

Bridging Awareness and Responsible AI Use: How Ethics and Trust Shape Business Students' Academic Engagement with AI

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Abstract

This study explores how business school students' awareness of Artificial Intelligence (AI) relates to their ethical concerns and trust in AI tools, and how these factors influence their critical evaluation and willingness to use AI-generated content in academic work. In the context of increasing reliance on generative AI in higher education, the research clarifies the mediating roles of trust and ethics in shaping responsible AI engagement. A quantitative survey was conducted among 103 students from business schools in Portugal and Poland. Using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) via SmartPLS 4, the proposed model tested relationships between three latent constructs—AI awareness, ethical concerns, and trust—and two outcome variables: critical evaluation of AI-generated content and trust in using AI outputs. Specific indirect (mediated) effects were also assessed. Cultural dimensions such as power distance, masculinity, individualism, and long-term orientation moderate these relationships. While limited by a modest sample size, the study provides robust evidence that trust and ethical reflection are critical to responsible AI use. It underscores the importance of culturally adapted AI literacy initiatives to promote thoughtful and ethical engagement with AI in academic settings.

Keywords: AI literacy; trust in AI; ethical concerns; AI critical evaluation.