Comparison of Trust in AI vs Peer Tools in Generation Alpha Education

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Abstract

Students aged 15-17's usage of AI in educational settings has been dramatically increasing in today's education, with both benefits and drawbacks reported in the literature. However, excessive dependency on AI raises concerns of technostress, fatigue, and anxiety among students that can negatively impact relationships with learning. Additionally, decreases in peer connection have led to a lack of social learning. However, upon conducting a digital study at Davis Senior High, the 101 sophomores surveyed routinely scored higher on trust for peers over their trust for AI on three of four metrics of trust: personalization, intent, and objectivity. Only AI consistency was scored higher than peer consistency. Research suggests that boosting peer trust and classroom connection over AI usage would directly contribute to improving the lack of peer consistency. Creating a stronger, more diverse student network can increase peer trust and connection effectively. Given the geographical cluster sample, more research is needed to expand on the differences in trust between AI and peers.

Introduction

Trust is a complex, subjective social-psychological phenomenon, but can be determined by general, more assessable factors. These include objectivity, intention, consistency, and personalization (Hancock et al., 2023; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2015). Distrust, such as in people and corporations, has widely been labeled a non-opposite of trust (Wildman et al., 2025). Instead, the opposite of trust can be measured when the trustor finds a lack of objectivity, intention, consistency, and personalization within the trustee. Additionally, interpersonal trust can be analyzed using the Pyramid Structure Model (Fu et al., 2024). This model describes trust as a modification of an individual trust baseline by trust risks and rewards of actions, which results in the end trust behavior. Therefore, combining the factor and pyramid theory can be used to inform perspectives on interpersonal trust even between a person and an AI algorithm.

Within high-school education, students have increasingly utilized AI to search for information, get help for schoolwork, and for entertainment (McClain et al., 2026). Within the academic ecosystem, reduced peer interaction and other social factors may contribute to greater dependency on generative AI among students (Liao et al., 2025; Hou et al., 2024). In a broader social context, the average time spent socializing and communicating among Americans aged 15 and older decreased from 41 minutes daily in 2015 to 35 minutes in 2025 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2026). Although this decline began before the widespread adoption of generative AI and may have been influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic during 2020, it reflects the broader changes in socializing and communication patterns over the past decade.

These behaviors represent the end trust behavior, or resulting action from trust factors, of the Pyramid Structure Model (Fu et al. 2024); when AI is being used more than peers, it demonstrates a difference in trust factors. However, AI usage does not necessarily indicate AI trust, as students may choose AI tools for their convenience instead. This distinction is important to differentiate end action from ethical trust factors within the model, given the widespread perception among teenagers that students frequently use AI to cheat on schoolwork (McClain et al., 2026). Research also suggests that building interpersonal trust is an essential component for adolescents to navigate and improve socially stressful school environments (Ma et al., 2026). Based on these findings, I hypothesized that differences in trust between the students and AI could be one factor influencing students' preferences for AI over peer-based academic assistance. Therefore, our study examines the specific dimensions of trust that may shape students' perceptions of AI and peers as reliable sources of academic support.

This study empirically examines how interpersonal trust between students and AI is created, utilizing the Pyramid Structure to assess determining trust factors of objectivity, intention, consistency, and personalization. Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

(RQ1) How do respondents rate general social, judicial, and consumer trust?
(RQ2) How do students compare AI and peers on personalization, intention, consistency, and objectivity in academic settings?

(RQ3) How do students perceive their peers' trust in AI relative to their own?
(RQ4) How do reported ratings differ across age and gender groups?

Methods

Surveys

In order to understand whether Generation Alpha trusts their peers or AI more in academic settings, I used a cross-sectional Google Forms survey. This survey used a name-check for identifiable responses, demographic selection choices for age, gender, and race, and quantitative responses on a scale of 1-5 for the survey questions. The survey was accessed by a QR code physically presented by the single survey giver, which respondents would respond to on their personal device. This survey included three parts, divided by form page and titled accordingly, meant to assess the Pyramid Model, including General Trust Index, Comparative Trust, and then Perceived Peer Trust. Terms and definitions were embedded within the question to reduce confusion.

Participants and Recruitment

Davis Senior High sophomores were recruited to participate in the research study through convenience-sampling, without selective discretion, including seven entire classrooms of sophomores. All participants provided written informed consent prior to data collection, in accordance with the protocols approved by the Davis Senior High School IRB "Trust in the Digital Age." IRB approved permission slips were maintained and approved by the school office. Recruitment and surveys were completed from May 20th, 2026 between to June 6th, 2026. The demographic information for all participants is reported in Table 1.

Survey Protocol and Rationale

The survey was completed independently among respondents and without outside input. Names were collected in order to ensure no duplicates or respondents without permission slips were represented within the data. The consent forms made it clear the survey would be used in a public research paper, such as usage in scientific fairs. Names are stripped from any published data. Respondents were not given direct supervision, but all filled out participation consent

forms and completed the surveys within five minutes. I did not make any statements and did not view their response while they were completing the survey, under the main umbrella of decreasing my influence as much as possible (Clarke & Braun, 2017).

Interview Analysis

The analysis was guided by a functionalist framework of trust and its derivative ideas of guilt and connection (Bieber & Viehoff, 2023). Within this framing, I applied both objective and theoretical social patterns to further understanding of Generation Alpha's trust, applying external survey data to our analysis. The manner of reporting can also be used to inform patterns, such as the differentiation of social desirability bias in an interview when compared to a survey, among others, when looking at the casual environment my data collection took place in.

Statistical Analysis

Means, Counts, Skews, Kurtosis, SD, Correlation of Questions, Probability Value by T-test of the quantitative responses were assessed. Graphs were made in Python (version 3.11) in Colab and Visual Studio Code, using the *pandas*, *matplotlib*, and *seaborn* libraries. All responses were included when making the code.

Question Short Name	Full Question Text
Q1: Social Trust	Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or do you feel you have to be very careful in dealing with people? (Social Trust: General belief that others are honest, reliable, and will abide by shared social norms)
Q2: Judicial Trust	Do you think most people would try to be fair to you, or would they try to use you for their benefit if they had the chance? (Judicial Trust: Belief that others will treat the inter-personal relationship using the same social rules)
Q3: Consumer Trust	How much confidence do you have in most large technology companies (like Google, Meta, or Nvidia) to act in your best interest? (Consumer Trust: Belief that businesses will use their product to benefit the consumer as much as possible)
Q4: Personalized	When you're struggling with a topic, do you feel like a peer's advice is more tailored to you than an AI's response? (Tailored: Follows the individuals unique strengths and ways of thinking) (Topic: An academic concept, such as a math unit)
Q5: Intention	If you are trying to improve a grade, do you feel like a peer or an AI is more invested in your success? (Invested: Gives information in the hope that the individual will succeed with it) (Success: For instance, doing good on an assignment)
Q6: Consistent	Who do you trust more to give the same answer twice: a peer who might change their mind based on their mood, or an AI that might change its answer based on how you word the question? (Same answer: For instance, a political question with a yes or no, in which the same side is given) (Wording: A user demonstrating clear bias towards one side, such as "the respectable side" etc.)
Q7: Objective	If you ask for a critique of your work do you trust a peer or an AI to be more objective? (Critique: Asking "give me feed-back on my essay") (Objective: Giving edits without regard to personal intention or mollifying the individual)
Q8: Perceived Peer Trust	Do you think your peers trust AI more or less than you do? (Asking the same question to a Model where both you and the peer have the same standing, which would believe the AI more?)

Figure 1. All questions of the survey regarding trust

The first section, General Trust Index, included three questions, which measured the participant's social, judicial, and consumer trust on a scale of 1 to 5, whereas 1 indicated low general trust and 5 indicated high general trust.

The second section, Comparative Trust, included Q4-Q7, each question targeting an academic situation weighing the consistency, personalization, intent, and objectivity between AI use and peers. 1s demonstrated high trust in AI across questions and 5s demonstrated high trust in peers across questions.

The third section, Perceived Peer Trust, included one question, Q8, that assessed whether respondents believed that their peers trusted AI more or less than they did.This was a measure to see if the academic culture reinforced the idea that many students overuse AI. A 1, or a lower score, indicated a belief that the participant trusted AI more than their peers, while a 5, or a higher score indicated a belief that the participant trusted AI less than their peers.

Results

Race	count1	Gender	count2	Age	count3
White	55	Female	57	16	70
Asian	26	Male	42	15	27
Multiracial	14	Non-Binary	1	17	4
Hispanic	5	Prefer not to say	1		
Black	1				

Table 1: Demographics of survey respondents

101 sophomores at Davis Senior High were surveyed. Participant demographics are: gender (43 men, 57 women, 1 non-binary), age (27 15-year-olds, 70 16-year-olds, and 4 17-year-olds), and race (55 White identified, 1 Black identified, 26 Asian identified, 5 Hispanic identified, and 14 Multiracial identified). Two of the responses contained only answers of "3," for all questions in

the General Trust Index and Comparative Trust, but were included in the results regardless of assumed rushing of survey.

Question	Mean Response (SD)	Skewness	Kurtosis
Q1: Social Trust	3.16 (0.85)	-0.11	-0.22
Q2: Judicial Trust	3.46 (0.77)	-0.72	0.22
Q3: Consumer Trust	2.20 (1.06)	0.47	-0.57
Q4: Personalized	3.66 (1.30)	-0.69	-0.73
Q5: Intention	3.59 (1.18)	-0.50	-0.57
Q6: Consistent	2.85 (1.12)	0.04	-0.68
Q7: Objective	3.28 (1.36)	-0.10	-1.28
Q8: Perceived Peer Trust	3.58 (1.10)	-0.54	-0.28

Table 2. Mean, skew, kurtosis, and standard deviation of survey responses

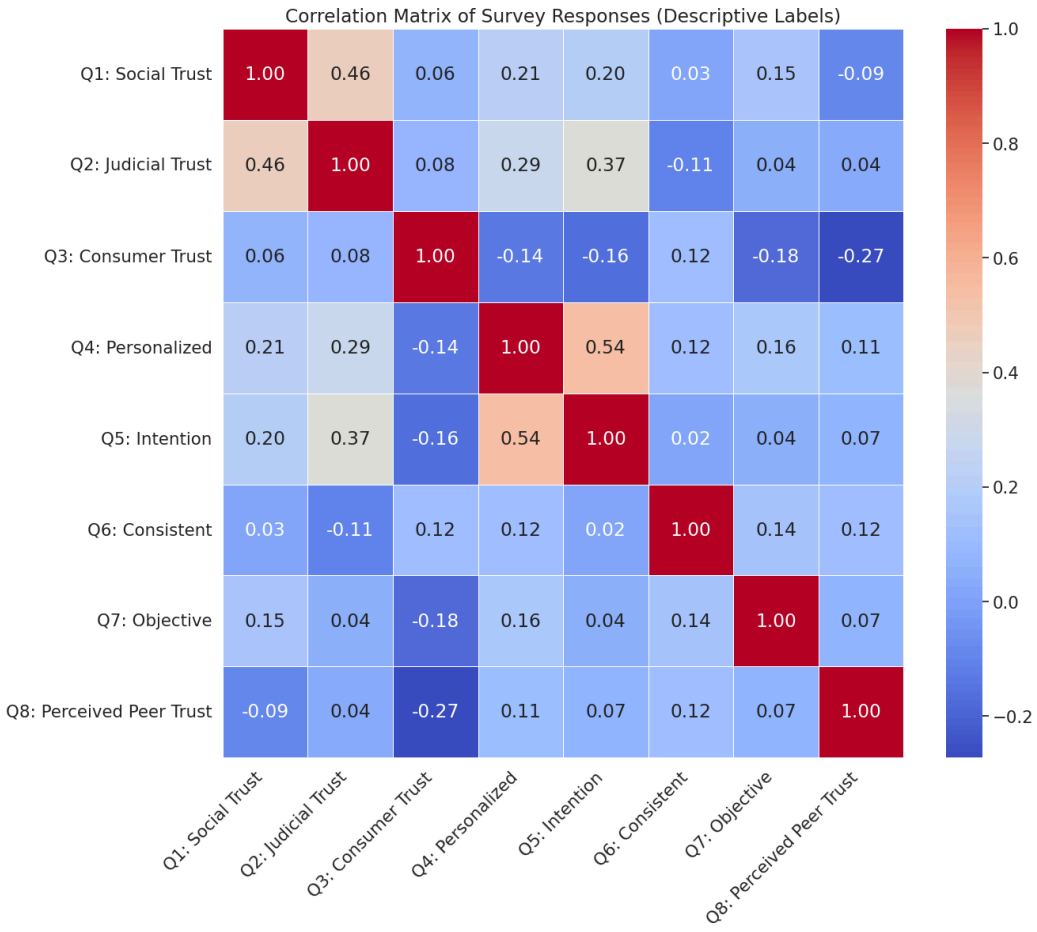


Figure 2. Correlation matrix of survey question responses

General Trust Index

The results reveal that the General Trust Index for Generation Alpha students focused more on interpersonal justice over consumer trust (Table 2), with a difference in average judicial trust Q2 (M = 3.46) and consumer trust Q3 (M = 2.20). This indicates that, for students of Generation Alpha, corporations that focus on AI are generally not trustable as in consumer trust Q3 (SD = 1.05). This may have an effect on AI trust (Figure 2), with moderate opposite correlation with Perceived Peer Trust (r = -0.27). This indicates that those that trust AI companies are more likely to trust AI more than their peers trust AI, and vice versa. Additionally, students had a strong correlation of social trust and judicial trust (r = 0.46) but a difference in their average prevalence, for social trust (M = 3.16), suggesting social trust is more difficult to achieve than judicial trust (Table 2).

Comparative Trust

Of three out of four measurements in Q4, Q5, and Q7 of trust (Table 2), peers ranked higher than AI on average, with peer personalization being their strongest measure Q4 (M = 3.66). Peer altruistic intent Q5 (M = 3.59) and peer objectivity Q7 (M = 3.28) were also stronger than AI. AI consistency was stronger than peer consistency Q6 (M = 2.85), demonstrating that Generation Alpha students would typically get AI help in a matter that the user already knows AI excels at, such as math, over more personalized, important, or moral based problems. There was a strong link between intent and personalized trust (r = 0.54), meaning that Generation Alpha students would typically associate positive intent with personalized comments (Figure 2).

Peer Comparison

When asked whether they believed their peers were stronger or weaker believers in AI than the respondent, respondents on average rated their peers to trust AI significantly more than themselves (ΔM = 0.61), with a platykurtic kurtosis (k = -0.279) (Figure 2).

Differences in Survey Response for Male and Female Respondents

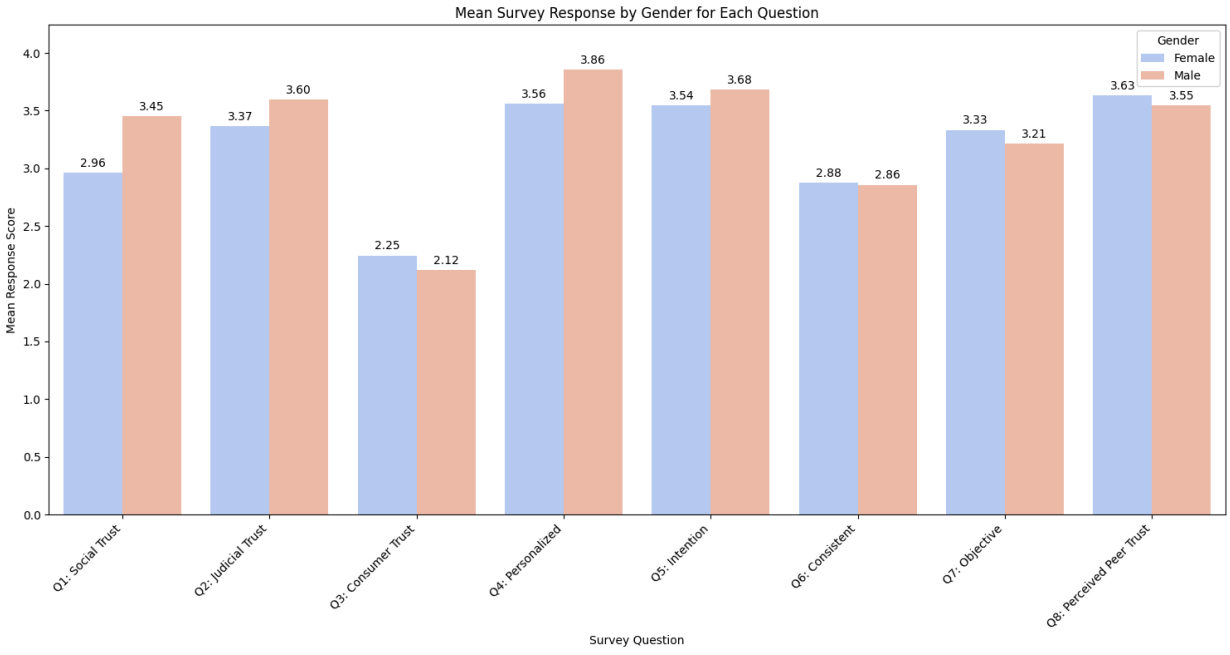


Figure 3. Mean survey response by gender for each question

Gaps between male and female respondents were not statistically significant except for the social trust question (Q1 female M 2.96, Q1 male M 3.45, M difference 0.49 at max, p = .004). Neither gender is truly associated with skewing peer or AI more than the other within the Comparative Trust section (Q4-Q7), but males typically reported higher social and judicial trust.

Difference in Survey Response for 15-year-old and 16-year-old Respondents

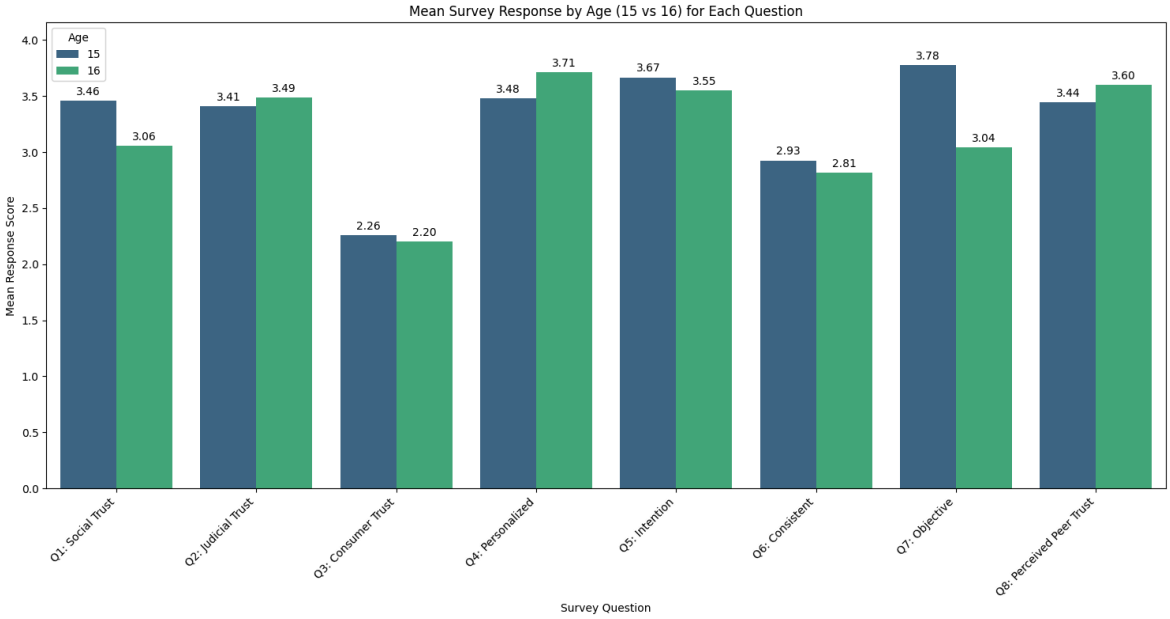


Fig 4, Mean survey response by age for each question

Response differences between fifteen year olds and sixteen year olds were largely insignificant except for in the objectivity trust factor: (Q7 15-aged M 3.78, Q7 16-aged M 3.04, Q7 M difference 0.74, Q7 p = .012). 15-year-olds rated peers as more objective, while 16-year-olds rated AI and peers on similar levels of objectivity.

Discussion

This study examined student trust in both peers and AI, in which on average, students trusted their peers more in three out of the four assessed metrics of trust. Existing social ideas of AI over-utilization affect students and cause pluralistic ignorance, as students will believe that their peers trust AI more than them. Polls have found that students have doubled their AI use, and that AI detection use has jumped accordingly from 38% to 68%, demonstrating its prevalence in

academic culture (Youngstown State University, 2025). While AI is beneficial to learning (Kestin et al., 2025), peer connection and assessment facilitates growth across sociological spectrums (Usher, 2025). As our results showed, trust in peers outweighs trust in AI in almost all dimensions of trust except consistency, demonstrating the emotional and academic assistance students put in their peers. Because the General Trust Index, or the baseline level that trustors would place in the trustee, is positive for social and judicial trust, the second tier, or weighing of the four trust factors in the Pyramid Model, is what causes this increase in AI usage, not an inversion of Generation Alpha's general trust.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity(Clarke & Braun, 2017) was an important part of analysis in my study. As a student researcher, my presence and social desirability bias regarding AI may have influenced how I conducted these interviews. Due to the open nature of the form and my status as a peer, I may have caused dismissiveness, bias, or noise that must be taken into account when performing final analysis of the study. I did not make any statements and did not view their response while they were completing the survey, under the main umbrella of decreasing my influence as much as possible.

AI Social Desirability Bias in Academic Settings (Ling et al., 2026)

The difference between respondents' perceptions of their own and their peers' AI trust may be consistent with the effects of pluralistic ignorance and social desirability bias (Hamilton et al., 2026). Social desirability is a driver behind respondent answers when asked about their trust in AI. As seen in the literature, the respondents rated their peers' AI usage 30% more than themselves, suggesting the underestimation of AI adoption and trust. Our survey had a higher average peer rating, M = 3.58, which is above the neutral midpoint 3, and is less than the literature. However, this still illustrates a self-overrestimation of trust in peers over AI at Davis Senior High. But even when looking at the results from this lens, consistency is still the highest rated aspect of trust for AI regardless, and therefore will not influence discussion.

Survey Differences in Age

The surveyed 15 year olds demonstrated a higher social desirability bias than 16 year olds on average (Figure 4). In relation to age development, 16-year olds have progressed significantly higher than 15 year-olds in autonomy and independent thinking psychologically (Icenogle et al., 2019; Steinberg et al., 2009), which may build up resistance to social desirability bias. Because these high-schoolers have had the same education at Davis Senior High, this social desirability bias is a likely reason that differentiates the means.

Survey Differences in Gender

In an academic setting, the surveyed males demonstrate a higher General Social Outlook, or higher trust in peers overall than in surveyed males (Figure 3). However, further research also supports that females rate trust on perceived kindness and self-disclosure, which was not evaluated due to the undisclosed identity of a person within the questions being asked, which may explain the drop in the General Social Outlook (Qiu et al., 2022). Therefore, it is likely that male and female respondents had similar baselines of trust: positive indicators for their belief in others' judicial and social compasses.

Need for Higher Peer Connection

The benefits and drawbacks of AI have been well researched in the literature. AI has supported increased rates of learning and incentive among young, contemporary learners. Conversely, AI also presents risks such as data theft and excessive screen time, which can negatively affect students' well-being. These concerns extend beyond technology, as increased reliance on AI may contribute to academic pressure and stress. This is particularly significant because increasing academic pressure has been associated with greater emotional problems among adolescents (Armitage et al., 2025). Although these effects were not directly measured in this study, the findings highlight the importance of balancing AI's academic benefits with students' mental health and healthy development, which requires peer connection.

Differences in Consistency

The differences in trust in consistency leaning towards AI (Figure 1) is in correspondence with previous research (Razorfish, 2026), demonstrating that in a situation where a student is asking multiple questions they would choose an AI tool over a peer's guidance. The data also suggests

that students find their peers' answers to be affected by their current emotional state. There was a strong link between intent and personalized trust (Figure 2), meaning that Generation Alpha students would typically associate positive intent with personalized comments. If Generation Alpha students use AI because of student trust in its consistency, or how much answers can be affected due to mood or coding, then having a stronger peer network instead may provide students with access to multiple perspectives rather than relying on a single peer to improve consistency (Dietrich & Spiekermann, 2021). As our research reports, there is more objective trust in peers, suggesting that a strong peer consistency would lead to a correct answer. AI can have both negative and positive effects in group projects (Lin & Chen, 2024); however, cooperative learning with peers can strengthen social-emotional skills, trust, and supportive peer relationships (Meza et al., 2025). In order to increase student trust academically, teachers must give students an efficient, trustable way to communicate with classmates. For instance, using a class message app, promoting large group projects, creating meeting times to discuss, and facilitating student connection when possible, instead of silent work.

Limitation

For the sake of a larger sample size, questions were heavily reduced in number and elaboration. Having multiple questions to identify baseline trust could have more accurately analyzed specifics for high schooler trust. Using a 1-5 scale where AI and peers allowed direct comparison, but not necessarily how much they trusted individually. Students were unsupervised and did not have incentives or background checks, lacking participant security. As a peer of the participants, my involvement may have also affected their answers or perception of the survey. Surveying entire classes can also cause similarity in responses. Additionally, participant diversity can be improved to get a more accurate picture of high-school representation. Further research can be done by expanding the questions to more accurately accommodate these limitations.

Conclusion:

While AI offers many positive benefits for high school education, the rise of usage can cause students of Generation Alpha, such as those I polled at Davis Senior High, to lose crucial peer-to-peer learning skills. Using the Pyramid Structure Model to analyze our findings, I

discovered that the average general trust baseline demonstrated positive trust in social and judicial regard, which would infer that a risk or reward of trust is the reason respondents trusted in AI. After applying the concept of social desirability bias to responses, it was apparent that of the four dimensions of trust, peers found the consistency of AI to be the most attractive factor. Research has suggested applying projects and networks involving larger groups of students in order to improve peer-to-peer trust and accelerate social skills.

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