Rebranding – A Systematic Literature Review and Future Research Agenda

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Abstract

This study presents the first systematic literature review dedicated specifically to rebranding within corporate and business contexts. A search across four major databases: Emerald Insight, ProQuest, ScienceDirect, and Web of Science identified 630 articles. After removing duplicates and excluding studies from non-business fields, a final sample of 98 articles was analyzed. The findings reveal a fragmented research landscape characterized by three key issues: the frequent use of consumer branding theories to explain corporate rebranding, a dominance of case study methods over quantitative or qualitative approaches, and a tendency to focus on single-industry or single-company analyses. Based on these gaps, the study proposes five directions for future research, including methodological diversification, cross-cultural comparisons, experimental designs, social media analysis, and the role of external consultants in the rebranding process.

Keywords: *rebranding, branding, systematic literature review, corporate rebranding, brand equity.*

JEL classification: M31, M10, L21

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1. Introduction

Rebranding was for a long time seen only as a part of the broader branding literature, not as a separate field of research (Kapferer, 1992; Aaker, 1996). However, the differences between branding and rebranding gradually led scholars to develop its conceptual foundations and treat it as a distinct subject (Daly & Moloney, 2004; Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006). The term first appeared in scholarly discourse in the early 1990s, although its business usage dates back to the 1770s (Oxford

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Dictionary). Early works by Olins (1995), Baker & Balmer (1997), Muzellec (2003), and Merrilees & Miller (2008) began to separate corporate rebranding from broader branding efforts and to highlight its strategic importance. This interest was later reinforced by the spread of digitalization: as established brands migrated online, many found that their existing branding was no longer competitive in the digital world, which prompted a wave of rebranding initiatives (Wise & Zednickova, 2009, Si, C., Hassan et all, 2025). The COVID-19 pandemic amplified this pressure, making digitalization central to companies' survival and growth, and bringing rebranding even more to the foreground (Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2021, Huang, X. et all, 2025).

Today, rebranding is treated as a subject in its own right, and it is seen as a strategic method through which companies keep their brand identities aligned with changing market realities and consumer expectations. As the topic has matured, research on it has become not only more frequent but also more specialized, moving from general discussion toward in-depth analysis from several, often very different, perspectives. From an organizational perspective, research has examined the internal and cultural alignment a rebrand requires (Gotsi, Andriopoulos and Wilson, 2008), while legal scholarship has raised questions about brand dilution and the limits of intellectual property protection (Olteanu, 2020). Others have focused on employee experience, looking at how staff live through and enact the change (Stuart, 2012), and on sustainability, where rebranding is treated as a way to align companies with the expectations of an eco-conscious market (Cristache, N., et all, 2024). Rebranding has also been examined in relation to company performance, both through stock-market value (Horsky & Swyngedouw, 1987) and, in a multi-country case study, through customer growth and turnover (Moisescu, 2006), while consumer-focused studies examine how audiences react to renamed brands in specific sectors, such as agri-food (Diaconeasa & Lădaru, 2020).

Given its complexity, the research on rebranding has remained fragmented, and several scholars have noted the absence of consolidated studies that could guide effective strategies (Stuart & Muzellec, 2004; Miller & Merrilees, 2012; Hankinson, Lomax and Hand, 2007; Gotsi & Andriopoulos, 2007). While systematic reviews have addressed related areas such as branding (Gilal et al., 2023), brand image (Plumeyer et al., 2017), and brand equity in B2B contexts (Keränen, Piirainen and Salminen, 2012), rebranding has not received similar attention. This highlights the need for a systematic review that can bring together existing knowledge and provide a clearer roadmap for academics and practitioners alike.

This study aims to bridge this gap by conducting a systematic review of the rebranding literature. Specifically, it seeks to trace how rebranding has been defined and applied over time, to examine the methodologies employed across the existing body of research, and to identify which aspects of the phenomenon have received the most attention and which remain underexplored. By mapping the current state of the field and highlighting its main gaps, the study also proposes directions for future research. To our knowledge, this is the first systematic review devoted specifically to rebranding, offering scholars both a consolidated overview of the literature and a clear picture of where further investigation is needed.

2. Methodology

2.1 Search strategy and data collection

We conducted a systematic literature review following the methodology proposed by Denyer and Tranfield (2009), which provides a structured approach to searching, selecting, and synthesizing academic literature. The review process adheres to the PRISMA reporting guidelines (Moher et al., 2009; Aromataris & Pearson, 2014), ensuring transparency and replicability at each stage (Figure 1).

Originally developed for medical research, the PRISMA framework has been widely adopted in the social sciences for its ability to minimize bias and provide a clear account of how studies are identified, screened, and included. The methodological design also draws on Snyder (2019), who highlights the value of systematic reviews in business research for mapping the current state of a field and identifying areas where knowledge remains underdeveloped.

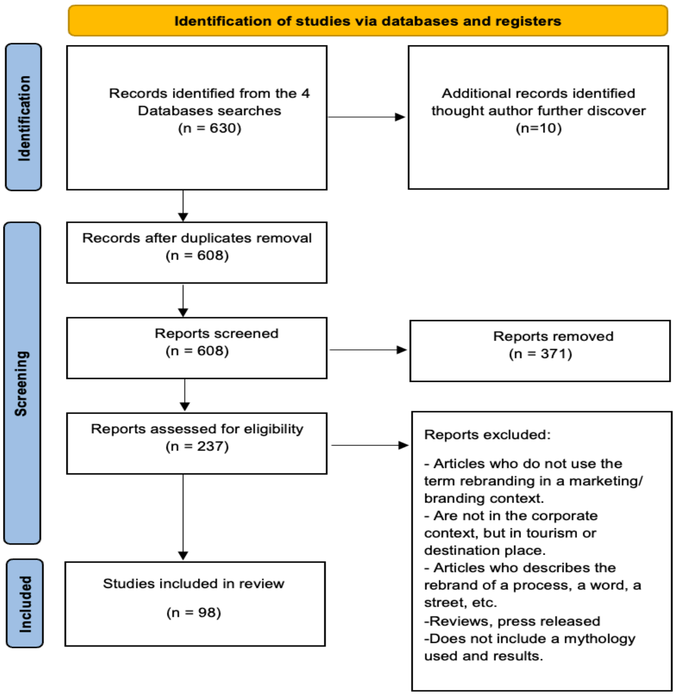

Figure 1. Systematic review process

Source: Authors' data based on the PRISMA flow diagram (Moher et al., 2009)

Through this approach, the study aims to offer a reliable synthesis of the rebranding literature, providing both a comprehensive overview of existing research and a foundation for identifying gaps and proposing directions for future investigation.

Four major databases were searched: Emerald Insight, ProQuest, ScienceDirect, and Web of Science. Although some scholars treat “rebranding” as synonymous with “revitalization,” “re-labelling,” or “brand refresh,” we limited our search to four term variations: “re-branding,” “rebranding,” “rebrand,” and “re-brand,” looking for these keywords in titles, keywords, or abstracts. Limiting the search to lexical variations of "rebranding" was therefore intended to ensure the conceptual coherence of the selected literature corpus and to reduce the risk of including studies in which the concept was used only peripherally or with a meaning different from its established use in the marketing literature.

The initial search yielded 630 articles across all databases. After removing entries with missing information (DOI, author, publication details), filtering out non-business fields (medical, literary, political, sociological), and eliminating duplicates, 258 unique articles remained.

Summary of the initial database search and filtering process

Table 1

Database	Scope	Total Articles	Retained
Emerald Insights	Title, keyword, abstract	155	84
ProQuest	Title, keyword, abstract	21	18
Elsevier	Title, keyword, abstract	22	10
Web of Science	Title, keyword, abstract	432	146
Totals		**630**	**258**

Source: Authors’ own research

2.2 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The inclusion criteria required that articles be written in English, published in peer-reviewed journals, and originating from the fields of marketing, management, or economics. No temporal restriction was applied, allowing the review to capture the full evolution of rebranding research from its earliest appearances to the present day. Articles were required to contain at least one of four keyword variations: "rebranding," "re-branding," "rebrand," or "re-brand" in the title or subtitle.

Studies were excluded if they fell outside the disciplines of marketing, management, or economics. This meant removing articles from fields such as medicine (where "rebranding" referred to pharmaceutical renaming or drug repositioning), sociology and psychology (where the term was used metaphorically for identity reconstruction), politics (where it described party or candidate image shifts), and literary studies. Books, book reviews, press releases, commentaries, and conference proceedings were also excluded, as were articles that used the term "rebrand" in non-branding contexts or that lacked sufficient empirical or conceptual depth. Studies addressing non-corporate settings were removed, including destination rebranding (countries, cities, or tourist areas), which typically involves public administration rather than business stakeholders, as well as institutional rebranding, street renaming initiatives, and the rebranding of specific terms or cultural concepts. Similarly, studies in which rebranding was not the primary research focus but rather a secondary or peripheral topic were not retained.

Following the application of these criteria, all 258 remaining articles were examined in detail. Non-academic publications and studies without a clear methodological framework were excluded. A recurring challenge during this phase was the frequent use of "rebranding" to describe general processes of change, such as organizational restructuring or policy shifts, rather than business-specific brand transformations. To ensure comprehensiveness, an additional 10 articles identified through citation tracking and cross-referencing were included, resulting in a final sample of 98 articles deemed relevant for the systematic review.

3. Description of the literature

3.1 Publication activity and trends

The rebranding literature has grown over recent decades (Figure 2). Earlier studies relied mainly on case studies and descriptive accounts, while more recent work has tried to quantify rebranding's impact on corporate performance and brand equity. Growth has not been linear: the earliest article dates from 1987 (Horsky & Swyngedouw, 1987), which remains among the most cited (229 citations). The most cited article overall is Muzellec & Lambkin's (2006) work on brand equity and corporate rebranding. The year 2014 saw the highest output, with 13 articles. Why research volume has not continued to grow, despite rebranding's recognized importance, remains an open question.

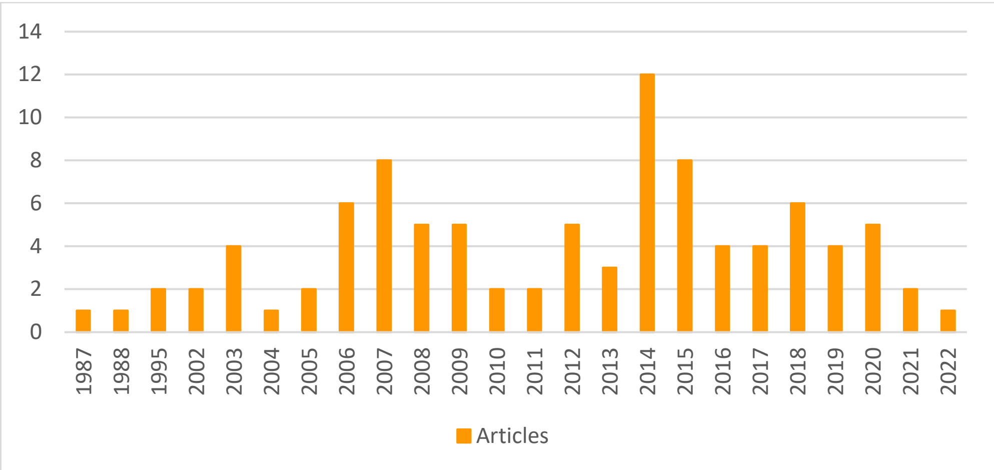

Figure 2. Rebranding publication trends over years
Source: Authors' own research

Using Litmaps (Figure 3), we identified the most cited authors: Laurent Muzellec and Mary Lambkin each have six articles, followed by Philippa Hankinson, Wendy Lomax, Manto Gotsi, and Constantine Andriopoulos with three each. The Journal of Brand Management leads with 15 mentions, followed by the Journal of Product & Brand Management (8), the European Journal of Marketing (5), and Corporate Reputation Review and the Journal of Business Strategy (4 each).

3.2 Theoretical perspectives

A key finding is the widespread use of consumer branding theories to explain corporate rebranding. Frameworks like Aaker's brand equity model and Keller's customer-based brand equity model have been frequently adapted (Brophy, 2014; Tsai, Dev & Chintagunta, 2015; Calderwood & Freathy, 2013). However, this transfer is not always appropriate given the multi-stakeholder nature of corporate rebranding. The field does have its own frameworks: Brand Reinforcement (Aaker, 1991), Brand Revitalization (Keller, 1999), Corporate Rebranding Principles (Merrilees & Miller, 2008), the Corporate Rebranding Process Model (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006), and the Brand Transfers Model (Kapferer, 2008) but these frameworks remain partial in scope, each addressing specific aspects of the rebranding process rather than offering a comprehensive account of it.

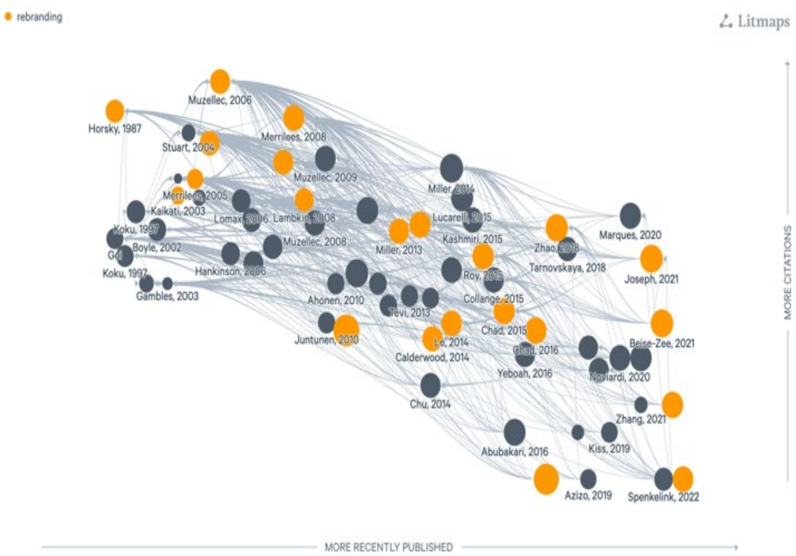

Figure 3. Most cited authors in rebranding research
Source: Authors' own research

3.3 Methodological approaches

The reviewed studies rely heavily on case study methods. Only 19% are theoretical; around 81% are empirical. Of the empirical articles, 46 are case studies, 8 are experiments, 10 are quantitative, 14 are qualitative, and just 1 uses mixed methods.While quantitative approaches have provided valuable insights into brand performance and market response, they often miss the dynamic nature of rebranding. Few studies have used longitudinal or mixed-method designs to track how rebranding efforts evolve over time.

4. Findings

Our research addresses key questions about rebranding: the main research topics, the theoretical frameworks used, and their implications for theory and practice. Unlike many academic fields where theory dominates, rebranding is highly practical. Theoretical papers do more than describe phenomena: they develop frameworks to improve rebranding efforts (Hatch & Schultz, 2003; Merrilees, 2005; Daly & Moloney, 2004).

4.1 Methodology and research gaps

Research on corporate rebranding is methodologically diverse but fragmented and highly context specific. Most empirical work relies on case studies, especially single-industry analyses and retrospective studies of successful rebranding, which account for 46 of the 79 empirical articles. These approaches, such as Berry's (1988) revitalization framework or Daly & Moloney's (2004) Vodafone-based model, offer rich insights but limited generalizability and risk survivorship bias.

Longitudinal designs are rare, with exceptions like Merrilees & Miller's (2008) study tracking heritage-innovation balance over decades and Horsky's (1987) stock market event study. The few theoretical contributions typically come from literature reviews rather than hypothesis-testing studies, as seen in Muzellec & Lambkin's (2006) typology integrating mergers and acquisitions theories with brand architecture concepts.

Quantitative methods (31% of empirical studies) often rely on cross-sectional surveys or financial analyses (Hanson et al., 2009; Marques et al., 2020) that reduce rebranding to measurable outcomes like stock prices or market share, while overlooking the social and cultural dimensions, such as employee identity struggles (Stuart, 2012) or perceived authenticity loss (Jaju, Joiner & Reddy, 2006). The lack of standardized measurement tools and inconsistent definitions of "brand equity" or "rebranding success" make cross-study comparisons difficult.

4.2 Methodological limitations

Three main limitations stand out. First, 54% of empirical articles are single case studies that rarely compare across industries, making it hard to distinguish general principles from context-specific ones. Second, failed rebranding initiatives are largely ignored. Only two studies examine high-profile reversals like Gap's 2010 logo retraction (Pollach, 2016). Third, social media's role in shaping stakeholder perceptions is underexplored, apart from Machado et al.'s (2012) sentiment analysis. Cultural and geopolitical variables are also largely absent, despite evidence that merger-driven strategies differ significantly between collectivist Asian and individualist Western markets (Lambkin & Muzellec, 2008).

The adaptation of consumer branding theories (such as Aaker's brand equity dimensions or Kapferer's identity prism) to corporate settings often fails to account for the full complexity of organizational rebranding: decision-making hierarchies, institutional legitimacy pressures, internal resistance, and the risk that consolidation may erode rather than strengthen brand equity. Stuart's (2012) tripartite identity model illustrates how consumer brand-attachment frameworks overlook the organisational dynamics at play, while Jaju et al.'s (2006) findings on post-merger brand equity decline similarly highlight the limits of assuming that theoretical constructs developed for consumer contexts translate directly into corporate rebranding outcomes.

Practitioner-oriented frameworks dominate the literature, such as Kaikati & Kaikati's (2003) six-strategy typology or Ahonen's (2008) four-phase process. While useful, their prescriptive focus on "best practices" often overlooks the contextual factors that shape outcomes. Few studies use contingency theory to map strategy-environment fit, though Lomax & Mador's (2006) rebranding matrix implicitly recognizes the role of context.

4.3 Implications for theory and practice

There is an urgent need for hypothesis-testing research to validate frameworks like Merrilees & Miller's (2008) six principles or Muzellec & Lambkin's (2006) hierarchical model. The field would benefit from theories that connect general branding concepts with what actually happens in rebranding projects, for example, through grounded theory studies in underexplored contexts like NGO rebranding or post-scandal image recovery. For practitioners, evidence-based tools are needed to navigate tensions between evolutionary changes (**minor visual adjustments**) and revolutionary ones (name changes), supported by cross-industry comparisons and failure case studies that are currently missing from the literature.

5. Conclusions and future research agenda

This systematic review reveals that rebranding research, while growing, remains fragmented in terms of theory, methodology, and scope. The field is dominated by single case studies (54% of empirical work), relies heavily on consumer branding theories borrowed for corporate contexts, and largely overlooks failed initiatives, digital-era dynamics, and cross-cultural differences. Based on these findings, we propose five directions for future research.

First, methodological diversification is needed. The dominance of qualitative case studies limits broader applicability. Future work should incorporate quantitative and mixed-method designs, including surveys, experiments, and longitudinal studies that can track the long-term effects of rebranding on brand equity and organizational performance. Questions about the durability of rebranding gains and the evolution of stakeholder reactions over time remain open.

Second, cross-industry and cross-cultural comparisons are essential. Most studies focus on single industries (Bamfo, Dogbe & Osei-Wusu, 2018; Blengini & Das, 2020, Zlati, M. L. et all, 2026), making it hard to identify universal patterns. Comparative research across sectors and across countries would help determine how cultural factors, brand heritage, and market maturity influence rebranding outcomes. The internal dynamics of rebranding within multinational companies, including interdepartmental conflicts and regional differences, also deserve attention.

Third, experimental research is needed to understand stakeholder reactions. High-profile failures such as Gap (Pollach, 2016) and Coca-Cola (Barkay, 2012) show that rebranding carries real risks. Experimental designs could help predict consumer and employee responses to different rebranding approaches, from minor visual changes to complete name changes. Additionally, a systematic analysis of rebranding failures – which are underreported due to publication bias – would provide valuable lessons for risk management.

Fourth, the role of social media in rebranding deserves much more attention. As consumers and media respond in real time to corporate changes, research should explore how different stakeholder groups react to announcements, whether immediate feedback enables companies to adjust their approach, and whether participatory models (such as public voting on brand elements) can increase stakeholder buy-in. The effectiveness of social media tools for gathering real-time feedback during rebranding remains largely unexplored.

Fifth, the role of external consultants in the rebranding process needs systematic study. While many case studies mention branding agencies, there is little research on whether the choice of agency influences outcomes, when external expertise outperforms in-house teams, or what criteria organizations use to select partners. The influence of individual creatives within agencies on rebranding results is also an open question.

By addressing these gaps, scholars can move corporate rebranding from a fragmented applied field toward a more robust theoretical domain with real predictive power. The field needs diverse methods, context-sensitive theories, and studies that include failures alongside successes – moving beyond isolated case studies to build a discipline that can guide organizations through the complexities of rebranding in the 21st century.

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