

Artificial Intelligence and Professionals' Work Alienation:

A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT,

This thesis explores how artificial intelligence (AI) affects professionals' identity and feelings of work alienation. As AI is increasingly integrated into the workplace, its effects on how professionals relate to their work have become more significant but are still unclear. The study employs a qualitative approach, comprising seven semi-structured interviews with professionals from diverse fields who implement AI in their roles and jobs. Following Thematic Analysis and Gioia's methodology, the results of this thesis offer insight into how AI influences professional identity, autonomy, and engagement. The findings show two contrasting experiences. For some professionals, AI disrupted their sense of meaning, reduced autonomy, and challenged their identity, leading to emotional detachment. For others, AI enhanced their role, supported their values, and fostered a stronger connection to their work. These differences highlight that the impact of AI depends heavily on how it is implemented and how professionals perceive their agency over it. This study contributes to current literature by shifting attention toward the emotional and identity-based effects of AI, offering practical insights for organizations on how to implement AI in ways that support, rather than alienate, their workforce.

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1. Introduction

In a world where Artificial Intelligence (AI) is evolving rapidly, improving every day by gathering and learning from external data (Stryker & Kavlakoglu, 2024). AI plays a significant role in modern workplaces, impacting how businesses operate, and professionals experience their jobs (Gulko, 2025). While AI brings many advantages, it also raises concerns about its effects on employees. AI is a technology that enables machines to act as humans through comprehension, problem-solving, decision-making, creativity, and autonomy (Stryker & Kavlakoglu, 2024). Furthermore, many organizations have started implementing more AI in the company due to benefits such as improved efficiency, reduced cost, supporting employees in their daily tasks, improved decision-making, and overall business performance (Moleté et al., 2025). Indeed, AI can automate repetitive tasks, allowing employees to focus on more meaningful work. It can also quickly analyze large amounts of data, helping businesses make informed decisions (Moleté et al., 2025).

However, organizations tend not to consider the negative effects that AI may cause on employees, such as stress, burnout, and absenteeism (Korinek & Klinova, 2023). One such effect is work alienation, a term that describes how an employee distances themselves from their job (Shantz et al., 2015). Work alienation may be caused by organizations relying too heavily on AI, leading individuals to feel emotionally disconnected, less valued and autonomous, and stressed that AI will take over their jobs, resulting in job insecurity (Vredenburg, 2022). To better understand how AI may lead to work alienation, it is essential to explore the underlying factors at the individual level that can contribute to this disconnection. According to Mottaz (1981), several key individual-level factors contribute to the development of work alienation. These include reduced job autonomy, a decline in work meaningfulness, job insecurity, and disruptions to professional identity.

This is especially relevant for professionals, whose work is closely tied to their identity. Professionals are the focus of this paper because their sense of identity is closely tied to their work (Pratt et al., 2006). They are individuals who use deep, specialized knowledge and skills to carry out important tasks that support others and help society function, often in ways that are not easily done by others (Evetts, 2003). This close connection between what professionals do and how they see themselves is known as professional identity. According to Pratt et al. (2006), professional identity is not just about the tasks someone performs, but about who they are because of their role, such as beliefs and values. Understanding how this identity is formed and how it may be challenged or reshaped is key to exploring how changes like AI affect professionals in the workplace. Therefore, Professionals are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of AI due to their reliance on individual factors. These characteristics, such as autonomy, expertise, and a strong sense of identity, make them more sensitive to the changes AI brings (Pratt et al., 2006). Recent research by Selenko et al. 2022 highlights that AI does not just take over routine tasks; it can deeply change how work is structured, in ways that affect how professionals see themselves. Many

professionals take pride in using their judgment, solving complex problems, and making important decisions. These are not just tasks; they are central to how professionals define their value and identity. However, when AI begins to assume these core responsibilities, it can feel as though something essential is being taken away. Therefore, this can have an impact on the professional's identity and cause the professional to lose interest and motivation to continue working. These are all signs of alienation.

Defined as the feeling of detachment or estrangement that individuals can experience in their workplace (Liu et al., 2025), when manifested, work alienation can lead to undermining employees' sense of purpose and fulfillment, as well as connection to their job, colleagues, and even themselves. A recent study by de Sio (2024) stated the challenges of AI, such as job displacement and its impact on meaningful work for professionals, suggesting that AI can disconnect employees from their work (de Sio, 2024). However, while this report importantly explored structural and ethical issues, it provided less focus to professionals' personal experiences, emotions, and perceptions of AI in their daily work. Consequently, more research is needed to understand how digital transformation, via AI implementation, can influence individual-level experiences (Braojos et al., 2024). More specifically, we still know little regarding how AI can affect professionals' work alienation and how professionals experience these changes (Selenko et al., 2022). Therefore, this thesis aims to analyze AI's influence on professionals' experience of work alienation, thus bridging the AI and individual levels of analysis. This thesis's research question (RQ) is: **How can AI influence professionals' experience of work alienation?**

This thesis makes two main theoretical contributions. Firstly, it adds to the existing literature on AI at work by exploring professionals' perceptions of AI's impact on the individual level, such as their professional identity, thus considering the individual frontier. Secondly, it sheds light on how professionals experience AI implementation regarding an overlooked yet important outcome, such as work alienation. Additionally, this thesis has practical implications. This research is relevant for organizations since it can help them understand how AI can affect professionals and their identities on a personal and emotional level. By understanding these effects, managers can create a better balance between tasks assigned to individuals and those handled by AI, while also taking professionals' mental well-being into account. Companies can better support employees during AI implementation by considering key factors like autonomy, job security, and meaningful work. Furthermore, by focusing specifically on professionals, the findings can help them to make sense of the connection between AI implementation, their identity, and work, as well as potential work alienation.

This paper begins by introducing the theoretical background of the main concepts: AI, professionals, professional identity, and work alienation. Following this, the methodology is explained, outlining the research approach and data collection methods used. The subsequent sections

present the analysis of the data, the results, and, finally, a discussion of the findings, leading to the conclusion.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Artificial Intelligence

Artificial Intelligence (AI), particularly Generative AI, is reshaping digital transformation by enabling the automated creation of meaningful content and redefining how value is generated across business and society (Feuerriegel et al., 2023). AI was first introduced in 1950, and fast forward to 30 years later in 1980, the first AI was introduced to the market known as XCON. There are many definitions of AI, which can make it difficult to pin down a single, universally accepted meaning. Different fields (computer science, philosophy, business, etc.) define AI in ways that suit their focus. For instance, in healthcare, AI is often seen as a helpful tool that supports doctors in diagnosing illnesses and suggesting treatment options (Gulley & Hilliard, 2024). AI in finance is again defined differently, as AI in finance means using technology like smart algorithms and machine learning to handle data, automate processes, and help make better decisions in financial services (Finio & Downie, 2023). Considering the above, in this thesis, AI is defined as “a collection of interrelated technologies used to solve problems that would otherwise require human cognition” (Selenko et al., 2022, p. 273).

The world of AI has developed and expanded into workplaces. According to AIPRM 2024, around 75% of organizations will have adapted to AI by the end of 2023, and around 92% of companies plan to invest more in AI over the next 3 years (Mayer et al., 2025). This growing integration of AI raises concerns about its impact on professionals, particularly regarding job displacement and work alienation. AI has supported organizations and professionals in many ways, such as reducing errors, lowering costs, increasing productivity, and handling repetitive tasks. In healthcare, for example, AI can assist doctors by suggesting medications based on patient information entered into the system. As Basu et al. (2020) explain, AI can save doctors time by helping with tasks like writing notes, organizing patient information in systems like EPIC, diagnosing illnesses, and even offering a second opinion. This shows how AI supports professionals by freeing them to focus on work that reflects their expertise and identity.

2.2 Professionals and Professional Identity

Professionals are individuals with specialized knowledge and expertise, which is often gained via education, training, or experience (Evetts, 2003). Furthermore, the focus is on professionals rather than non-professionals due to professionals performing complex tasks that require a certain amount of knowledge or experience, such as doctors, engineers, and researchers, and are more likely to see their work as part of who they are. In contrast, non-professional roles often involve more routine or standardized tasks and may not be as closely tied to a person's identity, autonomy, or sense of purpose. According to Shoellis (2024), professionalism is a complex and often personal concept; it

does not have a single, clear-cut definition. What it means to be a professional can vary from person to person, shaped by their identity, values, and life experiences. Their work is not only about doing tasks, but also about upholding ethical standards, exercising autonomy, and serving a larger societal good. Muzio et al. (2019) stated in their report that professional identity today is shaped through external factors such as demands, technology, and shifting societal expectations, which makes identity formation more dynamic and contested.

A key part of being professional is their professional identity. Identity defines how individuals see themselves, including their values, beliefs, skills, and the meaning they have to others and the world around them (Pratt et al. 2006). More specifically, “professional identity can be understood as a construct covering different core aspects of one's work, considered in terms of the individual's past, present, and future” (Vähäsantanen, 2022, p. 3). Hence, professional identity gives people a sense of pride, belonging, and purpose, and this is developed and reinforced via learning, interactions, and performing tasks that have meaning or are important for the individual.

In the workplace context, the rise of AI has begun to challenge professional identity (Shonhe and Min, 2025). AI systems are increasingly capable of performing tasks that were once exclusive to highly trained professionals. As firms begin to rely on AI for more complex tasks, this shift raises concerns about professional job security and the erosion of core responsibilities (Mäkelä & Stephany, 2024). When these core tasks are automated and supported by AI systems, professionals may experience a loss of job autonomy. As a result, Professionals may feel that AI could make some of their skills or tasks unnecessary, which can threaten their sense of identity and confidence in their work (Shonhe & Min, 2025). This disruption to professional identity and autonomy is closely linked to the concept of work alienation (Selenko et al., 2022)

2.3 Work alienation

The concept of alienation, broadly defined as the feeling of detachment or estrangement that individuals can experience in their workplace (Liu et al., 2025), has gained renewed attention with the rise of AI, as workers may feel increasingly disconnected from their roles (Feuerriegel et al., 2023). To narrow down the scope, “work alienation is a psychological state in which employees feel emotionally and mentally disconnected from their work” (García-Contreras et al., 2022, p. 3). Work alienation can stem from individual-level factors that shape how employees personally experience their work (Mottaz, 1981). These factors include job autonomy, job meaningfulness, job security, and professional identity. When these elements are disrupted, individuals may feel emotionally and psychologically detached from their work, which may lead to alienation.

As AI reshapes the workplace, understanding how it disrupts key individual-level factors, especially in professional roles, can help explain why some professionals experience work alienation. Job autonomy refers to the level of freedom and control everyone has over their work, and this concept was

first formalized in the 1970s, highlighting the importance of allowing employees to have control over their tasks, which would increase their satisfaction and motivation (Park & Jang, 2015). However, the introduction of AI software may reduce the job autonomy of individuals, such as taking over decision-making

Another important factor is job insecurity. This involves the concerns of every individual in the workplace; it refers to concerns about individual positions for the future (Taamneh & AL-Gharaibeh, 2014). With AI taking over more complex tasks, individual uncertainty increases, thinking they will be replaced, which can lead to stress and anxiety. This perpetual uncertainty can lead to stress and anxiety, which contribute significantly to fostering the sentiments of alienation.

Lastly, one of the most crucial factors for professionals is the disruption to their professional identity (Mottaz, 1981). When AI begins performing activities that were once at the center of a professional's role, the identity that they attach to their work begins to get undermined. This leads professionals to feel as if their work is losing significance and their worth is being eroded. They land in an identity crisis, feeling devalued, incompetent, and unsure about their role within the organization (Mottaz, 1981). These disruptions can cause professionals to feel devalued, less competent, or unsure of their place in the workplace, all of which contribute to alienation (Selenko et al., 2022; de Sio, 2024).

3 Methodology

3.1 Research design

This thesis used a qualitative research design to explore how artificial intelligence (AI) affects professionals, their identity, and work alienation. Qualitative research is useful when trying to answer questions like "how" and "why," as it helps the researchers to understand people's experiences, feelings, and the context in which they happen (Cleland, 2017). This method was especially helpful for studying topics like work alienation because it allowed the researchers to study from the personal stories and perspectives of professionals. Furthermore, it also made it possible to discover new ideas and build a deeper understanding of how AI changes the way people relate to their jobs. Although qualitative research can take more time and may be influenced by the researcher's views, it is still valuable as it helps to capture the unique thoughts, beliefs, and values of professionals in their real work situations (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

3.2 Data collection and sampling

To explore how AI can distance professionals from their work, this study considered participants from a variety of sectors to gain a broader understanding of how AI might contribute to work alienation in different professional environments. The participants were selected using purposive sampling, in which the researcher carefully chooses participants because they possess specific qualities, experiences, or knowledge that are important for the study (Stratton, 2024). The aim was to include people who could share meaningful insights based on their real-world

experience with AI at work. In total, seven participants were contacted through email, LinkedIn, and phone calls. After the first round of contact, four people agreed to take part in the interviews. To increase the sample size, snowball sampling was also used, which means that participants were asked if they could refer a colleague or friend with direct experience with AI in their job (Saunders et al., 2025). This method helped bring in the remaining four participants, resulting in a total of eight interviews.

Given the limited timeframe of the research, eight participants were considered sufficient. This is supported by Guest et al. (2006), who found that most major themes emerged within the first six interviews, especially when the sample is relatively homogeneous, suggesting that valuable insights can often be captured early in the data collection process. Since this study focused exclusively on professionals with experience using AI in the workplace, the sample met this condition. Moreover, Guest et al. (2006) observed that theoretical saturation is the point at which no new theoretical insights or concepts emerge and is typically reached within 12 interviews.

3.3 Research instruments

This study opted for semi-structured interviews to collect data from eight participants. Each interview lasted around 30-45 minutes and was conducted in English, which the participants were comfortable with. Semi-structured interviews were used for data collection since the goal of this thesis was to gather information from key informants who had personal experiences, attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs related to the topic of interest. Researchers can use semi-structured interviews to collect new, exploratory data related to a research topic (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). This type of interview allowed for open-ended questions, with the following questions, while still following a general structure. It gave participants the freedom to share their thoughts and experiences in their own words, while also making sure that all important topics related to AI and work alienation were covered (Gioia et al., 2012). Before each interview, each participant received clear information about the purpose of the study and gave their informed consent. Ethical approval for this research was granted by the Ethics Committee of the University of Twente, ensuring that the study met all required ethical standards related to participant safety, confidentiality, and informed consent. Therefore, all interviews were conducted confidentially, and personal details were removed to protect participants' identities.

All Interviews were conducted face-to-face, and interviews were audio-recorded with the participant's permission. Afterward, the recordings were transcribed verbatim using the Amber script transcription tool. Once the research was completed, all recordings were deleted to ensure privacy and confidentiality. A standard set of guiding questions was used during the interviews. These questions were carefully designed based on the main themes of the research.

Table 1. Overview of participants

NO	Position	Tenure	gender	age
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P1	Social media manager	6	M	32
P2	Coding programmer	4	M	28
P3	Software engineer	3	M	27
P4	Doctor	4	M	30
P5	Coding programmer	6	M	29
P6	Teacher	5	F	27
P7	Nutritionist	3	F	28

3.4 Data analysis

To analyze the data collected from the eight semi-structured interviews, this study made use of thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), Thematic analysis is a way of making sense of data by looking for patterns or common ideas that come up in the interviews and then exploring and explaining what those patterns mean. Thematic analysis was chosen because it offers a flexible approach that works well with rich, detailed, and complex accounts of personal experiences, making it suitable for exploring how professionals experience AI and work alienation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To ensure analytical depth and transparency, this study also incorporated elements of the structured coding framework developed by Gioia et al. (2012). While thematic analysis and the Gioia methodology are distinct approaches, the Gioia structure was used within the broader thematic analysis process to help organize and clarify the coding and theme development. Furthermore, the Gioia methodology is useful for qualitative research because it helps turn real-life experiences from participants into clearer, more organized ideas. It starts by staying close to what people say, then finds patterns in those ideas, and finally builds broader insights to better understand the topic.

The analysis of each interview followed six steps. In the first step, each interview transcript was read several times to become familiar with the data and to gain a good understanding of what was shared. In the second step, important ideas from the interviews were highlighted and labeled with short codes. These codes captured key points, such as “feeling monitored” or “AI helps but reduces creativity”. In the third step, similar codes were grouped into broader themes that reflected common experiences among participants. In the fourth step, these themes were reviewed carefully to make sure they accurately matched what participants said in the interviews. The fifth step involved clearly defining each theme and giving it a name that reflected its main idea. In the final step, the themes were used to help answer the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4. Results

4.1 AI as a buffer against work alienation

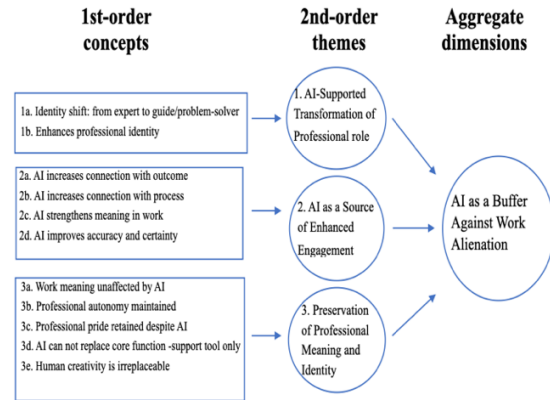


Fig. 1 Data structure on AI as a buffer against Work Alienation

Analyzing the participants' data concerning the impact of AI in their professions, the first aggregate dimension presents how AI has supported rather than caused a distance and disconnection from their professions. While popular discourse often emphasizes AI's alienating effects, such as loss of control or the fear of being replaced, the participants in this theme offered a more resilient and optimistic perspective. For some participants, AI was not seen as a threat but rather as a complementary tool that improved their profession in but most importantly, AI made the professions get closer and have more meaning to their profession Three main themes became evident that were particularly directed toward AI as a buffer against work alienation, namely “Preservation of Professional Meaning and Identity”, “AI-Supported Transformation of Professional Identity”, and “AI as a Source of Enhanced Engagement”.

4.1.1 AI-Supported Transformation of Professional Identity

This theme shows how some participants redefined their professional identities through AI, not by feeling replaced, but by adapting in ways that strengthened their roles. Many described a shift from expert to guide or problem-solver, which was seen as an opportunity to focus on higher-level, more meaningful contributions. As one teacher (P6) reflected:

“Now I'm more like a guide to them. Not the source of knowledge.”
“They can ask whatever they want to AI and they will get an answer. So I can only kind of guide the way and guide them through learning.”

These quotes show how AI changed the teacher's role from delivering knowledge to guiding learning. A similar shift was described by a programmer (P2):

“Since AI became widely adopted, it shifted my role from a code writer to a problem solver and strategist.”

These examples show how AI allowed professionals to move away from repetitive tasks and toward more strategic and creative aspects of their work. Another experience was that AI-enhanced participants’ professional identity. AI was not seen as a limitation but rather something that added value to their role. As one programmer (P5) stated:

“It made me realize that my role is not just writing code, but also solving difficult, complex problems. It added more value to my thinking and decision-making skills, and that’s why I feel more confident and skilled.”

“My work has a lot of meaning because it’s helping people when they are at their lowest... AI has made life easier for the patient, more than for me, because they get the treatment they deserve faster and more efficiently than before.” (P4)

For this participant, AI did not reduce their role but instead made it more impactful by improving patient outcomes and strengthening their sense of professional purpose.

Overall, participants felt that AI could support them in their work without replacing their judgment or authority. They maintained autonomy and responsibility while benefiting from automation. Rather than being displaced, they saw AI as a system that reinforced their decision-making role. Together, these experiences show that AI does not always lead to alienation. For some professionals, it enabled a positive transformation of identity, one that was adaptive, affirming, and rooted in a strong sense of professional value

4.1.2 AI as a source of enhanced engagement

While many participants initially expected AI to disrupt their profession or distance them from their work, several shared the opposite experience. For these individuals, AI acted as a source of enhanced engagement, helping them feel more connected to both the outcome and the process of their work.

One participant explained that AI had increased their connection with the outcome of their job by supporting their efforts to deliver better results to others:

“It helps me to create more things for my students. So it facilitates my job.” (P6)

“AI has not made me distant at all. Like, uh, it, it is just like adding more value to my work, and because I care about my customers. And, uh, that’s what matters the most, so it did not make me distant.” (P5)

Both quotes show how AI supported participants’ goals and allowed them to stay close to the impact of their work, reinforcing motivation and satisfaction. In addition to the outcome, participants also said that AI made the process itself more engaging. One teacher explained how it brought new tools and flexibility into the classroom:

“Because in the classroom, it gives me more tools to interact in different ways with my students. So it makes my job, honestly, quite interesting.” (P6)

This quote reflects how AI introduced variation and creativity into their daily tasks, making the work feel more stimulating and dynamic. There were also reflections on how AI strengthened the meaning of work overall. One programmer shared that using AI allowed them to move away from repetitive work and instead focus on more complex, valuable problems:

“It made me realize that my role is not just writing code, but also solving difficult, complex problems.” (P5)

This shift in focus from executing tasks to solving meaningful challenges helped the participant reconnect with what they valued in their profession. Lastly, some participants noted that AI improved the accuracy and certainty of their work, which boosted their confidence and trust in the quality of what they were doing. In a healthcare setting, this was especially appreciated:

“I feel like a more accurate job is being done with AI involved than what we used before.” (P4)

The quote shows how AI not only streamlined work but also increased the sense of precision and reliability, contributing further to professional engagement. Overall, these participants described AI not as something that distanced them from their profession, but as a tool that helped them feel more involved, more motivated, and more effective. In these cases, AI acted as a buffer against alienation by reinforcing the connection between professionals and their work on both emotional and practical levels.

4.1.3 Preservation of Professional Meaning and Identity

This theme shows that AI didn’t weaken participants’ connection to their work or their sense of professional identity. Instead, they felt their autonomy, value, and pride were preserved. Many said this was because of the nature of their jobs. For those in teaching, medicine, or programming, the main goal was helping other students learning, patient care, or client solutions, and that mattered more than how the work was done. AI was seen as a useful tool, but not something that could replace human responsibility or purpose.

“It’s still me taking care of the patient. The system gives recommendations, but I choose what’s best for them.” (P4)

“Well, it is not just easier for us, it is also better for patients. So, that is our goal. Our goal is that the patients get the treatment they deserve, at the right time before they, uh, they are, yeah, before they are more uncomfortable with their problems. And that is the goal. So that is achieved by AI.” (P4)

Another shared experience was that autonomy was not lost. Participants still had control over important decisions and the direction of their work. As one programmer mentioned:

“Some small coding decisions are now handled by AI, but the big choices are still mine.” (P5)

This reflects a strong sense of ownership and control over the most meaningful parts of their job.

Participants also described how, when using the right AI tools, they still retained pride in their role. Their confidence was tied to the fact that they were still the ones making the final decisions:

“I still take pride because, as I said, I still make the decisions about what is good and what is right.” (P4)

During the interviews, several participants said that human creativity remains essential, and that AI is there only to assist, not to replace. A nutritionist pointed out the importance of human connection in her field, and another participant reinforced the idea:

“Because like, I feel that. I feel that AI has brought a lot of, you know, new insights, and I think it's a profession that I still feel that it's very important to have a human-to-human contact.” (P7)

“AI tools can, uh, cannot give you human creativity.” (P5)
“Creativity and intuition are still mine. AI just helps with the basics.” (P5)

These quotes highlight the view that while AI is useful, it cannot replicate what makes their work meaningful. The distinction between automation and the human side of work was very clear to these professionals. Finally, participants reported that AI helped preserve their professional values. For example, one pharmacist and a programmer explained, respectively:

“AI is just a helping tool and nothing more than that. I still have the control to decide which drug fits best for my patients.” (P4)
“Some small coding decisions are now handled by AI, but the big choices are still mine.” (P5)

The reason why participants in this group experienced AI positively had a lot to do with their job, the values they hold, and the amount of control they had over the final decision. For many of them, AI was not seen as a threat but as something that helped them deliver better outcomes. This was especially the case for people working in healthcare, teaching, and programming; their main goal was to help others or serve the customer. That's what mattered to them. If they had the final say, AI was simply a support tool that made things easier or more effective. They didn't feel replaced because their role still required human input, whether it was decision-making, responsibility, or emotional connection. The meaning of their work stayed the same because AI didn't touch the parts that gave them pride or purpose. This shows how someone's experiences with AI depend a lot on the kind of work they do and what they care about. If the profession is more about serving others and if

they still feel in charge of the outcome, AI is more likely to be seen as helpful rather than harmful.

4.2 Pathways to work alienation through AI

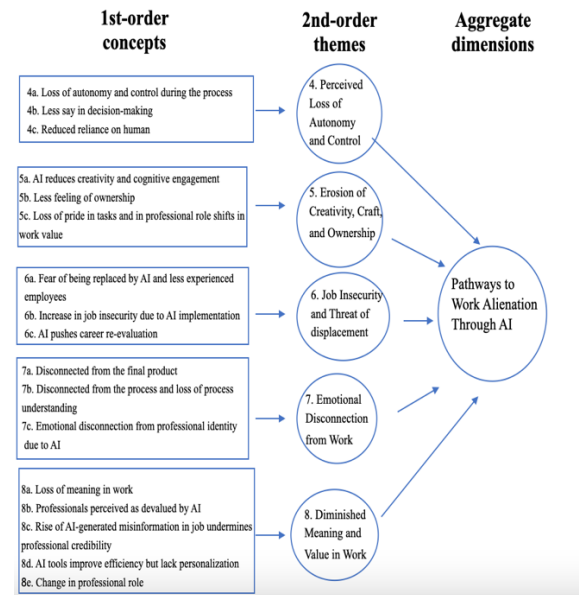


Fig. Data structure on Pathways to Work Alienation through AI

This aggregate dimension reflects the opposite view of another aggregate dimension, as it reflects the challenges participants felt had on the professionals due to AI. This theme talks about “perceived Loss of Autonomy and Control”, “Diminished Meaning and Value in Work”, “Job Insecurity and Threat of Displacement”, “Emotional Disconnection from Work”, and “Erosion of Creativity, Craft, and Ownership”.

4.2.1 Perceived loss of autonomy and control

As expected, most participants said AI reduced their sense of autonomy and control. They felt less involved in how tasks were carried out, with their roles becoming more limited over time. A social media manager and a programmer explained this shift:

“I felt like my role was reduced to just supervising its output, which made the work feel impersonal and less fulfilling.” (P2)

“AI limits my autonomy because I. Well, for now, I have less control over my work because AI is doing all the jobs that I was doing before.” (P1)

Both participants reflected on how their roles had shifted. They felt pushed to the side, overshadowed by the increasing presence of AI. Instead of being at the center of their work, they were left monitoring AI's decisions, which made their tasks feel less meaningful. Others also described how AI disrupted their decision-making power and reduced their

involvement in tasks they once considered valuable. One participant emphasized:

"AI limits my autonomy because I have less control over my work, because AI is doing all the job that I was doing before." (P2)

For this participant, AI was not just a support tool it was taking over. The work was still being done, but the participant no longer felt directly involved, which led to a sense of losing ownership over the outcome. When professionals are no longer actively shaping their contributions, the connection to the work weakens. This change was also present among professionals in education and content creation, where AI gradually replaced responsibilities that had once required human creativity or emotional connection. A nutritionist expressed this shift:

"Clients rely on AI and come to the nutritionist less." (P7)
"Basic coding tasks like writing both basic codes and simple log SMS feel less significant now." (P2)

4.2.2 Erosion of Creativity, Craft, and Ownership

For many participants, the arrival of AI not only changed how they worked, but it also changed how they felt about their work. One of the most recurring and personal consequences was the slow erosion of creativity, craftsmanship, and ownership. The very parts of their jobs that once brought pride and identity, thinking creatively, solving problems, and shaping something from scratch, were now being handed off to AI. What was left, in some cases, felt hollow. One content creator spoke candidly about how AI had changed the essence of their work:

"I'd say a big part of content creation is being creative, and I feel like creativity and intuition diminished after AI was involved." (P1)

What once required imagination, and intuition had become more about guiding a tool than expressing oneself. Instead of being a creator, this participant now felt like a curator, editing outputs generated by a system that didn't require the same emotional or cognitive input. Others expressed how their craft, the skills they had worked to develop over time, felt increasingly unnecessary. A programmer explained:

"The basic code skills and tasks writing are very important. And since now AI handles all of them, it's just kind of, uh, missing a part of my original work." (P2)

For this participant, the shift was not only about efficiency; it was about losing touch with the foundational parts of the profession. When AI began to perform those tasks, it stripped away the learning, mastery, and satisfaction that used to come with doing the work oneself. The emotional consequences of this shift were significant. One participant described how their connection to the storytelling part of their role had faded:

"I felt like I had less ownership over the storytelling aspect, which was the core of my professional pride before." (P1)

This quote reveals something deeper than just a task being automated; it shows a loss of personal connection, a fading sense of identity tied to work that once felt meaningful. Another participant put it plainly:

"It made the process feel more mechanical than meaningful because it was so AI-based." (P1)

This comment encapsulates the broader feeling shared by others: that while AI may improve speed or consistency, it can also strip work of the very qualities that make it rewarding and human. Together, these accounts show that the erosion of creativity and ownership isn't loud or dramatic; it is subtle, but deeply felt. It's the slow realization that the work you used to shape is now being shaped by something else. And while the job may still exist, the personal investment in it begins to fade. For many participants, this was not just a change in workflow, it was a quiet but profound form of alienation.

4.2.3 Job insecurity and threat displacement

Throughout the interviews, participants such as the social media manager, programmer, and iOS engineer expressed the greatest concern about AI taking over their professions. Their worry was not just about current changes, but also about how fast AI is evolving and what that could mean for the future, especially for professions like programming, where human judgment is often limited to executing predefined tasks. A few participants explained:

"Maybe the development is getting so fast, and I'm afraid that the programmer job is going to be replaced by AI. Well, it kind of concerns me." (P2)
"The only way you're going to get a job is by, uh, proving that AI can not replace you." (P5)

These quotes reflect a growing anxiety that professionals will need to constantly justify their relevance in a world where AI is becoming more capable and widely adopted. For some, this fear was already materializing. One participant shared how their company had reduced its workforce and turned to AI as a replacement:

"As I mentioned, the company fired a lot of people. And they want to use AI to make the current engineers more productive. So I think AI will try to reduce the number of engineers." (P3)

This quote highlights that AI is not only viewed as a tool for efficiency but also as a driver of layoffs and restructuring. When AI is introduced in this way, it sends a clear message: fewer human workers are needed. This message directly contributed to a sense of instability and anxiety among those who remained in their roles. Some participants also questioned their long-term value in the job market. In particular, they feared being replaced not just by AI itself, but by less experienced workers who were using AI to perform tasks previously seen as highly skilled. One participant reflected:

“Yes, I agree. And I sometimes wonder if someone else with less experience or no experience could do the same job just by using the right tools.” (P1)

This quote reveals a deeper fear that AI not only automates work but also flattens the skill hierarchy. Tasks that once required years of learning can now be done by almost anyone with access to AI tools, making their profession feel less unique and harder to defend. In response to these pressures, some participants started to rethink their entire career direction. One explicitly stated:

“I’m planning to switch jobs to something harder for AI to do, so I can feel more value.” (P3)

This quote shows that AI’s impact goes beyond daily tasks, and it also shapes how professionals view their future. Instead of growing within their field, some felt the need to abandon it altogether in search of something more resilient to automation.

4.2.4 Emotional disconnection from work

To dive deeper beyond technical and role-related changes, one of the most concerning experiences participants shared was the emotional impact of AI in their profession. Several participants described feeling increasingly disconnected from their work, both in terms of the process and the outcome. While AI may have made tasks faster and more efficient, it also created a sense of emotional distance, as the work no longer felt like it belonged to them. One clear example came from a participant who reflected on how AI changed the way they related to the final product:

“Uh, I feel more disconnected, to be honest, because the content was going out, it was performing well, but it didn’t feel like mine. There’s a difference between seeing your work succeed and watching an AI.” (P1)

“So basically, you see less effort in today’s outcome compared to what you had in the past? — Yes, indeed.” (P2)

These quotes show how the increasing use of AI made the work feel less personal. P1 expressed a clear emotional detachment, as their input no longer shaped the final output. P2 added that much of the task was now being done by AI tools, and their role had been reduced to monitoring rather than contributing creatively. This shift led to a reduced sense of ownership and a lower emotional connection to the task at hand. As this emotional distance grew, it began to affect how participants viewed themselves within their profession. One participant reflected on how their role had fundamentally changed:

“I became more of an operator of tools than a voice behind the brand. Uh, like it kind of shook my sense of identity.” (P1)

While this comment may seem subtle, it points to a much deeper concern: when professionals no longer feel central to the process or product, their work can begin to feel empty or meaningless. It’s not just that the task changed, but rather, their role in the task no longer felt essential. Overall, this theme shows that emotional disconnection can be just as

impactful as functional change. Even when the outcome is technically correct or successful, if professionals feel removed from the purpose, process, or authorship, they may begin to emotionally disengage from their work. Over time, this can contribute to a deeper form of work alienation, one rooted not in task complexity, but in feeling absent from what once gave the work meaning.

4.2.5 Diminished meaning and value in work

Beyond reducing autonomy, many participants said AI also affected the meaning they found in their work. Tasks once seen as fulfilling felt more mechanical and devalued, as AI took over responsibilities that had brought professional pride. One content creator described how their work lost its original sense of meaning:

“My creative input felt secondary, like I was curating content and not creating it.” (P1)

This shift from creation to curation reflected more than just a change in tools; it altered the participant’s relationship to the output. What had once been a source of identity and expression became something produced and optimized by algorithms. Others shared that the value of their professional contribution seemed diminished in the eyes of clients or employers. When AI-generated work was preferred, participants questioned the significance of their expertise. As one explained:

“It made me feel replaceable. Especially when clients preferred the AI version, when the posts that were created by AI performed better.” (P1)

These experiences suggest that AI not only altered workflows but also challenged professionals’ sense of being needed. Their knowledge and judgment, once key to delivering high-quality results, felt overshadowed by the efficiency and scalability of AI. The loss of meaning was also connected to how participants described AI-generated outputs lacking personal or emotional depth. A programmer shared:

“It is quick and efficient, but I feel like it’s not personal.” (P1)

Here, the speed and convenience of AI came at a cost: the sense of human connection and intentionality behind the work. This tension between efficiency and authenticity created a form of alienation, where the outcome was technically correct, but emotionally distant. Even professionals in healthcare and education, where meaning is often derived from human connection and service, expressed concern that AI was diluting the purpose of their role. A participant explained:

“After AI, that specialization felt diluted... I became more of an operator of tools than a voice behind the brand. It kind of shook my sense of identity.” (P1)

Such reflections show how the growing presence of AI changed not just the task, but the symbolic meaning attached

to the work. Being a professional no longer carried the same emotional or intellectual satisfaction when their role was reduced to executing what machines could suggest or perform. In some cases, this led to a re-evaluation of career paths. One participant shared their concern:

"I'm planning to switch jobs to something harder for AI to do, so I can feel more value." (P3)

This response highlights a deeper consequence of AI-driven devaluation: not just disengagement, but an active search for roles that preserve human uniqueness.

The reason why participants in this group felt that AI reduced the meaning of their work was mostly based on how they personally connected to their profession. For them, meaning came from using their creativity, making decisions, and seeing their input in the final product. When AI started taking over these parts, they didn't just lose a task, they lost something that made the job feel like theirs. This was especially clear in roles like content creation or programming, where people felt proud of their skills and the work they built from scratch. When AI was preferred or did the job faster, it made them question the value of their expertise. Unlike others who focused more on outcomes, such as helping students or patients, these participants cared more about the process and putting themselves into the work. That's why AI felt more like a threat than a help. It's also important to remember that each person saw AI differently. It depended on the job they had, how much control they felt, and what they valued most in their profession. For some, AI helped them get closer to their goal. But for others, it created a gap between them and their work.

5. Discussion

In this section, the theoretical and practical implications of the study will be discussed. It outlines how the findings of this thesis contribute to existing academic research and how they can also be useful for future managers and organizations. By highlighting how professionals experience AI in their daily work, this section connects the insights from the data to both theory and practice.

5.1 Theoretical Implications

This thesis makes two main theoretical contributions. First, it contributes to the existing literature on AI in a professional environment by mainly focusing on professionals and how it relates to work alienation. Firstly, while the literature on Artificial Intelligence in professional settings has largely concentrated on productivity and organizational outcomes, this study shifts the focus to the individual level. In section 2, it was discussed how AI is defined as a collection of interrelated technologies (Selenko et al., 2022) and how professionals' identities are formed and maintained (Pratt et al., 2006; Vähäsantanen, 2022). Building on that, the results of this thesis show that AI is not merely a tool for performing tasks, it is something that professionals must make sense of and position themselves relative to. In other words, professionals actively negotiate their identity in response to AI, whether by viewing it as a threat or as a support. This extends van Esch and Black's (2021) idea of identity

negotiation by demonstrating that the impact of AI is not unidirectional; its influence on identity is contingent on factors like the degree of control retained over decision-making and whether AI aligns with core professional values.

Second, this study adds to the theoretical understanding of work alienation in the context of AI. While classic theories of alienation, such as Marx's (1844) work, focus on structural disconnection from labor, this research shows how alienation can also occur on an emotional and cognitive level. This finding aligns with Liu et al. (2025), who describe work alienation as a dynamic process that includes emotional detachment, cognitive disconnection, and a weakened sense of purpose. My data reflect this layered view: some participants described feeling emotionally distant from their work or no longer recognizing themselves in their role, particularly when AI took over tasks that once gave them pride or meaning. These emotional and cognitive disruptions were tied closely to changes in professional identity, job autonomy, and value, reinforcing Liu et al.'s idea that alienation is not one dimensional.

This article also contributes to identity theory, specifically the work of Pratt et al. (2006), by showing how professional identity is actively made as a response to technologically driven changes like AI. Instead of assuming AI necessarily threatens professional identity, this paper study finds that it depends on how AI is introduced to the workplace and how professionals make sense of its purpose. For some, their sense of identity was unsettled when central aspects of their labor such as creativity, autonomy, or control over decisions, were affected by AI, creating a state of uncertainty or disconnection. Others described how AI allowed them to focus more on the parts of their work that mattered most to them, such as educating students or tackling challenging challenges. Under such circumstances, AI was not perceived as a threat, but rather as a vehicle that reaffirmed their professional sense of self and purpose. This adds to identity theory through the demonstration that professional identity is not just threatened by change outside, but can be redefined positively, subject to how well those changes are seated in individuals' core professional values paper.

5.2 Practical implications

This study offers several practical implications, particularly for organizations that actively utilize AI in their professional environments. One of the lessons that managers should consider is that AI not only impacts organizational productivity it also influences how professionals feel about their work, their sense of identity, and their emotional connection to their role. The findings show that AI can either strengthen or weaken this connection depending on how it is introduced and how much control professionals retain.

Therefore, managers should not overlook the emotional and psychological effects that AI has on professionals, which could disconnect them from their work. Furthermore, managers should consider that it should not affect the professional sense of autonomy, job meaning, or job security. These are not small concerns; these are factors that managers need to pay close attention to as these factors influence motivation, engagement, and overall mental well-

being. Companies that take these factors into account are more likely to succeed in the long term, both in terms of performance and employee satisfaction.

Another important point is about finding the right balance between what AI does and what the professional does. The findings suggest that AI works best when it supports professionals rather than replacing them completely. When people still feel they are making the final decisions or using their judgment, they are more likely to stay connected to their work. This was especially clear in fields like healthcare and education, where participants talked about how their goal was to help others, and AI helped them do that better without taking away their role.

Lastly, these findings can give managers keen insight into implementing AI in such a way that professionals continue to feel engaged and confident. It also shows precisely how AI can affect professionals' sense of identity and meaning, and along with it, how they feel about their work in general. Ultimately, it depends largely on how AI is implemented. If organizations do not want to alienate employees, they need to attend not just to efficiency but to maintaining the human experience of work. This kind of support can have a real impact on the success of AI integration.

6. Limitations and Future Research

This study, like all others, has its limitations. While it offers valuable insights into how professionals experience AI in their daily profession, it is important to mention a few limitations that may have influenced the findings. Firstly, the sample size of the data was relatively small, as only 7 participants were interviewed. This was mainly due to time and resource constraints. Yet, the insights were rich and meaningful, so that the current sample still offered variation across roles, which helped capture a range of personal experiences and reach useful information to be able to answer the research question. However, a larger sample may have provided even more diverse perspectives, especially across different professions or levels of experience with AI. Secondly, the data were coded and analyzed by a single researcher. While this allowed for consistency in the interpretation process, it also meant that the findings were shaped by a single analytical lens. Several discussion rounds were held with the thesis first supervisor, and, to further ensure rigor, a structured coding framework was followed, where codes were developed carefully based on participants' actual words, helping ground the analysis in the data. Future research could benefit from involving multiple coders to enhance objectivity and validate interpretations through intercoder reliability. Lastly, another limitation of this study is that it was cross-sectional, meaning it focused on participants' experiences at a single point in time. While this allowed exploring how professionals currently think and feel about AI in their work, it does not show how these experiences might change over time. As AI continues to develop and become more advanced, people's views are likely to shift depending on how their roles evolve or how AI is introduced in new ways. For example, someone who currently sees AI as helpful might start to feel differently if new tools begin to replace more complex tasks. On the other hand, someone who feels uncertain now might grow more

comfortable as they gain experience. That is why future research could benefit from a longitudinal approach, where participants are interviewed at different stages of their AI use. This would help show how feelings of work alienation or engagement might develop, and whether AI leads to long-term changes in how professionals connect with their jobs.

7. Conclusion

To conclude, this paper explores how artificial intelligence influences professionals' experience of work alienation and answers the research question: *How can AI influence professionals' experience of work alienation?* The findings in this paper suggest that there can be two distinct views: AI can either connect professionals to their profession or have the opposite effect. Therefore, differences in findings show the impact of AI depends on how it is implemented and used in the work environment.

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Appendix

Themes	Main questions	Probing questions
AI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Can you describe how AI is currently being used in your workplace? - In what ways do you feel AI has improved or disrupted your professional workflow? - How do you feel about the growing presence of AI in your profession? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What specific tasks have changed the most? Can you walk me through a recent example? - How do you feel about these changes overall? - Can you describe any tasks that have become easier or more difficult? What kind of decisions do you feel are now more or less in your hands? - What opportunities or risks do you see in the coming years? Do you feel more hopeful or more uncertain about where your role is heading?
Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In what ways has AI changed how you view your professional role and values? - What aspects of your work feel less since AI was involved in your role? - How do you see that AI affected how you see yourself as a professional? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How has the meaning or specialization of your work changed since AI became part of your role? In what ways, if any, has your sense of professional identity been influenced by this change? - What did those aspects mean to you before? Are there tasks or decisions you used to own that are now automated? - In what ways has the value you place on your role changed, if at all, since AI became part of your work? How have shifts in your responsibilities influenced how you see yourself professionally?

Work alienation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Can you describe a moment when you felt emotionally or mentally distant from your work? - What role, if any, did AI play in that experience? - In what ways has AI changed how connected or disconnected you feel from the outcomes of your work? - How does AI influence your sense of control or autonomy at work? - What gives your work a sense of meaning today, and how has AI influenced that? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Can you describe a moment that stands out? What triggered that feeling? Was it related to how a task was done, or what it meant? - How do you see the results of your efforts today, and how has that changed over time? In which parts of your work do you feel most or least connected, and why? - How has your role in decision-making evolved since AI was introduced? In what ways do you feel more empowered or more restricted in your work today? - How has your sense of meaning at work changed since AI became part of your role? What currently gives your work a sense of purpose or meaning?

Table 1: interview questions

