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SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This study explores social work students' perceptions of artificial intelligence (AI) using a phenomenological approach. Fourteen third- and fourth-year students in Bandırma participated in 30–45 minute in-depth interviews, guided by a semi-structured form. Data were analyzed thematically with MAXQDA, yielding 8 sub-themes and 27 codes under three main themes: (1) Perceptions of AI, (2) Intersection of Social Work and AI, and (3) AI Education and Access. Students highlighted benefits such as making life easier (f=10) and fast access to information (f=8), alongside concerns about lack of empathy (f=8) and privacy/data security (f=8). The integration of AI into the curriculum (f=9) emerged as a key need. Findings suggest that incorporating AI into social work education should be consistent with professional values to maximize benefits while addressing ethical concerns.

Key Words: *Artificial Intelligence, Social Work, Phenomenological Analysis, Social Work Education, Digital Transformation.*

Jel Codes: *I21, I23, O33, J24, K24.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the reflections of technological developments in the field of social sciences have increased the importance of interdisciplinary studies and paved the way for the emergence of new research areas. Especially the potential use of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies in the field of social work is being discussed extensively in academic circles, and scientific studies in this field are gaining momentum. In this context, the perceptions of future social workers on AI technologies and the role of these technologies in educational processes stand out as a research topic that needs to be examined in depth.

The relationship between AI and social work is becoming increasingly important. This is because social work, as a profession that aims to eliminate social inequalities and increase the welfare of individuals, must adapt to the changes brought about by digital transformation. In this context, features of AI such as data analytics, decision support systems, and personalized services have the potential to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of social service practices (Russell and Norvig, 2022).

In this context, AI is defined as systems that can perform learning and decision-making processes by imitating human intelligence. AI-supported technological tools such as big data and machine learning (Duan, Edwards, and Dwivedi, 2019) lead to significant transformations in the field of social work (Çakmak, 2024). However, this integration process brings along problems such as ethical concerns and access inequalities (Başcıllar, Karataş, and Güre, 2022).

Human dignity, equality, and justice, which are the core values of the social work profession (NASW, 2021), require re-evaluation in the technological transformation process. AI-supported systems' risks of weakening the client-expert relationships and their potential to ignore individual needs are important issues to be handled. In educational processes, AI improves students' digital skills and increases their professional competences (Uslu, 2023), but challenges such as maintaining a human-centered service approach are encountered.

The digital transformation of social work education directly affects the competences of future professionals. The integration of AI technologies into educational processes requires students to improve their data analysis, risk assessment, and decision-making skills, while at the same time strengthening their ethical reasoning and critical thinking abilities. In this context, social work students' perceptions and experiences towards AI technologies appear as important factors shaping the future of the profession.

In this context, this research seeks answers to the following basic questions:

1. What are the social work students' knowledge levels and perceptions of AI technologies?

2. How do social work students evaluate the possible effects of AI technologies on professional ethical values and a human-centered approach?

3. What opportunities and challenges do social work students perceive regarding AI technologies in their future professional lives?

On the other hand, this study analyzes the views of third- and fourth-year students in formal social work education in Türkiye on AI with an exploratory qualitative approach. The study aims to evaluate the role of AI in social work education through student experiences and to develop recommendations for future practices. The sample of the research was carried out with a limited number of students who live in Bandırma province, and the findings should be evaluated in this context.

2. SOCIAL WORK AND AI

Social work is a professional field that aims to increase the welfare of individuals in society, promote social justice, and protect human rights (Healy and Thomas, 2020). Today, rapidly developing technological transformation has led to radical changes in the field of social work, and traditional practices have been replaced by more innovative approaches. Digital technologies are effectively integrated into the intervention processes of social workers and contribute to making professional practices more efficient (Başcıllar et al., 2022).

On the other hand, AI is at the center of digital transformation and offers opportunities to support professional practices in areas such as data analytics, decision support systems, and personalized services (Zeb, Nizamullah, Abbasi, and Qayyum, 2024). At this point, in the field of social work, AI can perform functional tasks to analyze the needs of applicants and optimize the planning of services. Particularly, algorithms that can analyze complex data sets allow social workers to more easily identify groups at risk and direct appropriate resources.

On the other hand, decision support systems offered by AI provide social workers with the opportunity to make fast as well as accurate decisions (Kambur, 2022). These systems help to determine the most appropriate intervention methods by comparing both past data and current needs of the applicant. In addition, the analytical insights offered by AI in the formulation of policies for various social problems, such as economic inequality or housing insufficiency, also enable the development of macro solutions (Ademowo, 2024).

In this context, the ability of AI to provide customized solutions according to the individual needs of the applicants is a feature that increases the effectiveness of the service. With an AI-based system, a personalized intervention plan can be prepared by investigating the economic, social, and psychological situation of the applicant. In this way, in line with the individual-oriented practices of social work, it enables the application of more effective methods to improve the welfare level of applicants (Rogers, 1961).

On the other hand, digital transformation has also had profound effects on the social work profession (Parlak, 2017). Traditional social work methods have evolved into more comprehensive and

innovative practices by blending with digital tools and AI technologies (Berzin, Singer, and Chan, 2015). This process enables both meeting the needs of applicants faster and more effectively and enabling social workers to work more efficiently (del Fresno García, 2015).

AI-supported simulations developed in this framework allow social work students to experience crisis situations that they may encounter in real life in a safe environment (Uslu, 2023). Such applications contribute to the professional competences of students and prepare the ground for them to carry out more conscious and effective interventions in their future working lives (Kumar, Nayyar, Sachan, and Jain, 2023).

On the other hand, by automating administrative tasks and time-consuming processes, such as data management, AI tools also decrease the workload of social workers (Öngen, 2014). For example, chatbots and virtual assistants provide instant access to critical information, which enables experts to be prepared before interacting with their clients and improving service quality (Fernando and Ranasinghe 2023). Tools, such as machine learning algorithms, can also facilitate the development of early support mechanisms by identifying groups at risk and detecting situations that require urgent intervention (Nuwasiima, Ahonon, and Kadiri, 2024).

Along with all these positive developments, the applications of AI in the field of social work have also brought new debates on ethics and social justice. The necessity for AI algorithms to work without bias (Alptekin, 2021) is directly related to the principles of equality and justice of the social work profession. Digital inequalities and privacy issues are other critical elements to be considered in the use of AI because maintaining ethical standards in the collection and processing of client data is one of the professional responsibilities of social workers (NASW, 2021).

Overall, AI should be considered not only as a technological tool in the field of social work but also as a paradigm shift that has the potential to produce solutions to social inequalities (Maral, 2024). However, the use of this technology in harmony with the universal and ethical values of social work is critical for the future of the profession.

3. METHOD

This section aims to explain the methodological approaches and data collection and analysis processes used in the study. To base the research on a scientific basis and to obtain valid results, the details regarding the method were meticulously handled.

3.1. Research Design

In this study, phenomenological design, one of the qualitative research methods, was chosen. Phenomenology focuses on examining individuals' experiences of a particular phenomenon and the

meanings they give to these experiences (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2021). This approach was chosen to understand the views and experiences of social work students about AI.

The phenomenological method offers the opportunity to develop a new understanding of the subject (Giorgi, as cited in Creswell, 2014). According to Creswell (2013), phenomenological studies aim to produce meaning from common experiences. In this context, the effects of AI technologies in education and aspects such as ethics, access, and application were analyzed through in-depth interviews.

3.2. Sampling and Data Collection

Students who are familiar with digital technologies and have the capacity to express opinions about social work education were recruited for this present study. Therefore, the purposive sampling method was adopted (Patton, 2002). The sample included 3rd- and 4th-year social work students in Bandırma. The professional knowledge and field experience of the students in this class level were considered sufficient to evaluate AI. The reason for choosing Bandırma is accessibility and cost advantage. Data collection commenced only after the ethics approval had been obtained from the Bandırma Onyedi Eylül University Health Sciences Non-Interventional Research Ethics Committee under decision number 2024-11, dated 16.12.2024

The criteria for participant selection in the study are as follows:

- To be enrolled in a social work undergraduate program,

- To be a third- or fourth-year student,

- To accept to participate in the research voluntarily.

A total of 14 students participated in the interviews. This sample was determined according to the principle of data saturation; repeated data were observed after the 14th interview (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson, 2006).

Table 1. Participants' Demographic Information

Participant	Age	Gender	Department	Grade Class
P1	22	Woman	Social Work	4
P2	25	Woman	Social Work	4
P3	22	Woman	Social Work	4
P4	21	Woman	Social Work	4
P5	23	Woman	Social Work	4
P6	21	Man	Social Work	4
P7	23	Woman	Social Work	4

P8	24	Man	Social Work	4
P9	22	Woman	Social Work	4
P10	21	Woman	Social Work	4
P11	22	Woman	Social Work	4
P12	23	Woman	Social Work	4
P13	21	Man	Social Work	4
P14	21	Man	Social Work	4

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview form was prepared based on the literature and finalized with expert opinions. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and audio-recorded in the environments preferred by the participants; each interview lasted 45-60 minutes on average. This technique combines the advantages of structured and free interviewing (Büyüköztürk, Kılıç Çakmak, and Akgün, 2011).

3.3. Validity and Reliability of the Study

In qualitative research, validity and reliability are evaluated with the criteria of credibility, transferability, consistency, and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In this study, member checking was obtained for validity, and a trust relationship was established through long-term interaction. For transferability, the research process and context were described in detail. Consistency was ensured by documenting all stages, and the coding made by two researchers was compared.

In line with principles of research reflexivity, the authors acknowledge their positionality and the assumptions that may have shaped the research process. Throughout data collection and interpretation, reflective strategies were employed to minimise potential subjectivity, including maintaining analytic memos, using peer debriefing, and continually revisiting initial interpretations. These practices aimed to enhance transparency and strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings.

Against researcher bias, assumptions were constantly questioned, and their effects were tried to be minimized (Maxwell, 2013).

3.4. Data Analysis

The phenomenological thematic analysis method was employed for data analysis in this current study. This method allows us to identify and interpret patterns in the data systematically (Çarıkçı et al., 2024; Braun and Clarke, 2006). Firstly, the interviews were transcribed, and the non-verbal elements were also recorded. In the open coding analysis, both literature-based and data-derived codes were used. Main and sub-themes were formed in line with the relationships between the codes. The themes were interpreted according to the research questions and associated with the literature.

For reliability, two independent researchers simultaneously conducted the coding process, and consensus was achieved. In addition, validity was supported by the participant feedback. The analysis process was carried out with MAXQDA software.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings obtained from semi-structured interviews with third- and fourth-year social work students from Bandırma. The thematic analysis method was applied to explore the interview data. The views and experiences of the participants regarding AI were systematically categorized.

The data obtained from in-depth interviews with 14 participants were analyzed by the thematic analysis method, and 3 main themes, 8 sub-themes, and 27 codes were determined as a result of this process.

The main theme of "Perceptions of AI" includes 2 sub-themes and 8 codes. In this theme, there are 4 codes under the sub-theme of "Functional Benefit" (making life easier, fast access, information synthesis, detailed analysis) and 4 codes under the sub-theme of "Concerns and Concerns" (laziness, information reliability, weakening human relations, fear of unemployment).

The main theme, "Intersection of Social Work and AI," has 3 sub-themes and 11 codes. The sub-theme "Potential in Practice" contains 4 codes, the sub-theme "Client-Expert Relationship" contains 3 codes, and the sub-theme "Ethical Concerns" contains 3 codes.

The main theme of " AI Education and Access" is represented by 3 sub-themes and 8 codes. These sub-themes are "Need for Education" (3 codes), "Access Inequalities" (3 codes), and "Future-Oriented Suggestions" (3 codes).

The most frequently repeated codes in the opinions of the participants were "making life easier" (f=10), "integration into the curriculum" (f=9), "quick access" (f=8), "lack of empathy" (f=8), and "privacy and data security" (f=8). The least repeated codes are "geographical access differences" (f=2), "fear of unemployment" (f=3), "decision support system" (f=3), "risk of discrimination and prejudice" (f=3), and "continuing education programs" (f=3).

This code distribution shows that while social work students embrace the potential of AI to make life easier, they consider the integration of AI into the curriculum important in social work education, and at the same time, they are concerned about the lack of empathy and privacy and data security issues.

Table 2. Main Themes, Sub-themes, and Coding Table

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes	Frequency	Participants
1. Perceptions on AI	1.1 Functional Benefit	1.1.1 Making life easier	10	P1, P2, P5, P6, P7, P8, P10, P11, P13, P14
		1.1.2 Fast access	8	P1, P3, P7, P9, P10, P11, P13, P14
		1.1.3 Synthesizing information	6	P1, P2, P9, P10, P11, P13
		1.1.4 Detailed analysis	4	P3, P11, P13, P14
	1.2 Anxiety and Concerns	1.2.1 Encouraging laziness	5	P6, P10, P11, P13, P14
		1.2.2 Information reliability	5	P3, P5, P9, P10, P12
		1.2.3 Weakening human relations	4	P6, P8, P10, P12
		1.2.4 Fear of unemployment	3	P1, P6, P14
2. Intersection of Social Work and AI	2.1 Potential in Practice	2.1.1 Report writing	7	P2, P4, P6, P9, P11, P13, P14
		2.1.2 Data analysis	5	P3, P11, P13, P14
		2.1.3 Event planning	4	P1, P3, P5, P9
		2.1.4 Decision support system	3	P3, P13, P14
	2.2 Applicant-Expert Relationship	2.2.1 Lack of empathy	8	P4, P6, P7, P8, P10, P12, P13, P14
		2.2.2 The importance of the human factor	7	P4, P7, P8, P10, P12, P13, P14
		2.2.3 Use as a supportive tool	5	P4, P6, P9, P13, P14
	2.3 Ethical Concerns	2.3.1 Privacy and data security	8	P3, P5, P9, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14
		2.3.2 Respect for human dignity	5	P6, P7, P9, P13, P14
		2.3.3 Risk of discrimination and prejudice	3	P5, P9, P14
3. AI Education and Access	3.1 Training Needs	3.1.1 Integration into the curriculum	9	P2, P3, P5, P9, P11, P12, P13, P14
		3.1.2 Skills for use	6	P2, P3, P5, P9, P11, P13
		3.1.3 Ethical use training	4	P3, P5, P11, P14
	3.2 Access Inequalities	3.2.1 Economic factors	7	P3, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12, P13
		3.2.2 Competence for use	6	P3, P5, P8, P9, P12, P13
		3.2.3 Geographical access differences	2	P11, P14

	3.3 Future Orientated Recommendations	3.3.1 Institution-university co-operation	5	P5, P11, P13, P14
		3.3.2 Professional software	4	P6, P9, P13, P14
		3.3.3 Continuing education programs	3	P5, P11, P13

4.1. Perceptions on AI Theme

Social work students' perceptions of AI were categorized under two main sub-themes: functional benefit and worries and concerns.

4.1.1. Functional Benefit Sub-theme

The functional benefits of AI from the perspective of social work students stand out prominently in the interviews. When the students' narratives are analyzed, the diversity of the practical benefits they have experienced after starting to use AI technology draws attention. This sub-theme reveals the value that students derive from the use of AI in daily life and academic processes and the various advantages it provides.

In this context, most of the participants (10/14) emphasized that AI facilitates daily life and academic studies. P5 expressed this situation as follows: *"I think AI makes life much easier. When it first came out, I did not understand what it was for, but as I started to use it, I realized that it is actually a very useful media tool."*

Apart from that, some participants emphasized AI's capability to provide fast access as another prominent feature of AI. P7 explained this situation as follows: *"AI is acceleration for me. It has a direct accelerating and facilitating meaning in my mind. Personally, I apply immediately when I am in a difficult situation."*

Participants also mentioned the capability of AI to synthesize information from different sources. P10 expressed this situation as follows: *"AI creates an expression for us based on the information on all these sites or academic scientific research. We do not need to go and search one by one."*

Some participants emphasized the capability of AI to make detailed analyses. Regarding this, P13 claimed: *"When it really handles the things we overlook in a different way and puts them in front of us, we realize that those things can be handled in a different way as well, and we missed such details."*

When these narratives are evaluated as a whole, it is understood that social work students primarily perceive AI as a functional tool. Students find the features of AI, such as saving time, providing fast and comprehensive access to information, and synthesizing complex information in an understandable way, valuable for their academic and professional development. Especially in social work, which is a knowledge-intensive discipline, these functional benefits offered by AI significantly facilitate students' access to and processing of theoretical knowledge.

4.1.2. Anxiety and Worries Sub-theme

In addition to positive evaluations, a significant anxiety and concern dimension is also observed in social work students' perceptions of AI. While students appreciate the opportunities offered by AI, they also develop a critical perspective towards the potential risks it brings with it.

For example, the potential of AI to make people lazy is a concern expressed by some participants. P6 expressed this concern as follows: *"AI, first of all, with the technology that facilitates our daily lives... okay, I think it is a convenience, but there is also something like this: it makes people lazy. It drives too much laziness. Since it leads to laziness, it is actually necessary to restrict it, no matter how useful it is."*

In addition, some participants expressed their concerns about the reliability of the information provided by AI. P5 explained this concern as follows: *"We are currently writing a thesis. In the thesis, I sometimes ask for a bibliography. It mentions a name there. I search for the name; it does not come up. I ask AI again who this person is. For example, he says he is someone I made up. In other words, I actually think that most of the information we will use there is a bit fabricated."*

The potential of AI to weaken human relations is another concern expressed by some participants. P10 expressed this situation as follows: *"If social service is continued through AI, people may actually become technologically dependent. Human relations may weaken. These points need to be considered."*

Some participants expressed the potential of AI to take people's jobs. For example, P14 expressed this concern as follows but at the same time emphasized that this would not be the case in the field of social work: *"Some people think of AI as a thing. It can leave people unemployed. Yes, naturally, it can leave people unemployed in some subjects. But I think this is not the case in the field of social work. We will always need a human in the field of social work."*

Students' perceptions of the practical benefits of AI as well as their concerns and worries show that social work students' perceptions of AI are multidimensional. In this context, it can be said that while students are aware of the conveniences and advantages offered by AI, they are also sensitive to the potential negative effects of this technology. Especially, concerns about the reliability and confidentiality of information, the quality of interpersonal relationships, and professional futures come to the fore. These concerns are closely related to human orientation and ethical values at the core of the social work profession. In addition, these concerns reveal that students tend to evaluate AI from a conscious and critical perspective and seek a balanced approach in the integration of this technology into social work practice.

4.2. Social Work and AI Intersection Theme

Three sub-themes were identified under the main theme of the intersection of social work and AI. These are as follows: potential in practice, client-specialist relationship, and ethical concerns.

4.2.1. Potential in Practice Sub-theme

Social work students emphasize the potential use of AI in professional practice. Students revealed that they have concrete examples and predictions about how AI can be used in different application areas of the social work profession.

For example, some participants stated that AI can be especially useful in writing reports such as social investigation reports (SIR). P13 explained this situation as follows: *"When we write a social investigation report, I think that when* AI *is well trained, I think it will make a very good contribution to this social investigation report. It can be useful in the report part."*

In addition, the potential of AI in data analysis was emphasized by some participants. P14 expressed this situation as follows: *"It can help us in data analysis. Also,* AI *can be useful in diagnosing domestic violence, whether through image analysis or language comprehension skills."*

On the other hand, the potential of AI in group work and activity planning was also emphasized by some participants. P3 explained this situation as follows: *"For example, there is group therapy. You know, there are group interviews. These happen collectively. In these, we sometimes have certain activities, such as warm-up activities or similar activities. We cannot plan these activities immediately. For example, when AI is asked about this, it can be theater, or it can be a dialogue. It can adapt it immediately."*

Similarly, the use of AI as a support system in decision-making processes is also among the potential benefits emphasized. For instance, P14 expressed this situation as follows: *"Here, if we write a certain format about the family in AI, it can give us its own opinion, and this... It could give an accuracy rate of 80% compared to my previous research. When we give it that information, it can make an inference there."*

When these opinions are analyzed, it is understood that social work students see an important potential of AI, especially in the technical and managerial dimensions of professional practices. The contributions that AI can offer in areas such as reporting, data analysis, activity planning, and decision support systems have the potential to alleviate the workload of social workers and increase professional effectiveness. These potentials emphasized by the students show that AI can be positioned as a supportive and empowering tool in the background of social work practices.

4.2.2. Sub-theme of Client-Expert Relationship

The client-expert relationship, which is at the core of the social work profession, was one of the most emphasized topics by the students. This sub-theme covers the possible effects of AI on the client-expert relationship and students' views on the nature of this relationship. The students' narratives reflect their thoughts on how the relational dimension and human interaction at the core of the social work profession will be preserved in the context of AI.

Most of the participants emphasized the lack of empathy ability of AI as an important limitation in the client-expert relationship. P13 expressed this situation as follows: *"Since AI does not have the concept of emotion, we can feel what he/she feels or how he/she feels at that moment in a sentence coming from the applicant. But when we ask this to AI about how to respond to this, it may give a very flat answer, a very harsh answer, because it cannot pass emotions to us."*

On the other hand, the importance of the human factor in social work practices was also emphasized by some participants. P7 expressed this situation as follows: *"I think it cannot be used in the field of social service and intervention. Because we communicate with human beings, I do not think AI will only be useful in terms of intervention. It may be useful theoretically; I do not say anything to that, but I do not think it can be useful in terms of intervention."*

To add, some participants emphasized that AI should be used as a supporting tool in the applicant-expert relationship. P14 expressed this situation as follows: *"AI can define the emotions of the applicant; it can also tell what they are, but it does not understand emotions; it cannot understand them in any way. In this regard, I think there will be problems if we include* AI *in the process completely. I think that only AI should remain as a tool."*

When these opinions are considered in a holistic manner, they reveal that social work students draw a clear boundary about the role of AI in the client-expert relationship. Students think that the empathic, sensitive, and humanitarian nature of the client-expert relationship, which is one of the core values of the social work profession, should be preserved. The limitations of AI in understanding and responding to emotional and empathic dimensions constitute an important reservation about the use of this technology in direct interaction with the client. Students' views indicate that AI should be positioned as a tool that supports and strengthens the client-expert relationship but should not replace the human interaction at the core of this relationship.

4.2.3. Ethical Concerns Sub-theme

This sub-theme reveals the ethical concerns about the use of AI in social work practices and the relationship of these concerns with the core values of the profession. In this context, students have important question marks about how the social work profession will maintain its ethical standards while adopting technological developments.

For example, the issue of privacy and data security is among the most emphasized ethical concerns of the participants. P13 expressed this concern as follows: *"Now, one of the first ethical principles of social work practices is confidentiality. The AI in front of us has an internet database, and we know that it is processed. Now, when we present this information we receive from the applicant here, how sure can we be of its confidentiality? This is a risk, a danger for us."*

On the other hand, concerns about how to protect the principles of respect and dignity of human dignity were expressed by some participants. P14 expressed this concern as follows: *"I think that social workers should not ignore human dignity and ethics. If they ignore them, this time they will forget equality, justice, and basic values."*

In addition to these, potential prejudices and discrimination risks that AI algorithms may have are among the ethical concerns expressed by some participants. P9 expressed this concern as follows: *"As I said, there may be discrimination here, racism. Apart from that, it can violate private rights. Also, after all, this is an artificial thing, and there is a producer. Also, people from every country use it. I think that when there is a dispute between countries, they can take over our information, the answers I give, or the subjects I research."*

Overall, when these ethical concerns expressed by social work students are considered together, they point to important issues that need to be carefully addressed in the process of integrating AI into social work practices. In particular, privacy and data security, respect for human dignity, and prevention of discrimination risks are critical for the protection of the ethical standards of the social work profession. In this context, the sensitivity of the students on these issues reveals that there is a strong determination that the ethical principles of the social work profession should be protected against technological innovations. Therefore, it is important to systematically address these concerns and harmonize these technologies by considering the ethical standards of the profession. This reveals that a balance should be established between technological developments and the core values of the profession and that AI applications should be used in a way to support these values.

4.3. AI Education and Access Theme

Under the main theme of AI education and access, three sub-themes were identified: educational need, access inequalities, and future-oriented recommendations.

4.3.1. Education Need Sub-theme

This sub-theme reflects the students' views on the current state of their education in AI, their deficiencies, and their future educational needs. In this context, it is clearly seen in the statements of the students that they need a more systematic and comprehensive education to better educate themselves in the face of rapidly developing AI technologies.

In this context, most of the participants emphasized that AI education should be included in the social work curriculum. P14 expressed this need as follows: *"I think that AI education at the university is very incomplete at the moment. I think that AI education should be given in every period starting from the 1st grade to the 4th grade of universities. The AI revolution has already started, even though we all do not realize it."*

Similarly, some participants thought that there is a need to develop the skills to use AI. P3 expressed this need as follows: *"I have never seen such a thing before. I have not seen any training or course. I only heard about it from my friends during exam times: AI, look, when you ask this question, it gives you the answer immediately. I do not know how to use it at first; someone must show me. I think we are insufficient in this regard."*

Furthermore, some participants highlighted the need for training on the ethical use of AI. P14 expressed this need as follows: *"Trainings on the use of AI can be given. Trainings such as how to use it more effectively and how to use it in a more ethical and fair way can be given. I think it is only through education."*

In this framework, students' views on the need for training clearly reveal the need for social work education to adapt to the requirements of the digital age. In a period when AI technologies are rapidly developing and becoming widespread, it is becoming increasingly important to develop social work students' skills to understand, use, and evaluate these technologies within the framework of ethical principles. On the other hand, reported training needs of the students include both the acquisition of technical skills and the development of ethical awareness.

4.3.2. Access Inequalities Sub-theme

Social work students draw attention to inequalities in access to AI technologies. This sub-theme reflects various inequalities in access to AI technologies and the potential effects of these inequalities. In the students' views, there is an awareness that differences in access to a powerful technology such as AI can deepen existing social inequalities.

In this context, especially economic factors were emphasized as an important source of inequality in access to AI technologies. P13 explained this situation as follows: *"I think there is an inequality between students and professionals. For example, most AI applications have a certain limit. After a certain limit, for example, it says that you need to buy premium. Since these professionals actually use it constantly, it adds a plus feature to them. However, when it comes to students, for example, it comes to mind in terms of economy. I think students may be lacking in this regard."*

In addition, differences in competence in utilization were highlighted as another dimension of access inequalities. P5 expressed this situation as follows: *"I think there is no problem in terms of access, but professionals can ask clearer questions to AI, and AI can give clearer answers. I think students do not know how to ask questions. For example, I write a question, and it gives me an answer in 3-5 pieces, but my teacher prints a question; for example, I can get long answers."*

On the other hand, regional access differences were emphasized by some participants. P14 explained this situation as follows: *"Yes, there are inequalities in access to AI. Whether it is people*

living in rural areas, they cannot access AI *in any way. Since there is no certain internet environment and there are no computers, they may experience inequalities in this regard."*

These concerns expressed by students reveal inequalities in access to AI. The fact that factors such as economic resources, digital literacy level, and geographical location affect access to AI emphasizes the need for equal opportunities to benefit from these technologies.

4.3.3. Future-Oriented Recommendations Sub-theme

Social work students' suggestions for the future use of AI technologies constitute an important dimension of this research. This sub-theme reflects the solution suggestions and future visions of the students for more effective, ethical, and inclusive use of AI technologies in the field of social work. Students' suggestions focus on both the improvement of educational processes and the more efficient use of AI in practice areas.

In this context, the development of institution-university cooperation is one of the strategies suggested to make effective use of AI in the future. P13 expressed this suggestion as follows: *"In addition, it does not matter whether it is private or public in these social service institutions. They can be given something like a seminar, an event, or a free program where they can improve themselves because I really think that the employees also need this."*

In addition, the development of AI-supported professional software specific to the field of social work was suggested by some participants. P6 expressed this suggestion as follows: *"It could be this. Now we must fill out a report to get to know the applicant at first and to get his basic information. In fact, after we give him/her that information, it can be completely organized and made into a form. In order to make the work easier, or to make your reports easier, you can just enter some information in your reports; for example, he/she can listen to it from there and write a more qualified, more detailed report, for example."*

In addition to these, some participants suggested the organization of continuous training programs on AI. P11 explained this suggestion as follows: *"Trainings, but I mean, training cannot be given once and then passed. I think it should be continuous from time to time. I mean, from time to time, I am trying to say that it will be at a certain level; people should be reminded of these from time to time. As we said regarding AI earlier, there may be violations, whether it is about ethics or something like that. Therefore, there can be training for these."*

In this framework, collaborations to be established primarily between public institutions and universities can ensure the rapid integration of current developments in the field into educational processes and practices. These collaborations will allow both students and current practitioners to continuously update their knowledge and skills on AI.

On the other hand, the development of AI-supported software specific to the field of social work will support professional practices and contribute to the use of this technology in a way that does not weaken the core values and human-oriented approach of the profession.

Finally, it emphasizes the need for continuous updating of knowledge and skills in this field through continuing education programs. These trainings should aim to develop not only technical skills but also ethical awareness.

5. CONCLUSION

This study aims to examine the social work students' perceptions of AI, the potential of using this technology in the field of social work, and the ethical concerns it raises. The findings from the present study reveal a multidimensional picture of the place of AI technologies in the field of social work. The views of the participant students reveal the opportunities provided by AI and the challenges it brings. Also, this study handles the need for integration of this technology into social work education.

In this context, within the scope of the first theme of the present study, "Perceptions of AI," it was seen that students perceive AI primarily as a tool that facilitates daily life and academic studies, provides quick access to information, and synthesizes complex information. In addition, functional benefits of AI, such as saving time, providing comprehensive access to information, and the ability to make detailed analyses, were also emphasized by the students. However, at the same time, students were concerned about the potential of AI to make people lazy, produce unreliable information, generate the risk of weakening human relations, and have negative effects on employment.

On the other hand, under the second theme of the present study, "Intersection of Social Work and AI ", students' views on the potential role of AI in social work practices were evaluated. The students emphasized that AI has an important potential, especially in areas such as writing reports such as social investigation reports, data analysis, activity planning for group work, and its use as a support system in decision-making processes. However, students also expressed reservations about the nature of the applicant-expert relationship. The lack of empathizing ability of AI and its limitations in understanding and responding to emotional and empathic dimensions are seen as an important obstacle in the use of this technology in direct interaction with the client. In this context, students emphasized the importance of human interaction at the core of the social work profession and stated that AI should be positioned as a tool to support this interaction but should not replace this interaction.

On the other hand, the dimension of ethical concerns was one of the most emphasized issues regarding the use of AI in social work. Privacy and data security, respect for human dignity and protection of value principles, and potential biases and discrimination risks of algorithms are among the main ethical concerns expressed by students. The sensitivity of the students on this issue reveals that for the effective and ethical use of AI technologies in the field of social work, these concerns should be

addressed systematically, and these technologies should be harmonized with the ethical standards of the profession.

Within the scope of the third theme of the study, " AI Education and Access", it was observed that the students needed a more systematic and comprehensive education on AI, were aware of the inequalities in access to AI technologies and offered various suggestions for the future. Students emphasized the need to integrate AI education into the social work curriculum, to develop AI usage skills, and to provide training on ethical use. On the other hand, the fact that factors such as economic factors, usage competence and geographical location affect access to AI reveals that there is an inequality of opportunity problem in accessing AI technologies.

Looking at the future-oriented suggestions of the students, it reveals the need for a multidimensional approach for more effective, ethical, and inclusive use of AI technologies in the field of social work. Especially the development of public institutions-university cooperation, the development of AI-supported professional software specific to the field of social work, and the organization of continuing education programs are among the main suggestions of the students.

Overall, when the findings from the present study are evaluated, it is revealed that social work students' perceptions of AI are multidimensional. It is also seen that they seek a balance between the potential benefits and risks of this technology. In this context, although students are aware of the conveniences and advantages provided by AI technologies, they are also aware that these technologies should be used in accordance with the basic values and ethical principles of the social work profession.

In light of the results of this study, it is recommended that social work departments of universities should systematically integrate AI and digital technologies into their curricula. This integration should include both the acquisition of technical skills and the development of ethical awareness. Secondly, strong collaborations should be developed between social work institutions and universities on the use of AI technologies. Thirdly, AI-supported software specific to the field of social work should be developed and designed in accordance with the unique needs and values of the profession. Fourthly, strategies should be developed to facilitate access to AI technologies, reduce costs, and increase competence in their use. Finally, ethical standards and guidelines should be established for the use of AI technologies in the field of social work. These standards should cover issues such as privacy and data security, respect for human dignity, and prevention of discrimination and bias risks.

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