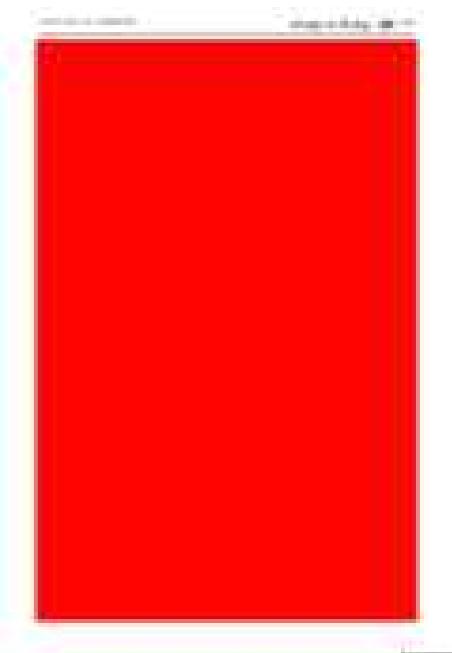


Will the AI bubble burst?

By Teo Kai Xiang

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Artificial intelligence was almost inescapable in 2025, but whether it will also dominate 2026 is not so clear

Teo Kai Xiang

In November, The Straits Times contacted real estate listing platform PropertyGuru to ask about the growing trend of AI-generated images in local property listings, after some netizens expressed anger over the images.

In response, the company told ST that "fully AI-generated photos" were not allowed on the platform. When provided with specific examples where such photos were used without disclosure, the company later added that any virtual staging or edit should be clearly indicated.

"Our team has reached out to the agents involved to take corrective action where needed," said the company's spokesperson. The AI-generated images in the examples cited were removed.

However, six weeks later, a search through the platform reveals multiple property listings where AI-generated images are still being used without disclosure – at times in place of any real photography of the living space being advertised.

This instance is emblematic of many implementations of artificial intelligence in Singapore in 2025: public controversy that fizzles out into a collective shrug.

THE YEAR AI BECAME UNAVOIDABLE

If 2022 was the year that first unleashed AI mania on the world, after the public release of generative AI tool ChatGPT, 2025 was the year that AI became unavoidable.

Singapore social media is awash with examples of netizens pointing out strange and unnatural AI-generated imagery used in marketing campaigns.

AI-generated images are no longer an uncommon sight on posters and signs in heartland neighbourhoods.

Most recently, Reddit users poked fun at an image used in a Chinese New Year brochure by local Fujian restaurant chain Putien containing telltale signs of AI use, such as deformed faces and hands.

Experts say the pace of advancements in AI is a double-edged sword.

Mr Poon King Wang, chief strategy and design AI officer at the Singapore University of Technology and Design, says this can outstrip human capacity to keep pace and control, but also turbocharges human capability and creativity.

This means that one of the defining trends of 2025 was controversy over when and how AI should be used.

Nanyang Technological University penalised three students over their use of AI tools when writing an essay in June, something which sparked a storm of controversy and commentary online when the students took to social media to dispute their grade. Some signs of AI use included non-existent academic references.

Still, online discussion soon spiralled beyond this initial case, to questioning what constitutes unethical use of AI in education when generative AI has been incorporated into search engines and word processors.

Healthcare cluster National University Health System has been rolling out "AI-free" periods – during which healthcare professionals should avoid using AI tools for clinical work or assessments – in 2025 to avoid a loss of skills due to overreliance on the technology.

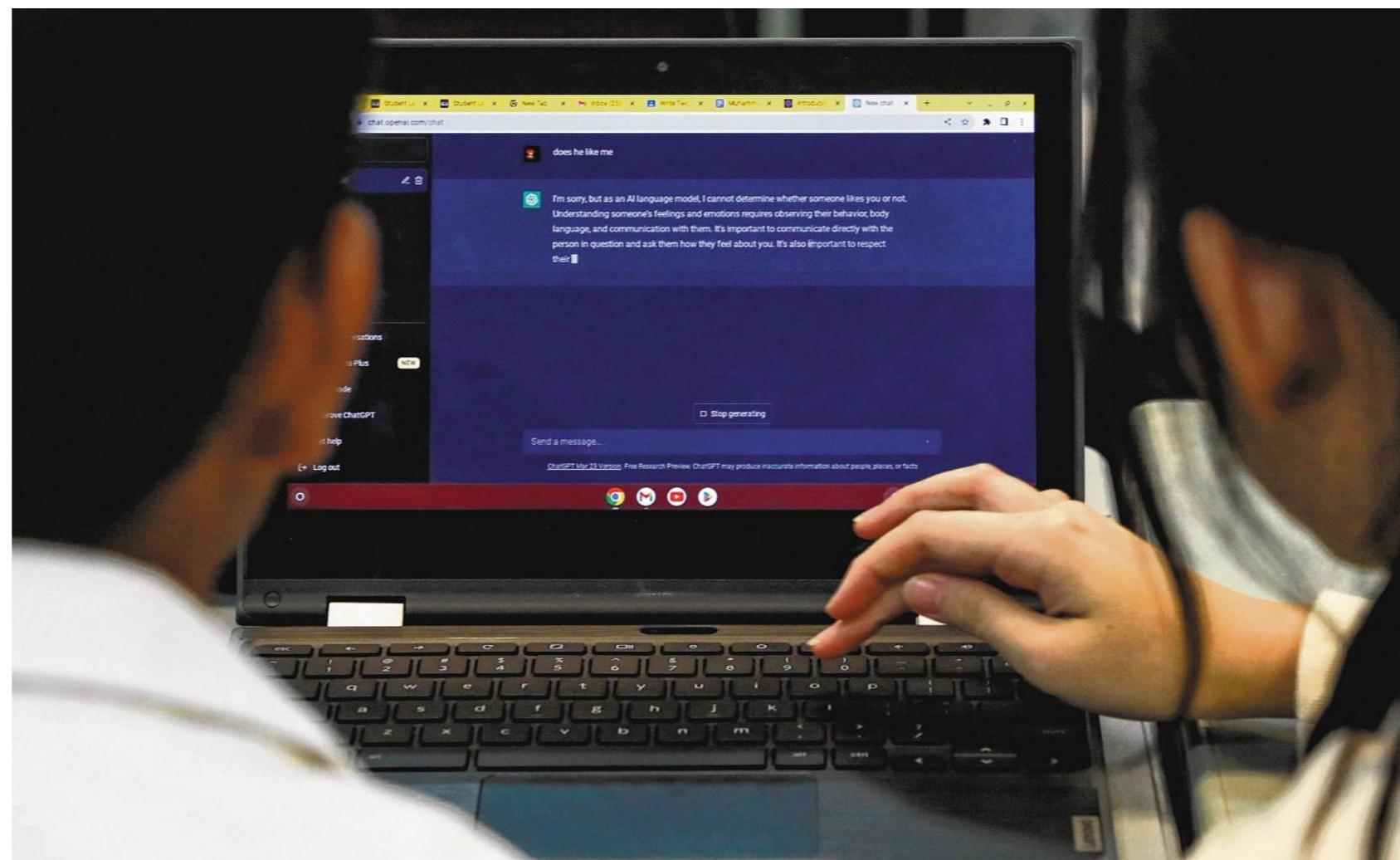
And in July 2025, mental health professionals told ST that they had seen a rise in the number of patients who are using tools like ChatGPT as a confidant. They warn that while ChatGPT might dispense useful generic advice at times, it cannot address those with more complex needs.

DOES ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE DELIVER ON ITS PROMISES?

We are seeing real, measurable improvements in some domains, and much thinner returns in others... But those gains taper off quickly when tasks require judgment, contextual understanding or responsibility for outcomes.

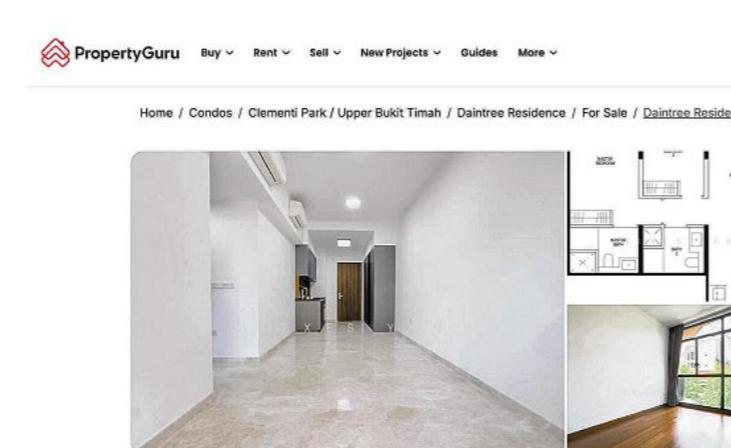
DR KOKIL JAIDKA

DR KOKIL JAIDKA, an associate professor at the National University of Singapore's department of communications and new media



A 2023 photo of secondary school students using ChatGPT in class. One of the defining trends of 2025 was controversy over when and how artificial intelligence tools should be used, with Nanyang Technological University penalising three students over their use of AI when writing an essay. PHOTO: ST FILE

Will the AI bubble burst?



A listing on PropertyGuru was corrected (above) after ST flagged it to the platform in November. The original listing had featured AI-generated furniture and fixtures. PHOTO: SCREENGAB/PROPERTYGURU



Reddit users pointed out the telltale signs of AI use in a brochure for a local restaurant chain's Chinese New Year promotions. PHOTO: SCREENGAB FROM REDDIT

INDISTINGUISHABLE FROM REALITY

AI's reality distortion has created a world of increasingly persuasive scams and misinformation that is finding a vast audience on social media.



"Pig-butchered scams", often found on social media and dating apps, get victims to send money over time. PHOTO: SCREENGAB FROM THREADS

Dr Jaidka points out that the risk is not a sudden moment when AI images become indistinguishable from reality, but rather the gradual erosion of the boundary between what is real and what is not.

The rise of AI-generated imagery means that the cues that people once relied on to discern the authenticity of a piece of content become increasingly meaningless.

This carries two key implications. First, AI-generated misinformation need not outright deceive. It can also subtly reinforce existing beliefs and biases in an environment where the truth matters less.

Second, the responsibility for verifying what is real and what is not has increasingly fallen upon individuals, as institutional safeguards lag behind advancements in AI.

The Singapore Police Force, Monetary Authority of Singapore and Cyber Security Agency of Singapore issued a joint advisory in March 2025 warning the public about the use of scams involving digital manipulation – in which AI deepfakes are used to impersonate others.

More recently, in November 2025, ST unearthed a swarm of inauthentic accounts operating on social media platform Threads. These accounts use what appear to be AI-generated images to lure real users into conversations with them, often drawing hundreds of comments with each post.

The posts, masquerading as attractive women and men, bear telltale signs of being "pig-butchered scams", where scammers build trust with their victims before extracting money through fraudulent investments or cryptocurrency.

Such inauthentic material has become intertwined with the business model of Meta, the company that operates Threads.

The social media firm internally projected around 10 per cent of its 2024 overall annual revenue (amounting to US\$16 billion, or S\$20.5 billion) comes from running advertisements for scams and banned goods, according to a Reuters investigation published in November 2025.

The company's internal research from May 2025 also estimated that Meta's platforms were involved in a third of all successful scams in the US.

Meta did not respond to a request for comment about the inauthentic pig-butchered material that ST found on its platforms. However, after the story's publication, a representative of the public relations firm retained by the company reached out to question the ST report's reference to the Reuters investigation.

As for the inauthentic AI-generated content, there was only radio silence.

WILL THE BUBBLE POP IN 2026?

Experts say the outlook for AI in 2026 is complicated.

Mr Poon says "we are both in a bubble and not in a bubble", referring to growing commentary by experts about whether the current AI boom is akin to the dot-com bubble of the late 1990s.

"In cases where the outcomes are real, the boom is real," he notes. "But in cases where there is just a lot of talk and inflated expectations, those are where there is a bubble brewing."

Much of the hype around AI stems from how it produces output that looks competent, even when it lacks grounding, precision or accountability, says Dr Jaidka.

If AI leads to sustained improvements in decision quality, learning or institutional capacity, then the gains are real, she adds.

If, however, it mainly produces more content – that is less diverse – while creating more work spent on verifying machine output, it amounts to a "reallocation of cognitive labour rather than a productivity revolution".

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