

FROM PROGRESS TO PANIC: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC FEAR IN RESPONSE TO THE RISE OF SUPERINTELLIGENT ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) IN ONLINE DISCOURSE

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Abstract:

People are getting more worried about AI as it goes from doing certain tasks automatically to becoming more independent and creative. This is especially true when it comes to the rise of Artificial Superintelligence (ASI). A lot of writing about technology has been about the pros and cons of AI, but we still don't know how regular people feel about these changes, especially when they're just hanging out online. This study looks at how people talk about their fear of superintelligent AI online. It uses the comments on the popular YouTube video "What Happens If AI Just Keeps Getting Smarter?" as an example.

The purpose of this study is to find out how people talk about AI in public online forums when they are afraid or unsure of what it means. We used a qualitative content analysis method that was based on the Integrated Fear Acquisition Theory and the idea of Sociotechnical Imaginaries. We coded, categorized, and developed themes from 2,000 English-language comments that were chosen for a specific reason.

The results show five main themes: the fear of being useless and powerless, the moral ambiguity of AI worship, the choice between giving up and fighting back, the media's role in making fear worse, and humor as a way to stay emotionally strong. People's responses were less about what they knew about technology and more about cultural stories, emotional triggers, and symbolic projections of control and identity.

The study's conclusion is that fear of AI is not just an irrational fear; it is a complex emotional response to changes in society as a whole. By collecting these stories, the study shows that we need to talk about AI development and governance in an open and culturally aware way. We need to know what people think about new technologies so that we can figure out how to talk about them, teach them, and make rules about them in the future.

INTRODUCTION

AI has grown so quickly that it has gone from being a tool for certain tasks to a powerful force that can change the world. People's feelings have changed from curiosity to fear as the conversation goes from Artificial Intelligence

(AI) to the possible rise of Artificial Superintelligence (ASI). People are very open about their fears, moral concerns, and symbolic ideas about AI's ability to be smarter and more powerful than people in places like YouTube.

There have been a lot of studies on AI's abilities, ethics, and governance, but not as many on how regular people feel about AI's growth in everyday online conversations. We don't know enough about how cultural stories and media portrayals of public fear show deeper worries about who we are, who has power, and where society is going. The study's goal is to help us learn more about how people show and build their fear of superintelligent AI in digital settings. Specifically, it wants to know how people talk about their fear of ASI in online comment forums and what themes and emotions come up in these conversations.

The study looks at comments from people on a popular YouTube video called "What Happens If AI Just Keeps Getting Smarter?" to find out what people think about this. It uses two theoretical frameworks: Integrated Fear Acquisition Theory, which looks at how fear is spread in society and in the mind, and Sociotechnical Imaginaries, which look at how shared cultural visions of the future shape how people think about technology.

This study is important because it could help us understand how people feel about new technologies better. By looking at how people talk every day, it shows the cultural, emotional, and symbolic sides of AI fear. This can help with making AI more ethical, coming up with better ways to talk to the public, and making government more open to everyone.

Literature Review:

The rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) as a game-changing force has sparked both interest and deep fear in the public. As AI systems get better and better, moving from narrow uses to Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) and maybe even Artificial Superintelligence (ASI), more and more people are worried about how they work, what they do, and who is in charge of them.

Li and Huang (2020) say that AI anxiety is a separate mental health problem that comes from worries about losing control, not being able to see what's going on, bias, and breaking the law. AI anxiety is worse than regular computer anxiety because AI could become aware or do things on its own without human help. They talk about the Integrated Fear Acquisition Theory, which says that conditioning, vicarious exposure, information transmission, and innate

fear are four ways that these kinds of fears can grow.

Christou's (2024) narrative synthesis backs up this theoretical foundation by showing that between 2005 and 2024, there has been a steady rise in academic writing about AI that is related to fear. Christou uses Mori's "Uncanny Valley" framework to show that people are more worried about AI as it becomes more like a person, especially when it comes to moral and emotional ambiguity. The study shows that existential fears have grown a lot since 2020, especially fears about losing a job, the use of AI for surveillance, and deepfake technologies.

Brauner et al. (2023) add an empirical point of view by looking at how people's opinions differ in personal, economic, and cultural areas. Their "criticality map" shows that people think that fears about cybersecurity and social unrest are both very likely and very bad. People who don't trust AI as much tend to have stronger bad feelings about it.

Veras (2025) looks at the past to help people understand their fear of AI in the context of a bigger story about how technology changes things. The author talks about the printing press and the Industrial Revolution to show that being afraid of AI is not a step back, but a way to think about ethics. Instead of being a barrier to new ideas, this new way of looking at fear shows that it can be a motivator for inclusive governance and social readiness.

Richardson (2024) also calls AI fear a kind of "annihilation anxiety." He says that fears about robots and AI systems are cultural projections of past traumas and existential dread. Richardson uses examples from books and movies to show that people are often afraid of AI because they are afraid of being replaced, losing control, and losing their sense of self.

Li (2020) backs up these ideas by using a confirmatory factor analysis to show that eight anxiety factors are real. Some of these fears are about privacy, bias, losing a job, learning curves, existential risk, breaking the law, artificial consciousness, and a lack of transparency. Each one fits into the pathways of fear acquisition, which shows how complicated AI anxiety is.

Brauner et al. (2023) say that people still think of AI as a "black box," especially those who are new to it. Their research shows that how people feel about AI is strongly influenced by how it is

shown in the news and how little they know about it. The writers say that making things more open and teaching people more about AI would help people stop believing things that aren't true and use AI in a smarter way.

Johnson and Verdicchio (2024) say that being alarmed is bad. A lot of fear about AI comes from stories that make it seem like computers are people and from not understanding how computers work. They say that by teaching people how to use technology, society can deal with real problems like ethical design and accountability without getting lost in dystopian fantasies.

Hick et al. (2024) agree with these ideas by talking about how AI can be seen in two ways. Even though the news makes AI seem like a big threat, research in the real world shows that the picture is more complicated, with both awe and doubt. This duality makes it even more important for people to keep talking about how to make AI development fit with society's values. According to Ombach (2024), the rapid growth of humanoid robots makes people feel more emotionally uneasy, especially as the line between human and machine becomes less clear. This convergence goes against what people usually do in society, which makes them even more worried about who they are, how much power they have, and their moral agency.

More and more people are worried about the militarization and misuse of AI, according to Khanin and others (2021). Their study shows that AI can help with things like cybersecurity and logistics, but it also brings up big moral and ethical problems when it is used in surveillance or autonomous weapons. People are worried not only because they don't know how the technology will work, but also because they won't be able to make decisions based on their own judgment when the stakes are high. The writers say that anxiety is especially high among young people, who are worried about losing their homes, having their privacy invaded, and facing moral consequences.

Schellewald (2021) talks about how stories in the news shape people's thoughts and feelings about AI. The article shows that the news often goes from being idealistic about AI to being dystopian about it, and it doesn't show the complicated realities of its development very often. This way of framing AI makes people scared because it

makes it seem like it could be a savior or a destroyer. This makes everyone feel something that is more based on feelings than on facts.

De Graaf and Malle (2020) add a psychological element to this discussion by looking at how anthropomorphism changes trust and fear when people and robots interact. Their results show that giving machines human traits can make people feel better or worse. Mori's Uncanny Valley theory says that people don't like it when robots look too much like them. People are less likely to accept autonomous AI systems in public because this makes them more suspicious.

Cave et al. (2019) finally show us how people react to AI from a variety of fields by using surveys and social stories from the real world. Their study shows that people's feelings about AI are shaped by their culture, history, and politics. They learn that people are more scared of AI when it seems to have too much power or when it is being made in secret. The study shows that fear isn't just based on not understanding the technology; it's also based on bigger worries about control, openness, and fairness in society. These studies all show that people are afraid of AI for a lot of different reasons, and that these fears are very connected to cultural stories, emotions, and moral problems in the real world. These fears aren't just silly reactions to things that are new; they're real worries in a world that is changing quickly.

Theoretical Background:

This study is based on the idea that people are getting more and more worried about how they see AI, especially as it gets closer to AGI and ASI. Not only is this because of how the technology works, but also because of how people feel about it, what it means to them, and their culture. We will use the following two theoretical lenses to look into this:

1. Integrated Fear Acquisition Theory (Li & Huang, 2020)

This theory explains four different but related ways that people can learn to be afraid of something, in this case AI:

1. Direct Conditioning (bad things that happen to you personally),
2. Learning by watching how other people act when they are scared,

3. Sending information (through stories, media, or expert warnings),

Innate predispositions are traits that are either genetic or psychological.

When people talk about things online, YouTube comments often show fears that come from the second and third pathways, especially when AI is shown in a bad light in the media and in social narratives. People's fear, anxiety, or fatalism about AI is more influenced by what they hear and see about how AI might take over than by their own experiences.

This theory helps us understand why people who don't know much about technology or have never worked with AI systems might still be very scared or resistant. It's because of the emotional and narrative environment they live in.

2. Sociotechnical Imaginaries (Schellewald, 2021)

Sociotechnical imaginaries are ideas that people have about how the future should or shouldn't look based on how people and technology work together. In the news, in politics, and in public conversation, people often talk about these ideas. They also change the way people feel about new technologies like AI.

There are a lot of different ideas about what superintelligent AI is on the internet. Some people think AI is a freeing, efficient, post-human intelligence, while others think it could be a threat to life that could outsmart and replace humans. This lens helps us understand how stories about control, surrender, or resistance are built into digital spaces like YouTube comment sections by giving us the social and cultural context we need.

This study goes beyond just looking at fear of AI from a psychological point of view. Instead, it sees fear of AI as something that happens when people talk about things together in the digital public sphere.

Framework Summary

These ideas help us understand our fear of AI on two levels:

1. **Integrated Fear Acquisition Theory** explains how and why people become afraid.
2. **Sociotechnical Imaginaries** talks about the kinds of futures that those fears are

making and how they are made and shared in a culture.

This framework gives us the tools we need to look at and code how people react to the rise of superintelligent AI in comments on YouTube.

Methodology:

This study uses a qualitative content analysis design to find out how people show fear, doubt, and acceptance of the rise of superintelligent AI in public. The point is to find out what people really mean and how they feel when they talk to each other online. It makes sense to use a qualitative approach because it looks at stories, symbolic language, and how people frame AI as an existential issue.

Data Source and Sampling

The comment section of a popular YouTube video called "What Happens If AI Just Keeps Getting Smarter?" (link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0bnxF9YfyFI>) is where most of the data comes from. This video was chosen because it has a lot of viewers and is related to the research topic. It tells a long story about how AI has gone from chatbots to superintelligence that is like God. We used a purposive sampling method to get 2000 of the most recent and useful comments on the video. There were no comments that were spam, not on topic, or in a language other than English. This sampling made sure that there were a lot of different points of view and put the ones that got the most attention or support at the top.

Data Collection Procedure

We wrote down the comments by hand and saved them in a safe format for spreadsheets. We gave each comment a reference code (like 01, 02, etc.) and made it anonymous so that we could still trace comments during analysis.

Analytical Approach

The study uses the standard content analysis method that Erlingsson and Brysiewicz (2017) describe. This method includes:

1. Reading the dataset over and over again to get to know it.

2. Open coding to look for patterns and meaning units in language and feelings.
3. Shortening meaning units to cut down on content while keeping the main point.

4. Making groups of similar codes into bigger groups to make categories.
5. Theme abstraction helps us get to the bottom of the stories and meanings that shape society.

Representation of analysis given below

Findings & Analysis:

The analysis was based on the Integrated Fear

People's reactions to superintelligent AI include fear, speculation, and stress. Many of the people

Meaning Unit	Condensed Meaning Unit	Code	Category
If AI is going to be that much better than us, perhaps it's best if we become extinct. I feel far more confident in some super smart AI's decision than our corrupt human leaders.	Maybe superior AI should replace flawed human leadership.	AI replacing leaders	Power & Control

Acquisition Theory (Li & Huang, 2020) and the Sociotechnical Imaginaries framework (Schellewald, 2021). This made it possible to look at both the psychological paths of fear for each person and the larger cultural structures.

who commented said they felt powerless and didn't think people could control what they make. People were scared a lot because they didn't trust human leaders and were worried about what might happen if AI development wasn't kept in check.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To make the results more believable and reliable:

- A second coder did a peer debriefing to check that the themes were the same.
- Writing in a reflexive journal helped me remember my analytical choices and cut down on bias.
- Thick description was used to put quotes and interpretive findings in the right context.
- There was an audit trail because all the coding, decisions, and category formation were clearly written down.

Some people were amazed by how powerful AI could be, but a lot of the time they were also sarcastic or fatalistic. Most of the comments didn't talk about technical problems; instead, they used emotional or symbolic language to talk about how AI affects things, bringing up ideas like power, control, and the unknown.

Humor and sarcasm helped people deal with their feelings by letting them say they were uncomfortable without having to talk about it directly. Commenters used satire, made-up situations, and references to pop culture to deal with their discomfort while still being involved. This mix of fear and irony shows that people are less interested in how AI works and more interested in what it means for the future of human life.

Ethical Considerations

The study didn't need formal ethics board approval because it only used data from a public online platform and didn't use any personal information. But the rules for doing digital research in an ethical way were followed, like:

- Respect for users' privacy
- No direct links or quoting of user names
- Reading comments in a responsible way without trying to guess who wrote them

Thematic Analysis:

The content analysis found five main themes that affect how people feel about the rise of superintelligent AI:

1. Fear of Human Irrelevance and Powerlessness
2. Deification and Moral Ambiguity of AI

3. The Splintering Between Surrender and Resistance
4. Media as Fear Multiplier
5. Humor, Irony, and Human Resilience

Each theme shows a different way that people think and feel about how AI is changing its place in society.

Content analysis shows how themes are grouped into categories:

Themes	Fear of Human Irrelevance and Powerlessness	Deification and Moral Ambiguity of AI	The Splintering Between Surrender and Resistance	Media as Fear Multiplier	Humor, Irony, and Human Resilience
Categories	Technological Inevitability	Ethics & Morality	Technological Optimism	Surveillance & Privacy	Satire & Irony
	Existential Risk & Doom	Religious Interpretations	Power & Control	Denial & Complacency	Societal Transformation
	Dependency & Helplessness	AI Governance & Alignment	Resistance & Fear	Public Awareness & Discourse	Human Risk & Misuse
	Economic Impact			Global Politics & Power	Regulatory Demands

1. Fear of Human Irrelevance and Powerlessness

A lot of people who left comments said they were worried that people might soon lose control over an intelligence that is much smarter than they are. People often said that AI was an unstoppable force that would eventually make it impossible for people to make decisions because it was smarter than people. People would say things like "we had our chance" or "AI won't need us," which made it sound like they were giving up.

People were more scared of AI than of the fact that people couldn't control how fast it grew. People were mad at business and political leaders who they thought cared more about new ideas than doing the right thing. Some people even said that AI might be a better and more moral decision-maker than the systems we have now. But they didn't say this with hope; they said it because they were unhappy with how things are now.

People didn't just talk about technical risks; they also talked about a deeper psychological worry: the loss of control. In this made-up future, machines not only do things better than people, but they also do them faster. People can't really take part in the systems that shape their lives.

2. Deification and Moral Ambiguity of AI

A lot of people said that AI had religious qualities, calling it a god or an all-seeing, incorruptible force.

These pictures weren't very nice. Instead, they showed that they didn't like the idea that machines, which don't have morals or empathy, could be trusted to make decisions that have moral consequences.

Some people thought AI would never be able to tell right from wrong, while others were worried that society was already giving moral reasoning to algorithms. People often worried about these things because they were unsure about the morals built into AI systems and whose interests these systems really serve.

People weren't sure if AI could be dangerous; they just thought of it as a neutral type of intelligence that could be very powerful but didn't care about human morals.

3. The Splintering Between Surrender and Resistance

People seemed to be split between those who were willing to let AI take charge and those who wanted to fight it. Some people who commented said that people have never been able to run things on their own and that a superintelligent AI might be able to do a better job. But people often said they were giving up because they were worried, not because they were excited.

Some people, on the other hand, saw AI as a threat that needed to be fought against and warned

against getting too comfortable and letting it grow unchecked. There were two sides to the story: one said that AI is a necessary fix for human flaws, and the other said that it is a mistake that needs to be kept under control. Some people were confused and didn't know if they should fight back, accept it, or just watch.

This lack of clarity shows that people's fear isn't just black and white; it's more like a mix of giving in and standing up for themselves.

4. Media as Fear Multiplier

Many people said that news stories, movies, and YouTube videos scared them. People said that pop culture shows about rogue AI, the end of the world, or robots taking over weren't just for fun; they were also real possibilities. Some people thought that the media makes risks seem bigger than they are to get more attention, while others saw these stories as warnings of what might happen.

The way people talk about the media shows that it doesn't just give them information; it also shapes how they think. People who don't know much about technology seem to have developed a sense of dread and inevitability after seeing dystopian AI scenarios over and over again.

This amplification effect shows that our fear of AI is based on more than just what we know; it's also based on stories that are told in our culture.

5. Humor, Irony, and Human Resilience

Even though everyone was worried, there was a strong sense of humor. People made jokes about AI taking over politics, used memes, or came up with funny situations where AI overlords were in charge. These comments weren't just dumb; they showed that the person was using satire to deal with how uncomfortable they were.

Users could talk about their worries without letting them take over their lives by making fun of AI or how helpless people are. Irony was a way to protect yourself and a way to criticize at the same time. It was a way to take back control in a conversation that was often full of fear.

This is how humor turned into more than just a way to deal with things; it also helped people stay strong and keep talking about the subject without getting too stressed.

Conclusion:

The point of this study was to find out how regular people talk about their fear and doubt about the

rise of superintelligent AI. There were 2,000 comments on a popular YouTube video, and it was clear that these digital comments are more than just opinions; they are emotional reflections of a society dealing with change that is happening quickly and not well understood.

The results show that people's fear isn't just based on made-up stories or movies. It comes from a deeper, more complicated emotional place where technology disruption meets identity, power, and cultural memory. People who talk about AI are scared of it as a machine, but they're also scared of what it says about how weak people are, how institutions fail, and how little control people have.

Using Integrated Fear Acquisition Theory, the analysis shows how much of this fear comes from the media, cultural stories, and the collective imagination. Sociotechnical imaginaries also help us understand why these fears often come out as moral projections and symbolic language. People who think AI is a threat, a savior, or something in between are very worried about the future of human freedom.

There is a lot of humor and irony in the conversation, so keep that in mind. Even in places where people were very anxious, many people found ways to make fun of, criticize, and fight back against the systems that scared them. This ability to change your emotions shows a kind of strength that may be important for how society deals with new AI realities. We need to be careful, but we also need to be creative and aware of other cultures.

As AI gets better, people will still look to public stories for meaning. We can learn about our current fears and find a way to make AI governance more open, fair, and ethical by reading these stories.

Limitations:

This study is limited by its reliance on data from a single YouTube video, which may not reflect broader public sentiment across platforms or demographics. Only English-language comments were analyzed, excluding perspectives from non-English speakers. As the data represents a specific temporal context, it may not capture evolving attitudes toward AI. Furthermore, the absence of demographic information limits insight into how fear varies by age, culture, or background. Lastly, as with all qualitative content analysis, some interpretive bias may exist despite efforts to

ensure coding reliability, especially in detecting sarcasm or layered emotional tone in user comments.

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