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*Feigned Digital Incompetence as a New Managerial Challenge:  
A Systematic Literature Review and Future Research Agenda*

**Keywords:** feigned digital incompetence; playing dumb; systematic literature review; conceptualization

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**Abstract**

**Theoretical background:** The “inability” to find an email, complete a form, activate a camera or microphone can not only irritate coworkers but also harm an organization. Pretending incompetence has been frequently reported in social media. However, it is predominantly discussed in the context of marital relationships. Nonetheless, a similar phenomenon has been observed in workplaces. In this paper, feigned digital incompetence construct is proposed. It is anchored in the overlap with knowledge hiding.

**Purpose of the article:** The intent of this paper is to showcase this overlap and outline a future research agenda in the digital context. This paper contributes to the organizational behavior and human resource management literature. It introduces a new construct that is widely discussed in social media but has yet to be thoroughly investigated in management research.

**Research methods:** A systematic literature review was conducted to ensure methodological rigor. Publications containing “feigned incompetence” and “knowledge hiding” were searched within the Web of Science and Scopus databases. These papers were further analyzed to formulate propositions for future research.

**Main findings:** The author identified 336 relevant studies. Analysis of the predominant knowledge hiding scale depicted overlap in the “playing dumb” dimension. Recognizing this overlap, the author advocates for testing scale adaptation and presents a list of constructs, based on selected theories, to be explored in preliminary studies.

## Introduction

Many employees face difficulties with technology, from using a copier to connecting a projector. Some of these struggles may be genuine, but they might also be feigned. This feigning incompetence, known in social media as “weaponized incompetence” or “strategic incompetence” has been recognized as a strategy to avoid certain responsibilities. In general, feigning incompetence is a behavior in which a person pretends to be unable to perform an activity correctly or at all. In social media, it is largely discussed in the context of task avoidance. Many women on platforms like TikTok reported their partners’ feigned incompetence in household chores, with content under the tag #weaponizedincompetence has been viewed 68.7 million times. Though humorous in presentation, it is recognized as a negative phenomenon causing labor inequity, and, thus, evoking negative emotions among its victims and observers.

Google Trends indicates a growing interest in the phenomenon within the context of work (*Trendy Google*, n.d.). Also Sandberg (2007) highlighted this behavior years ago in *The Wall Street Journal*, detailing employees’ strategic incompetence to avoid unwanted tasks. Currently, especially on platforms like LinkedIn, there is noticeable interest in the phenomenon, with many attempting to understand it. For instance, as it relates to not fully utilizing employees’ potential, it is being compared to another trending phenomenon, “quiet quitting” – where employees do their bare minimum. From this perspective, feigning incompetence at work can be perceived as counterproductive behavior affecting task distribution, decreased productivity, strained relationships, *inter alia* (Fox et al., 2001; Carpenter et al., 2021). As an impediment to the effective use of the organization’s resources, the phenomenon poses a new challenge for management units. The issue of “invisible work” and the unequal task distribution based on gender stereotypes further exacerbates it, posing a threat to the organizational sense of justice (Smith, 2022).

Taking all this into account, preventing, recognizing and responding to the challenge of feigned incompetence in an organization can be considered an important task for management. The question, however, is how to meet it when the nature of this behavior is implicit, and there is no comprehensive research on the subject. This article is the author’s attempts to map out possible paths for seeking answers to this question.

In management sciences, there is no defined construct for feigning incompetence. However, a related phenomenon – “knowledge hiding” – offers a possible starting point for understanding feigned incompetence. The goal of this paper is to show overlap of both constructs, and based on previous studies on knowledge hiding, outline a future research agenda on feigned incompetence in the digital context. This is achieved through a systematic literature review.

This article is structured as follows: a description of the methods used in data acquisition, analysis, and synthesis; presentation of the most important constructs

related to knowledge hiding and the main research trends in the scope of previously examined constructs and theories; confrontation of the results with existing knowledge and a proposal of an agenda for future research, as well as implications for theory and practice, limitations, and conclusion.

## Methods

### Initial searches

In this paper, the author employed a systematic literature review (Czakon, 2011, 2020). Preliminary keyword searches were undertaken in general Google search engines and Google Scholar, followed by focused searches in the Web of Science and Scopus databases. Keywords tested included variations of feigned incompetence, such as “simulated incompetence”, “pretend incompetence”, and “false incompetence”. “Feigned incompetence” emerged as the most appropriate term. Other terms explored included “cloak of incompetence”, “weaponized incompetence”, and “strategic incompetence”. Finally, related phrases in the context of knowledge hiding were checked. Ultimately, the keywords chosen for the literature search were feigned incompetence and knowledge hiding, with the Boolean operator used for the former as *feign\* incompetence*.

### Selection process

English articles from Web of Science and Scopus databases were examined. Of the 851 initially identified publications (on April 7, 2023), 394 duplicates were removed. Articles were then revised based on relevance. The author included articles meeting the following criteria. First, research had to be focused on employees’ behaviors. Excluded were articles on data privacy techniques, or feigning incompetence to stand trial. Second, research had to cover feigning behaviors of employees. Excluded were articles on knowledge hiding limited to just one dimension that is not playing dumb, but also those only mentioning knowledge hiding – not referring directly to this construct. Third, research had to focus on an intra-organizational context. Excluded were articles in the context of retailer-buyer or employee-client relationships, as well as interorganizational context. After filtering, 371 publications remained, with only three directly concerning feigned incompetence. A total of 336 articles were chosen for thematic analysis. The literature selection process is summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1.** The protocol of literature selection process

| Stage of selection process   | Results (number of articles)   |
|--|--|
| identification of articles [ <i>Early access, Article and Review</i> (article)] in databases:<br>a) Web of Science for search: <i>feign* incompetence (Topic) OR "knowledge hiding" (Topic)</i><br>b) and Scopus for search ( <i>TITLE-ABS-KEY (feign* AND incompetence) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("knowledge hiding")</i> )<br>(search on 7 April 2023) | identified articles = 851<br>– in WOS = 406<br>– in Scopus = 445   |
| identification of duplicates   | identified duplicates = 394<br>unique publications = 457   |
| separating irrelevant literature based on abstract analysis  | relevant publications = 371<br>irrelevant literature = 86  |
| separating reviews from literature   | included to review analysis = 336<br>– feigning incompetence = 3<br>– knowledge hiding = 333<br>separated reviews = 35 |
| search summary   | included to analysis = 336<br>rejected = 515   |

Source: Author's own study.

## Data analysis

Data were extracted from each article, including publication year, journal, citation count, related constructs, and keywords. This facilitated the study of the development dynamics of research on feigned incompetence and knowledge hiding. Construct lists were organized thematically and categorized by individual, team, and organizational levels. Keywords were analyzed for frequency, with emphasis on theory names and digital context-related phrases.

## Results

### Constructs underlying feigned incompetence

In management sciences, there is no construct dedicated to simulated incompetence, understood as pretending lack of competence to perform tasks of a certain type (especially digital competence). As a result of the review, three articles directly related to the phenomenon were found, published in journals of social psychology (*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*) and sociology (*Sociological Theory, Qualitative Sociology Review*).

The oldest of these (Shepperd & Socherman, 1997) focuses on sandbagging, a manipulative strategy aimed at inducing the opponent to reduce effort or lower their vigilance which is one of the forms of feigned incompetence. The main determinants of this behavior are supposed to be competition and uncertainty about its outcome. The authors emphasize that it occurs in competition in order to influence the percep-

tion and behavior of the opponent (Shepperd & Socherman, 1997). This phenomenon is perceived as a threat to the image and comfort of the pretender, as they may be perceived as a deceiving person who cannot be trusted (if the feigning is recognized) or a person of lesser competence than in reality (Shepperd & Socherman, 1997).

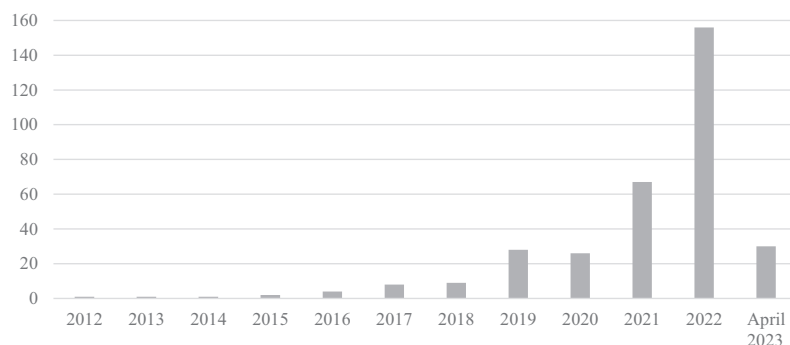
The other two publications focus on feigning incompetence in broader understanding, portraying it as an opposite of the so-called “cloak of competence”, i.e. presenting more-than-fully-able selves, more knowledgeable, informed, aware, skilled, experienced, accomplished, and so on (Edgerton, 1967, after McLuhan, 2020b). One of these discusses this behavior in the particular example of ethnographical work as a strategy inherent in the performing of the professional role (McLuhan, 2020b), while latter portrays its multi faces (McLuhan, 2020a). Feigning incompetence is presented in broader context of impression management that includes various ways people deliberately disregard, disguise, downplay, or diminish their personal abilities in social interaction for strategic and moral purposes (McLuhan, 2020a). McLuhan (2020a) distinguished three competence-concealing techniques: (1) avoidance – preventing the dramatic realization of competence by avoiding self-presentations or situation that would draw attention to and thereby reveal particular abilities (avoiding talking, activities, appearances, and audiences); (2) performance – dramatically realizing incompetence involving active competence concealing as “playing dumb”, making deliberate mistakes while attempting to accomplish a particular task, performing incompetent roles (roles that are commonly associated with diminished competence); and (3) neutralization – discounting, downplaying, distancing or otherwise explaining away evident but undesirable competent performances. Therefore, in this perspective feigning incompetence as active pretending lack of competence to perform particular task is seen as one of competence-concealing techniques.

Moving forward, literature search revealed 333 publication related to the above-mentioned construct. Number of articles being well over 40 suggests sufficient maturity of a domain for review (after Paul et al., 2021). The birth of the knowledge hiding construct can be seen in 2012–2014, and the beginning of its development in 2019. Currently, an intensified interest in the phenomenon can be observed. Publications on this topic from the last year make up 47% of all published so far (see Figure 1).

Among the journals, the greatest contribution to a domain is made by *Journal of Knowledge Management* (49 articles), *Frontiers in Psychology* (47), *Journal of Business Research* (23), *VINE Journal of Information and Knowledge Management Systems* (13), and *Knowledge Management Research Practice* (10).

The earliest article among the collected ones is “Knowledge Hiding in Organizations” by Connelly et al. (2012) and was published in *Journal of Organizational Behavior*. It is the most cited and also the most important publication in a domain as it initiated the use of knowledge hiding scale. In this paper, the authors established that knowledge hiding exists, distinguished it from related concepts and identified several predictors of the behavior in organizations. They described it as an intentional attempt by an individual to withhold or conceal knowledge (the information, ideas,

and expertise relevant for tasks performed by organizational members) that has been requested by another person. It is not simply the absence of sharing, thus it does not include failing to share knowledge by mistake, accident, or ignorance. However, it is not always deceptive or necessarily intended to do harm, what distinguishes it from such constructs as counterproductive work behavior, work aggression, or workplace incivility (Connelly et al., 2012).



**Figure 1.** Annual number of publications (on April 7, 2023)

Source: Author's own study.

Knowledge hiding scale consists of three dimensions – evasive hiding, playing dumb, and rationalized hiding. The first two involve some deception. While evasive hiding refers to pretending help intention by promising to complete answer in the future or providing incorrect information, playing dumb refers to pretending being ignorant of the relevant knowledge. The third dimension is not necessarily associated with deception. Rationalized hiding refers to offering a justification for failing to provide requested knowledge that may be honest and true.

### **Related constructs**

Knowledge hiding is a complex phenomenon. Confirmation of this may be found in substantial lists of constructs investigated in the context of this behavior.

### **Antecedents**

Studies shows that knowledge hiding is influenced by many factors – individual (e.g. employees' characteristics, behaviors, emotional and psychological states, personality traits, attitudes, skills, motivations), team (e.g. coworker relationships and dynamics, leadership) and organizational (e.g. organizational culture and climate, knowledge management and culture, work environment and conditions). Researchers focused mostly on leadership, investigating both its negative and positive aspects. Studies recognized significant influence of different leadership behaviors and styles

(e.g. altruistic leadership – Abdillah et al., 2022; ethical leadership – Anand et al., 2022; servant leadership – Anwaar & Jingwei, 2022; transformational leadership – Ladan et al., 2017; exploitative leadership – Feng et al., 2022; self-serving leadership – Peng et al., 2019), leaders' characteristics (e.g. leader humility – Zhong et al., 2021; leaders bias tendency – Du et al., 2022), and dynamics between supervisor and subordinates, especially LMX (Abdillah et al., 2022; He, Sun, et al., 2022).

In general, list of investigated antecedents consists of factors that are beyond the organization's control or only barely within its grasp (e.g. employee's personality traits – Karim, 2020; Soral et al., 2022), as well as those more easily or even highly manageable (e.g. HR practices and rewards system – Dodokh, 2020; Zhang & Min, 2021). It not only underscores the importance of the HR role right from the stage of candidate selection, but also portrays knowledge hiding as a multi-faceted challenge that cannot be easily met with one-size-fits-all solution.

### Outcomes

The multitude of antecedents appears particularly problematic when considering the potential threat that the negative outcomes of knowledge hiding pose to an organization.

Research shows that this phenomenon affects many aspects that are significant for organization's growth, success or even survival. Performance and creativity were recognized as the most important, garnering the main attention among researchers. The influence of knowledge hiding on them appears to be ambiguous. On the one hand, studies shows negative impact on performance at all levels (job performance – Nguyen et al., 2022; Jahanzeb et al., 2020; project team performance – Zhang & Min, 2019; enterprise innovation performance – Rong & Liu, 2021), considering both in-role and extra-role activities (in-role performance – Khoreva & Wechtler, 2020; task performance – Mharapara et al., 2022; Moin et al., 2022; project performance – Zhang & Min, 2019; extra-role performance – Ain et al., 2022). On the other hand, knowledge hiding is shown to positively affects performance both in the short and long run (task performance – Sulistiawan et al., 2022; innovative job performance, in-role job performance – Khoreva & Wechtler, 2020). Moreover, influence of this behavior can differ depending on its form. For example, relationship between in-role job performance and evasive hiding was found to be negative, while in context of playing dumb positive (Khoreva & Wechtler, 2020).

Knowledge hiding also has a two-fold effect on creativity. Studies show negative influence on creativity at various levels (employee/individual creativity – Chatterjee et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2020; Feng et al., 2022; team creativity – Peng et al., 2019; Bashir et al., 2022), impacting not only knowledge hidings (knowledge hidings' creativity – Černe et al., 2014), but also behavior targets and observers (employee creativity – Jahanzeb et al., 2019). However, studies reveal that knowledge hiding can enhance target's creativity through the mechanism of benign envy (IT professionals context – Zakariya & Bashir, 2021).

Despite these positive signals, it should be noted that knowledge hiding is associated with many negative phenomena: workplace incivility (Jafari-Sadeghi et al., 2022; Wen et al., 2022), defensive silence (Bari et al., 2020), negative word of mouth (Lv et al., 2021), distrust (Arain et al., 2020), competitive work environment and territoriality (Jafari-Sadeghi et al., 2022), work withdrawal behavior (Xu et al., 2022), reciprocal knowledge hiding (Serenko & Bontis, 2016), workplace deviance (Singh, 2019), counterproductive work behavior (Lv et al., 2021; Qi & Ramayah, 2022), moral disengagement (Arain et al., 2021; Zulfiqar et al., 2023), and even front-line service sabotage (Zulfiqar et al., 2023). It affects employees' well-being (Agarwal et al., 2022; Khoreva & Wechtler, 2020), job satisfaction (Offergelt et al., 2019), leading to turnover intentions (Serenko & Bontis, 2016; Offergelt et al., 2019; Haq et al., 2022). Therefore, it can be perceived as an element of unfavorable working conditions being a threat to human capital retention.

### **Moderators**

The direction and strength of the relationships between knowledge hiding and its antecedents or outcomes depends on many variables. The importance of leadership was emphasized again. Most studies focused on investigating contribution of leadership styles, leaders' characteristics, behavior, or supervisor-subordinate dynamics to the reduction of the phenomenon and its negative consequences (e.g. Feng et al., 2022; Jeong et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2022; Chhabra & Pandey, 2023; Akhtar et al., 2022; Wan et al., 2022).

Attention was also drawn to psychological and emotional factors (e.g. cognitive-based trust and affective-based trust – Nadeem et al., 2021; Guo et al., 2022; territoriality – Jin-song et al., 2022; mindfulness – Xu & Xue, 2023), interpersonal relationships (e.g. co-worker support – Khan, 2022; interpersonal liking – Shafique et al., 2022; forgiveness climate – Yao et al., 2020), and organizational aspects (e.g. reward structure – Wang et al., 2019; job complexity – Qin et al., 2021; market culture – Koay et al., 2022; organizational justice – Khan et al., 2022). The strength of the phenomenon appears to be dictated by a multitude of interconnected processes.

### **Theories behind feigned incompetence**

Complex nature of this phenomenon is explored by various theories. Different aspects of knowledge hiding are investigated through the lens of sociology and psychology. Researchers emphasize social context and the influential role of human interactions in shaping behaviors as well as the importance of personal inner processes, however, there are two theories prevailing in studies: social exchange and conservation of resources theories

Among all applied theories, the most popular is social exchange theory. In this context, knowledge hiding is portrayed as dyadic interaction in organization governed

by an unspoken social exchange between colleagues (Blau, 1964, after Connelly et al., 2012). Researchers draw on the reciprocity norm (Gouldner, 1960), according to which people are expected to feel an obligation to reciprocate acts of giving. Thus, an individual's history of reciprocal positive actions with their colleagues is expected to decrease their likelihood of engaging in knowledge hiding behaviors (Connelly et al., 2012). Drawing from the social exchange theory, researchers have investigated various factors that are favorable or unfavorable to reciprocal behaviors, such as trust (Al Hawamdeh, 2022; Erkutlu & Chafra, 2021; Nadeem et al., 2021), leader-member exchange (Feng et al., 2022), organizational citizenship behavior (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2021), psychological contract breach (Bari et al., 2022; Ghani et al., 2020) and abusive supervision (Khalid et al., 2018). Studies confirm that knowledge hiding is a result of exchange injustice, distrust, and other negative factors that undermine reciprocal relationships within an organization.

The second most popular theory is conservation of resources. According to this theory, people strive to retain, protect, and build resources, while the potential or actual loss of these valued resources is associated with stress (Hobfoll, 1989). Thus, individuals facing workplace stressors such as exploitative leadership might engage in knowledge hiding as a means to protect and minimize the loss of their valued resources (Hobfoll, 1989; Guo et al., 2021). Drawing on conservation of resources, researchers investigated different resource draining conditions such as workplace incivility (Aljawarneh & Atan, 2018), job insecurity (Shoss et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2022), negative leadership (exploitative – Guo et al., 2021; unethical – Qin et al., 2021), interpersonal conflict (De Clercq et al., 2022), or perceived contract breaches (Jahanzeb et al., 2020). Studies confirm picture of knowledge hiding as a strategy for conservation of resources in conditions of their depletion.

### **Geographical context**

The phenomenon of knowledge hiding was presented from different perspectives in terms of culture and profession settings. Among over 60 countries, most studies have been conducted in Asian countries, leading with China, Pakistan, and India. However, there was no shortage of studies by authors from other continents: Europe (e.g. United Kingdom, France, Italy, Norway, Slovenia, Germany), North America (United States, Canada), South America (e.g. Colombia, Brazil), Australia and Oceania (Australia, New Zealand) and Africa (e.g. Egypt, Morocco, Nigeria). Among them are representatives of both developed countries, according to the human development index (HDI), and the least developed (*Developed Countries 2024*, n.d.). This proliferation of perspectives creates a more comprehensive view on the phenomenon, but also reveals the influence of many cultural factors on its occurrence.

Most studies are geographically limited to the context of a single country. They refer to different constructs that can be considered universal across countries, but also to those specific to a particular region, such as Islamic work ethics (Islam et

al., 2021; Khalid et al., 2018), Zhongyong Thinking (Chen et al., 2022), or ChaXu climate (He, Wang et al., 2022).

Although geographically limited, they offer insights not only into phenomena reflected in specific cultural environments but also into the nature of its different relationships in other cultures or cross-cultural environments. Especially when they relate to Hofstede's cultural dimensions: Power Distance, Individualism, Uncertainty Avoidance, or Masculinity (Hofstede, 1984). For example, an experiment conducted by Hays et al. (2022) showed power differentiation (differentiation by control over resources) harmed team performance by increasing knowledge hiding in teams with high status differentiation (differentiation by respect from others). This study does not employ a country-comparative approach, however, it suggests possible differences in the level of knowledge hiding depending on country's level of power distance. Similarly, a study by Boz Semerci (2019) indicates significance of employee's individualistic or collectivistic values in moderating role between perceived task conflict and knowledge hiding. While study by Zhang and Wang (2021), focusing on uncertainty avoidance and masculinity, shows that the promotion effect of team innovative climate on team members' knowledge innovative behavior is heterogeneous under the different cultural values of members.

Although rarer than single-country studies, comparative and multinational studies can also be found in the knowledge hiding literature. For example, a study by Issac and Baral (2020) explored differences between countries of occidental and oriental cultures. It indicated emotional intelligence to be a key driving factor for knowledge hiding in terms of the occidental culture, while interpersonal distrust in the context of the latter. Study by Xiong et al. (2021) emphasized contribution of country culture to differences in employee's perception on appropriateness of conducting knowledge hiding. The authors suggested that in countries where individualism is dominating, this perception might be more likely to be unaffected by others' behaviors and opinions.

Taking all this into account, knowledge hiding can be considered contextually dependent in terms of culture. Consideration of cultural aspects is all the more important when preventing this behavior in the multinational teams. Researchers noted the existence of problems specific to this particular context which can induce knowledge hiding, e.g. perceived exclusion (Miminoshvili & Černe, 2022) or linguistic ostracism (Albana & Yeşiltaş, 2022). The solution to these problems is seen, for example, in cultural intelligence, which increase the likelihood of high-quality social exchanges among employees (Albana & Yeşiltaş, 2022; Bogilović et al., 2017).

### **Work system context**

Researchers also explored knowledge hiding from different perspectives in terms of work systems. Most studies are focused on quaternary and tertiary industries, where the former is represented mainly by IT and R&D companies (e.g. Dodokh,

2020; Huo et al., 2016; Kumar Jha & Varkkey, 2018; Li et al., 2020; Zhang, Ye et al., 2022), while the latter by hospitality and healthcare institutions (e.g. Akhtar et al., 2022; Aljawarneh & Atan, 2018; Donate et al., 2022; Lu et al., 2022; Zhao & Xia, 2019). Primary and secondary industries are also included in studies, e.g. in the context of manufacturing and farming companies (e.g. Hadjielias et al., 2021; Jena & Swain, 2021; Li et al., 2022). Participants of studies are representatives of mainly large companies from private sector, but there is no shortage of representatives of medium and smaller enterprises (e.g. Aleksić et al., 2021; Caputo et al., 2021; Hadjielias et al., 2021; Mohsin et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2022), or public institutions (e.g. Kumar et al., 2022; Malik et al., 2019; Weng et al., 2020). Furthermore, studies on knowledge hiding encompass traditional forms of work organization, but also explore virtual settings (e.g. Choudhary & Mishra, 2023; Gao & Kuang, 2022; Wu, 2021). Such a variety of studies in terms of professional context makes it possible to identify work systems differences that significantly affect the level of knowledge hiding.

The important nowadays seems to be technological infrastructure and the role of technology in creating work arrangements. Depending on whether technology for organization is a tool to help employees perform tasks, a focal point of work, as in the IT industry, or a workplace (virtual work), its impact on knowledge hiding can vary. Likewise for the various stages and pace of an organization's digital transformation. Studies show that technology can be one of the elements that co-create favorable conditions for the phenomenon to occur. It can cause employees to be forced to work faster and longer, feel the need to be constantly "connected", feel inadequate in terms of their skills, forcing them to spend time and effort learning and understanding various aspects of technology, feel at risk of losing their jobs as a result of being replaced by new technology or by others who understand it better, as well as feel uncertainty (Tarafdar et al., 2007). This so-called technostress is associated with increased knowledge hiding, which serves as a defense mechanism for employees against further loss of resources (Shen & Kuang, 2022; Zhang, Ye et al., 2022). A study in the context of virtual work arrangements found that technology not only indirectly affects knowledge hiding through digital burnout or loss of control, but can also make such behavior easier to perform (Choudhary & Mishra, 2023).

## **Discussion**

### **Construct conceptualization**

Research showed that feigning incompetence as an active behavior is presented in the literature as one of competence-concealing techniques. Although there is no construct addressed directly to a phenomenon, researchers in management studies developed similar concept which can be a basis for its conceptualization. Adopting knowledge hiding scale in terms of overlapping dimension to measure feigning incom-

petence, but in the digital context, seems however rational. In the following paragraphs discussion on this idea as well as its application in future research is provided.

The author defines feigned digital incompetence as a situation in which an employee pretends to lack the competence required to perform assigned to his or her activities that involve the use of digital technologies. It includes activities assigned officially as well as those arising from the scope of employee duties or the social context of work. For example, feigning incompetence can be performed while preparing the report which supervisor asked for, participating in a weekly online meeting, but also responding to an e-mail request of colleague for help. Therefore, it encompasses in-role and extra-role behaviors.

The author proposes a construct focused on digital competence. Digital competence can be defined as a combination of knowledge (concepts, facts and figures, ideas and theories which are already established, and support the understanding of a certain area or subject), skills (concepts, facts and figures, ideas and theories which are already established, and support the understanding of a certain area or subject) and attitudes (disposition and mindset to act or react to ideas, persons or situations) which involves the confident, critical and responsible use of, and engagement with, digital technologies for learning, at work, and for participation in society (Directorate-General for Education, 2019). In context of feigning digital incompetence, the emphasis is on the essential competencies required for an employee to perform tasks that involve the use of digital technology. As a result, this construct does not define a specific set of competencies, making their identification context-dependent. Digital technologies encompass both tangibles and intangibles in form of tools, systems, and devices designed to generate, store, or process data through programmed microprocesses that enable various functions, e.g. personal computers, tablets, cameras, calculators, digital toys, software, Internet and augmented or virtual reality (Johnston et al., 2022).

The author's focus on digital competence is also rooted in the acknowledgment that employees' digital competences can be essential in context of not only organization's productivity, development and innovation (Berman, 2012; Pereira et al., 2023; Huu, 2023) but also its survival, as was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic (Abed, 2021; Hai et al., 2021). Intellectual capital is one of the most important resources and its efficiency influence organization's financial performance, while the way of using it determines the competitiveness of individual companies and entire economies (Čupić et al., 2023; Pucar, 2012). Feigned incompetence can be treated as factor distorting the recognition of the intellectual capital held by the organization and thus, influencing its inefficient use. Acting as if one lacks digital proficiency equates to not displaying or using those skills, much like employees genuinely lacking the expertise.

The occurrence of the feigned incompetence at the subordinate employee level is already problematic, but it is not limited to this context. It can occur at the management level (Butt, 2021; Rong & Liu, 2021), increasing the scale of the problem. It is noted that IT solutions are increasingly used in recruitment and selection,

development and training, motivation, talent management and human resources (HR) services, thus, supporting personnel management processes and increasing the efficiency of administrative tasks (Karasek, 2019). From this perspective, feigned incompetence can pose a threat to the effective functioning of the organization already at the system level. Therefore, it is evident that this phenomenon is a serious problem that must be addressed.

Research in this area will enrich the literature in the field of human resources management and organizational psychology adding its valuable contribution to current discussions on emerging issues. For example, it may broaden the perspective on new challenges for managers associated with remote work (Pokojski & Lipowski, 2023), AI technology implementation (Bielińska-Dusza, 2022), or social interaction with robots (Rakowska, 2022). Furthermore, it can be used to develop tools, methods, or management styles to improve the process of digital transition in a company (Abbu et al., 2022).

At this point, clues on how to tackle this issue can be found in literature hiding knowledge. Feigning digital incompetence is a similar construct to knowledge hiding. Both behaviors are intentional and refers to employees hiding their resources. However, in the case of feigning incompetence employees are expected to perform certain activities, and, thus, to demonstrate digital competence, while in the case of knowledge hiding, they are just asked for sharing knowledge, not necessarily digital nor digitally provided. Digital competence is defined as a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes (Directorate-General for Education, 2019). Thus, although in both constructs hidden resources are relevant for tasks performed by employees, their scopes differ as well as expectations for their utilization.

Knowledge hiding construct (Connelly et al., 2012) focuses on dyadic interaction between knowledge hider and knowledge seeker being coworkers. Feigning incompetence can also be studied in the context of such interactions – between tasks assigner and tasks recipient. However, in this context more emphasis on the employee-supervisor relationship can be expected. It is also important to note that in these types of interactions, one party is not directly asking for specific resources, but rather for the completion of tasks, which necessitates the use of these resources. Indeed, not every task assignment will be also directly communicated each time as in the case of ongoing tasks like participating in monthly online meetings, sending weekly reports, or responding to emails. Furthermore, feigning incompetence is a form of a deception, while knowledge hiding not necessarily. The latter encompasses rationalized hiding which include providing an honest and truthful explanation for the inability to share the requested knowledge (Connelly et al., 2012).

Despite their differences, the concept of knowledge hiding serves as a useful reference point for developing a scale to measure feigning digital incompetence. Connelly et al.'s (2012) construct comprises three dimensions, each related to different types of knowledge concealment. The author perceives overlap between one of these – playing dumb and feigning incompetence. In the context of knowledge

hiding, playing dumb refers to pretending to be ignorant of the relevant knowledge. This includes pretending not to know the requested information or not to understand what knowledge seeker asked for, as well as lying about not knowing the requested information or being not very knowledgeable about it (Table 2).

Feigning incompetence is broader than playing dumb because it encompasses pretending to lack not just knowledge but also the skills needed for a particular activity. Despite this difference, the core idea remains the same: presenting oneself as lacking competence in a specific area. This can manifest in both verbal and non-verbal expressions of “incompetence”. Therefore, the playing dumb scale can be adapted to include aspects of feigning incompetence. This could involve pretending not to know how to perform an activity or claiming to have no prior experience with it, as well as lying about one’s lack of skill or knowledge in performing said activity (see Table 2).

To maintain the clarity of this adapted scale, the author suggests incorporating a digital context into the introductory question that precedes the scale statements. An example could be an open-ended question asking respondents about the last situation in which they feigned incompetence in a technology-related task. Crafting the research tool in this manner will also allow for contextual modifications in the future.

**Table 2.** Comparison of constructs – playing dumb and feigning digital incompetence

|  |  |   |
|--|--|---|
| Name   | Playing dumb (Connelly et al., 2012)   | Feigning digital incompetence (the author’s proposition)  |
| Definition   | Pretending to be ignorant of the relevant knowledge  | Pretending having a lack of digital competence necessary to perform assigned activities   |
| Hidden resources                                       | Knowledge requested by coworker relevant for tasks performed by employees  | Digital knowledge and skills necessary to perform assigned tasks  |
| A question preceding the measurement of the phenomenon | <i>Please describe the episode in which you declined to share knowledge with your co-worker:</i><br>(none definition of knowledge provided)  | <i>Please describe the episode in which you feigned a lack of competence in performing activity that required use of technology:</i><br>(none definition of competence provided)  |
| Items of scale   | In this specific situation, I...   | In this specific situation, I...  |
|  | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Pretended that I did not know the information</li> <li>2. Said that I did not know, even though I did</li> <li>3. Pretended I did not know what s/he was talking about</li> <li>4. Said that I was not very knowledgeable about the topic</li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Pretended that I did not know how to perform the activity.</li> <li>2. Said that I did not know how to perform the activity, even though I did.</li> <li>3. Pretended that I had never performed that activity before</li> <li>4. Said that I was not very knowledgeable about and/or skilled in performing the activity</li> </ol> |

Source: Author’s own study.

Ultimately, the use of this scale in research will provide more complete understanding of the phenomenon in the context of related constructs. Research on knowledge hiding reveals that such behaviors are shaped by social exchange dynamics and conservation of resource principles. These perspectives not only dominate the

research on knowledge hiding but also seem relevant to the highly reported form of feigning incompetence – weaponized incompetence, and, thus, potentially pressing problem. Social media reports contextualize this phenomenon within relationships, justifying the choice of social exchange theory. On the other hand, this phenomenon is often reported in context of task avoidance motivation, which aligns with conservation of resource theory. Therefore, the author proposes an initial study of this phenomenon from these two perspectives, with focus on its digital context.

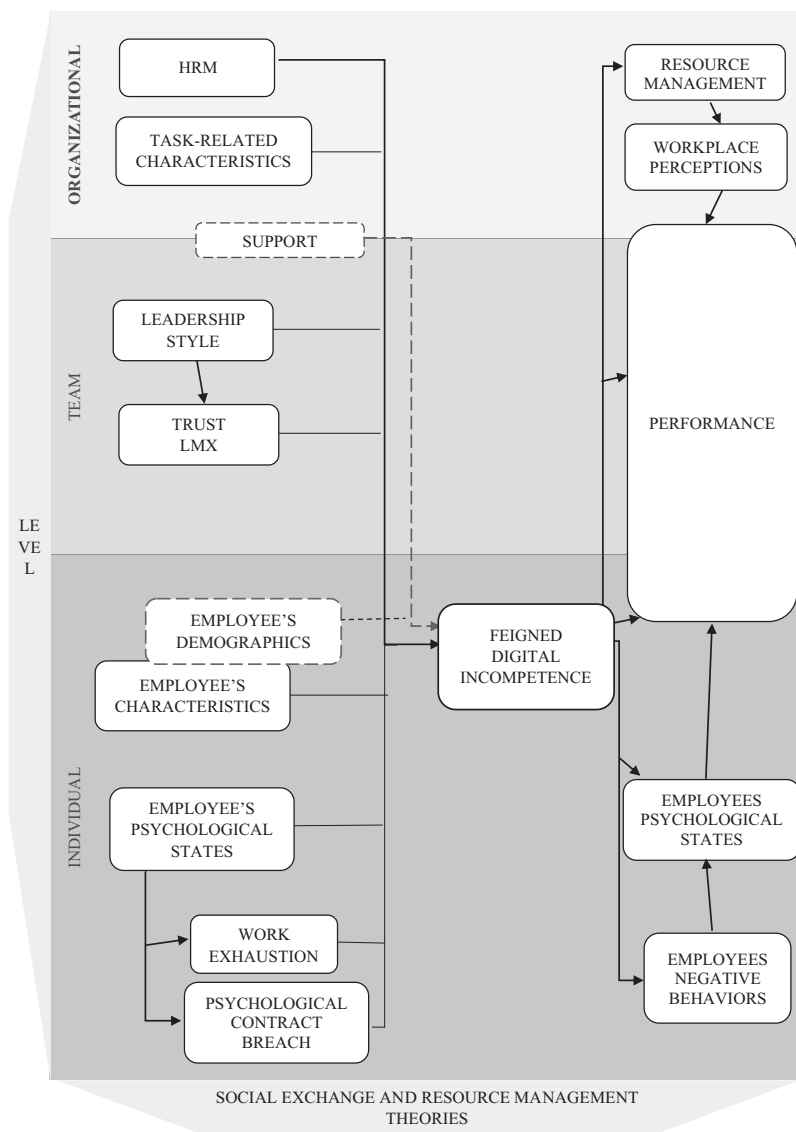
Drawing from social exchange theory, feigning incompetence can be interpreted as the result of employees' cost-benefit analysis in social interactions. Important antecedents in this perspective are those affecting employees' perception of the costs and benefits of task performance and digital competence demonstration. Outcomes can be explored in terms of the deceptive nature of this behavior and its impact on trust-related factors, as well as its influence on coworkers' workload and HRM efficiency.

From the viewpoint of resource management theories, feigning incompetence serves as an employee resource-conservation strategy. This strategy aims to prevent the expected depletion of their resources such as time, energy, or reputation. Important predictors include factors that determine the scale of resource consumption. Outcomes can be examined as the effects of changes in resource consumption both for feigners and coworkers due to the feigners' "inability" to perform assigned tasks or perceived incompetence. The author suggests that feigning incompetence may function as an informal method for employees to mitigate hindering job demands, making literature on avoidance job crafting (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) a relevant reference point for deeper investigation.

Drawing on both theories, the author proposes a model (as shown in Figure 2) that considers three levels: individual, team, and organizational. Previous literature suggests that feigned incompetence primarily occurs at the individual level, while antecedents and outcomes are found across various levels.

At the individual level, important antecedents include employee characteristics and psychological states. Studies have shown that feigned incompetence can be predicted by factors such as an employee's Machiavellianism (Shepperd & Socherman, 1997). Moreover, technostress or job insecurity mediated by psychological contract breach and work exhaustion may also predict this behavior (Arias-Perez & Velez-Jaramillo, 2022; Shen & Kuang, 2022; Xu et al., 2023; Zhang, Ye et al., 2022). In the context of employee characteristics, demographic variables like gender can act as moderators of feigned incompetence occurrence (Wan et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2021). Studies suggest that feigned digital incompetence may lead to decreased employee performance (Khoreva & Wechtler, 2020) and increased negative reciprocal behaviors (Serenko & Bontis, 2016). It may also affect the psychological states of employees, decreasing their job satisfaction (Offergelt et al., 2019) and increasing turnover intention (Haq et al., 2022).

At the team level, leadership styles mediated by trust and LMX may predict feigned digital incompetence (Anand et al., 2017; Erkutlu & Chafra, 2021). Support



**Figure 2.** Proposed research model of the dependencies to be studied

Source: Author's own study.

from the leaders and coworkers may moderate relationships of this behavior with resource-depleting factors (Khan, 2022; Zhai et al., 2020). Feigned incompetence is expected to decrease team performance (Bashir et al., 2022; Zhang & Min, 2019).

At the organizational level, a negative relationship may exist between this phenomenon and HR practices (Dodokh, 2020), as well as reward structure (Zhang & Min, 2019), presenting HRM as its key predictor. Other important antecedents seem

to be task-related characteristics, which determine both employee perception of costs and resource consumption. For example, studies suggest that task complexity can be positively associated with this behavior (Zhang, Min et al., 2022). In terms of outcomes, feigned digital incompetence is expected to decrease performance at organizational level as well (Rong & Liu, 2021). This relationship can be mediated by resource management factors like organizational slack (Bourgeois, 1981) and dynamic capabilities (Teece et al., 1997). Inefficient resource management can further negatively influence workplace perception, particularly in terms of justice – a key predictor of engagement in social exchange (Greenberg, 1990). Similarly organizational support, which could be considered also as moderator in relationships between resource-depleting factors and feigned digital incompetence.

Summing all of the above, ten propositions are formulated below.

1. Feigned digital incompetence is associated with individual, team and organizational level phenomena.
2. Feigned digital incompetence triggers and outcomes are located mainly in social exchange and resource management theories.
3. Feigned digital incompetence occurs mainly at the individual level.
4. Feigned digital incompetence is triggered by employee's characteristics and psychological states (such as self-efficacy, Machiavellianism, empathy, technostress, or job insecurity) at the individual level, leadership style (through trust and leader-member exchange) at the team level, and human resource management and tasks assigned – at the organizational level.
5. Relationships between employee's psychological states related to technostress or job insecurity and feigned digital incompetence are mediated by psychological contract breach and work exhaustion.
6. Feigned digital incompetence leads to performance and behavioral outcomes (such as decreased in-role/extra-role/task performance, increased negative reciprocal behaviors) directly, as well as indirectly by psychological states (such as decreased job satisfaction, increased workload, turnover intentions, burnout) at the individual level.
7. Feigned digital incompetence leads to performance outcomes at the team level.
8. Feigned digital incompetence leads to performance outcomes (such as decreased organizational performance, innovation and operational efficiency) directly and indirectly by affecting resource management (decreasing organizational slack and dynamic capabilities) as well as workplace perceptions (perceived organizational support and justice) at the organizational level.
9. Relationships of resource-depleting factors and feigned digital incompetence are moderated by support (organizational, leader's and co-worker's).
10. The occurrence of feigned digital incompetence is moderated by employee's demographics, especially age and gender.

For the initial quantitative studies, the author suggests exploring relationships listed above with the use of playing dumb scale adaptation. Employing cross-cultural and cross-professional approaches allows researchers to capture different angles of

phenomenon as well as validate the proposed measurement tool. It will also allow to identify the environments with the smallest and largest incidence of the phenomenon, which can be a useful indication, for further research – this time in the form of an interview.

## Conclusions

The main objective of this study was to outline a future research agenda on feigned digital incompetence based on existing research on knowledge hiding. This goal was achieved through a systematic literature review.

From a theoretical perspective, this article enriches the organizational behavior and human resource management literature by shedding light on knowledge hiding and introducing the novel construct of feigning incompetence. The overlap between knowledge hiding and feigning incompetence provides a new perspective for understanding these related phenomena. The results of the literature review serve as a key reference point, shaping a future research agenda focused on “feigned digital incompetence”. This study not only provides conceptualization of an unexplored phenomenon but also, through future study propositions, maps out its initial exploration. This may further contribute to the discussion on the managerial challenges related to digital transformation, virtual work arrangements or technostress; the role of human resource management in enhancing the effective use of intellectual resources; and, for example, factors affecting organizational performance.

From a practical perspective, this study, by signaling the existence of a non-obvious phenomenon and its possible negative consequences for the organization, sensitizes practitioners to the potential threat to the desired organizational functioning. Despite its preliminary nature, this study is already drawing managers’ attention to seemingly important aspects in the context of preventing and counteracting this behavior. Further development of the construct will provide managers with more detailed recommendations and strategies for mitigating its impact.

While this study remains an invaluable starting point for researchers and practitioners, highlighting emerging organizational concerns, it is subject to at least three limitations. First, the scope of the literature review is limited to English-language publications covered by the Scopus and Web of Science Collection databases.

Second, the author proposes to conduct an initial study through the lens of task avoidance, although motivations for feigning incompetence vary (McLuhan et al., 2014). While such an attempt will address a widely reported and thus potentially pressing problem (weaponized incompetence), it is important to recognize the need for further exploration of this phenomenon in different theoretical contexts. Third, the proposed quantitative method and scale adaptation cannot be considered sufficient tools to explore this phenomenon. Attention should be paid to the deceptive nature of the behavior and its potentially negative connotations, which may make it

difficult to obtain data for the study, especially in the context of public trust professions. Therefore, it is also important to emphasize the need for a different, perhaps experimental, methodological approach.

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