

# **Disrupting Tradition: Reshaping Traditional Bartending in Japan**

## **Abstract**

Organizations often face challenges leveraging tradition to meet contemporary demands without compromising its historical values. Previous studies have predominantly focused on specific traditional objects by illustrating how actors carefully update them through recovery, revision, or integration with novel elements to balance continuity and change. This paper attempts to contribute to this body of scholarship by analyzing tradition as an ongoing practice. It examines how actors *do* tradition innovatively. Analyzing the emerging movement in Japanese bartending, this paper asks how deviation from conventional behavior impacts the management of the tradition and innovation paradox. Although the three deviation practices: “spanning boundaries”, “breaking symbols”, “expanding work”, specified in the analysis transform traditional bartending features, they arise from a profound commitment to and pursuit of tradition. In conceptualizing this seeming break away from tradition, this paper presents the term “suspending tradition”, which indicates questioning the established boundaries of tradition rather than undermining tradition. This study revisits the role of deviation practices in the process of renewing tradition and suggests such practices could open up opportunities to reimagine and reshape established traditions.

### **Keywords**

Japanese bartending, tradition-innovation paradox, using history, doing tradition, suspending tradition

## **Introduction**

Recently, scholars have begun to explore how organizational actors leverage tradition as a historical *resource* to organizational ends (e.g., Dacin & Dacin, 2019; Kroezen & Heugans, 2019; Suddaby & Jaskiewicz, 2020; Petruzzelli & Savino, 2014). This, of course, does not mean that actors can use tradition for whatever they want. As cherished heritage from the past, tradition requires or forbids people to reenact particular patterns of actions (Shils, 1981). If the use of tradition significantly violates transmitted norms, the organization risks compromising its identity and facing criticism from both internal and external adherents

(Cancellieri et al., 2022; Cappelen & Pedersen, 2021; Dalpiaz & Di Stefano, 2018; Ravasi et al., 2019). Moreover, if actors stick to their tradition too much, it could, in turn, limit their ability to change (Sasaki, Ravasi, & Micelotta, 2019; Schultz & Hernes, 2013). Given this dilemma, scholars have examined the roles and nature of tradition in various contexts and offered insight into how to reconcile the paradoxical relationship between tradition and innovation (e.g., De Massis et al., 2016; Erdogan et al., 2020; Ravasi et al., 2019; Sasaki et al., 2020). These studies primarily demonstrated how actors source and retrieve specific traditional elements—such as ingredients or narratives for culinary (Cappelen & Pedersen, 2021; Petruzzelli and Savino, 2014), identity statements (Sasaki et al., 2020), and iconic features of past products (Ravasi et al., 2019)—and then carefully integrate or allow them to coexist with novel components, enabling them to balance continuity and change in response to contemporary contexts.

Whereas these studies have focused on various ways of using traditions, few studies have explored the practices of implementing these renewed/renewing traditions. Previous studies have revealed how actors produce resolutions that harmonize tradition with novelty. In their analysis, tradition is primarily viewed as a static set of objects. This paper, instead, views tradition as an integral part of ongoing practice and examines the moments of “doing tradition” in new manners that align with contemporary circumstances. It focuses on the emergence of a new-wave movement in Japanese bartending and investigates how actors in this movement deal with tradition and novelty within their practices.

Japanese bar culture began at the turn of the twentieth century when the first wave of Japanese modernization expanded. Since then, it has gradually developed a distinctively

unique style globally recognized today as “Japanese bartending” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7VFU9LE300>). This particular style—called “authentic” bars (*ōsentīc bā* in Japanese)—including the store décor and atmosphere, bartenders’ fashion, skills, and particular kinds of drinks, has come down over generations and still prevails in the Japanese bar scene. Over the last decade, however, a new generation of bartenders has started introducing new practices to respond to contemporary demands. Although this emerging movement is not unified under any institution or common initiatives, it has now gained recognition among incumbent bartenders and customers. Those new-generation bartenders do not necessarily try to establish an alternative category to authentic bars; meanwhile, their modifications usually seem notably radical, challenging the fundamental aspects of the existing tradition. Nevertheless, they have not faced severe criticism from the audiences and still claim they follow in the wake of traditional bartending.

This paper highlights the profound deviation practices usually considered to be avoided in the context of strategic use of tradition and examines their impact on the tradition-innovation paradox (Erdogan, 2020). Drawing on interviews and observations conducted in their bars, this paper identifies three prominent practices: “spanning boundaries”, “breaking symbols”, and “expanding work”. Although each practice markedly diverges from traditional components in various respects, these transformations arise from a profound engagement with and pursuit of tradition. Indeed, their practices still demonstrate connections to tradition, but in different forms from conventional approaches. For these bartenders, following tradition goes beyond merely preserving specific features; it involves reshaping their practices through inspiration drawn from tradition. Moreover, by highlighting deviations

prominently, they question the overt reliance on the existing boundaries that shape tradition. This paper clarifies the roles of deviation practices and presents the concept of “suspending tradition”, which disturbs the established foundations of tradition rather than dismantling tradition itself. This concept suggests that such disruptions could open up opportunities for organization actors to reshape tradition.

The following section reviews the discussion on the use of tradition and its paradoxical relationship with innovation. Then, it elaborates on the research setting, including the history of Japanese bar culture.

## **Theoretical background**

### *Using tradition as a historical resource*

Scholars in management studies have explored how organizational actors deal with tradition, which is broadly shared in organizations, societies, and nations (e.g., Cancellieri et al., 2022; De Massis et al., 2016; Erdogan et al., 2020; Petruzzelli & Savino, 2014; Ravasi et al., 2019; Sasaki et al., 2020). While tradition compels community members to inherit specific practices, current scholars have recognized tradition as a resource rather than merely a constraint (Dacin & Dacin, 2019). This research stream, to some extent, shares the perspective of strategic use of history building on the constructivist view that focuses on the rhetorical nature of history (e.g., Brunninge, 2009; Foster et al., 2011; Suddaby et al., 2010). In contrast to seeing history as rigid facts out of human control, this perspective emphasizes human agency, which constructs preferable history by selectively interpreting the past. Similarly, tradition might often be seen as inflexible heritages from a distant past, though it is also a construct invented

by people at some point in time (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). Viewing tradition as a more malleable concept than generally thought (Suddaby & Jaskiewicz, 2020), organizations could better preserve their identities in line with the current situation and create future opportunities.

One of the scholarly foci concerning the tradition-as-resource view is to understand how actors respond to contemporary demands while preserving their connections to tradition (e.g., Cancellieri et al., 2022; De Massis et al., 2016; Erdogan et al., 2020; Hatch & Schultz, 2017; Ravasi et al., 2019; Sasaki et al., 2020). Petruzzelli and Savino (2014) asked how old components, often considered obsolete in the current situation, can lead to successful innovation. Drawing on the case study of Danish chef René Redzepi, they examined the conditions for achieving innovation—specifically, what characteristics of traditional ingredients and methods of recombining them contribute to his groundbreaking recipes. They revealed that relatively unexploited traditional ingredients that retain freshness within the industry and cultural closeness between them and their user (in this case, the chef) that prevents improper usage of these objects fosters successful innovation. They also pointed out the significance of careful exploration to preserve the original meaning of traditional components and recombining them with novel techniques to update their values. Cappelen and Pedersen also studied a new culinary movement in Turkey and addressed how actors could construct legitimate historical narratives that repel competing ones (Cappelen & Pedersen, 2021). Building on “strategic ambiguity”, they demonstrated that intentionally using a vaguely defined past could help actors create room for innovation while mitigating the risk of harsh backlash against using tradition. Sasaki et al. (2019) paid more attention to the tension between continuity and change regarding the revered past. In the family business

context, they investigated how long-lived Japanese firms modify their traditional resource—identity statements (family motto)—when propelling strategic shifts to keep up with the current situation. Analyzing 25 cases, they identified three strategies for bridging the past with the present: elaborating, recovering, and decoupling. As distinct from simply replacing tradition, each strategy represents circumspect approaches, including partially updating the existing motto, crafting a new one inspired by historical elements, or introducing a new motto while retaining the old one. These studies remind us that actors do not always use tradition at their disposal. Tradition, as valuable shared histories imbued with symbolic meaning, particularly makes innovation within its framework a particularly delicate endeavor. For instance, as Cancellieri and colleagues suggested in their study on the Italian opera industry, to prevent negative reputations regarding the renewal of tradition, organization actors should maintain “the most familiar aspects of a tradition while departing from it on more peripheral features” (Cancellieri et al., 2022, p. 2705).

Some studies conceptualized the process, capabilities, or strategies to consider the paradoxical relationship between tradition and innovation. De Massis et al. (2016) offered a model called “innovation through tradition” to identify gaps in our understanding of developing new products leveraging knowledge from the past. They assumed two essential capabilities—interiorization and reinterpretation—to develop new products leveraging knowledge from the past. According to their model, firms need to seek and gain potentially valuable knowledge rooted in their own or local traditions. This valuable past knowledge should then be integrated with new technologies in order to create innovative products with new functionalities or meanings. By investigating eight long-established family companies

in Turkey, Erdogan et al. (2020) specified four strategies to address the paradox by combining two different approaches toward tradition (preservation or revival of old things) and innovation (segregation or integration of old and new things). They emphasized the reciprocal nature of tradition and innovation rather than viewing them as binary opposition. In addition to innovation through tradition, they demonstrated that the firms not only use tradition as a resource to bolster innovation but also utilize innovative resources like new technologies and new knowledge to uphold tradition, that is, “tradition through innovation” (p.45). Ravasi and colleagues (2019) proposed “innovation within tradition”, reflecting more on the constraining nature of tradition. In their analysis of Italian motor vehicle firms, designers and engineers who addressed the renewal of their iconic products evoking “legacy” or “tradition” carefully analyzed the trajectories of their past products so as not to disrupt their essential traits. By doing so, actors maintained continuity while developing a new model. While empirical contexts vary, previous studies considered two dimensions of tradition—as a resource and a constraint—and provided various insights on leveraging it for organizational ends. They highlighted that when using or updating tradition, actors should not disturb its core characteristics while striking a balance with novelty through careful reinterpretation, recombination with new technologies, or coexistence of traditional and modern components.

*“Doing tradition”: tradition as a form of practice*

While previous studies produced significant strategic insights from various angles, the perspective of tradition as a practice has not been fully exploited. The prevalent discussions have started by revealing how actors intentionally utilize a particular tradition commonly inherent in material or discursive objects. These analyses presuppose the existence of subjects

who distance themselves from objectified traditions, such as old knowledge, skills, symbols, rituals, and beliefs, to achieve desired outcomes. This might be because these studies implicitly follow a picture of the “using history” that separates subjects from history.

Yet, there are cautious views concerning actors seemingly exerting complete power over history for their ends from outside. Zundel et al. (2016, p. 229) offered a different mode of engagement with history: “being historical” apart from “utilitarian uses of history”. It provides that by being attuned to the past contexts, history can bring us to the attention of the conditions shaping our present life. Unlike focusing on the subjects using history instrumentally, they highlighted the power of history to provide a sense of alternative possibilities through the immersion of the past. Hatch and Schultz (2017, p.692) raised “the immediacy, intensity, and emotionality that history” evokes in others. They contended that prior studies tend to overlook when and how organizational actors have the idea to use particular histories. Through examining the Carlsberg Group in Denmark, they demonstrated how a historical corporate motto in Latin, “Semper Ardens”, inspired and guided contemporary organizational members on two separate occasions before its formal adoption. These studies argued that history is not merely a passive resource waiting to be discovered and interpreted by organizational actors; instead, it possesses agency, shaping actors’ behaviors and practices even before being intentionally utilized.

From this point of view, the subjects are constantly “being in a particular history”. And their practices are inseparable from this history. Similarly, carriers of tradition are always engaging within tradition through repetitive practices. This perspective could expand our research attention from practices of “using tradition” to “doing tradition”, practices of

performing tradition. Seeing tradition as practice itself is not new. Some scholars have explored tradition in the context of institutional theory (e.g., Dacin & Dacin, 2008; 2019; Dacin et al., 2010; Di Domenico & Phillips, 2009; Lok & De Rond, 2013; Lockwood & Glynn, 2016). In their seminal studies, Dacin and colleagues have discussed tradition as an institutionalized practice and emphasized the significance of custodial works in preserving and altering tradition (Dacin & Dacin, 2008; 2019; Dacin et al., 2010). It is basically correct that tradition includes various cultural elements (Dacin & Dacin, 2008), yet it is also true that it would be fundamentally rooted in repetitive practices. The tradition persists through practices; at the same time, its “slippage, imperfections, and deliberate innovation” also manifests as practices (Lockwood & Glynn, 2016, p.204).

Building on this perspective, this paper will revisit the current discussion on the tradition and innovation paradox. Instead of investigating how actors use tradition for innovation, the paper asks how actors are “doing tradition” innovatively. The new movement in Japanese bartending dealt with in this paper is a good example of this. The new-generation bartenders recognize that they reside in a particular tradition and identify as just professional bartenders rather than seeking an entirely brand-new identity. Meanwhile, they are doing traditional bartending but simultaneously inserting novelty and deviating from it within their practice. This paper examines the way they accomplish this and how they themselves articulate this practice. The following section will introduce the research setting: Japanese bars and bartenders’ history and current situation.

### **A Short history of Japanese Bartending**

*The dawn of bar culture in Japan*

Although several stories exist about the origin of Japanese bar culture, it says that some hotels began incorporating bars in the late nineteenth century. These hotels initially hired foreign bartenders or Japanese sailors with experience working as bartenders on their voyages. They trained the first generation of Japanese bartenders. At the beginning of the 1900s, some bartenders left the hotels and began working downtown. “Bars” devoted to alcoholic drinks, including beer, whiskey, liquor, and cocktails, gradually emerged in the city. In 1929, fifteen bartenders, mainly the first generation, founded the Japan Bartenders’ Association (which changed its name to the Nippon Bartenders’ Association in 1987). The initial purpose of the association was to build a community and improve the knowledge and skills of bartenders. Through their efforts, along with the first wave of Japanese modernization—which generally meant Westernization in this context—the bartender came to be commonly recognized as a modern cultural occupation.

In the post-war period, as the association resumed its activity in 1948, it began to institutionalize Japanese bar culture rigorously. There are two primary social reasons of the time for this push. First, Japanese society was filled with a mood for modernization and internationalization to recover from WWII (Starrs, 2011). Specifically, rebuilding the country as a cultural state—*Bunka Kokka (Kulturstaat)*—was urgent. The association picked up this atmosphere, assuming the bar, originally Western-derived culture, aligns with this purpose, advancing a national culture of life. It was also the best opportunity to improve bartenders’ status, which was associated with a shady image of the night business. This prompted the association to further institutionalize and refine Japanese bar culture. Since then, the distinctive style of Japanese bars has gradually evolved.

Second, since the late 1950s, bars flourished due to the rapid economic recovery known as the Japanese “economic miracle” (roughly from 1954 to 1970). Not merely the authentic style bars owned by association members but also the number of bars in the casual atmosphere increased. These casual bars were relatively less expensive, providing unfussy drinks such as whiskey-soda (called highball) and beer rather than well-crafted cocktails. This was a somewhat ironic situation; anyone could quickly become a bartender without any professional training, impairing the overall quality of bartenders. The association lamented this situation and started criticizing them repeatedly as “money-grubbers” and “fake bartenders who knew only about serving whiskey and water” and “worked mechanically” without devotion or sincerity. The association required its members to have self-discipline to be genuinely professional bartenders, distinguishing them from instant bartenders. This boosted its bartenders to the next level, culturally refined and equipped with extensive knowledge and advanced techniques for crafting cocktails— the “authentic bartender” emerged.

#### *A style of the authentic bar*

A style of Japanese bar(tending) had been well-established and came to be called “authentic bars” at least by the 1980s. This unique style was introduced in New York during the 90s and influenced bartenders and audiences there. It shaped a part of the stream of the craft cocktail movement in the US, which started around the 2000s (PUNCH, 2015). Several features distinguish authentic bars from other bars. One such feature is their atmosphere. They are usually quiet and chic rather than loud or vibrant. They typically feature six to ten counter seats (Figure1), occasionally accompanied by table seating; however, the counter remains

the centerpiece of the authentic bar experience. This symbolic setting draws a physical line between a bartender and a customer, simultaneously encouraging their face-to-face interactions.

Bartenders also share some features. They usually wear formal jackets and/or waistcoats (Figure2). Although not a strict convention, it is typical for a master bartender to wear a black or white jacket, while apprentices are distinguished by wearing waistcoats.

---- **Insert Figures 1&2** ----

They usually offer standard cocktails known as “classic drinks” (e.g., Martini, Gimlet, Manhattan, Old Fashioned, and so forth). While bartenders might have their original cocktails, frequently offering bespoke ones for the customer, the most noteworthy is the sophisticated standard cocktails. Even though these are usually very simple and fundamentally based on standardized recipes, they strive to make a “perfect glass of a standard” by employing various subtle measures. For instance, these practices are often highly detail-oriented, encompassing aspects such as how they cut the ice and determine its proper amount, the specific liquor brands they use, the number of stirs, and the intensity of shaking. A bartender who became famous for a specific drink is habitually called by the cocktail name, like “Mr. Martini”. Moreover, they consider the process of making drinks and their bodily movement a significant part of bartending. They are very conscious of their mixing style and carriage—the more elegant and smooth your movement can prove their sophisticated skills. The making process seems like a ritual, often compared to the Japanese tea ceremony. Mastering these symbolic behaviors is essential not only for crafting high-quality drinks but also for showcasing their professionalism through a performative display in front of customers.

These features have been transmitted from generation to generation through an apprentice system. In this system, becoming a fully-fledged bartender typically requires years of training. While a few bartender schools have emerged in recent years, they primarily adhere to and teach the style of the authentic bar. Due to these characteristics, Japanese bartenders carry the image of skilled craftspeople in general. Although this is definitely an example of invented tradition (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983), Japanese bartending, which is globally known today, provides a specific image and norms of the typical bar in Japan. The audiences are also significant custodians of this tradition. They commonly recognize the bar as a social gathering place for sophisticated adults, maintaining its quiet and calm atmosphere. Various media, including books and online articles, highlight the implicit rules that customers are expected to follow in Japanese bars. These include guidelines such as not taking a seat until directed by the bartender, refraining from asking for recommendations, consuming short cocktails within 20 minutes, avoiding loud conversations, and seeking permission before taking photos, among others. While these are not always true, people recognize that they must be appropriate customers by following the style and rules of participating in this tradition. It might make authentic bars a somewhat tricky place. Although there might be pros and cons, these characteristics are undoubtedly part of the legacy passed down from their predecessors, who, as previously mentioned, devoted themselves to creating a highly sophisticated culture during the post-war era.

#### *A new movement in Japanese bartending*

*Japanese bar culture has developed uniquely... there is a sense of style that guides the bartender's garb, posture, and the naming of cocktails and the work is passed down from a master to an apprentice. On the other hand, it is true that a new value arises.. for the new generation of bartenders, the traditional "style" would be reset or would never exist at the*

*beginning. (BRUTUS, 2023, p.17, author translated)*

Over the last decade, a new generation of bartenders—primarily those in their thirties to early forties—has emerged, implementing new styles. Although this movement is still in its early stages, as the above quote describes, it has gradually become recognized by incumbent bartenders and various audiences (e.g., Momose & Ema 2021; Urushido & Anstendig, 2021). While their approaches are not unified, they all significantly differ from the traditional practices of previous generations in various ways. They, for instance, experiment with unique cocktails that are nothing like ‘standard,’ even bringing them to the fore. Their bars have a relatively lively atmosphere rather than chic and quiet. Besides, their costumes are not always formal—some even wear jeans, a casual shirt, and an apron.

These bartenders might seem to come from and reside in an entirely different stream, but interestingly, most started their careers at authentic bars or trained in the authentic style; some are even association members, which is home to traditional bartenders. In fact, they are not technically immature or antagonistic toward tradition; they are still closely related to and perform tradition in their daily practices to some extent. Whether on purpose or not, however, the deviation from the established tradition could be a potential risk of a backlash by the custodian of the tradition and losing their legitimacy and professional identity (Cancellieri et al., 2022; Ravasi et al., 2019). This paper investigates how this twist could be possible and what this daring deviation brings forth in our understanding of managing tradition.

### **Data collection**

This study mainly uses data from interviews with new-generation bartenders to understand the emerging movement in Japanese bar culture. Most interviews were conducted at bars

with observation of their practices. The author has four years of experience working at an authentic bar (about once a week). This experience allowed the author to discern subtle differences and similarities between authentic and new-generation practices. Complementing this field research, various documents related to bar culture—such as association-published journals, magazines, books, and web articles—were also employed.

*Fieldwork at bars: interview and observation with Japanese bartenders*

Twenty-six interviews with bartenders were conducted, primarily during operating hours. Each interview lasted thirty minutes to three hours. In 2015, the author started with six authentic bartenders in Kyoto and Osaka. While researching authentic bars in Japan, I found that some bartenders had opened their own bars outside Japan. Most of them (with one exception) had been trained at an authentic bar in Japan and eventually moved overseas, such as to Singapore, Shanghai, Hong Kong, and New York City. During the interview, some elaborated on their aim and the future of Japanese bars, referring to authentic bars. For instance, a bartender in Singapore with ten years of prior work experience at an authentic bar in Japan noted: “Japanese authentic bars now tend to become a sub-culture (meaning “exclusive” in this context), only a relatively elderly people loved. ...what I am doing is to create a new culture that captures younger generations”. In a similar vein, a bartender in NYC showed their menu and explained: “You know, we do not offer standard cocktails on our menu because we'd like to establish and distribute something new as the next standard cocktails”. He provides a written menu disclosing the recipes of his original cocktails for dissemination. Although these findings stemmed from observations outside Japan, they led the author to recognize the emergence of a new generation of bartenders who were distancing

themselves from traditional Japanese bartending practices. Since then, drawing on snowball sampling, the author has identified new generations and conducted interviews with them in Japan.

The following section illustrates how new-generation bartenders incorporate novelty into traditional practices and the ways in which they justify these deviations. The analysis reveals three patterns of practices of new-generation bartenders that stir the existing tradition: “spanning boundaries”, “breaking symbols”, and “expanding work”.

### **Practice of new generation bartenders**

#### *Spanning boundaries: alternating between two distinct styles*

Some new-generation bartenders alternate between two distinct styles based on the context. For instance, one bartender works at a hotel during weekdays and at a downtown bar specializing in botanical ingredients on weekends. In the former setting, she adopts the authentic style: donning a formal waistcoat and bow tie, she serves classic cocktails like Martini, serving primarily to her older, regular clientele. In the latter, she embraces an experimental, new-generation approach: wearing casual attire such as a patterned shirt and apron, she crafts innovative cocktails featuring local botanical ingredients to appeal to a younger audience.

*“I know the style is totally different from the one here and at the hotel. Let’s say, Martini, a typical classic cocktail; I usually modify it to more casual and smoother [easy to drink] here. [...] The customers here usually want photogenic drinks, so I always become anxious if my cocktail looks too simple” [like what she serves at the hotel]. (interview #8 new-generation bartender)*

She consciously switches her way of bartending according to the styles of the bar and distinct

customer segments expecting different services at each place. She changes not merely her outfit but also the taste of the classic drinks. This seemingly contradictory practice is neither inconsistent with her identity as a professional bartender. She continues:

*But I do not feel awkward [working at bars with different styles]. I like the classic, formal style of bartending, but at the same time, working here allows me to improve my skills and knowledge as a bartender". (interview #8 new-generation bartender)*

It is not necessarily for her to choose between being a traditional and modern bartender. She believes that even though the styles differ, the skills and knowledge learned from both approaches consolidate her identity as a professional bartender. Switching between styles for distinct customer segments provides a relatively safe way to preserve legitimacy. This approach is particularly effective when physical distance separates the two customer groups, as in the previous example. However, such clear-cut separation is seldom achievable. New-generation bars often resemble authentic bars at first glance, making it likely that customers accustomed to the authentic style may also visit these newer establishments. Consequently, bartenders who adopt this practice have to switch their styles slickly within the same bar. A bartender who constantly seeks to create unique taste for his drinks notes:

*"I do not recommend my original cocktails to the customers who love and order classic cocktails. They have their preference, of course. [...] When a customer orders, for instance, 'White Lady' [a typical classic cocktail], we aim to exceed their expectations by crafting it at an elevated level to receive a positive evaluation. "I don't like to make classic cocktails, so please drink my originals, which are well-made and taste great." I think this is not the attitude of a professional bartender. I wonder if people who can't make classic drinks are really an excellent bartender". (interview #3 new-generation bartender)*

Although his menu does not feature standard classic cocktails, he is willing to prepare them

upon request. While he typically offers innovative drinks and expresses dissatisfaction with traditional ones (as will be discussed in the next section), he does not hesitate to serve classics when requested. In fact, he considers it unprofessional and embarrassing if a bartender lacks the skill or knowledge to craft classic cocktails. He emphasizes attentiveness to customers, observing their demeanor to tailor his approach accordingly. Describing this as fundamental to professional bartending, he refers to having the “*eyes of a detective*” to assess customers carefully. For him, maintaining two distinct styles—one traditional and the other experimental—is an extension of traditional bartending practices. This suggests, in turn, that pursuing novelty without a solid foundation in traditional skills or adequate respect for tradition could be perilous for a bartender’s legitimacy.

*Abandoning symbols: challenging stereotypes of tradition*

The most prominent practice of new generations is to abandon the symbols of established traditions. As noted above, they seemingly deviate from the traditional norms established in authentic bar culture in many ways, including their ways of making cocktails, drinks themselves, and costumes. While they recognized that these deviations would violate the core part of traditional practice, their way of performing these practices was still linked to the tradition. The first example is a bartender who dismisses a symbolic tool:

*“It’s already been about two hours since you came to our bar today, did you ever see me using a bar spoon or a shaker? I don’t do it much. I still put it [shaker] on the shelf but I don’t use it much here”.* (interview #1 new-generation bartender)

He does not use the typical bar tools to make his cocktails. Instead, he prepares pre-mixed

cocktails in small jars and keeps them in a refrigerator under extremely strict temperature control. Once he receives an order, he pours the jarred liquid into a glass and finishes up the cocktail in front of customers (Figure 3).

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This approach represents a departure from one of the most iconic elements of Japanese bartending: the meticulous techniques of stirring and shaking. For traditional Japanese bartenders, mastering these skills through rigorous training and experience is a testament to their authenticity and credibility. Performing these techniques with elegance in front of customers is a defining moment in authentic bars, symbolizing the craft and professionalism of the bartender. As a member of the bartender association and someone trained in an authentic bar, he respects and understands these traditional practices. However, he believes the priorities in bartending today have shifted to “*tasty, speedy, and photogenic*”, rendering the making process less critical. While creating flavorful and visually appealing cocktails remains a core skill for every professional bartender, he identified serving speed as an area needing improvement to meet contemporary demands. He also critiques certain inefficiencies in authentic bars, noting that when the master bartender is unavailable, customers may miss out on experiencing the best cocktails or find the bar closed. Pre-mixed bottled cocktails may resolve this: “*Put it extremely, this system allows even a part-time bartender without experience to serve sophisticated cocktails*”, he explained. Moreover, he expressed concerns about consistency, acknowledging that human factors like mood or physical condition could affect the quality of cocktails: “*As a human being, our condition goes up and down, of course.*”

*I could not make the exact same Martini or Manhattan every day*". Preparing bottled cocktails during his peak condition mitigates this risk, ensuring consistent quality. Driven by these considerations, he overhauled the cocktail-making process, ultimately deciding to abandon the symbolic act of shaking—a radical yet deliberate deviation from traditional bartending practices.

Despite characterizing his approach as "*a new way of thinking, a new world*", his attitude toward bartending remains deeply rooted in tradition. His cocktails largely adhere to standard recipes, and he upholds the visual and performative aspects of traditional bartending by wearing a formal jacket with a tie and intentionally moving gracefully throughout his work. Moreover, even invisible to customers, his meticulous preparation of pre-mixed cocktails reflects a commitment to the precision and craftsmanship emblematic of traditional bartending. For example, he calculates the exact amount of water that would be added during the shaking process and incorporates it into the pre-mix. The level of cocktails is reinforced through repeated prototyping to refine the taste and achieve an optimal final recipe. His confidence in the quality of his bottled cocktails is resolute: "*It could even be better than a shaken one*". For him, the essence of bartending lies in pursuing the perfect cocktail, a principle fully aligned with the values of traditional bartending. As he asserts, "*Everything [his skills and knowledge based on traditional bartending] is here in the jar*". Abandoning symbolic performances like shaking cocktails, therefore, does not equate to abandoning tradition. Rather, his approach demonstrates how traditional principles can manifest in innovative forms. He is neither an "instant bartender" who bypasses the craft nor a radical reformist seeking to break away from tradition. Instead, his practice represents a thoughtful

reforming of tradition, maintaining its core values while adapting to modern demands. For him, tradition resides in this process of continuous and meticulous updating:

*“In the first place, what we now call tradition must have been radically new in the past.. when some traditional ways become obsolete, we should change them according to the times”.* (interview #1 new-generation bartender)

Through his repetitive efforts to refine and perfect his craft, he demonstrates that tradition is not a static inheritance but an evolving practice.

Not only the preparation methods but also the cocktails themselves are transforming. As mentioned earlier, some bartenders go beyond the conventional cocktails. Their regular offerings often incorporate unconventional ingredients such as spices or employ specific technologies to extract unique flavors. One bartender, known for his constant pursuit of originality and innovation, even crafted a curry-inspired cocktail. Reflecting on his creative process, he explains:

*“Of course, the previous bartenders had an idea of making their original cocktails, but they never sought to get out of the box of classic cocktails. Their original cocktails basically followed classics, for instance, altering one ingredient of a standard recipe. What we are doing is totally different. For instance, we start creating something new based on unique ingredients that are not usually used for cocktails, such as Gyokuro [a kind of Japanese green tea]”.* (interview #3 new-generation bartender)

He represented his generation and highlighted how their innovative cocktails diverged from those of previous generations. While existing original cocktails are often variations of standard recipes, his generation starts from scratch, building cocktails around novel ingredients. This approach differs from the recombination method, which maintains

traditional components while integrating new technologies. For these bartenders, tradition is not defined by predetermined elements or substances. Yet, he mentioned the significance of learning standard cocktails as well:

*“We necessarily learn a lot from classic recipes. These are well-conceived. What I should gain is the logic behind the creation of these drinks. This helps me create my original cocktails”.* (interview #3 new-generation bartender)

While this process does not involve sourcing or reusing elements from traditional cocktails, it draws inspiration and guidance from tradition differently. In that sense, his practice is still within the stream of tradition. Similarly, the other bartender mentioned the loose influence of tradition in constructing his unique recipe. He emphasized how his seemingly odd cocktail, named “*Margherita*”, (Figure 4) was created quite seriously, explaining that it is underpinned by certain logic, such as the balance of sweet and bitter, which they learned primarily from classic cocktails. Thus, he professed:

*“What we do at our bar may not look authentic, but it’s based on authentic[bartending]. I’m not trying to be heretic. It’s true that some people do so, but we are not”.* (interview #9 new-generation bartender)

---- **Insert Figure 4** ----

Notably, these bartenders do not hold a negative view of tradition per se. Instead, they critique the conventional perspective on traditional cocktails, which they see as limiting creative opportunities.

*“I think we should update the views on cocktails; it is too narrow. I believe that we should not see solely standards like “Martini” or “White Lady as authentic drinks for bars. For instance, I think there is no evidence excluding drinks like lemon sour or oolong hai as a cocktail for bars. [Oolong Hai is a shochu with Oolong tea. Both drinks are common in casual drinking places such as “Izakaya” in Japan]. We, bartenders,*

*must have the ability to make these drinks great. These drinks, per se, are not bad. I would say it is unfortunate that older bartenders drew boundaries and abandoned these drinks to distinguish themselves from casual places like Izakaya". (interview #3 new-generation bartender)*

#### *Expanding Work: opening new horizons for bartenders*

The practice of “expanding the work” reflects efforts to broaden the scope of professional bartending, creating new opportunities and redefining the boundaries of their work. Recognizing that Japanese bar culture has gradually lost its appeal, especially among younger generations, new-generation bartenders are deeply concerned about its future. They challenge the rigid adherence to traditional ways of working, styles, and beliefs that they see as impeding the evolution of the bar industry. One influential new-generation bartender highlighted this concern during an interview:

*“I saw this [authentic] bartender posted on Facebook, [s]he discussed how to use a little finger when steering drinks (laugh). ... I know, but we don't have time for this; we have bigger things to worry about. ... I think they [authentic bartenders] are caught up too much in the style of bartending, and forget to create something fun". (interview #4 new-generation bartender)*

After years of experience abroad, this bartender now operates several innovative bars in Japan. These venues exemplify his forward-thinking approach: offering cocktail pairing courses with chefs, integrating cafe and cocktail concepts, blending bar culture with Izakaya styles, and more. Furthermore, he regularly organizes pop-up events to make bars more accessible and enjoyable for people unfamiliar with the traditional bar scene.

This approach also aims to expand the career horizons for bartenders, redefining what it means to work in this profession. For instance, he envisions a future where bartenders

are not confined to traditional bars; instead, they might work in restaurants as sommelier-like bartenders or as barista-bartenders in cafes. These ideas sometimes draw criticism from audiences. A prominent bar critic, for example, described him as “an entrepreneur, not a bartender”, implying a somewhat negative evaluation. However, such critiques do not deter him. On the contrary, he welcomes them as validation of his efforts to push the boundaries of what bartending can encompass. For him, the goal is clear: to “keep updating the bar culture to broaden opportunities for bartenders”. His pursuit of novelty is not an act of self-indulgence or ego; rather, it stems from a genuine desire to rejuvenate Japanese bar culture and secure its future. By embracing innovation and broadening the possibilities within the profession, he seeks to ensure that bartending remains relevant and inspiring for future generations.

In a similar vein, another bartender opened a daytime bar that resembles a café, offering non-alcoholic drinks and various gelato, appearing, at first glance, to diverge from traditional bar culture. He explained his motivation:

*“I know many talented female bartenders who feel compelled to retire after getting married or when raising children becomes a priority. This is a significant loss for bar culture. Many of them express difficulties working at night, so I wanted to create a workspace that accommodates them”. (interview #10 new-generation bartender)*

This initiative goes beyond simply providing a space for female bartenders who find it challenging to work night shifts. Japanese bar culture has traditionally been dominated by male, both behind the counter and as customers. While contemporary bars no longer exclude women, the culture remains primarily centered around masculinity. This bartender’s effort to

create an inclusive environment challenges these norms, potentially expanding and diversifying gendered bar culture. Though his bar appears unorthodox and differs from conventional establishments, his purpose aligns with the broader goal of rejuvenating the industry and also the efforts of social issues.

The last example involves a bartender who has reimagined the role of the bar itself to foster creativity and collaboration among his peers. His establishment, which resembles a garage, departs from the traditional aesthetic of Japanese bars. Previously employed at a hotel bar, he now dresses casually (Figure 5) and uses the space behind the bar for experimenting cocktail-making. Equipped with tools like a centrifugal evaporator and a low-temperature cooker, this space is dedicated to prototyping innovative cocktails and updating the menu seasonally.

---- **Insert Figure 5** ----

However, his initiative extends beyond his own work. He also leases this space to other bartenders, offering them an opportunity to explore new ideas and collaborate on projects. He describes it as “a co-working space for bartenders”, saying, “I think it’s great if something new arises through collaboration with others”. His unique approach not only supports individual creativity but also challenges the traditionally insular nature of the bar industry.

Every example illustrates bartenders who, despite appearing to diverge from conventional styles, are deeply committed to preserving and evolving Japanese bar culture. Judging their practices as inauthentic solely based on stylistic differences may be unfair and reductive.

## **Discussion**

The interviews and observation with new-generation bartenders reveal three distinctive practices: “spanning boundaries”, “breaking symbols”, and “expanding work”. If we conceive of tradition as something static and inherent in objects, images, or narratives, these practices appear to transgress the boundaries of tradition. For instance, abandoning iconic tools and attire, offering drinks deemed unacceptable in authentic bars, or engaging in sideline businesses might seem to undermine tradition, potentially damaging their authenticity and reputation among customers and veteran bartenders. Yet, these bartenders implement radical challenges and distinguish themselves from previous styles without hesitation. Indeed, their seemingly unconventional practices, far from jeopardizing their connection with tradition, are framed as extensions of tradition. As one interviewee remarked, “It may not look authentic, but it’s based on authentic[ity]”.

Alternating between two distinct styles allows bartenders to hold traditional and novel styles simultaneously. This coexistence approach is not entirely new. For instance, it parallels “decoupling”, identified by Sasaki and colleagues (2019), a strategy to navigate the tension between continuity and change. However, at the practice level of bartenders, adopting a new style is not merely about “addressing concerns not covered by the old” (p. 599) but is derived as a continuation of and deeply interwoven with tradition. For them, managing these dual styles per se is a testament to their professionalism as traditional authentic bartenders. Just as previous authentic bartenders were expected to continuously refine their craft by acquiring new skills and techniques, this adaptability is consistent with these traditional expectations. Moreover, tactically alternating between styles to suit customers reflects the

traditional bartender's essential skill of attentively observing patrons—a hallmark of Japanese bartending, often described as having the “eyes of a detective”. Mastery of two distinct styles emerges as an extension of conventional practice. Consequently, it does not inherently conflict with tradition or compromise their authenticity.

This is true or more prominent in abandoning symbolic character, such as creating unique cocktails and adopting new preparation methods. While their cocktails may feature obviously unconventional names, visuals, and ingredients—some entirely foreign to classic cocktails—they are often guided by the “logic behind the creation of [traditional] drinks”. In this sense, their approach remains within the tradition (Ravasi, 2019). However, their link to tradition is not rooted in extracting and preserving its essential traits. Rather, they are driven and inspired by traditional working ethos; as one bartender noted, their ultimate goal is basically to “make [these] drinks great”. Unlike approaches that seek to combine tradition and novelty while “carefully avoid undermining core characteristics” (Erdogan, 2020, p. 40), these bartenders are willing to abandon even iconic tools, such as the three-piece shaker, if doing so serves their pursuit of excellence. This is also not a departure from tradition but rather a result of pursuing and refining it. Put differently, they disrupt and update tradition based on tradition through iterative practice. By doing so, these bartenders demonstrate that tradition is not a static inheritance but an evolving practice, continually renewed through their commitment and creativity.

The practice of expanding the work option, while seemingly inconsistent with the image of bartenders as craftspeople solely dedicated to “bartending”, the aim of practice

overlaps the fundamental purpose traditional bartenders have set. Efforts to expand opportunities for bartenders—such as addressing gender disparities or fostering collaboration—are motivated by a shared commitment to advancing bar culture. These bartenders do not critique traditional bartending for its own sake or pursue innovation solely to satisfy personal ambitions. Instead, their work is driven by the goal of preserving and revitalizing Japanese bar culture through new possibilities. Although these approaches might seem broad or unconventional, labeling them as inauthentic or anti-traditional fails to account for their dedication to the essence of tradition.

In sum, while new-generation bartenders may appear to diverge from tradition, their work remains deeply rooted in traditional values in many respects. Rather than drawing a strict boundary between tradition and novelty, they refine their craft through the practice of “doing tradition”, with innovation emerging as a natural extension of it. While certain elements or features have conventionally been deemed essential, this paper suggests connections to tradition are not limited to preserving or reusing these core aspects. Tradition is not confined to static, specific elements; instead, it resides in the evolving practices, potentially serving as a driving force for actor’s creative endeavors.

### *Suspending boundaries of tradition*

Radical practices that have not been positively discussed in previous studies can be conceptualized as an approach to tradition renewal that challenges the boundaries between what is deemed “tradition” and what is not, rather than focusing on which aspects of tradition should be preserved or discarded. Scholarly discussions on tradition as a resource generally

reject an essentialist perspective, which assumes that tradition inherently possesses an unchangeable substance. Many modern traditions, though perceived as grounded in substantial historical continuity, were initially invented by vested entities without such foundations (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). Over time, invented traditions gain legitimacy and take root in society, caregiving the appearance of possessing intrinsic authenticity. Thus, one prominent approach for organizations seeking to derive value from tradition has been to carefully extract and retain its constructed core aspects, thereby avoiding severe backlash from their audiences (Cancellieri et al., 2022; Ravasi et al., 2019; Sasaki et al., 2020).

This study, however, offers a different perspective: it suggests how radical deviation from established traditions can unsettle their perceived foundations and challenge their boundaries. Rather than adhering to a moderate strategy of change that works within the existing framework of core and peripheral features of tradition, this approach provocatively questions and suspends the boundaries that define these categories. A key tactic for enacting this approach involves highlighting the arbitrariness of attachment to specific characteristics by deliberately deviating from tradition's core elements while maintaining a relationship to tradition itself. This subversive practice exposes the performative nature of tradition by showing that essential traits are not inherent but are stylized and performed (Butler, 1990).

The practices of the bartenders examined in this study exemplify such an attempt. Their intent is not to distance themselves from tradition per se but rather to critique the fixation on specific features as necessary expressions of tradition. By suspending norms and discourses that simplify tradition into a set of static characteristics, they challenge the exclusion of particular alternative elements and reinterpretations—which could violate the

existing core traits. Notably, this approach does not involve creating a hostile or oppositional category outside the existing tradition to criticize vested entities. In fact, the new generations have not positioned themselves as members of a new category with titles like “neo-mixologist” nor sought to establish a separate institution countering conventional associations. Instead, it blurs the established boundaries between the conventional and the novel, fostering internal reflection and transformation. By challenging tradition from within, rather than opposing it outright, these practices mitigate conflict while opening pathways for reshaping tradition.

Indeed, even previous generations of bartenders and their staunch advocates would likely agree that iconic tools, formal attire, or the use of specific drinks are not intrinsically tied to tradition. Through their unconventional practices, new-generation bartenders compel incumbents and others to reconsider the essence of tradition itself. Although this strategy remains risky, it holds significant potential for offering new possibilities for revisiting and reshaping tradition in dynamic and meaningful ways.

## **Conclusion**

This paper aimed to offer insights into the paradoxical relation of tradition to innovation by focusing on the emergent practices of new-generation bartenders. At the level of “doing tradition”, the way to show the connection to tradition would vary. While new generations seemingly interfere with some features considered the core of traditional bartending, their work always responds to tradition in many ways. It suggests that tradition is not just a constraint or direct resource for innovation but an indefinite fuel for moving on to a new challenge. Besides, by exploring the meaning behind these radical deviations from tradition,

the study proposed a possible approach that suspends existing norms defining the boundaries of tradition. While this perspective broadens current discussions on tradition, several unresolved issues remain.

First, further research is needed to explore the conditions under which this radical approach is viable. Key questions include who can take the lead in implementing it, what skills, knowledge, and social capital are required, and when it is most effective. Second, as this movement by new-generation bartenders is still in its early stages, its long-term impact on the evolution of tradition remains unclear. It is particularly important to investigate how vested entities—such as traditional bartenders and their customers—perceive and respond to this movement. As noted, there have not yet been significant objections or controversies, but further examination of these reactions is essential to evaluate the role of “suspending tradition” as a strategy for reshaping it. Finally, the concept presented in this study was produced from a specific case in the Japanese bar scene. However, interest in how organizations manage tradition has grown, especially in the context of craft revival in other industries. The tentative perspective proposed here could offer a fresh dimension to broader scholarly discussions on the interplay between tradition and innovation.

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## Figures



**Figure 1.** A Japanese authentic bar



**Figure 2.** A typical bartender in a formal suit



**Figure 3.** Pouring pre-mixed cocktail and finishing up in front of customer



**Figure 4.** A cocktail, Pizza Margherita



**Figure 5.** A casual appearance of bartender and experimental space