COMMUNICATION & SOCIETY

Concepción Fernández Villanueva
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6561-7368
cfvillanueva@cps.ucm.es
Universidad Complutense de Madrid

Gabriel Bayarri Toscano
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3540-9696
g.bayarritoscano@gmail.com
Universidad Complutense de Madrid
Macquarie University

Legitimation of hate and political violence through memetic images: the Bolsonaro campaign

Abstract

The federal elections were held in Brazil in 2018. The ballot resulted in a victory for the far-right candidate, Jair Messias Bolsonaro. The question that arose after the victory of the far-right was: How could this have happened? One of the instruments that undoubtedly contributed to this unexpected victory was a peculiar aspect of his political campaign: memetic communication. Through the use of memes in the social media (above all WhatsApp), Bolsonaro's project transformed these violent discourses against political opponents, feminism, racialised persons and poverty into a series of discourses legitimised through humour and irony. It was a simplification through the memes affecting the static system of cognitive and metaphorical frameworks. During the pre-election period in 2018, we carried out digital ethnographic research in the WhatsApp groups of supporters of Bolsonaro's project ("Bolsonarism"). In this period, we collected a sample of 132 memes belonging to WhatsApp groups composed of up to 256 members, who did not know each other and were geographically dispersed. The analysis we carried out demonstrates the trivialisation and legitimisation of violence against political opponents and other social groups. Much of this legitimisation was camouflaged under the mask of supposed humour and irony, which in reality was insulting, prejudicial and dehumanising.

Keywords
Communication, Brazil, far-right, humour, memes, violence, digital Anthropology.

1. Introduction

The federal elections were held in Brazil in October 2018. The ballot resulted in a victory for the far-right candidate, Jair Messias Bolsonaro. Despite his 27 years as a federal deputy, Bolsonaro had successfully projected an image of himself as an outsider of the political system, as a "man of the people." For the first time in the young Brazilian democracy, a military man would be the president of Brazil; one who had been polemical for reasons such as his attack on people of African descent, immigrants, women and the LGTBI community[1].

---

[1] On 29 October 2018, after Bolsonaro's victory, the Brazilian magazine *Carta Capital* gathered together some of the new president's most polemical phrases. The article can be read in full via the following link: https://www.cartacapital.com.br/politica/bolsonaro-em-25-frases-polemicas/.

Bolsonaro had also declared himself in favour of torture, with polemical phrases such as "the mistake made by the dictatorship was not to torture, it was not to kill" (the phrase was repeated in interviews in 2008 and 2016). During his political career, the new president of Brazil had also proposed on a number of occasions to close Congress so that the military could recover political control; in 1999 the then deputy exclaimed in the programme "Câmera Aberta" that a new Civil War was needed to change Brazil, as votes meant nothing, and that "at least 30,000 had to be killed, starting with Fernando Henrique Cardoso" (former president of Brazil for the Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB) in the years 1995-2003). Also in 1999 he was asked whether he would close Congress if he was elected president, to which he answered that as president he would foster the intervention of the Armed Forces: "Don't be in any doubt about it, I'm in favour of a dictatorship, of a state of exception." Bolsonaro aggressively defended the work of the Military Police, for example after the Carandirú Massacre, when the Military Police entered the prison of Carandirú (São Paulo) in 1992 and killed 111 inmates who had started a rebellion. On that occasion, Bolsonaro said "Only a few died; the police should have killed a thousand." In the year of the elections, he said "Violence must be combatted with more violence." "The police enters, resolves the problem, and if it kills 10, 15 or 20, with 10 or 30 shots each, it should be decorated, not condemned."

Bolsonaro had been until then a "low key" federal deputy; in other words, one of those considered with little influence, who supported aggressive and minority rhetoric and politics. However, his project had now won in the ballot box. It was the project of a militarised country that he supported; and he recognised the use and organisation of violence on the part of the State.

Following the victory of the far-right, the questions that arose were: How had this situation come about? What reasons had led more than 57 million people to vote for Bolsonaro?

This research is specifically focused on one of the characteristic aspects of his political campaign: memetic communication in WhatsApp. The choice of this specific element is due to the fact that in October 2019 the company WhatsApp itself publicly recognised that mass messages had been sent through contracts with companies in the 2018 election campaign. The Brazilian newspaper Folha de Sâo Paulo investigated the matter. It demonstrated the relations between the owners of these companies and the candidates, above all the candidate Jair Bolsonaro[2]. At the end of 2019, the High Electoral Court (TSE) refused to initiate proceedings to investigate the mass messages sent via WhatsApp.

Although he had a limited time allotted for election messages in the public media (8 seconds, twice a day[3]), Bolsonaro had a powerful network in place of organic distribution of images and information[4]. Studies by Datafolha consider that 81% of Bolsonaro electors were contacted by the social media, mainly WhatsApp[5]. In a country with more telephones than people, but where only 60% of the population has access to the internet, WhatsApp became one of the main sources of information during the Brazilian election campaign of 2018. In addition, that year 97% of smartphones included WhatsApp as a "zero tariff" app; in other words, consumers had unlimited use the app, even though they did not have unlimited data.

---

[2] Source: *Folha de São Paulo*. Retrieved from https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2019/10/whatsapp-admite-envio-massivo-ilegal-de-mensagens-nas-eleicoes-de-2018.shtml.

[3] The times for each candidate were established by the election commission (TSE). By way of comparison, the candidate Geraldo Alckmin (PSDB) was assigned 2 blocks per day of 5 min 32 sec, compared with 9 seconds for Bolsonaro.

[4] Source: *Huffington Post* Retrieved from https://www.huffpostbrasil.com/2018/11/04/bolsonaro-o-fenomeno-de-whatsapp-que-desbancou-3-decadas-de-campanha-de-tv_a_23573607/?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS5ji8&guce_referrer_sig=AQA AALVokVXfvjJvzldvmKGrGfUs3MHKrHbDkdsqairMonIhdAu-grB8aCe7OyX2BH7LqJ9BfpWs31K9_RTD4B-aseqa2C_4CgNcP2D2svFcBovN-8AudqL8YL1o6hGEd6SLqo3Mdg4JFDfcZ4NrJiAvswyF5_Ch1W3h7f2ROYKWH21q.

[5] Source: Datafolha.

Without internet connection, or having run out of their data plans, many people only had access to information directly shared by WhatsApp, without being able to open the links on the internet to qualify the information or check it against other news.

2. Memes in political communication: humour, teasing, legitimisation of violence and its political effects

Limor Shifman, in his work *Memes in Digital Culture* (2014), defines internet memes as deliberately created units of digital content with common features, which many users disseminate, imitate and transform via the internet. Its communicative and emotive potential is based on the power of the image, in the construction of meaning the visual aspect predominates, which is, at the same time, the main instrument to arouse attention and possibly the most relevant factor in the provocation of emotional effects. The image makes it possible to extend the meanings of verbal messages and multiplies the possibilities of creating metaphors (condensation of meanings) and metonymies (displacement) of messages towards new meanings beyond those contained in the verbal code. Its apparently light-hearted character, lacking in elaborate argumentation, apparently banal, contributes to reducing its importance as a "visual argument" (Smith, 2007) and as an activator of interpretations and meanings. The style or tone of the meme ("stance" as Shifman, 2014) contains an ideological position or attitude that is not clearly explicit but very influential.

Its replicating character, rapid transmission (Shifman & Thelwall, 2009), dependent on its appeal or capacity for surprise rather than on the meanings or consequences that may derive from its transmission, produces attitudinal inoculation effects, many of which go unnoticed. One could speak of people's susceptibility to certain influences since although they may appear to be "jokes" or pranks, they are in fact intentional visual arguments. The mixture of ideology, confusion with the joke, attractiveness, capacity for dissemination and speed, and apparent superficiality make memes a powerful instrument of social influence whose importance is underestimated (Wiggins 2019).

Memes ability to influence and manipulate a message depends on the sender's ability to control the people who receive it and their trust in the sender. If the sender controls the information and the recipients have trust or faith in the sender, then the potential for influence and manipulation can be very considerable (Chilton, 2003). The ethical aspects are clearly evident.

Memes are a very useful instrument for political expression and participation, a tool capable of shaping frames of perception of social reality. These frameworks are constructed and shared in closed groups, as in the case of WhatsApp, generating a specific sub-culture that shares codes of interpretation and constructs a specific identitarian culture. This shared meaning reinforces the feeling of belonging, and the memes are constant references to the relationship of shared meanings. On sending a meme (i.e., sharing it with friends, communities or acquaintances), the issuer expects the recipient to find sufficient value in the meme to be processed through a combination of the effects of humour and feeling of belonging to the group, offsetting the mental effort involved in its interpretation. Sharing the process of meme decoding therefore becomes a ritual for constructing the collective identity.

We consider memes to be a form of discourse native to digital culture, which has the capacity to interfere or penetrate all forms of discourse (Wiggins, 2019); and which has become popular and very frequent in political communication (Kien, 2019; Huntington, 2016; Howley, 2016), as well as in political propaganda during presidential elections (Ross & Rivers, 2017). Memes as genre have become part of our culture. They allow not only different forms of humoristic expression, but are also a form of political communication, to the extent that they have resulted in what has been called the "memeification" of politics (Dean, 2019).

What we propose to analyse in this paper is the capacity of memes to mix humour with political argument and the legitimising effects of violence that this process of masking produces. The boundary between offence and humour is often blurred.

Potter and Warren (1998) called camouflage the process of trivialisation and concealment of violence in comedies and humorous programmes, when this violence is physical and slight (falls, slaps, small blows exchanged between actors or characters in a programme), or simply verbal (ridicule or irony). The humorous context and relative innocuousness of the harm inflicted and suffered lead to the violence being considered non-existent or trivial. However, on many occasions, multiple acts of harm occur that are interpreted as simple humour. Kati Förster & Cornelia Brantner (2016) discuss violence and offence in the form of humour, and the ethical issues that arise and must be taken into account in the construction of cultural products of various formats.

Humour often provokes resistance and criticism when it refers to the powerful and also when it targets certain features of stereotyped or marginalised groups. The power of the creators or targets of the acts of humour mediates their permissiveness and legitimisation. Comments or mockery of the powerful and of ideologies and religions have produced repression and violence against the perpetrators (remember the attacks on Charlie Hebdo and the trials of rappers for mocking icons of power). In recent decades, with the steady implementation of affirmative action policies for certain social groups, and the demands of women, immigrants and anti-racists, some humorous products which were before considered acceptable have been questioned. Nowadays it is unacceptable to make humour dealing with the features of individuals that they cannot get rid of, such as physical deficiencies, the colour of the skin or certain pathologies for which they are not responsible.

Even in the context of advertising, in which humour is relatively frequent, the boundaries between offence and humour have been shown to be blurred. Beard (2008) has examined the reports on consumer complaints in New Zealand and concluded that 40% of advertisements included some offensive content. Shabbir and Thwaites (2007) included satire, disdain, sarcasm, hostility, superiority, malicious aggression, ridicule, and contempt within offensive humour. Mortimer, Pascoe and Ogilvie (2010), in their research on radio, TV and advertising posters in the UK show that 17 advertisements published in 2009 were subject to complaints for being racist, homophobic, sexist or critical of physical or psychological deficiencies, or because they contained indecent sexual insinuations.

Two highly political operations take place in the broadcasting of humorous memes. The first is the conversion into humour of a devastating critique of political figures, thus minimising it. Second is the establishment of ridicule when faced with criticism, which will be interpreted in terms of "lack of humour" with respect to a message that would have friendly components, given the sender.

To those who send memes, sarcastic criticism, satire and even the metaphorical dehumanisation of characters and the obscene sexualisation of the message are all humorous. Some recipients may find them violent and offensive. These two emotional positions with respect to the same product clearly depend on the legitimisation that each grant to ridicule. The senders legitimise sending these caricatures; they know very well that it is a criticism, but they consider it completely acceptable as a mechanism for communicative interaction and thus enjoy them. Others are annoyed and offended by them. What some consider freedom of expression, others consider aggression.

Senders of memes adopt a moral perspective about what they represent. When they criticise or offend a social collective or the values or identity of a group, the offensive representations of people or groups tend to be justified and seen as good, to make them acceptable and prevent them from being used against the senders by penalising their action of constructing the memes. Presenting as humour a devastating criticism or naturalise it as normal means legitimising violence. Legitimising violence does not only mean justifying it

based on an explicit moral or legal code. It is enough to present it as acceptable, reasoned, logical, natural or normal (Fernández Villanueva *et al* 2004, 2015).

To minimise the possible negative effect of interpreting the memes as violence, the aggressor's intent is disguised with humour, so the intention of doing harm is denied. The creativity, capacity to find a comic touch and sympathy are highlighted, and there is no doubting of the acceptable intentions. Election campaigns legitimise a certain dose of symbolic harm, irony, ridicule and criticism by their very function of criticising and rejecting the political proposals of adversaries. The problem is to what point are irony, ridicule or criticism acceptable or should be punished; in other words, are legitimate or not legitimate.

As well as the political legitimacy of criticism that may camouflage the violence of the senders, the latter may conceal their intentions indirectly, portraying themselves as sympathetic, with good intentions, agents of the law or courageous. Thus, the memes sent in political campaigns tend to include an implicit message of good intentions, a desire to improve the situation, of putting an end to problems caused by those who are offended in the meme; in other words, supposedly legitimate intentions.

As the intentions of all the political organisers of campaigns have the intention of criticising their opponents, the intent must be assessed from the point of view of whether they are only making a political criticism, or whether their intent is to dehumanise, animalise, or metaphorically destruct the adversary. In other words, whether they shift away from the area of criticism to that of insult. A mimetic representation is insulting if it is presented to the adversary immersed in negative feelings, including physical, psychological and social devaluation; and going as far as dehumanising and depriving the adversary of the basic attributes of any human being.

The transposition of political criticism to insult tends to take place indirectly, through metaphors. In this case we can attribute harmful intent to the sender (which takes us to the classification of illegitimate intent). As a result, the senders become aggressors.

From this point of view, the adversaries represented in the memes are victims of the insult, as their representation invites the reader/viewer to consider them as culpable, deserving insult, and above all, responsible for their social and political situation. Studies about prejudice provide us with guidelines on what representations are prejudicial and can thus cause harm to those who are represented. The image of lazy people assigned to the black population of the United States (Hochschild, 2016), that of sub-humans assigned to the disabled or to sexual minorities, is harmful for these groups. These images are based on false characters and have a very negative undeserved connotation that does not correspond to objective reality.

Social psychology early on pointed to the relationship between negative stereotypes and hostility and discrimination against groups. Hostility is an emotional predisposition close to anger or rage, and thus it can easily lead to aggression (lynching, disturbances, persecution of groups, witch hunts, etc.) in contexts of conflict or competition. Heterosexual hostility is present in sexism (Glick & Fiske, 2001). Aversive racism is very harmful to the group that suffers it, as it is very difficult to combat and evolves into new forms that make it more difficult to recognise and combat (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005). The violent normalisation of racism through the use of humour is what the Brazilian author Adilson Moreira calls "recreative racism" (Moreira, 2019). It is a form of negative characterisation; however, much stronger is the dehumanisation of the Other, which implies hostility, rejection and delegitimization, with its discriminatory and excluding consequences, which help crystallise racism as a structural phenomenon characteristic of the post–colonial Brazilian context.

3. Objectives

This case study proposes the analysis of the main memes that contributed in the election campaign to the construction of the Bolsonaro story on WhatsApp and the trivialisation and

legitimisation of his violent project. The objective is to reveal the influence of humour and irony (specifically in the memes) in the construction of political violence and the construction of the "enemy" of phenomenon of Bolsonarism. The hypothesis we will support in our case is that the category of "enemy" is not constructed based on political fundamentals but on the most basic human and ethical foundations: the enemy is an obscene, dirty, lazy, subnormal individual or group with animaloid features; in fact, subhuman.

4. Methodology

The methodology is based on several works belonging to the so-called visual methodology of Esmeralda Ballesteros (2014) and Araceli Serrano (2008, 2012), which provide examples of the analysis of audiovisual language that we deal with in this paper. These authors position the image as a core element in a visual sociology, revealing all its potential in the analytical process. In the work of Serrano and Zurdo our society is defined as "icon-centred" (Serrano & Zurdo, 2012); and Ballesteros describes images as "force fields," as a core element in a discursive analysis (Ballesteros, 2014).

However, the analysis carried out is based primarily on the procedure of Mey and Dietrich (2016) who propose an analysis of visual products based on the methodology supported by the Grounded Theory of Strauss and Corbin (1994). This is a methodology that systematises qualitative research through the construction of hypotheses and theories using data collection and analysis. The procedure of Mey and Dietrich proposes an inductive methodology that extracts the categories through the description and classification of the material and data sources to be analysed.

These authors understand that when these icons are produced prior to the analysis, the analysis must be carried out in the following order, which is used in this article: 1) Production of an inventory of items; 2) Segmentation of the elements for subsequent classification; 3) Writing and codification of memoranda as processes of interlinked interpretation; and 4) Interpretation and integration of various forms of knowledge on the subject.

The inventory of memes is not simply a list of image elements, but a selection of these elements with a view to an active construction, which acts as a basis for and is related to the desired hypothesis. The segmentation of the elements considers the verbal elements together with the visual. The process of interpretation includes the cultural dimensions that may refer to the targets or characters represented in the memes; and the integration of forms of knowledge is understood as the links with other related results, work and analysis.

In accordance with the studies of Leticia Cesarino (2019), the WhatsApp groups of Bolsonaro supporters could be divided into 4 types: 1) Official groups, responsible for countering the limited election advertising time granted to Bolsonaro on TV; 2) Support groups, in which daily mass releases are made by the administrators, and where the users may not interact with each other; 3) Large groups, made up of up to 256 members, who do not know each other, and who are dispersed geographically. There is a high rate of fake and aggressive news in these groups. There is also coordination between political activism at street level and the construction of the online discourse; and 4) Personal groups, characterised by high interpersonal communication, considered "safe" spaces where members exchange emotions sincerely.

In this article we will focus on the third type, the large groups. The data were collected in closed WhatsApp groups of Bolsonaro supporters during an ethnographic investigation that accompanied the rise of the "far-right" in the 2018 Brazilian election campaign. All the memes were shared (and probably produced) within the time frame of the months of September, October and November 2018; in other words from the official start of the national election campaign. The monitoring ended with the victory of the candidate Jair Messias Bolsonaro.

The sample for analysis consists of 132 memes, in the following categories: In the category of "non-citizen," the ethnographic data show us that a variety of groups are covered: the

political opposition, feminist groups, the inhabitants of *favelas* (shanty towns) minorities of African descent and the LGTBI+.

The justification for collecting the memes is based on the following analytical categories in the study of violence: 1) Polarisation, which is an important dimension of violence. Examples of this polarisation are black/white, intellectual/irrational, hero/villain, dirty/clean, obscene/pure; 2) Stereotyping: application of all the clichés of negative stereotypes to opponents; and 3) Dehumanisation of opponents through animalisation, degradation, anti-intellectualism and low intelligence. We use three analytical categories to analyse the memes. The categories are present in all of them, with varying levels of influence. As we will see, the construction of the native category of "enemy" is composed of a number of ideological and discursive elements we have defined for the classification of the memes. We then selected the 15 memes that best represent political identification, so the Bolsonaro supporter is defined as "a good citizen" with respect to the "non-citizen."

5. Results. Trivialisation of a violent political project

5.1. *Heroes against villains: Racism, anti-intellectualism and dehumanisation of others*

The category of "enemy" is constructed as a contrast between the heroism of the leading characters (Bolsonaro supporters) and the devaluation, stereotyping and dehumanisation of the enemies; the attack against feminism and LGTBIQ+ groups; racism against Afro-Brazilians (and indigenous Brazilians) through the criminalisation of poverty; anti-intellectualism; and scatological language with respect to the political opposition.

Of the 132 memes, we have detected 4 in which heroism is the absolutely core element. Nevertheless, this element is reflected across a variety of representations in our sample. Bolsonaro is presented in these memes as shooting from combat vehicles, like a romantic seductor or an authoritarian who nevertheless integrates minorities. Bolsonaro appears in other representations with Christian symbols, reinforcing the dichotomy of Good (God) against Evil (the Devil), as a heroic victim who is attacked in the press, or as a hero capable of alternating features of violent masculinity with the appeal to sensitivity and emotions (Bolsonaro crying, Bolsonaro hugging a child, etc.).

And against this heroic display of the Bolsonaro supporters is the depraved and villainous image of the opposition as a whole. The scatological language used against the political opposition is a basic piece in our sample; in fact, the most represented. Of the 132 memes, we have detected 48 in which this element lies at the core. The opposition is represented as animals in cages, the working classes as left-wing voters (as cleaners, road sweepers). The aim is to explain that whoever votes for the left is a loser in their professional and personal life. Moral depravity and degradation are shown through a variety of images of excrement around the progressive leaders, the physical attack on children by the Workers' Party, or the constant animalisation using a variety of species (monkeys, rabbits, foxes, bears, mice, flies, donkeys or donkey charmers).

One of the main consequences observed during the election campaign, and something that strengthens the study, is the provocation of disgust and rejection with respect to political opponents and the presentation of Bolsonaro's side as saviours, rescuers, liberators from animality and humanisers. It is the legitimisation of their violent actions in the meme presenting metaphorically good intentions and positivity of the Bolsonaro project in the face of the degradation of the opposition. The objective is to legitimise violence against the alleged depravity. A variety of images can be found which explicitly support this mechanism, like the representative meme that reads: "Un hombre de bien precisa de un arma" (A good man needs a weapon).

In addition, the groups or collectives who are not sympathisers with Bolsonarism are denigrated one by one. Feminism and the LGTBIQ+ collectives are central to 45 of the memes

collected, but they are present in many more. One of the main elements (supplemented by the polarised call for the feminine role pertaining to the "traditional family") and showing various images by which one would deduce that if women do not engage in this role they will necessarily be depraved, animalised and objectified through images that show hyper-sexualisation, dirt, disorders and deformity.

Racism against Afro-Brazilians (and indigenous Brazilians) through criminalising poverty is the second most frequent feature, detected in 28 memes as a central element. This element appears in the image of the former president Lula, originally from the north-east[6], mixed with the negative stereotype that represents unfaithfulness and theft (north-eastern depravity); Afro-Brazilians carry rifles; dark colours in representations of the city have a direct association with chaos and disorder, as well as dirt, compared with the clear, white neighbourhoods that are noble areas, where order and control are the rule for harmony.

Anti-intellectualism is the third feature with which the opposition and the non-supporters are stereotyped. It is the core element in 12 memes and is associated with moral depravation. Artists are represented as dependent on public finance, lazy, not workers and even as carrying arms, in other words dangerous beings who in the last resort can lead to the death of the "good citizen." State schools are represented as spaces in which progressive thought rules, so the images show the depravity of teachers, the hyper-sexualisation of female students of colour and the lack of order among the young from the *favelas* (also of colour) compared with the military schools, where the flag of "order and progress" is the educational motto.

The memes acted as images bearing the three basic elements in the construction and normalisation of violence: polarisation, stereotyping and dehumanisation, which were present in a variety of degrees in each of them. The types are organised as follows:

1) Various memes act as an element of political polarisation, reinforcing the boundary of identification between "Us" (the good, real citizens) against "them" (the enemy, the anti-citizen). The memes that represent this idea as a core element would be those that present comparative images, highlighting the features of simplification through the opposition itself: F. 2 ("Ele Sim vs elenâo"), F. 3 ("Before and after"), F. 8 (Women with "Bolsas" cards" (welfare assistance) and F. 11 ("Moral depravity" at school).

2) Many of the memes collaborate in the stereotype by which clichés and simplifications are applied with elements considered negative for enemies. The memes that represent this idea as central would be those in which the simplifications allow users to categorise the characters of the electoral political arena simply and superficially: F. 1 (Bolsonaro and Trump), F. 4 ("They'll call you homophobic"), F. 6 – ("Bolsa familia" motorcycle), F. 7 – ("Minha casa, minha vida"), F. 10 (Black pseudo-intellectual Marxism) and F. 9 (Marxist teacher).

3) The use of memes assisted actively in the process of dehumanising opponents, using forms of animalisation and intellectual or moral degradation. The memes that represent this idea in a central way are those characterised by a high level of explicit obscenity: F. 5 (Chewakas), F. 12 (Flies and excrement), F. 13 (Haddad cockroach), F. 14 (Bolsonaro spanking Haddad) and F. 15 (Skull).

5.2. *The detailed categories of constructing the enemy: analysis of symptomatic memes*

To improve comprehension of the results we present a detailed analysis of the 15 most representative memes from the sample, highlighting the symbolic elements and the categories we have described.

---

[6] The north-east region of Brazil is historically the biggest concentration of the population of African descent, so rational prejudice will often be accompanied by prejudice against the north-eastern population.

Element 1: Heroism

Figure 1: Bolsonaro and Trump.

To construct the enemy, the opposite side is needed: the hero. This image represents Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro as muscular heroes prepared to save their countries. Trump and Bolsonaro are compared to the figure of Rambo, and the message transmitted is that only through force and violence will it be possible to overcome the enemy. The message strengthens the dichotomy between good and evil, between the good citizen with respect to the bandit; of the hero against the enemy. In other images the hero is associated with religion through allusions to Jesus, angels or overcoming sin.

Element 2: Attack against feminism and the LGTBIQ+ collectives

Figure 2: "Ele Sim vs ele não."

During the election campaign the hashtag "*elenâo*" ("not him") was created to reject the candidature of Bolsonaro. Because of the success of the hashtag, the Bolsonaro supporters decided to create the opposite hashtag, "*ele sim*" ("yes, him"). The image shows on one side the attributes of women who support Bolsonaro. They are morally ethical, take care of their children, respect the family and practice good hygiene and their public image.

Compared with these, the feminists against Bolsonaro are shown as dirty and immoral; promiscuous and not respectful of traditions. A moral boundary is established in the comparison: good against evil. Dirty against clean. And Bolsonarism reinforces the criminalisation of feminism and the rights of women.

Figure 3: "Before and after."

Another moral dichotomy has also been constructed in this image: on the left we see a person with women's clothes, and the word "before." On the right is the same person, dressed differently. The writing on this image reads: "Now with Jesus." The image tries to criminalise the LGTBIQ+ collectives by saying that they have no morals or ethics. The story constructed was that to transform yourself into a good citizen you have to believe in Jesus. Jesus will be the solution to end with "the disease of transsexuality."

Figure 4: "They'll call you homophobic."

This image portrays a man kissing a child, next to gay pride flags. Under the image is the phase "This is the right of those who love. And if you don't agree, they'll call you homophobic." The message aims to normalise the idea that the LGTBQ community want to sexually "pervert" children. The family must be protected, as these people could endanger the supposed moral cleanliness of children.

The use of children in Bolsonarism has been recurring as a way of constructing the enemy. Any potentially dangerous person for Bolsonarism would be dangerous for children. Children are understood as the nucleus of a moral and religious project linked to the traditional family. The "bandit" is dangerous because he physically attacks children. The LGTBIQ+ collectives represent an attack on the immaculate moral values of children. Along the same lines, teachers also preach sexuality and Marxism in class.

Figure 5: Chewakas.

This image shows a number of Chewakas (characters from the *Star Wars* saga). The title reads "the first national meeting of women against Bolsonaro."

The image tries to say that women who do not support Bolsonaro will be very hairy and not shave or wax. Bolsonarism identifies these attitudes as part of the dirt that characterises feminism. The message thus expresses that women who are "good women" vote for Bolsonaro and also shave their bodies.

Thus, the violence of Bolsonarism against women includes the symbolic submission of women to a type of traditional and repressive aesthetics. Women will only have rights if they take care of their bodies. Otherwise, they must be ridiculed as part of the monstrosity making up the ideological spectre of progressivism. The image strips women of their humanity, and thus of their rights to citizenship through the animalisation of their aesthetic features.

Element 3: Racism against Afro-Brazilians through the criminalisation of poverty

Figure 6: "Bolsa familia" motorbike.

This image shows a group of black people, possibly a family, on a motorbike. The written message says: "going to get the Bolsa Familia." Although the original image does not necessarily correspond to Brazilian people, the added text refers to a social project called "Bolsa Familia," a kind of basic income targeted at vulnerable groups. The image suggests irresponsibility and lack of control, which are the stereotypical negative features of the black population.

The neoliberal project of Bolsonaro attacks these types of welfare policies. Thus, they project the profile of the kind of people who take advantage of the Brazilian welfare system. These people are black and have many children, so they can be eligible for more social assistance.

Bolsonaro himself has said on numerous occasions that the reproductive possibilities of the poor in Brazil should be limited chemically, thus whitening the skin of Brazilian society itself. Thus, the poor Afro-Brazilian population, and by extension also the indigenous Brazilians, would also be left out of the recognition of full citizenship.

Figure 7: "Minha casa, minha vida."

This image is another criticism of vulnerable groups. It shows a man sitting down drinking beer. Next to him is a house constructed out of beer cans. The text reads "Minha casa, minha vida" (my house, my life). This refers to another social welfare project, which makes public housing available to people who need it most and who live in *favelas*. Nevertheless, Bolsonarism criminalises these groups, trying to represent them as alcoholics, who use the housing system to buy drink.

Figure 8: Women with "BolsaFamilia" cards (social assistance).

In this image, the text reads: "What is the best social programme?" In the upper part an Afro-Brazilian woman is showing her "Bolsa Familia" card. At the bottom, a young, slim, white woman shows a card on which is written "Bolsa Naro."

The image is an attempt to degrade the poor Afro-Brazilians who receive social assistance. In contrast, the good citizen is white, with stereotypical Western features, who will vote for Bolsonaro. This image establishes a clear hierarchy between two individuals: one belongs to a despicable social class, which can be attacked and ridiculed; and the other to a recognised social class that does not need assistance to be successful. The white woman does not need social assistance; she will achieve her goals on her own merits. However, the black woman will need assistance, as she less hard-working or lazy. The structural inequalities are ignored. Thus, the image strongly reflects the meritocratic features of Bolsonarism.

### Element 4: Anti-intellectualism

Figure 9: Marxist teacher.

This image shows a traditional happy family. The message reads: "Don't change what you have learned from your family for what a Marxist teacher will teach you."

The dichotomy of this image is between the traditional family and left-wing thought. Teachers may be manipulating the minds of children. In this situation Bolsonarism recalls that the traditional family composed of white, heterosexual and happy parents and grandparents is the solution.

It also positions the family institution above the school system. Hierarchically what is learned in the family has more value than what is learned at school.

Figure 10: Black pseudo-intellectual Marxism.
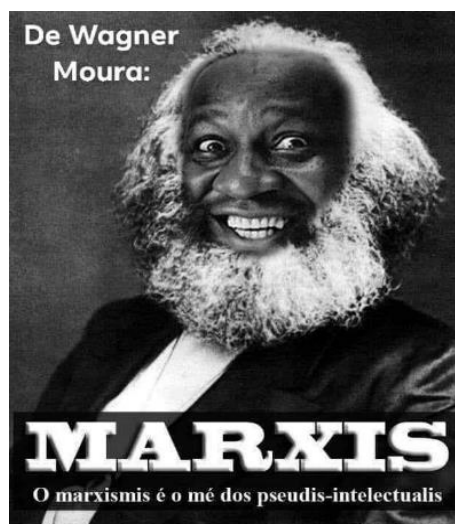
This image is a montage of Karl Marx, who has been given the features of a famous Afro-Brazilian: the comic actor nicknamed "Mussum." Mussum's character portrayed a poor, alcoholic black man in the TV programme "Os Trapalhões." On almost every occasion, this character verbalises his need to drink (or, as the image says, "mé," slang for any strong drink such as "cachaça").

In this way, it tries to ridicule Marxist thought, since by representing him as a black man suffering from alcoholism his thought is no longer "serious": Marx is transformed, as it says in the text, into a "pseudo-intellectual." Karl Marx's writings would be a "drug" and his readers or followers would be "addicted" to it. Marxism itself can be seen as another kind of "disease," reinforcing the health/disease duplicity (Bolsonaro's supporters being the first and those on the left the others). In addition, both the montage and the text suggest a meaning of madness, agitation and folly.

Figure 11: "Moral depravity" in schools.

This image consists of two photographs of classrooms side-by-side. On the left the text reads: "Days were like this," showing serious young female students wearing uniforms. The image on the right has the legend "Days are like this." It shows some female students dancing provocatively in the classroom.

The image tries to present the idea that sexualisation has depraved morals. It is a feeling of nostalgia: before, in the period of the military dictatorship, women would have been serious, morally acceptable, aesthetically clean. However, today women have been educated to sexualise space.

Implicitly it is an attack on teachers, who would be those responsible for the alleged moral depravity. It also values past times, which in Brazil means valuing the recent military dictatorship. In other words, it says that democracy has brought with it a dirty form of thought that the military would not have allowed. It is a call to military action, evoking a supposedly better, more decent past.

In the images of this element, as in a number of others, we also see concealed racism, as the "black" figures are associated with anti-intellectualism and the degradation of education.

Element 5: Scatological language, dehumanisation and degradation of the political opposition

Figure 12: Flies and excrement.

This image shows a piece of excrement surrounded by flies. The message reads: "only the flies have changed." It is the anti-establishment discourse of Bolsonarism. All politicians are like flies that fly around the excrement, but the system itself, in other words, democracy as it exists, is the core structural problem. Voting for other politicians is no use, as the system has to be changed; and to change the system the only option is to vote for Bolsonaro and his markedly military discourse.

Figure 13: "Haddad cockroach."

This image is of the candidate of the Workers' Party (PT) Fernando Haddad, represented in the body of a cockroach. Part of the scatological language of Bolsonarism aims to trivialise violence, dehumanise the enemy and present him as something dirty.

Using representations of insects to dehumanise the enemy is not something new. It happened during Nazism. The Jews were compared to cockroaches, and had to be exterminated using the same techniques as cockroaches; in other words, with insecticide, or in the human case, gas chambers.

Through humour and irony, the political opposition is being transformed into an insect which brings to mind the times of fascism and Nazism. Once more, the dispossession of citizenship takes place through dehumanisation.

Figure 14: Bolsonaro flogging Haddad.

This image shows Bolsonaro spanking the opposition candidate Fernando Haddad with a flip-flop. The flip-flop is covered with the Brazilian flag. The degradation of the spanked man is clear, becoming a child in an obscene image. The image transmits the violence that must be exercised against political opponents: the opposition and its ideas must not be respected; they have to be spanked in the name of something greater: in the name of Brazil. The use of the Brazilian flag on the flip-flop shows how the nationalist project justifies the use of violence. If it is a case of saving Brazil from its enemies, any technique is possible.

Figure 15: Skull.
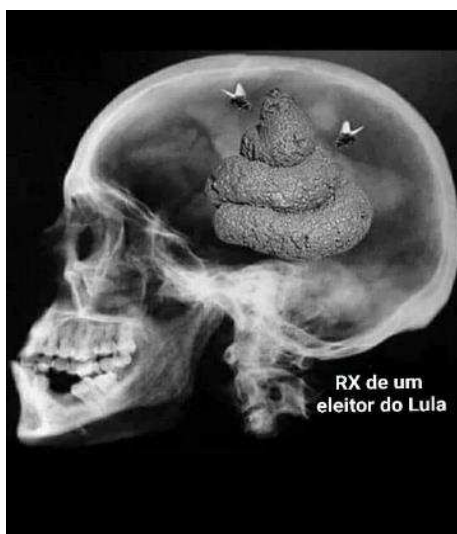
The final image shows an x-ray of a skull. According to the text, the skull is that of a voter for the Workers' Party. Instead of a brain, the skull contains excrement surrounded by flies.

This is how Bolsonarism ridicules, degrades and dehumanises any person who does not think like them. It shows that any person who votes for another political option will do so because they do not know how to think, as they do not have a brain. It is a clear expression of the political intolerance of Bolsonarism. And as the political opponent does not have a brain, there is no need to convince them, so there is no remedy; the remedy involves voting for Bolsonaro. And there is no need for understanding or dialogue, simply imposition over the enemies that have been constructed.

6. Conclusions

Humour is a type of language with its own codes, which are interpreted in a determined way in specific communities. The incongruent relationship between various elements of memes (such as within the image itself, or between the image and the text) obliges the reader to fill in the gaps, to "resolve the puzzle" (Shifman, 2014, p. 941). This leads to understanding the argument underlying the meme and in general, the humour, as an effect related to the resolution of the incongruity.

It is worth highlighting at this point that the investigation suggests that the level of manipulation of the recipients of the memes analysed is related to the trust in the source of the information (Chilton, 2003). In this respect, the level of trust in the sender in WhatsApp groups of this type is high. It is a space that collaborates in the construction of a new identity: Bolsonarism itself as a political phenomenon. Thus, in the process of constructing the truth, the recipient of the memes, the humour and its implicit violence appear to take precedence over a process of reflection regarding the legitimacy of the actual source of information that transmits it. It satisfies the pleasure and the satisfaction of domination and supremacy over the "enemy" (as a category we have deconstructed) rather than the need to determine the level of truth of the source.

The humorous memes constructed on a violent ideological basis are legitimised in this process of collective recognition that is produced when sharing them. The grounds through which the humoristic rhetoric of the memes provides a normalisation of a violent ideology are linked to the space of meaning occupied by humour in the public sphere: humour is understood as something that "should not be taken seriously," highlighting the comic, ridiculous or funny side of a context.

In the words of Professor Violeta Alarcón Zayas (2017): "the meme, like a joke, achieves through humour a situation in which, for a moment, perverse partisan impulses acquire a social status with a meaning (shared); and therefore a pleasure that arises from a common fantasy, which is tolerated as such, as it is disguised as comedy: it is not serious, and therefore violent ideas can be played with, which cannot be repudiated through the codes of conduct of non-humorous rhetoric."

When humour is aggressive and verges on deformation or defamation, we have to question whether it is humour or violence. It not only aims to produce superiority over targets, which is characteristic of aggressive humour (Kuiper, 2014), but to deform their image, attributing negative stereotypes or, even worse, dehumanising the Other. In this case, they become victims. Dehumanisation has a number of functions: to explain the conflict, justify aggression against the group and promote a feeling of superiority and provoke disgust and rejection. "It means the construction of an image of the Other as someone different and inferior. And also the mobilisation of intense emotions associated with the image. And immediate hatred and humiliation; followed by cruelty. And it ends with the justification of the destructive behaviour. It is a spiral that passes almost unappreciated" (Rodríguez Pérez, 2007, p. 38).

The memes that have been analysed show an intense use of violence against the opposition and those who are not supporters. Beneath the comedy they conceal their insults, disdain, prejudice, stereotyping, devaluation, degradation and dehumanisation. The political project of Bolsonarism constructs a reality in which "We" and "the Others" are completely opposed in their representation and in social value. The "We" is accompanied by the description of brave intellectual white heroes, supported by religion; while the Others are associated with stereotyped depraved, degraded and dehumanised features. Dehumanisation is based on the images of animalisation, privation of intelligence, sociability and on connotations of danger, degradation and repulsion that coincide with various of the connotations of what is now the classic concept of dehumanisation of Haslam (2006).

Degradation leads to the conversion of the opponents into waste and excrement. In a majority percentage of the memes these features are represented in the black population, which reveals additional racism in all the meme production.

The social effects of trivialisation of violence and its masking through humour are not trivial. The difficulty of identifying true violent intentions makes it difficult to assess their illegitimacy, or even to recognise the violence implicit in them. In a subtle but influential way it promotes the projection of stereotypes, unjust images that make it difficult for (natural) empathy to be aroused for the targets of the damaging and unfair images (victims). The emotion aroused by the degrading and dehumanised images is rejection and disgust. Second, it allows the viewers to become accomplices of the sender of the meme (the aggressor) in their attribution of responsibility or of the deserving nature of the situation. The images of memes raise a particular difficulty of identification, in terms of recognising prejudice and combating it; because of their relationship with the humour that camouflages prejudice and because the allusions are indirect, which makes determining their illegitimacy and even their presence more difficult.

The meme campaign we have analysed is an instrument that legitimises and normalises violence that is racist, sexist and against intellectuals, targeted at the organised political opposition and against the groups that are not sympathetic or close to Bolsonarism. In addition, they present a reconfiguration of the rights of citizens and the creation of a category: "the Enemy", supported in an evangelical religious discourse. The "far-right" constructs a collective enemy, generates a variety of confronted systems of morality and normalises the acceptance of its violent logic through the code of humour.

References

Alarcón Zayas, V. (2017). Humorismo como creación y fortalecimiento de los vínculos en la sociedad red: el caso de los memes sobre filósofos. *Revista de comunicación*, *16*, 122–146. Retrieved from https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/oaiart?codigo=6015158

Ballesteros Doncel, E. (2015). Debajo del burka: Discursos visuales sobre las múltiples formas de violencia ejercidas sobre las mujeres afganas. *Arenal: Revista De Historia De Mujeres, 22*(1), 157-187. https://www.doi.org/10.30827/arenal.vol22.num1.157-187

Beard, F. (2008). Advertising and Audience Offense: The Role of Intentional Humor. *Journal of Marketing Communications, 14*(1), 1-17. https://www.doi.org/10.1080/13527260701467760

Cesarino, L. (2019). Fractal identity and representation in bolsonarism: The king's digital body, conservantism–neoliberalism bivalence, and fractal personhood. *Revista De Antropologia, 62*(3), 530-557. https://www.doi.org/10.11606/2179-0892.ra.2019.165232

Chilton, P. (2003). Manipulation. In J. Verschueren, J-O. Östman, J. Blommaert & C. Bulcaen (Eds.), *Handbook of Pragmatics* (pp. 1-16). John Benjamins. https://www.doi.org/10.1075/hop.8.man1

Dean, J. (2019). Sorted for Memes and Gifs: Visual Media and Everyday Digital Politics. *Political Studies Review, 17*(3), 255-266. https://www.doi.org/10.1177/1478929918807483

Fernández Villanueva, C., Domínguez, R., Revilla, J. C. & Anagnostou, A. (2004). Formas de legitimación de la violencia en TV. *Política Y Sociedad, 41*(1), 183-199. Retrieved from https://revistas.ucm.es/index.php/POSO/article/view/POSO0404130183A

Fernández Villanueva, C., Revilla, J. C. & Domínguez, R. (2015). *Psicología social de la violencia*. Madrid: Síntesis. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282857600_Psicologia_Social_de_la_Violencia

Gaertner, S. &Dovidio, J. (2005). Understanding and Addressing Contemporary Racism: From Aversive Racism to the Common Ingroup Identity Model. *Journal of Social Issues, 61*(3), 615-639. https://www.doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2005.00424.x

Glick, P. & Fiske, S. T. (2001). *Ambivalent stereotypes as legitimizing ideologies: Differentiating paternalistic and envious prejudice.* In J. T. Jost& B. Major (Eds.), *The psychology of legitimacy: Emerging perspectives on ideology, justice, and intergroup relations* (pp. 278–306). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Haslam, N. (2006). Dehumanization: An Integrative Review. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 10*(3), 252-264. https://www.doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr1003_4

Hochschild, A. & ProQuest (2016). *Strangers in their own land: Anger and mourning on the American right/Arlie Russell Hochschild*. New York: The New Press.

Horst, H. & Miller, D. (2012). Normativity and materiality: A view from digital anthropology. *Media International Australia, Incorporating Culture & Policy*, *145*, 103–111. https://www.doi.org/10.1177/1329878X1214500112

Huntington, H. E. (2016). Pepper Spray Cop and the American Dream: Using Synecdoche and Metaphor to Unlock Internet Memes' Visual Political Rhetoric. *Communication Studies*, *67*(1), 77-93. https://www.doi.org/10.1080/10510974.2015.1087414

Förster, K. & Brantner, C. (2016) Masking the Offense? An Ethical View on Humor in Advertising. *Journal of Media Ethics, 31*(3), 146-161. https://www.doi.org/10.1080/23736992.2016.1188013

Kien, G. (2019). *Communicating with Memes: Consequences in Post-truth Civilization*. Lexington books. Rowman & Littlefield Washington. Retrieved from https://dokumen.pub/communicating-with-memes-consequences-in-post-truth-civilization-1498551335-9781498551335.html

Kuiper, N. A. (2014). Investigating the role of humor in psychological health and well-being. *Europe's Journal of Psychology, 10*(3), 464-479. https://www.doi.org/10.5964/ejop.v10i3.809

Mey, G. & Dietrich, M. (2016). From Text to Image—Shaping a Visual Grounded Theory Methodology. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *17*(2), Art. 2. https://www.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-17.2.2535

Moreira, A. (2019). *Racismo recreativo*. São Paulo: Sueli Carneiro.

Mortimer, K., Pascoe, K. & Ogilvie Johns, G. (2010). Is it funny or just offensive: an examination of the relationship between humour and offence in UK advertising. In *Transformational Marketing: Proceedings of Academy of Marketing Conference* (9781846000317). Coventry: Academy of Marketing. Retrieved from http://nectar.northampton.ac.uk/3628/1/Mortimer20103628.pdf

Potter, W. & Warren, R. (1998). Humor as camouflage of televised violence. *Journal of Communication, 48*(2), 40-57. https://www.doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1998.tb02747.x

Rodríguez Pérez, A. (2007). Nosotros somos humanos, los otros no. El estudio de la deshumanización y de la infrahumanización en Psicología. *Revista IPLA, 1*(1), 28-39. Retrieved from https://docplayer.es/169140-Nosotros-somos-humanos-los-otros-no.html

Ross, A. & Rivers, D. (2017). Digital cultures of political participation: Internet memes and the discursive delegitimization of the 2016 U.S Presidential candidates. *Discourse, Context & Media, 16*, 1-11. https://www.doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2017.01.001

Serrano Pascual, A. (2008). El análisis de materiales visuales en la investigación social: el caso de la publicidad. In A. J. Gordo López & A. Serrano Pascual (Coords.), *Estrategias y prácticas cualitativas de investigación social* (pp. 245-286). Madrid: Pearson Prentice Hall. Retrieved from http://biblioteca.hegoa.ehu.eus/downloads/20427/%2Fsystem%2Fpdf%2F3862%2FEstrategias_y_practicas_cualitativas_de_investigacion_social.pdf

Serrano, A. & Zurdo, A. (2012). Investigación social con materiales visuales. *Metodología de la investigación social: técnicas innovadoras y sus aplicaciones.* Madrid: Síntesis. Retrieved from https://eprints.ucm.es/48842/1/Uso_de_materiales_visuales%20Araceli_serrano_y_Angel_Zurdo%20olibro%20osintesis.paginado.pdf

Shabbir, H. & Thwaites, D. (2007). The Use of Humor to Mask Deceptive Advertising: It's No Laughing Matter. *Journal of Advertising, 36*(2), 75-85. https://www.doi.org/10.2753/JOA0091-3367360205

Shifman, L. (2014). *Memes in digital culture.* Vol. MIT Press Essential Knowledge. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Shifman, L. & Thelwall, M. (2009). Assessing global diffusion with web memetics: The spread and evolution of a popular joke. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, *60*(12), 2567–2576. https://www.doi.org/10.1002/asi.21185

Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1994). Grounded theory methodology. *Handbook of qualitative research,* 273-285. Retrieved from http://www.depts.ttu.edu/education/our-people/Faculty/additional_pages/duemer/epsy_5382_class_materials/Grounded-theory-methodology.pdf

Wiggins, B. (2019). The Discursive Power of Memes in Digital Culture. In *The Discursive Power of Memes in Digital Culture: Ideology, Semiotics, and Intertextuality* (1st ed., pp. 21-36). New York: Routledge. https://www.doi.org/10.4324/9780429492303-2