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The Future is Connection:

Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society

Avatars of ourselves: Exploring professional identity with generative AI in higher education

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Convincing digital copies of professional selves, avatars that look, sound, and respond like a person, have become easier to produce with generative artificial intelligence (GenAI). This paper reports work in progress on a postgraduate business subject at an Australian university, in which students explore professional identity by constructing, testing, and questioning AI representations of themselves. In a curriculum-embedded workshop, students choose between two equivalent activities: building an AI avatar from a self-authored knowledge base or writing a structured professional profile. Both ask students to decide deliberately what to share with, and withhold from, an AI system, then to test their representation against simulated professional scenarios before reflection and debrief. Drawing on postdigital perspectives, the design positions GenAI as neither threat nor solution but as a provocation for identity work. Both critical evaluation of technology and self-knowledge matter more when AI can convincingly represent a person. Preliminary findings from this first iteration, drawn from facilitator reflections and de-identified conversation logs, suggest that the pedagogical value of self-representing avatars lies in the critical questioning they provoke, rather than in their technical sophistication. The workshop offers a practical, adaptable model for critical and creative engagement with GenAI and professional identity.

Keywords: postdigital, critical AI literacy, AI agents, synthetic media, learning design, qualitative

Introduction

Discussion of technologies in education tends to be polarised, framed either as threat or solution (Fawns, 2022), and discourse around generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) follows a similar pattern of ‘fear and awe’ (Vallis et al, 2025). AI-generated avatars intensify these tensions. Realistic digital copies of humans can be produced from a text script, so that an avatar can plausibly speak for a person in professional settings such as hiring, client communication, and marketing. Such representations can now also be created without a person's consent, yet attention to GenAI has concentrated on text and academic integrity (Corbin et al., 2025), with image governance lagging behind (Arantes, 2026). For students entering professional life, understanding what synthetic representations can and cannot capture, and making deliberate choices about self-representation, is becoming part of professional practice itself.

This research explores students’ own construction of AI representations of themselves. The context is work-integrated learning, where students are expected to develop a professional identity alongside disciplinary knowledge. As GenAI can generate plausible professional personas in seconds, students need to understand, articulate and value their distinctive professional selves. Below is the design and implementation of a workshop that stages this as a practical, creative, and ethical inquiry, embedded in the final weeks of a postgraduate business consulting practicum. The paper reports on preliminary findings for practitioners, with a fuller account of the study and its findings to follow in subsequent work.

Background: Avatars, identity, and the postdigital

The approach draws on postdigital perspectives that treat technology as entangled with everyday life rather than as a separate tool for education (Fawns, 2022). Digital technologies are not passive tools; they shape how people work, relate, and see themselves, often without notice (Gravett & Bearman, 2025). From this stance,

the pedagogical task is not to teach students how to operate a platform, nor to protect them from it, but to design experiences in which students critically and creatively examine how these systems already participate in professional life (Bearman & Ajjawi, 2023). Avatars are a productive site for such inquiry because they materialise abstract concerns about data, representation, and identity in a form students can build, watch, and question. In this sense, the workshop invites students to interview a technology-in-use, attending to what it invites, obscures, and displaces (Gravett & Bearman, 2025).

Recent research examined AI-generated avatars as presenters of learning content, finding that students were largely comfortable with synthetic presenters but not especially impressed by them, and that clear design intentions were key to their effective and ethical use (Vallis & Britton, 2024; Vallis et al, 2024). Such findings suggest that more evaluation, judgement, and active engagement with these technologies are required. Hence, in this study, students author the inputs, interrogate the outputs, and judge where the representation fails.

The workshop also responds to critiques of authentic assessment. When authenticity is equated with reproducing workplace tasks, assessment risks narrowing to performance for employers and markets. An ontological view instead asks how assessment supports students in becoming professionals, integrating knowledge, action, and being (Dall'Alba, 2024; Vallis, 2024). The workshop is designed to encourage students to articulate who they are, decide what a Large Language Model (LLM) may know about them, and test the limits of artificial representation. In this sense, students may actively construct their professional identity.

Context

The workshop was delivered in two class sessions in the final weeks of a postgraduate business consulting practicum at a large Australian metropolitan university. In the practicum, student teams work on a semester-long project with a sponsor organisation and are expected to continuously reflect on their development as individuals and team members.

Students build their avatar using an institutionally supported AI agent platform, within institutional data governance arrangements. An ethics-approved qualitative study [2026/HE000489] explores students' experiences of the workshop through analysis of de-identified platform conversation logs and opt-in focus groups conducted by an independent facilitator.

Workshop design and implementation

In the orientation, an AI-generated video avatar of the subject coordinator is presented, demonstrating that a familiar professional identity can already be convincingly assembled from existing data. Students discuss the value of the polished professional persona and this representation in an increasingly automated age.

The workshop is designed to maximise student agency. Students are not obliged to construct their professional identity with an AI avatar. Via an anonymous slip, students may choose instead to write a professional profile so that no student feels socially compelled to hand personal information to an LLM. Both pathways address the same learning outcomes.

Before providing or writing any information, students reflect on what would be appropriate to share, omit, or withhold in different contexts for different purposes. They are encouraged to articulate their reasoning about professional judgement in pairs. The emphasis is on students' critique of AI-generated representation rather than on its production. This critical and reflective engagement with AI-generated representations aligns with calls to shift away from skills-based approaches towards understanding how AI shapes knowledge, practice, and decision-making (Arstorp et al., 2026).

Students develop custom AI agents within a facilitator-configured sandbox on cogniti.ai, designed to support safe and structured experimentation. The sandbox has configurable controls over system instructions, AI model selection, user access and sharing permissions, agent availability, and conversation history visibility.

These features enable students to explore agent design within clearly defined boundaries while providing facilitators with oversight of agent interactions and the learning process.

The session builds in a deliberate order, moving students from observing an AI-generated professional identity, to constructing and questioning their own, to situating those observations in recognisable professional scenarios. The two scenarios then place the representation under realistic strain. In the client meeting, students are asked to notice where the avatar or profile answers smoothly and where it substitutes plausible generality for their actual experience. In the ethical dilemma, values and human judgement are designed to surface, since the representation can only reproduce what students chose to encode. Further guided questions encourage students to connect their observations to professional practice and the limits of AI representation. Table 1 below outlines the pedagogical sequence.

Table 1
Workshop: Professional identity, AI and business

Phase	Activity
Orientation	Students view a short video avatar of the subject coordinator in which both script and video are AI-generated. They consider its authenticity and how it compares to online profiles on social media.
Choosing an activity	Students then choose whether to build an AI avatar (agent) from a self-authored knowledge base or write a structured written professional profile.
Constructing a self-knowledge base	Individually, students respond to scaffolded questions to describe their professional identity and values, deciding what to share, omit, or withhold and why.
Generating and questioning	Students generate their avatar or written profile and interrogate the result to identify what is accurate, exaggerated or oversimplified, and what is missing.
Testing against scenarios	Students test their profile or avatar against two simulated professional scenarios, a client meeting and an ethical dilemma.
Reflection and debrief	Individual written reflection, pair discussion, then structured group debrief.

Preliminary findings

Findings at this stage are preliminary, drawn from facilitator reflections and early analysis of workshop data collected under the approved study. Facilitators noted that the first iteration of the workshop generated strong student engagement, particularly through the opening AI-generated avatar video of the subject coordinator (the author, created with their consent), which prompted discussion about authenticity, professional identity, and the implications of AI-generated representations. Students were interested in creating their own AI avatars and agents, and student debriefs generated thoughtful discussion around ethical dilemmas, professional values, and the potential role of AI avatars in learning and professional contexts.

However, the implementation of control prompts revealed a gap between the intended learning design and how the activity unfolded through the interaction between design, platform constraints, and learning experience. Although the prompts were intended to encourage critical engagement with AI, they also created unintended barriers, with some students unable to save or deploy their agents. As unsuccessful attempts were not retained, it was not possible to examine students' inputs or fully understand the causes of these issues. While these technical issues shifted some attention from critical reflection to troubleshooting, they also became a learning opportunity, exposing students to the realities of working with emerging AI technologies and encouraging peer collaboration in problem-solving. In these moments, the technology itself shaped the session in unplanned ways (Gravett & Bearman, 2025), as much as the pedagogical design. This also echoes earlier findings that clarifying design intentions matters more than technical sophistication (Vallis et al., 2024).

Analysis of conversation logs from the pilot, collected under the approved study (24 postgraduate students, over 100 conversations conducted across two in-class sessions) suggests several emerging patterns, though these are preliminary findings. Student engagement varied considerably. Most students completed the structured scenario prompts, without challenging the avatar's identity and knowledge or testing the consistency of its outputs. The avatar responses to the set ethical dilemma were largely safe, formulaic answers unless students pressed further. Only a minority moved beyond following task instructions into unprompted critical behaviours. Notably, these spontaneous critical questions, rather than the scripted tasks themselves, appeared to generate the richest engagement.

Early observations also point to the significance of multilingual interaction, with several students code-switching into their first language at points where their questioning deepened, and to tensions around authorship and reflection. Some students delegated elements of the reflective task back to generative tools like ChatGPT, similar to evidence that offloading to GenAI can diminish engagement with the process itself (Mei et al., 2025).

Together, these emerging learnings suggest that the pedagogical value of self-representing avatars is in the critical questioning they provoke. Design considerations around scaffolding challenge, protecting metacognitive components, and avatar configuration will inform the next iteration of the study.

Discussion and future directions

This project repositions AI avatars in business education, from a delivery technology evaluated for engagement, towards a provocation for professional identity work. Rather than asking students to trust or distrust GenAI, the workshop asks them to inhabit the more uncomfortable and productive position of working out the limitations of AI systems and how integrating them into professional practice might subtly influence perceptions and values, without deeper critical engagement. This offers students a grounded, practical critique of algorithmic representation.

Findings from this first iteration are limited by the context of use in two class sessions for a subject at one institution. The design is nonetheless intended to be adaptable, and the anonymous-choice, withholding-first structure could transfer to other disciplines where professional identity, data literacy, and GenAI intersect. The next phase is a qualitative study of student experience through focus groups, analysed thematically, examining how students describe the gap between their AI representation and their sense of professional self, how they reasoned about withholding information, and whether the experience shifted their thinking about GenAI in professional practice.

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