Neuroticism, Thought Control Strategies, and Artificial Intelligence Anxiety: Challenges for Team Management in the Digital Era

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Abstract
As AI technologies increasingly permeate areas such as social media, smart devices, healthcare, and education, it becomes essential to understand individual differences in perceptions related to AI. Moreover, recent studies indicate that AI-based technologies facilitate the emergence of new and specific behaviors and strongly influence collective behavioral dynamics. In this context, the current study employs a quantitative approach to investigate the relationship between Neuroticism, Thought Control Strategies, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) Anxiety. A total of 297 participants (32 males, 165 females) completed standardized questionnaires assessing Neuroticism, Thought Control Strategies, and AI Anxiety. Data were collected through Google Forms using validated instruments: the Neuroticism Scale, the Thought Control Strategies Scale, and the Artificial Intelligence Anxiety Scale. The results revealed significant positive correlations between Neuroticism and AI anxiety, suggesting that individuals with higher levels of neuroticism are more susceptible to stress and prone to excessive worry, potentially contributing to increased AI-related anxiety. Additionally, all four AI anxiety subscales (learning, job replacement, socio-technical blindness, and AI configuration) showed significant positive correlations with Neuroticism. Meanwhile, three out of five thought control strategies showed significant positive correlations with the overall AI anxiety score—specifically, worry, social control, and punishment. These same strategies also demonstrated significant positive correlations with Neuroticism: worry, social control, and punishment. Understanding the influence of Neuroticism and thought control strategies on attitudes toward Artificial Intelligence can guide the development of targeted interventions to reduce negative perceptions and promote more positive, adaptive attitudes toward AI technologies.

Keywords
AI Anxiety; Neuroticism; Thought Control Strategies.

Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI), which includes technologies such as Machine Learning, Big Data analytics, Deep Learning, and Neural Networks, has become increasingly prominent in both mainstream media and academic research. Developed to enhance the performance of both individuals and organizations (Alsheibani et al., 2018), AI is now integrated into nearly all business functions, reshaping how organizations operate. The swift advance of AI has not only restructured how work is carried out within organizations but has also sparked lively public debate about its place in society. For many companies, AI is now viewed as a powerful engine for growth, innovation, and profitability (Bourne, 2019). Yet, alongside this optimism, concerns continue to grow—about the erosion of privacy, the displacement of human jobs, the persistence of algorithmic bias, the potential dangers of handing over important decisions to those systems, and the uncontrollable growth of AI (Kim et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the media plays a major role in shaping how people think about artificial intelligence, often amplifying fear through the stories it tells. Films and TV shows such as *The Terminator* or *Black Mirror* frequently present AI as dangerous, uncontrollable, or hostile. Cave and Dihal (2019) found that these portrayals highlight four recurring fears: losing one's humanity, being replaced at work, becoming alienated from others, and facing an AI uprising. By framing AI as an existential threat, such stories link intelligent machines with disaster in the public imagination (Down, 2024). Social media further intensifies this dynamic. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube are now central spaces where AI news, research, and debates spread rapidly (Li & Zheng, 2024; Guan & Chen, 2023; Qi et al., 2023). Here, science fiction and reality often blur together, fueling anxiety. As Coeckelbergh (2022) points out, even fictional portrayals of AI spiraling out of control shape how people imagine real-world risks.

In this specific context, the current study aims to investigate the relationship between Neuroticism, Thought Control Strategies, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) Anxiety, using a quantitative cross-sectional research design. The findings regarding both adaptive and maladaptive thought control strategies might identify possible interventions to reduce vulnerability and improve psychological resilience related to AI interaction and use.

Literature review

Previous studies have shown that individuals who score high on Neuroticism tend to experience increased anxiety, frequent worry, and a greater susceptibility to depressive behaviors (Costa & McCrae, 1992; Rammstedt & Danner, 2017). Within the framework of the Big Five personality traits, Szalma and Taylor (2011) found that Neuroticism was positively associated with negative attitudes toward robots. Moreover, the same study reported a similar correlation between Neuroticism and lower agreement with automated advice.

Individuals with high levels of Neuroticism are more likely to perceive AI and automation as threats to their job security, privacy, and social roles. Their predisposition to worry and fear can intensify concerns that AI will replace human labor, make errors, or cause unintended harm (Sindermann et al., 2021). Additionally, the rapid and often unpredictable development of AI technologies may elicit negative reactions in these individuals, as they tend to feel overwhelmed by swift changes and uncertain about their capacity to adapt.

According to Needle (2024), advancements in AI technology are likely to replace various jobs, and the increasing reliance on automation may diminish people's sense of purpose in their work. As a result, many individuals may need to change careers and acquire new skills. This idea is supported by a study from the McKinsey Global Institute (Manyika et al., 2017), which predicts that by 2030, between 75 million and 375 million workers (3% to 14% of the global workforce) will need to switch occupations (p. 4). While these changes could boost economic productivity (Wang & Wang, 2019), they are also likely to generate substantial concerns and anxiety about the development and application of AI technologies.

AI anxiety refers to a growing unease that includes both broad worries about engaging with AI systems and specific negative emotions related to using AI technologies (Rosen & Weil, 1990). According to Johnson and Verdicchio (2017), AI anxiety is a feeling of fear or discomfort about the potential for AI systems to become uncontrollable. Earlier research (e.g., Brosnan & Lee, 1998; Wang, 2007) has shown that anxiety about AI can either deter or encourage future interaction with these technologies. However, Johnson and Verdicchio (2017) emphasize that fear and anxiety often cause individuals to avoid engaging with AI entirely.

Intrusive thoughts are a hallmark of many anxiety disorders, such as obsessive–compulsive disorder, generalized anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Fehm & Hoyer, 2004; Wells & Davies, 1994). At the same time, research shows that experiencing unwanted intrusive thoughts is not limited to clinical conditions but is a fairly common part of human cognition (Rachman & de Silva, 1978; Salkovskis & Harrison, 1984; Wells & Morrison, 1994).

When faced with intrusive or unwanted thoughts, people often rely on a range of strategies to manage them (Fehm, 2003). One common approach is distraction, also known as attentional shifting. This involves redirecting attention away from the troubling thought toward something more neutral or pleasant, such as immersing oneself in work, listening to music, or focusing on an external object. While distraction can provide immediate relief, it often works best in the short term and may not address the underlying distress (Fehm & Hoyer, 2004). Another frequently used strategy is worry or thought replacement. Here, individuals try to substitute the intrusive thought with another line of thinking—sometimes even with a different worry. Although this can temporarily push aside the original thought, it may keep the mind locked in cycles of rumination rather than offering real relief (Freeston et al., 1995). Social control, or the act of talking and sharing, represents a more interpersonal approach. People may express their thoughts to friends, family, or colleagues, or seek reassurance from others. This can help reduce feelings of isolation and normalize the experience, but when relied upon excessively, it can foster dependence on external validation (Wells & Davies, 1994). A less adaptive method is punishment or self-criticism. In this case, individuals attempt to push out intrusive thoughts by criticizing themselves, feeling guilty, or even using small aversive

behaviors like snapping a rubber band on their wrist. Such strategies may temporarily suppress a thought, but they often backfire, intensifying distress and making the unwanted thought more persistent (Wells & Davies, 1994).

By contrast, re-appraisal, or cognitive reframing, offers a more constructive path. Instead of trying to fight or avoid the thought, individuals reinterpret it, reminding themselves that "this is just a mental event, not reality." This shift in perspective reduces the thought's emotional impact and helps build psychological flexibility, making re-appraisal one of the more effective long-term strategies for managing intrusive thoughts (Fehm & Hoyer, 2004; Wells & Davies, 1994).

Based on the findings from the literature review, the following research questions were formulated (see Figure 1):
RQ1: What is the relationship between Neuroticism and AI Anxiety?
RQ2: What is the relationship between Neuroticism and Thought Control Strategies?
RQ3: What is the relationship between Thought Control Strategies and AI Anxiety?

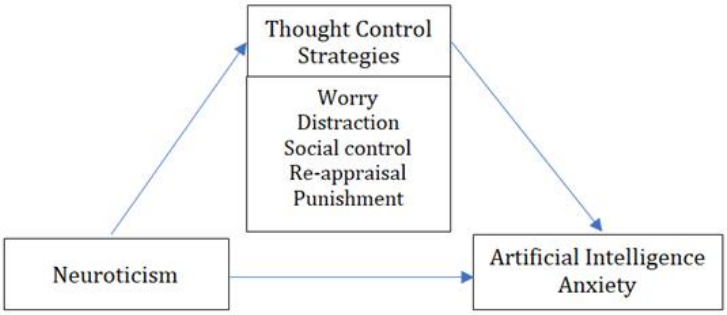

Figure 1. Conceptual framework
Source: Authors' research results/contribution

Methodology

The sample comprised 197 participants, including 32 males (16,2%) and 165 females (83,8%), aged 18-55 years (M = 20.59, SD = 5.87). The educational level of participants was the following: 32,2% high school, 64,8% bachelor, 1,5% master, 5% doctoral. The uneven gender distribution of participants is a common methodological limitation affecting possible generalization (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A purposive convenience sampling method was employed for data collection, utilizing a self-report survey format. Participants received a brief explanation of the study's purpose and provided informed consent before participation. Participants were provided with a link to the Google Form questionnaire set and assured that their responses would remain confidential and be used solely for research purposes. The study received ethical committee approval (no. 104/25.03.2024).

Participants completed a set of standardized questionnaires, including the Artificial Intelligence Anxiety Scale (AIA; Wang & Wang, 2019), the Thought Control Questionnaire (TCQ; Wells & Davies, 1994), and the Neuroticism Scale (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1968).

The Artificial Intelligence Anxiety Scale (AIA; Wang & Wang, 2019) includes 21 items (e.g., "I am afraid that widespread use of humanoid robots will take jobs away from people"), distributed across four subscales: learning, job replacement, socio-technical blindness, and AI configuration. Responses were rated on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency in the current sample ($\alpha = .938$).

The Thought Control Questionnaire (TCQ; Wells & Davies, 1994) is a 30-item self-report measure designed to assess individuals' strategies to manage unwanted thoughts. It comprises five subscales, each consisting of six items: distraction (e.g., "I occupy myself with work instead"), social control (e.g., "I ask my friends if they have similar thoughts"), worry (e.g., "I dwell on other worries"), punishment (e.g., "I tell myself not to be so stupid"), and re-appraisal (e.g., "I challenge the thought's validity"). Respondents rate

the frequency with which they employ each strategy on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 4 (Always). The questionnaire has demonstrated excellent reliability (α = .825).

The Neuroticism Scale (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1968) consists of 12 items (e.g., "I am often troubled by feelings of guilt"), measured on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The scale also showed high internal consistency in this study (α = .917).

Following data screening and cleaning, analyses were conducted using both descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations in SPSS version 26.0. Moreover, the correlations were analyzed for the effect size using Cohen's conversion table (Cohen, 1988).

Results and discussion

The data were analyzed using SPSS 26.0. Table 1 summarizes the means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis for all study variables. As the results indicate, all variables followed a normal distribution.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

	N	*Mean*	*Std. Dev.*	*Skewness*	*Kurtosis*
Learning	197	23.1980	10.82638	.238	.173
Job replacement	197	30.2995	8.42837	-.803	.173
Socio-technical blindness	197	18.2081	5.50995	-.439	.173
AI configuration	197	11.9442	5.54407	-.076	.173
AI anxiety	197	83.6497	24.11630	-.284	.173
Worry	197	14.3553	4.27566	.092	.173
Distraction	197	22.6701	3.35756	-.168	.173
Social control	197	15.6244	2.55371	.344	.173
Re-appraisal	197	14.6954	2.92223	-.146	.173
Punishment	197	13.5381	4.22152	.071	.173
Neuroticism	197	41.0406	10.70516	-.361	.173
Valid N (listwise)	197				

Source: Authors' research results/contribution

The Pearson correlation was selected to answer our first research question (RQ1: What is the relationship between Neuroticism and AI Anxiety?). The results (Table 2) revealed a significant positive correlation between the selected variables ($r = .301$, $p < .01$; medium effect size), thereby confirming the hypothesis. However, the relationship observed for all AI anxiety subscales were generally weaker: learning ($r = .219$, $p < .01$; small effect size), job replacement ($r = .250$, $p < .01$; small effect size), socio-technical blindness ($r = .226$, $p < .01$; small effect size), and AI configuration ($r = .277$, $p < .01$; small effect size).

Although statistically significant, these correlations (with small effect sizes) suggest that other factors (such as technology readiness, perceived usefulness, or ease of use) may, along with neuroticism, contribute to AI anxiety. Those results are in line with previous studies showing that people who exhibit the traits that are usually linked to neuroticism, such as the tendency to experience negative emotions, such as anxiety, irritability, sadness, or even subclinical depression (John & Srivastava, 1999). may be more vulnerable to AI-related anxiety due to a series of factors.

Among those previously reported factors, one can find the "black-box" nature of AI and job displacement. The reality is that most people find it hard to understand the immense complexity of AI technologies. Pellegrino (2015) referred to this aspect as the "black box," meaning that AI's lack of understanding and transparency in decision-making can lead to feelings of ambiguity, uncertainty, and a lack of control, all of which are hard to contain for people with high scores on neuroticism. Moreover, the evident and strong possibility that AI technologies will lead to a series of disruptive changes in job displacement and replacement heightens anxiety among those already predisposed to worry or to a pessimistic (dystopian) future orientation.

Table 2. Correlations between Neuroticism and AI Anxiety

		Neuroticism
Learning	Pearson Correl.	.219**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002
Job replacement	Pearson Correl.	.250**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

Socio-technical blindness	Pearson Correl.	.226**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001
AI configuration	Pearson Correl.	.277**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
AI anxiety	Pearson Correl.	.301**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

Source: Authors' research results/contribution

The second research question (RQ2: What is the relationship between Neuroticism and Thought Control Strategies?) was addressed through Pearson correlations (Table 3). Neuroticism showed a strong positive correlation with worry ($r = .480$, $p < .001$; medium effect size), indicating that individuals high in neuroticism are far more likely to rely on worry as a means of managing their thoughts (Borkovec & Inz, 1990). This aligns with the broader tendency of such individuals to engage in repetitive, negative thinking and rumination. A similar trend emerged with punishment ($r = .425$, $p < .001$; medium effect size), where high neuroticism was linked to self-critical and punitive responses to intrusive thoughts. Both strategies reflect maladaptive attempts at regulation, which may ultimately heighten rather than alleviate distress (Wells & Davies, 1994).

A smaller but still meaningful positive link was observed between neuroticism and social control ($r = .156$, $p < .05$; small effect size), indicating that more neurotic people may also seek reassurance or support from others when dealing with unwanted thoughts. The modest size of this connection suggests that social control acts as a strategy that, while it can offer temporary relief, points to a dependence on external regulation rather than the growth of internal coping skills.

Table 3. Correlations between Neuroticism and Thought Control Strategies

		Neuroticism
Worry	Pearson Correl.	.480**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Distraction	Pearson Correl.	-.012
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.869
Social control	Pearson Correl.	.156*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.029
Re-appraisal	Pearson Correl.	-.166*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.020
Punishment	Pearson Correl.	.425**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

Source: Authors' research results/contribution

By contrast, re-appraisal showed a significant negative correlation with neuroticism ($r = –.166$, $p < .05$; small effect size). This indicates that individuals higher in neuroticism may be somewhat less likely to use cognitive reframing, an adaptive strategy that helps reinterpret intrusive thoughts in less distressing ways. Distraction was unrelated to neuroticism ($r = –.012$, $p = .869$), suggesting that neurotic individuals neither rely on nor avoid this strategy more than others.

The results demonstrate that neuroticism is positively associated with maladaptive thought control strategies (worry, punishment, and, to a lesser degree, social control), and negatively associated with the more adaptive strategy of re-appraisal. This pattern highlights that individuals high in neuroticism are particularly vulnerable to using ineffective or even harmful methods of thought regulation, which may reinforce their emotional distress.

To address the final research question (RQ3: What is the relationship between Thought Control Strategies and AI Anxiety?), Pearson correlations were computed (Table 4) between each dimension of AI anxiety and the set of thought control strategies (Wells & Davies, 1994). The analysis of the relationship between thought control strategies and AI-related outcomes revealed a consistent pattern. Concerning learning about AI, significant positive correlations were found with worry ($r = .199$, $p < .01$; small effect size), social control ($r = .157$, $p < .05$; small effect size), and punishment ($r = .232$, $p < .01$; small effect size). Although these relationships fell within the small size range, they indicate that individuals who rely on these maladaptive strategies tend to perceive greater challenges or threats when engaging with AI-related learning tasks. By contrast, distraction and re-appraisal showed no meaningful associations, suggesting that these strategies do not significantly shape perceptions of AI learning.

A similar trend emerged concerning job replacement fears (Wang & Wang, 2019). Worry ($r = .150$, $p < .05$; small effect size), social control ($r = .226$, $p < .01$; small effect size), and punishment ($r = .211$, $p < .01$; small effect size) were all positively associated with stronger concerns about AI displacing human labor. Re-appraisal showed a weak, negative trend ($r = –.119$), hinting that individuals who engage in cognitive reframing may feel somewhat less vulnerable in the labor market, though the effect was not statistically robust.

In the case of socio-technical blindness, a phenomenon often linked to the "black box" nature of AI, where systems generate outputs without offering clear insight into how decisions are made, issues of transparency, trust, accountability, and fairness become central (Pellegrino, 2015). The analysis revealed that reliance on maladaptive strategies was significantly associated with socio-technical blindness, with worry ($r = .153$, $p < .05$; small effect size), social control ($r = .267$, $p < .001$; small effect size), and punishment ($r = .181$, $p < .05$; small effect size) all showing positive correlations. These findings suggest that individuals high in neuroticism may engage with AI in an emotionally driven manner, which can limit their ability to evaluate its broader implications critically.

The same pattern was observed for AI configuration, which reflects the discomfort that humanoid AI robots or technologies can evoke when they mimic human form, movement, or interaction without fully appearing human—a phenomenon known as the "uncanny valley" (Mori et al., 2012). Positive correlations were found with worry ($r = .155$, $p < .05$; small effect size), social control ($r = .152$, $p < .05$; small effect size), and punishment ($r = .228$, $p < .01$; small effect size), indicating that individuals who rely on these strategies are more likely to experience difficulties or heightened anxiety when dealing with the technical aspects of AI. By contrast, re-appraisal showed a small, non-significant negative association, pointing to a possible, but limited, protective role.

Finally, AI anxiety itself showed the strongest pattern of associations. Worry ($r = .212$, $p < .01$; small effect size), social control ($r = .245$, $p < .001$; small effect size), and punishment ($r = .271$, $p < .001$; small effect size) were all positively and significantly linked to higher levels of anxiety related to AI. Although modest in effect size, the results suggest that individuals who engage in self-punitive or worry-based regulation of thoughts are often prone to heightened fear and tension regarding AI.

Table 4. Correlations between AI Anxiety and Thought Control Strategies

		Worry	***Distraction***	***Social control***	***Re-appraisal***	***Punishment***
Learning	Pearson Correl.	.199**	-.092	.157*	-.104	.232**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.005	.198	.028	.146	.001
Job replacement	Pearson Correl.	.150*	.042	.226**	-.119	.211**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.035	.560	.001	.095	.003
Socio-technical blindness	Pearson Correl.	.153*	.078	.267**	-.007	.181*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.032	.278	.000	.917	.011
AI configuration	Pearson Correl.	.155*	-.009	.152*	-.114	.228**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.030	.898	.033	.111	.001
AI anxiety	Pearson Correl.	.212**	-.011	.245**	-.116	.271**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.003	.877	.001	.104	.000

Source: Authors' research results/contribution

These results are consistent with the findings of Fehm and Hoyer (2004), who identified a high frequency of intrusive thoughts as a core feature of several mental disorders, particularly anxiety disorders and depression (Purdon, 1999; Wegner & Pennebaker, 1993; Wells & Matthews, 1994). Similarly, Reynolds and Wells (1999) reported significant associations between anxiety and the Worry and Punishment subscales, further highlighting the link between maladaptive thought patterns and emotional distress.

Those results mirror the findings of Wells and Davies (1994), who stated: "*The overall pattern of correlations with TCQ subscales revealed that worry and punishment subscales, but not other subscales, predict a variety of scores on measures related to emotional vulnerability/ psychopathology. This suggests that the use of worry and punishment to control unwanted thoughts is associated with a proneness to emotional problems. It is possible that other TCQ subscales (i.e., social control and re-appraisal), which did not correlate with neuroticism or trait anxiety, may be more closely linked to measures of emotional stability and adaptation*" (p.875).

Conclusions

The present study aimed to explore the relationships between Artificial Intelligence Anxiety, Neuroticism, and Thought Control Strategies using a quantitative approach. The results revealed significant positive correlations between Neuroticism and AI Anxiety, indicating that individuals with higher levels of neuroticism are more likely to experience anxiety concerning the advancement and integration of AI technologies in various domains, consistent with previous findings (Kieslich et al., 2022; Kolasinka et al., 2019). Additionally, Neuroticism was positively associated with specific thought control strategies, particularly Worry and Punishment, suggesting a tendency among individuals with high neuroticism to engage in less adaptive cognitive coping mechanisms.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that maladaptive thought control strategies (worry, punishment, and social control) are positively linked with higher levels of perceived anxiety across different dimensions of AI. Adaptive strategies such as re-appraisal show weak negative associations, pointing to a potential protective role. Similar to the results for neuroticism, distraction appeared largely irrelevant, showing no consistent relationship with AI outcomes. This aligns with the findings of Wegner et al. (1987), who argued that distraction is neither an adaptive nor a maladaptive strategy for managing unwanted thoughts.

From a broader perspective, the findings suggest a psychological vulnerability pathway: individuals who habitually rely on maladaptive thought control perceive AI as more threatening, uncertain, and uncontrollable. This cognitive-emotional style may bias them toward heightened fears of job loss, difficulties in learning or configuring AI, and limited critical engagement with AI's societal implications. Conversely, the limited evidence for re-appraisal points to an adaptive strategy deficit—implying that interventions promoting cognitive reframing, acceptance, or mindfulness may buffer against AI-related fears. These findings underscore the potential value of training in adaptive approaches such as re-appraisal, acceptance, or mindfulness, which could help reduce reliance on maladaptive strategies and improve psychological resilience.

The findings lead to a series of practical implications at both individual and organizational levels. Thus, at the individual level, the results point to the fact that neuroticism, along with some maladaptive strategies such as worry or punishment, might represent specific vulnerability factors able to increase the AI anxiety levels. Therefore, interventions based on cognitive re-appraisal and reframing might strengthen the adaptive approach in people engaging with AI technologies (Gross & John, 2003). At the organizational level, the results suggest possible interventions to reduce employees' AI anxiety, such as developing their technological competence, implementing AI onboarding programs, and fostering innovative work behavior (Ramamoorthy et al., 2005).

Despite the significant findings of this study, a series of limitations must be acknowledged. A primary limitation is the cross-sectional design, which cannot establish causality. Additionally, the relatively small sample size restricts the generalizability of the findings beyond the studied population. Another common limitation, also present in many studies, is the exclusive reliance on self-report measures, which may reflect participants' attitudes rather than their actual behaviors.

Future research should expand the focus beyond neuroticism to include other components of core self-evaluation (Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2011), such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, and locus of control. Additionally, the potential mediating or moderating roles of individual psychological variables, such as magical thinking (Musa, 2020) and illusory beliefs (Kingdon et al., 2012), deserve further exploration.

An additional important direction for future research involves distinguishing between different forms of AI-related anxiety. Building on Spielberger's (1966) conceptual framework, it is crucial to differentiate between state anxiety—a temporary emotional reaction to specific situations—and trait anxiety, a more stable and pervasive tendency to experience worry and emotional distress across various contexts (Saviola et al., 2020). Making this distinction could provide more nuanced insights into how individuals emotionally respond to the growing presence and influence of AI technologies in everyday life.

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