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Doctoral Thesis
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**A Qualitative Research on Agile Branding: Conceptualization and Evaluation
from a Dynamic Capabilities Perspective in the Start-Up Context**

Málaga, 2025

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D./Dña MICHAELA PÖHLMANN

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Realizada bajo la tutorización de CARLOS DE LAS HERAS PEDROSA y dirección de CARLOS DE LAS HERAS PEDROSA Y MARIA CARMEN JAMBRINO MALDONADO (si tuviera varios directores deberá hacer constar el nombre de todos)

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“Everyone knew it was impossible, until a fool who didn’t know came along and did it.”

– Albert Einstein

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Summary of the Doctoral Thesis

Introduction

The years during the global pandemic of COVID-19 have demonstrated the extent to which the contemporary world is characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA) (Baran & Woznyj, 2021; Eilers et al., 2022; Ferreira & Coelho, 2020; Schoemaker et al., 2018). Numerous studies show that agility has a positive impact on business performance (Hobbs & Petit, 2017; Roberts & Grover, 2012; Vrontis et al., 2023). This finding aligns with the prevailing consensus in the management consulting literature, which posits that agility has emerged as a pivotal capability for numerous enterprises that have demonstrated resilience in the face of the challenges posed by the COVID-19 crisis (Chong et al., 2020).

In recent research, several scholars have indicated that conventional brand building and management processes and strategies are inadequate in their ability to respond swiftly to the evolving dynamics of the contemporary environment, and are therefore unable to effectively manage a brand in the present-day context (Baumgarth, 2020; Keller & Richey, 2006; Swaminathan et al., 2020; Toniatti et al., 2023). According to extant literature, contemporary brand management demands a more adaptable and proactive approach to swiftly address the rapidly evolving demands of a dynamic global landscape (Baran & Woznyj, 2021; Eilers et al., 2022; Golant, 2012; Iyer, Davari, Srivastava, et al., 2021; Peterson, 2019; Rego et al., 2022; Swaminathan et al., 2020). Eilers et al. (2022) posit that a novel approach to brand management is required and put forward an agile mindset as a potential solution.

Toniatti et al. (2023) observe that agility is also critical for brands to remain relevant and resilient in today's business landscape. Keller and Richey (2006) conclude that agility and collaboration are among the most crucial brand personality characteristics for success in the 21st century. Rego et al. (2022) argue that agile and resilient brands are better able to withstand turbulent times, recover and reinvent themselves. Adopting an agile approach enables companies to respond effectively to the needs of consumers, thereby maintaining a competitive advantage and ensuring a strong brand presence in a continually evolving marketplace (Keller & Richey, 2006). The necessity and mounting interest in agility in the context of branding is evident in the extant academic literature. Agile branding (AB) has been identified by numerous scholars as one of the most significant trends in the field of post-pandemic brand management (Baumgarth, 2020; Toniatti et al., 2023). Consequently, innovative approaches to brand management are emerging, and traditional branding principles are being challenged (Toniatti et al., 2023).

A comprehensive review of the prevailing literature revealed a paucity of scientific research on AB (Bruce & Jeromin, 2016; Hattendorf, 2021; Kalaignanam et al., 2021; Preece et al., 2019; Toniatti

et al., 2023), despite the consensus among experts that an agile approach to branding is a crucial necessity in the contemporary era (Baumgarth, 2020; Dänzler & Heun, 2014; Eilers et al., 2022; Golant, 2012; Lies, 2020). To date, no systematic, bibliometric analysis of the literature has been conducted to illustrate the current state of agility research in relation to branding. Moreover, the absence of a consensus on a definition or conceptualization of AB has resulted in a challenging understanding of the concept. Furthermore, no study has previously addressed the potential and, consequently, the opportunities and challenges of implementing AB.

The overarching objective of this dissertation is to evaluate the application of agility to strategic brand management. To achieve this overall research aim, specific sub-objectives and research questions are defined, and consequently, this thesis is divided into three major studies: firstly, to perform a bibliometric analysis and systematic review of the literature; secondly, to provide an elevated definition and conceptualization of AB; and thirdly, to assess the potential and, therefore, the opportunities and challenges of AB in the context of start-ups.

The objective of Study 1 is to conduct a bibliometric analysis to obtain an overview of the current production of scientific literature on agility in the context of brand management. The analysis enables a systematic review of the literature, the development of a theoretical framework, and the identification of gaps in existing knowledge. This analysis employs bibliometric methods to present and visualize trends and developments in the field of AB, examining scientific article literature produced between 1996 and 2023. Furthermore, the analysis offers insight into the conceptual frameworks and research streams that influence and intersect with AB.

The objective of Study 2 is to synthesize the existing literature with in-depth interviews to propose an improved definition of AB. Furthermore, the investigation endeavors to conceptualize AB by identifying the dimensions and antecedents that shape the innovative concept. The purpose of this study is to provide brand managers with concrete guidance on the implementation of AB in their brand strategy by developing the agile branding values and principles construct.

The overarching ambition of Study 3 is to examine the prospects of AB, given the scarcity of scientific research that has evaluated its opportunities and challenges. The term "start-up" is characterized by an agile culture, especially in the nascent stages of development (Griva et al., 2021). Given the demonstrated affinity and necessity for agility, as well as the findings' potential to provide further insights, AB is hypothesized to be of particular interest and relevance to start-ups. This hypothesis was confirmed during the preliminary interviews conducted in the early stages of the doctoral thesis. Consequently, the context of start-ups is selected to assess the potential of AB and to establish the framework for Study 3. The objective of Study 3 is to investigate the value and

applicability of AB, to identify the opportunities it offers to start-ups, and to uncover the unique challenges involved in its implementation. This research also assesses the manner in which AB contributes to the resolution of challenges commonly encountered by nascent business enterprises.

Methodology

Due to the scarcity of existing research on AB, a cumulative approach was chosen. The three articles constituting the dissertation are interrelated and mutually supportive. This doctoral thesis employed a mixed methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The quantitative approach involved the application of bibliometric analysis to identify publication patterns and citation networks. In contrast, the qualitative part incorporated a systematic literature review, structured expert interviews, and a group discussion.

In Study 1, a bibliometric analysis was conducted to obtain a detailed overview of the existing scientific literature and to define the theoretical framework of the dissertation. A systematic literature review was subsequently conducted for two primary purposes: first, to identify and synthesize all relevant publications on AB; and second, to identify gaps in the existing scientific literature on the subject.

Subsequent to the initial study's findings, qualitative semi-structured interviews were executed with a cohort of eleven experts specializing in the AB field. In order to analyze the data in a structured way, the interviews were first anonymized and transcribed into a written format. According to Dresing and Pehl (2018, 2023), the system employed for the transcription of semantic content was the one utilized, incorporating standardized rules. The written format was the basis for conducting a qualitative deductive-inductive content analysis according to Kuckartz and Rädiker (2020, 2022). Thereafter, an initial draft of the AB dimensions, antecedents, values, and principles was created following a thorough analysis of the interviews. Next, the results were validated and finalized in a group discussion with five participants. The transcript of the participant group discussion was subjected to analysis, following the same procedure as in the previous phase. The dynamic capabilities (DC) framework (Teece et al., 1997) was utilized as the predominant lens in this study.

In order to ascertain the opportunities and challenges of AB in the context of start-ups, 18 qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted with start-ups. The results of these interviews were then combined with the results of previous findings from Study 1 and Study 2. The interviews were analyzed in a manner consistent with the procedures employed in Study 2.

Results

Study 1 illustrated and examined the trends and evolution of AB through a bibliometric analysis of the scientific literature generated between 1996 and 2023. A bibliometric and systematic analysis of the extant literature revealed a marked increase in scientific research on agility in the context of brand management, particularly since 2008, with a notable peak in 2022. This trend indicates a growing interest in the subject area. Concurrently, the study underscores a paucity of academic research on AB in general, signifying a need for further investigation concerning the management of brands in a more agile and dynamic manner to contend with an ever-evolving global landscape. The present dissertation identified the following key themes related to agility and branding: managing continuous change, the impact of agility on the employer brand, the challenge of maintaining brand consistency, social media management, the role of small and medium-sized enterprises in the context of AB, and the relevance of agility to brands and their supply chain strategy.

Study 2 provided an enhanced definition and established a conceptualization of AB. The investigation was carried out through a systematic review of the extant literature, complemented by semi-structured qualitative interviews with 11 experts and a focus group discussion involving five participants. From the perspective of dynamic capabilities (Teece et al., 1997), five dimensions and twenty antecedents of AB were derived. The five dimensions are as follows: (1) leadership style and culture, (2) employee skills and competencies, (3) technology and methods, (4) stakeholder and feedback integration, and (5) ambidexterity. The 20 antecedents constitute the prerequisites for AB, linked to the five dimensions: (1.1) trust, empowerment, and ownership, (1.2) flat hierarchy, (1.3) test and learn culture, (1.4) evolvement, (2.1) lifelong learning, (2.2) openness to change, (2.3) global awareness, (2.4) reflection, (3.1) iterative adjustments, (3.2) quick results and short-term planning, (3.3) continuous improvement, (3.4) framework & non-negotiables, (4.1) openness, (4.2) co-creation, (4.3) heterogeneity, (4.4) customer centricity, (5.1) long-term adaptability, (5.2) balance, (5.3) industry type, (5.4) company type. AB encompasses all three pillars of DC: sensing, seizing, and transformation (Teece et al., 1997).

The following enhanced definition of AB was derived from Study 2: AB signifies the incorporation of agility into strategic brand management, with the objective of enhancing companies' market relevance and competitiveness within a dynamic environment. The brand is conceptualized as a living resource that is continually reflected upon, proactively evolved, and dynamically adapted to market changes, with a constant focus on customer value. Decisions are based on collected data and stakeholder feedback. Agile methodologies are integrated at the brand's initial creation as well as in its long-term maintenance. The brand manager, with an openness to experimentation, leads the brand

and is empowered to test and adapt it, always with the aim of constant improvement, maintaining a balance between brand continuity and change.

Study 3 assessed the potential and, consequently, the opportunities and challenges of AB. The start-up context and the dynamic capabilities framework provided a useful lens to focus and guide the analysis of the results. In the context of nascent business enterprises, the strategy of AB has been demonstrated to be a particularly interesting and relevant approach for addressing specific challenges in brand management. In the context of start-ups, the following advantages of AB were identified: rapid adaptation to internal and external changes, efficient use of resources, provision of guidance and structure, reduced risk of failure, and differentiation from established competitors. The subsequent challenges were identified: the complexity of implementation, the appropriate amount and value of stakeholder feedback, the scarcity of resources, the risk of losing brand awareness, identification and trust, and the lack of validated agile branding frameworks. In summary, the advantages and prospects associated with AB surpass the difficulties encountered by start-ups. In conclusion, the benefits and opportunities of AB outweigh the challenges faced by start-ups, making it a powerful strategy for companies in today's dynamic business landscape.

A general consensus exists among studies that scientific research on the AB approach is in its nascent stages, despite its considerable promise for contemporary brand management tailored to the specific requirements of companies operating within a dynamic business environment. A comprehensive review of the extant literature on the subject confirmed AB as a strategy, a method, and a mindset that is particularly suitable for start-ups. A synthesis of the literature revealed a consensus among the studies that the primary challenge associated with AB is achieving a balance between maintaining brand continuity and adapting to new contexts.

Discussion

Study 1 serves as the inaugural bibliometric analysis to examine agility in the context of branding. Despite the fact that the study by Thümler (2023) involves a bibliometric analysis of agile marketing (AM), it does not offer any significant insights into the realm of agile brand management. The present doctoral thesis systematically identifies and analyzes existing scientific research on AB. In addition, it presents the most influential studies and authors on agility in relation to branding, identifies the main categories of AB research, and summarizes the key findings of the current literature.

Many authors posit that in the contemporary business landscape, it is imperative to manage brands in a more agile and dynamic manner (Baumgarth, 2020; Dänzler & Heun, 2014; Eilers et al., 2022; Golant, 2012; Lies, 2020). A review of the scientific literature revealed a paucity of harmonized definitions, understandings, and conceptualizations of AB. Consequently, Study 2 offers an expanded

definition of AB and is the pioneering scientific study that conceptualizes AB by identifying its dimensions and antecedents. Moreover, a manifesto of AB was developed for the first time, in which a construct of values and principles was established, with a specific focus on practical application. This study makes a significant contribution to the development of flexible brand management solutions that are specifically geared to the dynamics of today's world. This need has been identified by several authors (Baran & Woznyj, 2021; Baumgarth, 2020; Eilers et al., 2022, 2022; Iyer, Davari, Srivastava, et al., 2021; Keller & Richey, 2006; Swaminathan et al., 2020; Toniatti et al., 2023). While Roberts and Grover (2012) argue that agility encompasses the DC elements of sensing and seizing, this study posits that AB also reflects the transforming pillar of DC. The findings concerning the leadership style and culture dimension of AB are in alignment with the assertions made by Ulrich and Yeung (2019) and O'Keefe et al. (2016). These scholars contend that managers must demonstrate agility to cultivate an organizational culture in which employees can fully embrace agile attitudes. Schoemaker et al. (2018) concur with the study's findings, which demonstrate a strong correlation between decision-making, learning, and the ability to identify opportunities.

Despite the numerous scientific confirmations of the necessity of AB in a VUCA environment (Baumgarth, 2020; Dänzler & Heun, 2014; Eilers et al., 2022; Golant, 2012; Lies, 2020), there is a lack of research on the potential of the new concept. Consequently, Study 3 assesses for the first time the opportunities and challenges of AB and offers emerging companies a solution to overcome brand-related challenges. While not the primary objective of the study, its results contribute to the scarce literature on start-up brand management. The study's findings, which conclude that AB offers start-ups the opportunity to adapt quickly to internal and external changes and to ensure their competitiveness in an ever-changing business landscape, are consistent with those of Gupta et al. (2020), who confirm that agility is an essential capability for responding to external changes. As Rode and Vallaster (2005) demonstrate, start-up founders do not initially possess the knowledge of whether their business idea will succeed in the market. AB offers significant advantages, as it allows rapid adaptation to customer needs, which might translate, in the long run, into greater customer satisfaction, higher sales and greater loyalty.

A synthesis of the three studies reveals a consensus conclusion: the delicate balance between continuity and adaptation constitutes a significant challenge of AB. Preece et al. (2019) and Kalaignanam et al. (2021) state that a combination of continuity and change is essential to ensure the longevity of a brand in a constantly evolving environment. However, the authors themselves describe the balance between both factors as the biggest challenge of AB strategy. Beverland et al. (2015) also underscore the challenge of brand ambidexterity.

This doctoral thesis contributes to the scientific literature on AB, strategic brand management, agility, dynamic capabilities, small and medium-sized enterprises, and start-ups. It successfully demonstrates the applicability of agility to strategic brand management. The three studies complement each other, contributing to the overall research objective in a sequential manner.

The study's findings carry implications for both theoretical frameworks and practical applications. This dissertation contributes to solving several research gaps by presenting validated scientific evidence on AB, always focusing on its applicability. By developing and validating the AB values and principles construct, which serves as the manifesto of agile branding, this investigation provides practitioners with tangible guidance on how to create and manage a brand in an agile way. By analyzing the potential of AB, practitioners can make informed decisions about the opportunities and challenges of incorporating it. This research contributes to the extant body of knowledge on brand management approaches for industries and types of organizations where customer and competitor demands are subject to rapid and constant change. Such conditions, which are a consequence of today's VUCA world, surely affect almost every company. In light of these findings, it is reasonable to hypothesize that the results of this study could be relevant to the estimated 333 million companies worldwide in 2021 (Dyvik, 2023), including start-ups in the initial phase of brand development and established companies seeking to maintain their relevance and competitive advantage in the marketplace. Moreover, these findings are of particular value to academics specializing in branding, marketing, business management, and communication. The research provides insights for individuals involved in strategic brand guidance and development, including marketing and brand managers, entrepreneurs and decision makers, brand and agency consultants, and corporate management stakeholders.

The study's particular emphasis on start-ups renders its results highly valuable to these entities, as they encounter distinctive branding challenges that differentiate them from well-established companies. Globally, the number of start-ups has surpassed 150 million, with an annual increase of 50 million new ventures (Shewale, 2024). Notably, 90% of these attempts are unsuccessful (Shewale, 2024). Cantamessa et al. (2018) detect that inadequate marketing and branding endeavors constitute a primary factor contributing to the failure of nascent business enterprises.

The present study is subject to several limitations. It constitutes merely a preliminary investigation on AB. Further scientific research is necessary to substantiate findings and advance the body of knowledge. In Study 1, the thesaurus function of VOSviewer might have generated a subjective interpretation of the results. Moreover, the investigation exclusively focuses on the terms "agil*" y "brand*", which yields a limited number of 70 articles for analysis. A thorough investigation to identify synonyms for "agility" could result in a more extensive search, potentially leading to the inclusion of

additional articles. In the event that the study is to be replicated in the future, other databases, such as Scopus or Google Scholar, could be considered.

In Study 2, the dimensions and antecedents are intended to form a holistic approach to AB. Consequently, the nuances inherent to distinct industries and sectors were not addressed, which could impede the implementation of the findings in specific sectors. Thus, subsequent research endeavors may concentrate on specific sectors, target groups, or industries. In light of the limited body of literature addressing AB, a qualitative study was undertaken. This may result in a subjective interpretation of the results.

Study 3 exclusively investigates the opportunities and challenges of AB in the start-up environment, thereby achieving a more profound focus on the results. The opportunities and challenges associated with AB are only partially transferable to large, established companies and other types of organizations. Further research is necessary to provide a more comprehensive and detailed analysis. Given my place of residence, the interviewed partners and start-up entities are predominantly of German origin. This may give rise to a cultural bias in the results. In subsequent studies, researchers may wish to explore cultural variations among different nationalities and the implications these variations have on agile brand management. While a diversity of male and female respondents and founders was aimed for in the study, an analysis of individual differences and similarities was not carried out. Future studies could identify gender differences and similarities. The high degree of heterogeneity in terms of sectors and B2C, B2B, and B2C business models was a point of particular emphasis. However, these factors were not systematically evaluated or distinguished within the analysis. Subsequent studies may ascertain these discrepancies. To further advance the research, future studies could examine in greater detail the opportunities, challenges, and feasibility of implementing AB in large, well-established companies. Furthermore, forthcoming research could explore the extent to which AB is currently being implemented in organizations, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

As this doctoral thesis represents the initial stage of my academic research, I acknowledge that I am still in the early stages of developing my scientific knowledge. Despite the fact that the interviews were continued until no further conclusions could be drawn (Eisenhardt, 1989), the number of eleven experts interviewed, 18 interviews with start-ups, and one group discussion with five participants may be insufficient for a complete generalization of the research results. Consequently, the study could be replicated with a larger sample size or validated through quantitative studies. The findings of all three studies indicate that maintaining brand consistency constitutes a significant challenge when implementing AB, as it may even have a negative effect on customers' perception of the brand.

Subsequent research endeavors may involve a more comprehensive examination of the impact of AB on brand recognition, brand image, customer satisfaction, and brand loyalty.

Conclusion

The present doctoral dissertation has successfully met the research objectives. The study examines the potential for transferring agility to the field of strategic brand management. The current state of knowledge on agility in brand management is presented and visualized. The concepts and research streams that shape and relate AB were identified and analyzed. An extended definition of AB was formulated. The research yielded five dimensions and 20 antecedents that facilitate the conceptualization of AB. The AB values and principles construct provides scientists and practitioners with a framework for creating and managing a brand in an agile manner in a dynamic and competitive environment. The potential, opportunities, challenges, and applicability of AB in the context of start-ups are detailed and discussed. This dissertation also helps to assess whether AB is suitable to overcome the specific challenges of start-up brand management.

AB is both a technique and a mindset. The application of agile methodologies to the strategic process of brand creation and management constitutes its essence. The dynamic approach necessitated by the paradigm shift in brand development and management is a critical component of the AB framework. It is imperative for brand leaders and managers to reevaluate their approaches and transition from a stance of stringent brand guardianship and adherence to prevailing norms to one of deliberate enablement, which proactively fosters continuous and iterative brand evolution.

In summary, the contemporary era is distinguished by rapid change, which necessitates an agile and flexible approach to brand management. In order to maintain their relevance within the marketplace, brands must demonstrate a capacity for agile adaptation in response to the shifting demands and environments of their customers. AB offers a valuable evolution of traditional brand management, encompassing both brand creation and long-term brand management. In this context, AB can be regarded as a contemporary response to the demands of our rapidly evolving, digitized world.

Resumen de la Tesis Doctoral

Introducción

Los años transcurridos durante la pandemia mundial de COVID-19, han demostrado hasta qué punto el mundo contemporáneo se caracteriza por la volatilidad, la incertidumbre, la complejidad y la ambigüedad (VUCA) (Baran & Woznyj, 2021; Eilers et al., 2022; Ferreira & Coelho, 2020; Schoemaker et al., 2018). Numerosos estudios demuestran que la agilidad tiene un impacto positivo en el rendimiento empresarial (Hobbs & Petit, 2017; Roberts & Grover, 2012; Vrontis et al., 2023). Esto también se corresponde con la literatura de consultoría de gestión, que afirma que la agilidad ha sido una capacidad crítica para muchas empresas que han sobrevivido a la crisis COVID-19 (Chong et al., 2020).

Recientemente, varios investigadores han revelado que los procesos y estrategias tradicionales de creación y gestión de marcas son demasiado lentos para reaccionar ante nuestro dinámico entorno y resultan insuficientes para gestionar con éxito una marca en la era actual (Baumgarth, 2020; Keller & Richey, 2006; Swaminathan et al., 2020; Toniatti et al., 2023). La literatura existente afirma que la gestión de marcas exige hoy un enfoque más flexible y dinámico para responder con rapidez a un mundo en constante cambio (Baran & Woznyj, 2021; Eilers et al., 2022; Golant, 2012; Iyer, Davari, Srivastava, et al., 2021; Peterson, 2019; Rego et al., 2022; Swaminathan et al., 2020). Eilers et al. (2022) afirman que es necesaria una nueva mentalidad para la creación de marcas y proponen una mentalidad ágil.

Toniatti et al. (2023) observan que la agilidad también es fundamental para que las marcas mantengan su relevancia y resistencia en el panorama empresarial actual. Keller y Richey (2006) concluyen que la agilidad y la colaboración se encuentran entre las características de personalidad de marca más cruciales para el éxito en el siglo XXI. Rego et al. (2022) sostienen que las marcas ágiles y resistentes son más capaces de soportar tiempos turbulentos, recuperarse y reinventarse. Con un enfoque ágil, las empresas pueden responder eficazmente a las necesidades de los consumidores, adelantarse a la competencia y mantener una fuerte presencia de marca en un mercado en constante evolución (Keller & Richey, 2006). La necesidad y el creciente interés por la agilidad en el contexto del branding son evidentes en la literatura académica. El branding ágil (BA) es reconocido por varios autores como una de las tendencias más relevantes en la gestión de marcas postpandemia (Baumgarth, 2020; Toniatti et al., 2023). En base a ello, están surgiendo enfoques innovadores en la gestión de marcas y se están cuestionando los principios tradicionales de marca (Toniatti et al., 2023).

Una revisión exhaustiva de la literatura existente muestra una falta de investigación científica sobre el BA (Bruce & Jeromin, 2016; Hattendorf, 2021; Kalaignanam et al., 2021; Preece et al., 2019;

Toniatti et al., 2023), a pesar del consenso entre los expertos de que un enfoque ágil de la creación de marcas es una necesidad crucial en la era contemporánea (Baumgarth, 2020; Dänzler & Heun, 2014; Eilers et al., 2022; Golant, 2012; Lies, 2020). Hasta la fecha, no se ha realizado ningún análisis bibliométrico y sistemático de la literatura para ilustrar el estado actual de la investigación sobre la agilidad en relación con el branding. Además, no existe consenso sobre una definición o conceptualización del BA, lo que dificulta su comprensión. Asimismo, ningún estudio ha abordado el potencial y, por tanto, las oportunidades y retos de la implantación del BA.

El objetivo general de la tesis es evaluar cómo puede aplicarse la agilidad a la gestión estratégica de las marcas. Para alcanzar este objetivo general de la investigación se definen unos objetivos específicos y preguntas de la investigación, y por tanto esta tesis, se divide en tres grandes estudios: 1) realizar un análisis bibliométrico y una revisión sistemática de la literatura, 2) ofrecer una definición y una conceptualización mejorada del BA, y 3) evaluar el potencial y, por tanto, las oportunidades y los retos del BA en el contexto de las start-ups.

Estudio 1 tiene como objetivo realizar un análisis bibliométrico para obtener una visión general de la producción actual de literatura científica sobre agilidad en el contexto de las marcas y, de este modo, permitir un análisis sistemático de la literatura, desarrollar un marco teórico e identificar deficiencias en el conocimiento existente. Este análisis presenta y visualiza las tendencias y la evolución sobre el BA mediante la aplicación de métodos bibliométricos a la literatura de artículos científicos producida entre 1996 y 2023. Además, el análisis proporciona una comprensión de los conceptos y corrientes de investigación que dan forma y se relacionan con el BA.

Estudio 2 pretende sintetizar la bibliografía existente con entrevistas en profundidad para proponer una definición mejorada del BA. Además, su finalidad es conceptualizar el BA mediante la identificación de dimensiones y antecedentes que dan forma al concepto innovador. El objetivo es proporcionar a los gestores de marcas orientaciones prácticas para aplicar el BA a su estrategia de marca mediante el desarrollo del constructo de valores y principios del BA.

El objetivo general del Estudio 3 es analizar el potencial del BA, ya que no se ha encontrado ninguna investigación científica que evalúe sus oportunidades y desafíos. Las start-ups se caracterizan por una cultura ágil, especialmente en las primeras fases de desarrollo (Griva et al., 2021). Debido a la afinidad y a la necesidad de agilidad y para profundizar en las conclusiones del estudio, se supone que el BA es particularmente interesante y relevante para las empresas emergentes, lo que se confirmó en las entrevistas iniciales en la fase inicial del proyecto doctoral. En consecuencia, se elige el contexto de las start-ups para evaluar el potencial del BA y enmarcar el contexto del Estudio 3. El objetivo del Estudio 3 es investigar el valor y la aplicabilidad del BA, identificar las oportunidades que ofrece a las

start-ups y descubrir los desafíos únicos que conlleva su implementación. Asimismo, se evalúa cómo el BA contribuye a resolver los retos a los que suelen enfrentarse las start-ups.

Métodos

Para esta disertación, se ha elegido una tesis por compendio, según la limitada investigación existente sobre BA, en la que los tres artículos están interrelacionados y se apoyan mutuamente. Esta tesis sigue un enfoque mixto de métodos, combinando métodos cuantitativos, como un análisis bibliométrico para identificar patrones de publicación y redes de citación, con métodos cualitativos, como una revisión sistemática de la literatura, entrevistas estructuradas a los expertos y una discusión en grupo.

En el Estudio 1, se llevó a cabo un análisis bibliométrico para obtener una visión general detallada de la literatura científica existente y definir el marco teórico del proyecto. Posteriormente, se realizó una revisión sistemática de la literatura con el objetivo de identificar y sintetizar todas las publicaciones relevantes sobre el BA, así como de identificar las lagunas en la literatura científica existente.

Basándose en los resultados del primer estudio, se realizaron entrevistas semiestructuradas cualitativas con once expertos del ámbito del BA. Para analizar los datos de forma estructurada, todas las entrevistas se anonimizaron y transcribieron primero en un formato escrito. De acuerdo con Dresing y Pehl (2018, 2023), el sistema de reglas para la transcripción de contenido semántico fue el utilizado, incluyendo reglas normalizadas. El formato escrito fue la base para realizar un análisis cualitativo de contenido deductivo-inductivo según Kuckartz y Rädiker (2020, 2022). Tras el análisis de las entrevistas, se creó un borrador inicial de las dimensiones, antecedentes, valores y principios del BA. Después, los resultados se validaron y se concretaron en una discusión en grupo con cinco participantes. La discusión del grupo de participantes se transcribió y analizó como en la fase anterior. El marco de capacidades dinámicas (Teece et al., 1997) se utilizó como lente predominante en este estudio.

Para determinar las oportunidades y los desafíos del BA en el contexto de las start-ups, se realizaron 18 entrevistas cualitativas y semiestructuradas con start-ups, y los resultados se combinaron con los descubrimientos previos del Estudio 1 y del Estudio 2. Las entrevistas se analizaron como en el Estudio 2. El marco de las capacidades dinámicas y las cinco dimensiones del BA identificadas en el Estudio 2 se utilizaron como perspectivas predominantes para este estudio.

Resultados

En el Estudio 1 se ilustraron y examinaron las tendencias y la evolución de BA mediante un análisis bibliométrico de la literatura científica generada entre 1996 y 2023. El análisis bibliométrico y

sistemático de la literatura reveló que el número de investigaciones científicas sobre agilidad en el contexto de la gestión de marcas ha aumentado, sobre todo a partir de 2008, y alcanzó su punto álgido en 2022, lo que indica un interés creciente en la ciencia. Al mismo tiempo, el estudio destaca que hay poca investigación académica sobre el BA en general, lo que indica que hace falta investigar más a fondo sobre cómo gestionar las marcas de forma más ágil y dinámica para competir en un mundo en constante cambio. El estudio identifica las siguientes temáticas clave relacionadas con la agilidad y la marca: la gestión del cambio continuo, el impacto de la agilidad en la marca empleadora, el reto de mantener la coherencia de la marca, la gestión de los medios sociales, la función de las pequeñas y medianas empresas en el contexto del BA, y la relevancia de la agilidad en las marcas y su estrategia de cadena de suministro.

El Estudio 2 pretendió ofrecer una definición ampliada y establecer una conceptualización del BA. Se realizó mediante una revisión sistemática de la bibliografía, seguida de entrevistas cualitativas semiestructuradas con once expertos y un grupo de discusión con cinco participantes. Desde la perspectiva de las capacidades dinámicas (Teece et al., 1997), se elaboraron cinco dimensiones y veinte antecedentes del BA. Las cinco dimensiones son las siguientes: (1) estilo y cultura de liderazgo, (2) competencias y habilidades de los empleados, (3) tecnología y métodos, (4) integración de las retroalimentaciones y las partes interesadas, y (5) ambidiestricidad. Los 20 antecedentes constituyen los requisitos previos para el BA, vinculados a las cinco dimensiones: (1.1) confianza, empoderamiento y propiedad, (1.2) jerarquía plana, (1.3) cultura de prueba y aprendizaje, (1.4) evolución, (2.1) aprendizaje permanente, (2.2) apertura al cambio, (2.3) conciencia global, (2.4) reflexión, (3.1) ajustes iterativos, (3.2) obtención de resultados rápidos y planificación a corto plazo, (3.3) mejora continua, (3.4) marco y principios innegociables, (4.1) apertura, (4.2) creación conjunta, (4.3) heterogeneidad, (4.4) centricidad en el cliente, (5.1) adaptabilidad a largo plazo, (5.2) equilibrio, (5.3) tipo de industria, (5.4) tipo de empresa. El BA abarca todos los tres pilares de las capacidades dinámicas: detección, aprovechamiento y transformación (Teece et al., 1997).

A continuación, se presenta una definición ampliada del BA derivada del Estudio 2: El objetivo del BA es integrar la agilidad en la gestión estratégica de la marca para mejorar la relevancia y la competitividad de las empresas en un entorno dinámico. La marca se considera un recurso en constante evolución, adaptada de forma proactiva a los cambios del mercado y centrada en la generación de valor para el cliente. Las decisiones se basan en los datos recopilados y en la retroalimentación de los interesados. Los métodos ágiles se integran tanto en la fase inicial de creación de la marca como en su mantenimiento a largo plazo. El director de marca dirige la marca con una actitud abierta a la experimentación y está autorizado a testarla y adaptarla, siempre con el objetivo

explícito de la mejora continua, estableciendo un equilibrio entre la continuidad de la marca y el cambio.

El Estudio 3 evaluó el potencial y, por tanto, las oportunidades y los retos del BA. El contexto de las start-ups y el marco de las capacidades dinámicas (Teece et al., 1997) proporcionan un marco útil para centrar y orientar el análisis de los resultados. El BA representa una estrategia particularmente interesante y relevante para las empresas emergentes que les permite resolver desafíos específicos de gestión de marcas. En el contexto de las start-ups, se identifican las siguientes ventajas del BA: una rápida adaptación a los cambios internos y externos, un uso eficiente de los recursos, una provisión de orientación y estructura, una reducción del riesgo de fracaso y una diferenciación de los competidores establecidos. A continuación, se enumeran los siguientes retos: la complejidad de la implementación, la cantidad y el valor adecuados de la retroalimentación de las partes interesadas, la escasez de recursos, el riesgo de perder la conciencia de marca, la identificación y la confianza, la falta de marcos del BA validados. En conclusión, los beneficios y oportunidades del BA superan los desafíos a los que se enfrentan las start-ups, lo que lo convierte en una estrategia poderosa para las empresas en el dinámico panorama empresarial actual.

En general, todos los estudios coinciden en que la investigación científica sobre el enfoque del BA está en iniciación, aunque ofrece un potencial significativo para el manejo moderno de marcas adaptado a las necesidades específicas de las empresas que operan en un entorno empresarial dinámico. Todos los estudios confirman el BA como una estrategia, un método y una mentalidad que resulta especialmente adecuada para las start-ups. Cada uno de los estudios concluye que el mayor desafío del BA es lograr un equilibrio entre la continuidad y la adaptación de la marca.

Discusión

El Estudio 1 es el primer análisis bibliométrico que examina la agilidad en el contexto del branding. Aunque Thümler (2023) realizó un análisis bibliométrico sobre el marketing ágil, su estudio no proporciona conocimientos especializados para la gestión de marcas. El Estudio 1 sirve para identificar y analizar de forma sistemática la investigación científica existente sobre el BA. Además, presenta los estudios y autores más influyentes sobre agilidad en relación con el branding, identificaba las principales categorías de investigación sobre el BA y resume los hallazgos clave de la literatura actual.

Muchos autores afirman que en el mundo actual es esencial gestionar las marcas de forma más ágil y dinámica (Baumgarth, 2020; Dänzler & Heun, 2014; Eilers et al., 2022; Golant, 2012; Lies, 2020). En la literatura científica, existe una falta de definición, comprensión y conceptualización armonizadas del BA. Por consiguiente, el Estudio 2 proporciona una definición ampliada del BA y es el primer estudio científico en conceptualizar el BA mediante la identificación de sus dimensiones y

antecedentes. Adicionalmente, se desarrolló por primera vez un manifiesto del BA en el que se estableció un constructo de los valores y principios, centrándose específicamente en la aplicación práctica. Este estudio contribuye de forma significativa al desarrollo de soluciones flexibles de gestión de marcas que se adapten específicamente a la dinámica del mundo actual. Esta necesidad ha sido señalada por varios autores (Baran & Woznyj, 2021; Baumgarth, 2020; Eilers et al., 2022, 2022; Iyer, Davari, Srivastava, et al., 2021; Keller & Richey, 2006; Swaminathan et al., 2020; Toniatti et al., 2023). Mientras que Roberts y Grover (2012) sugieren que la agilidad engloba los elementos de las capacidades dinámicas de percepción y aprovechamiento, este estudio concluye que el BA también refleja el elemento transformación de las capacidades dinámicas. Los resultados relacionados con el estilo de liderazgo y la cultura de la dimensión del BA son coherentes con las declaraciones de Ulrich y Yeung (2019) y O’Keeffe et al. (2016), que afirman que los directivos deben mostrar agilidad para fomentar una cultura organizativa en la que los empleados puedan adoptar plenamente actitudes ágiles. Schoemaker et al. (2018) están de acuerdo con los resultados del estudio que vinculan estrechamente la toma de decisiones y el aprendizaje con la detección de oportunidades.

Aunque numerosos científicos confirman que el BA es necesario en un entorno VUCA (Baumgarth, 2020; Dänzler & Heun, 2014; Eilers et al., 2022; Golant, 2012; Lies, 2020), no hay investigaciones sobre el potencial del nuevo concepto. En consecuencia, el Estudio 3 evaluó por primera vez las oportunidades y los desafíos del BA y ofrece a las empresas emergentes una solución para superar los retos relacionados con la marca. Aunque no era el objetivo principal del estudio, sus resultados contribuyen a la escasa literatura sobre la gestión de marcas de las start-ups. Los resultados del estudio, que concluyen que el BA ofrece a las start-ups la oportunidad de adaptarse rápidamente a los cambios internos y externos y de garantizar su competitividad en un panorama empresarial en constante cambio, se corresponden con los de Gupta et al. (2020), quienes confirman que la agilidad es una capacidad esencial para responder a los cambios externos. De acuerdo con Rode y Vallaster (2005), los fundadores de las start-ups no saben inicialmente si su idea de negocio tendrá éxito en el mercado. El modelo BA ofrece ventajas significativas, ya que permite una rápida adaptación a las necesidades de los clientes, lo que podría traducirse, a largo plazo, en una mayor satisfacción de dichos clientes, mayores ventas y mayor lealtad.

Los tres estudios llegaron a la misma conclusión: el equilibrio entre continuidad y adaptación es un desafío importante para la marca. Mientras que Preece et al. (2019) y Kalaighnam et al. (2021) afirman que una combinación de continuidad y cambio es esencial para garantizar la longevidad de una marca en un entorno en constante evolución, los propios autores describen el equilibrio entre ambos factores como el mayor desafío de la estrategia BA. Beverland et al. (2015) también destacan el desafío de la ambidexteridad de la marca.

Esta tesis doctoral en su conjunto contribuye a la literatura científica sobre el BA, gestión estratégica de marcas, agilidad, capacidades dinámicas, pequeñas y medianas empresas y start-ups. Este proyecto doctoral consiguió con éxito demostrar cómo puede aplicarse la agilidad a la gestión estratégica de marcas, mientras que los tres estudios se complementan entre sí y contribuyen paso a paso al objetivo de investigación general.

El estudio proporciona implicaciones no solo para la teoría, sino también para la práctica. Este proyecto de tesis doctoral contribuye a resolver varias lagunas de investigación al presentar evidencias científicas validadas sobre el BA, centrándose siempre en su aplicabilidad. Al desarrollar y validar el constructo de valores y principios del BA, que sirve como manifiesto del branding ágil, este proyecto proporciona a los profesionales una guía tangible sobre cómo crear y gestionar una marca de forma ágil. Al analizar el potencial del BA, los profesionales pueden tomar decisiones informadas sobre las oportunidades y los desafíos de incorporarlo. Este estudio avanza en el estado de los conocimientos sobre los enfoques de gestión de marcas para sectores y tipos de organizaciones donde las demandas de los clientes y los competidores cambian rápidamente y de forma constante, lo que, debido al mundo VUCA actual, seguramente afecta a casi todas las empresas. Por ello, las conclusiones de este estudio podrían ser relevantes para las cerca de 333 millones de empresas de todo el mundo, estimadas en 2021 (Dyvik, 2023), incluidas las start-ups que están desarrollando su marca por primera vez y las empresas establecidas que buscan mantener su relevancia y ventaja competitiva en el mercado. Además, estos resultados también son beneficiosos para los académicos especializados en marcas, marketing, dirección de empresas y comunicación. La investigación ofrece ideas a quienes se dedican a la orientación y el desarrollo estratégicos de las marcas, entre los que se incluyen los responsables de marketing y marcas, emprendedores y tomadores de decisiones, consultores de marcas y agencias, y partes interesadas de la dirección corporativa.

El enfoque particular del estudio en el contexto de las start-ups hace que sus resultados sean de gran valor para las start-ups, que se enfrentan a retos únicos de branding que las diferencian de las empresas ya establecidas. A nivel mundial, existen más de 150 millones de start-ups y se fundan 50 millones nuevas cada año, pero el 90 % de todas ellas fracasan (Shewale, 2024). El estudio de Cantamessa et al. (2018) detecta que las escasas actividades de marketing y branding son algunas de las causas principales del fracaso de las start-ups.

Esta investigación presenta varias limitaciones. El proyecto solo supone un primer paso para investigar el BA. Se necesita aún mayor profundización en la investigación científica. En el Estudio 1, la función de tesoro de VOSviewer puede haber dado lugar a una interpretación subjetiva de los resultados. Además, en el estudio solo se analizaron los términos “agil*” y “brand*”, lo que dio como resultado un número reducido de 70 artículos. Un análisis detallado de sinónimos de “agilidad” podría

llevar a una búsqueda más amplia y a la inclusión de más artículos. Otras bases de datos, como Scopus o Google Scholar, podrían considerarse si el estudio se repitiera en el futuro.

En el Estudio 2, las dimensiones y los antecedentes forman un enfoque holístico del BA. Por tanto, no se abordaron las diferencias entre las industrias y los sectores individuales, lo que podría complicar su aplicación a las ramas particulares. Por tanto, en futuras investigaciones se podría centrar específicamente en sectores, grupos objetivo o industrias concretos. Debido a la escasez de literatura sobre la materia, se llevó a cabo un estudio cualitativo. Esto puede dar lugar a una interpretación subjetiva de los resultados.

El Estudio 3 solo exploró las oportunidades y los desafíos del BA en el entorno de las start-ups para lograr un enfoque más profundo de los resultados. Las oportunidades y los desafíos del BA solo se pueden transferir de forma parcial a empresas grandes y ya consolidadas, y a otros tipos de empresas. Se necesita una investigación más amplia y específica. Debido a mi residencia, un gran número de los socios entrevistados y de las start-ups entrevistadas son alemanes. Esto podría provocar un sesgo cultural en los resultados. En un estudio futuro, se podría centrar la atención en otras nacionalidades y estudiar las diferencias y similitudes culturales, así como su impacto en la gestión de marcas ágiles. Aunque en el estudio se hizo hincapié en la diversidad de entrevistados hombres y mujeres y fundadores, las diferencias y similitudes no se analizaron individualmente. En estudios futuros se podría identificar diferencias y similitudes de género. Se hizo mucho hincapié en el alto grado de heterogeneidad en cuanto a los sectores y los modelos de negocio B2C, B2B y B2BC. Sin embargo, no se evaluaron y diferenciaron específicamente. Los estudios futuros podrían determinar con precisión estas diferencias. Para avanzar en la investigación, en el futuro se podría explorar con más detalle las oportunidades, los retos y la viabilidad de aplicar el BA en grandes empresas ya establecidas. Además, el futuro estudio podría profundizar en cómo y en qué medida se está aplicando actualmente el BA en las organizaciones, si de forma intencionada o no.

Dado que se trata de tesis doctoral y que con ella inicio mi investigación académica considero que aún tengo un largo camino que recorrer en cuanto al conocimiento científico. Aunque las entrevistas continuaron hasta que ya no se pudieron obtener más conclusiones (Eisenhardt, 1989), el número de once expertos entrevistados, 18 entrevistas con start-ups y una discusión grupal con cinco participantes puede ser insuficiente para una generalización completa de los resultados de la investigación. Por tanto, el estudio podría repetirse con un número mayor de participantes o validarse con estudios cuantitativos. Los tres estudios muestran que mantener la coherencia de marca es un gran desafío al aplicar el BA, ya que puede incluso tener un efecto negativo en la percepción de la marca por parte de los clientes. En futuras investigaciones se podría profundizar en cómo el BA afecta al reconocimiento de marca, a la imagen de marca, a la satisfacción del cliente y a la lealtad de marca.

Conclusión

Este proyecto doctoral ha cumplido con éxito los objetivos de investigación. Se examinó cómo puede transferirse la agilidad a la gestión estratégica de marcas. Se presenta y visualiza el estado actual de los conocimientos sobre agilidad en la gestión de marcas. Se identificaron y analizaron los conceptos y las corrientes de investigación que configuran y relacionan el BA. Se desarrolló una definición más amplia del BA. A través del proyecto se identificaron cinco dimensiones y 20 antecedentes que ayudan a conceptualizar el BA. El constructo de valores y principios del BA proporciona a científicos y profesionales una guía sobre cómo crear y gestionar una marca de forma ágil en un entorno dinámico y competitivo. Se detallaron y discutieron el potencial, las oportunidades, los desafíos y la aplicabilidad del BA en el contexto de las start-ups. La tesis también ayuda a evaluar si el BA es adecuado para superar los retos específicos de la gestión de marcas de las start-ups.

BA es una técnica y una mentalidad. Consiste en la aplicación de métodos ágiles al proceso estratégico de creación y gestión de marcas. El BA requiere un enfoque dinámico, que implica un cambio en la forma en que se han creado y gestionado las marcas durante mucho tiempo. Los líderes y gestores de marca deben reconsiderar sus perspectivas y pasar de una mentalidad de estricta tutela de la marca y adhesión a las normas establecidas a otra de habilitación consciente, que impulse de forma proactiva una evolución continua e iterativa de la marca.

En síntesis, la era contemporánea se caracteriza por la rapidez de los cambios, lo que demanda un planteamiento ágil y flexible para la gestión de las marcas. Para seguir siendo relevantes, las marcas deben adaptarse rápidamente a la evolución de los intereses de los clientes y a un entorno cambiante. El BA ofrece una valiosa evolución de la gestión tradicional de marcas, que abarca tanto la creación de marcas como su gestión a largo plazo. En este contexto, BA puede considerarse una respuesta contemporánea a las exigencias de nuestro mundo digitalizado y en rápida evolución.



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1. Global Introduction and Cumulative Dissertation Approach

As today's business environment constantly changes, scientific and practitioner literature suggest that brands must be managed more agilely to ensure that they remain sustainably relevant and competitive (Baran & Woznyj, 2021; Eilers et al., 2022; Golant, 2012; Iyer, Davari, Srivastava, et al., 2021; Landor, 2015; Peterson, 2019; Rego et al., 2022; Swaminathan et al., 2020). Although scholars articulate the need for an agile approach to branding, there is a scarcity of research on the concept of AB. The aim of this dissertation project is to analyze the existing research, define and conceptualize AB, to critically evaluate its potential, and to identify areas for further research. Initial findings indicate that AB emerges as a promising brand management strategy, particularly relevant for start-ups. Consequently, the research context of start-ups is selected to identify the potential value of AB in terms of opportunities and challenges. As a basis of this research project, AB is considered as the application of agility to strategic brand management. Strategic brand management refers to all activities to maintain a brand in the medium to long term (Iyer, Davari, Srivastava, et al., 2021; Santos-Vijande et al., 2013).

A paper-based approach is chosen for this dissertation, whereby the individual studies are interrelated and built on each other. The present chapter introduces the dissertation by first providing an overview of the published articles in high-ranking scientific journals, followed by its research background, motivation, examination of the research problems, objectives, relevance, methodology, limitations, and the overall structural overview.

1.1. Cumulative Dissertation Approach

This doctoral thesis is based on the compilation of three articles published in scientific journals of international relevance. All articles explore the concept of AB, from the analysis of previous academic research to the conceptualization and definition as well as the opportunities and challenges of the innovative concept in the context of start-ups. All three articles are published in scientific journals that are ranked Q1 or Q2 in Scopus and/or JCR. In accordance with the regulations of the Doctoral Program at the University of Malaga (UMA), the requirements for submitting a cumulative dissertation have been met. The following list enumerates all articles that comprise the dissertation's body of work:

- 1) Pöhlmann, M., Jambrino-Maldonado, C., de las Heras-Pedrosa, C., & Seitz, J. (2024). Trends and evolution of agile branding: A bibliometric analysis. *Business: Theory and Practice*, 25(2), 406–419. <https://doi.org/10.3846/btp.2024.21438> (Scopus Q2)
- 2) Pöhlmann, M., Seitz, J., Jambrino-Maldonado, C., & de las Heras-Pedrosa, C. (2024). Conceptualizing agile branding: Dimensions and antecedents for managing brands in a dynamic environment. *Administrative Sciences*, 14(6), Article 112. <https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci14060112> (JCR Q2, Scopus Q2)
- 3) Pöhlmann, M., de las Heras-Pedrosa, C., Seitz, J., & Jambrino-Maldonado, C. (2025). Evaluating the potential of agile branding: Opportunities and challenges in the start-up context. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 12(1), Article 279. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-04600-w> (JCR Q1, Scopus Q1)

1.2. Research Background and Motivation

This chapter presents an overview of the background and motivation of the dissertation project. It begins with an examination of the influence of VUCA on brand management, proceeds to an analysis of changes in brand management, and then discusses shortcomings in traditional brand management, the increasing importance of agility in brand management, and branding challenges faced by start-ups.

1.2.1. The Impact of VUCA on Brand Management

Recent years have clearly underlined the volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity that define today's global environment (Baran & Woznyj, 2021; Eilers et al., 2022; Ferreira & Coelho, 2020; Schoemaker et al., 2018). In order to effectively navigate the VUCA landscape and manage a company in a manner that ensures optimal performance, it is essential to cultivate agility at the strategic, human resources, leadership, and organizational level (Baran & Woznyj, 2021; Ulrich & Yeung, 2019). To meet this objective, individuals must possess a range of competencies, including the ability to navigate crises or emergencies, master new technologies and tools, manage stress, and rapidly adapt to shifting circumstances (Baran & Woznyj, 2021). The authors Baran and Woznyj (2021) strongly advise executives and leaders to take three interrelated actions to ensure organizational success in turbulent and fast-changing times: determine their VUCA, identify threats to agility, and integrate agility-enabling activities.

In the current business environment, brand managers must be aware of the various challenges and opportunities that arise from unexpected global events, evolving customer needs, increased competition, and the complexities of the media and sales landscape (Baran & Woznyj, 2021; Bruce & Jeromin, 2016; Caprano et al., 2024; Eilers et al., 2022; Ferreira & Coelho, 2020; Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2022). Peterson (2019) postulates that the prevalent volatility represents the most challenging factor for brand managers. It is necessary for leaders, together with their teams, to actively analyze the business environment and identify disruptive trends (Baran & Woznyj, 2021). Hence, they must be capable of adapting their brand quickly and responding swiftly (Peterson, 2019).

1.2.2. Changes in Brand Management

Brands have long since ceased to be a purely distinguishing feature of similar products (Bruce & Jeromin, 2016; Veloutsou & Delgado-Ballester, 2019). Jones (2012) emphasizes five significant ways how branding is transforming. First, he states that brands are no longer the persuader of buying a company's product, they evolve to provide a platform that is useful to the consumer, as the traditional role of the customer is changing. He asserts that consumers are becoming more informed, ethical, and skeptical, and that they are less susceptible to persuasion by brands (Jones, 2012). Second, the concept

of brand proposition is often regarded as a somewhat antiquated instrument of persuasion (Jones, 2012; Jowitt & Lury, 2012). Instead, brands are more and more focusing on offering purpose to their customers (Jones, 2012; Jowitt & Lury, 2012). Jowitt and Lury (2012) define purpose as a combination of vision, beliefs and personality of a brand. Third, there is a notable shift in the emphasis placed on consistency by brands (Jones, 2012). Jones (2012) states that brands are more open to consumer co-creation and to modifying their visual brand elements. Fourthly, it is observed that brands also tend to adopt a less controlling and more liberating approach to the implementation of innovative ideas within their organizations (Jones, 2012). Fifth, brands are transitioning from ownership to boundarylessness, whereby logos are even merged to serve a higher purpose (Jones, 2012).

The manner in which consumers engage with brands, and the function that brands serve for both the company and society, is undergoing a transformation as a consequence of the pervasive accessibility to information and the products available through digital channels (Swaminathan et al., 2020). Veloutsou and Delgado-Ballester (2019) agree that the brand management process has changed. The authors posit that previously, the brand creation and management process was a purely corporate task, where the brand was first constructed and subsequently anchored in the minds of consumers. Cova and Paranque (2016) add that the brand management process has changed due to the growing influence and the shifting power between companies and society. Consumers and other stakeholders such as employees or business partners now play a major role in shaping the brand creation and development (Cova & Paranque, 2016; Veloutsou & Delgado-Ballester, 2019). Companies and brand managers are losing control of the brand management process and need to see themselves as one entity amongst different stakeholder groups that are shaping a brand today (Veloutsou & Delgado-Ballester, 2019). Instead of trying to control the branding process, Veloutsou and Delgado-Ballester (2019) suggest that brand managers should see themselves as its coordinator. Swaminathan et al. (2020) concur with the observation that the role of the traditional brand manager or brand owner is undergoing a transformation. They note that brands are moving away from a model of exclusive ownership to one of shared ownership.

The study by Veloutsou and Delgado-Ballester (2019) further detects that employees responsible for branding encounter difficulties in proactively integrating stakeholders into the brand management process. Furthermore, the authors observe that there are only a few efforts to incorporate external agencies or consumers into the process, and that most companies neglect the necessity of it. Sarkar and Banerjee (2021) also emphasize the importance of brand co-creation. Their research shows that brand co-creation is beneficial for all stakeholders and in addition, it increases brand perception and adds value for customers. To effectively manage a brand in the current complex, uncertain, and unpredictable environment, brand managers must recognize that their role has evolved

from that of brand guardians to brand hosts (Veloutsou & Delgado-Ballester, 2019). This necessitates the constant integration of a diverse range of internal and external stakeholders, with their evolving needs being continuously incorporated into the brand management process (Veloutsou & Delgado-Ballester, 2019). Swaminathan et al. (2020) consent that an increasing number of stakeholders are turning into co-creators and are involved in the process of building, defining and experiencing a brand. The author call this effect “blurring of branding boundaries” (Swaminathan et al., 2020, p. 25).

Nevertheless, it has been demonstrated in the literature that not all customer feedback is of equal importance. Hippel already defines the “lead user” (Hippel, 1986, p. 796) approach as far back in 1986. Hippel (1986) characterizes a lead user as a pioneering consumer whose present-day needs anticipate the future demand of the general public. He further states that lead users are an optimal source of inspiration for companies seeking to identify trends and to develop future products and services that will become mainstream, while allowing them to remain aligned with evolving consumer demands. The lead user approach is a methodology that enables a company to focus on relevant stakeholder groups (Hippel, 1986). Hippel (1986) suggests that the lead user approach is particularly suited for products and services that are subject to rapid change and a high level of technological advancement. Consequently, his approach is particularly relevant and valuable in the context of the current era.

In the last century, digitalization has transformed the consumer from a passive buyer to a “data citizen” (Lammi & Pantzar, 2019, p. 1). Lammi and Pantzar (2019) define a data citizen as a consumer who constantly produces data and plays an essential role in the value creation process. Data therefore has become a substantial source when it comes to gathering feedback for branding or marketing, turning the consumer into a co-producer for product and service innovations (Lammi & Pantzar, 2019). Digitalization further enables fake news and hackers to cause brand damage that can spread around the world in seconds and, once published, is difficult to remove from consumers' minds or the Internet (Peterson, 2019; Swaminathan et al., 2020). Fake news can even be created on purpose by competing firms to generate a loss in trust in the targeted brand or to strengthen their own brand (Peterson, 2019).

A further shift in brand management is the concept of brand activism. In her study, Moorman (2020) seeks to ascertain whether brand managers consider it appropriate for the brand to engage in political messaging. She defines brand activism as “public speech or actions focused on partisan issues made by or on behalf of a company using its corporate or individual brand name” (Moorman, 2020, pp. 388–389). In order to engage in brand activism, a brand must necessarily speak out for or against a political issue (Moorman, 2020; Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022). Examples of political issues are among others climate change, transgender, same-sex marriage, or racism (Moorman, 2020). A common

concern among companies is the discrepancy between their political stance and the opinions of their customers, employees, and partners (Moorman, 2020). In the most adverse scenario, brand activism may culminate in anti-brand actions initiated by consumers, which may manifest as a shift in consumer sentiment, or even as a proactive campaign of public criticism or negative activities directed at a specific brand (Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022). In the research of Moorman (2020) as well as of Pöyry and Laaksonen (2022), it became evident that an increasing number of brands are engaging in the process of politicization. 47.2% of the marketing leaders surveyed, even said it was adequate, to “make changes to products and services in response to political issues” (Moorman, 2020, p. 388). According to the study of Moorman (2020), business-to-consumer (B2C) firms were even more open to brand activism. The fact that political statements by a brand can lead to critical voices or reactions of consumers should not stop a company from embracing brand activism (Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022). It is of greater importance to understand what political stance the firm’s consumers share and to avoid the respective negative triggers in brand communication (Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022).

1.2.3. Insufficiencies of Traditional Brand Management

Research has shown that traditional brand management processes take too long to respond to our dynamic environment and that existing strategies are not sufficient to successfully manage a brand today (Baumgarth, 2020; Bruce & Jeromin, 2016; Keller & Richey, 2006; Swaminathan et al., 2020; Toniatti et al., 2023). The literature reviewed indicates a need and growing interest in AB (Baumgarth, 2020; Toniatti et al., 2023). Several authors consent that brand management today demands a more flexible and dynamic approach to respond quickly to an ever-changing world (Baran & Woznyj, 2021; Eilers et al., 2022; Golant, 2012; Iyer, Davari, Srivastava, et al., 2021; Peterson, 2019; Rego et al., 2022; Swaminathan et al., 2020). Digitization and disruptive technologies require a permanent awareness and readiness for change as well as a permanent shift in management mindset (Bruce & Jeromin, 2016; Peterson, 2019; Schoemaker et al., 2018). Swaminathan et al. (2020) state that global hyperconnectivity has resulted in significant changes in how brands need to be developed and managed today. Their research revealed that existing brand models and hypotheses no longer fit and are insufficient to manage a brand in a hyperconnected world. Swaminathan et al. (2020) emphasize that this evolution requires a re-examination of traditional brand management. Eilers et al. (2022) claim that branding requires a new mindset—an agile mindset.

According to Bruce and Jeromin (2016), the reality of a traditional brand development process is as follows: In the absence of the public, companies create their brands until they feel the brand is now perfectly developed. Only then is it presented to the market. At best, the authors say, this process leads to customers buying the product. They add that it is often only when the success of the product

declines that the brand is adjusted, or the product is taken off the market. According to the authors, it often seems like a gamble. Baumgarth and Schmidt (2018) agree that today's dynamic markets require an additional form of adaptability, resulting in continuous brand adjustment. According to Eisele (2012), the classic brand development process follows a linear approach.

Since Ries and Trout (1972) introduced the concept of “brand positioning” various brand positioning models have been developed. However, Jowitt and Lury (2012) found that there is little difference between them. According to their research, most brand positioning models have the following components in common: “the competitive set or frame of reference, target consumer, insight, brand proposition or brand promise, reasons to believe, values or beliefs, personality, essence, differentiator, summary of the overall positioning, brand roots or origins” (Jowitt & Lury, 2012, p. 97). The authors state that traditional brand models do not meet the contemporary requirements as they were developed with a focus on singularity: “a single product, a single target audience, a single-minded proposition” (Jowitt & Lury, 2012, p. 97). They argue that today's world is more complex, and that modern brand models must consider multiplicity as there is a variety of different audiences, not only outside the company, but also within it. Communication takes place on several channels at the same time, and digitization has added numerous new points of contact (Jowitt & Lury, 2012).

Ulrich and Yeung (2019) consent that the world is changing at an accelerating pace, driven by ongoing technological innovations. The authors note that the ability to adapt quickly to a changing environment is now a key driver of success for both individuals and organizations. Companies that can respond quickly to changing customer needs and rapidly introduce innovative and relevant products and services will be the winners while those who lack this ability will lose (Ulrich & Yeung, 2019). While the environment is changing and turning globally connected faster than ever, Veloutsou and Delgado-Ballester (2019) emphasize that companies and brand managers seem unable to keep up with the pace. Schoemaker et al. (2018) conclude that older managers may have trouble handling today's dynamic and unpredictable markets because they come from years of stability.

The importance of stability and continuity in traditional brand management is confirmed by several authors. Bruce and Jeromin (2016) consent that successful and well-known brands often have one thing in common: years of continuity. The authors are certain that continuity in brand management is still important. However, they state that digitalization is forcing companies to complement continuity with adaptability and speed of action. While some brands are quite successful with their continuity, such as BMW or Coca-Cola, it can be the bottleneck for other brands, such as Nokia or Kodak, and the reason why formerly successful brands have lost their market position due to external change and missed adaptation (Bruce & Jeromin, 2016). Bruce and Jeromin (2016) argue that for a long time, companies had active communication sovereignty while in addition, the competitive

environment and customer needs were stable. They add that as a result, long-term brand models were based on continuity and consistency and had a good chance of success.

Kay (2006) confirms the importance of continuity as one of the main success factors in brand management in the past. At the same time, however, he says that it is very difficult to maintain branding consistency in practice. Preece et al. (2019) agree that a combination of continuity and change is important to ensure the longevity of a brand in a constantly evolving environment. However, they consent that there is a lack of understanding and research on how brands can combine continuity and change. The authors emphasize that further research is needed on how brands can add or remove components to ensure brand longevity. Veloutsou and Delgado-Ballester (2019) agree that there is little strategic thinking about how brands will be developed in the future.

Kay (2006) posits that a strong brand is a key factor in a company's success. Yet, he notes the absence of definitive guidelines for developing a strong brand and a lack of consistency in the literature on the design of the branding process. Jain (2017) also emphasizes the importance of a strong and committed brand identity to survive change and maintain recognition. The author defines brand identity as “the organization’s unique mission, history, culture, values, and personality” (Jain, 2017, p. 2). A strong brand identity positions a corporation for both change and future growth and facilitates an evolving marketing strategy (Jain, 2017).

1.2.4. Branding Challenges of Start-ups

The high rate of start-up failure, which is estimated to be approximately 90%, indicates that the success rate of new business ventures is relatively low (Cantamessa et al., 2018; Shewale, 2024). A study by Cantamessa et al. (2018) found that poor marketing and branding were among the main reasons for start-up failure. Recent studies indicate that start-ups face multiple challenges impacting their branding (Awad & Fatah, 2015; Chaudhri et al., 2022; Mukul & Saini, 2021; Rode & Vallaster, 2005; Wiesenberg et al., 2020). Key challenges that were identified are the absence of research on branding processes tailored to start-ups, severe resource constraints in terms of time, people and money, omnipresent uncertainty and risk of failure, founder-centricity, difficulties in stakeholder integration, low brand awareness, uncoordinated hiring processes, and a non-linear branding process (Awad & Fatah, 2015; Cantamessa et al., 2018; Chaudhri et al., 2022; Eggert & Kraus, 2016; Morris et al., 2002; Rode & Vallaster, 2005; Wiesenberg et al., 2020; Yang & Aldrich, 2017).

These constant internal and external changes and challenges underscore the necessity of innovative brand management approaches to match the special dynamics of start-ups. AB was identified as a potential solution that is particularly relevant for start-ups requiring dedicated research. The findings by Chaudhri et al. (2022) and Rode and Vallaster (2005) that start-ups need to incorporate

an agile approach to their branding, resonates with recent studies calling for more flexible, dynamic, and agile brand management practices (Baran & Woznyj, 2021; Baumgarth, 2020; Eilers et al., 2022; Golant, 2012; Iyer, Davari, Srivastava, et al., 2021; Peterson, 2019; Rego et al., 2022; Swaminathan et al., 2020; Toniatti et al., 2023).

1.3. Research Gap and Problem Statement

This chapter discusses the research gaps and the problem statement of the dissertation project. First, the agreed knowledge within the literature is highlighted, followed by the identification of research gaps and the derivation of the problem statement.

1.3.1. Agreed Knowledge Within Literature

Numerous studies show that agility has a positive impact on business performance (Hobbs & Petit, 2017; Roberts & Grover, 2012; Vrontis et al., 2023). This finding aligns with the management consulting literature, stating that agility has been a critical capability for many companies surviving the COVID-19 crisis (Chong et al., 2020). The necessity and growing interest in agility in the context of branding is evident in the literature reviewed. AB is acknowledged by several authors as one of the most relevant trends in post-pandemic brand management (Baumgarth, 2020; Toniatti et al., 2023). Innovative approaches to brand management emerge as traditional branding principles are questioned (Toniatti et al., 2023). Toniatti et al. (2023) observe that agility is critical for brands to maintain relevance and resilience in the current business landscape. Keller and Richey (2006) conclude that agility and collaboration are among the most crucial brand personality traits to succeed in the 21st century. Rego et al. (2022) argue that agile and resilient brands are better capable of enduring turbulent times, recovering, and reinventing themselves. With an agile approach, companies can effectively respond to consumer needs, stay ahead of the competition, and maintain a strong brand presence in an ever-evolving marketplace (Keller & Richey, 2006).

The study of Cantamessa et al. (2018) found that bad marketing and branding are among the main reasons for start-ups to fail. This challenge underscores the need for innovative brand management approaches that are tailored to the unique dynamics of start-ups.

1.3.2. Research Gap

A comprehensive review of the literature revealed a lack of scientific investigation on AB (Bruce & Jeromin, 2016; Hattendorf, 2021; Kalaignanam et al., 2021; Preece et al., 2019; Toniatti et al., 2023), despite the consensus among experts that an agile approach to branding is a crucial necessity in the contemporary era (Baumgarth, 2020; Dänzler & Heun, 2014; Eilers et al., 2022; Golant, 2012; Lies,

2020). In contrast to the increasing importance of AB, the existing scientific literature does not indicate a common definition nor conceptualization. Is it the implementation of agile principles from software development into brand management? Is it an approach or a skill? Is AB a substantially new idea?

Recent studies emphasize the need for agility in modern brand management, yet prior research lacks depth. The investigation concerning marketing agility conducted by Kalaiganam et al. (2021) reveals that brand agility requires its own research. Bruce and Jeromin (2016) confirm that there are only a few investigations that have transferred the concept of agility to the field of branding, and that these studies are largely limited to literature. Toniatti et al. (2023) concur that agility is one of the ascendant trends in branding, while observing that previous research on AB does not delve sufficiently into this phenomenon. Moreover, an analysis of the existing literature revealed a lack of research investigating the potential of AB examining its benefits and challenges.

The agile approach has already been applied to a number of business areas, including information technology, project management, human resources, and marketing (Hattendorf, 2021; Kalaiganam et al., 2021; Noteboom et al., 2021; Osei et al., 2018). While Thümler (2023) conducted a bibliometric analysis of AM, no bibliometric analysis has been conducted on agility related to brand management to date. Although the agile manifesto of software development (Beck et al., 2001a) and the agile marketing manifesto (Agile Marketing Manifesto, 2021b, 2021a) do exist, these values and principles cannot be transferred one-to-one on branding and there is no equivalent agile branding manifesto to guide the implementation of AB in practice.

Chaudhri et al. (2022) emphasize that the brand management of start-ups differs significantly from that of established companies. The extant literature on branding in start-ups is scarce, with the majority of studies focusing on established companies (Chaudhri et al., 2022; Rode & Vallaster, 2005). In addition, brand models are often not aligned with the specific needs and constraints of start-ups (Chaudhri et al., 2022), requiring a reassessment of brand strategies for these emerging businesses (Rode & Vallaster, 2005). Given the importance of branding to the success of start-ups and the scarcity of available research, further exploration of branding practices tailored to start-ups is critical.

1.3.3. Problem Statement

It can thus be argued that existing research on brand management is insufficient for industries and company types where the internal and external environment is in a state of constant and rapid evolution. Brands in such environments therefore find themselves ill-equipped in terms of dynamic and flexible brand management strategies and approaches. Despite the growing consensus among scientists that an agile approach to branding is necessary, there is a notable scarcity of research on the concept. To date, no bibliometric and systematic literature analysis has been conducted to illustrate

the current state of research on agility in relation to branding. Furthermore, there is no consensus on the definition or conceptualization of AB, which hinders comprehension. Additionally, no study has addressed the potential and thus the opportunities and challenges of implementing AB.

1.4. Research Aims, Objectives, and Questions

Given the lack of research on agile brand management approaches in fast-moving industries, this dissertation aims to holistically define, conceptualize, and analyze the potential of AB. The overall research objective is to evaluate how agility can be applied to strategic brand management. To achieve the overarching research aim and address the objectives and questions, the project is divided into three primary research studies: 1) conducting a bibliometric analysis and a systematic literature review, 2) defining and conceptualizing AB, and 3) evaluating the potential of AB in the start-up context (see Figure 1.1). The studies have been published in high-ranking and internationally recognized journals and build on each other (see Chapter 3, 4 and 5).

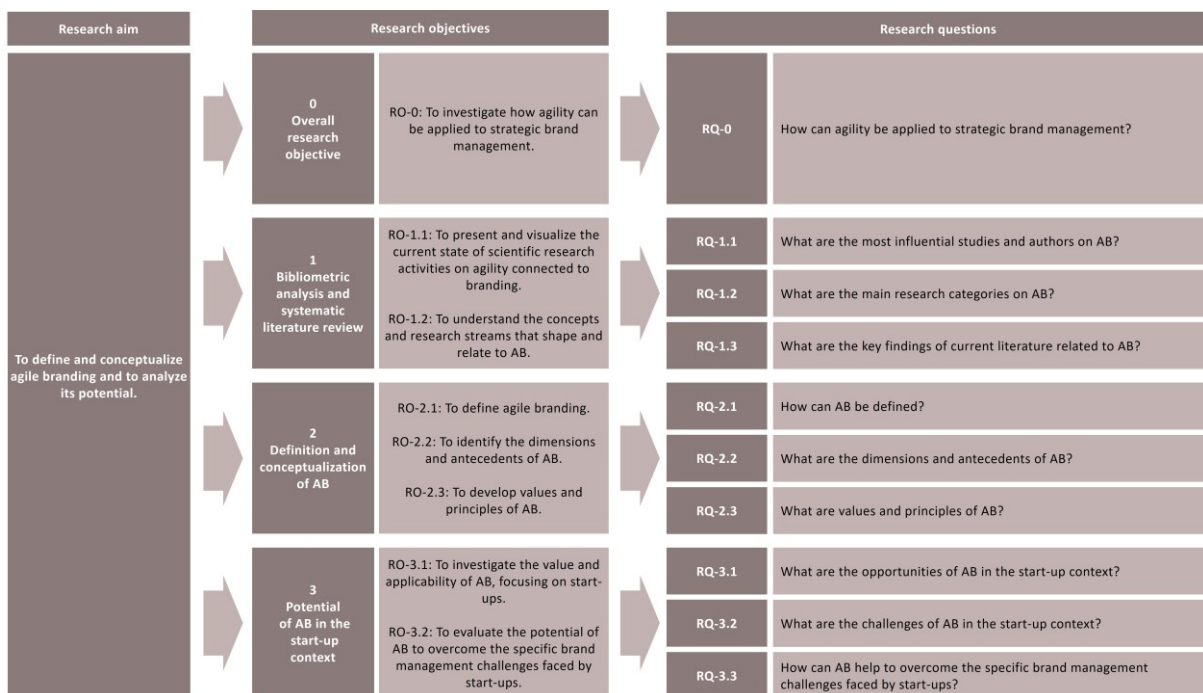


Figure 1.1: Research aim, objectives, and questions (own illustration).

1.4.1. Study 1 – Bibliometric Analysis and Systematic Literature Review of AB

The first step of this dissertation is to conduct a bibliometric analysis to gain an overview of the current scientific literature production on agility in the context of branding and thus enable a systematic literature analysis, develop a theoretical framework, and identify gaps within the existing knowledge. No bibliometric analysis has been conducted on the topic of agility in relation to branding to date. This

analysis aims to present and to visualize the trends and evolution on AB by applying bibliometric methods to the scientific article literature produced between 1996 and 2023 (see Figure 1.1, RO-1.1). In addition, the analysis provides an understanding of the concepts and research streams that shape and relate to AB (see Figure 1.1, RO-1.2). The following research questions form the basis to conduct Study 1:

- RQ-1.1: What are the most influential studies and authors on AB?
- RQ-1.2: What are the main research categories on AB?
- RQ-1.3: What are the key findings of current literature related to AB?

1.4.2. Study 2 – Definition and Conceptualization of AB

The bibliometric analysis and systematic literature review revealed that there is no coherent definition of AB. It is unclear what the concept implies. The second study therefore aims at synthesizing the existing literature with in-depth interviews to propose a definition of AB (see Figure 1.1, RO-2.1). Furthermore, the goal is to conceptualize AB through the identification of dimensions and antecedents that shape the innovative concept (see Figure 1.1, RO-2.2). The third aim of this study is to provide brand managers with tangible guidance on applying AB to their brand strategy by developing the AB values and principles construct. Inspired by the agile manifesto of software development (Beck et al., 2001a) and the agile marketing manifesto (Agile Marketing Manifesto, 2021b, 2021a), it is intended to serve as an agile branding manifesto for practitioners. Study 2 aims at setting the basis for further scientific research on AB. Three research questions guide Study 2:

- RQ-2.1: How can AB be defined?
- RQ-2.2: What are the dimensions and antecedents of AB?
- RQ-2.3: What are values and principles of AB?

1.4.3. Study 3 – The Potential of AB in the Start-up Context

The overall objective of the third study is to analyze the potential of AB, as no scientific investigation could be found that explores its opportunities and challenges. Start-ups are characterized by an agile culture, especially in the early development phase (Griva et al., 2021). Due to the affinity, as well as the need for agility and to deepen the findings of the study, it is assumed that AB is particularly interesting and relevant for start-ups, which was confirmed by initial interviews in the early phase of the dissertation. Accordingly, the start-up context is selected for the purpose of evaluating the potential of AB and for framing the context of Study 3.

Study 3 aims at investigating the value and applicability of AB (see Figure 1.1, RO-3.1) by identifying the opportunities it offers for start-ups and uncovering the unique challenges associated with its implementation. Moreover, it assesses the utility of AB in addressing the branding challenges commonly faced by start-ups. The following research questions are addressed in Study 3:

- RQ-3.1: What are the opportunities of AB in the start-up context?
- RQ-3.2: What are the challenges of AB in the start-up context?
- RQ-3.3: How can AB help to overcome the specific brand management challenges faced by start-ups?

1.5. Research Relevance for Science and Practice

This study contributes to the body of knowledge on agile brand management approaches for industries and company types in which customer demands and competitors are rapidly and constantly changing. This dissertation helps to address the current shortage of scientific research on AB and provides real-world value to organizations operating in such dynamic environments.

The findings of this dissertation are of relevance to all companies worldwide estimated at 333.34 million in 2021 (Dyvik, 2023), including start-ups developing their brand for the first time and established businesses seeking to maintain their market relevance and competitive advantage. Furthermore, the findings are beneficial for academics specializing in branding, marketing, business management, and communication. The research offers insights for those engaged in the strategic orientation and development of brands, including marketing and brand managers, entrepreneurs and decision-makers, brand consultants and agencies, and corporate management stakeholders.

The dissertation's emphasis on the context of start-ups renders its results of particular value for young companies, which face unique branding challenges that differentiate them from established businesses. Globally, more than 150 million start-ups exist and 50 million new ones are founded every year, with 90 percent of all start-ups failing (Shewale, 2024). The study of Cantamessa et al. (2018) detects that poor marketing and branding activities are among the leading contributors for start-ups to fail. The objective of this dissertation is to assist emerging businesses in making an informed decision regarding the potential benefits and challenges of adopting AB as a conscious and prevalent strategy. The dissertation presents a comprehensive analysis of the arguments for and against the integration of AB in business operations. Nevertheless, several of the outcomes are transferable to all enterprises.

1.6. Methodology

This chapter provides a summary of the methodologies applied throughout the dissertation. The respective chapters 3.2, 4.4, and 5.3 offer further details on each study. Additionally, this chapter contains supplementary information that was not included in the published articles due to space limitations.

1.6.1. Overall Research Design

This dissertation followed a mixed methods approach by combining quantitative methods like a bibliometric analysis to identify publication patterns and citation networks with qualitative methods such as a systematic literature review, semi-structured expert interviews and a group discussion. The choice to use mainly qualitative methods was based on the limited existing research on AB. The dissertation consists of three consecutive phases represented by three interrelated studies. Prior to conducting the first study, a preliminary review of the scientific and practice-oriented literature was conducted, and informal discussions were held with people who have already gained scientific or practical experience in the field of AB. Both the purpose and the significance of the research project were discussed with these informants to gain initial insights into the subject matter and to ascertain the value of the research idea.

In the initial phase and the corresponding Study 1, a bibliometric analysis was conducted to gain a detailed overview of the existing scientific literature and to be able to define the theoretical framework of the project. Subsequently, a systematic literature review was undertaken with the objective of identifying and synthesizing all relevant publications on AB, as well as identifying gaps in the existing scientific literature.

Based on the outcomes of Study 1 and the preliminary and informal conversations, qualitative semi-structured interviews with eleven experts in the field of AB were conducted in Study 2. The interviews were analyzed, and a first draft of the dimensions, antecedents, values, and principles of AB was created. Hereafter, the results were validated and sharpened in a group discussion with five participants. The dynamic capabilities framework by Teece et al. (1997) was used as the prevailing lens for Study 2. The main challenge of the second study was to identify experts to interview in the field of AB, as the term does not seem to be well established and known scientifically and practically, and few people have proactively researched or dealt with it in practice. This challenge was successfully overcome by using the networks of those experts who had already been interviewed. It was also a positive and noteworthy factor that the interviewees contacted were very quickly willing to support the study, once they were identified and contacted.

To determine the opportunities and challenges of AB in the start-up context, 18 qualitative semi-structured interviews with start-ups were carried out and the results were combined with the previous findings of Study 1 and Study 2. The DC framework by Teece et al. (1997) and the five dimensions of AB identified in the second study were used as the predominant perspectives for this study. A major challenge in undertaking this study was winning the start-up interviewees. More than 120 start-ups were contacted by e-mail, LinkedIn or telephone, yet the majority did not respond at all or emphasized that they did not have time to participate. The hurdle was ultimately resolved by successfully acquiring the start-ups through the personal and professional networks of the authors, a strategy that proved to be highly effective. Ultimately, most of the start-ups were gained through connections or referrals from other start-ups that had already been interviewed. Because of the authors' geographical location, most start-ups interviewed are German.

1.6.2. Tools and Software

The Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection database was used as the basis for the bibliometric and systematic literature review. This database is known as a rigorous and reliable source for academic analysis (Cabeza Ramírez et al., 2017; Donthu et al., 2021; Martinez et al., 2015). While the peer-reviewed articles on WoS form the basis of the systematic literature review throughout the dissertation, other publications identified during the process through snowballing on other databases such as Scopus and Google Scholar were also evaluated and included. Practitioner literature was also consulted yet only used to a limited extent to ensure a rigorous and high quality of the analyzed literature.

Microsoft Word was selected to create text documents, and Microsoft PowerPoint, Microsoft Excel, Canva, VOSviewer, and MAXQDA were utilized to generate graphics. The interviews were conducted and recorded with Microsoft Teams. A structured analysis of the literature, the interviews, and the group discussion was conducted using Microsoft Excel and MAXQDA. Zotero was employed to manage the sources. The primary software utilized for translation and grammar optimization was DeepL.

1.6.3. Quality Criteria

Qualitative studies always carry the risk of a subjective interpretation of the results. Care was therefore taken to adhere to the quality criteria of qualitative research (Tracy, 2010). To ensure the credibility, plausibility, and comprehensibility of the studies, the methodology, procedures, interview guidelines, questionnaires, and results were evaluated by the co-authors and independent researchers to guarantee their thoroughness and impartiality. Detailed, contextualized descriptions of the study

design, conditions and interview partners enable the transferability of the results to similar contexts. Consistency, stability, and reproducibility of the research results were secured through detailed documentation of all methodological steps, as well as external review by impartial researchers. All interview transcripts were rigorously documented and archived, and a codebook was developed to ensure uniformity in data analysis. The codebook can be found in Appendix A, Chapter 10.1.1, and an illustrative example of the coding strategy can be retrieved in Appendix A, Chapter 10.1.2. Furthermore, Appendix A, Chapter 10.1.3, contains a hierarchical code-subcode model from Study 2 and Study 3. Although the transcripts have been anonymized, they are only made available upon request to prevent any potential reconstruction of individuals' identities or companies. The statements identified as being key to the study's findings were incorporated into the respective study as quotations. Further information on the ethical and data protection aspects of this project can be found in Chapter 1.6.4. The respective search strategies for the systematic literature analysis can be found in the corresponding methodology chapter of each study (see 3.2, 4.4, and 5.3).

The confirmability and transparency of the research results was ensured by recording and transcribing all interviews and the group discussion. To ensure the accuracy and uniformity of the transcriptions of the recordings, a unified and extensive transcription guide was developed based on Dresing and Pehl (2018, 2023), and the transcriptions were cross-checked and validated by at least two different researchers. All interviews were documented transparently and can be accessed if needed. Reflexivity was achieved through a process of continuous self-reflection and meetings held for the purpose of addressing potential biases and discussing results. The application of triangulation through the mixed methods approach of bibliometric and structured literature analysis, interviews with different target groups, and a group discussion, increased the validity and robustness of the research results. The findings of each study were compared to ensure consistency in the conclusions drawn throughout the research project.

1.6.4. Ethics and Data Protection

The entire project was conducted in accordance with the highest ethical standards and data protection regulations, with the objective of ensuring the integrity and confidentiality of the information provided by the participants. The study was a non-interventional and non-medical investigation mainly conducted using semi-structured questionnaires as the basis for the interviews and the group discussion via Microsoft Teams. All participants have been fully informed in advance that anonymity is guaranteed, why the research is being conducted, how their data will be used and whether there are any risks involved. To protect the privacy of the informants, all interviews and the group discussion were transcribed and anonymized. Each participant has additionally signed a declaration of consent. A

brief overview of the study and its objectives was provided to the interview participants and group discussion attendees of Study 2 and Study 3 at the initial contact stage.

1.7. Study Delimitation and Limitations

The literature research has shown that AM and AB are sometimes being blended or used similarly. It is to be emphasized that this dissertation focuses on the agility concerning branding solely, excluding a focus on AM. Since the two areas are directly related, findings from AM will be reviewed and incorporated.

This study naturally contains several limitations, which are described in more extensive detail in the Chapters 3.4, 4.5.2, and 5.5.3 of the published articles and the overall discussion (see Chapter 7). Due to the limited state of research on AB, a qualitative study was conducted. Even if an effort has been made to fulfill the quality criteria of qualitative research, it can lead to a subjective interpretation of the results. This is the first dissertation I have worked on. Consequently, I only have limited research experience at the doctoral level, which can be a limitation in terms of researcher knowledge. Although the interviews were conducted until no further insights could be gained (Eisenhardt, 1989), the number of eleven interviewed experts, 18 interviews with start-ups and the group discussion with five participants may be insufficient for a generalization of the research results. The interviews and the group discussion focused predominantly, though not entirely, on German respondents due to my geographical location. It should be noted that intercultural perspectives could limit global transferability and generalization. This research project only offers an initial step in investigating AB. Far more research is needed.

1.8. Structural Overview

In the present Chapter 1, the background and motivation of the dissertation, research gaps and objectives, relevance, methodology, and limitations were introduced. Chapter 2 positions the dissertation within a theoretical framework and clarifies relevant definitions and concepts. Chapter 3, Chapter 4, and Chapter 5 present the three studies and related articles published in scientific journals. The individual articles were inserted in the published version but adapted to the format of the dissertation for a uniform layout. This is followed by a global summary and discussion of the results of each study and their synthesis in Chapter 6 and Chapter 7. Chapter 8 offers a comprehensive conclusion that synthesizes the findings of the dissertation. Chapter 9 enumerates all references. Chapter 10 contains all appendices, including documentation of the published articles. This is followed by an overview of all figures in Chapter 11 and all tables in Chapter 12. In Chapter 13, a comprehensive list of all abbreviations utilized in the dissertation is provided, while Chapter 14 comprises the glossary.

2. Global Theoretical Framework and Definition of Terms

To provide a clear theoretical basis and understanding of terms for the present dissertation, this chapter explains the fundamental underlying and related concepts. It begins with an overview of the theoretical framework, the understanding of AB in this research project, followed by the definitions of brand, strategic brand management, agility, agile marketing, start-ups, and dynamic capabilities.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

This section serves to establish a theoretical background of AB and this research project. In this dissertation, AB is understood as the application of agility to strategic brand management. Based on this understanding, the research objectives and the results of the bibliometric and systematic literature review (see Study 1 in Chapter 3), the following research areas have emerged, which reflect the positioning of this dissertation: agile branding, brand, strategic brand management, agility, agile marketing, start-ups, dynamic capabilities (see Figure 2.1).

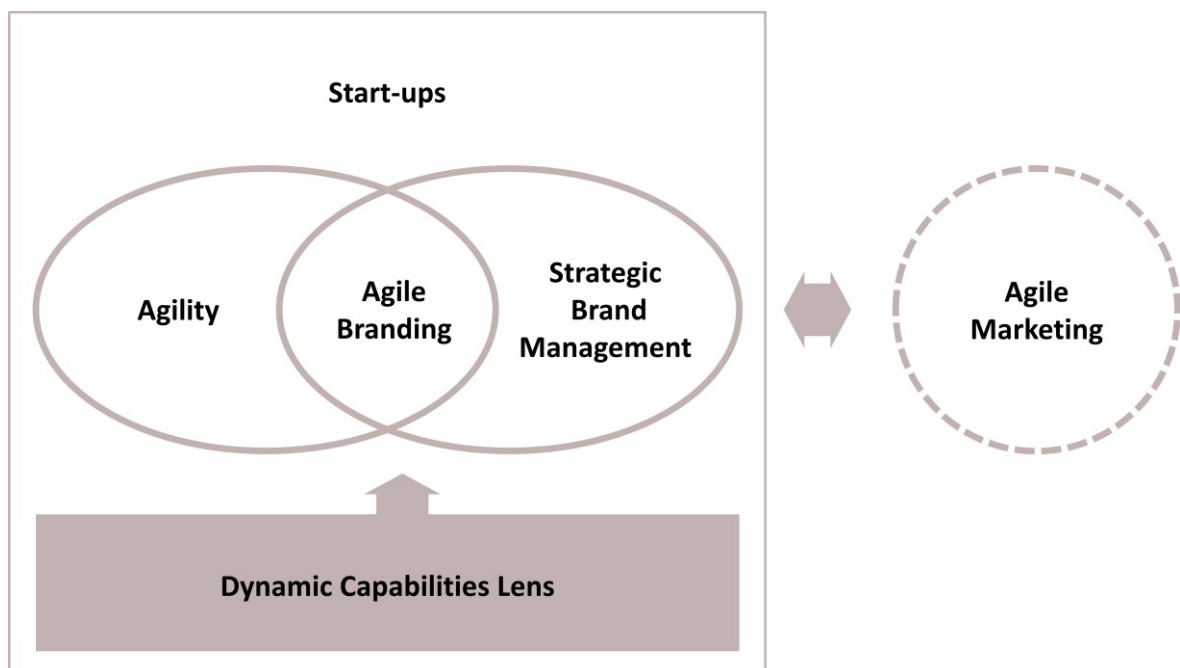


Figure 2.1: Theoretical framework of the dissertation project (own illustration).

This chapter subsequently examines the individual theories and terms that form the basis of the theoretical framework. First, this dissertation elucidates the concept of AB. It then proceeds to define a brand, introduces the terms strategic brand management and agility, and differentiates between AB and AM. It then examines the concept of the start-up in greater detail. Finally, it introduces

the dynamic capabilities framework, which was used to analyze the results. The individual concepts and theories are explained in more detail in the chapters which contain the published articles.

2.2. Understanding of Agile Branding in This Research Project

The literature analysis found that there is no unified and consistent definition of AB. Yet, some common elements and key characteristics can be derived from the literature: adaptability, flexibility, speed, autonomy, openness to experimentation, responsiveness, proactivity, and anticipation (Baumgarth, 2020; Bruce & Jeromin, 2016; Dänzler & Heun, 2014; Eilers et al., 2022; Golant, 2012; Iyer, Davari, Srivastava, et al., 2021; Keller & Richey, 2006; Kreutzer & Land, 2017; Lies, 2020; Rego et al., 2022; Toniatti et al., 2023). As the literature review did not provide a unified definition of AB and the definition and conceptualization of this approach is the aim of this dissertation, no definition of AB can be given at this point. In this project, AB is examined as the application of agility to strategic brand management.

2.3. Definition of a Brand

Veloutsou and Delgado-Ballester (2019) state that not even literature does find a common definition for the term brand. According to their literature review, a brand is often understood primarily as a logo and a name, in short, a visual and communicative way for consumers to distinguish a company's products or services from those of its competitors. They emphasize that this definition is outdated and does not longer correspond to the complexity and meaning attached to a brand these days. Veloutsou and Delgado-Ballester (2019) therefore propose the following modern definition of brand: “[...] an evolving mental collection of actual (offer related) and emotional (human-like) characteristics and associations which convey benefits of an offer identified through a symbol, or a collection of symbols, and differentiates this offer from the rest of the marketplace” (Veloutsou & Delgado-Ballester, 2019, p. 257).

2.4. Definition of Strategic Brand Management

Strategic brand management is defined as a set of four elements: “(1) the development of a marketing strategy coherent with the desired brand image; (2) the planning of the brand management over the medium to long term (set goals); (3) the evaluation of the evolution in the brand image and value in the market; and (4) the allocation of the economic and human resources necessary for the brand management” (Santos-Vijande et al., 2013, p. 150). Strategic brand management is seen as a process that seeks to align external influences with internal activities to enhance the brand's short- and long-term goals (Iyer, Davari, Srivastava, et al., 2021; Murphy, 1988). It refers to all activities to maintain a

brand in the medium to long term (Iyer, Davari, Srivastava, et al., 2021; Santos-Vijande et al., 2013). The aim of strategic brand management is to carefully align the company's overall marketing strategy with the intended brand image and to ensure that the brand's medium and long-term objectives are planned to guide the strategic marketing planning process (Iyer, Davari, Srivastava, et al., 2021; Santos-Vijande et al., 2013).

2.5. Definition of Agility

Hattendorf's (2021) research shows that there is no coherent definition of agility to date. Instead, she defines agility as a mindset that consists of flexibility, being able to react quickly to market demands, focusing on customer satisfaction, and being as transparent, efficient, and sustainable as possible. This definition provides the basic understanding of agility for this dissertation.

In 2001, a significant turning point was reached in the way work is approached in a context of high uncertainty and constant change. Seventeen software developers came together to create the Manifesto for Agile Software Development (Beck et al., 2001a). They defined four values and twelve principles which provide users with recommendations on how to approach projects whose outcome is still open: "1) individuals and interactions over processes and tools, 2) working software over comprehensive documentation, 3) customer collaboration over contract negotiation, 4) responding to change over following a plan" (Beck et al., 2001a). The authors of the Agile Manifesto assert that the values on the left are of greater importance to them than the values on the right, although the values on the right remain significant.

2.6. Definition of Agile Marketing

The literature review identified that AM and AB are directly interlinked yet must not be used synonymously. Kalaignanam et al. (2021) define marketing agility as: "Marketing agility refers to the extent to which an entity rapidly iterates between making sense of the market and executing marketing decisions to adapt to the market" (Kalaignanam et al., 2021, p. 36).

In 2021 a consortium of marketers even came together to define the latest version of the agile marketing manifesto, defining five values (Agile Marketing Manifesto, 2021b) and ten principles (Agile Marketing Manifesto, 2021a) on how to cope with the speed and complexity of today's marketing. The authors recommend the following values:

- 1. Focusing on customer value and business outcomes over activity and outputs.*
- 2. Delivering value early and often over waiting for perfection.*
- 3. Learning through experiments and data over opinions and conventions.*
- 4. Cross-functional collaboration*

over silos and hierarchy. 5. Responding to change over following a static plan.” (Agile Marketing Manifesto, 2021b)

2.7. Definition of Start-ups

In this study, start-ups are defined as follows: they were founded no more than ten years ago, have significant employee and/or sales growth (or are aiming for it) and/or are (highly) innovative with their technology and/or business model (Kollmann, 2022; Kollmann et al., 2023). Parthasarathy (2022) categorizes start-ups as a form of entrepreneurship and emphasizes their extreme importance in finding innovative solutions to existing and new problems and their crucial contribution to the growth of individual countries and the global economy. Griva et al. (2021) find that especially digital start-ups are characterized by a predominantly agile culture in combination with a high willingness to learn and innovation competence, especially in the early development phase.

2.8. Definition of Dynamic Capabilities

AB is seen as a dynamic capability for companies competing in a highly dynamic market environment. Dynamic capabilities are defined as “the firm's ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competences to address rapidly changing environments” (Teece et al., 1997, p. 516). They are a unique and difficult-to-copy combination of organizational, functional and technological skills based on three pillars: sensing external change, seizing new opportunities and transforming organizations (Schoemaker et al., 2018; Teece et al., 1997). In the subsequent chapters, the individual studies published as scientific articles are presented in sequence.

3. Study 1 – Trends and Evolution of Agile Branding: A Bibliometric Analysis

Title	Trends and Evolution of Agile Branding: A Bibliometric Analysis
Publication title and date	Business: Theory and Practice; July 31, 2024
Publisher	Vilnius Gediminas Technical University
Ranking	Scopus Q2
Authors	1. Michaela Pöhlmann, 2. Carmen Jambrino-Maldonado, 3. Carlos de las Heras-Pedrosa, 4. Jürgen Seitz
Contributions of the doctoral candidate	Conceptualization, methodology, software, validation, formal analysis, investigation, resources, data curation, writing – original draft preparation, writing – review and editing, visualization, supervision.
Citation	Pöhlmann, M., Jambrino-Maldonado, C., de las Heras-Pedrosa, C., & Seitz, J. (2024). Trends and evolution of agile branding: A bibliometric analysis. <i>Business: Theory and Practice</i> , 25(2), 406–419. https://doi.org/10.3846/btp.2024.21438
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Status	Accepted and published; postprint

Abstract

As today's environment constantly changes, scientific and practical literature suggests that brands must be managed more agilely. AB, characterized by stakeholder involvement, adaptability, and flexibility, emerges as an innovative approach for companies to navigate dynamic markets to ensure that they remain sustainably relevant and competitive. Yet, no bibliometric analysis has been conducted on agility related to branding to date. This study aims to illustrate and analyze the trends and evolution of AB by applying bibliometric methods to the scientific article literature produced between 1996 and 2023. The results of a systematic literature review are presented, and the findings of the bibliometric analysis of 70 publications listed in the Web of Science Core Collection database are evaluated. Furthermore, visualization and interpretation of bibliometric networks related to citations and publications, publication titles, keywords, authorship, and affiliations with the software VOSviewer are included. This bibliometric analysis shows that the number of scientific studies on agility related to branding has increased mainly since 2008, reaching its peak in 2022, indicating a growing research interest. The study reveals that much more research needs to be conducted on how brands can be managed more agilely and dynamically to compete in a fast-moving world.

Keywords: agility; agile branding; brand agility; branding process; strategic brand management; agile marketing; bibliometric analysis.

JEL Classification: M1, M3, O3.

3.1. Introduction and Literature Review

We live in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world, where companies must respond agilely and quickly to changing circumstances, and adapt their branding accordingly (Baran & Woznyj, 2021; Bruce & Jeromin, 2016; Capoano et al., 2024; Peterson, 2019; Schoemaker et al., 2018). By adopting an agile approach, companies can effectively respond to consumer needs, navigate competitive landscapes, and maintain a strong brand presence in an ever-evolving market environment (Keller & Richey, 2006; Yazıcı, 2024). While the agile approach has been scientifically applied to various business areas, such as IT, project management, supply chain management, human resources or marketing, literature on integrating agility into brand management is scarce (Hattendorf, 2021; Kalaignanam et al., 2021; Noteboom et al., 2021; Osei et al., 2018; Pöhlmann, de las Heras-Pedrosa, et al., 2024; Pöhlmann, Seitz, et al., 2024; Roy et al., 2017).

The authors Kalaignanam et al. (2021) emphasize that maintaining brand consistency is one of the main challenges when implementing marketing agility and point out that this concept may not be suitable for all businesses and all marketing activities. Brand image consistency is vital to maintaining strong brand associations (Kalaignanam et al., 2021). However, in an age where collaboration is the essence of business success, establishing a genuinely consistent and agile brand lived by employees and communicated to external stakeholders has become a significant challenge (O’Keeffe et al., 2016). Kalaignanam et al. (2021) draw attention to the challenges of AM as it can affect customer brand perceptions and attitudes, and blur brand associations as a result of frequent experiments, and can even have a damaging effect on brands. The authors Kalaignanam et al. (2021) believe that brand management decisions are less suited for market experimentation and recommend traditional methods of planning and supervision. Kalaignanam et al. (2021), and Özsoyer et al. (2023) therefore propose future research to find out which activities are especially suitable for AB.

Agile branding is defined as:

“the integration of agility into strategic brand management to enhance companies’ market relevance and competitiveness in a dynamic environment. The brand is seen as a living resource regularly reflected, proactively evolved, and dynamically adapted to market changes, always focusing on customer value. Decisions are based on collected data and stakeholder feedback. Agile methods are integrated both in the initial phase of brand creation and in the long-term care of the brand. The brand manager leads the brand with an openness to experimentation and is empowered to test and adapt it – always with the explicit goal of continuous improvement while balancing brand continuity and change” (Pöhlmann, Seitz, et al., 2024, pp. 14–15).

The analyzed literature exposes a need for and growing interest in agility related to branding due to ongoing change and environmental challenges. Rego et al. (2022) argue that agile and resilient brands are more able to withstand, recover, and reinvent during periods of turbulence. Keller and Richey (2006) identify agility and collaboration as the main characteristics of a corporate brand personality. To achieve long-term success, companies must embrace agile strategies that allow them to adapt to changing conditions and seize new market opportunities proactively (Keller & Richey, 2006). This requires anticipating future changes and swiftly adjusting brand strategies to stay relevant and innovative (Keller & Richey, 2006). The shift in consumer behavior towards prioritizing sustainable and environmentally friendly products (Pant et al., 2020; Purcărea et al., 2022; Towers et al., 2013; Zhang & Watson, 2020) has challenged companies to be agile in their branding and adapt to this evolution (Purcărea et al., 2022). Focusing on agile trends in corporate branding may become incrementally crucial as new technologies, social and political changes as well as media influence the present and future of branding (Schmidt & Redler, 2018; Sophocleous et al., 2024).

Agility influences the perception of an employer brand and thus impacts employer attractiveness for employees and potential applicants (Koch & Schermuly, 2021; Mahmoud et al., 2021; Martinez-Moran et al., 2021). The research of Koch and Schermuly (2021) implies that applying agile project management methods impacts employer branding, attracting new professionals, and increasing employee commitment. Thus, companies that use agile project management methods can use this fact in advertisements as an employer branding tool (Koch & Schermuly, 2021). The authors Mahmoud et al. (2021) suggest creating an inclusive and empathetic multigenerational work environment and increasing workplace flexibility to attract new talents and to overcome external challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic. O'Keeffe et al. (2016), Tandon et al. (2024), and Mardian (2024) argue that agility is an essential leadership skill in today's volatile world and changing environment.

In the literature analyzed, agility is often investigated in the context of social media (T. Chauhan et al., 2023; Chuah et al., 2021; Miquel-Segarra, 2018; Ram & Liu, 2018; Stone & Woodcock, 2013). The studies of K. Chauhan and Pillai (2023) as well as of Miquel-Segarra (2018), indicate that the extent of posting and content agility on the social media platforms of a brand does have a major impact on customer engagement and satisfaction. The sharp rise in internet usage has pushed healthcare brands to increase their agile visibility on multiple digital platforms and raise customer engagement online to grow their profitability as competition has intensified (T. Chauhan et al., 2023). While it is vital for customer engagement and satisfaction to create attractive content and interactions on fan pages, it is equally essential for brands' fan pages to be agile and react responsively to the evolving needs of customers and the competitive landscape (Chuah et al., 2021). The hospitality industry, for

instance, needs to become more dynamic and agile (King et al., 2019; Lam & Law, 2019) to deliver a meaningful service experience, especially given the emergence of disruptive innovations such as the sharing economy (King et al., 2019). The findings of Ram and Liu (2018) suggest that social media enables agile product testing, agile product development teams, and the integration of customer feedback *inter alia*. Companies should engage customers more in this agile process through institutionalized online brand communities while using them as an influential platform to improve the service experience (King et al., 2019).

In the literature reviewed, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) have been explored often in the context of agility and branding (Alsulami et al., 2021; Rozak et al., 2021; Villegas-Ch et al., 2022). The literature indicates that SMEs are exceptionally well positioned and need to implement agility (Rozak et al., 2021; Villegas-Ch et al., 2022). According to Alsulami et al. (2021), SMEs favor agile approaches over resource-intensive ones. According to Gupta et al. (2021), agility is one of the four capabilities that contribute to a company's competitive advantage, along with technology, marketing, and human resources. The authors stress that business agility is a capability that deals with the operational speed of a company in adapting its processes and procedures to external changes and is, therefore, crucial for a brand to remain competitive in dynamic markets.

The systematic analysis reveals that agility is particularly relevant for brands and their supply chain strategy (Bindi et al., 2023; Boardman et al., 2020; Brun et al., 2008; Caniato et al., 2011; Carmona L. & Gil Quintero, 2008; Kim & Kim, 2023; Martinez et al., 2015; Purcărea et al., 2022; Roy et al., 2017; Towers et al., 2013; Vaagen et al., 2011). In the literature considered for the bibliometric study, luxury, textile, fashion, and hospitality brands are frequently investigated concerning agility (Bindi et al., 2023; Boardman et al., 2020; Brun et al., 2008; Carmona L. & Gil Quintero, 2008; Kim & Kim, 2023; Lam & Law, 2019; Martinez et al., 2015; Riedmeier & Kreuzer, 2022; Towers et al., 2013; Vaagen et al., 2011). Consumers worldwide, and at any income level, want more and more luxury, which requires brands to strive for higher positioning and offer more valuable features for their products and services (Brun et al., 2008). Agility in the supply chain strategy impacts luxury fashion brands' performance (Bindi et al., 2023). For multi-brand fashion retailers to successfully adopt the see-now-buy-now model, they need to focus on improving their agility, to remain competitive in the face of time-based competition (Boardman et al., 2020). Riedmeier and Kreuzer (2022) suggest that luxury brand managers should see themselves as an agile facilitator pursuing a more dynamic and flexible approach to brand building and development while being aware of the urge for stakeholder co-creation.

The value of bibliometric analysis as a methodological approach to identify and better understand trends and developments throughout a defined research area has been demonstrated in several scientific articles in recent years (Blažun Vošner et al., 2017; Donthu et al., 2021; Pirri et al.,

2020; Rando-Cueto et al., 2022, 2023; Thümler, 2023) and gained a massive reputation in research (Donthu et al., 2021; Ellegaard, 2018). This method is particularly suitable for analyzing and exploring large amounts of scientific data (Donthu et al., 2021; Seuk Wai Phoong et al., 2022). Recently, the research areas in which bibliometric analysis has been applied, have expanded (Ellegaard, 2018; Ülker et al., 2023), and there is a growing number of guiding articles on how to carry out the method (Donthu et al., 2021). Thümler (2023) conducted a bibliometric analysis on AM in 2023. However, the study focuses on marketing and does not allow any explicit conclusions to be drawn about AB. To our knowledge, no bibliometric analysis exists on the topic of agility concerning branding.

The following research objectives are discussed in this article:

- To present and visualize the current state of scientific research activities on agility connected to branding.
- To understand the concepts and research streams that shape and relate to AB.

The outline of this study is as follows. The introduction chapter gave an overview of the current literature on AB, which was derived from the bibliometric literature research. The materials and methods used to conduct this study are explained, followed by the presentation of the results. The findings are then compared with previous scientific studies and embedded in the existing theory. The article concludes with implications for science and practice as well as the limitations of this study, directions for further research, and a general summary.

3.2. Materials and Methods

The articles of Donthu et al. (2021), Rando-Cueto et al. (2022), and Thümler (2023) served as an overview and guideline for conducting the bibliometric analysis. To perform the bibliometric analysis, the Web of Science Core Collection (WoS) database was used as the basis for further research. This database is considered a precise, reliable, and primary source for scientific analysis (Cabeza Ramírez et al., 2017; Donthu et al., 2021; Martinez et al., 2015). No other databases like Scopus were included additionally, as no significant differences in the data sets were found after a manual screening. After the bibliometric analysis, the literature was systematically reviewed, evaluated, and categorized with the software MAXQDA (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019).

The direct search in WoS for “agile branding” (Query String: TS=("Agile Brand*") OR TS=("Brand* Agility")) resulted in four articles only, which do not capture the complex understanding or had no correlation to the research topic after manual review. While the term agile branding is frequently used in practitioner literature (Landor, 2015), the authors conclude that it is not yet established within academic research, in contrast to other business areas such as social media, IT,

project management, supply chain management, or marketing (Hattendorf, 2021; Kalaiganam et al., 2021; Noteboom et al., 2021; Osei et al., 2018; Roy et al., 2017). Consequently, the authors followed the strategy of Gilliam and Voss (2013) and enlarged the literature search to retrieve all articles on agility related to branding, which resulted in the following query string: TS=(Brand*) AND TS=(Agil!*). Thümler (2023, p. 174) used a similar search strategy for the bibliometric analysis on AM which was TS=(agil*) AND (marketing).

The search for suitable literature was conducted in three stages (see Table 3.1 and Figure 3.1). The first search generated 152 results. The search was further narrowed and refined to obtain more rigorous results and align with the research objectives. Only scientific peer-reviewed articles were included in the analysis, and WoS categories unrelated to the research area, such as dermatology, were excluded. The language was not filtered to receive the most relevant articles possible. As step number three, the content of all articles was manually checked to ensure that they were applicable to the topics of agility and branding. In the end, 70 articles were assessed as eligible and included in the subsequent evaluation. For this analysis, the VOSviewer software was used as a systematic tool for creating bibliometric maps that assist in interpreting the semantic and conceptual structure of the research field (van Eck & Waltman, 2010).

Table 3.1: Results of the WoS Core Collection searches (own illustration).

No.	Date	Query String	Publications
1	2023-05-29	Brand* (Topic) and Agil* (Topic)	152
2	2023-05-29	Brand* (Topic) and Agil* (Topic) and Article (Document Types) and Chemistry Applied or Dermatology or Genetics Heredity or Zoology or Biotechnology Applied Microbiology or Medicine General Internal or Orthopedics or Plant Sciences (Exclude – Web of Science Categories)	105
3	2023-05-29	Articles after manual review for eligibility	70

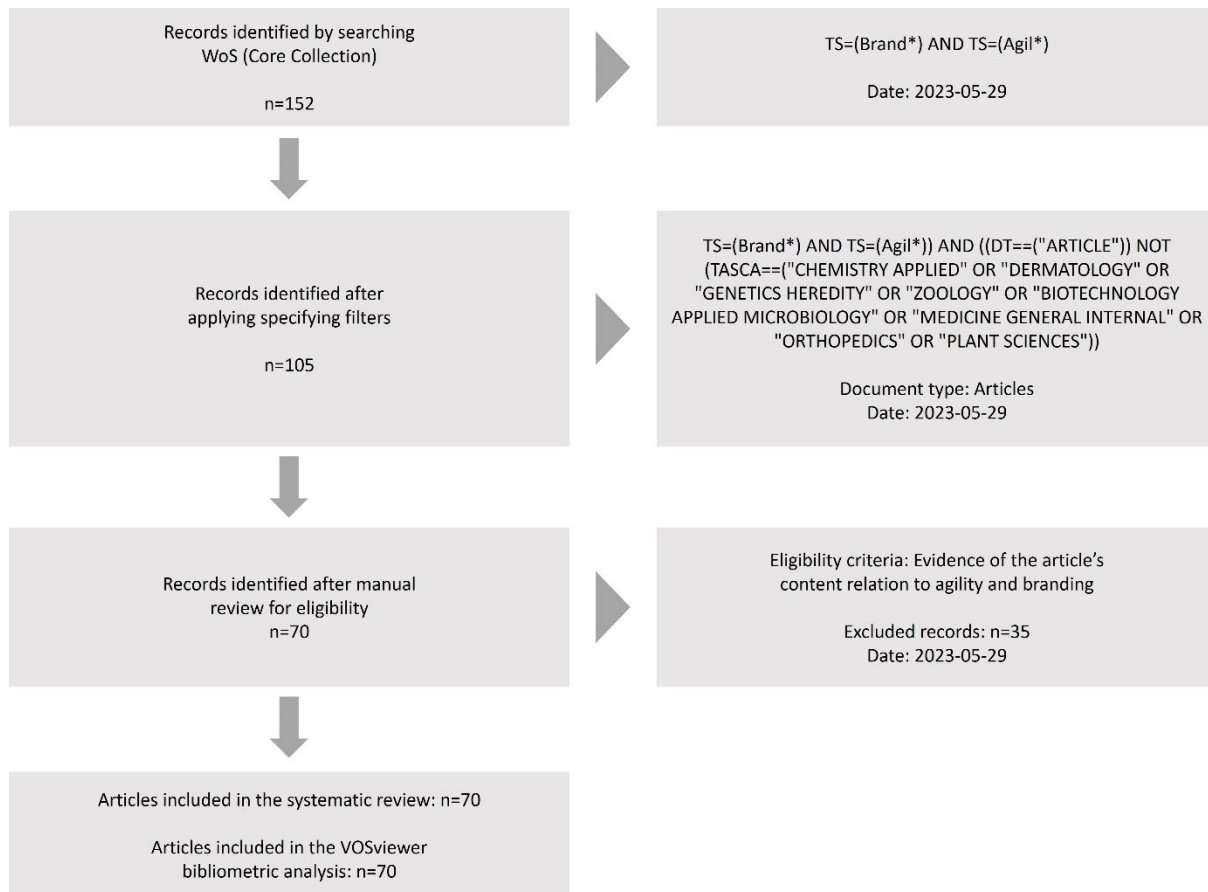


Figure 3.1: Flowchart of the bibliographic search and selection process (own illustration).

Visual bibliometric maps were generated using the VOSviewer software. With the help of VOSviewer, extensive bibliometric maps can be displayed graphically and easily interpreted (van Eck & Waltman, 2010). Thus, bibliometric networks were extracted from VOSviewer with emphasis on author keyword co-occurrence to identify prevailing and most prominent areas in the field of research, the most influential researchers and authorship co-occurrence, as well as countries and organizations with the highest scientific production and their co-occurrence (Sanchez-Nunez et al., 2020; van Eck & Waltman, 2010).

3.3. Results

This chapter illustrates the study’s results. It presents citations and publications per year, the main research categories, an analysis of publication titles, author keywords, authorships, and co-authorships.

3.3.1. Analysis of Citations and Publications per Year

As shown in Figure 3.2, the analysis of articles on the combination of the search terms Agil* and Brand*, shows a significant increase in citations and published articles since 2008 with a noticeable and steady expansion. Before 2008, almost no research was published in WoS on this topic. In 2022, the peak was reached with eleven publications and 222 citations per year. As six articles have already been published as of May 29, 2023, it can be assumed that the increase in research and the interest in agility and branding will continue to grow.

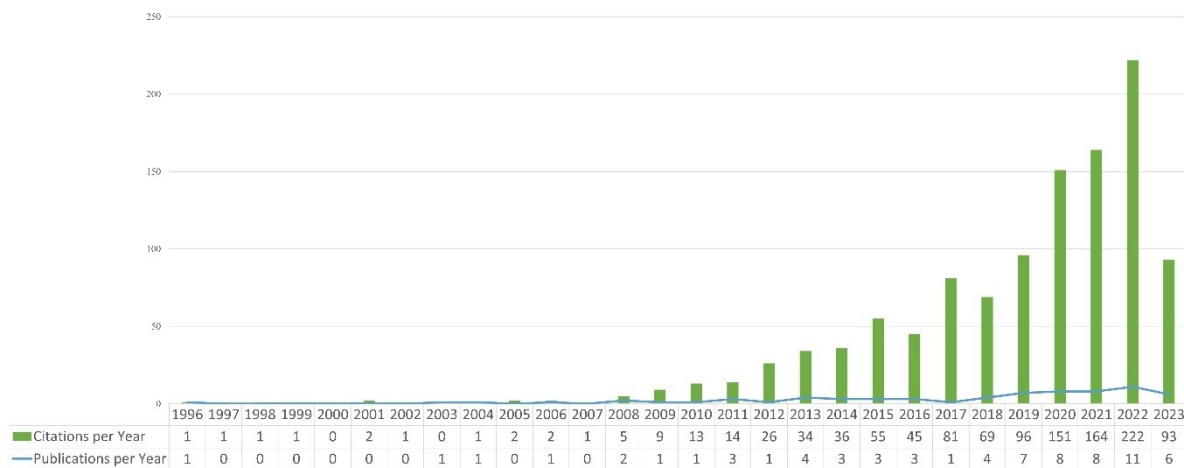


Figure 3.2: Citations and publications with a minimum record of one from 1996–2023 (own illustration).

The citation report in Table 3.2 shows that the 70 articles analyzed were cited 1,126 times, with an average citation per article of 16.09 and an overall h-index of 18.

Table 3.2: Citation report from 1996 to 2023 (own illustration).

Citation Report	
Publications	70
Sum of the times cited	1,126
Average citations per item	16.09
H-index	18

3.3.2. Analysis of Main Research Categories

Figure 3.3 illustrates the allocation of articles according to the primary research categories classified by WoS. The graph only shows results with a minimum record of three items. This results in the top ten main research categories presented in the graphic. Most articles are in the research category “business” with 30 articles (31%), and the category “management” with 25 articles (26%). Since they already cover 57% together, these are the most important categories for the research area. This is followed by the categories “operations research management science” (9 articles; 9%), “engineering industrial” (8 records, 8%), “engineering manufacturing” (6 records, 6%), “computer science information systems” (5 records, 5%), “environmental studies” (4 records, 4%), “information science library science” (4 records, 4%), “environmental sciences” (3 records, 3%), “green sustainable science technology” (3 records, 3%).

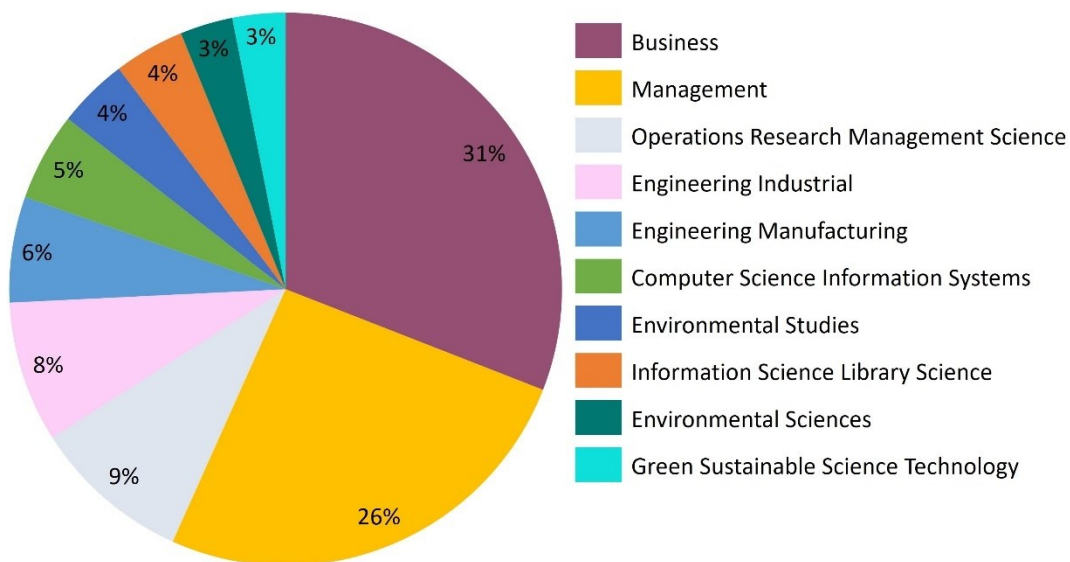


Figure 3.3: The ten main research categories with a minimum record of three (own illustration).

3.3.3. Analysis of Publication Titles

The topics of agility in connection with branding were addressed in various publications. Figure 3.4 displays the journals with the most published articles and a minimum record of two. The number of published articles does not differ significantly. However, the “Journal of Business Research” and “Sustainability” are the journals with a record count of three, with the most articles published per journal. Other publication titles that have contributed at least two articles to the research area are “Industrial Marketing Management”, “International Journal of Production Economics”, “International Journal of Production Research”, “Journal of Global Operations and Strategic Sourcing”, “Journal of Product and Brand Management”, “Journal of Strategic Marketing”, “Management Decision”,

“Palgrave Studies in Practice Global Fashion Brand Management”, “Process Innovation in the Global Fashion Industry”, as well as “Production Planning & Control”.



Figure 3.4: Articles published per journal with a minimum record of two (own illustration).

Table 3.3 represents the impact indexes of the twelve journals with a minimum article count of two. This shows that most journals are ranked Q1 in the Journal Impact Report and the Journal Citation Indicator.

Table 3.3: Journal impact report with a minimum record of two (own illustration).

Publication Title	Journal Impact Report (Scopus)	Journal Citation Indicator (JCI)
Journal of Business Research	Q1	Q1
Sustainability	Q1	Q2
Industrial Marketing Management	Q1	Q1
International Journal of Production Economics	Q1	Q1
International Journal of Production Research	Q1	Q1
Journal of Global Operations and Strategic Sourcing	Q2	Q3
Journal of Product and Brand Management	Q1	Q2
Journal of Strategic Marketing	Q1	Q2
Management Decision	Q1	Q1
Palgrave Studies in Practice Global Fashion Brand Management	Q4	not indicated
Process Innovation in The Global Fashion Industry	not indicated	not indicated
Production Planning & Control	Q1	Q1

3.3.4. Author Keywords Analysis

The VOSviewer software makes it possible to identify the keywords authors have assigned to their articles and to visualize their co-occurrence. This enables the identification of dominant and outstanding research streams within the research area. The keywords are grouped into clusters, and their co-occurrence is displayed in a network. The author keywords of the 70 articles from the WoS database were imported into VOSviewer, and a map with a minimum co-occurrence of one term is visualized in Figure 3.5. To improve visibility, keywords with identical meanings were replaced by one term that represents both. The relationship between the terms is illustrated by word groups or clusters. The keywords “agility” and “social media”, followed by “branding”, “innovation”, “digitalization”, “fashion industry” and “sustainability”, among others, stand out as the most frequently repeated keywords with the strongest relationship. Other clusters with high word repetition and strong co-occurrence to these clusters are “agile marketing”, “experimentation”, “employees”, “culture”, “covid-19”, “decision making”, “customers”, “interaction”, “capabilities”, “collaboration”, “strategy”, and “corporate social responsibility”.

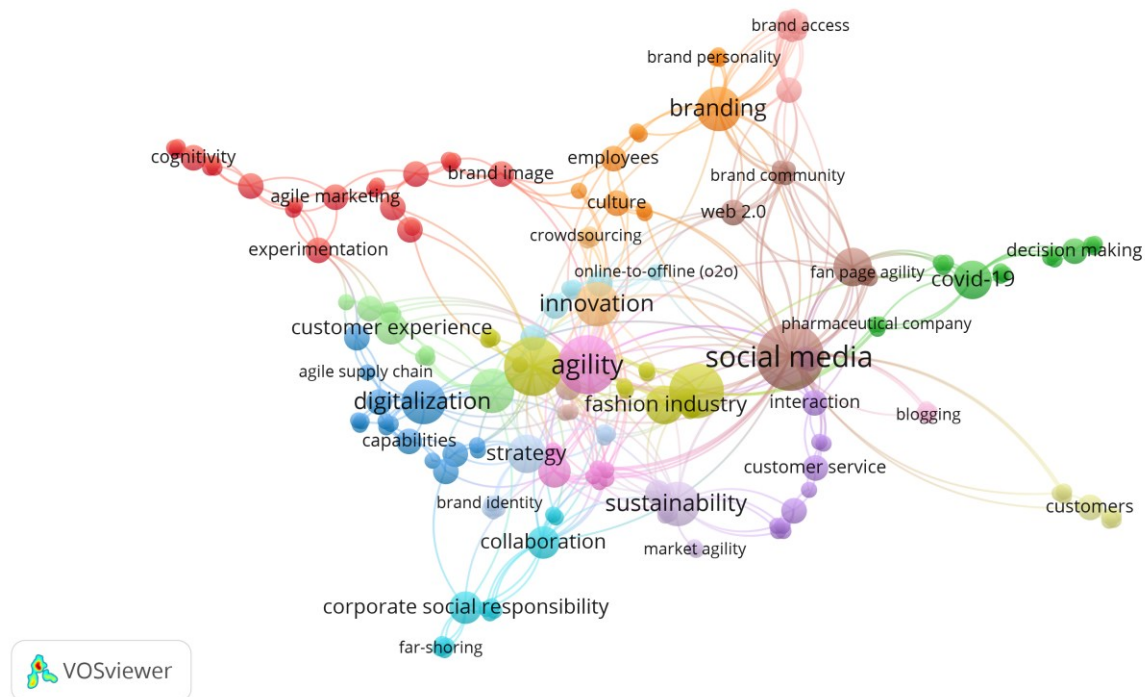


Figure 3.5: Author keyword co-occurrence map (own illustration).

3.3.5. Authorship Analysis

In the research area of agility and branding, several authors are influential in the number of articles they have published and the number of citations their works have received. Figure 3.6 shows the co-occurrence of authorship created with the VOSviewer software. Only authors are included with a minimum of one publication and a minimum number of 50 citations. Maria Caridi (164 citations), Cecilia Castelli (164 citations), and Federico Caniato (164 citations) are the most cited authors while also having published most articles (two articles each). They are followed by and interconnected with other well-cited authors, such as Alessandro Brun (113 citations), Giovanni Miragliotta (113 citations), and Stefano Ronchi (113 citations).

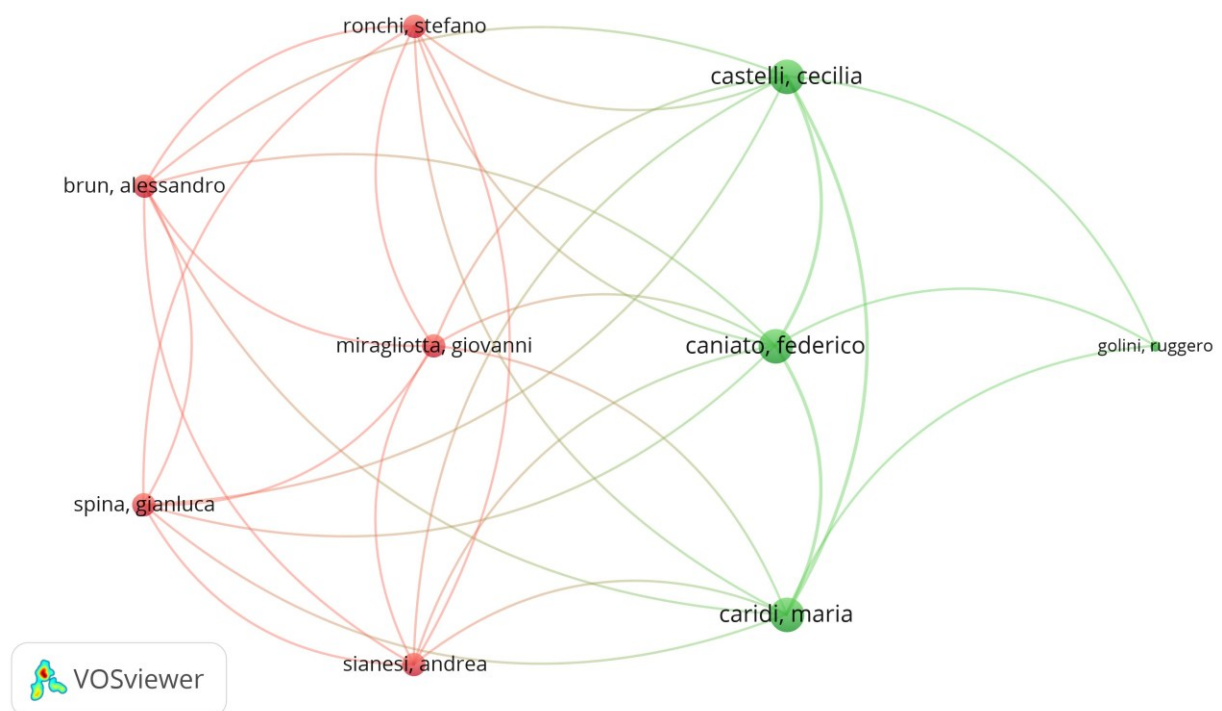


Figure 3.6: Authorship co-occurrence map (own illustration).

In addition to author influence and authorship co-occurrence, Table 3.4 presents the 20 scientific journal articles with the most citations in the WoS database. 18 articles are published in highly ranked journals (JCI Q1 and Q2). The twelve most cited authors focus their research on: Agility and collaboration as critical traits to successfully manage a brand personality in the 21st century (Keller & Richey, 2006); the role of supply chain management in the process of moving luxury brands towards a higher positioning and added value (Brun et al., 2008; Caniato et al., 2011); the cultivation of business model agility through focused capabilities (Battistella et al., 2017); the impact of content agility in social

media brand communities (K. Chauhan & Pillai, 2013); social networking in the workplace and its capability of reshaping a brand as well as its impact on employee satisfaction (Bennett et al., 2010); Original equipment manufacturers (OEM) manufacturing strategy for network innovation agility (Lin, 2004); the concept of marketing agility and the corresponding challenge of ensuring brand consistency (Kalaiganam et al., 2021); Generational differences in workplace motivation among Generation X, Y, and Z (Mahmoud et al., 2021); digital transformation in luxury-branded hotels to meet the changing demands of customers and stay ahead of the evolving competitive environment (Lam & Law, 2019); the use of new technologies to interact with customers in terms of personalization and customer engagement (Gupta et al., 2020); network agility as a booster for firm performance (Chen & Chiang, 2011) as well as influencing factors of the order-of-entry effect for new consumer packaged goods (Kerin et al., 1996).

Table 3.4: The twenty articles with the highest number of citations in WoS (own illustration).

Authors and Year	Article Title and DOI	Source Title	JCI	Times Cited, WoS Core
Keller and Richey (2006)	The importance of corporate brand personality traits to a successful 21st century business; 10.1057/palgrave.bm.2550055	Journal of Brand Management	Q2	115
Brun et al. (2008)	Logistics and supply chain management in luxury fashion retail: Empirical investigation of Italian firms; 10.1016/j.ijpe.2008.02.003	International Journal of Production Economics	Q1	113
Battistella et al. (2017)	Cultivating business model agility through focused capabilities: A multiple case study; 10.1016/j.jbusres.2016.12.007	Journal of Business Research	Q1	105
Chauhan and Pillai (2013)	Role of content strategy in social media brand communities: a case of higher education institutes in India; 10.1108/10610421311298687	Journal of Product and Brand Management	Q2	75
Bennett et al. (2010)	Workplace impact of social networking; 10.1108/02637471011051282	Property Management	Q4	61
Lin (2004)	Original equipment manufacturers (OEM) manufacturing strategy for network innovation agility: the case of Taiwanese manufacturing networks; 10.1080/00207540310001622449	International Journal of Production Research	Q1	53
Caniato et al. (2011)	Supply chain management in the luxury industry: A first classification of companies and their strategies; 10.1016/j.ijpe.2011.04.030	International Journal of Production Economics	Q1	51
Kalaiganam et al. (2021)	Marketing Agility: The Concept, Antecedents, and a Research Agenda; 10.1177/0022242920952760	Journal of Marketing	Q1	49

Mahmoud et al. (2021)	We aren't your reincarnation! workplace motivation across X, Y and Z generations; 10.1108/IJM-09-2019-0448	International Journal of Manpower	Q2	36
Lam and Law (2019)	Readiness of upscale and luxury-branded hotels for digital transformation; 10.1016/j.ijhm.2018.12.015	International Journal of Hospitality Management	Q1	34
Gupta et al. (2020)	Digital Analytics: Modeling for Insights and New Methods; 10.1016/j.intmar.2020.04.003	Journal of Interactive Marketing	Q1	31
Chen and Chiang (2011)	Network agility as a trigger for enhancing firm performance: A case study of a high-tech firm implementing the mixed channel strategy; 10.1016/j.indmarman.2011.01.001	Industrial Marketing Management	Q1	29
Kerin et al. (1996)	Product hierarchy and brand strategy influences on the order of entry effect for consumer packaged goods; 10.1016/0737-6782(95)00088-7	Journal of Product Innovation Management	Q1	29
Zhang and Watson (2020)	Marketing ecosystem: An outside-in view for sustainable advantage; 10.1016/j.indmarman.2020.04.023	Industrial Marketing Management	Q1	28
Moliner-Tena (2019)	Customer engagement, non-transactional behaviors and experience in services A study in the bank sector; 10.1108/IJBM-04-2018-0107	International Journal of Bank Marketing	Q1	26
Melegati et al. (2019)	A model of requirements engineering in software startups; 10.1016/j.infsof.2019.02.001	Information and Software Technology	Q1	24
Rozak et al. (2021)	Social Media Engagement, Organizational Agility and Digitalization Strategic Plan to Improve SMEs' Performance; 10.1109/TEM.2021.3085977	IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management	Q1	23
Koch and Schermuly (2021)	Who is attracted and why? How agile project management influences employee's attraction and commitment; 10.1108/IJMPB-02-2020-0063	International Journal of Managing Projects in Business	Q3	18
Zhang et al. (2014)	Transnational practices in urban China: Spatiality and localization of western fast food chains; 10.1016/j.habitatint.2014.01.003	Habitat International	Q1	17
Stone and Woodcock (2013)	Social intelligence in customer engagement; 10.1080/0965254X.2013.801613	Journal of Strategic Marketing	Q1	17

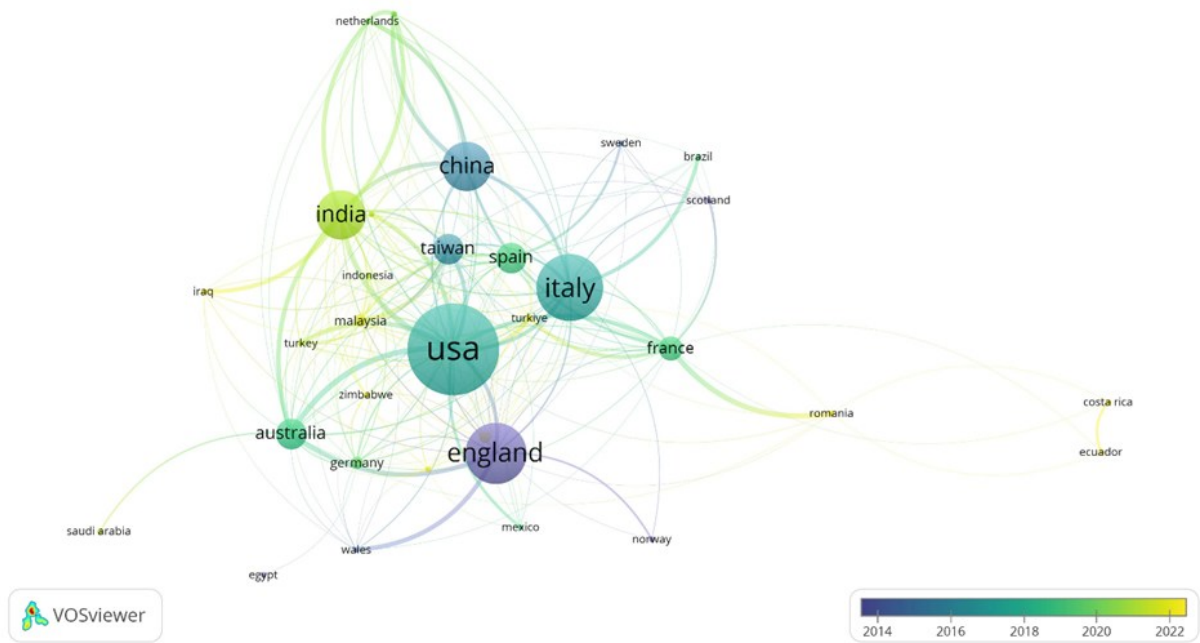


Figure 3.8: Countries co-occurrence map (own illustration).

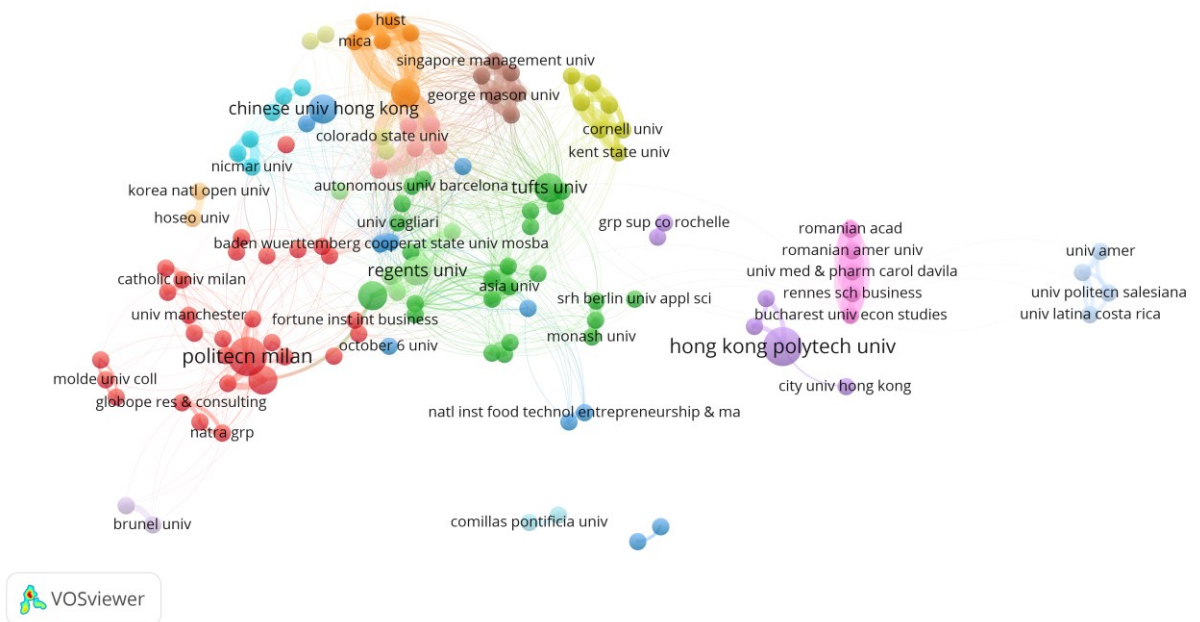


Figure 3.9: Organizations co-occurrence map (own illustration).

Figure 3.9 shows a biographical coupling of organizations with a minimum number of published articles. The network offers high international cooperation in research on the subject. The Polytechnic University of Milan in Italy (three articles) and the Hong Kong Polytechnic University in Hong Kong (three articles) published the most scientific articles on the research area of branding in combination with agility. In terms of citation frequency from the network, the Polytechnic University of Milan in Italy (176), Dartmouth College in the USA (115), the London School of Economics & Political Science in England (115), and the University of Southern California in the USA (115) are in the lead. The Polytechnic University of Milan in Italy also forms a strong network with various international institutions, such as the University of Manchester in England or the Molde University College in Norway.

3.4. Discussion and Conclusion

The study achieved its dual research objectives by providing a concise outline and visualization of current scholarly research efforts on AB, while also examining the underlying concepts and research paths that influence and overlap with it. The researchers conducted a bibliometric analysis and a systematic literature review of 70 WoS Core Collection database publications between 1996 and 2023, covering 206 authors, 58 journals, 20 publishers, 155 institutions, and 34 countries. An investigation of citations and publications per year was performed, followed by identifying the main WoS research categories, the published articles per journal and their impact factors, the authors' keywords, and their connections. Subsequently, the authors and their interrelationships were reviewed, and the 20 most cited articles in WoS were assessed. A word cloud analysis was conducted to complement the investigation to identify additional emergent research areas related to agility and branding. Additionally, the countries and the organizations with the highest production and their contexts were explored.

The results of the bibliometric analysis and the literature analysis indicate that agility has gained research interest in the context of branding in the last few years. However, with 70 articles considered relevant for the study, there is still a great need for further research on agility and its application to the creation and management of brands. This resonates with several authors, whose studies found that the topic of AB is largely unexplored (Bruce & Jeromin, 2016; Hattendorf, 2021; Kalaiganam et al., 2021; Pöhlmann, Seitz, et al., 2024; Preece et al., 2019; Toniatti et al., 2023). The research of Thümler (2023) on AM resulted in an equally low number of relevant articles with 75 publications. Rando-Cueto et al. (2022) used 1,365 articles in their bibliometric analysis of women's entrepreneurship and communication. The 70 articles analyzed were referenced 1,126 times, with an average citation per publication of 16.09 and an overall h-index of 18. While the average citation per

article is higher in the present research compared to the bibliometric analysis of Rando-Cueto et al. (2022) (12.86 citations per article), the h-index of 18 is significantly lower than that of the articles analyzed by Rando-Cueto et al. (2022) (h-index of 61). This could mean that although the articles in the present research were cited more frequently on average, they may have less overall influence or recognition in the academic environment.

The analysis revealed that the number of scientific studies on agility concerning branding had increased significantly since 2008, with the highest peak of publications observed in 2022. This indicates a growing interest in research in this area. 55 publications are allocated to the WoS research categories “business” and “management” (see Figure 3.3). Thus, these two categories represent the most relevant in the research field of agility concerning branding. The most articles per journal were published in the publication titles “Journal of Business Research” and “Sustainability” (see Figure 3.4). Only three articles were published in each of the two journals, which is a comparatively small number. Noteworthy is the high impact value of the publication titles in which the 70 articles appeared. Nine of twelve journals with a minimum of two publications, are ranked Q1 in the Journal Impact Report of Scopus (see Table 3.3).

The authors keyword analysis revealed that “agility”, “social media”, and “branding”, are the three most repeated keywords with the strongest correlation. This leads to the conclusion that AB plays a significant role especially around social media on which future investigation activities could deliberately focus to close potential research gaps. Based on the analysis of the word cloud generated with the software MAXQDA, the words “brand,” “strategy,” and “marketing” were most frequently mentioned in the abstracts of the twenty most cited articles from Table 3.4 (see Figure 3.7). Even though research on agile marketing is still in the early stages (Alghamdi & Agag, 2024), conducting an in-depth exploration of the concept is suggested to explore if any overlaps or insights can be derived for AB. Although Thümler (2023) conducted a bibliometric analysis on AM, his study does not focus on the specific insights gained for branding.

Maria Caridi (164 citations), Cecilia Castelli (164 citations) and Federico Caniato (164 citations) are the most influential authors in the research field in terms of the number of their publications along with their citations. The countries with the highest scientific production in this field are USA, Italy, and England. At the same time, the Polytechnic University of Milan in Italy (three articles) and the Hong Kong Polytechnic University in Hong Kong (three articles) produced the most scientific articles. The three most frequently cited authors focus their research on agility and collaboration concerning brand personality management (Keller & Richey, 2006), supply chain management of luxury brands (Brun et al., 2008) and business model agility (Battistella et al., 2017) (see Table 3.4).

The systematic literature analysis revealed the following focal topics in connection to agility and branding that overlapped across the articles: dealing with ongoing change and environmental challenges, the influence on employer branding, the challenge of brand consistency, social media management, SMEs, and supply chain strategy. In the following, the results of the content literature analysis are compared to further literature that was not part of the bibliometric analysis. While several authors agree that AB is necessary (Baran & Woznyj, 2021; Bruce & Jeromin, 2016; Eilers et al., 2022; Golant, 2012; Iyer, Davari, Srivastava, et al., 2021; Peterson, 2019; Swaminathan et al., 2020), there is a lack of research on AB (Pöhlmann, Seitz, et al., 2024).

The literature analysis of the 70 articles indicated that applying agile methods in a company influences the perception of an employer brand, while agility became a crucial leadership skill. Hattendorf's (2021) study of the recent adoption of agility in organizations, however, finds that there is still no consistent definition of agility. Hattendorf (2021) observes that there is hardly any academic research on whether the values and principles of the Agile Manifest (Beck et al., 2001b) are still up to date. Ulrich and Yeung (2019), Tandon et al. (2024), and Mardian (2024) agree with the authors of the bibliometric analysis, stating that agility should extend to leadership style, requiring leaders to sense change, rapidly learn, anticipate opportunities, and swiftly reallocate resources. The authors emphasize that leaders themselves must embody agility as a prerequisite for fostering an organizational culture where agile attitudes can be adopted by employees. When analyzing the literature, only the research of Pöhlmann, Seitz, et al. (2024), could be found that started examining the skills and competencies of leaders and employees necessary to develop and lead a brand agilely. Future research could address this topic and expand the research of Pöhlmann, Seitz, et al. (2024).

While the above-mentioned authors emphasize the necessity and value of AB, the review indicated that the maintenance of brand consistency is a significant challenge that can even have a damaging effect on the customer brand perception (Kalaighnam et al., 2021). Further investigation could focus on when agile brand management reaches its limits being too agile resulting in a negative effect on customer perceptions.

This study further indicated that SMEs are well suited and need to apply AB. Chaudhri et al. (2022) complement that start-ups need to establish a flexible and iterative branding process, as they often have few financial, human and time resources and their business model is constantly changing. Chaudhri et al. (2022) additionally emphasize that the branding of start-ups differs from that of established companies. No literature could be identified that focuses on the advantages and disadvantages of AB. Additional investigation could, therefore, close this research gap by investigating the advantages and disadvantages of AB, starting with a focus on SMEs or start-ups.

The study holds some limitations. Using the thesaurus function of VOSviewer may create a subjective bias in the investigators who conducted the analysis. To achieve the most precise and focused results, this study limits itself to the search terms “agil*” and “brand*”. The volume of results and, thus, the number of analyzed articles is modest, totaling 70. To further analyze the concept AB and to gather additional results, it is recommended that future investigations explore the research more broadly and include synonyms for agility. These could encompass “flexibility,” “dynamic,” or “adaptability.” Additionally, searching for articles focusing on the application of agile methods to branding, such as “Scrum,” “Kanban,” “Lean,” or “Design Thinking” could be valuable.

An additional constraint of this research is that WoS was the only database used for the bibliometric analysis. Yet, this database is suitable for achieving the research objectives, as great emphasis was placed on high-quality publications. Another limitation of this study is that only peer-reviewed articles were utilized. Future studies could also consider incorporating books, conference papers, or websites to gain a broader insight into the state of research.

The findings emphasize the importance of researching how brands can be created and managed more agilely to adapt to the rapidly changing environment. This research aims to contribute to understanding AB in today’s fast-moving world and its implications for brand success.

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4. Study 2 – Conceptualizing Agile Branding: Dimensions and Antecedents for Managing Brands in a Dynamic Environment

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Abstract

Traditional branding approaches take too long to react to today's dynamic environment. AB offers a promising approach and might be the contemporary answer to the demands of our digitalized world. While scientists state that an agile approach to branding is essential nowadays, there is a lack of knowledge on how AB can be conceptualized and applied in practice. This study aims to provide a better understanding of AB by identifying its dimensions and antecedents. It pursued a multi-method approach: a systematic literature review was conducted, followed by qualitative semi-structured interviews with eleven experts and a group discussion with five participants. Applying the dynamic capabilities perspective, the authors identify five dimensions, including 20 antecedents of AB: (a) leadership style and culture, (b) employee skills and competencies, (c) technology and methods, (d) stakeholder and feedback integration, and (e) ambidexterity. The critical challenge of AB is to balance brand continuity and adaptation. The study is the first to conceptualize AB, offering scientists and practitioners values and principles on how brands can be managed and further evolved in a constantly changing world to stay relevant in the market and ahead of the competition.

Keywords: agile branding; agility; strategic brand management; brand management; dynamic capabilities.

4.1. Introduction

The years during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially, have shown us how “volatile”, “uncertain”, “complex”, and “ambiguous” (VUCA) our world is today (Baran & Woznyj, 2021; Eilers et al., 2022; Ferreira & Coelho, 2020; Schoemaker et al., 2018). Whether it is an unexpected virus that affects the global economy at a rapid pace, diversified customer needs, increased and ever-evolving competition, or a highly complex media and sales landscape, brand managers need to be aware of changing circumstances and the resulting impact on their brands (Ferreira and Coelho 2020; Baran and Woznyj 2021; Bruce and Jeromin 2016; Eilers et al. 2022; Iglesias-Sánchez et al. 2022; Caprano et al. 2024). Peterson (2019) claims that the present volatility is the most challenging factor for brand managers.

Recently, research uncovered that traditional branding processes take too long to react to our dynamic environment and that existing brand management strategies are insufficient to successfully manage a brand nowadays (Baumgarth, 2020; Keller & Richey, 2006; Swaminathan et al., 2020; Toniatti et al., 2023). The existing literature affirms that brand management today demands a more flexible and dynamic approach to respond quickly to an ever-changing world (Baran & Woznyj, 2021; Eilers et al., 2022; Golant, 2012; Iyer, Davari, Srivastava, et al., 2021; Peterson, 2019; Rego et al., 2022; Swaminathan et al., 2020). Eilers et al. (2022) state that a new mindset is required for branding—an agile mindset. The literature analyzed detects a need and a growing interest in AB (Baumgarth, 2020; Toniatti et al., 2023). The authors of this study consider AB to be the application of agility to strategic brand management. Strategic brand management refers to all activities to maintain a brand in the medium to long term (Iyer, Davari, Srivastava, et al., 2021; Santos-Vijande et al., 2013).

Practitioners also emphasize the importance of AB. More and more brands are deviating from rigid brand consistency and incorporating social topics into their brand design and language. For instance, advocating for gender equality (Eizmendi-Iraola & Peña-Fernández, 2023), using gender-neutral wording in addressing customers, or changing the logo to support the LGBTQ+ community (Yates, 2021) and take a stand. A Google consumer survey (Snyder, 2015) showed that this agile and flexible branding positively affects consumers. Young millennials especially stated that they were more likely to “support a brand after seeing an equality-themed ad”. This confirms Jones’ (2012) theory that brands are more open to visual brand changes and less insistent on brand consistency. A study by Landor (2015) found that brands with a high level of agility consistently achieve better financial profits than the market average. They list six characteristics that define an agile brand: adaptive, open, global, principled, responsible, and multichannel. The study revealed the top ten global agile brands: Samsung, Android, Wikipedia, Google, Dyson, Apple, YouTube, Microsoft, Ikea, and Disney.

An intensive literature research revealed a lack of scientific investigation on AB (Bruce & Jeromin, 2016; Hattendorf, 2021; Kalaignanam et al., 2021; Preece et al., 2019; Toniatti et al., 2023), even though experts state that an agile approach to branding is essential nowadays (Baumgarth, 2020; Dänzler & Heun, 2014; Eilers et al., 2022; Golant, 2012; Lies, 2020). Despite the increasing importance of AB, the literature does not indicate its definition. Is it the application of agile principles from software development to branding? Is it an approach or a capability? Is AB a fundamentally new idea? The first aim of this article is to review the existing literature on AB and synthesize it with in-depth interviews to propose a definition of AB.

The in-depth research on marketing agility carried out by Kalaignanam et al. (2021) reveals that brand agility needs to be researched separately. The authors Bruce and Jeromin (2016) confirm that there are only a few transfers of agility to branding and that it is strongly limited to literature. Toniatti et al. (2023) confirm that agility is one of the emerging trends in branding, while noting that previous research on AB does not explore it deeply enough. Therefore, the second objective of this study is to determine the dimensions and antecedents of AB to provide a better understanding of the concept and its manifestation.

The agile approach has already been applied to various business areas, such as IT, project management, human resources, or marketing (Hattendorf, 2021; Kalaignanam et al., 2021; Noteboom et al., 2021; Osei et al., 2018). Although the agile manifesto of software development (Beck et al., 2001a) and the agile marketing manifesto (Agile Marketing Manifesto, 2021b, 2021a) exist to provide orientation in practice, there is no equivalent AB manifesto. The third aim of this study is to provide brand managers with tangible guidance on applying AB to their brand strategy by developing the AB values and principles construct.

Based on the literature analysis, three research questions emerged as the basis of this study:

- RQ-2.1: How can we define AB?
- RQ-2.2: What are the dimensions and antecedents of AB?
- RQ-2.3: What are the values and principles of AB?

A mixed-methods approach was undertaken to answer the research questions, consisting of a systematic literature review followed by qualitative expert interviews and a group discussion. The authors of this study want to emphasize that this research focuses on the agility concerning branding alone, excluding a focus on AM. The conceptualization of AM by Kalaignanam et al. (2021) and the agile front end of an innovation framework (Brand et al., 2021) served as the orientation for conducting the research. To answer the research questions, the DC framework has been applied as a predominant perspective for this study.

This study is relevant to every company worldwide estimated at 333.34 million in 2021 (Dyvik, 2023), be it start-ups developing their brand for the first time or established businesses that want to maintain their market relevancy and stay ahead of the competition. It is also important for professors, researchers, and students in branding, marketing, business management, and communication. The study provides insights for marketing and brand managers, entrepreneurs and decision-makers, brand consultants and agencies, and corporate management stakeholders who are involved in the strategic orientation and development of brands.

Building on dynamic capabilities as a guiding theory in agility, this study offers a conceptualization and operationalization of AB. The following dimensions, along with 20 antecedents, emerged to frame the concept: (1) leadership style and culture, (2) employee skills and competencies, (3) technology and methods, (4) stakeholder and feedback integration, and (5) ambidexterity. AB encompasses all three pillars of the DC framework: sensing, seizing, and transforming (Teece et al., 1997).

The outline of this study is as follows. First, the study is embedded in a theoretical framework derived from systematic literature research. The methods used to conduct the study will then be explained in detail. Thereafter, the results will be presented and related to existing scientific research. The study ends with the implications for science and practice, as well as the limitations of this study, directions for further research, and an overall summary.

4.2. Theoretical Framework

The authors of this study understand AB as integrating agility into strategic brand management. Strategic brand management is defined as a series of four elements: “(1) the development of a marketing strategy coherent with the desired brand image; (2) the planning of the brand management over the medium to long term (set goals); (3) the evaluation of the evolution in the brand image and value in the market; and (4) the allocation of the economic and human resources necessary for the brand management” (Santos-Vijande et al., 2013, p. 150). Strategic brand management is seen as a process that strives to align external influences with internal activities to improve the brand’s short- and long-term goals (Iyer, Davari, Srivastava, et al., 2021; Murphy, 1988). As brand managers today face the challenge of balancing brand consistency and adaptability (Beverland et al., 2015; Iyer, Davari, Srivastava, et al., 2021), AB must be seen as a dynamic capability for companies competing in a highly dynamic market environment.

Based on this understanding and the systematic literature review, three main research areas emerged related to AB and reflecting the positioning of this study: agility theory, agile marketing theory, and dynamic capabilities theory.

4.2.1. Agility Theory

According to Hattendorf (2021), many companies are desperately trying to find new ways to deal with the ever-changing environment and high speed. Companies are implementing agility to keep up with today's VUCA world (Baran & Woznyj, 2021; Eilers et al., 2022; Schoemaker et al., 2018). Research shows that agility has a positive impact on a company's performance (Hobbs & Petit, 2017; Roberts & Grover, 2012; Vrontis et al., 2023). This also corresponds to the management consulting literature, stating that agility has been a critical capability for many companies surviving the COVID-19 crisis (Chong et al., 2020). Pinho et al. (2022) highlight the growing scientific interest in agility, and point to increased publications in recent years.

In 2001 a milestone in how to approach work in a highly uncertain and ever-changing environment was set, when 17 software developers created the manifesto for agile software development (Beck et al., 2001a). The manifesto improved the way in which software should be developed by focusing on individual skills in workflows. Beck et al. (2001a, 2001b) defined four values and twelve principles that provide users with recommendations on how to approach projects whose outcomes are still open. Hattendorf (2021) states that there is not much academic research on whether the values and principles of the agile manifesto are still contemporary.

Hattendorf (2021) finds that firms often need more practical methods and recommendations to apply agility to their daily work. In contrast, Noteboom et al. (2021) state that since the creation of the agile manifesto (Beck et al., 2001a), a lot of agile methods have been established: scrum, kanban, design thinking, or extreme programming are particularly suitable if the requirements for the final product cannot yet be formulated in concrete terms at the beginning of the project (Goll & Hommel, 2015).

Hattendorf's (2021) research shows no coherent definition of agility to date. Instead, she defines agility as a mindset of flexibility, reacting quickly to market demands, focusing on customer satisfaction, and being as transparent, efficient, and sustainable as possible. This definition provides the basic understanding of agility for this study.

4.2.2. Agile Marketing Theory

The agile approach has been adapted to a variety of business areas like marketing, product development, IT, sales, finance, and human resources (Hattendorf, 2021; Noteboom et al., 2021; Osei et al., 2018). Although research on AM is still in its very early stages (Alghamdi & Agag, 2024), it has already been applied in business reality, and the first scientific studies exist (Kalaiganam et al., 2021; Osei et al., 2018; Thümler, 2023). Kalaiganam et al. (2021, p. 36) defines marketing agility in a

particular way, stating: “Marketing agility refers to the extent to which an entity rapidly iterates between making sense of the market and executing marketing decisions to adapt to the market”. Alghamdi and Agag (2024) find that AM positively influences a firm’s competitive advantage.

A survey conducted by AgileSherpas (2022) shows that the application of AM in practice is firmly on the rise. The report indicates that 43% of the surveyed marketers already use agile approaches in their daily work, and 42% apply traditional marketing (2022, p. 6). A hybrid combination of different agile methods, like scrum ban, is mainly used (61%) (AgileSherpas, 2022). In 2021, a consortium of marketers came together to define the agile marketing manifesto, identifying five values and ten principles to “keep up with the speed and complexity of marketing today” (Agile Marketing Manifesto, 2021a, 2021b).

The literature exploration identified that AM and AB are directly interlinked, and some authors even caution that AM might impact branding (Kalaiganam et al., 2021). Kalaiganam et al. (2021) suggest that future research is necessary to find out how AM specifically affects brand management and which brand management activities are suitable for AM. They also recommend exploring when the costs of managing brand image and consistency exceed AM’s benefits. The authors emphasize that maintaining brand consistency is one of the main challenges when implementing AM and point out that this concept may not be suitable for all businesses. Kalaiganam et al. (2021) draw attention to AM’s challenges, as it can affect customer brand perceptions and attitudes, blur brand associations due to frequent experiments, and even damage brands.

4.2.3. Agile Branding Theory

Successful and well-known brands often have one thing in common: years of continuity (Bruce & Jeromin, 2016; Kay, 2006). Research by Kay, conducted in 2006, confirms the importance and perception of continuity as one of the past’s main success factors in brand management. The authors Preece et al. (2019) are confident that continuity in brand management is still important while being convinced that a combination of continuity and change is essential to ensure the longevity of a brand in a constantly evolving environment. Beverland et al. (2015) note that brand managers are challenged with brand ambidexterity, referring to the tension between brand consistency and relevance, which often requires change and innovation. In contrast, Preece et al. (2019) stress a lack of understanding and research on how brands can combine continuity and change. Veloutsou and Delgado-Ballester (2019) agree that there is little strategic thinking about how brands will be developed in the future.

Digitalization, changing values, and rising business models result in entirely new requirements and challenges for brand management (Baumgarth, 2020; Schmidt & Redler, 2018; Toniatti et al., 2023). Baumgarth (2020) and Rego et al. (2022) state that the current environment requires brands to

change their brand management mindset, as the strategies from the past do not work anymore. They stress that brands must be more open to integrating stakeholder and customer feedback and constantly adapting their branding to upcoming events. Baumgarth (2020) adds that this new mindset can only arise if the people responsible for the brand embrace flexibility and agility, are open to experimentation, and are willing to make mistakes. This new branding approach requires a leadership style and corporate culture where the brand responsible can make independent decisions (Baumgarth, 2020). This innovative approach to brand management may clash with old world views and established corporate processes. Still, brands that stick to traditional brand strategies will not be able to cope with the challenges of the modern world (Baumgarth, 2020). Golant (2012) and Iyer, Davari, Srivastava, et al. (2021) agree that there is a demand for a more flexible and dynamic approach to branding. Routed by the COVID-19 pandemic, Baumgarth (2020) created the Brand Work Manifesto, guiding the successful management of a brand in times of crisis. He defines brand agility as one of four meta principles to do so.

The study of Eilers et al. (2022) confirms that an agile mindset is necessary to manage a brand in a VUCA environment successfully. Baumgarth (2020) and Toniatti et al. (2023) stress that a brand must remain relevant, modern, and innovative, and brand management must act according to agile principles instead of strict rules. Keller and Richey (2006) consent that a corporate brand must be agile to remain successful and react to market changes effectively. Kreutzer and Land (2017) state that companies today must respond much faster to changes than before, and customers demand speed. Dänzler and Heun (2020) state that while classic branding methods try to ignore unpredictable factors as far as possible, the agile approach calls for accepting these changes as a given and adapting the process accordingly.

The literature analyzed shows a need and growing interest in agility in the context of branding. AB is confirmed by several authors as one of the most critical trends in post-pandemic brand management (Baumgarth, 2020; Toniatti et al., 2023). Innovative approaches to brand management are arising as the principles of traditional brand management are being questioned (Toniatti et al., 2023). Toniatti et al. (2023) state that agility is crucial for brands to remain relevant and resilient in the current business landscape. Keller and Richey (2006) conclude that agility and collaboration are among the most crucial brand personality traits to stay successful in the 21st century. Rego et al. (2022) argues that agile and resilient brands are better capable of enduring turbulent times, recovering, and reinventing themselves. With an agile approach, firms can react effectively to consumer needs, keep ahead of the competition, and sustain a powerful brand visibility in an ever-evolving marketplace (Keller & Richey, 2006). Khan et al. (2022) suggest that future studies could address agile constructs in the context of branding.

Kalaignanam et al. (2021), and Özsoymer et al. (2023) propose future research to determine which activities are especially suitable for AB. The authors Bruce and Jeromin (2016) emphasize that brand agility does not mean actionism, nervousness, or hecticness, but an adequate, targeted, and rapid response of the brand to changing market situations.

The literature review revealed no universal and consistent definition of AB. Table 4.1 outlines various authors' understanding of AB. In summary, AB's following commonalities and critical characteristics can be identified within the literature: adaptability, flexibility, speed, ownership, experimentation, responsiveness, proactivity, anticipation, and flexibility (Baumgarth, 2020; Bruce & Jeromin, 2016; Dänzler & Heun, 2014; Eilers et al., 2022; Golant, 2012; Iyer, Davari, Srivastava, et al., 2021; Keller & Richey, 2006; Kreutzer & Land, 2017; Lies, 2020; Rego et al., 2022; Toniatti et al., 2023).

Table 4.1: Definition and understanding of agile branding in the literature (own illustration).

Reference	Definition/Description	Key Characteristics
(Baumgarth, 2020)	Three core values define the meta principle "agile" in the Brand Work Manifesto: Prioritizing adaptation over rigid adherence to brand rules, embracing experimentation over excessive protection, and promoting empowerment over a top-down approach.	Adaptability, experimentation, empowerment
(Bruce & Jeromin, 2016)	Brand agility entails the brand's rapid and targeted response to changing market conditions.	Responsiveness, speed
(Dänzler & Heun, 2020)	Agile branding acknowledges the inevitability of unpredictable factors and calls for adapting branding processes accordingly, in contrast to traditional branding methods that attempt to minimize unpredictable elements.	Adaptability
(Riedmeier & Kreuzer, 2022)	Agile branding is the capacity of brand management to react to market changes swiftly and appropriately within the established brand vision, ultimately making the brand compelling and valuable.	Responsiveness, flexibility
(Rego et al., 2022, p. 590)	The agile-resilient brand is "the firm's capability to reactively and proactively, as well as defensively and offensively, manage the brand's response to turbulence, through the anticipation of environmental change, the harnessing of the firm's brands and other assets to resist it, the flexibility to adapt to those changes, and the ability to improve competitiveness when faced with new environmental contexts".	Responsiveness, proactivity, anticipation, flexibility

4.2.4. Agile Branding as a Dynamic Capability

DC is “the firm’s ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competencies to address rapidly changing environments” (Teece et al., 1997, p. 516). They are a unique and difficult-to-copy combination of organizational, functional, and technological skills based on three pillars: sensing external change, seizing new opportunities, and transforming organizations (Schoemaker et al., 2018; Teece et al., 1997). DC helps companies analyze their external environment and align internal and external competencies to build competitive advantage and anticipate opportunities in times of deep uncertainty and rapid change (Schoemaker et al., 2018; Teece et al., 1997). These aim to improve the long-term evolutionary sustainability of a company instead of just enabling high efficiency in the short term (Schoemaker et al., 2018). DC has a positive impact on performance as well as providing a firm with a competitive advantage (Asseraf et al., 2018; Ferreira & Coelho, 2020). Scholars consider DC a diverse set of resources, processes, and skills (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; C. L. Wang & Ahmed, 2007). Eisenhardt and Martin (2000) argue that the potential for a long-term competitive advantage does not reside in the DC themselves but in the ability of resource configuration and the earlier and more effective use of DC compared to the competition. While ordinary capabilities aim to support current business activities efficiently, DC focuses on improving a company’s flexibility and adaptability to achieve long-term competitive advantage (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Teece, 2019).

Since 2009, several studies have applied the resource-based view (RBV) and DC as the predominant theoretical lens on agility constructs (Pinho et al., 2022; Roberts & Grover, 2012; Teece et al., 1997; Walter & Raetze, 2021). The DC lens has also been successfully applied in academia to conceptualize ambidexterity (O’Reilly & Tushman, 2008), AM (Alghamdi & Agag, 2024; Golgeci et al., 2023; Kalaighnam et al., 2021), and brand management (Ferreira & Coelho, 2020; Iyer, Davari, Srivastava, et al., 2021), thus confirming its scientific viability and applicability in investigating AB. The DC framework is, therefore, the predominant lens for this study.

4.3. Results

The deductive-inductive explorative approach resulted in five dimensions and 20 antecedents conceptualizing AB (see Figure 4.1). These are (1) leadership style and culture, (2) employee skills and competencies, (3) technology and methods, (4) stakeholder and feedback integration, and (5) ambidexterity. Antecedents are conditions that must exist or be built to enable AB to be practiced. Applying the DC lens, various factors were identified that contribute to the sensing, seizing, or transforming capability of a brand. These are shown in Figure 4.1. Yet the authors of this study emphasize that some factors can also be assigned to different pillars of DC. As the interviews were

conducted in the native language of the participants, the following quotes were translated into English, if needed.

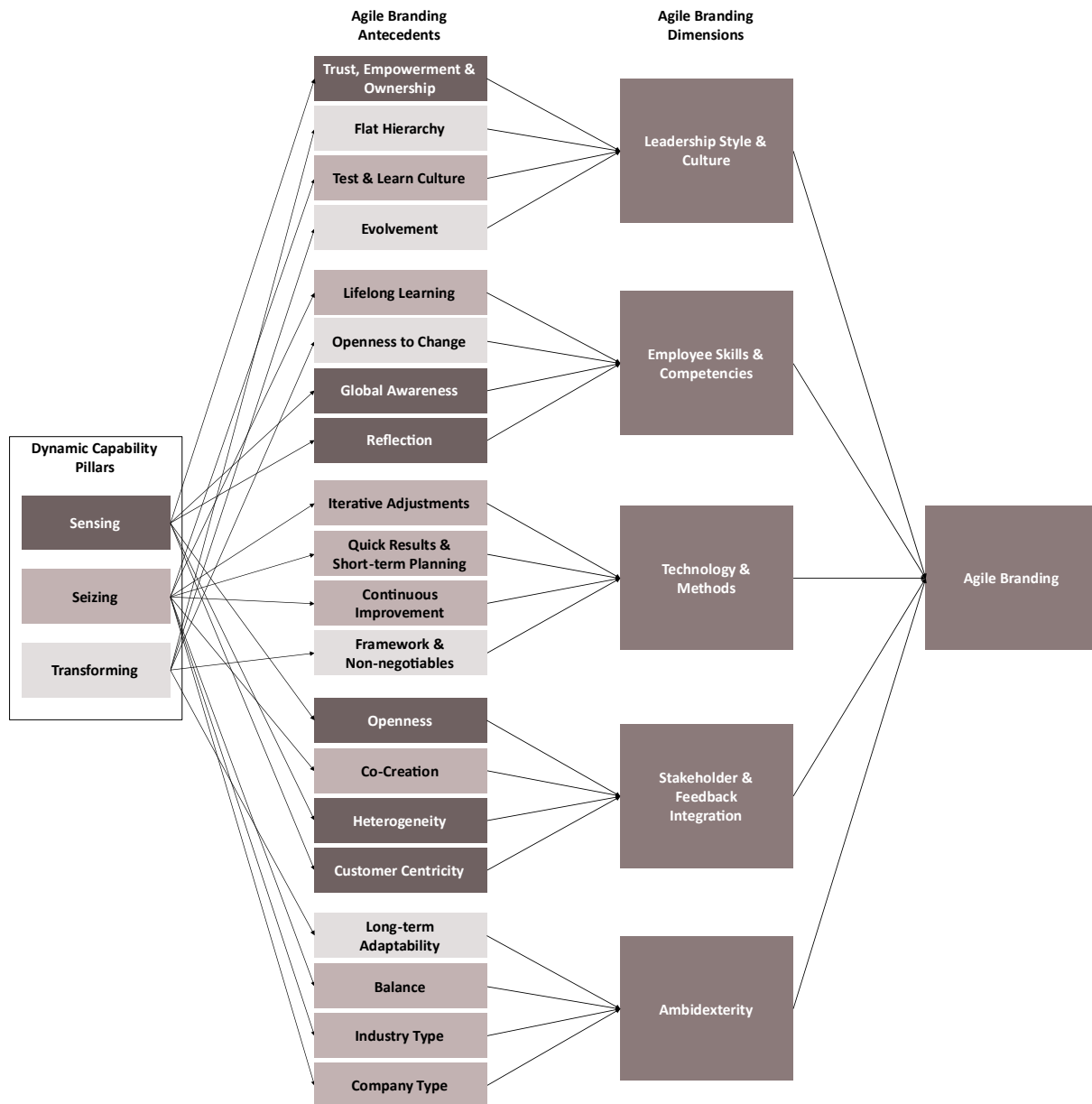


Figure 4.1: Agile branding dimensions and antecedents based on the dynamic capabilities’ framework (own illustration).

4.3.1. Leadership Style and Culture

The qualitative research revealed that AB must be firmly anchored in the leadership style and corporate culture. The informants agree that AB cannot develop if every decision must be approved beforehand. Trust in staff is necessary so that they can make their own decisions within a defined framework:

“If you must discuss every decision [...] first or have it approved first, then agility can never develop. In other words, you need a lot of trust, but I think you also need a clear framework within which that trust can operate.” (E-04, pos. 48, translated)

E-07 adds that agility needs to be developed:

“I do not suddenly act agile, fast, and adaptable if I have never learned that [...]. The world has simply become much faster, much more complex, and so I must be able to adapt much faster and that does not fit in with the old systems at all. Yes, I have to practice that and I cannot say, ‘OH, now I have a crisis, now we have to work together in agile teams’, that simply does not work.” (E-07, pos. 20, translated)

A flat hierarchy and fewer decision-makers emerged as prerequisites for AB. The brand team must have a mandate for autonomous decision-making within a defined framework to react and adapt the brand quickly to the environment. The biggest challenge was for top management to practice agility and be willing to set aside old ways of thinking and pass on power over strategic decisions:

“This means that there are NO more hours-long agreement processes [...]. There is perhaps ONE board member who takes another quick look at it, and that on an ad hoc basis. And otherwise, brand management [...] remains within the agile team. And this is something that reaches its limits in many companies because it simply has not been learned. But autonomy is certainly a very important principle.” (E-01, pos. 27, translated)

To manage a brand agilely, the informants agreed that it is necessary to establish a culture of testing and learning. The willingness to fail, motivated by leadership, is a prerequisite and an essential way to success, as is the informant’s consent that the brand team needs the experimental freedom and resources to be able to try, learn, and improve the brand very quickly, as stated by E-04:

“I think the corporate culture must be curious, it has to be open, it has to allow people to carry out tests and experiments and then, yes, deal with the results. In other words, if success does not come immediately, it is okay [...]. So, I think these are the areas of tension in which you operate. Everything trimmed to perfection or rather better-done-than-perfect and then learning and drawing conclusions from that.” (E-04, pos. 50, translated)

The third antecedent in AB’s leadership style and culture dimension is constant brand evolution. E-08 recommends continuously improving and evolving the brand instead of leaving a mark by undertaking significant and visible changes:

“I think the ego is a big thing in the marketing and advertising world [...]. When a new CMO comes in quite often there is at least a new something, a new ad campaign, a new brand [...]. And so, you know to kind of have the humility to say, [...] I am a steward of something that came before me [...] as opposed to I want to make my mark on this brand.” (E-08, pos. 48)

4.3.2. Employee Skills and Competencies

The second AB dimension emerged from the interviews and group discussion: employee skills and competencies. The informants agreed that lifelong learning and adaptation of skills are more important than strict guidance and precisely defined roles. The participants suggest employing someone who understands how brands fundamentally work but also has an agile mindset:

“I would say that you must understand how brands work [...]. And I believe that paired with an agile mindset or a corresponding mindset; you can achieve a very good transfer into practice. But looking for someone who has been an agile brand manager for ten years will probably be difficult.” (E-09a, pos. 68, translated)

The study respondents agreed that openness to change and flexibility are essential in agile brand management. A brand manager in these times must have a scientific and curious perspective. The interviewees emphasize that not all individuals are used to or willing to change and are, therefore, suitable for this role:

“I mean it’s almost like a scientific mindset of, you know, you’re continually running experiments and you know, I think a lot of people are not used to that [...]. They’ve been doing the same thing for ten years and at the same company and the same job, and they don’t want to change. And I, you know, I respect that but. Those companies and those people and those roles are not going to be successful ten years from now because the world is changing too fast.” (E-08, pos. 54)

The study indicated that an agile brand manager needs to be aware of global dynamics and anticipate what could impact the brand to manage it agilely and respond quickly. It is, therefore, vital to understand the social, political, and economic factors shaping a brand market:

“Let’s take food as an example. During the coronavirus lockdown, branded products sold incredibly well [...]. Now [...] we have a crisis, war, energy crisis, and so on, and now it’s suddenly the retail brands that are experiencing the push because people are saving [...]. And that’s where agile brand management comes into play for me because brands must be able to react agilely and take it seriously that I have actually shifted

consumer needs very, very clearly [...]. I'm not changing the positioning of my tomato paste, but I'm reacting agilely to changing needs and we're experiencing very volatile markets today, we're experiencing a lot of change and we're also seeing that adaptation must take place much, much more frequently today.” (E-10, pos. 18, translated)

Reflection was also mentioned as a prerequisite for AB. A brand manager today must constantly reflect and balance market and ethical demands without blindly integrating emerging customer needs:

“Mindset in this case means [...] the constant reflection between ethical requirements and market demands, so I think that's very important, that you always match that and don't just implement what the customer wants. And then, at the same time, always have a strategic awareness. I don't have to follow every trend. That is certainly the wrong understanding of agile.” (E-01, pos. 51, translated)

4.3.3. Technology and Methods

The third dimension derived from the study is technology and methods. The informants consent that iterative, minor, and quick adjustments are more critical than detailed and long-term planning:

“Having a detailed annual, you know plan is really difficult if not impossible with an agile process, right? So, it doesn't mean that you don't have goals. It doesn't mean that you don't have KPIs to measure those [...] but you have to be open to okay, this is what it looks like we're going to be doing for the next twelve months, but we're going to take a look every three months and revisit what we're doing and if we're still on track [...]. We all must be willing to revisit our own ideas even if we thought they were really, really good.” (E-08, pos. 56)

Some participants were confident that the values and principles of scrum could be applied to branding in an adapted way. E-08 recommends using processes like kanban and a backlog to prioritize and organize tasks. E-02 is sure it does not need a system or step-by-step guide but instead values or phrases that describe AB. E-01 emphasizes that brand management can be seen as agile project management:

“Typical agile methods, which you can read about in any project management book, naturally make just as much sense to use in brand management or brand building [...]. So, the combination of digital techniques and agile methods, that applies to brand management [...] as well.” (E-01, pos. 11, translated)

The investigation concluded that quick results and short-term planning are essential principles of AB. The brand creation and adaptation process shall be kept lean. The goal is to develop a brand that is deliberately not yet perfect, but which will work for the next few months. Afterward, it will be worked on and adjusted accordingly. E-01 recommends testing and delivering results quickly versus long-term brand management with intensive validation:

“These sprints also involve quickly delivering interim results to the customer and this also includes realizing ‘oh, something didn’t work, that’s just the way it is, I’ll try something else’. Of course, this is the opposite of long-term brand management [...]. And we don’t really have this experimental spirit in the company [...]. We’re actually keen to secure these ten thousand times, especially from a corporate perspective, before we somehow take a step towards the market.” (E-01, pos. 27, translated)

According to E-02, classic branding is very pre-structured and offers minimal opportunity to react quickly. E-08 points out that brands do not have to be designed for eternity:

“A lot of people are not thinking in an agile way. Still, they’re still thinking of okay lets you know, let’s create this thing that’s going to stand the test of time. But having done it in a more agile way you know that you’re going to do the best that you can with the information that you have at the moment but be adaptive [...].” (E-08, pos. 10)

The interviewees highlight that AB is built on continuous improvement and frequent and subtle brand evolution. The brand shall be seen as always in Beta, even if it is currently successful. An iterative process of proactive and continuous improvement should be established, while agile methods can achieve this goal. The perfect exact time interval is not defined. It is more important to watch it systematically and continuously.

“To me, AGILE branding would be, let’s modify things slowly. Let’s take our customers that are loyal to us along with us and evolve [...]. It’s a much more organic experience”. (E-08, pos. 24–26)

“Yeah, I think it’s applying an iterative continuously improving set of processes and measurements to the traditional practice of branding [...]. The older way of thinking was we really don’t want to change our brand. You know, we want to set something and you really, you know, just make it that it’s going to last forever and not ever change.” (E-08, pos. 8)

“At this point, it should perhaps also be mentioned that the relevance of data-supported key performance indicator systems, whatever they may be, is therefore increasing significantly and that continuous monitoring is highly relevant, and it is

precisely this gate that must somehow be integrated into the process in order to be able to react promptly.” (E-09a, pos. 42, translated)

The study determines the third antecedent within this dimension, which focuses on the brand framework and non-negotiables while leaving space for the employees to live out their creativity and understanding of the brand. When asked how a brand style guide fits in with agile brand management, E-01 answered:

“In my opinion, it fits well [...]. The only question is how strictly it must be adhered to. And in the past, it was exorbitant, you really weren’t allowed to change ANYTHING [...], which no longer works in the agile world [...]. The Google logo actually demonstrates this very well [...] that even a brand symbol can and must live.” (E-01, pos. 29, translated)

4.3.4. Stakeholder and Feedback Integration

The analysis of the expert interviews and the group discussion resulted in the fourth AB dimension of stakeholder and feedback integration:

“So, I think stakeholder integration or empathy and listening are extremely important. As a brand, I can no longer decide and say this is how it is. I must listen, but I don’t have to adapt completely [...].” (E-07, pos. 40, translated)

According to E-09b, having an openness for stakeholder feedback integration is a prerequisite for AB, even if the feedback does not correspond to one’s opinion:

“I accept that the findings may lead to a different result at the end of the day than I personally would have liked and the ability to make targeted and right decisions.” (E-09b, pos. 56, translated)

The first antecedent of this dimension is stakeholder co-creation. The informants consent that companies must listen to and integrate stakeholder feedback at a very early stage, continuously, and systematically. The insights shall then be used to co-create and co-evolve the brand iteratively. One participant points out that in traditional branding, stakeholder feedback is often only gathered when the brand is assumed to be ready for the market:

“So, with classic brand development, you usually sit back in your little room [...] finalize everything, have a logo, have a name and THEN go to the target group and get feedback once everything is ready. And I think that’s also the main difference, that I look at what works early on, how is a brand or the visual aspects in particular perhaps also perceived by the target group.” (E-09a, pos. 29, translated)

The study concludes the second antecedent regarding stakeholder and feedback integration: establishing a heterogeneous core stakeholder group to develop your brand collaboratively to obtain a multi-layered perspective internally and externally. All study experts agree that more than just the customer needs to be integrated into the AB process:

“That it is almost even harmful if only the brand people think about it [...]. You also need [...] people who are really familiar with the product or service [...]. That should actually be the mantra in brand work, that you continue to work together closely and across departmental boundaries [...].” (E-05, pos. 54, translated)

The interviewees agreed that the quality of customer feedback is essential. E-07 highly recommends following Hippel’s lead user approach (1986). Each piece of customer feedback shall be treated as a source of inspiration to continuously evolve customer value without implementing every piece of feedback unfiltered:

“Stakeholders are very important, but the stakeholder is not king, the stakeholder is a source of inspiration, an important one. And not all stakeholders are equally important, but I have to find people who challenge me, who provoke me, who inspire me [...].” (E-07, pos. 42, translated)

4.3.5. Ambidexterity

The fifth AB dimension that evolved from the research is ambidexterity and handling brand continuity and change. The interview partners agree that long-term brand adaptability to business environment changes is more important than holding on to decisions once made:

“So, from our point of view, in any case, this awareness of not sticking too closely to decisions once they have been made, when, let’s say, customer needs, the market is actually already ordering something else [...] the biggest advantage is that [...] you simply achieve a higher market and customer orientation more or less automatically through the application of these agile brand management principles.” (E-05, pos. 28, translated)

“I think brand management [...] in a traditional approach, is just kind of branding from okay we made this decision twelve months ago or twelve years ago to have this logo and all this stuff. And so, we’re just going to maintain status quo and make sure that everything’s consistent [...]. Yeah, just maintaining consistency and governance [...]. But I think the agile, the agile method is always open to some kind of change when change makes sense.” (E-08, pos. 32)

The study participants consented that the challenge of AB lies in striking a balance between brand continuity and quick adaptability to the environment. They recommended keeping a strong and stable brand core while adapting the communication assets agilely:

“That would definitely be a risk that you change too much too frequently and so you know customers are just kind of confused and not really sure what who you are or what you stand for or [...] recognize your brand altogether [...] if it’s done poorly though. So if it’s done well, [...] it would be subtle and [...] they’d feel like the brand was adapting to them.” (E-08, pos. 46)

E-02 stresses that the more robust and better the core of the DNA of the brand is, the easier it is to manage and shape a brand in an agile way:

“The core DNA. The better it is, the easier I can naturally shape the brand in an agile way, if I have a problem with it, then it gets tricky.” (E-02, pos. 40, translated)

E-09a stresses that the brand core and the positioning cannot be developed agilely:

“I believe that a brand core is something that cannot be developed in an agile way because it is simply something very fundamental.” (E-09a, pos. 31, translated)

“When it comes to communication, I think you can definitely make it more agile, try it out, test it, see what goes down well. I would still see the positioning, the orientation of the brand, as a very strategic task, which is primarily a question of market needs, customer needs that are potentially still to be satisfied, and for me that is not something that is agile [...].” (E-10, pos. 16, translated)

The informants caution that constancy is vital for a brand, and if you keep changing your brand too frequently, you cannot expect to have a strong brand:

“I think there’s a potential risk that it could become diluted at some point if I make adjustments too often [...]. I think it’s a challenge to find a balance.” (E-09a, pos. 41, translated)

E-07 is convinced that total agility does not work in branding; a balance must be found between traditional and AB, which inevitably represents an area of tension:

“Well, I’m not a fan [...] of agility completely, but I am a fan of combining the two [...]. Even if that sometimes leads to tensions [...]. But that’s exactly what I have to endure, where I have to find solutions.” (E-07, pos. 48, translated)

The study found that AB depends on the industry type. E-02 and E-05 agree with E-01, saying that the more vibrant and the higher the intensity of change in the brand's market, the more agile the branding needs to be:

“The greater the changes in your own market [...], the more reason there is to apply such agile brand management, if there are actually markets that are very stable, where [...] customer needs are stable, few new competitors enter, for example, that are affected to a small extent by external influencing factors, such as trends or political or legislative changes, then the need is certainly less high, but I think such industries are simply very rare nowadays.” (E-05, pos. 32, translated)

The study also revealed that agile brand management's intensity and ease of application relates to the company type. The informants agreed to lead a brand in such a way that it lives, and is constantly being adapted to keep up with changes to the business model. E-04 and E-07 agree that start-ups are predestined to apply AB as they cannot develop a finished brand right from the start because their business model is repeatedly changing:

“Firstly, start-ups usually change their business models five times. Yes, that means they can't develop a finished brand, they must have a brand that lives and is also adapted, from the name to branding, positioning and target groups. It's a very fluid process for them. That's why it makes no sense at all, even if they had the money, to somehow hire a brand agency for a year to develop a final concept for them now, but it will change three times in the future.” (E-07, pos. 10, translated)

E-03 explains that AB might be easier to immediately implement for start-ups because they already think in an agile manner and are probably already willing to adopt agile ways of working compared to large, sedate companies. E-08 agrees that earlier-stage companies like start-ups have less to lose than established companies, as significant changes can cause a loss of brand recognition:

“I think earlier stage companies [...] have less to lose by changing [...]. You know, Coca-Cola changing their logo, you know, substantially [...] means you know loss of brand recognition [...]. I think other organizations that are older have to teach themselves to be agile [...]. But it's really difficult for, you know, hundred-year-old company to become agile versus you know a young company.” (E-08, pos. 64)

4.3.6. Agile Branding Values and Principles Construct

The third aim of this study was to provide practitioners with more tangible guidelines on how to apply AB in practice; the authors of this study created the agile branding values and principles construct (see

Figure 4.2), following the agile manifesto (Beck et al., 2001b) and the agile marketing manifesto (Agile Marketing Manifesto, 2021b). Based on the identified dimensions and antecedents of AB, one value and three corresponding principles were derived. As in the agile manifesto (Beck et al., 2001b), it is emphasized that the values on the left are more important than those on the right, although the values on the right are still valid branding approaches.

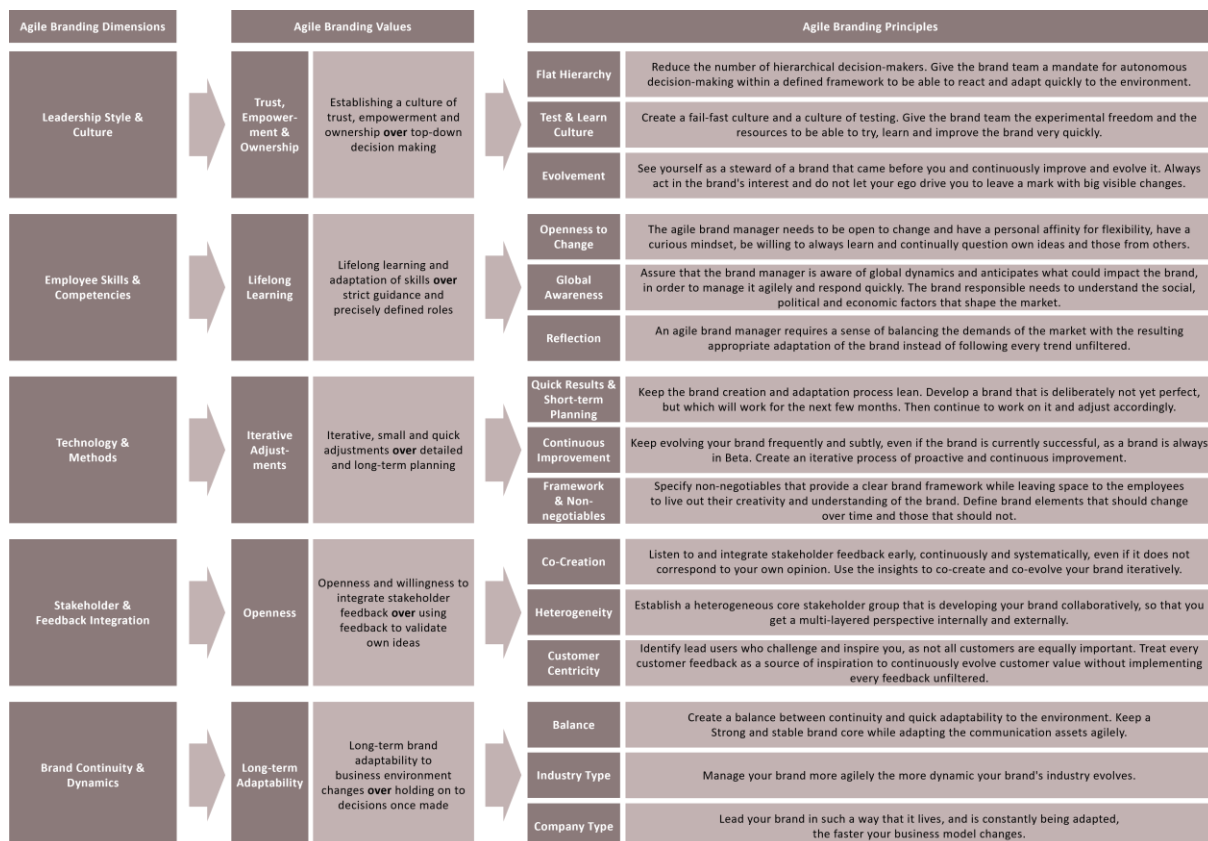


Figure 4.2: Agile branding values and principles construct (own illustration).

4.3.7. An Enhanced Definition of Agile Branding

Synthesizing the received views on AB within the literature, the conducted expert interviews, and the group discussion, the authors of this study propose the following enhanced understanding of AB:

AB means the integration of agility into strategic brand management to enhance companies' market relevance and competitiveness in a dynamic environment. The brand is seen as a living resource regularly reflected, proactively evolved, and dynamically adapted to market changes, always focusing on customer value. Decisions are based on collected data and stakeholder feedback. Agile methods are integrated both in the initial phase of brand creation and in the long-term care of the brand. The brand manager leads the brand with an openness to experimentation and is empowered

to test and adapt it – always with the explicit goal of continuous improvement while balancing brand continuity and change.

4.4. Materials and Methods

The literature review has shown that the topic of AB has hardly been explored in the academic research environment. Therefore, it was determined that the data would be collected as an explorative qualitative study to gain new insights relevant to practice (Eisenhardt, 1989; Hasche et al., 2017; Misoch, 2019). Data were gathered in three consecutive phases to answer the research questions.

4.4.1. Phase 1 – Systematic Literature Review

A clear understanding of the AB concept may serve the research objectives. However, a clear definition and shared understanding of AB does not exist, and research on this topic needs to be expanded. The direct search in the Web of Science Core Collection (WoS) for “agile branding” (Query String: TS = (“Agile Brand*”) OR TS = (“Brand* Agility”)) resulted in four articles only, which do not capture the complex understanding of the research area. This led to the assumption that agile branding is not an established scientific term. WoS is acknowledged as a precise and reliable repository for scientific analysis (Cabeza Ramírez et al., 2017; Donthu et al., 2021; Martinez et al., 2015). To define AB, a broader search strategy and a closer look at other branding-related areas were necessary (see Table 4.3 in Appendix Study 2). Since the search for AB yielded too few results, the authors followed the strategy of Gilliam and Voss (2013). They expanded the literature search to include all articles related to branding AND agility. Only peer-reviewed articles were included to ensure the results were high quality. WoS categories that did not serve the purpose of the review (e.g., Zoology or Astronomy Astrophysics) were excluded. Based on a keyword analysis with the software MAXQDA, “marketing” was most frequently mentioned in the abstracts of the twenty most cited articles on WoS from the first search. Since the literature analysis revealed that AM is a nomological network of AB, the literature search was extended to AM to include the most relevant surrounding constructs. The authors decided, therefore, to conduct an in-depth exploration of AM literature to explore if any overlaps or insights can be derived for AB. While the results of this search strategy form the basis of the literature review, other papers identified during the process were also analyzed and included.

4.4.2. Phase 2 – Qualitative Expert Interviews

The central database was created in phase two. Ten semi-structured interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Gläser & Laudel, 2004; Meuser & Nagel, 1991; Scheele & Groeben, 2010) with eleven experts were conducted between November and December 2022. The interviews lasted between 30 to 75 min

and took place live and virtually via Microsoft Teams teleconferencing software as well as in the respective local language of each expert. The literature does not clearly define what an expert is (Gläser & Laudel, 2004; Mey & Mruck, 2010). In this study, an expert was only selected if they had already consciously scientifically examined the topic of AB or had gathered practical experience in it. Toniatti et al. (2023) included only marketing and branding practitioners in their study. The authors emphasize that future research should also incorporate academics and their expertise, as combining insights from both fields ensures more comprehensive and richer insights. This study adds authors as a third dimension. Accordingly, the experts were grouped into at least one of these three categories: (1) academic, (2) author, or (3) practitioner. If they have dealt with AB being a professor or lecturer teaching at an academic institution, they were grouped under (1). The participants were grouped under (2) if they published at least one article or book on AB. (3) included practitioners who intentionally incorporated agile techniques in their brand or marketing activities. The experts were found through literature reviews, websites, blogs, social media content searches, and referrals from the other interviewees. Table 4.2 provides an overview of the interviewed experts.

Table 4.2: Characteristics interview experts of phase one (E-#) and group discussion participants of phase two (P-#) (own illustration).

No.	Gender	Agile branding experience (1-3)	Professional experience	No. of words (transcript)	Interview duration (minutes)	Interview date
Experts interviews (E-#)						
E-01	Male	(1) Academic, (2) Author	Brand consultant, author, professor for marketing and communications	9016	54	11-11-2022
E-02	Female	(1) Academic, (2) Author	Brand consultant, author, academic teacher for communications, media economy, marketing, leadership, and innovation	8673	58	24-11-2022
E-03	Male	(2) Author, (3) Practitioner	Author, founder of a brand consultancy	5032	40	02-12-2022
E-04	Male	(1) Academic, (3) Practitioner	Consultant, lecturer, podcast host and keynote speaker for brand management, partner at a brand consultancy	6666	51	02-12-2022
E-05	Male	(2) Author, (3) Practitioner	Author, head of marketing	6996	49	02-12-2022
E-06	Female	(2) Author, (3) Practitioner	Author, brand consultant, agile coach	6246	46	05-12-2022
E-07	Male	(1) Academic, (2) Author	Author, professor for marketing and brand management	13,175	75	07-12-2022

E-08	Male	(2) Author, (3) Practitioner	Author, speaker, consultant marketing technology and digital transformation	8541	50	07-12-2022
E-09a, E-09b	Male, Female	(1) Academic, (2) Author, (3) Practitioner	E-09a: Lecturer, co-author of E-09b, consultant E-09b: Lecturer, co-author of E-09a, consultant, agile coach	6210	49	07-12-2022
E-10	Female	(2) Author, (3) Practitioner	Founder of a brand consultancy, author, speaker	4093	27	12-12-2022
Participants group discussion (P-#)						
P-01	Female	(1) Academic, (2) Author, (3) Practitioner	Lecturer online communications, author, marketing professional	17,019	106	26-01-2023
P-02	Male	(2) Author, (3) Practitioner	Lecturer communications, author, agile coach, senior management consultant	17,019	106	26-01-2023
P-03	Male	(3) Practitioner	Creative director brand experience	17,019	106	26-01-2023
P-04	Male	(1) Academic, (2) Author, (3) Practitioner	Lecturer design, author, designer, co-founder brand agency	17,019	106	26-01-2023
P-05	Female	(2) Author, (3) Practitioner	Author, managing director, brand expert	17,019	106	26-01-2023

The interview guide was structured as follows: First, a brief introduction was given, the aim of the study was explained, and open questions were clarified. After general questions on AB were asked, semi-structured focus questions followed. At the end of the interview, the next steps were stated. The basis of the interviews was a semi-structured questionnaire grounded on the results of the literature research to guide the interview while leaving room for responding to new questions and statements (Myers, 2020). Several test interviews were conducted before the questionnaire was compiled to gain an initial understanding of the research topic alongside the literature. The questionnaire was further elaborated and optimized during the interview phase, as new insights into dimensions and antecedents were constantly being gained, which made it possible to formulate better-focused questions for the subsequent interviewees.

To analyze the data in a structured way, all interviews were first anonymized and transcribed into a written format. According to Dresing and Pehl (2018, 2023), the rule system for content-semantic transcription was applied, including extended rules. The written format was the basis for performing a qualitative content analysis according to Kuckartz and Rädiker (2020, 2022): First, all

interviews were undertaken as an initial reading to get an overall idea about the data. Important passages in the text were marked and paraphrased, and notes were made. The statements were then coded and allocated in a structured way to the deductive categories that resulted from the literature research and the research questions. A closer look at the coded passages revealed further inductive subcategories from the material. The whole dataset was looked at again and assigned to the subcategories. Saturation of research findings was reached when no new significant findings could be obtained after eleven experts were interviewed (Eisenhardt, 1989). Finally, the subcategories formed the AB antecedents, which were grouped into higher-level categories. In the end, these formed the AB dimensions. 229 codes were generated and analyzed from the transcripts in phase two. Figure 4.3 in Appendix Study 2 provides subcode statistics on the distribution and frequency of the coded segments from the transcripts of phase two. Ultimately, a first draft of AB's dimensions, antecedents, values, and principles was derived. For a technique-supported structured analysis, the software MAXQDA was used throughout the project (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019).

4.4.3. Phase 3 – Group Discussion

Gilliam and Voss (2013) recommend incorporating an expert judging process and the subsequent adjustment and iteration of the first construct definition. Thus, a semi-structured group discussion was undertaken on 26 January 2023, to further sharpen and validate the results from phase two. This unbiased view of experts who are not part of the research team made it possible to exclude a potentially subjective interpretation by the authors of this study. To overcome the challenge of bridging scientific research and practical application (Olswang & Prelock, 2015), the participants needed real-world experience with AB or branding in general. To assemble the experts for the group discussion, the work of Misoch (2019) and Perecman and Curran (2006) served as orientation. The sample characteristics are detailed in Table 4.2.

The assembled group was an artificial group whose social interaction was limited to the temporary laboratory and survey. The group discussion aimed to compose the participants both homogeneously and heterogeneously. The group can be seen as homogeneous because they have all dealt intensively with AB. However, they are also heterogeneous because they are involved with AB differently in their experience – either as a company founder, marketing or brand manager, consultant in a brand agency, author, lecturer, or agile coach. This heterogeneity aimed to provide the greatest possible diversity of opinions and experiences. The advantage of group discussions is that they combine the principle of collecting verbal data with group interaction processes and group dynamics (Misoch, 2019). The group discussion was transcribed and analyzed as in phase two. 108 codes were obtained from the transcripts of the group discussion and subsequently analyzed. Figure 4.4 in

Appendix Study 2 illustrates the subcode statistics from phase three. The experts in the group discussion were presented with the first draft of the AB dimensions, antecedents, values, and principles and encouraged to discuss them openly and critically. The discussion was conducted live and virtually via Microsoft Teams and lasted for two hours until no further comments were expressed. The research team maintained a moderating and neutral function (Greenbaum, 1998). Lastly, each antecedent was evaluated and linked to the three dynamic capability pillars: sensing, seizing, and transforming (Schoemaker et al., 2018; Teece et al., 1997).

4.5. Discussion

4.5.1. Theoretical and Practical Implications

This is the first study to attempt to conceptualize and define AB. The study contributes to elaborating the concept of AB by compiling five dimensions and 20 antecedents based on the perspective of the DC framework. This study contributes to developing flexible solutions in brand management oriented explicitly towards the dynamics of today's world, which several authors call for (Baran & Woznyj, 2021; Baumgarth, 2020; Eilers et al., 2022, 2022; Iyer, Davari, Srivastava, et al., 2021; Keller & Richey, 2006; Swaminathan et al., 2020; Toniatti et al., 2023).

While it was not the main objective of this study, the findings add to the advancement of agility and the DC theory. The DC framework has proven to be a suitable perspective for AB. During the analysis, it was realized that not all AB antecedents can be uniquely assigned to a single DC pillar; they may comprise more than one at a time. While Roberts and Grover (2012) state that agility comprises the DC elements of sensing and seizing, the authors of this study argue that AB additionally captures the transforming pillar of DC.

The deducted dimensions partially align with the findings of Vaszkun and Sziráki (2023), who define leadership, culture, teams, structure, methodologies, and practices as key dimensions of organizational agility. Relating agility to branding, brand ambidexterity should be added as a key dimension that needs to be considered when analyzing AB.

The findings related to the leadership style and culture dimension of AB align with Ulrich and Yeung (2019) and O'Keefe et al. (2016) stating that leaders themselves must embody agility as a prerequisite for fostering an organizational culture where agile attitudes can be adopted by employees. Baumgarth (2020) and Toniatti et al. (2023) emphasize that letting go, trust, permission, and training are more important in brand management than commanding, controlling, and governing. Schoemaker et al. (2018) find that leadership style is closely linked to the pillars of dynamic capabilities. The organization's ability to identify, question, and evaluate change translates into sensing capabilities

(Schoemaker et al., 2018). Decision-making and learning are strongly linked to seizing opportunities (Schoemaker et al., 2018).

The study found that employee skills and competencies are an essential dimension of AB, encompassing the empowerment of the brand manager. These results are similar to the findings of Eilers et al. (2022), who indicate that an agile mindset consists of “empowered self-guidance” (Eilers et al., 2022, p. 1). The researchers further detected an openness to change as a prerequisite of AB. This finding is consistent with those of Baran and Woznyj (2021) and Eilers et al. (2022), in that agility includes an ongoing learning process regarding new tools or technologies. Ulrich and Yeung (2019) agree with the results, stating that each individual must be naturally curious and constantly want to grow, yet simultaneously be eager to experiment and embrace appropriate risk-taking. The literature confirms the antecedent of global awareness by stating that brand managers must be sensitive toward the changing environment, actively observe and analyze it, and identify disruptive trends that could impact their brands (Baran & Woznyj, 2021; Bruce & Jeromin, 2016; Peterson, 2019; Sophocleous et al., 2024). Keller and Richey (2006) concur that companies must anticipate future changes and swiftly adjust brand strategies to stay relevant and innovative. Teece et al. (1997) confirm that sensing market changes and their implications ahead of competitors is an essential cluster of DC. Bruce and Jeromin (2016) underline the antecedent of brand reflection by pointing out that brand agility does not mean activism, nervousness or rush. It is about the brand reacting appropriately, purposefully, and promptly to shifting market conditions. Since brands bear a social responsibility (Carcelén-García et al., 2023), adjustments should always be ethically reflected.

The conclusions of this study, regarding dimension three technology and methods, fit with Goll and Hommel (2015), stating that scrum, kanban, design thinking, or extreme programming are helpful when the demands on the final deliverable cannot yet be precisely defined, which is also the case in branding. Golant (2012) and Iyer, Davari, Srivastava, et al. (2021) agree with the quick results and the short-term planning antecedent by stressing that brand management must become more flexible and dynamic. Baumgarth and Schmidt (2018) agree that today’s volatile markets demand extra adaptability, leading to a constant brand adjustment. The findings are further substantiated by Baumgarth and Schmidt (2018), who also recommend non-negotiables as a framework to provide brand managers with guidelines that enable flexible and rapid action when needed. This study suggests the importance of instruments to establish sensing capabilities, such as external scanning and scenario planning tools, to monitor key trends and uncertainties and link these two decision support systems.

The present research detected stakeholder and feedback integration as one of the most critical dimensions of AB. The existing literature underlines the finding by detecting that consumers and other stakeholders nowadays play a significant role in shaping the brand (Cova & Paraque, 2016; Veloutsou

& Delgado-Ballester, 2019). The findings conform with previous research, stating that brands must continuously incorporate and embrace customer-co-creation and a focus on the market in their strategy (Eilers et al., 2022; Kreutzer & Land, 2017; Rego et al., 2022). Swaminathan et al. (2020, p. 24) agree that the role of the traditional brand managers or owners is changing: “brands are shifting away from single ownership to shared ownership”. They call this effect the “blurring of branding boundaries” (Swaminathan et al., 2020, p. 25). Veloutsou and Delgado-Ballester (2019) agree with the heterogeneity antecedent, stating that various internal and external stakeholders must constantly be integrated, and their changing needs must be iteratively incorporated into the branding process. Several study participants recommended following the lead user approach by Hippel (1986), which describes a lead user as a pioneering consumer whose current vital needs represent the masses’ demand in the future. Hippel (1986) recommends the lead user approach, especially for products and services influenced by rapid change and a highly technological environment. Therefore, this approach could not be more relevant for our time. Teece et al. (1997) agree that lead user innovation is helpful in evaluating opportunities.

While Preece et al. (2019) and Kalaignanam et al. (2021) state that a combination of continuity and change is essential to ensure a brand’s longevity in a constantly evolving environment, and the study participants described balancing these two factors as the biggest challenge of AB. Beverland et al. (2015) also accentuates the challenge of brand ambidexterity.

The results confirm Kalaignanam et al.’s concerns (2021) that frequent experimentation and change can blur customers’ brand perceptions and even have a detrimental effect. They believe that brand management decisions are less suited for market experimentation and recommend traditional methods of planning and supervision. This study contradicts this statement and proposes solutions for how agility and the associated experimentation enthusiasm can be reconciled.

4.5.2. Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

This study only offers an initial step in conceptualizing AB. Far more investigation is needed. The dimensions of AB are intended to provide holistic recommendations for applying AB in practice, which can be applied to all sectors and industries. This is also a limitation of the current study, as it intentionally does not go into great depth per category. Future research could selectively analyze individual industries based on the five categories. Another limitation of the study is that most participants were German. To exclude a cultural silo, the following study could focus on greater cultural diversity. This also aligns with Toniatti et al. (2023) stating that future research should test AB concerning different branches and nationalities.

The research area of AB offers numerous possibilities for exploring individual sub-areas. It would be interesting to find out if and how companies currently apply AB, whether they do it consciously or unconsciously, and if there are any branch and country differences. The study found that start-ups need to practice AB because their business model constantly evolves. A future study could examine what advantages and disadvantages are perceived, specifically for start-ups, when applying AB. A comparison with established companies would then be interesting as a subsequent investigation. As technology is an essential dimension of AB, a future study could focus on how artificial intelligence, big data analytics, and digitalization can support AB. Exploring metrics and tools to assess a brand's agility and identify best practices would contribute to a deeper understanding.

The article review further indicates that maintaining brand consistency is a major challenge when applying AB, as it can even have a damaging effect on customer brand perception. Further investigation could focus on how AB impacts brand awareness, brand image, customer satisfaction, and brand loyalty.

4.6. Conclusions

This research elaborates on the concept of AB by compiling five dimensions and 20 antecedents from the DC perspective. AB requires a shift in how brands have been created and managed for a long time. Company leaders and brand managers must adapt their thinking and shift their mindset from being strict brand guardians and supporters of perpetuation and rigid rules to being attentive enablers who embrace and proactively drive continuous and iterative brand evolution.

A business leader must build a culture of trust, empowerment, and ownership to create and manage a brand agilely. For this, flat hierarchies and a test-and-learn culture are indispensable. The goal must always be to develop the brand in the company's interest and to put personal goals aside. The role of the agile brand manager requires lifelong learning and adapting skills and competencies to the brand environment. An openness to change is critical, as well as actively observing global dynamics to anticipate impacts on the brand and make changes in an early stage. A balance must always be found between the appropriate, ethical, and necessary adaptation of the brand and the market demands and changes. Employees must be attentive and evolve the brand proactively instead of reacting passively to the environment.

Instead of detailed and long-term planning, iterative, minor, and quick brand adjustments are necessary. The focus should be immediate results and short planning cycles, with more frequent and subtle brand evolution. Instead of defining strict brand rules, a brand framework and non-negotiables are needed, to provide a clear scope of the brand while leaving enough room for employees to be creative and live out their understanding of the brand. As a business leader and brand manager, you

must be open and willing to integrate stakeholder feedback. This needs to be evaluated early, continuously, and systematically. Compile a heterogeneous stakeholder group to acquire multi-layered input and perspective on your brand. Identify lead users who will serve as inspiration for the further development of your brand.

To ensure the success of a brand, long-term adaptability to the business environment must be guaranteed. Balancing brand continuity and agile adaptation is vital, and it requires a strong and stable brand core. The industry in which a company operates influences the brand agility required. If the industry is highly dynamic, the brand must be created and managed even more agilely. Depending on the type of company, this study recommends managing the brand with corresponding agility. Start-ups are predestined for the conscious application of AB, as their business model is repeatedly changing.

4.7. Appendix Study 2

This appendix describes the search strategy in the WoS Core Collection applied in Study 2. Furthermore, it provides the subcode statistics on the distribution and frequency of the coded segments from the transcripts of the phases two and three.

Overview Appendix Study 2

Table 4.3 Search strategy performed on August 23, 2023 (own illustration)

Figure 4.3 Subcode statistics on the distribution and frequency of the coded segments from the transcripts of phase two (own illustration)

Figure 4.4 Subcode statistics on the distribution and frequency of the coded segments from the transcripts of phase three (own illustration)

Table 4.3: Search strategy performed on August 23, 2023 (own illustration).

Subject	Search 1: Agile branding	Search 2: Agile marketing
Inclusion criterion #1 database(s)	Web of Science Core Collection	Web of Science Core Collection
Inclusion criterion #2 search term(s)	Agil* and Brand*	“Agile Marketing”, “Marketing Agility”
Inclusion criterion #3 document type	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Peer-reviewed journal articles
Query string	((TS=(Brand*)) AND TS=(Agil*)) AND (DT==(“ARTICLE”))	(TS=(“Agile Marketing”) OR TS=(“Marketing Agility”)) AND (DT==(“ARTICLE”))
Initial number of identified articles (inclusion criteria)	116	50
Exclusion criterion #1 Wos category	Articles in WoS categories unrelated to the research area (e.g., Zoology, Astronomy Astrophysics)	Articles in WoS categories unrelated to the research area (e.g., Zoology, Astronomy Astrophysics)
Query string	(TS=(Brand*) AND TS=(Agil*)) AND ((DT==(“ARTICLE”)) NOT (TASCA==(“CHEMISTRY APPLIED” OR “DERMATOLOGY” OR “GENETICS HEREDITY” OR “ZOOLOGY” OR “BIOTECHNOLOGY “ECONOMICS”)) APPLIED MICROBIOLOGY” OR “MEDICINE GENERAL INTERNAL” OR “ORTHOPEDICS” OR “PLANT SCIENCES”)))	((TS=(“Agile Marketing”) OR TS=(“Marketing Agility”))) AND (DT==(“ARTICLE”) AND TASCA==(“BUSINESS” OR “MANAGEMENT” OR “MANAGEMENT” OR “MANAGEMENT”)))
Excluded	9	13
Remained	107	37
Exclusion criterion #3 content	Manual selection after review of individual abstracts; Exclusion of articles that did not relate in-depth to branding AND agility	Manual selection after review of individual abstracts; Exclusion of articles that did not relate in-depth to agile marketing
Excluded	36	12
Remained	71	25

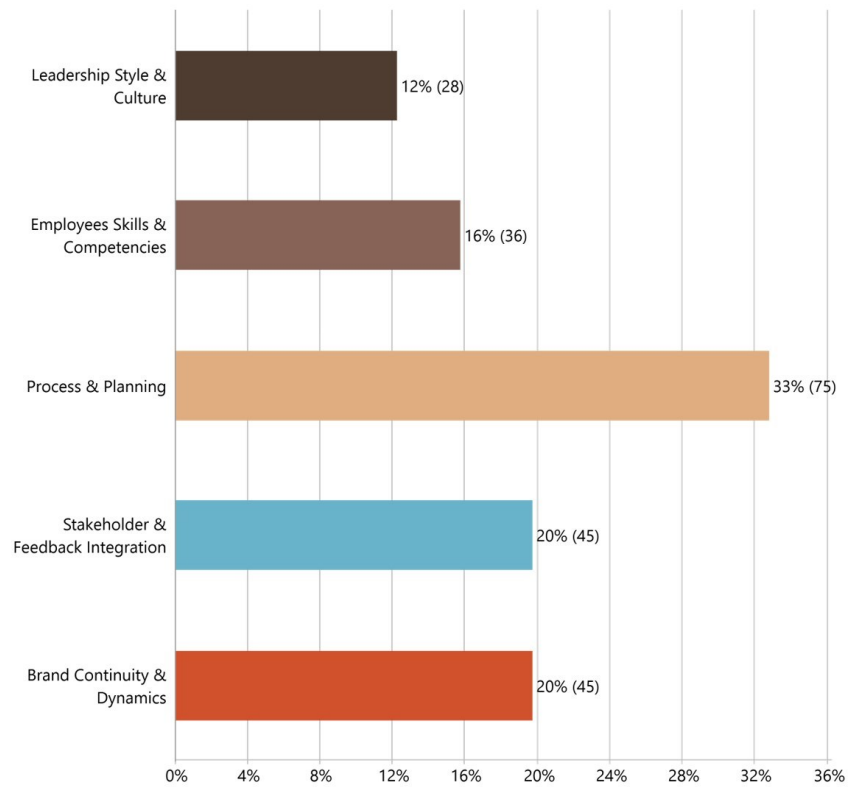


Figure 4.3: Subcode statistics on the distribution and frequency of the coded segments from the transcripts of phase two (own illustration).

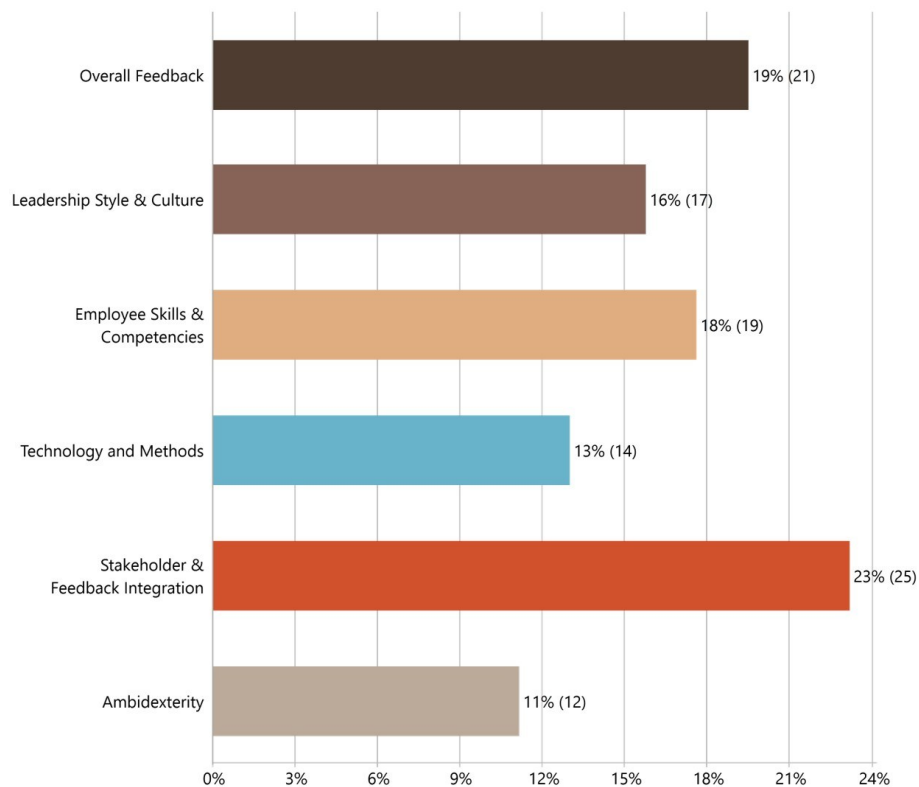


Figure 4.4: Subcode statistics on the distribution and frequency of the coded segments from the transcripts of phase three (own illustration).

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5. Study 3 – Evaluating the Potential of Agile Branding: Opportunities and Challenges in the Start-up Context

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Abstract

The necessity for companies to adopt an agile brand management approach to maintain relevance and competitiveness in our dynamic and fast-moving world is a key finding of recent studies. Nevertheless, no study has yet investigated the potential and applicability of the concept of AB. Concurrently, start-ups are confronted with the challenge of high failure rates due to shortcomings in brand management. The necessity for start-ups to adopt innovative and dynamic brand strategies arises from the constant internal and external changes that characterize the start-up environment. Previous studies on brand management, by contrast, have mainly focused on established companies. Given the affinity and need for agility observed in start-ups, AB appears to be particularly relevant for start-ups. This study aims to address two research gaps: firstly, to explore the potential of the concept of AB and, secondly, to expand academic research of branding practices tailored to start-ups to assist them in overcoming the specific brand management challenges they face. The study draws on an extensive and structured literature review, followed by qualitative semi-structured interviews with eleven experts and 18 start-ups, to discuss the opportunities and challenges of AB in the context of start-ups. The results were analyzed from the perspective of the five dimensions of AB and the dynamic capabilities framework. AB offers start-ups the opportunity to adapt swiftly to market changes, allocate resources efficiently, and reduce risk through data-driven decision-making. Overcoming challenges requires a shift in organizational culture and employee mindset, optimization of stakeholder feedback processes, and navigation of the complexities of implementation. In conclusion, the advantages of AB for start-ups are found to outweigh the disadvantages. The study extends the scarce research on AB and provides brand managers and start-up founders with an efficient approach to organizing their brand management process with limited resources.

Keywords: agile branding; agile marketing; agility; start-ups; brand management; dynamic capabilities.

5.1. Introduction

AB, characterized by empowerment, openness to change, short-term planning, co-creation, and adaptability, is being recognized as an important trend in modern brand management (Baumgarth, 2020; Bruce & Jeromin, 2016; Dänzler & Heun, 2020; Kreutzer & Land, 2017; Pöhlmann, Seitz, et al., 2024; Rego et al., 2022; Toniatti et al., 2023). Pöhlmann, Seitz, et al. (2024) understand AB as “the integration of agility into strategic brand management to enhance companies’ market relevance and competitiveness in a dynamic environment” (Pöhlmann, Seitz, et al., 2024, p. 13). While experts agree that an agile approach to branding is crucial in a VUCA world (Eilers et al., 2022; Golant, 2012; Lies, 2020; Pöhlmann, Seitz, et al., 2024), the in-depth literature screening indicated that there is a lack of scientific studies on AB (Bruce & Jeromin, 2016; Hattendorf, 2021; Kalaiganam et al., 2021; Pöhlmann, Jambrino-Maldonado, et al., 2024; Pöhlmann, Seitz, et al., 2024; Preece et al., 2019; Toniatti et al., 2023). To date, no study has been conducted that examines the potential and the value of the emerging concept of AB and thus confirms its applicability and relevance for science and practice. Consequently, this study presents a scientific evaluation of the opportunities (see RQ-3.1), and challenges (see RQ-3.2) associated with AB for the first time.

Concurrently, scientific as well as practitioner literature reveals that start-ups show a very high failure rate of 90 percent (Cantamessa et al., 2018; Shewale, 2024). The study of Cantamessa et al. (2018) detects that poor marketing and branding activities are among the main reasons for start-ups to fail. Key challenges identified include a lack of research on branding processes tailored to start-ups, severe resource shortages encompassing time, people, and funding, the pervasive uncertainty and risk of failure, founder-centricity, stakeholder integration, low brand popularity, uncoordinated hiring processes, and a non-linear branding process (Awad & Fatah, 2015; Cantamessa et al., 2018; Chaudhri et al., 2022; Eggers & Kraus, 2016; Morris et al., 2002; Rode & Vallaster, 2005; Wiesenberg et al., 2020; Yang & Aldrich, 2017).

These challenges underscore the necessity of innovative brand management approaches to match the special dynamics of start-ups. Research on branding in start-ups is relatively scarce, with much of the branding literature focusing on established companies (Chaudhri et al., 2022; Rode & Vallaster, 2005). Given the importance of branding to the success of start-ups, and the scarcity of available research, further exploration of branding practices tailored to start-ups is critical.

Start-ups are characterized by an agile culture, especially in the early development phase (Griva et al., 2021). The study of Pöhlmann, Seitz, et al. (2024) find that start-ups in particular need to apply AB due to their constantly evolving business model and recommend start-ups as a suitable application and investigation area of AB. The second objective of this study is to investigate how AB

can specifically address the brand management challenges faced by start-ups (see RQ-3.3). This is the primary study to analyze AB in the context of start-ups.

This research project examines the potential of AB by identifying the opportunities and challenges associated with its implementation in the context of start-ups. In addition, it offers start-ups in particular a solution-oriented approach to overcoming specific brand management challenges.

Three overarching research questions emerged that form the basis of this study:

- RQ-3.1: What are the opportunities of AB in the start-up context?
- RQ-3.2: What are the challenges of AB in the start-up context?
- RQ-3.3: How can AB help to overcome the specific brand management challenges faced by start-ups?

The study follows a mixed-method approach. First, an intensive systematic literature review was conducted, followed by interviews with 11 experts and 18 start-ups. The results were then analyzed from the perspective of the five AB categories according to Pöhlmann, Seitz, et al. (2024) as well as the dynamic capabilities framework by Teece et al. (1997).

This study is relevant to every start-up worldwide. Globally, more than 150 million start-ups exist, and 50 million new ones are founded every year (Shewale, 2024). This study helps start-ups to consider whether they should adopt AB as a conscious and prevalent strategy and outlines the reasons for and against its integration. While the results focus on start-ups, it is generally of significance for each of the 333 million companies estimated to exist worldwide in 2021 (Dyvik, 2023), as some of the findings can be partially transferred to all company types. Moreover, professors, researchers, and students interested in brand management, marketing, or economics will benefit from the insights of the study. The research offers valuable knowledge for practitioners like marketing and brand managers, start-up founders, brand consultants, and agencies involved in the creation and management of brands.

This introduction chapter provided an overview of the current state of the literature and the gaps that this study aims to bridge by answering the research questions. In the following, the theoretical framework is explained, and the study is positioned in a scientific context. The method is then explained, the results are presented and discussed in relation to the current literature. The chapter ends with a conclusion, implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

5.2. Theoretical Framework

Four main research areas form the theoretical framework of this study: agile branding theory, agility theory, dynamic capabilities theory, and start-up brand management theory.

5.2.1. Agile Branding Theory

Pöhlmann, Seitz, et al. (2024) describe AB as the application of agility to strategic brand management with the aim of maintaining and improving the market relevance and competitiveness of organizations in a highly dynamic and changing environment. Strategic brand management encompasses all activities aimed at ensuring the medium to long-term success of a brand (Iyer, Davari, Srivastava, et al., 2021; Santos-Vijande et al., 2013). Pöhlmann, Seitz, et al. (2024) identify 20 antecedents related to the dynamic capabilities framework, that are necessary to practice AB. The following five dimensions conceptualize AB: “(1) leadership style and culture, (2) employee skills and competencies, (3) technology and methods, (4) stakeholder and feedback integration, and (5) ambidexterity” (Pöhlmann, Seitz, et al., 2024, p. 7). AB is further defined as:

“The brand is seen as a living resource regularly reflected, proactively evolved, and dynamically adapted to market changes, always focusing on customer value. Decisions are based on collected data and stakeholder feedback. Agile methods are integrated both in the initial phase of brand creation and in the long-term care of the brand. The brand manager leads the brand with an openness to experimentation and is empowered to test and adapt it—always with the explicit goal of continuous improvement while balancing brand continuity and change.” (Pöhlmann, Seitz, et al., 2024, pp. 13–14)

AB is recognized as a vital mindset and trend in post-pandemic brand management, highlighting its growing significance for science and practice (Baumgarth, 2020; Eilers et al., 2022; Pöhlmann, Jambrino-Maldonado, et al., 2024; Pöhlmann, Seitz, et al., 2024; Toniatti et al., 2023). Traditional brand management principles are perceived as insufficient for successfully managing a brand in a VUCA environment (Baumgarth, 2020; Rego et al., 2022, 2022; Sanchez-Nunez et al., 2020; Schmidt & Redler, 2018), while agility is considered essential for brands to meet the new requirements and challenges of contemporary brand management (Baumgarth, 2020; Eilers et al., 2022; Iyer, Davari, Srivastava, et al., 2021; Keller & Richey, 2006; Pöhlmann, Seitz, et al., 2024; Toniatti et al., 2023). To stay relevant and competitive, brand management should embrace agile principles rather than sticking to rigid regulations (Kancherla et al., 2023; Keller & Richey, 2006; Toniatti et al., 2023). While several authors consent that a more flexible and dynamic approach to branding is required (Cuesta-Valiño et al., 2021; Golant, 2012; Henche et al., 2020; Iyer, Davari, Srivastava, et al., 2021), literature

acknowledges the conflict of brand relevancy and consistency (Beverland et al., 2015; Iyer, Davari, Zolfagharian, et al., 2021).

No scientific study has been conducted to date on the opportunities and challenges that the introduction of AB entails. The first aim of this study is to fill this gap in the literature so that brand managers can decide on the adoption of the new concept and are aware of its consequences. The following section takes a closer look at agility theory and provides insights into the literature on the opportunities and challenges of agility in other areas.

5.2.2. Agility Theory

Baran and Wozny (2021) suggest managing a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous environment through agility. They understand agility as the capability of individuals, groups or a company to recognise changes and react promptly to them. The following more detailed characterisation by Hattendorf (2021) provides the basic understanding of agility for this study: the flexibility to react to market demands, to focus on customer satisfaction and to operate as transparently, efficiently and sustainably as possible.

Agility is still mainly applied in IT, as the Manifesto for Agile Software Development was originally formulated by 17 software developers in 2001 to guide work in a highly uncertain and ever-changing environment (Beck et al., 2001a; Serrador & Pinto, 2015). Due to its success, the application of agility has now spread to other business areas including marketing, product development, sales, finance, and human resources (Alonso-Garcia et al., 2022; Goll & Hommel, 2015; Hattendorf, 2021; Noteboom et al., 2021; Osei et al., 2018; Serrador & Pinto, 2015). While AB has hardly been researched, initial studies on AM have already been carried out (Alghamdi & Agag, 2024; Kalaiganam et al., 2021; Thümler, 2023). Alghamdi and Agag (2024) observe that AM improves a firm's competitiveness and concur with the aforementioned authors that agility represents an opportunity for companies to enhance success.

Recent scientific as well as practitioner research proves that agility has a beneficial impact on efficiency, stakeholder satisfaction, project success, and corporate performance (Chong et al., 2020; Eilers et al., 2022; Hobbs & Petit, 2017; Roberts & Grover, 2012; Serrador & Pinto, 2015; Tanushree et al., 2024; Vrontis et al., 2023). While there is consensus in the literature on the benefits of agility, various authors emphasize its challenges and constraints. Multi-level communication, transparency, and knowledge sharing is found to be crucial as well as a major challenge when implementing and practicing agility (Baran & Woznyj, 2021; Suryaatmaja et al., 2020). Companies need to view a changing environment as a continuous process, while customer feedback should be integrated on an ongoing basis to allow rapid feedback on services or products (Baran & Woznyj, 2021; Culqui-Salazar et al.,

2023). Agility must also be reflected in the leadership style: a leader must exemplify agility, only then can an agile corporate culture be created in which the individual too can adopt agile attitudes (Mardian, 2024; Ulrich & Yeung, 2019).

Agility is a mixture of mindset and skillset: the individual must be curious by nature and want to continuously grow personally, while also being willing to experiment and take reasonable risks (Ulrich & Yeung, 2019). The implementation of agility is an ongoing process of trial and error, adaptation, and learning that requires a lot of continual engagement and the openness of employees (Hattendorf, 2021). The agile organizational style supports the integration of ethical reflections through a focus on flat hierarchies and teamwork (Zuber et al., 2022).

While the value and potential of agility has been investigated within the academic literature, no study could be found that addresses the benefits and challenges of AB, neither in established organizations nor start-ups. Since start-ups tend to favor agility (Griva et al., 2021; Krishnan et al., 2020), they are discussed in the following section as an area of application for AB and thus the underlying study.

5.2.3. Start-up Brand Management Theory

In this study, start-ups are characterized as follows: they were founded no more than ten years ago, have significant employee and/or sales growth or are aiming for it and/or are highly innovative with their technology and/or business model (Kollmann, 2022; Kollmann et al., 2023; Krishnan et al., 2020). Parthasarathy (2022) categorizes start-ups as a form of entrepreneurship and emphasizes their extreme importance in finding innovative solutions to existing and new problems and their crucial contribution to the growth of individual countries and the global economy. The study by Inegbedion et al. (2024) additionally indicates that product innovation and differentiation serve as important facilitators of SME growth and competitiveness.

While there is disagreement among scientists as to whether start-ups and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are identical concepts, Krishnan et al. (2020) classify innovative start-ups as a sub-category of SMEs. It emphasized that this dissertation does not regard start-ups and SMEs as equivalent entities. Instead, it aligns with the perspective outlined by Krishnan et al. (2020). In the literature reviewed, SMEs were frequently studied in the context of agility and brand management (Alsulami et al., 2021; Rozak et al., 2021; Villegas-Ch et al., 2022). SMEs need to implement agility and favor agile approaches over resource-intensive approaches (Alsulami et al., 2021, 2021; Rozak et al., 2021; Villegas-Ch et al., 2022). According to Gupta et al. (2020), agility contributes to a firm's competitiveness, alongside technology, marketing and human resources. Griva et al. (2021) find that digital start-ups are characterized by a predominantly agile culture in combination with a high

willingness to learn and innovation competence, especially in the early development phase. Several scientists consent that start-ups need to incorporate an agile approach into their branding (Chaudhri et al., 2022; Pöhlmann, Jambrino-Maldonado, et al., 2024; Pöhlmann, Seitz, et al., 2024; Rode & Vallaster, 2005). Due to the constantly evolving business model and the affinity of start-ups for agility, AB appears to be particularly interesting and relevant for start-ups, which is why it was selected as a predominant application area for this research project.

Branding is one of the key challenges for start-ups (Wiesenberg et al., 2020). The literature review exposes the following challenges that ultimately impact a start-ups branding: a lack of research on branding processes for start-ups, resource shortage, a high level of uncertainty and risk of failure, the hiring process, founder centricity and dependency, stakeholder integration, low brand popularity, and a non-linear branding process (Awad & Fatah, 2015; Cantamessa et al., 2018; Chaudhri et al., 2022; Eggers & Kraus, 2016; Krishnan et al., 2020; Morris et al., 2002; Mukul & Saini, 2021; Rode & Vallaster, 2005; Wiesenberg et al., 2020). The brand management challenges will be detailed in the following.

Start-ups face unique challenges that set them apart from established businesses, including a high level of uncertainty and risk, differences in leadership style and processes, and resource scarcity (Chaudhri et al., 2022; Krishnan et al., 2020). Chaudhri et al. (2022) find that branding for start-ups needs to be integrated into strategic planning from the outset, but that a different approach is required than the standard branding model used for large organizations. Several authors consent that branding in start-ups lacks of scientific research, as most branding literature focuses on larger and established companies (Chaudhri et al., 2022; Rode & Vallaster, 2005).

The literature analysis revealed that start-ups particularly struggle with resource scarcity – be it time, manpower or budget. The growth of SMEs is negatively affected by their limited access to finance (De Blick et al., 2024). The study by Rode and Vallaster (2005) found that due to time pressure and financial limitations, start-ups found themselves forced to quickly communicate brand adaptations, without thinking about consistency with other elements of the corporate identity. The limit of financial capabilities is among the most commonly reported reasons why start-ups fail (Arzubiaga et al., 2023; Awad & Fatah, 2015; Cantamessa et al., 2018; Krishnan et al., 2020), while personal entrepreneurial skills are found to be a decisive factor in obtaining financial resources (Adeniyi, 2023). Limited funding impedes the ability of start-ups to advertise their products or services effectively, or to conduct in-depth consumer research (Awad & Fatah, 2015; Krishnan et al., 2020; Morris et al., 2002; Rode & Vallaster, 2005).

Several authors consent that start-ups show a high failure rate of 90 percent along with a highly uncertain business environment, not knowing whether their business idea will succeed (Cantamessa

et al., 2018; Eggers & Kraus, 2016; Krishnan et al., 2020; Paranata et al., 2023; Rode & Vallaster, 2005; Shewale, 2024). Bad marketing and branding is among the main reasons for start-ups to fail, often related to the limited expertise of founders (Cantamessa et al., 2018; Krishnan et al., 2020). The novelty of start-ups also creates a notably high level of uncertainty among customers (Eggers & Kraus, 2016).

Establishing a unique ethos and commitment of employees is particularly important for the brand building process (Chaudhri et al., 2022). Especially in the early stages, founders emphasize the importance of hiring employees who fit the company culture and are passionate about the brand vision, which is a challenge according to Chaudhri et al. (2022) and Mukul and Saini (2021). However, the hiring process in start-ups is often unstructured without well-established HR practices, policies, or employees, while often the founders themselves handle the function of the HR manager (Mukul & Saini, 2021). Yet, most founders lack expertise in selecting and training new team members, which leads to a rushed and disorganized hiring process (Rode & Vallaster, 2005). Mollet and Kaudela-Baum (2023) emphasize the importance of HR capabilities in agile organizations, as these contribute directly to the transforming pillar to ensure continuous change in the organization (Teece et al., 2016). Salaries is found to be a big challenge for start-ups due to limited financial resources (Mukul & Saini, 2021). Many start-ups lose talented employees to better paying or more famous companies (Mukul & Saini, 2021).

Prior studies indicate that start-up success heavily relies on the founder, resulting in a major dependency and risk (Cantamessa et al., 2018; Chaudhri et al., 2022; Eggers et al., 2013; Krishnan et al., 2020; Paranata et al., 2023; Rode & Vallaster, 2005; Vallaster & Kraus, 2011). The founder's role and vision are important in shaping the company's culture and leadership style, but it is crucial that the founder's role evolves as the start-up grows (Chaudhri et al., 2022; Paranata et al., 2023). A lack of expertise and the often prioritization of financial and operational concerns over establishing their brand is seen as a key obstacle (Chaudhri et al., 2022; Paranata et al., 2023).

Stakeholders play a crucial role in providing inspiration and shaping the brand concept, which is why brand managers should see themselves as directors who adapt and harmonize the brand to the needs of the stakeholders (Chaudhri et al., 2022). However, it is a delicate balancing act between co-creating the brand and losing brand control (Chaudhri et al., 2022). The effectiveness of stakeholder integration in internationally operating businesses may be impacted by time zone, cultural or language differences (Rauf et al., 2023). The brand building process is often based on personal experience of the founder and feedback from friends and family, which is why several authors recommend seeking honest and unbiased feedback from stakeholders instead (Chaudhri et al., 2022; Rode & Vallaster, 2005).

Low or non-existent brand popularity and the lack of a long-established identity or reputation resulting in customer purchase insecurity is perceived as one of the key challenges for start-ups (Awad & Fatah, 2015; Chaudhri et al., 2022; Eggers et al., 2013; Vallaster & Kraus, 2011; Yang & Aldrich, 2017). Furthermore, they also struggle to build brand advocacy due to limited budget and unknown brand (Awad & Fatah, 2015). The fact that a company's image influences its access to funding, makes it even more difficult for start-ups to receive financial support (Arzubiaga et al., 2023). While brand authenticity supports SME growth (Eggers et al., 2013), Vallaster and Kraus (2011) find that the perception of brand authenticity declines with an increase in organizational size, which can be an advantage for start-ups compared to established competitors.

A start-up's branding is a non-linear, dynamic, flexible and continually evolving process, requiring an iterative and cyclical approach (Chaudhri et al., 2022; Rode & Vallaster, 2005). Perceived discrepancies between desired and actual customers may additionally lead to changes in the branding (Rode & Vallaster, 2005).

5.2.4. Dynamic Capabilities Perspective

The results of this study are analyzed applying the five dimensions of AB by Pöhlmann, Seitz, et al. (2024) and the DC framework by Teece et al. (1997). The DC framework has already successfully been applied in previous studies on agility (Pinho et al., 2022; Roberts & Grover, 2012; Walter & Raetzke, 2021), agile branding (Pöhlmann, Seitz, et al., 2024), agile marketing (Alghamdi & Agag, 2024; Golgeci et al., 2023), brand management (Ferreira & Coelho, 2020; Iyer, Davari, Srivastava, et al., 2021), and start-ups (Krishnan et al., 2020), and is therefore considered to be scientifically applicable to meet the research objectives of this study. AB is seen as a dynamic capability for companies competing in a highly dynamic market environment, while they are defined as “the firm's ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competences to address rapidly changing environments”. Three pillars form the DC framework: 1) sensing change, 2) seizing opportunities, and 3) transforming a business (Schoemaker et al., 2018; Teece et al., 1997).

5.3. Methodology

A mixed-method approach in two successive phases was chosen for the study. Initially, a systematic literature analysis was carried out followed by qualitative interviews with 29 participants. More details on the methodology are provided in the following.

5.3.1. Phase 1 – Systematic Literature Review and Search Strategy

As already stated by Naslund and Kale (2020), the literature search indicates that scientific interest in agility is extremely high and has increased steadily and immensely in recent years. There are 29,080 peer-reviewed articles registered in Web of Science Core Collection (WoS) on the topic of agility from 1999 to 2023. The scientific interest in start-ups is even higher, with 108,560 peer-reviewed articles published between 2000 and 2023 and a nearly exponential growth. The number of publications on agility in relation to start-ups has also increased, with 161 peer-reviewed articles registered in WoS between 1995 and 2023. The number is still relatively low at 161 but shows a remarkable increase since 2015. The number of publications on branding in start-ups is also very low at 212 yet reflects a sharp and steady increase since 2017. These findings resonate with Rode and Vallaster (2005) and Chaudhri et al. (2022) highlighting a lack of scientific investigation on branding processes in start-ups. The scientific interest in agility and branding has also increased considerably in the last few years, but with just 116 articles overall, it shows a high need for further research. This resonates with several studies that found that the topic of AB is largely unexplored (Bruce & Jeromin, 2016; Hattendorf, 2021; Kalaignanam et al., 2021; Pöhlmann, Seitz, et al., 2024; Preece et al., 2019; Toniatti et al., 2023). To meet the research objectives, systematically elicit the state of literature, and identify research gaps, AB and the branding challenges of start-ups were examined in-depth. Table 5.3 in Appendix Study 3 illustrates the results of the search query.

5.3.2. Phase 2 – Qualitative Interviews

As the literature review revealed that AB has hardly been explored in academic research, the data was collected as an exploratory qualitative study (Eisenhardt, 1989; Hasche et al., 2017; Misoch, 2019). Ten semi-structured interviews with eleven experts and 18 start-ups were conducted between November and December 2022 until data saturation was determined (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Eisenhardt, 1989; Gläser & Laudel, 2004; Meuser & Nagel, 1991; Scheele & Groeben, 2010). The interviews lasted between 30 and 75 minutes and took place live and virtually via Microsoft Teams teleconferencing software and in the national language of the interview partner. Literature does not provide a clear definition of an expert (Gläser & Laudel, 2004; Mey & Mruck, 2007). An expert was only considered in this study if he or she had already consciously dealt with the topic of AB in a scientific context or had gained practical experience with it. Thus, the experts were classified into at least one of these three categories of experience: (1) academic, (2) author or (3) practitioner. If they have previously engaged with the concept of AB in an academic context, either as a professor or lecturer, they were assigned to category (1). Participants who had published at least one article or book on the subject were placed in category (2). Category (3) comprised practitioners who had deliberately integrated agile techniques

into their brand or marketing activities. Table 5.1 and Table 5.2 present the characteristics of the informants.

Due to the local affiliation of the authors of this study and to be able to work out country-specific consistencies, the focus was placed on start-ups that were founded in Germany. To obtain an indication of national differences, start-ups from the USA, Canada, Malta, and the Netherlands were interviewed. No differences could be identified that would have supported continuing to include more countries in this initial research. Great emphasis was placed on achieving a high degree of heterogeneity in terms of industry sectors as well as B2C, B2B, and B2BC target groups. During the selection process of the start-ups, great importance was given to achieving a high degree of heterogeneity in terms of industry sectors as well as business models, differentiating between B2C, B2B, and B2BC. All start-ups were recently founded between 2014 and 2023 and meet the synthesized characterization described in Chapter 5.2.3.

The identification of all interview partners was conducted through a multi-faceted approach, comprising literature reviews, online searches of websites and blogs, social media content analysis, and referral requests from previously interviewed participants. These potential interviewees were then contacted via email, LinkedIn, or telephone.

A semi-structured questionnaire served as a guide throughout the interview while leaving room for new questions and statements (Myers, 2020). For a structured analysis of the data, all interviews were initially anonymized and transcribed into a written format. For this purpose, the rule system for content-semantic transcription by Dresing and Pehl (2018, 2023) was adopted using extended guidelines. The written format was the starting point for conducting a qualitative content analysis according to Kuckartz and Rädiker (2020, 2022). Important text passages were coded and assigned in a structured way to the deductive categories that resulted from the research questions. Subsequently, inductive subcategories emerged from the material, which ultimately resulted in the individual opportunities and challenges of AB for start-ups. The saturation of the research results was reached when no new significant findings could be gained after conducting a total of 28 interviews (Eisenhardt, 1989). The software MAXQDA was used for a technique-supported structured analysis (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019).

577 codes were generated during the content analysis with the support of MAXQDA software. Figure 5.4 and Figure 5.5 in Appendix Study 3 display subcode statistics on the allocation and occurrence of the coded segments from the transcripts of the second phase.

Table 5.1: Overview of the characteristics of the experts interviewed (own illustration).

E-#	Gender	Agile branding experience (1-3)	Professional experience	No. of words (transcript)	Interview duration (minutes)	Date
E-01	Male	(1) Academic, (2) Author	Brand consultant, author, professor for marketing and communications	9016	54	11-11-2022
E-02	Female	(1) Academic, (2) Author	Brand consultant, author, academic teacher for communications, media economy, marketing, leadership, and innovation	8673	58	11-24-2022
E-03	Male	(2) Author, (3) Practitioner	Author, founder of a brand consultancy	5032	40	12-02-2022
E-04	Male	(1) Academic, (3) Practitioner	Consultant, lecturer, podcast host and keynote speaker for brand management, partner at a brand consultancy	6666	51	12-02-2022
E-05	Male	(2) Author, (3) Practitioner	Author, head of marketing	6996	49	12-02-2022
E-06	Female	(2) Author, (3) Practitioner	Author, brand consultant, agile coach	6246	46	12-05-2022
E-07	Male	(1) Academic, (2) Author	Author, professor for marketing and brand management	13175	75	12-07-2022
E-08	Male	(2) Author, (3) Practitioner	Author, speaker, consultant marketing technology and digital transformation	8541	50	12-07-2022
E-09a, E-09b	Male, Female	(1) Academic, (2) Author, (3) Practitioner	E-09a: Lecturer, co-author of E-09b, consultant E-09b: Lecturer, co-author of E-09a, consultant, agile coach	6210	49	12-07-2022
E-10	Female	(2) Author, (3) Practitioner	Founder of a brand consultancy, author, speaker	4093	27	12-12-2022

Table 5.2: Overview of the characteristics of the start-ups interviewed (own illustration).

S-#	Position	Country	Year of foundation	Industry sector	Target group	No. of words (transcript)	Interview duration (minutes)	Date
S-01	Founder	Germany	2018	Textile & Clothing	B2C	5320	46	11-17-2022
S-02	Founder	Germany	2022	Food & Beverage	B2C, B2B, B2B2C	5259	40	11-18-2022
S-03a, S-03b	Founder, Founder	Germany	2021	Food & Beverage	B2C, B2B, B2B2C	5945	41	11-21-2022
S-04	Founder	Germany	2022	Skin & Body Care, Food & Beverage	B2C, B2B, B2B2C	5679	42	11-21-2022
S-05	Founder	Germany	2022	Food & Beverage	B2C, B2B2C	4172	31	11-25-2022
S-06	Senior Brand Manager	Germany	2020	Finance & Controlling, Software Development & Technology	B2B	6103	32	11-28-2022
S-07	Founder	Germany	2017	Employer Training, Law, Software Development & Technology	B2B	6544	39	11-30-2022
S-08	Managing Director	Germany	2018	Finance & Controlling, People Analytics, Software Development & Technology	B2B	4784	32	12-01-2022
S-09	Director of Brand	Malta	2014	People Analytics, Software Development & Technology	B2B	7495	49	12-05-2022
S-10	Founder	Germany	2022	Real Estate, Software Development & Technology	B2B	5047	37	12-12-2022
S-11	Founder	Germany	2018	Logistics & Supply Chain, Software Development & Technology	B2B	6165	37	12-14-2022
S-12	Founder	Germany	2018	Skin & Body Care	B2C, B2B2C	4341	31	12-15-2022
S-13	Founder	Canada	2018	Software Development	B2C, B2B2C	8443	52	12-15-2022

				& Technology, Food & Beverage				
S-14	Managing Director	Nether- lands (Head- quarter), Germany (Subsi- diary)	2017: Nether- lands 2021: Germany	Real Estate, Software Development & Technology	B2B	3705	24	12-16- 2022
S-15	Head of Product Marketing	USA	2017	Content Creation & Marketing, Software Development & Technology	B2C, B2B	6870	45	12-20- 2022
S-16a, S-16b	Founder, Founder	Germany	2022	Consulting, Employer Training	B2B	3955	27	12-29- 2022
S-17	Founder	Germany	2023	Food & Beverage	B2C, B2B, B2B2C	4298	28	12-30- 2022
S-18	Founder	Germany	2019	Food & Beverage	B2C	3881	27	12-21- 2022

Qualitative research inevitably entails a certain degree of subjectivity in the interpretation of results, and thus rigorous adherence to established qualitative research quality criteria (Tracy, 2010) is essential. To guarantee the credibility, plausibility, and comprehensibility of the research, the methodology, procedures, interview guidelines, questionnaires, and results were subjected to evaluation by all co-authors and independent researchers to ensure their thoroughness and impartiality. The research was conducted in such a way that the findings would be consistent, stable and reproducible. Furthermore, all transcripts were rigorously documented and archived, and a codebook was developed to ensure uniformity in data analysis. In order to provide context and depth to the study's results, the most significant statements were incorporated into the findings chapter as quotations. To guarantee the reliability and impartiality of the research findings, all interviews and the group discussion were recorded and transcribed for subsequent analysis. To ensure the accuracy and consistency of the transcriptions, a comprehensive transcription guide was developed following the methodology of Dresing and Pehl (2018, 2023), and the transcriptions were cross-checked and validated by at least two researchers. The research participants were fully informed in advance of their involvement in the study, that their anonymity would be guaranteed, why the research was being conducted, how their data would be used, and whether there were any risks involved.

5.4. Findings

In this section, the results of the interviews are presented in a grouped manner to provide answers to the research questions RQ-3.1 to RQ-3.2. Figure 5.1 presents the opportunities and challenges of AB in the start-up context linked to the DC pillars sensing, seizing, and transforming by (Schoemaker et al., 2018; Teece et al., 1997, 2016). The higher the coding frequency in the analysis, the higher the respective factors are displayed in the illustration. Figure 5.4 and Figure 5.5 in Appendix Study 3 provide further details of the coding frequencies.

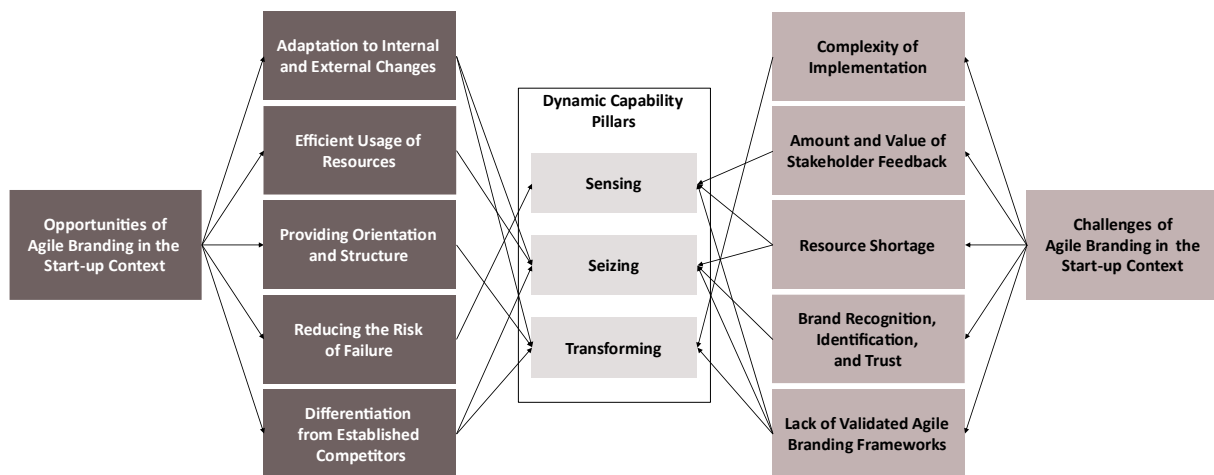


Figure 5.1: Opportunities and challenges of AB in the start-up context linked to the DC framework (own illustration): This illustration provides a visual representation of the interconnection between the opportunities and challenges associated with AB and the DC framework by Teece et al. (1997).

Figure 5.2 summarizes all opportunities and challenges of AB in the start-up context linked to the five dimensions of AB by Pöhlmann, Seitz, et al. (2024). The authors of this research point out that some opportunities and challenges can additionally be related to other dimensions of AB or DC pillars. The individual opportunities and challenges are detailed successively hereafter. All interviews were carried out in the participants' mother tongue, the following statements were therefore translated into English where necessary.

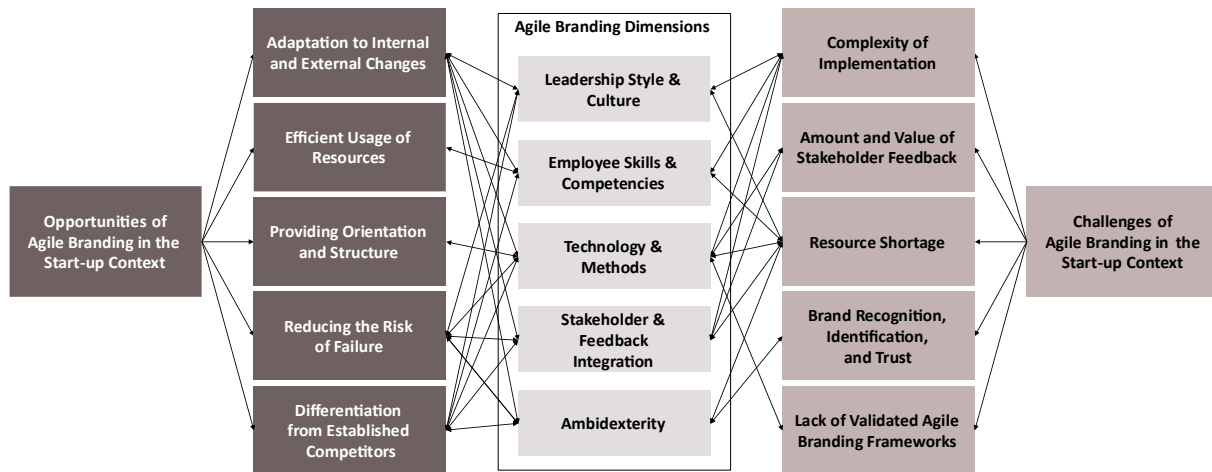


Figure 5.2: Opportunities and challenges of AB in the start-up context linked to the AB dimensions (own illustration): This figure offers a visual illustration of the interconnection between the opportunities and challenges associated with AB and the AB dimensions defined by Pöhlmann, Seitz et al. (2024).

5.4.1. Opportunities of Agile Branding in the Start-Up Context

This chapter presents the potential benefits of AB in the context of start-ups. The study findings illustrate that AB facilitates the rapid adaptation of start-up brands to internal and external changes, enables the efficient utilization of resources, provides guidance and structure for the dynamic brand management process, reduces the risk of failure through data-driven decision-making, and assists start-ups in differentiating themselves from established competitors.

5.4.1.1. Adaptation to Internal and External Changes

The qualitative interviews revealed that AB offers start-ups the opportunity to quickly adapt to internal and external dynamics, such as new competitors entering the market, changing customer requirements or an evolving business model:

“More established companies in our segment and newcomers have all diverged over time to our colour scheme, [...] and that’s why we wanted to clearly differentiate ourselves again.” (S-11, pos. 42, translated)

Several informants agreed that static processes are no longer effective in a world where change is occurring at an accelerated pace:

“Times have changed [...] in recent years [...]. In the past, you used to somehow define a brand strategy [...] and that simply worked for a relatively long time and was enough. Nowadays you realize that the need to revise, adapt and expand it is simply much more short-term and [...] you [...] can simply adapt and change the brand much more consciously in a timely manner and tied to current events.” (S-09, pos. 37, translated)

For start-ups, AB offers significant advantages by enabling rapid adaptation to customer needs, which ultimately leads to higher customer satisfaction, increased sales, and greater customer loyalty, as illustrated by E-05:

“You don't [...] stick too much to decisions that have already been made [...] when [...] customer needs and the market actually order something else, [...] that you [...] are always [...] optimally market and customer-oriented or can correct this relatively quickly.” (E-05, pos. 28, translated)

AB helps to align the brand to the different development stages of the start-up, where employees, customers, and offerings continually expand and evolve:

“At the beginning, when you're building a start-up, you have the problem that you often have to [...] adapt your offer again [...] and [...] it's important that the brand is not an obstacle, but a vehicle to support these changes.” (S-09, pos. 59, translated)

“Start-up [...] is a very dynamic environment [...] your employees are expanding, your customers are expanding, your product is expanding, your offering is expanding and [...] I believe that branding also has to fit in with the phases of a company [...].” (S-11, pos. 36, translated)

5.4.1.2. Efficient Usage of Resources

The respondents agreed that the efficient use of time, financial and human resources is a major advantage of AB, emphasizing the efficiency of iterative developments, as lengthy processes may lead to wasted time and money if the brand does not align with the market. Agile beta phases with stakeholder input promote faster decision-making and evaluation of successes and failures:

“I definitely believe that it's more effective to do it in an agile way [...] and if you somehow have a beta phase. I think otherwise you kind of build your dream house, but then somehow it doesn't work for anyone else and then I just think it's a waste of time.” (S-09, pos. 53, translated)

“You do it all for your customers, for the market. That's why it's obvious to do it based on this feedback. We didn't do it back then, which turned out to be a mistake. If we had made it agile back then and involved the stakeholders, we wouldn't have had to change it now.” (S-12, pos. 68, translated)

AB emerges as a financially valuable strategy for start-ups. Several interview partners underscore the importance of cost-effectiveness, advocating that early-stage start-ups avoid substantial upfront branding investments through AB. S-13 recommends prioritizing sales marketing

to gather data and make informed branding decisions, reserving long-term branding strategies for cash flow positivity:

“You can read day-to-day minute to minute, your successes and failures and that allows you to pivot very quickly to where you're spending money [...]. And that's critical for a start-up. The ability to pivot by reading that information can save you potentially months and months and months and save you hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of dollars.” (S-13, Pos. 52)

5.4.1.3. Providing Orientation and Structure

Interviewees unanimously affirm that AB offers an effective and efficient procedural structure, guiding brand management. It promotes goal setting and milestone achievement, facilitating a deeper understanding of the brand's direction, as stated by S-09:

“I know so many people who take so long to either build a brand or rebrand simply because they [...] don't set milestones, which you automatically set much better if you approach it in an agile way.” (S-09, pos. 53, translated)

“I think it makes sense [...] to keep challenging yourself and saying where you actually stand after half a year [...], after a year, maybe you want to change something, [...] not the way it was done with us [...]. It was never said somehow, is it really still state of the art [...], what does the market actually perceive out there [...] we dealt with ourselves and not with the outside world, we actually missed that a bit in between.” (S-07, pos. 78)

5.4.1.4. Reducing the Risk of Failure

This study finds that AB serves as a risk-reduction strategy due to validated decision-making and a closely aligned brand to market reality:

“You are [...] closer to reality, because many probably first develop, develop, develop and [...] only then appear. I always compare it a bit to ocean water [...] in which you swim. You surface and in the end it might not be that relevant, the brand might not be recognized or seen as such, you might even be too late with what you use or say there and so I just think [...] you minimize the risk of a flop.” (S-04, pos. 52, translated)

AB promotes a culture of innovation and testing within start-ups while encouraging learning through experimentation. It enables to test, validate or disprove ideas and hypotheses about customer needs and to react based on empirical results:

“If you set up the process correctly, [...] then you can [...] also look at how you are perceived and test something relatively quickly and of course you have a much broader [...] expertise [...]. You can simply make your development more valid and not just have best guesses and gut feelings [...] it's really well-founded.” (S-11, pos. 36, translated)

5.4.1.5. Differentiation From Established Competitors

The study found that AB offers start-ups the opportunity to stand out from large and established competitors, while confirming the suitability and relevancy of the concept for start-ups. Some informants noted that established companies tend to rely on traditional practices when adapting their brand. Technology-based start-ups are often agile from the outset, giving them a head start compared to older companies that need to adapt to agile practices first.

“I think that also works well for start-ups because they already think like that [...] which I sometimes miss in large companies, sedate companies, [...] I think you're more inclined to adopt this way of working.” (E-03, pos. 20, translated)

Several interviewees consent that the advantages of start-ups compared to established companies include their smaller size, lean structures, and fewer customers:

“I think start-ups can move faster a little bit because there are fewer stakeholders and also more willing to just try and experiment and see if something works as opposed to like the worry of like ten billion people are going to see this [...]. We could just [...] iterate on that in like a few conversations versus I feel like at a bigger company it would be like oh, like let's pass it to this person, now let's pass it to this person and like multiple rounds of checks.” (S-15, pos. 50)

The study found that well-established brands risk customer disorientation if they change extensively. Conversely, start-ups benefit from lower brand awareness, allowing for less noticed brand modifications:

“That was only a slight change [...] most people probably didn't even notice it [...]. Because we're still very small in that sense and people are just getting to know us. I think the bigger you are, the more difficult it is to change or adapt a brand.” (S-02, pos. 52, translated)

5.4.2. Challenges of Agile Branding in the Start-Up Context

This chapter presents the challenges of AB in the context of start-ups, as identified in the study. These include the complexity of implementation, the optimal amount and value of stakeholder feedback, resource scarcity, the risk of losing brand awareness, identification and trust, along with a lack of validated agile branding frameworks.

5.4.2.1. Complexity of Implementation

The research revealed that AB comprises certain challenges. One key difficulty identified through the study is the complexity of implementation. A lack of agile skills among team members requires substantial investment to foster an agile mindset. Overcoming the resistance of older managers who might prefer traditional methods was found to be an additional hurdle. Suitable tools and the definition of KPIs (key performance indicators) to determine when the brand needs to be adapted are major challenges:

“The question is, if you manage the brand in an agile way, how do you measure the success of the brand [...] you simply need so many tools and there just isn't the perfect tool for it.” (S-09, pos. 93, translated)

“I think the disadvantage with agile is actually defining the KPIs, when do I change something.” (E-06, pos. 18, translated)

The implementation of an appropriate information structure and methods for creating transparency were seen as challenging:

“The more agile you are, the more these guidelines live and the more frequently they have to be updated [...]. So the question now is, if I have someone externally who has to use this guideline, when do I make this update and what structures do I have within the team to communicate these changes, to share experiments that I am currently doing and to really keep all the people in the team up to date.” (S-09, pos. 99, translated)

5.4.2.2. Amount and Value of Stakeholder Feedback

Proactively gathering feedback is recognized as a challenge of AB. Respondents point out that proactively gathering feedback requires significant resources and caution against relying solely on potential customers to build a brand, emphasizing the importance of feedback from actual paying customers. While feedback is certainly valuable, it also poses the risk of diluting the primary vision of the brand by being overly influenced. One founder struggles to balance external opinions with confidence in the own vision. S-04 warns of the loss of disruption capability:

“The danger of relying too much on the outside world [...]. I know from previous jobs [...] that new brands or products were also tested to death so that in the end they were the lowest common denominator and didn't really [...] break through, and as a start-up you want to be more disruptive [...].” (S-04, pos. 54, translated)

5.4.2.3. Resource Shortage

The limited resources of start-ups have been identified as a challenge for AB and can hinder rigorous testing. It was mentioned that while AB may be more time-consuming initially, it can save time in the long run as fewer mistakes are made. Concerns were raised about sustainability, as existing brand materials are often unusable after rebranding. The cost of rebranding efforts, such as hiring designers and reproducing branded merchandise, strains limited budget:

“At the end of the day, time and money are lacking, as is so often the case [...]. We are a small team at the moment, I don't know who can put in a lot of time right now to really set up a clean, agile process, systematically collect customer feedback and process it [...]. In purely monetary terms, of course, you could hire someone, but money is also finite for us, especially in the start-up world, of course you have to think very carefully about what you're actually spending it on.” (S-10, pos. 54, translated)

The lack of expertise in brand management was cited as one of the biggest challenges, as most founders have a technical and not a marketing or branding background:

“That can be very difficult [...] because very often at the beginning of start-ups there is no branding person really on board, there is always minimal staffing and [...] the topic of brand is never really at the forefront [...].” (S-09, pos. 59, translated)

5.4.2.4. Brand Recognition, Identification, and Trust

AB promotes proactive brand evolution to gradually adapt to shifting demands. Consistent brand recognition is important to build long-term trust. This trust must be constantly rebuilt each time the brand is adapted, which requires a delicate balance between continuity and adaptability:

“I can imagine that agile brand management [...] can lead to lower recognition at first, but that doesn't have to be the case. I think that if the right approaches are used, this can be easily avoided.” (S-08, pos. 33, translated)

“Of course, [...] if you make [...] very big changes [...] in your brand strategy, you naturally have to rebuild the perception again and again [...]. That is always repeated work [...]. That's why I think I do see difficulties in the fact that you might confuse the target groups in some way.” (E-05, pos. 22, translated)

5.4.2.5. Lack of Validated Agile Branding Frameworks

The lack of research on AB is identified as a major obstacle of AB adoption. The unavailability of well-defined criteria for deciding when feedback should be implemented further hinders the application of AB. Various organizations interpret and manifest agility differently, which reinforces the necessity of a concise definition and process framework for AB. In addition, the difficulty of transferring scientific research results into practice was pointed out, which hinders the adoption of AB:

“Much more dramatically, they don't realize at all that there are findings on this [...]. The question is [...] how is it actually possible to bring knowledge into this community, to get it into practice?” (E-07, pos. 58, translated)

Several experts agreed that there is a shortage of scientific research that provides step-by-step guidance on how to apply AB.

“There is currently no framework that is really one hundred per cent based on the everyday life [...] of a brand manager.” (E-09a, pos. 50, translated)

“There are probably dozens of companies that already have an agile mindset, that act in this way, but wouldn't describe it as agile themselves. But I think there is still a lot of work to be done in terms of general awareness, whether it's agile marketing or agile branding [...]. But I think there's still a long way to go before this is really anchored in most companies or the wording (laughs) is in people's heads.” (E-09a, pos. 98, translated)

5.5. Discussion

This chapter presents an analysis of the research in the context of previous literature. It outlines the theoretical and practical implications of the study, identifies its limitations, and discusses potential future research directions.

5.5.1. Theoretical implications

This is the first study that investigates the opportunities and challenges of AB. Additionally, no study has been conducted to date that analyses AB in the context of start-ups and their brand management challenges. This study therefore contributes to further deepening the concept of AB, which numerous authors have called for (Bruce & Jeromin, 2016; Hattendorf, 2021; Kalaiganam et al., 2021; Pöhlmann, Seitz, et al., 2024; Preece et al., 2019; Toniatti et al., 2023). Furthermore, this investigation contributes to the expansion of the DC framework and to the advancement of research on agility, as well as on brand management literature within the context of start-ups.

The study consents with existing research stating that AB lacks a clear and established definition and practical processes (Bruce & Jeromin, 2016; Hattendorf, 2021; Kalaignanam et al., 2021; Preece et al., 2019; Toniatti et al., 2023), making its implementation challenging. These findings seem contrary to the advantage that AB offers orientation and structure (see Chapter 5.4.1.3). Interpretatively, while the understanding of AB to date already supports brands in becoming more flexible and adaptable, it requires more in-depth research to further specify the process and KPIs for AB. Until then, AB, as well as agility in general (Hattendorf, 2021), will be interpreted very subjectively.

Baran and Woznyi (2021) suggest strategically tackling the challenges of a dynamic environment in three steps: “identifying your VUCA, defining obstacles to agility, and implementing agility enhancing practices” (Baran & Woznyj, 2021, p. 9). Based on the results of the current research, the following adaptation of the strategy of Baran and Woznyi (2021) for AB is suggested: 1) Identify the factors that drive your dynamic brand environment, 2) define the barriers to the adoption of AB, 3) establish practices and adapt processes that facilitate the implementation of AB.

5.5.2. Practical Implications

This chapter presents the practical implications of the study, while critically discussing the findings within the existing literature. Figure 5.3 illustrates the research findings on how the application of AB can help start-ups to overcome their unique branding challenges that were identified within prior studies and further described in Chapter 5.2.3.

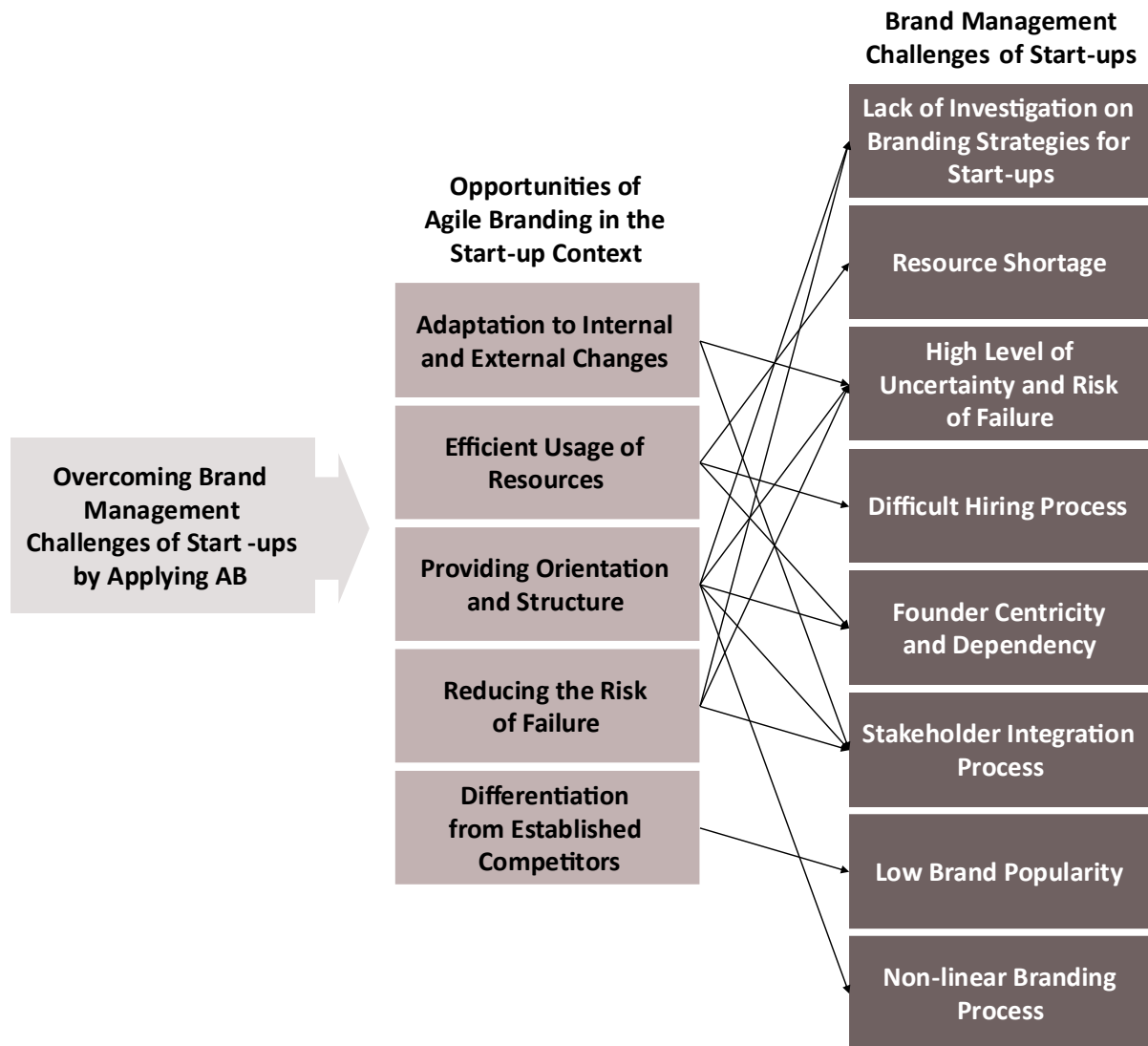


Figure 5.3: Overcoming brand management challenges of start-ups by applying AB (own illustration): This illustration demonstrates the direct correlation between the opportunities of AB and its ability to assist start-ups in overcoming their particular brand management challenges.

Rapid adaptation to internal and external changes was identified as the greatest opportunity of AB in the context of start-ups. AB draws attention to and acknowledges the uncontrollability of the world and the unpredictability of change. The findings relate to Gupta et al. (2020) stating that agility is an important capability to respond to external changes. Rode and Vallaster's study (2005) spotlights the necessity for start-ups to align their business strategies and values in order to be successful. Having a global consciousness and a customer dialogue is imperative for AB and requires keeping up with emerging trends, market shifts, and new technologies, which adds to the findings of Wang et al (2022), confirming that a focus on customers and the dynamic capabilities of a company contribute to an improved brand image.

Limited resources were found to be one of the biggest challenges for the brand management of start-ups within the literature (Cantamessa et al., 2018; Krishnan et al., 2020; Rode & Vallaster, 2005). The study confirmed that AB enables start-ups to utilise their scarce resources more efficiently. De Blick et al. (2024) highlight the importance of cost-saving management innovations as a strategy for addressing SMEs' limited access to external finance which in turn stimulate SME growth. Furthermore, the research indicated that time to market can be shortened through AB and adaptation to customer demands can take place rapidly. Its emphasis on proactive adaptation and customer-centricity makes it a powerful strategy for nurturing strong customer loyalty while staying aligned with the market.

Previous studies show that the branding process in start-ups is very dynamic and non-linear, and they have a particularly high need for a flexible and iterative branding process, while branding skills are often limited (Cantamessa et al., 2018; Chaudhri et al., 2022; Rode & Vallaster, 2005). The informants agreed that AB facilitates a structured brand management process and consented with the literature that start-ups often lack the necessary brand management experience. The informants concur that AB's incremental and iterative nature is often superior to radical changes, fostering continuous adaptation.

The literature review detected that 90 percent of the start-ups fail, while insufficient branding activities are among the main reasons (Cantamessa et al., 2018; Shewale, 2024). Rode and Vallaster (2005) emphasize that founders often do not know whether their idea will be successful in the market. It was found that AB helps to avoid critical errors, as the test and learn approach enables validated decisions to be made on the basis of gathered data.

The study results confirm the findings by Chaudhri et al. (2022) as well as by Rode and Vallaster (2005) that start-ups and established companies need to be differentiated in research regarding brand management processes. Consistent with Griva et al. (2021), several interview partners agreed that start-ups are inherently more inclined to agile thinking, distinguishing them from large established corporations. Rode and Vallaster (2005) agree that the size of the company in the start-up phase and a flexible corporate structure and adaptability can allow quick responses to consumer needs. The size and resulting speed of start-ups was identified as an advantage over large companies in applying AB. The literature review revealed that low brand awareness is a challenge for start-ups (Awad & Fatah, 2015; Chaudhri et al., 2022; Eggert & Kraus, 2016; Yang & Aldrich, 2017). Interestingly, the study found that this is precisely the advantage that start-ups hold over established companies when it comes to transforming the brand without confusing the customer.

AB comes along with various difficulties in the start-up context. The implementation of AB in existing processes represents the greatest challenge according to the interview partners. Employee recruitment and loyalty constitute a bottleneck for start-ups (Chaudhri et al., 2022; Mukul & Saini, 2021; Rode & Vallaster, 2005). Finding the right agile brand manager who aligns with the corporate culture and vision of the founders adds to the difficulty (Chaudhri et al., 2022; Mukul & Saini, 2021). The company culture, which is largely shaped by the founders, is critical to the success (Cantamessa et al., 2018; Chaudhri et al., 2022; Rode & Vallaster, 2005). Founders should therefore exemplify agility and create a culture favourable to AB as consented by Mardian (2024) and Tandon et al. (2024). While Rode and Vallaster (2005) state that internal communication and an optimal level and way of information sharing is perceived as a significant issue for founders, the study finds that effective, open and swift communication is crucial in AB. Communication is also an essential success factor of agile integration (Naslund & Kale, 2020). Adding to existing research finding that top management commitment and the establishment of an agile mindset and culture is one of the most important success factors of agile integration and change management (Campanelli et al., 2017; Naslund & Kale, 2020).

The amount and value of stakeholder feedback integration is perceived as an obstacle to the implementation of AB in start-ups, while previous research stresses the crucial role of stakeholder and feedback integration in the branding process (Chaudhri et al., 2022; Rode & Vallaster, 2005; J. Wang et al., 2022). Concurring with Chaudhri et al. (2022), some interview partners admit that they often seek subjective confirmation from friends and colleagues rather than genuine and valuable feedback. Emphasis was placed on the identification of key users, people with innovation-friendly characteristics, as introduced by Hippel (1986). One expert reinforced the Scrum value "openness" (Beck et al., 2001b), encouraging the willingness to listen to feedback and act on it, even if it contradicts one's preferences.

Financial constraints were found to be a notable barrier to AB in start-ups, as the application of AB can lead to a higher necessity of manpower, time and money in the first place. In line with previous research, the interviews detected that AB presents resource-related challenges, particularly for resource-constrained start-ups (Awad & Fatah, 2015; Cantamessa et al., 2018; Chaudhri et al., 2022; Morris et al., 2002; Rode & Vallaster, 2005). Furthermore, founders who are often technology professionals, may lack a full understanding of the importance of branding and may have limited brand management and marketing skills, as confirmed by Cantamessa et al. (2018). The study found that shortage of designated branding manpower can impede brand enhancement. While the study finds that resource scarcity is a challenge of AB, it also reveals that it assists in using those resources efficiently (see Chapter 5.4.1).

The challenge of potentially jeopardizing brand recognition, identification, and trust recognition due to frequent brand changes may initially appear at odds with the principles of AB, which prioritize rapid and ongoing adaptation. A closer look at the results leads to the conclusion that start-ups, especially in the initial phase, have the opportunity to adapt their brand more often without losing existing customers due to their low brand familiarity (Awad & Fatah, 2015; Chaudhri et al., 2022; Eggers & Kraus, 2016; Yang & Aldrich, 2017). Yet this should also be done thoughtfully, not too frequently, and always based on facts and data. In the end, it is crucial to find the balance between steady and continuous branding and the required adaptations. The need for caution is reinforced by Eggers and Kraus (2016), who found that customers are more likely to buy a brand if the brand seems familiar to them.

5.5.3. Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

It is important to note that the study is subject to certain limitations. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of the concept of AB, which has been shown to be fragmentary in the literature. It also contributes to bridging the research gaps related to brand management in start-ups. However, the study only considers the potential of AB in the context of start-ups. The opportunities and challenges identified are only partly transferable to large established businesses and other types of companies. Separate, extended research is needed to further understand AB and to generalize its potential for all firms. To further advance the research on the potential of AB, other categories of SMEs as defined by Krishnan et al. (2020) and large established companies should also be explored. Due to the residency of the authors, a large number of the start-ups interviewed were German. This could result in a cultural bias in the results. A future study could focus on other nationalities and explore cultural differences and similarities and the implications for agile brand management. Although the study emphasized a diversity of male and female interviewees and founders, the differences and similarities were not worked out individually. Future research could identify gender differences and commonalities.

Additionally, future research could delve into whether and how AB is currently being applied within organizations, whether unknowingly or intentionally. In summarizing the results, the study did not differentiate between the experts and start-ups interviewed. Further research could look at whether there are different nuances in the groups of interviewees. Analyzing gender-based differences among start-up founders could also provide exciting insights.

The study demonstrates that AB fosters innovation and competitiveness. The study by Inegbedion et al. (2024) demonstrates that product innovation and differentiation are significant factors that facilitate SME growth and competitiveness, which in turn result in increased employment generation. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that AB may also exert a positive influence on SME and

employee growth, which could be the subject of further investigation. Given the strategic importance of internationalization for SME growth (Rahman et al., 2024), it would be of considerable academic and practical interest to investigate the potential of AB in supporting the internationalization of start-ups and SMEs.

5.6. Conclusions

AB provides start-ups with a valuable and contemporary strategy to successfully navigate their brand in a dynamic and fast-paced business environment. It empowers them to quickly adapt to internal and external changes initiated by market dynamics, technological shifts, or unpredictable events. AB assists start-ups to use their scarce resources efficiently. It decreases time-to-market, supports swift alignment to customer needs, and fosters a culture of testing and learning. In addition, AB provides structure and direction that are essential for brand managers in today's fast-paced and dynamic marketplace. It focuses on defining objectives, setting milestones, and nurturing a deeper understanding of the brand's purpose. As opposed to traditional long-term approaches, AB centers on incremental and iterative refinements that ensure that the brand remains relevant in a constantly evolving environment.

Another upside of AB is the reduction of risk through validated and data-based decisions. Due to the agile approach, the risk of failure is reduced because brands are developed and adapted closely to market reality. The iterative process creates a culture of innovation and experimentation that enables start-ups to learn and evolve quickly. Finally, AB empowers start-ups to differentiate themselves from well-established competition. Start-ups, by nature tend to be more agile in their thinking and decision-making, which distinguishes them from larger corporations. They can leverage the advantages of their smaller size, lean structures, and lower brand popularity to introduce changes more discreetly and adapt quickly.

AB also comes with its own set of challenges. Implementing AB can be complicated and risks short-sightedness and conflict with non-agile processes and organizational structures. It can face resistance in convincing employees of its value, which requires a cultural shift towards adaptability. Developing agile competencies among employees and cultivating an openness for change is crucial for successful implementation. A mindset that brands need to constantly innovate and evolve is key. Another challenge is the quality and quantity of stakeholder feedback. It is crucial to identify the right lead users who will inspire the brand and identify future trends. While obtaining feedback is crucial, a balance should be found between the implementation of external opinions and the founders' vision.

Too frequent changes can jeopardize the brand and cause customers to lose brand recognition, trust, and identification. For resource-constrained start-ups, in particular, AB can entail additional

effort in terms of time, money, and personnel in the short term. Another challenge is that the concept of AB has hardly been addressed in academia. Therefore, there is still a lack of well-defined processes and orientations on how the approach can be implemented in practice. The present research contributes to filling this gap and expanding the scientific research on AB.

In summary, the benefits and opportunities of AB outweigh the challenges for start-ups, making it a valuable strategy for start-ups in today's dynamic business landscape. Agile and flexible brand management is essential to succeed in today's fast-paced business environment. A well-managed change process and the implementation of technological tools can overcome the challenges. A well-thought-out and data-based brand adaptation process will contribute to market relevance and customer satisfaction in the long run.

5.7. Appendix Study 3

This appendix presents the subcode statistics concerning the distribution and frequency of the coded segments derived from the transcripts of Study 3. Additionally, it delineates the search strategy employed in the WoS Core Collection. The figures are presented in the initial section, followed by the tables.

Overview Appendix Study 3

Table 5.3 Search query performed on September 09, 2023 (own illustration)

Figure 5.4 Statistics on coded segments from opportunities of agile branding in the start-up context (own illustration with MAXQDA)

Figure 5.5 Statistics on coded segments from challenges of agile branding in the start-up context (own illustration with MAXQDA)

Table 5.3: Search query performed on September 09, 2023 (own illustration).

Subject	Search 1: Branding challenges of start-ups	Search 2: Agile branding
Inclusion criterion #1 database(s)	Web of Science Core Collection	Web of Science Core Collection
Inclusion criterion #2 search term(s)	Brand*, Start-up*, Startup*, Challenge*	Agil*, Brand*
Inclusion criterion #3 document type	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Peer-reviewed journal articles
Initial number of identified articles (inclusion criteria)	40	116
Exclusion criterion #1	Articles in WoS categories unrelated to the research area (e.g. Zoology, astronomy astrophysics)	Articles in WoS categories unrelated to the research area (e.g. Zoology, astronomy astrophysics)
Excluded	11	9
Remained	29	107
Final query string	(TS=(Brand*) AND TS=(Challenge*) AND (TS=(Start-up*) OR TS=(Startup*))) AND (DT=("ARTICLE") AND TASCA=("BUSINESS" OR "MANAGEMENT" OR "COMMUNICATION" OR "HOSPITALITY LEISURE SPORT TOURISM"))	(TS=(Brand*) AND TS=(Agil*)) AND ((DT=("ARTICLE")) NOT (TASCA=("CHEMISTRY APPLIED" OR "DERMATOLOGY" OR "GENETICS HEREDITY" OR "ZOOLOGY" OR "BIOTECHNOLOGY APPLIED MICROBIOLOGY" OR "MEDICINE GENERAL INTERNAL" OR "ORTHOPEDICS" OR "PLANT SCIENCES"))))
Exclusion criterion #3 content	Articles that did not relate in depth to branding challenges of start-ups	Articles that did not relate in depth to agility related to branding
Excluded	7	36
Remained	22	71

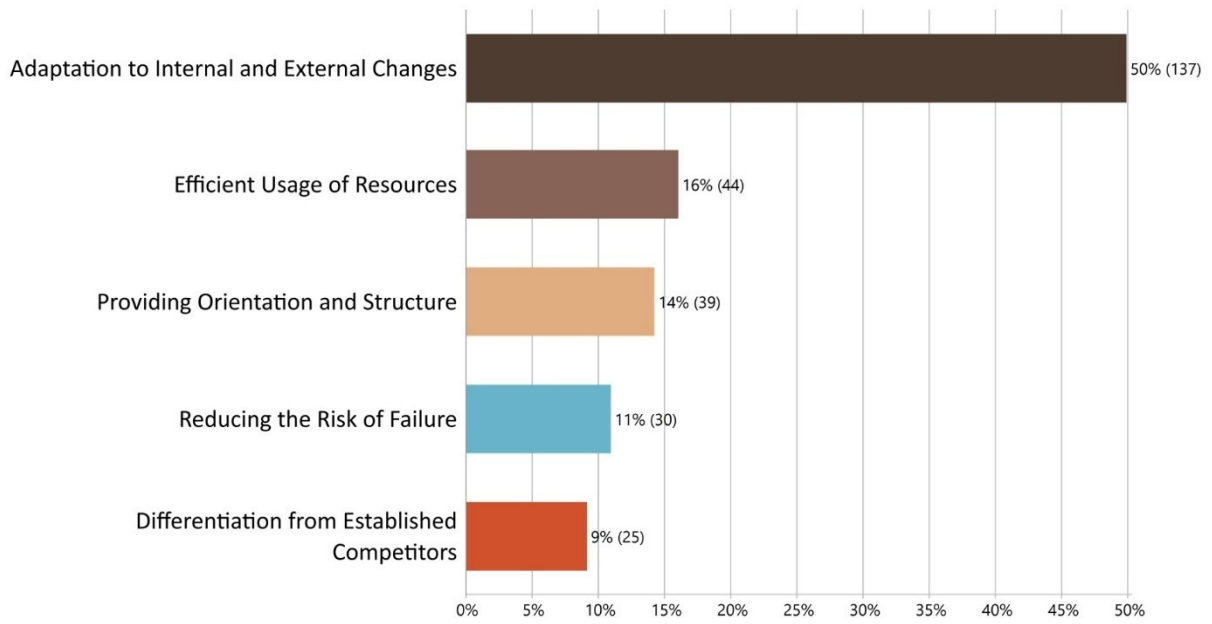


Figure 5.4: Statistics on coded segments from opportunities of agile branding in the start-up context (own illustration with MAXQDA).

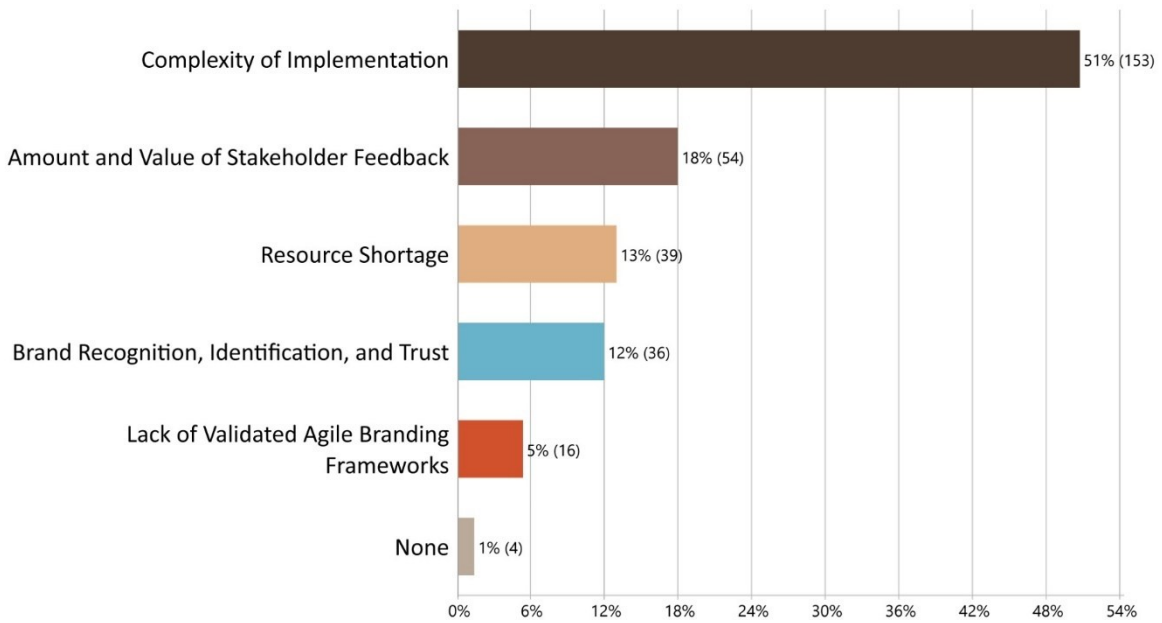


Figure 5.5: Statistics on coded segments from challenges of agile branding in the start-up context (own illustration with MAXQDA).

5.8. References Study 3

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6. Global Summary

This chapter provides a synthesis of the primary findings presented in the three articles included in this dissertation, with the objective of offering a comprehensive understanding of the research outcomes and their broader implications.

Study 1 in Chapter 3 examined and illustrated the trends and evolution of AB by conducting a bibliometric analysis of the scientific literature generated between 1996 and 2023. The bibliometric and systematic analysis of the literature revealed that the number of scientific research on agility in the context of brand management has increased, most notably since 2008, and peaked in 2022, indicating a growing interest in science on AB. Concurrently, the study underscores the scarcity of academic research on AB in general, indicating a clear need for further investigation aimed at uncovering strategies for more agile and dynamic brand management in today's rapidly evolving business landscape. The study identified the following key issues related to agility and branding: the management of continuous change, the impact of agility on employer branding, the challenge of maintaining brand consistency, the management of social media, the role of SMEs in the context of AB, and the relevance of agility on brands and their supply chain strategy.

Study 2 in Chapter 4 aimed at defining and conceptualizing AB through a systematic literature review followed by qualitative semi-structured interviews with eleven experts and a group discussion with five participants. Applying the dynamic capabilities perspective, five dimensions and 20 antecedents of AB were elaborated. The five dimensions are: (1) leadership style and culture, (2) employee skills and competencies, (3) technology and methods, (4) stakeholder and feedback integration, and (5) ambidexterity. The 20 identified antecedents form the prerequisites of AB which are linked to the five dimensions: (1.1) trust, empowerment and ownership, (1.2) flat hierarchy, (1.3) test and learn culture, (1.4) evolvment, (2.1) lifelong learning, (2.2) openness to change, (2.3) global awareness, (2.4) reflection, (3.1) iterative adjustments, (3.2) quick results and short-term planning, (3.3) continuous improvement, (3.4) framework & non-negotiables, (4.1) openness, (4.2) co-creation, (4.3) heterogeneity, (4.4) customer centricity, (5.1) long-term adaptability, (5.2) balance, (5.3) industry type, (5.4) company type. AB spans all three pillars of the DC framework: sensing, seizing, and transforming (Teece et al., 1997).

The following understanding of AB was derived from Study 2: AB signifies the incorporation of agility into strategic brand management, with the objective of enhancing companies' market relevance and competitiveness within a dynamic environment. The brand is conceptualized as a living resource that is continually reflected upon, proactively evolved, and dynamically adapted to market changes, with a constant focus on customer value. Decisions are based on collected data and stakeholder

feedback. Agile methodologies are integrated at the brand's initial creation as well as in its long-term maintenance. The brand manager, with an openness to experimentation, leads the brand and is empowered to test and adapt it, always with the aim of constant improvement, maintaining a balance between brand continuity and change.

Moreover, Study 2 introduced the construct of agile branding values and principles, which was modelled on the agile manifesto (Beck et al., 2001b) and the agile marketing manifesto (Agile Marketing Manifesto, 2021a, 2021b). This construct offers practice-oriented guidelines for professionals to apply AB and represents an initial draft of an agile branding manifesto.

Study 3 in Chapter 5 assessed the potential of AB and, consequently, the opportunities and challenges it presents. The start-up context and the dynamic capabilities framework proved to be useful lenses for focusing and orienting the analysis of the findings. AB represents a particularly interesting and relevant strategy to address the specific challenges associated with brand management in the context of start-ups. In the context of start-ups, the following advantages of AB were identified: the quick adaptation to internal and external changes, the efficient use of resources, the provision of guidance and structure, the reduction of the risk of failure, and the differentiation from established competitors. The following challenges were retrieved: the complexity of its implementation, the right amount and value of stakeholder feedback, the scarcity of resources, the risk of losing brand awareness, identification and trust, and the lack of validated agile branding frameworks. In conclusion, the advantages and possibilities offered by AB in the context of start-ups outweigh the difficulties encountered, thereby rendering it a highly efficient and effective strategy in today's dynamic business landscape.

The consensus among the three studies is that scientific research on AB is still in its infancy, yet it holds considerable promise for contemporary brand management strategies tailored to the distinctive requirements of companies operating in a dynamic business environment. All studies confirmed AB as a strategy, method and mindset that is particularly suitable for start-ups. Each of the studies concluded that the biggest challenge of AB is to balance brand continuity and adaptation.

7. Global Discussion

This chapter aims at discussing the overall relevance of the research findings by highlighting the theoretical and practical implications as well as the limitations and perspectives for future research.

7.1. Theoretical and Practical Implications

Study 1 in Chapter 3 is the first bibliometric analysis that examines agility in the context of branding. Although Thümler (2023) conducted a bibliometric analysis on AM, his study does not provide dedicated insights for brand management. Study 1 served to systematically identify and analyze the existing scientific research on AB. It uncovers the most influential studies and authors on agility in relation to branding (see RQ-1.1), identified the main research categories on AB (see RQ-1.2), and summarized the key findings of the current literature on AB (see RQ-1.3).

While many authors claim that it is essential to manage brands in a more agile and dynamic way in today's world (Baumgarth, 2020; Dänzler & Heun, 2014; Eilers et al., 2022; Golant, 2012; Lies, 2020), a harmonized definition, understanding and conceptualization of AB is missing in scientific and practitioner literature. Study 2 in Chapter 4 therefore provided an expanded definition of AB (see RQ-2.1) and is the first scientific study to conceptualize AB by identifying its dimensions and antecedents (see RQ-2.2). In addition, an agile branding manifesto was developed for the first time, establishing the construct of agile branding values and principles (see RQ-2.3) while focusing specifically on the application of AB in practice. This study contributes to the development of flexible solutions in brand management that are specifically oriented towards the dynamics of today's world, which several authors call for (Baran & Woznyj, 2021; Baumgarth, 2020; Eilers et al., 2022, 2022; Iyer, Davari, Srivastava, et al., 2021; Keller & Richey, 2006; Swaminathan et al., 2020; Toniatti et al., 2023). While Roberts and Grover (2012) suggest that agility encompasses the DC elements of sensing and seizing, this study found that AB additionally captures the transformational pillar of DC. The results concerning the leadership style and culture dimension of AB are coherent with the statement by Ulrich and Yeung (2019) and O'Keeffe et al. (2016) that managers themselves must embody agility in order to nurture an organizational culture in which employees can fully adopt agile attitudes. Schoemaker et al. (2018) consent with the findings of the study that decision-making and learning are strongly linked to seizing opportunities.

Study 2 further detected an openness to change as a prerequisite of AB. This finding aligns with Baran and Woznyj (2021) and Eilers et al. (2022) that agility includes an ongoing learning process regarding new tools or technologies. Ulrich and Yeung (2019) agree with the results that every person must be naturally curious and want to constantly develop, while also being willing to experiment and

take risks. Veloutsou and Delgado-Ballester (2019) agree with the heterogeneity antecedent stating that various internal and external stakeholders need to be constantly integrated, and their changing needs must be iteratively incorporated into the brand management process.

While numerous scientists confirm that AB is a necessity in a VUCA environment (Baumgarth, 2020; Dänzler & Heun, 2014; Eilers et al., 2022; Golant, 2012; Lies, 2020), to date, no research has been conducted to assess the potential of the new concept. Consequently, Study 3 in Chapter 6 successfully evaluated the opportunities (see RQ-3.1) and challenges (see RQ-3.2) of AB for the first time and offers start-ups in particular a solution approach to overcome their unique branding challenges. Although it was not the main goal of the study, the findings contribute to the limited body of knowledge regarding the management of start-up brands. The study's findings that AB provides the opportunity for start-ups to swiftly adapt to internal and external changes and ensure their competitiveness in a rapidly changing business landscape are consistent with the findings of Gupta et al. (2020), who confirm that agility is an important capability for responding to external changes. In line with Rode and Vallaster (2005), start-ups initially often do not know whether their business idea will be successful on the market. AB offers significant advantages by enabling rapid adaptation to customer needs, which may ultimately lead to higher customer satisfaction, increased sales, and greater customer loyalty. These results are consistent with Wang et al. (2022), confirming that a focus on customers and the dynamic capabilities of a company contributed to an improved brand image. The relatively small size and resulting speed of start-ups was identified as a key advantage over large companies in implementing AB. Concurring with Griva et al. (2021), multiple interviewees agreed that start-ups are inherently more agile in their thinking, differentiating them from large established companies. Rode and Vallaster (2005) also consent that the size of the company during the start-up phase as well as a flexible company structure and adaptability facilitate quick responses to consumer needs. Previous studies (Cantamessa et al., 2018; Chaudhri et al., 2022; Rode & Vallaster, 2005) align with the findings of this dissertation that the branding process in start-ups is very dynamic and non-linear, which is why they have a particularly high need for AB. The study consents with prior research identifying that AB lacks a clear and established definition and methods (Bruce & Jeromin, 2016; Hattendorf, 2021; Kalaignanam et al., 2021; Preece et al., 2019; Toniatti et al., 2023), making its implementation challenging.

All three studies concluded that the balance between continuity and adaptation is a major challenge of AB. While Preece et al. (2019) and Kalaignanam et al. (2021) state that a combination of continuity and change is essential to ensure the longevity of a brand in a constantly evolving environment, balancing these two factors was described as the biggest challenge of AB by the study participants. In line with the findings of the studies, Beverland et al. (2015) accentuate the challenge of brand ambidexterity.

The dissertation contributes to the scientific literature on AB, strategic brand management, agility, agile marketing, dynamic capabilities, SMEs and start-ups. This dissertation project successfully investigated the potential for agility to be applied to strategic brand management (see RQ-0). The three studies that comprise the dissertation were designed to build on each other, complement each other, and contribute step by step to the overarching research objective. The initial study was fundamental to identifying and delineating the current state of research on AB, establishing a theoretical framework for the dissertation, and conducting a systematic analysis of current research findings and literature gaps. This resulted in the necessity to define and conceptualize AB in a manner that would render it more tangible, a goal that was achieved in Study 2. Following the initial conceptualization of AB, the opportunities and challenges inherent to the new concept could be evaluated in Study 3. The three studies were therefore mutually dependent and required a sequential approach.

The dissertation provides implications not only for theory, but also for practice. This dissertation project bridges several research gaps by providing scientifically validated investigations on AB, always focusing on its applicability to practice. By developing and validating the agile branding values and principles construct, which serves as an agile branding manifesto, this project provides practitioners with a tangible guide on how to create and manage a brand in an agile way. Analyzing the potential of AB allows practitioners to make an informed decision about the opportunities and challenges of incorporating AB. This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge on brand management approaches for industries and organizations where customer demands and competitors are subject to rapid and constant change. Given the characteristics of today's VUCA world, it can be reasonably assumed that this phenomenon affects almost all companies. Considering the findings, it is evident that this dissertation holds significance for businesses across the globe, irrespective of their stage of growth. Whether a company is in its nascent stages, striving to establish its brand, or a well-established enterprise seeking to retain its market position and competitive advantage, the insights and recommendations derived from this dissertation can facilitate informed decision-making and strategies for long-term success. The research provides insights for marketing and brand managers, entrepreneurs and decision-makers, brand consultants and agencies, as well as corporate management involved in the strategic alignment and development of brands. This dissertation sets the basis for further scientific research on the topic of AB.

7.2. Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

This dissertation naturally holds several limitations. It only offers an initial step in investigating AB. Far more scientific research is needed. In Study 1 in Chapter 3, the usage of the thesaurus function of VOSviewer may have led to a subjective interpretation of the results. In addition, only the terms "agil*" and "brand*" were integrated in the study, resulting in a relatively low number of 70 articles to be analyzed. A detailed analysis of synonyms for agility could lead to a broader search and the inclusion of more articles. Other databases, such as Scopus or Google Scholar, could be considered if the study were to be repeated in the future.

The dimensions and antecedents in Study 2 in Chapter 4 aim to form a holistic approach to AB. Therefore, differences between industries and sectors were not addressed, which may make it difficult to apply the findings to specific industries. Future research could consequently focus on the differences of individual sectors, target groups or industries. Due to the limited amount of literature available on AB, a qualitative study was carried out. This may have led to a subjective interpretation of the results. Chapter 1.6.3 described in detail how this subjectivity was addressed.

Study 3 in Chapter 6 only explored the opportunities and challenges of AB in the start-up environment to achieve a deeper focus of the results. These results can only be partially transferred to large established and other types of companies. Separate extended research is necessary. Due to my residency, a great number of the interview partners and start-ups interviewed were German. This could have led to a cultural bias in the results. A future study could focus on other nationalities and work out cultural differences and commonalities and the impact on agile brand management. Even though the study emphasized a diversity of male and female interviewees and founders, the differences and commonalities were not worked out individually. Future research could identify gender-specific differences and similarities. A high degree of heterogeneity in terms of industries and B2C, B2B and B2BC business models was considered important. However, these were not specifically evaluated and differentiated. Future studies could explore these differences. Much more research is needed to enhance the conceptualization of AB and understand its potential. To further advance the research, the opportunities, challenges, and applicability of AB for SMEs and large established companies should also be explored. Additionally, future research could delve into whether and how AB is currently being applied within organizations, whether unknowingly or intentionally.

Since this is the first dissertation I have worked on, I have limited research experience at the doctoral level, which may be a constraint in terms of scientific research knowledge. While interviews were continued until no further findings could be derived (Eisenhardt, 1989), the number of eleven experts interviewed, 18 interviews with start-ups and the group discussion with five participants may

be insufficient for a full generalization of the research results. The study could therefore be repeated with a larger number of participants or further validated with quantitative studies. All three studies show that maintaining brand consistency is a major challenge when applying AB, as it can even have a detrimental effect on customers' brand perception. Further research could focus on how AB affects brand awareness, brand image, customer satisfaction, and brand loyalty.

The AB research area offers numerous opportunities to research individual sub-areas. Table 7.1 provides an overview of potential research questions, grouped into different categories, which emerged during the progress of the project, and could be explored in subsequent studies.

Table 7.1: A future research agenda on AB (own illustration).

Category	Research questions
Implementation and adoption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How can AB be effectively implemented in traditional industries? ▪ Are there industry or country specific differences in the adoption of AB? ▪ What are best practices of AB? ▪ How are companies currently applying agile methods to their brand management process, either consciously or unconsciously? ▪ Which company or industry types are more likely to adopt AB? ▪ How can AB be directly linked to AM? ▪ How can existing brands and brand management teams be transitioned to successfully implement AB? ▪ How does a team need to be (re-)structured to manage a brand in an agile way? ▪ What role does organizational culture play in the successful implementation of AB?
Globalization and international brand management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How can AB be specifically applied to the management of global brands to ensure the integration of intercultural and international characteristics? ▪ Are some cultures more open to AB than others? How does this affect the successful implementation of AB in cross-cultural teams?
Impact and outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What is the estimated impact of AB on business success? ▪ How does AB impact brand awareness, brand equity, brand image, customer satisfaction, or brand loyalty? ▪ When does the level of agility exceed the positive impact of AB? ▪ How does AB affect overall brand performance metrics compared to traditional branding? ▪ How can organizations ensure the necessary level of brand consistency while adopting AB practices?
Methods and technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Which agile methods, such as Scrum, Kanban, or Design Thinking, can be specifically applied to AB? ▪ How can an AB step-by-step framework and related templates look like that are easy to use in practice? ▪ How can artificial intelligence, big data, and digitalization support AB? ▪ What are the technical requirements, including software, tools, and processes, to effectively manage brands in an agile manner? ▪ How can artificial intelligence be utilized to manage a brand in an agile and fully self-generated manner?
Measurement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How can the degree and effectiveness of AB be measured? ▪ Which KPIs can be defined to make informed decisions related to AB?

8. Global Conclusions

This dissertation successfully fulfills the research objectives presented in Chapter 1.4. The dissertation examines how agility can be transferred to strategic brand management. The current state of AB literature is presented and visualized. The concepts and research streams that shape and relate to AB were identified and analyzed. An expanded definition of AB was formulated. The project identified five dimensions and 20 antecedents, which contribute to the conceptualization of AB. AB values and principles were developed and formalized in the agile branding values and principles construct. This provides scientists and practitioners with guidance on how to create and manage their brand in an agile way in a dynamic market environment. The potential, opportunities, challenges, and thus the potential of AB were elaborated and discussed in the context of start-ups. The study further evaluated whether AB is suitable to overcome specific start-up branding challenges.

AB represents both an approach and a mindset. It is considered as the application of agile methods to the strategic process of brand creation and management. AB requires an agile mindset, which demands a transformation in the conventional methods of brand creation and management that have been employed for a long time. Those in leadership and brand management roles need to reconsider their perspectives and transition from a mentality of strict brand guardianship and adherence to established norms to one of conscious enablement, proactively driving continuous and iterative brand evolution.

In synthesis, the contemporary era is characterized by rapid change, demanding an agile and flexible approach for brand management. To remain relevant, brands must adapt swiftly to evolving customer interests and a shifting environment. AB offers a valuable evolution of traditional brand management, encompassing both brand creation and long-term management. In this context, AB may be regarded as a contemporary response to the demands of our digitalized and fast-moving world.

9. Global References

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10. Global Appendices

This chapter contains two appendices. Appendix A includes all documents that were not published in the chapters on the studies due to the maximum article length permitted by the journals. Appendix B presents screenshots of the published articles.

10.1. Appendix A

The supplementary material, which was not able to be included in the three articles due to the limitations of the journal's length requirements, is compiled and presented in full in Appendix A.

Overview Appendix A

Table 10.1 Codebook used for the qualitative content analysis in Study 2 (own illustration).

Figure 10.1 Illustrative example of the coding strategy from Study 2 (own illustration).

Figure 10.2 Hierarchical code-subcodes-model of the AB values and principles construct – after the group discussion from Study 2 (own illustration with MAXQDA).

Figure 10.3 Hierarchical code-subcodes-model from Study 3 (own illustration with MAXQDA).

10.1.1. Code Book Applied in Study 2

Table 10.1 presents the codebook utilized for the qualitative content analysis. Ultimately, the primary code reflects the dimensions of AB, while the subordinate codes delineate the antecedents of AB. The codebook exemplifies the methodology employed for all interview and group discussion analyses.

Table 10.1: Codebook used for the qualitative content analysis in Study 2 (own illustration).

Code (= AB dimension)	Subcode (= AB antecedent)	Description	Examples from transcripts
Leadership style & culture	Trust, empowerment & ownership	The interviewee discusses trust, empowerment, or ownership as components of leadership style and culture in relation to AB.	<i>"If you must discuss every decision [...] first or have it approved first, then agility can never develop. In other words, you need a lot of trust, but I think you also need a clear framework within which that trust can operate."</i> (E-04, pos. 48, translated)
	Flat hierarchy	The interviewee expresses thoughts on flat hierarchies in relation to AB.	<i>"This means that there are NO more hours-long agreement processes [...]. There is perhaps ONE board member who takes another quick look at it, and that on an ad hoc basis. And otherwise, brand management [...] remains within the agile team. And this is something that reaches its limits in many companies because it simply has not been learned. But autonomy is certainly a very important principle."</i> (E-01, pos. 27, translated)
	Test & learn culture	The interviewee talks about the importance of a culture of testing and learning in relation to AB.	<i>"I think the corporate culture must be curious, it has to be open, it has to allow people to carry out tests and experiments and then, yes, deal with the results. In other words, if success does not come immediately, it is okay [...]. So, I think these are the areas of tension in which you operate. Everything trimmed to perfection or rather better-done-than-perfect and then learning and drawing conclusions from that."</i> (E-04, pos. 50, translated)
	Evolution	The interviewee talks about the necessity of long-term evolution of a brand in relation to AB.	<i>"I think the ego is a big thing in the marketing and advertising world [...]. When a new CMO comes in quite often there is at least a new something, a new ad campaign, a new brand [...]. And so, you know to kind of have the humility to say, [...] I am a steward of something that came before me [...] as</i>

		<i>opposed to I want to make my mark on this brand.” (E-08, pos. 48)</i>
Employee skills & competencies	Lifelong learning	The interviewee discusses the fact that employees have to be lifelong learners in relation to AB.
		<i>“I would say that you must understand how brands work [...]. And I believe that paired with an agile mindset or a corresponding mindset; you can achieve a very good transfer into practice. But looking for someone who has been an agile brand manager for ten years will probably be difficult.” (E-09a, pos. 68, translated)</i>
	Openness to change	The interviewee talks about the need for employees to be open to change in relation to AB.
		<i>“I mean it’s almost like a scientific mindset of, you know, you’re continually running experiments, and you know, I think a lot of people are not used to that [...]. They’ve been doing the same thing for ten years and at the same company and the same job, and they don’t want to change. And I, you know, I respect that but. Those companies and those people and those roles are not going to be successful ten years from now because the world is changing too fast.” (E-08, pos. 54)</i>
	Global awareness	The interviewee asserts that a brand manager must maintain a constant awareness of global developments and their potential impact on the brand.
		<i>“Let’s take food as an example. During the coronavirus lockdown, branded products sold incredibly well [...]. Now [...] we have a crisis, war, energy crisis, and so on, and now it’s suddenly the retail brands that are experiencing the push because people are saving [...]. And that’s where agile brand management comes into play for me because brands must be able to react agilely and take it seriously that I have actually shifted consumer needs very, very clearly [...]. I’m not changing the positioning of my tomato paste, but I’m reacting agilely to changing needs and we’re experiencing very volatile markets today, we’re experiencing a lot of change and we’re also seeing that adaptation must take place much, much more frequently today.” (E-10, pos. 18, translated)</i>
	Reflection	The interviewee talks about the need for employees to be able to reflect in relation to AB.
		<i>“Mindset in this case means [...] the constant reflection between ethical requirements and market demands, so I think that’s very important, that you always match that and don’t just implement what the customer wants.”</i>

			<i>And then, at the same time, always have a strategic awareness. I don't have to follow every trend. That is certainly the wrong understanding of agile." (E-01, pos. 51, translated)</i>
Technology & methods	Iterative adjustments	The interviewee mentions that a brand has to be constantly adapted in relation to AB.	<i>"Having a detailed annual, you know plan is really difficult if not impossible with an agile process, right? So, it doesn't mean that you don't have goals. It doesn't mean that you don't have KPIs to measure those [...] but you have to be open to okay, this is what it looks like we're going to be doing for the next twelve months, but we're going to take a look every three months and revisit what we're doing and if we're still on track [...]. We all must be willing to revisit our own ideas even if we thought they were really, really good." (E-08, pos. 56)</i>
	Quick results & short-term planning	The interviewee discusses how quick results & short-term planning are more important than perfectionism in relation to AB.	<i>"These sprints also involve quickly delivering interim results to the customer and this also includes realizing 'oh, something didn't work, that's just the way it is, I'll try something else'. Of course, this is the opposite of long-term brand management [...]. And we don't really have this experimental spirit in the company [...]. We're actually keen to secure these ten thousand times, especially from a corporate perspective, before we somehow take a step towards the market." (E-01, pos. 27, translated)</i>
	Continuous improvement	The interviewee comments on the need to continuously improve a brand in relation to AB.	<i>"Yeah, I think it's applying an iterative continuously improving set of processes and measurements to the traditional practice of branding [...]. The older way of thinking was we really don't want to change our brand. You know, we want to set something and you really, you know, just make it that it's going to last forever and not ever change." (E-08, pos. 8)</i>
	Framework & non-negotiables	The interviewee talks about the importance of framework & non-negotiables to create a framework within which	<i>"In my opinion, it fits well [...]. The only question is how strictly it must be adhered to. And in the past, it was exorbitant, you really weren't allowed to change ANYTHING [...], which no longer works in the agile world [...]. The</i>

		employees can operate in relation to AB.	<i>Google logo actually demonstrates this very well [...] that even a brand symbol can and must live.” (E-01, pos. 29, translated)</i>
Stakeholder & feedback integration	Openness	The interviewee argues that brand managers and business owners need to be open to integrating stakeholders and feedback in relation to AB.	<i>“So, I think stakeholder integration or empathy and listening are extremely important. As a brand, I can no longer decide and say this is how it is. I must listen, but I don’t have to adapt completely [...].” (E-07, pos. 40, translated)</i>
	Co-creation	The interviewee talks about the importance of stakeholder co-creation in relation to AB.	<i>“So, with classic brand development, you usually sit back in your little room [...] finalize everything, have a logo, have a name and THEN go to the target group and get feedback once everything is ready. And I think that’s also the main difference, that I look at what works early on, how is a brand or the visual aspects in particular perhaps also perceived by the target group.” (E-09a, pos. 29, translated)</i>
	Heterogeneity	The interviewee mentions that it is important that the stakeholders involved are very heterogeneous in relation to AB.	<i>“That it is almost even harmful if only the brand people think about it [...]. You also need [...] people who are really familiar with the product or service [...]. That should actually be the mantra in brand work, that you continue to work together closely and across departmental boundaries [...].” (E-05, pos. 54, translated)</i>
	Customer centricity	The interviewee mentions the importance of focusing on the customer in relation to AB.	<i>“Stakeholders are very important, but the stakeholder is not king, the stakeholder is a source of inspiration, an important one. And not all stakeholders are equally important, but I have to find people who challenge me, who provoke me, who inspire me [...].” (E-07, pos. 42, translated)</i>
Ambidexterity/ brand continuity & dynamics	Long-term adaptability	The interviewee talks about the need for brands to be able to adapt in the long term in relation to AB.	<i>“I think brand management [...] in a traditional approach, is just kind of branding from okay we made this decision twelve months ago or twelve years ago to have this logo and all this stuff. And so, we’re just going to maintain status quo and make sure that everything’s consistent [...]. Yeah, just maintaining consistency and governance [...]. But I think the agile, the agile method is always open to</i>

		<i>some kind of change when change makes sense.” (E-08, pos. 32)</i>
Balance	The interviewee talks about the need to balance brand adaptation and continuity in relation to AB.	<i>“That would definitely be a risk that you change too much too frequently and so you know customers are just kind of confused and not really sure what who you are or what you stand for or [...] recognize your brand altogether [...] if it’s done poorly though. So if it’s done well, [...] it would be subtle and [...] they’d feel like the brand was adapting to them.” (E-08, pos. 46)</i>
Industry type	The interviewee discusses that the degree of brand agility depends on the industry in which a company operates in relation to AB.	<i>“The greater the changes in your own market [...], the more reason there is to apply such agile brand management, if there are actually markets that are very stable, where [...] customer needs are stable, few new competitors enter, for example, that are affected to a small extent by external influencing factors, such as trends or political or legislative changes, then the need is certainly less high, but I think such industries are simply very rare nowadays.” (E-05, pos. 32, translated)</i>
Company type	The interviewee refers to the degree of brand agility depending on the type of company in relation to AB.	<i>“Firstly, start-ups usually change their business models five times. Yes, that means they can’t develop a finished brand, they must have a brand that lives and is also adapted, from the name to branding, positioning and target groups. It’s a very fluid process for them. That’s why it makes no sense at all, even if they had the money, to somehow hire a brand agency for a year to develop a final concept for them now, but it will change three times in the future.” (E-07, pos. 10, translated)</i>

10.1.2. Illustrative Example of the Coding Strategy

This appendix illustrates the way the quotations contributed to the formation of the deductive-inductive categories. The antecedents are the subcategories that ultimately describe the dimensions and, thus, the principal categories of the qualitative content analysis.

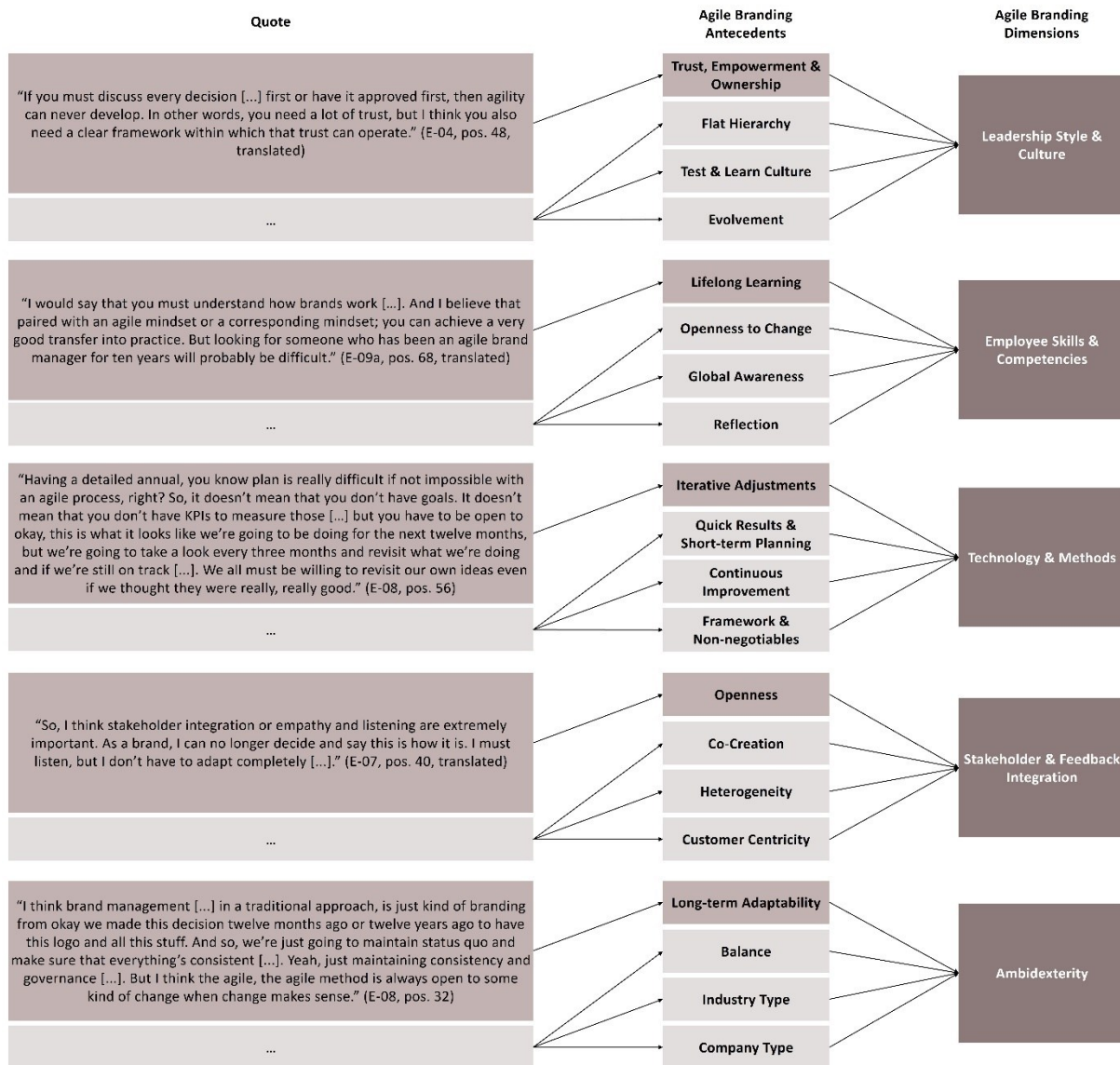


Figure 10.1: Illustrative example of the coding strategy from Study 2 (own illustration).

10.1.3. Hierarchical Code-Subcodes-Models

Figure 10.2 shows the hierarchical code-subcodes model of the AB values and principles construct from Study 2. Figure 10.3 presents the hierarchical code-subcodes-model from Study 3. The number of coded segments is indicated in brackets. The codes are ordered from top to bottom by frequency of coded segments.

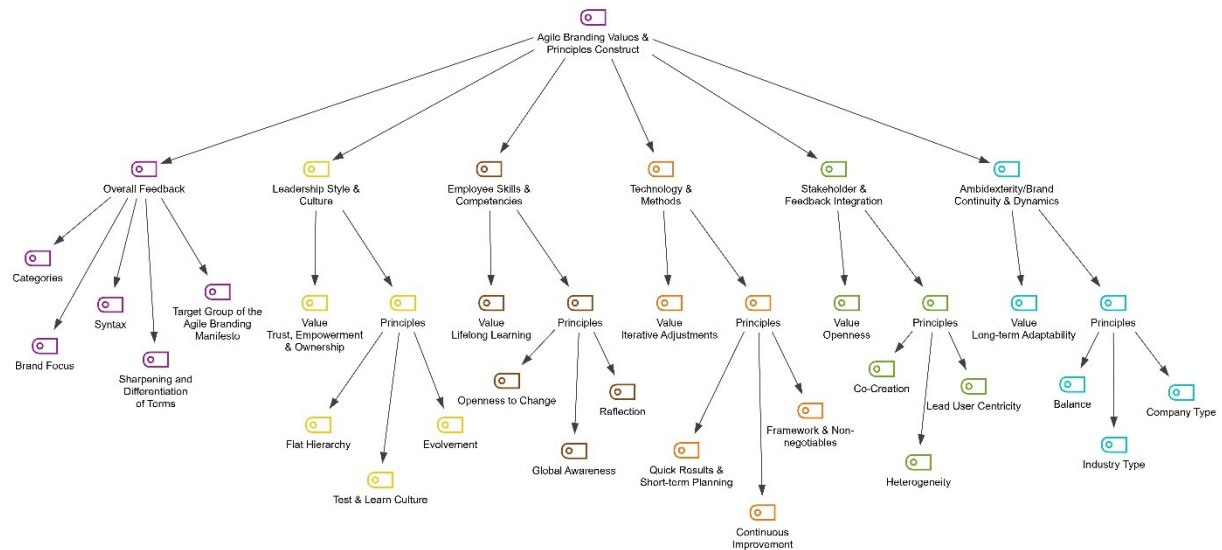


Figure 10.2: Hierarchical code-subcodes-model of the AB values and principles construct – after the group discussion from Study 2 (own illustration with MAXQDA).

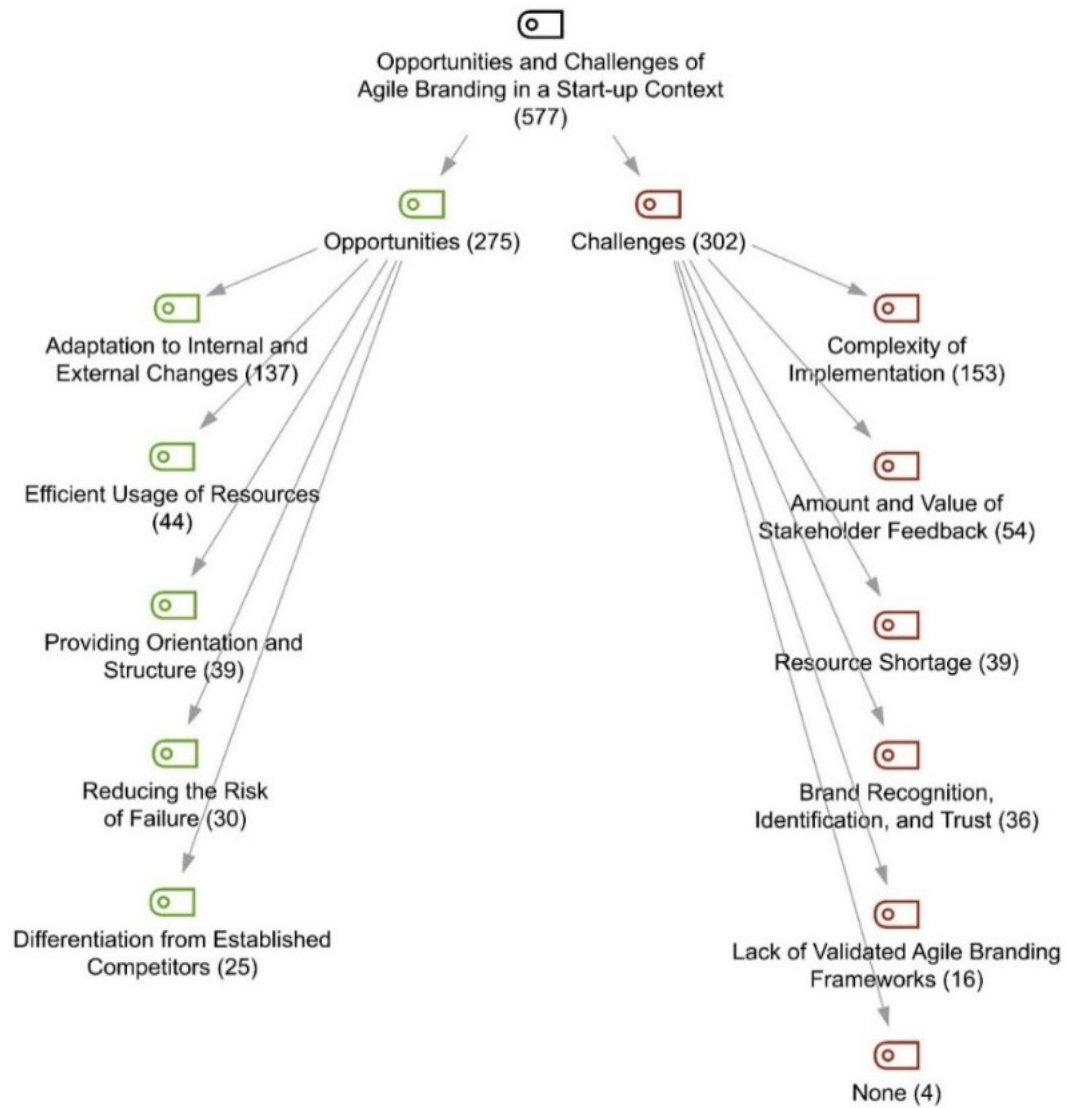


Figure 10.3: Hierarchical code-subcodes-model from Study 3 (own illustration with MAXQDA).

10.2. Appendix B

Appendix B contains screenshots of the articles published in the scientific journals from Study 1, Study 2, and Study 3.

Overview Appendix B

Figure 10.4 Screenshot of the published article from Study 1.

Figure 10.5 Screenshot of the published article from Study 2.

Screenshot of the published article from Study 3.

Figure 10.6

10.2.1. Screenshot Article 1 – Trends and Evolution of Agile Branding: A Bibliometric Analysis

This appendix provides a screenshot of the published article from Study 1:

Pöhlmann, M., Jambrino-Maldonado, C., de las Heras-Pedrosa, C., & Seitz, J. (2024). Trends and evolution of agile branding: A bibliometric analysis. *Business: Theory and Practice*, 25(2), 406–419. <https://doi.org/10.3846/btp.2024.21438> (Scopus Q2).

Abstract

As today's environment constantly changes, scientific and practical literature suggests that brands must be managed more agilely. AB, characterized by stakeholder involvement, adaptability, and flexibility, emerges as an innovative approach for companies to navigate dynamic markets to ensure that they remain sustainably relevant and competitive. Yet, no bibliometric analysis has been conducted on agility related to branding to date. This study aims to illustrate and analyze the trends and evolution of AB by applying bibliometric methods to the scientific article literature produced between 1996 and 2023. The results of a systematic literature review are presented, and the findings of the bibliometric analysis of 70 publications listed in the Web of Science Core Collection database are evaluated. Furthermore, visualization and interpretation of bibliometric networks related to citations and publications, publication titles, keywords, authorship, and affiliations with the software VOSviewer are included. This bibliometric analysis shows that the number of scientific studies on agility related to branding has increased mainly since 2008, reaching its peak in 2022, indicating a growing research interest. The study reveals that much more research needs to be conducted on how brands can be managed more agilely and dynamically to compete in a fast-moving world.

Keywords: agility; agile branding; brand agility; branding process; strategic brand management; agile marketing; bibliometric analysis.

JEL Classification: M1, M3, O3.

TRENDS AND EVOLUTION OF AGILE BRANDING: A BIBLIOMETRIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract. As today's environment constantly changes, scientific and practical literature suggests that brands must be managed more agilely. Agile branding, characterized by stakeholder involvement, adaptability, and flexibility, emerges as an innovative approach for companies to navigate dynamic markets to ensure that they remain sustainably relevant and competitive. Yet, no bibliometric analysis has been conducted on agility related to branding to date. This paper aims to illustrate and analyze the trends and evolution of agile branding by applying bibliometric methods to the scientific article literature produced between 1996 and 2023. The results of a systematic literature review are presented, and the findings of the bibliometric analysis of 70 publications listed in the Web of Science Core Collection database are evaluated. Furthermore, visualization and interpretation of bibliometric networks related to citations and publications, publication titles, keywords, authorship, and affiliations with the software VOSviewer is included. This bibliometric analysis shows that the number of scientific studies on agility related to branding has increased mainly since 2008, reaching its peak in 2022, indicating a growing research interest. The study reveals that much more research needs to be conducted on how brands can be managed more agilely and dynamically to compete in a fast-moving world.

Keywords: agility, agile branding, brand agility, branding process, strategic brand management, agile marketing, bibliometric analysis.

JEL Classification: M1, M3, O3.

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1. Introduction and literature review

We live in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world, where companies must respond agilely and quickly to changing circumstances, and adapt their branding accordingly (Baran & Woznyj, 2021; Bruce & Jeromin, 2016; Capoano et al., 2024; Peterson, 2019; Schoemaker et al., 2018). By adopting an agile approach, companies can effectively respond to consumer needs, navigate competitive landscapes, and maintain a strong brand presence in an ever-evolving market environment (Keller & Richey, 2006; Yazıcı, 2024). While the agile approach has been scientifically applied to various business areas, such as IT, project management, supply chain management, human resources or marketing, literature on integrating agility into brand management is scarce (Hattendorf, 2021; Kalaiganam et al., 2021; Noteboom et al., 2021; Osei et al., 2019; Pöhlmann et al., 2024a, 2024b; Roy et al., 2017).

The authors Kalaiganam et al. (2021) emphasize that maintaining brand consistency is one of the main challenges when implementing marketing agility and point out that this concept may not be suitable for all businesses and all marketing activities. Brand image consistency is vital to maintaining strong brand associations (Kalaiganam et al., 2021). However, in an age where collaboration is the essence of business success, establishing a genuinely consistent and agile brand lived by employees and communicated to external stakeholders has become a significant challenge (O'Keefe et al., 2016). Kalaiganam et al. (2021) draw attention to the challenges of agile marketing as it can affect customer brand perceptions and attitudes, and blur brand associations as a result of frequent experiments, and can even have a damaging effect on brands. The authors Kalaiganam et al. (2021) believe that brand management decisions are less suited for market experimentation and recommend traditional methods of planning and supervision. Kalaiganam et al. (2021), and

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Figure 10.4: Screenshot of the published article from Study 1.

10.2.2. Screenshot Article 2 – Conceptualizing Agile Branding: Dimensions and Antecedents for Managing Brands in a Dynamic Environment

This appendix provides a screenshot of the published article from Study 2.

Pöhlmann, M., Seitz, J., Jambrino-Maldonado, C., & de las Heras-Pedrosa, C. (2024). Conceptualizing agile branding: Dimensions and antecedents for managing brands in a dynamic environment. *Administrative Sciences*, 14(6), Article 112. <https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci14060112> (JCR Q2, Scopus Q2).

Abstract

Traditional branding approaches take too long to react to today's dynamic environment. AB offers a promising approach and might be the contemporary answer to the demands of our digitalized world. While scientists state that an agile approach to branding is essential nowadays, there is a lack of knowledge on how AB can be conceptualized and applied in practice. This study aims to provide a better understanding of AB by identifying its dimensions and antecedents. It pursued a multi-method approach: a systematic literature review was conducted, followed by qualitative semi-structured interviews with eleven experts and a group discussion with five participants. Applying the dynamic capabilities perspective, the authors identify five dimensions, including 20 antecedents of AB: (a) leadership style and culture, (b) employee skills and competencies, (c) technology and methods, (d) stakeholder and feedback integration, and (e) ambidexterity. The critical challenge of AB is to balance brand continuity and adaptation. The study is the first to conceptualize AB, offering scientists and practitioners values and principles on how brands can be managed and further evolved in a constantly changing world to stay relevant in the market and ahead of the competition.

Keywords: agile branding; agility; strategic brand management; brand management; dynamic capabilities.

Article

Conceptualizing Agile Branding: Dimensions and Antecedents for Managing Brands in a Dynamic Environment

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Abstract: Traditional branding approaches take too long to react to today's dynamic environment. Agile branding offers a promising approach and might be the contemporary answer to the demands of our digitalized world. While scientists state that an agile approach to branding is essential nowadays, there is a lack of knowledge on how agile branding can be conceptualized and applied in practice. This article aims to provide a better understanding of agile branding by identifying its dimensions and antecedents. This study pursued a multi-method approach: a systematic literature review was conducted, followed by qualitative semi-structured interviews with eleven experts and a group discussion with five participants. Applying the dynamic capabilities perspective, the authors identify five dimensions, including 20 antecedents of agile branding: (a) leadership style and culture, (b) employee skills and competencies, (c) technology and methods, (d) stakeholder and feedback integration, and (e) ambidexterity. The critical challenge of agile branding is to balance brand continuity and adaptation. The study is the first to conceptualize agile branding, offering scientists and practitioners values and principles on how brands can be managed and further evolved in a constantly changing world to stay relevant in the market and ahead of the competition.

Keywords: agile branding; agility; strategic brand management; brand management; dynamic capabilities



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1. Introduction

The years during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially, have shown us how “volatile”, “uncertain”, “complex”, and “ambiguous” (VUCA) our world is today (Baran and Woznyj 2021; Eilers et al. 2022; Schoemaker et al. 2018; Ferreira and Coelho 2020). Whether it is an unexpected virus that affects the global economy at a rapid pace, diversified customer needs, increased and ever-evolving competition, or a highly complex media and sales landscape, brand managers need to be aware of changing circumstances and the resulting impact on their brands (Ferreira and Coelho 2020; Baran and Woznyj 2021; Bruce and Jeromin 2016; Eilers et al. 2022; Iglesias-Sánchez et al. 2022; Caprano et al. 2024). Peterson (2019) claims that the present volatility is the most challenging factor for brand managers.

Recently, research uncovered that traditional branding processes take too long to react to our dynamic environment and that existing brand management strategies are insufficient to successfully manage a brand nowadays (Baumgarth 2020; Keller and Richey 2006; Swaminathan et al. 2020; Toniatti et al. 2023). The existing literature affirms that brand management today demands a more flexible and dynamic approach to respond quickly to an ever-changing world (Baran and Woznyj 2021; Golant 2012; Iyer et al. 2021; Peterson 2019; Rego et al. 2022; Swaminathan et al. 2020; Eilers et al. 2022). Eilers et al. (2022) state that a new mindset is required for branding—an agile mindset. The literature analyzed detects a need and a growing interest in agile branding (AB) (Baumgarth 2020; Toniatti et al.

Figure 10.5: Screenshot of the published article from Study 2.

10.2.3. Screenshot Article 3 – Evaluating the Potential of Agile Branding: Opportunities and Challenges in the Start-up Context

This appendix provides a screenshot of the published article from Study 3.

Pöhlmann, M., de las Heras-Pedrosa, C., Seitz, J., & Jambrino-Maldonado, C. (2025). Evaluating the potential of agile branding: Opportunities and challenges in the start-up context. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 12(1), Article 279. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-04600-w> (JCR Q1, Scopus Q1).

Abstract

The necessity for companies to adopt an agile brand management approach to maintain relevance and competitiveness in our dynamic and fast-moving world is a key finding of recent studies. Nevertheless, no study has yet investigated the potential and applicability of the concept of AB. Concurrently, start-ups are confronted with the challenge of high failure rates due to shortcomings in brand management. The necessity for start-ups to adopt innovative and dynamic brand strategies arises from the constant internal and external changes that characterize the start-up environment. Previous studies on brand management, by contrast, have mainly focused on established companies. Given the affinity and need for agility observed in start-ups, AB appears to be particularly relevant for start-ups. This study aims to address two research gaps: firstly, to explore the potential of the concept of AB and, secondly, to expand academic research of branding practices tailored to start-ups to assist them in overcoming the specific brand management challenges they face. The study draws on an extensive and structured literature review, followed by qualitative semi-structured interviews with eleven experts and 18 start-ups, to discuss the opportunities and challenges of AB in the context of start-ups. The results were analyzed from the perspective of the five dimensions of AB and the dynamic capabilities framework. AB offers start-ups the opportunity to adapt swiftly to market changes, allocate resources efficiently, and reduce risk through data-driven decision-making. Overcoming challenges requires a shift in organizational culture and employee mindset, optimization of stakeholder feedback processes, and navigation of the complexities of implementation. In conclusion, the advantages of AB for start-ups are found to outweigh the disadvantages. The study extends the scarce research on AB and provides brand managers and start-up founders with an efficient approach to organizing their brand management process with limited resources.

Keywords: agile branding; agile marketing; agility; start-ups; brand management; dynamic capabilities.



ARTICLE


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OPEN

Evaluating the potential of agile branding: opportunities and challenges in the start-up context

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The necessity for companies to adopt an agile brand management approach to maintain relevance and competitiveness in our dynamic and fast-moving world is a key finding of recent studies. Nevertheless, no study has yet investigated the potential and applicability of the concept of agile branding. Concurrently, start-ups are confronted with the challenge of high failure rates due to shortcomings in brand management. The necessity for start-ups to adopt innovative and dynamic brand strategies arises from the constant internal and external changes that characterise the start-up environment. Previous studies on brand management, by contrast, have mainly focussed on established companies. Given the affinity and need for agility observed in start-ups, agile branding appears to be particularly relevant for start-ups. This study aims to address two research gaps: firstly, to explore the potential of the concept of agile branding and, secondly, to expand academic research of branding practices tailored to start-ups to assist them in overcoming the specific brand management challenges they face. The study draws on an extensive and structured literature review, followed by qualitative semi-structured interviews with eleven experts and 18 start-ups, to discuss the opportunities and challenges of agile branding in the context of start-ups. The results were analysed from the perspective of the five dimensions of agile branding and the dynamic capabilities framework. Agile branding offers start-ups the opportunity to adapt swiftly to market changes, allocate resources efficiently, and reduce risk through data-driven decision-making. Overcoming challenges requires a shift in organisational culture and employee mindset, optimisation of stakeholder feedback processes, and navigation of the complexities of implementation. In conclusion, the advantages of agile branding for start-ups are found to outweigh the disadvantages. The study extends the scarce research on agile branding and provides brand managers and start-up founders with an efficient approach to organising their brand management process with limited resources.

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13. List of Abbreviations

AB	Agile branding
AM	Agile marketing
BA	Branding ágil
B2C	Business-to-consumer
B2B	Business-to-business
B2BC	Business-to-business-to-consumer
DC	Dynamic capabilities
KPI	Key performance indicator
RO	Research objective
RQ	Research question
SMEs	Small and medium-sized enterprises
UMA	Universidad de Málaga
WoS	Web of Science

14. Glossary

B2B	Business-to-business	Business-to-business refers to the business model in which companies sell their products or services to other companies.
B2BC	Business-to-business-to-consumer	Business-to-business refers to the business model in which a company sells its products or services to another company, which then sells them to the consumer.
B2C	Business-to-consumer	Business-to-consumer refers to the business model in which companies sell their product or service directly to the consumer.
KPI	Key performance indicator	KPIs are metrics that reflect the company's performance and serve as guidelines for achieving objectives.
SMEs	Small and medium-sized enterprises	Companies that are classified as small or medium-sized based on their number of employees and turnover.