



## Trust and Transparency: Investigating University Students' Attitudes Toward Responsible AI

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**Abstract:** As Artificial Intelligence (AI) becomes increasingly embedded in higher education, concerns surrounding Responsible Artificial Intelligence (RAI), particularly trust and transparency have moved from abstract ethical discussions to practical institutional challenges. While existing research has largely focused on technological capabilities and learning outcomes, empirical evidence on university students' perceptions of Responsible AI remains limited, especially in developing country contexts. This study investigates university students' awareness, ethical perceptions, perceived risks, and trust related to AI usage in higher education. A quantitative, cross-sectional survey was conducted among 719 undergraduate students from multiple academic disciplines at a Sri Lankan university. Data were analyzed using reliability testing, exploratory factor analysis (EFA), and multiple linear regression to examine the relationships between AI awareness, ethical perceptions, perceived risks, and trust in AI systems. The findings indicate that students demonstrate moderately high awareness of AI-related ethical issues, including bias, transparency, and data privacy concerns. While AI tools are widely used for academic support activities such as content development, coding, and proofreading, students exhibit cautious trust, often validating AI-generated outputs before use. Regression analysis reveals that AI awareness and ethical perceptions are significant positive predictors of trust in AI, whereas perceived risks negatively influence trust. The results further show strong student support for institutional AI governance, including clear usage guidelines, disclosure requirements, and responsible AI policies. These findings highlight that trust in AI is shaped not merely by usage frequency but by students' ethical understanding and risk awareness. This study contributes empirical evidence to the growing literature on Responsible AI in education and offers practical insights for universities and policymakers seeking to design transparent, ethical, and student-centered AI governance frameworks in higher education.

**Index Terms:** Ethical Perceptions, Quantitative Survey, Responsible Artificial Intelligence (RAI), Trust in AI, University Students

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has rapidly become an integral component of higher education, influencing teaching, learning, assessment, and academic research across academic disciplines. Universities increasingly employ AI-driven systems such as intelligent tutoring platforms, automated grading tools, learning analytics, and generative AI applications to enhance efficiency, personalization, and accessibility in education. Recent studies indicate that generative AI tools, including large language models, are now routinely used by university students for activities such as idea generation, writing assistance, coding, and problem-solving [1], [2]. As a result, AI is no longer a peripheral technology in higher education but a core

element shaping contemporary academic practices.

Despite its pedagogical potential, the rapid adoption of AI has raised significant ethical, social, and governance-related concerns. Issues related to academic integrity, algorithmic bias, transparency, data privacy, and accountability have become central to debates surrounding AI use in educational contexts [3], [4]. In particular, the widespread availability of generative AI tools has blurred traditional boundaries of authorship and originality, creating uncertainty among students regarding acceptable and ethical use of AI-assisted outputs [5]. These challenges highlight the growing importance of Responsible Artificial Intelligence (RAI), which emphasizes fairness, transparency, accountability, and meaningful human oversight in the development and deployment of AI systems.

Trust and transparency are widely recognized as foundational principles of Responsible AI. Trust in AI systems influences whether users are willing to rely on AI-generated outputs, integrate them into academic decision-making, and accept institutional AI initiatives [6], [7]. Transparency, particularly in terms of explainability and clarity regarding how AI systems generate outputs, plays a critical role in shaping this trust. Prior research suggests that students often experience a “trust paradox,” whereby they extensively use AI tools while simultaneously expressing concerns about accuracy, bias, and misuse [2], [8]. This paradox underscores the complexity of students’ attitudes toward AI and highlights the need to examine trust and transparency as practical, experience-driven constructs rather than abstract ethical ideals.

Existing literature on AI in higher education has predominantly focused on learning outcomes, instructional effectiveness, and technological innovation. Although recent studies have begun to explore ethical considerations and policy implications, empirical research examining students’ perceptions of Responsible AI remains comparatively limited [9]. Moreover, much of the current evidence originates from developed country contexts, leaving a gap in understanding how students in developing countries perceive AI-related risks, ethical responsibilities, and institutional governance. This gap is particularly important, as disparities in AI literacy and regulatory clarity may exacerbate concerns related to fairness, equity, and academic integrity [10].

To address these limitations, the present study investigates university students’ awareness, ethical perceptions, perceived risks, and trust related to AI usage in higher education. Using survey data collected from 719 undergraduate students across multiple academic disciplines in Sri Lanka, this research examines how these factors influence students’ trust in AI systems and their support for institutional AI governance. By employing quantitative techniques such as reliability analysis, exploratory factor analysis, and multiple linear regression, the study provides empirical insights into the determinants of Responsible AI acceptance among university students.

The contributions of this study are threefold. First, it offers large-scale empirical evidence on students’ attitudes toward Responsible AI within a developing country context. Second, it identifies key factors shaping trust in AI systems in higher education. Third, the findings provide practical implications for universities and policymakers seeking to design transparent, ethical, and student-centered AI governance frameworks. Ultimately, this research aims to support the responsible and sustainable integration of AI technologies in higher education.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. **Section 2** presents a comprehensive review of related

literature, focusing on university students' perceptions of Artificial Intelligence, with particular emphasis on trust, transparency, ethical concerns, academic integrity, and Responsible AI in higher education. **Section 3** describes the research methodology, including the study design, participant sampling, instrument development, data preprocessing procedures, and statistical techniques employed for analysis. **Section 4** reports the results of the empirical analysis, covering descriptive statistics, reliability assessment, exploratory factor analysis, and regression findings. **Section 5** discusses the key findings in relation to existing literature and highlights their theoretical and practical implications. Finally, **Section 6** concludes the paper by summarizing the main contributions, outlining limitations of the study, and suggesting directions for future research.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The rapid adoption of artificial intelligence (AI), particularly generative AI tools such as ChatGPT, has significantly reshaped learning practices in higher education. Recent studies report that a large majority of university students use generative AI tools regularly for academic purposes, including idea generation, writing support, and problem solving [1], [2]. While students acknowledge the efficiency and convenience offered by AI systems, research consistently highlights a parallel rise in ethical concerns related to academic integrity, trust, transparency, and responsible use [2], [3].

Trust in AI systems has emerged as a central factor shaping student attitudes toward AI assisted learning. Prior research conceptualizes trust as a multidimensional construct encompassing reliability, accuracy, transparency, and alignment with educational values [6], [7]. Studies across diverse geographical contexts indicate that students often exhibit a “trust paradox,” where they extensively use AI tools despite expressing doubts about their accuracy and reliability [1], [2]. This paradox suggests that perceived usefulness and time efficiency frequently outweigh ethical reservations, particularly in high-pressure academic environments [4], [8].

Transparency and explainability are repeatedly identified as core requirements for responsible AI use in education. Students express a strong desire to understand how AI systems generate outputs, what data they rely on, and how potential biases are mitigated [11], [12], [13]. However, expectations of transparency vary across disciplines. Teacher education and humanities students tend to emphasize interpretability, fairness, and pedagogical alignment, whereas business and technical students prioritize data security and system performance [2], [12], [14]. These disciplinary differences highlight the need for context-sensitive AI governance and ethics education.

Ethical concerns related to bias, fairness, and equity are also prominent in the literature. Students worry that AI systems may reinforce existing social and educational inequalities through biased training data, unequal access to AI tools, or algorithmic decision-making in assessment [10], [12], [15]. Equity-related concerns are particularly salient in studies conducted in developing or under-resourced educational contexts, where students fear being disadvantaged as AI becomes increasingly integral to academic success [9]. The concept of AI literacy has therefore been framed as both an ethical and equity issue, with unequal AI knowledge potentially widening achievement gaps [16].

Academic integrity represents one of the most contested areas of AI use in higher education. Multiple

studies report widespread confusion among students regarding plagiarism, authorship, and appropriate attribution when using generative AI tools [2], [3]. Despite recognizing the risks of academic misconduct, students continue to use AI extensively, often relying on personal judgment in the absence of clear institutional policies [1], [5]. Research consistently emphasizes students’ demand for explicit, consistent, and enforceable institutional guidelines to reduce ethical ambiguity and promote responsible AI use [2], [14].

Finally, data privacy and personal information protection remain significant concerns for university students. Students' express uncertainty about how their prompts, academic work, and usage data are collected, stored, and shared by AI systems [13], [17]. Privacy concerns vary by discipline and region, with students in business, health, and technical fields demonstrating heightened sensitivity to data security issues [12], [17]. Overall, the literature indicates that students’ attitudes toward responsible AI are shaped by a complex interaction of trust, ethical awareness, institutional guidance, and contextual factors, underscoring the need for holistic and student-centered AI governance frameworks in higher education.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to investigate university students’ awareness, perceptions, and attitudes toward Responsible Artificial Intelligence (RAI), with particular emphasis on trust and transparency. A structured questionnaire was used to collect self-reported data on students’ AI

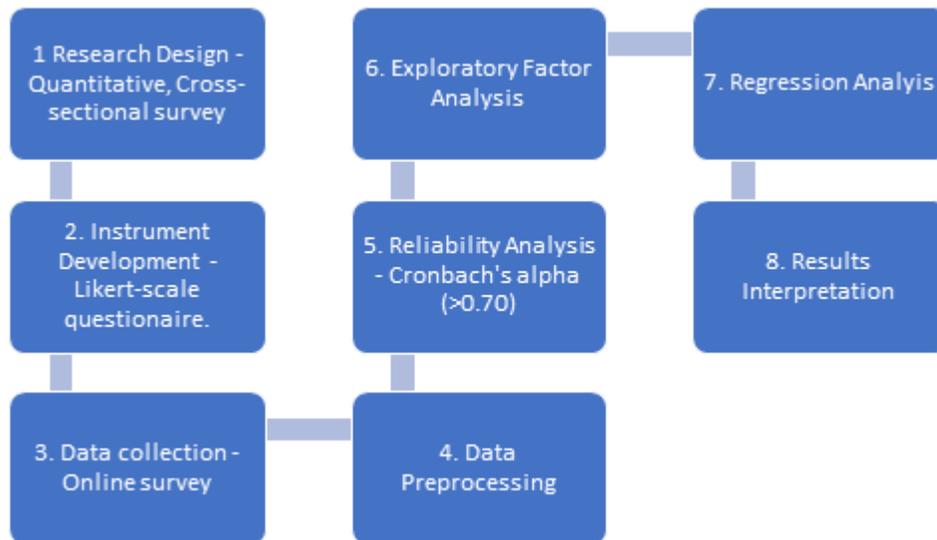


Fig 1. Methodology Workflow

usage patterns, ethical perceptions, awareness of AI risks, and expectations regarding institutional AI policies. The quantitative approach is appropriate for capturing large-scale trends and enabling statistical analysis of relationships among key constructs related to Responsible AI. Fig. 1. shows the methodology followed to complete this research.

#### 3.2 Participants and Sampling

Data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire distributed in digital format. Participation was voluntary, and responses were anonymized to ensure confidentiality. The target population comprised undergraduate students enrolled at a Sri Lankan university who had prior exposure to AI-enabled academic tools. A convenience sampling approach was employed, as participants were recruited through institutional mailing lists and online learning platforms. Only undergraduate students were included in the final analysis to ensure sample homogeneity. After data screening and removal of incomplete or invalid responses, the final dataset was used for analysis. Fig. 2. illustrates the gender distribution of the respondents. The sample consists of a relatively balanced representation of male and female students, with a very small proportion

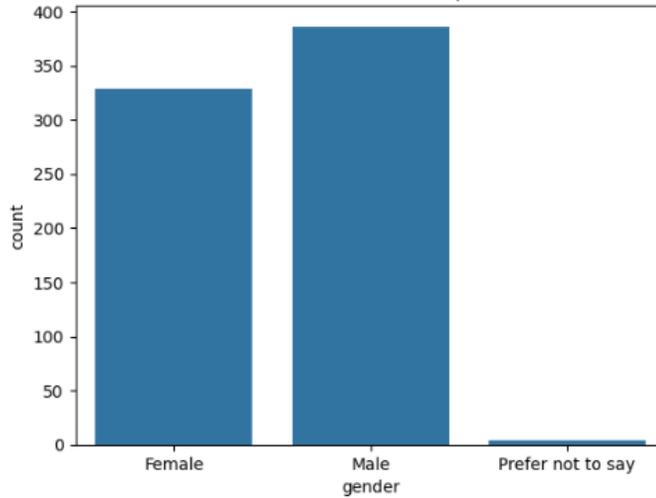


Fig 2. Gender Distribution

selecting “prefer not to say.” This distribution indicates adequate gender diversity for subsequent statistical analysis. Most participants were from the computing/IT discipline followed by business. Distribution of faculty/discipline wise participation will be shown in Fig. 3.

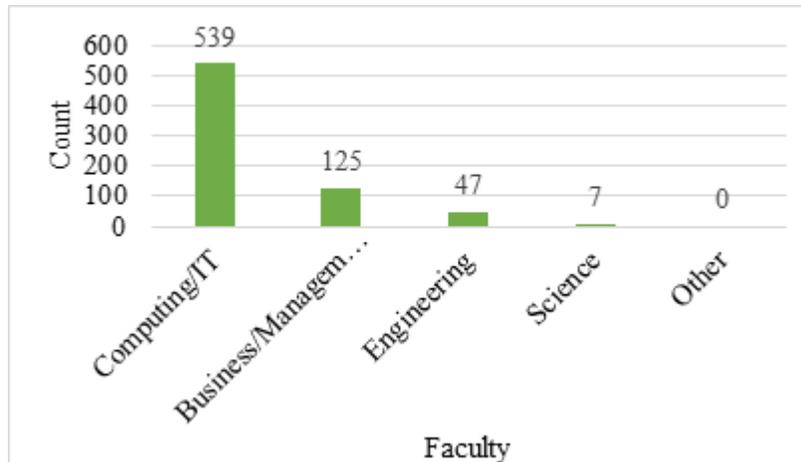


Fig 3. Faculty/Discipline Distribution

### 3.3 Instrument Development

The questionnaire comprised multiple items measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The instrument was designed to measure the following constructs shown in Fig. 4.

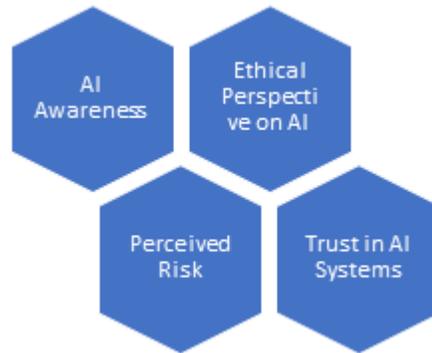


Fig 4. Instrument Development

Items were adapted from existing literature and refined to align with the study context. Prior to analysis, all Likert-scale responses were converted to numeric format, and values outside the valid scale range were excluded. Content validity was supported by adapting measurement items from previously validated instruments in related studies and refining them to align with the higher education context.

### 3.4 Data Preprocessing

Data preprocessing was conducted to ensure the accuracy and validity of the dataset prior to statistical analysis. Missing values and non-numeric entries were handled using numeric coercion and listwise deletion where necessary. Responses falling outside the valid Likert scale range (1–5) were excluded to maintain measurement consistency. Composite scores for each construct were calculated by averaging the corresponding items, with higher scores indicating stronger agreement with the construct being measured.

### 3.5 Reliability Analysis

The internal consistency of each construct was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. A threshold value of  $\geq 0.70$  was considered acceptable for reliability. Additionally, item-level diagnostics were examined to ensure that the removal of any individual item did not significantly improve reliability, thereby supporting the retention of theoretically relevant items. Cronbach's alpha values for all constructs exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory internal consistency.

### 3.6 Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was performed to examine the underlying factor structure of the measurement instrument. Principal axis factoring with Varimax rotation was employed. Prior to factor extraction, sampling adequacy and data suitability were assessed using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity. KMO values exceeding 0.60 and a statistically significant Bartlett's test ( $p < 0.05$ ) confirmed the appropriateness of the data for factor analysis.

Factors were retained based on eigenvalues greater than one and theoretical interpretability. Items with factor loadings below 0.40 or with substantial cross-loadings were excluded. The resulting factor structure aligned with the conceptual constructs of AI awareness, ethical perceptions, perceived risks, and trust in AI

systems, and was consistent with prior studies on responsible AI in education.

### 3.7 Regression Analysis

Multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between AI awareness, ethical perceptions, perceived risk, and trust in AI systems. Trust in AI was treated as the dependent variable, while AI awareness, ethical perceptions, and perceived risk served as independent variables. Composite construct scores were used for all variables.

Prior to model estimation, key regression assumptions were assessed, including linearity, normality of residuals, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity. Linearity and homoscedasticity were evaluated using residual plots, while normality was examined through histogram and Q-Q plots. Multicollinearity was assessed using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), with values below 5 indicating acceptable levels. Regression results were interpreted using standardized coefficients, p-values, and the coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ).

### 3.8 Statistical Tools

All statistical analyses were performed using Python. Data preprocessing and management were conducted using the pandas and NumPy libraries. Pingouin was used for reliability analysis and related statistical procedures, while factor analyzer supported exploratory factor analysis. Multiple linear regression modeling and diagnostic testing were carried out using stats models, and data visualization was performed using matplotlib.

For all inferential statistical analyses, a significance level of  $\alpha = 0.05$  was applied. This threshold indicates that results were considered statistically significant when the probability of observing the obtained effect by chance was less than 5%, which is consistent with standard practices in social science and educational research.

### 3.9 Ethical Consideration

Ethical principles were strictly followed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Data were collected anonymously and used solely for academic research purposes. The study did not involve sensitive personal data, and all responses were stored securely. The research complies with general ethical guidelines for social science research involving human participants.

This methodology provides a systematic and transparent account of the research process, ensuring the reliability and validity of findings related to university students' attitudes toward Responsible AI.

## 4 RESULTS

As demonstrated in this document, the numbering for sections upper case Arabic numerals, then upper case Arabic numerals, separated by periods.

### 4.1 Descriptive Statistics

The general awareness of university students, perception and attitude towards Responsible Artificial Intelligence (RAI) were analyzed using descriptive analysis. The research shows that students are

moderately highly aware AI-related concepts, especially on AI bias, privacy threat and the need to have transparency in AI systems. Most of the respondents indicated that they used AI tools on a regular basis, with most of these tools begin used in content creation, idea development, code-writing and proofreading. Fig. 5. presents the frequency of generative AI usage among respondents. The majority of students report moderate to high levels of AI usage, suggesting that AI tools are commonly integrated into students’ academic activities. Fig. 6. shows the distribution of students’ trust in AI tools. The results indicate a moderate level of trust overall, with noticeable variation across respondents. This pattern suggests that while students frequently use AI tools, their trust remains cautious rather than absolute.

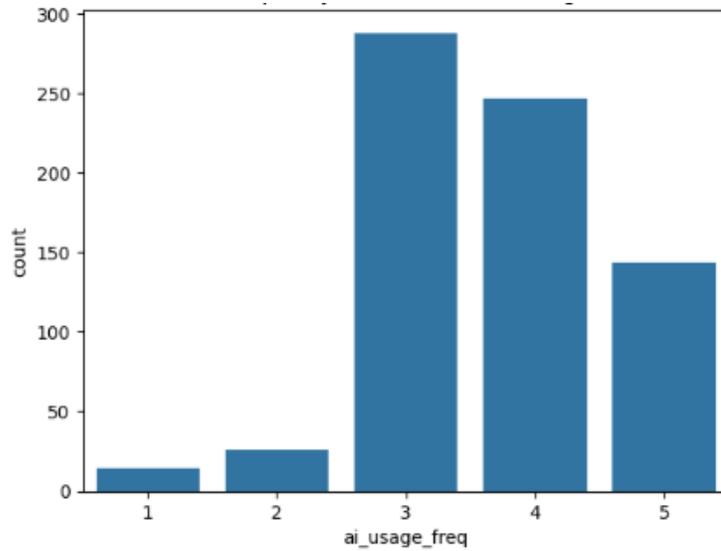


Fig 6. Frequency of AI Usage

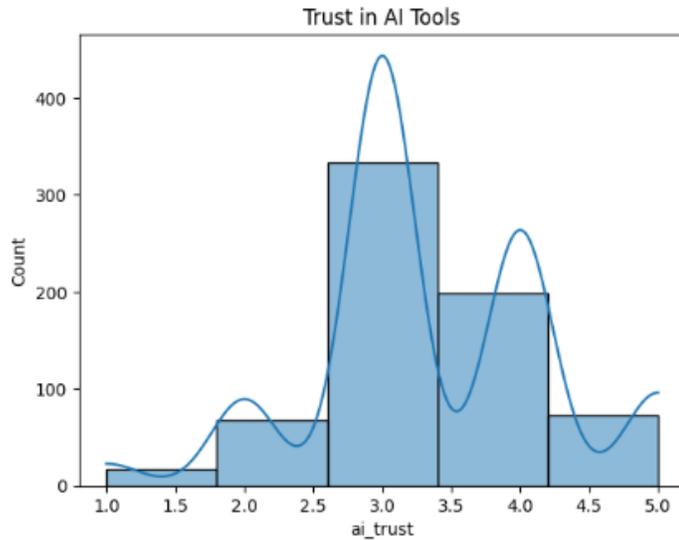


Fig 5. Distribution of Trust in AI

There were ambivalent responses to trust towards information generated by AI. Even though the use of AI tools was seen by many as a positive and time-saving trends, most of the respondents stated that they do not entirely rely on the AI outputs without validation, suggesting the use of the tools with caution. The supportive applications of AI (ex: proofreading and code generation with human knowledge) were ethically more acceptable than the fully automated content generation with no human input.

There was also an evident risk perception, with quite a significant percentage of the respondents' expressing worries about the issues of algorithmic bias, lack of critical thinking, and possible misuse in assessments. Notably respondents showed high levels of agreement with the statements that supported institutional direction, reporting of AI usage, and clear university regulations thus indicating that there is anticipation of formal AI regulation in higher institutional of learning.

**4.2 Reliability Analysis**

Internal consistency of the measurement tools was tested through Cronbach alpha. The constructs were all reliable with scores ranging between acceptable and strong alpha coefficients that exceed the traditional 0.70 limit. In this respect, the questions that constitute each construct such as AI awareness, ethical perceptions, perceived risk and trust in AL were consistent in their ability to represent the target theoretical dimensions.

An item-by-item analysis showed that a single item had no significant adverse effect on the reliability of a construct to which it was linked, thus justifying the presence of all indicators that should have been there based on the theory. These findings support the psychometric strength of the survey instrument and justify its suitability to be used in future multivariate analyses.

**4.3 Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)**

The appropriateness of data used to do the factor analysis was determined before factor extraction. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure showed that it had sufficient sampling adequacy and the Test of Sphericity based on Bartlett was found to be significant ( $p < 0.05$  and below) which proved that the correlation matrix used in the factor analysis was suitable. Fig. 7. displays the scree plot obtained from exploratory factor

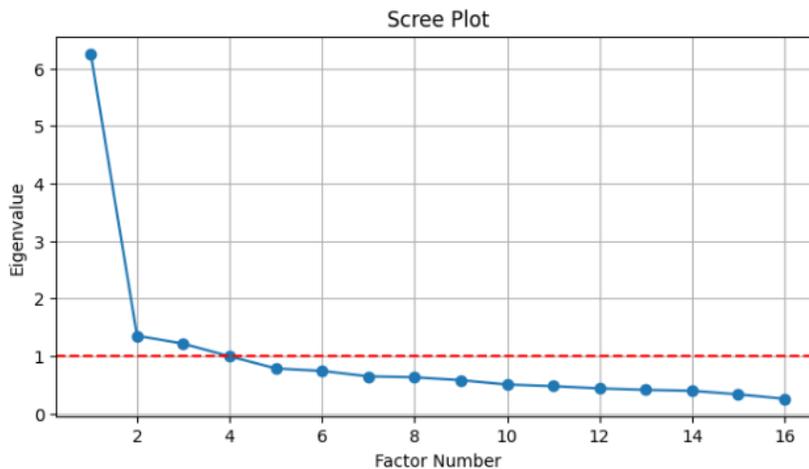


Fig 7. Distribution of Trust in AI analysis. Factors with eigenvalues greater than one were retained, supporting the selection of a multi-factor solution consistent with the theoretical constructs of AI awareness, ethical perceptions, and perceived risk.

Fig. 8. presents the factor loadings heatmap after Varimax rotation. The results show strong item loadings on their respective factors, with minimal cross-loadings, indicating satisfactory construct validity and a clear underlying factor structure.



Fig 8. Factor Loading Heatmap

Principal axis factoring with Varimax rotation was used to perform the exploratory factor analysis, which showed a distinct and understandable structure of factors. The factors were retained on the basis of eigenvalues, which were greater than one and theoretical interpretability. The factors which were extracted were aligned with the conceptual constructs that were suggested in the study, i.e., AI awareness, ethical perceptions, perceived risks, and trust in AI systems.

Factor loadings were strong in all the retained items and below the minimal level of 0.40 plus there were less cross-loadings. This means that construct validity is good and it proves the multidimensionality of the student views towards Responsible AI. The factor structure obtained, thus, proves that the perception of AI by the students is determined by a number of particular but related dimensions, and not a generalized attitude.

#### 4.4 Regression Analysis

The aim of the study was to find out the degree to which students trust AI systems are affected by AI awareness, ethical perceptions, and perceived risks. A multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to determine the effect of the above variables on trust ratings. The statistical significance of the resulting regression model allowed concluding that the independent variables explain the substantial share of the variance in the trust toward AI. Fig. 9. illustrates the relationship between residuals and fitted values. The

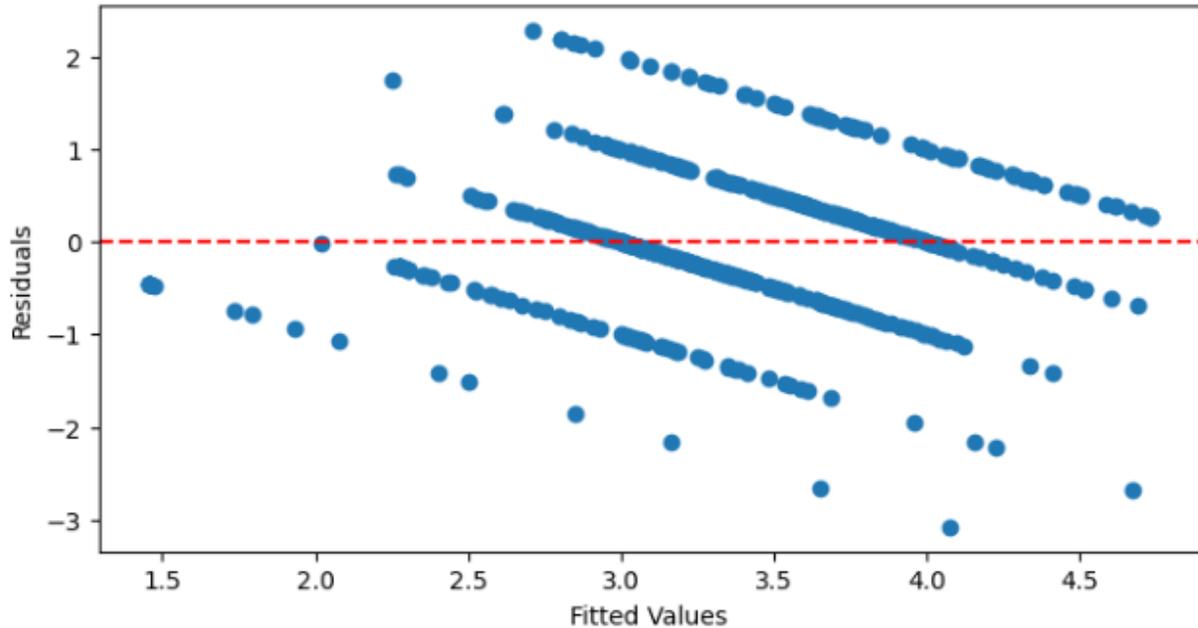


Fig 9. Residual vs Fitted Values

absence of systematic patterns suggests that the assumptions of linearity and homoscedasticity are reasonably satisfied.

The AI awareness and ethical perception were found to be statistically significant and positive predictors of trust in AI, which implies that when students gain a more profound definition of AI concepts and ethical responsibilities, they will develop greater confidence in AI systems. On the other hand, perceived risks were found to have a negative correlation with trust, which implies that the issues related to bias, privacy, and misuse decrease the willingness of students to put all their trust in AI outputs.

Diagnostic tests were done to ensure that the basic conditions of the regression assumptions were met such as linearity, normality, homoscedasticity and the lack of multicollinearity. Altogether, the results prove that the level of trust in AI does not depend on the frequency of using it only; it can be regulated by a ratio of the awareness, ethical knowledge, and perceived risk. Fig. 10. displays partial regression plots illustrating the unique contribution of each predictor variable to trust in AI systems after controlling for other factors in the model.

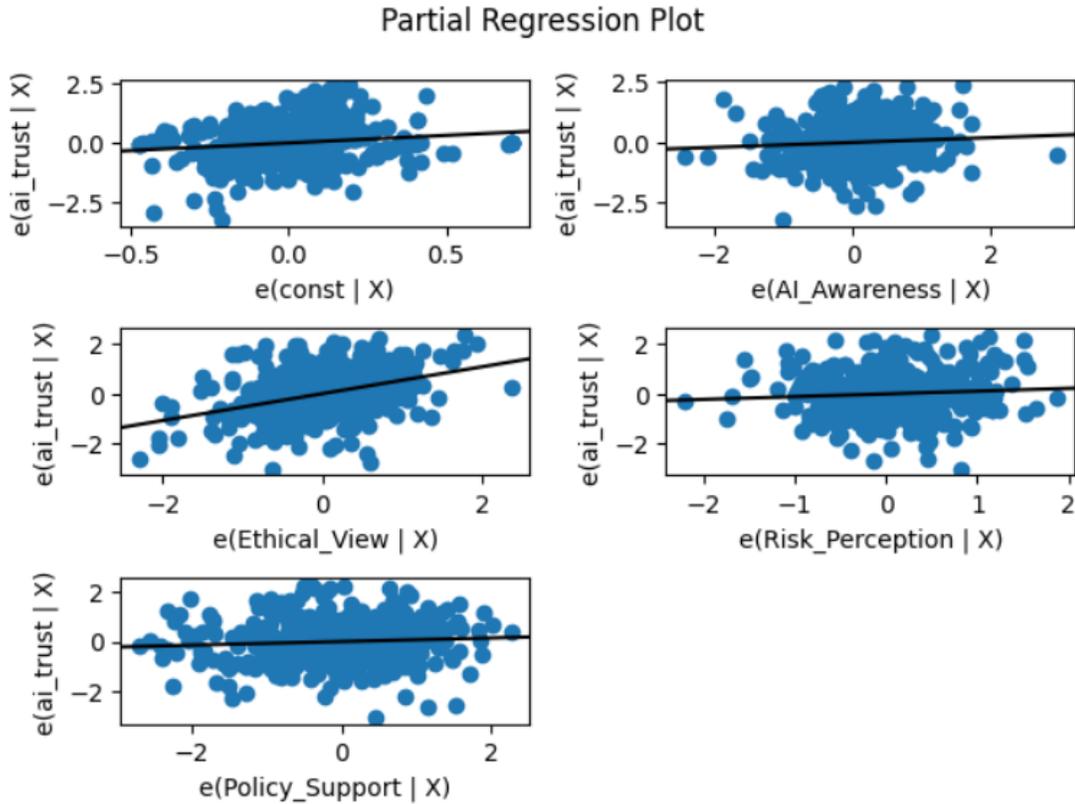


Fig. 10. Partial Regression Plot

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

This paper has explored the attitude of university students towards Responsible Artificial Intelligence with a specific focus concerning trust and transparency in the higher learning institution. The results are a conclusive demonstration of the fact that, as much as students are keen on using AI mechanisms in their academic goals, they do not blindly trust the mechanisms.

Levels of awareness regarding AI-related risks (such as bias, opacities, and the possible consequences of critical thinking) were rather high among participants. The ethical acceptance of AI was found to depend on the context, and the supportive uses got a more positive assessment than the completely automated generation of academic content. Interestingly, respondents showed great desire towards clear institutional policies, disclosure requirements, and responsible usage policies, thus presenting the purpose of higher-education institutions in helping direct ethical adoption of AI.

The findings also explain that confidence in AI is mainly mediated by the degree of awareness and moral cognition of students, but the increase in risk perception undermines faith in AI systems. The results highlight that the encouragement of the Responsible AI in the educational setting will necessitate not only the adoption of the technology but the implementation of the AI-literacy programs, ethics-focused courses, and the transparent leadership structures.

In practical perspective, institutions of higher learning must focus on developing clear policies on the use of AI, introduce the idea of Responsible AI into courses, and encourage critical thinking on AI tools instead of

their dependence. In this way, the institutions will be able to develop a culture where AI will enhance learning results without compromising academic integrity and ethical responsibility.

In general, the present study adds empirical data to the growing research on Responsible AI in education, especially in the context of developing countries. It provides useful information to teachers, policy-makers, and researchers who are trying to find the right balance between innovation and responsibility in the changing AI-based academic environment.

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