



Moral Responsibility and the AI Dilemma: Why Anxious Managers Are More Willing to Support Subordinates' Use of GenAI

Taofen Li*

School of Economics and Management
Xi'an University of Technology
Xi'an, China
59587432@qq.com

Abstract. Previous research has highlighted a prevalent phenomenon of “algorithm aversion” among professional managers. However, it remains unclear whether this aversion extends to their attitudes toward subordinates' use of AI tools. Drawing on moral decision-making theory, this paper develops a theoretical model to investigate how managers' moral responsibility influences their support for subordinates' use of Generative AI (GenAI). The empirical analysis reveals the following key findings: a) managers' moral responsibility is positively associated with their support for subordinates' use of GenAI; b) managers' technological sensitivity mediates the relationship between moral responsibility and their support for subordinates' use of GenAI; and c) managers' moral anxiety positively moderates the relationship between moral responsibility and their support for subordinates' use of GenAI. Specifically, when managers experience heightened moral anxiety, the positive effect of moral responsibility on support for subordinates' use of GenAI is amplified. This study uncovers the mechanisms through which managers' moral responsibility shapes the organizational adoption of GenAI technologies, providing theoretical insights for the implementation and promotion of GenAI within organizations.

Keywords: managers' moral responsibility, support for subordinates' use of GenAI, technological sensitivity, moral anxiety

1 Introduction

The emergence of models such as ChatGPT and DeepSeek marks a revolutionary breakthrough in generative AI (GenAI) technology. While GenAI enables users to efficiently automate the creation of text, code, images, and other forms of content, it has also raised ethical concerns due to its lack of transparency [1]. Scholars have argued that GenAI is deficient in common sense reasoning, cognitive flexibility, and social contextual awareness, potentially leading to significant risks[2]. Existing studies indicate that ordinary employees are more inclined to adopt AI tools, driven by factors such as work exhaustion and the desire for increased efficiency, with some

even developing a reliance on algorithmic tools [3]. In contrast, managers' professional confidence and heightened risk sensitivity often lead to their aversion to algorithmic systems[4].

The contrasting attitudes of managers and subordinates toward the use of GenAI raise critical questions: Should managers support or oppose subordinates' use of GenAI in the workplace? What are the key factors and underlying mechanisms influencing such support or opposition? Drawing on moral decision-making theory, this study argues that managers' moral responsibility motivates them to support subordinates' use of GenAI in their work. Furthermore, moral responsibility is positively associated with technological sensitivity, which, in turn, shapes their supportive attitudes. Moral anxiety, as a moderating factor, positively reinforces the relationship between moral responsibility and support for subordinates' use of GenAI. This study offers several contributions. It validates the impact of managers' moral responsibility on their support for subordinates' GenAI usage, highlights the mediating role of technological sensitivity, and uncovers the moderating effect of moral anxiety. These findings provide empirical support for organizational decisions regarding AI adoption and offer insights to help managers navigate the balance between technological applications and ethical responsibilities.

2 Theoretical Foundation and Research Hypotheses

This study is grounded in moral decision-making theory to examine managers' support for subordinates' use of GenAI. The theory explains how individuals, when confronted with moral and ethical dilemmas, make ethically sound decisions by integrating moral judgments, personal values, emotional responses, and prevailing social norms[5]. The framework in[6] divides the moral decision-making process into three stages: moral awareness, moral judgment, and moral intention or behavior. This framework informs the current study's analytical model, which follows the sequence of “moral cognition-technological evaluation-decision output.” We argue that when assessing the use of GenAI by subordinates, managers-guided by ethical principles-are likely to overcome their inherent algorithm aversion, conduct a balanced evaluation of GenAI's potential and risks, and ultimately make decisions that serve both organizational interests and subordinates' professional development.

2.1 Managers' Moral Responsibility and Support for Subordinates' Use of GenAI

Moral responsibility refers to an individual's psychological disposition to voluntarily assume ethical obligations, considering the broader social impact and long-term implications of their actions[7]. In the context of GenAI, moral responsibility involves a heightened awareness of potential ethical risks and a commitment to balancing organizational interests with social responsibility. According to moral decision-making theory, when managers are faced with technology adoption decisions-particularly those that influence subordinates' work practices and entail moral risk-they view mor-

al responsibility as a critical factor in the decision-making process, seeking to balance technological efficiency with ethical safeguards[8].

Managers' moral responsibility is reflected in their ability to assess the benefits and risks of GenAI, ensure ethical compliance in its implementation, and actively promote organizational technological innovation[9]. In terms of risk management, managers who exhibit high moral responsibility are more proactive in mitigating technological risks. They are more likely to provide technical training, design robust risk management frameworks, and ensure that subordinates use new technologies within compliant and well-regulated environments[10]. From an ethical compliance standpoint, Reference[11] suggests that morally responsible managers are more inclined to make ethically sound decisions, especially when confronted with GenAI-related issues such as data privacy and algorithmic bias. Regarding technological innovation, these managers are more likely to foster an organizational climate that supports innovation by modeling ethical leadership and cultivating a culture that enhances subordinates' receptiveness to technology[12]. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Managers' moral responsibility positively influences their support for subordinates' use of GenAI.

2.2 The Mediating Role of Technological Sensitivity

Technological sensitivity refers to the extent to which managers perceive, understand, and accept the characteristics, application potential, and associated risks of emerging technologies. Drawing on technology cognition theory, individuals' perceptions and understandings of technology are shaped by cognitive processes, mental models, and socio-cultural contexts. These cognitive structures, along with emotional responses, jointly influence their acceptance of new technologies [13].

Technological sensitivity acts as a crucial mediating mechanism between managers' moral responsibility and their support for subordinates' use of GenAI. First, moral responsibility is positively associated with technological sensitivity: managers with a strong ethical orientation are more likely to demonstrate heightened awareness of both the risks and opportunities inherent in emerging technologies[14]. Second, technological sensitivity significantly influences managers' decisions regarding the adoption of new technologies. When managers perceive the potential implications of a technology for their organizations and employees, they tend to approach adoption decisions with greater deliberation and caution[15]. In this way, technological sensitivity channels managers' moral responsibility into concrete supportive behaviors by encouraging the development of targeted support strategies. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2: Managers' technological sensitivity mediates the relationship between moral responsibility and their support for subordinates' use of GenAI.

2.3 The Moderating Role of Moral Anxiety

Moral anxiety, as an affective variable, moderates the relationship between cognition and behavior, particularly in environments marked by high technological uncertainty

[16]. It refers to the negative emotional state that arises from ethical uncertainty in technological decision-making, often manifesting as concerns about potential loss of control or ethical misalignment. Reference[17] highlighted that enhancing the transparency, fairness, and controllability of AI systems can alleviate such anxiety and facilitate technology adoption. However, the inherently creative yet opaque nature of Generative AI (GenAI) forces managers to weigh efficiency gains against ethical risks[18]. When moral anxiety is present, managers are more likely to conduct thorough ethical evaluations and adjust their support for subordinates' use of AI accordingly.

Managers with both a strong sense of moral responsibility and heightened moral anxiety tend to implement ethical guidelines and strengthen technical oversight to mitigate risks, allowing them to support GenAI initiatives with greater confidence rather than resorting to avoidance strategies. When managers interpret ethical concerns as central to their moral responsibility, this sense of duty may drive proactive ethical risk management, helping to reduce anxiety. In this regard, moral anxiety not only signals concern about the potential loss of control but also motivates managers to guide subordinates in navigating the ethical dimensions of GenAI, thereby reinforcing their support for its use. Accordingly, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3: Managers' moral anxiety positively moderates the relationship between moral responsibility and their support for subordinates' use of GenAI.

The theoretical model is illustrated in Fig. 1.

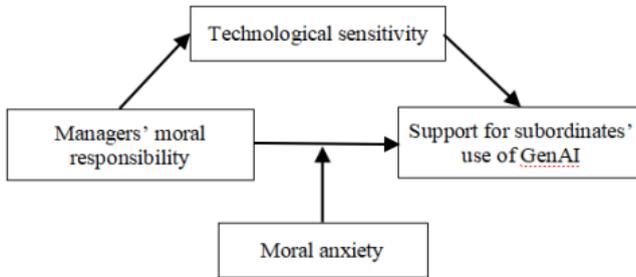


Fig. 1. Theoretical model.

3 Research Design

3.1 Sample Selection and Data Collection

The sample selection and data collection process comprised two stages: a pilot test and a large-scale survey. The pilot test involved MBA students from the business school at the researcher's institution, all of whom are working managers, which aligns with the research objectives. A total of 75 questionnaires were distributed, with 71 returned. After screening, 8 invalid responses were excluded, resulting in 63 valid responses. Among the respondents, 54.6% were male, 45.4% were female, and ages ranged from 23 to 52. A reliability and validity analysis was conducted, including the

calculation of Cronbach's α coefficient and CITC values. Based on the results, adjustments were made to some items, and the final formal questionnaire was developed.

The formal questionnaire was distributed through three channels: 1) The MBA office of the business school distributed it to alumni, collecting 141 valid responses; 2) It was distributed within the company, yielding 68 responses; 3) It was distributed via a targeted matching platform, collecting 150 responses. Invalid questionnaires were filtered based on respondents' background information, resulting in a final sample of 307 valid responses. Among the respondents, 48.7% were male, 73.3% were aged 30-49, the most common managerial experience was 4-10 years, and 84.0% were middle managers. The service and information industries accounted for the largest proportion, representing 32.6% of the sample.

The results of the normality test indicated that the sample data approximated a normal distribution, meeting the requirements for empirical analysis and allowing for subsequent statistical testing.

3.2 Measurement Instruments

All scales used in this study were adapted from established instruments widely employed in prior authoritative research, ensuring strong reliability and validity. Each scale utilized a 7-point Likert format, with respondents indicating their level of agreement (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree).

Moral Responsibility of Managers: This construct was measured using five items adapted from [19] and revised to reflect the GenAI context. An example item is, "I am responsible for ensuring that my subordinates comply with legal and ethical norms when using GenAI." Managers assessed their perceived moral responsibility. Cronbach's α indicated acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha=0.765$).

Support for Subordinates' Use of GenAI: Based on [20] and contextualized for GenAI applications, this scale included three items, such as, "I encourage my subordinates to use GenAI in their work." It assessed managerial support for subordinates' use of GenAI. Internal consistency was high ($\alpha=0.812$).

Moral Anxiety of Managers: Adapted from [21] and modified to fit the study's ethical decision-making framework, this four-item scale measured managers' moral anxiety. An example item is, "I am concerned about potential ethical issues that may arise when subordinates use GenAI." The scale demonstrated strong internal consistency ($\alpha=0.894$).

Control variables: This construct was assessed using three items adapted from [22] and revised to suit the study context. An example item is, "I actively keep up with the latest developments in GenAI technology." This scale evaluated managers' sensitivity to emerging GenAI technologies. Cronbach's $\alpha=0.767$.

Control Variables. Following [23], we controlled for position, gender, age, industry, and management experience, as these demographic characteristics may influence key variables. Specifically, the control variables were coded as follows: gender (1=male, 2=female); age(1=20-29 years, 2=30-39years, 3=40-49years, 4=50years and above); industry (1=manufacturing, 2=finance, 3=internet/information technology,

4=government/public services, 5=education, 6=healthcare, 7=construction/real estate, 8=energy, 9=retail, 0=other); position (1=senior manager, 2=middle manager, 3=entry-level manager, 4=other); and management experience (1=1-3 years, 2=4-6 years, 3=7-10years, 4=more than 10years).

4 Results

4.1 Confirmatory Factor Analysis and Common Method Bias Testing

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted using Mplus 8.3 to evaluate the discriminant validity of the four main constructs: managers' Moral Responsibility (RES), Technological Sensitivity (TEC), Support for Subordinates' Use of GenAI (SUR), and Moral Anxiety (ANX). The four-factor model demonstrated an acceptable fit to the data: $\chi^2/df = 1.809$, RMSEA=0.044, SRMR=0.069, CFI=0.972, and TLI=0.964—all exceeding the recommended thresholds. Furthermore, the square roots of the AVEs for each construct were greater than the absolute values of the inter-construct correlations, confirming discriminant validity. Compared to alternative models, the four-factor model yielded superior fit indices, further validating its discriminant validity.

As all measures were self-reported by managers, we assessed potential common method bias (CMB) using two approaches: (i) Harman's One-Factor Test: An unrotated principal component analysis revealed four factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, accounting for 68.934% of the total variance. The first factor accounted for 29.602%, which is well below the 50% threshold, indicating that CMB was not a major concern. (ii) Unmeasured Latent Method Factor Technique: A latent method factor was incorporated into the structural equation model to assess model fit. The model with the common method factor ($\chi^2/df = 2.185$, CFI=0.934, TLI=0.921, RMSEA=0.058) did not show a significant improvement over the model without the method factor ($\chi^2/df = 1.834$, CFI=0.949, TLI=0.937, RMSEA=0.041), suggesting that common method bias did not substantially affect the results.

4.2 Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

Descriptive statistics and correlation analyses were conducted using SPSS23.0 to examine the means, standard deviations, correlation coefficients, and the square roots of the AVEs for all main variables. The results revealed that managers' Moral Responsibility was significantly positively associated with Technological Sensitivity ($\beta = 0.289$, $p < 0.01$); Technological Sensitivity was significantly positively related to Support for Subordinates' Use of GenAI ($\beta = 0.549$, $p < 0.01$); and Moral Anxiety was significantly negatively associated with Support for Subordinates' Use of GenAI ($\beta = -0.397$, $p < 0.01$). These findings provide a foundation for subsequent hypothesis testing.

All four constructs demonstrated acceptable reliability and validity. Cronbach's α coefficients exceeded 0.7, AVE values were above 0.5, and Composite Reliability (CR) values surpassed the 0.7 threshold, indicating strong internal consistency and convergent validity. Furthermore, for each construct, the square root of its AVE was greater

than the absolute values of its correlations with any other construct, confirming adequate discriminant validity.

4.3 Hypothesis Testing Results

Main Effects and Mediation Analysis. To begin, multicollinearity was assessed. The variance inflation factor (VIF) values for managers' Moral Responsibility, Moral Anxiety, and Support for Subordinates' Use of GenAI were 1.219, 1.220, and 1.292, respectively—all below the commonly accepted threshold of 5—indicating no concerns about multicollinearity. The Durbin-Watson statistic was close to 2, suggesting no autocorrelation in the residuals. Subsequent linear regression analysis revealed a significant positive effect of managers' Moral Responsibility on Support for Subordinates' Use of GenAI ($\beta=0.303$, $t=3.478$, $p=0.001$), providing empirical support for Hypothesis 1. To examine the mediation effect, a model was constructed in which Technological Sensitivity served as the mediating variable. As shown in Table 1, Model 1 demonstrated that, after controlling for gender, age, industry, management position, and managerial experience, Moral Responsibility significantly predicted Technological Sensitivity ($\beta=0.276$, $p<0.001$). Model 4 further indicated that Technological Sensitivity significantly predicted Support for Subordinates' Use of GenAI ($\beta=0.671$, $p<0.001$). Bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples was conducted to test both direct and indirect effects. As presented in Table 2, the direct effect of Moral Responsibility on Support for GenAI use was not significant ($\beta=0.131$, 95% CI=[-0.027, 0.289]), while the indirect effect via Technological Sensitivity was significant ($\beta=0.172$, 95% CI=[0.072, 0.250]). The total effect was also significant ($\beta=0.303$, 95% CI=[0.132, 0.474]). These results confirm the mediating role of Technological Sensitivity, thereby supporting Hypothesis 2.

Moderation Analysis. The potential moderating role of managers' Moral Anxiety in the relationship between Moral Responsibility and Support for Subordinates' Use of GenAI was then investigated. Specifically, the analysis examined whether this relationship varies across different levels of Moral Anxiety. To test the interaction effect, all variables were mean-centered, and the interaction term (RES \times ANX) was standardized. In Table 1, Model 2 showed a significant positive effect of Moral Responsibility on Technological Sensitivity ($\beta=0.314$, $p<0.001$). Model 3, which included the interaction term, revealed a significantly positive coefficient ($\beta=2.371$, $p<0.001$), offering support for Hypothesis 3. The moderation effect was further examined via bootstrapping (5,000 resamples) using Mplus 8.3. Table 2 indicates that at high versus low levels of Moral Anxiety (mean \pm 1 SD), the conditional effect of Moral Responsibility on Support for GenAI use was significantly stronger ($\beta=0.701$, 95% CI=[0.166, 1.236]), as the confidence interval excluded zero. To facilitate interpretation of the interaction effect, a simple slopes plot was generated. The results indicated that the positive relationship between Moral Responsibility and Support for Subordinates' Use of GenAI was more pronounced under conditions of high Moral Anxiety, as reflected in a steeper slope, while the relationship weakened under lower anxiety levels. Collectively, these findings confirm that Moral Anxiety functions as a significant positive

moderator, amplifying the effect of Moral Responsibility on Support for Subordinates' Use of GenAI. This provides robust support for Hypothesis 3.

TABLE I. REGRESSION ANALYSIS RESULTS

Variables	TEC		SUR	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Control variables				
Gender	0.145	0.110	0.094	0.161
Age	-0.172	-0.165	-0.056	0.022
Industry	-0.013	-0.006	-0.029	-0.034
Position	0.176	0.147	-0.103	-0.100
Experience	0.117	0.077	0.118	0.142
Independent variables				
RES	0.276***	** 0.314*	- 0.396***	
TEC				** 0.671*
Moderating variables				
ANX		- 0.132***	- 1.798**	
Interaction terms				
RES × ANX			* 2.371**	
R^2	0.157	0.226	0.380	0.244
ΔR^2	-	** 0.069*	* 0.154**	-

Note: Dependent variable = SUR, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; ΔR^2 represents the change from Model 1 to Model 2 and Model 3.

5 Discussion

Guided by moral decision-making theory, this study elucidates the mechanisms through which managers' Moral Responsibility influences their Support for Subordinates' Use of GenAI. The empirical findings reveal three key insights: a) Moral Responsibility positively predicts managers' support for subordinates' use of GenAI; b) Technological Sensitivity serves as a full mediator in this relationship; and c) Moral Anxiety positively moderates the impact of Moral Responsibility on such support.

TABLE II. INDIRECT EFFECTS AND MODERATING EFFECTS

Path	Est.	SE	t	p	95% CI	
					low	high
Direct effect						
RES → SUR	0.131	0.081	1.624	0.107	- 0.027	0.289

Path	Est.	SE	t	p	95% CI	
					low	high
Indirect effect						
RES→TEC→SUR	0.172	0.046	3.783	0.000	0.072	0.250
Total effect						
RES→SUR	0.303	0.087	3.478	0.001	0.132	0.474
Moderating effect						
High(+SD)	0.773	0.194	3.985	0.000	0.393	1.153
Low(+SD)	0.072	0.192	0.376	0.144	-0.304	0.448
Differences	0.701	0.273	2.567	0.011	0.066	1.236

Note: Sample size is 307, coefficients are unstandardized, and the Bootstrap sample size is 5000.

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

This research contributes to the theoretical advancement of organizational behavior and AI technology management in three distinct ways:

Expanding the Perspective on GenAI Adoption: Anchored in moral decision-making theory, this study shifts the analytical focus from individual-level adoption behavior to managerial support for subordinates' adoption. It proposes a “moral cognition-(technological) moral evaluation-adoption decision” framework, illustrating how managers' Moral Responsibility, Technological Sensitivity, and Moral Anxiety jointly shape their support tendencies. This model offers a theoretical foundation for guiding managerial decision-making amid AI-driven organizational transformation.

Bridging divergent views in technology management theory: Previous research has highlighted ongoing debates regarding the relationship between managerial technological competence and adoption tendencies[24]. By incorporating the moderating role of Moral Anxiety, this study provides a novel perspective. It demonstrates that managers with a strong sense of Moral Responsibility are neither unconditionally supportive nor reflexively resistant to GenAI. Instead, they engage in morally grounded evaluations, carefully weighing technological benefits against ethical risks. This balanced approach offers an explanation for why some managers adopt a “prudent innovation” strategy when navigating high-risk technologies.

Integrating ethics into technology management discourse: By applying moral decision-making theory, this research enhances the understanding of how managers utilize Technological Sensitivity to move beyond the assumption of technological neutrality. Technological Sensitivity, informed by a sense of Moral Responsibility, enables managers to recognize the ethical implications of GenAI and factor them into their adoption decisions. This finding supports the call made by [25] to embed digital ethics into AI practice and offers valuable insights for promoting ethically responsible environments for GenAI adoption.

5.2 Practical Implications

The findings of this study offer valuable insights for organizations undergoing AI transformation, managers, and AI development institutions:

Addressing ethical challenges in AI-driven transformation: This study underscores the critical role of Moral Responsibility in shaping organizational AI adoption. To ensure the responsible deployment of AI, organizations should establish a comprehensive framework for moral responsibility in managerial decision-making. Key initiatives include forming AI ethics committees, clearly defining the boundaries of AI applications, conducting regular ethical assessments, and publishing transparency reports to enhance public trust.

Strengthening Technological Sensitivity and ethical decision-making among managers: Managers must cultivate both Technological Sensitivity and Moral Responsibility, as these factors significantly influence their support for subordinates' use of GenAI. Managers who exhibit a strong sense of Moral Responsibility are more likely to navigate ethical dilemmas in technology adoption with greater caution. Therefore, it is imperative for managers to proactively develop Technological Sensitivity, identify potential ethical risks, and utilize Moral Anxiety as a driver of ethical decision-making. Incorporating ethical evaluations into technology adoption strategies is crucial for preventing reckless implementation and excessive innovation.

Integrating ethical responsibility into AI development: AI development institutions must strike a balance between technological progress and ethical accountability. Collaborating with ethics experts can help ensure the design of AI systems that comply with ethical standards, particularly with regard to self-learning and decision-making processes. Additionally, fostering ethical awareness and a sense of social responsibility among R&D leaders is essential for addressing potential ethical risks at their root.

5.3 Research Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations that present opportunities for future research. First, the data predominantly come from the finance, internet/information, and education industries, which together represent 74.6% of the sample. These sectors are characterized by high technological sensitivity and strong ethical regulatory awareness. To improve the generalizability of the theoretical model, future research should explore industries such as manufacturing, public services, and healthcare, where the dynamics of ethics and technology may differ considerably. Second, the cross-sectional design allows for an examination of relationships among key variables but does not account for time-varying effects. Future studies should employ experience sampling methods to track managers over multiple time points, assessing whether the influence of moral responsibility on their support tendencies fluctuates in response to technological advancements and adoption cycles. Finally, this study focuses on individual-level psychological mechanisms, while organizational contextual factors may also play a significant role in shaping managerial decision-making. Future research should integrate organizational-level variables, such as examining whether a strong ethical corporate culture moderates the impact of moral anxiety. Furthermore, cross-level mediation mechanisms should be further explored, including whether an organization's AI governance maturity enhances managerial technological sensitivity. Despite these limita-

tions, this study offers novel insights into how managerial moral responsibility influences AI adoption support, providing a theoretical foundation for ethical AI governance within organizations.

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