

IMAGES ABOUT OLD AGE AND AGEING IN INTERNET MEMES

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Abstract

Internet memes shape new discourse phenomena that communicate ideas, feelings, and emotions through images, phrases, and/or videos on digital media. It is a ludic mass communication tool that uses humor and irony and is a source of great value for social discourse analysis. In this article, we analyze the ways in which old age and ageing are represented in Internet memes. This work is part of the studies on prejudices and stereotypes towards old age, featuring contributions from critical discourse analysis. A content analysis was made on a corpus of 47 memes, selected between July and December 2022 using keywords in the Google search engine. The results show that Internet memes

reproduce a reductionist and discriminatory view on senior citizens, linking old age to decline, sickness, asexuality, rigidity, and inability to learn. In turn, we observed the replication of gender stereotypes historically assigned to women, as well as an overestimation of the ideals of beauty and youth. Thus, in the face of the promotion of ageist images and stereotypes about old age, it is necessary to sensitize the population regarding these cultural artifacts and their inappropriate use that reproduces a naturalized ageism that limits the full exercise of the rights of older people.

Keywords: Memes, elderly people, ageing, ageism, stereotypes, prejudices.

1. Introduction

Internet memes have become a universal communication code due to their capacity for consumption and dissemination. As a discursive phenomenon of digital culture, memes constitute a unit of information of great value for the analysis of ideas and social discourses. This paper focuses on the study of internet memes as meaningful discourses that involve complex processes of production of meaning (Martínez-Ortega, 2020). The analysis focuses on the ways in which internet memes, as discursive phenomena, represent old age and aging by answering the following questions: What themes prevail in memes that use images of older people? What aspects do they connote? What characteristics are attributed to older people as a group? What meanings are presented implicitly or indirectly?

This paper recovers contributions from studies on prejudices¹ and stereotypes² about old age and aging in the media. At the same time, it is inscribed in the perspective of critical discourse analysis CDA focused on social problems, especially in the production and reproduction of meanings linked to domination and abuse of power (Van-Dijk, 2003, 2010). Following the discourse-cognition-society triangle, critical discourse analysis includes both written texts and images and multimedia materials, in this case the meme. Cognition refers to representations, beliefs and evaluations about old age. As for the social dimension, we analyze the views on the elderly who, many times, are judged only according to their chronological age, reinforcing certain stereotypes and prejudices. We seek to identify the themes through which reference is made in memes to old age, aging and the elderly. This identification makes it possible to relate the macro level with the microstructural level of the discourses in the *corpus* of selected memes. In the prejudices and stereotypes about old age, a clear polarization is observed where a positive presentation of youth is opposed *versus* a negative one of old age (Moreno-Toledo, 2010).

Another key element of CDA is the implicit meanings as presuppositions or indirect allusions present in memes (Van-Dijk, 2003). We cannot overlook omissions as a valuable element of

¹ According to the Real Academia Española, prejudice refers to a 'previous judgment or preconceived idea, usually unfavorable'. It is related to discriminatory actions typical of *viejismo* ('oldism') or *edadismo* (*ageism*) (Real Academia Española, n.d., definition 1).

² A stereotype is defined, according to the Royal Spanish Academy, as an 'image or idea commonly accepted by a group or society with an immutable character' (Real Academia Española, n.d., definition 2).

analysis for the proposed study. The production and reproduction of the discourses disseminated in memes also cannot avoid what Van Dijk calls the "mental models" that represent, on the one hand, personal beliefs and, on the other, offer representations of the social through the dissemination of knowledge, attitudes and ideologies. It is through these models that the relationship between the discursive and the social transits (Van-Dijk, 2016).

This study focuses on the group of the elderly since it is assumed that negative stereotypes about old age evidence situations of inequality and domination, leaving the elderly in a situation of clear disadvantage with respect to other age groups and, consequently, curtailing full access to the exercise of their rights (Bravo-Segal & Villar, 2020).

Next, a review of theoretical approaches and research papers that focused their analysis on Internet memes is presented. Then, key aspects about prejudices and stereotypes based on age (*ageism*) and their diffusion in the media are reviewed. Next, the methodological procedure is detailed and the categories and subcategories that emerge from the content analysis are presented. Finally, the main findings are discussed, and the final conclusions are presented.

2. About internet memes

With the development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)³, a digital culture began to emerge that enabled new forms of communication, perception, and language (Sánchez-Torres *et al.*, 2012). It is in this space where the use of the Internet and social media predominates that a new narrative emerges, which establishes another way of communicating, expressing ideas, feelings and emotions. It is the "meme" that has become a recent cultural phenomenon of recurrent use in society, whose purpose is to convey a message that "can take the form of an image, video, music, phrase or joke" (García-Huerta, 2014, p.1). Its main characteristic is the use of humor, satire, and mockery to convey a message that can refer to various topics such as the contingencies of a country, political debates or events of public notoriety, with the consequent transmission of cultural values that even generate changes in new generations (Muñoz-Villar, 2014). It is also a novel

³ ICTs are those technologies that enable the acquisition, storage, processing, evaluation, transmission, distribution and dissemination of information.

sociocultural phenomenon that is part of the cultural heritage (García-López & Martínez-Cardana, 2020).

Although the term "meme" was adapted by popular discourse to refer to the propagation of messages through the Internet, Richard Dawkins (1976) first used it as an abbreviation of "mimeme", alluding to any cultural process replicated within society. According to the author, a meme would be the cultural equivalent of a biological gene, capable of being transmitted and surviving in a given social ecosystem and, like genes, undergoing mutations, conjugating with other elements to form more complex cultural units (which Dawkins calls *memplexes*) or becoming extinct due to the push of other memes stronger than them (Table 1).

The memetic theory proposed by Dawkins is based on the understanding that the dissemination of ideas and cultural phenomena is explicable and comparable to the genes of individuals, since memes transmit certain patterns of behavior, thoughts and ideas by imitation, teaching and/or assimilation from generation to generation (Racioppe & Párraga, 2020; Castagno, 2013). However, for this cultural transmission to be favorable, certain criteria must be met, such as fidelity, fecundity and longevity; this implies that the replication is accurately carried out several times and that it lasts over time⁴ (Shifman, 2013).

⁴ According to Dawkins, fidelity refers to the degree of mutation that a meme can have when it is transmitted; if it is not edited, it is considered to have a high degree of fidelity. Fecundity alludes to the spatial reach and the speed with which a meme spreads; while longevity, refers to the time a meme persists among the users of a community (Gonzalez Prieto, 2014).

Table 1. Dawkins' memetic theory

Gen	Meme
Biological evolution	Cultural evolution
Individual	Individual
Inherited genetic information	Information accumulated in our memory and generally captured by imitation, teaching, or assimilation.

Source: prepared by the authors based on Castagno (2013).

However, and unlike the theory proposed by Dawkins, the central feature of Internet memes lies not only in their imitation or replication over time, but in the derivation or variation that they can present to nourish themselves, persist over time and expand their reach either locally or globally (García-Huerta, 2014). For this appropriation and transmission to occur, it is necessary that the participants of the communicative process at least share a system of significance that allows understanding it and giving it meaning as well as knowing the phenomenon of popular culture to which it is intended to refer since the meme usually relates ideas and arguments derived from other digital, semantic or literary resources (Sáez & Carp, 2021; Pérez-Salazar *et al.*, 2014). That is, they are not isolated, closed objects, but "process-objects" which implies understanding them as "open elements that are mutating through micro-repetitions and micro-differences" (Martínez, 2018, p. 1000). In turn, memes articulate and allow us to identify states of opinion of public discourses. This can be observed, for example, in the dissemination by the media of memes that connote an event of public interest (Shifman, 2013).

Mememes are communicative elements that usually use humor, ridicule or belittling as tools to convey ideas or opinions on issues circulating in society. Thus, they promote a new form of production of discourses and implicit meanings (Ballesteros-Doncel, 2016). This process of production and distribution is closely associated with ICTs since it is from them that it is possible to develop this new playful and massive sociocultural practice. In this sense, any ICT user can be a *prosumer*, i.e., consumer and producer of a meme (Ballesteros-Doncel, 2016). There are several free access applications available in *Apple Store* and *Play Store* that make it possible to create memes from a bank of images, videos or GIFs in order to modify their content (add text, and/or stickers).

Once produced, memes are immediately viralized through social media such as *YouTube*, *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Instagram* and even through the messaging and status service *WhatsApp*. Within these spaces they can manifest themselves in different ways, either as a string of characters (*emojis*, acronyms and socially constructed tags known as *hashtags*) or static images, which include others with embedded texts, micro-histories or moving images. Also, they can be presented through audiovisual products, either with a high level of fidelity, partially metaphorical (conformed by a video, audio and subtitles) or as reinterpretations based on the original message (González-Prieto, 2017). In turn, memes can be classified according to their main characteristics (Table 2).

Table 2. Categories of memes

Type of meme	Main characteristics
Macro images	They show a photo/drawing that illustrates a feeling or person, on which is superimposed a text that expresses -in a few lines- the situation.
Self-promotion	They originate as a means of conveying an idea or feeling, hoping that it will go viral.
Inverted celebrity	Created by third parties to celebrate and/or make fun of a person who did something considered ridiculous, or an image that refers to an emotion or stereotype that is then disseminated.
Urban myths	Refers to legends/rumors circulating in society. They are usually used for amusement/entertainment rather than to communicate something.
Marketing and Advertising	Advertising used by companies for its low cost, its purpose is to go viral and encourage the trade of a certain good or service.
Image editing	They are usually the most common, since images available on the Internet are edited with the purpose of communicating or making fun of something.

Pop culture reference

It refers to a particular event -national or international- through the edition of certain images.

Source: Own elaboration based on Muñoz-Villar (2014) and Bueno-Olivera (2021).

As a complement to Dawkins' theory, different approaches have been developed for the study of memes, since this approach has shortcomings such as not considering the active role of Internet users in the production, appropriation and reproduction of memes. Thus, the contributions of Knobel and Lankshear (2007) and Chen (2012) stand out, who give emphasis to users, cultural context and communicative processes, i.e., they focus on memes as part of a set of sociocultural interactions, pre-existing and shared in a society.

On the other hand, several investigations focus both on the values and functions and on the channels through which memes are produced, received and circulated, mainly social networks such as *Facebook*, *WhatsApp* and *Instagram* (Norstrom & Sarna, 2021; Souza & Passos, 2021; Martínez-Ortega, 2020; Racioppe & Párraga, 2020; Gallego-Camacho, 2019; González-Prieto, 2017; Ballesteros-Doncel, 2016). In this way, various techniques have been employed such as case studies, focus groups, interviews, content analysis (both structural and grammatical) and also mixed approaches with the incorporation of *ad hoc* surveys.

Martínez (2018) and García-Huerta (2014) conduct a theoretical review of meme studies where, both authors consider that this new cultural medium is becoming increasingly relevant in the transmission of thoughts, ideas and values that go beyond the ludic dimension and that, sometimes, its ideological content encourages political discussions of public interest.

Ballesteros-Doncel (2016) highlights that memes are not the exclusive patrimony of young people, but, for example, the messaging channel provided by *WhatsApp* made possible the appropriation and use of memes in other age groups. So, the author analyzed the memes captured during six months in a *WhatsApp* group made up of Spanish salaried women, aged between 50 and 55 years. From the analysis, she observed the presence of gender stereotypes, mainly linked to interpersonal relationships and household chores. The results show two perspectives: on the one hand, humor applied to everyday situations which denotes a naturalization of the patriarchal structure where domestic and care tasks are associated with women (the only ones capable of performing them correctly) and, on the

other hand, the materialization of a change, where there is talk of co-responsibility, positioning men with the capacity to learn and participate in these activities.

Meanwhile, the work of González-Prieto (2017) also shows that memes, as cultural experiences, cross age groups and are established as everyday experiences that bring us closer to humor, irony, satire and mockery through different social media. The main findings show that people between the ages of 40 and 65 replicate more times those memes that appeal to them (mainly those with sexual content) compared to two other groups of younger people⁵. In the case of the adult group, the dissemination is done through *WhatsApp* and *Facebook* while, the younger ones prefer to use *Instagram*, *blogs* or *Twitter*.

Gallego-Camacho (2019) considers that these new digital narratives are related, in turn, to the audiences of television programs. Through the analysis of the case of the Eurovision Song Contest, he addressed how television programs have incorporated social media and memes to dynamize the link with the audience, mainly *Twitter* through the *hashtag*. In this way, real-time interactions are generated that allow not only to increase and diversify the audience, but also to encourage creativity and the circulation of memes.

Although memes are associated with laughter and humor, they also fulfill informative functions that stimulate exchange and debate. Indeed, the ethnographic analysis carried out by Martínez-Ortega (2020) shows how memes circulating among students are used to share common experiences and feelings and even pursue informative or recruitment purposes for certain political causes. The author highlights the use of memes as a discursive practice carried out by students to encourage political debate and, therefore, could be considered as a space that enables the development of critical literacy⁶ in universities.

⁵ For his research, González Prieto (2017) implemented three focus groups, each composed of eight people: the first is composed of people between the ages of 18 and 25, the second between the ages of 25 and 40, and the third group includes people between the ages of 40 and 65. He studied in particular the memes received during 24 hours prior to the group and the participants' opinions about them.

⁶ It refers to the practice of reading and writing that allows critical access to the point of view, bias, gaze or subjectivity present in any cultural practice, be it written, visual or audiovisual.

Inquiry into the purpose of a meme can also be observed in the work developed by Racioppe and Párraga (2020), which analyzes the profile, motivations, expectations, and production logic of *Instagram* users who publish memes. For this purpose, a virtual ethnography and a survey of 23 users aged between 14 and 32 years were conducted. The main results determined that most of them engage in the design and circulation of memes as a leisure activity, the purpose of which is to entertain their followers. Also, young users tend to use this narrative tool to raise awareness about an issue or situation of social interest⁷.

Regarding memes as a form of expression of digital participatory culture, the research conducted by Norstrom and Sarna (2021), who analyze the opinions of Polish society on the Covid-19 pandemic, stands out. Based on 1,763 memes retrieved from different sources⁸, the authors show how memes reflect people's dissatisfaction with the social and health measures adopted by the government. This negative view is supported by memes starring "common people" (situated as vulnerable subjects) that were contrasted with "political actors and services", emphasizing the lack of trust expressed by people in relation to the measures adopted by state agents. Indeed, it is noticed that memes express ideas and socio-political contents in accordance with a given event, which influences public opinion, in this case, of the Polish society.

This conception of the meme, as a source that gives rise to public discussion in relation to a given event, is also analyzed in the study by Souza and Passos (2021) on the arrest of former Brazilian president Lula da Silva. Although the use of humor in counter-hegemonic discourses persists in the country, for decades, the meme has begun to position itself as a new resource for political activism and social mobilization. Again, we emphasize the idea that these messages acquire a certain meaning from a contextual framework that makes it possible to understand it. According to the above background, it is evident that, given

⁷ It is important the professionalization of content production on the Internet, where some users perceive this activity as part of their professional tasks related to marketing, communication, and production, thus encouraging the profitability of an activity or product through the exchange where, through the promotion of a service or product, some economic compensation is obtained.

⁸ The memes selected for the research came from six sources: national and regional newspapers with their own websites (932), *Facebook* pages (395 memes) and *Instagram* (436 memes).

current technological advances, memes are captured and used by a large number of Internet users in order to convey messages through humor. These discourses have a series of meanings -explicit and implicit- that construct and reconstruct a certain vision of the world and the people who inhabit it, their analysis makes it possible to observe the "shared imaginary, how we see ourselves and how they see us, what we laugh about and when we are laughed at" (Ballesteros-Doncel, 2016, p. 43). That is to say that, like other media, the language used in memes influences the perception of users, where prejudices, stereotypes and violent discourses are also reproduced (Martínez-Ortega, 2020). Hence their heuristic value to analyze how old age and aging are represented in them.

3. Digital media, memes and ageism

It is important to highlight that the elderly continue to be subject to a paternalistic, reductionist and discriminatory approach where, many times, the elderly are associated with losses, illnesses and limitations compared to the young, to whom "productivity, activity, fruitfulness and fecundity, usefulness and profitability" are attributed within the capitalist system (Moreno-Toledo, 2010, p. 2).

Negative attitudes and ideas that associate old age with illness, disease and loneliness are linked to ageism or *oldism*. Ageism determines discriminatory behaviors, prejudices and stereotypes towards older people based solely on chronological age. Three types of beliefs underlie ageist behaviors: first, negative ideas, where reference is made to the presence of disease and loneliness; second, positive or idealizing stereotypes where an optimistic image of old age is promoted, obviating the losses inherent to this vital moment; and finally, the confusing stereotype that is associated with a return to childhood or youth (Bravo-Segal & Villar, 2020; Moreno-Toledo, 2010). In turn, according to Levy and Banaji (2004) these behaviors can manifest themselves implicitly without conscious and voluntary control.

In this way, old age is approached and thought about from a reductionist approach that does not consider the heterogeneity of situations and particular characteristics that may occur throughout the aging process. Indeed, one of the consequences of the presence and social reproduction of ageist ideas is their appropriation/naturalization by the elderly themselves, which ends up conditioning a way of being and behaving in pursuit of complying with what the stereotype promotes (Quintero-Díaz, 2020; Orozco-Campos & López-Hernández, 2016).

Moreover, age discrimination has a negative impact on the self-esteem and physical health of the elderly, contrary to what happens when the internalization of positive representations of old age associated with better health and longer life expectancy predominates (Vayá & Durán, 2023; Chang *et al.*, 2020).

On the other hand, according to the [Global Report on Ageism](#), presented by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2021a), it is estimated that one out of every two people in the world has ageist attitudes. These ideas and discourses are disseminated and reinforced through the media, so their influence tends to be increasingly greater if we take into account the trend towards the predominance of a society mediatized by technologies (Fernández & Molina, 2021). For example, in the case of Argentina, according to the [report](#) on the construction of news in open television, prepared by the Public Defender's Office (2016), the image promoted of the elderly in the news is that of a passive, fragile and vulnerable subject. In turn, this monitoring carried out by the Public Defender's Office evidences a trend towards the homogenization of the elderly by the media.

It is after the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, together with the "geriatric emergency", that the media placed greater emphasis on older adults. However, the image transmitted about this population group was linked to the incidence and mortality from the virus, which promoted, in many cases, the reproduction of stereotypes and ageist attitudes from different media (Bravo-Segal & Villar, 2020).

In the case of Mexico, Guerson and Ibarra (2021) analyzed the social representations of old age in national press conferences and web pages of the Ministry of Health and identified the use of images that contain stigmas, stereotypes or prejudices that homogenize this population group. For example, by using images of people, gray-haired or bald, with glasses and/or canes where colors were assigned according to gender, such as pink for women and blue for men.

In Chile, the analysis carried out by Salazar-Norabuena (2021) focused on the news on the website of the Ministry of Health. The findings show that the elderly tended to be homogenized and categorized as a risk group that requires the solidarity and care of others in order to survive.

This trend was also observed in Colombia, where the elderly were represented in the written press, television and radio, highlighting situations of vulnerability, economic deficiency and dependence, ignoring the fact that old age is diverse (Quintero-Díaz, 2020). In fact, inequities in old age are the result of differential access to rights, which evidences inequalities accumulated throughout the life course (Dannefer, 2021).

In Argentina, Pochintesta and Baglione (2022) report that 41% of the headlines in the written press have a favorable view of the elderly on issues such as care policies, recommendations within the family, institutional and community sphere, as well as resilience and recovery from the virus. On the other hand, 36% of the headlines were unfavorable, focusing on deaths, contagions, vulnerability, and risk of the elderly population, as well as on situations of abuse and mistreatment. The remaining 22% were classified as neutral headlines. In short, although a favorable view predominates, prejudices and stereotypes still persist.

In the case of social networks, Jiménez-Sotomayor *et al.*, (2020) show that out of the content analyzed on *Twitter* (during the pandemic), a quarter of the messages were discriminatory or potentially offensive to this age group.

Ageism, in turn, is present in the idea that in old age it is no longer possible to learn, that it is a time of social isolation and lack of participation in decision-making, according to data provided by the survey conducted by Vargas and Herrera (2022) in Costa Rica. Indeed, the authors consider it urgent to advance in the promotion of more realistic conceptions of old age in order to expand educational opportunities and lifelong learning regardless of age.

Similarly, Vayá and Durán (2023) state that ageism continues to be present in cultural narratives and media messages, coexisting with new and old forms of expression. Their work focuses on the analysis of representations of sexuality in old age, highlighting ruptures and continuities of ageist stereotypes and prejudices present in contemporary cinema. Although both authors affirm that since the 21st century, cinema has begun to be more inclusive in relation to the sexuality of the elderly, certain taboos still persist. Namely, sex appears linked to love or marriage in monogamous and heteronormative couples, obviating diversity in sex-affective relationships. Also, patriarchal values and discourses are present in the images of older women, who see attributed the absence of sexual desire after menopause. However, an observation to note is that when cinema attempts to move away from asexuality, to show a

freer and more empowered image of female sexuality, these experiences are lived with guilt and fear. That is, when women give free rein to their desires, they pay an emotional cost for not adhering to the sociocultural and moralizing mandate (Vayá & Durán, 2023).

These ageist stereotypes, in relation to female old age and sexuality, are based on a patriarchal system that historically linked men to the productive sphere and women to the reproductive sphere (Estermann, 2021; Kergoat, 2003). In turn, women are assigned - through gender socialization- the tasks of childrearing and care during youth and adulthood. However, these functions are also reproduced during old age, where the care of grandchildren is presented as a new obligation, since it is assumed that grandmothers have time and can contribute/support their children as a form of solidarity, without considering their own desires and autonomy (Yuni & Urbano, 2008; Freixas-Farré, 2008).

In terms of stereotypes linking age and gender, a double standard has been identified as early as the 1970s (Sontang, 1972) where men are valued for their achievements (which increase with age), while women are valued for their appearance (which decreases with age).

As can be seen, prejudices and stereotypes about the elderly continue to circulate - consciously and unconsciously- in society and in the different media. It is therefore necessary to promote research that contributes to detecting and denaturalizing these ageist attitudes and prejudices that circulate in everyday life, since this is the only way to combat and prevent them (WHO, 2021b). Hence, the present study aims to explore and analyze Internet memes, as they constitute a recent communicational phenomenon of enormous value for the analysis of prejudices and stereotypical images of old age.

4. Methodology

The methodological strategy is based on content analysis due to its adaptability for the study of communicative phenomena (Piñeiro-Naval, 2020; Bardin, 2002; Krippendorff, 1990). In turn, according to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) the meme can be considered a semantic macrostructure that combines text and images. The delimitation of the *corpus* was carried out, between July and December 2022, through the *Google* search engine, using the following keywords: memes of elderly people, memes of grandmothers/grandfathers, memes of elderly women and men, and memes about old women/men.

In order to explore this novel and current phenomenon (García-López & Martínez-Cardana, 2020), theoretical criteria such as the content of images of older people and the number of reproductions (aspects that define its dynamism over time) were considered. Regarding the temporal criteria, "instrumental cases" (Stake, 2007)⁹ were taken for six months, based on the period proposed by Ballesteros-Doncel (2016)¹⁰.

The link and date of capture were recorded in a database. In turn, a search was carried out through *Google images* in order to identify the reproductions and number of sources of each meme. In this way, and taking into account the reproduction of the memes and their circulation, we considered those that had at least ten sources in the search, resulting in a total *corpus* of 47 memes that met these criteria out of an initial total of 95.

For the analysis, the proposal of Guarinos-Galán (2018, 2021) was taken into account, adapting some elements and including others from which the type of scenario (urban, rural, interior, exterior), characters (gender, animated, inanimate), physical characteristics (position, clothing, accessories) and actions of the characters (gestures) were identified. In turn, they were classified according to the type of meme (macro image, inverted celebrity, pop culture reference or image editing) and, if the meme included a phrase, the stylistic and/or humorous resources used (irony, ridicule, parody, metaphor, etc.) were analyzed. In addition, implicit or indirect aspects were identified, as well as the presence of polarizations (young *versus* old, active *versus* passive, healthy *versus* sick) considering different aspects raised by the CDA perspective. All these elements allowed the construction of thematic categories and subcategories in relation to stereotypes about old age, aging and the elderly.

Each meme constituted a unit of analysis where the first author of the article made a first systematization and construction of categories. Then, 30% of the memes were randomly selected and recategorized by the second author. Next, the Kappa index was calculated which yielded an interobserver value of 0.88 indicating a very good concordance (Piovani, 2018;

⁹ That is, we seek to understand in depth the construction of images of old age and aging through these cases, which exceed, of course, the analysis of the entire universe of memes that connote images of older people.

¹⁰ The author considers a six-month cutback.

Torres & Perera, 2009). The differences between the two researchers were submitted for discussion in order to achieve a conclusive categorization.

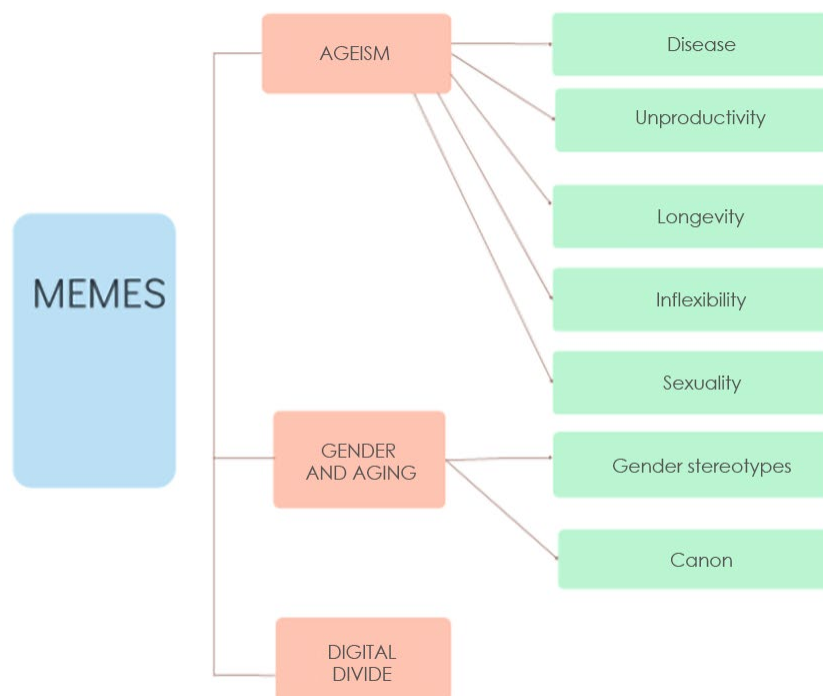
5. Results

The analysis of the distribution of the images used in the memes shows that 31 of them have women as protagonists and 13 use older men, while in only 3 cases a mixed presence of characters was identified. This greater frequency in the use of images of women is a key data if we consider gender differences in terms of who is the object of mockery. Indeed, a first approximation shows that, in the cases analyzed, old women are the object of a double discrimination that combines the criteria of age and gender.

As for the type of meme, there was a preponderance of macro images (40), followed by image editing (7). It should be clarified that some of the selected memes also correspond to the category of inverted celebrity (4) and reference to pop culture (2). The preponderance of macro images is related to the fact that they are the most used by the general public. At the same time, they are the simplest option when producing a meme since their creation does not require technical knowledge or complex tools to illustrate and/or emphasize a feeling, idea or reaction.

From the content analysis, three main categories of memes were identified, which are presented below following a criterion from most to least frequent (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Category network



Source: Own elaboration based on the data used in the research.

Mememes that make fun of the elderly by reproducing prejudices linked to age discrimination were the most recurrent (24). Thus, *ageism* seems to survive through these new cultural phenomena, recovering a perspective that considers old age as a *disease* (12), linked to the deterioration of cognitive functions (in particular, memory and inhibition, Figures 2 and 3), sensory decline (vision and hearing), mobility failures (slowness, use of supports such as cane or walker), chronic diseases (high blood pressure and cholesterol) and lower physical endurance. Dependence and lack of autonomy are also mocked (Table 3).

Table. Frequency of the thematic categories identified in Internet memes about the elderly.

Ageism		N=47
	Disease	12
	Unproductivity	3
	Longevity	3
	Inflexibility rigidity	3

	Sexuality	3
Gender and aging	Gender stereotypes	12
	Canon	4
Digital Divide		7
Total		47

Source: Own elaboration based on the data obtained in the research.

Figure 2. Meme about old age and disease (woman)



Translation: "They're gonna love what I cooked once I remember where I put it."

Source: Google (No date as of)

Figure 3. Meme on old age and disease (males)

—Tengo trió de ases
—¡UNO!
—¡BINGO! Jjajajaja
—A que carajos estábamos jugando?
—Ni idea, como me llamo? Jajaja



Translation: "I've got three aces – UNO! – BINGO! Hahahaha – What the hell were we playing? – I've no clue, what's my name? Hahaha."

Source: Google (No date b)

Another subcategory identified within the old-age memes refers to the mockery of the *unproductiveness* (3) of the elderly, since they are outside the labor market. A case to

highlight in the *corpus* is the figure of King Charles III who, together with the death of his mother, begins his "working" period. Here, the chronological age (76 years), insofar as it establishes a withdrawal from the formal market, constitutes, at the same time, the criterion of mockery (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Meme about old age and unproductiveness

Cuando te enteras que tienes que
empezar a trabajar a los 76 años



Translation: "When you find out at 76 that you have to start working."

Source: Google (No date c)

Figure 5. Meme about old age and longevity.

Sígueme para mas campañas de
márketing



Translation: "Follow me for more marketing campaigns. Palmo-LIVE."

Source: Google (No date d)

Longevity (3), understood as the increase in life expectancy by the elderly, is also taken as an object of jokes and irony. The increase in the years of survival is an achievement of

humanity, however, it is rarely considered in this way, but is perceived as a social burden. Even so, it is worth noting that in the cases of two public figures, Mirtha Legrand and Queen Elizabeth II, survival is positively valued because they embody a historical rivalry between Argentina and England (Figure 5).

Rigidity and inflexibility (3) are close to the myth of the cantankerous old man/ woman, incapable of change. This idea linked to ageism is based on the belief that older people become rigid as time goes by and are therefore unable to modify their habits. For example, rigidity is reflected in the attribution of fixed schedules (going to bed and getting up early, Figure 6) and in the inability to be "hip", that is, up to date, as one of the memes says. If diversity is assumed as the defining principle of old age, it can be seen in the memes that the characterization of this moment in the course of life is reduced to a set of qualities that carry a negative evaluation and are reinforced through humor.

Figure 6. Meme about old age, inflexibility and rigidity.



Translation: "When you go to bed at 6 PM: 'You smell like a granny'."

Source: Google (No date e)

The last of the subcategories identified refers to *sexuality* (3), where there is a tendency towards the idea that the possibility of feeling pleasure yields when old age arrives and that this event is inevitable. This positioning is based, in large part, on the belief that the physical changes that occur, such as hormonal mutations (andropause and menopause) and chronic ailments are *per se* impediments to the exercise of sexuality.

In this way, sexuality only corresponds to youth and adulthood, so any expression and indication of desire linked to sexuality in old age is socially condemned. This can be clearly

observed in memes, where older people are mocked and ridiculed when expressing fantasies and desires to explore new sexual activities and/or experiences (Figures 7 and 8).

Figure 7. Meme on old age and sexuality (women)



Translation: "Any age is good for learning."

Source: Google (No date f)

Figure 8. Meme on old age and sexuality (males)



Translation: "Could it be that, as you get older, you get dirtier? – What do you mean? – Well, my wife used to call me her knight 'in shining armor', but now she calls me a 'dirty old man'". (Translator's note: translated as joke.)

Source: Google (No date g)

The second category we identified in order of frequency is the relationship between certain roles and/or social expectations with *gender and old age* (16). Here it is worth clarifying that it is mostly women who are the protagonists of the jokes. Indeed, the memes classified under the subcategory *gender stereotypes* (12) emphasize roles "naturally" associated with the female gender such as cooking, cleaning, and shopping to which are added caregiving tasks, which are socially and historically assigned to women.

Caring for grandchildren, cooking for them and knitting are the most connoted activities (Figures 9 and 10). In old age, these actions continue to be linked to the reproduction of the labor force, except that they focus on caring for grandchildren as a way of contributing to family organization, that is, a model of intergenerational responsibility and solidarity that is not free of tensions and conflicts. Only one meme refers to the function of caring for grandchildren by a male, but, unlike older women, he is presented as having difficulties in carrying out this task, considering his role as a worker. At the same time, the listening and propagation of rumors/commentaries of events occurring in the family and the community are referred to as social behaviors exclusively linked to women.

The common scenario in these images is the home (and the activities related to this domestic space), the only place where the contribution of older women is shown. None of the images allude to women's community and social participation.

Figure 9. Meme on gender stereotyping



dopl3r.com - Memes - Amor de
abuela Abuela ven! No puedo
llueve ...

Translation: GRANDMA LOVE - "Grandma, come over! – I can't, it's raining. – But I'm hungry!"

Source: Google (No date h)

Figure 10. Meme on gender stereotyping



Translation: "My daughter is already messaging me for me to watch her kids. – BLOCKED."

Source: Google (No date i)

Regarding the female *canon* (4) in the way of aging, it can be observed how the principles linked to youth and beauty promote certain lifestyles, mainly promoted by celebrities, who

show off their bodies worked and modeled to erase any physical sign of aging. Thus, the images of older women with gray hair, wrinkles on their faces and signs of chronic ailments are contrasted with those of actresses and singers where there is no place for showing diverse, heterogeneous and non-hegemonic old age (Figure 11). This comparison goes beyond an age criterion to define old age, reinforcing the physical changes of women to whom the canon is contrasted. Thus, social differences resulting from unequal living conditions are erased and forgotten.

In turn, this polarization is evident in the way they dress, for example, celebrities wear shiny suits that are tight to the body and attract attention, while, on the contrary, those who do not belong to this sphere are represented by means of loose, "comfortable" clothes that cover most of the body, such as a *batón* (smocks)¹¹. Paradoxically, when an older woman, who does not conform to the canon, wears tight-fitting clothes and shows parts of her body, she is mocked (Figure 12).

Figure 11. Meme on gender stereotype and gender canon.

Shakira con 43 y JLo con 50 años // Yo con 20 años

#SuperBowl #PepsiHalftime 🇨🇴 #HalftimeShow



Translation: "Shakira at 43 and JLo at 50 / Me at 20."

Source: Google (No date j)

¹¹ In Argentina, a *batón* is a loose-fitting, one-piece female garment that reaches below the knee.

Figure 12. Meme on gender stereotype and canon.

Yo cuando sea abuelita:



Translation: "Me as a granny."

Source: Google (No date k)

Thirdly, less frequently we analyzed memes referring to the *digital and generational gap* (7) with respect to the use of technological devices and tools. Older people are characterized as a homogeneous population group, incapable of linking and using ICTs correctly. Ridicule, irony and exaggeration are used as ways of making fun of the difficulties that the incorporation of these new tools may entail, such as the erroneous or literal interpretation of phrases that appear on devices and social media (Figure 13).

Figure 13. Meme about digital divide and aging



Translation: "It says here that my password is wrong. But when I type in 'wrong' it still says that's not it."

Source: Google (No date l)

6. Most used resources in memes, polarizations and implicit meanings.

If we start from understanding the meme as a form of communication -configured by audiovisual and linguistic aspects- where discourses and narratives about the elderly are recorded, it is of great interest to deepen the analysis based on the implicit aspects and polarizations, as well as the most often used stylistic and humorous resources. These elements are those that perpetuate asymmetrical relations of domination, leaving the elderly in a situation of disadvantage and subalternity (Moreno-Toledo, 2010; Van-Dijk, 2003, 2010).

With respect to the most frequently used humorous resources, the use of irony, absurdity, strangeness, parody and double entendre was observed. Ridicule is evidenced through the exaggeration of physical characteristics, of situations erroneously attributed to the elderly, or of customs or defects that serve to mock this population group directly or indirectly.

Different stylistic resources are also used, such as anaphora (repetition of a word to ridicule, Figure 14), comparison (contrasting, for example, two women in different historical moments, Figure 15), hyperbole (exaggerating medical advice, for example, Figure 16) and metaphors (identifying a real object with an imaginary one, Figure 17) to achieve humorous effects.

Figure 14. Meme about old age and disease (males)



Translation: "Bad boys meeting. Bad blood pressure, bad kidneys, bad hearing, bad prostate."

Source: Google (No date m)

Figure 15. Meme on gender stereotype and gender canon.



Translation: "A 50-year-old woman in 1985 – A 50-year-old woman in 2020"

Source: Google (No date n)

Figure 16. Meme about old age and disease (woman)



Translation: "ME AS A GRANDMA: 'Doctors say that having one glass of wine a day can make you live longer. Cheers!'"

Source: Google (No date or)

Figure 17. Meme on gender stereotyping



Translation: "For sale. Three vintage security cameras."

Source: Google (No date p)

With regard to polarizations and implicit aspects, it can be observed that what underlies is a dichotomy between old and young (Table 4). This polarization is recurrent and covers several themes reinforcing a negative evaluation. Thus, allusion is made to social roles linked to passivity, the condition of being retired, leaving the elderly out of participation in society and out of the capacity to consume. Old age is associated with illness, while youth is linked to health and well-being.

Table 4. Main polarizations identified

Older	Youth
Sick	Sanos
Liabilities	Assets
Retirees	Workers
No occupation (time available)	Busy
out of fashion	fashionable
Non-consumers	Consumers
Unable to use ICT	Capable in the use of ICT
Asexuals	Sexed
Non-sensual	Sensual

Source: Own elaboration based on data obtained in the research.

In turn, polarizations reproduce gender stereotypes, assigning certain tasks and activities to older women such as cooking, knitting or caring, and women are also identified as spreaders of rumors and gossip¹². Older men, on the other hand, are associated with withdrawal from the labor market and retirement.

¹² In Argentina, the word "chusmerío" is used to refer to the spreading of rumors with certain malice and indiscretion about private or public matters.

It is key the way it is shown that the exercise of sexuality is predominantly linked to youth and adulthood, while any behavior or expression of sexual desire by older people is considered inappropriate or ridiculed (Figures 7 and 8).

Older people are represented as a population group that has difficulties in incorporating new skills, mainly related to the use of ICTs. On the other hand, young people are characterized as seasoned users who adapt easily to technological changes.

7. Discussion and conclusions

The aim of this work was to investigate the ways in which Internet memes represent old age and aging, paying particular attention to the predominant themes, the connoted aspects and the characteristics attributed to the elderly. Simultaneously, emphasis was placed on the relationship established between humor, the elderly, and the aging process.

From the analysis carried out, a preponderance of macro images was observed over the other categories due to the fact that this type of meme has become an icon, so both terms are often used as synonyms (García-Huerta, 2014). Advances in technological tools have promoted the use of illustrations with superimposed text, as they are the most used to illustrate and emphasize a feeling, idea or reaction. These memes come from popular culture and appeal to the use of drawings, photographs, television programs or movies whose protagonists are generally people.

Also, a recurrence of the forms of ageism registered in other studies is observed, where both positive and idealizing evaluations and negative ones prevail, where an equivalence between old age and disease is registered (Bravo-Segal & Villar, 2020; Jiménez-Sotomayor *et al.*, 2020). Although memes promoting an image of healthy aging were observed, these are starring actresses or public figures who erase any physical sign of the passage of time, which reproduces unattainable models.

The ability to learn and the flexibility to adapt to changes is reproduced in a stereotypical view that is the object of ridicule, particularly with regard to the use of information and communication technologies. The work of Vargas and Herrera (2022) also shows the validity of the idea that older people can no longer learn new things.

On the other hand, the findings presented find some points in common with the work of Ballesteros-Doncel (2016) regarding the naturalization of a patriarchal structure in the use of social networks. It highlights, in turn, a restrictive view on sexuality that is assumed as genitality and moves away from a comprehensive view that also includes eroticism, intimacy, thoughts, beliefs, attitudes and values, as well as desires and fantasies. Like the work developed by Vayá and Durán (2023), the full exercise of sexuality seems to be a taboo in old age and a motive for mockery in memes. These ideas tend to be internalized by the elderly themselves, which ends up conditioning a way of being and behaving in relation to their own sexuality. In this way, the behaviors, self-esteem and physical health of older people are negatively influenced (Quintero-Díaz, 2020; Orozco-Campos & López-Hernández, 2016).

The meme constitutes by definition an interactive cultural practice where, following the perspective of the CDA, in these interactions images that show the elderly in a place of social relegation are synthesized and reproduced. Two axes become key to our analysis. The first axis concerns the implicit value of discrimination that is accepted and disseminated in these messages without conscious and voluntary control, hence its effectiveness, even within the same group of elderly people. Indeed, discrimination against the elderly does not work in the same way as in ethnic or racial minorities, where it is more explicit and evident, as shown by Levy and Banaji (2004).

The second axis emphasizes the polarization between old and young. In this line, the present work evidences this moment of the life course as a period marked by illnesses, passivity, loneliness, losses and dependence. At the same time, youth is positively valued as a time of health, well-being, enjoyment, productivity, autonomy and active sexuality, as is also identified in the work of Moreno-Toledo (2010). Although these conclusions are applicable to the cases studied, they contribute elements to an in-depth understanding of the construction of images of old age and aging that challenge us in the face of increasingly aging societies.

In sum, memes offer us representations that are rooted in social heritage, they are not exempt from asymmetries, linked to power and domination relations that we see reproduced through humorous resources such as ridicule, irony and parody to show biased discourses and images of older people. These specific discursive structures, in effect, influence mental models to construct stereotypes or prejudices alluded to by the CDA perspective (Van-Dijk, 2016).

Finally, we emphasize that the analysis of memes contributes to raise public awareness of these cultural artifacts and their inappropriate use that reproduces a naturalized ageism, in line with the Inter-American Convention on the Protection of the Human Rights of Older Persons and the World Health Organization in its global campaign against ageism (2021). Indeed, unveiling this type of discourse should be a task promoted not only from academia but from each and every one of the actors, institutions and social spheres in order to build more inclusive societies for and with the elderly.

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Statement of authorship - CRediT

Paula Pochintesta: responsibility for direction and coordination for the planning and execution of the research activity; methodology and administration of the project.

Florencia Baglione: conducting research and the research process, specifically experiments or data/evidence collection; formal analysis.

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