



Selected Papers of #AoIR2025:
The 26th Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers
Niterói, Brazil / 15 – 18 Oct 2025

MEME WORK IN ANTI-VEG*NISM HUMOR ON INSTAGRAM: REFLECTIONS ON HATE SPEECH AND SOCIAL MEDIA REGULATION

Thiago Costa
Rio de Janeiro State University

Introduction

The proliferation of digital communication has facilitated the spread of humor-based content, particularly memes, across social media (Chagas, 2024; Denisova, 2019). While humor is often perceived as a lighthearted or unifying force, it can also serve as a vehicle for reinforcing social prejudices and ideological narratives. This study examines how anti-veg*nism (vegetarian and/or vegan) humor on Instagram functions as a mechanism for hate speech and the reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity. By analyzing memes from the Brazilian Instagram account @lagrimasdevegano (*veganstears*), this research investigates their discursive strategies and implications for digital content regulation.

Veg*nism, often positioned as a political and ethical stance, challenges dominant societal norms. The association of veg*nism with femininity and weakness contrasts with traditional masculinity, which valorizes meat consumption, revealing deep-seated gender constructs (Adamczyk et al., 2013; Adams, 2010; Gambert & Linné, 2018; Hannan, 2025; Petry & Barth, 2023; Reed et al., 2021; Rombach et al., 2023; Stanley et al., 2023; van der Horst et al., 2023). Memes reflect and reinforce these narratives under the guise of humor, contributing to broader ideological battles within digital spaces (Costa, 2023a, 2023b).

Theoretical Approach

This study employs the framework of disparagement humor (Ford, 2014, 2015; Ford & Richardson et al., 2015; Ford & Buie et al., 2019), which belittles individuals or groups while maintaining some level of deniability (e.g., "it's just a joke"). Such humor normalizes prejudice and reinforces social hierarchies. Drawing on Žižek's (2008) concept of ideology, this research argues that humor serves as an ideological mechanism that makes discriminatory discourses more palatable.

Suggested Citation: Costa, T. (2025, October). *Meme Work in Anti-Veg*Nism Humor on Instagram: Reflections on Hate Speech and Social Media Regulation*. Paper (or panel) presented at AoIR2025: The 26th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Niterói, Brazil: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

In the Brazilian context, these memes reflect gender ideals and conservative political-economic ideologies. Connell's (2005, 2009, 1987) theory of hegemonic masculinity explains how dominant masculinity marginalizes non-conforming gender expressions in humorous anti-veg*nism memes. Meat consumption, depicted as a marker of traditional masculinity, aligns with conservative ideologies resisting gender equity and environmental awareness (Gambert & Linné, 2018; Stanley et al., 2023; Adamczyk et al., 2023). Conversely, the Brazilian "Beef, Bible, and Bullets" political group lobbied for the slogan "The agro(culture) is pop." This translates to fewer environmental protections, as soy and cattle farming are prioritized, creating a perception that the agroindustrial sector provides food for the Brazilian population under a greenwashing narrative that discourages criticism (Lapper, 2022; Medeiros et al., 2024).

Platforms shape meme circulation, often framing them as free speech or humor. However, Becerra and Waisbord (2011) argue that liberal free speech ideals fail to ensure democratic communication under the maximalist approach of platform policies. Citarella (2019) highlights how extremists exploit loopholes, using coded symbols to bypass moderation and subtly radicalize users. Instagram's (n.d.) vague policies allow harmful content to spread unmoderated (Gillespie, 2018). The European Commission's Radicalisation Awareness Network warns that humor has become a strategic tool for extremist recruitment, disguising radical messages under irony (Fielitz & Ahmed, 2021). By leveraging irony and satire, these memes construct a discursive immunity, wherein offensive content is shielded from critique under the guise of humor (Billig, 2005). Knapp (2023) describes this as "meme work," a process similar to Freud's (2010) "dream work," using displacement and condensation to shape collective desires. Memes serve a greater function than merely conveying messages; they shape group dynamics and unconscious fantasies. By blurring the boundaries between illusion and reality, they actively influence politics, culture, and identity.

Methods

This study utilized the Instaloader API to collect data from the intended Instagram profile (n = 1145). It focused on static images that could be understood as memes (n = 28) in purposive sampling (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015). The selection criteria required explicit references to veg*nism (the primary topic), *gender* (as discussed in the literature on veg*nism and gender roles), and humor (text-based images with some jested structure). Two main themes were identified: gender issues and agribusiness. Due to research limitations, eight memes were analyzed, with four representing each theme.

A qualitative methodology was employed using visual critical analysis (Rose, 2016) alongside content analysis (Krippendorff, 2013) to examine the 28 memes. The study was structured around four key objectives: 1) Identifying recurring themes and visual tropes in anti-veg*nism memes; 2) Exploring the intersection of humor, masculinity, and hate speech; 3) Assessing how these memes shape and perpetuate ideological narratives; 4) Evaluating challenges in moderating humor-based hate speech on digital platforms.

The analysis, based on Rose's (2016) methodology, reveals that the memes are digitally manipulated using simple editing software, incorporating overlaid text and pre-existing templates. Their technological modality focuses on photo manipulation, cartoon modifications, and text overlays, often utilizing stock images or pop culture references. Their compositional modality focuses on the visual and textual arrangement, highlighting the use of humor, irony, and narrative framing to shape messages—such as repurposing graphs, cartoons, and iconic scenes from pop culture references. Lastly, their social modality reveals the cultural and ideological implications, showing how memes frame political or social disputes, often mocking veg*nism and a "soft" masculinity, and praising agribusiness narratives while disguising ideological biases as humor.

Results

Findings suggest that anti-veg*nism memes act as ideological tools, reinforcing gender norms and exclusionary practices. Two dominant themes emerged: 1) Veg*nism as a symbol of weakness – Many memes portray veg*nism men as physically weak, emotionally fragile, or socially inferior, often using the term soy boy to equate veg*nism with emasculation (Know Your Meme, 2017); and 2) Carnist ideology and conservative values – The images link meat consumption to masculinity and national identity, portraying veg*nism as an existential threat to traditional values (Petry & Barth, 2023; Stanley et al., 2023).

From a regulatory perspective, digital platforms struggle to address humor-based hate speech due to its ambiguous nature. Instagram's content policies prioritize freedom of expression and often fail to recognize humor as a conduit for discrimination (Gillespie, 2018). Findings highlight the need for nuanced moderation strategies that account for cultural context and ideological subtext (Salles et al., 2023; Santini et al., 2022).

Conclusion

This study underscores how humor operates as a subtle yet potent force in shaping ideological narratives, particularly in meme culture. By intertwining humor with gender and political ideologies, anti-veg*nism memes reinforce hegemonic masculinity and contribute to the normalization of social exclusion. The research also highlights the limitations of digital content regulation in addressing humor-based hate speech.

Future research should explore the broader implications of humor in digital discourse, particularly concerning political ideologies and misinformation. Additionally, platform governance must evolve to incorporate culturally sensitive moderation capable of discerning humor's role in perpetuating discrimination. Digital literacy initiatives should also be enhanced to equip users with the tools to critically engage with humor in online spaces, ultimately fostering a more inclusive digital environment.

References

Adamczyk, D. et al. (2023). Gender, Masculinity, and the Perception of Vegetarians and Vegans: A Mixed-Methods Investigation. **Sex Roles**, 89, 595-609. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-023-01420-7>.

Adams, C. J. (2010). **The Sexual Politics of Meat**. Continuum.

Becerra, M. & Waisbord, S. (2021). La necesidad de repensar la ortodoxia de la libertad de expresión em la comunicación digital. **Desarrollo económico**, 60(232), 295-313.

Billig, M. (2005). **Laughter and Ridicule**. Sage.

Chagas, V. (2024). Apresentação. In: Chagas, V (org.), **A cultura dos memes no Brasil**: agenda e desafios de pesquisa sobre uma das únicas instituições que se mantém de pé no país (pp. 11-24). EDUFBA.

Citarella, J. (2019). Irony Politics & Gen Z. **New Models**. <https://www.newmodels.io/editorial/issue-1/14-irony-politics-gen-z-2019-citarella>.

Connell, R. W. (2009). **Gender**. Polity Press.

Connell, R. W. (2005). **Masculinities**. Routledge.

Connell, R. W. (1987). **Gender and Power**. Stanford University Press.

Costa, T. (2023a). Um bando de lobos solitários: Uma análise dos memes de mentalidade sigma na machosfera do Instagram brasileiro. **Dispositiva**, 12(22), 269-290. <https://doi.org/10.5752/P.2237-9967.2023v12n22p269-290>.

Costa, T. (2023b). Apoiando a questão atual: Humor depreciativo e alteridade por meio de memes de internet. **Compolitica**, 13(1), 57-76. <https://doi.org/10.21878/compolitica.2023.13.1.663>.

Denisova, A. (2019). **Internet Memes and Society**. Routledge.

Fielitz, M. & Ahmed, R. (2021). **It's not funny anymore**. European Commission, Radicalisation Awareness Network.

Ford, T. E. (2015). The Social Consequences of Disparagement Humor: Introduction and Overview. **Humor**, 28(2), 163-169. <https://doi.org/10.1515/humor-2015-0016>.

Ford, T. E. (2014). Humor and Prejudice. In: ATTARDO, S. (ed.), **Encyclopedia of Humor Studies** (pp. 594-596). Sage.

Ford, T. E. & Buie, H. S. et al. (2019). Diminished Self-Concept and Social Exclusion: Disparagement Humor from the Target's Perspective. **Self and Identity**, 19(6), 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15298868.2019.1653960>.

Ford, T. E. & Richardson, K. et al. (2015). Disparagement Humor and Prejudice: Contemporary Theory and Research. **Humor**, 28(2), 171-186. <https://doi.org/10.1515/humor-2015-0017>.

Freud, S. (2010). **The Interpretation of Dreams**. Basic Books.

Gambert, I. & Linné, T. (2018). From Rice Eaters to Soy Boys: Race, Gender, and Tropes of 'Plant Food Masculinity'. **Animal Studies Journal**, 7(2), 129-179.

Gillespie, T. (2018). **Custodians of the Internet**. Yale University Press.

Hannan, J. (2025). "But Bacon"! The Performative Violence of Anti-Vegan Trolling. In: Hunnicutt, G. et al. (ed.), **Violence and Harm in the Animal Industrial Complex**. Human-Animal Entanglements. Routledge.

Instagram. (n.d.). Community guidelines. **Instagram**. https://help.instagram.com/350562574791105?helpref=faq_content.

Knapp, I. (2023). On Meme Work. **October**, 183, 3-16. https://doi.org/10.1162/octo_a_00474.

Know your meme. (2017). Soy Boy. **Know Your Meme**. <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/soy-boy>.

Krippendorff, K. (2013). **Content Analysis**. Sage.

Lapper, R. (2021). **Beef, Bible and Bullets**. Manchester University Press.

Leedy, P. D. & Ormrod, J. E. (2015). **Practical Research**. Pearson.

Medeiros, P. et al. (2024). Greenwashing and Disinformation: The Toxic Advertising of Brazilian Agribusiness on Social Media. **Comunicação e Sociedade**, 45, 1-26. [https://doi.org/10.17231/comsoc.45\(2024\).5417](https://doi.org/10.17231/comsoc.45(2024).5417).

Petry, A. C. & Barth, M. (2023). Masculinidade "ao ponto": análises sobre o apelo à virilidade ideal atribuída ao consumo de carne. **Mosaico**, 14(2), 174-188. <https://doi.org/10.21727/rm.v14i2.3623>.

Reed, K. E. et al. (2021). Neither soy nor isoflavone intake affects male reproductive hormones: An expanded and updated meta-analysis of clinical studies. **Reproductive Toxicology**, 100, 60-67. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.reprotox.2020.12.019>.

Rombach, M. et al. (2023). "Soy Boy vs. Holy Cow"—Understanding the Key Factors Determining U.S. Consumers' Preferences and Commitment to Plant-Based Milk Alternatives. **Sustainability**, 15(18), 1-14. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3390/su151813715>.

Rose, G. (2016). **Visual methodologies**. Sage.

Salles, D. et al. (2023). The Far-Right Smokescreen: Environmental Conspiracy and Culture Wars on Brazilian YouTube. **Social Media + Society**, 9(3), 1-22. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231196876>.

Santini, R. M. et al. (2022). We Love to Hate George Soros: A Cross-platform Analysis of the Globalism Conspiracy Theory Campaign in Brazil. **Convergence**, 28(4), 983-1006. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565221085833>.

Stanley, S. K. et al. (2023). Masculinity Matters for Meat Consumption: An Examination of Self-Rated Gender Typicality, Meat Consumption, and Veg*nism in Australian Men and Women. **Sex Roles**, 88, 187-198. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-023-01346-0>.

van der Horst, H. et al. (2023). Game changers for meat and masculinity? Male athletes' perspectives on mixed and plant-based diets. **Appetite**, 187, 1-11. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2023.106585>.

Žižek, S. (2008). **The Sublime Object of Ideology**. Verso.