

The Virality and Its Consequences: A Critical Literature Review on the Propagation of AI-Resurrected Celebrity Videos

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Abstract. The advent of generative artificial intelligence (AI) has precipitated a paradigm shift in the socio-technological mediation of death, memory, and celebrity. This literature review reveals that the propagation of AI-resurrected videos of deceased controversial public figures follows a distinct lifecycle, exposing critical deficiencies in existing legal and ethical frameworks. It traces this lifecycle from its inception, driven by motivations ranging from sincere memorialization to commercial exploitation and parodic critique, to its accelerated dissemination through the participatory and memetic logics of online culture. The analysis subsequently delves into the profound legal and ethical vacuums this lifecycle exposes, focusing on the inadequacy of existing personality rights frameworks to govern posthumous digital personas and the multifaceted conflicts concerning dignity, psychological harm, and community polarization. Synthesizing insights from digital ethics, media studies, and law, the review contends that "memetic memorialization" constitutes a distinct and volatile form of digital engagement, necessitating a governance approach that is nuanced, principle-based, and sensitive to context. It concludes by proposing a multi-layered governance framework centered on the principles of proportionality, dignity preservation, and contextual sensitivity.

Keywords: AI Resurrection, Meme Culture, Postmortem Personality Rights, Digital Ethics, Platform Governance

1. Introduction

The rapid maturation of generative artificial intelligence (AI), particularly in deep synthesis and large language models, has enabled "digital resurrection" — the creation of interactive, hyper-realistic simulacra of deceased individuals trained on their digital traces [1]. Long-standing human existential boundaries are being actively redrawn by digital technology. This capability has swiftly catalyzed the growth of a "digital afterlife industry" (DAI), which commercializes services ranging from private, therapeutic "griefbots" to public-facing digital recreations [2,3]. Concurrently, the architecture of contemporary digital sociality is fundamentally defined by participatory culture and the viral logic of meme culture [4].

This review interrogates the potent intersection of these forces: the creation and viral dissemination of AI-resurrected videos featuring deceased controversial celebrities. These videos, upon release into the digital public sphere, are subject to the transformative appetites of participatory networks, often becoming raw material for memetic re-appropriation and generating a unique form

of "memetic memorialization." While significant academic attention has been devoted to private, grief-oriented digital afterlife applications [3] and the broad legal challenges of postmortem data [2], a focused analysis of how public, celebrity-focused resurrections are metabolized through online meme ecosystems remains underdeveloped.

This study seeks to fill this gap by systematically synthesizing disparate literatures to map the lifecycle of this phenomenon and analyze the consequent socio-legal-ethical ruptures it produces. It investigates the theoretical frameworks explaining its propagation environment, the spectrum of motivations driving creation, the specific mechanisms fueling virality, the legal inadequacies and ethical dilemmas exposed, and pathways for responsible governance. Weaving together communication theory, digital ethics, and legal studies, this review constructs a coherent analytical framework for understanding a phenomenon that tests the very limits of posthumous personhood, collective memory, and the social contract in platform societies.

2. Theoretical foundations

To comprehend the trajectory of an AI-resurrected controversial celebrity video, one must examine the fundamental logics governing the digital ecosystem it enters—not a neutral broadcast not a neutral broadcast channel but a dynamic, participatory arena shaped by two core, interrelated theoretical paradigms: the affordances of participatory culture and the infectious mechanics of meme culture.

2.1. Participatory culture and its affordances

Participatory culture transforms users from passive consumers into active prosumers, simultaneously creators and consumers. This shift has profound implications for the construction and circulation of celebrity. Fan studies illustrates that digital platforms empower communities to actively appropriate, remix, and re-circulate a star's image, often re-contextualizing them into mundane or humorous "knowable spaces" that reinforce, subvert, or playfully expand their public persona [5]. The celebrity image becomes a communal resource, a shared symbolic vocabulary for expressing identity, affiliation, and critique.

AI resurrection represents a quantum leap in these participatory affordances. It moves the participatory act beyond editing or commenting on pre-existing, historically fixed texts (like film clips or interviews). It grants users—be they corporations, fan collectives, or individual provocateurs—the unprecedented power to generate novel performances, utterances, and appearances from the deceased. This is not merely interpretive engagement but ontological authorship over a simulated agent. It enables a form of "participatory necromancy," in which community gains the ability to script the actions of a digital revenant, exerting a profound and unsettling form of control over legacy and memory [6]. This technological empowerment escalates the stakes of participatory culture, transforming it from a space of textual negotiation to a workshop for posthumous identity (re)construction.

2.2. The viral mechanics of meme culture

If participatory culture provides the workshop, meme culture provides the distribution network and the replicative life-form that populates it. Internet memes, understood as multimodal units of cultural information that spread rapidly online through imitation and variation, are the primary currency of participatory exchange. Their propagation is often analyzed through a Darwinian lens, where

successful memes possess high degrees of "fidelity" (ease of accurate copying), "fecundity" (rate of reproduction), and "longevity" in the attention economy [7].

This dynamic extends to non-Western contexts, such as Chinese internet "Geng" (meme) culture, where memes spread through imitation and contagion to extract pleasure, solidify interest-based communities to shape identity, and function as symbolic codes that require decryption for meaningful in-group expression [4,8]. The psychological motivations for deploying these memes are multifaceted, ranging from self-presentation and social identification to emotional catharsis and gentle negotiation or resistance against dominant discourses [9].

This memetic ecosystem is not inherently benign. It possesses a shadow side capable of generating and propagating "malicious memes." Research on genres like "hell jokes", which derive humor from the suffering of others, demonstrates that such content can achieve widespread circulation while evading automated content moderation due to their coded, contextual, or ironic nature [7]. The meme space is a contested arena of meaning-making where humor, critique, community, and potential harm are intricately intertwined.

3. The lifecycle of a digital resurrected phenomenon

The journey of an AI-resurrected controversial celebrity video from artifact to viral moment follows a discernible lifecycle, initiated by a complex constellation of motivations and propelled forward by the powerful engines of memetic dissemination.

3.1. Motivations for creation: between grief and gimmick

At one pole lies the discourse of therapeutic or commemorative use. Proponents argue that interacting with a high-fidelity digital replica can provide a "semblance of continued presence," offering tangible solace to the bereaved [2]. This perspective positions the AI entity as a vessel for memory and an emotional prosthesis, aiming to soften the sharp edges of loss and preserve a sense of connection [10]. This motivation, while more commonly associated with private individuals, can extend to public figures through acts of fan-led memorialization or official estate-sanctioned projects intended to honor a legacy.

However, when the subject is a celebrity, and particularly a controversial one, other, more instrumental motivations quickly come to the fore. The most prominent is commercial exploitation. The deceased celebrity's likeness, voice, and persona are valuable intellectual property assets. The DAI enables the creation of a "digital twin" that can be leased or deployed for posthumous advertising campaigns, virtual concert performances, or new cinematic roles, effectively engineering an "afterlife career" that generates continuous revenue streams [11]. This practice commodifies human identity, reducing a person to a data-driven brand asset. It raises urgent ethical questions about consent, authenticity, and the dignity of reducing a human life to a perpetually licensable digital product [3].

Alongside commerce exists the motivation for social commentary, satire, or critical interrogation. It can critique a controversial figure's historical actions or beliefs by making their digital double articulate contradictory statements. It can function as a meta-commentary on the unsettling power and ethical ambivalence of the resurrection technology itself, holding a mirror to society's fascination with digital immortality. Often, it may simply be an act of provocation or absurdist humor, leveraging the shock value and uncanny valley effect to generate online engagement and notoriety [5,12].

3.2. Dissemination and virality: riding the memetic wave

Upon release into the digital public sphere, the AI-resurrected video enters a dynamic process of cultural digestion. This process begins with appropriation, the core mechanism of memetic culture where users assert their interpretive and creative authority by remixing the source material [13]. A video originally intended as a sincere memorial can be parodied into a dark joke. A corporate deepfake advertisement can be re-edited to mock the brand's ethics or to have the celebrity endorse a rival product sarcastically. The resulting derivatives are then amplified by platform algorithms designed to maximize engagement. AI-resurrected videos, by triggering strong reactions through their uncanny nature or controversial subject matter, are particularly susceptible to being fed into viral feedback loops, transforming a niche experiment into a global "participatory spectacle" [14,15].

Engaging with this content, by sharing a specific meme, commenting with a recognized catchphrase, or creating a duet, becomes a ritual of communal participation. It signals in-group membership, conveys a shared stance on the celebrity's legacy, or performs a collective skepticism towards the technology. This ritualistic dimension turns the viral spread from mere information transmission into a performance of digital social identity and belonging [9]. Consequently, the AI-resurrected celebrity is no longer a singular simulation but a fragmented, multi-vocal, and often contradictory presence across the network, its meaning dispersed and determined by the collective actions of the crowd.

4. Legal and ethical implications

The viral lifecycle of AI-resurrected controversial figures functions as a high-intensity stress test on existing legal frameworks and social norms. It exposes profound gaps in governance and ignites complex ethical conflicts that resonate at individual, communal, and societal levels.

4.1. Legal quagmires: personality rights in the digital afterlife

The legal environment is woefully unprepared for the challenges posed by digital personas after death. The central issue revolves around personality rights—the protection of name, image, likeness, and voice. While commercial exploitation without consent from the estate is the most actionable scenario, the core challenge lies in non-commercial, user-generated content: Whether a fan's parody or a satirist's deepfake constitutes an infringement of the deceased's portrait rights remains legally ambiguous. Legal principles like fair use were not designed for posthumous AI personas. The issue is further complicated by the impossibility of obtaining meaningful "mutual consent" from the deceased, creating a permanent ethical and legal defect [3].

Existing regulations on deepfakes and personal information are nascent and fragmented [11]. Because potentially harmful content can spread globally before any legal claim is adjudicated, this results in the basic rights of the deceased being unable to be defined and unable to withstand the extensive freedom of online expression.

4.2. Ethical and community fractures

Beyond the courtroom, the practice triggers a cascade of ethical dilemmas that strike at core human values surrounding death, memory, and respect. The most visceral conflict arises from the perceived desecration of the deceased's dignity. The memetic logic of online culture, which privileges humor, shock, brevity, and deconstruction, operates in direct opposition to traditional norms of reverence,

solemnity, and respect for the dead that underpin most memorial practices [6]. When a digital resurrection of a controversial figure is edited into a "hell joke" mocking their cause of death or their personal failings, it can be experienced by families, friends, and admirers as a profound symbolic violation—a form of digital grave desecration [7]. This connects directly to the risk of psychological harm. For those who were emotionally connected to the figure, seeing a manipulable puppet of their loved one or idol subjected to public ridicule, hate speech, or absurdist scenarios can be deeply traumatic, re-opening wounds and poisoning personal memories [3].

Furthermore, these digital resurrections act as potent catalysts for social and community polarization. Controversial celebrities often embody societal cleavages, political, cultural, or moral. Their AI resurrection becomes a new, highly visceral terrain upon which these old battles are refought. Different factions, fan groups, ideological opponents, historians, may create competing resurrections: one faction to sanitize and glorify, another to condemn and critique. This turns the digital afterlife into a proxy war for narrative control over history and legacy [5,12]. The result is often a cacophony that drowns out a nuanced, historically grounded understanding. The complex, multi-dimensional humanity of the deceased is reduced to a simplistic, binary symbol to be weaponized in online culture wars. This process not only inflames existing divisions but also undermines the potential for respectful, pluralistic, or reconciliatory engagement with a contested past. The technology, in this light, becomes an amplifier of conflict rather than a tool for understanding or closure.

5. Discussion

5.1. Core contradictions

The analysis presented in this review underscores that the phenomenon of AI-resurrected controversial celebrity videos represents a profound socio-technical dilemma, one that cannot be resolved through simplistic regulatory binaries of permission or prohibition. It exists at the fraught intersection of deeply held values: the drive for technological innovation and creative expression inherent in participatory cultures, the fundamental human needs for memorialization and emotional continuity, and the ethical imperatives to preserve dignity, prevent harm, and respect the finality of death. Navigating this complex terrain demands a governance philosophy that is equally nuanced, adaptive, and multi-layered. Insights gleaned from multi-stakeholder research suggest that while there is broad agreement on the necessity of some form of governance, consensus fractures over prescriptive, top-down mandates [3,11].

5.2. Principles for governance

A more viable path forward is likely found in a principle-based, context-sensitive approach developed through inclusive dialogue. The principle of proportionality and purpose-sensitivity dictates that regulatory and platform responses should be calibrated to the specific risk and context of the use-case; for instance, a stringent, consent-based model is appropriate for commercial exploitation or intimate grief therapy, whereas governance of public, non-commercial memetic expression might rightly prioritize transparency and harm mitigation over prior restraint, acknowledging the vital role of parody and social commentary in democratic discourse. Central to this framework must be a governing norm upholding the dignity of the deceased, moving beyond codified legal rights to encompass a broader societal expectation that digital recreations should not

constitute gross desecration or cause severe distress to surviving communities. This norm can inform ethical design choices and community standards even in legally ambiguous situations.

5.3. Multi-stakeholder action

Translating these guiding principles into concrete action requires coordinated effort across multiple domains. Legal frameworks must undergo a necessary evolution to clarify and modernize personality rights statutes, explicitly encompassing AI-generated likenesses and establishing clear, postmortem durations of control, likely vested in estates. The exploration of new legal concepts, such as a "right to digital dignity after death," merits serious consideration. In parallel, social media platforms must evolve from reactive content moderators to proactive governance architects. This entails investing in and implementing robust technical standards for content provenance, developing nuanced community guidelines for synthetic media that distinguish between malicious impersonation and creative expression, and collaborating on ethical "retirement protocols" for persistent digital personas. Furthermore, developers in the digital afterlife industry bear a responsibility to adopt a "precautionary design" ethos, building technical constraints, such as verifiable consent mechanisms or built-in interaction limits, directly into the architecture of their systems from the outset to prevent abuse and uncanny dependence.

5.4. Enduring challenges and future research

However, the fundamental tension between freedom of expression and postmortem protections represents a classic liberal dilemma. Empirical research indicates that public sentiment remains complex and cautious, dominated by ethical apprehensions over technological optimism, with a discernible gap between official narratives focused on feasibility and public discourse preoccupied with dignity and emotional consequence [12].

Addressing these enduring challenges necessitates a sustained commitment to interdisciplinary research along several key frontiers. Future work should include longitudinal empirical studies on the psychological and social impacts of memetic resurrections, comparative legal analyses to foster interoperable global norms, techno-ethical design research to embed values into AI systems, and robust initiatives in critical digital literacy to help public navigate this new media landscape.

6. Conclusion

The study systematically examined the phenomenon of AI-resurrected controversial celebrity videos, arguing that it constitutes a distinct and volatile form of "memetic memorialization." The analysis delineated a clear lifecycle: originating from mixed motivations, these digital artifacts are appropriated by online communities, undergo memetic re-engineering and algorithmic amplification, and evolve into viral spectacles. This process acts as a diagnostic, exposing critical deficiencies in legal frameworks ill-equipped to govern posthumous digital personhood and igniting profound ethical conflicts concerning dignity, psychological well-being, and collective memory.

The study still has certain limitations. It relies on existing literature and cases, which may not fully capture the rapidly evolving practices and public sentiments on social media platforms. The analysis is largely interpretive and conceptual, lacking empirical data to quantify the psychosocial impacts of memetic resurrections on different stakeholder groups. Future research should employ longitudinal empirical studies to assess the real-world psychological and social effects of these digital resurrections on families, fans, and the broader public. Additionally, techno-ethical design

research is crucial to embed values such as consent and dignity into the architecture of generative AI tools.

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