



Exploring the potential of AI-assisted self-representations in identity-focused art therapy

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Abstract

Aim: Generative text-to-image technologies offer new opportunities for individuals to visually articulate internal experiences. While traditional artistic self-portraiture has been extensively associated with self-insight, its AI-assisted equivalent remains underexplored. This study investigates the experiential and assessment potential of AI-generated self-representations and assesses their applicability within contemporary digital mental health frameworks.

Methods: Five participants (aged 18–58) engaged in a 45-minute image generation session using Midjourney, producing approximately 500 images. This was followed by semi-structured interviews analyzed via interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). This study is idiographic and exploratory, drawing on the principles of IPA. Our aim is an in-depth explication of lived experience and shared experiential layers across cases. The findings should therefore be read as hypothesis-generating and as groundwork for future, larger-scale and mixed-methods evaluations and potential telepsychology integrations.

Results: Three group experiential themes: (1) images as functional tools (e.g., as sources of comfort or aspirational vision boards); (2) self-reflective space (facilitating spontaneous self-disclosure and novel insight); and (3) modalities of self-definition (symbolic representation and narrative arc). Participants described the process as highly engaging and reported enhanced self-efficacy.

Conclusions: AI-assisted image generation presents a flexible and user-centered modality for psychological reflection, with potential to augment art- and narrative-based therapeutic interventions. Ethical measures (e.g., anonymized data handling, withdrawal options) proved viable. Further research should explore larger, diverse samples and examine integration within telepsychology platforms to assess clinical utility.

Keywords

artificial intelligence, art therapy, self-representation, narrative identity



Introduction

In recent years, artificial intelligence (AI) has transitioned from theoretical research into widespread practical applications [1], profoundly influencing healthcare, education, transportation, commerce, politics, and various other sectors [2]. Mental healthcare is no exception: not only predictive and diagnostic solutions [3] emerged, but also specialized chatbots targeting conditions like depression, autism, and anxiety, reporting high user satisfaction and promising effectiveness [4]. Younger generations, due to their natural affinity with digital media, might be particularly receptive to technology-integrated interventions [5].

Positioned within an idiographic, exploratory qualitative framework, the present study applies interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to examine how individuals experience and make sense of AI-assisted self-representation. Consistent with IPA's aims, our goal is not to generalize to populations but to provide a rich, contextualized account of experience and to identify common thematic structures across cases. We also consider how these experiential processes might align with digital mental health use-cases—particularly telepsychology workflows where creative, client-driven artifacts scaffold reflective dialogue.

AI-assisted art has introduced a new paradigm for human-AI interaction [6]. When using text-to-image models such as DALL-E 2, Imagen, Midjourney® V6, and DreamStudio, the user defines goals, provides input, and makes choices among the generated images, closely guiding and regulating the outcome. These choices, like those in traditional artistic processes, are inherently shaped by artists' cultural context, education, personal history, and psychological state; thus, the procedure itself may contain valuable information about the creators themselves. Haber et al. [7] attempted to integrate GenAI into therapy by visualizing different psychological aspects of patients (e.g., intrusive thoughts). Externalizing problems in this way allowed therapists and patients to interact directly with personalized issues, facilitating collaborative processing.

Digital art therapy

Creative processes have a beneficial impact on mental well-being [8]. Reynolds and Prior's study [9] supports this claim, employing qualitative methods and semi-structured interviews to explore how creative activities influenced subjective well-being among women diagnosed with cancer. Their findings highlighted that the creative process provided participants with positive experiences of success. Flow-like experiences had therapeutic value, as they allowed participants to temporarily put aside illness-related worries during creative activities.

Not only do traditional artistic activities hold such therapeutic potential [9]. Hacmun et al. [5] explored the potential of virtual reality art therapy (VRAT), where participants draw using VR technologies, followed by semi-structured interviews analyzing experiences qualitatively (thematic analysis). Participants reported losing track of time and external reality, experiencing profound present-moment awareness. In the study of Lyu et al. [10], participants generated images expressing their inner feelings associated with the theme "sweet home" using Midjourney, documenting their generation activities and reflections. An important finding was that text-to-image AI allows overcoming limitations of talent and affinity, enabling even non-artistic individuals to easily actualize their ideas and creativity, thus offering significant potential for art therapy contexts.

Self-representation and art

The self can be understood as a dynamic constellation of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors shaped by relations to others and differentiation from them, with its conscious aspect referred to as the self-concept [11]. Self-concept encompasses an individual's beliefs, convictions, and emotions about themselves, containing all things an individual believes to be true about themselves [11]. Instruments examining the self-construction process seek insight into various aspects of the self [10]. Both qualitative and quantitative methods are utilized in these investigations. Measurement tools and methods include, among others, the Twenty Statements Test, the Self-Concept Scale, and art therapeutic self-portrait creation [12].

According to Muri [13], self-portraits throughout art history enabled artists to deepen self-understanding by facilitating profound reflection on themselves and their experiences. Through self-portraiture, artists can observe themselves from an external perspective, enabling easier expression and validation of emotions and recognition of personal complexity. Self-portraits also help therapists as informative resources, versatile for therapeutic use. They provide insights into a client's self-concept and perception of their environment. This method can explore various mental issues (e.g., depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, body image issues), potentially aiding their management by supporting and encouraging clients to confront their problems. Creating self-portraits during therapy—when timed appropriately—allows individuals to experience themselves from a novel perspective, fostering personal development [12]. Esteban-Guitart et al. [14] found that university students produced more abstract, complex drawings expressing inner characteristics and metaphors. In contrast, younger participants with basic education created drawings focused on concrete activities and descriptions of their environments.

AI-assisted self-representation

This study forms part of a growing research initiative launched by Kellereessel and Ujhelyi in late 2022, aimed at exploring the experiential and diagnostic potential of AI-assisted artistic self-representation. The core methodology combines Midjourney with elements from classical self-portraiture and open-ended self-description tasks, treating each text prompt as a condensed self-description [12]. The overarching goal of this research line is to investigate whether generative art can provide meaningful insights into personality, identity, and mental health.

In their foundational mixed-methods study, 11 participants generated self-representative images using Midjourney, followed by brief (~15-minute) semi-structured interviews. Prompt categories were analyzed quantitatively, while thematic analysis of the interviews revealed strong experiential engagement. Participants described feelings of creative freedom, playful exploration, and personal insight. Many reported a sense of creative agency and self-discovery, highlighting the unpredictability of the AI output as a catalyst for new perspectives on the self. A recurring theme was the image as self-representation: participants used personal stories to inspire characters, settings, or objects. One participant, for example, recognized different periods of their life in the images and assembled a kind of visual self-tableau. This core theme inspired the current study's focus on self-definition.

Building on these foundations, large-scale quantitative research extended the protocol to a sample of 230 young adults, linking prompt sentiment and visual content to depression risk, as measured by the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI).

- The first quantitative study [15] demonstrated that negative sentiment in prompts was a significant predictor of depression scores ($r = 0.39$; $p < 0.001$). A ridge regression classifier achieved 79% sensitivity in identifying high-risk participants based on sentiment patterns in their prompts, suggesting that depressive cognitive-affective patterns can manifest even in the prompts themselves.
- The second, qualitative study [16] employed purposeful sampling and focused on the ten participants with the highest BDI scores. The thematic analysis of their interviews and images indicated therapeutic mechanisms akin to traditional art therapy: flow, externalization, and symbolic resolution of emotional conflict. Participants often described “sentiment switches”—abrupt shifts between positively-laden imagery and intrusive self-criticism—and generated unique “resource images” that offered a sense of calm or resilience. Some participants even had a “*very intense therapeutic experience*” (participant Leaf—p. 7).

These studies suggest that generative AI tools—when used in self-depiction contexts—may serve dual purposes:

1. As low-cost, scalable screening tools based on linguistic and visual cues, and;
2. As catalysts for therapeutic reflection, by surfacing emotionally charged or symbolically rich imagery.

However, these earlier interviews were brief and limited by predefined categories, leaving numerous psychologically meaningful experiences underexplored. Furthermore, participants' image interpretation processes, a key component of any art-based therapeutic or diagnostic tool, were not systematically analyzed and surfaced only when spontaneously mentioned by the participants themselves. The need for a richer, more idiographic understanding of participants' experiences thus became clear.

To address this gap, the current study adopts a deep phenomenological lens using IPA [17]. This methodology emphasizes idiographic, in-depth inquiry, enabling a richer engagement with participants' meaning-making. By conducting longer (45–70-minute) interviews and focusing on image-by-image interpretation, this study seeks to explore the following questions in greater detail:

- How do individuals interpret and narrate their self-generated images?
- What forms of self-insight, emotional regulation, or symbolic expression emerge through the process?
- Can these generative outputs serve as tools for therapeutic reflection, particularly in identity-relevant contexts?

The move toward deeper qualitative engagement reflects the need to understand not just *what* participants create, but *how* they relate to it, interpret it, and integrate it into their ongoing narratives of the self. The current study, therefore, not only expands the methodological scope of the original research but also deepens its psychological relevance—offering novel insights into how generative AI can support identity work, emotional processing, and potentially even therapeutic change. Exploring participants' experiences of the self-definition process and the image interpretation segment may contribute to assessing the psychological applicability of the method, particularly its potential for art therapy. The justification for further exploration of these potentials is supported by several studies discussed in the theoretical introduction [5, 7, 9, 10].

The aim of the current research is therefore to explore the practical applicability of the method and to understand what takes place cognitively, emotionally, and experientially in participants during image generation and interpretation. This is pursued through the following research question: What is the experience of self-definition and self-presentation through images during an AI-based image generation process?

Materials and methods

Participants

IPA is an idiographic approach and is specifically designed to work with small and homogeneous samples [18, 19]. Participants do not have to represent a population but rather offer access to a specific phenomenon from a particular perspective [20].

In the current study, participants were eligible if they were over 18 years old, had at least B1-level English proficiency, and were not undergoing psychiatric treatment at the time of participation (*sine morbo*) (see Table 1).

Table 1. Participant data.

Participant ID	Gender	Age	Highest level of education	Permanent residence	Relationship status	English proficiency	Prior use of AI-based text-to-image tools	Generation duration	Interview duration
Zebra	Female	24	Bachelor's degree	Capital city	In a relationship	B2	Tried once	45 min	68 min
Little Mole	Female	18	Secondary school (graduating)	Capital city	Single	B2	Regular user	45 min	71 min
Balloon	Female	27	Master's degree	Capital city	Single	C1	Tried once	45 min	54 min

Table 1. Participant data. (continued)

Participant ID	Gender	Age	Highest level of education	Permanent residence	Relationship status	English proficiency	Prior use of AI-based text-to-image tools	Generation duration	Interview duration
Berry	Female	25	Bachelor's degree	Capital city	In a relationship	C1	Heard of it, never tried	35 min	45 min
Budapest	Female	58	Bachelor's degree	Capital city	Single	B1	Heard of it, never tried	45 min	68 min

Five participants aged between 18 and 58 were included in the analysis. Their educational backgrounds ranged from secondary school to master's degrees. All resided in the capital city, were either single or in a relationship, had at least B1-level English proficiency, and were familiar with the AI technique used—some even used it regularly. Only one participant (Budapest) was an outlier in terms of age, but this was not deemed to significantly affect or bias the results.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis

The IPA is a qualitative method based on an interpretative, hermeneutic approach. Its primary theoretical foundation is phenomenology (the science of experience), which focuses on the individual and their subjective interpretations and experiential world [18, 21]. It examines phenomena as they appear from the first-person perspective [22]. Philosophically rooted in existentialism, IPA is particularly suited to exploring how individuals “find themselves in the world” [21], and is particularly effective in mapping identity, making it an appropriate method for investigating self-definition. Interviews created a dialogical space conducive to disclosure and meaning-making between the researcher and the interviewee, a position from which genuine understanding becomes possible. It is especially appropriate when we are interested in the intertwining of experience and self [21], which is precisely the aim of this investigation.

The analysis involved two researchers familiar with IPA and with the details of the study. Interviews were analyzed and group experiential themes were developed through consensus. Reflexivity was maintained via continuous dialogue, with both researchers sharing subjective impressions to identify and control potential biases. The interviewer kept detailed exploratory comments, capturing interpretative comments, emotional responses, and salient elements emerging from the text. The second analyst, who had no direct involvement in the interviews, reviewed these notes, questioned subjective-seeming impressions, and contributed observations from a more distanced perspective.

Theme development was an iterative, hands-on process: approximately 25 experiential statements were identified per interview, printed, and physically segmented to enable transparent categorization. Within each case, similarities and differences between themes were examined to define personal experiential themes (typically 5–7 per participant). In cross-case analysis, overlapping personal experiential themes were compared and merged to reveal group experiential themes present in all participants' accounts. These were then structured into three group experiential themes that captured the shared aspects of the phenomenon in a nuanced manner. Every step of the process was conducted collaboratively, with final decisions reached by consensus. Where interpretations diverged, we resolved them by consensus, privileging transparency and reflexivity over numerical agreement. In line with IPA conventions, we did not compute inter-coder reliability coefficients, as the aim is interpretative depth and credibility rather than category agreement.

A further added layer in the present research is that, during the image interpretation phase of the interviews, participants essentially engage in self-presentation through visual stimuli. This can be methodologically aligned with qualitative approaches that incorporate visual techniques. For example, drawing-based assessments are increasingly used in qualitative research, as they can facilitate rapport between researcher and participant by alleviating the anxiety of the interview setting or by providing a starting point or support for conversation. They also ensure that participants gradually engage in the process [23]. Combining visual techniques with in-depth interviews can yield a profound understanding of an individual's subjective experiential world [22].

The workflow of the current research was the following: Interview recordings → Verbatim textual transcription of interviews → Idiographic analysis: explanatory comments and experiential themes, followed by the consensus-based development of personal experiential themes → Cross-case analysis: merging of personal experiential themes, identification of common layers of experiences, consensus-based development of group experiential themes, which constitute the results of the research.

In this study, the generated images serve a similar purpose to drawings. Beyond their practical utility in facilitating the interview, they may also function as a kind of projective surface—through participants' interpretation of the AI-generated unexpected elements—according to the findings of Kellerwessel and Ujhelyi [12].

Procedure

Data collection took place in a quiet, private room at one of the buildings of the Faculty of Education and Psychology at Eotvos Lorand University. Each session was conducted in a one-on-one setting. The image generation duration was 45 minutes in every case, except for participant Berry, who finished 10 minutes early. Interview durations ranged from 45 to 71 minutes.

After building rapport and providing a short demonstration of the Midjourney software, participants were asked to use keywords of their choice to generate images that best represented them within the following 45 minutes, following the standardized instructions ([Supplementary material 1](#)). Midjourney (Midjourney Version 6, Midjourney, Inc.), the software used for image creation, generates images based on prompts (textual descriptions of the desired image) provided by the user. For each of those prompts, the software produces four distinct images, each interpreting the description with a different visual concept. The user can then decide whether to request additional variations or more detailed versions (upscales) of the images, or they can start the process over by making slight or significant changes to the prompt or writing an entirely new one. The process does not require any programming knowledge.

Participants could ask the researcher technical questions at any time, and they were allowed to use an online translation tool (DeepL, <https://www.deepl.com>) to help with any language difficulties, because the base language of the participants was Hungarian, but the language of the program was English. However, they had no other assistance; for example, they could not use a mirror or any specific images on their phones as a reference.

After the image generation procedure, a deep, approximately 60-minute-long semi-structured interview followed ([Supplementary material 2](#)), focusing on participants' experiences during the image generation process and the background of the created images. In the first part of the interview, participants discussed their images freely (image interpretation phase), while the other part involved more targeted questions about their holistic experience of the process. Compared to the previous studies, a new, longer, and more in-depth interview guide was developed and used, and image interpretation was emphasized during the interview: every participant guided the interviewer through all of their images, explaining their background and the thoughts associated with them one by one—this being the most important novelty in the current study, compared to the previous ones.

The audio files were transcribed manually. Speech disfluencies and repetitions were retained in their original form, and significant non-verbal cues (e.g., laughter) were marked in the transcripts. Each transcript is approximately 20 pages in length.

Participants were assigned pseudonyms of their choice (those having some meaning in Hungarian were translated into English), and they are referred to using these pseudonyms throughout this study. All ethical details were included in the participant information sheet and consent form, which every participant signed. The transcripts and recordings contain no personally identifiable information. Participants were allowed to request the deletion of their transcripts and generated images within one week following the study session, thereby withdrawing their data, but none chose to do so. Upon request, participants received copies of the images they generated.

The complete set of prompts from all participants is included in [Supplementary material 3](#).

A note on reproducibility

The study used Midjourney V6. Because Midjourney is a proprietary, evolving service, model updates may alter stylistic tendencies over time. To mitigate this, we logged every prompt, along with its time-stamp and generation parameters. Future work should experiment with using open-source models (e.g., Stable Diffusion XL variants) with fixed seeds and shared node-based workflows (e.g., ComfyUI) to enhance reproducibility and facilitate independent verification.

Results

As a result of the analytical process described above, three group experiential themes and six subthemes (two under each main theme) emerged, representing the experiential worlds of the interviewees. These themes are presented in the table below. All six subthemes were present in all five participants (Table 2).

Table 2. Thematic map.

Shared experience—main theme	Shared experience—subtheme	Quote
I. Image as a tool: functional images	1. Emotional self-support—desire-image, comfort-image	<i>"It's just a kind of desire... a desire-image." /Budapest/ "As if I were in a little warm forest cabin, and outside it's cold, it's snowing, but I'm safe inside." /Balloon/</i>
	2. Temporal dimension: self- and life-summary function, narrative construction	<i>"And then I saw into my past life, my thoughts, and basically reflected on my entire life." /Budapest/ "This is something I can talk about." /Little Mole/</i>
II. Space for self-insight	1. Self-reflective manifestations, openings during/as a result of the process	<i>"I'm typically the kind of person who... well, I don't know, I can't really express my emotions easily, and then when I had to name some adjectives, then I was like... whew." /Zebra/</i>
	2. Self-knowledge motivation, desire for, and realization of self-insight from the process	<i>"I just realized how much I fluctuate [...] I see myself much more clearly." /Berry/</i>
III. Modes of self-definition and self-presentation	1. Symbolization and the role of symbolic interpretation of AI-added elements in self-definition and presentation	<i>"I think it's much easier to see emotions in the images—at least for me—than to generate images from my emotions or my personality." /Zebra/</i>
	2. Whole-picture-focused self-definition and self-presentation	<i>"To guide the whole thing toward a beautiful... beautiful direction." /Little Mole/ "When someone else sees it, I want to show myself in a positive light, but at the same time, those bad parts are also there, and I don't want to deny them." /Balloon/</i>

The participant-generated images corresponding to the quotations can be found in the [Supplementary material 4](#).

The image as a tool: functional images

In many cases, the images served as multi-purpose tools for the participants: they, for example, facilitated emotion regulation, self-reflection, contemplation on topics of high personal relevance, or even existential summation.

A tool for emotional self-regulation—comfort images and aspirational images

Some participants described using certain images to amplify positive emotions or regulate negative ones—attributing them a self-help function. Two specific categories emerged: “comfort images” and “aspirational images.” The former refers to images that have a self-soothing function, while the latter display aspirations and act as self-motivational tools.

Comfort images provided a sense of peace and reassurance:

"Winter is coming [...] everything will be all cozy, and I don't know, this is the image I have in my head now." /Berry/ (Figure S1).

"I definitely wanted to show calmness in one of the images." /Zebra/

Some participants depicted locations or contexts that gave them a sense of safety:

"That I'm safe with my friends and family, and we have this little cozy nook, and even though it's dark outside, we're safe and we're together." /Balloon/ (Figure S2).

"The mountains symbolize Kismaros [a small village]. I'm studying peacefully and finally, there is calmness and happiness."/Little Mole/ (Figure S3).

The term "aspirational image" comes from Budapest's phrasing: *"I wish it were like this, but it's not. It's just a kind of aspiration—an aspirational image."* She visualized her dreams—what drives her and what she strives for: *"I have these desires, and right now I have to do everything to make things such."* (Figure S4).

Balloon represented her desired self in an abstract, symbolic form:

"Honestly, I would like to be such in the inside, even if I'm not always like this. I can imagine myself like this; I'd love to be part of this [image], like one of the little flowers or something." (Figure S5).

The self-help, emotion processing function appeared in several ways during generation. Little Mole, for example, presented a life-problem in one of her images and resolved it within the same image: *"This is like finally breaking free. Yes, setting things on fire and everything."* During the interview, she talked about a difficult, negative life phase, which she illustrated with the powerful symbol of a piano. However, the sheet music was set on fire by a cigarette, symbolizing her escape (Figure S6).

After generating an image reflecting her anxieties, Balloon created a calming one to counterbalance the negative emotions provoked by the former:

"I made these images because I'm very distressed about what's happening in the world—wars, climate crises, disasters, so on [...] to compensate for that, I started looking for a refuge."

In another image, Balloon symbolically armed herself with spikes as a form of protection:

"I think everyone has a part of them that's just a lost hedgehog in a dark forest—or at least I do—I am lost, but I am also a hedgehog, I have my spikes, I can protect myself, yet the world is so big and scary, and bad things happen in it all the time." (Figure S7).

The generated images were influenced by the emotions of their creators, but they also had a significant feedback effect. A clear example of this is Little Mole, who periodically returned to her comfort image during the interpretation phase, in order to calm herself: *"I'm going back to the cats..."* (Figure S3).

Berry intentionally created an image that would make her relax (Figure S1). This also helped her establish a sense of security during the process:

"I tried to listen to my feelings, like okay, what do I feel inside, what would I like to see, what would calm me down, and then came this wintry, fairytale-like image, and from there it was easier to get started."

"[This image] reminds me how important my relationships are to me, and how fortunately they're good too, and then I look at it and know that I'm not alone because I have my friends and family."/Balloon/ (Figure S2).

As we saw, not only did these calming comfort images evoke positive emotion in their creators, but also the aspirational ones. The core difference in the evoked emotions was the degree of proactivity— aspirational images helped to bring plans, motivations, and desires to the surface (or plans, motivations, and desires helped to bring themselves to the surface through those images). They functioned as reminders of what the participant wanted to keep in focus:

"Yes, a business analyst—I'm not a business analyst yet, but I want to be. Yes, I tried to... I will motivate myself with this [image], I'll look at this every day."/Berry/ (Figure S8).

The images reawakened the emotional states that motivated them—and not only positive emotions:

"I relived the anger I wanted to express."/Balloon/ (Figure S9).

A tool for understanding time—existential summarization, narrative construction, identities

The time dimensions—past, present, and future—and the related constructions of the temporal self played a key role in the image creation/interpretation process. During their interviews, participants tried to unify what they had created, constructing an overarching narrative based on their images, aided by their real-life stories. Most participants engaged in some form of life summarization, possibly influenced by the

instruction. Budapest was grateful for the task, because it allowed her to allocate some precious time entirely to self-reflection, something she feels she needed: *"You're just happy that you have some time to think about the things."* She experienced the process as a journey through different stages of her life: *"And then I saw into my past life, my thoughts, and reflected on my whole life—like thinking about now, the dog, the kid, the whatever. So I kind of accompanied my whole life."* Zebra also referred to the uniqueness of this experience: *"Not every day do we get the opportunity to collect all these keywords from our lives that we can later use to visualize ourselves, or the lives we live."*

Some tried to reach a totality of self-description in their allocated time, and attempted to condense their whole life into a single image (*"The married couple one (Figure S10) really contains everything I consider important in life and the things I imagine [...] the things that have preoccupied me so far in life or the things I love [...] I also included the past and the future. And because of the hill, the present is also there."* /Zebra/) or even a single word: (*"[My aim was to] capture those things that define me and summarize them in a single word or expressions."* /Zebra/). Others were more modest in their aims, using many different images to express many different facets of their identity (*"This now covers me,"* and to another picture, *"This completely describes [who I am]."* /Berry/).

Either in one or more images, different temporal self-concepts emerged throughout the process—for example, "the child-self" in the case of Balloon and Berry.

"Maybe it's a bit like the child-self or longing back, but she's just there in the middle of the forest, everything is exciting to her, everything she likes." /Balloon/ (Figure S11).

A kind of recollection and longing emerged, accompanied by a nostalgic emotional tone toward the qualities attributed to their child-self:

"It'd be nice to be a child who can just doodle anything." /Berry/

Budapest reflected on both her past and future selves. She contrasted her younger self with who she is now. She placed herself in time and space, imagining her elderly self in a place where she would feel content. She used temporality to present herself:

Past: *"Back then, I was ambitious, young, full of energy. I thought the world was mine."* Present: *"Now I lean back, stretch my back. It hurts a lot. So around retirement age, one tends to settle down."* Future: *"Somewhere by the waterfront, with a little cottage near the water—that's what I'd like for old age."*

Little Mole illustrated key turning points in her life through the interpretation of her images. Starting with the previously discussed burning sheet music, which symbolizes the closure of a negative life chapter, followed by a perspective-changing moment, when she realized she needed to proactively make changes for her own good. The third turning point was a recent, positive shift in her life. She repeatedly used the terms "old life" and "new life," reinforcing the notion of turning points:

1. Turning point (Figure S6): *"My life completely changed."*
2. Turning point (Figure S12): *"It depicts the moment when everyone I was there for [...] they all come to me and thank me and laugh, and I'm dying, and that's when I realized you need to let things out."*
3. Turning point (Figure S3): *"In the past few days, something shifted and finally [...] I started to stop blaming myself about this [learning difficulties]."*

She constructed a narrative: *"[These images] rather depict periods, because obviously, the old things are part of me too and contribute to who I am now, and obviously, many things have shaped and polished me."* She reflected on the continuity of her identity, emphasizing that her past is "part of her," thereby equipping those past events with meaning. She also talked about how when she heard the instructions, her own story appeared before her eyes, she could only define herself "with a story to tell."

A space for self-insight

The interviews revealed that the processes of image generation and image interpretation served as a space for self-exploration for the participants. A space in which they could freely reflect and associate with

themselves, sharing whatever thoughts came to mind. It also acted as a space where, through reactions to contextual elements and stimuli, they could gain new insights about their inner functioning.

Self-knowledge expressions and -disclosures during the process

Symbolization and symbolic interpretation emerged as major modes of self-definition and presentation—during image generation, symbolization dominated, and during the interviews, symbolic interpretation. During image interpretation, participants—through associations and either deliberate or spontaneous reflections—made self-relevant statements, thereby expressing aspects of self-knowledge. The images and the process elicited these confessions and catalyzed their verbalization.

Participants opened up about their inner psychological patterns and dynamics: *“I have an anxious attachment style, and that’s why it’s so important... not in a pathological way... that I’m together with others.”* /Balloon/ *“I’m an extremely empathetic person, maybe too much so, and it shows in... that I can understand others’ pain or joy—not just understand it, but actually feel it with them.”* /Little Mole/

Sentences beginning with *“I’m the kind of person who...”* marked aspects of identity that participants considered important and formed a kind of emphasized self-reflective frame: *“I’m the kind of person who needs to say things out loud to process them.”* /Little Mole/ *“I’m typically the kind of person who... well, I don’t know, I can’t really express my emotions easily, and when I had to name some adjectives [for the machine to work], then I was like... whew... my emotions are like toddlers, they can barely walk.”*

Some statements took the form of deep, confessional disclosures: *“Because I feel like my soul is older than my age. I’m not necessarily interested in the things my generation is.”* /Zebra/ *“I didn’t process my problems that way... I use marijuana too, but not to suppress anything.”* /Little Mole/

Self-knowledge realizations triggered by the process

Participants gained new insights about themselves through the process. Balloon discovered something that differed substantially from what she had previously thought: *“I was surprised by how many images I included, or wanted to include people... I don’t know, but now that you asked [in the interview], I started thinking about it. It hadn’t occurred to me before. But now I really need to think about it.”* /Balloon/

Berry’s attention was drawn to internal contradictions within her personality. She also reflected on the necessity of the image interpretation phase, noting that it was the retrospective viewpoint that enabled these realizations, which in turn motivated further reflection: *“It helped, because when we went back through everything, I realized this... this duality in me. So it helped even more, because if I had just done it and left, then it wouldn’t have clicked that this strong duality is really visible and felt in me—so it definitely helped.”* /Berry/

“I think this description, this talking about the images—it’s essential.” /Berry/

The significance of the interpretation phase was also made explicit by Little Mole. She felt the images alone were not sufficient for complete self-representation: *“Just because there’s a knife in my drawing doesn’t mean I want to kill someone or myself... but if the person, even if a patient, explains their view... then they might realize things about themselves they wouldn’t have thought of—it just comes out.”* /Little Mole/

Budapest was surprised by her own image choices and how motivated she became in self-knowledge during the process (*“I’m actually interested in myself!”*)—she even began planning to reflect further in daily life. She believed that the motivations behind her choices could carry important self-insight, which extends beyond the study session, providing a launch point for continued reflection: *“I’ll think about why I chose what I chose and what I’d pick tomorrow morning. There’s a reason why I clicked on that image, why I picked that one. It’s worth thinking about longer—and I will make time for that.”*

Modes of self-representation

Two subthemes emerged under the broader theme of self-definition and self-presentation: the role of symbolism and symbolic interpretation of AI-added elements, and the dimension of added meaning arising from the relationships between images.

The role of unexpected AI content

Since the user cannot specify explicitly *everything* on the created image, the generative model *has to* fill out the gaps with some content it finds fitting and probable—these components, however, can be interpreted as quite improbable and unfitting sometimes (maybe the task of self-image generation makes the user more sensitive to such unexpected contents). These surprising details can serve as projective surfaces for symbolic interpretation.

For example, in one image (Figure S10), Zebra depicted herself and her partner in old age, sitting in a garden. Since she hadn't specified the background, the AI filled in the space with hills. Zebra projected meaning into this random element, interpreting the hills as a symbol of the future because her desired future home, Tapolca, is a hilly area.

Zebra could also flexibly attribute meaning to those parts of the image that appeared chaotic or unfinished at first (Figure S13): *"This part is kind of a mess, not really detailed. But people's lives are a mess too, so it's a good little symbol."*

She also commented on the directional difference between symbolization and symbolic interpretation: *"I think it's much easier to see emotions in the pictures—at least for me—than to generate images from my emotions or my personality. But maybe that's just how my thinking works, so that part is harder for me."* (Figure S14).

Little Mole found some "angry little goblins" in an image about a peacefully reading young girl. She immediately associated those goblins with her own brain, which held her back from learning and achieving her goals (Figure S3). She externalized and personified her struggles: *"There are these angry, weird little creatures around me, who are my brain, pulling me back—and that's why I can't start the whole thing."*

By portraying her problems as cute characters, she reinforced a forgiving attitude toward herself: *"I've started to stop blaming myself for this whole thing."*

Holistic self-presentation across images

The term "holistic self-presentation" here refers to how the collective meaning, narrative arc, or interrelatedness of the images adds layers beyond the individual image meanings. As Balloon explained: *"Now I feel like there's a balance between the positive and negative parts, and that's good—but I'm not sure."* She consciously aimed to balance the emotional tones of her self-representation.

She also wondered whether she would've generated the same images had they been purely private: *"If the task were just for me—knowing that I'd never have to show them to anyone—then what would I have included? Would it be very different? I don't know."*

She opted to show her "presentable" side: *"Not necessarily because I think these are my most important traits, but because they're the most presentable."*

She used abstraction to mask her full authenticity: *"It's abstract enough that I'm comfortable showing it to anyone."*

Still, she remained aware of the distortion and tried to combat it: *"Even so, I feel these are true and important—not just superficial. I tried to prioritize honesty."*

Ultimately, she aimed to capture her complexity: *"To show as many different parts [of myself] as possible, through as many different images, of what I feel and think I am, and what's important to me."*

Berry similarly aimed to nuance her self-image, highlighting the internal "dualities" she often mentioned. The interpretation phase gave her a chance to explain: *"It was somewhat intentional—I wanted to emphasize that I'm not really that eccentric or that career-focused. I often feel an internal struggle between two worlds that don't coexist easily—they're just too different."*

This balancing intention was present throughout: *"Okay, now that everything's nice and pretty—here comes the other side."/Berry/*

“Yeah, for some reason, it turned negative toward the end... so I picked this last image to close on something positive.” /Balloon/ (Figure S15).

Most participants had some kind of overarching concept or narrative arc. For example, Zebra mentioned that her images built upon one another: “So the development process was definitely there in my work—in how I thought. I refined things as I went. After the first image, I already knew what to build on, drew ideas from it, understood better how the machine worked. So, the process was clearly important: where I was at each point influenced what kind of images I created.”

For Little Mole, there was a conscious intent to “lead it all toward something beautiful.” She moved forward in both time and emotional tone—starting with darkness and moving through turning points to a more hopeful present and future: “I started somewhere, and then kind of drifted in that direction.”

This direction was toward her wishes for the future, which closed the image sequence: “In the beginning, I didn’t have that concept that this is what I wanted to do. It only became clear at the very end [...]. That’s when I asked how much time was left, because I wanted to get this one last image done—it was the most important one.” (Figure S3).

Discussion

This study examined how five participants experienced *self-definition* and *self-presentation* when engaging with the AI-assisted self-representation protocol originally developed by Kellerwessel and Ujhelyi [12]. While earlier research focused on the method’s potential for personality assessment, our aim here was to investigate its possible value in psychological support contexts.

Guided by an idiographic IPA approach, we focused on *how* participants used the method, *what kinds of experiences* it generated, and *how* these experiences might inform digital mental health practices. Three group experiential themes emerged: images as functional tools, a space for self-insight, and modalities of self-definition. These themes, interpreted without claims to population-level generalizability, reveal ways in which participants engaged with AI-assisted images to regulate affect, externalize concerns, and construct or refine narrative identity.

Dual mechanism of meaning making

Our findings suggest that meaning-making in the AI-assisted self-representation protocol may involve at least two partially distinct pathways. The first pathway appears to be intra-generative: participants sometimes ascribed meaning to images already during the act of generation itself, without requiring subsequent discussion. For example, one participant (Little Mole) followed a deliberate conceptual plan, visually representing successive life periods that “shaped” the current self. This process occasionally involved re-framing difficult life events as necessary elements of personal growth, suggesting that symbolic reinterpretation can occur in situ. Such intra-generative effects could, in principle, be accessible in a solo setting, particularly if accompanied by structured self-reflection tools (e.g., guided journaling prompts).

The second pathway is dialogical, arising primarily during shared narration with a facilitator. Here, meaning was consolidated and made explicit through verbal articulation, co-construction of narrative, and reflective questioning. For instance, Berry emphasized that for her, “talking through” the images was indispensable: it was the act of jointly reviewing the generated images that prompted key self-insight realizations. This aligns with previous literature on externalized narrative processing, where the presence of an attuned listener can scaffold cognitive and emotional integration.

Whether self-guided post-session reflection (e.g., privately revisiting images, keeping a reflective diary) could approximate the benefits of facilitator-supported dialogue remains an open empirical question. Future research could test these mechanisms systematically using a 2×2 design (*generation: present/absent* \times *guided narration: present/absent*), and by adding a self-guided reflective journaling condition to explore whether structured private reflection can approximate facilitator-supported insight.

It is also worth noting that some effects, particularly those related to emotion regulation (e.g., visualizing comfort or aspirational imagery, externalizing problems into symbolic form), were reported independently of subsequent dialogue. For example, Berry described intentionally generating images that she would “like to see in that moment” to foster calmness. Such strategies might retain their benefit even in solo practice, and could potentially be developed into low-intensity, self-administered exercises for emotion regulation, provided that appropriate safeguards and user guidance are in place.

Self-awareness and change of perspective

A key experiential dimension was self-awareness. In the process of depicting and reflecting on themselves, participants had to think about themselves, bringing known self-knowledge to the surface and even generating new insights. In counseling, professionals are encouraged to use creative tools to facilitate self-awareness [24]. Participants chose their own important topics, what they wanted to share about themselves, much like in open-ended questioning [12]. The interpretation phase also had a clarifying function—participants had to adopt an observer perspective, reflecting on their images. According to Drujan et al. [25], such perspective-taking helps distance oneself from intense emotions, potentially easing the processing of emotionally challenging realizations. The images functioned as narrative anchors for self-disclosure and reflection. Participants stated that reflecting on their images helped make their self-image more comprehensible—highlighting inner dynamics and patterns that might otherwise remain unconscious. Several of them said they wouldn’t have reached such realizations without the opportunity to discuss their images.

Symbolization and symbolic interpretation emerged as major modes of self-definition and presentation. Symbol formation is fundamental to art, so its appearance in this creative process is unsurprising. In Lyu et al.’s study [10], participants used metaphors rather than direct depiction, e.g., portraying home as a harbor of love or oneself as a Samoyed dog floating in space. From a psychoanalytic perspective, symbols may reflect hidden desires or unconscious conflicts [26]. Jung and von Franz also viewed symbols as tools for understanding individual and collective psychological processes [26].

Images as tools

One of the central themes was the use of images as tools, for example, for emotion regulation. Comfort images helped participants soothe themselves, while aspirational images helped them to aspire. Visualizing positive emotions fostered self-affirmation, and portraying difficulties enabled integration and processing.

Similar to vision boards—a form of collage illustrating personal aspirations using magazine cutouts, drawings, inspirational words, etc.—many aspirational images in this study served as symbolic representations, rendering abstract dreams more concrete [27]. Vision boards are rooted in creative counseling traditions and aid problem-solving nonverbally [28]. In therapy, they offer a visual representation of clients’ thoughts, facilitating reflection, discussion, problem-solving, anxiety reduction, and identity development [29]. As some participants explicitly stated that the images could later help motivate them toward their goals, AI-generated aspirational images could serve these functions in counselling with appropriate guidance. Aspirational imagery also aligns with psychoanalytic concepts of wish fulfillment, where desires are satisfied through dreams or fantasies [30]. The question arises whether having a visual representation of a fantasy might enhance the feeling of fulfillment in a similar way.

Safe place imagery is a useful emotion regulation strategy, aiding in maintaining positive emotions and processing negative ones. It can be thought of as an emotional refuge that individuals can mentally return to in times of stress to regain stability. It is a relaxation technique that involves imagining a concrete or symbolic place that evokes feelings of safety and calm. It can reduce emotional involvement when reflecting on past events, thus serving as a self-help tool [25]. In the current study, without explicit prompting, participants spontaneously helped themselves in this way when negative memories or emotions were evoked. This aligns with findings from Tomán et al. [31], who used IPA to study the adaptation of individuals with chronic respiratory conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic. They found that safe place imagery supported coping. This raises the question of whether the image generation method could be used,

with the right instructions, as a form of self-soothing intervention. The visualized symbols and moods of comfort and safety had a calming effect. Could these images continue to provide comfort when revisited in the future?

Time, self, and narrative

Another important theme was the time and space created by the process. Generating images through AI offered a chance to reflect on the past, interpret the present, and imagine the future, as with some other art therapy methodologies. Participants could summarize their lives, presenting their identity to the interviewer, “as a story to tell.” According to Ricoeur [32], through storytelling, the narrator attempts to interpret the world, and narrative has a constructive role in the emergence of self-awareness [32]. Narrative identity is the internalized and evolving story of one’s life, integrating reconstructed past and imagined future to give life coherence and purpose. Through this narrative identity, individuals communicate to themselves and others who they are, how they became that, and what they see in their future [33].

Self-understanding, however, not only requires listing those past, present, and future selves: it also requires integration both synchronically and diachronically [34]. Participants’ self-definitions reflected both: they mapped their contradictory present aspects alongside temporal self-constructs, attempting to reconcile discrepancies, creating an overarching narrative. The concept of a turning point refers to a significant life event that leads to a clear change in a person’s life, making it a valuable tool for identity researchers [35]. Strauss stated that after such a turning point, the person feels fundamentally different [35]. In this study, some images depicted such turning points—moments after which participants felt they had a “new life.” When reviewing their images, participants like Little Mole expressed that certain events were necessary for becoming who they are now, and the image generation process effectively catalyzed such processes. This further underscores the narrative nature of the image generation process and its potential to examine identity formation through visual turning points.

Limitations and potential risks

The study’s idiographic and exploratory design privileges depth over breadth, which is consistent with the methodological aims of IPA. Accordingly, the sample is small and relatively homogeneous, and the findings are not intended to generalize. Additional limitations relate to the novelty of the research area, the early-stage nature of the method, and the specific characteristics of the tool used (e.g., challenges in human-machine interaction and software constraints). Platform variability is also a non-trivial concern for reproducibility; results should therefore be interpreted with caution. Regarding the subjectivity inherent in IPA, we addressed this by practicing ongoing reflexivity and maintaining continuous analytic dialogue between researchers.

The procedure should be applied with caution in clients with pronounced AI-related anxiety or perfectionistic tendencies, where the unpredictability of generative outputs may provoke distress. It may be contraindicated or require enhanced monitoring in PTSD and dissociative conditions (risk of triggers from vivid, dream-like imagery), in paranoid states (misinterpretation of AI agency), and in severe major depression (potential reinforcement of negative cognitions). We recommend brief pre-screening, explicit informed consent (including data use), a safety protocol for crisis escalation, and careful case formulation to decide whether the method is suitable at a given clinical stage. In all cases, the practice should be framed as adjunctive, not as a substitute for evidence-based interventions.

Conclusions and outlook

The results revealed that the process of image generation can facilitate emotion-regulating function and may aid self-definition and self-presentation challenges through the use and interpretation of symbols and the construction of narratives. In the overall picture, the relationships between individual images also emerged as important tools for self-definition. The significance of the image interpretation phase of the interview became evident:

Participants expressed positive experiences regarding the reflective image-sharing processes, and many of the process's benefits were realized during this phase through reflection and retrospection, as in earlier studies.

This exploratory study demonstrates the potential of generative AI systems—specifically text-to-image platforms like Midjourney—as engaging, user-driven tools for emotional self-regulation, narrative construction, and identity exploration. The integration of creative digital tools into mental health practice aligns closely with emerging frameworks in digital health innovation, which emphasize personalization, accessibility, and cultural adaptability. Moreover, the combination of qualitative self-report and machine-readable image features paves the way for scalable, hybrid approaches that merge narrative therapy with data-driven assessment. Technology is evolving rapidly, and science should take advantage of every new opportunity. The engaging, experiential, and unique nature of the method—reported by participants—may increase involvement in the process. Due to their natural relationship with digital media, younger generations may be particularly receptive to experiences involving technological tools [5] or populations that may feel less comfortable with traditional talk-based methods. This method may therefore offer a promising way to reach and engage them.

Future research directions

One possible future direction is to examine whether visualizing desires or a safe space in the form of generated images could have similar positive effects as vision boards or safe place imagery. It would be worthwhile to explore the method's applicability in narrative therapy, including narrative construction, externalization of problems, and the representation of turning points, as well as its use as a tool to study narrative identity and life transitions.

Based on the earlier outlined projective mechanisms, it would also be worth examining whether the method could function as a projective technique. Continuing this line of thought, exploring its parallels with existing projective drawing tests could be an exciting area of inquiry. The method's potential for art therapy-style applications is also promising, especially in its capacity to help recall and integrate life events and support self-definition and self-understanding.

It would be interesting to investigate to what extent the technique could serve as a reflective surface or conversational anchor during psychological sessions, and whether it facilitates communication between client and practitioner.

Telemedicine: tentative opportunities and next steps

Several telemedicine use-cases could be explored in future pilot work. First, a pre-session self-generation module may be feasible: participants receive standardized instructions, a brief video on prompt writing, and a short safety notice, then generate images privately before a remote session. Second, a synchronous video consultation might help scaffold meaning-making, where clinician and client review selected images together (e.g., screen-sharing), tentatively supporting re-framing and reflective distancing. Third, between-session options could include structured, self-guided journaling prompts linked to the images, optional re-generation around diverse themes (e.g., values, coping, relationships), or revisiting personally salient “comfort”/“aspirational” images; these practices might aid emotion regulation for some clients.

Evaluation could proceed via small feasibility/acceptability pilots and mixed-methods studies that track adherence, perceived helpfulness, qualitative change narratives, and adverse events, alongside comparisons of self-guided vs. guided formats. Moderators such as conscientiousness or perfectionism may help identify for whom tele-delivery is most (or least) suitable. Any clinical use should remain adjunctive and goal-focused, with careful case formulation and clear role boundaries.

Abbreviations

AI: artificial intelligence

BDI: Beck Depression Inventory

IPA: interpretative phenomenological analysis

Supplementary materials

The supplementary materials for this article are available at: https://www.explorationpub.com/uploads/Article/file/101172_sup_1.pdf.

Declarations

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AI-Assisted Work Statement: Participants used Midjourney V6 to create self-representative images as part of the data collection process. To create this manuscript, we, the authors, used OpenAI's ChatGPT models (versions 4o, o3, and 4.5) to assist with the formulation and refinement of the text in English. After using these tools, we carefully reviewed and edited the content as needed and took full responsibility for the final version of the publication.

Author contributions

LT: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing—original draft. KK: Methodology, Project administration, Writing—original draft, Writing—review & editing, Software. AU: Project administration, Supervision, Writing—review & editing. All authors read and approved the submitted version.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education and Psychology at Eotvos Lorand University, reference number: 2024/483. The research complies with the Declaration of Helsinki (2024).

Consent to participate

Participants were recruited via social media platforms, specifically Facebook and Instagram. Participation in the study was anonymous and voluntary. Informed consent to participate in the study was obtained from all participants.

Consent to publication

All images were generated by study participants using Midjourney V6 prompts in accordance with the study protocol. The copyright of the images is fully retained by the participants. The images do not infringe upon any third-party rights (e.g., trademarks, brands, or recognizable characters) and adhere to the Midjourney community guidelines. Publication of the images has been authorized through explicit participant consent for scholarly purposes.

Availability of data and materials

All images and prompts of the participants are available from the corresponding author on request.

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