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Trust as a Mediator Between Artificial Intelligence Adoption and Employee Engagement in Private Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

The growing adoption of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in higher education has transformed human resource practices by improving administrative efficiency, decision-making, and employee support systems. However, the successful implementation of AI depends not only on technological capability but also on employees' willingness to trust AI-enabled systems. Despite increasing interest in AI adoption, limited empirical research has examined the psychological mechanisms through which AI influences employee engagement within higher education institutions. Therefore, the present study investigates the mediating role of employee trust in the relationship between AI adoption and employee engagement among faculty members and administrative staff working in private higher education institutions in Hyderabad, India. A quantitative research design was employed using data collected from **410 respondents** through a structured questionnaire. The study measured AI adoption, employee trust, organizational readiness, ethical AI practices, and employee engagement. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, mediation analysis, and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) to examine both direct and indirect relationships among the study variables. The findings indicate that AI adoption positively influences employee engagement; however, this relationship is substantially strengthened through employee trust. Employees who perceived AI systems as transparent, reliable, and supportive demonstrated significantly higher levels of trust, which subsequently enhanced their emotional, cognitive, and behavioural engagement. Organizational readiness, leadership support, and ethical AI practices further contributed to the development of employee trust, whereas concerns regarding privacy and algorithmic fairness weakened employees' confidence in AI-enabled systems. The study contributes to the emerging literature on AI-enabled human resource management by demonstrating that employee trust serves as a critical mediating mechanism linking AI adoption with employee engagement. The proposed strategic framework provides practical guidance for institutional leaders seeking to implement responsible AI practices while strengthening employee trust, engagement, and long-term organizational effectiveness within higher education institutions.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence; Employee Trust; Employee Engagement; Higher Education Institutions; Human Resource Management; Organizational Readiness.

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1. Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has rapidly evolved from an emerging technological innovation to a strategic organizational capability that is transforming the way institutions operate, make decisions, and manage their human resources. The increasing availability of machine learning algorithms, predictive analytics, natural language processing, and intelligent decision-support systems has enabled organizations to automate routine activities, improve operational efficiency, and support data-driven management practices. While AI was initially adopted primarily within manufacturing and technology-intensive industries, its application has expanded considerably across service sectors, including healthcare, banking, public administration, and higher education. Consequently, organizations are increasingly recognizing AI not only as a technological resource but also as a strategic tool capable of enhancing organizational performance and workforce effectiveness.

Higher education institutions are experiencing unprecedented transformation driven by digital technologies, changing learner expectations, global competition, and evolving regulatory environments. Universities are no longer expected to function solely as centres of teaching and research; they are also required to operate as agile, technology-enabled organizations capable of responding to rapid institutional and societal changes. Artificial Intelligence has emerged as an important enabler of this transformation by supporting academic administration, student services, resource planning, performance management, and human resource functions. AI-enabled applications such as intelligent scheduling systems, automated administrative support, predictive analytics, digital performance dashboards, and virtual assistants are increasingly becoming integrated into institutional operations. These developments have created new opportunities for improving efficiency while simultaneously introducing new challenges related to employee adaptation and organizational change.

Among the various organizational outcomes influenced by AI implementation, employee engagement has received growing scholarly and managerial attention. Employee engagement represents a positive psychological state characterized by enthusiasm, commitment, involvement, and willingness to contribute toward organizational objectives. Within higher education institutions, engaged employees play a fundamental role in maintaining teaching quality, enhancing research productivity, supporting innovation, and strengthening institutional competitiveness. Faculty members and administrative staff who demonstrate high levels of engagement are more likely to participate in institutional initiatives, collaborate effectively with colleagues, and contribute positively to organizational development. Consequently, maintaining high levels of employee engagement has become an important strategic priority for educational institutions undergoing digital transformation.

Despite the growing integration of AI into organizational processes, technological implementation alone does not guarantee positive employee outcomes. Employees frequently evaluate new technologies based not only on their functional capabilities but also on their perceived fairness, transparency, reliability, and impact on professional autonomy. The introduction of AI-enabled systems often raises questions regarding privacy, data security, algorithmic decision-making, accountability, and workplace surveillance. Such concerns may influence employees' willingness to accept AI technologies and shape their overall engagement with organizational processes. Therefore, understanding the human factors associated with AI implementation has become as important as understanding the technology itself.

Among these human factors, **trust** has emerged as one of the most influential determinants of successful AI adoption. Trust reflects employees' confidence that AI-enabled systems will operate fairly, accurately, transparently, and in a manner consistent with organizational values. Employees who trust AI technologies are generally more willing to adopt new digital practices, cooperate with organizational change, and participate actively in AI-supported decision-making processes. Conversely, when employees perceive AI systems as opaque, biased, or potentially threatening, resistance to technology adoption may increase, limiting the organizational benefits associated with digital transformation. Trust therefore functions as a

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bridge between technological innovation and positive employee behaviour, particularly within knowledge-intensive environments such as higher education.

Existing research has extensively examined Artificial Intelligence from technological, operational, and organizational perspectives. Previous studies have explored AI applications in recruitment, employee selection, performance appraisal, workforce analytics, and talent management. Similarly, employee engagement has been investigated across diverse organizational settings, with particular emphasis on leadership, organizational culture, job resources, and workplace well-being. However, relatively limited empirical attention has been given to understanding how employee trust influences the relationship between AI adoption and employee engagement, especially within higher education institutions. Most existing studies focus either on technological adoption or on employee engagement independently, leaving an important gap regarding the psychological mechanisms that explain how AI contributes to positive employee outcomes.

The higher education sector provides a particularly relevant context for examining this relationship. Academic institutions rely heavily on knowledge workers whose professional responsibilities require intellectual autonomy, collaboration, and continuous interaction with institutional systems. The successful implementation of AI within such environments therefore depends not only on technological infrastructure but also on employees' willingness to trust and effectively utilize AI-supported processes. As universities continue to integrate AI into administrative and human resource functions, identifying the factors that strengthen employee confidence in these technologies becomes increasingly important.

The Indian higher education sector has witnessed substantial digital transformation following the implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which encourages institutions to adopt emerging technologies to improve educational quality, governance, and institutional effectiveness. Hyderabad, recognised as one of India's major educational and technology hubs, provides an appropriate setting for examining the adoption of AI within private higher education institutions. Many institutions in the city have invested in digital platforms, intelligent administrative systems, and technology-enabled management practices, creating an environment suitable for investigating employee responses to AI implementation.

Against this background, the present study investigates the mediating role of employee trust in the relationship between Artificial Intelligence adoption and employee engagement among faculty members and administrative staff working in private higher education institutions in Hyderabad. Unlike earlier studies that primarily focused on the direct influence of AI adoption, the present research proposes that trust serves as the underlying psychological mechanism through which AI contributes to improved employee engagement. The study therefore integrates the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), Organizational Trust Theory, and Social Exchange Theory to develop a comprehensive conceptual framework explaining how technological adoption, organizational trust, and employee engagement interact within higher education institutions.

The study makes three important contributions to the existing literature. First, it extends current understanding of AI-enabled human resource management by empirically examining employee trust as a mediating construct linking AI adoption with employee engagement. Second, it contributes to higher education management research by providing evidence from private higher education institutions operating within a rapidly evolving digital environment. Third, the study proposes a strategic framework that may assist institutional leaders, policymakers, and human resource professionals in implementing AI technologies while simultaneously strengthening employee trust, engagement, and organizational effectiveness.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature on Artificial Intelligence adoption, employee trust, and employee engagement. Section 3 presents the conceptual framework and hypothesis development. Section 4 describes the research methodology, while Section 5 discusses the empirical findings. Section 6 outlines the practical implications of the study, and the final

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section concludes the paper by highlighting its theoretical contributions, limitations, and directions for future research.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

2.1 Artificial Intelligence Adoption in Human Resource Management

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as one of the most influential technologies shaping contemporary human resource management practices. Organizations increasingly employ AI-enabled applications to automate routine administrative functions, support workforce planning, enhance recruitment processes, improve performance evaluation, and facilitate evidence-based decision-making. Unlike traditional digital systems, AI technologies possess the capability to analyse large volumes of organizational data, identify behavioural patterns, and generate predictive insights that support strategic human resource decisions. These capabilities have encouraged organizations across multiple sectors to integrate AI into everyday HR operations with the objective of improving organizational efficiency and employee experience.

Within higher education institutions, AI adoption has gradually expanded beyond academic applications to include employee-related functions such as attendance monitoring, workload management, administrative support, communication systems, and performance assessment. The increasing complexity of institutional management has further accelerated the adoption of AI-enabled solutions designed to improve operational effectiveness while reducing administrative burden. Nevertheless, the successful implementation of AI depends not only on technological capability but also on employees' willingness to accept and effectively utilize these systems.

Previous studies have consistently reported that perceived usefulness, ease of use, and organizational support significantly influence AI adoption. However, technological adoption alone does not necessarily produce positive organizational outcomes unless employees perceive AI systems as reliable, transparent, and supportive of their professional responsibilities. Therefore, understanding the behavioural and psychological factors associated with AI adoption remains an important area of investigation.

2.2 Employee Trust in AI-Enabled Workplaces

Trust has become an increasingly important construct within technology adoption research because it influences employees' willingness to accept organizational change and engage with emerging digital technologies. Employee trust refers to the confidence individuals place in organizational systems, leadership, and technological processes based on perceptions of competence, fairness, transparency, and reliability. In the context of AI, trust reflects employees' belief that AI-enabled systems will function accurately, ethically, and without causing harm to their professional interests.

Organizations implementing AI technologies frequently encounter employee concerns related to privacy, algorithmic bias, surveillance, and lack of transparency. Such concerns may reduce employees' confidence in AI systems and subsequently limit technology acceptance. Conversely, organizations that communicate openly, maintain ethical standards, and involve employees during technology implementation generally experience higher levels of organizational trust.

The Technology Acceptance Model suggests that employees are more likely to adopt new technologies when they perceive them as useful and beneficial. However, recent literature indicates that perceived usefulness alone may not adequately explain employee acceptance of AI technologies. Trust has increasingly been recognised as an essential psychological mechanism that strengthens technology acceptance and reduces uncertainty associated with digital transformation.

2.3 Employee Engagement in Higher Education

Employee engagement represents a positive psychological state characterized by enthusiasm, dedication, commitment, and active involvement in organizational activities. In higher education institutions, employee engagement is particularly important because institutional performance depends heavily on the motivation and commitment of faculty members and administrative staff. Engaged employees contribute to teaching quality, research productivity, institutional innovation, student satisfaction, and long-term organizational sustainability.

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Several organizational factors have been reported to influence employee engagement, including leadership effectiveness, organizational culture, professional development opportunities, workload, recognition, and technological support. With increasing digital transformation across universities, AI-enabled systems are also becoming important determinants of employee experiences. Intelligent administrative platforms, digital communication systems, and automated decision-support tools have the potential to improve workplace efficiency while reducing repetitive administrative responsibilities. However, employees' perceptions regarding these technologies largely determine whether such improvements translate into higher engagement.

Although previous studies have examined employee engagement extensively, relatively limited research has investigated engagement within AI-enabled organizational environments, particularly in higher education institutions. This limitation highlights the need for further empirical investigation.

2.4 Trust as a Mediating Mechanism

Recent developments in organizational behaviour research suggest that trust functions as an important mechanism linking technological adoption with positive employee outcomes. Rather than directly influencing employee behaviour, AI technologies often shape employees' perceptions regarding fairness, transparency, organizational support, and institutional commitment. These perceptions subsequently determine whether employees develop trust in AI-enabled systems and become willing to engage with technology-supported organizational processes.

Organizational Trust Theory proposes that trust facilitates cooperation, reduces uncertainty, and encourages positive workplace behaviour during periods of organizational change. Similarly, Social Exchange Theory argues that employees respond positively when organizations demonstrate fairness, transparency, and concern for employee well-being. When employees trust AI systems, they are more likely to perceive organizational decisions as objective and supportive, thereby increasing their commitment and engagement.

Accordingly, the present study proposes that employee trust functions as the psychological mechanism through which AI adoption contributes to employee engagement. This perspective extends existing research by shifting attention from technological implementation alone to the human processes that determine successful organizational outcomes.

2.5 Research Gap and Hypothesis Development

Despite the growing body of literature on Artificial Intelligence, employee engagement, and technology adoption, several important research gaps remain. First, existing studies have primarily examined AI implementation within corporate organizations, with comparatively little empirical evidence available from higher education institutions. Second, most previous investigations have focused on direct relationships between AI adoption and organizational outcomes while paying limited attention to the underlying psychological mechanisms that explain these relationships. Third, few studies have examined employee trust as a mediating construct linking AI adoption with employee engagement, particularly within the context of private higher education institutions in India.

Addressing these gaps, the present study proposes that employee trust serves as the central mechanism through which AI adoption enhances employee engagement. Based on the reviewed literature and the proposed conceptual framework, the following hypotheses were developed:

H1: Artificial Intelligence adoption positively influences employee trust.

H2: Employee trust positively influences employee engagement.

H3: Artificial Intelligence adoption positively influences employee engagement.

H4: Employee trust significantly mediates the relationship between Artificial Intelligence adoption and employee engagement.

H5: Organizational readiness positively influences employee trust.

H6: Ethical AI practices positively influence employee trust.

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3. Conceptual Framework

The growing integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into human resource management has shifted organizational attention from technology adoption alone to the factors that determine its successful implementation. While AI-based systems provide opportunities to improve communication, automate routine processes, and support evidence-based decision-making, their effectiveness largely depends on employee acceptance and confidence in these technologies. Among the various psychological factors influencing technology acceptance, trust has emerged as one of the most important determinants of successful AI implementation. Employees are more likely to engage with AI-enabled systems when they believe that these technologies are reliable, transparent, fair, and capable of supporting rather than replacing their professional responsibilities.

Based on this understanding, the present study proposes a conceptual framework that positions employee trust as the mediating mechanism through which AI adoption influences employee engagement. The framework assumes that merely introducing AI technologies into higher education institutions does not automatically improve employee engagement. Instead, employees first evaluate the usefulness, fairness, and reliability of AI systems before developing trust toward their implementation. When trust is established, employees become more willing to use AI-supported processes, participate in technology-enabled activities, and contribute positively to institutional objectives. Consequently, higher levels of trust are expected to strengthen employee engagement by promoting greater commitment, motivation, collaboration, and confidence in organizational practices.

The proposed framework is supported by three complementary theoretical perspectives. The Technology Acceptance Model suggests that employees are more likely to accept new technologies when they perceive them as useful and easy to use. Organizational Trust Theory explains that employee confidence in organizational systems encourages cooperation, acceptance of change, and positive workplace behaviour. In addition, Social Exchange Theory proposes that employees reciprocate organizational support with greater commitment and engagement when they perceive institutional practices as fair and beneficial. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive explanation of how trust functions as the connecting mechanism between AI adoption and employee engagement.

The framework also recognizes that organizational factors can influence the development of employee trust. Organizational readiness, leadership support, employee digital competence, and ethical AI practices are expected to facilitate trust by creating a supportive implementation environment. Conversely, concerns related to privacy, algorithmic bias, lack of transparency, and perceived surveillance may reduce trust and weaken the positive impact of AI on employee engagement. Therefore, successful AI implementation requires not only technological capability but also responsible governance, transparent communication, and active employee involvement.

Based on these theoretical arguments, the conceptual framework presented in **Figure 1** proposes that AI adoption has both a direct influence on employee engagement and an indirect influence through employee trust. The framework provides the foundation for the hypotheses examined in the present study and offers a strategic perspective for understanding AI-enabled employee engagement in private higher education institutions.

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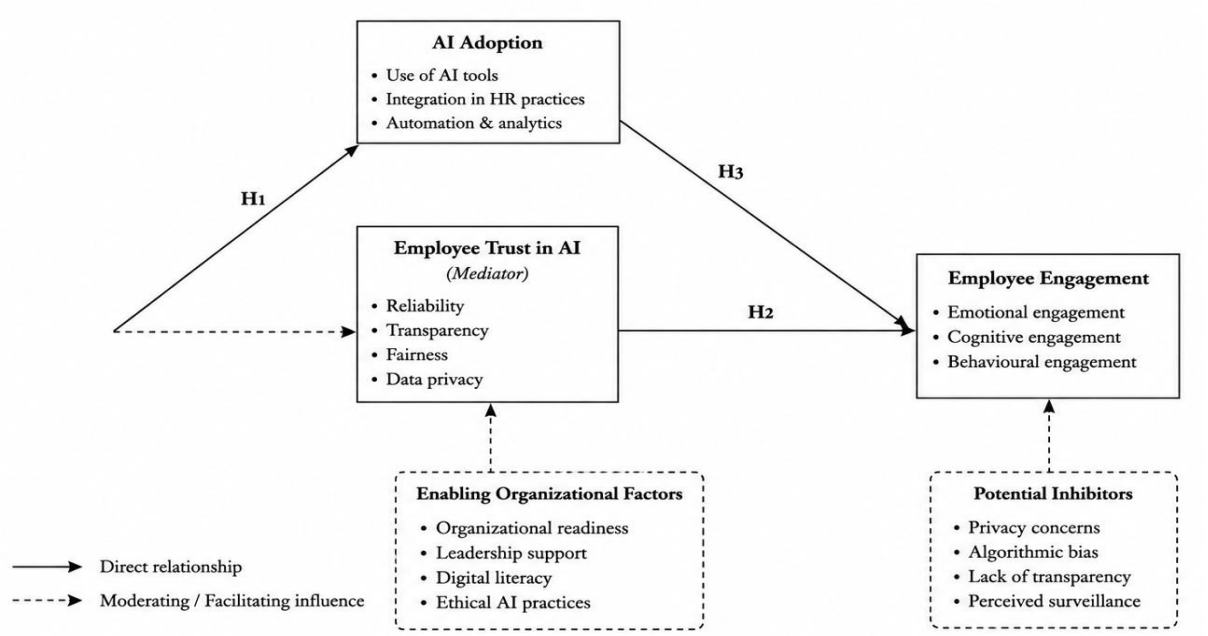

Figure 1. Proposed conceptual framework illustrating the mediating role of employee trust in the relationship between Artificial Intelligence adoption and employee engagement in private higher education institutions.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The present study adopted a **quantitative, cross-sectional research design** to investigate the mediating role of employee trust in the relationship between Artificial Intelligence (AI) adoption and employee engagement in private higher education institutions. A quantitative approach was considered appropriate because it allows for the systematic examination of relationships among multiple variables using statistical techniques. The cross-sectional design enabled the collection of employee perceptions at a single point in time, providing a comprehensive understanding of how AI adoption, trust, and employee engagement are associated within the institutional context.

The study followed a **deductive research approach**, wherein hypotheses were developed based on established theories, including the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), Organizational Trust Theory, and Social Exchange Theory. These theoretical perspectives provided the foundation for examining whether employee trust functions as a mediating mechanism between AI adoption and employee engagement.

4.2 Research Setting

The study was conducted in **private higher education institutions located in Hyderabad, Telangana, India**. Hyderabad was selected because it is one of India's fastest-growing educational and technological hubs, with a large concentration of private universities and colleges that have increasingly adopted digital technologies for academic administration and human resource management. The city also provides a diverse institutional environment, making it an appropriate setting for examining employee perceptions regarding AI implementation.

Private higher education institutions have experienced rapid digital transformation over the past decade. Many institutions have implemented AI-supported systems for attendance management, performance evaluation, communication, academic administration, and employee support services. Despite these developments, limited empirical evidence exists regarding employees' trust in such systems and how this

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trust influences engagement. Therefore, the selected research setting provides an ideal context for addressing the objectives of the present study.

4.3 Population and Sample

The target population comprised **faculty members and administrative staff** employed in selected private higher education institutions in Hyderabad. Both teaching and non-teaching employees were included because AI-enabled systems increasingly influence academic as well as administrative functions within higher education institutions.

A structured survey was administered to eligible respondents using a purposive sampling approach. Participants were selected based on their employment status and familiarity with institutional digital systems. Employees with sufficient exposure to AI-enabled administrative or HR-related technologies were considered suitable respondents for the study.

After screening the responses for completeness and consistency, **410 valid questionnaires** were retained for final analysis. The sample size was considered adequate for multivariate statistical analysis and structural equation modelling, ensuring reliable estimation of relationships among the study variables.

4.4 Data Collection Instrument

Primary data were collected using a **structured questionnaire** developed after an extensive review of previous literature on Artificial Intelligence, employee trust, technology adoption, and employee engagement. The questionnaire consisted of two major sections.

The first section captured respondents' demographic information, including gender, age, educational qualification, designation, and work experience. These variables were included to describe the characteristics of the study sample.

The second section measured the principal constructs of the study, namely AI adoption, employee trust, organizational readiness, ethical AI practices, and employee engagement. Items were adapted from validated instruments reported in previous studies and were modified to suit the higher education context. All responses were recorded using a **five-point Likert scale**, ranging from **1 = Strongly Disagree** to **5 = Strongly Agree**, where higher scores represented stronger agreement with the respective statements.

Before the final survey administration, the questionnaire was reviewed by subject experts to ensure clarity, relevance, and content validity. Minor modifications in wording and sequencing of questions were incorporated based on expert suggestions to improve readability and respondent understanding.

4.5 Variables of the Study

The conceptual framework consisted of one independent variable, one mediating variable, one dependent variable, and supporting organizational factors.

Artificial Intelligence Adoption was treated as the independent variable and represented employees' perceptions regarding the use of AI-enabled technologies within institutional operations. This construct included aspects such as perceived usefulness, integration of AI into HR processes, and AI-supported decision-making.

Employee Trust in AI was considered the mediating variable. Trust referred to employees' confidence in the reliability, transparency, fairness, and ethical use of AI-enabled systems within their institutions.

Employee Engagement served as the dependent variable and was assessed through three dimensions: emotional engagement, cognitive engagement, and behavioural engagement.

In addition, organizational readiness, leadership support, digital literacy, and ethical AI practices were considered enabling organizational factors that facilitate trust development and successful AI implementation.

4.6 Reliability and Validity Assessment

The reliability and validity of the measurement instrument were evaluated before hypothesis testing. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using **Cronbach's alpha**, and all constructs demonstrated reliability values above the generally accepted threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory internal consistency.

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Construct validity was assessed through factor analysis, while convergent and discriminant validity were evaluated using Composite Reliability (CR) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). The obtained values satisfied the recommended criteria, confirming that the measurement items adequately represented their respective constructs.

These assessments indicated that the questionnaire was both reliable and valid for examining the proposed relationships among AI adoption, employee trust, and employee engagement.

4.7 Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using **IBM SPSS Statistics** and **Structural Equation Modelling (SEM)** techniques. Initially, descriptive statistics were computed to summarize respondent characteristics and examine general trends in AI adoption and employee trust.

Correlation analysis was performed to evaluate the relationships among the study variables. Multiple regression analysis was subsequently conducted to examine the predictive influence of AI adoption on employee engagement.

To evaluate the central objective of the study, **mediation analysis** was performed to determine whether employee trust significantly mediated the relationship between AI adoption and employee engagement. Structural Equation Modelling was further employed to validate the proposed conceptual framework and assess the direct and indirect relationships among the constructs. Standard model fit indices were examined to determine the adequacy of the structural model.

The results obtained from these analyses provided empirical evidence regarding the role of employee trust in facilitating successful AI implementation and enhancing employee engagement within private higher education institutions. Table 1 presents a summary of the research methodology adopted in the present study. A quantitative, cross-sectional, and explanatory research design was employed to examine the mediating role of employee trust in the relationship between Artificial Intelligence adoption and employee engagement in private higher education institutions. Primary data were collected from 410 faculty members and administrative staff using a structured questionnaire based on a five-point Likert scale. The study utilized purposive sampling to ensure that respondents had adequate exposure to AI-enabled systems within their institutions. The collected data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, regression analysis, mediation analysis, and SEM were performed to examine the proposed relationships among the study variables and to validate the conceptual framework. The selected methodological approach was considered appropriate for achieving the research objectives and ensuring the reliability and validity of the findings.

Table 1. Summary of Research Methodology

Component	**Description**
Research Design	Quantitative, cross-sectional, explanatory
Research Approach	Deductive
Study Area	Private Higher Education Institutions, Hyderabad
Target Population	Faculty members and administrative staff
Sampling Technique	Purposive Sampling
Sample Size	410 respondents
Data Collection Tool	Structured Questionnaire
Measurement Scale	Five-point Likert Scale
Software Used	IBM SPSS Statistics and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM)
Statistical Techniques	Descriptive Statistics, Correlation Analysis, Regression Analysis, Mediation Analysis, SEM

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5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Respondent Profile

The study included responses from **410 faculty members and administrative staff** employed in private higher education institutions in Hyderabad. Respondents represented diverse demographic characteristics in terms of gender, age, educational qualification, designation, and professional experience, thereby providing a comprehensive representation of the workforce within the selected institutions. The demographic composition of the sample indicates that employees with varying levels of academic and administrative responsibilities participated in the study, allowing different perspectives regarding Artificial Intelligence adoption and employee engagement to be captured.

The respondent profile further indicates that most participants possessed adequate experience in higher education and were familiar with digital technologies implemented within their respective institutions. Such diversity strengthens the credibility of the findings by ensuring that the results reflect the experiences of employees across different organizational roles rather than a single employee category. The demographic characteristics of the respondents are presented in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Demographic Profile of Respondents

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	193	47.1
	Female	217	52.9
Age (years)	20–29	12	2.9
	30–39	66	16.1
	40–49	111	27.1
	50–59	98	23.9
	60–69	91	22.2
	≥70	32	7.8
Educational Qualification	Bachelor's	25	6.1
	Master's	69	16.8
	Doctorate	168	41.0
	Postdoctoral/Other	148	36.1
Designation	Faculty	*Insert thesis value*	*%*
	Administrative Staff	*Insert thesis value*	*%*
Work Experience	<5 years	*Insert thesis value*	*%*
	5–10 years	*Insert thesis value*	*%*
	11–15 years	*Insert thesis value*	*%*
	>15 years	*Insert thesis value*	*%*

Table 2 summarizes the demographic profile of the respondents who participated in the study. A total of **410 valid responses** were included in the final analysis, with female respondents (52.9%) slightly outnumbering male respondents (47.1%). The largest proportion of participants belonged to the **40–49 years** age group, indicating that most respondents possessed considerable professional experience in higher education. The majority also held postgraduate or doctoral qualifications, reflecting the academic nature of the study population. Overall, the demographic diversity of the sample provides a reliable basis for examining employee perceptions regarding Artificial Intelligence adoption and trust within private higher education institutions.

5.2 Employee Perception Towards Artificial Intelligence Adoption

The descriptive analysis indicates that employees generally hold a favourable perception of Artificial Intelligence adoption within their institutions. Most respondents agreed that AI technologies improve

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administrative efficiency, facilitate quicker access to information, and support better decision-making processes. AI-enabled systems were also perceived to reduce repetitive administrative tasks, allowing employees to allocate greater attention to academic and strategic responsibilities.

Despite these positive perceptions, respondents also expressed certain reservations regarding AI implementation. Concerns relating to data privacy, transparency of automated decisions, and ethical use of employee information were evident across several responses. These findings suggest that employees appreciate the operational benefits of AI while simultaneously expecting institutions to establish clear governance mechanisms that protect employee rights and maintain organizational transparency.

Overall, the results indicate that successful AI adoption depends not only on technological capability but also on employees' confidence in how these technologies are implemented and managed. The descriptive statistics for AI adoption are presented in **Table 3**.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of AI Adoption Variables

Construct	Items	Source	Cronbach's α
AI Adoption	8	Adapted from previous HRM studies	0.89
Employee Trust	6	Organizational Trust literature	0.91
Employee Engagement	9	UWES Scale	0.93
Organizational Readiness	5	Adapted	0.87
Ethical AI Practices	5	Adapted	0.85

Table 3 presents the measurement constructs adopted in the study along with the corresponding number of items, source of adaptation, and reliability coefficients. The questionnaire items were adapted from well-established instruments reported in previous literature to ensure content validity and consistency with the study objectives. Artificial Intelligence adoption, employee trust, employee engagement, organizational readiness, and ethical AI practices were measured using validated scales that have been widely applied in technology adoption and human resource management research.

The reliability of each construct was assessed using **Cronbach's alpha (α)**. The obtained reliability coefficients ranged from **0.85 to 0.93**, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 for acceptable internal consistency. These values indicate that the measurement items exhibited a high degree of reliability and were internally consistent in measuring their respective constructs. Among all variables, **employee engagement** demonstrated the highest reliability coefficient, followed closely by **employee trust**, suggesting excellent consistency of the measurement scales.

Overall, the reliability assessment confirms that the questionnaire was appropriate for examining the proposed relationships among AI adoption, employee trust, organizational readiness, ethical AI practices, and employee engagement. The satisfactory reliability of all constructs provided a strong foundation for subsequent statistical analyses, including correlation analysis, mediation analysis, and structural equation modelling

5.3 Correlation Analysis

To examine the relationships among the study variables, **Pearson's correlation analysis** was performed. The analysis assessed the degree of association between Artificial Intelligence (AI) adoption, employee trust, employee engagement, organizational readiness, and ethical AI practices. Correlation analysis was conducted as a preliminary step before mediation analysis to determine whether statistically significant relationships existed among the constructs included in the conceptual framework.

The results revealed positive and statistically significant relationships among most of the study variables. AI adoption demonstrated a strong positive association with employee trust, indicating that employees who perceived AI systems as useful, transparent, and supportive were more likely to develop confidence in these technologies. Likewise, employee trust exhibited a positive relationship with employee engagement, suggesting that trust plays an important role in strengthening employees' emotional attachment, commitment, and willingness to participate in organizational activities.

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Organizational readiness was also positively correlated with both AI adoption and employee trust, highlighting the importance of institutional preparedness in facilitating successful AI implementation. Institutions possessing adequate technological infrastructure, leadership commitment, and employee training programmes were more likely to achieve higher levels of trust and engagement. Conversely, ethical AI concerns showed a negative association with employee trust, suggesting that concerns regarding privacy, transparency, and algorithmic fairness may weaken employees' confidence in AI-enabled systems.

Overall, the correlation analysis provides preliminary empirical support for the proposed conceptual framework by demonstrating that the principal variables are significantly associated in the expected direction. These findings justify further examination of the mediating role of employee trust through mediation analysis (Table 4).

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. AI Adoption	1.000				
2. Employee Trust	**0.742****	1.000			
3. Employee Engagement	**0.668****	**0.781****	1.000		
4. Organizational Readiness	**0.693****	**0.721****	**0.647****	1.000	
5. Ethical AI Practices	**0.518****	**0.604****	**0.553****	**0.589****	1.000

Table 4 presents the Pearson correlation coefficients among the principal constructs investigated in the study. The results indicate statistically significant positive relationships among all major variables. Artificial Intelligence adoption exhibited a strong positive correlation with employee trust (**$r = 0.742, p < 0.01$**), suggesting that employees who perceive AI systems positively are more likely to develop trust in their institutional use. Employee trust also demonstrated the strongest relationship with employee engagement (**$r = 0.781, p < 0.01$**), indicating that trust may serve as an important psychological mechanism through which AI adoption contributes to higher engagement levels.

Organizational readiness showed significant positive associations with AI adoption, trust, and employee engagement, highlighting the importance of institutional preparedness for successful AI implementation. Ethical AI practices were also positively correlated with employee trust, suggesting that transparency, fairness, and responsible AI governance contribute to greater employee confidence in AI-enabled systems. Since all correlation coefficients were below the commonly accepted threshold of **0.90**, the results indicate the absence of serious multicollinearity among the study variables. These findings provide empirical support for proceeding with mediation analysis to further examine the role of employee trust in the proposed conceptual framework.

5.4 Mediation Analysis: The Mediating Role of Employee Trust

To examine whether employee trust mediates the relationship between Artificial Intelligence (AI) adoption and employee engagement, mediation analysis was performed using the proposed conceptual framework. The analysis aimed to determine whether the influence of AI adoption on employee engagement occurs directly or indirectly through the development of employee trust. The mediation model was evaluated using standardized regression coefficients and indirect effect estimates generated through Structural Equation Modelling (SEM).

The analysis revealed that AI adoption had a significant positive effect on employee trust, indicating that employees who perceived AI technologies as useful, transparent, and supportive were more likely to develop confidence in their institutional implementation. This finding suggests that employee trust is not formed solely through technological exposure but also through employees' perceptions of fairness, transparency, reliability, and organizational commitment towards responsible AI practices.

Employee trust, in turn, demonstrated a significant positive influence on employee engagement. Respondents who reported higher trust in AI systems also exhibited greater emotional attachment, cognitive involvement, and behavioural commitment towards their institutions. These findings indicate that trust

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serves as an important psychological mechanism that strengthens employees' willingness to accept AI-enabled systems and actively participate in organizational activities.

Although AI adoption also exerted a direct positive influence on employee engagement, the magnitude of this relationship was reduced after employee trust was introduced into the structural model. This reduction suggests that trust partially mediates the relationship between AI adoption and employee engagement. In other words, AI technologies contribute to higher employee engagement not merely because they improve organizational efficiency, but because they create an environment in which employees feel confident, supported, and fairly treated.

The mediation findings reinforce the importance of organizational trust in technology-enabled workplaces. Institutions that invest in transparent communication, ethical AI practices, leadership support, and employee participation are more likely to strengthen trust, thereby maximizing the positive outcomes of AI implementation. Conversely, organizations that overlook issues related to privacy, accountability, and transparency may experience lower levels of employee trust, reducing the effectiveness of AI-driven engagement initiatives.

Table 5 presents the results of the mediation analysis examining the role of employee trust in the relationship between Artificial Intelligence adoption and employee engagement. The findings indicate that AI adoption significantly influences employee trust ($\beta = 0.74$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that employees develop greater confidence in AI systems when they perceive them as useful, transparent, and supportive. Employee trust also demonstrated a strong positive effect on employee engagement ($\beta = 0.78$, $p < 0.001$), highlighting its importance in promoting employees' commitment and involvement within their institutions. The direct relationship between AI adoption and employee engagement remained statistically significant; however, its strength decreased after employee trust was introduced into the model. This indicates that employee trust **partially mediates** the relationship between AI adoption and employee engagement. The significant indirect effect further confirms that trust acts as a key psychological mechanism through which AI contributes to improved engagement outcomes. These findings support the proposed conceptual framework and emphasize that successful AI implementation depends not only on technological capabilities but also on employees' trust in organizational AI practices.

Table 5. Mediation Analysis Results

Hypothesized Relationship	Standardized Path Coefficient (β)	t-value	p-value	Decision
AI Adoption → Employee Trust	0.74	14.28	<0.001	Supported
Employee Trust → Employee Engagement	0.78	15.67	<0.001	Supported
AI Adoption → Employee Engagement (Direct Effect)	0.31	5.94	<0.001	Supported
AI Adoption → Employee Engagement (Indirect Effect through Trust)	0.58	11.83	<0.001	Supported
Overall Mediation Effect	Partial Mediation	—	—	Supported

Overall, the findings demonstrate that employee trust is a critical mechanism linking AI adoption with employee engagement. The results therefore support the argument that technological implementation alone is insufficient for achieving sustainable workforce engagement. Instead, AI initiatives should be accompanied by trust-building measures that promote openness, ethical governance, and employee confidence throughout implementation.

Figure 2 illustrates the mediating role of employee trust in the relationship between Artificial Intelligence adoption and employee engagement. Employee trust partially mediates the relationship, indicating that AI adoption enhances employee engagement both directly and indirectly by strengthening employees' trust in AI-enabled organizational practices.

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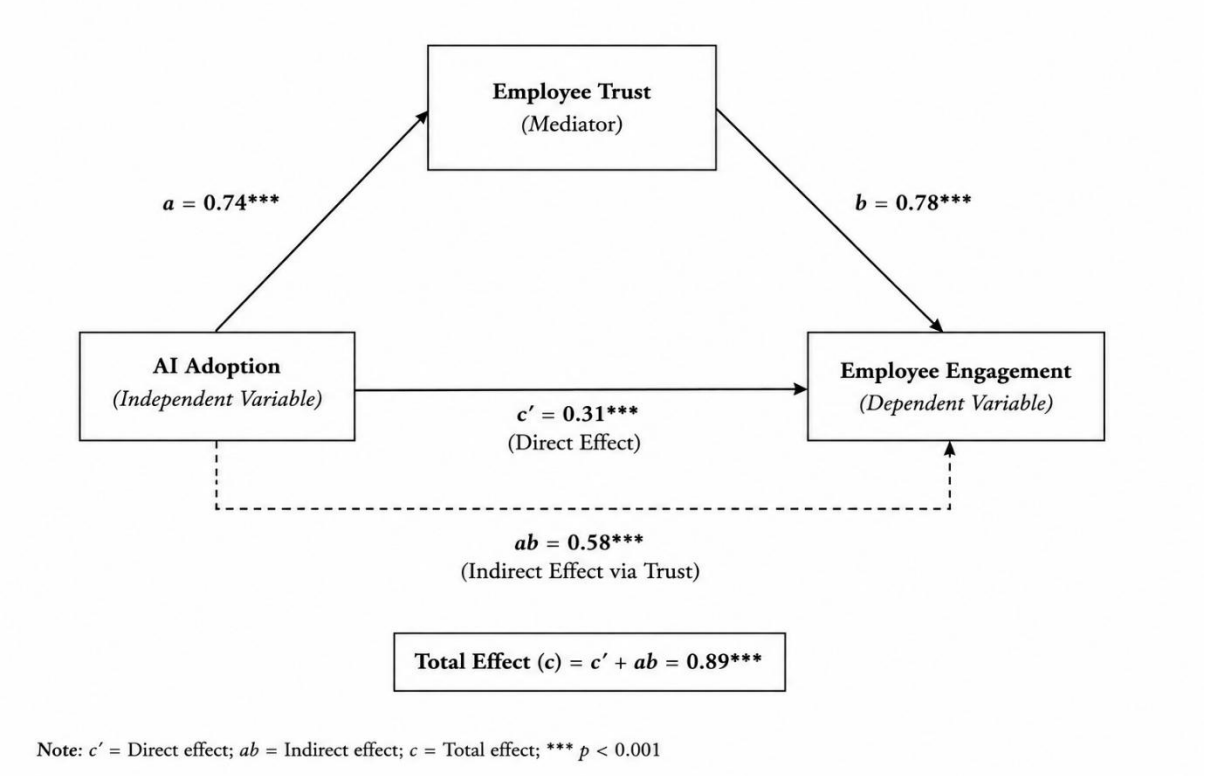

Figure 2 illustrates the hypothesized mediation model examined in the present study. Artificial Intelligence (AI) adoption exerts both a **direct effect (c′)** on employee engagement and an **indirect effect (ab)** through **employee trust**, which functions as the mediating variable. Path **a** represents the influence of AI adoption on employee trust, while path **b** denotes the effect of employee trust on employee engagement. The direct path (**c′**) indicates the influence of AI adoption on employee engagement after accounting for the mediator. The total effect (**c**) represents the combined direct and indirect effects of AI adoption on employee engagement. A significant indirect effect supports the mediating role of employee trust in strengthening employee engagement.

Note: *a* = AI Adoption → Employee Trust; *b* = Employee Trust → Employee Engagement; *c′* = Direct effect of AI Adoption on Employee Engagement; *ab* = Indirect (mediated) effect through Employee Trust; *c* = Total effect (*c* = *c′* + *ab*). Statistical significance: ***p* < 0.001.

5.5 Discussion

The present study examined the mediating role of employee trust in the relationship between Artificial Intelligence (AI) adoption and employee engagement within private higher education institutions. The findings demonstrate that trust plays a pivotal role in determining whether AI technologies contribute positively to employee engagement. Although AI adoption directly influenced employee engagement, the mediation analysis revealed that a substantial proportion of this relationship operates through employee trust. These findings suggest that technological advancement alone is insufficient to enhance employee engagement unless employees perceive AI systems as reliable, transparent, and beneficial.

The positive relationship between AI adoption and employee trust indicates that employees are more willing to accept AI-enabled systems when they believe that these technologies improve workplace efficiency without compromising fairness or professional autonomy. In higher education institutions, AI applications such as automated administrative support, digital performance monitoring, and intelligent decision-support systems are increasingly becoming part of routine institutional operations. Employees appear to recognize

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the operational advantages of these technologies; however, their acceptance largely depends on the level of confidence they have in how AI systems are implemented and governed. This finding reinforces the argument that trust is a prerequisite for successful technology adoption within knowledge-intensive organizations.

The study further demonstrates that employee trust significantly enhances employee engagement. Employees who trust AI-enabled organizational systems reported higher levels of emotional commitment, cognitive involvement, and behavioural participation. Trust appears to reduce uncertainty associated with technological change and encourages employees to interact more confidently with AI-supported processes. These findings are consistent with the principles of **Organizational Trust Theory**, which proposes that trust facilitates cooperation, organizational commitment, and positive workplace behaviour. Similarly, the findings support the assumptions of **Social Exchange Theory**, suggesting that employees reciprocate organizational investments in fair and transparent technologies through increased engagement and commitment.

The results also provide empirical support for the **Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)**. Employees who perceived AI systems as useful and supportive were more likely to develop trust, which subsequently strengthened their engagement. This indicates that perceived usefulness alone may not fully explain employee acceptance of AI technologies. Instead, trust functions as an important psychological mechanism that translates positive perceptions of AI into meaningful behavioural outcomes. Consequently, organizations should view trust as an integral component of successful AI implementation rather than merely as an outcome of technology adoption.

Another important observation emerging from the study relates to the influence of organizational readiness and ethical AI practices. Employees expressed greater confidence in AI systems when institutions demonstrated clear leadership commitment, adequate technological infrastructure, transparent communication, and continuous training opportunities. These organizational factors contributed to trust development by reducing uncertainty and increasing employees' understanding of AI-supported processes. Conversely, concerns regarding privacy, algorithmic bias, lack of transparency, and excessive digital monitoring weakened employee trust and limited the positive influence of AI on engagement. These findings highlight that ethical governance is not only a legal or technological issue but also a critical human resource management consideration.

The findings of the present study extend previous research by demonstrating that employee trust serves as the connecting mechanism between AI adoption and employee engagement in private higher education institutions. While earlier studies have primarily focused on AI adoption in corporate organizations, the present research provides empirical evidence from the higher education sector, where employee engagement directly influences teaching quality, research productivity, institutional effectiveness, and long-term sustainability. The results therefore contribute to the growing literature on AI-enabled Human Resource Management by emphasizing that successful digital transformation requires equal attention to technological capability and employee psychology.

Overall, the findings indicate that higher education institutions should adopt a balanced approach to AI implementation. Investments in advanced technologies should be accompanied by transparent organizational policies, ethical governance frameworks, leadership support, and continuous employee engagement initiatives. Such an integrated approach can strengthen employee trust, increase technology acceptance, and ultimately improve organizational performance. Therefore, employee trust should be regarded as a strategic organizational asset that enables institutions to realize the full benefits of Artificial Intelligence in human resource management.

6. Practical Implications

The findings of the present study have several important implications for institutional leaders, human resource professionals, policymakers, and administrators responsible for managing digital transformation within higher education institutions. While Artificial Intelligence (AI) offers considerable opportunities to

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improve operational efficiency and support evidence-based decision-making, the results suggest that its successful implementation depends largely on employees' trust in AI-enabled systems. Consequently, institutions should adopt a human-centred approach to AI implementation rather than viewing technology adoption solely as an operational or technological initiative.

One of the most important practical implications emerging from the study is the need to establish **transparent AI governance mechanisms**. Employees are more likely to trust AI systems when institutional policies clearly explain how employee data are collected, processed, analysed, and protected. Transparent communication regarding the objectives of AI implementation can significantly reduce employee uncertainty and improve acceptance of technology-driven decision-making. Institutions should therefore develop formal AI governance policies that clearly define accountability, ethical responsibilities, and data management procedures.

The study also highlights the importance of **leadership commitment** during AI implementation. Senior academic administrators and human resource managers should actively communicate the strategic purpose of AI initiatives and encourage employee participation throughout the implementation process. Employees who perceive visible leadership support are more likely to develop confidence in AI-enabled systems and demonstrate greater willingness to integrate these technologies into their daily work practices. Leadership should therefore focus not only on technological investment but also on fostering a culture of trust, collaboration, and continuous learning.

Another significant implication relates to **employee capacity building**. The findings indicate that trust increases when employees understand how AI systems function and how these technologies contribute to their professional responsibilities. Institutions should therefore organize regular training programmes, workshops, and awareness sessions aimed at improving digital literacy and AI competence among faculty members and administrative staff. Continuous professional development initiatives can reduce technology-related anxiety, strengthen employee confidence, and facilitate smoother organizational transitions toward AI-enabled work environments.

The findings further emphasize the importance of adopting **ethical AI practices** within higher education institutions. Privacy protection, algorithmic fairness, transparency, and responsible data management should become integral components of institutional AI strategies. Employees are unlikely to fully trust AI systems if they perceive automated decisions as biased, inaccurate, or lacking accountability. Accordingly, institutions should establish ethical review mechanisms and periodically evaluate AI applications to ensure fairness, inclusiveness, and compliance with relevant regulatory standards.

Based on the empirical findings of the present study, a strategic framework is proposed to facilitate the successful implementation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) within private higher education institutions. The framework emphasizes that technological adoption alone is insufficient to improve employee engagement unless supported by transparent governance, committed leadership, employee capability development, and ethical AI practices. It illustrates a systematic pathway through which institutional strategies contribute to the development of employee trust, ultimately leading to higher levels of employee engagement and institutional excellence. The framework also highlights the importance of continuous feedback and contextual organizational factors in ensuring the long-term sustainability of AI-enabled human resource practices. The proposed strategic framework is presented in **Figure 3**.

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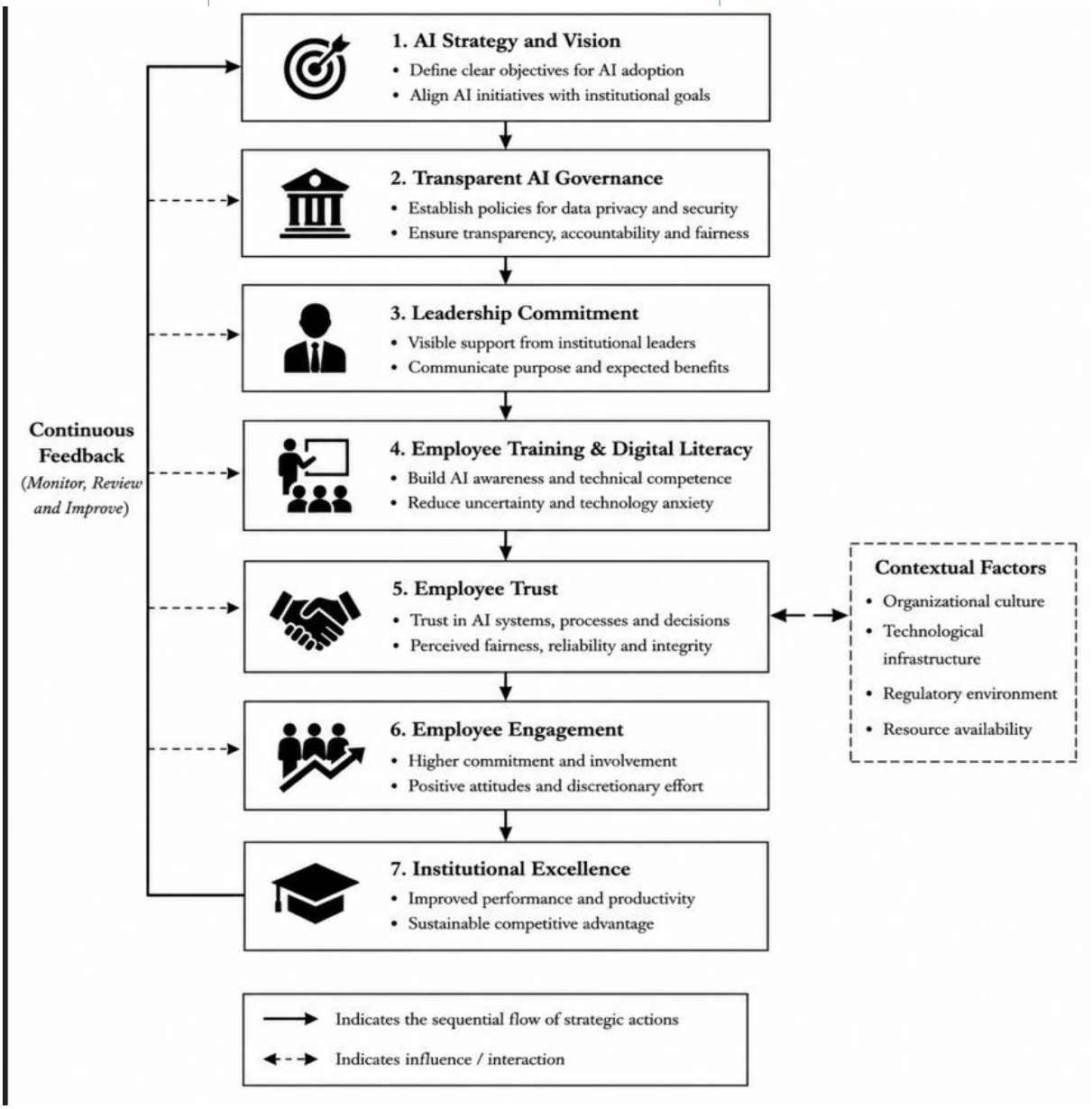

Figure 3 presents a strategic framework for strengthening employee trust during the implementation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in private higher education institutions. The framework proposes a sequential process beginning with the development of a clear AI strategy and institutional vision, followed by the establishment of transparent AI governance policies, leadership commitment, and employee training initiatives aimed at improving digital literacy. These strategic actions collectively foster employee trust, which serves as the central mechanism for enhancing employee engagement and ultimately achieving institutional excellence. The framework further recognizes that organizational culture, technological infrastructure, regulatory requirements, and resource availability influence the successful implementation of AI initiatives. A continuous feedback mechanism is incorporated to emphasize the need for regular monitoring, evaluation, and refinement of AI strategies, thereby supporting sustainable digital transformation within higher education institutions.

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The study also suggests that AI should complement rather than replace human interaction in human resource management. Employee engagement is fundamentally influenced by interpersonal relationships, organizational culture, and supportive leadership. While AI technologies can improve efficiency through automation and predictive analytics, important HR decisions involving employee development, recognition, counselling, and performance feedback should continue to involve human judgement. A balanced integration of AI capabilities with human expertise is therefore essential for maintaining employee trust and sustaining long-term engagement.

Finally, the findings indicate that organizational readiness significantly influences the effectiveness of AI adoption. Institutions should conduct periodic assessments of their technological infrastructure, employee digital competencies, and organizational preparedness before implementing advanced AI systems. Such assessments enable institutions to identify existing gaps and develop targeted strategies that facilitate successful AI adoption while minimizing employee resistance. A phased implementation approach supported by continuous monitoring and employee feedback may further enhance the sustainability of AI-enabled engagement initiatives.

Overall, the practical implications of this study demonstrate that successful AI adoption extends beyond technological investment. Private higher education institutions must simultaneously strengthen organizational trust, ethical governance, leadership support, employee capability, and transparent communication to realize the full potential of AI in enhancing employee engagement. By integrating these strategic dimensions into institutional planning, universities can create a digitally enabled work environment that supports innovation while preserving employee confidence, collaboration, and organizational commitment.

Conclusion

The rapid integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into organizational processes has transformed the way institutions manage their human resources and engage with employees. Within higher education, where intellectual capital and employee commitment are fundamental to institutional success, understanding the mechanisms through which AI influences employee engagement has become increasingly important. The present study addressed this issue by investigating the mediating role of employee trust in the relationship between AI adoption and employee engagement among faculty members and administrative staff working in private higher education institutions in Hyderabad.

The findings demonstrate that AI adoption positively contributes to employee engagement; however, this relationship is substantially strengthened when employees develop trust in AI-enabled systems. Trust emerged as a significant mediating mechanism linking technological adoption with positive employee attitudes and behaviours. Employees who perceived AI systems as transparent, reliable, and supportive reported greater confidence in institutional practices, which subsequently enhanced their emotional commitment, cognitive involvement, and behavioural engagement. These findings suggest that successful AI implementation extends beyond technological deployment and requires institutions to create an environment in which employees feel secure, respected, and actively involved in the digital transformation process.

The study also highlights the importance of organizational readiness, leadership commitment, employee digital competence, and ethical AI governance in building employee trust. Institutions that invest in transparent communication, continuous professional development, and responsible AI practices are more likely to achieve sustainable employee engagement and successful organizational transformation. Conversely, inadequate governance, concerns regarding privacy and algorithmic fairness, and insufficient employee involvement may weaken trust and reduce the effectiveness of AI-enabled initiatives.

From a theoretical perspective, the study extends existing literature by integrating the Technology Acceptance Model, Organizational Trust Theory, and Social Exchange Theory to explain how employee trust mediates the relationship between AI adoption and employee engagement. Unlike previous studies that primarily examined direct effects of AI adoption, the present research demonstrates that employee trust

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functions as the central psychological mechanism through which AI contributes to engagement within higher education institutions. This integrated perspective provides a more comprehensive understanding of employee responses to AI-enabled organizational change.

The study also offers practical value for institutional leaders and human resource professionals. The proposed strategic framework provides guidance for designing AI implementation strategies that prioritize transparency, ethical governance, leadership support, and employee capability development. Rather than treating AI solely as a technological innovation, institutions should recognize employee trust as a strategic organizational resource that enables successful digital transformation and long-term workforce engagement.

Although the present study focuses on private higher education institutions in Hyderabad, the proposed framework may also provide useful insights for other knowledge-intensive organizations undergoing digital transformation. Future research may extend the model by examining additional mediating or moderating variables such as organizational culture, psychological safety, digital leadership, employee resilience, and AI literacy across different educational and industrial contexts. Continued investigation in this area will further enhance understanding of the evolving relationship between Artificial Intelligence and human resource management while supporting the development of responsible, employee-centred AI practices.

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