Communicating Sustainability

A qualitative analysis of corporate communication of sustainability in the ICT-sector

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This thesis is dedicated to all those who
believed in me when I needed it the most;
To my family and my beloved,
thank you from all my heart.

Acknowledgements

Summary

The purpose of this thesis is to gain a richer understanding of how an IT corporation view, value and communicate sustainability, with regards to stakeholders. This is based upon an increased focus on sustainability and sustainable development in society. There is a lot of academic studies concerning the concept of sustainability or organizational sustainability, furthermore there is extensive research with regards to Green IT and how this can contribute to a sustainable future. However, this thesis position itself in between, exploring the effects of communicating sustainability specifically in the IT industry. This study is based upon one medium-sized IT corporation with Norwegian owners.

In total, 12 interviews were conducted. These were qualitative interviews, performed based upon a structured/semi-structured method, and further analyzed with thematic analysis. The study based itself on sustainability theory, stakeholder theory and corporate communication theory.

The study provide support for sustainability theory. Financial sustainability seemed to be one of the main drivers. As of now, profit still seems to be the *stronger* sustainable factor, compared to people or planet, however the study showed willingness and understanding from informants and corporation strategy that all dimensions need to be supported for a sustainable future. The study also showed support for stakeholder theory, however with an increased focus in communication towards contractual stakeholders, compared to community stakeholders.

The study showed that even though the corporation has increased its focus on sustainability, several employees, especially those not in the management, had less knowledge about the green shift and sustainability. This can be an indication that corporate identity and corporate strategy has not been communicated thoroughly.

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1. Introduction

During the later decades, sustainability has received an increasingly larger position both in the political and corporate world. Environmental destruction, exploitation of resources or equal opportunities for people in different parts of the world are all examples of challenges in today's global society. The United Nations (UN) produced in 2015 a list comprising of 17 essential development goals, with a total of more than 150 subsidiary goals, to increase the focus on global sustainability. The hope was to achieve these goals by 2030, however, this requires cooperation and collaboration between nations and corporations worldwide (UN, 2021). These development goals were all adapted by nations at the UN Sustainable Development Summit in New York 2015 (UN, 2021). Later that same year, most countries agreed upon the Paris agreement on climate change, and hence a more unified global focus on sustainability.

An increased focus on sustainability worldwide requires a massive change of established practices in the way resources are developed and utilized. Such changes do not come without costs and do not rest only on the shoulders of nations. To reach the goal of a more sustainable world, it is necessary that the business world such as private investors, money funds and corporations contribute with their parts. The private sector has competence, technological advances and capital that make them a vital part of these changes (Ziemba, 2020). As the world around us is changing, corporations discover that they both can, and should be a part of this sustainable growth. Organizations need to develop sustainability strategies that balance environmental, societal and commercial goals in such a way that they are addressed simultaneously (Molla, Abareshi & Cooper, 2014). Yet, governments can play an active role in promoting sustainability and reporting on sustainability (Pedersen et al., 2013).

Even though the shift towards sustainability is global, each nation has its own individual focus and regulations regarding everything from e.g., economy to equality, living standard, education, and therefore sustainability and environmental issues may be different from nation to nation (Ferri, 2017) As such, a country like Norway needs its own tailored focus towards the future. The Norwegian government has coined the term «green shift» which focuses on climate and environmentally friendly restructuring. The government have pointed out that Norway needs to "*find its own way to a green economy*" (Randen, 2020). Thus, Norwegian companies are expected and incentivized to change the way they operate. A study by Vormedal and Ruud

(2009) found that only 10% of Norwegian companies comply with the legal requirements on environmental reporting and the vast majority of firms report unsatisfactorily on non-financial issues.

Sustainability is often defined as meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs (Molla, Abareshi & Cooper, 2012). Dimensions linked to sustainability are economic, social, and environment, commonly known as the triple bottom line (Elkington, 1998) and firms need to balance these dimensions to become sustainable (Carroll, Brown & Buchholtz, 2018). Today there is a widespread belief that the future and success of any company is entirely dependent on how it is viewed by key stakeholders in the community it operates, (Cornelissen, 2014) and its degree of sustainability will be important in this respect (Bansal & Roth, 2000). Lim, Stratopulos and Wirjanto (2014) argue that organizational legitimacy reflects stakeholders' support to the organization, this regard both internal and external stakeholders. Hence, the pursuit of good corporate reputation will at the top of the mind of many executives. Further, engagement in activities promoting increased sustainability may be a source of companies' competitive advantage (Porter & Kramer, 2006).

It is argued that information technology (IT) can be an enabler for sustainability (Deng, Ji and Wang, 2017, Vidmar, Marolt & Pucihar, 2021) particularly through Green IT practices (Molla et al., 2014). Topics related to green IT practices are emissions, energy efficiency, e-waste and recycling (Molla et al., 2014). The dissemination of IT into all areas of business, social, and personal life has drawn attention to both positive and negative effects of IT on environmental sustainability (Molla et al., 2014). The negative effects relate to IT related emissions and waste. The positive role refers to IT as an enabler of greener practices that may contribute to environmental protection and resource conservation. IT is highly relevant for innovation in business practices into a greener direction (Hanelt, Busse & Kolbe, 2017; Vidamar et al., 2021).

1.1 Motivation and problem statement

Given the above motivations and the IT as enablers of sustainability, the aim of this thesis is to explore sustainability within the IT sector. With digitalization becoming increasingly apparent, IT companies play their part in the challenges with regards to sustainability. One of the main tasks of IT companies is to provide tools and structures designed to change the way people and organizations behave and execute their activities to become greener (Pawlowski & Robey,

2004). Still, there is limited research on how IT companies themselves look upon sustainability. There are some exceptions though. Deng et al. (2017) studied green IT initiatives among large IT companies (Fortune 500 companies). They found that emission, energy efficiency, e-waste and recycling were the most disclosed sustainability practices. Further, Molla et al. (2014) in a quantitative study found that a majority of Australian IT professionals (yet not necessarily working in IT companies) were most concerned about climate change.

It is acknowledged in the literature that different institutional context may influence how companies look upon and report sustainability issues (Vormedal & Ruud, 2009; Ferri, 2017). Much of what fall under social responsibility in other countries already falls under Norwegian legislation, this particularly relates to workers' rights, environmental issues and working conditions (Grenness" 2003), and consequently companies, may think that they already fulfill sustainability requirements (Ditlev-Simonsen, Hoivik, & Ihlen (2015). But with an increased focus on sustainability and the green shift, this may has changed. To my knowledge there is less research on sustainability of Norwegian IT firms. It is interesting to explore sustainability in a medium-sized Norwegian IT company. Also, there is less research on sustainability on medium-sized firms compared to larger firms (Baumann_Pauly, Wickert, Spence & Scherer, 2013; Fjørtoft, Grimstad & Glavee-Geo, 2020). Hence, the main goal of this thesis is to explore

- *What does sustainability mean for an IT company and what role does it play for stakeholders?*

Further, I have developed some sub-questions guiding this research. The first question is:

- *SQ1: How does an IT company look upon the dimensions of sustainability and the green shift?*

To further investigate the importance of sustainability to an organization, it is prevalent to discover how this is communicated to key stakeholders. Examples of stakeholder are owners, suppliers, customers, employees and the community in which the firm is operating.

- *SQ2: How does an IT company communicate sustainability to its stakeholders?*

Working with, and communicate sustainability is the responsibility of managers and IT professionals in the firm. With this in mind, it is interesting to explore how the organization's focus on sustainability may influence the employees in their daily work and in contact with customers, if any at all. This led to the following research sub-question:

- *SQ3: To what extent is sustainability integrated in day-to-day work and in contact with customers?*

To address the research questions, I draw on theory about sustainability, corporate communication, and stakeholder theory. The empirical basis for this thesis is an exploratory case study of a medium-sized IT company operating in Norway. The empirical findings are based on interviews with employees and managers in the company, in addition to some secondary data. With this thesis I contribute to the understanding of sustainability among employees and managers in an IT company, and what dimensions of sustainability they find most relevant for the company. There is an agreement that the company can contribute the most to sustainability through being able to develop greener products and systems relevant for customers, so customers' production processes and activities can be more sustainable, particularly related to the planet dimension of sustainability (Carroll, et al., 2018.). Internally, the people dimension (Carroll et al., 2018) was emphasized, that is through creating a good working environment and secure equality. Communication to employees (internal stakeholder) is considered very important because employees are in direct dialogue with customers. Yet, this thesis suffers from a limitation in that the empirical findings are based on research in one organization. Hence, it is difficult to generalize the results to other firms and other industries.

1.2 Structure

The thesis is structured into five main parts. Chapter 1 provides the introduction of the study, followed by the problem statement and the limitations of the study. Chapter 2 presents a review of relevant literature for the research topics. Chapter 3 describes the applied methodological approach including research design, data collection, data analysis and data evaluation. Chapter 4 presents the results of the study, with further analyzation of the data material with regards to theoretical frameworks. Chapter 5 presents the thesis summary, limitation of this study and future research suggestions.

2 Theory

This chapter will discuss the theoretical background for this thesis. Chapter *2.1 Sustainability* focuses on the presentation of the concept of sustainability and its history. In order to obtain an analysis of the results from the data material, a basic understanding of the subject matter is relevant. Furthermore, this chapter also presents theory on sustainability within business life, then follow up about the IT sector and introduce the concept of green IT. In addition, a presentation of the green shift as seen from a Norwegian perspective is also introduced in this chapter.

Chapter *2.2 Stakeholders* provides the definition and background of stakeholders, as well as how to identify important stakeholders. The literature in this area of study has changed from a strong focus on satisfying shareholders to include a larger part of potential stakeholders. Thus, defining and identifying important stakeholders can help influence an organizations development, especially when themed up with the concept of sustainability. Due to the fact that stakeholders are the core drivers of work towards sustainability, stakeholder theory is essential to this thesis.

Finally, the last subchapter *2.3 Corporate communication* presents a theoretical background of corporate communication and its importance. As a background for the thesis' further analysis, it requires an understanding of corporate communications history, as well as some of its uses. Moving on, this study presents theory on corporate identity and reputation, as this is one of the primary ways an organization manage relationships with its stakeholders (Cornelissen, 2014). Lastly, this thesis delves into employee communication, both with regards to how corporations communicate to their employees, as well as how employees themselves communicate either internally or externally.

2.1 Sustainability
2.1.1 Introduction to sustainability
Sustainable development is a comprehensive term which have developed substantially over the last decades. The term was coined for the first time when Gro Harlem Brundtland gave a definition of sustainable development in 1987, at the UN summit with the report Our Common Future, where she stated that: *"Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".*

This was based on the conference from Stockholm in 1972, Stockholm conference of the Human Environment, where challenges between sustainability, environment and development were discussed for the first time on a global scale. An important remark by Brundtland was that the environment and the globe we live on is not separated from human actions and development, but rather a framework for all human activity and development (Brundtland, 1987). Nations all over the world have unique and different challenges, but also vastly different impact on global society and environment. Some nations have small populations but leave a significant impression on the environment, whereas other nations have large populations and struggle with hunger, disease, squalor or death.

All of this has been recognized globally, and even though Brundtland in 1987 started the initiative, it has been followed globally throughout the following years. Among some were the United Nations Conference of Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro 1992, globally known as the Earth Summit. This resulted in nations wanting to work together and procure international agreements around the challenges of climate changes (UNCED, 1992). Jumping ahead 10 years later, the World Summit in Johannesburg South Africa, they saw an addition to the definition of sustainable development. This was the idea that sustainable development was based on three separate pillars, economic viability, social equity and environmental protection (UN, 2002).

This definition that sustainable development has been separated into three pillars, have been criticized for not showing the whole truth. By dividing it into three separate entities, it shows there exist considerations between the three pillars. As such, a divide between what is perceived as *strong* and *weak* sustainability is formed. This can lead to nations, governments or organizations accepting the fact there are considerations between strong and weak sustainability, and thus prioritize some pillars over others. This is often represented in the form of economic viability being emphasized over social equity and environmental protection (Adams, 2006).
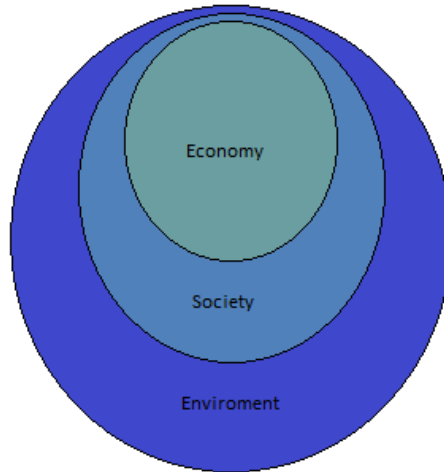
Figure 1, 3 dimensions of sustainable development (Adams, 2006)

Sustainable development has become an increasingly important facet of today's society and continues to be a highly important subject. Both with regards to academic research, but also by focus of global society. Nations worldwide stand in front of challenges regarding climate change, poverty, inequality and many more, thus this continued work is essential for a sustainable future. UN in particular are continuously working towards a sustainable future and one good example of this is the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This agenda was adopted by all United Nations Member States of 2015 contains a common blueprint for future peace and prosperity, not just for the people, but also for the world itself (UN, 2021).

2.1.2 Green Shift
Even though all UN nation members agreed to work on, and hopefully achieve UN's sustainability goals, we see that nations around the globe have their own unique challenges and are in different stages of reaching sustainability (SDSN & Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2021). This leads to some individual nations creating their own initiatives and focal points. In Norway, an example of this is Norway's focus on "*the green shift*". The Norwegian government (2014) explains that;

"The global climate and environmental challenges require restructuring to a society in which growth and development take place within nature's tolerance limits. A transition must occur to products and services that give significantly reduced negative consequences for climate and the environment than those currently. Society must go through a green shift. It will be demanding, but fully possible."

Even though the work towards a sustainable future is ongoing globally, each nation (such as Norway) need to adapt this work uniquely to their nation. Norwegian economy is based upon a small open economy, and in that respect, will be highly dependent on larger economies. Considering this, Norway must find its own unique way into a green economy. The end goal is to be a low-emission country by 2050. To make this happen, Norwegian industries needs to continue innovation and technological development, especially towards environmental challenges.

2.1.3 Sustainability in the business world

The neo-classical economic theory states that the main business purpose is to maximize profit for the owners, and in so doing a business will create wealth to the society (Friedman, 1970). This argument could easily be perceived as in opposition to sustainability, especially by considering the environmental and social conditions. Yet, with time, managers have become more aware of both the financial and reputational values related to sustainability (Gooderham, Grøgaard and Foss, 2019). Elkington (1997) introduces the concept "triple bottom line", i.e., economic, social and environmental factors, that made more explicit the costs to forms of failing to behave in a socially responsible manner (Gooderham et al., 2019). However, changing one's business structure or way of conducting business is an expensive transformation in most cases, and thus change does not always come easily (Carroll et al., 2018). With this said, there are several advantages of becoming more sustainable. For instance, lower cost, new ideas and a strong positive reputation are all upsides stemming from the innovative and entrepreneurial changes a more sustainable focus may bring. At the same time, not keeping up with sustainable goals and development can incur the wrath from both internal and external stakeholders, severely hampering a business' income (Carroll et al., 2018). An explorative study of more than 500 Norwegian managers reason for why their companies engaged in sustainability found that improving image and being recognized for moral and leadership were dominating motives (Brønn & Vidaver-Cohen, 2009). Brønn and Vidaver-Cohen (2009) did not find this surprising since a string social agenda may be critical for meeting stakeholder's expectations and protecting reputation.

If we look some 20 years ago, corporations and organizational leaders would require substantial positive reinforcement just to consider sustainability in their business structure (Carroll et al., 2018). This has somewhat changed, and in todays' society, corporations have more or less accepted that sustainability is an important theme. Rather than focusing on why the need for

sustainability, they focus on how to achieve sustainable operations and initiatives the best way (Carroll et al., 2018). Carroll (2015) noted *"Sustainability seems so logical – take care of the present, take care of the future – that virtually no one opposes it (anymore) as a concept"*. This is further proven by a study showing positive effect by a corporation's sustainability in organizational processes and performance (Eccles, Ioannou & Serfeim, 2014). Eccels et als. (2014) study showed that corporations that not yet implemented sustainable changes or increased their sustainable focus, characterized as *Low Sustainability,* performed worse than corporations already voluntarily introducing sustainable focus, characterized as *High Sustainability*. Among several reasons to this effect is the heightened involvement of stakeholder groups (Eccles et al., 2014). Logically this makes sense considering the impact of corporate identity and image.

One theory which tries to capture the essence of sustainability, and in turn a company's work towards sustainability is called "*the triple bottom line*" (Elkington, 1997). This revolves around the "*three key spheres of sustainability that it must attend to – economic, social, and environmental"* (Carroll, et al., 2018, p.61.). Within this theory you have the three P's - *profit*, *people* and *planet,* relating to the three sustainable dimensions. Profit revolves around the corporation's ability to create a positive financial state. The foundation of any business organization is its economic responsibility, which encompass being profitable, generate taxes and providing employment opportunities in the society. People relates to aspects such as quality of life, equality, opportunities, communities or even nations. And lastly, planet is the focus on our environment, challenges around less pollution, overuse of resources and general conservation of the planet. This theory can be relevant as a framework for reporting financial, social and environmental indicators. The theory may also be applied as a way to implement values, issues and processes a company need to overcome in minimizing harm to society, while at the same time creating economic, social and environmental value. Baumann-Pauly et al. (2013) studies sustainability practices in large multinational companies (MNEs) and small and medium-sized firms (SMEs). The study reveals distinctive implementation patterns of CSR between the two groups of firms, the MNCs were more advanced than the SMEs in making extensive public commitments to sustainability through publishing comprehensive reports, while SMEs were advanced in implementing sustainability practices in organizational processes and procedures, including engaging employee

2.1.4 Sustainability in IT-sector – Green IT

At this point, it seems inevitable that sustainability is vital for business organizations, no matter which sectors they operate. This is no different in the IT sector. Brønn and Vidaver-Cohen (2009) found that service industries, including, those relying on technology, found it important to engage in sustainability initiatives for profitability reasons, maybe due to their direct customer involvement. However, one may wonder in which way IT consultant firms or other information communication & technology (ICT) corporations could help the environment, as compared to social and financial sustainability. No matter the industry, corporations can work within sustainability to help financial equality, equal opportunities for employees, local sponsorships or other initiatives (Ziemba, 2020).

First off, before delving into green IT, what does it mean to describe something as green? In many ways, the term "*green*" is often describing anyone or anything that use environmental arguments or utilize environmental actions (Adams, 2020). Everything from political parties, academic researchers, organizations or even food have the ability to be labeled green. It was also used in conjunction with businesses, especially towards those that claim to be environmentally friendly.

Hussen (2019, p.358.) states that *"when it comes to the issue of protecting the environment, business is often viewed as the problem."* Thus, to combat environmental decline, businesses need to become part of the solution in one way or other. Herein lies the potential positive effects of both corporate image and reputation as previously mentioned, but also in potential financial success of working towards a *"greener"* corporation. Yet, some argue that corporate *"greening"* is not driven by anything other than financial gain (Adams, 2020). Moral high ground or green zealots in corporate management is often trumped by income and maximizing short-term gain for shareholders, something in direct contrast of working with long term sustainable goals (Hussen, 2019)

A concept related to IT and IT organizations is Green IT (Deng, Ji and Wang, 2017). One way of referring to Green IT, is the minimization of negative environmental externalities associated with the design, manufacture use and disposal of IT. It also includes actions related to IT professionals improving sustainable development, improving product stewardship, and preventing pollution (Molla et al., 2014). Some argue that information technology (IT)

functions represent *barriers* and *enablers* of environmental sustainability (Deng, Ji & Wang, 2017). One *barrier* is the fact the IT industry is a major consumer of electric energy. Large facilities housing energy draining servers and computers often stand out like a sore thumb in nature. Depending on nations and locations around the world, electric energy is created in a wide variety of ways. Some of these are powered by highly polluting fossil sources such as coal, oil & gas. Thus, a way to mitigate these issues could be making sure the energy requirements are either lowered through optimized equipment, but also from localizing server parks in areas with high access to renewable energy. Even though some say the IT industry is considered a "*necessary evil*", IT is one of the most effective tools we have today in addressing environment-related issues. As an *enabler* of sustainability, it helps for example by creating IT based sensor technologies, monitoring energy consumption (Deng et al., 2017). Another example of positive enabling by IT, is greener practices that contribute to environmental protection and resource conservation (Molla et al., 2014). An estimated reduction of 7.8 gigatonnes of CO_2 emission reductions were expected in 2020 based on the help from IT initiatives, representing approximately $946.5bn of cost savings globally (GeSI, 2008).

2.2 Stakeholders
2.2.1 Stakeholder theory
The concept of stakeholders derives from the terminology *shareholders* and *stockholders*. Shareholders and stockholders were groups that had an investment or *"claim"* in the company (Friedman, 1970). However, as the world evolved and became more global, more interested parties felt they had a claim (Carroll, et al., 2018). The first one to address stakeholder theory systematically was Freeman (1984) in his book Strategic management: A Stakeholder Approach. Freeman pointed out that there are several relationships to be aware of and that are important to an organization, and he argued that companies should strive to meet the needs of stakeholders. Freeman (1984, p.6.) defines a stakeholder as "*any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's purpose and objectives*". Stakeholders are often understood to be the owners, managers, employees, customers, suppliers as well as the community in which the organization is operating. Freeman's (1984) definition was built upon an idea that any organization need to have a strategy towards each stakeholder groups. As a response to this, companies need to broaden their strategies and change their operations to engage with various stakeholder groups.

However, an issue related to Freeman's definition of stakeholders is that it creates a very wide understanding of who or what counts as a stakeholder (Parmar, Freeman, Harrison, Wicks, Purnell, & De Colle, 2010). Parmar et al. (2010) claim that it is imperative to look at the relationships between stakeholders and organization (Parmar, et al., 2010). Freeman (1984) argue that companies should strive to meet the needs of stakeholders. In his eyes there are three distinct types of stakeholders: equity stakeholders, economic or market stakeholders and influence stakeholders. Equity stakeholders are those that have a direct "*ownership*" of the company. Economic or market stakeholders are those who not necessarily have an ownership, but an economic interest the company. And lastly influence stakeholders are those who neither have ownership, nor economic interest in the organization, but some sort of influence over/in the company (Cornelissen, 2014)

Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory stands in direct contrast to what Friedman (1970) had theorized previously. Friedman saw the corporate model as; Corporation -> Profit -> Stakeholder (In this case the stockholders/owners). On the other side, Freeman saw the corporate model as; Corporation -> Stakeholders -> Profit. These two models vary in the influence of stakeholders, and thus would change how the corporation consider sustainability and sustainable operation.

2.2.2 Identifying stakeholders

Even though Freeman (1984) states the importance of stakeholders, he does not give any indication of which stakeholders are most important, nor how to properly identify them. The question of who the most relevant stakeholders are for a firm can be challenging, and the answer to the question can depend on who you are asking (Thomsen & Conyon, 2012). Literature has several theories and models trying to solve that problem. One classic way of defining stakeholders is by Clarkson (1995) who divides the stakeholders into two distinct groups: primary and secondary stakeholders. Primary stakeholders are those essential for the continued organization's survival, in short, those which the organization could not live without. Secondary stakeholders are those who either influence or affect, or those who are influenced or affected by the organization. Even though these stakeholders do not have an immediate effect on the organization's survival, they will have the capacity to affect things such as public opinion one way or the other (Cornelissen, 2014).

Charkham (1992) has a different approach and view what ties a stakeholder has to the organization in any form of contract or formal agreement. As such we can divide them into either contractual stakeholders, or community stakeholders. This approach put contractual stakeholders in a group as long as they have any type of contractual relationship to the organization-based exchange in goods or services. On the other side, community stakeholders might not have any direct relationship, yet have an ability to influence the organization. Examples of contractual stakeholders are customers, employees, distributors, suppliers, shareholders and lenders. Examples of community stakeholders are consumers, regulators, government, local communities, media and pressure groups.

A third approach is grouping stakeholders in a typology based upon three distinctive attributes – legitimacy, power and urgency (Carroll, et al., 2018). This provides a way to analyze and determine importance of stakeholders based on these attributes, and in turn show stakeholder salience depending on these factors. An example of this is shown in figure 4, Stakeholder Typology.
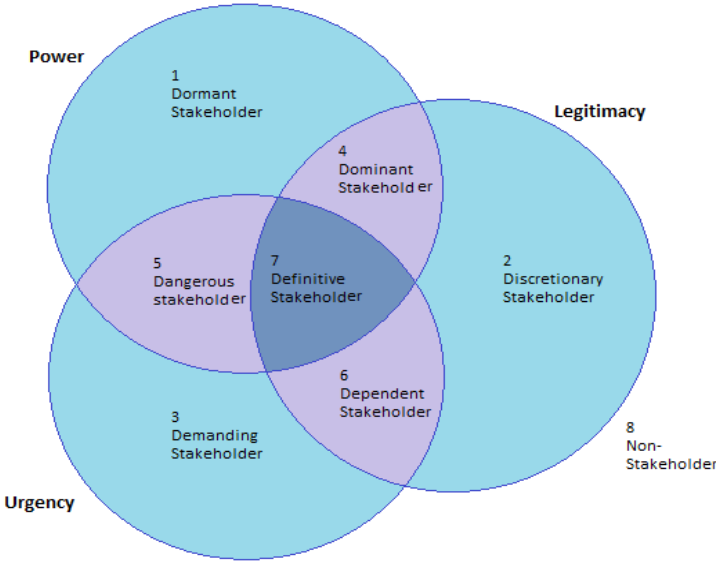
Figure 2, Stakeholder Typology (Carroll, et al., 2018, p.77.)

To sum up, stakeholders are an individual or a group of individuals who can affect or can be affected by the actions of the business. Internal stakeholders are entities within a business such as employees, managers, board of directors, and investors. While external stakeholders are entities who are not within the business itself but are affected by the business' performance. For instance, consumers, regulators, suppliers, and investors. Communication according to

Genç (2017) plays a crucial role in any sustainability strategy. Moreover, the future of any organizations strongly depends on how it is perceived by the key stakeholders such as investors, customers, consumers, employees and member of the communities in which the company operates (Cornelissen, 2014 p.308). Communication is discussed more thorough in chapter 2.3.

2.3 Corporate communication
2.3.1 Introduction to corporate communication
How firms are viewed by their stakeholders is considered critically for many firms (Cornelissen, 2014). As such, clear communication is becoming an increasingly important focal point of any corporation's business strategy. Further, protecting a company's reputation or perception is becoming *critical* in the mind of many CEOs and senior executives of several multinational and large corporations (PwC, 2013). As the society, and especially the flow of information has changed drastically during the last 50 years, it is apparent that the corporations and organizations had to rethink the way they were communicating (Brønn & Berg).

Up until the 1970s corporations tend to focus more on the scope of public relations than direct communication with its primary stakeholders. A lot of their communication took place through the media in form of adverts or press releases (Cornelissen, 2014). Hence, the communication was mainly one-way and thus the corporations did not need to consider reputation in the same way as they need to today. Corporations were to a larger extent free to manufacture the public image of themselves through media and press releases. However, as time passed by, other stakeholders became progressively more important, and started demanding information in a larger scale (Cornelissen, 2014). This led to a change in communication going from primarily public relations-related, to incorporate everything from corporate design, corporate advertising, internal communication to employees, issues and crisis management, media relations, investor relations, change communication and public affairs (Argenti, 1996).

Van Riel (1995, p.26.) defines corporate communication as "*an instrument of management by means of which all consciously used forms of internal and external communication are harmonized as effectively and efficiently as possible»*, with the goal of forming *«a favorable basis for relationships with groups upon which the company is dependent"*. This definition fits well with the definition given by Brønn and Berg (2005, p.22.) who describe corporate

communication as "*the orchestration of all instruments in the field of organizational identity in such attractive, realistic and truthful manner as to create or maintain a positive reputation for groups with which the organization has an interdependent relationship (stakeholders)*". From these definitions we can see the importance and relevance of clear communication both internally as well as externally from corporation management specifically towards stakeholders.

One change from this emphasis on a clear-cut communication at all levels throughout the corporation, was the adding of new and specialized communication departments within the organization. Whereas communication in a large degree was the job of public relations and marketing communication departments, we saw the emergence of new communication specialties such as human resources (employee and job market communication), production management (environmental communication), financial management (investor relations), as well as understanding that people within the organization are now communicating both with internal and external interested parties to a much larger degree. (Brønn & Berg, 2005). However, this will of course depend on the size of corporations, where in smaller organizations one person could take on the role of several types of communication.

Communication to stakeholders can take different forms, varying from annual reports, PR, company presentations, and today also the use of social media, for example Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and Instagram. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) argue that many organizations today has adopted social media as an effective method of corporate communication because it allows firms to engage more directly with its stakeholders, and further open up for two-way communication. Reilly and Hyan (2014) found that "green" companies were more likely to report sustainability information in their formal corporate communication compared to "no green" companies, the same was the case for corporate communication through on social media. The research was based on large American firms.

Brønn and Berg (2009) consider these four areas to be of main importance with connection to corporate communication: (1) Identity cluster, (2) Reputation cluster, (3) Corporate branding cluster and (4) Management of communication cluster. In the first cluster the authors asked the question of how identifying an organization can be determined as well as wanting to understand what challenges or aspects help influence the identity. In the second part, they tried to figure out the influence and importance of reputation, whether positive or negative, as well as which

factors have the strongest impact on reputation. In third cluster the authors explored what drivers affect corporate branding, what added value corporate branding could give, and how internal decision-making can influence corporate branding. In the last cluster they looked at questions such as the importance of harmonizing communication throughout the organization, or which factors could simplify overall communication policy within the organization. This can be seen in Fig. 1, *Coherence between the four core themes in research on corporate communication.*
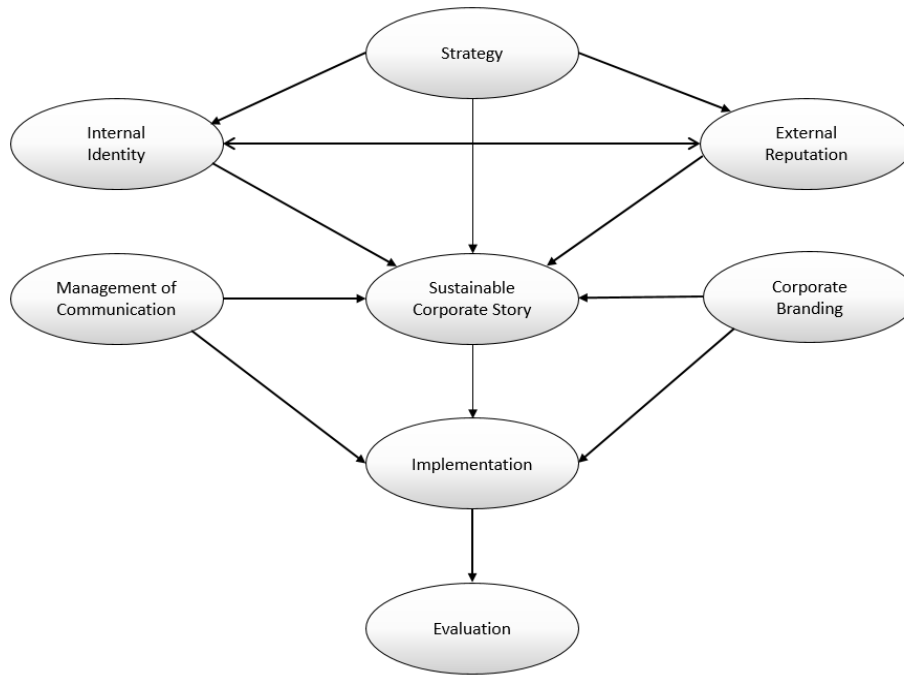
Figure 3, Four core themes. (Brønn & Berg, 2005, p.25.)

2.3.2 Corporate identity and reputation

Related to corporate communication, Cornelissen (2014) found expressions such as corporate identity and corporate reputation. Cornelissen (2014) discovered that managing relationships with stakeholders is clearly important, and one way of doing this is by building and maintaining a strong corporate reputation. A strong reputation is achieved when corporations communicate an either unique, authentic or distinctive corporate identity towards stakeholders (Cornelissen, 2014). These ideas of corporate identity have been around for a long time, however aspects such as organizational identity, reputation and corporate branding may be more important than ever, whether the goal is to attract top-level employees or capturing and keeping important clients (Schultz, Hatch & Larsen, 2000). Brønn & Berg's (2005) model shows an illustration of how different stakeholder groups each can have their own perception, or image if you will, of the corporation. It is the sum of these stakeholders' perceptions that in the end make up

corporate reputation, and corporations that focus more on one stakeholder group, while ignoring others might soon find themselves a big surprise (Brønn & Berg, 2005)
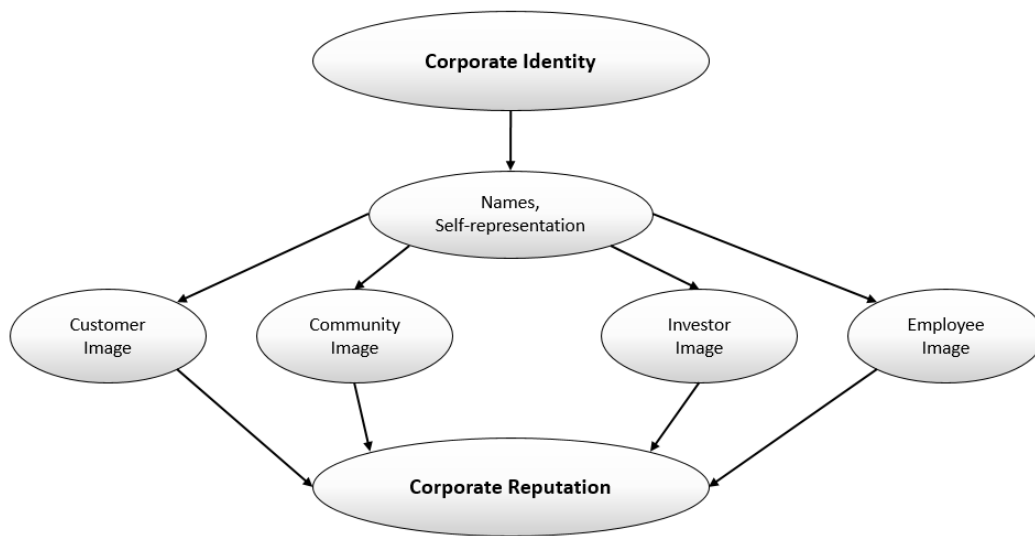
Figure 4, Corporate reputation. (Brønn & Berg, 2005, p.109.)

Olins stated that corporate identity "*can project four things: Who you are, what you do, how you do it and where you want to go*" (Olins, 1989). These four but seemingly simple questions all serve a purpose in providing guidelines for showing your corporate identity. Whether it revolves around your industry of operations, how you go about existing in that sector, or how you are looking towards the future, all relate to corporate identity and reputation. Meanwhile, a different take some researchers proposed were that organizations have five distinct identities: an *actual* (who the organization is, what they do, organizational behavior etc.), a *desired* (how they want to be perceived), a *communicated* (how they say they are based on their desire), a *conceived* (how the organization is perceived, either by internal or external stakeholders) and an ideal *identity* (whom the organization would compare themselves too – top of the class within that segment or industry) (Balmer & Greyes, 2003).

However, corporate identity is not necessarily a one-way approach. If a company prides themselves in having experts within a certain industry, it is also paramount the employees follow up on the promises, and really *do* have the technical expertise being promised. The same could be said if a corporation fronted a positive service minded attitude. If the employees are not able to follow-up on the corporate identity, reputation will soon drop. Thus, it is essential

that corporate identity is communicated throughout the organization and leave a lasting impression for its employees.

Cornelissen (2014) introduced the following three headings with regards to strategic advantages for a corporation. The first heading *Distinctiveness:* Creating a clear and distinct corporate image can help in awareness and recognition among stakeholder groups. This is also prevalent within the organization as it could help raise morale and motivation among employees by letting them feel like "we" compared to just another workplace. The second heading *Impact:* As the corporate identity and reputation can help provide a basis for being favored by stakeholders, the corporation's impact could for example manifest in stakeholder's willingness to support, invest, purchasing products or not opposing decisions. Third heading *Stakeholders:* Some stakeholders could be in several stakeholder roles. Depending on the corporation and its industry, some employees are also customers or shareholders. Thus, it is imperative the company continuously communicate, and follow through on perceived image. And when image and identity does not follow what is being communicated, employee's perception of the company's integrity and reputation might falter.

2.3.3 Employee communication

In part of building a corporate brand and identity a clear-cut communication is required, maybe even more so towards one of the major stakeholder groups – employees. Not only it is important and relevant for strengthening morale, but just as much to connect employees to corporate brand and identity (Cornelissen, 2014). The literature has shown that the way communication functions have differed in the last 50 years, especially the last 20. Where employees did not have any real way of communicating corporate brand and identity. And now with the emergence of social media, blogging and general ease of information flow employees can actively take part in corporate communication. However, because of this ease of communication, it is imperative employees' functions as brand ambassadors and not disruptive. Thus, the importance of communication within the organization is substantial when it comes to installing a sense of corporate identity or image within the employees.

In the last years, the environment of internal communication has changed significantly. Traditionally, the internal communication earlier was based on traditional face-to-face communication or printed publications. However, modern organizations these days rely as well on social networks and electronic media (podcasts or videos for example) (Verčič & Špoljarić, 2020). Moreover, which channels the organization choose can have different levels of cost, complexity, formality or capacity, and it is therefore imperative that the organization choose the communication method that best suits the message. Furthermore, organizations must also consider the needs with regards to employees, speed of data, sender goals, message given, receiver characteristics or resources (Verčič, 2019).

One way of looking at employee communication is through the methods *downward* and *upward* communication. With downward communication, messages, identity, brand and other information is sent downstream through either managers or via corporate information and communication systems (CICS). Andrews & Herschel (1996) describes this as "*information flowing from the top of the organizational management hierarchy and telling people in the organization what is important (mission) and what is valued (policies)*". Upwards communication relates to employees being able at sending information and communication upstream within the organization. Whether it regards information about projects, work, and information about organizational practices or policies. This type of communication can be substantially important for the organization, not only for morale and motivation (employees feeling they have a say, and not just a cog in the wheel), but also for improving an organization's overall profitability and performance (Cornelissen, 2014). Neglecting either downward or upwards communication can be quite detrimental to the organization, and seemingly both are equally important.

One exciting paradigm in how organizations collaborate with stakeholders, and especially employees, is the focus on engagement in the workplace. Communication expert's state engagement help improve morale and enthusiasm. In addition, it also increases work output as well as reducing absence or swift turnovers. This is backed up by literature saying there is a strong connection between employee performance and business outcomes with a focus on engagement (Verčič & Vokić, 2017). Some examples of key drivers are social climate,

personality traits, work environment or recognition from management/peers regarding work achievements. Moreover, internal communication satisfaction plays a big role in employee engagement, and companies that engage in effective internal communication have a much larger chance at high levels of employee engagement (Verčič & Vokić, 2017).

2.4 Summary

To sum up, there is an increased global focus on sustainability issues in the society, not at least related to environmental sustainability and unified goals of decreasing pollution. Hence, it is expected that organization integrate sustainability issues as part of their business. Sustainability is defined as economic, social and environmental factors, however Adams (2006) pointed out that often environmental and social viability is underplayed compared to economic viability, thus creating *weak* and *strong* sustainability. Thus one aim of this thesis is to explore what an IT consultancy company regard as important sustainability issues and to what extent this is integrated in "day to day" work in the organization and in contact with customers. Integrating sustainability can come at cost, but also give advantages for an organization such as increased legitimacy and reputation among its stakeholders (Carroll et al, 2018), e.g. potential investors, customers, employees and the society in general. Which stakeholders a company find most important can vary, hence it is interesting to explore which stakeholders an IT consultancy company find most important. Corporate communication is the strategy a corporation's leadership utilizes to portray, communicate and build their corporate identity and reputation to key stakeholders. Such as customers and suppliers (i.e. external stakeholders) and employees and managers (i.e. internal stakeholders) may find a corporation's identity and reputation important. It is not only vital with corporate communication to external stakeholders, but also internal, which is related to employee communication. Research shows that companies with effective internal communication have advantages over those without (Cornelissen, 2014).

3. Method

In this chapter I present the methodology used in this study to answer the proposed research questions. First, I present the choice of research design, data collection and analysis. Thereafter, I evaluate the quality of the research, which involves reliability, validity and ethics. This is shown in figure 5, Method build up.
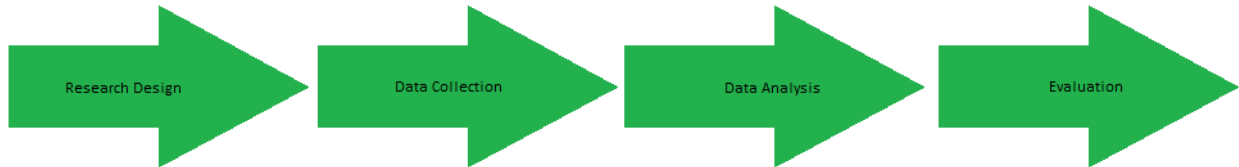
Figure 5, Method build up

3.1 Research design

The research design relates to the overall plan of answering research questions through data collection and data analysis (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). In general, we separate design into three main groups – exploratory, descriptive and causal design. This study has an explorative approach by analyzing sustainability within the context of a Norwegian medium-sized IT company. This is a suitable design for new and complex topics and the problem to be addresses is complicated in nature. Due to the complex nature of the research questions, in-depth knowledge through asking open questions in interviews was required to develop insights about the research topics. Further, an exploratory design is flexible and adaptive to change, which contributes to a certain degree of flexibility in the study.

Further, following the exploratory nature of this study, I adopt a qualitative research design (Saunders et al., 2019). Qualitative research seeks to explain how people understand and interpret events or a phenomenon. This method utilizes non-numerical data in constructing and developing a conceptual framework and theoretical contribution (Saunders et al., 2019), and this thesis build qualitative interviews on a one-on-one basis. This choice is based upon the perceived best way of obtaining subjective and socially constructed opinions, and thus is more applicable than a numerical approach such as the quantitative method (Saunders et al., 2019).

3.1.1 Research philosophy

Choice of research philosophy gives a basis for the foundation of the study, both in what way the research problem is addressed, and the best way to achieve a credible and substantial answer to the study (Saunders, et al., 2019). The purpose of this study is to explore sustainability in an exciting industry in the form of an ICT company, e.g. how sustainability is interpreted by the organization, how it is communicated to important stakeholders. One major stakeholder group is the employees, and I seek to explore their connection with sustainability in day-to-day work, if any. Due to the nature of this study and approach, it is not sufficient to obtain standardized data from a large number of respondents such as simple check marked questionnaires, but that the research questions are best answered through meaningful content such as text or speech (Saunders et al., 2019), which is why I have chosen one-on-one interviews.

3.1.2 Research approach

This research is based on a combination of an inductive and deductive approach (Saunders et al., 2019). Generally, a deductive approach involves testing of existing theories, while an inductive approach aims to generate meanings from the data collected and makes it possible to uncover unexpected findings (Saunders et al., 2019). Inductive theories are used when there is limited knowledge about the topic to be researched. Some research studies require a combination of these two approaches, called abductive approach. This is an approach that is just as common as inductive and deductive approaches (Saunders et al., 2019). An abductive approach is preferable when the researcher attempt to modify or generate new theories (Saunders et al., 2019)

In this study, the initial research questions were based on existing theories on sustainability, communication and stakeholder theory. Theory regarding sustainability, corporate communication or stakeholder theory are all well-known subjects within academic research, thus they are appropriate to utilize deductive approach. However, an inductive approach was used to analyze the data material and to and reflect upon theoretical subjects that appear through the data material (Saunders et al., 2019) and to rephrase the research questions. An inductive approach is advantageous when there is limited research on a problem subject in academic literature. This is apparent with regards to specifically how sustainability, corporate communication and stakeholder theory come together, with regards to an ICT corporation. Due to the mixture of subject themes, I found an abductive approach to be most applicable in this thesis.

3.2 Research strategy

Saunders et al. (2019) explain that a research strategy is the academics' detailed plan in attempting to answer the research problems. Thus, the strategy is guided by the research questions the researcher is attempting to explore. Literature points to several within qualitative research, however in this thesis I have chosen a single-case study design as my main strategy. A case study is an empirical investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2009), which fits my research. Case study research can include both single- and multiple case studies (Yin, 2009). The single-case study is appropriate when it represents a critical case in testing a well formulated theory, the case is an extreme, or unique case, or it is a revelatory case. A single case study allows the researcher to study a phenomenon in-depth. Due to the fact that I am writing the thesis alone and the time period assigned to this research, I found a single case study to be a more manageable approach, hence a holistic, single case study is employed (Yin, 2009). This strategy requires using rich, non-numerical data gathered through interviews with respondents in the chosen case company as well as the use of possible secondary data. Additionally, case studies are relevant to provide answers to what, why and how questions as is the case for this research (Saunders et al., 2019).

3.2.1 Case selection and case description

A key factor in case study is determining the boundaries of the study, before choosing the case itself (Saunders et al., 2019). A "*case*" in case study can refer to any number of things, depending on what you intend to study e.g. a person, a group, an organization, an event, a process or a number of other different case subjects. As stated in chapter 3.2, I chose a single case for this study. This was based on several factors, such as network, time and ease of access. Gaining access to conduct research in an organization can be difficult (Saunders et al., 2019).

Firstly, I chose a Norwegian IT consultant corporation. The green shift is a uniquely Norwegian aspect, and thus it would be important to choose a Norwegian company over a multi-national one that might not have the same connection to sustainability and green shift localized to Norway. Sustainability factors, as well as aspects such as work environment laws can differ from nation to nation, making it preferable to choose a corporation with mainly national roots. Secondly, I chose a medium-sized company. Compared to large and multi-national corporations, there is less research on medium-sized corporations related to this study's problem questions. Further, it is expected that medium-sized businesses have enough capital

and employees to have dedicated communication specialists and potentially more developed communication strategies compared to smaller businesses. Medium-sized businesses have between 50 and 250 employees defined by international standards, and as such also have a large enough sample size with regards to potential informants. Third factor were out of convenience and networking. As I personally know of an employee working in a Norwegian medium-sized IT consultant corporation, I had an easier time of getting access to informants.

The IT consultant company in this case has a focus on sustainability through their external communication, both on their website, but also through social media such as Facebook or Instagram. Among several IT based services, one focus point is on the energy industry, and energy-conserving IT systems. Thus, they seemed like an appropriate case subject for this study.

3.2.2. Selection of informants

Prior to data collection, a selection of informants were chosen to best answer the problem statement of this thesis. A selection is a part of the population, which to some extent represent the whole population. This selection can be narrowed down by the field of work the researcher is exploring (Saunders et al., 2019). The selection is based upon employees within an IT corporation, thus the whole population would be all employees of that IT company. Saunders et al. (2019, pp.295.) state that *"such a population may be difficult to research as not all elements or cases may be known to the researcher or are easy to access"*. Considering this, rather than focusing on the entire population, the researchers may define the population as something more manageable, often referred to as a target population. In this thesis, the target population is narrowed down to employees in an IT company working with sustainability, or employees in contact with customers. From this narrowing down, the researcher can take a manageable sample population for their study.

Population selection can also be based upon the study you are performing, quantitative studies require a larger portion to achieve numerical values as a base for your data. However, when concerning qualitative studies, each informant possesses a substantial amount of data, and thus the number of respondents can, and should, be lower. Kvale & Brinkmann (2014) state that a too high number of informants may actually hamper the research, i.e. it simply becomes too much data, and the underlining truths can be lost in the vastness. To acquire a representative data material, differences and variation is important when selecting your population segment

(Jacobsen, 2015). This is to get representative data material, and not just information from one uniform group or population, potentially leading to a skewed data basis.

In the end, the sample basis for this thesis were based upon employees in one medium sized ICT corporation. Within this corporation, to achieve a representative selection of data, both regular employees, as well as employees in managerial positions were chosen. Furthermore, some of the regular employees were working in departments such as HR and communication, while others had positions as analysts or consultants.

Initially, the informants were chosen both based on relevance to the study, but also by ease of access. Both managers and regular employees were initially asked to be informants. The first informants were recruited through my network, the rest through the snowball method, which is asking a respondent if s/he knows others in the population that could be willing to be interviewed (Johannessen, Christoffersen & Tufte, 2020). Further, some informants heard about the study from others at the office, and then volunteered to be a part of the data collection.

A total of 12 interviews were conducted, six informants had a managerial position at various levels in the organization and six had position as a consultant. In appendix. 3 I have provided a table of all the informants.

3.3 Data collection

The following section elaborates on the type of data used in this research. The thesis is based on a combination of primary and secondary data, with the primary data (interviews with informants) as the main data material.

3.3.1 Collection of primary data- interviews with informants

When choosing to go through with interviews, planning and preparation is required. The five p's; "*Prior planning prevents poor performance*" (Saunders et al., 2019) are a good guideline to go by. This preparation included reading up on literature surrounding the problem questions, in this case mainly sustainability and the green shift, stakeholder theory and corporate communication. If any informants had any questions about themes or subjects before or after the interview, they were free to ask me about it. However, I made a conscious choice of not defining sustainability in detail, as I was particularly interested in the answers I would receive regarding that subject.

According to Yin (2009) one of the most important sources of case study information is the interview. The interviews can take many forms, but open-ended interviews are most common, where you ask key informants about their opinions and/or insights about relevant themes for the research.

Yet, the literature states there are three main interview types, unstructured, semi-structured and structured (Saunders et al., 2019). Another typical way of differentiating interviews is as standardized and non-standardized. Standardized and structured interviews are linked together, as are non-standardized and semi-structured/unstructured interviews. In semi-structured interviews (non-standardized) the interviewer often starts with a pre-determined list of themes, and certain questions linked to these. As the interview proceeds the interviewer can use the answers received connected to each theme and try to identify the reality the interviewer seeks to reveal (Saunders et al., 2019). Unstructured interviews (non-standardized), also called in-depth interviews, are more informal in nature. Although used to explore or delve into an area relevant to the interviewer, they do not come with any pre-determined questions or themes, rather the interview is emergent and exploratory (Saunders et al., 2019). What is important is that the interviewer should strive to give the questions in such a manner that any bias does not come through, i.e. not to influence the interviewee in any shape or form (Saunders et al., 2019).

In this research I have chosen a rather structured interview approach with standardized questions for data collection. The interviews were based on a pre-determined questionnaire, however the answer possibilities were open, and thereby had commonalities with semi-structured interviews (Østbye et al., 2007). Structured interviews are a type of quantitative interviews, however they can be modified to somewhere in-between structured and semi-structured interviews, giving them a qualitative approach. These in turn excel in achieving in depth knowledge about certain subjects (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014) which is advised when conducting qualitative studies. Qualitative interviews attempt to collect information, or to be informed by the interviewees, rather than collecting quantifiable variables (Østbye, Helland, Knapskog & Larsen, 2007). The reason for a rather structured approach was due to informants' time-constraints (informants did these in the middle of their workday, so as not to drag out the interviews too long), as well as a method to receive unbiased and honest information from the informants about the case in hand. However, as mentioned, the interviews were still held in such a way that the informants had time and room to explore their answers, as well as give

statements or data further than the actual questions if they wanted to. As such, the interviews were somewhere in between structured and semi-structured methods, as all questions were open-ended.

A total 12 interviews were conducted with different individuals in the organization. The data collection took place from late April through end of May. The interview process varied somewhat, i.e. a combination of online interviews through zoom/teams, email and personal interviews. Due to Covid-19 and most informants working out of home office, most interviews were conducted online via Zoom or Teams. Some interviews were conducted by a research assistant locally in the organization among informants working at the office. The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes. All interviews were held in English, however some statements and expressions were translated from Norwegian to English at times. A few interviews were email-interviews. The interviewees were guaranteed anonymity.

At the start of every interview, the informants were asked to describe their current position within the corporation, as well as their age-group (set in five year segments). All informants had access to the question list before starting the interview and had the opportunity to ask any questions if necessary regarding theoretical background, nature of the study or definitions of the research topics. The main purpose of interviews was to discover the informant's opinion on the corporation's work towards sustainability, how sustainability was communicated, the importance of sustainability to key stakeholders, and if the employees themselves thought about sustainability in their daily work etc. The interview guide can be found in Appendix 2. Due to the nature of interviews over internet, interviews were recorded. This was clarified and consented to by informants beforehand. The interviews performed by the research assistant in person were recorded only by audio, and also clarified and consented to by all informants.

3.3.2 Secondary data

The main data for this thesis is the primary data, yet the thesis includes some secondary data. The secondary data used is based on publicly available information gathered from the case organization's website, LinkedIn and Facebook account, accountancy report and newspaper articles. The secondary data was particularly relevant for increased understanding of communication of sustainability to stakeholders. Use of secondary data in addition to primary data gave me a broader insight into the communication of the case firm's sustainability, and further, enhanced the research quality through triangulation of data (Yin, 2009).

3.4 Data analysis

Saunders et al. (2019) explains there are several different approaches to analyze data. These choices can be based upon the methodological and philosophical basis of research, the approach to theory development used in research and the analytical approach used in the technique. In this thesis I have chosen an inductive approach as well as an interpretivist philosophy. Based upon this, I have chosen to move forward with a thematic analysis. The data analysis will be a thorough study of the data material to identify potential themes, patterns and relations, and in turn attempt to give potential explanations of these (Saunders et al., 2019). The data analysis process started out with reading through the data material.

3.4.1 Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis is a structured and flexible way of analyzing qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Furthermore Braun & Clarke (2006) state that thematic analysis is a *"foundational method for qualitative analysis"*. This type of analysis is applicable both for large and small amounts of data sets (Saunders et al., 2019). I chose this method as a way to explore and relate themes to this thesis' research question, found in the data material based upon the interviews conducted and the secondary data. It was also an appropriate method based upon both interview length, as well as amount of interviews conducted. Saunders et al (2019, pp.651.) explains that thematic analysis can be separated into six steps;

1. Understand large amounts of different qualitative data
2. Integrate and link data from qualitative interviews and notes
3. Derive patterns or themes from a data set
4. Observe data, and produce a thematic description, and/or;
5. Test and develop both theories and explanations based on themes, patterns or relationships appearing through exploration of data
6. Draw and verify conclusions

Thematic analysis has the advantage of being flexible in the way that it is not necessarily tied to any research philosophy in particular (Saunders et al., 2019). Even though the way you interpret data differ based upon your research philosophy. For the same flexible reason, thematic analysis can be utilized whether one takes on an inductive, deductive or abductive approach. In a deductive approach, the researcher would let the theory and research question guide which themes are to be discovered. However, in an inductive approach, the themes naturally appear through examination of the data set, and further might modify or change your

research question appropriately. In this study I chose an abductive approach, thus letting the theory and research question guide me in search of themes through the data, however, by not being rigid and locked to the theory. Thus I let the data examined upon the pre-determined themes flow naturally and potentially change my research question based upon this exploration. Saunders et al (2019) explain that by taking on a thematic analysis approach, the researcher can spend their time rigorously analyzing the data, rather than spending valuable time trying to approach the data by strict rules advocated for its use taken on by other qualitative analyzing methods.

3.4.2 Coding data

The process of coding has its main purpose in categorizing and grouping data with similar meanings. By labeling data outtakes from data items, such as transcripts or documents, the researcher gives codes to the data such as to symbolize or summarize the data piece's meaning. By doing this, it can make data parts easier to access through further analysis (Saunders et al., 2019). In this thesis, I used my research question to help code my data, separating interesting data from non-interesting, thus saving time. This is an alternative version in studies taking on an inductive approach, where the researcher might need to code all data in search of themes, potentially being quite time consuming (Saunders et al., 2019). The data was coded manually.

3.4.3 Themes and recognizing relationships

Following coding, next step is recognizing relationships and themes in the data material. Even though this is seen as its own step in thematic analysis, it is often something the researcher does automatically while coding the data material (Saunders et al, 2019). In this thesis, I prepared a summary theme overview with the purpose of mapping similarities and differences, and thus further develop claims regarding connections. Saunders et al (2019) state the necessity of testing these connections, before any real connections can be claimed. Qualitative analysis seek to find alternative explanations for these connections, thus through the work of this data analysis I have been able to find conclusions based on the interview data material. In the analysis of data, I will also attempt to explore if certain themes or relationships differ between mainly managers and employees. Although I have collected information of informants based on age-groups and gender, I have prioritized the employee position.

3.5 Evaluation

This section discusses and describes the quality of the research study to increase the trustworthiness of the findings. Quality insurance of a case study with the inherent collection of data is important (Yin, 2009). The main ways to describe research quality are through the discussion of reliability and validity (Saunders et al., 2019). I will proceed to show this with regards to these requirements below. Lastly, I will look at potential ethical considerations in this study.

3.5.1 Reliability

Reliability in academic research pertains to a study's credibility and if the study generates consistent findings. A study would be considered having high reliability if other researchers would perform the same study under similar conditions, finding the same results (Saunders et al., 2019). Yin (2009) argues that the goal of the reliability is to minimize the errors and biases in a study. To increase reliability, I have emphasized to describe in detail the whole research process and to increase the overall transparency of my research. However, it is very challenging for another researcher to duplicate qualitative research (Johannessen et al., 2020).

In this study, I chose a structured interview guide with open ended questions to guide my research. In that way I tried to increase the study's validity. Use of a structured interview guide was important since a research assistant performed some interviews. A feature of structured qualitative interviews is that the interview guide and questionnaire should be shaped in such a way that no matter who gave the interview, the informants would have the same experience, even though the answers could differ from informant to informant.

To promote reliability further, questions were asked in a neutral way, as well as keeping awareness of body language and attitude. Since the research assistant is not as committed and knowledgeable of the subject, some errors could be expected, especially if the informant had questions regarding subjects or themes in the questionnaire during the interview. This was to a certain extent reduced by conducting somewhat structured interviews with pre-determined questions (yet with open ended questions), as well as providing the informant with information and questionnaire beforehand.

Some threats to reliability are researcher bias/errors and informant bias/errors (Saunders et al., 2019). In this study, some interviews were conducted personally, while some were conducted

through a research assistant. Since I was the sole researcher, bias and errors could also appear without me realizing it while doing the analysis, thus hampering the study's reliability. Informant bias or errors are a different challenge. Since most interviews were done in work hours, some interviews were able to be done impromptu when the informants had ample time, rather than specifying a certain time the interview had to be done. This led to informants not worrying about "finishing the interview" to get back to their job, and thus some interviews lasted longer than expected providing more data. Further, the fact that the informants were ensured anonymity before the interviews can reduce participant bias (Saunders et al., 2019). Also, the interviews for this study was voluntary for all informants which may increase reliability.

3.5.2 Validity
Another aspect of a study's quality is its validity (Saunders et al., 2019). Validity is often viewed by the dimensions, internal and external validity, and construct validity (Yin, 2009). In this study, internal validity related to what extent the findings are applicable to the whole organization. To increase internal validity, I used the same interview guide in all interviews. The internal validity was further enhanced by avoiding leading questions during the interviews. Yet, the 12 informants may not be representative for the whole organizations and hence, important opinions from other employees in the organization could have provided me with valuable information regarding the research questions. However, the interviews are with both managers and employees, women and men, and within different age groups, something that can increase internal validity. Data triangulation through including secondary data is another method for strengthening internal validity (Johannessen et al., 2020). In this study some of the interviews were conducted by a research assistant. However, it is relevant to mention that this was an employee within the organization. As such, some of the interviews performed by this research assistant could have some validity issues. When being interviewed by a colleague, the informants could modify their answers in a more favorable way, such as wanting to appear more knowledgeable or sustainable, compared to if the interview was performed by an outside source.

External validity is pertained to whether a study's research findings can be relevant to other contexts (Saunders et al., 2019). Typically, qualitative case studies are difficult to generalize to other settings or context (Yin, 2009) since they involve a small and unrepresentative numbers of cases (Saunders et al., 2019). Quantitative data collected from a large and representative population are better suited for generalization than a case study with few interviews (Saunders

et al., 2019). Consequently, it is difficult to generalize the results from this study to other organizations in the same or other industries. However, the results may be relevant for other medium-sized Norwegian IT companies since they are part of the same institutional context. Further, a description of the research context given in the method section may enable other researchers to evaluate if the results of this study could be used for comparative studies in similar organizations.

Construct validity in a qualitative study focus on to what extent the research examines what it intent to examine (Saunders et al., 2019). A challenge to this study could be the questionnaire and whether the informants understand all the terms used in the study. To increase construct validity the interview guide was developed after reading theory relevant for the study, such as theory about sustainability and IT, stakeholder theory and theory about corporate communication.

3.5.3 Ethical Considerations

In all stages of an academic study, ethical challenges may arise. Researchers need to consider the effects the study could have on those directly connected to the research (Saunders et al., 2019). In this study, I have considered this in all aspects of the research. This has especially been a strong focal point in data collection via interviews. As I have promised full anonymity both with regards to the company, as well as the informants themselves, I have taken utmost care with data storage and processing. In this study, I have not collected names of informants, however I have divided informants into male/female, employee/manager and into age-groups spanning 5 years. This is not enough to identify any informants, as per their requests. All informants were informed before interviews began, and signed a form consenting to being recorded, while also guaranteeing their anonymity. This is in accordance to ethical principles of privacy, and respect to the informants (Saunders et al., 2019).

Some informants in this study were selected before data collection started. However, more informants became available through snowballing, recommended by the initial informants. This can lead to ethical considerations. Often people tend to identify and recommend other potential respondents that are similar to themselves, thus this can create bias, resulting in a homogeneous sample (Lee, 2000). When it comes to the company's web-sites and secondary data, I made sure not to reveal any specifics. Rather, I extracted meaning or intent through their

communication. Throughout the thesis, I have made sure to give accurate referrals to previous work, which is both standard and ethical practice in academic studies.

4 Results and discussion of findings

This study entailed to explore the meaning of sustainability to an IT company and its importance to stakeholders. To do so, the overarching research question has guided this master thesis: *What does sustainability mean to an IT company and what role does it play for stakeholders?* In order to address this research question with inherent sub-questions, an exploratory single case-study with an IT company was performed. Overall, the main data were 12 interviews with employees and managers in the organization. This primary data was supplemented with secondary data. Moreover, this study was designed to provide a better understanding of the sustainability's importance to an IT company and its stakeholders. Section 4.1 present the empirical findings on the sustainability concept in general, and specific for the organization, and also includes the concept the green shift. In section 4.2. present and discuss the findings related to communication to stakeholders (SQ 2) and in section 4.3 I discuss to what extent and how sustainability is integrated in "day-to-day" work and in contact with customers.

4.1 The meaning of Sustainability for an IT company

General meaning of sustainability

Starting out the analysis I explored how the informants looked upon sustainability in general and not related to an IT company particularly. The analysis revealed that all the informants had an opinion about what is meant with sustainability. The analysis indicates that the informants defined sustainability from two perspectives: a business-related perspective and an environmental perspective. Most informants having a managerial position presented a definition of sustainability from a business perspective, that is, how companies can contribute to sustainability to the society. The following quote from a manager is illustrating:

> *"Sustainability for me is about companies that contribute to a better environment, take social responsibility and contributes to the society beyond the company itself.*

Another manager was more concrete giving an example of how a company can increase sustainability by evaluating its use of materials and resources in product development processes, as illustrated:

> "S*ustainability is about reducing the use of hazardous materials and minimizing the energy consumption during product development*".

The informants that were not in managerial positions looked at sustainability from a somewhat different angle, not from the perspective of an organization, but more from an environmental perspective with a focus on natural resources, recycling, and reduced product purchases. For instance, one informant stated that

> "*Sustainability is a way of preserving the natural resources and finding ways to protect them*".

Other employees explained the meaning of sustainability as buying more locally produced goods and minimizing product purchases that requires transport across the globe. Some informants mentioned the importance of recycling waste materials for instance, paper and plastic packaging.

It is interesting to note this difference in viewing sustainability between managers and employees. The results indicate that managers have a somewhat broader perspective on sustainability if we see the results in relation to Carroll et als' (2018) emphasize on the three P's (profit, people and planet). Both groups focus on the planet (environmental issues), yet the managers take the organization as a starting point. This may indicate that managers are more aware of the role of organizations for sustainability issues, and further the profit perspective. Another interesting finding is that none of the informants, neither managers nor employees referred to the "people" dimension such as quality of life and equality of opportunities when they reflected on sustainability issues in general. The reason for this may relate to the fact that many "people issues" in Norway are regulated by laws as stated by Grennes (2003).

Sustainability in an IT company

To dig more into the meaning of the sustainability concept I asked more concrete about the role of sustainability in the case-organization. Most informants thought sustainability was important for the organization, a few were somewhat reluctant and claimed that they were not sure if sustainability was important for the company or not. As claimed by one informant:

> "*We are only people, we do not produce or consume goods other than consumption of electricity and CO2 by commuting*".

The quote indicates that sustainability for some may represent environmental issues first and foremost and that not everybody is aware that the sustainability concept contains other dimensions.

Yet, in contrast to the general questions of sustainability, most informants were now more aware of the "people" dimension (cf. Carroll et al., 2018) and how sustainability came into practice in the organization through this dimension. The informants considered it important for the organization to provide an exciting and meaningful workplace to current and future employees. As one of the informants stated:

> *"To employ a sustainability strategy can help us create a meaningful place to work at the same time to make a difference and attract potential employees"*.

The case-organization has a growth ambition, and it is dependent on keeping and attracting highly skilled employees to compete for future projects. Creating a meaningful working environment can be important in that respect. In connection to this, the importance of equality was emphasized as part of the company's social responsibility. As noted by an informant:

> *"We put sustainability strategic goals as social responsibility related to diversity and inclusion in our organization. We work systematically to achieve them and measure results monthly, quarterly and annually"*.

The secondary data (website and newspaper articles) show that the company has a diverse workforce and worked hard to attract women to the organization. It is well known that there are fewer women than men in the industry (Brombach, 2016)

Thus, the results indicate that "people" as one of the three P's (Carrol et al, 2018) is included of what is meant with sustainability within the IT company. Furthermore, this finding is supported by the literature. As Tvaronaviciene (2014) argued, most organizations both focus and practice on long-term sustainability that can help them maintain a well-being workplace. The literature also suggest that most organizations realize the creation of a distinct and successful corporate identity through sustainability (Tvaronaviciene, 2014).

Yet, the analysis show that environmental issues too (Carroll et al., 2018, planet dimension), were mentioned as highly relevant for the company. Many informants revealed that energy saving power plans on electronics and lighting in their office are important for being sustainable. In addition, they mentioned that less traveling and online meetings is relevant for the company. Also, most informants believed that IT companies can have a big impact and contribute to sustainability goals in the society. The following quotes is illustrating:

> *"Sustainability is about minimizing the impact on our globe and future generations as far as possible, do our part in achieving the goals of international agreements on environmental issues"*.

Drivers of sustainability

The analysis indicated that increased profit and access to a larger customer base as important drivers for an increased focus on sustainability. The analysis shows that the profit dimension (Carroll et al. 2018) was important for the case firm, but first and foremost as a driver for sustainability. Most informants referring to the profit dimension identified financial motives as an aspect that drives sustainability in their business, that is, not emphasizing profit as a sustainable issue, but more as a driver for sustainability in the organization. This is illustrated by the following quote from one of the informants:

"*Sustainability will increase consciousness on the impact and responsibility a company has and combine profit and capitalism with doing good [.....] strengthening company profile and winning more business*".

In addition, several informants argued that sustainability would help attract potential customers and investors. This too, seemed to be a driver for sustainability, which further would influence profit. As one of the informants stated

"*Sustainability can attract interest from investors or potential customers which can lead to long term profitability. Since customers are increasingly setting higher demands for sustainability compliance that's why it is more vital that our company have focus on sustainability development*".

The findings seem to be in accordance with Eccles et als (2014) findings that increased focus on sustainability results in higher performance. Interestingly, several informants argued that most organizations failed to see the interplay between sustainability and profitability. If this is the case, the profit dimension of sustainability may be less known as part of the sustainability concept compared to the planet dimension, since the planet dimension, e.g., climate changes seems to be very present in media.

The green shift

The green shift is underlined by the Norwegian authorities. Therefore, I had some question related to this theme. Not all informants were aware of the concept "the green shift". Those informants who were most concerned about the concept and understood its purpose had a managerial position. The "average" employees seemed somewhat less occupied with the concept. An informant that emphasized the importance of the green shift noted that

> "The green shift is no longer a voluntarily activity. It is our social responsibility as an employer to become greener, reduce carbon footprint and educate people about its importance".

Further, the increased focus on the green shift was seen as a vital incentive for companies to improve sustainability. For instance, an informant mentioned that:

> "I think for many organizations government regulation is a must to force organizations to make changes to consumption and production. At the same time, the financial market is putting money into green /ESG companies (and out of oil & gas), which has a tremendous effect on the businesses".

Based on this, I draw the conclusion that the authorities focus on the green shift is awareness raising and may influence the companies' attitudes towards sustainability and may influence behavior. This is in accordance with Molla et als. (2014) findings. Further, awareness and increased requirements for reporting can be vital for an increased focus on sustainability (Pedersen et al, 2013). Yet, some informants argued that the green shift was of lesser importance for private and public consumption. Nor was the green shift expected to significantly affect the willingness in Norway to reduce the dependence on polluting oil and gas.

However, in addition to creating increased awareness about sustainability it was argued that the green shift was not directly relevant for the IT company internally. However, the green shift was important due to the fact it was expected growth in certain customer segments that needed to become greener in their production and this could represent a business opportunity for the company.

4.2 Sustainability communication with stakeholders

This study explored the importance of communicating sustainability to stakeholders, both internal and external stakeholders. Most of the informants who are in managerial positions were aware of the company's sustainability strategy. This is not surprising, since managers normally are in charge of strategic issues (Mallin, 2019).

Most important stakeholders

From the interviews it became clear that the most important internal stakeholders were considered to be employees and the investors. These were mentioned as most important both by employees and managers. Related to external stakeholders the managers and the employees agreed that customers and suppliers were important. Employees, investors, customers and

suppliers can be classified as primary stakeholders (Clarkson, 1995). Further, these stakeholders have a form of contract with the organization (Charkham, 1992). This can also be related to Freeman's (1984) perspective of stakeholders: Investors are equity stakeholders through ownership. Employees, customers, and suppliers are stakeholders having an economic interest in the interest in the company. In addition, some managers identified future investors and also regulators/authorities as important stakeholders for the company. It may not be surprising that the managers are more aware of potential investors and regulators as important stakeholder groups, since the managers are responsible for investor relations and that the company complies with laws, accountancy practices and so on.

Communication to stakeholders

In this study, the informants were asked about the importance of communication with internal and external stakeholders. The analyses revealed that most informants found it important to communicate to both internal and external stakeholders. This is illustrated by the following quote:

> "It is important to communicate sustainability to both internal and external stakeholders. Because I believe it is important so that they are aware that measures are being taken within the companies that they have invested in or companies they are working for to make sure we have a positive effect on the environment".

Yet, several informants claimed that it was even more important to communicate sustainability internally than externally. As one of the informants noted

> "I believe it is most important to communicate internally because this is about showing your employees how you put actions behind words so that they can show this to customers".

Another informant shared this view and stated that

> "I think internally is most important, because our employees are "our face" and our contact with customers".

It is interesting to note that employee communication is considered most vital by many. Employee communication is something that is stressed by (Cornelissen, 2014). Previous research shows that internal communication is important for employee engagement (Verčič & Vokić, 2017), and this can be advantageous for doing a good job, e.g., in contact with customers. A few informants argued that it also was important to communicate sustainability with external stakeholders, not at least to improve the reputation of the business. The following quotes are illustrating:

"It is important to communicate it externally in order to create a public opinion and setting trends that would benefit sustainability".

"Communicating sustainability with external stakeholders will unhide the future costs and improve the quality of the products and services. This will also enlarge the personal motivation and transparency of the business in regards to sustainable development".

Focus on image and reputation are in accordance with Brønn and Vidaver-Cohens (2009) findings. Meeting external stakeholders expectation and improve the image as a sustainable company can be critical for future growth (Bansal & Roth, 2000), and as stated, the case firm has growth-ambitions.

However, to sum up, it seems clear that the informants think that for an IT consulting company it is more vital to be concerned of internal communication of its sustainability strategy. The reason may be that the employees (consultants) are in direct contact with customers and through being informed of the organization's sustainability strategy, they are able to use this information in contact with customers. These results are supported by the literature. Genç (2017) argued that when there is a lack of internal communication within an organization, then it will be difficult to implement any changes with respect to making the organization more sustainable. Moreover, Genç (2017) also argued that external communication with the customers, work partners and the community is a must for sustainability strategies. This is because he believed that organization itself may face some losses in terms of sales of goods and services especially if there is an increasing trend towards sustainability at a global scale.

Ways of communicating

After stating their opinions about stakeholders, the informants were asked about what the best way was to communicate sustainability with stakeholders. Most informants from managerial positions stressed the importance of engaging more people in their organization to make sustainability accessible and understandable to everyone. To do so, the need of a full range of communication channels arise to ensure successful corporate communication.

Several informants discussed the use of infographics for sustainable development. Infographics is a powerful tool which allow people to easily digest information via visual data, charts, graphs and statistics. Most informants believed in the power of this tool on transforming data, sources and information to make them clear and easier to understand. As one of the informants stated

"I believe that most people today are well-aware of the impact we have had on the environment up until today, so spending too much time on further educating and

informing on this topic (sustainability) could be wasteful. I think it is better to consider a short and to the point infographics followed by direct measures taken could be a better way to go about it".

The case company had during the last couple of years developed a sustainable strategy, and it was emphasized to communicate this strategy to employees through the monthly company meetings or presentations. Further, it was argued that it was vital to make sure the firm put forward a message to customers, employees, owners/investors that shows the company is concerned about "green power" through various channels. Company presentations and other published articles was mentioned in this connection.

Related to this, as part of the case study, I further explored the case company's website, accounting report, and so on for information about sustainability. In its website, the company is sending a clear message about its sustainability strategy, not at least how the firm could improve sustainability among its clients. This can be interpreted as communication to external stakeholders, first existing and future clients, and also potential employees concerned about sustainability. Moreover, we find information about sustainability and the green shift on various blog posts on the company's website. One of the informants mentioned that the interest and awareness of external stakeholders to actively look for information if the company is contributing to sustainability has increased rapidly. Therefore, according to the informants, it is important to form an image or impressions when an organization is aiming to be known as a sustainable business, which is in accordance with Brønn and Vidaver-Cohens (2009) findings. Still, there is room for improvements. The company also use social media such as Facebook and LinkedIn. The impression is that these media outlets are not used to communication sustainability, more a general presentation of the firm, employees, information about projects. The accountancy report contain some information about the "people" dimension of sustainability (Carroll et al., 2018).

The importance of communication

It was argued by some informants that IT companies should communicate how the IT industry could contribute to increased sustainability in a society and emphasize "a combination of bigger purpose and economic impact" corresponding to Deng et als' (2017) argument. One of the informants explained how communication plays an important role in sustainability by stating the following statements:

"I mean sustainability is a way of life that can change the world. We can help preserve the natural resources by reducing our energy consumption. We are aware that us IT-industry fully rely on constant energy sources because we use desktops, laptops, and servers to operate [....] But then it will go back to the most important part, how can we be able to deliver this message? Communication is the key to make any strategy to be successful".

Communication entails the transfer of ideas, thoughts or feelings by the sender to receiver through both verbal and non-verbal means (Genç, 2017). In addition, Genç (2017) argued that in any sustainable plan or strategy, communication always play a vital role both internally and externally. Thus, making plans or creating applications for sustainable practices or acts, people need to express themselves internally within their organization.

4.3 The role of sustainability in "day to day" contact with customers

The case organization is delivering consultancy services to its customers (both existing and potential customers). Hence, I found it interesting to explore to what extent sustainability issues were relevant in contact with customers not at least since customers is considered as one of the main stakeholder groups. Related to this is the ability to improve customer relationship and address sustainability issues to customers can be vital. Thus, most informants believe that sustainability can be the gateway to improve or help the customer relations to grow. The informants were concerned about the opportunities for sustainability in the IT industry and argued that IT companies could have a high impact through the delivery of green products and services to customers. Green products and services are products with low environmental impacts and highly environmentally superior. These eco-friendly and green products usually developed through an alternative design which requires less resources and thereby be an enabler of sustainability as stated by (Deng et al, 2017). One informant noted that

"Through sustainability, this gives us the ability to increase longevity, maintainability and quality of the projects, solutions and company infrastructure as well as the encouraging the personal input and reputation".

In addition, most informants also believed that through sustainability, the company (and the IT industry) can optimize their resources for instance by monitoring prediction of adverse events, reducing energy consumption through standardization of services and through analysis and continuous improvement, in other words, be an enabler of sustainability (Deng et al, 2017). An informant from a managerial position claimed:

> *"One of the pillars of our business is to have a focus on how IT-industry products and services can contribute to better sustainability for our customers. Because I believe that we as a tech company can have the biggest impact in that way"*.

Several informants shared their experiences and claimed that good products and services are sometimes no longer enough. They also talked about "the conscious customers" who want more than just quality products and services, and often these customers are looking for businesses that align with their personal values. This indicates that the firm were aware of meeting customers' needs, as claimed by Freeman (1984). As one of the informants stated

> *"Usually, customers want to do business with organizations whose values align with their own"*.

Further, strengthening the brand as a sustainable company was important for the firm, both to attract and retain employees and customers, in line with Schultz et als' (2000) and Cornelissen (2014) arguments. As argued by Brønn and Berg (2005) it is the sum of important stakeholders' perceptions that make up corporate reputation, and as shown previously, employees and customers are considered among the most important stakeholders by the informants. This argument is illustrated by the following: One manager explained that its increased focus on sustainability has helped the firm to improve both employee engagement and customer relations and he noted that:

> *"Sustainability strategy puts certain requirements for our cooperation and often promotes positive change"*.

In addition, an employee shared his experience about how conscious customers were increasingly asking for more insight and content on sustainability in their tendering process. He further argued that sustainability were important to attract and retain both customers and employees and make part of sustainable development:

> *"Sustainability and focus on values are important to attract and retain the best talent and existing customers and make them part of the sustainable development we know is coming"*.

Further, it was argued that increased focus on sustainability towards customers could be motivating:

> *"It set's a clear focus on my business priorities, that is, hunt projects and business opportunities that help organizations in Norway to drive initiatives that contributes to social and environmental sustainability while staying profitable"*

It was argued that customers had become more aware of sustainability and it would be advantageous for an IT company to show that it was aware of sustainability. Subsequently, it

would be easier for an IT company to attract clients or customers who are looking to do business with an eco-friendly or sustainable company. Therefore, most informants stressed the importance of making sustainability as a priority when it comes to improving customer relations. This is in accordance with Brønn and Vidaver-Cohens (2009) findings that improving image and being recognized for moral is an important motive for engaging in sustainability. Still, even though customers were concerned about sustainability the company often had to convince customers that sustainable solutions would be profitable, illustrated by the following quote:

> *"How I communicate and discuss with customers on future business opportunities -what topics to choose to focus on and my ability to discuss and advice on sustainability and how they can attack the challenge on becoming a more sustaining organization… it is still hard to convince customers that sustainability will impact their balance sheet in a positive way".*

This illustrates the importance for employees to communicate sustainability to customers and may give the employees a feeling of "having a say" in the organization (Cornelissen, 2014). It was argued that even though customers were concerned about sustainability, many were driven by financial incentives as argued by Adams (2020) and not that concerned about the issue.

At the same time, some informants reported that they had not experienced any influence of sustainability on their daily work life and contact with customers. However, these informants had just recently joined the company and had not been working within the IT industry for more than a year. Hence, they may be less aware of the IT company's sustainability strategy or not having so much contact with customers. Further, the focus on sustainability was also dependent on customers interest on the theme, as claimed "are customers measured on sustainability or not".

5 Conclusions

This thesis is one of few studies exploring and investigating sustainability in a medium-sized IT corporation. This chapter summarizes the thesis's results. In addition, this chapter presents the thesis' limitations and future research avenues.

5.1 Concluding discussion and theoretical contribution

This study explores the role of sustainability in an IT company and the importance and influence of sustainability to both internal and external stakeholders. The aim of the thesis is to contribute with increased understanding of the meaning of sustainability for an IT company in Norway. The main research question guiding this study is: *"What does sustainability mean for an IT company and what role does it play for stakeholders?"* In additions the study addressed some sub-questions. To address the research questions, this thesis conducted an exploratory single case study with a medium-sized Norwegian IT company. Three theoretical perspectives formed the background for the thesis: sustainability theory, corporate communication theory, and stakeholder theory.

The concept of sustainability and the green shift (SQ1)

Considering the concept of sustainability, it is often captured by "the triple bottom line" (Elkington, 1998). That is, for an organization to be sustainable, it must be profitable and pay taxes, it must care about the people including human rights and equal opportunities, and not at least about the planet through reducing pollution, use resources more efficiently and develop greener technology and so on. In other words, sustainability encompasses more than environmental issues. One of the study's main finding is that sustainability for many is related to the environmental dimension of the concept. The reason may be that there is an increased focus on climate change world-wide, referring to the UNs development of goals to enhance sustainability, and further the Paris agreement with its goal of limiting global warming, and hence this dimension is often referred to in various media and increase peoples' (employees) attention towards this dimension. The planet dimension was most present in general questions about sustainability. Yet, this view seems to be consistent with Molla et als'. (2014) definition of sustainability, that is, meeting the needs of the present generations without compromising the need of future generations.

Relatedly, asking for sustainability in the IT company, the people dimension too, was prevalent, particularly among managers. The case company had during the last couple of years developed

its sustainable strategy, and I assume that the managers had been more involved in this process and hence had a broader perspective on what sustainability mean for the company in question. Issues that were highlighted for the people dimension was equality, good working conditions, and attract more women to the company, both as IT-consultants and as managers. It is regularly argued in the press that the IT-industry needs more women.

The profit dimensions were least referred to as a sustainability, both by managers and consultants. This does not mean that the informants, and the managers in particular, were not concerned about profit. Profit was of course important, but this was more seen as a driver for sustainability. That means, increasing the company's image as a sustainable company firm (Brønn & Vidaver-Cohen, 2009) could increase the company's legitimacy externally and internally (Cornelissen, 2014), and thereby increase its customer base and be an attractive employer. It was argued by some managers that younger generations are more concerned about sustainability when "choosing" employer.

In the study I introduced the concept "green shift". Many informants had heard about the focus on green shift in Norway, but not all. Managers thought the focus on green shift would be an incentive for companies to be more sustainable and make sustainability less voluntary for organization and may increase reporting on sustainability issues. It is interesting to see if this will be the case. A previous study by Vormedal and Ruud (2009) showed that a relatively low share of Norwegian firms complied with legal requirements in sustainability reporting.

According to the literature, the IT industry is a major consumer of electric energy which is a real adversity, and this was one reason for why I decided to conduct a study within an IT company. However, this study showed that employees believed in turning this disruption into opportunity. The informants argued that if all IT companies try their best to contribute to sustainability, such as providing green and environmentally friendly products, this will create a big impact on reaching sustainability goals. Several informants pointed out that this is where an IT company can contribute the most to sustainability, more than doing it internally. Therefore, I conjectured that IT companies can play a vital role in sustainability development. An important part of the case-company's sustainable strategy is to develop greener products and solutions for customers. The managers thought that an increased focus on sustainability was necessary to attract a larger customer base. Porter and Kramer (2006) say that engagement

in sustainability activities can increase a company's competitive advantage, and this could be the case for the IT-organization, I think.

Communication of sustainability (SQ2)

This thesis investigates the importance of communicating sustainability to its stakeholders. Subsequently, the study reveals that several informants agreed on the significance of communication about sustainability towards both internal and external stakeholders (Brønn & Berg, 2005; Van Riel, 1995). The most important internal stakeholders were employees and investors. The most important external stakeholders were their customers, but others were also mentioned, such as suppliers, future investors and future employees and regulators. However, most informants found internal communication with regards to sustainability most critical since most employees have a direct contact with customers. If employees were better aware of the company's sustainability strategy, they could use this information in contact with customers. In other words, it is important to communicate sustainability issues to employees, because employees represent an "information channel" for sustainability to customers. Further, infographics, website, blogs, and social media are some of the ways the IT industry to communicate sustainability to its stakeholders. Internal communication took mostly place through meetings and company presentations, information seemed to flow from the top of the organization to the employees, in line with how Andrews and Herschel (1996) describe downward communication. The results indicate that the website is the main channel for communicating sustainability externally and it seemed like social media were not used that much on sustainability issues. This may be related to internal communication regarded as more important than external communication. At the same time, it was noted that not all informants were totally aware of the company's sustainability strategy. This regarded new employees in particular, and I guess the Covid 19 situation with home offices may have influenced internal communication.

This study shows the importance of communication on sustainability; thus, I suggest that lack of communication is often perceived to indicate lack of commitment on the organizations part. Moreover, for any sustainability initiative to succeed in an organization, both internal and external communication shall be aligned and bring cohesiveness to the organization by promoting greater employee engagement through common interests across the company. When corporate communication/employee communication is not viable, the sustainability strategy will by definition be unsustainable, thus, lead to failure. Therefore, I conjecture that the

responsibility of the management to create an effective sustainability communication strategy involving all their stakeholders are very crucial.

Integration of sustainability in contact with customers (SQ3)

Finally, to address the last research sub-question *SQ3: To what extent is sustainability integrated in day-to-day work in contact with customers?* this study aimed to explore how sustainability were relevant for an IT industry in contact with customers during their "day-to-day work". In order to improve an organizations' sustainability practice and deliver greener solutions to customers, it is essential to get the support from the employees since they are the ones who will implement the change, they should also be involved in sustainable discussions. The "average" employee might appreciate when they work for a sustainable business with a clear sustainable strategy, that is, the identity as an sustainable organization can be important for employees (Cornelissen, 2014) and something they use in contact with customers to increase the company's legitimacy among customers (Lim et al, 2014). Thus, this study shows how sustainability can attract and retain employees.

According to most informants, customers were more concerned about green products and green technology, and it is vital to communicate such possibilities to customers. To what extent the employees emphasized sustainability in contact with customers further depended on the customers interest for the theme, as note by informants. Yet, the increased focus on "the green shift" in Norway made customers in some industries more aware of – and they met higher requirement for – becoming greener in their operation. In addition, conscious customers often want to do business with organization whose values align with their own. Therefore, sustainability was perceived as a gateway to improve customer relations (Helander & Möller. 2007).

Final conclusion

To conclude on the main question: *what does sustainability mean for an IT company and what role does it play for stakeholders?"* I draw the conclusion that sustainability has become more vital during the last years as argued in the literature, not at least due to increased focus on the green shift. As a result of the case company developing a sustainable strategy. Sustainability has become more important for stakeholders such as employees and customers in particular, and the IT-company seems to be aware of this. Sustainability is mainly seen from the planet and people perspective, with the possibility for increased profit as a driver.

Furthermore, the IT company also believe that through sustainability, it is possible to optimize their resources and reduce energy consumption. However, for an IT company or any company to become truly sustainable, it must leverage digital innovations to improve all three pillars of sustainability: profit, people and planet. Together with clear sustainability goals, which is propelled by effective leaders, cooperative employees and supportive investors, organization could reach sustainability goals.

5.2 Limitations

Qualitative studies are a demanding and time consuming process. Furthermore, while performing qualitative studies, methodological limitations and potential bias might occur (Saunders et al., 2019). Being a sole researcher, the amount of qualitative data I can analyze in a given timeframe will have its limitations. Furthermore, Covid 19 has shown itself from a very harsh side in the period of this study, and this has led to difficulties in both finding participating companies as well as informants. Having more informants and participating companies within the IT industry through a multiple case study (Yin, 2009) could have strengthened the study and give increased insight about sustainability in the IT industry. Informants from different corporations would have let me test theories and perspectives discovered in this study, and further potentially led to some generalization to the industry.

Although I let all informants have the opportunity to ask questions before the interviews commenced, I purposely did not define sustainability thoroughly since I was interested to find out their view on sustainability. To some extent, this can lead to some limitations in the data material, where some informants did not fully understand the complexities. However, these are also basis for data by exploring differences in the use of the term. Due to the fact, that some interviews were performed by a research assistant, some questions in the interview guide were somewhat incomplete answered. The use of research assistant was however chosen due mostly to Covid 19, and further, it also made it possible to interview more persons, 12 in total from different positions in the company, which can be recognized as sufficient for a medium-sized company. Still, a challenge with qualitative data is the lack of ability to quantify data. Even though a lot of data is being analyzed, explored and seen in relation with literature, it is still data from one IT-company. he study's empirical data are based on the informants' perception, and thus not necessarily representative for similar firms.

5.3 Suggestions for further research

This thesis is based on a single case study. This led to insightful and interesting findings. However, the scope is too narrow to generalize the findings. Future studies could therefore have a multiple case study approach and include several companies within the IT-industry and/or in other industries to compare findings. The case organization in this study is a medium-sized business, although on the larger side of the spectrum. Thus, it could be interesting to perform the same study among both smaller and larger companies in the industry to get a broader picture. Further, the case firm is a Norwegian firm having Norwegian investors. Firms that have owners from another institutional context, but still operating in Norway could be included in research too see if this influence sustainability issues. Further, quantitative approaches (survey) could be employed to enhance generalizability.

This study took place within the IT sector. Further research might want to utilize similar studies on other sectors, to further explore whether there is any differences in utilization or importance of sustainability within corporations and organizations. This study was also performed in a private company, and comparing results between private and state-owned businesses focus on sustainability might be very interesting. I will here present some further suggestions for future research based upon the three sub-questions in this thesis.

Sustainability and green shift

Sustainability is obviously important, made apparent by the number of studies and research that already exists on this subject. However, since this study is a single case study within the IT-industry, future research could further study the importance of sustainability in other IT corporations, to see if there is a difference in focus between organizations. The concept "green shift" is highlighted in Norway, however there are other green initiatives around the world, such as the 'green deal' in EU. What impact these national and international initiatives have on organizations' focus on sustainability could be prevalent to study and understand.

Communication of sustainability to stakeholders

For further research, it may be interesting to delve more into communication of sustainability to different stakeholder groups. This study had a more overall approach and did not explicit

explore for example which media and messages that was used in communication with stakeholders. However, targeted studies toward different stakeholder groups could reveal interesting information about stakeholder communication.

As stated in this study, sustainability is divided into three dimensions, social, economic and environmental dimensions (Elkinton, 1998). An interesting prospect would be a study delving into either each of these three dimensions with regards to stakeholders, or as a different approach, exploring which stakeholder groups tend to favor communication regarding some dimensions over others.

Sustainability integrated in "day-to-day work with customers
Sustainability is without doubt a highly relevant subject in today's society, and it would be interesting to study how employees in different corporations relates to and integrate sustainability in "day-to-day" work activities. This thesis looked upon the role of sustainability in communication and contact with customers, as a part of a larger study. However, a study purely focusing on this might reveal interesting facts, and could be studied in a dyadic context (Helander and Möller, 2007), that is, seen from the perspective of the organization and the customers.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Introduction to questionnaire

Background and purpose

This project is the last part of a master's degree in Samfunnskommunikasjon by University of Agder. It is equaling to 40 study points, and will be turned in during summer.

During fall 2020 I had a six week internship at the energy cluster GCE NODE here in Kristiansand. During this time I realized just how much the focus on sustainability is prevalent, especially towards the environment. Here in Norway the government coined the term green shift. EU has its Green deal, and UN has its 17 main Sustainable Development Goals. This inspired me to write a thesis based on sustainability and its relevance to communication.

To me it was interesting to focus on corporate communication and sustainability, as well as its potential effect for its stakeholders, both internal and external, with a focus on employees and customer communications. It was also interesting to focus on an industry that hasn't necessarily had the highest focus within previous studies, such as the IT industry.

Appendix 2. Questionnaire – interview guide

- 1st subject: Sustainability and the green shift
- What does sustainability mean to you
- What do you think is the motivation behind the organizations focus on sustainability

- How does sustainability affect your organization
- In what way does Syscos focus on sustainability impact you in day to day work (contact with clients, projects etc)
- Have you heard about the green shift
- If so, what effect do you think the green shift has on the organizations focus on sustainability

2nd subject : Communication, sustainability and stakeholders
- To which stakeholders do you think Syscos focus on sustainability matter the most and why?
  - Internal stakeholders (employees, investors, etc)
  - External stakeholders (customers, suppliers, etc)
- Why do you think it is important to communicate sustainability to stakeholders
- How does Syscos focus on sustainability influence your contact with customers
- Do you think this focus on sustainability is important for existing and potential new customers, and why
- What do you think is the best way to communicate sustainability
  - Internally
  - Externally
- How, if any, do you think the green shift affected communication, both internally and externally

Summary questions
- Which challenges or opportunities do you encounter in your day to day work with sustainability
- What do you think is the biggest opportunity for sustainability within the IT-industry

Thank you for participating.

Appendix 3. Interview summary

Informant	Position	Gender	Age
1	Leader	M	50+
2	Consultant	F	35+
3	Consultant	M	30+
4	Leader	F	40+
5	Leader	M	60+
6	Consultant	F	40+
7	Leader	M	40+
8	Leader	M	45+
9	Leader	F	60+
10	Consultant	F	35+
11	Consultant	M	50+
12	Consultant	F	30+