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Trust, Bias, and Agency: A Critical Examination of Students' Perceptions of AI in Academic Contexts

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Abstract. The fast incorporation of artificial intelligence (AI) in higher education has sparked an increased interest in understanding how students view its function, dependability, and ethical implications. This research critically investigates students' perceptions of AI in academic settings, focusing on the interconnected characteristics of trust, bias, and agency. Data from 60 undergraduate students, who were selected using purposive sampling technique, were acquired using a qualitative study approach, which included semi-structured interviews and theme analysis. The findings show that students have conditional faith in AI technologies, valuing their efficiency and accessibility while being dubious about accuracy and fairness. Participants were aware of algorithmic bias, notably in terms of Western-centric linguistic and cultural representation, but lacked a thorough knowledge of the technical causes of such bias. Furthermore, students navigated a complicated sense of agency, combining empowerment from AI-assisted learning with worries about reliance, authorship, and academic integrity. Emotions such as excitement, anxiety, and guilt highlighted the moral complexity surrounding AI's employment in academic research. These findings emphasize the need for higher education institutions to create critical AI literacy frameworks, clear policies, and context-sensitive pedagogies that promote ethical, egalitarian, and human-centred interaction with AI technology. The work adds to current discussions about human-AI partnerships in education by revealing how trust, bias, and agency are dynamically intertwined in student's lived experiences with AI-assisted learning.

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INTRODUCTION

In the constantly changing environment of higher education, the incorporation of artificial intelligence (AI) technology into academic contexts has sparked widespread

interest and concern. As students grow more familiar with AI-powered tools, such as automated feedback systems and generative-text platforms, their notions of trust, bias, and agency in regard to these technologies become vital. Understanding these impressions is important not just for pedagogical design and institutional policies, but also for ensuring that AI-enhanced learning environments promote, rather than undermine, student autonomy and equity. Recent research by (Basch et al., 2025) emphasized the need of higher education institutions developing solid policies and training programs on the appropriate usage of artificial intelligence. They also emphasized the significance of developing AI literacy among students and teachers to address ethical concerns, eliminate academic integrity hazards, and educate students to meet future workforce demands created by technology.

The growth of AI in educational settings has been extensively documented. Students use AI technologies for writing assistance, research support, summarization, and other academic purposes. A recent study found that over half of surveyed students claimed to use AI tools with some frequency in their assignments, but many remained sceptical about the tools' reliability and fairness (Fošner, 2024). Furthermore, a comprehensive Jisc report authored by (Attewell, 2025) found that, as AI becomes more integrated into daily study, students underlined the need for better institutional guidelines on what constitutes appropriate use versus over-reliance. This rising pervasiveness raises serious concerns about how students trust AI systems, identify bias in them, and preserve their own agency when engaging with such technology.

Trust is a key lens through which students interact with AI systems. When students perceive an AI system as trustworthy, transparent, and fair, they are more inclined to accept and incorporate it into their academic practice. However, empirical research paints a more complex picture: while students have good opinions regarding AI, they frequently indicate low levels of trust in its outcomes. For example, (Arif, 2023) mixed-method study discovered that, while 70.4% of participants had positive sentiments regarding AI, many were concerned about accuracy and future adoption. Trust is further compounded by the 'black-box' character of many AI systems, which can erode students' comfort and readiness to rely on such technologies, especially when fairness or accuracy is in doubt (Marrone et al., 2025).

Bias and equity are closely tied to the concept of trust. AI systems, even in educational settings, are susceptible to algorithmic bias, data-driven discrimination, and structural inequality. Concerns have been expressed that AI-mediated evaluation or feedback may repeat existing inequities, diminishing student agency and perpetuating disadvantage (Darling et al., 2024). Multi-stakeholder research done by (Karran et al., 2025) on AI acceptability in education discovered that transparency, explainability, and fairness are important mediators of trust and acceptance across student, teacher, and parent groups. Bias might show in student perceptions of unfairness in AI-generated feedback, worries about uneven access to sophisticated technologies, and anxiety about how algorithmic decision-making affects academic recognition.

In this context, agency refers to a student's ability to act, decide, and interact meaningfully with AI tools; not as passive recipients of automated help, but as active participants who comprehend, criticize, and negotiate the use of AI in their learning. Students frequently express concerns about losing control of their work, being unduly reliant on AI, or having their academic identity influenced by ambiguous algorithms. For example,

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in recent research of perceptions of AI as a teammate, students emphasized the significance of keeping human-centric skills such as critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration in order to distinguish themselves and maintain agency (Marrone et al., 2025). Ensuring student agency entails creating AI systems and educational practices that allow students to comprehend how AI works, challenge its outputs, and choose when and how to utilize it.

Despite the massive research on AI implementation in learning context, the multi-layer study observing the trust, bias, and agency of AI remains limited. Therefore, the current study entitled "Trust, Bias, and Agency: A Critical Examination of Students' Perceptions of Artificial Intelligence in Academic Contexts" aims to explore how students perceive AI in higher education, with a focus on (1) their levels of trust in educational AI tools, (2) their concerns and awareness of biases embedded in those tools, and (3) their sense of agency when incorporating AI into their academic work. By investigating these interconnected characteristics, the study hopes to provide a more complete picture of how students navigate the benefits and drawbacks of AI-infused learning environments. The findings are meant to help educators, policymakers, and educational technology developers understand how to design AI-enhanced learning in ways that are transparent, egalitarian, and student-centred. Lastly, this study is carried out to answer the following questions: (1) How is the level of trust of students in educational AI tools? (2) How are the students' concern and awareness of biases correlated to AI tools? and (3) How is the students' sense of agency of integrating AI into their academic learning?

METHODS

This study used a qualitative research approach based on an interpretivist paradigm, which holds that reality is socially produced by participants' experiences and meanings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The goal was to investigate how and why students develop specific perceptions of artificial intelligence (AI) in academic settings, particularly in terms of trust, bias, and agency. The study took a phenomenological approach, focusing on students' firsthand accounts of utilizing AI in their academics.

This investigation was conducted at a private institution in Malang, East Java, Indonesia. Participants were undergraduate students from the English Department who have used or encountered AI-powered technologies such as automated feedback systems, generative-text platforms, or learning assistance programs. A purposive sample strategy was used to recruit individuals who had direct experience with AI in academic work (Patton, 2015).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 60 students from three distinct classes and academic years who were selected through purposive sampling technique. This format allowed participants to express themselves freely while keeping the debate focused on the study's major themes: trust, bias, and agency. Each interview lasted 45-60 minutes and was held either face-to-face in a quiet place on campus or online via a secure video-conferencing platform, depending on the participant's preferences. The interviews were conducted in either Indonesian or English, depending on the participants' comfort.

Interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis in accordance with (Braun & Clarke, 2019) six-phase framework, which included familiarization, initial coding, theme creation, theme review, theme definition and naming, and report production. After

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completing the data analysis process, the researchers synthesized the reflection. To ensure the rigor, trustworthiness, and ethical integrity of the research findings, this study adhered to (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) evaluative criteria: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

FINDINGS

In all, 60 undergraduate students from different academic years participated in the study. The majority of participants (62%) said they used AI products like ChatGPT, Grammarly, or QuillBot at least once a week, mostly for writing assistance, summarization, and idea development. The participants' ages varied from 18 to 23, with the majority in their second or third year of study.

Three main themes emerged from thematic analysis of interview data: Trust in AI Systems, Perceptions of Bias and Fairness, and Agency and Control in AI-Assisted Learning, each with multiple subthemes that represent the complexities of students' experiences.

Trust in AI Systems

Conditional Trust Based on Accuracy and Transparency

Most participants showed conditional trust in AI technologies, indicating that their confidence was based on perceived dependability and output quality. Students praised AI's capacity to deliver speedy responses and helpful comments, but many remained sceptical about its authenticity.

> "*I trust it for grammar and structure, but I still check everything myself because sometimes the information sounds convincing but isn't accurate*." (Participant 17, Female, Class 2)

This scepticism often directed from the "hallucination" phenomenon, where AI tools generate syntactically flawless but factually incorrect. Students took a note that the persuasive tone of generative AI pushed them to maintain a highly observant posture of critical verification. For instance, another student emphasized the inner conflict between the AI's confident delivery and its actual reliability:

> "*The dangerous thing about AI is that it never sounds unsure. It gives you a wrong answer with the exact same confidence as a right answer. That's why my trust is always on a leash. I often use it for mechanical editing, but never as a confirmation of truth.*" (Participant 42, Male, Class 4)

Consequently, several respondents (n = 38) indicated considering AI outputs as a starting point rather than a finished result, demonstrating a mature understanding of AI's limits. Instead of fully outsourcing their cognitive work, these students utilized the technology primarily as a brainstorming partner or a structural scaffold to overcome the "blank page syndrome."

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Trust appeared to rise significantly when participants understood how the AI created findings, or when the platform provided clear explanations and visible revision process. This demand for sequential transparency suggests that student trust is directly tied to their ability to inspect the "black box" of the system. When a platform explains its reasoning, students feel more empowered to assert their own authorial agency:

> "*If the AI just gives me a flat answer, I don't really trust it. But when I ask it to explain why it suggested that specific argument, and it breaks down the logic, I feel much safer. It feels less like cheating or copying, and more like a collaborative peer review.*" (Participant 09, Female, Class 1)

The Role of Familiarity and Experience

Frequent users (students who engaged with AI for more than six months) displayed higher levels of confidence than those who used AI just rarely. Experience tended to foster pragmatic trust where students did not feel AI was flawless, but they were secure in knowing when and how to rely on it.

> "*After using it for a while, I know which answers are safe to take and which ones to double-check. It's like learning the tool's personality*." (Participant 41, Male, Class 1)

However, some first-year students expressed perplexity or scepticisms, indicating that digital literacy and exposure were important mediators in shaping trust.

Perceptions of Bias and Fairness

Awareness of Algorithmic Bias

Over half of the participants (n = 34) were aware that AI systems may be biased, but few could explain how this bias happened. Students provided instances of "Western-centric" writing styles and linguistic patterns that appeared to dominate AI-generated material.

> "*When I ask it to explain something about Indonesian culture, it always sounds Westernized or too formal. It doesn't feel local*." (Participant 8, Female, Class 3)

This sense of cultural disruption highlights a critical concern: while the AI is highly proficient in standard English syntax, it often fails to capture the subtle pragmatics of local lived experiences, essentially converting rich local heritage into an exoticized or overly standardized academic narrative. Another participant echoed this frustration, noting how AI consistently misinterprets regional social dynamics:

> *"I tried to use it to brainstorm examples of local wisdom in our community for an assignment, but the output felt like it was written by a tourist who just read it from somewhere online. It completely missed the collective spirit, for example the gotong royong aspect, and forced everything into*

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> *a very individualistic, Western framework."* (Participant 51, Male, Class 1)

Furthermore, the data revealed that student awareness of bias was closely related to their fields of study and language proficiency. For many, the bias became most visible not in *what* the AI said, but in *how* it structured thought. The technology's default setting appears to privilege direct, linear Anglo-American rhetorical structures, which many participants felt restricted their original insight:

> *"Every time I ask the AI to help me smooth out my paragraphs, it reshapes my arguments into this very rigid, aggressive Western style. It eliminates the polite, indirect transitions that are natural to our way of communicating. It's fair in terms of grammar, but unfair because it forces everyone to think and write like an American."* (Participant 23, Female, Class 4)

This subtle form of linguistic imperialism demonstrates that even when students cannot define the underlying pattern, they are highly sensitive to the cultural authority embedded within the tool's outputs. Consequently, the perception of "fairness" among these undergraduates is not merely about the absence of offensive content, but about the technology's capacity to recognize and respect cultural diversity. This apparent bias has occasionally caused caution in employing AI for culturally complex issues or projects that require local context.

Fairness and Ethical Concerns

Students also expressed concerns regarding the fairness of AI in educational evaluations. Several participants (n = 21) questioned if lecturers who use AI-based grading tools may unintentionally duplicate algorithmic bias or disfavour students unfamiliar with such systems.

> "*If AI helps teachers mark papers, what if it misunderstands creative answers or local expressions? That's not fair to us*." (Participant 55, Male, Class 2)

Some respondents also cited access inequality: students with higher English proficiency or greater internet access benefited more from AI technologies, resulting in what they called a "digital divide" in learning results.

Agency and Control in AI-Assisted Learning

Negotiating Dependence and Autonomy

The participants' debate highlighted a conflict between empowerment and reliance. On the one hand, AI improved their capacity to communicate ideas, save time, and obtain rapid response. On the other hand, it could undermine their sense of ownership over their academic work.

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> "*Sometimes I feel proud of my essay, then realize AI helped me too much. It makes me question if it's really my work*." (Participant 25, Female, Class 3)

Approximately two-thirds of the participants (n = 40) were concerned about becoming excessively reliant on AI, describing it as a "shortcut" that, if used incorrectly, may undermine creativity or critical thinking.

Strategies for Maintaining Agency

Students devised techniques to maintain agency, such as restricting AI use to particular phases of writing (concept development, proofreading) and purposefully revising AI-generated material in their own voice.

> "*I only use it for ideas or structure. I rewrite everything so the final version sounds like me.*" (Participant 3, Male, Class 1)

Participants also stressed the need of AI literacy education in helping students realize when AI support becomes an overreliance. Several suggested that colleges incorporate AI ethics and critical thinking training into their curricula to promote informed and responsible use.

Aside from the three major constructs, an emerging cross-cutting theme involved the emotional aspect of AI use. Students expressed diverse emotions, including curiosity, excitement, anxiety, and guilt. For example, some were concerned that AI might replace human ingenuity, while others felt guilty about utilizing AI tools on projects for fear of plagiarism allegations.

> "*It's exciting but also scary. I don't know if I'm learning or just depending on the machine.*" (Participant 30, Female, Class 3)

These emotive responses highlight the changing nature of student-AI connections, as well as the need of institutions addressing the emotional and ethical dimensions of AI integration.

The findings of this study are described in Table 1. It discusses the themes identified throughout the data collection, the major insights discovered, and the representative codes offered.

Table 1. Summary of the Research Findings

Theme	Key Insights	Representative Codes
Trust in AI Systems	Students trust AI conditionally; familiarity increases trust, but accuracy remains central.	"Checking accuracy," "learning tool's pattern," "trust but verify"
Perceptions of Bias and Fairness	Students perceive cultural and linguistic bias in AI outputs and question fairness in AI-assisted assessment.	"Western style," "unfair evaluation," "digital divide"

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Agency and Control	Students value AI's support but fear dependency; they employ strategies to retain authorship.	"Self-revision," "balance of control," "responsible use"
Emotional Reactions	Curiosity coexists with anxiety and guilt, reflecting ambivalence toward AI in learning.	"Excited but worried," "AI guilt," "machine dependence"

Overall, the data indicate that students' perceptions of AI are ambivalent where there is a combination of trust and scepticism, empowerment, and reliance. Students approach AI pragmatically, aiming to improve performance while keeping mindful of its ethical and cultural ramifications. Their narratives highlight the need of AI literacy and clear institutional policies in promoting responsible, egalitarian, and student-centred AI integration in higher education.

DISCUSSION

The current study looked at how students perceive artificial intelligence (AI) in academic settings using three connected dimensions: trust, bias, and agency. The findings demonstrated a complex interplay between students' trust in AI tools, understanding of their limitations, and the continual negotiation of autonomy in the learning process. These findings are consistent with recent studies showing that students' interaction with AI is marked by both utilitarian acceptance and critical ambivalence ((Zhang et al., 2025); (Basch et al., 2025)).

Trust in AI: Conditional Confidence and the Role of Experience

Students in this study showed a pattern of conditional trust, valuing AI's efficiency and aid while remaining dubious of its accuracy and reliability. This supports previous results that users' trust in AI tools is dependent on perceived transparency, control, and consistent performance ((Dwivedi et al., 2023); (Rahwan et al., 1969)).

As shown by (Cukurova et al., 2024), participants' trust increased with familiarity and frequent usage, implying that experiential learning develops confidence in AI systems. However, trust was not blind; students demonstrated "informed trust" by examining and validating results, indicating an increasing digital maturity among young users (Attewell, 2025).

This cautious yet pragmatic approach means that trusting AI is less about blind faith and more about adaptive confidence, which is a dynamic process based on experience, critical awareness, and situational judgment. In educational practice, this highlights the need of AI transparency measures, such as explainable feedback or dependability indicators, in maintaining adequate levels of student trust.

Perceptions of Bias and Fairness: Awareness without Deep Understanding

The findings revealed that most students were aware of possible bias in AI systems, but their comprehension of algorithmic mechanics remained rudimentary. This is consistent with research showing that, while students can identify bias in AI-generated outputs, they frequently lack the technical literacy to describe how it occurs ((Lee & Yang, 2023); (Arawjo et al., 2024)).

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Perceived Western-centric bias and lack of cultural sensitivity in AI-generated writing are consistent with cross-cultural critiques of generative AI models trained mostly on English-language, Western-based datasets ((Floridi & Chiriatti, 2020); (Hao et al., 2024)). These perspectives are concerning for institutions in Southeast Asia and other non-Western contexts, as the risk of epistemic marginalization might perpetuate cultural inequalities in knowledge creation.

Furthermore, fairness issues went beyond algorithmic bias to access disparity, with students with higher English proficiency or more dependable internet connection benefiting the most from AI-assisted learning. This mirrors bigger challenges including the digital gap and AI equity (Nguyen & Le, 2024). Thus, colleges must take into account not just the technological components of AI bias, but also the societal dimensions that influence how students perceive fairness in AI-mediated learning.

Agency and Control: Negotiating Dependence and Authorship

Students' narratives demonstrated ambivalence between empowerment and reliance, which is similar with the findings of (Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2024) and (Caines, 2023), who discovered that while AI increases productivity and expressiveness, it may diminish creativity and ownership if used blindly.

The conflict between autonomy and convenience exemplifies what (Fawns, 2023) refers to as the "pedagogical paradox of AI": the more helpful the system gets, the higher the risk of losing human agency. Students in this study used self-regulation tactics, such as revising AI-generated work and restricting its usage to idea development, indicating an emerging sense of ethical authorship.

These findings emphasize the significance of increasing AI literacy as critical and reflective practice, as well as technical skill (Long & Magerko, 2023). Empowering students to understand when and how to utilize AI responsibly may change reliance into collaboration, promoting a healthy balance of human and machine innovation.

Emotional Dimensions of AI Use

This study's emergent finding was the emotional complexity around AI use. Students felt excitement, anxiety, and guilt, all of which are compatible with (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2024) concept of "AI ambivalence". This emotional strain derives from uncertainties regarding AI's ethical standing in academics, as well as apprehension about being evaluated for adopting AI technologies.

Such findings highlight the importance of explicit institutional regulations governing the use of AI in academic activity. Ambiguity about appropriate actions might cause moral perplexity and anxiety among students (McDowell et al., 2024). Universities should thus provide explicit guidelines to ensure that students see AI as a legitimate aid rather than a potential form of misconduct.

The findings indicate a compelling need to incorporate AI literacy into higher education curricula as part of critical digital pedagogy, rather than only as technical training. Educators should urge students to question how AI systems generate data, recognize bias, and consider the ethical consequences of its use (Caines, 2023). AI literacy programs should address issues such as algorithmic transparency, data ethics, and ethical AI communication.

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Institutions should create explicit, context-sensitive rules outlining ethical AI usage in learning and evaluation. These regulations must also address digital inequality by ensuring that all students have equal access to AI tools and training. Universities and technology suppliers might collaborate to help localize AI systems so that they better represent regional languages and cultural situations.

Educators should utilize pedagogical techniques that encourage student agency, such as reflective writing assignments on AI use or collaborative debates about AI ethics. This not only raises metacognitive awareness, but also promotes a culture of responsible experimenting. To demystify the role of AI in learning, teachers must also demonstrate transparent AI use in their instructional design.

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings add to the growing body of literature on human-AI interaction in education, implying that trust, bias, and agency are not separate constructs but interdependent processes that shape students' interactions with AI. The findings support socio-technical learning theories in which technology and human agency are dynamically negotiated (Selwyn, 2022).

CONCLUSIONS

The study found that students' perceptions of AI are characterized by cautious optimism: they appreciate AI's potential to improve learning while being concerned about its ethical and cultural ramifications. Higher education institutions can create more equitable and human-centred AI learning environments by acknowledging the interconnected dimensions of trust, bias, and agency where the environments foster not only digital competence but also critical, ethical, and emotionally intelligent engagement with technology.

This study was restricted to one university environment in Indonesia; therefore, the findings may not be applicable to other areas or educational systems. Future research should use comparative, cross-cultural, or longitudinal methods to assess how attitudes change as AI becomes more integrated into higher education. Further study might investigate how instructors' attitudes and institutional discourse impact students' trust, bias, and agency.

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