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ОБЩЕСТВЕНИ КОМУНИКАЦИИ И ИНФОРМАЦИОННИ НАУКИ**

**FROM DEHUMANIZATION TO DIGITAL EMPATHY: THE CANDIDATES’
EXPERIENCE IN AI-ENABLED HIRING**

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Abstract: *Artificial intelligence-enabled hiring technologies are increasingly used to automate early recruitment interactions through chatbots and algorithmic screening. However, these systems frequently produce candidate experiences characterized by dehumanization, impersonality, and reduced interpersonal regard. This conceptual qualitative synthesis draws on evidence from organizational psychology, human-computer interaction, and conversational user experience research to address a critical gap: although AI recruitment tools are commonly evaluated for operational efficiency, human-centered design principles that protect candidate dignity remain insufficiently examined. This study introduces a digital empathy approach, a tool-agnostic interaction design that enables recruitment chatbots to convey situational sensitivity and organizational regard without attributing emotion or judgment to the machine.*

Through synthesis of peer-reviewed literature on algorithmic fairness, trust formation, and conversational agent design, the approach suggests five core dimensions: transparent process orientation (including role disclosure, rationale statements, and boundary-setting), emotional acknowledgment (non-deceptive normalization of candidate concerns), feedback architecture (structured updates, time expectations, and explanation boundaries), controlled anthropomorphism (a warm, professional tone without humanlike identity cues), and repair and escalation mechanisms (clarification prompts, error admissions, and pathways to human contact). Empirical evidence indicates that candidates often perceive algorithmic assessment as reductionistic and procedurally unjust. Furthermore, providing explanations enhances perceptions of fairness and recommendation intentions, regardless of the decision-maker’s nature. Early interaction quality has a disproportionate impact on trust due to thin-slice judgment processes and algorithm aversion. The approach suggests actionable guidance for HR practitioners and highlights priorities for experimental validation, cross-cultural replication, and assessment of chatbot-mediated recruitment outcomes.

Keywords: *AI-Enabled Recruitment; Digital Empathy; Candidate Experience; Dehumanization; Human-Centered AI*

INTRODUCTION

In today’s times, Artificial Intelligence (AI)-enabled hiring technologies structure candidate identification, screening, and progression from the earliest recruitment stages, often before humans become involved (Stanley and Aggarwal 2019). In one study, 15 recruiters and HR professionals reported that organizations use AI hiring software for sourcing and assessment, streamlining candidate data processing at every step (Li et al. 2021). Recruitment chatbots, increasingly visible as distinct tools, not only represent organizations in early recruitment but also strengthen employer branding – highlighting a shift from traditional interpersonal engagement to automated interactions (Koivunen et al. 2022).

The increasing automation of early recruitment interactions raises a central concern: candidates may perceive selection processes as impersonal and psychologically degrading, which affects both their experience and the organization’s reputation. Empirical research shows that individuals often experience algorithmic and machine-based assessments as “demeaning” and “dehumanizing,” and that such negative responses encompass more than concerns about accuracy; they reflect perceptions of interpersonal neglect (Lee 2018). Experimental studies confirm that digital interview formats (such as asynchronous recorded responses) are perceived as “creepier” and “less person-

al” than traditional videoconference interviews and provoke privacy concerns (Langer, König, and Krause 2017). The cumulative effect of perceived impersonality is a reduction in organizational attractiveness and trust, as algorithmic screening heightens perceptions of cost-cutting, exploitation, and diminished ethical standards (Koch-Bayram and Kaibel 2023; Yan et al. 2023).

Although AI has rapidly diffused into recruitment, both academic and practical work have mostly prioritized operational optimization rather than designing hiring interactions that address perceptions of impersonality or diminished candidate worth. Reviews show that recruitment AI is predominantly assessed for efficiency gains – with benefits mostly discussed from an organizational perspective – while the consequences for candidates remain underexplored (Mori et al. 2024). Despite growing adoption of recruitment bots, research on human-centered design for candidate-facing interactions is limited (Akram 2023). This gap is exacerbated by the inherent opacity of algorithmic HRM, leading to increased calls for transparency and explainability (Meijerink et al. 2021). The overarching challenge is therefore not just technical: it is to design AI-driven candidate interfaces that explicitly communicate procedural clarity and organizational regard, addressing dehumanization concerns rather than simply processing applications.

In the present study, digital empathy is defined as a candidate-facing interaction design orientation in which a chatbot communicates situational sensitivity and interpersonal regard through language, pacing, and supportive conversational moves, while avoiding any implication that the system possesses emotions or human judgment. This framing is aligned with work on computer-mediated empathy, which conceptualizes empathic interaction as a sequential process involving the transmission of socio-emotional signals, the experience and conveyance of empathy, and the recipient’s perception of empathic intent, while stressing that reduced access to non-verbal cues in mediated settings necessitates adapted communicative strategies (De Coninck and Emmers 2023). Trust in AI-mediated hiring is treated as applicants’ evaluative confidence in the system and the process it represents (Lee 2018). Transparency denotes the clarity with which the system communicates what it is doing, why it is doing it, and what the candidate can reasonably expect next (Meijerink et al. 2021). Anthropomorphic cues are design features that signal human likeness; a taxonomy distinguishes these social cues into verbal, visual, auditory, and invisible categories (Feine et al. 2019). Finally, meaningful feedback is conceptualized as informational justice, in which explanations shape individuals’ responses to procedures and decisions (Colquitt et al. 2001).

This study aims to clarify how the design of recruitment chatbots can mitigate dehumanization by creating a framework that preserves procedural efficiency while enhancing candidates’ trust and interpersonal regard. Guided by evidence that algorithmic decision-making often undermines trust and organizational appeal (Lee 2018), and by models of conversational agent social cues (Feine et al. 2019), the framework addresses three core questions: (1) How do recruitment chatbot design choices affect perceived trust and organizational attractiveness in early interactions? (2) Which combinations of transparency, social cues, and feedback are best suited to protect candidate dignity in AI hiring?, and (3) How can these elements be integrated into a user experience (UX) model that supports both operational needs and candidate well-being?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Rather than using an experimental or field-based design, this study follows a conceptual qualitative synthesis. The aim is to integrate evidence from organizational psychology – including applicant reactions, fairness perceptions, and trust-related evaluations – with research on conversational user experience (UX) to inform design principles for recruitment chatbots. This approach aligns with the suggestion that systematic, transparent literature reviews qualify as a distinct research method, especially in fragmented, interdisciplinary fields. While narrative reviews often attract criticism for their ad hoc methodology and lack of rigor (Snyder 2019), this synthesis prioritizes systematic evidential links between source material and the conceptual framework. Using thematic synthesis procedures, the analysis moves from open coding to the creation of descriptive and, finally, analytical themes (Thomas and Harden 2008). Ultimately, the result is a tool-agnostic framework grounded in patterns from literature, not in primary-data causal claims.

Evidence spans multiple disciplines, such as human resource management, organizational behavior, applied psychology, information systems, and human-computer interaction. Searches took place in both multidisciplinary and domain-specific databases – examples include Scopus, Web of Science, PsycINFO, ABI/INFORM, ACM Digital Library, and IEEE Xplore – using search terms relating to recruitment (e.g., hiring, selection, applicant), AI-enabled decision-making (e.g., algorithmic, automated), conversational interfaces (e.g., chatbot, conversational agent), and candidate experience constructs (e.g., fairness perceptions, trust, transparency, feedback). Inclusion required peer-reviewed articles (empirical studies or high-quality reviews) examining candidate interaction with AI-mediated recruitment or selection procedures. Papers needed to report psychologically relevant outcomes (like applicant reactions, fairness perceptions, or trust-related evaluations) and/or design-relevant findings for conversational interfaces. Purely technical papers without human or stakeholder evaluation, and studies irrelevant to recruitment, were excluded unless they directly contributed transferable conversational agent design principles. Reporting conformed to current guidance that stresses transparent documentation of identification and selection procedures (Page et al. 2021).

The analytic process employed a thematic synthesis approach, beginning with open coding of relevant text from eligible papers, followed by consolidation into descriptive themes, and culminating in the development of higher-order analytical themes to inform framework construction (Thomas and Harden 2008). Data extraction focused on two primary areas: (i) candidate-experience mechanisms identified in the literature (such as perceived interpersonal regard, dignity, fairness-related evaluations, and trust-relevant judgments) and (ii) design-relevant interaction features of conversational systems (including social cues, feedback practices, and error recovery). These themes were then organized into framework dimensions by grouping recurring patterns and specifying how particular conversational features are theorized to influence candidate experience outcomes, ensuring traceability between framework claims and the supporting evidence.

The ‘thin-slice’ perspective was applied to emphasize the diagnostic importance of early conversational moments from the candidate’s viewpoint. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that judgments and predictions based on brief observations of expressive behavior (less than 5 minutes) are reliably accurate, with longer observation periods offering no significant improvement; predictions from observations under 30 seconds are comparable to those from 4- to 5-minute intervals (Ambady and Rosenthal 1992). Consequently, the framework designates opening behaviors, expectation-setting, acknowledgment, repair moves, and escalation options as critical impression-forming segments that require explicit design attention.

RESULTS

In chatbot-mediated recruitment, candidate experiences of dehumanization are commonly activated by interaction cues that are interpreted as evidence that the organization is evaluating the person in a reductive, impersonal manner. A prominent mechanism concerns perceived reductionism, namely the sense that the evaluation reduces the applicant into quantifiable indicators while removing context (Newman et al. 2020). Experimental evidence in HR decision settings shows that algorithmic decisions are perceived as less fair than equivalent human decisions and that perceptions of reductionism influence this adverse fairness effect (Newman et al. 2020). When operationalized through a chatbot interface, these cues may be conveyed through rigid scripts, limited opportunity to elaborate, and minimal acknowledgement of situational context, which can be interpreted as low interpersonal regard.

A second trigger concerns opacity and informational absence, particularly when candidates receive decisions or process updates without meaningful explanation or feedback. In vignette-based personnel selection scenarios, participants who received explanations reported increased perceptions of procedural fairness, outcome fairness, interpersonal treatment, and intention to recommend; these positive effects were observed regardless of whether the decision-maker was AI or human (Malin et al. 2025). In practice, the absence of explanation can therefore operate as an interactional cue that the process is indifferent to candidate dignity.

Finally, tone mismatches can evoke dehumanization in both directions. Anthropomorphic cues

and human-like conversational features have been associated with higher perceived social presence, satisfaction, and trust in chatbot interactions (Chen et al. 2023), yet increased humanization has also been shown to elevate eeriness and reduce trust and behavioral intentions under certain design conditions (Song and Shin 2024). Together, these findings help specify the interpretive pathways through which early automated interactions can be experienced as dehumanizing.

In organizational research, trust can be conceptualized as an evaluative stance grounded in perceptions of the trustee's ability (competence), integrity (adherence to acceptable principles), and benevolence (orientation toward the trustor's welfare) (Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman 1995). In AI contexts, trust formation is shaped by how the system is represented and what it is perceived to be capable of doing. A review of empirical research indicated that trust development is influenced by the form of AI representation (e.g., virtual agents vs. robots) and the perceived sophistication of its intelligence, with AI anthropomorphism being especially important for emotional trust (Glikson and Woolley 2020).

Candidate trust is further influenced by the system's observed performance and by how errors are interpreted. Experimental evidence on "algorithm aversion" demonstrates that individuals tend to lose confidence in algorithmic forecasters more rapidly than in human forecasters after observing comparable mistakes, even when the algorithm performs better overall (Dietvorst, Simmons, and Massey 2015). This dynamic renders early interaction quality salient because initial experiences can disproportionately affect subsequent acceptance.

Consistent with thin-slice research, judgments based on brief observations can show reliable predictive accuracy, with longer exposure not necessarily improving accuracy (Ambady and Rosenthal 1992). In candidate-facing conversational systems, early signals conveyed through tone, clarity, and responsiveness therefore function as rapid impression inputs. Experimental work with chatbots in service encounters indicates that anthropomorphic design cues and agency framing alter perceived social presence and, in turn, influence company-related outcomes such as emotional connection (Araujo 2018), while candidate attitudes toward AI-enabled application processes and organizations using them are strongly associated with intentions to apply (van Esch, Black, and Arli 2020).

The digital empathy framework addresses candidate-experience risks in automated recruitment by providing a coherent interaction specification for chatbots. It conceptualizes empathic qualities as outcomes of communicative choices rather than indicators of machine emotion and prioritizes design strategies that safeguard candidate dignity while maintaining the efficiency and standardization that drive automation.

A transparent process orientation provides the interaction's structural integrity by making the chatbot's role and logic legible at the point of use. In dialogue, this looks like brief, timely disclosures that prevent candidates from having to guess the system's purpose: "I'm an automated recruitment assistant supporting early-stage screening," followed by rationale statements tethered to each request, such as "I'm asking about your notice period to plan interview scheduling," and clear boundary-setting, for example "I cannot make hiring decisions; the recruitment team reviews outcomes." The risk of weak transparency is not merely confusion, but adverse inference: when the system withholds reasons or next steps, candidates may interpret ambiguity as organizational indifference, which could lead to lower intentions to recommend the organization (Malin et al. 2025).

Within this clarity scaffold, emotional acknowledgement should be present but non-deceptive. Because mediated interactions constrain non-verbal cues, socio-emotional signaling requires deliberate adaptation (De Coninck and Emmers 2023). In practice, the chatbot can normalize uncertainty without implying personhood: "Job searching can be stressful; I will keep the steps clear and concise," or "If a question feels unclear, tell me, and I'll rephrase." The failure mode here is performative pseudo-empathy ("I care about you," "I'm rooting for you"), which risks being experienced as manipulative precisely because the system cannot genuinely hold such states.

A feedback architecture sustains dignity over time by preventing silence from functioning as a signal. In dialogue, it should deliver structured updates ("Application received"), time expectations ("You will receive an update within five working days"), and explanation boundaries ("I

can describe the stages and timelines, but I cannot disclose individual scoring or internal deliberations”), paired with immediate scaffolding (“Next, you can select an interview slot here”). This dimension is grounded in the logic of informational justice (Colquitt et al. 2001). Poor implementation creates the opposite effect: vague reassurance (“We’ll be in touch soon”) and non-answers to predictable questions can be read as disregard.

Controlled anthropomorphism specifies how the chatbot should feel human-compatible without claiming human identity. A practical implementation uses warm, professional language and respectful pacing (“Thanks, I’ve noted that. Next question”), while avoiding humanlike identity cues that invite mistaken inferences (for example, a personal name or avatar that is not clearly disclosed as an AI assistant). The design vocabulary for these choices is well established: social cues in conversational agents can be classified across verbal, visual, auditory, and invisible categories (Feine et al. 2019). Empirical evidence also indicates that human-like cues and agency framing influence social presence and evaluations of the conversational agent and the company (Araujo 2018). The risk is miscalibration: increased humanization can elevate eeriness and reduce trust and behavioral intentions in chatbot interactions (Song and Shin 2024).

Finally, repair and escalation mechanisms protect psychological safety when interactions fail. User research has documented a persistent gap between expectations and the actual capabilities of conversational agents, which can produce frustration and breakdowns (Luger and Sellen 2016). Accordingly, the chatbot should include clarification prompts (“Did you mean X or Y?”), transparent error admissions (“I may have misunderstood; let me restate”), and clearly signposted routes to human contact when stakes rise, or ambiguity persists (“If you prefer, I can connect you to a recruiter by email”). This is especially important because confidence in algorithms can deteriorate rapidly after users observe errors, even when algorithmic performance is strong overall (Dietvorst, Simmons, and Massey 2015).

CONCLUSION

This study argues that recruitment chatbots designed primarily for transactional efficiency may inadvertently undermine candidate trust by conveying cues of dehumanization, even when efficiency is the primary objective. Specifically, candidates’ negative evaluations often stem from the perception that automated assessment is reductionistic, prioritizing quantification over contextual understanding, which has been shown to reduce perceptions of procedural justice in algorithmic HR decisions (Newman et al. 2020). The synthesis further demonstrates that candidate-facing information design is a critical lever: in personnel-selection vignettes, providing explanations is associated with more favorable perceptions of fairness, improved interpersonal treatment, and stronger organizational recommendation intentions, regardless of whether decisions are attributed to AI or humans (Malin et al. 2025). In response, this study introduces a digital empathy approach that outlines how chatbots can maintain candidate dignity and clarity while avoiding procedural inefficiencies.

For human resources and talent acquisition, the approach suggests that recruitment chatbots should be managed as candidate-facing organizational representatives with measurable employer-brand implications, rather than as purely administrative intake tools. Experimental evidence shows that algorithmic personnel selection can increase applicants’ perceptions that the organization is motivated by cost reduction or exploitation, thereby reducing organizational attractiveness. These reputational effects extend beyond applicants, as algorithm-based HR decision-making has also been shown to prompt more negative consumer inferences about organizational ethicality. Consequently, governance should formalize transparency standards (including what is disclosed, when, and in what language), escalation thresholds and pathways to human contact, communication protocols for empathic yet non-deceptive messaging, and auditable documentation of candidate-facing explanations, in line with concerns about opacity and calls for explainability in algorithmic HRM (Meijerink et al. 2021).

As a conceptual qualitative synthesis, this study does not provide causal estimates and should be regarded as an approach rather than an intervention-evaluative study. The relevance and acceptability of the proposed design levers are likely to differ across industries, job levels, and labor market

conditions, and may be influenced by cultural norms and legal requirements related to disclosure and data use. Future research could evaluate the approach through vignette experiments that manipulate dialogue cues, supplemented by field studies, cross-cultural replications, and accessibility-focused assessments, such as language simplicity and disability-inclusive interaction design. Additionally, future research should investigate how varying degrees of algorithmic transparency and anthropomorphism affect candidate perceptions in different recruitment settings. Longitudinal studies could assess whether initial candidate reactions to chatbot-mediated processes persist or evolve throughout later recruitment stages, and whether specific chatbot design strategies contribute to improved hiring outcomes, such as diversity or candidate retention. Finally, deep qualitative research could explore candidate narratives to uncover unanticipated effects or context-specific concerns, thereby refining the approach's applicability to real-world organizational practices.

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ОТ ДЕХУМАНИЗАЦИЯТА КЪМ ЦИФРОВАТА ЕМПАТИЯ: ОПИТЪТ НА КАНДИДАТИТЕ ПРИ НАЗНАЧАВАНЕ НА РАБОТА С ПОМОЩТА НА ИЗКУСТВЕН ИНТЕЛЕКТ

Резюме: С нарастващото използване на AI-базирани технологии в ранните етапи на набирането на персонал, кандидатите често споделят, че се чувстват дехуманизирани и редуцирани. Настоящото проучване разглежда как дизайнът на чатботовете за набиране на персонал може да отговори на тези опасения чрез рамка за дигитална емпатия. Използвайки концептуален качествен синтез на литература от областта на организационната психология, взаимодействието човек – компютър и управлението на човешките ресурси, проучването идентифицира основните фактори, предизвикващи дехуманизация, като възприемана редукция, липса на прозрачност и неподходящи социални сигнали. Резултатите показват, че доверието в наемането на работа с помощта на изкуствен интелект зависи в голяма степен от качеството на първоначалните взаимодействия, при които кратките срещи оказват значително влияние върху възприятията за привлекателността на организацията и етичните стандарти.

Рамката препоръчва чатботовете да бъдат проектирани така, че да показват контекстуална чувствителност и уважение, като същевременно избягват внушенията за машинно съзнание. Тя се фокусира върху пет основни аспекта: прозрачност на процеса, честно емоционално признание, структурирана обратна връзка, балансиран антропоморфизъм и надеждни механизми за поправка. Като се фокусира върху достойнството на кандидатите, а не само върху ефективността, тя предлага практически стъпки за изграждане на доверие и справедливост. Проучването заключава, че чатботовете трябва да действат като усъвършенствани представители, гарантиращи, че автоматизираното наемане на персонал подкрепя както бизнес целите, така и благосъстоянието на кандидатите.

Ключови думи: набиране на персонал с помощта на изкуствен интелект; дигитална емпатия; опит на кандидатите; дехуманизация; изкуствен интелект, ориентиран към човека

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