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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; Capoano 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.

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 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 and 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 and Jeromin 2016; Hattendorf 2021; Kalaignanam et al. 2021; Toniatti et al. 2023; Preece et al. 2019), even though experts state that an agile approach to branding is essential nowadays (Baumgarth 2020; Dänzler and 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. 2019). Although the agile manifesto of software development (Beck et al. 2001a) and the agile marketing manifesto (Agile Marketing Manifesto 2021a, 2021b) 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:

1. RQ-1: How can we define AB?
2. RQ-2: What are the dimensions and antecedents of AB?
3. RQ-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 agile marketing (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 paper 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 paper ends with the implications for science and practice, as well as the limitations of this study, directions for further research, and an overall summary.

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 et al. 2021; Murphy 1988). As brand managers today face the challenge of balancing brand consistency and adaptability (Beverland et al. 2015; Iyer 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 paper: agility theory, agile marketing theory, and dynamic capabilities theory.

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 (Eilers et al. 2022; Baran and Woznyj 2021; Schoemaker et al. 2018). Research shows that agility has a positive impact on a company's performance (Vrontis et al. 2023; Roberts and Grover 2012; Hobbs and Petit 2017). This also corresponds to the management consulting literature, stating that agility has been a critical capability for many companies surviving the COVID-19 crisis (McKinsey & Company 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 and 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.

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. 2019). Although research on AM is still in its very early stages (Alghamdi and Agag 2024), it has already been applied in business reality, and the first scientific studies exist (Kalaignanam et al. 2021; Osei et al. 2019; Thümler 2023). Kalaignanam 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 (AgileSherpas 2022). 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 (Kalaignanam et al. 2021). Kalaignanam 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. Kalaignanam 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.

2.3. Agile Branding Theory

Successful and well-known brands often have one thing in common: years of continuity (Bruce and 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 and 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 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 and Richey 2006). Khan et al. (2022) suggest that future studies could address agile constructs in the context of branding.

Kalaignanam et al. (2021), and Özsomer 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 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 and Jeromin 2016; Dänzler and Heun 2014; Eilers et al. 2022; Golant 2012; Iyer et al. 2021; Keller and Richey 2006; Kreutzer and Land 2017; Lies 2020; Rego et al. 2022; Toniatti et al. 2023).

Table 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 and Jeromin 2016)	Brand agility entails the brand's rapid and targeted response to changing market conditions.	Responsiveness, speed
(Dänzler and 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 and 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

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". 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 2019; 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 and Coelho 2020). Scholars consider DC a diverse set of resources, processes, and skills (Wang and Ahmed 2007; Eisenhardt and Martin 2000). 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 and 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 (Teece et al. 1997; Pinho et al. 2022; Roberts and Grover 2012; Walter and Raetze 2021). The DC lens has also been successfully applied in academia to conceptualize ambidexterity (O'Reilly and Tushman 2008), AM (Kalaignanam et al. 2021; Alghamdi and Agag 2024; Golgeci et al. 2023), and brand management (Iyer et al. 2021; Ferreira and Coelho 2020), thus confirming its scientific viability and applicability in investigating AB. The DC framework is, therefore, the predominant lens for this study.

3. Results

The deductive–inductive explorative approach resulted in five dimensions and 20 antecedents conceptualizing AB (see Figure 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 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.

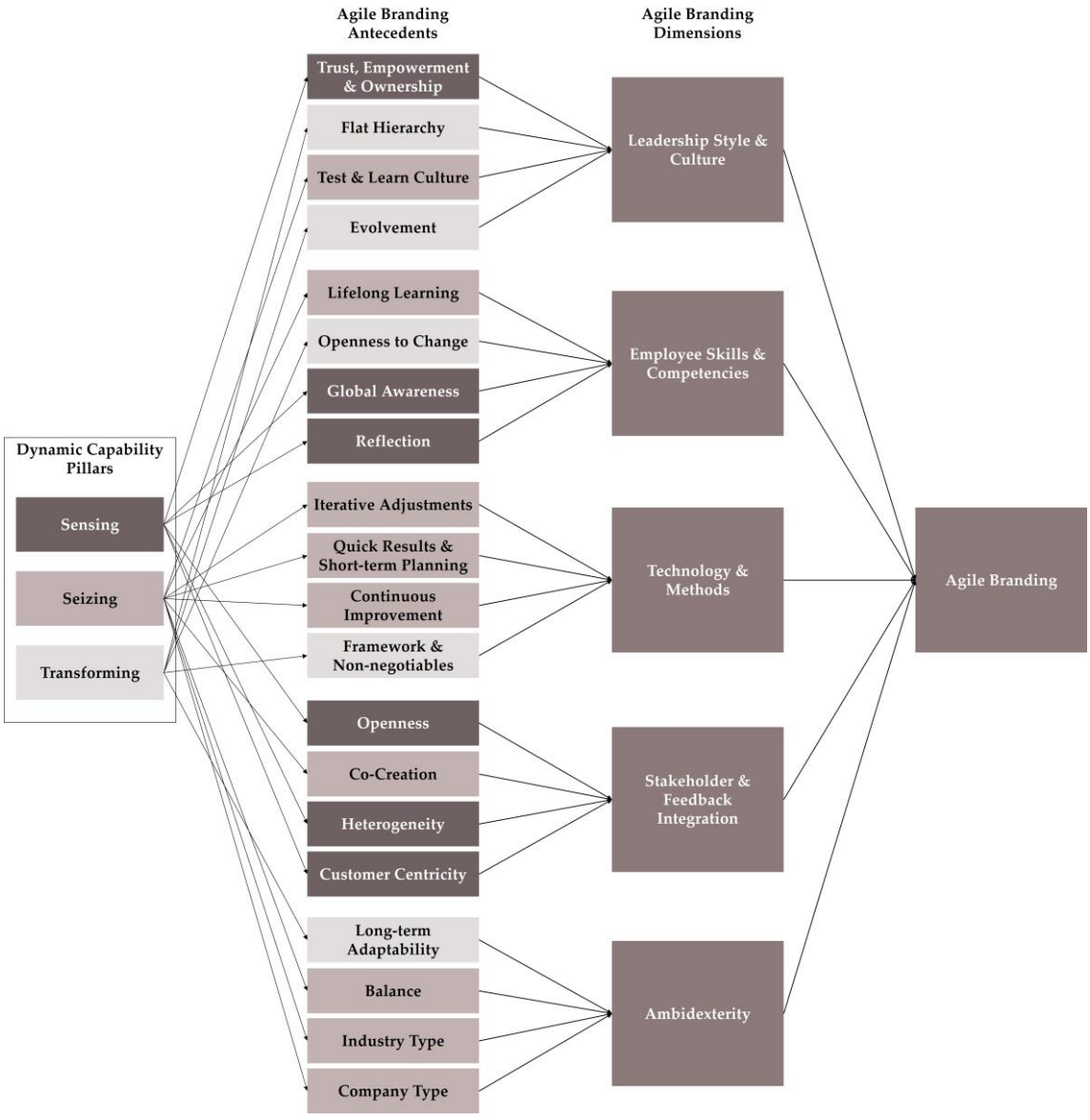


Figure 1. Agile branding dimensions and antecedents based on the dynamic capabilities' framework.

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 evolvement. 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)

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)

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)

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)

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 agile branding, 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)

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 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.

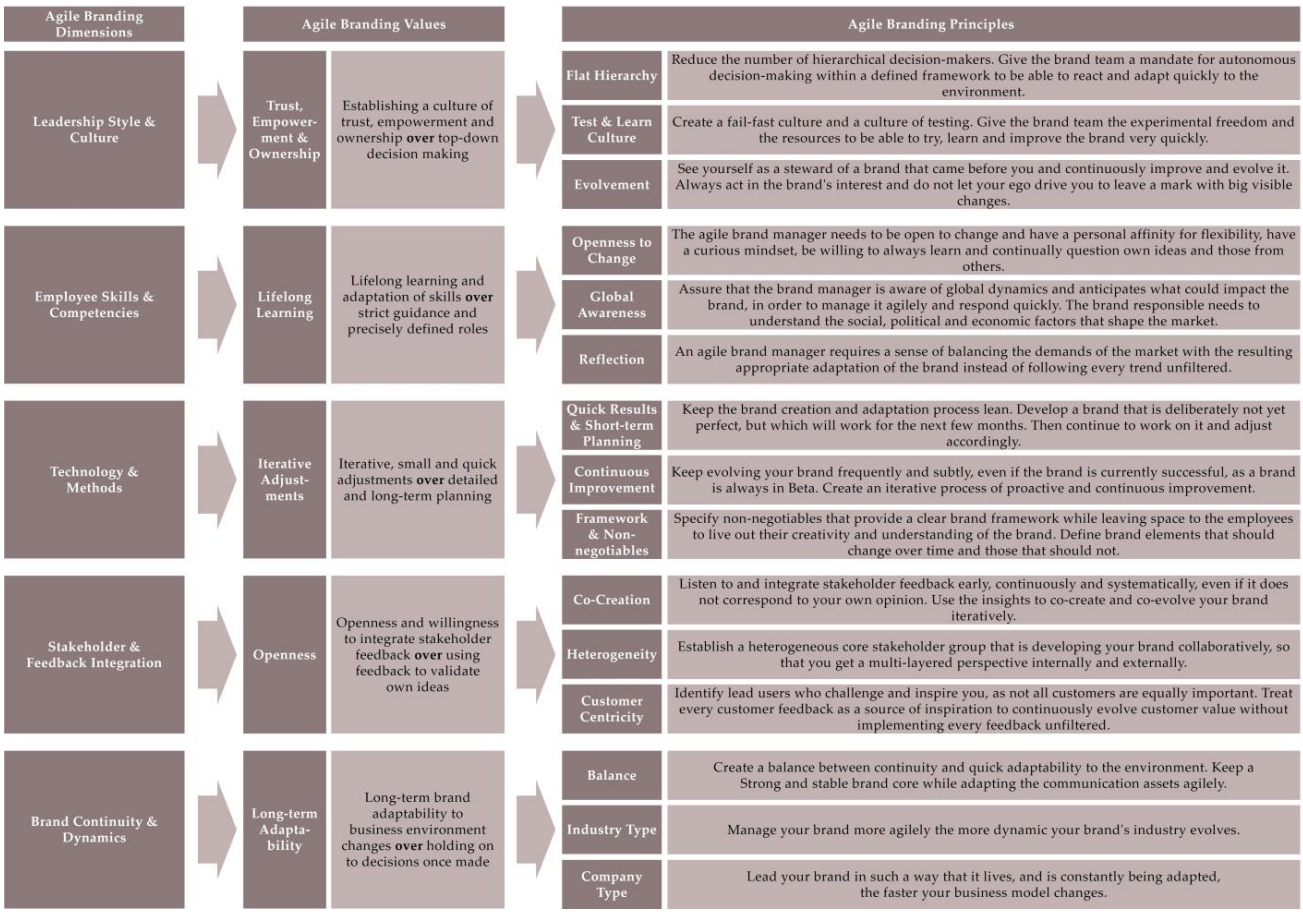


Figure 2. Agile branding values and principles construct.

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. 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.

4.1. 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; Martínez et al. 2015). To define AB, a broader search strategy and a closer look at other branding-related areas were necessary (see Table A1). 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.

4.2. Phase 2—Qualitative Expert Interviews

The central database was created in phase two. Ten semi-structured interviews (Denzin and Lincoln 2018; Gläser and Laudel 2004; Meuser and Nagel 1991; Scheele and 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 and Laudel 2004; Mey and 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 2 provides an overview of the interviewed experts.

Table 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

Table 2. *Cont.*

No.	Gender	Agile Branding Experience (1–3)	Professional Experience	No. of Words (Transcript)	Interview Duration (Minutes)	Interview Date
			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, 2022), 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 A1 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 and Rädiker 2019).

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 and 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 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 A2 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 2019; Teece et al. 1997).

5. Discussion

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 (Baumgarth 2020; Keller and Richey 2006; Swaminathan et al. 2020; Toniatti et al. 2023; Baran and Woznyj 2021; Eilers et al. 2022; Iyer et al. 2021).

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'Keeffe 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 and Woznyj 2021; Bruce and 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 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 and Paranque 2016; Veloutsou and 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 (Kreutzer and Land 2017; Rego et al. 2022; Eilers 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.

5.2. Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

This paper 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.

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.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: From our point of view, the manuscript does not require approval by the Ethics Committee or the Institutional Review Board. The study is a non-interventional and also non-medical study that was conducted using questionnaires/interviews 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. The interviews were transcribed and anonymized. It is not possible to identify the interviewees. All participants have additionally signed a declaration of consent, which can be provided on request.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

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Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Appendix A

Table A1. Search strategy performed on 23 August 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 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 "ECONOMICS"))
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

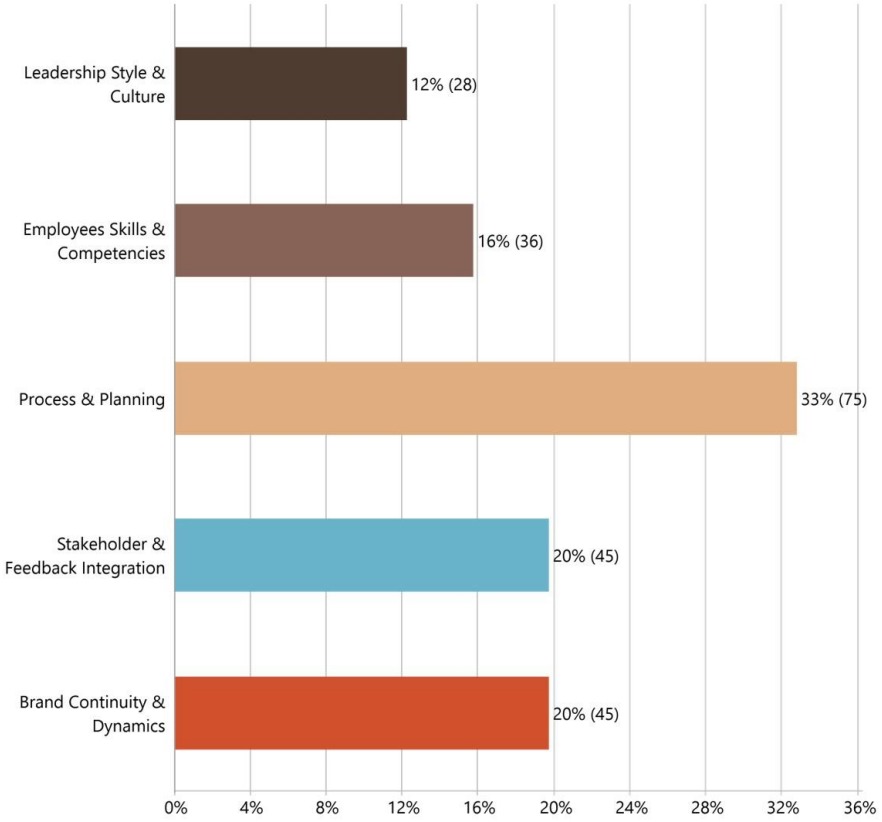


Figure A1. Subcode statistics on the distribution and frequency of the coded segments from the transcripts of phase two.

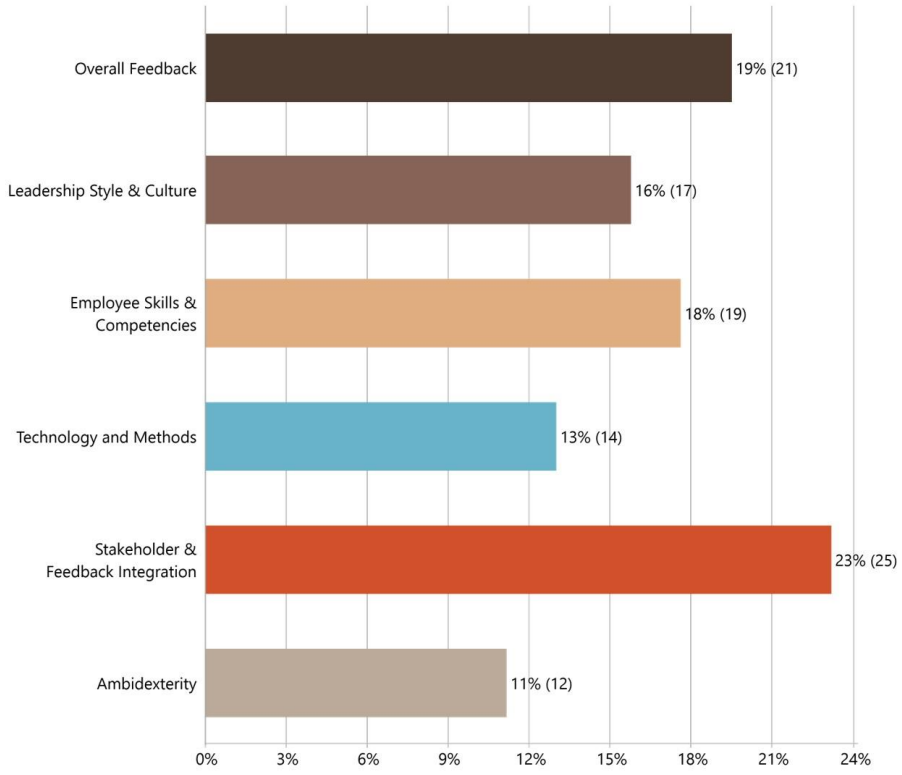


Figure A2. Subcode statistics on the distribution and frequency of the coded segments from the transcripts of phase three.

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