



Delegating (or not) to machines: How role expectations shape leaders' willingness to use AI for communication

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Artificial intelligence

Leadership

Care

Control

Role expectations

ABSTRACT

Artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly capable of replacing people in interpersonal communication, yet it remains unclear how willing leaders will be to delegate communication to AI. Four preregistered studies examine leaders' willingness to delegate specific employee interactions to AI and explore the underlying psychology behind these preferences. Results indicate that leaders are reluctant to rely on AI assistants to automate employee interactions (Studies 1–4). This reluctance is consistently driven by leaders' role-based expectations to signal care to employees, while leaders' desire to maintain control over interactions with employees plays a more context-dependent role (Studies 2–3). Importantly, we find that leaders' reluctance to delegate communication to AI is specific to AI and not merely a reluctance to delegate communication in general (Study 3). Finally, building on these findings, we show that leaders are most reluctant to delegate communication to AI assistants when interacting about sensitive issues (i.e., issues that heighten the need to signal care and maintain control), in contrast to operational issues (Study 4). Practical and theoretical implications are discussed.

Generative AI is poised to fundamentally transform interpersonal communication. Recent advances in large language models (LLMs) have enabled AI systems with unprecedented capabilities to produce language on peoples' behalf. Consequently, AI is now increasingly integrated into interpersonal interactions—including modifying, augmenting, and generating communication (Hancock et al., 2020)—which in turn shapes how people engage with and relate to others (Mihalcea et al., 2024). AI assistants, defined as algorithms that interact with other people on one's behalf (Gratch & Fast, 2022), are rapidly becoming more sophisticated: they can have fluent interactions across a wide variety of topics and audiences (Collins & Ghahramani, 2021), generate tailored persuasive content (Matz et al., 2024), and even serve as synthetic interaction partners (De Frietas et al., 2023). Already, 62% of U.S. adults report interacting with AI at least several times a week (Pew Research Center, 2025) and a recent survey of over 1000 U.S. knowledge workers revealed that 47% view AI as a tool that enhances communication in ways that improve problem solving and facilitate better relationships (Google Workspace, 2024).

As AI increasingly reshapes interpersonal communication, these developments are particularly consequential for leaders, whose roles are defined by communication-intensive work. Communication is widely recognized as a core function of leadership across a variety of models of leadership (e.g., negotiations between leaders and followers in leader-member exchange; ascertaining follower needs in servant leadership; see Nawaz & Khan, 2016) as well as across culture-based conceptions of what effective leadership “is” (e.g., Eastern vs. Western perspectives, Barkema et al., 2015). These communications-based expectations require substantial amounts of leader time and attention, and may only be intensifying in contemporary organizations (Mintzberg, 2013). Recent large-scale evidence shows that communication now occupies the majority of employees' work time, with Microsoft's 2023 Work Trend Index estimating that workers spend 57% of their working hours in communication-related activities including meetings, emails, and chat (Microsoft, 2023). For senior leaders, the proportion of time spent on communication is even higher: CEO time-use studies suggest that 70–85% of their time is spent on interpersonal communication

All data, materials, and preregistrations are posted and publicly available on OSF (https://osf.io/kmy9z/?view_only=6d911abea1e94b8594a079057902dc1d).

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2026.109139>

Received 2 May 2025; Received in revised form 4 July 2026; Accepted 22 July 2026

Available online 24 July 2026

0747-5632/© 2026 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

(Bandeira et al., 2020; Porter & Nohria, 2018).

Given the extent of leaders' communication demands, emerging advances in AI-assisted communication may offer meaningful opportunities to reduce this burden. Recent examples illustrate the technical potential of AI assistants to interact directly with employees on leaders' behalf. For example, at IBM, leaders use AI assistants that can provide real time assistance and guide employees toward relevant organizational HR resources, thereby freeing leaders to focus their attention on other tasks (IBM, 2024). Similar examples are emerging across other organizations. Unilever uses AI assistants for recruitment-related interactions with employees and Accenture's AI assistants interact with employees regarding their HR requests (e.g., leave requests, performance reviews; Aguinis et al., 2024).

Despite AI's growing technical capabilities to take on communication tasks, it remains unclear whether leaders are actually willing to delegate interpersonal interactions to AI. Research on AI adoption suggests that psychological factors play an important role in shaping people's willingness to use AI tools, particularly in social and interpersonal contexts (McLean & Osei-Frimpong, 2019; Raveendhran & Fast, 2021). The possibility of replacing humans with intelligent machines in interpersonal interactions highlights the need for new studies examining when and why leaders may be open to adopting AI assistants to interact on their behalf. AI can support communication at varying levels of autonomy. The present research focuses specifically on delegation, where an AI assistant interacts with others on a leader's behalf, rather than "assistive" situations where AI merely helps leaders compose or edit messages they deliver themselves. These two forms involve fundamentally different levels of autonomy and, therefore, likely carry distinct psychological implications for leaders. Our primary research objective focuses on examining whether and why leaders might delegate interpersonal communication to AI assistants when interacting with others such as coworkers or subordinates, and identifying the underlying psychological mechanisms.

Leveraging insights from role theory (Biddle, 1986), which focuses on people's expectations surrounding their behavior when they occupy social roles, we posit that leaders will be less willing to delegate communication to AI assistants due to beliefs that using AI assistants will prevent them from meeting their role-based expectations. In particular, people in leadership roles are expected to signal care toward those occupying lower positions in hierarchies (e.g., Keltner et al., 2008) as well as maintain high levels of personal control over organizational and communication processes (e.g., Fast et al., 2014). In the present work, we suggest that people in leadership roles might perceive that delegating communication to AI assistants (instead of doing so directly) will undermine their ability to signal care and maintain control over the interaction, resulting in unfavorable evaluations from others.

1. Role-based expectations: Care and control

Seminal work in role theory (Biddle, 1986) reveals that individuals tend to exhibit social behaviors that are consistent with the behavioral expectations associated with their social roles. Individuals often tend to define themselves within their roles and act in ways that are consistent with how they like to see themselves and how they like others to see them when operating in those social roles (Anglin et al., 2022). Importantly, this body of research underscores the idea that when people assume specific social roles, they encounter pressure to conform to role-specific expectations for appropriate behavior (Turner, 1978). People's fundamental desire to avoid negative judgment from others pressures them to meet behavioral expectations linked to their respective social roles (Biddle, 1986). Extensions of role theory as such suggests that the more people identify with their roles, more they are influenced by the expectations associated with those roles (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007; Sluss et al., 2011).

Leadership positions are prominent social roles that come with important role-based expectations (Biddle, 1986; Fishbein & Ajzen,

1975; Katz & Kahn, 1978). One of the most important expectations associated with leadership roles pertains to caring for those lower in the hierarchy and ensuring their well-being (Ronen & Mikulincer, 2012). Leadership roles invoke social obligations rooted in norms around being responsible for others' outcomes, instilling expectations that one signal care and compassion (Anderson et al., 2012; Cartwright & Zander, 1968), and use power benevolently (Tost & Johnson, 2019). Subordinates also believe displaying care is an important in-role behavior for leaders (Eisenberger et al., 2002; Toegel et al., 2013), adding to the pressure leaders face to demonstrate care towards those lower in the hierarchy.

In addition to care, leadership roles come with pressure to demonstrate that they can assert control (Mintzberg, 2009). Lacking a sense of control is a psychologically threatening state, especially for leaders (Fast & Chen, 2009; Fast & Overbeck, 2022), driving them to preserve it either directly or indirectly (Fast et al., 2014). Several factors can undermine leaders' sense of control, including structural constraints (Anicich et al., 2014; Anicich & Hirsh, 2017), power imbalances across hierarchical levels (Anicich et al., 2021) and restrictive organizational policies and practices (Sherf et al., 2019). Given the profound adverse consequences associated with experiencing a lack of control in leadership roles, individuals in these roles are typically highly motivated to maintain high levels of control.

2. Delegating communication to AI assistants

Contemporary leaders spend a substantial portion of their work time on communication-related activities. With recent advances in AI systems capable of performing communication tasks, delegating some of these activities to AI assistants may be a promising way to reduce workload and free up capacity for other leadership responsibilities. However, leaders may not adopt AI assistants solely based on their functional benefits. Leaders are inclined to behave in ways that meet role-based expectations (Joshi & Fast, 2013; Tost, 2015) and delegating communication to AI assistants may conflict with leaders' motivation to meet role-based expectations for signaling care and maintaining control in their interactions with others. Thus, while delegating communication to AI assistants may be a technically viable option, doing so might be incongruent with their role-based identities and lead to potential social risks (Anglin et al., 2022).

AI assistants function on behalf of a communicator by "modifying, augmenting, or generating messages to accomplish communication and interpersonal goals" (Hancock et al., 2020, p. 89). In this way, AI assistants have the potential to represent leaders in social contexts where their role identities matter. Given the autonomous nature of AI assistants, delegating communication to them can lead to either positive impressions of the delegator (if doing so leads to increased speed, scale, and responsiveness) or negative impressions (if the messages are impersonal or inaccurate; Endacott & Leonardi, 2022).

On the positive side, the potential efficiency gains are substantial: whereas a leader can typically only have one conversation at a time, an AI assistant can engage in hundreds of conversations simultaneously on one's behalf. From this perspective, one might expect leaders to eagerly embrace delegating communication to AI assistants. Research on organizational change, however, has long indicated that leaders are generally psychologically resistant to change—including to new technologies—even when such changes offer productivity or efficiency gains (Coch & French, 1948). For example, research on technology adoption suggests that acceptance is shaped not only by perceived usefulness of a technological tool but also by salient beliefs about the consequences of using the technology such as perceived social risks and impression management concerns (Davis, 1989; Davis & Granić, 2024). Other frameworks offer some guidance on how to facilitate technology adoption across a variety of use cases and situations (e.g., Koul & Eydgahi, 2017). Drawing on psychological research on role expectations, we question whether leaders will embrace delegating

communication to AI assistants—in spite of potential efficiency gains—as doing so could erode opportunities to meet social role expectations of signaling care and maintaining control.

Relevant to the question at hand, communication is a domain where these concerns might be particularly salient to leaders, as interacting directly with others can signal benevolence and responsibility (Eisenberger et al., 2002). Although delegation more broadly may seem socially risky for leaders (Akinola et al., 2018), delegating communication to AI assistants might especially undermine perceptions of effort (Hancock et al., 2020) and, conversely, signal that leaders do not care about the contributions of those lower in the hierarchy (Ashford et al., 2018). Indeed, when leaders use technology-mediated channels to interact with others, they perceive their counterparts as more psychologically distant (Raveendhran, Fast & Carnevale, 2020), a factor relevant to demonstrating care.

Moreover, delegating to AI assistants involves relinquishing some degree of control. AI assistants that interact with others on leaders' behalf can make decisions autonomously, potentially reducing leaders' ability to maintain control over the interaction (Endacott & Leonardi, 2022). While traditional communication technologies such as email or chat afford users enhanced control in how they present themselves, communicators have less control over how they are represented by autonomous AI assistants and may be concerned about potential (negative) impressions that others may form of them (Leonardi & Treem, 2020). In contrast, by communicating directly (rather than delegating to AI assistants), leaders can enact high levels of control over how they manage interactions (Ashford & Black, 1996; Isaakyan et al., 2021).

In sum, leaders may perceive that delegating communication to AI assistants can limit their ability to meet role-based expectations for signaling care and maintaining control.

Based on this theorizing, we posit the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. Organizational leaders are less likely to rely on AI assistants for communication with subordinates when compared to choosing direct interaction.

Hypothesis 2a. Leaders' reluctance to use AI to interact with subordinates is driven by lower perceptions of their ability to signal care, compared to direct interaction.

Hypothesis 2b. Leaders' reluctance to use AI to interact with subordinates is driven by lower perceptions of their ability to maintain control, compared to direct interaction.

Through the present research we aim to make several novel theoretical contributions. First, our findings contribute to research on the psychology of human-AI interactions and leadership in the age of AI (Aziz et al., 2024) by unpacking the psychological factors that drive leaders' decisions to delegate social tasks to intelligent machines (rather than to other humans). Second, we contribute to research on the psychology of technology (e.g., Jago & Laurin, 2022; Newman et al., 2020; Raveendhran & Fast, 2021), emphasizing the importance of context, such as hierarchies and communication contexts, in shaping people's perceptions of and willingness to use AI. While current work on AI performing managerial functions predominantly focuses on its impact on employees (e.g., Jago et al., 2024), our work contributes to this literature by examining this issue from leaders' perspective and highlighting the key psychological and contextual factors that determine when and why leaders deploy AI to function on their behalf. Finally, our work contributes to research on role theory by underscoring the enduring nature of role-based expectations for leaders, even as intelligent technologies such as AI assistants begin to perform various social roles and act as intermediaries between individuals in interpersonal interactions (Fast & Schroeder, 2020; Gratch & Fast, 2022). Our findings also have implications for AI design by highlighting the critical barriers to AI adoption in the leadership context.

3. Overview of studies

We tested our predictions across four preregistered studies ($n = 2507$). Using a sample of managers in organizations in the United States, Study 1 tested the hypothesis that leaders are less likely to delegate interactions to AI assistants than to interact with them directly. In Study 2, we employed an experimental design with ChatGPT (<https://openai.com/>) to examine whether the mechanisms of signaling care and maintaining control influence leaders' willingness to delegate communication to AI assistants. Study 3 examined our mechanisms in a different context and compared delegating to an AI assistant versus a human assistant to examine whether leaders' lower willingness to delegate communication to AI is an AI-specific effect, rather than reflecting a general reluctance to delegate communication. Finally, Study 4 examined how leaders' willingness to delegate communication to AI varied based on the type of issues and showed that leaders were more likely to delegate communication to AI assistants for issues that don't require them to signal as much care or maintain control. See Table 1 for a summary of studies.

We report all manipulations, measures, and exclusions for all studies and determined all sample sizes before data collection and analyses. In all studies, we preregistered the number of participants we planned to recruit, chose sample sizes that would enable us to have 80% power to detect small to medium effects and did not analyze data until data collection was completed. Preregistration links are available in the introduction to each study, and all data, preregistrations, and materials are posted and available via the Open Science Framework at https://osf.io/kmy9z/?view_only=6d911abea1e94b8594a079057902dc1d.

4. Study 1

In Study 1, we examined leaders' willingness to delegate communication in the context of a professionally relevant interaction—soliciting feedback from subordinates—to AI assistants, compared to soliciting feedback directly. Feedback processes—including specifically soliciting feedback from others—reflects a meaningful social interaction where both parties have choices regarding *how* they will communicate. Moreover, feedback solicitation involves vulnerability and openness to criticism, making it a rich context for studying the dynamics of leader-subordinate interactions. This inherent complexity provides a fertile ground for understanding the nuances of human-AI interactions and the conditions under which leaders might prefer AI assistance in managing these critical interpersonal exchanges.

In this study, we tested the hypothesis that leaders are less likely to delegate communication to AI assistants than to engage in direct communication. We utilized a Qualtrics panel to survey managers working in U.S. organizations. We asked participants to report their likelihood of using an AI assistant to solicit feedback from their direct reports in their current jobs as a behavioral intention measure of willingness to delegate communication to AI assistants. We preregistered this study using [aspredicted.org](https://aspredicted.org/6DX_W2F) (https://aspredicted.org/6DX_W2F).¹ This study had 80% power to detect an effect size of $d = 0.17$.

4.1. Method

4.1.1. Participants

We recruited 206 participants (107 female; 94 male; 5 did not indicate gender; $M_{age} = 40.45$; $SD_{age} = 12.74$) who were in managerial positions in U.S. organizations through a Qualtrics panel. Participants represented 19 industries and were predominantly working in the private-for-profit sector (71.8%). 47% of participants were employed in

¹ This study was conducted as part of a larger survey. Participants who were currently not in managerial positions answered different questions about AI unrelated to the current research.

Table 1
Summary of studies.

Study Number	Communication Context	Delegation Comparison	Sample	Main Findings
Study 1	Soliciting feedback from subordinates	AI assistants vs. direct communication (behavioral intention measure)	U.S. organizational leaders	Leaders were less willing to delegate communication to AI assistants compared to direct communication
Study 2	Communicating about employee issues	AI assistants vs. direct communication (behavioral intention measure)	Employed U.S. adults	Leaders were less willing to delegate communication to AI assistants compared to direct communication when they anticipated that doing so would signal lower care or lower control
Study 3	Regular team interactions like schedule updates, project timelines, managerial expectations	AI assistants vs. human assistants (behavioral intention measure)	U.S. adults in managerial roles	Leaders were less willing to delegate communication to AI assistants than to human assistants. This effect was mediated by perceived lower care.
Study 4	Soliciting employee feedback on sensitive vs. operational topics	AI assistants vs. direct communication (behavioral decision measure)	U.S. adults in managerial roles	Leaders were especially less willing to delegate communication to AI assistants when the topic was sensitive in nature (versus merely operational)

small organizations (1–100 employees) while the other 53% of participants were employed in mid-large organizations (100–1000+ employees).

4.1.2. Materials and procedure

Participants read the following prompt about AI assistants that can solicit feedback from employees:

“Companies are increasingly introducing digital assistants powered by artificial intelligence (AI) as tools for their managers to solicit feedback from their employees.

The AI digital assistants automatically reach out to employees on a regular basis and collect feedback from them on behalf of the manager.”

After reading this prompt, participants were asked to picture their company making AI digital assistants available to them to solicit feedback from their direct reports. Specifically, we indicated two options for seeking feedback: (1) they could reach out to their subordinates directly, or (2) they could use the AI digital assistant to automatically interact with their subordinates. Following this, we asked managers to indicate the percentage of time that they would be willing to use the AI digital assistant to solicit feedback from their subordinates on a scale from 0% (“Never use the AI digital assistant – always solicit feedback directly”) to 100% (“Always use the AI digital assistant to solicit feedback”). This percentage measure was our primary dependent variable.

Next, we sought to examine if there was any initial evidence for our theorizing about role expectations influencing leaders’ openness to using AI assistants for soliciting feedback by asking four open-ended questions: “What are the types of situations when you would not use the AI digital assistant to solicit feedback from your employees?”, “Why would you not use the AI digital assistant to solicit feedback in those situations?”, “What are the types of situations when you would use the AI digital assistant to solicit feedback from your employees?”, “Why would you use the AI digital assistant to solicit feedback in those situations?”. We also collected the following demographic information at the end of the survey: age, gender, employment status, organization size, organization sector, industry, and a five item individual difference IDAQ anthropomorphism measure adapted from Waytz et al. (2010).

4.2. Results

Willingness to delegate communication to an AI assistant. Consistent with our preregistration, we conducted a one-sample *t*-test with a test value of 50% (representing soliciting feedback via AI or directly at identical rates). Results revealed that, on average, participants indicated being willing to use the AI digital assistant to solicit feedback 44.06% ($SD = 30.71$) of the time, and this was significantly lower than the mid-point of the scale (50%), $t(205) = -2.78, p = .006, d = -.19, 95\% CI = [-$

.33, -.06]. These results provide initial support for our prediction that leaders are less likely to delegate communication to AI assistants, compared to communicating directly themselves.²

Follow-up analyses on open-ended responses: Reasons for not using an AI assistant Drawing on our theoretical framework, we sought to examine whether the two theorized reasons for leaders’ unwillingness to delegate feedback solicitation to AI assistants—signaling care and maintaining control—emerged in this study. To do so, two independent coders who were blind to our predictions coded participants responses to each of the following questions: “What are the types of situations when you would not use the AI digital assistant to solicit feedback from your employees?”, “Why would you not use the AI digital assistant to solicit feedback in those situations?”. Specifically, the coders coded each response for care (0 = does not describe motivation to signal care; 1 = describes motivation to signal care) and control (0 = does not describe motivation to maintain control; 1 = describes motivation to maintain control). After independently coding each response, the coders resolved discrepancies through discussion. The coders initially disagreed on 8.49% of responses and resolved them through discussion.

Initial evidence for leaders’ concerns about signaling care and control. Results indicated that 52.9% of participants indicated the inability to signal care toward subordinates as a reason for their unwillingness to delegate feedback solicitation to AI assistants, whereas 28.2% of participants cited the inability to maintain control as a reason for their unwillingness to delegate feedback solicitation to AI assistants for feedback solicitation. Thus, these results offered initial support that, consistent with our theorizing, perceptions about inability to signal care and maintain control emerged as key reasons explaining leaders’ unwillingness to delegate communication related to feedback solicitation to AI assistants. Examples of participants’ responses highlighting these reasons are presented in Table 2. Overall, Study 1 provided evidence for both leaders’ unwillingness to delegate communication related to feedback solicitation to AI assistants (H1), as well as preliminary evidence consistent with our theorizing that leaders’ desire to signal care and maintain control are important drivers of this effect.

Exploratory analyses on open-ended responses: Reasons for using AI assistant.

In addition to analyzing open-ended responses for evidence of our theorized mechanisms—signaling care and maintaining control—we also analyzed open-ended responses to two supplementary questions that explored participants’ reasons for being open to using AI assistants: “What are the types of situations when you would use the AI digital assistant to solicit feedback from your employees?”, “Why would you use the AI digital assistant to solicit feedback in those situations?”.

After reading participants’ responses to these questions, the coders

² We also explored the relationships between demographic variables and participants’ willingness to delegate communication to an AI assistant (see supplementals).

Table 2
Example responses of participants' reasoning for NOT using AI Assistants (Study 1).

What are the types of situations when you would NOT use the AI digital assistant to solicit feedback from your employees?	Why would you NOT use the AI digital assistant to solicit feedback in those situations?
When the employee needs direct assistance or has an issue that needs an immediate response. This [Speaking directly] will show the employee that their situation matters.	Those situations are more fragile and will need a direct human response to show you are aware and care.
I don't like it because I feel it is very impersonal. It is better to talk face to face. It is more personal that way and shows you care about what they have to say.	Some situations require a more personal approach, and there is respect involved when a manager directly and personally involves employees
When the employee needs direct assistance or has an issue that needs an immediate response. This will show the employee that their situation matters.	Its important to have a relationship with your employees. A personal touch on an issue helps keep the team engaged
I would not use an AI assistant in an instance where sensitive or confidential topics might be concerned.	I would not want to use the AI digital assistant in this situation because I would want to asses the employee's wants and needs myself so they always feel valued by me personally.

independently created categories that captured when and why managers were willing to delegate communication related to feedback solicitation to AI assistants. Following this, they coded each response with relevant categories that best captured participants' reasoning for their willingness to use AI assistants to solicit feedback. The authors then examined each category and calculated the percentage of participants who indicated that particular reason for their willingness to use AI assistants for soliciting feedback.

The most common reason participants cited was efficiency/convenience. 47.57% of participants cited this reason for their willingness to use AI assistants to solicit feedback from their subordinates. Following this, other common reasons included using AI assistants for simple, routine tasks (27.18%), and gathering straightforward information (24.27%). Notably, 16.5% participants said that they would not use AI assistants at all in any situation. Examples of participants' responses to these open-ended questions are presented in Table 3.

Table 3
Example responses of participants' reasoning for using AI Assistants (Study 1).

What are the types of situations when you would use the AI digital assistant to solicit feedback from your employees?	Why would you use the AI digital assistant to solicit feedback in those situations?
Would help me with attendance of my employees and keep track of my service records. Although it may be beneficial for other tasks	I would use AI Digital assistance because they are easier to use. This would save me and my company and time and money that would have to be spend on a human worker. AI digital assistant has become very dependable.
It can impact workflows by taking over mundane tasks. It can streamline and automate basic customer services interactions.	An AI assistant could free up time for humans to do necessary work. Would make us more efficient - and give us time to complete projects.
Scheduling and figuring out meeting agendas and times and locations. I would also use it for assigning tasks so that there is less space for frustration around workloads.	Reduces my need to follow-up until the employee has completed the task or removes me from the situation for simple things that my input is not really needed
I would use the AI digital assistant for collecting regular weekly and monthly reports. Also use AI to alert my subordinates for per-scheduled report.	I would use AI digital assistant in this situation because it would be a faster, easier process than doing it myself with each individual employee.

5. Study 2

In Study 2, we sought to test our predicted mechanisms by directly manipulating signaling care and maintaining control and assess their effects on leaders' willingness to delegate communication to AI assistants using an intended behavioral measure of our dependent variable. Taking advantage of OpenAI's LLM models, we incorporated this into our study methods in order to ensure that participants believed in the viability of AI assistance. We preregistered this study using [aspredicted.org \(https://aspredicted.org/SRJ_X7Z\)](https://aspredicted.org/SRJ_X7Z). This study had 80% power to detect an effect size of $f = 0.08$.

5.1. Method

5.1.1. Participants

We recruited 1199 U.S. adults (472 female; 727 male; $M_{age} = 37.81$; $SD_{age} = 11.40$) via Prolific Academic. 63.2% of participants had a bachelors degree or higher, 98.9% of participants were employed and 97.5% of participants reported that English was their native language. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (signaling care: low vs. high) x 2 (maintaining control: low vs. high) between-subjects design ($ns = 299 - 301$). Consistent with successful random assignment, there were no differences in participant demographics across conditions.

5.1.2. Materials and procedure

In this study, we asked participants to vividly picture themselves in the role of marketing manager of a large media company. We informed them that they had 20 direct reports in their team. We opted to describe the team as having 20 employees so that the social environment was large enough to indicate that using an AI tool would meaningfully save time, but not so large where regular interpersonal interactions might seem unlikely or unfeasible.

Following this, we informed participants in all conditions that they could communicate with their subordinates in two ways: (1) by reaching out to employees directly, and (2) by using a digital assistant powered by artificial intelligence (AI) that can automatically interact with employees. Notably, in all conditions, participants were informed that subordinates would be aware of interacting with a digital assistant deployed on their manager's behalf.

Next, we informed participants in all conditions that advances in AI have enabled people to automate communication in real time and provided more information about how large language models (LLMs) automate communication. By modifying our descriptions of how customizable these models are, we manipulated level of control in each condition. Specifically, in the two 'low control' conditions, we described the AI as "designed to have conversations with subordinates and make suggestions to them autonomously using preset rules and algorithms, and they *cannot* be fully customized or controlled by managers". In contrast, in the two 'high control' conditions, we described the AI as "designed to interact with subordinates according to the rules that are created by managers, and adjustments can be made to these rules. This allows managers to *fully control and customize* these AI systems".

In addition to providing descriptions of how the AI worked, we also included an example of an AI-generated email in each condition, serving as our care manipulation. We used ChatGPT to generate this example email and modified this email message to signal either high or low care. In all conditions, participants saw an email message generated by ChatGPT to communicate on behalf of a manager in response to a subordinate who shared that they felt overwhelmed at work. In the two 'low care' conditions, participants read that the AI was asked to write a message "designed to be efficient and maintain a degree of psychological distance from employees". In contrast, in the two 'high care' conditions, participants read that the AI was asked to write a message "designed to provide warm and caring communication with the employees". Following this, participants in all conditions read the email message

generated by ChatGPT on their behalf to address their subordinate who shared that they felt overwhelmed at work. We designed both of these manipulations to be clear, face valid manipulations of these two core constructs (control and care; see Appendix for the full email messages generated by ChatGPT in each condition).

Following these manipulations, participants were asked to indicate the percentage of time they would be willing to use the AI assistant to communicate with their subordinates on a scale from 0% (Only communicate directly) to 100% (only use the AI assistant at all times), our primary dependent variable representing a behavioral intention. We also collected the following demographic information at the end of the study: age, gender, race/ethnicity, English as second language, education level, and employment status.

5.2. Results

Signaling care: Willingness to delegate communication to an AI assistant. Supporting our predictions, results of a 2 (signaling care: low vs. high) $\times$ 2 (maintaining control: low vs. high) between-subjects ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of signaling care on participants' willingness to interact through an AI assistant, $F(1,1195) = 37.17, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .03$. Participants in the high care condition ($M = 31.65; SD = 30.03$) were more willing to interact with their subordinates through an AI assistant than those in the low care condition ($M = 21.59; SD = 27.21$). These results suggest that when leaders perceive they are able to signal higher care using AI assistants, they were more willing to delegate communication to AI assistants, providing support for care as a psychological driver of this effect.

Maintaining control: Willingness to delegate communication to an AI assistant. Consistent with our predictions, we also found a significant main effect of maintaining control on participants' willingness to interact through an AI assistant, $F(1,1195) = 7.91, p = .005, \eta_p^2 = .007$. Participants in the high control condition ($M = 28.93; SD = 30.06$) were more willing to interact with their subordinates through an AI assistant than those in the low control condition ($M = 24.29; SD = 27.91$). These results suggest that when leaders perceive are able to maintain higher control using AI assistants, they were more willing to delegate communication to AI assistants, providing support for control as an additional psychological driver of this effect.

There was not a significant interaction between the care and control conditions, $F(1,1195) = .07, p = .79, \eta_p^2 < .001$. These results indicate that leaders' concerns about the failure to meet role expectations, either by signaling low care toward subordinates or failing to maintain control, is sufficient to deter them from using AI for communication. They also suggest that the two mechanisms operate somewhat independently, as having (or lacking) both (as opposed to one or the other) did not meaningfully boost (or reduce) willingness to delegate communication tasks to AI. Thus, by experimentally manipulating signaling care and maintaining control, we found support for our hypothesized mechanisms driving leaders' willingness to delegate communication to AI.

6. Study 3

Study 3 served three purposes. First, we sought to gather converging evidence for our mechanisms by experimentally examining whether signaling care and maintaining control influenced leaders' willingness to delegate communication to AI assistants using intended behavioral measures and bootstrapped mediation analyses. Second, to rule out the possibility that the effect may be due to a general reluctance to delegate communication, we designed this study to include a direct comparison between delegating to an AI assistant and delegating to a human assistant. This contrast allows us to isolate whether leaders' reluctance to delegate communication to AI assistants was specific to AI assistants or, instead, due to a broader unwillingness to delegate in general. Finally, we also examined a different communication context to expand the scope of our inquiry. We preregistered this study using aspredicted.org

(<https://aspredicted.org/sdjb-nqxx.pdf>). This study had 80% power to detect an effect size of $d = 0.32$.

6.1. Method

6.1.1. Participants

We recruited 302 U.S. adults who were currently in managerial roles in their organizations (128 female; 173 male; 1 did not indicate gender; $M_{\text{age}} = 38.81; SD_{\text{age}} = 12.01$) via Prolific Academic. 74.3% of participants had a bachelors degree or higher, 97% of participants were employed and 99.3% of participants reported that English was their native language. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: human assistance ($n = 151$) and AI assistance ($n = 151$). Consistent with successful random assignment, there were no differences in participant demographics across conditions.

6.1.2. Materials and procedure

Participants were asked to think about their current roles as managers and answer a set of questions that followed. In both the human assistance and AI assistance conditions, we asked them to vividly picture a situation in their current managerial role in which they had weekly meetings with their teams to regularly communicate with them. In addition to these weekly meetings, we noted that there were several other communications such as schedule updates, project timelines, managerial expectations, and forwarded communications from various stakeholders that they had to share with their teams. We opted to have participants picture this scenario in their own current roles as managers to enhance the realism of this situation. Furthermore, we made it clear that participants already met with their teams on a weekly basis to emphasize that this was a context of regular team interaction.

Next, participants in the human [AI] assistance condition read:

"You have two ways to do this:

- (1) You have the option of reaching out to employees directly, or
- (2) You have the option of having your executive assistant [using a digital assistant powered by artificial intelligence (AI) to automatically] interact with your subordinates.

Your executive assistant [AI assistant] is fully aware of your calendar and schedule, ensuring they [it] stay[s] on top of all communications that need to be sent to your subordinates throughout the week. This person [AI] is specifically trained to communicate effectively and professionally with your team, maintaining accuracy and eliminating the risk of errors in these interactions."

In both conditions, we noted that their subordinates knew that they were interacting with their executive/AI assistant handling communication on their behalf. After reading this, participants completed the dependent measures. Finally, we collected participants' demographic information.

6.1.3. Measures

Signaling care. We measured perceptions of signaling managerial care using a four-item scale adapted from the perceived supervisor support scale (Eisenberger et al., 1986). All items began with "Communicating with my subordinates through my executive [AI] assistant would": "Show my subordinates that I really care about their experiences at work", "Show my subordinates that I am willing to help them if needed", "Show my subordinates that I have very little concern for them" (reverse-scored), and "Show my subordinates that I am willing to listen to their opinions". These items formed a reliable composite of signaled managerial care ($\alpha = .90$).

Maintaining control. We measured control using a four-item ad-hoc scale we developed for this study along a 1 ("Strongly Disagree") to 7 ("Strongly Agree") scale. All items began with "By communicating with my subordinate through my executive [AI] assistant": "I would have

control over all communications with my subordinates”, “I would be able to directly oversee all communications with my subordinates”, “I would retain full authority over the messages sent to my subordinates”, and “I would be able to manage and direct communication with my subordinates as needed”. These items formed a reliable composite of having control ($\alpha = .93$).

Willingness to delegate communication to a human [an AI] assistant. As with prior studies, participants were asked to indicate the percentage of time they would be willing to use the human [AI] assistant to communicate with their subordinates on a scale from 0% (Only communicate directly) to 100% (only use the executive [AI] assistant at all times).

We collected the following demographic information at the end of the study: age, gender, race/ethnicity, English as second language, education level, and employment status.

6.2. Results

Willingness to delegate communication. Consistent with our hypotheses, we found that participants were less willing to delegate interactions to an AI assistant ($M = 41.28$; $SD = 29.87$) relative to delegating interactions to a human assistant ($M = 48.76$; $SD = 26.32$), $t(300) = -2.31$, $p = .02$, 95% $CI_{\text{difference}} = [-13.85, -1.10]$, $d = -.27$, 95% $CI = [-.49, -.04]$. These results indicated that leaders are less willing to delegate communication to AI assistants than to human assistants, and importantly, that this reluctance reflects AI-specific resistance rather than a general reluctance to delegate communication.

Signaling care. Supporting our predictions, we also found that participants perceived that they would signal lower care when delegating interactions to an AI assistant ($M = 3.62$; $SD = 1.76$), relative to delegating interactions to a human assistant ($M = 4.06$; $SD = 1.71$), $t(300) = -2.19$, $p = .03$, 95% $CI_{\text{difference}} = [-.83, -.04]$, $d = -.25$, 95% $CI = [-.48, -.03]$. These results indicate that leaders anticipate that delegating communication to AI assistants would signal lower care to their subordinates, consistent with our theorizing.

Maintaining control. Contrary to our predictions, we did not find any differences between conditions on the extent to which participants perceived control when delegating interactions to an AI assistant ($M = 3.98$; $SD = 1.72$) relative to delegating interactions to a human assistant ($M = 4.15$; $SD = 1.66$), $t(300) = -.87$, $p = .39$, 95% $CI_{\text{difference}} = [-.55, .21]$, $d = -.10$, 95% $CI = [-.33, .13]$.

6.2.1. Mediation analyses

We conducted a 10,000-iteration bootstrapping analysis using the PROCESS macro (Model 4; Hayes, 2013) to test whether signaling care and maintaining control over the feedback process simultaneously mediated the relationship between assistant type [AI/human] and willingness to delegate interactions. Consistent with our theorizing and our preregistered analysis plan, we used a parallel multiple mediator model in these analyses as we hypothesized that both signaling care and having control would act as simultaneous mediators of this effect. Results revealed that the 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals for the indirect effects through care ($-5.89, -.24$) excluded zero, indicating that care mediated this effect. However, 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals for the indirect effects through control included zero ($-3.53, 1.24$), indicating that having control did not mediate this effect.

This study demonstrates that leaders' lower willingness to delegate communication to AI is specific to AI and not a general reluctance to delegate communication, as shown by participants' greater willingness to delegate to a human assistant. Additionally, our findings reveal a strong and consistent role of care in leaders' willingness to delegate communication to AI, indicating that care is a critical psychological factor when seeking to understand when and why leaders choose to delegate communication to AI.

Considering Studies 2 and 3 together, support for the role of control remains mixed. In Study 2, when the comparison was between delegating to an AI assistant and communicating directly, perceptions of control significantly shaped willingness to delegate. However, in Study 3, where the comparison was between delegating to an AI assistant and a human assistant, the influence of control was attenuated. This difference could reflect idiosyncracies in this particular experimental design, or it could indicate that leaders need to communicate directly in order to maintain perceived control (whereas they can achieve a measure of care when delegating to other humans); we expand on this possibility in the limitations section of the General Discussion.

7. Study 4

In Study 4, we tested our predictions through a simulation where participants assumed the role of a leader and made real decisions about delegating interactions with subordinates to AI assistants during a team-based task. While Study 3 examined our predictions across a range of interaction types and intended behavior, the present study took a more focused approach by systematically exploring how the topic being discussed influences leaders' willingness to delegate interactions given an ostensibly real decision. We first investigated whether leaders are more motivated to signal care and maintain control when dealing with sensitive issues compared to less sensitive ones. We then hypothesized that leaders would be less willing to delegate feedback solicitation to an AI assistant when the issue was more sensitive. Drawing on qualitative insights from Study 1, we distinguished between two common types of issues managers typically seek feedback on: routine operational matters (e.g., scheduling, task assignments) and sensitive issues (e.g., harassment, equity concerns). To ensure relevance and consistency, we used the professionally grounded context of soliciting feedback from subordinates, similar to Study 1.

Study 4 consisted of two waves of data collection: we began by conducting a pretest where we recruited an independent sample of participants to rate a list of issues on the extent to which they would be motivated to signal care and maintain control. We then used this same list of issues in the main experiment. The pretest study had 80% power to detect an effect size of $d = 0.18$. The main experiment had 80% power to detect an effect size of $d = 0.10$.

7.1. Method (pretest)

7.1.1. Participants

We recruited 201 employed, U.S. adults (78 female; 122 male; 1 preferred not to answer; $M_{\text{age}} = 37.25$; $SD_{\text{age}} = 11.49$) who were currently in managerial positions via Prolific Academic. We specifically targeted people in managerial roles via Prolific Academic's participant prescreen feature under the 'Work' category using the prescreen option that directly filters for participants who answered 'Yes' to the following question: "At work, do you have any supervisory responsibilities? In other words, do you have the authority to give instructions to subordinates?". This allowed us to recruit participants who had confirmed that they currently held supervisory responsibilities at work. We preregistered this study using [aspredicted.org](https://aspredicted.org/ZW2_ZPN) (https://aspredicted.org/ZW2_ZPN).

7.1.2. Materials and procedure

Participants were asked to vividly picture themselves as a manager in a large marketing company. We then provided participants with a list of topics that typically come up in organizations as ones on which managers seek feedback from their teams. This list included three sensitive issues (mistreatment by a teammate based on one's identity, verbal aggression by fellow teammates, bullying by fellow teammates) and three operational issues (allocating work tasks, setting deadlines for projects, managing team assignments).

Following this, we asked participants to rate each issue on the extent

to which they would be concerned with (1) showing care and (2) having control over the feedback process when asking for feedback on those topics. Participants provided their rating on a 7-point scale from 1 (not at all concerned) to 7 (very concerned). We counterbalanced the order of these dependent measures, and aggregated participants' responses into composites for both sensitive and operational issues for signaling care ($\alpha_{\text{sensitive}} = .97$ and $\alpha_{\text{operational}} = .96$) and having control over the feedback process ($\alpha_{\text{sensitive}} = .97$ and $\alpha_{\text{operational}} = .97$).

We collected the following demographic information at the end of the study: age, gender, race/ethnicity, English as second language, education level, and employment status.

7.2. Results (pretest)

Signaling care. We conducted a paired samples *t*-test to examine differences in participants' ratings between sensitive and operational issues. Participants rated that they would be more motivated to show care when soliciting feedback about sensitive issues ($M = 5.86$; $SD = 1.71$), relative to operational issues ($M = 4.53$; $SD = 1.67$), $t(200) = 11.05$, $p < .001$, $d = .78$, 95% CI = [.62, .94].

Maintaining control. Results of a paired samples *t*-test revealed that participants were more motivated to maintain control over the feedback process when soliciting feedback about sensitive issues ($M = 4.98$; $SD = 1.89$), relative to operational issues ($M = 4.56$; $SD = 1.74$), $t(200) = 3.16$, $p = .002$, $d = .22$, 95% CI = [.08, .36].

The results of this pretest suggested that, when soliciting feedback about sensitive (versus operational) issues, leaders were motivated to signal higher levels of care and sought to maintain higher levels of control over the feedback process.

7.3. Method (main study)

Building on the findings of our pretest, we created the experience of leading virtual teams to examine whether leaders may have different preferences for delegating feedback solicitation to AI assistants for sensitive and operational issues. In particular, based on our theorizing, we predicted that they would be less willing to delegate feedback solicitation to an AI assistant for sensitive issues where they are especially motivated to signal care and maintain control over the feedback process, relative to operational issues. We measured willingness to delegate communication using an ostensibly real behavioral decision (vs. behavioral intention, as in previous studies). We preregistered this study using [aspredicted.org](https://aspredicted.org/BKB_GK5) (https://aspredicted.org/BKB_GK5).

7.3.1. Participants

We recruited 599 employed, U.S. adults (288 female; 299 male; 10 non-binary; 2 other; $M_{\text{age}} = 39.17$; $SD_{\text{age}} = 12.12$) who were currently in managerial positions via Prolific Academic. 66% of participants had a bachelors degree or higher, 98.7% of participants were employed and 98.5% of participants reported that English was their native language. We used the same prescreen feature as the pretest to recruit participants who were currently supervising other people in their jobs.

7.3.2. Materials and procedure

At the outset, we informed participants that they would be working with a team of six people to complete a project and were assigned a team number. Following this, we informed participants that we would be selecting a team leader for each team based on a work style assessment. Next, to enhance realism, participants completed an 8-item work style assessment created for this study. After completing the assessment, participants were asked to wait a few seconds while their work style score was being calculated. After this, all participants saw the following message: "Based on the results of the Work Style Questionnaire, you have been selected to be the leader of your team".

Next, all participants were informed that their role as a team leader involved three key responsibilities: managing their team to ensure work

products are of high quality and are delivered at appropriate times, identifying what works and what doesn't and modifying project instructions accordingly, and ensuring that the team maintains high morale while working on the project. Following this, we provided detailed instructions about the task the team was going to be working on.

Participants read that they would work on tasks across four rounds with the same team, and that each round would last 5 min. The stated goal of the task was to help researchers study public reactions to news events by conducting sentiment analysis on news excerpts. We informed participants that there was a large corpus on news excerpts and that each team would read the excerpts, extract three key words or phrases from them, and assess the general sentiment of the excerpt (either positive, negative, or neutral). Following this, participants were asked to watch a 1-min video we created for this study that included an example showing how to conduct sentiment analysis (see OSF repository for video link).

Next, participants read that while their team worked on the sentiment analysis task, they would also need to independently complete this task with the same passages to check the team's work. This instruction was provided to realistically simulate a situation where participants, in leadership roles, experienced multiple simultaneous responsibilities that imposed on their time, similar to what managers would have experienced in the scenarios constructed for previous studies. Importantly, when managers have multiple responsibilities, they may have to delegate certain responsibilities to others.

After reading about their responsibilities, we informed participants that they must seek feedback from their teams on a number of topics that involved various aspects of working together on this task. Participants read further that seeking feedback on all the topics was critical to ultimately doing well on this project. Following this, participants learned that there were two options for soliciting feedback from the other five team members after each round: (1) an automated digital assistant could call each team member on zoom, take notes during the call, and send feedback to them, or (2) they could personally talk with each team member individually on zoom and ask for their feedback directly. Participants watched a 30-s video we created for this study that showed them how the automated digital assistant will make calls and take notes via zoom. We created this video based on an AI digital assistant with similar functionalities, Otter.ai (<https://otter.ai/>; see OSF repository for video link).

After reading about the two options that were available to them for soliciting feedback from their team members (doing so themselves vs. using an AI digital assistant), we asked participants to decide how they were going to solicit feedback on a number of topics by selecting between the two options. The list of topics presented to participants was the same as the pre-test and included three sensitive issues (mistreatment by a teammate based on one's identity, verbal aggression by fellow teammates, bullying by fellow teammates) and three operational issues (allocating work tasks, setting deadlines for projects, managing team assignments). Each topic was individually presented to participants, along with a choice to select between soliciting feedback via the AI assistant or soliciting feedback directly. After participants made their selection for each of the six topics, we debriefed them by informing that we were actually interested in understanding when and whether people would use an automated digital assistant to solicit feedback from their teams and that they were not actually working with a team and did not need to complete the sentiment analysis task.

We collected the following demographic information at the end of the study: age, gender, race/ethnicity, English as second language, education level, and employment status.

7.3.3. Measures

We coded participants' behavioral choices as 0 (solicit feedback directly) or 1 (use AI digital assistant). As preregistered, we created a composite measure for sensitive issues by calculating the mean frequency of participants' selection across the three sensitive issues

($\alpha = .92$). Similarly, we created a composite measure for operational issues by calculating the mean of participants' selection across the three operational issues ($\alpha = .84$).

7.4. Results

Willingness to delegate communication to an AI assistant. We predicted that participants would be less likely to delegate feedback solicitation to an AI assistant for sensitive issues—where we expected they may be more motivated to signal care and maintain control—relative to operational issues. Consistent with our prediction, a paired samples *t*-test revealed that participants were less likely to delegate feedback solicitation to the AI assistant for sensitive issues ($M = .31$; $SD = .43$), relative to operational issues ($M = .71$; $SD = .40$), $t(598) = -20.33$, $p < .001$, $d = -.83$, 95% CI = $[-.92, -.74]$. On average, participants were willing to solicit feedback via the AI digital assistant for less than half as many sensitive issues as operational issues.

Thus, these results revealed that in situations where leaders are concerned about signaling care or maintaining control, such as when soliciting feedback about sensitive issues, they are less likely to delegate feedback solicitation to AI assistants. However, leaders are much more open to delegating communication to AI assistants in situations where it will help them be more efficient without undermining their need to signal care or maintain control.

8. General Discussion

As AI assistants become increasingly capable of communicating on people's behalf in social and interpersonal contexts, questions arise about whether leaders will embrace these tools for interacting with subordinates. Our research suggests that leaders may be resistant to using AI assistants to communicate on their behalf, primarily due to perceptions that they would be unable to meet role-based expectations for signaling care, with concerns about maintaining control playing a more context-dependent role.

Across four preregistered studies, we examined when and why leaders are willing to delegate communication to AI assistants. Study 1, using a managerial sample, offered evidence that leaders are less likely to delegate communication with subordinates to AI assistants relative to communicating directly. Consistent with our theorizing about role-based expectations for leaders, analysis of qualitative responses provided initial evidence that this reluctance to delegate communication to AI assistants was primarily rooted in concerns about failing to signal care, with concerns about maintaining control also emerging as relevant. Study 2 provided converging evidence through an experimental design in which AI-generated communication was manipulated to enable high and low levels of care and control. Results indicated that when leaders can explicitly signal care and maintain control through AI assistants, they are more open to delegating communication to these tools. Thus, this study provided evidence that these role expectations can shape leaders' decisions to delegate communication to AI assistants. Study 3 tested the underlying psychological mechanisms by measuring anticipated care and perceptions of control as mediators. Consistent with our theorizing, results revealed that signaling care is a critical psychological driver of leaders' willingness to delegate communication to AI (versus control that had more mixed effects). Importantly, this study contrasted AI delegation with delegation to a human assistant, demonstrating that the reluctance to delegate communication was specific to AI, rather than a general reluctance, as evidenced by their greater willingness to delegate to human assistants. This comparison was a deliberate design choice to validate that leaders' reluctance to delegate communication to AI assistants is a reflection of their psychological beliefs about AI's ability to allow them to meet role-based expectations. Finally, Study 4 employed a realistic simulation design and compared leaders' decisions to delegate communication across sensitive and operational issues. Results revealed that leaders were more likely to

delegate communication to AI assistants when soliciting feedback about operational topics that are less likely to require them to signal care or maintain control (e.g., scheduling) than more sensitive topics (e.g., harassment). See Table 4 for a summary of key results.

Across all studies, we adopted open science practices including preregistration and public data sharing which strengthens the credibility and reproducibility of this research. Our samples were diverse and managerially relevant, including organizational leaders from medium-to-large U.S. organizations and employed U.S. adults currently holding managerial positions. Notably, across all studies we framed AI assistants as being technically competent in communication—reflective of current capabilities of these technologies—and found that, despite its technical competence, leaders were resistant to delegating communication to AI assistants. Thus, the observed resistance is not attributable to technical limitations of AI tools but, instead, reflects a meaningful psychological barrier.

8.1. Contributions to theory and practice

The present research makes several novel theoretical contributions. First, our findings contribute to research on leadership in the age of AI (Aziz et al., 2024) by unpacking the psychology of leaders as they consider delegating social tasks such as communication to intelligent machines (rather than to other humans). Our work suggests that, particularly when it comes to signaling care, social role expectations outweigh potential efficiency gains when leaders decide to delegate communication-related tasks to AI. Specifically, in social contexts, leaders are attuned to interpersonal signals that delegating to AI might send to others and make choices that enable them to appear more caring and in control. Our findings also show that by strategically delegating communication to AI assistants for certain types of issues (e.g., operational issues), leaders may be able to experience efficiency gains while simultaneously meeting social role expectations.

Second, our findings contribute to the expanding literature on the psychology of technology (e.g., Jago & Laurin, 2022; Newman et al., 2020; Raveendhran & Fast, 2021) by exploring the importance of context—for example, expectations and signals stemming from hierarchies or decision contexts (i.e., sensitive vs. operational)—and how it shapes peoples' interactions with AI. Research on the psychology of AI assistants has, thus far, focused on the person interacting with the AI assistant and the psychological impact of interacting with these tools for those on the receiving end (McLean & Osei-Frimpong, 2019). Complementing this line of research, our findings emphasize the importance of understanding the psychology of people who decide to use AI assistants to communicate on their behalf across a variety of different interpersonal environments. Specifically, our findings suggest that, for people in leadership positions, role-based expectations play an important role in determining when and why they may be open to delegating communication to AI assistants, as does the nature of the communication itself. In taking this contextual focus, our research highlights key psychological barriers to delegating communication to AI assistants that extend beyond functional considerations such as perceived usefulness and ease of use that are typically emphasized in technology adoption research (e.g., Davis, 1989).

Finally, we contribute to research on role theory (Biddle, 1986) which posits that individuals face role-based pressures to behave in certain ways when occupying social roles. While role theory has primarily been applied to social contexts involving human-to-human interactions, our work demonstrates its relevance in contexts where autonomous technologies occupy critical social roles acting as intermediaries between individuals in interpersonal interactions (Fast & Schroeder, 2020; Gratch & Fast, 2022; Jago et al., 2024). Notably, these technologies perform various actions autonomously—actions that may otherwise offer opportunities to people to enact behaviors that fulfill role-based expectations. Even in periods of dramatic technological change, such as the current ever-expanding capability of large language

Table 4
Summary of key statistical results across studies.

Study Number	Key Dependent Variable	Descriptive Statistics Mean (SD)	Statistical Test	Main Results
Study 1	Willingness to delegate communication to an AI assistant (behavioral intention measure; 0% = direct communication 100% = AI assistant)	44.06% (30.71)	One sample <i>t</i> -test	$t(205) = -2.78, p = .006, d = -.19, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-.33, -.06]$
Study 2	Willingness to delegate communication to AI assistant (behavioral intention measure; 0% = direct communication 100% = AI assistant)	<i>Care conditions</i> High care: 31.65 (30.03) Low care: 21.59 (27.21) <i>Control conditions</i> High control: 28.93 (30.06) Low control: 24.29 (27.91)	2 x 2 ANOVA	<i>Care main effect:</i> $F(1,1195) = 37.17, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .03$ <i>Control main effect:</i> $F(1,1195) = 7.91, p = .005, \eta_p^2 = .007$
Study 3	Willingness to delegate communication to AI assistant (behavioral intention measure; 0% = direct communication 100% = AI assistant)	AI assistant: 41.28 (29.87) Human assistant: 48.76 (26.32)	Independent samples <i>t</i> -test	$t(300) = -2.31, p = .02, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-13.85, -1.10], d = -.27, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-.49, -.04]$
Study 4	Willingness to delegate communication to AI assistant (behavioral decision measure; 0 = direct communication 1 = AI assistant)	Sensitive issues: .31(.43) Operational issues: .71 (.40)	Paired samples <i>t</i> -test	$t(598) = -20.33, p < .001, d = -.83, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-.92, -.74]$

models to communicate and make decisions as agents for both individuals and organizations, the present research underscores how enduring role-based expectations can be for those in leadership positions, particularly expectations related to signaling care, which emerged as a consistent driver across our studies.

More broadly, our research suggests that role theory itself may need to evolve as autonomous technologies increasingly mediate interpersonal interactions. Extant research on social cognition assumes human-to-human interactions, even when these interactions are technologically mediated (e.g., phone calls or emails). The sophistication of autonomous AI technologies that can accurately simulate leaders' mannerisms, characteristics, communication styles, and even elements of personality raises numerous questions about how roles and expectations in social contexts will develop given the automation of (some of) these interactions. For example, does deciding to use such technologies change leaders' assumptions about their roles on work teams, relationships with subordinates, or intended communication styles (either in-person or programmed via an AI)? Our work suggests that future research on role theory should incorporate methods and theorizing relevant to autonomous communication technologies and examine their implications in shaping role-based expectations and related perceptions for both users and observers.

Our work also has several practical implications. By uncovering key psychological barriers for delegating social tasks such as communication to AI assistants, our research suggests that organizations should focus not solely on functionality and efficiency when implementing these tools, but also on allowing leaders to meet role-based expectations, particularly those around signaling care. For instance, giving leaders autonomy over how AI-mediated communication is framed to their teams rather than mandating top-down adoption may help leaders signal care to subordinates. More broadly, our finding that leaders are substantially more willing to delegate communication about operational issues than sensitive ones (Study 4) suggests that a targeted deployment strategy (e.g., using AI assistants for scheduling, task assignments, and routine updates while preserving direct leader communication for sensitive matters) will likely be more effective than an all-or-nothing approach, for example, requiring AI and/or token use for managerial responsibilities writ-large. Our findings also have important implications for policy makers as they consider crafting policies for AI adoption in organizations by suggesting that they should safeguard people's social and psychological experiences at work beyond efficiency gains.

8.2. Limitations and future directions

The present research has some limitations as well as highlights potential directions for future research. First, these studies featured a number of distinct operationalizations and measurement decisions of care and control. Although we made these decisions in an effort to conceptually triangulate these constructs (e.g., experimentally manipulating control over AI communication rules in Study 2 vs. measuring perceived control over communications in Study 3) across a variety of different situations and use cases, the strength and consequences of these relationships will naturally vary across different work tasks, leader-subordinate relationships, and given features of different AI agent options. Relatedly, the empirical support for our two proposed mechanisms was not equally strong. While signaling care emerged as a robust and consistent psychological driver across studies, the evidence for maintaining control was more mixed. In Study 2, experimentally manipulating control significantly influenced willingness to delegate, but the mediation analysis in Study 3 did not find a significant indirect effect through perceived control. This pattern suggests that signaling care may be the stronger mechanism, while maintaining control may operate in a more context-dependent manner varying with, for instance, the degree of autonomy afforded to the AI system or the nature of the comparison condition (direct communication vs. human assistant). We additionally made some methodological choices that could have impacted the strength of different effects. For example, we adapted an existing, validated, "care" scale (Eisenberger et al., 1986) while constructing an ad-hoc "control" scale for the purposes of Study 3. Therefore, it is possible that some of the inconsistency in the control findings could reflect measurement limitations rather than substantive differences. It is also possible that the overt nature of the Study 2 manipulations may have increased demand characteristics, influencing the strength of the findings in this study. Future studies could use more subtle manipulations or behavioral field settings to test these mechanisms to enhance the internal validity and generalizability of these findings.

Second, our work primarily relied on U.S.-based samples. Although we discuss the relevance of our findings for broader leadership models and cultural contexts, our studies remain culturally and geographically bounded. Role-based expectations for leaders, including the relative emphasis on signaling care and maintaining control, may vary substantially across cultural contexts. For example, leaders operating within

collectivist cultures where relational obligations are especially salient may face stronger expectations to signal care by communicating directly, whereas leaders in cultures that prioritize efficiency may be more open to delegating communication to AI. At the sample level, we also collected relatively limited demographic information about participants, some of which were correlated with willingness to delegate communication to AI (e.g., organization size, tendency to anthropomorphize AI; see supplemental materials). Future research should examine whether these effects replicate across diverse cultural and organizational contexts.

Third, our studies did not measure several potentially relevant moderators that may shape leaders' willingness to delegate communication to AI assistants. For instance, leaders with greater prior AI experience or higher digital literacy may have more calibrated mental models of what AI assistants can and cannot do, potentially attenuating concerns about signaling care and maintaining control when delegating communication to AI given positive prior experiences with these technologies. Similarly, it is possible that leadership level also moderates our effects: senior executives managing hundreds of employees face substantively different communication demands than frontline managers overseeing smaller teams, and this might influence what trade-offs leaders make at each level. Organizational tenure could also play a role, as longer-tenured leaders may have more established relationships with subordinates that could either heighten reluctance to delegate (due to stronger felt obligations to signal care) or reduce it (if there is high trust). Other factors such as leadership style, organizational culture, and industry context may also shape how leaders evaluate their decision to delegate communication to AI. For example, leaders in technology-forward industries or organizations with cultures that prioritize innovation may face weaker social penalties for delegating communication to AI, whereas leaders in relationship-intensive industries may face stronger role-based expectations to signal care via direct communication. Future research should systematically examine how these individual and contextual factors moderate leaders' willingness to delegate communication to AI.

Fourth, Studies 1–3 relied on behavioral intention measures, while only Study 4 employed an ostensibly real behavioral decision. Although behavioral intentions are widely used in psychological research and are theoretically linked to actual behavior ((Ajzen, 1991)), future research should examine how these intentions translate to real behavioral choices focusing on not only *when* leaders choose to delegate communication to AI but also *how* they do so. For example, future research might explore how leaders choose to program AI assistants to communicate on their behalf. Relatedly, our studies explicitly informed participants that subordinates would be aware that they are communicating with an AI assistant acting on the leaders' behalf, but in practice, leaders may or may not disclose their use of AI. Given ongoing academic and policy discussions regarding privacy and consent in AI-mediated communication (e.g., does an AI assistant need to tell you that it is not a person?), an important direction for future research is to examine how the degree of disclosure shapes both leaders' willingness to delegate communication to AI. As AI assistants continue to proliferate, offering leaders increasingly varied settings, customization options, and interaction modalities, trends in leaders' willingness to use them will likely continue to evolve. Our research suggests that concerns about signaling care and maintaining control will remain fundamental to these decisions.

Fifth, our studies focused on leaders' initial willingness to delegate communication to AI assistants, but did not examine whether leaders would be satisfied with the communication that AI assistants actually generate on their behalf. Although the decision of whether or not to delegate communication to an AI assistant is a necessary precursor to any corresponding social interactions, these studies raise the question of whether leaders will receive better, worse, or equivalent outcomes compared to direct communication. Future research should examine how leaders evaluate AI-mediated communication processes, and subsequently, the upward communication they receive from those lower in

the hierarchy via these technologies.

Finally, our studies did not focus on how those lower in the hierarchy respond when leaders delegate social tasks such as communication to AI assistants. Although there is value in understanding these automation decisions from the perspective of leaders who have the power to choose to implement these technologies, prior work suggests that subordinates' psychological experiences with these technologies may also be important to consider. For example, studies show that interacting with technology has the potential to reduce the fear of negative evaluation (Raveendhran & Fast, 2021, 2024) and increase people's willingness to disclose information (Lucas et al., 2014). Thus, future studies can explore when and under what conditions subordinates may experience potential benefits of AI-mediated upward communication. Future work should also examine how observers perceive leaders who choose to delegate communication to AI assistants.

More broadly, future research should also explore how delegating social tasks to AI assistants changes the nature of social relationships. For example, AI assistants could expand social hierarchies by inserting a (potentially highly anthropomorphized) agent "in between" leaders and subordinates. As these technologies become more commonplace, it would be important to understand the psychological implications of changing social hierarchies both from the perspective of leaders making decisions to implement AI assistants to interact on their behalf (e.g., the present studies) as well as those interacting with them (e.g., Jago et al., 2024).

9. Conclusion

The increasing proliferation of AI assistants in society has allowed people to conduct various interpersonal interactions efficiently without having to be present. While the potential efficiency gains afforded by AI assistants are clear, the psychological implications of delegating social tasks such as communication to AI assistants (i.e., having AI assistants interact on one's behalf) are less obvious. The present research explored this question from the perspective of leaders and reveals that they resist delegating communication to AI assistants, driven primarily by leaders' motivation to meet role-based expectations for signaling care, with concerns about maintaining control playing a more context-dependent role. We hope that our work will further research on the psychology of leaders considering technological intermediaries for interpersonal interactions and, in doing so, enable more thoughtful implementation of AI assistants in social and interpersonal contexts.

10. Open practices

All data, preregistrations, and materials are posted and available via the Open Science Framework at https://osf.io/kmy9z/?view_only=6d911abea1e94b8594a079057902dc1d.

10.1. Preregistration links

Study 1 https://aspredicted.org/6DX_W2F
 Study 2 https://aspredicted.org/SRJ_X7Z
 Study 3 <https://aspredicted.org/sdjb-nqxx.pdf>
 Study 4 (Pretest) https://aspredicted.org/ZW2_ZPN
 Study 4 (Main) https://aspredicted.org/BKB_GK5

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Roshni Raveendhran: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Arthur S. Jago:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Jonathan Gratch:** Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. **Nathanael J. Fast:**

Conceptualization, Data curation, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests: Jonathan Gratch and Nathanael Fast reports financial support was provided by the Minerva Research Initiative, in partnership with the Air

Force Office of Scientific Research, under grant FA9550-18-1018. If there are other authors, they declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported through the Minerva Research Initiative, in partnership with the Air Force Office of Scientific Research, under grant FA9550-18-1018.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2026.109139>.

Appendix

Study 2 Manipulations

Low care, low control

Dear [Employee],

I hear that you are feeling overwhelmed with your workload. I need to remind you that as a member of this team, you are expected to manage your tasks efficiently and effectively.

I suggest that you prioritize your tasks and focus on the most critical ones first. You should also consider getting additional training or delegating some of your work to your colleagues, as teamwork and results are both essential to our success.

Please understand that we have high expectations for our team members and meeting deadlines is crucial to achieving our goals. I trust that you will take the necessary steps to manage your workload and meet our expectations while also taking care of yourself.

Regards,

[Your Name]

Low care, high control

Dear [Employee],

I hear that you are feeling overwhelmed with your workload. I need to remind you that as a member of this team, you are expected to manage your tasks efficiently and effectively.

I suggest that you prioritize your tasks and focus on the most critical ones first. You should also consider getting additional training or delegating some of your work to your colleagues, as teamwork and results are both essential to our success.

Please understand that we have high expectations for our team members and meeting deadlines is crucial to achieving our goals. I trust that you will take the necessary steps to manage your workload and meet our expectations while also taking care of yourself.

Regards,

[Your Name]

[\[CLICK HERE TO EDIT/PERSONALIZE THIS MESSAGE\]](#)

High care, low control

"Dear [Employee Name],

I wanted to reach out and let you know that I understand how challenging it can be to feel overwhelmed at work. You are not alone in this, and I want you to know that I am here to support you in any way I can.

Please know that your hard work and dedication are truly appreciated, and I understand that sometimes the workload can become overwhelming. Remember that your health and well-being are important, and if you need to take some time off or adjust your schedule, please don't hesitate to discuss this with me.

Thank you for your efforts and dedication, and please reach out if you need any support or assistance.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]"

High care, high control

"Dear [Employee Name],

I wanted to reach out and let you know that I understand how challenging it can be to feel overwhelmed at work. You are not alone in this, and I want you to know that I am here to support you in any way I can.

Please know that your hard work and dedication are truly appreciated, and I understand that sometimes the workload can become overwhelming. Remember that your health and well-being are important, and if you need to take some time off or adjust your schedule, please don't hesitate to discuss this with me.

Thank you for your efforts and dedication, and please reach out if you need any support or assistance.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]"

[CLICK HERE TO EDIT/PERSONALIZE THIS MESSAGE]

Data availability

All data, materials, and preregistrations are posted and publicly available on OSF (https://osf.io/kmy9z/?view_only=6d911abea1e94b8594a079057902dc1d)

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