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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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Introduction

Agile branding (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 and Jeromin, 2016; Dänzler and Heun, 2020; Kreutzer and 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 and Jeromin, 2016; Hattendorf, 2021; Kalaigyanam 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-1) and challenges (see RQ-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 and Fatah, 2015; Cantamessa et al. 2018; Chaudhri et al. 2022; Eggers and Kraus, 2016; Morris et al. 2002; Rode and Vallaster, 2005; Wiesenbergl et al. 2020; Yang and 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 and 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 agile branding can specifically address the brand management challenges faced by start-ups (see RQ-3). This is the primary study to analyse 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:

1. RQ-1: What are the opportunities of AB in the start-up context?
2. RQ-2: What are the challenges of AB in the start-up context?
3. RQ-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 analysed from the perspective of the five AB categories according to Pöhlmann, Seitz et al. (2024) as well as the dynamic capabilities (DC) 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 article ends with a conclusion, implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

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.

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 organisations 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 practise 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; Núñez-Barriopedro et al. 2022; Rego et al. 2022, 2022; Schmidt and 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 and 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 and 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.

Agility theory. Baran and Woznyj (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 and 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 and Hommel, 2015; Hattendorf, 2021; Noteboom et al. 2021; Osei et al. 2018; Serrador and Pinto, 2015). While AB has hardly been researched, initial studies on agile marketing have already been carried out (Alghamdi and Agag, 2024; Kalaigianam et al. 2021; Thümler, 2023). Alghamdi and Agag (2024) observe that agile marketing improves a firm's competitiveness and concurs 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 (Eilers et al. 2022; Hobbs and Petit, 2017; McKinsey and Company, 2020; Roberts and Grover, 2012; Serrador and Pinto, 2015; Tanushree et al. 2024; Vrontis et al. 2023). While there is consensus in the literature on the benefits of agility, various authors emphasise 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 practising agility (Baran and 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 and 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; Tandon et al. 2024; Ulrich and 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 and 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 organisational 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 organisations nor start-ups. Since start-ups tend to favour 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.

Start-up brand management theory. In this study, start-ups are characterised 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. The authors of this article emphasise that they do not consider start-ups and SMEs to be equivalent and follow the perspective of 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 favour 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 characterised 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 and 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 centrality and dependency, stakeholder integration, low brand popularity, and a non-linear branding process (Awad and Fatah, 2015; Cantamessa et al. 2018; Chaudhri et al. 2022; Eggers and Kraus, 2016; Krishnan et al. 2020; Morris et al. 2002; Mukul and Saini, 2021; Rode and Vallaster, 2005; Wiesenberget 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 and 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 and 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 and Fatah, 2015; Krishnan et al. 2020; Morris et al. 2002; Rode and 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 and Kraus, 2016; Krishnan et al. 2020; Paranata et al. 2023; Rode and 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 and 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 emphasise 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 and Saini, 2021). Yet, most founders lack expertise in selecting and training new team members, which leads to a rushed and disorganized hiring process (Rode and Vallaster, 2005). Mollet and Kaudela-Baum (2023) emphasise the importance of HR capabilities in agile organisations, as these contribute directly to the transforming pillar to ensure continuous change in the organisation (Teece et al. 2016). Salaries is found to be a big challenge for start-ups due to limited financial resources (Mukul and Saini, 2021). Many start-ups lose talented employees to better paying or more famous companies (Mukul and 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 and Vallaster, 2005; Vallaster and 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 prioritisation 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 harmonise 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 the 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 and 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 and Fatah, 2015; Chaudhri et al. 2022; Eggers et al. 2013; Vallaster and Kraus, 2011; Yang and Aldrich, 2017). Furthermore, they also struggle to build brand advocacy due to limited budget and unknown brand (Awad and 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 organisational 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 and Vallaster, 2005). Perceived discrepancies between desired and actual customers may additionally lead to changes in the branding (Rode and Vallaster, 2005).

Dynamic capabilities perspective. The results of this study are analysed 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 and Grover, 2012; Walter and Rætzke, 2021), agile branding (Pöhlmann, Seitz et al. 2024), agile marketing (Alghamdi and Agag, 2024; Golgeci et al. 2023), brand management (Ferreira and 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).

Methodology

A mixed-method approach in two successive phases was chosen for the study. Initially, a systematic literature analysis was carried

Table 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

out followed by qualitative interviews with 29 participants. More details on the methodology are provided in the following.

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 the 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 and Jeromin, 2016; Hattendorf, 2021; Kalaiganam 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 A1 illustrates the results of the search query.

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 and Lincoln, 2018; Eisenhardt, 1989; Gläser and Laudel, 2004; Meuser and Nagel, 1991; Scheele and Groeben, 2010). The interviews lasted between 30 and 75 min 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 and Laudel, 2004; Mey and 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. Tables 1 and 2 present the characteristics of the informants.

Due to the local affiliation of the authors of this article 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. 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 synthesised characterisation described in Chapter 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 anonymised 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

Table 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 & Technology, Food & Beverage	B2C, B2B2C	8443	52	12-15-2022
S-14	Managing Director	Netherlands (Headquarter), Germany (Subsidiary)	2017: Netherlands 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

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 and Rädiker, 2019).

577 codes were generated during the content analysis with the support of MAXQDA software. Figure A1 and A2 display subcode statistics on the allocation and occurrence of the coded segments from the transcripts of the second phase.

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.

Findings

In this section, the results of the interviews are presented in a grouped manner to provide answers to the research questions RQ-1 to RQ-2. Figure 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 A1 and A2 provide further details of the coding frequencies.

Figure 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

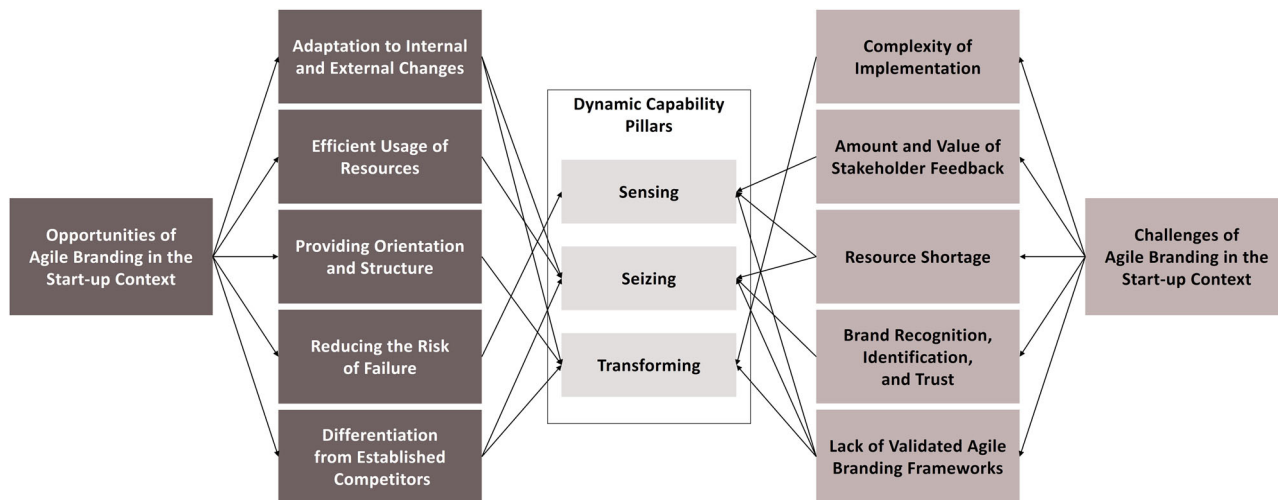


Fig. 1 Opportunities and challenges of AB in the start-up context linked to the DC framework (own illustration). This illustration provides a visual representation of the interconnection between the opportunities and challenges associated with AB and the DC framework by Teece et al. (1997).

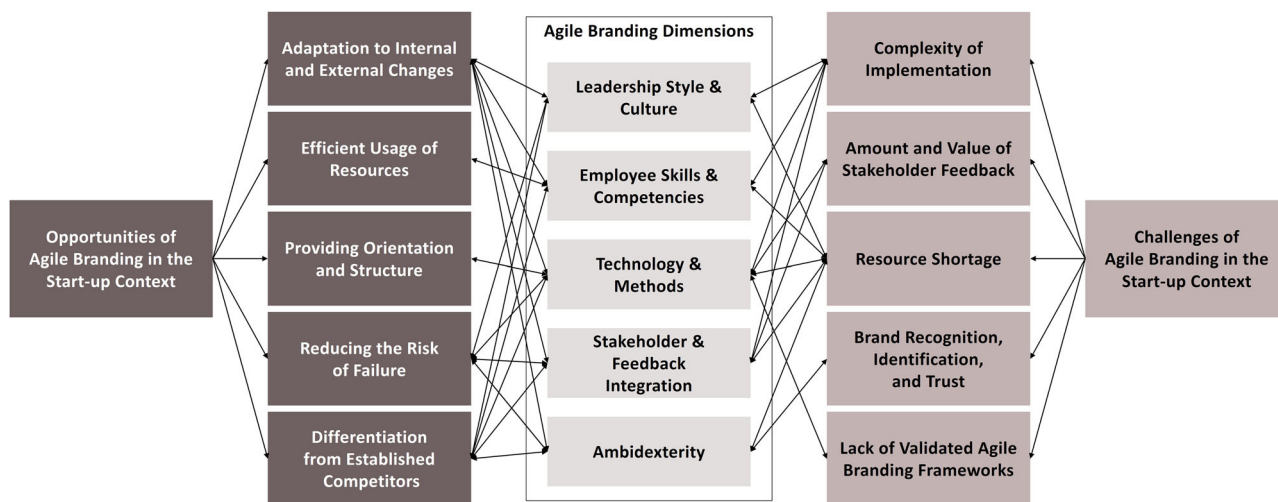


Fig. 2 Opportunities and challenges of AB in the start-up context linked to the AB dimensions (own illustration). This figure offers a visual illustration of the interconnection between the opportunities and challenges associated with AB and the AB dimensions defined by Pöhlmann, Seitz et al. (2024).

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.

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 utilisation 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.

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)

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 prioritising 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)

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)

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 recognised or seen as such, you might even be too late with what you use or say there and so I just think [...] you minimise 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)

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)

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.

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)

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, emphasising 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)

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)

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)

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 realise 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

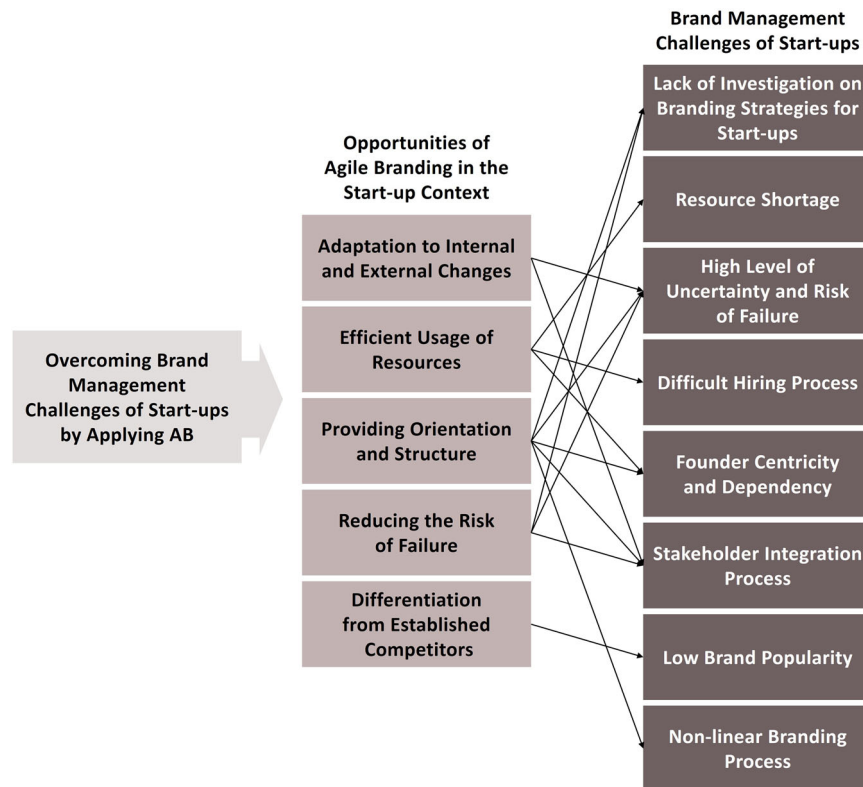


Fig. 3 Overcoming brand management challenges of start-ups by applying AB (own illustration). This illustration demonstrates the direct correlation between the opportunities of AB and its ability to assist start-ups in overcoming their particular brand management challenges.

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)

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.

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 and Jeromin, 2016; Hattendorf, 2021; Kalaignanam 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 and 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 on opportunities). 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 Woznyj (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 and Woznyj, 2021, p. 9). Based on the results of the current research, the authors of this article suggest the following adaptation of the strategy of Baran and Woznyj (2021) for AB: 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.

Practical implications. This chapter presents the practical implications of the study, while critically discussing the findings within the existing literature. Figure 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 2.3.

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 contributes 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 and 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 stimulates 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 and 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 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 and Fatah, 2015; Chaudhri et al. 2022; Eggers and Kraus, 2016; Yang and 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 and Saini, 2021; Rode and 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 and 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 and 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 and Kale, 2020). Adding to existing research findings top management commitment and the establishment of an agile mindset and culture are some of the most important success factors of agile integration and change management (Campanelli et al. 2017; Naslund and 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 and Vallaster, 2005; 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. Emphasize 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 and Fatah, 2015; Cantamessa et al. 2018; Chaudhri et al. 2022; Morris et al. 2002; Rode and 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 on opportunities).

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 and Fatah, 2015; Chaudhri et al. 2022; Eggers and Kraus, 2016; Yang and 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.

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 generalise 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 emphasised 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 summarising 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. Analysing 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 hypothesised 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 internationalisation 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 internationalisation of start-ups and SMEs.

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 centres 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.

Data availability

Data is contained within the article.

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Conceptualization, M.P., C.d.I.H.-P, J.S., and C.J.-M.; methodology, M.P., C.d.I.H.-P, J.S., and C.J.-M.; software, M.P., C.d.I.H.-P, J.S., and C.J.-M.; validation, M.P., C.d.I.H.-P, J.S., and C.J.-M.; formal analysis, M.P., C.d.I.H.-P, J.S., and C.J.-M.; investigation, M.P., C.d.I.H.-P, J.S., and C.J.-M.; resources, M.P., C.d.I.H.-P, J.S., and C.J.-M.; data curation, M.P., C.d.I.H.-P, J.S., and C.J.-M.; writing – original draft preparation, M.P., C.d.I.H.-P, J.S., and C.J.-M.; writing—review and editing, M.P., C.d.I.H.-P, J.S., and C.J.-M.; visualization, M.P., C.d.I.H.-P, J.S., and C.J.-M.; supervision, M.P., C.d.I.H.-P, J.S., and C.J.-M.; project administration, M.P., C.d.I.H.-P, J.S., and C.J.-M.; funding acquisition, C.d.I.H.-P, and C.J.-M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

The Ethics Committee of the National Research Project ‘Communication management of female-led start-ups’ at the University of Malaga has evaluated the proposal to carry out her study entitled ‘Evaluating the potential of agile branding: opportunities and challenges in the start-up context’, and issued the favourable report on 3 February 2025, with approval number COMMUP-10/2025. All procedures complied with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Previously, the methodology of the project was reviewed in 2022 by the coordinating institution of the project, the State Research Agency (MCIU/AEI/10.13039/501100011033/FEDER, UE), following the requirements and standards of the European Commission.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual adult participants included in the study prior to their participation in the survey. In any case, all participants were of legal age in the study country (18 years old) at the time of the survey.

Additional information

Supplementary information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-04600-w>.

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