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Autonomy & accountability in 4IR: Ethical implications of AI driven automation in Sustainable Business

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to explore how AI in Industry 4.0 is impacting work and business, posing ethical concerns. It addresses labor market disruptions, organizational transformation, sustainability, algorithmic bias, data privacy, and job displacement ethics. The report examines how AI adoption might help inclusive economic development and SDGs.

Research Methodology: The research uses mixed methodologies, incorporating qualitative and quantitative data. Secondary sources include 2019–2025 academic journal articles, government papers, industrial publications, and international databases. The research uses a systematic literature review, thematic analysis, statistical evidence from robotics adoption databases, and case studies in manufacturing, logistics, and service industries to discover patterns. The integration of theory and practice employs descriptive-exploratory approaches.

Results: Results indicate rising global use of industrial robots and AI, with South Korea, Singapore, and Germany exhibiting the highest robot density. AI automates monotonous activities and creates hybrid professions that demand digital and analytical talents. AI-adopting companies are becoming more flexible and data-driven. However, ethical issues such algorithmic bias in recruiting and decision-making, surveillance technology privacy threats, and low-skilled worker job displacement persist.

Conclusions: AI has promise to improve productivity, efficiency, and sustainability, but requires strong governance, ethical frameworks, and ongoing reskilling. Without controls, inequities and ethical problems may grow

Limitations: The study depends on secondary data and literature evaluation, with minimal original field research for context-specific insights.

Contribution: This study advances ethics, management, sustainability, and offers practical AI recommendations for stakeholders.

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1. Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is being integrated into the global workforce, notably in Industry 4.0, prompting more writing on its revolutionary powers and challenges. Industry 4.0, which integrates AI, IoT, cyber-physical systems, and automation, is changing economies, labor markets, and business models. AI transforms sectors, raising ethical and socioeconomic issues like employment displacement, algorithmic biases, data privacy, and technology ethics. This study summarizes current studies on AI's impact on the workforce, ethics, and sustainable economic growth, highlighting the balance between scientific advancement and social accountability. AI adoption's economic and labor effects, particularly automation's influence on employment, have been extensively studied. Gaitan, Popa, Turcu, Gaitan, and Ungureanu (2008) argue that AI and automation are replacing human labor in regular and physical tasks, altering enterprises. However, the other writers stress new job categories and position reconfiguration, suggesting that AI can supplement human work rather than replace it.

This viewpoint claims that AI will eliminate jobs in certain industries but create new ones in AI development, data analysis, and systems maintenance (Ivanov, Dolgui, Sokolov, Werner, & Ivanova, 2016). However, some studies predict that technology may remove 47% of US jobs within 20 years (H. Liu, Wei, Ke, Wei, & Hua, 2016). Their findings show that routine and manual jobs are particularly vulnerable, with serious ramifications for low-skill, low-wage workers. Mkansi and Landman (2021) found that automation threatens employment, but the true impact depends on workers' adaptation to new duties and the education system's capacity to retrain them. In emerging nations, where AI is expected to affect labor markets more, job displacement is a major worry. In countries with large informal labor markets or where agriculture is important, AI may reduce access to new jobs, increasing income inequality (Peng, Quan, Zhang, & Dubinsky, 2016).

However, AI can enhance working conditions and productivity in agriculture, industry, and healthcare through automation and data analytics (Ralston, Blackhurst, Cantor, & Crum, 2015). The literature has focused on AI implementation's ethical implications. Algorithmic bias is a major AI ethical issue. AI systems, notably in hiring, criminal justice, and lending, are often trained on biased data, which perpetuates prejudice and injustice (Marcucci, Antomarioni, Ciarapica, & Bevilacqua, 2022). Due to hiring data biases, AI-driven recruiting systems may unintentionally favor male candidates over female ones (Liao, Deschamps, Loures, & Ramos, 2017). AI systems used in predictive policing disproportionately target minorities, raising ethical concerns (Gaitan et al., 2008). Researchers emphasize the need for open, accountable, and auditable AI systems to reduce algorithmic bias. Promotes diverse perspectives in AI system development, adding to this dialogue.

AI systems that decrease bias and assist all groups can be built by including stakeholders from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. Several academics recommend stronger legislative frameworks to hold firms accountable for AI system biases (Ardito, Petruzzelli, Panniello, & Garavelli, 2019). Since AI systems increasingly use personal and sensitive data, privacy and surveillance concerns are high. AI-driven surveillance technologies like facial recognition and biometric data collection raise privacy and mass surveillance problems (Chashi & Mwanza, 2022). The GDPR regulates the collection, storage, and processing of personal data, laying the groundwork for ethical AI use in the digital economy.

AI advances faster than legislative measures, making it harder to set comprehensive norms that protect individual rights (Makwinja, 2020). Recent attention has focused on AI's role in Industry 4.0 sustainability. Academics believe AI technologies can help achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by improving resource efficiency, waste reduction, and green technology (Su, Qin, Tao, & Umar, 2020). Some study suggests that AI might boost industrial energy efficiency, reduce carbon emissions, and improve supply chains. AI-enabled smart grids improve energy distribution management, reducing energy waste and integrating renewable energy (Su et al., 2020). Artificial Intelligence may also help circular economy models, which reuse, repurpose, and regenerate resources after usage. AI can detect resource consumption and waste generation trends to optimize product lifecycles, according to (Ralston et al., 2015).

AI may help organizations switch to sustainable production and consumption by optimizing resource utilization and reducing environmental impact. Integrating AI into sustainable development plans is also difficult. The energy use of artificial Intelligence, especially in deep learning model training, is concerning. Research suggests that training large AI models with non-renewable energy sources may harm the environment (Rajapathirana & Hui, 2018). As AI use grows, its environmental benefits must be balanced with its ecological consequences. Researchers advocate energy-efficient AI algorithms and renewable energy for AI systems (Adekanmbi & Ukpere, 2023). AI may also help underprivileged communities access healthcare, education, and financial services, improving social sustainability. AI-driven telemedicine solutions improve medical access in rural and economically disadvantaged areas (Adekanmbi & Ukpere, 2023). AI-powered educational platforms are democratizing high-quality education, reducing gaps between developed and developing economies (Alkatiri, Mokodompit, & Paramata, 2025; Suryawan, Husainah, Latuconsina, Pahala, & Sumardi, 2025). These AI applications can promote fair and inclusive social development, supporting the SDGs' goal of reducing inequality and promoting social inclusion.

The rapid development and application of AI technologies have highlighted the need for extensive regulatory frameworks to ensure ethical and proper use. Some experts believe AI regulation should include technology, economics, law, and ethics (Peng et al., 2016). Ethical AI frameworks must prioritize openness, accountability, justice, and privacy to ensure human rights and social welfare in AI technology creation and usage. AI's global nature makes control difficult. AI technology transcends borders, making government regulation difficult. Developing global AI ethics and governance guidelines requires worldwide collaboration.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development defines reliable AI as open, accountable, and inclusive. However, these principles are not legally enforceable, making enforcement problematic (Baderan, Lantowa, Makur, & Idji, 2025; Peckham, 2021). Flexible ethical AI frameworks are needed to adapt to AI technology's rapid evolution. AI systems must comply with societal and ethical norms as they develop autonomy and decision-making power. Some researchers believe AI systems must include accountability and supervision to ensure transparent and justifiable decision-making (Alkatiri et al., 2025; Orlitzky, Schmidt, & Rynes, 2003).

Literature on AI's impact on the workforce, ethics, and sustainable development highlights both its transformational promise and its challenges for Industry 4.0. AI boosts productivity, efficiency, and creativity, yet also raises ethical, societal, and environmental concerns. To ensure a sustainable and equitable future for AI technology, job displacement, algorithmic biases, privacy issues, and the digital gap must be addressed. The literature underlines the need for comprehensive ethical and regulatory frameworks for AI use. These frameworks must prioritize transparency, accountability, fairness, and inclusion to ensure responsible AI development and deployment. As AI alters industries and labor markets, governments, business leaders, and engineers must ensure fair distribution of AI's benefits and careful risk management. Thus, AI may help achieve Bangladeshi companies for Sustainable Growth Goals, social inclusion, and sustainable economic growth.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Accountability, Governance, Audits

Accountability means being responsible for a system, its behavior, and its results. Algorithms lack moral or legal agency, but governance systems may hold creators and users accountable (Neumann, Winkelhaus, Grosse, & Glock, 2021; Putra, Indriani, Midiastuty, Suranta, & Rahmat, 2025). The proposed standard ISO 37000 defines this structure as "the system by which the entire organization is directed, controlled, and held accountable to fulfill its core purpose over the long term." If AI creators strive to develop AI responsibly, they need a governance system that ensures organizational accountability.

Moll (2021) defined urgent governance in environmental studies as auditing for system dependability vs societal harm. A power plant may pollute and retain productivity. AI systems may be technically dependable and operational inside an engineering quality assurance framework, but not ethically compliant. Ethical evaluation of these systems requires a unique governance structure. This evaluation may be included in the quality assurance process, but it assesses and improves social benefits and values rather than accuracy or profit (Machmud, Imbran, & Baderan, 2025; Mkansi & Landman, 2021). Technical debt and reliability engineering do not address social impact, downstream effects in critical domains, or ethical and fairness issues, even though reliability concerns are interconnected, and industry practitioners have established practices for testing production AI systems.
An audit is what?

Audits check complex processes for compliance with business rules, industry standards, and laws (Mhlanga, 2022). The IEEE standard for software development defines an audit as "an independent evaluation of the conformity of software products and processes to relevant regulations, standards, guidelines, plans, specifications, and procedures" (Mhlanga, 2020). Algorithmic auditing has come to resemble bug bounties, where external hackers are paid to find vulnerabilities and faults in deployed software (Marcucci et al., 2022). Based on information security and financial intervention approaches X. Liu, Chen, Chen, and Yao (2022), these audits have raised public awareness of algorithmic accountability.

An external evaluation of automated face analysis systems found high error rates between darker-skinned women and lighter-skinned men, showing how AI systems might perpetuate institutional racism and sexism. According to Safiya Noble Liao et al. (2017), interaction failures occur when AI system conception and implementation interact with inequitable social contexts, resulting in skewed predictions (Lee, Bagheri, & Kao, 2015). These findings emphasize the need for companies to understand and document the social and power dynamics in their deployed technologies' environments to limit their products' impact. Method justice means a fair and thorough method yields a valid decision. Thus, uniform and robust frameworks that allow independent audits to validate standards are necessary to improve compliance through procedural fairness. Audit integrity is best accomplished when auditors follow an ethical standard supported by an expected code of conduct or norm regulating the audit process. In finance, any feeling of dishonesty or lack of openness in audit procedures would make audit subjects ignore the conclusions.

2.2 Internal Audit External auditing

Where firms respond to an external authority Uçkun, Uçkun, Kilinç, Yener, and Ceyhan (2024) is limited by restricted access to internal processes. External audits by reputed professionals are less affected by internal organizational issues; however, they can only obtain model results via API (Jaiyeoba & Iloanya, 2019). Intermediate models and training data are often trade secrets, so auditors cannot access them (Ivanov, Dolgui, & Sokolov, 2019). Internal auditors can directly access systems to integrate additional information not available for external audits, revealing previously undetected risks. Internal audits, like quality assurance, strive to improve, update, or check product release risk assessments. Internal audits compare the product candidate's real-world performance to standards-based system behavior. A transition from post-deployment audits to pre-deployment audits during development allows proactive ethical interventions rather than reactive actions that can only be implemented after deployment, as in an external approach. The global commercial aviation accident rate is one per two million flights (Ivanov et al., 2019). Aircraft and engine manufacturers, airlines, governments, regulatory agencies, and other industry players collaborated for years to achieve this excellent safety record. Modern avionic systems are larger and more complicated, as seen by the Boeing 787's 13 million lines of code.
Design Checklists.

Simple checklists help designers identify crucial questions, edge circumstances, and probable failures (Lee et al., 2015). Due to its safety and design benefits, aircraft use checklists extensively. Other risks of using checklists to create complex software include indiscriminate use and neglecting context and delicate concerns. However, a checklist may help. Avoid yes/no questions to avoid the checklist

becoming a box-checking exercise. Instead, ask designers and engineers about their ethical risk assessment methods. Checklists should be linked to system faults and risks.
Trackability.

Aerospace and safety-critical software engineering emphasizes traceability between product requirements, sources, and system design. This requirements engineering method is popular in software (Lee et al., 2015). It is difficult to determine the origin of large datasets, assess model weights, and understand their link to system demands in AI research. Novel methods are needed to understand hazards as sociotechnical systems get more complicated and large-scale artificial intelligence systems become faster and more sophisticated (Uçkun et al., 2024).
Failure Mode and Effect Analysis.

Safety engineering uses Failure Modes and Effects Analysis (FMEA), a rigorous and systematic risk management method that assesses a design or technology for issues (Jaiyeoba & Iloanya, 2019). An FMEA identifies, eliminates, and prevents potential defects in products, designs, systems, and services. The pharmaceutical and medical device industries perform regular internal and external quality assurance audits. Audit documentation trails are as important as pharmaceuticals and equipment. Medical device quality assurance audits began with infusion pump and auto injector failures (Ivanov et al., 2019).
Design Controls.

Medical device product development is well-defined. Medical device makers must create and enforce "design control" systems to assure design criteria compliance and auditable designs and development processes under Code of Federal Regulations Title 21. Design controls are formalised to ensure that the final product meets its purpose and that technical risks have been recognized and handled. Aim to reduce expected technological dangers to the lowest practical level.
Purpose.

Medical device manufacturers must follow procedures to ensure that design specifications match the device's "intended use." The risk level of a "device" (or, more often, an algorithm—refer to Ivanov et al. (2019) (for details) determines the level of design regulation needed. For example, a tongue depressor (a basic wooden instrument) is Class I, while a deep brain implant is Class IV. Unlike a Popsicle stick, a tongue depressor displaces the tongue to allow organ and tissue exploration. When evaluating a cat identification or tumor detection method, this consideration is crucial, as its use may lead to significantly different risk profiles and additional risks from unintended uses.

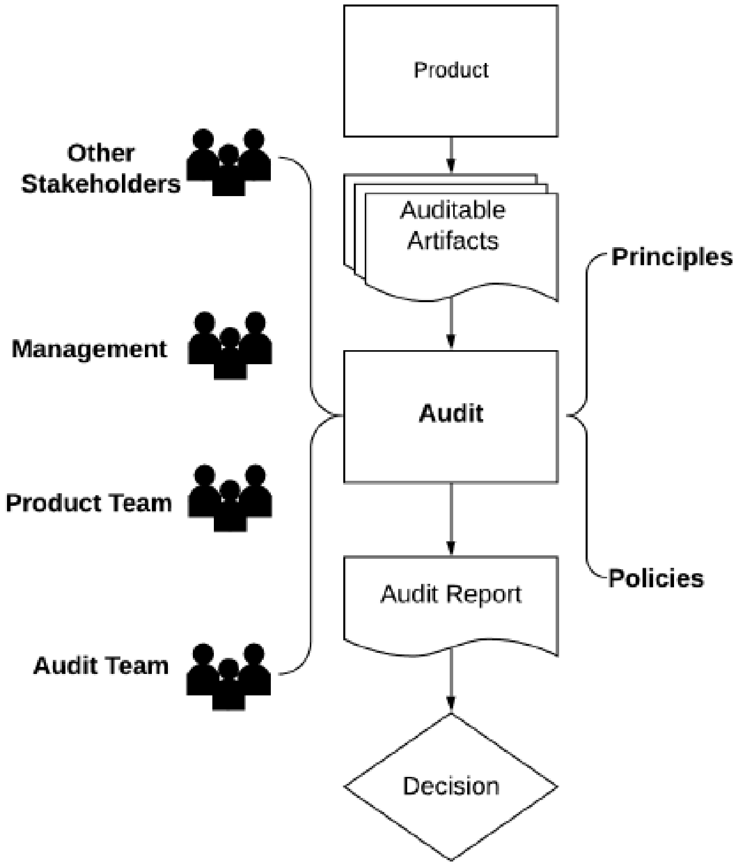

Figure 1. Summary of an internal algorithmic audit scenario. The audit occurs throughout product development and before launch. Led by the audit team, the product team, management, and stakeholders contribute to the audit. The audit considers policies, values, and ethical expectations to establish performance standards.
Source: Author

2.2.1 Design History.

The design control process—recording design input, output, review, verification, validation, transfer, and modifications—is essential for medical device makers. A design history file (DHF) must correctly capture the product and its development process and show that medical device designers and manufacturers followed design controls. New risks need constant updates to the DHF's risk assessment and hazard analysis. Medical product manufacturers aggressively pursue "post-market surveillance" to detect safety hazards. Structure susceptibility. In medicine, socioeconomic determinants of healthcare access and efficacy, and societal biases that affect prescriptions and treatments are widely understood. This broad recognition led to the creation of a framework for operationalizing structural vulnerability in healthcare settings and an evaluation instrument to document the expected social circumstances of a treatment or medical suggestion (Hoosain, Paul, & Ramakrishna, 2020). Algorithmic auditing should consider holistic, demographic, and environmental elements since social issues affect AI models and have social consequences.

Finance As computerized accounting systems emerged in the 1950s, corporate auditors continued to use manual methods to audit "around the computer." The Equity Funding Corporation incident and the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act in the 1970s prompted firms to improve internal control integration. It became more important to audit these systems directly. The 2002 Sarbanes-Oxley Act reformed the profession, emphasizing financial reporting and fraud prevention. However, financial auditing has lagged behind the technology-driven market and business financialization.

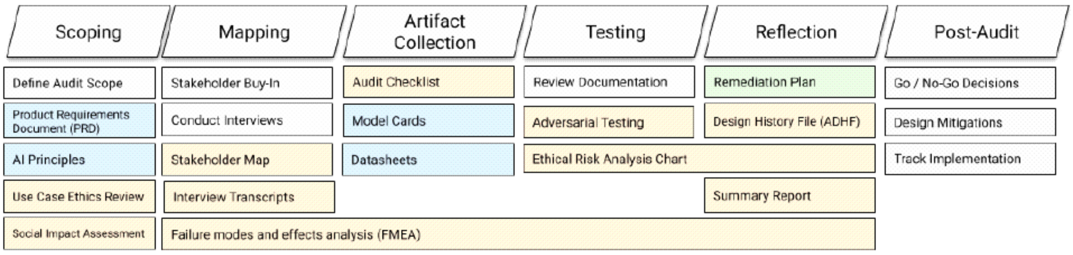

Figure 2. A Comprehensive Overview of the Internal Audit Framework. Gray represents processes, and colorful portions represent documents.The orange documents are from auditors, the blue ones from engineering and product teams, and the green ones are collaboratively developed.
Source: Author

2.2.2 Auditing Structure

Internal financial audits ensure that the company's formal governance system includes defining and communicating principles and objectives, monitoring their achievement, maintaining responsibility, and upholding values. Internal audits also assess if major risks in the company are being addressed properly. Internal financial auditors frequently have free access to critical company data, personnel, records, and outsourcing. Internal auditors must find, evaluate, appraise, and document sufficient material to meet audit goals, per IIA Performance Standard 2300, Performing the Engagement (Gereffi, 2017). The chief of internal audit sets the internal auditors' methodology and evidentiary requirements.

2.3 Key technologies and developments

Artificial Intelligence, sensors, and 5G communications infrastructure have enabled creative methods. Smart cities use technology to control traffic, alert authorities of full garbage bins, and detect criminal activity using facial recognition and gait analysis. 3D printers can make shoe insoles or spare parts on demand. Advances in biotechnology improve health and lifespan. Augmented reality helps surgeons perform more precise and minimally invasive surgeries by seeing the body and organs in three dimensions. Since 1990, the Human Genome Project has uncovered the genetic causes of diseases, while stem cell research might replace damaged cells in our bodies in vitro. These demonstrate numerous ways technology clusters are changing the world.

While other technologies contribute to the Fourth Industrial Revolution, many believe AI is key to disrupting business practices and society. Though AI has existed for decades (Gaitan et al., 2008). The convergence over the past decade of increased processing power and memory, along with the availability of vast amounts of free data, has driven its current use and rapid adoption, rather than AI discoveries or brain modeling. Google's early 2000s business strategy that monetized our browsing history foretold the arrival of free data and broad data privacy concerns. Many consider data the "new oil" and the cornerstone of the digital economy. Training AI algorithms is crucial, but insufficient training data has hampered AI applications. AI developers have profited from business practices that gather and store large amounts of data without remuneration, such as data farms for medical records.
Ethical challenges

Moore's predictions of the biannual doubling of processing power and memory capacity have mostly been correct, but silicon chip technology is reaching its limits. Quantum computing may be the next computer revolution, but only in areas where it outperforms ordinary computers in calculations and problem-solving. Quantum computing, now restricted to a few research labs, is unlikely to impact the Fourth Industrial Revolution soon. Modern technologies and processing capacities accelerate technology's infiltration of civilization at an unparalleled rate (Enholm, Papagiannidis, Mikalef, & Krogstie, 2022). This raises ethical issues.

Prior Industrial Revolutions had ethical difficulties, such as replacing specialized labor like weaving with more efficient mechanized looms, which exploited women and children as unskilled laborers. Technology took time to tackle these ethical issues, but automation increased production and created new fields like accounting and management. Big Tech's application of Fourth Industrial Revolution technology raises ethical questions that go beyond job issues and confront humanity. As Klaus Schwab notes, I am an avid admirer and early consumer of technology. However, I often wonder if our continuous incorporation of technology may erode human values like compassion and collaboration. Our relationship with cellphones shows this. Perpetual connectivity may deprive us of a critical resource: time to reflect and talk.

Life duration, health, intellect, and capabilities are being extended by biotechnology and AI, forcing us to rethink our morality (Enholm et al., 2022). Fourth Industrial Revolution technology is changing many aspects of human life. As artificial Intelligence automates human tasks, cognitive acuity decreases, reducing thinking, decision-making, and creativity (Dagada, 2024). Excessive interaction with digital assistants, robotic toys, healthcare robots encourages object personification and non-human interactions, affecting our ability to form and maintain genuine human connections. Our children's emotional and social development is hampered, reducing their empathy and emotional maturity for ordinary human relationships and social interactions. Personifying items creates ethical obligation and a desire to give them rights, leading to idolatry. Freedom and privacy are affected by the state's monitoring of citizens, whether through facial recognition or smart city data collection. Fourth Industrial Revolution ethics show that large technology businesses collect and exploit personal data for profit, compromising freedom and privacy, and leaving customers with no real alternatives. Free products and services are an abuse of power because Big Tech lures clients without informed permission concerning data usage, which is unacceptable.

2.3.1 Equality of access

Equitable access is a major concern regarding the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), which may worsen labor market inequities and make it harder for developing nations to adopt 4IR technologies. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted this issue, as Western nations utilized tracking apps and robots for hazardous tasks. Robots might sanitize surfaces with UV light, a risky task. The Wuchang field hospital in China used CloudMinds robots to assess temperature, distribute meals, collect filthy bedsheets, and dispose of medical waste (Choi, Chung, Seyha, & Young, 2020). Internet shopping increased even though people could still buy food in shops throughout the pandemic. This led to robots doing stock picking, reducing the need for humans. Some believe the epidemic will accelerate robots' adoption across industries, making furloughed people's jobs harder when nations return to normal (Chirita & Sarpe, 2024).

2.3.2 Disruption of labour markets

The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) disrupts labor markets, affecting blue-collar and white-collar workers, respectively. Mechanical automation is replacing manual work, a contrast from the first Industrial Revolution, although these limits are blurring. AI affects human-acquired skills like driving and drone control. Specialist-controlled medical robots help with complex procedures. When may a machine replace a skilled surgeon for such procedures? From accounting data analysis to medical imaging interpretation, AI systems perform many cognitive or specialized tasks formerly performed by humans. Even creative industries like journalism are driven by algorithms that can generate news from basic facts. Developers also want to push the boundaries in music and painting. Oxford Economics expects that manufacturing robots will remove 20 million jobs by 2030 (Chashi & Mwanza, 2022).

McKinsey Global Institute forecasts that automation would affect 75 million to 375 million jobs by 2030, or 3% to 14% of the global workforce Cascio and Montealegre (2016) remarked that some talented workers may be maintained and their productivity increased by job automation with existing technologies (Büchi, Cugno, & Castagnoli, 2020). show that automation will create new jobs, but they will require technical and interpersonal skills, especially in service and care. According to Oxford Economics, the "robotics dividend"—improved efficiency, GDP, and profit—will offset the effects on employment and create more jobs as demand and expenditure rise due to falling prices, higher income, and higher taxes. Automation is expected to create 250 million new jobs by 2030 to fulfill product and service demand, according to McKinsey. The service industry has grown, but many

people in transition may struggle to acquire the necessary skills for new jobs. Most research agrees that the main issue is reskilling and job mobility. Despite this, most OECD governments have cut training spending in the past two decades. Will jobless people be able to retrain or upgrade their education to qualify for these new jobs, even if many have pre-degree or vocational training?
Democracy under threat

The Capitol Hill, WA, riots on January 6, 2021, over the fiercely contested election of the 46th US President, are the result of years of digital addiction, notably on social media. How did a nation become so divided, with each party insisting it knows the truth? America is not alone; cultures worldwide are fragmenting, with different conceptions of "truth." The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) has serious ethical implications. Social media promotes worldwide connections—what is wrong with that? Technology easily traps us in a virtual world that disconnects us from reality (Brougham & Haar, 2018). How can a sophisticated civilization be so trusting? Social media and other digital platforms depend on machine learning algorithms that monitor every word and click. Based on human psychology, these algorithms evaluate our online activity to discreetly push us to get more involved, exposing us to other truths. As we communicate, we become entrenched in a group with similar views, distancing ourselves from other perspectives and disconnecting our connection to objective reality. The social bubble and its news streams become reality. We have lost the skill of conversation and bargaining, which only works in couples or small groups. The virtual world has deprived us of this while making us feel more connected. Social media prevents us from being patient and dedicated to real relationships. It protects us from the difficulties of true relationships, which evolve and contain human disputes and misunderstandings.

Table 1. Main technologies that are contributing to 4IR

Technology	Example applications
3D printing	Adidas scans your gait and styles a shoe just for you
AI	Facial recognition used to open your smart phone or for mass surveillance
IoT	Fridge connected to the internet to reorder contents when used
Robotics	Autonomous vacuum cleaners, stock or fruit pickers
Biotechnology	Growing replacement organs
Materials Science	Lighter and stronger materials
Quantum Computing	Modelling the human brain
Energy Storage	Electric cars
Blockchain	Crypto Currency

Source: Author

2.3.3 Asymmetry of power
Social media feeds our egos and exploits our worst traits. Virtual worlds are undermining our essence and humanity. Similar to other Industrial Revolutions, commerce is mostly in control, but a few major technology firms, including Google, Amazon, and Apple in the US and Tencent, Baidu, and Alibaba in China, drive this revolution. Many smaller specialized enterprises in artificial Intelligence, biotechnology, and cryptocurrency participate but are often bought by larger organizations (Binz & Truffer, 2017). Influential stakeholders fight to keep a minimum of laws to allow Big Tech's marketplaces to thrive. In his interview with EU Commissioner Thierry Breton, Mark Zuckerberg said that if the West fails to build a legal framework for the internet and digital sphere, China will. Our values are different, she reminded the crowd.

2.4 Need for agile governance and leadership
Most governance institutions are bureaucratic, but Big Tech's Fourth Industrial Revolution requires them to become more agile. Even companies, which are more trend-aware than public institutions, must adapt to rapid production changes, inventive solutions to current needs, and client demand. This is accompanied by increasingly advanced cybersecurity threats, disinformation, and hacking. AI algorithms, particularly in facial recognition and decision support applications, are inherently

stochastic and susceptible to bias and opacity, leading to fairness and justice issues, especially for specific ethnic groups (Belinski, Peixe, Frederico, & Garza-Reyes, 2020). In the next Industrial Revolution, industry and business leadership will need new skills, daring, and agility to protect privacy, promote justice, and stay competitive while adapting.

2.5 Challenging what it means to be human

The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) may threaten our identity and humanity more than labor markets and companies. Questioning human nature: As technology replicates human skills, we may grow dependent on them and lose our humanity. As we lose our ability to empathize, cognitive sharpness falls as we rely more on computers for decision-making, and, like autonomous automobiles, we lose moral agency, a human trait. Despite the EU's worldwide data privacy legislation, data has become the new currency in the Fourth Industrial Revolution, reducing freedom and privacy. Without a strong challenge to the economic paradigm that delivers free services and products for data, the effort would certainly fail. The rapid growth of this paradigm has led government agencies and businesses to feel they control our data and can use it as they choose (Arksey & O'malley, 2005). Blockchain technology has enabled the rise of cryptocurrencies, which threaten our privacy and freedom, as central banks govern the market by requiring their own digital money. If this happened, all financial transactions would be centrally recorded and linked to our identities, making economic activity impossible without government notice. A scenario like China's government control over its people.

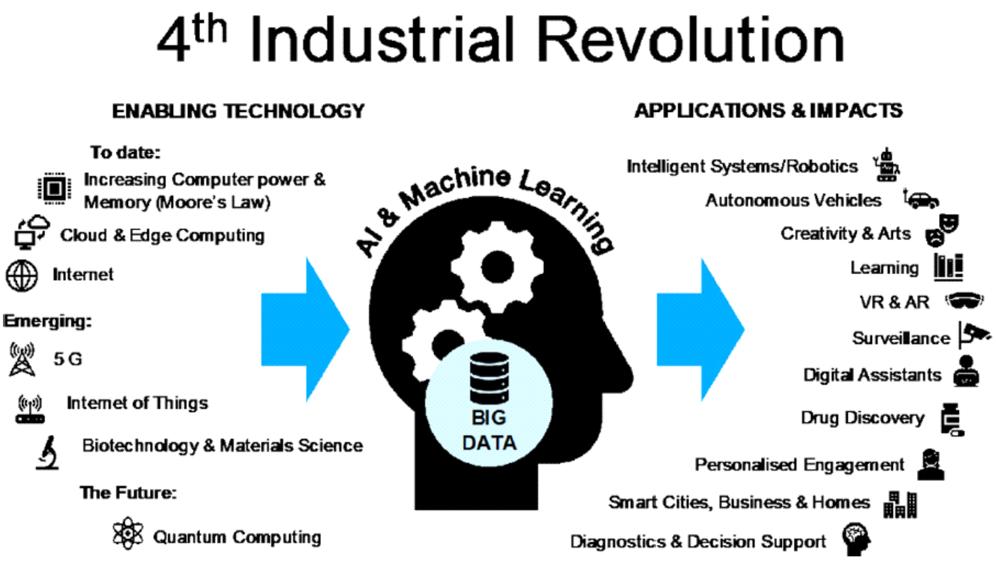

Figure 3. Artificial intelligence is important to several advancements in the Fourth Industrial Revolution, facilitated by various technologies, including upcoming ones such as 5G and future prospects like quantum computing.
Source: Author

2.5.1 Lure of progress

The ethical implications of the Fourth Industrial Revolution show that digital technology and artificial Intelligence are appealing because of the Enlightenment assumption that scientific and technical progress is desirable (Ardito et al., 2019). Enlightenment began in Europe in the 18th century and spread internationally, sparking the Industrial Revolution and free market economies of the West. So it is not surprising that there is an implicit expectation that the Fourth Industrial Revolution's technologies will improve our lives and comfort and help us thrive.

2.5.2 Losing consciousness

Businesses demand efficiency, leading us to become convenience-driven, but we often fail to understand what we are losing or how this technology affects us. At its most extreme, the Transhumanist worldview adopted by numerous high-tech CEOs advocates for transforming humanity through technology, especially AI (Ambroise, Prim-Allaz, & Teyssier, 2018). This theory suggests that humans might become Posthumans, beings with greater skills who could outlive humans by genetic alteration, pharmaceutical therapies, or brain uploading.

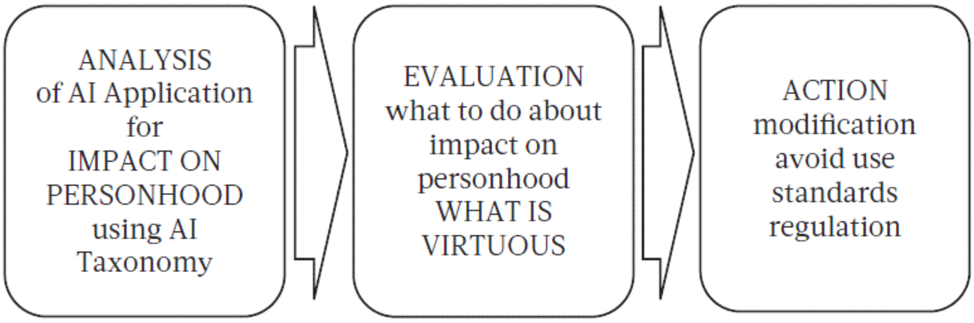

Figure 4. A paradigm for assessing the influence of AI applications on persons and subsequent actions. Although the emphasis is on AI, this methodology is applicable to any of the Fourth Industrial Revolution technologies.
Source : Author

The idea that technology is progress and useful has closed our eyes to its ethical ramifications. Social media, the internet, e-commerce, smart cities, and cutting-edge technology are used without considering their effects on humanity or our behavior and relationships (Akinrinola, Okoye, Ofodile, & Ugochukwu, 2024). Accelerating change makes us breathless and thirsty for novelty, so we anticipate shifts from job to job and relationship to relationship in search of something better and more gratifying. It gives the impression of more control over our lives and the digital world. The evidence shows that this technology is already dominating us; kids struggle to remove the "lens" through which they see and interact with the world. Their domain is digital technologies and AI. This technology has become a new priesthood, mediating our relationships and understanding of the world. Many people are dependent on this technology and feel insecure and emotional in face-to-face conversations when it is withdrawn. Our virtual world has subjugated us. Digital tyranny occurs when Big Tech and the government undermine our freedom and privacy.

3. Research Methodology

The technique utilized in this study aims to thoroughly examine the obstacles, ethical issues, and ramifications of artificial Intelligence (AI) in influencing the future of labor, especially within the framework of Industry 4.0. This methodology employs both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, utilizing a mixed-methods design to tackle the complex character of the topic. This research utilizes secondary data analysis, encompassing a literature review and statistical data. It employs a descriptive exploratory methodology to examine the effects of AI on the workforce, with an emphasis on ethical concerns and economic ramifications in Industry 4.0. The research seeks to investigate both the theoretical dimensions of AI integration and practical insights derived from industry case studies, surveys, and expert perspectives. The primary aim of the study is to assess the impact of AI adoption on labor markets, organizational frameworks, and societal aspects, as well as to provide ethical guidelines to manage these changes successfully.

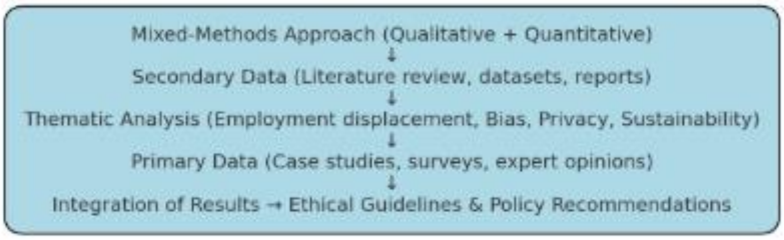

Figure 5: Methodology Framework
Source: Author

An overview of the links among terminology and topics of interest in the field of AI about the future of employment for sustainable Industry 4.0. This may be utilized to find novel research and development prospects in this domain. The role of AI in the future of work is examined through a comprehensive systematic literature assessment, which underpins the theoretical framework and contemporary discourse around AI in Industry 4.0. The review sources were chosen from several academic databases, with selection criteria emphasizing research published between 2019 and 2025 to guarantee the incorporation of the most current ideas. The study encompasses research on the economic ramifications of AI, workforce evolution, ethical issues, and sustainability within the framework of Industry 4.0. The literature review data is examined using thematic analysis, revealing prevalent themes and patterns including employment displacement, algorithmic bias, data privacy, and the socioeconomic effects of AI. This technique facilitates the discovery of deficiencies in current research, areas of agreement, and domains requiring additional exploration.

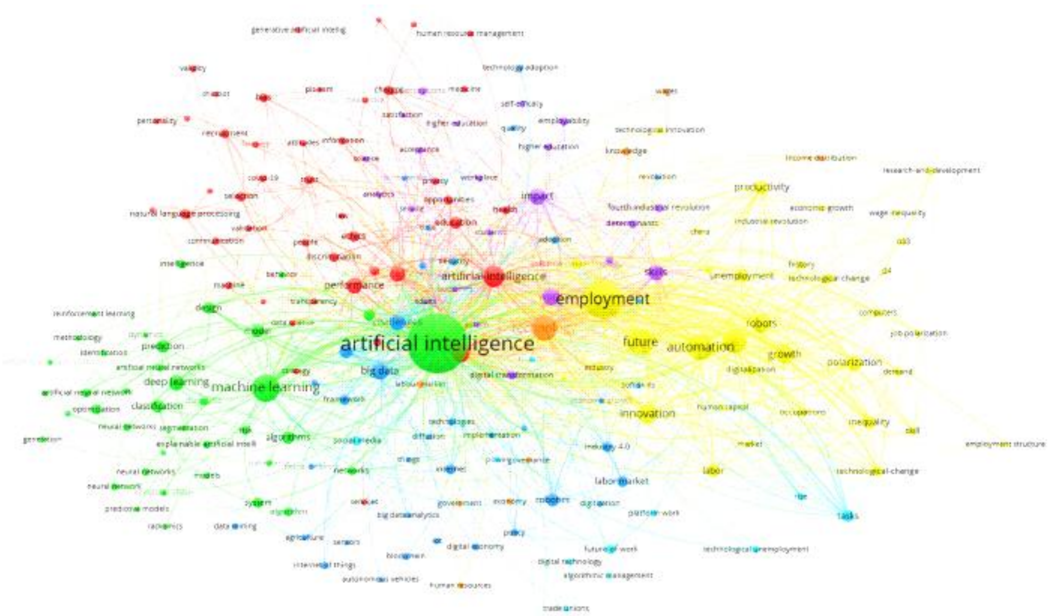

Figure 6. AI in shaping the future of work
Source : Author

3.1 Research Design
The results of this secondary data analysis serve as a foundation for developing hypotheses and directing the original data collection. Alongside secondary data, primary data was collected to furnish empirical evidence on the role of AI in workforce transformation, ethical dilemmas, and sustainable practices within Industry 4.0. The current study employs a descriptive-exploratory research approach, aptly adapted to examine the intricate and interrelated effects of AI on labor markets and ethical issues. This methodology enables a comprehensive evaluation of theoretical frameworks, empirical data, and policy ramifications, guaranteeing a holistic study. The principal research aims encompass: •

O.1. Assessing the disruptive impact of AI on labor frameworks and organizational paradigms. • O.2. Recognizing ethical challenges related to AI implementation, including algorithmic unfairness, data privacy concerns, and employment displacement. • O.3. Evaluating the alignment of AI with sustainable economic growth and its contribution to the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The descriptive component classifies current phenomena, while the exploratory portion examines new trends and patterns, facilitating the connection between theoretical ideas and practical implementations.

Figure 7. AI integration in workforce
Source: Author

4. Results and Discussion

This study's principal research aims centered on obtaining and evaluating publicly accessible datasets from businesses profoundly impacted by artificial Intelligence (AI). The identified industries encompass manufacturing, logistics, and other areas essential to Industry 4.0 (Agbehadji, Awuzie, & Ngowi, 2021). The technique utilizes secondary datasets acquired from credible sources, including government databases, industry publications, academic institutes, and AI-centric repositories.

4.1 AI's impact on workforce transformation and organizational models

The research highlights economic and informational aspects, including labor market fluctuations, productivity measurements, operational efficiency indicators, and rates of AI adoption. The expansion of industrial robotics has reached unparalleled heights, establishing a worldwide standard with over 3.9 million active robots documented in 2024. This milestone highlights the significant influence of automation technology on contemporary industries, altering production processes and worker dynamics globally. The Republic of Korea is at the forefront of robotic adoption, with a remarkable robot density of 1,012 robots per 10,000 employees. This statistic illustrates the nation's strategic emphasis on automation as a fundamental element of its industrial policy, especially in the electronics and automotive manufacturing industries. Singapore exemplifies its dedication to technological progress with a robot density of 730 units per 10,000 employees. The nation's focus on intelligent manufacturing and its status as a global logistics center have further enhanced this elevated degree of automation. Germany, with a density of 415 robots per 10,000 people, epitomizes the forefront of automation in Europe. Germany's significant embrace of robots is predominantly focused on its automotive and engineering industries.

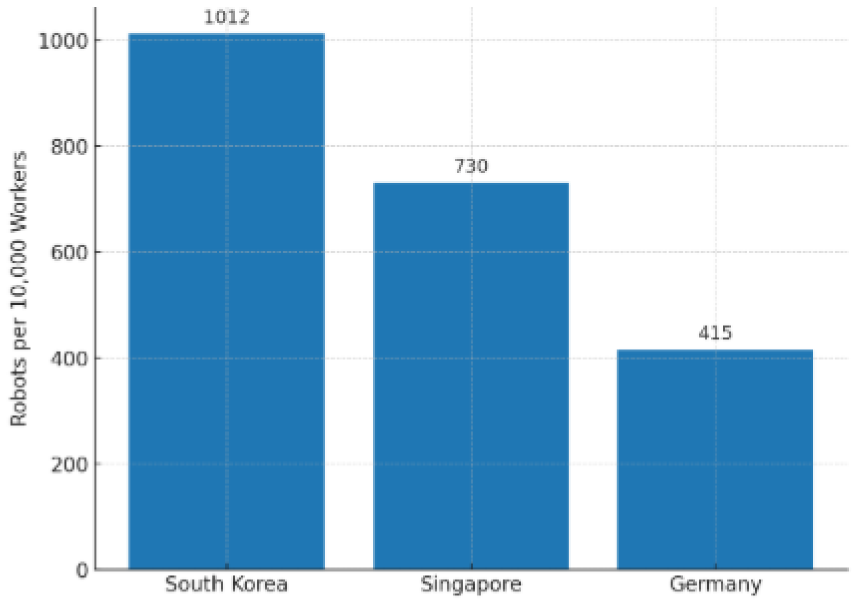

Figure 8: Robot Density per 10,000 workers
Source: Author

This extensive integration is enabled by robust collaboration between industry and academics, promoting the advancement of innovative robotics solutions. The differing robot densities across these nations underscore the relationship between technological adoption, industry goals, and worker tactics. A high density of robots often corresponds with sophisticated industrial environments that prioritize efficiency, accuracy, and scalability. Furthermore, these statistics indicate overarching economic and policy trends that emphasize automation as a strategy to sustain global competitiveness in progressively digitized and automated markets. This paper demonstrates the pivotal significance of industrial robots in defining Industry 4.0, with substantial consequences for productivity, employment, and the global economic framework. 3.2 AI's influence on workforce transformation and organizational structures is profound, since AI-driven technologies are radically reshaping work by automating repetitive and labor-intensive tasks, therefore allowing employees to concentrate on more strategic and creative endeavors. This rearrangement is notably apparent in sectors like manufacturing and logistics, where robots and AI systems have replaced conventional positions, enhancing operating efficiency and lowering costs. The rise of hybrid job profiles, integrating human ingenuity and problem-solving with AI-enhanced decision-making, signifies a substantial transformation in workforce composition. Furthermore, the equilibrium between automation and human participation prompts essential inquiries regarding the significance of human labor in AI-driven environments. Organizations in all industries are progressively implementing AI technology to streamline operations, boost productivity, and refine decision-making processes. AI-driven instruments like predictive analytics, supply chain optimization systems, and automated quality control procedures have empowered companies to address market demands with more efficacy.

4.2 Ethical dimensions of ai adoption: bias, privacy, and workforce displacement

AI-driven predictive maintenance solutions in manufacturing save downtime by anticipating equipment breakdowns, resulting in significant cost reductions. Adapting organizations to AI necessitates a reevaluation of conventional hierarchical frameworks. Companies are transitioning to agile organizational structures that emphasize cross-functional teams and autonomous decision-making. AI systems deliver data-driven insights that enable employees across all tiers to make educated decisions, promoting a culture of innovation and cooperation. Notwithstanding these advantages, the incorporation of AI presents considerable obstacles, such as the danger of excessive dependence on automated systems, possible biases in decision-making algorithms, and the necessity for ongoing upgrades to AI infrastructure. Organizations must address ethical problems, including openness in AI-driven choices and the effects on staff morale due to work automation. The incorporation of AI into the workforce has necessitated immediate reskilling and upskilling programs to equip individuals for AI-enhanced positions. Conventional skills are becoming outdated as AI technologies progress swiftly, leading corporations and governments to allocate resources towards education and training initiatives designed for the requirements of Industry 4.0. The principal focal points for workforce development, highlighting the necessity to augment skills, cultivate leadership, boost employee engagement, advance diversity and inclusion, and facilitate continuous learning and innovation.

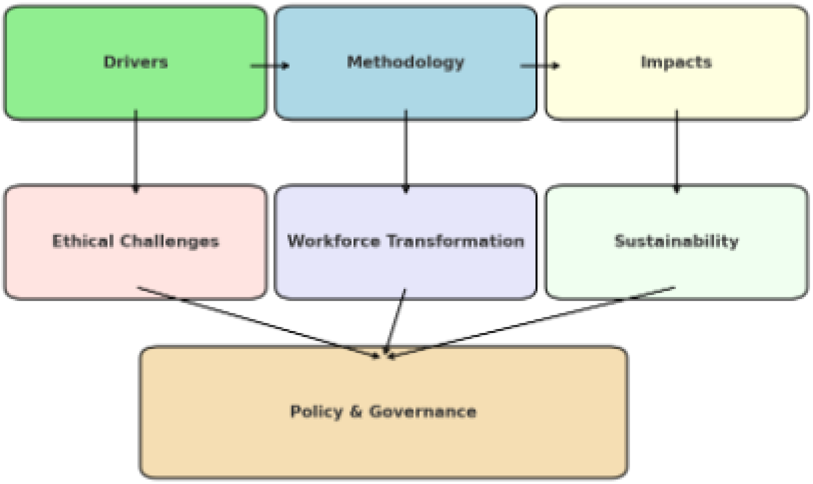

Figure 9: AI adoption in Industry 4.0
Source: Author

These characteristics are essential for ensuring that the workforce is sufficiently equipped to meet the growing needs of the contemporary workplace, especially in light of swift technological progress. Proficiency in programming languages, machine learning methodologies, and AI system administration is essential for personnel in positions directly involved with the implementation and oversight of artificial Intelligence. These technical abilities are essential for the proper implementation and enhancement of AI technologies inside organizational structures; hence, the cultivation of critical thinking, problem-solving, and emotional Intelligence has gained significant importance. These skills enhance the technical capabilities of AI systems, allowing employees to navigate intricate decision-making processes, manage uncertainty, and engage with technology and colleagues effectively; thus, fostering a culture of continuous learning is essential for workforce adaptability. Examples encompass initiatives such as AI apprenticeship programs and collaborations between technology firms and academic institutions to create AI-centric courses. Nonetheless, variations in access to these programs among various areas and populations provide a barrier, requiring inclusive initiatives to close the digital divide.

The adoption and effect of AI differ markedly between geographical areas and sectors, shaped by variables like economic growth, legal frameworks, and cultural attitudes toward technology. Countries such as the United States, Germany, and Japan have adopted AI more rapidly, bolstered by significant expenditures in research and development, sophisticated infrastructure, and a highly proficient workforce. These nations have experienced substantial productivity improvements and creative implementations of AI across several sectors, including healthcare and automobile production. Conversely, areas like Southeast Asia and Latin America are utilizing AI to tackle specific difficulties, like augmenting agricultural output and expanding healthcare accessibility. Nevertheless, these economies frequently encounter obstacles, such as insufficient finance, deficient digital infrastructure, and skill deficiencies among their workforce.

The effects of AI implementation vary among industries. Manufacturing and logistics are significantly impacted by automation, but service businesses get advantages from AI-enhanced customer interaction tools and increases in operational efficiency. Conversely, areas such as education and public administration have been sluggish in adopting AI, frequently owing to legal obstacles and reluctance to embrace change (Chashi & Mwanza, 2022). By analyzing these variances, stakeholders may discern optimal practices and customize tactics to specific local situations. For example, whereas South Korea has the highest robot density per worker, underscoring its preeminence in industrial automation, nations with low robot density might derive insights from these models to expedite their AI integration.

This study's methodological approach successfully integrated theoretical and practical views, offering a refined comprehension of AI's influence on the future of work and the promotion of sustainable industry practices. The results provide a basis for governments, entrepreneurs, and researchers to address the problems and possibilities presented by AI in the changing context of Industry 4.0. 3.3. The ethical implications of AI adoption include prejudice, privacy concerns, and worker displacement. The swift incorporation of AI into industrial environments, especially under Industry 4.0, has resulted in significant transformations in labor markets, organizational frameworks, and social structures. Although AI possesses considerable promise to enhance productivity, efficiency, and creativity, it simultaneously introduces certain ethical dilemmas that need thorough examination. This section of the article is on identifying and assessing the ethical difficulties linked to AI adoption, particularly examining concerns over algorithmic unfairness, data privacy, and job displacement. These issues have obvious ramifications for firms and employees, while also prompting wider inquiries of justice, responsibility, and human dignity in a swiftly evolving technology environment.

A significant ethical problem with AI is algorithmic bias, which denotes the systematic favoring or prejudice included in AI models during their decision-making processes. Artificial intelligence systems, especially those powered by machine learning algorithms, depend significantly on extensive datasets to provide predictions and inform actions. Nonetheless, these databases frequently contain historical biases, mistakes, or unrepresentative samples that may result in distorted conclusions. In workforce management, AI techniques are progressively utilized for making judgments regarding recruiting, promotion, and performance review. If AI systems are trained on data that embodies social biases—such as gender, racial, or socioeconomic disparities—there is a risk that the algorithms would perpetuate or even intensify these inequities. Research indicates that AI-driven recruiting systems, when trained on historical hiring data, may unfairly favor male candidates for technical positions and neglect candidates from underrepresented backgrounds (Gaitan et al., 2008).
Moreover, algorithmic bias may occur across several areas, including banking, healthcare, and law enforcement, where AI systems may unintentionally benefit some groups while disadvantaging others. In manufacturing or logistics, AI systems intended to enhance processes may favor efficiency at the expense of human welfare, thereby fostering dangerous work conditions or abusing low-wage workers. Consequently, tackling algorithmic bias is essential for guaranteeing that AI technologies promote, rather than hinder, justice and social equity in the workforce. To mitigate algorithmic prejudice, it is imperative to implement transparent and inclusive AI design methodologies. This entails utilizing varied and representative datasets, integrating ethical principles in AI model creation, and conducting frequent audits of AI systems for biases and errors. Moreover, enhancing openness in the decision-making processes of AI systems may cultivate trust among users and stakeholders, ensuring that AI adoption adheres to ethical ideals of justice and equity.

A significant ethical quandary in the deployment of AI is data privacy. AI systems depend on extensive data, prompting considerable worries around the collection, storage, and utilization of personal information. In Industry 4.0, where AI applications are pervasive throughout supply chains, production processes, and customer interactions, the magnitude and sensitivity of the data being analyzed are unparalleled. In this environment, AI systems frequently need access to personal data, including consumer preferences, purchasing patterns, employee performance indicators, and medical histories. In the absence of stringent data privacy safeguards, this information may be misappropriated for commercial advantage or misused, resulting in violations of personal privacy rights. Moreover, AI-driven surveillance technologies, progressively adopted in workplaces, might foster cultures of perpetual monitoring, eliciting ethical issues regarding employee autonomy and dignity.

In labor markets, breaches of data privacy might erode trust in AI systems, especially when employees perceive that their personal information is utilized for reasons beyond their authorization. To address data privacy problems, enterprises must establish stringent data governance frameworks that guarantee adherence to privacy requirements, including the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in the European Union. These frameworks must emphasize user permission, data minimization, and openness about data utilization. Furthermore, enterprises should allocate resources towards data encryption technologies and guarantee that AI systems are engineered to uphold user privacy while facilitating effective data processing for industrial optimization.

The potential of AI to automate processes and optimize operations poses a considerable problem regarding employment displacement. In summary, tackling job displacement necessitates coordinated initiatives from governments, corporations, and educational entities to invest in reskilling and upskilling programs. These programs must concentrate on providing workers with the digital and cognitive competencies essential for success in an AI-driven economy. Moreover, social safety nets, such as universal basic income (UBI) or salary subsidies, might offer temporary financial assistance to displaced workers. At the same time, they develop new skills or shift to different industries (de Paz-Báñez, Asensio-Coto, Sánchez-López, & Aceytuno, 2020). Furthermore, enterprises must adopt a more ethical approach to AI deployment by assessing the broader societal implications of automation and implementing measures to mitigate harm to employees. This entails advocating for inclusive growth policies that guarantee AI adoption advantages for all societal sectors, rather than consolidating wealth and possibilities within a select few.

4.3 AI integration for sustainable development and alignment

The study comprehensively tackles the ethical issues related to AI implementation by meticulously analyzing critical obstacles, including algorithmic unfairness, data privacy concerns, and employment displacement. This research highlights the complex equilibrium between harnessing AI's disruptive capabilities and maintaining justice, accountability, and social equality in its use within Industry 4.0. 3.4 The integration of AI for sustainable development and alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can transform global economic development models, impacting sustainability practices across diverse sectors. AI in manufacturing facilitates predictive maintenance by using machine learning algorithms to anticipate equipment problems before they occur, thereby minimizing expensive repairs and operational interruptions. AI enhances the longevity and efficiency of machines, hence decreasing expenses and minimizing waste generated by inefficient operations (Zheng, Paiva, & Gurciullo, 2020).

Furthermore, AI-driven technologies like smart grids in the energy industry enhance electricity distribution, guaranteeing the effective and sustainable utilization of energy resources. In agriculture, artificial intelligence technology like precision farming systems employs data from sensors, drones, and satellite imaging to facilitate real-time choices on irrigation, fertilization, and pest management. This diminishes the overutilization of water, fertilizers, and pesticides, hence reducing the environmental impact of agricultural activities (Lee et al., 2015). Artificial Intelligence in these sectors facilitates Sustainable Development Goal 12 - Responsible Consumption and Production by enhancing sustainable production methodologies and reducing resource wastage (Ametepey, Aigbavboa, Thwala, & Addy, 2024). Artificial Intelligence significantly propels innovation in green technology, which is essential for attaining sustainability objectives. Artificial Intelligence may expedite the advancement of renewable energy solutions by enhancing energy production and storage systems, which are crucial for the transition from fossil fuels and the alleviation of climate change.

AI algorithms are progressively employed to enhance the efficiency of solar panels and wind turbines. These technologies can predict energy production based on meteorological patterns, optimize the positioning of renewable energy equipment, and improve the integration of renewable sources into national power networks. AI-driven energy storage systems facilitate the retention of surplus renewable energy for utilization during off-peak periods, diminishing dependence on non-renewable energy sources and promoting a more stable and sustainable energy supply (Mhlanga, 2022). Moreover, AI-driven innovations in electric mobility are revolutionizing the transportation industry, a significant source of carbon emissions.

The advancement of AI algorithms that enhance traffic flow and route optimization can decrease fuel consumption, while autonomous electric vehicles (EVs) are expected to cut emissions in urban environments. These technologies correspond with SDG 13 - Climate Action by facilitating the reduction of carbon footprints and alleviating climate change (Mhlanga, 2022). Although AI raises apprehensions over job displacement, it simultaneously possesses the capacity to generate new possibilities for equitable growth, a fundamental aspect of SDG 8 - Decent Work and Economic Growth (Mhlanga, 2022). AI-driven solutions may augment productivity across industries, allowing firms to function more effectively while generating new opportunities for employment in nascent professions.

The extensive implementation of AI in healthcare, manufacturing, and logistics might stimulate the development of specialist positions in data analysis, AI system maintenance, and machine learning. To guarantee that AI fosters equitable growth, policymakers must prioritize skills development and reskilling initiatives for workers affected by automation. This may include providing training in digital competencies, artificial intelligence literacy, and data analysis, which are highly sought after across several sectors. AI facilitates workers' adaptation to emerging technologies, hence promoting economic diversity and mitigating inequality, in alignment with SDG 10 - Reduced Inequality (Peckham, 2021). Moreover, AI may be utilized to mitigate disparities in access to services like healthcare and education, especially in marginalized areas. AI-powered mobile health applications and online educational platforms provide options for engaging underrepresented communities, enhancing health and educational results worldwide.

5. Conclusion

Artificial Intelligence possesses significant potential to expedite the shift towards a circular economy, a framework aimed at minimizing waste and maximizing resource utilization. By employing AI in design and production, firms may implement more sustainable practices by creating goods that are simpler to discard, reuse, or repurpose. AI technologies, including machine learning and data analytics, can enhance the effectiveness of waste management systems by forecasting trash creation trends, optimizing collection routes, and improving material sorting and recycling. These technologies advance SDG 9 - Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure by enhancing industrial systems and promoting the establishment of sustainable infrastructure (Mkansi & Landman, 2021). Moreover, AI's capacity to enhance logistics and supply chains contributes to the reduction of emissions and the advancement of transportation network sustainability, hence bolstering SDG 12 - Responsible Consumption and Production (X. Liu et al., 2022).

Furthermore, AI allows organizations to evaluate the ecological consequences of their activities and formulate ways to mitigate them. AI systems can evaluate data on energy use, emissions, and waste generation, equipping firms with the knowledge necessary to formulate sustainability policies and match their operations with environmental requirements. The study clearly illustrates the alignment of AI technologies with sustainable economic development and their role in achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through resource optimization, innovation in green technologies, promotion of inclusive growth, and facilitation of the transition to circular economic practices (Mhlanga, 2020).

The research indicates that the interaction of workforce restructuring, organizational adaptability, skill development, and global comparisons highlights the revolutionary potential of AI in determining the future of work in Industry 4.0. Comprehending these interactions is essential for formulating policies and tactics that effectively leverage AI's potential while simultaneously confronting the ethical and societal dilemmas it poses. By synchronizing AI implementation with inclusive and sustainable methodologies, enterprises and governments may adeptly address these difficulties, guaranteeing equitable and significant contributions to economic and social advancement.

The ethical concerns related to AI adoption, such as algorithmic bias, data privacy, and job displacement, are crucial issues that must be resolved to guarantee that the incorporation of AI technologies into the workforce is egalitarian, transparent, and consistent with human dignity. As AI increasingly influences the future of employment in Industry 4.0, legislators, corporate leaders, and technologists must collaborate in formulating frameworks and solutions that address these ethical dilemmas. Promoting transparency, equity, and accountability in AI design and implementation may cultivate a more inclusive and sustainable labor market that harnesses AI's transformational potential while protecting the rights and well-being of workers.

The integration of AI technologies with sustainable economic growth and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is essential for guaranteeing that AI promotes industrial advancement while simultaneously improving the welfare of individuals and the environment. Through the optimization of resource use, the encouragement of green technologies, the advancement of inclusive growth, and the consideration of the ethical implications of AI, artificial Intelligence may significantly contribute to the establishment of a more sustainable and fair future. As companies evolve towards Industry 4.0, the incorporation of AI must be directed by regulations that guarantee its potential is fully actualized to benefit society, bolster economic resilience, and aid in the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

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