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The Impact of AI-Based Recruitment Systems on Employer Branding: The Role of Candidates' Aversion to AI Technology

Prof. Mario Baglietto

RELATORE

Prof. Giacomo Sillari

CORRELATORE

Gaia Claudia Esposito matr. 785861

CANDIDATA

Introduction

This thesis explores how the integration of AI-based recruitment software affects employer branding, focusing on the role of candidate aversion to AI in shaping these outcomes. As AI-driven tools become more prevalent in the hiring process, organizations face both opportunities and challenges in maintaining a positive employer brand. While AI can enhance efficiency in candidate selection, concerns about privacy, transparency, and fairness contribute to some candidates' aversion to AI in recruitment. This study examines how this aversion influences candidates' perception of the employer brand, potentially impacting their willingness to apply and engage with the company. Through a quantitative approach, this research provides insights into how companies should manage AI-based recruitment processes to strengthen their employer branding while addressing candidate concerns. The findings offer actionable recommendations for organizations seeking to balance technological innovation with a human-centric recruitment approach that supports their employer brand.

Chapter 1: The Role of AI in Recruitment and Employer Branding

1.1 The evolution of Human Resource Management

Human Resource Management (HRM), often referred to as HR, is a key organizational function aimed at enhancing employee performance to effectively support and achieve the company's strategic goals. It is recognized as a strategic and integrated approach to effectively overseeing an organization's most valuable resource: its employees. (Armstrong, 2006).

Human resource management emerged from the human relations movement, which originated in the early 20th century, influenced by Frederick Taylor's work on lean manufacturing. (Obedgiu, 2017). During the 1920s, Elton Mayo conducted a series of influential studies at the Hawthorne plant of the Western Electric Company in Illinois, which significantly shifted the focus of managerial and motivational theory.

Earlier approaches, such as Frederick Taylor's scientific management, viewed workers as mechanical components, emphasizing efficiency and individual performance optimization. These hypothesis emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, during rapid industrialization and economic expansion.

Mass production techniques, driven by technological advancements, led to an increased focus on efficiency and output. The earliest stage of HRM was dominated by the "Hypothesis of Economic Man" which viewed workers as primarily motivated by financial incentives. The assumption was that employees acted rationally to maximize their own monetary gain, and thus, HR practices focused mainly on wage-based incentives and strict task specialization. (Zhao et al., 2019) The economic instability of the Great Depression (1929) reinforced this approach, as financial compensation and job security became paramount concerns for employees (Bakker et al., 2019).

In contrast, the Hawthorne studies introduced the idea that employees operate within a social environment, where factors like workplace conditions and interactions with colleagues play a crucial role in shaping productivity alongside individual skills and capabilities. (Lumen, 2017).

As management theories progressed, the "Hypothesis of Social Man" emerged. Studies revealed that workers' productivity was not solely driven by financial incentives but was significantly affected by social relationships and workplace environment. This period also saw the rise of labor unions and employee rights movements, particularly after World War II, as workers demanded better conditions and recognition beyond financial compensation (Benson & Gospel, 2018).

The post-war economic boom encouraged organizations to invest in employee satisfaction, emphasizing teamwork and a positive organizational climate. This marked a shift toward a more human-centered approach, where employee satisfaction, teamwork, and a positive organizational climate became essential considerations in HRM. (Yang et al., 2020).

The economic prosperity of the post-war era, particularly in developed economies, enabled businesses to explore motivations beyond financial incentives. The rise of white-collar jobs and service industries shifted attention toward career growth, learning opportunities, and employee engagement (Stone et al., 2020). Building upon these insights, the "Hypothesis of Self-Actualizing Man" was introduced, drawing from Maslow's hierarchy of needs. This phase recognized that employees are not only motivated by financial rewards and social belonging but also by personal growth, development, and self-fulfillment. HRM practices began incorporating career development programs, training opportunities, and initiatives aimed at fostering employee engagement and personal achievement. (Ouyang Yi, 2013).

As understanding of human motivation became more nuanced, HRM entered the stage of the "Hypothesis of Complex Man". This perspective acknowledged that employees' motivations vary based on their individual experiences, expectations, and personal values. Consequently, HR practices shifted toward greater flexibility, recognizing that a one-size-fits-all approach was no longer effective. Organizations began implementing tailored HR strategies, such as personalized career paths, adaptive leadership models, and performance management systems that accounted for individual differences. (Fiedler, 1965)

Under the influence of the "Complex Man" hypothesis, combined with the rapid development and application of new technologies such as electronic computers, the theories of this period also evolved rapidly, ushering in a new era of contemporary management theory. Many

management theories and doctrines emerged, including John Kotter's leadership theory, Peter Senge's learning organization theory, and Mas Peters' management revolution theory (Qi Mingjie, 2009).

It is therefore possible to deduce that HRM is strongly influenced by socio-economic events and beyond. In this particular historical period, it is reasonable to assume that, with the advent of AI and all its implications, HRM will undergo further changes. Specifically, this thesis will examine the influence of artificial intelligence on one of the fundamental aspects of human resource management: recruitment, and how this may impact employer branding.

1.1.1 The Recruitment Process: foundations and key principles

Human Resources primarily deals with the management of individuals within organizations, emphasizing the development of policies and operational frameworks (Collings & Wood, 2009). Within companies, HR departments are generally in charge of various functions, such as hiring employees, overseeing training and development programs, evaluating performance, and administering compensation and benefits systems (Paauwe & Boon, 2009). HRM encompasses several key components that guide the effective management of an organization's workforce.

Below are the six fundamental elements of HRM (Orosoo et al., 2023):

1. Human resource planning
2. Recruitment and implementation
3. Professional development
4. Quality management
5. Performance management
6. Employee relationship management

The field of Human Resource Management has gained unprecedented significance, particularly in recruiting employees who bring essential expertise and skills to an organization. (Orosoo et al., 2023).

In modern organizations, the increasing importance of human resources, coupled with growing competition in the job market, has driven advancements in recruitment and onboarding

processes. Among human resources activities, recruitment plays a crucial role, as it lays the foundation for key organizational elements such as workforce budgeting, talent acquisition, corporate structure, and company culture. The primary objective of recruitment, in both managerial and operational functions, is to ensure the long-term sustainability of the organization. This is achieved by employing effective methods and strategies that not only help secure market share but also enhance competitive positioning.

Recruitment decisions impact multiple levels of the organization, from the hired individual to the team they join, the job they perform, and the overall corporate environment. This effect becomes particularly significant when hiring for managerial positions. Selecting the right candidate fosters positive attitudes and behaviors toward colleagues, tasks, and the company. Conversely, poor recruitment choices can result in misalignment, organizational inefficiencies, and increased employee turnover due to dissatisfaction (Yelboğa, 2008).

From a corporate perspective, recruitment is the process of selecting the best candidate among those who meet the required qualifications for a specific role. In a globalized and highly competitive market, hiring the right employees is essential for business success. When a candidate is chosen with the expectation of making a long-term contribution to the company through their skills and experience, recruitment becomes a strategic decision (Bali, 2013).

Talent acquisition and selection are among the most critical HR functions, directly influencing organizational performance. A skilled workforce is key to productivity and efficiency. Employees must meet specific job-related criteria; otherwise, achieving high-quality products and services becomes impossible. Therefore, companies must invest in finding and selecting a sufficient number of qualified employees (Can et al., 2009).

Recruiting and selecting the right employees is fundamental for an organization's sustainability and growth. However, the overall recruitment process lacks standardized evaluation models beyond various tests, interview techniques, and assessment tools. This makes it challenging to accurately assess recruitment decisions. For example, while the benefits of selecting one candidate over another can be measured, the opportunity cost of not hiring the other candidate remains uncertain.

Conducting recruitment strategically, objectively, and with a people-oriented approach is crucial to aligning both organizational goals and employee expectations (Gök, 2006). Recruitment involves identifying the best candidates based on job requirements. The aim is to hire individuals whose skills and qualifications match the job's demands, ensuring a strong alignment between the employee and the organization. Since recruitment is an expensive process, hiring an unsuitable candidate results in financial losses for the company. Additionally, employees who do not succeed in their roles may experience dissatisfaction and seek alternative job opportunities.

The recruitment process involves identifying suitable candidates with the required skills. To avoid selecting the best among mediocre candidates, companies must optimize their talent search efforts and ensure they attract the most qualified professionals. This requires defining the best talent sources (Cavdar, 2010). Organizations typically adopt two main strategies for filling vacancies: internal recruitment, through promotions and transfers, or external hiring. Before deciding on the best approach, companies must carefully assess two key factors. First, they must define the position and its job requirements through a thorough job analysis. Second, once the analysis is complete, they must determine the ideal candidate profile. If the process is not executed correctly, both the employee and the company risk facing dissatisfaction and inefficiencies.

In this thesis, we will analyze how Artificial Intelligence (AI) is utilized in relation to recruitment. Specifically, we will focus on the impact AI has on employer branding, examining how its use influences an organization's ability to attract and retain talent while shaping its reputation as an employer (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016).

1.2 Employer Branding and its determinants

Employer branding is deeply embedded within an organization and extends beyond simply attracting candidates—it plays a crucial role in shaping the overall perception of the company as a desirable place to work. The various employer brand attributes, including corporate values, workplace environment, career development opportunities, and leadership style, directly influence how both current and prospective employees view the organization.

A strong employer brand fosters a sense of belonging and engagement among employees, enhancing job satisfaction and retention. When an organization consistently demonstrates a commitment to employee well-being, professional growth, and a positive work culture, it reinforces loyalty and motivation, reducing turnover rates. Employees who feel valued and aligned with the company's mission are more likely to stay long-term and become brand ambassadors, further strengthening the employer's reputation in the job market. (Gilani et al., 2017).

Organizational attractiveness is widely recognised as a multifaceted concept. Numerous studies have attempted to define its distinct dimensions within the broader context of employer branding (Berthon et al., 2005; Sivertzen et al., 2013). In an effort to connect the fields of organisational identity and employer branding, Lievens et al. (2007) adopted the instrumental–symbolic framework to examine elements influencing both employer image and identity. Their research demonstrated that both instrumental attributes (such as organisational structure, job security, and team-building activities) and symbolic attributes (such as excitement, competence, and robustness) contribute to applicants' attraction to an organisation. Furthermore, they found that symbolic identity attributes are particularly influential in shaping employees' identification with their employer. Expanding on this, Jiang et al. (2011) suggested that organisational attractiveness comprises two key components: internal attractiveness, which concerns current employees, and external attractiveness, which pertains to prospective candidates. They argued that these two aspects should be assessed independently, together with individuals' intentions to join or remain with an organisation.

The concept of employer image refers to how external individuals, such as potential candidates, perceive a company as an employer. This external perception aligns with what is known as external employer branding, which involves managing the company's reputation in the job market. Conversely, the internal employer brand reflects how current employees perceive the organization and corresponds to its corporate identity. Employer image is part of a broader framework called organizational image, which represents how various stakeholders perceive the company as a whole. In addition to its reputation as an employer, an organization is also evaluated based on its financial image, which concerns perceptions of its economic stability and performance, its corporate social performance (CSP), which reflects how it is viewed as a

socially responsible entity, and its product or service image, which relates to the perceived quality of the goods or services it provides. (Brown et al., 2009; Lievens & Slaughter, 2016).

Moreover, employer branding significantly impacts the attraction of young talent, who often prioritize workplace culture, career growth, and alignment with personal values when choosing an employer. In today's competitive labor market, young professionals seek more than just financial compensation—they are drawn to companies that offer meaningful work, clear development pathways, and a supportive environment that fosters learning and innovation. Organizations with a well-defined and authentic employer brand gain a competitive advantage in securing top talent, as they are perceived as forward-thinking, employee-centric, and dynamic. By effectively communicating its values, culture, and career opportunities through employer branding initiatives, an organization can position itself as an employer of choice, appealing not only to experienced professionals but also to the next generation of skilled workers eager to contribute and grow within the company. (Gupta et al., 2019)

1.2.1   The role of HR practices in building employer branding

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is defined as the capability of machines to mimic or enhance human intelligence through reasoning and learning from experience (Kumar, 2022). AI is increasingly integrated into human resource management (HRM) to optimize processes such as employee onboarding, decision-making, mood assessment during customer interactions, and career development, as demonstrated by initiatives at companies like IBM (Ahmed, 2018). By leveraging vast amounts of global data, AI enhances HR functions including recruitment, training, performance appraisal, and talent retention. Additionally, it serves as a strategic tool to attract and train talent for future roles while automating up to 50% of current workplace tasks, thereby reshaping traditional personnel management and boosting organizational efficiency and profitability (Jaiswal et al., 2022; Tiwari et al., 2021)

According to Highhouse et al. (2009), employer image consists of subjective and temporary

mental representations of specific aspects of a company as an employer. This definition highlights that the employer image is shaped by individuals rather than the general public, can evolve over time, and focuses on distinct attributes rather than an overall impression. Furthermore, it is primarily cognitive in nature, as it is based on the mental associations individuals form about the organization.

The way an organization's HR activities and policies are structured plays a fundamental role in shaping its employer image. McKinsey's research indicates that future-ready companies distinguish themselves by having a clear identity, a focus on speed and simplicity, and a robust capacity for learning and innovation. These characteristics are not only essential for operational success but also for shaping a powerful employer brand.

When an organization understands what it stands for and communicates that effectively, it creates a consistent and authentic narrative that resonates with potential and current employees alike. In this context, HR plays a pivotal role in employer branding by rigorously managing talent by building strong analytics capabilities to mine data for: hiring, development, and retention; so they can ensure that only the best talent is attracted and maintained. HR business partners, acting as internal service providers, translate staffing needs into strategic actions that support high returns on human capital investments. This approach not only strengthens the organization's internal identity but also enhances its external reputation as an employer of choice.

HR practices play a fundamental role in building employer branding, as they directly influence the image that a company projects towards potential talent. One of the key areas where HR contributes to this process is through corporate culture and values.

Human Resources are responsible for creating and promoting the company culture, which is a crucial element of employer branding. The culture must align with the values and expectations of employees in order to attract the right talent (Schein, 2010). A strong, positive culture enhances employee engagement and retention, both of which contribute to a favorable employer brand (Kundu & Gahlawat, 2016).

Another important contribution of HR to employer branding is through recruitment and selection practices. Effective recruitment practices that value transparency, inclusivity, and

integrity help build a positive image of the company (Parker et al., 2016). A well-structured, fair selection process can significantly influence how the company is perceived externally. Moreover, HR professionals play a key role in ensuring that the recruitment process reflects the company's values and commitment to diversity (Sullivan, 2019), they're also responsible for improving the employee experience, which includes onboarding, training, professional development, and career opportunities.

A positive experience within the company is one of the main drivers of a strong employer brand (Saks, 2006). Creating a supportive and growth-oriented work environment attracts candidates who are seeking long-term career prospects and professional development.

In addition, well-being and inclusivity are key practices that HR must prioritize, the ones that promote physical, mental, and emotional well-being, as well as inclusive policies, are essential for building a solid reputation and attracting talent who seek a fair and sustainable work environment (Shuck & Wollard, 2010). Companies that prioritize employee well-being often see higher levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment, which contribute to a strong employer brand (Harter et al., 2003).

All the activities and policies (such as training, performance evaluation, talent management, etc.) should not be analyzed in isolation but rather as interconnected elements within a broader system. An effective HR system is evaluated based on how individual practices integrate with one another, supporting the organization's overall strategic objectives.

In other words, the success of an HR management system depends on the consistency and seamless integration of all its components. If we consider the system as a network of interrelated practices, each component—such as the recruitment process—can shape the overall perception of an organization. (Wood, 1999). Thus, every practice is not only a reflection of the company culture but also has the potential to influence the company's reputation as an employer, making it more or less attractive to talent.

For example, a lengthy, non-transparent hiring process with poor communication can create a negative perception of the company, regardless of the quality of its other HR practices.

Conversely, a positive candidate experience can strengthen employer branding, conveying values of efficiency, talent appreciation, and innovation.

1.3 A new way to recruit talents: AI based recruitment

Progress in artificial intelligence (AI) and automation is anticipated to bring significant transformations to both the economy and society.

By 2030, technological advancements may require approximately 14% of the global workforce to transition to different occupational categories. The adoption of AI is highly urgent given the rapid advancement of technology and digitization. (Ayuningtyas et al., 2024).

As Artificial Intelligence continues to be implemented across an expanding range of industries, an intense discussion has emerged regarding its potential effects on various societal sectors (Li et al., 2021), remarkably in the human resource management (HRM) one. Human Resource professionals have integrated AI into HR practices, utilizing machine intelligence to replicate cognitive processes, analyze data critically, and leverage global information to derive meaningful insights. (Afzal et al., 2023).

Identifying the best candidates for future roles is crucial for any organization. Integrated AI systems support recruitment teams by analyzing patterns and comparing them to the workforce, making it easier to select the right candidate. This reduces human decision-making and streamlines the hiring process. While many organizations face challenges in integrating AI into their HR practices due to high costs, AI has already begun transforming the recruitment process. Instead of spending excessive time reviewing candidates, employers now use AI to more efficiently select individuals with the necessary skills. Today, AI is particularly useful in two areas: (1) conducting interviews with bots and (2) assessing performance through machine learning.

The adoption of AI in HR (Human Capital Management) has led to increased efficiency and better outcomes. As AI becomes more integrated into HR, it is reshaping the recruitment process, allowing organizations to hire the right talent more effectively. (Orosoo et al., 2023)

1.3.1 *Main benefit and challenges the employer faces*

In recent discussions, numerous scholars have highlighted the potential effects of using AI in hiring processes. While some argue that AI could mitigate human bias and broaden access (Black & Van Esch, 2020) others warn that it may amplify, exploit, and reinforce existing biases (Ajunwa, 2019; Raghavan et al., 2020; Sánchez-Monedero et al., 2020).

Although AI has been present for a while, its application and definition in e-recruitment are relatively new, and there remains considerable debate surrounding both its use and its precise meaning (Franklin & Graesser, 1996).

A growing number of AI-driven tools are revolutionizing talent acquisition by enabling organizations to identify better job candidates more efficiently, enhance employee development, and foster retention through improved engagement. While AI has the potential to address critical pain points in talent acquisition by streamlining and optimizing processes, its implementation brings unique challenges that require careful consideration (Harvard Business Review). Generative AI, in particular, is reshaping recruitment processes: it helps managers craft more precise job descriptions, it enhances candidate personalization by enabling tailored communication. For organizations managing thousands of applications, generative AI allows for more customized outreach. This significantly improves efficiency and scalability in recruitment efforts (Hancock, McKinsey).

AI and automation tools are also widely adopted for tasks such as summarizing resumes and generating interview questions. According to the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), 85% of employers using such technologies report time savings and increased efficiency (Mukherjee, Forbes). A survey conducted among 225 American recruitment managers found that 60% of major U.S. companies are already utilizing advanced AI systems for human resource management. This figure is projected to increase to 82% by 2026. (Capponi, 2024).

According to Albassam (2023) AI presents substantial advantages for organizations, such as enhanced efficiency, reduced costs, and higher-quality hiring outcomes. Nevertheless, its application in recruitment also brings forth ethical and legal challenges, particularly regarding the risk of algorithmic bias and potential discrimination.

1.3.2 AI bias debate in recruitment: conflicting academic views

The advent of artificial intelligence and machine learning has renewed interest in identifying biases, primarily statistical in nature, and developing tools to mitigate their impact. (Judy et al., 2023). This has led to a growing focus on fairness in machine learning, prompting extensive research on the subject in recent years. Computers are now capable of performing tasks and making decisions that typically require human intelligence. Key benefits include the enhanced ability to identify, attract, screen, evaluate, interview, and interact with job candidates.

These advantages stem from AI's capacity to process large volumes of information and make decisions at speeds and scales far beyond human capabilities. (Black et al., 2020). AI-powered recruitment tools are increasingly regarded as essential assets in the ongoing competition for talent (Leicht-Deobald et al., 2019; Hunkenschroer & Luetge, 2022).

Most of the academic articles analyzed indeed discuss numerous advantages that AI brings to the human resources sector, which will lead to an improvement in efficiency and productivity.

As previously mentioned, AI applications are numerous, and one example provided in the study by Afzal et al. (2023) refers to the "Oracle" program used by government departments for recruitment purposes. This program helps both candidates and the department by using forms to store data and select relevant experiences and knowledge that candidates must possess for the role. In this case, AI even provided techniques to assess indicators of employee success, enabling the identification of those who need training and those to be retained.

Additionally, AI could be useful in reducing nepotism and potential biases in the selection process (Hmoud & Laszlo, 2019).

Furthermore, the literature highlights a broad but contradictory debate regarding the presence of biases affecting AI in recruitment. As Dessler (2020) explains, AI replicates human decision-making patterns based on the data it processes. Consequently, if historical recruitment and

selection practices exhibit biases, AI is likely to perpetuate these patterns by repeating past decisions.

While AI is designed to minimize human errors, its effectiveness depends heavily on the quality and neutrality of the data on which it is trained. Multiple studies have identified biases in machine learning applications, including facial recognition and candidate ranking systems. Bias in data is one of the major sources of biased algorithmic outcome, AI models can learn features that are "invisible" to a human expert.

Conversely, some researchers argue that AI's capacity to process vast amounts of information and make rapid decisions surpasses human capabilities, allowing AI-driven tools to reduce cognitive biases commonly encountered in human judgment during recruitment activities (Black et al., 2020). One concept that can address challenges throughout the AI lifecycle is causal reasoning. The absence of a clear understanding of causality makes it more difficult to create the datasets needed for analysis. Causal reasoning helps improve fairness and explainability, which in turn can enhance AI management in human resources by balancing both efficiency and equity.

The impact of AI on human resources, particularly in areas like hiring decisions, performance forecasting, and task automation, has intensified the pressure on HR professionals. AI can assist HR in identifying best practices and effective actions by using historical data and predictive analytics, promoting a future collaboration between HR and machines. (Merlin et al., 2018). There are also ethical and privacy concerns surrounding the use of AI to analyze complex workforce data. (Tursunbayeva et al. 2022).

Potential biases and unfairness that may arise when AI is applied to tasks like assessing performance data and forecasting future results (Qamar et al., 2021), one notable example is the situation Amazon faced with its AI-driven recruitment system. In 2014, Amazon developed an AI system designed to review resumes and identify top candidates for job positions, leveraging machine learning (ML) and natural language processing (NLP). However, by 2015, Amazon realized that the system was biased against female candidates. The AI model had been trained using historical hiring data, which was predominantly male due to the male-dominated

tech industry at the time. As a result, the algorithm developed an unconscious bias, devaluing resumes that contained female-associated terms, such as "women's chess club captain.".

We can say that bias in AI recruitment systems extends beyond the technical realm and into broader socio-technical factors. While computational approaches, such as improving dataset representativeness and refining machine learning algorithms, are crucial for mitigating bias, they do not fully address systemic, institutional, and societal influences that shape AI outcomes. Trustworthy and Responsible AI emphasizes the need to operationalize ethical values and create new norms around AI deployment. The risks associated with AI in recruitment are not only individual but can ripple through organizations and society, reinforcing historical inequalities if left unchecked. Therefore, fostering transparency, integrating human oversight, and adopting a multi-stakeholder approach are key to ensuring AI recruitment tools are both fair and effective. (Schwartz et al., 2022)

Chapter 2: Candidates' Aversion to AI in Hiring Processes

2.1 Different perspectives on AI

Trust in AI is shaped by a range of sociodemographic variables, such as social background, gender, age, and education level. Additionally, individual competencies, including AI literacy, anthropomorphism (the attribution of human traits to AI), and beliefs in AI's technical reliability, all play a significant role in determining trust in these technologies. The willingness to engage with AI and the desire for autonomy in decision-making are also crucial in shaping perceptions of AI.

A study by Jarosław Kozak and Stanisław Fel (2023) suggests that trust in AI can vary significantly across different cultures and countries, with nationality, cultural context, and religion being important factors. For instance, people from various cultural and educational backgrounds may view AI differently, influencing their overall trust in the technology. Men generally exhibit more trust in AI compared to women, and trust tends to increase with age. Moreover, individuals with higher education levels often demonstrate greater confidence in AI, as do those who believe in its reliability and functionality.

Furthermore, trust is positively influenced by perceptions of AI as innovative or useful. Users who experience outcomes better than expected from AI systems tend to have more trust in the technology.

The level of religiosity also plays a role, with more religious individuals often displaying stronger negative emotions, such as fear or anger, toward AI.

2.1.1 Psychological and emotional factors: transparency, fairness, and trust issues

The psychological and emotional factors influencing candidates' perceptions of AI-based recruitment systems play a crucial role in shaping their attitudes toward these technologies. Key elements such as opacity, emotional detachment, rigidity, autonomy, and the non-human nature of AI significantly affect how these systems are perceived and whether candidates feel comfortable engaging with them. Although it has been widely analyzed that the non-human characteristics of artificial intelligence can reduce the perceived trust that candidates have in it, it is necessary to introduce the concept of the "uncanny valley."

Masahiro Mori, a robotics professor at the Tokyo Institute of Technology, studied people's reactions to robots that looked and acted almost like humans. In particular, he hypothesized that a person's response to a humanlike robot would abruptly shift from empathy to revulsion as it approached—but failed to attain—a lifelike appearance. This descent into eeriness is known as the uncanny valley.

Specifically, the uncanny valley represents a genuine sense of discomfort that humans experience toward artificial intelligence when it falls into an intermediate state between human likeness and what is typically associated with a robot.
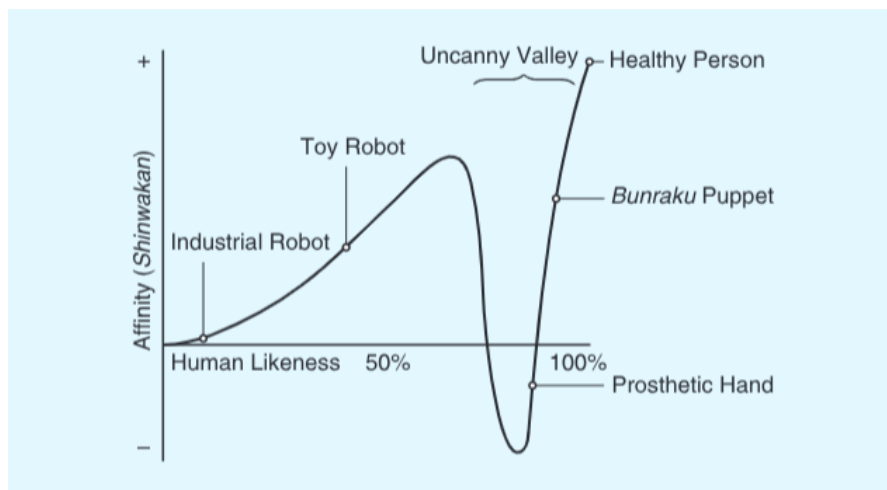
The graph illustrates the concept of the uncanny valley, which describes the proposed relationship between an entity's human resemblance and the level of affinity it evokes in an observer. [1]

Uncanny Valley — Healthy Person

Moving
Still

Humanoid Robot
Death
Ill Person
Bunraku Puppet

Industrial Robot
Stuffed Animal
Okina Mask
Ordinary Doll

Affinity (*Shinwakan*)

Human Likeness   50%   100%
Yase Otoko Mask (*Noh* Play)
Corpse
Prosthetic Hand
Myoelectric Hand
Zombie

[2]

While the uncanny valley specifically addresses discomfort caused by AI's near-human appearance, it is just one of several psychological and emotional factors that shape candidates' trust in AI-based recruitment systems. Elements such as opacity, emotional detachment, rigidity, and autonomy also influence perceptions, each playing a distinct role in how candidates engage with these technologies.

These factors, while interrelated, are conceptually distinct and each contributes to unique perceptions and emotional responses that can either encourage or hinder the adoption of AI in recruitment. (De Freitas et. al, 2023)

For example, the lack of transparency in AI decision-making processes, which can create a sense of opacity, may generate feelings of mistrust among candidates. When candidates cannot fully understand how an AI system makes decisions, it can lead to concerns about fairness and potential bias. (Highouse et al., 2008)

Additionally, AI's emotionless nature and perceived rigidity in handling complex human interactions can contribute to a lack of empathy, making candidates feel disconnected from the recruitment process. The sense of autonomy that AI systems possess—acting independently

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[2] *Translators' note: "Noh is a traditional Japanese form of musical theater dating to the 14th century in which actors commonly wear masks. The yase otoko mask bears the face of an emaciated man and represents a ghost from hell. The okina mask represents an old man."*

without human oversight—can further fuel candidates' anxieties, particularly when they perceive AI as a replacement for human judgment and interaction.

Research shows that these factors influence not only candidates' trust in AI recruitment systems but also their willingness to engage with them.

People don't know enough about artificial intelligence to trust it. While they may be interested and curious, they are also apprehensive due to a significant knowledge gap. Charlene Li's research highlights that people tend to trust robo-financial advisors because they receive solid, personalized advice (with the added benefit of not having to admit financial difficulties to a human). However, the situation is different with generative AI, such as ChatGPT. While the technology is impressive, it is still in its early stages. It remains a shiny new object that is not fully developed, which makes people cautious and skeptical.

Companies that introduce AI within their organizations can foster greater trust by implementing a "trust ladder." Trust develops over time, and it is unrealistic to expect people to automatically trust AI tools upon their introduction. Companies must allow AI to earn trust incrementally, moving from low involvement to full automation. Transparency is also essential in this process. The more transparent companies are about how they intend to use AI — for example, to replace mundane and repetitive tasks such as document compilation or summarizing files — and the impact it will have on employees, the better the acceptance will be.

Organizations that adopt AI incrementally and maintain openness about their safety, transparency, and security protocols will find it easier to integrate AI tools and build trust among their workforce.

Companies are increasingly pressured by societal expectations and, in some cases, regulations to demonstrate their commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion in their hiring practices. As a result, there is a rising demand for transparent and accountable recruitment processes, ensuring decisions are based on merit and potential rather than biases or outdated criteria (Mishra & Kumar, 2023).

Recruiters must leverage technology to meet the evolving expectations of job seekers, who may expect more inclusive and fair processes, while using technology, recruiters must maintain fair, unbiased practices that align with the broader organizational goals of diversity and inclusion. This involves addressing potential biases in automated systems and ensuring that technology doesn't inadvertently reinforce discrimination or exclusion. The "black box" characteristic of numerous AI algorithms can complicate the understanding and explanation of their decision-making processes. This opacity can lead to concerns regarding fairness and accountability, particularly when unfavorable decisions are made about candidates. (Umachandran, 2021).

The issue of user trust must also be taken into account. The idea that an algorithm plays a pivotal role in shaping an individual's professional path can cause discomfort among both recruiters and candidates. Building this trust requires the establishment of both strong and fair AI systems, along with the development of clear communication strategies that outline how these systems function and the safeguards in place to address potential biases (Amodei et al., 2019).

Trust is essential for reinforcing interpersonal relationships and serves as a cornerstone for maintaining social order. Over the years, its study has evolved into a multidisciplinary field, extending across various disciplines. It has been incorporated into areas such as business management, economics, engineering, and computer science. (Fan et al., 2011). Trust is an abstract and subjective notion with strong foundations in sociology and psychology. Its definition can differ considerably depending on the academic discipline, the entities involved, and the specific contextual factors at play (Jøsang & McAnally, 2005).

The concept of appropriate trust in Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems has quickly become a key focus for both researchers and practitioners. Various strategies have been employed to foster this trust, including confidence scores, explanations, trustworthiness indicators, and uncertainty communication.

Despite their capabilities, AI-embedded systems remain susceptible to failure or unpredictable behavior, which can result in misplaced trust and increase the risk of both misuse and disuse (Raja & Riley, 1997).

Instances of AI misapplication, such as Amazon's AI-driven recruiting tool exhibiting gender bias, highlight the serious consequences of trust misalignment. Ensuring that human trust in AI is well-calibrated allows individuals to recognize both its strengths and limitations, ultimately helping to mitigate the risks associated with its improper use (Parasuraman & Byrne, 2005). Although appropriate trust is essential for the successful implementation of AI systems, the current understanding of this concept remains fragmented (Mehrotra et al., 2024).

By addressing these concerns at both the AI-related and user-related levels, organizations can work towards reducing resistance to AI tools. However, interventions aimed at improving transparency and fairness must be carefully designed to avoid unintended consequences, such as increasing resistance or introducing new risks. Ensuring candidates are well-informed and actively engaged in the recruitment process is essential to fostering trust and acceptance of AI systems

2.1.2 The "ghosting effect"

Despite the aforementioned potential of AI, there are also dark sides to consider, particularly from the candidates' perspective: The advent of AI has introduced the risk of bias and discrimination; also the use of AI-mediated job interviews can lead to a "ghosting" effect, the candidates don't hear back from the employer despite them being successful during the interview, which may result in negative feelings for the candidate and lower self-esteem (Forbes, 2023; Leckfor et al., 2023). Glassdoor's chief economist notes a significant rise in job seekers reporting being ghosted by employers since the pandemic (+98% from February 2020 to 2021).

Ghosting, whether by individuals or companies, is widely regarded as unprofessional and irresponsible, reflecting poorly on the organization's integrity. Such behavior raises questions about whether a company's actions align with its stated mission and values, as well as concerns about its treatment of employees, customers, and stakeholders, particularly during challenging times. (The Guardian, 2022). "Ghosting" in recruitment refers to the abrupt and unexplained disappearance of one party during the hiring process, which leads to disruptions and delays.

This phenomenon can involve recruiters, employers, or candidates, all of whom may ghost one another. Understanding the root causes of ghosting and implementing strategies to address them is key to maintaining a smooth and effective recruitment process.

Recruiters can sometimes ghost candidates due to disorganization, heavy workloads, or shifting priorities, leaving candidates feeling undervalued and frustrated, which in turn harms the recruiter's reputation. Employers, too, may ghost either candidates or recruiters, often due to internal changes, decision-making delays, or a lack of communication processes.

This behavior not only causes frustration for candidates but also complicates the recruiter's task of managing expectations and maintaining client relationships. On the other hand, candidates may also ghost employers or recruiters, often due to a change of interest, receiving a better offer elsewhere, or a simple lack of professional courtesy. This unpredictability can be particularly challenging for recruitment firms trying to meet their clients' hiring needs.

The underlying causes of ghosting are often rooted in poor communication, misaligned expectations, or an overly complex recruitment process. In many cases, individuals may find it easier to avoid uncomfortable conversations by disappearing altogether. Moreover, with the increasing number of opportunities in today's job market, candidates may feel less obligated to engage with every potential employer.

To combat ghosting in recruitment, it's essential to establish clear communication channels and set realistic expectations from the outset. Regular updates and honest feedback help to build trust and reduce the likelihood of ghosting occurring. It's also important to streamline recruitment processes to minimize confusion and delays.

A well-organized process, with timely responses, prevents frustration and keeps all parties engaged. Maintaining candidate engagement through consistent follow-ups and personalized communication is another effective strategy. By acknowledging candidates' time and effort and keeping them informed—even when there are no updates—recruiters show that candidates are valued, which can reduce the chances of ghosting.

Providing training for recruiters to improve their communication skills and organizational abilities can significantly reduce instances of recruiter-initiated ghosting. Incorporating

technology to automate routine tasks can also free up time for more meaningful interactions. Encouraging employers to maintain open lines of communication and to be transparent with both candidates and recruiters helps reduce employer ghosting. An efficient and transparent hiring process is crucial to preventing delays and ghosting in the recruitment process.

By addressing the root causes of ghosting and fostering an environment of transparency, respect, and effective communication, recruitment firms can navigate the challenges posed by ghosting, resulting in a more reliable and effective hiring process that strengthens the firm's reputation and success.

2.1.3 Candidates' experiences and their effects

The level of candidate satisfaction with AI-driven recruitment tools remains an underexplored area in academic literature, with existing studies offering conflicting insights on the subject.

Some studies indicate that AI-driven recruitment systems, particularly those incorporating video-enabled social media, may discourage potential candidates from applying. This might be due to: computer anxiety (van Esch & Mente, 2018), the need for recruitment experts to have advices, and the lack of interaction. On the other hand, other research highlights a more positive perspective, showing that candidates often perceive AI-enabled recruitment systems as modern and engaging, which increases their willingness to complete the hiring process (van Esch & Black, 2019) and feel like companies that integrate AI into recruitment are often seen as forward-thinking, enhancing their employer branding (Miles & McCamey, 2018).

Familiarity with technology plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions. Candidates with prior exposure to AI systems or technological fields tend to have a more favorable outlook, seeing AI as a tool that can streamline recruitment and reduce subjectivity. In contrast, those who are less familiar with AI may approach it with skepticism, questioning its ability to assess human potential accurately.

Mahmud et al. (2022a) highlighted a wide range of factors that influence the acceptance of algorithms, which they categorized into four overarching dimensions: those related to the algorithm itself, to the nature of the task, to individual characteristics, and to broader contextual factors. Specifically, aspects such as the design of the algorithm (e.g., its transparency, speed

of response, and ability to learn), the way decisions are communicated (such as whether they are delivered orally or electronically), and the perceived quality of the algorithm's output all play a role in shaping user attitudes. The complexity of the task and the extent to which it involves subjective judgment are also significant, as are personal psychological traits, personality dimensions, demographic background, and familiarity with both the task and the technology. At a higher level, organizational priorities, cultural values, societal norms, and environmental uncertainty further influence individuals' responses to algorithmic systems.

Despite the richness of this framework, previous literature has rarely addressed in depth the perceived barriers that individuals associate with algorithms, particularly in terms of their aversion to them. Building on the Innovation Resistance Theory (IRT), this study seeks to fill this gap by exploring how various perceived barriers—linked to usability concerns, perceived value, risk, attachment to traditional methods, and image—can contribute to algorithm aversion.

Resistance to innovation often does not stem from a lack of awareness, but from a sense of comfort with the status quo or from a perceived conflict with existing values and beliefs. For instance, employees who have long relied on manual processes may struggle to adapt to algorithmic systems that redefine their role or autonomy. In such cases, the introduction of innovation is not only a technological shift but a psychological and cultural one.

The degree of resistance can significantly affect how quickly a new technology is adopted. Individuals may passively resist by showing disinterest, actively resist due to insecurity or skepticism, or even oppose the innovation outright. Scholars have generally grouped the causes of resistance into two main categories: functional barriers, which concern the practical and tangible consequences of adopting an innovation, and psychological barriers, which are rooted in deeper cognitive or emotional conflicts.

Traditionally, much of the research has focused on the drivers of innovation adoption, guided by a pro-innovation bias that assumes innovations are inherently positive. However, to understand why innovations often fail, it is equally important to investigate the reasons behind resistance. For this reason, the Innovation Resistance Theory has become a widely adopted theoretical lens for examining such behavior. It has proven effective in explaining resistance

across various domains, from internet and mobile banking to e-commerce and online education. In line with this body of work, the present study employs IRT to understand why many individuals—and particularly decision-makers—demonstrate reluctance or skepticism toward algorithmic decision-making in recruitment and beyond.

Negative past experiences with automated hiring processes can also contribute to mistrust. Candidates who have received rejection notifications from AI-driven systems without clear explanations often perceive these processes as opaque and unfair, reinforcing concerns about the lack of accountability in algorithmic decision-making. Additionally, individuals who have previously participated in recruitment processes characterized by transparency and well-structured communication may hold AI to the same standard. If AI-driven systems fail to provide clear reasoning behind hiring decisions, skepticism about their reliability and fairness is likely to increase. (Horodyski, 2023).

2.2 The risk of employer reputation damage

Companies often focus on hiring the best candidates while overlooking the impact a negative recruitment experience can have on their brand. Even rejected candidates influence brand perception: a positive experience, regardless of the outcome, helps maintain a strong employer reputation, whereas poor treatment can lead to reputational damage and even customer loss.

A significant majority of employees—88%—express discomfort with the use of artificial intelligence (AI) job interview apps during the candidate screening process, according to a survey conducted by The Harris Poll for Yoh. Among those who rejected AI, 55% preferred in-person interviews, and 48% did not trust AI's ability to accurately interpret human emotions and cues.

Nearly half of the respondents also expressed concerns about the potential misinterpretation of their biometrics, which could make them seem dishonest. Additionally, 38% of participants felt that AI would hinder their ability to gauge the interviewer's reactions. This discomfort was evident across both younger and older generations, with a notably higher percentage of workers aged 65 and older preferring an in-person interview over an AI tool.

The discomfort with AI in the interview process appears to be growing. A survey from May indicated that only about a third of respondents were opposed to AI in virtual interviews, showing that the "human touch" is still valued by candidates, regardless of their technological familiarity.

This shift suggests that employers should be aware of the potential negative impact on candidate experience, which is becoming an increasingly significant issue. A PwC survey revealed that nearly half of candidates declined a job offer due to a poor candidate experience, with common grievances including lack of communication after an interview, failure to acknowledge applications, or being "ghosted" by recruiters. These findings suggest that, even when employers believe they are using effective recruitment methods, job seekers may feel differently (Bolden-Barrett, 2019).

The candidate experience plays a crucial role in shaping a company's brand, either strengthening or damaging its reputation. In 2016, approximately 60% of job seekers reported a negative recruitment experience, with 72% sharing their dissatisfaction online (CareerArc, 2016). This has direct business implications: 41% of candidates who had a negative experience stated they would sever any relationship with the company, including future collaborations and product purchases (Talent Board, 2016).

Candidate experience is shaped by interactions with recruiters and the hiring process, influencing employer brand perception and the likelihood of candidates recommending the company to others (Russell & Brannan, 2016). Given that every hiring decision results in multiple rejected candidates, the risk of negative feedback spreading is high, particularly on platforms like Glassdoor, which attracts millions of monthly visitors.

Despite the significant role that selection methods play in both recruitment efficiency and employer branding, there is still a lack of a structured model integrating candidate experience into corporate hiring processes. Candidate experience is built through interactions between applicants and the company throughout the recruitment process. While candidates seek job opportunities, companies aim to attract the most suitable talent. Candidates invest time in preparing application materials and evaluating job offers, often engaging with potential employers even before meeting all the job requirements (Miles & McCamey, 2018).

The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) defines recruitment as a "continuous process of attracting and sequential processes of sourcing, assessing, and employing." Recruiters act as a bridge between companies and the job market, meaning their interactions with candidates directly impact brand perception. A negative experience can deter future talent and harm the company's reputation, whereas a positive one strengthens employer branding and candidate engagement.

Companies tend to focus on hiring the ideal candidate while overlooking the experience of those who are not selected. However, neglecting candidate experience can lead to negative reviews and even customer loss. Ultimately, candidate experience is shaped by perceptions and emotions arising from interactions with recruitment processes, practices, and personnel.

Even when no positions are available, companies remain under constant scrutiny from potential candidates. Active job seekers explore multiple opportunities, while currently employed professionals tend to consider only highly compelling job offers.

For smaller companies, the effect of a single negative experience may seem negligible, but on a larger scale, the number of dissatisfied candidates (and potential lost customers) increases, resulting in economic repercussions. A clear sign of inconsistency between declared values and actual practices can already be seen in job postings: claiming to be a "people-centric" company while stating that only selected candidates will be contacted is a contradiction.

To enhance the candidate experience, technology and automation can streamline personalized updates, particularly for high-volume recruitment processes. For instance, an automated system can handle communication for those who do not pass the initial screening, while direct feedback via call or video call is more appropriate for candidates who have participated in interviews. (Supply Chain People, 2022)

Providing a positive candidate experience is not only an ethical responsibility but also a strategic move: a transparent and respectful hiring process strengthens the employer brand and contributes to long-term business success.

AI and automation in recruitment should enhance industry reputation rather than compromise it. While these technologies improve efficiency and outreach, their implementation requires

careful oversight. For instance, Amazon's 2018 AI-powered hiring tool, initially designed to streamline recruitment, was found to exhibit bias against female candidates, raising concerns about fairness and reliability in AI-driven selection processes (Reuters).

Despite such risks, AI tools offer advantages, such as automating candidate outreach and streamlining recruitment processes. However, improper use can lead to errors, including impersonal communication and reputational risks. Platforms like LinkedIn have facilitated professional networking but have also contributed to a more transactional recruitment experience, reducing personal interactions. Studies indicate that non-verbal cues play a crucial role in communication, yet virtual interviews—now used by 82% of employers—are diminishing in-person engagement (Indeed, 2021).

Errors in automation, such as addressing candidates incorrectly in mass emails, illustrate the potential pitfalls of excessive reliance on AI. While such mistakes may not cause significant damage, they highlight the importance of quality control in automated recruitment processes. Poor candidate experiences can negatively impact an organization's reputation, making it essential for recruiters to monitor AI tools closely. Some AI applications, such as applicant tracking systems, have demonstrated effectiveness, with one company reporting a 43% increase in sourced hires after implementing automation software (Medallia & Harver Recruitment Technology).

As technology continues to reshape recruitment, businesses must balance efficiency gains with maintaining a human-centered approach. AI can reduce the time required for repetitive tasks, but it should complement rather than replace human decision-making to ensure ethical and effective hiring practices. (Kingston, 2023)

2.3 Research Question introduction

Human Resource Management (HRM) plays a crucial role in aligning employee performance with organizational goals, with recruitment being central to selecting qualified candidates who contribute to a company's success. Effective recruitment strategies not only enhance productivity and reduce turnover but also foster a positive organizational culture by hiring

individuals who align with the company's values. Recruitment can be approached through internal promotions or external hiring, based on a clear job analysis and candidate profile.

In recent years, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has increasingly influenced recruitment by streamlining processes such as candidate screening and interviews, improving efficiency and decision-making. However, AI's impact on employer branding—how an organization is perceived by potential employees—raises concerns, particularly regarding the personalization of candidate interactions. Employer branding is vital in shaping how a company is viewed by potential and current employees, influencing engagement, loyalty, and retention. HR practices such as recruitment, onboarding, and career development play a significant role in fostering a positive employer brand, creating an inclusive and transparent work environment.

Although AI offers efficiency and impartiality by processing high volumes of data and taking rapid decisions, it may also reinforce biases if trained on biased data, causing issues such as gender bias, as the case of Amazon's AI hiring tool. People trust AI differently depending on culture, education level, and gender, and this underscores the need for transparency and fairness in AI-based hiring practices. Moreover, the "ghosting" trend—whereby candidates are not provided with feedback after successful interviews—is harmful to the self-esteem of the candidate and the image of the company, emphasizing the need for good communication during the recruitment process.

Finally, HR practice and employer branding work together to recruit top talent and improve organizational performance. However, the integration of AI in recruitment creates problems, particularly around bias and candidate experience. While it is being adopted more and more, the candidate perspective of AI-driven hiring processes has not received proper attention, and there is not much literature that focuses on this element. This literature gap calls for a close look at how AI is influencing the candidate experience and its potential effects on employer branding.

2.3.1 Research Question

In this research I'm going to analyze this process from the perspective of the candidate, to better understand:

"*How does the use of AI in the recruitment process impact employer branding, considering candidates' aversion to AI?*"

H1: The use of artificial intelligence in the recruitment process has a negative impact on employer branding.

H2: The relationship between the variables is mediated by candidates' aversion to artificial intelligence
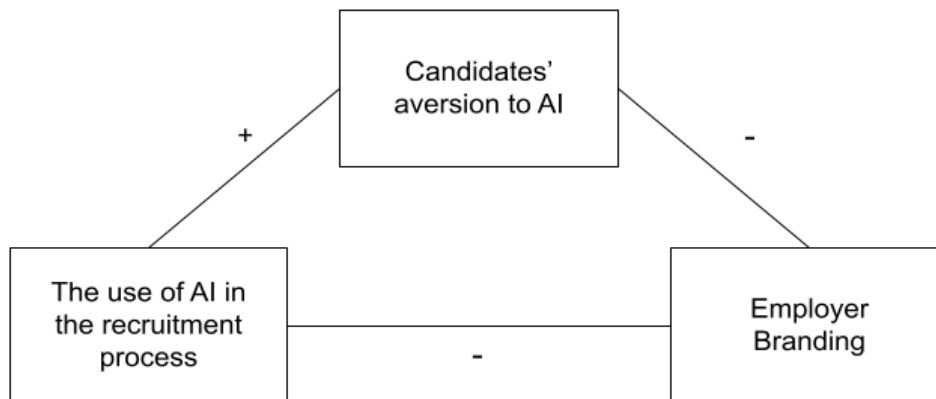
IV: The use of AI in the recruitment process
DV: Employer branding
mediator: candidates' aversion to AI

Chapter 3: Research Methodology and Empirical Analysis

3.1 Study Design and Data Collection

This thesis aims to provide an innovative contribution to the existing literature on the use of artificial intelligence in recruitment processes by introducing a perspective that has so far been largely overlooked: that of the candidate. While most academic work in this area has focused on the operational effectiveness of AI from the employer's point of view—emphasizing metrics such as cost reduction, time efficiency, and predictive accuracy—this research shifts the focus to how candidates themselves perceive the integration of AI into the hiring process.

In particular, one of the main theoretical contributions of this thesis lies in the introduction of candidate aversion to artificial intelligence as a mediating variable in the relationship between AI use in recruitment and employer branding. For the first time, this study hypothesizes that it is not merely the objective presence of AI in the hiring process that affects employer brand perception, but rather how candidates subjectively relate to this technology. A strong personal aversion to AI may lead candidates to view companies that adopt such tools in a more negative light, ultimately affecting their perception of the organization's employer brand.

This novel approach highlights the importance of addressing not only the technical effectiveness of AI in HR practices, but also the emotional and psychological responses of job seekers, suggesting that the successful implementation of AI in recruitment must be accompanied by thoughtful communication and change management strategies.

To investigate this relationship, the thesis employs a mediation model. Specifically, it posits that the relationship between AI use in recruitment (independent variable) and employer branding (dependent variable) is mediated by the candidate's aversion to AI (mediating variable).

The model assumes that AI use may have a direct effect on employer brand perception, but that this effect may be significantly influenced by the candidate's personal attitude toward the technology. If the mediation effect is confirmed, it would indicate that candidate aversion to AI plays a key role in shaping perceptions of employer branding in the context of AI-driven recruitment.

Data will be collected through a quantitative study using a structured questionnaire developed and distributed via the Qualtrics platform. The survey will include targeted questions designed to measure all variables in the model: perceived use of AI in the recruitment process, personal aversion to artificial intelligence, perceived employer branding.

The data will be analyzed using regression analysis and mediation models, conducted via SPSS software using the PROCESS macro (Model 4) developed by Andrew F. Hayes. This analytical tool enables the testing of both direct and indirect effects, thereby allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the mediating role of AI aversion in the proposed relationship.

Participants were recruited through an online sampling strategy, with particular attention given to individuals representative of the study's target population, namely young professionals. The recruitment process involved distributing a link that directed participants to the survey hosted on the Qualtrics platform. A total of 185 individuals initially took part in the study; however, only 162 responses were deemed valid, as these participants fully completed the questionnaire.

"Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. I am a Master's student in Marketing at LUISS Guido Carli University, and I am conducting research for my thesis on the impact of artificial intelligence on employer branding. The questionnaire will take less than 2 minutes to complete. All responses will be collected anonymously and used exclusively for academic purposes. During the study, you will be presented with a brief description of a job application process. You are kindly asked to read it carefully and imagine yourself in the described situation. Afterwards, you will be asked a few related questions."

In the first part of the survey, the manipulation of the independent variable took place: participants were randomly assigned to view one of two recruitment conditions—either a process involving artificial intelligence or a traditional interview conducted by a human HR recruiter.

In the second section, the focus shifted to the measurement of the dependent variable: employer branding. This was followed by a set of questions aimed at assessing the participant's level of aversion towards artificial intelligence.

3.2 Research Design

The present study aims to investigate how the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in the recruitment process influences candidates' perceptions of employer branding, while considering the mediating role of AI aversion.

To test the proposed hypotheses, a between-subjects experimental design was employed, manipulating the independent variable: the use of AI in the selection process (1 = traditional recruitment with a human recruiter; 2 = AI-based recruitment). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the following two experimental conditions:

Condition 1 – Traditional Recruitment (NO AI): Participants read a scenario in which they apply for a position at XYZ Company (described as a leader in its sector, known for employee well-being and innovation). The application process involves submitting a CV via email and being contacted by a human recruiter for an individual interview: *"Imagine that you want to apply for a job opportunity at this company: Company XYZ is a leader in sector X, known for its focus on employee well-being and innovation. To apply, you send your CV via email and will be contacted for an interview with a human HR recruiter."*

Condition 2 – AI-Based Recruitment: Participants read a similar scenario, but the selection process is automated: the CV is screened by an AI algorithm, and selected candidates complete a video interview assessed directly by the AI system: "*Imagine that you want to apply for a job opportunity at this company: Company XYZ is a leader in sector X, known for its focus on employee well-being and innovation. To apply, your CV will be analyzed by an artificial intelligence algorithm, which will select the most suitable profiles. The selected candidates will have an automated interview with an AI system, which will record and evaluate their responses."*

After reading the assigned scenario, participants were asked to evaluate several aspects using Likert scales:

Employer Branding Perception (dependent variable, Y): measured through a scale adapted from the "intention to pursue" subdimension of Highhouse et al.'s (2003) organizational

attraction scale, which assesses a candidate's intention to apply to or accept an offer from the company.

AI Aversion (mediating variable, M): measured using the General Attitudes toward Artificial Intelligence Scale (GAAIS), which captures participants' overall attitudes toward AI by aggregating responses to multiple items.

The statistical analysis used to test the hypotheses was a simple mediation model (Hayes' PROCESS Model 4). This approach allows for examining whether and to what extent the relationship between the use of AI and employer branding perception is mediated by candidates' aversion toward AI

3.3 Measurement of Variables

To empirically test the proposed mediation model, which investigates how the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in recruitment affects employer branding through candidates' aversion to AI, it is crucial to operationalize and measure the constructs involved. The statistical model assumes an indirect effect where the aversion to AI mediates the relationship between the recruitment method and the perception of employer branding. Three main variables were measured: the independent variable (type of recruitment process), the mediator (candidates' aversion to AI), and the dependent variable (perceived employer branding).

3.3.1 Measurement of the independent variable

The independent variable was manipulated experimentally through two hypothetical scenarios. In the traditional recruitment condition (coded as 1), participants read about a job application process involving a human recruiter and an interview. In contrast, the AI-based recruitment condition (coded as 2) described a process where CVs were screened by AI software and interviews were conducted using automated systems. These scenarios were designed to be equally detailed and comparable, except for the presence or absence of AI, to isolate its impact.

3.3.2 Measurement of the dependent variable

In this study, employer branding is operationalized as the intention of candidates to pursue employment with the organization, a construct that reflects how attractive a company is perceived by potential applicants in terms of action-oriented outcomes. To measure this dimension, a selection of items was drawn from the Organizational Attraction Scale developed by Highhouse, Lievens, and Sinar (2003). This scale is widely adopted in recruitment and organizational behavior literature, and it conceptualizes organizational attraction as a multidimensional construct comprising three distinct but interrelated components: general attractiveness, intention to pursue, and perceived prestige.

Table 1

Organizational Attraction Items by Component Assessed, Means, Standard Deviations, Variances, and Covariances

Item	M	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
General attractiveness																
1. For me, this company would be a good place to work.	3.35	.84														
2. I would not be interested in this company except as a last resort.[a]	3.33	.46	.95													
3. This company is attractive to me as a place for employment.	3.35	.53	.43	.71												
4. I am interested in learning more about this company.	3.21	.53	.48	.54	.97											
5. A job at this company is very appealing to me.	3.19	.55	.42	.56	.63	.79										
Intentions to pursue																
6. I would accept a job offer from this company.	3.54	.37	.32	.36	.40	.43	.63									
7. I would make this company one of my first choices as an employer.	2.98	.43	.37	.43	.50	.46	.37	.76								
8. If this company invited me for a job interview, I would go.	3.88	.34	.34	.34	.40	.36	.38	.36	.65							
9. I would exert a great deal of effort to work for this company.	3.39	.33	.34	.38	.42	.45	.40	.43	.39	.78						
10. I would recommend this company to a friend looking for a job.	3.69	.26	.24	.27	.29	.29	.24	.22	.22	.32	.65					
Prestige																
11. Employees are probably proud to say they work at this company.	3.78	.19	.14	.22	.12	.18	.15	.13	.13	.17	.23	.61				
12. This is a reputable company to work for.	3.86	.20	.19	.20	.20	.15	.17	.17	.18	.21	.21	.34	.55			
13. This company probably has a reputation as being an excellent employer.	3.77	.15	.15	.17	.14	.14	.16	.12	.15	.17	.21	.37	.35	.58		
14. I would find this company a prestigious place to work.	3.38	.31	.24	.34	.31	.33	.29	.33	.26	.33	.29	.34	.29	.36	.71	
15. There are probably many who would like to work at this company.	3.71	.15	.14	.16	.18	.16	.16	.11	.15	.15	.19	.21	.17	.24	.25	.57

Note: N = 302.
a. Reverse scored. All items were presented using a 5-point response scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*).

[3]

While the full scale includes 15 items measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree), only the "intention to pursue" subdimension was employed in this study. This subscale specifically measures the behavioral intention of job seekers—such as their

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[3] Retrived from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233990486_Measuring_Attraction_to_Organizations
Highhouse, S., Lievens, F., & Sinar, E. F. (2003). Measuring attraction to organizations. *Educational and Psychological Measurement, 63*(6), 986–1001. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013164403258403

willingness to apply for a position, accept a job offer, or prioritize the company among their employment options. The selected items were:

6. "I would accept a job offer from this company"

7. "I would make this company one of my first choices as an employer."

8. "If this company invited me to a job interview I would go"

9. "I would exert a great deal of effort to work for this company"

10. "I would recommend this company to a friend looking for a job"

The decision to include only this subdimension is grounded in both theoretical and methodological considerations. First, the intention to pursue dimension directly reflects the candidate-oriented perspective of the study, as it captures the job seeker's response to the recruitment process. This aligns with the goal of assessing employer branding from an external viewpoint. Second, prior validation work by Highhouse et al. (2003) showed that although attractiveness, prestige, and intentions are correlated, they are statistically and conceptually distinct constructs. Their research suggests that intentions serve as a mediator between perceptions (e.g., prestige or attractiveness) and actual job pursuit behavior, as described in the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). By isolating the intention component, the study focuses on the most action-oriented and predictive element of employer branding, which is crucial in understanding how AI in recruitment affects candidate decision-making.

Furthermore, selecting only one subdimension avoids conceptual overlap and enhances parsimony in the model, particularly important in mediation analyses where each variable must have a clear and distinct role. Including general attractiveness or prestige could have introduced confounding influences related to employer reputation or industry image, which are not directly manipulated in the experimental design.

Overall, the intention to pursue measure provides a focused, theoretically sound, and practically relevant assessment of employer branding, particularly suitable for evaluating the downstream effects of technological interventions such as AI in the recruitment process.

Following the selection and refinement of the measurement items, reliability analyses were performed to evaluate the internal consistency of the final scales. Cronbach's alpha coefficient is reported below

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.982	5

3.3.3 Measurement of the mediating variable

To measure candidates' aversion towards artificial intelligence, a shortened version of the General Attitudes Towards Artificial Intelligence Scale (GAAIS) was used. This is a validated instrument developed through two large-sample studies using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The scale has a bifactorial structure, consisting of two subscales: Positive GAAIS, which captures favorable attitudes towards AI, and Negative GAAIS, which assesses critical or fearful perceptions. Both components have shown good model fit indices as well as convergent and discriminant validity, making the scale a reliable tool for analyzing attitudes toward AI.

The GAAIS has proven to be a valuable instrument for capturing general perceptions of AI, clearly distinguishing between perceived benefits and perceived threats or problems. Previous studies have also highlighted how corporate trust is a crucial factor in the acceptance of AI, directly influencing both positive and negative attitudes. This makes GAAIS particularly suitable for investigating aversion as a potential mediator in the relationship between AI use in selection processes and employer branding.

Subscale (not for display)	Number (not for display)	Item
Positive	1	For routine transactions, I would rather interact with an artificially intelligent system than with a human.
Positive	2	Artificial Intelligence can provide new economic opportunities for this country.
Negative	3	Organisations use Artificial Intelligence unethically.
Positive	4	Artificially intelligent systems can help people feel happier.
Positive	5	I am impressed by what Artificial Intelligence can do.
Negative	6	I think artificially intelligent systems make many errors.
Positive	7	I am interested in using artificially intelligent systems in my daily life.
Negative	8	I find Artificial Intelligence sinister.
Negative	9	Artificial Intelligence might take control of people.
Negative	10	I think Artificial Intelligence is dangerous.
Positive	11	Artificial Intelligence can have positive impacts on people's wellbeing.
Positive	12	Artificial Intelligence is exciting.
Attention Check	A	I would be grateful if you could select Strongly agree.
Positive	13	An artificially intelligent agent would be better than an employee in many routine jobs.
Positive	14	There are many beneficial applications of Artificial Intelligence.
Negative	15	I shiver with discomfort when I think about future uses of Artificial Intelligence.
Positive	16	Artificially intelligent systems can perform better than humans.
Positive	17	Much of society will benefit from a future full of Artificial Intelligence
Positive	18	I would like to use Artificial Intelligence in my own job.
Negative	19	People like me will suffer if Artificial Intelligence is used more and more.
Negative	20	Artificial Intelligence is used to spy on people

[4]

In the present study, three items from the original scale were selected and administered using a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The selected items were:

Pos1: "For routine transactions, I would rather interact with an artificially intelligent system than with a human."

Pos13: "A system equipped with artificial intelligence would be better than an employee in many routine roles."

Neg3: "I think Artificial Intelligence makes many errors." – Standardized loading: 0.640, $p < 0.001$

These items were selected because of their strong alignment with the research question, which investigates how aversion to the use of AI in selection processes may mediate the relationship between AI usage and employer perception.

Pos1 and Pos13 reflect aspects related to candidates' openness and willingness to accept the use of AI in operational contexts, including recruitment. The preference for AI in routine

processes (Pos1) and the perception of its positive impact on task management (Pos13) provide an indirect measure of low aversion toward AI. In order to align the interpretative direction of all items with the construct under analysis — where higher scores indicate greater aversion — Pos1 and Pos13 were reverse-coded using SPSS (recoding 1 = 5, 2 = 4, 3 = 3, 4 = 2, 5 = 1), allowing for the computation of a consistent composite index.

Neg3, on the other hand, expresses a negative perception of AI's reliability, linked to the belief that it makes frequent errors — a key theme in candidates' rejection of its application in critical tasks such as recruitment.

To assess the internal consistency of the scales used in the study, reliability analyses were conducted. After removing items based on theoretical and statistical considerations, Cronbach's alpha was calculated for each construct. The resulting value provide evidence of the reliability of the measurement instruments.

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.833	3

3.4 Results and Discussion

To empirically test the first hypothesis (H1), concerning the potential negative impact of AI-based recruitment on employer branding, a statistical comparison was carried out between participants exposed to the two different experimental conditions. The goal was to determine whether the use of artificial intelligence in the recruitment process significantly influenced how candidates perceived the organization as an employer.

An independent samples t-test was conducted to test Hypothesis 1, which stated that the use of artificial intelligence in the recruitment process would have a negative effect on employer branding. Specifically, the analysis aimed to assess whether there were statistically significant differences in the mean employer branding evaluations depending on whether AI was present or absent in the recruitment process.

Since the comparison involved two distinct groups, randomly assigned to one of two conditions, a between-subjects design was applied. Each participant was exposed to only one of the recruitment scenarios (see Section 3.2), making the independent t-test the most appropriate statistical method for testing differences between group means. As the analysis involves comparing two means, it also requires an evaluation of the equality of variances. For this purpose, SPSS automatically performs Levene's Test for Equality of Variances, which helps determine whether the assumption of homogeneity of variance is met.

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances	
		F	Sig.
meanemp	Equal variances assumed	17.276	<.001
	Equal variances not assumed		

According to the results of Levene's Test for Equality of Variances, the null hypothesis of equal variances was rejected, as the test yielded a statistically significant result (p < .001). This indicates that the assumption of homogeneity of variance does not hold, meaning that the variances between the two groups differ significantly. As a result, the appropriate row to interpret in the SPSS output is the one labeled **"Equal variances not assumed,"** which adjusts the degrees of freedom accordingly to account for the violation of this assumption.

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						Significance		Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference		
		F	Sig.	t	df	One–Sided p	Two–Sided p			Lower	Upper
meanemp	Equal variances assumed	17.276	<.001	12.225	160	<.001	<.001	2.34482	.19180	1.96603	2.72360
	Equal variances not assumed			12.178	143.827	<.001	<.001	2.34482	.19254	1.96424	2.72540

The results of the independent samples t-test supported Hypothesis 1 (H1), revealing a statistically significant difference in employer branding perception between the two groups

(MwithAI= 4.30, SD = 1.01; MnoAI= 1.96, SD = 1.40; t(143.827) = 12.178, p < .001). This suggests that participants exposed to the AI-based recruitment scenario evaluated the employer more negatively compared to those who viewed the traditional human-led recruitment condition.

T-Test

Group Statistics

	COND	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
meanemp	1.00	82	4.3073	1.01456	.11204
	2.00	80	1.9625	1.40058	.15659

This suggests that the presence of an AI-based recruitment process negatively influences candidates' perception of the company as a desirable employer.

Subsequently, a mediation analysis (Model 4 of the PROCESS macro; Hayes, 2013) was conducted to test H2, assessing whether the relationship between the type of recruitment (1 = absence of AI; 2 = presence of AI) and employer branding was mediated by candidates' aversion to AI. This mediation analysis employed PROCESS Model 4, which facilitates a more streamlined analysis by producing fewer outputs compared to the default SPSS procedure. The independent variable was the type of recruitment, a categorical variable transformed into a dummy coded as 1 for recruitment without AI and 2 for recruitment with AI.

```
Run MATRIX procedure:

*************** PROCESS Procedure for SPSS Version 4.2 ***************

          Written by Andrew F. Hayes, Ph.D.       www.afhayes.com
      Documentation available in Hayes (2022). www.guilford.com/p/hayes3

*********************************************************************
Model  : 4
    Y  : meanemp
    X  : COND
    M  : meanave

Sample
Size:  160

*********************************************************************
OUTCOME VARIABLE:
 meanave

Model Summary
          R        R-sq        MSE          F        df1        df2          p
      .4946       .2446     1.2671    51.1577     1.0000   158.0000      .0000

Model
              coeff         se          t          p       LLCI       ULCI
constant     1.8079      .2794     6.4711      .0000     1.2561     2.3597
COND         1.2734      .1780     7.1525      .0000      .9218     1.6250

Standardized coefficients
          coeff
COND      .9863
```

In this model, there is one mediator—a non-manipulable variable that does not directly impact the relationship between the independent and dependent variables, but rather explains it. The relevant relationships examined were: the effect of X on M, M on Y, the interaction X*M on Y, and X on Y, although the latter primarily serves to determine whether the mediation is full or partial. From the model summary, it was evident that at least one beta coefficient was statistically significant (p = 0.000). The statistically significant effect of the independent variable (type of recruitment) on the mediator (AI aversion) (B=1.273, SE=0.178, t=7.15, p=0.000) confirms that the recruitment method influences candidates' emotional or cognitive responses towards AI. This finding is crucial, as it validates the theoretical assumption that AI-based recruitment may trigger aversion, which, in turn, may affect the perception of the company as an attractive employer. Hence, this result justifies proceeding with the mediation analysis to investigate whether AI aversion explains the relationship between the use of AI in recruitment and employer branding.

Examining the relationships individually, the first output showed the effect of the independent variable on the mediator (X → M), which was significant (p = 0.000); this was a necessary condition to proceed with the mediation analysis.

```
**************************************************************************
OUTCOME VARIABLE:
 meanemp

Model Summary
          R        R-sq        MSE          F        df1        df2          p
      .7634       .5827     1.2140   109.6315     2.0000   157.0000      .0000

Model
             coeff         se          t          p        LLCI        ULCI
constant    7.4626      .3076    24.2624      .0000      6.8551      8.0701
COND       -1.8848      .2005    -9.4005      .0000     -2.2809     -1.4888
meanave     -.4123      .0779    -5.2947      .0000      -.5661      -.2585

Standardized coefficients
          coeff
COND      -1.1120
meanave    -.3141
```

The second output considered the joint effect of X and M on the dependent variable (X, M → Y). Specifically, the effect of X on Y, controlling for the mediator, was statistically significant (p = 0.000), indicating that the mediator has a statistically meaningful impact. The regression analysis (PROCESS Model 4) revealed that both the recruitment condition and AI aversion significantly predicted employer branding. Specifically, the presence of AI in the recruitment process had a negative and statistically significant effect on candidates' perceptions of the company as an employer (B = -1.88, p= .000), while AI aversion also had a significant negative impact (B = -0.41, p= .000). Since the direct effect of recruitment condition on employer branding remained significant even after including the mediator, the results indicate a partial mediation.

```
*************************** TOTAL EFFECT MODEL ***************************
OUTCOME VARIABLE:
 meanemp

Model Summary
          R        R-sq        MSE          F        df1        df2          p
      .7129       .5082     1.4217   163.2899     1.0000   158.0000      .0000

Model
             coeff         se          t          p        LLCI        ULCI
constant    6.7172      .2959    22.6978      .0000      6.1327      7.3017
COND       -2.4099      .1886   -12.7785      .0000     -2.7824     -2.0374

Standardized coefficients
          coeff
COND      -1.4218
```

To confirm this, the direct effect of X on Y was examined and found to be statistically significant, confirming partial mediation. Additionally, the significance of the indirect effect (M → Y) was further supported by the confidence interval, which did not include zero, indicating consistent directional effects.

```
************** TOTAL, DIRECT, AND INDIRECT EFFECTS OF X ON Y **************

Total effect of X on Y
     Effect        se         t         p        LLCI      ULCI      c_ps
    -2.4099     .1886  -12.7785     .0000   -2.7824   -2.0374   -1.4218

Direct effect of X on Y
     Effect        se         t         p        LLCI      ULCI     c'_ps
    -1.8848     .2005   -9.4005     .0000   -2.2809   -1.4888   -1.1120

Indirect effect(s) of X on Y:
            Effect    BootSE   BootLLCI   BootULCI
meanave    -.5250     .1352     -.8206     -.2924

Partially standardized indirect effect(s) of X on Y:
            Effect    BootSE   BootLLCI   BootULCI
meanave    -.3098     .0792     -.4840     -.1740

******************** ANALYSIS NOTES AND ERRORS ********************

Level of confidence for all confidence intervals in output:
  95.0000

Number of bootstrap samples for percentile bootstrap confidence intervals:
  5000

NOTE: Standardized coefficients for dichotomous or multicategorical X are in
      partially standardized form.

------ END MATRIX -----
```

The results confirmed the presence of a statistically significant total effect of the condition on employer branding (B = -2.41, SE = .19, t = -12.78, p < .001), indicating that the use of AI in recruitment processes negatively affects how the company is perceived as an employer. This total effect was then decomposed into a direct and an indirect component.

The **direct effect** of the condition on employer branding, after accounting for the mediator, remained significant (B = -1.88, SE = .20, t = -9.40, p < .001). This suggests that the condition still exerts an influence on employer branding that cannot be fully explained by aversion to AI alone. Therefore, other unmeasured variables or mechanisms may also contribute to shaping employer brand perceptions.

The **indirect effect**, which reflects the extent to which the experimental condition impacts employer branding through its influence on aversion to AI, was also found to be significant. Specifically, the bootstrapped indirect effect via the mediator was B = -0.53 (BootSE = .14), with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -0.82 to -0.29. Because this confidence interval does not include zero, the mediation is statistically significant. This indicates that part of the negative impact of AI on employer branding operates through increased aversion to artificial intelligence. The partially standardized indirect effect was also significant (B = -0.31), supporting the robustness of the mediation effect in standardized terms.

Overall, these results support the hypothesis of **partial mediation**: the negative effect of using AI in recruitment on employer branding is partially explained by increased aversion to AI. While aversion accounts for a meaningful portion of the relationship, a significant direct effect remains, implying that other factors may also influence employer branding perceptions beyond the psychological response captured by the mediator.

Chapter 4: How does AI Recruitment affect companies?

4.1 Practical recommendations for companies

This thesis advances literature on AI in Human Resource Management by exploring the underexamined candidate perspective, focusing on aversion to AI and its mediation effect on employer branding. It bridges gaps in understanding how AI impacts perceptions of fairness, transparency, and emotional responses during recruitment, offering new insights into technology-human interactions. From a managerial point of view: the findings provide actionable insights for companies to mitigate candidate aversion by improving AI transparency, fairness, and personalization. This supports the design of recruitment strategies that balance technological innovation with human-centric practices, ultimately strengthening employer branding and enhancing talent acquisition efforts. The results of this study offer meaningful insights for companies that intend to implement or improve AI-based recruitment systems without compromising their employer brand. While the research confirms that the presence of artificial intelligence in the selection process may negatively affect employer branding—particularly among candidates who exhibit a strong aversion to AI—this effect is not necessarily due to the technology itself, but rather to how it is perceived and experienced by applicants.

For this reason, it is crucial that organizations adopt a transparent approach when communicating the role of AI in their recruitment practices. Clearly explaining what aspects of the application are analyzed by the algorithm, how the system works, and what measures are in place to ensure fairness can help build trust and reduce the sense of uncertainty often associated with automation.

An effective strategy may involve combining the efficiency of AI tools with the human touch typical of traditional recruitment. Maintaining human involvement, particularly in later stages of the process or during direct communication with candidates, can help counteract the perception of impersonality that often accompanies fully automated systems. This hybrid model can serve to protect the organization's image while maintaining operational efficiency.

In addition, investing in AI literacy may play a crucial role in reducing candidate resistance. Companies should consider offering clear and accessible information about how AI contributes

to enhancing the recruitment experience, for example through FAQs or short explanatory videos on their career pages. Informing and educating applicants—especially those less familiar with these technologies—can ease concerns and foster a more open attitude toward digital innovation.

Furthermore, companies are encouraged to systematically monitor candidate reactions by collecting feedback at the end of the application process. This allows organizations to evaluate satisfaction levels and identify any critical issues that may impact employer reputation. Tailoring employer branding strategies according to the digital readiness of the target audience may also be an effective move. While younger generations might view AI in recruitment as a sign of modernity and innovation, other segments may value more traditional, human-centered experiences.

Lastly, it is essential that organizations use AI in a way that is both ethical and inclusive. This means ensuring that algorithms are regularly audited to avoid discriminatory outcomes and that human oversight is maintained at key decision points. A transparent and responsible use of AI not only limits reputational risks but can also become a driver of trust, innovation, and attractiveness in the eyes of potential talent.

4.2 Balancing AI efficiency and human-centric approaches

In light of the growing tension between algorithmic efficiency and the preservation of human-centric values in recruitment, the results of the mediation analysis in this study provide an important empirical lens on how candidates cognitively and affectively respond to AI-driven hiring processes. The analysis, conducted via PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2017), revealed a statistically significant total effect of the recruitment condition on employer branding (B = -2.41, $p < .001$), indicating that candidates perceive organizations employing AI in their selection process as less desirable employers. However, this relationship was partially mediated by aversion toward AI: the indirect effect via AI aversion was also significant (B = -0.53; 95% CI: [-0.82, -0.29]), suggesting that the use of AI in hiring fosters discomfort or mistrust, which in turn damages the employer's brand perception. Notably, the direct effect of the recruitment condition on employer branding remained statistically significant even after including the

mediator (B = -1.88, p < .001), confirming a partial mediation. This outcome implies that while AI aversion plays a meaningful role in shaping employer branding, additional factors — possibly linked to perceptions of dehumanization, ethical concerns, or perceived lack of transparency — also contribute to candidates' skepticism.

These results echo Roemmich et al.'s (2023) findings that AI hiring technologies, especially those that claim to extract emotional and psychological insights, risk undermining trust by introducing opacity and affective commodification into hiring processes. While AI tools are often promoted as efficient and unbiased alternatives to human decision-making, they are not perceived as neutral by job seekers, especially when they operate without adequate contextualization or human oversight. Therefore, this mediation pathway highlights an essential tension in the recruitment space: the adoption of algorithmic hiring tools may fulfill organizational desires for precision and objectivity but can simultaneously erode the relational and affective dynamics that shape employer appeal. As hiring increasingly becomes a site of socio-technical negotiation, these findings underscore the importance of designing AI systems that do not merely replicate efficiency logics but also respect the emotional and psychological experience of candidates.

This duality between efficiency and empathy reflects deeper ethical tensions. As Hunkenschroer and Kriebitz (2023) argue, the deployment of AI recruiting systems inevitably raises questions about human rights principles—particularly autonomy, privacy, and nondiscrimination—which are deeply intertwined with the emotional and cognitive responses observed in this study. The significant mediation effect of AI aversion on employer branding perception aligns with their claim that AI tools can compromise applicants' sense of dignity and agency, especially when algorithmic decisions are opaque or feel dehumanizing. Indeed, when candidates perceive that critical career decisions are being delegated to "black-box" systems, they may interpret this as a disregard for their individuality and personhood—an interpretation that undermines trust and damages the relational core of employer branding.

Furthermore, from a normative perspective, the use of AI in recruitment must not only strive for technical validity but also actively avoid infringing on candidates' rights to privacy and autonomy. The fact that the direct effect in this study remains significant even after accounting for emotional aversion suggests that the problem is not just affective but structural: candidates

may be reacting to perceived violations of ethical expectations regarding fairness, transparency, and human connection in hiring interactions. This highlights a critical implication for employers—particularly those seeking to integrate AI tools into talent acquisition pipelines: the technology must be implemented with a strong ethical framework that respects not only efficiency goals but also the moral and emotional expectations of applicants.

As such, organizations must move beyond simply "informing" candidates about the presence of AI in selection processes. Instead, they must foster explainability, ethical oversight, and human touchpoints throughout the hiring journey. Embedding human-centric checkpoints, promoting algorithmic transparency, and allowing for recourse or human review are not just technical solutions—they are strategic investments in employer attractiveness. Ultimately, the findings emphasize that algorithmic efficiency alone cannot sustain a positive employer image unless paired with a genuine commitment to human values.

4.3 Limitations and future research directions

While this study offers valuable insights into the relationship between the use of artificial intelligence in recruitment and employer branding—mediated by candidates' aversion to AI— several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample consisted primarily of individuals residing in Italy, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other cultural or geographical contexts. Perceptions of AI, as well as employer branding expectations, can vary significantly across countries and labor markets, especially where digital infrastructures and levels of trust in technology differ.

Second, the recruitment scenarios were presented in a hypothetical format. Although this method allows for experimental control, it may not fully capture the emotional and behavioral complexity of real-life job-seeking experiences. Participants' responses may differ in an actual selection context, where personal stakes are higher.

Third, the study employed self-reported measures, which may be subject to social desirability bias or limitations in participants' introspective accuracy. Moreover, the aversion to AI was

measured using a subset of items from an existing scale, which, while statistically reliable, may not capture the full dimensionality of the construct.

Lastly, the study focused on a specific moment in time. As attitudes toward AI evolve—especially among younger, more tech-savvy generations—future research may uncover different patterns of perception and behavior that were not observable in the present sample.

The findings of Ayuningtyas et al. (2024), who investigated the adoption of AI technologies among Generation Z accountants using the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), suggest promising implications for future developments in employer branding research. Their study revealed that technology readiness and perceived usefulness significantly influence Generation Z's willingness to adopt AI, while perceived ease of use showed limited predictive power. These insights are particularly relevant in the context of recruitment practices increasingly mediated by AI.

Given that Generation Z—often described as digital natives—is already demonstrating a strong degree of technological optimism and readiness, it is plausible to assume that future cohorts, including so-called AI-native generations, will display even lower levels of aversion toward AI. As a result, the presence of AI in recruitment processes may no longer be perceived as impersonal or opaque, but rather as efficient, innovative, and even desirable.

Building on this evidence, future studies could explore whether external employer branding—particularly candidates' attraction to a company—is positively influenced when AI-based recruitment methods are implemented in a transparent and user-friendly manner. This would challenge the current assumption, tested in this thesis, that AI-based recruitment inherently weakens employer branding due to trust or fairness concerns. Instead, with increasing digital maturity, it is reasonable to hypothesize that AI may become a strategic asset in employer branding efforts, especially among tech-savvy or AI-acculturated generations.

While this study focused on AI aversion as the primary mediator of the relationship between AI-based recruitment and employer branding, future research could explore other psychological and perceptual variables that may influence this dynamic. For instance, perceived fairness of the selection process could play a central mediating role. Candidates may

evaluate AI-based recruitment as less transparent or biased, which could in turn negatively affect their perception of the employer, regardless of their general attitude toward AI.

Another potential mediator is trust in technology or automation. Individuals with higher trust in automated systems may interpret AI involvement in recruitment more positively, leading to higher perceived professionalism or innovation, and therefore stronger employer branding.

Perceived organizational innovativeness may also serve as a relevant mediator. Candidates might associate the use of AI in recruitment with a forward-thinking and technologically advanced corporate culture, which could enhance employer attractiveness under certain conditions.

In addition, perceived interpersonal warmth or lack of human connection could influence employer branding evaluations. If AI is seen as reducing opportunities for human interaction, candidates may feel emotionally distanced from the organization, negatively impacting their intention to pursue a position there.

Exploring these mediators in future studies would provide a more nuanced understanding of how AI-based recruitment strategies affect employer branding, and under which conditions these effects are either amplified or mitigated.

Conclusions

This study set out to explore how the implementation of AI-based recruitment systems impacts employer branding, with a specific focus on the mediating role of candidates' aversion to AI. Through a well-structured experimental design and quantitative analysis, this thesis provides key insights into the increasingly complex relationship between technological advancement in recruitment and human perception.

The results strongly support the first hypothesis (H1), confirming that the use of artificial intelligence in the recruitment process has a negative effect on employer branding. Participants exposed to AI-based recruitment scenarios reported significantly lower evaluations of the employer compared to those who were presented with traditional, human-led processes. This finding reinforces the growing concern that despite the operational benefits of AI—such as efficiency, scalability, and data-driven decision-making—its use in human-centric processes like recruitment may compromise candidates' perceptions of authenticity, fairness, and emotional intelligence.

Moreover, the second hypothesis (H2) was validated through mediation analysis, which demonstrated that candidates' aversion to AI significantly mediates the relationship between AI use and employer branding. This novel contribution underscores the critical importance of understanding candidates' psychological and emotional responses to automated systems. The more candidates exhibit aversion toward AI, the more likely they are to view the employer unfavorably when such tools are utilized.

These findings offer important practical implications for HR professionals and organizations. Firstly, it is evident that implementing AI in recruitment cannot be solely evaluated in terms of internal efficiency. Organizations must also consider the external image projected by such innovations and the candidate experience they generate. In particular, firms aiming to strengthen their employer brand need to balance automation with human touchpoints, ensuring transparency, empathy, and trust throughout the hiring journey.

Secondly, the research highlights the need for tailored communication strategies to address candidate concerns about AI. Educating candidates on how AI works, ensuring fairness and transparency, and clearly communicating the benefits and limitations of the technology can help mitigate aversion and enhance acceptance.

Finally, this thesis contributes to the limited but growing literature on the candidate's perspective in AI-based hiring, advocating for a human-centered approach to innovation. As AI continues to shape the future of work, it is essential for organizations to adopt inclusive, ethical, and psychologically informed strategies that align with evolving candidate expectations and values.

In conclusion, while AI offers undeniable advantages for recruitment, its impact on employer branding is mediated by human emotions, values, and perceptions. Understanding and addressing candidates' aversion to AI is not only a matter of ethical responsibility but also a strategic imperative for companies seeking to attract and retain top talent in the digital age.

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