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Research Article

Role-Play Based Learning in Entrepreneurial Leadership and Opportunity-Seeking among Indonesian Gen Z Undergraduate

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Abstract *- This study explores how experiential learning approach role-play simulations impacts entrepreneurial leadership and Personal Entrepreneurial Competencies (PECs) among Gen Z undergraduate students in Indonesia. Conducted at the Bandung Institute of Technology with 32 students of majoring Visual Communication Design, the semester-long Management Entrepreneurship course was designed for Students to be courage, so that they could seeking for their own answer. They acted as CEOs managing projects, hiring employees, and bargaining through job fair simulations. A "Knowledge Savings Account" mechanism was introduced: punctuality and active participation were tracked as deposits, while engagement yielded dividends at the semester's end. Observations revealed that students displayed high critical thinking in evaluating candidates, realistic yet aspirational salary expectations (often exceeding local minimum wage), and negotiation skills resembling real-world hiring dilemmas. Findings suggest that role-play based self-driven learning fosters opportunity-seeking, leadership, and reflective decision-making in Gen Z learners.*

Keywords - *Entrepreneurial Leadership, Personal Entrepreneurial Competencies, Role-Play Based Learning.*

I. INTRODUCTION

There is a common assumption that Visual Communication Design (VCD) undergraduates are merely executers of creative assignments, as the best managerial roles are usually held by engineering, management, or finance graduates. Research validates that VCD graduates encounter systemic hurdles to strategic leadership, causing a disconnect between business decision-making authority and design expertise. [1] This is an indication of the lack of strategic thinking skills. At the same time, the people who hold such roles usually do not fully understand the nature of work that designing is, however the VCD professionals are left between fulfilling their values as designers and fulfilling the market needs.

A. Structural Barriers within Cultural Industries

The relegation of VCD graduates to "executor" roles rather than strategic positions reflects what design leadership research identifies as one of the most significant challenges in the field. This phenomenon occurs when stakeholders expect designers to simply "make it look good" without seeking their input on strategy, which limits project potential and leaves professionals feeling undervalued. [2] 90% of companies aren't reaching the full potential of design despite increasing investment in design roles. The core issue lies in misaligned expectations where design leadership roles are misunderstood or underutilized, resulting in subpar products, inefficient resource use, and low team morale. [3] Many creative organizations employ "dual leadership" structures with artistic leaders fostering creativity and managerial leaders focusing on commercial demands. This separation further reinforces the perception that creative professionals are unable to effectively fulfill both roles. There is a widespread belief that the transition from successful creative to successful entrepreneur is a major challenge, particularly in managing commercial growth. On the other hand, those in these positions often don't truly understand the essence of design work, leaving VCD graduates caught between maintaining idealism

and meeting market needs. This gap creates what McKinsey calls a "strategic design barrier" a condition where organizations fail to see the potential contribution of design to business strategy. The research emphasizes that design leadership must be addressed first if companies want to capture the full business value of design. [2] Emerging research demonstrates that design thinking methodology can positioning designers as strategic contributors rather than mere executors.

B. Educational and Skills Development Challenges

Problems in Educational and Skills Improvement VCD educational programs traditionally focus on technical and creative skills while underemphasizing business strategy, entrepreneurship, and leadership competencies. Studies of Indonesian VCD programs show that while 60% of students have good career planning skills, only 30% have entrepreneurial planning abilities. [4] [5] Research tracking graphic design graduates shows that 25% remain in low-skill jobs even after graduation, though they report design-related activities.

This suggests that technical competency alone is insufficient for career advancement without strategic business understanding. [7] [8] Design thinking leadership develop critical skills such as strategic planning by understanding how design decisions impact business outcomes, systems Thinking by seeing connections between design choices and organizational success, user-centric strategy by developing business strategies based on deep user understanding, cross-functional collaboration implemented by working effectively with non-design stakeholders. [7] Studies show that 92% of business leaders now expect employees to have design skills, indicating growing recognition of design's strategic value.

This shift suggests opportunities for VCD graduates to reposition themselves as strategic contributors. [9] Indonesian research specifically shows that VCD graduates face challenges in portfolio literacy the ability to demonstrate both creative and strategic business capabilities to employers. Employers increasingly prioritize generic skills over disciplinary technical skills, requiring graduates to demonstrate strategic thinking capabilities alongside creative competency. [10] Implications for educational reform business strategy integration through teaching design students how their creative decisions impact business outcomes and organizational success. [11] [12] Entrepreneurial leadership developing capabilities for opportunity recognition, strategic planning, and business model innovation, [12] [11] and cross-functional collaboration. [9] Active learning through role play is believed to address the limitations of conventional lecture-based teaching.

A meta-analysis in STEM fields shows that active learning consistently outperforms lectures: exam scores increase by an average of 6%, and students in lecture-based classes are 1.5 times more likely to fail compared to those in active learning environments. [13] In other words, engaging students actively through role play, discussion, and problem-solving has a tangible impact on their comprehension and academic success, compared to passive listening. Moreover, sparking students' curiosity at the beginning of a lesson can further enhance learning effectiveness.

Neurocognitive research demonstrates that curiosity activates the brain's dopamine circuits and increases hippocampal activity, thereby strengthening long-term memory formation. Interestingly, when curiosity is high, students not only recall the information they seek but also retain incidental material that was not their primary focus. [14] Put differently, curiosity places the brain in an optimal state to absorb knowledge, functioning like a "vortex" that pulls in whatever is being learned now. [15] In classroom practice, role play can be introduced with curiosity-priming strategies such as teaser scenarios, data conflicts, or provocative questions so that students are intrinsically motivated to inquire and engage in the activity.

Another crucial factor is students' capacity for self-directed learning (SDL), defined as the ability to independently set goals, manage processes, and evaluate outcomes. According to Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (SDT), intrinsic motivation and autonomy thrive when three basic psychological needs are met: autonomy (a sense of control), competence (feeling capable), and relatedness (positive social connections). In the classroom, students are more independent and motivated when activities provide room for autonomy (e.g., choosing roles or approaches) and clear competence standards (knowing performance criteria so they feel capable). [16]

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

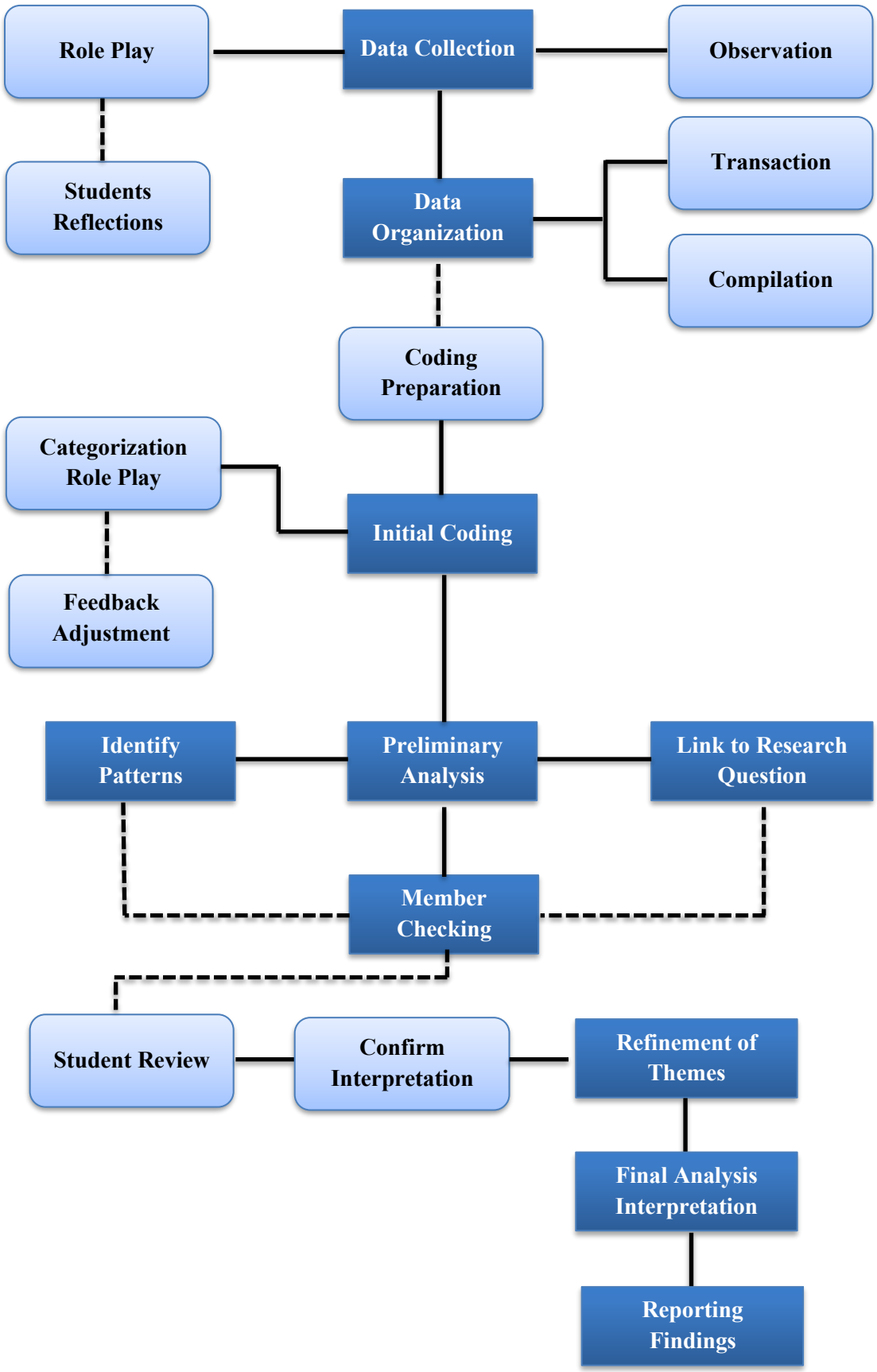

Figure 1. Role Play Analyse Procedure

This study was conducted in an undergraduate Visual Communication Design course, Course Management Entrepreneurship at the Faculty of Art and Design, ITB. The course was chosen for its focus on design strategy and client collaboration, making it suitable for role-play learning. Participants were 61 fifth-semester students (49 female, 12 male; ages 20–22). The class met weekly (3 credits, 150 minutes) over eight weeks, divided into two cycles of four weeks each. In both cycles, role play was conducted twice with different but thematically related scenarios, allowing students to experience multiple roles. Each cycle began with a briefing session and ended with evaluation and reflection. The researcher, who also taught the course, acted as an insider observer.

To maintain objectivity, an external observer assisted in data collection. The researcher did not participate as a role-player, instead facilitating instructions, observing, and occasionally serving as a game master to introduce unexpected events. Member checking was conducted by presenting preliminary analyses to students to validate the accuracy of interpretations. To clarify the role play data analysis procedure, the following is presented briefly in the figure 1.

A. Role Play Learning Based Study Literature

Role-playing (RP) is an experiential learning approach in which students enact specific roles within structured scenarios to explore decisions, emotions, and the social consequences of a situation. Theoretically, RP is grounded in three pillars:

1. Vygotskian social constructivism, which emphasizes knowledge construction through social interaction.
2. Kolb's Experiential Learning cycle, concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation.
3. Piagetian cognitive development, particularly assimilation and accommodation, which asserts that skills are not acquired adequately through reading alone but through active practice such as RP.

RP is also understood as a form of simulation that foregrounds interpersonal interaction, can be applied across courses, and is effective in cultivating empathy and self-insight. Classroom evidence indicates that experiential activities enhance content understanding and engagement; higher engagement is associated. [17] A robust RP design and sequence proceed as follows:

1. Preparation and instruction.
2. Dramatic enactment and discussion.
3. Re-enactment.
4. Evaluation.

In the preparation phase, the instructor selects a relevant issue, conducts a warm-up to reduce performance barriers, explains the educational objectives and the problem context to the entire class, then provides role briefings for the actors and defines the audience's tasks (e.g., what to observe/identify). Warm-ups are especially critical when the class first attempts RP, as some students may feel self-conscious performing before their peers; simple exercises help create psychological safety. [18]

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Strengths of the Study

The dramatic enactment phase allows sufficient time for students to "immerse" themselves in the problem, followed by a "return to reality" and a whole-class discussion to separate the actor's person from the role and to analyse role behaviour (rather than attacking the individual). Well-conducted discussions foster generalisation from the play experience to real-life contexts, for example, extracting principles from an intergroup-conflict scene and applying them to sports competition or the induction of new members.

Subsequently, re-enactment enables students to immediately test alternative strategies (including role reversal) derived from the discussion's insights; this provides opportunities to experiment with new behaviours in a safe environment. Finally, evaluation synthesises the session's strengths and weaknesses, appraises verbal/behavioural evidence of learning, and determines the need for follow-up sessions.

Figure 2. Role Play Activity

The instructor's role is central, as the architect of experience and the facilitator of reflection, not a director who "controls" the outcome. In early stages, the instructor may prepare role briefing sheets and use simple props (chairs, books, name tags) solely to clarify context, not to turn the class into "theatre" and then progressively shift from detailed scenarios to on-the-spot improvisation as the class gains proficiency. After each session, instructor and students review the proceedings to identify causes of any ineffective moments, making improvement a shared responsibility. Gradually progressing from simple situations to more complex problems sustains interest and reduces novice anxiety. [18]

Figure 3. Student's and Lecturer Assistant Tools

B. Limitations of the Study

Despite its strengths, RP has limitations that must be managed. Some students (and instructors) mistakenly equate RP with amateur dramatics or a game; others feel fearful or intimidated because the format is unfamiliar, leading them either to withdraw or to overact. Disrespect among players can make the experience unpleasant.

Accordingly, instructors should establish psychological-safety norms, conduct warm-ups, and structure audience roles (observer/identifier/critic) so that everyone participates actively and remains focused on role behaviour. A clear sequence and opportunities for reflective re-enactment are crucial to convert experience into transferable learning. [16] [17] Accordingly, at a theoretical level RP integrates socio-cognitive mechanisms (role taking to empathy/insight), the principles of direct experience (Kolb), and didactic staging (preparation–action–discussion–re-enactment–evaluation) to enhance curiosity, strategic understanding, and self-directed learning, provided it is enacted as a structured learning experience that prioritises the analysis of role behaviour over performance. [17] [16].

C. Key Findings

a. Student Autonomy in Creative Approaches

Prior to class, the teaching assistant designed a role-play toolkit consisting of an avatar template with predefined attributes: three-character traits (two positive and one negative), 2–3 soft skills (organizational), 2–3 hard skills (design-related), an expected monthly income (IDR 3–5 million), and a brief narrative background.

Figure 4. Avatar Guideline

Nevertheless, findings indicated that 9% of the students did not adhere strictly to the template, opting instead to modify or construct their own versions.

Figure 5. Student's Avatar

Guilford characterized divergent thinking as the ability to generate multiple solutions to a situation or problem and identified [18] such as fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration that systematized and organized character details according to their own logic and creative framework. This behavior indicates that students

engaged in cognitive processes produce leaps in thinking, including retrieving broader ranges of knowledge, building unusual chains of associations, and shifting perspective to see ideas in new light. Teresa Amabile's Componential Theory of Creativity [19] creativity emerges from the confluence of four components that were evident in your role-play activity such as domain-relevant skills that drew students upon their knowledge of character development, storytelling, and design principles when modifying the avatar template, demonstrated cognitive and personality processes conducive to novel thinking, particularly the willingness to take creative risks and break conventional rules, students showed intrinsic motivation to engage in the activity out of interest and personal challenge rather than simply completing the assignment as specified and the classroom environment supported creativity by allowing students the freedom to deviate from prescribed structures without penalty.

b. Salary Expectations and Parental Influence

From the 61 participating students, the reported expected monthly salary demonstrated a median of IDR 5.000.000, an average of approximately IDR 6.301.667 with the highest expectation reaching IDR 13.100.000 and the lowest at IDR 2,000,000. These figures suggest relatively high salary aspirations compared to national entry-level standards on IDR 4.482.914.

Figure 6. Student's Salary Expectations

Weiner's Attribution Theory provides crucial insights into how these graduates perceive their academic achievements and future earning potential. Students from top institutes likely attribute their academic success to internal, stable, and controllable factors such as ability and intelligence. This attribute pattern leads to higher expectations for future success and inflated salary expectations. [20] Research indicates that internal, stable, and global attributional styles for positive events predict higher levels of academic performance expectations. Students who attribute their admission to prestigious institutions to their superior abilities naturally extend this attribution to expected market value. [21] Festinger's Cognitive Dissonance Theory explains the psychological tension that arises when graduates' salary expectations conflict with market realities. The theory suggests that when individuals hold contradictory cognitions, believing they deserve high salaries while facing lower market offers, they experience psychological discomfort. [22]

Human Capital Theory partially explains why these graduates maintain high salary expectations. Having invested significantly in education at prestigious institutions, they expect proportional returns on their educational investment. The theory suggests that higher education levels should correlate with higher earning potential, bachelor's degree holders earn approximately 25% more than diploma holders in Indonesia. [23] However, this creates unrealistic expectations when local market conditions don't support such returns, particularly given that Indonesia's average fresh graduate salary ranges from Rp 4.35-5.25 million while UMR in many regions is significantly lower.

This finding adds significant value to understanding how prestigious educational contexts may inadvertently contribute to graduate unemployability through inflated salary expectations that don't align with local economic realities. The theoretical frameworks above provide a robust foundation for analyzing this phenomenon and

designing educational interventions that help bridge the expectation-reality gap while maintaining student motivation and self-efficacy.

c. Problem-Solving and Entrepreneurial Leadership in Negotiation Scenarios

Curiosity Effect Mechanism causing he increase in curiosity scores from pre- to post-role play indicates that the scenarios successfully stimulated students' curiosity. Observations showed that after the initial dilemma priming, students became more inquisitive and engaged in active internal discussions as a sign of cognitive curiosity. From a neuropsychological perspective, this aligns with theories suggesting that puzzle- like situations activate the brain's reward system (dopaminergic pathways). When students were intrigued by questions such as "How can this negotiation satisfy both parties?", it is likely that their dopamine levels rose, leading to heightened attention and stronger memory encoding [17].

This was reflected in the results: during debriefings, many students were able to recall scenario details and opposing arguments, and some still remember them even a week later. One student stated in an interview: "Because I was curious about the client's reaction, I paid close attention to every word my friend (acting as the client) said, and I still remember the main points." This provides evidence of curiosity-driven memory as described by Gruber et al. (2014) [14]. Thus, role play functioned as a medium for channeling curiosity: the initial curiosity was transformed into exploratory actions during the role play (asking questions, testing strategies), which ultimately reinforced learning. This mechanism supports the argument that curiosity is not merely an emotion but a cognitive state capable of "locking in" one's learning focus on the task at hand.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that a carefully structured role-play-based learning approach implemented as a semester-long, research-through-design intervention effectively cultivates entrepreneurial leadership, opportunity-seeking, and higher-order problem-solving among Gen Z Visual Communication Design undergraduates at a top Indonesian institute. Through repeated cycles of briefing → dramatic enactment → discussion → re-enactment → evaluation, students moved from passive recipients of knowledge to active decision-makers: they designed organizational structures, negotiated realistic hiring scenarios, weighed competing job offers, and practiced retention and bargaining strategies. The method also encouraged divergent thinking and creative autonomy (some students rejected templates to produce original solutions), improved curiosity-driven attention and memory encoding during negotiations, and stimulated reflective capacity needed for strategic leadership. Psychological and neurocognitive insights support these outcomes: role play creates agency, activates reward-related neural circuits that enhance motivation and memory, and supplies the social context for identity and self-efficacy development.

Social-cognitive and experiential learning frameworks (Vygotsky, Kolb, SDT) explain why the combination of autonomy, competence-building tasks, and relatedness in role-play produces sustained engagement and self-directed learning. Importantly, the classroom gamification device (Knowledge Savings Account) complemented role play by making participation tangible and by reinforcing punctuality and sustained engagement without undermining intrinsic motivation. Practically, the study highlights several actionable implications for design education: integrate role-play cycles into entrepreneurship curricula to build strategic thinking and leadership among design students; deliberately scaffold warm-ups and establish psychological-safety norms to avoid performance anxiety; include structured debriefs and re-enactments to translate role behaviour into transferable insights; and incorporate targeted guidance on labor-market literacy to help students align aspirational salary expectations with market realities while preserving motivation and self-efficacy.

Limitations temper the conclusions: data are qualitative and derived from a single-institution sample with an insider observer, which limits generalizability. Future research should adopt mixed-methods and multi-site designs, include longitudinal follow-up to track real-world career outcomes, and experimentally test specific scaffolds (e.g., salary-literacy workshops, coached negotiation practice) to refine pedagogical best practices. In sum, role-play based, student-centered learning, when deliberately designed and reflexively facilitated proves a powerful pedagogical tool to reposition VCD graduates from mere executors toward strategic, entrepreneurial

leaders capable of opportunity recognition, value negotiation, and creative problem solving in real business contexts.

Appendix

Based on the responses of 61 students, the majority (71.7%) designed avatars that closely mirrored their real-life identity. Meanwhile, 18.3% created avatars in the form of non-human creatures, and 10.0% experimented with gender-reversed identities. These results indicate that while most students preferred to maintain self-consistency in role-play scenarios, a notable portion used the opportunity to explore alternative identities. Symbolic interactionism (SI) is a sociological framework (originating with Mead and Blumer) that emphasizes how people create meaning and self-identity through social interactions. Blumer famously summarized SI in three premises: people act toward things based on the meanings they ascribe to them, these meanings arise from social interaction, and meanings are interpreted/modified by individuals. [24]

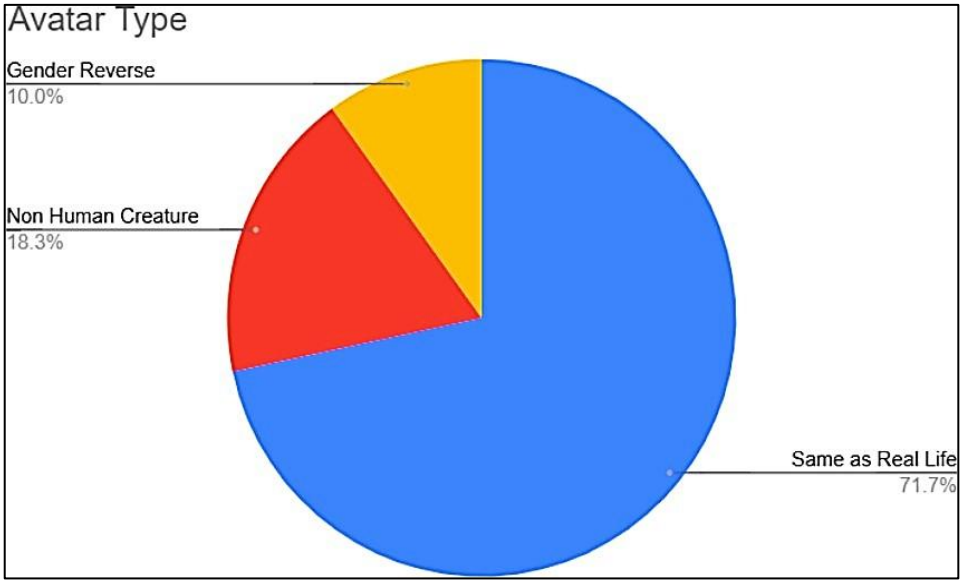

Figure 7. Student's Symbolic Iinteractionism Implementation

This diversity in avatar selection reflects both the comfort of self-representation and the creative drive to test roles beyond one's lived experience, suggesting that role-play can function as a medium for both self- affirmation and imaginative exploration.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no commercial or financial conflicts of interest that could be construed as influencing the outcomes of this research. All visual materials used in this study, including student avatars and representations, were created and published with the informed consent of the participating students. Ethical considerations were carefully observed to ensure that the rights and privacy of all participants were fully respected.

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