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Innovation Without Cultural Fragmentation: An Organizational Ambidexterity Model for Balancing Exploration, Coordination, Identity Coherence, and Implementation Discipline

Youssef Hariri[1]*, Hassan Nasser[1], Fatima Zahra[2]

1. Department of Organizational Ambidexterity and Innovation, Faculty of Business, Mohammed V University, Rabat, Morocco.
2. Department of Cultural Coherence and Implementation, Faculty of Management, University of Casablanca, Casablanca, Morocco.

Abstract

Organizational ambidexterity is commonly framed as the capacity to sustain exploration while exploiting established capabilities, yet this formulation under-specifies what happens inside organizations when the two activities require different structures, identities, coordination patterns, and criteria for commitment. Differentiation can protect experimentation, but it can also increase coordination burdens, weaken shared interpretations of organizational purpose, and complicate the conversion of exploratory initiatives into operating routines. This conceptual article develops an evidence-bounded organizational ambidexterity model in which innovation depends not only on maintaining exploration and exploitation, but on aligning four analytically distinct conditions: exploratory variety, coordination capacity, identity coherence, and implementation discipline. Identity coherence is defined here as the capacity to sustain an intelligible organizational relationship among competing innovation logics without requiring cultural homogeneity. Implementation discipline denotes selective commitment, resource allocation, transfer, and integration processes through which promising innovation is converted into organizational action. The resulting exploration–coherence paradox explains why arrangements that protect exploratory difference may simultaneously increase fragmentation risk. The model further distinguishes productive differentiation from three proposed failure states: fragmentation, rigidity, and innovation drift. Its contribution is configurational rather than prescriptive: different organizations may sustain ambidexterity through different structural and cultural mechanisms, and no configuration is assumed to be universally superior. The model remains non-empirical and requires longitudinal, multilevel, and comparative validation before its proposed relationships can be treated as established organizational mechanisms or managerial prescriptions.

Keywords: Organizational ambidexterity, Exploration, Identity coherence, Coordination, Implementation discipline, Innovation management

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Corresponding author: Youssef Hariri
E-mail ✉ youssef.hariri@um5.ac.ma

Introduction

Organizational ambidexterity addresses a persistent innovation problem: organizations must generate alternatives while continuing to refine, coordinate, and exploit what already works. Contemporary research nevertheless indicates that ambidexterity is not adequately represented as a single organizational capability or an abstract equilibrium between exploration and exploitation. Its manageability depends on mechanisms operating across multiple levels, including structures, leadership processes, organizational capabilities, and contextual conditions [1]. The theoretical problem is therefore not

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simply whether exploration and exploitation coexist, but how their coexistence is organized without degrading either exploratory variety or the organization's capacity for coordinated action.

Recent ambidexterity research indicates that manageability depends on multilevel organizational mechanisms and the orchestration of complementary knowledge assets rather than on a generic balance prescription [1, 2]. Yet coordination itself may generate new tensions. Exploratory units, teams, or projects often require discretion, interpretive latitude, and protection from established routines, whereas exploitation depends more heavily on reliability, integration, and selective commitment. The article argues that these demands create a neglected organizational problem: differentiation that supports innovation can also weaken the interpretive and operational connections needed to convert innovation into collective performance.

This article therefore proposes a conceptual ambidexterity model organized around four distinct but interdependent conditions: exploration, coordination, identity coherence, and implementation discipline. The model does not treat identity coherence as cultural uniformity or implementation discipline as bureaucratic control. Instead, it asks how differentiated innovation can remain organizationally intelligible and operationally convertible while retaining enough variation to remain genuinely exploratory.

The cultural problem inside organizational ambidexterity

Structural accounts of ambidexterity can obscure an interpretive problem. Exploration and exploitation are enacted by organizational members who must understand what different units are doing, why apparently inconsistent priorities coexist, and how divergent activities relate to a recognizable organizational purpose. Innovation narratives can perform part of this work by connecting otherwise divergent activities and helping actors accomplish ambidextrous organizing through meaning construction rather than structure alone [3]. Culture therefore enters ambidexterity not merely as an antecedent variable but as an ongoing interpretive accomplishment.

The difficulty becomes sharper when differentiated activities carry competing institutional logics. Longitudinal evidence from a scaling science-based venture shows that adopting commercially oriented and scientific logics can destabilize rather than simply enrich organizational identity, producing fragmentation when members cannot sustain a workable relationship between them [4]. This does not establish fragmentation as an inevitable consequence of differentiation, but it identifies a credible failure path.

Members also need not experience the same contradiction in the same way. Longitudinal research on organizational paradoxes demonstrates heterogeneous identity threats and responses across members and over time [5]. Accordingly, the present model defines identity coherence not as consensus, homogeneity, or elimination of competing logics, but as the proposed organizational capacity to keep those differences interpretable as belonging to a sufficiently intelligible collective enterprise.

Exploration, exploitation, and organizational differentiation

Exploration and exploitation often require partially different organizational conditions. Structural differentiation can protect uncertain experiments from routines optimized for current performance, but ambidextrous structures are themselves heterogeneous: different organizational arrangements can separate and reconnect innovative activities in different ways [6]. Differentiation should therefore be treated as a design choice with integration consequences, not as a synonym for successful ambidexterity.

Separation can also be geographic. Research on international exploration and exploitation shows that knowledge-seeking and knowledge-leveraging activities may be distributed across locations, making spatial organization part of the ambidexterity problem [7]. Geographic differentiation can provide access to heterogeneous knowledge while simultaneously increasing the organizational work required to maintain coordination and common interpretation.

Moreover, simultaneous orientations are not necessarily complementary under all conditions. Evidence from young SMEs indicates that entrepreneurial orientation and process improvement can become incompatible rather than mutually reinforcing [8]. Resource scarcity, organizational age, and limited managerial capacity can therefore alter whether differentiation produces productive specialization or competing demands that overwhelm integration.

Table 1 maps how these ambidextrous demands can create distinct downstream risks for coordination, organizational identity, and innovation conversion.

Table 1. Where exploration–exploitation tensions become coordination, identity, and implementation problems

Ambidexterity tension	Exploration-side requirement	Exploitation/ coordination requirement	Identity risk	Implementation risk	Balancing mechanism	Predicted consequence if unresolved
Variety–standardization	Preserve alternatives	Stabilize repeatable routines	"Innovators" versus "operators"	Premature lock-in or endless experimentation	Selective standardization	Rigidity or drift

Autonomy–integration	Local discretion	Cross-unit alignment	Detached subcultures	Weak transfer	Protected autonomy plus interfaces	Fragmentation
Differentiation–belonging	Distinct expertise/logics	Shared organizational reference	Competing identities	Low commitment to transferred work	Interpretive linkage	Cultural separation
Experimentation–commitment	Continue learning	Allocate scarce resources	Conflict over what counts as success	Delayed selection	Explicit transition criteria	Innovation drift

Note: Identity and implementation consequences are proposed conceptual syntheses. The table does not imply that every differentiated organization experiences these outcomes or that one balancing mechanism is universally superior.

Coordination costs of simultaneous innovation

Coordination is often treated as an unqualified solution to organizational differentiation, yet coordination can alter the innovation being coordinated. Field-experimental evidence shows that iterative coordination can improve innovation value while reducing novelty, indicating that tighter integration may redirect attention toward usefulness or convergence at the expense of more unusual alternatives [9]. Coordination therefore has both productive and constraining properties. The relevant question is not whether organizations should coordinate, but what must be coordinated, when, and with what consequences for exploratory variation.

Coordination also differs in quality. Research on ambidextrous leadership identifies top-management-team behavioral integration as a mechanism linking leadership behavior with members' ambidextrous behavior, while showing that the relationship is conditioned by team characteristics [10]. Integration consequently cannot be reduced to communication volume or centralized supervision.

Relational architecture matters as well. Social-network research on organizational paradoxes shows how collective responses can be enabled by patterns of relationships among organizational actors [11]. Taken together, these findings support a distinction between coordination capacity and coordination intensity. The proposed model treats coordination capacity as the ability to create sufficiently strong interfaces among differentiated activities while avoiding unnecessary homogenization. Under this interpretation, effective ambidexterity requires selective connection: too little coordination permits fragmentation, whereas excessive coordination may suppress the very variation that exploration is intended to preserve.

Identity coherence under competing innovation logics

Competing innovation logics become organizationally consequential through interpretation. Leaders can influence which tensions become salient and how organizational members understand them; longitudinal evidence shows that top-management leadership contributes to shaping the interpretive context within which paradoxical demands are recognized [12]. Identity coherence therefore cannot be assumed to arise automatically from formal structure or a corporate mission statement.

Communication practices provide another mechanism. Research in science organizations demonstrates that rhetorical practices can help actors respond to persistent contradictions without eliminating the opposing demands themselves [13]. Such practices are relevant because ambidextrous organizations may need members to recognize legitimate differences in priorities while continuing to understand those differences as organizationally connected.

Yet cognitive acceptance of contradiction is insufficient by itself. Experimental research finds that paradoxical frames support team creativity in combination with epistemic motivation, indicating that the capacity to hold opposing ideas productively depends on complementary motivational conditions [14]. The implication is important for the present model: identity coherence should not mean suppressing disagreement or constructing an artificially unified culture. It instead denotes a proposed relational property in which members can locate differentiated innovation logics within an intelligible organizational narrative while retaining enough epistemic and professional difference to sustain exploration. Coherence thus constrains fragmentation without requiring cultural sameness.

Implementation discipline and innovation conversion

Exploration produces organizational value only when at least some exploratory outcomes can move beyond protected experimentation. Recent configurational work on technological innovation emphasizes that organizations can use different organizational models to advance innovative activity rather than relying on a single design template [15]. This plurality suggests that innovation conversion should be separated analytically from exploration itself: generating promising options and creating an organization capable of absorbing selected options are different problems.

Selection is the first discipline in that conversion process. Formal modelling of organizational innovation selection shows that decision architecture matters when organizations must choose among projects under constrained resources and uncertain expertise [16]. Such findings do not establish one universally optimal selection rule, but they demonstrate why indiscriminate continuation of exploratory projects is not a neutral strategy.

Conversion also extends beyond selection. Process evidence from innovation projects transferred into mainstream organizational units shows that transfer requires continuing integration and resource exchange rather than a single end-stage handoff [17]. The article therefore defines implementation discipline as a proposed composite capacity comprising selective commitment, resource allocation, transition criteria, transfer, and operating-unit integration. Discipline here does not mean maximizing control. It means creating credible routes through which exploration can become organizational action while allowing weak, mistimed, or contextually unsuitable initiatives to be discontinued without treating every termination as an innovation failure.

The exploration–coherence paradox

Differentiation creates the protected variety on which exploration depends, but the same differentiation can weaken the social and interpretive conditions needed to sustain an organization across competing priorities. Evidence on top-management diversity illustrates this conditionality: psychological safety helps explain when heterogeneous perspectives can support an ambidextrous strategic orientation rather than simply remaining differences within the team [18]. Difference therefore creates potential value, not automatic integration.

Ambidexterity can also redistribute costs across stakeholders. Conceptual work connecting automation, organizational ambidexterity, and employee relations shows that innovation-oriented arrangements may generate tensions for employment relationships that disappear when analysis focuses only on innovation outputs [19]. Coherence consequently concerns who must live with organizational contradictions, not merely whether senior managers can articulate them.

At the frontline, actors do not simply receive fixed organizational resources; research on paradoxical tensions shows that employees actively transform available assets into resources for managing competing demands [20]. This indicates that balancing is partly enacted rather than completely designed from above.

The exploration–coherence paradox is proposed here to integrate these observations. Increasing differentiation may protect novelty while simultaneously increasing the coordination and identity work required to preserve organizational connection. Conversely, attempts to maximize coherence through standardization may eliminate productive difference. Ambidexterity therefore depends on maintaining enough coherence to prevent fragmentation without turning coherence into conformity.

An integrated organizational ambidexterity model

The proposed model treats ambidexterity as the joint management of four conditions rather than as a direct exploration–exploitation balance. First, exploratory variety preserves heterogeneous options. Second, coordination capacity connects differentiated activities selectively. Third, identity coherence maintains an intelligible relationship among competing innovation logics. Fourth, implementation discipline converts selected innovations through commitment, resourcing, transfer, and integration. None is assumed to substitute fully for another.

This architecture is deliberately non-linear. Empirical research on open innovation and ambidexterity indicates that relationships among openness, ambidexterity, and outcomes can be contingent and nonlinear rather than uniformly positive [21]. Organizational architecture is also context dependent: public-sector evidence shows that platform-based arrangements can provide an alternative way of organizing exploration and exploitation under institutional constraints [22]. These findings caution against representing ambidexterity as a universally optimal point on one continuum.

Recent systematic synthesis further shows that ambidexterity research spans culture, organizational capabilities, governance, networks, and performance concerns rather than forming a single settled management mechanism [23]. The contribution here is therefore integrative but explicitly proposed: the model reorganizes established component relationships around the problem of preserving innovation without cultural or operational disconnection.

Figure 1 visualizes why exploration creates innovation value only when coordination, identity coherence, and implementation discipline remain sufficiently aligned.

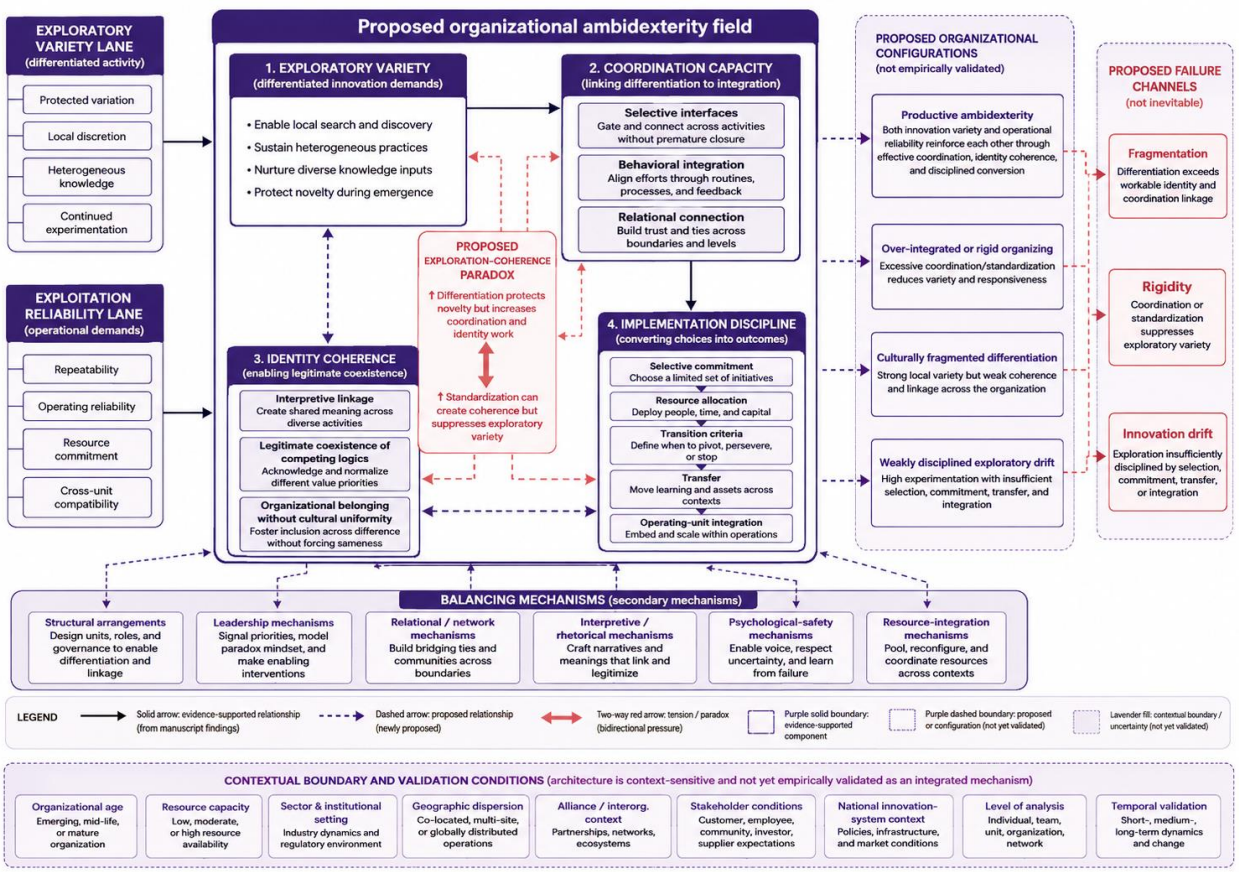

Figure 1. Exploration creates innovation value only while coordination, identity coherence, and implementation discipline stay aligned

Structural and cultural balancing mechanisms

No single balancing mechanism can resolve every tension identified by the model. Structural differentiation can protect exploratory work, but governance must also accommodate relationships that cross organizational boundaries. Research on strategic alliances shows that ambidexterity has interorganizational antecedents and governance requirements that differ from those operating within a single organization [24]. Consequently, a structure that works for internally separated units may not transfer unchanged to alliances, ecosystems, or distributed innovation arrangements.

Integration mechanisms are also non-equivalent. Evidence from small firms indicates that external network relationships and internal employee integration can have different relationships with exploration and exploitation rather than contributing through one generic integration pathway [25]. The implication is that "integration" should not be treated as an undifferentiated management good. Organizations may need different interfaces for acquiring external variety, combining internal knowledge, preserving specialized identities, and transferring innovations into operating routines.

Leadership represents another enabling mechanism. Research in high-technology SMEs associates ambidextrous leadership with employees' ambidextrous innovation behavior [26]. Such evidence supports leadership as one contributor, but not as a substitute for structural, relational, or implementation arrangements.

The broader literature therefore supports multiple structural, managerial-priority and interorganizational governance routes to ambidexterity rather than a single universally superior organizational architecture [6, 23, 24]. In the proposed model, balancing is achieved through a portfolio of selectively matched mechanisms whose relevance depends on where the dominant tension occurs.

Innovation configurations and predicted outcomes

The model implies that ambidexterity should be examined configurationally rather than as a single continuous capability. Organizations may achieve similar levels of exploratory activity while differing substantially in coordination, identity coherence, and implementation discipline. These differences matter because innovation systems themselves condition how ambidexterity and openness are organized. Comparative evidence across European follower and lower-performing innovation systems indicates that relationships among organizational ambidexterity, open innovation, and innovation outputs vary across institutional contexts [27]. Configuration therefore cannot be separated from the environment in which organizational choices are enacted.

Four qualitative archetypes are proposed here to clarify the model. Coherent ambidexterity combines protected exploration with selective coordination, sufficient identity coherence, and disciplined conversion. Fragmented exploration preserves variety but lacks adequate interpretive or relational integration. Coordinated rigidity achieves alignment and reliable execution while progressively narrowing exploratory difference. Innovation drift maintains experimentation without sufficiently credible selection, resource commitment, transfer, or discontinuation processes. These are theoretical configurations, not empirically observed classes, and organizations may move between them over time.

Table 2 contrasts the configurations as internally coherent bundles rather than ranking them on an assumed universal scale.

Table 2. Organizational configurations linking exploratory variety to coherence and innovation conversion

Configuration	Exploration pattern	Coordination arrangement	Identity coherence	Implementation discipline	Likely innovation conversion	Characteristic failure state	Boundary favoring configuration
Coherent ambidexterity	Protected, heterogeneous	Selective interfaces	Difference remains organizationally intelligible	Selective commitment and transfer	More credible conversion of selected initiatives	Tension remains manageable rather than eliminated	Sufficient integration capacity and resource discretion
Fragmented exploration	High local variety	Weak or episodic	Competing logics detach	Inconsistent transfer	Promising initiatives remain isolated	Fragmentation	Strong autonomy with weak cross-unit linkage
Coordinated rigidity	Narrowed variation	Dense alignment and standardization	High apparent consistency	Strong execution of accepted routines	Reliable conversion of familiar options	Rigidity	Environments favoring reliability over novelty
Innovation drift	Persistent experimentation	Loose coordination	Purpose may remain broad but commitments diffuse	Weak selection and transition discipline	Repeated experimentation with limited absorption	Innovation drift	Abundant discretion without credible selection gates

Note: The configurations and predicted consequences are proposed conceptual archetypes. They are not validated performance categories, and organizations may display hybrid or changing configurations.

Boundary conditions

The model does not assume that more innovation orientation, exploration, or ambidexterity invariably improves organizational outcomes. Evidence from SMEs in Bosnia and Herzegovina shows that relationships involving top-management innovation orientation, ambidexterity, and performance can be negative or nonlinear under transitional-economy conditions [28]. Such findings challenge any interpretation of ambidexterity as a monotonic organizational virtue.

Contextual variation is broader than national setting. Ambidexterity-related relationships differ across young SMEs, national innovation-system positions and transitional-economy SMEs, making organizational context a substantive boundary rather than nuisance variation [8, 27, 28]. Resource scarcity can constrain simultaneous orientations in young firms, while national innovation conditions can alter the value and feasibility of open or ambidextrous arrangements.

Sector and governance arrangements create additional boundaries. Public-sector platform organizing illustrates institutional conditions different from those facing conventional private firms [22]. Alliance ambidexterity introduces interorganizational dependencies and governance mechanisms that cannot simply be inferred from within-firm evidence [24]. Employee-relations tensions also show that an innovation architecture may appear effective from an innovation-output perspective while imposing costs on other organizational constituencies [19].

Accordingly, the proposed model should be interpreted as a contingent diagnostic architecture. Organizational age, resource availability, sector, institutional environment, geographic dispersion, stakeholder relations, and level of analysis may all change which balancing mechanism is feasible and which failure state becomes most salient.

Failure modes: fragmentation, rigidity, and innovation drift

The model distinguishes three proposed failure modes because unsuccessful ambidexterity need not take one form. Fragmentation occurs when differentiated groups, activities, or logics lose sufficient interpretive and relational connection to remain part of a workable organizational identity. Longitudinal evidence shows that incompatible logic adoption can fragment organizational identity during organizational scaling [4]. Member responses to paradox can also differ substantially, meaning that apparently coherent organizational narratives may conceal unequal identity threats [5].

Rigidity represents the opposite danger: organizations may respond to competing demands by strengthening procedures, integration, or standardization until exploratory variation becomes difficult to sustain. Evidence that entrepreneurial orientation and process improvement can become incompatible in young firms demonstrates that simultaneous demands need

not coexist harmoniously [8]. Experimental evidence that iterative coordination can increase value while reducing novelty similarly shows why coordination can constrain rather than simply support exploration [9].

Innovation drift is proposed as a third failure state in which experimentation continues without sufficiently disciplined selection or conversion. Formal work on innovation selection demonstrates the importance of decision architecture under resource constraints [16]. Process research further shows that transfer into mainstream units requires continuing integration and resource exchange [17]. Drift therefore concerns not excessive exploration itself, but exploration disconnected from credible commitment, termination, transfer, and absorption processes.

Theoretical contributions

The first contribution is to separate exploratory variety from the organizational conditions required to keep that variety collectively usable. Narrative research shows that ambidextrous organizing involves meaning construction as well as structure [3], while longitudinal evidence demonstrates that competing logics can threaten organizational identity [4]. The proposed exploration–coherence paradox therefore specifies a tension that is obscured when exploration and exploitation are treated only as activity categories.

Second, the model distinguishes coordination, identity coherence, and implementation discipline rather than subsuming them under generic integration. Structural configurations can support ambidextrous activity in different ways [6], rhetorical practices can help organizational actors work with competing demands [13], and innovation transfer requires continuing integration after exploratory work has produced a candidate initiative [17]. These mechanisms operate through different processes and should not be assumed to be interchangeable.

Third, the model makes level-of-analysis discipline explicit. Individual and organizational responses to paradox can diverge [5]. Team-level psychological and cognitive conditions cannot automatically be elevated to organization-level cultural mechanisms, even when they illuminate relevant processes [14]. Likewise, employee integration at firm level represents a different mechanism from individual acceptance or interorganizational governance [25]. The framework therefore treats cross-level relationships as empirical questions rather than inferential shortcuts.

Innovation-management implications

The model suggests a diagnostic question for innovation management: which balancing problem is currently constraining innovation? If novelty is disappearing, additional integration may worsen rather than repair the problem; experimental evidence demonstrates that coordination can increase value while reduce novelty in a specific innovation setting [9]. If innovation activity remains plentiful but isolated, the more important problem may be identity, relational connection, or conversion.

Mechanisms should therefore be matched to the diagnosed tension. Innovation narratives can contribute to interpretive linkage [3], psychological safety can condition how heterogeneous perspectives are integrated at top-management level [18], and employee integration can operate differently from external networking [25]. None should be treated as a generic cultural intervention.

Similarly, organizations should distinguish generating ideas from deciding which innovations deserve commitment. Selection architecture matters under constrained resources [16], while successful transfer cannot be reduced to an administrative handoff at the end of exploration [17]. These implications remain conceptual and conditional. They indicate questions managers can ask; they do not establish that applying the model will improve innovation performance.

Future research agenda

The first research priority is construct validation. Identity coherence should be distinguished empirically from organizational identification, consensus, cultural strength, psychological safety, and interpretive agreement. Longitudinal evidence on identity fragmentation provides a useful process foundation [4], while research on leadership and interpretive context indicates that the salience of paradox changes through organizational action [12]. Repeated measurement could establish whether coherence is relatively stable, episodic, or dynamically reconstructed.

Second, future studies should test configurations rather than only independent net effects. Geographic forms of exploration and exploitation already demonstrate that ambidexterity can span spatial arrangements [7]. Comparative work across national innovation systems [27] and transitional-economy firms [28] suggests that configuration viability may differ across institutional contexts.

Third, temporal ordering requires stronger evidence. Field experiments can isolate bounded coordination effects [9], but identity formation and innovation transfer may unfold over much longer periods. Process research on innovation transfer illustrates the value of tracing integration across project stages [17]. Multilevel longitudinal studies should therefore test whether coordination supports coherence, whether coherence facilitates transfer, whether failed transfer subsequently

weakens identity, and whether these relationships reverse under some conditions. The proposed model should be treated as falsifiable: evidence may support, refine, subdivide, or reject its relationships.

Limitations

This article integrates heterogeneous literatures that do not operationalize ambidexterity, culture, coordination, identity, and implementation in identical ways. Systematic work shows that ambidexterity scholarship already spans multiple analytical levels and mechanisms [1], while more recent synthesis organizes a broad literature across culture, capabilities, governance, networks, and performance [23]. Conceptual integration cannot remove the underlying construct and design heterogeneity.

A second limitation concerns cross-level inference. Longitudinal member-level evidence demonstrates that organizational paradoxes can generate heterogeneous identity responses [5], while experimental work on paradoxical cognition primarily informs team-level processes [14]. These findings illuminate the proposed architecture but do not by themselves validate organization-level relationships among its four conditions.

Third, the model remains non-empirical. Context-sensitive and nonlinear findings show why its configurations cannot be interpreted as universal performance prescriptions [28]. The proposed failure modes may also overlap empirically, change over time, or require additional categories. The framework is therefore an organizing theory for subsequent testing rather than a validated measurement system, predictive algorithm, implementation protocol, or established managerial intervention.

Conclusion

Organizational ambidexterity requires more than placing exploration beside exploitation. Differentiation can protect the variation on which innovation depends while simultaneously creating coordination burdens, competing interpretations of organizational purpose, and difficulties in converting experimentation into operating practice. This article therefore conceptualizes ambidexterity through four interdependent conditions: exploratory variety, coordination capacity, identity coherence, and implementation discipline.

Its central proposition is not that organizations should maximize all four. Productive ambidexterity depends on maintaining sufficient alignment among them without allowing coordination to become conformity, coherence to become cultural uniformity, or discipline to extinguish experimentation. Fragmentation, rigidity, and innovation drift represent distinct proposed ways in which that alignment can fail.

The framework remains intentionally bounded. Organizational level, resources, sector, institutional context, stakeholder relations, and time may alter both the tensions organizations experience and the mechanisms available to address them. Its value therefore lies in making those tensions analytically visible and empirically testable, not in claiming a universally optimal organizational design.

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