

STRATEGIC IGNORANCE: THE PARADIGM OF UNVEILING THE HIDDEN MOTIVES BEHIND MANAGERIAL BLIND SPOTS

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ABSTRACT

The prevailing idea is that decision makers tend to have access to information as much as possible and consider all information related to a subject for their decisions. However, the evidence shows that sometimes managers deliberately ignore some information. It is a kind of conscious ignorance that empowers managers to decide and act in the way they think is right. This behavioural strategy is called “strategic ignorance”. The aim of this study is to investigate the reasons why strategic ignorance is used by managers in SMEs across various industries. To achieve this goal, we conducted in-depth interviews with 12 managers. The results turn our attention to a hidden reality behind the logical behaviours of managers, and that is the human desire to use “conscious ignorance”. This study confirms that “strategic ignorance” is a deliberate attempt to prevent the organizations flow of knowledge or information. This phenomenon is influenced by the systematic, environmental, and cognitive stimuli of ignorance and the indicators of the information itself. Our research could help organizations develop more effective strategies for preventing and mitigating strategic ignorance. By understanding the underlying motivations and mechanisms of “Strategic ignorance”, organizations could implement interventions to promote more informed decision-making practices.

Keywords: Strategic ignorance, Willful managerial ignorance, Phenomenology, Decision making

1. INTRODUCTION

Strategic ignorance refers to a situation where an individual or agent consciously and intentionally chooses not to acquire certain information, despite having the opportunity or means to do so. It suggests that the person is aware of the possibility of gaining knowledge but actively decides to remain uninformed or avoid obtaining the information (Trimmer et al., 2021).

Building upon the understanding of failures in information gathering and deliberate ignorance, real-life tragedies have underscored the consequences of such shortcomings. For instance, in 2017, dozens of people and firefighters lost their lives in the Plasco building fire incident in Tehran (Iran). Many people lost their business documents and property in this incident and many families mourned. All this was caused by the negligence of a group of managers who ignored the information about the unsafe condition of this building (Gul & Tufail, 2025). This negligence eventually led to a tragic accident in the Plasco building, the fire and collapse of this building, and many firefighters paid the price for the negligence of the officials (Masoumi & Dehghani, 2017).

There are many such cases in our personal and organizational lives. A global example of such a phenomenon can be seen in the crisis of the COVID-19. In this context, Al Dahdah et al., (2021) in their study acknowledged that the public health leaders responded slowly to early evidence that people without symptoms could spread the new coronavirus from China. Incorrect assumptions, ineffective planning, and sluggish responses were among the mistakes that fuelled the crisis by neglecting the available evidence. According to Jalonen (2023), it can be said that we are facing a phenomenon called “ignorance” in human life. The meaning of this ignorance is not unconscious neglect, but on the contrary, it is conscious behaviour that happen to gain certain benefit.

Strategic ignorance, according to McGoe (2012), is the intentional creation and maintenance of a lack of knowledge in specific areas, used as a strategic tool for achieving goals by mobilizing unknown elements, manipulating information for advantages, and asserting authority while avoiding responsibility. While knowledge has been extensively studied, ignorance has often been overlooked as a crucial phenomenon that shapes organizational behaviour and decision-making (Akbulut, 2024). Strategic ignorance, in particular, has been identified as a deliberate and culturally induced form of not-knowing (Jalonen, 2023) that can be used as an organizational asset to deny liability when something failed to function or assert expertise in the face of uncertainty (McGoe, 2012). Strategic ignorance is a phenomenon that occurs when managers actively avoid gaining and using information that can potentially lead to transformative individual and organizational practices (Schaefer, 2019). This behaviour is most commonly seen in the corporate world, where managers may choose to ignore certain information to maintain their self-esteem and avoid facing complications.

According to Moore and Tumin (1949) ignorance must be viewed not simply as a passive or dysfunctional condition, but as an active and often positive element in operating structures and relations. The problem arises when managers and employees may not have clear boundaries for what they should know (Ungar, 2008). But sometimes ignorance may produce organizational efficiency and encourage the exploration of the unknown and increase the organizations ability to question the dominant views (Jalonen, 2023).

However, in the international literature there is still little information and published results about why managers choose to remain strategically ignorant, and how this impacts organizational outcomes. Due to this, we take a phenomenological approach toward understanding strategic ignorance in organizations. Drawing on the works of Proctor and Schiebinger (2008) and McGoe (2012), we explore the causes and consequences of strategic ignorance from the perspective of organizational actors. By adopting a phenomenological lens, we aim to uncover the lived experiences and perspectives of managers who choose to remain strategically ignorant, and the impact of this choice on organizational practices.

Paying attention to the issue of strategic ignorance among managers is interesting and thought-provoking. By framing the study of strategic ignorance through a phenomenological lens, we are emphasizing the subjective experiences and perceptions of managers who intentionally avoid information. This approach could provide valuable insights into the reasons why

managers engage in strategic ignorance and how they experience this behaviour. Additionally, by focusing on “why” managers engage in strategic ignorance, our research could provide a deeper understanding of the underlying motivations and mechanisms of this behaviour. By exploring these motivations and mechanisms, researchers can gain insights into how strategic ignorance can be prevented or mitigated, and how organizations can encourage more informed decision-making practices.

The own contribution and novelty of this research lies in its potential to provide a more nuanced understanding of the reasons why managers engage in strategic ignorance. While previous research has identified various factors that may contribute to strategic ignorance, such as cognitive biases (Pinto, 2019; Murata et al., 2015), political considerations (Somin, 2006), and information overload (Aldoory et al., 2006), there is still a gap in understanding the subjective experiences and perceptions of managers who engage in this behaviour. This phenomenological approach could provide valuable insights into how managers interpret and make sense of the world around them, and how their perceptions and experiences shape their decision-making processes. By filling this gap, our research could help organizations develop more effective strategies for preventing and mitigating strategic ignorance. For example, by understanding the underlying motivations and mechanisms of this behaviour, organizations could implement interventions to promote more informed decision-making practices.

Furthermore, our research could also contribute to the broader literature on decision-making processes within organizations. By exploring the subjective experiences and perceptions of managers, our research could shed light on how individual and organizational factors interact to shape decision-making practices. Overall, this research has the potential to contribute to both the literature on strategic ignorance and the broader literature on organizational decision-making processes.

The present study shows that managers resort to strategic ignorance to “reduce environmental pressure” and reduce stress caused by environmental complexity. This finding is consistent with Hertwig & Engel’s (2021) theory that considers conscious ignorance as a defense mechanism and a strategy to protect psychological well-being against harmful information. In the present study, “avoidance of cognitive dissonance” was mentioned as one of the motivations for ignorance. This result is consistent with Schaefer’s research that shows that people intentionally avoid gathering information to avoid facing failures or the need to take difficult actions. It is also similar to the present research that shows that managers use strategic ignorance as a tool to “reduce decision-making complexity.” This finding is consistent with recent work by Nordström et al. (2023) that showed that middle managers in large organizations consciously ignore information that increases the cognitive load of decision-making. As a result, both studies emphasize the active and intentional nature of this behavior.

It is worth noting that while classical decision-making theories, such as Simon’s (1957) bounded rationality model, attribute information neglect to mental limitations, our findings also suggest that managers strategically withhold information by calculating the benefits and costs. This new perspective is consistent with the work of Artinger et al. (2015) on the “economy of ignorance,” which considers ignorance as a rational choice to save cognitive resources.

Our research also supports the findings of Vu et al. (2023), who identified two main motivations for ignorance:

1. justification of selfish behaviors;
2. cognitive economy.

Of course, our study extends this view by adding an organizational dimension and shows that managers have a third motivation: maintaining control in complex environments.

At the same time, contrary to the view of Powell et al. (2022) who consider organizational ignorance as a tool of the powerful to maintain the status quo, our findings show that even middle-level managers in SMEs use this strategy to cope with environmental pressures. This difference is likely due to the different context of the studies (large organizations with centralized power structures versus agile SMEs). On the other hand, contrary to Alvesson (2021) who considers ignorance as a product of hierarchical structures, our findings emphasize that managers use this tactic even in non-bureaucratic organizations to maintain cognitive control. Similarly, Teo et al. (2022) point to the lack of a linear relationship between knowledge and behavior and consider ignorance to be caused by a cognitive gap, while our study shows that managers consciously ignore information with specific motivations (such as lack of trust in the system).

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Strategic ignorance is a phenomenon that has gained increasing attention in management studies (Alvesson and Spicer 2012, McGoe 2012). It refers to the deliberate avoidance or neglect of information by managers in organizations. Despite the potential risks associated with ignoring relevant information, managers may choose to remain unaware of certain issues to protect their self-interest or assert their authority.

Review of previous studies in the field of “ignorance” show the longstanding interest of philosophers and scholars in the concept of ignorance, which has been described in various ways through metaphors and conceptualizations (Alvesson et al. 2022). Despite efforts to pursue knowledge, ignorance is said to be constantly present, whether it is viewed as virtuous or vicious (Proctor and Schiebinger 2008, McGoe 2014, DeNicola, 2018, Ungar 2008). Ignorance as an organizational phenomenon is less studied compared to knowing, while understanding ignorance could help in managing knowledge more effectively (Roberts, 2013).

Jalonen (2023), mentions that organizations can be seen as systems of shared meaning where ignorance can be intentionally or unintentionally created and sustained through various social interactions, symbolic processes, and organizational structures. The literature of ignorance highlights that organizations can engage in behaviours that are not in their long-term interest, such as rewarding dysfunctional behaviour (Jalonen, 2023) or encouraging knowledge hiding (Connelly et al. 2012, Labafi et al., 2022), which can be seen as symptoms of organizational ignorance.

March and Simon (1993) define organizations as “systems of coordinated action among individuals and groups whose preferences, information, interests, or knowledge differ”. This means that differences in knowledge within an organization can reflect ignorance. While management typically focuses on what is known to create a picture of organizational reality, exploring ignorance can reveal new aspects of that reality. Despite this, management studies often treat knowledge uncritically as a neutral resource that enhances organizational performance (Bogner and Bansal, 2007).

The importance of identifying ignorance in organizational life is increasingly recognized, and it has been examined from various epistemological perspectives (Riaz & Farid, 2023). Proctor and Schiebinger (2008) propose that agnotology, which concentrates on why we don't know what we don't know, is a useful approach to investigate ignorance. Agnotology refers to deliberate and culturally induced ignorance, and it has been utilized to examine the use of ignorance in science and the commercial sector to create doubt and uncertainty around certain industries. McGoe (2012) employs the idea of strategic ignorance as an organizational asset to deny liability or establish expertise in situations of uncertainty.

Previous literature on “ignorance” discusses the growing interest in the concept of ignorance, which has been studied in various disciplines, including epistemology and sociology (McGoe, 2012). They argue that ignorance is a multidimensional concept that requires a nuanced and sit-

uated understanding (Essén et al., 2022, Alvesson et al., 2022). Different types of ignorance are identified, including: (1) genuine lack of knowledge (Parsons, 2022) and (2) willful suppression of knowledge (Vu et al., 2023). The international literature it is mentioned the need to consider the drivers, ambiguities, and processes of knowing and ignoring in organizational contexts.

The literature shows that “willful ignorance” may be used as a resource to protect the existing bureaucratic structure of the organization (Vu et al., 2023) preserve routines and avoid disruptions (Elhassan, 2025). Willful ignorance can also be motivated by personal comfort and intra-organizational social and political considerations (Alvesson et al., 2022), and may be influenced by group interactions or social identities (Sullivan-Clarke, 2024). The phenomenon is not purely a lack of knowledge or cognitive ignorance (Essén et al., 2022), but an active avoidance of gaining and using information.

Alvesson et al., (2022) mentioned the concept of willful ignorance, which is divided into two types: (1) “wilful ignorance” and “willful ignorance”. They explain that these two types are characterized by the degree of salience of the phenomenon in each situation and can be represented on a continuum with two axes: the ignorance axis and the willfulness axis. The authors describe strong and weak forms of willful ignorance, with strong willful ignorance being characterized by a strong will not to know, considerable uncertainty about how to reduce ignorance, and a preference for ignoring information despite difficulties in obtaining and assessing it. The authors suggest that powerful triggers are needed to prompt a change in the will to ignore. On the other hand, weak willful ignorance is characterized by a moderate or weak will not to know and a relatively open situation in terms of outcomes. Their work provides examples to illustrate these two types of willful ignorance. They also mentioned 4 drivers of willful ignorance in four categories (1) Institutional pressures, (2) Organizational norms and dynamics, (3) Individual motives, (4) Access to information.

The international literature on managerial strategic ignorance has identified several issues and problems that have not been sufficiently considered in research. One such gap is the lack of understanding of the relationship between strategic ignorance and organizational performance. While some studies suggest that strategic ignorance can lead to improved performance by enabling managers to focus on their core competencies (Bower & Gilbert, 2018). Another gap in the literature is the lack of research on the antecedents of strategic ignorance. While some studies have examined the factors that may lead managers to choose to remain ignorant of certain aspects of the organization, such as fear of failure or a desire to maintain the status quo (Kish-Gephart, Detert, Treviño, & Edmondson, 2009), much more research is needed to fully understand why managers choose to remain strategically ignorant. Furthermore, the revised literature on managerial strategic ignorance has primarily focused on its negative consequences, such as missed opportunities or increased risk, while neglecting the potential benefits of strategic ignorance. For example, strategic ignorance may enable managers to focus on their core competencies and make more informed decisions in areas where they have expertise (Hartog & Belschak, 2012).

Existing studies show that “ignorance” appears in different forms in the organizational context, each with distinct nature and consequences. According to McGoey (2012) and Paul et al. (2022), “organizational ignorance” refers to the systematic disregard of information by power structures to maintain the status quo, while “strategic ignorance,” which is the focus of the present study, considers ignorance as the conscious disregard of information by managers to control complexity or reduce the burden of responsibility. On the other hand, Dienes (2022) considers “cognitive ignorance” to arise from mental limitations in information processing, which is different from the conscious choice in strategic ignorance. These distinctions indicate that ignorance can be both a tool of domination (at the institutional level) and an adaptive strategy (at the individual level). It should be noted that each type of ignorance has its own conse-

quences. The findings of this study and studies such as Schaefer (2019) suggest that strategic ignorance, despite its short-term benefits (reducing the cognitive load of managers), may lead to the persistence of cognitive biases. In contrast, “institutional ignorance” (as defined by Paul et al., 2022) impairs organizational learning by limiting access to information, although it may provide temporary stability. These differences emphasize the importance of paying attention to the context in which ignorance occurs (individual vs. structural) and the motivations behind it.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. DATA AND ITEMS

This research is an exploratory one and has adopted a phenomenological approach as a methodology for inquiry. Phenomenology helps us to study a phenomenon in the context of its occurrence. It means approaching phenomena that present themselves directly to us as conscious human beings and attempting to understand their essences. It has at its center “the initial recognition of essential intuition as the necessary condition for locating the experiential world that philosophers seek to understand” (Natanson, 1973, p. 25).

A phenomenon is what humans directly experience (Myers, 2004). Once a person approaches a phenomenon and his/her initial understanding of it in sequence (Moralisyska, 2023). The phenomenological method proposes questioning what is usually taken for granted (Pedron & Saccol, 2009).

The strategic ignorance philosophy can be viewed as a social practice, and phenomenology is a methodology used to study social practices. The phenomenological approach to this research study used a qualitative interview. The qualitative interview aims to gain information regarding a particular research topic.

This phenomenological study was conducted with the aim of collecting and examining the lived experiences of 12 managers (most of whom were high-level managers and senior managers of the organization). The goal was to conduct interviews with managers who have an important role in organizational decisions.

In order to strengthen the validity and reliability of the findings, the study used the technique of triangulation (Natow, 2020). In-depth interviews were combined with potential supplementary data sources (such as organizational documents or observational field notes). That is, primary data were obtained from phenomenological interviews that were analyzed using the method of Colaizzi (1978). They were then compared with other sources such as documents and information. For this, internal reports, meeting minutes, etc. were examined to uncover possible discrepancies between managers’ self-reported justifications for ignoring information and their actual behavioral patterns. For example, if managers claimed in interviews that they were ignoring data due to complexity, but the meeting minutes showed that they were deliberately avoiding accountability, this would have led to a revision of our understanding of motivations. We also tried to be present in some management meetings as much as possible and to observe nonverbal signs of ignorance (e.g., topic avoidance, selective attention). For example, if managers repeatedly diverted discussions from risk reports, this empirically supported the interview themes of “pressure reduction”.

Because there may be differences between the way men and women think, we tried to choose equal interviews between men and women in selecting interviewees. This sample volume is obtained based on the theoretical saturation rule in qualitative research. Saturation has attained widespread acceptance as a methodological principle in qualitative research. It is commonly taken to indicate that, based on the data that have been collected or analyzed hitherto, further data collection and analysis are unnecessary (Saunders et al., 2018). We used a purposive sampling approach (Palinkas et al., 2015) due to the aim of the research and the collected data meth-

odology, respectively the in-depth interview. Participants were 12 people who had a significant role in their organizations decision-making process.

One researcher interviewed all 12 top managers, and each interview was audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim, the researcher who collected the data had previous experience in qualitative research. All the ethical aspects of the in-depth interview were strictly respected, the researchers were not members of the Organization of interviewees to avoid influencing the subjects statements. Observing the behaviour of these managers provides new insight into the information desire of managers in different decision-making situations.

The data were collected between December 2021 and January 2022 via face-to-face interviews. The research questions that framed our interviews were as follows:

1. Have you ever had a negative feeling when deciding and choosing from the available options? If yes, what did you do in that situation?
2. Have you ever had a decision-making situation that contradicts your values and beliefs? If yes, how did you feel in that situation, and how did you think you could control the situation?
3. Were there circumstances in which you did not want to know more about the opposing options to confirm yourself? If yes, what did you do?
4. Were there circumstances in which you did not want to know more about the opposing options to avoid negative feelings? If yes, what was your strategy to control yourself?
5. How would you react if you came across information that would change your beliefs about the options available and cost you (financially or non-financial)?
6. How would you feel if further evidence showed that you were wrong or incurring costs (financial or non-financial)?
7. Have you ever neglected certain information? Information that does not support your thoughts or interests.
8. Are you often concerned about «accountability» or «human responsibility»?
9. What factors may make you reluctant to develop newer evidence in a decision situation?
10. How readily do you think you are to hear different and contradictory opinions about your ideas about a decision?
11. What can you do to avoid negative feelings when confronted with information that contradicts your thoughts and previous information?

We translated the recorded interviews into written text and immediately used the MAXQDA10 software to enter the interviews, list them, codify, identify topics, and extract related citations for support. In-depth interview data were investigated using the phenomenological method of Colaizzi (1978). It shows that this approach has well met the current expectations of phenomenology. So, the steps listed in table 1 are designed according to the seven main steps recommended by Colaizzi (1978).

Table 1. Colaizzi system to phenomenological approach

Step 1	The recorded interview content was transcribed to prepare the study data, and the data, recorded content, were repeatedly reviewed.
Step 2	While recurrently reviewing the study data, sentences or phrases directly related to the transfer experience of managers were selected and extracted as meaningful statements.
Step 3	Meanings relevant to the study phenomenon were formulated by carefully considering each statement. By reiterating the process several times from Step 1 to Step 3, it was checked whether any meanings unrelated to participants' statements were formulated or any important meanings were omitted.
Step 4	From the formulated meanings, common themes were derived and organized into clusters.
Step 5	Based on these results, the themes representing the study phenomenon were thoroughly and inclusively described.
Step 6	Among the themes, clear and concise statements through which the key phenomenon of the study can be identified were described. Steps 2–6 were reviewed with qualitative management researchers to investigate whether the derived themes and theme clusters explained the nature of participants initial statements, and whether the words were appropriate for explaining the research phenomenon.
Step 7	To assess the validity of the study results, re-interviews were conducted in person or by telephone with participants who expressed their consent to participate in this process. This method was performed twice during the study confirmation period and was reviewed among 12 participants to determine whether the study correctly recorded their experiences.

Source: Author's contribution

3.2. SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

According to Guba and Lincoln (1994), the data were authenticated to determine the reliability and validity of the results.

First, to ensure that the researchers description and interpretation accurately reflect reality, this study used open-ended questions during the interview to draw participants experiences in a natural context. Individual responses were recorded accurately to prevent deviation.

The researchers asked the participants to give their comments and feedback on the results. The analysis of participants' statements, formulated meanings, and the results were checked with five experts in qualitative analysis.

Data collection and analysis were continued according to the theoretical saturation rule, and criteria for screening participants and participants general characteristics were provided. Including being the key managers and decision-makers of the organization, and their work experience is more than 15 years.

To ensure whether the auditability of collecting data and deriving study results was conducted with consistency, this study applied the seven-step analysis process of Colaizzi. Similarly, statements from the participants explaining the themes and theme clusters are provided in the study results.

Finally, to reduce bias and maintain neutrality in the process and results of the study, thus ensuring confirm-ability, the researcher tried to understand the participants experiences realistically. The present study was conducted in Iran and in the city of Tehran. The organizations that have been selected for the research were the organizations in which we have been present in the consulting process and we were in close contact with their managers and the real flows of their

working lives. These organizations include a bank, municipality, a private company in the field of consulting and marketing and launching construction projects, a private company in the field of construction projects, an insurance company, an economic research institute, a large medical clinic, a Charity and a small hospital in Tehran.

Tables 2 to 6 provide a quantitative overview of the demographic distribution of the interviewees. The gender balance and variation in age and professional experience enhance the methodological rigor and ensure a broader perspective in interpreting the interview data.

Table 2. Gender Distribution

Gender	Count	Percentage
Male	6	50%
Female	6	50%
Total	12	100%

Source: Author's contribution

The **gender parity** (Table 2) ensures that both male and female managerial experiences are equally represented, which is particularly relevant when exploring perception-driven behaviors such as strategic ignorance.

Table 3. Age Groups (grouped by decades for clarity)

Age Group	Count	Percentage
30–39	1	8.3%
40–49	3	25%
50–59	4	33.3%
60–69	3	25%
70+	1	8.3%
Total	12	100%

Source: Author's contribution

The **age distribution** (Table 3), ranging from 30 to over 70, captures perspectives across different generational cohorts, which may influence openness to information and cognitive processing patterns.

Table 4. Education Level. Source: created by authors

Education	Count	Percentage
PhD (Economics, Management, etc.)	5	41.7%
Professional PhD	2	16.7%
Master's	3	25%
Bachelor's/MD/Specialist	2	16.7%
Total	12	100%

Source: Author's contribution

The **educational background** (Table 4), showing a majority holding PhDs or Master's degrees, confirms the high cognitive and analytical profile of participants—crucial for understanding deliberate ignorance as a strategic behavior rather than as a knowledge gap.

Table 5. Work Experience (Years)

Experience Range	Count	Percentage
15–19	2	16.7%
20–29	2	16.7%
30–39	6	50%
40+	2	16.7%
Total	12	100%

Source: Author's contribution

The range of **professional experience** (Table 5) emphasizes that strategic ignorance is not limited to early-career or inexperienced managers. In fact, 50% of participants have over 30 years of experience, suggesting that this behavior may be deeply embedded in long-term organizational culture and leadership styles.

Table 6. Job Position

Position	Count	Percentage
CEO/Managing Director	5	41.7%
Deputy/Vice Roles	2	16.7%
Board Chairman/Head of Institute	3	25%
Mayor/Other Executive Roles	2	16.7%
Total	12	100%

Source: Author's contribution

Finally, **Table 6** shows a strong representation of top-tier decision-making roles (CEOs, directors, vice-chancellors, etc.), ensuring that the insights reflect high-stakes decision-making environments where information control and selective knowledge exposure are more likely to be strategic.

4. RESULTS

Based on the analysis, the study participants experiences were organized into categories and theme clusters of data analysis presented in Table 7.

Table 7. The categories and theme clusters of data analysis

Category	Theme cluster	Short description
Systematic Drivers of Ignorance	Distrust of the system	Uncertainty about the support of other managers of different level in practice
		Uncertainty about the support of senior executives or organizations to which they should be held accountable
		Occurrence of legal troubles
	Learned ignorance	Receive rewards for ignorant behaviour
		See the success of irresponsible and indifferent people
		Learn from institutionalized decision making patterns in the organization
Environmental Drivers of Ignorance	Environmental Complexity and ambiguity	Existence of various and confusing interpretations of the data
		Lack of objective evidence
		High volume of data and environmental information
	Environmental instability	High speed changes
		Speed of information expiration

Category	Theme cluster	Short description
Cognitive Drivers of Ignorance	Perceived incompetence	Inability to interpret new information
		Lack of sufficient knowledge about the issues
		Lack of experience on the subject
		Inability to understand cause-and-effect relationships
		Inability to prioritize information
	Concerned about the consequences of paying attention to information	Fear of being blamed
		Fear of being judged by others
		Fear of unforeseen events
		Fear of the need to change beliefs and values with new information
		Existing pressures to be accountable
		Contradictory attitudes and duality of values
	The illusion of competence	Bias towards old beliefs
		Smug complacency in predicting information
		Illusion of control
		The illusion of resource adequacy
Informational Drivers of Ignorance	Source of information	Uncertainty about the source of information
		Information source multiplicity
	Information features	Objectivity of information
		Information attractiveness
		Relevance to previous information
		Comprehensibility of information (complexity and ambiguity)

Source: Author's contribution

Table 7 offers a synthesized mapping of the emergent themes and categories derived through Colaizzi's method. This thematic structure adds transparency to the analytical process and helps contextualize the participants' narratives within the framework of strategic ignorance.

4. 1. CATEGORY 1: SYSTEMATIC DRIVERS OF IGNORANCE

- Distrust of the system

According to this concept, the lack of trust of decision-makers in receiving systematic support makes them more cautiously involved in newer information or evidence. Such behaviour will become systemic, especially if other peers or top managers are afraid of accountability".

"There have been many cases where my colleagues have reprimanded me for insisting on certain information" (participant 4: A 36-year-old woman, CEO of an engineering company).

"I am not sure if I should be excluded from the system by advocating a particular belief or evidence" (participant 6: A 54-year-old man, Manager of an insurance company).

"The system does not provide supportive conditions for me to study further" (participant 11: A 43-year-old woman, Managing director of a medical clinic).

- Learned ignorance

According to this concept. The system teaches people what to pay attention to and what stimuli to ignore. In other words, decision-makers eventually learn which issues (including information, evidence, and environmental stimuli) will benefit the most in a typical system.

"When I see less involved people or do not try hard to get more information are more successful, I become less motivated to act differently" (participant 2: A 40-year-old woman, Deputy CEO of a private bank).

“I think our decision-making style (in a system) will gradually become similar. Those who are very different are annoyed. Especially in Iran, people do not have learned to be responsible and accountable” (participant 5: A 50-year-old man, the mayor of one of the districts of Tehran).

“Those who oppose (due to attention to different and contradictory information) are gradually eliminated. Sometimes I wonder why I bother myself. Those who are not looking for trouble and accountability are more comfortable” (participant 8: A 61-year-old man, Head of an economic research institute).

4. 2. CATEGORY 2: ENVIRONMENTAL DRIVERS OF IGNORANCE

- Environmental complexity and ambiguity

According to this concept, ignoring certain information is inevitable when the environment is too complex for decision-makers to understand or interpret. However, this lack of attention to information can vary from person to person for reasons that will be discussed in later sections.

“Sometimes, I get upset. Today the information says one thing, while tomorrow, it says another. Today, the government, all those around us, and all the media encourage us to invest in the stock market, while tomorrow, everything changes, and this become the worst kind of investment. Sometimes I prefer to do my job and not deal with this information” (participant 6: A 54-year-old man, Manager of an insurance company).

“We hear different interpretations of much information. Sometimes I have to close my ears and eyes and do my job” (participant 7: A 48-year-old man, CEO of a Knowledge-based engineering company).

“In such a situation (the respondent refers to his unstable situation in Iran due to sanctions and the complicated economic situation and the COVID crisis), I prefer to do what I think is right. Sometimes I get bewildered, and I think paying attention to more information only confuses me, and I lose time” (participant 10: A 55-year-old woman, Head of a hospital).

- Environmental instability

According to this concept, the high speed of environmental changes and the loss of value of previous information deprive managers of the opportunity to pay attention to environmental variables, so managers are afraid to spend their resources (such as time and money) on environmental analysis. In contrast, the value of this information is only for a short time.

4. 3. CATEGORY 3: COGNITIVE DRIVERS OF IGNORANCE

- Perceived incompetence

According to this concept, a manager who knows he cannot deal with some information avoids dealing with them. This perceived inability may be due to inexperience with specific information or the inability to establish cause-and-effect relationships between specific data. Also, in many cases, managers cannot distinguish between strategic issues and issues of lower priority or cannot understand the urgency of paying attention to specific information.

“Well, sometimes I cannot understand some information. No one can understand all kinds of information. I think this is normal” (participant 3: A 65-year-old man, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Contracting Company (Construction Projects)).

“Sometimes I get so caught up in the day-to-day issues and problems of the organization that I think I have not been able to distinguish between important and more ordinary issues (participant 8 participant 8: A 61-year-old man, Head of an economic research institute)”.

“I believe that there are people among the organizations decision-makers who cannot under-

stand the cause of the issues. Due to inexperience or familiarity and some disciplines, these people have reached this position. They do not have a proper understanding of the subject or do not communicate with specific information, and this is a fact” (participant 11: A 43-year-old woman, Managing director of a medical clinic).

- Concerned about the consequences of paying attention to information

One of the reasons managers are reluctant to pay attention to some information is their fear of the consequences of this attention.

“Sometimes I am afraid that my insistence on paying attention to certain information will cause me trouble” (participant 4: A 36-year-old woman, CEO of an engineering company).

“Given the multitude of organizational disruptions, I sometimes choose to withdraw, lacking the patience to respond or take the blame” (participant 5: a 50-year-old man, The mayor of one of the districts of Tehran).

“I think we have to take responsibility for what we know. In my opinion, the burden of responsibility is heavy. I think we must also be motivated to be accountable. Sometimes I ask myself why I am looking for trouble! Do not care!” (participant 9: A 57-year-old woman, Vice Chancellor for Research, an active research institute in the field of economics).

- The illusion of competence

Hence, the illusion of competence is one of the factors that cause some information to be ignored. In the sense that managers think, know enough, and are successful enough. Managers fall into the trap of this illusion and think that the same old information and previous experiences will guarantee their success in the future.

“Our success shows that we have not made too many mistakes in paying attention to information” (participant 1: A 70-year-old man, CEO of a private bank).

“Believe me, every time I came to pay more attention to other points of view, I was wrong” (participant 3: Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Contracting Company (Construction Projects).

In the past, there was not much media and information. However, these days, programs are becoming more complex. I can’t communicate with topics such as formal planning (Participant 9: A 57-year-old woman, Vice Chancellor for Research, an active research institute in the field of economics).

4. 4. CATEGORY 4: INFORMATIONAL DRIVERS OF IGNORANCE

- Source of information

According to this concept, when it is not clear from which source the information is obtained, the probability of ignoring that information increases. For example, when a topic is rumoured in the organization, it is not clear where is the source of this information.

“Sometimes you really can no longer trust. For example, you saw the governments promises to invest in the stock market in 2021, and you must have considered how we faced the stock fall” (participant 1: A 70-year-old man, CEO of a private bank).

“Many times, a group has tried to make a piece of information seem important to us or that it is produced from information sources that reach us and influence our decisions. Not every source can be trusted” (participant 2: A 40-year-old woman, Deputy CEO of a private bank).

- Information features

According to this concept, some information may be more attractive to decision-makers for whatever reason. For example, it aligns with their expertise or approves of their opinions. Alternatively, it may be better to communicate that information. In other words, they are understand-

able and objective. Accordingly, sometimes the inherent characteristics of information cause others to pay attention to them.

“Yes, it was information that I relied on more because it was consistent with my knowledge and understood. I think this is normal. Well, the more you understand, the more you use” (participant 5: A 50-year-old man, the mayor of one of the districts of Tehran).

“Some issues are not understandable to me. I prefer to spend my time on understandable and valuable topics” (participant 8: A 61-year-old man, Head of an economic research institute).

5. DISCUSSION AND COCLUSION

The phenomenon of “strategic ignorance” can be described as a kind of strategy that will give managers the power to control some unknown or complex situations. This “conscious negligence” helps managers to release the pressure of accountability in such cases. However, the situation is not always unknown and complex, and only the unfamiliarity of the manager with the information may lead to ignoring the information. Also, the incompatibility of the new information with the old knowledge, managerial values, and beliefs may cause “strategic ignorance.” On the other hand, paying attention to some information causes managers to give up their ideas, beliefs, and values, which increases the risk of paying attention to specific information.

Strategic ignorance, as the deliberate avoidance of unfavorable information, challenges fundamental principles of transparency and ethical responsibility in leadership. Our study shows that managers often employ ignorance as a way to reduce cognitive load in complex environments, avoid conflict with prior beliefs, and avoid personal accountability for risky decisions. Such behavior raises important ethical concerns. For example, when managers systematically ignore negative information (e.g., financial risks, employee complaints), they shift the burden of failure onto stakeholders (e.g., employees, shareholders, society). This is consistent with McGoe (2012) argument that strategic ignorance can become a tool for organized irresponsibility. Another ethical threat is that if employees see leaders selectively ignoring critical data, organizational trust is reduced and potentially a culture of non-participation or secrecy is reinforced (Alowson et al., 2021). This becomes especially threatening for some sensitive businesses such as banking or healthcare systems, etc. Ignoring important information in these organizations may violate fiduciary duties or legal obligations, exposing companies to lawsuits or reputational damage.

Strategic ignorance as a widespread behavioural phenomenon among managers challenges the knowledge-attitude-behaviour model presented by Barnowski et al (2003). The knowledge-attitude-behaviour model analyzes human health-related behaviours by dividing change into three continuous processes: knowledge acquisition, belief production, and behaviour formation. As a result, based on the assumptions of this model, if people know that smoking is harmful to them, they will try to correct this behaviour. It means that people are so rational that as they acquire new knowledge, they consider a new cost-benefit structure for their future behaviours (Petty et al., 2007). However, Grossman, Z. 2014 points out that most people do not think, and act as logically as expected. Also, as Teo et al., 2023 acknowledged, there is no consistent relationship between knowledge and behaviour, and knowledge may not be a key driver of behaviour (Teo et al., 2023).

Drivers of ignorance were categorized into four main categories based on the research findings. The category of “Systematic Drivers of Ignorance” highlights that managers choose ignorance because of distrust of the system and learned ignorance. In this context, Alvesson et al.(2021) acknowledged that many organizations possess a significant amount of bureaucracy, which refers to the complex and rigid administrative systems and procedures they employ. This bureaucracy is characterized by numerous layers and units within the organization, resulting in a potentially challenging task of understanding the origins of various plans, rules, and proce-

dures. This lack of transparency can make it challenging for employees or individuals within the organization to comprehend the roles and responsibilities of administrators and the purpose behind their actions. In such environments, employees may choose to remain uninformed or avoid questioning the status quo due to the perceived risks or consequences associated with doing so. Paul et al. (2022) also mentioned that ignorance is often systematic, meaning it is not accidental or random, but rather a result of intentional or structured factors within an organization or system. They added, ignorance can indeed be used as a strategy for inaction and the avoidance of accountability.

The “Environmental Drivers of Ignorance” category emphasizes that decision-makers may engage in the act of ignoring certain information when confronted with an overly complex environment that surpasses their capacity to fully comprehend or interpret. As highlighted by Jarke-Neuert & Lohse in time pressure decision-makers commonly avoid information to reduce complexity. According to Lipshitz & Strauss (1997), in the real world, the accumulation of additional information does not reduce uncertainty and does not contribute to the quality of decision making, so decision-makers may engage in the act of ignoring certain information when confronted with an overly complex environment. Artinger et al. (2015) also mentioned that in complex, uncertain environments heuristics can be more successful than logic and statistics.

The “Cognitive Drivers of Ignorance” category highlights incompetency and consequences of paying attention to information. According to this research, humans deliberately avoid learning, tracking, and trying to obtain information that may have unpleasant consequences (Aumeboonsuke, 2025). This study also, shows that in most cases, we try not to use the information that violates our beliefs, forces us to respond, takes control of the situation, and makes us look inappropriate. In such cases, we try to give this information less priority. This is an issue that Alvesson et al. (2021) acknowledged that ignorance is a good tactic for blaming avoidance. Hertwig & Engel (2021), also assert that deliberate ignorance can be a means to protect oneself from potentially harmful or emotionally salient information. In this context, Schaefer (2019) also mentioned that people deliberately avoid collecting relevant information which would potentially lead to facing negative insights about failures or call to take difficult actions. As highlighted by Nordström et al., (2023), remaining ignorant makes it possible for people to form optimistic beliefs about information. Vu et al., (2023) acknowledged that there are two distinct motives for ignorance. According to them, people may be using ignorance as an excuse to legitimize selfish behaviour, or they may choose ignorance out of cognitive inattentiveness.

The “informational drivers of ignorance” category emphasizes the role of source of information and information features as a driver of ignorance. Both individuals and organizations exhibit cognitive and motivational biases when it comes to their perception of information and the subsequent decisions they make (De Dreu et al., 2008). These biases can stem from a state of ignorance, where people lack complete knowledge or understanding of certain subjects or situations. This ignorance can manifest in various ways, such as selective attention to information that aligns with preexisting beliefs or motivations, and the subsequent decision-making processes influenced by that information. It is important to recognize and address these biases rooted in ignorance, as they can hinder accurate comprehension and lead to potentially flawed judgments and choices. In this regard (Van Knippenberg, 2015) noted that, the abundance of information opens up new possibilities for individuals, organizations, and society as a whole. However, it also poses a challenge: understanding how to effectively utilize these opportunities becomes crucial for management research and practice.

Based on the results of this study, it is suggested that managers never take anything for granted. Different interpretations of information may indicate a particular issue as definite, accurate, or false. It must always be assumed that a fact may be hidden or that a phenomenon may have oth-

er interpretations. Accordingly, what we may have considered an opportunity given the available information and evidence may be a threat given another category of evidence.

The study's use of a small sample, involving only 12 managers, might make it harder to apply the findings to a wider group of people. To make the results stronger, future research should involve more people with diverse backgrounds. On the other hand, the study looks at small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) without specifying the type of industry. It would be interesting to explore how industry-specific factors could affect strategic ignorance. Investigating this in specific industries could give us a deeper understanding. Another limitation of this study is that the study doesn't talk about possible differences in how strategic ignorance is used across different cultures (Vlasenko, 2023). Looking into how cultural factors impact the adoption of this strategy could help us understand it better. Although in-depth interviews provide great qualitative data, combining them with numbers or using different research methods like surveys or observations could give us a fuller picture of strategic behaviour.

Suggestions for future research

First, we suggest conducting longitudinal studies to track the evolution of strategic ignorance over time. This could provide insights into its dynamics, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of how and why managers employ this strategy in different organizational contexts.

Secondly, we suggest comparing the prevalence and motivations of strategic ignorance across various organizational sizes, structures, and industries which can offer a broader understanding of its applicability and variations.

Also, future research could explore and evaluate intervention strategies aimed at reducing the negative impact of strategic ignorance within organizations. This may involve developing training programs or policies that encourage a more transparent information-sharing culture.

Finally, it is better to Complement qualitative findings with quantitative measures, such as surveys or experimental designs, which can strengthen the empirical foundation of the study and provide statistical significance to observed trends.

Ethical considerations

Prior to the interview, participants were allowed to record their voices. The participants historical and verbatim transcribed interview data were coded. The interview data and the essential code list were locked away, only available to the research team. The names of the interviewees and their organizational addresses are kept with the researchers.

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