

The Public Image of Artificial Intelligence in Memes

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Abstract

Public perception of artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly affected and formed not only by news and policy discourse but also by participatory vernacular culture, especially memes. The study investigates how conceptual metaphors embedded in Reddit memes create the image of AI and influence perceived agency, risk, trustworthiness, and ethical credibility of AI systems. Based on the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and the theory of multimodality, the study attempts to answer the following research questions: (1) What are the dominant metaphor families through which memes conceptualize AI? (2) How do these metaphors relate to affective stance and to judgments about AI? We compile a corpus of 1,000 image-based memes posted between 2018 and 2025 from high-traffic AI-adjacent subreddits (e.g., r/MachineLearning, r/ArtificialIntelligence). Memes are retrieved via the Reddit API using AI-related lexical filters. Methodologically, we combine computational metaphor discovery with human annotation. First, text (captions/overlays) and image tags are extracted. Candidate metaphor mappings are identified by clustering recurring source domain imagery (e.g., monster, tool, god, virus) with target domain AI claims (e.g., autonomy, intelligence). Second, each meme is labelled for primary metaphor, stance, and implied responsibility. Results show that Reddit memes focus on several metaphor families, such as AI AS AGENT (intentional, unpredictable), AI AS TOOL (instrumental, controllable), AI AS CHILD (trainable, naive), AI AS ORACLE (omniscient), etc. The study has also found that the metaphor family predicts stance and the responsibility assigned. Examining how memes represent AI through CMT is valuable because memes reveal the conceptual metaphors and categories people use to talk and think about AI. That is of linguistic value because it shows how abstract technical phenomena are adopted via metaphor in everyday language and how the patterns spread, become common, and compete in a community. By mapping which metaphors reappear, it is possible to identify how public discourse creates shared interpretive models of AI that influence how people feel about AI, what they expect from it, and how policy and media describe it.