



Prejudice in visual argument

Hidden argumentativeness of weight prejudice memes

Gabriel Fortes

Universidad Alberto Hurtado (UAH), Chile
orcid.org/0000-0003-4997-0019

Patrícia Fortes Cavalcanti de Macêdo

Universidade Federal da Bahia (UFBA), Brasil
orcid.org/0000-0002-2728-0431

This article discusses different types of “argumentativeness” in three memes related to overweight jokes posted in a community of meme generation (quickmeme.com) in July 2021. We aim to show how visual argument, image rhetoric, and social prejudice devices enable the creation of “joking” memes that frame an audience’s meaning-making towards prejudiced ideas. The methodological procedure was based on an analytical process of the selected memes using a theoretical framework on visual argumentation, media studies, and attitudes and beliefs around body image. The results suggest that fat body prejudice images in the memes operate in the level of persuasiveness of the audience of certain rationality through argument schemes easily recognizable by an audience.

Keywords: Visual argument. Argumentativeness. Rhetoric. Weight prejudice.

Preconceito no argumento visual

Argumentatividade escondida em memes gordofóbicos

Este artigo discute diferentes tipos de “argumentatividade” em três memes relacionados a piadas sobre excesso de peso postadas em uma comunidade de geração de memes (quickmeme.com) em julho de 2021. Nosso objetivo é mostrar como a argumentação visual, a retórica da imagem e os dispositivos de preconceito social possibilitam a criação de memes de “brincadeira” que enquadram a construção de significado de uma audiência em relação a ideias preconceituosas. O procedimento metodológico baseou-se em um processo analítico dos memes selecionados a partir de um referencial teórico sobre argumentação visual, estudos de mídia, atitudes e crenças em torno da imagem corporal. Os resultados sugerem que as imagens de preconceito de corpo gordo nos memes operam no nível de persuasão da audiência de certa racionalidade por meio de esquemas argumentativos facilmente reconhecíveis por uma audiência.

Palavras-chave: Argumento visual. Argumentatividade. Retórica. Gordofobia.

Prejuicio en argumento visual

La argumentatividade secreta en memes gordofóbicos

Este artículo analiza diferentes tipos de “argumentación” en tres memes relacionados con chistes sobre sobrepeso publicados en una comunidad de generación de memes (quickmeme.com) en julio de 2021. Nuestro objetivo es mostrar cómo el argumento visual, la retórica de la imagen y los dispositivos de prejuicio social permiten la creación de memes de “broma” que enmarcan la creación de significado de una audiencia hacia ideas prejuiciosas. El procedimiento metodológico se basó en un proceso analítico de los memes seleccionados utilizando un marco teórico sobre argumentación visual, estudios de medios y actitudes y creencias en torno a la imagen corporal. Los resultados sugieren que las imágenes de prejuicio por el cuerpo gordo en los memes operan en el nivel de persuasión de la audiencia de cierta racionalidad a través de esquemas argumentales fácilmente reconocibles por una audiencia.

Palabras clave: Argumento visual. Argumentatividade. Retórica. Gordofobia.

*To be anti-laughter, surely, is just plain ridiculous
(Michael Billig, 2001)*

Introduction

As Michael Billig (2001) said, one must be willing to step into craziness when trying to investigate seriously what is considered “funny”, nonetheless, jokes, laughter and comedy are ideological in its nature. For him it is the work of social critique to unveil how ideology is embedded in cultural pieces, artistic or not. In this work we aim to discuss how weight-related prejudice is constructed on social media through rhetorical devices that on the surface aim at comic relief or helpful advice, but on a deeper level are rooted on anti-fat social image construction.

Obesity and the fat body are consolidated as public health problems treated as an epidemic and called *globesity*, the phenomenon of the growth of weight related health issues. However, as Deborah Lupton (2015) proposes this has done more to emphasize the sickness dimensions of it in contrast to how we experience our body subjectively. For her this is an anthropological phenomenon of anti-obesity created through medical and media discourse, which permeates social media communication in many forms.

Medical, fitness and beauty discourse has been associated with body control (GARD; WRIGHT, 2005; WRIGHT, 2012), power relations asymmetries (MILLER, 2002) and social representation of unhealthy bodies (SNIDER, 2018). All this literature is relevant to understand how subjective and ordinary lives are constructed under socially legitimated discourse, especially if they refer to specialized and scientific *logos*, the rational undisputed dimension of knowledge that must be accepted by all. Our take in the discussion of body-related subjectivity is to understand how the persuasive device of discourse helps to construct specific ways of living.

In this sense, we discuss how particular (in our case, anti-fat) discourse participates in constructing subjective, personal level life experience through semiotic and shared cultural symbols (FREDERICK; SAGUY; GRUYS, 2016). Moreover, we propose to understand these rhetorical devices through the investigation of the anti-obesity discourse present in memes that convey a rationale for weight stigmatization. We propose that anti-fat discourse is based upon framing effects that leads the audience reaction to visual rhetoric (or visual arguments).

Social psychology has a clear root in rhetorical studies (BILLIG, 1993). We propose to bridge this tradition to cultural semiotics and visual argumentation

studies. We argue that recognizing the sole presence of a symbol in culture is not enough to understand its dynamic in framing intra and interpersonal subjectivity. Using rhetoric-informed analysis we aim to understand how socially shared symbols rely on aesthetic features which enable mediating effects that help the social construction of prejudice based on medical and health discourse. By mediating effects, we understand the process of “semiotic guidance” that conducts meaning-making towards an end; in our case, enabling the resolution to the fat-not-fat semiotic tension (VALSINER, 2001) but fostering an “acceptable prejudice” (MCMICHAEL, 2013).

It is worth considering that the image of the comical and clumsy fat man appears in Western societies since the mid-modern age. However, it is from the scientific advancement and attribution of obesity as a pathology, especially in the late nineteenth century, that the meaning of high body weight as a less fit and sick body is consolidated (VIGARELLO, 2013). For Jean-Pierre Poulain (2013), the medicalization of obesity transforms the moral causes of the devaluation of obesity into medical justifications and substantiates the “fight” against such pathology.

From these premises follows the institutionalization of obesity and a series of counterproductive recommendations coming from health organizations that focus on individual responsibility while ignoring social, economic, and cultural determinants of excess body weight (GARD; WRIGHT, 2005). Such a scenario is supported by the advance of anti-obesity scientific research that seeks to identify factors with prevalence, cause, and effects of obesity. On the other hand, critical perspectives of the biomedical model suggest that anti-obesity positions are dependent on unstable evidence, tend to overgeneralize their findings, turn a speculative idea into a scientific fact, and make use of alarmist rhetoric (LUPTON, 2018).

Therefore, it is important to understand how different discourses are presented through media outlets that foster prejudice, even when trying to promote physical health advice. This essay presents a conceptual discussion of obesity and its presence in social discourse, what are and how rhetoric devices are employed to persuade people about the equivalence between fat body and disease, and how visual arguments are an important vector of media persuasion aimed at audience emotional reaction. Then, we present an analysis of weight related memes that uses aesthetic elements which foster three types of emotional reaction in their audience: laughter, disgust, and fear. Later, we discuss how these types of emotion are central to the construction of anti-fat prejudice socially and globally shared.

1 Visual argument and persuasion

Traditionally, argumentation studies have focused on verbal persuasion in oral or written texts (BLAIR, 2012b). In this tradition argumentation (as persuasion) is taken as the social act of proposing adherence (or diminishing it) to a set of claims through advancing other claims (BLAIR, 2012a). With this view, most argumentation theorists ground their approach to argumentation (and persuasion) on both the intention to persuade and verbal language use to achieve it (AMOSSY, 2009). However, in the last decades prominent work on non-verbal argumentation (DA SILVA XAVIER, 2020) brought to the scene the need of amplifying the notions of argumentation. Multimodal studies have shown that visual and written texts are able to construct claims about the world that are perceived as convincing and “logically valid” (CHRYSLEE; FOSS; RANNEY, 1996; KJELDTSEN, 2015).

While most works on argumentation focus on evaluating the quality or validity of reasoning procedures and outcomes, rhetorical studies are mostly concerned on what devices of persuasion are being employed to create the effect of convincing an audience of a certain position (CHRYSLEE; FOSS; RANNEY, 1996). In this sense, when dealing with the persuasive dimension of argumentative discourse what is at stake is the dialogic relation of mutually constituting speech and audience reaction, in contrast to the tradition in argumentation studies to focus on the text itself.

For visual argument studies, context is even more important to understand what persuasive devices are being used. We can point to many types of contexts that are intertwined with argumentation, such as orator personal contexts, social common knowledge, institutional norms, language games, and audience reaction (ROCCI, 2008). Moreover, it has been proposed that the rhetorical situation is a context and visual arguments analysis requires at least three more context types (KJELDTSEN, 2015): the immediate visual context; the immediate verbal context and visual culture. All these three correspond to how information is shared through symbolic cues that allows the audience to infer and react to visual arguments.

In fact, Kjeldsen (2015) goes further into saying that for visual argumentation the audience is even more important than in oral or written forms. In his view, the construction of visual arguments depends a lot on giving the audience the frame to infer intention, common knowledge, cultural references, and the premise-conclusion relation in it. In this sense, visual argumentation is a mode of persuasion when someone uses imagery or pictures to materialize identifiable positions creating the presence of a given stance about a subject aiming to promote or diminish adherence to a point of view (KJELDTSEN, 2012).

Informed by the before mentioned literature we choose to call visual arguments the images that call for an audience for inferring something with the aim of persuading them of adhering to its message. However, some argumentation scholars have denied these images the status of arguments because of the lack of logical grounds to it, rather they prefer to understand it as psychological manipulation or subconscious influence (BLAIR, 2012b; JOFFE, 2008; KJELDTSEN, 2015), highly present in advertising pieces.

While recognizing that visual arguments constitute a particular and special kind of argument, we are confident that these images can construct and be perceived as claims to conclusions (CHRYSLEE; FOSS; RANNEY, 1996) shared by and through different forms of socially shared types of discourse. Making it clear that we position this work under the visual argument field, we must then define what rhetorical devices are, how they are conceptualized and most importantly how this relates to the construction of the aesthetics of anti-fat in the media.

In literature, linguistic and classical rhetoric, rhetorical devices represent the different “language uses” that help a piece of text (oral or written) be engaging, pleasant, interesting, memorable, and persuasive. While this might represent the strategic manoeuvring for persuasion in different texts, this also reveals how social positions are constructed and publicized by creating an emotional reaction rather than promoting reflection. Van Mulken (2003) presents how this can be seen in advertising. In her discussion, rhetorical devices are employed as means to draw the attention of an audience for different purposes, but mainly to convince people of the quality of products that are trying to be sold.

Richardson and Wodak (2009) analysed argumentative devices in political propaganda that were designed to construct fear of immigrants and imminent danger as racist strategies to convince voters to adhere to a certain political party (against a common enemy, normally framed as a threatening “other”). Their analysis of political visual propaganda is a clear example of how racist propaganda uses images of minorities associated with crime to convince an audience of how to vote through generalizing biased information, using fallacies, creating strawman arguments, and guiding the audience to false or ill-constructed information. Their conclusion is important because they state that this is not subliminal and unconscious manipulation. They alert that the use of these images to advance a position reveals a specific common knowledge that takes advantage of existing argument schemes, and that, most importantly, disguises racism (through rhetorical devices) within the

discussion of important issues, such as uprising crime, gender violence and asylum-seeking for immigrants.

2 Argument schemes and common knowledge

With the above mentioned we think we can have a case of how images are vehicles of ideological signs that guide the audience interpretation towards an idea, however this is not sufficient to talk about the argumentativeness of these images. One way to understand the “pretended” rationality of prejudice discourse is to understand what common knowledge or common inferential reasoning structures are deployed to convey a persuasive message of “almost rationality”. These structures of common knowledge have been conceptualized under different terms, such as *loci* or *topoi*, however, we will follow Wanton, Reed and Macagno (2008) ideas on argument schemes as the structures through which much of argumentative discourse operationalize their source of “inferential strength”.

We must point that we say “pretended” or “almost” rational, because these structures are fallible and subject to bad reasoning, such as the cases of prejudice discourse, and as we will argue, it is the case of prejudice images. In this sense, we take argument schemes as a good candidate to investigate the “reasonable prejudices” (VAN DIJK, 1984) constructed within visual argument, taking into consideration that these structures are vehicles for sign (ideological in nature) mediated social construction of knowledge. In this sense, argument schemes are not just a cognitive feature of the mind, but a socio-cultural practice of sharing common knowledge (MACAGNO; WALTON, 2013)

3 Discourse, image, and weight bias

Discourse is often understood as a multimodal vehicle for meaning making that requires us to actively participate in the process of interpreting and constructing our social reality (JOFFE; STAERKLÉ, 2007; DA SILVA XAVIER, 2020). We present three intellectuals that are highly influential to understand how image should be integrated in this discussion in order to fully grasp how prejudice discourse is constructed through making sense of socially shared signs. First, we discuss Charles S. Peirce idea of abduction as perceptual inference. Second, Roland Barthes semiotic interpretation of image analysis. And third, Jaan Valsiner ideas of meaning making as a process mediated and regulated by signs that at the same time constrains and enables other signs to arise as meaningful in a semiotic dispute.

With these three we aim to present how image mediated reality requires intuitive, almost instinctual, inference that is based upon previous knowledge and regularities present in discourse; moreover, we contend that this intuition is made possible through constraints that enables our interpretation of the world. Based on these ideas we intend to show that rhetorical and aesthetic devices are used by media outlets to convince us of a worldview guiding our interpretation of life.

Peirce's ideas on abduction refers mainly to two things: novelty in knowledge and a type of inference closer to a guessing instinct (PAAVOLA, 2005). For our present purpose we discuss the latter. In the later Peirce's view, abduction is a rather instinctual form of inference that we perform daily to make sense of our reality. For him, the sole act of looking through the window requires from us a high degree of unintentional, but rational interpretation (FORTES, 2021), that other formal reasoning procedures do not match. He goes further stating that this type of inference depends much on previous knowledge and socially shared cues for conveying meaning to reality.

This is crucial to understand how prejudice is spread in image-type signs. Prejudice is something socially reprehensible, therefore, it is imaginable that these images are not direct in expressing racism, homophobia, weight bias or gender violence (BILLIG, 2001). That is why ambiguity, vagueness and, often, "problem solutions" are the upfront message of prejudice image (ABBEY; VALSINER, 2005; DAGATTI, 2018). While we depend on abduction to infer our reality, image construction uses it to convey persuasive meaning hidden (sometimes not so much) under "positive" ideas.

While Peirce's idea concerned the process of inferring plausible interpretations in our ordinary life (especially from visual perception), Roland Barthes (BARTHES, 2015) proposes a systematic way to understand the semiotics of images. He proposes a system where images convey persuasive messages through multi-layered semiotic means. He proposes three types of messages within texts: the linguistic, or the text that accompanies an image; the symbolic, or the non-linguistic message that we can infer associating with other meanings; and the literal message, or the representational relation between image and represented object. A main contribution of this systematization is how connoted and denoted meanings are constructed through images. In this sense, we can understand the semiotic nature of how socially shared codes for interpretations are used to spread a message persuasively. Furthermore, this allows us to infer that from the tension of denoted and connoted messages that images guide active interpretations in both ways.

In this sense, it is crucial to understand how meaning is enabled through resolving tensions between different possible interpretations. Valsiner (2009) provides a useful framework to conceptualize how meaning is constructed in a tension of an A meaning that implies a non-A counterpart. This is not the same as connoted and denoted messages. In Valsiner's view (BRANCO; VALSINER, 2010), this is a rather deep mechanism of how meaning making in general is possible. The coexisting of A and non-A meaning is momentarily resolved through the mediation (or constraint) of other signs used to give form to A as different to non-A.

One example of this dynamic is the clean-non-clean binomial. In Valsiner's view (VALSINER, 2009), the meaning of clean (A) does not necessarily imply dirty (a possible non-A); it implies "not-clean", which could mean dirty, but also dangerous. In his view, these tensions could be resolved by other non-A types of meaning, however, the constraints that dirty imposes (as "the" non-A counterpart) to clean created a field of meaning useful to people in specific contexts that regulates actions in real life events - such as orienting towards the cleanse of an object (DA SILVA; MACEDO, 2021). This is crucial to us because the meaning construction of healthy lifestyle does not require that the tension revolve around being fat, however, that is how healthy advertising conveys meaning. In other words, when meaning to be healthy implies anti-fat discourse, what is at stake is the semiotic devices of meaning construction against a type of body, but not necessarily the promotion of health.

With all the above theoretical background, we argue the case that images convey meaning that depends on an audience actively engaged with what is portrayed. However, we can also make the case that the meaning projected and hidden in images are not straightforward messages, but implicit guidelines that drives the audience towards a certain ideological understanding of what is being said through visual and cultural semiotic resources. So far, we have pointed that an image can be analysed discursively and semiotically; in the following section we will argue that images also convey a certain type of rationality, what we will call argumentativeness.

4 The discursive construction of anti-fat rhetoric

From a biomedical perspective, overweight and obesity are defined as abnormal or excessive fat accumulation, usually measured by body mass index (BMI), that presents a health risk. In this sense, overweight is considered the main risk factor for several chronic diseases, including cardiovascular diseases, which are the leading causes of death worldwide (WHO, 2021). From an epidemiological point of view, data

points out that worldwide obesity has almost tripled since 1975. In 2016, about 39% of adults 18 years and older were overweight and 13% with obesity (WHO, 2021). Research focused on public health states that this scenario entails high costs to the healthcare system, which has mobilized governmental efforts over time. However, most attempts to “combat” the growth of obesity, and its possible consequences, have relied on misconceptions about body weight in the public narrative and have ignored structural and systemic issues related to the phenomenon.

A recent consensus to combat weight stigma (RUBINO *et al.*, 2020) describes how assumptions about the causality of weight gain/obesity have been used in a biased way to support a stigmatizing discourse. Some of the assumptions mistakenly used by the lay public and health professionals is that body weight is the direct result of calories ingested minus calories expended, and that obesity depends on individual failings, such as laziness and gluttony. Scientific evidence published in recent years demonstrates both caloric intake and caloric expenditure are dependent on other variables, many of which are independent of voluntary control, such as basal metabolic rate responsible for 60-80% of daily energy expenditure (RUBINO *et al.*, 2020).

Another assumed public narrative about fat bodies is that they are sick. These narratives have incited a “moral panic” around the obesity epidemic without sufficient evidence that obesity causes poor health (MUENNIG, 2008). Campos *et al.* (2006) presents evidence that counters the claim that adiposity is always pathological. For example, studies show that there are people with obesity who are “metabolically normal”, who are probably at their natural healthy weight.

Although not the focus of this paper, it is important to note that the pathologizing of obesity can be seen from different perspectives even by scholars who are concerned about the consequences of weight stigmatization. Part of them believe that defining obesity as a disease result in greater investment in the area, and others argue that there is no way to fight stigma by using what creates it. However, both perspectives agree that the rhetoric created around fat bodies, as lazy and gluttonous, is a socially constructed phenomenon under the influence of political forces such as science, medicine, and the media.

Most of what we share in our social life is made possible only by discursive means. Moreover, we share common goals and beliefs of what is good and desirable. Segal (2005) states that this system of shared norms and values guides behavior as a rhetorical system of shared discourse. In this sense, we share not only the cultural symbols available in culture, but also are convinced collectively through shared

discourse. In fact, Kwan (2009) points out that the ideas of health and well-being are more socially and symbolic than scientific, but the latter is used to enforce conformity to the former (MCMICHAEL, 2013).

McMichael (2012) draws attention to the dominant vs. resistant rhetoric tension. Medical and health promoting agencies employ several rhetorical (rather than rigorous scientific) methods to convince the general public of the dangers of the fat body. One special case is how causal claims are made without empirical evidence to back it, such as “fat causes diabetes” or “fat causes heart diseases”. As she discusses (MCMICHAEL, 2013), there is enough scientific discussion to understand that the causal relation should be disputed, as she presents conflicting studies whether the evidence points to each side of the causal claim.

In this sense, claiming causal rather than correlated evidence can be understood as an expert rhetorical device of authority to convince a non-informed audience of something that is disputed within the field of medical studies. On the other hand, resistant discourse tries to show these conflicts in medical research to point out that there might be other causes to disease or fat body, and these are not related to personality, value, or worthiness, three examples of psychological dimension of body stigma enabled through prejudice discourse.

Moreover, the prevalence of this power dynamic created what McMichael calls “socially-acceptable prejudice”. Scientific and cultural discourse of anti-fat enables several types of prejudiced behavior against fat bodies (MCMICHAEL, 2012). Socially shared beliefs that fat bodies are undesirable and can be changed by will reinforce that control over fat bodies is, actually, “helping” what McMichael (2013) calls legitimate oppression. This is so entangled in our way of life that it is hard to escape from the binomial fat-disease, however, the aforementioned studies show that this is a discursive phenomenon dependent on mass communication rhetorical devices, not physical or medical in its core. Now, anti-fat is understood as a rhetorical war (MCMICHAEL, 2012; 2013) over who has the legitimate claim over subjective body experience. We claim that the mainstream media plays a major role in spreading this war.

While there are different sides to this discussion, we aim to address how the semiotic dynamics of anti-fat rhetoric guides meaning making (therefore, action) towards weight bias, not health promotion. We claim that mainstream media and health discourse, through rhetorical devices, encourage the resolution towards fat-disease binomials and normalizing (even legitimizing) prejudice against fat bodies, rather than promoting pro health actions. With our paper, we aim to show that the

image rhetoric of anti-fat relies on convincing a broader audience of the ridicule (laughable character), disgust (undesirable body) and fear (sickness related bodies) of having a non-conforming body type.

5 Method

Following the literature on visual argumentation (and visual rhetoric), media studies, and attitudes and beliefs around body image, we propose to qualitatively analyse examples of memes that convey anti-fat prejudice hidden under humorous disguise. In this sense, memes are a good case for analysis because they have been deemed as an important cultural symbol of the current generation, moreover, memes have drawn attention to their discursive and socio-ideological nature (DAVIS; GLANTZ; NOVAK, 2016; KULKARNI, 2017). Studying memes is a good way into understanding social semiotics on the go.

For the corpus selection, we searched in websites where the users, themselves, create the memes and post them as part of a collaborative work. All the images were found on the internet through a community of meme generation (quickmeme.com) under the search terms: fat meme, overweight and fat body. We assume these memes were created by users over photos of other people they don't know.

By the time of our search (July 2021), we found over 40 memes related to overweight jokes and intentionally selected as examples the three most expressive ones that helped to show distinct mechanisms of visual argumentativeness. We chose those that 1) were visually recognizable and intelligible, 2) had different argument schemes to convey a hidden message of weight-prejudice, and 3) reflected and represented the diversity of the argumentativeness found in our search. One important note on studying this type of meme is that they are often banned from the platforms, which makes it hard to find and catalogue it after a preview screening.

Using the above-mentioned theoretical framework, we propose three categories found in the literature as rhetorical mechanisms aimed to portray (imagetically and argumentatively) fat bodies as undesirable. Our research does not intend to be exhaustive, and we do not infer that these are the only cases of weight-related memes. However, we aim to show how visual argument, image rhetoric and social prejudice devices enable the creation of “joking” memes that frame an audience meaning making towards prejudice ideas.

We discuss, then, how laughter, disgust and fear are commonly used in order to create an image of fat bodies for targeted and legitimated oppression through

common argumentative schemes, i.e., argument from final cause, argument from cause-effect relation, argument from proportion or frequency, argument from analogy, and many others (see also WALTON; REED; MACAGNO, 2008). Even if there are other mechanisms, we want to use these as a starting point to argue the case of an “argumentativeness” of prejudice images in the following categories (MCMICHAEL, 2012):

- *Laughter*: many studies have identified that the portrayal of fat bodies as funny or laughable is a central piece of mainstream entertainment. Works such as Fouts and Burggraf (2000) present that the heavier a fat body on media, the “funnier” comments on people’s weight were made, especially on female characters (showing also how gender roles and prejudice are part of the equation). Burmeister and Carels (2014) shows how fat body jokes were related to worsen attitude of others towards people who are fat. This type of mechanism is often used in comedy and other types of “it’s just a joke” discourse.
- *Disgust*: the production of an aversive feeling through discourse (image included) has been deemed at the centre of weight-bias prejudice (GRIFFITHS; TROOP, 2006; LUPTON, 2015). The “unwanted” body is a key part of social media (and weight-related mental health challenges). As these authors point, disgust is a mechanism used to generate avoidance and dissatisfaction over someone’s or of one’s own body, mostly, by showing images of bodies far from the ideal (this category could also refer to body-shaming disguised in body-positivity).
- *Fear*: lastly, we have the construction of fat-bodies as something to be fearful of. Wapner (2010) provides us of two clear examples of such construction: first, it is often said in the news that obesity is killing us (as persons and as societies) and, second, that the next generation will die before their parents due to fat-related diseases. It is clear that most of this construction comes from medical discourse on stigmatizing bodies through “scientific” data (mostly exaggerated or biased).

6 Analysis: three cases of weight prejudice memes

We proceed, now, to present three cases where laughter, disgust and fear are operationalized through visual arguments, image rhetoric and social prejudice to provide an audience element to frame their interpretation and construct a

“reasonable prejudice” (VAN DIJK, 1984; POTTER; EDWARDS; WETHERELL, 1993) over fat-bodies.

Laughter

This category refers to the argumentative and rhetorical devices employed to guide the audience reactions towards a comic feeling over the photo and pass an underlying presupposition that leads to prejudice. We will discuss one (Figure 1) (of many) examples of this type of discursive setting:

Figure 1 – Meme 1: “Torture for fat people” as an example of the laughter category



Source: <http://www.quickmeme.com/Torture-for-fat-people>

In the above image we see a girl trying to reach a cookie that is on her right shoulder with the written text “torture for fat people”. As Barthes (2015) proposes, the multi-layered construction of this meme uses the linguistic, the symbolic and the representational semiotic resources to indicate that people with obesity suffer from something they could avoid and can’t do what “regular people” could, and that is what it is funny about it. This meme’s juxtaposition of image and written text, in our interpretation, cues two great assumptions about obesity: first, the naturalized silliness of fat bodies that is often referred as “fat-as-funny” archetypes, and second, that people with obesity cannot control their desires for food.

However, diving deeper into the image we can point to two argumentative devices that leads the audience to believing that fat-bodies equates to lack of control, lack of willpower and excess of desire. We can point to two well-known argumentative schemes: argument from genus and argument from common knowledge. The scheme “argument from genus” is the argumentative structure where it is assumed that what belongs to a species belongs to a subject of the species. This means that it is assumed that being funny is a property of being fat, and,

therefore, that laughter is only natural. And the second scheme refers to the assumed folk knowledge that obesity must be related to lack of willpower.

The audience here is led to assume that something trivial for non-people with obesity is something difficult (and silly or funny) to people with obesity. Moreover, it emphasizes that obesity is associated with lack of control (assumed that obesity is due to excessive eating). Both statements can be represented as argument against obesity: first, fat people are funny because their behavior is silly (what is true to one, is true to all) and second, fat people can't control themselves otherwise (reduction of complex topic to simple explanation). Moreover, both are somewhat based on common knowledge frequently represented in entertainment and social media (FOUTS; BURGGRAF, 2000). In this sense, we can see both as fallacious arguments because it applies rules of categories to subjects as if the premises were true, and the meme tries to extrapolate this relation.

Disgust

We proceed to the category of disgust. Under this term we can find references to body dissatisfaction, unreal body types and body shamming. Most of the literature shows that fat bodies are deemed as disgusting (GRIFFITHS; TROOP, 2006) and undesirable (TAYLOR, 2022). And certain psychological traits (such as laziness) are attributed to fat people (especially, to women). In Figure 2, we find an example of the construction of a “joke” under that assumption that: 1) no one wants a fat body, 2) fat people lack discipline and 3) fat people are lazy. The meme below is called “Fat Guy Fred” and it has gone viral, transforming “Fred” as a token of “fat guy” jokes.

Figure 2 – Meme 2: “I’m gonna start my diet eventually” as an example of the disgust category



Source: <http://www.quickmeme.com/meme/3p76qt>

The meme is constructed through a juxtaposition between the image of a fat adult male in his room (or office) and a text that says “I’m gonna start my diet, eventually”. Some aspects of the image are relevant: first, it seems to be a messy room; second, it shows the fat body without clothes; and, third, it shows a contrast between the size of the body and the size of the furniture. All of these elements guide our interpretation to assume that this is a lazy, undisciplined and grotesque scene. We can now discuss the argumentative assumptions present in this image.

First, we can point to a similar idea, but operationalized through a different argument scheme. While the first image constructs the idea of “excess of hunger”, in Meme 2, the standpoint that is trying to be advanced is that there is a “lack of will”, in this sense, psychologizing and individualizing what it is to be obese. Second, it constructs through the argument scheme from opposites the idea that the man in the image is the opposite of a disciplined person (the use of the first-person pronoun “I” and the complement of “eventually” also indicates this idea). And third, through showing a shirtless man we think it points to the argument from analogy, where a shirtless fat man serves as analogy of undesired, unsexual, and disgusting. As Taylor (2022) points out, the construction of fat bodies as disgusting is a central part of social imagery around them, which have high implication in (non)romantic life of this population. With this image we see that fitness discourse (you can change if you want, and if you are the way you are is because you don’t want to change) is exaggerated to shame and embarrass people with obesity.

Fear

Lastly, we have a “funny” meme that convey a prejudice message in two senses. This last meme (Figure 3) is also known as “meanwhile at Wal-Mart” and it both aimed at making fun of poor people and fat people depending on the picture they choose to present this “viral text”.

Figure 3 – Meme 3: “Meanwhile at Wal-Mart” as an example of the fear category



Source: <https://sayingimages.com/wp-content/uploads/meanwhile-walmart-memes.jpg>

In the above meme we can see a fat person falling from an electric trolley at a supermarket store in the soda section and the text “meanwhile at Wal-Mart”. It is a common place of internet memes to make fun of what happens at Walmart’s. In this meme, particularly, the image being presented of a fat person dropping sodas are a centrepiece of medical discourse against obesity, such as “do physical exercise” and “do not consume sugary drinks or food”. But also, this portrays a picture of bad physical health, laziness, and difficulty of doing ordinary things. Both image and text emphasize the struggle of being fat as something to be avoided.

There are, in our analysis, two clear argument schemes that convey a prejudice message. First, the argument from effect to cause. In this, it is assumed that the consumption of sugary drinks causes weight gain, and also, cause people to get sick. What the image shows is the undesired “lifestyle” as an effect of being fat (something to be avoided). Second, we see the scheme of argument from consequences. In this sense, the image tries to persuade that the consequence of being fat is being disabled and inapt. With this we can we argue the case of a fearful (as in avoidance-oriented, not frightened) image based upon medical discourse that overstates the causality and the illness of being obese.

7 Discussion

In our discussion we would like to point to three elements: 1) what type of “rationality” prejudice memes appeal to, 2) visual arguments are symbolic resources that obey abductive processes of meaning-making, and 3) discuss the hidden nature of argumentativeness prejudice in these memes. Firstly, it is important to note that most of what is rational behind all the images above are, actually, fallacious applications of rational operations embedded within “silly jokes”. In this sense, the rational appeal is the appeal to the reproduction of stereotypes, hegemonic discourse, and fallacious uses of reasoning procedures.

The “reasonable prejudice” (VAN DIJK, 1984) is being constructed through the fallacious use of socially acceptable discourse over other people’s bodies, such as the medical, the fitness and the entertainment discourses (CRANDALL, 1994; GARD; WRIGHT, 2005; JORDAN, 2004; VELDHUIS; KONIJN; SEIDELL, 2014). What is at stake in these memes is that they are “partially” rational, or at least, use reasoning procedures deemed as valid and based on common knowledge easily identified by the audience. Therefore, the rhetoric of prejudice does not reveal itself as prejudice, but disguised as common sense, helpful advice, or silly joke.

Second, we should address that image interpretation, especially those of prejudice, are based upon vagueness and ambiguity elements (ABBEY; VALSINER, 2005). We think that an underlying mechanism operating in the guidance of our interpretation is giving implicit cues that access socially shared cultural semiotic resources (GILLESPIE; ZITTOUN, 2010). These implicit cues guide our attention and reflection to a set of cultural elements (i.e., the cookie, the naked body, and the soda section) that lead us to assume that these are relevant to interpret the image. However, without the written text and without the comic context, the three pictures are just: a girl being silly, a guy smiling to the camera and an accident at the grocery store. These cultural cues draw our attention (and reflection) to actively interpret a meaning beyond those of the picture, in this sense, guiding the semiotic mediation of what we see.

Third, following the metaphors of “reasonable prejudice” we propose to understand it as hidden argumentativeness employed to present prejudice as rational, or at least, smart reasoning. Even if the image does not impact the audience the way intended, it seems that the effect of “this image has a point” is being made, therefore providing the rhetoric of prejudice a frame of good and smart reasoning that tricks the audience into thinking that it is not oppressive.

Final Remarks

In conclusion, we would like to think of the relevance of this type of study in revealing underlying argumentative and rhetorical mechanisms of prejudice, in discussing a rationale to denounce stigmatization images and in promoting awareness towards the general and specific mechanisms of weight prejudice discourse. Lastly, we point to limitations in our study and future direction.

With this work we think we advance (even if a little) the understanding of how prejudice images operate in the level of persuasiveness of the audience of a certain rationality through argument schemes easily recognizable by an audience. This is important to advance ways to denounce this type of humiliation using rational and grounded discussion (even if a joke is only a joke). Finally, we think it is important to raise awareness that the depiction of fat bodies in mainstream and social media are centred in portraying the risks, problems, and difficulties of a big size body, a discourse that is not based on health concerns, but on oppressive rhetoric.

Our study presents some limitations that we must address: we have not made a throughout survey of the way argument schemes can be related to prejudice images; however, we think this work might be a new piece in an ongoing discussion

of how oppressive discourse operates in different levels to maintain control and social asymmetries. We think, and invite, new studies on visual argumentation of prejudice images as a way to better understand the persuasiveness of pictorial arguments.

Acknowledgments

The authors are thankful for the support given by the Psychology Doctoral Program (from the Universidad Alberto Hurtado) that gave space for an Argumentation Theory course where the first version of this paper was discussed with the students (Ingrid, Nadia, Mariana, Samid, Stefano and Phagner). The second author also states that this study was financed in part by the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior – CAPES), Brazil - Finance Code 001.

References

- ABBEY, Emily; VALSINER, Jaan. Emergence of Meanings Through Ambivalence. **Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research**, v. 6, n. 1, 2005.
- AMOSSY, Ruth. The new rhetoric's inheritance. *Argumentation and discourse analysis. Argumentation*, v. 23, n. 3, p. 313–324, 2009.
- BARTHES, Roland. **Rhetoric of the Image**. Translation: Raz Golestani Fard. Tehran: Nashr Markaz.[In Persian], 2015.
- BILLIG, Michael. Humour and hatred: The racist jokes of the Ku Klux Klan. **Discourse & Society**, v. 12, n. 3, p. 267–289, 2001.
- BILLIG, Michael. Studying the thinking society: Social representations, rhetoric, and attitudes. In: BREAKWELL, Glynis Marie.; CANTER, David Victor. (orgs.). **Empirical approaches to social representations**. Clarendon Press/Oxford University Press, 1993.
- BLAIR, John Anthony. The possibility and actuality of visual arguments. In: TINDALE, Christopher (Ed.). **Groundwork in the Theory of Argumentation**. Dordrecht: Springer, 2012a. p. 205–223.
- BLAIR, John Anthony. The rhetoric of visual arguments. In: TINDALE, Christopher (Ed.). **Groundwork in the Theory of Argumentation**. Dordrecht: Springer, 2012b. p. 261–279.
- BRANCO, Angela; VALSINER, Jaan. Towards cultural psychology of affective processes: Semiotic regulation of dynamic fields. **Estudios de psicologia**, v. 31, n. 3, p. 243–251, 2010.

- BURMEISTER, Jacob M; CARELS, Robert A. Weight-related humor in the media: Appreciation, distaste, and anti-fat attitudes. **Psychology of Popular Media Culture**, v. 3, n. 4, p. 223, 2014.
- CAMPOS, Paul *et al.* The epidemiology of overweight and obesity: public health crisis or moral panic?. **International journal of epidemiology**, v. 35, n. 1, p. 55–60, 2006.
- CHRYSLEE, Gail J; FOSS, Sonja K; RANNEY, Arthur L. The construction of claims in visual argumentation. **Visual Communication Quarterly**, v. 3, n. 2, p. 9–13, 1996.
- CRANDALL, Christian S. Prejudice against fat people: ideology and self-interest. **Journal of personality and social psychology** v. 66, n. 5, p. 882, 1994.
- DA SILVA XAVIER, Glayci Kelli Reis. Argumentação implícita e multimodalidade em gêneros da instância midiática. **Revista Eletrônica de Estudos Integrados em Discurso e Argumentação**, v. 20, n. 3, 2020.
- DA SILVA, João Roberto Ratis Tenório, MACÊDO, Gabriel Fortes. The Tension A<-> non-A in the Meaning-Making of a Chemical Element in a Sociogenetic Level. In: LYRA, Maria; PINHEIRO, Marina Assis (orgs.). **Cultural Psychology as Basic Science**. Springer, Cham, Switzerland, p. 19-31, 2018.
- DAGATTI, Mariano. Imagens da política, política das imagens: sobre comunicação, retórica e estética. **Revista Eletrônica de Estudos Integrados em Discurso e Argumentação**, v. 16, n. 1, p. 274-298, 2018.
- DAVIS, Corey B; GLANTZ, Mark; NOVAK, David R. “You Can’t Run Your SUV on Cute. Let’s Go!”: Internet Memes as Delegitimizing Discourse. **Environmental Communication**, v. 10, n. 1, p. 62–83, 2016.
- FORTES, Gabriel. Abduction. In: **The Palgrave Encyclopedia of the Possible**. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2021. p. 1–9.
- FOUTS, Gregory; BURGGRAF, Kimberley. Television situation comedies: Female weight, male negative comments, and audience reactions. **Sex roles**, v. 42, n. 9, p. 925–932, 2000.
- FREDERICK, David A; SAGUY, Abigail C; GRUYS, Kjerstin. Culture, health, and bigotry: How exposure to cultural accounts of fatness shape attitudes about health risk, health policies, and weight-based prejudice. **Social Science & Medicine**, v. 165, p. 271–279, 2016.
- GARD, Michael; WRIGHT, Jan. **The obesity epidemic: Science, morality and ideology**. London: Routledge, 2005.
- GILLESPIE, Alex; ZITTOUN, Tania. Using resources: Conceptualizing the mediation and reflective use of tools and signs. **Culture & psychology**, v. 16, n. 1, p. 37–62, 2010.
- GRIFFITHS, Jayne; TROOP, Nicholas A. Disgust and fear ratings of eating disorder-relevant stimuli: Associations with dieting concerns and fat intake. **Anxiety, stress, and coping**, v. 19, n. 4, p. 421–433, 2006.
- JOFFE, Hélène; STAERKLÉ, Christian. The centrality of the self-control ethos in western aspersions regarding outgroups: A social representational approach to stereotype content. **Culture & Psychology**, v. 13, n. 4, p. 395–418, 2007.

- JOFFE, Hélène. The power of visual material: Persuasion, emotion and identification. **Diogenes**, v. 55, n. 1, p. 84–93, 2008.
- JORDAN, John W. The rhetorical limits of the “plastic body”. **Quarterly Journal of Speech**, v. 90, n. 3, p. 327–358, 2004.
- KJELDSEN, Jens Elmelund. Pictorial argumentation in advertising: Visual tropes and figures as a way of creating visual argumentation. In: VAN EEMEREN, Frans; GARSSSEN, Bart (Eds.). **Topical Themes in Argumentation Theory**. Dordrecht: Springer, 2012. p. 239–255.
- KJELDSEN, Jens Elmelund. The study of visual and multimodal argumentation. **Argumentation**, v. 29, n. 2, p. 115–132, 2015.
- KULKARNI, Anushka. Internet meme and Political Discourse: A study on the impact of internet meme as a tool in communicating political satire. **Journal of Content, Community & Communication Amity School of Communication**, v. 6, n. 3, 2017.
- KWAN, Samantha. Framing the fat body: contested meanings between government, activists, and industry. **Sociological inquiry**, v. 79, n. 1, p. 25–50, 2009.
- LUPTON, Deborah. **Fat**. 2. ed. London: Routledge, 2018.
- LUPTON, Deborah. The pedagogy of disgust: the ethical, moral and political implications of using disgust in public health campaigns. **Critical public health**, v. 25, n. 1, p. 4–14, 2015.
- MACAGNO, Fabrizio; WALTON, Douglas. Implicatures as Forms of Argument. In: CAPONE, Alessandro; LO PIPARO, Franco; CARAPEZZA, Marco (orgs.). **Perspectives on Pragmatics and Philosophy**. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2013. p. 203–225.
- MCMICHAEL, Lonie. **Acceptable prejudice?: Fat, rhetoric and social justice**. Pearlsong Press, 2013.
- MCMICHAEL, Lonie. **Talking fat: Health vs. persuasion in the war on our bodies**. Pearlsong Press, 2012.
- MILLER, Joshua. Beauty and democratic power. **Fashion Theory**, v. 6, n. 3, p. 277–297, 2002.
- MUENNIG, Peter. The body politic: the relationship between stigma and obesity-associated disease. **BMC Public Health**, v. 8, n. 1, p. 1–10, 2008.
- PAAVOLA, Sami. Peircean abduction: instinct or inference?. **Semiotica**, v. 2005, n. 153, p. 131–154, 2005.
- POTTER, Jonathan; EDWARDS, Derek; WETHERELL, Margaret. A model of discourse in action. **American behavioral scientist**, v. 36, n. 3, p. 383–401, 1993.
- POULAIN, Jean-Pierre. **Sociologia da obesidade**. Tradução: Cecília Prada. São Paulo: Senac São Paulo, 2013.
- RICHARDSON, John E; WODAK, Ruth. The Impact of Visual Racism: Visual Arguments in Political Leaflets of Austrian and British Far-right Parties. **Controversia**, v. 6, n. 2, 2009.
- ROCCI, Andrea. Modality and its conversational backgrounds in the reconstruction of argumentation. **Argumentation**, v. 22, n. 2, p. 165–189, 2008.
- RUBINO, Francesco et al. Joint international consensus statement for ending stigma of obesity. **Nature Medicine**, v. 26, n. 4, p. 485–497, 2020.

- SEGAL, Judy Z. Interdisciplinarity and bibliography in rhetoric of health and medicine. **Technical Communication Quarterly**, v. 14, n. 3, p. 311–318, 2005.
- SNIDER, Stefanie. On the Limitations of the Rhetoric of Beauty: Embracing Ugliness in Contemporary Fat Visual Representations. In: RODRIGUES, Sara; PRZYBYLO, Ela (Eds.). **On the Politics of Ugliness**. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018. p. 337–365.
- TAYLOR, Allison. “But where are the dates?” Dating as a central site of fat femme marginalisation in queer communities. **Psychology & Sexuality**, v. 13, n. 1, p. 57–68, 2022.
- VALSINER, Jaan. **Cultural psychology today: Innovations and oversights**. Sage Publications Sage UK: London, England, 2009.
- VAN DIJK, Teun A. **Prejudice in discourse**. Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1984.
- VALSINER, Jaan. Process structure of semiotic mediation in human development. **Human development**, v. 44, n. 2–3, p. 84–97, 2001.
- VAN MULKEN, Margot. Analyzing rhetorical devices in print advertisements. **Document design**, v. 4, n. 2, p. 114–128, 2003.
- VELDHUIS, Jolanda; KONIJN, Elly A; SEIDELL, Jacob C. Counteracting Media’s Thin-Body Ideal for Adolescent Girls: Informing Is More Effective Than Warning. **Media Psychology**, v. 17, p. 154–184, 2014.
- VIGARELLO, Georges. **The Metamorphoses of Fat: A History of Obesity**. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.
- WALTON, Douglas; REED, Christopher; MACAGNO, Fabrizio. **Argumentation schemes**. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- WAPNER, Jessica. Archive for the ‘Health and wellness’ Category. **Journal of the National Cancer Institute**, 2010.
- WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION (WHO). **Obesity and overweight**, 2021. Disponível em: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/obesity-and-overweight>. Acesso em: 01 Jun. 2022
- WRIGHT, Jan. Biopower, biopedagogies and the obesity epidemic. In: WRIGHT, Jan; HARWOOD, Valerie (Eds.). **Biopolitics and the ‘Obesity Epidemic’: Governing Bodies**. Routledge, 2012, p. 9-22.