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Exploring Student Perceptions of AI-Based Recruitment: A Qualitative Study at Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the perceptions of Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia (UPI) students regarding the role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the recruitment process. As AI technologies increasingly influence hiring decisions through tools such as resume screening algorithms, chatbots, and video assessments, understanding how students perceive and interact with these systems is vital. Using a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten final-year and postgraduate students from various faculties. Thematic analysis revealed five major themes: limited awareness of AI tools, perceived efficiency and objectivity, concerns about bias and data privacy, a preference for human judgment, and a strong call for institutional support. While students recognized AI's potential to improve hiring outcomes, many raised concerns about bias, accountability, and lack of knowledge. The findings underscore the importance of integrating AI literacy into higher education career services to equip students with a critical understanding of AI's role in modern recruitment. This study contributes to the discourse on digital transformation in HR by amplifying the perspectives of future job seekers in an emerging market context.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the recruitment process has undergone a transformative shift, propelled by the rapid development and adoption of Artificial Intelligence (AI). From resume screening to virtual interviews and job matching algorithms, AI technologies are reshaping how companies identify, assess, and onboard talent [1] As organizations seek to enhance efficiency, reduce bias, and lower hiring costs, AI is becoming an indispensable component in human resource management [2] This transformation is especially relevant for university students, who are among the first cohorts to encounter AI-driven recruitment processes as they transition into the workforce. At Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia (UPI), where students come from various educational backgrounds and career aspirations, understanding the role of AI in

recruitment is essential for career preparedness and digital adaptability.

The recruitment landscape today is characterized by its demand for speed, precision, and inclusivity. Traditional hiring processes, often critiqued for being time-consuming and subject to human bias, are being replaced or complemented by AI-based systems. Tools such as HireVue's video interview analyser, LinkedIn's talent-matching algorithms, and AI chatbots for candidate interaction exemplify how AI automates and optimizes multiple stages of the recruitment funnel [3]). These innovations promise to create a more meritocratic and efficient hiring environment. However, they also introduce new ethical dilemmas, including algorithmic discrimination, data privacy concerns, and a lack of transparency.

Recent studies have examined perceptions toward AI in recruitment from both applicant and recruiter perspectives. Horodyski [4] found that while applicants generally appreciate the efficiency of AI, they also express concern over fairness and algorithmic opacity. Similarly, recruiters report that AI-based tools are helpful for filtering candidates and reducing manual workload, but challenges remain in balancing efficiency with fairness [5] Mujtaba and Mahapatra [6] emphasize that ensuring fairness in AI-driven hiring processes remains a major challenge, particularly regarding embedded biases in data and algorithms. Raji and Buolamwini [7] further argue that algorithmic hiring systems risk amplifying systemic inequalities when trained on biased historical data.

Despite the rapid deployment of AI in recruitment, a critical review of recent top-tier literature reveals that much of the existing research focuses heavily on Western contexts, technological feasibility, or corporate outcomes, leaving a significant knowledge gap in understanding how AI is perceived by job seekers in non-Western educational environments. For instance, in a comprehensive review of ethical AI in hiring, Buhmann and Fieseler [8] stress that candidate-facing experiences—especially among underrepresented groups—remain largely underexplored. Similarly, a review in Computers & Education emphasizes that digital employability frameworks often overlook AI-specific challenges faced by students in developing countries [9]

University students are not merely passive recipients of AI technology—they are also digital natives with varying degrees of familiarity and comfort with such systems. In Indonesia, and specifically at UPI, the growing use of digital tools in education has created a generation of students who are relatively well-versed in technology. However, awareness of AI's role in recruitment remains uneven. While some students are actively engaged with online platforms that employ AI for resume optimization or interview preparation, others remain unaware of the invisible algorithms shaping their employment prospects. This discrepancy highlights the urgent need for educational institutions to integrate digital literacy, especially AI-related competencies, into their career services and curricula [10] Digital literacy has been shown to enhance business performance and competitiveness, particularly when integrated with evolving digital ecosystems [11]

The potential benefits of AI in recruitment are well-documented. AI can process thousands of applications in minutes, identify the best-matching candidates through machine learning models, and reduce subjectivity by relying on data rather than human intuition [12] For instance, applicant tracking systems (ATS) are now equipped with natural language processing capabilities that scan CVs for keywords and skills, drastically narrowing the candidate pool before human recruiters even intervene. Such tools are particularly attractive to large organizations facing high application volumes. They also claim to reduce unconscious bias by standardizing evaluation metrics [13] However, recent studies challenge this claim, suggesting that biases embedded in historical hiring data can be perpetuated by AI systems if not carefully monitored and corrected [14]

Moreover, the use of AI in video interviews—where algorithms assess candidate behavior, facial expressions, and vocal tone—has sparked debates about the appropriateness and fairness of machine judgment. While proponents argue that such tools help eliminate human subjectivity and ensure equal treatment, critics question their scientific validity and potential to misinterpret candidates from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds [15] For UPI students, many of whom may be applying for roles in multinational companies or abroad, such concerns are particularly relevant. Differences in communication styles, accents, and body language could unfairly disadvantage otherwise qualified candidates, reinforcing the need for AI systems that are culturally inclusive and transparent in their design. The ethical dimension of AI-driven selection reflects broader concerns around organizational fairness and justice, which also emerge in research on employer branding in academic settings [16]

In the context of Indonesia, AI adoption in recruitment is still at a developmental stage but is growing steadily. According to a 2023 report by McKinsey & Company, Indonesian companies are increasingly investing in AI for talent acquisition, especially in tech, finance, and multinational sectors. However, small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which make up a significant portion of Indonesia's economy, continue to rely on traditional recruitment methods. This creates a dual-track system where some students encounter AI-intensive application processes, while others do not—a disparity that can affect overall perceptions and preparedness. For students at UPI, this reality means that while AI literacy is increasingly important, it must be contextualized within the broader spectrum of job-seeking experiences in Indonesia [17] Moreover, the integration of customer relationship management (CRM) and social media by MSMEs—as explored by Gaffar, Koeswandi, and Ciptagustia [18]reflects a broader digital transformation trend that parallels AI adoption in recruitment.

Importantly, UPI students' perceptions of AI in recruitment are shaped not only by their personal encounters but also by the narratives they consume through social media, peers, and online job forums. Misinformation or partial knowledge can lead to unrealistic expectations or unwarranted fears. For instance, a student who believes that AI systems always eliminate bias might feel demoralized when rejected, not realizing that the AI tool may have filtered their application based on outdated or non-inclusive criteria. Conversely, a lack of trust in AI might discourage students from applying to companies known to use such technologies. Hence, understanding how students interpret and respond to AI in recruitment is crucial for universities aiming to support holistic career development. These perceptions are intertwined with expectations shaped by institutional culture and leadership, as suggested by Hanifah, Rofaida, and Ciptagustia [19]

This study aims to investigate how university students, specifically those at Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia (UPI), perceive and respond to the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in recruitment processes. It seeks to uncover their level of awareness, perceived advantages and disadvantages, and the ethical concerns they associate with algorithmic hiring. Furthermore, the study is intended to inform higher education institutions particularly career development centres about the gaps in AI literacy and preparedness among students, thereby contributing to the design of more inclusive and future-oriented career support programs. It also provides insights for researchers and HR practitioners to better understand job seekers' perspectives from emerging economies in an increasingly digital labour market.

In conclusion, the integration of AI in recruitment is not just a technological shift but a cultural and educational challenge as well. Universities like UPI must play an active role in equipping students with both the technical and critical thinking skills necessary to navigate AI-driven hiring environments. As

future professionals, UPI students will not only be subjected to these systems but may also become their designers, users, or regulators. Understanding their current perceptions and experiences is therefore essential to fostering a more informed, ethical, and inclusive approach to recruitment in the AI era.

2. METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the perceptions, understanding, and experiences of UPI students regarding the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the recruitment process. A qualitative approach is considered appropriate as it facilitates an in-depth exploration of participants' subjective experiences and meaning making [20]. Given that the use of AI in hiring is still emerging in the Indonesian context, especially among student job seekers, this design provides flexibility and richness in capturing diverse insights.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, targeting final-year undergraduate and postgraduate students from the Faculty of Economics and Business Education, Faculty of Management, and other related disciplines at Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia (UPI). A total of 10 participants were recruited, ensuring variation in gender, academic discipline, and job-seeking experience. According to Merriam [21], purposive sampling is suitable for selecting "information-rich cases" that can illuminate the research problem.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, a common technique in qualitative inquiry that balances structure with openness [22]. Interviews were conducted either in person or via WhatsApp voice recordings, depending on the participant's comfort and availability. Each interview lasted approximately 20–30 minutes. To ensure ethical standards, participants provided verbal consent, were assured confidentiality, and were anonymized using pseudonyms (e.g., Participant A, B, C).

The interview guide was based on five key questions:

1. What do you know about Artificial Intelligence in the job recruitment process?
2. Have you ever applied for a job or internship that used AI technologies such as resume filtering or online assessments?
3. What is your opinion about AI-based recruitment tools? Do you find them fair or problematic?
4. Do you think AI makes recruitment easier or more difficult for fresh graduates?
5. What are your hopes or concerns about AI affecting your future job opportunities?

All responses were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke [23], which includes familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Thematic coding helped identify key patterns and recurring ideas, which were then clustered into major categories such as "trust in AI," "bias and fairness," "efficiency," and "awareness gap."

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the interview data revealed five prominent and recurring themes that reflect UPI students' perceptions of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in recruitment. These themes—(1) awareness and understanding of AI recruitment tools, (2) perceived advantages of AI in the job-seeking process, (3) skepticism and concerns about fairness, (4) trust in AI versus human judgment, and (5) students' perception and expectations from universities—were not arbitrarily chosen. Instead, they emerged inductively through a systematic thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's [24] six-phase framework. After generating initial codes from the transcribed interviews, related codes were clustered based on semantic similarity, interpretive meaning, and

recurrence across participants. The final five themes represent conceptually distinct but interrelated domains that consistently appeared in at least 60% of the interviews, ensuring both relevance and thematic saturation. The justification for these themes is further supported by their inclusion in the thematic map (Figure 1), which visually illustrates the relationships between these categories and their sub-themes. This approach aligns with qualitative research best practices, where the strength lies not in statistical generalization but in the depth and coherence of interpretive patterns across rich, narrative data.

3.1. Awareness and Understanding: Limited but Growing

The first theme that emerged highlights a generally limited yet evolving understanding of AI recruitment tools among UPI students. While some participants had encountered AI-based resume filters or video assessments during internship or job applications, most lacked concrete knowledge about how these systems operate or influence hiring outcomes. Participant G remarked, "If companies really use AI, then we need to understand how it works, or we'll be left behind."

This perception aligns with the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), which posits that perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness significantly influence individuals' acceptance of technology [25]. In this context, low perceived usefulness and limited ease of use due to lack of exposure hinder student engagement with AI recruitment systems. Many participants expressed uncertainty about what AI tools do or how to interact with them effectively—reducing their confidence and interest in engaging with such platforms.

Furthermore, this awareness gap reflects unequal access to digital capital—a concept referring to the knowledge, skills, and technological resources individuals need to function effectively in the digital age [26]. Students with higher digital capital—those who had explored LinkedIn optimization, followed career influencers, or engaged with job forums—showed a clearer understanding and greater openness toward AI in hiring. Meanwhile, those without such exposure appeared overwhelmed or hesitant. This discrepancy supports findings by Suwarno and Anggoro [10], who argue that digital employability remains uneven across Indonesian universities, despite increased access to technology. By combining TAM and digital capital theory, this theme underscores the importance of not just access, but also preparedness and perceived competency when interacting with AI systems. These theoretical lenses reveal that awareness of AI is not merely a binary condition (aware vs. unaware), but a continuum shaped by perceived utility, digital exposure, and institutional support.

This reflects findings by Suwarno and Anggoro [10], who noted that Indonesian students often lack exposure to contemporary recruitment technologies. While digital literacy is promoted within academic programs, the application of AI in employment contexts is underrepresented. As emphasized by Milanovic and Vučković [9], digital employability frameworks must evolve to address this new landscape of algorithmic hiring. However, some students displayed a growing interest in learning about these systems. Participant G shared: *"If companies really use AI, then we need to understand how it works, or we'll be left behind."* This attitude suggests a rising curiosity and a

potential for universities to bridge the knowledge gap through targeted workshops or curriculum enhancements.

3.2. *Perceived Benefits: Speed, Accessibility, and Impartiality*

Several participants identified notable advantages of AI-based recruitment tools, particularly regarding efficiency, time savings, and standardized evaluations. Participant A shared: *"AI saves time for companies, and maybe for us too. We can get results faster."* This aligns with the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), where perceived usefulness plays a key role in technology adoption. In this case, students perceived AI as helpful in streamlining recruitment processes, reducing waiting times, and providing more structured feedback mechanisms—at least in theory.

Participants also appreciated AI's potential to improve fairness by minimizing subjective human biases. For instance, Participant F expressed: *"If the machine is fair, it should choose the best person based on skill, not on looks or connections."* This belief reflects an aspirational view of algorithmic objectivity, suggesting that some students perceive AI systems as inherently more meritocratic. While this optimism reflects TAM's notion of perceived benefits, it also exposes a disconnect between perceived and actual fairness—given the empirical evidence of embedded bias in AI tools [27].

To further interpret this theme, we can refer to employability theory, particularly the concept of instrumental employability—where individuals focus on practical skills and tools that increase job access [28]. For many UPI students, AI appears to be a "must-understand" tool for career competitiveness. As the job market becomes increasingly automated, awareness of and adaptability to such tools are perceived as essential components of employability. This mirrors the findings of Milanovic and Vučković [9], who emphasize the growing role of algorithmic literacy in enhancing graduate outcomes in digital labor markets.

While students acknowledged these potential benefits, the overall tone was cautious. Many responses indicated a gap between theoretical expectations and real-life experiences, especially in cases where students were unsure how AI assessed their qualifications. This suggests that perceived usefulness—though present—was still moderated by limited transparency and digital readiness, reinforcing the earlier theme of awareness gaps.

3.3. *Bias and Fairness Concerns: Algorithmic Anxiety and Ethical Doubts*

Although some students acknowledged AI's potential to improve fairness, the most dominant concern across interviews was that of algorithmic bias, lack of transparency, and data misuse. Participant J commented: *"I don't even know what the machine sees. It's like you are judged by something you don't understand."* This sense of being evaluated by an invisible, unaccountable system echoes the concept of procedural fairness—a core tenet in organizational justice theory—where individuals care not only about outcomes but also about the fairness of the decision-making process [29]. Participants frequently questioned whether AI systems could truly be objective, especially when trained on biased historical data. Participant C remarked: *"If the AI learns from past data, and that data*

was biased, then it will also be biased." This concern aligns with the arguments of Raji and Buolamwini [7] and Binns et al. [30], who demonstrate that machine learning algorithms often reinforce existing inequalities unless proactively corrected. Here, algorithmic justice theory becomes useful—it emphasizes the need for fairness, accountability, and transparency in automated decision-making [31] The theory cautions that even well-intentioned algorithms may produce discriminatory outcomes if developers neglect the ethical and contextual implications of their training data.

In addition to fairness concerns, students also raised ethical issues around data privacy and biometric surveillance. Participant D asked: *"If AI can read our voice and face, where does that data go?"* This anxiety reflects broader societal debates about the ethical boundaries of data-driven hiring. It reinforces Ajunwa's [15] critique that many AI hiring systems violate norms of informed consent and transparency, especially in collecting and storing sensitive data such as facial expressions, speech patterns, or even eye movement. This theme illustrates a critical contradiction: students desire fairness and efficiency but lack trust in the tools meant to provide them. Without clear institutional safeguards, transparent explanations, or feedback from the AI system, students feel disempowered—believing they are reduced to data points rather than treated as holistic candidates. These reflections affirm that fairness in recruitment is not only about reducing bias but also about creating perceptibly just, explainable, and accountable processes.

3.4. Trust vs. Human Judgment: Between Objectivity and Empathy

Students expressed divided views on whether they trust AI systems to make recruitment decisions. While some viewed AI as efficient and potentially more impartial, others voiced strong reservations about its ability to understand human qualities such as motivation, personality, and contextual struggles. Participant I captured this concern poignantly: *"Machines don't feel. A human can understand your story, your struggles."*

This ambivalence reflects insights from trust theory, which distinguishes between cognitive trust (based on logic and perceived competence) and affective trust (based on emotional connection and empathy) [32]. AI systems, while capable of delivering on cognitive trust through standardization and consistency, are perceived as lacking affective dimensions—leading students to doubt their capacity to evaluate nuanced, personal narratives. Hence, students may trust AI to filter resumes but not to understand the subtleties of character or potential.

From a sociotechnical perspective, this tension highlights the importance of designing recruitment systems that balance machine efficiency with human judgment. Students consistently favored a hybrid model, where AI handles preliminary screening but humans conduct final assessments. Participant B articulated this preference clearly: *"Let AI help, but don't let it decide everything."* This approach mirrors current best practices in human-AI collaboration, where machines assist decision-making but do not fully automate it [33].

The reluctance to rely solely on AI also reveals a deeper concern about dehumanization. As hiring becomes increasingly data-driven, there is fear that candidates will be judged by quantifiable attributes while qualities like passion, adaptability, or resilience—especially important in early-career roles—may be ignored. This echoes Horodyski's [34] findings, where applicants reported discomfort with the idea of being "filtered" without any human interaction.

Thus, this theme speaks to the essential human element in trust-building. Students do not reject AI entirely, but they resist its dominance. Their call for balance reflects a desire for systems that are not only efficient but also empathetic, contextual, and just—values that are often difficult to encode into algorithms.

3.5. Institutional Support and Student Expectations: Bridging the AI Readiness Gap

The final theme centers on students' expectations of universities—particularly their desire for structured guidance and digital career preparation. Across interviews, participants repeatedly emphasized that AI-based recruitment tools remain unfamiliar territory, and that higher education institutions have not sufficiently addressed this gap. Participant H stated: *"UPI should give us training on LinkedIn algorithms or AI interviews. We don't want to be surprised after graduation."*

This expectation aligns with digital career readiness frameworks, which stress the importance of equipping students with both technical competencies and critical digital literacy for navigating modern labor markets [9] [10]. These frameworks advocate for proactive career services that go beyond resume building—offering workshops on algorithmic hiring, mock AI assessments, and simulations of applicant tracking systems (ATS).

From a theoretical perspective, capability theory [35] is especially relevant here. It posits that true empowerment is not just about providing resources (like job portals), but about enhancing individuals' capabilities—the real freedoms they have to achieve valued outcomes. In this case, digital tools are only useful if students have the knowledge, confidence, and institutional backing to use them meaningfully. Students' repeated calls for AI literacy training indicate a gap between access and capability—a distinction often overlooked in employability discussions.

Moreover, the interviews revealed that students view universities as trusted intermediaries between themselves and the increasingly complex digital job market. This reflects institutional trust theory, where individuals turn to familiar institutions (like universities) for protection and guidance in uncertain or rapidly changing environments [36]. By failing to provide AI-specific career preparation, universities may unintentionally erode this trust and contribute to graduate under preparedness.

Hence, this theme underscores the need for strategic institutional action. UPI—and similar institutions—can strengthen student confidence by embedding AI readiness modules into career development curricula, partnering with HR tech firms for internships, and offering certifications in digital recruitment systems. Doing so

would not only address the cognitive gaps but also promote digital equity in employability. Figure 1 illustrates the thematic map developed from the qualitative analysis of UPI students' perceptions regarding the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in recruitment.

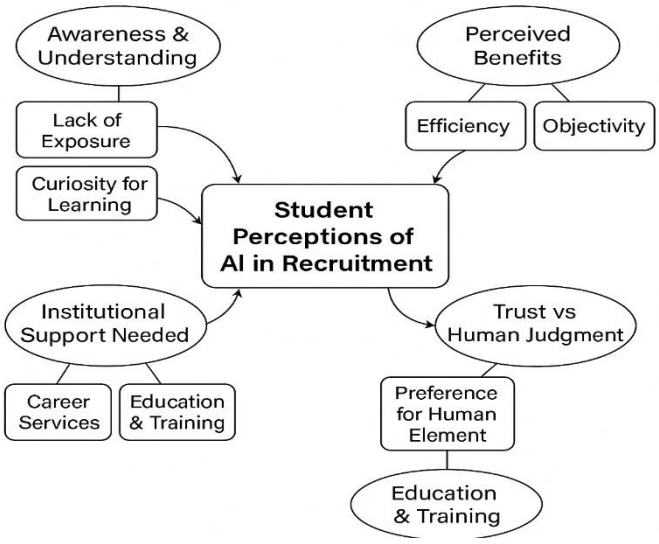

Figure 1. Thematic Map of UPI Students' Perceptions of AI in Recruitment

The central concept—Student Perceptions of AI in Recruitment—is surrounded by five major themes: Awareness and Understanding, Perceived Benefits, Bias and Fairness Concerns, Trust vs Human Judgment, and Institutional Support Needed. Each of these themes is further broken down into sub-themes that emerged from repeated patterns in participant responses. For example, Awareness and Understanding encompasses issues like lack of exposure and growing curiosity, while Institutional Support highlights the perceived need for AI-focused education and career services. The map visually represents how students' perceptions are interconnected and shaped by both technological experiences and institutional environments. This figure serves as a conceptual framework that guides the interpretation of qualitative findings, offering readers a clear view of how meaning was constructed from the data.

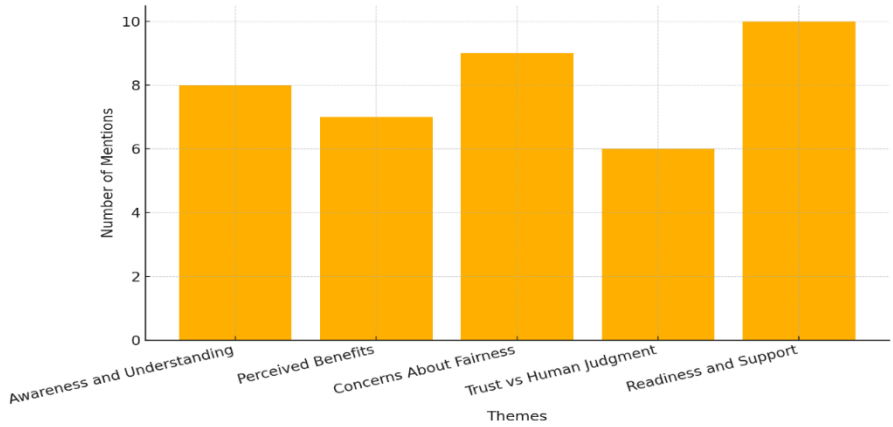

Figure 2. Themes Identified from UPI Student Interviews Regarding AI in Recruitment

Figure 2 presents a bar chart depicting the frequency with which each major theme was mentioned across the ten student interviews conducted at Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia. This visual complements the thematic map by adding a descriptive layer that shows the relative salience of each theme in participants' narratives. The theme Bias and Fairness Concerns was the most frequently mentioned, reflecting students' strong apprehensions about algorithmic discrimination and lack of transparency in AI-based recruitment. Institutional Support Needed and Awareness and Understanding also appeared frequently, indicating a perceived gap in preparedness and education regarding AI hiring tools. Meanwhile, themes like Perceived Benefits and Trust vs Human Judgment were discussed with moderate frequency, suggesting nuanced views about the trade-offs between AI efficiency and human empathy. While the bar chart does not measure statistical significance, it provides valuable insight into the distribution of concerns and priorities among the study participants, supporting a more grounded interpretation of the qualitative data.

In summary, the findings indicate that while UPI students are beginning to recognize the role of AI in recruitment, there is a significant knowledge and perception gap. They perceive both the promise and the peril of AI systems—appreciating their efficiency but questioning their fairness and transparency. Students largely support a hybrid recruitment model where AI assists but does not replace human judgment. To prepare students for a rapidly evolving job market, universities must step up their efforts in integrating AI literacy into career development initiatives.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight a nuanced and evolving perspective among UPI students regarding the role of Artificial Intelligence in recruitment. While students generally recognize the efficiency and convenience AI brings—such as faster processing and standardized screening—many remain unaware of how these systems work or how they may impact hiring decisions. This lack of transparency fuels concerns about fairness, bias, and data privacy, especially when students feel "judged by machines" without understanding the rules. Despite these apprehensions, most students are not entirely opposed to AI; instead, they express a clear preference for a hybrid approach where AI tools support but do not replace human decision-making.

To fully prepare students for a digitally-driven labor market, it is essential for universities like UPI to integrate AI literacy and ethical digital career practices into their academic and career development programs. By offering workshops, courses, and simulations involving AI tools in recruitment, institutions can empower students to navigate these technologies confidently and critically. As the job market continues to evolve, ensuring that graduates are not only digitally competent but also ethically aware will be crucial for promoting inclusive and equitable hiring practices in the AI era.

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