

# Strategic ambiguity: a systematic review, a typology and a dynamic capability view

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123

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – While strategic ambiguity has increasingly been used as a communication practice in response to crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and global conflicts, its proactive role in shaping organizations remains underexamined. Moreover, a comprehensive investigation into its antecedents, moderators, mechanisms, and outcomes – aligned with specific strategic ambiguity aims – is still lacking. We investigate how organizations deploy strategic ambiguity to shape their environment and identify the factors that affect the effectiveness of strategic ambiguity in achieving diverse strategic aims.

**Design/methodology/approach** – We conducted a systematic literature review (SLR) of 22 empirical studies on strategic ambiguity in organizational communication. We analyzed articles using the Gioia method to identify its key components – antecedents, mechanisms, moderators, and outcomes – based on the pursued aim.

**Findings** – We reframe strategic ambiguity as a dynamic capability and, building on this, we introduce a novel typology of strategic ambiguity based on two key dimensions: organizational flexibility (centralized vs decentralized) and environmental responsiveness (proactive vs reactive). Four distinct aims of strategic ambiguity, each with specific antecedents, mechanisms, moderators, and outcomes, emerge: (1) collaboration and engagement, (2) flexibility and adaptability, (3) control and influence and (4) reputation and legal protection.

**Originality/value** – We reframe the understanding of strategic ambiguity by positioning it as a dynamic capability rather than merely a strategic communication practice. By introducing a typology that outlines antecedents, mechanisms, moderators, and outcomes for each specific aim, we offer a structured framework for comprehensively understanding and leveraging strategic ambiguity.

**Keywords** Strategic ambiguity, Systematic literature review, Dynamic capabilities

**Paper type** Literature review

## 1. Introduction

Strategic ambiguity – traditionally defined as a deliberate, strategic communication practice that organizations use to navigate complex environments and diverse stakeholder needs (Eisenberg, 1984) – can often be more advantageous than clear communication in specific situations (Putnam and Sorenson, 1981). In fact, achieving strategic purpose often requires

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conveying information effectively (Berger, 2020), but factors such as message clarity and language explicitness significantly shape organizational outcomes (Ulmer *et al.*, 2011). As March (1978) suggests, precision in objectives and performance metrics can be a “mixed blessing,” highlighting the value of strategic ambiguity in certain contexts. Executives frequently employ language that is “reassuring yet indistinct, confident yet vague” to achieve strategic aims (Walker, 2022). For instance, when releasing the first negative report of the rebranded Meta (formerly Facebook, Inc.) in 2022, Mark Zuckerberg stated “Although our direction is clear, it seems that our path ahead is not perfectly defined” (IANS, 2022) – reflecting deliberate ambiguity during Meta’s challenges. Organizations may intentionally withhold clarity, using tactics such as stalling, smokescreens, and diversionary delays to manage crises (The New York Times, 2022).

While the application of strategic ambiguity has increased – such as in response to crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, global environmental disruptions, social protests, and military conflicts (Hoffjan, 2022; Scandelijs and Cohen, 2016) – existing research primarily treats ambiguity as a strategic communication practice, focusing on its role in message construction and relational dynamics (Eisenberg, 1984). This perspective neglects the broader organizational implications of strategic ambiguity, particularly its capacity to shape capabilities, reconfigure resources, and foster resilience in complex environments (Eisenberg, 1984; Giroux, 2006). Toyota’s launch of the Prius in 1997 highlights how strategic ambiguity can be used to reconfigure resources and modify organizational capabilities. By positioning the Prius as a fuel-efficient vehicle without committing to the full potential of hybrid technology, Toyota maintained flexibility in its strategic direction. This ambiguity allowed the company to allocate resources across both hybrid and traditional vehicle lines, enabling it to refine its production processes and supply chain capabilities. Toyota also used this approach to build new technological capabilities in hybrid systems, adapting its research and development (R&D) efforts without being locked into a single, rigid strategy. Over time, this strategic ambiguity allowed Toyota to evolve its organizational structure and capabilities, leading the hybrid vehicle market while remaining agile in response to changing market dynamics (see Coup, 1999).

Furthermore, there is a notable lack of comprehensive analysis of the antecedents, moderators, mechanisms, and outcomes of strategic ambiguity aligned with specific strategic aims (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2010; Ravishankar, 2013). Without a clear framework linking these components, organizations struggle to effectively deploy strategic ambiguity in a way that enhances their adaptability, resource reconfiguration, and resilience in dynamic environments. To address these gaps, this study answers the following research question: *How do organizations deploy strategic ambiguity to shape their environment and what factors influence its effectiveness in achieving diverse strategic aims?*

To answer this research question, we performed a systematic literature review (e.g. Bodolica and Spraggon, 2018; Tranfield *et al.*, 2003) of empirical academic works on strategic ambiguity in organizational communication. By employing the Gioia method (Gioia *et al.*, 2013), we identified and analyzed the key components of strategic ambiguity – antecedents, mechanisms, moderators, and outcomes – based on the aim. Thanks to this analysis and related interpretation, strategic ambiguity is here conceived as a dynamic capability: it embodies the organization’s ability to deliberately and adaptively use vagueness to sense, seize, and reconfigure resources in response to evolving environments (Teecce *et al.*, 1997). By framing strategic ambiguity within the dynamic capabilities framework, we underscore its capacity to align with core processes such as environmental sensing, opportunity seizing, and resource adaptation (Teecce, 2007). This perspective moves beyond the traditional view of ambiguity as a strategic communication practice (Eisenberg, 1984) to highlight its proactive role in shaping organizations and their environment.

Building on this theoretical foundation, the study introduces a novel typology of strategic ambiguity based on two key dimensions identified in the literature: organizational flexibility (centralized vs decentralized), and environmental responsiveness (proactive vs reactive). This typology differentiates four distinct aims of strategic ambiguity – (1) collaboration and engagement, (2) flexibility and adaptability, (3) control and influence, and (4) reputation and

legal protection – and uniquely links the antecedents, mechanisms, moderators, and outcomes to each pursued aim. By systematically clustering these components around their specific aims, the typology provides a granular understanding of how strategic ambiguity operates. For instance, each aim is supported by distinct antecedents that create the conditions for ambiguity, specific mechanisms that enact it, moderators that influence its application, and outcomes that define its effectiveness. This offers a structured framework that organizes existing research and deepens our understanding of how ambiguity is intentionally deployed to shape organizations and their environment.

Managers can leverage the proposed typology as a decision-making tool to deploy strategic ambiguity as a dynamic capability, enabling them to sense opportunities, reconfigure resources, and shape evolving environments. By systematically linking antecedents, mechanisms, moderators, and outcomes to specific aims – such as fostering collaboration, enhancing flexibility, exerting control, or protecting reputation – the typology provides actionable guidance for navigating organizational challenges.

## 2. Theoretical premises

Strategic ambiguity, traditionally understood as a strategic communication practice, involves deliberately using vagueness or imprecision in organizational communication to achieve specific objectives (Eisenberg, 1984). It is a conscious decision by organizations to withhold full clarity in order to maintain flexibility, influence perceptions, and manage the uncertainty inherent in complex environments (Ulmer *et al.*, 2011). Unlike unintentional ambiguity, which may arise from poor communication, strategic ambiguity is a calculated approach to balance clarity and flexibility, enabling organizations to adapt to changing circumstances while preserving control over messaging (Putnam and Sorenson, 1981; Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2010). This intentional use of ambiguity helps organizations craft messages that can be interpreted in multiple ways, allowing them to manage diverse stakeholder expectations, particularly in high-stakes and/or dynamic contexts (Scandeliu and Cohen, 2016).

The effectiveness of strategic ambiguity is inherently tied to its context. Clarity in communication occurs when the sender successfully narrows down possible interpretations to align them with their intentions (Eisenberg, 1984). However, ambiguity is often intentionally maintained to allow for varied interpretations, which can foster creativity, adaptability, and stakeholder engagement (Gulbrandsen, 2019). This flexibility allows organizations to navigate sensitive issues, avoid making premature commitments, and maintain control over their strategic narratives. For instance, during crises or periods of uncertainty, organizations may deliberately employ strategic ambiguity to protect their reputation, manage public relations, and delay decision-making until more information is available or the situation stabilizes (Meehan and Pinnington, 2021; Ulmer and Sellnow, 2000).

Strategic ambiguity plays a crucial role in managing diverse stakeholder interests, particularly in environments where different groups have conflicting expectations or needs. By leaving room for interpretation, organizations can craft messages that resonate with multiple audiences without committing to a single, rigid position (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2010; Ravishankar, 2013). This flexibility allows organizations to navigate crises, foster collaboration, and manage competing demands in dynamic settings. The use of strategic ambiguity can be seen in various organizational contexts, from corporate communication (Eisenberg, 1984; Ulmer *et al.*, 2011) to policy-making (Leitch and Davenport, 2003) and crisis management (Scandeliu and Cohen, 2016; Meehan and Pinnington, 2021).

Despite the increased application of strategic ambiguity, particularly in response to crises and complex environments, existing research has primarily focused on its role as a strategic communication practice. The broader implications of strategic ambiguity – specifically its potential to shape organizational capabilities, reconfigure resources, and foster resilience – have yet to be thoroughly explored. This gap in the literature presents a significant opportunity to extend the conceptualization of strategic ambiguity beyond a strategic communication practice that can enhance adaptability in rapidly changing environments.

### 3. Method

If a topic has been extensively studied, “researchers can use prior literature to identify critical independent, dependent, and control variables and to explain general mechanisms underlying the phenomenon” (Edmondson and McManus, 2007, p. 1159). By this, a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) has been considered the most appropriate research design to consolidate and synthesize academic research, similar to other scholars (Cristofaro *et al.*, 2024). According to Tranfield *et al.* (2003), unlike traditional narrative reviews, SLR assists in employing rigorous and reproducible evaluation methods and links future research to the questions and concerns posed by past research. In this regard, the proposed SLR aims to shed light on the empirical research on strategic ambiguity. The methodology of the SLR follows Tranfield *et al.* (2003). Specifically:

Step 1: the databases for the identification of the studies are: (1) Business Source Premier (EBSCO); (2) ProQuest’s ABI/Inform; (3) Web of Science; (4) Scopus; (5) PsycINFO; and (6) PubMed (including MedLine). The substantive relevance of contributions to the theme has been ensured by selecting articles that contained at least one of the following words within titles, keywords, and/or abstracts: “ambigu\*” or “ambivalence” or “opacity” or “equivocation” or “indeterminacy” or “vagueness” was entered in the search field. This produced a sample of 557 articles.

Step 2: we further restricted the search to peer-reviewed academic articles and reviews published in the English language in the fields of “Business, Management, and Accounting” and “Economics, econometrics, and finance.” We considered articles published from 1984 (Eisenberg, 1984) to November 2024. Duplicates from databases were eliminated at this stage. This step left 78 articles.

Step 3: the remaining 78 were subjected to a standard journal quality check. We were primarily interested in academic articles published in top-ranked journals. Like Bolt *et al.* (2022), we referred to the CABS Academic Journal Guide (AJG) (Chartered Association of Business Schools, 2021). We only considered articles published in journals ranked 3, 4, and 4\* in the AJG 2021 (e.g. Hristov *et al.*, 2024). This step ensured a certain level of academic rigor for filtered publications. A sample of 58 articles emerged.

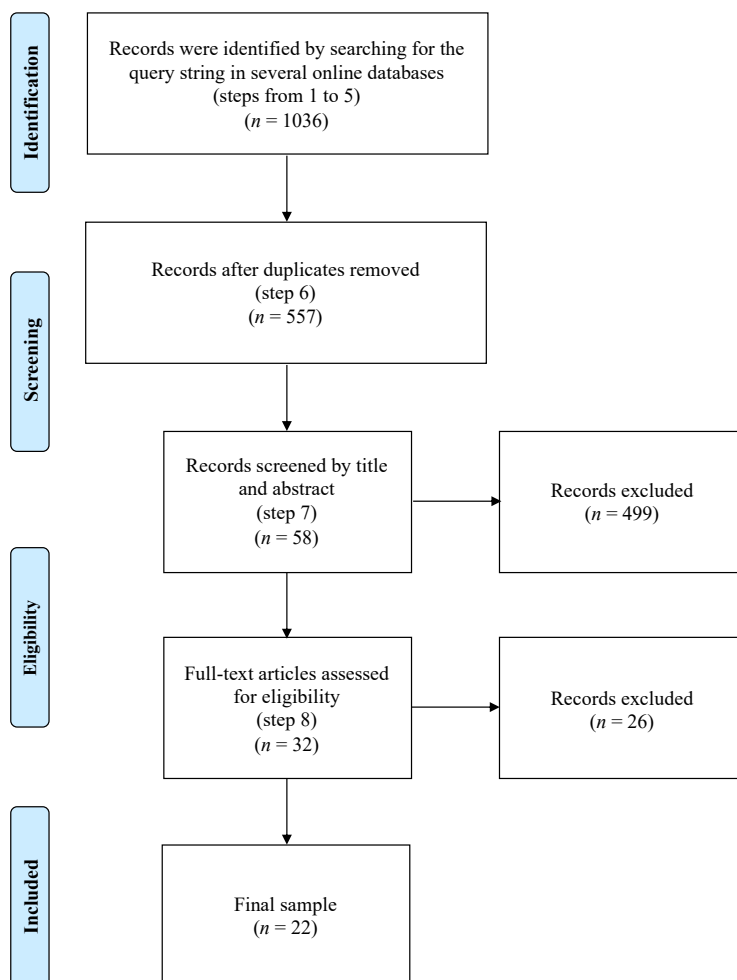
Step 4: We screened the articles’ titles and abstracts to establish relevance for further inclusion. We excluded publications on ambiguity unrelated to organizational communication and omitted articles on strategic ambiguity in contractual relationships (e.g. Bernheim and Whinston, 1998). Only articles addressing strategic ambiguity from Eisenberg’s (1984) perspective, particularly at the firm level, were selected, resulting in a preliminary sample of 34 articles.

Step 5: we read all full-text articles to ensure eligibility. This process yielded 22 articles that constituted our final sample. The retained articles on strategic ambiguity span 18 different journals. The *Journal of Management Studies* and *Management Communication Quarterly* are the primary outlets, publishing 28% of the articles. Among the selected journals, ten are ranked in the top tiers (4\* and 4) of the AJG 2021. The sample includes contributions from 51 authors, with only 11.76% publishing more than once, highlighting limited recurring research in the area. Research activity increased notably between 2013 and 2022, accounting for 56% of the publications, with peaks in 2014, 2016, and 2021.

For steps 4 and 5, two authors independently conducted a detailed reading and evaluation of each paper. Subsequently, they compared their assessments. When discrepancies arose, the authors engaged in collaborative discussions to revisit and re-assess the papers. In step 5, the two authors rated each article on a five-point Likert scale to determine whether the article focused on strategic ambiguity. The interrater reliability was 0.78.

Figure 1 captures the detailed article collection process (Liberati *et al.*, 2009).

Next, a workbook was prepared to record relevant data and information related to these studies (see Giardino *et al.*, 2023), namely the (1) general aim, (2) analytical approach, (3) unit



Source(s): Authors' own elaboration

Figure 1. Diagram of the article collection process

of analysis, (4) setting, (5) aim for pursuing strategic ambiguity, (6) antecedents, (7) mechanisms, (8) moderators, and (9) outcomes, (10) environmental responsiveness (proactive shaping or reactive adaptation), and (11) organizational flexibility (centralized control or decentralized control). See [Supplementary Material S1](#) for the full sample analysis. We applied the Gioia method ([Gioia et al., 2013](#)) to structure our analysis, focusing on the key components of strategic ambiguity: aims, antecedents, mechanisms, moderators, and outcomes (as done by similar SLRs; [Cristofaro et al., 2024](#)). The Gioia methodology is a systematic qualitative research approach designed to ensure rigor and transparency in data analysis, particularly in inductive theory-building. Introduced by [Gioia et al. \(2013\)](#), this method emphasizes the use of a structured data coding process that moves from first-order concepts (initial informant-centric codes) to second-order themes (researcher-centric themes), and finally to aggregate dimensions (broader theoretical constructs). The method aims to bridge the gap between raw data and emerging theory, providing a clear audit trail of the

analytical process. The Gioia method allows researchers to capture nuanced insights and build robust theoretical frameworks grounded in the empirical context by focusing on the iterative interplay between data collection, theory, and analysis. Figure 2 provides an illustrative example of this method applied to analyze the aim of strategic ambiguity.

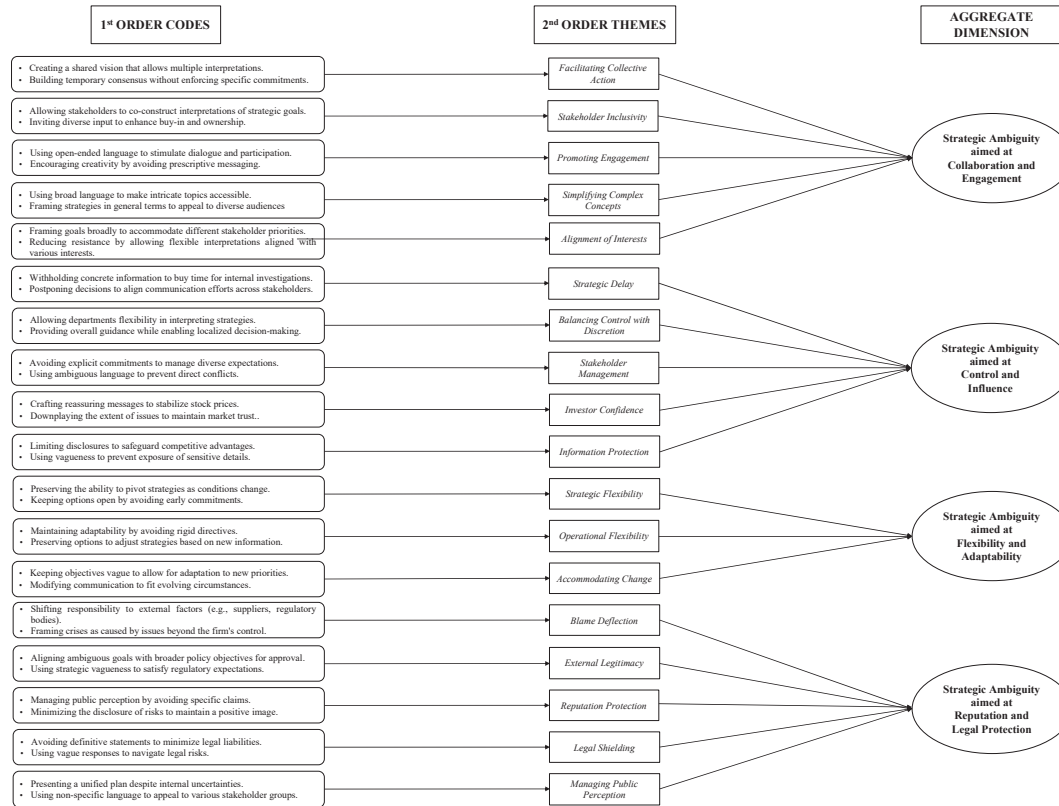
In doing that, we first conducted the coding of first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions for strategic ambiguity aims, which resulted in: (1) collaboration and engagement, (2) flexibility and adaptability, (3) control and influence, and (4) reputation and legal protection. Then, we completed coding of first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions for antecedents, mechanisms, moderators, and outcomes based on their link to strategic ambiguity aims. This approach allowed us to organize the components of strategic ambiguity effectively, ensuring each element was connected to its corresponding aim. Through this process, we developed four distinct aims for strategic ambiguity, each with its related antecedents, mechanisms, moderators, and outcomes. Finally, we clustered the four aims of strategic ambiguity according to the two dimensions we investigated for each article in the sample: environmental responsiveness (proactive shaping or reactive adaptation), and organizational flexibility (centralized control or decentralized control). This allowed us to build the typology presented in the next section.

#### 4. A typology of strategic ambiguity

Based on literature analysis, via the Gioia method (Gioia *et al.*, 2013), and interpretation, we introduce a novel typology that organizes strategic ambiguity's applications within the dynamic capabilities framework along two dimensions: environmental responsiveness and organizational flexibility; see Table 1. The first dimension, *environmental responsiveness* (Eisenhardt and Martin, 2000; Teece, 2007), refers to how effectively the organization uses strategic ambiguity to adapt to changes in the external environment or shape it. It ranges from proactive sensing (shaping), where ambiguity is deliberately employed to anticipate trends, engage stakeholders, and foster innovation, to reactive sensing (adaptation), where ambiguity serves as a defensive mechanism in response to immediate challenges, helping to mitigate risks and manage conflicting pressures (Scandellius and Cohen, 2016; Ulmer and Sellnow, 2000). In proactive scenarios, organizations use ambiguity to explore emerging opportunities and align diverse stakeholder groups around a shared yet flexible vision. This anticipatory use of ambiguity enables dynamic sensemaking and facilitates creative engagement before issues arise (Cristofaro, 2022; Simeone, 2017). Conversely, in reactive contexts, ambiguity serves as a protective strategy, allowing organizations to delay firm commitments, deflect accountability, and navigate crises with minimal reputational damage (Meehan and Pinnington, 2021).

The second dimension, *organizational flexibility* (Mintzberg, 1979), captures the extent to which strategic ambiguity is used to enable adaptive decision-making and reallocation of resources. This ranges from centralized control, where ambiguity is managed tightly by leadership to steer interpretations and maintain oversight, to decentralized control, where ambiguity empowers internal teams and external stakeholders to contextualize strategic goals, fostering localized adaptation and innovation (Davenport and Leitch, 2005; Denis *et al.*, 2011). In centralized contexts, ambiguity is deployed selectively to manage strategic narratives, maintain uniformity, and guide stakeholder interpretations during major organizational changes or in highly regulated industries (Giroux, 2006). In decentralized settings, ambiguity acts as a delegation tool, enabling greater interpretive flexibility and empowering diverse stakeholders to align their actions with the organization's evolving strategic objectives, particularly in collaborative environments such as R&D labs or corporate social responsibility (CSR) projects (Croft *et al.*, 2022; Scandellius and Cohen, 2016).

By combining these two dimensions – environmental responsiveness and organizational flexibility – we develop a typology that delineates four distinct strategic aims of ambiguity: (1) collaboration and engagement, (2) flexibility and adaptability, (3) control and influence, and (4) reputation and legal protection. These aims represent how organizations deploy strategic



Source(s): Authors' own elaboration

Figure 2. Example of coding process

**Table 1.** A typology of strategic ambiguity

Organizational flexibility/ environmental responsiveness	Proactive sensing	Reactive sensing
Centralized control	<i>Flexibility and Adaptability</i> (Strategic ambiguity enables high-level control while adapting strategies in dynamic environments)	<i>Control and Influence</i> (Maintains managerial discretion, using ambiguity to handle crises without relinquishing authority)
Decentralized control	<i>Collaboration and Engagement</i> (Empowers diverse stakeholders to interpret, co-create, and align with strategic goals through flexible messaging)	<i>Reputation and Legal Protection</i> (Uses ambiguity to mitigate legal and reputational risks, deflecting blame and avoiding explicit commitments)

**Source(s):** Authors' own elaboration

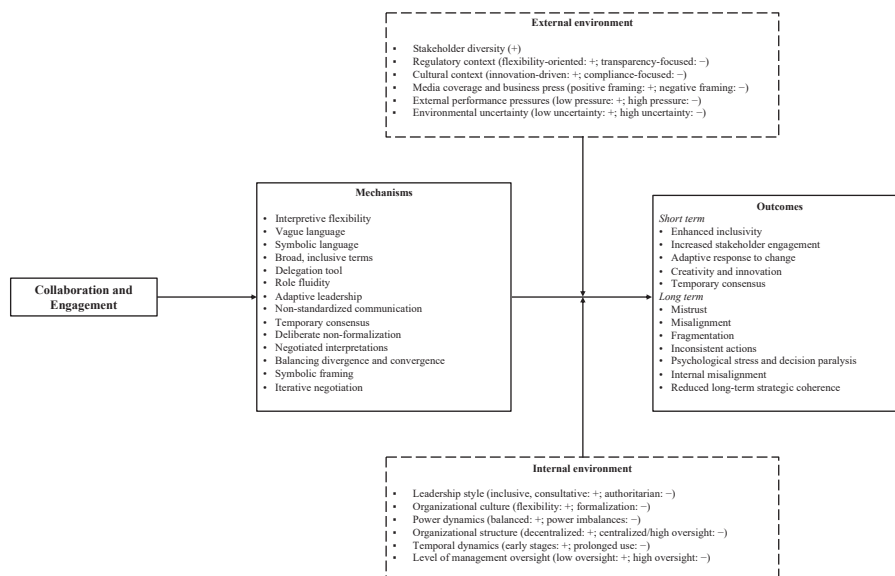
ambiguity as a dynamic capability. Specifically, dynamic capabilities are essential for firms to identify and respond to opportunities and threats (*sensing*), adapt to changing conditions by allocating resources effectively (*seizing*), and maintain competitiveness by enhancing and reconfiguring tangible and intangible assets to build resilience and agility in complex environments (*transforming*) (Teece *et al.*, 1997). These capabilities specifically involve the ability to modify ordinary capabilities and resources in response to changing environments (Laaksonen and Peltoniemi, 2018). Unlike ordinary capabilities, which focus on routine efficiency and operational stability, dynamic capabilities enable organizations to reshape their routines and assets intentionally, ensuring alignment with shifting market demands and fostering innovation (Helfat and Peteraf, 2015; Teece, 2007). This transformative nature underscores the deliberate and proactive deployment of specific capabilities to achieve strategic aims (Leemann and Kanbach, 2022). This reinterpretation is grounded in the systematic clustering of antecedents, mechanisms, moderators, and outcomes identified in the literature, consistently demonstrating the intentional and proactive deployment of ambiguity to achieve strategic ambiguity aims.

In the following sections, we provide a detailed analysis of each aim, including its antecedents, mechanisms, moderators, and outcomes, illustrating how strategic ambiguity functions as a dynamic capability.

#### 4.1 Collaboration and engagement

The collaboration and engagement quadrant emphasizes strategic ambiguity to empower diverse stakeholders through decentralized control and proactive sensing (Figure 3). By enabling organizations to sense shifts in their external environment and respond adaptively, strategic ambiguity facilitates the coordination of pluralistic interests, aligning resources and modifying ordinary capabilities to meet evolving strategic challenges. This capability is particularly vital in settings such as R&D initiatives, public sector projects, and CSR strategies, where stakeholder diversity necessitates a flexible yet cohesive approach (Davenport and Leitch, 2005; Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2010; Simeone, 2017).

Through its collaborative focus, strategic ambiguity transforms rigid, rule-bound processes into adaptive, relational systems that dynamically align with environmental changes. For example, the Foundation for Research, Science and Technology (FRST) leveraged ambiguity to decentralize its procedural funding approach, empowering Crown Research Institutes to reinterpret funding guidelines in alignment with national economic priorities. This approach encouraged stakeholders to take ownership, innovate, and align their proposals with evolving goals, demonstrating how ambiguity modifies operational routines to support collective engagement (Davenport and Leitch, 2005). Similarly, in CSR contexts, firms employ



Source(s): Authors' own elaboration

Figure 3. Strategic ambiguity aimed at collaboration and engagement

ambiguous messaging to streamline complex sustainability objectives into adaptable frameworks, enabling them to balance stakeholder interests while orchestrating resources toward shared goals (Scandeliuss and Cohen, 2016).

Strategic ambiguity also acts as a mechanism for orchestrating collaboration by aligning and reallocating resources across diverse stakeholder groups. At MIT SENSEable City Lab, ambiguity facilitated collaboration between multidisciplinary teams and external partners by emphasizing role fluidity and iterative project objectives. By eschewing rigid role definitions, the lab allowed team members to redefine their responsibilities dynamically, fostering alignment between human and technological resources and enabling seamless coordination in response to shifting project demands (Simeone, 2017). Similarly, in CSR strategies, ambiguity consolidates resources across departments and stakeholder networks, presenting unified goals that inspire collective action while maintaining flexibility in operational execution (Guthey and Morsing, 2014).

The mechanisms enabling strategic ambiguity to foster collaboration and engagement include broad, inclusive language, symbolic framing, and adaptable communication strategies. Broad terms such as “investment”, “sustainability”, or “innovation” allow stakeholders to co-construct interpretations, fostering a shared direction without imposing rigid constraints (Abdallah and Langley, 2014; Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2010). For instance, Bay City’s use of the concept “self-responsibility” enabled managers to reinterpret citizens’ roles in public service delivery, fostering collaboration while aligning operational practices with constrained resources (Jalonen *et al.*, 2018). Symbolic framing further facilitates engagement by aligning diverse groups under aspirational goals, creating a shared narrative that unites stakeholders without prescribing fixed roles or actions (Denis *et al.*, 2011).

Internal and external factors shape the success of strategic ambiguity in fostering collaboration and engagement. Internally, inclusive leadership and flexible organizational cultures amplify ambiguity’s potential to create shared meaning and align stakeholder efforts. For example, at MIT SENSEable City Lab, adaptive leadership and a decentralized structure enhanced the lab’s capacity to engage collaborators dynamically, bridging academic and practical problem-solving priorities (Simeone, 2017). Conversely, hierarchical leadership or

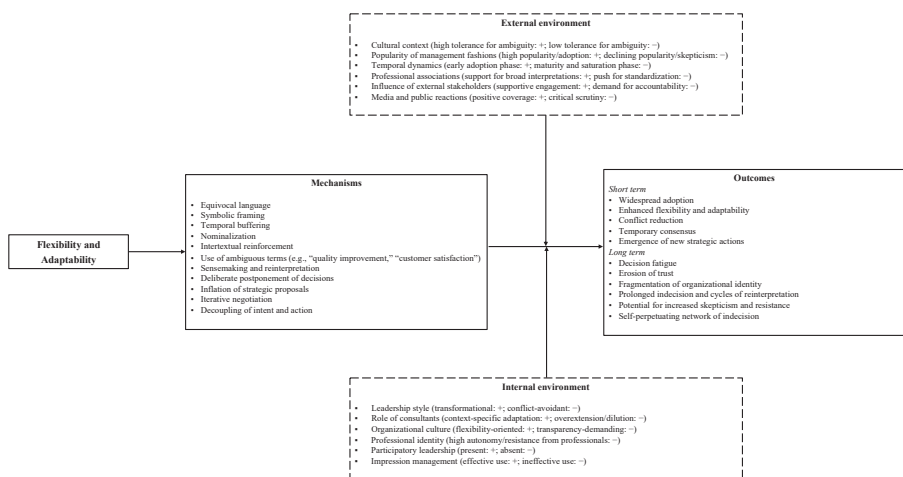
cultures resistant to flexible interpretations can stifle ambiguity’s transformative potential, as seen in universities opposing FRST’s funding reforms due to concerns over academic freedom and autonomy (Davenport and Leitch, 2005). Externally, regulatory pressures and stakeholder diversity influence ambiguity collaborative potential. In highly regulated contexts, ambiguity allows organizations to signal compliance while preserving flexibility, as demonstrated in Modern Slavery Act reporting (Meehan and Pinnington, 2021).

Temporal dynamics further condition the role of ambiguity in collaboration. During the early stages of strategic initiatives, ambiguity fosters exploration and broad stakeholder participation by offering interpretive flexibility. However, prolonged ambiguity without transition to clarity can lead to misalignment and inefficiencies. For instance, at GenCo, ambiguity initially enabled middle managers to tailor strategies to departmental needs, fostering collaboration. Over time, however, sustained vagueness led to fragmented implementation and inconsistent resource alignment (Schuler et al., 2023). Similarly, while ambiguity at MIT SENSEable City Lab supported early-stage coordination, prolonged reliance occasionally created stress and decision paralysis among team members seeking clearer guidance (Simeone, 2017).

#### 4.2 Flexibility and adaptability

The flexibility and adaptability quadrant focuses on leveraging strategic ambiguity to enable organizations to proactively sense environmental changes while retaining centralized control (Figure 4). In this way, strategic ambiguity modifies ordinary capabilities by transforming processes, while orchestrating resources to align with evolving strategic priorities (Giroux, 2006; Ravishankar, 2013).

Strategic ambiguity in fostering flexibility and adaptability helps stakeholders align strategic objectives with their specific needs while accommodating diverse contextual demands. For instance, during the rise of the Quality Movement, broad concepts like “Total Quality Management” (TQM) provided a flexible framework that organizations across industries could adapt to their unique contexts. This enabled widespread adoption despite the lack of consistent definitions, thereby transforming standardized processes into customizable capabilities that reflected the needs of individual industries (Giroux, 2006). Similarly, ambiguity helped navigate institutional voids and technological uncertainties in the Bangalore One ICT project by allowing government bodies and private sector partners to flexibly



Source(s): Authors’ own elaboration

Figure 4. Strategic ambiguity aimed at flexibility and adaptability purposes

reinterpret goals. This collaborative use of ambiguity enabled the dynamic alignment of human, financial, and technological resources, fostering effective partnerships despite differing objectives (Ravishankar, 2013). Such approaches, informed by ongoing feedback from the external environment, reduce resistance by delaying contentious decisions and enabling iterative adjustments, further illustrating how ambiguity reconfigures operational routines to achieve strategic alignment (Denis *et al.*, 2011).

Key mechanisms that enable this dynamic capability include equivocal language, symbolic framing, and temporal buffering. Equivocal language involves the use of broad, multi-interpretative terms like “integration” and “quality improvement”, allowing stakeholders to apply their own meanings and adapt strategies dynamically to meet local needs (Giroux, 2006). By introducing interpretive flexibility, equivocal language transforms rigid operational systems into adaptable, stakeholder-oriented processes. Symbolic framing further leverages inclusive, aspirational goals that align diverse groups without prescribing specific actions, thus enabling the reallocation of resources to areas of strategic importance (Denis *et al.*, 2011). For example, in the Bangalore One project, symbolic framing emphasized overarching goals that allowed for various interpretations, facilitating coordination among agencies with differing mandates while guiding resource orchestration (Ravishankar, 2013). Temporal buffering, which involves delaying specific commitments, enables stakeholders to negotiate, adapt, and align their contributions over time, further supporting the reconfiguration of resources and capabilities to meet dynamic demands (Yin *et al.*, 2024).

Internal factors such as leadership style and the role of consultants significantly influence the effectiveness of strategic ambiguity in modifying capabilities and orchestrating resources. Transformational leaders who embrace ambiguity as an opportunity for creativity and collaboration effectively use it to engage stakeholders, foster consensus, and build dynamic resource-alignment strategies (Denis *et al.*, 2011). In contrast, leaders who leverage ambiguity solely to evade decision-making may create confusion and resistance, reducing its capacity to enhance flexibility. For instance, in the early stages of a hospital merger, ambiguity initially reduced conflict but later led to frustration among stakeholders due to a lack of clarity on resource allocation (Denis *et al.*, 2011). Consultants also play a crucial role by tailoring frameworks like TQM to specific organizational contexts, enhancing their adaptability, and enabling organizations to reconfigure existing processes into flexible resource-driven systems. However, excessive reliance on ambiguity by consultants can dilute the framework’s core principles, weakening its long-term impact (Giroux, 2006).

External factors, including cultural context and temporal dynamics, also shape the success of strategic ambiguity in fostering flexibility and adaptability. In high-ambiguity-tolerant cultures, such as the Indian public sector, stakeholders are more willing to embrace flexible interpretations of strategic goals, leading to smoother implementation and resource alignment (Ravishankar, 2013). Conversely, in cultures that favor precision and empiricism, such as Finland, ambiguity may be perceived as evasive, prompting demands for clearer definitions, thereby limiting its ability to orchestrate resources effectively (Denis *et al.*, 2011). Additionally, the popularity of management trends like TQM moderates the effectiveness of ambiguity; while such trends are in demand, their broad language facilitates adaptation and resource allocation across industries. As the popularity of these frameworks wanes, however, ambiguity risks increasing stakeholder skepticism and creating pressures for greater precision in resource deployment (Giroux, 2006).

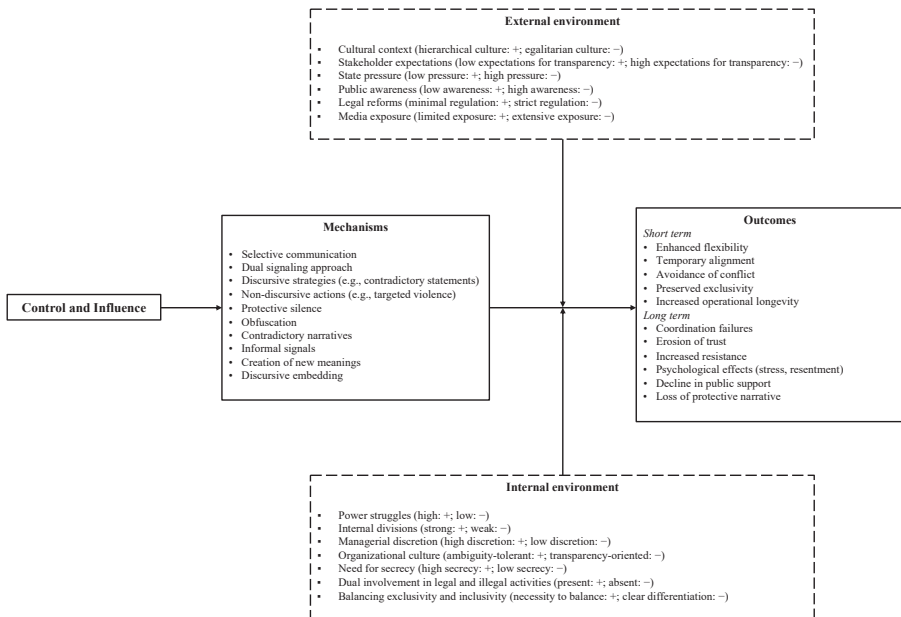
The outcomes of employing strategic ambiguity with a focus on flexibility and adaptability are multifaceted. In the short term, ambiguity fosters broad adoption and enables resource reconfiguration, as demonstrated by TQM and Bangalore One (Giroux, 2006; Ravishankar, 2013). By transforming ordinary capabilities into flexible systems and reallocating resources, ambiguity helps organizations navigate complexity, foster innovation, and reduce resistance to strategic initiatives. However, prolonged reliance on ambiguity without a shift to clarity can undermine these benefits. Over time, stakeholders may view ambiguity as a tactic to obscure intentions or evade accountability, leading to mistrust, fragmented organizational identity, and

decision paralysis as resource misalignment becomes evident (Denis *et al.*, 2011). Thus, while strategic ambiguity is a potent dynamic capability, its effectiveness depends on balancing its transformative potential with timely transitions to explicit guidance.

#### 4.3 Control and influence

The control and influence quadrant demonstrates how strategic ambiguity can preserve managerial discretion and maintain stability through centralized control and reactive sensing (Figure 5). In this context, ambiguity allows top management to obscure intentions, deflect attention from divisive issues, and avoid binding commitments, providing a means to retain managerial discretion. At the same time, strategic ambiguity facilitates adaptive responses when needed, allowing leaders to reconfigure resources and subtly influence stakeholders without the rigidity of formalized directives (Cappellaro *et al.*, 2021; van Gunten, 2017).

Strategic ambiguity achieves control and influence by modifying ordinary capabilities – such as decision-making routines and resource deployment strategies – into flexible mechanisms that align with fluctuating priorities. For instance, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) strategically employed ambiguous language in its 1990s exchange rate policies to navigate internal disagreements among member states. This approach allowed the IMF to maintain the appearance of unity while granting member states the discretion to interpret policies based on their national interests, dynamically balancing financial and political resources (van Gunten, 2017). Similarly, in talent management, organizations use ambiguity to sustain the exclusivity of talent pools, granting managers control over resource allocation while avoiding explicit communication that might alienate non-selected employees (Sumelius *et al.*, 2020). In covert organizations such as the Sicilian Mafia, ambiguity serves as a protective mechanism, creating an elusive organizational structure that complicates external scrutiny, thereby safeguarding its influence and operational resources (Cappellaro *et al.*, 2021).



Source(s): Authors' own elaboration

Figure 5. Strategic ambiguity aimed at control and influence

The mechanisms underlying this dynamic capability include selective communication, dual signaling, and paradoxical narratives, all of which enable organizations to orchestrate resources while maintaining influence. Selective communication tailors messages to different audiences, preserving managerial discretion by preventing overly prescriptive interpretations. For example, the IMF's vague policy guidelines provided national representatives with flexibility while minimizing conflicts that might undermine its authority (van Gunten, 2017). In talent management, dual signaling creates controlled information asymmetry: selected talents receive ambiguous praise, while others infer their standing informally, reinforcing the exclusivity of talent resources while maintaining organizational cohesion (Sumelius *et al.*, 2020). The Mafia's paradoxical narratives – deliberately contradictory statements – craft an enigmatic image that secures internal loyalty while deterring external interference, thereby sustaining control over its network of resources (Cappellaro *et al.*, 2021).

Internal factors, such as power dynamics, organizational culture, and managerial discretion, play a critical role in how strategic ambiguity supports control and influence. Within the IMF, ambiguity managed conflicts among member states by projecting unity while ensuring flexibility in the allocation of financial resources to meet divergent national needs (van Gunten, 2017). In talent management, ambiguity enables managers to balance exclusivity with inclusivity, navigating cultural expectations while maintaining control over human capital resources (Sumelius *et al.*, 2020). For the Mafia, ambiguity ensures control over dual legal and illegal activities, preserving its mystique while mitigating threats to its operations (Cappellaro *et al.*, 2021).

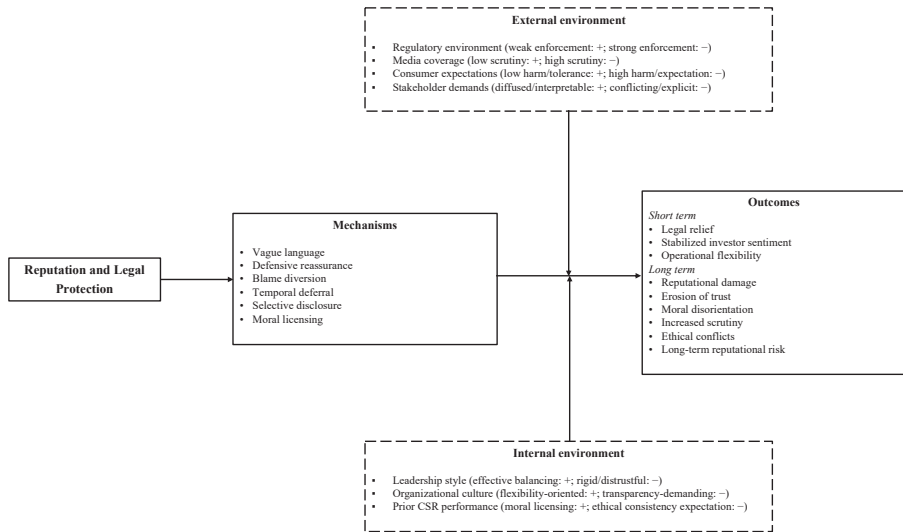
External factors, including cultural context, regulatory environments, and stakeholder expectations, also shape the use of strategic ambiguity to achieve control and influence. For the IMF, ambiguity allowed it to maintain authority in the absence of expert consensus but created governance challenges during policy implementation (van Gunten, 2017). In talent management, cultural norms favoring egalitarianism, such as those in Finnish subsidiaries, may weaken the effectiveness of ambiguity, as these cultures prefer transparency over controlled vagueness (Sumelius *et al.*, 2020). For the Mafia, ambiguity evolved in response to legal scrutiny, transitioning from simple opacity to complex, layered narratives that maintained its operational control while adapting to heightened external pressures (Cappellaro *et al.*, 2021).

The outcomes of strategic ambiguity in settings characterized by low environmental responsiveness and high organizational flexibility highlight its dual potential for control and influence. In the short term, ambiguity enhances managerial flexibility and mitigates conflicts, as seen in the IMF's approach to contentious policy debates, which preserved unity while enabling dynamic resource orchestration (van Gunten, 2017). In talent management, it sustains the exclusivity of talent pools, granting managers discretion in human resource strategies without inciting backlash (Sumelius *et al.*, 2020). For the Mafia, ambiguity shields its operations, ensuring the longevity of its influence and the effective allocation of resources across its network (Cappellaro *et al.*, 2021).

However, prolonged reliance on ambiguity can undermine control and influence by eroding trust, reducing coordination, and provoking stakeholder resistance. For the IMF, persistent ambiguity in policy communication weakened governance, leading to coordination breakdowns during currency crises (van Gunten, 2017). In talent management, ambiguity caused stress among selected talents and resentment among excluded employees, compromising cohesion and human capital strategies (Sumelius *et al.*, 2020). For the Mafia, its paradoxical tactics initially enhanced its control but eventually undermined its influence as public awareness of its violent methods grew, damaging its reputation and eroding its legitimacy (Cappellaro *et al.*, 2021).

#### 4.4 Reputation and legal protection

The reputation and legal protection quadrant highlights the use of strategic ambiguity to safeguard organizational interests by mitigating legal and reputational risks (Figure 6). This enables firms to dynamically align their resource allocation and decision-making processes with shifting stakeholder expectations, mitigating liabilities and maintaining public confidence. By



Source(s): Authors' own elaboration

Figure 6. Strategic ambiguity aimed at reputation and legal protection purposes

leveraging ambiguity, organizations reconfigure their legal, communicative, and operational frameworks to address immediate challenges while retaining the flexibility to adapt to evolving crises (Meehan and Pinnington, 2021; Ulmer and Sellnow, 2000) (see Figure 6).

The main aims of employing strategic ambiguity in this context include legal shielding, investor assurance, blame deflection, and delay tactics. Legal shielding allows firms to adaptively manage their legal exposure by avoiding explicit admissions of fault, transforming traditional compliance mechanisms into flexible protective tools (Ulmer and Sellnow, 2000). Investor assurance ensures resource stability during crises, helping firms manage stakeholder confidence and prevent destabilizing market reactions (Meehan and Pinnington, 2021). Blame deflection orchestrates accountability by reallocating responsibility to external actors such as suppliers or regulators, ensuring operational continuity while mitigating reputational risks (Kalkman and Molendijk, 2021). Delay tactics dynamically extend decision-making timelines, allowing organizations to assess their resource constraints and explore alternative strategies without prematurely binding commitments (Liu et al., 2024).

Mechanisms that support the role of strategic ambiguity as a dynamic capability include vague language, defensive reassurance, and selective disclosure. Vague language facilitates the flexible reconfiguration of operational responses by enabling firms to interpret and adjust their actions without committing to rigid protocols. For instance, during the 1993 *E. coli* outbreak, Jack in the Box issued ambiguous statements attributing the crisis to supplier issues, allowing for resource realignment while reducing immediate legal liabilities (Ulmer and Sellnow, 2000). Defensive reassurance aligns organizational responses with public expectations by signaling compliance or ethical intent without immediate structural changes, as observed in UK firms' responses to the Modern Slavery Act (Meehan and Pinnington, 2021). Selective disclosure facilitates resource orchestration by emphasizing compliance with broader standards while downplaying inconsistencies in localized practices, creating a controlled narrative that supports adaptive decision-making.

Temporal deferral represents a critical resource-oriented mechanism, enabling organizations to delay binding decisions while reallocating resources toward strategic evaluations. For instance, during product recalls, firms often deploy ambiguous statements to

maintain public trust and mitigate operational disruptions while exploring alternative resolutions (Liu *et al.*, 2024). Similarly, the selective framing used by Jack in the Box emphasized compliance with federal safety standards while temporarily deferring stricter state-level requirements, showcasing how ambiguity facilitates iterative adjustments to external pressures (Ulmer and Sellnow, 2000).

Internal factors such as leadership style, organizational culture, and historical CSR performance significantly influence the effectiveness of strategic ambiguity in modifying capabilities and orchestrating resources. Adaptive leaders who leverage ambiguity as a tool for dynamic resource management balance short-term legal shielding with long-term reputational considerations, fostering organizational resilience (Ulmer and Sellnow, 2000). Conversely, rigid leadership practices can undermine ambiguity's potential by fostering internal confusion or perceptions of manipulation (Kalkman and Molendijk, 2021). Organizations with strong CSR records often use their credibility to justify ambiguous communication strategies, dynamically reallocating resources toward managing stakeholder expectations during crises (Liu *et al.*, 2024).

External factors, including regulatory environments, media scrutiny, and stakeholder diversity, also condition how strategic ambiguity is operationalized as a dynamic capability. In contexts with weak regulatory enforcement, such as the Modern Slavery Act, ambiguity enables firms to align resources flexibly while signaling compliance. However, heightened media scrutiny and consumer demands for transparency can pressure organizations to transition from ambiguous strategies to explicit commitments, limiting their ability to sustain flexible resource allocation (Meehan and Pinnington, 2021). During the Jack in the Box crisis, increased media attention disrupted the effectiveness of vague language, necessitating clearer communication and reallocating resources toward damage control (Ulmer and Sellnow, 2000).

The outcomes of employing strategic ambiguity for legal and reputational protection demonstrate its dynamic capability to modify capabilities and orchestrate resources effectively. In the short term, ambiguity reduces liabilities, stabilizes stakeholder confidence, and reallocates resources to mitigate immediate risks. For example, UK firms leveraged ambiguity in their Modern Slavery Act disclosures to balance operational flexibility with regulatory compliance, while Jack in the Box's use of vague statements protected its market position during the *E. coli* outbreak (Meehan and Pinnington, 2021; Ulmer and Sellnow, 2000). However, prolonged reliance on ambiguity without transitions to explicit clarity can lead to resource misalignments, internal disorientation, and long-term reputational erosion. For instance, sustained vagueness among Dutch Border Guards eventually fostered ethical conflicts and operational inefficiencies, illustrating the trade-offs of ambiguity's adaptive potential (Kalkman and Molendijk, 2021).

## 5. Future research directions

This section outlines future research directions, focusing on both theoretical advancements and methodological improvements in understanding strategic ambiguity as a dynamic capability. Building on the proposed typology, we explore key areas for further investigation, such as the interaction of strategic ambiguity with other dynamic capabilities, contextual moderators' role, and emerging technologies' impact. Additionally, we highlight the need for more robust methodological approaches, including mixed-method designs and standardized measurement frameworks, to enhance the reliability, comparability, and generalizability of findings in this field.

### 5.1 Expanding the typology and understanding of strategic ambiguity

The proposed typology of strategic ambiguity, reframed as a dynamic capability based on environmental responsiveness and organizational flexibility, offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the diverse aims and elements of strategic ambiguity in organizational contexts. This reconceptualization aligns strategic ambiguity with the broader dynamic capability's framework, emphasizing its role as a proactive, adaptive capability that

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shapes organizations and their environment. By framing ambiguity as a dynamic capability, we move beyond its traditional conceptualization as a strategic communication practice (Eisenberg, 1984) to highlight its role in impacting core organizational processes, such as sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring (Eisenhardt and Martin, 2000; Teece, 2007). These processes involve orchestrating and adapting organizational resources to meet evolving challenges, a perspective enriched by the co-evolutionary approach to dynamic capabilities, which underscores the interaction between organizational intentions and environmental constraints (Cristofaro and Lovallo, 2022).

In this regard, organizations can use strategic ambiguity not just to react to external pressures but to actively influence the pace and direction of environmental changes, such as shaping stakeholder expectations or redefining market norms (see also Kulkarni *et al.*, 2024). This dynamic interaction aligns with the evolutionary perspective that sees ambiguity as a means of achieving evolutionary fitness by adapting and redesigning external conditions to sustain competitive advantage (Cristofaro and Lovallo, 2022; Teece, 2018). However, the typology also underscores the need for further research into its interactions with other dynamic capabilities, the role of moderators, and the influence of emerging technologies.

*First*, future research on the intersection of strategic ambiguity and dynamic capabilities could significantly enrich our understanding of how ambiguity interacts with other capabilities in the organizational context like knowledge absorption or market sensing, particularly in rapidly evolving industries. For example, studies could examine how strategic ambiguity enables firms to delay resource commitments while simultaneously enhancing their absorptive capacity, allowing for better adaptation to technological advancements or market changes. Furthermore, integrating strategic ambiguity with capabilities like innovation management could reveal how firms navigate uncertainty during innovation processes, balancing clarity and flexibility in pursuit of new opportunities. A particularly intriguing direction for future research is the interaction between strategic ambiguity and strategic foresight (Fergnani, 2022). As strategic foresight involves anticipating and shaping future possibilities, it would be valuable to explore how strategic ambiguity can be deployed as a tool within foresight activities to help organizations manage uncertainties and future-proof their strategies. By incorporating strategic ambiguity, firms may be better able to navigate long-term uncertainties, allowing for the flexibility needed to adjust their strategic direction over time. Future studies could explore questions such as: (1) How does strategic ambiguity enhance or hinder the effectiveness of strategic foresight in organizations facing highly uncertain environments? (2) In what ways can firms combine strategic ambiguity and strategic foresight to create a more adaptive and resilient long-term strategy? (3) How do different organizational contexts (e.g. innovation-driven firms vs regulation-driven firms) influence the interaction between strategic ambiguity and strategic foresight in shaping strategic outcomes? These inquiries could provide valuable insights into the role of strategic ambiguity as an enabler of foresight, helping organizations to be more agile and responsive in their decision-making processes.

*Second*, the integration of the dynamic capabilities framework further suggests the importance of examining managerial dynamic capabilities (Helfat and Peteraf, 2015), particularly metacognitive ones, in deploying strategic ambiguity. Indeed, as highlighted in the microfoundations of dynamic capabilities, managers play a crucial role in enacting and adapting capabilities through their cognitive and emotional processes (Cristofaro and Lovallo, 2022). In this regard, evolutionary sensemaking (a metacognitive managerial dynamic capability; Kulkarni *et al.*, 2024) highlights the need for managers to engage in continuous adaptation by aligning their cognitive frameworks with stakeholder preferences. This involves leveraging cognitive capabilities such as problem-solving and reasoning to manage complexity and ambiguity effectively. For example, managers can enhance their ability to interpret and integrate diverse information quality attributes by employing enactment processes like labeling and bracketing (Weick, 1995). These processes enable managers to simplify complexity and construct plausible narratives, reducing information asymmetry and

fostering alignment with stakeholders (Cristofaro and Lovallo, 2022). By embedding strategic ambiguity within the microfoundations of managerial capabilities, future research could explore how these processes contribute to broader organizational resilience and adaptability.

*Third*, at the firm level, organizational characteristics such as size, age, and industry context significantly shape how ambiguity is deployed. For instance, large, well-established firms may use ambiguity to preserve flexibility in highly regulated environments, whereas smaller and/or younger firms might leverage ambiguity to experiment with unconventional strategies or build legitimacy in uncertain markets (Biesenthal *et al.*, 2019). The evolutionary approach to dynamic capabilities further suggests that ambiguity facilitates the co-evolution of routines, enabling organizations to refine their internal practices while responding to external demands (Cristofaro and Lovallo, 2022). Strategic ambiguity may function as a critical dynamic capability for navigating diverse regulatory and cultural landscapes in international and cross-cultural contexts. For instance, multinational corporations operating in high-context cultures might employ ambiguity to align divergent stakeholder expectations without prematurely committing specific courses of action. Future research could explore how firms balance ambiguity across different cultural and institutional environments, focusing on its interaction with sensing and seizing capabilities.

Finally, the rise of digital tools and Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies introduces new dimensions to the study of strategic ambiguity. As organizations increasingly rely on AI to craft ambiguous messaging, researchers should investigate how these technologies influence the cognitive processes underlying ambiguity deployment. For example, does AI enhance managers' ability to construct plausible narratives, or does it create challenges in maintaining stakeholder trust due to perceived impersonality? Experimental studies comparing human-generated versus AI-generated ambiguity could provide valuable insights into these dynamics and their implications for adaptive capability development (Kulkarni *et al.*, 2024).

## 5.2 Methodological considerations

Most scholars investigating strategic ambiguity have traditionally favored qualitative research designs, which are well-suited for exploring complex, context-dependent phenomena (Bansal *et al.*, 2018). The nascent state of the field and the inherent challenges of operationalizing strategic ambiguity – given its varied dimensions and manifestations – further explain this preference. The inductive “bottom-up” logic, moving from specific cases to broader generalizations, is essential for theory development, particularly within the social sciences and management disciplines (Shah and Corley, 2006). However, this case-oriented focus often limits systematic comparisons, reducing predictive power, reliability, and generalizability of findings.

*First*, to address these limitations, future research should incorporate mixed-method approaches that integrate both case- and variable-oriented designs, such as qualitative comparative analysis (Kumar *et al.*, 2022). This approach can help uncover the configurational conditions under which strategic ambiguity produces different outcomes, offering a deeper understanding of its multifaceted nature. Replicating studies under diverse environmental contexts could reveal how strategic ambiguity adapts and transforms, enhancing the robustness of findings (Block *et al.*, 2022). Additionally, employing experimental designs could establish clearer cause-and-effect relationships, advancing our understanding of the antecedent-strategic ambiguity-consequence nexus (Podsakoff and Podsakoff, 2019). Mixed-method approaches can also provide comprehensive insights into the mechanisms driving strategic ambiguity's varied effects. For instance, combining content analysis of corporate disclosures with qualitative interviews could illuminate how ambiguous language is strategically employed and interpreted by stakeholders (Meehan and Pinnington, 2021; Scandellius and Cohen, 2016). Text mining techniques, such as sentiment analysis, could further quantify the impacts of ambiguous messaging on trust, legitimacy, and organizational reputation, offering a data-driven perspective on its short- and long-term consequences (Abdallah and Langley, 2014).

*Second*, a critical challenge remains the lack of standardized methods for measuring strategic ambiguity, rooted in the diverse conceptualizations across the literature. Scholars have utilized varied ladders of abstraction, complicating consistent operationalization and resulting in context-specific measures. In this regard, the reconceptualization of strategic ambiguity as a dynamic capability opens new avenues for empirical research. [Laaksonen and Peltoniemi \(2018\)](#) emphasize the importance of distinguishing dynamic capabilities from ordinary capabilities, highlighting how the former practically impact the latter and facilitate resource reconfiguration. Applying these principles, future research on strategic ambiguity should better empirically measure its influence on sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring processes, particularly its capacity to alter the allocation of both tangible and intangible resources. This can include tracking the deployment of both tangible and intangible resources, such as human capital, financial investments, and organizational knowledge, as firms deploy strategic ambiguity.

*Third*, the rise of digital communication tools and AI technologies presents new opportunities to investigate how these innovations influence the deployment of strategic ambiguity. Organizations increasingly employ AI-driven analytics and content-generation tools to craft tailored, strategically ambiguous messages for diverse stakeholder groups ([Yin et al., 2024](#)). Future research could explore whether these technologies enhance the intentional deployment of ambiguity by increasing precision in message crafting or, conversely, reduce its effectiveness by making communications appear overly impersonal or transparent. Experimental studies comparing human-generated versus AI-generated ambiguous messages could provide valuable insights into how digital tools shape stakeholder perceptions and the broader dynamics of organizational communication. This line of inquiry could also examine how AI influences the feedback loop between ambiguity and resource allocation, enhancing or inhibiting ambiguity as a dynamic capability.

## 6. Implications and conclusion

This study offers two significant theoretical advancements in the study of strategic ambiguity. *First*, we reconceptualize strategic ambiguity as a dynamic capability. Strategic ambiguity has been conceived primarily as strategic communication practice, particularly in the influential work of [Eisenberg \(1984\)](#), who emphasized its role in fostering coordination and managing diverse interpretations within organizations. This led prior research to be focused on strategic ambiguity utility in creating shared understanding and reducing conflict through deliberate vagueness. However, this study shifts the perspective by integrating strategic ambiguity within the dynamic capability's framework, thereby emphasizing its role in enhancing organizational agility and adaptability. Reframing strategic ambiguity as a dynamic capability aligns it with the core processes of sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring ([Eisenhardt and Martin, 2000](#); [Teece, 2007](#)). This perspective moves beyond the traditional view of ambiguity as a reactive or defensive tactic aimed at avoiding uncertainty or for crisis management ([Denis et al., 2011](#)). Instead, it underscores how ambiguity can be proactively employed to shape organizations and their environment.

*Second*, we propose a typology of strategic ambiguity, structured around the dimensions of environmental responsiveness and organizational flexibility, highlighting how firms intentionally use ambiguity to sense opportunities, reconfigure resources, and align stakeholder expectations in dynamic contexts. By distinguishing between centralized control vs decentralized authority and proactive engagement vs reactive engagement, the typology illuminates the different strategic intents behind the deployment of ambiguity, showcasing how it aligns with the broader dynamic capabilities of the organization. Since each strategic ambiguity aim is connected to peculiar antecedents, mechanisms, moderators, and outcomes, we contribute to the literature by identifying elements that shape the effectiveness of strategic ambiguity according to the pursued aim. By integrating these elements into our framework, such as moderators like leadership style, organizational culture, and regulatory context ([Davenport and](#)

Leitch, 2005; Ulmer and Sellnow, 2000), we provide a more nuanced understanding of the contingencies affecting the deployment and outcomes of strategic ambiguity.

To effectively implement the four identified strategic ambiguity aims – collaboration and engagement, flexibility and adaptability, control and influence, and reputation and legal protection – we offer actionable implications for managers:

*Collaboration and engagement.* To foster collaboration, managers can leverage strategic ambiguity by using inclusive language that allows stakeholders to co-construct meaning. The mechanism here involves broad, inclusive terms like “innovation” or “growth,” which allow diverse stakeholders to interpret these concepts in ways that align with their specific needs and expectations (Abdallah and Langley, 2014; Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2010). Additionally, role fluidity should be emphasized, where ambiguous role definitions encourage team members to step into multiple roles dynamically, thus facilitating collaboration and resource reallocation (Simeone, 2017). In this way, ambiguity helps transform rigid operational structures into adaptive systems that respond to evolving needs and goals, effectively modifying ordinary capabilities.

*Flexibility and adaptability.* Managers should deploy ambiguity to maintain flexibility and prevent premature commitments, particularly in environments that require rapid adaptation. The key mechanism here is equivocal language, where vague or multi-interpretable terms such as “integration” or “synergy” allow stakeholders to shape their own interpretations and adjust strategies as conditions change (Giroux, 2006; Ravishankar, 2013). This linguistic flexibility enables the dynamic reconfiguration of resources without committing prematurely to rigid paths. Additionally, symbolic framing can be employed to align disparate groups around shared but adaptable objectives, promoting collective ownership while accommodating local variations (Denis *et al.*, 2011). By using strategic ambiguity in this way, managers can shift operational processes and resource deployment to align with emerging demands, thus modifying ordinary capabilities to enhance adaptability.

*Control and influence.* In hierarchical settings, strategic ambiguity serves as a tool for maintaining control and managing competing interests by obscuring management’s intentions. The mechanism that enables this is selective communication, where top management communicates strategically vague messages to maintain authority and avoid clear commitments (van Gunten, 2017). This allows leaders to preserve discretion while subtly influencing the direction of organizational efforts. Another mechanism is paradoxical narratives, where contradictory or ambiguous statements are made to balance competing interests and preserve stability (Cappellaro *et al.*, 2021). These narratives can create an impression of unity or flexibility without requiring concrete action, helping to orchestrate resources across different factions of the organization. This enables managers to maintain control over resource allocation while keeping stakeholders engaged without being bound to specific outcomes.

*Reputation and legal protection.* When navigating reputational or legal risks, strategic ambiguity allows managers to mitigate exposure while retaining the flexibility to respond to evolving circumstances. A central mechanism is defensive reassurance, where vague but reassuring statements are issued to signal compliance or commitment without explicitly committing to specific actions (Meehan and Pinnington, 2021; Ulmer and Sellnow, 2000). This allows organizations to project an image of responsibility or ethical behavior while buying time to adjust resource allocations in response to external pressures. Another important mechanism is temporal deferral, where decisions or commitments are delayed through ambiguous language, giving the organization time to adapt its strategy and resources to manage emerging legal or reputational challenges (Liu *et al.*, 2024). This tactic helps organizations maintain stability and protect their resources, while avoiding immediate, binding commitments that could later be detrimental.

While this study provides a novel typology and reframes strategic ambiguity as a dynamic capability, it also faces certain limitations. The reliance on the Gioia method (Gioia *et al.*, 2013) for qualitative theory-building introduces subjectivity in data coding and theme development.

This method's interpretive nature may affect the identified typology's robustness. Future research could address this limitation by employing quantitative methods or mixed-method designs, which would help validate and refine the framework. Relatedly, the selection of environmental responsiveness and organizational flexibility as the primary dimensions for the typology, while grounded in existing literature, may not fully capture the complexity of strategic ambiguity's application. Other dimensions, such as technological advancements, life cycle stages, or industry-specific characteristics, could offer alternative lenses for examining strategic ambiguity's strategic role. Future studies should explore these additional factors to build a more comprehensive understanding of ambiguity's diverse applications.

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### Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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