

Inertia, boredom, and complacency in business-to-business relationships: Identifying and interpreting antecedents and manifestations

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Abstract

While opportunism, a 'dark side' construct, has been discussed at length, inertia, boredom, and complacency, have received less attention. This is surprising given their detrimental effect on relationships. This study identifies antecedents and manifestations of the constructs and discusses strategies for suppressing their emergence. We identify cognitive fatigue and positive reinforcement as antecedents of inertia; routine, formalization, instruction ambiguity, and self-concept incompatibility of boredom; and excessive self-efficacy and relationship continuity of complacency. Manifestations include response invariability, consensus seeking, shallow task engagement, reduced effort, and reduced attentiveness. In the context of resource deployment, we show that, whereas complacency is the result of self-serving resource restriction, boredom and inertia result from involuntary, or well-intentioned, resource restriction. We demonstrate the importance of understanding construct antecedents because, while the consequence of all three is underperformance, strategies for suppressing them vary because of the diverse range of antecedents and their resource deployment implications.

Keywords: Dark side; relationships; business-to-business; inertia; boredom; complacency

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1. Introduction

Much has been written about the bright side of business-to-business relationships. Strong relationships, exhibiting trust, commitment, and satisfaction, reduce uncertainty and allow organizations to access resources, improve product and service offers, and increase competitiveness (Barringer & Harrison, 2000; Palmatier et al., 2006). However, despite the evidence for mutual benefits, there may also be hidden costs to long-term relationships. Paradoxically, constructs such as trust and social capital, that enhance relationships and contribute to the bright side, can become destructive when they develop to excess (Grayson & Ambler, 1999; Pillai et al., 2017). This negative side is commonly referred to as the ‘dark side’ of relationships. Oliveira and Lumineau (2019, p. 232) define it as “the set of generally damaging aspects of IORs [interorganizational relationships]; these aspects can be voluntary or involuntary and are generally driven by competence or integrity issues”. Abosag, Yen, and Barnes (2016) assert that a dark side to long-term collaboration is unavoidable but needs to be minimised.

The most cited manifestations of the dark side are opportunism and conflict (Oliveira & Lumineau, 2019). Receiving considerably less attention, yet potentially as harmful, are the more passive states and traits of inertia, boredom, and complacency. Inertia, sometimes referred to as staleness, is resistance to change. It has been identified as a potential consequence of long-term relationships in a small number of studies (Anderson & Jap, 2005; Mooi & Frambach, 2012; Moorman, Zaltman, & Deshpande, 1992). Workplace boredom receives very limited attention in interorganizational relationship literature, though it has been studied in the context of organizational behaviour, and to a limited extent in services

literature in the context of frontline employees (Loukidou, Loan-Clark, & Daniels, 2009; Velasco, 2017). Boredom is a transient, negative emotional state that can lead to a reduction in productivity (Reijseger et al., 2013). Regarding complacency, Barnes (2005, p. 576) refers to it as a “comfort factor” and finds evidence for it creeping into mid-term relationships, with partners paying less attention to each other. Levinthal and Fichman (1988, p. 367) refer to the “liability of [relationship] adolescence”.

With the exception of a handful of papers (e.g., Friend & Johnson, 2017; Gopalakrishnan & Zhang, 2017; Vafeas & Hughes, 2016), the growing body of literature on the dark side of relationships continues to focus on opportunism and conflict (e.g., Chowdhury, Thorsten, & Zolkiewski, 2016; Grandinetti, 2017; Leonidou et al., 2018; Mele et al., 2018; Pfajfar et al., 2019; Pressey & Vanharanta, 2016; Zeng et al., 2017). The constructs of inertia, boredom, and complacency remain largely neglected. While they lack the overt maliciousness of opportunism, they still have a negative impact on performance, leading to under-delivery of the value proposition, and dissatisfaction. The aim of this paper, and its contribution to the literature, is to rectify the inattention paid thus far to inertia, boredom, and complacency in the context of business-to-business relationships.

The study seeks to identify why these constructs emerge, how they are manifested, and how they might be suppressed. Understanding the antecedents of the three constructs is fundamental. Behaviour modification requires us to understand the conditions that trigger the behaviour. While business relationship literature suggests the consequence of all three is, as with opportunism, underperformance, if the *causes* of the three constructs are different, attempting to suppress them as one does opportunism may be inappropriate and may do more harm than good to the relationship.

In addition, we interpret the three constructs in terms of their implications for resource deployment, an approach we believe to be novel in this context. The creation of value in a

business-to-business relationship depends on buyer and seller not only possessing appropriate resources but having the willingness and ability to deploy and integrate them (Findsrud, Tronvoll, & Edvardsson, 2018). Since inertia, boredom, and complacency are thought to lead to underperformance, this implies a resource deficit. However, antecedents may impact resource allocation and deployment in different ways. Understanding whether and why diminution in resource deployment is intentional or unintentional is important if one seeks to intervene and suppress the three constructs.

We answer calls for more research into the motivations and drivers that lead to dark side constructs (Oliveira & Lumineau, 2019; Payne & Frow, 2017). Furthermore, we seek the perspective of both suppliers and buyers, responding to the call for studies that deepen our understanding of whether suppliers and customers perceive dark side issues in the same way (Fang, Chang, & Peng, 2011; Johnsen & Lacoste, 2016).

We begin by reviewing the literature on the three constructs, inertia, boredom, and complacency, and briefly review the literature on resource deployment and integration. We describe our research context and our research method, present our findings, and discuss them in the context of interorganizational relationship literature and resource integration. We finish with managerial implications, focusing on the suppression of the constructs, and make recommendations for future research.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Inertia

In management literature, inertia is defined as “persistent organizational resistance to change” (Hannan, 2004, p. 214), manifesting itself as rigid behaviour and a reliance on past responses (Huang et al., 2013). Le Mens, Hannan, and Pólos (2015) suggest that the source of inertia is the set of procedures and routines that become embedded or institutionalized, over

time, in organizational memory. The mental models that characterise institutionalization increase efficiency but can also act as a constraint, risking a mismatch between behaviour and changes in the external environment (Xie et al., 2016). Inertia is also discussed in the behavioural psychology literature in the context of path dependence, a time-based diminishing scope of action (Thrane, Blaabjerg, & Møller, 2010). Pierson (2000, p. 252) explains that path dependence is present when “preceding steps in a particular direction induce further movement in the same direction”. Decision processes become fixed and old ideas are reproduced even if circumstances require new solutions (Garud, Kumaraswamy, & Karnøe, 2010). Actors are trapped and find it impossible to generate alternative responses (Sydow, Schreyögg, & Koch, 2009). Persistence with previous solutions runs the risk of developing into stagnation (Wolfe et al., 2019).

A small number of studies identify the emergence and negative effects of inertia in long-term business relationships. Beverland (2005, p. 577) says it is a paradox that “deepening relational commitments lead to inertia through the institutionalization of relational norms.” Gargiulo and Benassi (2000) concur, saying that long-term relationships, characterised by familiarity between long-term partners, are subject to inertia or cognitive lock-in. Regarding the impact of inertia, Skilton and Doolley (2010) suggest it manifests itself as partners relying on familiar solutions, even when the situation requires otherwise, resulting in underperformance. Differentiating inertia from opportunism, Lee (2013) observes that while repeated partner interactions lower information asymmetry, thereby reducing the likelihood of opportunism, a history of repeat exchanges can lead to inertia, which negatively influences performance. Villena et al. (2020) argue that opportunism is an overt, intentional misbehaviour, while relational inertia emerges unnoticed from repeated collaboration, leading to declining performance.

2.2. *Boredom*

Boredom is described as “an unpleasant, transient, affective state” (Fisher, 1993, p. 396), leading to difficulty engaging with a task, and reduced performance (Pekrun, 2006). Repetition – which implies a lack of variety – and monotony – a property of a repetitive task – are cited as antecedents of boredom (Cummings, Gao, & Thornburg, 2016). The negative effect of repetition is compounded when there is a lack of autonomy. Repetitive and constraining tasks reduce intrinsic motivation (Eastwood et al., 2012). Intrinsic motivation – the desire to engage in an activity because one is interested in it (Sheldon, Arndt, & Houser-Marko, 2003) – is fundamental to creativity, the context of this study (Auger & Woodman, 2016).

Boredom differs from opportunism in that it is an emotional state, resulting from an individual’s subjective evaluation of a specific task. It is characterised by negative valence and a low degree of physiological arousal (Pekrun, 2006). A consequence of boredom is lower productivity. While this outcome resembles passive opportunism in that it implies unfulfilled obligations (Seggie, Griffith, & Jap, 2013), the difference is that, unlike an opportunistic firm, a bored individual is not evading obligations for reasons of self-interest.

2.3. *Complacency*

Complacency is conceptualized as a psychological state characterised by an assumption that ‘all is well’ (Luciano et al., 2018). Kawall (2006) suggests that complacency is an over-estimation of one’s accomplishments or status, and excessive self-satisfaction. High self-efficacy – the belief in one’s capabilities to execute the action required for a specific attainment (Bandura, 1986) – leads to a reduction in the magnitude of effort allocated to a task (Vancouver, More, & Yoder, 2008). Closely linked to self-efficacy is overconfidence, which is the overestimation of one’s ability, performance, or level of control

(Moore & Healy, 2008). In the context of long-term business relationships, Friend and Johnson (2017) show that supplier overconfidence in the strength of a relationship with a buyer leads to poor service provision and a lack of responsiveness.

Differentiating complacency from opportunism, Kim and Choi's (2015) buyer-supplier relationship typology distinguishes between *deep* relationships that are closely coordinated and cooperative but prone to supplier complacency, and *sticky* relationships that are adversarial and asymmetric, and prone to supplier opportunism. Similarly, Stevens, MacDuffie, and Helper (2015) associate complacency with relationships characterised by too much trust, and opportunism with those characterised by too little trust.

2.4. *Resource deployment*

In a business-to-business relationship, value emerges from the resource-integrating activities of the supplier and buyer (Vargo & Lusch, 2017). For example, in the context of our study, buyers access creative expertise from suppliers and integrate it with market knowledge, a resource that the buyer already possesses. However, the supplier's possession of a resource is not sufficient. Successful resource integration is dependent on the extent to which the supplier leverages and deploys its resources (Edvardsson et al., 2014). Value creation is compromised when suppliers are unable or unwilling to deploy resources of appropriate quality or quantity, with the result that customers do not benefit as much as they might (Frow, McColl-Kennedy, & Payne, 2016). Resource integration is a useful perspective to employ for the interpretation of inertia, boredom, and complacency, since all three imply resource deficiencies.

2.5. *Summary and research questions*

In summary, the literature suggests that *inertia* is resistance to change characterised by a reliance on existing behaviours, *boredom* an unpleasant and deactivated emotional state, and *complacency* a feeling of self-satisfaction and over-confidence. Where they differ from opportunism is the implied absence of premeditated ill will towards the relational partner. Although there is a growing body of interorganizational relationship literature addressing opportunism, the dark side constructs of inertia, boredom, and complacency have received less attention. This deserves to be remedied. Research in other literature streams suggests these three states could negatively affect supplier performance. In the context of resource integration, this implies resource deficiency leading to suboptimal value realization. Our aim is to answer the following research question:

What are the antecedents of inertia, boredom, and complacency in the context of business-to-business relationships and how are they manifested?

We use our section on managerial implications to address how relational partners can suppress the emergence of the three constructs, addressing each antecedent in turn.

3. Method

3.1. Research context

The context for the study is the business relationship between marketers ('clients' or 'customers') and creative agencies, the latter an example of knowledge-intensive, professional service providers. The context is particularly suitable for a study into the dark side of relationships. While creativity and innovation are fundamental ingredients for all successful business organizations, the 'raison d'être' of creative agencies is to generate output that is "near the upper reaches of creativity" (Verbeke et al., 2008, p. 121). However, client–agency relationships that endure for the medium- to long-term suffer from reduced creativity, lack of proactive behaviour, and complacency, leading to client dissatisfaction

(Beverland, Farrelly, & Woodhatch, 2007). Research suggests that client–agency relationships are prone to an early demise, with only one in five surviving more than five years (Davies & Prince, 1999; Thomas, 2015).

3.2. *Research design*

The research was exploratory and abductive, though with inevitable presuppositions emanating from our prior review of the literature. An abductive approach goes beyond the basic, unreflective accounts of behaviour that actors provide, to construct meaning (Blaikie, 2000). Given the exploratory nature of the research, we adopted a qualitative approach, using semi-structured, one-to-one interviews. This permits immersion in actors' worlds and thick description (Bryman, 2012). There were two stages. The first sought buyer perceptions of long-term relationships with the aim of revealing manifestations of dark side constructs. The second sought the perspective of service providers with the goal of identifying antecedents.

3.3. *Data collection*

For the first stage of research, our sampling frame was a purchased list (GDPR-compliant) of 1800 marketing managers. To identify those most likely to have substantial experience of buying creative services and to provide rich data, we purposefully filtered (Patton, 2002) by participant seniority, business sector, and annual revenue. We selected 200 chief marketing officers (CMOs) of firms operating in consumer packaged goods (CPG) and retail, with a minimum annual revenue (and no upper limit) of £20 million GBP, located in the South of the UK. CMO-level marketers typically have an average of 15 years' experience (Lechner-Becker, 2019). An annual revenue of £20 million is the average for medium-sized firms (50-249 employees) in the UK and those likely to have larger marketing budgets. CPG and retail sectors account for 30 percent of advertising spend in the UK (Fisher, 2019) which

implies they are likely to be heavy purchasers of creative services. The benefit of conducting research in two different sectors (CPG and retail) increases the applicability of the findings to all buyers of creative services. The geographic filter was set for practical purposes, reducing travel time to facilitate face-to-face interviews. 22 marketers, 15 from CPG and seven from retail, agreed to participate. All had worked in marketing for a minimum of 15 years. The smallest firm turned over £30m and the largest £460m. To ensure consistency, the lead researcher conducted all the interviews, which took place between September 2018 and May 2019. The interview protocol, informed by our reading of the literature and checked, for face validity, by an industry practitioner with more than 20 years' experience, covered relationship evolution, changes in service provision and agency output, and client responses to change. Average interview duration was 50 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim to avoid information-selection bias. There was an average of 17 single-spaced A4 pages per interview transcription.

Stage 2 consisted of interviews with creative agencies. Using directories from trade organizations such as the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising and the Design Business Association, we selected and contacted 100 agencies in the South of the UK with a minimum of 10 employees, the threshold for classification as a 'small', rather than 'micro', firm. We applied this screening filter to increase the likelihood of speaking to agencies with a portfolio of clients and a broader range of experiences. Before contacting any of the agencies, we scrutinized their individual websites to confirm agency size and the extent of its client portfolio (information readily available on agency websites). 10 agencies agreed to participate and each offered us the opportunity to interview an Account Director from the client services department and a Creative Director from the creative department, meaning 20 interviews. Having two respondent categories allowed us to triangulate data across informants, identify any discrepancies, and strengthen validity. Thus, across the two research

stages, there were 42 participants. The smallest agency employed 12 people, and the largest 80. Interviews took place between September 2019 and January 2020 and, for reasons of consistency and continuity, were conducted by the same researcher as in stage 1. The interview protocol for stage 2 differed from stage 1 in that it explored *why* output and/or service diminished. As would be expected in semi-structured interviews, the protocol allowed participants to ‘deviate’ and the interviewer to delve deeper into themes that emerged during the interviews. Besides being informed by the literature, the validity of interview questions was enhanced by a ‘pilot’ interview with a senior practitioner to check questions were clear and delivered the required information. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Average interview duration was 62 minutes with an average of 19 single-spaced A4 pages per transcription.

In the interests of validity, respondents from both stages were given the opportunity to view their respective interview transcripts before analysis. A small number (eight) took up the offer and confirmed that the transcripts reflected their views.

3.4. *Data analysis*

Both researchers engaged in the process of analysing the data. We used the methodology proposed by Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2013). In the interests of reliability, at each of the two research stages, we began by selecting five transcripts, and coded them independently. We used NVivo 12, computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). Although the functions of this, and similar programmes, proliferate with each new software release, the key attribute is to allow the researcher to import textual data and assign codes to text. Codes can be refined and then grouped into categories, facilitating the development of theory that is grounded in the data. Aside from speed, advocates of CAQDAS

argue it enables a systematic, rigorous, and consistent approach, while acknowledging that it is only ever a tool to support the researcher's analytic approach (Ritchie et al., 2014).

Each researcher assigned codes to lines or passages of raw data. There was no attempt at this stage to apply theoretical codes. Coding was 'bottom up' and codes were descriptive. Each researcher created a codebook of these first-order codes. We then met to assess the extent to which there was inter-coder agreement across the transcripts. Using the Perreault and Leigh (1989) measure for two judges, we calculated this to be 0.88 and considered it confirmation of reliability (see Rust & Cooil, 1994). We resolved the few discrepancies, dealt with overlap by removing redundant codes, and created a definitive codebook. We continued to meet regularly to compare emerging codes and revise the codebook accordingly.

The next stage involved a process of abstraction to second-order themes that were one-step removed from respondent accounts (for example, in stage 1, *creative work is tired and stale* and *agency displays inflexibility* abstracted to *response invariability*). The final step in the process was to aggregate themes to overarching dimensions by looking for relationships between themes (for example, in stage 1, *response invariability* and *consensus seeking* aggregated to *inertia*). To substantiate the analytical process, we followed the advice of Pratt (2008, p. 501) and provide a selection of "proof quotes" (tables A1 and A2). Once analysis was complete, we compared our second-order themes with the interview transcripts to check that they were a true reflection of the raw data. Finally, in the interests of validating the study, we presented our findings to practitioners in several seminars. This gave the opportunity to check if the interpretations we had assigned to the data were credible. Figure 1 shows the construct manifestations identified by customers in stage 1, the antecedents identified by suppliers in stage 2, and the researchers' interpretation of these findings in terms of supplier resource deployment.

4. Findings

4.1. Stage 1: Customer perceptions - manifestations

We present the findings under the two over-arching dimensions of inertia and complacency and discuss manifestations of these constructs from the client perspective. Clients frequently used the word complacency without prompting. Rather than ‘inertia’, respondents used words such as ‘formulaic’, ‘tried and trusted’, and ‘tired’. We interpret these terms to imply inertia, based on Hodgkinson and Wright (2002) for whom inertia is reliance on a previously successful formula, Liao, Fei, and Liu (2008) who define inertia as a commitment to routine problem-solving procedures that lead to successful performance, and Ghoshal and Bruch (2003) who refer to inertia as tiredness and a lack of energy. Clients did not discuss the possibility that agency behaviour was attributable to boredom. This might be because it would reflect negatively on them and their projects. Furthermore, although boredom can manifest physical reactions such as lethargy (Pekrun, 2006), clients would rarely, if ever, observe designers at work in the creative studio.

(Figure 1 here)

4.1.1. Inertia

Clients noticed a decline in creativity once the relationship had become established, with several suggesting a turning point at about three years: “It’s all starting to look a bit tired, a bit samey. It doesn’t seem terribly creative or imaginative anymore” (Client 19). Clients perceived a reduction in the ability of the agency to generate novelty. Many expressed the view that there came a time when switching agency was inevitable, particularly if the agency was unable to respond to changes in the marketplace: “There comes a time when we need the agency to think differently, but they can’t seem to shift, and you feel you have to go elsewhere to get fresh thinking” (Client 5). We call this *response invariability*.

While response invariability can be attributed to an inability to generate new ideas, there is also the feeling that some agencies restrict their response intentionally, such as when a particular solution has proved successful in the past: “They have a tendency to drive their train along established tracks. If a solution worked previously, they re-use it. Creative parameters become narrower. They stick to the tried and tested” (Client 16). Some attributed this to the agency’s in-depth knowledge of the client. While customer-specific knowledge can increase the likelihood of relevant output, some detected an unintended negative consequence, namely predictability and conformance to established practice.

Also evident was the agency’s inclination for risk-avoidance, complying too readily with clients’ tentative suggestions: “They respond to the brief by giving us exactly what we ask for and nothing more. That can be good, but what we want is something novel, something new to the category that we haven’t thought of ourselves” (Client 12). Some suggested this was evidence of having grown too close, while others wondered if it might be reticence due to a power imbalance in the relationship: “It’s almost like they think ‘don’t upset the client, they pay our wages’” (Client 5). We call this *consensus seeking*.

4.1.2. *Complacency*

Without exception, clients acknowledged the danger of agencies becoming complacent. One manifestation was what appeared to be *reduced task effort*. This was characterised first, by frequent, and sometimes misplaced, assumptions: “They don’t ask as much as they should. They think they know what they’re doing but in reality, they may not. They assume nothing has changed. I think it’s complacent and lazy” (Client 4). The second manifestation was the recycling of old solutions. As noted above, some respondents interpreted the reliance on previous ideas as stagnation (inertia), while others attributed it to

‘milking’ a winning formula: “Agencies get complacent. They think, ‘We’ll just knock out another version of that.’ It’s quite depressing when this happens” (Client 10).

A second manifestation of complacency was *reduced attentiveness*. Respondents identified a reduction in responsiveness, either in terms of communication or task-completion: “They didn’t bother to tell me they were changing our account manager. I found out through LinkedIn. They clearly perceive me to be a low-value client” (Client 8). Similarly: “It seems to be taking weeks for them to turn our work around. I suspect it’s because we’re no longer a high priority for the agency” (Client 20).

Perhaps the most widespread indicator of reduced attentiveness was the tendency for agencies to switch client service teams once the revenue stream from the client seemed secure, replacing the ‘A’ team of senior managers with a ‘B’ team of junior managers: “I had to say to them, ‘We’re really unhappy. The people we liked on the business all seem to have been sucked into other clients’” (Client 6). In professional services, where the key contact at the supplier firm can be the single most important source of the relationship with the client, replacing the service team can have negative consequences, particularly when it appears to be instigated for the sole benefit of the supplier.

4.2. Stage 2: Supplier perceptions - antecedents

4.2.1. Inertia

The nature of some client work is prolonged and complex tasks. Agencies admit it becomes harder to generate fresh ideas as time proceeds: “Our first idea was really strong. The second was good too. The third not so much. Then you end up in a spiral you can’t pull out of. The creative response becomes identical each time. Despite your best efforts, you run out of creative solutions” (Agency 5, Creative Director). Extended challenging jobs deplete resources. We call this *cognitive fatigue*. Idea generation becomes onerous. As the Creative

Director from Agency 6 said: “Your brain limits itself to a specific avenue of exploration, shutting down other paths.”

A second antecedent of inertia that emerged was *positive reinforcement*. Agencies restrict the creative response to deliver what appeals to the client: “You know the client too well. You know what they like. You know what they’re going to say, so you respond to the brief in a certain way” (Agency 1, Account Director). Whereas cognitive fatigue leads to ‘lock-in’ and the inability to deliver a varied creative response, reinforcement prompts a deliberate decision to limit the range of ideas. What looks to the client to be creative exhaustion is, in fact, the agency delivering what the client has previously legitimized. Furthermore, given the fragility and power imbalance of client–agency relationships (Zolkiewski, Burton, & Stratoudaki, 2008), respondents expressed an inclination to avoid risk-taking for fear of upsetting the client: “You think ‘well, they’ve liked this before’. Rather than taking a step back, we do what we know they like. Why risk upsetting the client?” (Agency 10, Account Director).

4.2.2. *Boredom*

All respondents acknowledged that, once a relationship was established, repetitive work was inevitable. Routine work, which lacks variety and is monotonous, is less stimulating. Unlike cognitive fatigue (inertia), which is the result of ‘overload’, boredom emanates from a lack of challenge or ‘underload’. This is particularly irksome for creative minds:

Most designers get very excited when a new client walks through the door because there’s lots of potential, but when you’ve solved the problem once, and then they ask you, every single year, to respond to the same brief, it’s never going to be

challenging. Enthusiasm wanes and boredom will set in. Designers like new things.
(Agency 3, Account Director)

Constraint and prescription also emerged as antecedents of boredom. We refer to these as elements of *formalization*, which, when present in conjunction with repetition, exacerbate boredom. Formalization is the extent to which explicit formal rules influence ways of working (Fredrickson, 1986). A moderate level of formalization can be beneficial in that it provides direction and reduces ambiguity. However, in excess, it negatively influences idea generation by limiting flexibility and autonomy. Respondents spoke of organizational rules that constrain and of clients who are overly directive: “When the brief is rigid and non-malleable, designers get frustrated. It can be really demotivating” (Agency 7, Account Director). Low intrinsic motivation can lead to boredom:

Designers here have an awful lot of experience. They don’t want to be told what to do. When the client thinks they are the designer and we’re just pushing the mouse around, doing what we’re told, that’s really demotivating. You reach the point where your heart isn’t in it anymore. (Agency 10, Creative Director)

Agencies also identified poor-quality client briefing as a cause of boredom, citing a lack of goal clarity and/or insufficient background information as a common occurrence. Lack of specificity and useful information, which we call *instruction ambiguity*, limits the capacity of the creative person to perform the task, leading to a feeling of low perceived task control and boredom:

When you don't get a full brief, you're working blind. You're thinking 'I don't know where to go with this', and that has a negative impact on your motivation to do a good job. You feel less involved and you disengage. (Agency 8, Creative Director)

The final antecedent of boredom to emerge was what we call *self-concept incompatibility*. This occurred when a task conflicted with an individual's self-concept or personal identity, the former interpreted as *who I am* and the latter as *what I value* (Schwartz et al., 2011). Some individuals perceived certain jobs to be unsuited to the meanings they attached to themselves, leading to reduced task engagement and distraction-seeking behaviour, as explained by the Creative Director at Agency 9:

We've got what I call 'campers' and 'climbers' in the studio. You need both, but you need to know who's who. If I give an inappropriate job to a climber, they won't be inspired by it. They quickly become bored. They'll work on the job, but they'll be thinking about other things, like what they're cooking for dinner, or they'll work with their headphones on, listening to an audiobook or learning Spanish. They've tuned into something else which means they can't give 100 percent to the job.

4.2.3. *Complacency*

Two antecedents emerged from talking to service providers. The first was consistently successful past responses to client problems, leading to excessive self-efficacy:

After two or three years you're thinking, "Yeah, this again." There's a sense of, "We know what we're doing, we know what works, let's see if we can re-use last year's." There's not the same level of care that was shown at the start. You forget that actually, the audience might be different. (Agency 4, Account Director)

In this instance, re-using old ideas is neither the result of an inability to create something new, nor the well-intentioned aim to give the client what they prefer. Rather, it is the result of an intentional diminution of effort and time, or at the very least, negligence, resulting from successful performance. Admittedly, respondents recognised the danger of over-confidence:

The agency is thinking everything's going ok and that the client is happy. We've had that here. The client has been with us for ages and we think everything is fine, but we don't realise that the client has seen other 'shiny' stuff that's coming out of other agencies and thinks it's time for a change. The client decides to leave us, and we're offended by it, but you can understand why they are looking for fresh blood. (Agency 2, Account Director)

A second antecedent was a sense of security and a sometimes-misplaced expectation of relationship continuity, leading to a reduction in resources:

You have strong relationships with a couple of clients that you've built up over many years. There's a sense of security that the client isn't about to ditch you and run off. So, the agency thinks, "This is good. We've built ourselves up to a certain size on the back of these long-term clients. Now we need to grow and acquire, let's say, three new clients." The agency says to its talented creatives, "Go win some pitches" and so that talent is no longer focused on long-term clients. They've steered them to winning new business. Too much resource is spent on trying to win new work and not enough on servicing core clients. (Agency 5, Account Director)

5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical implications

As relationship longevity increases, so too does the potential for negative, or dark side, outcomes. While the emergence and impact of opportunism in business-to-business relationships is well-documented, the constructs of inertia, boredom, and complacency have received less scrutiny. This is perplexing given the capacity for each of these three traits, individually or in unison, to inflict damage on interfirm relationships in the form of under-performance and partner dissatisfaction (Anderson & Jap, 2005; Kilduff, 2019). Exploration of these dark side constructs, and how to mitigate their negative effects, is vital if the potential for premature relationship termination is to be reduced (Dant & Gleiberman, 2011). Stage 1 of our study revealed manifestations of inertia and complacency from the perspective of buyers. As noted, they did not attribute any of the negative manifestations to supplier boredom. One possible explanation for this is that it would have reflected negatively on their project by implying a perceived lack of intrinsic value. A second potential explanation is that clients are more likely to invoke rational causes for poor creativity rather than attributing reduced performance to the emotional state of boredom. Third, customers do not have the opportunity to see creative personnel at work and so would not observe any of the potential physiological signs of boredom. Stage 2 explored the antecedents of the three constructs from the perspective of service providers. Our research also considers how these dark side constructs can be mitigated. We reserve this discussion for our managerial implications. Although our study is context-specific (the provision of creative services to marketers), given the ubiquity of creativity in business, and the contribution it makes to organizational effectiveness, our findings are relevant and transferable to multiple contexts.

Our study makes two contributions to knowledge. First, we reveal the causes of inertia, boredom, and complacency, a trio of constructs under-represented in business relationship research. An appreciation of the causes of these constructs is vital if businesses are to take steps to impede their emergence. Antecedent-based intervention is likely to be the

most effective strategy to suppress the constructs and their associated undesirable behaviours. Although the consequence of all the constructs is underperformance, our research shows a diverse range of antecedents requiring different interventions. One cannot, for example, intervene to prevent cognitive underload with the same strategy that one would use in the case of cognitive overload. Second, we consider the implications of these antecedents in the context of resource deployment. Adopting a resource perspective emphasises the need to approach each construct and antecedent with the appropriate intervention because resources can be withheld (diminished) deliberately or involuntarily. Even when deliberate, it is not always self-serving, but can be well-intentioned. We now explore these issues in more detail.

We identified two antecedents of inertia. The first is cognitive fatigue leading to lock-in. This occurs after prolonged periods of involvement with a task. As time-on-task proceeds, with no opportunity to switch tasks, access to alternative solutions is blocked. The second is positive reinforcement. Prior legitimization of a solution prompts the provider to re-use it to gratify the buyer, rather than submit an alternative response that risks displeasing the buyer, leading to punishment (cf. Leue & Beauducel, 2008). Whereas lock-in is the inability to deviate from previous solutions, positive reinforcement creates expectations as to what the customer considers desirable, leading to the deliberate decision by the supplier to restrict idea generation. However, the customer only perceives response invariability, unaware that a drop in creative fluency may be a deliberate and well-intentioned strategy to deliver what the customer likes.

We identified four antecedents of boredom. The first is repetitive tasks that lack challenge, leading to lower task engagement. The second, which if present simultaneously with repetition, exacerbates boredom, is formalization. Excessive prescription by the buyer constrains the service provider's discretionary behaviour, reducing intrinsic motivation and performance (cf. Van Hooff & Van Hooff, 2017). The third is ambiguous instruction from the

customer. A poor-quality brief with a lack of goal clarity and insufficient information results in a sense of reduced control over the outcome, leading to boredom. Finally, we found evidence that, when the assigned task was a poor match with self-concept and personal identity, the individual would disengage, seeking distractions or even being disruptive. Our respondents suggested that creative people have very clear notions of who they are, what they value, what they aspire to be, and what type of work they are prepared to engage with. Our study shows that inertia and boredom manifest themselves to buyers in the same way, namely lower response variability, evidenced by reduced creativity. As discussed above, buyers in our study did not entertain the possibility that this manifestation might be attributable to boredom.

We found complacency to be caused by excessive self-efficacy or hubris. Firms become trapped in their own success and choose exploitation over exploration (cf. Wang, Senaratne, & Rafiq, 2014). The second antecedent of complacency stems from relationship continuity. The supplier presumes it has a privileged, 'high status' position. However, status can become a liability, leading to complacency. Complacency manifested itself as reduced responsiveness and neglect, and a redeployment of the customer service team to other, higher-priority customers. This was a counter-intuitive finding because client–agency relationships are asymmetric, with power generally wielded by clients because of the abundance of alternative suppliers (cf. Gopalakrishnan & Zhang, 2017). One would normally expect complacent, rent-seeking behaviour from the less-dependent partner (i.e., the client).

Interpreting dark side constructs through the lens of resource deployment is illuminating because it highlights the important distinction between willingness and ability. Regarding inertia, we find that cognitive fatigue, resulting from a high level of attention over an extended period, is characterised by willingness, but inability, to deploy resources, whereas positive reinforcement is characterised by the, albeit well-intentioned, deliberate

decision to diminish resource deployment. There is a fundamental difference between these two scenarios even though, from the customer perspective, the consequence of both is the same, underlining the need to understand determinants of the constructs. Cognitive fatigue implies resource depletion, hence the inability of the individual to deploy resources and fulfil the value proposition. Regarding boredom, routine, formalization, and ambiguous instruction are characterised by an involuntary reduction in resource deployment resulting from reduced intrinsic motivation caused by work that is unchallenging, constraining, or poorly defined. Self-concept incompatibility is different. The individual's assessment that a task does not fit with their identity leads to boredom but is characterised by a partial redirection of resources towards an activity that the individual finds more interesting. Thus, there is an element of intentional resource restriction. In our research, complacency is a firm-level construct, and is characterised by an intentional diminution in resource deployment. However, unlike positive reinforcement (inertia), where the reduction in resource deployment is deliberate but well intentioned, complacency implies a restriction of resources intended to benefit the supplier at the expense of the buyer. If boredom and inertia can be characterised as 'want to, but can't', complacency is 'can, but don't want to'. These distinctions are important because they demonstrate that dark side constructs may not always be a consequence of insufficient competence or integrity as suggested by Oliveira and Lumineau (2019). It is not necessarily the case that every manifestation of a relationship's dark side is the consequence of unethical or pernicious behaviour (cf. Payne and Frow, 2017).

Our research answers the call of Johnsen and Lacoste (2016) to explore both buyer and supplier perspectives. The approach has conspicuous benefits. We found that relational partners can attribute the same manifestation to different causes. What the buyer perceives as stagnation, the supplier explains as responding to the buyer's preferences. However, if value is what the beneficiary perceives it to be, the result is suboptimal. Similarly, what the buyer

perceives as inertia may in fact be boredom, caused by the excessive constraint imposed by the customer. Thus, as with much relationship research, there is justification, where possible, for seeking the perspective of all relational partners.

5.2. *Managerial implications*

We use this section to address how practitioners can mitigate the negative effects of the three dark side constructs. We propose that both supplier and customer should take responsibility if they believe the relationship is worth maintaining. As might be expected, some of the potential solutions carry risks and challenges of their own. We organise the section by looking at each of the antecedents in turn.

Sustained cognitive fatigue. Cognitive fatigue increases with time-on-task, particularly when that task is demanding. Prolonged attention to tasks characterised by divergent thinking – the creation of original ideas – is more likely to cause overload and lock-in. Leaders within the supplier firm must be vigilant and act before the effects of fatigue become pronounced, recognising that some will be more prone to it than others. Highly demanding explorative tasks should be interspersed with less demanding, even mundane tasks, to allow for periods of recovery in cognitive capacity. There is some evidence to suggest that leaders would be advised to anticipate, rather than simply respond to, cognitive fatigue in employees. Switching between tasks, even if the new task is less complex, takes longer once fatigue has already set in (Plukaard et al., 2015).

Positive reinforcement. The self-imposed constraint that results from consistently positive feedback from the customer results in supplier caution and the tendency to repeat what is interpreted as ‘desirable’ behaviour. Suppliers do not want to risk upsetting the client and jeopardising the account. The *performance-feedback-performance* loop needs to be interrupted so that there is an expectation for incremental improvement rather than goals

reflecting past performance. This is not to imply positive feedback should be replaced with negative feedback which would, in the context of creative tasks, undermine the supplier's sense of control and demotivate employees (Van Dijk and Kluger, 2011). Rather, the customer needs to create a gap between customer aspirations and supplier performance. The customer should encourage the supplier to embrace risk even if this means some of the supplier's ideas are situated at the boundaries of, or even redefine, relevance.

Routinization. Suppliers should consider regular job rotation. Research suggests that intra-organizational mobility reduces the onset of boredom, and maintains motivation and performance (Wood, 1995). However, there are potential negative consequences. First, the customer may not welcome a change in personnel, particularly if a close relationship has developed with one or more members of the service team. Second, there will be an inevitable loss of tacit knowledge – the personal and contextual knowledge acquired by 'doing' that is difficult to share (Nonaka, 1994). The result could be a drop, at least in the short term, in productivity. Clearly, a balance needs to be struck. Firms should avoid the simultaneous transfer of the entire account team and ensure there is an element of continuity. If rotation is not possible, which may well be the case in small companies, allowing employees to engage intermittently in a different task can reduce the risk of boredom. Given that routinization is associated with underload, a task rotation strategy should seek to improve the *demand-ability fit* by assigning a task that is more complex. This is clearly the opposite of the approach required for an individual suffering from overload. Managers should also remember that boredom-proneness varies. Some individuals may be more able than others to cope with repetitive tasks (Kass et al., 2001).

Formalization. Although the customer might argue that employee motivation is the responsibility of the service provider, demotivated service workers have a negative impact on output. If the customer has been well served by the firm in the past, and bearing in mind the

upheaval of changing supplier, it would be in the customer's interests to share responsibility for maintaining a motivated workforce at the supplier firm. Formalization can be positive if it clarifies goals and values. However, when the customer dictates solutions to experts, the constraining effect will undermine goodwill and effort. Taking a less prescriptive approach will be beneficial, since autonomy and a sense of ownership have been shown to be positively related, via intrinsic motivation, to creative performance (Li, Li, & Chen, 2018). That said, there is insufficient time and resource to risk the supplier firm deviating from expectations and delivering an unacceptable outcome. The customer can manage the tension between supplier autonomy and customer control by holding a series of 'check-in' meetings after project briefing, to monitor the ideation process and rein in ideas that are likely to be impractical, thus iterating between episodes of freedom and control. Customers can also create a climate in which the service provider feels empowered to be proactive, scanning the environment for change and recommending action to the customer on an ad hoc basis.

Instruction ambiguity. We found evidence that poor-quality instruction can lead to boredom. A brief characterised by insufficient information and/or lack of goal clarity leaves the supplier firm at a loss as to how to master the task and results in a reduction in the perception of task value. Poor instruction may be because of a lack of expertise on the part of the customer who does not know how to craft a good brief or a lack of awareness of the information the supplier needs. Alternatively, it could be that the customer, with multiple daily demands, considers brief writing to be low priority. Customer and supplier together can minimise the problem by co-crafting the brief. Not only does this make the task less onerous for the customer but, in addition, ensures the supplier can request all necessary information at the start of the project. It has an additional advantage in ensuring that customer and supplier are aligned in their interpretation of the brief from the start. While this approach makes

demands on supplier resources, the benefit of a well-honed brief and a show of willingness to make the customer's life easier will enhance the relationship.

Self-concept incompatibility. Leaders at the supplier firm need to be cognizant of the relevance of task characteristics to an individual's self-concept and personal identity. Several respondents in our research spoke of creative personnel as either 'campers' or 'climbers', the former much more likely to accept, and even welcome, monotony and predictability than the latter. Not all creative people seek constant challenge or aspire to rapid career advancement. Managers at supplier firms need to ensure a good match between task and individual. However, they also need to ensure 'campers' do not become resentful of the perception that they are 'less creative'. The value of their contribution to the firm's prosperity needs to be recognised and lauded in internal meetings. It will not always be feasible, particularly in small companies, to assign tasks to individuals that they value and find meaningful. In these occasions, managers should stress the importance of the task and of the relationship with the customer for the firm's well-being. Managers should also be aware that self-concept can evolve (Brown, 2015). A task that would previously have been resisted because it conflicted with an individual's identity may in time become acceptable.

Excessive self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is considered a main determinant of behaviour and can be an asset or a risk depending on its level (Guillen, 2020). Bandura (1997) argues that while it is better to err on the side of over-confidence, self-efficacy needs to be grounded in reality. In industries where there is an abundance of alternative suppliers, managers would do well to foster a modest amount of self-doubt by reminding employees that the firm is 'only as good as its last job'. They should not take their performance for granted and should benchmark versus competitors who are more than likely persistently 'knocking on the customer's door'. Rather than waiting passively for feedback, managers at supplier firms should proactively seek performance feedback from customers by instigating an annual or

biannual review. Signalling a willingness to use feedback to engage in self-regulatory behaviour will demonstrate commitment to enhance performance and revitalize the business relationship. Suppliers can, without reference to the customer, set themselves new performance goals that remotivate employees to increase their efforts.

Relational continuity. While a collaborative, rather than adversarial, relationship is likely to be more beneficial in motivating suppliers, customers may want to conduct a formal review of the supplier roster, for example every three years, to signal that relationship continuity is not preordained. An element of uncertainty in relationship status will ward off complacency. From the supplier perspective, it is inevitable that, as the firm grows, owner/managers who once interacted regularly with customers, will become more distant. Regular communication between senior manager and customer will suppress the suspicion that the customer is no longer valued. Suppliers should proactively propose strategies for short-term relationship repair (for example, people and process issues) and long-term relationship rejuvenation.

6. Limitations and future research

As might be expected, the limitations of this study suggest avenues for future research. Although our research gathered data from customers and suppliers, the study was not truly dyadic. Given the differences in interpretation of, for example, inertia, it would be highly instructive to collect data from matched relational partners. It would allow researchers to compare accounts of specific events and take account of specific contextual factors. While a degree of care would be required, researchers might even consider conducting joint, as well as one-to-one, interviews with relational partners. The combination of individual and shared narratives could be highly informative.

Given the inherent co-creative nature of supplier-customer relationships, it would be enlightening to explore perceptions of responsibility for the inhibition of dark side constructs. We touch on this to some extent in our study, but more research is needed. In many contexts, it is simplistic to lay the blame at the door of suppliers. Customers play their part, particularly in asymmetric relationships, where they set the rules of engagement.

Our research did not explore the association between relationship longevity and the emergence of the three dark side constructs, beyond the fact that they are prevalent in relationships that have lasted for two or more years. If a knowledge-intensive service firm is repeating a particular job every month, could boredom and/or inertia emerge in a matter of months? Where is the threshold? Clearly, a longitudinal study would be ideal, as it would reveal subtle changes in attitudes and behaviour in real time.

Finally, we explored these constructs as negative relationship traits. However, there is evidence to suggest that, in certain circumstances and at certain levels, boredom and inertia can have positive consequences (e.g., Sawant, Hada, & Blanchard, 2017). Future research could investigate these constructs with a more nuanced perspective to reveal contexts in which they might be beneficial.

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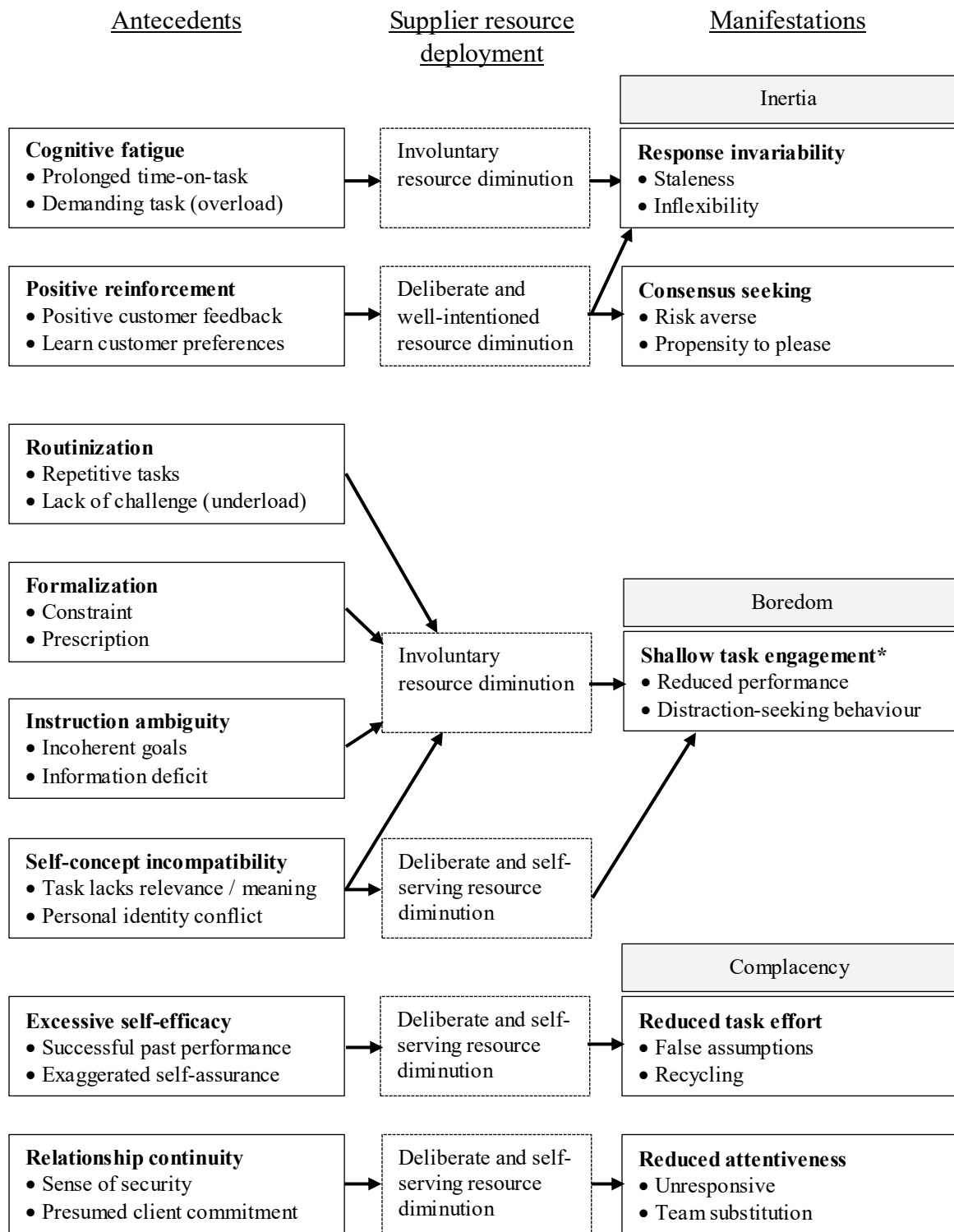
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*Supplier observation; customers did not attribute manifestations to boredom

Fig. 1. Construct antecedents, supplier resource deployment, and manifestations

Appendix

Table A1
Stage 1 proof quotes (customers)

Dimension	2nd-order themes	Proof quotes
Inertia	Response invariability	<p>You can hear them saying “Oh no, here we go again.” They can’t add any value. They go down the same route. (Client 12)</p> <p>We found that working with just one agency didn’t give us the variety we wanted. They became very fixed in their views about what things should look like. They wouldn’t budge, so in the end we left. (Client 22)</p> <p>They’ve become quite fixed in their views. It’s understandable given how long they’ve worked on the brand, but I’d like them to consider alternative perspectives. (Client 15)</p>
	Consensus seeking	<p>They stick to the same formula they’ve used for several years. It’s become a strait jacket. (Client 17)</p> <p>They respond by giving you exactly what you asked for. It’s disappointing. I’d like them to say, “We understand why you want to do it that way, but this way may be better.” (Client 5)</p> <p>I’d love them to come to me and say, “We’ve had this idea we want to show you.” That would show they haven’t gone stale. (Client 20)</p>
Complacency	Reduced task effort	<p>They know our audience, but sometimes I think assumptions can be made, and these can be incorrect. I think it’s partly laziness, not wanting to ask questions. I’d rather they asked. (Client 11)</p> <p>They get complacent. Instead of going back to the drawing board, they recycle old ideas. They need to ask themselves, “Is this still the best way of doing things?” We have to get them in and give them nudge and then it all starts up happily again. (Client 3)</p> <p>I think with our main agency there is a bit of complacency. They know they’ve achieved in the past. They’ve even over-delivered against certain metrics, so they relax a bit. We start to see the same ideas. (Client 12)</p>
	Reduced attentiveness	<p>They don’t show any inclination to come and see us. I’ve given them lots of clues that I’d like them to come to me, but they just say, “We’re busy, can you come here instead?” We’re obviously not high priority for them anymore. (Client 8)</p> <p>The biggest issue at the moment is lack of progress on jobs. I think they’ve outgrown us. We’re small fry now. It feels like they’re keeping us ticking over, but no more than that. (Client 19)</p> <p>After a time, the team we bought into, the senior people, drifts away and suddenly we’re dealing with junior people who we’ve never been introduced to. (Client 7)</p>

Table A2
Stage 2 proof quotes (suppliers)

Dimensions	2nd-order themes	Proof quotes
Inertia	Cognitive fatigue	<p>It's difficult for designers to explore the same avenue multiple times. Where do those new ideas come from? (Agency 3, CD)</p> <p>At the start, you throw everything at it to win the business and please the client. They see the very best of an agency. But after a while, it's hard to sustain that level of idea generation. It's a real challenge. (Agency 9, AD)</p> <p>One of our clients does the same campaign every two months. If I'm honest, you run out of steam. You think to yourself, "Where do I go next? How do I add value when it's the sixth, seventh time?" (Agency 8, CD)</p>
	Positive reinforcement	<p>We know what they like and what they don't like. We try to dodge the things they don't like. (Agency 2, AD)</p> <p>This is what 'good' looks like for them, so this is what we'll do. (Agency 7, CD)</p> <p>You get a really good understanding of what the client likes. You could do so much more, but you filter your ideas. You rule out so much. (Agency 8, CD)</p>
Boredom	Routinization	<p>You get bored if you are asked to do the same thing, it's the same brief as last year and the year before that. Great creatives like to be challenged. (Agency 9, CD)</p> <p>It's human nature. If you ask a creative to do the same thing time and time again, the enthusiasm goes. (Agency 8, CD)</p> <p>After a while, if it's fundamentally the same brief, the passion goes out of it and you stop trying. The client notices. (Agency 4, AD)</p>
	Formalization	<p>If it's repetitive and formulaic, and there's no freedom to be creative, that's where boredom creeps in. (Agency 5, CD)</p> <p>The brief can be very constraining and that can be negative. They say they want it in this style, but it takes away the creativity and the extra stuff you could bring to it. Your heart isn't in it. It can be demotivating. (Agency 6, CD)</p> <p>One of our younger designers, he's been working with a client who stepped over the line and is saying "move this to the left, make that blue." When they do that, you lose control of the job and become demotivated. I saw his enthusiasm for the work go downhill. (Agency 17 CD)</p>
	Instruction ambiguity	<p>We waste a lot of time clarifying, decoding, and filling in gaps ourselves. We're never quite sure if our interpretation is correct. You feel like you aren't in full control and so you lose interest. There isn't the same level of enthusiasm. (Agency 10, CD)</p> <p>Bad briefing leads to frustration and then, when they [designers] find out the client doesn't know what they want, disengagement. (Agency 7, CD)</p>
	Self-concept incompatibility	<p>Some designers are happy working nine to five on whatever you give them, but others want to feel a strong emotional connection with the output from their work. You need to be careful how you assign jobs, or you run the risk of a very bored designer. (Agency 8, CD)</p> <p>Some are happy to plod along, but others need the stimulation of the pitch situation. You can't expect a designer with aspirations to win awards to accept a mundane job with enthusiasm. (Agency 1, AD)</p>

Complacency	Excessive self-efficacy	<p>I've been working in this sector for 15 years, so it gives me confidence that I understand what works. Can that lead to complacency? Yes, I think it does. We get constrained by our own arrogance. (Agency 10, AD)</p> <p>At the beginning you dial up the creativity. But after a while, with the clients you've been with for some time, you start to churn out the same ideas. Complacency creeps in. Everyone seems happy but you are making yourself vulnerable. (Agency 6, AD)</p>
	Relationship continuity	<p>A lot of agencies are guilty of that. They send in all the big guns at the start. Then, when the account is won and starts to feel secure, and the client looks like they're in it for the long haul, they're handed over to the juniors and never see the senior team again. Attention has drifted to winning new business. (Agency 4, CD)</p> <p>I think there's a big issue with agencies constantly wanting to grow. Complacency creeps in. You might have been working with the client for 10 years and you think everything's ok, so your attention drifts towards your new business drive. (Agency 2, AD)</p> <p>You're working with a client and they feel like they're your biggest client because they're getting all the love. But then they hear you've had some big wins and they're no longer the biggest client and the love has gone elsewhere. They don't like it because they're not the big fish anymore, even though they stuck by you when times were hard. They're not getting the same level of attention. (Agency 1, AD)</p>