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Abstract

The current market for apparel retail goods is continuously getting more competitive due to the increasing amount of actors in the field. In order to stand out in the complex and dynamic market, branding has emerged to be companies’ top priority because brands are increasingly becoming more valuable assets to companies’ business performance. However, the topic of brand management usually lacks the consideration regarding practical aspects because of the questions of academics’ access and exposure to the field. Also, it has been said that one of the common obstacles in the Finnish apparel and textile industry is the lack of knowledge in branding and thus, more should be known about branding and the common perceptions of individuals who are working with branding.

In light of the above, the purpose of this thesis is to discover and expand knowledge on how Finnish apparel brand managers currently perform branding when managing a Finnish apparel brand. This study is composed of a literature review and an empirical research. In the literature review, issues related to branding are investigated. Brands, brand managers’ work tasks and the changes in today’s branding environment are all considered. In the empirical research the data was collected through semi-structured interviews with five Finnish apparel brand managers, who are managing a Finnish apparel retail brand.

Three central themes, a general understanding of an apparel brand and branding, brand managers’ work related tasks and brand managers’ main challenges in branding, were formed based on the various perceptions that research participants associated with branding and managing an apparel brand. The thematic orientations were similar between all of the participants, but some different perceptions occurred when studying the themes in more detail. Finnish apparel brand managers perceive an apparel brand from slightly different angles but they attach similar characteristics to their managed brands such as Finnishness, sustainability and story-telling. All of the Finnish apparel brand managers focus on creating and maintaining an identity for a trademark or products that are offered and ensuring consistency and clarity in all actions around the managed brand. In order to maintain the Finnish apparel brands, the Finnish apparel brand managers carry out several work tasks that revolve around the brand. Also, Finnish apparel brand managers take the branding environment into consideration while managing a Finnish apparel brand including for instance the effects of digitalization and sustainability issues. The challenges of branding are related to implementation of the brand strategy and to communicational issues of the brand message.

The findings of this study may assist the practitioners in the field in understanding the importance of branding from a broad perspective and analyzing the managed brand as an integral part of the ever changing branding environment. Also, the results may help to understand the value of establishing a consistent brand strategy as well as understanding the importance of the consumers.

Key words: branding, apparel branding, apparel brands, brand managers, brand management
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1 Introduction

This chapter presents the background of the studied issue together with problem discussion, research purpose and the research questions, which guide the whole research process. Also, key term definitions and delimitations are introduced and the structure of the thesis is presented.

1.1 Background

Clothing and fashion industry is one of the exceptional economic success stories of the past decade (Amed et al., 2016a). Over the past decade, the clothing and fashion industry has grown at 5.5 percent each year and according to the McKinsey Global Fashion Index, this industry’s worth is predicted to be 2.4 trillion US dollars (Amed et al., 2016a). The leading digital authority on the global fashion industry, Business of Fashion, and one of the leading management consulting firms, McKinsey & Company, have together composed a report about the state of clothing and fashion in 2017 (Amed et al., 2016b). According to this report, the clothing and fashion industry is one of the biggest and most value-creating industries in the world and it is bigger than transportation, media and even professional and commercial services (Amed et al., 2016b, p.38). In addition, it is stated in the report, even though it is not directly comparable, that if the industry of clothing and fashion were an individual country, its market size would equate the seventh-largest gross domestic product in the world (Amed et al., 2016b, p.38). This indicates that the clothing and textile industry represents a substantial share of economic activity in global trade (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2008, p.1).

The global market for apparel retail goods is constantly getting more intense and competitive, because of the increasing amount of actors in the field (McColl and Moore, 2011, p.91; Amed et al., 2016, p.18). According to McKinsey & Company, some of the fastest growing companies worldwide can be found within the apparel industry (Keller et al., 2014). Moreover, the number of offline and online apparel retailers are increasingly growing and the pace does not seem to decelerate in the near future (Keller et al., 2014). When the market conditions are getting more dynamic, competitive and complex, retail organizations’ marketing has become a crucial element and marketing activities have taken a key role in retail organizations’ strategic planning (McColl and Moore, 2011, p.91). Through marketing, or more precisely through branding that can be viewed as a powerful marketing tool, companies can differentiate their products from their competitors and position their place on the market (McColl and Moore, 2011, p.91; Graham et al., 1994, p.33). In the mainstream marketing literature, the brand and the practice of branding are agreed to be elements that are basically omnipresent in all successful businesses (Keller and Lehmann, 2006, pp.740,754) and this is also the case in the apparel marketplace, especially today when the apparel market is saturated (McColl and Moore, 2014, p.136). Jin and Cedrola (2017, p.2) also state that apparel and fashion company’s brand is the most important asset of the company. It has been recognized that brands are a part of organizations’ capital (Helm and Jones, 2010, p.545) and they have an essential role in consumer decision making process (Keller, 2003, p.9). As the market is
expanding rapidly and new entrants are continuously joining the market, it is important for the apparel retailers to concentrate on consistent brand management (Kapferer, 2008, p.280).

According to Kapferer (2008, p.13) the core concept of brand management is to gain power in the market by making a brand and thus, the brand concept more known, more shared and more bought among consumers. Salzer-Mörling and Strannegård (2004, p.225) state that brand management is used to reveal a story that makes the product or the company distinct in order to gain consumers attention in the marketplace. It is critical to have a strong, recognizable brand in a competitive market place, because powerful brands have an ability to influence the market and the power will increase as more consumers are aware of it, are convinced about it and count on it (Kapferer, 2008, p.13). Also, it has been long known that brands have a strong link to company’s wellbeing; when discussing company’s capital, the equity held in brands has a great impact on organization’s stock market worth and it is a primary source of company’s cash flow (Helm and Jones, 2010, p.545). However, a corporate wellbeing cannot only lean on a brand per se, because whether the brand per se is successful or not, it highly depends on how it is managed (Helm and Jones, 2010, p.545). Brand managers are people who manage their brands (Veloutsou, 2002, p.453) and are generally responsible for the holistic management of the brand (Veloutsou and Panigyrakis, 2004, p.105) and during the brand building process they have a key role when the brand’s promise and values are translated into action (Poulis, Panigyrakis and Panos Panopoulos, 2013, p.655).

1.2 Problem statement

Existing research on apparel branding has investigated many aspects, but some areas of this research field need further investigation. The existing research topics cover the areas such as the apparel brands as drivers of business differentiation (Wigley, Moore and Birtwistle, 2005), the relationship between apparel brand’s identity and image (Ross and Harradine, 2010), consumer behavior towards apparel and fashion (Evans, 1989), apparel brands within particular market sectors (Fionda and Moore, 2009), branding strategies of specific channels of distribution of apparel brands (Rowley, 2009) and issues relating to the co-branding (Shen et al., 2014). Even though the mentioned studies and other in the field are valuable concerning the subject of apparel branding, the field needs more practical aspects and holistic understanding about branding and how it is executed by the people who are working with branding.

According to Zwick and Cayla (2011, p.5) the inner life of the consumer has received a lot of attention among academics and it has been studied thoroughly by using a great amount of time, energy and resources. Conversely, social scientists have shed comparably little light to the work of marketing and thus, fairly little effort has been made to investigate increasingly expanding group of actors who are defining the markets and giving the shape on how consumer culture is understood and seen today (Zwick and Cayla, 2011, p.5). This is especially surprising as the outcomes of the work that market practitioners do are strikingly noticeable (Zwick and Cayla, 2011, p.5).

Furthermore, Brexendorf, Kernstock and Powell (2014, p.685) argue that even though brand practitioners and marketers have witnessed the growing complexity in the business field, research on the brand field has undergone only small changes regardless of the changes in business
practice. Due to this, Brexendorf, Kernstock and Powell (2014, p.686) have stated that ongoing discussion by academics and the needs of practical management are increasingly separating from each other and thus, causing a gap between these two issues. In order to offer guidance to brand practitioners for their everyday decisions, it is vital to know for instance what kinds of challenges brand managers are experiencing in their work, and therefore, Brexendorf, Kernstock and Powell (2014, p.686) have proposed that academic researchers and brand practitioners should co-operate more.

According to Brexendorf and Daecke (2012, p.35) the topic of brand management is also usually considered without consideration of the practical aspects, because the academics have often limited access and revelation to the field of brand management in practice. However, practitioners and especially managers who work closely with the brands, face several tasks and challenges on a daily basis, but usually they do not have time to examine conceptual developments and suitable research in the field (Brexendorf and Daecke, 2012, p.35). The nature of tasks of branding is changing over time, for instance, due to consumers who today are empowered as never before and the development of technology (Kapferer, 2008, p.3; Kotler et al., 2016, p.152). Brand managers and people who are working with branding have a lot of power regarding how the brands are presented, maintained and developed overall. When considering the brand management in practice in the apparel and textile industry, no research was found on investigating apparel brand managers, which is surprising since effective branding is a major force in the apparel and fashion world (Choi, 2014, p.3).

In the empirical research of this study, the focus is on Finland and Finnish apparel brand managers, because according to Lille’s (2010) research results, focusing on 11 Finnish small size design and apparel companies, there is a need especially in Finland, to know more about branding from a practical perspective and to gain more information how branding is executed in practice. This is because, Lille’s (2010) research results showed that one of the common obstacles in the Finnish apparel and textile industry is that it is too product-oriented and there is the lack of knowledge in marketing and branding. Also, according to Bhose’s (2016) interview with Anna-Kaisa Auvinen, who is the managing director of Finnish Textile and Fashion organization, Finnish apparel companies should pay more attention on brand building as well as developing their marketing. In order to know how branding is executed in practice among Finnish apparel brand managers, interviews are conducted to gain more in-depth understanding of the current branding performance of Finnish apparel brands.

1.3 Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this thesis is to discover and expand knowledge on how Finnish apparel brand managers currently perform branding when managing a Finnish apparel brand. The research has three research questions to achieve the purpose:
1. How do Finnish apparel brand managers perceive an apparel brand?

2. What are Finnish apparel brand managers’ central work tasks when managing a Finnish apparel brand?

3. How do Finnish apparel brand managers perceive the key challenges they face when managing an apparel brand?

1.4 Key term definitions

*Brand*
In this thesis the brand is defined accordingly: “a name, symbol, logo, design or image, or any combination of these, which is used to identify a product or service and distinguish it from those of competitors” (Kotler et al., 2016, p.423).

*Branding*
In this study branding is defined accordingly: “branding is endowing products and services with the power of a brand” (Kotler et al. 2016, p.423) and it is used to achieve differentiation and build sustainable competitive advantage (Kotler and Pfoertsch, 2010, p.11).

*Brand manager*
In this thesis brand manager is defined as a person who manages his/her brand(s) (Veloutsou, 2002, p.453) and is generally responsible for the holistic management of the brand (Veloutsou and Panigyrakis, 2004, p.105).

*Work task*
In this study work task is defined accordingly as Li and Belkin (2010, p.1771) view it; “work task refers to an activity people perform to fulfill their responsibility for their work, such as a work-related task.”

1.5 Delimitations

This thesis concentrates the investigation only on apparel brand managers within the marketing department and thus, the research does not study the other parts of the companies, such as product development and logistics even though they also have an important role when it comes to ensuring the business growth and a successful branding policy in their own ways (Kapferer, 2008, p.31). In addition, all the interviewed Finnish brand managers are working with premium brands and it is the researcher’s interpretation that all the apparel brands in this research can be seen as premium brands. Depending on the positioning strategy or the target segments, apparel and fashion brands can be categorized into four classes that are designer brands, luxury brands, premium brands and mass-market brands (Hameide, 2011). According to Hameide (2011, p.162) premium brands possess better quality, functionality and benefits based on a higher level of creativity and innovation. Also, premium brands are product centered and it requires intense understanding of consumer buying behavior and motivation. Furthermore, a premium brand is not advertised as elite...
as the way a luxury brand is but rather a premium brand attracts to the set of values that can be shared by people in many walks of life and people of many income levels (Hameide, 2011, p.162). It is important that all of the interviewed managers manage brands which are vertically on the same level so that the comparison between the managers is easier in the later stage of the research.

1.6 Structure of the thesis

In chapter one, the reader is introduced to the background of the research area together with the research problem and the motivations for conducting the study. Also, the purpose and research questions and research delimitations as well as the key term definitions for the study are presented. Chapter two focuses on literature review, in which the essential elements of the study – branding, a brand and its key elements as well as brand managers’ work related tasks and their today’s working environment – are presented in the light of existing literature and previous studies. In the end of this chapter, a conceptual framework of this research is introduced, which creates the base for this study’s empirical research. In chapter three, the methodological procedure is presented. The chosen research method and data collection method are introduced together with the sample selection. Also, in this chapter it is explained how the collected data is analyzed and the evaluation of research quality and ethical issues related to the study are also considered. Chapter four concentrates on results and analysis of the study. Results of the primary data collected through semi-structured interviews are analyzed in relation to existing literature and prior studies and their findings. Chapter five discusses the findings of the study in light of the presented research questions that have guided the study from the beginning. Lastly, in chapter six, conclusions of this study are made. Also, research limitations are presented and future research suggestions are provided.
2 Literature review

This chapter presents an overview of the subjects of branding, brands, brand managers’ work related tasks and today’s environment of brand managers. The mentioned subjects are introduced in order to establish a foundation of knowledge for this thesis as well as to be able later to contrast and compare the knowledge and the findings to the results of the empirical study of this research. The information regarding the mentioned subjects in this chapter is gathered from scientific literature, academic articles and previous studies in the field of studied issue.

2.1 Introduction to branding

Branding has existed for centuries as a means to distinguish one company’s products or services from those of another (Kotler et al., 2016, p.423; Keller, 2008, p.2). However, during the last decade, branding has come up as a top management priority because of the growing realization that brands are increasingly becoming more valuable assets to companies’ business performance (Keller and Lehmann, 2006, p.740). Branding signifies much more than simply giving a brand name and giving a sign to the markets and consumers that such a product or service has been stamped with the imprint and mark of a company (Kapferer, 2008, p.31). Furthermore, it is outdated to think that branding would be equal to an advertising campaign, because an advertising campaign is only one form of external communications (Kotler and Pfoertsch, 2010, p.7). Branding demands long-term involvement by the company and a high level of skills and resources (Kapferer, 2008, p.31).

Knox and Bickerton (2003, p.999) state that the concept of the brand can be derived to product marketing, where both brand management’s and branding’s role has been principally to establish preference and differentiation for a product or service in the customer’s mind. According to Graham et al. (1994, p.33) branding can be understood as a powerful marketing tool and is used to differentiate companies products or services in the marketplace. Some argue that branding strategies are created for the product by the company in order to identify and position the brand with positive product benefits to gain consumers attention as well as to build brand awareness and to increase profitability (Graham et al., 1994, p.33). According to de Chernatony and McDonald (2003, p.60), the aim of branding is to communicate the relevant added values, which competitors find difficult to mimic and for which consumers are ready to pay the premium price.

According to Kotler et al. (2016, p.423), branding is “the process of endowing products and services with the power of a brand”. The core idea is to create differences between offerings (Kotler et al., 2016, p.423). In order to make the consumes care and understand what the offering does, the marketers have to educate them of “who” the offering is, which is done by identifying it by naming it and with other brand elements (Kotler et al., 2016, p.423). According to Kapferer (2008, p.31) brands are a direct result of the strategy of product differentiation and market segmentation. Since companies’ aim is to better fulfill the particular customers’ expectations, companies put their focus constantly and repeatedly on providing the product differentiation with the ideal mixture of
attributes (Kapferer, 2008, p.31). These combinations of attributes include intangible and tangible, hedonistic and functional, invisible and visible attributes, and the whole process of product differentiation is executed within applicable economic circumstances for their businesses (Kapferer, 2008, p.31). When branding is successfully executed, it creates mental structures, which are helpful for the consumers to expand their knowledge about services and products, which helps them in decision making and also creates value to the company (Kotler et al., 2016, p.423).

According to Hameide (2011, p.39) branding is a versatile process, which brings out a certain value of a product and turns it into a consumer experience. Therefore, adding value to the customer and solving a problem is where the concept of a brand begins, after which the concept turns into a product. The product then is provided with an identity, which characterizes it and reflects the value that it gives to the consumer. The next step in the process is to use several marketing channels to communicate the values and characteristics to potential customers. Hameide (2011, p.39) ends his statement concerning branding saying that recognizing the purpose and the need for the brand to exist is the starting point of the whole branding process.

The reason behind branding is that companies desire to press their mark on various sectors and set their own imprint on their services and products (Kapferer, 2008, p.31). Due to this, it is not surprising that the word “brand” can also be referred to the act of burning a sign or an imprint into an animal’s flesh as a way to declare ownership of it (Kapferer, 2008, p.31). In summary, it can be stated that the core idea of branding is differentiating the product or the service, which is identified by a particular name, identity and tangible elements that establish the brand.

2.1.1 Defining a brand

Even though the importance of branding has commonly been recognized for the business, vagueness can be noticed among experts in the marketing related academic literature when it comes to defining a brand and what exactly comprises the brand (Kapferer, 2008, p.9; McColl and Moore, 2011, p.92). A common understanding has been recognized within the literature that a brand is much more than plainly a label (Gardner and Levy, 1955, p.35). According to Kotler et al. (2016, p.423) a brand is a name, logo, design, symbol or image, or some combination of these, which is applied to identify a product or service and differentiate it from competitors’ products or services. They also state that a brand can be viewed as an entity that provides consumers added value over and above its functional performance (Kotler et al. 2016, p.423). Wheeler (2006, p.4) argues that a brand is the big idea, the promise and the expectations that exist in each customer’s mind about a company, product or service. Gardner and Levy (1955, p.35) state that the brand can be identified as a complex symbol that enhances ideas, values and attributes and also utilizes these to build up a plain product. Kapferer (2008, p.3) states that the brand is a unique set of values that includes both tangible and intangible values and the brand can be viewed as “a name that symbolizes a long-term engagement, crusade or commitment to a unique set of values, embedded into products, services and behaviors, which make the organization, person or product stand apart and stand out” (Kapferer, 2012, p.12).
2.1.2 Elements of a brand construct

Due to the lack in the branding literature of how to define the brand construct and boundaries, researchers de Chernatony and Dall’Olmo Riley (1998a, p.1074) developed a model after they had carried out a content analysis based on the interviews with chief industry brand consultants and more than 100 articles from the literature. The created model worked as the foundation for establishing the theory of the brand, and it allowed the researchers to identify the brand construct and boundaries (de Chernatony and Dall’Olmo Riley, 1998a, p.1074). They suggested 12 main elements that categorize the essential proposals in the branding literature. McColl and Moore (2011, p.94) have updated and outlined de Chernatony’s and Dall’Olmo Riley’s (1998a) elements of the brand construct model and according to them a brand in terms of its role can be viewed as a legal instrument, a logo, a company, a communication shorthand, a risk reducer, an identity system, an image in consumers’ minds, a value system, having a personality, a party to a relationship, an adding value or an evolving entity. Figure 1 below illustrates the different elements of the brand construct.

![Figure 1. Elements of the brand construct (adapted from McColl and Moore, 2011, p.94)](image)

The above mentioned twelve elements of a brand include several aspects of the activities of the company and the perceptions of the consumers (de Chernatony and Dall’Olmo Riley, 1998b, p.428). The brand exists on ground of an ongoing process in which the expectations and values integrated in the brand are placed and carried out by the company and defined, and then reassessed by the consumers (de Chernatony and Dall’Olmo Riley, 1998b, p.428). de Chernatony and Dall’Olmo Riley (1998a, p.1088) affirm that their element of the brand model has many dimensions. However, they stress that the importance on each brand construct varies by the brand and the company based on their nature and also where the strategical focus is emphasized both within the brand and the company.
2.1.3 Key brand elements

de Chernatony and Dall’Olmo Riley (1998a, p.1076) argue, when conceptualizing a brand, that the brand includes both tangible and intangible elements, and each of these elements are dependent on each other. Brand logo, unique design details, associated slogans and functional qualities are all tangible elements of the brand because they can be easily noticed and observed by consumers (Wigley, Nobbs and Larsen, 2013, p.248). Conversely, the intangible elements can also be identified but are less apparent and thus, cannot be recognized as easily as tangible ones; they are elements such as brand’s identity, image and personality (de Chernatony and Dall’Olmo Riley, 1998a, p.1076) and heritage (Wigley, Nobbs and Larsen, 2013, p.249). All these intangible elements lead consumers’ psychological reactions and social renditions to the brand, and thus have an effect to consumers’ purchasing behavior and brand loyalty (Holt, 2002, p.79). In this way, brands can be seen as intangible promises made tangible through noticeable signs. Also, Schembri (2009, p.1307) stresses the intangible assets of the brand stating that consumers stay loyal to the brand because of the associations they attach to the brand while they consume the brand. Therefore, for instance, consumers do not select and purchase Levi’s jeans just because of the signature red logo with the brand name on the bottom side of the jeans but due to the emotional associations that are triggered by the logo, and the perceived mental images that represent a fascinating lifestyle symbolized by that logo (Solomon, Bamossy and Askegaard, 2016, pp.43, 215).

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the brand, the tangible and intangible elements that combine the brand are investigated more thoroughly. It is important to remember that both of these elements are interdependent and together creating the brand (de Chernatony and Dall’Olmo Riley, 1998, p.1076). Figure 2 below illustrates the tangible elements and intangible elements of the brand.

![Figure 2. Model of tangible and intangible elements of the brand (adapted from de Chernatony and Dall’Olmo Riley, 1998a, p.1076; Wigley, Nobbs and Larsen, 2013, p.249)]](image)
**Intangible brand elements**

**Brand identity**
Brand identity is the way how a company wants to establish or position its service or products or itself in the consumers’ minds (Kotler et al., 2016, p.426). Wheeler (2006, p.6) states that brand identity is the verbal and visual expression of a brand and it expresses, communicates, visualizes, supports and synthesizes the brand. Brand identity should establish the basis for sustaining resonance with all the potential and existing customers as well as with other essential stakeholders such as employees (Botschen, Combe and Thelen, 2013, p.3) and often branding strategy is used as a means of transmitting the brand’s identity (Nandan, 2005, p.265). Botschen, Combe and Thelen (2013, p.15) also argue that the identity of the brand is vital to consumers in apparel retailing since the brands that are worn are more closely identified with the “self” and are more visible forms of consumption. Roy and Banerjee (2014, p.207) state that a brand’s success in a competitive market relies upon the choice of the identity of the brand and the way how an identity is used for creating an image and protecting that its image is sufficiently passing on to its identity.

**Brand image**
Brand image refers to the consumers’ perceptions of the brand’s verbal and visual expressions, which leads to the mental emotional or psychological associations that the brand aims to maintain in the consumers’ minds (Ballantyne, Warren, Nobbs, 2006, p.344; Kotler et al., 2016, p.426). Basically, consumers use these mental associations or perceptions as a means to differentiate between several brands and simplify the choice (Ballantyne, Warren, Nobbs, 2006, p.344). In order to establish the right brand image in the consumers’ minds, the marketer has to transmit brand identity through all available marketing mix variables (product, price, promotion, place) (Kotler et al., 2016, p.426). Moore, Fernie and Burt (2000, pp. 903, 932) stress that it has become very valuable to create and maintain a brand image in the competitive and globalizing market situation.

**Brand personality**
Brand personality has been formally defined as “the set of human characteristics associated with a brand” (Aaker, 1997, p.347). Choi (2014, pp.3-4) states that brand personality expresses the brand identity and also the way how consumers compound to the brand. Choi (2014, pp.3-4) also highlights that apparel and fashion brands’ brand personality is more unstable and dynamic because of the continuous need to refresh and update brands identity in today’s market. Brand personality usually acts as a self-expressive or symbolic function, which has an impact to the emotional aspects of the brand (Jiang and Nagasawa, 2012, p.171). In other words, a powerful brand personality enables consumers to utilize brands in order to interact with others and create a unique bond with the brand (Ligas and Cotte 1999, p.613).

**Brand equity**
According to Aaker (1996, pp.7-8) “brand equity is a set of assets (and liabilities) linked to a brand's name and symbol that adds to (or subtracts from) the value provided by a product or service”. The concept of brand equity stands for the share of firm equity that derives from the brand and thus, for not losing in value, the brand must be delicately managed (Salzer-Mörling and Strannegård, 2004, p.227). Salzer-Mörling and Strannegård (2004, p.227) introduce brand equity as
consisting of the following four major asset categories: brand name awareness, brand loyalty, perceived quality, and brand associations. Leone et al. (2006, p.126) state that a brand’s power lies in the minds of consumers and what they have learned, felt and experienced about the brand over time and thus, brand equity can be thought as the “added value” embedded to a product in consumers’ words, thoughts and actions.

**Positioning**
According to Kapferer (2008, p.171) brand positioning defines the point of view, which is used by the products of the brand to enter a market for growing their market share by benefiting from the competition. Also, brand positioning means highlighting the unique characteristics of the brand, which differentiates it from the competitors and gains the public’s attention (Kapferer, 2008, p.175). When a company is positioning its brand in to the market, the following issues should be considered: what is the brand’s purpose and benefit, what are the unique attributes that can create and support such a benefit, who is the target customer for the brand, and who are the brand’s competitors (Jin and Cedrola, 2017, p.8). When it comes to positioning apparel brands in the apparel industry, a growing number of apparel and fashion brands are putting environmental sustainability at the center of their brand strategy and are positioned to benefit from the forecasted growth in this market (Kim and Hall, 2015, pp.31-32). According to Kiron et al. (2012, p.71) two thirds of the managers today agree that placing environmental sustainability is a necessity in order to be competitive.

**Heritage**
Bringing confidence and balance by emphasizing historical elements of the brand, is a way of handling the rapid changes in the environment (Hakala et al., 2011, p.447). The trend of finding comfort in the past has increased among consumers, which provides a boost in popularity for apparel brands that have their image built around heritage, stability and authenticity (Loveland et al., 2010, p.405). It has also been stated that these qualities in a brand creates a stronger emotional and symbolic bond between a consumer and a brand (Ballantyne, Warren and Nobbs, 2006, p.349). Some have argued that heritage has been perceived as a unique quality, which makes it a valuable organizational resource in creating long-term strategic value and can offer ground for exceptional performance (Hakala et al., 2011, p.447). Also, a company’s brand heritage can be viewed as a unique competitive tool when the company is expanding its business in to international markets (Hakala et al., 2011, p.454).

**Tangible brand elements**

**Brand elements**
According to Kotler et al. (2016, p.432) brand elements can be viewed as trademarkable devices that differentiate and identify the brand such as the name, logo or character of the brand. Both Henderson et al. (2003, p.297) and Bailey and Schechter (1994, p.42) have specified the tangible brand elements, which are the most visual. These visual stimuli involve the logo, signage, labeling and packaging, the visual theme of marketing tools that are used to promote the products or services as well as product design and the design of points where customer interaction happens such as the
company’s website (Henderson et al., 2003, p.297; Bailey and Schechter, 1994, p.42). By having visual stimuli for the brand, it can help building strong brands, because stimuli can create loyalty, differentiate products, allow premium pricing and protect against competition (Henderson et al., 2003, pp.297-298). This claim is supported by Hertenstein’s, Platt’s and Brown’s (2001, p.18) research focusing on the design quality of visual stimuli in relation to financial performance of the companies and according to their research results, companies that had good design quality had better financial performance as well. Henderson et al. (2003, p.298) also argue that the tangible brand elements may be efficient because they are learned faster and remembered remarkably longer than stimuli which is verbal. All the above mentioned tangible brand elements serve to signify and indicate brand identity, image, personality, market position and heritage to consumers (Wigley, Larsen, Nobbs, 2013, p.254).

Brand image and personality may be actualized within the surroundings in which it is promoted and sold (Wigley, Nobbs and Larsen, 2013, p.258). Therefore, a store, where an apparel brand is present, is an essentially important area when it comes to expression of tangible brand elements (Wigley, Nobbs and Larsen, 2013, p.260). The DNA of an apparel brand may be actualized in a store context if the overall design and construction of the store as well as its integration of logos, pictures and other visual stimuli and clues of the brand are well presented (Wigley, Larsen and Nobbs, 2013, p.258).

2.1.4 Brand strategy

Wheeler (2006, p.36) states that the brand strategy provides a principal unifying idea around which all actions, behavior and communications are aligned around the brand. Kotler and Pfoertsch (2006, p.73) argue that in general a brand strategy can be defined as the choice of common and unique brand elements, which an organization implements across the several products or services it sells to consumers. When creating a brand strategy, the starting point of it is to solve what the company stands for and then building the strategy on brand promise, brand mission, brand value proposition, brand personality, brand positioning as well as on brand architecture (Kotler and Pfoertsch, 2006, pp.164,168). The aim of the brand strategy is to increase the company’s attraction from the consumers’ perspective and also to give the company’s employees criteria which can be used to evaluate the weight of their actions (Kotler and Pfoertsch, 2006, p.73).

2.1.5 The importance of brands for companies and consumers

Brands do matter for the companies for many different reasons. A brand acts as an identification purpose and it also offers a legal protection for unique aspects and features of products and services (Keller, 2003, p.11). Additionally, a brand provides a mean for empowering the offered product with one of a kind associations and meanings, which differentiates it from other products (Keller, 2003, p.11). A brand can also signal a particular level of quality so that consumers, who are satisfied with the brand, can easily purchase the product again. Thus, a brand can become a key issue for securing the competitive advantage for the company (Keller, 2003, p.11).
Considering the consumers, a brand can work as an identification of the maker or source of a product or act as symbolic devices (Keller, 2003, p.9). Also, a brand can provide means of simplification or a shorthand device for consumers when they are making decisions between different products (Keller, 2003, p.9). Brands create personal and unique meanings to consumers, which help their daily activities and enhance their lives; hence it is important that a brand can inspire trust and consistency for consumers, which will eventually lead to brand loyalty (Keller, 2003, p.11).

2.1.6 The principles of branding

In order to execute successful branding, Kotler and Pfoertsch (2006, pp.162-163) argue that the following five branding principles should be followed: consistency, clarity, continuity, visibility and authenticity. For any company, the principle of consistency is one of the most important principles of branding. In order to become consistent, companies need to have a holistic approach for all relevant dimensions of the brand and its touchpoints that goes far beyond the product or service. For instance, how the brand is presented in the marketing channels and how employees interact with customers through customer service. The principle of clarity in branding is vital because consumers have to be able to understand who the brand and the company behind it are and what they represent. Clarity is based on the company’s mission, vision and core values, and it should be easy to understand and adopt. Regarding the principle of continuity, consumers trust brands and count on them because they know what to expect based on their previous experiences of the brand. Due to this, a company should not reform what it stands for only because of the sake of change. The principle of visibility means that the brand has to be always visible to its target group and be present at points where the desired consumers’ attention is high. Brand visibility is important because it increases the brand exposure and hence, helps to develop the brand awareness in the minds of consumers. Kotler and Pfoertsch (2006, p.163) end their argument about the principles of branding with the principle of authenticity, which refers to the acting and thinking of all members in the organization with the focus of creating the feeling and originality for the consumers to use, own or direct a one of a kind treasure, even if this happens subconsciously. If all the above mentioned principles are taken into consideration and branding has been applied successfully, it can create value and distinctiveness for the company, its services or products and to consumers (Graham et al., 1994, p.33).

![Image of branding principles](adapted from Kotler and Pfoertsch, 2006, pp.162-163)
2.2 Brand managers’ work related tasks

Brand management has existed for a long time but the form of brand management as it is understood today originates from the 1930s, when the significance of the brand recognition and image were discussed among marketing practitioners (Low and Fullerton, 1994, pp.180-181). During the early days of brand management, the activities such as promotional campaigns and advertising were the only activities for maintaining the brand awareness (Low and Fullerton, 1994, p.180). Nowadays, when maintaining and developing a brand, many other elements need to be considered and because of that it is a complicated task to manage brands in today’s business environment (Herstein and Zvilling, 2011, p.188). Today, brand management is all about implementing, developing, planning and evaluating the brand strategy, which is managed by organizational framework by the brand manager (Kotler and Pfoertsch, 2006, p.66). Brand management is a vital part of future-oriented management if it is considered that brand value occasionally creates a considerable portion of total company value (Kotler and Pfoertsch, 2010, p.5). Additionally, companies are better prepared to conform to the ever-changing competitive market conditions, when they have implemented strong brand management into their business (Kotler and Pfoertsch, 2010, p.5).

In order to create and develop a successful brand, it should be remembered that it is a complex task to do (McColl and Moore, 2014, p.136). It has also been stated that “brands are built not born” (Hameide, 2011, p.107; Keller and Lehmann, 2006, p.751). Today, the significance of the role the brand manager has in the company is not in doubt since it is a complicated task to manage brands in today’s highly competed business environment (Herstein and Zvilling, 2011, pp.188-189). However, topics related to the descriptions of brand managers work tasks, what they take care of for creating and managing the brand, need to be discussed more thoroughly. The existing research about brand managers has mostly concentrated on studying and analyzing brand managers’ work related tasks and the employed practices in fast moving consumer goods when it comes to food products versus non-food brand managers (Herstein and Zvilling, 2011), pharmaceutical product brand managers versus other fast moving consumer goods brand managers (Panigyrakis and Veloutsou, 1999) and automobile industry’s brand managers (Veloutsou, 2002). Because no research about apparel brand managers’ work related tasks can be found, this part of the literature review will explore what has been generally considered and stated to be brand managers’ work tasks in other industries that have been investigated according to previous studies and academic literature.

2.2.1 Maintaining and strengthening the brand equity

Brand managers must understand what are the founding ideas of their brand (Brexendorf and Daecke (2012, p.34). Keller and Lehmann (2006, p.744) also argue that in order to manage a brand correctly, a brand manager must have a clear understanding of the equity in his or her brand; what makes it unique and what it is worth. According to Brexendorf’s and Daecke’s (2012, p.33) research results about brand managers’ tasks in fast consumer goods industry, one important task of brand managers is to strengthen the brand equity and value over time. When brand equity is
developed, brand managers’ responsibility is to maintain, increase and defend the equity of the brand in the turbulent market environment (Beverland, Wilner and Micheli, 2015, p.589). In order to do so, it is vital for brand managers to maintain consistency when it comes to both marketing support and an image, have a mindset towards long-term goals, and delicately sustain the existing equity of the brand (Beverland, Wilner and Micheli, 2015, p.589).

### 2.2.2 Implementing and coordinating brand-related issues

Whatever the level of responsibility a brand manager holds, he or she needs to collaborate with several internal and external stakeholders so that he or she can get information and coordinate the brand’s success (Poulis, Panigyrakis and Panos Panopoulos, 2013, p.655). According to Panigyrakis’ and Veloutsou’s (1999, p.507) research about brand managers’ work tasks in pharmaceutical and other fast moving consumer goods industries, the main task of a brand manager is the coordination of the internal and external interfaces, which is a part of the brand manager’s overall implementation role. Brand managers are the communication center for their brand and therefore, when discussing brand managers’ work tasks related to coordinating and implementing, their main responsibility is to execute the brand plans, which include for instance the brand development (Panigyrakis and Veloutsou, 1999, p.505). Also, Veloutsou’s (2002, pp.458-459) research results, about brand managers’ work tasks in automobile industry, indicated brand managers high involvement regarding implementation and coordination of brand-related issues. In order to successfully coordinate brand-related issues, brand managers have to be in close contact to both its internal stakeholders (employees and core suppliers) and its external stakeholders (consumers and retailers).

#### Internal branding and training

The results from Panigyrakis’ and Veloutsou’s (1999, p.506) research indicates that brand managers’ responsibility is to take a leading role in the training of sales personnel on brand-related issues but when it comes to training assistants, the training is very limited because due to the limited amount of assistants. Other than sales personnel, Panigyrakis and Veloutsou (1999, p.506) do not mention any other internal colleagues of brand managers concerning training. Vallaster and de Chernatony (2006, p.778) look at a company as a whole and state that one of the brand manager’s tasks is to work with internal brand building, which core idea is to facilitate the expansion of a mutual understanding of the company’s brand identity to all employees who work in the company (Vallaster and de Chernatony, 2006, p.778). Veloutsou (2002, p.459) also argue that brand managers should train their colleagues about the brand values because nobody can question the importance of non-tangible elements of the brand expression. In addition, according to Wheeler (2006, p.4) there is considerable evidence that organizations, whose employees embrace and understand the brand, are more successful. Burmann and Zeplin (2005, p.281) also state that brand manager’s task is to monitor that all of the employees are familiar with the brand concept and promised to live the brand both internally and externally, but the researchers also highlight that it should not be only the brand manager’s task to monitor that everybody inside the company lives the brand.
When it comes to external branding, Panigyrakis’ and Veloutsou’s (1999, pp.506,508) research findings revealed that brand managers’ role is extremely limited in evaluating and controlling the distribution strategy. This is because brand managers have little control regarding the selection of distribution channels because the distribution decisions are made and controlled by the top management and interactions are carried out by the sales department (Panigyrakis and Veloutsou, 1999, pp.506,508). However, more recent studies disagree with this view. According to Poulis, Panigyrakis and Panos Panopoulos (2013, p.655) brand managers act as intermediaries between the company and all the outside partners. Moreover, Herstein and Zvilling (2011, p.201) claim that in the twenty-first century a brand manager should consider his- or herself firstly as a person, who is responsible to bridge the existing gap with a distributor. Distributors and retailers should be thought of as a key branding component and thus, brand managers need to sustain the relationship well to maintain a more effective distribution (Herstein and Zvilling, 2011, p.201).

2.2.3 Maintaining brand relevance

There was no mention about maintaining brand relevance in previous studies that only focused on brand managers’ work tasks. However, it was seen appropriate to add it as a work task, since other authors have perceived it as a brand manager’s work task. Brand managers should be able to manage the relevance of their brand (Beverland, Wilner and Micheli, 2015, p.589). The brand has to be relevant in order to ensure brands continuous growth over time (Keller, 2016, p.13). According to Beverland, Wilner and Micheli (2015, pp.589-590) managing brand relevance may demand innovation and change of the brand and this can cause a situation where brand managers need to create an explicit framework for the brand and strengthen the brand’s image, and also innovate the brand in order to keep the placement in the business when market changes. Nevertheless, adaptation should not be achieved by the expense of diluting the brand’s fundamental identity (Beverland, Wilner and Micheli, 2015, p.590). Therefore, it is not an easy task to balance between consistency and change when it comes to brand marketing activities (Beverland, Wilner and Micheli, 2015, p.590).

2.2.4 Working with tangible brand elements

When talking about branding, a core element of it is naturally the brand itself and all the several tangible elements that build it up such as names, packaging, symbols, slogans, logos and characters (Keller, 2016, p.14). Brand managers work with tangible elements of the brand because these elements can be created, developed and manipulated to display and demonstrate whatever image is wanted (Wigley, Larsen and Nobbs, 2013, p.249). Intangible brand element like brand image is more difficult to be controlled by brand managers, and thus they can be advised by visual or tangible elements by hoping that consumers perceive them as representing an image similar to what is intended (Wigley, Larsen and Nobbs, 2013, p.249). According to Wheeler (2006, p.8), it is essential to work with the visual identity of the brand, since it unlocks associations and triggers perceptions of the brand. Herstein’s and Zvilling’s (2011, pp.196-197) research findings revealed that brand manager’s one task is to shorten the purchasing process for consumers and therefore, he
or she has to consider the tangible brand elements such as the particular design of the brand itself and a logo of a special color, because these visual stimuli serve consumers as their main means when it comes to shortening the purchasing process. According to Wigley’s, Larsen’s and Nobbs’s (2013, p.249) research, brand managers manage and control tangible elements but product designers are responsible for creating them.

2.2.5 Making decisions regarding the brand

One of brand managers’ tasks is to plan and develop proposals concerning the future plans of their managed brands (Panigyrakis and Veloutsou, 1999, p.498). However, the findings from Panigyrakis’ and Veloutsou’s (1999, p.509) research showed that brand managers’ role seems more important concerning short-term strategic planning compared to long-term strategic planning. Thus, brand managers do not engage very much in strategic decisions but they have more responsibility when it comes to tactical decisions relevant to their brands (Veloutsou, 2002, p.458; Panigyrakis and Veloutsou, 1999, p.509). According to Panigyrakis’ and Veloutsou’s (1999, p.509) research, the findings indicated that brand managers in fast moving consumer goods participate in the decision-making process and can strongly influence the decisions, however, the decision are not made solely by the brand manager, but in collaboration with others such as internal and external managers and groups. The collaboration managers and groups they work with involve the marketing manager, category manager, headquarters, the advertising agency, the finance department and the research and development department (Panigyrakis and Veloutsou, 1999, p.509).

2.2.6 Evaluating and controlling the marketing mix elements

According to Panigyrakis’ and Veloutsou’s (1999, p.508) research, one of the brand managers tasks is also to ensure that the brand they manage has the marketing mix elements (price, product, place and promotion) to obtain the best outcome and that the budget they have at their disposal will be well invested with emphasis on the aspects of communication of the marketing mix. Herstein and Zvilling (2011, p.193) state that a brand manager needs to select and employ different marketing tactics in order to penetrate the market. Their research results also showed that it depends a lot on the company’s resources what kinds of marketing techniques a brand manager can use (Herstein and Zvilling, 2011, p.193). When a brand manager is working in a company, which has rich resources, he or she can take advantage of expensive and advanced marketing activities that will strengthen the chances of the brand’s achievement in the market, whereas, a brand manager in a company with little resources has to investigate and employ relatively cheap marketing techniques (Herstein and Zvilling, 2011, p.193).

Panigyrakis and Veloutsou (1999, p.508) argue, based on their research results, that brand managers in pharmaceutical industry and other fast moving consumer goods industry use a lot of time to evaluate and control the marketing mix, but their main task in that area is principally focused on evaluating and controlling of the promotional mix elements (advertising, public relations, sales promotion and personal selling). When brand managers evaluate and control the above mentioned
things, they do it together with the salesforce or with the advertising and promotion agencies (Panigyrakis and Veloutsou, 1999, p.508).

### 2.2.7 Analyzing the market

In order to stay relevant, an important aspect is to know what happens in the market. Brexendorf and Daecke (2012, p.34) state that in order for a brand manager to make determined decisions he or she needs to collect and combine all available market data concerning the managed brand. Besides investigating the market, the brand manager has to thoroughly examine and evaluate the performance data of his or her own brand and therefore, various sources of insights have to be taken into account by using quantitative and qualitative market research (Brexendorf and Daecke, 2012, p.34). According to Veloutsou’s (2002, p.458) research findings, brand managers are also usually expected to analyze and interpret market information. However, her research concentrating on brand managers’ tasks in the automobile industry showed that brand managers involvement concerning developing forecasts and estimating future developments and prospects in the market did not appear to be as great.

### 2.2.8 Understanding the importance of consumers

One of the most important tasks a brand manager has to carry out is to make real efforts to concentrate the brand’s marketing strategy on getting to know and understanding consumers and not neglecting them (Herstein and Zvilling, 2001, p.201). It is important that a brand manager places the consumer at the center of his or her plans and makes sure that the brand offers the consumers what they want (Panigyrakis and Veloutsou, 2000, p.180). Also, the more interest is shown towards customers and to understanding who they are, the more successful the brand will be (Gad and Heinämaäki, 2001, p.91). According to Herstein’s and Zvilling’s (2011, p.196) research results, it is a brand manager’s task to frequently gather focus groups in order to find out all possible knowledge concerning the consumers’ needs. When consumers’ needs are investigated thoroughly over time, it will help to keep the long-term competitive advantage against competitors (Herstein and Zvilling, 201, p.200).

Although a brand manager studies consumers and gains a lot of in-depth knowledge of them, the brand manager should never stop working, because today brand managers are encountering the declining brand loyalty of customers (Brexendorf and Daecke, 2012, p.34). Schau, Muñiz and Arnould (2009, p.41) propose to concentrate on co-creation with the consumers because if the consumers are taken into the branding, the meaning of the brand will strengthen and the brand will obtain added brand value. Therefore, a successful brand is not only developed through a static outcome of brand manager’s actions, but also with the consumers who are active brand value co-creators (Merz, He and Vargo, 2009, p.341). Brexendorf and Daecke (2012, p.34) also state that brand managers have to keep up with what happens in today’s dynamic environment and participate in an active dialogue with the consumers through digital media.
2.2.9 Summarizing brand managers’ work tasks

When summing up brand managers’ work tasks according to previous studies and academic articles, the following key themes emerged: maintaining and strengthening the brand equity, implementing and coordinating brand-related issues, maintaining brand relevance, working with tangible brand elements, making decisions regarding the brand, evaluating and controlling the marketing mix elements, analyzing the market and understanding the importance of the consumers. Figure 4 below, sums up what has been considered and argued to be brand managers’ tasks in general in other industries that have been investigated.

![Brand managers’ work tasks diagram]

Figure 4. Brand managers’ work tasks in relation to previous studies

2.3 The environment of today’s brand managers

The only issue which is certain in the twenty-first century is continuous change (Wheeler, 2006, p.26). The environment of brands is constantly changing and evolving due to increased global competition, faster flows of communication and information and empowered consumers, whose wants and needs are changing rapidly (Kotler et al., 2016, p.152). Kotler et al. (2016, p.152) also state that since marketing environment is continually introducing new opportunities and threats, it is essential that companies constantly observe and adapt to changes that happens in the marketing environment. In order to compete and have a strong brand in the highly competed market, there are issues that should be considered by brand managers and that have an impact on how today’s brands are managed. The existing research about brand managers and their work related tasks (Panigyrakis and Veloutsou, 1999; Veloutsou, 2002) have been carried out in the beginning of 21st century and due to this, no information can be found on how for instance digitalization affects managing a brand, because this issue did not exist at that time yet. Although Herstein’s and Zvilling’s (2011) research was conducted closer to date, there also could not be found any notes about increasing
issue of sustainability nor digitalization. In order to understand the environment, where today’s brand managers work, it is essential to consider these issues because they also shape the environment of brand management.

2.3.1 Switching from a product to a brand

The lifecycle of products and services is getting shorter as the world is rapidly changing (Gad and Heinämäki, 2001, p.51). Gad and Heinämäki (2001, p.51) argue that a decade ago companies were still focusing on the product in most fields of business, but nowadays the focus is moving increasingly into the brand. Products enter and exit the market in a faster pace than before, but the brand stays. Most of the traditional brands have been established through a unique product and in these cases, it is impossible to separate the product and the brand. However, in today’s world, the existence of most brands do not depend on the relating products (Gad and Heinämäki, 2001, pp.51-52). Ballantyne, Warren and Nobbs (2006, p.349) also argue that as today’s society is visually-led and image-based, it is not simply enough to concentrate on product attributes as a means of establishing significant differentiation, but the focus should be more on attaching brand meanings. Moreover, according to Zegheanu (2017) recently in the apparel industry, the spotlight has shifted from what the product is to what the product represents and hence, the brand itself has to have meaning.

According to Lille’s (2010, pp.10-11) research about Finnish apparel and textile industry, differentiation has been usually achieved through the product in the Finnish market. The attempt has been to make products different or special compared to other products by its unique design. Also, the uniqueness of the design is emphasized in the education. However, it should be remembered that garments are utility articles and tools for making business in the apparel and fashion industry. A product can be designed either to the needs of the target market so that the product corresponds on existing demand or a product can be designed for creating new needs for the target market. If new needs are created for the target market by the product, it is vital to offer experiences and tempting images of the product, in which a consumer experiences getting a special added value. However, it is essential how the added value is communicated to a consumer. Lille (2010, pp.10-11) ends her argument by stating that it should also be remembered that the marketing of fashion and design products is based on added value.

2.3.2 Telling stories

According to Keller (2016, p.13) increasing significance can be recognized when it comes to brand intangibles and social responsibility to consumers, especially for millennials who have been born between early 1980s to middle 1990s, and thus, marketers and brand managers have started to include more abstract ideas like brand stories as vital elements to the brand strategies. Using for example brand stories as a part of branding strategy is seen as a very potential and useful tool, because it can provide financial and branding profits and benefits to a company, which is crucial in its long-term success (Keller, 2016, p.13). All (2013) also advocates implementing the brand story
to the brand strategy, because every brand has a story to tell and great stories are more valuable to a brand in today’s market environment than ever before. Storytelling can also be seen as a company’s key asset when it comes to differentiating itself from its competitors (All, 2013).

### 2.3.3 Thinking sustainable

Fisher-Buttinger and Vallaster (2008, p.x) state that branding environment has changed and increased attention has arose around sustainability, including the environment, the social and the ethical issues. Kotler et al. (2016, p.151) also argue that today a primary issue for most governments, consumers and companies is environmentally friendly behavior. If companies are making manufacturing process changes, introducing products that are more eco-friendly, reducing waste as well as minimizing energy usage or resources; all of these improvements can now contribute to companies’ competitiveness (Kotler et al., 2016, p.151). All (2013) also highlights that brands have started to reconstruct their marketing approach in a way that it aligns with the brand’s socially responsible values. Several sustainable apparel and fashion brands have started to pop up in the industry, for example Patagonia, by having sustainability issues closely related to their brand identity and brand strategies (Kim and Hall, 2015, pp.31-32).

### 2.3.4 Understanding branding in a digital world

Technology has shaped people’s lives dramatically (Kotler et al., 2016, p.166). According to Fisher-Buttinger and Vallaster (2008, p.x) branding environment has changed a lot because of digitalization and the focus of branding has shifted to revolve around it. According to Yadav and Pavlou (2014, p.20), because of the rooted penetration and voluminous daily usage of the Internet and digital gadgets, it is essential to understand how to implement all things into branding and marketing and this area should be examined more. Because of the high level of digitalization that occurs in consumers’ everyday life, brand managers must rethink virtually all of the company’s practices and beliefs for making sure that they are still valid (Keller, 2016, p.11).

In the twenty-first century it has been argued that social media has become one of the most influential innovations and it has also become a powerful marketing tool for companies to promote themselves to the consumers (Strähl and Gräff, 2017, pp.225,227). Brexendorf’s and Daecke’s (2012, p.34) research results indicated that one of the brand managers’ work tasks is to engage consumers on different social media platforms. The most influential and known social media tools are Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn and Pinterest (Strähl and Gräff, 2017, p. 227). Also, the mentioned social media tools may help marketers and brand managers to utilize what consumers want to share through their personal opinions and preferences in creating more powerful brand ties (Keller, 2016, p.11). However, Keller (2016, p.11) argues that brand managers should remember that even though it is easy for them to connect with consumers in several different ways because of the social media, it is also easy for their competing brands as well. A competitor’s offer or a deal in today’s digital market is only one click away, which is constantly putting consumers’ brand loyalty to the test (Keller, 2016, p.11).
2.4 Conceptual framework of the research

The conceptual framework of this study presents the combination of the key concepts that have emerged in literature review chapter. The model that illustrates the conceptual framework is shown in Figure 5 below. The model is about branding and it portrays the concepts that together establish the concept of branding. The key concepts of branding are the brand, the brand manager’s work tasks and the surrounding environment. All of these key concepts of branding are illustrated as circles that overlap each other, since a relationship exists between all of them as one concept can affect the other two concepts. However, it is important to mention that the model presenting the conceptual framework of this study is created by the study’s researcher and her interpretations that are central when considering the topic of branding. Therefore, the model has not been used by other researchers before.

One key concept of branding is the brand, since the core idea of branding is to create differences between offerings and these offerings represent product or services, which are identified with a brand name and other brand elements (Kotler et al., 2016, p.423). According to Kapferer (2012, p.12) a brand works as a symbol that enhances a unique set of values, which are embedded into products or services and these unique values together with the identity differentiate the brand from the competitors. The next key concept is related to the person who manages the brand and carries out different activities in order to maintain and manage the brand so that the brand is identifiable and distinct from the competitors’ brands. According to the contemporary research, a brand manager is considered to be a person who manages a brand (Veloutsou, 2002, p.453) and is responsible for the holistic management of the brand (Veloutsou and Panigyrakis, 2004, p.105). By executing different work tasks (see Figure 4, p.19), the brand manager has an influence on how the branding is executed in practice. For instance, by working with tangible elements of the brand such as name, logo and package, the brand manager can use these elements as means to enhance the identity of the brand as well as to differentiate the brand from competitors. Therefore, the key concept of brand manager’s work tasks is closely related to branding. The third key concept of branding is the environment. According to Kotler et al. (2016, p.152), the environment of brands is constantly changing and evolving due to increased global competition, faster flows of communication and information and empowered consumers, whose wants and needs are changing rapidly. Hence, the environment can be viewed as a force that constantly puts pressure on the brand and the brand manager in order to stay in the highly competed market by developing the brand. The environment is also closely related to branding, because the means of branding need to evolve along with the constantly changing environment in order for the branding to succeed. Thus, one key concept of branding is the environment.

The two-directional arrows in the model portray that the circles influence each other. For instance, advanced technology has changed the field of branding a lot because digitalization has brought the brands closer to consumers than ever before due to the Internet. This in turn affects the work tasks of a brand manager, since new work tasks have emerged, for instance, there is a need of creating content on the brand’s different social media channels. Moreover, as every work task that a brand
manager accomplishes is in a relation to a brand that is being managed, every task that is being performed by the brand manager has an impact on the brand.

The focus of this study’s empirical research is on all of the concepts, the brand, the brand manager’s work tasks and the environment, in order to have better understanding on how Finnish apparel brand managers currently perform branding, since all the mentioned concepts together establish the concept of branding. In summary, all of the concepts mentioned above shape and influence the way of how branding is perceived and executed.
3 Research methodology

This chapter presents how this research was designed and conducted. All the steps, that were taken in order to fulfill the purpose of this study, are introduced and justifications for the chosen methodological decisions are provided. This chapter presents the chosen research method, the procedure of selecting the research participants, the process of data collection and data analysis. Also, the research quality is evaluated and ethical issues related to this study are considered.

3.1 Qualitative research method

The most appropriate research method should be defined by what the research purpose is and what it stands for (Silverman, 2005, p.6). The purpose of this thesis is to discover and expand knowledge on how Finnish apparel brand managers currently perform branding when managing a Finnish apparel brand. Due to the purpose of this research, a qualitative research method was chosen. A qualitative research method was the most appropriate option, because the aim of this method is to gain a deeper understanding about a phenomenon in the real life of people (Yin, 2011, p.8). Additionally, the chosen research method was seen suitable for this study, because it is often employed to answer hows of human opinion, experience and behavior and also because this type of information is difficult to achieve via quantitative methods (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p.8). As the purpose of this study is to investigate how the Finnish apparel brand managers perform branding, it is hence a ‘how’-question related to human opinion, experience and behavior and it also concentrates on understanding the phenomenon.

Qualitative research method was seen suitable for this study because this research is not concentrating on establishing univocal cause and effect relationships between single variables (Gummesson, 2005, p.312) such as the amount or quantity of the work tasks, which could be better studied with quantitative methods, but on the quality and the structures of the work tasks and how they are interpreted through the human beings (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p.8). Moreover, as the purpose of this study is to gain an in-depth understanding of Finnish apparel brand managers’ thoughts and perspectives, it is essential for this research to explore the studied issue by discussing with the Finnish apparel brand managers and thus, the chosen research method is appropriate because qualitative research’s aim is to empower individuals to hear their voices and share their stories (Creswell, 2007, p.40). Also, qualitative research method was seen suitable as the researcher is taken into the real world where people work and live because these methods are highly personal and interpersonal in nature (Patton, 2002, p.407).

Research is usually divided into deductive and inductive analysis, when it comes to discussions about analysis. Deductive approach aims to formulate hypotheses and theories from which a certain phenomenon can then be tested and explained whereas inductive approach draws more general claims or statements from the cases that have been observed (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008, p.21). In agreement with Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2009, p.95) the division between deductive reasoning and
inductive reasoning is incompetent, because pure deduction or induction rarely exists as clear-cut alternatives (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008, p.23). In this thesis, both deductive and inductive approaches are taking place; hence the nature of this thesis is abductive. According to Bryman and Bell (2015, p.27), abduction refers to a process that includes back-and-forth engagement with the literature and with the social world, which works as an empirical source for theoretical ideas and therefore, the process can also be called dialectical shuttling. In this thesis both research logics, deduction and induction, were used in different phases of the study and thus, the research moved between these two research logics during the research process (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008, p.23). At first, a review of appropriate literature was carried out in order to get an insight into particular research fields, which provided the basis for theoretic knowledge about the topic of this study. The pre-understanding of theoretic knowledge of the subject guided the study’s empirical part. Therefore, in the beginning of the research process the research logic of deduction was more present. However, theoretic knowledge of the study was reinforced and modified after carrying out the empirical research since new valuable information was collected from the interviews and therefore, the research logic of induction was more present in the middle of the research process. Nevertheless, the final complemented conceptual framework was created by using both the theoretic knowledge and the knowledge from empirical research and thus, both deduction and induction were present in the end of the research process.

3.2 Sample selection

The type of sampling that is used in the qualitative research has a great impact on the ultimate quality of the research (Coyne, 1997, p.623). Taking into account the nature of the research, a purposive sampling type was chosen as the most appropriate for this study, because the researcher wanted to select individuals for the research, since they can purposefully inform an understanding of the studied issue and the central phenomenon in the research (Creswell, 2007, p.125). According to Patton (2002, p.230), the power and logic of purposive sampling exist in choosing information-rich cases or study units for investigate in depth and these study units are the ones from which a researcher can learn in great extend regarding issues of central importance to the purpose of the research. As the purpose of this thesis is to investigate not random apparel brand managers, but specifically concentrate on Finnish apparel brand managers and to investigate precisely what apparel brand managers do in Finnish context. Due to this, it was important for this study to select the particular study units in order to interview those people that will provide the most abundant and relevant data for the topic of study (Yin, 2011, p.88).

In order to investigate the study’s purpose, participants were chosen purposefully on the basis of their involvement in branding of an apparel brand. Also, it was important, when choosing the participants for this research, that all of them met certain criteria which were necessary for the study. Firstly, because the purpose is to study Finnish retail apparel companies’ apparel brand managers, the chosen participants must be working in Finnish apparel or textile companies, which has a Finnish heritage and headquarter in Finland as well as the company’s business is still active. Additionally, the chosen apparel brand manager’s work must revolve around managing the Finnish
apparel brand. In this research, a brand manager is defined as a person who is actively taking part and working closely with a Finnish apparel brand. In other words, the person’s work tasks revolve around a Finnish apparel/clothing brand and he or she is managing the brand. It is important to notice that all the interviewed managers fall into this description even though their titles are not exactly brand managers as seen on the Table 1 below. This is because the most of the interviewees work in small enterprises and due to their size they do not have a very formal organizational structure and thus, the definitions of the titles are vague. However, all the interviewees were asked if they are managing the apparel brand (Veloutsou, 2002, p.453) as well as are they responsible for the holistic management of the brand (Veloutsou and Panigyrakis, 2004, p.105) and all the interviewees admitted this. Because of the interviewees titles are different, the researcher thinks it is good to use the title brand manager throughout this report in order to be clearer.

The above mentioned criteria limited the sample size, but it allowed the researcher to provide a focused research. The contact information of a few participants were gained from the acquaintances of the interviewer and otherwise from the companies’ own website. When there was no clear statement on the company’s website stating who is the brand manager of the firm, the person with a high marketing position was contacted in order to find out who is responsible for managing the brand in the company. Table 1 below shows a visualization of the sampling of the participants. The time the participants have worked in the selected companies varied between 3,5 to 20 years. In order to ensure the interviewees’ anonymity and privacy, the interviewees’ names were changed to screen names. Letters from A to E represent different Finnish apparel brand managers who participated in the research.

Table 1. Participants of the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Head of Marketing and Communications</td>
<td>Participant's office</td>
<td>69 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Chief Commercial Officer</td>
<td>Participant's office</td>
<td>45 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Designer and Brand Director</td>
<td>Skype interview</td>
<td>65 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Chief Marketing Officer</td>
<td>Participant's office</td>
<td>62 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Brand Manager</td>
<td>Participant's office</td>
<td>103 minutes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When considering the qualitative study, there is no formula for determining the desired number of study units for the data collection (Yin, 2011, p.89). In this study, five study units were used in order to collect data for the empirical part of the research. Five study units were thought to be enough for this study considering the available time and resources for conducting the research. With five participants in this research, the saturation point was achieved, since similar opinions and perspectives occurred most of the time when interviews were compared to one another and because of this, the conclusion of theoretical saturation can be made as the collected data began to repeat itself (Tuomi and Sarajärvi, 2011, p.87). Nevertheless, it should be noted that the chosen interview method, semi-structured interview, could have had an impact on this, since the interview questions were the same for all the participants and thus the same themes were discussed.

3.3 Data collection

As the purpose of this thesis is to investigate how Finnish apparel brand managers perform branding, personal interviews were chosen as the most suitable means of data collection because it allows the researcher to enter into the other person’s perspective (Patton, 2002, p.341). Also, for this thesis, it was natural to collect data in the form of interviews because according to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009, p.324), managers are usually more willing to agree to be interviewed than to complete a questionnaire, as long as the research topic is interesting and relevant to their current work. Moreover, as the purpose of this research is to understand the ‘how’ concerning Finnish apparel brand managers, it was natural to use non-standardized (unstructured and semi-structured) interview method because the data collected from this form of interview may be applied to express and understand the ‘how’ (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009, p.321). Data was collected in the form of semi-structured interview because this interview method allows varying the order of questions regarding the interviewee profile (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009, p.320). Also, this interview form allows asking follow-up questions by the interviewer in order to go deeper into the participant’s responses and get more detailed answers (Patton, 2002, p.372; Gray, 2004, p.214). It was essential that the chosen interview method allowed probing of views and opinions because the aim of the interviews was to investigate the perceptions that interviewees connect to the phenomenon of branding (Gray, 2004, p.217). Moreover, semi-structured interview method was chosen because it allows the interview questions being designed open-ended, which help to avoid bias and give interviewees the opportunity to build on and explain their answers and thoughts openly during the interview (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009, p.332).

However, there are limitations using interview as a data collection technique. According to Hastings and Perry (2000, p.209), when the researcher serves as the instrument when conducting the interview, he or she should thus be skilled in dynamics of interviewing, personal interaction and question framing. As the researcher of this thesis is not a professional interviewer, a pilot study could have been conducted before the actual interviews in order to know what kinds of probing questions could have been appropriate. However, all the conducted interviews went smoothly and rapport was gained with all the participants. It has been suggested that it is important for the interviewer to achieve rapport, meaning establishing a relationship with the interviewee, because
the created relationship encourages the interviewee to want to participate in and remain with the
interview (Bryman and Bell, 2015, p.219). Additionally, as semi-structured interview method was
used, its nature led to different probing questions being asked to different interviewees, which in
turn led to slightly different information being collected. Nevertheless, if structured questions
would have been used instead of semi-structured questions, it would have decreased the researcher’s
flexibility to ask follow-up questions, which may have prevented getting into the core of the studied
phenomenon (Patton, 2002, p.349). However, even though the chosen semi-structured interview
method allows the researcher to ask probing questions from the participant in order to get more
detailed answers, this interview method do not let the participants to speak as freely as they could,
because as the name of the method reflects, the interview is structured in some level and guided by
the interview guide. If unstructured interview method would have been used instead of semi-
structured, even more detailed responses could have come up during the interviews, since then the
researcher cannot deliberately lead the interview because there would not be any settings of the
questions.

3.3.1 The process for conducting the semi-structured interviews

At first, all the possible participants were contacted by the researcher via email. The introduction
letter requesting access was sent via email and it included a short introduction of the researcher, the
purpose of the research, how the person being contacted might be able to help and what the
participation involves (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009, p.179). Overall seven different Finnish
apparel brand managers were contacted by an email, allowing all of them an equal opportunity to
take part in the research. Five out of seven Finnish apparel brand managers agreed to be interviewed
for the research. After the confirmation of the participation for the study, negotiations about time
frame and mode of interview were discussed and the researcher started to work with a participation
consent form and with an interview guide. Both, the participation consent form and the interview
guide can be seen in the appendices of this report. The participation consent form (see Appendix 1)
was created for the interviewees in order for them to know what the research process is, as well as
what their participation entails, how the gathered data will be used, and how and to whom findings
will be reported (Bryman and Bell, 2015, p.143). The interview guide (see Appendix 2) was
prepared to ensure that the same basic lines of investigation are followed with each participant
(Patton, 2002, p.343). The interview guide consisted of short background information about the
interviewer and two bigger themes – general understanding of an apparel/fashion brand as well as
apparel brand manager and the apparel/fashion brand. The first theme concentrated on apparel and
fashion brands in general as well as the particular apparel brand the interviewee is managing. The
second theme consisted of questions about branding and work related tasks when it comes to
managing an apparel/fashion brand. The interview guide included 20 questions, excluding the
background information questions, and these questions were selected based on a primary light
literature review. Both the participation consent form and the interview guide were sent to all of the
participants one week before the actual interview.

The interview guide with the interview questions were sent to the Finnish apparel brand managers
beforehand as the researcher thought that it would be easier to get an access for the interviews since
the research topic is closely related to one of the key business performance activities. By doing so, the participants could see prior to the interview what kinds of themes will be covered and thus, they could prepare and form their answers if they wanted to do so. When questions were sent prior to the interview, the researcher thought that it would also give more time for asking the follow-up questions during the interview since the interviewee is already familiar with the structure and thus, the limited time would be used more efficiently. Koskinen, Alasuutari and Peltonen (2005, p.123) argue that in some situations when the questions are given to interviewees beforehand, it may lead smoother but also more rigid interview due to the frame set by the interview guide. In order to avoid the stiffness, the researcher of this study emphasized before all the actual interviews that the interview guide only works as a frame for the interview and the interview does not have to command it. By making this decision to give the interview questions prior to the interview, the researcher need to consider how it may affect the genuineness of the study, since the participants could have responded in a different way if the questions would not have been revealed to them beforehand. However, before each interview started, the researcher asked from each interviewee whether they had had time to prepare for the questions and only one participant out of five had thought through the questions whereas two interviewees admitted they had only browsed them quickly before the interview and the other two admitted they had not even looked at the questions beforehand.

In total, five interviews were conducted. The interviews were completed between the 6th of April and the 12th April in 2017. All the interviews were conducted in Finnish so that all the participants could use their mother tongue, which was thought to give more insightful answers if the interviews would have been conducted in English instead. Four out of five interviews were conducted as face-to-face interviews on-site at the managers’ company facilities in a closed space, where only the interviewer and the interviewee were present. This guaranteed a calm environment for the interview. One interview was conducted via Skype, because the participant was located abroad at the time. During the Skype interview the interviewer was located at her own home in order to guarantee a peaceful environment from her side. According to Bryman and Bell (2015, p.675) when using the Skype interview, the advantages are for instance the higher degree of flexibility of last minute adjustments as well as cost and time savings when there is no need to travel to the interview especially then when the sample is geographically dispersed. However, when using the Skype interview, there is a chance for an error due to connection problems and if the speech breaks up during the interview, it can result in poor recordings for the interview that can make transcription difficult (Bryman and Bell, 2015, p.675). The connection was good during the Skype interview despite one short voice connection shortage. To avoid losing any data, the researcher asked the interviewee to repeat what was said during the short connection problem. When closing the interviews, the researcher always asked the participants if they had final comments, which they would like to make. The duration of the interviews ranged between 45 and 103 minutes. With regard to data analyzing process, all five interviews were recorded and transcribed. Altogether, this resulted in 5,45 hours of recorded material. Overall, the interviews proceeded well and all the interviewees showed interest towards the interview.
3.3.2 Benefits and challenges of using interviews in the executive research

Studies, that have used depth interviews as a method for studying marketing executives, rarely discuss the unique benefits and challenges of qualitative method (Cotte and Kistruck, 2006, p.465). Even though this thesis’ interview method is semi-structured instead of depth interview, it is relevant to consider the benefits and pitfalls of the chosen research method. Since this thesis’ research method is also an interview and its aim is to investigate people in the marketing executive level, Cotte’s and Kistruck’s (2006) findings are used to evaluate the chosen method’s benefits and challenges of this study.

Cotte and Kistruck (2006, pp.468-474) argue that the benefits for studying marketing executives by using interviews as a qualitative technique are understanding of organizational meaning and openness whereas the challenges are secrecy and face. With understanding of organizational meaning Cotte and Kistruck (2006, p.468) mean that talking with executives is usually seen as the only way to understand a specific market from their perspective. The other benefit, openness, refers to that by breaking down communication barriers, which leads to more insightful information from the interview (Cotte and Kistruck, 2006, p.470). When considering the above mentioned benefits for conducting the interviews with marketing executives, it can be noticed that both of them occurred as benefits for this thesis as well. In order to better understand Finnish apparel brand managers’ thoughts and opinions about the marketing phenomenon of branding, conducting interviews with executive level apparel brand managers was the most suitable option to gain this insightful information. Also, as the rapport was gained with all of the interviewees, even though stronger with a few of them, the interviewees provided well-thought and very descriptive answers, which expanded above the questions themselves.

When it comes to the challenges, according to Cotte and Kistruck (2006, p.471) the first challenge, secrecy, may occur if the participant fears of giving too much information during the interview. The other challenge can be the face, which means that when conducting an in-person face-to-face interview, the issues of self-presentation can arise or what Alvesson (2003) also calls as “impression management” (Cotte and Kistruck, 2006, p.472). Even though the researcher tried to minimize the risk by highlighting the anonymity of the participants, the researcher noticed the challenge of secrecy occasionally when conducting interviews with a few participants. The researcher thinks that the reason behind this might be that the interviewees did not want to reveal any strategical decisions for the interviewer since the topic focused on branding and as it has been stated earlier that brands are increasingly becoming more valuable assets to companies’ business performance. However, this happened only few times for a few interviewees and when the researcher noticed that the answering stayed rather surface-level, she tried to approach the question from a different angle and usually this helped to increase the depth of the discussion. When it comes to the challenge of face, the researcher would not acknowledge it as a challenge in this study because it appeared that all of the Finnish apparel brand managers being interviewed were actually saying what they felt or knew and did not parrot what they assumed to be appropriate answers for someone in their position. This is because the participants took time to respond, openly admitted the challenges they are facing in their job and willingly explained issues in detail. It might be that the challenge of face was not the case in this study, because before each interview took place, the
researcher emphasized the fact that the interviews are conducted anonymously, there are no right or wrong answers and she also clearly communicated that she wants to specifically hear participants personal thoughts, opinions and perceptions about studied issue.

3.4 Data analysis

A coding approach was chosen to analyze the collected data from the semi-structured interviews. Coding method was seen the most suitable means of data analysis because it allows the researcher to recognize and re-contextualize data, which allows a fresh view of what is there as well as this data analysis method enables reading and re-reading of the collected data to make selections that are relatable to the studied phenomenon (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996, pp.45-46). Concerning the data analysis method, initial coding and focused coding methods were chosen as the most appropriate. Both of these coding methods are considered part of grounded theory’s coding canon, however, both of the methods can be used in non-grounded-theory studies as well (Saldaña, 2013, p.51). The coding process was carried out by using both “manual” coding, meaning coding on hard-copy printouts, and using Microsoft Word’s ‘Comment’ demand in order to code directly onto word-processed data (Saldaña, 2013, pp.25-26).

The process of data analysis started already when transcribing the interviews by pre-coding the data by underlining and bolding rich and meaningful participant quotes that caught the researcher’s attention (Saldaña, 2013, p.19). However, after all the transcripts were written, the actual coding started with the first cycle method by using the initial coding method of the transcribed interviews (Saldaña, 2013, p.51). Initial coding method can also be known as open coding method (Saldaña, 2013, p.100) and it is a process that breaks down, examines, compares, conceptualizes and categorizes data (Saldaña, 2013, p.100; Corbin and Strauss, 2008, p.195). The coding of interview transcripts was carried out in the same order as the interviews were conducted in. During the initial coding, the data was closely examined and broken down into individually coded segments.

After all the transcripts were coded by using the initial coding, the second cycle method, focused coding, was applied. With focused coding the most meaningful or frequent codes are continuously compared, reorganized, and synthesized to create “the most salient categories” in the data (Saldaña, 2013, pp.52,213). When similar codes or instances started to appear, they were grouped into particular categories by their meaning and these categories were given a descriptive definition. During the whole of the coding process, constant comparisons were employed, meaning that if a new code of a category was found, it was compared with previous codes and if the new code did not correspond with the original definition, then either a new category was established or the definition was modified (Gray, 2004, p.332).

Each interview transcripts were first coded individually. Then all the created categories by each interview were compared to each other to look for similarities and differences. After creating a final list of categories, interview transcripts were read again and whenever interviewees said something that connected an idea and a category, a linkage between these two was created. For instance, when
an interviewee said: “We are definitely rather Finnish than Nordic in the markets, even though it’s a more trendy word, but it’s maybe more associated towards clinical esthetic.”, this was coded as “defining the brand attributes” and then grouped to the category called “characteristics of the brand”. After identifying the categories, a theme was created around them to present the bigger picture of similar categories. In total, three themes were identified: a general understanding of an apparel brand and branding, brand managers’ work related tasks and brand managers’ main challenges in branding. Under each theme, the identified categories can be found and also the related sub-categories. For instance, sub-categories such as “Finnishness”, “sustainability” and “story-telling” can be found under the category of “characteristics of the brand”, which in turn belongs to the theme of “a general understanding of an apparel brand and branding”.

3.5 Evaluation of research quality

In business research as well as in social sciences the quality of research is often evaluated by using the basic framework, which includes three concepts of reliability, validity and generalizability (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008, p.291). However, these three concepts are not used to evaluate the quality of this study because they are more suitable criteria for studies, which rely on the critical or realist conceptions of the social world that produce findings that can be empirically tested and confirmed (Moisander and Valtonen, 2006, p.23). As this study is more interested in deeply understanding particular persons (Finnish apparel brand managers) within a specific context rather than in hypothesizing about causes and generalizations across space and time (Patton, 2002, p.546), other concepts were chosen to be more suitable for this specific research. Additionally, the interpretations that are produced for this study do not stand for ‘the one and only truth’, but rather they portray a way of interpreting and understanding the phenomenon (Moisander and Valtonen, 2006, pp.149-150), which in this case is the phenomenon of branding among Finnish apparel brand managers.

In this study Lincoln’s and Guba’s (1985) concept of trustworthiness is used to evaluate the quality of the research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) replaced validity and reliability with the parallel concept of trustworthiness (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008, p.294; Creswell, 2007, p.202). This concept includes the following four aspects: transferability, credibility, conformability and dependability and these aspects substitute the typical criteria of external and internal validity, objectivity and reliability (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p.21). The concept of trustworthiness was chosen to evaluate the quality of the study because the researcher of this study wanted to focus on establishing that the research results are transferable, credible, confirmable and dependable (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008, p.294). Also, it is more common to use the concepts of reliability and validity when instruments with established metrics are used to conduct the study and as any instruments were not used in this research, these concepts were not seen the most suitable ones for evaluating the quality of the research (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008, p.292).

The concept of transferability refers to show what the level of similarity between the conducted research is compared to previous researchers and their results and how the findings of the research
are applicable to other contexts (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008, p.294). When it comes to this study, brands and brand managers’ work related tasks were investigated in the context of Finnish apparel retail companies. To improve the transferability of this study, the findings from this research were comprehensively compared to similar researchers’ results. Additionally, rich and thick description of the methodological procedure, including the chosen research method, sample selection and data collection and analysis, was provided in this report, which may help the reader to apply the study’s findings to other contexts such as a context of similar population.

The concept of credibility refers to show if the researcher has familiarity with the studied topic and the data is adequate to justify the claims (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008, p.294). To improve the credibility of this research, the researcher familiarized herself comprehensively regarding the studied subject by reading the literature and previous studies concerning the chosen topic. By using triangulation, which refers to process of using several methods or sources of information (Patton, 2002, p.247), the credibility of the study can be improved. With regard to this study, triangulation was not strongly apparent. Only data from the conducted interviews and data from previous studies, scientific literature and academic articles were used in this study which means only evidence from different types of data sources were used with a single research method.

The concept of comfortability refers to the idea that the interpretations and findings are linked to the data in ways that others can easily understand it as well as the study’s findings are shaped by the participants’ responses and not by any potential bias, the imagination or personal motivations of the researcher (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008, p.294). Concerning this study, the interpretations were based in the data in order to improve the conformability of this research. The links between the researcher’s interpretations and the actual data were illustrated by using quotations from the interviews. These quotations represent the actual things that were said by the research participants during the interviews. However, some minor authorization might occur, since the quotations are translated from Finnish to English. When the quotations are used, they offer concrete examples of the interviews for the reader. Also, the researcher wanted to provide many quotations from the interviewees in order to achieve better transparency so that a reader can make his or her own judgements. However, the reader can judge whether to believe the interpretations or not. Moreover, the researcher provided step-by-step description of data analysis in order to provide a rationale for the decisions that were made.

The concept of dependability refers to traceability, logic and documentation of the research process and to what extent the research could be repeated by other researchers (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008, p.294). In order to improve the dependability of this study, the process from literature review to methodological procedure was described as openly and clearly as possible so that the reader could follow the researcher’s interpretations and to have enough information so that the research could be repeated. Also, the conducted semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed in a way that it was possible to go back to the collected data by listening to it as well as by reading it as many times as required. Moreover, actual quotations that were linked to the data were used to justify the researcher’s interpretations.
3.6 Ethical considerations

In this study, it was important to take ethical issues into considerations since the study included people in their real life contexts and the research’s aim was to find out their opinions and perceptions (Gray, 2004, p.58). When considering the ethical issues, when it comes to the process of data collection, participants were not harmed in any way by the research (Gray, 2004, p.235). As it was already mentioned when describing the process for conducting the interviews, all the interview participants were given the participation consent form (see Appendix 1). This consent form was also given because of the ethical considerations of the chosen research method (Gray, 2004, p.235). Informed consent wanted to be given through a written statement instead of a verbal agreement (Gray, 2004, p.60). By reading the participation consent form, the interviewees could see what their rights are in terms of participation and withdraw from the study, asking questions and refusing to answer questions, the issue that the interview is audio-recorded and transcribed for the research purposes, confidentiality when it comes to handling the data and sharing with third parties.

In the beginning of every interview, the researcher introduced herself and explained that the purpose for conducting the interview is to gain information for the Master’s thesis and the gathered information is only used for research purposes. Also, it was explained how the information will be handled and used. The interviewees received an interview guide one week before the interview so that they had a framework of what kinds of questions will be asked (see Appendix 2). Before the interviews started the researcher always asked whether the interviewees had any questions in respect of the interview and if any questions related to the interview would come up during the interview, they should feel free to ask anything. In order to protect the interviewees’ confidentiality, all the data that was revealed in the findings of this report was anonymized and the interviewees’ names were changed to screen names so that they could not be identified. Moreover, the gathered information was not shown to any third parties. Ethical issues were also found during other steps of the research process. The confidentiality issue was strongly present for instance when analyzing the data, processing and storing the data, as well as during the writing up the findings of the research.
4 Results and analysis

This chapter introduces the findings of the empirical research and provides the analysis of the main themes, which could be formed based on the answers of Finnish apparel brand managers.

The empirical data is analyzed under each theme, and both similarities as well as differences are identified and discussed. When the findings are being analyzed, they are also compared to the existing literature and studies on branding. The findings of the research follow the same structure as it was discussed during the interviews. First, apparel brands and branding are discussed in general in order to gain understanding how the Finnish apparel brand managers perceive brands and branding. Secondly, brand managers and the work tasks they relate to their job when managing a brand are discussed. Thirdly, challenges that the Finnish apparel brand managers encounter are presented. Regarding the quotations in this chapter, whenever the interviewee said or referred to the actual brand name, it has been replaced by the entry “(brand’s name)”, since anonymity has been provided for the interviewees and thus, the actual brands’ names cannot be used.

4.1 A general understanding of an apparel brand and branding

In the existing literature, there cannot be found one exact definition for a brand and also what builds up a brand (Kapferer, 2008, p.9). However, it has been commonly agreed that a brand is more than a name. A brand works as a symbol that enhances a unique set of values which are embedded into products or services and these unique values together with the identity differentiate the brand from the competitors (Kapferer, 2012, p.12). All of the Finnish brand managers said that it is difficult to define an apparel brand. However, they referred to an apparel brand as a trademark that has a certain image around it or as an emotionally appealing added value that a product has in consumers’ minds. One participant said the following:

“It is a trademark and an image or reputation formed around it. Image and reputation make the brand special and that is how you separate yourself from the competition. Brand isn’t only what we want to give to the consumer, but also how it falls through or what kind of an image the consumer has about it.” (A)

However, one brand manager emphasized that there is no difference when it comes to comparing an apparel brand to any other brand as seen on the following quote:

“An apparel brand doesn’t differ from any other type of brand. Brand as such is a trademark, which has been identified in a particular way. If it is a clothing brand or a fashion brand, it’s identified to a certain industry. The thinking starts within the consumer, what they need, how they differ from others and what they represent. There is a physical product, which is surrounded by an immaterial story.” (D)
4.1.1 Characteristics of the brand

When brand characteristics were discussed, three concepts emerged during the interviews. These themes are Finnishness, sustainability and story-telling. Other characteristics that Finnish apparel brand managers attach to their brand are uniqueness of the products and good quality products. The last two attributes were not cited as many times as the first three ones, so they will not be examined more thoroughly.

Finnishness

According to de Chernatony and Dall’Olmo Riley (1998, p.1076) brands include both tangible and intangible elements. Intangible elements are elements that cannot be touched, such as brand identity, brand image, brand personality and heritage. When heritage is viewed as a unique quality of a brand, it can become a valuable resource when it comes to creating long-term strategic value for the company (Hakala et al., 2011, p.447). Two of the interviewed Finnish apparel brand managers work with a brand that has been established for quite a long of time and they perceive that the brand’s history and its evolution create value for the company. In addition, a company’s brand heritage can be viewed as a unique competitive tool when the company is expanding its business into international markets (Hakala et al., 2011, p.454). This point was also noticed among Finnish apparel brand managers, since all of them perceived that the heritage, which is attached to Finnishness can be seen as a noteworthy competitive tool especially in international markets. All of the participants have a strong linka ge to the country where they come from and thus, they attach the value of Finnishness to their brands when discussing about the characteristics which make their brands distinctive. However, Finnishness was perceived in different ways by the participants. Others relate it to honesty and how it is a common characteristic of a Finn as seen on the following quote:

“Honesty has always been a big element or a big matter that we believe in and that we don’t go around things, but we say things very straight forward, which can be seen in our choices for models and in all of our visual marketing, which show that we do things in a very honest type of way. ... if I think where the element of honesty has come from, it has come from Finnishness, because a Finnish man is quite truthful and says the things as they are and doesn't try to embellish them.” (B)

Others relate Finnishness to the design that reflects the brand’s roots and thus, it works as a way of differentiating the brand from the international competitors. One participant said the following:

“All in all, we are sort of a brand that wants to go international and wants to take Finnish design abroad. However, we do not want in any circumstances to forget Finnishness nor to separate it from our products or our collections, because it is a solid part of our brand.” (C)

One brand concentrates on exporting Finnish lifestyle rather than the Finnishness as an intrinsic value. Also, even though participants are proud of their heritage some of them want to be associated as a Nordic brand as well but some of them prefer rather that the brand is connected to Finland. One participant said the following:
“Well, we definitely want to be rather Finnish when we are abroad than Nordic, even though it is a trendier word, but there is a certain, more clinical, esthetic related to Nordic, and (brand’s name) is closer to Karelian or more like traditional type.” (A)

Moreover, it was interesting to notice that three participants discussed that climate and the typical weather of Finland have an impact on their brand when it comes to the design of the products.

**Sustainability**

Branding environment is evolving all the time and today a lot of attention is focused around sustainability (Fisher-Buttinger and Vallaster, 2008, p.x). Sustainability issues are also considered by all of the Finnish apparel brand managers since they perceive that sustainability is one of the key characteristics of their brands. Many brands are focusing producing good quality garments with timeless design so that garments would last longer and transcend seasons. One participant stated that they are constantly working towards better quality products also from a sustainable point of view, meaning that they are searching ways for how to reuse their brand’s clothing that are not usable as such anymore. In addition, one brand has launched a concept that revolves around sustainability issues and encourages consumers to think about their consumption. One participant said the following about the sustainability aspect of the brand:

“We want to make quality products that are durable and the kind that the customers value and maybe that way we try to affect to the matter that clothes wouldn’t be consumed as much and would be bought with consideration and also valued, taken care of and recycled, which is a goal of ours in the clothing industry.” (C)

Surprisingly, one participant also brought up a thought, as seen on the quote below, that it is not so sustainable creating needs for consumers to buy more products, and therefore, the company invests to produce well-made clothes that serve their customer for a long time:

“We are aware that generally marketing and in a way creating a needles need isn’t sustainable, but on the other hand well made products that serve the consumer for a long time are ecological.” (E)

**Story-telling**

In the literature it has been stated that one of the aspects, that is changing the branding environment, is the brand stories that include abstract ideas and today they increasingly work as essential elements in many brands’ brand strategies (Keller, 2016, p.13). There were a few dimensions regarding the brand stories among the Finnish apparel brand managers. One dimension was to focus on telling stories related to the brand’s collections and thus, the story always changes and is not a permanent story that is built around the brand itself. In this case, at first there is the story and after that the products are built around it. One dimension was that the brand tells a story about the brand itself as seen on the following quote:

“Telling a story is very important, and for us when thinking about the brand the core thing isn’t about who we are but what (brand’s name) is, where it was born and why the products are as they are, so that people understand what they are buying and why, and can feel according to that.” (B)
However, one dimension was also that the companies do not tell a story but rather concentrate on communicating the brand’s mission for consumers. Then, the focus is on explaining why the company is doing the things, which it is executing. The main reason for doing this is that if an imagined story would be communicated, it would be in contradict with the core of the brand, which is adapted to its purpose. One participant said the following:

“I would say it’s more like a mission than a story. It’s more what we communicate about what we are actually doing. The purpose is definitely in the core of the brand and we are not trying to make things look better than they actually are.” (A)

### 4.1.2 Product orientation

In the existing literature it was stated that nowadays companies are shifting their focus more and more in to the brand, whereas a decade ago the focus was more on the product (Gad and Heinämäki, 2001, p.51). This is due to a shortening lifecycle of products; products come and go in the market, but the brand stays. Concentrating on the products or being too product-oriented has been stated to be one of the common obstacles in the Finnish apparel and textile industry (Lille, 2010, p.14). When discussing with the Finnish apparel brand managers, it was noticed that for a few brand managers the core idea of the business is the product and a lot of time and resources are used for that. It was stated that in order to succeed, the promises around the product have to be fulfilled over and over again, because otherwise the reputation can be damaged and it is hard to win back the customer’s loyalty. Also, the importance of the product was highlighted when the discussion focused on the issue of maintaining a successful and well-known brand. One participant said the following:

“I think that the product is the most important and that the product holds the promises that it gives and holds its reputation, because we all know how fast it spreads if the quality isn’t right and how difficult it is to win back a lost customer.” (E)

However, one participant stated that before the brand focused a lot on the product and the design but nowadays they have changed to think that a consumer is in the center of everything rather than the product. Nevertheless, this is still rather new thing for the company as seen on the following quote:

“...this type of consumer based marketing or generally consumer based business orientation is fairly new in this company. Our background is in design and also in logistics. Now we have completely turned around our methods so that we are trying to have the consumer as the start of and in the core of everything.” (D)

### 4.1.3 Digitalization

Fisher-Buttinger and Vallaster (2008, p.x) state that branding environment has evolved a lot due to digitalization and the focus of branding has moved to revolve around digitalization. Yadav and Pavlou (2014, p.20) also state that the impacts of digitalization on branding should be investigated
more. When the effects of digitalization on branding were discussed with the Finnish apparel brand managers, the common response was that it has a great impact on branding, for example on how the brand can be communicated to consumers through multiple digital channels. One participant said that digitalization influences everything what is done inside the company and due to this digitalization has been implemented to the core of the company strategy. This is because digital channels provide fact based information for the behavior of the target group and hence, these channels provide opportunities to understand the consumer better and this way it can also give solutions on how the company can better communicate the brand message and desirable content to the consumers. Two participants said that digitalization has enabled creating the brand’s own online store and a lot of resources are put to constantly developing it. One participant is developing different kinds of digital tools for the brand’s webshop to better communicate the brand’s assortment and collections to consumers. One participant is planning the brand’s website and webshop and the company recently established a responsive website that functions on all digital devices as seen on the following quotation:

“It’s very important that we move along with digitalization. We have just released a responsive website, which operate on all the devices. We have a very strong digital back office in our website and online store and we just hired another graphic designer for this. This is an issue that needs to be attended because everything is going towards digitalization.” (B)

According to Strähle and Gräff (2017, pp.225, 227) social media is very powerful tool for companies to promote themselves to the consumers. Some argue that social media helps to advance of marketing communications in a more affordable and effortless manner (Jin and Cedrola, 2017, p.19). Jin and Cedrola (2017, p.19) also state that social media platforms create authentic and instantaneous relationships with consumers, making it possible for apparel fashion brands to bond with the people in a way that was not possible to do with a certain advertising budget before. When discussing with Finnish apparel brand managers, it was commonly stated that it is important to follow how different digital technologies such as social media develop all the time and it is vital to implement different social media channels to brands’ communication strategies because these channels allow interaction with the consumers. Also, for most of the Finnish apparel brands, social media channels like Instagram and Facebook are the main channels used for the brands’ marketing. According to Jin and Cedrola (2017, p.19), Instagram is widely used among apparel and fashion brands because it enables brands to reinforce their core values through images. Regarding the effects of digitalization on branding, one participant said that social media is affecting branding the most because today everything is so instant and information spreads rapidly, which in bad cases can lead to unfortunate situations. To avoid these type of situations, it requires that all brand related issues to be consistently executed according to the chosen plan. Also, one participant said that digitalization enables communicating the brand on multiple platforms, but creating content requires a lot of time and resources. Additionally, even though digitalization provides several benefits, it is difficult to gain the consumers attention, since every company has equal possibilities to reach the customers.
4.1.4 The meaning of branding

In order for a brand manager to manage a brand correctly, he or she has to have clear understanding of what the brand stands for, what makes it unique and what it is worth (Kotler and Pfoertsch, 2006, p.73; Keller and Lehmann, 2006, p.744). A few participants stated that in order to maintain and manage a brand, it requires that the identity of the brand has to be clear for all the company’s employees, because otherwise it is very hard to communicate the brand for the consumers. If the brand is not clear for its makers and thus, they cannot open the brand for themselves, the brand is not strong and therefore, the brand cannot be clear for the consumers either. Because of this, it is crucial to clearly understand the identity of the product or the service that is being offered for the consumers. This perception is in line with the branding principle of brand clarity (Kotler and Pfoertsch, 2006, p.162). A few Finnish apparel brand managers perceived that branding is creating an identity for a trademark or for products or services that are being sold by the company. However, this perception had two different dimensions. One perception was that branding means disclosing all the immaterial content of the trademark. One participant said the following:

“Well maybe it is about creating the identity for the brand. Or maybe it is about creating a personality for the trademark. In a way maybe it is all the content and something deeper that can be found under the bare brand or the visual image. Maybe it is bringing these things forward.” (C)

One perception was that branding means understanding the purpose of the brand and also its identity. Kapferer (2008, p.33) also states that specifying brand purpose in defining the brand’s raison d'être, which presents the brand purpose’s absolute necessity, is in the core of branding. The perception by one Finnish apparel brand manager was that when the identity is clear, it determines everything, for instance, who the target customer is and what the unique selling points of the trademark are. This participant said the following:

“Well branding is that you understand the identity for the product or service that you are offering. ... Understanding the purpose of your brand in this world as we call it here the raison d'être, this means the reason to exist, so branding is that you understand it and then communicate it to your target group.” (D)

According to Beverland, Wilner and Micheli (2015, p.589) brand manager’s task is to maintain, increase and defend the brand equity and in order to do so, brand managers have to be consistent when it comes to an image of a brand and marketing support. A few Finnish apparel managers perceived that branding means conformity and consistency in every action that is related to a brand and everywhere where the brand is exposed. This perception by the apparel brand managers is in line with the first branding principle of brand consistency (Kotler and Pfoertsch, 2006, p.162) and it means for instance that all of the brand messages must be according to the chosen brand strategy of the brand. One participant said the following:

“Well maybe that all of the messages and actions made on the consumer’s level are according to the brands guidelines. ... It is a sort of conformity and goal-oriented work everywhere where the brand is visible and what marketing can affect.” (E)
According to the interviews, it is crucial to maintain the consistency in every decision in relation to the brand as the image and the value of the brand can quickly be affected negatively if the brand is seen in a wrong place or attached to wrong idealistic thoughts. It is slow and demanding to build the brand value, but the value can disappear in minutes if things are not done according to the plan. This is important especially today since digitalization enables consumers to follow brands more actively and share information and pictures rapidly.

Besides understanding the identity for the product or the service or maintaining the consistency according to the chosen strategy, there was a perception that differed from these views when it was discussed what it requires to maintain a successful and well-known brand. This perception highlighted the importance of the issues, which cannot be seen by others outside of the company’s office, meaning searching for fabrics, visiting the factories, logistics, finance and invoicing, customer service and the management of claims. It was stated that this “back office” is the most important thing for maintaining a successful and well-known brand and these issues create the foundation of the brand.

4.1.5 The state of Finnish apparel branding

According to Lille’s (2010, p.11) research results, one of the common obstacles in the Finnish apparel and textile industry is that there is the lack of knowledge in marketing and branding. When discussing Finnish apparel brands in general, all of the Finnish apparel brand managers discussed that there are a few big brands and then lots of small brands in the Finnish apparel and textile industry. When the current state of Finnish apparel branding was discussed with the participants, the perceptions were divided. It was stated that Finnish apparel branding is a bit depressing because there are great, small brands in the industry but most of them do not succeed in the end for different reasons. One perception was that when it comes to branding in general in Finland, Finns do not know how to do branding and there is a lot to learn how to brand good products. One participant said the following:

“Finns just are really poor at branding. In branding, there is a lot of making things look better than they are, which isn’t what Finns are about. ... There is too engineer-type way of thinking and because of that the mindset is that the product will sell itself.” (B)

However, a few perceptions were that Finnish apparel branding is not as bad as the Finnish media indicates it and that Finnish apparel branding is going on to the right direction. However, there is a lot of work that still needs to be done. One participant said the following:

“I wouldn’t give Finns a too bad of a grade, which newspapers usually do and say that Finns are bad at branding, but still I would say that there is room to improve a lot, for example, when it comes to understanding the importance of branding.” (D)

A few interviewees also brought up that the Swedes are better in terms of branding compared to Finns as seen on the following quote that was said by one participant:
“...somehow we are not able to do it as well as our western neighbors.” (E)

Different reasons were listed why branding is not so good in Finland. One main reason that emerged during the interviews was the lack of financial resources and know-how. For instance, if there are only little resources, it is hard to grow a business, because the marketing budget is limited and thus, it requires a lot of work to even market the brand so that consumers could find the brand. Additionally, the other main reason for not succeeding in branding was the product orientation of the brands. This can be seen in a quotation above that refers to branding in general in Finland; the state of mind is that if the product is good it will sell itself and according to the quotation straight below said by one participant that a good product is not enough for running a successful business:

“I have followed some certain small Finnish clothing brands and even though there are gorgeous products and great design but if there is no know-how or on the other hand no resources to acquire the know-how, which leads to the issue that there are unfortunately a lot of stories, which show that a good product isn’t simply enough to make it work commercially.” (D)

4.2 Brand managers’ work related tasks

By examining the previous studies and academic articles about brand managers’ work related tasks, the following key themes emerged: maintaining and strengthening the brand equity, implementing and coordinating brand-related issues, maintaining brand relevance, working with tangible brand elements, making decisions regarding the brand, evaluating and controlling the marketing mix elements, analyzing the market and understanding the importance of the consumers. According to the interviews with the Finnish apparel brand managers, it can be noticed that they are working with similar activities with their brands compared to what other brand managers in other industries are stated to be working with.

4.2.1 A brand manager

In the existing literature it is stated that a brand manager is a person, who manages a brand (Veloutsou, 2002, p.453), is an expert on the brand (Panigyrakis and Veloutsou, 1999, p.497) and this person is responsible for the brand’s holistic management (Veloutsou and Panigyrakis, 2004, p.105). It was hard for a few participants to sum up what is the job description for an apparel brand manager. However, most of them perceived their job description to be diverse. The following quote was said by one participant:

“Well that is a difficult question. Just like all the other brand managers, we have to know our brand and also work around it so that it’s portrayed correctly, because you can’t go along with something that you don’t believe in or like.” (B)

According to the answers of Finnish apparel brand managers, the job description is broad since the Finnish apparel brand managers are involved in a lot of different activities that are related to their
brand, for instance, they are creating the visual identity for the brand, thinking how to communicate their brand to consumers and guiding the employees who work around the brand. One participant said the following:

“Maybe it is in a way creating the framework so that everyone understands the brand and help and support in communicating the brand. … Brand manager's job has to do with a lot of things, because one day we can be thinking about tags in clothing, one day about Facebook messages and one day product descriptions so basically it is a very wide field of work.” (C)

4.2.2 Implementing, maintaining and coordinating brand-related issues

Panigyrakis’ and Veloutsou’s (1999, p.507) research findings indicated that the main task of a brand manager is the coordination of the internal and external stakeholders and this coordination is a part of the brand manager’s overall implementation role. All of the Finnish apparel brand managers highlighted that one of their main work tasks is to implement, maintain and coordinate the brand-related issues both inside the company as well as for the external stakeholders like consumers, and retailers and thus, the findings are in line with previous research.

**Internal stakeholders**

When it comes to the implementation of the brand-related issues with internal stakeholders, Gad and Heinämäki (2001, p.91) state that a brand manager has to communicate a lot with the employees so that the core idea and smallest nuances of the brand would be clear to them. Also, according to Burmann and Zeplin (2005, p.281), it is a brand manager’s task to monitor and control that all employees are familiar with the concept of the brand. All of the Finnish apparel brand managers stated that it is their task to ensure that all employees understand what the brand is all about and what should be communicated to consumers. Also, Finnish apparel brand managers monitor that the brand’s look, feel and the tone of voice are executed coherently despite of the market or the communication channel. In practice this means that participants clearly communicate the brand’s message to other employees in the company so that employees understand what the goal is. By ensuring and keeping the focus on what the brand really is and stands for, Finnish apparel brand managers monitor the brand’s execution process as well as guide the employees and discuss the brand-related issues with them. One participant said the following:

“I have to trust that all the employees in this company know what they are doing and everybody understands what our brand policy is and that it’s always executed in a right way and no one takes any side steps or shortcuts but follows the chosen strategy. Quite a lot of my time is used to holding on the strings so that the staff will follow the chosen policy.” (B)

Three participants mentioned that it is essential that the chosen brand strategy is followed in order to coherently create the brand. One participant truly emphasized that the main tasks of her includes creating a framework for the brand strategy together with her team and ensuring the strategy’s implementation as seen on the following quote:
At the moment, there is a brand strategy file on my work desk. Last time it was created and established together with my team in 2014 but now it’s time to do it again. However, a lot will stay as it currently is but it always evolves a bit. ... The main goal is that the brand looks the same on 360 degrees.” (D)

According to a few participants when it comes to the implementation, it is a brand manager’s task to ensure that people are in their right places and they have sufficient resources to do their work. This is essential, because there is no use for a brand strategy if the implementation cannot be guaranteed in practice. It was surprising to notice that two participants did not directly mention the concept of brand strategy at all during the interviews.

Most of the Finnish apparel brand managers stated that the key people, who are also making decisions concerning the brand, know what the brand is all about and thus, the chosen strategy is carefully followed. When considering the group of employees that are outside the core brand team, the brand managers sometimes need to remind, question their decisions and guide them. When it comes to guiding employees, one participant said that she visits the brand’s stores once a month to see whether the brand identity is presented according to the strategy in the store environment and she also gives ideas and inspiration for the store staff. In addition, one participant stated that sometimes she looks through texts and posts before they are published on social media channels together with the person, who actually writes the texts and plans the posts especially if the person is new in the company. The brand manager’s task here is to guide the person so that he or she would understand what the desired style, in which the brand wants to communicate with consumers, is. Also, besides discussing the brand-related issues before hand with an employee, sometimes the brand manager might also give some comments after a released publication; what was done well and what issues require improvement. By doing so, the brand manager both implements the brand strategy concretely and trains the employee.

**External stakeholders**

When it comes to the implementation of the brand-related issues with external stakeholders, the results from Panigyrakis’ and Veloutsou’s (1999, p.506) research showed that brand managers’ involvement was low when it comes to the distribution decisions and contact with distribution channels in both sectors of pharmaceutical and fast-moving consumer goods products. Most of the answers from the Finnish apparel brand managers were in line with the perception that brand managers rarely have any power in the selection of distribution channels because the sales team of the companies is responsible for that. In this case, Finnish apparel brand managers task is to provide materials and ensure that the sales team has the right information and knowhow about the brand, because the sales team is in charge for implementing the brand strategy for the retailers. However, one participant stated that it is him who makes the decisions about all the retailers that sell the brand’s goods directly to consumers, but mostly he works with the international agents of the brand, who work as middlemen between him and the selected retailers. In this case, the brand manager provides information about the brand to agents, who in turn are in contact with the retailers and it is the agents’ responsibility to communicate the brand to the retailers. In order to ensure that the agents have sufficient knowledge of the brand, the brand manager organizes sales meetings for the
agents together with his team so that they can train the agents. Besides showing the new collection for the agents, the implementation of the brand strategy is also revised by explaining how the brand should be presented and communicated to retailers.

4.2.3 Keeping the brand relevant

In order to ensure constant growth of the brand, the brand needs to be relevant (Keller, 2016, p.13) and it is a brand manager’s task to manage the relevance of his or her brand (Beverland, Wilner and Micheli, 2015, p.589). All of the Finnish apparel brand managers perceived that it is important to keep the brand relevant. The brand has to be kept relevant in order to stay in the competition and this requires that there should be development in every act related to the brand. However, when revising the brand in order to stay relevant, the development should be subtle all the time so that the brand would still be identifiable and consistent to its chosen strategy. This perception is in line with the branding principle, brand continuity (Kotler and Pfoertsch, 2006, p.162). One participant said the following:

"I think that there needs to be development in all areas all the time in order to be able to stay in the game. ... However, the change should be made discreetly so that there won’t be any fraction on the way, but rather the brand is always completely identifiable and in line what has been made and produced previously. A discreet development so to say". (D)

In order to keep the brand relevant, it requires thinking about the brand as a whole; is the mission still valid, is the unique selling point still relevant and does the visual identity still communicate of the brand identity the best possible way. According to the Finnish apparel brand managers, when the time is invested in thinking of the current situation of the brand, it helps them to see which issues are still valid and central for the brand and which issues are not and should be eliminated. It is important to evaluate and question whether the chosen strategy for the brand is still relevant and does it serve the brand in a right way, because the chosen brand strategy guides what kinds of decision will be made, which then affects in everything what is done around the brand. One participant said the following:

"Renewing a brand is like doing a spring-cleaning in your wardrobe. Sometimes everything needs to be gone through carefully and see if our unique selling propositions among other things are still in shape and line, because they are the tools that are used to control the brand and the conformity." (E)

In practice, maintaining the brand relevance for Finnish apparel brand managers mean taking the time and thinking if the current situation of the brand is still in line with the chosen brand strategy and for example, does the visual identity of the brand reflect the core identity of the brand. One Finnish apparel brand manager said that after being away for few years from the company and then coming back, he and the other founding members of the company noticed that the brand is not currently following according to the original brand plan and strategy and due to this, the brand had started to drift to different directions, communication was not clear and thus, the brand became dim both for its makers and to its customers. Because of this, the focus of the brand was revised and it
was the brand manager’s task to implement the new/original strategy of the brand identity; what the brand is all about, what the texts of the brand should contain, how the brand’s tone of voice should be communicated and how the brand should look visually. Also, two other participants said that when revising the brand, it is their responsibility together with their teams, to think about how the brand’s visual identity, for example the logo, should be modified and implemented to all the materials of the brand and to the places where the brand is exposed, for example on the website of the brand.

4.2.4 Creating and maintaining the visual identity of the brand and the tone of voice

Brand image is difficult to control by brand managers, and hence they work with tangible elements of a brand, because these elements can be created and developed to present and illustrate whatever image is wanted by the company (Wigley, Larsen and Nobbs, 2013, p.249). The responses by the participants are in line with this previous study in the field, since all of the Finnish apparel brand managers strongly perceived that one of their work tasks is to maintain and modify the visual identity and the tone of voice of the brand. Most of the participants work closely with a small team and together they work on the visual identity of the brand. The decisions are made together with other team members when it comes to designing the tangible brand elements such as packaging of a product or hangtags of a garment. It could be also noticed that all the participants manage and take part of designing the tangible brand elements such as packaging, hangtags and catalogs, but none of them actually take part of executing these elements by themselves or placing the orders of them. These tasks are delegated to other employees. This is in line with Wigley’s, Larsen’s and Nobbs’s (2013, p.249) research as well, which states that brand managers control and manage brand’s tangible elements, but other employees, in their case product designers, are responsible for creating them. However, one apparel brand manager said that he takes part in the actual execution process when creating the different visual identity elements of the brand as seen on the following quote:

"I’m in charge of everything related to visual identity, which contains catalogues, building the website along with making banners, ads and videos. Everything which is related to marketing is my daily work.” (B)

A few participants stated that a lot of time and resources are used, for instance, to design hangtags and collar labels for garments as well as to edit the texts and pictures for the marketing purposes, because these elements reflect the brand and thus, it is important that all the pieces that identify the brand in some way have to follow the chosen brand strategy coherently. One participant said that one part of creating a brand strategy is to create the graphical elements of the brand, for instance, which font and exact color hue to use in the logo. When the graphical elements are settled, it is easier to implement the brand’s visual identity from hangtags to marketing materials and advertisements to company’s website and to different digital and social channels. The main goal for doing this is that the brand would look the same in every touchpoint where the brand is present. Touchpoints are places in which consumers attach with the service or product and thus, touchpoints can be for instance products, trade shows, website, social media channels, publications, emails as
well as word of mouth (Wheeler, 2006, pp.5,37). All the Finnish apparel brand managers stated that they are also maintaining the brand’s tone of voice; it is the way how the brand communicates to consumers. One participant said that he does not write texts for social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram by himself, but one of his work tasks is to control that the content of the published texts is according to the nature of the brand. One participant also said that it is important to discuss about the brand’s tone of voice with the employees so that it will remain the way as it should be when communicating with the customers. This brand manager said the following when discussing about the tone of voice of the brand:

“I’m going through what the right tone of voice of the (brand’s name) is with the person who is responsible of our customer service. I go through with this person, who is responsible for our customer service, that what is the right tone of voice how (brand’s name) speaks to the customers. The tone of voice should be warm and have a positive vibe because we want to be very friendly to our customers.” (C)

According to Wigley, Larsen and Nobbs (2013, p.258) an apparel brand’s DNA can be actualized in a physical store if the visual stimuli of the brand are well presented. Four participant’s brands have their own physical stores and all of them stated that it is essential for the brand to be present in this way. It was said that it is important to have an own store from the point of view of brand management, because the brand’s own store is the purest place, where the brand can be present. Also, it was mentioned that the company wants to ensure that they have a place where a consumer can physically come and experience the brand. However, one participant emphasized that the reason opening an own store was more related to have a chance to closer examine consumers as seen on the following quote:

“Originally, one of the important reasons why we put up our own store was that we wanted to understand the consumer better and get the direct feedback from them.” (E)

4.2.5 Making decisions and creating the brand together with the team

The research findings of Panigyrakis’ and Veloutsou’s (1999, p.509) research showed that one of brand managers’ tasks is to make decisions regarding the brand. However, the results indicated that brand managers do not make decisions alone, because they interact with several internal and external managers and groups in making decisions. It was stated that these managers and groups can be for instance headquarters, category manager, marketing manager and the advertising agency. These findings are in line with the Finnish apparel brand managers’ answers. All participants stated that they make decisions concerning their own brands, but the decisions are thought and decided together with their teams. These teams include people like the chief executive officer, manager of design, digital manager, creative director, art director, product and graphic designers as well as consultant agencies. Additionally, one participant even said that, because the company’s work policy is so conversational, it is sometimes hard to perceive how much she can actually have an influence on the decision-making. However, a few participants said that even though their brand is created in collaboration with other team members, there are few things that are made only by the founders of the brand or solely by the brand manager himself. One participant said that if the
question is about the brand’s identity, then only she and the person who founded the brand with her make the decisions since they know the deepest essence of the brand. Also, one participant said that he is the only one who makes the decisions on commercial issues related to the brand as seen on the following quote:

"We sit together a lot and do things where everyone is involved. The only thing where I make the decisions alone is the commercial side, for example, if something doesn’t sell or we don’t need something. This is where I make the call to leave something out for example because of cost related reasons. Otherwise, I allow everyone to do their own thing and trust that they know what they are doing." (B)

Panigyrakis’ and Veloutsou’s (1999, p.509) research results revealed that brand managers do not participate in strategic decisions that are relevant to their brands, but rather have more responsibility considering the tactical decisions of the brand. According to the responses of the Finnish apparel brand managers, they have a role in both strategic and tactical decision-making. With regard to the tactical decision making, Finnish apparel brand managers plan hangtags for garments, take care of their brands’ daily marketing communications tasks such as planning and updating social media channels and organize brand’s stand on trade fairs. When it comes to strategic decision making, Finnish apparel brand managers plan, maintain and implement the strategy of the brand, take part of planning the visual identity of the brand as well as take part of renewing the brand when it is needed.

4.2.6 Controlling and creating content for promotional mix elements

Based on the results of Panigyrakis’ and Veloutsou’s (1999, p.508) research, brand managers spend a lot of time controlling and evaluating the marketing mix elements (product, price, place and promotion) of the brand, however, their main task in this area is mainly focused on controlling and evaluating the promotional mix elements (advertising, public relations, sales promotion and personal selling) of the brand. Also, according to Herstein’s and Zvilling’s (2011, p.193) research, it is a brand manager who selects and employs different marketing tactics in order to penetrate the market. The same orientation in relation to previous studies was also noticed when discussing with the Finnish apparel brand managers. Most of the participants take part and make the decisions how to promote and advertise their brand, but do not make the decisions concerning pricing, the product itself or issues related to distribution of the products. However, one participant said that one of his work tasks is to think about the prices of the products as well as which retailers to choose. This participant is the same brand manager who works closely with the brand’s international agents. Also, in Panigyrakis’ and Veloutsou’s (1999, p.508) research it was stated that brand managers control and evaluate the brand’s promotional mix together with the advertising and promotion agencies. A few Finnish apparel brand managers said that they sometimes take into consideration outside consultants advices when planning the promotional mix elements but mostly all the marketing related decisions are made and controlled inside the company.

Previous studies state that it is a brand manager’s task to make the decisions regarding marketing tactics and work with the promotional mix of the brand, but there was little information what the
work around marketing and promotion actually contains. According to Brexendorf’s and Daecke’s (2012, p.34) research results, it is part of a brand manager’s daily job to engage consumers on different social media platforms, not by providing a service to the consumers, but providing source of inspiration about the desires of consumers and the language they use in relation to the brand. Two different dimensions were noticed when it comes to directly engaging consumers on social media among Finnish apparel brand managers. Two of the Finnish apparel brand managers stated that one of their main work tasks is to plan, update and take care of the brand’s marketing communications in different social media channels like on Instagram and Facebook. These two participants plan and decide when and what kind of content, including texts and pictures, will be publicly posted on their brands’ social media channels and they also publish the posts and pictures themselves. Three other participants also work with social media; they plan and give suggestions what the posts on Instagram, updates on Facebook or newsletters should contain, but they do not publish the content themselves because that is someone else’s work task in the company. One participant said that she makes a monthly social media plan with her team, which includes suggestions for actual posts or texts but then the employees who work more closely with the social media select the most suitable suggestions for the different channels as seen on the following quote:

"Here in the headquarters we are making a monthly social media plan, which includes suggestions regarding the content for the next month. This basically means ready typed texts and posts. After that the people who make it happen, pick the ones that they feel are the most relevant. ” (D)

Even though there is a difference when it comes to the actual execution process of publishing the content on social media, all of the participants said that it is important that the chosen marketing strategy is consistent so that the brand’s recognizability remains the same on all social media platforms.

With regard to other forms of marketing communications, two Finnish apparel brand managers said that one of their work tasks is also to plan and organize arrangements for photoshoots for the next season’s clothing collection. The arrangement can include for instance selecting the shooting location, booking models and a photographer and creating a budget for the photoshoot. However, these brand managers main responsibility in terms of photoshoots is to take care that the strategy of the brand is followed and the focus stays on the right direction; what kinds of pictures will be taken and what is the feeling in the pictures so that the pictures resonate the brand in a right way. One participant said the following:

"During the photoshoots my job is to focus on the strategy and take care that we won’t lose our way but hold on tight to what our brand is. I’m the all seeing eye when it comes to styling, lights, model’s expression, colors and I make sure that everything is in line and looks like before, but a little bit better.” (B)
4.2.7 Analyzing the brand performance

According to Veloutsou’s (2002, p.458) and Brexendorf’s and Daecke’s (2012, p.34) research results, brand managers task is to collect and analyze available market data in terms of the managed brand. Also, Brexendorf and Daecke (2012, p.34) argue that brand managers should evaluate the performance data of the managed brand by using both quantitative and qualitative market research techniques. Only one participant emphasized that it is her task to understand and analyze what happens in the market and how each market works where the brand is present.

When it comes to evaluating the performance data of the managed brand, the responses varied a lot. Considering the previously mentioned participant, she is the only one from the Finnish apparel brand managers who actually executes every other year a broad brand research for consumers on the selected markets. One participant said that the value of the brand and the development of the brand are monitored through customer feedback at the moment so any data tracking is not adapted. One participant said that she keeps track of the brand value and the development of the brand by exploring the paid studies, but the company has not purchased any in recent times. One participant said that she follows the development of the turnover. However, she added that this metric does not directly indicate the value of the brand and thus, she monitors more the development of the brand’s visual identity. By saying this, she means that she tracks more how different communications channels of the brand, such as website and Instagram, develop over time. One participant said that she monitors the performance data of the brand from the perspectives of the product, marketing communications and turnover and sales together with the team as seen on the following quote:

“Following the product, its quality and development, are in the core all the time. Regarding social media, the amount of (brand’s name) followers, fans and likes are noted as well. Then again the growth of turnover or sales in stores along with fan engagement or loyalty are also the issues that come to mind in the first place that are always monitored on a daily basis.” (A)

The results from Veloutsou’s (2002, p.458) research indicated that the involvement of brand managers, concerning developing forecasts and estimating future prospects in the market, did not appear to be on a high level. This result is also in line with the Finnish apparel brand managers since none of them mentioned about developing forecasts or examining future expectations in the market during the interviews.

4.2.8 Considering the consumers

According to Panigyrakis and Veloutsou (2000, p.180), a brand manager should place consumers at the center of his or her plans. Also, Herstein and Zvilling (2001, p.201) highlight based on their research findings that one of the brand manager’s most important task is to understand consumers and not neglect them. All of the responses from the Finnish apparel brand managers are in line with Herstein’s and Zvilling’s (2001) research findings. When discussing about consumers, all brand managers stressed the customer-centric business as well as the importance of understanding
consumers and their needs, because without consumers, the companies would not exist. The following quote was said by one participant:

“Understanding the target group is everything. Everything we do should start from understanding the needs of consumers. ... Your brand has a chance to live, if you are able to solve an existing problem or goal in your target group’s life.” (D)

One participant stated that it is a brand manager’s task to know the brand’s target market in order to understand the drivers in their lives, what they do and how they act in the world where the brand is attached. In order to create the brand loyalty between the brand and a customer, the customer’s needs have to be satisfied and the customers need to experience that the brand gives value for their money.

In practice, Finnish apparel brand managers investigate their customers’ needs and preferences for instance by reading the comments that are sent to brand’s customer service, by listening their staff who are working in the brand’s physical store, by asking their international retailers and agents what the local customers there have discussed, by asking directly from their customers via social media channels if, for instance, some certain type of a garment is wanted among customers or by observing the customers if seen in the environment where the brand can be attach because of its nature. One participant said the following:

"We are asking our customers’ opinions for example on Facebook, where we can ask for instance what kinds of garments customers would like to have in the future. We are also listening to the feedback, which we are getting from our retailers.” (C)

It is also important to be active and quickly respond to customers if either good or bad comments or questions are left on customer service. Additionally, one participant said that she sometimes reads Internet forums with her team in order to get to know what the brand image is at that moment, meaning how consumers perceive the brand. It was also perceived that it is a brand manager’s task to think what the best ways are to connect with their target market and how the communication should be created in order to be easily understandable. However, Finnish brand managers do not organize focus groups in order to elicit consumers’ needs as it was emphasized in Herstein’s and Zvilling’s (2011, p.196) research.

Creating brand experiences was not mentioned in previous studies. However, four participants stated that it is important to create brand experiences to customers. One participant did not have a clear picture of what was the idea of a brand experience is. Today, companies are inspired to strengthen the brand experience to keep and lure customers because of the great amount of purchasing choices (Wheeler, 2006, p.40). In practice, a few Finnish apparel brand managers said that their work task, when considering creating brand experiences to customers, is to design, plan and organize how their brands’ stand looks like in trade fairs they take part to. Trade fairs act as one touchpoint for the brand, because of how consumers see the stand, pictures, the presented collection and how everything is put together, create the brand experience to a consumer. In addition, one participant said that the company also puts time and resources for creating a good-looking
packaging, because the goal is to create a brand experience to customers also when opening the received package. In this case, the brand manager takes part for the design process of the packaging. The importance of having an own physical store was discussed earlier when considering the tangible brand elements, but one participant stated that the main reason why their company wanted to open their own store was because of creating brand experiences to their customers. When a customer enters to the brand’s store, the customer enters the world of the brand and he or she can experience how the brand looks, feels and sounds as seen on the following quote:

“We opened our own store particularly because of the brand experience so that you could be able to experience the brand and that this is how (brand’s name) looks like, feels like and sounds like. You will get the experience when you walk in to the (brand’s name) world. It was a big project to open a store and I was very much involved in it.” (B)

Moreover, two participants said that they take part of planning and organizing events to their target customers in environment, which is in direct relation to the brand. These events are purely organized for creating the brand experiences and enhancing the customers’ brand engagement.

4.3 Brand managers’ main challenges in branding

Two major challenges aroused among the most of the Finnish apparel brand managers when challenges were discussed with them. These challenges were related to implementation of the brand strategy and to communicational issues of the brand message. This is interesting, because all the participants stated that implementing, maintaining and coordinating brand-related issues are one the most important work tasks they have. However, as the companies are growing all the time, new employees are hired, new markets are entered and new communication channels are harnessed, it is vital that every person in the supply chain understands what the brand is all about so the brand work is consistent on every touchpoint where the brand comes out and is present. The brand touchpoints are important because each touchpoint a brand has, is an opportunity to strengthen the brand and also to communicate its essence (Wheeler, 2006, pp.5,37).

4.3.1 The implementation of the brand strategy and the brand message

For the Finnish apparel brand managers the first big challenge in branding is the implementation of the brand strategy and the brand message within the company and especially with the external stakeholders. Concerning the internal stakeholders, like people who work for the brand inside the company, it was stated that when the company is growing all the time and new employees are recruited, it is important that the implementation of the brand strategy is consistent within the company so that the brand identity and brand message would be clear for all employees in order to present a coherent and intact brand on public. When it comes to external stakeholders, whether it is one person, who creates the platform for the brand’s website or various retailers abroad, there is a task and a challenge how to communicate the brand’s message so that it would not break or decline on the way. The implementation is important even though it would consider only the website
developer, however, this person has impact on creating the brand’s visual identity, which in turn affects how the brand is experienced by consumers. Moreover, the bigger the market area the brand covers, the bigger the challenge is. When the retailers are scattered all over the world, it is hard to monitor if the brand strategy is followed and maintained according to the plan. One participant said the following:

“If there are several touch points where the brand comes out and is present, it is important that you can control the big picture that the message doesn’t break or the brand doesn’t diminish on the way and this is definitely one very concrete issue that we are dealing with on a daily basis.” (D)

When the company enters to a new market area, it is important to communicate the idea and the identity of the brand to new people who are in charge for delivering the brand message for consumers. However, it is hard to know, for instance, if the brand message is told in a right way by the retailers to consumers, who can create the image of the brand based on how the retailer presents and tells about the brand. If the staff, who works at the retailers, understand the brand and its identity and esthetics, where does the inspiration for the collection come from, how materials are produced and where do they come from, the better the staff can communicate the brand to consumers and the more it increases the recognizability of the brand. If the staff, who works at the retailers, understand the brand and its identity and esthetics, where does the inspiration for the collection come from, how materials are produced and where do they come from, the better the staff can communicate the brand to consumers and the more it increases the recognizability of the brand. Also, one participant emphasized that the biggest challenge in branding is how the brand and its message is presented by retailers, because it is difficult to control how the retailer portrays the brand for example in the store, which can have an impact on the customers’ brand image. The products that are put on display affect how the customers perceive the brand, because even though there would be finer products in the collection, they might not be on display everywhere because of the retailer’s choice. Also, in today’s highly competed market, if the orders are not delivered on time in full or the product does not sell, it can lead to the termination of the agreement with the brand or to brand blocking. All in all, no matter how well the brand is established and maintained, it cannot be completely controlled, because of the involvement of the retailer in the supply chain. The participant who emphasized the challenge of how the brand is presented by the retailers said the following:

“Well, distribution is a big issue. When going into export, finding a common ground with the retailers on how the brand is presented, as they are the supervisors of the brand in that particular market area, so that the way how they handle and work with the brand would be consistent.” (E)

The participants said that in order to avoid conflicts, the brand strategy has to be clearly communicated to all stakeholders, who work with the brand, and the execution of the implementation has to be followed. Also, consistency and clarity in brand communication of the brand is a key.
4.3.2 The communicational issues of the brand

The other challenge is about the communicational issues of the brand. A few perceptions appeared when discussing with the participants about this topic. The first perception is how to reach consumers who are geographically scattered in a large area and the resources for contacting the people are limited. When a company is rather small and it wants to do business abroad, it is a challenge to get consumers attention on international level and in order to increase the brand exposure and develop the brand awareness in the minds of consumers, it would be essential to be visible for the consumers. This challenge is related to the branding principle of brand visibility (Kotler and Pfoertsch, 2006, p.163). One participant said the following:

“Communication is always difficult when trying to reach a large audience with a small budget, since we are also selling our products all over Europe. ... The key and the toughest nut to crack is how you can reach people and how you are able to tell your story to them cost effectively.” (B)

Because of the era of digitalization, social media has helped a lot of Finnish apparel brands to grow conspicuousness among international consumers, since according to the participants their target groups are attached to digital devices and are present on different social media channels. One participant said that the cheapest way to overcome the challenge of getting consumers’ attention towards the brand is to produce a great piece of a product so that when a consumer walks in to a store, he or she will purchase it, because of the quality and the look of the product, and afterwards familiarize him- or herself with the brand.

The other perception is related to the penetration of the brand and its brand message on different social media channels. A few participants said that even though social media has helped and allowed small brands to appear on the market, it is also a challenge, since all the competitors can also use social media as a communication tool for their brands. One participant said that today following fashion and clothing generally can be very shortsighted if thinking about social media because everything can be blended as one big mass and thus, bringing forward the managed brand and its message can be rather difficult. Again, it was stated that in order to overcome this issue, the work around the brand has to be persistent, consistent and creative.
5 Discussion

This chapter discusses the findings of the study in light of the presented research questions, which have guided the whole research process. In addition, the model of the conceptual framework of this research is complemented with the empirical findings of this study.

In the conceptual framework of this research (Figure 5, p.23), the concept of branding was formed by the researcher from three different concepts, based on the scientific literature, academic articles and previous studies in the studied field. These three concepts were the brand, brand manager’s work tasks and the environment. All of the concepts were presented in the literature review chapter. When the collected data from the interviews of Finnish apparel brand managers were analyzed, it was possible to further express how these concepts take place in practice. It can be stated that branding, among Finnish apparel brand managers, is influenced by the interaction of the brand, brand manager’s work tasks and the environment, since it was recognized that the themes that emerged from the collected data were highly connected to each other. Figure 6 below presents the complemented model of the conceptual framework of this research based on the main findings of the empirical research. The model illustrates what are the main findings when discussing branding among Finnish apparel brand managers.
By analyzing the collected data from the empirical research, it is now possible to answer the study’s research questions. The research questions will be answered in the same order as they were presented previously in the introduction chapter.

**Finnish apparel brand managers’ perceptions about an apparel brand**
The first research question was “How do Finnish apparel brand managers perceive an apparel brand?”. Finnish apparel brand managers perceived an apparel brand as a trademark that has a certain image around it that separates the brand from the competition, as an emotionally appealing added value that a product has in consumers’ minds or as an identified trademark for a physical product, which is surrounded by an immaterial story. These perceptions can be seen on the complemented model (see Figure 6), when looking at the circle of the brand. The fact that Finnish apparel brand managers perceived an apparel brand from different angles is in line with the findings of existing literature, because as it was stated in the beginning of this research, there are multiple definitions for a brand in the marketing related academic literature (Kapferer, 2008, p.9; McColl and Moore, 2011, p.92). However, Finnish apparel brand managers perceived the idea of apparel brand according to the common understanding of the brand, since the brand can be commonly recognized as a name, image symbol or unique set of values, which is applied to identify and differentiate a product or service from the competitors’ products or services (Kotler et al., 2016, p.423; Kapferer, 2008, p.3). Also, it has been stated that the brand can be a promise that exists in
consumers’ minds and it provides consumers added value (Wheeler, 2006, p.4; Kotler et al. 2016, p.423).

When discussing with Finnish apparel brand managers about their own apparel brands they manage, they perceived that it is important to have characteristics around the brand because the characteristics can make the brand more distinctive among competitors. Also, these characteristics are used to strengthen the brand’s identity, which in turn helps the Finnish apparel brands to establish and position their products in the consumers’ minds (Kotler et al., 2016, p.426). Today, it is extremely important to have a strong brand identity in the market due to the abundance of choice (Hakala et al., 2011, p.447). It can be seen on the complemented model (see Figure 6) that Finnish apparel brand managers attach the characteristics of Finnishness, sustainability and story-telling to their brands. Finnishness can be attached to the element of heritage, which can be viewed as one of the intangible brand elements (Wigley, Nobbs and Larsen, 2013, p.249). Two of the Finnish apparel brand managers perceived that Finnishness as a characteristic is a valuable organizational resource and it creates value for the company. Three other Finnish apparel brands perceived Finnishness as a company’s brand heritage that works as a unique competitive tool in the international markets (Hakala et al., 2011, p.454). The reason, why the differences occur might be that the first two brands have been in the industry for a longer time than the other three and thus, they have a longer history to communicate to the consumers, which creates more value to the company.

Sustainability was also perceived to be one key characteristic of a Finnish apparel brand (see Figure 6). This positioning strategy also helps to differentiate the brand from the competitors and gain the public’s attention (Kapferer, 2008, p.175). The fact that sustainability has an important role among Finnish apparel brands is that branding environment has changed and a lot of attention has risen around sustainability, including the environment, the social and the ethical issues (Fisher-Buttinger and Vallaster, 2008, p.x). Due to this, the two-directional arrow between the circles of the brand and the environment in the complemented model (see Figure 6) is presented since in this case these issues influence each other. Finnish apparel brands want to take their responsibility concerning sustainability issues, for instance producing quality garments that transcend seasons, but also today’s empowered consumers demand companies to take these issues into consideration.

Brand stories and story-telling are increasingly changing the branding environment (Keller, 2016, p.13) and a few Finnish apparel brands have also included story-telling in to their brand strategies in order to better communicate the brand’s identity to the consumers as well as to promote the products more effectively with an interesting abstract idea (see Figure 6). Also here, the two-directional arrow between the circles of the brand and the environment influence each other. However, a few Finnish apparel brands communicate their company’s mission rather than a story, because an imagined story would be in contradict with the brand’s identity. The founding purpose of the company might be the reason why differences occur in story-telling, since both brand stories and stories with a mission, were reported from both the smaller and bigger Finnish apparel brands.

According to Lille’s (2010, p.11) research results, one of the common obstacles in the Finnish apparel and textile industry is that it is too product-oriented. When the core idea of the business was
discussed with the Finnish apparel brand managers, a few of them perceived that the product is in the core and a lot of time and resources are used for that. Other participants discussed the importance of the brand and one participant even said that the company was used to be very product-oriented but nowadays they have changed to think that a consumer is in the center of everything rather than the product. Certainly, it is important to focus on producing a good quality product because without a product there cannot be a brand either. However, in today’s market environment, where the focus has shifted from what the product is to what the product represents (Gad and Heinämäki, 2001, p.51), it is essential to focus on communicating the added value and the brand meanings more efficiently to the consumers. Due to this change of focus in branding environment, this topic can be seen on Figure 6 with the name of “Brand- vs. product-centric” and in this case, the circles of the brand and the environment yet influence each other.

**The central work tasks of Finnish apparel brand managers**

The second research question was “What are Finnish apparel brand managers’ central work tasks when managing a Finnish apparel brand?”. When the Finnish apparel brand managers’ work tasks were investigated in more detail, it can be stated that similarities and differences were found among the participants as well as regarding the findings that have been generally recognized in the existing literature (Panigyrakis and Veloutsou, 1999; Veloutsou, 2002; Herstein and Zvilling, 2011; Brexendorf and Daecke, 2012; Pouliis, Panigyrakis and Panos Panopoulos, 2013; Beverland, Wilner and Micheli, 2015; Wigley, Larsen and Nobbs, 2013). According to the Finnish apparel brand managers, their central work tasks when managing an apparel brand are the tasks listed below. All the mentioned work tasks are carried out in order to maintain and manage the brand so that the brand is identifiable and distinct from the competitors’ brands. Due to this, the two-directional arrow between the circles of the brand manager’s work tasks and the brand in the complemented model (see Figure 6) is presented since these issues influence each other. The work tasks can be seen on Figure 6, when looking at the circle of brand manager’s work tasks:

- Implementing, maintaining and coordinating brand-related issues
- Keeping the brand relevant
- Creating and maintaining the visual identity of the brand and the tone of voice
- Making decisions and creating the brand together with the team
- Controlling and creating content for promotional mix elements
- Analyzing the brand performance and
- Considering the consumers.

When looking at the Finnish apparel brand managers’ answers concerning their central work tasks, some differences can be noticed. However, the above mentioned work tasks are commonly agreed by all of them according to collected data. The main reason for having a bit different job description between Finnish apparel brand managers can be because of the size of the company, which has an influence on their areas of responsibilities. For instance, it was noticed that the Finnish apparel brand managers, who work in smaller size companies, also have responsibilities related to sales or design. Besides planning, implementing and maintaining the brand and its message, they also participate more on different execution processes that are related to the brand. Finnish apparel brand
managers, who work within bigger size companies, do not participate that much on the actual execution processes because these work tasks are delegated to someone else in the company.

When looking at the differences between the Finnish apparel brand managers work tasks and the work tasks of brand managers that have been stated according to the other scholars (Panigyrakis and Veloutsou, 1999; Veloutsou, 2002; Herstein and Zvilling, 2011), the biggest differences are when it comes to the following work tasks: analyzing the brand performance, keeping the brand relevant and considering the consumers. All of the other scholars highlighted the importance of analyzing the market, but, rather than analyzing the market, the Finnish apparel brand managers analyze the brand performance, since only one participant emphasized that it is her work task to know what happens in the market and how each market works where the brand is present. However, it is important to analyze the market, where the brand is present, in order to better adapt to the changes in the market as well as not losing the touch to the consumers.

However, previous studies focusing purely on brand managers’ work tasks did not discuss the issues related to keeping the relevance of the brand. Also, regarding the task of considering the consumers, there were no mentions about creating brand experiences to the consumers either. These two work tasks were seen important among Finnish apparel brand managers. Also, digitalization has changed the branding environment a lot (Fisher-Buttinger and Vallaster, 2008, p.x) and this issue was not considered in the previous studies. However, Finnish apparel brand managers stated that digitalization has to be considered in branding because today’s consumers are attached to it and hence, the brands also have to adapt in to it. Due to digitalization, new touchpoints of a brand have emerged like different social media channels and online stores and hence, brand managers also have to consider these issues when creating and implementing the brand’s strategy in order to ensure consistent performance of the brand. Because of the fact that digitalization has an important role in branding for Finnish apparel brand managers, it is presented in the complemented model (see Figure 6) and it has an influence on both circles of the brand and the brand manager’s work tasks.

Challenges of Finnish apparel brand managers when managing an apparel brand

The third and the last research question was “How do Finnish apparel brand managers perceive the key challenges they face when managing an apparel brand?”. When discussing with the Finnish apparel brand managers, two main challenges were identified. The first challenge is related to the work task of implementing, maintaining and coordinating brand-related issues and that is why this work task inside the circle of brand managers’ work tasks in Figure 6 is highlighted with red color. This issue is a challenge because the companies grow and more people are involved for establishing the brand and therefore, it is challenging to monitor that the brand and especially its identity are presented consistently through the whole supply chain, which have an impact on how the brand will be perceived by the consumers and hence, can influence the brand image. All of the Finnish apparel brand managers said that the key for this challenge is consistency and clarity in brand communication.

The other challenge is related to the communicational issues of the brand regarding how to cost effectively reach consumers that are scattered in a large area geographically as well as how to
penetrate the brand and its brand message on different social media channels. These challenges are related to the work task of controlling and creating content for the promotional mix elements and due to this, this work task inside the circle of brand manager’s work tasks in Figure 6 is also highlighted with color red. The first issue was perceived as a challenge as the marketing budgets are rather limited and it would be essential to be visible in the eyes of consumers’ in order to gain more brand awareness. In order to overcome this issue, the Finnish apparel brand managers use social media to cost efficiently reach consumers as according to them, their target groups belong to the generation who uses digital devices and are present on social media channels. The second issue was perceived as a challenge as today, the brand presence in social media is absolute and therefore, the competition regarding gaining consumers’ attention is high and hence, it can be hard to penetrate the brand’s message on different social media channels. In order to overcome this challenge, the Finnish apparel brand managers stated that the work around the brand has to be consistent, persistent and creative.
6 Conclusion

This chapter presents the conclusions of the research. Also, practical implications are presented in order to contribute to the field that has been investigated. Moreover, research limitations are considered and future research suggestions are proposed.

In order to discover and expand knowledge on how Finnish apparel brand managers perform branding five Finnish apparel brand managers were interviewed. The concept of branding was established through combining the concepts of the brand, the brand manager’s work tasks and the environment of branding, and all of these concepts influence each other. Finnish apparel brand managers perceive an apparel brand from slightly different angles. Finnish apparel brand managers attach the following characteristics to their managed brands: Finnishness, sustainability and storytelling, and these characteristics can be viewed as part of the identity of the brand as well as to help distinguish the brand from competitors. All of the Finnish apparel brand managers focus on creating and maintaining an identity for a trademark or products that are offered and ensuring consistency and clarity in all actions around the managed brand.

The Finnish apparel brand managers are maintaining the Finnish apparel brands by carrying out several work tasks that revolve around the brand. The work tasks include (1) implementing, maintaining and coordinating brand-related issues, (2) keeping the brand relevant, (3), creating and maintaining the visual identity of the brand and the tone of voice, (4) making decisions and creating the brand together with the team, (5) controlling and creating content for promotional mix elements, (6) analyzing the brand performance and (7) considering the consumers. Moreover, the findings of this study regarding the work tasks of Finnish apparel brand managers seem to support the results of other scholars, who have investigated the issue of brand managers’ work tasks in other industries.

Furthermore, Finnish apparel brand managers take the branding environment into consideration while managing a Finnish apparel brand. For instance, sustainability is closely related to the brands’ identities, the opportunities of digitalization like website and social media channels are harnessed in order to better engage with the consumers and cost-efficiently communicate the brand’s message to the consumers all over the world. Also, some of the Finnish apparel brand managers put focus on story-telling differentiating the brand from the competitors. The Finnish apparel brand managers perceive that the key challenges they face during maintaining a Finnish apparel brand are related to implementation of the brand strategy and to communicational issues of the brand message, because there are many people that can have an impact on how the identity of the brand and the brand values are presented to consumers, which in turn can influence on the brand image.

6.1 Practical implications of the research

Regarding the practical implications of this thesis, the first practical implication is the understanding of branding from a broad perspective and analyzing the managed brand as an integral
part of the ever changing branding environment. As the branding environment is evolving constantly, it is important to consider the changes in order to stay in the markets that are highly competed due to the great amount of actors in the field. The main changes in the branding environment are related to the issues of digitalization, sustainability and the importance of the brand.

The second implication is the understanding of establishing a consistent brand strategy. When the brand strategy is clearly defined, it is easier for all employees in the company to understand what the brand stands for and how the brand message is communicated to consumers. Also, the chosen brand strategy, including for instance the brand’s visual identity, needs to be consistent to ensure that the brand is presented coherently, the brand image perceived by the consumers and the brand’s recognizability remains the same on all touchpoints and platforms, where the brand is exposed to the consumers. Furthermore, the brand strategy needs to be considered and monitored from time to time whether the chosen strategy, which is created around the brand identity for the brand, is still relevant and if it serves the brand in a right way.

The third practical implication is the understanding of the consumers. It is important to put consumers in the middle of branding and to understand their needs and wants in order to offer tempting images and experiences of the product or service so that the consumers would experience that they get a special added value. When time is used for investigating the consumers and the world where they live in, it is easier to communicate the brand’s identity and create brand experiences for them, which will help to gain the consumers loyalty in the highly competed markets of apparel brands.

6.2 Research limitations and future research

This research has its limitations like any other study. However, the limitations establish interesting possibilities for future research. Due to time limitations, this thesis focused only on one country, specifically Finland. Further research including other countries and larger sample size are suggested in order to be able to conduct a comparative study between apparel brand managers from different countries and also to be able to make generalizations from the study results. Moreover, this research concentrated on apparel brand managers, who work with premium brands, but when talking about apparel brands, there are three other categories: designer brands, luxury brands and mass-market brands. It would be interesting to compare how branding is performed among apparel brand managers, who are managing the other categories of apparel brands.

When considering the qualitative techniques that were employed in this study, in the future research it would be interesting to utilize other qualitative techniques, such as observations or focus groups, and execute the research as a longitudinal study, which enables studying the apparel brand managers for a longer period of time. By doing this, more in-depth knowledge and detailed information about apparel brand managers’ qualifications and capabilities could be gained for providing better brand management in the upcoming decades.
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Appendices

APPENDIX 1: Informed consent form for the interviewees

I want to thank you, for participating to this Study and taking time from your busy schedule. I, Heli Hoivanen, will conduct interviews, which is part of my Master’s thesis. The Master’s thesis is part of my studies in The Swedish School of Textiles/The University of Borås and it investigates branding among Finnish apparel brand managers.

The purpose of this Study is to discover and expand knowledge on how Finnish apparel brand managers currently perform branding when managing a Finnish apparel brand.

I would like you to read carefully the below information concerning the participation for this Study. If you have any questions related to this Study, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Request for informed consent:

- I understand that my participation in this Study is voluntary. I understand that I may withdraw from this Study at any time without any consequences. Also, I understand that my data will not be used if I withdraw from this Study.

- I acknowledge that I have been given an opportunity to ask questions related to this Study.

- I understand that when I am taking part in this Study I will be interviewed by the researcher who is involved in this Study. I also understand that I have the right to refuse to answer any questions I do not feel comfortable with.

- I understand that the interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed for research purposes. I also understand that the interview transcript will be stored securely by the researcher and not put in any archive for three years before it is destroyed.

- I understand that the data will be anonymized and my confidentiality as a participant in this Study will remain secure. I understand that the researcher will not reveal any of my personal details, such as name and the company name I am working for.

- I understand that my words may be quoted in this Study, but all my individual responses will be anonymized.

- I understand that the gathered data will not be revealed or shared with any third parties.

- I understand that there is an opportunity for me to receive a copy from the final Master’s thesis’ report.

By signing this form I want to confirm my voluntary participation for this Study and also agree that I have read and understood all the information provided to me. I am also aware that I will get a copy of this participation consent form to myself and the researcher will also get one for her records.

Name of Participant: ___________________________ Name of Researcher: ___________________________
Signature: ___________________________ Signature: ___________________________
Date: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________
For further information, please contact: Heli Hoivanen (researcher’s contact information)
APPENDIX 2: Interview guide  (The original interview guide is translated from Finnish.)

Thank you for participating to this study. I want you to know that the interview is constructed around few themes and broader questions will be asked. I want to emphasize that the questions, which are presented on this form work only as a frame for the interview and thus, I would like you to feel free to talk about anything related to the themes. I also want to stress the fact that the interview is kept anonymous.

Background information:

- How many years you have worked in the apparel/textile industry?
- What is you title in the company where you work?
- How many years you have been employed in the company?
- Could you briefly tell me about your career within the apparel/textile industry?

General understanding of an apparel/fashion brand:

- What does an apparel/fashion brand mean to you?
- What builds up an apparel/fashion brand?
- What do you think consumers are looking for in apparel/fashion brands in general?
- What do you think it requires to establish and maintain a successful fashion brand?
- How would you describe the brand you are managing?
- What are the characteristics that make your own brand distinctive?

Apparel brand manager and the apparel/fashion brand:

- What does branding mean to you?
- What do you think about Finnish apparel/fashion branding?
- What is your role in the branding process of your brand?
- How do you consider consumers in branding?
- What kinds of challenges do you face in branding?
- What kinds of investments you make to ensure, maintain and protect the brand over time?

(There are more questions on the next page.)
• How do you see the growing speed of digitalization affecting to branding?
• How much do you work with brand’s intangible elements like brand identity, image and personality?
• How much do you work with brand’s tangible elements such as brand name, logo, slogans and packaging?
• How do you see your role when it comes to managing your brand with internal and external stakeholders?
• What is your task when it comes to communicating your brand to consumers?
• In what ways do you track your brand’s value and its development?
• How would you sum up the Finnish apparel/fashion brand manager’s job description?
• What is the most exciting thing about your job?