

DESIGNING A SPECULATIVE DIGITAL FOREST FOR ARCHIVING MEME CULTURE AS PUBLIC MEMORY

FONSEKA O. N. P.^{1*} & LIYANAGE P. P.²

^{1,2} Department of Integrated Design, University of Moratuwa, Moratuwa, Sri Lanka

¹nipuniprathibha99@gmail.com, ²prasanna@uom.lk

Abstract: Memes, fleeting yet potent vernaculars, encode cultural memory, public sentiment, and grassroots critique. Their ephemerality, combined with platform dependence and weak institutional archiving in non-Western contexts, renders them vulnerable to digital oblivion. This paper introduces MEMESCAPE, a speculative and participatory design project that reimagines meme preservation through the metaphor of a digital forest. Instead of treating decay as loss, MEMESCAPE stages cycles of growth, mutation, and evolution as central archival gestures. Grounded in a practice-led approach, the research integrates mid-fidelity prototyping, participant walkthroughs (N=8), and psychoanalytic reflection. The prototype, built in Figma, maps static memes, GIFs, and videos to forest analogues, each with distinct behaviours, resembling elements of an ecosystem. Guided sessions revealed emotional responses to public history documented from multiple perspectives.

Findings suggest that the forest metaphor shifts user perception from passive content consumption to participatory cultivation, encouraging ethical reflection on the preservation of memes while facilitating their evolution. In the Sri Lankan context, where memes often outpace traditional media in shaping political discourse, MEMESCAPE foregrounds the politics of memory itself. The project contributes to speculative archival practice by proposing an inclusive, living and affective interface ecology that resists permanence, embraces transformation, and invites users to feel the experience of active exploration of digital chronicles of public history.

Keywords: *Meme Culture, Digital Heritage, Participatory Design, Speculative Interface, Cultural Memory*

1. Introduction

As human beings, we have to forgive the internet for forgetting faster than we think. In the infinite scroll of its feeds, memes, those seemingly disposable fragments of cultural electricity, mutate and vanish. But to dismiss them as trivial is to misunderstand the architecture of our digital psyche, because, in truth, memes are the contemporary folklore: decentralised, volatile, and deeply psychological. They encode collective anxieties, ridicule the powerful, and crystallise social tensions, often more visceral and deeply resonating than any journalistic headline. What traditional media hesitated to say, memes screamed in pixels and punchlines.

During the period of the 2024 Sri Lankan presidential election, memes transcended humour and became vernacular weapons of political witness, ridiculed, remembered, and resisted. One meme creator remarked: *"Memes reflect the socio-political dynamics and the behaviours of the people of their time... They document the key issues and different perspectives that shaped the political narratives."*

Yet the underlying tragedy is that these digital artefacts, rich in sociopolitical context, are also terrifyingly fragile. They vanish through account deletions, algorithmic volatility, or the apathy of cultural gatekeepers. As one meme user illuminated, *"Some news was seen in memes before it was ever on the TV. But they disappeared... No place keeps them."* What we risk losing is not just media, but public memory. Existing conventional archives aiming for classification fail to hold the context-dependent, fluid nature of memes.

Responding to that loss with a refusal to treat memory as a conventional, fixed archive, the author proposes *MEMESCAPE*, a speculative design intervention that reimagines meme curation and preservation through the metaphor of a forest ecosystem, where public memory is alive, growing, decaying and evolving; Static memes becoming trees, branching and cross-pollinating; GIFs looping continuously like water elements; videos evolving over time like dynamic organisms. Grounded on forest ecologies, psychoanalysis, and participatory design, *MEMESCAPE* facilitates users to wander, explore conversational shifts and plant memes. It makes space for contemplation, reminiscing and forgetting as ethical gestures that shape memory rather than mere preserving.

This work emerges from the Global South, where digital preservation is not much prioritised, and where memes become cultural memory by necessity, not by design. As another meme creator observed, *"There's no line anymore between creator*

*Corresponding author: Tel: +94 774867687 Email Address: nipuniprathibha99@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31705/FARU.2025.21>

and audience. *Everyone's part of the process now.*" If that is true, then the archive must become participatory, effective, and willing to evolve.

Grounding in speculative design, this study intends to conceptualise and prototype an alternative, ecosystemic approach to meme preservation, by exploring three aligned research questions:

1. How can memes be archived through a speculative, ecosystemic design approach that treats digital memory as dynamic, participatory, and regenerative rather than static?
2. What modes of interaction enable users to engage meaningfully with the lifecycle of memes within a forest-inspired interface?
3. What cultural, ethical, and design implications arise when meme preservation is reframed as a living memory ecology, especially within a Global South socio-political context?

Aligning with these questions, the paper aims to serve three contributions; a recontextualization of memes as digital cultural artefacts embedded within ecological cycles of growth, decay, and evolution (Conceptual Contribution), A practice-led, speculative research model that integrates ecological metaphors, mid-fidelity prototypes, and participatory walkthroughs (Methodological contribution), The development of MEMESCAPE, a prototype that operationalises public discourse as cultural data and positions reframes as active agents in evolving digital memory ecosystems (Design Contribution).

2. Literature Review

The traditional archive is a rigid construct, often shaped by colonial logics of permanence, hierarchy and institutional control. Its authority rests on selection, exclusion, and control. Appadurai (1996) and Tuhiwai Smith (2012) both critique this epistemic authority. They highlight the historical erasures in postcolonial contexts with uneven digital preservation potentials, due to the lack of archival infrastructures. Despite their sociocultural significance, vernacular digital behaviours, particularly memes, are rarely considered archival content inside such systems. As one linguistic researcher highlighted, *"Digital preservation is not just about keeping data alive, but is also about choosing what kind of futures we allow to remember us."* This section unpacks that choice.

Scholars like Shifman (2013) and Jenkins (2009) position memes as cultural transmission units embedded within participatory media ecosystems, which becomes especially salient in the Global South, where political instability, multilingual expression, and limited media freedom contextualises memes as alternative channels for civic narration. How this memetic humour becomes a strategy for dissent, solidarity, and political witnessing is further emphasized by studies on Sri Lankan and South Asian digital cultures (e.g., Lokuge & Wijeratne, 2022; Arora, 2019). Here, memes serve as informal records of public memory, embodying what Berger and Luckmann (2016) identify as socially constructed knowledge created through everyday symbolic interaction. As one meme creator noted in the author's field study, *"There is no creator and audience anymore. Everyone contributes and remembers or forgets together."*

Yet, despite their cultural potential, memes are mostly treated as disposable pieces. Chun (2011) describes the digital condition as one of "enduring ephemerality", where media survives in form but not in context. Circulation of memes without provenance causes blurring of their traces, jeopardising the authenticity, interpretation and also historical accountability, concerns also studied in misinformation and provenance literature (e.g., Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; Meese et al., 2021). The full horror of this is revealed by Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality: memes do not merely represent political reality, they simulate it, distort it, and sometimes replace it. In this hyperreal ecology, memory is no longer a record; it is a battleground. As one political strategist stated, *"One meme could drag a niche issue into national outrage."* Therefore, preserving memes is more of an ethical and epistemic challenge than a simple cultural task.

Within digital heritage and GLAM (Galleries, Libraries, Archives, Museums) communities, "living archives" that evolve with community participation rather than static archives have been favoured by scholars (Huvila, 2015; Flinn, 2007). These models emphasize participatory design, contextual metadata, and relational forms of memory, most conventional systems still struggle to accommodate. Taking this discourse into account, MEMESCAPE shifts from preservation "as storage" to preservation "as an ecological process", where growth, decay, and transformation are integral to cultural continuity.

Speculative interventions that challenge dominant technological assumptions are encouraged by critical design and HCI scholarship (Dunne & Raby, 2013; Bardzell & Bardzell, 2015). In digital memory studies, scholars such as Whitelaw (2015) argue for "generous interfaces" that support exploration and interpretive depth rather than efficiency. Such speculative interfaces have also been employed to surface affective and ethical dimensions of data (Elsden et al., 2017). Aligning with this lineage, MEMESCAPE considers the interface as an experiential, metaphor-driven space rather than a mere retrieval mechanism, foregrounding wandering, and contemplation.

According to this literature, MEMESCAPE is positioned at the crossroads of digital heritage, speculative design, and media cultures of the Global South. Its contribution is to reinterpret meme preservation as an ecological, emotive, and culturally grounded process, rather than just data retention. MEMESCAPE defies archival formalism by combining forest ecologies with participatory meaning-making, addressing the pressing requirement for culturally appropriate, dynamic approaches to sustaining digital vernaculars in postcolonial contexts.

3. Research Design and Methodology

The aim of this research is not to design a product, but to intentionally disturb and resist the logic of deployment, optimisation, and neutral observation. Rooted in speculative design research, this methodology draws from Dunne & Raby's (2013) critical design tradition and Light & Akama's (2014) relational design ethics, embracing speculation as a strategy of ethical haunting. It is not here to offer answers but to stage dilemmas. So, *MEMESCAPE* functions as a design probe, not as a solution. This is a deliberately symbolic artefact constructed to provoke reflection on how individuals interpret, negotiate, and emotionally respond to the lifecycle of memes.

3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN AND EPISTEMOLOGY

This study, grounded in qualitative and participatory methodologies, adopts a speculative design approach positioning design not simply as an act of form-making but as a mode of inquiry. This intentional speculative design of MEMESCAPE as a symbolic, mid-fidelity prototype allows to test interpretive and meaningful engagement with ecological metaphors. The core objective of this method is to foreground emotional provocation and experiential wandering, not to strive for functionality.

3.2 METHODS USED

The methodology includes two primary components as follows:

3.2.1 Speculative Interface Prototyping



Figure 1: Mid-fidelity prototype of *MEMESCAPE*
(Source: Author)

The MEMESCAPE prototype designed using Figma, as a mid-fidelity, metaphor-driven interface, mimicked three formats of memes: static meme images, meme gifs and meme videos, mapped onto forest ecological behaviors. These were visualised through interactive walkthroughs of 2D and 3D visual animations. To enhance emotional immersion, motion graphics and non-linear spatial logic were used, rejecting flat timelines and task-oriented navigation.

3.2.2 Participant Sampling

As demonstrated in the table (Table 1) below, the author recruited eight participants (N=8) through purposive sampling. This quantity complies with speculative probe methodology, which prioritizes engagement, interpretive complexity, and emotional resonance over statistical generality (Dunne & Raby, 2013). Saturation was determined when repeated walkthroughs yielded recurring interpretive patterns involving memory, ephemerality, and metaphorical comprehension.

Table 1: Participant Overview

Participant Role	Age Range	Gender	Recruitment Route	Inclusion Criteria
Meme Creator (x3)	20–30	Male	Instagram DM, Facebook pages	Active meme creation and familiarity with political humour

Communication Designers (x2)	22–28	Male and Female	University networks	Design literacy; ability to interpret speculative interfaces
Digital Media Users (x2)	18–35	Male	Personal networks	Regular meme consumers with varied digital literacy
Cultural Critic (x1)	30–40	Female	Professional contact	Knowledge of digital satire and public discourse

3.2.3 Guided Walkthroughs and Feedback Session



Figure 2: Testing the low-fidelity wireframes with a linguistic researcher
(Source: Author)

Each testing session followed a structured protocol lasting 30–45 minutes as demonstrated in the diagram. This guided walkthrough (Figure 3)+ ensured consistency across sessions while maintaining open interpretive space.

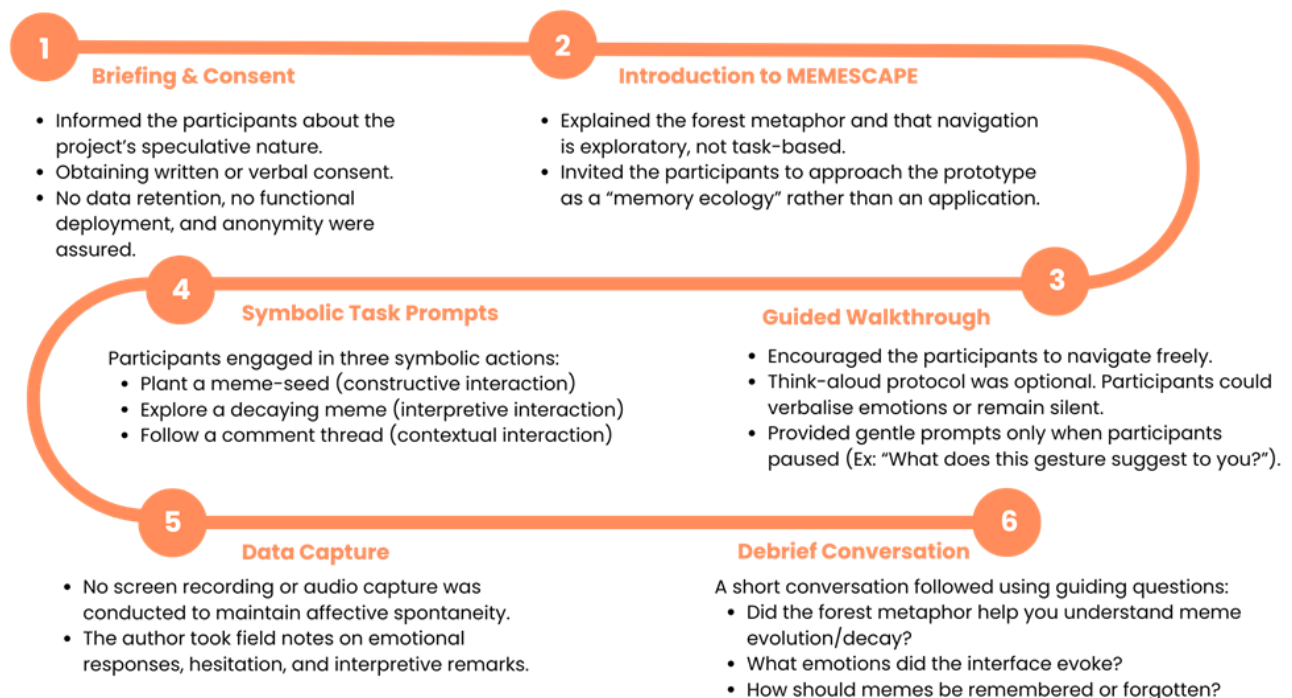


Figure 3: Step-by-Step Protocol
(Source: Author)

3.3 DATA ANALYSIS

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach, the Walkthrough and conversation data were thematically coded. These codes captured affective responses, metaphor comprehension, and perceptions of history from multiple perspectives. This analytical lens ensured findings reflected both symbolic interpretation and lived user experience.

3.4 REFLEXIVE PRACTICE AND RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY

The designer also undertook a psychoanalytical reflection process as part of the methodology. A parallel visual journal was maintained throughout the design process. This included observations, emotional responses, blind spots, and symbolic associations. The intent was to surface unconscious assumptions and biases that could shape the design and interpretation of MEMESCAPE.

Rather than claiming objectivity, this research embraces positionality. The author (designer) is both a participant and a provocateur. The speculative interface is not neutral. It is an invitation to reflect on difficult questions such as “What should be remembered?”, “What is ethical to forget?”. This reflexive component adds methodological depth. It aligns with the tradition of feminist design research and decolonial thinking, where the designer's emotional and cultural position becomes part of the research process.

3.5 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Considering the symbolic and speculative nature of the project, no identifiable user data was stored or published, and all testing was anonymised. The purpose of the walkthroughs was not only to evaluate usability, but also to explore emotional and ethical engagement. For this, consent was obtained before participation and users were informed of the speculative, non-functional nature of this system.

The project also engages in ethical forgetting. It is noteworthy that not all meme fragments presented in the prototype were meant to be saved. The interface design included symbolic gestures of deletion and decay. This reframes memory not as accumulation, but as care.

4. Analysis of MEMESCAPE's Design Intervention

4.1 ARCHIVING AS ECOSYSTEM AND REWILDING DIGITAL MEMORY

Since *MEMESCAPE* is not sterile, it does not resemble an archive. It does not index or save for the sake of saving. Instead, it grows, breathes and decays. Conceived as a speculative ecosystem, *MEMESCAPE* abandons the extractive logics of institutional archives. Rather than mummifying memes into rigid taxonomies, it treats them as organic, evolving agents in a dynamic memory ecology. Drawing inspiration from forest ecosystems, the project maps meme typologies onto natural analogues: static memes as towering trees, GIFs as flowing water elements, videos as dynamic organisms in constant mutation. This ecological metaphor reframes memory not as something stored, but as something lived, decomposed, and regenerated.

Unlike the sanitised, sorted, and selective traditional archive, *MEMESCAPE* is a memory space, an emotional landscape that stages public memory as a forest in flux. Here, data is not mere content, and the interface becomes a site of mnemonic disturbance where users do not just consume memory but actively cultivate it.

4.2 DESIGNING THE FOREST INTERFACE

The *MEMESCAPE* interface was not designed to be efficient, but to invite users into a world where memes are not discrete artefacts, but symbiotic agents interacting with the digital ecology around them. Upon entering, users do not merely browse. They explore the forest as active participants, planting meme seeds, observing growth, and encountering public discourse built around memes. The interface dynamically responds to user interaction: light shifts, organisms glitch, and new memes emerge without warning.

This wandering is not leisure; it is symbolic labour. The user becomes a memory forager, an explorer of cultural undercurrents. There are no search bars, no folders, no filters. Instead, movement is choreographed by ambient stimuli: low glitch sounds, rustling metadata, breathing textures. The absence of hierarchy or timelines is deliberate. In this forest, meaning is not retrieved but is unearthed.

4.3 MEME FORMS AS ORGANISMS

Every media form of memes (static meme images, meme GIFs, meme videos) has a biological behaviour, similar to the elements of an ecosystem. Drawing from this realisation, meme data visualisation in *MEMESCAPE* assumes a biological behaviour. Static memes are visualised as trees, rooted, layered with bark-like metadata, brittle from overuse but still standing as ideological monoliths. GIFs function as rippling water, looping endlessly, reflecting fragmented emotion, filling crevices in user pathways and mirroring collective sentiment. Videos are dynamic organisms, mutating over time based on ambient interaction, exposure, and crowd remixing. Some evolve. Some collapse. None stays still.

These entities interact with each other across zones of the forest, allowing users to observe cultural evolution in real time, not through static archiving, but through dynamic behavioural feedback.

4.4 THE PUBLIC DISCOURSE LAYER

The image of a meme makes it memorable, indeed, but it is the participatory public discourse built around it that makes the meme unforgettable. Therefore, in *MEMESCAPE*, meme artefacts are accompanied by their vernacular sediment, comment trails, quote reposts, reaction GIFs, and meme replies themselves. This participatory discourse can be explored as digital fossils of sentiment, and the users can

Users can inspect these discourse layers, revealing how meaning shifts and consolidates over time. The system does not interpret them for the user, but lets users draw their own insights. This acknowledges a radical truth; in the age of Homo Digitalis, data is the new mineral oil, and meme discourse is its rawest, most volatile form. *MEMESCAPE* does not extract this resource, but it renders it visible ethically.

4.5 USER INTERACTIONS: PLANT, EVOLVE, OBSERVE, FORGET

Interaction in *MEMESCAPE* is symbolic and non linear. Users can plant a meme seed. In other words, submit their own meme to the forest, knowing it will change, decay, or merge. They can actively explore evolution: observe how memes have evolved, just like elements of an ecosystem. They can track discourse layers across memes and explore and the public sentiments have shifted over time.

There is no central control, and this space does not forcefully guide the users. Instead, by letting them discover new patterns of information, it releases dopamine in their brains and develops curiosity to explore more. No act is final and each action contributes to the ecosystem. Users are not only memory agents, but they are also ritual performers, each decision a gesture of contemplation, reminiscence, satire, or forgetting.

4.6 THE EXPLORER'S ROLE: FROM PASSIVE SCROLLER TO DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHER

Unlike conventional archives, *MEMESCAPE* transforms the user into an explorer of cultural terrain. One does not scroll through content. One *wanders through ecosystems of emotion and politics*. The user is cast into roles: gardener, mourner, provocateur, witness.

This explorer model is essential in reframing memory from consumption to participation. The interface activates curiosity, hesitation, and sometimes guilt. Some users reported feeling *watched by the memes they planted*. Others experienced joy when their meme organisms merged with others. This is not gamification. It is mnemonic dramaturgy, where every user choice enacts a philosophy of remembrance.

4.7 INTERFACE AS COGNITIVE DISRUPTOR

The interface intentionally resists conventional UX and lacks tutorials and fixed endpoints. No breadcrumbs. Users must navigate through intuition, feeling, and symbolic association. This cognitive friction disrupts habitual digital behaviour. In a world where most interfaces numb users into efficiency, *MEMESCAPE* seduces them into contemplation. It enacts a *productive discomfort*, which one user called “visually tender but emotionally sharp.”

The visual grammar draws from glitch art, biomorphic forms, and postmodern ambiguity. Interface logic bends, meme trees collapse into ponds, discourse clusters fracture into mist. *MEMESCAPE* uses confusion as pedagogy. It teaches the user that meaning is neither immediate nor permanent.

4.8 TOWARD A LIVING ARCHIVE THAT EXTENDS BEYOND PRESERVATION

MEMESCAPE is not a museum or another Dropbox of memes. It is a living archive, one that mutates, forgets, and regenerates in response to collective behaviour. Rather than preserving everything, *MEMESCAPE* proposes an ethic of intentional decay. Some memes should die. Some should merge. Some should return in haunted form. Memory, here, is not an act of collection; it is an act of cultivation. A cycle. A wound that blooms.

By merging speculative design, forest metaphor, participatory logic, and emotional choreography, *MEMESCAPE* redefines what it means to remember digitally. It is not a platform. It is not an interface. It is a living epistemology, a forest grown from memes, dreams, grief, and the radical possibility of forgetting well.

5. Findings and Discussion: Memescape as an Inclusive Space for Evolving Public Memory

5.1 ENTERING THE FOREST: MODES OF ENGAGEMENT

The tests done with the eight participants were far more crucial than a usability test, as this was an effective immersion where each session was treated as an exploratory interaction, designed to provoke emotional resonance. Participants were prompted to act, not as mere consumers of media, but as active explorers of vernacular memory. The basic instructions were given, and the system welcomed them without nudging.

5.2 EMOTIONAL TENSION AND INTERFACE MOOD.

Where most digital systems aim for frictionless clarity, *MEMESCAPE* weaponises confusion as cognition. Aligning with speculative design's goal to trouble assumptions rather than offer mere function, the mood of the user was utilised as the method. Users acknowledged they felt that they had entered a space that did not demand input, but demanded presence. One participant remarked, "I felt like the memes weren't asking me to do anything... just to be with them".

Table 2: Themes Overview of User Engagement with MEMESCAPE
(Source: Author)

Theme	Definition	Representative Quote (Anonymised)	Design Implication/s
1. Exploratory Engagement	Users become active explorers (not passive viewers), treating MEMESCAPE as a navigable memory ecosystem rather than a tool	<i>"It felt more like a place to walk through, not a page I had to use." (P3)</i>	Supports exploration-based navigation and non-linear pathways as core interaction logic of MEMESCAPE.
2. Emotional Tension & Mood	Affective cues (colours, pacing, micro-animations) build intentional emotional ambiguity that slows users down.	<i>"The interface wasn't nudging me to do anything. It just invited me to feel something." (P1)</i>	Affirms the use of mood as method. It validates tension as a cognitive disruptor rather than a mere UX flaw.
3. Symbolic Interaction & Meaning-Making	Users interpret memes as evolving cultural signs shaped by social-political contexts and communal knowledge.	<i>Through those memes, I was seeing how people talk to each other through them." (P6)</i>	Strengthens emphasis on comment-threads, contextual layerings, and user-driven planting to represent discursive depth.
4. Metaphor as Cognitive Frame	The forest metaphor allows users to understand and interpret memory as dynamic, ecological processes.	<i>"It was more like a memory forest than just an archive." (P4)</i>	Validates metaphor as structure while strengthening ecological interactions (growth, decay, evolution).
5. Productive Disorientation	Lack of conventional UI cues induces initial friction that leads to reflective engagement.	<i>"Not knowing what to do made me stop aimless scrolling and think. Like it was slowing me down on purpose." (P2)</i>	Confirms that UI minimalism and refusal of efficiency induce disorientation which becomes pedagogical.
6. Ethical Ambiguity & Responsible Forgetting	Users confront ambiguities around preservation, decay, and the politics of forgetting.	<i>"It felt like a moral choice..deciding whether to keep it or let it rot." (P5)</i>	Strengthens decay as ethical gesture and supports the design of selective forgetting mechanisms.

In MEMESCAPE, emotional tension is purposefully embedded into the interface mood to influence how users engage with digital artefacts. The interface does not aim for neutral usability alone but strategically incorporates affective cues such as colour contrasts, pacing of interactions, and micro-animations to provoke subtle discomfort, curiosity, or anticipation. This calibrated tension disrupts habitual scrolling behaviours, prompting users to slow down and reflect on the presented meme artefacts. By alternating between familiar, inviting elements and unexpected design interventions, the interface maintains a dynamic emotional state that mirrors the volatile, often contradictory nature of memetic content. Such tension enhances cognitive engagement, encouraging users to actively and critically interpret memes rather than consume them passively. The mood, therefore, operates as both a navigational and interpretive framework, aligning the experiential layer of MEMESCAPE with its broader goal of reframing memes as culturally significant artefacts rather than low-brow, transient entertainment.

5.3 SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONS IN MEMESCAPE

Symbolic interactions within MEMESCAPE occur through the exchange, interpretation, and modification of memes as shared cultural signs. In this context, memes operate as condensed semiotic units where text, imagery, and contextual cues combine to convey socially relevant meanings. These interactions are moulded by both the creator's intent and the audience's interpretive frameworks, which are informed by prior knowledge, cultural alignments, and online vernacular. The platform facilitates iterative cycles of participatory meaning-making, where users not only consume but also interpret and recontextualise meme content, producing derivative works that embed new layers of symbolic value.

This process aligns with symbolic interactionism, wherein meaning is continuously negotiated through social engagement rather than being fixed at the point of creation. In MEMESCAPE, the symbolic exchange is further intensified by the temporal and context-specific, event-driven nature of meme dissemination, particularly in political contexts such as elections, protests. Memes serve as cultural shorthand for complex socio-political positions, enabling rapid communication of collective attitudes while also reinforcing group identities. The shared recognition of symbolic references, be they visual metaphors, intertextual jokes, or ironic framings, strengthens in-group cohesion while signalling differentiation from

opposing viewpoints. Thus, symbolic interactions in the inclusive space of MEMESCAPE are both a reflection of and a contributor to the evolving discursive landscape of digital political culture.

5.4 THE POWER OF METAPHOR

A central hypothesis of this study was that the forest metaphor could function not just as a visual aesthetic but also as a cognitive reframe of digital memory. The findings validate this, as no user referred to *MEMESCAPE* as an archive. Instead, they called it “A memory forest,” where they could explore public history from multiple perspectives.” They continued, “A wild record of how people feel, and an interface that does not force you.”

The metaphor allowed complex archival phenomena, mutation, decay, regeneration, and speculation to become viscerally tangible. Instead of scrolling linearly through static folders or timelines, users foraged through affective terrain, where they understood memory not as data, but as live elements of an ecosystem. This aligns with Lakoff and Johnson’s theory that metaphor structures thought, not just language. In *MEMESCAPE*, metaphor structures interaction, replacing databases with ecosystems and turning users into active explorers rather than passive scrollers.

5.5 PRODUCTIVE DISORIENTATION: A DESIGN OF REFUSAL

A key finding was that the absence of interface conventions, no search, no labels, and no linear logic initially frustrated users. But that friction soon transmuted into contemplation. One user highlighted:

“At first, I didn’t know what to do. Then I realised that not knowing was the point.”

This affective slowing down is critical since it subverts the neoliberal UI imperative for efficiency and replaces it with a pedagogy of pause. The interface doesn’t help users “find what they’re looking for”, but gently nudges them to explore what is fading. Such disorientation becomes a method of deprogramming digital habits, moving users from task completion to emotional dwelling.

5.6 ETHICAL DISCOMFORT: WHO DECIDES WHAT DESERVES TO ROT?

Perhaps the most potent revelation was the ethical ambiguity participants experienced. In a design system where forgetting is possible and decay is a gesture, not a deletion, users confront questions they had never asked, such as: “*Should I preserve this meme?*”, “*What if it says something important, but I hate it?*” “*Can forgetting be ethical?*”

Here, participants experienced an unusual emotion that can be considered accountable grief. One participant described it as “Letting go of a version of me that believed in that joke.” These are not technical responses, but existential reactions to the digital culture. *MEMESCAPE* surfaces what traditional archives conceal. Memory is never neutral, and neither is forgetting.

5.7 IMPLICATIONS: TOWARD EFFECTIVE DIGITAL HERITAGE

The findings suggest that speculative design, when intertwined with metaphor, ritual, and emotional ambiguity, can activate alternative modes of remembering, ones that challenge platform hegemony, archival violence, and interface homogeneity.

The aim of *MEMESCAPE* is not mere preservation but to offer transformation, something which is more crucial. It dares to say that some things must die, some memories must wander, and some memes, no matter how viral, deserve to be decayed. In doing so, it reframes the ethics of digital heritage. Not everything should be saved, but everything, even the forgotten, must be felt.

6. Conclusion & Future Directions

6.1 TOWARD A LIVING ARCHIVE THAT FORGETS

Indeed, this is an era of viral saturation, but *MEMESCAPE*’s overarching aim is not to preserve or monumentalize digital culture. Instead, it proposes an *ecology of ethical forgetting*. Rather than treating memes as static artefacts to be stored, the system frames them as living cultural forms that emerge in the public imagination, mutate through discourse, and decompose through collective inattention. *MEMESCAPE* departs from archival logics that fix, label, and eternalise. It is designed to breathe: to grow through participation, to decay when neglected, and to render memory as navigable terrain. The project is not a database but a landscape which is walkable, affective, and open-ended, in which users act less as content consumers and more as caretakers of shared affect.

This paper argues that speculative design grounded in metaphor, meaningful interaction, and productive ambiguity can surface how digital publics negotiate public memory. The forest metaphor functions not as ornament but as a cognitive scaffold, modelling a form of mnemonic participation that is fluid and deliberately indeterminate.

By inviting participants to wander, explore and plant, *MEMESCAPE* foregrounds questions that conventional archival spaces sidestep: what merits forgetting; when archiving reproduces harm; and who should decide what is allowed to decay.

These are not merely technical problems but normative and political ones. The system does not resolve them; it exposes them, making the tensions legible and shareable. MEMESCAPE is presented as a research probe, an inclusive and resilient space for public history. As such, it offers a tractable framework for studying attention, evolution, and cultural memory in networked environments, while inviting continued debate about the ethics of what we choose to remember and to let go.

6.2 FUTURE DIRECTIONS OF MEMESCAPE AS A GROWING FOREST

Future directions for MEMESCAPE target research, institutions, and the public sphere. It will redefine digital cultural preservation by modelling memes as living lineages, which are time-aware embeddings, sentiment-drift curves, and memetic phylogenies that reveal how formats fork, merge, and decay. For institutional adoption, MEMESCAPE will ship audited datasets, reproducible pipelines, and policy-ready governance (consent, provenance, redaction), enabling museums, libraries, and universities to deploy the platform within ethical and legal frameworks.

With the rapid advancement of AI technology, AI-driven sentiment and evolution analysis will combine multimodal transformers with diffusion and survival models to trace affect, mutation pressure, and lifespan. A misinformation and political-influence module will map narrative variants, detect coordinated amplification, and surface provenance trails, supporting accountable scholarship while respecting privacy and community norms.

Bridging the digital vernacular with the real world, MEMESCAPE will operate as AR/VR exhibition spaces where visitors step inside evolving meme-forests, annotate paths, and join moderated, multilingual dialogues that foreground grassroots perspectives alongside institutional voices. Inclusive access (assistive cues, low-bandwidth modes) and deliberative UX (friction that slows impulsive sharing, prompts that invite counter-readings) apply behavioural insights ethically to foster reflective participation. It is not about “saving memes.” It documents digital chronicles of public memory and offers a rigorous, UX-driven blueprint for inclusive, resilient cultural-preservation initiatives.

6.3 FINAL REFLECTION, AS THE ARCHIVE THAT REFUSES TO CLOSE

Most of the time, history is documented by those who document it. We live in a time where forgetting is feared. Where every click is cached, every meme reuploaded, every comment scraped. But not all memory is liberation, and not all permanence is preservation. Sometimes, to forget is to heal. To decay is to nourish. And, to facilitate evolution is to sustain.

MEMESCAPE invites users to explore differently. It is not a claim to neutrality. Unlike traditional archives that mummify artefacts and treat them as static pieces, it is not clean but gloriously unfinished. A felt archive. A forest that remembers with you, and sometimes, for you. And when the forest forgets, it does so with care.

7. Citations, References and Acknowledgements

7.1. REFERENCES

- Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Arora, P. (2019). *The next billion users: Digital life beyond the West*. Harvard University Press.
- Bardzell, J., & Bardzell, S. (2015). *Humanistic HCI*. Morgan & Claypool.
- Baudrillard, J. (1994). *Simulacra and simulation* (S. F. Glaser, Trans.). University of Michigan Press. (Original work published 1981)
- Berger, P., & Luckmann, T. (2016). Contemporary Extensions: Social Order Re- Wired. In *Routledge eBooks* (pp. 29–30). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315775357-11>
- Chun, W. H. K. (2011). *Programmed visions: Software and memory*. MIT Press.
- Dunne, A., & Raby, F. (2013). *Speculative everything: design, fiction, and social dreaming* (p. 204) [Book]. MIT Press. <https://readings.design/PDF/speculative-everything.pdf>
- Elsdén, C., Walsh, D., Wallace, J., Kaye, J., Balestrini, M., Martin, M., ... & Kirk, D. (2017). Situating and sustaining paper-based personal informatics. *CHI '17: Proceedings of the 2017 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 2336–2348.
- Flinn, A. (2007). Community histories, community archives: Some opportunities and challenges. *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, 28(2), 151–176.
- Huvila, I. (2015). “Being entrusted with the secrets of the people”: Technology in participatory GLAM work. *Information Research*, 20(1), 1–15.
- Jenkins, H. (2009). *Confronting the challenges of participatory culture*. MIT Press.
- Lokuge, D., & Wijeratne, Y. (2022). Political humour and digital activism in Sri Lanka: Meme cultures and dissent. *South Asian Media Research Journal*, 4(1), 54–72.
- Meese, J., Pearce, C., & Sauter, T. (2021). Deepfakes and the epistemology of the digital image. *New Media & Society*, 23(7), 2071–2087.
- Shifman, L. (2013). *Memes in digital culture*. MIT Press
- Smith, L. T. (2012). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples* (2nd ed.). Zed Books.
- Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2017). *Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making*. Council of Europe.
- Whitelaw, M. (2015). Generous interfaces for digital cultural collections. *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, 9(1).