

A Systematic Review of Explainable Artificial Intelligence Techniques for Trustworthy Machine Learning Systems

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Abstract- The increasing deployment of machine learning (ML) systems in high-stakes domains such as healthcare, finance, criminal justice, and autonomous systems has significantly intensified concerns about transparency, accountability, reliability, and societal trust. While modern ML models particularly deep neural networks have demonstrated superior predictive performance, their complex, non-linear architectures often render them opaque, leading to criticism that they function as “black boxes” whose internal reasoning is difficult for humans to interpret, audit, or validate. This lack of interpretability poses risks in safety-critical and regulated environments, where stakeholders require clear, understandable justifications for automated decisions. In response to these challenges, Explainable Artificial Intelligence (XAI) has emerged as a crucial and rapidly evolving research area aimed at designing methods that make AI systems more interpretable, transparent, and aligned with human values, ethical principles, and legal requirements. This article presents a systematic review of Explainable AI techniques developed between 2000 and 2021, focusing on their role in enabling trustworthy machine learning systems by structuring the landscape of XAI into intrinsic (interpretable-by-design) and post-hoc (after-the-fact explanation) approaches, examining representative and widely adopted techniques such as LIME, SHAP, and Integrated Gradients, and critically discussing the methodological and practical challenges in evaluating explanation quality. Furthermore, the review analyzes how XAI intersects with broader principles of trustworthy AI including fairness, accountability, transparency, robustness, and human oversight while identifying key research gaps and outlining future directions for developing more reliable, human-centered, and socially responsible AI systems.

Keywords- Explainable AI, Trustworthy Machine Learning, Interpretability, Model Transparency, XAI Taxonomy, LIME, SHAP, Integrated Gradients, Responsible AI, AI Governance.

I. INTRODUCTION

Machine learning models have achieved remarkable success in prediction, classification, and decision-making tasks across a wide range of domains, including healthcare, finance, cybersecurity, transportation, and digital services. Advances in deep learning, large-scale data availability, and computational power have enabled systems that can outperform human experts in specific tasks such as image recognition, natural language processing, and fraud detection. However, as these models have grown in complexity often comprising millions or even billions of parameters their internal decision-

making processes have become increasingly opaque to humans. This lack of interpretability creates a fundamental tension between performance and transparency, particularly in high-stakes settings where erroneous or biased decisions can have severe consequences. In many real-world applications, stakeholders including developers, domain experts, regulators, policymakers, and end users require clear and meaningful explanations for model behavior before they are willing to trust, validate, or adopt AI-driven systems. Without such transparency, even highly accurate models may be rejected due to ethical, legal, or societal concerns.

For example, in healthcare, a medical diagnosis model must be able to explain why it predicts a particular disease, especially when treatment decisions, patient safety, and legal liability are involved. Clinicians need to understand whether a model's recommendation is based on medically sound reasoning rather than spurious correlations or dataset biases. Similarly, in financial systems, a loan approval or credit scoring model must justify why an applicant was denied credit, both to comply with regulatory requirements and to ensure fairness and accountability. In the context of autonomous vehicles, interpretability is critical for safety and trust; these systems must provide interpretable reasoning for their actions, particularly in edge cases such as emergency braking, collision avoidance, or navigation in complex environments. Beyond these examples, interpretability is also essential in areas such as criminal justice risk assessment, hiring algorithms, and recommendation systems, where opaque decisions can reinforce social biases or lead to discriminatory outcomes. Collectively, these challenges highlight the urgent need for AI systems that are not only accurate but also understandable, auditable, and socially responsible.

These concerns have motivated the rapid development of Explainable Artificial Intelligence (XAI) a multidisciplinary research field dedicated to making AI systems more transparent, interpretable, and accountable to human users. XAI seeks to bridge the gap between complex machine learning models and human understanding by developing methods, frameworks, and evaluation criteria that reveal how models arrive at their decisions. Importantly, the goal of XAI extends beyond purely technical interpretability; it aims to support trustworthy AI that aligns with ethical principles, legal requirements, and societal expectations. This includes ensuring fairness, mitigating bias, enabling accountability, and fostering human oversight in automated decision-making systems. In this context, explainability is not merely a technical add-on but a fundamental component of responsible AI design. This review synthesizes major developments in XAI from 2000 to 2021, providing a structured taxonomy of explainability techniques, analyzing key methods such as LIME, SHAP, and Integrated Gradients, and critically examining how explainability contributes to broader notions of trustworthiness, governance, and human-centered AI.

II. METHODOLOGY: SYSTEMATIC REVIEW APPROACH

We conducted a structured and systematic literature review to ensure comprehensive coverage and methodological rigor in surveying research on Explainable Artificial Intelligence (XAI). The review process was designed to capture foundational work as well as significant methodological advances that have shaped the field over more than two decades. Our primary inclusion criteria required that studies be published between 2000 and 2021, a time frame that reflects both early interpretability research in classical machine learning and the rapid expansion of XAI techniques driven by modern deep learning systems. We focused on publications that explicitly addressed explainability, interpretability, or transparency in artificial intelligence or machine learning, ensuring that selected works contributed directly to the research questions of this review. Eligible sources included peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings from leading AI and ML venues, and reputable open-access preprints, such as those available on arXiv, which are widely recognized within the research community for disseminating cutting-edge work prior to formal publication.

In addition to topical relevance, studies were included if they made substantive contributions to one or more of the following areas: the development of explainability methods or algorithms, the proposal of conceptual or architectural frameworks for XAI, or the evaluation of explanation quality, usefulness, or reliability. This included both intrinsic interpretability approaches, such as transparent model architectures, and post-hoc explanation techniques designed to interpret black-box models. We also considered interdisciplinary contributions that connected technical XAI methods to human factors, ethics, or governance, provided they were grounded in technical analysis or empirical evaluation. By applying these criteria, the review sought to balance theoretical foundations with practical applicability, capturing work that has influenced both academic research and real-world deployments of explainable systems.

To maintain focus and analytical clarity, several exclusion criteria were applied during the selection process. Papers published after 2021 were excluded to preserve the historical scope of the review and to ensure consistency with the intended publication timeframe. We also excluded purely performance-driven machine learning studies that prioritized accuracy or efficiency without addressing

interpretability or transparency, as such works do not directly inform the goals of XAI. Finally, non-technical opinion pieces, position statements, and high-level discussions lacking methodological or empirical contributions were omitted, even when they addressed ethical or societal issues, in order to maintain a strong technical and analytical foundation. Together, these inclusion and exclusion criteria helped ensure that the reviewed literature provides a coherent, relevant, and rigorous basis for understanding the evolution and impact of XAI techniques in trustworthy machine learning systems.

III. TAXONOMY OF EXPLAINABLE AI TECHNIQUES

Building on the taxonomy proposed in widely cited surveys by Barredo Arrieta et al. (2019) and Schwalbe and Finzel (2021), we distinguish between two broad categories of Explainable AI techniques: intrinsic (interpretable-by-design) methods and post-hoc explanation methods. This distinction reflects fundamentally different philosophies of achieving explainability either by constructing models that are transparent from the outset or by developing techniques that interpret complex models after they have been trained. Intrinsic methods are inherently transparent due to their structural simplicity and human-readable representations, making them particularly valuable in safety-critical and regulated domains. Representative examples include Decision Trees, which represent decisions as hierarchical logical rules; Linear Models, which offer clear and interpretable feature coefficients; Generalized Additive Models (GAMs), which balance non-linearity with interpretability through additive feature effects; and Rule-based Systems, which encode explicit decision logic in human-understandable if-then statements. These models are naturally interpretable, easier to audit and validate, and better aligned with regulatory expectations in sectors such as healthcare, finance, and public policy, where transparency and accountability are essential.

However, intrinsic interpretability often comes at the cost of predictive performance, particularly when dealing with high-dimensional, unstructured, or complex data such as images, speech, or large-scale textual datasets. Deep learning models typically outperform simpler interpretable models in such contexts, leading to a persistent trade-off between accuracy and transparency. This tension has fueled ongoing debate within the AI research community about the appropriate balance between performance

and interpretability. In this regard, Rudin (2019) strongly advocates for prioritizing interpretable models over post-hoc explanations in high-stakes applications, arguing that explanations of black-box models can be unstable, misleading, or vulnerable to manipulation. From this perspective, if an AI system is used to make consequential decisions such as determining medical treatment, parole eligibility, or credit access the model itself should be inherently understandable rather than relying on after-the-fact explanations. This viewpoint reinforces the ethical and practical importance of intrinsic interpretability as a cornerstone of trustworthy AI.

In contrast, post-hoc explanation methods aim to interpret already-trained black-box models without modifying their internal structure. A prominent example is LIME (Ribeiro et al., 2016), which generates local surrogate models that approximate complex predictions using simpler, interpretable models such as linear regression in the neighborhood of a specific instance. This approach is widely used for explaining image classification outcomes and individual loan approval decisions by highlighting influential features. Another influential technique is SHAP (Lundberg & Lee, 2017), which leverages Shapley values from cooperative game theory to assign consistent and theoretically grounded feature importance scores across different models. Additionally, gradient-based attribution methods such as Integrated Gradients (Sundararajan et al., 2017) are commonly applied in deep learning to trace predictions back to input features by analyzing gradient paths. These techniques are especially prevalent in computer vision and natural language processing, where model complexity necessitates sophisticated explanation mechanisms to enhance transparency and trust.

IV. TRUSTWORTHINESS IN MACHINE LEARNING

While explainability is a crucial component of responsible AI, it is not sufficient on its own to ensure trustworthiness in machine learning systems. A truly trustworthy AI system must satisfy a broader set of principles that encompass not only interpretability but also transparency, fairness, accountability, robustness, and alignment with human values. Transparency, in particular, plays a foundational role in enabling stakeholders to understand how and why automated decisions are made. Beyond individual explanations for specific predictions, transparency requires clear documentation of model development, training data, assumptions, and limitations. In this context,

significant contributions such as Model Cards (Mitchell et al., 2019) and Datasheets for Datasets (Gebru et al., 2018) have emerged as important tools for structured documentation in machine learning. Model Cards provide standardized summaries of a model's intended use, performance characteristics, evaluation metrics, and potential risks, while Datasheets for Datasets offer systematic descriptions of dataset provenance, collection methods, representativeness, and known biases. Together, these frameworks enhance transparency by making critical information accessible to developers, auditors, regulators, and end users.

Fairness represents another essential pillar of trustworthy AI, as machine learning models can inadvertently perpetuate or amplify existing social biases present in training data. Explainable AI techniques play a crucial role in identifying and mitigating such biases by revealing how different features influence model predictions across demographic groups. Through feature attribution methods, counterfactual explanations, and bias-aware evaluations, XAI enables researchers and practitioners to detect discriminatory patterns, assess disparate impacts, and implement corrective measures such as rebalancing data, modifying model objectives, or introducing fairness constraints. Accountability is closely related to both transparency and fairness, as clear and interpretable explanations allow for responsibility assignment when AI systems produce harmful or erroneous outcomes. When a model's decision-making process is traceable and understandable, it becomes possible to identify whether failures stem from flawed data, model design, deployment errors, or human oversight, thereby supporting legal, ethical, and organizational accountability.

Human-centered design further strengthens trustworthiness by ensuring that explanations are meaningful, intuitive, and aligned with human cognitive processes rather than purely technical or mathematical constructs. Miller (2019) emphasizes that effective explanations should resonate with how people naturally reason about causality, intent, and responsibility, rather than relying solely on abstract statistical measures or complex visualizations. This perspective highlights the importance of designing XAI systems that prioritize user comprehension, contextual relevance, and usability across diverse stakeholder groups. In practice, this involves tailoring explanations to different audiences such as clinicians, regulators, engineers, or lay users and incorporating user feedback into explanation design. By integrating transparency, fairness, accountability, and human-centered principles, XAI moves beyond

technical interpretability toward a holistic vision of trustworthy, socially responsible, and human-aligned artificial intelligence.

V. REPRESENTATIVE FRAMEWORKS FOR XAI

A key diagrammatic and conceptual contribution to the structuring of Explainable AI research comes from van der Velden et al. (2021), who proposed an integrative framework that explicitly links model characteristics, explanation techniques, evaluation approaches, and user requirements. Unlike earlier taxonomies that primarily categorized XAI methods, this framework emphasizes the relationships and dependencies among different components of an explainable system. At its core, the framework recognizes that the choice of explanation technique cannot be made in isolation but must be informed by the underlying model architecture, the decision-making context, and the intended audience of the explanation. By systematically mapping these elements, van der Velden et al. provide a structured lens through which researchers and practitioners can reason about the design of explainable AI systems in a principled manner. This holistic perspective is particularly valuable in bridging the gap between technical XAI development and real-world application needs.

The framework connects four interrelated dimensions: model type, explanation method, evaluation criteria, and user needs. The model type dimension distinguishes between inherently interpretable models (such as linear models or decision trees) and complex black-box models (such as deep neural networks), recognizing that different models require different explanation strategies. The explanation method dimension includes post-hoc techniques such as feature attribution, surrogate models, counterfactual explanations, and visualization-based approaches. The evaluation criteria dimension highlights the importance of assessing explanations not only in terms of technical fidelity but also in terms of usability, clarity, and relevance to stakeholders. Finally, the user needs dimension emphasizes that explanations should be tailored to specific audiences, such as domain experts, regulators, or end users, each of whom may require different levels of detail and types of insight. By integrating these dimensions into a single conceptual framework, van der Velden et al. enable more systematic decision-making in the selection and deployment of XAI techniques. Researchers can use this framework to align explanation methods with both technical constraints and human-centered

objectives, ensuring that explainability serves practical and ethical purposes rather than remaining a purely theoretical exercise. In applied settings, this approach helps practitioners match appropriate XAI tools to specific applications, such as medical diagnosis, autonomous driving, or financial risk assessment. Ultimately, the framework supports the broader goal of building trustworthy AI systems by ensuring that explainability is context-aware, user-aligned, and rigorously evaluated, rather than being treated as an afterthought in model development.

VI. KEY STUDIES IN EXPLAINABLE AI

A key diagrammatic and conceptual contribution to structuring the field of Explainable Artificial Intelligence comes from van der Velden et al. (2021), who proposed an integrative framework that systematically links model type, explanation method, evaluation criteria, and user needs. Unlike earlier taxonomies that primarily classified XAI techniques in isolation, this framework emphasizes the interdependencies among these dimensions and positions explainability as an inherently contextual design problem. The framework acknowledges that different machine learning models ranging from interpretable linear models to complex deep neural networks require distinct explanation strategies that align with their internal structure and decision-making processes. Furthermore, it highlights that explanations must be evaluated not only for technical fidelity but also for usability, clarity, and practical relevance to intended users. By explicitly incorporating user needs into the framework, van der Velden et al. shift the focus of XAI from purely algorithmic transparency toward human-centered interpretability, ensuring that explanations are meaningful, actionable, and aligned with real-world decision-making contexts.

Within this framework, the selection of an appropriate XAI technique is guided by a careful consideration of the application domain, stakeholder requirements, and regulatory constraints. For instance, in medical imaging, where deep learning models are prevalent, gradient-based attribution methods may be preferred, whereas in financial risk assessment, inherently interpretable models or Shapley-based explanations might be more appropriate. The framework also encourages researchers to adopt systematic evaluation criteria that balance technical accuracy with user comprehension, trust, and decision support. This approach helps bridge the gap between theoretical XAI research and practical deployment, ensuring

that explainability is not treated as an afterthought but as a core component of AI system design. By integrating technical, cognitive, and contextual dimensions, the framework provides a comprehensive roadmap for developing trustworthy, transparent, and user-aligned AI systems across diverse domains.

Building on this conceptual foundation, a number of key studies between 2000 and 2021 have significantly shaped the development of XAI and trustworthy machine learning. Ribeiro et al. (2016) introduced LIME, providing a widely adopted method for generating local, interpretable explanations for black-box models. Lundberg and Lee (2017) proposed SHAP, establishing a unified and theoretically grounded framework for feature attribution based on Shapley values. In the same year, Sundararajan et al. (2017) developed Integrated Gradients, offering an axiomatic approach to attributing deep learning predictions to input features. Rudin (2019) advanced a critical perspective advocating for inherently interpretable models in high-stakes applications, while Barredo Arrieta et al. (2019) provided one of the most comprehensive taxonomies of XAI methods. Mitchell et al. (2019) contributed Model Cards as a structured documentation framework, and Miller (2019) emphasized the importance of human-centered explanations grounded in social science. Finally, Schwalbe and Finzel (2021) refined XAI taxonomies, and van der Velden et al. (2021) integrated these developments into a holistic framework linking models, explanations, evaluation, and user needs.

VII. OPEN CHALLENGES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Despite significant theoretical and practical advancements in Explainable Artificial Intelligence, the field continues to face a number of fundamental and unresolved challenges that limit its widespread adoption and effectiveness. One major issue concerns the evaluation of explanations, as there is currently no universally accepted set of metrics or benchmarks for determining what constitutes a “good” or meaningful explanation. Different stakeholders such as engineers, domain experts, and end users often have divergent expectations, making it difficult to define a single standard of explanation quality. Another persistent challenge is the trade-off between faithfulness and interpretability, where simpler, more human-understandable explanations may not accurately reflect the true internal reasoning of complex models. This can lead to explanations

that are intuitive but potentially misleading, undermining trust rather than enhancing it. Additionally, many XAI techniques are computationally expensive, particularly for large-scale deep learning models, raising concerns about scalability, efficiency, and real-time applicability in industrial settings.

A further limitation lies in the design of user-centric explanations that are tailored to specific domains, tasks, and audiences. Many existing XAI methods are developed primarily from a technical perspective, prioritizing mathematical rigor over human usability and cognitive alignment. As a result, explanations that are meaningful to data scientists may be confusing or unhelpful to clinicians, regulators, or lay users. There is therefore a growing need for interdisciplinary research that integrates insights from human-computer interaction, cognitive psychology, and social sciences into XAI design. Moreover, the deployment of XAI in real-world environments often reveals contextual complexities such as organizational constraints, legal requirements, and decision-making workflows that are not adequately captured in laboratory or benchmark-based evaluations. Addressing these challenges requires a more holistic approach that considers not only algorithmic performance but also human understanding, trust, and practical utility.

To overcome these limitations, future research should prioritize the development of standardized evaluation benchmarks that enable fair and consistent comparison of XAI methods across different models and applications. There is also a critical need for stronger integration of XAI with existing and emerging regulatory frameworks, particularly in sectors such as healthcare, finance, and autonomous systems where explainability is increasingly mandated. Large-scale, real-world user studies involving diverse stakeholders should be conducted to assess how explanations impact trust, decision quality, and accountability in practice. Additionally, researchers should explore hybrid modeling approaches that balance predictive performance with interpretability, combining the strengths of deep learning with transparent or explainable components. By addressing these research directions, the field of XAI can move closer to realizing its goal of enabling truly trustworthy, human-centered, and socially responsible artificial intelligence systems.

VIII. CASE STUDY: EXPLAINABLE AI IN CLINICAL DECISION SUPPORT FOR MEDICAL DIAGNOSIS

A representative case study illustrating the practical impact of Explainable Artificial Intelligence can be found in clinical decision support systems for medical diagnosis, where trust, accountability, and interpretability are essential. In this setting, deep learning models are often used to analyze medical imaging data, such as radiographs or histopathology slides, to detect diseases with high accuracy. While these models frequently outperform traditional approaches, their black-box nature raises concerns among clinicians who must ultimately justify diagnoses and treatment decisions. To address this challenge, gradient-based XAI techniques such as Integrated Gradients and saliency maps have been employed to highlight regions of input images that contribute most strongly to a model's prediction. These visual explanations allow clinicians to verify whether the model is focusing on medically relevant features, such as lesions or anatomical abnormalities, rather than spurious artifacts.

In practice, explainability in this domain serves multiple stakeholders with distinct needs. Clinicians use explanations to build confidence in model recommendations and to identify potential failure modes, such as overreliance on irrelevant image regions. Hospital administrators and regulators benefit from transparent documentation practices, such as Model Cards and Datasheets for Datasets, which describe model performance across patient subgroups and disclose known limitations. From a fairness perspective, XAI techniques can be used to analyze whether model predictions systematically differ across demographic groups, helping to identify and mitigate biases related to age, gender, or ethnicity. Importantly, the explanations must be presented in a human-centered manner, using intuitive visual or textual representations that align with clinical reasoning rather than abstract mathematical scores.

This case study highlights both the benefits and limitations of XAI in real-world deployments. While explanation methods can enhance trust and support accountability, they do not eliminate the need for rigorous validation, domain expertise, and human oversight. Explanations may be incomplete or misleading if they are not faithful to the underlying model, underscoring the importance of careful evaluation and user studies. Nevertheless, the integration of XAI into clinical decision support

demonstrates how explainability can function as a critical enabler of trustworthy AI, facilitating collaboration between humans and intelligent systems in high-stakes environments. This example reinforces the broader argument that effective XAI must be context-aware, user-aligned, and embedded within a comprehensive framework of transparency, fairness, and accountability.

IX. CONCLUSION

Explainable Artificial Intelligence has emerged as a foundational requirement for building trustworthy, responsible, and human-aligned machine learning systems in an increasingly automated world. As AI models are deployed in critical domains such as healthcare, finance, criminal justice, and autonomous systems, the ability to understand, audit, and justify their decisions has become as important as predictive performance.

This systematic review has traced the evolution of XAI research from 2000 to 2021, capturing its transition from early interpretability efforts in classical machine learning to sophisticated post-hoc explanation techniques for deep learning models. By synthesizing a broad body of literature, we have categorized key XAI approaches into intrinsic and post-hoc methods, highlighting their strengths, limitations, and practical implications. Furthermore, the review has demonstrated that explainability cannot be treated as an isolated technical feature but must be integrated within broader frameworks of ethical AI, governance, and human-centered design.

Beyond technical categorization, this review has emphasized the deep connections between explainability and core principles of trustworthy AI, including transparency, fairness, accountability, and user empowerment. We have shown how contributions such as Model Cards, Datasheets for Datasets, and human-centered explanation theories have expanded the scope of XAI beyond model interpretability to include documentation, bias mitigation, and stakeholder communication. Key methodological advances such as LIME, SHAP, and Integrated Gradients have provided powerful tools for interpreting complex models, while frameworks like that of van der Velden et al. (2021) have helped structure the selection and evaluation of XAI techniques in context. The case study in clinical decision support further illustrated how explainability can enhance trust, improve decision quality, and facilitate responsible AI deployment in real-world settings. Together, these developments underscore that XAI is not merely a research trend

but a critical enabler of socially responsible and reliable AI systems.

Despite these achievements, significant challenges remain that require sustained interdisciplinary research and collaboration. Future work must move beyond purely technical notions of explanation quality and incorporate rigorous, standardized evaluation benchmarks that reflect real user needs and decision contexts. There is a pressing need for large-scale empirical studies involving diverse stakeholders to assess how explanations influence trust, understanding, and outcomes in practice. Additionally, stronger integration of XAI with regulatory frameworks is essential to ensure compliance, accountability, and public trust in AI systems. Researchers should also explore hybrid modeling approaches that balance interpretability and performance, rather than treating them as opposing objectives. Ultimately, the goal of XAI should be to produce explanations that are not only mathematically sound but also meaningful, fair, transparent, and actionable for human users, thereby fostering truly trustworthy and human-centered artificial intelligence.

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