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BETWEEN ANTICIPATION AND AMBIVALENCE: PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE, WORK, AND IDENTITY IN SLOVENIA

Entre antecipação e ambivalência: percepções públicas sobre inteligência artificial, trabalho e identidade na Eslovênia

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ABSTRACT

As artificial intelligence (AI) increasingly reshapes work and social organisation, public debates often prioritise efficiency and innovation while overlooking questions of identity, meaning, and social belonging. This study examines how ordinary citizens in Slovenia perceive the impact of AI on work, professional identity, and broader societal change, positioning lay reflections as a valuable source of insight into early-stage sociotechnical transitions. Using an exploratory mixed-methods survey (n = 26), the study combines descriptive statistical analysis with thematic analysis of open-ended responses to capture both evaluative judgments and experiential perspectives. The findings reveal three central patterns. First, AI is predominantly perceived as a future-oriented and symbolic force rather than as a materially experienced workplace reality. Second, willingness to adapt through retraining is widespread but largely conditional, shaped by external triggers such as perceived necessity and institutional support rather than proactive individual initiative. Third, concerns related to AI are primarily identity-based, focusing on potential loss of meaning, human value, and social relevance rather than immediate economic insecurity or job loss. This suggests that adaptation to AI is not perceived merely as a matter of skills acquisition, but fundamentally as a question of meaning, social recognition, and human relevance. To interpret these dynamics, the article introduces the AI–Identity–Readiness Triangle, an original heuristic framework that situates public perceptions of AI at the intersection of actual exposure, identity-related vulnerability, and system-level enabling conditions. The study contributes a humanities-informed perspective on AI adoption, highlighting the importance of cultural context, ethical reflection, and social meaning in shaping public responses to technological change.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Future of Work; Public Perceptions, Human Identity, Adaptation to AI, Sociotechnical Change

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ENTRE ANTECIPAÇÃO E AMBIVALÊNCIA: PERCEPÇÕES PÚBLICAS SOBRE INTELIGÊNCIA ARTIFICIAL, TRABALHO E IDENTIDADE NA ESLOVÊNIA

Between anticipation and ambivalence: public perceptions of artificial intelligence, work, and identity in Slovenia

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RESUMO

À medida que a inteligência artificial (IA) remodela cada vez mais o trabalho e a organização social, os debates públicos muitas vezes dão prioridade à eficiência e à inovação, negligenciando questões de identidade, significado e pertença social. Este estudo examina como os cidadãos comuns na Eslovénia percebem o impacto da IA no trabalho, na identidade profissional e nas mudanças sociais mais amplas, posicionando as reflexões leigas como uma fonte valiosa de informações sobre as transições sociotécnicas em fase inicial. Utilizando uma pesquisa exploratória de métodos mistos (n = 26), o estudo combina análise estatística descritiva com análise temática de respostas abertas para capturar tanto julgamentos avaliativos quanto perspectivas experienciais. As descobertas revelam três padrões centrais. Em primeiro lugar, a IA é predominantemente percebida como uma força simbólica e orientada para o futuro, e não como uma realidade materialmente experienciada no local de trabalho. Em segundo lugar, a vontade de adaptação através da reconversão profissional é generalizada, mas em grande parte condicional, moldada por factores externos, como a necessidade percebida e o apoio institucional, em vez de iniciativas individuais proactivas. Terceiro, as preocupações relacionadas com a IA baseiam-se principalmente na identidade, centrando-se na potencial perda de significado, valor humano e relevância social, em vez de na insegurança económica imediata ou na perda de emprego. Isto sugere que a adaptação à IA não é percebida apenas como uma questão de aquisição de competências, mas fundamentalmente como uma questão de significado, reconhecimento social e relevância humana.Para interpretar essas dinâmicas, o artigo apresenta o Triângulo IA-Identidade-Prontidão, uma estrutura heurística original que situa as percepções públicas da IA na interseção da exposição real, da vulnerabilidade relacionada à identidade e das condições facilitadoras no nível do sistema. O estudo contribui com uma perspectiva informada pelas humanidades sobre a adoção da IA, destacando a importância do contexto cultural, da reflexão ética e do significado social na formação das respostas públicas às mudanças tecnológicas.
Palavras-chave: Inteligência Artificial, Futuro do Trabalho, Percepções Públicas, Identidade Humana, Adaptação à IA, Mudança Sociotécnica

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, artificial intelligence (AI) has shifted from a niche technological domain to the forefront of global discussions about the future of work, society, and human identity. Today, AI drives automation systems, predictive analytics, algorithmic decision-making, and generative creativity, radically transforming how people work, communicate, learn, and produce value (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2019). According to the OECD, between 14% and 32% of jobs in member states may be automated by 2035 (OECD, 2021), with public expectations increasingly shaped by uncertainty and anticipation of change.

Although AI is often presented as a technological advancement driven by efficiency and productivity, humanistic and social-scientific approaches emphasise that AI is not a neutral tool. Rather, it engages questions traditionally examined by philosophy, sociology, and anthropology, including identity, autonomy, agency, the meaning of work, social roles, and a sense of belonging (Turkle, 2011; Arendt, 2018; Thorn, 2015). Harari (2018) notes that for centuries, human history has organised society around the concept of *homo faber*—the human as a being who works and thereby affirms social status and purpose. If AI increasingly alters this role, it may contribute to shifts in how work and human relevance are understood.

Slovenia represents a specific European context in which established cultural norms intersect with ongoing transitions toward a digital economy. In a country characterised by relatively high levels of formal education, a strong normative value placed on »honest work,« and a historically rooted sense of social belonging (Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, 2017), AI raises questions that extend beyond technological competence alone. Moreover, digitalisation is unevenly distributed—across regions, generations, and employment types—linking the integration of AI in Slovenia to broader issues of social inequality and access (Petrovčič et al., 2024).

At the same time, public debates on AI and the future of work often remain predominantly technocratic, focusing on economic growth, innovation policy, and technological competitiveness. In contrast, the perspectives of non-expert individuals—such as employees, teachers, students, and administrative staff—are less frequently examined in empirical research. In this context, insights from the social sciences and humanities can offer a complementary perspective by conceptualising AI as a socially embedded phenomenon shaped by values, meanings, and lived experience, rather than solely as a technological instrument.

This study seeks to contribute to this perspective by exploring how non-expert individuals in Slovenia perceive artificial intelligence and its societal implications. Rather than treating the public as a passive recipient of technological change, the study approaches participants as active interpreters whose expectations, concerns, and evaluations may influence which forms of AI are perceived as acceptable and legitimate within society. Given its exploratory design, the study does not aim at statistical representativeness but focuses on early-stage meaning-making processes surrounding AI.

Based on the theoretical background and aims of the study, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1: How do individuals in Slovenia conceptualise and emotionally perceive artificial intelligence, and how do they describe its perceived influence on their work, professional identity, and sense of social belonging?

RQ2: To what extent are individuals in Slovenia willing to adapt to AI-related changes—through retraining, lifelong learning, and acceptance of broader socio-institutional adjustments—and which factors (e.g., access to resources, motivation, perceived risk) appear to condition this willingness?

Given the exploratory nature of the study and the limited sample size, the following hypotheses are treated as guiding propositions intended to structure the interpretation of the empirical findings rather than as statistically testable claims:

H1: Higher levels of educational attainment are associated with greater willingness to engage in retraining in response to AI-related changes.

H2: Stronger perceptions of identity-related threat associated with AI correspond to lower levels of readiness to adapt to AI.

H3: Individuals with direct practical experience using AI tools tend to report more positive attitudes toward the use of AI in the workplace.

By addressing these questions, the article contributes to a humanistically informed understanding of AI in society by examining how non-expert individuals interpret its implications for work, identity, and adaptation.

Specifically, the paper contributes to existing scholarship in three original ways: (1) by providing one of the first humanities-oriented empirical explorations of AI perceptions in the Slovenian context; (2) by introducing an original conceptual framework—the AI–Identity–Readiness Triangle—to support the interpretation of public meaning-making processes related to AI; and (3) it extends debates on AI beyond technocratic logic by treating lay emotional responses as data of equal epistemic value.

To achieve these aims, the study employs an exploratory mixed-methods research design based on a structured survey instrument explicitly aligned with the research questions and guiding hypotheses. The survey instrument consisted of 16 items combining closed-ended and open-ended questions. Its structure and content are briefly described in Section 3.2, while the full questionnaire is provided in Appendix A. The operationalisation of key concepts and the alignment between survey items, research questions, and analytical strategies are presented in Table 1, which provides a transparent overview of the methodological logic underpinning the study. In particular, in Table 1 the mapping between the research questions, guiding hypotheses, and the corresponding survey items, together with their data types and analytical approaches is presented. It illustrates how key concepts were operationalised and how quantitative and qualitative data were integrated within the exploratory mixed-methods design.

Table 1 - The full survey instrument is provided in Appendix A

Research focus	**Research question / hypothesis**	**Survey items**	**Item type**	**Analytical approach**
General perception of AI	RQ1	Q6 (perceived current and future impact of AI on work), Q12 (perceived benefits and risks of AI)	Likert-scale items	Descriptive statistics (frequencies, central tendency)
Emotional and identity-related perceptions	RQ1 / H2	Q10 (open-ended: perceived changes in work), Q16 (open-ended reflections)	Open-ended responses	Thematic qualitative analysis
Willingness to adapt and learn	RQ2	Q11 (readiness to retrain or upskill)	Likert-scale item	Descriptive statistics
Education and adaptation	H1	Education level (demographic variable), Q11	Ordinal variable + Likert-scale item	Descriptive association (non-parametric)
Practical experience with AI and attitudes	H3	Q7 (use of AI tools), Q12 (attitudes toward AI in work contexts)	Binary variable + Likert-scale item	Group comparison (non-parametric)
Policy preferences and societal responses	RQ2	Q15 (support for policy measures related to AI)	Categorical item	Frequency analysis

Source: Author's own compilation

1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Artificial intelligence (AI) as an object of scholarly inquiry requires an interdisciplinary approach that goes beyond a technicist understanding of AI as merely an »advanced tool.« Contemporary authors emphasise that AI is simultaneously a technological system, an economic infrastructure, a cultural phenomenon, and a social actor influencing core processes of societal organisation (Floridi, 2014; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2019). The theoretical foundation of this article therefore draws on three complementary perspectives: technology as a social force, AI as a challenge to identity and work, and AI as an ethical–political question. These perspectives are employed as analytical lenses rather than as claims about the deterministic effects of AI, and they serve to contextualise how individuals may interpret and emotionally frame AI-related change.

1.1 Artificial Intelligence as a Disruptive Societal Technology

The rise of AI unfolds within the context of the so-called *Fourth Industrial Revolution*, which integrates automation, big data, machine learning, robotics, and algorithmic decision-making (Schwab, 2016). In this transformation, AI is no longer merely software; it increasingly functions as an infrastructure underpinning contemporary economic and organisational models.

Hongladarom (2020) conceptualises AI as a key mechanism of »surveillance capitalism,« in which data—often collected without individuals' awareness—are transformed into predictive models that influence human behaviour. This process contributes to new asymmetries of power between technology platforms and citizens. AI also reshapes labour markets, with forecasts ranging from moderate (OECD, 2021) to more extensive projections (Frey & Osborne, 2013), the latter estimating that up to 47% of jobs in OECD countries may be susceptible to automation.

From the perspective of labour economics, AI's disruptive potential is commonly described through:

- the replacement of routine cognitive and physical tasks;
- the transformation of job roles (e.g., administrative work shifting toward coordination and oversight of algorithmic systems);
- the emergence of hybrid skillsets and so-called »centaur intelligence,« in which human and AI capabilities are combined (Daugherty & Wilson, 2018).

Importantly, these processes do not unfold uniformly across occupations or social groups. Empirical studies indicate that repetitive and standardised tasks are more vulnerable to automation, while roles involving social interaction, emotional labour, and creativity tend to remain more resilient (Frey & Osborne, 2013; Nedelkoska & Quintini, 2018). In the present study, these macro-level dynamics are not examined directly; rather, they provide a structural backdrop against which individual perceptions and expectations related to AI are formed.

1.2 A Humanistic Perspective and the Question of Identity

While technological debates often frame AI primarily in terms of efficiency and productivity, humanistic and philosophical perspectives emphasise that the central challenge of AI concerns questions of meaning, identity, and human purpose. Turkle (2011) argues that the substitution of human interaction with algorithmic systems may lead to a form of »loneliness in the crowd,« whereby communication increases while relational depth diminishes.

From a humanistic standpoint, identity is understood as being constructed through work, creation, and social participation. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt (2018) distinguishes between labor (activities necessary for survival), work (the creation of durable artefacts), and action (collective engagement in the public sphere). Contemporary debates suggest that AI may destabilise these distinctions by altering the role of humans as creators and actors, thereby influencing how individuals perceive their place in social and professional life.

An additional dimension is introduced by existential and posthumanist perspectives, which consider the possibility that AI may not only assist but also surpass human cognitive capabilities (Thorn, 2015; Ferrando, 2019). Such arguments raise fundamental questions about the future role of work as a source of meaning. In the present study, these perspectives are not treated as empirical claims about actual societal transformation, but as interpretative frameworks that help explain why individuals may experience AI-related change as an identity-related or existential concern rather than merely a technical or economic issue.

1.3 Ethics, Social Justice and Technological Inequality

The development and implementation of AI are not neutral processes; they are shaped by political decisions, economic interests, and unequal access to technological infrastructure. These dimensions influence who benefits from AI and who bears its risks.

In the Slovenian context, Petrovčič et al. (2024) highlight persistent digital inequalities that affect access to digital knowledge and competencies. If adaptation to AI depends on educational, financial, and temporal resources, uneven governance of AI may reinforce existing social inequalities. The present study does not evaluate

institutional arrangements directly; instead, it focuses on how such ethical and justice-related issues are perceived, anticipated, or articulated by individuals.

At the international level, ethical debates on AI commonly emphasise principles of fairness, accountability, transparency, and human oversight (Floridi & Cowls, 2019). In Slovenia, however, ethical reflection on AI remains comparatively limited, with policy and technological implementation often advancing more rapidly than public ethical dialogue (Davison et al., 2024). These considerations form part of the normative context within which public attitudes toward AI are shaped.

1.4 Summary of the Theoretical Framework

Taken together, the literature reviewed above highlights three interconnected dimensions that inform the analytical orientation of this study: AI as a driver of economic disruption, AI as a challenge to identity and meaning, and AI as an ethical–political issue. These dimensions are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2 - Theoretical concepts of artificial intelligence and their key implications

Concept	Key Implications	Authors
AI as a disruptive economy	Automation, labour market polarisation, precarisation	Hongladarom (2020); Frey & Osborne (2013); Schwab (2016)
AI as an identity challenge	Shifts in the understanding of humanness; work as a foundation of meaning and belonging	Arendt (2018); Turkle (2011); Thorn (2015); Harari (2018)
AI as an ethical–political phenomenon	Need for just policies and regulation; digital access as a prerequisite for adaptation	Floridi & Cowls (2019); OECD (2021); Petrovčič et al. (2024)

Source: Author's own compilation

Rather than positioning AI as a purely technological phenomenon, this framework situates it within broader socio-cultural processes that shape how individuals interpret technological change, particularly in relation to work, belonging, and social justice. The framework thus provides a conceptual basis for examining public perceptions of AI without presupposing specific empirical outcomes.

1.4.1 Research Gap

Although international surveys and policy-oriented studies have examined public attitudes toward AI (e.g., Eurobarometer; Pew Research Center), there is currently no interdisciplinary, humanities-informed empirical research focusing on the cultural, emotional, and identity-related dimensions of AI perception in the Slovenian context. Existing studies tend to prioritise economic disruption, automation forecasts, and policy design, while paying limited attention to how AI is interpreted by non-expert individuals as a phenomenon connected to meaning, belonging, and human purpose.

Accordingly, this study addresses a threefold gap:

1. a **regional gap**, by providing empirically grounded insights into AI perceptions in Slovenia;
2. a **conceptual gap**, by integrating cultural and identity-centred perspectives into AI perception research;
3. an **epistemic gap**, by treating emotional and value-laden responses to AI as analytically relevant data rather than as peripheral attitudes.

1.5 From Theory to Empirical Inquiry

The theoretical perspectives outlined above inform the design of the empirical component of this study by identifying key domains through which public perceptions of AI can be meaningfully examined. Rather than testing theoretical claims directly, the study adopts an exploratory approach that seeks to capture how individuals interpret AI in relation to work, identity, and broader societal conditions.

In the following section, these theoretical considerations are operationalised through a survey-based research design. The subsequent sections present the empirical results and conclude with a discussion of the main findings and their broader implications.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

The study was designed as an exploratory empirical investigation employing a mixed quantitative–qualitative approach. This design is particularly suitable for examining phenomena that have not yet been conceptually or empirically explored in depth and for capturing subjective perceptions, meanings, and early-stage interpretations (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The primary aim of the study was not statistical generalisation to the broader population, but rather to explore how individuals in Slovenia perceive and interpret the societal implications of artificial intelligence during an early phase of digital transformation.

Data were collected using a web-based survey, which enabled efficient access to participants, ensured a high degree of anonymity, and reduced potential social desirability bias (Dillman et al., 2014). The survey was administered via the 1KA platform, which is widely used in Slovenian academic research, and was open between 8 June and 8 September 2025.

2.2 Sample Characteristics

A total of 26 valid responses were included in the analysis. The age distribution of participants was heterogeneous, with the largest share aged 31–45 years (35%), followed by participants aged 18–30 (31%) and 46–60 (27%). Respondents aged 60 years or older represented a smaller proportion of the sample (8%) *(see Table 3)*.

Regarding employment status, the public sector was predominant (58%), followed by employment in the private sector (19%) and students (12%). The sample did not include self-employed individuals or retirees. The educational attainment of participants was notably high: 19% held a doctoral degree, 23% a master's degree, and 12% a bachelor's degree. The mean level of education (M = 6.9; SD = 2.0) indicates that the sample represents a highly educated segment of the population, a factor that is taken into account in the interpretation of findings *(see Table 3)*.

Table 3 - Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

Variable	Categories	%
Age	18–30	31%
	31–45	35%
	46–60	27%
	60+	8%
Employment sector	Public	58%
	Private	19%
	Students	12%
Education level	PhD	19%
	Master's	23%
	Bachelor (1st cycle)	12%

Source: Own survey (1KA, 2025)

2.3 Survey Instrument

The survey instrument consisted of 16 questions combining structured and open-ended formats. The questionnaire was organised into four thematic sections:

(1) demographic characteristics (age, employment sector, education);
(2) familiarity with and use of artificial intelligence;
(3) perceptions of AI's impact on work, identity, and society;

(4) willingness to adapt through learning or retraining and attitudes toward selected policy responses.

Likert-type items employed a five-point scale to assess familiarity with AI and perceived current and future impacts on work and society. These items were designed as single-item indicators rather than as multi-item scales, reflecting the exploratory nature of the study. Open-ended questions (e.g., reflections on how AI has affected participants' work or broader societal concerns) were included to capture qualitative narratives, emotional responses, and value-based interpretations that could not be fully assessed through closed-ended items.

The alignment between individual survey items, research questions, and analytical strategies is presented in Table 1, while the full questionnaire is provided in Appendix A.

2.4 Data Collection and Analysis

Survey data were exported from the 1KA platform and prepared for analysis. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistical methods, including frequencies, percentages, and measures of central tendency for Likert-type items. Given the limited sample size and exploratory design, no factor analysis or multivariate modelling was conducted.

Qualitative data from open-ended responses were analysed using thematic analysis following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This process involved familiarisation with the data, initial coding, identification of candidate themes, review and refinement of themes, and final interpretation. To enhance interpretative reliability, the qualitative analysis was conducted independently by two authors, with discrepancies discussed until agreement was reached (Guest et al., 2012).

2.5 Statistical Analysis

Statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 31). In line with the exploratory aims of the study, the analysis focused on descriptive statistics and selected non-parametric comparisons appropriate to the level of measurement and sample size. Statistical testing is used here not to infer population-level effects, but to explore internal consistency and the directionality of observed patterns within a small and exploratory sample. Frequencies and percentages were used for categorical variables, while Likert-type items were summarised using descriptive measures.

Where relevant, associations between selected variables were explored using non-parametric tests such as the Mann–Whitney U test and Fisher's exact test. Statistical significance testing was used descriptively, and emphasis was placed on observed patterns and tendencies rather than on inferential generalisation.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study prior to participation. Participation was voluntary, and responses were collected anonymously. All data were used exclusively for research purposes and processed in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the ethical guidelines of the University of Maribor. Due to the anonymous design of the survey, the risk of respondent re-identification was eliminated.

2.7 Methodological Limitations

Several limitations of the study should be acknowledged. First, the sample size is small (n = 26) and not representative of the Slovenian population. Second, the educational level of participants is exceptionally high, which may be associated with more reflective or favourable attitudes toward AI. Third, the web-based recruitment strategy excludes individuals with limited digital access, meaning that digitally vulnerable groups are

underrepresented. Finally, the cross-sectional design captures perceptions at a single point in time and does not allow for the analysis of changes over time *(see Table 4)*.

Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable exploratory insight into how AI is perceived in relation to work, identity, and societal change in the Slovenian context. As one of the first humanities-oriented empirical investigations of this kind, it offers a foundation for future longitudinal, comparative, and methodologically expanded research.

These limitations are consistent with the exploratory nature of the study. Rather than undermining the findings, they delineate the scope within which the results should be interpreted and point toward directions for future research.

Table 4 - Methodological Reflections and Suggested Improvements

Dimension	Strength	Limitation	Suggested Future Improvement
Sample	Access to a highly educated participant segment allowed for insight into humanistic reflections often absent in general-population datasets	Small, non-representative sample; digitally excluded groups not captured	Stratified random sampling across regions and socio-economic groups; inclusion of offline respondents
Method	The combination of quantitative and qualitative survey items enabled descriptive quantification and insight into emotional and narrative dimensions.	The cross-sectional design captures perceptions at a single point in time.	Future research could employ longitudinal follow-up surveys or panel designs to track changes in perceptions.
Data	Combination of thematic qualitative data and numeric indicators provides multi-layered interpretation	**Inferential statistical testing used descriptively due to limited sample size**	Future research would benefit from an expanded empirical base

Source: Authors' own methodological reflection based on the survey design (1KA, 2025)

3 RESULTS

3.1 Familiarity with and Practical Use of AI (RQ1)

Respondents reported a moderate level of familiarity with artificial intelligence (Q5). While only a small proportion described themselves as highly knowledgeable, most indicated at least basic familiarity with AI-related tools.

In terms of actual use, AI is primarily present in respondents' work as a form of cognitive support rather than as mechanical automation. The most frequently reported tools were chatbots and conversational systems (e.g. ChatGPT), followed by speech-recognition tools, while the direct use of analytical systems or robots was rare (Q7). This indicates that AI is currently integrated mainly into knowledge-based and informational tasks.

3.2 Perceived Current and Future Impact of AI on Work (RQ1)

Most respondents reported that artificial intelligence has not yet substantially affected the nature of their work (Q9). In contrast, anticipated future impact was rated noticeably higher, with a clear majority expecting AI to significantly influence their profession in the coming years (Q6).

A paired comparison between perceived current impact and anticipated future impact indicates a consistent directional difference between present experience and future expectations. A Wilcoxon signed-rank test was applied to compare these paired evaluations. Although the difference did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance ($Z = -1.70$, $p = .090$), the distribution of ranks shows a clear tendency toward higher scores for anticipated future impact. Given the small sample size, this result is interpreted descriptively as evidence of an anticipatory gap between current experience and expectations of future change.

Qualitative responses (Q9.1) further contextualise this pattern. Reported effects of AI are currently limited, task-specific, and concentrated in cognitively oriented professions such as education and information technology.

Respondents most often referred to support in information retrieval, text production, and quality control, rather than to fundamental changes in job roles or occupational structures.

Taken together, these findings suggest that AI is presently experienced more as a **symbolic and future-oriented phenomenon** than as a material force reshaping everyday work practices. Perceptions of AI are therefore shaped less by lived disruption and more by anticipation, imagination, and broader societal narratives about technological change.

3.3 Attitudes Toward the Benefits and Risks of AI (RQ1)

Responses to attitudinal statements (Q12a–Q12f) indicate that AI is perceived in both functional and risk-related terms. Most respondents agreed that AI supports routine administrative tasks and enhances productivity, confirming its instrumental value in work-related contexts. At the same time, a notable proportion expressed concerns regarding reduced need for human social skills, data security, and trust in AI.

Correlation analyses highlight a pattern of ambivalence rather than polarisation. Perceived erosion of human social skills (Q12b) was moderately and positively associated with distrust in AI (Q12f) (Spearman's $\rho = 0.57$, $p = 0.003$) and with concerns about personal data security (Q12d) ($\rho = 0.48$, $p = 0.013$), suggesting that identity-related concerns are closely intertwined with broader ethical unease. Moreover, agreement that AI is necessary for corporate competitiveness (Q12e) was also positively associated with distrust toward AI ($\rho = 0.56$, $p = 0.003$), indicating that instrumental acceptance of AI may coexist with normative scepticism.

Overall, these findings show that public attitudes toward AI are neither uniformly positive nor negative. Instead, perceived benefits, economic necessity, and ethical or identity-related risks are simultaneously acknowledged, reflecting a distinctly ambivalent orientation toward AI.

3.4 Willingness to Learn and Retrain (RQ2)

Responses to Q10 indicate that willingness to engage in additional training or retraining is predominantly conditional. While a smaller group reported proactive readiness to acquire new skills, the majority of respondents indicated that they would pursue retraining only if adaptation became necessary. A minority expressed low or negative readiness to change their competencies.

This pattern suggests that adaptation is largely perceived as a reactive response to external pressures rather than a self-initiated strategy, underscoring the importance of institutional conditions and perceived necessity in shaping readiness to adapt.

3.5 Education and Readiness to Retrain (H1)

Descriptive analysis of educational attainment (Q4) shows a heterogeneous distribution of formal education levels within the sample (see Table X). The largest share of respondents reported education level 5 (30.8%), followed by level 8 (23.1%) and level 10 (19.2%). Lower and intermediate levels (levels 4, 6, and 7) were also represented, each accounting for between 7.7% and 11.5% of the sample.

Overall, the sample includes respondents across a broad range of educational backgrounds, with no single educational category constituting an absolute majority.

Table 5 - Highest attained level of education

Highest attained education level (Q4)	N	%
4	2	7.7
5	8	30.8
6	2	7.7
7	3	11.5
8	6	23.1
10	5	19.2
Total	**26**	**100.0**

Source: Authors' own methodological reflection based on the survey design (1KA, 2025)

The observed trend was slightly negative (Spearman's $\rho = -.18$, $p = .387$), indicating that higher levels of formal education were not associated with greater readiness to engage in additional training or retraining in response to AI-related changes.

This finding challenges the assumption that educational attainment alone functions as an enabling factor for adaptive behaviour in contexts of technological change. Instead, it suggests that readiness to adapt is more strongly shaped by motivational, identity-related, and institutional factors than by formal educational credentials as such.

3.6 Identity-Related Threat and Readiness to Adapt (H2)

Hypothesis H2 examined the relationship between perceived identity-related threat and readiness to adapt to AI-related changes. Identity-related threat was operationalised through agreement with the statement that AI reduces the need for human social and interpersonal skills (Q12b). The association between perceived identity-related threat (Q12b) and readiness to engage in additional training or retraining (Q10) was examined using Spearman's rank correlation.

The analysis revealed a **moderate and statistically significant positive association** between perceived identity-related threat and readiness to adapt (Spearman's $\rho = .56$, $p = .003$). This indicates that respondents who more strongly perceived AI as undermining human social and interpersonal skills also reported **higher** levels of willingness to engage in additional education or retraining.

This finding contrasts with the initial expectation that identity-related threat would inhibit adaptive responses. Instead, it suggests that perceived threats to professional identity and human relevance may, under certain conditions, function as **mobilising rather than paralysing factors**. Rather than inhibiting adaptive behaviour, perceived identity-related threat appears to function as a mobilising force, prompting respondents to consider retraining as a strategy for preserving relevance, agency, and professional self-understanding. This pattern is consistent with a "threat-as-mobilisation" dynamic, in which perceived challenges to identity activate adaptive responses rather than withdrawal.

3.7 Practical Experience with AI and Workplace Attitudes (H3)

For the purposes of testing H3, respondents were classified as AI chatbot users or non-users based on reported frequency of use. Participants who reported clear and affirmative use of AI chatbots (positive values on the usage scale) were coded as users, whereas those reporting no use, rare use, or neutral exposure (zero or negative values) were coded as non-users. This operationalisation prioritises practical engagement with AI over incidental or symbolic exposure.

Associations between practical AI use and selected workplace-related attitudes were examined using Spearman's rank correlation, with AI use treated as a binary indicator. The analysis reveals a moderate and statistically significant positive association between AI use and the perception that AI increases productivity ($\rho = .49$, $p = .011$). This suggests that respondents who actively use AI tools are more likely to evaluate AI as functionally beneficial in terms of work efficiency.

By contrast, the association between AI use and the perception that AI supports routine administrative tasks approached statistical significance ($\rho = .37$, $p = .066$), indicating a positive trend that did not reach conventional significance thresholds. No meaningful association was observed between AI use and perceived overall impact of AI on one's profession ($\rho = .07$, $p = .733$).

Taken together, these findings suggest that practical AI use is more closely related to evaluations of concrete, task-level benefits than to broader perceptions of occupational transformation.

Overall, these findings partially support H3. Practical experience with AI appears to be selectively associated with more positive evaluations of AI's instrumental value—particularly productivity gains—rather than with broader perceptions of occupational transformation. This pattern suggests that hands-on engagement with AI may normalise its utility in specific task-related domains without necessarily translating into more optimistic assessments of its long-term professional impact.

Given the exploratory nature of the study and the limited sample size, these results are interpreted descriptively and indicate a differentiated relationship between AI use and workplace attitudes, warranting further investigation in larger and more diverse samples.

3.8 Summary of Results

Overall, the results indicate that AI is currently perceived as having a limited direct impact on work, while expectations regarding its future influence are substantially higher. Readiness to adapt to AI is widespread but predominantly conditional and appears to be shaped less by formal educational attainment than by perceived identity-related concerns and patterns of practical engagement with AI. Quantitative indicators and qualitative responses consistently point to a differentiated and ambivalent configuration of public perceptions, in which perceived benefits and perceived risks coexist rather than exclude one another.

4 DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that public perceptions of artificial intelligence in Slovenia are shaped less by direct everyday experience and more by anticipation, uncertainty, and culturally embedded understandings of work and human value. Although most respondents reported that AI has not yet substantially affected their daily work practices, expectations regarding its future impact were markedly higher. This discrepancy suggests that AI currently operates primarily as a symbolic and anticipatory force rather than as a materially experienced one, consistent with observations that technological change often enters society first as an idea before becoming a structural reality (Kaplan & Haenlein).

Across quantitative indicators and open-ended responses, attitudes toward AI were distinctly ambivalent. Respondents simultaneously recognised functional benefits—such as productivity gains and support for routine tasks—while expressing concerns related to trust, erosion of human social skills, and ethical uncertainty. These patterns do not indicate rejection of AI, but rather the coexistence of instrumental appreciation and normative unease. Notably, explicit fears of job loss were relatively rare. Instead, concerns were predominantly framed in terms of identity, relevance, and the preservation of human judgment and social value. This orientation aligns with humanistic perspectives that conceptualise work not merely as an economic activity, but as a central source of meaning, dignity, and social belonging (Arendt; Turkle).

Readiness to adapt through learning and retraining further reinforces this interpretation. While a majority of respondents expressed openness to acquiring new competencies, this readiness was largely conditional rather than proactive. Importantly, formal educational attainment did not emerge as a decisive enabling factor. Instead, adaptive readiness appeared to be more closely related to perceived identity-related vulnerability and to how AI was interpreted in relation to human worth and agency. In this sense, reluctance to retrain should not be understood as resistance to learning as such, but rather as hesitation toward adapting to a future perceived as potentially devaluing human contribution. These findings support the interpretation that adaptation is not primarily a matter of knowledge or skill acquisition, but of meaning, trust, and institutional framing.

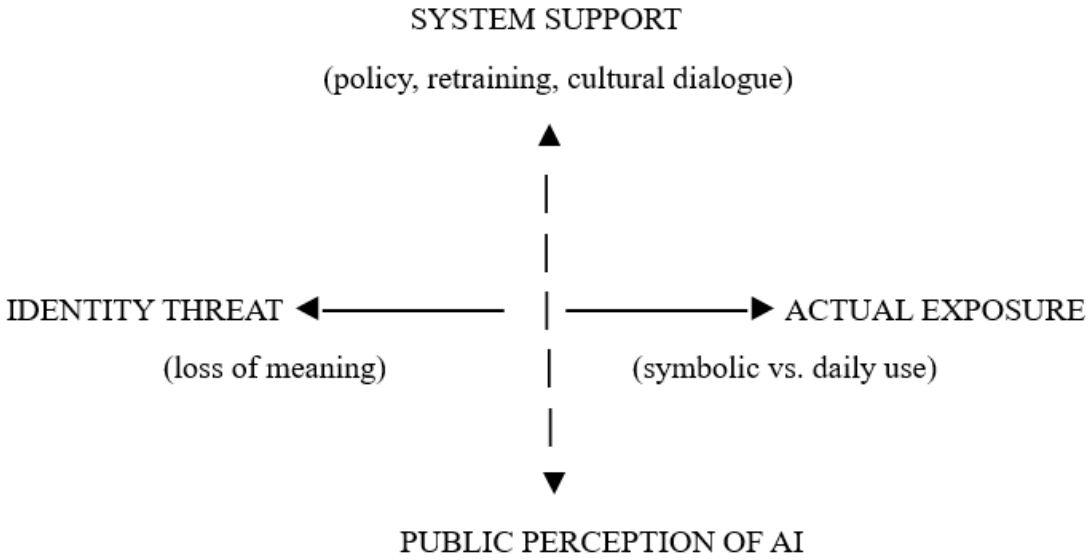
To summarise the interpretative logic emerging from the results, Figure 1 presents the AI–Identity–Readiness Triangle as a simplified conceptual illustration. Rather than representing a causal or predictive model, the figure serves as a heuristic device that visualises how public perceptions of AI are shaped by the interaction between practical exposure to AI, identity-related concerns, and perceived system-level support. It is intended to support interpretation of the empirical patterns observed in this study and to guide future hypothesis-driven research, rather than to establish explanatory mechanisms.

Public preferences regarding policy responses further underscore this relational understanding of AI adoption. Support was strongest for measures that promote hybrid “human + AI” models and accessible retraining opportunities, while support for universal basic income (UBI) was minimal. UBI—often proposed as a response to large-scale technological unemployment—was not perceived as socially legitimate within this sample. This suggests that respondents do not envision AI as a pathway toward a post-work society, but rather expect work to remain a central social and existential institution. Instead of income decoupled from labour, respondents favour policies that preserve work while transforming how it is organised and supported.

Taken together, the findings indicate that AI acceptance in Slovenia is conditional and relational. AI is welcomed when it is perceived as complementing human capabilities, but resisted when it is seen as undermining meaning, identity, or social value. These patterns suggest that the societal integration of AI will depend not only on technological performance, but also on the extent to which institutions succeed in framing AI as supportive of human agency rather than as a substitute for it.

Finally, the interpretations offered here should be considered in light of the study's exploratory design and limited sample size. Rather than aiming for statistical generalisation, the study focuses on early-stage meaning-making processes within a specific cultural context. In such settings, analytical coherence and convergence between quantitative tendencies and qualitative responses are particularly informative. The consistency of these patterns supports the value of the findings as a foundation for future longitudinal, comparative, and culturally sensitive research on AI and work.

Figure 1 - The AI–Identity–Readiness Triangle. A conceptual model synthesising theoretical perspectives and empirical patterns observed in the study. The figure serves as an interpretative heuristic rather than a causal or predictive model



Source: Authors' own illustration based on theoretical synthesis and survey findings

The triangle should therefore be read as a sensitising framework that organises interpretation, not as a model of causal relationships.

4.1 Implications for Policy and Governance

The findings point to several implications for debates on AI governance and labour policy. Stronger public support for policies that frame AI as a complement to human work, alongside limited endorsement of unconditional income replacement measures, suggests that work continues to function as a central source of identity and dignity in the Slovenian context.

Rather than calling for prescriptive policy solutions, these results highlight the importance of aligning AI governance with culturally embedded understandings of work and human value. From this perspective, socially legitimate AI integration appears to depend not only on technological effectiveness, but also on ethical oversight, the preservation of meaningful human roles, and equitable access to lifelong learning. Policies that acknowledge these dimensions may be better positioned to foster public trust and long-term acceptance of AI-driven change.

4.2 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The interpretations presented in this discussion should be considered in light of the exploratory nature of the study and its limited empirical scope. The small, non-representative sample does not allow for statistical generalisation, and the findings should therefore be understood as indicative rather than conclusive. In addition, the cross-sectional design captures perceptions at a single point in time and cannot account for how attitudes toward AI may evolve as its practical integration into work and society increases.

Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable insight into early-stage meaning-making processes related to artificial intelligence and highlights dimensions that are often overlooked in technocratic analyses. Future research would benefit from expanding the empirical base through larger and more diverse samples, enabling more robust statistical testing and comparative analysis across social groups.

Longitudinal and cross-national studies could further clarify whether anticipatory concerns identified here translate into concrete behavioural change over time, and how institutional frameworks, policy interventions, and increasing everyday exposure to AI shape readiness to adapt. In addition, qualitative approaches such as in-depth interviews or ethnographic studies could deepen understanding of the emotional and identity-related dimensions of AI that survey-based methods can only partially capture.

Answering RQ1: Perceptions of AI, Work, and Identity

In response to RQ1, the findings indicate that Slovenian citizens predominantly perceive artificial intelligence not as an immediate material force transforming everyday work, but as a symbolic and anticipatory phenomenon associated with future change. While most respondents report limited direct impact of AI on their current professional tasks, they simultaneously expect substantial future influence, pointing to a phase of societal anticipation rather than lived disruption.

Importantly, perceptions of AI are framed less in terms of economic risk and more through identity-related concerns, including potential loss of meaning, purpose, and social relevance. This suggests that AI is experienced primarily as a cultural and existential challenge rather than merely a technical or productivity-enhancing tool. Public understandings of AI in Slovenia are therefore deeply intertwined with the social meaning of work and with broader questions of human distinctiveness.

Answering RQ2: Willingness to Adapt and Conditions of Readiness

Addressing RQ2, the study finds that willingness to adapt to AI-related changes—through retraining, additional education, or acceptance of broader reforms—is largely conditional rather than proactive. Most respondents express readiness to upskill only if adaptation becomes unavoidable, indicating a strong dependence on external triggers such as institutional demands or structural pressures.

This conditional readiness appears to be shaped by the interaction of limited everyday exposure to AI, heightened identity-related vulnerability, and perceived insufficiency of system-level support for lifelong learning. As a result, adaptation is framed primarily as a reactive necessity rather than an opportunity for self-directed development. These findings underscore that individual readiness to adapt cannot be understood independently of institutional frameworks and culturally embedded narratives surrounding AI.

Conceptual Clarification

It is important to emphasise that the AI–Identity–Readiness Triangle is proposed as an interpretative and heuristic framework rather than a statistically tested explanatory model. Its purpose is to organise empirical insights and guide future hypothesis-driven research, rather than to establish causal relationships.

Implications for AI Governance and Social Integration

The findings of this study suggest that the societal integration of artificial intelligence cannot be understood solely as a technological or economic process, but must be approached as a cultural and institutional transformation. Public acceptance of AI in Slovenia is neither technophobic nor uncritical; rather, it is conditional and strongly shaped by concerns related to meaning, identity, and social value.

These patterns imply that legitimacy and trust in AI will depend less on technical performance than on the social conditions under which AI is introduced. Support is highest for applications that complement human work, while visions of replacement or post-work futures receive little endorsement. This underscores the importance of governance frameworks that safeguard human agency, transparency, and responsibility.

Furthermore, the conditional nature of readiness to adapt highlights that lifelong learning and reskilling cannot be framed as purely individual responsibilities, but require visible institutional support and social legitimisation. More broadly, the findings suggest that successful AI integration depends on recognising AI as a socio-technical and cultural challenge—one that must be negotiated collectively rather than imposed through technological inevitability.

CONCLUSION

The comparative study conducted between a public and a private organization empirically confirmed the existence of significant differences in the behavioral styles and expression of leadership competencies among employees. The private sector is characterized by a prevalence of dynamic, goal-oriented profiles (Lion/Rabbit), reflecting a higher level of initiative, decisiveness, and result orientation. In contrast, stable, collaborative profiles (Lamb/Turtle) were more common in the public sector, indicating greater reliability, process orientation, and emphasis on interpersonal relationships.

A shared finding across both organizations is the need for further development of soft skills—particularly in competencies such as empathetic leadership, effective feedback, conflict resolution, and collaborative communication. These findings are consistent with contemporary leadership research, which increasingly highlights the importance of emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills in complex organizational environments.

The use of the Problem-Based Learning (PBL) approach proved to be an effective method for bridging higher education with practice during the research process. PBL enables participants to tackle real-life challenges, develop interdisciplinary skills, and strengthen self-reflection and responsibility for learning. At the same time, it encourages the creation of concrete, context-specific solutions, further enhancing its practical value in both educational and organizational settings.

The coordinate analysis model used in the study demonstrated several advantages: it allows for visually accessible classification of individuals by behavioral styles, provides a diagnostic basis for understanding team dynamics, and offers a foundation for strategic workforce development planning. Due to its flexibility, ease of interpretation, and visual clarity, the model is suitable for use across sectors, organization sizes, and even international contexts.

For future research, we propose:

- ✓ expanding the sample to include a larger number of organizations and regions,
- ✓ incorporating longitudinal measurements to track the development of behavioral styles over time,
- ✓ conducting experimental studies to examine the effects of specific educational interventions,
- ✓ and integrating qualitative methods (e.g., in-depth interviews or focus groups) to better understand cultural and organizational factors related to competency development.

Based on the results and theories that emphasize the role of knowledge leadership in promoting innovation and mutual learning (Rahman et al., 2025), we recommend that the development of soft and leadership competencies also include targeted training to foster knowledge sharing, collective learning, and team-based innovation. Such an approach can strengthen the internal agility of organizations and support sustainable leadership.

In this way, it is possible to advance our understanding of behavioral styles within the context of complex organizational systems and contribute to the development of more inclusive, agile, and sustainability-oriented leadership practices.

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Appendix A

Survey Questionnaire (English Translation)

Section 1: Demographic Information

Q1. What is your age?

- 18–30
- 31–45
- 46–60
- 60+

Q2. You are currently employed in:

- Public sector
- Private sector
- Student
- Other: _____

Q3. In which sector do you primarily work? (multiple responses possible)

- Industry / Manufacturing
- Finance / Banking
- Healthcare
- Education
- Information Technology (IT)
- Construction
- Hospitality / Services
- Other: _____

Q4. What is your highest completed level of education?

- Secondary education
- Bachelor's degree (1st cycle)
- Master's degree (2nd cycle)
- Doctoral degree (PhD)

Section 2: Familiarity with and Use of Artificial Intelligence

Q5. How well do you know artificial intelligence (AI)? (1 = not at all, 5 = very well)

Q6. Do you think AI will significantly affect your profession in the future? (1 = not at all, 5 = very strongly)

Q7. Which AI-based tools do you use in your work? (multiple responses possible)

- Chatbots (e.g., ChatGPT)
- Analytical or predictive modelling tools
- Automated robots or machines
- Speech or text recognition tools (e.g., virtual assistants)
- Other: _____

Q8. To what extent is your work already automated or supported by AI? (1 = not at all, 5 = to a very high extent)

Q9. Has AI already affected the nature of your work?

- Yes
- No

Q9.1 If yes, how has AI affected the nature of your work? (Open-ended response)

Section 3: Adaptation and Attitudes toward AI

Q10. Are you willing to engage in additional education or retraining due to the introduction of AI? (−3 = strongly unwilling, +3 = strongly willing)

Q11. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements: (−3 = strongly disagree, +3 = strongly agree)

- **Q12a.** AI increases employee productivity.
- **Q12b.** AI reduces the need for human social and interpersonal skills.
- **Q12c.** AI helps with routine administrative tasks.
- **Q12d.** AI threatens the security of personal data.
- **Q12e.** AI is essential for companies' competitiveness.
- **Q12f.** I do not trust AI.

Section 4: Perceived Occupational Impact

Q13. In your opinion, which three professions will be most threatened by AI? (Please list in order of importance)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Q14. In your opinion, which three professions will be least affected by AI or may even be strengthened by it?

(Please list in order of importance)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Section 5: Policy Measures and Societal Responses

Q15. Please indicate your level of support for the following measures: (−3 = strongly oppose, +3 = strongly support)

- Free retraining and upskilling programmes of sufficient quality

- Introduction of a universal basic income
- Tax incentives for combining human labour with AI
- Incentives for investments in projects where human skills complement AI
- Development of ethical guidelines for AI use (privacy protection, prevention of bias)
- Other: _____

Section 6: Open Reflection

Q16. Do you have any additional thoughts, concerns, or ideas regarding AI and the future of work in Slovenia?

(e.g., personal experiences, concrete examples, useful links) (Open-ended response)