

HORIZON SCANNING

Emerging issues for EU policymaking

Issue 11

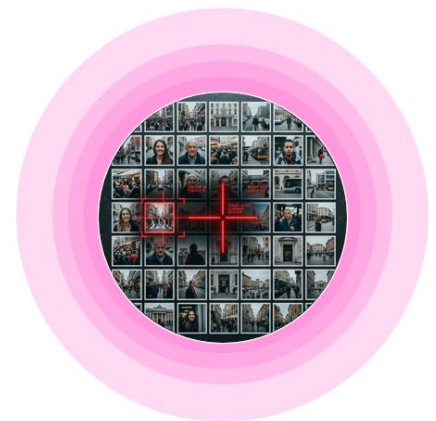
This is the eleventh report from the ESPAS horizon scanning process which looks at “signals of change” - emerging trends and issues – that appear to be marginal today but could become important for the EU in the future. From the 13 signals of change presented below, three emerging issues were perceived as potentially most impactful by policymakers:



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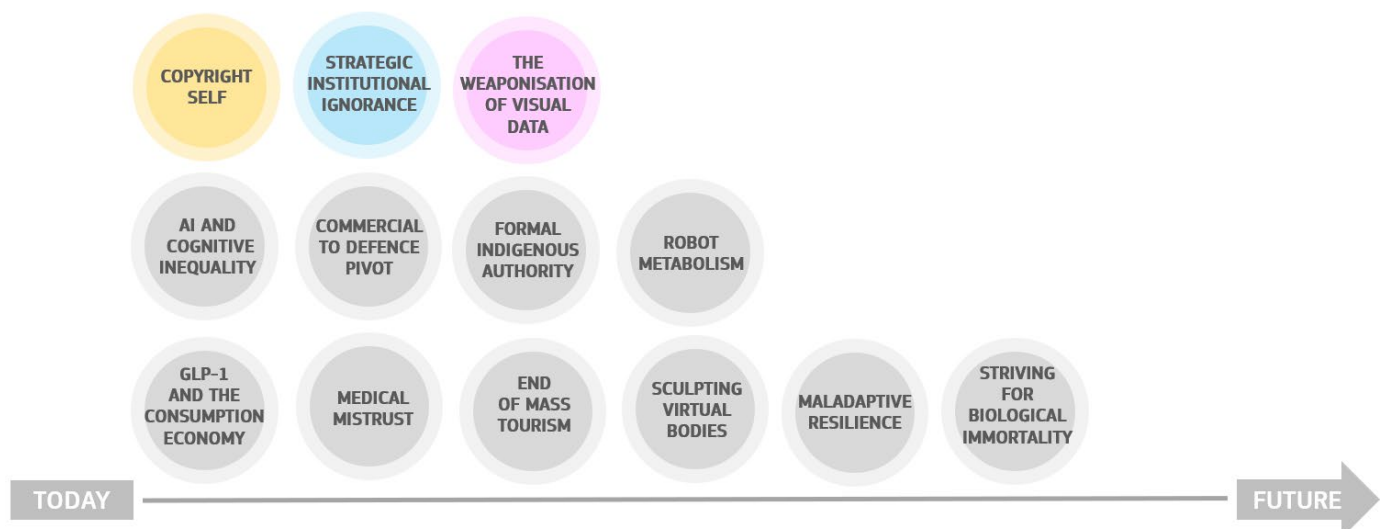
**STRATEGIC INSTITUTIONAL
IGNORANCE**



**THE WEAPONISATION OF
VISUAL DATA**

Pictures: Adobe Firefly

The European Strategy and Policy Analysis System (ESPAS) is an inter-institutional EU process promoting foresight and anticipatory governance. Its horizon-scanning activity is led by the Joint Research Centre and the European Parliamentary Research Service. The signals of change were identified and developed through a series of sense-making workshops with participants from across the EU institutions and bodies, examining recent developments in multiple domains. The three most significant signals were identified via a survey among the horizon-scanning community and a targeted group of EU policymakers, followed by a workshop to explore and assess the issues in more depth. A summary of this evaluation is presented on the following pages. The selected signals should be viewed as original lenses offering different perspectives on the challenges and opportunities the EU is facing now and could face in the coming years. Beyond these three, other signals of change identified in the latest horizon-scanning sessions are presented briefly below.



Copyright self

AI applications have raised many copyright issues when creating content from existing data. A specific issue is the new risk of exploitation of the private data of individuals when pictures and videos available on the internet are (mis-)used for AI fakes. Denmark plans to tackle the issue by changing the copyright law to give people copyright to their own body, facial features and voice¹. In the US, Taylor Swift has trademarked her voice and image². The EU's AI Act already requires labelling AI-generated content and disclosure of training data, while EU countries address deepfakes mainly through sexual-exploitation laws³.

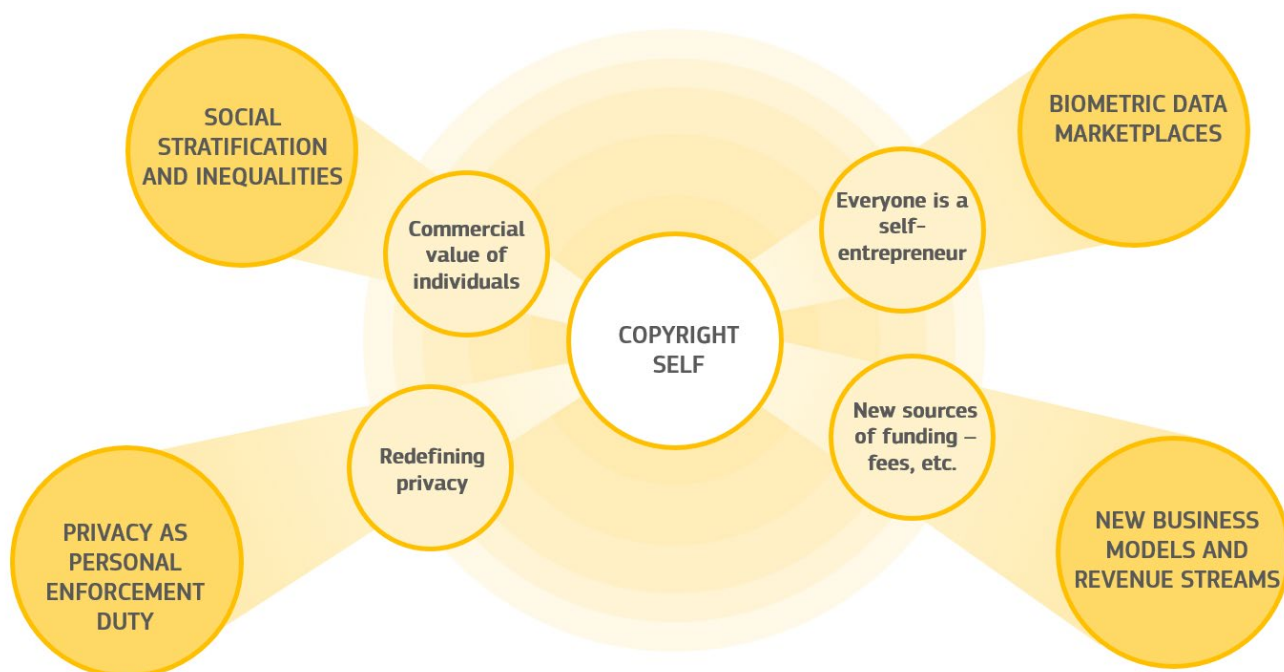
The Danish approach is wider, giving protection and rights to any individual in the virtual world. This can be seen as a change in how we perceive and respect our identities. It can also lead to extreme privatisation. Copyrighting yourself creates new business opportunities as individuals can sell their likeness, their digital avatar, to be used in AI videos⁴. As social behaviour is not geared towards data privacy and protection, governments are stepping in to regulate the impacts of digital platforms on people.

Because a face or voice can be uploaded and copied in a split second on servers in any country, it becomes unclear which nation's laws should apply and who can and/or should enforce these rights. All this forces us to rethink what can be owned, how public-interest uses should be balanced, and whether current laws are fit for managing biometric data.

How can it change our perspective?

Being able to copyright one's face, voice or movements makes us look at the "ownership" of our likeness in a completely new way. Instead of the creator of a picture or video (the "author") being the only one holding the rights, the person shown (the "subject") also becomes a rights-holder. This changes the balance. Because a fingerprint or a smile is not a work of art, the "originality" of raw, natural data is thereby acknowledged. This gives people the power to block the commercial use of their likeness even when no creative effort is involved, upholding privacy or personality rights in front of copyright.

Futures Wheel: An indication of potential consequences



What if the EU...?

... were to create a single "self-copyright" title with a voluntary deposit-and-licence system?

Strategic institutional ignorance

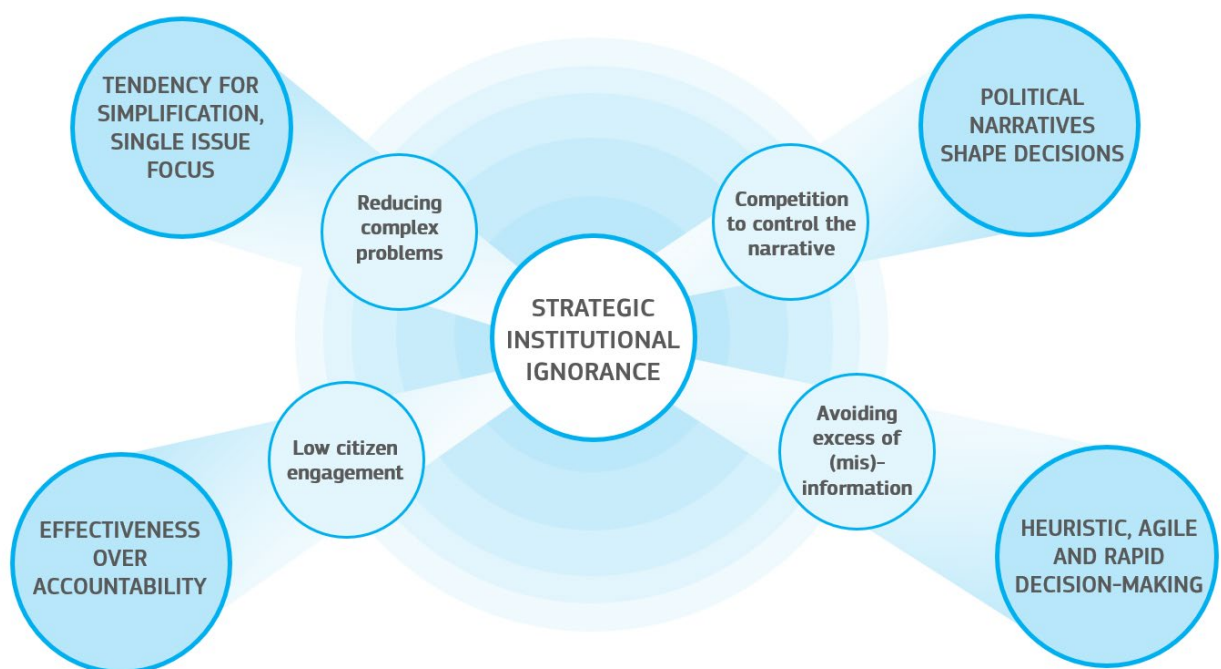
On top of extensive research on knowledge and learning, there is increasing interest in understanding the role of ignorance as an intentional behaviour at individual and collective levels⁵. At individual level, deliberate ignorance is the conscious choice not to seek or use knowledge (or information). Institutional ignorance refers to the lack of awareness or understanding within an organisation or institution, often due to entrenched structures or cultures that inhibit knowledge sharing or critical thinking⁶.

Strategic ignorance is thus an intentional decision to ignore certain pieces of information or knowledge to achieve given objectives. For example, managers use it in situations of perceived uncertainty to reduce cognitive load in complex environments, avoid conflict with prior beliefs or avoid personal accountability for risky decisions⁷. Ignorance should therefore not be automatically dismissed as a passive flaw or a dysfunctional cognitive state. Instead, used strategically, it can be an active, and sometimes constructive, element within organisational relationships, potentially serving as a strategic asset that helps decision-makers manage complexity and navigate uncertainty.

How can it change our perspective?

Paradoxically, understanding strategic ignorance can help improve the decision-making processes of governments invested in evidence-informed policymaking. It can be done by developing know-how on how best to use it as a strategic asset to help manage complexity and navigate uncertainty in decision-making while optimising the use of evidence.

Futures Wheel: An indication of potential consequences



What if the EU...?

...acknowledged in the impact assessment process not only the available knowledge and evidence but also strategic ignorance in addressing a policy topic?

The weaponisation of visual data

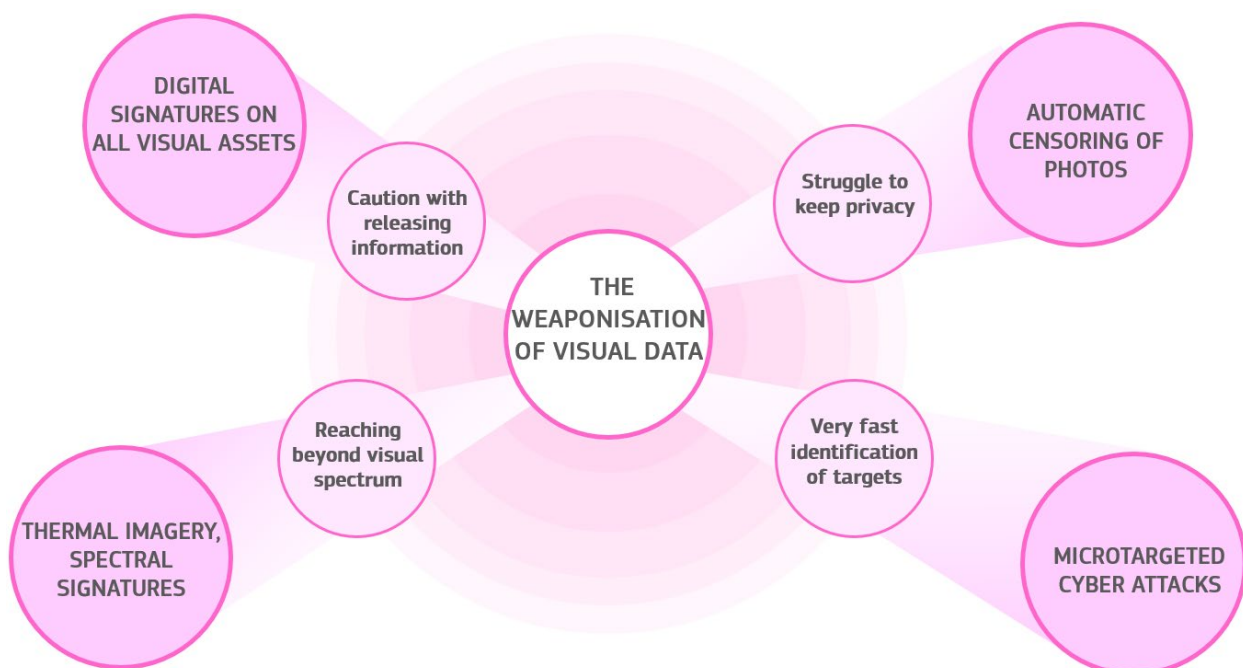
Images have become operational inputs for autonomous violence. In this emerging "post-representational" regime, visual data from smartphone uploads, satellite feeds, and social media is systematically harvested as training data and real-time targeting information for AI-enabled weapons systems⁸. This collapses the traditional boundary between civilian observation and military participation. As autonomous weapons select and engage targets based on "generalised target profiles" derived from visual datasets, every image of a person or place becomes potential ammunition in automated kill chains⁹.

The visual commons — billions of images uploaded constantly by people and digital devices — are being militarised in ways that existing legal and ethical frameworks were never designed to govern, while the technology using these images becomes ever easier to access¹⁰. While the EU AI Act excludes pure military AI from its scope, the progress of these technologies creates the risk of automated identity-based targeting ("biometric genocide"), erodes human control over lethal force and militarises public visual data infrastructures¹¹.

How can it change our perspective?

Shared photos and videos do not only shape the visual culture – influencing beliefs, perceptions, identities, knowledge or power – but increasingly serve as operational images¹² to track, navigate, activate, oversee, control, visualise, detect. This dual role needs to be acknowledged when creating governance and ethical frameworks for visual assets. Understanding both perspectives is particularly important where the two conflict: the cultural role focuses on context, authorship, ambiguity, visibility and recognition while operations impact simple labelling, reuse, standardisation, surveillance and exposure.

Futures Wheel: An indication of potential consequences



What if the EU...?

... mandated the availability of contextual information for every piece of visual data, including information on subject and event context as well as viewpoint and framing?

Other signals of change

- **Striving for biological immortality**

The gadgets that track our biometrics are increasingly precise and involve a great variety of measurable variables, making the striving for immortality seem easier than ever. In the future, medical digital twins might bring this to a whole new level. There are already cardiac digital twins that can simulate the functioning of a patient's heart with a remarkable level of detail, and digital cognitive twins are being tested which may eventually suggest personalised activities to train the mind before age-related problems arise¹³. The tech billionaire Bryan Johnson has dedicated his life and fortune to taking current anti-ageing practices to the extreme¹⁴. At the same time, US wellness and longevity supplement industries are preparing to go mainstream as the administration's loose regulatory environment and criticism of established medicines may lead to insurance coverage for supplements and wider consumer access¹⁵.

- **The end for mass tourism**

Rising environmental risks and associated costs are increasingly challenging the traditional model of mass tourism. Heatwaves, wildfires, and extreme weather events are making classic destinations like Mediterranean beaches and tropical islands less predictable and safe, while also driving up operational and insurance costs for tourism infrastructures¹⁶. Governments are responding by internalising these risks through taxation and regulation, such as Hawaii's recent increase in tourist taxes to fund climate adaptation and disaster resilience measures¹⁷. At the same time, the insurance industry reports that global natural catastrophe losses are consistently exceeding \$100 billion annually, calling for a re-evaluation of their risk models¹⁸.

These pressures may trigger a shift away from mass tourism toward more sustainable and climate-aware travel. However, travellers may end up facing significantly higher prices reflecting the costs of insurance, disaster risk, and environmental adaptation expenses. Not everyone will be able to upgrade their travel plans, potentially limiting access to overseas holidays and reinforcing inequalities in who can continue to participate in global tourism.

- **Robot metabolism**

The developments in robotics are taking a leap towards machines that can grow by consuming other machines. Typical robots today are not able to increase in size and complexity, adapt, or repair themselves. Truss Link, a modular robot capable of self-assembly and self-reconfiguration, claims to be the first to enable robot metabolism, a process whereby robots use their mechanical abilities, standardised modules and power from similar robots to grow or adapt without any external machinery¹⁹. This means in the future robots could become truly self-sufficient. Instead of relying on human technicians, they could fix themselves, adapt to new tasks, or even reassemble after damage, all with no extra help. That opens the door to sustainable robot ecosystems, capable of evolving and surviving in places where humans can't go. Rather than copying the look of animals, this approach mimics how life functions, for example, how natural systems grow, heal, and adapt²⁰. Ultimately, this is a step toward real autonomy where robots not only think independently but also physically sustain themselves without human intervention.

- **GLP-1 reshaping the consumption economy**

The growing use of GLP-1 weight-loss drugs such as Ozempic is beginning to reshape consumer behaviour and market dynamics. By suppressing appetite and cravings, these medications are reducing demand for high-calorie snacks, sugary treats, and other foods people buy for pleasure rather than nutrition, prompting food and beverage companies to rethink product portfolios and marketing strategies²¹.

Emerging evidence also shows that GLP-1 users are reallocating how they spend both time and money, cutting back on dining out and indulgent purchases while increasing investment in wellness, fitness, and lifestyle-oriented services²². The ripple effects extend to airlines, retail, fashion, and other consumer sectors, as changing consumption patterns and lifestyle choices influence spending across the economy. This suggests that the "GLP-1 economy" is not only reshaping what people buy but also how they organise their daily lives, amplifying the impact of these drugs beyond food and retail into broader social and economic patterns²³.

- **AI and cognitive inequality**

Humans are losing their reasoning skills with the temptation to use AI. The full impact on our brains and thinking is still to be seen, as longitudinal studies are not yet available. Growing evidence shows that over-reliance on AI tools can lead to “cognitive offloading”, that is, shifting mental tasks to external aids. While this frees up mental capacity, it may harm critical-thinking abilities that depend on active analysis and evaluation²⁴. A new study compared groups of participants who were tasked with writing essays over four months, with or without the assistance of large language model (LLM) applications. Participants who were allowed to use LLMs consistently underperformed at neural, linguistic and behavioural levels, and their essays tended to be more homogenous²⁵²⁶. While the risks related to cognitive atrophy related to AI are widely discussed, some argue that another risk of cognitive inequality arise with the providers tailoring the complexity of the content to customers, offering less cognition-enhancing materials to those less able and preventing them from developing cognitive skills²⁷

- **Commercial to defence pivot**

Leading consumer technology companies are pivoting from “non-military” policies to “defence-first” business models²⁸. Between June and July 2025, the Pentagon awarded \$800 million to OpenAI, Google and xAI for “agentic AI” development—autonomous systems capable of multi-step mission planning and vulnerability identification for national security applications²⁹. This represents a complete reversal: companies that prohibited military use just months earlier now compete for defence contracts. The pivot extends beyond AI. In May 2025, Meta partnered with Anduril to integrate Reality Labs’ VR/AR technology into “EagleEye” battlefield systems using the Lattice command-and-control platform, repurposing billions in failed consumer metaverse investments as military infrastructure³⁰.

The pivot is also reflected in tech managers’ career decisions. Spotify CEO Daniel Ek announced he would step down as CEO to become Executive Chairman, explicitly to focus on building “defense supercompanies” through his €600M investment in Helsing, Europe’s AI combat drone manufacturer³¹³². This signals a cultural shift: defence mogul as peak status for consumer tech founders.

- **Institutionalisation of Indigenous Authority**

While Article 8(j) of the Convention on Biological Diversity has recognised Indigenous knowledge since the 1990s, the first formal meeting of the UN Subsidiary Body on Article 8(j), held in Panama City in October 2025, transformed Indigenous participation from ad-hoc consultation into a permanent, seated mechanism within multilateral biodiversity governance³³. In parallel, new benefit-sharing mechanisms—most notably the Cali Fund—are beginning to channel resources from digital sequence information directly toward Indigenous Peoples and local communities³⁴.

Together, these developments point to emerging hybrid governance models in which authority over land, knowledge, and biodiversity policy is increasingly shared, with direct implications for environmental regulation, research governance, and the green transition³⁵.

- **Medical mistrust**

A recent analysis showed that in the UK members of Gen Z are significantly underrepresented in clinical trials and health studies, which undermines the effectiveness of new treatments and cures³⁶. One reason is growing mistrust in medicine.

Medical mistrust refers to the scepticism or lack of confidence that individuals or communities have towards healthcare systems and providers³⁷. While general mistrust of science, rise of conspiracy theories and misinformation contribute to this phenomenon, it is often grounded in specific experiences. This phenomenon often stems from historical injustices, such as unethical medical experiments and systemic discrimination, impacting marginalised groups. Factors contributing to medical mistrust include perceived discrimination, lack of representation, and communication barriers³⁸. Mistrust can lead to reduced healthcare use, non-adherence to medical advice, and poorer health outcomes. In the long term it will also negatively affect discovery and innovation in medicine.

- **Maladaptive resilience**

Resilience (both as returning to previous state or transformative) has long been seen as a positive trait, however its potential negative consequences are increasingly raised³⁹. Maladaptive resilience refers to the ability to recover from adversity using strategies that might be harmful in the long run.

While resilience generally implies bouncing back in a positive way, maladaptive resilience involves coping mechanisms that seem effective initially but can lead to negative consequences over time⁴⁰. In individual terms, someone might use avoidance or denial to deal with stress, which can prevent them from addressing underlying issues. In the context of social systems, maladaptive resilience strategies can initially help systems withstand environmental or social stressors but put additional stress on other systems and exacerbate wider problems like ecosystem degradation or greenhouse gas emissions⁴¹.

- **Sculpting virtual bodies**

Body image, body dissatisfaction are often associated with social media and online presence shaping the diet and fitness culture. As the digital world becomes a virtual/augmented reality, there will be a new avatar/body to worry about⁴². Full-body avatars are digital figures in virtual or augmented reality that mimic a user's movements, creating the feeling that these virtual bodies are their own. This experience, known as embodiment, arises from seeing and feeling the avatar move like the user, leading to a sense of ownership and presence in the virtual space.

Such experiences can influence how people perceive themselves and behave⁴³. For instance, the Proteus effect describes how users adapt to the traits of their avatars; they might feel more self-conscious if their avatar is sexualised or move more slowly in real life after using an elderly avatar. Using avatars that are fit or idealised can temporarily improve self-confidence and encourage positive personal changes, but they can also worsen anxiety or highlight personal insecurities if not used carefully⁴⁴.

ENDNOTES

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- ³² <https://liveforlivemusic.com/news/spotify-founder-daniel-ek-step-down-ceo-2026/>
- ³³ <https://enb.iisd.org/cbd-subsidiary-body-scientific-technical-technological-advice-sbstta27-sb8j1>
- ³⁴ <https://www.cbd.int/dsi-gr/califund.guide.pdf>
- ³⁵ <https://barents-council.org/news/sami-indigenous-summit-2025-sami-futures-in-the-arctic>
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