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"Funny Weapons": The Norms of Humour in the Construction of Far-Right Political Polarisation

Gabriel Bayarri Toscano [1] **and Concepción Fernández-Villanueva** [2]

[1] Audiovisual Communication, Rey Juan Carlos University, Spain
[2] Social Psychology, Complutense University, Spain

Correspondence: Concepción Fernández-Villanueva (cfvillanueva@cps.ucm.es)

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Abstract

Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Nayib Bukele in El Salvador, and Javier Milei in Argentina are just a few paradigmatic cases that represent, to different degrees, the rise of populism, the advances of right-wing radicalism, and the resurgence of extreme nationalism in Latin America in the last decade. 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 these political campaigns: memetic communication. Through the use of memes in social media (above all WhatsApp), the far-right transformed violent discourses against political opponents, feminism, racialised persons, and poverty into a series of messages legitimised through humour and irony. This process operated as a simplification that disrupted stable systems of social norms and metaphorical frameworks. Between September 2022 and February 2024, in the weeks leading up to and following each presidential election, we collected and analysed visual data employing open-source software. We also conducted ethnographic fieldwork and digital ethnography during the weeks preceding the elections to capture online and offline discourses and the affective milieu of each electoral campaign, providing contextual insight into the impact of memetic communication. Our analysis demonstrates the trivialisation and legitimisation of violence against political opponents and other social groups. This process may also be interpreted as an attempt to render the unconstitutional as legitimate, framing exclusionary or violent political acts as necessary or even virtuous. Much of this legitimisation was camouflaged under the mask of supposed humour and irony, which in reality was insulting, prejudicial, and dehumanising.

Keywords

far-right; humour; Latin America; memetic communication; social norms; violence

1. Introduction

It was 2 PM in a suburb of Rio de Janeiro in October 2022. A skinny, ownerless dog was begging for food at a demonstration in support of Bolsonaro. A protester shouted: "Watch out for that dog—if Lula wins, we'll have to call him picanha!"—referring to a prized cut of beef. Around him, dozens of people erupted in laughter, amplifying the joke: "If Lula wins, he'll be the first to eat it!" shouted a man dressed in yellow. "We'll have to be careful when buying a hot dog!" added a young man wearing a T-shirt with their leader's face. As Bolsonaro appeared on stage, thousands of Brazilian flags—green and yellow—were raised to the cry of "Mito! Mito! Mito!" erasing any trace of the street dog from their minds.

Elsewhere in Latin America, in a suburb of Buenos Aires, a supporter of Milei during his campaign in September 2023 remarked: "Milei is good, he is a man who likes dogs; his dogs are part of his thinking." The boy, attending the march with his Uber Eats bike, was joined by another voice: "But the Kirchneristas eat cats; soon we'll be eating dogs for sure if that mafia continues to rule," exclaimed a middle-aged man, visibly anxious. "We run the risk of becoming like Venezuela—a country of laughter, a communist country," an elderly woman remarked, oscillating between laughter and indignation. These unsettling jokes travelled beyond Latin America, taking on new meanings. By 2024, Donald Trump, in a presidential debate against Kamala Harris, claimed that Haitians living in the US "are eating dogs." Harris's initial reaction was laughter—an instinctive, perhaps nervous, response to what she perceived as rhetorical absurdity. However, her expression quickly changed as she attempted to reframe the comment within the domain of the "serious."

The trajectory of these jokes illustrates how humour can serve as a social norm—either to strengthen in-group bonds and alleviate anxiety or, conversely, to justify the violation of norms. Within the far-right political ecosystem, humour operates not simply as entertainment but as a strategic tool to reconfigure the boundaries of what is socially acceptable. Leaders such as Bukele, Milei, Bolsonaro, and Kast are not merely aligned in their militarism, authoritarian tendencies, violent rhetoric, and market fundamentalism; they are also bound by their deployment of humour as a means of shaping political discourse. As influencers in their own right, they cultivate and amplify humorous narratives on social media, where laughter becomes a mechanism for normalising otherwise transgressive discourses.

In this article, we analyse how memes produced by supporters of far-right leaders—particularly in Brazil, Argentina, and El Salvador—contribute to the normalisation of violence and the construction of exclusionary social norms. Through a contextualised visual analysis of meme communication, we examine the interplay between humour and political discourse, with a focus on how visual and affective framings legitimise aggression, trivialise violence, and reshape collective perceptions of what is socially acceptable. By exploring both the discursive and emotional dimensions of these memes—whether manually created or AI-generated—we argue that humorous political content functions as a powerful tool in the radicalisation of right-wing movements and the reinforcement of authoritarian narratives within the Latin American postcolonial context.

2. The Normalisation of Violence Through Norms of Humour

2.1. The "Serious" vs. the "Humorous"

Discursive coding in terms of "seriousness" or "humour" has traditionally been framed as a dichotomy, separating direct, literal communication from humorous, interpretive communication (Wodak et al., 2021). Humour, as a communicative code, is distinguished by its flexibility—it allows for multiple interpretations and the suspension of credibility in the transmission of messages (Dynel & Messerli, 2020). However, this very adaptability makes humour a powerful mechanism for shaping social norms, influencing how audiences perceive what is acceptable within political discourse (Shifman, 2019).

One of the most concerning aspects of humour in political contexts is its capacity to mask misinformation and desensitise audiences to forms of symbolic violence (Haslam, 2022). The claim that political opponents or marginalised groups would resort to eating dogs, for instance, is a rhetorical device that simultaneously ridicules and dehumanises (Billig, 2019). In Brazil, some demonstrators who laughed at such jokes later claimed they did not actually endorse such an idea, while others insisted it was simply a means of mocking political adversaries. Regardless of intent, these jokes serve to reinforce a normative framework in which violence and exclusion are rendered trivial or even humorous. This aligns with Cardoso de Oliveira's (2004) notion of "dignified moral substance"—humour here operates to strip political opponents of their moral standing, justifying their exclusion from the realm of legitimate politics by portraying them as fundamentally transgressive (Fielitz & Ahmed, 2021).

2.2. Violence and Humour

The use of humour to normalise violence has become a core strategy within far-right political communication (Askanius & Keller, 2021). Whether through grassroots digital spaces or official party messaging, humour allows for the introduction of otherwise unacceptable discourses into the public sphere (Merrill et al., 2024). It facilitates discussions of topics such as capital punishment, misogyny, homophobia, and xenophobia by presenting them in an ironic or exaggerated manner (Burkart et al., 2023). This process gradually shifts social norms, making these positions appear more acceptable over time (Brantner et al., 2019).

Humour also provides a convenient shield for those who propagate violent ideas. When challenged, individuals can retreat behind the argument that it was "just a joke," thus evading moral and political accountability (Billig, 2019). This defensive mechanism creates a culture in which those who critique violent humour are themselves ridiculed as overly sensitive or lacking in social awareness (Parrot & Hopp, 2020). As a result, humour functions as a gatekeeping tool, delineating who belongs within certain ideological communities and who does not (Gallardo-Paúls, 2018).

Far from being a passive cultural phenomenon, humour actively shapes the political agenda (Cho et al., 2020). Through repeated exposure to dehumanising jokes, audiences become more receptive to explicit violence (Bastian & Haslam, 2011). First, humorous framings test the boundaries of what is acceptable; later, explicit policy positions or violent rhetoric are introduced with reduced resistance (Pérez & Greene, 2016). This process underscores humour's role as a transitional mechanism—an intermediary step between symbolic violence and its material enactment (Denisova, 2019).

2.3. Latin American Particularities and the Postcolonial Context

Understanding humour as a vehicle for normalising implicit violence requires situating it within its cultural and historical context (Pinheiro-Machado & Vargas-Maia, 2023). In Latin America, the postcolonial condition is key to deciphering how humour operates within political polarisation. Jokes that suggest "a good bandit is a dead bandit" (Bolsonaro's Brazil), that "a dictator can be cool" (Bukele's El Salvador), or that "selling organs is just another form of market freedom" (Milei's Argentina) must be analysed in relation to the region's history of authoritarianism, structural inequality, and racial hierarchies (Bassil et al., 2023).

The militarisation of public discourse is particularly relevant here (Fernández-Villanueva & Bayarri, 2021a). In Latin American far-right humour, opponents are frequently depicted as animals, criminals, or existential threats to the nation (Fernández-Villanueva & Bayarri, 2021b). This tactic—rooted in historical practices of dehumanisation—renders political enemies disposable. The friend-enemy distinction is reinforced through popular memes and jokes that depict progressive leaders as rats, cockroaches, or parasites. Such imagery is not new; it echoes fascist and Nazi propaganda of the 20th century, which similarly employed humour to prime audiences for exclusionary violence (Fielitz & Thurston, 2018).

Humour, then, is far from innocuous—it is a communicative code that both reflects and constructs social norms (Shifman, 2019). In fragile democratic contexts, where reactionary movements wield increasing influence, humorous discourses can become key instruments of radicalisation (Askanius, 2021). The far-right's strategic use of humour in Latin America demands urgent scholarly attention, particularly regarding regulation and digital literacy (Gomes-Franco e Silva et al., 2022). The normalisation of "soft" codes of exclusion through humour not only erodes democratic debate but also sets the stage for more explicit forms of political violence (Colussi et al., 2023).

3. Memetic Communication and the Far-Right

3.1. From Political Cartoons to Digital Memes: Historical Shifts in Visual Political Commentary

In recent years, political discourse in Latin America has become increasingly polarised, with electoral periods serving as moments of peak rhetorical confrontation (Merrill et al., 2024). Political polarisation seeks to legitimise violence against opponents by classifying them as enemies, rendering them politically and socially expendable (Slimovich, 2022). Bandura (2019) highlights how this process fosters devaluation and dehumanisation, elevating certain leaders to near-mythical status while demonising their adversaries—a dynamic that involves the sanctification of political leadership and the simultaneous degradation of dissenting groups, including non-political and marginalised identities. As Soler Gallo (2019) argues, the division of society into an "us" versus "them" dynamic is reinforced through fear, manipulation, hyperbolic statements, irony, sarcasm directed at opponents, and the delegitimisation of conventional politics. This phenomenon has been exacerbated by digital communication technologies, which amplify political narratives through new forms of media (Rubira & Puebla, 2018).

Among these new forms, memetic communication has emerged as a particularly influential mode of discourse, deeply intertwined with the evolution of social norms. However, the memetic mode represents a break from previous forms of political visual commentary, such as printed political cartoons. While both genres deploy

humour and visual exaggeration, traditional editorial cartoons—typically authored, signed, and published in institutional media—often framed their satire within the bounds of journalistic commentary, civic pedagogy, or political critique. Their reach was largely controlled by editorial standards and limited by circulation.

Memes, in contrast, are decontextualised, anonymous, and virally distributed, unanchored from institutional oversight. They rely less on caricatured drawing styles and more on the remix of photographs, screenshots, and AI-generated images. Their humour is not always oriented toward satire, but toward affective mobilisation, mockery, and symbolic annihilation. While the political cartoon is episodic and author-driven, the meme is accumulative, networked, and participatory. It thrives on immediacy and replication, allowing users to appropriate, distort, or intensify its meaning. As noted by Shifman (2019), the hyper-signification of memes allows for layered interpretations that transcend the linear communication style of traditional cartoons. Furthermore, their multimodal design (Burkart et al., 2023; Hakokõngas et al., 2020) enables them to engage audiences simultaneously on cognitive, visual, and emotional levels, making them especially potent tools for shaping social perception in volatile political climates.

3.2. Humour, Norms, and Polarisation in Contemporary Far-Right Memetic Discourse

Memetic communication does not merely reflect political divisions; it actively constructs and reinforces social norms. Unlike traditional political communication, which relies heavily on rational discourse and structured argumentation, memes operate primarily through metaphor, metonymy, and affective appeals. They often use emotionally charged imagery or culturally loaded symbols, and their brevity enhances their ability to spread virally. Their effects are diffuse but powerful, resonating with audiences on an emotional rather than rational level. Moreover, memes can be spontaneously shared and remixed, connecting with existing content in ways that are difficult to predict or control (Bredekamp, 2017). This emotional immediacy makes memes particularly effective tools for fuelling polarisation and reinforcing ideological narratives. Digital humour plays a central role in defining what is socially acceptable. By repeatedly circulating memes that ridicule, dehumanise, or delegitimise political opponents, these visual artefacts contribute to the gradual erosion of democratic norms, normalising hostility, aggression, and political violence.

The study of memetic communication is relatively recent, but it is increasingly recognised for its role in shaping political narratives (Arkenbout, 2022; Askanius & Keller, 2021). According to Dynel and Messerli (2020), the most common form of internet meme consists of an image paired with text, designed to elicit a humorous response. This humour is multimodal (Burkart et al., 2023; Hakokõngas et al., 2020), engaging viewers cognitively, visually, and emotionally. Shifman (2019) notes the phenomenon of hyper-signification, in which memes layer meanings and condense complex social critiques into simple formats. These compressed, emotionally loaded messages act as powerful mobilising forces, attaching feelings to digital objects and contributing to the renegotiation of shared social norms (Cho et al., 2020).

A key aspect of this process is the way humour disguises violence and offence as entertainment. Political memes frequently cross the line into hate speech, but their comedic framing offers plausible deniability. Individuals can evade accountability by claiming they were "just joking," while critics are dismissed as humourless or overly sensitive (Billig, 2019). This tactic is particularly potent in jurisdictions where legal definitions of hate speech remain narrow or ambiguous (Figueruelo Borrieza & Martín Guardado, 2023). In the Latin American context, humour has long served as a means of reinforcing social hierarchies,

especially those based on race, gender, and class. Memes that depict opponents as animals, degenerates, or existential threats function not only as ideological expressions, but as performative acts that delineate who belongs in the national community—and who does not.

In Brazil, Argentina, and El Salvador, memetic communication has become integral to far-right political discourse. In Brazil, Bolsonaro's online supporters frequently posted memes that portray adversaries as weak, corrupt, or effeminate, reinforcing traditional gender norms and delegitimising dissent. In Argentina, supporters of Javier Milei have used memes to frame critics as parasites, equating economic reform with moral purification. In El Salvador, Bukele's online presence features memes that depict him as a saviour or messiah, while opposition figures are mocked as traitors or puppets of foreign powers.

A particularly salient rhetorical device is exaggeration, which involves amplifying specific traits or events beyond their realistic proportions to provoke strong emotional responses or ridicule. This often manifests as hyperbole, a deliberate and overt overstatement used to intensify the message's impact and elicit humour or indignation (Wodak et al., 2021). While all hyperboles are exaggerations, not all exaggerations rise to the level of hyperbole, which is typically more stylised and explicit in its distortion. In the context of far-right memes, these techniques distort opponents' traits for comic effect or vilification. Although satire can sometimes serve as critique, in this case, it becomes a vehicle for rhetorical violence (Gallardo-Paúls, 2018). Memetic mockery has real-world implications: It can harm reputations, incite harassment, or serve as justification for discriminatory policies (Pérez & Greene, 2016). Moreover, the alignment of meme culture with populist rhetoric further amplifies its power. Populist discourse thrives on simplified narratives of good versus evil, friend versus enemy (Mouffe, 2022), and memes provide the perfect medium for transmitting such binaries.

On a global scale, populist movements deploy visual simplifications that echo 20th-century propaganda techniques—especially those used by fascist and communist regimes (Bassil et al., 2023). These movements use humour to present exclusionary ideologies as common sense, masking radicalism with laughter. Leaders like Bolsonaro, Milei, and Bukele embrace this aesthetic as part of their public personas, turning memes into instruments of personal mythmaking and ideological mobilisation (Bayarri et al., 2024; Colussi et al., 2023). There is growing concern over how to regulate memetic communication in this context. As humour operates in legal and cultural grey zones, tech platforms and policymakers struggle to moderate meme-based disinformation and hate. Initiatives like "platform governance triangles" (Gorwa, 2019) involving governments, tech firms, and civil society have attempted to address this gap, but enforcement remains inconsistent. National laws often lag behind the digital innovation and cultural ambiguity of memes, allowing exclusionary or violent messages to circulate unchecked.

In the context of electoral politics in Latin America, memes have been instrumental in legitimising political violence—not through explicit calls to action, but by defining the terms of acceptable political discourse. Opponents are framed as not only wrong but subhuman, immoral, or laughable. This affects not only the targets of such representations—who may be women, LGBTQI+ people, indigenous communities, or the poor—but also the broader public understanding of who belongs in the political conversation (Denisova, 2019; Fraticelli, 2023).

Academic studies (e.g., Bowen, 2020; Merrill & Lindgren, 2021) confirm that memes are no longer peripheral to political communication. They play a central role in shaping public opinion and in producing cultural

norms. In Latin America, the stakes of this memetic war are particularly high. In Brazil, memes contributed to Bolsonaro's image as a protector of the family and nation. In Argentina, they helped cast Milei's opponents as enemies of progress. In El Salvador, they presented Bukele as a messianic leader whose authority cannot be questioned. These are not just jokes—they are "funny weapons" that change the rules of political engagement.

4. Objectives and Methods

In this article we aim to analyse how memes produced by supporters of far-right leaders—particularly in Brazil, Argentina, and El Salvador—contribute to the normalisation of violence and the construction of exclusionary social norms. Specifically, we examine the interplay between humour and political discourse, focusing on the ways in which visual communication legitimises aggression, reinforces hierarchies, and reshapes perceptions of what is socially acceptable.

We also seek to examine how memetic representations of political antagonists contribute to the normalisation of violence and the transformation of social norms. Building on existing research on memetic communication, we explore how humour operates as a mechanism for legitimising exclusionary discourses, reinforcing political hierarchies, and shaping collective perceptions of what is socially acceptable. Furthermore, we investigate the role of generative AI tools—such as Stable Diffusion, MidJourney, DALL-E, and GANs—in reshaping the production and dissemination of political memes, assessing their impact on the intensification of political polarisation, the reinforcement of stereotypes, and the legitimisation of violence. This process may also be interpreted as an attempt to render the unconstitutional as legitimate, framing exclusionary or violent political acts as necessary or even virtuous, particularly against marginalised social groups.

The methodology integrates visual data collection with digital ethnography, drawing from Alonso's (1994) socio-hermeneutic approach, which advocates for contextual analysis of visual narratives beyond their explicit content, and Pauwels (2015), who highlights the role of images in generating new theoretical insights into social life. Visual discourse is seen as a social practice embedded with the intentions and positions of its actors, revealing ideological structures (Barthes, 1995; Serrano & Zurdo, 2023). Data collection focused on open Telegram groups where far-right supporters actively engage in political discourse. The collection took place in the weeks preceding and following each presidential election in Brazil, Argentina, and El Salvador, between September 2022 and February 2024. Specifically, six Telegram groups were analysed, with two per country: one associated with the "official account" of a right-wing populist politician and another representing a self-managed grassroots group.

These spaces provide insight into the memetic strategies employed by supporters of Bolsonaro in Brazil, Milei in Argentina, and Bukele in El Salvador, offering a lens into how humour functions as a vehicle for reinforcing social norms of exclusion that extend beyond political opposition and target marginalised groups such as LGBTQI+ individuals or racial minorities, thereby fostering everyday or interpersonal polarisation and legitimising forms of political violence. In Brazil, data collection covered the electoral rounds held on October 2 and October 30, 2022. The "Carlos Bolsonaro—Official Account" group, with 144,267 members, contributed 72 images, while the "Bolsonarista" group, with 38,362 members, provided 17,072 images. For Argentina's elections on October 22 and November 19, 2023, data collection spanned from October 1 to November 30. The "Javier Milei Official" group (675 members) contributed 1,564 images, while the "Milei

president 23–27. Long Live Freedom" group (481 members) contributed 6,202 images. In El Salvador, data was gathered between December 4, 2023, and February 4, 2024, coinciding with the single-round election on February 4. The "Nuevas Ideas" group (140 members) contributed 118 images, while the "Nayib Bukele" group (3,333 members) provided 518 images.

We applied critical visual methodology, adapting grounded theory to the visual domain, as proposed by Mey and Dietrich (2016). The process followed these steps: (a) contextualisation of data aligned with the research questions; (b) creation of a sample inventory from the Telegram datasets; (c) manual categorisation of recurring themes; (d) image coding; and (e) interpretive theorisation of the memes in relation to political polarisation. We selected images that exemplify dominant narrative structures rather than attempting an exhaustive review of all collected data. The categories were cross-validated by both researchers to ensure analytical consistency.

To complement the visual data, ethnographic and digital ethnographic fieldwork was conducted to capture both online and offline discourses, as well as the affective climate surrounding each election. Offline data were collected through participant observation at political rallies and informal interviews with attendees. These interactions offered insights into how online humour is rearticulated in public discourse. Memes encountered in Telegram groups were frequently referenced in chants, signs, and casual conversation, confirming the circulation of memetic messages across communicative contexts. This contextual approach enhances the understanding of how memetic communication functions as a mechanism for consolidating political identities, reinforcing social hierarchies, and legitimising political aggression. By situating memes within broader cultural and political frameworks, the study offers a critical perspective on their role in shaping contemporary social norms and the boundaries of political acceptability.

5. Results. The Role of Social Norms in Memetic Communication: Brazil, Argentina, and El Salvador

The analysis of meme-based communication in Argentina, Brazil, and El Salvador reveals that generative AI memes tend to be more generic and symbolic, often lacking textual content and expressing broader, more universally recognisable symbols. Manual memes, by contrast, are more context-specific, reactive to immediate political events, and often carry more emotionally charged, even sadistic content. In our sample, AI-generated images represented between 0.5% and 6% of the visual material, while manual memes accounted for the overwhelming majority, ranging from 94% to nearly 99% depending on the group.

These differences suggest that while both types reinforce similar social norms related to exclusion and violence, AI-generated memes may be more prone to polarisation via exalted imagery of leaders and dehumanising portrayals of opponents (Bayarri & Fernández-Villanueva, 2025). Thematically, two motifs recur with high frequency: the sanctification of political leaders, particularly in AI-generated content, and the dehumanisation of adversaries, more prominent in manually crafted memes. These patterns appeared consistently across the three countries, with religious or mythological imagery, animalistic portrayals, and calls for exclusion or mockery.

Audience engagement metrics within the Telegram groups—measured by reactions, replies, and shares—indicate that memes that use humour to delegitimise opponents tend to attract higher interaction. Popular memes were often adapted by users, shared across other platforms, or remixed with new captions or filters,

suggesting a participatory dynamic that reinforces the normative power of humour. In several instances, memes that gained traction online were later cited or echoed during offline rallies, indicating an intertextual feedback loop between digital and analog spaces.

Ethnographic fieldnotes from rallies and political gatherings reinforce this connection. Supporters frequently referenced memes during interviews or shouted popular slogans derived from meme culture. This offline uptake demonstrates how digital humour not only shapes online discourse but also informs real-world political identity and allegiance. By studying both the circulation and public uptake of memes, the findings show how memetic humour contributes to norm formation by testing, validating, and reinforcing social boundaries through collective laughter.

5.1. Argentina: Nationalism, Heroism, and the Normalisation of Political Exclusion

In Argentina, both generative AI and manually created memes reinforce a nationalist and populist imagery centred on Javier Milei and his ideological narratives. In the "Javier Milei Official" and "Milei President 23–27. Long Live Freedom" Telegram groups, AI-generated images constitute 4.86% and 3.53% of the content, respectively. These AI-generated visuals depict Milei as a heroic, lion-like figure, invoking themes of medieval heroism, patriotism, and anti-establishment defiance—representing a constructed norm in which leadership is equated with masculine strength and aggressive individualism (see Figure 1). For instance, the image on the left shows the "lion Milei" acting fiercely against his political opponents, who are dehumanised and transformed into rats, while the central image portrays Milei as a Napoleonic figure. In contrast, the image on the right, which was produced manually, depicts Peronist Sergio Massa talking to a sympathiser—also animalised—to whom he says, "Do you understand that I devalue the coin so that the right does not come back?" to which the sympathiser answers, "Yes, long live Perón."

Figure 1. Representations of Milei's heroism and attacks on Peronism. Source: Own composition.

Manually created memes (95.14% and 96.47%) take a more combative approach, often ridiculing political opponents and reinforcing the notion that traditional media and left-wing movements threaten national integrity. The humour embedded in these memes serves not only as entertainment but as a form of ideological reinforcement, establishing mockery as a normative means of delegitimising adversaries. In our corpus, over 60% of the memes included explicit derision of political opponents, with common labels such as "rats," "leeches," or "scum."

Responses in Telegram groups reflect this process: Supporters praise Milei as a "Templar" and "national hero," while derogatory remarks about opponents reinforce social norms of exclusion that extend beyond political opposition and target marginalised groups such as LGBTQ+ individuals or racial minorities, thereby fostering everyday or interpersonal polarisation.

These same narratives are echoed in real-world political discourse. At Milei's rallies, humour and aggression intersect in meme discourse that is often charged with emotions of rejection, anger, and hostility. Supporters reassert the memes' messages in offline settings. "Milei is a beast, a lion who will save us," a supporter states, connecting the digital meme discourse with political mobilisation. By repeatedly circulating memes that establish humour as a socially acceptable medium for exclusion, these spaces redefine what is legitimate political speech and what is considered too "serious" to challenge.

5.2. Brazil: Religious Morality and the Sanctification of Political Leadership

Brazilian far-right memetic communication relies heavily on religious and nationalistic themes to reinforce conservative social norms. Within the "Carlos Bolsonaro—Official Account" and "Bolsonaristas" Telegram groups, the use of generative AI in meme production is significantly lower—2.78% and 0.51%—indicating a greater reliance on traditional meme formats. Despite this, manually created memes are highly effective in shaping discourse, reinforcing notions of Bolsonaro as Brazil's moral guardian.

Humour plays a crucial role in constructing norms around political legitimacy. The juxtaposition of innocence and corruption in Bolsonaro-related memes reinforces a binary opposition of "good" versus "evil," normalising the idea that his opponents are inherently corrupt or morally depraved. AI-generated imagery amplifies this message by portraying Bolsonaro as a sanctified leader, aligned with a divine vision of omnipotent strength and moral absolutism (see Figure 2). The two images on the left exemplify this aesthetic, presenting Bolsonaro as a divinised and enlightened figure, evoking Christian-nationalist connotations of sacred leadership. In contrast, the manually produced image on the right targets the LGTBIQ+ community through grotesque humour: It depicts a trans woman who, instead of engendering a baby, would be engendering an excrement—yet another display of exclusionary nationalism through ridicule.

Figure 2. Representations of Bolsonaro's divinity and attacks on LGTBIQ+ communities. Source: Own composition.

Reactions within these groups indicate strong affective ties to these representations: The most interacted memes included either religious blessings, mythological symbolism, or violent commentary against opposition

figures. Over 70% of the memes analysed used some form of religious or moral framing. Bolsonaro's followers frequently express solidarity using religious language: "All together with the patriot," "Myth, let's not forget him." Conversely, reactions to memes depicting opponents often involve calls for violence—"That vagrant should have been killed," "Shot in the head"—illustrating how humour, when integrated into political discourse, helps to redefine violent rhetoric as an acceptable norm.

Offline, these messages resonate strongly. During campaign events, supporters echoed meme slogans, chanted biblical references, or wore imagery identical to popular digital memes. "I support Bolsonaro because he supports the family," a voter declares, highlighting how digital humour fosters ideological cohesion and frames political loyalty in moral terms. This fusion of meme culture and religious nationalism reflects the broader transformation of far-right discourse into an emotionally charged, exclusionary system.

5.3. El Salvador: AI-Driven Hero Worship and the Rewriting of Political Legitimacy

El Salvador's memetic discourse differs in its higher rate of generative AI use (6.16%, the highest among the three countries), demonstrating a sophisticated visual strategy for constructing Nayib Bukele's image as a near-divine leader. The "Nuevas Ideas" and "Nayib Bukele" Telegram groups prominently feature AI-generated portrayals of Bukele as the embodiment of national salvation, reinforcing a normative vision of leadership that merges technological progress with authoritarian control—an aesthetic that sacralises the figure of the leader as a technological deity (see Figure 3). The two images on the left reflect this approach: the first attributes superpowers to President Bukele, while the second celebrates an alleged moment of national prosperity under his rule. In contrast, the manually produced image on the right shows Bukele physically assaulting a "gang member" while a group of journalists writes critically in the background—suggesting that the media ignores the supposed security benefits of Bukele's actions. The caption reads "and then they hit him with everything," implying that journalists only focus on condemning violence without acknowledging its effects.

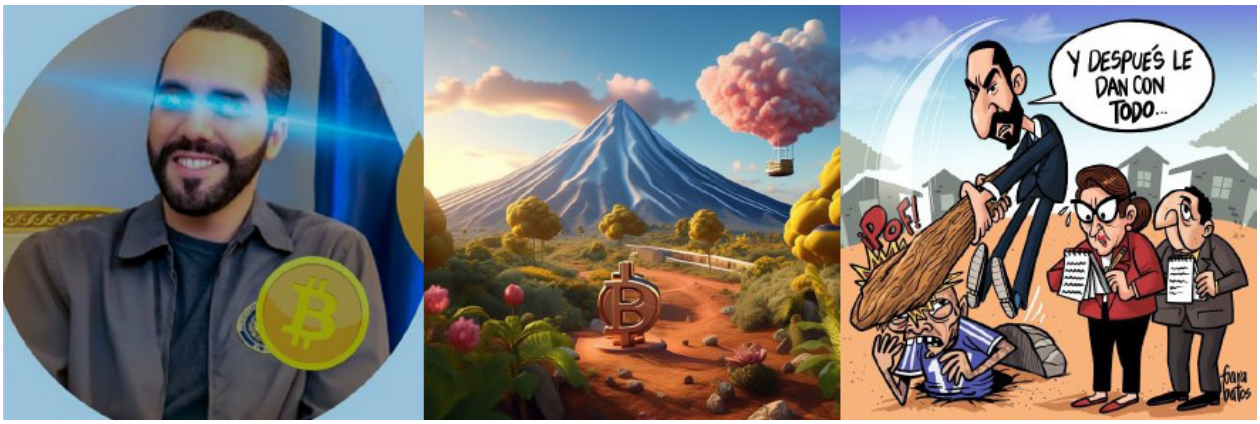

Figure 3. Representation of El Salvador under Bukele. Source: Own composition.

Manual memes, by contrast, aggressively target political opposition, frequently associating Bukele's adversaries with crime, economic ruin, or external threats. Over half of these memes reference opposition leaders as "puppets," "communists," or "rats." The frequent depiction of opposition figures as foreign agents or obstacles to national progress aligns with broader regional trends, where humour serves as a means of social control, reinforcing norms that exclude critics from legitimate political participation. Audience

engagement in these groups shows strong enthusiasm for heroic portrayals of Bukele. “The best president in Latin America. Of the world,” one comment reads. “He has saved us all. He is Jesus,” another asserts. These statements illustrate how humour and AI-generated aesthetics contribute to the sacralisation of Bukele’s leadership, entrenching social norms that position him as the sole figure capable of ensuring national prosperity.

Offline, these norms persist in public sentiment, where Bukele’s supporters adopt memes as part of everyday discourse. “The coolest president,” one campaign volunteer states, while another compares El Salvador’s current security situation to its violent past, legitimising Bukele’s authoritarian measures as necessary corrections to historical disorder. These interactions reveal how digital culture informs not only voter identity but also popular imaginaries of leadership, national salvation, and political belonging.

6. Discussion and Conclusions: The Normalisation of Violence Through Humour in Memetic Communication

6.1. Humour as a Mechanism for Reinforcing Social Norms and Justifying Violence

Memetic communication in Brazil, Argentina, and El Salvador plays a pivotal role in the reconfiguration of social norms, particularly in the normalisation of political violence through humour. By repeatedly using satire, irony, and ridicule to frame political opponents as ideological threats, memes function as a rhetorical tool that transitions veiled violence into explicit aggression (Merrill et al., 2024). These dynamics establish humour not merely as a discursive strategy but as a means of defining what is socially permissible in political dialogue (Billig, 2019; Shifman, 2019).

Across the three countries, memes shape and enforce social norms by clearly opposing exalted images of the “us” group to degraded, dehumanised depictions of the “other,” whether through animalisation, robotisation, or symbolic trashing. These framings, often linked to violence or exclusion, mirror historical methods of marginalisation and are deployed through ridicule and sarcasm, forming acts of everyday polarisation. Haslam (2022) argues that even subtle forms of interpersonal coldness can be socially damaging, while studies on humanisation (Bastian et al., 2013; Pavetich & Stathi, 2020) suggest that emotional connection mitigates these effects. Our findings support this view and link meme-based dehumanisation with broader transformations in everyday relationships between citizens. This is in line with Reynares’ (2024) theory of everyday polarisation, where not only direct violence but also emotional coldness, mockery, and fear contribute to antisocial, depersonalising attitudes (see Figures 1, 2, and 3).

In Argentina, digital humour constructs political adversaries as existential threats to national purity, reinforcing a norm in which ideological dissent is framed as an attack on the nation itself (Bassil et al., 2023). In Brazil, memes integrate Christian morality into political discourse, presenting leftist opposition figures as fundamentally corrupt and morally bankrupt (Rubira & Puebla, 2018). In El Salvador, AI-generated memes elevate Bukele to an almost divine status, reinforcing a norm in which authoritarian governance is equated with stability and progress (Pinheiro-Machado & Vargas-Maia, 2023).

Far from being harmless expressions of online culture, memes serve as cultural artifacts that regulate social norms by embedding exclusion, mockery, and delegitimisation into everyday discourse. The humour they

employ lowers the threshold for accepting aggression, making political violence seem justifiable, if not inevitable (Fielitz & Ahmed, 2021). When opposition figures are continuously portrayed as deviant, inhuman, or dangerous, the transition from symbolic violence to material aggression becomes easier to rationalise (Denisova, 2019). This phenomenon illustrates how humour operates as a first step in shifting social acceptance toward more explicit forms of political violence (Gallardo-Paúls, 2018).

6.2. AI-Generated Memes and the Acceleration of Polarisation

The rise of generative AI in meme production further complicates this process. While AI tools such as Stable Diffusion, MidJourney, and DALL-E have democratised political meme creation, they have also intensified the speed and scale at which social norms can be shaped and manipulated (Bayarri & Fernández-Villanueva, 2025). The accessibility of these tools allows for the rapid production of visually sophisticated content, making political messaging more persuasive and immersive (Burkart et al., 2023). However, this technological shift also presents challenges in distinguishing authentic discourse from algorithmically generated propaganda (Brantner et al., 2019).

Our dataset revealed significant differences in the formal and rhetorical features of AI-generated and manually created memes. AI memes tend to feature fewer words and rely more on symbolism, emphasising epic or mythologised portrayals of political figures. These images often depict leaders as divine, animalistic, or superhuman—particularly lions, messianic beings, or armored warriors—and are often rendered with high aesthetic quality. Such depictions contribute to the aspirational emotional appeal of these figures and serve to elevate their perceived legitimacy beyond normal political critique.

In contrast, manually created memes are frequently reactionary, rougher in visual execution, and replete with textual elements such as insults, slang, and explicit polarising cues. They focus on degrading opponents through ridicule, distortion, or associations with criminality, moral decay, or foreign influence. These memes are often more immediately linked to current events and adapted in real time, allowing users to respond quickly to breaking news and share content that resonates with shared grievances or frustrations.

Interestingly, while AI-generated memes constituted a smaller portion of the dataset (between 2.78% and 6.16%, depending on the country), user interactions with them—measured through the number of reactions, reposts, or positive emoji responses—suggested higher affective reinforcement. They were less frequently modified by users but more frequently commented on as “powerful,” “epic,” or “moving.” In contrast, manually created memes were more likely to be remixed and reshared with personalised captions or annotations, demonstrating a higher degree of participatory engagement and narrative adaptability.

These findings suggest that AI-generated memes are particularly effective at conveying hegemonic and aspirational imagery, reinforcing long-term symbolic associations between authoritarian leadership and national salvation. Meanwhile, manually created memes remain central to real-time political antagonism and the construction of in-group/out-group boundaries. Together, both forms of meme production contribute to the affective and discursive terrain of polarisation—albeit through different strategies and temporal dynamics.

Although AI enhances engagement with political content, it also exacerbates the oversimplification of political discourse. When memes reduce complex political debates to emotionally charged images, they

solidify social norms that favour simplistic, binary understandings of governance—where opposition is framed as inherently corrupt or dangerous, and where leadership is elevated to near-mythical status. This form of digital communication reinforces political divisions, making it more difficult for democratic dialogue to thrive (Cho et al., 2020).

6.3. The Challenge of Regulating AI-Driven Memetic Communication

The widespread adoption of AI in meme production presents significant regulatory and ethical challenges. The ability to generate highly persuasive political content at scale increases the risk of misinformation and the strategic manipulation of public opinion (Gomes-Franco e Silva et al., 2022). Given Latin America's history of political instability and economic inequality, AI-generated memes tend to widen existing digital literacy gaps by privileging those with greater access to digital tools and interpretive skills, while rendering other populations—particularly older adults, rural communities, and individuals with lower levels of formal education—more susceptible to these persuasive visual narratives. As Fielitz and Thurston (2018) argue, such memes operate through aesthetic cues and affective triggers that bypass analytical reasoning, making it harder for less digitally literate audiences to identify bias, satire, or manipulation.

In contexts where educational inequality, limited media literacy, and high levels of digital consumption converge—as in many parts of Latin America—certain groups are more likely to interpret memetic messages literally or as truthful representations, particularly when they mirror cultural narratives already present in everyday discourse. This makes AI-driven visual propaganda especially potent among populations with limited access to critical media education.

In authoritarian-leaning democracies, where trust in traditional media is already compromised, AI-generated memes can serve as an alternative propaganda tool, allowing leaders to bypass institutional checks and consolidate their image through visual storytelling. This is particularly evident in El Salvador, where Bukele's memetic presence is heavily AI-enhanced, positioning him as a transformative figure beyond traditional political constraints (Mouffe, 2022). In Brazil and Argentina, AI-driven meme culture similarly serves to reinforce ideological narratives, deepening political antagonisms and fostering segmented information bubbles (Parrot & Hopp, 2020).

Given these developments, there is an urgent need for a multifaceted approach to mitigate the risks posed by AI-driven memetic communication. Strengthening media literacy programs is crucial to equipping citizens with the ability to critically assess digital content (Haslam, 2022). Additionally, regulatory frameworks must be adapted to address the potential for AI-generated disinformation, ensuring transparency in the production and dissemination of political memes. While outright censorship may not be a viable solution, fostering digital accountability through platform governance and content moderation remains a critical step in mitigating the adverse effects of AI-driven propaganda (Wodak et al., 2021).

6.4. The Role of Memes in Shaping Future Social Norms

Memetic communication has become a fundamental mechanism in defining the contours of political legitimacy in Brazil, Argentina, and El Salvador. As memes continuously shape perceptions of leadership, opposition, and ideological affiliation, they contribute to the gradual acceptance of aggressive political rhetoric (Kien, 2019).

Humour, in this context, is not neutral—it serves as a powerful instrument that establishes what forms of discourse are permissible, influencing public attitudes toward political violence (Parker, 2019).

As Mason (2018) notes, polarisation impairs democratic negotiation by fostering emotional hostility rather than ideological difference. Haslam (2022) also warns that emotional detachment and interpersonal coldness are among the damaging outcomes of everyday polarisation. AI-generated memes amplify these effects, accelerating the normalisation of exclusionary politics and reinforcing the perception that aggression against certain groups is not only acceptable but necessary. This process highlights the urgent need to understand memes not merely as digital ephemera but as core instruments in the transformation of social norms (Fraticelli, 2023).

As technology continues to evolve, the intersection of political humour, AI, and memetic communication will remain a crucial area of study. Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort to balance digital freedom with ethical responsibility, ensuring that memetic spaces do not become unchecked arenas for the legitimisation of political violence (Gorwa, 2019). Ultimately, fostering a more informed and pluralistic media environment will be key to resisting the entrenchment of exclusionary and aggressive social norms in digital political culture.

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Data Availability

No research data are available for this article, as the study is based on publicly accessible online content and qualitative visual interpretation. Meme materials cited are included as figures for illustrative purposes only.

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About the Authors

Gabriel Bayarri Toscano is a lecturer at Rey Juan Carlos University. His research focuses on far-right digital culture in Latin America, working at the intersection of anthropology, politics, and communication. He analyzes memetic, affective, and visual strategies, audience responses, and the role of generative AI in political antagonism. He has published widely and held a British Academy Postdoctoral Newton International Fellowship at the University of London.

Concepción Fernández-Villanueva is an Emeritus Professor of social psychology at the Complutense University of Madrid. Her research focuses on the social psychology of violence—particularly gender-based violence and youth violence—examined through media discourse, social representations, and collective identity. She has directed and collaborated on numerous national and international research projects and has published widely in peer-reviewed journals and edited academic volumes.