FEIGNED DIGITAL INCOMPETENCE AND DIGITAL MISFIT – A PILOT STUDY

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Purpose: This study examines the relationship between digital misfit and employees' feigned digital incompetence, focusing on the moderating roles of digital self-efficacy and coworkers' similar behaviors. It aims to test adapted self- and other-reported scales and explore these relationships preliminarily.

Design/methodology/approach: This pilot study is based on primary data collected using the Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing method from 79 employees across various sectors in Poland. Both self- and other-reports were used to evaluate the reliability and validity of newly adapted measures.

Findings: Results indicate that greater digital misfit increases the likelihood of feigned digital incompetence, especially when digital self-efficacy is low and coworkers exhibit the same behavior. This suggests feigned incompetence acts as a coping strategy against technological stress.

Research limitations/implications: The use of self-reports may introduce social desirability bias, whereas other-reports showed more balanced distributions and may better capture the phenomenon. Future studies should refine measurement tools and examine workplace culture effects in larger samples.

Practical implications: The findings confirm that feigned digital incompetence can impede digital transformation. Validated tools, particularly other-reports, can help managers detect and address these behaviors early through targeted support and training.

Social implications: Understanding employees' responses to digital pressure supports inclusive transformation strategies, emphasizing the importance of promoting digital self-efficacy and organizational support to reduce technostress.

Originality/value: This study offers a novel conceptualization and measurement of feigned digital incompetence, highlighting digital misfit, digital self-efficacy and social influences as key factors. Its insights are valuable for researchers, HR professionals, and managers involved in digital change initiatives.

Keywords: feigned digital incompetence, digital misfit, technostress, techno-complexity, digital self-efficacy.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Although technological changes are often willingly introduced in organizations to enhance productivity and innovation, they bring not only opportunities but also potential threats and challenges. Research has shown that employees may experience significant stress when faced with a complex and uncertain technological environment, particularly when they feel pressured to continually update their skills and competencies (Tarafdar et al., 2007). In such cases, a technological environment that is intended to support employees' work can paradoxically become a source of stress and inhibition.

According to the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model (Demerouti et al., 2001) and Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989), this additional technological stress may increase perceived job demands. As a result, it can influence employee behavior by triggering coping strategies aimed at conserving personal resources. These theoretical frameworks help explain how individuals manage the strain of digital transformation and its impact on performance and well-being. These models also have the potential to explain a related but distinct phenomenon, feigned digital incompetence, which refers to situation when an employee is pretending to lack digital competences necessary to perform tasks (Stadnicka, 2024). Although anecdotal evidence of this behavior has appeared on social media, it remains largely under-researched. In management literature, a somewhat similar concept, playing dumb, has been studied (Connelly et al., 2012). This construct refers to a form of knowledge hiding in which employees pretend not to possess knowledge they actually have. "Playing dumb" typically occurs within interpersonal interactions, particularly when a coworker directly seeks information, and is considered a dyadic, response-based behavior.

In contrast, feigned digital incompetence is a broader phenomenon that extends beyond employee-coworker interactions. It does not require a direct request for information and may occur in the presence of supervisors or passive observers. This behavior involves pretending to lack digital competencies, not only in terms of knowledge, but also technical skills or a willingness to use digital tools. Despite these differences, both constructs represent deceptive strategies for withholding intangible resources that are essential for effective task performance.

Research indicates that such behaviors can be detrimental, not only from the managerial perspective but also in terms of coworker relationships and overall organizational performance (Stadnicka, 2024). For example, they may undermine team collaboration (Serenko, Bontis, 2016), reduce trust (Arain et al., 2020), lead employees to turnover intentions (Haq et al., 2022; Offergelt et al., 2019) and negatively affect employees' wellbeing (Khoreva, Wechtler, 2020) and work outcomes (Ain et al., 2022; Chatterjee et al., 2021; Jahanzeb et al., 2020; Khoreva, Wechtler, 2020; Mharapara et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2022; Rong, Liu, 2021; Zhang, Min, 2019).

Given the increasing reliance on digital technologies in contemporary workplaces, and the stress employees may experience in adapting to these changes, further investigation into feigned digital incompetence is warranted. This article contributes to the literature by exploring how employees' perceived digital misfit influences their tendency to engage in this behavior. In this study, digital misfit is defined as a perceived mismatch between an employee's digital skills and competencies and the technological demands of their work environment.

By addressing the phenomenon of feigned digital incompetence, this pilot study represents a preliminary attempt to understand the underlying mechanisms that contribute to its occurrence, mechanisms that could potentially hinder digital transformation initiatives and limit the effective use of digital tools and resources in organizational settings. The insights derived from this research aim to provide valuable guidance for managers striving to foster a work environment that supports employees in navigating a rapidly evolving technological landscape. In doing so, organizations can help reduce the likelihood of deceptive behaviors that mask intangible but critical capabilities.

This pilot study is based on data collected through Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) from a sample of 79 employees across various workplace settings.

The structure of this article is intended to guide the reader through the key components of the study in a logical and coherent manner. It begins with the theoretical background, where the concept of feigned digital incompetence is positioned within broader discussions of technostress and relevant sociological theories. This is followed by the formulation of research hypotheses. The methodology section outlines the research design and data collection process. The results section presents the main empirical findings, which are subsequently interpreted and discussed in relation to the theoretical framework. The article concludes with a discussion of both practical and theoretical implications, particularly for organizations navigating digital transformation, alongside the study's limitations and suggestions for future research on this still underexplored phenomenon.

2. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

2.1. Digital misfit and feigned digital incompetence

The adoption of new digital technologies within organizations is often intended to enhance employee efficiency and overall productivity. However, the inherent complexity of these technologies, coupled with the rapid pace of technological change, can create ongoing pressure for employees to continuously update their technology-related knowledge and skills (Tarafdar et al., 2007). This pressure may negatively impact their well-being, potentially

offsetting the intended benefits of digital transformation (Nayak et al., 2025; Ragu-Nathan et al., 2008; Tarafdar et al., 2007).

The complexity associated with technologies, referred to as techno-complexity, can lead users to feel inadequate in terms of their skills, compelling them to invest additional resources, such as time and effort, to improve their competencies (Tarafdar et al., 2007).

In line with the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Demerouti et al., 2001), techno-complexity can be seen as increasing job demands, which may lead to strain unless employees can draw upon sufficient job resources, such as cognitive, emotional, physical, and social capacities, to mitigate the negative effects.

Complementarily, according to the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989), employees are motivated to protect and conserve their valuable resources. Thus, when faced with increased job demands and a threat of resource loss, they may engage in adaptive or protective behaviors to preserve their remaining resources and manage stress within a challenging work environment.

Studies have shown that playing dumb, pretending to lack knowledge (Connelly et al., 2012) can be such defense mechanism in conditions of stressful environment (Agarwal et al., 2023; Shen et al., 2024). In particular, studies on job crafting , the changes employees make to align their job demands and resources with their personal abilities and needs, indicate that avoidance behaviors may serve as a way for employees to reduce hindering job demands (Tims et al., 2012; Tims, Bakker, 2010).

Therefore, it can be assumed that feigned digital incompetence, a situation in which an employee pretends to lack the digital competence required to perform a task (Stadnicka, 2024, p. 234), may constitute a response to technostress resulting from a perceived mismatch between the employee's digital competencies and the demands of a technologically complex work environment (hereinafter referred to as *digital misfit*).

The assumptions concerning the influence of digital misfit on feigned digital incompetence also appear to be supported by Social Exchange Theory, which posits that an individual's engagement in interpersonal interactions is based on a calculation of the associated costs and benefits (Blau, 1967; Cropanzano, Mitchell, 2005; Homans, 1958). Increasing stress levels and growing demands placed on employees due to technological changes may negatively affect their perceived cost-benefit ratio of admitting digital competence or performing certain technology-related tasks. In light of social exchange theory, feigned digital incompetence can therefore be interpreted as a covert form of refusal to participate in an exchange perceived by the individual as unequal or unfair.

Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Digital misfit leads to feigned digital incompetence.

By testing this relationship, the author assumes that pretending to be digitally incompetent can serve as a coping mechanism for employees experiencing technological overload. Given that digital misfit is influenced by employees' perceived digital competence, and that feigned

digital incompetence may serve to manipulate such perceptions, it is reasonable to expect that the tested relationship will be especially moderated by digital self-efficacy.

2.2. Moderating role of digital self-efficacy

Digital self-efficacy refers to an individual's perception of their own efficacy in performing tasks related to the use of digital systems (Ulfert-Blank, Schmidt, 2022, p. 8). From the perspective of job demands, it can reflect an individual's perceived capacity to manage technological demands. Thus, individuals with lower levels of this perception may feel less capable of dealing with technological complexity compared to those with higher levels. As a result, they may be more likely to avoid using technology.

On the one hand, studies have shown that low levels of digital self-efficacy are negatively associated with the use of digital systems, even when individuals possess high levels of technological competence. Digital self-efficacy influences both the perceived ease of use and the behavioral intention to engage with such systems (Hsia et al., 2014). These findings underscore the importance of self-efficacy in shaping attitudes and intentions toward the use of various new technology use. For example, users with high technology self-efficacy tend to show more positive attitudes toward anthropomorphic technology (Gupta, Nagar, 2025), while general, Internet, and healthcare technology self-efficacy influence attitudes toward healthcare technologies (Manuel III, Capistrano, 2025). Consequently, low perceived self-efficacy may lead to avoidance of technology-dependent tasks, for example, by creating exaggerated barriers.

On the other hand, according to the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus, Folkman, 1984), an individual's perceived ability to cope with challenges plays a key role in determining their choice of coping strategies. This is further supported by the concept of self-efficacy, which associate stronger perceived self-efficacy with more active coping efforts (Bandura, 1977a, 1982, 1997). Thus, individuals with low self-efficacy are more likely to adopt emotional or avoidant coping behaviors, rather than engage in active problem-solving strategies.

Therefore, low digital self-efficacy can be expected to intensify the impact of digital misfit on the occurrence of avoidant behaviors, such as feigned digital incompetence. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Digital self-efficacy moderates the relationship between digital misfit and feigned digital incompetence, such that the positive effect of digital misfit on feigned digital incompetence is weaker at higher levels of digital self-efficacy.

This hypothesis emphasizes how behavior stems from employees' expectations. It assumes that employees who perceive their own efficacy as high are likely to expect that they can cope with challenges posed by a technological environment, and therefore will be less inclined to choose avoidant-type behaviors.

The expectations influencing behavior in this framework concern the resources employees believe they possess to deal with a given problem. However, they may also relate to the anticipated outcomes of specific behaviors. When employees choose to feign digital incompetence, they expect particular results. Such expectations are shaped by their previous experiences, including observed workplace behaviors and their consequences.

Consequently, the occurrence of this phenomenon in the surrounding environment may have a similar effect to that of digital self-efficacy. Therefore, a potential moderator worth considering could also be coworkers' feigned digital incompetence.

2.3.   Moderating role of coworkers' feigned digital incompetence

Feigned digital incompetence, as a form of deceptive behavior that potentially hinders task execution by introducing unnecessary obstacles, can be perceived as negative workplace conduct. Given its covert nature, it is likely to be observed, or even recognized, only infrequently. As such, this behavior constitutes a departure from normative expectations and may therefore be classified as workplace deviance, defined as "voluntary behavior that violates significant organizational norms and, in so doing, threatens the well-being of the organization or its members, or both" (Bennett, Robinson, 2000; Robinson, Bennett, 1995). This type of behavior can have significant consequences not only for employees who are directly targeted, but also for those who witness it or work in environments where deviant coworker behavior is collectively present (Robinson et al., 2014).

According to Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977b), employees learn behaviors by observing and imitating others, particularly when those behaviors are perceived as normal or rewarded within the workplace environment. For this reason, the frequent occurrence of feigned digital incompetence may serve as a behavioral model for coping with excessive performance demands. When such behavior is regularly witnessed, especially within specific organizational or technological contexts, employees may be more likely to adopt it in response to increasing technological pressures.

It is also plausible that, in line with the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), feigned digital incompetence may function as a retaliatory strategy, particularly when the employee has previously been the target of such behavior. Moreover, when this behavior becomes widespread and begins to influence task allocation, it may be used as a self-protective mechanism aimed at preserving a sense of distributive justice.

Therefore, the frequency of feigned digital incompetence among coworkers should be considered a key factor in understanding the relationship between digital misfit and employees' own engagement in such behavior. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Coworker's feigned digital incompetence moderates the relationship between digital misfit and employee feigned digital incompetence, such that higher frequency of coworker's feigned digital incompetence is associated with a stronger positive relationship between digital misfit and employee feigned digital incompetence.

Based on the above hypotheses, a model was proposed (Figure 1) that aims to explain the mechanisms through which digital misfit, , the perceived mismatch between an employee's resources to meet the demands of the technological environment and the demands themselves, contributes to the emergence of feigned digital incompetence.
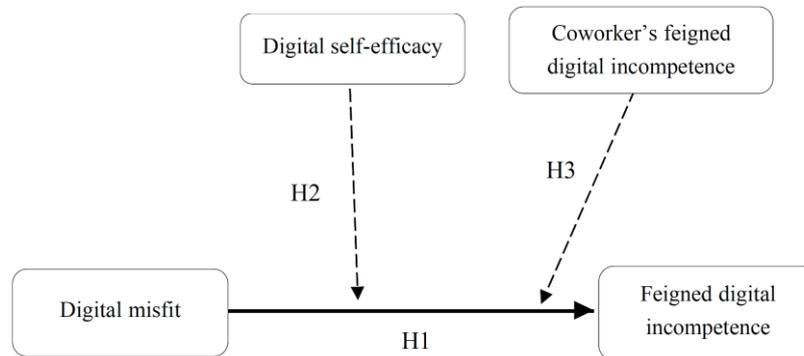
Figure 1. Research model of relationships between digital misfit and feigned digital incompetence. Source: developed by the author.

The model presented in Figure 1 is based on an assumption that employee's high perception of digital misfit lead employees to engage in feigning digital incompetence. This tendency may be further reinforced when such behavior becomes normalized within the workplace context and when employees perceive their own digital efficacy as low.

3. Methods

3.1. Data Collection

Data for this study were collected using Computer-Assisted Web Interview (CAWI) method. The sampling was convenient and consisted of working adults from various workplaces across Poland who volunteered to participate. This approach was appropriate given the pilot nature of the research. The final sample consisted of 79 participants (34 men and 45 women), aged between 20 and 71 years (Median = 29), with work experience ranging from 0 to 47 years (Median = 9). Most respondents (81%) held higher education degrees. No missing data were reported.

The questionnaire consisted of Polish adaptations of validated scales in form of self-reported measurements. These scales were translated using the back-and-forth translation method. Respondents were asked to rate how much they agreed with each statement on a scale of 1 to 7. Employee's feigned digital incompetence and coworker's feigned digital incompetence were measured using adapted versions of a 4-item *playing dumb* scale (Connelly et al., 2012) and three selected items from the *social loafing* scale (George, 1992). The same sets of items were used to assess both constructs, but were phrased differently to

capture two perspectives: performed behavior (self-reported by the employee) and perceived behavior (ascribed to coworkers). Cronbach's alpha coefficients for both instruments indicate high internal consistency, with values of 0.859 for the employee scale and 0.931 for the coworker scale. Digital misfit were measured using a 5-item adaptation of *techno-complexity* scale (Tarafdar et al., 2007). Cronbach's alpha coefficients for this instrument indicates high internal consistency, with values of 0.832. Digital self-efficacy was measured using a 27-item adaptation of the *digital self-efficacy* scale (Ulfert-Blank, Schmidt, 2022). The instrument showed high internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.910.

3.2. Data analysis

The dataset was prepared in Excel, and all variables were carefully collected, verified, and coded prior to analysis. As an initial step, a reliability analysis was conducted to examine the internal consistency of the applied measurement instruments using Cronbach's alpha. The results, presented above, confirmed acceptable reliability levels for all scales. Subsequently, basic descriptive statistics were calculated. For hypothesis testing, linear regression analyses were performed. First, simple linear regression was used to test direct effect (H1). Then, moderation effects (H2 and H3) were tested using an interaction regression model – Classical PROCESS model accessible in JASP as module. All analyses were performed using JASP software.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive statistics and correlations

The initial analysis of the distribution (Table 1) indicates that only one variable, Digital Self-Efficacy (DSE), meets the assumption of normality (p = 0.715). Overall, respondents report high levels of digital self-efficacy. The distribution of employee's Feigned Digital Incompetence (FDI) is right-skewed, with a clear floor effect, indicating that most respondents report minimal engagement in this behavior. This may suggest that FDI is genuinely rare or potentially underreported due to social desirability bias. In contrast, Coworker's Feigned Digital Incompetence (CFDI) appears to be more evenly distributed across the response scale, though with a slight right skew. This suggests that respondents observe this behavior among coworkers with varying frequency, or that they may be more willing to report such behaviors in others than in themselves, possibly due to reduced social desirability bias when evaluating others. The distribution of Digital Misfit (DM) is also slightly right-skewed, with most respondents reporting moderate levels of perceived misfit.

Table 1.

Descriptive statistics for each variable

Variable	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Shapiro-Wilk test	p
FDI	2.15	0.96	1.05	0.65	0.9	<0.001
DM	3.13	1.29	0.6	- 0.04	0.96	0.002
DSE	4.75	0.99	- 0.01	- 0.49	0.99	0.72
CFDI	3.54	1.43	0.03	- 1	0.97	0.05

FDI – (employee's) feigned digital incompetence; DM – digital misfit; DSE – digital self-efficacy; CFDI – coworker's feigned digital incompetence.

Source: own work.

Although three out of four variables are not normally distributed, the sample size of 79 respondents (N > 50) is sufficient for stable estimation of regression parameters. However, knowledge about the distribution of the variables informed the choice of data analysis methods.

In the subsequent analyses comparing groups by gender, only the DSE variable significantly differentiates the groups in terms of gender: men achieved higher average scores than women, and this difference is statistically significant (p = 0.002 for the t-test and p < 0.001 for the Mann-Whitney U test), with a moderate effect size. For the other variables – FDI and TU – no statistically significant differences between the sexes were found. This means that in terms of these characteristics, women and men differ only in terms of DSE, while in terms of FDI and TU their scores remain comparable.

Analysis of correlations (Table 2) indicates that FDI is positively associated with higher levels of DM, negatively associated with DSE, and positively correlated with the frequency of observing this behavior in coworkers (CFDI). This preliminary evidence supports the assumption that FDI tends to occur in contexts characterized by technological complexity, perceived low digital competence, and a higher occurrence of this behavior in the workplace. Furthermore, there is no significant correlation between CFDI and either DM or DSE, which is logically consistent. However, the lack of correlation between DM and DSE suggests that individuals' feelings of digital misfit are independent of their perceived digital efficacy. Since DM was measured through perceptions of techno-complexity, this lack of correlation suggests that external factors like technological complexity have a stronger influence on feelings of digital misfit than individuals' self-assessed digital competence.

Table 2.

Spearman's Correlations

Variable	Statistics	FDI	DM	DSE	CFDI
FDI	Spearman's rho	-			
	p-value	-			
DM	Spearman's rho	0.336**	-		
	p-value	0.002	-		
DSE	Spearman's rho	-0.310**	-0.151	-	
	p-value	0.005	0.183	-	
CFDI	Spearman's rho	0.341**	0.005	-0.034	-
	p-value	0.002	0.963	0.763	-

FDI – (employee's) feigned digital incompetence; DM – digital misfit; DSE – digital self-efficacy; CFDI – coworker's feigned digital incompetence; * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.

4.2. Hypotheses testing

A simple linear regression was conducted to test the hypothesis that DM positively predicts FDI (H1). The model was statistically significant $F(1, 77) = 16.45$, $p < .001$, and explained 17,6% of the variance in FDI ($R^2 = .176$). DM significantly and positively predicted FDI ($B = 0.314$, $SE = 0.077$, $t = 4.06$, $p < .001$; $\beta = 0.420$), indicating that individuals who perceive a greater mismatch between their digital competence and the demands of the technological environment are more likely to engage in feigning digital incompetence. Therefore, hypothesis 1 was confirmed.

To test the hypothesis that DSE moderates the relationship between DM and FDI, a moderation analysis was conducted using an interaction regression model in JASP (PROCESS module). Bootstrapped standard errors and 95% confidence intervals based on 1,000 resamples were used to account for potential violations of normality and heteroscedasticity. The results revealed that DM had a significant positive effect on FDI ($b = 1.047$, $SE = 0.296$, $p < .001$), whereas the main effect of DSE was not significant ($b = 0.238$, $SE = 0.199$, $p = .233$). However, the interaction term (DM × DSE) was statistically significant but negative ($b = -0.159$, $SE = 0.060$, $p = .008$), indicating that the strength of the relationship between DM and FDI varies depending on the level of DSE. A conditional effects analysis (Figure 2) showed that at low levels of DSE (16th percentile), the effect of DM on FDI was strong and significant ($b = 0.457$, $p < .001$). At medium levels (50th percentile), the effect was still significant but weaker ($b = 0.284$, $p < .001$), and at high levels of DSE (84th percentile), the effect became statistically non-significant ($b = 0.119$, $p = .213$).
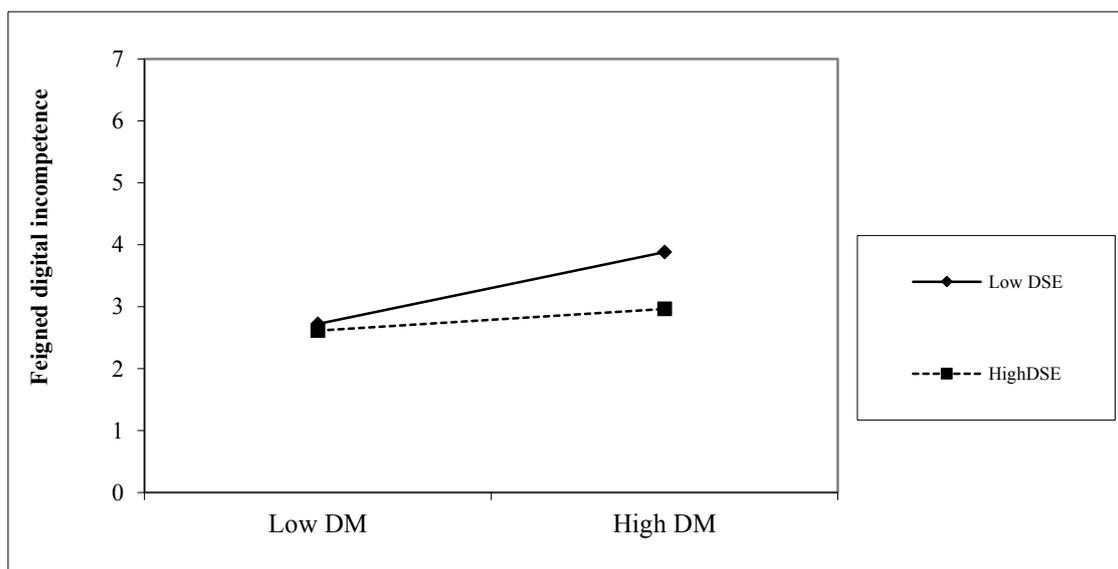
Figure 2. Moderation.

These findings suggest that DSE attenuates the positive effect of DM on FDI, with the effect becoming non-significant at higher levels of DSE. Therefore, hypothesis 2 was confirmed. The model explained 29.3% variance in FDI ($R^2 = 0.293$).

An analogous analysis was conducted to test the hypothesis that CFDI moderates the relationship between DM and FDI, such that higher levels of CFDI strengthen this relationship. The moderation analysis revealed that CFDI significantly moderates the relationship between DM and FDI. The interaction term (DM×CFDI) was marginally significant (b = 0.084, SE = 0.043, p = .051), indicating that the strength of the relationship between DM and FDI varied depending on CFDI levels. Conditional effects analysis (Figure 3) showed that at low levels of CFDI (16), the relationship was weaker but still significant (b = 0.200, p = 0.031), whereas at medium (50) and high (84) levels, it became progressively stronger and more significant (b = 0.320 and b = 0.463 respectively, both p < 0.001).
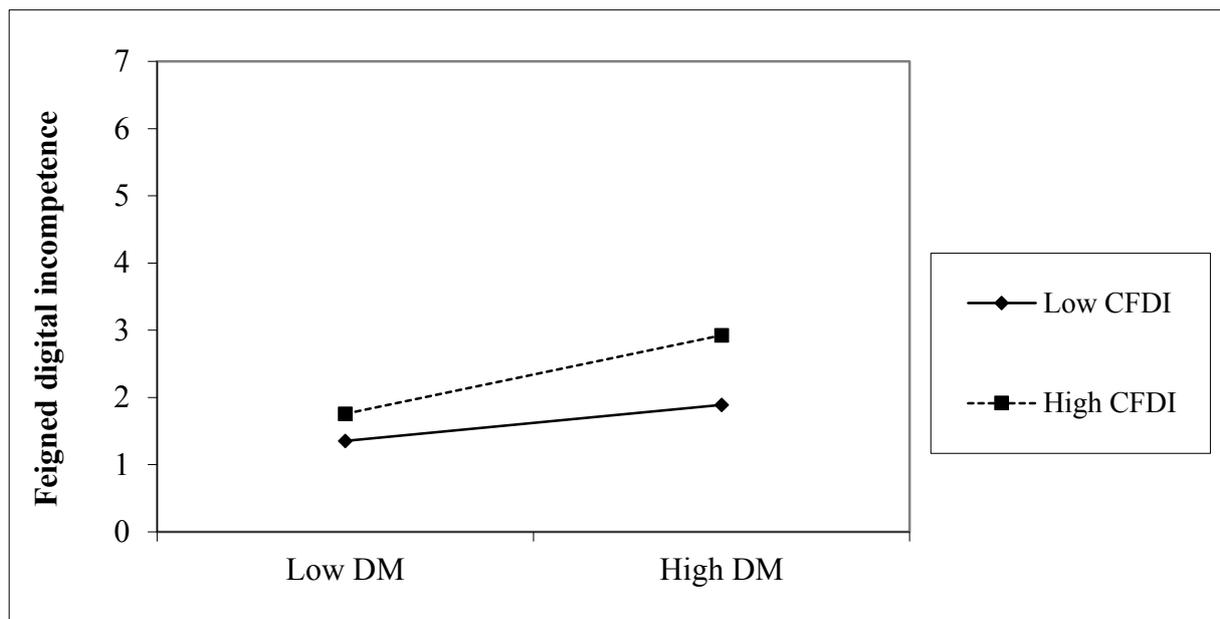
Figure 3. Conditional effects analysis.

These findings suggest that CFDI enhances the positive influence of DM on FDI, with the effect being most pronounced at higher levels of CFDI. Therefore, hypothesis 3 was also confirmed. The model explained 33.9% variance in FDI ($R^2 = 0.339$).

5. Discussion

This pilot study aimed to preliminarily test adapted scales to measure feigned digital incompetence and to examine hypotheses linking this behavior with digital misfit, low digital self-efficacy, and the frequency of coworkers' engagement in similar behaviors.

Findings suggest that the "playing dumb" scale (Connelly et al., 2012) and selected items from the social loafing scale (George, 1992) can be successfully adapted to capture aspects of feigned digital incompetence. However, a particular limitation of the instrument was observed. Measuring socially undesirable behaviors through self-report methods can be problematic due

to individuals' tendency to provide socially desirable responses in self-description (Edwards, 1957; Paulhus, 1991). This may occur either because the respondent genuinely believes their positive self-reports or deliberately falsifies them (Paulhus, 1984). Regardless of the motive, this tendency typically results in the underreporting of deceptive behaviors. In line with this, the present study observed a floor effect in self-reported feigned digital incompetence, with most responses clustering at the lower end of the scale. Conversely, reports of coworkers' behaviors were more evenly distributed across the scale. This suggests that other-report measures (e.g., evaluating coworker behaviors) may provide more valid data when investigating behaviors perceived as socially undesirable. Nevertheless, when studying antecedent factors, particularly individual ones such as digital misfit, using self-report measures appears to be justified. Other-report measures, which rely on observed behaviors or subjective evaluations by others, seem less appropriate in this context. Conversely, they may be more suitable for assessing outcomes, as the way employees subjectively perceive their work environment and colleagues' behavior influence their own behavior.

Furthermore, the study confirmed the association between feigned digital incompetence and the employee's perceived mismatch between their digital skills and the demands of a complex technological environment (digital misfit). This supports the assumption that employees working in technologically demanding environments may intentionally downplay their digital competence as a coping strategy. The mechanisms underlying this relationship can be explained through the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model (Demerouti et al., 2001) and Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989). The ongoing need to keep up with evolving technological requirements may indirectly increase job demands. Increased job demands can further lead to strain or even exhaustion, which can negatively affect in-role performance (Bakker et al., 2004). In response to rising demands, stress, and the risk of resource depletion, employees may engage in resource-conserving behaviors as a protective mechanism (Hobfoll, 1989). Thus, digital misfit may contribute to workplace stress and exhaustion, potentially triggering avoidant behaviors, such as feigned digital incompetence, that serve to protect employees' resources by avoiding responsibilities involving digital tasks. This potential avoidant motive aligns with the concept of "weaponized incompetence" popularized on social media, where similar behaviors are used to evade tasks or responsibilities. Further research, especially qualitative studies involving individual interviews, would be valuable to explore and better understand the underlying mechanisms of this behavior. This is particularly important given that the literature suggests feigning incompetence situations is a multifaceted phenomenon. It occurs not only as a strategy to limit expectations and responsibilities but also for purposes such as managing relationships, seeking gains, saving face, or entertaining others (McLuhan et al., 2014).

This pilot study also confirmed the moderating role of digital self-efficacy, whereby lower levels of self-efficacy strengthened the relationship between digital misfit and feigned digital incompetence. The effect diminishes at higher levels of perceived self-efficacy. This suggests

that employees with low confidence in their digital abilities may be more prone to constructing unnecessary barriers to technology use. When confronted with technological complexity, they may be more likely to adopt avoidance-oriented behaviors if they perceive themselves as incapable of coping with digital demands. These findings are consistent with theoretical perspectives linking higher perceived self-efficacy to more active coping strategies and reduced avoidance in stressful contexts (Bandura, 1977a, 1997). Although no direct effect of digital self-efficacy on feigned digital incompetence was observed, its moderating role suggests that self-efficacy may buffer the impact of digital misfit. This interpretation aligns with prior research showing that computer self-efficacy positively influences individuals' behavioral intentions to engage with digital systems, particularly in challenging or unfamiliar settings (Hsia et al., 2014). Therefore, in light of the pilot study, digital self-efficacy emerges as a psychological resource that mitigates the negative influence of technological stressors on employee behavior. Supporting its development may serve as a potential intervention to reduce the occurrence of feigned digital incompetence and support digital transformation.

The moderating role of coworkers' feigned digital incompetence was also confirmed, indicating that it strengthens the relationship between digital misfit and an employee's own feign digital incompetence. When such behavior becomes common in the workplace, it appears to be normalized, thereby reinforcing it as a socially acceptable coping strategy in response to technological demands. This phenomenon can be explained through Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977b), which posits that individuals learn behaviors by observing and imitating other, especially when these behaviors appear to be effective or widely accepted. As more employees engage in feigned digital incompetence, others may adopt the same behavior as a learned response to similar stressors. Another explanatory framework is Social Exchange Theory, which suggests that employees evaluate their engagement and responsibilities based on the perceived balance between costs and benefits. As technological demands increase, raising the "cost" of work, employees may engage in withdrawal behaviors to restore a perceived equilibrium. Feigning digital incompetence can serve this function by reducing task demands or responsibilities. It is also possible that the behavior is driven by the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960). Employees may reciprocate such behaviors when they perceive that others have previously hindered their work or manipulated the distribution of tasks at their expense. However, this potential dynamic requires further investigation. A more comprehensive model should consider contextual factors such as task interdependence, psychological contract breach, and the level of technological support, especially in cases where the behavior is reciprocated not just between coworkers, but also toward the organization or its management. Given the complexity and subtlety of these dynamics, exploratory qualitative research is recommended to deepen understanding of the situational and interpersonal factors that shape feigned digital incompetence in the workplace.

6. Theoretical implications

In light of the findings, this pilot study presents several implications worth considering. From a theoretical perspective, one key methodological contribution is the validation of adapted instruments that can be used to measure the insufficiently explored phenomenon of feigned digital incompetence. These adaptations provide a foundation for future research aimed at empirically investigating this behavior across various workplace relationships and contexts.

Furthermore, the study contributes to the theoretical development of the feigned digital incompetence construct by framing it as a coping mechanism in response to digital misfit, employees' perceived mismatch between their digital competencies and demands of technological environment. This perspective broadens the understanding of how employees may strategically respond to digital pressures in the workplace, an insight that is particularly important in light of the exponential advancement of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence. Based on the findings of this pilot study, feigned digital incompetence may be interpreted as a form of avoidant behavior that serves a protective function in response to technostress. It may be particularly likely to occur when employees lack confidence in their digital abilities and when such behavior is frequently observed among coworkers.

These findings also point to potential avenues for further research on the phenomenon.

First, it may be valuable to explore individuals' attitudes and orientations toward such behavior, particularly in relation to the normalization of workplace behaviors, as addressed in this study. The pilot study focused solely on the frequency of behavior and confirmed that individuals were more likely to engage in (or report) such behavior when it was perceived as common. Reporting that others behave this way also seemed to facilitate the willingness to disclose similar behaviors themselves.

Second, the motivations underlying feigned digital incompetence warrant further investigation, especially to examine the assumed avoidant nature of the behavior. Its occurrence in the context of elevated technostress levels suggests that it may function as a coping mechanism. In this light, feigned incompetence could serve as an indirect plea for help, seeking additional support, training, or assistance from colleagues, or signaling a sense of overload in a subtle way. However, it would be important to explore whether this barrier-setting is genuinely a response to technological strain, or rather a form of responsibility avoidance, as it is sometimes portrayed on social media, where technological change may be used as an excuse for underperformance.

Third, it may be fruitful to examine the task-specific context of the behavior. Understanding the situational nuances could help clarify whether feigned digital incompetence serves as a strategic response to increasing workload demands or to mitigate engagement in repetitive and redundant tasks. It would be valuable to explore whether this behavior is more prevalent in group settings, where task redistribution and shared responsibility are possible, and to assess

how high task interdependence influences both the use and consequences of this strategy. Accordingly, research on job design, particularly with regard to task characteristics (e.g., Hackman, Oldham, 1975; Morgeson, Humphrey, 2006), would offer important insights.

Fourth, considering the individualistic nature of this coping strategy, future research should explore relevant individual differences. Factors such as levels of individualism (Singelis et al., 1995), digital competences (Vuorikari et al., 2022), and locus of control orientation (Rotter, 1966) may influence the likelihood of engaging in such behavior and the specific contexts in which it is employed. These individual traits may play a crucial role in how individuals cope with technological uncertainty and shaping their willingness to feign incompetence as a strategy for managing demands or avoiding responsibility.

7. Practical implications

From a practical perspective, the study highlights that feigned digital incompetence is a real and observable phenomenon in the workplace, and one that may carry harmful consequences. It can contribute to the normalization and spread of such behavior among coworkers. As a form of placing unnecessary obstacles in the way of adopting new digital technologies, it may hinder digital transformation and act as a subtle form of resistance to organizational change. Therefore, it should not be dismissed as a humorous or anecdotal issue, as it is sometimes portrayed on social media, but rather recognized as a serious workplace phenomenon. This is especially relevant considering the research on related behaviors such as knowledge hiding, which has been shown to negatively affect trust, collaboration, and overall team performance.

Importantly, the findings suggest that the occurrence of such behaviors may serve as an early warning signal for managers, pointing to a potential gap between employees' digital competencies and the increasingly complex demands of the technological work environment. This digital misfit may cause employee overload, stress, and negatively impact their wellbeing and productivity. As such, it should prompt further organizational analysis, both at the individual and team levels, to identify underlying causes and implement targeted interventions. Feigned digital incompetence can stem from factors such as the rapid pace of new technology implementation, insufficient training or technical support that leaves employees feeling under-resourced to manage technological demands, or fear of negative evaluation in environments with poor feedback culture or ineffective problem-solving practices.

Managers seeking to assess the presence of this phenomenon may consider using the proposed measurement tools, particularly other-reported instruments, which appear to be more effective in capturing these types of behaviors in workplace settings. However, these instruments may be better suited for scientific contexts, where greater anonymity can be

ensured. In practical organizational settings, identifying feigned digital incompetence may prove challenging, as the behavior is often subtle and context-dependent. Managers may therefore need to rely on indirect behavioral cues within teams, such as recurring patterns of avoidance or inconsistent engagement with digital tools.

Efforts to prevent this phenomenon should focus not only on enhancing employees' digital skills but, more importantly, on strengthening their digital self-efficacy, for instance, through positive reinforcement and targeted feedback. Implementing digital mentoring programs could be particularly beneficial in this regard, as they provide personalized support for employees and assist in resolving ongoing problems or uncertainties. Guidance from an experienced mentor can serve as a stable point of reference in an uncertain technological work environment.

Under such stressful conditions, microlearning may also prove to be an effective method for developing employees' digital competencies and self-efficacy. Microlearning refers to a form of digital learning of short duration that, using various multimedia, enables action-oriented learning with immediate relevance (Beste, 2023). This approach allows employees to acquire missing knowledge before or during specific tasks, apply it in practice, and gradually become familiar with the presence and use of new digital technologies in a non-overwhelming manner.

The consistent acquisition of knowledge, its practical application, and the experience of small successes seem to be a valuable approach for employees in developing digital self-efficacy.

Furthermore, addressing the observed behaviors requires avoiding task redistribution based on perceived "incompetence" and encouraging open communication about difficulties and a collaborative problem-solving. Such an approach may help discourage the perception of feigned incompetence as a viable coping strategy and promote more constructive alternatives.

8. Limitations

The pilot study, based on 79 responses, served as a foundation for the preliminary evaluation of the measurement instruments and the initial testing of hypotheses. It also provided valuable insights that inform the direction of future research in this emerging area. At the same time, the study's design and scope also highlight several limitations that should be addressed in subsequent research.

As previously noted, an important limitation pertains to the choice of measurement tools. The findings suggest that measuring feigned digital incompetence through self-report instruments is inherently challenging, particularly due to the influence of social desirability bias. While the observed floor effect may reflect a genuinely low frequency of the behavior, it is equally plausible that the phenomenon is underreported. Given its covert nature and

the potential reputational risks associated with admitting to such behavior, especially within organizational cultures that prioritize digital competence and proactivity, participants may have been reluctant to disclose their engagement in it. Although anonymity was ensured and no data were collected regarding participants' companies or professions, the risk of underreporting cannot be entirely ruled out.

Another limitation related to the choice of measurement tools concerns the impact of questionnaire length on participants' willingness to take part. Although the 27-item *Digital Self-Efficacy* scale (Ulfert-Blank, Schmidt, 2022) demonstrated excellent internal consistency and yielded a normal distribution of responses, several participants reported that the survey was too long. This may have contributed to the relatively small sample size, as the length could have discouraged participation. To improve response rates and enhance participant engagement, it may be worth considering the use of a shorter scales to measure the digital self-efficacy scale in future studies. For example, the 10-item *Technology Self-Efficacy* scale developed by Thatcher and Perrewé (n.d.), which has consistently demonstrated acceptable reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.70$) in recent technostress research (e.g., Chen et al., 2024), could be a suitable alternative. This recommendation is further supported by follow-up research conducted by the author, in which participants also expressed greater willingness to complete shorter instruments.

Another limitation relates to the sampling context. The study was conducted solely among participants from Poland, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Cultural differences in dimensions such as individualism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance, identified by Hofstede's cultural framework may reduce the cross-cultural applicability of the results (Hofstede, 1984; The Culture Factor, n.d.).

Feigned digital incompetence appears to be a behavior potentially associated with the pursuit and protection of individual interests, although this hypothesis still requires empirical validation. In highly collectivist cultures, such as Colombia (individualism score = 29, The Culture Factor, n.d.), where group harmony and collective well-being are emphasize (Hofstede, 1984)d, such behavior may be less socially accepted or even discouraged due to its self-serving nature. In contrast, Poland's more moderate level of individualism (score = 47, The Culture Factor, n.d.) may allow for greater personal boundary-setting and support the occurrence of such behaviors as a form of subtle self-interest or workload management in the workplace.

Furthermore, Poland scores relatively high on power distance (score = 68, The Culture Factor, n.d.), indicating that hierarchical relationships in organizations are more pronounced (Hofstede, 1984). In this context, feigned digital incompetence may serve as a strategy to manipulate task allocation or exert indirect control when formal authority is limited, functioning as a covert mechanism for negotiating workload or maintaining a hidden advantage. In countries with lower power distance, such as Denmark (score = 18, The Culture Factor, n.d.), where organizational hierarchies are flatter and autonomy is more widely distributed (Hofstede, 1984),

such behaviors may be less about power dynamics and more about alternative motivations, or may occur less frequently.

Poland also exhibits high uncertainty avoidance (score = 93, The Culture Factor, n.d.), reflecting a cultural tendency toward discomfort with ambiguity and rapid change (Hofstede, 1984). This may amplify the impact of technological transitions on employee stress levels and foster more strategic, long-term coping behaviors, such as feigned digital incompetence, as a way to delay or avoid engaging with unfamiliar tools or workflows.

Therefore, future research would benefit from the inclusion of culturally and geographically diverse samples to better explore potential cross-cultural differences in the manifestation and interpretation of feigned digital incompetence.

The study is also limited by the chosen methodological approach – quantitative research – which, while suitable for testing straightforward models, may not be the most appropriate at the stage of preliminary investigation. Exploratory, qualitative methods, particularly in-depth interviews, would offer a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon. At the preliminary stage, qualitative research could enable scholars to explore how feigned digital incompetence is perceived by employees, assess the extent to which social desirability bias affects self-reports, and, crucially, investigate the underlying mechanisms, situational triggers, and potential consequences of the behavior. Such insights would be instrumental in advancing both theoretical development and practical understanding of this emerging construct.

9. Conclusion

The findings of this pilot study demonstrate that feigned digital incompetence, a phenomenon in which employees pretend to lack digital competence that are necessary to perform a task, can serve as a response to digital misfit, the gap between technological demands and indivudial's digital competence. The results also underscore the role of digital self-efficacy and social learning, highlighting how personal confidence and peer behavior shape employee's likelihood to engage in such avoidance tactics.

Although subject to several limitations, these findings provide initial evidence for the relevance of this emerging construct and provide a foundation for future research exploring its underlying mechanisms, motivational drivers, and workplace consequences. Future studies could validate measurement instruments, examine cultural variations, and investigate the specific contexts and individual differences that predict the occurrence of feigned digital incompetence.

From a managerial perspective, observing this phenomenon can serve as an early warning indicator of potential challenges in implementing new digital technologies, particularly particularly those arising from insufficient consideration of employees' individual needs related

to skill development and adaptation to technological change. Organizations can proactively address this risk by offering targeted support for digital competence development, such as microlearning resources, digital mentoring, and structured feedback, while fostering a collaborative climate that encourages open communication, mutual support, and joint problem-solving

As digital demands continue to intensify, understanding subtle forms of resistance like feigned digital incompetence is increasingly relevant for theory and practice alike. By recognizing and addressing this behavior, organizations can better align technological initiatives with employee capabilities and promote more effective, inclusive technology adoption.

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