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DATAFICATION AT WORK: NAVIGATING AI, PRIVACY CONCERNS, AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

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DATAFICATION AT WORK: NAVIGATING AI, PRIVACY CONCERNS, AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Short Paper

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Abstract

Our study investigates the opportunities and challenges of increasing workplace datafication from an employee perspective. It focuses on how AI-driven data collection and analysis shape employee perceptions and influence their engagement levels. As AI becomes part of workplace operations, it introduces a complex balance between productivity gains and employee privacy, thereby influencing organizational outcomes. Using a quantitative survey, we will test the relationships between AI-driven datafication, privacy concerns, work-life conflict, productivity, and employee engagement. We specifically examine employee engagement as a key outcome, recognizing it as essential for organizational performance, retention, and job satisfaction. Overall, our study contributes to datafication research by examining the nuanced effects of increasing employee transparency on employee perceptions and attitudes. Our anticipated insights will support organizations as they navigate the complexities of datafication at work, helping them create balanced, employee-centred approaches to AI integration that promote employee engagement.

Keywords: Datafication, Digital Work, Artificial Intelligence, Employee Privacy, Engagement.

1 Motivation

In today's digital workplace, advanced technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI) are reshaping how work is conducted and experienced by employees. AI tools are no longer just support systems but are becoming integrated partners in workplace processes (Attaran et al., 2020; Baptista et al., 2020). The adoption of AI in companies is increasingly seen as a powerful lever for boosting productivity at both organizational and employee levels. Reflecting this shift, approximately 80% of employees reported that AI has improved their performance. Users are over four times as likely to say that AI-enhanced working conditions rather than worsened them (Lane et al., 2023). Yet, this productivity boost comes alongside a rapid acceleration in datafication, which refers to the process of transforming everyday activities into data points for continuous monitoring, analysis, and optimization (Mettler, 2023).

In workplaces, expanding datafication is linked to employees' everyday activities, behaviours, and even personal characteristics being transformed into data points (Mettler, 2023; Nyman et al., 2024). As a result, the breadth and depth of employee data collected lead to increasing transparency among employees (Gierlich-Joas et al., 2022). As AI tools monitor and analyse continuous flows of data, they enable insight into not only work-related activities but also personal preferences, social dynamics, and potentially non-work-related exchanges (Acquisti et al., 2015; Bernhardt et al., 2023). Therefore, while AI tools promise benefits like personalized services and improved efficiency, they are also making it easier to decipher intimate details about employees (Mettler, 2023). Consequently, the extensive data generation and processing create conflicts between employees' private lives and work, as personal information becomes increasingly exposed within professional contexts (Teebken et al., 2023). This

creates a situation where the datafication of employees becomes a tool for organizational control, leading to tensions between maximizing efficiency and respecting individual autonomy (Nyman et al., 2024).

As employees are increasingly subject to algorithmic decision-making and monitoring, it is crucial to understand the human consequences of these developments (Leidner & Tona, 2021; Mettler, 2023). Employee engagement is defined as a cognitive, emotional, and behavioural commitment to organizational goals (Shuck & Wollard, 2010). This state is vital for organizational success, as engaged employees are more likely to contribute positively to their organization (Bhappu & Schultze, 2018). Our study investigates employee engagement as a key outcome variable of growing datafication resulting from AI use in the workplace. As datafication intensifies through the increasing use of AI at work, we propose that understanding how employees navigate the trade-offs between the benefits and challenges of these technologies is essential for assessing their engagement levels. This examination is critical in assessing how employees balance efficiency gains with potential erosions on work-life boundaries.

Building on the growing literature on datafication (Leidner & Tona, 2021; Mettler, 2023; Nyman et al., 2024), and by focusing on employee engagement, we aim to provide insights into how organizations can foster a productive, privacy-respecting environment that supports sustained employee commitment. Our research question explores both the challenges and potential benefits of datafication: *How do privacy concerns, work-life conflict, and productivity shaped by datafication influence employee engagement?* Our study builds on the work of Tams et al. (2020), who developed a moderated mediation model rooted in the Job Demand-Control Model (JDCM) by Karasek's (1979). This model is particularly relevant for our research, as it examines the role of control in mitigating workplace stressors related to technology use. Our findings will contribute by centering the employee experience in discussions of AI-driven workplace technologies. While much of the discourse on AI in organizations focuses on productivity gains from a managerial perspective, our study shifts the focus toward employees' autonomy, engagement, and overall work satisfaction. Thereby, we expect that our findings will emphasize the need for AI tools that balance privacy concerns with productivity benefits. These insights also help guide service providers, employers, and policymakers in creating measures that address the challenges of datafication in AI-driven workplaces.

2 Literature Review

AI is rapidly reshaping digital workplaces by automating tasks that traditionally require human intelligence, thereby promising increasing productivity levels at work (Lane & Williams, 2023). The capabilities of AI tools are marking a significant leap from instrumental to intelligent tools that can potentially replace or augment human work (Baptista et al., 2020). However, the implementation of AI in workplaces is far from uniform – different tools may complement or disrupt human roles to different extents (Lane & Williams, 2023). In particular, the use of AI assistants is on the rise, reflecting a broader trend of integrating intelligent tools into workplaces. Microsoft Copilot stands out as a prominent example of this trend, as it provides a seamless integration within the Microsoft ecosystem (Hamer, 2024). For example, Copilot can assist users by seamlessly integrating with Microsoft 365 to help draft documents, analyse data, and manage emails (Microsoft, 2024). Thereby, to function properly, AI assistants depend on the continuous collection and processing of vast amounts of employee data. This can extend beyond professional activities, encompassing personal attributes such as behaviours, preferences, and even sentiments, which is making employees more transparent and vulnerable to surveillance (Mettler, 2023). As a result, insights into professional relationships, social dynamics, and communication patterns can be created, revealing deeper aspects of employee behaviour and interactions (Acquisti et al., 2015; Bernhardt et al., 2023).

Managing employees' attitudes toward such AI tools is crucial for their successful implementation in workplaces (Park et al., 2024). The literature shows that building and sustaining employee engagement plays a pivotal role in this process, as engaged employees are more likely to adopt positive attitudes and behaviours that support organizational goals: Bhappu and Schultze (2018) emphasize that fostering employee engagement has become a top management priority, as an engaged employee willingly applies discretionary effort to meet the company's objectives. Furthermore, Wang and Diao (2023) highlight

that employee engagement not only motivates employees to embrace change but also serves as a sustainable competitive advantage. Consequently, cultivating engagement is essential for organizations seeking to integrate AI smoothly and align it with employees' motivations and goals. AI tools, especially assistants, play a dual role in this evolving landscape: While enhancing productivity, they rely on the analysis and handling of extensive employee data.

Research emphasizes that the heavy reliance of AI tools on vast amounts of data to function introduces significant privacy concerns among employees (Menard & Bott, 2024). Over half of the employees whose work is associated with the collection of data by AI expressed concerns about privacy and felt that excessive amounts of their data were being gathered (Lane et al., 2023). With AI becoming more embedded in workplace processes, the demand for data grows, advancing datafication and posing critical questions about privacy (Lane & Williams, 2023). While AI tools continuously monitor and analyse data, employees feel that their personal lives are increasingly intruded upon during work, leading to heightened work-life conflict (Teebken et al., 2023). At the same time, the discourses in existing literature on how digital work impacts work-life balance predominantly focus on the benefits of digital work. For instance, in the realm of AI in the workplace, the literature underscores the potential of AI assistants to revolutionize digital workplaces, thereby exploring various dimensions from the trust created by the design features of AI tools to their impact on productivity and employee well-being (Cranefield et al., 2023). Thereby, research consistently shows that achieving a healthy balance between work and personal life can enhance employee engagement. For instance, work-life balance has a positive relationship with employee engagement, which in turn positively affects job performance or productivity (Campo et al., 2021). Here, despite the increasing relevance of AI and datafication, the connection between employee privacy concerns, resulting in work-life conflict (as opposed to work-life balance), and their implications for employee engagement remains underexplored in the literature.

3 Hypothesis Development

3.1 Theoretical Framework and Research Model

Our research builds on the moderated mediation model developed by Tams et al. (2020), which is rooted in Karasek's (1979) Job Demand-Control Model (JDCM). The JDCM has been widely applied in organizational psychology and Information Systems research, as it offers a structured way to understand how work-related stressors interact with control factors to shape employee outcomes. However, while JDCM has traditionally focused on physical and psychological job demands, its assumptions require modification when applied to AI-driven datafication, as this introduces new dimensions of digital surveillance, transparency, and privacy concerns. Tams et al. (2020) recognized the need to update JDCM in response to modern information systems use, particularly by examining how technology-related stressors (e.g., interruption overload) interact with worker control to influence work-life conflict. Our study extends this perspective by adapting their model to AI-driven workplace monitoring and datafication. Specifically, we refine its core components as follows:

Redefining Job Demand: In traditional JDCM applications, job demands refer to workload or time pressure. In AI-driven workplaces, however, we argue that employee privacy concerns, stemming from extensive data collection and surveillance, function as a modern job demand. Employees experience stress not just from task requirements but from the feeling of being continuously monitored, evaluated, and analyzed through AI-driven systems.

Updating Control Factors: Classic JDCM assumes that job control refers to employees' autonomy over their work tasks. At the same time, in a digitalized work environment, autonomy alone does not mitigate AI-related stress. Instead, privacy control, the extent to which employees feel they can regulate how their data is collected, used, and shared, becomes a critical moderating factor. Privacy control allows employees to manage their exposure to datafication, similar to how task control reduces traditional workload stress in JDCM.

Expanding Stress Consequences and Balancing AI's Dual Role: The Tams et al. (2020) model linked work-life conflict to technology overload. We retain work-life conflict as a central stress outcome but

extend the framework by examining employee engagement as a consequence. We propose that AI-driven datafication does not only cause stress, but also influences employees' commitment, motivation, and emotional investment in their work. While privacy concerns introduce stress, AI also enhances productivity. Unlike JDCM's traditional negative framing of job demands, we incorporate productivity as a counterbalancing factor, acknowledging that AI tools can create both pressure and efficiency gains.

In the following chapter, we present our adapted research model (Figure 1), which builds upon Tams et al. (2020) while addressing the limitations of JDCM in AI-driven workplaces. This framework explicitly accounts for the unique challenges posed by datafication, moving beyond traditional workload-based stress models. Our model explains how AI-related privacy concerns, work-life conflict, and privacy control interact to shape employee engagement and productivity. Next, we detail the relationships between these constructs and introduce our research hypotheses.

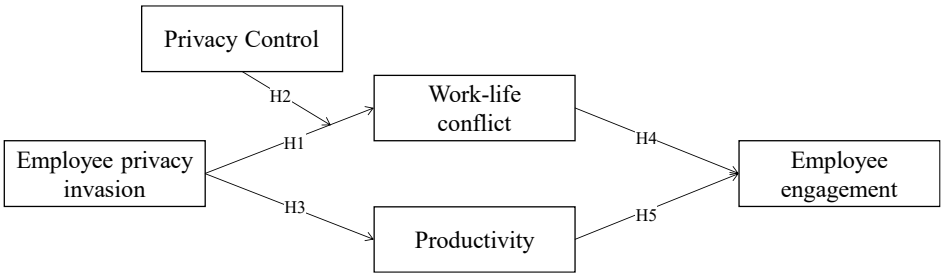

Figure 1. Research model.

3.2 Employee Privacy Concerns and Work-Life-Conflict

Work-life conflict has been extensively studied in the context of digital technologies. For instance, extant literature explores how digital workplace tools can offer more flexibility in everyday work but paradoxically lead to a deterioration in work-life balance (Duan & Deng, 2022). Our study extends this understanding by introducing privacy concerns as a key factor contributing to work-life conflict, as opposed to work-life balance. AI-enabled monitoring tools often rely heavily on the collection and processing of employee data, thus compounding privacy issues (Lane & Williams, 2023). Teebken et al. (2023) showed that employees perceive increasing workplace digitalization as a source of growing privacy concerns, particularly as digital tools increasingly collect data that blurs the lines between professional and private life. We propose that the increasing datafication of the workplace, which leads to a sense of privacy concerns, exacerbates work-life conflicts. Hence, we posit:

Hypothesis H1: Employee privacy concerns are associated with higher work-life conflict.

Individuals strive to manage and maintain clear boundaries between their professional and personal lives (Williams et al., 2023). However, when employees feel that their privacy is being compromised through excessive data collection, e.g., facilitated by AI assistants, they may feel a loss of control over their personal information. This perceived loss of control can lead to stress and a sense of intrusion into their private lives, further weakening the boundaries between work and personal life (Teebken et al., 2023). Employees who face high job demands but have low control over their work are more likely to experience negative outcomes such as stress, exhaustion, and work-life conflict (Karasek, 1979). In the context of privacy concerns, this suggests that when employees perceive a high invasion of privacy (a job demand), the extent to which this leads to work-life conflict could be moderated by the level of control they have over their privacy. Therefore, we propose:

Hypothesis H2: The level of control employees have over their data plays a moderating role between privacy concerns and work-life conflict. For employees with high privacy control, the increase in privacy concerns leads to lower work-life conflict.

3.3 Employee Privacy Concerns and Productivity

The literature highlights the ambivalent role of technology in achieving work-life balance, recognizing both its benefits and drawbacks (Duan & Deng, 2022). Traditionally, privacy concerns have been

associated with adverse outcomes in the literature, such as increasing surveillance (Mettler, 2023; Teebken et al., 2023). However, the privacy-transparency paradox highlights how increased workplace transparency and corresponding privacy concerns can create both a sense of surveillance and opportunities for enhanced productivity (Gierlich-Joas et al., 2022). Thus, while privacy concerns are often associated with negative outcomes, they may also be linked to higher perceived productivity in cases where employees recognize the benefits of AI-driven optimization. By investigating this relationship, we aim to explore whether the productivity gains provided by AI tools can sometimes outweigh work-life conflicts due to privacy risks. Thereby, we offer a more nuanced perspective on how employees balance these competing factors in digital workplaces. This specific link between privacy concerns and productivity perceptions has not been explicitly examined in prior research. Thus, we suggest:

Hypothesis H3: Employee privacy concerns are associated with increased perceptions of productivity.

3.4 The Impact on Employee Engagement

When employees experience significant work-life conflict, engagement can be adversely affected. Research indicates that work-life conflict leads to diverse negative emotional and psychological states, which are detrimental to employee engagement. For instance, work-life conflict has been shown to predict reduced job satisfaction, lower organizational commitment, and increased absenteeism, all of which are antithetical to the core components of employee engagement (Jiang, 2012; Kossek & Lautsch, 2012). The negative impact of work-life conflict on engagement is further supported by studies showing that work-life balance has a significant positive relationship with employee engagement (Campo et al., 2021). In summary, the literature suggests that higher work-life conflict is associated with lower levels of employee engagement because it drains the emotional and psychological resources necessary for engagement (Hughes et al., 2019). Therefore, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis H4: Work-life conflict negatively influences employee engagement.

In the literature, the relationship between variables surrounding the concepts of productivity, efficiency, usefulness, efficacy, and employee engagement has not been thoroughly investigated. Despite the lack of direct research in this area, some inferences can be made from the existing literature. For instance, studies have shown that high-involvement work practices, which can lead to increased efficiency and productivity, are associated with higher engagement (Iddagoda & Opatha, 2020). A positive work environment, which includes efficient and productive work processes, enhances employees' sense of capability and satisfaction in their job (Campo et al., 2021). This suggests that there could be a positive feedback loop where increased productivity and efficiency foster greater employee engagement. In turn, employees who perceive their work as efficient and meaningful may be more motivated and invested in their roles. Given this understanding, we propose:

Hypothesis H5: Increased productivity leads to higher employee engagement.

Regarding consent and autonomy, our study acknowledges that the implementation of AI tools varies across workplaces. Some AI tools are voluntarily adopted by employees for productivity enhancement, while others are mandated by employers as part of organizational workflows. To capture this variation, our survey will include a control question assessing whether the AI tools used by employees were freely chosen, imposed by the employer, or a mix of both. This distinction is important as autonomy in technology use could impact employee perceptions of privacy and engagement. Additionally, we will include a control variable to account for participants' general attitudes toward AI. These attitudes, ranging from optimistic to distrustful, could influence perceptions of workplace surveillance, productivity, and engagement.

4 Planned Research Methodology

As a next step, we will conduct an online survey to validate the proposed model and test our hypotheses. The survey follows a structured, multi-stage approach, beginning with demographic questions to ensure participants meet the survey's quota requirements and align with our target sample. Our sampling

strategy aims to ensure diversity across age groups, genders, industries, and job functions to capture a broad perspective on AI-driven datafication in different work environments. We aim to recruit approximately 400–500 participants to obtain a representative sample for robust statistical analysis. Facilitated by a market research company, participants will be selectively recruited to have familiarity with AI tools in the workplace, ensuring relevance to our research context. A fundamental prerequisite for participation is that respondents are currently employed and use AI assistants, such as Microsoft Copilot, on a regular basis for work-related tasks. A screening question will confirm their level of usage before survey participation. To ensure ethical compliance, our study follows fundamental research ethics principles, including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation.

Following the demographic section, participants will respond to the main questions corresponding to our measurement model, with all items measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Finally, we will incorporate control variables for alternative potential explanations, e.g., including gender, age, educational background, or functional role of participants. We use established scales from prior research to measure our study variables, aiming to ensure content validity for our survey instrument. Where necessary, we adapt existing items slightly to enhance clarity and fit our specific context. Employee engagement is measured using items developed by Soane (2012). To capture perceptions of employee privacy concerns and privacy control, we adopt items from Xu et al. (2011). Productivity is measured following the adapted usefulness scale provided by Ayyagari et al. (2011). Finally, we assess work-life conflict using items adapted from Wang (2023). Originally designed to measure work-life balance, Wang's items are carefully modified by reversing their phrasing to reflect the work-life conflict in our study context accurately. These adaptations were necessary to align the constructs with our research framework while preserving their original validity. To enhance data quality, we will implement several exclusion criteria, e.g., remove cases displaying suspicious response patterns. Our data analysis will proceed in two main steps. First, we begin by assessing the measurement model to ensure appropriate measurement quality (Hair et al., 2014). Second, to test our hypotheses, we will apply structural equation modelling (SEM) using SmartPLS, leveraging PLS path modelling. PLS is particularly suited for exploratory research or early-stage theory building, as it handles reflective constructs effectively under conditions of non-normality and smaller sample sizes.

5 Conclusion

As AI tools continue to play a critical role in reshaping workplace processes, understanding their effects on employees is becoming increasingly relevant. Our study will contribute to the existing literature by expanding the understanding of how AI-driven datafication impacts employees. First, our study will enrich the engagement literature by exploring the role of work-life conflict and productivity perceptions in determining employee engagement, shedding light on how AI tools can simultaneously create stress while driving efficiency. Second, it will expand privacy concerns research by examining both the negative (work-life conflict) and potentially positive (perceived productivity) effects of privacy concerns. By integrating productivity into the discussion of privacy concerns, our research introduces a novel perspective, which builds on the assumption that privacy concerns may, in some instances, lead to enhanced productivity. Third, we apply the Job Demand-Control Model (JDCM) by Karasek (1979) to AI-driven environments, thereby expanding the model's applicability to modern digital workplaces. Finally, our research lays the groundwork for future studies by highlighting the consequences of digital technologies, particularly AI, on employees.

The practical relevance of this research lies in the widespread adoption of AI technologies in workplaces and their role in shaping employee engagement. As organizations increasingly integrate AI tools, balancing productivity gains with privacy considerations will grow in importance. Our findings will inform organizations and service providers on designing AI tools that foster transparency and empower employees with control over their data, potentially enhancing engagement. Additionally, our study will contribute to broader discussions on privacy policies and governance frameworks, thereby supporting the dual goals of productivity and employee well-being in AI-driven workplaces. Ultimately, this will help organizations navigate the complexities of datafication in work environments.

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