An Assessment of The Challenges of Brand Consistency

Master's Thesis

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Abstract

Brand consistency is essential in creating and maintaining a strong brand. However, brand consistency has never been harder to achieve. Co-creation and the digital landscape have made the construction of brands more complex than ever, hence challenging the management of brands. Current literature within brand management primarily focuses on the relations between brands and consumers. A new field within the literature nuances this perspective by proposing that researchers should consider brands as social processes entailing multiple stakeholders. This study places itself within this literary field and contributes to the current theory by studying how the digital landscape and multiple stakeholders challenge brand consistency. The Danish hearing aid company Widex is used as a case example and insights into its brand contributes to theoretical and practical findings.

The thesis finds that digital platforms and stakeholders challenge brand consistency in more than one way. First of all, the digital space offers companies many new marketing opportunities, but at the same time, it complicates, restricts and controls the digital marketing efforts in many ways. Second of all, multiple stakeholders mean that the brand-building process must include and involve stakeholders with different interpretations and needs which companies have to cater to. Consequently, companies need to develop versatile brands that are able to manoeuvre in the complex market. This entails a brand that has a consistent core identity, but simultaneously is able to adapt and stay relevant according to the context. The thesis finds that two key words in achieving brand versatility are involvement and transparency. For a brand to stay consistent and relevant at the same time, stakeholders need to be involved and informed. Furthermore, a company needs to understand all aspects of the different contexts it communicate within. Then, the company needs to adapt its brand story accordingly in order to fit within the context in question.

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1. Introduction

Several scholars have argued that a strong brand can be a source to sustainable competitive advantage (e.g. Aaker, 1989; Farquhar, 1989; Keller, 1993). Hence, much research has been conducted on conceptualizing and managing brands in order to control "the marketing effects uniquely attributable to the brand" (Keller, 1993, p. 1). The brand is an important aspect in the relationship between company and consumer (Arnold, 1992), and traditionally, branding has focused on positioning products and managing brand identity in order to increase brand equity (Aaker, 2002; Louro & Cunha, 2001).

A brand consists of expressions and images (Abratt & Kleyn, 2011). To preserve and increase brand equity, brand managers must ensure that the expressions and images are aligned, thus creating brand consistency (Delgado-Ballester, Navarro, & Sicilia, 2012; Keller, Sternthal, & Tybout, 2002). One of the key factors for developing a strong brand is to make sure that consumers have a consistent brand image (Farquhar, 1989), which can be corrupted by inconsistent or indistinct expressions. Misperceptions and perception gaps are critical impediments in a brand's success (Kenyon, Manoli, & Bodet, 2018); hence, brand consistency is an essential and relevant subject to study. Additionally, Beverland, Wilner and Micheli (2015) find that "brand consistency is critical to maintaining the strength and favorability of brand associations" (p. 590).

Viewing the matter from a practical context, if a company's brand communication is not consistent, stakeholders will, necessarily, get an inconsistent impression of the brand. One might have a different experience with the company than an acquaintance; or one might have one type of experience with the company only to have a conflicting one at a later time. The company's identity might initially speak to a given stakeholder, but the version of the company's identity that said stakeholder experiences at a later time might not. The stakeholder in question is not certain what to expect from the company. In other words, the stakeholder - or any other stakeholders - does not have a consistent perception of who the company is and what it stands for.

Such scenarios can be avoided if the brand stays consistent (Beverland, Wilner, & Micheli, 2015).

However, such scenarios are also increasingly common. While the theory is clear about the importance of communicating a consistent brand identity, brand consistency has never been as challenged as now due to the fact that "Communicative or rich environments such as the internet accentuate the complexity of brand meanings and emphasize the co-invention of brand interpretations" (Berthon, Pitt, & Campbell, 2009, p. 357). Consumer behavior is increasingly focused around the internet (Kingsnorth, 2016, p. 55) and in an effort to adapt, marketing has followed online consumer trends and is becoming gradually more online itself (Thomas & Housden, 2017). While this development has resulted in new opportunities for marketing de-

partments, it has also resulted in numerous new platforms and different methods for marketers to juggle at once (Chaffey & Smith, 2017). The notion of digital marketing has, for example, increased brand complexity because more outside factors now affect companies' practical marketing activities. On the internet, consumers are now more empowered than ever before (Cova & Pace, 2006), and consequently, they have a greater voice in the formulation of brand meaning.

Due to this tendency, "in the post-modern era, brand meaning is not controlled by managers alone, but instead co-created through ongoing interactions among brand users" (Berthon, Pitt, & Campbell, 2009, p. 357). Therefore, branding literature, today, agrees that brands are constituted by multiple stakeholders in co-creation (Hemetsberger & von Wallpach, 2013; Iglesias & Bonet, 2012; Mäläskä, Saraniemi, & Tähtinen, 2011; Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013).

The importance of brand consistency is nothing new (Farquhar, 1989), but the subject is as crucial as ever. Consumers are constantly being exposed to numerous new brands, online and offline, and easier routes to purchasing products and services means that customer loyalty is dying (Loebl, 2014). Along with the notion of co-creation, companies now face a more complex market. Operating within this complexity challenges brand consistency - but at the same time, brand consistency is increasingly important because companies need to improve their recognizability in said market. This seems like a paradoxical challenge between balancing stability and fluidity (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006, p. 124), and that is exactly what this thesis studies.

Despite the acknowledgement of stakeholders as co-creators of brands, branding researchers have empirically focused solely on consumers and marketers (Hatch & Schultz, 2010). Accordingly, Kenyon, Manoli and Bodet (2018) find that literature has remained on brand managers, hence lacking insights into a broader stakeholder group. Furthermore, the concepts of co-creation and stakeholder branding remain unstudied areas in relation to brand consistency.

With this in mind, the thesis aims to answer the following research questions:

How do the digital landscape and multiple stakeholders challenge companies' brand consistency, and how can companies achieve brand consistency today?

Before the problem question can be answered, the branding literature still lacks theoretical conceptualization of the interrelatedness of multiple stakeholders (Hemetsberger & von Wallpach, 2013) and insights into how "various online texts by multiple stakeholders change intended brand meaning in terms of content" (Vallaster

& von Wallpach, 2012, p. 1514). Therefore, the thesis needs to create a foundation of understanding about the notions of brand and digital marketing. This will be achieved by answering the following sub-questions:

- How is a brand created?
- What should the brand-building process entail?
- Which role does the internal organization play in brand consistency?
- How do digital market and consumer trends affect a company's brand consistency?
- What role do social media play in the facilitation of active brand communities?

By answering the research question and the sub-questions, the thesis first and foremost intends to contribute to the understanding of the challenges companies face today regarding brand consistency, as well as providing recommendations on how to implement the findings of the thesis. Moreover, the thesis aims to challenge, elaborate on and add to the current literature within branding, which will contribute to the theoretical field.

1.1 Structure of the Thesis

Laying a foundation of the thesis, the first chapter has presented the background and motivation of doing this thesis. In doing so, the research question was presented along with five sub-questions to elaborate and attain knowledge on the subject at hand. Next, the second chapter will include the theory of science which lies at the root of our academic approach in conducting the study. The third chapter will then present and review the literature within branding as well as assess the theoretical foundation of digital marketing.

In the fourth chapter, the empirical findings will be analyzed and assessed in relation to the theory. Said theory has not provided much empirical understanding on business-to-business (B2B) branding in the context of brand consistency (Merz, He, & Vargo, 2009); hence the Danish hearing aid company Widex is analyzed to provide insights into a B2B organization. Additionally, the branding literature has mainly been concerned with the relationship between brand and consumer; hence the thesis takes a perspective on another stakeholder group. Employees play a vital role in the brand-building process (Iglesias and Bonet, 2012) as their behavior "can make or break a brand" (Iglesias, Ind, & Alfaro, 2013, p. 673). Therefore, the empirical data will be based on interviews with internal employees at Widex. By doing this, the study will explore how a large organization and one of its sales companies approach branding and how this affects brand consistency. In doing so, the thesis will primarily focus on two main issues in the brand-building process: employees and digital marketing.

In the fifth chapter, the analytical findings will be discussed by comparing the different aspects and elaborate on their meaning and contributions in answering the problem question. Moreover, the discussion will entail proposals of new theoretical concepts and recommendations for implementing these. Next, the sixth chapter will conclude on the final thesis by conducting a precise answer to the problem question. Finally, the study will be completed with presentation and discussion of topics for further research.

2. Theory of Science

2.1 Research Paradigm

"There is no perfect agreement among economists, anthropologists, sociologists, or psychologists on what the distinctive and central problems and methods of their respective disciplines are." (Rosenberg, 2008, p. 1). It is agreed, however, that philosophy – the perception of the world – is closely linked with the nature of knowledge and the sciences (e.g. Holm, 2013; Jacobsen, Schnack, Wahlgren, & Madsen, 2006; Kukla, 2000; Rosenberg, 2008). Before data can be collected and processed, the overall understanding of how knowledge is generated and developed needs to be considered (Holm, 2013). Hence, this chapter aims to clarify the fundamental assumptions and perceptions of the world and knowledge which guide the thesis.

First of all, it is imperative to place the thesis within an epistemological direction, i.e. to consider what knowledge is acceptable (Bryman, 2012, p. 27). Simplified, epistemology can be divided into naturalism and interpretivism (Bryman, 2012; Rosenberg, 2008, p. 26). Naturalists, whom can also be labelled positivists, believe that researchers can obtain and collect objective knowledge in order for them to create unbiased theory (Bryman, 2012). Naturalism originates from the belief that researchers are able to find unspoiled data, which is data that can be communicated and shared without the sender or receiver affecting it (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). In communication studies, it can be illustrated by Shannon and Weaver's (1949) Model of Communication which constitutes communication as a linear, mathematical process. Opposed to this view, interpretivism entails that knowledge is a social phenomenon that is subjectively constructed by definition (Rosenberg, 2008). Interpretivism's roots include Weber's examination of *Verstehen* (Bryman, 2012) that basically implies that everything is understood and interpreted. This means that researchers are not able to find objective data and create unbiased knowledge (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Data collection and analysis cannot be separated from interpretation because every situation is influenced by context, and therefore, data is always unlike (Gummeson, 1993). It also means that communication is not linear, as Shannon and Weaver propose, but instead iterative in nature.

This thesis has a clear epistemological view that constitutes knowledge as subjective, created between individuals. We share the belief that the social world cannot be observed and processed in its literal meaning but instead the metaphorically interpretations can and will be examined. According to Holm (2013), "we create our worldview in collaboration with other people" (p. 125). This is important to acknowledge because it means that what this thesis looks for are the shared, collaborative productions and reproductions of the world.

In principle, the thesis does not comply with a 'strong' form of constructivism (Schwandt, 2000, p. 198), however, we will not go into a deeper discussion of whether the entire reality is constructed or if only the social one is (Jacobsen *et al.*, 2006). The study does however affiliate with Collin's (1998, p. 41) moderate version of social constructivism, and therefore recognizes how "matters are "contextual" in that they are constituted by a context of intersubjectively determined background assumptions" (Schwandt, 2000, p. 199). This means that as researchers we must be aware of our own subjective background in which we place this study and realize that the knowledge we gain from it is contextual. Furthermore, we must acknowledge that the thesis' subjects are influenced by contextual factors as well. These are issues that will be discussed in the section of validity and reliability.

Metaphorically speaking, the research paradigm can be considered a pair of glasses through which researchers view the world. Hence the next sections will discuss what the notion of social constructivism does to this study's perspective on organization and brand.

2.1.1 Perspective on organization and brand

Holm (2013) claims that there is a clear connection between the philosophy of science and the way practical knowledge is conducted (p. 15). This thesis studies a phenomenon related to the notion of an organization, hence it is essential to define what an organization is to this thesis. "To say that social institutions are 'constructed' means roughly that they do not exist independent of people's actions, beliefs, and desires – their reasons for acting", Rosenberg (2008, p. 113) argues. We believe that organizations are constructed, and Rosenberg's definition of "constructed" agrees with the perspective we put on the phenomenon. According to Luhmann (1995), organizations are social system, and "social systems are not constituted by human beings but by communications" (Brummans, Cooren, Robichaud, & Taylor, 2013, p. 184). Luhmann's (1995) theory of social systems is based on constructivist thoughts (Jacobsen *et al.*, 2006, p. 155) and his ideas are the foundation of one of the main pillars within the field of CCO, short for the communicative constitution of organizations (Schoeneborn & Blaschke, 2014). This thesis ascribes to the same beliefs as CCO and therefore thinks that organizations do not objectively exist. Instead organizations are phenomena we *do*. In social interaction we produce and reproduce an organization's existence, thus organizations are constituted by communication (Brummans *et al.*, 2013).

The idea that communication constitutes organizations is not new. However, it can be used to explain how "Sequences of communication events unfold into communication episodes, which in turn recursively interlock to form a self-sustaining network of communication that constitutes an organization" (Blaschke, Schoeneborn, & Seidl, 2012, p. 880). Luhmann considers an organization to be an autopoietic system which means that it has the ability to produce and reproduce itself which happens when communication episodes link up

with previous communication episodes in emerging processes (Blaschke, Schoeneborn, & Seidl, 2012; Brummans *et al*., 2013). This perspective on what an organization is and how it is created means that we should perceive organizations as fluent, dynamic entities. Furthermore, "It is important to note that Luhmann considers communication a purely social phenomenon. In this sense, communication has to be conceptualized as an emergent phenomenon that arises from the interaction between individuals" (Schoeneborn & Blaschke, 2014, p. 290). Communication only exists when the message is understood or misunderstood (Luhmann, 1995). In relation to this thesis, it thus becomes clear that we are examining understandings that derive from communication. This conceptualization implies that organizations only are what we understand them to be. Brands emerge from the same constructivist concept saying that brands only matter because we interpret them (e.g. Hemetsberger & von Wallpach, 2013; Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2008; von Wallpach, Hemetsberger & Espersen, 2017). This means that brands, like organizations, are social phenomena constructed in communication.

We live in a social world which we both construct and which constructs us (Barker, 2012; Giddens & Sutton, 2013). Therefore, we are influenced and restrained by existing communication while also capable of producing new (Luhmann, 1995; Schoeneborn & Blaschke, 2014). In relation to branding, it means that individuals are able to communicate brand meaning but they are also constrained by the brand communication preceding them. This makes the notion of brand and branding fairly paradoxical in nature, and it strongly influences how knowledge about brand and branding will be assessed later in the thesis.

2.1.2 Perspective on brand consistency

In relation to answering the problem statement, the perspective on brand is imperative to have established. Since we consider a brand a social construction that is fluently and interchangeably constituted by communication, the concept of consistency and what consistency even means need to be placed in this context. The study has been an iterative process and realizations like this have raised new questions that the thesis must answer. If organizations and brands are social phenomena within a socially constructed social world, consistency in the meaning of identical communication does not exist in reality. Instead we define consistency as a high degree of stability, constancy and uniformity of meaning.

This is one of the drawbacks of submitting to a social constructivist view. The problem is reflexivity which means that "The statement that all facts are constructed, by virtue of its universality, obviously falls under its own scope: if it's indeed a fact that all facts are constructed, then that metafact must itself be constructed" (Kukla, 2000, p. 68). This means that nothing is factual and constant. However, in order to study brand consistency, we must examine how brand consistency can be defined within a social constructivist context.

2.2 Research Strategy

"Questions of social ontology cannot be divorced from issues concerning the conduct of social research. Ontological assumptions and commitments will feed into the ways in which research questions are formulated and research is carried out" (Bryman, 2012, p. 34). Therefore, the ontological and epistemological foundations of this study's research paradigm are closely linked to the research strategy. As already stated, we do not regard organizations and brands as objective categories. Therefore, a strategy which focuses on formal, independent properties would be dissonant with the paradigmatic base (Bryman, 2012).

"Qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" states Creswell (Lichtman, 2014, p. 9). This statement agrees with what this study assesses; individuals' or groups' understanding and construction of meaning. A qualitative research strategy therefore complies with the underlying philosophical assumption of social constructivism, which asserts "that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors" (Bryman, 2012, p. 33). As pointed out by Lichtman (2014), qualitative research can contribute to understanding human and social phenomena, such as brands, by providing the researchers with rich, subjective data from the subjects at hand (Jacobsen *et al.*, 2006).

With a social research strategy, it is essential to consider the relationship between theory and research. According to Bryman (2012), a deductive approach, i.e. moving from theory to empirical findings, usually relates to a quantitative research, whereas an inductive approach, i.e. moving from empirical findings to form theory, usually is a qualitative discipline. However, "just as deduction entails an element of induction, the inductive process is likely to entail a modicum of deduction" (Bryman, 2012, p. 26). This study, which is formed by an overall qualitative strategy, primarily takes an inductive approach, but it also entails deduction. This applies because the empirical research is grounded in theory and simultaneously constructs theory. The iterative nature of the thesis means that the researchers weave back and forth between data and theory creating multiple starting points to the theory and the analysis (Lichtman, 2014, p. 46). This makes the design a fluent process which supports the thesis' epistemological viewpoint.

The qualitative research strategy allows for the researchers to explore meanings, concepts and metaphors from the subjects which are involved in the social construction of a brand (Jacobsen *et al.*, 2006). Because of the constructivist nature of a brand, it is imperative to obtain deep insights into individuals' meaning, and for this matter a qualitative research strategy is desirable (Brinkmann, 2015; Malhotra & Birks, 2007). Qualitative data, however, lacks the counts and measures (Berg & Lune, 2013) which quantitative data can describe

through numerical expressions (Jacobsen *et al.*, 2006, p. 118). Therefore, the thesis makes use of both qualitative and quantitative research, which is known as mixed-methods research (Lichtman, 2014, p. 7). Some scholars argue that the two research strategies cannot be aligned because they belong to separate paradigms and are contradictory in nature (Bryman, 2014). In this example, however, a strong qualitative strategy is pursued and therefore quantitative research is useful because it complements the data collection. This increases the representativeness of the findings, and thereby offers completeness in the sense that "a more complete answer to a research question or set of research questions can be achieved by including both quantitative and qualitative methods" (Bryman, 2014, p. 637).

2.3 Research Design

The term case study can be used to describe the analysis of an organization and its stakeholders in order for the researchers to test or construct theory (Easton, 1992). A case study is useful for understanding complex matters where the context is important and where subjective factors apply (Dul & Hak, 2012; Fidel, 1984). Assessing the notion of brand consistency requires subjective experiences and understandings to be analyzed and through "case study methods, [we are] able to go beyond the quantitative statistical results and understand the behavioral conditions through the actor's perspective" (Zainal, 2007, p. 1). As Stake (2000) states, "case studies are useful in the study of human affairs" (p. 19) and therefore a case study design is applied to examine the human interpretation of a brand. Furthermore, the nature of brands calls for understanding the phenomenon at hand in depth, and Patton (1987) finds that "a case study becomes particularly useful where one needs to understand some particular problem or situation in great depth" (p. 19).

According to Yin (1984), a case study can be categorized as exploratory, descriptive and explanatory. As discussed above, this study attempts to build its empirical research on a theoretical foundation whilst also developing and constructing theory on the basis of empirical findings. In that regard, the case study can be categorized as an explanatory study (Yin, 1984) that attempts to "examine the data closely both at a surface and deep level in order to explain the phenomena in the data" (Zainal, 2007, p. 3). The constructivist perspective on organization and brand makes the study a complex and multivariate case and the explanatory strategy contributes to unravelling the multifaceted interpretations. As Yin states, however, his three categories are not hierarchical or mutually exclusive (Zainal, 2007), which means that the case study at hand is not precluded from exploratory and descriptive actions. Finally, adding to the research design, the case study is also normative in nature because recommendations based on the case's practical implications will be discussed (Kasanen, Lukka, & Siitonen, 1991).

2.4 Research Methods

According to Ellram (1996), the research design must contain arguments for the various methods and sources used to collect data. The next sections therefore aim to present and explain why different methods have been used and how they contribute to an adequate understanding of the topic. Baxter and Jack (2008) argue that "each data source is one piece of the 'puzzle', with each piece contributing to the researcher's understanding of the whole phenomenon" (p. 554). In this thesis, different sources are used to fill the entire 'puzzle' and even though the method of qualitative interview is the main source, a quantitative survey, netnographic research and web sources are used to complement the study.

2.4.1 Qualitative interview

Qualitative research can be either direct or indirect (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). The main sources of the thesis are interviews; hence direct research is the main driver. The purpose of conducting qualitative interviews is to gain insights into the thoughts, feelings and interpretations about the brand and the branding process. These insights are imperative in order to answer how brand consistency is achieved. In principle the concept of interpretation is unobservable (Patton, 2002, p. 340) and therefore interviews are conducted to uncover it, because interviews can unfold interviewees' experiences with the brand (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Lichtman, 2014).

As Lichtman (2014) puts it, "this study intended to explain the variation in participants' practices and understandings. For this reason, we recruited a smaller sample compared to those in quantitative studies, and we recruited informative participants rather than statistically-representative participants" (p. 251). This study intends something similar, and to answer the problem statement, it therefore becomes more relevant how a small number of brand stakeholders construct brand meaning than to find a statistically-representative number of participants.

Structure is a way to easily organize and analyze interview data (Bowen, 2005). Therefore, semi-structured in-depth interviews provide necessary structure as well as flexibility for the subjects to share and take the interviews in the direction that make sense to them (Bryman, 2014; Lichtman, 2014). Additionally, Bryman even encourages going off at tangents because "it gives insights into what the interviewee sees as relevant and important" (Bryman, 2014, p. 470). The belief that knowledge is constructed and only exists in a specific, unique context (Schwandt, 2000) means that interviews are only reflections of the situated context and hence invalid in a larger perspective (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, p. 71). This view questions the value of interviews and their *raison d'être*, which is why it is not taken to the extreme. Instead, the interviews are made with a phenomenological viewpoint in mind and built on the assumption that data retrieved from inter-

views can reflect the subject's reality outside the interview (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, p. 70). Phenomenology is about understanding how the subjects perceive social phenomena (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015) and this is exactly what this study's interviews should contribute with.

Lichtman (2014) argues that a qualitative researcher must organize and make sense of the collected data in order to "identify key concepts that come out of the data" (p. 318). In our study, data analysis becomes a matter of processual interpretation (Lichtman, 2014), thus focus is on condensing meaning from the phenomena defined by the interviewees (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The analysis will be concerned with drawing central themes from the subjects' nuanced descriptions in order for the researchers to compare and link the interviews with each other (Bryman, 2014; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

2.4.2 Questionnaire

Since the study shares the belief that a brand is something constructed in human interaction, it is necessary to deeply assess brand stakeholders' perception of the topic at hand. Therefore, the phenomenon of branding is most effectively studied by qualitative interviews. However, in the case study it is valuable to identify generable tendencies in order to answer more satisfactory to the problem statement, and in this a questionnaire is helpful in uncovering a broader, generalizable picture of stakeholders' perceptions (Rienecker & Jørgensen, 2010, p. 294). Moreover, a questionnaire is used because of its obvious strengths of broad and quick responses (Bryman, 2014). A large number of respondents are interesting to include because they all act as stakeholders in the brand-building process, hence their perceptions can be valuable.

In the data collection, the questionnaire only has a supportive and complementary function because it has obvious weaknesses in relation to answering the problem statement alone. Opposed to an interview, it is not possible to ask new or follow-up questions, which increases the risk of respondents not answering or understanding the questions (Bryman, 2014). And, it is not possible to dig into answers or allow respondents to go out of their own tangents. In addition to this, Bryman (2014) states that "because there is no interviewer in the administration of the self-completion questionnaire, the research instrument has to be especially easy to follow and its questions have to be particularly easy to answer" (p. 233). Therefore, recommendations from Lietz (2010) are followed concerning question length and order. Furthermore, Lietz (2010) argues that negatively worded questions should be avoided and that "[a] means of reducing the cognitive load on respondents stems from using specific rather than general terms" (p. 251).

2.4.3 Netnography

In the beginning of the 2000s, Kozinets (2002) concluded that "Consumers making product and brand choices are increasingly turning to computer-mediated communication for information on which to base their decisions" (p. 61). This statement is arguably truer today than when Kozinets stated it, hence it makes sense to investigate brand stakeholders online as they take part in the brand construction. In general, the number of internet-based ethnographic studies has increased because this is where consumers are (Bryman, 2014), and this thesis acknowledges that. Kozinets (2002) terms online ethnography for the method of netnography and presents it as a method for providing consumer insights. According to Kozinets (2009), "Ethnographic research enables the researcher to gain a detailed and nuanced understanding of a social phenomenon" (p. 55), and netnography carries the same benefits. In this study, netnography is chosen because it offers easy access to the diverse interactions made by stakeholders online (Kozinets, 2009).

Social network analysis is advantageous to apply in a netnographic study (Kozinets, 2009), and therefore this study will examine social network analysis' "main units of analysis: 'nodes' (social actors) and 'ties' (the relations between them)" (p. 49). The people interacting online through likes, comments, sharing, etc. are the nodes and their communication are what creates and forms the 'ties'. In the study, it is essential to gain insights into how a brand is constructed, and netnographic observations of interaction help to collect data on online structures and practices of co-creation (Kozinets, 2009). Kozinets (2002) distinguishes between five different types of online communities which can be assessed with netnography, and in this case the authors have concentrated on web pages that are organized around a particular brand. To structure the data collection, the research follows Kozinets' (2009, p. 61) flow of a netnographic research project. The netnographic method makes valuable contributions to this study, but as Kozinets (2009) argues "it would be wrong to assume that we could gain a complete picture through a pure netnography." (p. 64).

2.4.4 Virtual websites and documents

As a final source for empirical findings, the study gains knowledge from websites and virtual documents. According to Bryman (2014), "web pages are potential sources of data in their own right and can be regarded as potential material for both quantitative and qualitative content analysis" (p. 654). Therefore, the study aims to take advantage hereof and uses web pages for sources of data regarding the case brand. Also, content from web pages are used as empirical findings because today, valuable data and thoughts are shared online. Furthermore, certain web content can provide a level of up-to-date data that other sources cannot, because web content can be updated and re-published at any given time. Therefore, the thesis has especially applied web content as a source for statistics and recent development within different market trends.

2.5 Validity and Reliability

According to Schrøder, Drotner, Kline and Murray (2003), validity and reliability are crucial concepts to include in a research project. Qualitative research is subjective in nature, making the researchers vulnerable to bias (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), thus validity and reliability will be outlined in this section.

Validity, first of all, is about the truthfulness of the research (Schrøder *et al.*, 2003). In relation to the interviews, validity concerns the question of interviewees having understood the questions, and the researchers having understood the answers. To increase validity, the interviews have followed semi-structured guides which mean that the conducted interviews had room for clarification and flexibility (Bryman, 2014; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Moreover, the interviews were conducted at the interviewees' work address which potentially creates a safe and known environment (Schrøder *et al.*, 2003, p. 143). Also, we attempted to establish rapport and symmetrical power relationships with the interviewees because it contributes to validity if the situation feels like an everyday conversation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Lichtman, 2014). The interviews have been conducted in Danish as it is the interviewees' native language. However, the content has been translated and presented in English. The translations can have affected meaning because language holds bias according to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Currie, 1970). Translating from one language to another therefore affects validity; hence we have had a general awareness of the issue.

Finally, it is important to mention that we have a relation with the case company as one of us works at Widex. In regard to validity, it has therefore been possible to follow-up on the interviews and make sure with the interviewees that they mean what they said. This has on the one hand increased validity, but on the other hand it can also have increased the risk of jargon and in-talk during the interviews. However, with two researchers present at the interviews, this has been avoided. Furthermore, we argue that the topics discussed have not been controversial or sensitive, and that the questions therefore have not limited the interviewees to speak their mind.

Researchers need to be aware of their own background and position in the context (Holm, 2013), hence it is described above. This does challenge validity, but at the same time it brings some benefits. First of all, we already knew that the case company had an organizational structure that made it interesting to examine. Second of all, the interviewees were very willing to share information because they knew one of the researchers. And finally, we have used some of the knowledge that we already possessed. The knowledge has mainly been of factual character, and in the data collection, we have aimed to make the known unknown (Tietze, 2012).

In relation to the questionnaire, validity is harder to obtain because the methods do not allow for real-time interaction. We cannot be sure that we interpret the same meanings as the respondents because it cannot be discussed right away like it is possible in interviews. Therefore, we have followed the recommendations of keeping questions short and understandable without negative wording (Bryman, 2014; Lietz, 2010). The same issue of validity goes for the netnographic research and the online sources. With all sources, but even more salient with the online ones, it is essential to be aware of authenticity and credibility (Bryman, 2014). Therefore, control, reflections and theory have helped to keep validity high (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

Second of all, reliability refers to the study's ability to be replicated (Schrøder *et al.*, 2003) and needs to be considered along validity to create a strong study. This study can never be replicated completely because its exact contextual frame cannot be re-created. However, a study still can be made reliable by making its methods transparent (Bryman, 2014). Therefore, the study clearly includes the methods and theories that are applied, and all data is attached as appendices. Moreover, the thesis follows a strict structure, which is presented in the introduction.

2.5.1 A single case study

Some scholars oppose against the use of case studies with the argument that single cases cannot be used for generalization (Flyvbjerg, 2006). This relates to the concept of reliability – or transferability, as Lincoln & Guba (1985) call it. In relation to this, it is worth noting that this study does not intent to be representative of all organization. Instead, it seeks to examine a general issue in a specific context. Patton (1987) argues that "a great deal can be learned from a few exemplars of the phenomenon in question" (p. 19) and that is what the thesis seeks to do. Likewise, Flyvbjerg (2006) believes in the benefits of a case study, and he finds that context-independent knowledge and rules are not enough to bring the learning process to a higher level. Therefore, this thesis has gained valuable insights from a context-dependent source, i.e. the case study. The value of the case study does not depend on its ability to generalize, but "on the validity claims that researchers can place on their study" (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 233).

2.6 Introduction of the Case Company and the Interview Subjects

The case company, Widex, is a family owned company founded in Denmark in 1956, and today, the company employs over 4,000 people worldwide (Widex, 2018). A global company like Widex has a vast number of stakeholders, each with their own interpretation of the brand. Additionally, over 4,000 employees defy the ability to create a coherent and united brand. Moreover, Widex competes on various different markets worldwide where both business-to-business customers and end-consumers differ greatly. In most markets,

Widex sells its products to hearing care professionals who then sell or dispense it to the end users, this being individual consumers suffering from a hearing disability. As a result, Widex can be considered a business-to-business-to-consumer (B2B2C) company rather than a more classic business-to-business (B2B) company or a business-to-consumer (B2C) company. Widex further sells a portion of its products to public medical institutions such as public hospitals. The company's sales consultants also spends time assisting end users in public and private contexts alike (Appendix 4).

In other words, Widex essentially has two target groups that needs to be considered: the small businesses and public institutions that buy Widex' products, and the end users who actually use the products (Appendix 2). Being a B2B2C company with two main target groups as well as numerous other stakeholders challenges the notion of Widex' brand consistency, making Widex an interesting, relevant and valuable case company for this study. However, as R. Bech (Appendix 8) points out, Widex is primarily a B2B company, hence we will assess it this way.

The company offers the advantages of 'closing-in' on a real life phenomenon as it unfolds in practice (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 235). Furthermore, our relation to Widex means that we are able to get access to employees from different units, which contributes to creating a nuanced and holistic study. "Case study method enables a researcher to closely examine the data within a specific context. In most cases, a case study method selects a small geographical area or a very limited number of individuals as the subjects of study" (Zainal, 2007, p. 1). For this thesis, four interview subjects are carefully chosen because they offer insights into positions of the organization where the brand is actively shaped.

First of all, an interview with Per Holmen, Head of Brand and Communications, is conducted due to the fact that he holds a lot of responsibility in activities which concern the Widex brand. Therefore, he works very actively and consciously with the brand every day. P. Holmen is employed at Widex A/S, which is Widex' global headquarters. Second, an interview with Rina Bech, Content Marketing Specialist and Global SoMe Manager, is relevant because R. Bech holds a crucial position in Widex' communication with internal and external stakeholders. As a part of P. Holmen's team in Widex A/S, she sits very close to the strategic brand formation. Third, Pernille Kloppenborg, Customer Service Manager DK/SE, who does not have a formal role of brand communication, gives interesting insights into customer service's understanding of the brand. P. Kloppenborg interacts with customers every day, thus she is an essential stakeholder in the brand construction, which will be discussed later in the thesis. P. Kloppenborg is responsible for the Swedish and Danish customer service department and she is employed in Widex' Nordic sales company, Widex Nordic. Finally, an interview with Pia Lund, Audiological Sales Support, is conducted to get close to one of Widex represent-

atives, who works with selling Widex and its products and services every day. Like P. Kloppenborg, P. Lund is employed at Widex Nordic, and she is responsible for the Danish sales and customers.

As already mentioned in the introduction, the thesis aims to contribute to the theoretical field. It does this by building insights into two, in relation to the brand-building process, rather unstudied areas. This contributing objective of the thesis is also one of the reasons why P. Lund and P. Kloppenborg are chosen as empirical subjects. Traditionally, brand management has concentrated on positions close to communication and advertising (Iglesias & Bonet, 2012), hence interviews with a customer service manager and a sales representative provide valuable additions.

Widex is a global company with sales companies all over the world. This means that communication sometimes has to travel a long way between many stakeholders before it meets the market. Therefore, the interview subjects are chosen based on their very different positions in the organization. P. Holmen and R. Bech sit in positions where Widex' official brand communication is formulated. Where P. Holmen and R. Bech primarily develop communication which are presented and delivered on behalf of the entire Widex organization, P. Kloppenborg and P. Lund to a larger degree communicate on behalf of themselves and Widex Nordic. Nevertheless, they all affect the Widex brand as some of the primary stakeholders in the brand-building process. Hence, this makes them very interesting subjects in regard to studying the notion of brand and brand consistency.

3. Theory

This chapter will introduce the relevant theory that is needed to understand the notions of brand, brand consistency and digital marketing. First of all, theory on brand consistency will shortly be presented in order to state its value. Second, a literature review will present and assess the current branding literature in order to comprehend how branding and brands can be perceived. Finally, due to digital marketing's influence on branding, the theory within this field is presented as well.

3.1 Brand Consistency

"Once developed, managers must defend, preserve and increase the brand's equity against a backdrop of a changing market environment" (Beverland, Wilner, & Micheli, 2015, p. 589). Additionally, several scholars believe that defending, preserving and increasing brand equity involves keeping the brand consistent in both image and marketing materials (e.g. Delgado-Ballester, Navarro, & Sicilia, 2012; Keller, Sternthal, & Tybout, 2002). Moreover, Farquhar (1989) argues that one of the keys in building a strong brand is to have a consistent brand image, which is achieved by "managing the relationship between the consumer and the brand" (p. 29). "The implicit assumption underpinning much of the branding literature is that if you keep your brand communications simple, steady, and memorable people reach a shared brand meaning that is consistent with an organization's" (Berthon, Pitt, & Campbell, 2009, p. 356).

A challenge, however, is that brand stakeholders can have very different knowledge bases, hence they will interpret the brand inconsistently (Berthon, Pitt, & Campbell, 2009). "Consequently, a brand can have multiple meanings in the market depending on the stakeholder." (Lanseng & Olsen, 2010, p. 1109). Moreover, theory stresses that consistency can only be obtained if sender and receiver share a mutual knowledge base (Chwe, 1998). Companies therefore must be aware that "a consumer's learning process is facilitated when all communications surrounding a brand, regardless of source, deliver a clear and consistent message of a brand's identity and meaning" (Berthon, Pitt, & Campbell, 2009, p. 357). Berthon, Pitt and Campbell (2009) find that obtaining consistency has become a more complex and challenging task due to the internet. Their only focus is on consumers though. Gyrd-Jones and Jonas (2014), on the other hand, emphasize the importance of employees because they find that as direct stakeholders in delivering brand experiences, employees play a crucial role in keeping the organization together. Therefore, consistency is as much about managing employees as managing consumers. Misperceptions and perception gaps among all brand stakeholders can hinder brand success (Kenyon, Manoli, & Badet, 2018), thus the issue of brand consistency concerns all stakeholders.

3.2 Literature Review

Very different views on the nature of branding and dissimilar perceptions on how brands are constructed fill the field of branding theory. To get an understanding of what brand consistency means today and how it can be achieved, this study needs to start with covering the theory in a literature review to find the relations and coherence in regards to the subject at hand. Such an outline is valuable in understanding the notion of branding, and the thesis will make a review to identify potential valuable insights and gaps in the literature. In doing so, the literature review will not stick to already sketched overviews (e.g. Andersen, 2006; Louro & Cunha, 2001), but instead make a, to this study, simpler and more relevant assessment. First of all, the literature review will contain literature that finds branding to be an inside-out discipline where the brand is defined by the company. Second, the review will include literature that considers branding as an outside-in process which proposes consumers as co-creators. Finally, the literature review involves the latest research within branding literature that focuses on multi-stakeholder branding.

3.2.1 Branding as an inside-out discipline

The first string in our literature review is the theory that we have gathered under the principle of building brand identity and brand image from an inside-out perspective.

According to Aaker (2002), brand identity "provides direction, purpose and meaning" (p. 68). Thus, building a strong brand identity has been a main focus for various scholars who have based their research on the premise that a brand should express personality and identity to be relatable for the consumer (e.g. Arnold, 1992; Keller, 1993). Louro and Cunha (2001) groups this perspective under the projective paradigm, which entails "Firm-centred roles associated with the unilateral creation and sustenance of competitive advantage through differentiation and/or efficiency" (p. 857). Within this paradigm, the focus is mainly on differentiating the product by adding personal attributes to the identity in an accomplishment that Aaker (2002, p. 87) terms the extended identity. With the Brand Identity Planning Model, Aaker (2002, p. 79) suggests that branding can be considered a linear process of internal planning. A strong and differentiated brand identity is built by thinking the brand as a product, an organization, a person and a symbol (Aaker, 2002), hence the brand is a way to stage-manage the identity. In addition to this, Fournier (1998) argues that the brand identity makes the organization function as an active partner in a brand-consumer relationship. Building brand identity is a way to improve customer-based brand equity, which is the added value linked to a brand (Aaker, 2002; Keller, 1993). This, however, is not only about building brand identity but also about obtaining a positive brand image. Keller (1993) argues that the brand image is built by the brand associations the consumers ascribe to the brand. The inside-out perspective, hence, does consider the external associations of the brand but it is thought of as a consequence of the identity. Therefore, the focus is still on creating the most effective

identity and using this to create "favorable, strong, and unique brand associations" (Keller, 1993, p. 1). This approach to branding relates to the Porterian positioning school of strategy (Porter, 1980) which believes that strategy formation is an analytical process about finding one's position in the market (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, & Lampel, 2009).

According to Kapferer (2012), it is a mistake to pursue an ideal market position and instead the brand should pursue "an ideal of its own" (p. 164). Creating a relationship with a consumer based on being an ideal partner therefore should not be a goal in itself – a reasoning which Fournier (2009) interestingly agrees with in her own earlier studies. In more practical terms, this means that a brand should not target its customers by showing them who they are, "but rather as they wish to be – as a result of purchasing a given brand" (Kapferer, 2012, p. 162). Branding should stem from a deep inner inspiration and the search for the brand's DNA does not begin by looking at consumers but by looking at the brand's products, name, logo, etc. (Kapferer, 2012). In this way, Kapferer shares the product-centric view of Aaker and Keller, but in his Brand Identity Prism dimensions of culture and reflection add more nuances (Kapferer, 2012, p. 158). According to Kapferer (2012), a strong brand is an ideology and people should be able to be reflected as carriers of the ideology when they use the brand. Still, Kapferer's view represents a traditional view where brand strategists construct and deliver the brand identity, which "thus resides on the sender's side an 'image'" (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006, p. 119). It is a rather essentialist way of thinking which limits the flexibility and expressivity in the brand (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006) by placing the strategic discipline of branding in the hands of the brand managers/strategists (Aaker, 2002; Aaker, 2004).

This is why we categorize this perspective *branding as an inside-out discipline* because the theory is centered around the internal process of creating a strong brand. The brand manager defines the vision of how the brand should be perceived and when established, "a relationship can then be formed between the brand and its target audience, creating value for the latter through benefits or credibility" (Kenyon, Manoli, & Bodet, 2018, p. 7). Furthermore, there is a general perception of the consumers as more or less passive recipients on the other side of the brand delivery. In relation to brand consistency, this means that keeping a consistent brand is a matter of execution (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006, p. 120). Since the brand lies in the hands of the brand managers, multiple stakeholders and brand touchpoints do not challenge the coherence fundamentally, but few different identities can be needed (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006; Louro & Cunha, 2001). As Kapferer (2012) argues, brand charters are management tools for creating consistency in the organization (p. 164) and if a consistent branding message is delivered from the center of the organization then the brand will be consistent as well.

This belief, that the brand can be delivered as fixed identities, contradicts this study's perspective on brand and therefore this theoretical direction alone is not enough to answer the problem statement.

3.2.2 Branding as an outside-in process

What a brand is and how branding should be conducted all depends on perspective (Andersen, 2006), hence different perspectives need to be taken into consideration in order to deliver a valuable answer that uncovers the issue of brand consistency. While the inside-out perspective is concerned with how the brand is constructed internally, another area within branding theory is more concerned with consumers and how a brand is constructed by and with them. This theoretical direction constitutes the brand as a dynamic and cultural symbol, which is formed by consumers and branding should follow their and society's flows (Holt, 2004; Holt & Cameron, 2010; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001).

According to Holt (2004), every brand should pursue iconic status because humans seek cultural icons. Holt argues that brands can reach this status by offering a myth which society needs, thus he is very focused on culture, society and markets instead of products and their functional and emotional offerings (Holt, 2004, p. 39). With a six steps model, Holt and Cameron (2010, p. 197) present the approach to cultural branding, which has a deep emphasis on cultural innovation and social disruption. Cultural branding is an iterative process with an outward looking focus, and in theory it is advisable to become a cultural icon. However, the strategy seems highly opportunistic because it requires an organizational readiness which few can match (Holt, 2004, p. 209). It also appears troublesome, if not impossible, to have every brand stakeholder communicating the same, externally-bounded cultural message.

To Holt's branding vision, an important premise is the statement that consumers are tribal beings who construct brands in their joint narratives (Holt, 2004, p. 3). A statement supported by several scholars who support that branding should focus on consumers' shared relations and the meanings and value they, in unity, ascribe to brands (e.g. Cova & Cova, 2001; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009). According to Cova (1997), "the link is more important than the thing" (p. 307), and brands therefore need to facilitate and support communities in which consumers can meet (O'Guinn & Muñiz, 2009). Consumers cannot be perceived as passive actors because they demand transparency and control (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Klein, 1999; Wipperfürth, 2005). Therefore, they meet in brand communities where they interact and socialize based on their shared connections to a brand (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). Opposed to the inside-out perspective, this take on branding is not centered on brand managers creating a powerful brand from within the organization. Instead, Muñiz & O'Guinn (2001) argue that "Brand communities are participants in the brand's larger social construction" (p. 412). This means that community members produce and reproduce brand meaning when they interact. In common practices performed by consumers, value is created and

shared (Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009), hence brand managers are not the only producers of brand identity and value. The organization must listen and follow inputs from brand communities in order to create coherent and appropriate brand communication (O'Guinn & Muñiz, 2009). Moreover, studies find that brand communities can be great sources of innovation (Füller, Jawecki, & Muehlbacher, 2007) and at the same time they contribute to diffusion of innovations (Füller, Schroll, & von Hippel, 2013).

Consequently, Quinton (2013) argues for the significance of a community paradigm within branding. Co-production and social production are necessary concepts to consider due to the new digital era where consumers are more empowered and knowledgeable than ever (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Quinton, 2013). The empowerment of consumers not only increases the risk of brand hijack (Wipperfürth, 2005), it also has very positive implications because of the value consumers co-create when they engage in brand communities (Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009). Accordingly, scholars acknowledge the concept of brand community and community members' importance and actual foundation in brand (re)production. In general, however, the literature is vague in terms of delivering valuable and usable recommendations for brand managers.

The thesis shares many of the beliefs grounded in perceiving branding as an outside-in process. This perspective relates to the brand as a dynamic and fluid process that emerges not only in the hand of brand managers but with and in interaction with consumers. What this does in terms of brand consistency is undiscussed. On this matter, this literary field is sparse and it appears an understudied area.

3.2.3 Stakeholder branding

Ascribing to a perspective of social constructivism, this thesis has the opinion that brands are (re)produced and co-constructed in social interaction, thus it cannot be preserved solely by a company and its brand managers. Quinton (2013) argues that brand management should be handled with "respectful interaction at various touch points via rich media opportunities that reliably convey a consistent brand story that has relevancy to the consumer's life" (p. 927). The various touch points, which Quinton mentions, are exactly why branding and consistency are so challenging. But, it is also why branding is not limited to include only brand and consumers. The brand is constructed at all places where the brand is present and that includes more than consumer interaction. As Mühlbacher and Hemetsberger (2008) state, "a brand is continuously co-constructed by those who are interested in the brand" (p. 11). Therefore, the literature on the brand community phenomenon is limited because it only pays attention to the interplay between consumers and brand. The creation of a brand, however, is a much more "complex, contextual, and interactive process within a social system of interrelated, yet diverse actors who, themselves, may become part of the brand." (Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2008, p. 11). This opens up to a broader field than the above-mentioned literature on branding does. This has mainly focused on consumers and product brands, which is not fulfilling (Jones, 2005). Hatch

and Schultz (2010) mention that "the only stakeholder groups branding researchers have empirically examined thus far have been consumers and marketers" (p. 592). Additionally, Merz, He and Vargo (2009) find that the literature lacks research on business-to-business branding. Hence, new directional focus which considers all stakeholders and therefore concentrates on stakeholder branding is called for (e.g. Hemetsberger & von Wallpach, 2013; Merz, He, & Vargo, 2009; Mäläskä, Saraniemi, & Tähtinen, 2011; Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2008).

Brand stakeholders can be all employees, consumers, business-to-business customers, shareholders, distributors, etc. This means that, for example, Aaker's Brand Identity Planning Model and Muñiz and O'Guinn's concept of branding community do not explain the holistic process of branding. Thus, Mäläskä, Saraniemi and Tähtinen (2011) present the analogy of branding pool to describe the process. According to Mäläskä, Saraniemi and Tähtinen (2011), all stakeholders influence the brand in context of nets and, opposed to a brand community, "the branding pool is not intentionally organized around the focal firm's brand, but leaves actors free to act on their own initiative" (p. 1147). Consequently, organizations must pay attention and allocate resources to networking and relationship building as a crucial discipline for brand co-creation (Mäläskä, Saraniemi, & Tähtinen, 2011; Merz, He, & Vargo, 2009). Likewise, Vallaster, & von Wallpach (2013) argue that managing brands requires engagement in the co-creation with stakeholders because they find that interdependent stakeholders produce and shape brand meaning in their simultaneous interactions. Co-creation, however, does not mean that brand managers are redundant. Instead, they belong to the core group of stakeholders and have a profound role in stimulating the processes (Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2008, p. 13). Hence, brand managers still play a vital role in brand construction. It is just crucial that brand managers prioritize brand stakeholder relations and choose wisely between stakeholders "according to their possible impact on brand-value creation" (Jones, 2005, p. 27).

The concept of having multiple stakeholders co-creating the brand has led various scholars to consider branding a network process. Mäläskä, Saraniemi and Tähtinen (2011) present their idea of a brand pool of networks, and, moreover, Vallaster and von Wallpach (2013) view brand stakeholders as a network which they term "multi-log" (p. 1513). Taking a network perspective on the branding process encourages believing that stakeholders construct brands by their network connections.

Contemplating branding as a process of stakeholder co-creation is a nuanced and holistic view of the brand-building process. This view corresponds ontologically with the view that brands are constructed when interpreted (Bryman, 2014) in processes of communication (Blaschke, Schoeneborn, & Seidl, 2012; Luhmann, 1995). Hence, the perspective of stakeholder branding corresponds with the theory of science that the thesis ascribes to.

3.2.3.1 Three brand concepts of stakeholder branding

In the branding literature, many scholars have sought to develop models for brand management, however "these models largely presuppose linear or conduit models of communication" (Cornelissen, Christensen, & Kinuthia, 2012, p, 1097). A linear model of communication is not concordant with a social constructivist view; hence much branding literature lacks the theoretical conceptualization corresponding with this thesis. Instead, this section will present three of the current concepts which do consider branding to be a non-linear activity with multiple stakeholders as brand co-creators. In the analysis, the concepts and their underlying premises will be examined in regard to their ability to explain the empirical data and in regard to their relevance to brand consistency.

The first concept is "The stakeholder-brand value model", which illustrates how stakeholders collectively affect brand equity (Jones, 2005, 26). The model argues that value is created in the interaction between brand and its stakeholders. Moreover, it stresses that "Managers' actions in relation to the brand affect stakeholders' perceptions of the brand, but that the overall perception of the brand is also affected by the actions of other stakeholders." (Jones, 2005, p. 26). Jones (2005) assesses stakeholders on a meso-level contemplating managers as a stakeholder group, employees as another, consumers as a third, and so on.

The second concept is "The organic view of the brand" in which Iglesias, Ind and Alfaro (2013) find that "meanings that a consumer derives from a brand are subjective and the result of individual experiences and perceptions" (p. 678). Where Jones (2005) is concerned with how employees and consumers can affect each other's perception of brand value, Iglesias, Ind and Alfaro (2013) stresses the significance of how brands are developed on an individual, micro-level. Moreover, individual stakeholders are connected in nets.

The third concept is 'Action Net Theory', which contemplates that "we are better equipped to explain new brand phenomena through thinking in terms of actions and narratives, rather than in terms of their sources." (Hemetsberger & von Wallpach, 2013). Action Net Theory suggests that brands are constituted in fluid and dynamic nets of action. This encourages brand researchers to study the actions of stakeholders instead of the actual stakeholders.

3.2.4 Brand logic

The unlike directions within the literature of branding entail different perspectives on what logic underlies the brand. A dominant idea that marketing has adopted from economics is the rational that identity lies in the product (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006, p. 125; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Much branding literature therefore fo-

cuses on product brands (e.g. Aaker, 2002; Arnold, 1992; Keller, 1993). This implies an inside-out perspective where product attributes are some of the base of what the brand means.

This perspective has changes though and marketing is now evolving toward a service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Merz, He and Vargo (2009) argue that branding is headed in the same direction as well "from the conceptualization of brand as a firm-provided property of goods to brand as a collaborative, value co-creation activity of firms and all of their stakeholders." (p. 328-329). This perspective constitutes branding as an ongoing process and mandates stakeholders as co-creators. Additionally, this thought entails to consider brands as narratives, which forces branding "to refocus on what brands *do* for us rather than what they are so as to make us better understand what they mean to us" (Hemetsberger & von Wallpach, 2013, p. 6).

A product brand only focuses on customers (Balmer & Gray, 2003). Hence, it does not take the various stakeholders into account. In this way, corporate brand and product brand fundamentally differ in disciplinary scope because corporate brands entail multiple brand stakeholders (Balmer & Gray, 2003). In contrast to a product brand, a corporate brand takes a holistic view concerning all relevant stakeholders (Iglesias, Ind, & Alfaro, 2013, p. 672). Therefore, corporate branding cannot be ignored because the branding discipline needs to be extended to include more than just customers (Abratt & Kleyn, 2011, p. 1060). Abratt and Kleyn (2011) find corporate brands to be a consequence of organizations formatting, and "From this perspective, all brand touchpoints and experiences are crucial in building a brand" (Iglesias & Bonet, 2012, p. 258).

Summing up, the literature review shows that the existing branding literature points in many different and opposite directions in regard to the brand-building process and the notion of a brand. The new theories within brand research place themselves within the field of stakeholder branding. This thesis places itself within the same field, however, other directions still pose useful contributions to discussing branding. The theory will be explored much further in the study.

3.3 The Importance of Digital Marketing

According to Thomas and Housden (2017, p. 23), the last ten years has seen every successful company incorporate the internet as part of its marketing strategy. Chaffey and Smith (2017) elaborate and state that digital marketing has become a key area and method for companies to attract, serve and communicate with customers, to save money and resources and to build its brand. Chaffey and Smith use the terminology *the electronic market space* (p. 4) to describe the online world where more and more business is conducted, including selling and marketing products and services to the more than three billion potential consumers who

are present on the internet. As a result of the growing importance and size of this electronic market space, consumers to a large degree meet brands online rather than offline.

While marketers may first and foremost practice digital marketing because the consumers are present in the electronic market space, the digital methods also offer various marketing benefits that offline marketing lacks. Thomas and Housden (2017), for example, point to the fact that consumers' online behavior gives marketers extended knowledge about each individual consumer and his/her habits, whereas offline marketing only allows for broad knowledge about customer segments through overall consumer research and statistics. The unique knowledge that marketers gain through people's online activity today gives any business the chance to customize its marketing efforts towards its target group to a much larger degree than before.

Thomas and Housden describe this new opportunity as "nothing less than a revolutionary change" (Thomas & Housden, 2017, p. 3).

3.3.1 The Diverse and Complex Landscape of Digital Marketing

Digital marketing is an ever-evolving area, and Chaffey and Smith (2017) highlight the many various sub-parts of digital marketing, or, in other words, the many different ways for brands to meet and interact with consumers online. Specifically, Chaffey and Smith present eight key activities within digital marketing that companies should consider (p. 14-16):

1. Creating a coherent digital experience
2. Creating an integrated digital marketing plan
3. Producing content marketing
4. Conducting Search Engine Optimization (SEO)
5. Conducting paid search marketing (namely Google AdWords)
6. Conducting social media marketing
7. Conducting email marketing
8. Analyzing digital efforts and results across all online channels

Below, a selection of significant digital marketing activities will briefly be explained.

3.3.1.1 Planning (the SOSTAC model)

Chaffey and Smith (2017, p. 556) suggest using Smith's own SOSTAC marketing planning model to build an effective, integrated marketing plan that accounts for both classic marketing principles as well as specific

digital marketing tendencies. SOSTAC is an abbreviation of Situation analysis, Objectives, Strategy, Tactics, Actions and Control (Chaffey & Smith, 2017, p. 3). Briefly put, it is meant to analyze, explore and plan where the company is currently at in terms of its digital marketing, where it wants to go, how it can get there from an overall, strategic perspective, how it can get there from a more practical, tactical perspective, who exactly needs to do what, and finally, how the digital marketing efforts can be monitored and analyzed.

While the SOSTAC model is merely one method to conduct a digital marketing plan, it represents Chaffey and Smith's belief that digital marketing should deliver an organized, focused and coherent experience to consumers. It further emphasizes that a digital marketing strategy should account for the many different aspects and activities of the complex landscape of digital marketing. While this study has not used the SOSTAC model directly, the study subscribes to this belief and this approach to digital marketing.

3.3.1.2 Content marketing, social media marketing and email marketing

Content marketing is about creating and distributing self-made content, including everything from static website content to media content such as videos, text blogs, infographics and the like (Chaffey & Smith, 2017, p. 37). The content is meant to inform and communicate, to create value to the customers, to spark interaction between the company and the customers, and to support the company's sales and customer goals. Overall, it is meant to position the company in a certain way in the market and to attract and retain customers (Chaffey & Smith, 2017, p. 253).

Content marketing needs to be shared (Chaffey & Smith, 2017), and one way to do so is through social media. Social media is an obvious channel to reach customers because it is such a dominating phenomenon in modern society (Thomas & Housden, 2017, p. 52), with so many customers spending extensive time on social media platforms.

Social media marketing is understood as using social media platforms as tools to activate the company's or the organization's communication and marketing strategy, as well as to speak to and with customers. Chaffey and Smith (2017, p. 225) particularly highlight the aspect of social media marketing that concerns interaction with customers. To this, there are several possibilities in terms of specific social platforms that can be used to market through. Chaffey and Smith (2017, p. 10) first and foremost mention the so-called 'Big 8': Facebook, Instagram (owned by Facebook), Google, YouTube (owned by Google), Snapchat, Twitter, LinkedIn and Pinterest.

Most major social media platforms today offer marketers the option to run paid advertisements on the platforms (Kingsnorth, 2016). One highly important aspect of social media advertising is the ability to target a

quite specific segment of users (Chaffey & Smith, 2017, p. 126). This gets based on the preferences, demography and characteristics of the users as shown via their social media behavior and profile descriptions. Marketers can customize its advertisements to fit the specific customer segments that they want to reach with each specific advertisement.

Another way to speak to customers online is through email marketing. On average, Internet users spend 34% of their time online on email sites (Thomas & Housden, 2017, p. 62). So, similar to social media, email is first and foremost an obvious way to communicate towards customers simply because it is a method through which companies are certain to reach a large number of people. In a 2015 DMA National Client Email study, 90 percent of respondents stated that they considered email marketing to be a method of "importance" or "great strategic importance" and only 4 percent said that they expected a decline in their email marketing budgets over the next year (Thomas & Housden, 2017, p. 63).

Among other things, the specific use of email as a marketing tool includes sending out regularly newsletters as well as sending follow-ups or conversion emails often triggered by an action by the customer, such as setting up a user account on the company's website. Either way, the goal of email marketing is, similar to most other digital marketing methods, to convert and retain customers (Chaffey & Smith, 2017).

3.3.1.3 Search Engine Marketing

A different key aspect of digital marketing is Search Engine Marketing (SEM), which is, in its essence, about companies' ranking in online search engines - or more specifically, on search engine result pages (SERPs) - such as Google.

SEM first and foremost includes Search Engine Optimization (SEO)[1], which is the effort of ranking high on SERPs organically. There are several ways to achieve this for a company, including structuring its website in the right manner by adding the right keywords in the right places. If executed correctly, this will help the company website appear early on SERPs when people are searching for these specific keywords. In order to decide what keywords should be prioritized, one must conduct a keywords analysis to find out what keywords that relevant customers within the company's industry search for, while also taking into account what keywords your competitors optimize for and how well they rank for them (Chaffey & Smith, 2017).

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[1] Please note that some scholars and marketing professionals refer to SEO and SEM as two separate forms of online marketing, with SEM covering paid search marketing. In this study, in line with Chaffey and Smith's definition, SEM covers all marketing categories within search engine marketing, including both SEO and paid search marketing (Chaffey & Smith, 2017, p. 384).

Another way to rank high on SERPs organically is through link-building (or backlinks), in which links to the company's website are featured on other websites than the company's own. If the websites are legitimate, and if their content is relevant for the company's own website, search engines like Google will reward the company for it by improving its ranking (Kingsnorth, 2016). There are several ways to get links featured on legitimate websites, including guest blogging or content-based partnerships, native advertising, digital PR, having a link featured in online guides, and more (Dean, 2018c).

Yet another important activity of SEM is paid search marketing, including Google AdWords. This is where marketers pay to rank high on SERPs. They produce a text-based advertisement for their website through the Google AdWords platform and bid on certain keywords (Chaffey & Smith, 2017). If executed correctly, the AdWords advertisement will show up near the top op the SERP when people are searching for one or more of the keywords that the marketer has bid on. Microsoft Search Marketing is a similar tool operating in search engines Bing and Yahoo! (Chaffey & Smith, 2017, p. 384).

A significant aspect of paid search marketing is the concept of Pay Per Click (PPC) marketing, in which marketers quite literally pay the service provider every time a user click on their digital advertisement. In the case of Google AdWords, for example, marketers pay Google whenever their AdWords advertisement shows on the SERP and the user who searched also proceeds to click on the link (Chaffey & Smith, 2017).

3.3.1.4 Additional online paid marketing

It should be noted that overall online paid marketing also includes several other marketing activities than paid search marketing (Kingsnorth, 2016). Paid social media advertising, as previously described, is one example.

Below is a brief description of other selected online marketing activities.

Banner advertisements is visual advertisements placed on other websites than your own. Banner advertisements can be present on many types of websites and have several different sizes and formats. The websites of news media commonly include several banner advertisements (the equivalent of offline banner advertisements in traditional print media) (Thomas & Housden, 2017).

Native advertising is sponsored content. It is essentially content marketing posted on other websites (or, in an offline setting, in newspaper and physical magazines) in a format similar to the regular content of the site (Chaffey & Smith, 2017, p. 408). It can, for example, be articles posted on news media sites in a format simi-

lar to the natural news articles (Thomas & Housden, 2017, p. 304), though it must be clearly stated that the articles are sponsored (Marketing Practices Act).

Influencer marketing is closely related to sponsorships. It is essentially the marketing phenomenon of paying (often public) individuals, whose opinion and taste matter to other consumers, to post about a product or service on social media (Chaffey & Smith, 2017).

At the same time, a phenomenon closely related to influencer marketing is word of mouth marketing (Kingsnorth 2016). It is understood as the phenomenon of ordinary people talking about a brand to other people - thus marketing it in an everyday context - word of mouth marketing is, initially, not a paid concept. However, marketers can generate own, paid, word of mouth marketing (Thomas & Housden, 2017, p. 305). This is called amplified word of mouth marketing: Arnhold (2010, p. 83) draws on the Word of Mouth Marketing Association (WOMMA) and its description of amplified word of mouth marketing versus organic word of mouth marketing, stating that "[o]rganic [word of mouth marketing] occur[s] naturally when people are happy with a product and have a natural desire to share their support and enthusiasm", but "[o]n the contrary, amplified [word of mouth marketing] occur[s] when marketers launches campaigns in order to accelerate [word of mouth marketing] in existing or new communities". In an online context, amplified word of mouth marketing is essentially the same as influencer marketing (Thomas & Housden, 2017, p. 305), but Thomas and Housden (2017, p. 259) states that it is not reserved for the internet, and that companies might hire people to recommend their products in everyday settings such as bars or even taxis.

3.3.1.5 Devices

Besides the different digital channels/methods for meeting consumers, Chaffey and Smith also stress the significance of the physical devices that connect consumers to the electronic market space. The average modern consumer owns 3.64 devices that offer Internet access (Chaffey & Smith, 2017, p. 5). Whereas desktops (PCs) used to be the preferred device, mobile devices are now the most-used objects for entering the online world, especially in terms of social media (Kingsnorth, 2016, p. 151), and the trend will likely continue to grow in the future (Thomas & Housden, 2017, p. 6). That affects digital marketing efforts as well, as different devices offer different consumer experiences. This means that marketers need to tailor their online efforts in order to meet the needs of different devices and take into account the popularity of various devices as well as the fit between type of marketing activity and device. Some activities are better suited for certain devices than others - just like some offline commercials are better suited for billboards than newspapers, etc.

As a more hands-on and digitally focused supplement to the SOSTAC model, Chaffey and Smith (2017, p. 45) recommends the RACE planning system (Figure 1) in order for companies to gain a structured approach to the many aspects of digital marketing. The planning system is a model that helps marketers get an overview of the stages of the consumer journey and where specific digital marketing tactics can and should be applied in order to reach desired objectives. The model, in other words, matches marketing objectives with stages in the consumer journey. It first and foremost differs from marketing plans of the past - including Chaffey and Smith's own SOSTAC model - in that it is purely digital.

Applying a number of Chaffey and Smith's eight key activities within digital marketing in practice, marketers should, according to the model, first and foremost embrace an integrated digital marketing strategy. They should, among other things, use search engine marketing, social media and various types of content marketing to reach and attract customers while they are exploring their purchase opportunities. Then, marketers should make their product stand out to customers through a great website which includes further content marketing and a customer community. A company's website should, as the model states, "Be worth finding" (Chaffey & Smith 2017, p. 45). Marketers should then convince customers to choose their product over competitors' products through, among other things, promotions and the price and quality of the product as communicated by the marketer. Finally, marketers should engage customers in the digital marketing effort in order for them to function as advocates for the product and thus be a part of attracting new customers.

Summing up, digital marketing is characterized by its many different shapes and formats that all contribute differently to stakeholders' experiences with the brand. This can be a complex matter, but it simultaneously offers marketers a broad range of diverse opportunities for the brand to reach customers. Models such as the RACE planning system and the SOSTAC model - and the philosophy behind them - can help marketers effectively operate within the complex electronic market space.
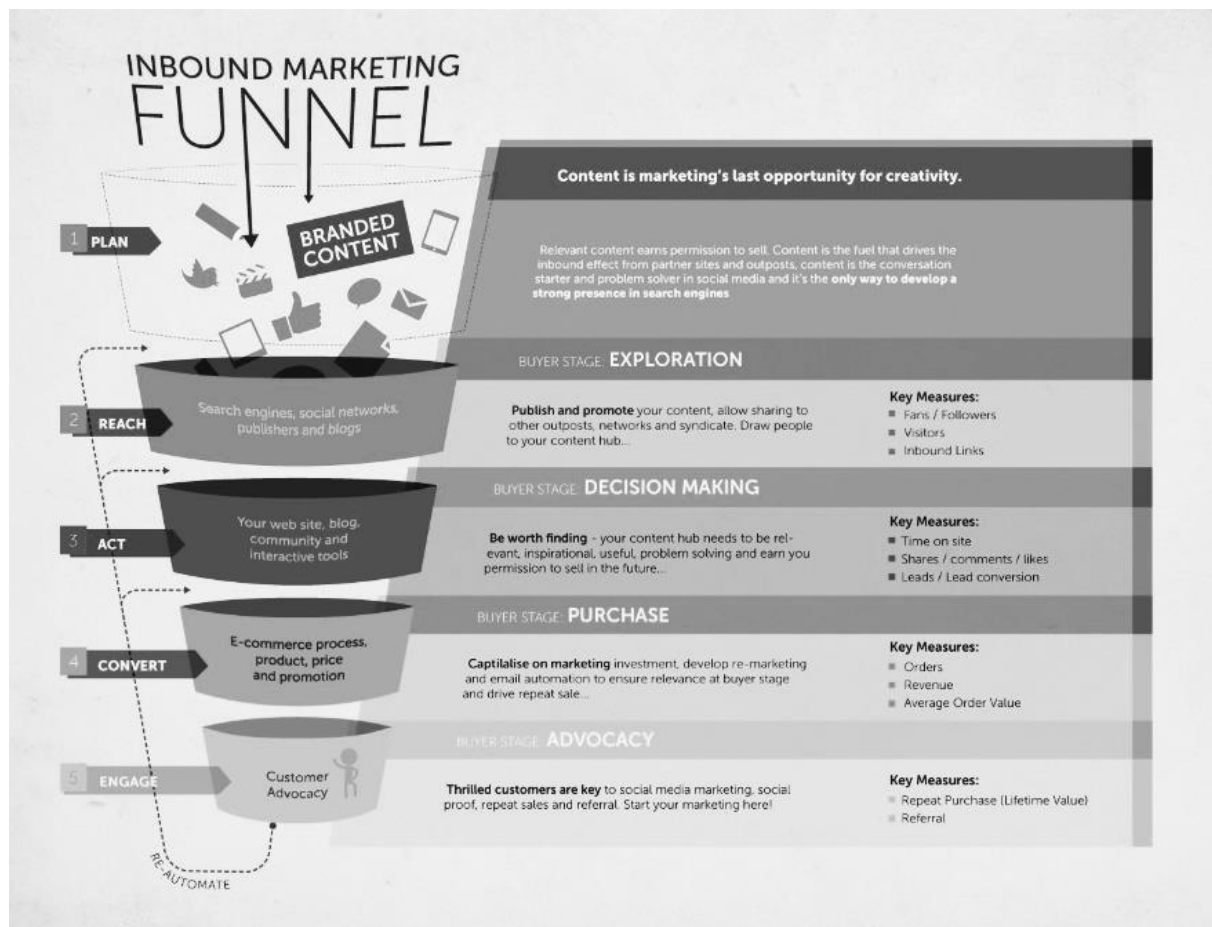
Figure 1: The RACE planning system

4. Analysis

In the analysis, the empirical findings will be examined and compared with the theory. The chapter will start by assessing how a brand is constituted, and how it should be defined in the context of Widex. Next, organizational factors for brand consistency are analyzed. And, finally, the study will analyze how a large enterprise like Widex operates through the different digital marketing channels and how this affects brand consistency.

4.1 The Constitution of a Brand

As the literature review demonstrated, scholars disagree about the nature of a brand. This study takes the perspective that a non-metaphorically brand does not exist, because the perspective of a brand, as presented in chapter 2, stipulated that brands are constituted by communication. Before the research question can be answered, the study needs to develop a clear concept of what this entails.

The "Three brand concepts of stakeholder branding" presented in the theory chapter do not ascribe to the notion that communication constitutes brands. However, the analysis will use them to elaborate on the said notion and brand consistency by comparing these concepts to the empirical findings.

4.1.1 Prioritizing stakeholders

P. Holmen believes that every stakeholder influences the brand (Appendix 1, 11:50-13:12), and so do all the interview subjects (Appendix 2; Appendix 4; Appendix 3). As presented in the theory, Jones (2005) agrees with this assumption, hence he argues that companies must consider how multiple stakeholders create value in the brand-building process.

Moreover, Jones (2005) makes an important contribution to the perspective of stakeholder branding by stressing that some stakeholders are more salient than other. On this matter, Jones' model of stakeholder-brand value can be used to prioritize stakeholders in primary and secondary ones. Jones (2005) argues that primary stakeholders are those that interact regularly, contribute to brand strategy, and are attractive, which relates to how important they are to the company. P. Holmen finds that customers and partners do influence the brand, but not in the same clear and direct way as employees (Appendix 1, 12:58-13:12). Additionally, R. Bech explains how Widex includes employees' brand perception in the formulation of corporate brand identity (Appendix 2, 15:10-15:45). Needless to say, employees interact regularly about the brand. The findings also show that they contribute to brand strategy, and they are crucial to the company in general. Therefore, employees can be categorized as primary stakeholders according to the stakeholder-brand value model.

According to R. Bech, Widex' primary target group is professional dispensers of hearing aids (Appendix 8). Additionally, P. Lund tells that her objective as a sales rep is to prepare and equip hearing aid dispensers to sell and dispense Widex hearing aids (Appendix 4, 06:46-07:20). Hearing aids cannot be purchased without consumers going through a professional; hence the hearing professional has a significant role to Widex. Widex regularly interact with customers, strategy is formed to appeal to customers, and they are attractive. This makes business professionals (i.e. B2B customers) a primary stakeholder group (Jones, 2005).

In relation to brand consistency this is important to notice, because it means that not all communication is equally important to the brand. For example, employees and business customers should be prioritized in branding.

P. Lund finds that her and her colleagues perceive the brand in different ways (Appendix 4, 15:03-15:43). Additionally, the survey with Widex employees shows that employees have different stories about the Widex brand (Appendix 9). Moreover, the survey indicates that the same stakeholder tends to tell different stories according to the circumstances. This contradicts Jones (2005), who groups all employees in one box. Hence, this complexity is something which his model does not capture and explain.

All in all, Jones (2005) stresses the fact that relationship-building is highly important and that some relationships should be prioritized over others. Jones (2005), however, fails to provide a comprehensive model that examines how brands are co-constructed.

4.1.2 The organic view of the brand

The fact that P. Lund and her colleagues perceive the brand very differently even though they are all employees is covered by Iglesias, Ind and Alfaro (2013). Their organic view of the brand finds that meanings are subjective and formed on a micro-level.

P. Kloppenborg recalls how she constructs stories herself in different situations. "I make something up myself, I think, and it can be things that I have heard from here. I cannot rule out that something has stuck, but I do make some things up myself in relation to what is so good about our hearing aids" (Appendix 3, 32:23-33:02). The organic view of the brand explains this by illustrating how individual stakeholders are related and affect each other. This means that P. Kloppenborg will tell different stories because she interacts with different stakeholders. In these interactions, she influences brand meaning of the stakeholder(s) she interacts with, and she is herself influenced by the stakeholder(s) (Iglesias, Ind, & Alfaro, 2013).

Moreover, the organic view of the brand model highlights the importance of brand interfaces as the places where non-human attributes of the brand meets consumers (Iglesias, Ind, & Alfaro, 2013, p. 678). In the case of Widex, this is, for example, where hearing aid solutions make the brand tangible. Products are non-human tangibles expressing the brand, however, as the model shows these brand interfaces do not exclude humans to be there along with the products. As P. Lund puts it, "So in my work with such a private shop, which sells hearing aids for 30,000 DKK, it is enormously important that they know to the bones of our hearing aids what they can achieve with their customers with different hearing" (Appendix 4, 06:46-07:20). P. Lund supports the products she sell in order to make sure that it 'comes alive'. To her, products are a huge part of the Widex brand, and in the brand interfaces, she finds that products, service and selling should be interconnected (Appendix 4). Accordingly, P. Kloppenborg also finds that high quality service should follow high quality products (Appendix 3, 16:00-16:48). Hence, brand interfaces matter to brand consistency because product and service relate.

The brand interfaces are also where external stakeholders are met with Widex' digital and printed brand expressions, which P. Holmen and R. Bech are some of the primary stakeholders in delivering content to. As the model shows, the brand interfaces are very important because this is where the organization and its members are able to influence external stakeholders under the company's name. As mentioned, R. Bech works in this space, and she describes her job as gatekeeping because she needs to make sure that everything is branded before it is used externally (Appendix 2, 03:58-04:12). For example, she makes sure that sales companies have branded their communication with Widex logo and Widex graphics before it goes out (Appendix 2, 02:48-03:15). This way the communication does not become arbitrary, and it increases consistency because the communication clearly is spoken "on behalf of" the Widex organization (Schoeneborn & Blaschke, 2014, p. 294). According to Iglesias, Ind and Alfaro (2013), consistency in the brand interfaces are crucial as they argue that "The construction of a leading brand requires consistent management across a number of interfaces" (p. 678).

The brand interfaces, however, are not the only places where brand meaning is constructed. This happens when employees, like P. Kloppenborg, makes up their own stories in connection with colleagues, customers, family, friends, etc. as well. Furthermore, "Brand stories may emanate from a commercial context but be retold and transmitted by customers who perpetuate a brand's history and identity" (Berthon, Pitt, & Campbell, 2009, p. 359). This (re)produces brand meaning, thus this conception is important to recognize. Iglesias, Ind and Alfaro highlight this phenomenon by connecting stakeholders outside the brand interfaces. This means that brand communication, from primary stakeholders, can happen in any context not controlled by the company. This challenges consistency,

The organic view of the brand model captures the organic and dynamic nature of a brand, but it has two conceptual flaws. First, the brand interfaces only involve organization and consumers, which is too narrow-minded. In the case of Widex, for example, their primary stakeholders are business customer which means that more than consumers co-create the brand. Furthermore, also media, competitors, opinion-makers, etc. can induce brand meaning (Appendix 1, 14:20-14:37). Second, the model connects individuals, but these do not construct the brand *per se*. It is the understanding of brand that matters (Luhmann, 1995).

4.1.3 Brands as action nets

P. Lund focuses very much on getting to know her customers and she mirrors them to make them feel comfortable (Appendix 4, 10:06-10:30). Similarly, P. Kloppenborg tells that Customer Service handle their customers in different ways because their priority is to cater to various customer needs (Appendix 3, 01:00-02:44). This illustrates that stakeholders change their actions in order to relate and appeal to customers. Therefore, Hemetsberger and von Wallpach (2013) argue that these actions are brand defining instead of the stakeholders executing them. This means that branding is not about thinking in terms of connected actors, it is about "actions and narratives, rather than (…) their sources" (Hemetsberger & von Wallpach, 2013, p. 6). Action Net Theory, thus, inspires to contemplate that stakeholders do not (re)produce the brand, but what they do with the brand does.

"The product is the product", P. Holmen tells (Appendix, 04:49-05:19). According to him, this cannot be changed. However, he elaborates on this by saying that the story, the training and the service surrounding it can be changed. Therefore, these actions are very crucial in the brand-building process. Hemetsberger and von Wallpach (2013) find that such actions are connected in a network which brings meaning to the brand.

Stakeholder actions, however, do not adequately clarify the construction of brands. As Luhmann (1986) argues, "The concept of action would only cover utterance and information but not understanding (Schoeneborn & Blaschke, 2014, p. 290). When P. Holmen says that the product is the product, this does not mean that stakeholders will not put different meanings into it. P. Lund has already explained how she approaches customers differently, thus customers are presented with different product stories (Appendix 4). Hence, Action Net Theory fails to consider that P. Kloppenborg's and P. Lund's actions need to be (mis)understood before they create meaning.

4.1.4 Brands as constituted by communication

Social systems, including organizations, are constituted by communication (Brummans *et al.*, 2013, p. 184; Luhmann, 1995). Brands are phenomena descending from the communication (re)producing social systems;

hence brands are to be conceptualized as constituted by communication as well. This entails that a brand's context will change over time and place (Schwandt, 2000) and, hence, so will the brand.

In relation to the findings above, this means that some communication is more defining because it stems from primary stakeholders (Jones, 2005). Moreover, it means that tangible communication (e.g. products, advertising) in the brand interfaces is easier controlled than intangible communication (e.g. P. Lund supporting the customers). However, these are related. This view is concordant with the thesis' constructivist perspective; hence brand consistency is a matter of aligning communication (information, utterance and understanding) and must be studied on this premise.

Widex does not carry any objective meaning. Neither is P. Lund nor P. Kloppenborg capable of delivering objective, true brand meaning to their associates. Instead, individuals must induce meaning to the brand that changes with the context as the case of Widex confirms. Therefore, individuals change their interactions, and the meaning they develop from it, every time new communication emerges (Cornelissen, Christensen, & Kinuthia, 2012). That needs to be taken into account.

P. Lund explains that she handles customers on the basis of all the knowledge that she has gained over the years (Appendix 4, 02:45-02:55). Thus, she automatically takes advantage of her previous experiences. This corresponds with the recursive nature of communication which means that every communication builds on top of previous communication (Luhmann, 2003). Consequently, this results in an interlocking network of communication episodes. Moreover, the communications are not fixed because contexts always change (Appendix 3; Appendix 4; Appendix 9). Therefore it does not make sense to look at stable individuals because it is communication episodes that are emerging and (re)producing the brand.

In an organizational context, communication episodes are taking place all the time, but of course not all of these communications are equally defining for how the brand is perceived. As already presented, Jones (2005) distinguishes between stakeholder groups. This is not adequate though. The same stakeholder in customer service can sometimes engage in communication which is brand defining and other times in some that is not (Appendix 3, 16:00-16:48). Jones' does not take this into account.

To separate communications that are relevant from those who are not, it is essential to look at Luhmann's notion of *decision communications* (Brummans *et al*., 2013). "If communications do not concern decisions, they merely constitute interactions" (Brummans *et al*., 2013, p. 185). Thus, decision communication can be defined as communication that makes a stakeholder (re)produce meaning about the brand.

P. Lund explains how a customer has told her that "Pia Lund is Widex. She is implicit Widex" (Appendix 4, 16:04-16:09). This example means that P. Lund's communication with the customer has led to the customer making a decision about associating Widex with P. Lund. Another example comes from the interview with R. Bech. She explains that Widex is surveying its employees about how they perceive the Widex brand (Appendix 2, 15:10-15:45). Afterwards these ideas are taken into account and a narrative is developed based on them. That is an example of how interactions with employees encourage Widex to take a decision regarding how to define corporate brand identity. Accordingly, it illustrates how communication, which influences stakeholders to make decisions about what *they* communicate about the brand, constitutes it.

4.2 Brand Definition

As the literature review proves, different scholars within the branding literature have dissimilar views on branding's disciplinary scope. Accordingly, theory has turned its focus from product branding to corporate branding. Hence, this analytical section will examine how a brand should be defined by assessing the notion of product brand and corporate brand in the practical context of Widex.

4.2.1 Corporate branding

According to Abratt and Kleyn (2011), the corporate brand consists of corporate expressions and stakeholder images. The corporate expressions are the activities which express corporate identity, and the brand is developed when stakeholders interpret these expressions. A customer believes P. Lund to be synonymous with Widex (16:04-16:09) which means that whatever P. Lund expresses, the customer believes it to be Widex' expressions. Stakeholders only interact with elements or parts of an organization's corporate identity (Abratt & Kleyn, 2011), hence customer service agents and sales reps represent crucial stakeholder groups because they are some of the employees with the most customer interaction (Appendix 3; Appendix 4). Therefore, they are (un)consciously spreading corporate brand meaning to customers (Schultz & de Chernatony, 2002; Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2012, p. 1506).

Balmer and Gray (2003) find that "a corporate brand is contingent" (p. 980), hence a company can choose not to have one. The findings contradict this belief as the above-mentioned example with P. Lund proves that customers will form a corporate brand in their mind whether Widex chooses to have one or not. As Watzlawick, Bavelas and Jackson (1967) state, we cannot not communicate (p. 49). Because brands are socially constructed, multiple stakeholders will always have a meaning about Widex, hence (re)producing the corporate brand. Companies need to acknowledge this and therefore the corporate brand is hugely affected by the internal brand-building process. R. Bech agrees with this view, as she mentions how, "From my point

of view, the corporate brand and the employer brand is connected. They should always be aligned" (Appendix 2, 17:32-18:03).

At Widex, the brand has historically been built on and by product launches (Appendix 1, 03:30-03:44). Accordingly, this is very clear when speaking to the employees. In the survey, most respondents feel that Widex' communication is about products (Appendix 9), and both P. Lund and P. Kloppenborg are very product-focused when they have to define the Widex brand (Appendix 4, 14:14-15:00; Appendix 3, 20:02-20:20). P. Kloppenborg, however, explains how the product focus is not always enough and she recognizes that customer service needs deeper insights into what Widex stands for (Appendix 3, 21:06-21:31). Accordingly, Balmer and Gray (2003) state that "There is an increasing realisation that corporate brands serve as a powerful navigational tool to a variety of stakeholders" (p. 972-973). This view is concordant with P. Kloppenborg's situation as she expresses that she misses the navigation tool that the corporate brand can be. That a corporate brand is missing is also explicit in the very different answers the employees give about the Widex brand (Appendix 9). Moreover, R. Bech, like P. Kloppenborg, experiences that product branding is not enough because it does not make stakeholders aware of Widex in between product launches (Appendix 2, 10:28-10:50). Hence, product brands are temporary where the corporate brand is long-term (Iglesias, Ind, & Alfaro, 2013).

Abratt and Kleyn (2011) find that corporate brands focus on all stakeholders whereas product brands only concern the customers. The communication unit at Widex is aware of this, and therefore, P. Holmen confirms that something is happening in regard to building a corporate story about Widex (Appendix 1, 03:55-04:22). R. Bech believes that Widex is very early in the process of building a corporate brand (Appendix 2, 04:30-04:40), but she agrees with P. Holmen, who says, "…our customers buy more and more into the overall corporate brand and the offers that the overall brand provides instead of the individual products" (04:23-04:38).

According to P. Holmen, it is very important that the corporate brand is differentiated from competitors. Therefore, Widex cannot just brand itself based on audiological and technical expertise, because competitors possess similar attributes (Appendix 1). Instead, he argues that Widex has to consider, "where we can differentiate ourselves from competitors, and here you take a look at what history do we have, how is the company built, what are our values" (Appendix 1, 06:15-09:30). Adding to this, P. Holmen argues that Widex has an advantage by being a family-owned company which offers flexibility, independency and credibility. Especially, credibility is a key word to P. Lund when working with customers (Appendix 4, 08:01-08:29). Also, she explains that she actually aims to tell stakeholders about the Widex legacy (Appendix 4, 13:30-14:07).

The identity the employees perceive the brand to have is fundamental in the brand-building process (Hatch & Schultz, 2010). As the stakeholder-value model shows, employees are crucial in producing brand meaning. Therefore, it is very adverse for the meaning of the brand that P. Kloppenborg admits not really knowing what Widex' brand is (Appendix 3, 20:02-20:20). Moreover, P. Holmen and R. Bech, who both work in Brand and Communications, are concerned with creating a strong corporate brand. Simultaneously, P. Kloppenborg highlights the Widex brand as "great sound" (Appendix 3, 16:54-17:00), and Similarly, P. Lund turns to product characteristics, when she is asked about the Widex brand. Hence, there is a misperception about what the brand should entail.

"Users are increasingly aware of the discrepancy between a producer brand's claim and the actual behavior of its corporate owner (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Füller, Schroll, & von Hippel, 2013; Holt, 2002). Therefore, it can lead to discrepancy in brand meaning if headquarters communicate about the corporate brand, while front-line employees communicate something else entirely. Such gaps between stakeholder perceptions and brand promise made by the corporation are main threats to the corporate brand (Iglesias, Ind, & Alfaro, 2013, p. 672). Hence, ideally employees should be aligned and consistent in their expressions.

The interviews with Widex employees confirm the importance and benefits of having a corporate brand. P. Holmen and R. Bech's acknowledgement hereof is aligned with the shift in branding literature's focus from product branding towards the corporate brand. However, the findings also illustrate how the brand can be inconsistent if the primary stakeholders are not aligned.

The next section discusses how a corporate brand can even be a source of sustainable competitive advantage.

4.2.1.1 The resource-based view of corporate brand

"The resource-based view of the firm helps us understand why corporate branding imparts long-lasting value. This economic theory is based on the proposition that firms are heterogeneous in terms of their resources and internal capabilities, and that these resources and capabilities can provide the basis for superior performance if they meet specific criteria" (Balmer & Gray, 2003, p. 983). Building on Barney's (1991) VRIN-framework to understand sources of sustainable competitive advantage, Balmer and Gray (2003) claim that a corporate brand can be such a resource. To have this potential, a corporate brand must be valuable, rare, imperfectly imitable, and non-substitutable (Barney, 1991, p. 105-106). Widex' corporate brand will be analyzed with this framework in order to evaluate whether it should be prioritized for establishing brand consistency.

Value

First of all, the corporate brand must be valuable. This means that customers are attracted by it and that they want to buy in to it. R. Bech experiences that corporate branding is exactly what stakeholders are interested in on social media (Appendix 2, 08:47-08:58), and P. Holmen also explains that the corporate brand is what customers buy (Appendix 1, 04:23-04:38). Additionally, Balmer and Gray (2003) share the same perception in terms of the value of a corporate brand.

This does not mean that a corporate brand covers all stakeholder needs though. P. Lund tells that hearing care professionals need to know a lot about the products before they buy them (Appendix 4, 08:38-09:20). Moreover, P. Kloppenborg experiences that customers are very concerned with products and services which means that a corporate brand does not cover every need. Its value is dependable on the stakeholder and the context.

Rarity

Second, the corporate brand must be rare. Widex' corporate brand originates from the legacy of its founders and it is deeply rooted in the fact that the company is still family-owned (Appendix 1, 06:15-09:30). These factors make the corporate brand rare because "a competitor cannot easily purchase it in the marketplace" (Balmer & Gray, 2003, p. 983). A product can be developed and copied, but a company's history is always unique.

However, with this being said, it does not mean that a competitor could not have a similar rare background and history.

Imperfect imitability

Third, a corporate brand must be imperfectly imitable, which it can be for two reasons: First, R. Bech tells how she makes sure that visual expressions like logo, names, etc. are kept consistent and present across all content (Appendix 2, 02-48-03:34). These elements are trademarked, and thus imperfectly imitable. Second, the notion of a brand in itself is intangible (Balmer & Gray, 2003). That makes it hard to grasp and inimitable as well.

Non-substitutability

Fourth, a corporate brand must be non-substitutable to be a source of competitive advantage. As the interviews show, customers are not only concerned with the corporate brand but with products and services as well. Concretely, P. Kloppenborg tells that their public customer Bispebjerg Sygehus is very fond of Widex, however, "they are not more faithful or loyal than if the [Widex] shelves are empty and the necessary hearing

aid is not present to their client at the moment, they will take whatever [competitive] product is next to it" (Appendix 3, 06:40-07:15). This illustrates how customers can be inclined to substitute the corporate brand due to pragmatic issues. Moreover, the customers need to know the products and they need to have the service that comes with them (Appendix 4; Appendix 3). This indicates that the corporate brand will be substituted if products and services are more interesting elsewhere. Thus, claiming that a corporate brand cannot be substituted is not true.

In conclusion, the case of Widex shows how it is problematic to claim that a corporate brand is a strong source of sustainable competitive advantage. Moreover, it is essential to realize that Barney (1991) is associated with the design school of strategic management, which takes a clear inside-out perspective on strategy formation (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, & Lampel, 2009). However, stakeholder interpretations are what define the brand, and if they do not perceive it to be valuable, rare, imperfectly imitable or non-substitutable, it is not an advantage. Therefore, a corporate brand cannot be a source of sustainable competitive advantage by definition.

As already implied, products and services are crucial elements of Widex' communication. The next section will analyze this further.

4.2.2 Product and service branding

P. Lund experiences that customers need to be handled differently, and she focuses on meeting their needs by mirroring them (Appendix 4, 10:06-10:30). Similarly, P. Kloppenborg tells that customer service must be very pragmatic when they interact with customers (Appendix 3, 11:08-11:40). These examples indicate that customer interaction often happens on the customers' terms, and customers are often interested in products and services (Appendix 3, Appendix 4). Therefore, P. Kloppenborg, even though she misses a corporate brand, also finds that customer service would benefit from a more brand-minded and knowledgeable approach in regard to product USPs, narratives, benefits, etc. (Appendix 3, 11:40-12:56).

In sales calls and services call, customers are concerned with products. On Widex' social media platforms the same issues assert themselves where interactions mainly concern products as well (Appendix 2, 19:50-21:27). Even though brand management is shifting focus towards corporate branding (Iglesias & Bonet, 2012), it seems that product and service branding should not be neglected. Mäläskä, Saraniemi and Tähtinen (2011) agree with this viewpoint and find that product brands and corporate brands are inseparable. Also, P. Holmen states that, "there should be a strong connection between the two (i.e. corporate brand and product brands)" (Appendix 1, 04:23-04:38).

Products are evidently the topic of much customer interaction. That is why P. Kloppenborg sees a need for more product familiarity because it is a significant part of her job. Product branding is crucial, not only because it obviously is relevant to customers, but also because product branding in general should influence product development and innovation (Appendix 1, 25:00-25:34). This happens internally, but also externally where research shows how brand communities can be great sources of product innovation (Antorini & Muñiz, 2013; Füller, Jawecki, & Muehlbacher, 2007). Therefore, both corporate brand and product brands need to be recognized and prioritized because they pose valuable contributions on different levels. Moreover, they need to be aligned to avoid perception gaps (Kenyon, Manoli, & Badet, 2018) and to create common knowledge bases among stakeholders (Berthon, Pitt, & Campbell, 2009).

Widex Nordic works with various customer groups (Appendix 3, 03:10-04:23). Even though customers differ greatly, P. Kloppenborg recalls that customer service always make a virtue out of handling all customers equally. "We can tell that those who use our hearing aids, the audiologists in the public clinics, to them it also means a lot that they can feel that when you call us and need help, you get a good service, the necessary support and is not left behind" (Appendix 3, 05:15-05:45). As P. Holmen explains, Widex' customers not only want to buy products, they also want to buy services (Appendix 1, 04:49-05:19).

Branding is moving towards a service-dominant logic (Merz, He, & Vargo, 2009; Vargo & Lusch, 2004), which needs to be acknowledged in the brand-building process. Customer service, obviously, concentrates a lot on delivering good service, and to P. Kloppenborg, products and services are linked and they both contribute in constituting the Widex brand (Appendix 3, 16:54-17:00). According to P. Lund, service also plays an important role in her position as a sales rep. This is evident in the fact that she is very concerned with equipping the hearing aid dispensers to handle their clients (Appendix 4, 08:01-08:29). Also, in relation to digital marketing, R. Bech mentions that Widex works with preparing and supporting customers with digital content (Appendix 2, 25:47-26:02).

"While managers have a crucial role, personnel – and especially front-line employees – are at the heart of service and corporate brands" (Iglesias, Ind, & Alfaro, 2013, p. 673). At the 'heart', the findings show that products and services are brand constitutive elements, hence they should be integrated in the strategic brand choices (Abratt & Kleyn, 2011). Even though a lot of scholars have turned to solely concentrating on corporate brands, product and service branding should not be neglected. Selling products and services supports the corporate brand as interdependent activities (Hatch & Schultz, 2010, p. 592).

4.3 Organizational Factors for Brand Consistency

"Brand consistency refers to the standardization and preservation, over time and place, of a defined brand image and associated meanings" (Beverland, Wilner, & Micheli, 2015, p. 590). As found in the previous chapter, companies benefit from focusing on corporate branding because stakeholders are attracted by it, and it comprises a multi-stakeholder focus. Moreover, the empirical data found that the brand-building process should include product and service branding as well.

The next section will concentrate on organizational factors in Widex that affects brand consistency.

4.3.1 Brand expressions

"When Kurt goes to the audiologist in Sdr. Omme and needs to buy the [Widex] story, then it should be the same message that Jens Ejner meets in Hellerup when he does the same (…) at some point the customers meet and says 'that was pretty cool because Widex actually stands for something transparent and reliable that I can buy in to'" (Appendix 1, 02:46-03:25). As Head of Brand and Communications, P. Holmen experiences the importance of realizing consistent expressions that make the Widex brand clear and consistent in the mind of customers, no matter where they meet and interpret the brand. Brand consistency is about aligning stakeholders' knowledge bases which is facilitated through consistent expressions (Berthon, Pitt, & Campbell, 2009). Thus, P. Holmen is very concerned with developing a brand identity is perceived consistently across channels and touchpoints (Appendix 1, 02:00-02:17).

Widex works with both businesses and consumers (Appendix 3, 00:20-01:00), and P. Kloppenborg recalls that they aim to handle all stakeholders consistently by providing the same great service no matter the context (Appendix 3, 05:58-06:07). Accordingly, P. Lund and R. Bech both focus on equipping business partners to handle Widex' products and communication when business partners work with their customers. By providing this level of service, Widex not only attracts customers, but they also make sure that external brand stakeholders are able to communicate a consistent narrative to their peers (Appendix 1, 15:22-15:34). Consistent service thus means that Widex' business partners and Widex dispensers are inclined to deliver consistent brand messages to their stakeholders, e.g. colleagues and customers. Consequently, this means that services function as brand expressions as well.

P. Holmen thinks that Widex should develop a relevant brand concept (Appendix 1, 01:36-01:50) that is delivered consistently by communicating the same company-selected brand meaning across websites, sales pitches and product launches (Appendix 1, 10:24-11:21). Specifically, R. Bech makes sure that every digital content piece is branded with Widex images and logos before they are shared with retailers and sales compa-

nies. This is a way to keep control of the visual expressions (Appendix 2, 02:48-03:34), and it entails recognizability. Consequently, the ideal is that logos become irrelevant because consistent expressions over time have meant that stakeholders are well aware of the brand from just a few characteristics (Appendix 2, 18:47-19.00). By setting up rules for external expression, the communication spoken "on behalf of" the organization (Schoeneborn & Blaschke, 2014, p. 294) becomes consistent when it meets stakeholders in the brand touchpoints. Additionally, P. Holmen believes that the brand stakeholders will perceive the Widex brand more uniformly if Widex execute consistently through all channels (Appendix 1, 14:40-15:15).

Every day the brand is (re)produced in brand expressions which take place in customer service, at sales calls, through digital marketing, etc. At theses touchpoints, Widex employees are able to influence and induce brand consistency. Therefore, internal brand alignment is key in ensuring that the network of communication becomes as consistent as possible. This will be examined in the next section.

4.3.2 The flow and form of information

In agreement with the analysis above, R. Bech finds that employees should verbalize the brand in a fairly similar way as they agree on the same brand identity (Appendix 2, 13:08-13:25). She bases this on experience because she has seen how sales companies that are creating, modifying and localizing content results in unsuccessful outcomes (Appendix 2, 04:45-05:05). Asking Widex employees, all, except one, answer that they know the Widex brand to a high or very high degree (Appendix 9). This seems like a very positive result, but when they are asked to describe the Widex brand, they give very different answers. The same goes for P. Kloppenborg who is not sure about the brand's meaning.

In relation to this, over half of the survey respondents think that Widex only to a small degree communicate brand stories (Appendix 9). P. Lund experiences this lack of sharing as well, and she feels that headquarters do not put an effort into communicating with sales companies. Asked about this, she answers, "I do not think that it (i.e. information) comes naturally from headquarters" (Appendix 4, 19:25-19:56). Moreover, P. Kloppenborg misses transparency in the internal communication that does come (Appendix 3, 24:55-25:05). She recalls that customer service agents are usually introduced to very sales-oriented presentations when they are informed about news in the organization. Instead she would like a "more nuanced description of what Widex is going out with" (Appendix 3, 13:40-14:48).

Since brand consistency depends on common knowledge bases (Berthon, Pitt, & Campbell, 2009), the lack of information can lead to perception gaps. Consequently, this will result in inconsistent communication when employees share their perceptions with other stakeholders going forward. According to P. Holmen, some of this inconsistency can be handled by practicing appropriate brand governance (Appendix 1, 21:20-

22:00). Specifically, this entails constant communication about the importance of brand alignment and compliance with Widex' brand guidelines combined with gatekeeper positions (Appendix 1; Appendix 2). Also, the brand governance should include a high level of transparency (Hatch & Schultz, 2010) and regular information as P. Kloppenborg argues that they need it in their jobs (Appendix 3, 21:06-21:31; 24:55-25:05).

Transparency not only concerns employees but should involve all stakeholders. When external stakeholders are met with transparent communication, it has positive effects into the stakeholders extended networks as well (Hatch & Schultz, 2010, p. 595). Therefore, "Rather than asking what information managers dare share with people outside the organisation, they must ask if there are good reasons for holding information back. The more individuals know, the more they can contribute to the brand-building process so that the brand is relevant to them" (Iglesias, Ind, & Alfaro, 2013, p. 685).

4.3.3 A two-way flow

P. Lund does not really feel involved in the communication at Widex. When asked about it, she answers: "well a little, but not really. Because it is decided from the top what we should communicate. Nobody ever ask about how I would communicate it. In that way it is one-way communication I would say (…) This I could miss a little... that we could communicate both ways." (Appendix 4, 17:23-17:55). P. Lund's opinion on the lack of involvement is something that she shares with lots of her colleagues as the Widex employees also believe that the brand is predominantly defined by top management (Appendix 9).

According to P. Kloppenborg, it would be optimal if headquarters could deliver relevant brand messages that would align headquarters and sales companies (Appendix 3, 22:55-23:32). However, as she acknowledges, "if you only sit with your own little area then it makes sense that if you do not get out and hear what actually is going on… just like the situation in customer service. If we only sit and talk to dealers and clinics but not really understand what their everyday challenges are, then it can be very difficult" (Appendix 3, 25:16-25:36). Hence, P. Kloppenborg argues for the importance of involvement and insights into different areas of the business because it would make alignment easier (Appendix 3, 25:55-26:02). Employees are bearers of cultural values and involving them therefore results in a more relevant and shared brand identity (Cornelissen, Christensen, & Kinuthia, 2012, p. 1096). A sales rep with more than 25 years of experience, which P. Lund has, arguably carries a lot of knowledge and experience with her. Therefore, it does not make sense not to take advantage of her many years in the business. Something that P. Lund would find amazing, thus she wonders why she is never asked and included (Appendix 4, 18:02-18:15).

As a response, Widex has started to focus on employee advocacy to get employees more involved and conscious about their roles as ambassadors (Appendix 2, 12:47-13:00). "Employees play an important role in

expressing and delivering to the brand promise and need to be trained and encouraged accordingly." (Abratt & Kleyn, 2011, p. 1054), hence employer branding can make employees feel included and enhance knowledge and transparency. Additionally, R. Bech experiences that it is much more effective to have humans telling brand stories instead of the corporation (Appendix 2, 16:17-16:56). Not only because employees then feel included but also because "employees reflect this belief in their interactions with clients and other stakeholders" (Iglesias, Ind, & Alfaro, 2013, p. 673).

Therefore it is discouraging that P. Lund tells how she is incapable of sharing experiences from the field because she does not know who to contact or where to go (Appendix 4, 20:16-20:49). Likewise, P. Kloppenborg misses channels or systems for sharing besides the CRM system for complaint handling (Appendix 3, 17:16-18:54). Iglesias, Ind and Alfaro (2013) believe that "the brand must be capable of implementing mechanisms, processes and platforms that enable consumers and other stakeholders to provide their views, suggestions and ideas" (p. 684). Evidently, Widex needs this.

"Brand identity management is not a simple strategic top-down process any longer" (von Wallpach, Voyer, Kastanakis, & Mühlbacher, 2016, p. 397).

4.3.4 Cross-functional insights

P. Kloppenborg definitely experiences benefits from cross-functional collaboration as she finds how collaboration between marketing and customer service works very well because they, in unity, are able to solve problems and find relevant solutions to customers' needs (Appendix 3, 27:55-28:31). Moreover, to increase customer service's knowledge, they have implemented a bimonthly meeting with one of the audiology-trained sales reps where customer service gets to ask questions (Appendix 3, 19:00-19:30). Cross-functional collaborations like these are also something R. Bech mentions as she tells how she works very closely together with different teams in the organization (Appendix 2, 21:49-22:56). By collaborating with the digital marketing team, who is responsible for web pages and online user journey, the audiologists, who are experts in the industry field, and the graphical team, R. Bech stays at the forefront of the business and she makes sure that Widex' stories are consistent.

Semiotics can play an important role in constructing meaning (Iglesias & Bonet, 2012, p. 254). An example from the interview with P. Lund is how she refers to customer service as "the order office" and logistics and operations as "the packing department" (Appendix 4, 21:01-21:28). Terms like these bring forward certain connotations, which in this example are not very nuanced and neglect the potential of the two teams. P. Kloppenborg believes that customer service could support sales much more than they do today because they

take customer inputs everyday (Appendix 3, 08:10-10:19). However, if the perception is that they are 'only' an order office, they will not get listened to.

The analysis has already proven how customer service plays a crucial role in the brand-building process. Hence, misperceptions about their role can discourage consistency. A main challenge remains "that managers must persuade employees of the need to be aligned with the values of the brand" (Iglesias, Ind, & Alfaro, 2013, p. 673).

4.3.5 Local adaptation

"I follow what is coming from headquarters, but nowhere near as much as what is actually coming locally from [Widex Nordic] when marketing and the sales reps announce something because I feel that I can use it much more. It is more hands-on, it is on my level, if you can say it like that (…) The other stuff becomes(…) a little too fluffy and, again, like it is a commercial that needs to be sold to me. I do not need that", P. Kloppenborg explains (Appendix 3, 26:40-27:10). Again, P. Kloppenborg stresses the importance of keeping communication honest and transparent so she does not feel like a customer being targeted by her own colleagues. At the same time, though, she mentions another very crucial point; the fact that local information from her associates in Widex Nordic is much more relevant and useful than what she gets from headquarters.

In the Nordic markets, the business structures of the customers differ widely. For example, Sweden has a majority of public clinics, which Widex' sales representatives are only allowed to visit one time per year. Denmark, on the other hand, has a lot of private clinics that sales representatives can visit almost all the time (Appendix 3, 04:20-04:48). Structures vary from market to market, and as P. Lund finds, "Headquarters are not completely prepared to be so nuanced in every country or place in the world. It is really challenging to be so" (Appendix 4, 22:21-22:36). Accordingly, Widex Nordic very much sets the agenda by themselves. P. Kloppenborg recalls how Widex Nordic's own marketing team and the sales reps in collaboration with the customers develop what is needed (Appendix 3, 21:55-22:28). Moreover, P. Lund says about the communication with headquarters: "[I]t is not something I experience very much because I do not communicate with them. It is marketing who does that" (Appendix 4, 19:16-19:24).

Both P. Kloppenborg and P. Lund experiences how Widex Nordic marketing is adapting and localizing communication to fit the Nordic markets. As P. Lund recalls, "our marketing department are doing a lot so that us in sales get the right thoughts" (Appendix 4, 19:25-19:56). She finds it useful that marketing makes plans and delivers focus that she can follow (Appendix 4, 12:34-13:10). Likewise, P. Kloppenborg recognizes the importance of Widex Nordic's marketing team questioning headquarters deliveries because top-down communication does not necessarily fit the markets (Appendix 3, 22:37-22:49).

4.3.6 Pragmatic branding

What P. Kloppenborg, P. Lund and their colleagues experience is that communication from headquarters is irrelevant and absent (Appendix 3; Appendix 4; Appendix 9). This easily becomes the case when "the focus on reinforcing a brand's existing position may not address shifting socio-cultural expectations or challenges faced by consumers, resulting in perceptions of irrelevance" (Beverland, Wilner, & Micheli, 2015, p. 590). Additionally, P. Kloppenborg believes that Widex Nordic needs to give the brand a local twist in order to make it useful (Appendix 3, 22:55-23:32).

Both P. Lund and P. Kloppenborg experience that they need to be pragmatic in their communication instead of delivering something irrelevant. This corresponds with P. Holmen's view, "What I am very much an advocate for is related to consistency and a consistent message externally. It is not as much a mathematical consistency, which says that everything is identical. It is more an experienced consistency, which says that at first things can look differently, but seen from the other side, it is actually perceived as the same" (Appendix 1, 16:34-16:58). This is also what P. Kloppenborg aims for in customer service as she wants to keep the same level of service for all customers even though their issues differ (Appendix 3, 05:58-06:07).

An issue at Widex is that the hearing aid markets differ all over the world. Different regulations and different ways of handling hearing aids mean that even in the same country product focus differs. For example, the Danish market is divided into a public and a private sector in which dissimilar products are found. Since Widex' brand identity has relied on product launches, it becomes challenging that markets do not know and require the same products (Appendix 1, 03:30-03:44). As Gyrd-Jones and Jonas (2014) argue, front line staff is mainly concerned with product and service brands. This corresponds with the case of Widex where front line staff is branding Widex very pragmatically in order for them to cater to market's needs. Therefore one consistent brand story about products and services does not make sense, and it would be very challenging for headquarters to individualize every narrative (Appendix 4, 22:21-22:36).

Summing up, the empirical findings confirm the importance of having a corporate brand. Advantageously, a corporate brand entails all stakeholders, and it attracts external ones. At the same time, the findings also show that a corporate brand cannot attract or be valuable enough to stand alone. Stakeholders are also attracted by and concerned with products and services. Hence, these elements must be related to the corporate brand to ensure attractiveness and consistency.

Moreover, the findings prove that stakeholders will produce inconsistent meanings if they are misinformed or uninvolved in the brand. Some brand expressions can be kept consistent from central positions, for example, in marketing. This includes gatekeeping, which makes sure that visual expressions are aligned. However,

the employees recall that communication from headquarters is not always relevant and useful on a micro-level.

4.4 The Brand in the Context of Digital Marketing

4.4.1 Navigating through digital marketing channels

As previously covered, there are a large number of different methods and channels for companies to market their products or services digitally. The fast-changing digital marketing landscape offers several activities through which companies can reach, convert and retain consumers online (Chaffey & Smith, 2017). In the following, the study will analyze how a large enterprise like Widex operates through the different digital marketing channels and how a company's use of digital marketing might affect its brand consistency.

Like many other companies, Widex practices a number of different digital marketing activities. The company is present on social media, working with organic content on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and YouTube, with a few individual departments in various geographical markets also being present on Instagram. The company further conducts social media advertising on Facebook and LinkedIn and also practices SEO, Ad-Words, email marketing and digital native advertising (Appendix 8) with the help of digital marketing agency Magnetix (Magnetix, 2018a). Drawing on Chaffey and Smith's terminology (2017), Widex seems to be embracing an integrated digital marketing approach similar to the one expressed in the SOSTAC model. The company further appears to realize the demand for modern companies to meet the customer through various methods and in various settings within the electronic market space as shown in the RACE planning system.

As mentioned in the theory, each digital marketing activity in a company is operated in its own way and each activity has a specific set of purposes. Some activities are, to some extent, similar and should be approached similar, while some activities are vastly different from the others. When Widex posts on Facebook, for example, the company mostly posts product news or pathos-heavy content focusing on life with hearing loss (Appendix 5). Widex seems to dedicate its Facebook profile to communicating relatively soft and personal values while speaking directly to the end user. This is in line with Facebook's position in the market as a social media platform for users' personal life that is being used by a large number of people in a wide age group (Statista, 2018a).

On the other hand, Widex' LinkedIn profile is dominated by posts about the trends and technology of hearing aids, including, to a large extent, Widex' own. Widex seems to strive to position itself as a thought leader within the hearing aid industry and to educate followers in the industry. Accordingly, the posts often include the phrase "Food for thought" (Appendix 6). At the same time, Widex occasionally addresses the hearing

care professionals specifically, instead of addressing the end-users like the company's Facebook posts do (Appendix 6). Once again, this is in line with the common use of the social media platform. LinkedIn is viewed as a professional platform that first and foremost is used for B2B purposes rather than B2C purposes (Thomas & Housden, 2017).

4.4.1.1 A dilemma between adaptation and consistency

Several of Widex' social media posts, however, occur on both platforms (Appendix 5; Appendix 6). A lot of the posts from both platforms occur on Widex' Twitter profile as well (Appendix 7). The posts might have been adjusted from platform to platform to fit each platform's specific characteristics. On Twitter, for example, the posts have been cut short to fit Twitter's profile as a platform for short updates and news (Kingsnorth, 2016). However, the primary content is occasionally the same across the different platforms.

A company that markets through several social media platforms faces a dilemma which is clearly exemplified in the case of Widex: if a company uses different platforms, it needs to post platform-appropriate content for each specific social platform, but at the same time, it needs to be consistent throughout all aspects of its marketing.

It seems that Widex tries to balance between both. On the one hand, the company re-uses certain content across all social media platforms which gives the users a consistent experience when meeting Widex at different touchpoints within social media marketing. On the other hand, Widex is aware that certain content is better suited for LinkedIn than Facebook, for example. Overall, Widex arguably strikes a decent balance between posting similar content but still keeping the differences of the platforms in mind, but in some instances, the content on the platforms might turn out too contrasting. Examples of the latter include the aforementioned use of pathos on Facebook versus the more professional and industry-related topics on LinkedIn. Moreover, Widex' Facebook content solely addresses the end-users whereas the LinkedIn content occasionally addresses the hearing care professionals. R. Bech confirms the split focus, stating that Widex uses "different channels for the different target groups" (Appendix 8). Evidently, this contributes to less consistent brand expressions.

The issue of adapting to digital platforms while staying consistent may also be apparent within other digital marketing disciplines than social media. As mentioned, Widex applies the digital marketing methods of SEO, AdWords, email marketing and native advertising (Appendix 8). While this paper has not obtained insight in Widex' methods regarding these activities, they are crucial to consider as aspects of these activities can be brand contradictive. According to SEO expert Brian Dean (2018c), one of the most important parts of SEO is link-building, and a deciding factor within link-building is getting a link featured on external web-

sites that are of high quality and that are relevant for the company in question. If a given company, on the other hand, is featured on websites that Google deems invalid or not relevant for the company, Google could 'punish' the company by demoting the company in its SERPs (Dean, 2018b). From a brand consistency perspective, any given company would, naturally, also prefer to be featured on external websites that are brand-relevant. However, a marketing method such as digital native advertising might complicate the matter. Native advertising is a rather controversial marketing method (Brenzel, 2014) which can limit a company's options of choosing websites that may publish its native advertisements. As a result, the company could potentially be forced to select websites for its native advertising that are considered invalid or irrelevant to the company by Google, thus hurting the company's SEO. Moreover, because Google and its algorithms decide what pages are valid and relevant to the company in question, the company might even buy spots for its native advertising on websites that it believes to be valid and relevant, only to see Google decide otherwise. This would, again, compromise the company's SEO. As the company learns to understand Google preferences, it could avoid the issue by only conducting native advertising on websites that Google considers valid and relevant, thus improving its SEO - but even though they should, these websites might, in reality, not be completely in line with the company's brand, thus hurting its brand consistency. Once again, the company would have to choose between adapting to digital marketing methods and remaining true to its brand.

4.4.2 New customer habits

As the above shows, companies such as Google can be particularly threatening to regular companies' brand consistency, because it can force companies to adapt its digital marketing to comply with rules that the companies cannot affect themselves. However, one reason why companies cannot avoid Google in today's marketing is the fact that consumers' habits in the buying process have changed as the electronic market space grows (Andersen, 2014). The consumer journey has changed - and search engines play a significant role in the new reality. Companies' massive online presence has given customers much more accessible information about products and services, and the emergence of search engines has made it easier for consumers to research and navigate among these products and services (Kingsnorth, 2016). At the same time, consumers' own online presence and the ever-evolving field of digital marketing (Chaffey & Smith, 2017) has made it easier for companies to reach consumers more often and in more different settings than before.

In an attempt to map this new consumer journey, marketing agency OMD has introduced a consumer journey model, the ECO-SYSTEM model (Figure 2), which is specifically build for modern marketing and modern customer behavior (Andersen, 2014). The model especially considers search engines as a key part of the new consumer journey and how the search engines and the entire electronic market space affect the very consumer journey format (Andersen, 2014). According to OMD, previous consumer journey models, such as the AIDA model, are no longer applicable because they view the consumer journey as a linear process. Today's

buying process is much more complicated, OMD argues. Rather than viewing the process as a funnel where customers narrow down their number of buying options before eventually settling on one, marketers should view the buying process as a loop. Customers actually consider more and more options before settling on one, then re-evaluate their options and either stick with their current choice or go back to researching options, before selecting a new option, then re-evaluating again, and so on and so forth (Andersen 2014). OMD describes the process as an ecosystem (hence the name).
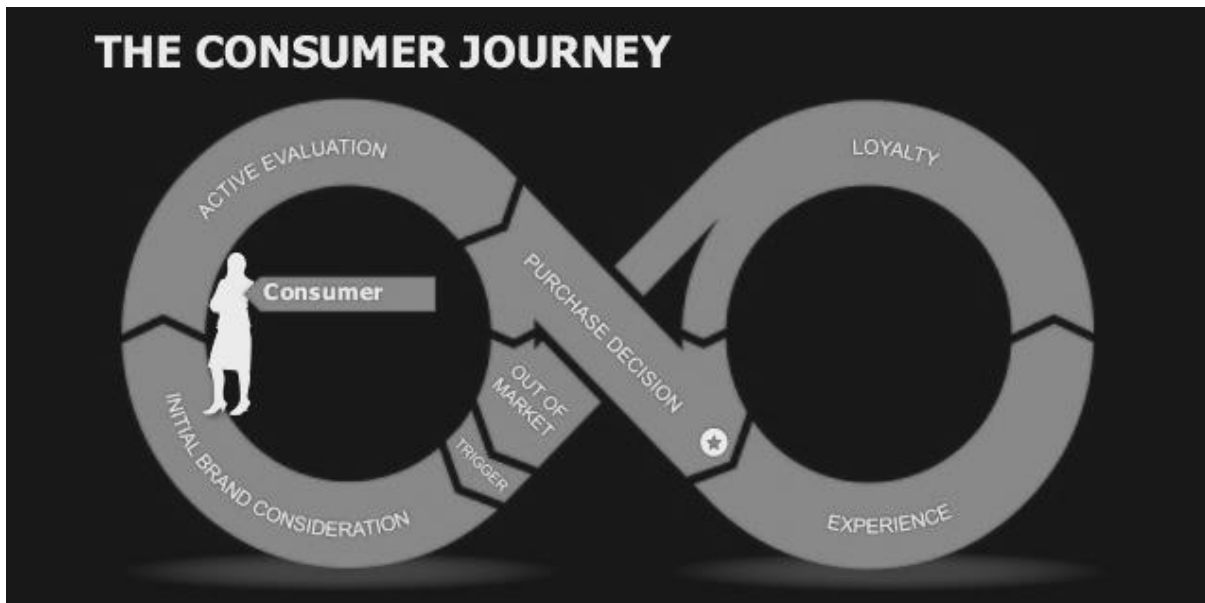
Figure 2: The ECO-SYSTEM mode

The changing consumer journey and its consequences for brand consistency will be further explored in the discussion of this paper.

4.4.3 Brand communities

As already described, another important aspect of today's brand reality is brand co-creation among external stakeholders (Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009). The process of co-creation might manifest itself in the form of brand communities (O'Guinn & Muñiz, 2009). In this regard, it is important to note that this thesis distinguishes between passive brand communities and active brand communities: the former is understood as a community of stakeholders that are not interacting and engaging to a large degree, thus not actively co-creating the brand. The latter is understood as a community of stakeholders that are in fact doing so, thus actively contributing with opinions, discussions and the like that might add to a company's brand meaning.

Active brand communities challenge brand consistency because it entails communication episodes which companies cannot control or are unaware of (Appendix 2, 19:50-21:27). In order to avoid this, companies must strive to take control of the brand communities: companies must themselves create and facilitate brand communities for consumers to interact about the brand and co-create it (O'Guinn & Muñiz, 2009). This matter will be explored further in the discussion of the thesis. Before doing so, however, it is essential to assess how corporations' brand communities actually thrive. Therefore, returning to the case of Widex, the following analysis will explore the state of Widex' brand communities, including whether or not they exist in an active format, and look into what Widex does to facilitate brand communities in practice.

In the literature review, it was briefly described how few studies actually account for the practical aspects of brand communities. While the concept of brand communities is highlighted as a key-factor in developing a successful brand throughout much brand theory, this thesis do not believe that the theory provides sufficient information, discussions or conclusions about the action-oriented phases of brand co-creation. In other words, the methods through which brand managers can create, facilitate and support brand communities rarely seem to be explored and neither do the ways through which companies can actually reap the benefit from their direct brand community efforts. According to Kingsnorth (2016), however, one of the benefits of social media in a business context is the ability to interact with customers and give customers a room to interact with each other about the company - an online community, in other words. This points towards the notion that social media and the online world altogether can be a rather obvious way to create and support brand communities, which Quinton (2013) confirms. Social media as a brand community method also makes sense from a functional standpoint since countless customers can easily meet and interact online. Gathering so many customers in a physical setting would, naturally, be more complicated to facilitate.

Widex has managed to gain a relatively large amount of social media followers. As of April 2018, the company has 197,805 Facebook followers, 4,967 Twitter followers and 18,739 LinkedIn followers (Facebook, 2018; LinkedIn, 2018; Twitter, 2018) on its main social media pages (meaning the pages that are not region-specific but rather represent Widex' overall brand). While there are many brands with a much larger number of social media followers (Statista, 2018b), it seems that Widex' number of followers should be enough to gain some degree of community effect on social media.

However, Widex' followers do not interact on Widex' social media pages in a matter that supports brand co-creation. Considering Kozinets' terminology of nodes and ties, there are few socially active followers (nodes) and little expression of interactive relation (ties) such as sharing of opinions among the followers. As of the 26th of April 2018, Widex' Danish Facebook page has posted 43 times on Facebook in 2018, only receiving an average of 15.9 likes or reactions per post. This is despite Facebook being the most community-

and consumer-focused social network (Kingsnorth, 2016). The number is even slightly misleading, as more than one-third of the likes and reactions come from just three posts. The median of likes and reactions for each post of 2018 is nine, and if the three posts with significantly more likes than the rest were not accounted for, the average of likes and reactions would be 11.125. That is arguably not a lot of reactions, especially when you consider that some of Widex' own employees are probably inclined to like or react to the posts themselves.

Likes and reactions are far from the only factor in active brand communities, however. It is far from the only manifestation of ties that nodes can engage in. It can be argued that likes and reactions on Facebook are simply a way for brand stakeholders to show their opinion about a certain statement or piece of content from the company on a very basic level. If they like the post, they support the statement or the content that is communicated in the post. Other than liking, users have five other reaction options available (symbolized as five different emojis), and depending on which one they choose, they can either express that they love the content in the post, that they find it amusing, that they are surprised about it, or that it makes them sad or angry. Expressing one of these feelings for content posted by the company is the only option stakeholders have to contribute to the brand if they wish to do so through Facebook likes and reactions. Furthermore, Widex' 43 posts of 2018 have only gained a combined 22 reactions other than likes, and at least nine of those are from one of Widex' own employees, meaning that stakeholders have expressed a reaction about a Widex post just 13 times (maximum). That is 1.9 percent of the combined reactions Widex have received on Facebook in the year of 2018. The rest of the reactions have only consisted of users showcasing their support for the statements or content Widex has posted by liking it. By doing so, people simply reinforce Widex' existing brand rather than contributing to co-creating it.

While the Facebook reactions give stakeholders limited options for contributing to the brand, people can instead contribute to the brand more extensively on Facebook by commenting on the posts. However, Widex has only received nine comments on its Facebook posts in 2018 (not counting comments from Widex itself), corresponding to 0.2 comments per posts. Furthermore, the few comments that the company does receive do not appear to be contributing much to the creation of the brand. In some comments, the consumers simply state their excitement for the brand (Appendix 6), which essentially has the same effect as followers liking the posts, meaning that they reaffirm Widex and its brand in its current state. Other stakeholders use the comment section to ask practical questions about the products (Appendix 6), essentially using the comment sections as a customer service channel. This tendency is confirmed by R. Bech as well (19:50-20:02). The comments are, in general, mostly reserved for the company. There is little actual interaction within the group of nodes, resulting in predominantly passive ties among the followers themselves.

4.4.3.1 Challenges of online communities

All in all it is easy to conclude that Widex is not doing a sufficient job of activating its users and creating an active brand community on its Facebook account, something that seemingly should be doable due to Facebook's user-oriented format and Widex' amount of followers. However, it should be noted that Facebook users' behavior has changed over the last few years. While a large amount of consumers are still present on Facebook and brand pages are still getting more followers (Statista, 2017a), people are interacting much less on the social media platform than they used to (Hutchinson, 2017). In other words, people are observing more. They are still present on the platform, they are just more passive. If a company's main marketing objective on Facebook is to expose consumers to content, advertisement and the like, this development should not be an issue, but if a company wishes to use the platform to facilitate an active brand community, users' passive behavior represents a significant challenge.

Another possible explanation of the poor interaction on Widex' Facebook page is the fact that Widex do not sell directly to end-users but instead sell to hearing care professionals who then sell or dispense it to the end-users. Because Widex is a B2B company it might be difficult to create an active brand community on a consumer-oriented social media platform like Facebook. Perhaps Widex would benefit more from a brand community on LinkedIn, which, as mentioned, is much more B2B-focused (Thomas & Housden, 2017). The study does not suggest that B2B companies cannot succeed on Facebook (this matter will be touched upon the discussion), but in a vacuum, B2B companies should fare better on a B2B-platform than a more consumer-focused one. In the case of Widex, the point can be further stressed by R. Bech's comment stating that the company does in fact, in a general sense, target the hearing care professionals to a larger degree than the end-users (Appendix 8). As mentioned, R. Bech also states that the company aims to target end-users and hearing care professionals on different channels which seems to be confirmed by Widex addressing the former on Facebook and the latter on LinkedIn. But the point is that even though Widex makes this distinction, the company simply might not be equipped to succeed as much on Facebook as on LinkedIn because the company is a B2B company rather than a B2C company.

Assessing Widex' LinkedIn profile, the company does in fact seem to have much more support than on Facebook. In 2018, Widex has posted 32 times on LinkedIn, receiving an average of 53.8 likes per post (LinkedIn, 2018) which is quite a lot compared to the 15.9 likes or reactions per post on Facebook. The number becomes even more telling when considering that Widex has more than 10 times as many followers on Facebook than on LinkedIn. This stark difference in interaction on the two social media platforms may be affected by the user tendencies on each platform, but it also seems to point towards the fact that Widex and its brand and content is more fit for LinkedIn which is likely due to LinkedIn's professional and B2B-oriented profile. However, Widex has still received just 10 comments on LinkedIn in 2018 (LinkedIn, 2018)

(once again not counting the company's own). That is 0.3 comments per post meaning almost as few comments as on Facebook (0.2), ones again pointing towards the conclusion that Widex is simply not good enough at creating an active brand community and engaging users on social media.

It is, however, worth noting that Widex' products may not be obvious topics to converse and interact about online. R. Bech claims that the hearing aid industry is still subject to some degree of shame and taboo and says that it can be difficult to create engagement online because most people do not want to be associated with hearing loss (Appendix 2, 09:25-09:34). At the same time, this only stresses the importance of creating engaging content. However, considering Widex' posts on LinkedIn and Facebook, generating engagement does not seem to be a major priority. The posts often inform and talk *to* the followers rather than asking questions, interacting and aiming to talk *with* the followers. In one example, Widex highlights complications of features regarding environment adaptation in hearing aids that automatically amplify certain aspects of the user's surrounding sounds on the basis of assumptions about the user's listening intentions. Then, Widex encourages the reader to click on a link and learn about Widex' sound technologies that solve these complications (Appendix 6). The information is most likely relevant for hearing aid users and professionals within the hearing aid industry, and the post might contribute to establishing Widex as a thought leader. But, the post is also clearly sales-oriented and essentially serves the purpose of selling Widex' products rather than engaging followers in conversation. Another example is a post in which Widex writes about the benefits of a product, the PRO LINK wireless fitting device (Appendix 6). Here, the company's approach is to write directly about the product in a more obvious sales-oriented manner. Moreover, this is one of the posts that is directed towards the hearing care professionals, further emphasizing the product focus and sales agenda of the post. R. Bech even says that product news and the like are quite dominant on Widex' social media sites because Widex is a product-oriented company even though she admits that this is not great social media content. Moreover, she actually does not believe that followers are interested in reading about these types of subjects repeatedly (Appendix 2, 08:47-08:58).

All things considered, Widex' specific social media posts seem to support the claim that Widex has not been successful at building and facilitating an active online brand community. But with that being said, it is far from given that Widex actually wishes to create this brand community. It is not a given that the company actually tries to do anything about it itself. When asked about the effect of brand stakeholders and their role in creating Widex' brand, P. Holmen does not appear to have thoroughly considered external brand stakeholders and brand communities as factors in creating the brand at all (Appendix 1, 11:25-11:50; 12:45-13:11). He does acknowledge that external stakeholders can affect brands today, but places a greater emphasis on the role of internal brand stakeholders as brand ambassadors (Appendix 1, 12:45-15:15; 23:57-24:20). He further stresses that he believes that Widex' corporate brand is built by the company from within. Moreo-

ver, he states that the areas that differentiate Widex from its competitors - and that the outside world should associate Widex with - should be defined by the company itself (Appendix 1, 05:50-07:24). All in all, judging from P. Holmen's statements it seems clear that external brand communities is not a direct and essential aspect of Widex' brand marketing efforts.

But does this actually make a difference? Can companies - Widex or any other - actually control online brand communities or at least take an active approach to creating and facilitating them? Can social media in fact be used directly by the companies to generate active brand communities? And how do the answers to these issues affect brand consistency? While highly relevant, these are not questions that can be answered strictly on the basis of the empirical data as Widex do not appear to have the answer itself as long as brand communities and external brand stakeholders is not top of mind of P. Holmen and the rest of the marketing and communication department of Widex. Therefore, this will be examined further in the discussion of this thesis.

Summing up, from a digital marketing perspective, the empirical findings show that various digital marketing channels can threat a company's brand consistency, because companies must cater to a large number of digital marketing disciplines that may be contradictory. At the same time, however, a new, more digital oriented consumer journey points towards the difficulty of omitting digital activities from a company's marketing efforts.

Specifically considering Widex, namely its social media marketing, the company aims to strike a balance between communicating a consistent brand story across its digital marketing activities while also trying to adapt to each of said activities. However, Widex does not succeed in doing so completely, consequently expressing a somewhat inconsistent voice through its digital marketing.

Another specific threat to brand consistency is the notion of online brand communities that co-creates a company's brand. Assessing Widex' social media marketing from a co-creation perspective, the empirical findings further show that Widex has not been able to establish, control, and facilitate an online brand community that actively contributes to creating the company's brand. At the same time, however, the findings reveal that Widex does not prioritize an active approach to online brand communities whatsoever.

5. Discussion

This chapter aims to discuss and elaborate on the findings of the analysis in order to draw more generalizable implications hereof. The discussion will start by assessing how the brand-building process should be conceptualized, and what this process entails for brand consistency. Next, brand consistency in digital marketing will be discussed. And finally, a new brand perspective will be presented along with practical implications hereof.

5.1 Brands as Networks of Communication

Current literature mainly focuses on sources (i.e. stakeholders) and their roles in brand co-construction. However, this thesis argues that brands are constituted by communication and not stakeholders. Therefore, we suggest a new conceptual framework which suggests that brands should be regarded as networks of communication. In this conceptualization we draw direct inspiration from the field of CCO (Blaschke, Schoeneborn, & Seidl, 2012). In explaining how communication constitutes an organization, Blaschke, Schoeneborn, and Seidl (2012) turn the traditional network approaches inside out, "so that a network's vertices represent communication episodes, while its edges represent the participation of individuals in communication" (p. 889). Likewise we propose a conceptual framework that considers communication episodes (i.e. decision communication about the brand) as the source of brand meaning.
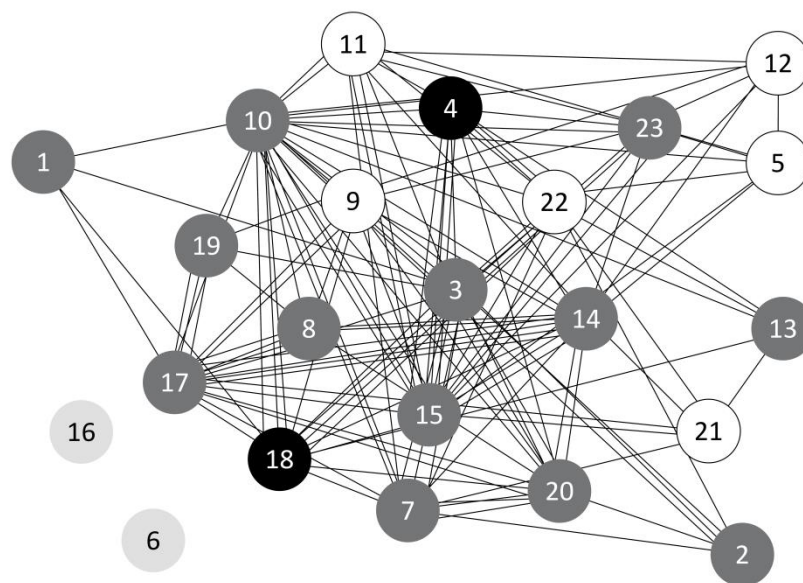
5.1.1 Communication episodes

Constitutive communication episodes represent interaction that constitutes the brand. Concretely, communication episodes can be P. Lund visiting Gentofte Hospital (Appendix 4, 01:06-02:36), or P. Kloppenborg participating in an internal product meeting (Appendix 3, 13:40-14:48). Other examples could be stakeholders interacting with online content on Widex' social media platforms, or a customer interpreting a Widex advertisement. These situations are built of communication between various stakeholders and the interpretations that the stakeholders take away from these situations are brand defining. For example, P. Kloppenborg might hear something at this meeting that makes her understand the Widex brand in a certain way; hence she (re)produces brand meaning. Also, the concept of word of mouth in the digital space is a powerful source of brand (re)production (Andersen, 2014).

Widex' branding mainly concentrates on products. Therefore, a network of Widex' branding will be filled with communication episodes concerning products. In a case example presented by Blaschke, Schoeneborn, and Seidl (2012), they use the network of communication approach to categories communication episodes in topics related to R&D or marketing in a given organization. Their categorization helps to clarify what focus

the organization is directed towards and how it changes over time. R&D is the dominantly topic, thus the organization can be classified as very R&D minded.

In the case of Widex, the communication episodes can be categorized by topics as well, thus making it possible to map out what brand meanings emerge in the stakeholder network (Figure 3). One of the strengths of this approach is how it includes both macro and micro level structures. At Widex, it is evident that the corporate branding is lacking, hence this will be evident in the network. In the example below, Widex communication is theoretically mapped. The light grey episodes are product branding, the black ones service branding, the white ones corporate branding, and the last two indefinite.

Figure 3: Example of Widex' network of communication episodes

Simplified, this illustrates the meaning of Widex' brand. Moreover, the communication episodes can be analyzed at a micro level to discover how the internal communication, for example, is too sales-oriented and non-transparent.

The analysis of communicative structures can also be used to detect what topics and issues emerge on an external level as well. For example, brand communities can, in theory, be great sources of insights into stakeholders' opinions and interpretations. Social media could be used to detect interaction about the Widex brand or to identify higher-level structures about societal tendencies. This would provide the brand with the needed flexibility and dynamic nature to meet structural flows (Holt, 2004).

5.1.2 The relationship between communication episodes

As the example illustrates, communication episodes are linked together forming the brand in their intercon-nectedness. This represents the recursive nature of brand communication. Concretely, this means that the brand meaning P. Kloppenborg takes with her from an internal product meeting will affect how she communicates about the brand in her next communication episode concerning the brand. Moreover, this next communication episode will involve stakeholders that will (re)produce their interpretation of the brand based on P. Kloppenborg's communication.

On social media, multiple stakeholders are able to quickly and effortlessly interact with each other about Widex, thus co-creating the brand. When stakeholders communicate online, it is typically shared with various users at once, which means that online communication potentially reaches several stakeholders, hence affecting brand meaning on a large scale. Users tend to rely on other users' recommendations by acting upon their opinions. Therefore, online communication must be considered due to its potentially high influence.

Hence, this demonstrates the recursive nature of communication and how we base our understanding on the knowledge base that we have obtained from previous episodes with other stakeholders. Because of this, brand meaning is ever-changing and developing as communication episodes change their content. Therefore, new communications will continuously produce new brand meaning or reproduce old.

5.1.3 Brand stakeholders

As P. Holmen states, everyone touches the brand (Appendix 1, 11:50-12:45). Hence, all organizational stakeholders can be brand stakeholders who are able to (re)produce brand meaning. By placing the actors behind the communication episodes, this exemplifies how brand stakeholders do not create the brand by just being. They do it when they communicate. Therefore, this conceptualization also allows for a multi-stakeholder perspective because everyone can produce brand communication. Traditionally, consumers and marketers have been the primary sources that have been investigated by branding researchers (Hatch & Schultz, 2010; Merz, He, & Vargo, 2009); however, the concept of brands as networks of communication overcomes this. Thus, offering a more holistic and nuanced perspective on the brand-building process.

Even though we recognize that branding is a multi-stakeholder discipline, we still acknowledge that an organization is capable of developing an internal brand identity (Abratt & Kleyn, 2011; von Wallpach, Hemetsberger, & Espersen, 2017). Employees have key roles in the brand-building process (Abratt & Kleyn, 2011; Iglesias & Bonet, 2012; Iglesias, Ind, & Alfaro, 2013), hence it is essential that they are aware of the brand and their roles as ambassadors (Appendix 1).

Of course, the brand is also (re)produced externally from the organizational space. This means that stakeholders with no direct interaction with the organization co-construct brand meaning as well. A very clear example of this in practice comes from P. Holmen who recalls an audiologist in Stockholm who loved Widex even though she had never used Widex before (Appendix 1, 04:30-05:40). This exemplifies how brands live and develop on their own.

5.1.4 Filling a theoretical gap

The idea of brands as networks of communication clarifies how brands are created. This idea covers a theoretical gap in that it describes the emerging co-construction of brands on a macro and micro level. In practical terms, this idea can be used to illustrate present structures of brand meaning, thus uncovering perception gaps or undesirable brand directions. Needless to say, this requires a lot to accomplish in practice. Communication episodes emerge all the time in many different contexts; hence it would be impossible and undesirable to keep track of them all. Blaschke, Schoeneborn, and Seidl (2012) track internal mail correspondences in their case example and, in general, it would be more feasible to map out written communication than verbal interaction. The possibilities of digital marketing, moreover, has increased companies' abilities to track and target individual stakeholders through their online activities. This makes it easier and more organized to gain insights into relevant branding knowledge. Still, the idea is very challenging and demanding in execution though. Instead, we argue that it proposes a valuable conceptual contribution to brand theory.

Several scholars argue that despite of co-creation brand managers still play a vital role in brand meaning because they belong to the core group of brand influencers (Jones, 2005; Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2008; Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013). Brand managers produce a lot of the brand communication hence forming the network and the brand, and by involving and transparently communicating with stakeholders they are able to shape brand meaning.

In terms of brand consistency, this concept illustrates two very crucial points: Both brand consistency and brand flexibility matters. First of all, brand consistency is crucial because the interlocked communication episodes mean that brand meaning will diffuse in multiple directions if communication is inconsistent, and this is an impediment for brand equity. Second of all, brand meaning is (re)produced in all kinds of different, micro level contexts. This means that the brand cannot be micro managed, and that it is not even desirable to do so. Therefore, consistency cannot denote that brand managers try to control the brand on every level of brand creation.

5.2 A Brand Paradox

In the literature review, the section "Branding as an inside-out discipline" covers the literary field within branding theory, which believes that the brand should be controlled by brand managers which define every aspect of it. Assumable this would create consistency since a small number of stakeholders would define the brand. However, brands cannot be defined as static entities. Even though P. Holmen and R. Bech are concerned with brand governance and gatekeeping, stakeholders always (re)produce the brand 'outside the gates'. Iglesias and Bonet (2012) argue that, "Even if brand managers have control over some sources of brand meaning, especially the more tangible sources, such as the product or the brand logo; they do not have full control over all the different factors and multiple stakeholders that build brand meaning in the total customer experience" (p. 253). P. Lund and P. Kloppenborg are great examples of this since they illustrate how the brand is defined and changed on a micro-level no matter how controlled brand communication is kept.

At Widex, many employees do not feel informed about brand communication, and additionally, they do not feel involved in the construction hereof. This has created brand gaps and brand misperceptions between internal stakeholders who believe that they receive too little and unfocused information. Much communication at the front line concerns products and services. Ironically, the brand identity has enclosed product branding; however, it has not covered the needs of the front-line staff anyway. Due to a lack of involvement and two-way communication, the sales company Widex Nordic and headquarters seem out of sync.

Paradoxically, the case of Widex exemplifies that the fewer stakeholders who are involved in the brand communication and the more narrow the perspective of the brand is, the more inconsistent the brand becomes.

5.3 A New Brand Notion

The analysis finds that organizations should strive for developing a clearly-defined and transparent corporate brand. A corporate brand will always be present whether the organization prioritizes it or not. And, not prioritizing it can lead to inconsistency and insecurity about the organizational direction. Moreover, stakeholders are attracted by corporate brands, and Balmer and Gray (2003) even proposes that the corporate brand can be a source of sustainable competitive advantage. The case of Widex shows, however, that even though a corporate brand has many positive attributes, it is a bit naïve to call it a source of sustainable competitive advantage.

The brand means what it is (re)produced to mean. Products and services are the elements of much front line staff; hence these areas are vital in brand meaning. Therefore, corporation, products and services cannot and

should not be separated from each other. Focusing solely on one area in the brand-building process evidently results in gaps in the perception of the brand because stakeholders need different aspects. At Widex, P. Kloppenborg, P. Lund and their colleagues would benefit from the navigation tool, i.e. the corporate brand, but simultaneously they need to share a clear understanding of the products and services they provide. Hence, it is essential to take a holistic perspective on the organization in the brand-building process. In terms of brand consistency, this would align corporate expressions with stakeholder perceptions creating more consistency.

Corporate branding as a notion is not enough to capture and comprehend the importance of interconnecting the different areas of the brand. Therefore, we propose *organizational branding* as a new theoretical notion in brand literature. The term *organizational branding* covers the fact that branding includes all stakeholders involved with the organization's brand and likewise it covers all areas involved in the constitution of brand.

If companies only prioritize or focus on corporate branding or product branding, their branding expressions will not be holistic enough. Taking a holistic view on the brand and the brand-building process has two clear benefits: the brand becomes a source of sustainable competitive advantage and it becomes more consistent.

First of all, an organizational brand perspective enhances the argument for considering the brand a source of sustained competitive advantage. Firstly, the value of the brand will increase. Evidently, stakeholders are not only attracted by the corporate brand as customers are concerned with and attracted by products and services as well. Therefore, the value of the brand will increase if it takes this into consideration. Secondly, a corporate brand is already rare, but adding the organization's products and services into the mix makes it even rarer. Products and services usually are not rare *per se*, however in relation with the corporate brand, it provides a combination that is hard to find elsewhere. Thirdly, the analysis found that a corporate brand is already imperfectly imitable; however, again products and services enhance this advantage. Finally, the case of Widex exemplified how a corporate brand is not enough for customers to substitute the brand. If the brand offering, however, includes an attractive brand that involves an attractive narrative about the corporation, its products and its services, it arguably becomes very undesirable to substitute the brand with another.

Second of all, organizational branding seems to increase complexity by adding a new dimension to the brand-building process. We argue, however, that it does not add a new dimension; it merely recognizes the way the brand is already being co-constructed. Stakeholders will not only produce meaning about a very narrow-focused brand. Moreover, it cannot be foreseen what the brand should entail. If Widex turned towards a focus of pure corporate branding, the risk of widening the perception gaps would arguably get bigger. If they only focused on products, the same would happen. Stakeholders have different focuses, and the

brand needs to cater to these. Complexity is part of the brand whether the organization likes it or not. By acknowledging this, the company can concentrate on aligning the corporate brand with its product brands and service brands. This will create a connecting thread between all brand communications.

Therefore, organizations should not consider branding a discipline where they have to choose between corporate, product and service branding. Instead, organizations – and the branding literature – would benefit from a more holistic brand perspective. All brand elements emerge in an ongoing process of communication; hence we must acknowledge and be conscious of this.

5.3.1 The brand-building process

The corporate brand involves all stakeholders (Abratt & Kleyn, 2011). However, clearly stakeholders have different perspectives on what issues are relevant. P. Kloppenborg and P. Lund obviously have other, more narrow and localized perspectives than R. Bech and P. Holmen. Their brand scopes are of course affected by their positions as employees in a sales company and employees in headquarters' Brand and Communications, respectively. R. Bech and P. Holmen both have explicit responsibility for global brand communication, and they sit in positions where they communicate with stakeholders on a global scale. For example, R. Bech is responsible for all of Widex online platforms, which means that she has access to user insights from all over the world.

As the stakeholder-brand value model illustrated, all stakeholders are not equally important. Neither are all communication episodes. Because R. Bech and P. Holmen have global perspectives, and they sit in positions where they are able to formalize and express the brand on a global level, it makes sense that branding, after all, resides at their department. Co-creation and stakeholder branding do not entail that the brand managers do not have control at all. They can still affect and influence brand stakeholders, but if they do not inform and include them, they will lose the control.

Oppose to P. Holmen and R. Bech, P. Kloppenborg and P. Lund are at the front-line of customer interaction. From this they gain valuable experience and insights into the market and the customers. These are insights that need to be shared back up in the organization. Therefore, communication needs be transparent, informative and, not least, two-way. Every level of the organization is responsible for the brand. The recursive interlocking nature of communication episodes demands interconnectedness. Therefore, branding should not be considered a top-down, bottom-up, inside-out, or outside-in process. It should cover it all.

Summing up, the concept of brands as networks of communication illustrates that brand meaning is created by a network of stakeholder interpretations. This challenges consistency because it proves how the interpre-

tations are made on a micro-level. At the same time, however, it also indicates that relative consistency can be achieved by aligning communication. This points to the paradox that consistency is not about keeping tight control; on the contrary, it is about involvement.

Involvement and transparency would cause a more holistic brand perspective and encourage what we term the organizational brand. By considering branding as a process that happens on a multidimensional level (i.e. bottom-up, top-down, outside-in, inside-out at once), the brand will become more dynamic, relevant and reactive. New tendencies or structures in the market will be shared, increasing the speed of brand adaptation. Moreover, the employees would be able to reproduce the brand while still adapting to specific, contextual stakeholder needs. If P. Kloppenborg, P. Lund and their colleagues had a larger share in the brand construction, it would be easier for them to align their everyday work and interaction with the overall brand. Hence, they could also attain higher understanding of the business and how the products and services play into the whole.

5.4 Brand Consistency in Digital Marketing

In the analysis, Widex' approach to digital marketing was touched upon. Among other things, the company's social media effort was analyzed from a brand consistency perspective. Evidently, Widex tries to balance between delivering a coherent experience across different platforms and trying to fit its content to each specific platform, keeping the differences of these platforms in mind. In the following, the issue will be explored in a broader and more general sense: it will be discussed what overall market factors and modern marketing trends affect companies' ability to gain brand consistency across various digital marketing channels. In doing so, the discussion will especially touch upon the influence of private companies with severe power to affect digital marketing operations, as well as the recent changes in the consumer journey.

In extension of the analysis of Widex' digital marketing, its approach to active brand communities was also specifically analyzed in the analysis. Working from the premise that social media is an obvious method for facilitating brand communities, it is clear that Widex has not been able to build and support such communities on social media. Evidently, the company does not appear to take brand stakeholders into account when conducting social media marketing and formulating social media marketing strategies. In the following, it will be discussed if companies can in fact create and facilitate their active online brand communities and what the answer to this questions means for brand consistency.

It will further be discussed how a company's external profile might affect its approach towards social media marketing. Finally, an overall solution to achieving brand consistency while adapting to different digital marketing channels will be suggested and visualized in a model.

5.4.1 External factors and market trends

As touched upon in the analysis, the typical digital marketing channels, such as social media, allow companies to market in different settings and in different ways. In a business context, Facebook, for example, is used to communicate towards consumers and interact with them through organic posts and targeted advertisements according to Chaffey and Smith (2017). Moreover, the advertising options also allow companies to sell through Facebook. So, all in all, the platform offers marketers quite many different opportunities.

Marketers must, however, take Facebook's constantly changing algorithms into account. R. Bech mentions this as a challenge for Widex (Appendix 2, 03:35-03:56), and many other companies most likely share this problem. As of right now, for example, posts and advertisements which include videos is a high priority of Facebook's (Nelson, 2017), so in order to be shown more often in users' news feeds, companies must, naturally, make more video content. For some companies this may not be a big deal, but other companies may not usually incorporate videos in its marketing, may not have experience producing video content, may not have a budget for it, and/or may not sell a product or a service that is fit to be marketed through videos. However, producing Facebook marketing content that will not be shown to as many relevant users on Facebook as possible would seem like a waste of time and resources. And Facebook is so important in today's consumerism (more on that later) that simply disregarding Facebook altogether is difficult. That seemingly leaves marketers with just one option: produce Facebook content that caters to Facebook's algorithm. Continuing the video example, this means that companies must adjust its marketing to include videos even if that is otherwise not ideal for its brand, its budget or its product. In other words, in this case, some companies will be forced to deviate from its usual brand identity and strategy in order to fully benefit from Facebook marketing. Consequently, this will hurt the companies' brand consistency.

And that is just Facebook. That is just one example.

Another one is Google. Here, companies must first and foremost account for SEO, which is a highly important method for modern marketers (Chaffey & Smith, 2017). As touched upon in the theory, SEO can be a complex matter because so many different aspects contribute to choosing and optimizing for the right keywords, including competitors' keywords, the competition for each keyword, the search volume for each keyword (the degree to which people typically search for the keyword), and, of course, the keywords' relevance to the company and its products. A company might find a number of keywords that are consistent with its overall branding, including its often-used phrases and its tone of voice. However, if one or more of its competitors dominate these keywords, it might not be possible for the company to rank high for these. Therefore, the company might need to settle for keywords that it can more easily rank high for, but that is not completely in line with its wording and tone of voice on other marketing channels. Once again, the brand

consistency will be compromised. One way for companies to avoid this is by focusing on keywords that are related to their organizational brand, as presented previously in this chapter, rather than their product brand. While all companies within the hearing aid industry most likely focus their keywords on hearing aids and hearing loss, companies can differentiate themselves from competitors in search engines by ranking high for keywords that are related to their unique organizational brand. The challenge regarding this strategy, however, is that consumers will most likely search for product-related keywords and keywords related to hearing loss in the search engines. This would make it difficult for companies to show up in searches if their keywords are not related to their products and the explicit problems their products solve. Therefore, in order to rank high in search engines within a competitive field, companies must choose keywords that are product-related but not highly competitive, even though said keywords might not relate to the company's organizational brand.

The above examples both point to one significant challenge in digital marketing: the power of private companies such as Facebook and Google. While this study will not discuss potential legal and ethical matters regarding Facebook and Google's power, it is arguably remarkable that marketers worldwide is so affected by the rules and operations of a handful of private companies. Before the emergence of such tech-giants, no private company could, presumably, single-handedly cause marketers all over the world to adjust their entire marketing strategy from one day to another by introducing a new rule to its own service. Today, companies like Facebook and Google can do exactly that. One would expect that Facebook and Google's changes in their algorithms are first and foremost based on consumer preferences and demands, which would make them objective and natural in that they would simply be a result of trends in the market. But that is not the point. The point is that phenomena like Facebook and Google are private companies with private agendas who, at the same time, has a degree of power that might be characterized as monopoly. The companies are not just affecting the spaces where marketers and consumers interact - they *are* the spaces. The combination of the above gives companies like Facebook and Google a type of influence on modern marketing and consumerism that arguably has not been seen before.

When Facebook, for example, decided to prioritize video content, marketing departments had to react and adapt. In another example, Facebook announced at the beginning of the year that it would start prioritizing posts in users' news feed from friends and families over posts from company pages (Mosseri, 2018). As a consequence, marketers now need to spend more money on Facebook advertising because organic posts from their company's Facebook page will not be shown to as many people as before. For some companies, this merely meant that they had to restructure their marketing budget or add more finances to the marketing department altogether. Not ideal, but not business-altering either. But what about small companies with low or non-existing marketing budgets? These companies might have relied on Facebook as a marketing channel

because it used to allow companies to reach consumers for free. For these companies, Facebook's announcement might have affected their whole marketing strategy. If they did not have the budget to keep up with Facebook's changes, they would no longer be able to use Facebook in the same manner as before. This would significantly affect their brand consistency and branding effort altogether if Facebook was indeed a major part of their branding. The same can even be said of large corporations with predetermined or conservative marketing budgets for whom Facebook also played a big role in their brand identity, but who could not adapt to Facebook's changes either.

Google often changes its algorithms too. Once, so-called long tail keywords (phrases of 3-5 words or more) were, for example, the most valuable in the eyes of Google (Dean, 2018a), so marketers analyzed and researched long tail keywords that fit their businesses the best and incorporated them in their SEO strategies. Then Google developed its algorithms (Dean, 2018a) in such a way that it now makes more sense to prioritize medium tail keywords instead (phrases of 2-3 words), and marketers needed to adjust their SEO strategies accordingly. It may not seem like a particularly big change, and for some companies it probably was not, but considering the complexity and difficulty of finding and optimizing the right keywords, as discussed above, some companies were surely affected quite a lot by this development.

Facebook and Google are of course allowed to change whatever they want (within the law). At the end of the day, they do not answer to anyone but their boards and shareholders. But the point is not what Facebook and Google are allowed to or not - the point is that a few private companies can influence key digital marketing practices whenever they desire. All things considered, that makes modern marketing and brand consistency increasingly complicated.

Marketers could simply choose not to market through Facebook and Google. But Facebook and Google matter so much to today's consumers that this would arguably be unwise. Facebook has become one of the most important channels in digital marketing (Dudharejia, 2017) and modern society overall, and more than two billion potential consumers are present on the social media network (Statista, 2018c). At the same time, researching products and services through search engines has become a standard practice for consumers in the buying process (Chaffey & Smith, 2017), and Google is so far ahead of its competitors (Figure 4) that marketers cannot omit the search engine from its strategies: Google sits on 91.25 percent of the market while its closest competitor, Bing, sits on just 3.08 percent (StatCounter, 2018).
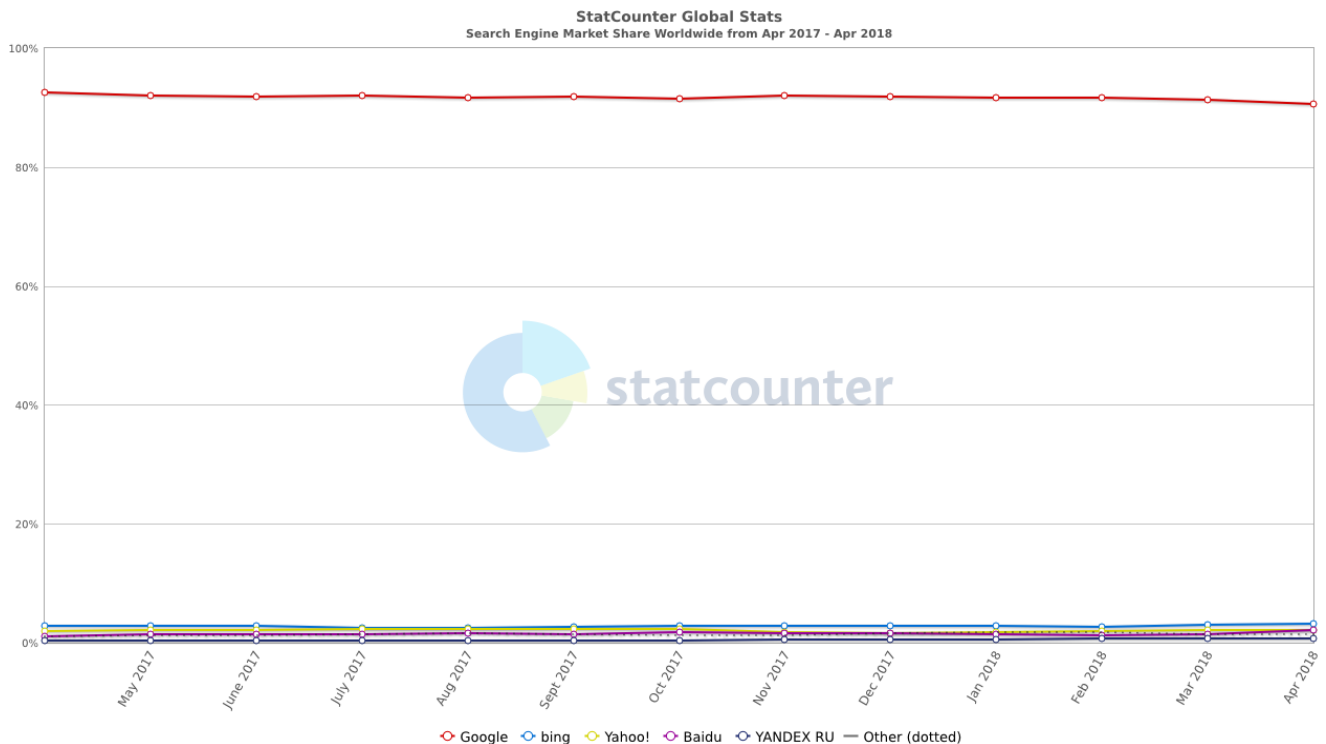
Figure 4: The worldwide search engine market share

In other words, there are seemingly no way for modern marketers to avoid Google and Facebook. And while these platforms have given companies plenty of new marketing opportunities, they have, arguably, also taken away some amount of control for marketing departments because marketers are now forced to cater to a few private companies that dictate the very framework that the modern marketer must operate within.

5.4.2 Digital marketing and the new consumer journey

Further emphasizing the need to incorporate Google, Facebook and the like in today's marketing is the fact that the consumer journey has changed, as touched upon in *New customer habits*. As mentioned, the new online reality has given customers more options and more tools to explore and manage said options, while marketers have gotten more methods and various venues to reach their audience.

It can be argued that this new reality has resulted in a consumer journey with more opportunities for both customers and marketers - but also a more complex consumer journey.

OMD has, as described, tried to make the new consumer journey more accessible through its ECO-SYSTEM model; and even though they do not specifically mention the *new* consumer journey, Chaffey and Smith claims, to some extent, to have done the same by constructing the RACE planning system.

As previously addressed, the model offers marketers an overview of the newest digital marketing activities. Considering the model from a brand consistency perspective, this might help marketers align various digital marketing initiatives and make sure they all stay within the overall brand strategy. It also highlights how many different touchpoints and aspects are included in the area of digital marketing, as each marketing objective in the model can or should be reached by a number of different digital marketing methods. As has already been touched upon, this added complexity can arguably challenge companies' brand consistency because marketers need to consider so many different aspects in the digital sphere. The model, however, might help marketers navigate through the different touchpoints in a systematic and coordinated way.

With that being said, one might argue that the steps of the RACE planning system are essentially similar to the marketing objectives and consumer journeys of the past. Before digital marketing, it was, arguably, just as important to have an integrated marketing approach, to reach new customers, to stand out among competitors, to convert interested customers to sales and to make current customers brand advocates. All of this does not seem new. At the same time, the main steps of the old consumer journey likely did not differ much from the one presented in the RACE planning system. While it can in fact be helpful for modern marketers that the model specifically focuses on the digital touchpoints of each step in the consumer journey, the overall journey and the overall marketing objectives do not seem to be much different than the ones presented in consumer journey models decades ago.

OMD's version of a consumer journey model for the modern marketer is arguably more precise in emphasizing how today's consumer journey differs from consumer journeys of the past. As described, OMD views this new consumer journey as an ecosystem in which customers are constantly being exposed to new options and are constantly reassessing said options. This analysis makes sense. It is not hard to imagine that the average customer, before starting the buying process, has an overall knowledge of a number of brands within a given industry as a result of the companies' brand awareness efforts. When the customer realizes a need and enter the buying process, the old consumer journey models assumed that the customer would then discard brands as he/she learned more about them before eventually having narrowed down the search to a single brand (Andersen, 2014). But considering today's electronic market space and the existence of Google and other search engines, the process must necessarily have changed: now, customers use the search engines to research their options, thus learning more about the field and finding more potential brands the further they travel down the consumer journey (Andersen, 2014).

The analytics behind the ECO-SYSTEM model is arguably an argument for the importance of brand consistency in modern marketing. When the customers become aware of more and more brands through the consumer journey and continue to re-evaluate brands as they circle around in the loop, it would seem that it becomes more important for brands to stand out. There are several ways to be remembered as a brand - alternative and eye-catching marketing is, for example, a valid option, though some companies may not have a profile and a product that support that sort of marketing activities. Either way, however, a key method to position a company in the market is by having a consistent brand. If companies tell the same brand story again and again they might have a better chance of solidifying themselves in the minds of the consumers (Appendix 1, 02:46-03:25; Appendix 2, 18:47-19.00, 32:15-32:35). Whether or not this actually results in sales will, obviously, be affected by a number of other things (the quality of the brand story, the customer targeting, the actual product, etc.). But being remembered in the jungle of different brands that consumers meet when researching and re-evaluating might just give you an advantage.

5.4.2.1 The downside of digital agencies

Another, more tangible, way of navigating within the new, complex consumer journey and the digital landscape is by employing a digital marketing agency. As described, Widex has done just that by outsourcing parts of its digital marketing effort to the digital agency Magnetix.

On the surface, such a decision seems wise, especially because Widex practices several digital marketing methods. The agency is, presumably, better equipped to succeed within digital marketing because the agency specializes in doing so. Furthermore, it could appear to be wise from a brand consistency standpoint, because Widex has placed at least some of its digital marketing activities in the hands of the same people, thus, supposedly, making sure the different activities are aligned.

But with that being said, trusting said external marketers to handle its activities could also hurt Widex' overall brand consistency in the long run. While the company's digital marketing activities might be aligned with each other, the activities might not be aligned with Widex' overall brand, because the agency might not understand Widex' brand well enough to express it in the right manner. As the empirical data of this thesis has shown, including the survey among Widex employees (Appendix 9), Widex' internal brand stakeholders do not even have a shared understanding of Widex' brand identity. It could arguably be even more difficult to get an external marketing agency to completely understand the brand as Widex would like them to communicate it and represent it. And even if the agency does understand the brand, there is no guarantee that the agency will prioritize brand consistency. The agency will, most likely, be judged on Widex' return on investment, likely understood as an uptick in sales or similar tangible KPIs. Therefore, the agency will, naturally, prioritize results related to these more so than brand consistency. Widex could, of course, ask Magnetix

to prioritize brand consistency - but true brand consistency might be difficult to measure in the short run. Sales and the like are not. Therefore, it would be difficult to control and assess the agency's effort to operate completely within Widex' brand identity. Moreover, like any other agency, Magnetix obviously has other interests than one customer. This could further contribute to the agency making decisions that does not cater to Widex and its brand. Magnetix, for example, also serves one of Widex' primary competitors, Oticon (Magnetix, 2018b). This could be a significant conflict of interest in general, and could, among other things, hurt Widex' brand consistency, or Oticon's for that matter. If Magnetix, for example, locates the only keyword that is completely consistent with both companies' brands while also giving the company in question a good chance of ranking high in Google, who gets the keyword? And who might have to settle for one that is either less competitive on Google or less consistent with the company's brand?

These and similar issues point towards the challenge of employing an external agency in order to adapt to the complex electronic market space. While an agency might help a given company operate within the digital sphere, the agency could, at the same time, compromise the company's brand consistency.

5.4.2.2 Controlling the conversation

Returning to the ECO-SYSTEM model, one essential point in OMD's presentation of the new consumer journey model is the notion that consumers are being more affected by word of mouth marketing and comparison sites today (Andersen, 2014; Appendix 1, 04:30-05:40). In other words, they are listening more to voices outside of the company's' control. This might be a significant challenge for the company's brand consistency - because what if the stories about the brand that potential customers hear on comparison sites and from former customers do not reflect the company's own branding? Such inconsistency will certainly affect the potential customers' impression of the company (Delgado-Ballester, Navarro, & Sicilia, 2012) and could leave them with a wrong understanding of the company's brand. The company might also appear untrustworthy in the eyes of stakeholders because the brand story that the company communicates itself would be inconsistent with the brand story told by users who have actually interacted with the company and used its products.

Regarding the effort to control the conversation of the brand, P. Holmen speaks of the importance of every single employee being a brand ambassador (Appendix 1, 11:50-12:45). That might be one way for Widex to control at least part of the word of mouth marketing. If everyone from Widex tells the same story to professional and personal acquaintances they do their part in spreading and establishing a specific narrative about Widex. All the stories and recommendations that originate from Widex will be the same. This would, however, require a focused effort to actively incorporate Widex' employees in the company's word of mouth marketing. P. Kloppenborg even admits that she tends to fabricate and tell her own stories about Widex be-

cause Widex is not particularly clear about what the company would like its employees to communicate to the outside world about its products and its business (32:23-33:02). So it seems that Widex' current effort to use its employees as brand ambassadors leaves a lot to be desired. Nevertheless, it is arguably an area with a rather clear path to positive changes that could assist the company in spreading and controlling the story about Widex, and P. Holmen's awareness of its importance is at least a start.

Word of mouth marketing, however, can grow from a large number of different sources (Kingsnorth, 2016), including external ones, so encouraging and teaching employees to be brand ambassadors is just the tip of the iceberg if you want to control what people say about your brand and your company. Another way for companies to initiate its word of mouth marketing itself is, as described in the theory, using amplified word of mouth marketing to pay people outside of the company to recommend its products (Arnhold, 2010, p. 83). The method of amplified word of mouth marketing is certainly an effective way to generate and control stories about your brand. But it does not eliminate the existence of organic word of mouth marketing, in which customers or other people who have been in touch with a given company one way or another share their experiences with others, who then might share the story with someone else, and so on. Just because a company spreads one story it may not affect the natural stories from customers who have actually been in touch with the company and its product.

The solution to also affecting organic word of mouth marketing, thus fully controlling the conversation - or at least as much of it as possible - seems clear: brand consistency across all touchpoints. In other words, the company must make sure that the same brand story is expressed in every single part of the company that consumers might, one way or the other, come in contact with. Not only should the employees tell the same story when they function as brand ambassadors - the same story should be communicated through social media, SEM, website, offline media, customer service, sales, the physical package of the product, the confirmation email after purchasing a product, and so on and so forth. It must all contribute to the overall brand experience.

R. Bech echoes this sentiment as she claims that "[Widex'] brand needs to look the same regarding of where you meet it" (Appendix 2, 05:35-05:39). This amount of consistency might be a challenge, however, especially for a large enterprise like Widex. R. Bech, for example, further explains how some of the company's sub-departments around the globe tend to 'localize' Widex' visual brand material, meaning they change it to fit their own market, something which R. Bech finds problematic (Appendix 2, 04:45-05:05).

This further seems to prove the notion that a strong brand starts from within, as already described. It may not be an easy task, as R. Bech's example of the localization of Widex shows, but it nevertheless seems that this

is something marketers must strive for. If the brand story is the same across the entire stream of communication that comes from the company itself, it must necessarily increase the chance of consumers getting a consistent impression of the brand and a consistent experience with the company and its products. This may in turn affect the stories people tell about the brand, or, in other words, the organic word of mouth marketing.

A company may not be able to completely control all people's stories of its brand, but brand consistency in as many aspects of the company as possible might be the closest the company will come to doing just that.

5.4.3 A critical assessment of brand communities

When speaking about the attempt to administer marketing factors taking place outside of the company and its direct control, it is a natural next step to once again touch upon brand communities from a company standpoint. Due to the online focus of this thesis and the previously presented arguments for social media as an obvious platform for brand communities, this discussion will solely focus on online communities, namely social media as a forum for brand communities and co-creation.

5.4.3.1 Social media as a brand community setting

As shown in the analysis, it seems clear that Widex is currently not capable of facilitating an active online brand community, much less a meaningful one that provides true value to the company's brand. However, P. Holmen's and R. Bech's statements indicating that Widex does not make a great effort to facilitate active brand communities at all of course need to be taken into consideration. In *Challenges of online communities*, this study already found that Widex does not appear to actually prioritize an active approach to brand communities. Widex' social media content, which does not seem to encourage interaction and discussion, points towards this finding as well.

If Widex is not trying to create an active online brand community, it is, naturally, difficult to conclude whether or not the company would be able to do so if it wanted to. Instead, it is relevant to consider and evaluate the most obvious options for companies in a general sense (meaning Widex and other companies alike) to create such a community if they so desire, thus supporting its external brand stakeholders in co-creating the brand. As mentioned, there is no clear answer to be found on the practical aspects of brand communities in the brand theory. As a starting point, this study still believes that social media should be the most obvious option for companies to establish active brand communities, partly due to the theory (Quinton, 2013), partly due to the social environment on social media (Kingsnorth, 2016), and partly due to the practical matters of connecting large amount of people from all over the world. With that being said, it is worth considering to what extent social media really excels as the go-to place for marketers wanting to establish

and operate an active brand community. Hence, the evaluation of social media as a source of online brand community facilitation.

As alluded to in the analysis, Facebook, for starters, might present problems for B2B companies like Widex when it comes to active brand communities. In a strict sense, Widex and other B2B companies could be challenged by Facebook no matter what due to the social platform's consumer and user focus. When further considering the trends of users becoming more passive on Facebook, there might be even less room for success for a B2B company that wishes to create a lively community on Facebook.

Instead, as also touched upon in the analysis, the company could turn to LinkedIn for its brand community efforts. After all, LinkedIn is supposed to be for businesses rather than consumers (Thomas & Housden, 2017), so in theory, Widex should thrive more here. The company has so far not been successful in creating interaction on LinkedIn either, but again, that might be due to the nature of Widex' LinkedIn posts as well as Widex' lack of focus on brand community facilitation rather than the social environment they are posted in. Or perhaps not - because is LinkedIn, as a social network, even geared for conversation and social communities at all? Digital marketing theory does not seem to truly address this matter. Thomas and Housden (2017, p. 19) do state that LinkedIn can be used to ask professional connections and acquaintances for advice as part of decision-making processes, thus picturing LinkedIn as a forum for conversation and social interaction. If one looks at his or her own LinkedIn profile, one might see this point confirmed by connections asking for suggestions and perspectives on professional dilemmas including potential purchases in a B2B context. However, Thomas and Housden's point is that people consult other people on LinkedIn and similar platforms *instead* of consulting the companies. This is an argument for LinkedIn as a social platform where conversation, interaction and similar community-related actions do in fact take place, but it simultaneously pictures LinkedIn as a platform that users consult to avoid interaction with companies or within company-created forums. It is also worth highlighting Kingsnorth's definition of LinkedIn (2016, p. 156) which essentially portrays LinkedIn as a modern business card and a database for recruiters to find new prospects - in other words, a place for users to showcase themselves and their professional competences rather than a place for actual interaction and dialogue. This further seems to emphasize that LinkedIn simply might not be an obvious place for companies to create and facilitate valuable brand communities based on communication and brand creation among brand stakeholders, namely customers.

LinkedIn and Facebook are, of course, far from the only social media. But as briefly touched upon earlier, Twitter is for short news rather than interaction (Kingsnorth, 2016), and YouTube is primarily a platform for product advertising and tutorials (Thomas and Housden, 2017, p. 297), meaning one-way communication from the company. Instagram, meanwhile, is so consumer-focused that Widex' headquarters do not even use

the platform at all (Appendix 8) - so it does not seem that the answer should be found among social media other than Facebook and LinkedIn either.

However, according to best practices presented in the theory, a company's success regarding active brand communities on social media has a lot to do with the content companies post on its social media sites in order to engage followers (Chaffey & Smith, 2017; Thomas & Housden, 2017). As described in *Challenges of online communities*, Widex, for example, does not produce particularly engaging content. But the nature of the content might not matter much if users are not particularly likely to discuss and interact a lot on either of the major social media channels. In other words, a company's engaging content will not have much effect if the majority of its followers have no intention to engage whatsoever.

The point, however, is not that it is impossible to use social media to create and facilitate valuable brand communities online, not even in a B2B context. Surely there are examples of companies that have, in fact, succeeded in doing so. An example such as LEGO comes to mind (Davidi, 2014). LEGO is a B2B company like Widex and, in a more detailed manner, the company is even a B2B2C company like Widex. But the two companies are quite different, as LEGO obviously produces and sells vastly different products than Widex. That could suggest that the success regarding active brand communities is as much dependent on the product and perhaps the general brand of the company. LEGO arguably sells a product that is much easier for the average consumer to understand and relate to than a technical hearing aid. Furthermore, it is once again worth emphasizing R. Bech's statement that hearing aids are viewed as products consumers are not proud of showing a public interest in (Appendix 2, 09:25-09:34). This certainly points towards product type playing a major role in companies' ability to create active brand communities on platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn. One would presumably need to conduct a rather extensive research in order to understand how often (or how rarely) companies in general succeed in creating such communities and how this relates to the companies' products, and due to the scope of the thesis, this study has not prioritized such a research. But product type absolutely should not be dismissed as a significant factor in companies' brand community efforts.

Still, it also should not be concluded that product type is the only factor influencing the extent to which companies can actively create interactive brand communities online. The above-mentioned user tendencies on social media still point towards the notion that many regular companies, especially B2B companies, could be hard pressed to successfully create and facilitate a true brand community on social media. There are certainly challenges, and as a result, social media does not seem to be the standard practice and the be-all and end-all answer to the *how* of creating active online brand communities that one might have expected it to be. And as this study has already touched upon a couple of times, herein lies the recurrent problem with the notion of

brand communities as well as brand community theory: how can a company, practically speaking, actually establish a brand community that brings real value to the company and the creation of its brand? The theory is full of - predominantly positive - writings on the importance of brand communities, but does not discuss the hand-on ways for companies to take an active approach towards co-creation on brand communities. And as the above has shown, the otherwise obvious method for marketers to create brand communities - social media - might, while not impossible, not be such an obvious method after all. This leaves us with somewhat of a nonconclusion: might social media, if the company and its content is well-suited for it, be used as a way to create active brand communities online? Yes. But is social media, as a rule of thumb, the standard setting for any given company to establish an active brand community? No.

Returning to brand consistency, the indefiniteness of the practical part of brand communities is arguably yet another aspect of digital marketing that may challenge a company's brand consistency. As previously alluded to, the very concept of brand communities might, in itself, present a problem for brand consistency because the control of the brand is removed from the company. However, if a proven and well-defined platform for companies to approach and control brand communities existed, the problem might have been less significant. It might have been easier for brand managers to control brand stakeholders and their co-creation of the brand, because the company, to some degree, would still be in charge of the platform, at least if that platform was a social media account, for example. In other words, the company would have been able to control the setting of the brand community. But when an obvious setting for companies to actively create brand communities does not exists, and the one setting that may have made the most sense on paper - social media - does not appear to be applicable either, the problem remains. Active brand communities remain an ungraspable phenomenon that might hurt a company's brand consistency to a considerable degree because there are no well-functioning standard and no practical go-to as to how a company might successfully establish and facilitate an online brand community.

5.4.4 Brand consistency and social media as a marketing channel

While social media does not appear to be ideal as a general setting for active brand communities, at least not for B2B companies such as Widex, this matter obviously does not make social media any less important as a digital marketing channel altogether.

In *The brand in the context of digital marketing*, this paper has already shed light on the issue of staying consistent across various social media platforms while still adapting to the specific platform in question, as exemplified by Widex' different content and tone of voice on Facebook and LinkedIn. It is worth noting, however, that the different purposes and structures of Facebook and LinkedIn are most likely fairly well-known due to both platforms' popularity. As a result, users could potentially realize that the difference in Widex'

content is merely an attempt to comply with the environment and purpose of each social platform. Expecting such an understanding from users as a premise for Widex' brand communication on social media would, however, require all users to have a similar knowledge base. As the theory states, this can be difficult, which can challenge brand consistency altogether (Chwe, 1998) - and therefore, actually counting on a specific knowledge base regarding the source of the communication seems unwise. Moreover, Berthon, Pitt and Campbell (2009, p. 357) explicitly state that the brand communication should express the same, consistent brand meaning no matter what source is being used as a channel for communication. This further shows the need to communicate about the same topics to the same target group with the same tone of voice across all social media channels. Hence the recurrent problem of the differences between LinkedIn, Facebook and most other social media platforms: in order to fit each respective platform, a company must submit to vastly different rules and best practices from platform to platform - but from a brand consistency perspective, the message and the brand meaning should be the same no matter the platform.

In extension of this problem comes the issue of showcasing a brand on social platforms that is consistent with the type of company in question and the type of product or service it sells. In other words, there should not only be consistency across different channels of communication; there should also be consistency between the company and each channel. This, arguably, is especially relevant when the channel is an external one with its own brand, whether the channel is a newspaper, a social media platform or something similar. As alluded to already, Widex is a highly product-focused company, but on a user-focused and 'light' social media platform such as Facebook, we argue that a complex and purely professional approach to the company's posts is not very appropriate. Widex seem to know this: as mentioned above, the company's Facebook profile is largely reserved for content based on pathos and personal values (Appendix 5). The issue of consistency occurs when considering what sort of company Widex is, not just outside of Facebook, but outside of the social media sphere and the electronic market space altogether. As previously alluded to, stakeholders' perception of the brand should reflect the company's own brand story (Iglesias, Ind, & Alfaro, 2013). However, P. Lund, for example, clearly has an exclusively professional and technical approach to her audiological work including her interaction with Widex customers and users (Appendix 4). However, some of Widex' most lighthearted Facebook posts, including posts with emojis or Valentine's Day-themed pictures (Appendix 5), might not be in line with P. Lund's (and other sales consultants') strictly professional approach to what can be a very serious disability (Appendix 4). This can create a perception gap between stakeholders: the stakeholders who get exposed to the brand story that Widex communicates on Facebook will get one perception, and the users who speak to P. Lund will get another one.

The above may be a bit of a reach - after all, the majority of Widex' Facebook posts concern the disability of hearing loss in a sympathetic and serious manner, as previously mentioned (Appendix 5). But the fact that

Widex is an example of a company that most often manages to keep its social media posts in line with its behavior in professional situations in real life does not minimize the importance of the issue in a general sense. Using another example than Facebook, Widex would, for example, arguably never be able to convincingly apply a social media platform such as Snapchat to its marketing efforts, at least not in Snapchat's current form. Snapchat is a medium with a predominantly young audience (Statista, 2018e), and its product is dominated by various filters and the like, all of which seem to signal entertainment, fun and youth (Snapchat, 2018). This would seem too out of sync with what Widex sells and what it represents, as presented by strictly professional and technical oriented sales consultants such as P. Lund.

The solution to the issue presented here seems rather easy: companies whose profile and product type do not match a specific social platform can simply avoid using said platform in its marketing. These types of considerations are arguably nothing new and not reserved for digital marketing, as the context of advertising is arguably just as important offline as online. You might not see too many print advertisements for Barbie dolls in The Wall Street Journal, for example.

However, the issue is worth mentioning anyway. Social platforms are still new and developing, so companies might not be as certain about where to be present and where not to be present as they are when it comes to classic and offline platforms. Facebook, for example, was once reserved for college students (Kingsnorth, 2016, p. 150) and was not considered appropriate for marketing purposes (Kingsnorth, 2016, p. 159), before eventually becoming a channel where a large number of different companies with different target groups advertise. It can be speculated that this development was, at least partly, a consequence of Facebook's increasing popularity and broader demographic user segment (Corbett, 2009; Statista, 2018). But what if Snapchat, for example, experiences a similar growth - does that mean that serious and technical oriented B2B companies from the medical device industry, such as Widex, should start advertising amidst emojis and dancing hotdog filters on Snapchat? Would embracing such a platform be smart and forward-thinking or would it be inappropriate and inconsistent with the company's brand?

Using social media for marketing purposes while being brand consistent is, arguably, difficult due to the fact that so relatively few valid social media platforms exist. Sticking to Chaffey and Smith's definition of the primary social media options (2017, p. 10), there are, as previously mentioned, just eight. There certainly are a lot more major newspapers and magazines in the world, so companies have a significantly larger pool to choose from, meaning that they have a better chance of finding an offline medium that is perfect for the company and its products. On the contrary, if a company cannot find a good fit for its advertising among the eight social media platforms, it will either have to compromise its brand consistency or it will have to dismiss social media in its marketing altogether. Neither seems ideal.

So what should companies do - should they embrace social media platforms even if they do not seem to be appropriate when considering the companies' brands, products and industries? Or should they stand firm and avoid the social media platform(s) in question, even if it means potentially missing out on exposure towards a large number of potential customers?

One could argue that companies simply need to look at the the advertisements' effect on the bottom line. If a company gains sales and revenue as a direct result of advertisements on platforms that one would normally deem a misfit for the company, something is clearly working despite the bad fit between brand and platform. In that case, the company might just choose to ignore the advertisements' unfortunate effect on its brand consistency.

But the very premise of this study is, of course, that brand consistency should be strived for. The theory backs this up and so do the findings of the study. Prioritizing financial short-term gains over brand consistency might, among other things, hurt a company's long-term market position, its chance of standing out among consumers' many online options and its ability to control the conversation about itself and its products, as previously discussed. Therefore, this study will not conclude that positive results from advertisements justify brand inconsistency if the advertisements are being showcased on social media platforms that do not fit the company's brand. That leaves the question unanswered, however: to what extent should a company's brand dictate which social media channels the company uses? In an extreme scenario where a company's brand is not fit for any major social media, how does the company balance between staying consistent and taking advantage of the social media marketing trend? Is dismissing social media as a marketing channel altogether really the best option?

Answering these questions thoroughly might require a more extensive cost-benefit analysis, taking into account the potential gain of direct social media advertisements versus the potential long-term loss of advertising on social media channels that are not consistent with the company's brand. Due to the scope of this study, such an analysis has not been conducted here.

5.4.5 A model of brand consistency in digital marketing

Either way, the issue above points towards the overall complexity of doing digital marketing in regard to brand consistency. It reaffirms the greater question of how a company can take full advantage of the different digital marketing trends without sacrificing its brand consistency. As touched upon earlier in this chapter, as well as in *The brand in the context of digital marketing*, marketers must comply to the different purposes, environments, algorithms, rules and regulations of each digital marketing channel in order to get the most out

of the channel. Doing so while staying completely consistent in your brand communication is a significant challenge. The problem of advertising on social media channels that are not fit for the brand is just one of many similar examples.

R. Bech believes that a core brand identity needs to be present in all marketing activities - but that the marketing department, at the same time, is allowed to modify parts of the brand to fit into different contexts. R. Bech says, referencing Widex as an example:

"Widex is Widex. The brand is the brand. But the brand is allowed to look slightly different as long as you meet [certain] minimum requirements regarding the core of our brand. If you can find the core of our brand, [the rest of the brand] is allowed to be altered a bit because we need to adapt to Facebook's algorithms and the users' needs. Instagram does it a little different, and LinkedIn does something else." (Appendix 2, 31:49-32:14)

One can furthermore add Google's algorithms and several other phenomena to the list of digital marketing channels that operate in different ways and therefore might require adaptation from a given company and its brand, as discussed earlier.

R. Bech arguably has a point. Her suggestion might be the best answer to the question of how a company can successfully apply various digital marketing activities in its marketing effort without sacrificing its brand consistency. Her observation further correlates with those of her colleagues, as shown in the analysis of this paper. P. Lund and P. Kloppenborg both allude to the notion that the brand can be localized to fit specific environments, and P. Holmen expresses a belief that brand communication should deliver a consistent experience but not necessarily be identical across all external communication (Appendix 1, 16:34-16:58).

Some of the primary benefits of brand consistency are making sure that consumers associate a company's brand with certain strengths and favorable characteristics at all times and that the brand stands out in the market in a positive manner (Beverland, Wilner, & Micheli, 2015, pp. 589-590). We argue that this can still be accomplished even if aspects of the brand are modified as long as the core of the brand stays the same across all channels and touchpoints. And, specifically viewed from a marketing perspective, we further argue that companies might have enough room to live up to the aforementioned differences of various marketing channels - at least to some degree - as long as only the very core of the brand needs to stay the same.

This means that in order to gain brand consistency and still succeed when conducting marketing within the electronic market space, a company's brand must in fact not be completely consistent after all. Instead, the

company needs to be consistent about the defining characteristics of its brand but at the same time be capable of tweaking certain other aspects of the brand.

The brand must be consistent but flexible.

This theory is summarized in Figure 5. The conceptual model shows that all marketing activities (the square boxes) need to reflect at least two types of brand stories at the same time (as shown by the black lines): a brand story based on the core brand identity of the company (the middle circle) and an individual brand story based on the specific marketing channel (the circles in the periphery of the model) where the activity takes place.

Figure 5: Brand consistency in digital marketing

The model further shows that some activities should reflect a third brand story, this being a brand story that is based on a second marketing channel. Paid search marketing, for example, needs to reflect a brand story based on the search engine in which the advertisement is shown as well as a brand story based on the company's website. The reason is that paid search marketing, such as AdWords, is built for search engines and is shown on search engines too, but at the same time, the advertisement redirects users to the company's website (either its primary website or a tailor-made landing page). Therefore, the advertisement arguably needs to tell a similar story as the website in order for the consumer to have a coherent experience throughout the process of seeing the advertisement and clicking on it.

Finally, the model shows the connection between certain online marketing activities (as shown by the blue lines). This connection does not mean that the brand story necessarily needs to be the exact same across these activities; but it does mean that the brand story should be even more similar than otherwise due to the fact that the activities are similar (all social media, for example) and/or due to the fact that some aspects of the activities are directly connected (SEO and blog posts, for example, because both activities are dependent on the same keywords).

While the model illustrates the above finding that the brand should be consistent but flexible, it is based on the digital marketing theory of Chaffey and Smith (2017), Thomas and Housden (2017) and Kingsnorth (2016). The model does not include every single existing digital marketing activity, but is based on the most essential ones as presented in the theory of digital marketing of this study. Influencer marketing is not included in the model, however, because it is still, to some extent, a niche marketing activity that is primarily used by companies within a small group of industries (Grostøl, Jest, & Kristensen, 2017). Also, banner advertising in this model solely refers to banner advertising on online news media sites and the like, as the activity of banner advertising on social media is considered a sub-activity under social media content and is therefore covered by the overall activities of social media content on different social media platforms in the model.

Even though the model is first and foremost conceptual, companies can remove or add marketing activities and channel-based brand stories until it only shows the exact activities and channel-based brand stories applied by the company in question. By doing so, the model will represent an overview of the company's own individual marketing activities and the brand stories they should reflect, thus serving as a tool to make sure that the right brand stories are always being presented in the right digital marketing activities.

It also must be noted that the model is temporary, in that it is based on current marketing activities and channels. The specific activities and channels included in the model may not continue to be relevant over time.

Furthermore, while the core brand identity should remain consistent across channels and activities, it is not inconceivable that even said core will, in some cases, develop and change over time. This could, among other things, be a result of extensive new input from brand stakeholders, societal changes or changes in the core product or core business of the company. However, in such instances, the manifestations of the activities as well as the brand stories - whether channel-related or core identity-related - can be replaced by new ones in the model. In other words, the very framework of the model should, everything else being equal, remain the same.

At the same time, the model is, of course, merely a visualization of the theory that brands might adapt to different marketing channels if the core brand identity remains consistent. The difficult part is practicing this in real life. Marketers must find ways to present alternative versions of the brand on the different channels - but not *new* versions of the brand. There must still be a consistent and recognizable voice across all channels, and the core identity of the brand must still be present in each and every activity.

Summing up, this chapter has shown that companies' ability to succeed within digital marketing while keeping its brand consistent might be challenged by several external factors and trends. Such factors and trends include the influence on digital marketing tendencies from private companies such as Google and Facebook as well as significant changes in the consumer journey. Among these changes are an increasing number of online options for the consumers as well as the growing importance of word of mouth marketing.

According to the theory, another external factor that might influence brand consistency is brand communities. This thesis suggests that social media is, on paper, the most obvious setting to create and facilitate brand communities, but when digging deeper it seems clear that social media is not necessarily the answer either, at least not for B2B companies. The lack of an obvious setting for brand communities is not only a flaw in the very concept of brand communities - it also emphasizes how brand communities can be another threat to brand consistency because it is so difficult to control.

Staying with social media, this chapter has also discussed how a company's brand should affect its use of social media as a general marketing channel, which is yet another example of the complex relationship between digital marketing and brand consistency. Finally, the chapter has suggested that if a company locates its core brand identity and manages to keep this core consistent through all its digital marketing activities, the company might be able to adapt other parts of the brand to the digital marketing channel in question without sacrificing its primary brand consistency. The brand must be consistent but flexible. This theory has been visualized in Figure 5.

5.5 Brand Versatility

There is a lack of brand communication and brand involvement at Widex, creating gaps in stakeholders' brand perceptions. This challenges brand consistency. As found brand managers are able to control some of the brand expressions, thus increasing consistency. However, while it makes sense to formalize the brand identity at a central level in the organization because the brand needs to embrace multiple stakeholders, consistency cannot be and should not be too restraining. The brand needs a core identity, but it also needs to be able to localize and adapt to stakeholders' specific contexts.

This means that lack of communication is not the only challenge to brand consistency. The communication, which does come, should not be considered irrelevant and unfit for use. It should be embracing and cater to stakeholders.

This matter further relates to the external brand communication that lies within digital marketing. As discussed, companies initially face the dilemma of catering to contradictive digital marketing disciplines simultaneously while also expressing a consistent brand identity. However, as shown in Figure 5, a company can solve this dilemma by defining a core brand identity and then modifying its brand story to fit each specific marketing channel while keeping the different manifestations of the brand stories focused around the core brand identity.

Therefore, on the basis of the above, we argue that companies need to pursue what we call *brand versatility*: a brand with a strong and comprehensive core that enables the brand to be flexible and adaptive without losing consistency.

By achieving brand versatility, organizations are able to cater to multiple stakeholder needs, which is desirable and necessary in today's marketing space. Versatility is needed because the brand should be the consistent navigation tool that stakeholders can direct towards because of its recognizability, but it should also be flexible enough to comprise room for local and contextual adaptation. P. Kloppenborg requests a brand which guides her when she communicates with customers. That would require a consistent core that employees would always be able to understand and relate to. Simultaneously, she needs to adapt to the specific and contextual issues that she is met with. The same is the case within the digital landscape, as Widex' marketers must understand and communicate the core brand identity while still being allowed to adapt to the rules, purposes and best practices of specific digital marketing disciplines.

All in al, as found in the analysis, brand consistency should imply an experienced consistency for brand stakeholders, but consistency does not have to imply identical communication across channels.

5.6 Practical Implications

The study has found that brands need to be versatile, understood as consistent but flexible. Now, the thesis aims to discuss the implications of the findings. The following implications aim to deliver more practical recommendations of how brand versatility can be implemented and executed. We propose that successful brand versatility includes involvement, transparency and digital competencies.

5.6.1 Implement and formalize channels for sharing communication

Organizations should create channels for sharing communication. Online employees should have access to forums where they are able to share brand narratives. Concretely, this could be an intranet where different employees are able to share stories from their workday. Or it could be a corporate Instagram profile where employees are allowed to have 'take-overs' where they control the site for some time. Offline this could include meetings on a more local level where colleagues can share stories about each other, the customers, the products, etc., for example, with different functions as moderators. Moreover, communication could be encouraged by formalizing employees as mediators, hence responsible for sharing content and information.

5.6.2 As transparent communication as possible should be shared with stakeholders

This entails that P. Kloppenborg should not leave a meeting and feel like she has just been met by a sales pitch from her colleague. Internally, employees should know the details of the company. For example, this means that weaknesses and disadvantages of products are shared as well, and that sales numbers are visible. At the same time, external stakeholders should be kept in the loop about the organization's culture, processes, employees, etc. as well. Concretely, this could again involve a casual Instagram profile or an executive blog where the C-level of the organization share insights from their everyday.

5.6.3 Attempt to create and facilitate active brand communities

Companies should attempt to create and facilitate active brand communities online through social media platforms and engaging content on said platforms. The companies should interact with the brand stakeholders on the platform and should attempt to steer the conversation within the brand community in a direction benefitting the company and its core brand identity. The company should guide but not control the co-creation process.

It must be noted that because social media is, as discussed, not that obvious as a setting for companies to create active brand communities, the above may be hard to achieve. However, the discussion also could not conclude that it is completely impossible to create active brand communities on social media either. Due to this nonconclusion, the thesis recommends that companies make an attempt, as the scenario in which the company actually succeeds would, all things considered, be preferable.

5.6.4 Explore active brand communities

Either way, companies should always observe user-created online communities in order to learn. The company can explore the brand community by analyzing the conversations, thus learning about its brand stakeholders' understanding and opinion of the brand. If needed, the company can then adjust its own brand communication to match the brand stakeholders' brand understanding, thus creating brand consistency while simultaneously catering to the brand stakeholders including customers and potential new customers.

In order to explore the active online brand communities despite not being the ones to create and facilitate them, companies must, on a practical level, locate them first. The communities could, for example, be present on the company's own social media profiles or in private social media groups on Facebook and the like.

5.6.5 Produce tangible descriptions or visualizations of the core identity

In order to actively apply the core brand identity to all sorts of brand communication, stakeholders from the company must, at all times, have a very clear understanding of the core brand identity in a tangible sense. The company can encourage this by formulating the core brand meaning in the form of tangible manifestations of the core brand identity. This could be a visual or written description of sort. The essential point is that these manifestations should be very clear, give internal stakeholders a very specific understanding of the core identity in its current form and be easy for internal stakeholders to actively consult and use in the everyday work life when communicating the core brand meaning.

5.6.6 Understand digital marketing activities from a brand story perspective

In order to successfully adapt its brand to the various digital marketing activities while still keeping a core brand identity, the companies need to understand the appropriate way to communicate within a specific context, understood as the context of a given marketing activity. The company should, for example, know exactly what specific brand story it should communicate in its Facebook posts, on its LinkedIn advertisements, in AdWords, and so on, based on the appropriate way to communicate within these contexts.

This includes finding an appropriate tone of voice, but it is not only about doing so. Changing your brand story to fit a context is about understanding all the aspects of the context. In order to change its brand story to fit Facebook, for example, a company must also incorporate video marketing in its brand communication, because videos are crucial for a company to succeed on Facebook.

5.6.7 Understand other brand communication activities from a brand story perspective

This above matter is not reserved for digital marketing. A thorough understanding of the context and the necessary brand story related to the context is needed in all brand communication situations that the company might operate within. If, for example, a sales consultant is conducting a sales meeting with a high-ranking manager in a large corporation, the sales consultant needs to be aware of the appropriate brand story that should be communicated in this context. If the setting of the meeting is very formal, the brand should be presented in a formal manner, for example.

5.6.8 Remain flexible regarding channel-specific brand stories

At the same time, the company must stay flexible in its specific brand stories. It is not enough to be flexible in adapting its overall brand once and then settling on a specific brand story for each channel without being open to changing it yet again. Best practices on the various channels can change regularly, as shown in the discussion of Facebook and Google's power in the market, for example.

In order to remain flexible, the company needs to keep track of the development of each activity. In a very practical sense, both can be achieved by following and continuously consulting digital marketing experts, either online or in real life.

5.6.9 Internal stakeholders should prioritize external interaction

It is crucial to mention that this recommendation does not only include front line employees. If sales are the only ones engaging with customers, customer insights from 'the field' will always be based on sales interpretations. Therefore, more than sales need to engage in external interaction to increase and align internal knowledge and to contribute with different perspectives. For example, this entails that employees from marketing or customer service meet customers, go on sales calls, or attend meetings with different stakeholders that contribute to the brand.

5.6.10 Organizations should implement cross-functional collaborations

Cross-functional collaborations will result in higher knowledge and better alignment. By collaborating actively between different functions, employees will obtain insights into more aspects of the business, and they could be able to produce more relevant and consistent communication. For example, sales and digital marketing should collaborate on certain issues. If SEO optimization is based on wording that sales never use, customers might never search for these words as they have not heard them in brand expressions. A collaboration and involvement across functions could prevent this.

6. Conclusion

Brand consistency is a crucial matter for the success of a brand. The thesis finds that brands are dynamic phenomena which are constituted by communication, and this means that the meaning of a brand depends on its stakeholders' interpretations of said communication. If interpretations are inconsistent, misperceptions and perception gaps will occur and impede brand success. Multiple stakeholders are included in the co-creation of brand meaning; hence brand managers need to know how to tackle this reality in order to deliver a consistent brand. Brands are understood in micro-level communication which forms as networks to constitute the brand, and this means that branding needs to be regarded on both a micro- and macro-level.

In order for brand managers to induce consistent brand meaning, they can engage in controlling brand expressions and keeping these aligned. Due to the fact that a brand is always (re)produced in different contexts, the brand-building process will, however, entail that absolute consistency is unobtainable on a micro-level. Stakeholders will always have different knowledge bases and will always meet the brand in different contexts, thus they will interpret different brand meanings. Moreover, companies need to cater to stakeholder demands and needs which also differ in nature.

Today's digital landscape covers numerous essential platforms that companies need to engage in as part of their marketing efforts. This can be complex, but due to a changed consumer journey centralized around said digital landscape, companies must embrace marketing activities within the digital marketplace. At the same time, huge private companies like Facebook and Google are firmly in power of the most popular digital platforms, and regular companies must therefore cater to them and operate within their frameworks. Thus, executing digital marketing is not just a matter that lies in the hands of the company itself.

This loss of power combined with the necessity to conduct a large number of different digital marketing activities can hurt a company's brand consistency: the structures of Facebook and Google's frameworks as well as the best practices of the different digital activities might contradict the company's brand identity. As a result, companies can be forced to choose between brand consistency and digital marketing success.

Another threat to a company's brand consistency is brand communities consisting of stakeholders that co-create the company's brand. While this process can benefit a brand because important stakeholders become more involved in the brand creation, the process can also hurt a company's brand consistency because it takes away the company's control of brand meaning. Social media appears to be an obvious option for companies to establish and facilitate brand communities, thus keeping a level of control. However, when looking closer, especially on Facebook and LinkedIn, the consumer trends of the primary social media platforms do

not appear to support companies' ability to create active brand communities after all. As a result, the practical matters behind brand communities as an active marketing method remain a mystery. This indefiniteness of the how-to of active online brand communities only emphasizes the brand communities' threat to a company's brand consistency.

The above findings prove how the digital landscape and multiple stakeholders challenge companies' brand consistency. Moreover, it leads to answer how brand consistency is achieved.

The above findings prove that companies must adapt to stakeholders and the digital landscape to stay relevant. Therefore, absolute and static brand consistency becomes, not only unobtainable, but undesirable as well. Therefore, companies need to strike a balance between consistency and flexibility if they want to assert themselves in today's brand space. Consequently, companies need to develop brand versatility. Brand versatility is achieved by developing a brand with a holistic and strong core identity that allows for continuous adaptation and learning where the brand meets its stakeholders. These meetings take place in different contexts including different types of digital platforms, sales meetings, customer service conversations, etc. The brand must, essentially, be consistent across channels but flexible enough to adapt to all of the contexts.

On behalf of the above findings, a number of recommendations can be suggested for companies to achieve brand versatility:

In order for companies to develop a brand that is versatile, they must acknowledge that involvement and transparency are key words. The communication needs to be open and clear because the more stakeholders know, the more they will contribute to the brand. By delivering honest and transparent information, stakeholders will enhance their knowledge which will align their knowledge bases, thus increasing brand consistency. Transparency goes hand in hand with involvement, and brand managers need to involve stakeholders in the core brand identity. Hereby, they are able to influence its creation and more likely to share its meaning. Also, stakeholders most likely possess valuable knowledge and experience that they are only able to share if they are involved. The thesis finds that involvement of external stakeholders are difficult online, and instead the case findings suggest that involvement of employees are a main task because they are at the front line of the market.

Among other things, brand versatility further requires a thorough understanding of the different contexts that the company in question operates within. This might help determine to what extent and in what way the company should adapt its brand story within the context in question.

7. Further Research

When conducting a study like this, we realize that the more knowledge we obtain, the more we do not know. This realization opens up a lot of questions that we are afterwards able to propose. This chapter will elaborate on some of the main issues of the thesis which can be examined as further research.

First of all, the findings of the thesis let us to develop a number of recommendations based on the conclusions that we did. These recommendations are hypotheses originating from the findings, but in order to increase their validity, these are to be examined further in other contexts.

The interview subjects of the study are all Widex employees, hence affected by their internal context. As the thesis considers customers as active stakeholders in brand co-creation, the study could be further nuanced and balanced by including customers to gain insights into their perspectives on Widex' branding. Additionally, studies could involve various stakeholder groups, including media, suppliers, retailers, etc. Thus, the field of stakeholder branding still lacks research into the entire field.

This study has used the B2B2C company Widex as a case company. The fact that Widex mainly focuses on B2B has directed the study based on this fact. One of the findings of the study is that organizations should consider both corporate, product and service branding. This conclusion is based on the findings that such a holistic view would offer consistency and relevance at once. However, this might be different if brand consistency within a B2C company was to be studied. The theory and the findings show that consumers are attracted by corporate brands. The B2B customers, however, are attracted by product and service branding. Therefore, in a B2C setting, the corporate brand might be enough to both stay consistent and relevant. A topic for further research thus becomes whether brand consistency should be approached differently in regard to the company's customer group.

A topic for further research within the context of digital marketing is further discussing the influence and market position of companies such as Google and Facebook. This study has discussed how such companies affect regular companies' brand consistency because marketers must operate within the platforms of these private companies. The rules and structures of the platforms are directly controlled by Google and Facebook and can be changed from one day to another. The rules and structures (or the changes to them) are not necessarily in line with a given company's brand consistency. For further research, the effect of the, arguably, monopoly-like market position of companies like Google and Facebook could be explored. By interviewing experts in digital marketing and digital culture, we could get an understanding of how digital marketing and brand consistency control in a digital context would be affected if the social media market and the search

engine market were more competitive or if Google and Facebook were subject to more legislation. This is especially relevant in the context of the recent lawsuit and fine against Facebook and Google, respectively (Bowcott & Hern, 2018; European Commission, 2017).

Another, more tangible, topic for further research within digital marketing is exploring the case company's digital marketing disciplines outside of social media. As mentioned, this thesis has obtained no extensive knowledge of the ways Widex conducts marketing activities such as SEO, AdWords, email marketing and native advertising. Nor has the thesis obtained any information about Widex' results from said activities. By getting such information, we would gain more understanding of the effect on brand consistency of these types of activities.

Presumably, a number of these activities are conducted by Magnetix, Widex' digital marketing agency. This paper has argued for a number of brand consistency complications from employing a digital marketing agency, but the findings regarding this matter could, to some extent, be tested and expanded by gaining more knowledge of Magnetix' actual work on behalf of Widex. Such knowledge could be obtained by interviewing marketers from the agency working directly with Widex and by asking R. Bech or other marketing employees from Widex about the work of Magnetix.

In the discussion of this thesis, the topic of whether or not companies should operate on social media platforms that are not relevant for their brand was explored. It was discussed if companies should prioritize long-term brand consistency the use of unfit social media platforms if the short-term results of marketing activities on said unfit social platforms were positive. It was suggested that finding the real answer to such a question would require a cost-benefit analysis in which the revenue that could be gained through activities on the social media platforms in question were compared to the potential long-term loss of brand inconsistency. Such an analysis could in fact be conducted to shed more light on the subject. It could, for example, be done by obtaining knowledge of the results of companies who have done both things and by conducting consumer surveys about how consumers would react to companies advertising and being present on different social media platforms that do not seem to be in line with a given company's brand.

In order to gain an even greater understanding of Widex' marketing activities from a brand consistency perspective, it might be relevant to move out of the digital sphere and instead explore Widex' offline marketing activities. This would help in learning about these types of marketing activities' effect on a company's brand consistency.

Furthermore, this thesis has only discussed active brand communities on social media due to the notion of social media seeming like an obvious setting for brand communities and due to the overall digital focus of the marketing-related aspects of this thesis. However, in extension of the above, it could be relevant to research and explore active brand communities in other, offline settings. This could give a greater understanding of brand communities as a general concept as well brand communities' effect on brand consistency in a broader sense.

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9. Appendices

Appendix 1

Interview with Per Holmen, Head of Brand and Communications, Widex A/S

Interviewers: Bastian Grostøl and Nikolaj Skovsted Kristensen

Duration: 26:31

Appendix 2

Interview with Rina Bech, Content Marketing Specialist and Global SoMe Manager, Widex A/S

Interviewers: Bastian Grostøl and Nikolaj Skovsted Kristensen

Duration: 32:54

Appendix 3

Interview with Pernille Kloppenborg, Customer Service Manager DK/SE, Widex Nordic

Interviewers: Bastian Grostøl and Nikolaj Skovsted Kristensen

Duration: 33:34

Appendix 4

Interview with Pia Lund, Audiological Sales Support, Widex Nordic

Interviewers: Bastian Grostøl and Nikolaj Skovsted Kristensen

Duration: 23:33

Appendix 5

Screenshots from Facebook for netnographic research

Appendix 6

Screenshots from LinkedIn for netnographic research

Appendix 7

Screenshots from Twitter for netnographic research

Appendix 8

Email correspondence with Rina Bech

Appendix 9

Overview of the Widex employee survey about the Widex brand