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

Abstract

This study explores the emotional and experiential impact of AI-powered recruitment processes on applicants' experiences and organisation's employer branding, highlighting 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 dehumanisation—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, organisations continue to implement AI-driven recruitment processes, prioritising operational efficiency over candidate experience. The study applies the theoretical framework of social determinism of technology to explain this paradox, arguing that AI in recruitment primarily benefits organisations at the expense of applicants. The findings underscore the need for a balanced approach that integrates AI's efficiency with human-centred recruitment practices to mitigate negative outcomes.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Recruitment, Employer Branding, Communicative Experience, Communication.

1. Introduction

Recruitment has traditionally been viewed as a human-centric process, deeply rooted in interpersonal communication and relational dynamics between recruiters and applicants. The process involves more than just selecting a candidate based on qualifications; it is an experience where both parties engage in a mutual exchange of information, emotions, and expectations. Applicants, in particular, value the human connection in recruitment, seeking not only opportunities but also affirmation, respect, and empathy from organisations. This human element in recruitment is crucial, as it allows applicants to feel seen, heard, and understood, contributing to a more positive overall experience. When candidates perceive a lack of respect or empathy, it can lead to dissatisfaction, which not only affects their performance but also their perception of the organisation (Fritts and Cabrera, 2021; Fernandes et al. 2022; Pena et al., 2023).

Historically, recruitment has been designed and perceived as a process that transcends mere transactional communication. It encompasses the psychological and emotional well-being of the applicants, who invest significant time and energy into securing employment. Organisations, in turn, benefit from creating a positive candidate experience, as it enhances their employer branding and their ability to attract and retain talent. As noted in extant literature, recruitment is integral to organisational success, impacting both short-term and long-term performance outcomes. Recruitment, in particular, shapes how organisations are perceived in the job market, with a positive candidate experience enhancing employer reputation, while a negative experience can have lasting repercussions on organisation's talent acquisition endeavours (Wilfred, 2018; Vu, 2020; Abdallah et al., 2021; Sushanto et al., 2023; Mikgolo and Dikota, 2023; Chen, 2023).

The significance of communication in recruitment has been well-documented. For applicants, recruitment is not just a formal process but a meaningful interaction that can significantly influence their career trajectory. Effective communication in recruitment allows for transparency, feedback, and clarification, ensuring that candidates feel valued, even if they are not selected for the role. Organisations that emphasise positive communication practices during recruitment processes are more likely to foster long-term relationships with candidates, contributing to a stronger employer brand and a more engaged workforce (Wilfred, 2018; Grossman and Schoolderman, 2022).

In recent years, advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) have dramatically altered the landscape of recruitment, introducing new tools designed to streamline the hiring process. AI-driven tools, including applicant tracking systems (ATS), automated screening mechanisms, and chatbots, have become increasingly prevalent in recruitment, offering organisations the ability to process large volumes of applications in a fraction of the time previously required. These tools promise enhanced efficiency, reduced human error, and faster decision-making, making them attractive to organisations seeking to improve their hiring processes. However, the introduction of AI into recruitment has raised significant concerns about the impact on the human element of the process. While AI tools are adept at handling logistical tasks, such as sorting resumes or scheduling interviews, they lack the capacity to engage in meaningful interpersonal communication. Recruitment is not merely a mechanical process of matching qualifications to job descriptions; it involves the evaluation of soft skills, emotional intelligence, and cultural fit, aspects that AI systems are ill-equipped to assess. The lack of empathy and personalised feedback in AI-driven recruitment processes can lead to a sense of alienation for candidates, who may feel reduced to data points rather than valued as individuals.

Given its novelty and recency, AI in recruitment is still an emerging discussion in academic literature (Oksanen, 2018; Hunkenschroer and Luetge, 2022).

Findings of this study reveal that the integration of AI into recruitment processes has consistently resulted in negative experiences for applicants, particularly due to the lack of human interaction and the rigidity of AI systems. Applicants report feelings of anxiety, frustration, and detachment when interacting with AI tools during recruitment. These negative emotions are largely driven by the impersonal nature of AI-driven processes, which lack the empathy, warmth, and adaptability that are hallmarks of human interactions. One of the key issues that candidates face when engaging with AI-driven recruitment is the perceived lack of transparency. Candidates often express concerns about how their responses are being evaluated and what criteria are being used to assess their applications. Unlike human recruiters, who can provide feedback and clarification throughout the process, AI tools operate in a “black box” manner, processing inputs without offering insight into how decisions are made. This lack of transparency leads to feelings of uncertainty and distrust among candidates, who are left questioning the fairness of the recruitment process. The rigidity of AI systems further exacerbates these negative experiences. AI tools typically follow strict protocols, offering limited flexibility in how candidates can respond to questions or showcase their unique skills and attributes. For example, AI-driven interviews often impose strict time limits for responses, providing little opportunity for candidates to elaborate or clarify their answers. This inflexibility contrasts sharply with human-to-human interactions, where recruiters can adapt the conversation based on the candidate's responses, allowing for a more nuanced and personalised exchange. The emotional toll of AI-driven recruitment processes cannot be understated. For many candidates, particularly those seeking life-changing career opportunities, the recruitment process is a significant event that carries high emotional stakes.

When the process is reduced to a series of impersonal, algorithmic interactions, candidates often feel dehumanised, leading to increased anxiety and frustration. These emotions are compounded by the inability of AI systems to provide reassurance, empathy, or feedback, which are critical components of a positive recruitment experience.

The negative experiences that candidates endure during AI-driven recruitment processes have far-reaching implications for organisations, particularly with regard to employer branding. Employer branding refers to the image and reputation an organisation cultivates as an employer, and it plays a crucial role in attracting and retaining talent. Candidates' experiences during the recruitment process are central to shaping this image, and a negative experience can significantly harm an organisation's ability to compete for top talent in a competitive job market. Research has shown that candidates who have negative experiences with AI-driven recruitment are likely to associate those experiences with the organisation as a whole. This association can be particularly damaging in the age of social media and online reviews, where candidates frequently share their experiences on platforms such as LinkedIn and Glassdoor. Negative reviews, stemming from feelings of frustration, anxiety, and detachment, can lead to reputational damage that is difficult for organisations to overcome (Grossman and Schoolderman, 2022).

Despite these risks to employer branding, organisations continue to integrate AI tools into their recruitment processes. This persistence can be explained by the significant operational benefits that AI offers, particularly in terms of efficiency and cost savings. AI-driven tools allow organisations to process thousands of applications quickly, reducing time-to-hire and enabling them to respond to market demands more swiftly. The cost savings associated with AI, particularly in terms of reducing the need for human recruiters, further incentivise organisations

to continue using these tools. However, these efficiencies come at a cost. As organisations prioritise speed and cost savings, they risk alienating candidates, leading to long-term damage to their employer brand. Candidates who feel devalued and dehumanised by AI-driven recruitment processes are less likely to recommend the organisation to others, and they may even discourage potential applicants from applying in the future. This dynamic creates a tension between the short-term benefits of AI integration and the long-term consequences for employer branding.

Findings of this study thus throw a paradoxical dilemma about organisations' continued advocacy and push for AI in recruitment space despite an acknowledgement of negative experiences by applicants. The study extends social determinism of technology (Hughes, 1987) to AI in recruitment to solve this paradox. Technological development and innovations in the AI driven recruitment space emerge to be driven by the cost and speed benefits enjoyed by the organisations as they have the means to finance this development. It finds that a blind diffusion of AI in recruitment is leading participants to experience negative emotions arising from a complete absence of human emotion, respect, transparency, and communicative feedback, and posing a threat to organisation's employer brand image. Thus, lying at the intersection of technology, recruitment, and human experiences, this study seeks an answer to the research questions 'Why do organisations deploy AI in recruitment processes despite the known risk on their employer branding' and 'Why do AI developers continue ignoring negative experiences of applicants while using AI tools in recruitment processes'?

This study makes a notable and unique contribution by bridging the enduring void of studying and describing the experiences of the applicants in an AI facilitated recruitment process. Thematically analysing their direct experiences at semantic and latent levels, it studies the

negative emotions that AI evoked in them along with the underlying causations. It further extends the social determinism of technology to the AI enabled recruitment space and solves the paradoxical dilemma of organisational focus on AI despite negative experiences of participants. Taking India as a case, the findings of this study are particularly relevant to growing offshoring geographies across Southeast Asia (SEA) as they continue to hire significantly high volumes of manpower and have begun experimenting with AI in their hiring processes. A conscious deployment of AI in recruitment arguably carries a potential to achieve a positive experience, transparent assessment, and strong employer branding.

2. Recruitment, AI, and the Theory

The persistence of AI-driven recruitment tools, despite their documented negative impact on candidate experiences, can be understood through the theoretical lens of social determinism of technology. This theory, initially articulated by Hughes (1987), posits that technology is not neutral or objective; rather, it is developed, shaped, and deployed in ways that serve the interests of those who possess the resources and power to create and implement it. In the context of AI-driven recruitment, this means that the organisations deploying these systems—particularly large corporations with significant economic means—are the primary beneficiaries, often at the expense of the candidates they seek to hire. Social determinism of technology suggests that technology is designed to serve the interests of those who finance and control its development and implementation. In other words, technology is not developed in a vacuum, but is shaped by social, political, and economic forces. It is created to solve problems or address needs as defined by those who have the power to commission and fund its development, often with little regard for broader societal impacts or the well-being of those who use it.

In the case of AI-driven recruitment systems, large corporations and tech giants, who can afford the high costs associated with developing or purchasing sophisticated AI tools, dominate the space. These organisations have a vested interest in streamlining their recruitment processes, reducing costs, and making faster hiring decisions, particularly as they receive vast numbers of applications for open positions. AI tools, which can quickly filter resumes, conduct initial assessments, and even perform interviews, are marketed and implemented as solutions to these operational challenges, allowing organisations to process vast amounts of candidate data with minimal human intervention. However, this efficiency comes at a cost, particularly for the job applicants who interact with these AI systems. The findings of this study, as well as recent literature on the subject, highlight the emotional toll that AI-driven recruitment systems can have on candidates. Negative emotions such as anxiety, frustration, and disconnection are common, as applicants navigate opaque, rigid, and impersonal AI systems. While the economic benefits for organisations are clear, these systems are not designed with the candidate experience in mind. Rather, they prioritise efficiency, scalability, and cost reduction, in line with the economic interests of the organisations that fund and deploy them.

One of the key insights provided by the theory of social determinism of technology is that the development and deployment of technology often reflect the priorities of the dominant social group—in this case, the organisations that use AI-driven recruitment tools. From an organisational perspective, AI offers numerous advantages. First, AI tools significantly reduce the costs associated with human recruitment teams, who would otherwise have to sift through thousands of resumes and conduct numerous initial interviews. Second, AI systems can handle large volumes of applications quickly and consistently, reducing the time-to-hire and allowing organisations to remain agile in fast-moving industries. Third, AI systems can purportedly reduce human bias in recruitment, as they rely on algorithmic decision-making rather than

subjective human judgment (Upadhyay & Khandelwal, 2018). These perceived benefits make AI an attractive investment for organisations, particularly those with the resources to implement such systems at scale. However, while these tools may address organisational concerns, they often fail to meet the needs of the candidates who interact with them. The findings of this study underscore the fact that AI systems are ill-equipped to handle the more nuanced, emotional, and communicative aspects of recruitment that are essential for creating a positive candidate experience. Candidates reported feeling disconnected from the process, unable to receive feedback or clarification, and often left in a state of uncertainty about how their applications were being assessed. These negative emotions are not incidental but are intrinsic to the design of AI systems, which prioritise operational efficiency over interpersonal interaction. Several recent studies support these findings, suggesting that while AI can streamline recruitment processes, it frequently alienates candidates. For example, a study by Black and van Esch (2021) found that candidates who interacted with AI-driven recruitment systems were more likely to report feelings of anxiety and frustration compared to those who engaged with human recruiters. The authors argue that this disconnect is a direct result of the design of AI systems, which prioritise efficiency and scalability over the emotional and psychological well-being of candidates.

One of the critical insights offered by the theory of social determinism of technology is that once a technology is adopted, it begins to shape the behaviour, expectations, and decision-making processes of those who use it. In the context of AI-driven recruitment, organisations that adopt these tools may become increasingly reliant on them, adjusting their recruitment strategies to fit the capabilities of the technology rather than the needs of the candidates. This self-reinforcing cycle is evident in the findings of this study. Once organisations begin using AI systems, they may find it difficult to return to more human-centred recruitment processes,

even if they are aware of the negative impact on candidate experience. This is partly due to the significant investment required to implement AI systems, both in terms of financial cost and organisational restructuring. Once an organisation has committed to using AI for recruitment, it may be reluctant to revert to more labour-intensive human processes, particularly if the AI system is perceived as delivering operational efficiencies. This shift in behaviour reinforces the role of AI in recruitment, even if it comes at the cost of candidate experience. This self-reinforcing cycle has been documented in several recent studies. For instance, van den Broek et al. (2020) argue that the adoption of AI in recruitment leads to a fundamental shift in how organisations approach hiring. Rather than focusing on creating a positive candidate experience, organisations increasingly prioritise the operational efficiencies delivered by AI. This shift in focus creates a feedback loop, where AI becomes more deeply embedded in recruitment processes, making it difficult for organisations to prioritise candidate experience even when they recognise the negative impact of AI systems.

The tension between the operational efficiencies offered by AI and the human-centred nature of recruitment is a central theme in the literature on AI in human resources. The literature provides numerous examples of this tension between technological efficiency and human-centred processes. For example, a study by Hickman et al. (2022) found that while AI systems can reduce bias and improve efficiency in recruitment, they often fail to provide the interpersonal interaction and feedback that candidates expect. The authors argue that this disconnect is a result of the design of AI systems, which prioritise operational efficiency over the relational aspects of recruitment. Similarly, a study by Meijerink and Keegan (2021) found that candidates who interacted with AI-driven recruitment systems were more likely to report feelings of anxiety and frustration, as they were unable to receive feedback or clarification during the recruitment process. The tension between technological efficiency and human-

centred processes is not unique to AI-driven recruitment but is a broader issue that arises whenever technology is used to replace human interaction. In the context of recruitment, this tension is particularly pronounced, as the emotional and relational aspects of the process are essential for creating a positive candidate experience. However, as the theory of social determinism of technology suggests, the design and deployment of AI systems are driven by the economic interests of organisations, which prioritise efficiency and cost savings over the emotional well-being of candidates. Moreover, organisations will need to rethink how they design their recruitment processes to ensure that they are meeting the needs of candidates as well as their own operational goals. This may involve re-evaluating the role of AI in recruitment and considering how it can be used in ways that enhance rather than detract from the overall hiring experience of all parties involved.

3. Method

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the experiences of applicants and practitioners during AI-driven recruitment processes. The focus of this research is to understand the emotional and experiential impact of AI tools in recruitment, particularly the negative experiences reported by applicants. A qualitative approach is well-suited for this study because it allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences, providing nuanced insights into the emotional and communicative dynamics at play.

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary data collection method, allowing for flexibility in the interview process while ensuring that key topics were covered. This approach facilitated a deeper understanding of how participants perceive and experience AI-driven recruitment, particularly in relation to the lack of human interaction, transparency, and emotional support. The interview guide was developed with open-ended questions to

encourage participants to share their thoughts and experiences freely, while still adhering to the research objectives.

3.1 Sample and 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 organisations. 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 organisation that utilised 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.

3.2 Data Collection

A total of 30 participants from 13 organisations from BFSI, FMCG, Consulting, Energy and Automobiles industries participated in this study. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 60 minutes on an average. The interviews were conducted in a setting chosen by the participants to ensure they were comfortable, contributing to the richness and authenticity of the data. The interview questions were designed to explore

participants' experiences with AI-driven recruitment, focusing on emotions and the overall experience. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, cleaned for coherence, and subsequently proofread to ensure accuracy of the sentiments expressed by participants. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility in probing deeper into participants' responses while maintaining consistency across key topics. This approach provided comprehensive data, capturing both the individual nuances of participants' experiences and the overarching themes that emerged across the sample. The interviews took place in cities of work for the participants (Mumbai, Pune, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Delhi, Noida, Gurugram) between January 2024 to June 2024.

3.3 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed as the primary analytical method, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Thematic analysis is particularly useful for identifying patterns of meaning across qualitative data and is well-suited for exploring complex emotional experiences. Braun and Clarke's framework provides a rigorous and systematic approach to coding and analysing data, ensuring that the findings are both reliable and valid.

The six phases of Braun and Clarke's framework were used in this study to arrive at the themes. The first step involved thoroughly reading the interview transcripts to become immersed in the data. During this phase, initial impressions were noted, and attention was paid to recurring emotions, experiences, and concerns expressed by the participants. This phase was crucial in identifying early patterns and key points of interest that would guide subsequent stages of analysis. In the second phase, the data were systematically coded to identify key segments of interest. A total of 198 data extracts were identified as relevant to the study's objectives. A few examples of these data extracts are appended below:

“So it can be unsettling for candidates and the fact that it can be unsettling for candidates needs to be taken into account by organizations in their policies”.

“To be transparent, everybody who attends this interview will go nervous only OK because it is like we'll be expecting every minute what is going to be a next second for us on the call”.

“Yes, it made me sometimes it made me nervous and anxious when there was no feedback from the AI”.

“I remember being very stressed, of course”.

Initial coding was conducted using an inductive approach, meaning the codes were generated from the data itself rather than being imposed by predefined categories. The codes were designed to capture the underlying sentiments expressed by participants, such as frustration, anxiety, and dissatisfaction with the AI-driven recruitment process. The initial codes were then examined for patterns and grouped into broader themes that captured the core aspects of participants’ experiences. At this stage, the 81 data extracts were grouped into 5 initial codes. Examples of these codes are appended below:

AI driven interviews make candidates more nervous as compared to the human driven interviews.

Candidates face a lot of anxiety when dealing with AI in recruitment process.

AI driven interviews make candidates feel uncomfortable.

These codes were then reviewed for commonalities and grouped into four overarching themes, which captured the broader emotional and experiential dimensions of AI-driven recruitment. During this phase, the themes were refined to ensure they were distinct and coherent. This process involved reviewing both the individual codes within each theme and the relationships between themes. For example, above three codes found themselves merged in a theme

"Candidates felt uncomfortable in AI driven hiring process", leaving two distinct themes for further analysis. In the fifth phase, these two themes were found merging into each other, leaving a final team to emerge. This theme was named as "AI invoked a negative sentiment in recruitment process". Finally, as sixth phase, the analysis was compiled into a coherent narrative, linking the themes to the research questions and objectives. The report emphasised the emotional and communicative dissonance caused by AI-driven recruitment, supported by representative quotes from participants. This phase also included relating the findings to the broader theoretical framework of social determinism of technology, demonstrating how the experiences of participants reflected the tension between technological efficiency and human-centred communication. Table 1 appended below provides a comprehensive view of deploying the six phases of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021) framework in this study.

Table 1: Thematic Analysis using Six Phases of Braun and Clarke framework

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

To ensure the reliability and validity of the thematic analysis, all due measures were taken throughout the research process. The intercoder reliability was ensured by having authors independently code a subset of the transcripts, after which discrepancies were discussed and resolved through face-to-face meetings. This process helped refine the coding scheme and ensured consistency across the data set. Additionally, reflexivity was maintained throughout

the research process, with the researchers continually reflecting on their potential biases and the influence these may have on the interpretation of the data. By engaging in reflexive practice, the research team was able to maintain a critical stance and avoid imposing preconceived notions on the data. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant institutional review board (IRB). All participants provided informed consent prior to their interviews, with assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Data were stored securely, and all identifying information was removed from the transcripts to protect participant privacy.

The methods employed in this study provided a robust framework for exploring the negative experiences of applicants and practitioners during AI-driven recruitment processes. The use of Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework ensured a rigorous and systematic approach to data analysis, allowing for the emergence of key themes that reflect the emotional and communicative challenges posed by AI in recruitment. By capturing both the semantic and latent meanings in the data, this study offers valuable insights into the broader implications of AI integration in recruitment, particularly in relation to the theory of social determinism of technology.

4. Findings

Findings of this study reveal that applicants experienced a negative emotion while their interaction with AI in a hiring process. A conceptual model given in figure 1 explains the observations, communicative experiences, and underlying reasons.

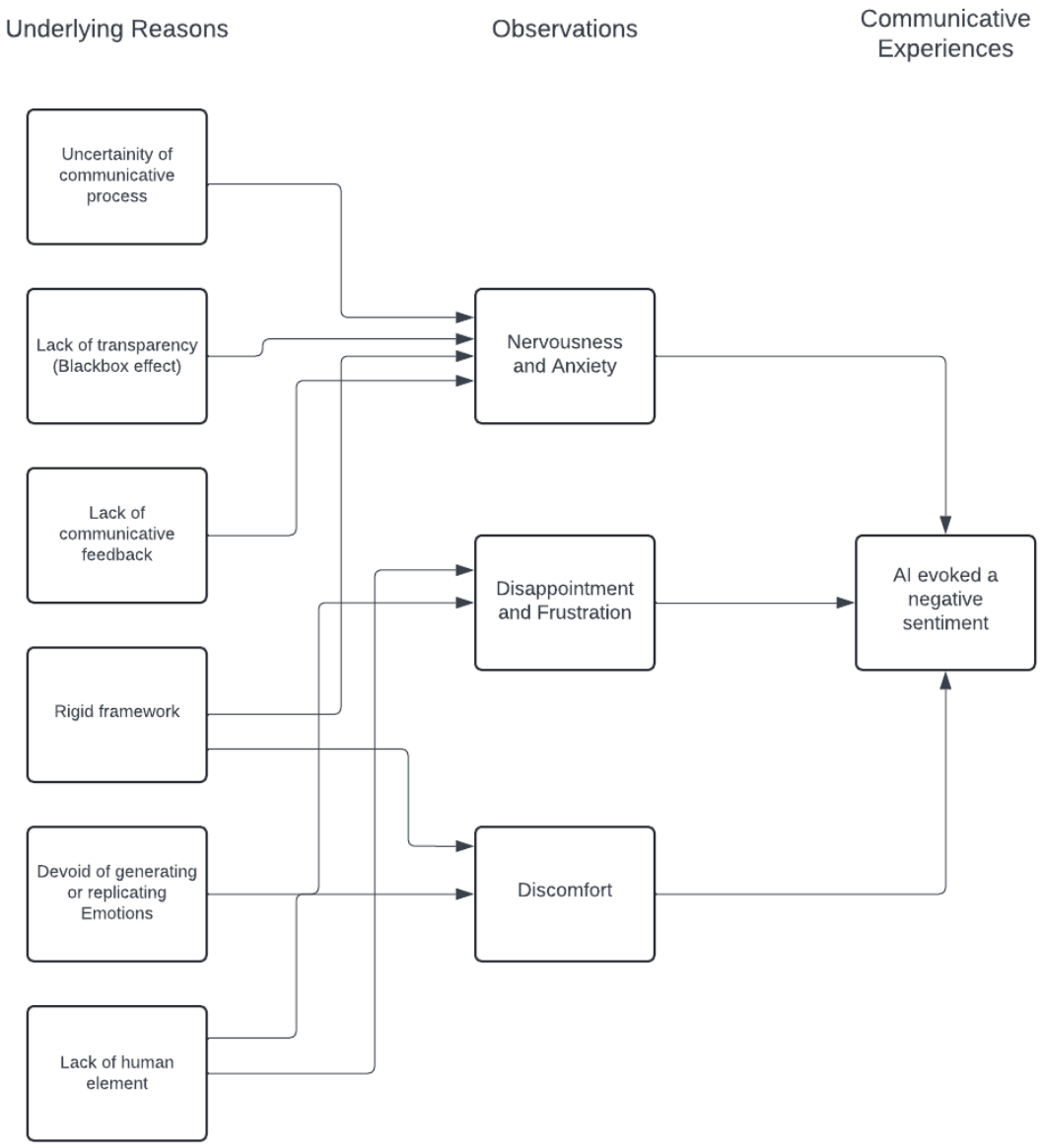

Figure 1: Conceptual Model explaining the Observations, Communicative Experiences and Underlying Reasons

4.1 AI Evoked a Negative Sentiment

One of the most dominant and pervasive themes that emerged from this study is the negative sentiment evoked by AI-driven recruitment processes among applicants. Participants consistently expressed feelings of discomfort, anxiety, frustration, and detachment when interacting with AI systems during recruitment, primarily due to the absence of human interaction, the rigidity of AI systems, and the lack of transparency and feedback. This negative

emotional experience was not limited to applicants alone; practitioners who implement and manage AI recruitment tools also acknowledged these issues, indicating an organisational awareness of the challenges posed by AI in recruitment.

This section explores the various ways in which AI-driven recruitment evoked negative sentiments among applicants and demonstrate how practitioners acknowledged and understood these negative experiences. Despite recognising these challenges, organisations continue to prioritise the operational efficiencies of AI over the candidate experience.

Applicants frequently described the AI-driven recruitment process as emotionally unsettling, causing a range of negative emotions such as nervousness, anxiety, frustration, and even fear. These emotions were exacerbated by the fact that AI systems often fail to provide the kind of feedback and reassurance that human recruiters would offer during a traditional recruitment process.

4.1.1 Nervousness and Anxiety

Several applicants reported experiencing heightened levels of nervousness and anxiety during their interactions with AI recruitment systems, particularly during AI-driven interviews. The primary source of this anxiety was the uncertainty and lack of control over the process. For instance, Participant P28 reflected on their nervousness: “I did fluster a bit but yeah but the whole thing was a bit nervous. I became nervous yeah.” This heightened nervousness was attributed to the fact that, unlike in human-to-human interviews, there was no opportunity to gauge the interviewer’s reactions or the direction of the interview. In traditional recruitment, applicants can typically pick up on non-verbal cues or the tone of the interviewer, which helps manage their expectations and allows them to adjust their responses accordingly. However, in

AI-driven interviews, applicants were left feeling uncertain about how they were being evaluated.

This feeling of uncertainty was reiterated by Participant P4[1], who described the anxiety that stems from not knowing how they were being judged by the AI system: "In an in-person interview by the end of it, if it's not going well, you tend to know and you mentally prepare yourself *ki haan shayad nahin hoga* [2](that perhaps it won't work out). *Yahan pe* (here), there is no mental preparation. You don't know what's happening. You don't know what they're judging you on. You just have to wait. So yes there was that anxiousness *ki kya hua* (about what happened)." The lack of real-time feedback and the opaque nature of AI decision-making processes left applicants feeling vulnerable and anxious about their performance and the outcome. The sense of anxiety was further compounded by the mechanical and impersonal nature of AI systems. Several participants noted that AI systems lacked the flexibility and adaptability that human recruiters offer. For example, Participant P9 explained how the AI system's rigid structure affected their performance: "At the initial phase, it's an interaction with AI; I was nervous." They went on to highlight how this nervousness was exacerbated because they were unfamiliar with AI-driven recruitment processes and did not know what to expect.

Moreover, applicants often experienced a heightened sense of nervousness during AI interviews compared to traditional human interviews. As Participant P9 put it: "It was the very first time I was interacting with AI, so it was at a much higher level [of nervousness] I would say than my regular experience." This suggests that the unfamiliarity and impersonal nature of

[1] Participants of this study were assured of their anonymity and have thus been referred as codes throughout this study. Nomenclature PX indicates participant number X.

[2] Vernacular (Hindi) texts are italicised, with their English translation appended ahead to explain the meaning.

AI systems amplified the applicants' anxiety, resulting in a less comfortable and more stressful experience than they would have encountered in a human-to-human interview.

4.1.2 Frustration and Discomfort

Beyond anxiety and nervousness, applicants also frequently expressed frustration with the AI-driven recruitment process. This frustration often stemmed from the perceived lack of fairness and transparency in AI systems, as well as the impersonal and mechanical nature of AI interviews. Participant P3, for example, described their experience as deeply disappointing and even anger-inducing: "I think it was disappointment. And which gradually boiled down to anger at some point and the second was not really anger, but you know I was like you know what is the use of this, you know, why? Why do this?"

This sense of frustration was exacerbated by the rigid structure of AI systems, which did not allow for the kind of conversational flexibility that human recruiters typically provide. As Participant P10 explained: "There was like 30 seconds of silence. So there was some anxiousness, nervousness that is going (through) me because I was very silent and know for that ki (that) you will be judged based on the way you are communicating as well." The rigid framework of AI interviews—where applicants are often given a fixed amount of time to answer questions without any opportunity for follow-up or clarification—left participants feeling constrained and frustrated, as they were unable to present themselves fully or respond to questions in the way they would have preferred.

Several applicants also mentioned feeling uncomfortable due to the lack of human presence and the absence of non-verbal cues during AI-driven interviews. Participant P9 remarked: "When you are looking at the person [in a human-to-human interview], while giving out a

response, there is some sort of assurance of acceptance of the answer… But when you are looking at a blank screen thinking out loud in your mind and giving out a response, like you are just putting things on a blank paper." This absence of non-verbal feedback left applicants feeling disconnected and uncomfortable, as they had no way of gauging how their responses were being received or whether they were on the right track.

The rigid and impersonal nature of AI systems was also a source of discomfort for applicants. Participant P27 described how the absence of human warmth and interaction made them feel cheated and disconnected from the process: "I was upset. I was angry… I just felt very cheated." This sentiment reflects the broader frustration and discomfort that many applicants felt when interacting with AI systems, which they perceived as cold, impersonal, and disconnected from the human-centred nature of recruitment.

4.1.3 Fear and Detachment

Some applicants also reported feeling fear and detachment during AI-driven recruitment processes, particularly when faced with the uncertainty of how their inputs were being evaluated. Participant P5 recounted their experience: "I was scared. I was very scared… I have to get a job and when I sit in front of the screen and I went numb." This fear was often linked to the high stakes of the recruitment process—where a candidate's future career prospects were on the line—and the impersonal nature of AI systems, which offered no reassurance or feedback during the interview process.

Moreover, applicants often felt detached from the recruitment process, as AI systems did not provide the kind of personalised interaction that they were accustomed to in human interviews. Participant P4 described how this detachment manifested in their experience: "You don't know

what's happening. You don't know what they're judging you on. You just have to wait." This lack of engagement and feedback left applicants feeling distanced from the process and uncertain about their performance. This emotional detachment was also reflected in the way AI systems were perceived as failing to connect with applicants on a human level. Several participants mentioned that they missed the interpersonal rapport that typically develops during a human-to-human interview, where recruiters can offer encouragement, feedback, and non-verbal cues. This detachment contributed to the negative sentiments that applicants experienced during AI-driven recruitment, as they felt isolated and disconnected from the process.

4.2 Practitioners' Acknowledgment of Applicants' Negative Experiences

Interestingly, practitioners were acutely aware of the negative sentiments that applicants experienced during AI-driven recruitment processes. While organisations continue to adopt AI tools for their efficiency and cost-saving benefits, practitioners acknowledged that these systems often failed to provide a positive candidate experience. Practitioners expressed concerns about how AI systems might be alienating applicants and creating a more stressful, impersonal recruitment process.

For example, Participant P1, a practitioner, recognised that AI systems can cause frustration for candidates, especially when the questions posed by AI are not relevant or adaptable: "It's frustrating… The chatbot will ask you a number of questions, and there will definitely be a certain scenario where these questions might not be relevant to you as well." This acknowledgment underscores the practitioners' awareness of the rigid and inflexible nature of AI systems, which can lead to frustration and negative experiences for candidates. Participant P26, another practitioner, echoed these concerns, noting that applicants often become nervous when interacting with AI systems due to the lack of clarity and feedback: "To be transparent,

everybody who attends this interview will go nervous only… Because it is like we'll be expecting every minute what is going to be the next second for us on the call." This recognition of the anxiety caused by AI systems highlights the practitioners' awareness of the emotional toll that AI-driven recruitment can have on candidates.

Additionally, practitioners recognised that AI systems often fail to provide the kind of emotional support and empathy that candidates need during the recruitment process. Participant P1 explained: "Sometimes the candidates are really not interested to hear no. There is a certain fancy way and a polished way to say no, so they're really looking forward for that. But whenever it's AI, the AI will say no. The AI will not use any fancy thing or a fancy language to say no to you." This quote illustrates how AI systems, in their pursuit of efficiency, often overlook the importance of delivering feedback in a sensitive and empathetic manner, which can leave candidates feeling devalued and frustrated.

Moreover, practitioners acknowledged that the lack of human interaction in AI-driven recruitment processes can create a sense of detachment and disconnection for candidates. Participant P26 remarked: "You can't do away entirely with the human part of it." This recognition reflects the broader sentiment among practitioners that AI systems, while efficient, are not capable of replicating the human warmth and empathy that candidates expect during the recruitment process.

The findings clearly illustrate that AI-driven recruitment processes evoke a range of negative sentiments among applicants, including anxiety, frustration, fear, and detachment. These negative emotions are primarily caused by the lack of human interaction, the rigidity of AI systems, and the absence of transparency and feedback. Applicants frequently reported feeling

nervous and anxious due to the uncertainty and impersonal nature of AI interviews, while others expressed frustration with the inflexibility and lack of engagement offered by AI systems. Practitioners, too, were aware of these negative sentiments and acknowledged that AI systems often failed to provide a positive candidate experience. Despite this recognition, organisations continue to prioritise the operational efficiencies of AI-driven recruitment, indicating a tension between the need for efficiency and the importance of maintaining a human-centred approach to recruitment. As AI continues to play an increasingly prominent role in recruitment, it is essential for organisations to address these negative sentiments and seek ways to improve the candidate experience, ensuring that the recruitment process remains both efficient and empathetic.

5. Discussion

The increasing integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into recruitment processes, while enhancing efficiency and reducing costs, has been shown to evoke significant negative emotional responses among job applicants. These emotions, as identified in the current study, are primarily rooted in the perceived lack of human interaction, transparency, and empathy that AI-driven processes offer. The study's findings align with existing literature, indicating that candidates often experience feelings of anxiety, frustration, and dehumanisation when interacting with AI systems (Jarrahi, 2018; Meijerink & Keegan, 2021). The emotional disconnect stems from the rigid, algorithmic nature of AI systems, which fail to accommodate the nuanced, interpersonal dynamics traditionally associated with human-centered recruitment processes. Recent studies have further substantiated the emotional toll of AI-driven recruitment. For instance, Hickman et al. (2020) identified that applicants often feel disempowered and uncertain about their evaluation process, exacerbated by the opacity of AI algorithms. This aligns with the current study's findings, where candidates reported significant

anxiety due to the perceived lack of fairness and transparency in AI-driven decisions. The inability of AI to provide real-time feedback or engage in personalised interactions leaves candidates feeling isolated and undervalued, contributing to a heightened sense of frustration and dissatisfaction. Moreover, the rigidity of AI systems, which operate under strict protocols and offer limited flexibility, has been consistently reported as a source of negative emotion. Applicants often feel constrained by the structured nature of AI interviews, which do not allow for the conversational flow or adaptability characteristic of human-to-human interactions (Upadhyay & Khandelwal, 2018). This lack of flexibility, coupled with the absence of non-verbal cues such as empathy and understanding, exacerbates the emotional detachment experienced by applicants. The emotional impact is particularly significant in high-stakes recruitment scenarios, where the job application process carries profound personal and professional implications for candidates.

The emotional repercussions of AI-driven recruitment processes are not limited to individual experiences but have broader implications for organisational outcomes, particularly in the context of employer branding. Employer branding, a critical aspect of talent acquisition strategies, shapes how potential employees perceive an organisation and influences their decision to apply for or accept job offers. A positive employer brand can attract top talent, whereas a negative reputation can deter qualified candidates, ultimately impacting an organisation's ability to compete effectively in the labour market. The current study's findings underscore the potential long-term consequences of negative applicant experiences on employer branding. When candidates feel anxious, frustrated, or dehumanised during the recruitment process, they are more likely to form negative perceptions of the organisation. These perceptions are often shared on platforms such as Glassdoor and Indeed, where candidates can publicly review their recruitment experiences. Negative reviews can quickly

damage an organisation's reputation, particularly in a competitive job market where employer branding plays a crucial role in attracting and retaining talent (Thompson, 2022).

The link between candidate experience and employer branding has been well-documented in recent studies. Black and van Esch (2021) emphasise that organisations that fail to address the negative emotional impact of AI recruitment risk alienating potential talent and damaging their employer brand. While AI tools may offer short-term efficiencies, the long-term effects on an organisation's reputation can be detrimental if the candidate experience is neglected. The current study corroborates this view, highlighting the disconnect between the operational benefits of AI and the potential damage to employer branding if the emotional well-being of candidates is not prioritised. Furthermore, the growing influence of social media and online platforms amplifies the impact of negative recruitment experiences on employer branding. In an era where information spreads rapidly online, negative reviews and experiences can quickly go viral, leading to widespread reputational damage. This dynamic is particularly pronounced in industries where talent is scarce, and employer branding plays a pivotal role in attracting high-quality candidates. The reputational risks associated with negative AI-driven recruitment experiences are therefore significant and warrant careful consideration by organisations. Despite these risks, organisations continue to implement AI-driven recruitment processes, driven largely by the perceived operational benefits. However, the long-term damage to employer branding could outweigh these short-term gains if the negative emotional impact on candidates is not adequately addressed.

The practitioners interviewed in this study were well aware of the negative emotions experienced by applicants during AI-driven recruitment processes. They recognised that while AI systems are efficient, they often fail to provide the level of human interaction and empathy

that candidates expect during the recruitment process. This acknowledgment reflects a critical aspect of the AI recruitment debate: organisations are not unaware of the challenges that AI poses for candidate experience; rather, they are consciously prioritising the operational efficiencies that AI offers over the emotional well-being of applicants. This recognition among practitioners aligns with recent studies highlighting the growing awareness within organisations of the emotional toll that AI-driven recruitment processes can have on candidates. Recent studies indicate that recruitment professionals are increasingly aware of the limitations of AI systems (Chang, 2024) in providing a positive candidate experience, yet they feel constrained by organisational pressures to improve efficiency and reduce costs. The current study's findings resonate with this perspective, indicating that while practitioners understand the negative emotional impact of AI, they often feel that the benefits of AI, particularly in terms of handling large volumes of applications, outweigh the drawbacks.

The tension between acknowledging the negative experiences of candidates and the continued implementation of AI in recruitment is indicative of a broader organisational challenge. Practitioners are caught between the need to deliver efficient, cost-effective recruitment processes and the desire to provide a positive, human-centred candidate experience. This dynamic creates a paradox where organisations, despite being aware of the emotional toll on candidates, continue to rely on AI-driven processes due to the significant operational benefits they offer. This paradox is further complicated by the recognition that AI-driven recruitment systems are becoming increasingly necessary for organisations that need to manage large volumes of applications. As organisations scale, the sheer number of applications makes it impractical for human recruiters to handle every aspect of candidate evaluation. AI systems provide a practical solution to this challenge, enabling organisations to process applications more quickly and efficiently. However, this efficiency comes at the cost of the emotional well-

being of candidates, a trade-off that organisations must carefully consider. The acknowledgment of negative applicant experiences by practitioners suggests that organisations are not blind to the potential risks of AI-driven recruitment. Instead, it reflects a conscious decision to prioritise efficiency and cost savings over the emotional well-being of candidates. This decision is driven by the perceived operational benefits of AI, despite the known risks to employer branding and candidate experience.

The continued implementation of AI-driven recruitment processes, despite the widespread acknowledgment of their negative impact on candidate experience and the risks to employer branding, presents a paradox that warrants closer examination. This paradox raises important questions about the priorities that drive organisational decision-making and the role that technology plays in shaping recruitment processes. While AI systems offer clear advantages in terms of speed, scalability, and cost savings, they fall short in addressing the emotional, communicative, and relational aspects of recruitment that are essential for creating a positive candidate experience. This tension is reflected in the findings of this study, which show that candidates often feel dehumanized by AI systems, even as organisations benefit from the efficiencies that these systems deliver. This tension can be understood as a direct consequence of the social determinism of technology. AI recruitment systems are not designed to meet the needs of candidates; rather, they are designed to serve the economic interests of the organisations that use them. This is evident in the rigid, impersonal nature of many AI systems, which prioritise the efficient processing of applications over the emotional well-being of candidates. The fact that candidates frequently experience anxiety, frustration, and disconnection when interacting with AI-driven recruitment systems is not an unintended side effect but is intrinsic to the design of these systems, which are developed to meet the needs of organisations rather than candidates.

The current study's findings suggest that organisations are willing to accept the trade-off between the emotional well-being of candidates and the operational efficiencies offered by AI. While the negative experiences of candidates may pose a risk to employer branding, organisations appear to prioritise the short-term benefits of AI, such as reduced time-to-hire, cost savings, and the ability to manage large volumes of applications. This decision reflects a broader trend in which technological advancements are embraced for their potential to increase efficiency, even when they come at the cost of human-centred experiences (Zanoni, 2021). This paradox can be understood through the lens of the social determinism of technology, which posits that technology is developed and implemented in ways that primarily benefit those who have the means to fund and control it. In the context of AI-driven recruitment, this theory provides insight into why organisations persist in using AI tools despite being aware of the negative consequences for candidates.

The social determinism of technology suggests that technological systems are designed to serve the interests of those who have the power to develop and implement them. In the case of AI recruitment tools, large organisations with significant resources are the primary beneficiaries of the efficiencies these tools offer. AI systems allow organisations to reduce the costs associated with hiring, process large volumes of applications efficiently, and make faster hiring decisions. These benefits align with the economic interests of organisations, which prioritise operational efficiency and cost savings over the emotional well-being of candidates. Moreover, the theory of social determinism posits that once a technology is adopted, it tends to shape the behaviour and expectations of those who use it. In the context of AI-driven recruitment, organisations may become increasingly reliant on AI tools, adjusting their recruitment strategies to fit the capabilities of the technology rather than the needs of the candidates. This

dynamic creates a self-reinforcing cycle where organisations continue to invest in AI tools, further entrenching the technology in their recruitment processes, even as they recognise the negative impact on candidate experiences.

Recent studies support this perspective, highlighting the growing reliance on AI in recruitment despite its known drawbacks. For example, research by Bessen (2022) indicates that organisations are increasingly adopting AI-driven tools in recruitment to remain competitive, even when these tools are associated with negative candidate experiences. This trend is further reinforced by the economic pressures facing organisations, particularly in industries where speed and efficiency are critical to maintaining a competitive edge.

The social determinism of technology also explains the persistence of AI-driven recruitment in the face of negative feedback from candidates. Organisations, driven by the need to optimise their recruitment processes, may prioritise the operational benefits of AI over the emotional well-being of candidates. This prioritisation is evident in the continued investment in AI tools, despite the growing body of evidence indicating their negative impact on candidate experience and employer branding. Furthermore, the economic and competitive pressures facing organisations exacerbate this dynamic. In a globalised labour market, where talent is scarce and competition for top candidates is fierce, organisations may feel compelled to adopt AI-driven tools to gain a competitive advantage. This pressure to innovate and remain competitive can lead organisations to overlook the long-term consequences of AI-driven recruitment on their employer brand and candidate experience. The continued implementation of AI in recruitment, despite the known risks, reflects a broader societal trend in which technological efficiency is often prioritised over human-centred considerations. This trend is particularly

pronounced in the context of AI, where the promise of efficiency, cost savings, and scalability often overshadows the potential negative impact on individuals.

The findings of this study reveal a complex interplay between the operational benefits of AI-driven recruitment processes and the negative emotional impact on candidates. While AI offers significant advantages in terms of efficiency and cost savings, these benefits come at the cost of human-centred recruitment experiences. The acknowledgment of negative applicant experiences by practitioners highlights the awareness of these challenges within organisations. However, the continued implementation of AI in recruitment, despite the risks to employer branding, reflects a broader societal trend in which technological efficiency is prioritised over human-centred considerations.

The implications of this discussion are significant for organisations seeking to balance the benefits of AI with the need to provide a positive candidate experience. As the reliance on AI in recruitment continues to grow, organisations must consider the long-term consequences of their technology adoption decisions, particularly in relation to employer branding and candidate experience. Future research should continue to explore the emotional and experiential impact of AI-driven recruitment processes, with a focus on developing strategies to mitigate the negative effects and enhance the human-centred aspects of recruitment.

6. Conclusion, Limitations, and Future Scope of Studies

This study provides a comprehensive exploration of the emotional and experiential impacts of AI-driven recruitment processes on applicants, shedding light on the significant challenges that arise when organisations prioritise technological efficiency over human-centred recruitment practices. The findings underscore the pervasive negative emotions experienced by

candidates—such as anxiety, frustration, and dehumanisation—which are directly linked to the rigid, impersonal nature of AI systems. These emotional responses not only diminish the candidate experience but also pose substantial risks to an organisation's employer branding, potentially leading to long-term reputational damage.

Despite practitioners' acknowledgment of these challenges, the study reveals a paradox: organisations continue to implement AI in recruitment processes, driven by the perceived operational benefits such as cost savings, speed, and the ability to manage large volumes of applications. This paradox is aptly explained through the lens of the social determinism of technology, which suggests that AI tools are developed and adopted primarily to serve the interests of those who have the resources to fund and control them. In this case, the benefits accrue to organisations, often at the expense of applicants' emotional well-being and overall experience. The study contributes to the broader discourse on the implications of AI in human resource management, emphasising the need for organisations to carefully balance the efficiencies offered by AI with the imperative to maintain a positive, human-centred recruitment experience. As AI continues to play an increasingly prominent role in recruitment, the findings of this study serve as a critical reminder that technological innovation should not come at the cost of the emotional and psychological well-being of candidates.

While this study provides valuable insights into the emotional and experiential impacts of AI-driven recruitment processes, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study's qualitative nature, while offering deep insights into participants' lived experiences, limits the generalisability of the findings. The sample size, though sufficient for qualitative analysis, may not fully capture the diversity of experiences across different industries, organisational sizes, or cultural contexts. Future research could benefit from larger, more diverse samples to enhance

the generalisability of the results. Second, the study primarily focused on the negative emotions experienced by applicants, potentially overlooking instances where AI-driven recruitment may have had neutral or positive effects on candidate experience. While the focus on negative experiences was intentional to highlight the risks and challenges, future research could adopt a more balanced approach, exploring a broader spectrum of candidate experiences with AI-driven recruitment processes. Third, the study's reliance on self-reported data introduces the potential for response bias. Participants may have been influenced by recent experiences or perceptions of AI in the media, which could have affected their responses. Additionally, the qualitative methodology does not allow for the quantification of the prevalence or intensity of the negative emotions reported, limiting the ability to assess the broader impact of these experiences on the recruitment process. Finally, the study was conducted within a specific timeframe and may not fully account for the rapid advancements in AI technology. As AI tools continue to evolve, their impact on recruitment processes and candidate experiences may change, potentially mitigating or exacerbating the issues identified in this study. Future research should consider longitudinal studies that track the impact of AI on recruitment over time, capturing the dynamic nature of technological change.

The findings of this study open several avenues for future research. First, there is a need for more extensive quantitative research to complement the qualitative insights provided here. Large-scale surveys could help quantify the prevalence of negative emotions among candidates interacting with AI-driven recruitment systems and explore the relationship between these emotions and other variables such as job type, industry, and demographic factors. Second, future research should explore the potential for hybrid recruitment models that combine the efficiencies of AI with the empathetic, human-centred interactions that candidates value. Investigating the effectiveness of such models could provide organisations with practical

solutions to mitigate the negative emotional impacts of AI while retaining the operational benefits. Additionally, the cross-cultural implications of AI-driven recruitment processes represent a fertile area for future study. Given that perceptions of technology, interpersonal communication, and recruitment practices vary across cultures, research exploring how AI-driven recruitment is received and experienced in different cultural contexts could provide valuable insights for global organisations. Finally, as AI technology continues to advance, it is essential to explore the ethical implications of its use in recruitment. Future studies could investigate the ethical considerations surrounding AI-driven decision-making, focusing on issues such as transparency, accountability, and the potential for AI to undermine human dignity in the recruitment process. By addressing these areas, future research can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the role of AI in recruitment, helping organisations to navigate the complex interplay between technological innovation and human-centred practices in the evolving landscape of talent acquisition.

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