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AI Involvement and Psychological Safety: The Mediating Role of Psychological Ownership in Human–AI Collaboration

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Abstract

The increasing integration of artificial intelligence (AI) in collaborative work environments raises important questions about how AI involvement influences employees' psychological experiences. Drawing on organizational psychology and human–AI collaboration research, this study examines the relationship between AI involvement, psychological ownership, and psychological safety. Specifically, it proposes that AI involvement may influence psychological safety through its impact on psychological ownership. A scenario-based experiment with 74 participants was conducted using a between-subject design with two conditions representing different levels of AI involvement. Participants completed measures of AI involvement, psychological ownership, and psychological safety. Data were analyzed using regression analysis and mediation effect testing with PROCESS Model 4. The results show that psychological ownership significantly and positively predicts psychological safety. However, AI involvement does not significantly predict psychological ownership, and the hypothesized mediating effect of psychological ownership is not supported. These findings suggest that while psychological ownership plays an important role in fostering psychological safety, AI involvement may not directly influence ownership perceptions. This study contributes to the emerging literature on human–AI collaboration by highlighting the importance of psychological ownership in shaping psychologically safe work environments and by suggesting that the psychological effects of AI involvement may operate through more complex mechanisms than previously assumed.

Keywords

human–AI collaboration, psychological ownership, psychological safety, AI involvement, organizational psychology, Mediating effect analysis

1. Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) is rapidly transforming contemporary workplaces, particularly within knowledge-intensive and decision-oriented tasks. Rather than functioning solely as passive tools, AI systems increasingly participate in task execution, content generation, and decision support, giving rise to new forms of human–AI collaboration. Across industries, employees now work alongside intelligent systems that contribute directly to work outputs, reshaping traditional assumptions about how work is performed and how

contributions are distributed. As organizations continue to integrate AI technologies into everyday workflows, understanding the psychological consequences of human–AI collaboration has become an important challenge for organizational research.

While early research on AI adoption has largely emphasized efficiency, productivity, and technological acceptance, emerging evidence suggests that AI integration also alters employees' subjective psychological experiences. When AI systems participate actively in task completion, the boundaries of authorship and personal contribution may become less clear. Employees may no longer perceive work outcomes as fully originating from their own effort, potentially reshaping their psychological relationship with their work. Such shifts are particularly relevant to psychological ownership—the feeling that a target or outcome is "mine"—which plays a central role in motivating engagement and shaping workplace attitudes. Despite its theoretical relevance, little is known about how AI involvement influences psychological ownership in collaborative work contexts.

Existing research on human–AI collaboration has primarily focused on performance outcomes, trust in AI systems, and technology acceptance processes. Although these perspectives provide valuable insights into how individuals interact with intelligent technologies, they offer limited understanding of the psychological mechanisms through which AI participation influences broader workplace experiences. In particular, prior studies have rarely examined how AI involvement affects employees' sense of ownership over work outcomes or how such ownership perceptions subsequently shape interpersonal functioning at work. Moreover, psychological safety—an essential condition for open communication and learning in organizations—has traditionally been explained through leadership, team climate, and organizational culture, with limited attention given to technological antecedents. Consequently, the psychological pathway linking AI involvement to psychological safety remains insufficiently understood.

To address these gaps, the present study proposes a psychological mechanism explaining how AI involvement influences employees' psychological safety through psychological ownership. Drawing on psychological ownership theory and research on human–AI collaboration, this study argues that increased AI participation may weaken individuals' perceived control and personal investment in work outcomes, thereby reducing psychological ownership. Lower ownership perceptions may subsequently undermine psychological safety by decreasing individuals' confidence in expressing ideas and engaging openly in workplace interactions. To test this mechanism, a simulated workplace task experiment was conducted using a between-subject design comparing different levels of AI involvement. Mediation analysis was employed to examine whether psychological ownership transmits the psychological effects of AI involvement on psychological safety.

This study makes several contributions to the literature. First, it extends psychological ownership theory into AI-augmented work environments by identifying technological participation as a novel antecedent of ownership perceptions. Second, it advances research on human–AI collaboration by uncovering a psychological mechanism that connects technological involvement with employee workplace experiences, moving beyond performance-centered perspectives. Third, the study contributes to psychological safety research by introducing AI involvement as an upstream contextual factor influencing interpersonal risk-taking through individual psychological processes. Collectively, these contributions highlight the importance of considering psychological sustainability when designing and implementing AI-supported work systems.

2. Literature Review & Hypothesis Development

2.1 Human–AI Collaboration

Recent advances in artificial intelligence (AI) have fundamentally transformed the nature of work, particularly in knowledge-intensive and cognitively demanding occupations. AI systems are increasingly capable of performing analytical, creative, and decision-support functions that were traditionally considered uniquely human, thereby reshaping how work tasks are organized and completed [1, 24]. Rather than merely automating routine labor, contemporary AI technologies augment human capabilities and participate directly in problem-solving processes, leading organizations to redesign workflows around human–machine interaction.

As AI capabilities expand, the relationship between humans and technology has gradually shifted from tool usage toward collaborative partnership. Scholars have increasingly conceptualized AI not as passive instruments but as active collaborators that contribute to joint task performance [2]. Research on hybrid intelligence suggests that effective outcomes often emerge from the complementary strengths of humans and AI systems working together [3]. Similarly, organizational studies indicate that AI systems now function as decision partners that influence information processing, coordination, and responsibility distribution within teams [4, 25]. This transformation marks a fundamental change in how employees perceive their role in task completion, as cognitive authority and contribution are increasingly shared between human workers and intelligent systems.

Beyond performance outcomes, recent research has begun to highlight the psychological consequences of human–AI collaboration. Interaction with AI agents can shape individuals' perceptions of trust, competence, and agency during task execution [5]. Moreover, individuals often respond differently to outcomes produced with AI assistance compared to purely human-generated results, suggesting that AI involvement may alter subjective experiences related to responsibility and authorship [6]. As AI increasingly participates in creative and cognitive processes, employees may experience changes in how they perceive ownership over work outcomes. Understanding these psychological responses is therefore essential for explaining how AI integration influences workplace experiences beyond efficiency and productivity.

2.2 Psychological Ownership

Psychological ownership refers to the state in which individuals feel as though a target of ownership, whether material or immaterial, is "theirs" [7]. Unlike legal ownership, psychological ownership reflects a subjective psychological experience characterized by feelings of possession and personal connection toward an object, task, or outcome. Within organizational contexts, employees frequently develop psychological ownership toward their work, ideas, or organizational roles, which shapes motivation, responsibility, and behavioral engagement [8].

According to psychological ownership theory, such feelings emerge through three primary routes: control over the target, intimate knowledge of the target, and personal investment of the self into the target [7]. First, perceived control enables individuals to influence outcomes and decisions, fostering a sense that the target reflects their agency. Second, gaining deep knowledge and familiarity strengthens cognitive attachment by allowing individuals to understand and predict the target's characteristics. Third, self-investment—such as effort, time, and creativity—creates a psychological linkage between the individual and the object, reinforcing the perception that the outcome embodies part of the self. These mechanisms collectively explain how individuals come to internalize work outcomes as extensions of their identity.

Empirical research has consistently demonstrated that psychological ownership plays a critical role in shaping workplace attitudes and behaviors. Employees who experience stronger ownership tend to exhibit greater responsibility and stewardship toward organizational outcomes [9]. Psychological ownership has also been associated with increased intrinsic motivation and proactive engagement, as individuals are more willing to invest effort in outcomes they perceive as personally meaningful [10]. Furthermore, ownership feelings strengthen psychological attachment and valuation processes, leading individuals to evaluate self-related objects more positively [11]. A comprehensive review by Dawkins et al. [12] further confirms that psychological ownership functions as an important psychological mechanism linking workplace structures with employee motivation and behavior.

To facilitate empirical investigation, prior research has developed validated measurement approaches to assess psychological ownership perceptions. Among these, the scale proposed by Avey et al. [13] has been widely adopted in organizational research due to its reliability and construct validity. This scale conceptualizes psychological ownership as a measurable psychological state reflecting individuals' sense of possession toward their work or organizational targets, providing a foundation for examining how contextual factors influence ownership perceptions.

Taken together, psychological ownership represents a central psychological process through which individuals interpret their relationship with work outcomes. Because ownership feelings depend heavily on perceived control, knowledge, and personal investment, changes in work structures or task participation may alter the extent to which individuals experience ownership. In contexts where cognitive contributions and

decision authority are shared with technological agents, the formation of psychological ownership may therefore be affected, providing a theoretical basis for examining its role within human–AI collaboration.

2.3 AI Involvement and Psychological Ownership

As artificial intelligence becomes increasingly embedded in work processes, employees' experiences of agency and control during task completion may fundamentally change. Research on digital technologies suggests that advanced technological systems can reshape how individuals perceive their role in producing outcomes, particularly when decision-making authority is partially transferred to algorithmic systems [14]. In human–AI collaboration contexts, AI systems do not merely assist execution but actively participate in generating recommendations, analyses, and outputs, thereby altering the extent to which individuals perceive themselves as primary contributors to task outcomes.

Studies on algorithmic management further indicate that technological involvement may reduce perceived autonomy and control by structuring workflows and guiding decision processes through automated logic [15]. When individuals experience reduced discretion over how work is performed, opportunities for self-investment and personal influence—two key antecedents of psychological ownership—may diminish. Similarly, research on automation perception shows that individuals often attribute part of task performance to technological systems rather than themselves when automation plays a salient role, which can weaken feelings of personal contribution and authorship. Experimental evidence also demonstrates that AI involvement can reduce perceived personal agency, leading individuals to feel less responsible for outcomes generated with algorithmic assistance [16].

Because psychological ownership emerges from perceived control and personal investment [7], reduced agency and autonomy in AI-assisted tasks may undermine individuals' sense that work outcomes genuinely belong to them. As AI participation increases, employees may therefore experience weaker psychological ownership toward collaborative outputs.

H1: AI involvement negatively predicts psychological ownership.

2.4 Psychological Ownership and Psychological Safety

Psychological safety refers to a shared belief that individuals can express themselves without fear of negative interpersonal consequences, such as embarrassment, rejection, or punishment [17]. Within organizational settings, psychological safety plays a critical role in enabling open communication, learning behaviors, and interpersonal risk-taking. A comprehensive review by Edmondson and Lei [18] highlights psychological safety as a foundational condition supporting employee engagement and adaptive performance, particularly in environments characterized by uncertainty and collaboration.

Psychological ownership may serve as an important psychological antecedent of psychological safety. When individuals perceive work outcomes as "theirs," they are more likely to experience responsibility, personal investment, and identity connection with their tasks, which can increase confidence in expressing ideas and participating actively in work processes. Empirical research demonstrates that stronger ownership perceptions are associated with proactive behaviors such as voice and constructive suggestion, which rely heavily on feelings of interpersonal safety [19]. Furthermore, meta-analytic evidence indicates that psychological safety is positively linked to motivational and behavioral outcomes that emerge when individuals feel secure in contributing their perspectives [20]. Because psychological ownership strengthens individuals' perceived legitimacy and psychological attachment to their work, it may reduce perceived interpersonal risk and promote safer self-expression within task contexts.

Accordingly, individuals who experience stronger psychological ownership are expected to report higher levels of psychological safety.

H2: Psychological ownership positively predicts psychological safety.

2.5 The Mediating Role of Psychological Ownership

Building on the preceding arguments, psychological ownership may function as a psychological mechanism linking AI involvement to psychological safety. Mediation analysis provides a theoretical

framework for examining how an independent variable influences an outcome through an intervening psychological process [21]. Rather than assuming a direct relationship alone, mediation models allow researchers to identify underlying explanatory pathways that clarify why certain effects occur. Recent methodological advances further emphasize the importance of testing indirect effects using bootstrap approaches, which offer more accurate estimates of mediation effects compared to traditional causal-step procedures [22].

In the context of human–AI collaboration, increased AI involvement may reduce individuals' perceived control and personal investment, thereby weakening psychological ownership (as proposed in H1). Reduced ownership may subsequently diminish individuals' willingness to express themselves and engage confidently in task-related interactions, leading to lower psychological safety (as proposed in H2). Consistent with contemporary mediation modeling frameworks implemented through the PROCESS analytical approach [23], psychological ownership is therefore expected to transmit the psychological influence of AI involvement on psychological safety.

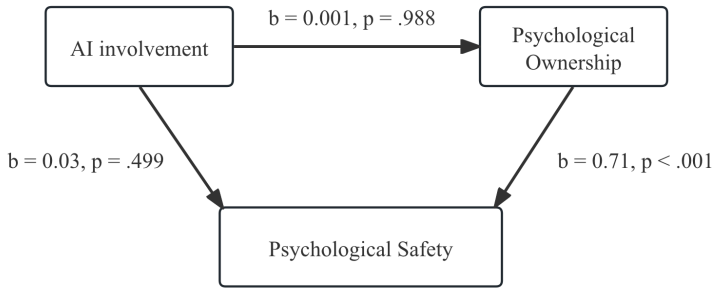
H3: Psychological ownership mediates the relationship between AI involvement and psychological safety.

2.6 Integrated Theoretical Model

Taken together, the preceding sections propose an integrated framework explaining how AI involvement shapes psychological experiences in collaborative work contexts. Increased AI participation may weaken individuals' perceived control and personal contribution, thereby reducing psychological ownership (H1). Psychological ownership, in turn, fosters a sense of confidence and openness that enhances psychological safety (H2). Accordingly, psychological ownership is expected to function as a mediating mechanism linking AI involvement to psychological safety (H3).

By integrating perspectives from human–AI collaboration and organizational psychology, the proposed model conceptualizes AI involvement as a contextual factor that influences organizational psychology through ownership perceptions. The overall conceptual model is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Mediation model with unstandardized coefficients



Note. AI involvement did not significantly predict psychological ownership (b = 0.001, p = .988). Psychological ownership significantly and positively predicted psychological safety (b = 0.71, p < .001). The direct effect of AI involvement on psychological safety was not significant (b = 0.03, p = .499). The indirect effect was not significant, 95% CI [-0.080, 0.089].

3. Method

3.1 Participants

A total of 74 undergraduate students were recruited through an online survey platform. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. The sample consisted of 32 males (43.2%) and 42 females (56.8%), with a mean age of 20.3 years. All participants were full-time students from a comprehensive university and had prior experience using AI-based tools (e.g., writing assistants or translation software), ensuring familiarity with the experimental context.

Although the sample was relatively homogeneous in terms of educational background, it is appropriate for experimental research focusing on psychological mechanisms in emerging human–AI collaboration

contexts. The use of student participants is consistent with prior studies in organizational and behavioral research, particularly when examining perceptions, attitudes, and cognitive responses to technology.

3.2 Experimental Design

The study employed a between-subject experimental design with two conditions: low AI involvement and high AI involvement. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions. The level of AI involvement served as the independent variable in this experiment.

3.3 Procedure

Participants first read a simulated workplace scenario in which they were asked to imagine themselves working as a market assistant responsible for completing an English market analysis report.

Depending on the assigned condition, participants were informed that either the report was primarily completed by themselves with AI assistance (low AI involvement) or largely generated by AI with their revision (high AI involvement).

After reading the scenario, participants were instructed to imagine completing the task and then completed a questionnaire measuring their psychological perceptions related to the task. The entire procedure took approximately 5–8 minutes.

3.4 Measures

3.4.1 AI Involvement

AI involvement was measured using three self-developed items (AI1–AI3) designed to capture participants' perceived level of AI participation in task completion. The items were developed based on prior research on human–AI interaction and algorithmic involvement (e.g., [5, 16]). Responses were recorded on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 7, with higher scores indicating greater perceived AI involvement. The three items were averaged to create a composite AI involvement score. In the present sample, the scale showed excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .969$).

3.4.2 Psychological Ownership

Psychological ownership was measured with five items (PO1–PO5) adapted from Avey et al. [13]. Responses were recorded on a seven-point Likert scale, with higher values indicating stronger feelings of ownership toward the task or work process. The five items were averaged to form the composite score. In the present sample, the scale demonstrated good reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .843$).

3.4.3 Psychological Safety

Psychological safety was measured with four items (PS1–PS4) adapted from Edmondson [17]. All items were rated on a seven-point Likert scale, with higher scores reflecting stronger psychological safety. The four items were averaged to create the composite score. In the present sample, the scale demonstrated good reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .816$).

3.5 Data Analysis Strategy

All analyses were conducted iusing SPSS 27.0. First, internal consistency was examined using Cronbach's alpha. Second, descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations were calculated for AI involvement, psychological ownership, and psychological safety. Third, the hypotheses were tested using linear regression analyses. Finally, the mediation hypothesis was examined using PROCESS Macro (Model 4.2) with 5,000 bootstrap samples, where AI involvement served as the independent variable, psychological ownership as the mediator, and psychological safety as the dependent variable.3.5 Data Analysis Strategy

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations among the study variables. AI involvement showed no significant association with psychological ownership (r = .002, p = .988) or psychological safety (r = .06, p = .630). By contrast, psychological ownership was strongly and positively associated with psychological safety (r = .72, p < .001).

Table 1: Descriptive statistics and correlations

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3
1. AI involvement	4.70	1.89	—		
2. Psychological Ownership	5.56	0.98	-0.002	—	
3. Psychological Safety	5.52	0.97	-0.06	.720***	—

*Note. N = 74. Composite scores were computed as the mean of each scale., ***p < .001.*

4.2 Hypothesis Testing

H1 proposed that AI involvement would negatively predict psychological ownership. Regression analysis showed that AI involvement did not significantly predict psychological ownership, b = 0.001, SE = 0.061, t = 0.015, p = .988, 95% CI [-0.121, 0.123]. Therefore, H1 was not supported.

H2 proposed that psychological ownership would positively predict psychological safety. When AI involvement and psychological ownership were entered simultaneously, psychological ownership significantly and positively predicted psychological safety, b = 0.710, SE = 0.081, t = 8.770, p < .001, 95% CI [0.548, 0.871]. Therefore, H2 was supported.

H3 proposed that psychological ownership would mediate the relationship between AI involvement and psychological safety. The direct effect of AI involvement on psychological safety was not significant, b = 0.029, SE = 0.042, t = 0.679, p = .499, 95% CI [-0.055, 0.113]. The bootstrapped indirect effect through psychological ownership was 0.002, with a 95% confidence interval of [-0.080, 0.089]. Because the confidence interval included zero, the mediation effect was not significant. Thus, H3 was not supported.

Table 2: Regression and mediation results

Path	*b*	*SE*	*t*	*p*	95% CI
AI → PO (H1)	0.001	0.06	0.06	0.988	[-0.121, 0.123]
PO → PS (H2)	0.71	0.08	8.77	< .001	[0.548, 0.871]
AI → PS, direct effect (c')	0.03	0.04	0.68	0.499	[-0.055, 0.113]
AI → PO → PS, indirect effect	0.002	—	—	—	[-0.080, 0.089]

Note1. The indirect effect was estimated with 5,000 bootstrap samples.
Note2. AI involvement did not significantly predict psychological ownership (b = 0.001, p = .988). Psychological ownership significantly and positively predicted psychological safety (b = 0.71, p < .001). The direct effect of AI involvement on psychological safety was not significant (b = 0.03, p = .499). The indirect effect was not significant, 95% CI [-0.080, 0.089].

5. Discussion

5.1 Theoretical Interpretation of AI Involvement

The present findings challenge prevailing assumptions regarding the psychological consequences of AI integration in organizational contexts. Contrary to expectations, AI involvement did not significantly reduce psychological ownership. This result contradicts prior concerns that algorithmic systems inherently undermine human agency and control [15].

Instead, the findings are more consistent with emerging perspectives that conceptualize human–AI interaction as a form of complementarity rather than substitution . From this perspective, AI systems may enhance rather than displace human contribution, allowing individuals to maintain a sense of authorship even in AI-augmented tasks.

Importantly, this study extends existing literature by suggesting that the psychological effects of AI involvement are not determined solely by the level of technological participation, but by how such

participation is cognitively interpreted by individuals. This shifts the focus from "AI presence" to "perceived role of AI," offering a more nuanced explanation of human–AI collaboration.

5.2 Psychological Ownership as a Core Mechanism

The strong positive relationship between psychological ownership and psychological safety provides robust support for established organizational theories. This finding is consistent with foundational work on psychological safety, which emphasizes the role of individual confidence in enabling interpersonal risk-taking [17]. It is also in line with research demonstrating that ownership perceptions promote voice behavior and proactive engagement [19].

Beyond replication, the present study extends psychological ownership theory [7] by positioning ownership as not only a motivational construct but also an interpersonal enabler. Specifically, the findings suggest that ownership fosters a sense of legitimacy and psychological entitlement to speak, thereby facilitating psychologically safe interactions.

This reconceptualization highlights psychological ownership as a bridging mechanism linking individual cognition and social dynamics, which has been underexplored in prior research.

5.3 Reconsidering the Mediating Mechanism

The absence of a significant mediating effect indicates that the relationship between AI involvement and psychological safety may not follow a simple linear pathway. This finding contradicts conventional mediation assumptions that technological factors influence outcomes through a single psychological mechanism. At the same time, the result is consistent with recent work emphasizing the complexity of human–AI interaction, where outcomes are shaped by multiple interdependent factors such as trust, transparency, and perceived reliability [5]. Accordingly, this study extends prior research by suggesting that psychological ownership may represent only one of several parallel mechanisms through which AI involvement operates. Future models should therefore adopt a multi-path or multi-level framework, incorporating both individual-level perceptions and contextual factors [25].

5.4 Implications for Human–AI Collaboration Research

This study makes several theoretical contributions to the literature on human–AI collaboration. First, the findings are in line with prior research highlighting the importance of integrating technological and organizational perspectives when examining AI in the workplace [14]. Second, the results contradict deterministic views of automation that predict a uniform decline in human psychological engagement. Instead, the findings demonstrate that traditional organizational constructs, such as psychological ownership, remain highly relevant in AI-augmented environments. Finally, this study extends existing frameworks by introducing a psychologically grounded explanation of how AI involvement relates to interpersonal outcomes. By linking human–AI interaction with psychological safety, the study bridges two previously disconnected research streams and opens new directions for theory development.

5.5 Practical Implications

From a practical perspective, the results offer several insights for organizations adopting AI technologies in collaborative work environments. First, the findings suggest that the introduction of AI systems may not automatically undermine employees' sense of ownership. Organizations can therefore integrate AI tools into workflows without necessarily fearing that technological participation will diminish employees' psychological attachment to their work. Second, given the strong relationship between psychological ownership and psychological safety, organizations should prioritize strategies that maintain employees' involvement and responsibility in collaborative tasks. Encouraging active human participation in decision-making processes and ensuring that employees retain meaningful control over task outcomes may help preserve both ownership perceptions and psychological safety. Finally, organizations should consider how AI systems are implemented and communicated to employees. Transparent explanations of AI processes and clear delineation of human and AI roles may help foster trust and reduce uncertainty in human–AI collaboration.

5.6 Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relied on a scenario-based experimental design and self-reported measures, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to real organizational settings. Future research could employ field studies or longitudinal designs to examine how AI involvement influences psychological experiences in actual work environments. Second, the present study focused on a limited set of variables and did not incorporate potential moderating factors such as trust in AI, task complexity, or job autonomy. Future research could explore how these contextual variables shape the relationship between AI involvement and psychological outcomes. Third, the sample size was relatively modest, which may have limited the statistical power to detect small effects. Larger and more diverse samples could provide more robust tests of the proposed relationships.

Despite these limitations, the present study provides an initial empirical exploration of how AI involvement relates to psychological ownership and psychological safety in collaborative contexts.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the relationships among AI involvement, psychological ownership, and psychological safety in collaborative work contexts, proposing a mediation model grounded in organizational psychology and human–AI collaboration research. The results provided partial support for the model. Psychological ownership significantly and positively predicted psychological safety, suggesting that a stronger sense of ownership enhances individuals' willingness to express ideas and take interpersonal risks. However, AI involvement did not significantly predict psychological ownership, and the proposed mediating effect was not supported.

These findings indicate that the psychological impact of AI involvement may be more complex than expected. Rather than diminishing ownership, AI may function as a supportive tool that coexists with human agency, allowing individuals to maintain a sense of contribution. At the same time, the strong link between psychological ownership and psychological safety underscores the importance of fostering employee engagement in AI-assisted environments.

This study contributes to the literature on human–AI collaboration by highlighting key psychological dynamics and suggests that future research should examine how technological and organizational factors jointly shape employee experiences.

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