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POST-PANDEMIC MARKETING STRATEGIES

Assessing Changes in the Use of Print and Digital Marketing Influenced by COVID-19 Pandemic Era

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Tämä laadullinen tutkimus arvioi markkinoinnin strategista päätöksentekoa, liittyen perinteiseen painettuun ja modernimpaan digitaaliseen markkinointiin. Tutkimus toteutettiin Pohjanmaan alueella, kaupan, palveluiden, matkailun ja julkishallinnon toimialoilla toimivissa yrityksissä. Oikean tasapainon löytäminen analogiselle ja digitaaliselle markkinoinnille, yhdistäen fyysisiä ja digitaalisia markkinointituotteita on tärkeää yrityksen liiketoiminnalle. Samalla tulisi huolehtia merkityksellisyydestä kohderyhmille ja asiakkaille. Markkinointibudjetit tulee suunnitella varmistuen kannattavuus ja sijoitetun pääoman tuotto.

Tämän tutkimuksen tulokset vahvistavat hypoteesin, että digitalisaatio yrityksissä ja niiden markkinoinnissa, kiihtyi pandemian aikana. Uudet, hyväksi koetut menetelmät jäivät pysyviksi käytänteiksi yrityksen asiantuntijuuden lisääntyessä markkinoinnin digitaaliseen ekosysteemiin liittyen. Integroitu markkinointiviestintä esittelee menetelmiä, joiden avulla yritykset voivat navigoida modernissa markkinoinnin ja liiketoiminnan ympäristössä.

Vastuullisuus ja digitalisaatio ovat merkittäviä avaintekijöitä yrityksen markkinoinnin suunnittelussa ja päätöksenteossa. Vastuullisuus on tutkimukseen haastatelluissa yrityksissä normi ja kaikki yrityksen liiketoimintaan ja markkinointiin liittyvien päätösten tulee täyttää vastuullisuuden asettamat kriteerit. Markkinointiympäristö jatkaa evoluutiotaan ja tarjolla olevat monimuotoiset vaihtoehdot vaativat kyvykkyyksiä, asiantuntemusta ja resursseja tulevaisuudessa. Printin ja digitaalisen markkinoinnin välinen suhde jatkaa muuttumistaan. Perinteisellä printillä on edelleen kysyntää markkinoinnissa, mutta uusien käyttötapojen kehittäminen vaatii vuorovaikutteista asiakassuhdetta markkinointiostajan ja palveluiden tarjoajan välillä.

ABSTRACT

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This qualitative research assesses the strategic marketing decision-making, regarding the use of printed and digital marketing. The research is conducted in Ostrobothnia and concentrates on companies operating in retail, service, travel and public sector. Finding the right balance for offline and online marketing, combining physical and digital marketing products, while being relevant for target audiences and customers, is essential for organizations. Marketing budgets must be planned keeping profitability and return-on-invest in mind.

The research results confirm the hypothesis, that digitalization was accelerated in business and marketing operations during the pandemic, and new best practices became permanent after companies gained more expertise and experience in a more digital marketing ecosystem. Integrated marketing communications introduces methods for companies to navigate in the modern marketing and business environment.

Sustainability and digitalization are the main key factors in the marketing planning and decision making. Sustainability is a norm in the researched companies and all business and marketing decisions must meet the required standards. The marketing environment continues to evolve and complexity of options available require capabilities, expertise and resources in the future. The relation between print and digital marketing keeps changing. Traditional printing still has a role in marketing but developing new methods of use require communicative customer relationship between marketing buyers and production providers.

Keywords digital marketing, sustainability, printing, measurable, customer relationship

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ABBREVIATIONS

AI	Artificial intelligence
AR	Augmented reality
AKKE	Alueiden kestävän kasvun ja elinvoiman tukeminen (Translation from Finnish language: Supporting sustainable growth and vitality of regions)
COVID-19	Disease that caused a global pandemic
CVCI	Customer-value-chain-involvement
FPIF	Federation of the Printing Industry in Finland
Gen X	Generation born years 1965-1980
Gen Y	Generation born years 1981-1996
Gen Z	Generation born years 1997-2010
Gen Alpha	Generation born years 2011-2024
IAB	Interactive advertising bureau
IoT	Internet of things
IT	Information technology
IMC	Integrated marketing communication
QR-code	Quick response-code
ROI	Return on invest

SC	Spacing computing
SEM	Search engine marketing
SME	Small and medium size enterprise
SMM	Social media marketing
TV	Television
VOC	Voice of customer
VR	Virtual reality
WHO	World Health Organization
4P	Product, price, place, promotion

1 INTRODUCTION

This thesis concentrates on the ongoing discussion between traditional print marketing and the growing amount of digital marketing and the strategic decision making related to their use in organizations in the Ostrobothnia area. The discussion is a key issue among marketing professionals and decision makers as well as marketing production companies, such as printing companies and digital marketing solution providers. To balance the needed resources in organizations working in planning and producing marketing operations, it is important to understand the true marketing needs, especially after global market crisis situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic rapidly changed the way marketers could reach and serve their target groups and customers during the pandemic starting from year 2020 throughout the year 2022. The pandemic period also changed the marketing supply chain operations globally. The hypothesis of this research is, that after the pandemic forced companies to test new ways of marketing operations in a rapid pace, the transformation back to the pre-pandemic marketing methods has not been as rapid will transform back at all. To continue this hypothesis, the changes made in marketing made due to the pandemic, may have become normal operations and there might not be a return to traditional marketing production methods in the same volume as before. Lark and Bonfner describe that "the pandemic's initial impact has changed where we work and how we collaborate and communicate, blurring the lines between home and workplace" (Lark & Bonfner, 2023.) This has an effect in both business-to-business and business-to-customer operations and therefore marketing operations as well. A recent, post-pandemic thesis written about the Vaasa region by Nurmi in 2024, "Social media marketing in small and medium enterprises in Vaasa" states that SME's in the Vaasa area are developing their presence particularly in social media as part of their marketing strategy." (Nurmi, 2024). As SME's develop and grow their

digital presence in their target audiences, the assumption in this research is that marketing budgets have and will be adjusted between printed and digital media solutions.

Post-pandemic marketing strategies assumably include more sustainability issues as well as risen costs in several fields of the marketing supply chain and its operations, than pre-pandemic. Sustainability issues have become a norm in organizations, and the pandemic period has forced companies to evaluate cost and sustainability issues as part of their business operations, as all operational activities, processes and costs have been forced to monitor carefully in the crisis caused by the pandemic. Research about strategic sustainability orientation influence on organizational resilience by Ahmic in 2022, revealed that "strategic sustainability orientation significantly and positively influences organizations resilience and its three sub-components: anticipation, coping and adaptation capabilities" (Ahmic, 2022, p.169).

In addition to forced business operation changes, caused by government restrictions and regulations, consumer behaviour and customer journeys have changed due to COVID-19. There are changes in the society and working environments after the pandemic, as people still work remotely outside offices as companies balance between remote and hybrid working post-pandemic. Taking these societal factors into notice is essential when approaching the research subject of post-pandemic marketing.

In a previous study, in a near geographical location of Ostrobothnia, a study *Success, strategies and future of firms in South Ostrobothnia during COVID-19*, was published in 2022. The study raises the importance of recognizing the need of development of specific expertise and knowledge of marketing in businesses. The study was part of a *Business Models After COVID-19 in South Ostrobothnia*-project. The study states that there is a need for companies to gain and have expertise in digital marketing communication as part of their growth strategies. More than half of the companies in the study already had strong digital orientation.

Still, small companies lacked resources and skills for digital operations (Joensuu-Salo et al., 2022).

This research of assessing post-pandemic marketing strategies, concentrating on the print and digital media relation in the Ostrobothnia area is continuing previous research to gain more understanding of the marketing decision-making factors. This research aims to discover especially how printed marketing is seen in the marketing and media mix after the pandemic, compared, or combined with the growing digital marketing needs.

Digitalization of the hospitality industry in the Ostrobothnia, Kvarken region has been researched by the Destination Kvarken program in cooperation with Hanken Svenska Handelshögskola. In the research it is stated that digitalization provides a way to better "...automate and enhance their offered services in order to smoothen the processes and create new value for both the companies and its customers" (Latvasalo & Björk, 2019). Looking at the timeline of the study in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the process of digitalization has been strongly risen, but not fully implemented in the companies.

This qualitative research studied if and how the pandemic was a driving force in forming new ways of implementing marketing operations, not only during the exceptional pandemic time but possibly permanently. It also aimed to discover what are the main elements and reasons in the marketing decision making process, when deciding between printed or digital marketing or they combined. To receive first-hand information the research data was collected by in-person interviews of business and marketing decision makers in the Ostrobothnia area. The interviews were conducted as semi-constructed interviews and analysis was formed after thematic coding of the interview recordings and transcriptions.

Though statistics present that printing as an industry is facing challenges, there still is need for physical printed materials (Federation of

the Printing Industry in Finland, 2023). This research investigated opportunities where printing can differentiate itself from digital solutions, such as through creative design, luxury materials, and the psychological impact of physical engagement with printed content. Even location or target group (i.e. age groups) might have an impact on whether to use print or digital end products in marketing.

The study discussed how digitalization has opened doors to more sustainable practices in the print industry, such as reducing waste, implementing on-demand printing, and using eco-friendly inks and substrates. It will also explore how these advancements are marketed to eco-conscious consumers and how print companies are integrating these values into their branding efforts.

2 LITERATURE VIEW

This literature review presents the existing literature of the research subject. Webster & Watson describe that “an effective and well-conducted literature review as a research method creates a firm foundation for advancing knowledge and facilitating theory development.” (Webster & Watson, 2002). The literature view is divided into parts according to the research area, adding the principal explanations of the marketing industry evolution, to understand the general marketing development stage in today’s marketing. Marketing is a complex and multidimensional concept, and this literature view concentrates on the elements which describe the time and capability environment of print and digital marketing. This literature view seeks to find available research which reflect the marketing methods and the decision-making factors, to have context and theoretical framework for preparing and conducting the interviews in this research.

2.1 Marketing and media mix

This chapter with its subchapters explains the elements within and surrounding the marketing and media mix, which need to be considered in the strategic marketing decision making. The basics is explained to recognize the context in which the post-pandemic marketing decision makers operate in. The complexity is in the changing business environment where these elements are connected to through various marketing operations. Kotler and Armstrong have defined marketing mix as “set of tactical marketing tools that the firm blends to produce the response it wants in the target market”. (Kotler & Armstrong, 2016)

2.1.1 Evolution of principals of marketing

The concept of marketing has changed and developed during the years. One of the most known marketing researchers, Philip Kotler describes the evolution of marketing in the book *Marketing 5.0*. through different

generations, as these generations are all targeted by marketers, which makes it more complex to reach them. Kotler writes, that “despite understanding the distinctive needs of different generations, most companies are not well-positioned to serve all of them” (Kotler, 2023, chapter 2). The five generations living during this same era are Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y, Generation Z, and Generation Alpha. The named generations are presented in the timeline of the birthyears of each generation. The generations are explained as follows. Baby Boomers were born in 1946 to 1964, generation X were born between years 1965 to 1980, generation Y present birthyears 1981 to 1996. The final two named generations are generation Z, which describes those who were born between years 1997 and 2010 and finally generation Alpha is the term used for those who are born years 2011 and 2024. Kotler describes the gaps between these named generations in the marketing planning and implementing, which leads the organizations to find new ways in planning marketing operations and directing marketing processes. (Kotler, 2023).

The basics of marketing, printing, the marketing mix and marketing strategy decision making process is explained through literature that has existed for a longer time. The concept of digitalization has been researched in more recent studies and can be explained through a continuous developing perspective.

Digitalization in marketing is described as “a process of moving a business model that was originally used manually toward digital” (Rahman, 2023). Digitalization enables valuable data collection and analytics. Marketing analytics can provide valuable insights into customer preferences and trends (Keer, 2020). As digitalization offers new tools and dimensions in marketing operations, the analytics of the operations also becomes deeper in detail. The qualities of the developed digital tools and the possibilities of integrations of the ecosystems they provide, marketing analytics results can be utilized in the marketing decision-making process.

Digital marketing can be categorized into six main categories according to Benyon and presented by Brown & Thompson. The categories are digital advertising, content marketing, email marketing, marketing automation, search engine marketing (SEM) and social media marketing (SMM). (Brown & Thompson, 2022; Benyon, 2019).

The importance of measurement has been recognized in research. According to Verhoef & Leeflang, if managers could measure marketing productivity, the marketing productivity could be increased (Verhoef & Leeflang, 2009). Measurable marketing provides tools for development and management.

Scott describes that in the past, traditional advertising, such as newspapers, magazines, radio, television and printed direct mail were the media tools available. Using these media don't allow personal targeting unless using very difficult, expensive ways. The internet provides more efficient, targeting options compared to traditional advertising methods that require large marketing budgets. Adding internet's interaction possibilities compared to one-way, interrupting traditional advertising, web marketing can serve right content to the right person, at the right place, at the right time. (Scott, 2020).

Hamel recommends businesses in his *Leading revolution* book, that when planning for the future, there is a need "to look where no-one else is looking at." Hamel states that "sometimes creating proprietary foresight is just a matter of slogging through more data." (Hamel, 2000. p129). The concept of reinventing an industry is described in this Harvard Business School publication, where in one of his arguments, Hamel further encourages to always dig deeper into the data and ask further questions, why and what. Creating a data-oriented focus will allow to understand the meanings behind the data and provide further inputs for development processes as details are revealed through the data and its deep analysis.

2.1.2 Integrated marketing communications

Integrated marketing communications (IMC) is an approach in marketing that includes several marketing channels and methods. Naik and Peters describe integrated marketing and its effectiveness which is based on a synergy of marketing activities, where effectiveness is high when each activity is succeeded. The synergy of marketing activities can be examined through four areas, combining different media types, scheduling the timing of each media activity, using design that have a similar form and integrating the used content in different channels into a mutual plan to maintain the synergy. (Naik & Peters, 2015).

The budget allocation of the marketing budget needs to be in synergy as well when IMC is planned. It has been discovered in research in the subject that offline media and online media combined can result in decrease in Offline media budget and online media budget can be increased and added reach further achieved. The combination of offline media, such as TV and print and online media, such as internet advertising and direct emailing, are called cross media. The synergy of cross media has proven advantages and budget planning can be supported with calculations utilizing specific mathematical formulas. (Naik & Peters, 2015). Social media has been growing, and new channels have been formed after Naik and Peters' study, but social media can be linked into the cross-media synergy to broaden the integrated marketing communication channels and methods to reach target audiences.

McDonald et al., emphasize that "the aim of integrated marketing communications is to combine our communications efforts so that customers feel that they have a single, consistent conversation with the firm, helping both parties to achieve their objectives." (McDonald et al., 2024).

Percy provides a strategic and systematic approach to the IMC. He presents a model where communication flows are systematic regardless of the media. When developing an effective IMC plan, the focus at first is the review of the marketing plan. Any conditions in the market noticed

in the review phase should be investigated very closely. Cultural aspects, strength and weaknesses of the advertising and promotion mix, are elements that build the brand when balanced in a suitable way. The target audience needs to be selected, and research must be made concerning customers decision-making paths. This will help to discover how the marketing communications process is working in each decision-making stage. Finally, when the plan is finalized, the manager should make decisions on the budget allocation and choose the suitable media from available options. Choosing and naming primary and secondary media before implementing the plan, is the final stage of the planning process. Tracking the campaigns, collecting data and analysing them to recognize the effectiveness of the plan will act as a base for the following continuous planning and implementation. (Percy, 2023).

2.1.3 Value chain and modern marketing strategies

In the concept of value chain as a framework in identifying international competitive advantage, Hollensen presents in his Global Marketing literature, that value chain activities are systematically linked in the operations throughout an organization's infrastructure. Originally presented by Michael Porter, the value chain activities are a combination of support activities, such as human resource management, technology development, procurement, which are streamed with primary activities. The primary activities include inbound logistics, operations, outbound logistics, marketing and sales and service. (Porter, 1998).

Kotler presents the term megamarketing and five tech elements that enable the megamarketing concept. The elements are Internet of Things (IoT), Artificial Intelligence (AI), Spacing Computing (SC), Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) and Blockchain, a database that records data across multiple computers. (Kotler et al., 2023). Utilizing these technical elements require technology capabilities and agile testing to receive results that drive business further in a profitable and sustainable way.

Internet of Things (IoT) is a concept of interconnectivity, which combines physical elements and thing to the internet. As Kotler describes, IoT “presents an opportunity for marketers to create innovative marketing campaigns that seamlessly integrate online and offline elements” (Kotler et al., 2023). Connecting traditional offline spaces of offline marketing elements, such as printed material, there can be a connection between print and digital marketing in a measurable way. The advantage of IoT is that data can be collected and used in analysing customer behaviour.

Another additional term of marketing, metaverse marketing, according to Kotler et al., is not meant to replace traditional marketing, but to add to the existing marketing methods. Kotler et al describe that “as a result, they seamlessly integrate their metaverse initiatives into their existing marketing strategies, ensuring the sustainability in their metaverse marketing efforts”. Planning the metaverse marketing requires understanding customer motivations in the metaverse, design in how to participate in the metaverse and thirdly, selecting the most suitable implementation ways. (Kotler et al., 2023).

Different generations navigate in and between the metaverse in a different way, which is important for marketers to identify and to understand. As an example, Generation Y and Generation Alpha, according to Kotler et al., are not as receptive to traditional advertising, meaning logo placement and product advertisement in virtual worlds. (Kotler et al., 2023). New generations are reachable in other than traditional offline formats, although when visiting physical places, such as stores, they can be reached through instore marketing.

Dahlén reminds that the strongest brands have a strong presence in visibility, also known as salience. Those brands which are seen in as many situations as possible have strong brand salience. Strong brand salience results in strong presentation in people’s minds. A well seen brand is the one that comes first into people’s minds. (Dahlén, 2006).

Supporting this view, an article by Godfrey, Seiders & Voss (2012) reminds, that “few marketers would limit themselves to a single communication channel, unless they were forced to do so.” In their article, a multichannel relationship communication and personalized messages to existing customers, is described as a part of a broad relationship marketing strategy.

In the beginning of the millennium, Mascarehas, Kesavan and Bernacchi describe in a value-chain book edited by Pita, et al., that any industry, almost all companies are functioning in faster developing business environments and at risk more than ever. Even in the beginning of the millennium, the researchers have recognized that the main capability of a company is “its ability to continually redesign its value chain and to reshuffle its structural, technological, financial and human assets in order to achieve maximum competitive advantage.” (Pita et al., 2004). Maintaining focus on a company’s core strategic planning and implementation has been relevant throughout the evolution of digitalization. In their article, the suggestion is that managers should involve customers at all stages of the value chain. This model created in their study, is called Customer-value-chain-involvement (CVCI). The CVCI model enables creating an ongoing continuous customer feedback loop, which can result in deep and continuous loyal customer relationships. To succeed in the operation model, it is important that the managerial level is committed into the process and analysing the results on a regular basis. (Pita et al., 2004).

2.2 The marketing business environment

A changing business environment can be viewed under the term market dynamics. According to Banton (2024) “Market dynamics refer to the forces, patterns and behaviors that shape the interactions between producers, consumers, and other stakeholders in an economic system.” This system is a complex interactive mechanism that can rapidly change

and be affected in a crisis or other change in the business or societal environment. The following factors are part of the system and are reviewed in the following subchapters.

2.2.1 Global COVID-19 pandemic driving change in marketing

COVID-19 was a global pandemic in 2020-2022, according to the World Health Organization (World Health Organization, 2025). In this research, COVID-19 is reviewed as an era that had an impact in changing global business operations in an unseen way. This research concentrates on the time after the pandemic was declared to be over by the World Health Organization and in an international business perspective rather than going into detail of what scientific or biological health issues COVID is related to. The understanding of the health concept of COVID-19 is not in the scope of this research as it concentrates on the marketing business perspective, and more precisely marketing decisions and the reasons behind those decisions after the pandemic. The pandemic was a global situation which forced companies and organizations to change their operations rapidly and this study aims to find out if COVID-19 period forced digitalization and lead to permanent changes and if it formed new practices in marketing.

As this research concentrates on the time after COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to understand and reflect to the changes compared to the pre-pandemic era and situation before year 2020. There are media industry annual reports from before and after year 2020 that will be reviewed and presented to make a comparison and to view changes in marketing operations. There are several research and data providers that are reviewed by companies and stakeholders operating in marketing and having to make decisions about the marketing strategies and marketing budget. To understand how the print and digital media has and is changing in Finland and globally after the pandemic, a selection of a variety of data has been studied and examined. Some key data providers and researchers are introduced in this research.

According to studies after the pandemic, research states that micro, small and medium sized organizations are transitioning to digital marketing to achieve and maintain competitiveness in their market, especially after the pandemic (Rahman et al.,2023). The research of Rahman et al. revealed that “there is a need for innovation efforts from related parties so that post-pandemic buying and selling process goes according to expectations.” In addition, there was a problem identified that the cost of digitalization leads to prefer traditional marketing, which however was not preferred by the target groups.

In a global aspect, the effect of the pandemic in driving digitalization has been studied in the recent years, following the COVID-19 pandemic. As stated in research conducted in Malaysia, “the importance of digitalization was amplified during COVID-19 pandemic, accelerating the digital transformation process for many nations.” Continuing the statement, it is described, that “Fourth Industrial Revolution (IR4.0) led this process, facilitating the adaptation of new technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), cloud, and big data in all aspects of our lives.” (Rasiah et al., 2023).

The research by Basu et al. discusses that “The growing centrality of customer psychology and decision-making in the application of marketing analytics underscores the need for businesses to adopt a more customer-centric approach, tailoring their strategies to the intricate nuances of modern consumer behaviour.” In the study, it was acknowledged that after the COVID-10 pandemic, there was a surge in the adaptation of data-driven business decision-making process (Basu et al., 2023). As the customer expectations have risen in competitive business environments, the need for customer understanding and evolving trends within the target audience, is an asset for marketing decision makers and managers operating in the marketing decision-making process.

Ahmic et al. discovered four stakeholder managerial concerns during the COVID-19. The first concern was workers suddenly working from home

or in hybrid mode. The second concern was security and health related, such as how to create a safe shopping environment for customers. The third concern discovered were value chain related, such as logistics, the termination of contracts by significant customers and the distance from the production sites compared to the delivery destination. The final and fourth concern areas during the COVID-19 were related to new communication and connection ways, depending on the capabilities of IT, digital platforms and stakeholders' preparedness to operate in these new ways. (Ahmic et al., 2021). As a global benchmark from Europe, Bosnia and Herzegovina, statistically the year 2020 was most effected in export, industrial production and tourism. The following year 2021 improvements in these areas of operations were made but inflation growth made it more challenging to bounce back. (Agency for Statistics – BHAS, 2022).

Lark & Bonfrer discuss in their article "Hybrid marketing is here to stay: preparing for the marketing operation environment", how not only the way workers collaborated and communicated in the work places remotely during COVID-19, but also the marketers, consumers and businesses were in a situation where the way they used to operate was changed to a new way (Lark & Bonfrer, 2022). The way customers interact with businesses changed due to the pandemic and new ways needed to be service designed, developed and operated in agile ways. The findings Lark & Bonfrer found was that as digital-only experiences were presented to consumers during COVID-19, such as online grocery shopping to other digital interactions, the preferences and behaviours have changed so that there are new standards for customer experiences in the entire lifecycle of the buying process (Lark & Bonfrer, 2022). This finding will give a guideline for all marketers, that a change has happened and there is a need to focus on the development in the industry, to stay aware of the most suitable ways to operate in the still evolving business environment.

2.2.2 Post pandemic development needs of businesses in South Ostrobothnia

Based on results of research called "Success, strategies and future plans of firms in South Ostrobothnia", companies had managed to maintain or grow their market position during the pandemic (Joensuu-Salo et al., 2022). In the research, which was part of a regional council-funded project AKKE, the aim was to identify changes and future needs of business models shaped by the pandemic. It was discovered that companies had a grown need for coaching and training concerning digital operations. Participants in the study had mentioned in open questions that the influence of social media channels became more effective in their marketing and digitalization became more important in business operations in a larger perspective. Companies had to centralize and concentrate on new marketing channels, some renewing their brand at the same time. An interesting find is, that companies, who's business had declined, aimed growth with similar methods than those companies who's branch had survived well and succeeded in the market. (Joensuu-Salo et al., 2022).

According to the results of the South Ostrobothnia AKKE-research, the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on which type of growth strategies companies see in their future. There were geographical differences in the results. The city areas were more concentrated into finding new customers from the existing markets, and rural areas were creating and developing new products and services for new markets. Those companies who aimed to grow defined themselves as more digital oriented than those who were not aiming at growth. Companies operating in a lower succeeding branch had lower digital orientation. When asked more specific questions related to which area of business operations there was a need for more expertise, the highest rate was the need for more expertise in digital marketing related skills, and the second highest was general marketing related skills and expertise. (Joensuu-Salo et al.,

2022). The results show a relation with marketing strategies, companies' growth aims, and choosing the most effective tools and processes for marketing operations. The marketing- and media-mix will be more digital as companies gain new digital skills and capabilities and start operating more digitally to reach their growth aims.

The most popular growth strategy in the South Ostrobothnia research was to grow with existing products in existing markets. This strategy requires maintaining and strengthening existing customer relationships and finding new customers. It requires leadership skills in both customer relations as marketing communications. Especially finding new customers requires skills and capabilities in digital marketing. (Joensuu-Salo et al., 2022).

2.3 Finnish marketing and media spend in budgets

The Federation of the Printing Industry in Finland, is a trade organization. It is a member association of Finnish Media Federation also known as Finnmedia. The FPIF states that its mission is to "enhance the competitiveness of our member companies and make sure that the business environment supports the success of our industry." (Federation of the Printing Industry in Finland, 2025.) In their latest 2024 annual report, it is stated that statistics of the industry are incomplete as some of the companies categorize themselves in non-related categories. This will have an impact on the relevance of conclusions in the printing industry and needs to be noticed when reviewing and analysing the reports in research in the area. According to FPIF, it will release a sustainability model for the industry during the year 2025, to respond to the need of helping the printing industry operators to manage and measure their sustainability issues. (Print & Media, 2025).

In research published by Statistics Finland, a Finnish national statistical research organization in 2021, it is stated that "The digital transformation of the media industry accelerated during the COVID-19 year: the

publishing industry continued to shrink, while digital media increased their consumption.” (Statistics Finland, 2021).

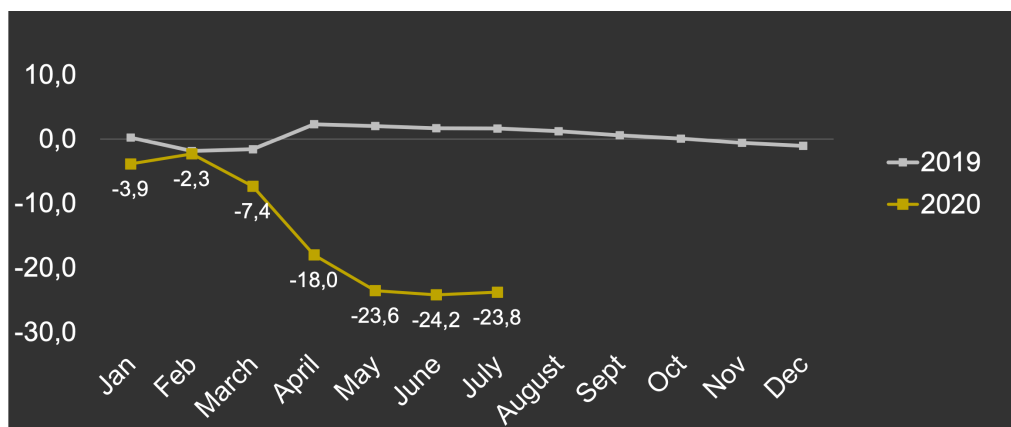
It was discovered during this literature review that “The production of the mass media statistics ended on 31 December 2024. The decision to discontinue statistics production is connected to central government savings, because of which Statistics Finland's budget will contract.” (Statistics Finland, 2024) In practice, the decision means that further research data about the research topic of media methods in Finland will be provided by separate and various research companies and not necessarily combined by a governmentally financed researcher.

Kantar Media Finland is a market research and media intelligence company that provides information consumer behaviour, media trends and advertising insights. Kantar Media Finland is a part of international Kantar, which is the world’s leading marketing data and analytics business. Kantar sees itself as helping its customers to understand how to shape the future with available data of occurred situations, such as crisis situations like the pandemic.

When Kantar Media announces its research results, it is widely distributed and cited globally within the industry. In the latest report Kantar states that in 2024 total media advertising spending in Finland was 1,3336M€ and there was a decrease compared to year 2023. Digital advertising covered 54,9% of the total media spending. The categorization of the research results varies, and in those categories where digital media is calculated together with print media, print media share is 17% of the total market. (Kantar, 2024).

When reviewing history data from the Kantar data, it was important to investigate the timeline to see the pre-pandemic and the pandemic starting time, to understand from a data proven view, what the impact of the global crisis was for the marketing and media sector. Through graphs the change can be visually noticed and then analysed deeper.

In Picture 1 presented by Kantar in 2020, the visible change of media advertising expenditure due to the pandemic is seen in the months of February and March 2020 when the pandemic spread. Compared to the previous year 2019 the total media advertising, including print and digital media, had a decline. (Kantar. 2020).



Newspapers, Magazines, TV, Radio, Outdoor, Online, Cinema.
Including advertising of electoral campaigns.

KANTAR

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Picture 1. The Media Advertising Expenditure Trends

In the picture the cumulative development is presented together with the change-% versus previous year. This chart does not separate the print and digital media, which could provide a comparison of the decline between the two media choices. However, the chart shows that there was a drastic change in the use of media, that was a new starting point on which media expenditure was later evolved based on new experiences and methods and the rising digitalization.

IAB Finland is a digital media focused community and partner to companies aiming at increasing their knowledge in digital marketing. IAB Finland provides information, workshops, seminars and courses for professionals and organizations. IAB Finland also participates in the regulation processes by giving its expertise in the field of digital marketing. It is a part of the IAB global community and provides a unique global network to its members. While IAB concentrates in digital marketing, its

research and article provide valuable insights to the integrated marketing communications (IMC) and its development. As companies have an increased need to develop their digital media skills, educational institutes such as IAB Finland have an important role in offering targeted programs for companies and their professionals. (IAB Finland, 2025).

2.4 Sustainability in marketing

Sustainability has become one of the key elements and factors in business decision making and there are regulations that are impacting marketing decisions as well as other business operations. Sustainable marketing, according to the director of Commercial Reach & Influence at Cambridge University, Charlie Thompson is defined as follows: "Sustainable marketing is a purpose-driven practice that works to orientate businesses, brands and society towards a sustainable future, influencing appropriate awareness, aspiration, adoption and action across economic and sociocultural systems by taking necessary accountability for its impacts and opportunities. In doing so, it acts in service of long-term well-being for all." (Thompson, 2023).

A Business Systems Research Journal research published in 2022 by Ahmic revealed that "strategic sustainability orientation significantly and positively influences organizations resilience and its three sub-components: anticipation, coping and adaptation capabilities." (Ahmic, 2022).

Sustainability is monitored by auditing and auditing results can give various certifications to organizations to present them forward to their customers and stakeholders. IAB Finland has a Sustainability work group, formed of marketing industry sustainability professionals. In their recent article, the group presents five key points concerning sustainability for companies operating in business.

1. Sustainability in the core of business
2. Consumers expectations and values

3. Business advantages and risks
4. Meaning of stakeholder relationships
5. Consequences of neglecting sustainability

The first point highlights that sustainability cannot be a separate part of a company's operations, but instead it must be a keen part of the business strategy and marketing. When a company has genuine sustainable marketing, it strengthens the brand, builds trust to clients and differentiates the company from competitors. The second point highlights that consumers, especially younger generations expect sustainability and responsibility from companies and are ready to pay more for products and services that reflect their values. Honest and open communication about sustainability acts are the key in building this trust. Thirdly, sustainability can be a strategic competitive advantage, but it requires consistency and openness to succeed in its realization. Misleading propositions or green washing can lead to decline in reputation, decline in customers or legal actions. The meaning of stakeholder relations is the fourth key point presented by IAB Finland sustainability group. It means that sustainable companies are more interesting to employees, strengthens partnerships and investors and increase the reputation of the company. Companies should also require sustainability from their subcontractors and business partners. Neglecting sustainability is the fifth and final key point emphasizing that if sustainability is not taken into consideration, there can be several consequences. A company can lose competitive advantage, trust, reputation, have legal consequences and problems in adapting into the stricter laws. The lack of sustainability can endanger long term business. (IAB Finland, 2025).

2.5 Theoretical framework

To gain an understanding of the existing situation of the research subject and to deepen knowledge to any future trends of development in

marketing decision making between and within printed and digital marketing materials, this research is based on previous literature, studies, scientific and other public articles, in addition to semi-conducted in-person interviews. According to Swanson, "a theoretical framework helps to ground the research focus understudy with theoretical underpinnings and to frame the inquiry for data analysis and interpretation." (Swanson, 2013). The formation of the framework in this research was first sketched around the key elements of the research questions and then built on a Lucidchart-tool to present the elements based on the literature view findings. On the left the key elements around the post-pandemic strategic marketing decision making are marketing budget, business environment, sustainability and the marketing and media mix, divided into print and digital. The right side of the framework describes the business operational factors, the left side the marketing production factors. In the upper middle is the budget, and in the down middle is sustainability. Together the factors form an ecosystem needed to strategic marketing decision making and a balanced operational business model. The description of the Integrated marketing communications can be viewed with the context of this framework.

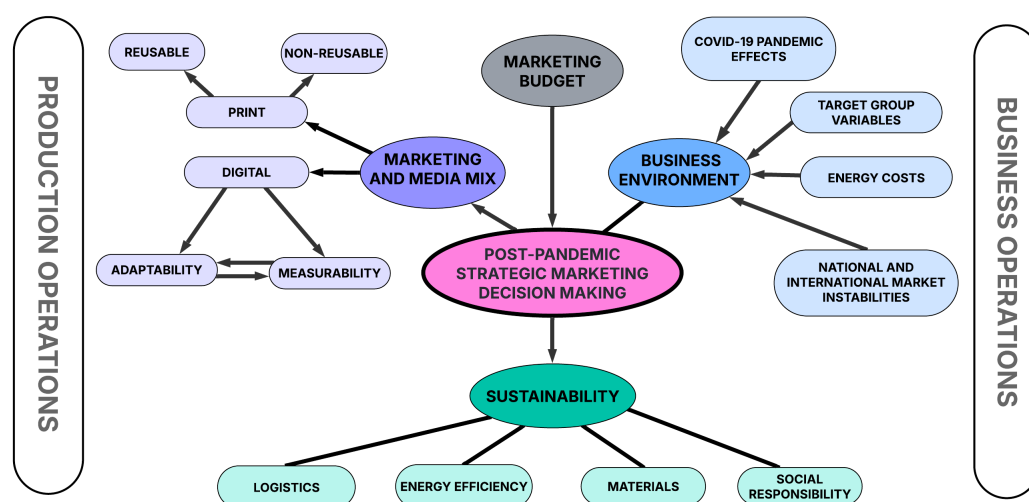


Chart 1. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework has been used as the base of the interview questions in the semi-conducted interviews. The framework raises the

themes which are involved in the research area and shows the connections and relations in the operational context as well. The framework can also be seen as a mind map-type graph, connecting elements in relevant categories and showing dependencies to the research subject named in in the middle.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the methodology used in this research to discover knowledge and understanding of the use of print and digital marketing in organizations operating in the service, travel and public sectors in the Ostrobothnia area. The research also aims in creating an understanding of the reasons behind the marketing mix decisions. The stages of the methodology involve research approach, research purpose, research goals, data collection, analysis and liability and validity of the research.

3.1 Research approach

The outcome of this research can provide valuable insights in how businesses in the marketing and print industry can stay competitive in an increasingly digital-first world. Creating a well-balanced and growth aiming marketing budget is important for companies, but there is a need to understand the different aspects of possible marketing methods before making decisions on how to reach the target group in a profitable way, to reach a satisfactory return on invest (ROI).

The principle of relevance in qualitative research is described as an approach where the sample is obtained by the aim of receiving information and insight from a source that has an appropriate experience and knowledge from the research subject. The amount of sample is not significant, but the quality and relevance of source is. (Puusa, 2020) This research follows the principle of relevance as base of decision of the research information sources, the organizations and interviewees. The scope of the research is organizations operating in the Vaasa region, in Ostrobothnia, Finland. The interviewees are decision makers in company marketing and are involved in the marketing strategy and budgeting processes as well. To understand the current and future of marketing decision making factors in these organizations, the research approached and contacted active decision-making managerial roles in the area.

3.2 Research purpose

This research is valuable, as it is important to understand if and how the field of marketing has changed permanently and in which aspects after the COVID-19 pandemic. This research will give insight for companies for better and more suitable planning, investments and development for their marketing and business operations in the future. The research also aims to give insight into the marketing decision making process and criteria and to also give insight to those providing marketing services to companies and organizations. Understanding the ecosystem of the marketing decision making process and the reasons behind budget allocation and the purpose behind of the marketing decisions, will give tools to adapt into the constantly changing and more digitalized field of marketing.

As Kotler describes in his publication Marketing 5.0., marketing has evolved from the earlier studies, where the model of 4P's was one of the most used basic marketing models based on research (Kotler et al, 2023). These 4P's, product, place, price and promotion have been accompanied by other additional factors during the change in the field of business operations and thus marketing. Understanding the additional factors and the change in the global business environment due to digitalization, is essential for businesses operating with the marketing mix, which also keeps changing and developing into a more complex set of marketing methods.

Printing has been historically a method of producing communication material to audiences, but due to digitalization and new communication channels and change in audience's media preferences, the amount of printing has decreased already before the pandemic, especially after year 2008 (Federation of the Printing Industry in Finland, 2018). The pandemic however changed the way business could do their business, how they could reach their customers and especially those businesses who lost profit, needed to rapidly adapt to digital ways in reaching their

target audiences, as physical, printed materials were more difficult to produce and distribute compared to digital materials. The pandemic as a sudden global crisis differs from a long-term industrial evolutionary and developmental change, which printing as an industry has experienced during the digitalization.

3.3 Research goals

The main research goals are to find out the reasons behind the decisions when producing marketing materials, print, digital, or other communication materials in companies after the global COVID-19 pandemic. As the aim of this research is to discover answers to the research questions, it is valuable to receive first-hand information from decision makers who are aware of all the factors behind the timeframe and operational environment of the services industry, such as retail, service, travel and public service industry in Ostrobothnia before, during and after COVID-19. Interviewees have been chosen to represent not only the organisation they work for, but as part of their role, representing their wide range of stakeholders and inner customers.

The aim is to highlight the key challenges the printing industry has faced in the era of digital transformation, including competition from digital-only media, the decline in print consumption, and rising consumer expectations for fast, personalized service and communication.

3.4 Research methods

This research uses qualitative methods. Interviews to organizations, the marketing decision makers in companies operating in the Ostrobothnia area in the retail, travel and service sector as well as insights from the printing and digital marketing companies in Finland, will give input and knowledge to this research. Reviewing literature and industry related publications, such as annual reports will give secondary data of the use

of printing and digital media methods in Finland in general before and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

A semi-conducted interview gives in-depth and detailed understanding of decision making and processes behind them. While shaping the interview questions, it is important not to make questions that make assumptions or lead the interviewee to any answers that are in the interviewer's hypothesis (Wells, 2020).

In this research the research interview invitation was sent in Ostrobothnia March 2025 via email to the recipients (Appendix 1.), after a phone discussion which introduced the research subject to the interviewees. The timetable for the interview was proposed to the interviewees within a same two-week period, aiming at conducting all the interviews within two weeks. This way the interviews for the research could be processed in a good focus without delays for the research advantage.

As Puusa describes, it often is valuable to send the research questions and subjects of the discussion to the interviewees in advance, as it helps to achieve the goals of the interviews, which is to receive an in-depth insight from the chosen persons to the research problem and the area of interest (Puusa, 2020).

3.5 Research questions and sub research questions

The specific question that this research will aim to answer is: Have Ostrobothnian organizations operating in the service, travel and public sector, with international stakeholders, made changes in the use of printed and digital marketing material after COVID-19 and if so, why?

The sub research questions are: Have these companies found a balance between printed and digital marketing after COVID-19 pandemic? What are the main reasons behind the use of marketing material decisions (cost, sustainability, production time, logistics, better reach of target

group, other?) The interview questions (Appendix 2.) in this research are formed based on these research questions. The research questions are divided into main categories: general background, where interviewees talk about their role in the company and related to marketing decision making. Second category is discussion about the marketing strategy changes post-pandemic, to find out if their strategy changed and how. It also leads the discussion to find out the most significant challenges in adapting marketing efforts during and after pandemic. The balance between print and digital marketing is talked in the third part of the interview questions to find out if and how there was a change in the use of print and digital marketing. The question of the role and value of print in marketing is asked in this part, as well as the role of digital marketing to find out the difference between them. A customer engagement related question belongs to this part, to ask if the interviewees see a difference in customer engagement and conversion between print and digital marketing. The role of international marketing is discussed through semi-conducted topics related to the possible change during pandemic and the role of printed and digital tools for international audiences. The final part of the interview aims to discover the role of sustainability and future trends in the interviewed companies. These themes are part of the theoretical framework and the interview, and the pre-sent questions and discussion frame was based on the subjects from the theoretical framework.

Approaching the issue through these research questions comes from the need to understand the decision-making factors organizations have to consider in their annual planning to stay in the budget frame given. Verhoef and Leeflang mention that "marketing departments should have a strong role within the company, as it will improve business performance" (Verhoef et al., 2009), which is relevant in the understanding of the role of smart decision-making concerning marketing. Verhoef and Leeflang listed consequences if the role of marketing is not considered as a strategic element in business. One of the listed issues is that the

synergies that result from mixing marketing decision disappear. Key capabilities linked to the improved performance of marketing departments are accountability, innovativeness and customer connection (Verhoef et al., 2009).

The research questions also serve the marketing production companies, as receiving the answers will help them to analyse their business environment and to develop their customer success management in a more customer centric way. Being customer centric is seen as an opportunity to build strategic customer relationships and to grow together with the customer, in a trusted partnership. The questions provide the possibility to gain insight in the customers value chain and more knowledge of the factors that influence the customers business and marketing decision making.

3.6 Research hypothesis

In the hypothesis, both the marketing buyer has needed to find new tools, and the seller has had to adapt its operations and production capacity to new levels due to the COVID-19 era. It is in interest to find out, what issues have been seen as good practises, that have stayed since the pandemic and what issues have been replaced, and what have been brought back from the past to post-pandemic marketing operations.

The researcher has experienced the pandemic firsthand and started working as an Agile Coach in a printing and marketing production company, aiming at leading agile practises in the company's own sales and marketing department, together with business units, at the difficult new situation the pandemic made in the market. This study includes some insights based on personal work experience as a professional in the field of marketing for several years.

3.7 Research analysis

Analyzing interview material in qualitative research is described by Anu Puusa as detective work, where the interviewee combines his or her own preliminary thoughts to the discussions held during the interviews, that will result in a story presented in the research. Puusa emphasizes that the analysis of the interview material should not be mechanical categorizing, but a thinking process that results into a research story presented in the research (Puusa, 2020).

As Puusa mentions, it is important to give the interviewee the opportunity to widely talk about the subject, and to deepen the understanding of the research, the interviewer should also have a good understanding of the subject in the research to be able to combine the previous knowledge to the interview results. (Puusa, 2020).

In this research, the author has a background and a profession in the field of marketing and marketing communication. This background, combined with the experience as working before, during and after the pandemic, in the field of marketing operations and development in a marketing production service organization, provides is a deep understanding of the subject through primary experience. However, the interview questions and the interviews were conducted with the aim to receive the responses without any emphasis on the researcher's previous work experience, opinions or assumptions, to maintain the research open to the responses and insights from the interviewees and the organizations they represent.

The analysis phase uses coding to present the results and insights anonymously and categorically. This method follows the "the process of developing and combining (or breaking up) categories is essentially about observing the principles of exhaustiveness and exclusiveness." Following the guidelines of Gillham's categorizing, the main highlights from the interviews were formed into an analysis grid (Gillham, 2000), attached as appendix 3 in the research paper. Appendix 4 presents the thematic

interview analysis which gathers the direct quotes of the interviewees in a categorized grid.

3.8 Research liability and validity

To ensure the liability and validity of the research the subject was chosen based on several years personal working experience in the marketing industry and industry statistics and reports. The search for the existing literature for the literature review chapter was conducted with academic search engines, such as VAMK Finna Tritonia Library, using keyword searches related to the subject and industry. As COVID-19 pandemic is a global health crisis of a recent era, there was specific effort to find information to support the timeframe of after the pandemic. The literature review includes insights of basics of marketing, printing and digital marketing, sustainability, supply chain management and customer centric business. Suitable literature was searched and discovered also in physical libraries and printed books. Recent studies in the era of post-pandemic however were mostly available online.

Once the research subject, main research questions and the targeted geographical research area and industry were decided, the participating companies were chosen to represent such companies which have active marketing operations, and their industry or sector had been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviewees were all directly contacted first by a phone conversation and a mutual email-invitation with the interview questions attached to present the scope of the coming interview. The interviews were all made in person, recorded and transcribed with a voice recorder and Microsoft Word-transcription tool. One interview was held in English and the others were held in Finnish language so there was a need to translate the transcriptions before the keywords could be recognized from the interview data.

All interviewees were kept anonymous, and the data is presented after coding the participants. The results are based in the interviewees interpretations of their own personal experience as managers and marketing decision-makers in their own field of expertise. These interpretations are reviewed together with the existing literature, and the conclusions are based on them combined.

4 INTERVIEW FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This part of the research paper will present the interview results after the process of coding was completed and a coding chart was formed as part of the process. "Coding is an analytic method that condenses units of qualitative data into abridged forms for purposes of pattern detection and development of other analytic outcomes such as categories, concepts, assertions, and themes." (Wolgemuth et al., 2024). The chosen interview analysis method is thematic analysis.

The six themes were risen from the interviews, after reviewing similarities and repeated themes in the results. The chart included the coded interviewees on top of the chart, P1, P2, P3, P4 and P5. P3 and P4 were in the same interview, as their organizations are closely linked to each other. The keywords, the themes of the chart were named on the left side of the chart. The presented themes are digitalization, lifecycle of printed material, quick response to trends, sustainability, measurability and print.

The thematic analysis chart consists of direct citations from the in-person interviews and are presented anonymously without any recognisable features. Anonymous handling of the interviews and the citations are agreed with the interview participates. The content provides direct thoughts of interviewed persons to the research themes. The chart and the highlights do not contain all citations of the interviews, as the interviews were all approximately 45 minutes and consisted broad discussion around the subject. Re-reading the dictations, highlighting the main points in text, and re-listening the interview recordings validate the chosen content of the final analysis chart. The results, key findings and highlights are presented by each theme, in the following subchapters, together with the analysis and findings of the interviews.

After forming the thematic analysis chart, the next phase of the research was to return to the research questions and to further analyse them

based on the literature review findings. Generally, there were several points that were in the research hypothesis, but there were also additional findings in the interview material. This chapter describes the findings and adds researchers' analysis to them. The analysis takes into consideration a broader perspective than only the thematic analysis itself. As the interviews were held as a semi-conducted interview, there was additional discussion related to the marketing and business operations and strategy, which provide insight outside the interview question range.

The research questions were: Have organizations in Ostrobothnia, operating in the service, travel and public sector with international stakeholders, made changes in the use of printed and digital marketing material after COVID-19 and if so, why? The sub research questions are: Have these companies found a balance between printed and digital marketing after COVID-19 pandemic? What are the main reasons behind the use of marketing material decisions (cost, sustainability, production time, logistics, better reach of target group, other?) The analysis describes the business environments, key themes discovered through the thematic analysis, the marketing decision making factors and the role of printed marketing material, which needs its own review based on the results.

4.1 Pandemic and post-pandemic business environments

The interviewees, coded P1, P2, P3, P4 and P5 described that the pandemic rapidly changed their business environment. The area of Ostrobothnia, especially the Vaasa region and the city of Vaasa, are described by all the interviewees as international environments. Businesses operating in the area have international workforce, universities and other schools are known from their international students and co-operation with global education operators.

Businesses that P1, P2 and P3 represent are very dependent on international customers in their business. P1 mentions that they have workforce from educational institutions, which can mean both international and local students. Therefore, due to the pandemic social distancing regulations and restrictions in the society, there was a major impact in the business environment and adjustments had to be made in daily operations. One of the adjustments was being more digital to reach and interact with stakeholders and customers. P3 describes how operations were immediately directed into non-stop Microsoft Teams-meetings without meetings or interaction in person. Customers couldn't visit stores on a regular basis, consumers started more frequent online shopping and traveling wasn't possible due to governmental restriction locally and global restrictions affecting travellers planning to come to the area from abroad.

The post-pandemic period officially started 2022 when WHO declared the pandemic to be over. Travelling and regular consuming had gradually begun to increase earlier, as restrictions were eased and vaccination programs had been in effect in the society. But as business operations and consumer behaviour had already changed to operate in a more digital way, the interviewed organizations had noticed that increased digitalization and new digital channels still maintained strong in presence. Distance working has become regular among working people, which means that marketing must be considered more digital to reach the target groups in their mobile or other online platforms rather than handing flyers in physical locations or sending printed brochures to distance workers who visit the office location only occasionally or not at all. Rasiah et al. also described the pandemics impact in accelerating digitalization. The literature review confirms the statements by the interviewees that the importance of digitalization was amplified during COVID-19 pandemic, accelerating the digital transformation process for many nations. (Rasiah et al.,2020).

P2, P3, P4 and P5 attend regularly fairs and seminars within their branch and found physical presence important as part of their marketing. P2 describes how participation in fairs has become more digital and less printed material is distributed in fair stands. P2 also adds to the discussion how some industry fairs have become more business-to-business events rather than consumer events post-pandemic. Businesses book meetings with b2b visitors in advance to discuss business, and this allows more time for presentations and sales negotiations compared to walking in the event venue handing flyers or brochures in the event. Joensuu-Salo et al. emphasize similarly, that especially finding new customers requires skills and capabilities in digital marketing. (Joensuu-Salo et al., 2022).

4.2 Digitalization in measurable and modern marketing

After analysing the key words via coding, it was clear that digitalization is one of the main elements of marketing operations in the researched organizations. The main citations of the interviewees under the theme digitalization in the thematic chart were as follows:

P1: "Digital channels have risen to become, let's say, our main channels"; P2: "Digitalization enables data which supports our marketing decision making"; P3: "Nine out of ten want digitally produced info material"; P4 & P5: "Pandemic accelerated and developed digitalization".

The revealing highlighted comment was from interviewee P3, as the mention came that while attending global industry fairs, "nine out of ten want digitally" produced info material. The answer came while during the interview discussion, it was asked if the organization would have digital screens or paper brochures as marketing material on their stands. P3 also adds that "Web is very important still and we have never put this amount of money for example in Google ads". As Kotler presents, the marketing mix has changed and in addition to the traditional 4P's, product, place, price and promotion, there are new components in the

mix and marketing has evolved from earlier studies. (Kotler et al. 2023). The balance of the marketing components has changed and the demand for digital materials by customers attending fairs is according to the interviewees very high.

P1 mentions that there were many changes in the business environment before, during and after the pandemic. The rise of digitalization had already begun pre-pandemic, and issues such as producing different language versions in marketing material is more cost efficient in digital channels than physical printed material, where formats have certain measured space to use and language variations cannot be similarly all be placed in one product, as the text content size will not be practical.

P2 emphasizes that "from a marketing perspective measuring is also important and in digital channels there is data available". This supports statements by Keer, that digitalization enables valuable data collection and analytics. In addition, marketing analytics can provide valuable insights into customer preferences and trends (Keer, 2020). P4 & P5 explain from their point of view that "Digital marketing is so much more when thinking input/output ratio".

The importance of measurement was also recognized by Verhoef & Leeflang, who stated if managers could measure marketing productivity, the marketing productivity could be increased (Verhoef & Leeflang, 2009). In the interview P1 compared print and digital marketing, mentioning that digital marketing produces data for analysis, while similar data is not available for print. Measurability is one decision making factor, when considering marketing procedures between print and digital marketing.

The thematic coding brought up the theme of quick response to trends which implicated that there is a need for quick reactions, which is possible in digital marketing. Comments in the discussion by the interviewees were similar in needs to react. P1 mentioned that in their daily operations "We have to be aware all the time of what's going on and follow

trends, which our digital partners do for us” adding “What does the youth think?” P2 finds that the “Content needs to be interesting to meet the right target group”. P3 feels that in the terms of relevance “We have to change more and more”. P4 and P5 analyse their need for relevance while stating that “You have to know and recognize who is in your channels and how they react”. In addition, P4 describes the changed marketing production processes by adding “No more long film-type commercials, but quick, time-relevant content videos in social media.” To conclude the discussion about relevance in today's marketing, P4 & P5 emphasize that “Authenticity is important.”

4.3 Importance of sustainability in marketing decision making

Sustainability is in the very core of marketing method decision making among all the organizations and the companies that they represent, that participated in this research. All the interviewees empathized that their owners core values and strategy are built upon sustainability and responsibility. As Thompson (2023) described, “Sustainable marketing is a purpose-driven practice”, which could be proven in the interview results concerning sustainable marketing. The key citations of the interviewees under the theme sustainability are presented as follows:

P1: “We choose materials that are ecological” “Sometimes logistics costs are higher than producing the brochure”. P2: “People want to hear about our sustainability issues and they need to be proved”, P3: “I think that's a big responsibility to think of what you're doing today for nature, maybe you put more effort to it (print) and I wouldn't say luxury project but something specific, you just don't do it because it might end in the garbage”, “We're in the sustainable Finland programme”. P4 & P5: “Our objectives come from strategy where carbon neutrality is a key issue” and “To not hand out brochures to everyone is a sustainability issue.”

From the perspective of sustainability, the statements emphasized that there cannot be materials that have a short lifecycle and are possibly

moved into trash as soon as they are delivered, such as dated printed materials, flyers, brochures, rollups, posters or equivalent. Sustainability comes from the strategy and values of the organizations, so sustainability is self-evident as all interviewees described. Mentioning the strong emphasis of the company owners' and organizations' commitment to sustainable development issues in all business operations makes sustainability the most important element in the marketing decision-making process. To be able to calculate, measure and report sustainability related components, there is a need for data of the marketing material production throughout the supply chain, from planning, production to delivery and recycle. These direct and mandatory customer needs give good guidelines for marketing production companies towards a more data-driven production also from a sustainability point of view. The interviewees mentioned the importance of low carbon-footprint in marketing material production and the importance of a long lifecycle of a marketing material product. However, there were no mentioning of measurement or tracking of sustainability levels in the use of digital marketing material, which implies that the reporting is now focused on physical products rather than the production of digital materials.

P2 sees that sustainability issues are key driving factors in their decision making concerning printed material, explaining that "if we print, we aim to use such material that has a long lifecycle." Material that has changing content and information such as times and dates have a short lifecycle when any changes occur in the content. The printed material can also be smaller in size and include content that directs to company web pages where updated content is always available. P2 mentions that after directing the customer to the web page, the customer journey can be analysed and development made to enhance the customer experience.

P3 raises the logistics aspect to the sustainability discussion by mentioning that in their business "we look at the whole loop from when we decide that we have to create, we would like to print very local so don't have big transportation"

4.4 Role of printed material in post-pandemic marketing

All interviewees mentioned that the use of printed marketing material had decreased in their marketing. The decrease has accelerated after the pandemic, but there had already been changes in the balance between printed and digital marketing material before year 2020. Digitalization has become increasingly meaningful to the organizations leading into a decrease in printed marketing in the marketing and media mix. The citations of the interviewees under the theme print are presented as follows:

P1: "If we would use more print, there should be more unique and something new from our perspective and we should be offered just the right solutions how we could utilize print, but so far we have not been presented by such solutions." P2: "We genuinely try to utilize all our produced printed material (no waste)". P3: "Budget allocation between print and digital has shifted, let's say, from a six digit to four in print". P4 & P5: "Traditional printing houses need to transform into more digital houses." and "Print used to be much more simple than digital".

Printed materials are produced only if the lifecycle of the printed material, such as a brochure, is long. Another criterion is that it needs to be very relevant and well targeted to the right recipients to achieve its meaning in a profitable and sustainable way. The citations of the interviewees under the theme lifecycle of printed material are presented as follows:

P1: "Print lives such a short period of time". P2: "Material that has changing content and information such as times and dates have a short lifecycle when any changes occur in the content" and "If we print, we aim to use such material that has a long lifecycle". P3: "We have noticed for example of a brochure, that when we did the last brochure, we made it so that you can use it for two – three -four years of lifecycle". P4 & P5: "Print materials, such as traditional newspapers, are alive only one day and then they are gone, they are thrown into the garbage."

P1 mentions that they have a need for data of the use and effectiveness of their printed marketing material but have not found a solution on how to collect such data for further analysis. P1 states "We analyse a lot of the data we receive, but we don't receive it from print". The lack of accurate data compared to digital marketing is one factor that influences marketing decision making. Scott mentions similar issues in his research, saying using traditional media don't allow personal targeting unless using very difficult, expensive ways. (Scott, 2020).

When asked about budget allocation between print and digital marketing, P3 answered that the shift is estimated to have lowered from six to four digit in euros in print. The amount is significant, as the decrease directly affects the business of printing houses offering print materials. P1 describes how the costs of producing printed material are high and would take a major part of their marketing budget. The cost factor of print production and distribution is another important factor that influences marketing decision making when finding the right marketing operation solutions.

In addition, P1 brought up an important issue of the lack of ideas and inspiration from the printing service providers of possible new technologies and materials in the printing industry. P1 stated that "if we would use more print, there should be more unique and something new from our perspective and we should be offered just the right solutions how we could utilize print, but so far we have not been presented with such solutions." P1 continues "it has been more like that we ourselves have decided to buy some print and sent material, but there has been nothing like, you could do this and that. So, there is lack of print expertise".

When evaluating and considering the use of printed marketing material, the right material selection and the use of new, more sustainable and ecological printing techniques might follow the organizations sustainability guidelines in a way that printed materials could be considered. Still, the content in printed material is more general and considered as

brand marketing rather than tactic marketing, as the first mentioned has a longer lifecycle as a relevant product. During the interviews there were printed brochures in the interviewees offices, that represented brand brochures and sustainability brochures, which both are designed to have approximately a three-year lifecycle according to interviewees P1, P2 and P3. According to P3 "We have noticed for example of a brochure, that when we did the last brochure, we made it so that you can use it for two – three -four years of lifecycle".

P4 and P5 described the use of printed attachments between local newspapers and postcards. Postcards are sent to specific target groups with a very detailed content. Logistics and postal costs are evaluated more strictly by all interviewee's organizations, and therefore the use of direct mailing is not considered as a cost-efficient and profitable marketing communications method, but rather as special campaigns targeting to differ from digital content.

P1 mentioned that traditional campaign catalogues can be seen as brand marketing in addition to tactical marketing. Producing special, seasonal campaign catalogues still have a role but, as production and logistics cost have risen, proper planning of such catalogue is very important to gain the best relevance of a catalogue.

The use of QR codes in smaller printed items were a content technique that all interviewees had recognized to utilize traditional printed material to visit digital, more measurable channels. All the interviewees attend industry fairs and forums, domestic and international, mainly targeting their b-to-b target group. Compared to the time before the pandemic and the resent risen energy and logistics costs, there are smaller printed materials produced to lower the costs of delivery. Still, there is a need for printed material, as it can be seen and experienced as a concrete giveaway, aiming at leaving a memorable mark in the target groups minds. To test and measure the relevance of the handed printed material, there is a suggestion or offer behind the QR code, that directs the

customer to digital channels, where interaction, communication and service can continue.

The research questions aimed to find out whether a balance has been formed between print marketing and digital marketing. After reviewing the interview results, it is clear, that the decline of printed marketing has continued, but there still are needs for printed marketing material. The criteria for the use and production of printed material in general have a larger emphasis than before. The results present that printed material cannot be wasted or overproduced. The meaning of the printed material should always be evaluated through sustainability criteria, such as material, production type, logistics types, energy level and overall cost.

The lifecycle of printed material was one on the key criteria in the marketing decision making concerning choice between printed or digital marketing material. Printed material can in some use cases be a give-away-type product, something tangible and concrete that can be handed out in personal meeting with customers. Printed material can also be a unique product, that draws attention more than the constant flow of digital content in the target groups devices and surroundings. Printed material, according to the interview results is more often a brand building marketing product, rather than a promotional, short-time product. Short-time products are printed material such as flyers, posters, campaign material with dates or prices. The content is a key element in the decision making, whether the content is communicated and distributed as a printed material or on digital channels, where any changing, detailed content can be easily edited real-time.

All the interviews for this research gave indications that marketing decision makers have lowered the budget for printed material, but print is still in the assortment of methods when creating brand awareness or direct contact with customers. Printed material might still be seen as a valuable choice itself, but the additional costs and sustainability issues

concerning the distribution, logistics and recycling add to the total costs to printed materials' disadvantage, while comparing the different marketing forms.

5 CONCLUSION

This chapter draws together the conclusions of the research. After the research analysis, the analysis was compared to the research questions and the initial hypothesis of the use of print and digital marketing in the post pandemic era. New perspectives were discovered during this research which provided valuable information for both the marketing decision makers and the marketing production providers. These conclusions are explained through the digitalizing and growingly sustainable environment and a customer-centric, voice-of-customer approach. The voice of the customer needs attention as it will develop both the customer and the marketing production providers business. The research can be stated as a valid and a meaningful subject as the results give insight to the elements in the strategic marketing decision making process, to both the marketing buyer and the marketing production providers in both print and digital marketing.

5.1 Digitalization and sustainability drive change

The research results and interview discussions with marketing decision makers confirmed the research hypothesis that there are permanent changes in the marketing operations after COVID-19. Digitalization and sustainability can be named as the key leading factors in the marketing decision making process. Sustainability is not seen as a separate factor in the business environment, but a strategic element in the very core of business and decision making in organizations, also in marketing. As the literature review implied, there are systematic factors that organizations recognize as key elements in their budget allocation, resourcing and overall profitable business decision-making. Ahmic's findings about the role of strategic sustainability orientation in organizational resilience divided into three sub-issues: anticipation, coping and adaptation (Ahmic, 2022), were present in the organizations interview discussions in this

research. The marketing decision-making process includes a fundamental sustainability aspect as sustainability issues lead into discussions, negotiations and decisions where printed marketing material with material issues, production methods, logistical, target group reach, recycle factors and finally the return on investment, are evaluated and compared thoroughly with digital marketing methods.

Data-driven decision-making and measurability of marketing operations is essential in monitoring how well the marketing tools have reached set goals and how data should be used in future marketing development and budget allocation. Digital marketing offers data and information such as target group reach and ROI in a way that physical, printed marketing material does not provide by itself without a connection, such as a QR-code path to a digital platform.

5.2 Importance of VOC, Voice of customer

It was clear that organizations are spending a lot of time and effort to find the right solutions for the right marketing decisions in a constantly changing and complex business environment. Gathering information about the best practices in their own business environment is crucial, as sustainability goals target to operations where no resources are wasted, either material, energy or social resources.

Marketing service providers would like to be seen as professionals and specialists in their own productions. Marketing buyers rely on the suggestions and offers by marketing service providers. It is valued and wished that service providers would proactively bring their best solutions and options to the customers, the marketing buyers and the decision makers attention. Knowing the buyers' needs and their customers business and marketing goals, a well-kept seller-buyer relationship can be built to become a customer-focused long-term partnership. A long-term partnership can be formed when the seller offers the right solutions, and the buyer can rely on the service providers proactive professionalism

taking into considerations all the customers strategic decision-making aspects. The voice of the customer (VOC) should be continuously monitored by the marketing service providers, especially those, who might be in risk of losing business in the changing business environment.

Printing companies could find new potential business in offering new sustainable production methods, targeting print campaigns more carefully, and suggesting new materials to the customers proactively, to maintain printed materials as unique and distinguished marketing materials in the marketing mix.

As Hollensen mentions in his Global Marketing literature, a decision-oriented organization and a "marketing infrastructure will have better chances of success if they operate in a corporate culture where the employees see their basic task as satisfying customers and their expectations." (Hollensen, 2004. p16.)

The VOC can be linked into customer equity management. Storbacka describes in his book Growth strategy (2005) that managing and measuring customer equity requires that investments made into customers are divided into core earnings and new earnings. The earnings from those customers who are the most valuable, according to the company's business strategy, are so called positive earnings. These earnings help the business to grow profitably, to earn market share and to prove owners and shareholders, that the company is following its strategy and gaining advantage from it. (Storbacka, 2005).

As P1 described in the interview, it is valuable for the marketing buyers that marketing production companies, such as printing companies are proactively involved in the process of marketing operations planning together with the customer, to find the right and most suitable solutions for the use of marketing material, such as campaign material or other marketing material. Building a proactive and trusted strategic customer relationship between the marketing buyer and marketing production seller can help both companies in their business goals. Korkman and

Arantola present in their customer-oriented approach that a company can be a practical expert and produce a better operational model in practice by developing the customers own expertise, by presenting and giving both familiar and new methods, or enhancing the environment where the operation occurs. (Korkman et al, 2009). Traditional marketing production companies, like printing companies could find advantage in deep and strategic customer relations, which was also hoped in the interviews. Taking the lead in expertise in a customer relationship, is more valued than a passive approach, where the customer needs to place an order without knowing more suitable options available.

6 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

The literature studied for this research confirmed that marketing has changed during the COVID-19 pandemic and is still evolving. As Lark & Bonfrer mention, the marketing supply chains are poorly defined and instrumented, and there is a need to standardize the management of the various platforms for better operations (Lark & Bonfrer, 2022). Expanding research to the management of marketing operations in the marketing mix could reveal the need to scale and be more cost-efficient within the entire supply chain. New media channels and platforms, the rising retail media in the media ecosystem combined with the evolving digitalization in the retail environment, is a well-recognized and growing subject, yet to be academically researched in the Finnish market.

Continuous research of sustainability in marketing would be an act of responsibility and therefore recommended. Sustainability of digital marketing methods is an element that could be researched and reported more in the future as discussions have been risen about the sustainability of the use of digital tools and artificial intelligence. The technical production and the amount of energy used in digital platforms and application operations could give more understanding of the actual sustainability of digitalized marketing business and therefore give guidelines for most responsible digital marketing options.

This research was conducted by interviews in organizations operating in a specific geographical area in Finland, but further research could be made to gain a nation-wide understanding of the main aspects in the strategic marketing decision-making process and the reasons behind the decisions to find out if there are geographical or local differences behind the decisions, especially if the business locations need more logistics from the marketing production site to the delivery site. Whenever logistics is needed to distribute the marketing materials in the supply chain,

sustainability and cost issues are carefully viewed in the marketing decision-making process.

The interviewed companies operate in an ecosystem of stakeholders or are part of a national organization or ownership that provide the base for the company strategy. Therefore the base of the decision-making issues in these organizations that participated in this research was clear. Smaller companies might still have their sustainability programs developed, or they don't necessarily use sustainability as guiding the marketing decision-process. A wider range of companies in research could give a more variety of results than in this research, where companies had clear sustainability programs and goals guiding their marketing decisions and they were very committed to them.

Developing new marketing production automation solutions, could bring new methods in the planning and production process of physical material in a more time- and cost-efficient way. Integrating AI into providing creative solutions, that an interviewed director was hoping for from i.e. the printing houses to marketing buyers, could fill the lack of offering solution options to businesses proactively. This however would require significant changes and development in the value chain management and customer relationship management, if personal customer communications and dialogue is allocated to AI instead of marketing production professionals. Developing AI tools and methods into marketing processes require suitable capabilities and resources. The level of AI capabilities in companies marketing operations would also be relevant to research together with the previous research recommendations. AI already is involved in the digital marketing operations, but how can its use be implemented by ensuring the use supports the important decision-making factors, such as sustainability, cost, and ROI.

A global or local business environment crisis can vary in duration and in context, but the way companies manage their marketing processes during and after a crisis, could be researched more in-depth in the Finnish

business environment. Organizational culture issues, organizational structures, the level of agile development capabilities could be researched in the context of marketing decision making and operational processes.

In the future, there possible could be a time, where marketing evolution comes to a point where in practise the used terminology does not divide traditional marketing and digital marketing. Digital marketing may grow into being the concept of marketing and the term marketing includes digital marketing without the definition. The industry has always kept developing and bringing new solutions into the marketing ecosystem, and terms that need to be defined in general language now, might not be used anymore as generations create their own terminology and the use of it.

New pandemic or other comparative crisis situations should be thought in business scenarios and in the strategic marketing planning. Companies should prepare themselves for marketing operation crises, to be able to adapt agile methods, if any of the planned marketing methods become subject for a sudden decline in use or vice versa. Maintaining and developing capabilities and resources open-minded will keep a company connected to its customers and stakeholders. Researching the preparedness of Finnish or Ostrobothnian companies to a new crisis, would be an interesting add in the context of profitable and sustainable marketing decision making.

Another view of a similar research could be from a marketing service provider point of view. How well have marketing production companies invested into filling the customers growing digital marketing needs – are services offered in the best interest of the customer and the customers business, or to fill the production companies own production lines, by offering services that are best for the production company. The level of VOC in this process could be researched in more detail in Finland and

Europe to provide in-depth insight and to create a market-oriented marketing ecosystem.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1. Interview invitation


Invitation to Participate in Research on Post-Pandemic Marketing Strategies /VAMK International MBA Thesis  

Tove Asukas 


Dear 

Thank you for participating in the research I am conducting as part of my master's thesis in International Business Management at VAMK. The research studies how marketing strategies, particularly the balance between print and digital marketing, have evolved in the post-pandemic era in companies operating in the Ostrobothnia region in terms of international marketing.

This research is particularly important for our region, as many companies in Vaasa and Coastal Ostrobothnia operate in international markets and have had to adapt their marketing strategies in response to global changes. Understanding these shifts can help businesses make informed decisions about future marketing investments, balancing sustainability, cost-effectiveness, and customer engagement. Given your expertise, I greatly appreciate the opportunity to interview your organisation and gain insights into your experiences and perspectives on the subject.

As discussed in our phone conversation today, the interview is scheduled on **Thursday 20th March, at 15 pm at your  office.**

Below the **5 main themes** and questions related to them, for you to preview the issues beforehand.

Looking forward to see you!

With best regards,
 Tove Asukas
 International MBA Student
 VAMK

APPENDIX 2. Interview questions

General Background

1. Can you briefly describe your role in your company's marketing decision-making?
2. How has your company's target market or audience changed in recent years, especially internationally?

Marketing Strategy Changes Post-Pandemic

3. How did your marketing strategy change during the COVID-19 pandemic?
4. What were the most significant challenges in adapting marketing efforts during and after the pandemic?
5. Have any of the pandemic-induced marketing changes become permanent? If so, which ones?

Print vs. Digital Marketing

6. How has your company's use of print marketing changed post-pandemic?
7. Has your budget allocation between print and digital marketing shifted? If yes, how and why?
8. In what scenarios do you still see value in print marketing?
9. What digital marketing channels have gained the most importance for your company post-pandemic?
10. Have you seen differences in customer engagement or conversion rates between print and digital marketing?

International Marketing Challenges

11. How has your approach to international marketing evolved post-pandemic?
12. Have digital tools helped in reaching international customers more effectively?
13. Do you see any differences in marketing preferences between domestic and international audiences?

Sustainability and Future Trends

14. Has sustainability influenced your marketing decisions, especially regarding print materials?
15. How do you see the future balance between print and digital marketing in your industry?
16. Are there any emerging trends in marketing that you believe will shape the next few years?

Thank you for your time and participation.