DIGITAL CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS AS SYMBOLIC TOOLS OF PROTEST, CRITIQUE, AND MOBILIZATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE:
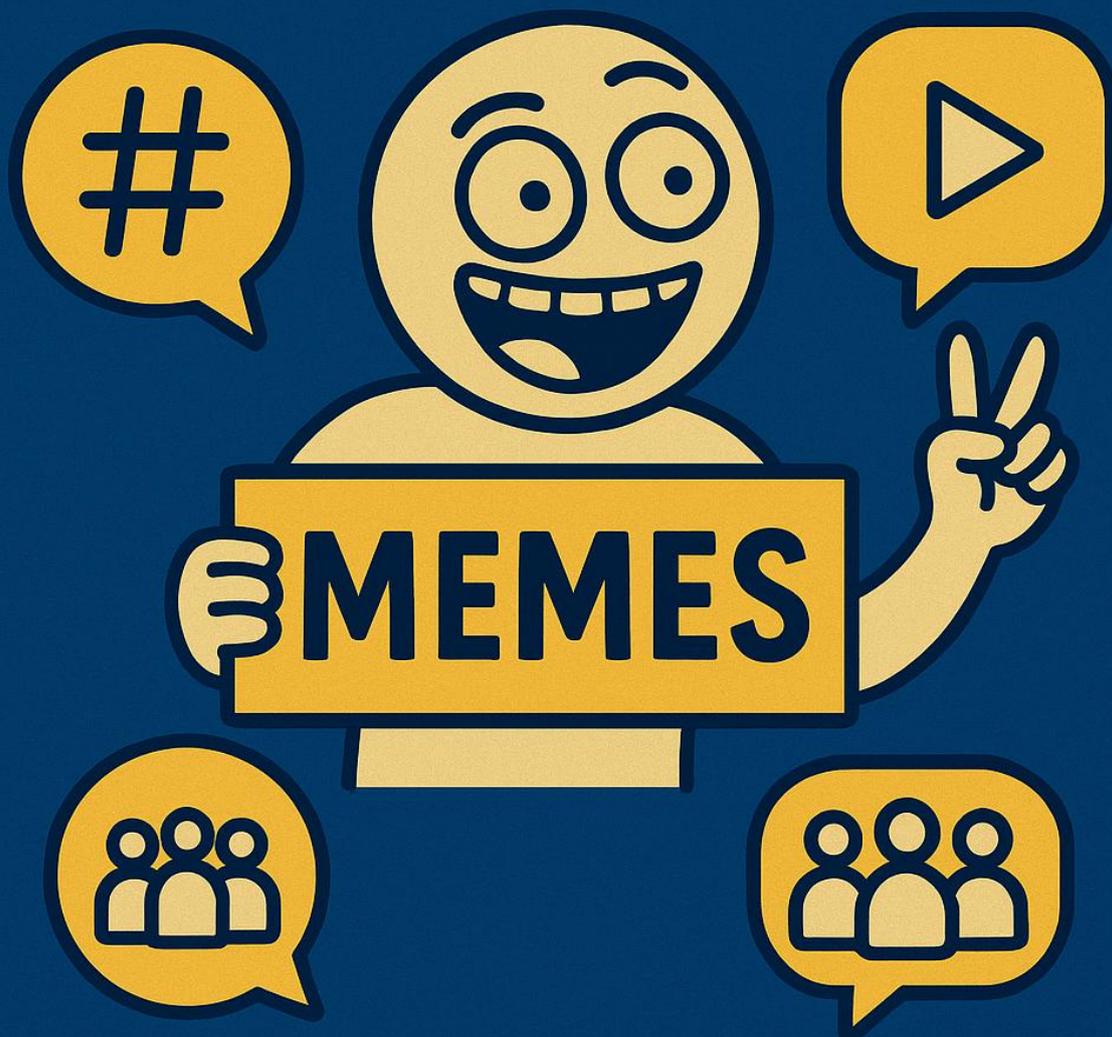## A STUDY OF GEN Z ACTIVISM IN NEPAL, INDONESIA, AND BEYOND

MEMES

RUDY C TARUMINGKENG

Oleh:
Prof Ir Rudy C Tarumingkeng, PhD
Professor of Management NUP: 9903252922
Rector, Cenderawasih State University, Papua (1978-1988)
Rektor, Krida Wacana Christian University, Jakarta (1991-2000)
Chairman Board of Professors, IPB-University, Bogor (2005-2006)
Data Analyst and Chairman, Academic Senate, IBM-ASMI, Jakarta

URL: https://rudyct.com/ab/Buku-Artikel-rudyct-23-24.htm

Naskah akademik:

Digital Cultural Expressions as Symbolic Tools of Protest, Critique, and Mobilization in the Digital Age: A Study of Gen Z Activism in Nepal, Indonesia, and Beyond

ABSTRACT

In the digital age, cultural expressions have transcended the boundaries of entertainment and entered the realm of activism. Memes, viral videos, fan cultures, and hashtags—once dismissed as trivial digital artifacts— have become **powerful instruments of protest, critique, and mobilization.**
This essay examines how these forms of *digital cultural expressions* shape political consciousness and collective identity, particularly among **Generation Z activists** in countries such as **Nepal, Indonesia, Thailand, and other parts of the Global South.**

Through a sociocultural and media-ethical lens, this study analyzes how seemingly playful, humorous, or aesthetic digital materials perform serious political functions—articulating dissent, mobilizing communities, and reconfiguring the grammar of public protest. Ultimately, it argues that these new symbolic forms mark a profound transformation in the

relationship between **culture, politics, and technology**—where the meme becomes the manifesto, and virality becomes visibility.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION: CULTURE, MEDIA, AND POLITICS IN MOTION

1.1. The Rise of Digital Resistance

The 21st century has redefined the way people express dissent. Traditional protests—marches, leaflets, strikes—are now complemented, even replaced, by **digital mobilizations.**
Twitter hashtags ignite revolutions (#BlackLivesMatter, #MilkTeaAlliance). TikTok videos become political satire. Memes turn into ideological battlegrounds.

In this new ecology, **"expression is action."**
What we post, share, remix, and caption online becomes part of a symbolic struggle for meaning and power. As the philosopher Michel Foucault might argue, the internet is not only a site of discourse but also a site of governance—where truth, identity, and resistance are negotiated.

1.2. Why Gen Z Matters

Generation Z (born between 1997–2012) is the **first truly digital-native generation.**
They grew up not merely consuming media but **co-creating it.**
For them, memes are not "jokes," but a language; hashtags are not "labels," but **flags of belonging**; and virality is not coincidence, but a **strategy of amplification.**

In regions like South Asia and Southeast Asia, where political expression is often constrained by state power, **digital creativity becomes a mode of survival and protest.**

From the streets of **Kathmandu and Jakarta** to the networks of Bangkok or Manila, Gen Z employs humor, art, and irony to critique corruption, environmental destruction, and authoritarianism—transforming the "play" of digital culture into **the politics of the possible.**

CHAPTER 2. DIGITAL CULTURE AS POLITICAL SYMBOLISM

2.1. The Semiotics of Memes

A meme is a cultural "gene"—a unit of meaning that spreads, mutates, and evolves.
In digital activism, memes serve as **semiotic weapons.**
They condense complex critiques into simple, shareable visuals.
They carry irony, humor, and outrage simultaneously.

For instance, the "NPC" meme, originally used to mock conformity, was reappropriated by activists to critique passive citizenship and state propaganda.
In Indonesia, the meme *"makan gaji buta"* (getting paid without working) was turned into viral satire against bureaucratic inefficiency.
In Nepal, satirical memes depicting political leaders as cartoon villains became more effective than traditional editorials in communicating public discontent.

Thus, memes transform **political criticism into a participatory game of meaning.**
They democratize satire, allowing every smartphone user to become a cartoonist of power.

2.2. The Power of Virality: When Sharing Becomes Solidarity

Virality is the currency of the digital age.
But virality is not random—it is the result of **affective resonance.**

A meme, hashtag, or video goes viral when it captures **shared emotion**—anger, hope, irony, fear.

This emotional contagion transforms the individual act of sharing into **collective action.**
As the media theorist Zizi Papacharissi explains, *"Networked affect is the glue of digital protest."*

Examples:

- In Nepal, the viral TikTok dance remix "*Pratibandha Hoina, Kranti Ho!*" ("Not Prohibition, but Revolution!") spread among students protesting fuel price hikes in 2022.

- In Indonesia, the hashtag **#ReformasiDikorupsi** (2019) mobilized millions of tweets, memes, and art pieces criticizing parliamentary corruption and weakening of anti-corruption laws.

- In Thailand, the #MilkTeaAlliance movement used memes of anime heroes and pop idols as symbols of cross-national solidarity against authoritarian regimes.

Thus, virality becomes **visibility**, and visibility becomes **political legitimacy.**

2.3. Fan Culture as Political Infrastructure

Fan culture—often dismissed as "fandom" or "obsession"—has emerged as a political force.
K-pop fans, anime communities, and gaming groups have repurposed their organizational skills for activism.

In Indonesia, **ARMY (BTS fans)** once flooded Twitter with messages supporting human rights campaigns.
In Nepal, local fandom communities used their networked creativity to design infographics supporting earthquake recovery and environmental

awareness.

Fan groups understand **algorithms**—how to trend, how to flood hashtags, how to coordinate uploads—making them ideal digital activists.

As Henry Jenkins (2016) observed in *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era*, fandom is a form of **civic engagement.**
It blends emotion with coordination, pleasure with purpose.

CHAPTER 3. HASHTAGS AS DIGITAL BANNERS OF IDENTITY

3.1. The Hashtag as Symbolic Space

A hashtag is not merely metadata; it is a **discursive territory.**
It organizes attention, shapes conversation, and creates identity.
Through hashtags, people join movements without physical proximity.

Examples:

- #ReformasiDikorupsi in Indonesia unified dispersed protests into one digital voice.

- #EnoughIsEnough in Nepal became a rallying cry for governance reform.

- #JusticeForMyanmar, #SaveTheInternet, #MilkTeaAlliance formed transnational alliances of Southeast Asian youth.

Hashtags make **fragmented grievances visible**.
They turn personal outrage into public archives of resistance.

3.2. Hashtag Activism and Emotional Solidarity

The emotional power of hashtags lies in their dual nature—rational and affective.

They invite participation through simplicity ("type and share"), yet carry deep meaning.

During protests, hashtags serve several functions:

1. **Information Dissemination** – updates, schedules, calls for donation.

2. **Framing** – defining the narrative and moral legitimacy of the protest.

3. **Memory and Archiving** – preserving collective histories of struggle.

For example, in Indonesia's Omnibus Law protests (2020), hashtags like #TolakOmnibusLaw and #BuruhBergerak chronicled both anger and creativity—through protest posters, parody videos, and visual art.

CHAPTER 4. CASE STUDY: GEN Z DIGITAL ACTIVISM IN NEPAL AND INDONESIA

4.1. Nepal: Digital Protest in a Post-Monarchy Context

Nepal's young democracy (after the monarchy's fall in 2008) remains fragile.
The youth—especially students—have turned social media into a **parallel public sphere** to critique corruption, patriarchy, and economic stagnation.

During the 2022 protests against inflation, the hashtag **#EnoughIsEnough** became a national symbol of frustration.
Memes depicted ministers as "boomers out of touch," and TikTokers remixed political speeches into ironic dance tracks.

Unlike traditional activism led by parties or unions, **Gen Z in Nepal uses humor and parody to bypass censorship.**

A meme of a sleepy politician shared by thousands does more damage than an editorial in a newspaper.

Moreover, online communities organized offline aid—donations, food drives, and flash mobs—demonstrating how **digital outrage translates into civic action.**

4.2. Indonesia: The Meme-ification of Reformasi

In Indonesia, youth protests have evolved since 1998's *Reformasi.* The 2019–2020 movements against corruption and environmental degradation marked a new wave of **"post-Reformasi digital activism."**

On Twitter, memes of *"DPR = Dewan Pengkhianat Rakyat"* ("Council of People's Betrayers") went viral, mocking the parliament's attempt to weaken anti-corruption laws.
Street art merged with online design, while platforms like TikTok and Instagram became arenas for satire.

Memes portraying legislators as *"Avengers of Oligarchy"* or turning President Jokowi's statements into remix videos generated millions of views.
They weren't just jokes—they were **performative critiques of governance.**

As communication scholar Merlyna Lim calls it, this is *"algorithmic activism"*—activism that speaks the language of the platform.

4.3. From Digital Humor to Real-World Protest

Both in Nepal and Indonesia, the humor of memes belies its serious function: **it disarms power.**
By laughing at authority, youth reclaim psychological agency.

The transition from meme to march, from hashtag to street, follows a typical cycle:

1. **Cognitive Phase** – online discussion spreads awareness.

2. **Affective Phase** – viral emotions trigger solidarity.

3. **Mobilization Phase** – calls for offline protest emerge.

4. **Institutional Phase** – the movement influences public debate or policy.

In 2019, Indonesian students mobilized through memes, coordinated via WhatsApp, and documented via Instagram—proving that digital culture can indeed spark analog consequences.

CHAPTER 5. DIGITAL HUMOR AND IRONY AS STRATEGIES OF SURVIVAL

5.1. The Politics of Irony

In countries where open criticism can invite repression, **irony becomes a weapon.**
Digital humor acts as camouflage—critiques are hidden in parody, allowing plausible deniability.
"Just a meme" becomes a political shield.

This *ironic activism* aligns with what political theorist James Scott calls *"hidden transcripts"*—covert forms of resistance embedded in everyday expression.

In both Nepal and Indonesia, young activists use this strategy to critique power without overt confrontation.
When satire trends, the system trembles.

5.2. Visual Aesthetics of Resistance

Aesthetics matter.
In a world saturated by visuals, activists compete for attention not through arguments, but through **style.**

Illustrations, anime edits, and remix videos transform protests into **aesthetic movements.**
The "#SavePapua" posters in Indonesia, designed with minimalist blue tones and symbolic birds, traveled globally through Tumblr and Pinterest.
In Nepal, feminist artists used collage and digital painting to critique gender inequality.

These creative visuals **collapse the boundary** between art and politics, pleasure and protest.

CHAPTER 6. TRANSNATIONAL SOLIDARITY AND THE MILK TEA ALLIANCE

The "#MilkTeaAlliance" (Thailand–Taiwan–Hong Kong–Myanmar–Indonesia) shows how digital cultural expressions can transcend borders. It began with memes mocking China's online nationalism, and evolved into a **pan-Asian youth solidarity movement.**

Its aesthetic: cute anime, emojis, milk tea cups.
Its politics: democracy, free speech, and youth solidarity.

This movement demonstrates how **pop culture fandom intersects with civic consciousness**—a unique hallmark of Gen Z activism.
The meme becomes a bridge between nations, turning shared aesthetics into shared ethics.

CHAPTER 7. CRITIQUES AND LIMITATIONS

7.1. Slacktivism and the Attention Economy

Critics argue that digital activism risks becoming *slacktivism*—symbolic gestures without real change.
Sharing a meme may not equal policy reform.
Virality fades faster than legislation changes.

However, as scholars like Manuel Castells remind us, power today is not only material but **symbolic.**
Control over meaning precedes control over institutions.
Digital activism reshapes discourse—the precursor to structural change.

7.2. Censorship and Algorithmic Suppression

Governments have learned to manipulate digital platforms—through bot armies, takedowns, and algorithmic shadow bans.
In both Nepal and Indonesia, activists report their posts being flagged as "fake news."
The battlefield of protest is not just the street but **the algorithm.**

Therefore, the struggle for digital freedom is also a struggle for **epistemic justice**—the right to speak, to be seen, and to be heard.

CHAPTER 8. ETHICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL DIMENSIONS

8.1. From Expression to Responsibility

With great virality comes great responsibility.
Memes can liberate but also misinform.
Hashtags can unite but also divide.

The ethics of digital protest lie in **intent and accuracy**—the commitment to critique without hate, to satirize without dehumanizing.

The philosopher Hannah Arendt's concept of "the space of appearance" applies here:
Each act of posting or sharing is a political appearance—**a moment of**

public being.
Therefore, every meme is an ethical act.

8.2. The Aesthetics of Hope

Despite cynicism, Gen Z's creativity reveals a **new form of hope.**
Their humor is not escapism—it is resilience.
Their memes are not nihilism—they are reinventions of community.

In a fragmented world, digital cultural expressions reweave solidarity.
They remind us that activism can be joyful, and protest can be poetic.

CHAPTER 9. CONCLUSION: THE NEW GRAMMAR OF DISSENT

The digital age has rewritten the grammar of resistance.
Where once protest relied on leaflets and megaphones, now it speaks
through **pixels, parodies, and hashtags.**

Memes, viral videos, fan cultures, and hashtags are not peripheral but
central to contemporary political communication.
They embody what Raymond Williams called *"structures of feeling"*—the
lived, emotional experiences of a generation seeking justice through
creativity.

In Nepal, Indonesia, and beyond, **Gen Z is not apolitical—they are
differently political.**
They protest with humor, organize through fandoms, and imagine
futures through the aesthetic of memes.

Their resistance is not always loud, but it is persistent, playful, and poetic.
It is a revolution of meaning.

"In the digital age, every meme is a manifesto,
every hashtag a hymn,
every viral video a spark of democracy."

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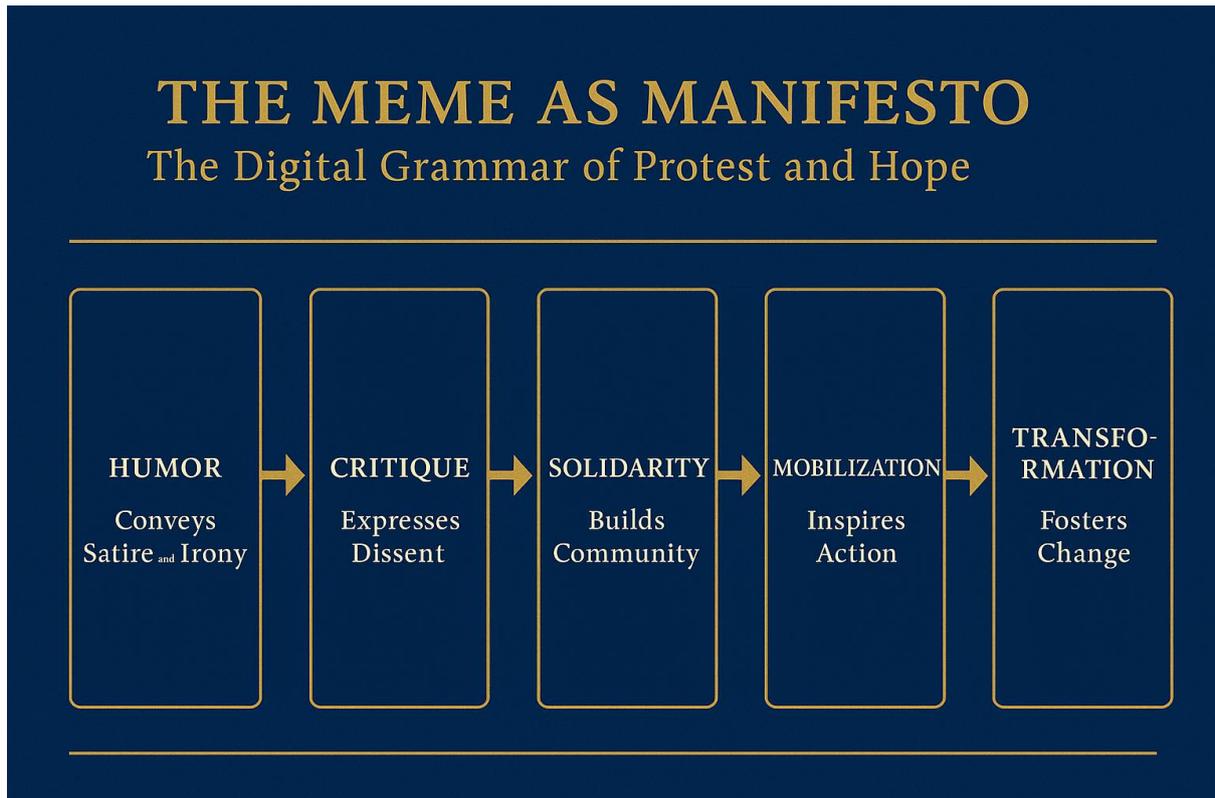
Reflection and Discussions:

The Meme as Manifesto — The Digital Grammar of Protest and Hope

1. From Humor to Critique: Irony as the New Political Language

Humor is often dismissed as superficial—a fleeting distraction from the gravity of politics.
Yet, in the digital era, humor has become a **weapon of the weak**, an instrument to say the unsayable.

When Generation Z in Kathmandu, Jakarta, Bangkok, or Seoul creates and shares memes mocking corruption or hypocrisy, they are not escaping politics—they are **performing politics through laughter**.
This humor is not innocent; it is subversive.
As Mikhail Bakhtin once observed, the *carnivalesque* overturns hierarchies through mockery, transforming fear into collective power.

In authoritarian or semi-democratic societies, irony becomes **a coded critique**—an indirect but potent language of dissent.
A meme depicting a sleepy politician, a dancing bureaucrat, or a sarcastic hashtag like *#TerimaKasihPemerintah* ("thank you, government") in Indonesia, carries the weight of public cynicism disguised as comedy.

Thus, humor evolves into **critique**, laughter becomes literacy, and the act of sharing a meme becomes an act of resistance.

2. From Critique to Solidarity: Shared Irony, Shared Identity

Digital cultural expressions—memes, fan edits, hashtags—generate **affective solidarity**.
They create a feeling of togetherness grounded not in ideology, but in shared emotion.
This is what Zizi Papacharissi calls *affective publics*: networks connected not by structure, but by sentiment.

A meme may begin as an individual's joke, but through repetition and remix, it becomes **collective vernacular.**
In Nepal's *#EnoughIsEnough* movement or Indonesia's *#ReformasiDikorupsi*, young people who never met in person find kinship through humor, art, and outrage.
The meme acts as both *mirror* and *megaphone*—reflecting shared frustration while amplifying collective voice.

Solidarity today does not require physical assembly; it is **networked empathy.**
Through ironic laughter and viral creativity, Gen Z learns that resistance can also be joyful—and that joy, in itself, is a form of defiance.

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3. From Solidarity to Mobilization: When Pixels Move People

The power of digital protest lies not only in its symbolism but in its **mobilizing capacity.**
A viral meme or hashtag may appear trivial, but its visibility challenges the monopoly of narrative.
It reframes politics in a language that the masses understand—visual, participatory, emotional.

The transformation from meme to movement follows a familiar rhythm:

1. **Humor sparks attention.**

2. **Critique crystallizes meaning.**

3. **Solidarity amplifies emotion.**

4. **Mobilization translates it into action.**

In Indonesia, online creativity led to real-world protests in 2019–2020. Students who shared parody videos about the *Omnibus Law* eventually filled the streets of Jakarta with banners that echoed their digital slogans. In Nepal, TikTok songs mocking inflation turned into chants at rallies. Memes became placards. Tweets became footsteps.

Thus, the meme transcends the screen—it becomes a **symbolic rehearsal for physical action.**

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4. From Mobilization to Transformation: Digital Culture as a Moral Force

The ultimate challenge for digital activism is to transform momentary virality into long-term change.
Virality fades quickly, but meaning persists when it reshapes collective imagination.

Transformation occurs when humor and critique mature into **ethical awareness**—when the meme no longer mocks only individuals but interrogates systems, values, and power structures.
For example:

- Environmental memes evolve into ecological movements (#SaveTheEarth, #FridaysForFuture).

- Feminist memes become education campaigns on gender justice.

- Anti-corruption memes lead to calls for transparency and governance reform.

The digital grammar of protest thus becomes a grammar of **hope**—a way of reclaiming meaning in an age of noise.

Gen Z's humor does not merely resist; it **reimagines** the world it seeks to inherit.

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5. The Ethical Dimension: Between Expression and Responsibility

While memes democratize expression, they also risk trivializing truth.
In the pursuit of virality, satire can slip into slander, irony into misinformation.
Hence, the **ethics of digital protest** demands discernment—knowing the difference between ridicule that enlightens and ridicule that dehumanizes.

The philosopher Hannah Arendt reminds us that politics begins when people appear before one another in truth.
In that sense, meme-making is not just creativity—it is **public appearance**, an ethical act of visibility.

The challenge for digital citizens is to sustain **integrity within virality.**
True protest does not only expose lies; it also cultivates conscience.

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6. Global Echoes: The Transnational Imagination of Gen Z

The digital age has made protest borderless.
From the *Milk Tea Alliance* to #ClimateStrike, memes travel across languages and cultures, carrying fragments of shared struggle.

A meme about censorship in Myanmar resonates with Indonesian students who face disinformation, and with Nepali youth frustrated by political stagnation.
These connections form what Arjun Appadurai calls *global scapes*—flows of imagination that transcend geography.

Digital culture has thus become a **common moral language** for youth worldwide:
the grammar of humor, the syntax of solidarity, the rhetoric of change.

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7. Aesthetics of Resistance: Protest as Art, Art as Protest

Unlike the revolutionary posters of the 20th century, today's protest art is **interactive, remixable, and memetic.**
Its aesthetics blend irony, color, and absurdity to communicate complex truths in seconds.

This aesthetic resistance transforms protest into **cultural performance.**
It blurs the line between art and activism, pleasure and politics.
When Indonesian youth draw digital cartoons of "oligarch monsters," or Nepali artists remix traditional mandalas with protest symbols, they are not merely expressing anger—they are **reclaiming imagination as a political space.**

As the saying goes, "when art becomes protest, protest becomes art."

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8. The Future of Digital Dissent: Toward Regenerative Politics

The future of activism will not be measured only by numbers on the streets but by **the creativity of conscience**.
Gen Z's digital resistance is reshaping not only communication but also moral vocabulary.

They remind older generations that protest need not always roar; sometimes it memes, dances, and sings.
They demonstrate that critique can be compassionate, that laughter can heal, and that the internet—despite its toxicity—can still be a space for **hopeful renewal.**

The meme as manifesto reveals a new truth:

Change does not always begin with slogans; sometimes it begins with a smile.

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9. Philosophical Reflection: The Meme as the Mirror of Humanity

At its core, the meme reflects the contradictions of human civilization—our desire to mock and to mend, to laugh and to love.
It is the most human of digital forms: fragile, ephemeral, yet infinitely creative.

The meme is **a philosophy in disguise**.
It distills complexity into symbol, despair into laughter, and solitude into community.
Like a modern proverb, it carries fragments of collective wisdom disguised as jest.

If the 20th century was the century of manifestos, the 21st is the century of memes—shorter, faster, but equally profound in their reach.
Where Marx and Engels wrote *The Communist Manifesto*, today's youth write their own—through humor, hashtags, and art.

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10. Conclusion: From Meme to Meaning

The journey from **Humor → Critique → Solidarity → Mobilization → Transformation** is not merely a diagram; it is the **moral evolution of digital citizenship.**

- **Humor** awakens.

- **Critique** clarifies.

- **Solidarity** connects.

- **Mobilization** acts.

- **Transformation** sustains.

In this cycle, memes, videos, and hashtags become vessels of civic imagination.
They translate politics into culture and culture into action.

As we witness the laughter of youth on the streets of Jakarta or the rhythmic chants of students in Kathmandu, we understand:
The digital revolution is not just technological—it is **ethical, aesthetic, and human.**

"In the age of algorithms, humanity resists not by silence or violence, but by creativity — by turning the meme into a manifesto of hope."
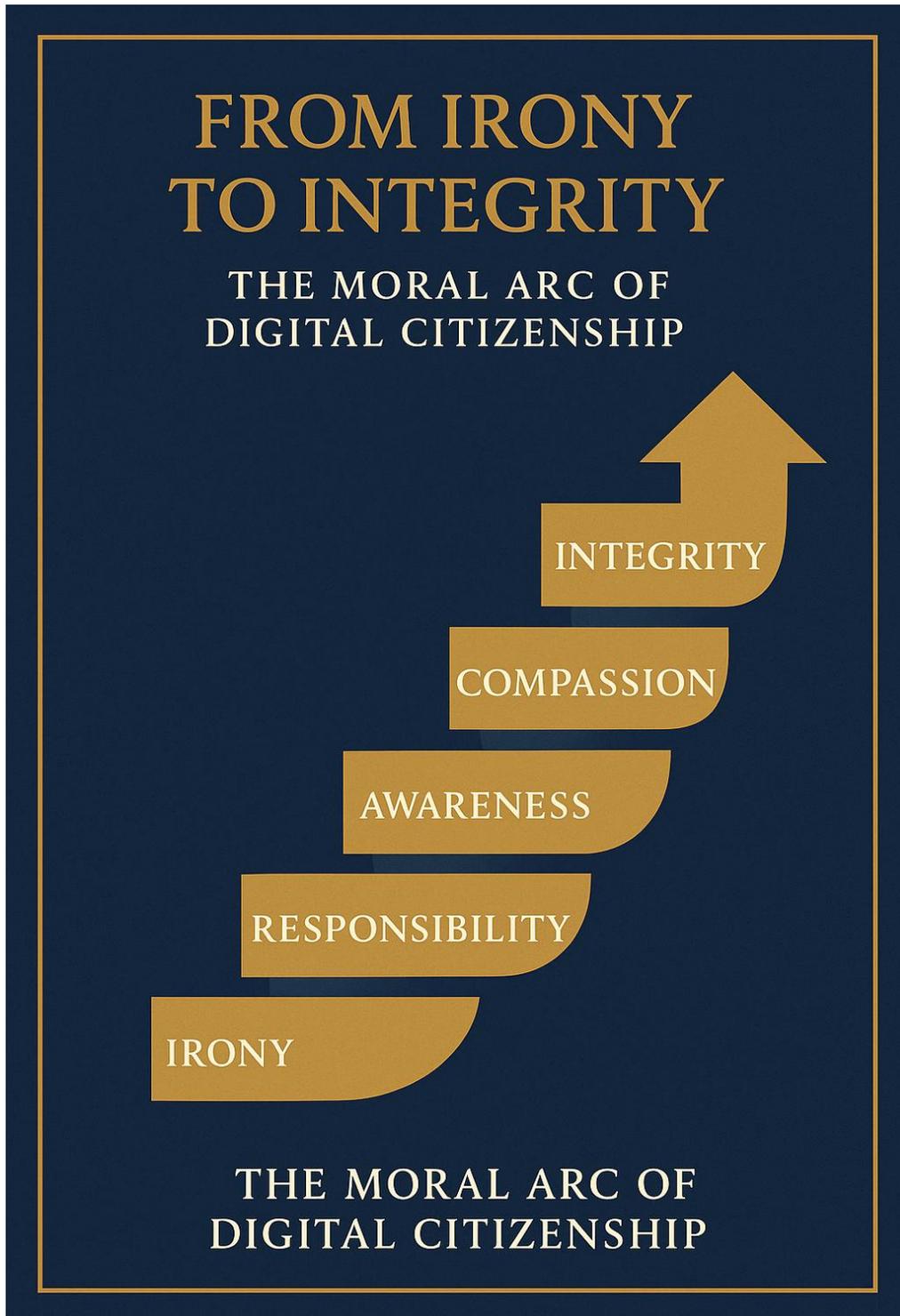
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