Dehumanized by Design: Decoding the Emotional Impact of AI in Recruitment on Employer Branding

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This study explores the emotional and experiential impact of AI-powered recruitment processes on applicants' experiences and the organization's employer branding and highlights the significant challenges associated with the increasing reliance on AI in talent acquisition. Through thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 30 applicants and practitioners, this study uncovers pervasive negative emotions such as anxiety, frustration, and dehumanization stemming from the rigid and impersonal nature of AI systems. These emotional responses pose substantial risks to employer branding, potentially leading to long-term reputational damage. Despite practitioners' awareness of these challenges, organizations continue to implement AI-driven recruitment processes, prioritizing operational efficiency over candidate experience. AI in recruitment primarily benefits organizations at the expense of applicants.

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Introduction

Recruitment has long been centered on human interactions, where both recruiters and applicants engage in an exchange of information, emotions, and expectations. This human connection is crucial for applicants, as it ensures they feel valued and respected, positively influencing their perception of the organization (Fritts & Cabrera, 2021; Fernandes et al., 2022). Historically, recruitment processes have transcended mere transactional communication, contributing significantly to employer branding, talent acquisition, and organizational success (Wilfred, 2018; Vu, 2020). Candidates value transparency, feedback, and human connection throughout the process, fostering long-term relationships and reinforcing employer branding (Grossman & Schoolderman, 2022). However, the recent integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into recruitment has disrupted these

dynamics. AI tools, such as applicant tracking systems and AI interviewing mechanisms, promise efficiency but lack the human touch crucial to candidate experiences. These tools, while adept at logistical tasks, fail to assess soft skills, emotional intelligence, or cultural fit—key elements that contribute to a successful hire (Oksanen, 2018; Hunkenschroer & Luetge, 2022).

A poor candidate experience during recruitment, particularly in an AI-driven process, can damage an organization's reputation, making it harder to attract top talent.

Findings from this study reveal that AI-driven recruitment consistently evokes negative experiences for applicants, primarily due to the absence of human interaction. Candidates report feelings of frustration, anxiety, and detachment, driven by the rigidity and impersonal nature of AI systems. The lack of transparency in AI evaluations creates uncertainty and distrust, further compounding candidates' negative experiences. These negative experiences pose significant risks to organizations' employer branding. A poor candidate experience during recruitment, particularly in an AI-driven process, can damage an organization's reputation, making it harder to attract top talent. Negative reviews on platforms like LinkedIn and Glassdoor amplify these challenges, leading to long-term damage to the organization's image (Grossman & Schoolderman, 2022). Despite these risks, organizations continue to adopt AI due to its operational benefits, such as cost savings and speed. This study explores the paradox of why organizations persist in using AI despite its known negative impact on candidate experiences.

By extending the theory of social determinism of technology (Hughes, 1987) to AI in recruitment, this study addresses the research questions: Why do organizations deploy AI in recruitment despite the known risks to their employer branding? And Why do AI developers ignore negative applicant experiences? The study makes a contribution by bridging the gap in understanding the applicant's perspective in AI-facilitated recruitment along with explaining AI's directions and organizations' enthusiasm towards AI. The study's findings, based on experiences in India, offer insights applicable to Southeast Asia's rapidly growing recruitment markets, underscoring the need for a more conscious deployment of AI to balance efficiency with a positive candidate experience.

Recruitment, AI & the Theory

The increasing adoption of AI-driven recruitment systems by organizations presents a paradoxical dilemma. On the one hand, these systems promise operational efficiency, scalability, and cost reduction for employers, which is particularly attractive for large corporations that process vast numbers of job applications. On the other hand, applicants engaging with AI tools report negative experiences, including feelings of anxiety, frustration, and disconnection. Despite these adverse effects on candidates, organizations con-

tinue to rely on AI in recruitment, creating a tension between efficiency-driven technological adoption and the human-centered needs of candidates. This study explores the experiences on a latent level and explains this paradox, investigating why organizations persist in using AI in recruitment, even when it negatively impacts candidate experience.

To understand this paradox, the study draws on the social determinism of technology, a theoretical perspective that views technology not as a neutral force but as a product of social, political, and economic forces. Hughes (1987) argues that technology is shaped by the priorities and interests of the dominant social groups—those with the resources to develop and deploy it. In the case of AI in recruitment, large organizations, particularly those with significant financial and technological resources, shape how these tools are developed and implemented. As a result, AI systems are designed to serve the operational needs of these organizations, prioritizing efficiency, speed, and cost-effectiveness over the nuanced human elements of recruitment. This focus aligns with the economic imperatives of businesses but often disregards the psychological and emotional well-being of candidates who interact with these systems.

The theory suggests that technology development is guided by the priorities of those who fund and control it. In recruitment, this means that AI systems are not neutral tools but rather are developed to meet the specific needs of employers. These systems are thus designed to streamline recruitment, reducing the need for human recruiters and enabling organizations to process large numbers of applications rapidly. As Upadhyay and Khandelwal (2018) highlight, AI tools can reduce human bias and improve consistency as well as speed in hiring decisions, making them attractive to employers. However, this efficiency comes at the cost of personal interaction and feedback that candidates value in traditional recruitment processes (Black & van Esch, 2021). This study applies the social determinism of technology to the context of AI recruitment, demonstrating how the economic interests of organizations drive the design and deployment of these tools. As organizations seek to maximize efficiency, they adopt AI systems that can process applications at scale, even if this diminishes the candidate experience. Moreover, once these systems are embedded in organizational processes, they become difficult to replace, creating a self-reinforcing cycle where the operational benefits for employers outweigh the negative experiences of candidates (van den Broek et al., 2020). This feedback loop perpetuates the paradox, as organizations, despite acknowledging the negative impact on applicants, continue to rely on AI-driven recruitment tools. Thus, the findings of this study underscore the importance of critically examining the role of AI in recruitment, balancing organizational efficiency with candidates' psychological and emotional needs.

Method

This study employs a qualitative research design to examine the emotional

and experiential impact of AI-driven recruitment processes on both applicants and practitioners. Given the complexity of participants' lived experiences and the need for deep insights, a qualitative approach is ideal for understanding the nuanced dynamics between AI tools, communication, and emotions in recruitment. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary method to allow for flexibility while ensuring key topics were covered.

Sample & Sampling Procedure

The study sample consisted of 30 participants, divided into two groups: applicants who had undergone AI-driven recruitment processes, and practitioners who were directly involved in implementing or using AI tools for recruitment in their organizations. A purposive sampling method was employed to ensure that participants met criteria relevant to the research focus. For applicants, the inclusion criteria required that participants had applied for a role within the last six months in an organization that utilized AI tools in its recruitment process. Additionally, participants were required to have prior experience with a traditional human-to-human recruitment process, allowing for a comparative understanding of the differences between the two methods. For practitioners, participants were required to either hold decision-making authority or have significant influence in the implementation of AI tools in recruitment. Practitioners were also required to have direct involvement in recruitment as recruiters, hiring managers, or interviewers. This dual-perspective sampling—gathering insights from both applicants and practitioners—enabled a holistic understanding of the recruitment experience from both sides of the process.

Data Collection

Data were collected from 30 participants across 13 organizations in industries including BFSI, FMCG, Consulting, Energy, and Automobiles. The semi-structured interviews, conducted between January and June 2024, lasted approximately 60 minutes on average, and took place in participant-selected settings in cities including Mumbai, Pune, Bangalore, Hyderabad, and Delhi, to ensure participant comfort and data richness. The data were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and proofread to capture the accuracy of sentiments. This method allowed for flexibility in probing deeper into responses, providing comprehensive data that captured both individual nuances and overarching patterns across participants.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) six-phase framework, which systematically identified patterns across the data. The first phase involved familiarisation with the interview transcripts, noting initial patterns of emotions, experiences, and concerns. In the second phase, data were coded inductively, allowing themes to emerge naturally from the participants' experiences. A total of 81 data extracts were identified, capturing key emotions such as frustration, anxiety, and dissatis-

faction with AI-driven recruitment. For instance, one participant remarked, "Yes, it made me nervous and anxious when there was no feedback from the AI," while another shared, "I remember being very stressed, of course." In the third phase, these 81 data extracts were grouped into five initial codes, such as "AI-driven interviews make candidates more nervous than human-driven interviews" and "Candidates feel uncomfortable during AI-driven recruitment." These codes were further refined into overarching themes. For instance, the codes related to nervousness and discomfort were merged into the broader theme, "Candidates felt uncomfortable in AI-driven hiring processes."

In the final phases of analysis, these themes were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and distinctiveness. The overarching theme that emerged was "AI invoked a negative sentiment in the recruitment process," capturing the emotional toll AI tools placed on candidates. Table 1 provides a comprehensive view of deploying the six phases of Braun and Clarke (2006; 2021) framework in this study.

The study ensured reliability and validity through rigorous intercoder reliability checks and reflexive practices. Researchers independently coded transcripts,

Table 1 Thematic Analysis Using Six Phases of Braun and Clarke framework

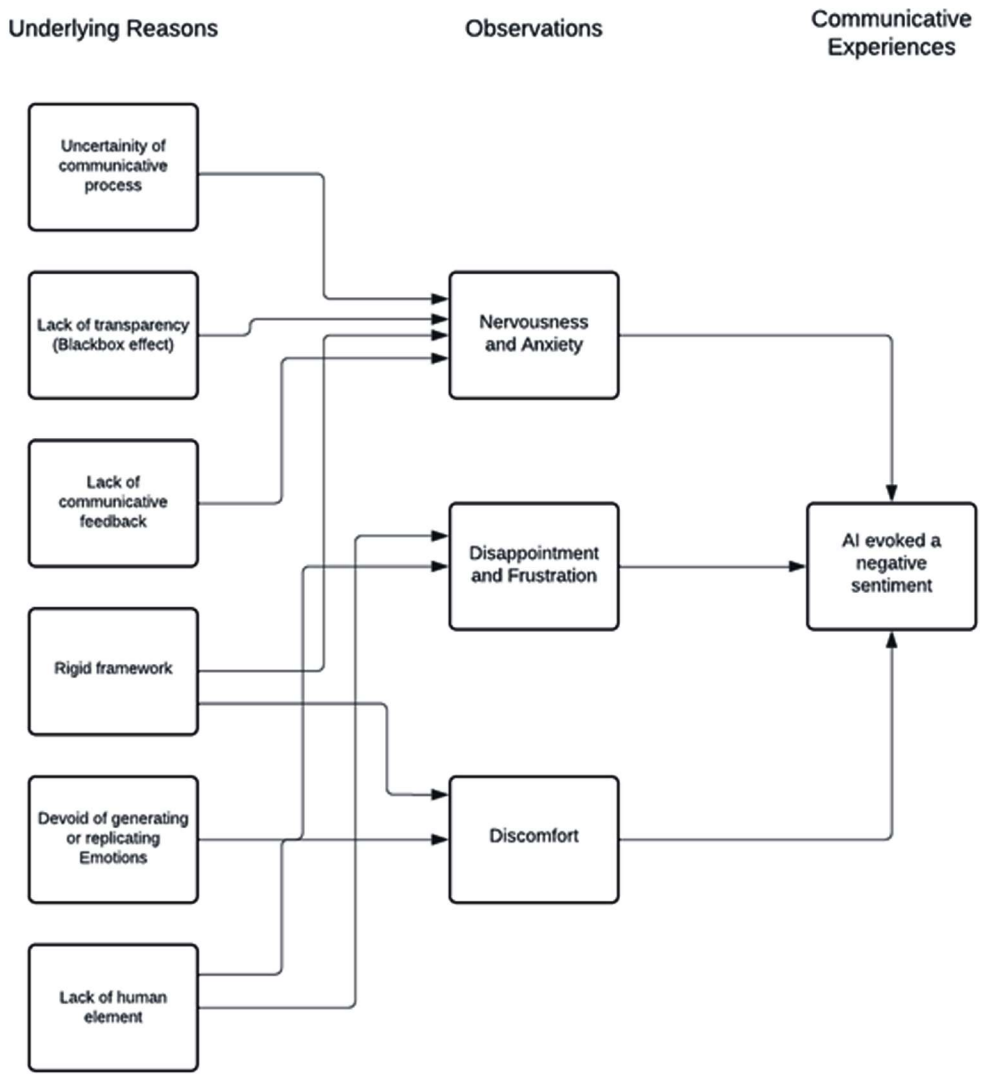
Thematic Analysis using six phases of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021)					
Phase1	**Phase 2**	**Phase 3**	**Phase 4**	**Phase 5**	**Phase 6**
Familiarising yourself with data	**Generating Initial Codes**	**Searching for themes**	**Reviewing themes**	**Defining and naming themes**	**Producing the report**
	L1 Coding	**L2 Themes**	**L3 Revised themes**	**L4 Final themes**	
Data digitally recorded, transcribed, proofread and reviewed multiple times to familiarise with it. Data extracts which point towards possible common sentiments identified and grouped together to proceed to the phase 2 i.e. coding.	Candidates felt disappointed or sad in a recruitment process that used AI as interviewer in place of humans.	Candidates felt disappointed in AI driven hiring process	Candidates felt disappointed in AI driven hiring process	AI invoked a negative emotion	Findings and themes explained along with quotes.
	AI driven interviews make candidates more nervous as compared to the human driven interviews	Candidates felt uncomfortable in AI driven hiring process			
	Candidates face a lot of anxiety when dealing with AI in recruitment process				
	AI driven interviews make candidates feel uncomfortable				
	Practitioners acknowledged that candidates experience nervousness, stressed, and anxious	Practitioners acknowledged the negative experiences of candidates in an AI driven hiring process	Practitioners acknowledged the negative experiences of candidates		

discussing discrepancies to refine the coding scheme. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the study to avoid researcher bias. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board, and participants provided informed consent on record, with assurances of confidentiality and anonymity.

Findings

The findings of this study reveal that applicants experienced a negative emotion while interacting with AI in the hiring process. A conceptual model given in fig 1 explains the observations, communicative experiences, and underlying reasons.

Fig. 1 Conceptual Model Explaining the Observations, Communicative Experiences & Underlying Reasons



AI Evoked a Negative Sentiment

The respondent reported discomfort, anxiety, frustration, and detachment during AI recruitment, largely due to the absence of human interaction, the rigidity of AI systems, and the lack of transparency and feedback. Notably, practitioners implementing AI recruitment tools also acknowledged these issues, indicating an organizational awareness of AI's challenges. Despite this awareness, organizations continue to prioritize the operational efficiencies of AI over improving the candidate experience. Applicants described the AI-driven recruitment process as emotionally unsettling, with AI systems failing to provide the feedback and reassurance that human recruiters typically offer. We outline how these negative sentiments arose and how practitioners understood these challenges yet continued to favour AI's operational benefits.

Applicants described the AI-driven recruitment process as emotionally unsettling, with AI systems failing to provide the feedback and reassurance that human recruiters typically offer.

Nervousness & Anxiety: Many applicants experienced heightened nervousness and anxiety during AI interviews. The main source of anxiety was uncertainty and a lack of control over the process. Participant P28[1] remarked, "I did fluster a bit… the whole thing was a bit nervous. I became nervous yeah." Unlike in traditional interviews, where applicants can interpret non-verbal cues from interviewers, AI-driven interviews offered no such cues, increasing the uncertainty of evaluation.

Participant P4 highlighted the anxiety from not knowing how they were being judged by the AI system: "In an in-person interview… you tend to know… But here, there is no mental preparation… you don't know what's happening." The absence of real-time feedback made participants feel vulnerable, with the opaque AI decision-making process exacerbating this anxiety. The impersonal nature of AI systems further intensified these feelings. For instance, Participant P9 noted their anxiety stemmed from unfamiliarity with AI processes, stating, "At the initial phase, it's an interaction with AI; I was nervous."

Moreover, applicants found the level of nervousness in AI interviews higher than in traditional interviews. Participant P9 explained: "It was the very first time I was interacting with AI, so it was at a much higher level [of nervousness] than my regular experience." This unfamiliarity and the impersonal nature of AI amplified their anxiety, resulting in a more stressful and less comfortable experience.

Frustration & Discomfort: Beyond anxiety, applicants frequently expressed frustration with the AI recruitment process, often due to a perceived lack of fairness and transparency. Participant P3

[1] Participants of this study were assured of their confidentiality and anonymity and are referred via codes throughout the study. Nomenclature PX indicates participant number X.

described the experience as deeply disappointing, even leading to anger: "I think it was disappointment… and which gradually boiled down to anger… why do this?"

AI interviews lacked the conversational flexibility of human interviews.

The rigid structure of AI systems compounded this frustration, as AI interviews lacked the conversational flexibility of human interviews. Participant P10 recounted, "There was like 30 seconds of silence… I was very silent… and knew that *ki*[2] [that] you will be judged based on the way you are communicating as well." The fixed format of AI interviews, with no opportunity for clarification or follow-up, left participants feeling constrained, and unable to express themselves fully.

Many applicants also felt uncomfortable due to the absence of human presence and non-verbal cues during AI-driven interviews. Participant P9 remarked, "When you are looking at the person [in a human-to-human interview] there is some sort of assurance of acceptance… But when you are looking at a blank screen… you are just putting things on a blank paper." This absence of non-verbal feedback left applicants feeling disconnected, and uncertain of how their responses were received.

The impersonal nature of AI systems was another source of discomfort. Participant P27 expressed feeling cheated and disconnected, remarking, "I was upset. I was angry… I just felt very cheated." This sentiment reflects the broader frustration and discomfort felt by many applicants when interacting with AI, which they perceived as cold and impersonal.

Fear & Detachment

Some applicants reported feelings of fear and detachment during the AI-driven recruitment. Participant P5 described their fear: "I was scared… when I sit in front of the screen, I went numb." This fear stemmed from the high stakes of the recruitment process and the impersonal nature of AI, which provided no reassurance or feedback.

The sense of detachment was evident as applicants felt disconnected from the recruitment process. Participant P4 stated, "You don't know what's happening… You just have to wait." The lack of engagement and feedback left applicants feeling distanced from the process and uncertain about their performance. Many applicants missed the interpersonal rapport that typically develops during human-to-human interviews, contributing to their emotional detachment and negative sentiments.

Practitioners' Acknowledgment

Practitioners were well aware of the negative experiences candidates faced during AI-driven recruitment. While or-

[2] Vernacular (Hindi) texts in this study are italicised with their English translation appended ahead in brackets

ganizations continue adopting AI for its efficiency, practitioners recognize that these systems often fail to provide a positive candidate experience. Participant P1, a practitioner, noted, "It's frustrating… the chatbot will ask you… questions [that] might not be relevant to you." This awareness of AI's rigidity and lack of adaptability mirrors the frustration applicants expressed.

Participant P26 acknowledged that applicants often felt nervous during AI interactions, stating, "Everybody who attends this interview will go nervous only… we'll be expecting every minute what is going to be the next second." Practitioners also recognized the emotional toll AI-driven recruitment can take on candidates. Participant P1 observed that AI lacked the emotional support and empathy human recruiters could provide, explaining, "Whenever it's AI, the AI will say no… not [in] any fancy… language." This mechanical approach left candidates feeling devalued and frustrated.

Practitioners further acknowledged that the lack of human interaction in AI recruitment could create detachment for candidates. Participant P26 remarked, "You can't do away entirely with the human part of it." This sentiment reflects the recognition that while AI may be efficient, it fails to replicate the warmth and empathy candidates expect during recruitment.

In conclusion, AI-driven recruitment processes evoke a range of negative emotions, from anxiety and frustration to fear and detachment. These emotions primarily arise from the lack of human interaction, AI's rigid structure, and the absence of feedback and transparency. Practitioners are aware of these negative experiences but continue to favor AI's operational efficiencies. As AI becomes more prominent in recruitment, it is crucial for organizations to address these negative sentiments to ensure a recruitment process that is both efficient and empathetic.

Discussion

The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into recruitment has enhanced efficiency and reduced costs but also triggered significant negative emotional responses from applicants. These emotional reactions, primarily driven by the lack of human interaction, transparency, and empathy in AI systems, align with existing research. Candidates frequently report feeling anxious, frustrated, and dehumanized when engaging with AI during recruitment processes (Jarrahi, 2018; Meijerink & Keegan, 2021). AI's algorithmic rigidity is at odds with the nuanced, interpersonal dynamics expected in traditional, human-centered hiring practices. For example, Hickman et al. (2022) found that applicants often feel disempowered and uncertain about how they are being assessed, exacerbating anxiety and frustration. Similarly, the current study revealed candidates' concerns about fairness and transparency, with AI's inability to provide real-time feedback further heightening dissatisfaction.

The structured, inflexible nature of AI interviews does not allow for the con-

versational flow or adaptability typical of human recruiters, contributing to emotional detachment. Applicants often feel constrained by AI's rigid protocols, unable to communicate non-verbal cues such as empathy, which exacerbates their negative experiences. This disconnect is particularly problematic in high-stakes recruitment situations, where the implications for candidates are both personal and professional.

These emotional repercussions extend beyond individual experiences, affecting organizational outcomes, particularly employer branding. A positive employer brand is essential for attracting top talent, while negative perceptions can deter qualified candidates, jeopardizing an organization's competitive edge. The current study underscores the long-term risks AI-driven recruitment poses to employer branding. Candidates' feelings of anxiety, frustration, and dehumanization lead to negative perceptions of the organization, which are often shared publicly on platforms like Glassdoor or Indeed. These reviews can quickly damage an employer's reputation, especially in competitive job markets where branding plays a crucial role in attracting talent (Thompson, 2022).

Recent studies emphasize that organizations ignoring the emotional toll of AI recruitment risk alienating potential employees and tarnishing their employer brand (Black & van Esch, 2021). While AI tools bring short-term efficiencies, the negative impact on candidate experiences can have long-term repercussions for the organization's reputation. The amplification of negative experiences via social media platforms exacerbates this risk. In industries with talent shortages, employer branding becomes a critical factor in securing high-quality candidates, and negative reviews can spread rapidly, amplifying reputational damage.

Despite practitioners' awareness of the emotional strain AI-driven processes place on candidates, organizations continue to implement these systems. Interviewed practitioners acknowledged that AI systems, while efficient, fail to provide the empathy and human interaction candidates expect. This acknowledgment reflects a central dilemma: organizations prioritize operational efficiency over candidate well-being, despite being fully aware of the consequences. The study's findings align with research showing that recruitment professionals recognize AI's limitations (Chang, 2024), but organizational pressures to improve efficiency and reduce costs compel them to persist with these technologies.

AI systems, while efficient, fail to provide the empathy and human interaction candidates expect.

This tension—balancing efficiency with candidate experience—illustrates a broader organizational challenge. Practitioners find themselves in a paradox, where they must navigate the need for cost-effective recruitment while recognizing that AI-driven systems negatively affect the candidates. As organizations scale and face increas-

ing volumes of applications, the need for AI becomes more pressing, but at the expense of personalizing candidate interactions.

This paradox is symptomatic of a broader societal trend in which technology, particularly AI, is designed and implemented to benefit organizations rather than individuals. The social determinism of technology provides a framework for understanding this dynamic. AI recruitment systems are developed primarily to serve organizational economic interests, not the emotional or relational needs of applicants. The impersonal, rigid nature of these systems reflects this focus on efficiency over empathy. Consequently, candidates' experiences of anxiety, frustration, and disconnection are not accidental but inherent in the design of AI systems, which are primarily developed to meet organizational goals.

The study highlights that organizations are willing to accept the trade-off between candidate well-being and operational efficiency. Despite the risks to employer branding, many organizations prioritize short-term benefits such as reduced time-to-hire, cost savings, and the ability to manage large application volumes. This approach reflects a broader pattern in which technological advancements are embraced for their potential to streamline operations, even at the expense of human-centered experiences (Zanoni, 2021). The social determinism of technology suggests that once a technology is adopted, it shapes behavior and expectations, reinforcing a cycle where organizations continue to invest in AI recruitment tools despite their negative impact on candidates.

Recent studies corroborate this view, showing that organizations increasingly adopt AI-driven recruitment tools to remain competitive, even when they acknowledge the emotional toll on candidates (Bessen, 2022). Economic pressures, particularly in industries where efficiency and speed are paramount, further incentivize organizations to prioritize operational gains over human-centered recruitment.

The persistence of AI-driven recruitment, despite known drawbacks, reflects the prioritization of efficiency over empathy in organizational decision-making. The findings of this study reveal a complex interplay between the benefits of AI and the negative emotional impact on candidates. Organizations recognize the emotional toll but continue to rely on AI, a decision influenced by the social determinism of technology, where operational needs overshadow human considerations.

These findings have significant implications for organizations aiming to balance the benefits of AI with the need to offer a positive candidate experience. As AI becomes more prevalent in recruitment, organizations must carefully consider the long-term consequences of their technology adoption decisions, particularly regarding employer branding. Future research should explore strategies to mitigate the negative emotional effects of AI recruitment and enhance human-centered elements within these processes.

Conclusion, Limitations & Future Scope of Studies

This study delves into the emotional and experiential impacts of AI-driven recruitment on applicants, highlighting key challenges that emerge when organizations prioritize technological efficiency over human-centered approaches. The findings reveal significant negative emotions—such as anxiety, frustration, and dehumanization—experienced by candidates, stemming from the rigid, impersonal nature of AI systems. These emotional responses not only degrade the candidate experience but also risk damaging employer branding, potentially causing long-term reputational harm.

Despite practitioners acknowledging these challenges, organizations persist in implementing AI recruitment, driven by operational advantages like cost savings, speed, and scalability. This paradox can be interpreted through the lens of the social determinism of technology, which suggests that AI tools are developed primarily to serve organizational interests, often at the cost of applicants' emotional well-being. This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on AI in human resource management, urging organizations to balance technological efficiencies with the need to maintain a human-centered recruitment experience. As AI's role in recruitment grows, the findings serve as a reminder that technological innovation should not undermine candidates' emotional and psychological well-being.

However, the study acknowledges several limitations. Its qualitative nature, while offering in-depth insights, limits the generalizability of the findings. The sample size, though appropriate for qualitative analysis, may not fully represent the diversity of experiences across industries, organizational scales, or cultural contexts. Future research with larger, more diverse samples could enhance the generalizability of these insights. Furthermore, the study primarily focuses on negative emotions, potentially overlooking instances where AI recruitment may have had neutral or positive effects. Exploring a wider spectrum of candidate experiences could provide a more balanced understanding of AI's impact. The reliance on self-reported data also introduces response bias, with participants' perceptions possibly influenced by recent media or personal experiences with AI.

Several avenues for future research emerge from this study. First, large-scale quantitative studies could complement the qualitative insights, measuring the prevalence of negative emotions and exploring their relationships with job type, industry, and demographics. Second, investigating hybrid recruitment models that combine AI's efficiency with human-centered interactions could offer practical solutions for organisations to address the emotional challenges of AI while retaining operational benefits. Additionally, exploring AI-driven recruitment across diverse cultural contexts would provide valuable insights for global organizations. Finally, as AI technology advances, research should focus on the ethical implications of its use in recruitment, particularly issues related to transparency, accountability, and the potential for AI to

undermine human dignity. By addressing these areas, future research can better guide organizations in balancing technological innovation with human-cenered practices in recruitment.

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