Through a Moral Lens: Moral Foundations and Public Acceptance of Artificial Intelligence Across Contexts

Nayeon Kim, University of Georgia[1]
Yilang Peng, University of Georgia[2]

Artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly embedded in everyday consumer and public life, with opportunities and challenges related to efficiency, fairness, and social inequality (Al-Kfairy et al., 2024; Chander et al., 2025; Danaher, 2024). As AI systems become more influential in decisions affecting consumers and society, understanding the factors that shape public acceptance of AI has become increasingly important. Although prior research has examined general predictors of AI acceptance (Pelau et al., 2021; Schiavo et al., 2024), less is known about how moral foundations shape acceptance across everyday contexts such as hiring, criminal sentencing, personalized marketing, job automation, and self-driving cars. Drawing on moral foundations theory, this study examines whether individualizing, binding, and liberty foundations are associated with attitudes toward AI and perceived AI-induced inequality. Survey data from 614 U.S. participants were analyzed using exploratory factor analysis and ordinary least squares regression with demographic and political controls.

Results show that moral foundations relate to AI acceptance differently across contexts. Individualizing foundations, which emphasize care and fairness, were negatively associated with attitudes toward AI in hiring and criminal sentencing and positively associated with perceived AI-induced inequality in hiring, criminal sentencing, and job automation. Binding foundations, which emphasize loyalty, authority, and purity, were positively associated with attitudes toward AI in hiring, criminal sentencing, and personalized marketing. Liberty foundations showed limited associations across contexts. These findings reveal that public acceptance of AI is shaped by underlying moral values regarding fairness, vulnerability, and social inequality across everyday contexts. The study suggests that consumers may evaluate AI systems not only based on technical performance, but also on their alignment with broader social concerns and expectations, especially in high-stakes contexts.

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[1] Nayeon Kim (mykite12@uga.edu), PhD Student, Department of Financial Planning, Housing and Consumer Economics
[2] Yilang Peng (Yilang.Peng@uga.edu), Associate Professor, Department of Financial Planning, Housing and Consumer Economics

