

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# UNMASKING AI: HOW MEDIA SHAPES STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS TECHNOLOGY

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## Abstract

This study, titled Unmasking AI: How Media Shapes Students' Perceptions and Attitudes Towards Technology, explores how media representations influence undergraduate students' understanding and attitudes toward artificial intelligence (AI) in public universities in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. A sample of 391 students was selected using Taro Yamane's formula, and data were collected through a structured questionnaire. The study addressed three key research questions and tested three null hypotheses, examining students' perceptions of AI, their awareness of AI technologies, and the influence of media portrayals on their attitudes. The cross-sectional survey design enabled the collection of data at a specific point in time, capturing contemporary views on AI and media influence. The analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics to summarize central tendencies and trends in the data, while t-tests were applied to compare the mean responses of male and female students. Results showed that a significant number of students associate AI with robots and expressed concerns about AI technologies replacing human jobs. The study also found no significant difference between male and female students' perceptions of AI or the media's influence on their attitudes. The findings highlight the powerful role of media in shaping AI narratives and suggest the need for AI education to promote a more balanced and informed understanding. The study provides valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and AI developers to address misconceptions and prepare students for the evolving technological landscape.

**Keywords** Artificial intelligence (AI), awareness of AI technologies, structured questionnaire.

## INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence (AI) is not a new concept, having its roots in ancient myths and philosophical

musings about creating intelligent beings. Throughout history, the idea of machines capable of human-like cognition and behavior evolved from mere fantasy to tangible technology (Kumar, 2021; Yang, 2022). Early conceptions of AI were abstract, embedded in stories about mechanical beings and automata, gradually taking shape as scientific inquiry advanced. Russell and Norvig (2021) describe this progression as an ongoing transformation from imagination to philosophy, and ultimately into functional, sophisticated computer systems. These early imaginings, however, created an enduring legacy of both hope and fear surrounding AI, which has persisted even as the technology itself has advanced into practical applications.

Despite the growing presence of AI in our daily lives, many popular narratives about the technology remain largely unrealistic, shaped by cultural representations in media and entertainment. These depictions have had a profound influence, not only on the general public but also on experts in the field, further complicating the task of defining AI. Scholars like Davis (2023) argue that while AI can be succinctly described as a machine's ability to act sensibly and proactively within its environment, popular portrayals often exaggerate or distort these capabilities. According to Matthews (2021), these dramatized media narratives continue to shape public perceptions and trust in AI, making it essential to critically examine how the technology is portrayed.

The media's influence on AI perception is undeniable. As AI technology permeates various sectors—from healthcare and education to transportation and commerce—its societal impact has become a topic of intense scrutiny. Recent advancements in big data, the Internet of Things (IoT), and cloud computing have only amplified the relevance of AI in shaping modern life (UNESCO,

2021). At its core, AI revolves around replicating facets of human intelligence, including problem-solving, learning, and creativity, in machines. However, as Desai (2020) notes, the popularization of AI has also led to misconceptions, particularly regarding the technology's actual capabilities versus its potential.

The term "artificial intelligence" was formally introduced by John McCarthy during the Dartmouth Research Project in 1955 (Patel, 2020). This initiative laid the groundwork for understanding AI as the process of enabling machines to perform tasks that would typically require human intelligence. Yet, the definition of intelligence itself remains fluid, with scholars like Fernandez and Smith (2023) acknowledging the limitations of current definitions. Intelligence, whether human or artificial, involves a complex interplay of biological, psychological, and cultural factors, and its full nature remains elusive.

The growing application of AI across various domains has raised significant questions about its impact on society. From healthcare innovations to autonomous vehicles, AI's influence is vast and pervasive, sparking both optimism and concern. As evidenced by recent studies (Green, 2022), public attitudes towards AI are deeply influenced by media portrayals, particularly in entertainment. These narratives can create unrealistic expectations or unfounded fears, depending on how AI is framed. This shaping of perceptions is especially pertinent for younger audiences, such as students, who are continually exposed to AI narratives in the media (Diaz, 2023).

A recent survey by Brewer (2022) found that media representations significantly influence how the public perceives AI, often resulting in a skewed understanding of the technology's actual potential and limitations. This has led to the emergence of what some scholars call the "Sociology of AI"—a

growing subfield that explores the social implications of AI's integration into everyday life (Liu, 2021). The media's role in constructing these narratives is crucial, as it not only informs public opinion but also shapes policy decisions and research directions.

Understanding how students perceive AI is particularly important. As future leaders, their views on AI will directly impact how the technology is developed, applied, and regulated. Studies have shown that younger generations, particularly university students, are more likely to interact with AI technologies in their daily lives, whether through social media algorithms, virtual assistants, or automated systems (Hernandez, 2023). As such, their attitudes toward AI—shaped by both personal experience and media portrayals—will be pivotal in determining AI's future societal role.

Given the limited research on students' attitudes toward AI in Nigeria, this study aims to fill a critical gap. Existing literature, such as that of Owolabi et al. (2021) and Noah et al. (2021), has largely focused on workforce or sector-specific applications of AI, leaving a gap in understanding how the technology is perceived by those who will be most affected by its future developments—students. By investigating students' perceptions, this study not only contributes to the broader body of knowledge but also provides insights into how AI narratives influence young people in their formative years. The findings will be crucial for policymakers, educators, and technology developers in shaping the future of AI in society.

### **Research Questions**

1. What perception does students hold about Artificial Intelligence?
2. What is the awareness level of students' technologies that uses artificial intelligence (AI)?
3. What is the Perception of students on the

influence of media representations on their attitudes towards artificial intelligence or intelligent machines?

### **Hypotheses**

1. There is no significant difference between the mean response of male and female students on perception does students hold about Artificial Intelligence.
2. There is no significant difference between the mean response of male and female students on awareness level of students' technologies that uses artificial intelligence (AI).
3. There is no significant difference between the mean response of male and female students on perception of students on the influence of media representations on their attitudes towards artificial intelligence or intelligent machines.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The study population consisted of registered undergraduate students in Public Universities in Akwa Ibom State. This large and diverse group provided an ideal context to investigate how students perceive and react to the growing influence of artificial intelligence (AI) as shaped by media narratives. In order to obtain a representative sample from this population, a sample size of 391 students was determined using Taro Yamane's formula. This sampling method ensures that the sample is statistically significant, capturing the variability and trends present across the student body while maintaining a manageable number of respondents for practical data collection.

The study employed a cross-sectional survey research design, which allowed for the collection of data at a specific point in time. This approach is particularly useful in understanding students' perceptions and attitudes, as it captures the views and experiences of a diverse population without the need for long-term observation. By taking a

snapshot of attitudes within a single academic year, the research can more accurately gauge how contemporary media representations of AI influence student perspectives in real-time.

To ensure that the sample was representative of the entire student population, a multistage sampling technique was used. This method involved selecting students from various faculties across the university, ensuring that respondents came from a wide array of academic disciplines. This diversity in academic backgrounds is important, as students in different fields may be exposed to varying levels of technology and media, potentially leading to different perceptions of AI.

The data for this study were collected using a structured questionnaire, a widely accepted method in social research that facilitates the collection of quantitative data. This instrument was designed to capture students' attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions regarding AI, as well as the

extent to which media influences their views. The questionnaire ensured that respondents could express their views in a structured manner, allowing for easy analysis and comparison of responses.

Once collected, the data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Descriptive analysis provided a clear overview of the central tendencies, distribution, and frequency of responses, helping to identify key patterns and trends in student attitudes. The Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS V.27) was employed to facilitate this analysis, ensuring accurate and reliable processing of the data. Through the use of SPSS, the study was able to summarize and interpret large volumes of data efficiently, providing meaningful insights into how media shapes student perceptions and attitudes toward AI.

**RESULTS**

**Table 1: Student’s Awareness of Artificial Intelligence (AI)**

Possible First Thought on the Term ‘A.I’	Frequency	Percent
Robots	267	68.3
Inventions that will soon make humans useless in several industries	41	10.5
Easy job execution	53	13.6
Expensive humanoids created to take over jobs from humans	30	7.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>391</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Source: Field Survey**

The data presented in Table 1 illustrates students' awareness and perceptions of Artificial Intelligence (AI), shedding light on their various associations with the term. A significant majority, approximately 68.3% of respondents, indicated that they primarily think of robots when considering AI. This overwhelming perception highlights how media representations—often showcasing AI in the form of autonomous

machines—dominate the public's understanding of the technology. The association suggests that while students are familiar with the concept of robots, they may not fully grasp the broader applications of AI, such as its role in data analysis, healthcare, and education.

In contrast, 13.6% of students viewed AI as a technology that facilitates easier job execution. This perspective indicates an awareness of AI's

potential to enhance productivity and efficiency in various tasks, reflecting a recognition of the benefits that AI can bring to the workplace by augmenting human capabilities rather than merely replacing them.

Additionally, 10.5% of respondents expressed concerns that AI might make humans lazy and ultimately redundant in several industries. This apprehension reflects a common fear surrounding technological advancements, where the belief persists, that increased automation could lead to diminished human skills and fewer job opportunities. Such sentiments emphasize the need for discussions about the ethical implications of AI and its impact on the labor market, underscoring the importance of preparing students for a future increasingly shaped by this technology.

Finally, 7.7% of students associated AI with "expensive humanoids created to take over jobs from humans." This view paints a somewhat dystopian picture of AI, influenced by sensationalized media narratives that focus on the risks of automation and potential job displacement. It also indicates a lack of understanding of the diverse applications of AI beyond humanoid robots.

Overall, Table 1 captures the varied perceptions among students regarding AI, reflecting a mix of fascination, concern, and misunderstanding. These insights underscore the significant role of media in shaping public awareness and attitudes toward AI, highlighting the need for educational efforts that promote a more comprehensive understanding of this transformative technology.

**Table 2: Respondents' Awareness of Technologies That Use Artificial Intelligence (AI)**

<b>Technologies That Use Artificial Intelligence</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Drones That Do Not Require a Human Controller	45	11.50
Virtual Assistants	33	8.39
Digital Recommendation Systems	45	11.50
Automated Vehicles	50	12.40
Wireless Networks	45	11.50
Voice Recognition	45	11.50
Facial Recognition	45	11.50
Search Algorithms	33	8.39
Advanced Social Robots	50	12.40
<b>Total</b>	<b>391</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Source: Field Survey**

Table 2 presents the respondents' awareness of various technologies that incorporate Artificial Intelligence (AI). The data reveals that 12.40% of participants identified automated vehicles and

advanced social robots as significant examples of AI applications. This suggests a growing recognition of these technologies, which are becoming increasingly visible in society through media coverage and technological advancements.

A notable 11.50% of respondents indicated awareness of drones that operate without human controllers, wireless networks, voice recognition systems, and digital recommendation systems. This awareness reflects the pervasive nature of AI technologies in everyday life, illustrating how these innovations are not just confined to specialized fields but are increasingly integrated into consumer experiences, such as in online shopping and smart home devices.

Interestingly, only 8.39% of respondents identified virtual assistants and search algorithms as technologies using AI. This lower percentage might indicate a gap in understanding how widely these applications are utilized, as virtual assistants like

Siri or Alexa are common in many households but may not be associated with AI by all users. This points to the potential for educational efforts to enhance awareness about the role of AI in familiar technologies.

The insights gleaned from Table 2 highlight the varying levels of awareness among respondents regarding AI technologies, suggesting that while some are well-informed, there is still a significant opportunity to educate the broader public about the diverse applications of AI. Increasing awareness could help mitigate misconceptions and promote a more nuanced understanding of how AI impacts daily life.

**Table 3: Respondents' Perceptions of Media Influence on Attitudes Towards AI**

Perception of Media Influence on Attitudes Towards AI	Frequency	Percent
Significant Impact	174	44.5
Little Effect	113	29.0
Slight Impact	59	15.0
No Effect	38	9.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>391</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Source: Field Survey**

Table 3 outlines respondents' perceptions regarding the influence of media portrayals on their attitudes towards Artificial Intelligence (AI) and intelligent machines. Notably, 44.5% of respondents indicated that media representation had a significant impact on their attitudes towards AI development and innovation. This statistic underscores the powerful role that media plays in shaping public perception, as it often dictates narratives surrounding the capabilities and implications of AI technologies.

In contrast, 29% of respondents reported that media had only a little effect on their attitudes, while 15% stated it had a slight impact. This range

of responses suggests a spectrum of awareness and engagement with media narratives about AI. The 9.8% of respondents who felt that media had no effect at all may reflect a more critical or skeptical approach to media consumption, indicating that some individuals actively seek information beyond mainstream narratives.

The findings from Table 3 emphasize the necessity for a more informed media discourse on AI. Given that a substantial portion of the population relies on media for information about technological advancements, it is crucial to promote accurate and responsible portrayals that can help foster a well-rounded understanding of AI among students and the general public. By addressing media

influences, stakeholders can better prepare their potential impacts on society. individuals for the realities of AI technologies and

**Table 4: Perception of AI between Male and Female Students**

Group	Mean	t-value	p-value	Conclusion
Male	3.45	1.12	0.26	Accept null hypothesis
Female	3.30			

The mean perception of artificial intelligence (AI) for male students (3.45) and female students (3.30) shows no statistically significant difference (t = 1.12, p = 0.26). This suggests that both male and female students hold similar views regarding

AI, indicating that their perceptions are influenced similarly, irrespective of gender. Media representations do not seem to impact one gender more than the other in shaping their perception of AI.

**Table 5: Awareness of AI Technologies between Male and Female Students**

Group	Mean	t-value	p-value	Conclusion
Male	3.50	-1.56	0.12	Accept null hypothesis
Female	3.65			

The mean awareness level of AI technologies for male students (3.50) and female students (3.65) indicates that female students reported slightly higher awareness, but this difference is not

statistically significant (t = -1.56, p = 0.12). Both male and female students show similar levels of awareness of AI technologies, suggesting that gender does not significantly affect students' exposure to or understanding of AI-enabled tools.

**Table 6: Perception of Media Influence on Attitudes towards AI between Male and Female Students**

Group	Mean	t-value	p-value	Conclusion
Male	3.60	-1.03	0.31	Accept null hypothesis
Female	3.75			

The mean response regarding the perception of media influence on attitudes towards AI for male students (3.60) and female students (3.75) shows no statistically significant difference (t = -1.03, p = 0.31). This indicates that both male and female

students perceive the media's influence on their attitudes towards AI in a similar manner, confirming that gender does not play a significant role in shaping these attitudes.

**DISCUSSION**

The findings reveal that a significant portion of respondents reported having only a minor to moderate familiarity with the term "artificial intelligence" (AI), while some indicated a high level of understanding. This suggests that students are generally well-acquainted with modern technology, highlighting a trend of increasing technological literacy among the youth. Despite this growing familiarity, awareness of AI varies among students based on individual experiences and exposure, reflecting a diverse landscape of understanding. This pattern indicates that while many students recognize the term "artificial intelligence," their depth of knowledge can differ widely.

Such findings align with prior research indicating that many students were previously unaware of the term "artificial intelligence." Given the global surge in AI discussions and applications, it is reasonable to see an uptick in familiarity. This awareness is further supported by the AI Index (2023), which shows distinct variations in AI comprehension across different regions, with countries like Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Chile, Peru, Russia, and Mexico exhibiting particularly high levels of understanding.

Interestingly, the most common image associated with AI among respondents was that of robots, reflecting a popular cultural narrative that often equates AI with robotic technologies. However, a substantial segment of respondents also linked AI to the notion of technologies designed to simplify tasks, raise concerns about human obsolescence in various sectors, and perceive AI as expensive robots aimed at replacing human workers. This perspective illustrates that many students are acutely aware of the potential implications of AI on industries and employment, harboring anxieties about AI outsmarting humans or ultimately dominating the workforce with advanced capabilities. These insights resonate with previous

research (Wartianen, 2020; Nader, 2022; Royal Society, 2018), which suggests that public perception of AI is often framed through the lens of its embodiment in robotic forms, with discussions predominantly focused on its application in various industries.

Additionally, while students identified virtual assistants, facial recognition, online search algorithms, wireless network connections, and advanced social robots as prevalent AI technologies, they were less familiar with self-driving cars, digitally controlled drones, and big data systems. This disparity can largely be attributed to the pervasive use of smartphones among students, which incorporate many commonly used AI technologies. In contrast, advanced AI applications like driverless cars and sophisticated social robots remain relatively rare, particularly in developing nations, where their adoption is just beginning to take hold. These findings resonate with the work of Keles and Aydin (2021), who noted that university students in Eastern Anatolia demonstrated awareness of AI, particularly in the context of everyday applications.

The study further revealed that the most recognized AI technologies among students included automated drones and cars, followed closely by search algorithms, virtual assistants, and digital recommendation systems. This suggests that while some advanced AI systems may not be part of students' daily lives, they are still aware of their existence. The ubiquity of information available on the Internet and social media plays a critical role in exposing individuals to technologies that may not be prevalent in their immediate environment. This phenomenon underscores the importance of digital literacy and the need for ongoing education about AI technologies, as students navigate a world increasingly shaped by these advancements.



In light of the hypotheses tested in the study, the results revealed no significant differences between male and female students regarding their perceptions and awareness of AI. This was true for their understanding of the influence of media on their attitudes towards AI as well. The lack of significant difference suggests that gender does not play a critical role in shaping these perceptions, reinforcing the idea that media representations and societal discussions about AI affect students universally. These results indicate a consistent understanding among students, regardless of gender, highlighting the importance of collective experiences in shaping attitudes toward technology. Overall, the findings underscore the necessity for ongoing education about AI technologies to enhance digital literacy, ensuring that students are well-equipped to navigate an increasingly AI-driven world.

## **CONCLUSION**

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is increasingly becoming an integral part of our social fabric, driven by global advancements in information and communication technologies. This growing prevalence highlights the necessity for stakeholders—including educators, policymakers, and technology developers—to understand public perceptions of AI. Such insights are crucial for guiding the responsible advancement, application, and governance of AI technologies.

The findings of this study suggest that students' attitudes, opinions, perceptions, beliefs, and understanding of AI and modern technology are significantly shaped by how AI is represented in the media. This underscores the media's critical role as a lens through which societal views and realities are formed. Moreover, while media narratives play a significant role in influencing public perception, the impact of these narratives is moderated by individual agency and other personal factors. This means that personal

experiences, educational backgrounds, and individual beliefs can greatly influence whether one supports or opposes the advancement of AI.

The intersection of AI and media representation is pivotal in shaping how students and, by extension, society at large understand and interact with technology. As AI continues to evolve and integrate into everyday life, understanding public sentiment becomes increasingly essential for ensuring its beneficial application. By acknowledging the media's influence and the importance of individual perspectives, stakeholders can better navigate the complexities surrounding AI and its role in society.

## **Recommendations**

1. Educational institutions should integrate AI-related courses into their curricula as general subjects. This initiative will foster a deeper understanding of AI among students, equipping them with the knowledge to critically engage with AI technologies and their implications.
2. Schools and universities should implement media literacy programs that specifically address how AI is portrayed in the media. By educating students on discerning media representations and critically analyzing AI narratives, they can develop more informed opinions and attitudes toward the technology.
3. Stakeholders, including educators, policymakers, and technology companies, should facilitate public forums and discussions focused on AI. These dialogues can help demystify AI, address misconceptions, and gather diverse perspectives, ultimately fostering a more nuanced understanding of AI's role in society.

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