Recognising 'Being' in the BANI world

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Abstract

Orientation: The early 2000s were defined by the VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity) environment, where work faced unpredictable challenges. Post-COVID-19, the BANI (Brittle, Anxious, Non-linear, Incomprehensible) framework emerged, highlighting the fragility and anxiety now present in workplaces. As these rapid changes unfold, it is crucial to develop strategies for coping and building resilience while forming a balance between *being* and *doing*.

Research purpose: This study aimed to explore ways to recognise individuals by developing mechanisms that assist them in adapting to the evolving world of work. The research sought to answer the question, "How can the *being* be recognised in the BANI world?"

Motivation for the study: The study was inspired by the need to understand what keeps the individuals grounded amid the transition from the VUCA to BANI environment.

Research methodology: The study is non-empirical, relying on a review of existing empirical research literature. Insights are also drawn from real-life experiences of individuals, complementing the analysed non-empirical data.

Main findings: The findings indicated that awareness and meaning play a crucial role in enhancing individuals' experiences and supporting well-being in the BANI world. Workplace spirituality could serve as a recognition tool, helping individuals find meaning and purpose that fosters resilience.

Practical implications and contribution: The study highlighted that recognising the uniqueness of the workplace individual helps alleviate the challenges of the BANI era. A conceptual framework that integrates workplace spirituality is recommended to promote employee well-being and ensure sustained work engagement amid the turbulence of the BANI era.

Keywords: Awareness; BANI; Being; meaning; contribution; workplace spirituality

Introduction

Background and contextualisation of the study

Following the VUCA environment that characterised early 21st-century business operations, the BANI model of the 2020s, introduced by American anthropologist Jamais Cascio, offers a new perspective on the business world. While VUCA describes the workplace as volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous, highlighting the challenges of a rapidly changing work environment (Coopersmith, 2021; Kruger & Barkhuizen, 2024), the BANI model frames the world of work as brittle, anxious, nonlinear, and incomprehensible. In this vulnerable environment, individuals feel overwhelmed and struggle to find easy ways to adapt. Du Plessis (2023) asserts that those immersed in the world of work must continuously adapt their identities and seek meaning to make sense of the contribution required from them.

Recent studies have focused on describing the shift from VUCA to BANI yet there are limited academic research papers written to address the impact of the BANI era on working individuals. This paper aims to

explore strategies for human *beings* to cope and adapt within the BANI environment. It is a literature review study designed to investigate the popular yet underexplored concept of the BANI world. The paper specifically focuses on recognising the human *beings* impacted by the changes characteristic of the BANI environment.

Research design and methodology

Non-empirical studies typically draw conclusions subjectively, based on personal observations and current events. While this study is not primarily data-driven, it involved a comprehensive literature review of the BANI framework to identify emerging themes relevant to the research question. The researcher's ontological and epistemological views inevitably influence the conclusions drawn from the study. Therefore, the perspective guiding this research is shaped by the researcher's assumptions about the validity, acceptability, and legitimacy of the knowledge yielded (Saunders et al., 2019).

Literature Review

A brief review of the VUCA environment

It is nearly impossible to address the BANI environment without referencing the preceding VUCA world that dominated the first two decades of the 21st century. The VUCA framework, which characterises the world as volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (Kruger & Barkhuizen, 2024), originated in a military context to describe the unpredictable conditions of warfare (Joulaei, 2024). Understanding and addressing the elements of the VUCA era is crucial for organisational development and change (ODC) specialists, as well as organisational leaders, to help businesses become more resilient in the face of increasing complexity. By recognising and responding to these factors, organisations can foster a culture of adaptability, enabling them to navigate the challenges of the modern landscape and achieve long-term, sustainable success.

The concepts of VUCA and BANI describe challenging environments but focus on different aspects (Menaria, 2024). The two frameworks were developed to address the complex issues arising from the dynamic and unpredictable nature of the modern world. The VUCA era, which originated from military strategy, gained widespread attention in the early 1990s when business strategists applied it in corporate environments. VUCA was used as a cornerstone for comprehending and navigating the challenges posed by shifts in the geopolitical landscape, market dynamics, and technological advancements. As the framework evolved, it was integrated into ODC initiatives and leadership development projects to facilitate decision-making and embrace the impact of globalisation.

The VUCA framework is widely utilised by businesses to develop strategic plans that are flexible and adaptable to the ever-changing landscape of global markets and environments. In contrast, the BANI framework is increasingly employed by organisations to identify emerging trends and uncover opportunities for innovation in the face of evolving challenges (Menaria, 2024; Abeysekera, 2023). VUCA provides a lens through which the unpredictable and turbulent nature of contemporary business and global environments can be understood. It highlights the dynamic forces that businesses must navigate, helping them to devise strategies that are responsive to both expected and unforeseen changes. By addressing these challenges, the VUCA framework equips organisations with the tools to manage risk, foster resilience, and remain competitive in an unstable world.

A closer look at the BANI environment

In his article, *Facing the Age of Chaos*, Cascio (2020) argues that a new paradigm has emerged, necessitating the development of new language to describe contemporary realities. He contends that the VUCA framework has become increasingly irrelevant, as its use no longer provides meaningful insights into the complexities of the modern world. Consequently, a new framework is required to better understand the current landscape, assess the extent of chaos, and guide the development of appropriate responses. Such a framework would ideally offer a foundation for exploring novel adaptive strategies, enabling organisations and leaders to navigate the challenges of an increasingly unpredictable environment.

The BANI framework, Cascio's intentional parallel to VUCA, is a concept that captures the characteristics of the modern era, especially concerning business, technology, and societal transformations. It offers valuable insights into the challenges and dynamics of contemporary environments. Abeysekera (2023) advocates for the use of action research within this context as a systematic approach to problem-solving and inquiry, which is commonly applied across various fields, including business and social sciences. Action research involves a continuous, iterative process of data collection, analysis, and implementation of changes to address identified issues or challenges. When applied to the concepts of resilience, adaptability, and sustainability, it can serve as an effective tool for individuals, organisations, and communities seeking to navigate the complexities of the BANI environment.

Key traits of BANI

The key traits of BANI are described below as presented by Monica (2024). The first trait of the BANI framework, brittleness, emphasises the fragility of modern systems, which, unlike traditional systems, are increasingly vulnerable due to their reliance on interconnected technologies and the rapid pace of change. This brittleness is evident in our dependence on digital infrastructure, where even minor disruptions or software bugs can lead to significant chaos. It underscores the need for preparedness in the face of potential failures and disruptions, highlighting the importance of redundancy, robustness, and adaptability in system design.

The second trait of the BANI framework, anxiety, captures the pervasive uncertainty of the modern era, driven by rapid technological advancements, geopolitical shifts, and challenges such as climate change. This anxiety leads to concerns about the future, job security, and the legacy we leave for future generations. It is a valid response, prompting us to question the stability of institutions, the reliability of information, and the sustainability of people's lifestyles. Addressing this anxiety necessitates resilience, adaptability, and a readiness to embrace change, alongside the development of mental and emotional strategies to navigate uncertainty (Joulaei, 2024).

The third trait of the BANI framework, non-linearity, emphasises that modern complexities frequently defy simple cause-and-effect relationships. In contrast to the past, where problems could often be addressed through a linear progression of steps, contemporary challenges tend to be interconnected and exhibit non-linear dynamics. For instance, a single social media post can rapidly escalate, influencing public opinion and triggering real-world consequences in unpredictable, exponential ways. To effectively navigate these non-linear challenges, it is essential to adopt advanced problem-solving approaches such as systems thinking and scenario planning, which recognise the interconnected and dynamic nature of modern issues.

The final trait of the BANI framework, incomprehensibility, reflects the challenges of fully understanding and predicting the consequences of actions in a complex world. Unlike the past, where decision-making was guided by established models, the vast data and intricate systems today make it difficult to grasp the full scope of situations. A notable example is artificial intelligence (AI), which, despite its transformative potential, introduces ethical and philosophical dilemmas with unpredictable outcomes. This underscores the importance of developing ethical frameworks and governance structures to guide AI's development and deployment.

The impact of BANI traits

The BANI framework offers a systematic approach to understanding and addressing the complexities of unpredictable environments. Its four dimensions provide valuable insights into navigating such landscapes. Table 1 summarises the impact of each dimension, serving as a foundation for developing targeted intervention strategies.

Table 1: Impact of BANI traits on individuals and organisations

Trait	Impact
Brittleness	Highlights the fragility of systems, necessitating enhanced resilience and adaptability to withstand sudden disruptions and dynamic changes.
Anxiety	Underscores the psychological impact of uncertainty, influencing decision-making and emphasising the need for clear communication and supportive organisational structures.
Non-linearity	Draws attention to the absence of straightforward causal relationships, requiring strategies that embrace interconnectedness and flexibility.
Incomprehensibility	Reflects the opacity and complexity of modern contexts, advocating for continuous learning and the willingness to revise strategies as new information emerges.

Essentially, both VUCA and BANI frameworks highlight the significance of adaptive strategies and resilience in addressing organisational challenges in complex environments (Menaria, 2024). While VUCA emphasises the dynamic and unpredictable nature of external challenges, BANI offers a more contemporary perspective, addressing psychological and cognitive responses to complexity, such as anxiety and the struggle to comprehend non-linear or opaque situations. BANI's focus extends to emotional and cognitive dimensions, providing insights into managing uncertainty and guiding present organisational strategies with a forward-looking approach.

Implications of BANI on individuals

Menaria (2024:2) lists nine features that are involved in comprehending the corporate and social environments in the BANI world as reflected in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Comprehending the corporate and social environments

Feature	Implication
Agility	Be flexible, experiment quickly
Vision	Identify core values, stay grounded

Networking	Collaborate, form communities
Lifelong learning	Be curious, embrace new knowledge
Well being	Manage stress, build resilience
Risk Management	Become capable of withstanding shocks and disruptions regardless of their origin
Change Management	Foster a culture of experimentation, decentralise decision making and promote learning and adapting
Scope	Internal dynamics such as culture, processes, behaviour
Leadership focus	Strategic thinking and agility in responding to external disruptions

The BANI features, as illustrated in Table 2 above, reinforce the critical need for agility and adaptability. It highlights how each dimension imposes unique challenges while offering guidance on building robust, resilient, and forward-thinking strategies. By addressing both structural vulnerabilities and psychological complexities, the framework equips individuals and organisations to navigate the unpredictability of modern landscapes effectively.

The framework emphasises the importance of agility, adaptability, and strategic foresight in navigating uncertainty, enabling organisations and individuals to respond effectively to today's multifaceted challenges. Cascio (2020) contends that a profound transformation is reshaping systems at every level, from global trade and information networks to personal relationships. These shifts demand fundamental, and at times challenging, changes. Navigating this transition may require new conceptual frameworks and innovative approaches to understanding and adaptation.

Drawing on a constructivist grounded theory study conducted within a South African construction company, Tshetshe and Viljoen (2024) argue that achieving organisational relevance and business effectiveness in the BANI world necessitates aligning strategy with culture. In their 'ICA' Framework, they identify identity, communication, and alignment as core themes, with sub-themes such as awareness, meaning, and contribution emphasising the foundational role of culture in supporting individuals within the workplace. The study emphasises the importance of leaders understanding these themes and highlights the role of ODC specialists in equipping leaders with tools to navigate and cope with these dynamics effectively. Figure 1 below is a representation of the 'ICA' framework.

Figure 1: The 'ICA' Framework
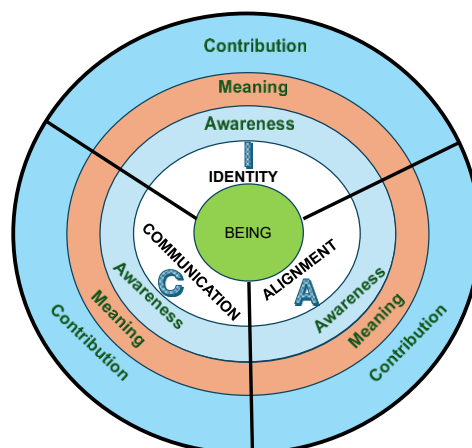
Tshetshe & Viljoen (2024:46)

The framework is based on the premise that at the core of every strategy execution is the individual, whose needs must be understood to optimise their performance. Duty performance is a tangible or measurable activity within the broader process of executing a strategy, positioned at the contribution level of the framework. This can be likened to turning the steering wheel of a vehicle—while a skilled driver can operate the steering wheel, the engine beneath the hood must be properly maintained for optimal performance. Similarly, beneath observable contributions lies a set of filters, shaped by awareness, through which individuals interpret and assign meaning to the external world in the BANI era.

In contemporary society, work constitutes a significant aspect of individuals' lives and frequently serves as a primary source of social identity (Aboobaker, Edward, & K.A., 2020). Consequently, there is an increasing expectation for workplaces to cultivate a sense of wholeness and connectedness, addressing both the professional and personal dimensions of employees' lives. Research by Aboobaker et al. on the role of leadership in shaping employee behaviour underscores the critical importance of leaders in the VUCA/BANI era. Leaders significantly influence and promote positive behaviours among subordinates through their attitude, commitment, and leadership style. A BANI leader must demonstrate resilience in the face of stress, exhibit empathy, rely on intuition, and actively seek opportunities for both personal and organisational growth within challenging situations.

Workplace spirituality

Since the early 21st century, management theory and practice have shifted from a focus on wealth maximisation and economic growth to an emphasis on sustainability and the holistic development of the organisation (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000). This shift has sparked increasing interest in workplace spirituality, reflected in the growing body of scholarly research on the topic. Generally, workplace spirituality is understood as a multidimensional framework that seeks meaning and purpose in life (Krishnakumar & Neck, 2002). It encompasses elements such as inner life, openness, care, connectedness, respect, humility, compassion, and transcendence. Workplace spirituality is conceptualised as comprising three key dimensions: meaningful work at an individual level, a sense of community at the group level, and alignment with organisational values at an organisational level (Lategan & Kokt, 2022). Pawar (2016) highlighted that workplace spirituality contributes to the emotional, psychological, social, and spiritual well-being of employees. This suggests that workplace spirituality remains relevant, despite its emergence prior to the BANI era.

Conceptual framework

In the development of conceptual frameworks suggested above by Cascio (2020), it is essential to recognise that at the core of the BANI framework and its implications for the workplace lies the individual, who often assumes the responsibility of executing business strategies within a defined scope. When global dynamics necessitate strategic shifts, organisations frequently realign their approaches to maintain market relevance to prevent the Kodak moment. However, as organisations are composed of individuals, strategic flexibility must account for their needs, ensuring they are supported in adapting and coping with the changes effectively.

The conceptual framework in Figure 2 below takes into account the four dimensions of the BANI era, the implications of its features as per Menaria (2024), the 'ICA' framework developed by Tshetshe and Viljoen, and the elements of workplace spirituality as seen by Lategan and Kokt (2024).

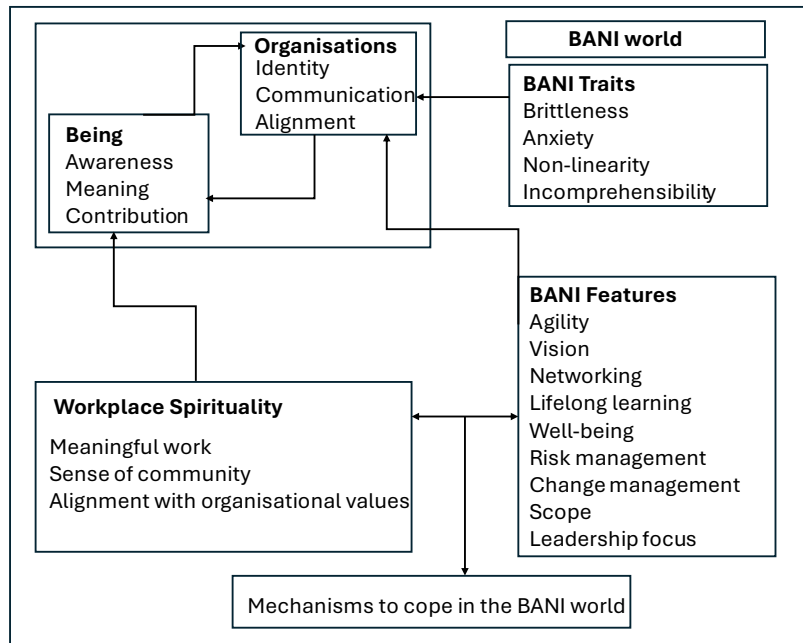**Figure 2: Conceptual framework for coping in the BANI world**

Figure 2 provides a graphical representation of the relationship between the ICA framework, workplace spirituality, and the BANI framework. The conceptual framework highlights, in the top-left block, the coexistence of individuals and organisations within a shared environment designed to achieve desired outcomes in either profit-driven or charitable entities. Drawing from Tshetshe and Viljoen's ICA framework, Figure 2 illustrates that organisations express their presence by communicating their offerings and expectations through an identity that fosters alignment. Conversely, individuals seek recognition of their intrinsic *being*, expressed through awareness, meaning, and contributions to a greater cause.

In the top right, the figure also demonstrates how the traits of BANI, namely, brittleness, anxiety, non-linearity, and incomprehensibility, affect organisations, which serve as the primary environment where individuals spend most of their waking hours. Organisational resilience is intrinsically linked to the personal resilience of individuals responsible for steering and executing strategies. Consequently, the turbulent impact of BANI on organisations directly affects individuals, who must navigate the challenges of coping with unforeseen circumstances in the present while preparing for future uncertainties.

The characteristics of BANI highlight critical areas that influence organisations, necessitating proactive responses in these domains. These areas include agility, vision, networking, lifelong learning, well-being, risk management, change management, scope, and leadership focus. BANI challenges organisations to evaluate their agility in adapting to external environments, clarify their goals and timelines, and strategically determine with whom to network and establish partnerships to effectively navigate the complexities of the BANI landscape.

The BANI framework underscores the necessity of lifelong learning to maintain relevance and stay informed within the domain of futures thinking. In the absence of well-being among individuals, progress becomes challenging in the face of turbulent and uncertain times. Continuous risk and change management are essential for organisations to remain attuned to the trajectory of the global landscape in the BANI era. Additionally, maintaining a clear understanding of the operational scope and ensuring unwavering leadership focus are critical for navigating these complexities effectively.

Workplace spirituality, with its focus on meaningful work, sense of community, and alignment with organisational values, enhances individual resilience. The conceptual framework suggests that it can be explored as a tool to address the challenges associated with each BANI trait. By applying these principles, workplace spirituality may help individuals better cope with the impacts of the BANI environment.

Summary, limitations, and recommendations

This study reveals that while BANI affects organisations as entities, it is the individuals within these organisations who directly experience the impacts of brittleness, anxiety, non-linearity, and incomprehensibility. Consequently, it is essential to emphasise the significance of individuals and to prioritise cultivating organisational resilience through personal resilience. Workplace spirituality offers a promising avenue to mitigate the adverse effects of the BANI era on individuals.

The findings of this study are confined to the insights derived from the analysed literature. They represent a synthesis of the information identified in the reviewed sources. To ensure academic integrity and facilitate further research, all literature sources contributing to the conceptual framework have been appropriately cited. However, differing results may emerge if future researchers utilise alternative literature sources to test the conceptual framework.

Data Availability Statement

The article is grounded in an extensive review of literature. The non-empirical research data analysed is derived from the studies cited in the references section of this paper.

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