Department of
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Tactical Authenticity: The Art of Being Human Enough for Recruiters and Machine-Readable for algorithms

A qualitative research using in-depth semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis on how graduates from UK Russell Group Universities navigate the current digital job market

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how recent Russell Group graduates navigate the increasingly algorithmic landscape of UK employment, revealing the complex interplay between elite educational capital and digital hiring technologies that challenges assumptions about privilege and access in the digital age. While 75% of global recruiters now use Applicant Tracking Systems (ATS) and UK employers receiving an average of 140 applications per graduate vacancy, little is known about how highly educated individuals with significant social and cultural capital experience these hidden hiring systems that operate beyond their traditional advantages.

Through semi-structured interviews with twelve graduates who completed their degrees in 2024 and 2025, this research examines how elite university graduates develop beliefs about opaque algorithmic systems and employ tactical strategies to succeed in digital job searching, ultimately revealing the transformation of employment from qualification demonstration into algorithmic navigation.

The findings reveal a fundamental paradox: even graduates from prestigious universities must engage in intensive digital labor to navigate hiring algorithms that remain largely opaque to them. These graduates develop "tactical authenticity," an advanced strategic self-presentation that maximizes algorithmic matching while maintaining defendable truthfulness. They mostly use AI tools as collaborative partners rather than replacement technologies, creating workflows that balance automation with personal agency, yet remain mystified by the systems evaluating their applications.

The study documents how platform-mediated job searching transforms employment into complex system navigation where success depends as much on algorithmic literacy as professional competence. Graduates must continuously optimize profiles, strategically build networks, create content for visibility, and manage emotional presentation and all forms of unpaid labor that shift recruitment costs from employers onto job seekers. The emotional costs are substantial, including mental health impacts, relationship strain, and exhaustion from always-on digital job searching that transforms personal time into unpaid professional labor.

This research extends digital labor theory beyond traditional workplace contexts, advances understanding of algorithmic literacy as new digital capital, and reveals pressures for strategic self-presentation operating beyond professional boundaries. Most significantly, the study reveals that even privileged graduates struggle with algorithmic opacity, suggesting broader implications for employment inequality in the digital age.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The UK graduate job market has transformed dramatically over the past twenty years, evolving from concerns about too many graduates competing for too few roles in 2004 (Tomlinson, 2004) into a complex digital ecosystem where algorithms increasingly shape how graduates find employment and how their professional identities are evaluated. Today's job seekers navigate new forms of "Information, Control, and Engagement," where employers can access expansive digital footprints, process vast quantities of candidate data through opaque systems, and where the boundaries between personal and professional online presence have become blurred and consequential (Souto-Otero, 2024). This transformation alters the employment landscape where success now depends not only on qualifications and skills, but on understanding and strategically adapting to technological systems that operate beyond traditional professional boundaries.

The scale and implications are significant. Around 75% of global recruiters and 70% of large companies use Applicant Tracking Systems (ATS) to filter applications (Select Software Reviews, 2025), a shift that redefines who reaches human review. What began as simple tracking tools now functions as algorithmic gatekeeping that performs keyword matching, ranking, and increasingly AI-driven analysis, turning applications from human-readable documents into optimised data packets. Competitive pressure amplifies this dynamic, UK employers received an average of 140 applications per graduate vacancy in 2023/24 (a 59% YoY increase) (ISE, 2024), creating a volume problem which might be the reason for the necessity of automated screening. Many recent graduates report serious emotional stress and exhaustion from negotiating these digital processes (The Guardian, 2025). Alongside formal applications, graduates are also expected to build personal brands and cultivate visibility through platforms such as LinkedIn (STEP, 2024) (Smith & Johnson, 2023), developing platform-specific skills that extend beyond traditional competencies into algorithmic optimisation and digital self-presentation (Enhancv, 2024) (Helsper, 2025).

These developments exemplify what Pasquale (2015) calls "black box" decision-making, hidden scoring systems reduce accountability and public understanding while reshaping how candidates must behave to be seen at all. The shift resonates with broader media theory from McLuhan's "the medium is the message" (McLuhan, 1964) to work on algorithmic accountability that shows how technical systems structure visibility and action (Diakopoulos,

2014). Building on perspectives that illuminate how users learn to adapt to technological systems (Williams, 1974; McQuail, 1983), opacity pushes job seekers to strategise within systems they cannot fully understand, transforming job search from demonstrating competence into a game of optimisation where the rules remain largely hidden. Recent research shows that even technically trained students hold uneven "folk theories" about ATS; some strategically rework their CVs while others do not know these filters exist (Armstrong et al., 2023; Armstrong et al., 2023). Algorithmic literacy thus becomes a form of digital capital that is unevenly distributed, often mediated by social connections and institutional resources, raising the possibility that algorithmic hiring increases rather than reduces employment inequalities.

Despite growing scholarship on algorithmic hiring, important gaps remain in understanding graduates' everyday practices. Firstly, most studies focus on general student populations or specific technical fields, leaving unclear how highly educated graduates from elite institutions navigate white-collar sectors where algorithmic screening is prevalent. Secondly, while we know graduates form beliefs about automated systems, we lack detailed evidence on how these beliefs are produced, shared, and translated into concrete tactics in the UK context. Thirdly, although digital labour theory suggests emotional costs, there is limited documentation of the specific emotional and practical toll these navigation strategies impose on graduates' mental health and relationships.

This study addresses these gaps by examining how recent graduates from Russell Group universities understand and navigate algorithmic hiring systems in the UK job market, focusing on the white-collar employment sector where automated screening is most common and consequential. Through semi-structured interviews with twelve graduates who completed their degrees in 2024 and 2025, the research explores how graduates construct their refined beliefs about hiring algorithms and develop tactical strategies for success in digital environments where the rules remain largely hidden.

Conventional explanations of graduate job search emphasise candidate quality and human recruiter judgment, but they omit the visibility step where ranking and filtering decide who is seen at all. This omission misattributes outcomes to individual merit, obscures pre-interview fairness issues, and undercounts the unpaid digital labor required to satisfy ranking rules. By centering the algorithmic gate, this study explains variance in early-career trajectories that human-only models cannot, and it identifies where careers guidance and platform policy should act.

The research contributes by complicating deterministic accounts of technology and documenting the everyday labour of system navigation. It shows how graduates develop complex yet partial beliefs about hidden hiring systems, often using AI tools as collaborative partners while struggling with persistent uncertainty; how strategic profile optimisation recasts personal branding as emotional labour balancing authenticity and algorithmic appeal; and how elite university networks can be tactically deployed yet remain insufficient without additional digital practices and relationship-building. It also provides evidence of the emotional and practical costs of digital job searching including application pressure in elite environments and examines the ethical compromises graduates make around data sharing and self-presentation.

The dissertation is structured as: Chapter 2 depicting relevant literature and key concepts; Chapter 3 presenting the conceptual framework; Chapter 4 outlining the research objectives and questions; Chapter 5 detailing the research design and methodology; Chapter 6 presenting findings organised around five themes; and the final chapter synthesizing implications for employment equality and future research in the digital age

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review explores the five key themes that this research examines: Algorithmic and Platform Literacy, Personal Branding and Profile Optimization, Strategic Content and Visibility, Network Building, and Digital Labour. These themes represent crucial concepts in media and communications research that examine how people interact with technology and society, particularly in contexts where digital platforms mediate fundamental life processes such as employment. In this study, we focus on recent Russell Group graduates who are looking for jobs in the United Kingdom, a population that represents a unique intersection of high educational capital and digital vulnerability as they navigate increasingly opaque hiring systems that operate beyond their traditional advantages.

2.1.Algorithmic and Platform Literacy:

Traditional media theories provide foundational frameworks for understanding how technology and society develop together in complex, mutually constitutive relationships. McLuhan's "the medium is the message" (McLuhan, 1964) reveals how communication channels fundamentally alter not only what we communicate but how we think, relate to each other, and

understand our place in the world. This insight is particularly relevant to our study of algorithmic hiring, as it suggests that the very presence of ATS systems and LinkedIn algorithms fundamentally transforms how graduates must think about and approach job searching, not just the tools they use. Williams' work on television (Williams, 1974) and McQuail's "Mass Communication Theory" (McQuail, 1983) offer crucial correctives to technological determinism, arguing that people learn how to "play the game" as part of an ongoing process shaped by culture, social structures, and human agency. This perspective directly helps our understanding of how Russell Group graduates develop advanced strategies for navigating algorithmic systems despite their opacity, suggesting that their elite educational background may provide them with particular advantages in learning to adapt to technological constraints.

In today's digital platform world, Pasquale's "Black Box Society" (Pasquale, 2015) provides a crucial framework for understanding how hidden scoring systems create new forms of opacity that make it increasingly difficult to hold these systems accountable. This framework is essential for our study because it explains why even highly educated graduates struggle to understand the algorithmic systems that evaluate their applications, creating the very conditions that necessitate the development of "folk theories" and tactical strategies. Diakopoulos (2014) extends this analysis by showing how people attempt to understand hidden algorithms through various investigation techniques, revealing the creative ways that users develop "folk theories" about systems they cannot directly observe. This research directly connects to our findings about how graduates develop shared beliefs about ATS functionality and LinkedIn algorithms through peer networks and online communities.

Research studies provide compelling empirical evidence of how these theoretical frameworks manifest in real job-hunting situations. Studies on "Navigating Automated Hiring" (Armstrong et al., 2023) and Armstrong et al. (2023) demonstrate that even technically trained students develop different and incomplete ideas about algorithms used in hiring processes, especially Applicant Tracking Systems (ATS), revealing how algorithmic literacy becomes a new form of digital capital that are unevenly distributed across the student population. This finding is crucial for our study because it suggests that even among Russell Group graduates with significant technical training, algorithmic literacy may be unevenly distributed, potentially creating new forms of inequality that operate beyond traditional markers of educational privilege. Helsper's 2025 study of Spanish job seekers confirms that having platform-specific job search skills, rather than general digital skills, leads to more interviews. This research directly supports our

focus on platform-specific skills and suggests that the refined LinkedIn optimization strategies that our participants develop may indeed provide tangible benefits in the job market.

Russell Group graduates face what we can call a double black box: ATS systems that filter applications through opaque criteria and LinkedIn's algorithm that affects professional visibility through equally mysterious ranking mechanisms. A SAGE study of 991 posts (SAGE, 2025) demonstrates that hashtags, @-mentions, and large networks lead to more reactions. This finding helps our understanding of how graduates develop strategic content strategies, as it provides empirical evidence that the tactical approaches our participants describe (such as strategic language use and network building) are grounded in actual platform mechanics. (Degraux, 2025) extends this understanding by connecting reach to how long people spend reading posts and using niche hashtags. This research supports our findings about how graduates develop nuanced understandings of content timing and audience targeting, revealing that their strategic thinking about platform mechanics is not merely speculative but grounded in observable patterns. Liu (2025) documents how creators learn from each algorithm change, adapting their strategies to focus on reposts and vertical videos when these formats receive algorithmic preference. This finding directly connects to our research by showing how users develop adaptive strategies in response to algorithmic changes, a pattern we observe among our participants who continuously adjust their LinkedIn strategies based on perceived algorithmic preferences.

2.2.Personal Branding and Profile Optimization:

With socially shaped beliefs and pressure to adapt to technology and society, graduates quickly learn the game and shape their visibility through personal branding and constant optimization that transforms professional identity into a performative project requiring continuous attention and strategic calculation. Goffman's dramaturgical model (Goffman, 1959) provides the foundational framework for understanding this transformation, where job-seekers create front-stage performances designed to attract recruiters' attention after successfully navigating automated gatekeepers. This framework is essential for our study because it explains how our participants navigate the complex tension between authentic self-presentation and algorithmic optimization, revealing how they develop complex strategies for managing multiple audiences (human recruiters and algorithmic systems) simultaneously. However, as Meyrowitz argues, digital media collapse these stages, mixing personal and professional identities so that a harmless LinkedIn post or Instagram story can fundamentally affect how candidates are

evaluated (Meyrowitz, 1985). This insight directly connects to our findings about how graduates must carefully manage their entire digital footprint, not just their formal applications, revealing how algorithmic hiring extends beyond traditional professional boundaries.

Being employable has become today's marketing challenge, with management guides available to train individuals in the art of self-commodification (Peters, 1997). But as noted by researchers (Lair et al., 2005), selling yourself risks losing authenticity and increases inequality by creating new forms of professional competition that privilege those who can most effectively market their experiences. This research explains the ethical tensions our participants navigate, as they struggle to balance authentic self-representation with the pressure to optimize for algorithmic systems. Senft's concept of "micro-celebrity" demonstrates how ordinary users adopt influencer tactics like constant posting, audience analysis, and style changes to gain just enough micro-fame for recruiters to notice (Senft, 2008). This framework helps explain how our participants develop elaborate content strategies that go beyond simple professional networking to include strategic audience targeting and engagement optimization.

With every platform and algorithm change, the performance must be adjusted, creating what amounts to a continuous optimization project that consumes significant time and emotional energy. Hearn calls this the "visibility burden," an endless requirement to stay searchable, relatable, and data-rich (Hearn, 2008) that transforms professional development into a form of unpaid digital labor. This concept connects to our key findings about the emotional and practical costs of algorithmic job searching, explaining why our participants report exhaustion and burnout from continuous profile optimization.

We can see these performances paying off through research studies that demonstrate the tangible benefits of strategic optimization: Caruso's 2021 study finds graduates systematically rewriting headlines, skill tags, and endorsement lists to climb LinkedIn search, revealing how algorithmic optimization has become a crucial skill for professional success. This finding directly supports our research by providing empirical evidence that the mature strategies our participants develop may indeed provide tangible benefits in the job market. (Parks-Yancy & Cooley, 2020) link branding activities to significantly more interview invitations among early-career professionals. These studies provide crucial validation for our focus on personal branding and profile optimization, showing that the strategies our participants develop may indeed provide significant benefits in the job market.

2.3.Strategic Content and Visibility:

Personal branding and constant optimization are achieved through strategic content and rewarded with visibility, creating a complex ecosystem where every element of professional self-presentation must be carefully calibrated for both human and algorithmic audiences. Hall's "encoding/decoding" essay (Hall, 1973) provides a crucial framework for understanding this dual audience challenge, showing that a LinkedIn headline is first written by the job-seeker and then read by at least two distinct audiences: human recruiters who evaluate professional competence and ranking algorithms that determine visibility and reach. This framework is the most essential for our study because it explains the strategic thinking our participants develop, as they must craft content that appeals to both human judgment and algorithmic preferences simultaneously.

Since these channels run on code rather than human judgment, algorithms have become the new gatekeepers that fundamentally alter how professional communication operates. Gillespie argues they quietly decide what counts as relevant, forcing users to optimize or disappear (Gillespie, 2014) in a system where algorithmic preferences often override human professional judgment. This insight connects to our findings about how graduates develop refined understandings of algorithmic preferences, revealing why they invest significant time in learning platform mechanics and developing strategic content strategies. Van Dijck and Poell identify four hidden platform logics that shape this transformation: programmability, popularity, connectivity, and datafication that continuously reshape what rises to the top of a feed (van Dijck & Poell, 2013). These logics explains how graduates develop strategic approaches to content creation, as they must navigate systems that prioritize engagement, network density, and data-rich content over traditional professional qualifications.

Many practical guides translate these theoretical insights into actionable strategies. Lindmaa's hashtag study demonstrates that mixing one broad tag (#Careers) with one specific tag (#UKFinTech) keeps a post visible for days rather than hours (Lindmaa, 2023). This could help enhance our knowledge on how graduates develop sophisticated hashtag strategies, providing empirical evidence that their tactical approaches are grounded in actual platform mechanics. Penn's career center advises students to copy job advertisement wording, avoid tables, and put skills first in each bullet point so AI scanners can read them (University of Pennsylvania Career Services, 2024). This shows how institutions are already teaching students to navigate algorithmic systems, suggesting that our participants' mature strategies may be partially learned

through formal career guidance. Evidence shows graduates adapt quickly once they understand the rules: Bhattacharya & Verbert's user test found that a pop-up explaining keyword importance made participants rewrite their skills immediately (Bhattacharya & Verbert, 2025). Connecting with how graduates develop advanced understandings of algorithmic requirements, showing that they can quickly adapt their strategies once they understand the rules of the system.

2.4.Network Building:

The job search does not end once a graduate's profile can be found; it only begins, requiring graduates to develop complex networking strategies that can convert algorithmic visibility into actual employment opportunities. Habermas's idea of a public sphere helps us see LinkedIn as a semi-open space where professional talk provides or denies access to opportunities (Habermas, 1962). This framework can help explain how graduates navigate LinkedIn as a performative space where professional communication can open or close employment opportunities. In this space, value flows through networks rather than hierarchies, reflecting Castells' network society idea (Castells, 1996) where position within professional networks often determines success more than individual credentials. This insight is crucial for our study because it explains why even Russell Group graduates with elite credentials must develop elaborate networking strategies, as their traditional educational capital may be insufficient without active network cultivation.

Granovetter's classic study reveals why weak ties - people you somewhat know - provide fresh job information that close friends rarely offer (Granovetter, 1973), demonstrating how professional networks operate through principles of information diffusion rather than emotional closeness. Drawing parallels, we can see how graduates develop strategic networking approaches, as it explains why they invest significant time in building broad professional networks rather than focusing on close relationships. Donath & boyd extend this understanding by showing that simply displaying these connections online acts as a reputation signal, where others see who supports you before they read your CV (Donath & boyd, 2004). On LinkedIn, van Dalen finds that algorithms actively favor visible, active networks, so being socially connected also improves ranking power (van Dalen, 2023). This finding supports our research by providing empirical evidence that the networking strategies our participants develop may indeed improve their algorithmic visibility, creating a virtuous cycle where network building enhances both human and algorithmic evaluation.

In many cases, university channels provide the easiest starting point for graduates. BU Questrom notes that alumni referrals reduce onboarding costs by 30% and speed hiring decisions (BU Questrom, 2025), while Oxford's MyOxford Network promises "instant trust" and stays open for life for their alumni (Oxford Careers, 2025). Sheffield's ten-year-old mentoring program reports that 82% of mentees gained interview access through a mentor's introduction (Sheffield Careers, 2024). We can connect these empirical evidences to our research by showing that the institutional advantages our Russell Group participants enjoy may indeed translate into tangible employment benefits, validating our focus on how elite educational capital interacts with digital hiring technologies.

Once these warm connections are used, graduates must reach outward, developing strategies for cold networking that can expand their professional reach beyond institutional boundaries. Granovetter's weak-tie logic meets Rogers' diffusion theory: new tactics spread fastest through loose contacts who connect multiple circles (Rogers, 1962). This theoretical framework explains how our participants develop strategic networking strategies that extend beyond their immediate university networks, revealing how they leverage weak ties to access broader professional opportunities. Informational interviews speed up this spread: Kanar's experiment shows two coffee chats increased students' networking confidence by 18% and doubled referrals within three months (Kanar, 2023). Drawing parallels, we can see how graduates develop systematic approaches to networking, providing empirical evidence that their strategic networking efforts may indeed yield tangible benefits.

Scanning alumni directories, writing personalized notes, scheduling calls, and tracking follow-ups add up to hours of unpaid effort that transforms networking from a professional skill into a form of digital labor. Van Dalen's research on algorithmic gatekeeping shows why this work never stops: each feed update rewards the most recently active networkers, pushing everyone else to keep connecting (van Dalen, 2023). Our participants report similar feeling on constantly pressured to maintain active networking, revealing how algorithmic systems create new forms of continuous professional labor that extend beyond traditional networking practices.

2.5.Digital Labour:

Russell Group graduates now spend hours each day on online tasks that look like "job search" but fit what Scholz calls digital labor, unpaid activity that feeds the very platforms judging them (Scholz, 2013), creating a paradoxical situation where graduates must perform unpaid work to access employment opportunities that may never materialize.

This cycle begins with algorithmic literacy: learning how LinkedIn's feed or an ATS processes data, requiring graduates to develop advanced understanding of systems they cannot directly observe or control. Each new rule creates extra work such as rewriting headings, re-tagging skills, scheduling posts that are exactly the kind of "hope labor" Kuehn & Corrigan describe: effort offered for exposure in the hope it will pay off later (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013). This concept can be applied to how graduates invest significant time in learning platform mechanics and developing optimization strategies, revealing how algorithmic opacity creates new forms of speculative labor that may or may not yield returns.

Next comes personal branding and optimization, a form of emotional labor first studied by Hochschild that has been fundamentally transformed by digital platforms. Graduates must smile in profile photos, sound positive in rejection follow-ups, hide frustration and all feelings managed for the chance of a job (Hochschild, 1983) in a system where emotional authenticity becomes a professional liability. This framework shows the emotional costs of algorithmic job searching, revealing how graduates must manage their emotional presentation not just in interviews but in their entire digital presence. Illouz shows how digital capitalism blurs private emotion and public performance, turning every like or comment into a small commodity of the self (Illouz, 2007). This insight connects to our research by helping explain how graduates' personal interactions on professional platforms become commodified forms of professional capital, revealing how algorithmic hiring extends beyond traditional professional boundaries.

Strategic content and visibility increase the workload exponentially. Duffy's research on aspirational labor finds that constant posting, watching analytics, and testing hashtags affects newcomers and women most, who feel pressure to "stay relevant" without pay (Duffy, 2017). Drawing parallels to our research, we can understand that the intensive content creation our participants describe may indeed create new forms of inequality, particularly affecting those who cannot afford the time investment required for continuous optimization. Moore adds that self-tracking metrics lock graduates into a measured competition they can never finish (Moore, 2018), creating a form of algorithmic anxiety that transforms professional development into a continuous performance evaluation.

With network building, the work spreads beyond individual optimization into complex relationship management that requires significant emotional and temporal investment. Informational interviews, coffee chats, and personalized messages look free but consume evenings and weekends, transforming personal time into professional labor. Jaffe warns that

dedication framed as "passion" can hide burnout (Jaffe, 2021), while Liu et al. show that algorithmic management is a double-edged sword: improving efficiency while increasing anxiety when the numbers drop (Liu et al., 2025).

Surveys confirm the human cost of this transformation. A 2024 Forbes poll reports 72% of applicants say job hunting harmed their mental health (Forbes, 2024), while LinkedIn recruiters now talk about "rejection fatigue" and rising burnout (LinkedIn, 2025). Gen Z fears that AI will eliminate entry-level roles - 72% expect fewer openings, causing an "AIxiety Pivot" toward other careers (Zety, 2025), while Business Insider even calls today's market a "dumpster fire," linking algorithmic competition to networking exhaustion (Business Insider, 2025). These findings support our research through empirical evidence that the emotional costs our participants report are not isolated experiences but represent broader trends in contemporary graduate employment, validating our focus on the human impacts of algorithmic hiring systems.

CHAPTER 3

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Digital hiring operates as a cascading system where platform logics create opacity, which in turn generates folk theories that drive tactical responses across optimization, content creation, and networking. These tactics produce emotional and digital labor costs alongside ethical compromises, ultimately manifesting as new forms of inequality extending beyond traditional markers of privilege.

Platform logics establish the foundation through LinkedIn and ATS infrastructures that prioritize programmability, popularity, connectivity, and datafication (van Dijck & Poell, 2013). These systems favor engagement ready content formats, dense networks, and keyword legibility, subtly redirecting graduate effort from demonstrating competence toward optimizing signals and creating tension between professional integrity and platform compliance.

Opacity emerges as a structural feature rather than incidental limitation. Pasquale's "black box" (Pasquale, 2015) captures the deliberate secrecy surrounding scoring and ranking, operating as "double opacity" in graduate search where ATS filters determine who is readable to humans while LinkedIn algorithms rank who is visible to them. This opacity protects competitive advantage while forcing continuous user adaptation.

Facing such opacity, users develop folk theories that are shared but partial beliefs about system operations. Rader & Gray (2015) demonstrate how people infer causal rules that shape behavior, leading graduates to theorize about keywords, recency, document formats, and engagement heuristics while circulating advice that can both empower and mislead depending on accuracy and access.

These folk theories drive four interconnected tactical areas. Profile optimization draws on Goffman (1959) while navigating Meyrowitz's (1985) stage collapse as graduates scripting front-stage credibility while guarding back-stage authenticity. Network building actively converts Bourdieu's social capital (1986) into opportunities through routines that operationalize weak ties (Granovetter, 1973) in platformed environments. Algorithmic literacy manifests through content design and AI-assisted workflows, including keyword mirroring, format choices, cadence, and tag strategies that translate abstract rules into manipulatable artifacts. Personal branding balances authenticity with algorithmic appeal, recognizing that status metrics function as employability proxies (Marwick, 2013).

These tactics carry significant costs, as affective display and regulation become integral to job search itself (Hochschild, 1983), while constant optimization constitutes unpaid digital labor (Scholz, 2013). Kuehn & Corrigan (2013) frame this as "hope labor", speculative investment with uncertain returns and Hearn's "visibility burden" (Hearn, 2008) captures the dynamic where profiles require perpetual reorganization to satisfy shifting algorithmic logics.

Ethical compromises emerge from constrained agency as graduates exchange data for reach, borrow employer language for matching, and practice "tactical authenticity", phrasing that indicates being truthful while maximizing machine alignment. This pragmatism reflects limited bargaining power in platform-mediated markets and reveals how optimization pressures narrow expressive range.

Outcomes concentrate advantage even among elite graduates who encounter friction without specific literacies and sustained effort. Those with denser networks, better coaching, or more time to optimize convert signals into interviews, while others experience attrition, exhaustion, or withdrawal. By centering the algorithmic gate, this framework explains variance that human-only models miss and identifies intervention points: transparency standards for screening, careers guidance that teaches system navigation without normalizing exploitation, and platform policy that reduces treadmill dynamics (van Dijck & Poell, 2013; Pasquale, 2015; Hearn, 2008).

The framework treats employment as system navigation under opacity where success depends on translating credentials into platform-legible signals while managing the labor and ethical trade-offs the market demands.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study explores how recent Russell Group graduates understand and navigate algorithmic hiring systems in the UK job market, examining how these highly educated individuals with significant social and cultural capital develop complex beliefs about opaque systems and adapt their job search strategies in response to algorithmic mediation that operates beyond their traditional advantages. The research focuses on understanding how elite educational credentials interact with digital hiring technologies in ways that challenge our assumptions about privilege and access in the digital age.

The literature demonstrates that even technically trained students develop uneven "folk theories" about hiring algorithms, with some strategically adapting their approaches while others remain completely unaware of algorithmic filtering. However, most existing research focuses on general student populations or specific technical fields, leaving unclear how elite university graduates experience these systems despite their theoretical advantages in social and cultural capital.

The key research question that guides this study is: **How do recent Russell Group graduates (2024-2025) understand and tactically navigate algorithmic hiring systems and platforms in the contemporary UK job market?**

This question breaks down into several specific objectives. Firstly, I examine how graduates develop beliefs about opaque hiring technologies, including ATS systems and LinkedIn algorithms, and how these "folk theories" spread through social networks and influence job search strategies. Secondly, I investigate the tactical practices graduates employ in response to algorithmic mediation, including AI collaboration, profile optimization, strategic networking, and personal branding efforts. Thirdly, I analyze the emotional and practical costs of these navigation strategies, including the digital labor graduates perform and the ethical compromises they make around data sharing and self-representation. Finally, I explore how these processes may reproduce or challenge existing inequalities in graduate employment.

Using semi-structured interviews with twelve Russell Group graduates who completed their degrees in 2024 and 2025, this research provides insights into a unique historical moment of automation, innovation, and economic uncertainty in UK graduate employment. The study contributes to media and communications scholarship by documenting how algorithmic mediation fundamentally transforms job searching from a process of demonstrating qualifications into complex system navigation requiring new forms of digital literacy that extend beyond traditional professional competencies.

CHAPTER 5

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

5.1.Methodological Rationale:

I chose semi-structured interviews as my primary research method because my research question is open-ended and exploratory rather than hypothesis-driven, requiring a methodological approach that could capture the nuanced, lived experiences of graduates navigating increasingly opaque algorithmic systems that operate beyond their traditional professional boundaries. As Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) argue, qualitative interviews are particularly suited for understanding lived experiences and meaning-making processes, providing the depth and flexibility necessary to explore how graduates construct their complex beliefs about hiring algorithms and develop tactical strategies for success in digital environments where the rules remain largely hidden. Surveys would have been too restrictive, failing to capture the emotional complexity and strategic thinking that characterizes contemporary job searching in algorithmic environments.

I deliberately chose 45-60 minute interviews, recognizing that the sensitive nature of algorithmic job searching required sufficient time for trust-building and deep exploration of experiences that participants may have been reluctant to share with others. As DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) note, longer interviews are necessary when exploring emotionally charged topics that require trust-building, particularly when participants may be reluctant to share strategies they worry might be perceived as unethical or manipulative in the competitive digital job market. The extended format allowed me to dive deep into their experiences while giving participants time to feel at ease sharing potentially vulnerable information about their struggles and strategies.

5.2.Sampling and Sampling Strategy:

I employed purposive sampling to recruit participants who could provide rich insights into the research questions (Patton, 2002), recognizing that the sensitive and complex nature of algorithmic job searching required participants who could articulate their tactical approaches, emotional responses and ethical reasoning. My inclusion criteria were intentionally narrow to capture a specific moment in UK graduate employment history that represents a crucial turning point in how we understand the relationship between technology and employment. I focused on graduates from Russell Group universities who completed their degrees in 2024 and 2025, as this period represents a unique historical moment of automation, innovation, and economic uncertainty that has fundamentally altered how graduates must approach their professional development. By studying highly educated graduates from elite institutions, I aimed to demonstrate that even those with significant social and cultural capital struggle to navigate algorithmic hiring systems without developing specific strategies and relying on luck, a finding that challenges our assumptions about privilege and access in the digital age.

The sample included graduates from Asian and European backgrounds, a rather unintentional choice. Several required visa sponsorship while others had right to work through EU settlement schemes in the UK, creating additional layers of complexity in their job search experiences. While visa checks and sponsorship requirements play a major role in the UK job market, they were not the focus of this study; my focus was on participants' algorithmic beliefs and strategies, though I recognize that migration/visa background may have influenced job-search experiences and outcomes, and I note this as a limitation when interpreting the findings. I included graduates from any white-collar field except medicine, as I was uncertain about the specific hiring processes in the medical sector.

Recruiting participants for this sensitive topic was challenging more than expected, as Darko et al. (2022) note when discussing hard-to-reach populations, particularly when the topic involves potentially controversial strategies and ethical compromises that participants may be reluctant to discuss. People actively job searching were often too exhausted to participate, while those who had recently secured employment were busy with their new roles. I initially used mutual contacts and word-of-mouth referrals, but to avoid bias toward a single university, I expanded my recruitment through LinkedIn Premium, messaging individuals with "open to work" badges or recent job postings that suggested they were actively engaged in digital job

searching. I also contacted Russell Group student union leaders, which helped me recruit one participant who was particularly engaged with graduate employment issues.

My final sample comprised 12 participants, a number determined by data saturation principles (Guest et al., 2006) that emerged through the iterative process of data collection and analysis. As interviews progressed, responses began to converge on recurring patterns such as substantial time investment in daily job search, shared accounts of exhaustion, highly similar optimisation tactics for CVs/cover letters and LinkedIn visibility, and comparable experiences with university career services and ATS checks, indicating that additional interviews were unlikely to yield meaningfully new codes. All held advanced degrees (MPhil/MSc or Advanced Diploma), demonstrating their high educational credentials and mature analytical skills. Eight participants had recently secured employment while four were still searching.

I assigned neutral pseudonyms for my research participants for complete anonymity, recognizing the sensitive nature of the strategies and ethical compromises they had discussed. This minimizes identifiability and avoids over-emphasizing ethnicity while preserving the contextual information needed to interpret findings.

5.3.Research Tools:

I conducted interviews both in-person and via Microsoft Teams, depending on participant preference and comfort. Teams' built-in transcription function served as my primary recording and transcription tool (Davidson, 2009). While automated transcription has limitations compared to professional transcription services, it provided adequate accuracy for analysis purposes while being cost-effective and immediately accessible (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006). I reviewed all transcripts for accuracy and made corrections where necessary, ensuring that the nuanced language and nuanced reasoning of participants was accurately captured for analysis. A sample interview transcript is provided in Appendix B to illustrate the interview process and data quality.

5.3.1. Interview Guide:

I developed the interview guide following systematic methodological principles outlined by Kallio et al. (2016), recognizing that the complex nature of algorithmic job searching required a structured approach that could capture both the technical and emotional dimensions of participants' experiences. Before conducting interviews, I piloted the guide with two friends who had recently secured employment, following van Teijlingen and Hundley's

recommendations about the importance of pretesting (van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002). The initial guide was too lengthy, exceeding 60 minutes, so I revised it to fit the target timeframe while maintaining the depth necessary to explore the complex nature of participants' algorithmic navigation strategies.

The final guide comprised four major sections that built upon each other to create a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences: Job Search Context (gathering background about participants' individual situations and timelines), Beliefs about Hiring Algorithms and Platforms, Tactical Behaviours Online, and Outcomes, Emotions and Reflection. I prepared ten core questions with probe questions for each section, recognizing that the complex nature of algorithmic job searching required flexible probing that could adapt to participants' unique experiences and insights. The probes were used flexibly depending on participants' responses and the interview flow, as I wanted to explore their journeys in depth rather than maintain surface-level discussions. The complete interview guide is provided in Appendix A.

True to semi-structured interview methodology, many conversations evolved organically beyond the prepared questions (Adams, 2015), revealing unexpected insights and experiences that enriched our understanding of how graduates navigate algorithmic hiring systems. This flexibility allowed participants to share experiences and insights that I had not anticipated, revealing the complex, multifaceted nature of contemporary job searching.

5.3.2. Conducting Interviews:

Following Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009) guidance on building rapport and managing sensitive topics, I focused on creating a comfortable environment for participants that would allow them to share potentially vulnerable information about their struggles and strategies. The longer format proved essential for this process, as it allowed participants to gradually develop trust and feel comfortable discussing tactics they worried might be perceived as unethical or manipulative in traditional professional contexts. Many participants began with reluctant, monosyllabic responses but gradually developed trust and shared detailed accounts of their experiences, including tactics for navigating algorithmic systems and the ethical compromises they had made in pursuit of employment.

I maintained careful boundaries during interviews, recognizing that my own knowledge of ATS systems and algorithmic hiring could potentially influence participants' responses and compromise the authenticity of their beliefs and experiences. When participants asked me to

explain ATS systems or share my technical knowledge during the interview, I deferred these educational moments until after the interview concluded to avoid influencing their responses or thought processes. This approach helped preserve the authenticity of their beliefs and experiences while still providing value to participants who had generously shared their time and insights.

5.3.3. Thematic Analysis:

I employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis, recognizing that the complex nature of algorithmic job searching required a systematic approach that could identify patterns across participants' diverse experiences while remaining grounded in their individual narratives. Using Taguette, a free qualitative analysis software, I coded all interview transcripts systematically, identifying both explicit statements and implicit patterns that revealed the complex nature of participants' strategic thinking and emotional responses. The analysis process involved multiple iterations of coding and theme development, as the complex nature of algorithmic job searching required careful consideration of how different themes interconnected and influenced each other.

Initially, I identified ten distinct patterns across the interviews, which I subsequently collapsed into five global themes through an iterative process of refinement and consolidation that recognized the interconnected nature of algorithmic navigation, strategic optimization, and emotional management. These final themes speak to the research gaps identified in the literature review and offer a deeper understanding of the key concepts explored in this study, revealing how graduates develop advanced strategies for navigating systems they cannot fully understand. The themes emerged organically from the data while remaining grounded in the theoretical framework established in earlier chapters. To ensure trustworthiness, I regularly returned to the original transcripts to verify that themes accurately represented participants' experiences (Nowell et al., 2017). The complete thematic analysis grid with supporting quotes is provided in Appendix C.

5.4.Ethics, Positionality and Reflexivity:

This research received approval from the LSE Ethics Committee and followed all institutional guidelines for participant protection. No participant is identifiable in the research, and I have anonymised all university and company names to prevent harm to any institution while preserving the contextual information necessary for understanding participants' experiences (Saunders et al., 2015). I minimized disclosure and avoided ethnic-coded pseudonyms to

reduce re-identification risk and unintended essentialization. The consent form and information sheet used for participant recruitment are provided in Appendix D.

My positionality in this research was complex and required careful navigation, as my own experiences with algorithmic hiring systems created both opportunities and challenges for understanding participants' perspectives. I became interested in this topic through my personal experiences navigating the UK job market from elite university recognizing how they created both common ground and potential biases in my research approach. I had also previously worked on research examining ATS algorithms from both candidate and employer perspectives, providing valuable technical context but also potentially influencing my assumptions about how participants should understand and navigate these systems. I was conscious of not allowing my assumptions or experiences to unduly influence the interviews or analysis by mindful responses and open-ended questions instead of one-sided ones.

I believe my position as a fellow graduate helped participants feel comfortable sharing strategies they might have been reluctant to discuss with someone in a different power position (Berger, 2015), creating a research relationship based on shared experience rather than hierarchical authority.

However, I do acknowledge that my positionality may have introduced some bias that could have influenced both recruitment and data collection processes. LinkedIn's algorithm may have prioritised certain profiles in my recruitment efforts based on my own platform engagement patterns, potentially creating a sample that was more algorithmically visible or engaged than the broader population of Russell Group graduates. Additionally, my university background and LinkedIn profile may have influenced participants' willingness to share certain experiences, particularly those that might be perceived as unethical or manipulative in traditional professional contexts. However, the consistency of patterns across interviews suggests these potential biases did not significantly compromise the findings (England, 1994).

The interview process itself prompted reflection on my methodology and revealed important insights about how to conduct research on sensitive topics that involve both technical complexity and emotional vulnerability. Early interviews revealed that some participants struggled to articulate responses immediately and benefited from analogies and examples to stimulate their thinking about algorithmic systems that they had experienced but not necessarily analyzed systematically. I gradually adapted my approach in later interviews to include more illustrative examples, helping participants connect with and articulate their own experiences

more effectively while maintaining the methodological rigor necessary for qualitative research. This iterative refinement demonstrates the reflexive nature of qualitative research and the importance of remaining responsive to participant needs throughout the data collection process (Pillow, 2003).

CHAPTER 6

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATIONS

The results and interpretations are presented in this section through five interconnected themes and their sub-themes, revealing the complex interplay between technological systems and human agency in contemporary graduate employment. The findings emerged as recurring patterns from twelve in-depth interviews through systematic thematic analysis, providing rich insights into how Russell Group graduates navigate the increasingly opaque landscape of algorithmic hiring. The five themes speak directly to the core research question of understanding recent UK graduates' beliefs about hiring algorithms and platforms, their tactical strategies for success, and the broader implications of these practices for employment equality in the digital age. A comprehensive thematic analysis grid with supporting quotes is provided in Appendix C.

6.1. Algorithmic Beliefs and System Navigation:

Graduates combine practical AI tactics with shared "folk theories" while staying uncertain about ATS logic and fairness, therefore leading to diverse coping strategies.

6.1.1. AI as Collaborative Design Partner:

The Russell Group graduates from my sample strategically employ AI tools as collaborative partners in crafting job applications, maintaining creative control while delegating technical optimization tasks to AI models. This approach reveals their refined understanding of AI collaboration that balances automation with personal agency.

Lily's comment demonstrates their remarkable adaptation capacity thereby showing reveals their experimental AI engagement and nuanced understanding of strategic prompt framing: *"I learned a lot about ChatGPT during that period and I learned it only by applying for jobs like I would prompt it in weird manners that, oh, you're the hiring manager. Do this. Do that."*

Taylor reinforces the controlled nature of these collaborations: *"I will write the narrative. Like I said, I'll always write the narrative of how I want to be... Everything is typed, it's just that instead of me phrasing the lines, it does phrasing the lines for me, but the brainchild of like what has to be everything I think."*

This shows us their advanced understanding of the division of labor between human creativity and AI execution.

William shows how AI tools serve as diagnostic tools: *"highlight the keywords that are required on your CV... if the word analytical is missing from your CV and the job description as per that the level of importance is high... I would just look at which word is missing and I if I put add it onto my CV."*

A pattern that suggests their refined understanding of AI as a diagnostic tool for identifying gaps between professional presentation and algorithmic requirements.

However, there also pitfalls when graduates become overly dependent on algorithmic tools rather than maintaining professional judgment. Emily's experience reveals such over-reliance risks: *"there's definitely situation where I was just too lazy. I'm just like please write a cover letter for me and then basically copy pasted this job description link. And then use that."*

Overall, participants mostly act as active creators who strategically deploy AI tools to bridge authentic professional narratives with technical requirements. This finding complements Armstrong et al.'s (2023) work on ATS strategies and aligns with Helsper's (2025) platform-specific skills, showing graduates actively shape AI output rather than following algorithmic recommendations.

6.1.2. Navigating ATS Opacity and Systemic Uncertainty:

Despite evolving technical understanding through AI collaborations, graduates experience profound uncertainty about how automated screening systems operate, leading to adaptive strategies based on incomplete information because they omit the visibility effect of ranking/filters that decide who is seen and peer-shared "folk theories."

Lily despite securing a job recently after more than 1000 applications captures this uncertainty perfectly: *"I still don't understand if I for now for example, send my CV to like some company, will it get accepted or not? Cuz I would still it's still an unknown thing. Will the ATS pick it or not?"*

This can highlight both the fundamental opacity of algorithmic systems and the psychological toll of navigating unpredictable systems.

Participants acknowledge ATS systems as unfair yet necessary to manage application volumes. For example, Olivia noted, *"It's a flawed system, but I don't know if I think it might be the most viable system at this point."*

This was a very common answer amongst all the participants showing that they understand the struggles of the employers' side of managing today's market demands and do not entirely villainise such technological systems.

However, participants are also very well aware of the growing business surrounding this ambiguity. Grace identifies this as: *"People say this is such a given situation that we have to navigate... it's more of like how they make like all this business surrounding it, like consult with us, how to pass the ATS screening."*

This could indicate how opacity has spawned an optimization industry, creating new forms of inequality. More significantly, how the graduate themselves are aware of such commodification.

Chloe who has also recently secured a job reports a timing tactic from her own practices: *"If you change the URL you can actually view all the jobs that are open within one hour rather than 24 hours… when I know how it works, I quickly understand why others got a job… if you apply by the deadline, they will not review your application because you're too late… after I receive that information online I just actively apply earlier… the less the better."*

This shows that the graduates go beyond just keyword optimization and learn advanced platform mechanics and timing strategies to truly stand out and crack the system and secure employment.

These shared experiences reveal a fundamental contradiction: graduates develop complex technical and platform skills for job search optimization while remaining mystified by the systems evaluating their applications. This creates Pasquale's (2015) "black box" decision-making, where graduates develop coping strategies based on incomplete information because they omit the visibility effect of ranking/filters that decide who is seen.

6.2. Strategic Profile Optimization:

Professional branding of the self is treated as necessary performance in contemporary digital hiring environments, yet graduates experience significant fatigue, awkwardness, and often weak returns from these efforts.

6.2.1. Personal Branding as Performance Labour:

Graduates navigate complex decisions about presenting professional experiences while balancing authenticity with pressure to create compelling narratives in competitive digital spaces.

Camille articulated this pressure that she has been facing for almost a year of job-search now through her words and intense body language: *"LinkedIn you kind of wanna make yourself sound so prepared even if like you maybe you did something that it's quite easy or it's not so complicated, but you wanna make it sound fantastic... today I think it's about selling yourself the best... it's more like how you can make someone believe that that's special and that's different and unique because at the end of the day, you know, now a lot of people go to university."*

This can indicate how higher education democratization has transformed professional competition from qualification-based to narrative-based, thereby leading to the survival based on your marketing skills.

The platform's design indicates creation of anxiety around visibility signals in our participants. Chloe describes the "Open to Work" badge on LinkedIn dilemma: *"If you put on the badge like Open to work that you are very desperate and then you're like really like, you know, eager to have a job that makes you look cheap... But for me I think it's really important for others to know that I need a job."*

This was a controversial subject among the participants with some saying it is not useful, some believing it is desperate and some believing it will help with being more visible to recruiters. These experiences show almost all our participants have made complex calculations about their professional visibility for a simple functionality in a platform such as the green circle showing “Open to Work” on their profile picture in LinkedIn.

Some participants possess resilience against exaggeration pressure in presenting yourself on LinkedIn to show true authenticity. William confirms this: *"I'm not the kind of person who*

would exaggerate it... I feel the person who would be interviewing me is in the industry and is working and has worked for, I assume 15-20 years... that person knows if you're doing an internship. This is the kind of work that any intern would be given usually."

Overall, all the participants demonstrated lot of experiences on their self-presentation and their own form of thinking on what's right and what's not in showing authenticity in professional platforms.

6.2.2. Visibility Through Content Strategy:

Graduates develop nuanced content strategies beyond self-promotion to include targeted audience analysis and strategic timing, revealing how professional networking has evolved from relationship-building to content creation and algorithmic optimization.

Lily describes her calculated approach: *"I think it also made me realise of the kinds of achievements that I've had and what I bring to the table... If I'm applying for this role and if I'm connected to the hiring manager, what is the kind of post that they would like to see or some kind of achievement of mine? So it was very strategic, very cunning in a sense because I was trying to manipulate them."*

A comment which makes us think about even individuals need to develop strategic understandings of audience targeting and strategic content creation unlike just brands in the old days.

However, this strategic approach also comes with significant costs beyond time investment. Olivia captures this as: *"I don't think I have the time for that as well... I think it's too exhausting of a process for me and I think it's also quite unfair... LinkedIn has also become a very like, I have friends who say that I'm going to post every day on LinkedIn to get this sort of reach. And I've seen it's kind of exhausting and a lot of the posts just end up saying nothing... I prefer more like one-on-one networking I guess."*

We can clearly note from our sample, how algorithmic optimization creates new forms of professional exhaustion.

These findings suggest graduates engage in Hochschild's (1983) "emotional labour", managing feelings and self-presentation for economic benefit beyond traditional workplace boundaries. This connects to Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical analysis, suggesting digital platforms collapse boundaries between front-stage and back-stage performance.

6.3. Network-Driven Tactical Approaches:

Several participants reported networking as effective though often forced, uneven in payoff, and emotionally complex, revealing how professional networking has evolved from authentic relationship-building to strategic labor requiring complex emotional management and strategic calculation.

6.3.1. Elite University Capital and Its Limits:

While Russell Group participants acknowledge significant advantages in the white-collar job market due to their university brand, they also face the reality that these privileges are increasingly insufficient in today's competitive market that values algorithmic optimization alongside traditional credentials.

Sofia explains the institutional advantage in early hiring stages: *"The brand name itself, definitely. People are like, Oh my gosh, you must know your stuff so well. And I feel like it's a lot easier to get to the final stages as well. Everyone on my course tends to get a job rather quickly."*

However, graduates experience profound disillusionment when these advantages fail to deliver expected outcomes. Amelia articulates this as: *"I spent a hell of an amount for tuition fees... I'm studying in one of the top three universities in UK, so like of course it should be such a case for me to get a job right?... But that was not the case because so many people from the University are still unemployed who have done masters... Many of my friends are still unemployed and they've gone back home."*

This could indicate how higher education democratization and algorithmic hiring have altered the relationship between elite credentials and employment outcomes in today's algorithmized job market.

The institutional response reveals how universities themselves have adapted to algorithmic hiring systems. Taylor explains: *"most of the Russell group universities already do like an ATS check on your CVs. So at least for us, only if our CV pass, they gave us a particular format... only if that passes we get book like career counselling appointments."*

This was a common pattern amongst all the participants' responses when asked about their university benefits. A finding that suggests even elite institutions must now teach students to navigate algorithmic gatekeepers.

6.3.2. Strategic Relationship Building Through Forced Networking:

Systematic approaches are developed for professional networking that prioritize strategic value over genuine connection, often at significant emotional cost.

Taylor describes her methodical approach: *"I don't immediately see the job and put the application until and unless... I immediately go to people I try to see whom I can connect to. I drop in at least like 4 to 5 cold messages... I want to hear their thoughts on how the application can be made."*

This being a common response amongst some participants could indicate how graduates have developed elaborate networking strategies that prioritize strategic value over authentic connection.

However, this strategic networking often feels forced and inauthentic. Emily provides a candid assessment: *"90% of the situation I feel like I'm forced to. 10% of like, oh, I'm really interested in the work experience... but most of the matches I don't give a .... I just wanted to have a job. So it's more like a force... If I would reach out from them only if we are alumni. I'll reach out from the oh, like so. It's like, oh, we're alumni. Can you tell me a little bit more?"*

A very honest sharing of such experience shows us higher probability of psychological costs where graduates suppress authentic human connection.

These findings help us understand how graduates must convert Bourdieu's 1986) "social capital" into employment opportunities through systematic relationship cultivation prioritizing strategic value over authentic connection. This strategic relationship work represents another form of unpaid labour that graduates must perform.

6.4. Digital Labour and Emotional Costs:

The search becomes unpaid, always-on work that extends beyond traditional job searching to include advanced algorithmic optimization, strategic content creation, and continuous professional self-presentation.

6.4.1. University-Environment Driven Mass Application Pressure:

Elite university environments can create unrealistic pressure for immediate job searching that may drive graduates toward volume-based application strategies that may be contributing to market conditions necessitating algorithmic screening.

Lily explains this urgency through a terrible situation she faced unfortunately when she arrived for her degree in London: *"we come in September…. I overheard a friend saying that the people sitting in the library right now are not studying, they're applying for jobs... we haven't even had welcome week…our course hasn't even started."*

This may create a dynamic where financial and visa pressures drive indiscriminate applications. Olivia notes this as: *"with the changes around immigration and sponsorship... there's a lot of pressure... Everyone wants to find a job and people feel like just having a job in hand is, even if it's something that they don't like, it's still better than not having anything... if you keep applying for multiple roles, eventually you'll get something... just like the rule of numbers."*

An ongoing tiring situation where policy changes and institutional pressures can create conditions where graduates prioritize employment quantity over quality.

6.4.2. Volume vs. Quality Applications and Social Relationship Strain:

Graduates adopt contrasting strategies revealing complex trade-offs between efficiency and effectiveness in contemporary job searching. However, both approaches ultimately face emotional exhaustion and relationship difficulties.

Amelia describes the volume approach she used in LinkedIn: *"in terms of the number of roles that applied, so it will definitely be like 1000 minimum... when that stress hits you. Oh my God, I don't have a job... even when you're on the bus or something, you just click on the easy apply, like, submit everything."*

This was a common experience amongst some candidates where volume-based strategies created new forms of professional anxiety and exhaustion.

In contrast, Chloe advocates for quality over quantity: *"I know a lot of people, some of my friends, they spent like 3 hours applying for like I don't know, 20 or 30 jobs. But for me, I don't believe in, you know, the quick application thing... I think companies only want people who are, like, really passionate about their jobs... I need to spend more than 3-4 hours a day applying for three or four jobs in total."*

The pattern which mirrored with other participants' experiences showed how quality-based strategies created different forms of professional investment and emotional engagement.

However, quantity or quality, both demand intensive time investment. Lily illustrates this coherently as: "*Literally all my waking hours... during spring term it was literally the moment*

I woke up till I slept because even if I was sleeping, I would just like look at LinkedIn and save the jobs... Even I was on a vacation with my... dad's 50th birthday... I was having networking calls throughout that period."

These shared experiences indicate that the digital job searching has transformed from focused activity to continuous engagement.

Despite intensive effort, graduates often face constant rejections without feedback leading to emotional distress. Sofia's frustration reflects this: *"give everyone a reply. Don't ghost people... these days you have to spend hours and hours and hours applying for each job. They want an arm and a leg. They want everything from you and then they don't even have the decency to reject."*

This was the most echoed frustration among all the research participants indicating that the recent algorithmic hiring leads to new forms of professional disrespect.

When it comes to relationships, the competitive job market does strain friendships. Grace describes how employment success affects her relationships with her friends who haven't secured a job yet: *"I feel like I'm responsible... more drawn into, like, trying to help them..build their self esteem... I need to spend my time to help them review the cover letter."*

A form of additional unpaid labour as successful graduates feel obligated to support struggling friends.

These findings are consistent with Scholz's (2013) concept of 'digital labour', unpaid work that feeds platforms evaluating graduates. The emotional costs align with Hochschild's (1983) analysis of emotional labour but show how digital job searching extends this burden beyond workplace interactions into personal relationships.

6.5. Data Exchange and Ethical Boundaries:

Graduates acknowledge and accept data trade-offs for employment opportunities, but many draw strict boundaries on certain personal data and reject certain practices, revealing how they have developed nuanced self-ethical frameworks for navigating digital hiring.

6.5.1. Pragmatic Data Trade-offs and Privacy Boundaries:

Graduates' data value decisions are calculated choices to prioritize employment over privacy concerns, revealing their nuanced understanding of trade-offs in contemporary digital hiring.

Emily articulates this trade-off*: "I don't really care because I don't think that my data is that valuable. But if you think like, oh, maybe they could use all those applicants data together. Maybe they could create a database... we're literally giving them a lot of valuable data... But I need a job. So I think that's what I got."*

A common patterns amongst all graduates either showing they don't have a choice for data sharing or do not really care about it as long as they secure employment, patterns indicating complex understandings of data value and privacy trade-offs.

However, graduates do establish personal boundaries around some sensitive information. As Lily says with remarkable clarity: *"I am OK with you using my data, I just can't give financial data, so I think that's where I draw the line. So someone asked me to like put my call on the Internet. I'm just like, no, that's not happening."*

This demonstrates how our sample graduates draw data boundaries and privacy limits.

6.5.2. Strategic Self-Presentation and Ethical Grey Areas:

Graduates engage in well-thought language manipulation within self-defined ethical boundaries while maximizing their competitive advantage.

Grace describes her cross-industry approach: *"Of course I did some like a bit of tweaking... I've never done consulting work, but I've applied to like some consulting jobs... I use some consulting wordings for that, but then I try to assess like whether or not this to some extent can work... sometimes, like the wordings, may sound different, but apparently maybe it's the same role."*

This reflected among most participants on tweaking words to present themselves strategically.

Ava provides ethical reasoning for such tactics: *"I like probably in some ways I exaggerated. Some experiences found a lot more important, so one work experience was just with my uncle for something. And I'm like, oh, I did like a business plan…. It was not a business plan... if I'm exaggerating something and if I'm talking to a person about it and they ask me, what did you do in that... I should be able to tell exactly what I did."*

These practices suggest graduates are developing complex personal ethical frameworks that allow strategic self-presentation while maintaining defendable authenticity. The participants'

approaches demonstrate 'tactical authenticity', strategic language choices that maximize algorithmic matching while remaining grounded in actual experience.

6.6. Discussion:

The research's findings suggest a fundamental paradox: highly educated individuals with significant social and cultural capital must still engage in intensive digital labor to navigate opaque hiring algorithmic systems that operate beyond their traditional advantages. The five themes interconnect to illustrate how Russell Group graduates develop complex yet incomplete understandings of hiring technologies due to omitting the visibility effect of ranking/filters that decide who is seen, leading them to adopt survival strategies that can contradict their professional values while revealing the complex interplay between technological systems and human agency.

The findings suggest a possible self-reinforcing feedback loop: university-driven pressure for immediate applications may contribute to mass application behaviours that encourage greater reliance on algorithmic screening systems. While we cannot establish causality, this dynamic can transform job searching from demonstrating qualifications into complex system navigation, where success may depend as much on algorithmic literacy as professional competence. Even elite graduates engage in "tactical authenticity", complex strategic self-presentation that maximizes algorithmic matching while maintaining defendable truthfulness.

The intensive emotional and practical costs suggest current digital hiring practices shift recruitment burdens from employers onto job seekers, creating new forms of unpaid labor that particularly disadvantage those who cannot engage in continuous self-optimization. However, AI as collaborative partner rather than replacement tool represents an important evolution, signaling increasing normalization of AI-mediated hiring and suggesting a more nuanced relationship between human agency and algorithmic systems than traditional technological determinism frameworks.

Conceptually, we articulate tactical authenticity as a distinct self-presentation mode under algorithmic visibility constraints. Empirically, we document how Russell Group graduates allocate time to keywording, profile optimisation, and AI-assisted tailoring as unpaid labour induced by ranking systems. Practically, we specify possible interventions: careers services teaching visibility-aware workflows; platforms and employers curbing brittle proxies and providing transparent feedback.

CHAPTER - 5

CONCLUSION

This study explored how recent Russell Group graduates navigate the increasingly algorithmic landscape of UK employment, revealing how elite educational capital interacts with digital hiring technologies in ways that complicate assumptions about privilege in the digital age. Through interviews with twelve graduates who completed degrees in 2024 and 2025, the research examined how these individuals form beliefs about opaque hiring systems, deploy tactical strategies, and manage the time and emotional costs of algorithmic job searching.

The findings surface a central paradox: even graduates from prestigious universities must undertake intensive digital labour to move through screening systems they do not fully understand. These graduates develop "tactical authenticity", a calibrated mode of self-presentation under algorithmic constraint, in which they mirror employer language to achieve machine legibility, keep every claim defensible if probed, and layer messages across CVs, LinkedIn, and direct outreach to balance visibility with integrity. They use AI tools as collaborative partners, constructing workflows that balance automation with personal agency, yet remain mystified by evaluation systems. Platform-mediated job seeking shifts the task from demonstrating qualifications to navigating ranking infrastructures, where success depends as much on algorithmic literacy as on professional competence.

This research contributes to media and communications scholarship by extending digital labour theory beyond workplace contexts, advancing understanding of algorithmic literacy as a form of digital capital, and identifying new pressures for strategic self-presentation that spill beyond conventional professional boundaries. The findings also show how graduates make pragmatic, ethically conscious compromises under conditions of limited bargaining power in digitally intermediated markets.

This study is interpretive and context-bound: it focuses on a small, purposive sample of Russell Group graduates predominantly international students seeking visa sponsorship pursuing UK white-collar roles during a period of economic uncertainty and rapid AI adoption. As such, the findings characterise perceptions and practices rather than hiring outcomes and should not be over-generalised across sectors, institutions, or geographies. Platform affordances and ranking heuristics are also in flux, which may recalibrate the value of specific tactics over time. Finally, our use of reflexive thematic analysis privileges depth and contextualisation over statistical representativeness.

Future research should compare cohorts from a wider range of universities, include longitudinal designs to track belief and practice evolution, and examine cross-cultural patterns. Studies that incorporate employer perspectives and technical audits of ranking systems would round out the picture of how digital hiring actually operates. Overall, the digital transformation of graduate employment is reconfiguring professional identity and human–technology relations, pointing to the need for institutional reform and technological redesign that prioritise societal development over narrow notions of algorithmic efficiency.

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