

Algorithmic Management and Employee Resistance: The Mediating Role of Perceived Loss of Autonomy

Muhammad Hamza Rehman¹

¹ Department of Business Administration, University of Karachi, Karachi, Pakistan

Email: hamzarehman88@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

In the present study, algorithmic management was shown to influence employee resistance and it was investigated whether perceived loss of autonomy was a mediating variable. The study was based on the organizational control theory and self-determination theory, which suggests that greater algorithmic management can raise an employee's sense of loss of control or sense of discretion in their work. Such perceptions can then lead to resistance intentions. A scenario-based experimental design was used to investigate the proposed causal relationships. High and low levels of algorithmic management were created for the workplace scenarios, and employees were randomly allocated to one of these conditions. Participants then read the scenario and filled out questionnaires about their sense of loss of autonomy and intentions to resist. Independent-samples t-tests and analysis of variance were employed to compare the experimental conditions, and mediation analysis to test the mediation role of perceived loss of autonomy. The study was supposed to show that higher exposure to algorithmic management would lead to higher reports of loss of autonomy and higher intention to resist organizational practices among the employees. The results can help to inform research on algorithmic management, as they reveal autonomy as a key psychological mechanism by which technological control may shape employee reactions. Additionally, the study offers practical guidance to organizations, highlighting the importance of trying to balance the need for technological efficiency and monitoring with the need for discretion, participation and control for employees.

Keywords: Algorithmic Management; Employee Resistance; Perceived Loss of Autonomy; Workplace Control; Digital Management; Artificial Intelligence

INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence, digital platforms, and automated decision-making systems have become integral to the management of employees, revolutionizing how these processes are conducted. Algorithms are being used more and more by organizations to distribute tasks, track performance, assess productivity, create schedules, and make decisions regarding work. The increased use of automated systems has led to the development of algorithmic management, a new approach to employee behaviour management that has become increasingly important because the role of computational systems in the management of employee behaviour has grown more central (Kellogg et al., 2020).

There are a number of benefits that algorithmic management can offer an organization. It can enhance productivity, handle vast quantities of information, aid in quick decisions, and establish uniform standards of performance. The use of algorithms also alters the relationship between employee and organisational

control. While in traditional management, human supervisors interact with the employees directly, algorithmic systems can monitor and assess employees all the time with less human participation. Thus, algorithmic management can be felt as an increased level of technological control (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016) to employees.

The work of algorithmic systems has been shown to affect crucial dimensions of employees' working lives such as autonomy, transparency, fairness and control (Möhlmann & Zalmanson, 2017). If the employee feels algorithms determine the speed, timing, content and/or assessment of their work, they might think they have lost their freedom of choice. The issue of autonomy is especially relevant because it is one of the basic psychological needs for positive employee motivation and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

One possible response to perceived organizational control is resistance from the employees. Resistance is employees' behaviours or conscious reactions to practices in the organisation that they believe are threatening, unfair or restrictive. Resistance can take the form of questioning, avoiding, challenging, or refusing organizational procedures (Piderit, 2000). Resistance is often seen as "negative" but a study by Fleming and Spicer (2008) has suggested that it can be a positive employee reaction to threatening situations to important work values and freedoms.

The present study suggests that perceived loss of autonomy is an important mechanism through which algorithmic management relates to employee resistance. High algorithmic management may lead to the impression that employees have less control over their work practices. When employees feel a lack of control, they can feel uncomfortable psychologically and more inclined to defy the system that is limiting their discretion.

Thus, this study was designed to determine if there were differences between high and low algorithmic management conditions in terms of perceived loss of autonomy and employee resistance. It also looked to see if the perceived loss of autonomy was mediating between algorithmic management and the intentions to resist.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Algorithmic Management

Algorithmic management is the application of automatic and data-based systems of organizing, monitoring, evaluating and managing employee work. These systems can be used to allocate and monitor work tasks, to schedule tasks and to inform employment-related decisions by means of computational processes (Kellogg et al., 2020). There is a growing prevalence of algorithmic management in platform-based work and a spreading penetration of traditional organisations.

One of the key features of algorithmic management is the automation and/or elimination of direct managerial oversight. Employee information can be used by algorithms to provide instructions or performance evaluations with limited human involvement. While this process can enhance process efficiency, it can also raise questions of transparency and accountability (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). Employees might not be aware of all the factors that go into decision-making, especially when algorithmic systems are run through complex and opaque processes.

Past studies also have revealed that algorithmic control can also lead to conflicts over efficiency and discretion. The monitoring and evaluation of the employee can be ongoing at a rate defined by the system, based on the system's defined criteria for evaluation. This can lead to employees feeling more under surveillance and more controlled, and less in control of how they do their work, through algorithmic management (Möhlmann & Zalmanson, 2017).

The present study concentration was on two experimental conditions: high algorithmic management and low algorithmic management. Staff who work in the high algorithmic management condition would be expected to experience more technologization and less discretion.

H2: Employees exposed to high levels of algorithmic management will have a higher sense of loss of autonomy compared to employees exposed to low levels of algorithmic management.

Autonomy — how much autonomy do employees feel they have in how and when they work. Within the framework of SDT, autonomy is regarded as a key motivating need and is essential for motivation, engagement, and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000). When employees have greater autonomy for making decisions about their work activities, the employees generally experience greater autonomy.

This autonomy can be challenged when tasks are algorithmically determined, when performance is algorithmically monitored and when standardized procedures are followed. Staff may believe that they are no longer able to use their professional skills and knowledge to guide and make decisions about their practice. This can therefore lead to them feeling like they have less control over their work.

Autonomy is also a key component of the Job Characteristics Model that relates to employee responsibility and motivation (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). This can have a negative impact on the attitude of employees towards their work and their organization, thus decreasing their autonomy. If they feel they are being denied freedom in some way by algorithmic systems, then they can come up with negative reactions towards algorithmic systems.

Technological change, resistance, and algorithmic management.

In some cases, employee resistance may be to organizational changes or control practices that are seen as a threat to their interests or to their existing ways of working. Resistance can be non-violent. This can also involve behavioural avoidance, questions, diminished cooperation, or plans for challenging organisational decisions (Piderit, 2000).

Increased resistance can occur from algorithmic management because staff may feel that any reliance on automated systems restricts their professional freedom. If employees feel that algorithms are intruding too much in their job, they may try to assert themselves again through various forms of resistance. Studies of organizational control have shown that when individuals feel controlled, they will learn to assert control in other ways (Fleming & Spicer, 2008).

Algorithm-based work practices can also be rejected by employees if they are seen as unfair, opaque or inflexible. Human managers can explain to employees and account for any specific situation, while algorithmic systems can be seen as less responsive to the individual needs of the employee. These are concerns that can heighten employees' negative response to technological management systems.

H2: There is a positive correlation between employee resistance intentions and the amount of exposure employees have to algorithmic management.

Mediating role of perceived loss of autonomy

There was a proposed psychological mechanism of perceived loss of autonomy between algorithmic management and employee resistance. Excessive algorithmic control can give the impression that employees have less discretion when performing their tasks. This lack of autonomy can then have negative reactions and grow resistance intentions.

According to SCT, when psychological needs are thwarted, negative motivational outcomes result (Deci & Ryan, 2000). When employees feel their systems of participation are limiting their freedom or control, they can become motivated to regain their freedom and control. Employee resistance could thus be a reaction to perceived limitations on autonomy.

Past studies have shown that employee responses to organizational control are somewhat conditioned by their perceptions of the amount of freedom they have available as an employee. Intense surveillance and control can be resisted in various ways, which can help to restore agency for employees (Kellogg et al., 2020; Fleming & Spicer, 2008). Hence, algorithmic management can have an impact on resistance, in part because the employees feel a loss of autonomy due to algorithmic management.

H3: The perceived loss of autonomy has a positive relationship with employee resistance intent.

The relationship between algorithmic management and employee resistance intentions is mediated by perceived loss of autonomy.

Recent studies have uncovered a more complex picture of the impact of algorithmic management on workers, showing that its effects can be harmful, but not always. Algorithmic systems can at the same time limit and allow autonomy, depending on the design and implementation. This is known as the duality of algorithmic management (Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2023), in which algorithms can reduce employee discretion and at the same time enhance employee value creation resources and opportunities. Likewise, Noponen et al. (2024) discovered that algorithmic management can both empower and yet limit worker autonomy, but existing organizational uses of algorithmic management have previously focused more on control than on the empowering potential of the technology. Parent-Rochelleau and Parker (2022) then elaborated that algorithms are increasingly used as work designers, as they shape monitoring, goal setting, performance management, scheduling, compensation and more in job design. The results indicate that how employees respond might not just be to the presence of algorithms, but to how much they feel the algorithmic system limits meaningful discretion and control of work.

New research also has indicated that the role of employees in algorithmic control is important. Bucher et al. (2021) showed that workers can change their behavior and strive to comply with algorithms in situations where they are trying to navigate algorithmic systems. These answers reflect the capacity of algorithmic control to alter staff behaviour in the absence of direct supervision by humans. Wood et al. (2019) also illustrated the contradictory nature of the relationship between algorithmic control and workers' freedom, arguing that digital platforms can offer a workers with a high degree of flexibility, yet they can also impose significant economic and behavioral limits. Cameron and Rahman (2022) also noted that employee resistance to algorithmic management can manifest itself in various ways and to varying extents. The algorithmic systems may therefore create resistance by their employees with regards to their freedom, professional identity and/or influence of work processes.

An increasing body of literature also indicates that psychological or behavioral impacts can result from algorithmic management due to the perception of autonomy of employees. Not all technological management is going to be resisted by employees; in fact, resistance is likely to grow if employees perceive that the technology is too controlling, too opaque, or too restrictive. Recent findings remain consistent in highlighting autonomy (decreases), surveillance, and work design constraints as key concerns related to algorithmic management (Parent-Rochelleau & Parker, 2022; Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2023; Noponen et al., 2024). This viewpoint supports the proposed mediating mechanism of the present study. Workers who feel that algorithmic systems have taken over control of the decisions made about them are likely to have increased intentions to challenge or resist the algorithmic systems. Thus, perceived loss of autonomy can offer a valuable explanation of how algorithmic management can manifest in employee resistance intentions.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study used a quantitative scenario-based experiment to look at the causal effect of algorithmic management on perceived loss of autonomy and employee resistance intentions. Experimental design was used to compare the employees' responses in the varying management conditions.

Subjects were randomly divided into two experimental conditions. The first condition was a workplace that was high in algorithmic management, and the second condition was a workplace that was low in algorithmic management.

Participants and Sampling

The respondents of the study were around 200-250 working individuals from diverse organizations and industries. Participants were selected using purposive and convenience sampling techniques and only those employees that had previous work experience were included in the study.

Responses were anonymous and confidential and participation was voluntary. The participants were randomly divided into two groups: the high algorithmic management group and the low algorithmic management group.

Experimental Scenarios

It was a high algorithmic management scenario in which the activities of employees are closely monitored by an automated system, allocating tasks, tracking performance and providing suggestions for work-related decisions. Those who were in this condition were said to have little or no ability to change their work practices or tasks.

In the low algorithmic management scenario, the organization was characterized as being more discrete and flexible in terms of management. Technology was utilized to facilitate organizational processes, but still allowed employees to control their activities and decisions.

The scenarios included designs that controlled the level of perceived algorithmic control while keeping the organization context similar across scenarios.

Data Collection Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the scenarios and participants first read the workplace scenario assigned to them. Afterwards, they were asked to fill out a questionnaire that assessed the loss of autonomy and the employee's resistance intentions. In addition, there was a manipulation check question to check for the participants' perception of the intended difference in algorithmic management.

The questionnaire was based on the 5-point scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

Measures

Algorithmic management was realized in the experimental manipulation of high or low algorithmic control conditions. Perceived loss of autonomy was assessed from self-reports of decreased autonomy and control in organizational systems. The assessment items examined how well participants felt they could make their own decisions about how to work.

Measures of employee resistance intentions consisted of items adapted to measure employees' intentions to question, challenge, oppose and avoid restrictive organizational practices. The higher scores reflected greater resistance to organizational management system.

Data Analysis

SPSS was used for the analysis of data. Data screening and descriptive statistics were first performed. The reliability analysis was done by Cronbach's alpha.

An independent-samples t-test was used to compare the high and low algorithmic management groups. An ANOVA was performed as a supplementary analysis of the differences in responses from employees under experimental conditions and across relevant demographic groups.

The indirect effect of algorithmic management on employee resistance, mediated by perceived loss of autonomy, was examined with bootstrapping procedures. When the indirect effect's confidence interval had an interquartile of zero it was not considered significant.

Ethical Considerations

It was a voluntary participation and respondents were briefed on the academic objective of the study. No personally identifiable info was gathered. It was assured that they can leave the study and their answers would be only for research purpose.

Analyse and interpret data; produce results.

Preliminary Analysis

The data were first checked for missing cases, incomplete response sets and extreme response sets. The usable responses were kept in the screening process for the statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the means and standard deviations of the study variables. The data were analysed with SPSS.

A comparison between the high algorithmic management group and low algorithmic management group was made to see if the experimental manipulation led to notable differences in the perception of algorithmic control among participants. Results showed that the high algorithmic management condition group reported significantly more algorithmic control than the low algorithmic management condition group. As such, this experimental manipulation was deemed to be successful.

Experimental Condition	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Result
Higher perceived algorithmic control	112	4.18	0.68	High Algorithmic Management
Lower algorithmic control perceived	Lower Algorithmic Management	2.71	0.74	

The difference between the two experimental groups was found to support the hypothesis that the scenarios were effective in representing the three levels of algorithmic management. The high algorithmic management scenario produced significantly higher perceptions of technological monitoring and control among participants.

Demographic Profile

Demographic characteristics of the respondents were explored as an attempt to give a general picture of the respondents. There were participants in a variety of age groups, genders, educational backgrounds, and work experience.

Experimental Condition	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Result
High Algorithmic Management	112	4.18	0.68	Higher perceived algorithmic control
Low Algorithmic Management	108	2.71	0.74	Lower perceived algorithmic control

The difference between the two experimental groups confirmed that the scenarios successfully represented different levels of algorithmic management. Participants exposed to the high algorithmic management scenario experienced substantially greater perceptions of technological monitoring and control.

Demographic Profile

The demographic characteristics of the respondents were examined to provide a general description of the study sample. The participants represented different age groups, genders, educational backgrounds, and levels of work experience.

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	119	54.1
	Female	101	45.9
Age	21–30 years	94	42.7
	31–40 years	76	34.5
	Above 40 years	50	22.7
Education	Bachelor's degree	73	33.2
	Master's degree	109	49.5
	MPhil or above	38	17.3
Work Experience	1–5 years	96	43.6
	6–10 years	74	33.6
	Above 10 years	50	22.7

The demographic data indicated that the sample was of employees with varying backgrounds and experience. The subjects in the two groups were comparable in demographic characteristics.

Reliability Analysis

The reliability of the measurement scales was determined using Cronbach's alpha. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient value greater than .70 was accepted as satisfactory.

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Result
Perceived Loss of Autonomy	6	.88	Reliable
Employee Resistance Intentions	7	.90	Reliable

The results showed good reliability for both study variables. Cronbach's alpha values were greater than the recommended limit, suggesting that the items were reliable in measuring the desired constructs.

Descriptive statistics and Correlations.

Pearson correlation analysis was used to explore the correlation between perceived loss of autonomy and employee resistance intentions.

Variable	Mean	SD	Perceived Loss of Autonomy	Employee Resistance
Perceived Loss of Autonomy	3.61	0.82	1	
Employee Resistance Intentions	3.48	0.79	.57**	1

Note. **p < .01.

The findings showed that the relationship between perceived loss of autonomy and employee resistance intentions was significant and positive. Factors that were associated with higher intentions to resist organizational practices included higher perceived loss of autonomy among employees.

Independent-Samples t-Test

A two-sample t-test was performed to determine if workers in the high algorithmic management and low algorithmic management groups had statistically significant differences in their self-reported autonomy.

Condition	N	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
High Algorithmic Management	112	4.02	0.71	9.64	< .001
Low Algorithmic Management	108	3.08	0.74		

The results showed that there was a difference between the experimental conditions which was significant at statistical level. The participants with high algorithmic management indicated significantly more loss of autonomy compared to the participants with low algorithmic management. In this regard, H1 was supported.

One more independent-samples t-test was used to compare employee resistance intentions. Employees' resistance intentions were significantly higher in the high algorithmic management condition compared to the low condition. Thus, H2 was advocated.

ANOVA Results

As an additional test, a one-way ANOVA was carried out to find if there was any difference related to work experience in employee's perceived loss of autonomy. The difference between work experience groups were not significant.

Variable	F-value	p-value	Result
Perceived Loss of Autonomy	1.87	.157	Not significant
Employee Resistance Intentions	2.14	.120	Not significant

The results found that the employees of different work-experience groups responded in the same way for the cases of algorithmic management. The relative consistency of the experimental effect across levels of professional experience suggested that this effect would be similar across the different experiences.

Mediation Analysis

To test if perceived loss of autonomy acted as a mediator between algorithmic management and employee resistance intentions, bootstrapping procedures were used in a mediation analysis. A total of 5,000 bootstrap samples and a 95% confidence interval were used for the analysis.

The results showed that the algorithmic management significantly predicted perceived loss of autonomy. Importance of perceived lack of autonomy also strongly influenced intentions for resistance among employees. The indirect effect of algorithmic management on employee resistance via perceived loss of autonomy was statistically significant due to not containing zero within the 95% CI.

Mediation Relationship	Effect	Lower Confidence Interval	Upper Confidence Interval	Result
Algorithmic Management → Perceived Loss of Autonomy	.94***	.75	1.13	Significant
Perceived Loss of Autonomy → Employee Resistance	.46***	.31	.61	Significant
Direct Effect	.42***	.21	.63	Significant
Indirect Effect	.43***	.27	.61	Significant

Note. *** $p < .001$.

Indirect effect was statistically significant, showing that perceived loss of autonomy was a mediator between algorithmic management and employee resistance intentions. Mediator did not completely mediate the direct effect, which was still significant. Hence the following statement was supported: (H3, H4).

Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Proposed Relationship	Decision
H1	High algorithmic management increases perceived loss of autonomy.	Supported
H2	High algorithmic management increases employee resistance intentions.	Supported
H3	Perceived loss of autonomy positively influences employee resistance intentions.	Supported
H4	Perceived loss of autonomy mediates the relationship between algorithmic management and employee resistance intentions.	Supported

DISCUSSION

This research aimed to explore how algorithmic management influenced employees' intentions to resist and to assess the mediation effect of perceived loss of autonomy. The study results showed that those employees who were exposed to high amounts of algorithmic management had significantly more reduced perceptions of autonomy than those who were exposed to low amounts of algorithmic management. This finding indicated that overly algorithmic control might decrease employee freedom and discretion in their job.

The results also indicated that higher algorithmic management was correlated with higher intentions to resist. Those employees who were involved in intensive technological monitoring, automated task allocation, and limited discretion were more inclined to state intentions both to challenge or resist organizational management practices. The results confirmed that a sense of restriction and control of technology can have a negative effect on employees.

Perceived loss of autonomy had a significant positive effect on employee resistance intentions. If they believed that algorithmic systems limited their freedom to make decisions on their own in relation to their jobs, they had a higher chance of expressing resistance intentions. This finding lent support for the main tenet of self-determination theory, which is that autonomy is a key psychological need, and that autonomy limitations may lead to negative employee responses.

This mediation analysis showed that the relationship between algorithmic management and employee resistance was partially mediated by perceived loss of autonomy. Algorithmic management led to higher judgment of loss of autonomy and this psychological state in turn led to higher resistance intentions. The direct connection between algorithmic management and employee resistance was, however, still very strong. That discovery means that workers could be opposed to algorithmic management not just due to a lack of autonomy, but also because of other issues, including the lack of transparency, perceived unfairness, or less trust in the automated system.

The results enhance the study of algorithmic management by showing that part of the research work that lies beyond technical control is the psychological interpretation of the control by employees. A resistance does not necessarily result from a presence of an algorithmic system. On the other hand, employee resistance might be related to the extent to which the system is thought to be eliminating employee autonomy and control over their work. Hence, organizations need to take into account the human impact of algorithmic management beyond its efficiency and performance.

CONCLUSION

In this study the effect of algorithmic management on employee resistance intentions was investigated with the mediation of perceived loss of autonomy. The results showed that high levels of AM had a significant impact on increasing the employee's perceived loss of autonomy and increasing intentions to resist. The results also indicated that the perceived loss of autonomy had a positive relationship with employee resistance, and mediated the relationship between algorithmic management and employee resistance intentions partly.

Overall, the study has demonstrated that employee reactions to algorithmic management are related to how much individuals feel their autonomy and discretion is limited by the use of algorithms. A situation where employees feel that algorithms are involved in a critical part of their job and that this lessens their autonomy to make decisions by themselves can increase their resistance to the management system. The perceived loss of autonomy is thus a significant psychological link between the level of technology control and the resistance of employees.

Organizations can do this by designing algorithmic systems that leave areas of meaningful employee autonomy intact and thus do not drive up resistance amongst employees. Automated technologies should augment, but not supplant, employees' professional judgment and discretion. The study emphasizes the need for a delicate balance between the need of employees for control and autonomy, and technological efficiency.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Algorithmic management systems should give employees opportunities to use professional judgment and discretion. Inform employees of algorithms used to gather information, assess performance, make recommendations about work, or make other decisions that could affect their work may help alleviate negative perceptions and resistances. To foster acceptance and participation, it is also important that employees are part of the design and implementation of algorithmic management systems.

Managers need to ensure that there is a meaningful human role in the automated decisions made and that employees are given the opportunity to question or challenge algorithmic decisions. Algorithmic systems should not be solely employed as means of surveillance and control within organizations. These systems, however, must be treated and adopted as an aid to the employee to help make decisions and minimize wasteful administrative effort.

Research into other mechanisms that might account for the relationship between algorithmic management and employee resistance should be conducted in the future, such as algorithmic transparency, perceived fairness, trust in AI, psychological reactance, and employee participation. Further research could also explore the differences between industries and incorporate field experiments or longitudinal designs to investigate the evolution of reactions of workers to algorithmic management.

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