

Empowered or Exposed? The Tension Between Human Agency and Automation in GenAI-Driven Creative Work

Laura Hesse, Paul Muschiol, Reinhard E. Kunz

Department of Media Management
Bauhaus-Universität Weimar
Weimar, Germany

e-mail: laura.hesse@uni-weimar.de

e-mail: paul.muschiol@uni-weimar.de

e-mail: reinhard.kunz@uni-weimar.de

Abstract— This study examines how varying levels of human agency in generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) collaboration influence employees' perceived vulnerability and professional identity in creative work. It further investigates the moderating role of management support in shaping these effects. Grounded in Transformative Service Research (TSR), the study conceptualizes GenAI as a systemic shift that may disrupt autonomy and role identity. A two-study experimental design in the media industry provides empirical insight into the tensions between automation and human agency.

Keywords—generative artificial intelligence; creative industry; perceived vulnerability.

I. INTRODUCTION

The rapid integration of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) systems into organizational contexts – particularly within creative and knowledge-intensive industries – has introduced a renewed and multifaceted tension between automation and human agency [1]. This tension operates not only at the strategic level, where managers must weigh anticipated benefits such as efficiency gains, cost reduction, and competitiveness [2] against ethical considerations of transparency, fairness, and accountability [3]. It also extends into the lived experience of individual employees who must navigate the evolving transformation of their professional roles [4]. For many, particularly in the creative industry, this is not simply a technical or operational choice, it is a question that touches on professional identity, authority, autonomy, and consequently the future role of human agency in knowledge-based and creative labor [5]. In this study, GenAI is approached as a subset of artificial intelligence technologies that autonomously produce content such as text, images, and designs based on learned patterns [1].

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, we outline the research goals that guide our investigation. Section 3 presents the theoretical background, drawing on Transformative Service Research (TSR) and the concept of identity threat. Section 4 describes the proposed methodological approach and data collection strategy. In Section 5, we discuss anticipated contribution. Finally, Section 6 concludes with a summary of suggestions for future research.

II. RESEARCH GOALS

Despite growing academic interest in the implications of implementing GenAI within work environments, so far existing research has focused on outcomes such as task restructuring, job displacement, and evolving skill demands [4]. However, less attention has been paid to how GenAI affects the lived experience of employees, particularly in creative roles where GenAI extends into tasks traditionally tied to human judgment, authorship, and originality. Building on research on Human–AI collaboration [6] and algorithmic management [2], this study

(1) examines how different levels of human agency in human-GenAI collaboration affect employees' perceived vulnerability, particularly in creative work contexts; and

(2) investigates the moderating role of management support in shaping this relationship by exploring how different forms and levels of management support may mitigate the impact of GenAI integration on employees' perceived vulnerability.

III. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Drawing on a TSR perspective [7], we conceptualize GenAI integration as a fundamental shift in creative service systems, with direct implications for employees' role identity and vulnerability. We build on this perspective to conceptualize vulnerability as a condition in which employees experience a reduced capacity to maintain well-being, dignity and agency in their roles, particularly when technological shifts like GenAI challenge their sense of professional identity. In the media industry, where creative and knowledge-intensive output is central to professional identity, GenAI is not only a tool for innovation, but also a potential disruptor of professional roles and expertise [5]. We extend the concept of identity threat [8] to argue that vulnerability may emerge when GenAI takes over tasks that employees perceive as central to their creative expertise. Importantly, the extent to which this vulnerability is experienced may depend on the presence and quality of managerial support, which can serve as crucial buffer shaping how employees experience these technological changes [9]. Thus, our conceptual framework positions vulnerability not as an incidental by-product of automation, but as a foreseeable outcome of

organizational decisions. Particularly, regarding how GenAI is implemented, how human agency is structured, and how managerial support is communicated and enacted.

IV. METHOD AND DATA

We employ a two-study experimental research design to examine how varying levels of human–GenAI interaction affect employees’ perceived vulnerability in creative work contexts. The experimental conditions simulate three distinct modes of collaboration, each characterized by a different degree of co-authorship and content control: human-led scenarios in which GenAI acts as a supportive assistant, balanced co-authorship models where human and GenAI contributions are equally weighted, and GenAI-led conditions where the system autonomously generates content and the human’s role is limited to approval. In this study, perceived vulnerability is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct and measured across technostress, job insecurity, and professional identity threat. All constructs are operationalized through validated instruments from organizational and service research and are currently undergoing pretesting for contextual alignment.

A. Study 1

Study 1 involves a field experiment, which will be conducted beginning of June 2025, with employees at a media organization in Germany that has integrated an in-house GenAI system into daily editorial workflows. Participants (N ~ 200) will be randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions, varying the type of human–GenAI interaction: (1) a human-led condition (high human agency), where employees lead the content creation process and use GenAI as a support tool; (2) a GenAI-led condition (low agency), where GenAI generates the content and employees are limited to reviewing and approving it; (3) a balanced co-authorship condition, where control is shared between human and GenAI; and (4) a control condition that reflects a traditional workflow without any GenAI support. All participants will be randomly assigned to one of four conditions and complete the same type of content creation task to ensure comparability across conditions. The organization operates within a financially constrained media sector, where concerns over job security are salient, providing a meaningful context to investigate how different configurations of human–GenAI collaboration influence employees’ perceived vulnerability. The dependent variable, perceived vulnerability, is measured across three validated dimensions: professional identity threat, job insecurity, and technostress. Each construct will be assessed using established scales from organizational and service research.

B. Study 2

Study 2 employs a 2(management support: clear guidelines present vs. clear guidelines absent) x 2(human–GenAI interaction: human-led vs. GenAI-led) between-subject online experimental design. The online experiment (planned end of June 2025) is designed to test the role of management support in shaping employees’ perceived vulnerability during collaboration with GenAI. Participants

will be randomly assigned to conditions that manipulate the presence or absence of clear and supportive managerial guidance regarding the use of GenAI [9].

Together, both studies aim to provide insight into the human implications of GenAI integration in creative work and inform the development of supportive implementation strategies in organizations undergoing AI-driven transformation.

V. CONTRIBUTION

Our findings contribute to research at the intersection of AI, work dynamics, and service systems. First, we advance research on human–GenAI collaboration in creative industries by examining how AI integration affects not just task outcomes but employees’ professional identity and emotional vulnerability. By focusing on creative labor industry, we extend recent discussions around human-AI collaboration into domains where authorship and ownership are central to value creation. Second, we contribute to the TSR agenda by showing how service innovations like GenAI can unintentionally produce harmful or exclusionary conditions for employees. We argue that for GenAI to be truly transformative, implementation must prioritize not only efficiency and scalability but also psychological safety and equitable value co-creation. Third, we aim to offer new insight into the automation-agency tension, identifying the role of managerial support as key to shaping how employees experience GenAI collaboration not only in terms of performance, but also in relation to identity and well-being. Finally, we provide an industry-specific and methodological contribution through our field experiment in the media sector.

VI. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This research-in-progress proposes a conceptual and experimental framework to examine how varying degrees of human agency in GenAI collaboration influence employee vulnerability. Future steps will focus on implementing the proposed experiments to empirically test these relationships and generate insights for more inclusive GenAI implementation. Key challenges include isolating constructs like vulnerability in controlled settings, accounting for individual differences such as prior AI experience, ensuring validity, and securing access to relevant organizational contexts. Further research could expand this work by exploring additional moderating factors such as innovation culture or AI literacy and applying the framework across industries beyond the media sector.

REFERENCES

- [1] L. Bahn and G. Strobel, “Generative artificial intelligence,” *Electronic Markets*, vol. 33, no. 1, pp. 33–63, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12525-023-00680-1>
- [2] S. Krakowski, J. Luger, and S. Raisch, “Artificial intelligence and the changing sources of competitive advantage,” *Strategic Management Journal*, vol. 44, no. 6, pp. 1425–1452, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1002/smj.3387>
- [3] L. Alkrie et al., “RAISE: Leveraging responsible AI for service excellence,” *Journal of Service Management*, vol. 35, no. 4, pp. 490–511, 2024.

- [4] D. R. Lozie et al., “Examining the impact of generative artificial intelligence on work dynamics,” *Human Resources Management and Science*, vol. 6, no. 2, 3420, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.18282/hrms.v6i2.3420>
- [5] A. Autor, D. Mindell, and E. B. Reynolds, *The work of the future: Building better jobs in an age of intelligent machines*, MIT Press, 2023.
- [6] M. Stelmaszak, M. Möhlmann, and C. Sørensen, “Algorithms delegate to humans: Exploring human–algorithm interaction at Uber,” *MIS Quarterly*, vol. 49, no. 1, pp. 305–330, 2025.
- [7] L. Anderson and A. L. Ostrom, “Transformative service research: Advancing our knowledge about service and well-being,” *Journal of Service Research*, vol. 18, no. 3, pp. 243–249, 2015.
- [8] H. Tajfel and J. C. Turner. *An integrative theory of intergroup conflict*. Brooks/Cole: Monterey, CA, 1979.
- [9] L. Xiao and V. Kumar, “Robotics for customer service: A useful complement or an ultimate substitute?,” *Journal of Service Research*, vol. 24, no. 1, pp. 9–29, 2021.