

Riding Digital Transformation in International Context: The Agile Marketing Capability

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to identify key theoretical dimensions of the Agile Marketing Capability and provide empirical guidelines needed to facilitate its implementation. Our findings extend current theoretical and empirical research on agility concept in the context of digital transformation and international marketing management.

Keywords:

Agile Marketing Capability; international management; international marketing; digital transformation; case study.

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INTRODUCTION

The constant state of flux in the current business environment has led marketers to focus on the application of agile methods, experimentation for shortening cycle time, increase flexibility, sharpen competitiveness (Barkema, Baum, & Mannix, 2002; Grewal & Tansuhaj, 2001; Sebastian, Ross, Beath, Mocker, Moloney, & Fonstad, 2017), as well as swift adaptation to market globalization (Chaffey, 2010; Day, 2011; Overby, Bharadwaj, & Sambamurthy, 2006; Panda & Rath, 2017). Businesses must continuously rethink their business models, offerings, and processes to stay in tune with the digital transformation characterized by technological progress, digital communication, and shifting customer demand (Royle & Laing, 2014; Kachouie, Mavondo, & Sands, 2018; Rogers, 2016) and to integrate technology with marketing communication strategies to satisfy customer needs (Killian & McManus, 2015). Literature on marketing and strategy have focused on *agility* to address the challenges posed by digital transformation, such as “embrace change” (O’Keeffe, Ozuem, & Lancaster, 2016: 432), predict market needs and innovate (Rigby, Sutherland, & Takeuchi, 2016) especially in highly competitive (Fourné, Jansen, & Mom, 2014; Weber & Tarba, 2014) and international marketing management scenario (Hagen, Zucchella, & Ghauri, 2018), and cater to the needs of international customers (Bock, Opsahl, George, & Gann, 2012; Theodosiou and Leonidou, 2003; Vendrell-Herrero, Bustinza, Parry, & Georgantzis, 2017). From this perspective, agility is a firm’s ability to stay up-to-date with market dynamics and accordingly adapt strategies, tactics, and operations to rapidly respond to market changes in new business opportunities (Dubey, Altay, Gunasekaran, Blome, Papadopoulos, & Childe, 2018; Ravichandran, 2018).

In the digital and international contexts, literature on agility in marketing is scarce. Much has been researched on agility in supply chain and manufacturing (e.g., Lee, 2004; Swafford, Ghosh, & Murthy, 2006). However, agility in management and marketing literature has recently gained academic attention, where scholars have recognized the role of marketing in shaping agility as key driver to international performance (Hagen et al., 2018). Extant literature explores the drivers and outcomes of international marketing agility (Asseraf, Lages, & Shoham, 2018) or that of inherently global firms (Nemkova, 2017), whereas a few other studies explore the relationship between agility and entrepreneurial orientation (Tahmasebifard, Zangoueinezhad, & Jafari, 2017) or consider customer agility (Roberts & Grover, 2012a). However, extant knowledge has neglected to understand how specifically agile capabilities in marketing might take place when considering international contexts, and furthermore what key aspects may contribute to develop a proper Agile Marketing Capability

The present study closes this gap by investigating the concept of agility in digital marketing domain and exploring the theoretical and empirical dimensions of the Agile Marketing Capability. Following an in-depth qualitative study, the empirical study focuses on a case study of Spotahome, a leading company in online booking for non-vacation home rentals.

This study contributes theoretically to research and empirically to management practice of agile marketing concepts in digital and international business contexts, in order to develop effective competencies of speed, flexibility, and customer responsiveness in marketing strategies and operations.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Agility is a strategy that addresses the challenges posed by digital transformation and facilitates easy adaptation to the current complex business environments (Tahmasebifard et al., 2017) characterized by escalating competition, diverse customer requirements and expectations, and rapid change in technology (Lin, Chiu, & Chu, 2006; Yusuf, Sarhadi, & Gunasekaran, 1999). Dynamic capabilities are hallmark of agility (Chakravarty, Grewal, & Sambamurthy, 2013), which is defined as a firm's dynamic capability to efficiently redeploy resources for creating value (Teece, Peteraf, & Leih, 2016) and managing turbulent environments (Chakravarty et al., 2013; Felipe, Roldán, & Leal-Rodríguez, 2016; Lee, Sambamurthy, Lim, & Wei, 2015; Lu & Ramamurthy, 2011). Given the pivotal role of marketing in developing a firm's dynamic capabilities (Barrales-Molina, Martínez-López, & Gázquez-Abad, 2014; Orlandi, 2016; Xu, Guo, Zhang, & Dang, 2018) and the need to build efficient marketing capabilities to successfully compete in international markets (Davicik & Sharma, 2016), marketing researchers are now focusing on dynamic *marketing* capabilities (Bruni & Verona, 2009).

In the field of marketing and strategy research, it is broadly recognized the positive linkage between agility and marketing performance (e.g., Alford & Page, 2015; Golgeci & Gligor, 2017; Hendrix, 2014; Nemkova, 2017; O'Keefe et al., 2016). Agility is crucial for creating customer value and added competitive advantage (Matthyssens, Pauwels, & Vandembemt, 2005) and providing firms with the ability to face market changes (Tahmasebifard et al., 2017). In a firm, marketing function mainly concerns with demand creation, and agile competencies facilitate cope with the demand and quickly adapt tactics and operations in response to environmental changes (Golgeci & Gligor, 2017; Roberts & Grover, 2012a). Therefore, agile capabilities in marketing area refer to dynamic marketing capabilities.

Earlier studies on agility describe agile firms, especially in supply chain and IT, in disruptive business contexts they are known to continuously monitor and detect environmental changes, opportunities, and threats (Gligor, Holcomb, & Stank, 2013; Li, Goldsby, & Holsapple, 2009; Sambamurthy, Bharadwaj, & Grover, 2003; Sangari & Razmi, 2015), thus responding swiftly to market changes with timely decision-making and innovation (Chen, Wang, Nevo, Benitez-Amado, & Kou, 2015; Eckstein, Goellner, Blome, & Henke, 2015; Gligor et al., 2013; Lu & Ramamurthy, 2011; Swafford et al., 2006). In particular, firms can exploit existing or acquired resources to respond quickly to the changing market needs (Abdoli Bidhandi and Valmohammadi, 2017; Li et al., 2009; Mandal, 2018; Sangari & Razmi, 2015; Sharifi & Zhang, 1999) or gain quick access to information access, form multitasking teams, or introduce new products and explore new markets with alacrity (Ismail & Sharifi, 2006; Lin et al., 2006).

Furthermore, by foreseeing temporary changes in supply chain, technology, competition, and demand (Eckstein et al., 2015; Li et al., 2009; Overby et al., 2006), agile firms can promptly respond to the changing needs of new or extant markets (Chakravarty et al., 2013; Hult, Ketchen Jr, & Slater, 2005; Li et al., 2009; Sangari & Razmi, 2015) and adequately coordinate with the supply chain (DeGroote & Marx, 2013). Customer responsiveness entails the use of IT to improve adequacy, accuracy, accessibility, and timeliness of information and facilitate the access to relevant customer data (DeGroote & Marx, 2013; Gligor et al., 2013; Kitchens, Dobolyi, Li, & Abbasi, 2018). Customer responsiveness, hence, requires timely identification and proactive or reactive response to changes (Abdoli Bidhandi & Valmohammadi, 2017; Sharifi & Zhang, 1999). Agile firms may better predict market demand, enhance customization, or use IT to meet customer expectations (Ismail & Sharifi, 2006; Lin et al., 2006; Roberts & Grover, 2012b; Sambamurthy et al., 2003).

Flexibility is a key feature of agile firms that must respond quickly to market changes and customer demands without major strategic changes (Gligor et al., 2013; Lu & Ramamurthy, 2011; Overby et al., 2006; Sheffi & Rice Jr, 2005). Flexibility helps in quickly adjusting strategies to compete with speed and surprise (Cegarra-Navarro, Soto-Acosta, & Wensley, 2016; Sambamurthy et al., 2003) and redeploy resources (Teece et al., 2016) or even adapt business models to best practices (Rindova & Kotha, 2001). Flexibility might also include managing new or diversified products and objectives with the same facilities and existing supply chain (Abdoli Bidhandi & Valmohammadi, 2017; Eckstein et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2015; Sharifi & Zhang, 1999; Swafford et al., 2006)

Agile firms are also characterized by decision makers who resolutely deal with changes, opportunities, and threats in the business environments (Gligor et al., 2013). People in agile organizations are more productive, efficient, and effective in achieving organizational objectives (Abdoli Bidhandi & Valmohammadi, 2017; Sharifi & Zhang, 1999) as they benefit from close relationships and collaboration (Felipe et al., 2016; Mithas, Ramasubbu, & Sambamurthy, 2011; Wagner, Beimborn, & Weitzel, 2014), decentralized decision-making, and expertise in using IT to address dynamic environments (Chakravarty et al., 2013; Zhou, Bi, Liu, Fang, & Hua, 2018). Moreover, marketers use technology integration to align with businesses (Ismail & Sharifi, 2006; Kearns & Sabherwal, 2006; Lin et al., 2006; Oh & Pinsonneault, 2007; Tallon & Pinsonneault, 2011) to facilitate effective information flow across the supply chain (Li, Lin, Wang, & Yan, 2006; Roberts & Grover, 2012b).

METHODOLOGY

Limited studies on agility in digital marketing had led to the exploratory nature of the present study. A process of inducting theory using a single case study method (Yin, 1994) is adopted to empirically explore the dynamics of this complex unfamiliar phenomena (Eisenhardt, 1989; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Yin, 1994). Case study methodology is crucial for “confronting theory with the empirical world” (Piekkari, Welch, & Paavilainen, 2009; p. 569), therefore agile competencies in the field of digital marketing can be empirically studied (Edmondson & McManus, 2007; Yin, 1994; Stake, 1995).

Case selection

A purposeful sampling approach (Patton, 2014) is followed to select a case study that typically represents agile marketing capabilities (Yin, 1994; (Silverman, 2013; Stake, 1995). The study aimed to select a case study such that no previous studies had investigated on renowned digital platforms such as Airbnb, Amazon, and Uber (e.g., Stone, 2013, 2017). Consequently, Spotahome, a leading company founded in 2014 and engaged in the online booking for non-vacation home rentals, was chosen for empirical studies. We find this a very interesting concept to conduct an empirical qualitative research in agile competencies in digital marketing. In particular, such firms depend on the use of digital tools and are sensitive to changes in international customer needs and pursue customer-centric marketing initiatives (Roberts & Grover, 2012a). These traits are critical to marketing agility (Matthyssens et al., 2005; Tahmasebifard et al., 2017). Furthermore, such firms are required to be highly flexible both internally and externally, in order to adjust their marketing strategies and operations according to

digital transformation or adapt marketing activities to different international contexts (Golgeci & Gligor, 2017; Roberts & Grover, 2012a; Teece et al., 2016).

Spotahome is committed to providing easier home renting services, similar to “getting a coffee,” while surmounting traditional real estate agencies and addressing customers’ appreciation for holiday rental platforms. The company’s mission is *“to reinvent real estate. Make it transparent, instant, and exciting. Loved at last. Unreal estate [...] We work to teleport people into homes anywhere, so they can live the experience without being there. We connect with them. We bring the reality to them.”* Spotahome fulfills customers’ requirements for home rental and ensures cross-communication and transparency. *“The Spotahome experience removes the need for in-person viewings, saving both tenants and landlords the time and expense. We take professional photos, design floor plans, and record high-definition videos of the property and neighbourhood. We also write detailed descriptions about the home and local area”* (www.spotahome.com).

Data collection

Study data were collected from semi-structured interviews, Spotahome social networking site, and official website to ensure data triangulation, enrich research findings (Miles & Huberman, 1984) and increase their robustness (Dubé & Paré, 2003; Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1994). For in-depth understanding of agile marketing phenomenon and reduced misinterpretation (Hagen et al., 2018), the study followed homogeneous lines of inquiry (Yin, 2009).

The primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews with respondents highly knowledgeable in this field (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). A standardized interview protocol consisting of eight questions was followed owing to the complex process of conducting interviews (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Robson, 1993; see Appendix A). The questionnaire was pilot-

tested with an Italian firm operating in the online booking to ensure clarity (Yin, 1994) and avoid or complexity (Van Teijlingen, Rennie, Hundley, & Graham, 2001). Further exploratory questions were asked to ensure openness and enrich information during the open-ended interviews (Myers, 2013; Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2015). Each interview of 30-min duration was properly recorded and transcribed (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Seidman, 2013) and coded through NVivo 10 software. Interview respondents included key informants of Spotahome marketing department with different roles, to ensure diverse information on marketing processes and strategies (see Table 1).

Insert Table 1 about here

Secondary data were collected from Spotahome social network and official website. Spotahome Facebook page was included to gather additional data for analyzing the firm's marketing strategies (Miles & Huberman, 1984). All multimedia content shared on Spotahome Facebook page (i.e., posts, photos, and videos) were captured using NCapture (the browser application of NVivo).

An in-depth analysis of Spotahome official website was made and the relevant information was coded (see Table 2).

Insert Table 2 about here

Data analysis

A within-case analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007) and theoretical categories or concepts during coding process were made (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Data coding

and analysis was performed using NVivo 10 software. First, data and coded key units of text (e.g., “adapt” and “collaboration” codes) were analyzed, including and extending the meaning of each unit of text with a list of codes (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Second, data were further analyzed by identifying new codes and comparing with the coded data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The interview data were triangulated with the other data sources until theoretical saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Finally, a thematic analysis to identify patterns and common meanings or themes (Boyatzis, 1998) was made and a few relevant concepts were identified for better theoretical understanding.

Coding process was carried out independently and simultaneously. Using NVivo 10, a Coding Comparison Query was run and the emerging inconsistencies were solved until a Kappa coefficient above 0.75 was achieved. Therefore, the key dimensions of the Agile Marketing Capability, that is, “continual improvement pace,” “customer-oriented responsiveness,” “high flexibility,” “people collaboration” were identified (see Table 3). The major study outcomes are discussed in the following sections.

Insert Table 3 about here

FINDINGS

Agility in a digital, international context was empirically studied through analysis of semi-structured interviews, triangulated with Spotahome Facebook page and official website, and additional archival documents. Spotahome is a global digital firm, which strongly drives digitalization of real estate industry. The firm educates customers across countries on a different home renting experience. The study analysis provides interesting insights, actions, and guidelines

on how firms in international contexts influenced by the power of digital transformation should develop and implement Agile Marketing Capability.

Continual improvement pace

In a digital and global marketplace, Spotahome must continuously improve and innovate. From press reviews retrieved from the archives, the company was found to have gained important funding in the past 2 years to promote expansions across countries and invest in new product development for optimized digital services to tenants and property owners. The firm has a long-term vision led by innovation as key performance measure, as declared by the Head of Insights and Analytics:

We have to be at the forefront of technology [...] so we innovate all the time in technology, we innovate all the time in customer support, we innovate all the time in many things that come to bring better support to customers.

Spotahome has been attempting to bring improvement and innovation in the real estate industry. For instance, it provides a real-time virtual experience to customers through 360° view of the properties. The firm follows the concept of “online entrepreneurs” called *digital nomads*, which is popular in fashion industry, to influence marketing campaigns (Johanson, 2014). Digital nomads are tech-savvy, English-speaking, young people (MacRae, 2016) highly popular on social media. The firm also aims to digitalize the complete renting process, including booking and digital transactions. The mode of payments is crucial for global firms such as Spotahome in order to ease monetary transactions from across the world.

In practice, a firm must continuously improve management. As claimed by the SEO manager in charge of improving brand ranking on search engines (e.g., Google):

We are always trying to make improvements on the website by making small changes [...] launching a new functionality on the website or testing a new channel, or whatever initiatives that we come up within the company. We are always trying to lunch them as fast as possible with the minimum cost or effort.

Managers create a weekly report analysis of customers' behavior, for example, how they click on the website, what content do they select, among others, in order to identify areas of "underperformance" and make better decisions to fulfill target requirements. They also analyze gain and loss of visibility in terms keywords, cities, and targets and try to improve accordingly. Furthermore, external freelancers are also important to international businesses and require ongoing improvement. The firm defines a weekly plan to achieve a goal, and communicates the changes that need to be implemented (e.g., a new promotion and a discount). If there is lack of efficiency, they communicate through Hangouts or e-mails and asked them to optimize. Hence, they always review the "frictions" that may arise among the market stakeholders (tenants and landlords) by constantly advancing their product. Hence, improvements, innovation, and optimization are not feasible if Spotahome is tardy in response. As stated by the Head of Brand and Communications:

Our plans are shorter, because we think in the mid-term instead of in the long-term [...] so the plans are shorter, and everything has to be relevant for the customer.

Every advance plan represents a forecast of future scenarios. Accordingly, the marketing department as well as the other departments defines different quarterly plans for the main project areas according to their role (e.g., content for the site, link building and BI, and technical aspects of the website for the SEO manager). They also try to enhance speed by simplifying the communication channels. One team member covers all languages and a minimum of two channels, which is in fact crucial global marketing performance.

Customer-oriented responsiveness

Spotahome is a complete customer-centric marketing firm, which is enabled by the 100% online platform for superior customer experience, as repeatedly claimed in their website. For example *“we work to teleport people into homes anywhere, so they can live the experience without being there. We connect with them. We bring the reality to them,”* or *“we are dedicated to providing the most enjoyable and stress-free housing search service. From booking to final confirmation, we’re there for you!”* Customer-focused attention is critical for a firm’s mission. Several of the firm’s Facebook posts are as follows: *“Are you planning to move to Berlin but you don’t know the city? We will guide you. We will help you to choose the place fit for your needs,”* or *“Are you going to move to another city but you don’t have already found the right rent for you? We will help you to choose the perfect home!”* where Spotahome tends to customers, offering help and guidelines to provide the best digital experience.

In particular, the firm is committed to continuously foresee and respond to customer-related changes in order to fulfill their expectations. Here, IT certainly plays a key role. As a digital business, Spotahome owns the advantage of analyzing customer behaviors and motivations across touch points and gradually optimizes customer interactions and predict future behavior. Hence, the Head of Brand and Communications asserts:

You need to follow the conversation across media channels and across countries to analyze also the sentiment of the conversation, if it is positive or negative, neutral, and also the keywords that users are using. Users can use some wording, a specific messaging [...] and you have to switch your messages if yours have not delivered the proper idea or the proper description of the service that you are given.

Further asserting that,

We have different metrics to measure the satisfaction levels, and when those metrics go down a little bit, we put all efforts to solve the situation [...] The customer has to be on the center. Not the brand, it's the customer. Not the company, it's the customer.

Accordingly, Spotahome tries to address customers' diverse needs and offer a customizable product. For example, landlords seek profits from their property through quick rentals, whereas tenants seek accommodation in specific areas and characteristics. The Spotahome tool is extremely useful for both landlords and tenants: landlords can avoid the hassles of potential tenants visiting the property. The tool facilitates home renting in a couple of clicks. Meanwhile, tenants who temporary move abroad for travel or seeking international experience get guaranteed verified and real accommodation, along with the photos and videos of the property. This is especially important for firms operating in international markets to cope with different sets of expectations and ensure safety and transparency. Verification of properties is one of the key strengths of Spotahome and prevents scams.

Create value for customers is a top priority for , hence it exploits technology to constantly forecast and respond to customer needs proactively by applying technology to implement changes relevant to customer expectations and reactively by adjusting failing ideas. They analyze group pages on Facebook dedicated to those seeking accommodation in places such as Madrid, Milan, or Rome, they contact the potential customers and offer customized solutions. This is critical for global digital firms that use technological tools to satisfy expectations of international customer. Recalling the words of the Head of Digital Performance Marketing:

There are specific audiences decided by Google, so we can't choose, it's something automatic, but it's able with the algorithm to understand when you put for example specific keywords like we are searching for some users interested in, specific target with this age, located in specific countries, cities, or neighborhoods, that search for something related to the architecture or garden etc. Maybe could be our potential customers. So, we prepare these different lists, and we try to target these customers.

We can measure all the journey funnel, so we know the number of people interested in the world to rent and accommodation [...] we try to convince him to book [...] we analyze this funnel, we use the Analytics as the first tool to analyze the traffic, and the acquisition, and the behavior.

High flexibility

Based on the ease of its product, Spotahome strongly leverages on a flexible and adaptive approach to satisfy changing customer needs and international scenarios. Their website states, “*we embrace simplicity*” and “*we get more from less,*” which suggest that the firm strives to satisfy its customer needs with optimum resources. A Facebook post states, “*Do you already know how to rent on Spotahome? 1. Search and select your accommodation, 2. Book the property, 3. Wait the confirmation from the owner, 4. Just move. Easier than that!*” Therefore, Spotahome ensures a trust-based and guaranteed method that flexibly adapts to needs and expectations of customers seeking accommodation.

In particular, Spotahome has to cope with the seasonality of rental market. Hence, the firm adapts its product to September–October or January–February, when people move and change house frequently. The Head of Insights and Analytics claims:

If you have an objective, you have to adapt your own task to these objectives. So, if you for example if you have to change something for budget limitations then the other activities have to cut down the same budget.

Flexibility is key for Spotahome, and they invest proper resources by simplifying and ensuring frugality without radical changes but optimizing in terms of money, time, and efforts. This adaptive approach is particularly crucial in international contexts. Spotahome adopts flexible planning since marketing should adapt to changing contexts. As the SEO manager claims:

We try to make the Spotahome product available in as many geolocations as possible [...] you can search for an accommodation in Madrid [...] but maybe you are looking for an accommodation in a specific address, or

next to whatever square, or in a neighborhood [...] we try to create or make the site as granulated as possible by geolocation entities [...] in order to adapt our product [...] to people searching for accommodation, we try to make that life easier this way.

Accordingly, it is important to develop an accessible product that flexible to various international contexts. As a global firm, they aim to be more efficient and effective by satisfying international customers' different expectations. The Head of Digital Performance Marketing states that,

To reach the target necessary for Spotahome that complete our specific audience, and interested to book an accommodation [...] we need to involve the language because each user from their country search with the proper language. Everytime it's necessary to think about the audience, the user. The user is between specific age, located in a specific city or country, and we need to speak their languages [...] so we need to be flexible and to adapt to the country of origin [...] from your sofa, you can book from Cagliari an accommodation in Madrid, in your language. So we adapt for you our website, and from the beginning until the payment method.

In practical terms, Spotahome tries to adapt to customers' expectations. For example, a Ukrainian customer moves to Poland for work or a customer from Barcelona travels for leisure. Furthermore, they try to adapt their campaigns to users' language. For instance, in Belgium, people mainly speak English, French, and Dutch languages, and Dutch language is not included in Spotahome website languages, but they create some campaigns in Dutch language through remarketing, and impact websites in Dutch on lifestyle and sport, trying to convince the user to "come back" to Spotahome, and convert him.

People collaboration

Finally, one key aspect to succeed in digital, global contexts relates to collaboration among people, both internally and externally focused. As Spotahome asserts in the website, "*we play a*

pivotal role in eliminating communication and language barriers between local landlords and foreign tenants” by offering excellent customer support in several languages on both sides,” and also “*we are a team,*” “*we live for the mission,*” and “*we trust in trust,*” values that highlight how alignment, interaction, and trust-based relationships among people are crucial for developing a working environment to build successful, international marketing programs. The Head of Brand and Communications remarks:

We need to think in a global level and we need to cooperate in a global level. So everytime that we have a success, we celebrate all together. And everytime that we fail, we cry all together [...] I try to be a mentor and teach what is the right way that we should follow, but I’m always opened to receive feedbacks, to allow anyone in my team area saying you’re not right, maybe we can try to do this other thing and open to test, and discover another alternative.

Accordingly, success depends on cooperation and collaboration among people in marketing projects. Spotahome nurtures close and trust-based relationships both within and among departments. The marketing team may collaborate with the product department to solve technical issues between the website and the platform, or with the customer experience team to learn reviews based on user suggestions or complaints. The marketing department also needs to interact with the design team for the “creativity” required for advertisement, or insight team to gather necessary data to measure promotions, among others. This holds good for managing a global market. The Brand and Communications Executive states:

Spotahome headquarter is in Spain [...] all the teams are located in the same building and in the same place [...] I’m sitting with the other brand communication managers for other regions, for example I have here the english one, the german one, the french one, so we talk all the time together because in marketing we are now structured like a function that gives service to the different regions, and we are like a global marketing team.

Thus, despite decentralized decision-making in global firms where different people are in charge of different countries, cooperation, and working together must be simplified as in physical proximity.

A digital, global firm like Spotahome strongly depends on the use of technological means for communication to foster an environment of close cooperation, for example, chatting tools for interacting, sharing documents, and links (e.g., Slack and Hipchat), and also internal newsletter for delivering weekly news and update all departments. Therefore, by leveraging technology, the firm strongly enhances information flows across the organization. In a meeting, information is loaded onto a chat box to ensure full and transparent communication among the team. The CEO incentivizes this aspect by planning a weekly update on the main achievements for the department and their targets. The Head of Insights and Analytics, sums it up despite recognizing that is not easy:

Sometimes it happens that you think that only the things you do are the right ones. It's a matter of listening, it's a matter of understanding the needs of each department, it's a matter of understanding the need of the company and if you are able to combine all that and put them in the same direction it all goes well. So we are a team because we have an objective, and all the company works towards the same objectives.

DISCUSSION AND THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION

This study contributes theoretically to the literature on agile and dynamic marketing capabilities. First, this work advances the field of dynamic marketing capabilities (Barrales-Molina et al., 2014; Bruni & Verona, 2009; Xu et al., 2018) by defining a new capability: the Agile Marketing Capability.

Second, this study extends the existing theories on agility to the marketing domain, providing a theoretical framework in which to study the key dimensions of the Agile Marketing Capability.

Continual improvement pace. Earlier studies claim that supply chain and IT agility continuously detect environmental changes and swiftly respond with innovative solutions (Chen et al., 2015; Gligor et al., 2013; Lu & Ramamurthy, 2011; Sambamurthy et al., 2003), such as redeploying resources and quickly performing tasks (Abdoli Bidhandi & Valmohammadi, 2017; Li et al., 2009; Mandal, 2018). The study findings show that, when referring to international and digital marketing, ongoing efforts in adopting cutting-edge technology that analyze market trends, customer behavior, and competition are key to providing optimized services and innovative responses to international customer needs. The Spotahome case study shows that many initiatives such as 360° photos of properties, involvement of digital nomads, digital bookings, and payments innovative actions in real estate industry. Moreover, planning in the short or mid-term, constantly improving the strategic areas relevant for customers, is essential to achieve greater speed in adjusting tasks by learning directly from customer insights.

Customer-oriented responsiveness. Majority studies on agility focus on swift responsiveness, that is, to identify and respond to changes in supply chain, technology, competition, and demand in a reactive or proactive manner and to recover from them (Abdoli Bidhandi & Valmohammadi, 2017; Eckstein et al., 2015; Overby et al., 2006; Sharifi & Zhang, 1999). IT facilitates gathering customer information (DeGroote & Marx, 2013; Gligor et al., 2013; Kitchens et al., 2018). Agility implies greater market prediction and customization (Ismail & Sharifi, 2006; Lin et al., 2006; Roberts & Grover, 2012b; Sambamurthy et al., 2003). The case study confirms marketing function. The firm is able to be more responsive to customer demand at a global level by using metrics for measuring customer satisfaction levels, by analyzing sentiments across media channels and countries, and generally tracking information and in turn offering more customized products. In the Spotahome case study, ensuring safety and transparency was also vital.

Accordingly, the study findings confirm that technology is key to adopt more proactive or reactive marketing strategies toward the marketplace and to create higher customer value.

High flexibility. Prior studies on agility highlights the relevance of an adaptive approach (Overby et al., 2006; Sheffi & Rice Jr, 2005) to compete with speed and surprise, to adjust strategies and redeploy resources flexibly (Cegarra-Navarro et al., 2016; Sambamurthy et al., 2003; Teece et al., 2016), and to manage new or diversified products and objectives with the existing facilities and supply chain (Abdoli Bidhandi & Valmohammadi, 2017; Eckstein et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2015; Sharifi & Zhang, 1999; Swafford et al., 2006). The study results contribute to extend existing literature by showing that, in case of marketing, such flexibility is achieved with a flexible planning that place individuals at the center and that easily adapt to changing customer requirements. In our case study, for example, the firm tries to adapt to the seasonality of rental market, manage evolving objectives, and reach global target by saving time, efforts, and money. Interestingly, the concept of flexibility is attempts to pursue simplicity by specifically providing an easy home searching tool, which makes rental simple, accessible, and adaptable to the different requirements expressed by customers across countries.

People collaboration. According to the literature, agility suggests collaboration as crucial for effective and efficient achievement of a firm's objectives (Abdoli Bidhandi & Valmohammadi, 2017; Sharifi & Zhang, 1999). This is further enhanced by IT integration and alignment throughout the supply chain, which facilitate information flows (Ismail & Sharifi, 2006; Kearns & Sabherwal, 2006; Oh & Pinsonneault, 2007; Tallon & Pinsonneault, 2011). Empirical evidence presented in this study confirms this argument and demonstrates that collaboration among departments (e.g., marketing and product teams) and being open to feedbacks and advice from others are some of the essential features for global marketing teams that strongly need to foster close and trust-based relationships. In addition, particularly for digital, international businesses,

the use of communication tools throughout the organization is critical in order to facilitate up-to-date information on achievements and targets and weekly goals across teams and departments for business alignment.

In sum, the study findings support a framework that identifies the key dimensions of the Agile Marketing Capability: continual improvement pace, customer-oriented responsiveness, high flexibility, people collaboration.

Managerial implications

Although the present study provides an initial theoretical and empirical understanding on the Agile Marketing Capability, it gives managerial insights on developing an Agile Marketing Capability, particularly in digital and international contexts. These insights would help managers and practitioners in employing agility features in their marketing strategies and operations.

The study findings provide interesting guidelines for managers and practitioners in the implementation of agility in marketing field. The definition of the key factors of Agile Marketing Capability advances the knowledge of practitioners and international marketers on how to implement agile marketing and improve their ability in leveraging digital technologies to satisfy their customers in dynamic and international business contexts.

Furthermore, through an in-depth qualitative case study, this study could be of particular interest for international marketing managers to understand the methods of developing agile capabilities in their field and pursue quicker, more flexible, and responsive strategies and operations.

Limitation and future research

Although the study findings provide a good theoretical and empirical understanding of the Agile Marketing Capability, this research has some limitations that may be addressed in future research.

With regard to the methodological perspective, the qualitative data analysis involved only one firm because of the nature of the research. Although the study findings may be generalized to a certain degree, it would be necessary to explore this topic in multiple research contexts. Future research may use this study as a pilot case and increase the viability of the results in other organizational settings.

Future studies could also develop scales for measuring Agile Marketing Capability and use survey instrument to validate our findings.

It would be interesting to understand the relationships between the identified dimensions and their underlying nature (i.e., are they formative or reflective of the Agile Marketing Capability?), as well as develop a proper procedure.

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APPENDIX A - SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Before starting with the interview, I would like to ask you some preliminary questions. Could you specify:

- Name
- Surname
- How long have you been working in Spotahome?
- According to your role within the company, which are your main tasks or activities that you perform?

Q1. According to your opinion, and also on the basis of your experience at work during these years, which are the main changes that take place in Spotahome sector?

- Technological changes, changes in customer needs or preferences, new competitors?
Other?
- What activities do you implement in accordance with these changes? (e.g., market monitoring, sector analysis, customer data collection) What are the specific tools that you use?

Q2. With respect to the competitors in the same or similar sectors at international level, what is in your opinion the key success factor or most representative aspect that enable Spotahome to succeed and be competitive at international level? Why?

- “*We innovate to win,*” this is one of the values of Spotahome. What does it mean for you? In which way innovation is central for Spotahome competitive advantage?

Q3. On the basis of your experience at work, what are your customers looking for? What are their needs?

- Do you use specific channels/tools to communicate and interact with them? For example?
- Do you use specific tools to collect and analyze data of your customers? For example?
- Can you explain me the way or the procedure through which you try to satisfy customer needs?

Q4. Can you describe the procedure that you follow to change/update marketing plans?

- What are the key factors that you consider mostly to improve/optimize marketing plans or programs?

Q5. The mission of Spotahome basically concerns to make renting simple and fast, and offers the possibility for customers to live an experience without being there. Among the values the Spotahome supports there are “*we embrace simplicity*” and “*we get more from less.*” On the basis of your role within the firm, could you describe me what do they mean these principles for you? Could you give me a practical example?

Q6. How do you use technology to communicate with customers? What type of relationship do you create with them?

- Could you tell me an example of the way in which you interact with your customer on the basis of your current/past experience?

Q7. How do you use technology to communicate and coordinate your work with the other people within your department? Could you tell me an example of the way in which you use technology in this sense?

- Conversely, in which way do you use technology to communicate and coordinate your work with the other departments? Could you tell me an example of the way in which you use technology in this sense?

- Finally, how do you use technology to communicate and coordinate your work with the other departments located in different countries? Could you tell me an example of the way in which you use technology in this sense?

Q8. In its official website, among its key values Spotahome declares “*we are a team.*”

According to you, and also on the basis of your experience at work, what does it mean?

- Can you describe me what type of relationship do you have with the other people within your department? In which way do you work with marketing department? Can you describe how is a “normal” working day?
- What type of relationship do you have with the other departments? In which way to you work with them? For example?
- What type of relationship do you have with the other departments located in different countries? In which way to you work with them? For example?

Table 1. Summary of primary data sources

Source	Position	Interview time span (minutes)
Semi-structured interview	Head of Brand and Communications	28
Semi-structured interview	Brand and Communications Executive	31
Semi-structured interview	Head of Digital Performance Marketing	33
Semi-structured interview	Head of Insights And Analytics	18
Semi-structured interview	SEO Manager	33
Semi-structured interview	Growth and User Acquisition Coordinator	32

Table 2. Summary of secondary data sources

Source	Type	Number of items
Social network	Posts on Facebook	251
Official website	Web page	5

Table 3. Summary of Agile Marketing Capability dimensions

Dimension	Definition	Code example
Continual improvement pace	The ability to constantly make improvements, update marketing plans, and deliver new marketing programs in a quick manner.	<p>“Every Monday we create a report, with an analysis of previous week, and then we take decisions after this analysis. In order to adjust in case of underperformance, we need to invent something to go to the target” [Head of Digital Marketing Performance]</p> <p>“We are always trying to make improvements on the website by making small changes [...] launching a new functionality on the website or testing a new channel, or whatever initiatives that we come up within the company” [SEO manager]</p>
Customer-oriented responsiveness	The ability to continuously sense and respond to market changes, in a proactive or reactive way, for greater customer satisfaction.	<p>“We can measure all the journey funnel [...] we use the Analytics as the first tool to analyze the traffic, and the acquisition, and the behavior” [Head of Digital Performance Marketing]</p> <p>“We are applying technology to a sector completely new, so when we implement a change we don't know what is gonna be the response of the market. We have to be super proactive in the reaction that the customer has” [Head of Brand and Communications]</p>
High flexibility	The ability to easily adapt to changing international customer needs and contexts.	<p>“We try to do more with less because we try to optimize and spend less not only money, but time, efforts, everything” [Growth and User Acquisition Coordinator]</p> <p>“We try to make everything simple [...] when we define a plan we say, okay, is it simple enough to be understand by a kid of 3 years old or 50 years old person? If it is the second option, let's think again and let's try to make it simpler because we need to deliver really clear messages” [Head of Brand and Communications]</p>
People collaboration	The ability to create close and trust-based relationships among people and departments for a collaborative working environment.	<p>“It's a matter of listening, it's a matter of understanding the needs of each department, it's a matter of understanding the need of the company [...] we are a team because we have an objective, and all the company works towards the same objectives” [Head of Insights and Analytics]</p> <p>“We are sitting with different people from different markets. I can ask them like can you help me with this because I don't know how to do it or I don't understand [...] we are very close one to another” [Brand and Communications Executive]</p>