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Analysis a Critical Discourse Analysis of the Representation of Artificial Intelligence in Online Media and its Impact on Public Perception

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Abstract. *The rapid development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in digital spaces has reshaped the landscape of information production and consumption, particularly through online media that actively represent this technology in diverse narratives. These representations not only convey technical information but also shape how the public understands, experiences, and responds to the presence of AI in everyday life. This study aims to analyze how AI representations in online media influence public perception using a qualitative approach with an interpretative phenomenological design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, limited observation of digital interactions, and analysis of relevant online media documents, involving 8–15 participants who actively engage with digital media in academic and social contexts. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis to identify patterns of meaning emerging from participants' experiences. The findings reveal that public perception of AI is constructed through three main tendencies: expectations of technological convenience and efficiency, anxiety regarding the potential replacement of human roles, and ambivalence characterized by dependency and skepticism toward AI-based information. These results indicate that media discourse plays a significant role in simultaneously shaping emotions, knowledge, and social attitudes toward technology. Theoretically, this study reinforces the Critical Discourse Analysis perspective in understanding the relationship between language, ideology, and subjective experience in digital technological contexts. Practically, the findings contribute to the development of critical digital literacy and offer implications for education and public communication policies in responding to the increasingly pervasive advancement of AI.*

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence; Discourse Analysis; Online Media; Public Perception; Qualitative Phenomenology.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the digital sphere has become a primary arena for individuals to construct, negotiate, and represent social reality through language. University students, for instance, are no longer merely consumers of information but also active producers of discourse through social media posts, comments, and interactions within digital learning platforms. In their everyday experiences, language functions not only as a means of communication but also as a medium of power that shapes perceptions, identities, and even social positioning within the digital public sphere. This phenomenon illustrates that discursive practices are inseparable from the increasingly complex dynamics of technology, ideology, and power relations.

Preliminary observations indicate that social media users, particularly younger generations, tend to engage in the production and reproduction of discourse that is rapid, viral, and often unverified. Exploratory interviews with several university students reveal a degree of ambiguity in interpreting the meaning of digital messages, especially when encountering content that contains ideological bias, linguistic manipulation, or technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI). In educational contexts, lecturers are also confronted with new challenges in

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interpreting how students construct meaning from digital texts, including the use of AI tools such as ChatGPT in learning processes. This condition reflects a shift in literacy practices from conventional forms toward digitally mediated critical literacy that requires more advanced discourse analytical skills.

At the global level, the urgency of this research is further reinforced by the increasing role of digital media and AI in shaping public discourse. Studies suggest that social media functions not only as a communication platform but also as a mechanism that structures meaning and power relations within society (Liew et al., 2026). Moreover, representations of AI in media and education influence how individuals understand technology and the social realities surrounding them (Zottola & Conoscenti, 2026). Other research highlights that AI discourse in educational contexts is often constructed through narratives of optimism that do not necessarily reflect users' lived experiences (Selvi, 2025). Meanwhile, discourse analysis has been applied to examine users' experiences in interpreting political and cultural discourses on social media, although much of this work remains dominated by quantitative approaches (Amma, 2026).

A review of the literature over the past five years indicates significant developments in discourse analysis, particularly in its integration with digital technologies and multidisciplinary approaches. Li, Yu, and Yu (2026) demonstrate that narratives surrounding AI in media are constructed through complex combinations of linguistic and ideological strategies. Similarly, Wu and Lin (2026) show how digital learning applications reproduce specific ideologies through language design and multimodality. In the field of education, Wiklund (2026) emphasizes that Foucauldian discourse analysis is capable of revealing how educational technologies shape learning subjects through discursive practices. However, most of these studies primarily focus on textual analysis or large corpora, thereby overlooking the subjective experiential dimension and the meanings constructed by individuals in their everyday interactions.

Accordingly, a clear research gap emerges, namely the lack of studies that deeply explore lived experience, meaning-making processes, and the social dynamics experienced by individuals in engaging with digital discourse. In fact, qualitative approaches—particularly within the tradition of Critical Discourse Analysis—hold significant potential to uncover how language operates not only as text but also as a lived social practice experienced directly by individuals.

Based on this background, this study aims to conduct an in-depth analysis of discursive practices in digital contexts, with a particular emphasis on experience, meaning, and power relations constructed within social interactions. The focus of the study is directed toward understanding how individuals—such as university students or social media users—interpret, produce, and negotiate discourse within digital environments shaped by specific technological and ideological influences. Theoretically, this research is expected to contribute to the development of qualitative discourse analysis by emphasizing the dimension of subjective experience. Practically, the findings are anticipated to support the advancement of critical digital literacy in educational contexts, particularly in addressing the challenges posed by the era of artificial intelligence and social media.

2. THEORETICAL REVIEW

The phenomenon of Artificial Intelligence (AI) representation in online media cannot be understood merely as the transmission of information, but rather as a social practice that shapes how individuals construct meaning about technological reality. In everyday experience, individuals rarely interact directly with AI itself; instead, they engage with narratives about AI constructed through media language. A university student, for instance, may develop optimism toward AI due to narratives of "efficiency and sophistication," while simultaneously experiencing anxiety driven by discourses of "human replacement by machines." This ambivalence indicates that public perception is not neutral, but rather the result of complex discursive constructions.

To understand this phenomenon, this study employs three main theoretical approaches: (1) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), (2) Media Representation Theory, and (3) Social Construction of Reality Theory.

These frameworks do not merely define what discourse is, but explain how discourse operates in shaping individuals' experiences, emotions, and ways of thinking about AI.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA): Language as a Practice of Power

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) conceptualizes language as a social practice that is never neutral, but always embedded within relations of power and ideology. In the context of AI, media does not simply report technological developments; rather, it actively constructs how AI is understood by the public through specific lexical choices, metaphors, and framing strategies.

Recent studies demonstrate that media frequently frames AI through hyperbolic narratives—either as a "savior of the future" or an "existential threat"—which directly influence public perception (Zottola & Conoscenti, 2026; Nkoala et al., 2026). Li, Yu, and Yu (2026) found that representations of AI in Chinese media are shaped by linguistic strategies reflecting ideological and national interests. Meanwhile, García-Orosa and González-Arias (2026) emphasize that media functions as a "risk amplifier," capable of intensifying or reducing public anxiety toward AI.

From the perspective of individual experience, CDA helps explain why individuals may feel fear or trust toward AI not based on direct interaction, but as a result of repeated exposure to dominant discourses. Thus, analysis extends beyond textual structures to examine how discourse shapes social consciousness.

Media Representation Theory: Framing Technological Reality

Media Representation Theory emphasizes that media does not reflect reality, but constructs it through processes of selection, emphasis, and interpretation. In the context of AI, representations are often symbolic and even mythological in nature.

Barbalau (2026) argues that AI is frequently represented in media as a "semi-human entity" possessing intelligence and autonomy, thereby creating collective imaginaries that do not necessarily correspond to technical reality. Similarly, Senadheera, Shaamala, and Yigitcanlar (2025) found that AI narratives in digital media, such as YouTube, tend to be biased toward technological optimism, potentially shaping unrealistic public expectations.

In participants' experiences, these representations often manifest as confusion: whether AI should be understood as a tool, a partner, or a threat. This theory helps explain that such confusion is not an individual shortcoming, but rather a consequence of the inconsistency inherent in media representations themselves.

Social Construction of Reality: Perception as a Product of Social Interaction

The Social Construction of Reality theory (Berger & Luckmann) posits that reality is continuously produced through social interaction, including through language and media discourse. In the context of AI, public perception is formed through three processes: externalization (media produces discourse), objectivation (discourse is perceived as reality), and internalization (individuals accept and interpret it as truth).

Recent studies show that media narratives about AI significantly influence how society understands technological risks, ethics, and future implications (Graves-Sandriman, 2026; Zamani & Rousaki, 2026). In policy contexts, AI discourse can even normalize certain practices without public awareness (Zamani & Rousaki, 2026).

In everyday life, this process becomes evident when individuals begin to reproduce media narratives—such as "AI will replace human jobs"—as if they were objective facts, even though they are products of discursive construction.

Comparative Perspective and Theoretical Positioning

Each of these approaches offers a distinct analytical focus: (1) CDA → emphasizes power relations and ideology in language; (2) Media representation → explains how reality is framed; (3) Social construction → explains how meaning is internalized by individuals

Although these perspectives are complementary, this study positions Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the primary analytical lens, due to its capacity to simultaneously connect text, context, and power. CDA not only explains how AI is represented, but also why such representations emerge and who benefits from them.

Meanwhile, Media Representation Theory and Social Construction Theory are employed as supporting frameworks to understand how discourse is received and interpreted by participants in their everyday lives.

Conceptual Framework of the Study

This study conceptualizes AI representation in online media as a discursive practice that shapes not only textual production but also individuals' subjective experiences. Using CDA as the primary framework, the data are interpreted as follows: (1) Media language is analyzed as a form of ideological practice; (2) Narratives about AI are understood as products of representational construction; (3) Participants' perceptions are interpreted as outcomes of internalized social discourse

Accordingly, participants' voices are not treated as "neutral" data, but as reflections of complex interactions between personal experience and broader discursive structures. For example, when participants express fear of AI, the analysis does not stop at describing the emotion, but traces how that fear is shaped by specific media narratives.

This framework enables the study not only to describe the phenomenon, but also to uncover the underlying social and ideological mechanisms at work. In doing so, it contributes theoretically to the development of Critical Discourse Analysis in the digital era and practically to enhancing public critical literacy toward AI technologies.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) design. This approach is selected because the study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of individuals' subjective experiences in interpreting digital discourse, particularly how language, technology, and social context shape their lived realities. Phenomenology enables researchers to explore the meaning of lived experience in a reflective and contextual manner, which cannot be adequately captured through quantitative approaches (Adesuyi, 2026; Alaba et al., 2026). Furthermore, this approach is aligned with discourse analysis, which positions language as a social practice directly experienced by individuals.

Participants in this study were selected using purposive sampling, based on the consideration that they possess direct experience related to the phenomenon under investigation. The number of participants ranged from 8 to 15 individuals, following the principle of data depth in phenomenological research. The inclusion criteria included: (1) individuals who actively use digital media or social media, (2) individuals who have experience interacting with digital discourse-based content (such as AI, social media, or digital learning platforms), and (3) individuals willing to share their experiences openly. In certain cases, snowball sampling was also employed to reach additional participants with similar characteristics. The study was conducted within a higher education context, focusing on university students as subjects who intensively engage with digital discourse in both academic and social life.

Data collection was carried out using several primary methods, namely in-depth interviews, limited participant observation, and document analysis. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format to allow participants the flexibility to express their experiences and meanings freely. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was recorded using digital devices with participants' consent. Observations were conducted on participants' activities in interacting with digital discourse, such as their use of social media or learning platforms. Additionally, documents such as social media posts, comments, and other digital texts were analyzed as supporting data. All collected data were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and depth of analysis.

Data analysis was conducted using a thematic analysis approach combined with open coding principles. The analytical process followed several stages: (1) repeated reading and immersion in the data (immersive reading), (2) initial coding to identify units of meaning, (3) grouping codes into major themes, (4) interpreting relationships between themes, and (5) constructing thematic narratives that represent participants' experiences. To enhance the

systematic nature of the analysis, this study utilized NVivo software as a tool for coding, data organization, and tracking thematic patterns (Tolsada-Velasco & Hernández-Guillén, 2026; Alemdar & Aşıkcan, 2026). This approach allows for a deeper integration of textual analysis and contextual interpretation.

The trustworthiness of the data was ensured through four key criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was achieved through data triangulation (interviews, observations, and documents) and member checking, in which participants were asked to verify the researcher's interpretations. Transferability was ensured by providing thick descriptions of the research context, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other contexts. Dependability was maintained through systematic documentation of the research process (audit trail), while confirmability was ensured by maintaining objectivity through researcher reflexivity and analytical trace documentation (reflexive journaling) (Mansyuriadi & Sapriadi, 2026; Knowlton, 2026).

From an ethical perspective, all participants were provided with informed consent prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and participants had the right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Participants' identities were protected through the use of pseudonyms, and all data were securely stored and used solely for research purposes. This study also adhered to ethical principles in qualitative research, including respect for privacy, fairness, and scientific integrity.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

The analysis of participants' experiences reveals that the representation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in online media is not received as a singular or fixed meaning. Instead, it is interpreted through complex, ambivalent, and often contradictory processes. From the thematic analysis, three major themes emerged that illustrate the dynamics of participants' experiences and perceptions: (1) AI as a Promised Hope, (2) AI as a Haunting Threat, and (3) Ambiguity of Meaning: Between Dependency and Suspicion.

These themes do not stand independently but are intertwined within participants' everyday experiences.

Theme 1: AI as a Promised Hope

Many participants were first introduced to AI through online media that promote narratives of optimism—emphasizing convenience, efficiency, and a more intelligent future. In this context, AI is understood as an "ideal assistive tool" capable of simplifying the complexities of academic and professional life.

One participant (P3), a final-year university student, explained:

"When I see it in the media, AI feels like a solution for everything. It makes doing assignments faster, and finding ideas becomes easier… it feels like having a personal assistant."

This narrative is particularly reinforced by exposure to educational content on platforms such as YouTube and popular articles that highlight the advantages of technology. However, behind this optimism lies a tendency among participants to internalize media narratives without substantial critical reflection.

Interestingly, this experience is not entirely stable. The optimism that emerges is often situational—strong when AI performs effectively, but easily shaken when the outcomes fail to meet expectations. This indicates that "hope" toward AI is not a fixed belief, but rather a continuously negotiated construction.

Theme 2: AI as a Haunting Threat

In contrast to the first theme, some participants expressed more anxious emotional experiences. Media narratives portraying AI as a replacement for humans, a threat to employment, or even an ethical risk contribute to a sense of unease that is not always explicitly articulated.

One participant (P7) stated:

"Sometimes I feel afraid… if AI becomes more intelligent, will we still be needed? The media often talks about humans being replaced."

This fear does not necessarily stem from direct experience, but rather from repeated exposure to media discourse that is often dramatic and speculative in nature. In some cases, participants even acknowledged that they "do not fully understand AI technology," yet still experience genuine concern.

At the same time, an interesting paradox emerges: participants who feel threatened by AI continue to use it in their daily activities. This creates a tension between practical dependence and existential anxiety.

Theme 3: Ambiguity of Meaning — Between Dependency and Suspicion

This theme represents the convergence of the previous two experiences. Participants are neither fully optimistic nor entirely pessimistic; instead, they occupy an ambivalent position—using AI while simultaneously questioning it.

One participant (P5) remarked:

"I use AI almost every day, but sometimes I also doubt it… is this actually correct? I'm afraid it might be wrong, but we just trust it anyway."

This ambiguity manifests in several forms: (1) Dependence on AI for efficiency, (2) Doubts regarding the accuracy and reliability of information, (3) Awareness of potential manipulation in language

Observations indicate that some participants engage in an "internal negotiation" when using AI—they benefit from the technology while attempting to maintain a critical distance. However, this effort is not always consistent, particularly under time pressure or academic demands.

This phenomenon suggests that participants' experiences cannot be simplified into categories of "acceptance" or "rejection." Instead, they exist within a gray area characterized by compromise, tension, and adaptation.

Summary Table of Themes

Table 1. Table of Themes

Main Theme	Meaning of Experience	Emotional Dynamics
AI as Hope	AI as a solution and convenience	Optimism, dependency
AI as Threat	AI as risk and human replacement	Anxiety, uncertainty
Ambiguity of Meaning	AI as a tool that is simultaneously questioned	Ambivalence, critical reflection.

Transitions Between Themes

These three themes do not emerge in a linear sequence but move dynamically within participants' experiences. An individual may shift from optimism to anxiety within a short period, depending on the context of use and the type of discourse consumed.

Thus, the findings demonstrate that perceptions of AI are not stable entities but are continuously shaped through discursive processes influenced by interactions between media exposure, personal experience, and social needs.

Reflective Insights

What stands out most from these findings is not the dominance of a single perception, but the persistent tension present in participants' experiences. They simultaneously inhabit two realities: (1) a reality that promises convenience and efficiency through AI, and (2) a reality that generates anxiety regarding its broader implications.

This tension becomes a crucial space for understanding how discourse operates—not as a force that imposes meaning directly, but as a gradual process that shapes how individuals feel, think, and act.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the representation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in online media generates three primary forms of experience among participants: hope, fear, and ambivalence of meaning. These experiences do not emerge independently; rather, they are produced through ongoing discursive processes operating via media language, news framing, and dominant technological narratives. In other words, public perception of AI is not a direct reflection of the technology itself, but a socially constructed reality mediated by discourse.

AI as Hope: The Illusion of Progress and the Normalization of Technology

The findings reveal that some participants perceive AI as a solution to various academic and everyday challenges. This sense of hope is strongly shaped by media narratives emphasizing efficiency, convenience, and technological advancement. From the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this condition can be understood as the result of technological discourse hegemony, which subtly normalizes AI as an "inevitable progress."

Nguyen and Hekman (2024) explain that media frequently frames AI through strategies that promote technological optimism, leading the public to accept AI as a universal solution. This aligns with Jaballah's (2026) findings, which demonstrate that AI discourse in media tends to blur the boundary between technical reality and social imagination.

However, this sense of hope does not necessarily reflect critical awareness; rather, it represents the internalization of media discourse. Participants not only adopt the functional use of AI but also internalize the media's definition of what constitutes "progress."

AI as Threat: The Production of Fear in Media Discourse

The second key finding highlights the emergence of fear toward AI, particularly concerning human replacement and job loss. This fear does not originate from direct experience but from the dissemination of catastrophic narratives in digital media.

Zottola and Conoscenti (2026) argue that AI discourse is often constructed along two extreme poles: technological utopia and future dystopia. It is the dystopian pole that produces collective anxiety, even among individuals who do not fully understand AI technology.

Lupano (2025) similarly found that representations of AI in both Chinese and Western media frequently evoke fear through metaphors of "machines replacing humans." In the context of this study, participants' fear reflects how media functions as an emotional amplifier, rather than merely a channel for information dissemination.

Thus, fear toward AI can be understood as a discursive effect rather than a rational response grounded in direct experience.

Ambivalence of Meaning: Tension Between Dependency and Suspicion

The most significant finding is the emergence of ambivalence—participants actively use AI while simultaneously questioning its validity and implications. This condition reflects an internal contradiction within everyday digital practices.

Meneses-Fernández and Granja-González (2026) suggest that media narratives about AI across different contexts are often inconsistent, resulting in fragmented public perceptions. Meanwhile, Elmholdt et al. (2025) argue that AI discourse in digital environments generates "epistemic uncertainty," where users are no longer fully confident in the knowledge sources they rely upon.

In this study, participants' ambivalence reflects an ongoing negotiation between practical necessity and unstable critical awareness. They depend on AI for efficiency while maintaining suspicion regarding its accuracy and authority.

Theoretical Discussion: CDA as the Primary Lens for Social Meaning

Compared to Media Representation Theory and Social Construction Theory, CDA provides the most comprehensive framework for understanding how AI discourse operates. CDA not only examines the content of messages but also the power relations, ideologies, and linguistic strategies that shape public perception.

Kyyrö (2025) emphasizes that technological discourse is inherently linked to the production of collective meaning influenced by media institutions and policy frameworks. Meanwhile, Colăcel (2026) introduces the concept of "borrowed discourse," suggesting that fear toward AI often arises from the adoption of external narratives that are not critically examined by individuals.

Accordingly, the findings of this study reinforce the CDA perspective that language is not merely a reflection of reality but a mechanism for constructing social reality itself.

Researcher Reflection and Social Context

From a reflexive standpoint, it is important to acknowledge that participants in this study operate within a digital ecosystem characterized by abundant information but limited critical verification. Their social positioning as university students or active digital media users influences how they consume AI-related discourse—often rapidly, fragmentarily, and without deep contextual engagement.

The researcher's own position as part of the digital society also plays a role in shaping data interpretation. This awareness is essential, as discourse analysis inherently involves positionality—that is, the ways in which the researcher's social experience influences the interpretation of reality.

Conceptual Synthesis

Overall, the findings demonstrate that: (1) Hope toward AI is constructed through discourses of technological optimism, (2) Fear toward AI is produced by dystopian media narratives, (3) Ambivalence emerges as a consequence of inconsistencies within public discourse

Together, these dynamics reveal that perceptions of AI are not individual phenomena, but socially constructed processes that continuously evolve through language and media.

5. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the representation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in online media produces complex and dynamic patterns of meaning, manifested through three interrelated experiences: hope, fear, and ambivalence. These patterns reflect not merely individual perceptions, but discursive constructions shaped through continuous interaction between media narratives, technological framing, and participants' everyday experiences. The findings indicate that public understanding of AI is neither stable nor neutral; rather, it evolves through ongoing negotiation between optimism toward technological progress and anxiety about its potential consequences.

Beyond identifying these patterns, this study offers a deeper insight into how individuals inhabit a dual reality in the digital era—one that promises efficiency and advancement, and another that generates uncertainty and existential concern. This tension reveals that discourse operates not as a fixed system of meaning, but as a fluid process that gradually shapes how individuals interpret, feel, and respond to technological change. In this regard, the study contributes conceptually to Critical Discourse Analysis by emphasizing the experiential dimension of discourse, highlighting how language functions not only at the level of text but also within lived social practice.

From a practical perspective, the findings carry important implications across several domains. For policymakers, the study underscores the need for more balanced and responsible communication regarding AI, avoiding both excessive optimism and fear-inducing narratives. In educational contexts, the results highlight the urgency of integrating critical digital literacy into curricula, enabling students to interpret and evaluate AI-related discourse more reflexively. Additionally, the findings suggest the importance of addressing the psychological dimension of digital engagement, particularly in mitigating anxiety and fostering more informed and critical interactions with technology.

However, this study is not without limitations. The research is situated within a relatively specific context, focusing primarily on university students, which may limit the transferability of findings to broader populations. The composition of participants is also relatively homogeneous, and the depth of exploration is constrained by time and scope. These limitations point to areas that remain underexplored, particularly regarding diverse social groups and longitudinal perspectives on evolving digital discourse.

Future research is therefore encouraged to expand both methodological and contextual boundaries. Employing alternative qualitative approaches, such as ethnography or narrative inquiry, may provide richer insights into the social dynamics of digital discourse. Additionally, involving more diverse populations and broader socio-cultural contexts would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of how AI discourse is constructed and experienced across different groups. Further investigation is also needed to explore dimensions that remain implicit in this study, such as the long-term impact of AI discourse on identity formation, social relationships, and knowledge production.

Ultimately, this study positions discourse not as a passive reflection of technological reality, but as an active force that shapes how society understands and engages with AI. By foregrounding the interplay between language, experience, and power, this research contributes to a more critical and nuanced understanding of digital life in the age of artificial intelligence.

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