MORAL DILEMMAS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: A STUDY ON GENDER AND ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE

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Abstract: This study investigates the moral dilemmas faced by university students, focusing on gender differences and academic disciplines (Arts vs. Science). Utilizing a descriptive survey design, a sample of 200 students was selected from Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University via simple random sampling. Data was collected using the self-constructed University Student Moral Dilemma Scale (USMDS). The analysis utilized Mean, Standard Deviation, and t-tests. Findings indicate a significant gender difference in Academic & Digital Integrity, and a significant difference between Arts and Science students in Societal & Professional Responsibility. No significant differences were found in Interpersonal Relations across either demographic.

Keywords: Moral Dilemmas, Gender Differences, Academic Discipline, University Scholars, Moral Psychology, Higher Education.

Introduction

Morality forms the philosophical and psychological foundation of human social interaction, governing the principles of right and wrong behavior. In the context of higher education, moral reasoning is the cognitive process through which students evaluate ethical dilemmas, weigh competing values, and determine the most justifiable course of action. Foundational cognitive-developmental theories, such as those proposed by Piaget (1932), argue that moral judgment evolves progressively as individuals transition from heteronomous conformity to autonomous ethical evaluation. Building upon this, Kohlberg (1981) established a paradigm of moral reasoning based on justice, demonstrating that individuals advance through specific stages of moral development, culminating in the application of universal ethical principles.Understanding university students' ethical frameworks requires a multi-dimensional theoretical approach. While Kohlberg emphasized justice, Rest (1986) expanded the operationalization of moral judgment through the Four-Component Model, suggesting that moral behavior requires moral sensitivity, judgment, motivation, and character. Conversely, Turiel (1983) and Nucci (2001) introduced Domain Theory, which distinguishes strictly moral issues (harm, fairness) from societal conventions (rules, traditions), a distinction highly relevant to university policies. Furthermore, Bandura's (1991) social cognitive theory of moral thought highlights the phenomenon of "moral disengagement," explaining how otherwise ethical students might justify academic misconduct by displacing responsibility or rationalizing their actions within a high-pressure academic environment.The intersection of gender and moral reasoning remains a critical area of psychological inquiry. Gilligan (1982) challenged traditional justice-centric models, proposing that female moral development is often deeply rooted in an "ethic of care," prioritizing interpersonal relationships and empathy, whereas males may lean toward an "ethic of justice," focusing on rules and individual rights. In a university setting, these differing orientations can significantly influence how students navigate interpersonal conflicts, peer loyalty, and competitive academic pressures.The academic environment and chosen discipline act as secondary socializing agents that shape a student's professional and societal ethics. Students in the Arts and Humanities are often immersed in curricula that encourage subjective interpretation, cultural relativism, and the exploration of the human condition. In

contrast, Science and Technology disciplines traditionally emphasize objective truths, rigid methodological rules, and empirical facts. These distinct epistemic environments can foster differing approaches to societal and professional responsibility, influencing how students perceive their duties toward the environment, the workplace, and broader societal rules.Modern higher education is increasingly defined by digital transformation. Consequently, digital ethics and academic integrity have emerged as the most frequent arenas for student moral dilemmas. The ease of access to online resources, the advent of artificial intelligence, and the normalization of digital piracy create complex ethical conflicts. Students must constantly navigate the boundaries between collaborative learning and plagiarism. Simultaneously, universities are tasked with cultivating social responsibility, preparing students not just for professional competence, but for active, ethical citizenship. The transition into university life tests these frameworks, demanding a high level of autonomous moral reasoning to balance personal ambition with academic integrity and societal duty.

Review of Literature

Kohlberg, L. (1981).The Philosophy of Moral Development: Moral Stages and the Idea of Justice
Sample: Longitudinal study of 84 male participants (originally aged 10-16).
Method: Qualitative clinical interviews using hypothetical moral dilemmas (e.g., the Heinz dilemma).
Findings: The study concluded that moral reasoning develops through a rigid sequence of six stages across three levels (pre-conventional, conventional, post-conventional), driven by cognitive development and exposure to cognitive-moral conflicts.
Relevance to present study: Provides the foundational cognitive framework for understanding how university students process justice-based dilemmas and societal responsibilities.

Gilligan, C. (1982).*In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*
Sample: Diverse groups of male and female adolescents and adults.
Method: Qualitative interviews regarding real-life personal moral conflicts and hypothetical dilemmas.
Findings: Identified a distinct female moral orientation centered on an "ethic of care" and relationship preservation, contrasting with the male-dominated "ethic of justice" and rule adherence.
Relevance to present study: Directly underpins the formulation of hypotheses (H01, H02, H03) investigating gender-based differences in academic integrity and interpersonal relations.

Rest, J. R. (1986).*Moral Development: Advances in Research and Theory*
Sample: Extensive cross-sectional samples of high school, college, and graduate students.
Method: Quantitative survey utilizing the Defining Issues Test (DIT) to measure moral schemas.
Findings: Demonstrated that formal education, particularly at the university level, significantly enhances moral judgment capabilities, shifting students from conventional to post-conventional thinking.
Relevance to present study: Validates the focus on higher education as a critical period for moral development and supports the use of quantitative survey methods for assessing moral orientations.

Bebeau, M. J. (2002).*The Defining Issues Test and the Four Component Model: Contributions to Professional Education*
Sample: Graduate and professional students in dentistry and medicine.
Method: Pre-and post-test evaluations of professional ethics curriculum interventions.
Findings: General moral reasoning does not automatically translate into professional ethical competence; specific, discipline-based professional responsibility education is required.
Relevance to present study: Informs the investigation into "Societal & Professional Responsibility," emphasizing how academic disciplines shape professional ethics.

Duckett, L., & Ryden, M. B. (1994).*Education for Ethical Nursing Practice*
Sample: Undergraduate nursing students.
Method: Longitudinal cohort study assessing moral reasoning across academic years.
Findings: The clinical environment and structured ethical training within a specific scientific/medical discipline significantly improved students' ability to navigate complex professional dilemmas.
Relevance to present study: Justifies the comparative analysis between Arts and Science students (H04, H05, H06) by showing that disciplinary environments actively shape ethical development.

Sharma, A., & Singh, R. (2019).*Digital Plagiarism and Academic Integrity among Indian University Students*
Sample: 450 undergraduate and postgraduate students from North Indian universities.
Method: Descriptive survey using a customized academic integrity questionnaire.
Findings: A high prevalence of digital piracy and 'copy-paste' plagiarism was found, largely driven by academic pressure and a lack of clear institutional policies regarding digital ethics.
Relevance to present study: Contextualizes the "Academic & Digital Integrity" dimension within the Indian university ecosystem, providing a cultural baseline for the current data.

Kumar, S., & Patel, V. (2020).*Impact of Value Education on the Interpersonal Ethics of Higher Education Students*
Sample: 300 students from central universities in India.
Method: Quasi-experimental design comparing students with and without formal value education modules.
Findings: Students exposed to formal value education demonstrated significantly higher scores in peer honesty, loyalty, and conflict resolution.
Relevance to present study: Supports the necessity of evaluating "Interpersonal Relations" as a distinct measurable dimension of student morality.

Das, M., & Gupta, P. (2021).*Disciplinary Variations in Moral Reasoning: A Comparative Study of Humanities and STEM Scholars*
Sample: 250 students (125 Arts, 125 Engineering) in West Bengal.
Method: Cross-sectional survey using modified moral dilemma vignettes.
Findings: Humanities students exhibited higher subjectivity and contextual moral reasoning, whereas STEM students demonstrated rigid adherence to systemic rules and professional codes.
Relevance to present study: Directly supports the investigation of academic discipline as an independent variable affecting societal and professional responsibility.

Mishra, K. (2018).*Gender Perspectives on Academic Dishonesty in Indian Higher Education*
Sample: 500 university students across multiple disciplines.
Method: Self-report scales measuring attitudes toward cheating and peer reporting.
Findings: Male students exhibited a higher tolerance for academic shortcuts and cheating, while female students reported higher anxiety and stricter adherence to academic integrity guidelines.
Relevance to present study: Provides empirical backing within the Indian context for the hypothesis regarding gender differences in Academic and Digital Integrity.

Reddy, T., & Rao, K. (2022).*Social Responsibility Orientations of University Youth in the Post-Pandemic Era*
Sample: 600 university students in South India.
Method: Descriptive survey assessing civic engagement and environmental ethics.
Findings: Science students showed a pragmatic approach to environmental and societal rules, while Arts students showed higher theoretical civic engagement but lower practical adherence to institutional rules.
Relevance to present study: Informs the interpretation of the "Societal & Professional Responsibility" outcomes, particularly regarding how different disciplines interact with societal rules.

Research Gap: While international frameworks (Kohlberg, Gilligan, Rest) have deeply explored the cognitive and gendered nuances of moral reasoning, and Indian studies have independently addressed

academic cheating or value education, a synthesized gap remains. Previous literature has largely treated "academic integrity" as traditional classroom cheating, missing the modern nuance of digital ethics (AI use, digital piracy) heavily prevalent in the post-pandemic university landscape. Furthermore, there is a distinct lack of literature within the Indian context that simultaneously measures the tri-dimensional impact (Digital Integrity, Professional Responsibility, and Interpersonal Relations) of *both* gender and specific academic streams (Arts vs. Science) using a localized tool. This study fills this gap by utilizing the uniquely constructed USMDS to provide a contemporary, multi-dimensional ethical profile of university students in Lucknow.

Objectives

1. To study the moral dilemmas of male and female students of Universities in Lucknow.
2. To study the moral dilemmas of Arts and Science Discipline students of Universities in Lucknow.

Hypotheses

- H01: There will be no significant difference in Academic & Digital Integrity of male and female students
- H02: There will be no significant difference in Societal & Professional Responsibility of male and female students
- H03: There will be no significant difference in Interpersonal Relations of male and female students
- H04: There will be no significant difference in Academic & Digital Integrity of arts and science students.
- H05: There will be no significant difference in Societal & Professional Responsibility arts and science students.
- H06: There will be no significant difference in Interpersonal Relations of arts and science students.

Research Methodology

Research Design: Descriptive survey research is used in this study.

Sample Size: A sample of 200 students were selected using the simple random sampling technique from the Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University.

Sampling Technique: The participants will be chosen utilizing the simple random sampling technique to ensure unbiased representation.

Research Tool: Data will be collected using the self-constructed **University Student Moral Dilemma Scale (USMDS)**. The USMDS consists of 70 situational statements categorized into three dimensions:

- Academic & Digital Integrity: Contains 30 items assessing behaviors like cheating, piracy, and AI use.
- Societal & Professional Responsibility: Contains 25 items measuring attitudes toward rules, environment, and workplace fairness.
- Interpersonal Relations: Contains 15 items evaluating honesty with friends and loyalty versus truth.

Data Analysis

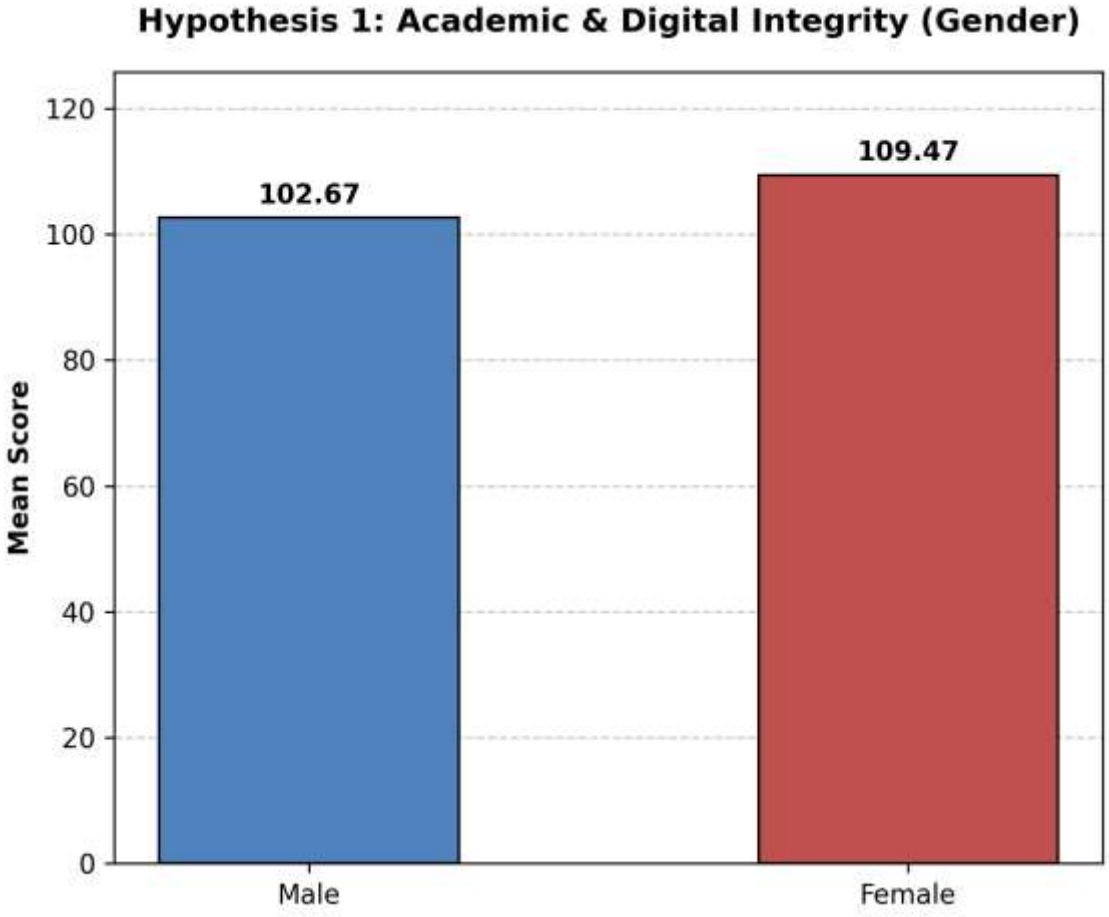
Mean, Standard Deviation (SD), and the t-test are used to analyze the collected data.

Hypothesis 1

H_{01}: There will be no significant difference in Academic & Digital Integrity of male and female students.

Table 1: Mean, S.D., and t-value of Male and Female Students on Academic & Digital Integrity

Group	N	Mean	S.D.	M.D.	t-value	Level of Significance
Male	105	102.67	18.72	6.80	2.37*	Significant at 0.05 level
Female	95	109.47	21.56			

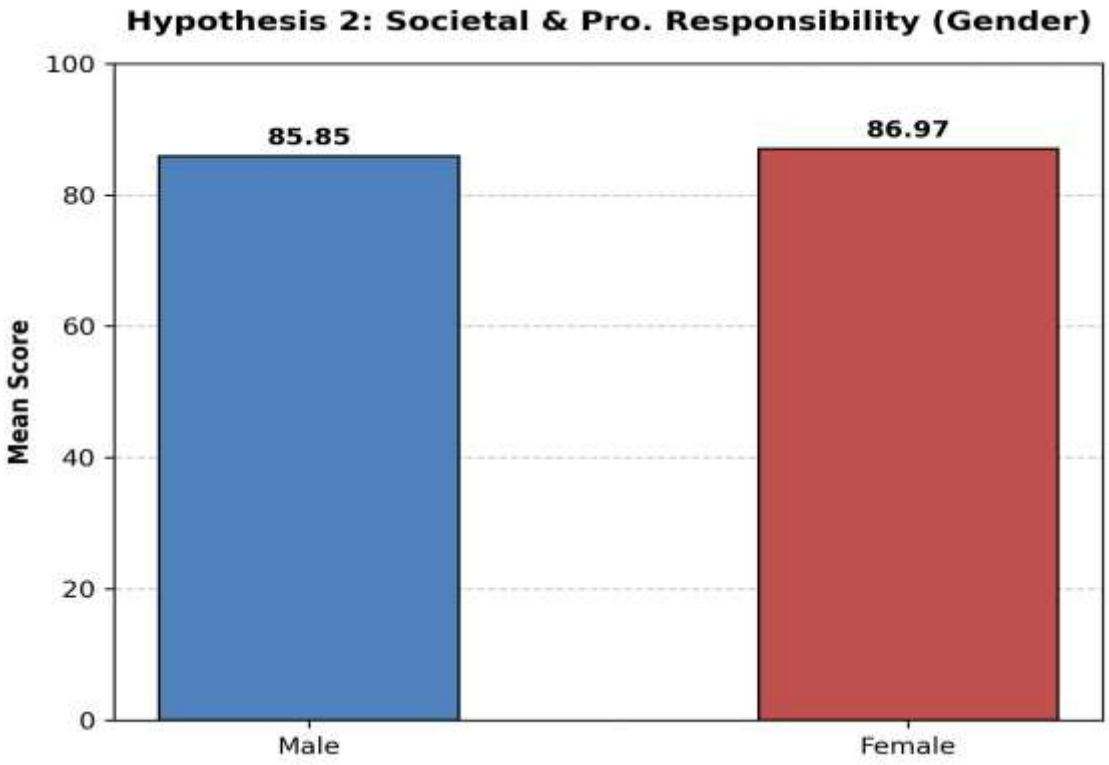


significant at 0.05 level

Interpretation: Table 1 reveals the comparison between male and female students specifically regarding Academic & Digital Integrity. The calculated t-value 2.37 is greater than the table value 1.96 at the 0.05 level of significance.

Conclusion: Therefore, the null hypothesis (H01) is rejected. There is a significant gender difference in Academic & Digital Integrity.

Bar Graph 1: *A bar graph comparing the Mean scores of Academic & Digital Integrity of male and female students.*



Hypothesis 2

H_{02}: There will be no significant difference in Societal & Professional Responsibility of male and female students.

Table 2: Mean, S.D., and t-value of Male and Female Students on Societal & Professional Responsibility

Group	N	Mean	S.D.	M.D.	t-value	Level of Significance
Male	105	85.85	16.66	1.12	0.39^{NS}	Not Significant
Female	95	86.97	23.13			

NS - Not significant at 0.05 level

Interpretation: Table 2 shows the comparison for Societal & Professional Responsibility. The calculated t-value 0.39 is less than the table value 1.96 at the 0.05 level of significance.

Conclusion: Therefore, the null hypothesis (H_{02}) is accepted. There is no significant gender difference in Societal & Professional Responsibility.

Bar Graph 2: *A bar graph comparing the Mean scores of Societal & Professional Responsibility of male and female students*

Hypothesis 3

H_{03}: There will be no significant difference in Interpersonal Relations of male and female students.

Table 3: Mean, S.D., and t-value of Male and Female Students on Interpersonal Relations

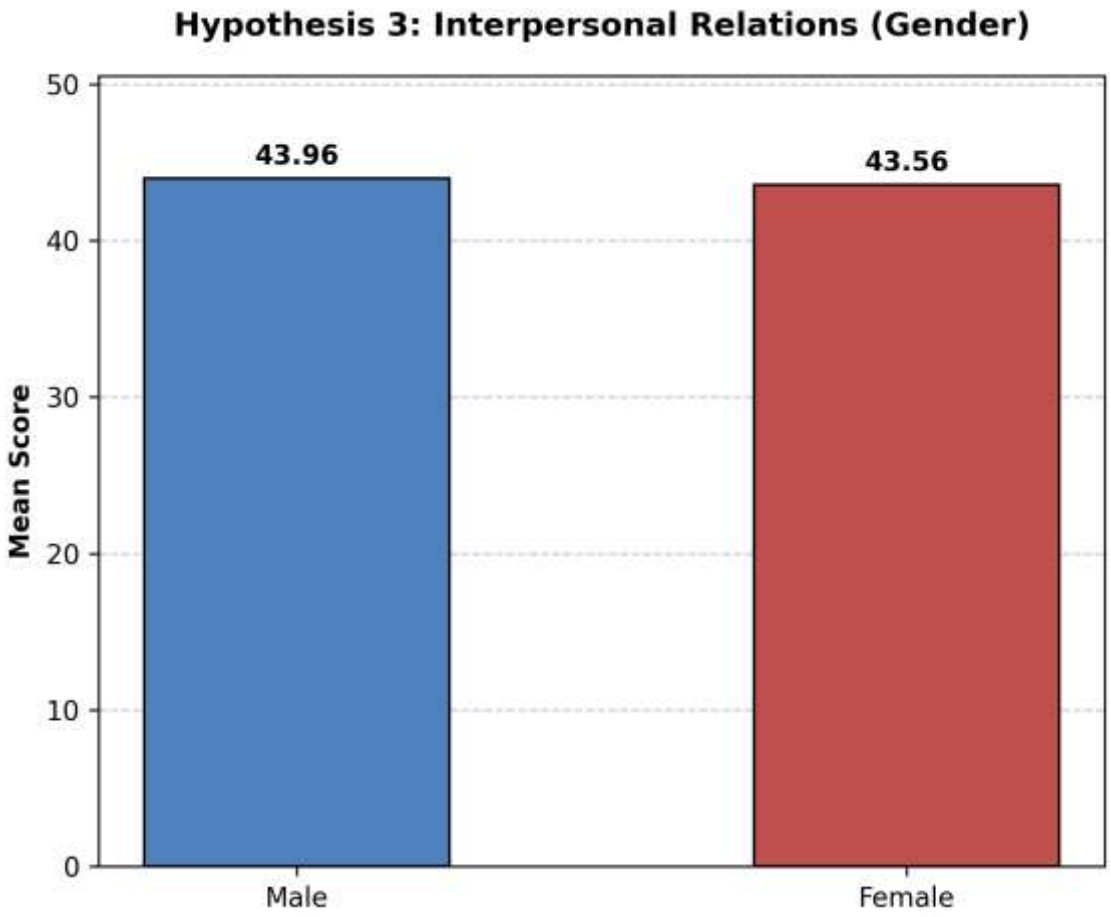
Group	N	Mean	S.D.	M.D.	t-value	Level of Significance
Male	105	43.96	9.64	0.40	0.25^{NS}	Not Significant
Female	95	43.56	13.13			

NS - Not significant at 0.05 level

Interpretation: The calculated t-value 0.25 is less than the critical table value 1.96 at 0.05 level of Significance.

Conclusion: The null hypothesis (H_{03}) is accepted. There is no significant gender difference regarding Interpersonal Relations.

Bar Graph 3: *A bar graph comparing the Mean scores of Interpersonal Relations of male and female students.*



Hypothesis 4

H_{04}: There will be no significant difference in Academic & Digital Integrity of arts and science students.

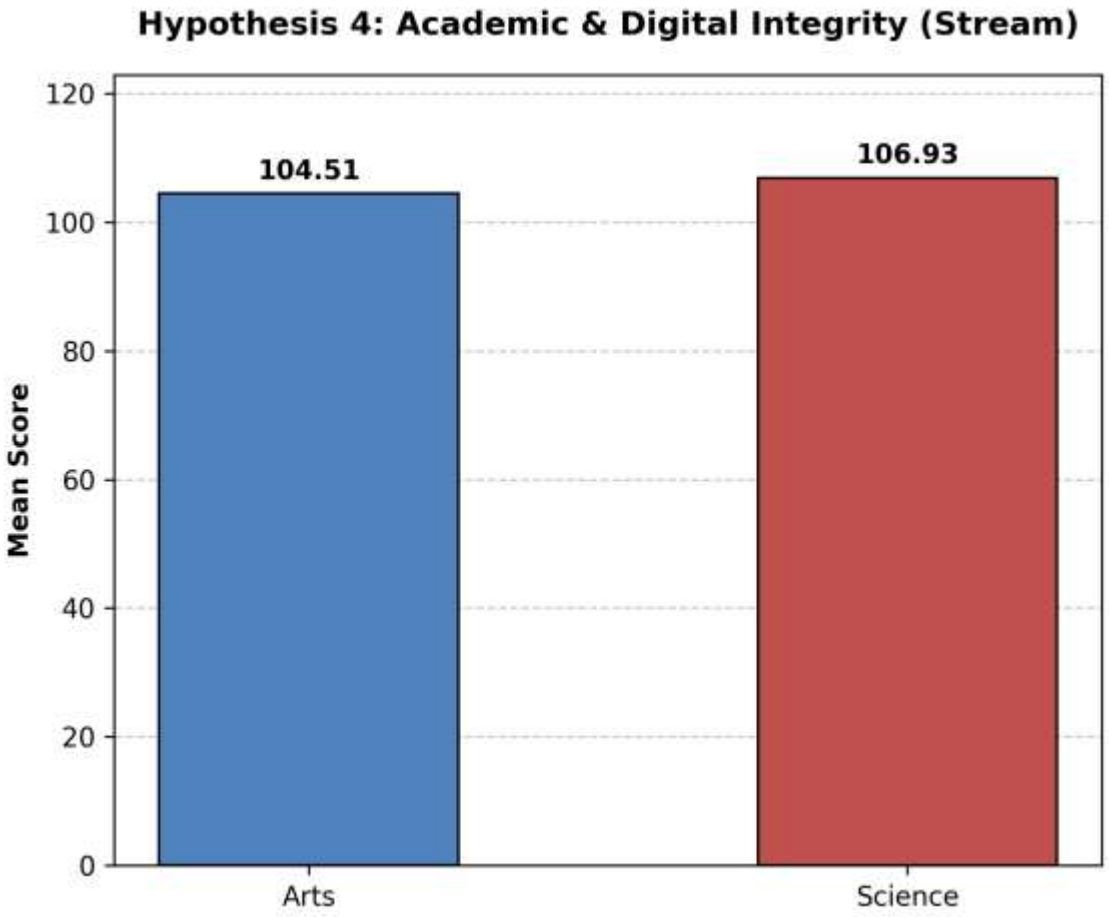
Table 4: Mean, S.D., and t-value of Arts and Science Students on Academic & Digital Integrity

Group	N	Mean	S.D.	M.D.	t-value	Level of Significance
Arts	85	104.51	18.87	2.42	0.85^{NS}	Not Significant
Science	115	106.93	21.41			

NS - Not significant at 0.05 level

Interpretation: Table 4 details the comparison between Arts and Science students for Academic & Digital Integrity. The calculated t-value of 0.85 is less than the critical value 1.96 at the 0.05 level of significance.

Conclusion: The null hypothesis (H_{04}) is accepted. Academic discipline does not significantly affect Academic & Digital Integrity.



***Bar Graph 4**: A bar graph comparing the Mean scores of Academic & Digital Integrity of arts and science students.*

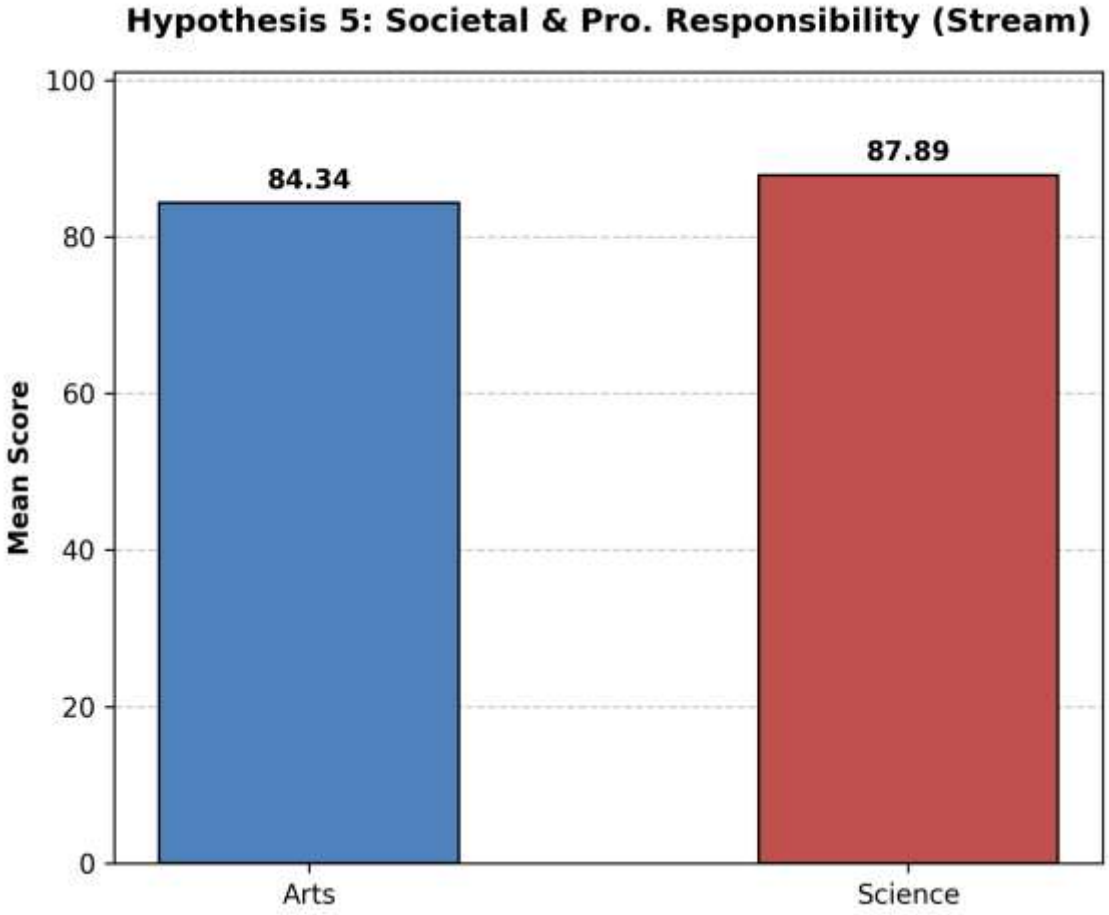
Hypothesis 5

H_{05}: There will be no significant difference in Societal & Professional Responsibility arts and science students.

Table 5: Mean, S.D., and t-value of Arts and Science Students on Societal & Professional Responsibility

Group	N	Mean	S.D.	M.D.	t-value	Level of Significance
Arts	85	84.34	20.61	5.18	2.11*	Significant at 0.05 level
Science	115	90.15	17.34			

significant at 0.05 level



Interpretation: For Societal & Professional Responsibility, the calculated t-value 2.11 is greater than the table value 1.96 at the 0.05 level of significance.

Conclusion: The null hypothesis (H_{05}) is rejected. There is significant difference in Societal & Professional Responsibility based on the academic stream.

Bar Graph 5: *A bar graph comparing the Mean scores of Societal & Professional Responsibility arts and science students.*

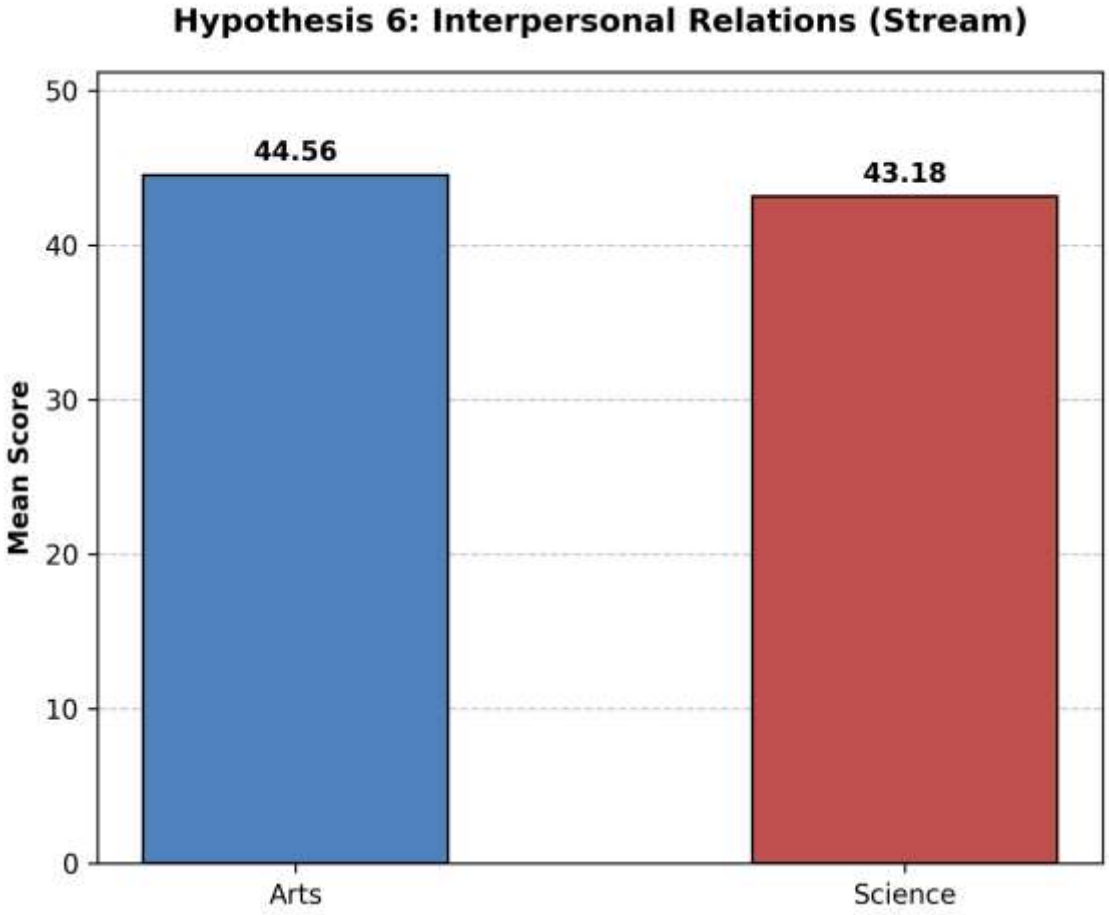
Hypothesis 6

H_{06}: There will be no significant difference in Interpersonal Relations of arts and science students.

Table 6: Mean, S.D., and t-value of Arts and Science Students on Interpersonal Relations

Group	N	Mean	S.D.	M.D.	t-value	Level of Significance
Arts	85	44.56	10.92	1.32	0.86^{NS}	Not Significant
Science	115	43.18	11.76			

NS - Not significant at 0.05 level



Interpretation: Comparing Interpersonal Relations between disciplines yields. The calculated t-value of 0.86 is less than the critical value 1.96 at the 0.05 level of significance.

Conclusion: The null hypothesis (H_{06}) is accepted. Arts and Science students do not differ significantly in their Interpersonal Relations.

Bar Graph 6: *A bar graph comparing the Mean scores of Interpersonal Relations of arts and science students.*

Results and Findings

The statistical analysis of the data collected through the University Student Moral Dilemma Scale (USMDS) revealed distinct patterns in the ethical orientations of university scholars based on gender and academic discipline. The consolidated outcomes of the hypothesis testing are presented in the table below.

Table 7: Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Variable Tested	Comparison Group	t-value	Significance Level	Outcome
H01	Academic & Digital Integrity	Male vs. Female	2.37	0.05	**Rejected** (Significant difference)
H02	Societal & Professional Responsibility	Male vs. Female	0.39	NS	**Accepted** (No significant difference)
H03	Interpersonal Relations	Male vs. Female	0.25	NS	**Accepted** (No significant difference)
H04	Academic & Digital Integrity	Arts vs. Science	0.85	NS	**Accepted** (No significant difference)
H05	Societal & Professional Responsibility	Arts vs. Science	2.11	0.05	**Rejected** (Significant difference)
H06	Interpersonal Relations	Arts vs. Science	0.86	NS	**Accepted** (No significant difference)

NS = Not Significant at the 0.05 level

Major Findings

Based on the empirical data, the primary findings of this study are as follows:

1. **Gender Impact on Digital Ethics:** A statistically significant gender difference exists concerning Academic & Digital Integrity. Female students exhibited higher mean scores (109.47) compared to their male counterparts (102.67), indicating a stricter adherence to digital and academic ethical guidelines among women.

2. **Gender Neutrality in Other Domains:** Gender does not significantly influence a student's orientation toward Societal & Professional Responsibility or their Interpersonal Relations. Both male and female students demonstrated comparable ethical reasoning in peer interactions and societal rule adherence.
3. **Disciplinary Impact on Societal Duties:** Academic stream plays a significant role in shaping Societal & Professional Responsibility. Science students demonstrated a significantly higher mean score (90.15) than Arts students (84.34), suggesting that scientific curricula may foster a stronger orientation toward structured professional and societal ethics.
4. **Disciplinary Neutrality in Other Domains:** A student's academic discipline (Arts versus Science) showed no significant impact on their Academic & Digital Integrity or their Interpersonal Relations. Peer-to-peer loyalty and basic academic honesty levels remain consistent regardless of the chosen academic stream.

Discussion

The data reveals that female students exhibit a significantly different moral orientation regarding Academic and Digital Integrity compared to males, aligning with Gilligan's theories of gender-differentiated ethical frameworks. Furthermore, Science students scored significantly higher in Societal and Professional Responsibility than Arts students, suggesting that structured, rule-based scientific curricula may foster a more rigid adherence to professional and societal guidelines. No significant variations were observed in interpersonal ethics across either demographic, pointing to a universal baseline in peer-to-peer morality among the university cohort.

Educational Implications

- Integrate targeted digital citizenship modules into university curricula.
- Develop gender-sensitive counseling approaches for academic stress and integrity.
- Enhance teacher training to recognize disciplinary biases in ethical development.
- Promote interdisciplinary ethics workshops bridging Arts and Science perspectives.

Limitations & Future Research

Limitations:

- Sample restricted to a single university in Lucknow.
- Self-reported survey tools may introduce social desirability bias.
- Limited scope of academic disciplines explored.

Future Research:

- Expanding the sample across multiple universities and states.
- Conducting qualitative interviews to understand the *reasoning* behind the dilemmas.
- Investigating the specific impact of AI usage policies on digital integrity scores.

Conclusion

This study underscores that while interpersonal moral frameworks remain consistent among university students, significant variations exist in academic and societal ethics based on gender and discipline. By highlighting female students' distinct approach to digital integrity and science students' structured professional responsibility, this research emphasizes the need for nuanced, curriculum-specific ethical training in higher education to foster well-rounded, responsible graduates.

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