

On May 12, 2025, the first workshop within the research project “The Death of the Avatar. The Condition of Digital Identity After Losing Access to a Social Media Profile” was held at the Magdalena Abakanowicz University of the Arts in Poznań. The project is funded under the PRELUIDUM 23 grant of the National Science Centre (Poland).

The workshop took the form of an artist talk combined with a discussion based on Marta Ceccarelli’s text *Internet’s Dark Forests. Subcultural Memories and Vernaculars of a Layered Imaginary*, as well as self-reflective exercises.

Participants were introduced to the research framework developed by the project leader, presented with initial artistic works accompanying the research, and familiarized with approaches to interpreting the internet as a collection of “imaginaries” – mental images and metaphors that help explain its complex technological, social, and cultural nature. The concept was discussed through the example of the “Dark Forest” metaphor.

Students engaged in a discussion on strategies for addressing the ephemeral nature of prosumed content, starting from the thesis presented in the first chapter of Ceccarelli’s book, *The internet doesn’t exist...*, considered both metaphorically and literally. Participants raised issues such as building independent online communities and creating backups of their content, both digitally and physically (e.g., printing photographs). The group represented diverse attitudes toward their social media accounts: some expressed complete detachment from what they share online, while others emphasized a strong emotional connection to their content, treating it as an important part of their lived experience.

The question of ownership of produced content also emerged. Not all participants regularly create backups, instead storing their materials directly on social media platforms. This reliance on platforms entails the risk of data loss – an issue that was also highlighted during the discussion.

In the final part of the workshop, participants completed two self-reflective exercises. In the first, they were asked to mark on a timeline (2000–2025) the year in which they created each social media account they could recall – whether still active or no longer accessible. The exercise allowed for marking multiple accounts on the same platform. The second task involved recalling a situation in which access to an account was lost and describing the circumstances along with the accompanying emotions. The worksheets were anonymous; only the year of birth was required.

The results indicate that in a group of eight participants, all representing Generation Z, the number of accounts created ranged from 7 to 20. Many of these were multiple accounts on the same platform created at different stages of life, often without access to earlier ones. Some accounts had been created as early as the age of seven.

The narratives collected in the second exercise revealed numerous instances in which loss of access was involuntary – due to scams, hacking, or account blocking. There was also a case of deliberate account deletion as a form of withdrawal from social media, later accompanied by regret over irreversibly lost data. The emotional responses included: “I

was angry,” “I felt sorry for the account,” “sadness due to lost memories (recorded),” “I felt nervous,” “frustration with rebuilding a profile,” “sadness,” “I feel ashamed, but at the time it was total despair! A national tragedy!”, “I regret it (...) but at the same time I’m glad I did it, because now I’m less attached to what I post online,” and “I was sad because I was an admin of a The Sims 3 fanpage and no one there knew why I disappeared.”

The last two statements are particularly significant. On the one hand, the experience of loss is associated with grief; on the other, it may foster a certain distance toward online self-presentation. Another important aspect is the loss of contact with individuals within specific communities that exist exclusively through particular accounts, without alternative channels of communication. In such cases, the disappearance of an account may lead to unanswered questions regarding the reasons for one’s absence.

Additionally, the workshop highlighted differences in relationships depending on the account and community involved. A single individual may function differently across various platforms and social groups, which corresponds to the concept of “lore-building” discussed by Marta Ceccarelli.