

Should death do us part?

Audience Perceptions of Digital Immortality in *Artificial Immortality* (2021)

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Conceptualising immortality

The meaning and pursuit of immortality has long occupied a central place in philosophical, religious, and cultural discourse (Buben; Kar; Rosenthal; Nairn). At its core, immortality refers to the continuation of existence beyond the limits of material death, often understood as the endurance of an intangible identity such as the soul, consciousness, or personal essence (Andrade). In contemporary digital culture, this enduring pursuit has taken on new significance through digital immortality, where technologies such as artificial intelligence, data preservation, and interactive avatars promise new ways of sustaining identity, presence, and memory beyond biological death. Accordingly, this article examines how audiences engage with digital immortality through responses to the documentary *Artificial Immortality* (2021), focusing on how viewers negotiate the concept through scepticism, spirituality, and lived experiences of grief and loss. In doing so, it situates digital immortality within longer histories of human attempts to transcend mortality while also considering how emerging technologies reconfigure the meanings of life, death, and continued existence.

Bauman describes immortality as the “potential for life expansion” (6), capturing the human desire to move beyond the finiteness of mortal life. Across theological and cultural contexts, this yearning for ongoing existence has been expressed in different ways. Many religious traditions, for example, offer visions of an afterlife in which the self continues beyond death, whether through eternal reward or punishment, cycles of rebirth, or forms of spiritual

happen after death but also shape moral systems, where earthly behaviour is guided by the promise of lasting significance (Chin Park and Pyszczynski; De Cruz and De Smedt; Kar).

At the same time, philosophical and psychological perspectives suggest that immortality is not only literal but can also be symbolic. In this sense, individuals seek continuity through legacy, memory, cultural contribution, and the passing on of values (Dechesne et al.). The Terror Management Theory (TMT), first conceptualised by Greenberg et al., helps explain this process by arguing that awareness of one's mortality creates existential anxiety, which individuals manage by investing in beliefs and practices that offer either continued existence or lasting meaning beyond death. From this perspective, striving for immortality, whether literal or symbolic, serves as a way of coping with the anxiety surrounding the inevitability of material death (Darrell and Pyszczynski; Dechesne et al.; Fa). As Bauman suggests, much of human behaviour can be seen as a form of "defiance and denial of death" (7), where individuals attempt to create meaning, stability, and continuity despite life's limitations. More recent scholarship extends this idea, showing that both religious beliefs and secular practices, including emerging technological engagements with death, are shaped by this ongoing desire to extend the self beyond its biological endpoint (De Cruz and De Smedt; Savin-Baden and Mason-Robbie). These perspectives present immortality not as a fixed concept, but as a complex and evolving one.

Digital Immortality: Evolving perspectives on death in the age of technology

The concept of digital immortality can be understood as a contemporary extension of symbolic immortality, where technology enables new and emerging forms of continued existence beyond biological death (Basett; Huberman). Advances in 'death tech' or thanatechnologies (e.g. those concerned with death, grief, immortality, and the afterlife) have accelerated alongside developments in artificial intelligence (AI) and are reshaping how

mortality (and consequently immortality) is experienced and understood (Özdemir et al.; Puzio). A prominent example is two-way digital immortality, which allows the living to interact with digital avatars of the deceased (Kawashima et al.). These avatars, often described as “mind twins,” are created from personal data such as text, images, video, and audio, enabling simulations that resemble the deceased and allow ongoing interaction for the bereaved.

Such technologies are increasingly visible in commercial contexts, with platforms like MyHeritage, HereAfter AI, Eternime, and Storyfile developing digital afterlife services (Puzio). Their primary aim is to provide emotional support and assist with grief by maintaining a sense of continued presence (Syarova et al.). However, these developments raise significant moral, theological, and philosophical concerns, particularly around the potential erosion of human uniqueness and established understandings of death (Di Ceglie).

A growing body of literature highlights the paradoxical risks of these technologies. While intended to ease grief, digital immortality may produce an ‘immortality trap’, where prolonged interaction extends grief, fosters dependency, and increases vulnerability to manipulation (Fa; Harbinja et al.; Özdemir et al.). It may also encourage attachment to “idealized or distorted versions of the deceased” (Fa 6), reshaping memory and emotional experience. These concerns are compounded by ethical and legal challenges, including issues of data ownership, consent, posthumous personhood, and potential misuse for harmful purposes such as exploitation or defamation (Balaji et al.; Marinotti and Lubin; Mason-Robbie and Savin-Baden; Nowaczyk-Basińska and Kiel).

The commodification of digital immortality further raises concerns about privileged access and inequality. As these services are often costly, they may be more accessible to those with greater financial resources, reinforcing existing socio-economic disparities (Bhargava;

Hurtado Hurtado). These issues highlight the need to examine digital immortality through an interdisciplinary lens that considers technological, ethical, philosophical, psychological, and cultural dimensions, as well as public discourse (Bhargava; Nowaczyk-Basińska and Kiel).

Public engagement with digital immortality is largely shaped by its portrayal in speculative popular culture and science fiction, which reflect broader societal concerns about life, death, and technological transcendence (Bhargava; Nairn and Matthews). As a result, it is widely understood as a complex and contested concept (Biano). Although empirical research remains limited, existing studies suggest that attitudes toward digital immortality are closely linked to beliefs about death, religion, morality, and authenticity (Nairn and Matthews). Some individuals resist these thanatechnologies to avoid burdening loved ones with continued emotional ties, while others emphasise the sacred nature of traditional death practices over simulated interactions (Kawashima et al.; Privezentseva et al.). There is also widespread scepticism about the current limits of technology, particularly its inability to authentically reconstruct personality (Torres). These complexities are reflected in behavioural research, which identifies emotional needs, perceived risks, and individual values as key factors shaping engagement (Tu et al.).

As Nairn and Matthews suggest, contemporary understandings of immortality are increasingly shaped by an interplay between technological imaginaries and enduring moral and spiritual frameworks. This tension is evident in public discourse, where digital immortality is both embraced as innovation and questioned as an ethical problem. Public responses reflect this tension. While there is curiosity about AI's potential to preserve identity, acceptance remains cautious and often sceptical (Tu et al.; Yin et al.). Concerns about authenticity, control, and emotional impact frequently outweigh perceived benefits, and attitudes are shaped by cultural, religious, and personal experiences of loss. Overall, digital

immortality emerges as a contested phenomenon that reflects both enduring desires to transcend mortality and contemporary efforts to reconfigure life and death. Yet, while existing scholarship has mapped many of the ethical, philosophical, and technological implications of digital immortality, less attention has been paid to how audiences themselves interpret these possibilities when encountering them through documentary media. Examining responses to *Artificial Immortality* (2021), therefore, offers a way to understand how public engagement with digital immortality is shaped not only by technological promise or ethical concern, but also by scepticism, spirituality, grief, and lived experiences of loss.

Method

This study adopted a qualitative, exploratory approach to examine how YouTube commenters engage with the concept of digital immortality as presented in the documentary *Artificial Immortality* (2021), directed by Ann Shin. The film explores emerging technological efforts to extend human existence beyond biological death through artificial intelligence, robotics, and biotechnology, raising questions about whether the human mind, identity, and consciousness can be replicated. Featuring perspectives from prominent thinkers such as Nick Bostrom, Hiroshi Ishiguro, Ben Goertzel, and Deepak Chopra, the documentary situates digital immortality within broader debates about post-biological life, human-machine integration, and the possibility of AI-generated “mind twins.” Its selection for international film festivals, including DocEdge (2021), the Calgary International Film Festival (2021), and the Spirit Film Festival (2021), further reflects its cultural and scholarly relevance to contemporary discussions of emerging technologies (A.rtificial i.mmortality).

YouTube was selected as a site of analysis due to its role as a participatory platform where audiences publicly negotiate and respond to emerging ideas. Two versions of the documentary were identified on YouTube. The first video contained 583 comments, while the

second contained 683 comments. Comments from both videos were extracted using data-scraping software and subsequently cleaned. This process involved removing spam, duplicate entries, and comments written in languages other than English. The final dataset comprised 1,012 comments, which formed the corpus for analysis.

The study employed Braun and Clarke's (*Conceptual and design thinking*) reflexive thematic analysis. This approach was selected for its capacity to capture both semantic meanings (explicit content) and latent meanings (underlying assumptions and interpretations) within the data, aligning with an interpretive analytical perspective. The analysis followed the six phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (*Using thematic analysis*). First, the data were familiarised through repeated reading of the comments. Second, initial codes were generated independently by the researchers before being compared and discussed collaboratively. This iterative process allowed for the refinement and consolidation of codes. Through following these steps, an initial set of eight themes was identified. These were subsequently reviewed, refined, and collapsed into five overarching themes that best captured the patterns within the dataset. Three of our final themes are discussed here, including: (1) scepticism toward digital immortality, (2) religious or spiritual interpretations of immortality, and (3) personal experiences with loss. Themes omitted from this article included social and ethical concerns about AI futures and existential reflections on mortality.

Theme 1: Scepticism toward digital immortality

The first and most prominent theme, with 417 comments, scepticism toward digital immortality, captures a widespread reluctance to accept that AI-driven systems can meaningfully preserve human consciousness or identity. Comments within this theme consistently frame digital immortality, particularly in the form of AI-generated digital avatars or mind-uploading imaginaries, as producing, at best, a simulation or replica rather than a

continuation of the self. Statements such as “I die, but a digital copy lives on. It isn’t me,” “a copy of you isn’t you,” and “even if you could capture the full data set of a person, that person would still die with their body” emphasise a perceived distinction between data, personality, mimicry, and authentic personhood. From this perspective, AI-generated digital avatars are not extensions of the self but imitations that lack the essential qualities that constitute being.

Such scepticism aligns with existing scholarship that characterises these technologies as forms of “weak” artificial immortality (Puzio). Although AI systems may replicate behavioural patterns or reconstruct aspects of personality from data, they do not possess consciousness or subjective experience (Iglesias, et al.; Stokes). Consequently, they function as simulations rather than continuations of life. Ulatowski’s analogy illustrates the point, describing digital avatars as akin to playback devices. Much like a television displaying a recorded film, these systems can reproduce expressions or memories without actually experiencing them. The appearance of personhood is therefore generated through computational processes that resemble what Iglesias et al. describe as “philosophical zombies” (98). The digitally generated avatar may exhibit human-like behaviour, reminiscing on stored data, but there is ultimately ‘nobody home’.

When commenters suggest that “it will only build a predictor based on all of our data,” they further emphasise that AI-generated representations of the deceased rely on archived data to produce responses (Iglesias, et al.). Such systems create the impression of interaction while lacking the capacity for genuine growth, spontaneity, or relational depth. Scholars similarly argue that these entities are better understood as facsimiles or substitutes that simulate communication rather than sustain it (Jiménez-Alonso and Brescó de Luna). The distinction becomes particularly significant in the context of human relationships, where attachment is

directed toward a specific, irreplaceable individual rather than a set of reproducible traits (Brinkmann). Under such conditions, the idea that loss could be mitigated through replication appears fundamentally flawed, as a copy cannot stand in for the singularity of the original person (Mercer and Trothen).

Alongside these philosophical concerns, commenters express scepticism grounded in the biological and scientific limits of current AI technologies. Assertions that “we don’t even understand consciousness yet,” “the brain is too complex to replicate,” and “AI can mimic behaviour but not consciousness” reflect a broader awareness of gaps in contemporary knowledge. Scholarship reinforces this position by emphasising that human consciousness cannot be separated from the systems that produce it (Mercer and Trothen). The brain operates in constant interaction with the body through neural, chemical, and hormonal processes. Emotional states, cognition, and perception emerge not only from neural activity but also from interactions with the wider organism, including the gut, endocrine system, and sensory feedback (Mercer and Trothen).

Scepticism toward digital immortality reflects more than a rejection of AI; it signals deeper uncertainty about the nature of consciousness and the limits of computational representation. Commenters implicitly recognise what scholarship makes explicit: current AI-driven frameworks remain ill-equipped to reproduce the complexity, continuity, and embodied nature of human experience. Digital immortality, as a result, is understood not as a viable extension of life but as a reductionist approximation that falls short of preserving the self in any meaningful sense.

Theme 2: Religious or Spiritual Interpretations of Immortality

The second theme, religious or spiritual interpretations of immortality, captures a cluster of 233 responses that frame immortality as belonging to a divine or metaphysical domain rather than an AI-driven technological one. Comments such as “you can’t upload the soul,” “only Jesus can give eternal life,” “humans cannot play God,” and “the soul transcends data” position AI-mediated digital immortality, particularly through AI-generated digital avatars, as fundamentally incompatible with long-standing spiritual understandings of human existence. Rather than rejecting immortality outright, these responses reassert its legitimacy within religious frameworks, suggesting that eternal life is not a technical problem to be solved, but a spiritual condition governed by divine authority (Nairn and Matthews). A point worth noting is that the religious frameworks tended to skew towards Western or Abrahamic conceptions of the afterlife and, therefore, alternative religious perspectives were missing in such elucidations on digital immortality.

The rejection of AI-driven digital immortality on religious grounds is not unexpected. Although secularisation has displaced organised religion from many institutional centres of power (Ferngren; Nairn), religion continues to exert cultural and moral influence, particularly in shaping beliefs about death and the afterlife (Bhargava; Nairn and Matthews). Scholarship has long demonstrated that religious systems function as frameworks for moral judgement and social regulation, often grounded in the notion of moralising gods who monitor behaviour and reward or punish accordingly (Johnstone; Willard et al.). Comments such as “only Jesus can give eternal life” or “real eternal life is through Christ” align closely with this body of work, reinforcing the idea that immortality is contingent upon adherence to divine structures rather than human innovation. Religious discourse, therefore, operates as a boundary-setting mechanism, policing the limits of what is considered legitimate or attainable in relation to life, death, and what lies beyond.

At the same time, these responses draw upon deeply embedded dualistic understandings of the self. Assertions that “your spirit leaves the body when you die” or that “the soul cannot be captured by the machine” reflect a long-standing body–soul dualism in which the essence of personhood is conceived as immaterial, invisible, and fundamentally distinct from the physical body (Heflick et al.). Scholars have noted that such dualistic thinking emerges early in cognitive development and persists across cultures, often underpinning religious conceptions of the afterlife (Harris; Malcolm). Within such a framework, the body is understood as a temporary vessel, or even a form of confinement, for an immortal soul that exists independently of biological processes (Hacker; O’Neill).

AI-mediated digital immortality, by contrast, is typically premised on a materialist logic that reduces consciousness to information, a form of data that can be extracted, replicated, and sustained within computational systems (Hurtado; Magerstädt). The tension between these ontologies is central to the resistance articulated in this theme. If the soul is non-material and transcendent, then it cannot be digitised, simulated, or reproduced through artificial intelligence without losing its essential nature. As several comments suggest, AI-generated avatars may replicate aspects of memory, personality, or cognition, but they fail to capture what is perceived to be the true essence of the self—the soul. From this perspective, digital immortality is not simply impossible; it is conceptually misguided, mistaking the brain for the soul and simulation for transcendence.

Religious and spiritual frameworks, therefore, provide a powerful interpretive lens through which AI technologies are evaluated and, in many cases, resisted by online contributors. By situating immortality within divine authority and grounding personhood in an immaterial soul, commenters challenge the legitimacy of AI-driven digital immortality at both moral and ontological levels. In doing so, they reaffirm the enduring influence of religious thought in

shaping contemporary debates about technology, identity, and the limits of human intervention in life and death.

Theme 3: Personal Experiences with Loss

The third and final theme, personal experiences with loss, captures a more ambivalent and emotionally complex set of responses to digital immortality. Unlike the previous themes, which were characterised by strong opposition, 84 comments within this theme reveal a divided perspective on whether AI-mediated digital immortality, particularly through AI-generated digital avatars and conversational replicas, might support or hinder the grieving process. Responses such as “living forever without him would be worse than death,” “would I want a digital version of my loved ones?,” “my parents are still in my head,” and “I wish I could ask my grandfather questions today” reflect deeply personal engagements with bereavement, memory, and the enduring presence of the deceased. Other responses, including “watching someone fade away is devastating,” foreground the emotional trauma associated with loss, positioning AI-driven digital immortality as a potential, yet uncertain, means of coping.

These reflections align closely with established scholarship on grief, particularly frameworks that conceptualise bereavement as a dynamic and ongoing process (Manzella). The dual process model suggests that individuals oscillate between a loss orientation, characterised by emotional pain, longing, and remembrance, and a restoration orientation, which involves adapting to life without the deceased and re-engaging with everyday responsibilities (Stroebe and Schut; Xie). Within such a framework, AI-mediated digital immortality presents a paradox. On one hand, AI-generated digital avatars may support loss-oriented coping by

enabling continued connection, offering a sense of presence, and facilitating remembrance. On the other hand, such systems may disrupt restoration-oriented processes by inhibiting the psychological adjustment required to accept absence and move forward.

Broader debates within grief studies further illuminate this tension. Earlier psychoanalytic approaches, such as Freud's, emphasised the need to sever emotional bonds with the deceased in order to achieve closure (Hall; Manzella; Worden). More contemporary perspectives argue that while death ends a life, it does not end a relationship. Ongoing connections are maintained through what are often termed 'continuing bonds' (Klass), sustained by memories, stories, and symbolic objects (Florczak and Lockie; Hall). Comments such as "family memories are enough," "your legacy lives through stories," and "make videos for your children instead of avatars" resonate with this perspective, suggesting that non-interactive forms of remembrance may provide a healthier means of preserving connection without impeding emotional adjustment.

Within this context, AI-mediated digital immortality can be understood as both an extension and a potential distortion of continuing bonds. While AI systems offer the possibility of interaction and simulated presence, they may also prevent what some scholars describe as the emotional relocation of the deceased, a process necessary for adapting to loss (Worden). Continued engagement with highly lifelike digital avatars risks blurring the boundary between presence and absence, potentially complicating or prolonging grief in ways that may become psychologically "maladaptive" (Florczak and Lockie 282).

The ambivalence expressed in these comments also finds resonance in public discourse. Reactions such as those from Robin Williams' daughter Zelda Williams, who has spoken against the use of AI to recreate her father, finding it "personally disturbing", highlight the

potential for such technologies to be experienced as unsettling or distressing rather than comforting. As she states:

To watch the legacies of real people be condensed down to 'this vaguely looks and sounds like them so that's enough', just so other people can churn out horrible TikTok slop puppeteering them is maddening [...] You're not making art, you're making disgusting, over-processed hotdogs out of the lives of human beings, out of the history of art and music, and then shoving them down someone else's throat hoping they'll give you a little thumbs up and like it. Gross. (Saunders and Busby paras 10-11)

Williams' view underscores the broader point that while digital immortality may appeal as a means of sustaining connection, its emotional consequences are far from straightforward.

Overall, personal experiences of loss shape nuanced and often conflicting attitudes toward AI-driven digital immortality. Some individuals are drawn to the possibility of maintaining interaction with deceased loved ones, while others recognise that such practices may interfere with processes of grief, adaptation, and personal growth. The comments, therefore, point to a careful negotiation between the desire to hold on and the need to let go, highlighting the limits of AI-mediated technological intervention in fundamentally human experiences of loss and mourning.

Conclusion

In conclusion, digital immortality reveals how enduring human desires to transcend death are being reimagined through contemporary technologies. Our analysis shows that public responses to these developments are shaped not only by curiosity, but also by deep scepticism, spiritual beliefs, and personal experiences of grief. Across the comments, digital immortality was rarely understood as a true continuation of the self. Instead, it was more

often framed as simulation, imitation, or an ethically troubling attempt to reproduce what many believe is irreducibly human.

Crucially, these technologies remain limited. There is still no scientific understanding of how consciousness emerges, nor any viable method for transferring it into digital form. Digital avatars, therefore, function not as continuations of the self, but as data-driven simulations. While they may appear to offer continuity beyond death, they also introduce new emotional, philosophical, and ethical tensions, particularly around authenticity, grief, memory, and the boundaries of personhood.

Ultimately, digital immortality is best understood not as the defeat of death, but as a cultural and technological response to mortality anxiety. It reflects both the persistence of humanity's desire for continuity and the limits of technology in addressing the existential, spiritual, and relational realities of death. As such, these emerging practices demand ongoing critical scrutiny across technological, ethical, and cultural contexts.

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