



**To explore the role of strategic decision-making adaptations by middle managers in times of uncertainty**

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A research project submitted to the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration.

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## **Abstract**

The heightened uncertainty by Covid-19 created an environment whereby managers and organisations needed to adapt. However, the strategic adaptation in decision-making in times of uncertainty was not fully understood, especially in the heightened uncertainty, which created a need for this study. Therefore, this study explored the strategic decision-making adaptations by middle management, specifically in times of uncertainty. The study followed a qualitative approach through interviews of 15 middle managers across nine organisations in the fast-moving consumable goods industry.

The study's findings demonstrated a need for middle management to adapt their strategic decision-making based on the environmental context that focuses on meeting the consumers changing needs. The adaptation exists in both the business and macro-environment, whereby these actions can pivot or mitigate risk for the organisation. The researcher proposes a conceptual framework for how middle management can adapt their strategic decision-making in times of uncertainty with an explicit focus on pivoting or mitigating risk in both the business and macro-environment.

## **Key Words**

Strategic decision-making, uncertainty, adaptation

## Declaration

I declare that this research project is my own work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration at the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University. I further declare that I have obtained the necessary authorisation and consent to carry out this research.

**Student number:** 20803428

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>ii</b>
<b>Key Words</b> .....	<b>ii</b>
<b>Declaration</b> .....	<b>iii</b>
<b>List of tables and figures</b> .....	<b>vii</b>
<b>1. CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH PROBLEM</b> .....	<b>1</b>
1.1. Introduction .....	1
1.2. Research problem.....	2
1.3. Purpose statement .....	5
1.4. Research objectives .....	5
1.5. Practical and theoretical contribution.....	5
1.6. Conclusion .....	6
<b>2. CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW</b> .....	<b>7</b>
2.1. Introduction .....	7
2.2. Optimal decision-making .....	7
2.3. What is uncertainty .....	9
2.4. Decision-making in uncertainty.....	11
2.5. Strategic decision-making and role of middle managers .....	14
2.6. Conclusion .....	15
<b>3. CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH QUESTIONS</b> .....	<b>16</b>
3.1. Introduction .....	16
3.2. Research questions.....	16
3.3. Conclusion .....	17
<b>4. CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN</b> .....	<b>18</b>
4.1. Introduction .....	18
4.2. Research design and philosophy .....	18
4.3. Approach selected and methodological choice .....	18
4.4. Strategy, time horizon, Population, and unit of analysis .....	19
4.5. Sampling method and size .....	19
4.6. Measurement instrument.....	20
4.7. Data gathering process and analysis approach.....	21
4.8. Quality controls and limitations.....	23
4.9. Conclusion .....	24

<b>5. CHAPTER 5: RESULTS .....</b>	<b>25</b>
5.1. Introduction .....	25
5.2. Sampling description .....	25
5.3. Reliability and validity .....	26
5.4. Coding, categories, and themes .....	26
5.5. Results.....	27
5.5.1. Research question one.....	28
5.5.1.1. The need for adaptation.....	28
a. High levels of uncertainty.....	29
b. Adapting to the environment.....	29
5.5.1.2. The nature of the uncertainty .....	31
a. The staff impact.....	31
b. The strategic impact .....	32
c. The organisational design impact.....	33
5.5.1.3. The strategic adaptation .....	34
a. Resource allocation .....	34
b. Innovation .....	35
c. Decision-making adaptations .....	36
5.5.1.4. The role of the manager .....	37
a. Understanding the market environment.....	37
b. The data considerations .....	38
c. The operational considerations.....	39
5.5.1.5. Summary of finding for research question 1 .....	40
5.5.2. Research question two.....	40
5.5.2.1. Opportunities from uncertainty .....	41
a. Internal opportunities .....	41
b. Market/external opportunities.....	44
5.5.2.2. Threats from uncertainty .....	45
a. Organisational impact .....	46
b. External market impact .....	48
5.5.2.3. Summary of findings for research question 2.....	50
5.5.3. Research question three .....	50
5.5.3.1. Internal obstacles.....	51
a. Senior management .....	51
b. Organisational culture .....	52
c. Poor data quality .....	53
5.5.3.2. External obstacles .....	53
a. Government regulations.....	53
5.5.3.3. Summary of findings for research question 3.....	54
5.6. Conclusion.....	54
<b>6. CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION OF RESULTS .....</b>	<b>56</b>

6.1.	Introduction .....	56
6.2.	Research question one .....	56
6.2.1.	Need for adaptation.....	56
6.2.2.	Nature of uncertainty .....	58
6.2.3.	Strategic adaptation .....	59
6.2.4.	The role of the manager.....	60
6.2.5.	Summary and conceptual framework.....	62
6.3.	Research question two .....	62
6.3.1.	Environmental factors of strategic adaptation .....	63
6.3.1.1.	Opportunities from uncertainty .....	63
6.3.1.2.	Threats from uncertainty .....	64
6.3.2.	Summary and conceptual framework.....	65
6.4.	Research question three .....	65
6.4.1.	Obstacles .....	66
6.4.1.1.	Internal obstacles.....	66
6.4.1.2.	External obstacles .....	67
6.4.2.	Summary and conceptual framework.....	67
6.5.	Conclusion.....	68
<b>7.</b>	<b>CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....</b>	<b>69</b>
7.1.	Introduction .....	69
7.2.	Principal findings .....	69
7.2.1.	Research question one.....	69
7.2.2.	Research question two.....	70
7.2.3.	Research question three .....	71
7.2.4.	Summary of principal findings.....	71
7.3.	Limitations of study .....	72
7.4.	Suggested future studies .....	73
7.5.	Conclusion.....	74
	<b>References .....</b>	<b>75</b>
	<b>Appendix 1: Interview Questions.....</b>	<b>85</b>
	<b>Appendix 2: Approved ethical clearance.....</b>	<b>85</b>

## List of tables and figures

<b>Table 1: Semi-structured interview themes.....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Table 2: Sample description .....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Table 4: Summary of results .....</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>Figure 1: Codes per interview.....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Figure 2: Cumulative codes .....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Figure 3: RQ1 overview of findings.....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Figure 4: RQ2 overview of findings.....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Figure 5: RQ3 overview of findings.....</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>Figure 6: Conceptual framework: Need for adaptation .....</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>Figure 7: Conceptual framework adapted for complexity and uncertainty .....</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>Figure 8: Conceptual framework adapted for strategic adaptations .....</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>Figure 9: Conceptual framework adapted for environmental scanning .....</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>Figure 10: Conceptual framework: Opportunities from uncertainty .....</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>Figure 11: Conceptual framework: Threats from uncertainty .....</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>Figure 12: Final conceptual framework .....</b>	<b>72</b>

## 1. CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

### 1.1. Introduction

Decision-making is a well-researched and studied phenomenon that has dominated the collective understanding of how professionals make decisions for decades (Okoli & Watt, 2018). The managerial decision-making process constantly estimates the outcomes and allocates resources to execute their decisions (McCann, 2020). However, in times of uncertainty, we know middle managers play a role in sensemaking by scanning and interpreting their environment and sense giving by addressing any ambiguity experienced (Sharma & Good, 2013). Decision-making in uncertainty is understood to be satisfying but not optimal (Bakonyi, 2018). The level of uncertainty brought by the Covid-19 global pandemic has tested managers worldwide due to their lack of preparedness for crisis management (Bowers, Hall, & Srinivasan, 2017).

Strategy is generally a long-term fixed and deliberate plan; however, there needs to be a balance between this long-term plan and adapting it to the rapidly changing environment (Fowler, Gajewska-De Mattos, & Chapman, 2018). Adapting strategy in response to environmental stimuli was deemed an emergent strategy coined by Mintzberg (1978). Therefore, the strategy was seen as either deliberate or emergent, whereby the emergence of autonomy and the formulation of participatory strategies by middle and lower-level managers promotes adaptive behaviour; This part is mediated through strategic planning, leading to higher performance and results (Fowler et al., 2018).

Adaptation is the process of individuals or collective communities creating or implementing decisions to mitigate the risk of perceived or projected change (Kristiana, Pramono & Brian, 2021). Firms need to adjust in the short term for long-term sustainability, which is reliant on their innovation and adaptation strategies (Ehrig & Foss, 2021). In contrast, strategic managerial decision-making adaptation would be classified as the reaction by managers to their dynamic environment to best



influence the organisation's strategy by creating a more emergent strategy by making sense and giving sense to their business context (Sharma & Good, 2013).

Based on the decision-making in uncertainty literature ((Harvard Business School Press & Drucker, 2001; Guth & Kliemt, 2017; Kaschner, 2017; Thomas, 2020; Ansell & Boin, 2017) and the emergent strategy literature (Mintzberg, 1978; Mintzberg & Waters, 1985; Floyd & Wooldrige 1992; Lavarda, Canet-Giner & Peris-Bonet 2010; Fowler et al. 2018) the researcher has identified a gap in strategic decision-making adaptations by middle managers in times of uncertainty. Therefore, this study will **explore the role of strategic decision-making adaptations by middle managers in times of uncertainty**. The research problem and purpose statement will explain why this is necessary and further supported by the literature review, which will delve into existing literature and guide the research questions. The chosen qualitative methodology will be unpacked and set the scene for the upcoming research, followed by the findings and discussion and finally, the concluding outcomes of this study.

## **1.2. Research problem**

Uncertainty is a setting or context that we do not fully understand as individuals and managers (Einhorn, 2020). The Covid-19 global pandemic had amplified the need for managers to adjust to times of uncertainty. This adjustment would require a different approach to managerial decision-making to adjust to the change in the environment as managers would have an acute awareness of the current contextual setting (Kutz, 2008). Jacobides and Reeves (2020) suggest changes from Covid-19 is not temporary but will also have a long-lasting impact. Therefore, managerial decision-making in the short term will have a long-term impact on the organisation.

The epidemic has impacted numerous diligence worldwide, which has redounded in forced short and long-term changes (Jacobides & Reeves, 2020). Simple changes like increased corporate meetings in the average workday have substantially increased (DeFilippis, Impink, Singell, Polzer & Sadun, 2020). Managers have had to make strategic and other decisions outside of the normal state of their preparedness to cater to the environment's changes (Alvarez, Afuah & Gibson, 2018).

Decision-making in uncertainty is characterised by having an unstable information basis and thus creates unpredictability, requiring managers to be aware of the risk in their decisions (Kaschner, 2017). Decision-makers often deal with doubt and uncertainty, which forces them to strive and move swiftly and execute decisions; however, these decisions must be monitored and adjusted when needed (Al-Dabbagh, 2020).

Under normal circumstances, the managerial decision-making process still experiences a variability of uncertainty, and no decision made by managers have a comprehensive understanding of the possible outcome (Alvarez et al., 2018). However, the unpredictability caused by the pandemic has created a level of uncertainty that is dynamically evolving, and decision-makers do not have a precise understanding of the spread of the disease (Foss, 2020). The more managers understand decision-making in uncertainty, the better equipped they will be when uncertainty strikes; however, organisations lack evidence-based comprehension to develop decision-making skills, specifically around the pandemic (Thomas, 2020).

Therefore, managerial, strategic decision-making in uncertainty requires an adaptation process that unfolds throughout the changes forced by the pandemic. There is significant literature on decision-making in uncertainty (Harvard Business School Press & Drucker, 2001; Guth & Kliemt, 2017; Kaschner, 2017; Thomas, 2020; Ansell & Boin, 2017). Harvard Business School Press and Drucker (2001) already emphasised, fifty plus years ago, that the evolution of uncertainty was moving at a faster pace than expected and that these uncertain events were becoming more common. Guth and Kliemt (2017) expand that uncertainty is inevitable, and with uncertainty, a level of risk in decision-making is expected. Kaschner (2017) suggested that decision-making in uncertainty require one to be completely risk-aware when adapting to uncertain times. Ansell and Boin (2017) suggest that managers seek more information during times of uncertainty to allow for more robust decision-making, whilst Thomas (2020) indicated decision-making in uncertainty generally was done under time constraints which limited the leader's ability to obtain information, and this created a level of anxiety for managers.

Additionally, a significant portion of the literature on emergent strategy emphasises middle managers' role in strategic decision-making (Mintzberg, 1978; Mintzberg &

Waters, 1985; Floyd & Wooldridge 1992; Lavarda et al. 2010; Fowler et al. 2018). Firstly, Mintzberg (1978) coined the term emergent strategy, adapted from the deliberate or planned process to an unintended plan based on environmental factors. Mintzberg and Waters (1985) further elaborate on what it means for a strategy to emerge in an organisation and how managers change their intentions from the deliberate strategy to the emergence whereby the organisation or change in environment rejects the conscious decisions. Floyd and Wooldridge (1992) illustrate how middle managers shape organisations more adaptable and stimulate behaviour that radiates from intended expectations and has an upward and downward impact on strategy formulation. Lavarda et al. (2010) suggest that middle managers facilitate information flow from bottom to top and guide strategic adaptations. Fowler et al. (2018) supported Lavarda et al. (2010) by suggesting that middle managers facilitate adaptive behaviour and that middle managers are drivers of emergent strategies. The role of top-level managers is to filter the decisions and actions of middle management.

Furthermore, Ehrig and Foss (2021) suggest that there is a sense of unknowns when decision-makers deal with radial uncertainty and that there is a need to understand the adaptation process, specifically around how firms react and cope with the emergence of novelties. The adaptation process is defined by how firms deal with change from the unknowns and adjust their strategy to cope with these variables (Ehrig & Foss, 2021). This is similar to how Mintzberg (1978) coined the term emergent strategy based on any deviation from the original strategy, which came from reacting to the environment.

However, the adaptation process is around the organisational level and does not explicitly focus on the individual's strategic decision-making adaptation, thus creating a gap in the literature which the researcher aims to delve deeper into. Covid-19 has created a sense of uncertainty, and a problem of this magnitude could not thoroughly be planned for and required decision-making adaptations. Therefore, the researcher aims to explore the role of strategic decision-making adaptations by middle managers in times of uncertainty.

Based on the body of knowledge on decision-making in uncertainty, emergent strategies, and the role middle managers play in strategic decision-making

adaptations, the researcher has identified a gap in research, specifically around the strategic decision-making adaptations by middle managers in times of uncertainty such as the Covid-19 pandemic. The gap in the literature has created a need for understanding the strategic decision-making adaptation middle managers face and designing a framework for the strategic adaptation process experienced throughout the heightened uncertainty from Covid-19.

### **1.3. Purpose statement**

This study seeks **to explore the role of strategic decision-making adaptations by middle managers in times of uncertainty**. Ansell & Boin (2017) argue that inexperienced managers deal with uncertainty by calling for more information. However, when information is limited or not available, this would still require managerial decisions. Therefore, this study will focus on how middle managers help the organisation make sense of uncertainty and influence strategy in times of uncertainty.

### **1.4. Research objectives**

This study aims to cover the following research objectives.

- 1) To explore the role of strategic decision-making adaptations by middle managers in times of uncertainty.
- 2) To explore the opportunities and threats that led to an emergent strategy in times of uncertainty.
- 3) To explore obstacles remaining which influence decision-making in emergent strategy in times of uncertainty.

### **1.5. Practical and theoretical contribution**

The practical contributions aim to develop a framework for middle management influence on strategic decision-making adaptations in times of uncertainty. The framework will be a basis for how middle managers adapted their strategic decision-making and influenced emergent organisational strategies throughout uncertainty from the Covid-19 global pandemic. Further practical contributions will be how middle managers identified and risks and opportunities from the uncertainty and any possible obstacles influencing strategic decision-making and emergent strategy. Furthermore, the theoretical contributions will add to the body of knowledge on

decision-making in uncertainty and the role of middle managers influence on strategic decision-making in emergent strategy.

### **1.6. Conclusion**

The research problem identified a gap whereby research to explore the strategic decision-making adaptation by middle management in times of uncertainty was needed. The need for the research has a theoretical need in adding to the body of knowledge in decision-making in uncertainty and strategic adaptation. The practical need for this study will shed light on this topic and aid managers in their strategic decision-making adaptation in times of uncertainty.

## **2. CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Introduction**

Uncertainty has become a reality for everyone in the context of Covid-19. Individuals worldwide have been impacted in some way or form, and hence this phenomenon was classified as a global pandemic affecting over 200 countries in the world (Wang & Su, 2020). Further to the personal impact, the pandemic has had a significant strain on organisations worldwide with economic, travel, regulatory and trading impacts, to mention a few.

This level of uncertainty has tested many managers working in numerous industries worldwide, and these managers were not equipped to deal with crisis management (Bowers et al., 2017). The uncertainty around the pandemic had forced managers to adapt their decision-making throughout the various imposed government regulations. The necessary adaptation can be linked to adaptation strategy, which suggests that humans plan behaviours or actions to meet minimum requirements to solve pressing problems (Kristiana et al., 2021).

This chapter will focus on optimal decision-making and then evaluate uncertainty; after that, focus on decision-making in uncertainty. Finally, the strategic decision-making in uncertainty with a specific focus on middle management influence will be discussed. All these constructs will provide insight into evident research problems that this study will focus on.

### **2.2. Optimal decision-making**

The classical theory of economic decision-making makes precise, testable predictions about the behaviour of the decision-making agents (Simon, 1979). Additionally, Simon (1979) suggests that all predictive power comes from characterising the environment's shape in decision-making. Therefore optimal decision-making is defined as precise, testable assumptions considering the characteristics that shape the environment. Decision-making is a daily phenomenon for everyone and occurs at an individual, group or organisational level (Lam & Van der Borgh, 2021). At some point in time, each individual, no matter the designation, has to decide.

When managers in an organisation make decisions, they do so from a well-informed basis, such as looking at the traditional financial viewpoint of the cost-benefit analysis (Ishizaka & Siraj, 2018). Additionally, managers lean towards past experiences and intuition when making decisions that influence the organisation under normal day-to-day circumstances (Capelo & Dias, 2009). Usually, managers navigate a substantial amount of information to reflect on different variables to make the best possible decision (Okoli & Watt, 2018). However, the best possible decision is not always optimal as various factors need to be considered, whereas managers focus on past experiences which do not always replicate in the future in the same contextual setting.

Lackes, Siepermann and Vetter (2020) suggested that using forecasts is a prerequisite for sound decision-making. However, forecasts sometimes have limited information in a dynamic situation, forcing the decision-maker to deviate from the suggested data-driven decision. Furthermore, all factors contributing to forecasts add complexity and is limited to adjusting the inputs used to inform the decision-maker. Additionally, Buckley and Casson (2019) suggested that there is only so much complexity a system can handle, and decision-making should adjust to the environment so that a more complex environment requires fewer constraints on decision-making and vice versa. This forced managers to adapt to the way decisions were made as these managers had to react to the surrounding environment (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992).

However, Lackers et al. (2020), Buckley et al. (2019) and Capelo et al. (2009) agree that the nature of the decision is an essential factor and the more routine the decision, the less external stimuli needed for the manager and the decision-making would come from a place of intuition or previously experienced outcomes. However, the researcher suggests that routine decisions based on previous outcomes do not fully consider the dynamic environment that the manager has to navigate. The Covid-19 pandemic has proved that past experiences cannot always govern decisions in the current context, as no manager has experienced a global interference of this magnitude in the twenty-first century.

Furthermore, Intezari and Pauleen (2017) considered decision-making a continuing process of identifying and assessing the various options for achieving a specified

objective. As highlighted in the preceding paragraphs, the literature suggests that decision-making has known variables that are used as an input to determine the possible outcome or output around the decision needed in the specific context. There are numerous variables and plausible outcomes to decision-making. To further illustrate the extent of the various variables, influential executives focus on when decisions need to be based on principle or when decisions need to be made pragmatically (Harvard Business School Press & Drucker, 2001). Therefore suggesting leaders and managers make decisions based on their perception of principle or practical importance.

Additionally, the decision-making approach is not a one-size-fits-all model and needs to adapt to the situation and environment (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992). The optimal decision-making process is subjective as one could argue that any decision made by management does not have a clear view on the outcome and therefore is not optimal but rather best fit for the situation and the information at hand (Luan, Reb & Gigerenzer, 2019). Decision-making by managers understanding all the possible outcomes is also a far-reaching statement or assumption due to the various variables and plausible outcomes (Alvarez et al., 2018).

Based on the prior literature discussed and the fact that decision-making depends on the environment or context in which the manager operates, this raises the question of the strategic decision-making adaptation. Optimal decision-making is dependent on the situation and information at hand. The manager can also bring in past experiences and focus on pragmatic or principle outcomes.

### **2.3. What is uncertainty**

The concept of *uncertainty* in literature was brought to light by one of the first social scientists, Frank Knight, in 1921. Knight defined *uncertainty* in decision-making as a process whereby the decision-maker did not know the possible outcome of the decision at hand (Emmett, 1999). Additionally, Knight argued that fundamental uncertainty is a feature of the world whereby the human mind's cognitive limitations and awareness of irreducible uncertainty (Dimand, 2021). Furthermore, Knight suggested uncertainty arises from unpredictable, poorly understood change, posing knowledge problems on the effects of interacting factors (Rindova & Courtney, 2020).



Uncertainty literature dates back into the early twentieth century and is not a new or unfamiliar concept in literature. However, the level of *uncertainty* needs to be evaluated and understood in the current volatile environment (Bundy, Pfarrer, Short, & Coombs, 2017). The current environment has experienced shock and heightened levels of uncertainty from Covid-19 that impact businesses reality, as Jacobides and Reeves (2020) suggested.

More recently, *uncertainty* has been defined as a source of unknowns, disruption and change (Bundy et al., 2017). At the same time, *uncertainty* is understood to exist on a continuum from weak to strong (Packard & Clark, 2020). Additionally, Packard and Clark (2020) classify uncertainty as either mitigable or immitigable, whereas immitigable uncertainty is nearly impossible to predict. Covid-19 can be classified as immitigable as the predictability sits on the firmer end of the continuum suggested by Packard and Clark (2020). Therefore, the researcher proposes that if uncertainty is impossible to predict, managerial decision-making becomes more complex and requires managers to navigate the unknowns and make the most appropriate decision within the context or environment they face.

Within the current environment and context, managers have experienced many unknowns around the Covid-19 pandemic. The unknowns seemed unpredictable to the extent of heightened uncertainty whereby decision-making adaptations were challenged, which forced some managers to adopt a biased, emotional and intuitive stance instead of one built around logic and facts (Einhom, 2020). The unpredictable nature of the Covid-19 pandemic had created widespread anxiety and distress, which negatively impacted the psychology amongst ordinary people (Dubey, Biswas, Ghosh, Chatterjee, Dubey, Chatterjee, Lahiri & Lavie, 2020). Both Dubey et al. (2020) and Einhom (2020) suggested that the unpredictability from the pandemic amplified the uncertainty, which deterred managers from making decisions with complete confidence on the impact on their organisation and the outcome thereof.

In addition, the concept of uncertainty has been further augmented by the VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) world. The U.S military initially introduced the concept of a VUCA world at the end of the Cold War in 1991, and this required the United States to adapt swiftly to highly improvised weapons and tactics used by opponents (Millar, Groth & Mahon, 2018). However, the notion of a VUCA

world only became famous in 2014 and has since been used to describe market conditions and environments that organisations and leaders increasingly face (Gottfredson, 2021). Additionally, Thomas (2020) suggested that in VUCA conditions, decision-making is influenced by multiple factors, which, in an ever-changing environment, increase complexity and uncertainty for the decision-maker.

Based on the previous literature available on uncertainty and how the concept dates back over one hundred years. There is a vast body of knowledge public; however, uncertainty from Covid-19 has forced a change in the environment. The researcher has released an opportunity to build on strategic decision-making adaptation to include uncertainty from the Covid-19 pandemic.

#### **2.4. Decision-making in uncertainty**

When the concept of decision-making in uncertainty is put forward, one reflects on previous economic instances whereby this concept was lived and the outcome thereof not as envisaged. One of these instances of current knowledge is the global financial crisis experienced from 2007-09, which certainly tested decision-making in uncertainty as traditional approaches were used to try and understand the economic behaviour through assumptions that brought about intellectual failures (Hill, 2021). This emphasises Luan et al. (2019) view that decisions are made around the best fit for the current situation. In hindsight, one could reflect on the global financial crisis and criticise the decision made; however, that was the best fit at that time.

Gottwald and Braun (2019) suggested that decision-making can be viewed as a computational process that eliminates alternatives, thereby reducing uncertainty. Additionally, Gottwald and Braun (2019) further suggested that in rational decision theory, uncertainty has multiple sources that indicate a lack of consciousness on the part of the decision-maker. A bounded rational decision-maker will accept a single best option and select any satisfying option, therefore, suggesting the decision-maker has limited processing capabilities. Additionally, bounded rationality suggests that managers have inherent cognitive limitations that limit their ability to account for uncertainty in exogenous events (Kotlar & Sieger, 2019).

For leaders who face unknowns, decision-making is rife with uncertainty and becomes an adaptive process with four components: cognition, communication,

coordination, and control (Comfort, Kapucu, Ko, Menoni, & Siciliano, 2020). In times of uncertainty, leaders are expected to effectively respond to mitigate the consequences of the unknown (Ansell & Boin, 2017). Arend (2020) suggests that a firm's uncertainty decision-making depends on luck from the initial reaction to the uncertainty, based on the unpredictability from possible outcomes. Based on the preceding authors' viewpoints on decision-making in uncertainty, the common theme is that managers cannot predict the possible outcome. This affirms the need for the study **to explore strategic decision-making adaptations by middle management in times of uncertainty** as the Covid-19 pandemic presents a context of heightened uncertainty.

The managerial decision-making adaptations had to evolve around the unknowns so that organisations could continue to operate in the uncertainty. An attempt to do this was by realigning strategy to the environment by business model adaptation (Crick & Crick, 2020). However, with this business model adaptation, managers had to adjust their decision-making to influence the organisation. The managerial decision-making process is not consistent due to procedural uncertainty; hence these decisions are only satisfying and not optimal (Bakonyi, 2018).

Even though managers adapted to the uncertainty caused by Covid-19, this was not structured and well planned. However, some managerial decision-making can capitalise on uncertainty instead of attempting to mitigate the unknown (Packard & Clark, 2020). Decisions around investing in information technology systems can be classified as an attempt to capitalise on uncertainty caused by Covid-19. Doubling down on specific trends during the pandemic can be valuable for managers and organisations as the adaptation will be aligned to the new reality by growth opportunities in the new normal (Jacobides & Reeves, 2020).

Furthermore, the information around the impact of Covid-19 was limited, and many organisations were reactive to the aftermath that followed. Managers were forced to adapt their means of decision-making as limited data existed on the impact of the pandemic, and companies had been forced to alter their business models to stay significant (Crick & Crick, 2020). Managers and deviser have long advocated the requirement for gracefulness in strategy; however, the lightning speed that Covid-19 unfolded forced executives to develop methods in systems and operations to fulfil

the customer needs (He & Harris, 2020). Additionally, Buckley and Casson (2019) suggested that decision-makers do not fully understand the state of the environment when making decisions, and sometimes the uncertainty itself arises when the decision-maker themselves are not aware of what they are uncertain about.

Organisations have faced deep uncertainty from Covid-19 and have had to adjust their ways of working and adapt to their customer needs by developing systems and methods (He & Harris, 2020). However, the fundamental objective is how these firms will adjust to sustain a competitive advantage. Teece, Pisano and Shuen (1997) proposed that firms could do this through a dynamic capability approach which emphasises a firm's capacity to renew its competencies to achieve congruence from the changing business environment. Furthermore, Teece et al. (1997) emphasise that specific innovative responses are necessary when time-to-market and timings are critical.

The new reality brought in by Covid-19 impacted the strategic intent of many organisations as their management teams were not fully prepared to deal with this heightened level of uncertainty (Bowers et al., 2017). Many organisations have changed the production process and identified external needs dictated from Covid-19 (Puliga & Ponta, 2021). Hanisch and Rake (2021) proposed that innovation did not come from the business need for growth and profit but rather from an exogenous crisis such as Covid-19. Additionally, Puliga and Ponta (2021) support Teece et al. (1997) in suggesting that organisations need to reconfigure their assets and organisational structures by adapting to the internal and volatile external market to sustain profitable growth.

Covid-19 has had an adverse impact on most consumers and economies (Kim, Lee, Jhang, Park & Lee, 2021). Income across many people has reduced, and unemployment rates rapidly increased (Islam, 2020). The pandemic has forced the world and organisations to re-evaluate their working methods as the environmental change will have a lasting impact (Jacobides & Reeves, 2020). This significant shift in the macro-environment has further amplified the uncertainty and predictability of a sense of normalcy again.

Finally, based on the discussed literature, the researcher has acknowledged that decision-making occurs from an uninformed basis and, in some instances, to the organisation's detriment. In other instances, managers use uncertainty to pivot their organisation and align to the new reality. Therefore, **this raises the question of the opportunities and threats that lead to emergent strategies within the organisation.**

## **2.5. Strategic decision-making and role of middle managers**

*Strategic decision-making* is decisions made in an organisation that impact an organisation's long-term perspective (Kumar & Sharma, 2021). How managers make decisions is central to the dynamic capability approach, which suggests managers use and reconfigure resources based on the external environment (Hughes, Souchon, Nemkova, Hodgkinson, Oliveira, Boso, Hultan, Yeboah-Banin & Changco, 2019). There is some probability that managers can meaningfully influence the organisation's performance given the opportunity (Newark, 2018). Additionally, if managers are reconfiguring the organisation's resources and can influence the organisation, they can impact the strategic intent and execution.

Middle management has a role in strategic decision-making, as argued by Wooldridge and Floyd (1990). This role should be substantive and not nominal, allowing for better quality decisions from middle managers and enabling them to question strategic decisions put forward by senior management (Wooldridge & Floyd, 1990). Floyd and Wooldridge (1992) further stated that middle managers are organisational linking pins and best positioned to scan the internal and external environment whilst influencing strategy and strategic decisions. These studies conducted by Floyd and Wooldridge emphasise that middle management has an active role in influencing strategic decision-making and the organisation.

Mintzberg and Water (1985) suggested that managers provide a sense of direction in the organisation and search for patterns of organisational action that create self-awareness which impacts strategic choices. Lavarda et al. (2010) further supported Mintzberg and Water's 1985 study by echoing that managers have a role in strategic decision-making and forming strategy through bottom-up influence and developing an emergent strategy based on middle managers involvement. More recently, Fowler et al. (2018) also suggested that middle managers have a role in strategic decision-

making through adaptive behaviour and strategic planning, leading to higher performance outcomes. Additionally, the researcher proposes that middle managers are the individuals who drive emergent strategies for the organisation and allow for information flow from the bottom up.

Sharma and Good (2013) suggested that middle managers play a role in sense-making and giving in times of uncertainty by scanning their environment and eliminating ambiguity. We know from previous literature that middle management plays a role in strategic decision-making in times of uncertainty. We know they facilitate information flow throughout the organisation and deploy adaptive behaviour, which influences organisational performance. These adaptive behaviours form what can be classified as an emergent strategy in response to the internal and external environments. However, middle managers have no clear sense of strategic decision-making adaptations in times of uncertainty, specifically around Covid-19.

Finally, the literature suggests that middle management has a significant role in scanning the environment and making sense of their context to aid the organisations in achieving or adjusting their strategic intent. Therefore, the researcher put forward the question of obstacles preventing the emergent strategy from occurring and further amplifies the need to understand middle management strategic decision-making adaptations.

## **2.6. Conclusion**

Optimal decision-making is subjective as managers do not always have a comprehensive view of the required information needed to make decisions nor fully understand the outcome (Alvarez et al., 2018). Uncertainty has been the reality for everyone with Covid-19, resulting in an adaptation to reality as this is not a temporary change but also some lasting changes (Jacobides & Reeves, 2020). Middle management has had to consistently be aware of their internal and external environments and adapt their behaviour. The strategic decision-making process has led to an emergent pattern rather than a deliberate, planned process. Therefore, this study aims to explore the role of strategic decision-making adaptations by middle managers in times of uncertainty. These strategic decision-making adaptations will focus on internal and external risks and opportunities and further evaluate the possible obstacles that prevent a more emergent strategy.

### 3. CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

#### 3.1. Introduction

Based on previous literature and findings discussed in chapter two, the researcher has identified a gap in the role of strategic decision-making adaptations by middle managers in times of uncertainty, specifically around the uncertainty encountered by Covid-19. We know middle management have a role to play in strategic decision-making and emergent strategies; however, it is not clear on the strategic decision-making adaptations. Therefore, this study will delve into the following key areas as set out by section 3.2.

#### 3.2. Research questions

The researcher has proposed three research questions to be tackled in this study. A single overarching researcher question is proposed and supported by two sub-questions.

**RQ1: To explore the role of strategic decision-making adaptations by middle managers in times of uncertainty.**

Optimal decision-making is subjective as managers do not always have all the necessary information needed when making decisions (Alvarez et al., 2018). Uncertainty has been around for more than one hundred years, and as suggested by Knight, decision-makers do not know the possible outcome of all their decisions (Emmett, 1999). Whereas Comfort et al. (2020) suggested decision-making in uncertainty was more an adaptive process that needed to align to the environment and business context. Hughes et al. (2019) solidified this concept, which suggested that managers reconfigure the organisation's resources based on the external environment. Therefore, research question one is needed to explore the role of strategic decision-making adaptations by middle management in times of uncertainty.

**RQ2: To explore the opportunities and threats that led to an emergent strategy in times of uncertainty.**

Bounded rationality suggests that managers have intellectual limitations in reacting to the uncertainty of exogenous events (Kotlar & Sieger, 2018). In addition, decision-making in uncertainty at an organisation depends on luck to the initial response to the uncertainty (Arend, 2020). Furthermore, Packard and Clark (2020) suggested that managers and organisations capitalise on uncertainty instead of mitigating the unknown. Therefore, the researcher put forward research question two to explore opportunities and threats that led to an emergent strategy in times of uncertainty.

**RQ3: To explore obstacles remaining which influence decision-making in emergent strategy in times of uncertainty.**

Middle managers have a significant role in strategic decision-making, as suggested by Wooldridge and Floyd (1990). Mintzberg and Water (1985) and Lavarda et al. (2010) support this notion and further suggest that middle managers form an emergent strategy by understanding their environment and deploying a bottom-up approach. Additionally, Sharma and Good (2013) indicated that managers have the role of scanning the environment, making, and giving sense to their context, thus influencing the organisational strategy. Therefore, research question three will focus on obstacles in developing an emergent strategy.

### **3.3. Conclusion**

To conclude, the researcher has proposed three research questions that stood out as a gap in the literature. Research question one is the overarching research question which will be supported by two sub-questions to fully understand and explore the role of strategic decision-making adaptations by middle managers in times of uncertainty. The following chapter will focus on the research methodology deployed in understanding and answering the proposed research questions.



## 4. CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

### 4.1. Introduction

This section will discuss the methodology used for the research that was conducted. A qualitative methodology was used to determine the role of strategic decision-making adaptations by middle managers in times of uncertainty, namely the Covid-19 pandemic. Qualitative studies are primarily exploratory and address new types of research problems (Chenail, 2011). Qualitative research can provide rich insights and contextual explanations for current challenges (Lanka, Rostron & Singh, 2021). The researcher researched the fast-moving consumable goods (FMCG) industry by semi-structured interviews with 15 respondents, as specified in the predetermined population, to understand the lived experience of middle managers.

### 4.2. Research design and philosophy

An **exploratory approach** was best suited as the research objective aimed to seek different insights into this phenomenon around the strategic decision-making adaptations of middle managers in times of uncertainty. Research philosophy aims at views and assumptions about the augmentation of the body of knowledge. (Saunders & Lewis, 2017). The study was based on ontological assumptions, which shaped the focus on the individual's working lives, especially around the uncertainty from Covid-19 and the effect on their strategic decision-making adaptations. The researcher set out to study the respondents in a natural environment and gathered data from an **interpretivism approach**. This approach allowed for an in-depth understanding of which the respondents perceived, experienced and made sense of the world (Lanka et al., 2021).

### 4.3. Approach selected and methodological choice

The selected approach used for theory development needed to condense raw contextual data into summaries, establish clear links from the research objectives to the raw data and develop a framework from the underlying structured experiences and processes evident in the raw data. Therefore, this study deployed the inductive approach. The **Inductive approach** allows for codes and themes to be derived from the data itself, as Clarke and Braun (2016) suggested. Additionally, Thomas (2006)

suggested that an inductive approach is best positioned to condense raw data, establish links to proposed research questions, and develop a theoretical framework.

A **qualitative research** approach was conducted in semi-structured, zoom interviews with middle managers in the FMCG industry. Qualitative methods are seen as research that allows the researcher to get in and get their hands dirty (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2012). Therefore a qualitative mono method was used to explore these individuals and consequently increased the body of knowledge in decision-making in uncertainty and the role of middle manager influence on strategic decision-making in the emergent strategy literature.

#### **4.4. Strategy, time horizon, Population, and unit of analysis**

The researcher administered a **phenomenology research strategy** to determine the heart of the lived experiences by individuals, emphasising gaining a more precise, detailed understanding of strategic decision-making adaptations by middle managers in times of uncertainty. In-depth, zoom semi-structured interviews did allow for individuals to share new insights from their lived experience (Saunders & Lewis, 2017). The researcher collected raw data from middle managers impacted by the uncertainty from Covid-19 at a point in time through a single interview. Therefore, a **cross-sectional study** was conducted. The researcher captured the current frame of mind from the middle managers at a specific point in time.

The selected population was middle-level managers (non-executives) with strategic decision-making influence on the organisation in the FMCG industry. The population consisted of strategy, operations, marketing, demand planning, key-account/sales, finance, procurement, supply chain, and customer service. This allowed the researcher to probe the strategic decision-making adaptations caused by the pandemic, whereas the adaptations were limited to change in the environment and not change in roles and responsibilities within the organisation. Therefore, allowing for an emergent strategy to evolve. The **unit of analysis** was the individuals having a shared experience.

#### **4.5. Sampling method and size**

The sampling method used was **non-probability sampling**. Non-probability sampling was used because the researcher did not have access to the whole

population, and the chosen sample could not be at a random selection method. Furthermore, the researcher opted to use **purposive sampling**. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling whereby the researcher's judgement is used to select the sample (Etikan, 2017). Additionally, purposive sampling allowed the researcher to have diversity in the sample (Vehovar, Toepoel & Steinmetz, 2016). A maximum variation strategy was deployed as a wide range was selected to exemplify complexity, and a wide array of different middle managers was selected across nine different FMCG organisations.

The sample size was initially set to be between 12 and 16 participants, and the researcher managed to conduct 15 in-depth zoom interviews, ranging from 33 to 52 minutes. A sense of data saturation was evident from 12 interviews, as suggested by Sim, Saunders, Saunders and Kingstone (2018). The researcher aimed to reach respondent triangulation to gain multiple points of view.

The criteria used for selecting the respondents were middle managers in the FMCG industry who make regular decisions for the organisation, especially around the uncertainty caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The variation of employees was limited to essential workers only. This allowed the researcher to understand the managerial, strategic decision-making adaptations without a break in the working context caused by Covid-19. The respondents were fully operational in their role pre and during the disruption on the macro environment and uncertainty caused by Covid-19.

#### **4.6. Measurement instrument**

A **semi-structured interview** was used as a research measurement instrument. The interview consisted of three themes but allowed for the respondents to introduce additional insights. There was a total of 15 in-depth interviews conducted which ranged from 33 to 52 minutes. The semi-structured interviews allowed for data gathering on the specified research objectives whilst enabling theory development by allowing the participants to share their individual experiences and tell a story from their perspective (Silverman, 2020).

Preparation for the semi-structured interview was done by gathering insights into the participants and their organisation. The researcher considered insights such as the

duration at the organisation and their specific designation, level and frequency of decision-making needed for their role. The researcher developed an interview guide that facilitated the discussion on specific themes rather than focusing on predetermined questions, as Doody and Noonan (2013) suggested. A natural environment was created through zoom interviews which allowed the participant to be at ease and open up to the researcher without any physical limitations created by Covid-19. A signed consent form or formal consent was granted in the recorded interview prior to questioning. Permission for recording the interviews was requested and granted by all 15 respondents, which aided in the transcription process.

The semi-structured interview will cover the following key themes;

Theme	Literature
RQ1: To explore the role of strategic decision-making adaptations by middle managers in times of uncertainty	(Harvard Business School Press & Drucker, 2001; Guth & Kliemt, 2017; Kaschner, 2017; Thomas, 2020; Ansell & Boin, 2017).
RQ2: To explore the opportunities and threats that led to an emergent strategy in times of uncertainty.	(Mintzberg, 1978; Mintzberg & Waters, 1985; Floyd & Wooldrige 1992; Lavarda et al. 2010; Fowler et al. 2018).
RQ3: To explore obstacles remaining which influence decision-making in emergent strategy in times of uncertainty.	(Mintzberg, 1978; Mintzberg & Waters, 1985; Floyd & Wooldrige 1992; Lavarda et al. 2010; Fowler et al. 2018).

**Table 1: Semi-structured interview themes**

(Source: Author's Own creation)

The researcher tested a few questions with managers influencing strategic decisions within selected organisations using the Delphi technique to guide the predefined themes and associated questions posed to the respondents (McMillan, King & Tully, 2016).

#### **4.7. Data gathering process and analysis approach**

Data was gathered through 15 semi-structured in-depth interviews. In-depth interviews allowed a deep understanding of the real-life lived experiences of the participants, as suggested by Christensen, Johnson and Turner (2019). The interviews were initially planned to be face-to-face to get up close and personal with the participant and allow the researcher to observe body language. However, the researcher was cognisant regarding safety protocols surrounding Covid-19 which

resulted in the interviews occurring over zoom to ensure physical safety to all the respondents. The duration of an interview was estimated to be approximately between 45 and 60 minutes; however, the actual duration throughout the 15 interviews spanned between 33 and 52 minutes. The researcher introduced themes for the line of questioning, linked to the research questions, and then probed the respondents with open-ended questions throughout the interview. All interviews were recorded, and this allowed for transparency during the process and assisted with data coding.

Qualitative data analysis can generally be outlined in five steps: compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). A **thematic analysis** was conducted. The thematic analysis systematically identifies, organises, and offers insights into patterns of themes across data sets (Clarke & Braun, 2016). The thematic analysis requires more involvement and interpretation from the researcher with an implicit focus on identifying and describing ideas and themes within the data in terms of codes (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2011).

The thematic analysis was done in the six steps suggested by Scharp and Saunders (2018). The first step was to become familiar with the data, which was easily attainable as the researcher did all the interviews and coding. The second step involved generating coding categories based on the rich data received from the respondents. After that, step three involved generating themes that came through specifically around the research objectives. The fourth step involved reviewing themes and the connection to the research objectives. Step five involved the definition and naming categories of these themes. Finally, the sixth step involved locating exemplars that required the researcher to select examples of a theme linked to the research questions.

The data analysis was transcribed by capturing feedback into specific codes. The codes were evaluated and placed into categories, and sub-categories were created as indicated by the data. The relationship with categories was classified as themes. The themes add to the theory and body of knowledge around the study (Saldana, 2021).

#### 4.8. Quality controls and limitations

Qualitative research has lagged behind quantitative research from a data transparency perspective as the anonymity of the human subjects need to be protected (Batt & Kahn 2021). The data was validated by **validity, reliability and bias evaluation**. The validity tested the extent to which the measurement accurately measured what was intended, while reliability tested for the consistency of data collected using the same procedures and conditions. Finally, the researcher evaluated bias by explicitly introducing and forming the role of a research student throughout the interview. The researcher did not suggest any themes outside the predetermine themes unless put forward by the respondents.

Whenever inductive research is conducted, the researcher cannot make solid scientific claims (Jebb, Parrigon, & Woo, 2017). These solid scientific claims cannot be inferred as qualitative research has to protect the anonymity of the respondents throughout the process of gathering and analysing data (Batt & Khan 2021). The researcher also acknowledges that respondent triangulation will strengthen the conclusion. Triangulation through literature is limited based on the identified gap, and therefore, data triangulation will be challenging to obtain through literature.

Respondent triangulation from the data analysis aided a firm conclusion. Furthermore, this study has focused on a specific industry and therefore could pose a risk of not being fully transferable across all industries. Additionally, due to the extent of the Covid-19 pandemic, the consistency of the data gathering process posed an issue whereby face-to-face interviews were not possible due to social distancing and video recording and body language cues not available due to mobile data challenges poor internet connectivity. Finally, a few respondents were interrupted during the interview process by their physical surroundings due to these interviews occurring on zoom, and not all respondents were able to be at an uninterrupted venue.

The data was collected and will be stored for the required period stipulated by the university of ten years. Additionally, the data will be stored on an external hard drive and backed up on cloud storage with limited access to ensure confidentiality. Confidentiality will be ensured by reporting solely on the themes/codes determined,

and no names of respondents will be made available or reported on. The respondents also had free will to withdraw without reason, and their data would be discarded without question or harm to the respondent. Finally, the respondents all gave consent to have the interviews recorded by either video, audio or both.

#### **4.9. Conclusion**

To conclude, a qualitative study was conducted to explore the strategic decision-making adaptation by middle management in times of uncertainty. A total of 15 semi-structured interviews was conducted across nine different FMCG organisations. The duration of the interviews varied from 33 to 52 minutes and was conducted via zoom. Data was gathered using thematic analysis and following the six associated steps to identify themes, codes and exemplars to support the research questions. Finally, all data collected was done safely and ethically and will be safely stored for ten years with restricted access to ensure confidentiality to all 15 respondents.

## **5. CHAPTER 5: RESULTS**

### **5.1. Introduction**

The results of the study of strategic decision-making adaptation by middle management in times of uncertainty will be presented in this chapter. Further to the methodology discussed in chapter four, qualitative research in semi-structured interviews with 15 middle managers was completed. The researcher used a thematic analysis to analyse the data collected. The thematic analysis allowed for systematically identifying, organising and offering insights into patterns of themes across data sets (Clarke & Braun, 2016). As reflected in appendix three, the interviews were conducted using predetermined questions, which supported the research questions set out in chapter three. The findings from the semi-structured interviews are presented below.

### **5.2. Sampling description**

The sample consisted of 15 middle-level managers working at nine different organisations, all within the FMCG industry. Each respondent was deemed an essential worker during the national lockdown instituted by the local government. Therefore, the insights shared were from continuous working throughout uncertainty and the different government regulations at a first-hand experience. As represented in the table two below, middle managers in different designations were interviewed, which allowed for a diverse perspective of strategic decision-making adaptations in times of uncertainty. The diverse purposive sample allowed the researcher to gather data that answered the proposed research questions in chapter three.



Respondent	Industry	Designation	Duration at organisation	Denoted organisation	# of employees	Latest reported revenue
1	FMCG	Export Manager	>5 years	Org 1	>10 000	\$9.4m
2	FMCG	Customer Service Manager	>5 years	Org 2	>13 000	\$2.7bn
3	FMCG	Supply Chain Manager	>5 years	Org 3	>50 000	\$1.4bn
4	FMCG	Promotional Sales Manager	>5 years	Org 3	>50 000	\$1.4bn
5	FMCG	Key Account Manager	>2 years	Org 4	>8 000	\$102m
6	FMCG	Brand Manager	>2 years	Org 5	> 99 000	\$42bn
7	FMCG	Product Manager	>2 years	Org 6	>17 000	\$14.8bn
8	FMCG	Procurement Manager	>5 years	Org 7	>10 000	\$9.4m
9	FMCG	Finance Controller	>2 years	Org 8	>100 000	\$29bn
10	FMCG	Brand Manager	>2 years	Org 8	>100 000	\$29bn
11	FMCG	Supply Planning Manager	>2 years	Org 8	>100 000	\$29bn
12	FMCG	Senior Demand Planner	>5 years	Org 8	>100 000	\$29bn
13	FMCG	Brand Manager	>2 years	Org 8	>100 000	\$29bn
14	FMCG	Key Account Manager	>5 years	Org 8	>100 000	\$29bn
15	FMCG	Strategy Manager (S&OP)	>2 years	Org 9	>130 000	\$37bn

**Table 2: Sample description**

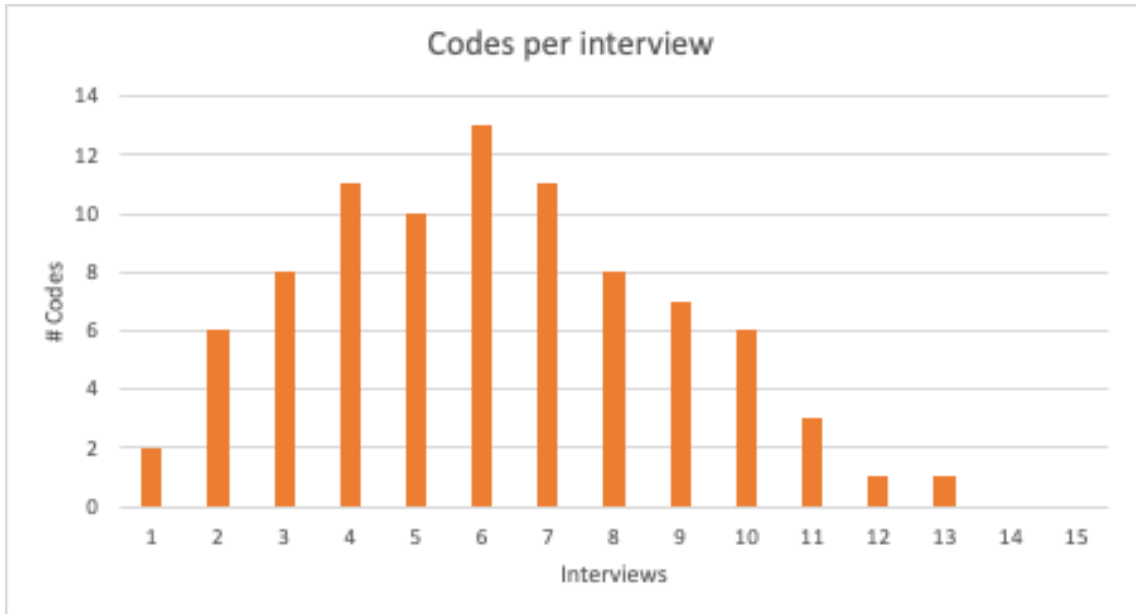
(Source: Author's Own creation)

### 5.3. Reliability and validity

The validation process occurs in the interview itself, whereby the interviewer validates the respondents' responses by asking clarifying questions (Brinkmann & Kale, 2018). The researcher successfully deployed this process for each respondent and any open-ended responses from the questions posed. The respondents were allowed to correct or reiterate the response to the questions if it was incorrectly captured or interpreted by the researcher.

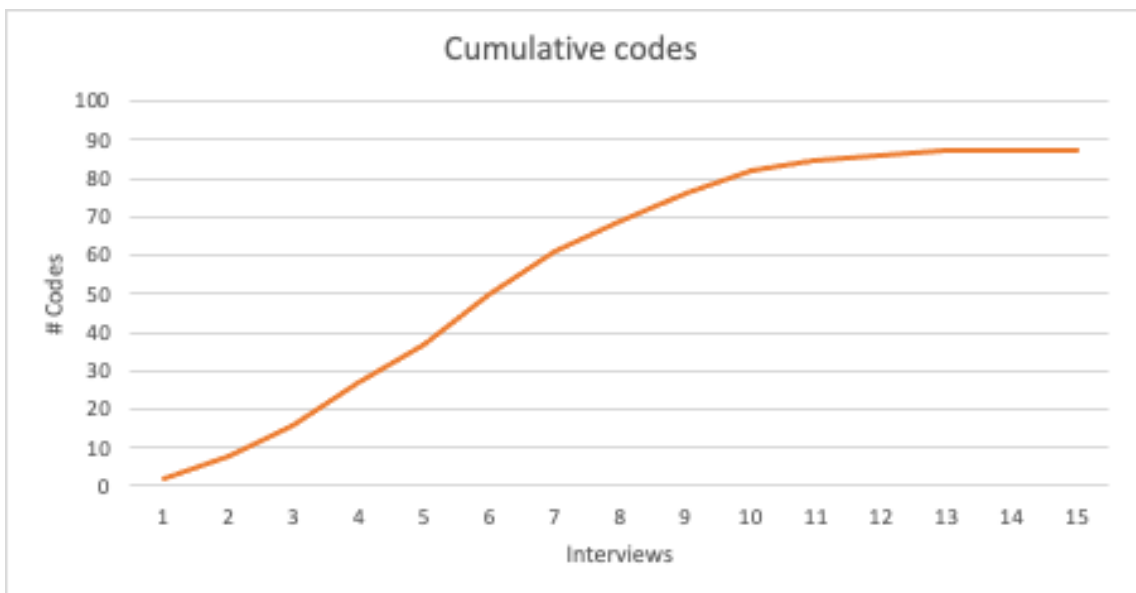
### 5.4. Coding, categories, and themes

A total of 87 codes across the 15 interviews was recorded. Within the 87 codes, six key themes were identified. The themes reflected from the data are; the need for adaptation, the nature of uncertainty, the strategic adaptations, the role of the manager, the environmental factors of the strategic adaptations and the internal obstacles at the organisation. These themes will be further evaluated in chapter six. The below figures one and two reflect the number of codes recorded per interview and the cumulative number of codes throughout the interviews. There were no other codes recorded after the thirteenth interview. Therefore, the researcher reached data saturation at 13 interviews.



**Figure 1: Codes per interview**

(Source: Author's Own creation)



**Figure 2: Cumulative codes**

(Source: Author's Own creation)

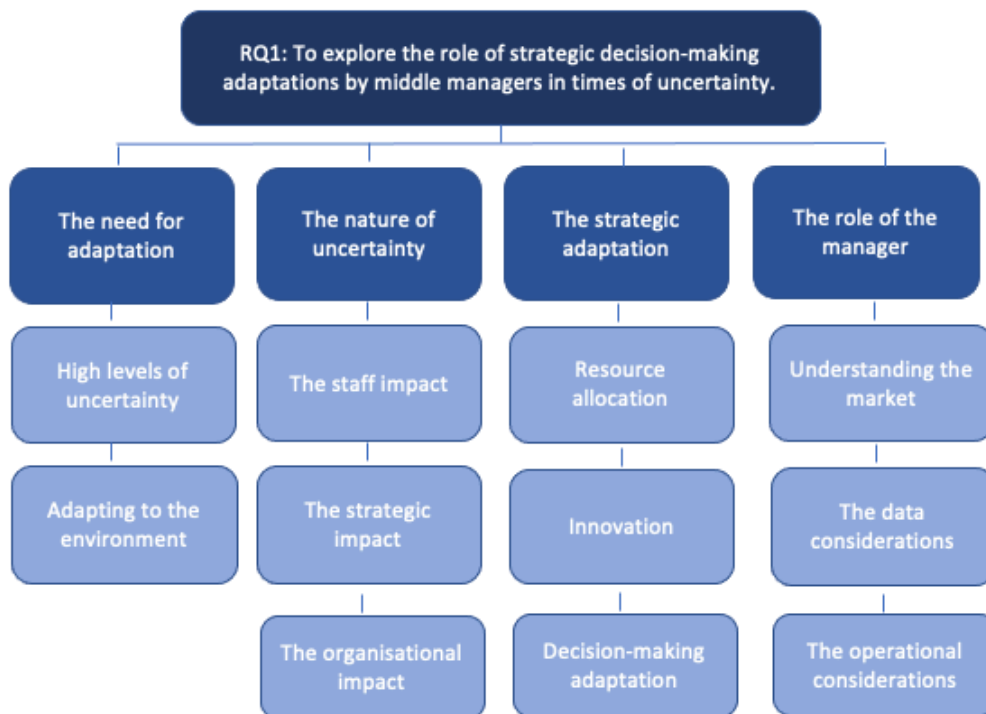
## 5.5. Results

The following findings are organised by code type and presented in the research questions that guided the data collection process.

### 5.5.1. Research question one

**RQ1: To explore the role of strategic decision-making adaptations by middle managers in times of uncertainty.**

Research question one results were summarised into four categories. These categories are; the need for adaptation, the nature of uncertainty, the strategic adaptation, and the manager's role. Each of these categories had further subcategories, which is discussed in more detail. A visual summary of the categories and subcategories can be seen in figure three.



**Figure 3: RQ1 overview of findings**

(Source: Author's Own creation)

#### 5.5.1.1. The need for adaptation

The consensus across all respondents was heightened levels of uncertainty in their everyday lives and environments caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. These heightened levels of uncertainty brought about a need for adapting to the unknowns and the dynamic environment.

**a. High levels of uncertainty**

4:1 “This was a shock to our system and very uncertain times had forced us to adapt and align to the environment ...” (Org. 3, Resp. 4)

3:1 “There was uncertainty knowing this virus is everywhere and we had to do something to find some sort of normalcy but we needed to adapt to this new normal ...” (Org. 3, Resp. 3)

12:1 “We didn’t know what was happening in the market and it was very difficult to predict what was going to happen next ...” (Org. 8, Resp. 12)

Respondents physical environment was changing, and they were forced to work from home without prior warning or planning. This created heightened uncertainty for these individuals, and they were forced to adapt to the environment as local government had enforced social distancing and stay at home regulations.

**b. Adapting to the environment**

The physical environment had changed, and even though organisations' expectations were business as usual, it was far from that. The respondents indicated the change in the physical environment to be challenging to adapt to.

5:1 “It was challenging with the remote working, everything was done via zoom and it was difficult to build and sustain relationships without the face to face interaction ...” (Org. 4, Resp. 5)

8:1 “Working from home wasn’t easy but this was necessary due to the uncertainty and safety protocols around this virus, the face to face interaction was lacking and had a negative impact on how we do things ...” (Org. 7, Resp. 8)

Respondents indicated their anxiety levels had increased, and there was added pressure to deliver on targets and functional tasks. The added pressure resulted in working additional hours in a day to get the increased demands done.

15:1 “Everyone felt the pressure it was overwhelming and no one knew what to expect ... “ (Org. 9, Resp. 15)

11:1 “There was a lot of turbulence in the organisation and this was very stressful and a lot of uncertainty ...” (Org. 8, Resp. 11)

12:1 “The amount of daily meetings increased substantially because of the shift to working from home you couldn’t just walk up to someone and ask them a question, you either had to call or schedule a quick meeting ...” (Org. 8 Resp. 12)

Some respondents indicated they needed to adapt or else their jobs would be at risk. The perception was that if they could not execute their tasks efficiently from working from home, they would be forced to return to the office environment or be retrenched.

2:1 “This was very scary and we had to adapt and adjust to the new ways of working and if this didn’t happen there were talks of retrenchments ... “ (Org. 2, Resp. 2)

4:2 “Staff morale was at its lowest as people felt that if they didn’t deliver they would be axed ...” (Org. 3 Resp. 4)

7:1 “These changes from the uncertainty had forced us to work from home and created additional pressure on achieving results in this tough macro environment ...” (Org. 6, Resp. 7)

There was a clear need for the organisations and their employees to adapt to the unknown environment and still deliver results as usual even though there were significant uncertainty levels. Organisations still needed to operate in this dynamic environment but had to adjust and adapt to government regulations. The employees had to shift with the organisation's demands and execute their tasks despite experiencing a surge in corporate meetings. The employee's perception was that they would lose their jobs if they could not deliver the results.

### 5.5.1.2. The nature of the uncertainty

The data on the nature of uncertainty suggested three overarching themes. These themes were; the staff impact, the strategic impact and the organisational design impact.

#### a. The staff impact

This theme suggested the overall impact on the staff was negatively perceived, and the adaptation from the organisations had forced change which no one was prepared for and created a stressful environment and job losses from retrenchments.

3:2 “The overall staff impact was negative because of the safety aspect and the unknowns ...” (Org. 3, Resp. 3)

7:2 “There was added pressure to perform and for the organisation to make profits in this time and because sales was not normal we had to cut cost and the organisation decided to initiate retrenchments ...” (Org. 6, Resp. 7)

10:2 “It was hard, we had massive losses in sales because our products are deemed as a luxury and this forced the organisation to retrench which impacted the overall morale ...” (Org. 8, Resp. 10)

13:2 “Everyone was uneasy with the uncertainty and even our execs struggled to navigate this uncertainty which created a sense of a reactive culture, lacking direction workforce ...” (Org. 8, Resp. 13)

The uncertainty created many cost-saving initiatives, and organisations sales were not as envisioned, resulting in many organisations deciding to reduce their workforce to save cost. Then staff that were not retrenched had increased workload and a sense of guilt for still having jobs whilst their colleagues were retrenched.

7:5 “The retrenching of staff resulted in increased workload for us and almost a sense of guilt for having survived the retrenchments ...” (Org. 6, Resp. 7)

2:5 “Some people chose to leave the organisation due to the excessive workload and over and above the retrenched staff we lost people which compounded the already low morale ...” (Org. 2, Resp. 2)

**b. The strategic impact**

Organisations were forced to adapt and remain relevant during the initial stages of Covid-19. There was little to no information on how long the pandemic would last, and organisations opted to reduce the planning horizons and increase their decision-making frequency to be flexible and constantly adjusting/adapting to the environment.

2:2 “This was very unexpected and our business was not as usual, we experienced certain items sales spike due to panic buying and other products demand had just dropped off ...” (Org. 2, Resp. 2)

4:3 “Our customers buying patterns changed and it became very difficult to read the customers and markets ...” (Org. 3, Resp. 4)

6:2 “The uncertainty resulted in panic buying our revenue shot up and we had to increase our stock holding to meet the demand, our customers were buying up to three times more than their normal orders ...” (Org. 5, Resp. 6)

9:2 “The uncertainty changed how we targeted our customers, we had to adjust and try and get stock into specific regions due to lockdown regulations ...” (Org. 8, Resp. 9).

Organisations started targeting specific customers, and specific products were prioritised from a manufacturing perspective. The objective was to supply the spike in demand and maximise profits throughout this period.

11:2 “We experienced sales from unstructured growth and we were not fully prepared to respond to this uncertainty ...” (Org. 8, Resp. 11)

15:2 “The environment was very uncertain and we were not sure if customers needed our products and we had to focus on being a going concern ...” (Org. 9, Resp. 15)

### c. The organisational design impact

The respondents indicated that their organisations had to change the way they worked. Some organisations increased production to cater to unknown demand, and some did not have sufficient demand and restructured their workforce.

1:3 “The increased demand resulted in us running our factories at max capacity and still not having sufficient product to supply all orders ...” (Org. 1, Resp. 1)

14:2 “I was anxious we were losing sales and didn’t know when this was going to change, the collaboration fell to the side as people were focusing on their selves and didn’t want to be retrenched ...” (Org. 8, Resp. 14)

14:3 “We were forced to outsource certain areas and only focus on our core competencies ...” (Org 8, Resp. 14)

Some organisations did not know how to react and position their workforce for this change in environment.

12:2 “We were hit with a curve ball and was forced to work from home but it took our company longer to decide how and what to focus on ...” (Org 8, Resp. 12)

8:2 “We could not prepare for this no matter how good your organisation is ...” (Org. 7, Resp. 8)

The data suggested the nature of uncertainty impacted staff, strategic stance and organisational design. All three of these had to change to remain relevant and adhere to government regulations which kept changing as more information around the pandemic became available.



### 5.5.1.3. The strategic adaptation

The data collected from the strategic adaptation suggested three subcategories. These subcategories were classified as; resource allocation, innovation and decision-making adaptations.

#### a. Resource allocation

Organisations were forced into some adaptation to remain relevant during the uncertainty from Covid-19. The adaptations reflected how these organisations allocated their limited resources to align with customer demand and government regulations.

5:3 “We changed our organisational structure and acquired another FMCG company in this time when the market was unstable ...” (Org. 4, Resp. 5)

7:3 “Our global company decided to split the South African business unit from the company portfolio and created a standalone organisation which allowed us to react to the environment faster ...” (Org. 6, Resp. 7)

8:3 “We were forced to be more operationally involved due to the high levels of uncertainty. I was visiting the factories much more frequently during the initial stages of uncertainty ...” (Org. 7, Resp. 8)

Outside of changes in organisational structure and increased operational involvement, organisations also chose to reallocate budgets and spend to reach the consumer, who was also impacted by a change in environment.

10:3 “We had to change tact as our customers were extremely price sensitive and we decided to focus on more strategic customer promotional deals to maximise our profits, even though this resulted in loss of market share ...” (Org. 8, Resp. 10)

13:3 “We reallocating our funding on in-store sampling of products to digital funding. We were not driving awareness but rather focusing on conversion ...” (Org. 8, Resp. 13)

14:3.1 “Other than outsourcing non-core competencies, we reshuffled the workload and had to find a way to manage the increased workload due to outsourcing ...” (Org. 8, Resp.14)

Companies had to make a strategic change to align to their business context. In some instances, the focus was to increase profits, but this came at a decline in market share as other organisations were doing whatever it took to increase sales in this period.

#### **b. Innovation**

Many respondents indicated that their organisations had to innovate in this time of uncertainty. Innovation in terms of new products, new systems, streamlined supply chains, expedited continuous improvement projects.

2:3 “We had to bring in new products to counteract the sales lost from non-essential products such as alcohol and cigarettes ...” (Org. 2, Resp. 2)

15:3 “We tried to innovate faster and protect our market share, to the extent we had a dedicated task team focusing on how to position our products to the consumer in this uncertain environment ...” (Org. 9, Resp. 15)

4:3 “Our customers buying baskets were changing and we had to adapt and offer them something they needed and not necessary wanted ...” (Org. 3, Resp. 4)

11:3 “We planned to maximise our efficiency at our factory and streamline our supply chain, we wanted to get out more product with less input and there was an emphasis to sweat the assets harder than ever before ...” (Org. 8, Resp. 11)

The data suggested that organisations were focused on maximising return on investment during this time. There was a fixation to reduce cost from streamlining or driving efficiency throughout the business. Some organisations chose to expedite product launches to gain a share of their competitors.

7:3.1 “We were able to successfully launch four new products in 2020 whereas we normally launch between one or two new products a year ...” (Org. 6, Resp. 7)

13:3.1 “We really focused on reaching our customers and understanding what they needed, many consumers were looking for healthy foods and we focused on innovating around these needs ...” (Org. 8, Resp. 13)

### c. Decision-making adaptations

How middle managers had to approach decision-making required a lot more scanning on the environment, and they were forced to be more operationally involved to understand the dynamic needs of their customers and the requirements from senior management to execute on the overall ambition.

3:3 “Long-term decision-making was no longer possible as the environment was rapidly changing and we had to increase the frequency of our decision-making, we went from yearly plans to having quarterly plans and even monthly plans depending how much the market was moving ...” (Org. 3, Resp. 3)

4:3 “We had to align our decisions to what our customers were doing but, we noticed that decisions were made in silos and minimal to no consultation was done ...” (Org. 3, Resp. 4).

6:3 “We had to prioritise our customers and align our decisions to what our customers required from us and also what was required from the government regulations ...” (Org. 5, Resp. 6)

7:3.1 “Our decision to break away from global afforded us the agility in decision-making and we were able to react faster to the market ...” (Org. 6, Resp. 7)

Organisations needed to be agile throughout the different levels of lockdowns, and the respondents indicated that they had to increase the frequency and approach on how they reacted to these regulations.

#### **5.5.1.4. The role of the manager**

The data around the middle manager's role suggested that these managers need to scan the environment and understand the market and the on-goings to make decisions that influence the direction of the organisation in this time of heightened uncertainty.

##### **a. Understanding the market environment**

Managers had to understand the markets and products they wanted to leverage in this uncertainty. Some managers pivot the organisation by focusing on specific customers and products to maximise revenue, and others choose to brace and scan the environment before reacting.

2:6 “We had to react to the government regulations and the block on sales of alcohol forced us to cross sell other products to ensure sales were still coming in ...” (Org. 2, Resp. 2)

5:6 “We had to react to the environment and adjust to our customers’ buying patterns ...” (Org. 4, Resp. 5)

6:6 “I had to decide on which markets to leverage and which products to leverage, keeping in mind the government regulations and our customers had to adhere to this for us to service them ...” (Org. 5, Resp. 6)

7:6 “We focused on exploring opportunities in the environment, we really wanted to understand what our consumers wanted and needed and then focused on how to meet this need but we needed to stay close to the consumers as their needs were very fluid ...” (Org. 5, Resp. 7)

9:6 “The level of uncertainty was so great we had to start scenario planning beyond normal while making sense of all variables in the environment and proposing mitigation plans ...” (Org 8., Resp. 9)

Two managers decided to focus on the internal environment more than the external environment. These respondents' focus was on maximising profits for the organisation, even in an uncondusive environment.

14:6 "Understanding that we needed to make profit I chose to not align to one of my customers' requests which didn't make sense for us because it was not profitable. Therefore, my focus was to focus only on strategic deals and partnerships ..." (Org. 8, Resp. 14)

1:6 "I had to fair share the stock that was available but doing so with selected customers who maximised our profits, we did not prioritise normal orders and managed the customers very closely ..." (Org. 1, Resp. 1)

Managers were facing unknowns but still had a role to play in driving their organisations forward. However, they could not pivot their organisations if they did not fully understand or attempt to understand their internal and external environments.

#### **b. The data considerations**

The uncertainty initially hit hard, but as time progressed and data became available, both internally and externally, managers reverted to more data-driven decisions and less intuition or decisions from what seemed to be an uninformed basis.

3:6 "I was focusing on big data prior to Covid and when Covid hit the assumptions I had at that point in time felt outdated, however, throughout the first few months we were able to see consumer trends changing and strong data coming through social media and our digital platforms ..." (Org. 3, Resp. 3)

6:9 "Throughout trying to understand what was going on in the market we had to be agile with our thinking and provide options to our senior management team based on what we were seeing on the ground ..." (Org. 5 Resp. 6)

7:6.1 "I had to reallocate my budget and focus on emerging trends that we saw coming through from social media platforms like TikTok for example ..." (Org. 6, Resp. 7)

9:6.1 “I had to asked a lot of probing questions to gather data to best understand the way forward and how to scenario plan around this uncertainty ...” (Org. 8, Resp. 9)

10:6 “We were focusing on gaining market share from untapped markets, we closely monitored the market share and then decided on where and how to leverage our products ...” (Org. 8, Resp. 10)

12:6 “I had to focus on leveraging our internal stakeholders, more specifically sales force to understand their perspective of what was happening in the market and overlay this with the sales data to better predict the sales for the organisation ...” (Org 8. Resp. 12)

Even though data was not readily available at the inception of Covid-19, there was a time when rich data started surfacing, and some organisations focused on leveraging by delving into internal and external data. The researcher anticipated more emphasis on unemployment and macro issues; however, the respondent focused more on micro trends.

### **c. The operational considerations**

The middle management team had a role to play, and a strong emphasis was on operation considerations. The respondents felt more at ease aligning the operational plans and execution ahead of other factors mentioned in the manager's role.

1:9 “I actively managed cost by leveraging relationships with our 3PL throughout the hard lockdown and staggered opening of the economy ...” (Org. 1, Resp. 1)

3:9 “We looked at how we would supply our customer’s demands with our limited resources and then identified gaps and proposed what-if scenarios to mitigate any risk ...” (Org. 3, Resp. 3)

8:6 “My key focus was to secure supply on key commodities in this time of uncertainty. This allowed our organisation to pivot in the panic buying experienced during the hard lockdowns ...” (Org. 7, Resp. 8)

11:6 “I planned ahead for the future to ensure the organisation would have sufficient production capacity to fulfil future demand ...” (Org 8. Resp. 11)

13:6 “We focused on product launches and expedited these launches to get into a market which was hungry for these products ...” (Org 8. Resp. 13)

15:6 “My role is to actively look at business continuity and whether it be through product innovation, system innovation or even maximising end to end efficiencies this is what I focus on ...” (Org 9. Resp. 15)

A clear theme came through on how these managers better execute or position their organisations to maximise profits and stay a going concern throughout the uncertainty experienced.

#### **5.5.1.5. Summary of finding for research question 1**

In summary, four categories of data aided in exploring the role of strategic decision-making adaptations by middle managers in times of uncertainty. These categories suggested a need for adaptation due to high levels of uncertainty caused by Covid-19. This resulted in strategic adaptations across the nine organisations, which middle managers aided to an extent. The extent to which middle managers influenced strategic decision-making adaptation during uncertainty was by scanning the business environment, considering the available data, and enforcing operational changes to align with the organisation's strategic intent, which was influenced by reorganising resources and innovation.

#### **5.5.2. Research question two**

**RQ2: To explore the opportunities and threats that led to an emergent strategy in times of uncertainty.**

Research question two results were summarised into two categories. These categories are the opportunities from the uncertainty caused by Covid-19 and the threats in this uncertainty. These categories were further summarised into subcategories which are depicted in figure four below.



**Figure 4: RQ2 overview of findings**

(Source: Author's Own creation)

### 5.5.2.1. Opportunities from uncertainty

Covid-19 brought about heightened uncertainty, as indicated by all respondents. However, in this uncertainty, some organisations could pivot from opportunities created in the uncertain business environment. These opportunities were classified as either within the organisation itself or external and within the micro and macro environment.

#### a. Internal opportunities

The internal opportunities were classified in two subcategories namely, innovation and operational efficiency.

##### i. Innovation

Innovation was classified as either product or system based. Some organisations chose to introduce new products into the market based on the consumers' basic



needs, and some organisations opted to use the forced lockdown regulations to implement or improve current systems such as digital platforms.

2:4 “We had to innovate and offer our customers new or alternative products especially with restriction of trade on certain high revenue products such as alcohol and cigarettes ...” (Org. 2 Resp. 2)

15:3 “Our customers wanted higher nutrient and we decided to give this exactly this ... (Org. 9, Resp. 15)

Some organisations wanted to get to the customer quicker and avoid the middle-man platforms. They targeted creating e-commerce where consumers could order their products directly from the organisation without leaving their house or buying through a third party.

5:4 “This was the perfect opportunity for us to expedite our e-commerce offering, we are working on business to customer model driven by an e-commerce platform which will allow consumers to order directly from us and we would deliver to them, almost like a Takealot platform ...” (Org. 4, Resp. 5)

6:4 “We needed to leverage digital in this time, people’s lives changed, and they became more attached to their cell phones, and we needed to make sure our marketing efforts was directed to reach the consumer’s new reality ...” (Org. 5, Resp. 6)

Respondents indicated that social media applications such as Tiktok and Instagram had a surge in users and browsing durations. Therefore, organisations targeted these platforms to market their products and gain insights into consumers browsing patterns.

7:4 “We directed a lot of our efforts to social media and targeted marketing on these platforms, there was a huge surge on social media usage, and we focused here to reach the consumer ...” (Org. 6, Resp. 7)

6:8 “We had to expedite the new products we had in the pipeline and get it to market as soon as possible to remain competitive ...” (Org. 5, Resp. 6)

9:8 “We targeted specific brands and customers and aligned to what they needed from us ...” (Org. 8, Resp. 9)

The innovation theme shed light on organisations making strategic changes aligned to innovating. Furthermore, these strategic changes were perceived as opportunities by most respondents. Respondents indicated that their organisations had to innovate, and if they failed to do so, the organisation would be moving against the direction of their competition which would have a further adverse impact on profits and market share.

## ii. Efficiency

Respondents indicated that their organisations could/have gained from increasing efficiency in their operations. Efficiency in the sense of doing more with less was achieved by either running production facilities beyond desired capacity and leveraging economies of scale or by using the downtime from lower sales to fix inefficiencies in processes and manufacturing.

1:4 “The panic buying allowed us to run our production facilities beyond their normal capacity and this allowed us to capitalise on sales ...” (Org. 1, Resp. 1)

3:4 “We actively focused on how we can increase our outputs to meet the surge in demand ...” (Org. 3, Resp. 3)

8:4 “We relied on the agility of our supply chain to pivot demand in these unknown times ...” (Org. 7, Resp. 8)

11:4 “Our organisation focused on creating a supply chain of tomorrow, even though this was the focus we didn’t fully capitalise on this due to increased cost from not reading the customer demand accurately ...” (Org. 8, Resp. 11)

Even though the aim was to streamline processes and manufacture, some organisations struggled to balance efficiency and cost. However, the thought process was ignited and allowed organisations to focus on doing more with less actively.

**b. Market/external opportunities**

The market/external opportunities were classified in two subcategories namely, business diversification and market share grab.

**i. Business diversification**

Some respondents indicated a shift in the way their organisations focused their product offerings. Two of the nine organisations entered a new category altogether, which differed from their core business offering prior to Covid-19.

4:3.1 “Our organisation decided to buy out another FMCG company during the peak of lockdown, this was easier for us as we were already well established in the market and this new company would bring a different offering to our customers ...” (Org 4. Resp. 5)

12:4.1 “We leveraged our global product offering and decided to launch something in South Africa that had proven successful in other business units around the world, this was a shift from selling yoghurts to now selling baby formula also ...” (Org. 8, Resp. 12)

One respondent perceived the high levels of uncertainty to be a good thing as it allowed their organisation to reset and make tough decisions that would have been frowned upon under normal circumstances.

14:4 “Our company was struggling before Covid, and we needed to make a big change and a big shift but no one from senior management was comfortable to admit it. Now that Covid has happened it almost gave us a reason to change and restructure for example ...” (Org. 8, Resp. 14)

Some organisations chose to expand their offerings and shift their core competencies whilst some employees perceived Covid-19 to be the driving force to

allow for significant changes that would not have happened under normal circumstances. However, some organisations embraced the opportunity to enter new markets in uncertain times.

ii. **Market share grab**

The competition was fierce during the peak of Covid-19, and respondents perceived customers to be price-sensitive and not brand loyal. Respondent indicated that the economy was in distress, which allowed some organisations to leverage economies of scale.

3:3.2 “Because we actively focused on increasing efficiencies, which did have some positive impact on our cost, we were able to be more competitive on strategic deals with our customers and beating our competitors in price ...” (Org. 3, Resp. 3)

9:4.1 “Our market intelligence team was able to determine gaps in selected customers and categories and this gave us direction to increase presence and be more competitive ...” (Org. 8, Resp. 9)

15:4.1 “Our competitive advantage sat with our ability to understand what our customers needed, and we re-positioned our offerings around that ...” (Org. 9, Resp. 15)

Respondents indicated the opportunities in the market impacted how their organisations were able to shift focus and strategic intent to align to gaps in the market and aggressively compete. Furthermore, due to higher production efficiencies, some organisations partner with their customers with strategic promotional pricing deals, which results in a higher market share.

**5.5.2.2. Threats from uncertainty**

Organisations also experienced a threat from the uncertainty and had to adjust their strategic intent and position to remain relevant and maximise revenue. These threats were classified into two subcategories, namely, organisational impact and market impact.

a. **Organisational impact**

Respondents indicated that there were significant threats within the organisation due to the uncertainty itself. Further to the uncertainty, organisations had to be agile to respond to unknown customer demands. The organisational impact was further evaluated by the staff impact and the resource impact.

i. **Staffing impact**

Respondents indicated that restructuring had a detrimental impact on the organisation. Even though organisations focussed on reducing the cost, the perception was that reducing the workforce resulted in a more threat to business continuity. The cost will be reduced in the short term but have a negative impact in the long term.

2:5 “Our staff were very demotivated and felt unsafe due to the virus and the excessive workload created by restructuring, some people just left without another job and this created extra pressure and risk of sustainability in the short term ...” (Org. 2, Resp. 2)

3:5.1 “Over and above the retrenchment we also struggled with staff retention, we made a decision to return to the office sooner than other organisations and some people chose not to comply and left ...” (Org. 3, Resp. 3)

4;5 “Even though management think retrenching is essential for business survival, this process poses a real risk to the company because they are losing key skills ...” (Org. 3, Resp. 4)

5:5 “People were working in silos and the stakeholder involvement fell away, we all just worked passed each other and this impacted how we executed our strategy ...” (Org. 4, Resp. 5)

7:5.1 “Retrenching staff actually resulted in us losing sales, the company retrenched sales people who we actually needed and this created a serious threat for us as we just kept losing sales ...” (Org. 6, Resp. 7)

13:5 “Job security and organisational sustainability was the biggest threat for us, everyone just focused on survival ...” (Org. 8, Resp. 13)

The general connotation of retrenchments was perceived to be negative. However, only two respondents discussed employee health and well-being as a threat to the organisation.

1:5:3 “There were so many jobs lost that it even got to a stage that there was no back up for key people at the factory, some production lines stood still because the people manning them fell ill due to covid and we didn’t have sufficient skills to keep this line running ...” (Org. 1, Resp. 1)

15:5. “Our company took the health and well-being of our associates very serious and if there was even a hint of people being ill we stopped the factories which resulted in financial losses ...” (Org. 9, Resp. 15)

The retrenching of employees was perceived to be a short term win for organisations. However, this was perceived as the most significant threat post-Covid-19 as the companies would be left with an overworked workforce and less skilled people to pivot the organisation beyond Covid-19.

## ii. **Resource impact**

Resources had to be managed carefully throughout the high levels of uncertainty and beyond that. Organisations had to focus on supplying to an erratic demand while reducing cost.

1:5 “Threat of supply due to running our factories beyond their limits but, if we cannot supply we will give our competition the edge ...” (Org. 1, Resp. 1)

3:5.2 “If we couldn’t meet the customer demands this would result in more job losses, we had to ensure we could supply our products at all times ...” (Org. 3, Resp. 3)

11:5 “We had to keep our factory running at the initial lockdown to ensure we didn’t lose any sales and could meet our targets ...” (Org. 8, Resp. 11)

Some organisations were cautious on how to allocate their resources due to the uncertainty and had to make tough decisions on where and how to commit resources.

15:5.2 “We don’t have unlimited resources and have to be careful where we bet ...” (Org. 9, Resp. 15)

8:5 “We tried to secure key components for manufacturing to ensure we could keep our factories running ...” (Org. 7, Resp. 8)

One respondent brought forward a threat of non-payment from their credit customers due to lower sales and tighter cash flows.

“Our credit customers also experienced hard times and threat of non-payment put us at risk as we still had to pay our fixed costs ...” (Org. 5, Resp. 6)

Respondents indicated that the threats from uncertainty had a significant impact on employees, resulting in lower overall morale and a workforce spread too thin. Even though the impact brought about positive financial gain for the organisations, the perception is that it would be a short term gain, and the overall impact would create a sense of risk in the longer term. Additionally, organisations had to sweat their assets even beyond normal circumstances to reduce cost and close any gaps in supply.

## **b. External market impact**

Further to the respondents' organisational hurdles, there was also an inclination on threats from the external business environment. The impact of the macro, meso and micro trends had a connotation of a business threat classified as either a market dynamic or higher levels of competition.

### **i. Competition**

Competition in such an uncertain market was ubiquitous. The macroeconomy impacted organisations due to high levels of unemployment, and customers were perceived to be less brand loyal than usual.

3:5.3 “We need to protect our market share in these times as everyone is looking for ways to pivot in this uncertain market ...” (Org. 3, Resp. 3)

4:3 “People are being retrenched in this economy and their disposable income is changing which impacts our revenue ...” (Org. 3, Resp. 4)

6:5.2 “Our performance is very much linked to the industry’s performance, if the industry struggles that directly influences us as we a critical component supplier ...” (Org. 5, Resp. 6)

8:5.1 “Threat of new entrants was high in this economy, customers were not brand loyal and very price sensitive so if they could get a similar product at a cheaper price they would shift their demand ...” (Org. 7, Resp. 8)

Some respondents expressed concerns on the market not bouncing back to pre-Covid days and will further impact a business struggling for survival.

14:5 “The biggest threat is what happens if sales don’t return post covid, this will result in more job losses on an already thin workforce ...” (Org. 8, Resp. 14)

11:5 “We offer too much of a premium product for an economy that is really struggling and will take years to recover ...” (Org. 8, Resp. 11)

12:5.1 “People cannot afford our products anymore ... “ (Org. 8, Resp. 12)

4:8 “Our management team just focussed on surviving this pandemic and hope for business to return to normal post covid, if this even exists ...” (Org 3. Resp. 4)

Several respondents indicated that competition and market conditions were a significant risk to their organisations because no one could fully predict the outcome



of Covid-19, and most businesses were in survival mode. Organisations had to adjust and cater for shifts in demand, and some were better positioned than others. This results in market share shifts and less revenue.

## ii. Government regulations

Government regulations formed a core of most execution plans and strategic intent for all nine organisations. The theme of the government regulations was constantly a topic of discussion from different perspectives, such as gain in revenue from panic buying to lost revenue from trade limitations. However, one of the respondents shared additional insight regarding the threat to their organisation.

15:5 “Government regulations was at the core of our mitigation plans, they governed what we can and can’t do and this created deeper uncertainty and threaten our plans ...” (Org. 9, Resp. 15)

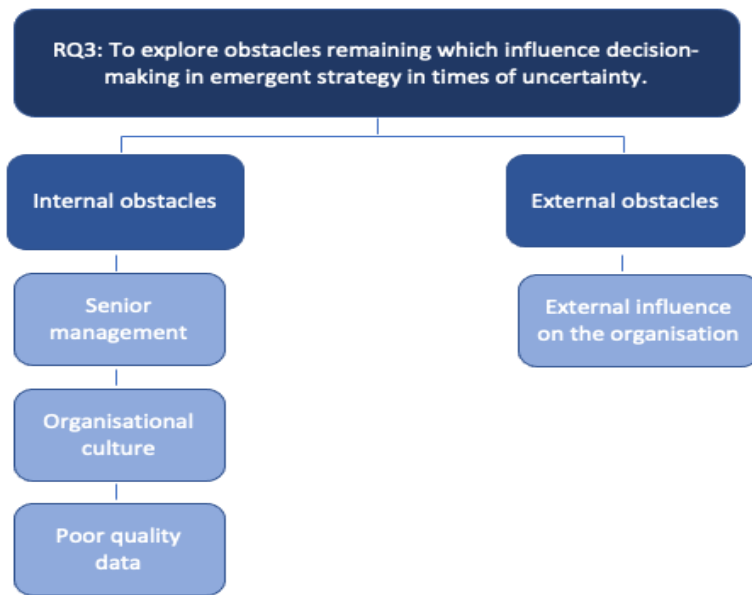
15:8 “We had to wait for the environment to stabilise, especially from a legislation point of view, before we could make any big changes as if these changes were not aligned to the government regulations it would be wasted efforts and resource allocation ...” (Org. 9, Resp. 15)

### **5.5.2.3. Summary of findings for research question 2**

In summary, four categories of data aided in exploring opportunities and threats that led to an emergent strategy in times of uncertainty. Opportunities were further categorised to be within the organisation or in the market/external environment. These opportunities were focused on innovating, maximising operational efficiencies, business diversification and leveraging market share in a competitive environment. The threats were also perceived as internal and external, emphasising overworked staff and limited skills due to retrenchments and reallocating resources. Aggressive competition and constantly changing government regulations also impacted organisations negatively.

### **5.5.3. Research question three**

**RQ3: To explore obstacles remaining which influence decision-making in emergent strategy in times of uncertainty.**



**Figure 5: RQ3 overview of findings**

(Source: Author's Own creation)

### 5.5.3.1. Internal obstacles

The respondents all had diverse backgrounds; however, each faced obstacles in influencing the organisation's strategy. The most prevalent obstacle noted was senior management itself and how they do not support initiatives, and this was further illustrated in the organisational culture.

#### a. Senior management

Senior managers were perceived to be the prohibition of emergent strategies. Respondents suggested that their senior management team did not fully support them in their environmental scanning and analysis and rather pushed an execution plan on them instead.

1:7 "Our management teams work in silos, decisions are not objective and actually favour certain individuals instead of the organisation itself ..." (Org. 1, Resp. 1)

2:7 “Senior management don’t even take our ideas into consideration therefore, we just don’t bring forward anymore ideas because no one listens ...” (Org. 2, Resp. 2)

6:7.1 “Our senior management team do not share info with us, they take decisions in silos ...” (Org. 5, Resp. 6)

7:7 “Our senior leadership is just too prescriptive ...” (Org. 6, Resp. 7)

8:7 “There are several levels of authority in this business, senior management controls everything and I just make recommendations ...” (Org. 7, Resp. 8)

10:7 “Senior management just don’t listen or take decisions, they force the global strategy onto Africa ...” (Org. 8, Resp. 10)

14:7 “Changes need to be signed off by senior management and there are many meetings here for this to happen ...” (Org. 8, Resp. 14)

The majority of the respondents suggested that senior management control the emergent strategy, and because of this, there is no room for ideas or execution. There is constant scanning from the middle management teams; however, if ideas go through to the next level, they are lost in hierarchical red tape and always pending decisions.

#### **b. Organisational culture**

The culture at organisations suggests a more autocratic environment and less conducive for generating ideas. Respondents suggest organisations are stuck in their ways.

3:7 “This is a very culture based company and dates back to the old founders, we simply cannot break the old ways of thinking and everyone becomes little versions of their line manager and therefore don’t think for themselves and just fall into complacency ...” (Org. 3, Resp. 3)

4:7 “We just do what we told, we are not consulted and that’s just how things are done here ...” (Org. 3, Resp. 4)

6:7.2 “The global ways of working is just forced on us and we have follow their strategy ...” (Org. 5, Resp. 6)

### c. Poor data quality

A theme of insufficient data for decisions and emergent strategies was strongly reflected in organisation eight. The perception around data suggested a reactive environment which was deemed to be an obstacle itself.

11:7 “The quality of data is very delayed, we need real time data to make the right decisions and estimates ...” (Org. 8, Resp. 11)

12:7 “We just don’t know what is happening in the market and are reliant on information from internal stakeholder to forecast demand ...” (Org. 8, Resp. 12)

13:7 “We always analysing data and not taking decisions in this place ...” (Org. 8, Resp. 13)

The organisations' obstacles were mainly perceived to be internal with a strong theme on senior management controlling and dictating strategy. Even though middle managers had more practical information and knowledge from the ground-up, it was deemed irrelevant for the business strategy.

### 5.5.3.2. External obstacles

External obstacles were limited, and respondents could not overcome the internal hurdles to experience external constraints. However, the government regulation constant theme resurfaced for two respondents.

#### a. Government regulations

The fact that lockdown had impacted how businesses could operate created uncertainty on the next move for some organisations, and this was perceived to create an obstacle due to fluid regulations.

9:7 “We are forced to aligned with what our customers want and especially now these wants are constantly changing due to regulations ...” (Org. 8, Resp. 9)

15:7 “Government plays a huge role in how we plan our strategy, not just in Covid but in general as well, this is Africa ...” (Org. 9, Resp. 15)

### 5.5.3.3. Summary of findings for research question 3

The prevalent theme that stood out in exploring obstacles remaining that influenced decision-making in emergent strategies in times of uncertainty was senior management perceived to be a prohibitor. Further to senior management’s influence on emergent strategy, organisational culture featured as a factor having an adverse impact. Poor data quality was also perceived to be an obstacle negatively influencing middle managements influence on emerging strategies. Finally, the unknown government regulations created an economic obstacle that directly influenced the organisation’s decision-making in emergent strategies.

## 5.6. Conclusion

The three research questions were covered by ten opened-ended interview questions put forward to 15 middle managers to shed light on these areas. Throughout the data gathering process, 87 codes and six themes were recorded. Based on all the data gathered and interpreted, a summarised view of the findings can be seen in table four below.

Research Question	Summary of data gathered
<b>RQ1: To explore the role of strategic decision-making adaptations by middle managers in times of uncertainty.</b>	Uncertainty created a need for adaptations in strategic decision-making by middle managers. These decision-making adaptations spanned across multiple facets of the organisation, such as innovating, maximising operational efficiencies, and impacting staff and resource allocation. External factors such as turbulent markets and government regulations coupled with high unemployment further impacted organisations strategic position.

<p><b>RQ2: To explore the opportunities and threats that led to an emergent strategy in times of uncertainty.</b></p>	<p>Opportunities and threats were identified to be internal and external. The internal environment was influenced by leveraging innovation and focusing, maximising market share whilst reallocating workload and sweating assets beyond usual methods were necessary. The external environment also experienced aggressive competition and price-sensitive consumers, which created more significant risks for the organisations.</p>
<p><b>RQ3: To explore obstacles remaining which influence decision-making in emergent strategy in times of uncertainty.</b></p>	<p>The common theme across most organisations suggest that senior management itself influence decision-making in emergent strategies. The senior management team is still perceived to control and own the strategy, whereas the middle manager's role is limited and directed mainly by the senior team.</p>

**Table 3: Summary of results**

(Source: Author's Own creation)

## **6. CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION OF RESULTS**

### **6.1. Introduction**

The objective of this chapter is to discuss the detail of the findings presented in chapter five. Chapter five findings will be reviewed against the literature set out in chapter two. The primary objective of this study was to explore the role of strategic decision-making adaptation by middle managers in times of uncertainty. From the 15 interviews conducted with middle managers across nine different organisations, the study found that middle managers were forced to adapt to the environment in the heightened uncertainty caused by Covid-19.

The layout of this chapter will follow the research questions put forward in chapter three, which guided the data collection. All research questions will be evaluated and form the basis of the conceptual framework suggested by the researcher from all data gathered throughout the study.

### **6.2. Research question one**

**To explore the role of strategic decision-making adaptations by middle managers in times of uncertainty.**

Research question one was the anchor of the study and the main research question. The purpose was to understand the role of strategic decision-making adaptations by middle managers in times of uncertainty. The finding revealed a clear need for adaptation based on the nature of uncertainty from Covid-19. Middle managers were prone to understanding their environment and directing resources, staffing requirements, navigating evolving government regulation, pivoting the organisation through innovation, maximising operational efficiency and effectively adapting their strategic decision-making based on these factors.

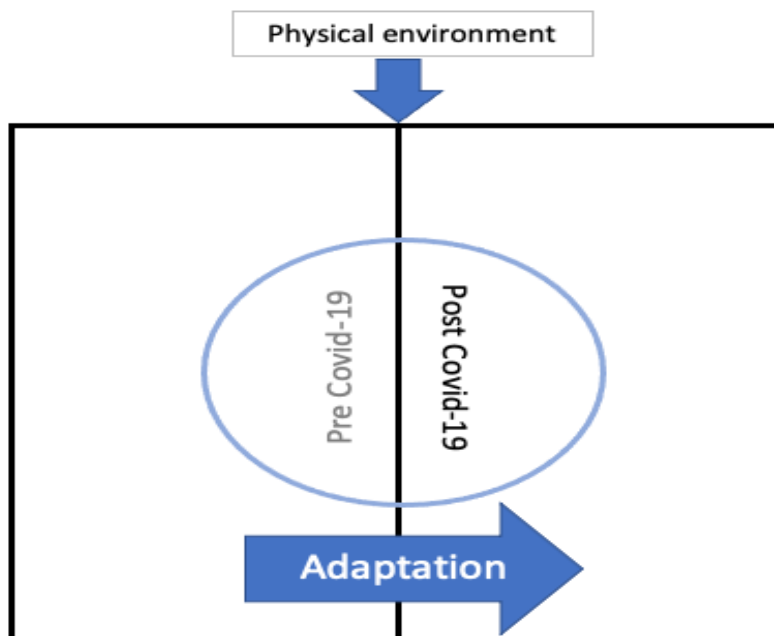
#### **6.2.1. Need for adaptation**

The Covid-19 pandemic created heightened levels of uncertainty which required a need to adapt to the dynamic environment. All respondents shared the basic need for adaptation in both a personal and professional sense. The respondents indicated they were not geared or prepared to deal with the level of uncertainty. This response

from the respondents was consistent with Bowers et al. (2017), who suggested that managers worldwide were not equipped to deal with the crisis as this did not form part of their daily tasks. Additionally, the respondents indicated that this uncertainty was a new normal, and they struggled with reading the market and predicting demand and consumer needs.

The new reality was forced upon all individuals and enforced by government regulations which supported Jacobides and Reeves (2020) position on the adaptation as a long term change that required organisations to do business differently. Furthermore, Kumar and Sharma (2021) proposed that any decision that impacts the organisation's long-term outlook is deemed a strategic decision. Therefore, the adaptation to the environment by organisations at a holistic level and managers at an individual level directly influenced the strategic intent of business as we know it. All respondents emphasised a need to be agile during the different stages of lockdowns and unknowns from Covid-19.

Both the research and literature suggest the environment is changes are not just short-term and will have a long term impact, and there the adaptation will change the ways of working as depicted in figure six below.



**Figure 6: Conceptual framework: Need for adaptation**

(Source: Author's Own creation)



### **6.2.2. Nature of uncertainty**

The macro-environment impacted all and organisations experienced added pressure to perform and make profits. The impact on the business environment forced managers to focus on cost cutting initiatives.

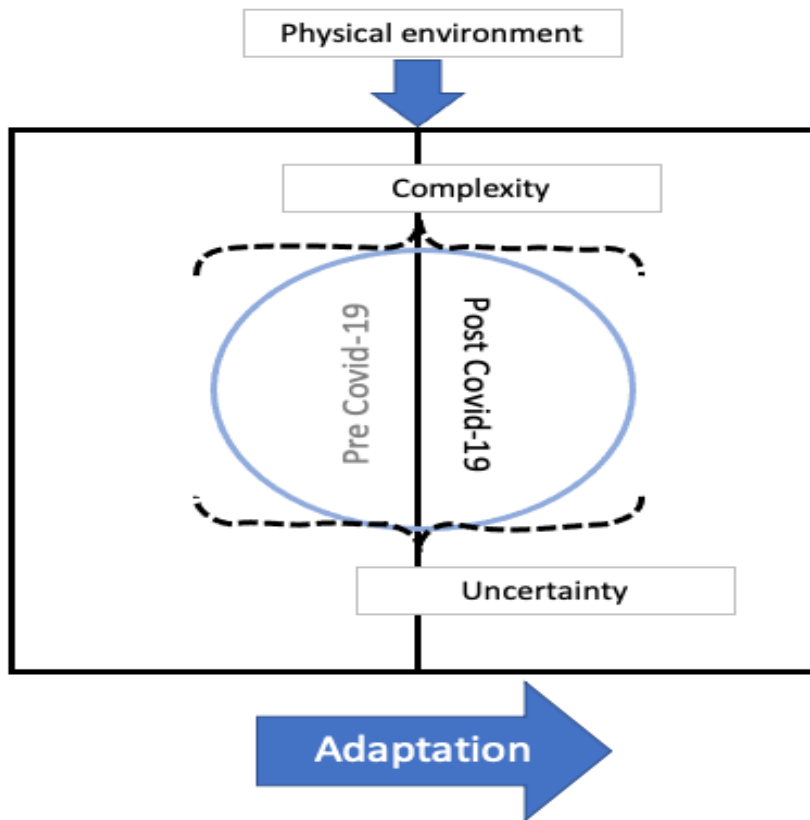
As captured by the researcher's findings, the nature of the adaptation suggested three levers that needed to be considered. These levers were classified as the staff, strategic and organisational impact. The research findings highlighted the many cost-saving initiatives organisations undertook to maximise efficiency and reduce costs in this volatile market. These cost-saving initiatives ranged from retrenchments to maximising factory efficiencies which required thoroughly evaluating the impact of the uncertainty with an attempt to understand the new reality. These findings resonate with Bundy et al. (2017), who stated uncertainty needed to be evaluated and understood to navigate.

The uncertainty forced changes beyond what managers envisioned and therefore resulted in unpredictability, and due to not being able to predict, a sense of uneasiness settled in. Aligning to the view of Packard and Clark (2020), immitigable uncertainty is nearly impossible to predict. Furthermore, Both Dubey et al. (2020) and Einhom (2020) confirmed the researcher's findings, which reflected that managers were making decisions they did not fully have confidence in and struggled to navigate the uncertainty.

Finally, the findings suggest the level of complexity exponentially increased, and the dynamic environment from government regulations added more unknowns and complexity into an already strained system with various constraints, as supported by Thomas (2020). He stated that decision-making is influenced by multiple factors, which increase complexity in an ever-changing environment. Additionally, Buckley and Casson (2019) suggested that a system with limited means to deal with complexity and decision-making should adjust to the environment.

The nature of uncertainty increased post-Covid-19, and even though uncertainty existed pre-covid-19, organisations were able to navigate better. Likewise, complexity always exists in the business environment, but the level of complexity

created by Covid-19 created additional constraints for organisations and managers. Therefore the researcher has included these factors in the conceptual framework as depicted below in figure seven.



**Figure 7: Conceptual framework adapted for complexity and uncertainty**

(Source: Author's Own creation)

### 6.2.3. Strategic adaptation

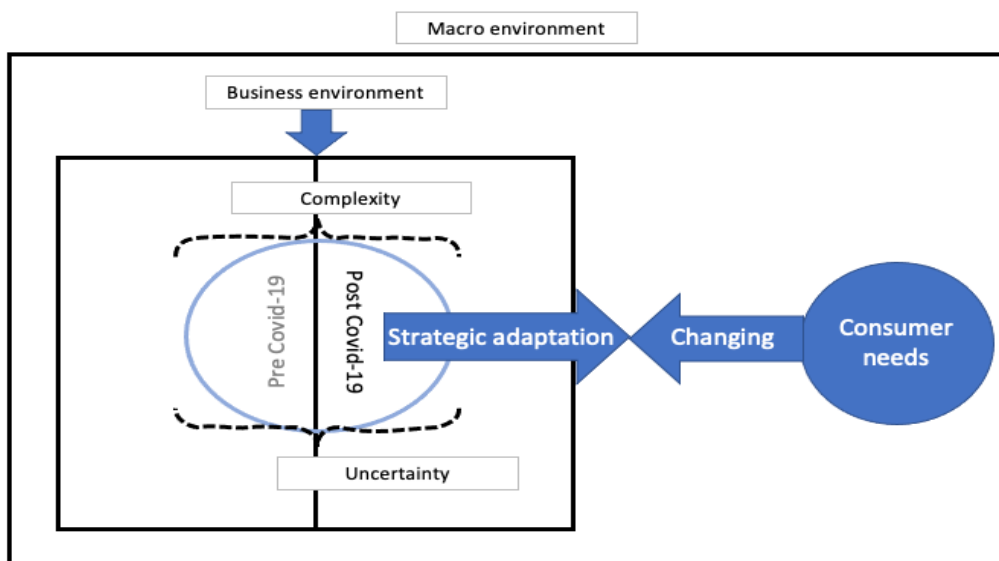
The strategic adaptation findings indicated that innovation and resource allocation were prevalent across the nine organisations. Additionally, the respondents suggested a clear need to adapt to the macro, meso and microenvironment, and failure to do so would result in the organisation's product offering being irrelevant.

Resource allocation was categorised as repositioning the organisation's limited resources and focusing on maximising operational efficiency. Research findings suggest managers use and reconfigure resources based on the external environment, aligning with Hughes et al. (2019). Respondents indicated a clear need

to do more with less. Additionally, innovation was positioned to offer new products or adjust current offerings to align with consumers' changing needs.

The realigning resources aspect resonates with realigning strategic positioning to the environment by adapting the business model, as suggested by (Crick & Crick, 2020). The need to innovate suggests that organisations did not just focus on mitigating the uncertainty but also attempted to capitalise on the uncertainty, as Parkard and Clark (2020) stated. The development of cost-saving methods from reallocating resources and focusing on operational efficiencies aligned with He and Harris (2020), who suggested that making adjustments of this magnitude was necessary to meet the consumers' needs.

Furthermore, the researcher has evolved the conceptual framework to include the strategic adaptation to reflect how this adaptation aligns with consumer needs. This is depicted in figure eight below.



**Figure 8: Conceptual framework adapted for strategic adaptations**

(Source: Author's Own creation)

#### **6.2.4. The role of the manager**

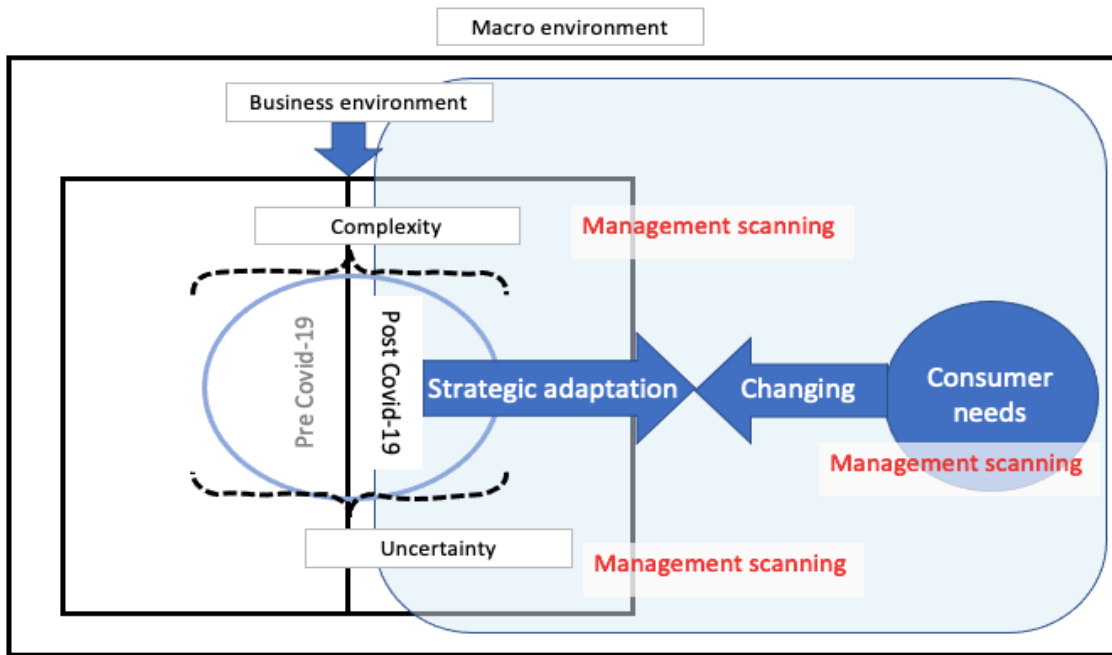
The role of the manager in strategic adaptation has proven to be essential during the heightened uncertainty. The ability to resonate with the need to reposition resources and understand consumer needs was possible due to being close to the environment

and consistently scanning for more opportunities. Floyd and Wooldridge (1992) proposed the environmental scanning concept, which indicated that middle managers are essential in this process, and the findings support this viewpoint.

Additionally, the research findings suggest that middle managers create awareness of the environment and provide a sense of direction for strategic choices, which resonate with literature from Mintzberg and Water (1985), who emphasised managers are searching for patterns of organisational action that create awareness within the organisation which in turn impacts the strategic intent. Furthermore, respondents suggested that they had to be more operationally involved to ensure a robust response from the uncertainty. Fowler et al. (2018) inferred the closer involvement in operations, who stated that strategy is built bottom-up and by middle managers who interact with the environment.

8:3 “We were forced to be more operationally involved due to the high levels of uncertainty. I was visiting the factories much more frequently during the initial stages of uncertainty ...” (Org. 7, Resp. 8)

Furthermore, Sharma and Good (2013) supported Mintzberg and Waters (1985) and Fowler et al. (2018), who emphasized the environmental scanning done by middle managers and how these managers make sense and give a sense about the environment to senior management. This concept aligned with the researcher's findings and highlighted the need for middle managers strategic decision-making adaptation in uncertainty, specifically around Covid-19. The research findings and literature echoed the same view and allowed the researcher's conceptual framework to be further augmented, as depicted below in figure nine.



**Figure 9: Conceptual framework adapted for environmental scanning**

(Source: Author's Own creation)

### 6.2.5. Summary and conceptual framework

The researcher overlapped the research findings with the current literature proposed in chapter two. Based on the findings and literature, a conceptual framework was developed, as depicted in figure nine. The conceptual framework evaluates both the internal business environment and the macro-environment. These environments have experienced significant change based on the uncertainty and complexity created by Covid-19. The researcher proposes that business post-Covid-19 require strategic adaptations to align with consumers changing needs. These adaptations are monitored by middle managements' ability to scan the dynamic environment and further aid their organisations by their strategic decision-making adaptations in times of uncertainty.

### 6.3. Research question two

**To explore the opportunities and threats that led to an emergent strategy in times of uncertainty.**

Research question two supported the anchor question. Based on the clear need for adaptation and the nature of change brought about by Covid-19, a theme of

opportunities and threats was put forward. The threats and opportunities existed in the overarching theme of environmental factors from which strategic adaptation originated.

### **6.3.1. Environmental factors of strategic adaptation**

Intezari and Pauleen (2017) suggested that decision-making is ongoing and always consider various alternatives to meet a specified objective. The research findings also suggested a dynamic environment where managers could make decisions to achieve the organisation's objective. The dynamic decision-making approach allowed managers to identify threats and opportunities in their business and macroenvironment, and this will be elaborated further in the upcoming section.

#### **6.3.1.1. Opportunities from uncertainty**

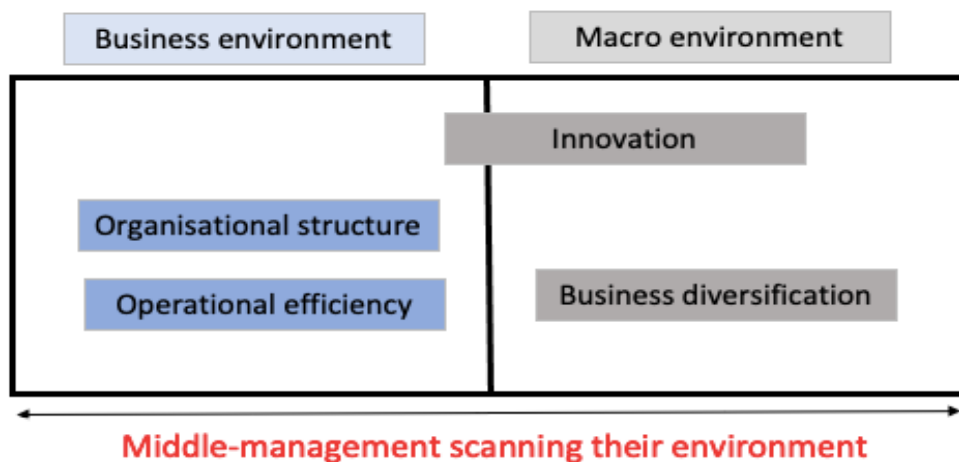
The researcher probed on opportunities in an uncertain environment linked to the possibility of an emergent strategy as coined by Mintzberg in 1978. The findings suggested that middle managers could identify opportunities in the form of either innovation or efficiency. This response to the environment by managers was aligned to the views of Ansell and Boin (2017), who indicated leaders were expected to respond to mitigate unknowns in times of uncertainty effectively.

6:8 “We had to expedite the new products we had in the pipeline and get it to market as soon as possible to remain competitive ...” (Org. 5, Resp. 6)

The efficiency aspect uncovered in the findings suggests that middle managers focused on reducing cost, which was needed in a cash-tight macro-environment. A surge in customer demand also required a shift of thinking and execution to ensure organisations could capitalise on the unpredicted demand. This concept of maximising opportunities aligned with the view of Packard and Clark (2020), who suggested managers should focus on capitalising on the uncertainty instead of merely bracing and mitigating unknowns. Respondents emphasised the need to maximise sales and revenue by maximising their supply chains to cope with this spike in demand.

Furthermore, the need for innovation and maximising operational efficiencies by reorganising resources and organisational structure was supported by Teece et al.

(2017), similar to the findings from the researcher. Respondents indicated their focus was to seek any methods to maximise profit. Additionally, the research findings suggest that some organisations diversify their business offering by acquiring new portfolios or products by entering new markets. The acquisition aspect did not form part of the literature findings and shed new insight into opportunities from uncertainty. Therefore based on the findings and literature, the researcher developed the framework depicted below in figure ten.



**Figure 10: Conceptual framework: Opportunities from uncertainty**

(Source: Author's Own creation)

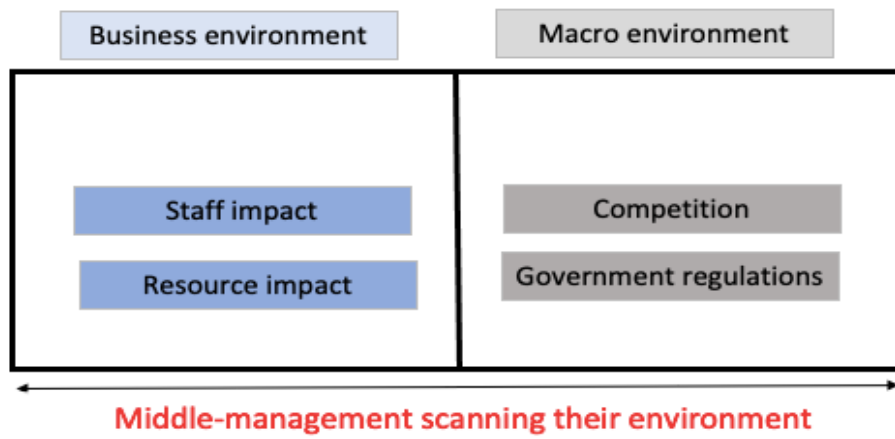
### 6.3.1.2. Threats from uncertainty

The researcher probed on threats from the uncertainty brought about by Covid-19. The respondents indicated the most significant threat from the heightened uncertainty was in the macro-environment due to high unemployment and dynamic government regulations coupled with aggressive competition, which resonates with Teece et al. (1997), who stated that organisations aim to renew their competencies to achieve congruence from the dynamic environment, therefore, sustaining a competitive advantage.

The findings on the internal impact suggested that staff morale was at an all-time low due to organisations retrenching. Additionally, in the context of reallocating resources, some employees had to incur additional workloads. Furthermore, the threat of business continuity was shared by numerous respondents to the extent that in some instances, operations had come to a halt due to too thin a workforce and

critical staff falling ill with Covid-19. The research finding on the operational impact was particular to the organisations that the respondents represented. There was no further link to literature as the study's primary focus was around Covid-19. These risks had a diverse reach depending on the organisation's specific strategic intent.

However, the researcher did evolve the conceptual framework to include the aspects linked to both the business and macroenvironment. This impact is depicted below in figure 11.



**Figure 11: Conceptual framework: Threats from uncertainty**

(Source: Author's Own creation)

### 6.3.2. Summary and conceptual framework

The conceptual framework focused on opportunities and threats in times of uncertainty which prohibited a more emergent strategy. These opportunities and threats existed in both the business's internal environment and the external or macro-environment. Throughout attempting to uncover threats and opportunities, the common thread was the management's need to continuously scan these environments and adapt accordingly.

### 6.4. Research question three

**To explore obstacles remaining which influence decision-making in emergent strategy in times of uncertainty.**



The researcher explored obstacles that prevented middle management's decision-making regarding developing an emergent strategy in times of uncertainty. These obstacles were narrowed down to internal and external obstacles, which will be further discussed below.

#### **6.4.1. Obstacles**

*Obstacles* were defined as any factor which prevented middle managers from making sense and giving a sense of their environment to senior management with the primary objective is forming an emergent strategy.

##### **6.4.1.1. Internal obstacles**

The research findings suggested that internal obstacles were classified into three main categories: senior management, organisational culture, and poor data quality for decision-making. The majority of the respondents indicated that senior management created obstacles for middle management to share their findings from constant environmental scanning openly.

8:7 "There are several levels of authority in this business, senior management controls everything and I just make recommendations ..." (Org. 7, Resp. 8)

These findings resonate with Newark (2018) suggested that middle managers can significantly influence the organisation given the opportunity. However, the findings contradict Floyd and Wooldridge (1992), who stated that middle managers are linking pins between internal and external environments. Even though the perception indicated that middle-managers could act as linking pins, senior management did not consider their ideas and findings. Likewise, on the concept of providing a sense of direction for the organisation, as put forward by Mintzberg and Waters (1985), the research findings suggested that middle-managers act more in the designation of executing instead of influencing.

Additionally, the findings contradict Lavarda et al. (2010), who proposed that middle management influence the organisation's strategy from a bottom-up build based on the dynamic environment. Likewise, contradicting Fowler et al. (2018) suggested that middle management's influence is through adaptive behaviour focusing on strategic planning, leading to higher performance. The respondents indicated their role was to

maximise efficiencies; however, this was more positioned in terms of opportunities for the organisation. This efficiency drive was also an expectation from senior management as they forced their teams to reduce costs.

Further obstacles were highlighted from the research findings, which was not covered in previous literature. These obstacles focused on organisational culture being a deterrent which resonates with the senior management controlling the strategic process for their organisation. The organisational culture suggested middle management did not function in an entirely conducive environment which supported all their opinions or suggestions towards an emergent strategy. Finally, some respondents indicated insufficient data available in the organisation to aid in strategic decision-making. However, the researcher has inferred a link to Einhorn (2020), who suggested that managers are deterred from making decisions with complete confidence due to the heightened uncertainty as it could adversely impact the overall performance.

#### **6.4.1.2. External obstacles**

The research findings reflect obstacles beyond the organisation and its senior management team. These obstacles exist in the macro-environment. The biggest obstacle identified is the coronavirus itself and its impact on the economy. The human well-being and safety aspect was prioritised in the short term, which adversely impacted organisations' ability to trade as per usual. Therefore, the government regulations set out created barriers for organisations and, in turn, formed obstacles deemed out of their control. These obstacles were not covered in the literature reviewed and thus will form part of the limitations and proposed future research that the researcher will recommend.

#### **6.4.2. Summary and conceptual framework**

Based on the research findings and the limited linkage to current literature, the researcher has decided not to include a framework for obstacles remaining which influence decision-making in emergent strategy in times of uncertainty.

## 6.5. Conclusion

The researcher evaluated the three research questions and designed a conceptual framework through an evolution process by focusing on each aspect linked to research questions one and two. Research question three did not have sufficient information to form part of the conceptual framework, and the findings from research question three did not shed sufficient insight to incorporate into the researcher's framework. However, the researcher shed light on the overarching research question of the role of strategic decision-making adaptation by middle managers in times of uncertainty. **The findings conclude that middle management has a significant role in scanning the business and macro-environment, allocating resources, mitigating risks, and capitalising opportunities for their organisation.**

## 7. CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 7.1. Introduction

Chapter seven will focus on the findings discussed in chapter five and the interpretation of the findings discussed in chapter six. The principal findings will be positioned in line with the research question proposed in chapter three. These principal findings will demonstrate that the objectives of the study have been achieved. After that, limitations of the study will be discussed, followed by suggested future research and finally, the overall conclusion regarding the strategic decision-making adaptations by middle managers in times of uncertainty.

### 7.2. Principal findings

The purpose of this study was to i) explore the strategic decision-making adaptations by middle managers in times of uncertainty, ii) to explore the opportunities and threats that led to an emergent strategy in times of uncertainty and iii) to explore obstacles remaining which influence decision-making in emergent strategy in times of uncertainty. The principal findings per the research questions are listed below.

#### 7.2.1. Research question one

**To explore the role of strategic decision-making adaptations by middle managers in times of uncertainty.**

Research question one was the overarching research question for this study, and two other research questions supported this question. The findings on research question one suggested a need for adaptation due to the high levels of uncertainty caused by Covid-19. This uncertainty tested managers as they were not equipped to deal with such high levels of uncertainty which was also suggested by Bowers et al., 2017. Additionally, the nature of uncertainty required managers to evaluate and understand the context and environment (Bundy et al., 2017). Packard and Clark (2020) view of uncertainty is occasionally unpredictable and immitigable, which resonated with the findings around the heightened uncertainty Covid-19 created.

Furthermore, the heightened uncertainty forced strategic decision-making adaptation based on the environment and the consumers' changing needs. Organisations were

repositioning their resources, directed by middle management, to align with the changing environment, as Crick and Crick (2020) proposed. This need for strategic adaptation focused on middle management specifically, whereas Fowler et al., 2018 suggested the adaptation was a bottom-up build which partially resonates with the findings whereby middle-managers did give direction to senior management. Therefore, the principal findings for research one question indicate that middle management has a significant role to play in strategic decision-making adaptation based on their positioning, which is closer to the environment, which allows them to scan the business and macroenvironment in the uncertainty and either mitigate the uncertainty or pivot the organisation by capitalising on new trends.

### **7.2.2. Research question two**

**To explore the opportunities and threats that led to an emergent strategy in times of uncertainty.**

Research question two supported the overarching question and delved further into uncertainty and possible opportunities and threats created. The findings suggest both risk and opportunities existed in the business and macro-environment. Ansell and Boin (2017) viewpoint that managers are expected to respond to the unknowns and mitigate the uncertainty effectively aligned to the researcher's findings. Additionally, Jacobides and Reeves (2020) suggested Covid-19 had brought about a new reality and organisations needed to adjust to this new reality.

Furthermore, threats were primarily identified in the macro-environment with high levels of unemployment, and organisations continued to retrench to cut costs. A further aspect of government regulations impacting trade negatively impacted all organisations. Therefore, the principal findings for research question two indicate both opportunities and threats existed, and organisations attempted to mitigate within their control; however, the external environment created obstacles. Organisations developed an emergent strategy within their control factors through environmental scanning and reacting to consumer needs.

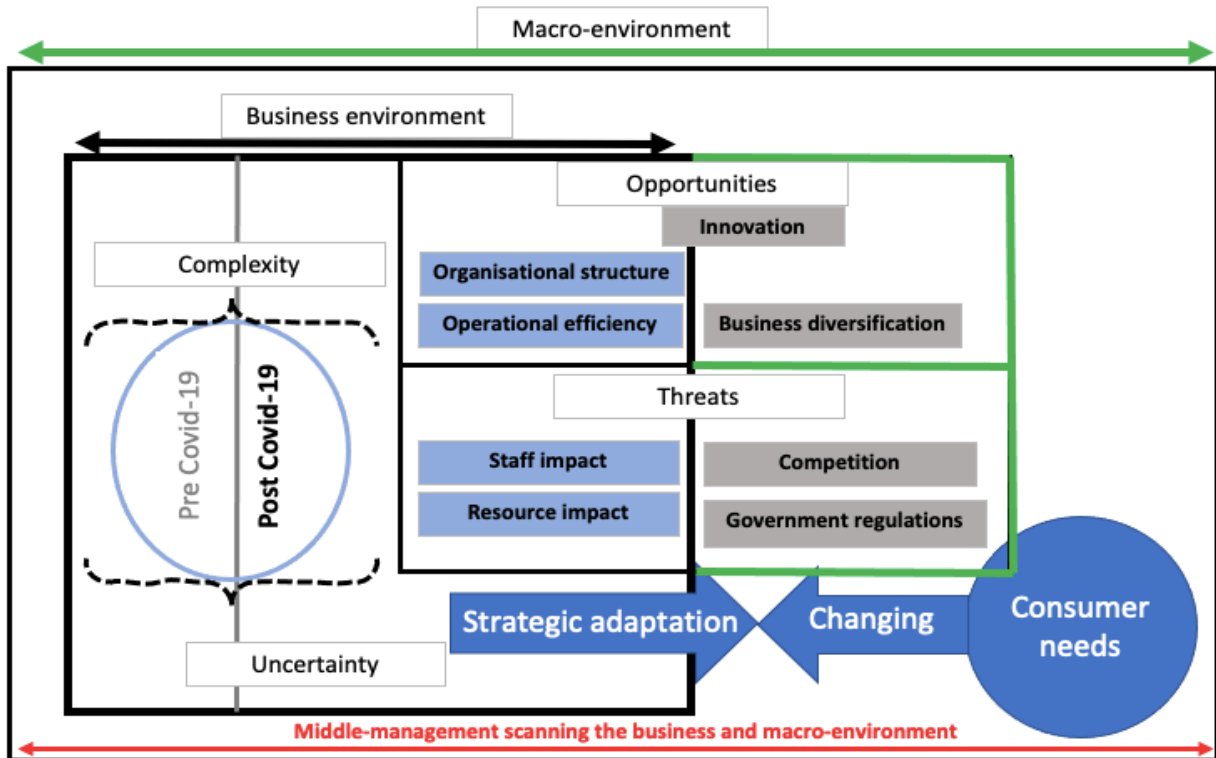
### 7.2.3. Research question three

**To explore obstacles remaining which influence decision-making in emergent strategy in times of uncertainty.**

Research question three further supported the overarching research question, and the findings suggested obstacles existed in both business and macro-environment. Even though Newark (2018) suggested middle managers can make an influential impact on the organisation, given a chance, this contradicted the research findings, which indicated the most significant obstacle preventing an emergent strategy from evolving was senior management's influence on the strategic position in the organisation. The control from senior management resonates with Einhom (2020) findings which indicated middle managers were deterred from making decisions in uncertainty due to lack of confidence and the outcome having an overall adverse impact on the organisation.

### 7.2.4. Summary of principal findings

The overall summary of the principal findings was a conceptual framework created from the research findings. The framework encapsulates research questions one and two and omits three due to the insufficient depth from the findings. The conceptual framework is depicted below in figure 12.



**Figure 12: Final conceptual framework**

(Source: Author's Own creation)

The overall conceptual framework depicts the business environment pre- and post-covid. The findings focus on post covid and the strategic adaptation, which needs to align to the consumers changing needs. Complexity pre-existed Covid-19; however, uncertainty significantly increased post-Covid-19. Opportunities and threats exist within the organisations and the macro-environment, focusing on a few aspects to either pivot the organisation or mitigate against risk.

### 7.3. Limitations of study

The researcher focused on the FMCG industry specifically due to the nature of Covid-19 and physical restrictions regarding face-to-face interactions and networking beyond the researcher's current network. Therefore, the study was limited to the FMCG industry due to more accessible access to respondents. The strategic adaptation decision-making only focused on a small sample due to the qualitative nature; however, the researcher believes there can be great depth by conducting a quantitative study and testing correlations and patterns from a larger population, specifically in the suggested conceptual framework proposed in this study.

Additionally, due to the unknown nature of the virus, respondents continuously rescheduled interviews based on work commitments, falling in, or even close family members falling ill due to Covid-19, which impacted the respondent's availability. Furthermore, some respondents were distracted during the interview process as it was conducted via zoom and often, background distractions impacted undivided focus. Mobile data limitations and connectivity also posed a limitation as some respondents did not have stable internet connections.

Furthermore, the nature of the study was to explore strategic decision-making adaptation, and some respondents did not share freely due to confidentiality concerns despite the researcher assuring confidentiality to all respondents. This concern on sharing freely prohibited depth in the data gathering process in some aspects of the intended exploratory study. Finally, many respondents did not sign and return interview consent forms; however, they consent to be interviewed in the audio recordings.

#### **7.4. Suggested future studies**

The researcher proposed three questions; however, research question three regarding obstacles preventing an emergent strategy did not get sufficient depth from the data gathering process. Partially due to interviewer bias and the physical restrictions on the data gathering process impacted delving deeper. Therefore, the researcher suggests a study specifically focusing on the obstacles middle management faces in creating an emergent strategy in times of heightened uncertainty. Likewise, the researcher suggests focusing on the relationship between the business and macro-environment and how managers can better leverage their limited resources in both environments by conducting a quantitative study and testing correlations.

Additionally, the study focused on a specific industry. The researcher suggests this study should focus on the macro-environment and across multiple industries to further explore the strategic decision-making adaptation by middle managers in times of uncertainty across various industries. Finally, a concept of leadership was highlighted by some respondents, and more specifically, the leadership style and leader needed to navigate organisations throughout the heightened uncertainty.



## **7.5. Conclusion**

The research study explored the role of strategic decision-making adaptation by middle managers in times of uncertainty. The need for this study was highlighted by identifying a research problem based on the gap in literature focusing on heightened uncertainty brought about by Covid-19. Additionally, a practical contribution was made by developing a conceptual framework for a middle manager when focusing on strategic decision-making adaptation in uncertainty. The literature review focused on recent literature, creating the three research questions proposed in chapter three.

A qualitative study was conducted by interviewing 15 middle managers across nine organisations in the FMCG industry. The data gathered was interpreted using thematic analysis. The findings suggested that middle managers play a role in strategic decision-making adaptation by scanning the business and macro-environments and mitigating risk while pivoting opportunities in both environments.

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## Appendix 1: Interview Questions

Interview Questions
At your company, how did you experience the pandemic?
How did you experience the uncertainty in the organisation from Covid?
Where there any big strategic changes that happened? How did that impact you?
What did you perceive to be the biggest opportunity to the industry in your view from this uncertainty?
What did you perceive to be the biggest threats to the industry in your view from this uncertainty?
Can you think of an example of how you managed to influence organisational strategy in the past year?
Do you think there are still obstacles in the organisation that prevents you from helping the organisation develop a more emergent strategy? What are they?
Have these threats and opportunities influenced your strategy and how?
Have you as a middle manager been able to influence strategy, how? In what ways? Why were you able to influence?
Anything else you think we need to discuss that was not covered?

(Source: Author's Own creation)

## Appendix 2: Approved ethical clearance

<p><b>Gordon Institute of Business Science</b> University of Pretoria</p>	<p><b>Ethical Clearance Approved</b></p>
<p>Dear Mitesh Rugununan,</p>	
<p>Please be advised that your application for Ethical Clearance has been approved. You are therefore allowed to continue collecting your data. We wish you everything of the best for the rest of the project.</p>	
<p><a href="#">Ethical Clearance Form</a></p>	
<p>Kind Regards</p>	