Gordon Institute of Business Science
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THE EXPERIENCES OF MIDDLE MANAGERS ENACTING STRATEGIC ROLES IN FINANCIAL SERVICES ORGANISATIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

For organisations to remain competitive in uncertain turbulent markets, growing research on emergent strategic approached calls for business leaders to open up strategy formulations processes and include actors outside the corporate elites, such as middle managers, in so called open strategy processes (Brielmaier & Friesl, 2023). This to afford them the unique insights and perspectives to guide strategy formulation for strategic agility.

However, there is limited knowledge about the practical applications of such approaches beyond theory (Brielmaier & Friesl, 2023), and less about the middle managers perspectives when invited to join open strategy processes notwithstanding the dynamics of their interactions with senior leadership (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011; Splitter et al., 2023)

This cross-sectional interpretivist study employs exploratory qualitative research methods to explore the experiences of middle managers in organisation's strategy formulation processes. Data was gathered from 14 semis-structured interviews with middle managers from the financial services sector in South Africa and thematically analysed to gain their unique lived experiences.

Findings indicated that the majority of middle managers were being included in strategy formulation with positive experiences of inclusion, however a new perspective were the negative consequences of inclusion that impaired their ability to effectively participate.

These findings have important significant for business leaders adopting open strategy process as they provide pertinent insights that can guide the preparation of middle managers for inclusion in strategy formulation. In addition, this research addresses the call for research that gives light on the dynamic of interdiscursive interactions between senior leaders and middle managers from the middle managers unique perspective.

KEYWORDS

Open strategy , Inclusion, Strategic thinking , Strategy formulation, Strategic competency

PLAGIARISM 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 Name:

4 March 2025

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1 CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO RESEARCH PROBLEM

1.1 Background to Research Problem

Organisations operating in emerging markets have the arduous task of maintaining their competitive advantage despite rapid changes brought on by the characteristic uncertain, turbulent and hypercompetitive market contexts (Hortovanyi et al., 2021; Shams et al., 2021), representing a strategic challenge. Furthermore, rising global risk and instability adds additional uncertainties that present new challenges for organisations, with many struggling to adapt (Monteiro, 2025). Financial services organisations in addition exist among fierce competition, due to the often-undifferentiated offerings (Mensah & Edem Amenuvor, 2022), as well as political, regulatory and economic challenges that significantly affect their competitiveness. Organisations' increasingly lack the strategic agility to keep abreast of the rapid rate of technological innovation, growth and new competition that emerge from the increasing rate of globalisation (Fuertes et al., 2020; Healey & Hodgkinson, 2024; Krassimir & Yusaf, 2019), particularly in South Africa.

Therefore, regaining their competitive advantage in emerging markets, literature posits that organisations depart from the control and rigidity of strategic planning that is better suited for stable market conditions (Mintzberg, 2024). Instead, organisations ought to adopt emergent strategic approaches to develop the dynamic capabilities (DCs), that proactively take measures to continuously improve organisational market responsiveness and strategic agility (Monteiro, 2025; Shams et al., 2021; Teece, 2018). However, established organisations appear stuck on autopilot maintaining focus on control, hierarchy and routine strategic planning that result in silos and horizontal barriers to vertical communication. These factors render the radical strategic changes required to achieve dynamic capabilities, challenging to attain (Mintzberg, 2024).

The adoption of open and inclusive strategy formulation (SF) processes, and the incorporation of strategic thinking (ST) are examples of such emergent strategic approaches, organisations may employ to gain agility. Open and inclusive SF involves the inclusion of employees outside the traditional strategy elites, such as middle managers (MMs), increasingly called for by strategy management literature, to gain the required strategic agility (Mintzberg, 2024; Monteiro, 2025; Whittington et al., 2011). The strategies devised by senior leadership teams and elites on their own,

are disconnected from realities on the ground, rendering them ineffective. Furthermore, literature posits that simply “including” lower-level employees, does not guarantee the promise of dynamic capabilities and strategic success (Splitter et al., 2024), more needs to be considered.

The exact way the MMs are to enact their strategic roles meaningfully when included in SF, how they as diverse people, and not just a role are affected, as well as the skills they require to participate, remain under-researched and at best, examine only theoretical benefits of inclusion and neglect how MMs should practically participate, nor gives their unique perspectives (Friesl et al., 2023; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011; Splitter et al., 2024; Tarakci et al., 2023).

The incorporation of the cognitive approach of strategic thinking (ST) at MM level, may prove an effective tool in the effective participation of MMs in SF processes. Through the enabling of skills of analysis of complex situations, identification of patterns and relationships resulting in the generation of new and innovative solutions to strategic problems (Geier, 2024), through collaboration. Furthermore, ST facilitates the rapid and innovative responses to changing environments, required for strategic agility in uncertain market context (Graetz, 2002; Liedtka, 1998).

Strategic thinking as a concept, in itself, is less well understood with Goldman (2012) positing there to be a strategic thinking gap in leadership due to this lack of understanding, a lack of ST development among leaders and confusion about what ST actually is (Liedtka, 1998). There are limited studies examining ST at the middle and lower levels in organisations in support of strategic decision-making, representing a research gap for the further study of ST in organisations (Geier, 2024; Goldman et al., 2015; Nuntamanop et al., 2013; Shaik & Dhir, 2020; Splitter et al., 2024).

This research, therefore, poses an alternate view of causes of strategy failure, departing from implementation as the cause (Tawse & Tabesh, 2021), and suggests even in SF, gaps still exist in the sensing and sense-making functions that may lead to ineffective strategies being chosen. This research seeks to explore in depth and in practice, the unique perspectives of MMs experiences with their organisations SF processes and uncover the role strategic thinking plays in the SF process.

1.2 Purpose of Research

Organisations in the financial services sector operate in regulated, uncertain and hypercompetitive environments, requiring dynamic capabilities that emerge from individual employees to sustain competitive advantage. Employing emergent strategic approaches, such as open and inclusive SF, is one of the recommended methods to attain the required strategic agility to gain competitive advantages (Mintzberg, 2024). Organisations often face challenges in adapting their strategic approaches in increasingly uncertain and turbulent environments, which can hinder their ability to maintain their competitive advantage in these contexts.

The purpose of this research, therefore, is to empirically explore the experiences of MMs in the financial services sector in South Africa, related to their participation in their organisations SF processes. This research aims to highlight that even in the SF side of the strategic process, gaps may still exist, leading to ineffective strategies that emanate from ineffective SF processes, resulting in strategy failure. This research will further the theoretical conversation, by highlighting the SF process through the lens of MMs enacting their strategic roles, adding their unique perspectives and experiences in SF and how they incorporate ST, when enacting their strategic roles.

It aims to illuminate the experiences of MMs such that organisations may become more effective in adopting the emergent strategic approaches, improve organisational strategic decision-making, enhance the experiences of MMs by equipping them better for inclusion, and ultimately assist organisations to gain strategic agility, for sustained competitive advantage.

1.3 Research Objectives

The objective of this research will therefore be to explore in depth, the experiences of MMs in the SF processes of organisations in the financial services sector of South Africa, and how they incorporate ST in their inputs to SF.

The objectives of this research were therefore to uncover and understand the following:

I. Understand their level of involvement in their organisations SF process and experiences related to this. If included, what were their experiences, if excluded what were their experiences?
II. Understand how their involvement is enacted and the processes and experiences related to MM involvement in SF processes.
III. Uncover the tools and processes they utilise for the sensing function of SF. Uncover what tools they used to gather data, how they interact with the data as well as their experiences related to the sensing function of SF.
IV. Uncover the MMs awareness of ST, the behaviours they exhibit that are associated with ST and how they use ST to contribute to SF processes.

The research objectives were realised using an exploratory and qualitative research approach as this would allow to gain the required understanding of the dynamics related to the topic.

1.4 Business Need for the Study

The current environment of business is that of increasing geopolitical instability and rapid technological advancement that place increasing uncertainties on market environments and organisations, particularly in emerging markets (Ferraris et al., 2022; Monteiro, 2025). Organisations therefore require to emergent strategic approaches to navigate the uncertainties and remain competitive. The tendency of established organisations is to remain stuck in the layers of hierarchy, bureaucracy and outdated strategy process that will not attain them sustained competitive in uncertain turbulent market contexts.

This research adopts a DC theory approach to attaining sustainable competitive advantage and demonstrated that the incorporation of open strategy process that include MMs as an integral part of SF together with ST will afford organisations the strategic agility to remain competitive in uncertain and turbulent market contexts.

This research therefore equips business leaders with the understanding of the importance of MMs' participation in emergent strategic processes for gaining organisational agility, due to their market proximity (Salvato & Vassolo, 2018; Tarakci et al., 2023; Wooldridge & Floyd, 1990). This knowledge will assist in leveraging MMs as a key resource for aligned strategic decision-making that leads to competitive advantage in uncertainty.

The research will in addition, provide business leaders with insights into the unique perspectives of MMs pertaining to their strategic roles and provides knowledge business leaders can utilise to drive effective organisational renewal through the incorporation and participation of MMs in emergent SF processes (Langenmayr et al., 2024). This through understanding the particular strategic skills and competencies required by MMs to effectively participate in SF processes and foster the diversity and innovation that emerges from open strategic processes.

The knowledge of how MMS can think more strategically coupled with contributions to SF, can facilitate a stronger middle management strategic culture and improved employee engagement.

1.5 Theoretical Need for the Study

This research was grounded by the dynamic capabilities theory of organisations that asserts that complex, uncertain and turbulent market environments require the attunement and continuous understanding of market contexts coupled with the ability to rapidly adapt and evolve in response to changes in the environment, to maintain competitive advantages (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985; Teece, 2007). Organisations still struggle with attaining the required the adaptability that gains them competitive advantage in the uncertain and turbulent emerging market contexts.

This research adds to the research gap on emergent strategic practices in practical settings and adds to the understanding of how open and inclusive SF processes incorporating ST are applied practically within organisations (Langenmayr et al., 2024; Mintzberg, 2024), by empirically exploring the in practice the under-researched perspectives and experiences of MMs in open and inclusive SF processes (Splitter et al., 2023) and thereby extends the largely theoretical knowledge on open strategy.

In addition, this research adds to the understating of ST in practice within organisations, a reported gap in research (Geier, 2024; Goldman et al., 2015; Nuntamanop et al., 2013; Shaik & Dhir, 2020; Splitter et al., 2024) and practically extends the largely conceptual ST knowledge.

1.6 Structure of the Study

Chapter 1 of the research presented an overview of the research. It established the context from which the research topic emerged in the background of the study and presented the purpose and need for the study from a theoretical and business perspective.

The rest of the research paper presents the current perspectives and topics from theory, that guided the formation of the research questions on which this research inquiry was undertaken. Chapter 2 presents this critical review overlaid with the researcher's analysis of the research findings, and presents the research topics in and integrated sequence, following the respective discussions from literature. This demonstrates how the research questions were derived from the gaps in the respective literature.
Chapter 3 then presents the research topics in an integrated manner, demonstrating the relationship between the research questions that from the basis on the research inquiry.

The research design and methodology employed to explore and gather findings of the research questions is discussed in Chapter 4 with the findings presented in a logical sequence per research question outlined in Chapter 5 and discussed with comparison and contrast to reviewed literature in Chapter 6.

Finally, the research is summarised and conclusions presented in Chapter 7. This draws on the business problem in Chapter 1, the literature in Chapter 2, and the findings and discussion of findings in Chapter 5 and 6 to offer recommendations for business practitioners as well as for future research on the topic of MM experiences in SF processes and ST.

2 CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides insights into the theoretical framing of the research topic and the current research that is relevant to the research topic. The researcher demonstrated their understanding of the elements that underpins the research problem by critically reviewing the relevant literature and providing their own outlook on the views posed in literature on the research topic.

This research makes the contribution that strategy failure or the lack of attainment of strategic agility is possibly due to ineffective strategies being implemented owing to the lack of strategic thinking abilities of middle managers involved in SF.

The chapter opens with the theoretical scoping of the research by reviewing the dynamic capabilities theory, the lens through which this research is viewed and its relevance. It is the acceptance of the dynamic capabilities theory that would enable the inclusion of middle managers by senior leadership in organisations in the SF. The role of middle management in organisations and their relevance in SF, namely their strategic role is then discussed. This in the second section of this chapter, through the concept of open strategy which is the foundation of their involvement in strategy beyond just as implementers of strategy.

Lastly, the construct of strategic thinking (ST) was explored in this chapter looking at the definition of strategic thinking and the measurement instruments pertaining to assessment of strategic thinking is analysed and discussed.

2.2 Dynamic Capabilities Theory

This research inquiry was grounded by the dynamic capabilities theory which is concerned with how organisations attain sustainable competitive advantage in complex, uncertain and hypercompetitive market contexts, through constantly evolving to adapt to the changes in the environment (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985; Teece, 2007).

Emerging markets are characteristically uncertain, complex and dynamic (Zhu & Sardana, 2019). Uncertainty makes them chaotic and complex with accelerated rates of technological growth and rapid globalisation (Vecchiato, 2019). Therefore,

organisations operating in these environments must arduously address the challenges of adapting to rapid market changes and maintaining their competitive advantages (Shams et al., 2021). Organizations in emerging markets can no longer rely solely on the Resource-Based View (RBV) for a sustained competitive advantage. The RBV was based on an internal focus of organisations using unique combinations of their inimitable resources, to gain the most market share in the markets they compete (M. J. Chen et al., 2021). It can be expected that this internal focus is more suited to stable environments than uncertain rapidly evolving market contexts. These markets require external focus together with internal capabilities through dynamic capabilities (DCs) to remain adaptable, resilient, and flexible, alongside effective strategies and resources.(Pitelis et al., 2023; Teece, 2007, 2014; Vecchiato, 2014). Strong DCs are concerned with organisations constantly staying congruent with the market, their capacity to shape their surrounding ecosystem and ability to rapidly change their value offering in response (Teece, 2014; Teece, 2018). This is why DCs as an approach is best suited for organisations in emerging market contexts.

For organisations to adopt a DC approach, they require an organisational learning orientation, which would enable a search for the continuous improvement and experimentation associated with DCs. In addition to a learning orientation, DCs are the sensing (constantly scanning and interpreting threats and opportunities), seizing (by timing allocation and redistribution of resources to exploit opportunities) and reconfiguring (continuous and periodic combining and reconfiguring the business model, intangible and tangible assets for new opportunities) abilities that exist at organisational , team and individual levels of the organisation leading to sustained competitive advantage in uncertain contexts (Baden-Fuller & Teece, 2020; Pitelis et al., 2023; Teece et al., 2016). It is this malleability and adaptability that distinguished DC theory from the RBV theory from which it was derived (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985). For the purpose of this research, dynamic capabilities theory will be limited to a focus on the sensing function of dynamic capabilities, concerned with the continuous scanning, evaluation and interpretation of signals from the market, and interpreting the threats and opportunities sensed.

Characteristics of DCs dictate that there be alignment of organisational structures and strategies for the effective coordination of assets, and thus organisational flexibility or agility be present (Pitelis et al., 2023). This dictates strong organisational

alignment and interconnectedness to facilitate the required agility in response to market shifts. Recent literature, in line with this view, calls the DCs be built ground up and not limited to the CEO and top management teams, a stark contrast from its founding principle, of being organisation based (Mintzberg, 2024; Salvato & Vassolo, 2018). Building from the ground up means developing managerial and entrepreneurial traits of sensing and seizing, for individual employees at micro-level, building up to the team level through the interactions of the individuals, then to the dynamic capabilities of the organisation through consolidation (Mintzberg, 2024; Salvato & Vassolo, 2018). This means that organisations can only be considered as dynamically capable, if the managers and employees in the organisation have dynamic capabilities, as these capabilities incorporates the collective learnings of individuals within the organisation.

Individual DCs are the ability to sense the need for change in an environment and respond to that change using their cognition, emotions and habits from previous lessons learned to inform entrepreneurial decision-making otherwise referred to as dynamic managerial capabilities (Helfat & Martin, 2015; Pitelis et al., 2023). Individuals have DCs when they have “the ability to override certain dysfunctional features of organisational decision-making” (Teece, 2007, p.1327) to gain strategic agility. Organisations in complex and unpredictable environments require multiple actors to support the continuous scanning and interpretation of signals from the market. This function cannot be centralised, as senior leadership alone may not have sufficient capacity and market proximity to perform this function conclusively for strategy formulation.

The dynamic managerial capabilities of individual and teams becomes increasingly important in the uncertain and turbulent context and those of hypercompetition as it represents the tacit knowledge and capabilities of employees, that are developed through learning, within organisations that are not easily replicable and provide a source of sustainable competitive advantage. This gives the organisations the required adaptability and agility to evolve along with changes in the markets. It is with this context that this research seeks to explore in more detail the dynamic capabilities of MMs in organisations and how these can further be developed to assist organisations gain these tacit, irreplicable dynamic managerial capabilities for sustained competitive advantages even in complex turbulent environments.

2.3 Strategic Agility

As a micro foundation of an organisation's dynamic capabilities (Sampath et al., 2021), Baden-Fuller and Teece (2020) describe Strategic Agility as the continuous sensing and seizing functions of dynamic capabilities theory occurring under conditions characterised by complexity, turbulence and rapid change . Strategic agility, as a concept that was introduced over 30 years ago (Weber & Tarba, 2014) as the adaptive skills of the organisation that give it the capability of speed and flexibility to continuously sense opportunities and/or threats in the environment, rapidly respond (through the organisations leadership and management teams making bold and fast decisions) by reconfiguring its resources; to create new value for the organisation (Doz & Kosonen, 2008; Sampath et al., 2021; Teece et al., 2016).

Strategic agility, therefore, brings about continuous and systematic transformation that affects the organisation in its entirety; it's products, processes, services and structures. It is drastically different from the routine singularly incremental change occurring in the organisation's daily processes that scholar Teece (2014) refers to as ordinary capabilities, resulting from the strategic planning associated with the RBV theory of stable markets. Ordinary capabilities may gain the organisation competitive advantage through operational and financial efficiencies, however, this advantage, in a rapidly dynamic and turbulent environment is likely to be short-lived.

From the description it can be derived that strategic agility is associated with the elements of scanning, speed, flexibility, alignment, integration and organisational learning. Requiring people withing organisations to keep abreast with developments in the environment then rapidly integrate the information such that changes an adaptation are made to maintain or increase competitive advantage. It is concerned with the organisations having strategic sensitivity and simultaneously, resource fluidity to seize opportunities or threats as they present (Iborra et al., 2020; Sampath et al., 2021). They therefore require strategic agility to weather these risks as they present. Weber and Tarba (2014) refer to it as the organisation's ability for exploration and exploitation through organisations having ambidextrous designs. The importance of the organisation's ability to balance, trade-off and align resources between routine core business models and new business models within the organisation, necessary to maintain core business while adapting to changes in the environment can be noted (Iborra et al., 2020). It therefore can be derived that

organisations in uncertain contexts need to be adept at both through developing strategic agility.

Obtaining strategic agility is positively associated with improved organisational decision-making and thus market performance (Iborra et al., 2020) as it is associated with increased proactivity in sensing, interpreting and driving implementation of these transformational changes, to gain sustained competitive advantage (Christofi et al., 2021; Sampath et al., 2021;Teece et al., 2016). The recent COVID 19 pandemic, the threats to global supply from the geopolitical instability and regional wars are such examples of instability and increasing global uncertainties of which organisations need to be attuned to remain competitive. Successful organisations were those that were able to sense signals of change and quickly adapt to the changes by adapting business models to compete.

This research takes a keen interest in exploring the element of strategic agility related to the sensing and sense-making function. This is related to the ability of individuals or teams scanning, learning to decipher and how to interpret developments (perception), and which opportunities, technologies and markets to pursue and how competitors may respond, which is an important starting point for an organisation gaining dynamic capabilities (Helfat & Peteraf, 2015; Teece, 2007). It can be argued therefore that individuals in the organisation require an entrepreneurial skill and the cognitive capability to effectively scan the uncertain environment and interpret information from various sources that may be incomplete (Kirtley & O'Mahony, 2023), make sense of it and package it in a way that it can inform the strategic decisions of the organisation.

2.4 The Middle Managers

Middle managers (MMs) are portrayed in literature as the proverbial ham in the organisational sandwich, existing as the link between employees and top management teams of organisations. Their importance often related to the effective functioning and outcomes of the organisation due to their role in the coordination of resources and their responsibilities pertaining to organisational knowledge and information flows within and across hierarchal levels, to deliver value (Bagchi & Sharma, 2024; Gjerde & Alvesson, 2024; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). Their

command of resources both financial and human distinguishes them from lower-level employees in their ability to enact strategic initiatives. In this way, it can be argued that MMs play an invaluable role in the strategic management process as they manage the narratives in the organisation (Bagchi & Sharma, 2024; Tarakci et al., 2023). With this in mind, it can be ascertained how crucial middle managers are for the translation and dissemination of strategic plans across the lower levels of the organisation to those that will bring the strategic changes to life.

Historically, their roles in strategy were deemed only necessary for this downward execution of strategic plans formulated by decision-makers i.e. the implementation of strategic plans coupled with the synthesis and reporting of progress upwards (Tarakci et al., 2023b). In this context, literature did not consider their role in SF, arguably due to the elitist view of strategy being reserved for the CEO or top management teams. These leaders had insights into the organisations future direction and plans that were kept as tight secrets for top management teams, to maintain first mover advantages (Whittington et al., 2011). Some literature in addition, viewed the role of MMs as being under threat due to the changing attitudes of senior leaders seeing them as non-essential as well the view that their roles were being made redundant through technological advances that allow senior leadership the direct monitoring and access to employees at lower levels (Tarakci et al., 2023a).

However, top management teams, are posited as often having blind spots to information that does not resonate with them. This, leading to failure to detect key market trend shifts, external and internal signals that may have organisational consequences. This underscores the critical role the MMs are posited to play in the attainment of strategic agility, through their dynamic managerial capabilities and market proximity (Salvato & Vassolo, 2018). MMs can longer simply drive implementation of strategy, due to recent technological advancements (Tarakci et al., 2023a), more is expected of them to take a more divergent strategic focus and assist senior leadership team in building strong effective strategies.

There is limited research on MM interactions with top management teams in strategy formulation (SF) in practice and how they contribute to strategic agility (Hortovanyi et al., 2021; Langenmayr et al., 2024). Historically, MMs were excluded from SF processes, possibly appropriate due to more stable market dynamics, however even then their exclusion was met with immense dissatisfaction and demoralisation of MMs responsible for its implementation due to the lack of strategic context and

feelings of being sidelined and kept out of the “inner circles” (Westley, 1990). Though not advocating for opening of the SF process, Westley (1990)’s research still called for organisations to create opportunities for MMs to question and sense-make strategies horizontally at their level, prior to implementation, to avoid the negative and opportunistic behaviour that may arise otherwise to derail strategic change (Splitter et al., 2023).

In contrast, inclusion in SF processes was associated with high energy levels, empowerment, engagement and motivation (Adobor, 2019; Block, 2017; Langenmayr et al., 2024) which gave implementation of strategy a more favourable opportunity to success. Wooldridge and Floyd (1990) around the same period as Westley (1990)’s research, agreed with this view positive view, but also cautioned inclusion of MMs at senior leaderships discretion and to find ways to manage this particularly, should the resultant strategies threaten the positions of some of the middle managers. A key perspective to be considered even modern open strategy approaches.

Finally, although inclusion has many positive benefits, the simple including alone of MMs in strategy rooms is unlikely to lead to the positive benefits of inclusion.

These insights led to the first research question that aimed to uncover and understand the experiences of MMs in the organisations SF processes:

Research Question 1: What are the experiences of MMs in their organisations SF processes?

2.5 Open and Inclusive Strategy

However, in current contexts, organisations are departing from this exclusionary view and incorporating more open and inclusive SF process (Langenmayr et al., 2024), as emergent strategic practices. Open and inclusive strategy derives its principles from open innovation, defined as a continuum whose application and practices vary by context. It is the transparency, inclusion and participation of employees outside the traditional corporate strategy elites, to widen the search for strategic ideas and improve strategic understanding and commitment to implementation (Whittington et al., 2011). It is associated with the sharing of view, knowledge and information without the transposing of decision-making rights. The responsibility remains with the senior

leadership teams, who possess the cognitive abilities to consolidate and interpret the inputs from middle management into robust strategies for competitive advantage. It is through open and inclusive strategy that MMs participate in SF processes, and the resultant knowledge generation becomes a key strategic asset (Adobor, 2019).

MMs are required to inform strategy formation and lead the adaptive efforts of sensing the environment for opportunities and threats under open strategy (Tarakci et al., 2023b) thereby translating the ambiguous environmental shifts to concrete strategies and actions for employees. MMs structural positioning and influence makes them even more critical for inclusion in SF processes, due to this duality of responsibility that include both strategy making and strategy implementation (Dobusch et al., 2019; Hortovanyi et al., 2021). When MMs enact their strategic roles effectively, they afford organisations strategic agility and competitive advantage.

However, it is uncovered in literature that MMs often struggle to enact their strategic roles due to among many reasons, intentional exclusion, being seen only as implementers as well as due to their own feelings of inadequacy and lack of strategic discourse competency (Adobor, 2019; Birkinshaw, 2017; Langenmayr et al., 2024; Splitter et al., 2024). MMs require to craft inputs into SF processes in a manner that is persuading, issue-sells and compelling to gain the uptake of senior leadership (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011; Splitter et al., 2024; Whittington et al., 2011). They require the discernment of what information is strategic and warrants the attention of senor leadership (Seidl et al., 2024). A lack in these “strategic discursive competencies” means they will fail to make meaningful contributions that impact the strategic direction of organisations (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011,p964).

MMs are also confronted with the possibility of giving unpopular views or feedback to senior leadership during SF interaction, which creates a dynamic that may hinder effective SF should the MM choose to keep quiet and not share their valuable upward feedback and inputs and may fear retaliation (Brielmaier & Friesl, 2023; Tourish & Robson, 2006). Senior leadership, upon adopting open and inclusive strategic approaches ought to be aware of such dynamics and take measures to minimise the occurrence and impact of these. In addition, adoption of open and inclusive strategic processes may be coupled with concurrent traditional closed strategies during the transition (Langenmayr et al., 2024), MMs may face additional challenges related to navigating these two conflicting strategic premises, leading to confusion.

Yet, beyond their roles, and beyond their struggle to attain the attention of top management teams during strategy discourse to the best of the researcher's knowledge, there is limited research concerning the interactions between top management teams and MMs in SF discourse. Literature posits that inclusion does not guarantee the attention of top management teams and more needs to be done to ensure the interaction between the levels yields the promised result of open and inclusive SF processes (Brielmaier & Friesl, 2023; Dobusch et al., 2019; Splitter et al., 2024). The quality of ideas that inform long-term strategy are those that are strategic, however emanating from daily operations. Therefore, MMs may find that should their ideas be too operational, and thus of low quality, they may not be incorporated into organisational strategies by senior leadership, leading to unintended exclusion and the associated negative consequences (Adobor, 2019).

It is at this juncture that this research seeks to uncover the insights related to the experiences of MMs in SF and gain deeper understanding of the dynamics that underpin this interaction. The second research question emerged from this view which sought to understand the dynamic of MMs contribution to the SF processes of organisations.

This related to how they contribute to SF, what they contribute and the tools they employ when enacting their strategic roles presented below as:

RQ2: How to the MMs feed into the SF process of organisations and how is this captured?

In addition, the strategic efforts of MMs should be supported by infrastructure that enables them to capture the multi-source insights from sensing, facilitate their analysis and interpretations of information and assist MMs to build and craft storylines necessary to capture the attention of senior leadership and influence strategic decision-making. Literature on Information technology (IT) support for strategic processes empirically proved that investments by business leaders into IT systems that support the core functions of the organisation and directed specifically to facilitate employees sensing and sense-making functions were critical as they led to enhanced organisational dynamic capabilities and improved organisational performance in emerging market contexts (Chen et al., 2017). This highlights the

value that tools add in facilitating strategic agility by enabling the efficient sensing and seizing functions across the organisation and in particular to MMs.

This led to the third research question that sought to uncover the tools that MMs relied upon for the sensing function of SF below:

Research Question 3: What tools are used by MMs to facilitate the sensing function of SF?

Literature discusses possible methods of initiating an organisational renewal or change. Interestingly, research from Hortovanyi et al. (2021), posits the appointments of new senior leadership teams from outside the organisation as critical for signalling organisational renewal, and necessary to trigger the start of open and inclusive strategy implementation. In the scholars' research, communications of organisational renewal preceded the implementation of the open and inclusive strategy process, the start of which was triggered by the appointment and announcement of a new organisation president. This brings into question whether organisations could forge change from exclusive closed processes into open and inclusive with existing senior leadership teams and whether the process would be similar in such instances.

2.6 Strategic Thinking

Strategic thinking is concerned with how strategists think (Bonn, 2005). As a concept it was introduced in management literature by early writers on the subject namely Mintzberg and Waters (1985), who described the different types of strategies and the conditions under which each prevailed and scholars Graetz (2002) and Liedtka (1998), who defined the concepts and elements of ST and compared it to strategic planning. Uncertain, complex environments were associated with lesser central control and many actors in an organisation that responded to changes in the environment with "deliberately emergent" strategies Mintzberg and Waters (1985). This linked the concept of continuous monitoring and response to environmental shifts, with open strategy and strategic thinking.

Different scholars have since define strategic thinking (ST) in different, but related ways. Liedtka (1998,p.121) defines it as a "synthesizing process whose outcome is

an integrated perspective of the enterprise". Their research identified the elements of strategic thinking as having a systemic perspective, being intent-focused, intelligent opportunism, thinking in time, and being hypothesis driven. Graetz (2002,p.456) sees it as the combination of intuition, divergent thinking and creativity to synthesize information continuously to gain a sustained competitive advantage, Moon (2012) as a rational irrational, convergent and divergent thinking approach to find alternative ways of providing value alluding to the interdependent left brain and right activities required for strategic thinking, Geier (2024) as a combination of visionary, creative and synthetic thinking. These are all with the outcome of informing better strategic decision-making in complex, uncertain and turbulent environments (Goldman, 2015).

All these scholars converge on the view that strategic thinking starts with the adoption of a systems perspective. This incorporates looking beyond one's day to day role and becoming concerned with the understanding of the organisation as a whole and how different business units influence and are interdependent on each other. The scholars also align on the view that ST is associated with the employment of a combination of an analytical logical approaches together with a creative approaches to strategy making, that results in the imagining of new and different strategies adapt to the changing environments. The do however differ on the emphasis they place on the different elements of strategic thinking. Leidtka (1998) started with five elements which have gone through several iterations by other scholars, with the latest from Geier (2024) who focused only on the elements of visionary thinking, creative thinking and synthetic thinking as measures for assessing ST.

Strategic thinking (a component of DCs), differs from strategic planning (a component of RBV). Strategic planning was a formalised, logical, and convergent approach that guides implementation of strategies on a schedule; equivalent to operational planning, to drive efficiency (Graetz, 2002; Mintzberg, 2024; Teece, 2014). Strategic planning was posited by Mintzberg and Waters (1985) in the early works as requiring predictability of the environment to enable the realisation of strategies. It is concerned with control and efficiency in stable environments and is internally focused on the combinations of organisational resources in an inimitable manner for gaining competitive advantage. It is strategising on a set periodic schedule. It can be argued therefore that it is highly unsuitable for uncertain and turbulent market contexts. ST in contrast, serves as an additional element to strategic

planning that does not replace planning, but that ought to be viewed as a focus on the process rather than the resultant plan (Graetz, 2002). This means ST is always a continuous process, making it best suited for rapidly evolving uncertain and dynamic environments. Liedtka (1998) and Krassimir and Yusaf (2019) support this view and posit that strategic planning should observed as a catalyst and starting point, for the continuous process of strategic thinking.

Strategic thinking in practice is concerned with managers “developing strategic questions, forming issues, developing insights using strategic analysis, assessing the competitive landscape and generating strategic options” (Nuntamanop et al., 2013, p.247). In this way it concerned with managerial takes of SF processes. Empirically, ST has the elements of conceptual thinking, visionary thinking, creativity, analytical thinking, learning ability, synthesizing ability and objectivity, as the essential behaviours that demonstrate ST competency (Bonn, 2005; Geier, 2024; Liedtka, 1998; Moon, 2012). Leaders demonstrating these competencies were associated with strategic actions and strategies that led to business growth. This gave weight to the earlier arguments suggested in literature by Liedtka (1998) that compared and differentiated ST from strategic planning. The linking of ST to outputs of strategies and strategic actions, confirmed the link between strategic thinking and business growth. This also further justified ST as a critical and essential skill for leaders and employees across the organisation to possess, to gain the required strategic agility of DCs.

In practice however, in established multilayered organisations particularly, business leaders value more the principles of order and structure that are typical of strategic planning than the creative divergent principles of strategic thinking. With organisations designed and structured to produce this order, making it an arduous task to switch from established processes to be unstructured and unfamiliar innovation processes (Liedtka & Ogilvie, 2011; Mintzberg, 2024). This presents a paradox between cognitively what they know they should be doing to gain competitive advantage and what they essentially do in practice – more of what they have always done. It will therefore be interesting to uncover in practice the tensions presented by this paradox.

2.6.1 Elements of Strategic Thinking

2.6.1.1 Synthetic thinking

The sensing of opportunities requires the strategic thinker having adopted a systems perspective, to possess cognitive ability to recognise the need for change the recognition of patterns and signals of change in the environment. They ought to be able to make sense of the multiple, incomplete, contradictory and complex information from different sources (taking on a systems perspective), view it from different perspectives, find connections interlinkages and synthesize new meanings and hypotheses, to find new solutions to strategic problems (Bonn, 2005; Elsbach & Stigliani, 2018; Liedtka, 1998). This is an important element as it will enable management teams to effectively manage the ambiguity and adaptability required with exploring while exploiting. This makes the synthesizing element, a key aspect of strategic thinking.

2.6.1.2 Creative thinking

SF requires an element of creativity related to analysing the information then constructing creative hypotheses that guide emergent SF. Creative thinking in strategy, involves seeking new ideas and novel ways of doing things (Bonn, 2005). Creativity emanates from then need to imagine multiple future alternatives that may emanate from the information collected during the synthesis process (Bonn, 2005; Geier, 2024; Graetz, 2002; Liedtka, 1998). Creative thinking is where the divergent part of ST takes the logical analyses and converts to many different emergent ideas.

Creative thinking hinges on collaboration and social networks therefore aligning greatly with the principles of open and inclusive strategy. Research from Kauppila et al. (2018), posited that social relationship and diverse perspectives within organisations increased creativity associated with strategic decision-making. This means that when collaboration is encouraged within organisations, the interactions bring diverse perspectives and fragments of different knowledge that when combined, bring about emergent and innovative ideas to solve problems. In this way, it can be deduced, the principles of open strategy enable the ST element of creative thinking, and in turn, creative thinking brings benefits of open strategy to light.

2.6.1.3 Visionary Thinking

Visionary thinkers are those able to “define a guiding objective for their actions” (Geier,2024, p4). They can form and communicate a vision of the future that motivates, despite uncertainty (Geier, 2024). Having a clear vision for the future aids in giving direction and guiding focus in daily activities and routines that develop strategic agility and dynamic capabilities of the organisation. It is not limited to the upper echelons of the organisation. Liedtka (1998) referred to it as thinking in a manner that connects the past present and future that motivates employees of the organisation and drives action towards a common goal of the future.

2.6.2 Strategic thinking and middle management

To enable effective inclusion and interaction between top management teams and middle management in open SF, both parties require to build strategic discursive competence with each other (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). This means that middle managers require to be adept at engaging in a meaningful and presenting data in influential way that top managers understand. Research from Splitter et al. (2024) confirms this by positing that an exclusionary effect in inclusive strategy can occur when middle managers fail to gain the attention of top management teams through unfamiliarity of strategy discourse. The development of the specific mode of thinking that is ST, may be a method of gaining and improving strategic discourse for middle managers (Goldman et al., 2015; Liedtka, 1998).

Recent literature on strategic thinking has evolved and merged with the concept of design thinking. Although design thinking was originally associated with designers converting complex problems into simple designs, it was noted in recent work by scholars such as Elsbach and Stigliani (2018) to have integrated into management literature in complex uncertain contexts, through the usefulness of design-based tools such as prototyping, brainstorming, idea visualisation, user observation, empathy being the emotive aspect, and lastly iteration. These are used to solve complex, ambiguous business problems and drive innovation. Scholars including Liedtka and Ogilvie (2011), identified design thinking an essential skill for managers to enhance their sensing and seizing capabilities. Notably, the principles are identical to strategic thinking with the distinction being the focus on the use of the tools for design thinking vs the cognitive ability of the individual with strategic thinking.

For this research strategic thinking, will be referred to as the cognitive ability to strategically connect three types of thinking namely creative thinking, synthetic thinking and visionary thinking (Liedtka, 1998; Geier, 2024) related to the strategic thinking of MMs.

This starkly contrasts with the traditional view of strategy as being reserved for the executive or corporate elites of the organisation and encourages formal inclusion of employees to gain access to wider perspectives and more aligned strategic initiatives (Langenmayr et al., 2024; Splitter et al., 2024). However, in the turbulent uncertain contexts the merits of involvement of more and varied members of the organisation hold as changes occur more rapidly than a few people in upper structures can possibly keep abreast of. People at lower levels of the organisation interface more frequently with customers, suppliers and other external stakeholders therefore an organisations DCs should include a mechanism that continuously channels information upwards to the strategic decision makers and should ideally develop strategic thinking, to be able to capture these insights for decision-making.

Strategic thinking is a continuous process, cognitive in nature, requiring a systems perspective and a combination of logical analysis as well as creativity. This research will also take the cue from literature and relate strategic thinking as existing squarely with the individual and their abilities, linking it as an antecedent for strategic agility at the micro or individual level as only individuals can think strategically, not organisations (Liedtka, 1998).

Geier (2024) provided a validated measure for strategic thinking that was based on prior works of scholars such as Graetz (2002) , Liedtka (1998), Nuntamanop et al. (2013), and Bonn (2005) and provided a strategic thinking assessment that validated the core measurements of strategic thinking as synthetic thinking, visionary thinking and creative thinking. These discussed in detail below.

Traditional Strategic thinking is posited to be under the threat of disruption brought on by amongst other technological factors and 4IR. Scholar Namaki (2021) suggests a shift in strategic thinking core concepts and teaching should include the penetration of technology and AI into core concepts of strategy making and strategic thinking. However, as admittedly there is no known development of literature currently to measure this scholars' novel views of strategic thinking, this research will evaluate

strategic thinking in the traditional sense as per Namaki (2021)'s description due to availability of a validated measurement tool.

2.6.3 Strategic Thinking and Open Strategy

.Developing strategic thinking capabilities at this level, will therefore be beneficial for strategic agility. Due to their role as issue sellers to the upper levels, it is imperative for MMs to sense, make sense of issues, synthesize them into legible hypotheses the top management team for them to act on. Literature supports this view by proposing the development of strategic thinking at levels below top management teams, as a more efficient method of continuous market sensing due to market proximity (Goldman et al., 2015; Graetz, 2002; Healey & Hodgkinson, 2024; Liedtka, 1998; Salvato & Vassolo, 2018) .

Proponents of the emergent open and inclusive strategy suggest for organisations to depart from historic views of strategy as an exclusive, secretive process reserved only for the corporate elite, due to its inefficiency in contexts of rapid change. It is proposed that for a more inclusive strategy processes, the search for strategic ideas be widened and the development of understanding of strategy across the organisation be undertaken, to improve strategic discourse across the organisation (Goldman et al., 2015; Liedtka, 1998; Splitter et al., 2024; Whittington et al., 2011). Literature theoretically recognises the importance of integrating the skills from ST for the attainment of the benefits of open and inclusive strategy in organisation.

However, in practice employees perceived strategic thinking as an elite function (Goldman et al., 2015; Langenmayr et al., 2024), suggesting that inclusion of diverse levels of employees is not current mainstream practice in organisations. Research on open strategy posits that senior leadership teams, felt their power challenged by the notion of inclusive strategy with employees frustrated when their inputs were perceived as disregarded by senior leadership teams in SF processes (Splitter et al., 2024; Whittington et al., 2011). This represents a theoretical tension between the two actors and suggests the simple addition of employees to SF processes may not guarantee strategic agility, but that learning on both sides may be required.

Equipping employees at lower levels with sensing, sense-making and synthesizing skills associated with ST, was posited to assist in gaining the promised benefits of strategic agility (Goldman et al., 2015; Liedtka, 1998; Nuntamanop et al., 2013).

This insight led to the research question 4 presented below, which sought to uncover the current behaviours and practices of ST that MMs exhibit in organisations and how they incorporated ST into their inputs into SF.

Research Question 4: What are the ST behaviours and practices exhibited by MMs in South African financial services organisations?

This research therefore aimed to add to research on dynamic capabilities and the antecedents of strategic agility, by exploring, in the South African context of financial services sector organisations, the concept strategic agility and strategic thinking at the individual level of the organisation, with a particular focus on MMs. To uncover and understand their experiences of the SF processes of their respective organisations. In addition, this research aimed to explore how ST was incorporated into the SF processes of organisations.

Chapter 3 below, presented the research questions in logical order and demonstrates the integration of the research questions derived from the critical evaluation of the literature in Chapter 2.

3 CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

3.1 Research Questions

The research questions that were used to guide this exploratory research were integrated into the literature review in Chapter 2. This allowed the presentation of a logical link to how the research questions were derived.

In this chapter, an overview of the research questions is presented using a diagram in Figure 1 below, that summarises the research questions and presents the relationship between the research questions. A description of each research question follows.

3.1.1 Overview of the Integrated Research Questions

The various research questions could be assessed as having the relationship presented in the figure below.

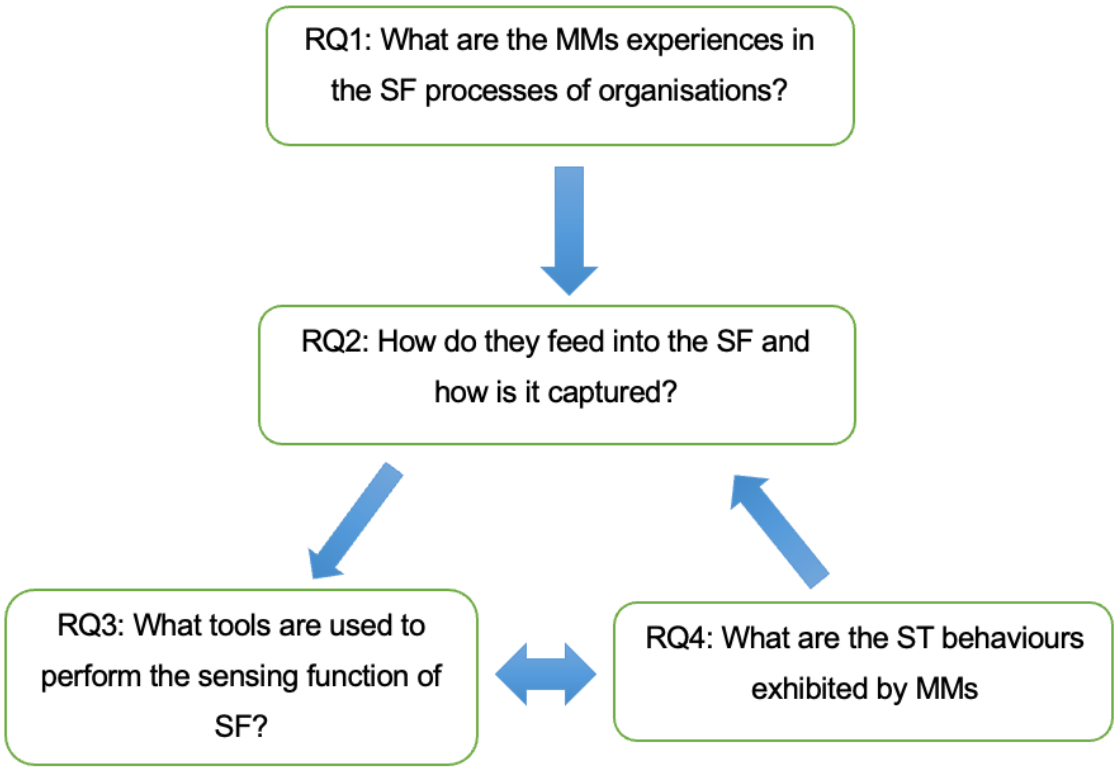

Figure 1: Research Questions Map

Source: Authors own

4 CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

This research aimed to explore the experiences of MMs in the strategy formulation processes of South African organisations in the financial services sector and how they incorporate strategic thinking in their contributions. This chapter therefore first presents a summary of research design and methodology choices in Table 1 below, followed with a detailed discussion on these choices and methodology limitations in the rest of the chapter.

Table 1: Summary of research methodology and design

Choice of Research Design	Qualitative
Research Philosophy	Interpretivism
Purpose of Research Design	Exploratory
Approach to Theory Development	Inductive
Methodological Choice	Mono-method
Research strategy	Narrative research
Time Horizon	Cross-sectional
Population	MMs in financial services sector organisations in South Africa, at least one year experience in MM role
Unit of Analysis	Individual MMs
Sampling Method	Purposive, non-probability sampling
Measurement Instrument	Interview guide, semi-structured interviews
Data Collection	Semi-structured interviews, open-ended questioning, recorded interviews. Approved ethical clearance, confidentiality maintained
Data Analysis Approach	ATLAS.TI Software, Thematic analysis
Quality controls	Data triangulation, respondent triangulation, Evidence provision, Scientific robustness

4.2 Choice of Research Design

To explore the experiences of MMs in their organisation's SF process and how they incorporate ST in strategic initiatives in organisations, an inductive qualitative research method was used, due to the enquiring nature of the research topic. The choice of a good research design is critical as it informs the overarching approach of research. It is posited in literature as determining the structure of the research questions, the decisions related to sampling and explains why specific methods were chosen to conduct the research (Flick, 2011).Thus, in line with the nature of the topic, being exploratory, a qualitative research design was chosen for this research inquiry and underpinned the methodological and literature approached to the research.

Qualitative research is posited in literature to be useful in exploration of a lesser-known phenomenon thereby gaining in-depth, rich, humanised perspectives and insights to better understanding of the research problem and question and (Bhangu et al., 2023; Saunders & Lewis, 2018). The specific experiences of MMs in organisational contexts are lesser known , particularly from an empirical perspective. Research on open strategy, strategic thinking and dynamic capabilities, the overarching theoretical concepts that this research is based, are reported as largely conceptual (Shaik & Dhir, 2020). Therefore, qualitative research was best suited for this research as it encouraged open ended enquiry that sought to gain an understanding of attitudes and behaviours of the participants in their natural setting and to derive meaning of situations and phenomena.

In contrast, quantitative research was deemed unsuitable for the same reasoning. Quantitative research methods were described as more suited when the theoretical perspectives are well researcher and well established and where the researcher sought to test against the established laws (Adams et al., 2014). For this reason, this research design was deemed inappropriate for the research topic.

In addition, qualitative designs assist in the understanding of topics emanating from respondents relaying the meanings and interpretations of their realities, based on their contexts at the time of enquiry (Ayr, 2012). Based on this insights, semi-structured interviews were conducted in participants natural settings. In qualitative research inquiry, this is posited to provide high quality of associated responses of their experiences in the respective organisations, which is essential for capturing rich data. Qualitative research methods were selected also because they were posited

as providing rigorous techniques for the analysis of subjective and complex social phenomena, often reported as being difficult to quantify (Bhangu et al., 2023).

It is for these reasons therefore that qualitative research methods were selected as the basis upon which of this research inquiry was undertaken.

4.2.1 Purpose of Research Design

In line with the qualitative research methodology selected, an exploratory research approach was selected and used for this research inquiry. The researcher sought to gain new insights related to the MMs experiences with SF in financial services organisations and how they incorporated strategic thinking in their contributions. This, to the knowledge of the researcher, had not been explicitly researched in the literature reviewed, therefore the researcher sought to uncover new insights, and assess the topic from a new and different angle (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). Past research had discussed theoretically, how MMs may be impacted by inclusion in the SF processes, but to the knowledge of the researcher, none had actually gained the insights from the MMs themselves for example (Brielmaier & Friesl, 2023; Brinkman, 2013). Hence an exploratory inquiry was selected as most appropriate.

The exploratory approach was ideal as the research questions were open-ended in nature (Sampath et al., 2021), there were no set clear outcomes, these were gained from the analysis of the participants responses.

4.2.2 Research Philosophy

The research philosophy should align with the research design chosen. On this basis that the philosophical approach for this research was the interpretivist as aligned with qualitative inquiry, it is a paradigm that that seeks to gain insight into people's experiences and interpretations of their surrounding world which aligned with the principles of qualitative research . Interpretivist philosophy was selected as the lens through which this research inquiry would be conducted, analysed and interpreted (Creswell et al., 2007) as the topic required the understanding of what was occurring in the natural settings of MMs, related to SF processes. Saunders and Lewis (2018) confirm the appropriateness of this approach for business research due to organisations complexity and uniqueness as context mattered for this approach. Interpretivist paradigm was therefore selected due to its alignment with qualitative research and due to the nature of the research inquiry seeking to gain and

understand the views of MMs in SF forums, how they understood the processes and what was expected of them and how they enacted their strategic roles.

4.2.3 Approach to Theory Development

This research inquiry adopted a primarily inductive theory development approach as the researcher approached data analysis from the semi-structured interviewed from a clean-slate perspective. The codes emerged from the data and were not applied to the data. In this way, the approach was inductive as theory and conclusions emerged from the data as opposed to data fitting into pre-constructed theory, as in the deductive approach (Adams et al., 2014).

In addition, the research gained the perspectives of MMs through their experiences through data that was collected, analysed, coded, themed and from which conclusions were drawn in a general manner, as characteristic of qualitative analysis (Brinkman, 2013). The ground-up approach was deemed relevant for the research questions as they were based on exploration and gaining understanding without the knowledge of what would emerge from them (Saunders & Lewis, 2018).

4.2.4 Methodological Choices

Saunders and Lewis (2018) argued that for business management research, such this research inquiry, a mixed methodological approach would be ideal. They offered as due to mixed methodology having the advantage of one methodological approach overcoming the weaknesses of the other, and the possibilities of attaining richer data from mixed methodology. Whereas this view was logically sound, due to the time limitations posed for the timeous completion of the MBA, mixed methodology was not selected for this research inquiry, and a mono-methodological approach was selected instead. It would have been ideal to have closed the research loop by testing the findings from the qualitative research through a quantitative survey, to either confirm or disprove them, had time allowed.

Primary data was collected from the study sample using semi-structured interviews that were up to one hour in duration. These were recorded and transcribed, processes and analysed and thematic analysis was applied (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). The interviewer was mindful and avoided the common error of beginning to summarise narratives from the interviewees and gain validation during the interview

processes. This error compromises the quality of insights, as pointed out by Brinkman (2013). Desktop research was also conducted and informed the arguments presented in the literature review.

4.2.5 Research Strategy

A narrative research inquiry was adopted as the research strategy for this research inquiry through semi-structured interviews. This from narrative inquiry allowed the MMs to relay their stories of their experiences in their organisations past and present, of SF processes, and enabled a deeper understanding of their experiences whether included or excluded from SF processes. This narrative approach was also used to gain understanding of the MMs awareness and understanding of ST and how they practiced ST in their daily lives or when enacting their strategic roles. This gave a perspective of how SF processes had possibly evolved over time (Creswell et al., 2007; Saunders & Lewis, 2018), where relevant for example. As an example, some MMs relayed that there had been moves from top-down and closed SF processes to recently more inclusive SF processes and their reasonings behind why this had changed.

4.2.6 Time Horizon

A cross-sectional study was conducted to explore the current experiences of MMs in SF processes. This type of study provides insights into a group at a point in time and requires a heterogeneous sample for credibility, including varied races, genders, and socio-economic backgrounds (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). This research met those criteria. Additionally, due to the time constraints of the MBA course, a cross-sectional study was the ideal choice as it allowed for the rapid collection of data within time constraints.

Longitudinal studies have been conducted in literature that evaluated the process and progress of open strategy in organisations (Splitter et al., 2024) which tracked the practice of open strategy over time in an organisation and gave insight into the real time progress and dynamics. Longitudinal design has the advantage of studying phenomena over time and observing change over time (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). However, due to practical considerations of time, a cross-sectional research approach was adopted instead.

4.3 Research Methodology

4.3.1 Population

The targeted population for this research inquiry were employees of South African organisations in the financial services sector, who occupied positions at middle management level. They were referred to in this research as middle managers or MMs. These were either MMs due to their structural position in the organisational hierarchy (reporting into senior leadership and having a team that reports into them) or where their organisations formally designated their role as middle management.

This population was selected due to the critical functional and structural positioning they occupied in organisations (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). Literature reviewed posited that MMs controlled narratives in organisations due to their influence horizontally and vertically combined with occupying operational and strategic roles. MMs' inclusion and participation in SF were posited to result in strong, aligned strategies due to their unique positioning and insights, within organisations. MMs were impacted in different ways by organisations employing open and inclusive strategic processes, and as individuals, limited research existed on their lived experiences in SF processes in practice (Splitter et al., 2023). Therefore, this research took interest in their unique perspectives outside of theoretical concepts.

The financial services sector was chosen as the context for this research as it is an established industry sector and one of the largest industries in South Africa. It has faced much turbulence and disruption in recent years. They face challenges of rapid technological advances, low customer growth due to worsening economic conditions, and increasing competition from new market players, being communications industry that is using their technological know-how and leveraging their customer base to diversify into Fintech This puts pressure on them to develop strategic agility for their organisations to maintain their advantage in the markets.

4.3.2 Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis was the individual MMs. This narrative research inquiry was focused and collected data from these individual MMs to gain insights into their experiences as narrated by themselves.

There was variance in the organisations, characteristics and backgrounds of the respondents for heterogeneity, however, they were all limited to the same level across the organisations, which allowed for the establishment and the validation of the data collected through respondent triangulation (Saunders & Lewis, 2018).

4.3.3 Sampling Method and Size

Sampling was used to gather data as opposed to the whole population of MMs in the financial services sector, for the practical reasons of time and resources. It would have been highly impractical to try gather data from the entire population, though this was posited by Saunders and Lewis (2018) as a more accurate and effective approach.

This research enquiry was exploratory and inductive in nature and thus associated with non-probability purposive sampling with a heterogenous sample of participants from different organisations, departments, backgrounds and different MM positions, to ensure diversity and richness of perspectives and experiences (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). Non-probability sampling was selected because the researcher lacked a complete list of the MMs population, and the impracticality of seeking to interview all MMs in South Africa. The purposive approach relied on the researcher's judgement in selection of a sample, deemed relevant to explore the research question against certain pre-determined criteria (Saunders & Lewis, 2018).

Respondents were selected for participation provided they met the following criteria: 1) Full time employment in the financial services sector organisations 2) employed in an organisation with operations in South Africa 3) occupied middle management positions and 4) in middle management position for a minimum of one year.

The initial invitations to participate sent out by the researcher, stipulated these requirements for initial self-selection of the participants into or out of the sample list. The researcher further confirmed that participants met qualifying criteria at the beginning of the semi-structured interviews, through interview question 1.1, which asked them to describe their role and reporting structure within the organisation.

The researcher leveraged their networks to identify participants initially, then participants in addition recommended their own networks that met the criteria. In this

way, snowball sampling was employed in the identification and selection of participants (Saunders & Lewis, 2018).

Non-probability sampling was posited by Saunders and Lewis (2018) to typically as one that required smaller sample sizes of between 12 and 30 participants for university student level research and/or until saturation is approached. Furthermore, scholar McCracken (1988), suggests the emphasis of qualitative research as seeking to gain detailed and richness of data, such that themes emerge and not simply volume of data as in quantitative analysis. Therefore, the sample size matters less in qualitative research than in quantitative research. Qualitative research required interviewing up until data saturation where no new themes or insights emerged.

This resulted in a sample of 14 participants aligned with the analysis approach, although the researcher had approached close to 30 potential participants through the call for research participation. The saturation graph presented below in Figure 2 demonstrated the saturation point was approaching from the 10th participant during analysis stage and justified the sample size of 14.

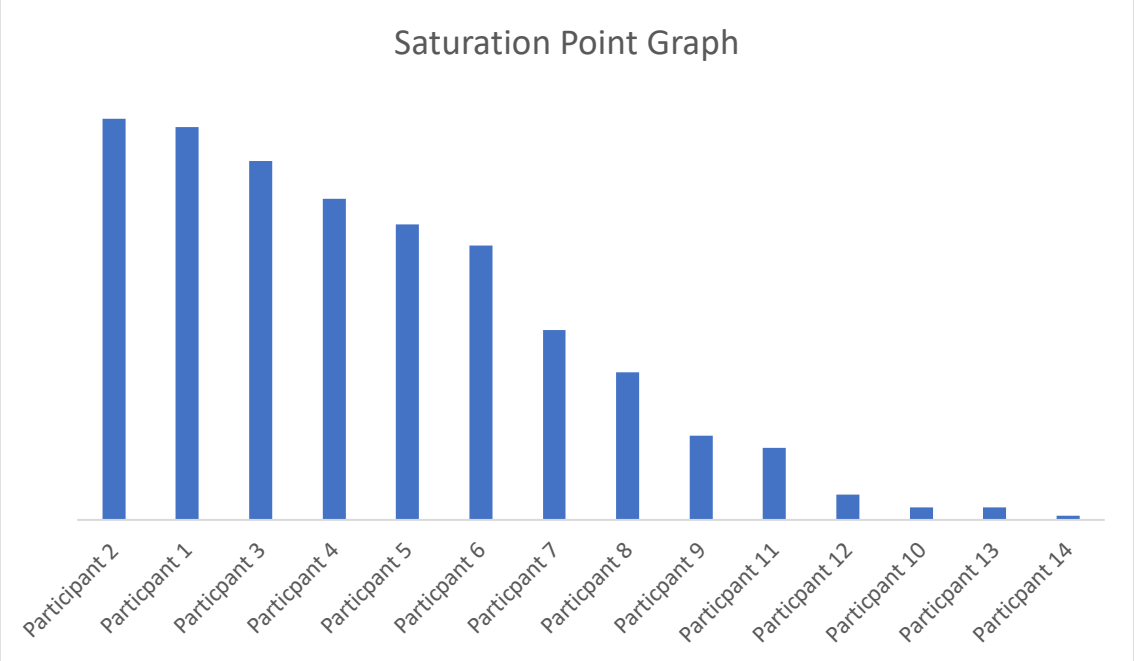

Figure 2*: Graph demonstrating code saturation*

Source: Authors own

4.3.4 Measurement Instrument

Brinkman (2013), argued that a qualitative interview ought to have a thread that connects the research questions to the interview guide, the interview and analysis and reporting. Therefore, the crafting of the interview guide was critically important to ensure that it addressed the research questions and facilitated accurate reporting.

The interview guide for this research inquiry, was crafted and adapted from previous similar research outcomes of previous literature for example from the research of Liedtka (1998),Moon (2012), Nuntamanop et al. (2013), and Geier (2024). This was based on the findings from the research literature review and was formulated to enable the obtainment of relevant responses aligned with the research questions.

The interview guide was crafted such that it facilitated a semi-structed interview approach with a set of core open-ended questions, that also enabled some flexibility for the researcher to explore topics that emerged from the experiences of participants (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). Question 1.1 asked “Tell me more about your current role and your reporting structure” which allowed participants to describe their roles and hierarchal position and facilitated the researcher to assess their suitability for the interview. The interview guide was submitted to the ethics committee and received the relevant ethical clearance before it was utilised to collect the primary qualitative data. The interview guide went through an iterative process of correction and adaptation based on feedback from the research supervisor as well as from feedback received from the Ethics committee. A copy of the ethical clearance approval was attached to the Appendices list at the end of this research report.

The researcher kept in mind the recommendations from the scholar McCracken (1988), in the design and the implementation of the interview guide as it prioritised open-ended questions, the approach for questioning went from general and broad open questioning to narrowed down to a specific idea and/or the researcher probed deeper utilising specific questions when the participant was vague in response. The semi-structed nature of the interview guide facilitated a flexible questioning approach, was simple and the questions were adjusted based on cultural sensitivities where appropriate.

The semi-structured interview guide allowed for a level of structure for the interview, whilst simultaneously allowing for flexibility, probing and that was led by the respondents during the respective interviews.

4.3.5 Data Gathering Process

Research interviews are the architype of qualitative research methods for conduction of empirical research. As this research was qualitative in nature, primary data was collected from one-on-one recorded semi-structured interviews, which were conducted with a purposive sample of heterogenous participants from financial services organisations in South Africa. Data were also collected from desktop research of predominantly high quality rated academic journals, which informed the theoretical arguments presented in the literature review in Chapter 2 of this research report.

The 14 semi-structured interviews were conducted utilising online video conferencing through Google Meets, Teams and Zoom online platforms and used recording tools namely Otter.AI and the researchers' recording applications on their smartphone. Participants were geographically dispersed (example in Durban, Cape Town and across Gauteng) and due to the time of year (November – December period), video conferencing facilitated access to participants at their workplaces and at their homes. As a result, interviews were conducted either first thing in the morning when some of the participants arrived at work, over lunch time and most were in the evenings as participants were waiting to avoid rush hour traffic.

The flexibility of the data collection approach through online video platforms allowed the researcher access to a higher number of participants for interviews. The benefits of qualitative interviewing , which is the observance of participants verbal and non—verbal responses and cues and changing the approach accordingly (Saunders & Lewis, 2018), was maintained through the researcher insisting the cameras be switched on for the duration of the interviews. Only two participants could not have their camera on for entire duration of the interview due to connectivity issues, however the flow of the interviews, though interrupted were not significantly impacted. Interviews lasted an average of 48mins and a total of 669mins of interviews were done adding to the validity of the interview process.

Additionally, transcription software was employed for the transcription of the research interviews immediately following the semi-structured interviews. The audio recording was converted to text by Otter.AI software and the researcher, ensured the accuracy of the transcriptions by re-listening to the recordings and following the transcription as well as editing where the software had made errors. This ensured accuracy of the data capturing from the interviews. The software was accurate approximately 95% of the time and required minimal intervention from the researcher which assisted the reliability of the data (Saunders & Lewis, 2018).

Semi-structured interviews accommodated the free self-expression of participants in response to questions, and that new material be explored and probed further as it spontaneously arose. This was crucial for obtaining the individual perspectives of the experiences that MMs had within their organisations. Informed consent was confirmed (Brinkman, 2013) verbally at the commencement of each interview and participants signed confidentiality agreement forms. The interviews were treated with high confidentiality (Peticca-Harris et al., 2016), respondent confidentiality was ensured through anonymisation of organisation names to “the organisation” and participant names to “the interviewee” in transcripts and assigned participant numbers (e.g. Participant 4) for data analysis and reporting as presented in Table 2 of Chapter 5 of this research report.

4.3.6 Analysis Approach

The exploratory nature of this research inquiry necessitated data collection from qualitative semi-structured interviews. This resulted in non-text primary data from audio recordings which were transcribed into text data for analysis through the adoption of conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Saunders & Lewis, 2018). The analysis and coding process occurred soon after the interview, so as to maintain the essence of the data. Conventional content analysis was used as the basis for data analysis as Hsieh & Shannon (2005) posited this as one of the numerous ways to analyse data collected through open ended interviews, that was most suited for the inductive approach. The researcher listened to recordings during transcription serval times and the transcribed data read a few times by the **researcher to familiarise themselves with the data**. Data was then analysed and inductively and **initial open coding done**, to capture the essence and meaning as close as possible to the initial raw data. In the coding approach researcher started with a clean slate approach to the analytical process, repeatedly immersed

themselves in the data allowed the data to guide the themes that emerged as per the inductive approach.

Axial coding was then applied where the first category codes were categorised into inter-linked and interrelated sub-categories and categories. This is a more advanced categorisation of data which were then **aggregated into themes** (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). ATLAS.TI software was utilised to code the data, categorisation of the data was however conducted manually on Microsoft Excel and Microsoft word, utilising codes exported from ATLAS.TI. The codes were generated from summarising sentences from the participants and assigning a summarising code or phrase that encapsulated the essence of the sentence. The researcher made decisions each time about the categories (Creswell et al., 2007) which were determined by grouping codes per research question and the clustering them based on relatedness. This resulted in three to five categories per research question. Similar, related codes were clustered into one category and so on. This process Then categorised codes were re-loaded onto ATLAS.TI for grouping and theming. 445 primary codes emerged from the 14 semi-structured interviews, speaking to the extent and richness of data collected. To ensure that the codes addressed the research question, each code was assigned the numeric of the research question, which facilitated manual categorisation as well. These analyses were conducted until coding saturation was reached i.e. when the rate of new codes declined, which indicated the approaching of the saturation point.

These findings from the analysed themes were presented in Chapter 5 and compared to relevant theories and research findings in the discussion in Chapter 6.

4.3.7 Quality Controls

The researcher undertook measures to ensure the integrity of their research inquiry. This can be put into question due to the subjective nature of qualitative research. Integrity concerns ensuring the validity, reliability and credibility of qualitative research (Stiles, 1993), by employing certain quality controls. Meaning researchers ought to be consistent, transparent and reflective to maintain the integrity of qualitative research.

Credibility was ensured for this research inquiry through the provision of all supporting documentation and recordings as evidence during submission as well as

providing a detailed account of the data gathering construction and analysis steps as discussed in sections 4.3.5 and 4.3.6. In summary, data construction was ensured through a heterogenous sample was selected and outlined in Table 2 of Chapter 5, interviews being co-constructed as they were semi-structured and the interviewer reflected and made noted following each interview to capture the essence of the discussion (Stiles, 1993).

Reliability was ensured through the documented consistency of the procedures applied in obtaining the primary data. For example, the researcher used a single set of interview questions from the interview guide to conduct the basis of all semi-structured interviews, which had been ethically cleared. The researcher has also meticulously documented in the data collection section how the data collection was conducted, such that another researcher would be able to conduct this similar research again, and in the data analysis section above, the research again meticulously described the analysis process they undertook (Stiles, 1993).

Validity and robustness of the data and conclusions of the research inquiry was ensured by applying triangulation of data sources (Stiles, 1993) for example. The researcher ensured respondent triangulation by interviewing a heterogenous sample of participants from diverse backgrounds and organisations to ensure that the research phenomenon was captured from different angles and perspectives. Data triangulation was also applied through the comparison and relation of the research findings to findings in literature and through testing the theoretical constructs from literature reviews and were compared against the lived experiences of the participants, with the interview guide.

4.4 Research Limitations

Although the qualitative research approach was ideal for this research inquiry, owing to the fact that literature was reported as not yet mature for strategic thinking and open strategy (Geier, 2024; Splitter et al., 2024), it was not without its limitations. Saunders and Lewis (2018) outlined the following as limitations to qualitative research inquiry. Firstly, the findings from qualitative research are not quantifiable as they were collected as text data. Statistical analysis could not therefore be applied to the qualitative data, affecting generalisability and replicability of the data. Secondly, qualitative data being subjective and context-specific also affected the

generalisability of the data. Thirdly, qualitative research was observed as limited in its generalisability owing to the smaller sample size when compared to quantitative research which required 150+ respondents. This research included a sample size of 14 participants specifically in the financial services sector in South Africa, which raises questions of whether the findings could be generalised to MMs in other sectors and/or in other countries. In addition, the sampling approach of non-probability purposive sampling, though relevant for qualitative research,

The identification, accessing of participants, the process of securing interviews and gaining informed consent were aspects of qualitative research that Peticca-Harris et al. (2016) described as not as straightforward and linear as may have been depicted, but rather a dynamic process that may have presented additional challenges were it not considered during planning stages. As such, online interviews were conducted for this research, which detracted from the standards of traditional qualitative interviews that are conducted as in person one-on-one interviews.

Lastly, the time horizon was also a limitation as only a cross-sectional approach could be adopted owing to the timelines specified for the MBA course.

5 CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the key findings derived from the narratively collected primary data, collected through in-depth semi structured interviews, that endeavoured to answer the research questions presented in Chapter 3. These pertained to the experiences of middle managers in the strategy formulation process and how they incorporate strategic thinking into their contributions to strategy formulation for the attainment of dynamic capabilities based on the theory from Teece (2007).

This chapter begins with presenting the characteristics of the participants from which data was collected to provide context, and thereafter, logically presents findings from the interviews following the qualitative analysis process of transcription, coding, categorising, and grouping into salient themes.

5.2 Sample description and context

The characteristics of the sample of participants are presented in Table 2 below. The purposive sample was obtained through judgement and snowball sampling, utilising the researchers' networks for referrals. A total of 14 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with individual middle managers, as the research sought to gain a deep understanding of the unique experiences of people within this particular level within an organisation as described in Chapter 2. The middle managers occupied 14 different roles in different organisations within the financial services industry, which provided a diversity of insights, and had been exposed to strategy formulation processes of their organisations past and present.

The names of the participants and their organisations were anonymised by assigning participant numbers in the analysis to maintain the confidentiality of the participants. Where participants or the interviewer had mentioned names of participants and/or organisations, it was amended during the transcription process by assigning a name of "the organisation" or editing out the name to protect respective identities.

The sample consisted of a 36% female and 64% male cohort of middle managers, who collectively had been in middle management roles for an average of 3.8 years. They all had previous exposure to the SF processes of their organisations whether directly or indirectly. Those with direct experience and exposure were encouraged to share their experiences pertaining to their involvement in the process, and the

participants with indirect exposure were encouraged to share their experiences with participating in SF indirectly. This provided balanced perspectives of the group of middle managers.

Participants were in addition encouraged to share their lived experiences pertaining to the subject matter as far as possible as well as to not limit their experience to their current organisation, but to include experiences from previous organisations where they had held middle manager roles, and to compare and contrast their experiences across organisations. To obtain richness and depth of data, participants who wanted to sometimes express their themselves in isiZulu were given leeway to do so as the researcher believed this would allow free expression from participants. However, only a few phrases required translation into English by the researcher.

Two of the participants occupied roles as in-house strategists in their respective organisations. They narrated their unique experiences of their involvement in the SF processes of their organisations as strategists who were also middle managers. Most participants held middle manager roles in key strategic business units of organisations for example, another participant was a Business enablement role responsible for the entire bank's customer data management and a Head of strategic pricing and product development, responsible for determining competitive pricing strategies of their organisation, for example, which can be argued as one of an organisation's key enabler s for competitive advantage.

Table 2: Description of Participants

Participants	Gender	Financial Services Industry	Middle Manager Title	Years in MM role	Interview Duration(min)
Participant 1	M	Banking insurance	Product Portfolio Lead	3	60
Participant 2	M	Insurance	Business Strategist	5	56
Participant 3	F	Investments	Senior Operations Manager	3	60
Participant 4	M	Banking	Business manager: Products	8	51
Participant 5	F	Banking	Business Enablement Manager	3	76
Participant 6	M	Investments	Strategic Accounts Manager	3	36
Participant 7	M	Insurance	Head of Data analytics	2	45
Participant 8	F	Banking	Digital Transformation Advisor	3	25
Participant 9	M	Insurance		5	38
Participant 10	M	Investments	Senior Portfolio Manager	8	45
Participant 11	M	Banking	Head of Marketing and communications	3	52
Participant 12	F	Investments	Legal Advisor	3	45
Participant 13	F	Insurance	Head of strategic pricing and product development	4	45
Participant 14	M	Insurance	Head of risk billing	2	35
Total					**669min**

5.3 Introductory Questions

The researcher reassured the participants of confidentiality and obtained verbal consent from each of the 14 participants at commencement of the interviews. The researcher sought to make the participant at ease by engaging in small talk to build rapport and providing background to the research for context. Opening questions asked participants to describe their roles within their respective organisations and

outline their reporting structures, to ascertain their position in the company, deduct whether they were indeed middle managers as per the criteria in Chapter 4, and get them comfortable to talk openly.

5.4 Research Question Results

The results of the research inquiry are presented below in a logical outline of salient themes that emerged per research question, supported by quotations from participant. A summary of the themes is presented at the end of the chapter in Table 2.

5.4.1 Research Question 1

What are the middle managers experiences with the strategy formulation process?

Research Question 1 aimed to ascertain MMs familiarity with the SF processes of the organisations as well as to gauge the level of involvement and sentiments towards the SF processes with interview question 1.1 and 1.2 in the guide Were directed at uncovering the pertinent issues surrounding MM involvement in SF processes in practice as discussed in Chapter 2.

Figure 3 below presents an overview of the key themes and categories that emerged in response to Research Question 1.

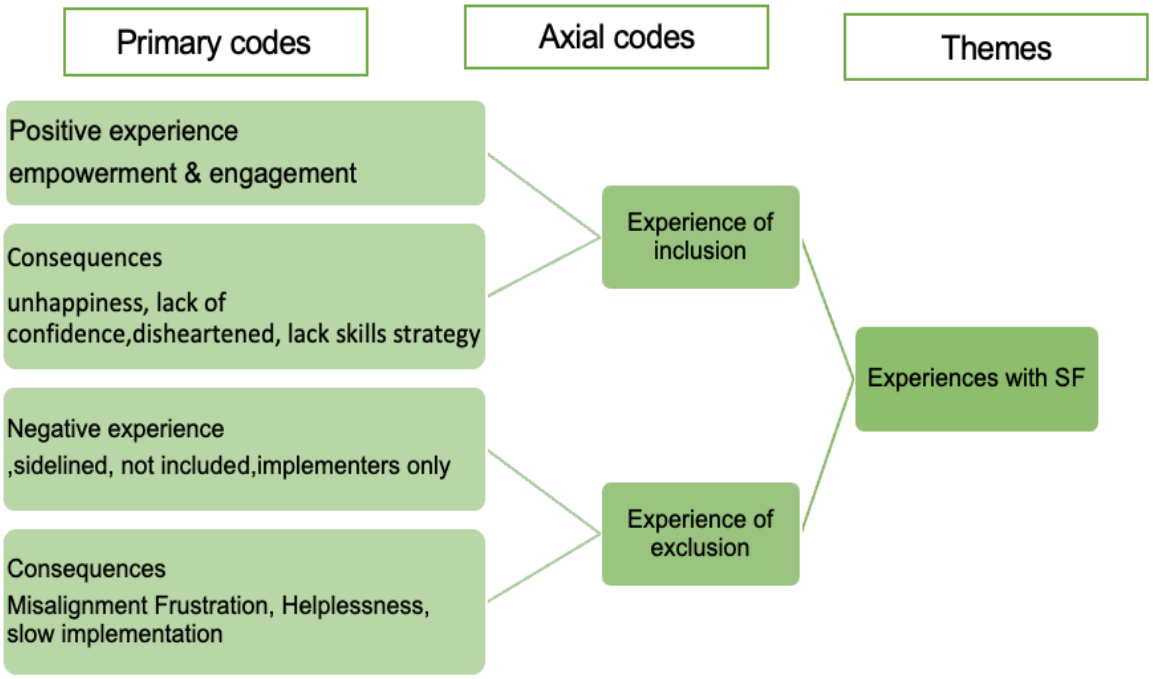

Figure 3: *Key codes and themes for research question 1*

Source: authors own

5.4.1.1 Experiences with SF

With regards to enquiring on their familiarity with the SF processes or events, to make it easier for the participants to relate to what was being asked, the researcher used non-academic corporate jargon of “Strat sessions” or “Bosberraads” to refer to the SF process typically carried out in organisations. All 14 participants were familiar with Bosberaads additionally, gave insights into SF processes in their organisations.

> *“Usually, let's say Exco would go out and have the Bosberaads. Then they'll come back and then present, you know what they think, or just maybe the CEO, what he's thinking. CO members saying what I see that should then filter down into the various departments, and then those departments will have their own strategy sessions. And you will obviously, yeah, you probably go back to the main dog to the like, primary strategy. But what I find is a little bit of a disconnect. I don't*

necessarily think people actually understand what strategy is. Yeah." (Participant 12)

"They are going to the bush with input from this is what you should do. These are the insights which supports strategic direction. We've talked about this, but we are here now to really dependence, just test this. So, there's some sort of input by which comes from into management. Gets to test. It gets approved, then it gets like, then cascaded down." (Participant 2)

Initial responses provided insights into the level SF processes, and the varied ways in which they were required to be involved, that were organisation specific. Participants either had experiences related to being involved in the SF process or of being excluded from SF process, both discussed below.

i. Exclusion from SF

Insights from some of the participants uncovered there to be general exclusion of MMS in SF processes through a general top-down approach and sometimes differences within organisation. Participants relayed experiences for being excluded from the SF and only consulted once it was time to implement strategies in terms of feasibility and implementation timelines.

"…we would be part of the strategy formulation in terms of, so, how would it work? You know, so practicalizing. This is the strategy. This is what we need to achieve in three years. You as middle managers, need to help us. What would the implementation plan look like? What kinds of resources do you need, and how would you then marry the resources to the implementation? And, of course, Track Set results. So yes, we would be part of the input of the strategy, but from the implementation…" (Participant 11)

Three participants narrated experiences of being excluded from SF and the costs of having organisational strategies formulated in a top-down manner then cascaded down to them without any prior involvement. Some became visibly passionate in

their expression and body language when relaying their opinions on the subject. One participant ensured confidentiality again by reconfirming he wouldn't be identified.

> *"And unfortunately, at the organisation, we would actually also be in a position to be part of the strategy, the formulation process, so we wouldn't have any input in terms of this would work. This wouldn't work. Maybe let's change this, that or the other. Because, as I said, we are closer to knowing how it will be operationalised."* (Participant 11)

Some of the participants pointed out that exclusion was equated to traditional culture in organisations, whether current or previous organisations, of an "old boys club" mentality or a mentality that only a select few had the know-how to strategize.

> *"It's a culture mentality that only execs can think strategically and, you know, help the business move forward. They're the only ones that know what the future looks like, and therefore they can solve, it's a mess. It's a culture thing. It's a way of thinking that, you know these, people can do this, and others may be not so good, but I think for me, I think cross functional teams that are made up of different people, different personas, would make an excellent strategy teams where you Have a combination of diverse people, people from different levels, people that represent from society. I think that's how you get the strategy right. That's how you get the best in terms of socializing it."* (Participant 8)

> *"In the sense that like, so I used to help, like, our Botswana operations and Zambia operations when they go to the bush, I am the guy who is like facilitating or helping, putting the text together and conversation, when you come to the South Africa market, they will just go to the bush without us, the same organization, but it has differences"* (Participant 2)

> *"So, you would first have it, they'll cascade it down. So really, from exec to us, to us, to the teams, and each manager will be responsible for certain part of the strategy. And then we have a road show at the beginning of the year that talks about strategy and what we need to achieve. That's done by the CEO in normally a town hall session. And then we have some drinks there, after that, and then it's never talked about*

again until the end of the year. Oh, my God, this is confidential right?" (Participant 6)

In Participant 6's organisation, strategy is top down as it's a multi-national organisation and gets fine-tuned to the South African business context. He further expressed a cynical view of leaderships attitudes towards inclusion of middle managers levels in formulation of strategy.

"I think it is I'm yet to find a company that actually does that? Literature says this but practically is something else. Most companies will say this is what they do but in reality, it's something entirely different. They give the socially acceptable response but in reality, it's something. Leadership will always say "we listen to you but behind closed doors it's something else. Leaders have ego and feel threatened by having more people involved." (Participant 6)

One participant noted that being in legal and a support function, they are only consulted after the fact to check feasibility and legality of strategic options.

"Okay, I'd say because legal is a support function business. Let me say, the business that I'm in, their strategy would probably most likely include legal, but they wouldn't say, it's illegal, hey, can you add on here? They'll acknowledge legal participation in whatever they're doing, but they wouldn't necessarily say, hey, legal, can you add on to our strategy about what do you need to do?" (Participant 12)

The researcher therefore adopted a flexible approach of adjusting the slant of their questioning slightly based on the Participants exposure to and level of involvement in the strategic process. For example, with Participant 6, the researcher adjusted the approach to probe his thoughts on the merits of such an approach and how this impacted him in his role at the local level.

ii. Consequences of exclusion

Exclusion was associated with a lack of buy-in and disconnection from the middle managers, they felt misalignment of strategies to organisational realities, a lack of

trust in the MMs and slow dissemination of strategic information that slowed down and/or hindered strategic implementation.

> *"Because, in terms of I'm not seeing the especially when it comes to communication, and also when it comes to these, some of the strategy, I do feel that. It conveys the sense of not trusting the employees with some information. And also, I haven't seen like, at least the quick moves, like, Okay, we have announced a new strategy, and just seeing like, the immediate change takes a bit slow to like, to filter through the organization, and for me, just feels like it's a missed opportunity. In terms of, like, if it is accelerated, there's an opportunity cost of like, not doing things fast, you're losing out on like, all these benefits you could have unlocked six months ago, so now you're only unlocking them 1year later."* (Participant 2)

These excluded participants expressed what they felt were the opportunity costs associated with a cost of innovation, diversity of perspectives and speedier execution of strategic initiatives. One participant noted that communication and translation of strategy does not occur effectively enough, which hinders implementation through lack of understanding and involvement in formulation.

> *"I know when it's happened, and in the forums that I'm in are still very close circles, only you'll see the senior leadership time at lower Management hears about it is when something's approved. And now we're trying to operationalize and, you know, roll out which, which makes it a bit tough, because I think they sure comes out of nowhere to them, but then, but then now for you, it's like no, but this makes sense because you've been in the detail."* (Participant 1)

Another participant shared her experience with misalignment of strategy with operations and the helplessness and frustration felt when they had to work backwards due strategic decisions taken without middle managers input resulted in senior leadership driving the wrong strategies, costing time, money and other resource wastage.

> *"So, I think it's the cost of that is that the executives or and the advisory board then focus on. On, on the things that are, you know, in those*

strategic goals, yes, instead of focusing on the finer details. Example…We so one of our strategic objectives is to win the hearts of our clients. We wanted to be the number one rated in our industry in terms of service delivery so they we have been having, especially more recently, some service delivery challenges with, you know, more customer complaints and things… Are now introducing a CRM system, that's going to help us to track all the queries that come in…but the underlying root cause of what's creating the maybe client complaints and the service delivery drops, is that we don't have a proper say workflow system to help us to and to help our staff members and to help managers. And if we had a workflow system in place, all of those client service issues would probably disappear…So now, instead of just have a, you know, focusing our time and attention on a workflow system. They're now pushing through the CRM system…yeah, once we have the workflow system in place, they're then going to see that there was actually no known CRM system, so it's working backwards in a way…And yeah. Can do nothing about it." (Participant 13)

This points to clear gaps being present when MMs are excluded from the SF processes. MMs expressed strong views with exclusion, including lacking clarity of strategic intent, lack of follow-through from senior leadership and the cascade of strategic information may be slow and ineffective, risking implementation efficiency and success.

iii. Experiences related to inclusion in SF

The majority of the participants reported they involvement and inclusion into their organisations SF processes. They were recently invited, allowed to participate and asked for their inputs into the SF processes of their respective organisations. The experience related to inclusion varied in terms of the expectation of MM participation.

What was noteworthy that emerged, were participants who felt included in the SF processes of their organisations reported they felt empowered by their leaders. They felt listened to and considered and that their leaders valued them.

“Like, it makes it you feel empowered. You know it makes you feel that you you've been listened to your you are adding value, but you also get anxious as well.” (Participant 3)

“So, your inputs in terms of how you're driving product development is valuable inputs and insights that is taken in, into the main goals and head goals around your initiatives that you've got in terms of your your planned initiatives, do, you do the plan or the road map, which is then either check and challenge by colleagues in the same local Yes, then the senior executives also have a look at it to provide guidance, because you present your plans also to, we call it an exco. Those exco members have a view to or a buy in to say. Yes…So, we do have an opportunity to be sorry, to to be strategic, and you can, there are platforms for you to showcase your, let's say your enterprise view, yeah. But at the end of the day, the Accountable people are the executives.” (Participant 4)

The benefit of inclusion they noted to be collaboration and alignment of all stakeholders moreover, what emerged as important to them as middle managers, was that their inclusion in SF led to alignment of strategic goals to internal realities, and avoidance of duplication of efforts. Managing the expectation among leadership, and other middle managers from other business units that interact with each other.

“So, the benefit of doing that is it helped create alignment, right?... So, the misalignment in priorities is a problem. It's the benefit of having that session that that session actually we've got we aligned on our priority” (Participant 5)

“…we talk about collaboration, listening to other people, and getting being open to other people's ideas, other people's you know what I'm saying? Yeah, about 20 managers coming from different environments, running different areas, so you need to give them the time of day” (Participant 9)

Participants that had vocalised a top-down exclusion approach also contributed to the discussion of how they felt being included would benefit in terms of the avoidance of misalignment of strategy and time wastage on duplication of efforts.

> *“I think if we had, if we had more of a bottoms up approach, if the people who are really much closer to the details you know, got to say, look, these are the things that me and my department are struggling with. And if we can fix these five things within the next year, it will, you know, help solve 20 different issues that we're currently experiencing. So, I think, I think, yeah, there's, there's definitely, for me, more merit in having more of a bottoms up approach, even if, even if, that is just to inform the shorter the short-term goals.”* (Participant 13)

Noteworthy, was that inclusion and collaboration, had been driven as a culture in the organisations by the new and younger CEOs that had joined from external. All of the nine participants felt that inclusion happened when driven by the senior leadership of organisations and that an enabling culture was essential to foster true collaboration.

> *“So, so, for example, our current CEO is very much a culture guy. You know that our company has got to have the right culture. So, the So, for example, they created a culture core meeting, which I was nominated to be part of that culture thing. And we had to give back to the company on the culture and on the strategy and the ideas that were accumulated in terms of the what the culture of the organisation should look like going forward.”* (Participant 10)

Another interesting and new insight that emerged was that inclusion had occurred as a result of changes of senior leadership teams in organisations. All the participants included had had a new younger CEO join the organisation and some reported that over 60% of senior leadership were new. Participants noted that these new leaders had been brought in to introduce inclusion and collaboration and novel approaches to move the organisations into the future. This, the researcher linked to organisations importing the skills and capabilities for introducing “Open strategy” to organisations.

> “*I think now maybe yes, but there's been a quite a big shake up in in almost all structures of our company. So, the I let's say there's six, six execs of which one, two. Let's say half of them are new, okay, and there's a couple of managers that's also, let's say, six senior managers myself, then one of them who's also fairly new. As I said, we're about 120 people, but I think*

almost 60 of us are new in the last two years. So, so I think there's been a bit of a rejuvenation." (Participant 7)

"They all from organisation M, and the two Execs are also from organisation M. So, they brought them with, but I learned so much from them all the time. That's great to have that open mind and that learning orientation" (Participant 3)

Another participant relayed that senior leadership now recognise the value of middle managers in SF when it comes to alignment of strategy to realities and middle managers are best placed in the organisation to give valuable insights for SF.

"Ja, no, absolutely. You know, I think, I think being a middle manager is, is probably the best suited position from an organizational placement point of view, but it's also the most challenging, right? Because, yeah, literally in between, you've got a view of of what happens from from where you sit to the operational level, right? Yeah, sort of what is called the bottom level of everything else. Literally, you know what's happening your ears on the ground. You walk that you walk the mile with, with, with, with the rest of the organization, even you have the responsibility to, you know, take the strategy from a senior manager, yeah, and roll it out to to the operational" (Participant 11)

This view emphasises the insights from participants where there was more of top-down formulation and the resultant missing on valuable insights that may change direction of strategic initiatives that could be caught specifically by the middle manager level due to their operational expertise. Pointing to the importance of the adoption of inclusive approached to SF processes in organisations.

iv. Consequences of inclusion

An important and interesting insight that was uncovered in this research, was related to the unexpected consequences of inclusion of MMs into SF processes. Although MMs felt validated and empowered by senior leaders when they were invited and allowed to participate in SF processes, surprisingly, they were still an observed unhappiness from the MMs. Feelings of a lack of confidence, frustration, disillusionment , disheartenment and anxiety were associated with participants

involvement with the SFSF process. Participants noted disheartenment when their inputs were not selected in SF processes following extensive efforts in compiling insights. Another expressed disappointment with inconsistencies of inclusion, when following inclusion in some strategic discussions, sometimes excluded from others.

> *"So, I'll, I'll say one thing is that that that planning process is it's sometimes it can be disheartening by the fact that there's a lot of, listen, there's a lot of business areas of product, people that have got ideas for their different products, fighting for money, for funding."* (Participant 4)

> *"And sometimes when you're not included it's not nice…And as a manager, I need to respect that. It can't be that because they including me now, that now I must make sure that I'm there all the time. I understand that I'm not going to be all the time, and I can't now get possible upset, when I'm not included."* (Participant 9)

The lack of MM confidence was an insight that consistently emerged across all participants interviewed. This was noted as an inhibitor to their inputs being taken up by senior leaders in SF process. Participants described an internal struggle with confidence when interacting with senior leaders. They reported a lack of input packaging ability, lack of negotiation and persuasion skills as affecting confidence with inputs.

> *"I think it's my fear of presenting confidence…I don't know how to present that info. We don't know how to present that in a way that will be bought by higher ups…but you know what captures me the most when I'm listening to a presentation here is when you're able to relate it in a personal way…So what skill is that storytelling? But where would you learn?"* (Participant 3)

> *"The first thing is not just opening your mouth, because you need to open it. You need to know whatever you bring into the table. You know when you're speaking about it, and you want to look at something that needs to be, that needs to contribute towards your strategy, obviously, people to understand it the way you understand it, right? So, they've all been available in some confidence, you know, like we all support this, this, this notion that I can only speak at the level, that I'm in myself as well. Then*

one day you're in a room full with executives, and then, you like quiet , and so forth. So, it's gotten their confidence individual to confidence, individually, always building yourself, speaking public." (Participant 9)

"I'm going to answer this two ways. Yeah, right, as a newbie, it's fearful, right? Let's be honest, if somebody would experience an organization and having constant engagement with this, with the respective managers, it's blissful because you know, you have the confidence to go to anybody, and you can get that feedback accordingly. So, a level of comfort is much higher in terms of experience, whereas a newbie, like, if I have to start at a new organization, yeah, I'm not going to go straight to an executive. I'm going to do some soul searching first, figuring my way out to that type of level. If you hear what I'm saying?"

There was the realisation of the need to convey insights packaged in a manner senior leaders would understand and be attentive to however they were limited by their technical focus to articulate issues and recommendations to senior leaders.

In summary, the experiences of MMs in SF processes were related to either inclusion or exclusion from SF processes. Exclusion from SF was associated with strong negative experiences and emotions from MMs related to frustration with misalignment with strategies, a lack of context for strategic initiatives they were expected to implement and a resultant feeling of disconnect, frustration and helplessness.

Inclusion on the other had was associated with new interesting insights that despite the positivity associated with inclusion, MMs were still unhappy due to expressed lacking strategic discursive competencies. They expressed feelings of frustration and lack of confidence as consequences to inclusion without appropriate strategic competence development.

5.4.1.2 Conclusion to research question 1

In seeking to answer the question pertaining to the experiences of middle managers with strategy formulation it was uncovered in the research that MM experiences were centred around whether they had been included or excluded from SF processes. Generally, MMs responded positively towards inclusion in SF processes and felt valued and empowered. In contrast, exclusion had the opposite feelings of being

side-lined and un-valued and even threatened, with consequences of misalignment and slower and ineffective implementation.

The results also uncovered new and unexpected insights. Emergent was the insight that the recent changes to inclusion, had resulted from to changes in senior leadership, mostly at CEO level, who drove and enabled a culture of inclusion in their new organisations. Unexpected and interestingly, organisations seemed to import the expertise of new senior leadership to drive transformation in SF processes towards inclusion and collaboration, which instilled a question of how organisations without senior leadership changes achieved transformation of their SF processes.

Inclusion was associated was also associated with the unexpected feelings of frustration and disheartenment from participants emanating from the process of This was due to their reported lack of skills observed to possibly be inhibitory to effective interaction of MMs with senior leadership in SF forums. This may impact negatively the uptake of inputs from MMs and could possibly impact the success of the SF process.

5.4.2 Research Question 2

How do middle managers feed into the strategy formulation process and where is it captured?

Research question 2 aimed to uncover the experiences related to inputs into SF that informed strategic decision-making. This would further enhance the understanding of MMs' involvement in SF. Interview questions 1.3 and 1.4 enquired the process and the content of the inputs and encouraged free expression of experiences.

Themes that emerged are presented in Figure 4 below and presented in detail with supporting quotations in the text that follows.

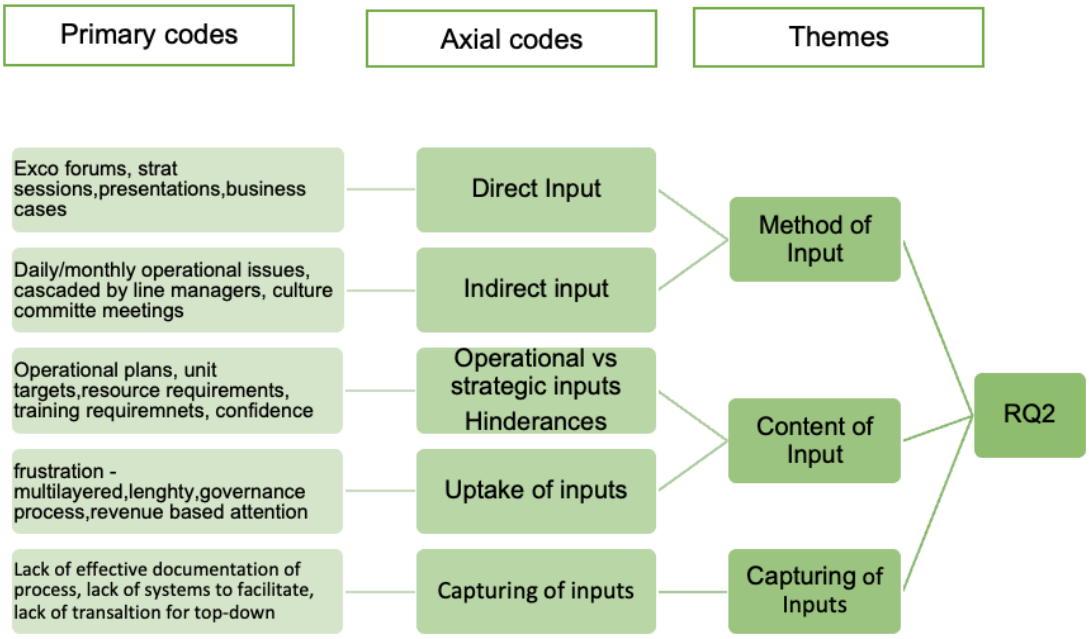

***Figure 4**: Key codes and themes for research question 2*

Source: Authors own

5.4.2.1 Method of Input

Participant responses to this research question were strongly linked with the experiences of MMs in SF from research question 1 theme 5.4.1.1. Related to the how MMs contributed to SF was tied to whether the organisational SF process was open and inclusive or exclusive. The researcher linked inclusive processes with direct inputs into SF and indirect inputs with exclusive top-down processes.

i. Direct inputs

Participants' inputs were reported as direct, where participants interacted directly with the senior leadership teams in strategic discussion forums. These were where middle manager insights were presented by MMs, discussed and captured for strategic decision-making. MMs in these forums unsurprisingly conducted PowerPoint presentations of the insights they had gathered. These forums that some participants referred to as 'Exco forums' or 'Exco Strat sessions' reportedly occurred twice a year formally. These could be convened

outside these timelines if any major disruption occurred for example as with the COVID pandemic. a year formally.

> *“Yes, you do have MANCO and EXCOs, you know, in terms of strategy sessions. But the the key thing is, it's all part of planning. Yeah, because, yes, there's, there's an organizational method or or governance method around the running of the businesses…And so you've got insights in terms of what's happening with either the business and with the markets, which is outside, yeah, with the competition, yes. So your inputs in terms of how you're driving product development is valuable inputs and insights that is taken in, into the main goals and head goals around your initiatives that you've got in terms of your your planned initiatives, do, you do the plan or the road map, which is then either check and challenge by colleagues in the same local Yes, then the senior executives also have a look at it to provide guidance, because you present your plans also to, we call it a exco. Those exco members have a view to or a buy in… there's this, there's a set platform where you can present initiatives to see if they can still be accommodated if the initiative.”* (Participant 4)

ii. Indirect Inputs

Indirect inputs into SF were associated with reports of MANCO meetings where senior leadership were not present, and the MMs relied on their line managers to roll up their inputs into Exco forums or Strat sessions. Another interesting insight was the culture committees where culture was aligned to the strategic initiatives. These were not direct SF interactions; however, discussions were centred on strategy and culture. Inputs of the MMs were rolled up from these sessions to Exco to inform SF.

> *“So, there is a monthly exco meeting that that takes place, and then in the in that monthly exco, our regional head or the branch manager will then come back and say, Guys, this is what's going on. This is feedback, yeah. And obviously, some of the stuff, you know, they request our input, yes, you know, yes. So that's how it works.”* (Participant 10)

"I think, in a way, we may potentially also influence have, like an indirect influence on what those strategic objectives are, just simply by, you know, things that happen over the year or whatever, and initiatives that, you know we think of in our area, that my executive would then take forward to those discussions." (Participant 13)

"Then you just chuck it in the email and say, like, Oh, these are the key movements and key numbers. They are growing in the segment. You can send that information, and these are some of the strategies point which they're talking about. Then you to push it and to the key people." (Participant 2)

5.4.2.2 Content of Inputs

Going beyond how MMs input into SF were the insights relating to exactly what MMs were providing as inputs into SF processes of their organisations. The types of inputs that MMs contribute have a direct impact on the types and quality of strategies that will emerge from SF processes. It is therefore vitally important to gain an in-depth understanding of their participation in these SF processes.

i. Operational vs Strategic Inputs

An insight that consistently emerged across the responses from the majority of participants were the operationally focused inputs they were contributing into SF processes. These included inputs of business unit plans for the upcoming period, resource needs, staff competency requirements, and staff development insights. These reflected their operational priorities and indicated feasibility, and in addition, lacked a strategic perspective. This pointed to a perspective where there was a gap where MMs themselves left the strategy formulation to senior leaders indicating they had not yet fully embraced or know how to embrace the perspective of strategic roles.

"So, in terms of inputs, right? It's data. So, when I say data, what am I referring to? So, I've got these reports that we hold in-terms of, so we've got the reports that we've built, and we also have got reports that we get from business. Okay, that inform us in terms of what are the issues that they are facing. You know, with regards to data, what that information then

helps us with? It helps us to be able to actually plan and prioritize in terms of what are we going to be driving." (Participant 5)

"We would be part of the strategy formulation in terms of, so, how would it work? You know, so practicalizing. This is the strategy. This is what we need to achieve in three years. You as middle managers, need to help us. What would the implementation plan look like? What kinds of resources do you need, and how would you then marry the resources to the implementation? And, of course, Track Set results. So yes, we would be part of the input of the strategy, but from the implementation." (Participant 11)

Few of the participants indicated inputs that were strategic in nature. What was surprising to emerge was that in some organisations, particularly in the banking subsector, participants were expected to present complete business cases that propose the strategic direction that the organisation should take, which resulted in competitive sessions where participants from various business units were required to vie for strategic selection from Exco. These participants also demonstrated in their responses, greater familiarity with data analysis and packaging of business cases for SF inputs. They in addition conveyed familiarity with skills required to succeed in these environments, such as politicking, networking and influencing skills. These participants, it was noted by the researcher, occupied predominantly strategic roles example Business development and product development roles as opposed to operational roles.

"If you know how to deal with people, read the room, understand who the influences are, who you who you're selling to, yeah, and who you need to get lobby Yeah, buy into this vision or this product that you're trying to take to market. Yeah. And not knowing people, and being able to network and have relationship, yeah, and his skills, that's that's the only thing that will set you apart." (Participant 4)

"We if, if you do build the right relations with the right people, you're able to convince the right people. And that helps get your projects and how it fits into your strategy, or the finish line" (Participant 1)

Interesting insights that emerged from these strategically inclined participants, were the general lack of strategic capability amongst the general middle manager peers that were included in SF processes of organisations. This is discussed in the category below of hinderances to effective inputs.

ii. Hinderances to effective MM input into SF

Participants that were strategists as well as MMs provided interesting insights related to what could hinder the effective input of MMs in SF processes. They relayed that middle managers lacked strategic capacity, due to the demands that are placed on them to achieve operational goals. This meant MM's focus was unproportionally directed towards operational tasks and had low time capacity for strategic activities as a result. Particularly in organisations that had in-house strategists. The insights uncovered where sensing activities were outsourced to in-house strategists, activities such as interpretation of data and problem analysis. A reported lost opportunity to develop this muscle in the MMs and improve their strategic discursive competence.

> *"No, I think you should consider this so that, but it's also because when someone is too stuck in the detail, it's hard for them to then see what the higher-level objective is. I guess that's the difference between a senior leader versus someone below, like still doing you know, the junior managers, etc., are doing all the heavy lifting. It's necessary, because they need to be in the detail is senior leadership needs to have that high level overview, because the details can become overwhelming." (Participant 1)*

> *"Middle managers, they are actually more task driven. Yeah, more tasks because more tasks driven, we should be elevating them more."* (Participant 11)

These sentiments were echoed by other operational participants.

> *"From my experience, even with the previous company, yes, I would say so. I think a lot of times, people are just focused on getting their team to produce the outputs that they need to just getting this, getting the salary, whatever."* (Participant 7)

“You do. It's difficult for my role managers, because I we do get involved in too much in the day to day. It's definitely got, like my boss will say to me, sometimes it's nice to be dancing on the dance floor, but sometimes you need to get onto the balcony to be able to see everything, and it's difficult to get there. Yeah, and it takes a conversation with him for me to get to get me out of you, out of the day to day. We really do get involved in the hip. Also, like we were saying, example, it's also the way we develop our team and below us. We need to make them also be able to do that yes, to be able to come out and look from the balcony.” (Participant 3)

“So, I think it's it's really about setting aside the time to properly look at things and properly understand what they're seeing and and I think that is also part of the problem with middle management team leaders, people in those sort of role is it's such a just it feels like a rat race all the time. You're just chasing your tail trying to just get your work done or make sure your team are doing what they need to be doing, that people often don't have the time to just sit and plan things, or to just sit and think about things…” (Participant 13)

These insights are unsurprising based on the structural positions that MMs occupy and the duality of their roles. An interesting insight, was the reported lack of data analysis, interpretation and/or synthesis of data that suggests that the quality of inputs were not at the level that senior leadership may derive value and incorporate them for strategic decision-making, pointing to a lack strategic discourse competency in MMs. These were insights from MMs that had dual roles as in-house strategists who formed advisory teams to assist middle managers come up with solutions to solve strategic problems as part of their function. They commented on the observed lack of sensing skills among middle managers.

”Y*eah, I think it's almost like it's not even a lacking skill. It's more around having to put on a different hat, because you're always in the same problem, you think you know what the solution will be, but bringing someone who thinks differently, who will see the problem differently, might just be what they need. And I think that's why then they have like, you know, advisory teams like us, who, you know, helping them with advisory.”* (Participant 8)

“But I don't necessarily think it should just fall on, say me or my team, because at the end of the day, it's each different department, it's they should actually have the know how to interpret, you know, what they seeing, and then make the decisions or give suggestions based on what they're seeing. But but I do, I do think that, and not just at current organisation, like I said at my previous employer as or there were people in that middle management level that didn't necessarily have the ability to interpret properly, interpret what they're seeing and turn that into actionable items or into strategic focus areas.” (Participant 13)

The researcher linked these insights to those provided research question 1 on the experiences of MMs and consequences of their inclusion. The lack of skills can be related to the lack of confidence in the interactions with senior leadership in inclusive SF processes.

iii. Uptake of inputs

From discussions of how MMs contribute their inputs and the type of inputs they contributed to SF processes, emerged the theme of how their inputs are managed by senior leaders. Participants reflected on the both the process for input contribution as well as what they felt contributed to their inputs being taken up by senior leaders for strategic decision-making. This information gave further in-depth insight into the inclusive processes of SF in organisations. The researcher uncovered that inputs that were perceived to have significant revenue impact were frequently prioritised by senior leadership teams, particularly threats to revenue. Threat perceptions was reportedly tied to quicker turnaround times for convening and for decision-making, even in indirect exclusive settings.

“I guess it depends what, what the impact on the company would be quick, people would move like during COVID.” (Participant 7)

“They do use it. They definitely do, because it impacts revenue, yeah.” (Participant 6)

Another key insight to emerge related to the uptake of inputs, was the frustration with the MMs several multi-layered governance committees, especially in the banking sub-sector, to provide inputs. This impacted the time to input uptake reportedly varying from 3months to one year. This was a new insight to emerge that dealt

specifically with the process following the giving of inputs and what happens to the inputs afterwards.

> *"Sort of, there's a lot of governance processes, especially in the bank. It sometimes is sort of a creative and stifling hurdle. We you know, it would be nice to go and do the unpacking report back to one particular layer of governance and keep refining it until you get it to that perfect point. Now you end up, being too consultative, and with that, you also end up taking longer to form that strategy and then also execute on the strategy. Yeah, so that sort of the issues in the process that I'm sort of experiencing with that".* (Participant 1)

> *"So, I would say any, any, anywhere around a month or three months, maybe, if it's less critical, maybe a year. It really depends what, what estimated impact on the on the bottom line is going to be."* (Participant 7)

> *"Which is like, as much as you get them, the insights in the uptake of some of the insights takes quite a while…Then the other challenge is we might gather the information from a strategy, cascading it down to the respective point where it needs to be to be digested."* (Participant 2)

The researcher linked this with the unhappiness expressed in research question 1, noting that the uptake process led to frustration among participants. The analysis indicated that the reported multi-layered and lengthy processes are problematic and misaligned with the strategic agility needed to capitalise on opportunities in uncertain markets. This suggests a need to reflect on how to streamline processes and enhance agility.

5.4.3 Capturing of Inputs

Documentation of inputs for strategic decision-making is key for traceability and continuity. The key finding related to capturing of insights, were the lack of effective documentation of the SF process. Participants noted this as a gap particularly in top-down SF that led to confusion and lack of understanding of the strategic initiatives they were expected to late implement. Additionally, in top-down SF, were the insights related to a lack of documentation tracking the SF process and

decisions. This created frustration and further contributed to confusion related to strategic initiatives.

A consistently emerging insight across all participants, surprisingly, was the lack of system for documentation and capturing of inputs. Inputs were stored locally on personal laptops and all participants reflected on the lack of historical strategy insights as limiting only an abridged final output of SF processes was available.

> *"I think if you view strategy as just going out and having, like, the weekend away we put the document together. Sometimes the document itself doesn't actually say much. So, I'm also like, like, it's like a rehash of the same old, same old…Again, that that is, I think that is what people understand strategies…that is what is put down piece of paper that says nothing"* (Participant 12)

> *"So, no, it's definitely very frustrating. And you know, you think, with everything being on the cloud now and everything being centralized, and everything's file sharing and whatever everything you need is well documented and easily accessible, and it's not a case, sometimes people just do something in the moment, and they just forget about it, and you can never find again."* (Participant 1)

It can be deduced from this research, that a lack of effective documentation together with lack of appropriate systems for storage of MM inputs compromised the SF process as MMs may be left lacking the required context for strategic decisions, and there is lacking centralised databased where inputs can be stored and accessed at a later stage, detrimental for continuity required in SF processes.

5.4.3.1 Conclusion to Research question 2

Insights to research question 2 uncovered that linked to the experiences described in research question 1. MM feelings expressed in research question 1 were linked to the lengthy and multilayered processes outlined for input contributions for example.

Unsurprising was the operational nature of participant inputs into SF processes, with least amount of data processing and interpretation. This, the researcher analysed and linked back to the lack of strategic discursive competence expressed in research

question 1. This could impact the quality of the interactions between the MMs and senior leadership teams, should they be unable to comprehend the impact of MM inputs on business due to their operational nature. Improvements are required both in the quality of middle manager inputs as well is the capturing and documentation of the SF process which is currently localised in personal computers of middle managers and that of SF is reportedly ineffective.

5.4.4 Research Question 3

What tools and processes are employed by middle managers in the financial services industry to carry out the sensing function?

This research question focused on the MMs ability to perform the sensing function of SF. Section 2 of the interview guide focused on the sensing function of the SF process, and interview question 2.1, 2.3 and 2.4enquired about how middle managers keep themselves updated with external market developments, the tools used for the sensing function, the type of information they evaluated and how they capture in financial services sector.

In response to the research question, the themes related to tools and processes for sensing function that emerged from the research were which sensing tools were employed by MMs for sensing, how the data from sensing was stored and accessed, and how sensing decisions were made. This gave an insight into the physical tools but also the process through which decisions are made as to what should be highlighted and escalated up to senior leadership for input into the SF processes.

Figure 5 below presents the main categories and themes that emerged from research question 3.

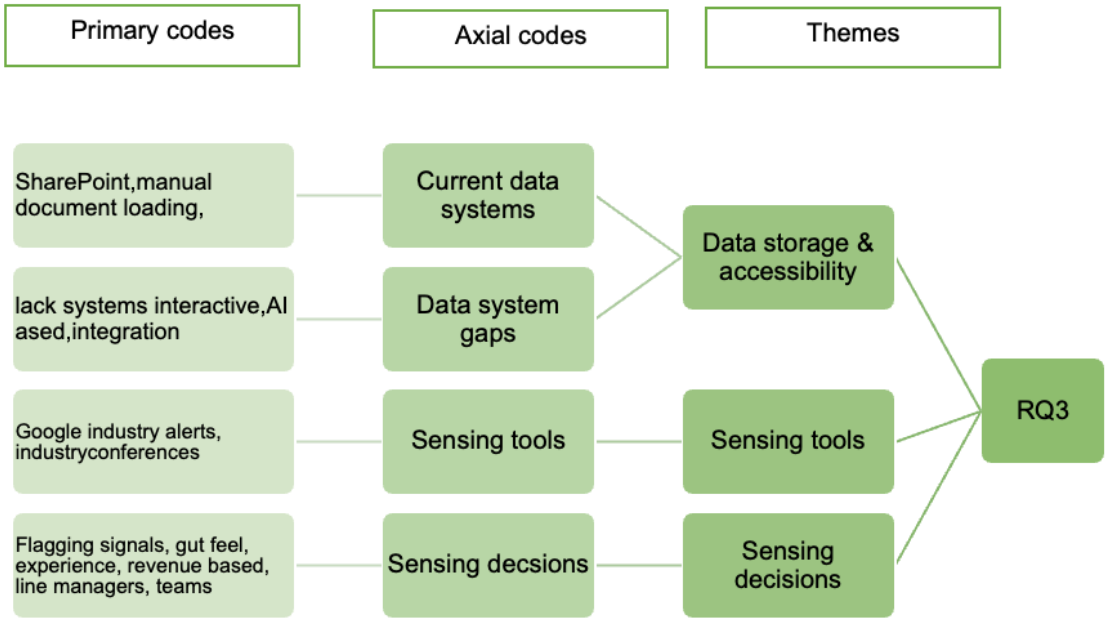

Figure 5: *Key codes and themes for research question 3*

Source: Authors own

Consistently across all 14 participants the need to stay informed about developments in the external environment was deemed essential and a core function of their roles. This provided them with valuable insights for input contribution to SF processes, they linked this function with their performance and development upwards within the organisation. One participant linked scanning with performance and expressed they felt senior leadership expected he kept updated as was a high performer.

> *"I mean, it's not, I think they trust that I do it, because I'm one of the high performing employees."* (Participant 6)

This demonstrated that keeping up to date with developments through the sensing function, was important to MMs.

5.4.4.1 Sensing tools

Participants reported employing various creative tools to keep up to date such as, subscriptions to industry reports, current affairs tracking, following industry leaders

on LinkedIn, Google search alerts on industry subjects, global news and consulting clients as data sources.

> *"Okay, so, so I guess what's important for me are the businesses that I'm investing in on behalf of clients…so it's basically reading. So, I mean, I like to read your financial mail magazine. I also watch on DSTV, business day TV, just to keep up in terms of what's taking place. And I guess it's a regular thing…and we luckily, we also get research from external companies like above, Investec, JP, Morgan, Citibank, because they cover research. So luckily, my organisation has got a relationship, but I can't keep up with that because of our work. So, yeah, I try to look as much as I can*." (Participant 10)

> *"And just conference like attending conference attendance, with conference attendances, you get to hear what was like, what other organizations are working on, where they are, the direction that they're moving, and then bring that back, and you see, how does that apply?"* (Participant 5)

Unexpected was the view that participants preferred to conduct their own external scanning, rather than depend on external consulting organisations to carry out this function. This especially true for if there were specific research on a business case or strategic input they were required to provide.

> *"Yeah, and I think at the end of the day, the amount of briefing and meeting times you'd have to have with an external consultant, you might as well do a lot of it yourself."* (Participant 1)

Most participants noted though, that they used a dual approach of keeping abreast themselves, and dependent on the project or level of strategic input required, they would also employ external market research consultants.

5.4.4.2 Data Storage and accessibility

The sensing function required participants to collect data from various sources, analyse it and recognise interlinkages and derive meaning from the data. This requires access to various sources of stored data from which data can be derived. Participants reflected on the importance of having adequate data storage systems in

the facilitation of accurate and relevant strategy insight generation and the value of revisiting older strategies in pursuit of new ones. The lack in systems and the manual nature of data collection was an unexpected and pertinent insight to emerge as a limitation for MMs in the sensing function.

> *"…storing these things, because you never know, like a strategy you might have formulated a year or two ago gets tossed aside, and then it becomes relevant in a year's time, because then the leadership sees a competitor doing something like, okay, but why aren't we doing this? And then you go back and say, we had this on the strategic roadmap, we had this, we had that."* (Participant 1)

Consistently across all 14 participants it was emphasized the lack and the necessity of integrated data storage systems that are easily accessible and facilitate efficient interaction with data for the sensing process. This emerged as a critical issue due to a noticeable gap in data management for strategic processes. Additionally, Participants reported that senior leadership does not always recognize the value of such systems, often prioritizing other pressing strategic issues over investments in data storage.

> *"Ideally, what this this repository is more like a document loading system. It just stores, archives documentation. I still need to go in and open the thing and look at it. Yeah, it would be great to say, yes, you've submitted your product review pack. Is there possible that you can actually have a way to compare to say if I was to pull a snapshot of the top, I'm making example 2020 what the product look like. I could get a graphical representation with Oh. My Financial Reporting look like this. My customer complaints look like this. My customer journey looked like this, yeah. And then I can compare it to 2022 and look at Oh. 2024 looks like this. I can see over the last three cycles; this is where I've improved. This is where I've gone badly. To do better, the thing is, I had to go physically into a document and lift it out. It's automatic, like a BI business intelligence function. It'll be great to have more business intelligence in that archiving capability, not just, hey, I've got a document, yeah…"* (Participant 10)

Participants noted dissatisfaction with current data storage systems that do not enable effective access to and analysis of data for sensing functions. Participants

noted the use of SharePoint and systems such as PowerBI as being used for data storage. These are in silo's according to departments and manual manipulation is required as they lack integration.

> *"And you know, you think, with everything being on the cloud now and everything being centralized, and everything's file sharing and whatever everything you need is well documented and easily accessible, and it's not a case, sometimes people just do something in the moment, and they just forget about it, and you can never find again."* (Participant 1)

This in itself was a hinderance to the sensing process of middle managers as they would prefer interactive AI based data systems for strategic sensing purposes that would enable longitudinal data analysis, various trend analysis and reporting that would make the sensing process more efficient and effective.

5.4.4.3 Sensemaking decisions

Interview questions 2.7 to 2.9 enquired regarding how middle managers process the data collected from scanning and how they made decisions on what information to feed into the SF process for strategic decision-making. This is key as it impacts what senior leadership prioritises for strategic decision-making.

The research uncovered that participants rely on and consult their peers and their reportees to make sense of signals from scanning and to test their assumptions relating to data they have analysed. Nine participants offered they have adhoc meetings with trusted peers who were good at interpretation of data while the rest utilised their weekly or monthly interdepartmental meetings with trusted other middle managers. Four participants expressed a reliance on their line managers to make sense of the data or to challenge their assumptions as wells for assistance with data packaging for senior leadership.

> *"...that would be the informal platforms that you've got, like ama [the], the morning meeting at the office, and speaking to the regional head, speaking to your colleagues, I think would be if there's something that I'm seeing that could be, that could be affecting us... And then we share that information with our CIO as an example."* (Participant 10)

> *“It's important we don't know everything we learn every single day from people. People's experiences are different exactly then you take a learning from that, just how people process information so different… I get input from I first go to my reportees, and I'll say, this is what I'm thinking, yeah, so she is the team leader, one of my team leaders. She's basically like my 2IC, and then I will put it together. Then I've bounced it off my manager, which is my COO. I after that, then I will then go to the Exco.”* (Participant 3)

This demonstrates that MMs consultative and had a collaborative approach to data collection and leveraging their teams’ diverse insights. Some participants in addition, expressed a reliance on past experience and gut feel as some of the methods for making decisions on what to cascade up to senior leadership for strategic decision-making.

> *“It comes out to communicate it. So, there's that true, like the gut feel of like knowing treated the I see the implication there is the like, this is set, whether that is something worthwhile, you can you just make sense of it and just it so that people know.”* (Participant 2)

Responses from participants in strategy roles indicated that they perceived a general lack in sense-making skills particularly among operational middle managers.

> *“I'm fortunately, I do believe that it's a skill that a lot of middle managers don't have, and I it's not just from my experience at current organisation, but again, my previous at my previous employer, it was almost like, you know, we would give them access to all of this fantastic information, and with the assumption that they would then be able to look at what's happening and build in their own minds, come up with action plans or initiatives off of that. But I learned very quickly that that was not the case because I then would start getting or feedback would start coming to say, okay, this information is all great, but what do you suggest we do about it? And then, and then, it was almost like made my responsibility to not just report on the numbers or the trends or whatever. But to also say, based off what I'm seeing in these dashboards, these are my recommended actions for your department,”* (Participant 13)

This points to middle managers not being able to interpret data and make meaningful decisions and recommendations from it either for their own use and/or for strategic inputs, but the belief that senior leaders have a role to play in the development of this sense-making skill among middle managers.

5.4.4.4 Conclusion to Research question 3

Research question 3 uncovered that participants employ varied and creative tools to keep themselves updated and scan the environment for changes, which they felt a critical part of their roles as middle managers. Once data is collected however, a pertinent insight to emerge was the lack of technology and investment into technology to facilitate the SF process. Participants unanimously called for data management systems that would be interactive to facilitate sense-making. This is a gap worth exploring pertaining to the agility and quality of strategic inputs.

Another key insight possibly relevant for the development of sense-making skills for MMs was the reliance on peers, past experience and line managers testing assumptions and making sense of data.

5.4.5 Research Question 4

What are the strategic thinking behaviours and practices exhibited by middle managers in the financial services industry?

Research question 4 endeavoured to gain insights into the level of awareness of the concept of ST practice among the participants, and to identify the current ST behaviours exhibited among middle managers in practice. This would assist to ascertain the gap between theory and practice of ST identify gaps and possible areas of focus in the pursuit of further development of ST among middle managers.

Section 3 of the interview guide uncovered the participants current understanding of ST as a concept through interview question 3.1. Interview question 3.6 required participants to reflect on how MMs could be encouraged to think more strategically.

In response to the research question, key themes that emerged were, a long-term perspective and systems perspective. The anticipation of change through their sensing function as well as development of ST. These and their categories are presented in Figure 6 below and discussed with supporting quotes in the text that follows.

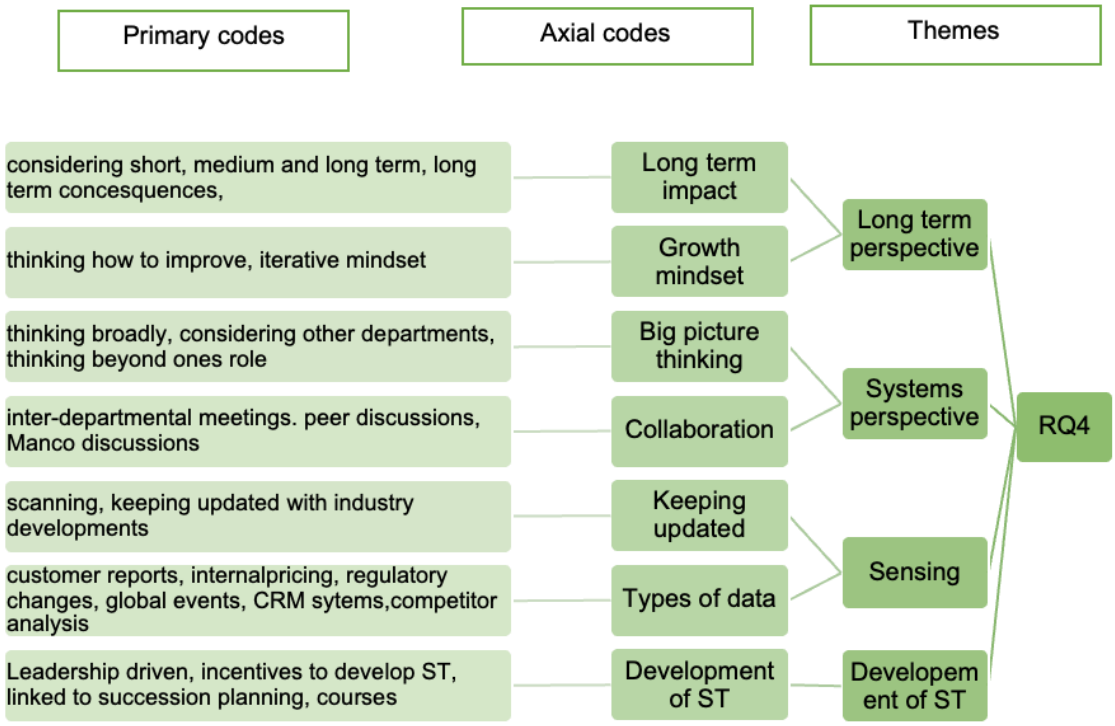

Figure 6: *Key codes and themes for research question 4*

Source: Authors own

Participants demonstrated a familiarity with ST as a concept and were able to verbalise the key principle related to ST that of a long terms perspective and systems thinking presented in detail below. An interesting, yet unsurprising insight was that consistently across all 14 participants, it emerged that they felt that ST was not a common skill among their peers. Some participants expressed they felt that even in large organisations the skill was lacking and even among some senior leadership teams. One participant felt this was contributed to the wrong people being appointed to leadership positions, others felt it is not a common skill because there was a tendency for everyone to think in the same way.

"*There's very few that would think strategically. There's a lot that don't think strategically. And when I say a lot, it's because they either get stuck into two things, one, being a level of comfort, and they find with what they are doing, and they don't want to move further, so they'll remain in that spot. And then you have people that are in that position, and I'm going to be nasty when I say in a position where they shouldn't be in the position."* (Participant 14)

"So, so, no, sad to say, I don't think it's a I don't think it's a general skill." (Participant 7)

"No, definitely not good. No. No, no, no. I mean, you know that there's the strategic thinking is definitely not there, right...But if I look, I mean, I worked at an organisation in Durban, I worked at another organisation. And even now, you know, when I just read, I just think the financial services companies are struggling to capture the stokvel market with some form of success. Because people just think, just they just think in the same way, or they just are thinking of, how are they going to make money from this huge pot of stokvel money that that is operating in our country" (Participant 10)

They associated the lack of ST ability to being stuck in comfort zones and not having the capacity to contemplate the future.

5.4.5.1 Long term perspective

Participants were asked to share their perspective on their understating of ST and the behaviours of a strategic thinker. Participants demonstrated a basic, though literal understanding of ST. It consistently emerged throughout all 14 participants that ST was associated with individuals applying long-term perspectives of strategy and the organisation, not only short-term priorities, but the middle and long-term implications of decisions.

"To not just think about one step in front of you and think about the consequences medium term and long term? I think that probably Yeah, sums it up, yeah…in strategy, you need to have that, long term attitude…" (Participant 1)

"What comes to me to my mind, it's having a more it is being able to think about what can we do in the short term, as well as what can we then continue within the long term? So, the solutions that you might build be like aah man, this thing was only meant to solve that problem at that particular time, did not think of the impact that you will have in the long run." (Participant 5)

"…means you obviously, you understand your current operating environment, but you know, what is your business going to look like in five years' time? Yeah, you know. So, in order for you to remain successful or to remain relevant in this role, you know what you know, try to think in a different way. Try to think how you're going to grow, how you're going to survive, how you going to tap into the new markets. You know, how you're going to retain your clients, how you going to get your your client's children…" (Participant 10)

These insights emerged without prompting from the researcher which reassured that the participants understood the long-term view as a basic concept of ST. Participants spontaneously associated ST with a preoccupation with preparing for the long-term profitability of the organisation.

5.4.5.2 Systems Perspective

The theme of systems perspectives emerged from participants descriptions of St from the participants. Expectedly, the element of systems thinking was not expressed outright as such, the researcher analysed the responses and derived the meaning from the phrases participants used to describe ST as a whole concept.

i. Big Picture Thinking

All 14 participants consistently articulated that they associated ST with big picture view and a consideration of aspects beyond their own role when making strategic decisions. Seven of the participants articulated using phrases such as "thinking broadly" or "thinking in a different way" even "considering other department's perspectives" as examples.

“Strategic Thinking, in my opinion, means that you cannot think what you have in front of you look at the bigger picture and see the long-term effect.” (Participant 14)

“I take it as whatever you're looking at, is it future fit? And does it take also look at the enterprise. If you look at the enterprise head, how does it fit in, in the greater organization, not just the environment. Future fits. And then does it cover the whole business?” (Participant 4)

“They need to think beyond their current focus. Very important, they need to be able to fully understand the strategy, firstly, secondly, thirdly, think beyond your current role, because then then you're in a position to, you know, groom some of these skills that you're talking about. Then you're in a position to say if it's going to if we need to get there in five years. And this is where we are. These are the things that enable us.” (Participant 11)

Another participant reflected on how their line manager reminds them to adopt a big picture view

“Like my boss will say to me, sometimes it's nice to be dancing on the dance floor, but sometimes you need to get onto the balcony to be able to see everything, and it's difficult to get there” (Participant 3)

These responses demonstrated an awareness and acceptance of systems thinking as a ST behaviour that the participants either currently exhibit or are actively developing, to improve their interactions with senior leadership teams in SF processes.

ii. Collaboration

Collaboration as a category emerged consistently across the nine participants that were included in the SF processes of organisations. Being collaborative and recognising interdependence of functions was one of the key elements of systems thinking. The collaboration involved formal cross-functional meetings and discussions on sense-making and SF processes. Participants viewed interdependence on colleagues as crucial for daily operations and the leveraging of peers' skills, such as data interpretation for SF processes. One participant explained at length the collaborative effort that undertaken to gain interdepartmental alignment such that

effective prioritisation of tasks could occur, as an example of adopting a systems perspective.

> *"We talk about collaboration, listening to other people, and getting being open to other people's ideas, other people's you know what I'm saying? Yeah, about 20 managers coming from different environments, running different areas, so you need to give them the time of day."* (Participant 9)

This conveyed that at MM level, there was a basic understanding and to some degree practiced of the some of the core concepts of systems thinking related to ST.

5.4.5.3 Sensing

Participants were asked through question 2.1 of the interview guide to describe how they kept up to date with industry developments that could potentially impact strategies. This was related to MMs anticipating changes in the external and internal environments, a key sensing activity for MMs that think strategically.

i. Keeping Updated

This theme consistently emerged across all participant responses in their descriptions of the processes employed for strategic inputs. Participants' behaviours of staying attuned to the external environment proactively, demonstrated their practiced scanning behaviours for sensing activities to anticipate change. Additionally, it emerged that internal scanning was undertaken to anticipate changes in customer demands and preferences through for example, quotations done for clients in the insurance sector.

> *"Take that information, and I'm always communicating with clients to see if there's what insights and research doing and what the client needs, and if, if there is an alignment, I need to understand how that will firstly impact revenue. It's impacting revenue from a risk perspective, then I take that to the senior team to make them aware of what's going on and how this could potentially impact our revenue in the next two to three years, if we don't start to prepare together, to implement."* (Participant 6)

This is the function that is second nature to the participants, to scan and to some extent also make interlinkages in within their organisations. An approach driven by senior managers encouraging regular MANCO meetings. This they reported, forced them to have awareness of other business areas within the organisation and how they can best work together in achievement of strategic goals.

> *"So again, for me, my story needs to make sense. I was like. I was like, okay, this is what we're seeing, and this is what the other team is busy working on we are misaligned priorities, and that's why we're not going to see movement. And then we had a session with a counterpart from the other teams. That's why I said now he's able to bring it in"* (Participant 5)

What is apparent is that participants value collaboration and they are encouraged by senior leaders to seek it out and practice this. Participants collaborate both top down and bottom up in their sensing and sensemaking functions.

5.4.5.4 Development of ST in practice

Participants were asked to reflect on their own ST skills through interview question 3.2. As discussed above what emerged was a perception of a general lack of ST skills. The researcher, therefore, probed further to ascertain the participants perspective on how ST was being developed in their organisations currently, or how they felt this should be developed.

The participants offered that the development of ST among MMs was something that could be done and that senior leaders in organisations had the responsibility to do this. One participant noted that in their organisation development of skills was tied to senior leaders KPIs and there were rewards and incentives in place to encourage leaders to develop their incumbents. The tone of ST was shown to be tied to the attitude of the senior leaders. Where there was an intentional culture to enable and encourage ST, then this was driven by the leaders who in turn intentionally developed this skill. Where the leaders felt threatened or themselves did not have ST abilities then this would not be prioritised among middle managers too.

> *"This skill contextually where I am, it is, it is it is a must for senior manager to help the middle manager grow so talent development, transition planning is is part of what we do, very intentional. You are measured*

against it. It is important that even if there's programs, there's learnerships, there's, you know, qualifications, or whatever it is, learning and development that you can enlist your senior managers on. Do that. We want programs that are specifically devised for middle and senior managers within the organisation. So, we we approach institutions to say we need to go and develop these skills in our middle and senior managers put together program that is relevant and specific to the organisation." (Participant 11)

Another way that participants recognised as a way of developing ST among middle managers was involving them in strategic discussions at senior level as well as giving them more opportunities to practice ST. They recognised that some middle managers are sent on theoretical courses however, these are not enough for the development of said skill. The importance of development of this skill was also highlighted as a need also for succession planning. Ensuring you have senior leaders of the future that already possess ST skills.

"…look, there's probably a need to and it's also part of like, I guess, developing from your timber and growing your own timber, because the 80/20, split or whatever will eventually morph into like 50/50, or whatever as they move up, and the only way to get them there is to, you know, slowly transition them and involve them in certain aspects." (Participant 1)

"I'm sure you know my answer. It's a culture problem everywhere, and culture, culture is one of those things. You have to be intentional about it that I want to build a culture where people thinking strategically. I want to build a culture where people feel empowered to make, you know, strategic decisions, and you enable them with resources. You enable them with upskilling them, sending them to calls, but you give them the opportunity to practice it. You invite them strategic Boot Camps that are not for executives to go to some lavish hotel and eat a nice meal. Strategic boot camps, we hold them in the hallway. Everyone is invited, and people are given problems to solve, and we get to see what people come out with." (Participant 8)

The development of skills was also associated with talent retention as well as succession planning.

> *"You know, we've got a very low staff turnover in those in those levels. Yes, yes. Succession planning, also, you know, you start grooming people at an earlier age, so that when, when the opportunities come, people are ready, right? Yeah, people also, where I work stay there for long because of stretch included. I mean, I've been in the bank since 2006"* (Participant 11)

The researcher analysed that the development of ST skills in organisations was more passive than actively encouraged. This was from the view that organisations opted for theoretical learning approaches of courses and degrees however, MMs were not afforded capacity and time for the practicing of MM skills

5.4.5.5 Conclusion to research question 4

From a ST behaviours and practices perspective, participants demonstrated a limited awareness of what ST practices entail. These were limited to long term perspectives and collaboration and to a certain extent, synthetic thinking. What was interesting was the unanimous acknowledgement of the lack of ST skills across middle managers. All participants expressed this view and that there was a need to develop this skill, and that senior leadership had a critical role to play in creating enabling culture that facilitates the development of ST and the link between development of ST thinking and succession planning.

The upcoming chapter will therefore discuss in more detail the findings from this chapter in relation to learnings from literature discussed in Chapter 2.

Table 3: Summary of categories and themes

What are the experiences of MMs with SF?	
Themes	**Categories**
Experiences with SF	Experiences of exclusion - consequence
	Experiences of inclusion - consequence
	Consequences of related to type of involvement
How do MMs feed into the SF process and where is it captured?	
Themes	**Categories**
Method of Input	Direct input
	Indirect input
Content of Input	Operational vs strategic inputs
	Hinderance to effective input
	Uptake of Inputs
Capturing of inputs	Capturing of inputs
What tools and processes are employed by MMs to carry out the sensing function of SF	
Themes	**Category**
Sensing tools	Sensing tools
Data Storage and accessibility	Current Data systems
	Identified Data systems gaps
Sensing decisions	Sensing decisions
What ST behaviours and practices are exhibited by MMs in financial services sector how to they incorporate into SF?	
Themes	**Categories**
Long term perspective	Long term impacts
	Growth mindset
Systems perspective	Big picture thinking
	Collaboration
Sensing	Keeping up to date (methods)
	Types of data collected
Development of ST	Development of ST

6 CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

6.1 Introduction

This research inquiry adopted an exploratory qualitative approach to explore the experiences of MMs in the SF processes of their respective organisations and how ST was incorporated in the MMs inputs therein. This was in response to the business problem outlined in Chapter 1, of the challenges organisations encounter in maintaining competitive advantage in the uncertain and turbulent contexts of emerging markets.

The findings presented in Chapter 5, are discussed in detail in this chapter drawing comparisons to the critical literature review findings in Chapter 2 from which they we derived to answer the business problem stated in Chapter 1. The findings for each research question are discussed in an integrated manner based on the key themes that emerged per research question. The discussion relates the findings from this research current discussions uncovered in literature, in addition it determines whether the findings confirm, contradict or extend current knowledge.

6.2 Discussion of Research Question 1 Findings

What are the middle managers experiences of their organisation's strategy formulation process?

This research was an exploration of the role played by MMs in the SF processes of their organisations in the financial services sector. Research question 1 therefore, focused on the lived experiences of MMs in their organisations SF process. The key themes of; experiences of exclusion from SF processes (section 5.4.1.1) and experiences of inclusion into SF processes (section 5.4.1.2) of organisations, emerged from the findings and are discussed below in an integrated manner.

6.2.1 Experiences of Exclusion

Unsurpirsingly, this research confirmed the perspectives from literature outlining the conventional approach to strategy formulation in some organisations, that is secretive, mysterious and reserved as the core function of the CEO, senior leadership teams and the elite strategy teams of organisations (Birkinshaw, 2017; Langenmayr et al., 2024; Whittington et al., 2011). Insights from this research from

excluded participants in section 5.4.1.1 subsection i, relayed that senior leadership teams conducted SF on their own, then dictated the strategies back and only engaged in checking feasibility and timelines for implementation. Participants felt sidelined , had strategies dictated to them with expectations to implement without the proper context and incomplete information. Participant 6 explained how they had minimal input and incomplete information for implementation. These confirmed the historic research from Westley (1990), where middle managers felt sidelined, and the lack of context demoralised them. It is surprising the concept still persists 30 years later, in practice, despite the advancement of literature on the topic of strategic management.

However, when compared against the literature of Mintzberg (2024) it is understandable given the nature of established organisations with deeply rooted, hierarchies and programmed processes and silos, who may not easily change and favour strategic planning. These organisations' SF processes are posited to often disintegrate into operational planning, as confirmed by Participant 11 where only the implementation feasibilities were discussed during their strategy sessions.

Exclusion in this research had the consequence of lack of context for strategic decisions, and feeling a sense of helplessness, when there were misalignments with operational realities in the strategies developed by senior leadership. This confirmed research by Adobor (2019) where theoretically exclusion was posited to result in disconnect of MMs strategic initiative . Tarakci et al. (2023a) posited that MMs not aligned with strategies, resorted to deviant behaviours that derailed strategic initiatives such as the deliberate slowing down of implementation and direct sabotage of strategic initiatives. This deviant perspective differed from findings in this research as it was not evident in the responses of the participants, whether expressed by participants or interpreted by the researcher. The researcher noted still a commitment from MMs to execute strategies despite limited information and perhaps a de-prioritisation of strategic initiatives when they were unclear. The illustrated that in this case implementation took excessively longer, example one year, instead of four months.

Participant 13 for example, relayed the frustration and helplessness felt when senior leadership adopted strategies without considering the views of the MMs, which led to an incorrect strategic focus on boosting CRM, due to increased customer complaints, instead of fixing a claims processing system from which the complaints

emanated. This was evidence of the misalignments that could result from the strategic choices senior leadership made if issues were not perceived as strategic (Brielmaier & Friesl, 2023).

This research confirmed that clear gaps exist when MMs are excluded and a purely top-down approach is preferred by senior leaders as exclusion in this research inquiry, was associated with MMs lacking clarity of strategic intent, the slow and ineffective cascade of strategic information, possibly risking implementation efficiency and strategic success.

6.2.2 Experiences of Inclusion

In contrast, majority of the participants relayed experiences related to their inclusion in SF processes of organisations in section 5.4.1.2 subsection ii. Literature describes inclusion as invitation to participate and participation in the stratergic conversations otherwise reserved for senior leaders, intended to shape the continued agility of an organisation's strategy (Whittington et al., 2011). Participants relayed that inclusion emanated from senior leaderships' realisation of the need for MMs support of strategic initiatives for effective implementation. This view emanates from the recognition of the critical role MMs play within the organisation in championing strategic change and success and the realisation of the need to unlock their value in attainment of the promise of strategic agility in organisations through emergent open and inclusive strategic processes as discussed in literature from Brielmaier et al. (2023) and Whittington et al. (2011).

Collaboration created knowledge as Participant 9 related their experience of learning from others and senior leaders when in SF forums, that is not easily inimitable confirming findings from scholars Adobor (2019) and Splitter et al. (2024), who posited the benefits of open and inclusive strategy as the human tacit knowledge, learning and knowledge creation that become organisational competitive advantage, harnessed through collaboration. Similarly, inclusion of MMs in strategic processes in this research resulted in collective buy-in and facilitation of action of the strategic initiatives from the participants and confirmed the observations from the longitudinal study of Langenmayr et al. (2024) where inclusion in open strategic processes resulted in collective learning and buy-in from all actors involved in the formulation of the strategic change. It can therefore be argued that the experiences of MM inclusion results in capturing value from MMs, alignments and buy-in that facilitates strong

strategies being formed that facilitate strategic agility competitive advantage in uncertain market contexts as demonstrated in the research of scholars Nuntamanop et al. (2013).

New insights emerged where MMs invited to contribute and participate in SF processes in this research, were associated with positive experiences of MM empowerment, feelings of being heard and being valued by senior leadership in section 5.4.1.2 subsection ii. In contrast to experiences of exclusion, the inclusion of MMs was associated with an alignment of strategies with operational realities, with the benefit of reduced duplication of efforts and resource wastage. This confirmed the theoretical findings from Adobor (2019) and Whittington et al. (2011), who noted similar benefits to open and inclusive strategic processes. The empowerment that MMs associated with inclusion and participation in SF processes was described in literature in short, as having a sense of underlying purpose, a commitment to achievement of the purpose, the recognition of interdependency with others and creation of conditions for others to feel the same (Block, 2017). This research uncovered a new direct association of empowerment to inclusion in the SF processes.

It can be deduced that inclusion of MMs in SF has the benefit of the facilitation strategy success through ownership and commitment but also can be used as a tool for middle manager development due to the proliferative effects of empowerment associated with it.

This research extended what is theoretically known about the consequences of inclusion of MMs in SF. It was uncovered first-hand from the perspective of the MMs themselves, the experience that MMs, though positive, feeling included and valued still expressed lingering unhappiness at the juncture of strategic interactions with senior leadership in SF processes, as a consequence of inclusion in 5.4.1.1 subsection iv. MMs experienced a sense of inadequacy and lacked confidence which was linked with an expressed lack of adequate input packaging skills when participating and interacting with senior leadership in strategic processes. Participant 3 for example noted their fear of presenting and lack of confidence in Exco forums as well as lacking in communicating in a manner Exco would understand. This was a new insight not explicitly discussed as a perspective coming from MMs, in the literature reviewed by the researcher, only theoretically conceptualised. This research therefore added a new perspective that extended findings from the

research of Splitter et al. (2024), Langenmayr et al. (2024) and Adobor (2019) pertaining to the actual interactions of MMs and senior leadership in inclusive SF processes. These scholars' research theoretically, established that a lack of strategic discourse competencies of in MMs can have an exclusionary effect despite MMs inclusion in SF processes, in addition that inclusion of employees in open strategy processes could potentially lead to disappointment should they perceive their inputs to be disregarded or unvalued. More importantly, this would negate the intended benefits of inclusion of MMs perspectives in SF processes, rendering them ineffective.

Splitter et al. (2023) posited there to be limited research on the impact of the concept of open strategy has on the MMs enactment of their roles as strategists and Splitter et al. (2024) again noted the importance of effective interactions between the senior leaders and MMs in SF processes to realise the intended benefits of open and inclusive strategic processes . To the best knowledge of the researcher, this had not been explicitly studied and written about until currently.

Lastly, new insights emerged that related that inclusion had been recent in the last three years and brought on by significant changes in Exco level leadership, through the appointment of younger CEOs and senior leadership members from outside the organisation, who introduced and actively drove these organisational culture transformations of inclusion, collaboration and open strategic processes. This further confirmed literature from Hortovanyi et al. (2021) who noted strategic renewal as effective when there was a change in senior leadership to trigger the change.

This research therefore empirically suggests that MMs included in SF processes could require further intervention than mere invitation to participate. To effectively realise the promise of open and inclusive strategies, MMs may require additional upskilling on strategic discourse and effective interaction with senior leadership to mitigate the negative consequences of inclusion.

In addition, organisations who still have predominantly closed SF processes had MMs that felt significantly hindered in their enactment of strategic role as sense-giving was not effectively done.

6.3 Discussion of Research Question 2 Findings

How do middle managers feed into strategy formulation and where is it captured?

This research aimed to explore SF processes in South African financial services organisations and understand the role and experiences of MMs. Research question 2 focused on how MMs participate in SF, the process of cascading their insights, and their contributions to senior leaders' strategic decisions. The answers to this research question are discussed below in an integrated manner.

6.3.1 Method of Input into SF

The literature reviewed by the researcher did not offer the granularity of insight into the content of MMs contributions and exactly how MMs relayed their insights, beyond having MMs join strategy teams in boardroom sessions (Adobor, 2019; Brielmaier & Friesl, 2023; Wooldridge & Floyd, 1990). Research by Brielmaier and Friesl (2023) advised that in open strategy, included actors require strategic discourse skills of knowing what, when and how to say things to gain the attention of senior leadership, however, do not describe the content of what is to be presented. In addition, that it cannot be assumed that just by simply including middle managers in strategy formulation they will participate, with their inputs regarded as valuable (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011; Splitter et al., 2024). MMs, therefore, require specific skills related to the enactment of their strategic roles, during SF processes.

This research found that while participants felt empowered and valued collaboration, the input content and quality was not sufficient and largely operational in nature both for the included and more so for the excluded participants. Regarding the granularity of how MMs contribute inputs, this research, provided new insights into the experiences of MMs related to the process of contributing inputs into SF processes. This research uncovered that MMs contribute inputs either directly through direct interactions with senior leadership in SF process boardrooms and Exco meetings confirming literature on the strategic interactions between MMs and senior leadership in SF processes (Brielmaier & Friesl, 2023; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011) or indirectly, via inputs being cascaded up from their line managers into strategy meetings, via email or extrapolated from monthly MANCO meetings and routine operational

progress meetings. Interestingly, indirect input was linked to exclusion and direct inputs linked to inclusion. There were no reported technology based open calls for the inclusion of MMs in SF processes when organisations initiated open strategic processes. The concept had organically developed . This contrasted the processes employed in Splitter et al. (2024). This research did not uncover the online platform based “open sourcing” of strategic inputs investigated in literature, that leveraged technology to invite participation in open strategy as with research of (Brielmaier & Friesl, 2023), demonstrating the continuum of open strategy to still be on the more conservative side through involvement of the management layers only.

Unsurprisingly, indirect participation was related to experiences of exclusion and MMs relied of their line managers to cascade up insights from daily interactions or from weekly and operational progress meetings or monthly cross-functional MANCO meetings to senior leadership teams during SF processes. This meant that strategic issues were left to senior leadership teams in closed exclusive SF processes to decide and translated back to MMs (Tarakci et al., 2023a). This was discussed in research question 1 under experiences with exclusion, led to the negative feelings and views from MMs and may contribute to lack of strategy success.

This research uncovered that direct input into SF processes in contrast, were related to the MM experiences inclusion and participation in SF processes alongside senior leadership teams. MMs contributed inputs directly at Exco forums or strategy sessions utilising PowerPoint presentations, business case presentations , typically convened twice a year. This limited exposure to strategy formulation discourse to only twice a year for MMs. Brielmaier and Friesl (2023)’s research suggested frequent strategic interactions and opportunities for MMs to be involved in strategic conversations, and direct coaching as effective means to develop their strategic discursive competencies. There was limited evidence of direct strategic coaching and limited opportunities for MMs to enter strategic conversations uncovered in this research.

This research went further to uncover, these direct interactions were where the inadequacies of MMs related to strategic competencies and their resultant low esteem occurred.These SF meetings and discussions were the critical juncture at which interdiscursive interactions occurred between MMs and senior leadership as demonstrated in research of Brielmaier and Friesl (2023). This also was where

literature posited MMs were required to present inputs in a manner that senior leadership could identify with and integrate into decision-making (Brielmaier & Friesl, 2023; Langenmayr et al., 2024; Splitter et al., 2024), that determined the strategic decisions and resultant strategic direction taken. It was unsurprising therefore, that these interactions resulted in negative consequences related to inclusion as MMS felt inadequately equipped to participate effectively.

MMs therefore as literature suggests, need specific strategic discourse skills at this juncture for their inputs to be understood and taken up by senior leadership to inform strategic decision-making (Brielmaier & Friesl, 2023; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011; Splitter et al., 2024). Literature from Rouleau and Balogun (2011) posit these skills to include amongst many others, the ability to effectively package issues through language, issue-selling, politicking, networking value and influencing required outside the strategy room to gain acceptance strategic initiatives. These would enable MMs to connect their interests with the interests of others, and to mobilise alliances necessary, to influence strategic decision-making. This suggests that MMs should be familiar with the “rules of the strategic game” as it were, to influence strategic direction.

6.3.2 What inputs were contributed

In addition to how inputs are contributed, this research explored the content of inputs that MMS contributed to SF process for strategic decision-making, and confirmed literature on the nature of inputs that MMs contribute to SF. Firstly, it confirmed the often-technical orientation and preoccupation with operational activities of MMs, limiting them from shapeshifting into systemically orientated strategic roles when their role required a strategic focus (Splitter et al., 2023, 2024). Secondly, this research uncovered that in addition to inputs possibly not being effectively conveyed, the inputs were overly technical and operationally laden content, more fitting for operational planning. The data processing of inputs was reported at a rudimentary level and were not converted into problem focused presentations. These were potentially not usable by senior leadership for SF in their state. MMs did not know how to present inputs in a manner that would connect with senior leadership and facilitate uptake, detracting from their effectiveness when enacting strategic roles (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011).

Interestingly, this research uncovered that MMs from the banking sub-sector who held strategic roles, conveyed greater familiarity with inclusive and collaborative environments and the and appeared to convey greater proficiency with data analysis, interpretation, greater awareness of the politicking and networking value described above. Unexpected were the insights that these MMs were required to contribute complete business cases in competitive styles of SF forums. They competed with other MMs from other business units for the adoption of their complete strategic initiatives. The researcher contributed this to the strategic nature of their roles for example, Business enablement and product portfolio development roles. Literature had only noted that the invitation to participate in open strategy was a competitive one for non-managerial employees competing to get a spot on the strategy table, unlike MMs where it is a requirement of their roles.

The researcher analysed on the subject of improving the quality and effectiveness of inputs though sense-making and suggested that perhaps MMs in these roles could be leveraged in organisations to assist in the development of strategy discursive competencies of other more operational MMs at a peer level.

6.3.3 Capturing of Inputs

Lastly, a key insight that emerged related to how MMs contributed to SF process, was related to the capturing of insights. There was a general of effective documentation of the SF process, particularly affecting MMs excluded for SF processes. They lacked context relating to the process under which the strategic decisions were formulated with the consequence of ineffective translation of strategies and reported slower implementation. Surprisingly, inclusive SF processes, did not have centralised databases for the capturing of strategic input. Each MM kept their inputs and presentations locally on their laptops and at best, on SharePoint. A problem being the lack of continuity should a MM leave or be reassigned.

6.4 Discussion of Research Question 3 Findings

What tools and processes are employed by middle managers in the financial services industry to carry out the sensing function?

Development of organisational DCs requires managers develop the processes and capabilities to continuously sense their environments for opportunities and threats, effectively analyse and interpret them and convert to insights that can be used for effective strategic decision-making that lead to dynamic capabilities (Teece, 2007).

Research question 3 was concerned with uncovering the practicalities related to the participants' sensing function and the tools employed to carry out this function. The themes that emerged were sensing tools, data storage and accessibility and sensing decisions, discussed in detail below with reference to relevant literature. Overall, this research question uncovered novel insights that answered the call for more comprehensive updates to research on understanding the practical process of MM sensing to gain deeper perspectives on what they do in SF processes, and how they do it (Tarakci et al., 2023a).

Going into this research, the researcher did not expect to uncover the degree of lack in systems to support strategic processes in financial services organisations that were reported by the study participants in section 5.4.3.2. Consistency across all 14 participants the lack in effective systems was relayed, example Participant 1 noted their frustration at loss of continuity in strategic analysis following the departure of his line manager who had the information locally stored on their laptop. Participant 10 noted only a manual document loading system that they could not utilise for any analysis. All participants experienced limitations with systems that hindered their synthesis and contributed to the negative consequences of inclusion discussed in research question 2.

Literature highlights the significant role of the sensing function in the strategic process, with open and inclusive SF processes aiming to include MMs closer to the market to harness their unique perspectives (Birkinshaw, 2017; Brielmaier & Friesl, 2023). However, the reviewed literature did not specifically identify at a granular level, the tools used for this function. Sensing emerged as a key function of the participants

in this research. Participants viewed keeping abreast with market developments as a basic requirement of their roles.

6.4.1 Sensing Tools

Unsurprisingly, the tools that participants employed for the sensing function were as diverse as the sample of participants, with each narrating their preferred methods of staying abreast with developments that included Google industry insights, Google search alerts, industry conferences, following industry leaders on social media, global news tracking, industry reports, client consultations and even competitor websites as a few examples. This confirms literature from Brielmaier and Friesl (2023) noting that technology has an important role in the facilitation of open strategy inclination in organisations, due to the enablement of access to information and facilitating collaboration.

Unexpected, was the informal nature of such sensing process and the lack of formalised processes for the collection of information and insights from the markets. There did not seem to be a standardised method or collection of tools for collecting insights, this was left up to the MM. Literature reviewed did not offer any recommendations on processes MMs should follow nor organisations have to facilitate sensing. Literature only gave guidelines for senior leaders to formulate rules of engagement and boundaries for contribution processes and recommended this process of guideline formulation be closed (Dobusch et al., 2019; Langenmayr et al., 2024).

This left a question on how or whether senior leadership ensured the quality and reliability of market signals picked up by MMs that informed SF processes. This would require consideration as it impacts the quality interdiscursive interactions and resultant strategic decisions.

6.4.2 Data Storage and Accessibility

The sensing function required participants to collect data from various sources, analyse it and recognise interlinkages and derive meaning from the data (Baden-Fuller & Teece, 2020). This required access to various sources of stored data from which data can be derived.

This research extended the practical knowledge from literature by highlighting the systems or lack thereof to facilitate the sense-making function of sensing. Again, all participants emphasized the lack of coupled with the necessity of integrated data storage systems that can facilitate efficient sensing and sense-making processes. The current use of Cloud based SharePoint and PowerBI were reported as ineffective for the requirements of the MMs sensing and sensemaking functions and with the opportunity cost of the capability to rapidly convert data signals into usable insights for strategic decision-making.

MMs expressed requiring integrated data systems where multiple data sources can be accessed and interacted with to enable and improve the data analysis and interpretation skills of the MMs and thus improve quality of inputs into SF processes. Information technologies that become embedded in the core competencies of the organisation and enable the sourcing and analysis of strategic information, create dynamic capabilities of strategic flexibility for organisations and should be regarded as critical (Chen et al., 2017). They further recommend that IT spend should be channelled towards important strategic areas in organisations. Literature from Namaki (2021), confirms this view and posits that shifts in strategic processes are occurring due to various levels of disruptions in all dimensions of strategy making. The literature calls for the greater incorporation of technology for data diagnostic analytics and AI based frameworks to enable efficient and effective contemporary strategic processes.

Ultimately, data storage and accessibility would facilitate the sensing and sense-making functions of MMs and improve the quality of inputs, as well as mitigating the negative consequences of inclusion.

6.4.3 Sensing Decisions

This theme emerged as a result of participants' reflection on their approach to data processing, following scanning and how they made decisions as which information was pertinent to inform SF input contributions.

MMs that embrace their strategic roles are proficient at sensing and sense-making processes of SF, they can interpret data, package it in a manner that "issue-sells" and convey in an influential manner that captures the attention of the senior leadership teams during SF processed to inform strategic decision making

(Birkinshaw, 2017; Brielmaier & Friesl, 2023; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011; Splitter et al., 2024; Westley, 1990). Insights that emerged suggested the sensing decisions of MMs were mostly collaborative, with participants leveraging their peers, line managers and sometimes even a consulting their teams to assist with sense-making of data. This insight was unsurprising due to the earlier discussed lack of data analysis and data interpretation and packaging skills that impacted MM confidence in strategic discourse and suggests that MMs seek out informal means to make sense of the data they are to present at SF sessions. The sense-making behaviours of MMs in sensing function to the knowledge of the researcher, have not been studied before, through the perspective of the MMs in open strategy literature.

Strategic discourse is significantly improved through practice and exposure to strategic conversations as well as direct coaching from managers (Splitter et al., 2024) ; therefore, this practice of collaboration and involvement in strategic discussions is beneficial for MM improvement of strategic discursive competencies. Moreover, this process can be effectively enhanced with the right IT tools specifically developed to support strategic activities of sensing and sense-making, found in literature to lead to strategic agility and organisational performance.(Chen et al., 2017).

6.5 Discussion of Research Question 4 Findings

What are the strategic thinking behaviours and practices exhibited by middle managers in the financial services industry?

Research question 4 endeavoured to gain insights into the level of awareness of the concept of ST practice among the participants, and to identify the current ST behaviours exhibited among middle managers in practice. As discussed in Chapter 1 and 2, ST is important for open and inclusive SF processes as it equips MMs with the skills required to effectively participate in inclusive SF processes. ST linked open strategy to strategic agility and sustained competitive advantage in uncertain contexts as it provided the skills to formulate innovative strategies. Skills of systemic thinking, synthetic thinking, visionary thinking, creative thinking (Geier, 2024; Graetz, 2002; Nuntamanop et al., 2013).

Findings from the research question are discussed in an integrated manner below and compared to what is known from literature presented in Chapter 2.

This research's finding on ST in practice are imperative as literature concedes that research on ST is largely conceptual, and few empirical studies exist (Shaik & Dhir, 2020). These findings, therefore, add to the knowledge on ST in practice. This research confirmed findings existence of a ST gap in organisations, described over a decade ago by scholar Goldman (2012). It uncovered interesting insights into how ST was practically being developed and encouraged in organisations. Additionally, this research uncovered in practice, the limited awareness of what ST practices entails, and the limited ST behaviours exhibited by MMs in practice. These were limited to long term thinking, systemic thinking and collaboration. Providing that in practice, ST was not at the forefront of strategic processes as concept and confirming the findings that essentially business leaders were still in a paradoxical situation related to the practical implementation of ST (Liedtka & Ogilvie, 2011).

6.5.1 Long Term Perspective

Having a long-term perspective, emerged as a common theme where this was equated to analysing long term impacts of decisions and preparing now for opportunities that may emerge in the future. Literature from Goldman (2012) posits that ST has the characteristics such as long-term thinking, that differentiate it from operational thinking. This demonstrated the MMs when aware of their strategic role responsibilities adopt a more long-term view that departs them from mere operational thinking. A long-term view would assist MMs involves in SF to prioritise their strategic role as it means departing from the priorities of current business and consider future impacts.

This weakly linked with the element of visionary thinking in literature, as visionary thinking is related to being future focused and having a strong sense of purpose and guiding objective that impacts daily activities and routines (Geier, 2024). Visionary thinking would impact how MMs see themselves in the enactment of strategic roles (Splitter et al., 2023) and would provide the necessary focus and drive to passionately and confidently present their strategic cases in SF interactions. This was not strongly associated in this research, pointing to a need for its development in practice, beyond just an association with long-term thinking.

It emerged that MMs exhibited a stronger sense of systems thinking when compared to visionary thinking. It is known from literature, that systems thinking underpins strategic thinking as it enables a strategic thinkers to create interlinkages both vertically and horizontally, to understand the interdependencies within an organisation, but also interlinkages with the external environments (Liedtka, 1998; Senge et al., 2015; Shaik & Dhir, 2020). In this research, the element of systems thinking was expresses as “looking at the bigger pictures and “thinking broadly” as examples. MMs were actively collaborating in various forums (example MANCO, culture meetings and business update meetings) whether excluded or included in SF forums. This demonstrated awareness that ST required a departure from silo thinking and seeking to evaluate impacts of decisions across the whole organisation and not just one’s own area of influence. It created alignment in the organisations and facilitated prioritisation of tasks for example in the case of Participant 5 in 5.4.4.2 subsection ii.

This would prove difficult for excluded MMs as they lacked the vertical interlinkages that provided them with strategic context, leading to misalignment. A systems perspective is the cornerstone of developing strategic thinking as well as for inclusion into SF processes. MMs under-developed in this arena would be inept at participation in SF processes of their organisation.

6.5.2 Sensing and Collaboration

Lastly, the practice of scanning and keeping up to date with developments emerged as a ST behaviour that the researcher derived from responses of participants. The scanning element confirms literature by Nuntamanop et al. (2013) who posited the behaviours of strategic thinkers as constantly learning, networking, hiring experts, reading, engaging people in same and related industries and searching for new knowledge to name a few. Their research focused on leaders’ ST behaviours and their development. What is not known, are the ST behaviours of lower-level managers (MMs) (Geier, 2024) these were not presented in the reviewed literature.

However, this research uncovered similar ST behaviours from MMs. MMs admitted that keeping updated with market developments was critical for their roles for the sensing function. MMs networked at congresses, networked with other MMs internally and externally, hired experts in the form of consultants, consulted customers as well as experts, as presented in section 5.4.3.1 from Participants 10,

Participant 5 and Participant 7. It can therefore be extrapolated that the similar ST behaviours exhibited by MMs cane be used as the basis to assess and develop ST in MMs. Their aforementioned lack of synthesis and creative skills, however, brings into question the effectiveness of their insights once collected, and how these were effectively presented in SF forums for strategic decision-making.

6.5.3 Lacking ST Behaviours

Notably absent in the insights uncovered from this research, were the solidly guiding elements of synthetic thinking and creative thinking as described in the ST assessment tool from Geier (2024).This inferred a lack of awareness and usage of these ST elements in practice that confirms literature on lack of ST in practice. Creative thinking is the divergent element of strategic thinking that takes the logical and analytical information from sensing activities and applies creative imaginings of meaning and envisions innovative ways of doing things (Bonn, 2005; Goldman et al., 2015; Graetz, 2002). It is an essential element for ST thinking as it guides the innovation element that provides strategic options and flexibility, based on making connections among seemingly unrelated and unconnected things.

In addition to the lack of creative thinking, synthetic thinking behaviours were also lacking. Literature posits synthetic thinking as emerging from systemic thinking. As discussed in Chapter 2, synthetic thinking is the cognitive ability to after recognising signals for change, the ability to make sense of multiple, incomplete, contradictory and complex information and synthesize new meanings (Bonn, 2005; Elsbach & Stigliani, 2018; Liedtka, 1998). The requirement to image alternative futures and create hypotheses is what links synthetic thinking to creative thinking. This was reported as lacking in this research, as observed by MMs who were also strategists in their organisations. MMs lacked the skills of problem-based analysis and data interpretation skills and outsourced these functions to these strategist MMs. This represents a key finding as in such organisations, special attention may have to be paid as to how the competence is developed and the role in-house strategists are to play in this context. Synthetic and creative thinking skills would assist MMs to develop the above-mentioned skills. It can therefore be ascertained the importance of ST for the SF process of organisations.

The researcher therefore linked the lack of this element of ST to the general lack of strategic skills and the unhappiness and inadequacies of MMs discussed in research

question 1. These reportedly limited their confidence and strategic discourse competencies and led to unhappiness, as well as in research question 2, that hindered their abilities to gain effective uptake of their inputs due to their reported rudimentary nature. The lack of the ST skills therefore closes the circle on the overall experiences of MMs with SF processes as it is potentially due to these under-developed ST skills that they are currently experiencing unhappiness, despite inclusion into SF processes. This view was supported by this research as linked to this insight, was the unanimous acknowledgement of the lack of ST skills across MMs. All participants expressed this view of the urgent need to develop this skill in practice to facilitate effective inclusion in SF processes.

6.5.4 Development of ST skills

What emerged strongly in this research, in addition, were the insights relating to the role that senior leadership can play in the development of ST in practice. There was a reliance on their line-managers to assist with sensing and sense-making activities of MMs as well as the acknowledgement of the creation of an enabling culture for collaboration and how this assisted in developing skills for MMs.

What was interesting were the different ways in which organisations currently sought to develop ST in practice. It seemed a more passive approach was adopted, than active. For example, sending MMs on courses or making courses available on online learning platforms with limited success. MMs generally lacked time capacity to enact strategic roles, let alone subscribe to online courses as narrated by Participant 13, who offered that her online learning license had lapsed on several occasions due to time pressures. The development of ST required intentional pursuit of senior leaders, for employees at lower levels, including involvement and exposure to strategic discourse, theoretical training. Moreover, practical opportunities to routinely practice strategic thinking behaviours were suggested as means for ST development in this research as well as in the literature (Bonn, 2005; Casey & Goldman, 2010; Liedtka, 1998).

The role of senior leaders is therefore instrumental in the development of ST skills. As was noted, direct coaching supplemented vicarious learning, senior leaders could also be incentivised to develop ST skills in their subordinates as was offered by Participant 10, whose organisation ties ST skill development to senior leaders'

performance KPIs. Participants 8 also suggested practical business case-based learning as a means of developing ST among MMs echoing findings from literature.

An interesting insight to emerge was the link between development of ST capabilities and suggested staff retention and succession planning. Though this was not attributed specifically to ST development but development in general. It would be interesting to uncover though, whether the development of ST led to career development and succession planning as was suggested in this research.

7 CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Introduction

In this final chapter of this research inquiry, the findings will be synthesised and presented in relation to the research objectives and providing insight into the implications of these findings from a practical business perspective as well the contributions this research makes to the growth of the body of theoretical knowledge on the topic. A model will be presented that encapsulates the experiences of MMs in SF based on the themes that emerged. This chapter will conclude, address the limitations and future research recommendation.

7.2 Recap of Study Rationale

This research focused on addressing the arduous business challenge faced by organisations operating in uncertain and turbulent markets, of sustaining competitive advantage amidst the rapid changes and growing uncertainties characteristic of these environments. Literature, in the context of dynamic capabilities theory, posited such organisations in uncertain and turbulent contexts, benefit from a departure from RBV theory based strategic practices instead, should adopt the better suited emergent strategic practices of DC theory to develop the strategic agility required for sustained competitive advantage (Baden-Fuller & Teece, 2020; Mintzberg, 2024).

Theoretically, MMs played a critical role when included as active strategic actors in emergent strategy formulation processes, such as open and inclusive strategy, due to their key positioning within organisations. Their incorporation of ST practices in decision-making in addition was posited to significantly contribute to strategic decisions that gain organisational agility (Splitter et al., 2024; Whittington et al., 2011). However, for MMs their effective contribution required appropriate ST and strategic discursive skills to influence strategic decision-making and ultimately more organisational agility. A lack in these skills was associated with interdiscursive tensions and disregard of MM inputs into SF and resultant feelings of disconnection and disengagement particularly when interactions with senior leadership were hostile or not open to negative feedback from MMs (Langenmayr et al., 2024; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011).

Limited empirical research existed that practically evaluated the interactions of MMs and senior leaders in SF process (Langenmayr et al., 2024; Splitter et al., 2024) and

even less if any literature, to the best knowledge of the researcher, had examined the SF processes through the unique perspectives of individual MMs enacting their strategic roles in practice. This research was therefore designed to explore in practice, the experiences of MMs in SF processes of South African organisations in the financial services sector and the ST thinking behaviours MMs incorporated into the SF processes.

This research aimed to provide business leaders with insights on how MMs experience the SF processes of organisation, such that are able to consider their perspectives when designing SF processes in organisations. The research also aimed to provide business leaders with the knowledge of what skills are required by MMs and how to effectively equip MMs with the skills and competencies to effectively participate in emergent strategic approaches. This will assist leaders aiming to design training programmes for the strategic competence development of their MMs.

Lastly, this research aimed to guide business leaders on how to leverage ST for the contributions of MMs into SF processes and reap the full intended benefits of open and inclusive strategy, drive improved strategic decision-making and ultimately the implementation of adaptive strategies.

7.3 Conclusions of findings

RQ 1: What are the MMs experiences with the strategy formulation processes of organisations?

Research question one explored MMs' experiences within their organisations' SF processes. This research inquiry added practical insights to theoretical concepts in literature, by detailing individual MMs' lived experiences. While literature discusses the benefits of including MMs in strategic approaches, limited research exists examining their interactions with senior leadership from a MM's perspective.

Findings from the research question uncovered the majority of MMs experiences as positive experiences of inclusion in SF processes and to a lesser extent, negative experiences of exclusion from SF processes. This encouragingly indicated these organisations in the financial services sector were adopting emergent strategic approaches to gain competitive advantage in the increasingly uncertain and hypercompetitive market context of South Africa. In line with literature, MM exclusion

associated with negative experiences with MMs being slower to implement changes and indicated a tendency to de-prioritise new strategic initiatives due to insufficient information for implementation.

Inclusion of MMs in contrast, was associated with positive experiences of feeling valued, heard and empowered, which facilitated buy-in, tacit knowledge generation, learning and facilitated implementation of initiatives. This confirming findings in literature of the benefits of open and inclusive SF processes. MMs were unexpectedly, despite inclusion had negative experiences related to interactions with senior leadership during SF processes. They narrated unhappiness which limited their full participation in open and inclusive SF processes, also limiting the intended benefits of open and inclusive SF processes. This added to theoretical literature findings, the actual lived practical experiences of MMs involved in open SF processes and was an invaluable finding for business leaders where inclusion is practices or that seek to develop more inclusive strategic processes.

These consequences cannot be taken lightly as they may have far reaching impacts such as talent loss and withdrawal from the SF processes when senior leaders do not make SF interactions safe spaces and when MMs feel ill equipped and inadequate as similar to the research of Brielmaier and Friesl (2023). Business leaders ought to prioritise the continuous upskilling of MMs.

Organisations practicing top-down exclusionary processes were limited in the value they extracted from MMs and possibly limited the success of their strategic initiatives through lack of understanding of strategies from the MMs required to drive execution. Faced with this lack of information, unlike in Tarakci et al. (2023a)'s research, where direct sabotage was observed, MMs in this research rather de-prioritised change initiatives and focused on current business. Though not as direct, this behaviour would also render strategic initiatives longer to implement and even unsuccessful.

These organisations ought to adopt a more open strategic approach more conservative along the continuum, perhaps including MMs strategy translations sessions prior to launch of initiatives for example to mitigate the negative impacts. A diagrammatic representation of research question 1 is presented in Figure 7 below.

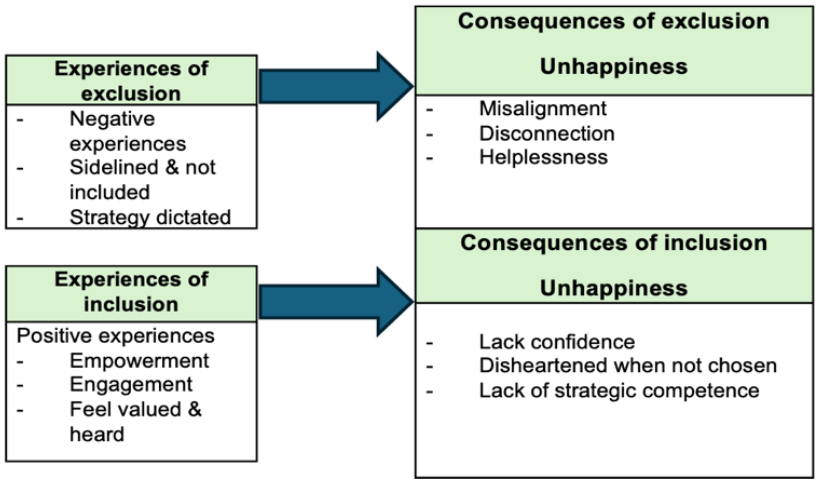

***Figure 7**: Experiences of MMs in SF processes of organisations*

Source: Authors own

RQ 2: How do MMs feed into strategy formulation and where is it captured?

MM participation in emergent strategic processes affords diversity of perspectives and stronger strategies due to the alignment of strategic initiatives with operational realities and greater external context. This is afforded by MMs positioning within the organisation and their market proximity (Salvato & Vassolo, 2018; Tarakci et al., 2023) rendering them essential SF processes.

MMs typically fed into the SF process directly in Exco forums and formal strategy formulation processes held twice a year, or indirectly with their operational inputs from day-to-day practice, cascaded up to strategy sessions via their line managers. Indirect input were operational discussions that MMs had with line managers, cascaded up by their line managers to SF, with the possibility of important issues not being prioritised if line manager did not agree or felt it no important. This process would be ineffective for capturing insights or MMs and led to feelings of disregard and helplessness from MMs as strategic misalignments resulted, confirming literature from Tarakci et al. (2023) and Westley (1990) on consequences of exclusion.

This research extended literature findings, by answering the call to shed light on the exact nature of interactions between MMs and senior leadership from the MMs perspective. Direct MM inputs were associated with inclusive SF processes and were where the expressed inadequacies, lack of confidence, lack of issue packaging

and selling, as well as lack of strategic discursive skills of MMs caused interdiscursive tension and disregard of inputs. MMs provided valuable insights that could alter strategic direction, however, owing to their reported operationally focused content, senior leadership would not deem them as strategic and not incorporate them in strategic decision-making leading to unintended exclusionary effects (Langenmayr et al., 2024), leading to negative consequences of inclusion.

This new insight sheds light on how the inclusion of MMs in opened strategy ought to be managed. Business leaders would require investment into the upskilling of MMs in strategic discourse competencies and the organisations' way of doing strategy, how the information should be packaged and presented such that these interactions derive the promised value. MMs require to be further empowered and upskilled to embrace the evolution into their strategic roles further. Only when they can fully contribute, will their interactions lead to their value be unlocked.

Figure 8 below demonstrates the links between MM inputs methods and input content as emerged.

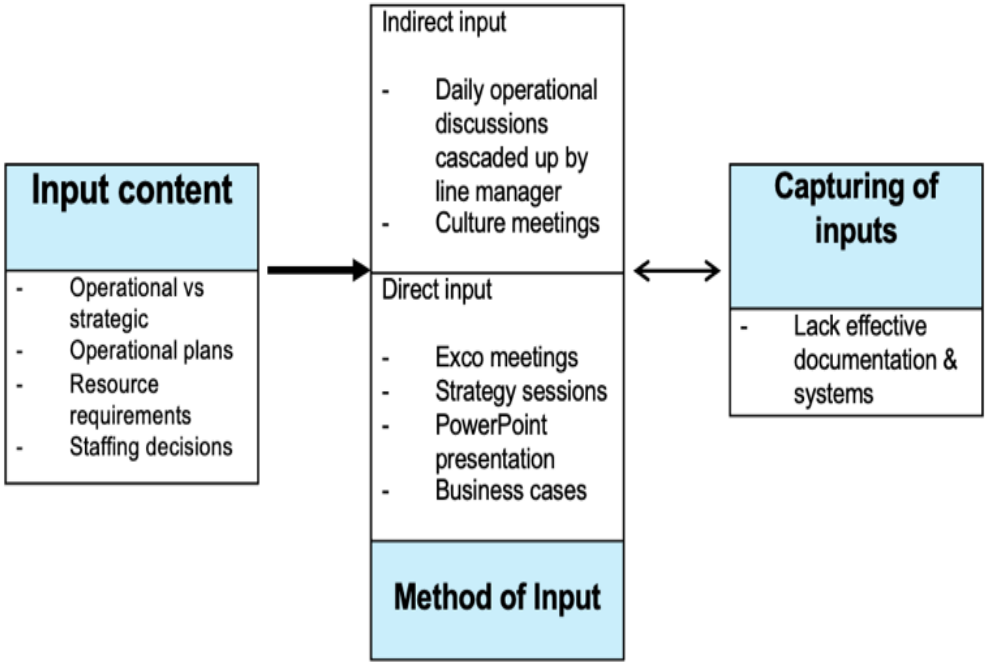

***Figure 8**: MMs input into SF process and how its captured*

Source: Authors own

RQ 3: What tools and processes are utilised by MMs to perform the sensing function of SF?

Research question 3 yielded unexpected findings, providing new insights from the practical perspective of MMs. The relationship between themes is demonstrated in Figure 9 below.

This research questions uncovered an unexpected lack of specific sensing tools that facilitated the sensing function of MMs in financial services organisations. Participants noted a categorical need for integrated and interactive systems and IT tools that would facilitate and enhance their sensing and sense-making capabilities. Currently, they utilised manual data storage systems such as SharePoint, that were in silos by department that they had to manually collect and analyse. MMs it was uncovered in research question 2, had limitations with data processing and interpretation that affected the quality of their inputs into SF processes, the lack of systems to support them in this function was a major limitation. Research notes the critical role IT systems specifically targeting the strategic sensing and sense-making functions play for strategic agility and improved organisational performance in uncertain markets. It was therefore surprising that these systems were lacking in practice.

These findings gave useful practical insights that add to the knowledge on managing and enhancing quality of inputs into strategic interdiscursive interactions (Langenmayr et al., 2024; Splitter et al., 2024) and into how MM strategic competence could be facilitated and improved in practice. It is evident that business leaders ought to prioritise investments into systems that will facilitate the development of higher quality inputs for strategic decision-making and that provide a mechanism for continuity through the capturing and storage of strategic data and information. The relationship between the themes is illustrated in Figure 9 below.

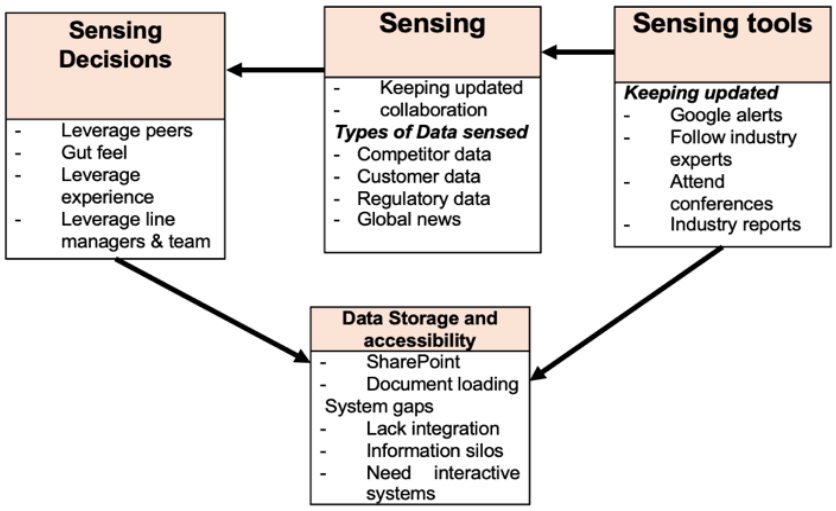

Figure 9: *Tool used by MMs for sensing*

Source: Authors own

RQ 4: What are the ST behaviours and practices that MMs incorporate into SF?

ST underpins open and inclusive strategy to strategic agility and sustained competitive advantage in uncertain contexts through providing skills that enable MMs to sense and sense-make effectively. It allows MMs the cognitive ability to analyse data from multiple sources, recognise patterns and interlinkages, effectively make interpretations from the data and create multiple innovative versions of imagined futures and options for strategic direction and decision-making based on the data to gain strategic agility and competitive advantages in uncertain and turbulent markets (Geier, 2024).

What was known from the literature are the elements of ST being creative thinking, synthetic thinking and visionary thinking (Geier, 2024) and the behaviours that demonstrate ST in senior leaders and how leaders were encouraged to develop ST in practice (Goldman, 2012; Goldman et al., 2015).What was not known was the ST behaviours of lower-level managers and how these were developed in practice, beyond theoretical concepts. This research therefore added to the gap in literature on ST development in MMs in practice by demonstrating the ST behaviours of long-term thinking and systemic thinking as the behaviours exhibited by MMs in financial services organisations and the elements of creative thinking and synthetic thinking

as lacking among MMs in practice. This could be due to the insights uncovered in research question 2 that ascertained that MMs had limited time for ST and strategic tasks and often prioritised operational day to day tasks. Therefore, MMs ought to be given afforded opportunities by senior leaders to practice ST. The current passive approach uncovered in this research, of sending MMs on theoretical ST development courses yield limited results. Literature suggests supplementation of courses with routine practice and direct coaching as effective means to develop ST in MMs.

Business leaders should devise a mix of theoretic, practical, vicarious learning and practice to encourage ST. Creation of a culture of ST would encourage leaders to develop ST as a developmental and staff retention offering.

The findings are presented in Figure 10 below, demonstrating the relationships between the themes to emerge.

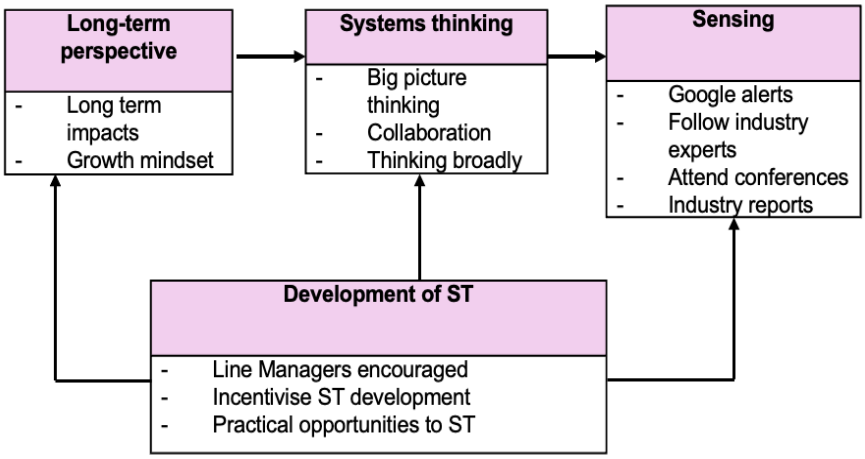

***Figure 10**: ST behaviours and practices exhibited by MMs*

Source: Authors own

7.4 Integrated Model of Research Findings

This research uncovered new rich insights on the experiences of MMs in their organisations SF formulation process that are valuable for business leaders to note of in the pursuit of emergent approaches of maintaining competitive advantages.

This model presented as Figure 11 and Figure 12 was designed to illustrate the experiences of MMs, leading up to the SF interactions with senior leadership. It illustrates the relationships between the emergent themes, then simplified to

recommendations of where ST elements can be applied to improve ST inputs and ultimately strategic decision-making.

The experiences of MMs are illustrated as leading to the central finding of MM unhappiness, which was apparent whether MMs were included or excluded from SF. MMs included in SF were not effective at sensing and sense-making due to lacking strategic tools to carry out the sensing function, as well as ST skills such as synthetic thinking and creative thinking to interpret signals and make creative propositions for strategic direction. This led to input content that is largely operational and technical and not strategic in nature. These inputs are then directly contributed during SF interactions with senior leadership. In addition, MMs lacked the strategic discourse and confidence to effectively present their inputs influentially such that they are taken up for strategic decision-making, which also led to the central theme of unhappiness.

For excluded MMs, on the other hand who indirectly input into SF, also contributed operational content and relied on senior leaders to convey their strategic priorities. This led to consequences of unhappiness related to misalignment and the process of strategy translation that did not facilitate effective strategic context giving and effective implementation.

ST was the under-pinning principle that connects open strategy inclusion to the promised benefits of strategic agility and competitive advantage. Only long-term thinking and systemic thinking were apparent, and MMs incorporated in their approach to their operational and strategic functions as the start of embracing strategic roles.

Interventions are required to develop ST, strategic discursive competencies, such that the process is more fruitful and leads to interactions with senior leadership that are strategic in nature, and produce emergent strategies designed to garner strategic agility and enhance competitive advantages for organisations.

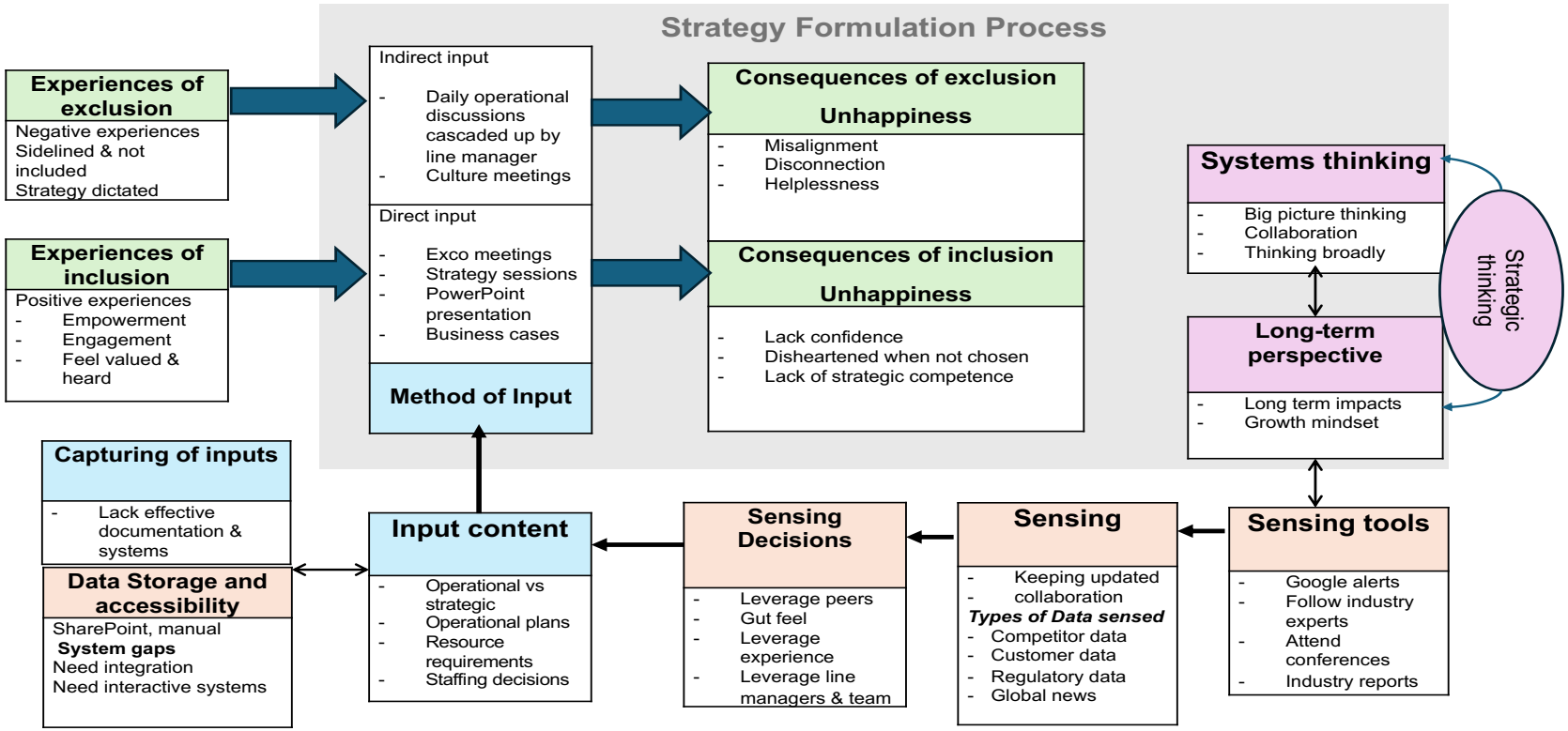

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Figure 11: *Integrated view of experiences of MMs in SF processes*

Source: Authors own

Figure 11 above was further simplified to demonstrate the overarching effect that ST could have in enhancing the strategic competencies of MMs leading up to SF process interdiscursive interactions with senior leadership. The training and upskilling interventions are represented at the appropriate area where they would be most useful.

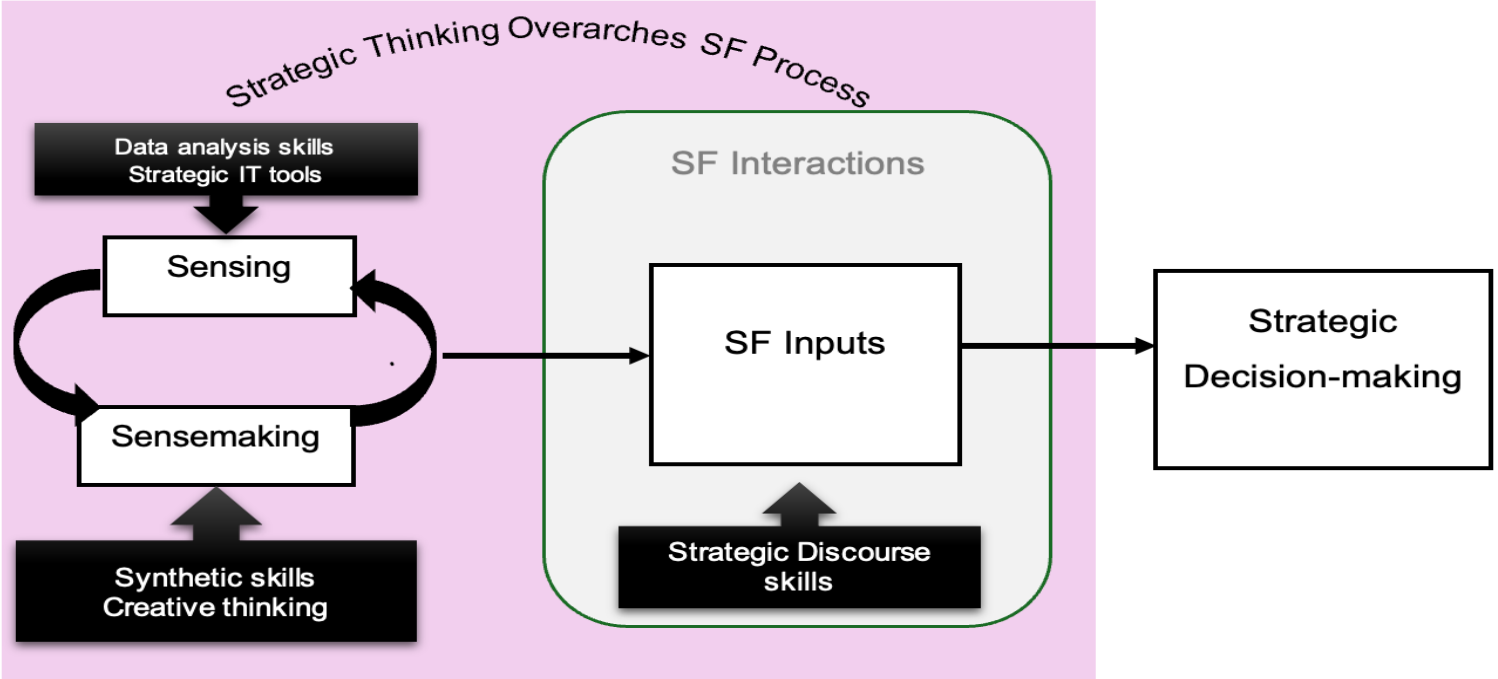

***Figure 12**: Final Model for enhancement of MM inclusion in SF*

Source: Authors own

7.5 Limitations of the research

The limitations related to the topic was the expansive amount of data collected as a result of the interview process. With the study being qualitative, there was expansive amount of information from transcripts that was difficult and time consuming to sift through to get the relevant data for the research manually, this could mean that critical insights may have been lost in the amount of data processes, despite the meticulous nature it was assessed, due to time.

This research also considered only one aspect or group or respondents, being the MMs as they were the focus of the study, thus representing a one-sided view. It would have been interesting to in addition, get the perspectives of senior leaders on the MMs' engagements during SF processes. From their perspectives, what are the shortcomings of MMs and how these could be improved. This would give great insights to the MMs themselves, on what senior leaders expected of them when in SF processes.

The topic of open strategy is not yet well established and mature, with few scholars on the topic and research mostly theoretic and conceptual (Fuertes et al., 2020; Splitter et al., 2024), hence the choice of qualitative study with its inherent limitations related to small sample size and generalisability of findings. This research was undertaken only in the financial services sector of South Africa; therefore, its findings have limited impact and cannot be extrapolated to the entire population of MMs in other industries and geographical locations.

Lastly, the identification, accessing of participants, the process of securing interviews and gaining informed consent were aspects of qualitative research that Peticca-Harris et al. (2016) was challenging and time consuming for a cross-sectional study even with planning, the availability of people could lead to lower-than-expected sample sizes.

7.6 Recommendations for future research

Due to the qualitative nature of the research and breadth and depth of data that was uncovered, some intriguing elements on MMs were uncovered, not relevant to this search enquiry but should be considered for future research.

First, as mentioned in the limitations, this study only focused on MMs in the financial services sector of South Africa. Future research could explore the perspectives of senior leaders in organisations on the MM's role in SF from their perspectives. This would provide a triangulation of experiences that would be interesting to uncover.

Secondly, a notable insight was the introduction of emergent strategic processes in financial services organisations being triggered by new, young external CEOs driving change. Future research could look at organisations where there has not been a change in leadership and investigate how they are approaching gaining DCs or approaching the move to more emergent approaches.

Lastly, future studies could investigate empirically the introduction of open and inclusive SF process and whether these actually lead to better organisational performance as theoretically hypothesized in literature.

7.7 Conclusion

The market environment continues to be uncertain and turbulent with global risks rising daily and competition intensifying, particularly in the financial services sectors. Organisations though recognising the value of MMs in strategic processes, need to intentionally drive efforts to practically upskill MMs in strategic discourse and skills, to afford them time to practice strategy and invest in the appropriate technological tools and systems to facilitated SF. In this way MMs can effectively contribute to the sustainability of the organisations.

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APPENDICES

7.8 CONSISTENCY MATRIX

Title: The Experiences of Middle Managers in Strategy formulation

Propositions/Questions/Hypothesis	Literature Review	Data Collection Tool	Analysis
RQ1: What are the middle managers experiences of their organisation's strategy formulation process?	Pitelis et.al., 2023 Tarakci et.al., 2023 Teece, 2014 Rouleau & Balogun, 2011	Section 1 Interview guide	Thematic analysis on open-ended questions
RQ2: How do MMs feed into SF processes and how is this captured?	Splitter et al., 2023 Whittington et al.,2011	Section 2&3 of interview guide	Thematic analysis
RQ3: What tools and processes are employed by MMs South African financial services to carry out the sensing function of strategic agility?	Chen et al., 2017 Brielmaier & Friesl, 2023 Splitter et al., 2023 Boon, 2005 Casey & Goldman, 2010	Section1 of interview guide	Thematic analysis
RQ4: What are the ST behaviours exhibited by MMs and how are they incorporated into SF	Geier, 2024 Shaik & Dhir, 2021 Goldman, 2012	Section 1&3 of interview guide	Thematic analysis

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Year Completed: _____2024_____

Title of Research: GIBS

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Student Signature: _____

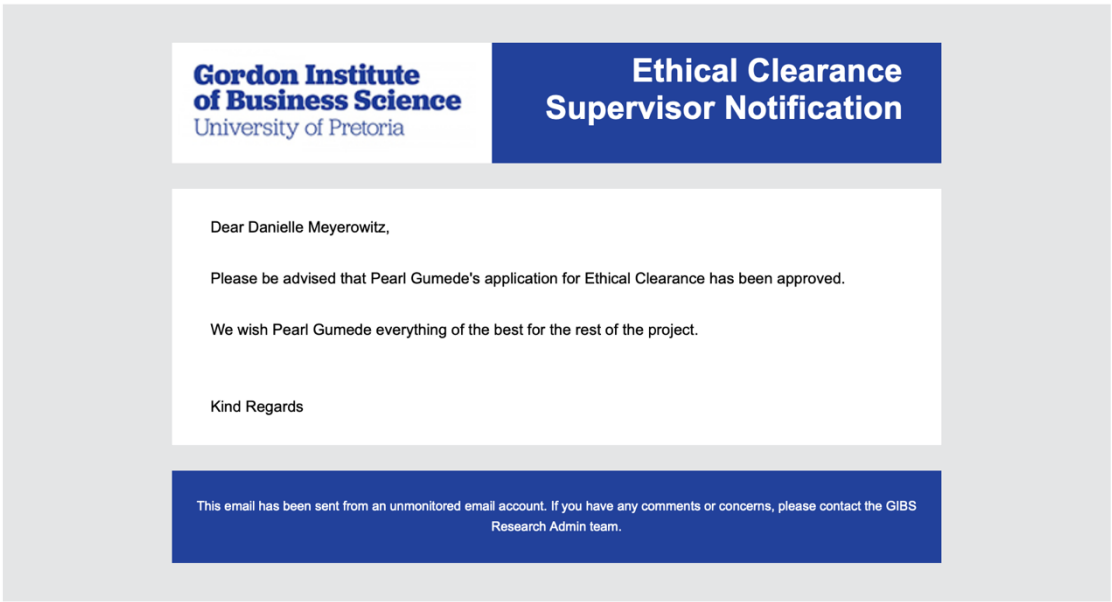
Date: ____03/03/25_____

Supervisor Signature: _____

Date: __03/03/2025_____

7.10 ETHICAL CLEARANCE

From: Masters Research <MastersResearch@gibs.co.za>
Sent: Monday, 11 November 2024 10:41
To: Danielle Meyerowitz <Meyerowitzd@gibs.co.za>
Cc: Masters Research <MastersResearch@gibs.co.za>
Subject: Ethical Clearance Approved for Student Pearl Gumede



Gordon Institute of Business Science
University of Pretoria

Ethical Clearance Supervisor Notification

Dear Danielle Meyerowitz,

Please be advised that Pearl Gumede's application for Ethical Clearance has been approved.

We wish Pearl Gumede everything of the best for the rest of the project.

Kind Regards

This email has been sent from an unmonitored email account. If you have any comments or concerns, please contact the GIBS Research Admin team.

Danielle Meyerowitz
Lecturer
Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria

7.11 DECLARATION FROM

CERTIFICATION OF DATA ANALYSIS SUPPORT

I hereby certify that (please indicate which statement applies):

[Y] I DID NOT RECEIVE any additional/outside assistance (i.e. statistical, transcriptional, and/or editorial services) on my research report.

[ ] I RECEIVED additional/outside assistance (i.e. statistical, transcriptional, and/or editorial services) on my research report.

If any additional services were retained, please indicate below which:
[ ] Statistician
[ ] Transcriber
[ ] Editor
[ ] Other (please specify): _____

Please provide the name(s) and contact details of all retained service providers:

Service Provider 1:
Name: _____
Email Address: _____
Contact Number: _____
Type of Service: _____

Service Provider 2:
Name: _____
Email Address: _____
Contact Number: _____
Type of Service: _____

Service Provider 3:
Name: _____
Email Address: _____
Contact Number: _____
Type of Service: _____

I hereby declare that all statistical write-ups and thematic interpretations of the results for my study were completed by myself without outside assistance.

Name of Student: _____
Signature: _____
Student Number: _____
Student Email Address: _____

Date: _____

7.12 CODE LIST SAMPLE

"never talked about again"	Long term strategy is for changing business model
Alignment resulted in step change improvement	Long term strategy is for exploring
And sometimes when youre not included its not nice	Management requires mindset shifts
Anxious	Managing expectations of leadership
becomes very tough to manage both sides of	MANCO sessions
benefit of inclusion - managing expectations	Minimal input
Benefits of Inclusion - alignment	Missed opportunity
Business development role	MM aspiring to proactive working
Cascading Down to MMs	MM belief self scanning /sensing is better
CEO driven strategic inclusion	MM beliefs strategy deprioritised over existing business
CEO driven strategy output communication	MM comfortable with status quo
Challenges with top down	MM Confidence lacking
Changed to Bottom up build approach	MM confusion
Check and challenge target discussions	MM cross-functional role

Closed strategy formulation process	MM doesnt like managing people
Collaboration	MM feelings
Communication challenge	MM has to overcome reluctance to change
Competitive environment forces re-strategising	MM inclusion for scenario testing
Competitor driven strategic change	MM inclusion leads to better implementation buy-in
Corporate strategy cascaded down and modified	MM inclusion results in better quality of day to day work
Cost of top down is loss of finer details	MM involved in Operationalisation of strategy
Cross-functional alignment	MM lack confidence in Exco forums
Dictation of strategy not right	MM lack long term view
Difficult to change processes	MM lack of urgency for implementation
Digital transformation strategy for competitive advantage	MM no time for strategic analysis
Disadvantage of exclusion	MM prefers managing processes
Disheartening	MM role best suited for providing inputs
Distraction from strategy by day to day	MM strategic empowerment leads to better strategic inputs
Documentation of strategic decisions lacking	MM struggle with operations vs strategy focus

Dont strongly believe in strategy	MM Task focused
Employee input into culture orientation of organisation	Need buy-in of employees to be successful
Employee value proposition missing in communication	Need clear differentiation of short tem plan vs long term strategy
Employees dont feel part of strategy	neglect employee views & needs
Employees feel threatened	Strategic thinking at all levels beneficial
Employees reluctance to change strategy	Strategic thinking for career development
Empowerment	Strategic thinking for MM is executing the plan
Enabling environment creates collaboration	strategic thinking helps MM add value
Environment has changed	Strategic thinking in role is decding which client to target
Exclusion from formulation	Strategic thinking is contemplation
Exclusion misses crucial aspects that can be caught by another level	Strategic thinking is determined by organisational culture
EXCO Sessions	Strategic thinking is improvement mindset
Exco update on the strategic direction	Strategic thinking lacking evenin big organisations
Exhausting	Strategic thinking not a common skill

External focus for competitive advantage	Strategic thinking only for Execs
Familiarity with strat sessions	Strategic thinking self-definition
Fearful	Strategic thinking training required
Formulation and execution linked	Strategy is about having dynamic capabilities
	Strategy is iterative
Frustration with input process	Succession planning
Frustration with input process	Sustainable business view
Global leaders formulate strategy	Team communication skills required
Global Strategy customised to South African conditions	The difference between Senior leaders and MMs
Governance	Theoretical development training offered
Huge positive impact on business	Theoretical training less effective
Hybrid jobs meant no time for strategic view	Think beyond current role
Implementation challenges	Think holistically
Implementation takes time due to changes	Thinking in a different way
Inclusion Culture	Understanding current environment while thinking of future

Ineffective documentation	Very Few MM think strategically
Innovation is opportunity cost to top down strategy	South African industry doesnt localise strategy
Insufficient problem analysis	Stepwise process for strategy formulation input
Internal environment limits swift strategic changes	Strategic actions taken without MM awareness
Internal strategy analysis & review	Strategic ambitions dont account for current organisation state
Is that if you're too collaborative, sometimes you won't get to making decisions.	Strategic ambitions met only 10% of time
	Strategic change result Business model change
Lack big picture view	Strategic change takes time to materialise
Lack of bottom up strategy formulation practice	Strategic process is a work in progress
Lack of effective output cascade to MM	Strategic Values not practiced in reality
Lack of effectiveness Consultant based strategy	strategy communication
Lack of leadership transparency	Strategy deprioritisation costs long run growth
Lack of MM buy-in	Strategy formulation process more top down
lack of practiced open strategy	Strategy is what will shift the organisation
Lack of realisation of strategic goals	strategy misalignment with reality

Lack of strategic role definition	Strategy workshops
Lack of strategic view cost rapid growth	Target setting
Lack of strategy follow through	Technological change from strategy output
Lack of strategy resourcing	they will just go to the bush without us, the same organization, but it has differenced
Lack of trust in employees	Time filled with non-strategic tasks
lack of understanding of strat decisions	Top down leads to resources focused on wrong things
Lack significant changes from strat formulation	Top managers formulate strategy
Lack the benefit of diverse thought	Townhall communication of strategy output
Leaders test assumptions with MMs	Uneven information
Leadership only focus on goals not on goal enablers	when strategy gets delivered to the bigger audience is that the company always talks to what they want to achieve, but they never address what's it for the employee?
Leadership prior exposure determines development focus	Yearly slight strategic amendments
Leadership strategic direction uptake competitive	Loss of longitudinal analysis perspective
lengthy governance costs innovation	Manual data collection internally

Limited resources limit strategic initiatives chosen	MM previous experience for sensing
Line manager takes up insights from MM to Exco	MM sensing process
Long term strategy for diversifying	Need for AI based storage
Lack of sense-making skills	Need for data integration
Lack strategic thinking practices	Need for interactive strategic data storage
Lack systems thinking	
Leadership allows MM free expression of thoughts	
Leadership development of Strategic thinking in MM	
leadership development programmes	
Leadership empowers strategic thinkin in MM	
Leadership measured on Management Development	
Leadership provide better technology to encourage ST	
Leadership provide rewards	