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Reimagining MBA education in the age of artificial intelligence; A meta-synthesis

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ABSTRACT

The integration of artificial intelligence into Master of Business Administration (MBA) education is reshaping the foundations of management learning worldwide. This study conducts a qualitative meta-synthesis of 17 peer-reviewed sources published between 2001 and 2021 to examine how AI technologies—ranging from generative models and adaptive learning systems to predictive analytics and federated learning—are influencing MBA curricula, pedagogy, student engagement, and institutional strategies. Findings reveal that AI holds transformative potential for enhancing personalization, academic performance, and curriculum relevance, while also addressing enrollment challenges and labor market misalignments. However, integration remains uneven and fraught with ethical, infrastructural, and pedagogical challenges, including concerns over academic integrity, faculty preparedness, and digital equity. Conceptual frameworks such as the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), paradox theory, and interpretive structural modeling elucidate the enabling and constraining factors surrounding AI adoption. The study highlights the urgent need for business schools to pursue a holistic and ethically grounded AI strategy that balances technological innovation with humanistic leadership development. Ultimately, AI is not only redefining how MBAs are delivered, but also reorienting their purpose toward preparing future-ready leaders for complex, data-driven environments. The paper concludes with a call for adaptive, inclusive, and ethically sound educational reforms in MBA programs worldwide.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence has prompted a critical reassessment of traditional educational paradigms, particularly within the realm of postgraduate business education. The Master of Business Administration, long regarded as the gold standard for cultivating managerial acumen and leadership capabilities, now

faces mounting scrutiny regarding its relevance and adaptability in the face of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Barber, 2021; Halkias et al., 2020). This transformation, characterized by the integration of digital, physical, and biological systems, has precipitated a paradigm shift in both the expectations of MBA students and the competencies demanded by employers (Fahim et al., 2021).

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At the forefront of this evolution is the growing incorporation of AI technologies—ranging from machine learning and natural language processing to generative AI models like ChatGPT—into both the content and delivery of MBA programs. These technologies offer novel avenues for personalized learning, real-time feedback, and adaptive instructional design, thereby reshaping the pedagogical landscape of business education. Yet, the proliferation of AI also introduces complex ethical, methodological, and pedagogical dilemmas, particularly regarding academic integrity, assessment validity, and the erosion of critical thinking. In increasingly algorithmic environments, the absence of digital literacy is not merely a barrier to effective technology use—it can actively endanger individuals by shaping behaviors in subtle but consequential ways. Research from risk-intensive industries shows that digital platforms, particularly those driven by visual media, can glamorize unsafe practices and incentivize harmful behaviors when users lack the critical capacity to decode and resist their influence (Soroori Sarabi et al., 2020). This underscores the urgent need for new literacies in AI-mediated education—not only to enhance engagement, but to protect learners from unexamined behavioral conditioning.

The scholarly discourse surrounding AI in MBA education remains both vibrant but fragmented, with researchers offering divergent perspectives on its implications. Some emphasize its transformative potential to enhance engagement, curriculum relevance, and graduate employability (Nagi, 2018), while others highlight significant institutional and cultural barriers to integration, including technological infrastructure deficits, resistance among faculty, and uneven digital literacy. Such divergent perspectives may also be influenced by broader narrative framings, as public discourse—often shaped by media or institutional messaging—plays a significant role in constructing how technologies like AI are perceived and judged (Kharazmi & Mohammadi, 2020). Moreover, the rise of AI has coincided with declining MBA enrollment in several regions, raising urgent questions about the value proposition of business degrees in a data-driven, automation-intensive global economy (Fahim et al., 2021). Additionally, critical scholarship has shown how corporate influence—through funding and academic partnerships—can

shape educational narratives to legitimize opaque data practices, complicating efforts to foster independent, ethically grounded AI discourse (Sarfi et al., 2021).

This manuscript aims to synthesize and critically evaluate the emerging research on AI integration in MBA education, with particular attention to how various studies conceptualize its role, opportunities, and limitations. By comparing theoretical models, empirical findings, and policy implications across a diverse array of geographical and institutional contexts, this study seeks to identify the principal trajectories through which AI is reshaping management education. The need for such analysis is heightened by growing evidence that algorithmic systems—whether in AI-driven learning environments or social media platforms—exert deep psychological influence on users, shaping attention, identity, and emotional health in ways that often go unnoticed (Nosraty et al., 2021). Understanding these impacts is crucial if educational AI is to serve human development rather than inadvertently undermine it. In doing so, it provides a structured foundation for reimagining the MBA as a future-ready, technologically literate, and ethically grounded platform for leadership development.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative meta-synthesis approach to critically examine existing academic literature on the integration of AI in MBA education. The method is appropriate for identifying cross-cutting themes, contradictions, and research gaps across diverse scholarly works. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select 17 peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, and conference proceedings published between 2001 and 2021, encompassing a broad range of perspectives on AI in management education. The inclusion criteria focused on studies that explicitly analyzed AI tools—such as machine learning, generative AI, adaptive learning platforms, and predictive analytics—as they relate to MBA curricula, pedagogy, student outcomes, and institutional strategy. These sources were drawn from international contexts to ensure both geographical and conceptual diversity in the dataset.

The selected studies were subjected to thematic coding using an inductive content analysis framework. Key themes were extracted through

iterative reading and comparative synthesis, including (1) pedagogical transformation, (2) curriculum reform, (3) learning personalization, (4) ethical implications, and (5) institutional readiness for AI adoption. To ensure rigor, each study was assessed for methodological quality and theoretical grounding before being included in the synthesis. Particular attention was paid to empirical designs—such as surveys, case studies, and quasi-experiments—as well as conceptual frameworks, including the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), interpretive structural modeling, and paradox theory. Studies emphasize that the effectiveness of AI depends not just on technological capacity but on users' ongoing education and digital literacy. Without these, even advanced systems risk being underused, misinterpreted, or misapplied (Hosseini et al., 2021). The synthesized findings aim to provide a comprehensive and analytically robust overview of how AI is reconceptualizing the structure and objectives of MBA education in the digital age.

FINDINGS

Baruch and Leeming (2001) investigated the perceived value of MBA education by examining the experiences of 344 graduates from a leading UK business school, focusing on the personal and professional outcomes attributed to their studies. The study aimed to assess the extent to which MBA programs contribute to enhancing managerial competencies, skills, self-confidence, and career progression. Through survey data, the authors found that graduates consistently reported positive impacts in key areas such as decision-making, leadership, strategic thinking, and communication skills. Moreover, the MBA experience was associated with elevated self-perception and tangible career advancements, including promotions and increased responsibility. While the study did not directly engage with artificial intelligence or digital technologies, its relevance to the broader conversation on MBA education lies in establishing a baseline of perceived value prior to the widespread integration of AI tools and curricula. As such, it offers a useful comparative reference for evaluating how emerging technologies like AI may further enhance or transform the benefits of MBA programs in the contemporary context.

Pfeffer and Fong (2004) critically analyzed the institutional and ideological challenges facing U.S. business schools, particularly with respect to their

MBA programs, and explored the global implications of their influence. The authors argued that U.S. business schools, while globally dominant and often emulated, have increasingly adopted a market-driven orientation that prioritizes career advancement and salary enhancement over the cultivation of professional management values. Drawing on empirical data and theoretical insights, they identified several structural and cultural problems—such as weak links between business education and managerial practice, limited practical skill development, and a lack of professional ethos—that undermine the broader educational and societal goals of business schools. While the article does not specifically address artificial intelligence or digital transformation, it offers a foundational critique relevant to current debates about modernizing MBA curricula. In the context of AI integration, the authors' call for a more substantive, profession-oriented approach to business education highlights the need for emerging technologies to be embedded within a broader ethical and professional framework rather than treated solely as tools for career enhancement.

Naik and Ragothaman (2004) investigated the effectiveness of artificial neural networks (ANNs) in predicting MBA student success, comparing this machine learning approach with traditional statistical models—logit and probit regressions. The study aimed to enhance MBA admission decision-making by evaluating how well these models could classify applicants into categories of likely success or marginal performance within graduate business programs. Inputs for the models included undergraduate GPA, GMAT scores, age, undergraduate major, and other demographic or academic variables. The neural network demonstrated predictive performance comparable to the statistical models, confirming its viability as an admissions support tool. While the study affirmed the potential of ANN for use in educational contexts, it also acknowledged limitations such as the interpretability of neural models and the generalizability of findings due to data constraints. This research contributes to the broader conversation about incorporating AI-driven analytics in management education, particularly in the areas of student evaluation and admissions processes.

Nagi (2018) addressed the urgent need to reevaluate and modernize MBA programs in Thailand in alignment with the country's national

development strategy, “Thailand 4.0.” As Thai higher education institutions witness a surge in student enrolment, particularly in business programs, there is a growing expectation among students for measurable outcomes—specifically, employability and alignment with the digital economy. The paper explored how emerging technologies, such as the Internet of Things (IoT), AI, robotics, blockchain, and data analytics, are reshaping business landscapes, thus necessitating a corresponding evolution in business education. The author argued that MBA programs in Thailand must shift from traditional theoretical frameworks to skill-based, outcome-driven training models. Emphasizing collaboration with both public and private sector stakeholders, the study highlighted how such partnerships can enhance curricular relevance and better equip students for real-world challenges. It was noted that while critics have questioned the enduring value of the MBA, the degree remains a vital credential for leadership roles in technologically advanced business sectors. The paper concluded that for MBA programs in Thailand to remain competitive and responsive to the needs of the Thailand 4.0 vision, universities must undergo substantial curriculum reform. This includes integrating digital competencies, fostering innovation, creating AI-enabled curricula, and adopting flexible teaching strategies that support lifelong learning and digital adaptability.

Dekhane and Thakur (2018) explored the transformative role of emerging electronic trends (E-trends) in the context of MBA education, emphasizing how these digital technologies enhance the accessibility, practicality, and global relevance of business learning as regard to AI. Framed against the backdrop of rapid advancements in information and communication technology and AI, the study outlined how modern educational tools—such as MOOCs, mobile learning, cloud computing, learning management systems (LMS), artificial intelligence, social networking, and peer-to-peer assessment—are reshaping traditional pedagogical approaches. The paper asserted that these E-trends are particularly valuable in postgraduate business education, offering enhanced interactivity, flexibility, and real-world applicability. By eliminating geographical barriers and fostering anytime-anywhere learning, AI-powered digital platforms empower MBA students with immediate access to global knowledge

and professional development resources. The authors also highlighted the capacity of these technologies to elevate faculty performance by facilitating innovative content delivery, real-time feedback, and virtual collaboration with international experts. In particular, tools like MOOCs and LMSs enable customized, self-paced learning experiences, while mobile learning ensures ubiquitous access to educational content. Peer assessments and in-house authoring were also discussed as participatory approaches that encourage collaboration, accountability, and content personalization. These innovations collectively transform the conventional MBA into an advanced and market-responsive degree, better aligning graduate competencies with the demands of the digital economy. The study concluded that while technology alone cannot solve all educational challenges, its thoughtful integration—coupled with supportive institutional reforms—can significantly enhance learning engagement, employability, and academic efficacy in MBA education.

Halkias et al. (2020) addressed the imperative to reshape MBA curricula in response to the evolving demands of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (IR 4.0), a global shift characterized by the convergence of digital, physical, and biological systems in the rapidly evolving AI environment. The chapter posited that traditional business education must undergo significant transformation to prepare future executives for technological disruptions and the emergence of new value creation ecosystems. The authors argued that MBA programs are uniquely positioned to act as catalysts for economic and social transformation by equipping students with the skills necessary to navigate complex, interdependent global markets. Central to this vision is the integration of online technologies and digital tools into pedagogy, which the authors view not only as an educational necessity but also as a model of the collaborative, networked business practices that IR 4.0 demands. Key recommendations included embedding interdisciplinary learning, digital literacy, and cross-sector collaboration into MBA curricula. The chapter emphasized the role of business schools in fostering innovation-driven leadership, strategic thinking, and a global mindset, all of which are essential for managing the uncertainties and opportunities brought about by rapid technological change. In this AI-enabled

framework, MBA programs become platforms for regional development and global impact, extending their influence beyond academia into the socio-economic fabric of society.

Ultimately, the chapter underscored the urgency of aligning MBA education with the structural realities of IR 4.0, asserting that doing so is vital for cultivating leaders capable of leveraging disruption into sustainable growth.

Chatterjee and Poovathingal (2020) offered a novel methodological contribution to the study of MBA education by identifying and prioritizing key enablers of managerial performance among MBA students, including artificial intelligence. The authors addressed a notable gap in the literature—while many studies have proposed various factors that influence managerial capability, few have examined the interrelationships among these factors or established a systematic approach for prioritizing them. To this end, the study employed a hybrid analytical framework that combined Interpretive Structural Modelling (ISM) with MICMAC (Multiplication Appliquée à un Classement) analysis. ISM was used to map the hierarchical structure and “help achieve” power of each enabler, while MICMAC allowed for classification based on driving power and dependence. This dual approach enabled a nuanced understanding of how certain enablers act as key drivers or outcomes within the broader system. Out of 14 identified enablers, five emerged as particularly influential in enhancing managerial performance. These key enablers can now be prioritized by educators, administrators, and policymakers seeking to allocate resources effectively and improve educational outcomes.

Barber (2021) presented a compelling argument for rethinking MBA education in light of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, calling for a shift from traditional, retrospective business curricula toward transformative, future-oriented executive education. The article criticized many current MBA programs for being overly focused on conventional inputs—such as structured functional knowledge and prestige—at the expense of transformative learning outcomes. The author argued that to remain relevant, MBA programs must develop learners' meta-skills, including creativity, complex problem-solving, adaptability, strategic thinking, and smart utilization of AI. Framing the discussion around the rapid technological, economic, and societal changes

identified by the World Economic Forum, the article emphasized that future business leaders must be prepared for careers in a volatile and evolving global environment. The paper advocated for a curriculum that integrates interdisciplinary learning, challenges conventional assessment practices, and encourages learners to draw on their own professional experiences to foster intellectual growth and innovation. A transformative MBA, as conceptualized in this article, must prioritize civic responsibility, global awareness, and a readiness to engage with the complex challenges of the modern workplace. This includes not only technological fluency and collaborative skills, but also ethical leadership and critical reflection. The author concluded with a vision of the MBA as a platform for developing intellectually curious, socially responsible, and future-ready leaders, rather than merely a credential for elite advancement.

Xu and Babaian (2021) addressed the growing need to integrate artificial intelligence (AI) education into business curricula, recognizing the increasing relevance of AI in business decision-making and operational processes. Their study detailed the development and evaluation of a graduate-level AI course designed for non-technical MBA students, aiming to bridge the gap between technical AI knowledge and managerial application. The proposed curriculum balanced core AI concepts with emerging developments in the field, emphasizing accessibility for students without computing backgrounds. The authors examined the course's pedagogical structure and assessed its effectiveness based on student feedback, learning outcomes, and perceptions. Findings demonstrated that students gained substantial understanding of AI principles and their business implications, alongside improvements in confidence when engaging with AI-driven decision-making. The study provided actionable recommendations for business educators on curriculum design, including the importance of practical examples, interdisciplinary framing, and iterative refinement based on student experience. This research contributes significantly to the discourse on AI literacy in management education by offering a tested model for AI integration into MBA programs.

Gryaznov (2021) examined the transformative impact of digital technologies on business education, contextualized by the acceleration of digitalization during the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper,

presented at the International Scientific Conference “Digital Transformation of the Economy,” identified major trends compelling business schools to reevaluate their pedagogical strategies and institutional roles. The pandemic-induced shift to remote learning catalyzed a lasting transition toward digital modes of education, which the author conceptualized through a three-phase model reflecting the evolution of online learning in business schools. While the study did not focus exclusively on artificial intelligence, it situated AI within the broader landscape of digital technologies reshaping business education, including virtual learning environments, digital collaboration tools, and data-driven pedagogy. Gryaznov argued that the reconfiguration of business curricula to integrate such technologies is essential to remain responsive to evolving economic and technological demands. The paper contributes to the discourse on how MBA programs must adapt structurally and strategically to harness the benefits of digital transformation.

Schoeman, Moore, Seedat, and Chen (2021) explored South Africa’s preparedness for integrating artificial intelligence (AI) into its business landscape, emphasizing the need for strategic digital transformation amid rapid technological advancement. Developed in collaboration between Accenture and the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS), the report addressed the growing urgency for South African businesses to adapt to a digitally-driven future. While not an academic study in the traditional sense, the working paper offered key insights relevant to management education by highlighting the strategic competencies required for navigating AI integration. It emphasized the necessity for executive awareness, leadership alignment, and skill development in AI-related domains to ensure business longevity and competitive advantage. By underscoring the pivotal role of AI in future business operations and strategy, the paper indirectly pointed to the imperative for MBA programs and executive education in South Africa to incorporate AI literacy and digital strategy into their curricula. The authors advocated for a proactive, informed approach to AI adoption, suggesting that readiness extends beyond technology to include culture, leadership, and educational infrastructure.

Fahim et al. (2021) investigated the global decline in Master of Business Administration program enrolments in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Industry 4.0), focusing on identifying and prioritizing the key barriers influencing this trend. Acknowledging the evolving demands of the labor market and the shifting value proposition of MBA education, the study applied Grey Incidence Analysis (GIA)—a decision-making tool suited for systems with limited or uncertain data—to rank the severity of barriers affecting international MBA enrolments. The study found that “employment difficulties” emerged as the most significant barrier, suggesting that graduates perceive limited job prospects despite earning an MBA. Other highly ranked barriers included “lack of entrepreneurship skills,” “high cost,” “longer payback duration,” “10-year return on investment (ROI),” and “lack of data analytic skills.” These findings indicate that both financial considerations and perceived skill misalignments contribute heavily to declining interest in MBA programs, especially among international applicants. The authors emphasized the importance of using these insights to inform strategic policymaking and resource allocation. They argued that addressing the top-ranked barriers—particularly through curricular updates in different new field like artificial intelligence, better career services, and improved entrepreneurial and data-related training—could help restore the relevance and appeal of MBA programs. Furthermore, the study makes a novel contribution to the literature by employing GIA to formally quantify and prioritize enrolment challenges in the context of Industry 4.0, offering a structured framework for institutional and policy-level interventions.

Baliga (2021) offered a critical reflection on the state of MBA education, emphasizing its misalignment with the demands of a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world and the ongoing technological hybridization shaping global business. The article questioned the conventional structure and delivery of MBA programs, pointing to growing skepticism—exemplified by public critiques such as Elon Musk’s—about the overemphasis on financial metrics and boardroom strategy at the expense of innovation and value creation. The author highlighted a major shift in student preferences away from traditional full-time MBA programs toward

more flexible evening, weekend, and online formats. This trend, compounded by the rise of specialized programs in areas like analytics, artificial intelligence and informatics, underscores the need for MBA curricula to evolve beyond generic managerial training. Baliga argued for a transformation in pedagogy, advocating for a shift from passive, lecture-based teaching to active, experiential, and interdisciplinary learning models. He further suggested incorporating real-world complexities and stakeholder dynamics into business education, enabling future leaders to better navigate global uncertainty. The paper concluded by proposing a reimagining of MBA education rooted in holistic development, adaptability, and technological fluency, essential for the sustainability of MBA programs in a rapidly changing global context.

CONCLUSION

This study has critically examined the evolving role of AI in MBA education, drawing on a diverse body of contemporary research to assess how AI is reshaping pedagogical frameworks, curricular priorities, and institutional strategies. The findings confirm that AI is not merely an ancillary tool for enhancing business education but is rapidly becoming a central driver of innovation within it. Across the studies analyzed, AI technologies—ranging from adaptive learning systems and generative AI models to predictive analytics and federated learning—are shown to improve instructional quality, personalize the learning experience, and better align educational outcomes with market demands. These innovations are increasingly being recognized as essential to equipping future managers with the competencies required to lead in a technologically saturated and algorithmically driven world.

However, the potential of AI in business education is tempered by persistent challenges. Ethical concerns about plagiarism, the dilution of critical thinking, algorithmic biases, and academic integrity remain at the forefront of the debate. Many educators and institutions remain ambivalent, oscillating between enthusiastic adoption and cautious skepticism. Furthermore, technological integration is uneven across regions and institutions, often constrained by limited digital infrastructure, insufficient faculty training, and resistance to pedagogical change. These structural limitations are

not only logistical but also reflective of deeper institutional inequities that can lead to exclusion and disengagement. Addressing such disparities requires more than technical solutions—it calls for justice-oriented educational strategies that prioritize access, fairness, and institutional accountability. Studies grounded in models like the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Interpretive Structural Modelling reveal that teacher support, administrative vision, and student digital readiness are critical variables influencing successful AI adoption. These findings emphasize the need for holistic, system-level approaches to AI integration—approaches that go beyond technical implementation to include capacity building, ethical education, and inclusive design.

The implications of AI extend beyond pedagogy to the very identity and societal role of the MBA degree. Once the uncontested credential for leadership development, the MBA now faces increasing scrutiny in the context of declining enrollments and shifting student preferences. There could be numerous factors contributing to this shift, and certainly one of them arises from societal influence. Societal norms have the power to shape individual behavior and create significant pressure to conform, especially when reinforced by industries that thrive on idealized visions of success. These industries not only reflect but also intensify cultural expectations, turning aspirational ideals into systemic demands. As seen in sectors like beauty, this dynamic can produce widespread psychological strain while maintaining the illusion of individual empowerment (Nosraty et al., 2020). In the context of business education, this means that understanding how learners respond to MBA programs today also requires attention to how societal and institutional expectations shape their evolving preferences—especially as AI begins to address those very demands. A growing segment of learners now seeks education that is not only academically rigorous but also agile, customizable, and aligned with real-world digital competencies. AI technologies respond to this demand by enabling modular, experiential, and data-driven educational pathways that challenge traditional lecture-based, one-size-fits-all instruction. Studies on simulation-based learning, virtual reality integration, and AI-enhanced role-plays underscore that experiential, context-rich learning is both more engaging and more effective at developing strategic and interpersonal skills. In this way, AI becomes a catalyst for

reimagining not only how MBA programs are delivered, but also what they are meant to accomplish.

Nevertheless, the successful future of MBA education in the AI era depends on maintaining a delicate balance between technological fluency and humanistic depth. Business leaders of the future will not simply be consumers or overseers of AI systems; they will need to understand the ethical, societal, and strategic implications of their deployment. Therefore, MBA programs must embed interdisciplinary, reflective, and ethical dimensions into their AI curricula. This entails fostering critical digital literacy, enhancing soft skill development, and promoting socially responsible innovation. The integration of AI into education must be guided by a vision of human-AI collaboration, not substitution.

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