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ON JOKES AND BOUNDARIES: NEGOTIATING THE VALUE OF ML AND AI WORK THROUGH MEMES

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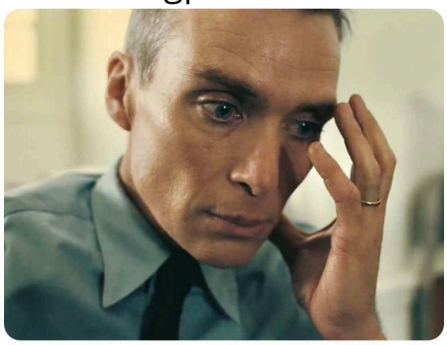
Introduction

Software developers, data scientists, and AI engineers – these occupations have been dubbed as a nascent "coding elite", controlling data and algorithms through code rather than being subject to potential automation themselves (Burrell & Fourcade, 2021). However, the introduction of Large Language Models (LLMs) that can produce code seems to constitute a moment in which assumptions around the essence and value of this professional field are fundamentally destabilised. In this project, we centre this automation anxiety (Bassett and Roberts 2023) by empirically tracing how the value of coding work on and with Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning (ML) is negotiated in memes. Our thematic analysis examines how memes construct the symbolic boundaries between different groups of coders, the perceived limitations of AI-generated code, and the uncertainties surrounding the future of coding work.



Studying changing valuations through memes

In this project, we draw on the conceptual lens of valuation studies (Helgesson and Muniesa, 2013; Kjellberg and Mallard, 2013; Lamont, 2012) to study how the rise of LLMs with coding capabilities affects how ML/AI work is (e)valuated in online memes.

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This lens enables us to examine how emerging ways of working with AI are negotiated and ordered in memes, reflecting the evolving perceptions of AI-related work and associated concerns about automation and the future of coding labour.

In studying memes, we build on and extend scholarship that has examined the various roles memes play in online communications, from fostering solidarity and empowerment (Cinque and Vincent, 2022; Gal, Shifman, and Kampf, 2016) to processes of othering (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017). These correspond with multivalent functions of humour: humour can differentiate and contrast social groups (Meyer 2000), but it can also provide relief in the face of seemingly insurmountable social tensions (Douglas 1968; Han and Kuipers 2021). Here, memes provide an opportunity to explore “rapidly changing valuation situations” (Kjellberg and Mallard 2013). Thus, we are interested in how humorous memes process the shift in relationship with ML/AI tools for people who produce code and (re)define this work and its worth.

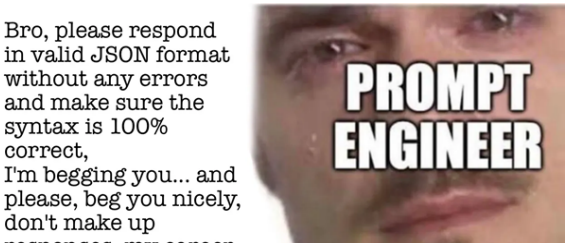
Data and method

We draw on an initial corpus of over 350 memes that we collected from the website ProgrammerHumor.io. The website is a meme aggregator (Wu and Wall 2021) collecting memes on the topics of different technologies from other sources such as Reddit, Twitter or private chat groups. Accordingly, we do not centre ProgrammerHumor.io as an online space itself but rather understand it as an entry point to a broad variety of memes around AI that circulate across various online/offline contexts and spaces (Miltner 2018). In July 2025, we collected all memes published under the tags #machine-learning and #artificial-intelligence, resulting in 401 memes spanning back to 2018. Subsequently, we engaged in purposive sampling to arrive at a corpus fitting our research interest and manageable enough for a qualitative analysis. Given our interest in current negotiations of value, we sorted our data by publication date and then selected the first 60 memes that (i) had an image macro format (Miltner 2018), containing both image and text, (ii) contained a humorous element, and (iii) thematically contained assignations of value or worth to AI/ML work. Both authors individually coded for these elements and discussed ambiguous cases in bi-weekly interpretive meetings from August to October.

Having arrived at this core sample, we produced textual descriptions of each meme and then conducted a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2017) of both textual and visual (Shifman 2013) elements of our data. This allowed us to identify relevant themes in our corpus that speak to our research interest around negotiations of value and worth around AI/ML work.

Programmers vs. AI in the constructions of worthy coding work

Our results show how memes define the boundaries and negotiate the value of programming work when new ways of producing code are introduced. They do so by constructing and articulating symbolic hierarchies of worth among different relationships between programmers and “AI”.



First, the memes differentiate between coders based on their relationship to code and AI. These memes draw symbolic boundaries against those who lack a deep understanding and skill in programming and thus have to depend on AI tools for producing code. Such characters are, for example, “prompt engineers” (Figure 2) and “vibe coders”, who produce code by interacting with LLMs through natural language prompts. These evaluations emphasise the knowledge and craft acquired over time by superior coders, which allow them command over ML/AI and the ability to work **on** AI rather than **with** AI as needed help. The symbolic hierarchies we encounter in these memes thus foreground human agency in the coding process.

Figure . Source: https://programmerhumor.io/ai-memes/the-prompt-engineers-prayer-k1bz, last accessed on 20.11.2025

In contrast, other memes shift focus to code as the outcome of work, emphasising the poor quality of AI-generated code that falls short of expectations and assumed standards of professional work. Some of these memes invoke debugging, the process of finding and eliminating errors or bugs in code, and the time it requires as a measure of code’s quality, which establishes AI-generated code as inferior (Figure 3). While AI tools produce code fast, these memes argue that often – too often – this code does not work or requires extensive debugging work, which means that in the end, the results and efficiency might not benefit from the use of AI.

Moreover, a variety of memes address questions of automation and the future of work in software engineering and related fields. Often, they do so by highlighting that all AI code results from training models on human-generated code. These articulations of the connection between the quality of the code that AI is trained on and the resulting AI-generated code or coding suggestions also humorously reflect on poor coding from programmers, acknowledging that human-generated code is not always perfect either (Figure 4). These memes more directly address the “automation anxiety” (Bassett and Roberts 2023) in the field, as some of them explicitly raise the question of programmers being replaced. While figures like the prompt engineer are not explicitly portrayed as a threat, AI is often portrayed with more confrontation, either as an unnecessary or unwanted element of the workflow that does not improve results, or as a potential competitor.

This analysis provides a snapshot of how a professional field’s culture extends online and how it processes a renegotiation of what good coding work is, due to the new practices of using LLMs to generate code through the medium of memes. While many memes portray the worth of coding professionals by drawing boundaries against

AI-generated code and those who use it, other memes construct the value of coders by emphasising that AI depends on their work.

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