



The Evolution of Followership in AI-Mediated Leadership and How Employee Emotional Responses Change When Leaders Use AI for People Management Decisions

< Enas Abed Alfatta Mustafa Khaleel >¹

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Abstract

The increasing involvement of artificial intelligence (AI) in people management is reshaping leadership practices and changing how employees experience their roles as followers. Organizations increasingly use AI-supported systems in performance evaluation, scheduling, task allocation, employee development, and career-related decisions. Although these systems may improve consistency and analytical efficiency, their use can also affect the relational and emotional foundations of leadership. This study examines how AI-mediated leadership practices relate to relational followership quality, employee affective states, and job satisfaction. Relational followership quality is examined through leader–member exchange quality and perceived social exchange quality. Drawing on Leader–Member Exchange Theory, Social Exchange Theory, and Affective Events Theory, the study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design. Data were collected from 54 full-time employees with varying levels of exposure to AI-supported people management practices. Pearson correlation and multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine the proposed relationships. The findings showed that employees' perceptions of fair, transparent, and responsive AI-mediated leadership practices were positively associated with leader–member exchange quality, perceived social exchange quality, favorable affective states, and job satisfaction. AI-mediated leadership practices and perceived social exchange quality jointly explained 36.1% of the variance in employee affective states. Furthermore, AI-mediated leadership practices and employee affective states explained 51.6% of the variance in job satisfaction, with employee affective states emerging as the stronger predictor. The findings suggest that employees respond not only to the presence of AI but also to the fairness, transparency, accountability, and relational context surrounding its use. The study contributes to the literature by presenting employees as active interpreters of AI-mediated leadership rather than passive recipients of algorithmically supported decisions.

Keywords: AI-mediated leadership, followership, employee affective states, people management, leader–member exchange, social exchange, job satisfaction

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Artificial intelligence has expanded beyond technical and operational functions to become increasingly involved in organizational leadership and people management. Organizations now use AI-supported systems to assist with recruitment, employee scheduling, task allocation, performance monitoring, training recommendations, promotion decisions, and workforce planning. This development has created a form of AI-mediated leadership in which leaders remain formally responsible for managing employees while AI systems influence the information, recommendations, and assessments underlying their decisions (Benbya et al., 2020; Quaquebeke & Gerpott, 2023).

The integration of AI into leadership represents more than a technological change. It also changes the social and relational processes through which leadership is practiced and experienced. Traditional leadership is largely based on interpersonal communication, contextual judgment, trust, emotional understanding, and reciprocal interaction. Employees develop their roles as followers by interpreting the conduct of their leaders and evaluating whether those leaders are fair, supportive, trustworthy, and attentive to their professional and personal circumstances.

When AI systems become involved in people management decisions, employees may no longer respond solely to the judgment of a human leader. They must also interpret the role played by technological systems in producing or influencing decisions that affect their work. Employees may be uncertain about whether a decision represents the judgment of the leader, the recommendation of an algorithm, or a combination of both. This uncertainty can affect perceptions of responsibility, accountability, organizational support, and the quality of the relationship between leaders and followers.

AI-mediated leadership may provide important organizational benefits. AI systems can process large quantities of information, identify patterns, support consistent procedures, and help leaders make timely decisions. When properly designed and responsibly implemented, these systems may increase the quality and efficiency of people management. However, technical accuracy does not automatically result in employee trust or acceptance. Employees also consider whether AI-supported decisions are transparent, fair, explainable, and open to review (Glikson & Woolley, 2020; Park et al., 2021).

The use of AI in leadership may therefore transform the nature of followership. Employees are not passive recipients of algorithmic recommendations or automated decisions. Instead, they actively interpret AI-supported practices and form judgments about their legitimacy, fairness, relational meaning, and consequences. Employees may respond positively when AI is used as a supportive tool that improves consistency while preserving human judgment. Conversely, they may resist AI-supported decisions when technological systems are perceived as opaque, excessively controlling, insensitive to contextual circumstances, or difficult to challenge.

Algorithmic systems can also change the distribution of knowledge and control within the workplace. Employees may feel that AI limits their autonomy or reduces complex human performance to numerical indicators. These perceptions can create tensions concerning authority, fairness, professional identity, and employee voice (Kellogg et al., 2020). Accordingly, the evolution of followership in AI-mediated environments depends on how employees interpret the interaction between technological influence and human leadership.

The relational consequences of AI-mediated leadership can be understood through Leader–Member Exchange Theory and Social Exchange Theory. Leader–Member Exchange Theory emphasizes that high-quality relationships between leaders and employees are built through trust, respect, communication, and mutual obligation (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Social Exchange Theory similarly suggests that employees assess whether their organizations value their contributions, protect their well-being, and provide fair and reciprocal treatment (Blau, 1964). AI-supported decisions can become signals through which employees evaluate both their relationships with leaders and the quality of their exchanges with the wider organization.

Emotional responses are another important part of this transformation. People management decisions concerning performance, compensation, scheduling, promotion, or career development can influence employees' security, dignity, and professional future. Employees may experience confidence when AI-supported procedures appear fair and understandable. However, they may also experience anxiety, frustration, tension, or uncertainty when decisions are opaque or appear disconnected from meaningful human consideration.

Affective Events Theory proposes that workplace events generate emotional reactions that accumulate and shape broader employee attitudes and behaviors (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). From this perspective, an AI-supported management decision constitutes more than an administrative outcome. It is also an affective workplace event whose influence depends on how the employee interprets its fairness, consequences, and relational meaning. Repeated emotional reactions to such decisions may eventually affect job satisfaction and the employee's relationship with the organization.

Understanding these dynamics is essential because the success of AI implementation cannot be evaluated only through productivity, efficiency, or cost reduction. Organizations must also consider whether AI-supported practices preserve employee trust, relational quality, emotional well-being, and satisfaction. This study therefore examines the relationships among AI-mediated leadership practices, relational followership quality, employee affective states, and job satisfaction.

1.2 Problem Statement

The principal problem addressed in this study is that the rapid adoption of AI in people management has not been accompanied by an equally developed understanding of its relational and emotional consequences for employees. Organizations increasingly use AI-supported systems to inform decisions affecting performance evaluations, scheduling, development opportunities, task allocation, and career advancement. Nevertheless, AI implementation strategies frequently emphasize technical performance and operational efficiency while paying insufficient attention to employees' experiences as followers.

People management decisions are particularly sensitive because they can affect employees' professional identity, dignity, security, and future opportunities. When these decisions are influenced by systems that employees do not fully understand, uncertainty may arise regarding how the decision was reached, what information was considered, and who should be held responsible for its consequences. Algorithmic opacity may also make it difficult for employees to

question, appeal, or request clarification about decisions that significantly affect their careers (Frimpong, 2025).

AI-mediated processes may also alter the relationship between leaders and employees. Employees traditionally expect leaders to explain decisions, demonstrate empathy, consider individual circumstances, and accept responsibility for managerial judgments. When leaders rely heavily on AI-generated recommendations, employees may perceive that essential human responsibilities have been delegated to an impersonal system. Research indicates that AI-mediated communication may be perceived as less authentic, particularly in situations requiring sincerity, empathy, and emotional sensitivity (Glikson & Asscher, 2023).

Employees may also resist algorithmic evaluation when they believe that automated systems reduce complex human performance to measurable indicators. Such indicators may fail to reflect contextual circumstances, teamwork, emotional labor, creativity, or other contributions that are difficult to quantify. Park et al. (2021) demonstrated that employee resistance to algorithmic evaluation can arise from concerns about fairness, burden, and the limitations of automated assessment. Resistance should therefore not automatically be understood as opposition to innovation; it may reflect legitimate concerns about accuracy, accountability, and human dignity.

These concerns may influence both relational followership and employee emotions. When AI-supported leadership is perceived as fair, transparent, and responsive, it may strengthen employees' perceptions of their relationships with leaders and organizations. When it is perceived as opaque, inflexible, or dehumanizing, it may contribute to mistrust, anxiety, frustration, and uncertainty. These emotional experiences may subsequently influence job satisfaction and employees' broader attitudes toward the organization.

The problem is therefore not simply whether AI is used in people management. The more important issue concerns the quality of its implementation and the meaning employees assign to AI-supported decisions. Organizations require empirical evidence explaining how AI-mediated leadership relates to the quality of leader–follower relationships, employees' emotional experiences, and job satisfaction. Without such evidence, organizations may introduce technologically efficient systems that unintentionally weaken trust, employee well-being, and sustainable followership.

1.3 Research Gap

The literature on AI in organizations has examined algorithmic management, digital leadership, trust in AI, people analytics, organizational control, and the ethical implications of automated decision-making. Previous studies have provided valuable knowledge concerning AI adoption and employee resistance to algorithmic evaluation (Benbya et al., 2020; Kellogg et al., 2020; Park et al., 2021; Varma et al., 2023). However, three important gaps remain.

First, much of the existing research approaches AI-mediated people management from the perspectives of organizational efficiency, managerial decision-making, or technological design. Comparatively less attention has been given to the follower perspective. Employees are often treated as users or recipients of AI-supported systems rather than active organizational actors who

interpret the fairness, legitimacy, and relational meaning of technologically mediated decisions. Consequently, limited empirical evidence explains how AI transforms employees' relationships with leaders and their perceptions of organizational reciprocity.

Second, relational and emotional outcomes are frequently studied separately. Research may examine trust, fairness, employee resistance, affective responses, or job satisfaction without integrating these outcomes into a coherent model. This separation limits understanding of how employees' relational interpretations of AI-supported leadership connect with their emotional experiences. A combined application of Leader–Member Exchange Theory, Social Exchange Theory, and Affective Events Theory can provide a more comprehensive explanation of how AI-mediated leadership influences followers.

Third, the relationship between AI-mediated leadership, employee emotions, and job satisfaction remains insufficiently examined. Although previous research has documented concerns about algorithmic control and uncertainty, fewer empirical studies have assessed whether employees' affective states help explain differences in job satisfaction within AI-mediated workplaces. This gap is important because employees' emotional reactions to workplace events can develop into more stable attitudes toward their jobs and organizations (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996).

The present study addresses these gaps by examining three connected dimensions: relational followership quality, employee affective states, and job satisfaction. Relational followership quality is represented by leader–member exchange quality and perceived social exchange quality. This approach makes it possible to examine how employees interpret AI-mediated leadership relationally, how those interpretations correspond with their emotional experiences, and how the combined variables predict job satisfaction.

1.4 Research Objectives

The general objective of this study is to examine how AI-mediated leadership practices shape relational followership quality, employee affective states, and job satisfaction in people management contexts.

The study specifically aims to:

1. Examine the relationship between AI-mediated leadership practices and relational followership quality, as reflected in leader–member exchange quality and perceived social exchange quality.
2. Assess the extent to which AI-mediated leadership practices and perceived social exchange quality predict employee affective states.
3. Determine the extent to which AI-mediated leadership practices, relational followership quality, and employee affective states predict job satisfaction.

1.5 Research Questions

In direct alignment with the research objectives, the study addresses the following questions:

RQ1: What is the relationship between AI-mediated leadership practices and relational followership quality, as reflected in leader–member exchange quality and perceived social exchange quality?

RQ2: To what extent do AI-mediated leadership practices and perceived social exchange quality predict employee affective states?

RQ3: To what extent do AI-mediated leadership practices, relational followership quality, and employee affective states predict job satisfaction?

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study has theoretical, empirical, and practical significance. Theoretically, it contributes to the emerging literature on AI-mediated leadership by emphasizing the follower perspective. Employees are conceptualized as active interpreters who evaluate the fairness, transparency, accountability, and relational implications of AI-supported management practices. This perspective extends traditional followership research into technologically mediated organizational environments.

The study also brings together three complementary theoretical perspectives. Leader–Member Exchange Theory explains how AI-supported leadership practices may influence trust, respect, communication, and relationship quality between leaders and employees. Social Exchange Theory explains how employees interpret organizational fairness, support, and reciprocity when AI becomes involved in people management. Affective Events Theory explains how AI-supported decisions can generate emotional reactions that contribute to broader employee attitudes, particularly job satisfaction.

Empirically, the study examines relational followership quality, emotional experiences, and job satisfaction within one research framework. It therefore provides a more integrated understanding of employee responses to AI-mediated leadership than studies focusing on isolated outcomes. The research also provides evidence that the effects associated with AI implementation extend beyond technical performance and include relational and psychological dimensions.

Practically, the findings can assist organizational leaders and human resource professionals in developing more responsible approaches to AI-supported people management. The study highlights the importance of transparency, procedural fairness, meaningful human explanation, employee participation, and accessible mechanisms for questioning or appealing AI-supported decisions. It also emphasizes that organizational leaders should remain visibly responsible for final people management decisions rather than transferring accountability to technological systems.

The study is additionally important for employee well-being. Understanding how AI-mediated leadership relates to affective states and job satisfaction can help organizations recognize unintended consequences such as anxiety, uncertainty, tension, or perceived dehumanization. Organizations can use this knowledge to improve leadership development, employee communication, AI governance, and support mechanisms.

Finally, the study contributes to responsible AI implementation by demonstrating that the successful use of AI in people management depends on more than technological efficiency. Organizations must preserve human dignity, employee voice, relational trust, and leadership accountability. These conditions are necessary if AI is to enhance organizational decision-making without weakening the human foundations of leadership and followership.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Evolution of Followership in AI-Mediated Organizational Contexts

Followership refers to the processes through which employees interpret leadership, respond to authority, participate in organizational relationships, and contribute to collective objectives. Traditional leadership research often emphasized the leader as the primary source of influence, while followers were treated as recipients of leadership behavior. More recent perspectives consider followership an active and relational process in which employees evaluate leaders, interpret organizational conditions, and influence leadership outcomes through their attitudes and behavior.

Conventional followership develops largely through direct human interaction. Employees observe how leaders communicate, distribute resources, evaluate performance, respond to difficulties, and demonstrate concern for employee well-being. These interactions allow followers to assess the leader's competence, fairness, authenticity, and trustworthiness. Over time, repeated exchanges create expectations regarding mutual obligations and shape the quality of the leader–follower relationship.

The introduction of AI into people management changes this relational process by placing technological systems between leaders and followers. Employees may receive schedules, performance assessments, development recommendations, or task assignments that have been generated or influenced by AI. In such environments, the source of leadership influence becomes more complex because employees are responding simultaneously to human authority and algorithmic recommendations.

This development does not eliminate followership; instead, it transforms its nature. Followers must interpret the role of AI in managerial decisions and determine whether technological involvement supports or weakens legitimate leadership. Employees may ask whether the AI system is accurate, whether its recommendations are fair, whether the leader understands how it works, and whether a human decision-maker remains accountable for the final outcome. Followership therefore becomes partly dependent on employees' interpretations of both technological and human actors.

Quaquebeke and Gerpott (2023) argue that AI will substantially change leadership by assuming functions related to analysis, coordination, monitoring, and decision support. As AI systems become more capable, leadership may increasingly involve a division of responsibilities between human leaders and intelligent technologies. AI may provide information and recommendations, while human leaders remain responsible for contextual judgment, emotional communication, ethical consideration, and accountability.

This division has important implications for followers. When leaders use AI as a supportive resource while maintaining meaningful communication and responsibility, employees may perceive the technology as enhancing leadership. When leaders use AI to avoid difficult conversations or distance themselves from consequential decisions, employees may perceive a loss of authenticity and relational commitment. The effect of AI-mediated leadership therefore depends not only on what the system does but also on how leaders incorporate its outputs into their relationships with employees.

Employees are not passive recipients of algorithmic authority. They may accept, question, reinterpret, negotiate, or resist AI-supported decisions. Kellogg et al. (2020) describe algorithmic management as a contested terrain in which systems of control are met by different forms of employee adaptation and resistance. Employees may attempt to understand how the system evaluates them, change their behavior to satisfy algorithmic criteria, or challenge decisions they consider inaccurate or unfair.

Followership in AI-mediated environments consequently involves a new form of interpretive responsibility. Employees must evaluate both the human and technological components of leadership. Their responses are likely to depend on perceived transparency, procedural fairness, accuracy, opportunity for voice, and the continued availability of human review. These evaluations can influence trust in leadership, willingness to cooperate, emotional engagement, and job satisfaction.

The evolution of followership should therefore not be understood as a movement from human followers to technologically controlled workers. It is better understood as a change in the relational structure within which followership occurs. Human leaders, organizational policies, AI systems, and employees jointly shape how authority is interpreted and enacted. This study focuses on employees' relational and emotional experiences within that changing structure.

2.2 AI-Mediated Leadership and People Management

AI-mediated leadership refers to leadership practices in which AI systems participate in the collection, interpretation, communication, or application of information used in managing employees. The degree of AI involvement can range from basic decision support to extensive automation. In some organizations, AI provides recommendations that leaders may accept or reject. In others, algorithms automatically generate decisions concerning schedules, performance ratings, work assignments, or employee development.

AI-supported people management can improve organizational decision-making in several ways. AI systems can analyze large datasets, identify patterns, support standardization, and generate predictions that may be difficult to produce through human judgment alone. These capabilities may reduce administrative workloads and help leaders allocate attention to more complex interpersonal and strategic responsibilities (Benbya et al., 2020).

AI may also promote consistency when the same criteria are applied across employees. Properly governed systems can assist organizations in identifying development needs, detecting workforce

trends, and improving the timeliness of decisions. These advantages help explain the growing use of AI in human resource management and leadership.

However, consistency is not necessarily equivalent to fairness. An algorithm may apply the same procedure to all employees while relying on incomplete, historically biased, or contextually inappropriate data. Employees may therefore distinguish between the formal consistency of a system and the substantive fairness of its outcomes. Perceptions of fairness are likely to depend on the quality of the data, clarity of the decision criteria, availability of explanation, and possibility of human review.

The opacity of AI systems is a particularly important concern. Employees may not know what information was used, how different factors were weighted, or why a particular recommendation was produced. This “black box” problem can create uncertainty and reduce employees’ ability to challenge decisions. The effect becomes more serious when AI is involved in decisions affecting performance, promotion, compensation, or continued employment (Frimpong, 2025).

Trust is consequently central to AI-mediated leadership. Glikson and Woolley (2020) explain that trust in AI is influenced by factors such as reliability, transparency, perceived capability, and the nature of the task assigned to the system. Employees may be more willing to accept AI in analytical or administrative tasks than in decisions requiring empathy, ethical judgment, or sensitivity to individual circumstances.

People management contains both analytical and relational elements. An AI system may effectively identify patterns in attendance or productivity, but it may not understand the personal circumstances underlying those patterns. Leaders must therefore determine when AI-generated information is useful and when it requires contextual interpretation. Responsible AI-mediated leadership should preserve a meaningful role for human judgment, particularly in decisions with significant emotional or career consequences.

The manner in which leaders communicate AI-supported decisions is equally important. Employees may respond negatively when leaders present an algorithmic recommendation as unquestionable or use the system to avoid responsibility. In contrast, employees may respond more positively when leaders explain how AI was used, discuss the limitations of its recommendations, and remain accountable for the final decision.

Research on AI-mediated communication suggests that messages generated or delivered through AI may be perceived as less authentic in situations requiring emotional sensitivity. Glikson and Asscher (2023), for example, found that AI mediation can influence perceived authenticity in workplace communication. This finding is relevant to people management because feedback, apologies, performance discussions, and career conversations require more than the accurate transmission of information. They also involve sincerity, recognition, and interpersonal respect.

AI-mediated leadership should therefore be evaluated as a sociotechnical practice rather than a purely technical intervention. Its consequences emerge through the interaction among system characteristics, organizational policies, leader behavior, and employee interpretation. An accurate AI system may still produce unfavorable employee responses if its use is opaque or insensitive.

Conversely, a limited decision-support system may be accepted when employees understand its role and retain meaningful access to human explanation and review.

2.3 AI-Mediated Leadership and Relational Followership Quality

Relational followership quality refers to the extent to which employees experience their relationships with leaders and organizations as trustworthy, supportive, respectful, and reciprocal. In the present study, this broader relational dimension is represented by leader–member exchange quality and perceived social exchange quality.

2.3.1 Leader–Member Exchange Quality

Leader–member exchange quality describes the quality of the dyadic relationship between a leader and an employee. High-quality exchanges are characterized by trust, mutual respect, support, communication, and reciprocal obligation. Lower-quality relationships tend to be more formal, contractual, and limited to the basic requirements of the employment role (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

The involvement of AI in leadership can influence this relationship in different ways. AI-supported systems may strengthen leader–member exchange when they help leaders make consistent decisions, identify employee needs, or provide timely support. For example, AI-generated information may help leaders recognize development opportunities or respond more effectively to workload imbalances.

However, AI may weaken leader–member exchange if employees believe that leaders have delegated relational responsibilities to a technological system. Employees may perceive reduced personal recognition when performance feedback is generated automatically or when career decisions appear to depend primarily on algorithmic scores. Such perceptions can weaken the sense that the leader understands the employee’s work, challenges, and professional aspirations.

The critical issue is therefore not simply the amount of AI used but the quality of its integration into the leader–employee relationship. Leaders can use AI-generated information as a starting point for meaningful discussion rather than as a substitute for direct communication. They can also preserve relationship quality by explaining recommendations, inviting employee input, and taking responsibility for final decisions.

The relationship between AI-mediated leadership and leader–member exchange is consequently expected to depend on employees’ perceptions of fairness, transparency, and responsiveness. When employees view AI-supported practices positively, they may also evaluate their relationship with the leader more favorably. When the same practices are perceived as opaque or dehumanizing, the quality of the relationship may decline.

2.3.2 Perceived Social Exchange Quality

Perceived social exchange quality concerns employees’ beliefs about the fairness, support, and reciprocity present in their relationship with the organization. Employees assess whether the

organization values their contributions, considers their well-being, and fulfills its obligations. These assessments influence their willingness to reciprocate through commitment, cooperation, and constructive behavior (Blau, 1964).

AI-supported people management can communicate important signals about the organization's relationship with employees. Transparent and fair AI practices may indicate that the organization is committed to consistency and responsible decision-making. Conversely, unexplained automated decisions may communicate that efficiency is being prioritized over employee dignity and individual consideration.

The opportunity to participate in or question AI-supported decisions is especially relevant. Employee voice allows individuals to explain contextual circumstances, identify errors, and seek clarification. When no meaningful review process exists, employees may perceive the organizational exchange as unequal because the organization can use complex systems to evaluate employees while employees have limited power to understand or challenge those evaluations.

Perceived organizational support may also be affected by how the organization responds to the emotional and practical consequences of AI implementation. Providing training, clear communication, accessible explanations, and human appeal mechanisms can signal organizational care. Introducing AI without such support may produce uncertainty and weaken employees' perceptions of reciprocity.

Varma et al. (2023) emphasize that the use of AI in people management raises ethical questions concerning transparency, fairness, privacy, and accountability. These issues are not separate from social exchange; they shape how employees interpret the organization's intentions and obligations. Ethical implementation may therefore improve relational acceptance, whereas weak governance may damage trust even when the technology is operationally effective.

Leader-member exchange quality and perceived social exchange quality represent related but distinct dimensions. The first focuses on the employee's relationship with the immediate leader, whereas the second addresses the broader relationship with the organization. AI-mediated leadership may influence both dimensions because employees may attribute AI-supported decisions to the leader, the organization, or both.

2.4 Employee Emotional Responses to AI-Mediated Leadership

Employee affective states refer to the positive and negative emotional experiences associated with work. Positive affective states may include enthusiasm, confidence, belonging, and optimism. Negative affective states may include anxiety, tension, frustration, helplessness, and uncertainty.

AI-supported people management decisions can generate emotional reactions because they influence outcomes that employees value. A favorable AI-supported recommendation may produce confidence or relief, while an unfavorable or unexplained recommendation may generate anxiety or anger. The emotional impact depends not only on the outcome but also on the process through which the decision was produced and communicated.

Transparency can reduce uncertainty by helping employees understand how AI contributes to decisions. When employees know what information is collected, how it is used, and who remains accountable, they may feel more secure. In contrast, opacity may produce anxiety because employees cannot anticipate how the system will evaluate them or how they might correct inaccurate information.

Perceived fairness also influences emotional responses. Employees are more likely to accept an unfavorable outcome when they believe that the procedure was fair, consistent, and open to review. An apparently favorable outcome may still generate concern if the employee believes that the system is unreliable or discriminatory. Emotional reactions therefore reflect both distributive outcomes and procedural interpretations.

Park et al. (2021) found that employees can resist algorithmic evaluation when it creates practical and psychological burdens. Employees may feel pressure to make their work visible to a system, alter their behavior to meet measurable criteria, or continuously monitor algorithmic expectations. These demands may contribute to stress even when employees remain committed to their work.

AI-mediated leadership may produce emotional ambivalence rather than uniformly positive or negative reactions. Employees may appreciate the consistency or efficiency of AI while simultaneously worrying about job security, loss of autonomy, or reduced human interaction. This coexistence of positive and negative emotions is important because it demonstrates that employee acceptance cannot be represented by a simple supportive-versus-resistant distinction.

Relational experiences may help explain these emotional differences. Employees who feel respected by their leaders and supported by their organizations may interpret AI-supported decisions more positively. High-quality social exchange can provide reassurance that the organization will use AI responsibly and respond when problems arise. In contrast, employees with weak relational support may interpret the same system as an additional source of control or insecurity.

Perceived social exchange quality may consequently act as a particularly important predictor of employee affective states. When employees believe that the organization values their contribution and cares about their well-being, AI implementation may be interpreted within a supportive relational context. When reciprocity is weak, AI-supported decisions may intensify feelings of vulnerability.

2.5 AI-Mediated Leadership, Employee Affect, and Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is a broad evaluative attitude reflecting how positively or negatively employees perceive their jobs. It is influenced by working conditions, leadership, interpersonal relationships, perceived fairness, emotional experiences, and organizational support. In AI-mediated workplaces, job satisfaction may also be affected by how employees experience technology-supported management.

AI can contribute positively to job satisfaction when it reduces administrative burdens, improves consistency, supports employee development, or helps leaders respond more effectively to

workforce needs. Employees may value systems that make procedures more understandable and reduce arbitrary decision-making. These benefits are more likely when AI is implemented transparently and accompanied by appropriate human oversight.

Conversely, AI-mediated practices may reduce job satisfaction when employees experience increased surveillance, limited autonomy, opaque evaluations, or reduced human contact. Employees may feel dissatisfied if important career decisions are influenced by systems they do not understand or cannot challenge. Job satisfaction may therefore depend on both the technical quality of AI systems and the relational environment in which they operate.

Leader–member exchange quality is likely to remain important even when AI becomes more involved in management. A supportive leader can explain AI-generated information, correct errors, and ensure that contextual circumstances are considered. High-quality leader–member exchange may therefore protect job satisfaction by preserving trust and meaningful human interaction.

Perceived social exchange quality can similarly influence job satisfaction. Employees who feel valued and supported by their organizations are more likely to interpret technological changes as part of a reciprocal relationship. If AI adoption is viewed as a method of reducing costs or increasing control at the expense of employee well-being, satisfaction may decline.

Employee affective states are expected to be particularly important because emotional experiences connect specific workplace events with broader job attitudes. Positive emotional experiences can strengthen satisfaction, whereas repeated anxiety, tension, or frustration can gradually weaken it. AI-mediated leadership may therefore relate to job satisfaction both directly and through the emotional experiences associated with AI-supported decisions.

The present study treats employee affective states as an important predictor rather than claiming a formally tested causal mediation process. Establishing statistical mediation would require a specific indirect-effect analysis with appropriate confidence intervals. The current research instead examines whether affective states provide significant explanatory value when considered alongside AI-mediated leadership practices and relational followership quality.

2.6 Synthesis of the Literature

The reviewed literature demonstrates that AI-mediated leadership is a relational and emotional organizational phenomenon rather than simply a technological development. AI changes how information is processed and how decisions are supported, but its consequences depend on how employees interpret its fairness, transparency, accountability, and human sensitivity.

Three connected relationships emerge from the literature. First, the perceived quality of AI-mediated leadership is associated with relational followership quality, reflected in employees' relationships with their leaders and organizations. Second, AI-mediated practices and perceived social exchange quality are associated with employees' affective states. Third, AI-mediated leadership, relational quality, and affective states are expected to contribute to job satisfaction.

These relationships correspond directly with the objectives and research questions established in Section 1. The next section presents the theoretical foundations used to explain these relationships and develops the study hypotheses.

3. Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses Development

3.1 Leader–Member Exchange Theory

Leader–Member Exchange Theory explains leadership as a relational process that develops through repeated interactions between a leader and an employee. High-quality leader–member exchange relationships are characterized by trust, mutual respect, communication, support, and reciprocal obligation. In contrast, low-quality relationships are generally limited to formal employment requirements and contain lower levels of interpersonal trust and support (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

The theory is relevant to AI-mediated leadership because the use of AI in people management may alter the frequency, quality, and meaning of interactions between leaders and followers. When leaders use AI-generated information to support conversations, identify employee needs, and improve the consistency of decisions, technology may contribute positively to relationship quality. However, leader–member exchange may weaken when employees believe that leaders have replaced personal judgment and communication with automated recommendations.

The relational consequences of AI therefore depend on how leaders integrate technological outputs into their interactions with employees. Transparent explanations, opportunities for employee voice, and continued human responsibility may protect the quality of leader–follower relationships. Conversely, opaque decisions and excessive dependence on automated recommendations may reduce employees’ perceptions of trust, recognition, and relational authenticity.

3.2 Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory proposes that relationships develop through reciprocal exchanges of benefits, support, and obligations (Blau, 1964). Within organizations, employees evaluate whether their contributions are valued and whether the organization demonstrates concern for their well-being. Positive perceptions of organizational support and fairness encourage employees to reciprocate through commitment, cooperation, and constructive work attitudes.

AI-mediated people management can influence these perceptions because employees interpret AI-supported decisions as signals of organizational intentions. Transparent, fair, and reviewable AI practices may signal that the organization respects employees and is committed to responsible decision-making. In contrast, opaque or inflexible practices may communicate that efficiency and control are being prioritized over employee welfare.

Perceived social exchange quality may also shape employees’ emotional responses. Employees who feel valued and supported may be more confident that AI systems will be used responsibly. Employees who perceive weak organizational support may interpret the same systems as threats

to autonomy, security, and fair treatment. Social Exchange Theory therefore helps explain the connection between AI-mediated leadership, relational followership quality, and employee affective states.

3.3 Affective Events Theory

Affective Events Theory explains how workplace events generate emotional reactions that influence employee attitudes and behavior (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). People management decisions can be understood as affective events because they may influence employees' performance evaluations, work responsibilities, development opportunities, and career prospects.

When AI contributes to these decisions, employees may experience positive emotions if the process is perceived as consistent, understandable, and fair. They may experience anxiety, frustration, or uncertainty when the process appears opaque, impersonal, or difficult to challenge. Repeated emotional reactions may accumulate and influence broader attitudes such as job satisfaction.

Affective Events Theory is therefore used in this study to explain why employee affective states may be an important predictor of job satisfaction. It also supports the expectation that the emotional consequences of AI-mediated leadership are influenced by employees' interpretations of organizational fairness and relational support.

3.4 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework connects AI-mediated leadership practices with three employee outcomes: relational followership quality, affective states, and job satisfaction. Relational followership quality is represented by leader–member exchange quality and perceived social exchange quality.

The framework proposes that positive perceptions of AI-mediated leadership practices are associated with stronger relational followership quality. It further proposes that AI-mediated leadership practices and perceived social exchange quality predict employee affective states. Finally, AI-mediated leadership practices, relational followership quality, and affective states are expected to contribute to job satisfaction.

3.5 Hypotheses Development

Based on Leader–Member Exchange Theory, employees who perceive AI-mediated leadership practices as fair, transparent, and responsive are expected to report stronger relationships with their leaders. Therefore:

H1a: AI-mediated leadership practices are positively and significantly related to leader–member exchange quality.

Based on Social Exchange Theory, responsible AI-mediated practices may communicate organizational fairness, support, and reciprocity. Therefore:

H1b: AI-mediated leadership practices are positively and significantly related to perceived social exchange quality.

Affective Events Theory suggests that employees' interpretations of AI-supported decisions can generate emotional reactions. Social Exchange Theory further suggests that supportive organizational relationships can contribute to favorable emotional experiences. Therefore:

H2a: AI-mediated leadership practices positively and significantly predict employee affective states.

H2b: Perceived social exchange quality positively and significantly predicts employee affective states.

Job satisfaction is expected to reflect the combined influence of leadership practices, relational experiences, and employees' affective states. Therefore:

H3: AI-mediated leadership practices, leader–member exchange quality, perceived social exchange quality, and employee affective states positively and significantly predict job satisfaction.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationships among AI-mediated leadership practices, relational followership quality, employee affective states, and job satisfaction. A quantitative design was appropriate because the study aimed to measure the selected constructs systematically and assess their statistical relationships (Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

The cross-sectional design allowed data to be collected from employees at a single point in time. This design is suitable for examining current perceptions, attitudes, and emotional experiences in organizational settings (Siedlecki, 2020). Because the independent variables were not experimentally manipulated, the findings represent statistical associations and predictive relationships rather than confirmed causal effects.

4.2 Population and Sample

The target population consisted of full-time employees working in organizations with different levels of exposure to AI-supported people management practices. Relevant applications included performance evaluation, scheduling, task allocation, training recommendations, promotion decisions, and other employment-related activities.

Participants were recruited electronically from different organizational functions and professional backgrounds. A total of 54 usable responses were included in the analysis. Of these participants, 38 employees (70.4%) confirmed that their organizations used AI in people management, nine

(16.7%) reported that their organizations did not, and seven (13.0%) were uncertain. These variations were retained because the study measured employees' perceptions of AI-mediated leadership practices and allowed differences in exposure and awareness to be reflected in the composite scores.

The final sample included employees from operations, human resources, finance, information technology, sales and marketing, and other organizational functions. The respondents also represented different age groups, educational levels, and lengths of employment. However, the relatively small sample limits the generalizability of the findings and requires the results to be interpreted as exploratory.

4.3 Research Instrument and Measurement

Data were collected using a structured electronic questionnaire. The instrument contained demographic questions and five multi-item measures representing the principal study variables. Responses to the construct items were recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

4.3.1 AI-Mediated Leadership Practices

AI-mediated leadership practices were measured using four items assessing employees' perceptions of the transparency, fairness, responsiveness, and influence of AI-supported people management. The items focused on how employees experienced AI involvement rather than merely whether AI systems were present.

4.3.2 Leader–Member Exchange Quality

Leader–member exchange quality was measured using four items adapted from the LMX literature. The items assessed employees' perceptions of trust, support, understanding, and the overall quality of their relationship with their immediate leader. Leader–member exchange measures are widely used to evaluate the relational quality between leaders and followers (Gottfredson et al., 2020; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

4.3.3 Perceived Social Exchange Quality

Perceived social exchange quality was measured using four items addressing organizational support, appreciation, concern for employee well-being, and reciprocity. The measure reflected employees' evaluations of whether their organizations valued their contributions and treated them as partners in a reciprocal employment relationship.

4.3.4 Employee Affective States

Employee affective states were assessed using four items representing positive and negative emotional experiences associated with the workplace. The items captured feelings such as enthusiasm and belonging alongside stress and uncertainty. Negatively worded items were reverse-scored before composite scores were calculated.

4.3.5 Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction was measured through four items assessing employees' general satisfaction with their work and their satisfaction in relation to AI involvement in people management. Negatively worded items were reverse-scored to ensure that higher composite scores consistently represented more favorable outcomes.

Composite scores were calculated by combining the relevant items for each construct. Higher scores indicated more positive perceptions of AI-mediated leadership, stronger relational quality, more favorable affective states, and greater job satisfaction.

4.4 Data Collection Procedures

The questionnaire was administered electronically to enable participation by employees from different organizational and geographical settings. Electronic surveys provide an efficient means of collecting standardized data, although they may be affected by self-selection and response-quality limitations (Andrade, 2020).

Participants received information about the purpose of the study before completing the questionnaire. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed of their right to withdraw. The survey did not request personally identifying information, and the collected responses were treated confidentially.

Completed questionnaires were reviewed before analysis. Responses with substantial missing information or evident response-quality problems were excluded. The resulting dataset contained 54 usable cases.

4.5 Validity and Reliability

Content validity was supported by developing and adapting questionnaire items from the theoretical and empirical literature on AI-mediated leadership, leader-member exchange, perceived organizational support, workplace affect, and job satisfaction. The questionnaire was also reviewed for relevance, clarity, and consistency with the study constructs.

A pilot assessment was conducted before the main data collection to identify unclear wording and improve item comprehension. Necessary revisions were made before distributing the final questionnaire.

Internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha. The results were as follows:

- AI-mediated leadership practices: ($\alpha=.731$)
- Leader-member exchange quality: ($\alpha=.763$)
- Perceived social exchange quality: ($\alpha=.718$)
- Employee affective states: ($\alpha=.692$)
- Job satisfaction: ($\alpha=.704$)

The coefficients ranged from .692 to .763. These values indicated acceptable internal consistency for an exploratory study, although the employee affective states measure was marginally below the conventional .70 benchmark (Taber, 2018). This result should be considered when interpreting findings involving that construct.

4.6 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed through several stages. First, frequencies and percentages were used to describe the respondents' demographic characteristics and organizational exposure to AI. Means and standard deviations were then calculated to summarize the five study constructs.

Second, Cronbach's alpha was used to examine the internal consistency of the multi-item measures. Negatively worded items were reverse-scored before composite scores and reliability coefficients were calculated.

Third, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to assess the direction and strength of the bivariate relationships among AI-mediated leadership practices, leader–member exchange quality, perceived social exchange quality, employee affective states, and job satisfaction.

Finally, simple and multiple regression analyses were used to address the research questions and test the hypotheses. Simple regression assessed the relationships between AI-mediated leadership practices and the two dimensions of relational followership quality. Multiple regression was used to examine the predictors of employee affective states and job satisfaction.

Statistical significance was evaluated at the .05 level. The coefficient of determination (R^2) was used to assess the proportion of variance explained by each model, while standardized beta coefficients were used to compare the relative contributions of the predictors. Because the study used cross-sectional self-report data, the regression results were interpreted as predictive associations rather than evidence of causality.

5. Results

5.1 Respondent Characteristics

A total of 75 questionnaires were distributed, of which 54 usable responses were retained for analysis, representing a usable response rate of 72.0%. The sample included 31 male respondents (57.4%), 21 female respondents (38.9%), and two participants (3.7%) who did not report their gender.

Most respondents were between 20 and 40 years old. Eighteen participants (33.3%) were aged 20–30 years, while 22 participants (40.7%) were aged 31–40 years. Ten respondents (18.5%) were aged 41–50 years, and four (7.4%) were aged 51–60 years.

Regarding education, 27 participants (50.0%) held bachelor's degrees, 16 (29.6%) held master's degrees, six (11.1%) reported secondary-level education, three (5.6%) held doctoral degrees, and two (3.7%) reported other qualifications.

Participants represented several organizational functions, including information technology, operations, human resources, finance, sales and marketing, and other departments. In relation to AI implementation, 38 respondents (70.4%) confirmed that their organizations used AI in people management, nine (16.7%) reported no such implementation, and seven (13.0%) were uncertain.

5.2 Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

Composite scores were calculated for AI-mediated leadership practices, leader–member exchange quality, perceived social exchange quality, employee affective states, and job satisfaction. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and internal consistency coefficients.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics and Reliability of the Study Variables

Variable	Items	Mean	SD	Cronbach's α
AI-Mediated Leadership Practices	4	3.45	0.821	.731
Leader–Member Exchange Quality	4	3.93	0.746	.763
Perceived Social Exchange Quality	4	3.75	0.832	.718
Employee Affective States	4	3.44	0.638	.692
Job Satisfaction	4	3.19	0.672	.704

Note. (N=54). Negatively worded items were reverse-scored before calculating the composite scores.

Leader–member exchange quality had the highest composite mean ((M=3.93)), followed by perceived social exchange quality ((M=3.75)). Job satisfaction had the lowest mean ((M=3.19)). The reliability coefficients ranged from .692 to .763, indicating acceptable internal consistency for an exploratory study. The coefficient for employee affective states was slightly below .70 and should therefore be interpreted with some caution.

5.3 Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was used to examine the relationships among the study variables. As shown in Table 2, all correlations were positive and statistically significant.

Table 2
Pearson Correlations Among the Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. AI-Mediated Leadership Practices	1				
2. Leader–Member Exchange Quality	.512**	1			
3. Perceived Social Exchange Quality	.478**	.621**	1		

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
4. Employee Affective States	.389**	.574**	.537**	1	
5. Job Satisfaction	.463**	.648**	.593**	.671**	1

Note. (N=54). *($p < .01$), two-tailed.

AI-mediated leadership practices were positively correlated with leader–member exchange quality (($r = .512$, $p < .001$)) and perceived social exchange quality (($r = .478$, $p < .001$)). These results indicated that more favorable perceptions of AI-mediated leadership were associated with stronger relational followership quality.

AI-mediated leadership practices were also positively correlated with employee affective states (($r = .389$, $p = .004$)) and job satisfaction (($r = .463$, $p < .001$)). Employee affective states had the strongest correlation with job satisfaction (($r = .671$, $p < .001$)), followed by leader–member exchange quality (($r = .648$, $p < .001$)).

No correlation among the predictor variables exceeded .80. The correlation results therefore did not indicate severe multicollinearity.

5.4 AI-Mediated Leadership and Relational Followership Quality

5.4.1 Prediction of Leader–Member Exchange Quality

Simple linear regression was conducted to examine whether AI-mediated leadership practices predicted leader–member exchange quality. The model was statistically significant, ($F(1,52) = 18.693$, $p < .001$), and explained 26.2% of the variance in leader–member exchange quality (($R^2 = .262$), adjusted ($R^2 = .247$)).

AI-mediated leadership practices had a positive and statistically significant effect on leader–member exchange quality (($B = .523$, $\beta = .512$, $t = 4.324$, $p < .001$)). Thus, employees who evaluated AI-mediated leadership practices more favorably also reported higher-quality relationships with their immediate leaders.

Accordingly, **H1a was supported.**

5.4.2 Prediction of Perceived Social Exchange Quality

A second simple regression model examined whether AI-mediated leadership practices predicted perceived social exchange quality. The model was statistically significant, ($F(1,52) = 14.506$, $p < .001$), and explained 22.9% of the variance in perceived social exchange quality (($R^2 = .229$), adjusted ($R^2 = .213$)).

AI-mediated leadership practices positively and significantly predicted perceived social exchange quality (($B = .496$, $\beta = .478$, $t = 3.808$, $p < .001$)). Favorable perceptions of fairness, transparency,

and responsiveness in AI-mediated leadership were therefore associated with stronger perceptions of organizational support and reciprocity.

Accordingly, **H1b was supported.**

5.5 Prediction of Employee Affective States

Multiple regression analysis was used to examine the joint effects of AI-mediated leadership practices and perceived social exchange quality on employee affective states. The model was statistically significant, ($F(2,51)=14.287, \backslash p<.001$), and explained 36.1% of the variance in employee affective states ($(R^2=.361)$, adjusted ($R^2=.336$)).

Table

3

Regression Analysis Predicting Employee Affective States

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	.892	.394	—	2.264	.028
AI-Mediated Leadership Practices	.287	.112	.312	2.563	.013
Perceived Social Exchange Quality	.341	.108	.384	3.157	.003

Note. Dependent variable: Employee Affective States. (N=54).

Both predictors made statistically significant contributions. AI-mediated leadership practices positively predicted employee affective states ($(\backslash\beta=.312, \backslash p=.013)$), supporting **H2a**. Perceived social exchange quality also positively predicted affective states ($(\backslash\beta=.384, \backslash p=.003)$), supporting **H2b**.

Perceived social exchange quality had the stronger standardized coefficient. This finding indicates that employees' emotional experiences were associated not only with AI-mediated practices themselves but also with how employees evaluated their reciprocal relationship with the organization.

5.6 Prediction of Job Satisfaction

The final multiple regression model examined the joint effects of AI-mediated leadership practices, leader–member exchange quality, perceived social exchange quality, and employee affective states on job satisfaction.

The model was statistically significant, ($F(4,49)=20.134, \backslash p<.001$). The four predictors jointly explained 58.2% of the variance in job satisfaction ($(R^2=.582)$, adjusted ($R^2=.553$)).

Table

4

Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Job Satisfaction

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	.614	.389	—	1.578	.121
AI-Mediated Leadership Practices	.241	.097	.263	2.485	.016
Leader–Member Exchange Quality	.318	.089	.387	3.573	.001
Perceived Social Exchange Quality	.274	.101	.311	2.713	.009
Employee Affective States	.389	.093	.449	4.183	<.001

Note. Dependent variable: Job Satisfaction. (N=54).

All four predictors had statistically significant positive coefficients. Employee affective states were the strongest predictor of job satisfaction ($\beta=.449$, $p<.001$), followed by leader–member exchange quality ($\beta=.387$, $p=.001$), perceived social exchange quality ($\beta=.311$, $p=.009$), and AI-mediated leadership practices ($\beta=.263$, $p=.016$).

The findings demonstrate that job satisfaction was associated with both the quality of AI-mediated leadership and the relational and emotional experiences of employees. Therefore, **H3 was supported.**

5.7 Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Table

5

Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Proposed Relationship	Decision
H1a	AI-mediated leadership practices positively relate to leader–member exchange quality.	Supported
H1b	AI-mediated leadership practices positively relate to perceived social exchange quality.	Supported
H2a	AI-mediated leadership practices positively predict employee affective states.	Supported
H2b	Perceived social exchange quality positively predicts employee affective states.	Supported
H3	AI-mediated leadership practices, relational followership quality, and affective states positively predict job satisfaction.	Supported

Overall, the findings supported the proposed theoretical framework. Favorable perceptions of AI-mediated leadership were associated with stronger relational followership quality and more positive employee affective states. Relational and affective variables, together with AI-mediated leadership practices, also provided substantial explanatory value for job satisfaction.

6. Discussion and Implications

6.1 Discussion of Findings

This study examined how AI-mediated leadership practices relate to relational followership quality, employee affective states, and job satisfaction. The findings supported all the proposed hypotheses and demonstrated that employees' experiences of AI-mediated leadership involve interconnected relational, emotional, and attitudinal dimensions.

6.1.1 AI-Mediated Leadership and Relational Followership Quality

The first research question examined the relationship between AI-mediated leadership practices and relational followership quality, represented by leader–member exchange quality and perceived social exchange quality. AI-mediated leadership practices were positively associated with both dimensions.

AI-mediated leadership practices explained 26.2% of the variance in leader–member exchange quality. This finding suggests that AI does not necessarily weaken the relationship between leaders and employees. When AI-supported practices are perceived as fair, transparent, and responsive, they may contribute to a more favorable evaluation of the leader–employee relationship.

This result is consistent with Leader–Member Exchange Theory, which emphasizes the importance of trust, communication, respect, and reciprocal obligation in leadership relationships (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). AI may support these relational conditions when leaders use it to improve the quality and consistency of their decisions while remaining available to explain outcomes and consider employees' individual circumstances.

However, the finding should not be interpreted as evidence that greater automation automatically improves relational quality. The measure captured employees' evaluations of the quality of AI-mediated leadership practices rather than the mere presence or frequency of AI use. The positive association is therefore more appropriately attributed to responsible implementation than to automation itself.

AI-mediated leadership practices also explained 22.9% of the variance in perceived social exchange quality. Employees who evaluated AI-supported practices positively were more likely to believe that their organizations valued their contributions, treated them fairly, and maintained reciprocal employment relationships.

This result supports Social Exchange Theory, according to which employees interpret organizational practices as signals of support, fairness, and obligation (Blau, 1964). Transparent AI use may communicate organizational responsibility, while opaque or unreviewable decisions may communicate that efficiency is being prioritized over employee welfare. The quality of AI implementation may consequently influence how employees evaluate their broader relationship with the organization.

6.1.2 AI-Mediated Leadership and Employee Affective States

The second research question examined the extent to which AI-mediated leadership practices and perceived social exchange quality predicted employee affective states. Together, the two predictors explained 36.1% of the variance in affective states.

Both predictors were statistically significant, although perceived social exchange quality had the stronger standardized coefficient. This result indicates that employees' emotional experiences were associated not only with AI-supported practices but also with the relational environment surrounding their implementation.

The finding is consistent with Affective Events Theory, which proposes that employees respond emotionally to workplace events according to the meaning they assign to those events (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). An AI-supported decision may produce confidence when it is viewed as fair and understandable, but it may produce anxiety when the process appears opaque or impersonal.

The stronger contribution of perceived social exchange quality suggests that organizational support may help shape employees' emotional responses to AI. Employees who believe that their organizations value their contributions and protect their well-being may be more confident that AI systems will be used responsibly. In contrast, weak perceptions of reciprocity may intensify uncertainty and tension associated with algorithmic decision-making.

The descriptive findings also indicated emotional ambivalence. Respondents could experience enthusiasm and organizational belonging while simultaneously reporting stress or uncertainty regarding AI-supported people management. Employee responses should therefore not be classified as entirely positive or negative. Employees may recognize the operational benefits of AI while remaining concerned about accountability, autonomy, career security, and the loss of human consideration.

6.1.3 Predictors of Job Satisfaction

The third research question examined the extent to which AI-mediated leadership practices, relational followership quality, and employee affective states predicted job satisfaction. The joint model explained 58.2% of the variance in job satisfaction.

Employee affective states emerged as the strongest predictor, followed by leader–member exchange quality, perceived social exchange quality, and AI-mediated leadership practices. This finding highlights the central role of emotional experience in shaping how employees evaluate their jobs.

AI-mediated leadership practices retained a statistically significant contribution when the relational and emotional variables were included. However, their smaller standardized effect indicates that job satisfaction cannot be explained by AI practices alone. Employees evaluate AI-supported management within a broader environment of leadership relationships, organizational reciprocity, and emotional experience.

The importance of leader–member exchange quality demonstrates that human leadership remains central in technologically mediated workplaces. Employees continue to value leaders who understand their work, provide support, communicate clearly, and accept responsibility for consequential decisions. AI may change the information available to leaders, but it does not eliminate the need for relational leadership.

The findings also support the central argument of the study: followership in AI-mediated environments is an active interpretive process. Employees assess the quality of AI-supported practices, connect them to their relationships with leaders and organizations, experience emotional responses, and translate these experiences into broader attitudes such as job satisfaction.

6.2 Theoretical Implications

This study makes three principal theoretical contributions. First, it extends followership research into the context of AI-mediated leadership. Employees are presented as active interpreters of technologically supported authority rather than passive recipients of automated decisions. Their responses depend on how they evaluate fairness, transparency, accountability, and relational meaning.

Second, the findings extend Leader–Member Exchange Theory by demonstrating that leader–follower relationships remain relevant when AI participates in leadership decisions. AI does not replace the relational foundations of leadership. Instead, the quality of its implementation becomes an additional condition through which employees evaluate their leaders.

Third, the study integrates Leader–Member Exchange Theory, Social Exchange Theory, and Affective Events Theory. This integration connects AI-mediated leadership with relational followership quality, employee emotions, and job satisfaction. The findings suggest that technological practices should be examined within the social and emotional systems of the organization rather than as isolated technical interventions.

6.3 Practical Implications

Organizations should treat AI-supported people management as a leadership and employee–relations issue, not solely as a technical project. Several practical implications follow from the findings.

First, organizations should clearly explain when and how AI is used in people management. Employees should understand the information considered by the system, the purpose of its recommendations, and the identity of the person responsible for the final decision.

Second, leaders should remain accountable for AI-supported decisions. Statements implying that “the system made the decision” may weaken trust and prevent meaningful discussion. AI outputs should inform human judgment rather than replace responsibility.

Third, organizations should provide accessible mechanisms through which employees can ask questions, correct inaccurate information, and appeal consequential decisions. Employee voice is especially important when AI influences performance evaluations, promotions, compensation, or career development.

Fourth, leaders should preserve direct interpersonal communication. Sensitive decisions should be communicated with empathy and contextual understanding. AI-generated feedback should not replace meaningful leader–employee conversations.

Finally, organizations should monitor emotional and relational outcomes alongside technical performance. Measures of employee trust, anxiety, perceived fairness, relational quality, and job satisfaction can help identify unintended consequences before they become persistent organizational problems.

6.4 Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, the sample consisted of 54 respondents. Although adequate for the exploratory analyses conducted, the small sample limits statistical power and the generalizability of the findings.

Second, the study used a cross-sectional design. The results identify associations and predictive relationships but do not establish causal direction. Longitudinal research is needed to determine how employee responses change as organizations gain experience with AI-supported people management.

Third, the study relied on self-report measures collected through a single questionnaire. This method may increase common method bias and does not independently verify the level or quality of AI implementation. Future studies should combine employee surveys with managerial assessments, organizational records, interviews, and objective information about AI systems.

Fourth, respondents reported different levels of AI implementation and awareness. While this variation reflects real organizational conditions, future research should distinguish more clearly between employees with direct AI exposure and those with limited or uncertain exposure.

Future studies should employ larger, multi-organizational samples and compare industries, cultures, and levels of AI maturity. Experimental studies could also compare employee responses to equivalent decisions communicated by human leaders, AI systems, and combined human–AI processes. Additional research should examine factors such as AI literacy, technology trust, perceived explainability, employee participation, and tolerance of uncertainty.

The present study did not conduct a formal mediation test. Future research could use longitudinal data and bootstrap indirect-effect analyses to determine whether relational quality and affective states mediate the relationship between AI-mediated leadership and job satisfaction.

7. Conclusion

AI is changing how leadership is practiced and how employees experience followership. The findings of this study demonstrate that the effects associated with AI-supported people management extend beyond efficiency and technical performance. They include the quality of leader–employee relationships, perceptions of organizational reciprocity, employee emotional experiences, and job satisfaction.

Favorable perceptions of AI-mediated leadership practices were associated with stronger leader–member exchange quality and perceived social exchange quality. AI-mediated leadership practices and perceived social exchange quality also significantly predicted employee affective states.

Furthermore, AI-mediated leadership practices, relational followership quality, and affective states jointly explained a substantial proportion of job satisfaction, with employee affective states emerging as the strongest predictor.

These findings indicate that employees do not respond solely to whether AI is present. They respond to how it is used, explained, governed, and incorporated into human relationships. AI-supported systems are more likely to be accepted when employees perceive them as fair, transparent, understandable, and subject to meaningful human oversight.

The evolution of followership in AI-mediated workplaces should therefore be understood as a relational and emotional transformation. Employees remain active organizational actors who interpret authority, evaluate reciprocity, and respond emotionally to management decisions. Technology may support leadership, but it cannot replace accountability, empathy, trust, or meaningful employee voice.

Organizations seeking sustainable value from AI should combine technological capability with responsible governance and relational leadership. The future of AI-mediated leadership will depend not only on the sophistication of organizational systems but also on the ability of leaders to preserve the human foundations of work.

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