

AI Management and Emotional Disengagement: A Conceptual Overview

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Abstract

The increasing integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into organisational management continues to present possibilities to improve operational efficiency. Nevertheless, any improvement in operational efficiency needs to acknowledge the impact upon the engagement and well-being of employees. This conceptual paper discussed emotional disengagement associated with an AI approach to organisational management, an area which continues to be substantially under researched. This conceptual paper highlights the need to retain human-centred values within the element of digital transformation, to ensure technology adoption achieves organisational outcomes and maintains motivation of the employee. Using Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Socio-Technical Systems Theory, this paper produces a unidirectional conceptual framework in which emotional disengagement occupies a key link between implementation of AI and organisational performance. This theoretical synthesis responds to a significant gap, that of the socio-emotional effects of AI-based management in organisational contexts, especially within post COVID-19 workplaces where hybrid and remote working has facilitated an increased reliance on algorithmic systems. The expected main contribution from this study includes, it offers a human-centric, context-sensitive perspective on AI adoption and its implications for management innovation. Besides, it proposed a simple yet flexible framework for empirical research across industries and cultural contexts. It also offers practical contributions for managers, policymakers, and AI developers as they develop AI-based systems that increase efficiency, allowing employee autonomy, trust, and well-being. In consideration to align technological advances with least SDG8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), this paper exemplifies the necessity of integrating human values into AI-based organisational management for sustainable organisational performance.

Keywords: AI-Driven Management, Emotional Disengagement, Employee Well-Being, Self-Determination Theory, Socio-Technical Systems Theory

Introduction

Management through artificial intelligence (AI) has profoundly disrupted conventional workplaces. More frequently, AI is undertaking managerial responsibilities of oversight, presetting (assigning) tasks, and prescribing concrete courses of actions (Zirar et al., 2023; Venugopal et al., 2024). AI systems can enhance efficiency and standardise management but also pose the risk of displacing human-centred management. Empathy and conversations are reported to be abruptly replaced by imminent data-driven monitoring, in which human oversight is largely removed and replaced by algorithmic determinations programmed in advance (Venugopal et al., 2024). It is plausible to question what this means for employee motivation, engagement, and relationships at work.

One of the major risks is emotional disconnect or disengagement. Employees may feel detached, psychologically disengaged, and devalued especially when algorithmic decisions overlook individual context (Venugopal et al., 2024). Not only does surveillance from higher management increase, but the amount of feedback from human employees decreased, and autonomy diminished reducing trust and psychological safety, thus, further damaging the employee experience. This is particularly acute for hybrid, or remote working environments, which have proliferated since the pandemic (Galanti et al., 2023).

Although AI-driven management can provide operational efficiencies, it might also diminish the human qualities necessary for sustainable performance in organisations (Gupta & Banerjee, 2025). Furthermore, while the body of literature is increasing on AI in management, there is a lack of knowledge of the socio-emotional aspects of AI in management, especially in consideration of emotional disengagement which can erode trust, autonomy, and effectiveness in the long-term. Based on the underscored possible challenges (e.g., diminished human quality leading to organisations' performance deterioration) and the identified research gap, this has become the main motivation for the researchers to undertake this study. The researchers believed that this conceptual paper addresses that gap by presenting a framework for ethical, human-centred AI management that advances employee well-being, while contributing to Sustainable Development Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) as well.

Literature Review

AI-Driven Management in the Modern Workplace

The digitalisation of work has hastily altered organisations' management way of managing people and processes with Artificial Intelligence (AI) now moved to centre stage in the management role (Kassa & Worku, 2025). This has been described as AI-Driven Management, where tasks traditionally managed by people like assignment, performance accountability, scheduling, and even decisions, are managed by algorithmic systems and machine-learning tools (Rodgers & et al, 2023). Amazon, IBM, and a large number of tech start-ups have adopted similar systems, or components of AI-Driven Management systems to increase operational efficiency, standardise employee oversight, and enable real-time feedback (Machucho & Ortiz, 2025). These AI systems provide obvious benefits to customer, provider's productivity and resource allocation but equally provide a major shift in the nature of the relationships at work as projects are now managed or replaced by dialogue and algorithms, replacing empathy and humanity (Akinagbe, 2024).

Yet, the transition has raised several issues namely, increasing anxiety regarding the emotional and psychological costs of algorithmic control. As managerial function is increasingly automated, employees will potentially feel that their labour is assessed impersonally and without any meaningful human recognition or relationship (Akinagbe, 2024). Managers, routinely short on time dealing with countless issues, that neglect the personal recognition of employees could opt (or start to prefer) the easier option of having algorithmic monitoring instead of personal update interview with each employee, further alienating and detracting from an emotionally engaged employees (Schlund & Zitek, 2024). Over time, employees can feel a level of disconnection from their work without human oversight, leading to a social disconnect from management cues, loss of appreciation for their labour, loss of autonomy and eventually silent disengagement (Schlund & Zitek, 2024). These circumstances can lead to emotional disengagement over time, a psychological state pertaining to a stasis, withdrawal, and lack of emotional involvement in one's work. In the process of emotional disengagement, motivation and ultimately work performance, will decline not to mention additional problems like absenteeism, silent quitting or even resignation problems impacting their organisation's capacity of employee wellbeing and resilient performance (Schlund & Zitek, 2024).

The surge in the use of AI in management also entails ethical and social consequences, especially where it is employed with little to no principles of human-centred design (Akinagbe, 2024). For example, the use of robust decision-making systems, also called "black-box algorithms" are known to exacerbate employees' risk of mistrust and helplessness. For example, consider the case of an employee who is either denied a promotion, or flagged for underperformance, by an AI algorithm, but nobody knows exactly why the algorithm made those decisions. As a result, the employee is left feeling confused, and unfairly judged, and ultimately feels helpless because there is no appeal to the decision. The algorithm cannot provide clarification or re-consideration in the same way that any human manager would be able to provide. The ability to no longer consider context related to the person, or to merely count them as another 'piece of data', results in a loss of trust in the system, and the organisation. This cycle of negativity could result in either (1) abandoning or disengaging from a system that they otherwise were committed to; or, (2) emotional disengagement, in which this employee is only able to understand their existence as a data point, rather than a human being (Tong et al., 2021).

Furthermore, real-time monitoring technologies may increase stress and erode people's sense of psychological safety. This is important in post-pandemic workplaces, where more hybrid and remote work arrangements have resulted in greater use of AI, particularly for supervision (Galanti et al., 2023). Establishing how AI-Driven Management fosters emotional disengagement is important for organisational sustainability and linked to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8, in terms of decent work, fair treatment and equitable long-term development in a digital economy.

Understanding Emotional Disengagement in Organisational Settings

Emotional disengagement is a psychological phenomenon in which employees feel emotionally detached, indifferent or separated from their work. While employees may demonstrate physical or cognitive disengagement on a limited, task-specific basis, emotional disengagement suggests a more permanent state of disinterest and commitment (Sarwar et

al., 2024). Emotional disengagement can stem from unmet psychological needs like lack of recognition, lack of autonomy, and lack of purpose, and is evident in behaviours like less enthusiasm, limited contribution, and emotional withdrawal (Sarwar et al., 2024). Emotionally disengaged employees may continue to show up physically, yet mentally and emotionally they are checked out, often leading to decreased productivity, poor collaboration, and an increased risk of silent quitting or eventual resignation (Serenko, 2024).

In many contemporary organisations utilising AI-based management systems to allocate work, appraise productivity and evaluate outcomes, the risk of emotional disconnection may be higher (Gupta & Banerjee, 2025). Moreover, if employees feel their commitment is being appraised by emotionless algorithms, without human judgement, they might feel devalued and detached from the organisation. With computerised analysis of employees' work and the absence of emotional assurance or human interaction, the foundation of trust could flounder (Tong et al., 2021). From a managerial perspective, this is a challenge for managers and leaders when working to heighten employees' motivation or emotional commitment in an era where AI take a significant proportion of human role in a workplace (Akinagbe, 2024). When working with AI, managers will need to be aware that they run the risk of having aspects of human connection eliminated entirely unless they implement explicit ways in which to humanise the engagement with AI, as transparency in an AI introduction is important to consider; such as, employee engagement in developing the system, considering the amount of hybrid or AI managers, who are responsible for managements of humans' activities, virtually unaccompanied (Akinagbe, 2024).

In modern organisations where AI-driven management systems are increasingly used to assign tasks, monitor performance, and evaluate outcomes, the risk of emotional disengagement can be exacerbated (Gupta & Banerjee, 2025). When employees feel that their efforts are being judged by impersonal algorithms, without context or feedback from a human manager, they may start to feel undervalued and alienated. The absence of human interaction and emotional validation can result in a breakdown of trust between employees and the organisation (Tong et al., 2021). From a managerial standpoint, this creates a critical challenge especially in maintaining motivation and emotional commitment in a workplace where AI takes over many human-centric roles (Akinagbe, 2024). Without intentional strategies to humanise AI integration, such as transparent communication, employee involvement in system design, or hybrid AI-human supervision, managers may unknowingly contribute to a culture of disengagement and emotional burnout (Akinagbe, 2024).

Challenges of Algorithmic Control in Human-Centred Work Environments

AI-driven management introduces unique challenges to workplaces that traditionally rely on human judgment, empathy, and relational trust. While algorithmic systems can optimise task allocation, streamline workflows, and ensure consistency, they often lack the emotional intelligence needed to interpret human experiences or subtle context (Schlund & Zitek, 2024). For example, an AI system may flag an employee as underperforming based solely on metrics, without recognising underlying personal challenges (e.g., family problem, mental health issue etc.) or external factors (e.g., a sudden shift in project scope, system downtime, or a team-wide resource shortage) that temporarily affected performance. This rigid and data-centric approach can undermine employees' sense of autonomy and fairness, two psychological needs that are essential for engagement and morale. Moreover, the opacity of many AI

systems (commonly referred to as “black-box algorithms”) creates an environment of uncertainty where employees are unable to question or understand decisions made about their roles, performance, or development opportunities (Akinagbe, 2024).

From a managerial standpoint, this shift poses a serious dilemma. While AI may improve operational efficiency, it risks weakening the relational bonds that human managers build with their teams, bonds that foster motivation, trust, and emotional commitment (Rodgers et al., 2023). In workplaces where feedback, encouragement, and informal check-ins traditionally play a role in maintaining employee engagement, the replacement of these human interactions with AI systems may result in emotional distance and detachment (Rodgers et al., 2023). This is especially problematic in human-centric sectors such as education, healthcare, or the creative industries, where work is deeply personal and emotionally driven (Zirar et al., 2023). If left unaddressed, the growing reliance on algorithmic control could erode the emotional fabric of organisations, making it harder for managers to maintain a healthy, motivated, and resilient workforce (Zirar et al., 2023).

Underpinning Theories and Proposed Conceptual Framework

This conceptual paper is anchored in two key theories namely Self-Determination Theory (SDT) by Deci and Ryan (1985) and Socio-Technical Systems Theory (STS) by Emery and Trist (1960).

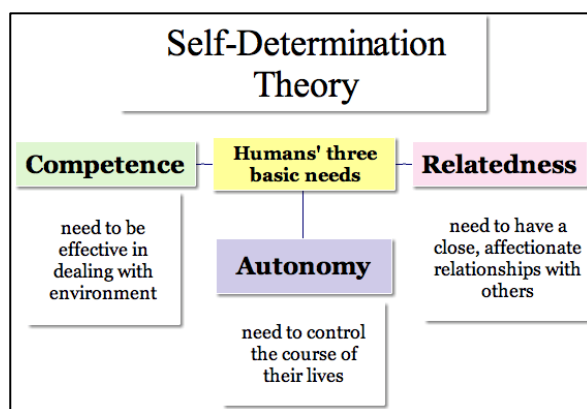


Figure 1: Self-Determination Theory

Source: Deci and Ryan (1985)

SDT posits that individuals are most engaged when their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fulfilled, per Figure 1 (Deci & Ryan, 1985). AI-driven management, by nature of its impersonal and automated processes, can compromise these needs. When AI systems control tasks and monitor outcomes without employee input, autonomy is restricted. Standardised feedback systems may limit competence validation, and the absence of human supervisors may impair relatedness. The violation of these needs can lead to intrinsic demotivation and emotional disengagement (Kassa & Worku, 2025).

STS advocates for a balanced integration of technology and social systems in organisational design (Emery & Trist 1960). When AI is implemented without considering the social and emotional needs of the workforce, it creates technical dominance, undermining the synergy between human and machine. STS theory thus supports the argument that technology should

be designed to complement, not replace, human-centred management, reinforcing the need for ethical and inclusive AI practices (Passalacqua et al., 2025).

Based on the underscored problem statement and literature review, the proposed research framework for this research is depicted in Figure 2. This paper proposes a simplified conceptual framework that examines the unidimensional relationship between:

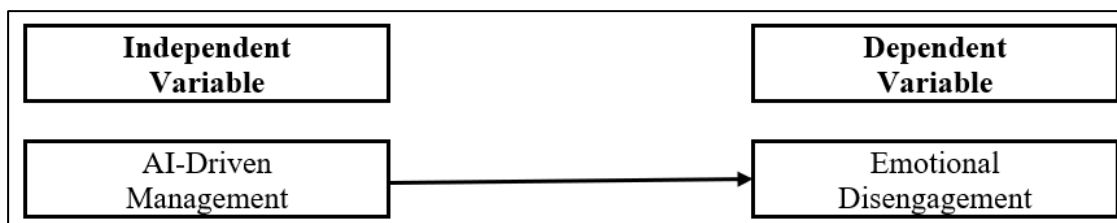


Figure 2: Proposed Conceptual Framework

Source: Authors' Own Work

Based on the literature review discussion and the underscored problem statement, it is hypothesised that;

H1: Perceived AI-driven management is positively associated with emotional disengagement among employees.

This framework suggests that the more employees perceive AI as replacing human managerial roles, the more likely they are to experience emotional disengagement especially when their psychological needs are unmet.

Strategic Implications for Humanising AI in Management

To address the growing concerns around emotional disengagement, organisations must take a proactive stance in integrating human-centred principles into AI-driven management systems. While AI can enhance efficiency and consistency in decision-making, it must not come at the cost of employee well-being. One key strategy is to ensure transparency and explainability in algorithmic decisions. Employees should be able to understand how decisions (e.g., performance evaluations or task assignments) are made, and have access to explanations in plain language (Chandima, 2024). This clarity is deemed can builds trust in the system, reduces feelings of helplessness, and empowers employees to take ownership of their work outcomes.

Another important step is to preserve employee autonomy by allowing flexibility in workflows and maintaining human oversight. Rather than using AI to rigidly dictate daily tasks or performance goals, systems can be designed to offer suggestions that employees can accept, adapt, or discuss with their supervisors. This hybrid approach respects individual judgment and context, reinforcing a sense of control and self-worth (Sundari et al., 2024). Autonomy is a core component of employee motivation, and preserving it in digitally managed environments is critical to preventing emotional disengagement and job dissatisfaction (Sundari et al., 2024).

Equally important is the role of AI in supporting rather than replacing interpersonal communication. This is because, human connection remains central to workplace

engagement, especially in sectors that depend on collaboration, empathy, and trust (Zirar et al., 2023). AI systems should be designed to complement managerial roles by handling repetitive tasks while enabling supervisors to focus more on coaching, mentoring, and team development (Nawaz et al., 2024). Organisations should also implement feedback mechanisms that allow employees and managers to review, contest, or override AI-generated decisions. This not only fosters a sense of fairness but also ensures that human insight remains integral to the decision-making process (Nawaz et al., 2024).

These strategies reflect the broader goals of Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG 8): Decent Work and Economic Growth, which emphasises the need for inclusive, safe, and human-centred working environments. Ethical AI adoption that prioritises transparency, autonomy, and human connection ensures that technological progress does not alienate the workforce, but instead uplifts it. By embedding ethical and emotional considerations into AI management design, organisations can build a more sustainable future, one where innovation and humanity advance together (Sposato et al., 2025).

Expected Outcome and Contribution of this Research

This conceptual paper aims to establish a conceptual basis for understanding how AI-driven management can play a role in employee emotional disengagement, especially in human-centric work activities. Utilising Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Socio-Technical Systems Theory (STS), the research is conceptual in nature, detailing a unidimensional model of emotional disengagement which finds AI-driven management is a major predictor of emotional disengagement. It is anticipated that as an increasing proportion of managerial control is automated, fulfilling the employee's psychological needs for autonomy, competency and relatedness diminishes awareness of, and connection to the role. Based on this process, a theoretical outcome will present a simplified framework for a passive employee engagement and disengagement interaction, while offering an engaging argument for growing disengagement experiences and patterns in the modern workplace.

This conceptual paper adds to the literature, theoretically expanding on SDT and STS theory regarding AI enabled workplace management, a relatively underexplored context (Passalacqua et al., 2025). It provides the idea that emotional disengagement can come from not only bad leadership or organisational culture but also the structural and impersonal characteristics of leading people through AI-driven supervision. Besides, this conceptual paper helps close an important gap in the intersection of human motivation theories with the ongoing discourse on emerging technologies, reinforcing the importance of including psychological principles into the design and deployment of AI. The researchers also felt this paper offered a new integration of behaviour and technology theories to help explain the socio-emotional impact for workers involved with AI in the workplace.

In terms of the method, the paper proposes a one-dimensional model, facilitating the measurement of the independent and dependent variables, which enables relatively easy empirical testing in future research. The focus on a one-dimensional construction of AI-driven management and emotional disengagement further enables researchers and practitioners interested in testing or extending the model in other organisations to validate the model, since it requires less specificity. Furthermore, if future researchers wish to make the model their own, the conversion to other construct forms should be relatively easy, as

one-dimensional constructs can have identifiable similarities. This simplified approach not only enhances the model's applicability but also opens the door for quantitative research using surveys, behavioural analysis, or experimental designs, thereby expanding methodological options in this emerging field.

In terms of practical contribution, the present research provides actionable and implementable recommendations for human resource practitioners, organisational leaders, and AI developers to humanise the current AI era of management. Recommendations including facilitating algorithmic transparency, integrating human oversight, providing interpersonal connection, and integrating feedback loops can help to improve employee engagement, and employee well-being. This is especially important as organisations grappling with hybrid and full remote work arrangements where algorithmic oversight is more prominent than ever. This proposed conceptual paper connects to SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) as it promotes not only efficient but also ethically responsible and emotionally considerate, ensuring that digital transformation supports instead of suppressing the human spirit at work.

Directions for Future Research and Empirical Validation

To help theorise and improve the generalisability of the proposed conceptual framework, future research should empirically assess the relationship between AI-driven management and emotional disengagement in a variety of organisations and industries. Different sectors (finance, education, health, logistics) that are at different stages in their digital transformation will produce valuable insights into how AI influences employee and other humans' emotions and engagement differently. Quantitative studies which include structured surveys or behavioural data, will provide evidence of the unidimensional constructs presented in this paper, and also explore if the findings are robust across job types and employment circumstances (e.g., remote/hybrid/on-site workforces).

Future research can also consider exploring whether moderating variables may play a role in either the strength or direction of the effect of AI-driven management and emotional disengagement. Moderating variables such as digital readiness, job complexity or trust in AI systems are likely to be influential in understanding how employees react (e.g., engage/disengage) to AI systems in terms of algorithmic control. Similarly, potential mediating variables such as perceived autonomy, psychological safety, or fairness of AI systems provide opportunity to explain the causal mechanisms in a more comprehensive way. Testing the moderating and mediating variables will strengthen the explanatory power of the model and provide a greater understanding of AI-human relationship in organisational contexts.

Moreover, longitudinal studies are needed to evaluate how continued exposure to AI-driven management contexts will compound emotional engagement and overall employee health and wellbeing. As technological advancements in AI become more integrated into work contexts, its psychological impacts could change or evolve and require long-term evaluation. In addition, cross-cultural comparisons are needed and can be explored too, to assess how cultural values, norms, use, and expectations about technology and authority shape the way of AI-driven management being perceived and/or experienced. Such research would foster a

more comprehensive and internationally relevant understanding of ethical AI use in the workplace.

In the nutshell, this conceptual paper has advanced a view that emotional disengagement is increasingly emerging as a significant issue in the context of work in AI-manged work settings. The development of a simplified unidimensional framework, rooted in Self-Determination Theory and Socio-Technical Systems Theory, has offered a novel theoretical take on how AI-driven management may hinder the fulfilment of basic psychological needs leading to emotional disengagement. This framework also encourages organisations to take a fresh look at how technology is being used to facilitate managerial functions, to prioritise organisation efforts towards overall quality of work over speed and efficiency when they compromise the overall experience and well-being of employees.

Besides, this paper contributes theoretically and methodologically to the existing nascent debates of the management of AI and work psychology as well as to practical applications associated with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 8 that promote decent work in the digital space that is ethical, and human-centred. Future empirical validation and contextual adaptations of this model are vital for designing AI systems that support both productivity and human flourishing in the workplace.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no competing interests related to the content of this research.

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