

# Framing uncertainty: from VUCA to BANI to PUMO in contemporary management discourse

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to address a gap in organisational scholarship by examining how uncertainty acronyms such as VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity), BANI (Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear and Incomprehensible) and the emerging PUMO (Polarised, Unthinkable, Metamorphic and Overheated) function as evolving metaphors with identifiable lifecycles. While widely used in practitioner discourse, these frames have rarely been analysed systematically at the intersection of metaphor theory and management fashion theory.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study adopts a conceptual and discursive approach, integrating management fashion theory and metaphor theory. Bibliometric trends, search data and secondary sources are used illustratively to trace the emergence, diffusion and stabilisation of uncertainty metaphors.

**Findings** – The analysis shows that VUCA became institutionalised as a turbulence frame; BANI reframed uncertainty through fragility and anxiety; and PUMO represents an emergent overlay emphasising polarisation and sustained pressure. These metaphors operate both as cognitive frames shaping managerial sensemaking and as fashionable knowledge objects that diffuse through supply-side and platform-mediated channels.

**Originality/value** – The paper introduces a metaphor-lifecycle lens to organisational uncertainty; clarifies how uncertainty metaphors shape managerial attention and leadership identities; and explains their patterned discursive evolution without implying predictive authority over organisational outcomes.

**Keywords** Uncertainty, VUCA, BANI, PUMO, Management fashion theory, Metaphor theory, Sensemaking

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

## 1. Introduction

Uncertainty in a business setting was first systematically addressed by Knight more than a century ago (Knight, 1921). Nearly a hundred years later, uncertainty has been described as the *raison d'être* of administrative processes (Chawla *et al.*, 2012). The early twenty-first century has seen the rise of acronyms that function as metaphors for the bewildering futures facing organisations. Metaphors have long played a central role in studies of competitive



strategy and organisation, shaping how complex realities are interpreted and acted upon (Biscaro *et al.*, 2025; Hunt and Menon, 1995).

Among the most prominent of these metaphors is VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity), which emerged from US military doctrine in the late twentieth century (Barber, 1992) and was later adopted into management and leadership discourse as a way of characterising turbulent, dynamic and unpredictable environments (Bennett and Lemoine, 2014a, 2014b). More recently, the acronym BANI (Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear and Incomprehensible) was introduced by futurist Jamais Cascio to describe a world marked by systemic fragility, psychological strain and cascading disruptions (Cascio, 2020; Kraaijenbrink, 2022) and recently elaborated in an online article (Cascio, 2025) and in a book titled *Navigating the Age of Chaos* (Cascio *et al.*, 2025). Even more recently still, PUMO (Polarised, Unthinkable, Metamorphic and Overheated) has been proposed in strategy and innovation discourse to capture intensifying polarisation, rapid transformation and sustained systemic pressure in contemporary environments (Lichtenthaler, 2025).

Frameworks of this kind provide concise accounts of the challenges facing leaders, organisations and societies. As metaphors, they do more than describe external conditions. Metaphors convey characteristics from one domain to another and actively shape how actors make sense of and understand the world (Alvesson and Spicer, 2010; Lakoff and Johnson, 2008). VUCA emphasises the difficulties of operating in unstable and information-poor environments, BANI foregrounds systemic vulnerability, emotional reactivity and epistemic breakdown, and PUMO draws attention to polarisation, unthinkable shocks, continuous transformation and overheated systems. In this way, these acronyms influence not only how uncertainty is described, but also how it is perceived and managed.

This paper traces the conceptual evolution from VUCA to BANI to PUMO, arguing that such acronyms function as cognitive shortcuts, rhetorical devices and discursive frames that shape managerial sensemaking (Lakoff and Johnson, 2008; Weick, 1995). Research on megatrends highlights long-term shifts in technology, climate, demographics and geopolitics that form the background conditions under which new metaphors emerge (Naughtin *et al.*, 2024; Ng *et al.*, 2025). VUCA is aligned with an era defined by globalisation and post-Cold War dynamics. BANI reflects a period marked by climate disruption, digital saturation and rising psychological strain. From this perspective, megatrends help explain why acronyms emerge when they do: they condense slow-moving structural pressures into simple frames that facilitate communication and sensemaking.

The shift from VUCA to BANI to PUMO is, therefore, not merely a change in vocabulary. It reflects a broader transformation in strategic discourse, from an emphasis on external volatility and informational ambiguity towards internal fragility, affective states and the limits of human comprehension, and then towards polarisation, continuous transformation and chronic systemic pressure.

Drawing on a narrative review of their origins, diffusion and comparative logic, this paper examines how these frameworks function as metaphors of strategic uncertainty. The analysis integrates perspectives from management fashion theory (Abrahamson, 1996; Benders and Van Veen, 2001; Piazza and Abrahamson, 2020), cognitive linguistics (Lakoff and Johnson, 2008) and the sociology of risk and modernity (Bauman, 2013; Beck, 1992; Power, 2004). The discussion is grounded in the historical contexts from which each acronym emerged: VUCA, shaped by post-Cold War military strategy; BANI, arising in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate-related disruptions and sociopolitical polarisation; and PUMO, reflecting more recent concerns with polarisation, unthinkable shocks, continuous transformation and intensified societal and competitive pressure.

The paper contributes both historically and conceptually. Historically, it traces how uncertainty metaphors emerge in response to specific crises and discursive needs. Conceptually, it situates these acronyms within management fashion theory and metaphor studies to show how they travel, adapt and risk ossifying into buzzwords (Cluley, 2013; Collins, 2000). In doing so, it advances understanding of how organisational knowledge is constructed and circulated through language (Røvik, 2023; von Krogh *et al.*, 2012).

In spite of their popularity, organisational scholarship lacks a systematic account of how acronyms such as VUCA, BANI and PUMO function as uncertainty metaphors with identifiable lifecycles – that is, as discursive objects produced, promoted, adopted and eventually losing legitimacy over time at the intersection of practitioner discourse and organisational theory. Building on management fashion theory and metaphor theory, this paper treats these acronyms as fashionable knowledge objects that condition managerial attention and legitimise particular leadership identities and responses (e.g. the strategist-navigator of VUCA, the stabiliser-caregiver of BANI and the boundary-manager of PUMO).

This study advances three contributions. First, it introduces a metaphor-lifecycle lens to organisational uncertainty, conceptualising these acronyms as evolving frames that move through stages of emergence, diffusion, stabilisation and potential decline. Second, it integrates metaphor theory and management fashion theory to explain how uncertainty metaphors operate simultaneously as cognitive frames and as fashionable knowledge objects. Third, it clarifies how dominant uncertainty metaphors shape managerial attention, leadership identities and repertoires of action.

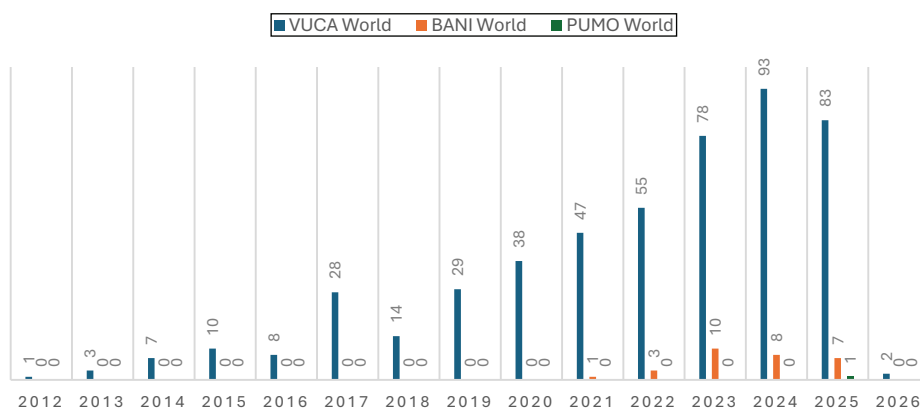
The analysis proceeds in four stages. First, the paper reviews the military origins of VUCA and its diffusion into management discourse. Second, it examines the emergence of BANI as a framework for the 2020s, emphasising its focus on brittleness, anxiety, nonlinearity and epistemic limits. Third, it introduces PUMO as an emergent overlay frame centred on polarisation, unthinkable shocks, metamorphic change and overheating. Fourth, it compares the three frameworks and develops a lifecycle model of uncertainty metaphors, proposing five propositions to guide future conceptual and empirical research.

## 2. Methodological note

This paper follows a narrative review approach. Narrative reviews are appropriate for conceptually fluid topics that span multiple domains and remain only partially consolidated within the academic literature (Baumeister and Leary, 1997; Ferrari, 2015; Hammersley, 2001). Acronyms such as VUCA, BANI and the emerging PUMO circulate across military doctrine, strategic management, consulting practice, executive education, futurist discourse and digital platforms. Because these acronyms evolve across heterogeneous arenas rather than within a single scholarly tradition, a narrative approach allows for a more integrated and historically sensitive analysis of their development.

The aim is to synthesise how such acronyms arise, circulate and acquire meaning in managerial discourse. Addressing this question requires engaging with a broad set of materials, including peer-reviewed research, practitioner publications, consulting outputs and platform-based content. Together, these sources make it possible to trace the discursive pathways through which acronyms become recognisable frames for describing uncertainty and organisational turbulence.

The inclusion of practitioner-oriented and grey literature (see Auger, 1998) is methodologically justified by the current structure of the scholarly record. As illustrated by Figure 1, Scopus-indexed publications referencing VUCA World are limited but gradually increasing. In contrast, references to BANI World remain sparse, and PUMO World is virtually absent, except for the recent article by Lichtenthaler (2025) introducing the term.



**Figure 1.** Scopus-indexed publications referencing VUCA World, BANI World and PUMO World in title, abstract or keywords over time

Source: [www.scopus.com](http://www.scopus.com); retrieved 8 January 2026

This pattern indicates that academic engagement lags behind practice-driven diffusion rather than fully capturing it. In such cases, relying exclusively on peer-reviewed sources would systematically under-represent how these acronyms actually emerge, spread and are used in managerial contexts. Because PUMO is very recent, its near-absence in Scopus should be read as a timing effect and as evidence of early-stage emergence rather than as an indicator of practical or conceptual importance.

A bibliometric snapshot further illustrates the uneven relationship between academic attention and the practical diffusion of strategic acronyms. Figure 1 shows the limited and delayed presence of these terms in Scopus-indexed publications, highlighting why a narrative review must extend beyond peer-reviewed sources when examining emergent managerial frames.

Acronyms such as VUCA and BANI often gain traction through consulting reports, executive education materials, keynote talks, blogs and platform-mediated discussions long before they are stabilised in academic journals. Grey literature, therefore, provides critical insight into early framing, rhetorical positioning and demand-side uptake. Including these materials aligns with the paper's objective of examining acronyms as discursive and sense-making devices rather than as fully theorised constructs. Given PUMO's mid-2020s introduction, low indexing should be read as timing and early-stage emergence rather than as a proxy for practical relevance.

The analysis focuses on identifying recurring patterns in the evolution of these frames. Management fashion theory, metaphor studies, megatrends research and recent work on polycrisis dynamics provide complementary perspectives for understanding why new metaphors emerge when older ones lose traction. Insights from digital platform studies further help explain why acronym diffusion has accelerated and how algorithmic systems shape which frames gain visibility (Madsen and Slåtten, 2025a). The narrative approach enables these perspectives to be connected and supports the development of a conceptual model that captures how acronyms are introduced, promoted, adopted and eventually replaced.

Overall, the narrative review emphasises interpretive synthesis rather than procedural exhaustiveness. It allows the analysis to follow acronyms across academic, professional and

digital contexts and to reconstruct the broader discursive and structural conditions that shape their lifecycles. This provides the methodological foundation for the lifecycle model and propositions developed in the later sections of the paper.

### 3. The volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity world: origin and uptake in management

The acronym VUCA originated in US military circles during the late 1980s and early 1990s as a response to the collapse of the bipolar world order that had defined Cold War geopolitics. It was popularised at the US Army War College as a conceptual shorthand for framing strategic conditions in the post-Cold War era, when military leaders confronted a fluid, multipolar world marked by novel threats and asymmetric challenges (Barber, 1992).

#### 3.1 Military doctrine and the coining of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity

In its original military context, VUCA served as a pedagogical shorthand for the multifaceted and unpredictable nature of modern warfare. The term is commonly traced to US Army War College doctrine in the early 1990s, particularly in discussions of how to educate strategic leaders for an environment characterised by rapid technological change, shifting alliances and emerging non-state actors (Barber, 1992). While the acronym itself likely evolved informally among instructors, it quickly gained traction as a succinct expression of the idea that strategic environments had become fundamentally less predictable.

Each component of the acronym denotes a distinct type of challenge. Volatility refers to the speed and magnitude of change; uncertainty captures the limits of prediction and reliable forecasting; complexity highlights the multiplicity of interdependent variables that obscure causality; and ambiguity points to unclear meaning or the risk of misinterpretation even when information is available (Bennett and Lemoine, 2014a, 2014b; Johansen, 2012). These concerns were not entirely new. Earlier leadership scholars, such as Bennis and Nanus (1985), described environments characterised by increasing ambiguity and complexity, though they did not use the acronym. Barber (1992) notes that this earlier work inspired VUCA, but the acronym added a memorable, integrative label that organised these challenges into a single frame.

Strategic leadership literature emerging from the War College emphasised that future military leaders would need to develop new capacities – such as adaptive thinking, systems awareness and tolerance for ambiguity – to operate effectively in a VUCA world (Barber, 1992). As military operations unfolded in Somalia, Bosnia and the Persian Gulf during the 1990s, the concept's relevance was reinforced by the mismatch between conventional doctrines and on-the-ground realities. In this context, VUCA served as both a diagnostic label and a pedagogical metaphor, alerting officers to the need for agile, reflexive and resilient forms of leadership (Giustiniano *et al.*, 2020; Koh, 2024; Syamsir *et al.*, 2025).

#### 3.2 Diffusion into management discourse

The migration of metaphors from military contexts to business and management has a long tradition, with frequent use of military-inspired terms such as “guerrilla warfare”, “marketing warfare” and “strategy war games” (e.g. Lee *et al.*, 1998; Prelipceanu, 2008; Ries and Trout, 1986; West *et al.*, 2018). By the early 2000s, VUCA began to appear in business schools, executive education programmes and consulting literature. Processes such as globalisation, digital transformation and geopolitical instability contributed to a growing sense that traditional planning models were inadequate. VUCA provided vocabulary that resonated with these emerging concerns. Its appeal lay less in analytical precision than in mnemonic power: the acronym condensed diffuse anxieties into a compact rhetorical device, facilitating its movement from military doctrine to consulting presentations and MBA classrooms.

Bennett and Lemoine (2014a, 2014b) argue that VUCA gained traction in management because it offered a simple typology for differentiating types of challenges and corresponding responses. Volatility could be addressed through agility and buffers; uncertainty through information and analysis; complexity through restructuring and simplification; and ambiguity through experimentation and communication. This disaggregation helped reposition VUCA from a purely descriptive metaphor towards a more actionable framework.

In leadership development, VUCA was rapidly integrated into programme design. Johansen (2012) proposed “VUCA Prime”, a complementary set of leadership responses (Vision, Understanding, Clarity and Agility) intended as antidotes to the original four conditions. Similar reinterpretations appeared in the business literature under labels such as “VUCA 2.0” (Dharmasiri, 2022), reframing the acronym as a call for new competencies rather than a diagnosis of dysfunction.

Consulting firms and corporate strategists adopted the VUCA lexicon to legitimise organisational change initiatives. References to VUCA conditions became common in discussions of agile transformation, scenario planning and innovation strategy. In this context, VUCA was no longer presented as a warning but as a baseline assumption – something modern leaders were expected to manage by default. Executive coaches and HR professionals incorporated the concept into competency models, emphasising cognitive flexibility, emotional intelligence and systems thinking as key leadership attributes.

The diffusion of VUCA into management discourse also coincided with a broader turn towards complexity-aware organisational theory. Frameworks such as the Cynefin model (Snowden and Boone, 2007) and complexity leadership theory (Uhl-Bien and Marion, 2009) offered more elaborate theoretical treatments of uncertainty and emergence. VUCA, however, served as an accessible entry point for non-academic audiences, translating these ideas into a concise, communicable form.

By the 2010s, VUCA had achieved near-buzzword status. It was invoked across sectors, from finance and health care to education and public policy, to describe a wide range of unpredictable conditions. The acronym appeared frequently in practitioner-oriented outlets such as *Harvard Business Review* and *Business Horizons* (Bennett and Lemoine, 2014a, 2014b; Kail, 2010a, 2010b, 2011). This ubiquity, while demonstrating its resonance, also prompted critique. Observers argued that VUCA had become vague or tautological, explaining too much while prescribing too little. Others noted that it could naturalise dysfunction, framing uncertainty as inevitable and thereby excusing inadequate preparation or strategic inertia.

In spite of these critiques, the metaphorical power of VUCA has endured. It distils complex and overlapping phenomena into a communicable form; highlights the limits of linear planning; and provides a shared vocabulary for training, strategising and storytelling. Even during the early 2020s, VUCA continued to be cited as a framework for articulating strategic challenges in dynamic environments (Bogsnes, 2023a, 2023b), and it remains an underlying assumption in practitioner surveys, such as recurring studies among German-speaking controllers (Schäffer, 2022).

By the end of the 2010s, however, a growing sense emerged – particularly among futurists and resilience scholars – that VUCA no longer fully captured the texture of contemporary disruption. What once appeared as a novel insight increasingly came to be treated as a baseline condition. The emergence of BANI, discussed in the next section, represented both a continuation and a critique of the VUCA paradigm. The cascading crises of the 2020s opened space for a successor framework that foregrounded fragility, affect and epistemic strain.

This shift also mirrors changes in the megatrend landscape. Earlier analyses emphasised globalisation, digitalisation and demographic change; more recent work highlights climate volatility, resource constraints, geopolitical fragmentation and algorithmic acceleration. As

megatrends evolved, VUCA's focus on turbulence and ambiguity captured less of the emotional and structural pressures organisations confronted. BANI resonated more directly with environments shaped by interacting trends and compounding shocks.

Although VUCA became institutionalised as a dominant uncertainty frame, it did not settle how uncertainty should be conceptualised. As crises deepened and affective pressures intensified, successor formulations emerged. The next section examines how BANI reframed uncertainty through fragility and anxiety and how subsequent developments extend this trajectory towards polarisation and sustained pressure.

#### 4. From fragility to polarisation: the evolution of uncertainty frames

While VUCA became a mainstay in military and management discourse throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the onset of the 2020s prompted calls for a framework that could better account for cascading crises, emotional exhaustion and epistemic disorientation. Recent work on polycrisis dynamics emphasises that contemporary disruptions do not occur independently but interact, compound and intensify one another (Brosig, 2025; Rakowski *et al.*, 2025). Economic turbulence amplifies climate stress; political polarisation accelerates technological risk; global health crises disrupt supply chains and social stability. BANI gained traction because it captures this interactive structure of disruption. Its emphasis on fragility, anxiety, nonlinearity and incomprehensibility reflects the lived experience of navigating overlapping crises rather than isolated shocks. In this context, the acronym BANI emerged as an attempt to update and extend the strategic vocabulary of uncertainty.

##### 4.1 Defining brittle, anxious, nonlinear and incomprehensible

The BANI framework was introduced by futurist Jamais Cascio in 2018 and further articulated in his 2020 essay, *Facing the Age of Chaos* (Cascio, 2020). Cascio argued that while VUCA had been a useful shorthand for dynamic environments, its terms no longer captured the intensity or structure of contemporary disruption. His claim that “we eat VUCA for breakfast” signalled that volatility and uncertainty had become baseline conditions rather than exceptional challenges. BANI was proposed as a more fitting metaphor for the chaotic era he described.

Each element of BANI highlights a distinct dimension of this environment. Brittle systems appear stable yet are prone to sudden, catastrophic failure. Such systems lack redundancy and adaptive capacity, often providing little warning before collapse (Cascio, 2020). Global supply chain disruptions during 2020–2021, for example, exposed the hidden fragility of just-in-time logistics, where minor delays cascaded into system-wide breakdowns (Pujawan and Bah, 2022).

Anxious captures the psychological and emotional state of individuals and organisations operating under sustained pressure. It reflects pervasive uncertainty, fear and paralysis of decision-making arising from information overload, ambiguous threats and eroding trust. In a BANI context, leaders face not only external complexity but also internal anxiety that constrains judgement and action (Kraaijenbrink, 2022).

Nonlinear points to the breakdown of proportional cause-and-effect relationships. In nonlinear systems, small inputs can generate disproportionate and unpredictable outcomes, and events unfold through compounding feedback loops rather than sequential chains. Social media virality, exponential disease transmission and sudden financial contagion exemplify such dynamics (Cascio, 2020). This resonates with Taleb's (2007) concept of Black Swan events, i.e. rare but high-impact disruptions that expose hidden fragilities and the limits of prediction. BANI translates these insights into a managerial metaphor by emphasising how stressed systems amplify minor triggers into major consequences.

Incomprehensible refers to phenomena that resist understanding even when data and analytical tools are abundant. This may result from systemic complexity, opaque algorithmic processes or

socially irrational behaviour. Unlike ambiguity, which implies unclear meaning, incomprehensibility suggests that meaning itself may be inaccessible or unstable (Dharmasiri, 2022).

Cascio emphasised that BANI was not intended to replace VUCA but to deepen it. Where VUCA focuses primarily on external environmental conditions, BANI integrates system-level characteristics with subjective experience. In doing so, it marks a discursive shift towards the affective and cognitive dimensions of organisational life. BANI foregrounds not only structural fragility but also human vulnerability, reframing uncertainty as both systemic and psychological.

#### 4.2 *The spread and reception of brittle, anxious, nonlinear and incomprehensible*

BANI entered wider managerial discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic, which exemplified many of its defining features. Health-care systems proved brittle under stress; organisations and populations experienced heightened anxiety amid evolving and contradictory information; the virus spread in nonlinear ways across global networks; and experts struggled to make sense of rapidly changing data. Cascio's (2020) essay circulated widely on digital platforms such as Medium and Twitter, where it was quickly taken up by business analysts, leadership coaches and futurist communities.

By 2021, consultancies and executive education providers began referencing BANI in articles, webinars and training programmes. Practitioner outlets such as *Forbes* argued that BANI better captured contemporary challenges than VUCA, particularly by addressing their emotional and systemic dimensions (Kraaijenbrink, 2022). Institutions such as the WU Executive Academy described BANI as a sharper lens for understanding overlapping global crises (Schlegelmilch, 2023).

In organisational practice, BANI diffused across multiple domains. In human resource management, anxiety was used to emphasise the importance of psychological safety, mental health support and clear communication. In operations and supply chain management, brittleness became a diagnostic lens for identifying single points of failure and enhancing resilience. In technology and AI ethics, incomprehensibility highlighted the opacity of algorithmic systems and the limits of interpretability. In strategic foresight, nonlinearity reinforced the move away from linear planning towards scenario-based approaches and stress testing.

Academic engagement with BANI remains limited but is emerging. Menaria (2024) contrasts BANI and VUCA in the context of innovation strategy, arguing that BANI more directly addresses emotional and cognitive barriers to action. Nagpal (2023) similarly examines leadership development under BANI conditions, emphasising resilience, emotional intelligence and sensemaking capacity. While BANI has not yet achieved the institutionalisation of VUCA, its rapid uptake in executive education and practitioner discourse suggests growing resonance.

At the same time, critics have questioned whether BANI represents a substantive advance or a repackaging of familiar ideas. Dharmasiri (2022) raises concerns about conceptual clutter and the risk of acronym proliferation. Cascio himself cautioned against treating BANI as a predictive model or universal solution, emphasising its role as a sensemaking device rather than a prescriptive framework.

In spite of these reservations, the timing and diffusion of BANI signal a broader shift in how uncertainty is framed. If VUCA captured the turbulence of a globalising and digitising world, BANI reflects a phase characterised by overlapping systemic risks, psychological strain and epistemic disruption. In this sense, BANI functions not simply as a successor but as a reframing of strategic uncertainty, emphasising affective states and system fragility alongside environmental volatility. Its resonance lies not only in its conceptual components but also in its alignment with lived experiences of overload, anxiety and loss of control.

#### 4.3 *Polarised, unthinkable, metamorphic and overheated as an emergent overlay frame*

A more recent addition to the uncertainty-acronym landscape is PUMO. Introduced in mid-2020s innovation and strategy discourse, PUMO has not yet achieved the diffusion or institutionalisation associated with VUCA or the growing uptake of BANI. Its analytical relevance lies less in empirical saturation than in what it signals about the evolution of uncertainty metaphors.

Whereas VUCA foregrounded turbulence and BANI emphasised fragility and anxiety, PUMO shifts attention to polarisation, continuous transformation and sustained systemic pressure. In this sense, it can be read as an overlay frame: it extends VUCA's turbulence and BANI's affective stress by adding a structural dimension of antagonism and a temporal dimension of overheating.

Given its recency, PUMO is treated here as an emergent framing innovation rather than a stabilised managerial doctrine. Its inclusion allows the analysis to capture the early stages of acronym formation and to illustrate how uncertainty metaphors continue to mutate in response to perceived polycrisis conditions.

#### 4.4 *Comparative synthesis*

Table 1 summarises key contrasts across VUCA, BANI and PUMO, showing how PUMO extends earlier frames by foregrounding polarisation and sustained pressure.

The comparative overview provides the foundation for the lifecycle analysis that follows. With the three frameworks outlined, the next section directly compares them, examining not only their conceptual emphases but also how they reshape assumptions about knowledge, emotion and leadership.

### **5. Volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity, brittle, anxious, nonlinear and incomprehensible and polarised, unthinkable, metamorphic and overheated: comparative analysis**

VUCA, BANI and PUMO all offer cognitive tools for navigating uncertainty, but they differ in their conceptual emphases, underlying assumptions and implications for strategic action. This section compares the three frameworks by examining their metaphorical logics, their treatment of knowledge and emotion and their respective roles in managerial discourse.

#### 5.1 *Conceptual emphases and underlying assumptions*

VUCA functions primarily as an environmental descriptor. It frames the external world as volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous and calls on leaders to interpret, adapt to and operate within these conditions. Its components emphasise the limits of prediction and planning in unstable environments, reinforcing the need for agility, situational awareness and systems thinking (Bennett and Lemoine, 2014a, 2014b; Johansen, 2012).

BANI, by contrast, integrates external dynamics with internal responses. While brittleness and nonlinearity describe structural and systemic conditions, anxiety and incomprehensibility foreground the affective and cognitive strain placed on individuals and organisations (Cascio, 2020). The novelty of BANI lies in its dual focus: uncertainty is not only a property of the environment but also a psychological condition.

PUMO extends this trajectory by foregrounding polarisation, transformation and sustained systemic strain. Rather than emphasising turbulence (VUCA) or fragility and anxiety (BANI), PUMO highlights environments characterised by ideological fragmentation, rapid metamorphosis and overheating across political, technological and ecological domains. In this framing, uncertainty is intensified not only by complexity or brittleness but also by persistent antagonism and cumulative pressure.

**Table 1.** Comparative overview of VUCA, BANI and PUMO as successive uncertainty frames

Dimension	VUCA	BANI	PUMO
Core claim	Turbulent environment; adapt	Fragile environment; stabilise and care	Polarised and overheated environment; manage boundaries and pressure
Components	Volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity	Brittle, anxious, nonlinear, incomprehensible	Polarised, unthinkable, metamorphic, overheated
Dominant metaphor	Fog: navigation in turbulence	Fragility and overload	Fault lines: pressure cooker
Leader identity	Strategist-navigator	Stabiliser-caregiver	Boundary-manager
Typical response	Agility and sensemaking	Resilience; psychological safety	Depolarising sensemaking; “cooling” capacity; transformation capability
Diffusion carriers	Consulting; business schools; leadership discourse	Speakers/coaches; consulting; platforms	Strategy/innovation discourse; platforms; Exec Ed (early)
Status (indexing)	Established	Diffusing	Very recent; low indexing (timing effect)
Link to others	Baseline turbulence frame	Reframes VUCA via fragility/affect	Extends VUCA + BANI with polarisation + chronic pressure

These distinctions mark successive shifts in metaphorical logic. VUCA evokes navigational imagery – leaders steering through storms or fog – where uncertainty is difficult but manageable. BANI draws on a fragile imaginary, emphasising systems prone to sudden breakdown and actors under emotional strain. PUMO, in contrast, invokes polarisation and pressure imaginaries, where leaders operate amid sustained tension, ideological contestation and accelerated transformation. In this sense, VUCA foregrounds external complexity, BANI combines structural breakdown with human vulnerability and PUMO emphasises fragmentation and overheating.

A further distinction concerns epistemology. Ambiguity in VUCA implies that meaning is unclear but potentially recoverable through better information or analysis. Incomprehensibility in BANI suggests a deeper limit: some phenomena may resist understanding altogether, even with abundant data (Dharmasiri, 2022). This shift from epistemic difficulty to epistemic humility reflects growing recognition of the limits of human cognition in technologically mediated and highly complex systems. PUMO introduces a further shift. “Unthinkable” signals not only limits to analysis but also the collapse of shared interpretive frames, in which events exceed existing categories and provoke normative rupture. “Metamorphic” underscores continuous transformation rather than episodic disruption, while “overheated” captures the cumulative acceleration of crises across domains. Together, these elements suggest a move from epistemic humility towards epistemic instability.

### 5.2 Strategic and organisational implications

The three frameworks also differ in the strategic responses they encourage. VUCA implies a world in which flexibility, foresight and interpretive competence are essential. Leaders are urged to cultivate vision to counter volatility, understanding to reduce uncertainty, clarity to manage complexity and agility to respond to ambiguity (Johansen, 2012). Strategic prescriptions within the VUCA paradigm often emphasise scenario planning, decentralised decision-making and continuous learning (Snowden and Boone, 2007).

BANI introduced a different set of imperatives. Brittleness calls for robustness and redundancy in system design. Anxiety highlights the need for psychological safety, trust and emotional support. Nonlinearity requires preparedness for outliers and experimentation rather than linear forecasting. Incomprehensibility demands humility, plural interpretation and iterative sensemaking (Cascio, 2020).

PUMO implies yet another strategic orientation. Polarisation foregrounds ideological fragmentation and contested realities, requiring boundary work, coalition management and deliberate de-escalation. “Unthinkable” signals the need for preparedness beyond conventional scenario planning, while “metamorphic” emphasises continuous transformation rather than episodic disruption. “Overheated” underscores sustained systemic strain, encouraging leaders to balance adaptation with cooling mechanisms that prevent escalation and fatigue.

These differences signal successive shifts in leadership expectations (Uhl-Bien, 2021). Under VUCA, the leader appears as an adaptive strategist navigating complexity. Under BANI, the leader becomes a stabiliser and interpreter, sustaining coherence amid fragility and anxiety. Under PUMO, the leader assumes a boundary-spanning and tension-balancing role, operating amid ideological contestation and chronic systemic heat. The movement from VUCA to BANI to PUMO thus reflects a progression from managing turbulence to coping with fragility to mediating polarisation under sustained pressure.

Tables 2–5 deepen this comparison by mapping the epistemic, affective and prescriptive logics of each acronym; the final column in each table shows how PUMO links back to (and reframes) the VUCA and BANI emphases.

First, Table 2 summarises these contrasting epistemological and affective orientations. This comparison highlights both divergence and complementarity. Rather than viewing VUCA, BANI and PUMO as competing paradigms, they can be understood as layered and partially cumulative frames, each extending and reframing its predecessor.

The PUMO column illustrates how polarisation and sustained pressure amplify the epistemic and affective dynamics identified in VUCA and BANI while introducing new leadership challenges tied to boundary management and de-escalation.

### 5.3 Towards a layered or successive understanding

Although BANI is often presented as a successor to VUCA, it is more accurate to view these frameworks as layered rather than competing. VUCA describes broad environmental turbulence; BANI captures what happens when such turbulence accumulates, exposing internal fragility; PUMO foregrounds polarisation and sustained systemic pressure amid intensified fragmentation. In practice, organisations rarely replace one acronym with another. Instead, they mobilise them selectively as overlapping diagnostic lenses.

This layered understanding has practical value. An organisation may diagnose its external environment as VUCA – rapid market shifts and regulatory uncertainty – while applying a BANI lens internally to identify brittleness, manage anxiety, anticipate nonlinear risks or recognise limits to comprehension. Several commentators suggest that BANI functions as a

**Table 2.** Epistemological and affective orientations

Dimension	VUCA	BANI	PUMO
Knowledge	Ambiguous; partial	Incomprehensible; nonlinear	Contested; polarised
Emotion	Stress/urgency	Anxiety/overwhelm	Antagonism and pressure
Default mode	Adaptation	Stabilisation	Boundary work; cooling
Leadership	Sensemaking strategist	Psychologically attuned stabiliser	Boundary-spanning mediator

**Table 3.** Conceptual and practical contrasts

Dimension	VUCA	BANI	PUMO
Focus	Turbulence	Fragility + affect	Polarisation + pressure
Epistemic stance	Uncertainty manageable via sensemaking	Uncertainty disrupts inference	Meaning conflict and legitimacy strain
Suggested response	Agility and scenario work	Resilience and care practices	Mediation and boundary spanning
Imagery	Fog/navigation	Collapse/overload	Fault lines and overheating
Status	Mainstreamed	Growing	Emergent

**Table 4.** Metaphorical imaginaries

Dimension	VUCA	BANI	PUMO
Imagery	Turbulence and fog	Brittleness; overload	Fault lines and overheating
System view	Complex turbulence	Cascading fragility	Polarised systems; heat
Mood	Urgency	Anxiety/fatigue	Antagonism and strain
Neighbours	Agility and uncertainty management	Resilience and burnout	Polarisation and legitimacy strain

**Table 5.** Acronyms as packages of the future: communicability, framing and prescriptive roles

Dimension	VUCA	BANI	PUMO
Packaging	Portable 4-part diagnosis	Portable 4-part diagnosis	Same 4-part form
Future frame	Turbulent	Fragile/overwhelming	Polarised/overheated
Prescriptive logic	Adapt; sensemake	Stabilise; care	Depolarise; cool; transform
Performative role	Agile strategist	Care-oriented stabilisers	Boundary manager
Uptake	Institutionalised	Diffusing	Emergent

stress test applied to VUCA conditions, revealing what fails when agility and adaptability are insufficient (Kraaijenbrink, 2022; Schlegelmilch, 2023). A PUMO lens may be invoked when polarisation, legitimacy conflicts, or chronic strain dominate the agenda, requiring boundary management, de-escalation and sustained adaptive transformation rather than agility or resilience alone.

At the same time, the proliferation of acronyms invites caution. As Dharmasiri (2022) notes, successive labels risk conceptual inflation, where novelty substitutes for insight. The usefulness of VUCA, BANI, or PUMO ultimately depends on whether these frames enable more reflective and actionable understanding rather than rhetorical differentiation.

Table 3 summarises the key distinctions and overlaps across VUCA, BANI and PUMO. The inclusion of PUMO highlights how polarisation and sustained pressure extend the earlier turbulence and fragility logics, reinforcing the cumulative rather than replacement character of uncertainty metaphors.

#### 5.4 Metaphorical imaginaries

Beyond their analytical roles, VUCA, BANI and PUMO operate as metaphorical imaginaries that shape how uncertainty is felt, narrated and managed. As acronyms, they

evoke distinct moods and leadership archetypes. VUCA positions the leader as a navigator confronting fog, storms and shifting terrain. BANI recasts the leader as a stabiliser operating amid breakdown, overload and emotional strain. PUMO introduces an image of the leader as a mediator and boundary manager, working across fault lines in environments characterised by sustained pressure and ideological heat.

Metaphors structure perception and action by condensing complexity into recognisable imagery (Lakoff and Johnson, 2008). VUCA draws on metaphors of movement and navigation, suggesting that uncertainty can be traversed through skill and foresight. BANI invokes images of fracture, collapse and noise, emphasising fragility and exhaustion rather than manoeuvrability. PUMO draws on imagery of fault lines, overheating and pressure accumulation, signalling environments marked by polarisation and chronic escalation rather than episodic disruption.

Table 4 summarises these symbolic differences.

Taken together, these metaphorical frames suggest that VUCA, BANI and PUMO are more than technical acronyms: they are discursive tools that define phases of managerial thought and shape how leaders narrate crises, assign responsibility and establish legitimacy.

### 5.5 *Packaging the future: acronyms as cognitive and commercial devices*

Acronyms such as VUCA, BANI and PUMO illustrate how the future is packaged rather than merely predicted. Their four-letter form transforms diffuse anxieties into portable knowledge objects that can be taught, circulated and monetised in the management knowledge market (Heusinkveld, 2013). In this sense, acronyms simplify complexity while simultaneously prescribing appropriate managerial responses.

From a management fashion perspective (Abrahamson, 1996; Benders and Van Veen, 2001; Piazza and Abrahamson, 2020), this packaging function is central to the diffusion of the fashion. Acronyms operate as symbolic infrastructure, enabling consultants, educators and futurists to legitimise interventions and promote leadership ideals. Comparable dynamics appear in other acronymic discourses, such as Industry 4.0, 5.0 and 6.0, where sequential labelling implies inevitability and progress (Madsen *et al.*, 2025).

The recent emergence of PUMO illustrates this ongoing churn of managerial shorthand (Lichtenthaler, 2025). PUMO captures widening divides, unimaginable shocks, continuous structural change and escalating pressure. Its rapid emergence following BANI suggests shorter cycles of acronym production, driven by megatrend shifts and platform dynamics that reward concise, resonant labels.

The risk of such packaging is that rhetorical appeal may crowd out analytical depth. Acronyms can stabilise discourse but also ossify it, reducing complex futures to sloganised frames. The scholarly task is therefore not only to trace how such terms circulate but also to critically assess what they illuminate (as well as what they obscure) when uncertainty is reduced to four letters.

Table 5 summarises how VUCA, BANI and PUMO function as packaged representations of uncertainty, emphasising their communicability, framing logic and prescriptive implications.

## 6. Towards a lifecycle model of framing uncertainty

The comparison of VUCA, BANI and PUMO points to a recurring pattern in how uncertainty is framed in managerial discourse. These frames do not arise or spread in isolation. Instead, they move through recognisable cycles that resemble the rise, stabilisation and decline of management fashions (Abrahamson and Piazza, 2019; Piazza and Abrahamson, 2020). New frames emerge when existing ways of interpreting uncertainty lose traction, diffuse through consulting channels and digital platforms, stabilise as part of

organisational vocabulary and fade as shifting conditions generate demand for alternative language. This section outlines a lifecycle model that captures these dynamics and clarifies the forces and actors that shape how uncertainty is framed over time. The model does not claim predictive authority over organisational outcomes; rather, it specifies patterned dynamics in the discursive evolution of uncertainty metaphors.

### 6.1 *A lifecycle logic*

Frames of uncertainty tend to emerge when prevailing metaphors no longer align with lived realities. This typically occurs when megatrends shift, shocks accumulate or leaders encounter contradictions that existing interpretive frames fail to explain. In this respect, uncertainty framing follows a logic similar to that of management fashions: frames rise in prominence, diffuse through institutional and digital channels, stabilise through repeated use and decline as alternative interpretations gain attention.

UUCA is aligned with a period shaped by globalisation and post-Cold War restructuring, emphasising turbulence, ambiguity and the limits of prediction. BANI resonated in a landscape marked by climate strain, digital saturation and the collective fatigue of the pandemic era, foregrounding fragility, anxiety and epistemic strain. PUMO reflects a further turn towards widening divides, events once regarded as unthinkable, continuous structural transformation and rising levels of competitive and societal pressure.

These shifts are not random. They reflect deeper structural forces that push the field towards new forms of sensemaking. Slow-moving megatrends generate long-term pressure. Black Swan events such as the COVID-19 pandemic expose fragilities that established models overlook (Antipova, 2021; Madsen and Silva, 2022). Polycrisis dynamics link shocks together and magnify their effects. As these forces intensify, existing frames of uncertainty lose explanatory power, creating discursive space for new frames to emerge.

Once articulated, uncertainty frames begin to diffuse. Their early spread is driven by supply-side actors (e.g. consultants, futurists, educators and platform influencers) who package and promote new interpretations of uncertainty (Jung and Kieser, 2012). Demand-side actors adopt these frames because they offer simple, communicable ways to make sense of complex and stressful conditions. The interaction between supply and demand shapes both the speed and reach of diffusion. Digital platforms further amplify this process, as their algorithms favour short, repeatable and emotionally resonant formulations, allowing uncertainty frames to circulate faster than more elaborate theoretical models (Madsen and Slåtten, 2025b).

Over time, frames of uncertainty may stabilise and become institutionalised (Perkmann and Spicer, 2008; Piazza and Abrahamson, 2020). They enter organisational vocabulary, appear in leadership programmes and function as default reference points in strategic conversations. Stabilisation, however, also creates the conditions for saturation. As use becomes widespread, nuance and precision often decline. When circumstances shift again, or when new shocks expose the limits of the dominant frame, it begins to feel incomplete or outdated. New frames then enter the discourse, and the cycle repeats.

The rapid rise of BANI indicates that these cycles are accelerating. Environmental change unfolds more quickly, and platform-based communication accelerates alongside it. Supply- and demand-side actors interact more closely, tightening feedback loops between invention and adoption. The result is a faster turnover of uncertainty frames and a shorter lifespan for successive metaphors. The recent emergence of PUMO illustrates this dynamic, although it is too early to determine whether it will gain sustained traction. At this stage, PUMO should be read as an early signal rather than a consolidated framework, highlighting how quickly

new frames appear when existing ones feel insufficient and when platform dynamics reward concise, ready-made interpretations of uncertainty.

These recurring movements can be clarified by outlining the core stages of uncertainty framing and the roles of supply- and demand-side actors. [Table 6](#) summarises these patterns.

6.2 *Why this lifecycle matters?*

Lifecycle models are well established across numerous fields, including marketing ([Wells and Gubar, 1966](#)), accounting ([Gupta and Sing Chow, 1985](#)), pedagogy ([Kornbeck and Jensen, 2012](#)) and project management ([Jaafari, 2000](#)). Closely related ideas also appear in diffusion research, where innovations spread through identifiable adopter phases ([Rogers, 2003](#)), and in management fashion theory, which explains how ideas rise through promotion, bandwagon effects and institutional endorsement before losing momentum ([Abrahamson, 1996](#); [Piazza and Abrahamson, 2020](#)). Popular management discourse has further operationalised these dynamics through models such as the Gartner hype cycle, which maps the trajectory from initial enthusiasm to normalisation and decline ([Dedeheyir and Steinert, 2016](#)).

Applied here, a lifecycle perspective helps explain why particular ways of framing uncertainty rise, spread and fade when they do. Frames such as VUCA, BANI and PUMO serve as condensed interpretive devices that translate complex, shifting conditions into manageable language. Their prominence is therefore time-bound. As environmental pressures change and older metaphors lose resonance, new uncertainty frames gain traction, diffuse through managerial and digital channels and eventually stabilise or decline. A lifecycle lens makes these transitions visible and provides a structured way to examine how uncertainty is repeatedly reframed in management discourse.

Uncertainty frames operate not only as metaphors but also as responses to environmental pressure, organisational needs and platform dynamics. Their trajectories depend on the interaction between supply-side and demand-side actors. Frames gain relevance through repeated use, stabilise as they become embedded in practice and decline when shifting conditions or disruptive events expose their limitations.

**Table 6.** Lifecycle stages of framing uncertainty and key actors

Stage	Description	Supply-side drivers	Demand-side drivers	Examples
Emergence	New frames appear when existing interpretations no longer fit	Futurists, theorists, consultants, innovative scholars	Leaders sensing gaps in prevailing frames	VUCA, BANI, PUMO
Diffusion	Frames spread through institutions and platforms	Consulting firms, trainers, educators, influencers	Managers, HR teams, journalists, online communities	VUCA in leadership programmes; BANI on LinkedIn
Stabilisation	Frames become standard vocabulary	Business schools, coaching firms, certification programmes	Organisations embedding frames in routines and narratives	VUCA as default uncertainty frame
Saturation	Overexposure reduces clarity and usefulness	Content recycling by consultants	Routine shorthand use; media repetition	VUCA in the 2010s corporate slides
Replacement	New frames emerge as limits become visible	Thought leaders proposing alternatives	Managers seeking fresher narratives	BANI displacing VUCA; PUMO rising alongside BANI

Viewing VUCA, BANI and PUMO within a broader cycle clarifies their roles in managerial discourse. Each condenses complexity into a usable interpretive lens that reflects the dominant pressures of its time. Each also becomes vulnerable as those pressures evolve. The lifecycle model helps explain why these transitions now occur more rapidly: digital platforms compress diffusion, megatrend shifts accelerate and polycrisis dynamics expose fragility more frequently. Together, these forces shorten the lifespan of any given way of framing uncertainty.

Understanding this lifecycle helps explain past patterns and offers a lens for anticipating future ones. It also underscores the need for critical use. Uncertainty frames can clarify turbulence, but they also simplify it. They support sensemaking, yet they cannot replace detailed analysis. Recognising their lifecycle makes both their value and their limits easier to assess.

### 6.3 Illustrative evidence from Google Trends

Figure 2 presents Google Trends data for the search terms *VUCA world*, *BANI world* and *PUMO world* on a global scale. Although Google Trends does not directly capture organisational adoption, it offers a useful indicator of broader discursive attention over time (Silva and Madsen, 2022). Because PUMO was introduced in 2025, the figure is best read as an indicator of early-stage emergence rather than a comparative measure of impact or practical uptake.

The figure shows that VUCA maintains consistently higher visibility throughout the period, with pronounced spikes during global disruptions, particularly between 2020 and 2023. This pattern is consistent with VUCA's status as an institutionalised baseline frame that resurfaces during periods of heightened uncertainty rather than disappearing altogether.

BANI follows a different trajectory. Interest rises more gradually from 2020 onwards, with sharper fluctuations and a notable increase towards the latter part of the period. This compressed and volatile pattern supports the argument that newer acronyms diffuse faster but also exhibit less stable attention dynamics, reflecting tighter feedback loops between crises, platform amplification and managerial sensemaking.

By contrast, PUMO registers negligible search volume over the period shown, which is expected given its introduction in 2025. This reinforces its status as an emergent and still

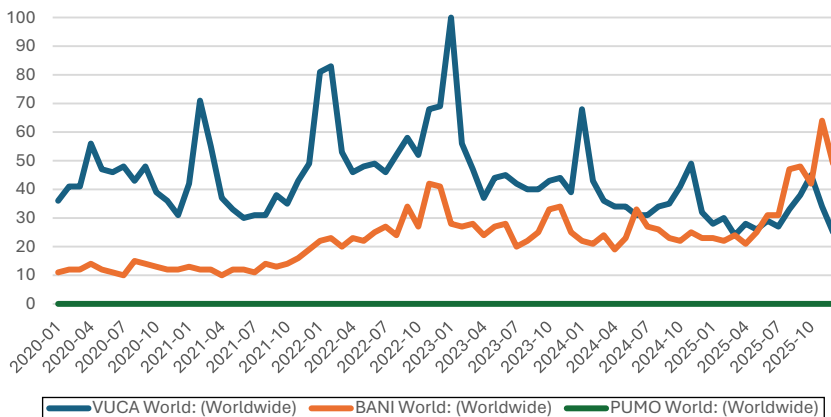


Figure 2. Relative global search interest for VUCA World, BANI World and PUMO World

Source: [www.trends.google.com/trends](http://www.trends.google.com/trends); Retrieved 8 January 2026

very marginal frame. Rather than contradicting the lifecycle model, the lack of visible traction underscores its temporal logic: emergence precedes diffusion, and not all proposed acronyms progress beyond the initial stage.

Taken together, the figure illustrates overlap rather than substitution. VUCA remains visible even as BANI gains attention, supporting a layered interpretation in which new uncertainty frames supplement rather than fully replace older ones. The data also lends indicative support to the claim that acronym lifecycles are shortening, with newer frames exhibiting faster but more volatile attention patterns. In digitally mediated and polycrisis contexts, the lifecycle of uncertainty metaphors may compress, with emergence and diffusion occurring more rapidly than in earlier management fashion waves.

## 7. Propositions

The lifecycle model identifies recurring patterns in how uncertainty is framed, diffused, stabilised and eventually replaced in managerial discourse. These patterns are not accidental. They arise from identifiable forces that shape how managers interpret turbulent environments. Frames of uncertainty condense broad environmental pressures, circulate across institutional and digital channels and become embedded through repeated organisational use. When their limits are exposed, alternative frames emerge, and the cycle begins again.

Taken together, these dynamics suggest a set of recurring mechanisms through which uncertainty is framed and reframed over time. The propositions below specify expected associations in discursive emergence, diffusion and stabilisation. They are intended as analytically useful, testable statements about framing dynamics, not as deterministic predictions of organisational outcomes.

### 7.1 Proposition 1: environmental shifts drive emergence

- P1. Major shifts in megatrends and polycrisis pressures increase the likelihood that new uncertainty frames will emerge to replace existing ones.

Emergence reflects a growing mismatch between prevailing language and lived conditions. When megatrends shift, such as digital acceleration, climate stress, or geopolitical fragmentation, leaders lose confidence in frames that no longer capture their environment. Polycrisis dynamics intensify this effect by producing overlapping and mutually reinforcing shocks. As conditions drift away from the assumptions underlying VUCA, BANI becomes more compelling. As BANI in turn feels incomplete in a context marked by sharper polarisation, events once regarded as unthinkable, continuous structural transformation and rising societal and competitive pressure, PUMO emerges. Environmental drift creates conceptual gaps, and new frames arise to fill them.

### 7.2 Proposition 2: supply-side actors shape early diffusion

- P2. The early diffusion of new uncertainty frames is driven primarily by supply-side actors such as consultants, futurists and educators who package and promote new interpretations.

Supply-side actors play a central role in framing uncertainty at early stages. They introduce new labels, interpret their meaning and construct the initial narratives around them. Consultants favour frames that are easy to teach and operationalise. Futurists articulate broad environmental shifts. Educators integrate new frames into leadership models and training

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programmes. Operating upstream of practice, these actors shape managerial vocabulary before organisations widely adopt frames.

### 7.3 Proposition 3: platform logic accelerates uptake

- P3. Algorithmic amplification accelerates the diffusion of uncertainty frames by privileging short, repeatable and emotionally resonant formulations.

Digital platforms reward simplicity, emotional salience and ease of circulation (Madsen and Slåtten, 2025a, 2025b). Frames that can be condensed into acronyms benefit disproportionately from this logic. Platforms compress the time between introduction and adoption by amplifying content that is easily shared and quickly understood. As a result, BANI diffused far more rapidly than VUCA, and early signals suggest that PUMO may follow a similar trajectory. Platform design shortens the diffusion phase and accelerates framing cycles.

### 7.4 Proposition 4: organisational adoption stabilises acronyms

- P4. Uncertainty frames stabilise when organisations embed them into leadership development, strategic narratives and internal communication routines.

Stability arises through institutionalisation. Organisations translate frames into training modules, strategy templates and shared vocabularies (Perkmann and Spicer, 2008). Repeated internal use reinforces common interpretations and extends a frame's lifespan. VUCA reached this stage when it became a standard reference in leadership development and strategy discourse (Bennett and Lemoine, 2014a, 2014b). BANI is now entering a similar phase in resilience-oriented and crisis-focused programmes. Stabilisation depends less on external promotion than on internal organisational routines.

### 7.5 Proposition 5: extreme events expose limits and trigger replacement

- P5. Black Swan events and sudden disruptions increase the likelihood that dominant uncertainty frames will be displaced by alternative frames offering more resonant interpretations.

Extreme events function as stress tests for prevailing frames. Pandemics, system failures and geopolitical shocks expose the limits of language that underestimates fragility, nonlinearity, or emotional strain. When mismatches between framing and lived experience become visible, demand for alternative interpretations grows. This process elevated BANI during the COVID-19 period and opened space for additional frames, such as PUMO, as technological dominance and societal polarisation intensified. Shocks reveal where existing frames fail, prompting replacement rather than incremental adjustment.

Together, these propositions depict uncertainty framing as a dynamic process shaped by environmental change, actor constellations and communication infrastructures. Frames gain influence when they resonate with emerging conditions, are actively promoted by supply-side actors, are amplified by platforms and are embedded in organisational practice. They lose influence when conditions change or when disruptive events expose their limits. The propositions provide a structured basis for future empirical studies of how managerial language evolves under conditions of persistent uncertainty.

### 7.6 Possible empirical validation

To support empirical validation, the five propositions can be translated into testable hypotheses using observable indicators of metaphor visibility and uptake (e.g. platform mentions, search interest, consulting reports, executive education syllabi and firm communications). For example, *H1* (from P1): Shifts in objective turbulence proxies (e.g. volatility indices, geopolitical risk indices, major disruption counts) are positively associated with the introduction of new uncertainty acronyms in practitioner discourse; *H2* (from P2): Early growth in acronym visibility is strongest in supply-side channels (consulting, training and coaching) before spreading to firm communications; *H3* (from P3): algorithmic environments (platforms and influencer networks) accelerate diffusion, such that acronyms with higher short-form shareability exhibit steeper early adoption curves; *H4* (from P4): embedding an acronym in organisational routines (training materials, strategy templates and internal communications) predicts higher persistence over time; and *H5* (from P5): major disruption events produce measurable shifts in discourse, increasing the relative use of successor frames over incumbent ones in the months following the shock.

## 8. Limitations and future research

This paper adopts a narrative review approach (Baumeister and Leary, 1997; Ferrari, 2015) to examine how uncertainty is framed through VUCA, BANI and the emerging PUMO concept. Narrative reviews are well-suited to conceptually fluid topics that span multiple domains and circulate across both academic and practitioner contexts, but they also have clear boundaries. The approach emphasises interpretive synthesis rather than exhaustive retrieval of sources. As a result, the analysis draws on a wide range of materials but does not aim to catalogue every use of these frames across industries, sectors or regions. The objective is to identify broad patterns in how uncertainty frames arise, diffuse and evolve, not to provide a comprehensive empirical mapping.

The discussion of PUMO reflects an additional limitation. Because the frame is recent, the peer-reviewed literature surrounding it remains minimal, and its longer term trajectory is uncertain. Its use in this paper is, therefore, exploratory and illustrative, serving primarily to highlight accelerated lifecycle dynamics rather than to evaluate PUMO as a fully consolidated or validated framework.

The lifecycle model proposed in the paper should also be interpreted with care. It offers a structured way to conceptualise recurring patterns in the framing of uncertainty, but it is not intended as a deterministic or universal sequence. Lifecycle stages may vary in duration, intensity, or ordering across contexts and different frames may follow distinct trajectories depending on industry, culture, technological conditions or platform dynamics. The model provides a conceptual foundation, but it requires empirical testing to assess how these dynamics unfold in practice.

These limitations also point to several avenues for future research. Empirical studies could examine how uncertainty frames diffuse across industries, organisational fields and national contexts and how quickly framing cycles accelerate under conditions of digital amplification and polycrisis pressure. Longitudinal analyses could trace shifts from emergence to saturation over time, while qualitative studies could explore how managers interpret, negotiate, or resist dominant frames in everyday practice. Platform-oriented research may investigate how algorithms shape the visibility and uptake of particular metaphors, and comparative work could assess whether similar lifecycle dynamics apply to other forms of managerial framing, such as visual models, slogans or numbered paradigms.

Future research can also extend this work by examining how uncertainty frames circulate across organisational, national and digital contexts, how they influence leadership practice

and how they interact with broader discourses of crisis, resilience and technological change. The appearance of PUMO suggests that new frames will continue to emerge as megatrends evolve (Naughtin *et al.*, 2024) and polycrisis dynamics intensify (Rakowski *et al.*, 2025), reinforcing the need for sustained scholarly attention to the language of uncertainty.

Taken together, these limitations do not weaken the paper's contribution. Rather, they clarify its scope: to advance a conceptual model, identify key mechanisms and propose a research agenda for understanding how uncertainty is framed and reframed in contemporary management discourse.

## 9. Conclusion

This paper set out to synthesise how acronyms arise, circulate and gain meaning in managerial discourse. The cases examined – VUCA, BANI and the emerging PUMO – illustrate how managerial language evolves as leaders search for ways to interpret shifting conditions. Each acronym condenses a particular historical moment into a compact frame: VUCA captured the turbulence of globalisation and post-Cold War uncertainty (Bennett and Lemoine, 2014a, 2014b); BANI reflected a period marked by systemic fragility, collective strain and nonlinear shocks (Cascio, 2020); and PUMO signals a further turn towards polarisation, events once seen as unthinkable, continuous structural transformation and rising pressure across markets and society (Lichtenthaler, 2025). Together, these metaphors show how uncertainty is narrated and how leadership expectations are shaped through concise linguistic devices (Alvesson and Spicer, 2010; Weick, 1995). By treating VUCA, BANI and PUMO as portable “packages of the future”, the analysis clarifies how each acronym couples a diagnosis of uncertainty with a distinctive leadership stance and a preferred repertoire of responses.

This study advances three interrelated contributions. It introduces a metaphor-lifecycle lens to uncertainty frames, integrates metaphor theory with management fashion theory and clarifies how dominant acronyms shape managerial attention, leadership identities and acceptable responses. The analysis shows that these acronyms are not isolated constructs but part of a broader lifecycle. They emerge when older frames lose traction, diffuse through supply-side actors such as consultants and educators (Abrahamson, 1996; Jung and Kieser, 2012), stabilise as organisations incorporate them into training and strategic narratives and eventually decline as new shocks expose their limits. Digital platforms accelerate this process by privileging short, repeatable and emotionally resonant content (Madsen and Slåtten, 2025b), tightening the feedback loop between introduction and mainstream adoption. These dynamics help explain why newer acronyms such as PUMO gain visibility more rapidly, reflecting shorter cycles of meaning-making in an environment shaped by megatrend shifts (Naughtin *et al.*, 2024), Black Swan disruptions (Taleb, 2007) and polycrisis pressures (Brosig, 2025; Homer-Dixon *et al.*, 2021).

Understanding these cycles matters because acronyms do more than label uncertainty; they package the future in ways that influence how leaders think and act. Their clarity and communicability make them useful tools for sensemaking (Weick, 1995), but their simplicity can also obscure nuance or reinforce narrow interpretations. Used uncritically, they risk sliding into management fashions that promise more than they explain (Benders and Van Veen, 2001). Used thoughtfully, they can function as heuristics that prompt reflection, structure discussion and guide strategic attention.

Ultimately, such acronyms remain valuable only when their limits are acknowledged. Understanding them requires attention to the forces that produce them, the platforms that amplify them and the cycles through which they rise, stabilise and decline. A critical awareness of these dynamics allows scholars and practitioners to use uncertainty frames as tools rather than templates and to engage turbulent futures with greater clarity and care.

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