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Marketing Agility: A Critical Review of Literature

Dr. Evans Ojiambo Onditi, PhD¹

¹ Murang'a University of Technology, P. O. Box 75-10200, Murang'a, Kenya.

* Author for Correspondence ORCID ID; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3635-9133>; Email: conditi@mut.ac.ke

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The current business environment is highly dynamic, with frequent changes in customer needs and technology. The success of business firms in such a scenario depends on their ability to adopt and engage in agile marketing practices. This article offers a critical review of existing literature on the concept of marketing agility, beginning with definitions, the various dimensions of marketing agility, as well as the antecedents and market factors that influence the need for marketing agility. The article also reviewed the various obstacles to marketing agility that exist in business firms as well as the benefits of agile marketing practices. In terms of theoretical perspectives, the Resource-Based Theory and the Dynamic Capabilities Theory were examined in detail to help explain how marketing agility can be a source of competitive advantage for business firms. The article concluded that marketing agility is directly linked to digital transformation since the business environment is characterised by a high rate of technological advancement, which includes the use of Artificial Intelligence in business activities. Marketing agility enables firms to rapidly make adjustments to their marketing strategies in anticipation of or in response to market changes. The article provided relevant recommendations for managers of business firms, such as investing in the training of employees in agile marketing practices and the use of digital tools like cloud computing and data analytics.

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INTRODUCTION

The objective of this paper was to critically examine and synthesise existing literature on marketing agility with the aim of clarifying its conceptual foundations and dimensions, identifying key antecedents, obstacles to marketing agility, benefits of marketing agility and proposing a future research agenda to guide both academic inquiry and managerial implementation of agility in marketing practices. The business world has experienced the emergence of new channels of distribution and marketing communication and a significant digital transformation of business processes. The behaviours of customers in terms of shopping and brand interaction have changed a lot in recent years (Swaminathan et al., 2020). The digital transformation has provided a huge amount of customer and market information to marketing practitioners through digital platforms such as websites, mobile applications and social media and this has changed marketing practices. Marketing practitioners now view shopping by customers as a journey and not just a linear path to buying products significantly (Lee et al., 2018). On the same note, Gao and Yang (2020) argued that the challenges that firms and marketing practitioners faced during the COVID-19 pandemic led to a fundamental rethink of marketing models. Marketing scholars recognise that marketing practices of business firms need to be "agile" in order to enable business firms to cope with dynamic business environments (Moorman, 2020). This led scholars to think of marketing agility (MA) as the key priority in the journey to achieve marketing excellence by business firms. However, Kalaignanam et al. (2020) argued that despite the importance ascribed to marketing agility, it is still not clear what it is. For instance, they ask whether marketing agility is the application of agile principles to marketing or whether it is a key factor in the achievement of marketing excellence, which depends on the existence of simplified

structures that remove bureaucracy from marketing decision-making. This implies that marketing agility is a new idea, but it is related to other agility concepts such as strategic and organisational agility (Teece et al, 2016). The significant potential of agility has resulted in a strong interest in agility within the marketing function. Zhou et al. (2019) and Kalaignanam et al. (2021) argued that the changes in customer preferences and behaviour, competitor actions and advances in technology are all marketing phenomena which either affect or are strategically and operationally covered by activities related to the marketing department

EMPIRICAL REVIEW**The Definition of Marketing Agility**

As a new concept in marketing, there is a lack of a common definition of marketing agility. Homburg et al. (2020) suggest that marketing agility is a key dimension of marketing excellence and to them, it is "a firm's strategic means for executing growth activities by the marketing organisation and its members through simplified processes and structures, quick decision making and learning through trial and error. Zhou et al. (2019) define marketing agility as "a firm's ability to proactively anticipate and sense marketing opportunities and to respond quickly and flexibly to those opportunities in order to better satisfy customer needs. On the other hand Gomes et al. (2020) define marketing agility as "the ability of a business firm to respond quickly and effectively to changing market conditions, customer demand and competitive pressures. Kalaignanam et al. (2021) define marketing agility as "the extent to which a business entity rapidly iterates between making sense of the market and executing marketing decisions to adapt to market changes. This definition offers a granular and process-based perspective, which indicates that marketing agility is a combination of four key concepts, which are sense-making, iteration, speed

and marketing decisions. These definitions clearly show that marketing agility is a concept that gives business firms the ability to detect and adapt to changes and new circumstances in the market place and then make relevant adjustments to their marketing strategies and tactics in a timely fashion to exploit market opportunities and or avoid business threats and this is critical to the business firms' continued existence.

The Dimensions of Marketing Agility

There are several dimensions of Marketing Agility that have been identified by various marketing scholars. Hajli et al (2020) proposed 6 dimensions of marketing agility, which are speed, flexibility, customer centricity, collaboration, experimentation and data-driven decision making. Speed is the ability of the firm to respond quickly to changes in the market by launching new products or making adjustments to its current marketing strategies (Khan, 2020). Flexibility enables a firm to adapt its marketing plans and tactics to changing customer needs and competitor actions. According to Hashem and Atieh (2024), customer-centricity means that the marketing department is able to understand and respond to customer needs and customer feedback in a timely manner and tailor marketing messages to customer needs. The collaboration aspect refers to being able to work well with both internal and external stakeholders of the firm to develop and implement marketing strategies. The experimentation dimension requires a firm to have the ability to test and learn from new technologies and distribution channels, as well as new marketing approaches and to iterate quickly and optimise its marketing campaigns based on the customer feedback received. In the current digital business world, data-driven decision making is essential and it is the firm's ability to collect, analyse and use the data to gain insights and make informed marketing decisions.

There are four other key dimensions of marketing agility that have been proposed by Kalaignanam et al. (2021) and they are sense-making, speed,

iteration and marketing decisions.. According to them, sense-making is an attempt to reduce confusion by confronting issues, actions and events that are surprising or confusing, which is common in a dynamic marketing environment. Therefore, at its core, sense-making is the firm's response to developments in the market that were unexpected. This requires marketing practitioners to first notice the unexpected development, have a shared understanding of the development and draw further cues from the development (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Iteration means that firms are able to repeatedly refine their marketing decisions before scaling or re-launching them. Kalaignanam et al. (2021) argued that iteration is different from being guided by a deliberate plan and implementing "pre-orchestrated" marketing decisions, which implies organisational ability to improvise. This implies that executing marketing plans iteratively or using the "small-bets" approach is a key characteristic of marketing agility. Iteration also means that marketing practitioners recognise that market changes are an ongoing phenomenon, hence the need to pivot and pursue a new task or idea if customer feedback shows that further adaptation of the firm's marketing mix elements is required. The justification behind the iteration dimension is that when you execute marketing activities iteratively, the firm becomes better prepared for unpredictable market changes by mitigating the risk of huge up-front investments and being quick in adapting and changing direction based on market information.

The speed dimension proposed by Kalaignanam et al. (2021) is similar to that of Hajli et al. (2020). The marketing decisions dimension relies on the market information or knowledge gained from the sense-making dimension. This market information should provide sufficient evidence for marketing practitioners to make the decision to act, wait and act later or refrain from acting. This implies that firms need to pursue both reactive and proactive marketing decisions and to recognise that in certain market situations, the best decision may not be to act. However, there has to be a balance between

proactive and reactive marketing decisions because if the firm does not respond, then it will be perceived as not being customer-centric and if it is not proactive, then it may be seen to be a market follower only. Marketing decisions require a data-driven approach to decision making as suggested by Hajli et al. (2020). Therefore, the market decisions made to respond to market opportunities or to avoid market threats should be based on market information or knowledge.

Market Factors influencing the need for Marketing Agility

A dynamic business environment is the foundation on which the argument for marketing agility is built. This is because dynamic business environments are prone to frequent changes that may lead to uncertainty (Zhou et al., 2019). Uncertainty makes it difficult to predict market-related changes and possible outcomes of marketing decisions (Teece et al., 2016). According to Wilden and Gudergan (2015), the market changes that are associated with a dynamic business environment are changes in government regulations, changes in technology, changes in consumer behaviour and competitive intensity. These changes usually lead to higher levels of market uncertainty. When faced with such changes, the ability of the marketing team to make quick decisions is beneficial because it allows firms to make relevant, proactive and reactive decisions to respond to the changes. However, Teece et al. (2016) argue that uncertainty does not affect business firms in the same way and that the business environment is not faced with uncertainty all the time. This implies that when the business environment is experiencing relative stability or if the changes in the market become very predictable, the cost of agility may outweigh the benefits. When faced with uncertainty in the business environment, doing the right things (effectiveness, ethics and judgment) becomes more important than doing things right (Efficiency and accuracy). When there is relative stability in the business environment, the marketing department of the firm must still keep

their eyes and ears open and be ready to respond accordingly when a market change occurs and this highlights the value of the sense-making dimension of marketing agility.

The current business environment is experiencing rapid technological advancements, especially in the area of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the use of digital platforms. These technological developments have significantly changed how customers and organisations interact with each other and hence, market orientation is needed to enable firms to adopt and use new marketing technologies rapidly to avoid losing their competitive edge (Rathore, 2021). Another market factor that has influenced the need for marketing agility is globalisation and the market expansion goals of the firms. For instance, when a firm expands its operations to international markets, it becomes exposed to a diverse group of customers whose needs and preferences are not similar to those of local customers. This calls for a rapid adaptation of marketing strategies to suit the international market segments (Perkin, 2022). Changing customer behaviour is also a dynamic market factor which drives the need for firms to adopt marketing agility. This is supported by Ziolkowska (2021), who suggested that the modern customer is more demanding and expects instant gratification, seamless omni-channel interactions and personalised product and service experiences. In this case, it is marketing agility that will enable business firms to meet the product and service expectations of such customers. It is also important to note that competitive intensity in the marketplace makes the need for marketing agility more critical.

A higher level of competition in the marketplace pushes firms to be more agile in terms of their marketing activities (Almahirah, 2020). For example, competitors are a source of learning because marketing agility is not just about responding to customer needs, but it is also about monitoring what competitors are doing and quickly exploiting any gaps or mistakes made by the

competitors. Similarly, competitor actions such as sales promotions or new product launches mean that a firm would need to have the flexibility required to counter the actions of competitor firms by doing its own sales promotions or new product development without waiting too long for management approval (Hajli et al., 2020). In this case, speed to market can be a source of sustainable competitive advantage because firms that move quickly with their innovations and product campaigns will be able to seize market share before slow firms are able to react.

Antecedents of Marketing Agility

Marketing agility is likely to reside at the organisational level in the form of flexible structures, routines, processes and cultural norms and values. This implies that without organisational capabilities and structure, marketing agility may not be sustainable (Kalaiganam et al, 2021). It is also important to note that marketing agility is driven by a firm's superior ability to effectively integrate the discovery of market opportunities and develop and deliver marketing solutions. Maitlis and Christianson (2014) suggested that marketing agility is supported by an organisational structure that allows for effective knowledge sharing and integration. This is because such a structure reduces conflicts, allows lateral communication between cross-functional teams and enables sense-making and speed at the organisational level. The availability of marketing technology also makes it possible for firms to be agile in their marketing activities. Demikan and Delen (2013) stated that marketing technology refers to the technological infrastructure and processes that firms deploy for collecting and analysing market information. For instance, software for conducting marketing analytics can enable marketing practitioners to identify trends or opportunities that need marketing strategy adaptation (Maloney, 2020).

Marketing technologies that support marketing agility include AI and data analytics tools, which are effective in providing marketing practitioners with

insights into customer behaviour and this leads to the making of data-driven marketing decisions. Similarly, customer relationship management systems are effective at helping marketing practitioners to manage the firm's interactions with customers as well as personalising marketing efforts. Firms also need to have highly skilled and knowledgeable employees who are able to correctly analyse and interpret the results of marketing analytics and recommend relevant actions to management to improve the firm's marketing agility. The extant literature also indicates that organisations need to have marketing leaders who have three attributes in order to drive marketing agility effectively and these are sensitivity, unity among the leaders in making bold and quick decisions without engaging in win-lose politics and the ability to reconfigure capabilities and re-deploy organisational resources (Doz & Kosonen, 2018). Sensitivity is the foundational attribute because it requires the marketing leader to possess the sharpness of perception and the awareness of environmental changes.

Obstacles to Marketing Agility in Firms

There are several obstacles that can hinder the effective implementation of marketing agility in an organisation. The first obstacle is the presence of rigid organisational structures and bureaucratic processes, which slow down the decision-making process and responsiveness of the firm to market changes (Khan, 2020). Secondly, a lack of cross-functional collaboration can hinder the seamless communication and flexibility of departments that is needed for quick organisational adaptation. Thirdly, it is difficult to scale marketing agility across ecosystems, especially when the firm's external stakeholders, such as suppliers and distributors, have not adapted agile practices themselves (Sultana et al., 2022). The fourth obstacle is a lack of skilled manpower within the organisation. This is critical since marketing agility requires employees who are creative and well-versed with digital technologies, especially for

marketing research and data analytics. This implies that firms may struggle to find employees who have the right mix of marketing and technological skills, as well as creativity and flexibility.

The fifth obstacle is technology-related, which Stylos and Buhalis (2021) argued that firms that still use outdated technology in their operations, as well as having rigid workflows, will experience slow response times and stifled innovation. This is because old technological systems do not have the capability for real-time data collection or customer engagement, which is critical for marketing agility. Financial constraints represent the sixth obstacle, which Osei et al. (2019) opined that shifting marketing strategies at short notice calls for reallocation of resources or acquiring new ones. Therefore, budgetary constraints may clash with an organisation's fixed budget or return on investment expectations. The seventh obstacle is the cultural resistance to change for which Sachdeva and Kumar (2022) argued that when the leadership and employees of an organisation are used to traditional marketing methods, they are likely to resist the adoption and use of agile marketing practices such as iterative planning or rapid experimentation and this will hinder the adoption of agile marketing practices.

Benefits of Marketing Agility

The current business environment is driven by significant technological advancements, increased competitive intensity and ever-changing customer needs and preferences. In such an environment, marketing agility stands out as a critical driver of business success by providing a variety of benefits to firms that adopt agile marketing practices. The first benefit of marketing agility is enhanced organisational efficiency and productivity. This is because marketing agility allows for cross-functional collaboration and automation of processes, which leads to rapid execution of marketing activities using less resources (Foltean & Van Bruggen, 2022). Secondly, marketing agility enables business firms to enjoy greater resilience

during times of market uncertainty, such as when there are economic disruptions and changes in legal factors, such as tax increases that affect product prices. In such a scenario, marketing agility enables a firm to respond and adapt accordingly to the market situation (Lewnes, 2020).

Thirdly, marketing agility enhances the level of innovation within an organisation since it fosters a test and learn culture that encourages marketing teams to experiment with new ideas or systems and in so doing, it reduces the fear of failure and makes quick rollout of new product or process ideas to become the norm. The fourth benefit is that it allows a more effective use of marketing data by marketing practitioners. This is because the existence of AI technologies has enabled firms to engage in real-time data analysis, which speeds up the decision-making process by giving the marketing team in-depth insights into consumer behaviour. This leads to the development and implementation of data-driven marketing strategies. The fifth benefit is that marketing agility can be a source of sustainable competitive advantage for a business by enabling the marketing team to be proactive in identifying market changes and competitor actions and then responding with speed to exploit any competitor gaps or mistakes. This protects the firm's market share and enhances the loyalty of the firm's customers.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

The Resource-Based Theory

The proponent of this theory is Wernerfelt (1984) and it views the resources and capabilities of a business as being critical for the firm's competitive capabilities and achievement of superior performance. The Resource-Based Theory (RBT) states that the identification and possession of internal resources by firms will contribute to the firm's ability to maintain a competitive advantage and improve its performance (Barney, 1991). The RBT classifies the resources of a firm into tangible and intangible resources. It then views them from

three categories, which are human capital resources, physical capital resources and organisational capital resources (Wernerfelt, 1984; Barney, 1991; Touboullic & Walker, 2015). Human capital resources include employees as well as their training, experience, knowledge and skills. Physical capital resources consist of the firm's plant and equipment, while organisational capital resources refer to the reporting structures, planning, control systems, organisational culture, financial resources and intellectual property (Komakech et al., 2025). These resources support various organisational activities such as marketing research, procurement, production, distribution and promotion and they also enable the business firms to enhance their operational efficiency and respond effectively to the demands and changes in the market (Flynn et al., 2010; Hunt & Davis, 2008).

A resource is considered vital to a business firm if it meets the valuable, rare, inimitable and organised (VRIO) criteria (Turber & Gassman, 2015). Resources are considered valuable if they enable a firm to develop and or implement strategies that improve the efficiency and effectiveness of firm operations. Valuable resources owned by a business firm which are rare or difficult for competitor firms to acquire are preferred because they make it possible for the firm to enjoy a competitive advantage by implementing a value-creating strategy that competitors cannot implement simultaneously (Barney, 1991). Inimitability of resources means that the resources must be difficult or even impossible for a firm's competitors to copy. The implication is that valuable and rare resources can only be a source of sustainable competitive advantage if competitor firms that do not currently have these resources are not able to acquire them. Organised means that a business firm must have the ability to effectively integrate and use its valuable resources for maximum benefit. This is because having valuable, rare and inimitable resources may not offer a lasting competitive advantage if the business firm is not organised to exploit their potential. Therefore, organised firms require to have

the right systems, organisational culture, organisational structure and processes so that they can capitalise on the unique resources they possess. The relevance of the RBT to the concept of marketing agility lies in the fact that marketing agility enables business firms to continuously refine their products, marketing messages, distribution and promotion strategies if they possess resources that are valuable, rare and inimitable. The RBT also strongly states that a firm's competitive advantage lies in its unique resources such as technology, manpower, brand equity and market information. Marketing agility depends significantly. On the internal resources of the firms, such as skilled manpower and advanced marketing analytics, to be able to quickly adjust their marketing strategies in response to changes in customer behaviour, competitor actions or industry trends.

Dynamic Capabilities Theory

The Dynamic Capabilities Theory (DCT) is an extension of the Resource-Based Theory and it was proposed by Teece and Pisano (1994). It states that business firms operating in the same industry may achieve different levels of performance because they have different resources and capabilities (Barney, 1991; Peteraf, 1993). In order for a business firm to remain competitive, especially in a changing or new market, it has to develop specific capabilities and continuous learning (Ambrosini & Bowman, 2009). Competitive advantage can be attributed to firms that are able to react quickly and in a flexible manner to product innovation while at the same time having the capability to manage firm-specific capabilities in ways that effectively coordinate and redeploy internal and external competencies (Teece et al., 1997). The DCT explains how and why certain business firms have a competitive advantage even when in situations of rapid and unpredictable change. Dynamic capabilities are defined by Teece et al. (1997) as the ability of a business firm to combine, develop and reconfigure internal and external resources in order to respond to a rapidly changing business

environment. The underlying assumption of the DCT is that business firms that are able to reconfigure their resources and capabilities in line with the recognised opportunities and environmental change are the ones that will create and sustain a competitive advantage (Teece, 2012).

Dynamic capabilities can be classified into 3 categories, which are sensing capability, seizing capability and reconfiguring capability. The sensing capability requires firms to be able to continuously scan the business environment in order to identify market opportunities inside and outside the boundaries of the organisation. Activities under sensing capabilities include conducting marketing research and having a marketing intelligence system to collect new or improved market information. Seizing capabilities come into play when the firm has identified market opportunities which need to be exploited by the firm. The implication here is that the firm must have the ability to select the right market opportunities, the right technology or even the right competitive strategies. Reconfiguring capability refers to the ability of the firm to recombine and reconfigure the firm's resources to address or respond to market changes and opportunities. The DCT is relevant to the explanation of marketing agility because it suggests that business firms need to develop capabilities for sensing market opportunities, seizing them and reconfiguring firm resources to adapt to the market changes. Marketing agility is an outcome of the dynamic capabilities which make it possible for firms to speedily adjust their marketing mix strategies in response to or in anticipation of market changes. Similarly, marketing agility is needed for the continuous transformation of organisational resources. The DCT emphasises that business firms must be able to reconfigure their internal processes and adapt their strategies accordingly. This implies that agility in marketing will call for resource allocation or reallocation, such as launching new products, changing brand messages or reallocating digital marketing budgets to respond to market changes.

CONCLUSION

The existing literature indicates that the time to market is shorter for firms that adopt marketing agility. However, a significant reduction in time to market may not be achieved in industries that have a long and complex purchase cycle. Similarly, marketing agility is directly linked to digital transformation since the current business environment is characterised by a high rate of technological advancement. Marketing agility makes it possible for firms to rapidly make adjustments to their strategies using real-time data analytics. Digital transformation provides the marketing team with the technological infrastructure, such as automated processes, data analytics software and AI, which enhances the ability of business firms to identify market changes and make the necessary adaptations. Availability of financial resources is critical to sustaining marketing agility and this implies that if marketing budgets are to be set up using traditional budgeting approaches that tie organisational resources to market-specific objectives, marketing agility may not be feasible in such a situation. This means there is a need for an agile budgeting process for the marketing function. Organisations that adopt agile marketing practices are likely to be well placed to offer customer-centric experiences and to exploit market opportunities that arise from competitor actions and changes in customer needs and preferences

Recommendation

In a dynamic business environment, firms need to be highly proactive and train their employees for agility. For example, they should encourage and provide staff with opportunities to upskill themselves in agile marketing practices, digital tools like cloud computing and data analytics, which are crucial for making sense of available marketing data. It is also necessary for the marketing team to be customer-obsessed and keep their attention on the frequently evolving needs of customers by analysing customer behaviour and feedback. This is

because marketing agility is most effective when it is able to directly improve the experience of customers in their interactions with the company and its products. The top management of business firms should allow and empower cross-functional teams to work autonomously since this speeds up the process of decision making and execution of marketing strategies. A test and learn culture should be encouraged by management through A/B testing or pilot programs and small-scale rollouts so that the marketing teams can learn quickly and then make iterations based on relevant data from the A/B tests.

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