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Ethic Paper: The Meme Dilemma

Internet memes—humorous images, videos, or phrases spread rapidly online—have become a dominant form of cultural communication. Since 2019, memes have increasingly shaped public discourse, influenced political outcomes, and impacted individual lives. While memes offer humor and communal engagement, they also raise complex ethical issues concerning privacy, consent, misinformation, and digital responsibility.

Using recent examples and ethical frameworks such as the ACM and IEEE Codes of Ethics, this essay explores the dual nature of meme culture and the moral responsibility of its participants. On the positive side, memes often provide relief during societal stress. For example, the viral Bernie Sanders 'mittens' meme of 2021 offered comic relief during a politically tense period (Wired, 2021). Memes have also served as tools for activism, like the 'Karen' meme, which was used to call out selfish or racist behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some individuals, such as Laina Morris "Overly Attached Girlfriend" and Kyle Craven "Bad Luck Brian", leveraged their meme fame into financial or career opportunities (Media Ethics Initiative, 2018).

However, meme culture can also be deeply harmful. Memes have been used to bully, harass, and radicalize individuals. A notable case is the 'Star Wars Kid,' whose video became an early viral meme leading to intense bullying and mental health struggles. More recently, memes have played roles in political radicalization, such as those spreading disinformation around the 2020 U.S. election and January 6th Capitol riots. Memes like Pepe the Frog, initially innocent, have been co-opted by hate

groups, prompting legal battles by its creator to protect the character's legacy (The Guardian, 2019).

These examples raise ethical concerns around consent, representation, and responsibility. The ACM Code of Ethics urges professionals to 'avoid harm,' 'be honest and trustworthy,' and 'be fair and take action not to discriminate' (ACM, 2018). Similarly, the IEEE Code of Ethics emphasizes avoiding injuring others, their property, reputation, or employment. Meme creators and sharers should consider whether their actions uphold these principles. Creating or sharing a meme that humiliates or misrepresents someone, even in jest, can violate these ethical standards. Furthermore, meme ethics intersects with legal concerns about intellectual property and compensation. The EU's Article 17 (formerly Article 13) sparked debate about copyright filters potentially restricting memes. Meanwhile, creators like TikTok's Jools Lebron have fought to retain rights over their viral phrases, signaling a shift toward recognizing memes as intellectual property (Wired, 2024). In an age where content spreads at lightning speed, giving proper credit and obtaining consent becomes more than courtesy—it's an ethical necessity.

In addition to technical and professional codes of ethics, biblical teachings offer timeless guidance on how we communicate and treat others—even in digital spaces. Scripture consistently emphasizes the importance of respect, truthfulness, and the value of each individual, all of which intersect with meme ethics. One foundational verse is Proverbs 18:21: 'The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.' This verse underscores that our words—and by extension, our digital expressions—carry the power to uplift or to harm. Memes that ridicule or shame others may garner laughs, but they risk violating the biblical principle of using our words to build others up (Ephesians 4:29). The Bible also warns against bearing false witness (Exodus 20:16), a commandment that resonates in an age of meme-based misinformation. Spreading memes that distort truth or manipulate perception for humor can contribute to false narratives, echoing the sin of dishonesty. Incorporating biblical values into meme ethics doesn't mean avoiding humor altogether—it means creating and sharing content in a way that respects human dignity, promotes truth, and avoids

needless harm. These values align closely with modern professional ethics and enhance the moral responsibility we have as digital citizens.

Ultimately, meme culture represents both the best and worst of digital expression. While it can unite and entertain, it can also marginalize and harm. Ethical engagement with memes requires self-awareness, empathy, and adherence to professional and moral standards. By applying frameworks like the ACM and IEEE Codes, and considering the human impact of digital content, individuals can help ensure that memes remain a force for connection rather than division.

Works Cited

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The code affirms an obligation of computing professionals to use their skills for the benefit of society.

Code of Ethics. <https://www.acm.org/code-of-ethics>