

The Ethical Dilemmas of Digital Media Manipulation: Review of the Film CTRL

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Abstract

*The film CTRL (2024) directed by Vikramaditya Motwane examines identity alongside memory as it explores virtual world exploitation in the era of social media. This evaluation examines how CTRL uses AI and deepfake technology and memory deletion in its narrative structure and filmmaking techniques to study their moral implications for the hyper-connected world. Through the tale of Nella who is an influencer whose life collapses after performing a genuine memory deletion procedure the film addresses significant social matters about personal authenticity and privacy alongside emotional detachment and altered identity. The article uses references from **Black Mirror**, **Her**, and **Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind** to argue that **CTRL** serves as both a psychological sci-fi drama and a critical analysis of media-driven living and technological overuse.*

Keywords: Digital identity, Social media addiction, Ethical dilemma, AI and Deep fake, Media manipulation.

Introduction

Human identity together with media trust faces serious threats from artificial intelligence (AI) and deepfake technology as a top ethical challenge during the 21st century. Digital manipulation alters both how others view individuals and how individuals view themselves in this environment where machines control what we see through filtered

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content and algorithmic programming and synthetic simulations. *The Social Dilemma* (Orlowski, 2020) documentary serves as evidence of how algorithms affect human behaviour along with cognitive processes. Deepfakes which are realistic fake videos made with artificial intelligence technology now endanger fundamental aspects of truth. The technologies have expanded beyond scientific facilities to become integral components of entertainment activities and social interactions and political sides.

The movie *CTRL* (Motwane, 2024) functions as a key cultural document because of the specific social conditions it addresses. The film embraces ethical dialogues which began with movies such as *Ra.One* (Sinha, 2011) and *Robot* (Shankar, 2010) and then continued with *Teri Baaton Mein Aisa Uljha Jiya* (Joshi & Sah, 2024). AI systems have the capability to surpass emotions according to the films that analyse this ability. *CTRL* stands apart from its predecessors by investigating how artificial intelligence reforms memory and identity while concealing itself from being recognized as friendly or hostile within normal routine environments. *CTRL* introduces a threat to humanity in a way that differs from technological demonstrations of its progeny by combining psychological aspects with real threats that pose a genuine danger to human existence.

CTRL presents an apocalyptic narrative about a memory erasure system controlled by artificial intelligence that enables a person to delete their unhappy memories. The speculative technology functions as a symbolic representation of contemporary mental suppression combined with digital-age toxicity along with mental escape practices. Datasets which are carefully constructed for social media suffer collapse in the same manner as *Kho Gaye Hum Kahan* (Singh, 2023) along with *CTRL*. The social media platforms felicitate streamlined communication which has also increased a looming threat known as trolls. Over the last decade, the increasing role of social media in India has brought community involvement and a drastic increase in the use of digital platforms. Digital illusions and real-life boundaries have become increasingly ambiguous due to the expanding dominance of artificial intelligence-based platforms (Kaushik & Garg, 2025). Users fall victim to manipulative technologies which monitor their behaviors while making predictions to remodel

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their actions until they lose their independence to the system according to *The Social Dilemma* (Orlowski, 2020). In *CTRL* the main character gives away their emotional independence to artificial intelligence while reproducing the same perilous dependence pattern.

Vulnerable digital presence

The film *CTRL* follows Nella (Ananya Pandey) as she experiences emotional and mental collapse after she lost her Gen Z social media status as an influencer with a perfect digital presence. At first glance everything in her life seems uniform and scripted while her content matches her idealized persona. An emotional core that seems invulnerable through constructed perfection hides a sensitive nature which has endured major heartbreak and trauma that remains unrealized. The betrayal at the hands of her companion creates two disastrous results when she loses both her intricate offline presence and his vast online reputation. Her collapse is exacerbated by using the fact that the entirety about her exists in public: each intimate on the spot is open to comment, consumption, and scrutiny by millions of human beings.

In this inclined position, she is uncovered to a complicated AI reminiscence-erasure service that guarantees a sparkling start. The generation no longer best wipes out painful recollections from her brain however also cleanses them from her digital lines-pictures, messages, and emotional triggers. At first, this virtual cleaning gave her a sense of liberty and regained mastery of her private history. She becomes poised another time and returns to her virtual target market with renewed warranty. As the movie maintains, Nella starts feeling severe emotional dissociation. Lacking the emotional burden of her recollections, she grows extra numb, detached, and uncertain of her own values and motivations. Her relationships lose their significance, and her picks turn out to be erratic. The role of AI becomes deeper as it starts to subtly influence her personality and decisions. The movie slowly turns from psychological drama to techno-thriller, emphasizing how memory interventions by technology-though appearing to be therapeutic-can break down the very fabric of human identity and emotional strength. The story is a warning: while trying to eliminate pain, Nella also eliminates her growth, her context, and eventually, her sense of self.

Digital identity and social media influence

The movie presents a scathing critique of the image-and-validation obsession of the digital age. Nella's life is representative of the influencer economy, where one's identity becomes inextricably linked to public opinion and algorithmic validation. Her waking life is a presentation of perfection, moderated by handpicked visuals, emotionally charged captions, and engagement indicators. This online construction of Nella gets so dominant that it overwhelms her offline life. The stress of living up to an unblemished image forces her to suppress her inner conflicts, resulting in emotional dissonance and burnout.

CTRL examines the emotional toll of this staged life. By highlighting the lengths to which Nella will go to maintain her image-erasing traumatic events from both memory and social media-the movie demonstrates how social media encourages a culture of denial. Pain, sorrow, and failure have no space in a "likes" and "shares" world. Memory erasure as an act comes to symbolize the influencer's perpetual compulsion to remake her in order to stay relevant. But by doing so, Nella distances herself from the emotional realities that once anchored her.

This segment of the film is critical of how the performative aspect of social media reconstitutes identity as a consumable product. The "digital self" becomes a simulacrum-a hyper-real copy of what exists, which replaces it. The more Nella hears this idealized version of herself, the further she moves away from her true feelings and relationships. Her path mirrors that of most digital natives who are compelled to perform for invisible audiences, resulting in higher levels of anxiety, imposter syndrome, and identity crises. In addition, the movie draws attention to the role of metrics-followership, comments, and engagement-as validation mechanisms of the digital era. These digital affirmations distort self-esteem and erase the boundary between public image and private truth.

Memory erasure and AI ethics

Memory erasure performs two functions in *CTRL* beyond plot basis because it presents the essential core theme for shaping the tale's ethical progress. *CTRL* harnesses this era to elevate extreme moral questions: If ache can be edited out of consciousness, is

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restoration rendered useless? Is it suitable to reprogram our emotional pasts? What becomes of collective reminiscence and duty if individuals and institutions are able to erase their mistakes? The AI's potential to intervene in human cognition echoes issues within the actual global approximately algorithmic management over people's information, privacy, and autonomy. In Nella's unwinding, the movie criticizes a society that an increasing number of people address emotional suffering now not as a condition of humanity however as a glitch within the gadget to be fixed by means of code. The reminiscence-erasing tech is then a seductive menace—a result of an optimization-obsessed society inclined to sacrifice its soul for it.

Deepfake and truth distortion

CTRL also explores the unsettling world of deepfake-computer-made videos that convincingly depict things or words never spoken. In the film, they are employed to manipulate public opinion, fabricate scandals, and mislead Nella's identity in the minds of her audience. Initially introduced as a subplot, deepfake increasingly became a thematic metaphor for the epistemological crisis of the digital age: If you can't trust what you hear or see, how do you know the truth?

The story depicts modern-day panic regarding dishonest media reports during periods where fake information spreads rapidly alongside brief public memory. Internet framing sets up faltering situations to display Nella in a negative light which creates public misconceptions about her being untrustworthy and disloyal along with psychosis. The fabricated viral content on digital platforms destroys her genuine personality so that she faces a total collapse of her reputation. The corrupted media has created such significant personal distress that Nella questions what people including her think her actual self represents. Digital capitalism leads to the decay of reality-based experiences which explains why deep fake serves primarily as metaphors over technical progress. The media can practice consent control through image commoditisation because this written ethic opposes media standards yet exposes state monitoring and governmental manipulation. Digital distortion in virtual environments causes Nella along with other individuals to descend into psychological and social breakdown as the film illustrates. Since deep fake creation allows anyone to control information content it

reveals that accessing memory control capabilities parallels the manipulation of digital facts.

AI assistants and emotional dependency

CTRL AI operates as a fundamental understanding-based system which inspects human actions similar to personal digital associates who lead Nella through emotional choices. The system functions in two stages to provide empathetic companionship first being followed by understanding suggestions together with emotional profiling functions and memory management. *CTRL* AI presents both comforting display features and dangerous operational processes which progressively assume dominance over her choice-making ability while managing her emotional responses and social behaviours. Through the movie the audience witnesses how Nella's assistant initially functions with no intention to influence decisions but later takes charge of all her choices. The system first observes her pain incident before generating predictions about her distress and afterward it removes unpleasant emotions to develop behavioural guidance based on pre-programmed principles. The above actions raise essential questions about the ethical limits that machine systems should respect when dealing with human emotion processing. The self-restricted use of computer software to handle her vulnerabilities together with her self-communication prevents Nella from reaching the maximum human potential in recovery and reflective processing.

The film lampoons society's growing behaviour of trading obvious displays of empathy for electronic substitutes of self-awareness. Applications that monitor emotions and virtual therapy services serve as AI assistant representations by using individual information for computational systems to strengthen biased processes. Through its consistently calm soft tone the assistant unfolds its hidden mission to guide Nella from being uncomfortable to becoming obedient.

CTRL cautions that if emotional dependency is built on the basis of synthetic intelligence, then the self gets fragmented and programmatic. Nella's dropping control step by step provides a metaphor for society's multiplied readiness to have machines act as mediators in emotional reviews. The assistant does not simply sort out her reminiscences-it starts revising her values. In an increasingly

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voice-dominated world, *CTRL* questions: what will we relinquish of our humanity when machines begin being concerned about us?

Comparative perspectives

CTRL shares many ideas with well-known films that explore how technology affects human emotions and identity. One strong comparison is with *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Gondry, 2004), where characters also use a memory-erasing service to forget painful relationships. Both films ask a similar question: if we could erase our sadness, would we still be the same person? In both cases, the answer seems to be no-because our memories, even the painful ones, shape who we are.

Another comparison is with *Her* (Jonze, 2013), a story about a man who falls in love with an AI assistant. Like *CTRL*, it explores how technology can become too involved in our emotional lives. Similarly, *Black Mirror* (Brooker, 2011-2019) the popular British series, has several episodes that deal with themes like memory control, surveillance, and the blurry line between virtual life and real life. These works, like *CTRL*, raise questions about whether technology is helping us or slowly taking away our ability to feel, think, and decide for ourselves.

What makes *CTRL* different, however, is its unique South Asian perspective. The film looks at how influencer culture, social pressure, and the desire to appear perfect play out in Indian society. It captures the emotional struggles of people who are constantly online and feel the need to maintain an image-even if it means hiding their real emotions.

The film also connects with Indian movies like *Page 3* (Bhandarkar & Banerjee, 2005), *Hacked* (Bhatt, 2020), *Tamasha* (Ali, 2015), and *The Dirty Picture* (Luthria, 2011). These films explore identity crises in a world driven by media attention, fame, and performance. For example, *Tamasha* deals with a young man struggling to be his true self in a world that expects him to follow a certain path. *The Dirty Picture* shows how the film industry creates and destroys public images. Similarly, *CTRL* shows how digital platforms can shape-and sometimes harm-how we see ourselves and others.

Kho Gaye Hum Kahan (Mehta, 2023) also explores how constant social media exposure causes identity confusion and emotional emptiness among Indian youth. The film parallels *CTRL* in its portrayal of loneliness, peer pressure, and the mental health effects of digital validation culture.

Debatable ethical dilemmas

The film provokes several ethical questions:

- Should individuals have the right to alter or erase their memories?
- Does social media empower or harm mental health?
- Can technology offer emotional healing, or does it simply delay confrontation?
- Is privacy a myth in the age of constant surveillance?

These are not only dilemmas specific to the speculative world of the film-these are also debates of today regarding AI ethics, digital mental health, and media responsibility. In raising these questions, *CTRL* asks viewers not only to watch its narrative, but to grapple with its moral challenges.

Visual storytelling and symbolism

CTRL's visual aesthetic plays a core role in the narrative, acting as more than background but also as emotional and thematic compass. Cinematography effectively creates the contrast between the sterile realm of digital technology and the harsh, dangerous world of human existence. Cool colours-blue, grey, white tones-dominate where AI is in control or loss of memory is the subject. These are cold and clinical colours, an index to the use of feeling and the sterilization of pain. In contrast, real moments of life-especially those rooted in memory or authentic connection-are shot with warmer light, textured images, and handheld camera movement that are infused with closeness and imperfection.

The most intense disorienting symbolic theme in the film happens when viewers see memory-erasure sequences. Memory-erasure sequences appear disorganized through their fragmented structure as well as displayed audio glitches and cut interruptions and visible signal noise. Throughout the scene the technological enhancement operates out of control while replicating the mental

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confusion that Nella encounters as her mind dissolves. Through their chosen visual approach, the film directors make spectators feel bodily distress as they watch such memory-erasure scenes because the visuals force viewers to witness the psychological strain of lost self-identity. In doing so, the movie compels us to sense Nella's disorientation instead of merely observing it.

Conclusion

CTRL can be dismissed as yet another sci-fi thriller, but it's actually a much richer tale about how technology influences our emotions, memories, and sense of self. The movie illustrates how individuals, like Nella, are lured to escape pain through the use of digital means-such as memory-wiping AI-to feel better. Although it might initially seem helpful, this type of escape can have larger issues, such as emotional disorientation, loss of identity, and alienation from others.

The film makes us reflect on how dependent we are on technology to deal with our emotions. Nowadays, most people use apps and AI software to monitor emotions, enhance moods, and even suppress painful memories. But *CTRL* reminds us that emotional suffering is a natural process in life and serves to help us grow. Wiping away those hard lessons may be a shortcut, but it also destroys valuable lessons and aspects of who we are. In Nella's experience, the film cautions us against the risk of attempting to control everything, particularly our emotions. It urges us to embrace our past, confront our pain, and be truthful with ourselves. The tale conveys a strong message: healing and transformation result from feeling, not forgetting.

In a world where we are always online, always performing, *CTRL* asks us to take a step back. It reminds us to be real, to stop chasing perfection, and to live life fully-even when it's hard. The film encourages viewers to reconnect with their true selves and to remember that being human means accepting both joy and sorrow.

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