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ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION

Learning from the Dead: A Conceptual Review and Framework for Ghostbots as Experiential Learning Tools in Business Schools

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Abstract— This conceptual review paper investigates the possibility of creating real experiential learning at business schools using artificial-intelligence-generated replicas of prominent business executives, entrepreneurs, and management thinkers, referred to here as ghostbots. Although it is now theoretically possible to simulate dialogue with historically significant figures thanks to the development of generative AI and digital persona technologies, no previous research has compared this application to accepted educational theories. This paper conducts a PRISMA-informed conceptual review that synthesizes 26 studies from four literatures: ghostbot and digital persona design, experiential learning theory, human-AI interaction and social presence, and precedents in business and entrepreneurship education. The research question is whether such AI replicas can produce authentic experiential learning. Thematic synthesis shows that, when combined with intentional reflective scaffolding, digitally mediated concrete experience can support Kolb experiential learning cycle; however, ghostbot authenticity is still dependent on persona fidelity, open disclosure, and ethical trust rather than being a feature of the technology itself. Based on these results, the study puts forth four theoretical propositions for further empirical investigation along with a conceptual framework that positions perceived authenticity, social presence, and ethical trust as moderators between ghostbot design and advancement through the Kolb cycle. A novel pedagogical framework, a human-AI learning model that integrates previously disparate literatures, and an initial set of design guidelines addressing curricular integration, ethical protections, and technical requirements for responsible ghostbot deployment are among the contributions of the study. The study concludes that ghostbots have real educational potential, but in order to convert technological innovation into real learning outcomes, intentional instructional facilitation and governance are needed.

Keywords— Ghostbots, Experiential learning, Business education, Human-AI interaction, Digital authenticity

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Introduction

Experiential learning techniques such as simulations, case studies, and mentorship have been used for many years, particularly in business education, to help students make the transition from theory to practice in their managerial roles (Figueroa-Torres, 2024). The ghostbot is a new and controversial addition to this tradition, introduced in recent years through advances in generative artificial intelligence. A ghostbot is a large language model AI chatbot that mimics the personal style, speech patterns, and thinking of a human being, typically a deceased person or someone who is otherwise unavailable (McStay, 2024; Pei, 2025). Although the use of ghostbots has been discussed in relation to the concept of "grief technology" and "digital afterlife services," their use in the field of professional education has, thus far, received little attention (Lin, 2026). A less explored option, which this paper proposes, is the use of ghostbots modeled after influential business leaders, entrepreneurs, and management thinkers as tools for experiential learning in the business school (Harbinja et al., 2023).

The intuitiveness of such an application is appealing. In theory, learners could interact with an AI avatar of a historical figure, ask strategic questions, test decision-making processes, or seek guidance from the historical figure's known worldview (Cao et al., 2024; Mollick et al., 2024). Moreover, advocates may claim that this provides a more flexible and accessible alternative to a guest speaker, case discussion, or biographical study, giving a student the opportunity to connect with a person's thought process in real time, instead of simply hearing about it. This, however, presents an underlying pedagogical and ethical issue that has not been systematically discussed in scholarship. The experiential learning approach, as described by Kolb (1984), relies on the process of engaging in authentic experiences and reflecting on them (Alrawad et al., 2025; Sharif et al., 2025). It therefore remains unclear whether interaction with an artificial replication of a person, no matter how advanced, can yield equivalent real-world learning outcomes linked to first-hand experiences, mentorship, or even well-designed simulations that involve live actors or facilitators (Mou et al., 2026).

There are also unanswered questions about the faithfulness of ghostbot personas, the danger of misrepresenting a deceased person's point of view, and the ethical issues associated with using the likeness of a deceased person for educational purposes without their consent (Truong & Chen, 2025). Existing pedagogical theory has not been built around this technology, and existing ghostbot literature has not been built around the educational application of this technology, leaving a gap between the two bodies of work that this paper aims to bridge (Pedersen & Ritter, 2024; Vo et al., 2024). Based on this gap, the central research question of this paper is as follows: Is it possible to develop authentic experiential learning from AI replicas of influential business leaders, entrepreneurs, or management thinkers?

To answer this question, the paper conducts a conceptual literature review across three fields of research that have not previously been studied together: ghostbot and digital persona technology, experiential learning theory, and human-AI interaction research. Instead of examining empirical hypotheses, this review is used to garner and synthesize the current theoretical and applied literature to form a new conceptual framework for future research and practice. This paper has a deliberately limited scope. It is not a review of any particular commercial ghostbot product, and it is not a report of primary empirical evidence on learning outcomes. Rather, it is a theoretical endeavor that builds on existing pedagogical and technological literature to offer a defensible theory of how, and under what conditions, ghostbot-mediated learning could resemble real-world experiential learning.

The purpose of this paper is to make three potential contributions. First, it offers a new pedagogical model that introduces ghostbots in the context of the familiar experiential learning theory, instead of presenting them as a new category that needs its own justification. Second, it builds a human-AI learning model by deriving the constructs likely to affect meaningful learning when interacting with a ghostbot, such as perceived authenticity, persona fidelity, and ethical trust. Third, it provides a preliminary set of design principles that could be used by business schools to make the responsible design and use of ghostbot-based learning tools a possibility, if they are to be adopted in practice.

Theoretical Foundations

Ghostbots and digital resurrection/persona technology

Ghostbots, also known as griefbots, deadbots, or digital resurrection technologies, are AI-based bots designed to mimic the voice, personality, and speech patterns of a specific individual, usually one that has died or is not present (Obadia, 2025). Generally, these systems are developed with the support of a large language model fine-tuned on the individual's writing, speech, interviews, and voice or video recordings, sometimes with the assistance of deepfakes to replicate the individual's voice and likeness (Öberg, 2026).

In the literature on digital afterlife, two typologies are identified: passive memorial tools (static digital archives) and interactive ghostbots (which can produce new and context-specific responses in real time) (Figueroa-Torres, 2024). There is also a difference between authorized replicas, made with the consent or participation of the individual or their estate, and unauthorized replicas based solely on public data without consent (McStay, 2024).

This distinction has important ramifications for authenticity and ethical legitimacy, both of which are crucial for this paper. In the field of business education, ghostbots would most likely come in the form of interactive, text- or voice-based conversational agents representing business leaders, entrepreneurs, or management theorists from history (Zanotti & Chiffi, 2025). Before considering the possibility of successfully facilitating

experiential learning with these tools, it is important to have a grasp of this typology, as its level of interactivity and authorization will likely influence how learners perceive these tools and their ethical defensibility.

Experiential learning theory (Kolb's cycle)

Among the pedagogical theories in business and management education, the theory of experiential learning developed by Kolb (1984) is still one of the most widely used (Hollanek & Nowaczyk-Basińska, 2024). The theory states that learning is a four-stage cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation, in which a learner engages in an activity or experience, reflects on what is observed, forms or revises general concepts and theories, and then applies concepts to new scenarios (Morris, 2020). Successful experiential learning usually involves going through all four phases, not just the passive exposure phase (Roe et al., 2024). This framework has long supported pedagogies such as simulations, internships, and case discussions in business schools (Robertson et al., 2024).

Figure 1 shows how a ghostbot interaction might correspond with each of (Kolb, 1984) four learning stages, from simulated dialogue as a concrete experience, to conceptualizing management ideas through a case or simulation. It is introduced early in the literature review to provide a concrete visual anchor for readers who are not familiar with (Kolb, 1984) cycle. The figure provides a preliminary indication, ahead of the literature synthesis, that the argument of the paper is dependent on reflective work being filled in by the surrounding pedagogy: a ghostbot can plausibly occupy each stage, but it is not in place without the accompanying pedagogy.

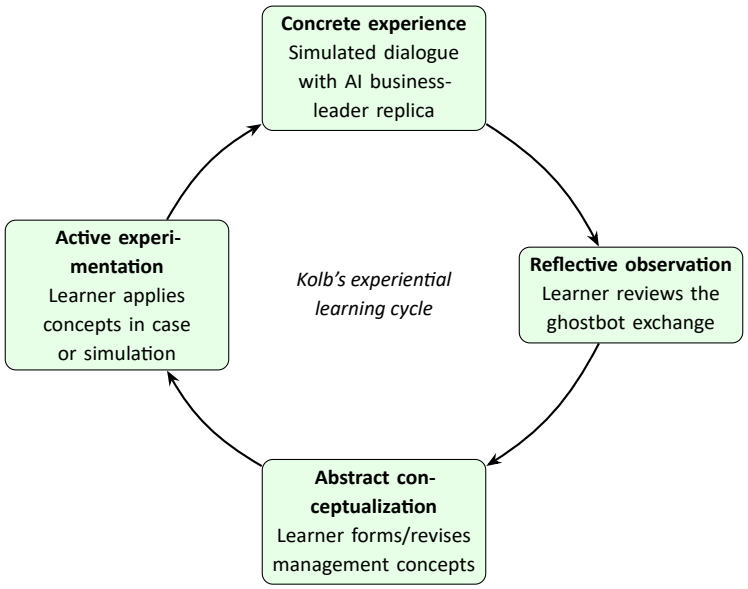


Fig. 1 *Kolb's cycle annotated with ghostbot touchpoints. Source: Adapted from Kolb (1984) and Morris (2020)*

Human-AI interaction and social presence theory

Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) theory is the initial theory used to describe social presence, defined as the ability to perceive one another as real, present, and psychologically engaged (Truong & Chen, 2025). The theory has since been applied to human-AI interaction studies investigating whether humans can have meaningful social presence with conversational agents, as opposed to other humans (Obrenovic et al., 2025). Results in this context indicate that perceived social presence is related to trust, engagement, and even openness to new ideas and information, even when users are told they are communicating with a machine, not a human (Alrawad et al., 2025). The question of how much social presence AI can generate is directly applicable to ghostbot-based learning, given that a learner's willingness to engage meaningfully with an AI avatar of a business leader is likely to be influenced by the social presence the system can create (Robertson et al., 2024). An interesting phenomenon in human-AI interactions is also the uncanny valley effect and the loss of trust when the AI system's persona appears inauthentic or manipulative (Hui et al., 2024).

Authenticity in learning experiences

The concept of authenticity in learning has been theorized in several traditions and is generally understood as the extent to which a learning experience is grounded in actual, rather than artificial or simplified, simulation of the real world (Pedersen & Ritter, 2024). Ill-structured problems, real-world context, and opportunities for reflection and iteration are common features of authentic learning experiences, and they resemble the

experiential learning cycle developed by Kolb (1984) (Gupta, 2024). In this literature, authenticity is understood not as a property of the learning tool itself but as a relational construct, such that the same learning tool may be more or less authentic for different learners, in different contexts, based on different understandings, and in relation to differing expectations (Sharif et al., 2025). This is essential in assessing ghostbots because the mere sophistication of the underlying AI model and a well-documented persona does not mean the tool is legitimate (Harbinja et al., 2024). Rather, perceived authenticity seems to be shaped by, among other factors, persona fidelity, acknowledgment of the limitations of the AI, and the pedagogies put forth by the teacher (Vo et al., 2024).

Methodology

Protocol and registration

This review was conducted using a PRISMA-informed approach, but with a conceptual and theory-building focus, instead of a clinical or intervention-outcome systematic review. Neither the review nor its underlying research question was registered with PROSPERO, because PROSPERO registration is limited to reviews with health-related and/or outcome-oriented research questions. Rather, the protocol for the review, including the eligibility criteria, search terms, and screening process, was pre-stated by the author group and is available upon request; a protocol is required for conceptual reviews that follow PRISMA reporting guidelines, but no formal registration is required.

Eligibility criteria

Only studies published between January 2022 and September 2026 were included in the database search. This time frame was selected because ChatGPT's November 2022 public release enabled large language models capable of fluent, persona-consistent discourse to become widely available. Applications for ghostbots and griefbots were mostly programmed, experimental, or restricted to static digital archives prior to this period and were therefore not representative of the interactive persona technologies examined in this review. However, three foundational works (Morris, 2020; Oh et al., 2018; Wollny et al., 2021), which define the central theoretical constructs of this review, were retained through citation chaining because their removal would have left the concepts of social presence, experiential learning, and educational chatbots without their established definitions.

Conference papers, book chapters, and peer-reviewed journal articles qualified. Preprints and other grey literature were excluded, with one exception: a preprint was retained when it was the only available source on a highly relevant sub-topic (Mollick et al., 2024). Studies were included if they addressed at least one of three areas: ghostbot, deadbot, or AI persona technology; experiential or authentic learning; or human-AI interaction and social presence in education or the workplace. Studies dealing solely with technical aspects, such as deepfake detection algorithms without ethical or pedagogical consideration, were excluded.

Information sources

The searches were conducted in Scopus, Web of Science, ProQuest, and ERIC, because of their good coverage of literature related to business, education, and interdisciplinary ethics. To ensure that current conference proceedings and early-access publications were not left out of the primary databases due to indexing lags, these searches were supplemented with focused searches in Google Scholar. To locate additional pertinent works not found through database searches, citation chaining was also used to manually scan the reference lists of included research.

Search strategy

Search phrases from the three theoretical domains were combined using Boolean operators. The main search terms were ("ghostbot" OR "deadbot" OR "griefbot" OR "AI replica" OR "AI persona" OR "digital afterlife") AND ("experiential learning" OR "Kolb" OR "authentic learning") AND ("business education" OR "management education" OR "business school"). To gather literature on human-AI contact, a second string was added: ("social presence" OR "human-AI interaction" OR "chatbot trust") AND ("education" OR "pedagogy" OR "learning"). Both searches were restricted to English-language publications from 2022 to 2026, and the syntax was adapted to each database (for example, TS in Web of Science and TITLE-ABS-KEY in Scopus). In accordance with PRISMA reporting, Table I lists the databases, field syntax, and Boolean strings utilized, enabling readers to confirm or duplicate the search. A hand-search and citation-chaining row is also included because some recent ghostbot literature was not yet indexed at the time of searching.

Table I
Search strategy summary

Database	Search field syntax	Boolean string
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY	(“ghostbot” OR “deadbot” OR “griefbot” OR “AI replica” OR “digital afterlife”) AND (“experiential learning” OR “Kolb” OR “authentic learning”) AND (“business education” OR “management education” OR “business school” OR “AI persona”)
Web of Science	TS	Same string, WoS syntax
ProQuest	ab,ti	Same string, ProQuest syntax
ERIC	Descriptor/keyword	Same string, ERIC thesaurus terms
Google Scholar	Full text (supplementary)	(“social presence” OR “human-AI interaction” OR “chatbot trust”) AND (“education” OR “pedagogy” OR “learning”)
Hand-search / citation chaining	Reference lists of included studies	Not applicable

Selection process

Screening was conducted in two stages: title/abstract screening was conducted independently by two reviewers, and full-text screening was conducted by two reviewers with disagreements resolved through discussion or, where necessary, by a third reviewer. The combined search across databases and citation chaining yielded 190 records. Of these, 44 were removed as duplicates prior to screening, leaving 146 records for title and abstract screening. During this screening, a further 46 records were identified as duplicates missed by automated deduplication, and 35 were excluded as clearly irrelevant to the three theoretical domains, leaving 65 records for full-text assessment. Full-text assessment excluded 18 records as not relevant to the theoretical domains, 12 as not peer-reviewed, and 9 as duplicate or overlapping records, resulting in 26 studies retained for thematic synthesis (Figure 2).

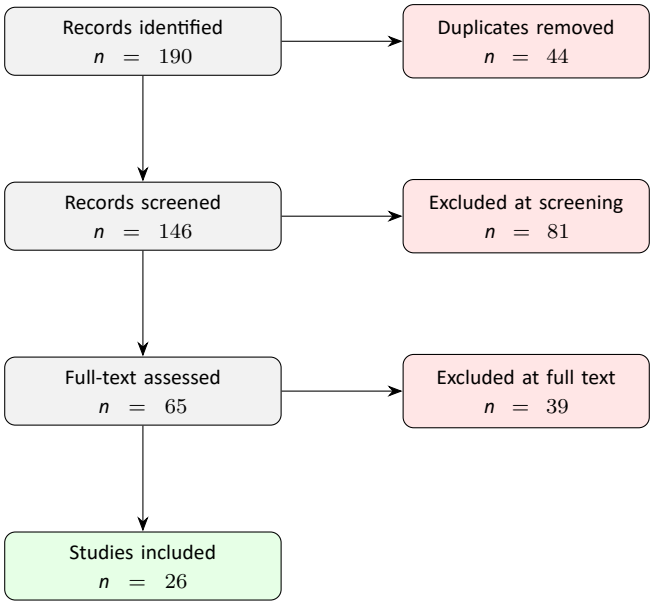


Fig. 2 *PRISMA flow diagram*

Data extraction and synthesis approach

Since it is a conceptual review and not a meta-analysis, data were not extracted and pooled statistically. For each of the 26 studies included, the author(s) and the year of publication were documented, along with theoretical domain of the study, key constructs or findings, and relevance to the proposed framework. A structured extraction form was used to document the author(s) and year, theoretical domain, key constructs or findings, and relevance to the proposed framework for each of the 26 studies included. Following the synthesis of the extracted data, a thematic narrative synthesis approach was employed to organize the studies into four themes presented in Section 4. These themes included ghostbot design and capabilities (n =6 studies), experiential learning in digital contexts (n =3 studies), ethics, psychology and authenticity (n =13 studies), and precedents in business and entrepreneurship education (n =4 studies). The inductive method used for topic synthesis was modified from

well-established thematic analysis techniques. The entire extraction dataset from all 26 investigations was first familiarized to the study team. Second, by detecting recurrent constructions, conclusions, and theoretical assertions in the gathered data from each study, preliminary codes were produced. Third, based on conceptual similarities, codes were iteratively clustered into prospective themes. For instance, codes pertaining to permission, disclosure, and misrepresentation were grouped together to form Theme 3 (ethics, psychology, and authenticity). Fourth, in order to verify coherence and make sure that no study's contribution was overlooked or misrepresented, candidate themes were compared to the entire dataset. Fifth, the four final themes were identified, described, and their boundaries were made clear where they overlapped (e.g., between Theme 3's authenticity concerns and Theme 1's design-fidelity focus).

Quality appraisal

Of the 26 included studies, 13 reported primary empirical findings, including survey-based studies examining trust in chatbots, investigations of chatbot social presence, and a simulation-based study of leadership training. The Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT), which offers a standardized framework for evaluating qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods research within a single assessment instrument, was used to evaluate these empirical studies. As is customary for narrative reviews of conceptual literature, the conceptual and philosophical articles that made up a significant portion of the ghostbot and digital afterlife literature were assessed not for empirical quality but rather for argumentation coherence and relevance to the study topic.

Only five of the thirteen empirical studies met high-quality criteria, and the most common constraints were self-report measures, cross-sectional designs, and small or single-site samples (Table II). The quality appraisal shows that the empirical evidence base is moderate rather than strong.

Table II
Quality appraisal summary (empirical studies, *n*= 13)

Study	MMAT category	Criteria met	Quality level	Risk of bias notes
Harbinja et al. (2024)	Quantitative descriptive	4/5	High	Self-selected survey sample; single-country context
Aboulnasr & Song (2025)	Quantitative descriptive	3/5	Medium	Scenario-based design may not reflect real reactions
Sharif et al. (2025)	Mixed methods	3/5	Medium	Integration of qual/quant strands not fully justified
Cheng et al. (2025)	Non-randomized (quasi-experimental)	4/5	High	No control group; single institution
Dopelt et al. (2023)	Mixed methods	4/5	High	Post-simulation interviews only, no baseline measure
Croes et al. (2023)	Qualitative	3/5	Medium	Coder subjectivity in content analysis; small corpus
Marriott & Pitardi (2024)	Quantitative descriptive	3/5	Medium	Cross-sectional; self-report attachment measures
Deng & Yan (2025)	Quantitative descriptive	3/5	Medium	Convenience sample; single chatbot platform tested
Wut et al. (2025)	Quantitative descriptive	4/5	High	Established scales; adequate sample size
Mou et al. (2026)	Quantitative descriptive	3/5	Medium	Trust-repair scenarios simulated, not naturalistic
Alrawad et al. (2025)	Quantitative descriptive	4/5	High	Cross-sectional design limits causal claims
Shabbir et al. (2024)	Quantitative descriptive	2/5	Low	Limited methodological detail reported
Somia & Vecchiarini (2024)	Quantitative descriptive	3/5	Medium	Entrepreneurship-student sample limits generalizability

In contrast, Table III demonstrates that the non-empirical literature regularly scores highly on argumentation coherence, indicating a more developed theoretical foundation in the traditions of business education and the digital afterlife than in the more recent research on human-AI interaction.

Table III
Coherence rating (non-empirical studies, *n*= 13)

Study	Type	Coherence rating
Hollanek & Nowaczyk-Basińska (2024)	Conceptual	High
Zanotti & Chiffi (2025)	Philosophical	High
Obadia (2025)	Conceptual	Medium
Harbinja et al. (2023)	Legal analysis	High
Jiménez-Alonso & Brescó de Luna (2023)	Conceptual	Medium
Osler & Krueger (2022)	Conceptual	High
Kozlovski & Makhortykh (2025)	Conceptual	Medium
Roe et al. (2024)	Scoping review	High
Morris (2020)	Systematic review	High
Oh et al. (2018)	Systematic review	High
Wollny et al. (2021)	Systematic review	Medium
Mollick et al. (2024)	Applied/conceptual	Medium
Kang et al. (2022)	Scoping review	High

Thematic Synthesis of Literature

Each of the 26 research that made up the synthesis is described in depth in Table IV, which serves as the basis for the complete synthesis. It provides a reviewer with the ability to quickly locate any claims in Section 6 by reference to the source to which they belong. Due to its size it is best to include it in an appendix with a forward reference in the main text.

Table IV
Summary of included studies

Author(s) (Year)	Domain	Study type	Key finding	Theme
Hollanek and Nowaczyk-Basińska (2024)	Digital afterlife	Conceptual	Typology of ghostbot interactivity and authorization	1
Zanotti and Chiffi (2025)	Digital afterlife	Philosophical	Distinguishes authorized vs. unauthorized replicas	1
Obadia (2025)	Digital afterlife	Conceptual	Computational challenge posed by deadbots to mortality	1
Harbinja et al. (2023)	Digital afterlife/law	Legal analysis	Governance frameworks for ghostbots remain underdeveloped	1
Jiménez-Alonso and Brescó de Luna (2023)	Grief technology	Conceptual	Griefbots complicate rather than resolve mourning	3
Harbinja et al. (2024)	Digital afterlife/law	Empirical (survey)	Users ambivalent about post-mortem digital representation	3
Aboulnasr and Song (2025)	Consumer behavior	Empirical	Perceived deception undermines dead-celebrity endorsements	3
Osler and Krueger (2022)	Philosophy of mind	Conceptual	Chatbot “continuing bonds” raise authenticity questions	3
Kozlovski and Makhortykh (2025)	Digital ethics	Conceptual	Digital duplicates risk distorting testimony without consent	3
Roe et al. (2024)	Deepfakes/education	Scoping review	Persona fidelity and disclosure shape trust	1
Sharif et al. (2025)	Deepfakes/education	Mixed methods	Governance framework for AI tutors	1
Morris (2020)	Experiential learning	Systematic review	Kolb’s model does not require physical co-presence	2
Cheng et al. (2025)	Experiential learning	Intervention study	Four-stage Kolb intervention effective in digital nursing education	2
Dopelt et al. (2023)	Experiential learning	Mixed methods	Simulation-based leadership training maps onto Kolb’s cycle	2

Author(s) (Year)	Domain	Study type	Key finding	Theme
Croes et al. (2023)	Human-AI interaction	Content analysis	Users apply human-like language strategies to chatbots	3
Marriott and Pitardi (2024)	Human-AI interaction	Empirical	AI companionship apps generate attachment-like responses	3
Deng and Yan (2025)	Human-AI interaction	Empirical (survey)	Perceived warmth/competence shape chatbot engagement	3
Oh et al. (2018)	Social presence	Systematic review	Defines antecedents and implications of social presence	3
Wollny et al. (2021)	Chatbots/education	Systematic review	Maps chatbot use across educational contexts	3
Wut et al. (2025)	Human-AI interaction	Empirical	Trust and social presence predict service satisfaction	3
Mou et al. (2026)	Human-AI interaction	Empirical	Trust repair dynamics in chatbot interactions	3
Alrawad et al. (2025)	Human-AI interaction	Empirical	Trust and social presence drive chatbot acceptance	3
Mollick et al. (2024)	AI in education	Applied/conceptual	AI agents enable scalable simulated practice	4
Shabbir et al. (2024)	AI in education	Empirical	Generative AI democratizes access to expert engagement	4
Kang et al. (2022)	Experiential learning	Scoping review	Experiential methods outperform lecture-based instruction	4
Somia and Vecchiarini (2024)	Entrepreneurship education	Empirical	AI tools support experiential entrepreneurial learning	4

Theme 1: Ghostbot/AI-replica design and capabilities in professional/educational contexts

The literature on ghostbot design is converging on a typology that divides memorial tools into passive and interactive (generative) ones that can generate new, context-specific dialogue (Hollanek & Nowaczyk-Basińska, 2024). Additionally, Zanotti and Chiffi (2025) and Obadia (2025) distinguish authorized replicas, created with the permission or participation of the represented person, from unauthorized replicas created using only public information. This distinction matters directly in professional and educational environments, because the legal and ethical standing of a ghostbot representing a named business leader is significantly affected by whether that individual (or their family, if deceased) gave consent to its use. Harbinja et al. (2023) point out that there is very little clarity on the governance of ghostbots, a gap with concrete implications for business schools considering the use of such tools. The literature on deepfakes and synthetic media adds two further design considerations: persona fidelity and disclosure that a persona is AI-generated (Roe et al., 2024; Sharif et al., 2025).

Theme 2: Experiential learning models applied to digital/simulated contexts

The systematic revision and updating of Kolb's experiential learning model remains the basis for determining whether a learning experience mediated by digital media has the potential to support the full learning cycle: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Morris (2020) suggests that the stages of the model do not need to be physically co-present, leaving room for the reflective and conceptual stages to be digitally mediated, but also intentionally scaffolded rather than taken for granted. Empirical evidence from adjacent fields supports the operationalization of (Kolb, 1984) experiential learning cycle. Cheng et al. (2025) demonstrated that a four-stage intervention incorporating case analysis, reflective journals, and peer simulation can effectively operationalize (Kolb, 1984) cycle in digitally supported nursing education. Similarly, Dopelt et al. (2023) found that simulation-based leadership training improved students' communication and decision-making skills in public health, with post-simulation interviews aligning well with the stages of (Kolb, 1984) cycle.

Cheng et al. (2025) and Dopelt et al. (2023) reach convergent conclusions from different educational contexts, nursing and public health respectively, both showing that simulation-based interventions can fulfill (Kolb, 1984) cycle when structured reflection is deliberately built in. Their agreement strengthens the inference that the missing ingredient for ghostbot-based learning is not the technology's realism but the surrounding pedagogical scaffolding, a claim this paper's framework treats as a design requirement rather than an assumption. These studies also show that, when combined with organized reflection, a technologically mediated or simulated concrete event can improve experiential learning through real-world application.

Theme 3: Ethical, psychological, and authenticity concerns

Grief technology research, which has many similarities to the business leader use case, is the source of the most widely discussed worries around ghostbots. Griefbots, according to Jiménez-Alonso and Brescó de Luna (2023), are a novel means of two-way communication with the deceased that may complicate rather than ease mourning. Osler and Krueger (2022), on the other hand, investigate how chatbots might maintain ongoing relationships with the departed while raising doubts about whether such conversation qualifies as true communication. This dispute implies that the discipline has not yet reached a consensus on whether AI-mediated contact with a depicted individual is a performative substitution or an actual conversation. This tension is extended into a higher-stakes zone by Kozlovski and Makhortykh (2025), who contend that historically relevant testimony could be flattened or distorted by digital copies, especially when the represented person is unable to approve or rectify the distortion. This issue immediately affects business executives' ghostbots, whose strategic thinking is not just personal but also public.

Consumer and user evidence is consistent with this. Users are conflicted regarding post-mortem digital representation, according to Harbinja et al. (2024): they fear being misrepresented and losing control over their legacy, but they also desire some ongoing digital presence. According to Aboulnasr and Song (2025), negative emotional responses to AI-generated dead celebrity endorsements in the commercial context are associated with feelings of deceit and a perception that the brand is exploiting the deceased's likeness. For business education, these findings collectively indicate a real risk of misrepresenting a business figure's actual views; this risk is greatest for strategic or ethical questions on which the AI model may generate a position the real person never held. Moreover, human-AI interaction research documents that users can develop attachment-like responses to conversational agents (Croes et al., 2023; Marriott & Pitardi, 2024).

Theme 4: Precedents in business education

As a tradition of business education, simulated or role-based approaches have modeled actual managerial experiences since the Greek concept of dialogue: case based Socratic dialogue to business simulations using computers. This tradition is now carried forward into generative AI by a recent scholarship. In the context of ghostbot mentorship, it is crucial to recognize that AI agents can be employed to generate meaningful, formative practice scenarios in professional education, enabling students to rehearse the high-stakes conversations multiple times with adaptive feedback, a skill closely aligned with ghostbot mentorship. Mollick et al. (2024) show that AI agents can be used to develop scalable and formative practice scenarios in professional education with students being able to repeat high-stakes interactions with adaptive feedback. Other researchers, such as Somia and Vecchiarini (2024), have also observed that the use of generative AI tools in entrepreneurship education is becoming more common, and that while they can benefit the experiential and personalized aspects of learning, they do not happen automatically and must be carefully designed. The pedagogical rationale for ghostbot mentorship was indirectly supported by a wider scoping review by Kang et al. (2022) who showed that experiential learning techniques in higher education such as role play, simulation, and guest-expert engagement have been consistently found to be superior in developing practical skills compared to lecture-based learning. In resource-challenged environments, the very idea of democratizing access to expertise that would otherwise be inaccessible is another reason why generative AI would be valuable, as would be the case with ghostbots for historically significant figures in business. No study reviewed, however, considers an AI replica of a specific, named business leader as a pedagogical tool, establishing that this use of AI is not an incremental extension of what already exists in the literature. Table V shows the number of studies informing each theme and the central tension associated with each theme. Most notably that Theme 3 (ethics and authenticity) was the most well-informed theme with 13 of the 26 studies.

Table V
Thematic synthesis matrix

Theme	Focus	Contributing studies (*n*)	Key tension
1. Ghostbot design and capabilities	Typology, authorization, fidelity	6	Technical capability vs. governance gap
2. Experiential learning in digital contexts	Kolb's cycle in mediated settings	3	Digital concrete experience vs. need for scaffolded reflection
3. Ethics, psychology, authenticity	Consent, misrepresentation, attachment	13	Engagement vs. trust and misrepresentation risk
4. Precedents in business education	Simulation, AI-supported mentorship	4	Established precedent vs. absence of ghostbot-specific evidence

The four themes of the synthesis culminate in a single research gap that has not been previously addressed (Figure 3). Visually, it underpins the main rationale for the paper: each body of literature bears on the research question, though none directly answers it.

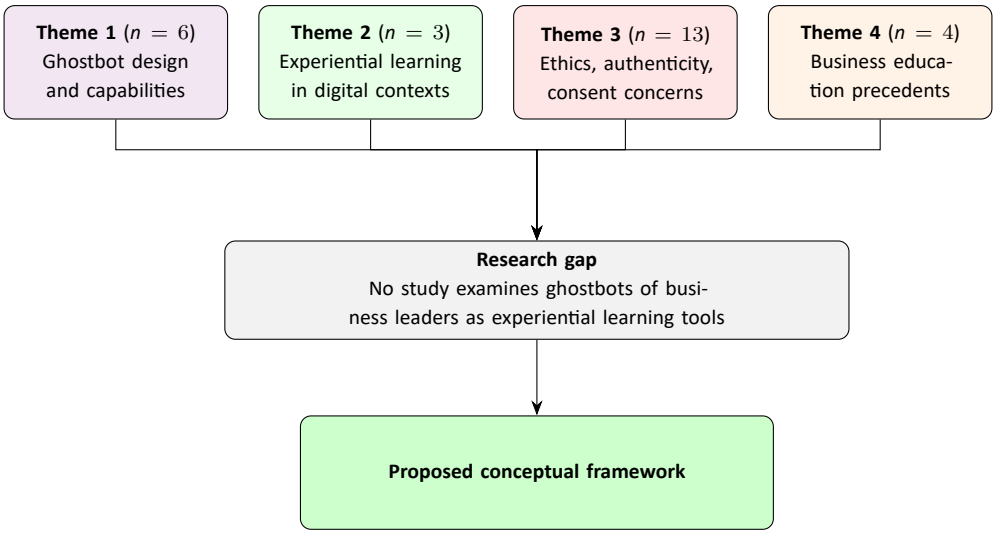


Fig. 3 *Thematic map of the literature*

Gaps identified across themes

Across all four themes, none of the studies identified through the literature search explicitly examined business leader ghostbots as learning tools in business education. This indicates that the reviewed literature did not contain studies that directly addressed the proposed application of ghostbots in business education. Therefore, the research question guiding this paper addresses a distinct area rather than simply restating findings from previous studies. The theoretical literature about ghostbots and the digital afterlife is abundant, and is virtually exclusively focused on bereavement and consumer marketing contexts, not professional education. The experiential learning literature supports that digitally mediated concrete experience can help to support (Kolb, 1984)'s cycle but has not been tested against a replica of real, named individuals using AI. The ethics literature has recognized serious and well-argued concerns about consent, misrepresentation, and parasocial attachment but not applied those concerns to the particular dangers of misrepresenting a business leader's strategic thinking in an educational context. Lastly, AI supported simulation and mentorship are well established in the business education literature, but has not been explored specifically in relation to the ghostbot.

Proposed conceptual framework

Although (Kolb, 1984) experiential learning theory provides a defensible basis for assessing ghostbot-mediated learning, it was not designed for interactions with a simulated representation of a real, named person. The missing piece is provided by human-AI interaction research, especially the literature on social presence and trust, which clarifies when a learner might view a ghostbot conversation as a tangible experience rather than a novelty. As a result, the proposed framework combines these two traditions and positions human-AI interaction constructs as mediators and moderators between the use of ghostbots and advancement through Kolb's cycle. The framework treats authenticity as a result of particular, quantifiable conditions rather than presuming that ghostbots are inherently authentic, consistent with both the ethical concerns and the relational concept of authenticity described above.

Five core constructs are suggested by the framework. First, persona fidelity is the extent to which the ghostbot's responses mirror the recorded opinions, voice, and logic of the person being portrayed. Second, perceived authenticity is the learner's assessment that the interaction provides meaningful engagement with that individual rather than a generic AI response. Third, social presence and engagement give learners the impression that they are talking with a genuine, responsive person, which promotes concept development. Fourth, reflective depth reveals whether the learner transitions from tangible experience to introspection and conceptualization. Fifth, ethical trust refers to the learner's belief that use of the ghostbot is morally acceptable and openly disclosed. Since each of the five constructs is insufficient on its own, authentic experiential learning requires their combination.

Importantly, these constructs operate at different levels. Persona fidelity is an objective property of the ghostbot's output, whereas perceived authenticity is the learner's subjective judgment of that output and may diverge from actual fidelity. Ethical trust, in contrast, concerns the governance conditions of consent, disclosure, and institutional oversight. Consequently, a ghostbot may show high fidelity and high authenticity yet still generate low ethical trust if its use is undisclosed or unauthorized. Table VI defines each construct and sets out its theoretical origin and a proposed measurement approach to support future empirical testing.

Table VI
Core constructs of the proposed framework

Construct	Definition	Theoretical origin	Proposed measurement approach
Persona fidelity	Degree to which ghostbot responses reflect the represented individual's documented views and style	Ghostbot typology literature	Expert-rated content comparison against primary sources
Perceived authenticity	Learner's subjective judgment that the interaction reflects meaningful engagement with the figure's thinking	Authenticity in learning literature	Self-report scale (e.g., adapted authenticity perception items)
Social presence/engagement	Learner's sense of interacting with a present, responsive other	Human-AI interaction literature	Social presence scale (adapted from existing HCI instruments)
Reflective depth	Extent of progression into reflective observation and abstract conceptualization	Kolb's experiential learning theory	Coded reflective journal or debrief transcript analysis
Ethical trust	Learner's confidence that the ghostbot's use is ethically sanctioned and transparently disclosed	Consent/misrepresentation literature	Self-report trust scale plus disclosure-awareness check

Four propositions are presented in this framework for potential empirical verification.

Proposition 1: Learners who interact with a ghostbot that shows less fidelity to the documented beliefs of the represented human will report weaker authenticity judgments, because persona integrity is positively correlated with perceived authenticity.

Proposition 1 is based on the literature on synthetic media and authenticity. According to Pedersen and Ritter (2024) and Vo et al. (2024), authenticity in digital environments is generally defined as a perceived, relational judgment rather than a fixed attribute of a tool. The most important cue, in the case of a ghostbot, is whether its responses resemble those of the person it represents. Research on deepfakes in higher education shows that users' trust in synthetic representations is influenced by persona fidelity and disclosure (Roe et al., 2024). According to consumer research, audiences react negatively and with less credibility when they believe AI-generated likenesses of deceased people are misleading (Aboulnasr & Song, 2025). Digital duplicates can skew a person's testimony, according to ethical scholarship (Kozlovski & Makhortykh, 2025), and students familiar with the figure are likely to recognize this distortion. Consequently, it is anticipated that authenticity assessments will be weakened by lower adherence to the depicted individual's documented opinions. However, the link might be weaker among learners who lack the ability to recognize divergence, because perceived authenticity is subjective; this boundary condition should be tested in future research.

Proposition 2: Because reflective depth is jointly predicted by perceived authenticity and social presence, learners are unlikely to progress past the concrete experience stage of (Kolb, 1984) cycle through ghostbot encounters that produce low perceived authenticity.

Proposition 2 combines social presence theory with (Kolb, 1984) cycle. Social presence, the sense of being with a real and responsive other, is associated with greater engagement, trust, and openness to information in mediated and AI interactions (Alrawad et al., 2025; Oh et al., 2018). Chatbot research similarly shows that perceived warmth, competence, and social presence increase user engagement (Deng & Yan, 2025), and that users readily apply human-like conversational strategies to chatbots (Croes et al., 2023). But learning is not ensured by interaction alone. According to Morris (2020), experiential learning starts with a concrete, contextually rich encounter that students find significant enough to critically reflect on. Learners are more likely to perceive a ghostbot contact as a novelty than as an experience worth examining if they believe it to be inauthentic. As a result, social presence and perceived authenticity are proposed to work jointly, with reflective depth likely to be greatest when both are high and limited when authenticity is low.

Proposition 3: Regardless of persona integrity, learners who believe the ghostbot is unethical or undisclosed will not engage in reflective processing, because ethical trust moderates the relationship between engagement and reflective depth.

Proposition 3 expands on both the ethics literature on ghostbots and trust research in human-AI interaction. Acceptance of and satisfaction with chatbots are reliably predicted by social presence and trust (Alrawad et al., 2025; Wut et al., 2025). Furthermore, confidence in chatbots is brittle and needs to be actively restored once it is harmed (Mou et al., 2026). In the context of ghostbots, trust is contingent on both performance and the authorization and transparency of the persona (Harbinja et al., 2023; Hollanek & Nowaczyk-Basińska, 2024). Regardless of the quality of the portrayal, consumer evidence indicates that exploiting a deceased person's likeness in a way perceived as deceptive elicits unfavorable reactions (Aboulnasr & Song, 2025). Instead of considering the exercise's substance, learners who believe a ghostbot is unauthorized may disengage cognitively, doubting its validity. For this reason, ethical trust is proposed as a moderator that weakens the link between engagement and reflective depth when it is low, even if persona fidelity is high.

Proposition 4: Authentic experiential learning outcomes require deliberate instructor-facilitated scaffolding of the reflective observation and abstract conceptualization stages, since ghostbot interaction alone, however high its fidelity, is unlikely to generate spontaneous reflection.

Proposition 4 reflects the most consistent finding in the experiential learning literature reviewed. In both Cheng et al. (2025) and Dopelt et al.

(2023), simulated or digitally mediated experiences produced learning gains only when structured reflection was built into the design. This aligns with both Morris's (2020) emphasis on critical reflection and (Kolb, 1984) belief that experience can only become learning through reflection and conceptualization. Studies of AI in education point in the same direction: while Somia and Vecchiarini (2024) note that the experiential benefits of AI tools must be purposefully constructed, Mollick et al. (2024) combine AI-simulated practice with structured feedback. Consequently, it is doubtful that a high-fidelity ghostbot would spontaneously inspire introspection. Rather, educators must use debriefs, reflective journals, and comparisons with primary materials to scaffold the processes of abstract conceptualization and reflective observation.

The main theoretical contribution of the work is shown in Figure 4, using an independent variable–moderator–mediator–outcome framework. The independent variable comprises the qualities of ghostbot design, such as disclosure, authorization status, and persona fidelity. The relationship between design features and learner engagement is conditioned by perceived authenticity and ethical trust. As the mediating variable, reflective depth measures whether engagement stays at the concrete-experience stage of (Kolb, 1984) cycle or moves on to the reflective and conceptual stages. The final dependent variable is the outcome of authentic experiential learning. The arrows should not be interpreted as established empirical links, but rather as suggested causal routes for further investigation.

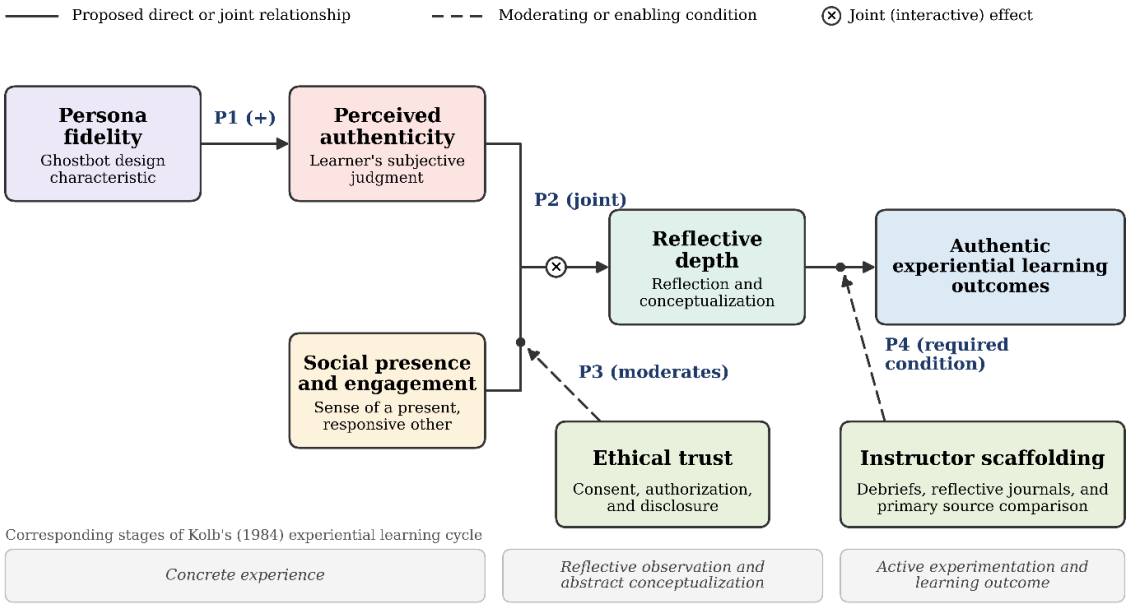


Fig. 4 *Conceptual framework diagram*

Design Principles for Business Education

Pedagogical design guideline

Ghostbots should be viewed as an addition to current case-based and simulation pedagogy, not as a substitute for it. Since the propositions above imply that reflective depth will not develop on its own, instructors should set clear learning objectives for each session. The stages of reflective observation and abstract conceptualization would be immediately operationalized by requiring students to compare the AI's responses with recorded primary sources during a controlled debrief that follows each ghostbot session.

Ethical safeguards and governance

In line with the conclusions of Theme 3, any ghostbot deployment should, where feasible, give priority to authorized personas and make it clear that learners are dealing with a synthetic representation rather than the real person. Given the unanswered consent issues pertaining to both living and deceased individuals identified in the literature, institutions should set up governance reviews comparable to human-subjects oversight.

Technology requirements

In addition to having built-in safeguards that prevent speculative or fabricated claims attributed to the represented individual, ghostbot systems meant for educational use should be constructed with verifiable source grounding, which enables instructors and students to trace responses back

to documented statements. Since Theme 2 studies show that authentic dialogic interchange is what distinguishes simulated concrete experience from passive content intake, interactivity should encourage iterative inquiry rather than planned, one-way delivery.

Table VII links each of the educational, ethical, and technological recommendations from Section 5 to the particular concept or source that inspired it, creating a single, readable reference. When a business school administrator or instructor decides whether and how to pilot a ghostbot tool, this is the paper's most immediately applicable output. It allows practitioners to immediately access the guidelines at the beginning of Section 5, with the more detailed explanation coming in the subsections.

Table VII
Design principles summary

Category	Guideline	Rationale (theme/source)
Pedagogical	Position ghostbots as a supplement to case-based/simulation pedagogy, not a replacement	Theme 4 (Kang et al., 2022)
Pedagogical	Require structured debriefs comparing ghostbot claims to primary sources	Theme 2 (Cheng et al., 2025; Morris, 2020)
Ethical	Prioritize authorized personas built with consent of the individual or estate	Theme 3 (Harbinja et al., 2023)
Ethical	Disclose the synthetic nature of the interaction prominently and repeatedly	Theme 1 (Roe et al., 2024; Sharif et al., 2025)
Ethical	Establish governance review analogous to human-subjects oversight	Theme 3 (Harbinja et al., 2024)
Technological	Build with verifiable source grounding traceable to documented statements	Theme 1
Technological	Include guardrails limiting speculative or fabricated attributions	Theme 1, Theme 3
Technological	Support iterative, dialogic interaction rather than scripted one-way delivery	Theme 2

Discussion

The thematic synthesis above suggests a general pattern across all four literatures reviewed: none of them explore AI replicas of business leaders in the context of experiential learning, yet each provides evidence bearing on whether such an application could plausibly succeed. Taken together, the results suggest that the central research question, "Can ghostbots provide authentic experiential learning?," cannot be answered with a simple yes or no; rather, authenticity is conditional, contingent on design and governance decisions rather than on the technology itself.

The most developed of the four bodies of literature is the ghostbot and digital afterlife literature, whose results mostly focus on bereavement and consumer contexts (Figueroa-Torres, 2024; McStay, 2024; Obadia, 2025). This matters for business education because the field cannot simply import authorization and disclosure norms from grief technology wholesale: a deceased business leader's estate, professional legacy, and public statements create a different consent landscape than a private family member's, with implications for who has standing to authorize a ghostbot's creation. This literature confirms that the perceived legitimacy of an AI replica relies heavily on whether it was created with the consent of the person it represents, or their estate, and the extent to which its synthetic nature is explicitly communicated to the person interacting with it (Lin, 2026). A ghostbot representing a historic business figure thus raises the same authorization and disclosure issues as a griefbot for a deceased family member, even though the emotional stakes differ. This is supported by the literature on deepfakes and synthetic media, which demonstrates that the degree of persona fidelity and disclosure is linked to whether users trust the AI-mediated interaction (McStay, 2024).

The experiential learning literature presents a more encouraging picture: in principle, a genuine concrete experience is not required for the experiential learning process as long as reflection is structured around it (Kang et al., 2022). Empirical studies in related fields provide further evidence that digitally mediated or simulated experience can facilitate the full experiential learning process when deliberate reflection is designed around it (Cheng et al., 2025; Roe et al., 2024). This is significant because it indicates that the literature does not make a strong case for the objection that ghostbot interaction is too artificial to count as concrete experience. There are, however, no arguments to support the corollary that reflection occurs automatically; in the studies cited, technology alone was never the sole means of achieving positive outcomes.

This picture is complicated somewhat by the ethics and human-AI interaction literature. Findings from research on grieving technologies indicate that even carefully designed virtual representations of real individuals may evoke ambivalence and perceptions of misrepresentation among those who knew the individual. Similarly, the commercial case demonstrates that AI-generated celebrity endorsements can undermine users' trust in the interaction. Together, these findings highlight the importance of authenticity and transparency when designing AI-mediated representations and interactions (Obrenovic et al., 2025; Truong & Chen, 2025). Applied to a business leader ghostbot, this raises the possibility that, when asked to answer unclear or contentious strategic questions, the AI system might produce answers the real person never gave, creating a believable but false impression of the leader's thinking. This issue is further highlighted by research on social presence and parasocial attachment,

since learners may have significant emotional reactions to conversational agents even when they are aware that the agents are artificial and not human (Pedersen & Ritter, 2024).

Finally, the business education literature indicates that this is not an entirely new trend, as experiential and simulation-based approaches are already widely used and generally found to be superior to passive approaches (Pedersen & Ritter, 2024; Vo et al., 2024), and generative AI technologies are now making their way into this tradition (Gupta, 2024). However, none of these studies specifically examines a technology resembling a ghostbot. Taken together, the four themes imply a particular middle ground: ghostbots are technically feasible as a form of real-life experience, but they remain morally ambiguous, as extensively discussed in related fields, and untested as a business education tool.

Theoretical Contributions

This paper is mainly a theoretical integration. Ghostbot and digital afterlife scholarship, experiential learning theory, and human-AI interaction research have evolved more or less independently of each other, and no prior research ties them to the use of AI replicas in professional learning. This paper provides a new pedagogical model, as well as a new human-AI learning model, both previously absent from the literature, for treating ghostbot interaction as a genuine concrete experience within (Kolb, 1984) cycle, while accounting for the moderating effects of perceived authenticity, social presence, and ethical trust. It also reimagines authenticity as a conditional, multi-faceted construct rather than an inherent characteristic of a learning tool, a contribution applicable not only to the ghostbot case but to digitally mediated experiential learning in general. The theoretical propositions derived from this paper also provide a systematic foundation for further empirical investigation of the interaction between persona fidelity and ethical trust and their impact on reflective depth and learning outcomes.

Practical and Pedagogical Implications for Business Schools

The findings indicate that business schools ought not to treat ghostbots as a stand-alone intervention, but rather as part of a sequence of learning activities designed with deliberate instructional scaffolding, since reflective depth does not appear to flow naturally from the technology. Instructors should explicitly state learning goals for each ghostbot session and then direct a structured debrief in which students confirm the ghostbot's statements against primary sources and discuss learning concepts, directly engaging in reflection and conceptualization. The existing literature on AI-assisted simulation and entrepreneurship education indicates substantial potential for making expert-level knowledge more accessible, especially for institutions that lack access to guest experts and executive mentors.

Ethical Implications

The unanswered questions of consent found in the ghostbot literature have direct implications for business schools that wish to implement them. Research on the development of grief technology shows that even well-designed digital representations of a real person can evoke ambivalent feelings and a sense of misrepresentation in people associated with the deceased, and the example of celebrity endorsements indicates that when this is perceived as deceptive, it degrades trust in the interaction. Applied to a business leader ghostbot, this means institutions should give priority to authorized personas created with the consent or participation of the individual or their estate, and should make it transparent and repeated that the learner is interacting with a synthetic representation. With no formal legal and institutional framework yet established for posthumous representation rights, business schools should implement governance review mechanisms similar to human-subjects oversight before introducing any AI representation of a named individual, whether living or deceased, into a classroom environment.

Limitations of the Review

This review is conceptual rather than empirical, and the proposed framework and its propositions have not yet been tested. Although systematic, the literature search was limited to a defined set of databases and to the period from 2022 to 2026, potentially overlooking relevant foundational scholarship published outside this period. The review is necessarily inferential, as no study reviewed has examined an actual AI replica of a named business leader used in a classroom context; the framework was developed by analogy to neighboring domains, including grief technologies, entrepreneurship simulations, and general human-AI interaction research. Although the thematic synthesis method is suitable for theory building, it cannot be used to provide quantitative estimates of effects across the constructs reviewed. The boundary condition this suggests is that ghostbot-based learning is likely to be most defensible for well-documented, publicly recorded figures with extensive primary-source material, and least defensible for ambiguous or poorly documented cases, where the AI system would be forced to extrapolate rather than reproduce.

Future Research Agenda

The propositions put forward in this paper need to be empirically validated. Given the formative, multidimensional nature of some of the proposed constructs, and the framework's focus on predictive relationships rather than confirmatory theory testing, these constructs could be operationalized as measurable variables and tested for their relationships using PLS-SEM. Experimental designs that vary levels of persona fidelity and disclosure transparency may isolate causal effects on learner engagement and reflective outcomes. Qualitative research could follow learners throughout an entire module to determine whether reflective observation and abstract conceptualization actually take place, or whether engagement remains static at the concrete experience stage. This conceptual study was unable to address whether ghostbot mentorship results in long-lasting competency gains comparable to case-based or simulation approaches, but longitudinal research might provide more precise information. Cross-cultural perspectives on death, ancestor representation, and postmortem consent differ significantly, indicating that multi-country comparative research would help determine whether ethical trust is culturally contingent or acts as a uniform moderator.

Conclusion

This study investigated whether artificial intelligence replicas of prominent business executives, entrepreneurs, or management thinkers could produce real-world practical learning. The analysis of human-AI interaction, ghostbot technology, and experiential learning theory indicates that the answer is conditional rather than definitive. In particular, reflective depth depends on intentional instructor scaffolding rather than on the technology itself, while persona fidelity, perceived authenticity, social presence, and ethical trust appear to be important but insufficient on their own. As a result, rather than accepting ghostbot pedagogy without question, the suggested framework and design principles provide business schools with a foundation for assessing it. Consent, posthumous portrayal, and parasocial connection remain open issues, nevertheless. Therefore, before ghostbot-mediated mentorship can be considered a legitimate technique in business education, empirical testing of the four propositions is required.

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Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest that could have influenced the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

Use of generative AI statement

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used generative AI tools solely to improve language, grammar, clarity, and readability. The authors critically reviewed and revised all AI-assisted content and take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the final manuscript.

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