ISSN No. 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XV Issue XI November 2026

Managers as Shock Absorbers in AI Implementation: A Systematic Literature Review and Conceptual Synthesis for Asian Organisational Contexts

P.Baba Gnanakumar

Professor, Kristu Jayanti Institute of Management,Kristu Jayanti university, Bengaluru

DOI: https://doi.org/10.51583/IJLTEMAS.2026.151100040

Received: 08 November 2026; Accepted: 13 November 2026; Published: 25 November 2026

ABSTRACT

Purpose. Practitioner discourse increasingly casts middle managers as the "shock absorbers" of AI-driven transformation, yet academic knowledge about this buffering role is scattered across organisational behaviour, human resource management (HRM), information systems and labour-process research. This review consolidates that evidence for Asian organisational contexts and converts the metaphor into testable theory.

Design/methodology/approach. We conducted a protocol-guided systematic literature review of 40 Scopus-indexed journal articles published between 2021 and 2026, supplemented by foundational theory and contextual practitioner evidence. Studies were appraised for quality, coded deductively and inductively using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis adapted for systematic reviews.

Findings. Evidence that AI exposure raises the job insecurity, technostress, loneliness and exhaustion among Asian employees is robust, and leader- and organisation-level resources consistently moderate these effects. The direct observation of managerial buffering, however, is confined largely to Chinese platform-labour ethnographies and no study models have been idenfiied as the buffering as a mediating mechanism.

Originality/value. We define the managerial shock absorption as a discrete construct, specify an Absorb–Translate–Redistribute (ATR) mechanism, identify antecedents, outcomes and the Asian contextual moderators, and advance five propositions and a model for empirical testing. The review also exposes the structural paradox: Asian firms ask middle managers to absorb AI shocks while using AI to delayer the managerial tier itself.

Keywords: Middle level managers; Algorithmic management; Sensemaking; Technostress;

INTRODUCTION

1.1 The "Shock Absorber" Metaphor: From Practitioner Discourse to Academic Inquiry

The image of managers as the organisational shock absorbers entered mainstream discourse through Korn Ferry's *Talent Trends 2027* survey of more than 1,300 talent and senior leaders across over 75 countries. Only 6% of respondents judged their senior leaders fully prepared to guide AI-driven transformation, while 66% expected managers to spend more time helping teams through change than overseeing day-to-day work (Lin, 2026). Korn Ferry's own commentary predicted that managers would become "the shock absorbers of the organization" (Lin, 2026). Gallup data reported alongside the survey show that employees whose managers actively supported their team's AI use were engaged at 48%, against 30% where managers did not. The Asia-Pacific research also makes the same point, describing middle managers as the missing link in the "messy middle" of AI adoption (Ang, 2025).

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Within the organisations, the shock-absorber metaphor captures the managers' intermediary position, their translation of AI mandates and the depletion of their resources. This review asks how far the academic literature supports each property and what it would take to turn the metaphor into a testable construct.

1.2 The Pivotal but Precarious Position of Middle Managers in Asian AI Implementation

Researchers have long viewed the middle managers as strategic actors who implement, synthesise, facilitate and champion strategy (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992; Wooldridge et al., 2008), and as the intermediaries who shape how change unfolds (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Rouleau, 2005). AI intensifies this position. AI systems increasingly perform the managerial tasks such as monitoring, scheduling and algorithmic management that can strengthen the control of management as a whole while weakening the power of the individual managers (Jarrahi et al., 2021).

In Asia the position is especially precarious. Executives at a 2026 regional forum reported that Chinese firms are removing middle-management layers as AI reshapes work (Caixin Global, 2026), and Gartner's 2025 CEO Survey found that more than half of chief executives intend to use AI to de-layer middle-management roles within five years (Gartner, 2025). Managers are therefore asked to absorb AI shocks on behalf of others while their own roles are being redesigned by the same technology.

1.3 The Fragmentation of Existing Knowledge: Why a Systematic Review Is Needed

Relevant evidence is dispersed across disciplines that rarely cite one another. Organisational psychologists study AI-induced job insecurity and loneliness (Tang et al., 2023; Yam, Tang, et al., 2023). HRM scholars study AI-assisted HR ecosystems (Budhwar et al., 2022; Malik, Budhwar, Patel, & Srikanth, 2022). Labour-process scholars study platform supervisors (Huang, 2023; Zhang et al., 2026), and information-systems scholars study knowledge brokerage around algorithms (Waardenburg et al., 2022). Few of these studies take the manager as the unit of analysis, and fewer still do so in Asian settings. A systematic review can consolidate these streams, expose where evidence is strong or merely inferred, and specify what empirical work should come next.

1.4 Research Questions

Four research questions has been identified to do this research from the literature review.

- **RQ1.** What forms of AI-induced uncertainty do employees in Asian organisations experience, and what evidence links managers to their mitigation?
- **RQ2.** How do managers make sense of, translate and redistribute AI-related pressure between AI systems, senior strategy and frontline employees?
- **RQ3.** Which capabilities, organisational conditions and cultural-institutional contingencies enable or constrain managerial buffering in Asia?
- **RQ4.** How can these insights be integrated into a framework of managerial shock absorption that yields testable propositions?

1.5 Contributions of the Review

The review makes three contributions. First, it consolidates a fragmented literature into a theme–evidence matrix that grades the strength of evidence for each mechanism. Second, it converts the shock-absorber metaphor into a delimited construct with an Absorb–Translate–Redistribute (ATR) mechanism, antecedents, outcomes and a depletion cost. Third, it specifies cultural and institutional moderators relevant to Asian organisations and translates them into five propositions and a model for empirical validation.

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2. Background: Middle Managers and AI in Asian Organisations

2.1 The Managerial Layer in AI-Driven Transformation

Thompson's (1967) thesis holds that the organisations protect their technical core from environmental turbulence. In AI implementation the core is frontline work, and the turbulence originates partly inside the organisation, in strategic AI mandates and algorithmic control systems. Sensemaking theory explains how managers construct plausible accounts under equivocality (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005), and research on emotional balancing shows that middle managers attend to subordinates' emotions during radical change (Huy, 2002). Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018) and the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) add a resource logic: buffering consumes managerial resources and is sustainable only when those resources are replenished.

Researchers done in AI refines these theoretical perspectives. Automation and augmentation are paradoxically intertwined (Raisch & Krakowski, 2021); humans and technologies exercise conjoined agency (Murray et al., 2021); and work design matters more than ever in digitalised workplaces (Parker & Grote, 2022). Together, these perspectives imply that the managerial layer is where abstract AI strategy is converted into concrete changes in tasks, discretion and evaluation.

2.2 Distinctive Features of the Asian Context (Governance, Culture, Adoption Patterns)

Asian organisational contexts differ from Western ones along three dimensions relevant to buffering. Culturally, many Asian societies score high on power distance and collectivism (Hofstede, 2001; House et al., 2004), which shapes whether managers are expected to shield subordinates paternalistically and whether employees voice concerns upward. Cross-cultural scholarship further proposes historical, religious and exposure-based reasons why Asian employees may be more accepting of machines than Western counterparts (Yam, Tan, et al., 2023).

Institutionally, the governance of algorithmic work varies widely. In China, regulatory attention to platform algorithms has prompted firms to revise penalty systems, which reshapes the space within which supervisors exercise discretion (Chen, 2026; Zhang et al., 2026). In adoption patterns, Asia-Pacific firms are moving quickly from experimentation to integration (Ang, 2025), while high-consequence HR systems, in which appraisal outcomes drive pay and promotion, raise the stakes of AI-assisted evaluation (Zhang & Rosli, 2026).

2.3 Existing Reviews and Their Limitations

The existing reviews fall into three clusters. Skill-focused reviews, such as Sancar and Camı's (2026) systematic review of 39 articles, document a shift in middle managers' roles from operational supervision towards data-driven decision-making and human–AI collaboration design, but treat managers as bundles of skills rather than as buffers. HRM-centric reviews map AI applications across HR functions with limited attention to the managerial intermediary (Budhwar et al., 2022; Malik, Budhwar, & Kazmi, 2023). Well-being reviews synthesise AI-induced technostress and burnout but rarely theorise who mitigates the strain.

Zhang and Rosli's (2026) structured review is the closest match, connecting the explainability, AI literacy and human oversight with the middle managers' reliance on AI-assisted appraisal in the Chinese enterprises. None of these reviews, however, integrates the buffering, sensemaking, resource depletion and cultural contingency into one framework, which is the gap the present review addresses.

3. Methodology: Systematic Literature Review Protocol

3.1 Review Approach

The review follows the evidence-informed systematic review logic of Tranfield et al. (2003). Because the construct of interest is emergent and spans disciplines, we adopt a protocol-guided integrative design:

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systematic search and screening produce the evidence base, and interpretive thematic synthesis produces the conceptual framework. This hybrid design suits review questions whose aim is theory building rather than effect-size estimation, for which a meta-analysis would be premature given the heterogeneity of constructs and measures.

3.2 Search Strategy (Databases, Search Strings, Boolean Operators)

Scopus was the primary database. Web of Science and publisher platforms (Emerald, Elsevier, Wiley, SAGE, Springer, Taylor & Francis, APA PsycNet, MDPI and Frontiers) were used for verification and for backward and forward citation chasing. A supplementary geographic block (China, India, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Taiwan, Pakistan, Thailand or Asia*) was applied to identify Asian samples.

The core Scopus string combined three concept blocks:

TITLE-ABS-KEY (("artificial intelligence" OR "AI" OR "algorithm" OR "algorithmic management"*
OR "automation" OR "generative AI")
AND ("middle manager" OR "manager*" OR "supervisor*" OR "leader*")*
AND ("buffer" OR "sensemaking" OR "translat*" OR "job insecurity" OR "technostress"*
OR "role ambiguity" OR "emotional exhaustion" OR "organi?ational support"
OR "AI literacy" OR "dynamic managerial capabilit"))*
AND PUBYEAR > 2020
AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, "ar") OR LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, "re"))
AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, "English"))

3.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria (Timeframe, Geography, Study Type, Language)

Table 1. Eligibility criteria

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Timeframe	Published 2021 onwards (online-first 2020 accepted if issue year is 2021 or later)	Pre-2021 empirical work (retained only as foundational theory)
Source	Peer-reviewed journal articles indexed in Scopus	Conference papers, book chapters, theses, preprints; practitioner reports used only as context
Topic	AI, algorithmic or automation implementation with an employee- or manager-level outcome, or a managerial or leadership mechanism	Purely technical AI studies; consumer-only studies
Geography	Asian samples prioritised; non-Asian studies included where they theorise managerial intermediation	—
Language	English	Non-English
Verifiability	Bibliographic record and DOI or publisher page verifiable	Records that cannot be located in any index

3.4 Screening and Selection Process

Screening proceeded in three stages: title and abstract screening against the topic criterion, full-text eligibility assessment, and bibliographic verification against publisher records. The verification stage proved consequential. Records that could not be located in any scholarly index, or whose authorship could not be confirmed, were excluded, and two peer-reviewed reviews published in outlets unlikely to be Scopus-indexed were retained only as supplementary evidence. The final corpus comprises 40 included studies, supported by 19 foundational theory sources and five practitioner sources used for context only.

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3.5 Quality Appraisal of Included Studies

Empirical studies were appraised with criteria adapted from the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool: clarity of the research question, appropriateness of design, measurement validity, treatment of common-method variance, and transparency of analysis. Qualitative studies were further assessed for reflexivity and thickness of description, and conceptual and review articles for theoretical coherence and methodological transparency. Most quantitative studies rely on cross-sectional or time-lagged self-reports, which limits causal inference. The multi-study designs of Tang et al. (2023) and Yam, Tang, et al. (2023), the vignette experiment of Meng et al. (2025) and the long-duration fieldwork of Chen (2026) and Zhang et al. (2026) provide the strongest evidence.

3.6 Data Extraction and Coding Strategy

A standard extraction form recorded author, year, journal, country, sector, design, sample, AI phenomenon, managerial mechanism, theoretical lens, outcomes and boundary conditions. Codes were applied deductively from an a priori template (absorb, translate, redistribute) and inductively for mechanisms that the template did not anticipate, such as relational loneliness and non-linear insecurity effects.

3.7 Thematic Synthesis Approach

We adapted Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis to the review context: familiarisation with the extracted data, initial coding, theme generation, review of themes against the full corpus, theme definition and write-up. Themes were then mapped onto the propositions developed in the conceptual synthesis, and each theme was graded for strength of evidence according to design quality, number of supporting studies and the share of Asian samples.

4. Findings: Thematic Synthesis of the Literature

4.1 Descriptive Overview of the Reviewed Literature (Publication Trends, Countries, Methods)

Publication activity has rebounded after a dip in 2024: 2026 contributes 8 of the 40 included articles, matching the 2022–2023 peak, signalling sustained and growing scholarly interest (Figure 1). Just over half of the corpus (21 of 40) draws on Asian samples, but that evidence is concentrated in China, and Japan is effectively absent from the verified corpus.

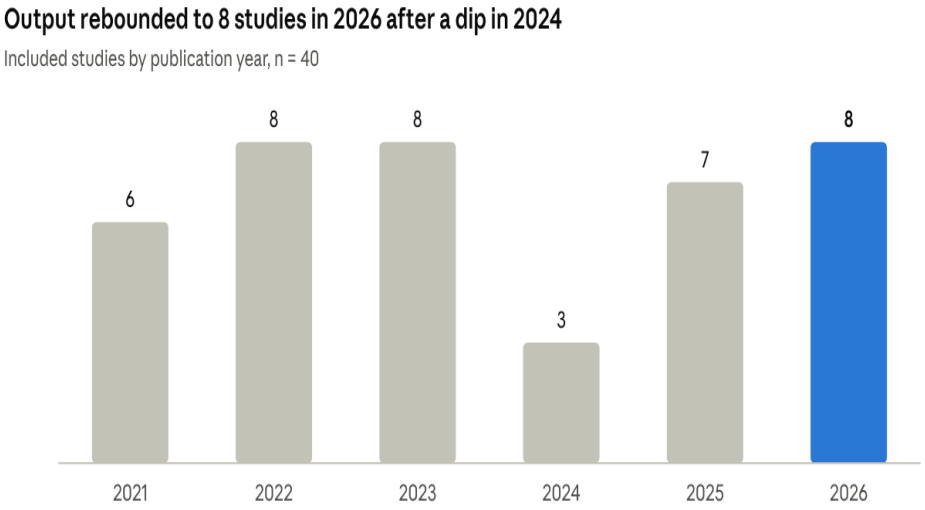


Figure 1. Publication trend of included studies, 2021–2026 · this review's coding (n = 40)

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Table 2. Geographic and methodological distribution of included studies (n = 40)

Category	n	Illustrative studies
Mainland China	10	Kong et al. (2021); Huang (2023); Meng et al. (2025); Chen (2026); Hu et al. (2026)
India	4	Verma & Singh (2022); Malik, Tripathi, et al. (2022)
Multi-country Asian samples	2	Tang et al. (2023); Yam, Tang, et al. (2023)
South Korea	2	Kim & Lee (2024); Kim et al. (2025)
Vietnam, Indonesia, Jordan	3	Widianto et al. (2021); Bui et al. (2025); Salih et al. (2026)
Non-Asian empirical comparators	7	Waardenburg et al. (2022); Harunavamwe et al. (2025); Vieira & Junte (2025)
Country not determinable from verified record	3	—
Conceptual or review articles	9	Raisch & Krakowski (2021); Parker & Grote (2022)
Method: quantitative survey	15	—
Method: experimental or multi-method	3	—
Method: qualitative, case or ethnographic	13	—
Method: conceptual or review	9	—

Table 3. Characteristics of core included studies

Study	Country / setting	Design	Finding relevant to managerial shock absorption
Kong et al. (2021), IJCHM	China, hotels (n = 432)	Survey	Organisational commitment mediates the effect of AI awareness on career competencies and burnout
Verma & Singh (2022), Computers in Human Behavior	India, high-tech firms	Survey	Perceived substitution crisis conditions how AI-enabled job characteristics affect innovative work behaviour
Malik, Tripathi, et al. (2022), International Journal of Manpower	India, Industry 4.0 firms	Qualitative	Work overload, job insecurity and complexity drive AI-related technostress
Tang et al. (2023), Journal of Applied Psychology	Taiwan, Indonesia, Malaysia, US (N = 794)	Four studies, mixed methods	Interacting with AI raises loneliness, linked to insomnia and after-work drinking
Yam, Tang, et al. (2023), Journal of Applied Psychology	US, Singapore, India	Multi-method	Robot exposure raises job insecurity; in India, insecurity predicts burnout and incivility
Xu et al. (2023), IJERPH	China (n = 321)	Survey	AI awareness relates to depression via emotional exhaustion; perceived organisational support buffers the link
Li et al. (2024), Frontiers in	China, 11 listed	Survey	Middle managers' digital leadership raises employee work engagement via empowerment and

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Psychology	firms (n = 559)		commitment
Kim & Lee (2024), HSSC	South Korea	Survey	AI adoption raises job stress and burnout; AI-learning self-efficacy buffers
Kim et al. (2025), HSSC	South Korea	Survey, SEM	AI adoption lowers psychological safety, raising depression; ethical leadership buffers
Meng et al. (2025), Behavioral Sciences	China (N = 167)	Vignette experiment	Employee–AI collaboration raises loneliness and, through fatigue, counterproductive behaviour; leader emotional support weakens the effect
Bui et al. (2025), Journal of Management Control	Vietnam, universities (30 interviews)	Multiple case	Middle managers mobilise controls to reconcile competing institutional logics
Hu et al. (2026), SAGE Open	China, 410 dyads	Multi-source survey	Middle managers' AI usage mediates the effect of entrepreneur–AI collaboration on their performance
Feng & Adams (2026), Management in Education	China, schools (n = 488)	Survey, PLS-SEM	Middle leaders adopt generative AI when it fits leadership work without added workload
Zhang et al. (2026), Competition & Change	China, Guangzhou delivery stations	Fieldwork	Algorithmic control depends on supervisors' manual interventions and discretion
Chen (2026), Sustainability	China, Nanjing delivery station	16-week ethnography	Station managers perform penalty, risk, resource and knowledge buffering; relief is discretionary
Vieira & Junte (2025), Work and Occupations	Spain, dark stores (51 interviews)	Qualitative	Managers become "algorithmic brokers" who interpret algorithmic output

4.2 Theme 1: The Nature of AI-Induced Uncertainty for Employees (Job Insecurity, Technostress, Role Ambiguity)

The most robust finding of the review is that AI exposure generates multi-dimensional uncertainty for employees across Asian contexts. Job insecurity is the most consistently documented response. Exposure to robots increased job insecurity in a preregistered Singaporean experiment, and among Indian engineers robot-related insecurity was associated with burnout and workplace incivility (Yam, Tang, et al., 2023). Perceived substitution crisis similarly conditions the innovative behaviour of Indian high-tech employees (Verma & Singh, 2022).

The relationship is not always linear. A two-wave study of 485 Chinese office employees found a U-shaped link between AI-induced job insecurity and innovative behaviour, partly mediated by knowledge hiding; surprisingly, trait resilience amplified rather than dampened the effect of insecurity on knowledge hiding (Zhong et al., 2026).

Technostress and exhaustion form a second cluster. Qualitative evidence from Indian Industry 4.0 organisations identifies work overload, job insecurity and complexity as AI-related technostress creators

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(Malik, Tripathi, et al., 2022). In China, AI awareness is associated with depression via emotional exhaustion (Xu et al., 2023), and in South Korea AI adoption increases job stress and burnout (Kim & Lee, 2024). A third, less recognised form is relational: across four studies in Taiwan, Indonesia, Malaysia and the United States, employees who interacted more with AI reported greater loneliness, linked to insomnia and after-work alcohol use (Tang et al., 2023), and a Chinese vignette experiment traced the same loneliness to counterproductive work behaviour (Meng et al., 2025).

Role ambiguity is rarely measured directly, but it is implicit in findings that AI-enabled appraisal reshapes fairness and satisfaction depending on whether the AI or the supervisor holds decision-making power (Pan et al., 2025). The implication for managers is that the "shock" they must absorb is not a single stressor but a bundle of economic, cognitive, relational and procedural threats.

4.3 Theme 2: Managerial Sensemaking and Narrative Construction

Managers do not simply transmit AI mandates; they construct meaning around them. Classic work shows that middle managers interpret and "sell" change through everyday micro-practices (Rouleau, 2005) and revise their schemata through lateral sensemaking with peers (Balogun & Johnson, 2004). The AI-era literature extends this. In Vietnamese universities, a Confucian-influenced and state-controlled setting, middle managers reconcile competing institutional logics through an "accommodation package" of separation, compromise and hybrid organising (Bui et al., 2025). Finnish evidence shows that middle managers leading AI-integrated service teams spend more time on the fairness of AI decisions and on motivating subordinates who resist relying on AI (Koponen et al., 2025).

Sensemaking appears most consequential where AI is opaque. Professionals struggle to engage with AI outputs for critical judgements when they cannot interrogate the system's reasoning (Lebovitz et al., 2022), and intermediaries who can interpret algorithmic output acquire disproportionate influence (Waardenburg et al., 2022). In Chinese enterprises, explanations improve perceived transparency but do not by themselves protect users from poor AI advice; oversight adds value only when managers hold both the authority and the criteria to question model output (Zhang & Rosli, 2026). Sensemaking capability is therefore not a soft skill but a precondition for buffering.

4.4 Theme 3: Buffering Practices—Absorbing, Translating, and Redistributing

4.4.1 Absorbing Strategic Ambiguity

Absorption occurs when managers hold uncertainty on behalf of their teams, keeping work moving even when the destination of AI strategy is unclear. Scholarly evidence of absorption is largely indirect. In a three-wave South Korean study, ethical leadership weakened the link between AI-induced job insecurity and perceived psychological contract breach (Kim, Kim, & Lee, 2024), and it also buffered the negative effect of AI adoption on psychological safety (Kim et al., 2025). Leader emotional support reduced the loneliness produced by employee–AI collaboration (Meng et al., 2025). These moderation effects are consistent with absorption but do not observe it directly.

4.4.2 Translating AI Mandates into Operational Meaning

Translation converts abstract AI strategy into concrete work routines. Middle managers' digital leadership in Chinese listed firms was associated with higher employee work engagement through empowerment and affective commitment, consistent with managers aligning digital strategy with everyday tasks (Li et al., 2024). In Chinese schools, middle leaders adopted generative AI when it could be folded into existing responsibilities without increasing workload (Feng & Adams, 2026). In Chinese SMEs, middle managers' own AI usage partially mediated the effect of entrepreneurs' AI collaboration on managers' job performance, more strongly among managers with high change-related self-efficacy (Hu et al., 2026). Outside Asia, managers in

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algorithmically managed retail become "algorithmic brokers" who interpret system output for workers (Vieira & Junte, 2025), mirroring the knowledge brokerage described by Waardenburg et al. (2022).

4.4.3 Redistributing Algorithmic and Workload Pressure

The most direct evidence of shock absorption comes from Chinese platform labour. Chen's (2026) 16-week ethnography of a subcontracted food-delivery station in Nanjing identifies four practices through which station managers selectively absorb, translate and pass on algorithmic pressure: penalty buffering (for example, helping riders appeal fines and customer complaints), risk buffering, resource buffering and knowledge buffering. Crucially, this relief depends on managers' personal discretion; it stabilises platform operations while giving workers temporary relief rather than enforceable rights.

Zhang et al. (2026) show in Guangzhou that algorithmic control of riders cannot function without the everyday manual interventions of station supervisors, who may assign easier tasks to riders struggling with quotas while retaining discretion to penalise. Huang (2023) adds that algorithmic management absorbs conventional managerial methods, including fines that riders experience as predatory. Redistribution is therefore double-edged: the same managers both soften and enforce algorithmic discipline.

4.5 Theme 4: Enablers and Constraints of Managerial Buffering

4.5.1 Managerial Capabilities (Dynamic Managerial Capabilities, AI Literacy)

Dynamic managerial capabilities, rooted in managerial human capital, social capital and cognition (Adner & Helfat, 2003; Helfat & Martin, 2015), offer a promising lens. In a large Indonesian public institution, middle managers' dynamic managerial capabilities improved organisational performance only through organisational capacity for change, a relationship moderated by attitudes towards change (Widianto et al., 2021). In Jordan's fintech sector, the components of global dynamic managerial capabilities mattered for innovativeness only as an integrated bundle (Salih et al., 2026), and such capabilities can be built through open-innovation collaborations such as university–industry consortia (Crupi & Mortara, 2026).

AI literacy, the ability to know, understand, use and evaluate AI (Ng et al., 2021), equips managers to interpret outputs and resist both blind trust and reflexive rejection (Zhang & Rosli, 2026). Self-efficacy operates as a personal resource at both levels of the hierarchy: AI-learning self-efficacy buffered Korean employees' job stress (Kim & Lee, 2024), and change-related self-efficacy strengthened Chinese middle managers' AI–performance link (Hu et al., 2026).

4.5.2 Organisational Support and Discretion

Perceived organisational support (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002) is the most consistent boundary condition in the corpus. It moderated the indirect link between AI awareness and depression in China (Xu et al., 2023), emerged as a critical buffer against AI-related job insecurity (Zhang et al., 2025), and fully mediated the effect of technostress on workplace flourishing in a South African comparator sample (Harunavamwe et al., 2025). Organisational commitment likewise mediated the effect of AI awareness on burnout among Chinese hotel employees (Kong et al., 2021).

Practitioner evidence suggests that managers themselves lack this support. An Infosys Knowledge Institute survey of 2,603 employees found that only 22% of middle managers were actively involved in AI transformation, against 49% of senior executives, and only 13% said they always have freedom to choose when to use AI (McKendrick, 2026). Korn Ferry's analysts similarly conclude that shock absorbers need an organisational system behind them (Lin, 2026).

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4.5.3 Cultural and Institutional Contingencies in Asia

Asian evidence points to three contingencies. First, relational resources matter: Chinese and Korean studies repeatedly show that relational leadership resources (ethical, transformational and emotionally supportive leadership) buffer AI strain, consistent with relational expectations of paternalistic care. Second, high-consequence HR systems raise the stakes, because AI-assisted appraisal in Chinese enterprises carries strong consequences for pay, promotion and mobility (Zhang & Rosli, 2026). Third, institutional regulation shapes managerial discretion, as Chinese platform regulation has reshaped the space within which station managers buffer (Chen, 2026; Zhang et al., 2026). The literature rarely measures cultural values directly, so these contingencies remain inferential.

4.6 Theme 5: Divergent Managerial Roles—Endorsers, Translators, Bottlenecks, and Resisters

Managers do not respond uniformly. Middle managers have long been shown to both help and hinder strategy (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992), and support for algorithmic management declines with rank, with mid-level and frontline managers less optimistic than top managers (Jarrahi et al., 2021). The corpus reveals at least four role configurations: endorsers whose own AI use transmits adoption downward (Hu et al., 2026); translators and brokers who interpret algorithmic output (Vieira & Junte, 2025; Waardenburg et al., 2022); bottlenecks whose overload slows adoption as they absorb new validation and coaching duties without adjusted targets (McKendrick, 2026); and enforcer-buffers who simultaneously soften and impose algorithmic discipline (Chen, 2026; Zhang et al., 2026).

Resistance and control are co-constituted in algorithmic settings (Cameron & Rahman, 2022), and managers can be both agents and subjects of algorithmic management (Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2023). What remains absent from the peer-reviewed literature is a systematic typology linking these roles to managerial mindsets and capabilities in Asian firms.

Table 4. Theme–evidence matrix

Theme	Strength of evidence	Asian evidence	Key gap
1. AI-induced uncertainty	Strong (multi-method, multi-country)	China, India, Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore	Role ambiguity rarely measured
2. Sensemaking	Moderate (qualitative, conceptual)	Vietnam, China	No validated measure of AI sensemaking capability
3a. Absorbing	Indirect (moderation studies)	China, Korea	Absorption never observed directly
3b. Translating	Moderate	China	Translation rarely modelled as a mediator
3c. Redistributing	Strong but sector-specific (ethnography)	China (platform labour)	Unknown in conventional firms
4. Enablers and constraints	Strong for organisational support; emerging for capabilities	China, Korea, Indonesia, Jordan	Manager-level support rarely measured
5. Divergent roles	Weak to moderate	China	No peer-reviewed Asian typology

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5. Conceptual Synthesis: An Integrative Framework of Managerial Shock Absorption in Asia

5.1 Defining and Delimiting the Shock-Absorbing Construct

We define **managerial shock absorption** as *a manager's discretionary, resource-consuming enactment of behaviours that intercept AI-induced uncertainty originating in strategic mandates or algorithmic systems and convert it into forms that subordinates can tolerate and act upon*. The construct is distinct from three neighbours. Transformational leadership is a general style rather than an AI-specific intercepting function. Perceived organisational support is an employee perception of the organisation rather than a managerial behaviour. Algorithmic brokerage captures interpretation but not the holding of ambiguity or the reallocation of pressure. The definition also builds in a cost: because absorption consumes the absorber's resources, it carries a depletion outcome for the manager.

5.2 The Absorb–Translate–Redistribute Mechanism

The ATR mechanism comprises three behaviours. **Absorbing** means holding strategic ambiguity, for example by acknowledging uncertainty about AI's trajectory without passing anxiety downward. **Translating** means converting AI mandates into operational meaning, for example by specifying what an AI tool changes in a particular role and what it leaves intact. **Redistributing** means reallocating residual algorithmic and workload pressure through penalty, risk, resource and knowledge buffering (Chen, 2026).

> ***Proposition 1 (The Buffering Mechanism).*** *Managerial shock-absorbing behaviours—absorbing strategic ambiguity, translating AI mandates into operational meaning, and redistributing residual pressure—mediate the relationship between AI-induced uncertainty and employee outcomes (adoption behaviour, emotional exhaustion, turnover intention).*

This proposition is grounded in evidence that AI uncertainty predicts exhaustion and withdrawal (Xu et al., 2023; Yam, Tang, et al., 2023), that leadership moderates these links (Kim et al., 2025; Meng et al., 2025), and that ethnographies reveal the concrete behaviours through which such moderation plausibly operates (Chen, 2026). Reframing leadership moderation as a mediated managerial mechanism is the central theoretical move of the framework.

5.3 Antecedents: What Enables a Manager to Absorb?

> ***Proposition 2 (Sensemaking as an Enabler).*** *Managers with higher sensemaking capability—the ability to construct coherent, adaptive narratives about AI—are more likely to enact effective shock-absorbing behaviours, particularly in contexts of high strategic ambiguity.*

Sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995), evidence that middle managers reconcile competing logics (Bui et al., 2025) and the influence that knowledge brokers gain under algorithmic opacity (Waardenburg et al., 2022) all support this proposition. Dynamic managerial capabilities, AI literacy and change-related self-efficacy act as complementary antecedents (Helfat & Martin, 2015; Hu et al., 2026; Ng et al., 2021), and the Indonesian evidence suggests that capabilities translate into results only when the organisation itself has capacity for change (Widianto et al., 2021).

5.4 Outcomes: Employee Adoption, Well-Being, and Retention

The framework specifies three employee outcome families: adoption behaviour (use, experimentation and innovative work behaviour), well-being (emotional exhaustion, depression and loneliness) and retention (turnover intention). A fourth, managerial outcome is critical: absorption depletes the absorber. COR theory predicts that sustained buffering without replenishment produces managerial exhaustion, and practitioner reports of middle-manager overload are consistent with that prediction (McKendrick, 2026).

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Proposition 3 (Organisational Support as a Condition). *The buffering effect of managerial shock absorption is stronger when managers perceive higher organisational support (clear AI strategy, discretion, training, psychological safety), because such support replenishes the resources managers need to buffer others.*

Perceived organisational support is the most consistent buffer in the corpus (Xu et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2025), clear AI plans and manager support track higher engagement (Lin, 2026), and buffering that depends on personal discretion alone is fragile (Chen, 2026).

5.5 Contextual Moderators Specific to Asian Organisations

Proposition 4 (Cultural Contingency in Asia). *The strength and form of managerial shock absorption vary across Asian contexts: relational and collectivist orientations may amplify the effectiveness of translating and redistributing behaviours, while very high power distance may constrain managers' willingness to absorb ambiguity on behalf of employees.*

Relational leadership resources consistently buffer AI strain in Chinese and Korean samples; high-consequence HR systems in China magnify oversight duties (Zhang & Rosli, 2026); and reactions to AI vary across cultures (Yam, Tan, et al., 2023). Additional moderators include the regulatory regime (for example, platform-algorithm regulation in China), ownership type (state-owned versus private) and the intensity of organisational delayering.

Proposition 5 (Role Divergence). *Middle managers in Asian AI implementation adopt heterogeneous roles—endorsers, translators, bottlenecks, and resisters—shaped by their sensemaking capability, dynamic managerial capabilities, and the degree of alignment between organisational AI strategy and operational reality.*

Rank-dependent optimism about AI (Jarrahi et al., 2021), the help-or-hinder duality of middle managers (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992) and the co-constitution of control and resistance (Cameron & Rahman, 2022) ground this proposition.

Table 5. Propositions, evidence status and suggested tests

Proposition	Evidence status	Suggested design
P1 Buffering mechanism	Indirect (moderation studies, ethnography)	Multilevel, three-wave manager–employee dyads
P2 Sensemaking enabler	Conceptual and qualitative	Scale development; diary studies under ambiguity
P3 Organisational support	Strong at employee level	Moderated mediation with manager-rated support
P4 Cultural contingency	Inferential	Cross-national comparison (e.g., India, China, Vietnam, Japan) with measured cultural values
P5 Role divergence	Weak to moderate	Latent profile analysis; comparative case studies

5.6 A Proposed Model for Future Empirical Testing

Figure 2 integrates the five propositions. AI-induced uncertainty is the input; the ATR behaviours carry its effect to employee outcomes (P1); sensemaking and related capabilities enable those behaviours (P2); organisational support and Asian contextual factors condition their strength (P3, P4); and role configurations describe how managers sort into distinct patterns of response (P5). Managerial depletion is modelled as a cost of absorption that feeds back into managers' future capacity to buffer.

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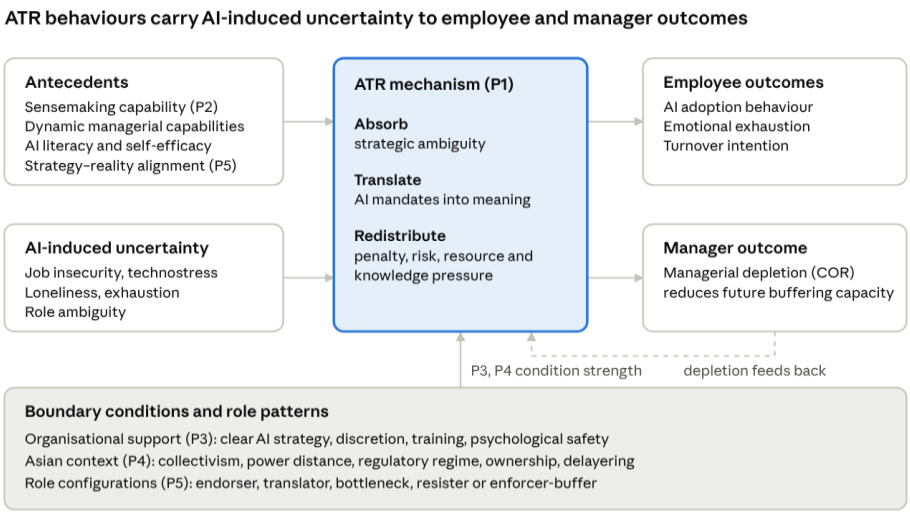


Figure 2. The Managerial Shock Absorption (ATR) model · propositions P1–P5

DISCUSSION

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

6.1.1 Consolidating a Fragmented Literature

The review shows that four literatures (AI and employee well-being, AI-enabled HRM, algorithmic management, and the middle-management strategy process) describe the same phenomenon from different vantage points. Employee-level studies document the shock; labour-process studies document the absorber; and HRM studies document the system that ought to support the absorber. Read together, they reveal that the missing link is the manager-level mechanism itself, which no study has yet measured as a mediator.

6.1.2 Moving the "Shock Absorber" Metaphor into Testable Theory

By defining the construct, separating it from adjacent constructs and specifying its mechanism, antecedents, moderators and depletion outcome, the ATR framework converts a practitioner metaphor into falsifiable propositions. The metaphor's engineering logic is retained: absorbers protect, convert and wear out. Each of these three properties now corresponds to a measurable element of the model: positional intermediation to the mediating role of ATR behaviours, conversion to translation, and wear to managerial depletion.

6.1.3 Extending Buffering and Sensemaking Theory to AI Contexts

Thompson's (1967) buffering was organisational and structural; the evidence reviewed here shows that AI-era buffering is individual, discretionary and interpretive. Chen's (2026) finding that relief depends on managers' personal discretion implies that buffering is a managerial behaviour subject to depletion, not a stable structural property. Sensemaking under AI is likewise complicated by algorithmic opacity, which turns interpretive capability into a source of intra-organisational power (Waardenburg et al., 2022). The framework thus links buffering theory to COR theory's resource logic and to sensemaking theory's account of meaning construction.

6.2 Contextual Contributions: What the Asian Evidence Reveals

The Asian evidence reveals three patterns. First, it is unusually rich on relational leadership as a buffer, suggesting that relational expectations make the manager's personal care a salient resource. Second, it is uniquely detailed on the redistribution of algorithmic pressure in platform labour, where Chinese fieldwork shows managers simultaneously protecting and disciplining workers. Third, it exposes a structural paradox:

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Asian firms are asking middle managers to absorb AI shocks while using AI to delayer the same managerial tier (Caixin Global, 2026).

For Indian organisations specifically, evidence exists on technostress creators (Malik, Tripathi, et al., 2022), substitution threat (Verma & Singh, 2022), insecurity-driven burnout (Yam, Tang, et al., 2023) and AI-enabled HR ecosystems in multinational subsidiaries (Malik, Budhwar, Patel, & Srikanth, 2022; Malik, Budhwar, Mohan, & Srikanth, 2023). No study yet examines Indian middle managers as buffers, which makes India an especially promising site for testing the framework.

6.3 Practical Implications for Asian Organisations

Organisations should treat managerial shock absorption as a resourced role rather than an unfunded expectation. Five actions follow from the evidence:

1. **Brief managers before teams.** Share the reasoning behind AI decisions with managers before announcements reach employees, and acknowledge uncertainty openly (Lin, 2026).
2. **Build AI literacy and sensemaking capability first.** Give managers time and tools to become confident AI users before asking them to lead adoption (Ang, 2025; Zhang & Rosli, 2026).
3. **Grant explicit discretion and adjust targets.** Formalise managers' authority to question AI outputs, to pause or adapt deployment and to buffer penalties, so that relief does not depend on personal goodwill (Chen, 2026).
4. **Monitor the absorbers.** Track middle-manager exhaustion alongside employee adoption metrics, since COR theory predicts depletion.
5. **Calibrate AI intensity.** Non-linear effects of AI-induced job insecurity (Zhong et al., 2026) suggest that staged, moderate deployment is safer than abrupt, extensive deployment.

6.4 Research Agenda: Priorities for Empirical Validation

Five priorities stand out. First, develop and validate a multi-dimensional managerial shock absorption scale covering absorbing, translating and redistributing behaviours, with separate manager and subordinate ratings. Second, test Proposition 1 with multilevel, multi-wave manager–employee designs that model buffering as a mediator rather than inferring it from leadership moderation. Third, extend research beyond China to India, Japan, Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines, measuring cultural values directly rather than inferring them from country. Fourth, study conventional firms, not only platforms, to establish whether redistribution generalises. Fifth, examine the managerial cost of absorption longitudinally, including burnout, role ambiguity and exit among middle managers.

7. Limitations of the Review

7.1 Methodological Limitations (Search Coverage, Language Bias, Grey Literature)

The review is restricted to English-language, Scopus-indexed articles, which under-represents Chinese-, Japanese-, Korean- and Vietnamese-language scholarship. Several 2026 articles were verified at abstract and metadata level rather than in full text. Practitioner sources, including the Korn Ferry survey, are used only as context because their samples and methods are not peer-reviewed.

7.2 Conceptual Limitations

Much of the evidence for absorption is inferred from moderation effects of leadership and support rather than from observed managerial behaviour, so the ATR mechanism is a theoretically grounded inference rather than an established finding. Proposition 5 rests on the thinnest evidence base and should be treated as the most exploratory of the five.

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7.3 Boundaries of the Proposed Framework

The framework applies to organisations in which managers retain some discretion over how AI is implemented. It may not apply to fully algorithmic gig work with no human intermediary, or to contexts in which AI removes the managerial tier altogether. Its cultural propositions are hypotheses, not findings.

CONCLUSION

The "shock absorber" metaphor is more than rhetoric. The reviewed literature shows that AI generates a bundle of economic, cognitive, relational and procedural threats for employees; that managerial and organisational resources buffer these threats; and that in at least some Asian settings managers visibly absorb, translate and redistribute algorithmic pressure. The evidence also shows that buffering is discretionary, under-supported and self-depleting, and that the managerial tier asked to absorb AI shocks is itself being reshaped by AI. The ATR framework and its five propositions offer a path from metaphor to measurement. For Asian organisations, the practical lesson is direct: shock absorbers need a system behind them, or they will fail when the road gets rough.

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