Retail business model adaptability: Navigating disruption through theorizing the role of project management[1, 2]

Kayla Kim Sampson

GBSB Global Business School (Malta)

Abstract

Retail business models are undergoing continuous transformation propelled by digital disruption, changes in consumer behaviours and an unexpected pandemic. This study investigates the role of project management (PM) as a strategic enabler of adaptability and resilience in retail business models (RBM) during times of disruption. Examined through the lens of the Dynamic Capabilities Theory and Resource-Based View (RBV), the research explores the PM methodologies known as agile techniques that assist in innovation, reduce risks and embrace organisational change, aligning change with strategic objectives. Renowned retailers, Zara and Amazon are highlighted as organisations that have adopted agile practices and achieved RBM adaptability through responsive supply chains and self-managed teams. Scrum and Kanban are identified as methodologies adopted by these retailers, demonstrating the ability to improve decision-making in real-time as opposed to traditional methods that are more aligned with predictable projects. PM is demonstrated as an operational tool that enables transformation through ongoing modifications and the integration of knowledge and long-term competitiveness. The study's limitations include large-scale organisations and secondary data. Future research could focus on analysing hybrid PM models of SMEs, emphasizing the changes to PM's role as a key driver in RBMs resiliency and adaptability.

Key Words: Retail Business Models (RBMs), Project Management (PM), Adaptability, Resilience, Agile Methodologies, Dynamic Capabilities Theory, Resource-Based View (RBV)

1. Introduction

The current retail industry has endured significant transformation and continues to experience unpredictability. The Covid-19 pandemic, an evolving digital landscape and supply chain challenges present serious disruptions to business models. During times of uncertainty,

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organisation's ability to remain agile and resilient becomes progressively vital (Mosteanu, 2024). While organisations aim to achieve agility and resiliency, the strategic role of PM in navigating adaptive RMBs remains underexplored in current literature. Advancements in the digital environment have created new markets, necessitating Retail Business Models (RBM) to adapt, for instance, during the Covid-19 pandemic retailers that adopted digital business models experienced an increase in online sales as a result of the multichannel approach (Mostaghel et al., 2022). Fast fashion retailer, Zara has utilised technology to increase efficiency in supply chain operations, enabling the retailer to introduce new styles every two weeks which would not have be possible without the adaptive supply chain model (López et al., 2021).

Projects are viewed as the driving force in the creation of corporate strategy, increasing organisations' competitive edge. Identified as a valuable tool in planning and managing processes, project management (PM) is capable of navigating risks that organisations may encounter (Vrchota et al., 2021). Comparable to how RBMs have evolved, organisational projects too, have. Digitalisation trends have enabled project managers to communicate seamlessly, and to conduct and track projects using new PM software's such as Zoom, Asana, SharePoint and Slack, while navigating megatrends like AI and automation, gig economy and an evolving corporate culture (Mcgrath and Kostalova, 2020).

Although organisations are continuously developing effective strategic plans, the integration of PM serves as a link between strategic intent and practically implementing the changes to achieve business model adaptability and resilience. To reduce RBM volatility and improve preparedness, this research paper aims to explore the essential role of PM as a strategic driver in RBM adaptability and resilience. PM has the capacity to prompt transformation through its methodologies, specifically agile techniques. The article is based on secondary data and conceptual analysis and adopts an exploratory design to establish PM strategic positioning in achieving business model adaptability and resiliency. Figure one depicts the relationships between the key concepts discussed.

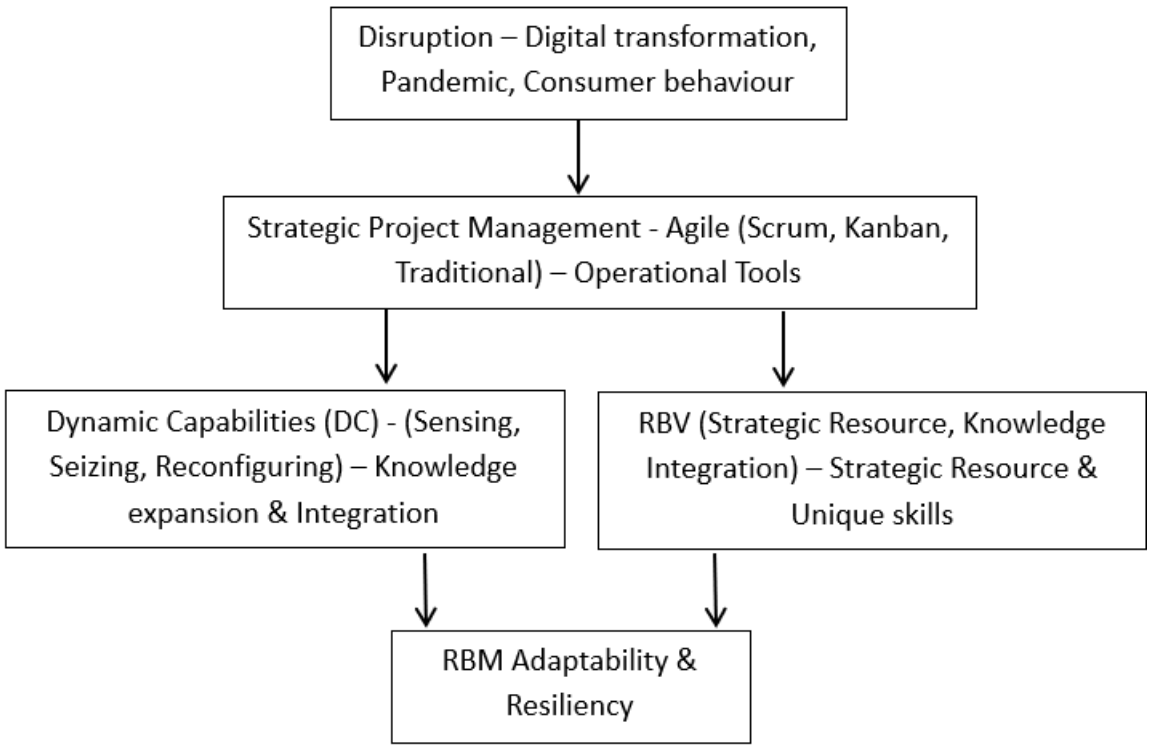

Figure 1: Conceptual framework linking key concepts
Source: Author's own compilation

1.1. Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to determine how project management can strategically enable adaptability and resiliency in retail business models because of disruption, through the Dynamics Capabilities Theory & Resource-Based View (RBV).

- To determine how retailers can utilise PM methodologies to support business resilience and adaptability.
- To analyse existing retail business models using case studies of well-renowned retailers to identify patterns of successful adaption.
- To examine PM strategic role in retail transformation, using the Dynamics Capabilities Theory & Resource-Based View (RBV).

2. Project Management Methodologies and Adaptability

2.1. Traditional Project Management

PM is a combination of knowledge, skills, tools and methods to effectively manage a project. PM is considered as a mechanism for enhancing business and implementing changes, fostering

innovation and promoting adaptability. It includes nine focus areas to ensure that projects are conducted efficiently and logically (Simonaitis et al., 2023). However, before initiating a project, the implementation method should be selected based on traditional and agile approaches. Traditional PM is well suited when all aspects of the project are known i.e. project needs, goals, budget and completion date. Traditional methodologies include Waterfall, Critical Path Method (CPM), PRINCE2 (Projects IN Controlled Environments) and Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) (Omonije, 2024).

2.2. Limitations and Value of Traditional PM

Traditional PM methodologies such as the Waterfall and CPM may not be suitable for the retail environments volatile market, however traditional methods are still valuable for when project's needs, budget and goals are known. Examples may include expansion projects where budgets are fixed, compliance projects requiring Prince2 methodologies or in best practices such as HR or quality management, which rely on PMBOK's methodology (Omonije, 2024). While traditional PM methodologies such as Waterfall and Prince2 provide structure and control for projects, the strict guidelines severely restrict retailers operating in volatile markets.

2.3. Agile Project Management

2.3.1. Definition and Evolution of Agile Methodologies

Agile project methodologies on the other hand implement projects under conditions of increased uncertainty. Agile methodologies, referred to as "lean" thinking were previously applied to software development however, these methodologies are now adopted for its adaptability and simplicity and are often used in healthcare and marketing, government projects and adverting projects. Considering the integration into various industries, literature disregards the challenges of interpretating agile principles from the initial software origins to several other organisations experiencing transformation like retail. Therefore, a deeper understanding of how these methodologies support organisational dynamic capabilities farther than project-based initiatives are still required, thus, showcasing retailers that have successfully implemented agile techniques. The adaption and feedback cycles promote knowledge integration in projects, enhancing opportunities to capture new markets. Developed to enhance innovation, the main agile methodologies include Scrum, Kanban, Extreme Programming (XP) and Lean. Scrum is an agile concept that outlines a process for managing software while Kanban helps team members to visualise tasks, categorising tasks into manageable parts. Kanban also limits administrative work for team members. Conversely, The Extreme Programming (XP) facilitates software development by administering code changes, contributing to the foundational phase of development. Lean agile focuses on improving the software development process by creating more value through reducing waste, such as eliminating meaningless operations from the

development process. In addition, VUCA, a popular acronym that describes the influencing factors of agile, represents volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity, which are potential situations that could occur during a project (Omonije, 2024).

Agile methods promote change while traditional methods are rigid where any changes require a new signed agreement. The accuracy of implementation, especially while considering new technologies or procedures, require meticulous implementation of agile and often demand adjustments in organisational structure of projects. Therefore, interpreting the principles of agile PM is thereupon regarded as an ongoing challenge for organisations as it is not a generic solution, considering that projects differ in strategy, business process design and project governance.

2.3.2. Agile Values in Practice

The **values** of Agile project management focus on (Dong et al., 2024):

- Individuals and personal exchanges over processes and tools.
- Functional software over extensive documentation.
- Customer engagement over contract negotiation.
- Adapting to change over following a plan.

2.3.3. Agile Principles

Additionally, the **principles** of Agile project management include (Dong et al., 2024):

- Fulfil customers through early and constant delivery of beneficial software.
- Amending requirements regardless of the phase, to improve customers' competitive advantage.
- Regular delivery of functioning software with reduced time frames.
- Business leaders and developers should collaborate throughout the project.
- Projects should be created around individuals who are driven.
- Communicating information on development teams through in person conversation.
- Use functional software as a key metric of progress.
- Sustainable development: all members should continuously maintain a steady speed.
- Ensure constant monitoring of technical excellence and sound design.
- Simplicity is essential.
- Self-managed teams generate the best designs.
- Constantly consider how to become more successful.

With reference to the above, agile PM are suitable for retailers operating under uncertainty such as digital transformation projects or amending specifications irrespective of the stage of the project. The key principles, customer engagement over contract negotiation' and 'fostering self-managed teams' permits continuous increase in integration. Broadly adopted for flexibility, agile methodologies enable innovative practices such as encouraging autonomous teams that are key in retail transformation (Omonije, 2024). Self-managed teams, direct communication and feedback cycles facilitate knowledge distribution, enabling organisations to restructure capabilities according to market needs.

By leveraging the above-mentioned methodologies (Scrum, Kanban, XP and Lean) allow organisations to navigate VUCA challenges and pivot strategies to respond to market feedback in real-time, unlike traditional methods that are rigid. This type of methodology was developed for organisations "adapting to change over following a plan" (Dong et al., 2024), emphasizing retailer adaptability and resilience. Complex projects are broken down into feasible sprints using the Scrum methodology while reducing ambiguity through customer engagement and joint efforts with end-users like store staff (Dong et al., 2024). Nevertheless, while agile techniques are effective, the practical implementation challenges require attention. Similarly, agile is characterised by challenges since there is no standard generic solution for all organisations. Organisations may be required to strategically align certain processes to achieve an agile approach and may further entail amendments in organisational structures of projects.

Disruption in a Retail Context	Key Features Influencing PM	Proposed PM Methodology	PM Action
Digital Transformation	Volatile & evolving period	Agile (Scrum, Kanban)	Cyclical progress, continuous feedback
Consumer Behaviour Shifts	Rapid pivot, evolving trends	Agile/lean PM	Trial with level of risk, quick loops
Supply Chain Interruption	Volatile external factors, immediate adaption	Hybrid PM	Agile for quick response & traditional for fixed aspects
Warehouse Renovation/ Expansion	Predictable, fixed timeline & budget	Waterfall, Prince2	Rigid planning with sequenced methodical phases

Table 1: PM Methodologies Suitable for Disruption Situations

Source: Author's own compilation

2.4. Existing Retail Business Models

2.4.1. Zara's Agile Supply Chain and Innovation Model

The multinational clothing retailer Zara operates agile supply chains and adopts data driven production models with fast growing marketing strategies. The retailer has created its entire business model based on agility and a quick response system that is equipped to navigate disruptions. Due to the drawback of traditional methodologies, agile methods offer efficiency and flexibility in volatile and rapidly evolving environments (Anifa et al., 2024). Agile supply chains allow businesses to meet customer needs faster, enabling significant cuts in time-to-market (Atanacković, 2019). While Zara's ability to adopt agile techniques are well established, the exact PM practices that drive agility have not been fully explored.

2.4.2. Key Agile Characteristics in Zara's Operations

Christopher, Harrison, and Van Hoek (1999) identify the key characteristics of an agile supply chain which consists of:

- **Market sensitivity** – Zara uses sales employees to track best and worst sellers and relies on sales figures which are then passed to design teams to create physical products, illustrating sensing capability (Teece 2007). The knowledge expansion and integration permit Zara to 'seize' market opportunities which shift PM practices in a strategic resource, hindering competitors' abilities to imitate due to real-time flow of information.
- **Virtual Integration** – Zara includes the collection of information from all departments within the organisation. Zara virtually shares all product information through the chain organisation and with its suppliers, whereby products remain readily available while maintaining inventory levels.
- **Network-based** – Zara has built adaptable relationships with all stakeholders, including suppliers. Zara collaborates with exclusive yet smaller specialised factories, leading to reduced costs and a flexible system.
- **Process alignment** – Zara capitalises on the internet-based software, maintaining a high level of connectedness between processes and procedures in which all members remain updated and connected regardless of geographical locations.

2.5. Amazon's Agile Team Structure

Ates and Suppayah (2024) suggest that the organisation also empowers employees through an agile internal network that encourages disciplined innovation. The internal network should be flexible and agile enough to enable employees to fail early on. Moreso, an agile system increases visibility of all tasks and operations, clarifies strategies and encourages employee-driven ideas.

2.5.1. Amazon Working Backwards (AWB) Model

In addition to the above, Amazon developed the Amazon Working Background (AWB) method to innovate, which results in internal corporate projects. 'Working backwards' involve employees obtaining ideas from customers, ultimately leading to new products and services. The ideal customer groups are identified first and then product ideas follow, preventing the development and costly investment in products. Amazon utilises Press Releases and Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) to obtain customer feedback as if the products have already been introduced (Ates and Suppayah, 2023).

- The AWB demonstrates the organisations customer centric approach similar to how the agile method emphasizes collaboration and delivering value to customers.
- During development, short development cycles are implemented through which continuous feedback and adaptation takes place.
- The AWB require teams to pivot if customer feedback shows a different direction. Access to data-driven systems allows teams to quickly gather data, examine performance and make decisions accordingly. This process is consistent with the adaptability and ongoing improvement of the agile methodology.
- The 'Two-Pizza Rule' are small multi-skilled teams that Amazon has integrated to encourage autonomous teams that are results driven. A team (generally 6-10 people) should be small enough to 'feed' two small pizzas and are responsible for a particular good or service. This approach aligns with the agile technique as teams are multi-cultural and are fit to make decisions of their own. These self-managed teams drive the exchange of knowledge, in line with RBV.
- The adoption of Scrum has also been reported, coinciding with agile transformation (Atlas, 2009).

Retailer	**Zara** – Fast Fashion	**Amazon** – E-commerce & Multiple Service Offerings
Agile Technique	Incorporated in Supply Chain & Data-Driven Production	Agile Teams & Focus on Customer Innovation
Agile Application	Quick turnaround for design to market, flexible manufacturing and real-time demand sensing.	Autonomous teams – "Working Backwards" & "Two Pizza Teams" with continuous feedback

Table 2: Agile Adaptability in Zara and Amazon

Source: Author's own compilation

2.6. Dynamic Capabilities Theory and Resource-Based View (RBV) in PM

2.6.1. Understanding Dynamic Capabilities in PM

Dynamic Capabilities (DC) is associated with top management activities, competitiveness and the firm's ability to adapt to changes. DC also pertains to management's ability to sense and seize market opportunities (Teece, 2007), therefore when management can identify and seize opportunities, organisations are able to increase competitive advantage and respond to challenges owing to the resources and knowledge accumulated and integrated (Patricio et al., 2021). This coincides with the RBV, highlighting how internal capabilities such as PM skills lead to organisational competitiveness. RBV is a strategic management theory and is founded on the notion that different resources and capabilities vary across organisations, increasing their value propositions and overall competitive advantage (Almarri and Gardiner, 2014).

2.6.2. Four Knowledge Processes in PM

According to Eriksson (1989), four knowledge processes of dynamic capability relate to PM, namely:

i) Knowledge Accumulation – The organisations ability to restore capabilities through reproducing knowledge from external collaboration and internal learning.
ii) Knowledge Integration – The connection between obtained knowledge from external sources and existing knowledge.
iii) Knowledge Utilisation – The organisations ability to utilise knowledge that is obtained and integrated.
iv) Knowledge Reconfiguration – The organisation blends new knowledge with existing capabilities, leading to the changes in capabilities.

2.6.3. PM & Market Responsiveness

Teece (2007) further notes that dynamic capabilities are closely aligned to management "sensing" and "seizing" market opportunities. Sensing relates to the market, customer demands and market opportunities in generating new knowledge. Seizing, on the other hand, refers to opportunities for organisations to gain new knowledge. Both concepts are connected to PM, where implementing sensing allows for the restructuring of dynamic capability functions. This transforms operational PM resources to evolve effectively, enabling effective adaptation.

2.6.4. Knowledge Capability in PM

Based on the abovementioned, new knowledge and capabilities are obtained through projects whereby project knowledge is changed into routines to gather knowledge and develop the dynamic capabilities. Knowledge accumulation occurs through utilising PM tools such as PM forums, thematic discussions and newspapers. Altering project knowledge into routines consist of delivering projects through agile practices include informal channels such as informal communication between project teams and flexibility in problem solving. Furthermore, PM acquires external knowledge such as training, staffing and consulting when internal capabilities are lacking. Business stakeholder participation is also crucial to ensure that knowledge from projects is shifted to the operations and that resolutions are implemented and recognised immediately while supporting the integration of new capabilities (Patricio et al., 2021).

2.7. PM as Strategic Resource in RBV

The RBV assesses how resources can guide an organisation and enhance performance through understanding the strategic significance of PM. RBV emphasizes the importance of intangible assets such as organisational culture and collaboration, while viewing project management as a strategic capability that requires detailed PM methodology, internal resources and experienced project managers (Petit, 2012). Despite the theory's focus on an organisation's unique resources, RBV offers a clear roadmap for examining strategic potential of PM resources (Habbershon and Williams, 1999). In essence, this assists PM managers to recognise and leverage components of the PM function, enabling firms to capitalise on PM capabilities for growth regardless of internal goods and services or external mergers.

2.7.1. PM as a Strategic Enabler in Retail Transformation

Ultimately, PM can be described as a strategic driver for organisational change, particularly in a retail environment that is constantly evolving. Transformations within retail organisations consist of strategic changes to business models and technological adoptions whether in e-commerce, customer service or processes involving AI and data analytics. Innovations including digital transformation are based on projects that are planned, managed and assessed (Tommasi, 2018). Changes within retail organisations are complex and involve a high degree of risk therefore strategic PM is crucial to mitigate potential risk by following PM practices, allocating resources and ensuring projects remain within specific budgets and timelines, (Carujo et al, 2022). The core of PM is to help in the implementation of an organisation's strategy, more effectively and innovatively than competitors. Thus, supporting various organisational functions such as finance, technology and social needs (Gonçalves et al., 2023).

3. Implications for Theory and Practice

PM has emerged as a critical link in organisations strategic and practical process of change, adaptability and retail transformation. Agile methodologies have proven to be valuable beyond software building on the empirical data of renowned retailers such as Zara and Amazon, emphasizing the importance of agile supply chains and autonomous teams. From a practical standpoint, customised agile solutions are required to meet the needs of organisations, since there is no "one-size-fits-all" approach. PM practices vastly improve firms' ability to mitigate risk and any complex retail transformations. Furthermore, the paper highlights the need for continuous upskilling within PM teams, enabling members to keep abreast of technological developments. Figure two, below maps the relationship between strategic PM practices and adaptability outcomes.

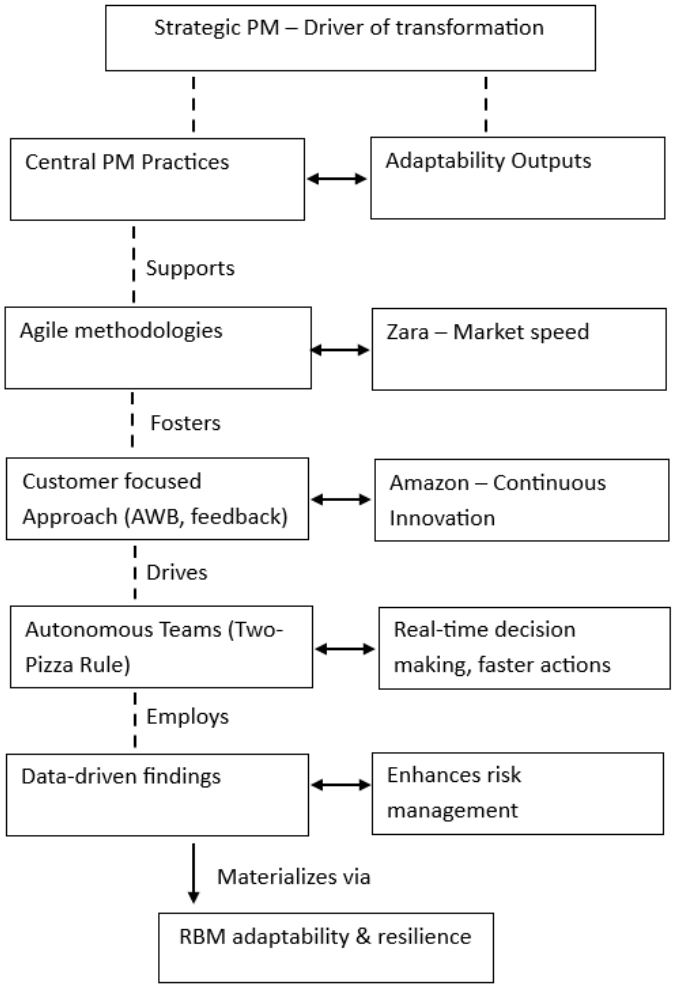

Figure 2: Relationship between strategic PM practices and adaptability outcomes
Source: Author's own compilation

4. Challenges and Limitations

The research paper explores retail adaptability and project management as primarily conceptual topics with limited empirical data. Two large retailers (Zara and Amazon) are the focus of the study, limiting exposure of small and medium size organisations (SMEs). Additionally, project management practices are continuously evolving, potentially reducing the validity of the data in this study in the future.

5. Directions for Future Research

Future research could aim to discuss a broader range of retailers, consisting of SMEs. This, understanding how PM methodologies are applied in organisations with less resources. Moreover, research should assess hybrid PM methodologies of agile and traditional, revealing whether hybrid approaches exceed single approaches as well as how hybrid PM methodologies benefit businesses operating in emerging markets or digitally operating SMEs.

6. Conclusion

This research paper addressed three research objectives; objective one was to determine how retailers can utilise PM methodologies to support business resilience and adaptability. Both PM methodologies provide benefits, however agile methodologies are more effective due to their flexible nature for organisations trading in volatile markets. Scrum and Kanban support autonomous teams and provide real-time feedback for market changes, supporting an innovative environment which is key to adaptability. Agile approaches are suitable for disruptions like digital transformation or changes in consumer behaviours. Conversely, traditional PM methodologies are appropriate for projects where all aspects are defined.

Objective two analysed existing retail business models of Zara and Amazon to identify successful adaptation, revealing that both retailers employ agile methodologies. Zara integrated agility though the supply chain and manufacturing networks while Amazon demonstrated agile internal network that encourages disciplined innovation amongst employees. Amazon also developed the AWB model consisting of self-managing teams and customer orientated approach. These two retailers have illustrated the benefits of integrating agile methods, which have created adaptable resilient RMBs.

The third objective aimed to examine PM's strategic role in retail transformation using the Dynamic Capabilities (DC) Theory and the Resources- Based View (RBV). The study found that PM plays a critical role in retail transformation, mainly through agile approaches and by

connecting strategic goals with flexible implementation operations while identified as a key operational driver for RBM adaptability and agile approaches. From the perspective of the DC theory, PM permits organisations to sense, seize and reconfigure opportunities for quick knowledge integration. However, RBV recognises PM as a key capability that increases competitiveness. PM serves as a structure for knowledge integration, resource realignment and effective utilisation – facilitating continuous transformation and positioning PM as a supportive function yet a strategic facilitator of RBM resilience.

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About the Author

Kayla Kim Sampson

GBSB Global Business School
South Africa

Kayla Kim Sampson is a PhD researcher at GBSB Global Business School. She holds a master's degree in retail business management from the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT). Her previous studies concentrated on strategic management in e-tailing.

She specializes in the retail industry and is currently employed as a Senior Buyer for a well-known retailer in Malta. Additionally, she has experience as a lecturer at the university where she completed her postgraduate studies.

She is currently pursuing a PhD in innovation management under the supervision of Prof. Dr. M.F. HARAKE. The PhD program spans 3 years (full-time) and features a curriculum centred on digitalisation, artificial intelligence, technology, entrepreneurship and innovation management. Her research focuses on AI transformation in employment, exploring how AI-driven training can enhance the appropriate skills for an evolving market.

Kayla Kim Sampson can be contacted at kayla.sampson@student.gbsb.global