

# Reconciling the tension between consistency and relevance: design thinking as a mechanism for brand ambidexterity

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**Abstract** In order to sustain and grow brand equity, brand managers are faced with balancing the preservation of existing brand identity through consistency with the need to maintain relevance, which requires change and innovation. In this paper we build upon the concept of organizational ambidexterity (March 1991), arguing that design thinking—the logics and practices associated with designers—can serve as a mechanism which promotes and enables the integration of brand consistency and relevance. Drawing on cases of innovation at firms across a range of industries, we show how design thinking can trigger brand ambidexterity across a three-stage process. We identify eight practices and examine how designers enable brand managers to address enduring consistency-relevance tensions in ways that ensure innovations renew or revitalize the brand without undermining its essence.

**Keywords** Design · Design thinking · Brand consistency · Brand relevance · Innovation · Product innovation · Exploitation · Exploration · Ambidexterity

## Introduction

Strong brands deliver many valuable outcomes for firms, including significant price premiums, loyal customers, sales, and ultimately higher firm valuation (Fischer et al. 2010; Madden et al. 2006). Brands<sup>1</sup> are among the most important intangible assets for firms (Keller and Lehmann 2006) and brand-building activities are a top priority for many marketing managers (Keller 1999). Brand equity is built through brand awareness and brand image, the latter of which requires the development of favorable, strong, and unique brand associations (Keller 1993). Once developed, managers must defend, preserve and increase the brand's equity against a backdrop of a changing market environment (Van Rekom et al. 2006). To do so, brand managers must maintain consistency (in both image and marketing support), take a long-term view, and carefully leverage existing brand equity (Delgado-Ballester et al. 2012; Keller et al. 2002; Park et al. 1986). Yet at the same time, managers must also maintain brand relevance, which may require change and, importantly, innovation (Aaker 2012; Holt and Cameron 2010; Kapferer 2014).

Integrating the competing objectives of consistency and relevance is not easy. On one hand, brand managers must establish a clear frame of reference for the brand and reinforce the brand's image over time; on the other, they must innovate

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<sup>1</sup> Defined as “a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or combination of them which is intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and differentiate them from those of competitors” (Keller 1993, p. 2).

in order to adapt to market changes (Beverland et al. 2010). However, adaptation must not come at the expense of diluting the brand's essential identity (Van Rekom et al. 2006). The need to strike a balance between continuity and change in brand marketing activities echoes debates in the innovation management and organizational learning literatures related to firms' capacity to create both incremental and radical product innovations (Dewar and Dutton 1986), and to foster both explorative and exploitative behaviors (Raisch and Birkinshaw 2008). In those areas, scholars have been drawn to the concept of *ambidexterity*: the notion that organizations shouldn't choose one mode or activity over another, but rather engage in both simultaneously for sustained performance (e.g., He and Wong 2004; Raisch et al. 2009).

This study focuses on a possible mechanism enabling consistency and relevance activities to co-exist: the logic of design and its related practices. Researchers and practitioners have identified design as a driving force behind improved brand relevance (Allen et al. 2008). For instance, designers are often tasked with bringing new meaning to existing product categories or communicating new meanings to consumers (Holt and Cameron 2010; Nedergaard and Gyrð-Jones 2013). Moreover, the inherent logic and practices of designers—sometimes referred to as “design thinking” (Brown 2009; Chen and Venkatesh 2013; Cross 2011; Dorst 2006; Liedtka 2014; further defined below)—have been identified by innovation management researchers as having much to offer business disciplines, particularly as a potent means to innovate (Koepecka et al. 2012; Martin 2009).

Despite calls to adopt a design thinking approach to brand management, to our knowledge, no research has examined the nature of these espoused benefits. We respond to these appeals, and address the question: “how can design thinking enable brand managers to reconcile the tension between consistency and relevance?” Drawing on cases of innovation at firms across a range of industries, we find that designers' distinctive processes and practices can trigger what we term “brand ambidexterity”—the capacity to attain *both* consistency and relevance—thus enabling brand managers to establish or increase brand relevance without sacrificing the benefits of consistency. In particular, we provide evidence that designers address consistency-relevance tensions through a three-stage process involving eight practices and that each of these practices is, in turn, imbued with the hallmarks of design thinking. In so doing, we improve our understanding of the relationship between brand and innovation management.

## Literature review

### The brand management challenge: consistency vs. relevance

Brand *consistency* refers to the standardization and preservation, over time and place, of a defined brand image and

associated meanings, for example, through names, symbols and positioning themes (Bengtsson et al. 2010). Academics and practitioners alike have identified consistency, fortification, reinforcement and preservation of brand identity as cornerstones of competent brand management practice. For example, “[b]rand consistency is critical to maintaining the strength and favorability of brand associations,” notes Keller (1999, p. 103; see also Aaker 2014), who also includes consistency as one of the ten items in his brand scorecard. Park et al. (1986, p. 143) propose that consistency is essential not only for established brands but also brands at the “fortification stage,” and emphasize the need for new products to stress their linkage to the original brand concept/image.

Low and Fullerton (1994) show that tactical decisions and feedback mechanisms are organized around the brand, rather than at an organizational or departmental level. Thus, marketing mix decisions are driven by a brand's extant identity, communications are developed to ensure consistency with that identity, and feedback mechanisms such as tracking research measure divergence from previous awareness, further promoting a focus on reinforcing the status quo (Keller 1993; Keller and Lehmann 2006). A commitment to consistency and stability is also revealed in the brand audit process, whereby managers are encouraged to focus on customer touch-points and journeys in order to close identity-image gaps (Hatch and Schultz 2000; Högström et al. 2015). Finally, instructional case studies and high profile failures often provide morality tales about the dangers of inconsistency (Deighton 2003) or straying from one's identity (Dolan 2001).

Each of these provides evidence of an inherent logic of *exploitation*, which March (1991) explained thus: “the essence of exploitation is the refinement and extension of *existing* competencies, technologies and paradigms” (p. 85, emphasis added). However, a focus on exploiting existing capabilities can be problematic: managers must also be prepared to adapt the brand to changing circumstances if, for example, attributes that were once compelling and differentiating have been adopted by competing brands, rendering them mere points of parity. Given the value placed on stability, competitive responses typically are limited to incremental adaptations focused on maintaining brand preference among existing customers. These incremental adaptations may ultimately lead to the erosion of brand equity. For example, the focus on reinforcing a brand's existing position may not address shifting socio-cultural expectations or challenges faced by consumers, resulting in perceptions of irrelevance (Holt 2004); is unlikely to lead to maintained market position or prevent price and margin erosion (Aaker 2012); and may reduce customer relevance (Rust et al. 2004).

Therefore, although brand consistency is important, so too is *relevance*, the perception “that the brand has something that is personally relevant or appropriate to the consumer” (Rosenbaum-Elliott et al. 2011, p. 176). According to Aaker

(2012), relevance exists when a product or service category or subcategory emerges; there is a perceived need or desire on the part of a group of customers for that category; and the focal brand is in the consideration set of desirous customers. Measures of brand value, including Young & Rubicam's Brand Asset Valuator (BAV), identify relevance as one of two core measures of brand strength. Importantly, innovation and relevance are inextricably connected, because innovation creates the category that drives desire: "Competitive success involves making competitors irrelevant by developing offerings so innovative that they contain 'must haves' that define a new category" (Aaker 2012, p. 44). By definition, a brand's ability to create such impactful change cannot come from the refinement and extension of existing capabilities but rather relies upon *exploration*: the capacity of organizations to investigate and pursue new opportunities, develop new knowledge, and radically innovate their products and services (Tushman and O'Reilly 1996).

Despite agreement among brand scholars that innovation is imperative for brand relevance (Aaker 2012; Holt and Cameron 2010) and that relevance has a positive impact on financial performance (Gerzema and Lebar 2008; Mizik and Jacobson 2008), brand innovation is often hindered by the consistency-based dominant logic of brand marketers, which leads actors to focus on reinforcing identity through incremental innovations. Although useful (and vital) for driving brand equity, such logic engenders just one set of insights critical for the long-term success of the brand. Indeed, brand decline can result when managers emphasize stability at the expense of innovation (Aaker 2012; Keller 1999; Urde et al. 2013). For example, Jaguar Land Rover, Volvo and Aston Martin suffered from excessive exploitation of existing knowledge and product designs during Ford ownership, and are now exploring new technologies and design languages to revive their respective brands (Raggio and Leone 2008).

Tensions between consistency and relevance, and between exploitation and exploration, as well as differences between incremental and radical innovation are summarized in Table 1. While there are clear parallels—consistency, exploitation and incremental innovation on one hand, relevance, exploration and radical innovation on the other—the concepts are not completely aligned. For example, Apple's category-expanding iPad was a radical product innovation, but it was consistent with the brand (Chang et al. 2012; Ranscombe et al. 2012; as Aaker (2012) noted, this innovation also achieved enhanced brand equity through relevance). Equally, the design of the Cayenne sport-utility vehicle (SUV) by luxury sports car company Porsche is an example of exploitation of existing technology, which led to a successful, off-brand product (da Silveira et al. 2013). At the same time, very often consistency is achieved through the exploitation of existing knowledge and technology and incremental innovation of products and

services; whereas relevance requires a different logic, one which relies on exploration and the pursuit of radical innovation.

### The dominant logic of strategic brand management

We contend, therefore, that the dominant logic underpinning contemporary brand management privileges consistency over relevance, and propose that this logic leads key decision-makers to focus their actions on reinforcing identity in ways that may inhibit potentially beneficial innovation.

A dominant logic represents the belief systems and mental models managers use when making decisions or "the way in which managers conceptualize the business and make critical resource allocation decisions" (Bettis and Prahalad 1986, p. 490). Although originally conceptualized as a firm-level construct, work on organizational culture and group collaboration suggests that logics exist at multiple levels, including within functional groups or disciplines (Carlile 2002; Flynn 2011). These logics provide stability; ensure consistency among members of a functional division or organization; and enable actors to structure information and engage in sensemaking. However, they also affect how problems are framed and what information is considered meaningful, and thereby influence what is perceived to be the correct course of action (Knorr-Cetina 1999). Individuals develop these logics through a number of avenues, including formal training; interactions with close network members; exposure to stories that reinforce notions of right and wrong; experience; and reinforcement mechanisms such as formal and informal reward structures (Martin 1992).

Drawing from the research presented above, we propose that brand management has a dominant logic rooted in preserving consistency. This logic represents just one important input into the problem of value creation (i.e., it is neither "wrong" nor "the one right way"). However, it is worth emphasizing that while assisting brand managers to negotiate and navigate their world, the conformity to a dominant logic also implies that they may ignore or denigrate information and insights that do not conform to their worldview (Carlile 2002; Dougherty 1992). For example, in their study of brand managers, Högström et al. (2015) found that schemas defined managers' time horizon as well as the width of their enacted environment: "the environment consciously selected, attended to, acted upon, and deemed important for the brand's performance" (p. 5). The authors identified two schemes, calculative and heuristic, both of which affirm consistency while undermining the ability or likelihood to innovate. To our knowledge, their study remains the sole examination of the management schema underpinning brand management and one that explicitly links branding with a dominant logic.

**Table 1** Relationships among constructs: consistency/relevance, exploitation/ exploration, and incremental/radical innovation

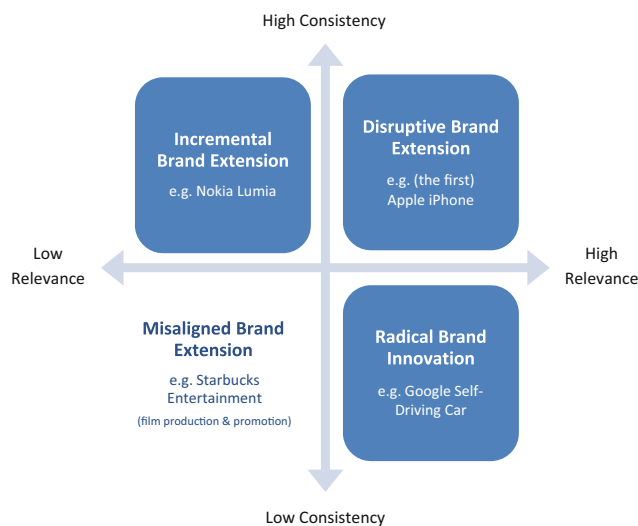
	Ambidexterity (Exploitation – Exploration)	Degrees of innovation (Incremental – Radical)
<b>Consistency</b>	<b>Exploitation</b> focuses on existing competencies, technologies and paradigms, honing and extending current knowledge (Andriopoulos and Lewis 2009). Exploitation enables firms to meet the needs of existing customers or markets (Benner and Tushman 2003); reduce variation and cost; enhance control and improve execution and product/service offerings (Junni et al. 2013). However, its variance-reducing dynamics can stunt radical innovation and responsiveness to new customer segments (Benner and Tushman 2003), increasing the risk of obsolescence and of falling in a “success trap” (Cao et al. 2009; Gupta et al. 2006).	<b>Incremental innovation</b> is characterized by relatively simple improvements, adaptations, line extensions, or imitations of competitive offerings (de Brentani 2001), as well as continuous modification of previously accepted practices (Abernathy and Clark 1985). It requires a limited amount of new knowledge (Dewar and Dutton 1986).  Incremental innovation is characterized by small changes in technology, and high customer familiarity with products/ services (Danneels and Kleinschmidt 2001).
<b>Relevance</b>	<b>Exploration</b> focuses on the development of new knowledge (Andriopoulos and Lewis 2009); creates options (Benner and Tushman 2003); and seeks out new opportunities (Jansen et al. 2009).  Exploration is related to the search, variation and experimentation that can lead to radical innovation of products and services (Athuahene-Gima 2005) and can help meet the needs of emerging customers or markets (Jansen et al. 2006). However, exploration may fail to deliver meaningful returns from costly search and experimentation activities (Cao et al. 2009) and poses the risk of falling in a “failure trap” (Gupta et al. 2006).	<b>Radical innovation</b> is characterized by discontinuity with the past (Garcia and Calantone 2002), and requires a high degree of new knowledge (Dewar and Dutton 1986).  Radical technological innovation entails clear advances in state-of-the-art technology and offering better functionality or performance. Radical market innovation is characterized by high novelty from a customer point of view, but perception of potential risk in adopting it (Danneels and Kleinschmidt 2001).

**Brand ambidexterity**

Brand managers are often given little insight into how to manage the tension between consistency and relevance (Brown et al. 2003; Thompson et al. 2006). Aaker (2014) suggests brand relevance requires specialist skills to be sensitive to marketplace changes and emerging weaknesses, capabilities often at odds with his stance on avoiding change biases. Gerzema and Lebar (2008) suggest that instilling energy into one’s brand requires marketers to focus on exploring new sources of meaning, yet the ability to do so is not generally part of brand management practice. Merz et al. (2009) propose that established brand models treat customers as exogenous to value creation, resulting in the inability to identify or use insights that may conflict with marketers’ intended meaning. Instead, many of the routines fundamental to brand management, such as establishing a brief, converting it into a strategic document or “brand bible” (Holt and Cameron 2010) and then using that document to drive future action (including writing briefs that define desired innovation or design) can undermine brand managers’ ability to identify the early warning signs of a need for change, let alone revitalize or reposition brands.

Although little guidance exists to help brand managers resolve the competing imperatives of brand consistency and relevance, we argue that doing so is fundamental for sustainable performance. Thus, following the terminology used in the management literature, we introduce the concept of *brand ambidexterity*, which we define as a marketing capability

(Day 1994) whereby a brand is strategically managed to create value through the pursuit of both consistency and relevance. Rather than conceptualizing consistency and relevance along a linear continuum, we characterize brands as sitting in a two-dimensional space, which is similar to what is argued by ambidexterity researchers (Birkinshaw and Gupta 2013; Cao et al. 2009). Figure 1 shows the interplay and possible outcomes of various levels of brand consistency and relevance. Importantly, in our conceptualization of brand ambidexterity,



**Fig. 1** Interplay and possible outcomes of brand consistency and relevance



only the bottom left quadrant in the diagram—the combination of both low relevance and low consistency (Keller 1999)—must be avoided. The remaining quadrants, however, reflect strategic opportunities for differential forms of innovation. For example, incremental brand extensions show how brands can enhance consistency without necessarily increasing relevance, and be more or less successful in doing so (e.g., iPhone6 or the Nokia Lumia, respectively) (Aaker 2012). Conversely, radical brand innovations such as the Morgan Motor Company’s hydrogen powered LifeCar are characterized by high relevance and low consistency (Beverland 2009). Finally, disruptive brand extensions are examples of significant brand ambidexterity, as solutions are high in both relevance and consistency, as in the case of the first iPhone and iPad (Aaker 2014).

Moreover, we argue that the precepts and practices associated with a design-driven logic—described below—provide important resources for ambidextrous brand management. That is, when well-deployed, design thinking practices can help brand managers successfully navigate their way among multiple innovation options while avoiding the lower left quadrant altogether.

### The nature of design and design thinking

If the dominant logic of brand management privileges consistency but relevance is required for sustainable performance, it stands to reason that brand managers might benefit from exposure to different frames of reference. Increasingly, evidence suggests that designers frame brand and innovation challenges differently than marketers (Micheli et al. 2012; Verganti 2008, 2011). Indeed, the ability to challenge existing ways of thinking and/or to force organizations to ask “what if?” type questions as a means of creating value is consistent with a design thinking approach (Liedtka 2004).

Herbert Simon (1969) was among the first to investigate design as a perspective, defining it as “the transformation of existing conditions into preferred ones” (p. 4). The term now employed for this process, “design thinking,” comes from the title of a 1987 book by Peter Rowe, but its use outside of the design literature is even more recent, having been popularized by Tim Brown (2008) of design consultancy IDEO. Despite the diversity of views over the nature and scope of design thinking, there is general agreement over designers’ methods or ways of thinking about problems. In this research, consistent with previous studies (Li 2002; Liedtka 2014; Martin 2009) we define design thinking as a creative and strategic process characterized by the following hallmarks: abductive reasoning, iterative thinking and experimentation, holistic perspective, and human-centeredness.

**Abductive reasoning** Abductive reasoning is different from deductive reasoning (which seeks to guarantee the truth of its

conclusion if its premises are correct) and inductive reasoning (inference based on multiple observations), because it involves considering the possibility of what *might* be (Martin 2009), and challenges what exists, asking “what if?” type of questions (Liedtka 2014). Therefore, abductive reasoning allows for the creation of new knowledge and insight (Kolko 2010), as “designers focus on ... workable solutions [that] are ‘assertion-based rather than evidence-based’” (Michlewski 2008, pp. 386–387). In so doing, design thinking foregrounds a focus on how things *ought* to be, and the pursuit of novelty (Cross 2011).

**Iterative-thinking and experimentation** The need to address “what if?” questions and to address problems focusing on desired results, rather than on the status quo, leads to another hallmark of design thinking: the reliance on iteration and experimentation. Indeed, consonant with Beckman and Barry’s (2007) model of innovation as a learning process, design thinking is a dynamic, iterative means of apprehending problems and considering solutions. Design thinking is characterized by trial-and-error learning through iterative forms, prototyping, and trials that test a range of possible solutions with end-users and other project stakeholders.

**Holistic perspective** Scholars have emphasized that design thinking (and innovation more broadly) requires a holistic perspective, one which considers not just the specific issue under consideration, but how that issue functions *in context* as part of the environment or system in which it exists (Brown 2008; Owen 2007). This implies a general “understanding of the problem, including customer’s needs (explicit and tacit), the end-user’s environment, social factors, market adjacencies, and emerging trends” (Holloway 2009, p. 52). Such emphasis on context (including market context), is useful to trigger brand ambidexterity, as it helps frame problem definition as contingent on the system in which it emerges.

**Human-centeredness** Design thinking reflects an experience-focused approach, which examines the perspective of affected individuals (e.g., consumers, users) within a system, including not only a product or service’s function and use, but also anticipating related emotions or meanings before considering possible solutions (Brown 2008; Crawford and Di Benedetto 2014). Human-centeredness is distinctive from the customer orientation (e.g., Kohli and Jaworski 1990) espoused by marketing (including brand) managers in that it not only can help identify unarticulated or latent needs (Michlewski 2008), but also fundamentally reframe or create new markets and their products.

Given these attributes, it becomes evident why the outcomes of design thinking might be useful for brand managers and others concerned with firm strategy; design thinking practices are compelling because they rely on an

inherently subjective synthesis of available information and a construed response leading to an innovative outcome, rather than a single solution that all competitors can eventually identify and deploy. Martin (2009) notes that design thinking stands in contrast to the analytical thinking (decision-making based on deductive and inductive reasoning) that is prevalent in current management processes, where a “reliability bias” confers authority on outcomes that are consistent and predictable rather than necessarily valid. As Liedtka (2004) asserts, “design thinking seeks to create new possibilities and to choose among them, not merely to solve problems... the solution represents invented choice, rather than discovered truth” (p. 196). Similarly, Austin and Devlin (2003) assert that designers engage in reconceiving, a process that reframes problems and outcomes. Reconceiving is a particularly useful practice for dealing with the unanticipated and stands in contrast to replication, the logic the authors attribute to business disciplines such as marketing and branding. Indeed, although design can address a range of problem types, advocates of design thinking often argue that it is particularly useful under conditions of high uncertainty.

Despite its appeal, the notion of design thinking is not without its critics. For example, Kimbell (2011) notes that the phrase is a misnomer given the wide range of design-based disciplines and individuals’ skills and processes; she criticizes the fact that most popular accounts of design thinking are fundamentally de-contextualized from design history and literature. We emphasize that we do not intend to imply that the practices of the designers in our study sample serve as evidence of a singular representation of what designers do. Instead, we share Kimbell’s (2012) determination to focus on design-as-practice—“a situated and distributed unfolding in which a number of people, and their knowing, doing and saying...are implicated” (p. 135)—and seek to understand design thinking based on its practice in context or application within firms. Therefore, we concentrate on designers’ processes and practices, particularly as they relate to increasing brand relevance, and show how adoption of such processes and practices can lead to successful brand innovation.

### Brand ambidexterity and design thinking

We propose that design thinking can have an important role in resolving enduring brand problems. Anecdotally, as well as in the data we present below, senior leaders and brand managers seek assistance from designers when looking to drive brand growth in mature categories (for example, see Keller and Fay (2012) on the development of U by Kotex); enhance existing or add new brand associations via innovation (cf. Verganti 2011); and refresh tired brands or brands perceived to be in decline (cf. Ravasi and Lojacono 2005). In particular, the abductive reasoning inherent in design thinking can help

address pernicious dualisms such as consistency versus relevance.

Nonetheless, studies on the use of design thinking in brand management are rare (see, for example, Karjalainen and Snelders 2010; Townsend et al. 2013). In related work, Verganti (2008, 2011) has identified how designers reframe existing category meanings. His research focuses on the creation of particular products rather than on brands per se, but the findings imply that designers’ approach to value creation is distinctive from marketers’. Similarly, while Christensen and Raynor (2003) identify marketers’ concern with maintaining brand consistency as a barrier to radical innovation, they also provide several examples of firms that avoided obsolescence by simultaneously embracing radical innovations and creatively reframing existing brand strategies. However, the authors did not explore how this occurred, an issue we address in the study described below.

### Method

To address our research question we focused on the right side of Fig. 1, examining designers’ practices as they addressed brand challenges through increased attention to relevance. Doing so allowed us to notice and carefully examine sometimes conflicting internal stakeholder concerns (i.e., brand managers’ tendency to protect extant assumptions versus the need or desire to innovate) and how designers’ proposed solutions emerged from a distinct set of practices. We adopted a modified grounded theory research design, wherein research questions and emergent lines of inquiry are driven by theoretical sampling and constant comparison among the literature, data, and emerging theory (Fischer and Otnes 2006). We selected this approach because theoretical sampling and constant comparison helped us understand the rich, but variously-enacted practices associated with “design thinking” in the context of brand strategy across multiple cases. This discovery-oriented research approach is also useful for exploring concepts such as design thinking in a new context (brand management) as well examining apparent paradoxes, tensions, practice, and process issues.

We conducted the study in three phases: we engaged an expert sample, conducted firm-level case analysis, and employed population checking.

### Phase I

We began with 13 depth interviews with recognized design experts in Australia and New Zealand. To identify these experts, the first author read local industry publications [the complete run of industry periodicals *Prodesign* (NZ) and *Monument* (Australia)]; drew on contacts in academic design departments; and followed up on contacts provided by the

informants during the interviews (i.e., snowball sampling). These individuals are established, practicing industrial designers (design experience ranged from 10 to 44 years) who run consultancies predominantly focused on providing strategic design and branding services and have a history of thought leadership on business and design-related topics.

During this initial phase, we explored the nature of design practice by asking informants to describe projects that they had been involved with for the duration of the work. We asked each designer to narrate the project process, including reflecting upon their roles, responsibilities, activities, and challenges. We compared their accounts, including successes and failures, and read internal memos and briefing documents provided to us. We were attentive to the interplay between design and branding, focusing on projects involving the reinvigoration of brands in a wide range of industries, including: food, consumer electronics, fashion, furniture and fittings, automotive, air travel, hotels, and medical equipment among several others. Interviews lasted, on average, 1.5 h, were audio recorded, and fully transcribed by the first author (resulting in a total of 203 A4 12-font 1.5-spaced pages).

## Phase II

In addition to familiarizing us with the nature of the designers' practices, the expert interviews were instrumental in identifying exemplar cases of firms that used design to either renew their brands or maintain the relevance of that brand. Accordingly, the second phase of study focused on a set of firms that attributed brand renewal to design input and saw design as integral to their brand strategy. The focal cases in the study's second phase were selected through theoretical sampling, that is, through their ability to contribute to emerging theory. We applied theoretical sampling in two ways: first, based on the themes that emerged during the first phase, the design experts identified approximately 20 examples of firms that would be worth studying more deeply. Second, since data analysis occurred following each case study (involving the standard processes of coding and memo writing), emergent insights drove subsequent case selection. Data collection ended when theoretical saturation was reached, i.e., when new data provides no new theoretical insights (Strauss and Corbin 1998). During this stage, we conducted interpretive interviews with senior industrial designers (all but one of whom were employed within the organization studied;  $n=24$ ) and brand managers or marketers with brand responsibility ( $n=20$ ) in 20 firms (see Table 2), conducting a total of 44 interviews.<sup>2</sup>

Interviews were driven by grand tour questions that enabled informants to speak about their experiences and

practices on their own terms. These were interspersed with floating prompts or specific follow-up questions to explore areas of interest or gain clarification on in vivo terms and processes (McCracken 1988). Although the questions in our interview guide shifted across the cases and as patterns emerged that warranted further investigation, the basis of each interview involved explorations of innovation projects with multiple stakeholder inputs including brand and market considerations. We asked each informant to describe projects they considered to be successes, as well as those they were unhappy with or considered failures. Since interviews were conducted at the workplace, we were able to access a range of related project media, including: documents, video, and artifacts such as prototypes, concepts, mock-ups, and final versions. Consistent with research on the story-telling potential of such objects, we used these to stimulate further discussion (Stigliani and Ravasi 2012).

Interviews in Phase II lasted on average 1.5 h (with an upper range of 3.5 h). These interviews were recorded and transcribed, resulting in a transcript of 420 A4 12-point font, 1.5-spaced pages. Data were analyzed using the three-stage coding process recommended by Spiggle (1994): open, axial and selective. The first author and a trained assistant coded the data independently. Disagreements, although rare (the initial agreement rate was 85%), were discussed, and, where necessary, resolved in consultation with two colleagues knowledgeable about design and brand management. All three authors then further interpreted the data, offering new insights, pushing for clarification and contextualization, and reflecting upon their own experience with design cases to challenge interpretations.

## Phase III

The third phase of data collection involved a population check with six designers (two from each study phase plus two new informants), whereby we presented our early interpretations and theories for feedback. Two subsequent seminars with brand managers were also conducted as part of the population check process. In each case, the sessions went on for more than an hour and generated additional insight, enabling us to further refine our theory.

Issues of research quality were addressed in the same way as other studies of this type (e.g., see Flint et al. 2002). We addressed research trustworthiness through standard grounded theory criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, integrity, fit, understanding, generality and control (Strauss and Corbin 1998). These outcomes were achieved by using the same researcher to collect data, two people to analyze data, two additional authors to interpret findings, population checking, theoretical sampling, relating theoretical findings to informants' worldviews, three follow-up interviews with informants to clarify in vivo terms, grand tour

<sup>2</sup> Note that we have cloaked the names of both individuals and firms with pseudonyms to insure informant anonymity.

**Table 2** Informant and company details

Case	Case company pseudonym and industry category	Employees	Estimated turnover (US\$ Million)	Extant assumption destabilized by design thinking	Resulting transformation (Innovation)
1	“Comfy Chairs” Office Furniture	250	51–100	Form follows function	Form provides competitive advantage
2	“Swift Ships” Ship Building	220	51–100	Speed through power	Speed through aerodynamics
3	“Sleek suits” High performance sportswear	50	51–100	Primacy of technology	Marriage of technology & senses (“techno-organic”)
4	“Green Clean” FMCG	50	0–50	Sustainability vs. performance	Sustainability <i>and</i> performance
5	“Nature Clothing” Fashion	150	101–200	Fashion vs. sustainability	“Slow fashion”
6	“Home Help” Appliances	4,000	1,500+	Appliances are functional	Appliances enhance and express lifestyle
7	“Lounge Co.” Consumer Furniture	500	100+	Price vs. sustainability	Durable value
8	“Medi-Tech” Medical Equipment	30	0–50	High craft vs. commercialization	Customized craft
9	“Dream Sleep” Consumer furniture	120	0–50	Traditional vs. contemporary	Timeless craft
10	“Shower Co.” Bathroom fitting	400	201–500	Shower as space for functional action	Bathroom as spiritual sanctuary
11	“Kitchen Friend” Crockery	200	51–100	Mass design vs. high design	Antiques of future
12	“Stroller Co” Baby Equipment	150	201–500	Parent has to adapt to product	Products integrate multiple life goals
13	“Fine Cloth” Wool	50	401–500	Intrinsic commodity	Valued ingredient provider
14	“Haute Cuisine” Food	45	101–150	High value=high quality cuts only	All cuts are high value in context
15	“Spark Co” Industrial Electric Engineering	120	0–50	Functionality vs. high design	High design is functional
16	“Street Bags” Bags	70	101–150	Functionality vs. fashion	Fashionable functionality
17	“Craft Gear”: Stationary	120	101–150	Fun and functional for school	Creative fun for all
18	“Smoothie Co” Food and Beverage	80	101–150	Natural vs. commercial	Authentic
19	“Style Corp” Fashion	150	201–500	Classic vs. fashion	Timeless craft
20	“Smart Women” Fashion	120	201–300	Modernity vs. tradition	Traditionally inspired for today

questioning, dialectical tacking, constant comparison, and presentation of initial results at industry and research seminars.

During our interviews, designers and brand managers discussed an array of projects that were provoked by a need to innovate by increasing brand relevance. In particular, the designers explicitly identified that tensions between brand consistency and relevance were central to the framing, discourse and practices related to these innovation projects. Through the process of constant comparison and multiple rounds of thematic coding, we classified these tensions based on the nature of the problem and the source of the tension (external or internal to the organization).

## Findings

We were able to group the tensions identified by designers into three forms based upon the impetus for relevance: brand position vs. market; brand position vs. effectiveness; and brand position vs. emerging future (see Table 3). Brand position is defined as “the part of the brand identity and value proposition that is to be actively communicated to the target audience and that demonstrates an advantage over competing brands” (Aaker 1996, p.71). Exploring the sources of these tensions allowed us to identify underlying assumptions promulgated by brand managers, as well as the productively disruptive design logic (thinking and practices) that stimulated alternative options. These alternatives triggered brand



**Table 3** Sources and expressions of brand consistency-relevance tension

Tension type	External source of tension	Internal source of tension	Essence of problem	Example of logic of consistency	Example of design thinking	Cases where evident
Brand position vs. Market	Customer-driven demand.	Opportunity identification	Inability to exploit potential opportunities because they are perceived 'off-brand.'	Demand for a professional range of products for adults clashed with Craft Gear's focus on children.	Why can't adults play too?	4, 6, 9, 11, 16, 17, 20
Brand position vs. Effectiveness	Equity problems.	Strategic short falls.	Inability to meet targets.	Clean Green brand manager saw "green" products as involving the sacrifice of performance.	What would it take to design green cleaners that were performance leaders?	1, 3, 4, 8, 13, 14, 15
Brand position vs. Emerging future	Environmental calibration.	Preemptive defense of equity.	External changes impacting the relevance of core brand promise.	Nature Fashion's brand manager saw conflict between being a sustainable brand and perceptions that the industry promoted unsustainable consumption.	How do we marry fashion sensibility, financial imperatives and reduced consumption?	1, 2, 5, 7, 10, 12, 18, 19

ambidexterity and increased the innovativeness of the proposed solutions.

All three tensions resulted from conflict between the desire to maintain consistency and the need for relevance. We found that, far from being necessarily reluctant to change, many brand managers were well aware of the dangers associated with ignoring calls for change including declining sales, losing retailer support, reduced competitiveness, decreases in internal resourcing for the brand, and the potential for firm decline. Brand managers also were aware that their previous efforts at tackling these issues through consistency had not resolved them. Thus, while brand managers realized they had to address a central problem, understood their previous approaches had not worked, and knew they needed to do something different, they lacked the skills to do so.

**Practices leveraging design thinking to enable brand ambidexterity**

As discussed above, we do not argue that managers' concern with maintaining the consistency of their brand's identity and image is, in itself, misplaced. However, in examining organizational responses to a need for increased relevance, we found that overreliance on existing frames was an impediment to relevant innovation.

Our analysis reveals that designers' unique contribution to resolving consistency-relevance tension can be understood as a three-stage process that begins as existing assumptions are *destabilized*. Next, the disruption caused by destabilization provides an opportunity to *define* and *develop* alternative perspectives. Finally, the dialectic tension is resolved and order is restored by *transforming* the initially-held assumptions in ways that re-interpret, but do not ignore, the original meanings. In each stage, the hallmarks of design thinking are continually deployed, often concurrently. These are detailed in Table 4 and form the basis for addressing our research question.

**Destabilization**

Brand managers tend to pursue consistency by focusing on reinforcing the extant brand's position through messages, making choices of where and how to compete, and articulating the benefits of the brand to the target user (Keller 1999). They do so to reduce confusion, clarify identity and build equity (Keller 2003), but a by-product of these practices can be resistance to new interpretations of identified problems. In our interviews, it was clear that many brands managers had reified category codes, assumptions, brand position and consumer expectations, and thus considered them *natural* market categories (cf. Slater 2002), which were therefore immutable and enduring. Consider John's definition of the category in which his brand competed:

**Table 4** Design practices that enable brand ambidexterity

	Abductive reasoning	Iterative thinking and experimentation	Holistic perspective	Human-centeredness
<b>Destabilization:</b> (1) naïve questioning (2) problem interrogation (3) contextual immersion	What if we could be or do something different?	What happens if we play with the implications of underpinning mental categories?	Where does the current offering set in terms of context(s)?	What are the espoused and latent needs of users (consumers)?
<b>Define and develop:</b> (1) capabilities matching (2) problem scoping (3) solution development	What could help us achieve relevance?	How do we develop innovative concepts in line with the brand?	How can we design an offer that addresses the wider context in which the problem emerges?	How can we address users' needs?
<b>Transformation:</b> (1) mapping innovation to brand (2) re-stabilizing	How can the innovation best link the brand's past and future?	Can we reframe the innovation in a way that connects to the brand's existing and potential images? Can we expand the brand managers' mental horizons?	How do we ensure the brand delivers value-in-use to stakeholders by defining new brand extensions or associations?	Does the innovation enable the brand to address user needs in a new way, changing perceptions and expectations?

You can move too far outside of the expectations within our category, because the consumer, if you try and talk to them about a washing machine, then you're talking about a washing machine. Don't forget you're talking about a washing machine. Keep it in context and don't try and take me too far out of that space, and what we know from the consumer, from our advertising testing. So that sort of puts some boundaries around our communications. (John, Home Help, Chief Brand Officer)

Although John had good reason to view appliances in functional terms, doing so to this extent limited his ability to differentiate his brand against European competitors and low cost South-East Asian copies, leading to senior management pressure for change (see Table 2). Indeed, a category audit revealed that when lined up side by side, it was almost impossible for consumers to tell competitive brands apart, including a new range for which John had developed a design brief reflecting assumptions of consistency. The firm's senior management team was involved in the product development planning process, and quickly made it clear that the firm needed to do something radically different that would draw on their reputation for innovation while ensuring the high margins necessary to maintain local product and research and development capabilities.

John's approach of drawing on stable knowledge categories was typical of how all but a few brand managers we interviewed responded to calls for relevance-driven change. As a result, when pressure for change conflicted with brand managers' category schema, they were prone to resist. For example, the brand manager at Sleek Suits—a sportswear company—struggled with a move to more relevant innovation because he drew on the industry-wide distinction between performance (which he viewed as a consistent and valuable characteristic of the brand) and fashion (which he dismissed as volatile and therefore dangerous). Similarly, the brand manager at Haute Cuisine—a meat processor—reified category norms of “high-quality meat cuts” thereby placing his brand program in an unsustainable position.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, designers' responses to the same shifts were less entrenched, and therefore more malleable. Instead of reverting to category schema, Sleek Suits' designer, James, sought to understand why high performance athletes were rejecting the firm's wetsuits in favor of seemingly less advanced products by competitors. Similarly, Peter, the designer at Swift Ships, a ship building company, drew upon the firm's engineering expertise to consider how speed could be achieved in ways compatible with clients' calls for greater fuel efficiency, thereby destabilizing the brand manager's view that speed equaled power. Joe, a design consultant brought

<sup>3</sup> Further examples of changes that threatened or destabilized brand managers' assumptive frames are provided in Table 2 under the “destabilization” heading.

in to advise the team at Haute Cuisine, identified how perceptions of high-quality versus low-quality cuts of meat had shifted throughout history, and were largely driven by culinary trends. In each of these examples, the first step in mobilizing brand ambidexterity and thereby having the capability to address various forms of the relevance-consistency tension involved fundamentally destabilizing the categories used by brand managers to frame their options for innovation. They did so through three interrelated sub-practices: naïve questioning, problem interrogation, and contextual immersion.

**Naïve questioning** The first process, naïve questioning, involves asking seemingly simplistic questions such as “what if a dishwasher had a different shape?” (Home Help); “why is high performance incompatible with fashion?” (Sleek Suits); and “what if speed could be achieved with less power?” (Swift Ships). Joe, Haute Cuisine’s design consultant, was tasked with making his client’s brand more sustainable. The firm had built an innovative brand in a small niche: specific high-end cuts of meat desired by American luxury restaurants. Despite the strategic objective to move away from a commodity approach and improve returns for farmers (the firm’s owners), changes to the brand based on a logic of consistency had raised prices for less than ten percent of Haute Cuisine’s product line. By interrogating underlying assumptions about the products in the brand’s portfolio, the designer reframed the problem by subverting industry-based definitions of low-grade vs. high-grade cuts:

They had a product matrix that looks a bit like this [draws pyramid]. You have got high-end products and very low-end products, right? And I could see that all their pricing models were here [top of pyramid] with the high-end cuts, selling racks of venison all beautifully trimmed for the French market or whatever. But they had all this stuff down here [bottom of pyramid], which is B-grade cuts that they weren’t doing much with. I thought: “Well, can we turn tripe [intestinal meat] into a designer product?” [...] So we took B-grade venison cuts and produced special dishes and sausages out of them. We were able to command higher price points in better chains of supermarkets in Europe and North America. All of a sudden, the whole pricing model looks different. (Joe, Haute Cuisine, External Design Consultant)

One can sense the radical nature of Joe’s proposal as Barry, Haute Cuisine’s brand manager, contrasts extant category norms with revised interpretations:

There has been strong positioning discipline on the best eating cuts. You don’t really want to put a whole lot of venison on the market, so we had narrowed the cuts

down to the middle of the animal. We always would sit back and say: “well, the offal and that is just there and we will flick it off where we can,” whereas of course it is a high end product in many ways, or can be made into one as much as possible. (Barry, Haute Cuisine, Brand Manager, emphasis added)

**Problem interrogation** The second destabilization sub-practice is problem interrogation, which entails focusing on understanding the broader socio-cultural and/or historical context in which the consistency-relevance tension emerges. Although “what if?” questions may seem naïve, they are useful precisely because they destabilize the taken-for-granted norms that (a) underpin brand managers’ preference for consistency, and (b) undermine the ability to balance consistency with relevance.

For example, the brand team at Dream Sleep, a consumer furniture firm, struggled to respond to demands for more “traditional” styles of bedroom furniture over the course of 2 years. A segment of prospective end consumers had shown an interest in this style of furniture, and the sales team argued that the lack of such a product line was a weakness that moved consumers to purchase competitors’ offerings. It was a compelling argument, given that, on average, consumers only purchase bedroom furniture once every 10 years; losing potential customers who admired the brand was viewed as a significant problem. Retailers were also growing more insistent on being able to offer such a product line given the amount of floor-space they allocated to the brand. However, for the brand team, “traditional furniture” was an established industry category that referred to historical European or Colonial period furniture, both of which clashed with the brand’s established position of modern designs integrating technology and wood into “sleep systems”:

Sales see an immediate opportunity there; they don’t understand sometimes our reluctance to do it, if it feels quite uncomfortable, conflicting with what we’ve built up. [...] The sales] guys are out in the marketplace saying, ‘Stores are asking for this!’ and you know, we’re there as the purists to sort of say, well, this is what we’ve agreed as who we are as a company and everything we do needs to fit within here, we can’t just be about chasing five minute opportunities. [...] We’ll just turn out being like everybody else. (Mikhailia, Dream Sleep, Brand Director)

Dream Sleep illustrates the Brand Position-Market tension described above, exemplifying both external (customers and retailer) and internal (sales force) sources. The brand director’s comments provide evidence that she sees brand management’s role as preserving the “pure” voice of the brand, protecting it by

fending off what she dismisses as “five minute opportunities.” While Mikhalia has justifiably internalized standard brand management practices such as consistently positioning the brand as a means of maintaining equity (“it feels uncomfortable, conflicting what we’ve built up ... we’ll just turn out being like everybody else”), in so doing, she is ignoring both the voice of the customer and the possibility of significant opportunities to grow the brand.

For their part, the design team was no less worried that a move into “traditional” styles would dilute the brand’s design language. Traditional furniture is a category with an established set of codes, including specific materials, styles, marketing imagery and user lifestyles that have been used by brand managers competing in this market to reinforce their category associations and identity, and many of those were antithetical to the firm’s brand associations. However, in contrast to Mikhalia, designer Jeremy and his team took a naïve view and asked: “why *can’t* our brand include traditional styles”? In posing the question, the designers saw the category of “traditional” as a malleable cultural artifact (Slater 2002) that could be shaped to the brand’s advantage. Destabilizing so-called natural assumptions (Slater 2002), designers at Dream Sleep undertook a historical review of furniture styles in order to understand why the “classic” styles had enduring appeal:

Our approach with that one was to just sort of say: “Well, what do you mean by traditional furniture?” So we actually went on to a much deeper sort of background research project to actually say [...] “what are people meaning when they say ‘traditional’ or ‘antique’?” [...] The most surprising aspect that came out of that was that people will talk ‘tradition,’” but [...] the images that they’re conjuring up are quite highly decorative pieces. [...] We were able to open people’s eyes up to the fact when they were saying “we want more traditional furniture”; what they were really meaning is that “we like the look of European furniture from the 18 and 19th century. (Jeremy, Dream Sleep, Designer)

In interrogating why consumers valued traditional furniture and associated it with certain styles, the design team found that museums played a key part in shaping expectations. Museums typically feature furniture that has not only survived the passing of time in good condition, but once belonged to the wealthy and therefore also carries cachet or scarcity value. Furthermore, the design team’s research had uncovered a series of tacit beliefs that were driving the espoused needs: consumers calling for traditional furniture placed a high value on traditional styles because the decorative pieces were believed to be crafted by skilled craftspeople, in contrast to the contemporary styles consumers associated with mass-production. These insights formed part of an ongoing conversation with the brand team and were drawn upon in designing a new line of bedroom furniture for the brand.

**Contextual immersion** The final sub-practice we identified in the destabilization phase involved immersing oneself in the relevant stakeholder context in order to gain a greater sense of their experience, goals, and life world. This contextual immersion was used to challenge stable categories and stimulate “what if?” type conversations that sought to balance consistency and relevance. Although contextual immersion is a common design process (reflective of the tenet of human-centered design), we noted that designers tended to involve brand managers directly in immersive activities, perhaps hoping to invoke a shared experience and thus similar interpretations relevant for problem definition.

For example, designers at Medi-Tech, a medical equipment firm, brought brand managers in to observe surgeons performing operations in order to show them how important a surgeon’s identity as a skilled craftsman was. The brand had built a reputation for high-quality equipment targeted at hospitals, but was finding it difficult to convince many operations managers to place large orders because of the expense. The design team believed targeting surgeons directly with customized equipment would be a way to enhance the brand’s reputation and differentiate it the marketplace. In contrast, the brand team wanted to focus their efforts on a small segment target of private hospitals, as they believed the only way to address cost concerns was to lower quality inputs, thus diluting the brand’s meaning. Coaxed by the designers to observe surgeons in situ, the brand managers realized they could maintain premiums and address concerns about sales through individualized tools that represented an extension of the surgeon’s sense of self.

Performance sportswear designers at Sleek Suits engaged in a similar practice to destabilize assumptions that were undermining the brand team’s ability to achieve greater relevance. The company had a reputation for technological leadership in swimsuits aimed at professional and semi-professional triathletes. However, despite winning awards and strong initial sales, the brand had problems: its garments were rarely seen being worn by elite athletes at top events, a critical component of the brand’s awareness-raising strategy; the lack of repeat purchase indicated that loyalty was low; and net promoter scores for the brand were neutral at best. Yet customers and influencers (specialist sports and design media) marveled at the technological sophistication of the suits, and market feedback indicated price was not an issue. In the passage below, brand manager Paul expresses his frustration:

The brand is all about performance. We put a lot of money into [development]. The brand is a performance-led one, because all we focus on is the performance of the product [... So] the product’s amazing, and appealing to the people we want, [...] but I think you can push it too far, it just becomes about pure innovation rather than a product that you want. [...] A lot of companies take a lot of short cuts



because [they're] trying to get product sold at the cheapest prices to get them into the hands of more people. So they compromise on the quality of the products, and that does dilute the message, the story, and so they put their money more into the marketing of what will motivate people to buy it based on price. (Paul, Sleek Suits, Brand Manager)

Paul's passage reinforces the power of stable categories to hinder brand ambidexterity. Although Paul acknowledges the product is over-engineered for the needs of the market, he draws on the split between brand authenticity—in this case, context-specific brands focused on performance-driven gear for professionals undertaking triathlons—and marketing fashion-driven products sold by brands with no athletic heritage. For Paul, the options are tradeoffs: one can either remain true to the brand, or cut quality and compete on price. The design team was similarly frustrated with the underperformance of the products and, like Paul, understood that the brand was under-delivering relative to value-in-use. Their solution to the conundrum was to immerse themselves, together with Paul and his brand team, in the context of competitive triathlons by entering into an inter-company competition. James, the design group's leader, insisted that throughout the season they test a range of different suits: their own Sleek Suits brand as well as those of competitors. It soon became apparent that Paul's original interpretation of "performance" was too narrow (see also his later passage in the "[transformation](#)" section) and that fit was a variable requiring improvement.

I will wear my competitors' products and I'll always wear our products, particularly in the early stages to test new fabric. I'll sleep in the fabric, constantly push it against my face, swim in it, you know, sweat in it, to just see the performance of the fabric and also for fit. You know, in the early years, when we were building [brand name] the fit was not something that was focused on, it was just trying to make as many products with great design and great fabric but we didn't think about the fit so much. As a result, over the years we had a number of different products having inconsistencies in the sizing. (James, Sleek Suits, Designer)

This practice of contextual immersion challenged brand management's assumptions about the market and allowed both the brand and design teams to think more broadly about technological superiority and performance. Paul and his team also identified that while the suits missed the mark in terms of comfort, they did have many advantages that customers were unable to gain from existing providers. Through their own immersive experience and subsequent interviews with leading athletes, the marketers realized that no one suit delivered to the user's needs, and thus everyone was forced into some form of compromise. Although customers were delighted with the performance features of the Sleek Suit's products, the grueling

experience of triathlon meant that competitors ultimately preferred the cheaper, fashion-focused products Paul's team had disparaged. This realization provided the basis not only for a new range of products but also the transformation of the brand (see section below).

Designers of a range of goods throughout our sample deployed the practice of contextual immersion as a means of gaining both consumer insight and shared interpretations with marketing colleagues. For example, designers and marketers in Street Bags joined cycle couriers to understand additional benefits of their bags (the brand had originally been focused solely on professional photographers but this market had proven too small). Members of the design and brand teams at bath fitter Shower Co observed consumers' shower rituals and learned that the desired user experience transcended the functional act of washing to enter a more spiritual frame, something that existing brands had ignored by focusing on function alone. When the brand team at baby equipment firm Stroller Co. immersed themselves in the context of new parents' lives, they found that the parents wanted to fit the arrival of baby into an existing lifestyle, rather than change their activities around the baby, as current designs seemed to presume. Finally, the design consultant and marketers in Haute Cuisine embarked upon an immersive behind-the-scenes culinary tour of major U.S. cities to identify potential high margin retailers for their newly redefined products made from "lower" grades of meat. In each case, deeply entrenched existing categories were destabilized, giving rise to the realization that brand ambidexterity—the consistent *and* innovative rather than consistent *or* innovative approach—could produce a more strategically meaningful solution:

There is a blurring of lines between an upmarket restaurant and an upmarket bistro-brasserie and you've got far more people interested in dining out, but not necessarily the formality of it. So we realized we could broaden our target market without watering down our positioning. (Barry, Haute Cuisine, Brand Manager)

Finally, it is important to note that the hallmarks of design thinking defined previously are evident throughout the destabilization phase (see Table 4). When the design consultant for Haute Cuisine asks whether B-grade meat cuts can be redefined as designer products, he is using *abductive* reasoning. The designers at Dream Sleep investigated meanings and current perceptions with an inquisitive approach, determining relevant new styles through *iteration*; while at Sleek Suits, designers and marketing managers decided to better understand the product in *context* by participating in triathlon competitions. Other examples of contextual immersion presented above are also reflective of *human-centeredness*, as they highlight designers' attention toward users' espoused and latent needs.

## Define and develop

We find that once the categories that act as a barrier to brand relevance have been destabilized, both designers and brand managers can begin to consider the possibility of innovation. This next phase involves defining and developing possible solutions. Three inter-related sub-practices within this phase are: *capability matching*, *problem scoping*, and *solution development*. Since the focus of our study is on design practices that address brand issues, we concentrate primarily on the first two rather than on the practices deployed by designers related to solution development (i.e., actual product design). During the define and develop stage, designers interacted regularly with their branding counterparts for two reasons: to leverage specific brand-related inputs such as customer research, and to ensure that the resulting innovation could be integrated within an expanded brand narrative.

**Capability matching** In the first sub-practice, designers examine the stock of real and symbolic resources that can be used to trigger brand ambidexterity. Designers (often in consultation with brand managers) search not only for tangible inputs into a planned design, but also for possible symbolic assets that could be leveraged to ensure the innovation did not clash with the brand's position. Importantly, however, the focus of this practice is not simply on reiterating an existing identity, but rather on expanding it, often by adding new associations that do not clash with existing ones, reinterpreting existing categories, or highlighting aspects of the firm's operation that had previously been downplayed or ignored.

Returning to the case of Dream Sleep, designer Jeremy aimed to make the brand more relevant to customers and retailers by drawing on the insights generated in the destabilization phase related to the meanings underlying the word "traditional," and sought to satisfy the consumer's desire for decoration and timelessness with the firm's extant competencies. It happened that the firm's expertise in carpentry and established reputation for craftsmanship was an asset that could be leveraged to produce a range of furniture that could be authentically positioned as "traditional," contradicting the brand's existing narrative.

We need to produce products for modern living because that's what everybody is after. We're not about creating show pieces; we're about creating functional items that are every day, but also extracting out some of what those details were and playing on the whole sense of craftsmanship [...] All our products are assembled by hand and hand finished, so we started to pull through some of the handcrafted detailing ideas; it was more about being traditional and inspired, as opposed to creating traditional furniture" (Jeremy, Dream Sleep, Designer)

**Problem scoping** The second sub-practice of the define and develop stage involves a formal analysis of the wider context that any innovation must address, with the objective of developing a deep understanding of the exact nature of the problem to be addressed. At Swift Ships—the technology leader in double-hulled, fast, commercial catamarans used to haul large loads—the brand's heritage lay in breakthrough, lightweight ships which combined strength and stability with high speed. The dual-hulled design enabled high speeds in rough conditions, and therefore the brand had been able to differentiate itself around a potent combination of high speed (through large engines) and the ability to carry heavy loads that others were unable to compete against. However, when fuel costs increased dramatically, customers complained that the powerful engines were making the ships too costly to run, and they retrenched, returning to slower, less innovative boats that could still haul large loads.

Once the design team destabilized existing views that high speed necessarily required more power, the design and brand teams assessed how they might maintain speed (consistency) while innovating on efficiency (relevance), beginning by mapping the wider context in which their customers operated.

While not inconsistent with insights gleaned through contextual immersion, problem scoping involves a broader investigative frame aimed at defining potential solutions by recognizing key attributes the design had to address while identifying opportunities for the extant brand to add value and reinforce its position. For example, the team at Swift Ships noted that although they addressed concerns about fuel costs, customers' shifts to larger, slower ships actually added costs in unexpected ways, often because they took longer to unload, or because their wide berth and large draft limited the number of ports they could enter. Slower, mono-hulled ships were also less welcome in many major ports because their older engine technology created more emissions. Within the firm, there was no appetite to design smaller ships because of their lower prices and high design costs, and firm leaders knew fuel costs would not remain high for long enough to justify the up-front investment in a new line of ships. Designer Peter describes the insights gained from the problem scoping process and the resulting solution:

[About 10–15 years ago] it was about moving people quickly and efficiently; obviously fuel costs were important. [...] but in the last 6 months it has been amazing change. [...] High speed customers are still making money, but they've pulled their power back from normally operating at 80 to 85% power to running at 70%, 75% power [...] Because our hulls are very easily driven, it doesn't take much to move them through the water, unlike a big ship that takes a lot of power to get over inertia. If we put smaller engines into it, the lifetime fuel costs are lower and we'll just pull the speed back a long

way. [...] All of a sudden, you see all sorts of things that you didn't notice in good times, and you can cut, and you can change it, and you're not actually changing the nature of the brand, you just make it more efficient. (Peter, Swift Ships, Head of Design)

The design team's solution was an engine refit, a relatively low cost change in the industry, which meant that not only could the firm adapt to customer concerns without diluting its brand's essence, it could also enhance the brand with new associations. Thus, the designers' approach shifted the brand's value proposition away from a simple equation of weight and speed to a more subtle focus on the relationship among weight, aerodynamic design, and efficiency. Crucially, speed as a defining brand attribute was not dropped—the refit boats were still faster than conventional ships because they ran higher in the water.

These examples illustrate how a combination of capability and stakeholder analysis informs the final design solution. It must be emphasized that these two sub-practices ensure the resulting solution provides the brand with renewed relevance without sacrificing consistency. Other examples reinforce this finding. The team in Haute Cuisine not only realized they had the competencies necessary to develop solutions that would be valued by their customers and internal stakeholders, they also came to understand that they could redefine pieces of the category, thereby establishing themselves as market leaders and shutting out competitors. Another insight gained through the redesign process involved new perceptions around product standardization in terms of fat content, tenderness and even size. While buyers saw value in their product, the commodity nature of the meat trade was a barrier to restaurant customers' sustained purchase because the variability in supply, price and quality meant chefs had to re-adjust menus regularly and alter their preparation and cooking practices with each cut. A new focus on standardizing available product, when married with an awareness of key purchasers' concerns, produced an increase in sales through permanent menu listings.

**Solution development** While the creation of a new product range and supporting system is a visible form of innovation, solution development is equally concerned with ensuring both consistency and relevance. Dream Sleep's designer identifies the logic behind developing a range of furniture that reflected a craft heritage in name and look while fitting in with the overall brand position.

So that's the [...] process; we know who we are as a company, we know the things that are important to us as a design philosophy, and if we have opportunities within the marketplace [...] we ask:] how can we take elements and play with them from a design aspect and fit that into

modern life, but also fit that in a way that when we release a product to market, even if it physically looks quite different to what we have produced before, it fits with [our product] family? (Jeremy, Dream Sleep, Designer)

Jeremy's passage describes his approach to designing a solution that addresses relevance (in this case by addressing various market actors' calls for traditional furniture) in a way that fits within and/or logically expands the brand's identity. Like all the designers interviewed, Jeremy's attempt to balance these needs is reflected in the notion of a common design language owned by the brand (the desire for "fit"). Similarly, Joe redesigned all of Haute Cuisine's packaging to ensure that all cuts of meat reflected the company's high quality and easy-to-use positioning. The design teams at Shower Co. and Stroller Co. reframed their innovative ranges around their newly defined positions of "bathroom systems" and "parenting empathy" respectively. The team at consumer appliance producer Home Help used their breakthrough dishwasher, called the Dishdrawer,<sup>4</sup> to escape the commoditization of home appliances, and thereby enhance their established brand promise of consumer simplicity by emphasizing ergonomics as well as functional performance:

A lot of what we try and put into our products is ease of use and ergonomic superiority, because appliances have been such functional beasts, and technology has really limited them as to the way that they're configured ... [our goal is,] let's see if we can use technology or just some different thinking to break down those barriers, but deliver something that's far closer to what the customer really wants as opposed to what technology or what convention would normally see delivered. (Derek, Home Help, Head of Design)

The define and develop phase is also clearly related to design thinking's attributes (see Table 4). At Dream Sleep, abductive reasoning was supported by the investigation of existing capabilities and heritage, which gave the company the opportunity to understand how it could achieve greater relevance. Designers at Swift Ships sought a holistic perspective by mapping the wider context in which their customers operated, and then adopted a human-centered approach to identify solutions which could lower operating expenses without sacrificing power. At Home Help, the development of the radically-innovative Dishdrawer was made possible by experimenting with new product forms while maintaining alignment with the company's brand promise around usability and ergonomics.

<sup>4</sup> Approval to identify this product and therefore the firm has been granted.

## Transformation

The final stage provided the basis to transform the brand. This stage builds on the previous sub-practice of solution development and involves two sub-practices: formally mapping the innovation to the brand, and *re*-stabilizing.

**Mapping the innovation to the brand** Since the developed solution expands the brand narrative in an authentic but relevant way, designers and brand managers in this phase refresh the brand's identity as well as the categories underpinning notions of consistency. For example, note how Home Help's chief brand officer's understanding of the brand's capabilities and meaning has transformed in light of a paradigm-shifting form factor (from dishwasher as box to dishwasher as drawer):

I think our competitors' brands are so focused on being just a little bit better than the other guy that they focus on little things being a little bit better. Whereas that's not our space anymore. We're not really concerned if our washing machine doesn't spin as fast as the guy next to us, because we want to be above all that, and come up with a washing machine that's just easier for people to use. It gives them the result they're looking for, and they enjoy using it more, and so you stop looking at the little things and you start to say: "what's the big picture here?" (John, Home Help, Chief Brand Officer)

Thus, the product's design innovation isn't complete until it can be formally located within the brand's narrative. This involved tweaking the brand story by emphasizing or revealing associations that the brand had heretofore ignored, but could credibly claim, as well as rebuilding the complete brand system (i.e., reworking all brand-supportive marketing materials).

**Restabilizing** Restabilizing is both an outcome of the first two phases and the mapping process, and a transformational sub-practice, since brand managers use the insights from the processes of destabilizing and defining and developing new physical outcomes from the mapping process as the basis for defining consistency in the future. John's passage above captures these points. In refreshing the way brand, customer, and other market-related constructs were categorized, brand managers such as John not only solved current brand problems, they also expanded the possible futures for the brand. As a result, the meaning of relevance was both "re-set" and central to future brand strategy, a point reinforced by Paul from Sleek Suits:

When the design of the product changed, I discovered that this was becoming a whole story of design, function, the athlete, nature, the fibers, all these things all mixing together ... We called this aspect "techno-organic," and it's now part of the brief for a lot of designers,

photographers or people that associate with or contract with us to give them the feel of the brand. We need to have a technical look because we are technical brand, but we need an organic shape or line that's flowing and working with the shape of the body that's still somehow striking but without it looking cluttered. (Paul, Sleek Suits, Brand Manager)

Based on the insights gained through destabilization, and expanded in the define and develop stage, Sleek Suits' designer redefined the product's design focus. The first step was to concentrate on combining technology with comfort through the development of new body specifications for multiple ranges of suits. This involved using different models to inform suit measurement and design; the creation of different products to reflect the subtly diverse contexts in which user groups would experience the brand's promise; and the transformation of the brand through new graphics, stories, web designs, and anthropomorphic product line names intended to reflect the harmony between technology and nature. As Paul states, this process in turn transformed how he saw the brand in the future, shifting from technology-driven performance to 'techno-organic', and an emphasis on style that reinforced how users wanted to feel while performing, rather than fashion at the expense of performance. The success of the design-driven brand and product innovation process is evident in the fact that once the suit and marketing program's redesign was complete, Sleek Suits' managers proceeded to launch new brand extensions into additional sports, including cycling, competitive swimming, and running.

In a final example, managers at office furniture company Comfy Chairs found themselves needing to adapt to industry changes in commercial office management. The specification of furniture for large scale projects, once the domain of architects keen on maintaining the integrity of their design work, had shifted to corporate project managers more focused on value for money than aesthetics. It was in this context that Comfy Chair's brand managers found themselves needing to convince a new group of buyers that furniture was not a cost to be minimized, but rather a potential business asset. Activation of the *destabilization* and *define and develop* phases resulted in the development of a new range of products that were novel for their integration of mind and body. The result was more than a product line's redesign; it also transformed the brand's management from being, in the words of Comfy Chair's marketer, "furniture geeks" to holding a new focus on user and buyer value-in-use. This fundamental shift, from sole attention to function and comfort to that of equal consideration of emerging business models, is reflected in the comments of the brand's furniture designer:

We've always designed furniture to match the way that your body works. One thing we've had to do is understand



how the workplace is changing. What are the business models that companies are embracing to try and create competitive advantage? So we realized, [...] our furniture matches the way your body works. [Yet] if thinking is so important to you in your work, why shouldn't furniture also match how your mind works? And that's fundamentally it. So we've started to create this whole new opportunity for storytelling and educating the market. (Adam, Comfy Chairs Designer)

Adam's passage represents several notable outcomes of the transformation process. By enhancing both consistency and relevance, the transformed brand position was then restabilized and now forms the basis of a new brand identity driving marketing activities. Brand managers reported that the end of this process resulted in new tracking measures, new employment branding programs, new physical environments, and a redesign of brand communications. Moreover, as the design and brand teams worked on the new range of furniture and its messaging, they were also motivated to redesign marketing communications to ensure consistency across all the brand's product ranges. This is point is notable, because while creating a line of products to respond to changes necessitated by a new category of buyers meant that the new products would be mapped back to fit the brand narrative, ideally, its impact permeates and refreshes the entire expanded range to ensure logical connections among product lines.

As shown in Table 4, the hallmarks of design thinking are equally present in the transformation phase. For example, at Comfy Chairs, the initial destabilization of the existing paradigm led to a human-centered innovation in which attention to stakeholders' (project managers as well as users) latent needs enabled the company to connect its heritage of quality through ergonomics to a distinctive, modern position focusing on linking the comfort of both body and mind. Developing a Dishdrawer through an iterative process meant that brand managers at Home Help now had vastly broader horizons regarding the possibilities for both positioning and enacting the brand through innovation. Finally, at Sleek Suits, the expanded brand concept 'techno-organic' was conceived by adopting a holistic view of users, and then introduced to better address their needs.

## Discussion

Similar to the integration of exploitation and exploration in the general management literature, the combination of consistency and relevance in branding is regarded as fundamentally important, but also as an enduring and formidable challenge. Hence, scholars have called for studies to illuminate the mechanisms that can enable organizations to achieve such

integration (Andriopoulos and Lewis 2009; Cao et al. 2009; Raisch and Birkinshaw 2008). In this study we have identified design thinking as an important mechanism to trigger brand ambidexterity: the capacity to strategically integrate, rather than trade off, consistency and relevance. In particular, our findings show how the logic and hallmarks of design thinking can help "override the organization's tendency to go down the path of least resistance... [so that managers] might find creative ways of delivering on two objectives at the same time" (Birkinshaw and Gupta 2013; p. 293).

We propose that brand ambidexterity is at the heart of maintaining a strong brand, not least because it provides a pathway for innovation. To our knowledge, this is the first paper to provide insight into how to balance brand relevance with consistency. As others have noted, apart from being warned that this goal is important but tricky to achieve, managers have been given little advice on how to balance these two seemingly paradoxical forces (Brown et al. 2003; Thompson et al. 2006). Extant studies emphasize the value of both consistency and relevance; for example, studies of brands such as those by Brown et al. (2003), Giesler (2012), and Thompson et al. (2006) demonstrate that something akin to brand ambidexterity is necessary to maintaining or reviving equity. However, vocal critics of the dominant brand model have stressed the need for greater flexibility in how managers view their brand's position or identity. Holt (2004), for example, urges managers to serve as ever-alert activists, sensing emerging shifts in the zeitgeist and responding with anticipatory provocation. Such appeals, while perhaps helpful in motivating the cultural connections necessary to achieve relevance, are difficult to implement and likely to be disadvantageous if taken at face value.

We reject the view that consistency should be dispatched with, although we do support claims that a singular adherence to consistency acts as a cultural barrier to the creative process (Holt and Cameron 2010). Consistent with authors such as Dougherty (1992), Holt (2004) and Slater (2002), we find that those outside of (or simply unfettered by) the organizational expectations and structures that can constrain and inhibit brand managers—including profit and loss responsibility; short-term metrics; deep contact with only a limited portion of an organization's actors and concerns; and frequent role rotation—such as the designers in our study, are more likely to view the brand's problems with fresh perspectives. Also, our findings demonstrate that designers use distinctive processes, draw on alternative sources of information, and employ different practices than those employed by brand managers. Our research shows that the bundle of logics and practices associated with design, referred to here collectively as "design thinking," can be a powerful mechanism for facilitating the integration of consistency and relevance by introducing innovations in support of, rather than in conflict with, existing brand identity.

This is illustrated by observing designers' responses to tensions arising from misalignment between market requirements and brand position. Rather than capitulate to accepted norms, the designers we studied tended to question the assumptions embedded in the project briefs themselves. Such predilections provided a useful counterbalance to the ossification-prone codes of brand management. Design thinking, therefore, is particularly conducive to addressing the imperative of brand innovation, which by definition demands disruption of the status quo. Our findings thus highlight the importance of design practices, which can stimulate or augment brand innovation. For example, a holistic perspective is based on the "freedom to explore and to follow unexpected but promising leads, while keeping the overall vision as a subliminal yardstick for the project's success" (Michlewski 2008, p. 385). The practice of reconsidering a problem through interrogation is intimately connected to the investigation of existing themes and assumptions, potentially leading to a deeper transformation of an organization's own practices (Dorst 2011). As Stewart argues, such reframing "can open up promising new avenues for addressing seemingly intractable problems, and in certain cases can significantly redirect an organizational mindset into promising paths" (Stewart 2011, p. 518). The willingness to entertain a range of possible solutions through iterative and experimental processes means that designers are more likely to bring new meanings to product categories (Verganti 2009) and/or accept and be able to leverage insights acquired when co-creating with consumers. User-centeredness is crucial given that, as Brown (2009) asserts, "many of the world's most successful brands create breakthrough ideas that are inspired by a deep understanding of consumers' lives and use the principles of design to innovate and build value" (p. 90).

In our study, the practices associated with design thinking enabled brand managers to avoid aiming only for greater consistency, and instead to integrate consistency and relevance. Importantly, we do not find, nor do we argue for an interpretation of brand ambidexterity as the pursuit of equal measures of relevance and consistency. Both our data and anecdotal marketplace evidence reveal numerous examples of successful innovations which rely primarily on either enhanced consistency or improved relevance. As illustrated in Fig. 1, the point we underscore is that varying levels and combinations of consistency and relevance are likely to result in differential forms of innovation. When well-cultivated, interpreted and deployed, design thinking practices can help brand managers strategically and successfully navigate their way among multiple innovation options.

Our study makes a number of contributions to the brand, marketing and strategic management literatures. Our primary contribution lies in our finding that designers' logics and practices can provide a powerful means to assist brand managers in achieving an objective which can often seem unattainable: maintaining market relevance through innovation without unintentionally corrupting or distorting carefully cultivated

brand equity. Second, the practices identified in our study expose, and to some extent repudiate, the ability of extant brand management practices to effectively resuscitate brands that require revitalization. Our third contribution is the construct of *brand ambidexterity*. Drawing upon evidence from leading, brand-driven organizations, we demonstrate that although apparently irreconcilable, consistency and relevance can co-exist if a firm is able to deliver innovations consistent with its brand promise and customers' expectations. Fourth, our conceptualization of brand ambidexterity contributes to the management literature by responding to calls to identify antecedents of ambidexterity (Raisch and Birkinshaw 2008; Birkinshaw and Gupta 2013) as we propose that design thinking serves as an important precursor. Fifth, we shed light on the nature of ambidexterity. Several authors have emphasized the multitude of competing definitions and differences in its operationalization (for reviews, see Lavie et al. 2010; Junni et al. 2013); for example, some authors have regarded ambidexterity as an organization's intention to pursue both exploration and exploitation (e.g., He and Wong 2004) while others have considered it as the outcome of exploration and exploitation (e.g., Rothaermel and Alexandre 2009) and still others have measured it as an organization's capacity to both exploit and explore (e.g., Gibson and Birkinshaw 2004). Our research shows the importance of conceptualizing ambidexterity—in general as well as in the context of brand management—as a capability. Finally, our findings serve to identify one means by which design can add value to brands, responding calls for such research (including 2014–2016 Marketing Science Institute research priorities) (Allen et al. 2008; Hultink 2010; Nedergaard and Gyrd-Jones 2013).

### Implications for managers

Our findings have two key implications for brand managers centered on recognizing the need for design thinking and organizing in such a way as to encourage the achievement of brand ambidexterity. Although it may be tempting to suggest that brand managers become more like designers or adopt a design thinking approach, we caution against such a view. Findings suggest that designers, and commercial creatives more generally, have different skills than those in other commercial disciplines (Stigliani and Ravasi 2012).

By definition, ambidexterity refers to the capability of doing two things (originally, to be able to work equally well with both hands). Thus, brand managers should be aware of the warning signs that suggest consistency will no longer deliver results. Since the "iron cage of branding" (Holt and Cameron 2010) ensures managers prefer data that reinforces consistency, we suggest that brand managers expand on the range of information inputs related to brand strategy, particular during periodic reviews involving tracking. While tracking may highlight how effectively consistent one is, the debrief could

also examine the efficacy of relying on existing associations alone. Designers could either be included in such sessions and be charged with challenging these assumptions, or tracking could be complemented by additional forms of inquiry, such as qualitative studies and/or the analysis of “big data” providing a polyvocal view into the dynamics of the brand’s cultural and competitive environment. In addition, brand managers should periodically review how their brand aligns with existing corporate goals in order to spark debates about how to best remain relevant internally.

The second implication involves organizational structures and practices that enable and reward ambidexterity. Many of the organizations studied had systems and structures ensuring that designers and brand managers interacted regularly and had strong working relationships. Senior managers within each function met regularly and briefed one other on forthcoming projects and emerging challenges. These organizations had few formal functional boundaries and designers and brand managers often worked in close proximity even if they were involved in different projects providing ample information flow and cross-fertilization among communities of practice. The result in these organizations was that individuals had access to and clear knowledge of the overall strategy and understood that each function had a crucial role to play in achieving it.

As we have emphasized in our findings, what is crucial for brand managers is not to always aspire to attain consistency and relevance, but to be able to do so when appropriate. Hence, from a practical point of view, our recommendation is not to always rely on design thinking, but to do so when consistency and relevance should be both achieved.

### Limitations and future research

Further research should be conducted to empirically test the relationships among design thinking practices, brand relevance, and, longitudinally, brand equity. In particular, a scale for design thinking could be developed to further clarify the construct as well as enable measurement of the relationship of design thinking to brand equity and long-term brand competitiveness. Similar work could also be done to clarify and measure the different dominant logics in order to examine the relationship between each and brand consistency, relevance, and equity. Complementing this, additional qualitative studies of the dominant logic underpinning brand management would be valuable to explore the boundary conditions of such an approach. These could inform education and practice by accompanying what we argue is currently a predominantly exploitative logic with a more explorative one, and develop a set of tools to allow brand managers to manage the challenge of relevance as well as consistency.

While we have not examined the organizational capabilities and supportive structures that reinforce brand ambidexterity, this would be rich territory to explore. Empirical studies of

firms with strong brands and a history of maintaining equity through innovation would enable the identification of the structural support mechanisms that underpin and enable brand ambidexterity (cf. Aaker and Joachimsthaler 2000), while comparisons of these firms with firms that struggle to balance the tensions identified herein would enable the identification of particular capabilities that foster brand ambidexterity. Similarly, some management studies of ambidexterity have suggested organizational design solutions for engendering the capability, such as the establishment of separate units to concurrently but separately pursue exploration and exploitation (e.g., Andriopoulos and Lewis 2009; Tushman and O’Reilly 1996), or the introduction of less-hierarchical management structures. Still others have suggested careful examination of the role of top management in reconciling tensions that prevent ambidexterity or in modeling and encouraging risk-taking. Each of these is ripe for study and experimentation.

Although we have focused on the mental barriers to relevance among brand managers and the solutions designers provided to them, further studies could explore the interaction practices that enable brand managers to expand their mental horizons. Although much research suggests the two functions differ in their approach to innovation, few studies identify the practices they use to overcome functional differences and enhance cooperation. Again, ethnographic studies of brand-innovation interdependence would provide useful insights into this question.

Finally, our findings identify the value of a different form of creativity to an enduring brand management problem. Future research could investigate the individual and organizational barriers to adopting design thinking practices in a variety of ways. At an individual level, researchers could examine the mental and subconscious barriers (and their antecedents) to the creative practices necessary to resolving consistency-relevance tensions, including related models of education and training.

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