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From aesthetic pressure to fatphobia: violence in memes in times of COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

This article aims to understand how the constructions of aesthetic pressure and fatphobia are engendered in the representations of female bodies in Brazilian memes during the covid-19 pandemic. The theory turns to the memes as a Brazilian cultural element, the articulation of the subjectivity and the female body, besides the construction of beauty and hostility based on the size of the bodies. The investigation was based on Discourse Analysis applied to a corpus composed of memes, collected on Instagram and Google. The results show discourses that perpetuate structural violence and gender violence through the construction of female body image. The material reveals that social constructions under the body and beauty have been present since childhood and the social distinctions attributed to lean and fat bodies.

Keywords

Fatphobia; Aesthetic Pressure; Pandemic; Body.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has modified life experiences as well as exposed realities and practices settled in contemporary society. Life through the Internet has gained more emphasis, mainly on content production and interactivity on social networks. Despite the social distancing, people remained close through connections established in the virtual environment and reinvented everyday practices.

In this space where communication and social interactions are developed, it became common to share memes - images usually associated with humor and produced on a large scale - in which the body was the protagonist. Considered exponents of digital culture and symbols of "engaging culture", these contents have great popularity nowadays due to the ease of creation and reproduction in digital media (Martino & Grohmann, 2017).

In the pandemic context, memes aiming at the body gathered the same theme: the fear of gaining weight during the period of social distancing. The concern about the amount of body fat seems to ignore the high lethality rate of the virus and the health consequences of those infected with COVID-19. Such positioning issues an alert when understanding the expansion of the pandemic in Brazilian territory, which records more than 22 million infected and more than 619 thousand deaths.¹

The fear of fat exposed in the media reveals a social system in which beauty is an imperative, and the body is the center of attention and desire. In this context, society bases the status of each individual on personal image and especially on the body. This is not a recent phenomenon, and it establishes media, commercial, and health logics, aimed at promoting an ideal body: the slim one. The attribution of body senses was structured within a beauty concept that has its meaning changed according to the culture, time, and society where it is inserted. In this construction based on appearances, fat in the bodies implies inequalities, stigmatization, and loss of rights. Such implications constitute a structural and institutionalized prejudice directed at fat people entitled fatphobia (Jimenez-Jimenez, 2020).

Faced with this reality of valuing and excluding bodies, there is still an oppression regarding gender. Women's history shows that image has weight and social power. Thus, beauty corresponds to a structure that goes beyond aesthetics and consolidates itself as an instrument of female control evidenced by *The Myth of Beauty* (Wolf, 2018). Based on this, this paper proposes a reflection about the social constructions of female bodies presented in memes during the COVID-19 pandemic, stimulated by the following question: how are the constructions of beauty standards and fatphobia engendered in the representations of female bodies present in the memes that circulated in Brazil during the COVID-19 pandemic?

In the structure of the text, we approach the conceptualization and development of the meme and its respective relationship with culture in Brazil. Afterward, we propose a reflection on the female body through the course of history, as well as the importance in the construction of women's subjectivity. In the next phase, we present the methodological outline, developed in the light of The Discourse Analysis, and the thematic and sub-thematic categorization of the corpus. Finally, we developed the analysis from the categories of Aesthetic Pressure and Fatphobia, understanding that the speeches evidenced in the memes promote the construction of the female slim body as a symbol of beauty and success while the fat body is associated with stigmas.

Memes, a digital culture phenomenon

Communication and cultural practices take a prominent place in the virtual environment.

¹ Information regarding January 07, 2022. Retrieved 2022, January 8 from: <https://g1.globo.com/saude/coronavirus/noticia/2022/01/07/brasil-registra-534-mil-casos-por-covid-em-24-horas-e-media-movel-sobe-para-233-mil-por-dia.ghtml>.

Through online life, any person who has a profile on social media such as Instagram and Facebook, or uses communication tools like WhatsApp, must have already shared, created, or received a meme. This type of content is more than an image, but a symbol of a new culture developed and/or evidenced in the digital world.

The meme was conceptualized in 1976 by British biologist Richard Dawkins (Dawkins, 1979). The term originates from the abbreviation of the Greek root *mimeme*, which means imitation. The scientist develops the concept around the word in the work *The Selfish Gene*. In it, an analogy is presented between cultural evolution and genetic evolution, where the meme performs the function of the DNA molecule, with replicating characteristics. It is a unit of imitation or a replicating element of the widespread culture from person to person. Therefore, this transmission from one brain to the other operates through imitation and replication (Dawkins, 1979; Martino & Grohmann, 2017).

Despite the different attributions regarding the emergence of the internet meme, it turns out that it emerged as an important symbol of digital Culture. In a popular sense, memes:

“They are understood as ideas, games, jokes or behaviors that spread through their replication in a viral way, and characterized by the repetition of a basic formal model from which people can produce different versions of the same meme” (Fontanella, 2009).

In Brazil, memes with characters that are already part of the national culture stand out, such as Nazaré Tedesco (Soap Opera *Senhora do Destino*) and Carminha (Soap Opera *Avenida Brasil*). However, the sources used as a pattern for memes are diverse. Among the usual, there are images of cats, celebrities, anonymous people who gain notoriety after a certain situation and political figures, such as the president of the Republic.

According to Dawkins (1979) there are three characteristics that determine these cultural units' survival, which are also found in genetic replicators: longevity, fecundity and copy fidelity. In this proposal, fecundity is the most important, because the dissemination of the meme will occur through it. Recuero (2008) adds a fourth aspect: the reach within the network, where those that are closer (local) or more distant (global) are addressed.

Regarding its reproducibility, meme production platforms provide ready-made templates with famous images where custom phrases are inserted, in addition to enabling the upload of personal photos. The durability of a meme is conditioned by the processes of re-creation, so it is considered dead when it does not propagate. In this context, there is no difference between “producers” and “consumers”. Therefore, memes belong to those who use them and offer new contexts/uses (Martino & Grohmann, 2017; Oliveira Neta, 2017).

The sharing and development of memes create impacts and make the understanding of the current culture possible. According to Shifman (2013) such “cultural information” is distributed in a micro base and impacts in a macro way. From the author's perspective, they spread from person to person and become a shared social phenomenon capable of shaping mentalities, behaviors and social actions, as it occurs in the Brazilian context.

For Lunardi (2018), memes are beyond manifestations of Web culture and constitute themselves as new symbols of Brazilian folklore. The researcher presents five conclusions about the country's meme culture: humor to address politics, social issues and national culture; Brazilian memes are forms of protest; memes help to develop a national cultural identity; the production and sharing of memes about Brazilian culture help in the connection between users and in the creation of a Brazilian community and identity; and memes as a form of belonging of the Brazilian community on the global internet.

The country also has a collection aimed at this content: the meme Museum. Inaugurated in 2015, the digital platform is a project of Fluminense Federal University. It is possible to find catalogs and research

references on the topic in it. Thus, "all indications are that research on memes has assumed an importance related to their presence in digital networks" (Martino & Grohmann, 2017).²

Reflections on the female body

Women's bodies are everywhere: on magazine covers, on product advertisements, on screens displayed in museums, on T-shirts sold by brands and fast-fashion retailers. Admired, sexualized, empowered, sold, controlled, the social condition of the female body is the result of a historical and socio-cultural process. For this reason, analyzing the representations of this body involves a search to understand the positions of women in society from various perspectives, which also implies the (re) construction of subjectivities.

The female body, according to Colling (2015), was invented by several normative discourses that showed the man as a reference of perfection. Through the narratives, one body was exalted and the other disqualified, establishing a naturalized power relationship. From the speeches, conceptions were perpetuated and are present until the current days. They try to de-legitimize women as curious, indiscreet, vain, envious, and hysterical beings.

The trajectory of discourses and social practices involves a history of silences of the body, as addressed by Michelle Perrot (Matos & Soihet, 2003). Although it was exposed and constructed as an object of attention and desire, the body was silenced. The silences have gone through several instances, from the female figure through image and behavior codes, to her intimate life. The women's pleasure was condemned, and the body transformations were silenced, such as the experiences of the first menstruation and menopause.

Women's movements stood out by giving voice to the body. As an important articulator of feminist discourse, it brought demands such as sexuality and the right to reproduction. The search for the body's autonomy has passed and still goes through constant struggles facing the patriarchal discourses that prevail over the female body.

Among the forms of oppression, the control of the female image is constantly reinvented and stands out through The Beauty Myth (Wolf, 1992), which conditions women's bodies to concepts of beauty and the constant search for a physical pattern associated with health and the fear of aging. The beauty system is beyond aesthetics and consolidates itself as an ideology that takes the position of the mystique of domesticity, motherhood, chastity, and passivity. For (Wolf, 1992), the Beauty Myth is a reaction against feminism and tries to end the advances it has brought to women in different spheres of life.

From this perspective, it is not related to women, but to the male power that has become institutionalized in society. This control structure found in the media a propulsive source of its ideals. Through it, the contemporary woman is at the mercy of references on how to act, feed herself and build her own body. However, it is necessary to understand the relationship between the media and society in a dialectical way: "the mass media absorb and recycle the contents, demands and behavioral tendencies of society, and the public appropriates and re-signifies them" (Castro & Prado, 2012).

In recent years part of the media segment points to a new axis that marks the culture of this era. Some of the media that promoted certain practices of control of the female body help to question and break them today. To meet social demands, new editorial lines address the guidelines of women's movements: abortion, motherhood, financial independence, resistance, relationships and feminism (Paixão & Rodrigues, 2020).

This new scenario, which questions and confronts the control of female bodies, has the challenge of transposing discursive structures that readapt sociocultural changes and perpetuate the naturalization

² Retrieved 2020, October 29 from: <https://www.museudememes.com.br/>.

of behaviors and positions of power. In this context, the dualistic characteristic that gives prestige to one category and de-legitimizes the other through two bodies is manifested: the worshiped and the political.

From the worshiped body to the political body

The condition of the body is of (re)construction, so it can tell stories, register eras and establish rites and social positions. By being naked from the biological concept, the body becomes a symbol of culture, and it can gain political positioning as an instrument representing control and/or resistance. Capitalist society experiences the idolatry of the image where the body has become a worship and consumption instrument.

As a coveted commodity, the body is built from an "investment work" based on the belief of liberation and fulfillment (Baudrillard, 1995). From this scenario, personal identity is conditioned to body identity. Commitment to the body is a normative principle that rules narcissistic society. This duty is associated with the pleasure of building it and with symbolic values focused on the logic of beauty, such as through the control of the amount of fat in the bodies. Such a system emphasizes the role of men, women and even children in the construction and maintenance of the body.

The transformation of the body as an object involves aesthetic codes that characterize the Beauty Myth proposed by Wolf (1992). A body reference group that brings together thinness, youth and muscles defined by physical exercises is aimed primarily at women. In this sense, Wolf (1992) advocates the creation of a source of female control from beauty, while on page 140 Baudrillard (1995) states that beauty is an absolute and religious imperative for women, making it an essential quality.

The thin body became evident and worshiped in the society of appearance, being related to thinness, even if, according to Baudrillard (1995, p. 149), they do not have "natural affinity". In this logic, the belief that beauty considered natural is oriented toward the slim body has been created, even if it is sculpted through aesthetic procedures and medical techniques.

Brazil ranks second in the ranking of countries that most performed plastic surgery in 2019, according to data from the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ISASPS, 2020). The global survey also identified a 7.4% increase in surgical and non-surgical procedures in the period. In addition to surgery, other practices have been disseminated aiming at weight loss. In the second half of the last century, restrictive diets were disseminated by the media, associated with weight loss guides and appetite suppressants or moderators (Sant'Anna, 2016).

Although surgeries, diets and physical activities are resources to achieve the aesthetic ideal, it can be affirmed that this construction of beauty remained utopian as new conceptions of beauty emerged: the belly type, the size of the silicone prosthesis, the shape of the face. These practices overwhelm those who are willing to follow them because the ideal body becomes impossible to achieve. A problem that stands out in front of a culture that conditions the body to social position, health and happiness.

Thus, the slim body is the representation of success in all instances of life, from professional to personal life. This scenario operates with opposite meanings to the bodies. Besides being a body that escapes the aesthetic norm, the fat body is credited with moral imperfections. The consequence is the attribution of stereotypes associated with failure, sadness, impurity, laziness, and idleness, among other negative aspects. Therefore, fat has become a symbol that leads to stigmas and exclusion. Stigmatization involves a social sign and a moral sign that enables value judgments about the body. That subversive body bears marks for weight considered inadequate, while the morality of fitness imposes on beauty a high social value as well as on character (Mattos, 2012).

In this way fatphobia is operated, that is, stigmatization that excludes fat bodies from occupying and moving between spaces. Therefore, the construction of senses and power over bodies operates in different ways. Aesthetic pressure refers to the oppression experienced by anyone, especially women,

to follow the standard accepted in contemporary society. While fatphobia operates in a logic of social exclusion, hostility and stigmatization, which still involves loss of social rights (Jimenez-Jimenez, 2020) as will be addressed in the analysis of memes.

The fat body that goes against aesthetic norms and is used to promote the ideal of diversity, happiness, and self-esteem breaks with the prevailing social brand. This assumed fat body is a political body, which, while unwanted and inadequate, assumes the position of resistance (Jimenez-Jimenez & Abonizio, 2017). "These bodies, happy with who they are, show other fat or non-standard women how to embrace their bodies, regardless of what the current standard understands as beautiful and healthy" (Jimenez-Jimenez & Abonizio, 2017).

Methodological procedures

In order to meet the questions presented in the research focused on the female body, the dynamics of analysis is composed of three strategies. At first, searches were carried out on Google and Instagram platform aiming to find memes in the format of images, shared during periods of quarantine and/or social distancing due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The choice of Google was due to the possibility of cataloging materials from different web sources. The Instagram option, on the other hand, is based on being a social network that stands out through the publication of images and videos.

The three searches, carried out in September, October and December 2020, resulted in the quantity of 44 memes. To find them, this qualitative study used *hashtags* and sets of keywords (Table 1) with terminology (in Portuguese) associated to the topic and the pandemic period. Between parenthesis there is the English version (for better reader understanding).

Table 1 - keywords used in data collection

Hashtags - Instagram	Keywords - Google
#memesquarentena (#quarantinememes)	memes, quarentena (quarantine)
#quarentenagorda (#fatquarantine)	memes, quarentena (quarantine), gorda (fat)
#quarentenamemes (#memesquarantine)	memes, mulheres (women), gorda (fat)
#depoisdaquarentena (#afterquarantine)	memes, quarantine (quarantine), coronavirus
#quarentenacoronavirus(#coronavirusquarantine)	memes, gordofobia (fatphobia), coronavirus
#quarentenamagra (#thinquarantine)	memes, pandemia (pandemic), dieta (diet)
#engordandonaquarentena (#gettingfatinquarantine)	-

Source: produced by the authors

The initial set was submitted to a curation process, which resulted in a sample of 22 memes, filtered according to the purpose of the work. Thereby, it is noteworthy that the selection of memes sought to identify materials that only approached female bodies and that used discursive associations, textual and imagetic, directed only to the COVID-19 pandemic. Among them, are the use of masks or words with reference to the pandemic. The criteria for delimiting the memes were also based on structural characteristics: images that tried to construct a sense of humor, irony, or sentences with deliberate Portuguese mistakes. These strategies focused on delimiting the corpus of analysis of the research, after all, as Orlandi (2009, p. 63) points out, "the construction of the corpus and the analysis are closely linked: deciding what part of the corpus is already deciding about discursive properties". Thus, this process covered structuring, that is, the traces of sense construction.

The second stage contemplates the analysis of the material, based on Discourse Analysis (DA), from the perspective of Orlandi (2009). This proposal seeks to understand not the grammar, but how a

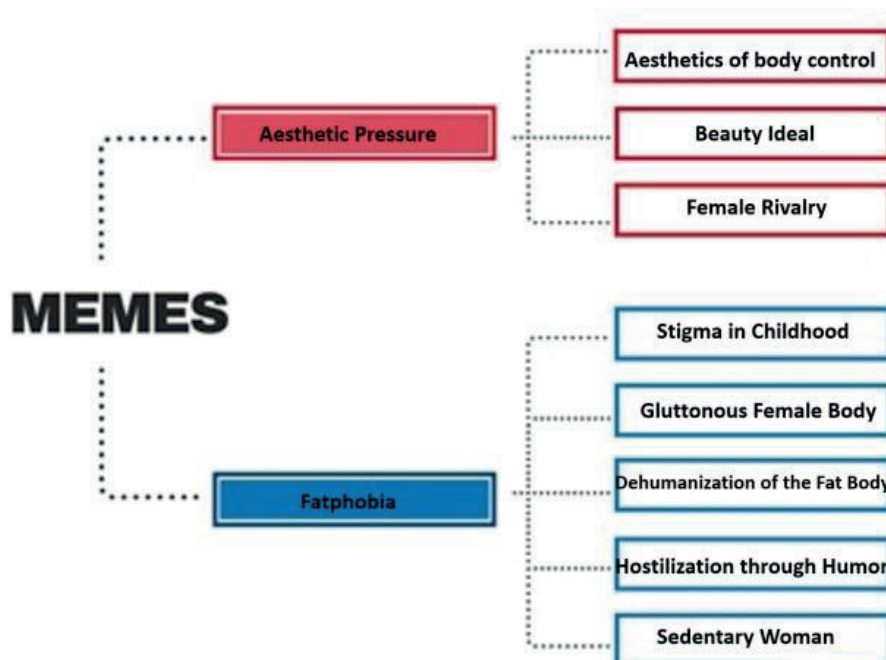
certain symbolic object constructs meaning. In DA, language involves ways of meaning, that is, the notion of speech is not only about the transmission of information, but about the process of meaning. In this way, it is noticed that the important thing in this analytical method is the functioning of speech and meaning. Therefore, it covers the “language in the world”, that is, the development of discursive meanings that are part of man and history (Orlandi, 2009, p. 16).

After the verification of the discursive practice of the material, the corpus was categorized to cover the two forms of social oppression present in the research problem. Thus, the memes were divided into two groups following the most pertinent discursive constructions in each material. In the first group, aimed at Aesthetic Pressure, 10 materials stood out. While the following, related to fatphobia, gathered 12 memes. However, we understand that all the research objects collected are fatphobic because they construct discourses that operate senses of the fat body as inferior.

In order to answer the research question, themes were also constituted from the two categories already mentioned (Infographic 1). In the Discourse Analysis approach, categorization, according to Medeiros & Amorim (2017), is not the center of the analysis, because the discourse takes on this function. From the authors' perspective, this process does not represent restricting or isolating narrative marks, as in memes. Therefore, we aim to reveal the structural characteristics of Aesthetic Pressure and Fatphobia through the narratives developed in the memes. Through the themes, we articulated the interpretation of the speeches' description with the theoretical device, in order to contemplate the mode of production of meanings in memes, following the analytical method proposed by Orlandi (2009).

From this, regarding the Aesthetic Pressure, three approaches were found: Aesthetics of Body Control, Beauty Ideal, and Female Rivalry. The category Fatphobia was built with an emphasis on five discourses: Stigma in Childhood, Gluttonous Female Body, Dehumanization of the Fat Body, Hostilization through Humor, and Sedentary Woman.

Infographic 1 - representation of the division of categories and subcategories



Source: produced by the authors

The categories are explored in the analysis of five memes selected for this text, being possible, in

some of them, to observe more than one subcategory present. We highlight that, from the perspective of Discourse Analysis, the analyses are not closed. Even after being analyzed, the memes that represent the subcategories mentioned above may show other discursive forms not explored in this article. This occurs because "every discourse is part of a broader discursive process that we cut out, and the form of the cut out determines the mode of analysis and the theoretical device of interpretation that we construct" (Orlandi, 2009, p. 64).

Aesthetics of body control and stigma in childhood

From a historical perspective, the use of the weight scale as a control instrument of beauty worship is a practice conditioned mainly to female behavior, represented in Figure 1. The speech "Girl, try again without the mask" uttered by the girl who is introspective and takes her hand to her mouth - when looking at the weight indicator on the scale - refers to the strategy of irony. The mask represents the symbolic weight she accumulated in her body. Thus, the body is free from the guilt conditioned to a possible weight gain, and the mask, considered a personal protective equipment against COVID-19, takes on a new symbolic value associated with the aesthetic pressure.

Figure 1 - Aesthetic Pressure



Source: Instagram³

The girls worried about their weight shown on the scales, reveals a characteristic of the Beauty Myth: fat causes the feeling of guilt among the female population, after all, the body does not belong to them, but to society (Wolf, 1992). This representation through children reveals a system of beauty promoted from an early age and conditioned to gender.

We emphasize the concern of using children's images in memes that elicit fatphobic speech and practices. The meme sustains that the aesthetic pressure starts early in childhood, especially among girls. It conditions behaviors and images, and is established during children's development, making it possible for fat people to experience fatphobic practices already at this stage of life.

³ The image has been digitally altered to protect children's identities.

Discrimination is not developed only by unknown people, that is, in the public environment. It is present in the family environment, through teachers and colleagues. In this sense, the school becomes a central place to address this issue and an inclusive education. However, the institution is often unprepared as well, from lack of physical/structural accessibility - such as chairs and uniforms - to teacher training (Jimenez, 2019).

The stimulus to behavior predisposed to the beauty segment begins in childhood, where girls are encouraged to take care of their image through makeup and toys associated with appearance worship. In this way, they grow up surrounded by the speech: you must be beautiful.

Beauty Ideal

In a society based on consumption practices aimed at beauty, even dolls are subject to aesthetic worship. One of them was consolidated as a stereotype of the female body and image 60 years ago: Barbie. The toy reproduces a reference of a woman, built from an hourglass-shaped silhouette, a belly without any fat, and physical characteristics associated with light eyes, blond and straight hair.

During the pandemic, the use of Barbie as a central figure in memes exposed the body dichotomy that conditions the beauty promotion culture. Figure 2 shows the aesthetic pressure from two demands of the beauty industry on the body: it must be thin and fit. The image on the left shows the desired body in June 2020, which involves body building and maintenance through physical practices.

The search for modeling the body through muscles has contributed to the development of a feminine profile since the 1980s. Currently, little has changed. In this construction of beauty worship, muscles are, according to Mattos (2012, p. 33), a "valued social brand" through bodybuilding. By portraying the fit body in a positive way, the meme endorses the belief of bodybuilding from a system that emphasizes muscle maintenance and weight loss. This condition corroborates the development of subjectivity, or, as the researcher refers to it, of the "bioidentity" that has body appearance as its priority.

Figure 2 - Aesthetic Pressure



Source: Instagram

In pandemic times, the female beauty profile represented by the second Barbie figure abandons

the social privilege, conditioned to image, due to the interruption of physical exercises, associated with the care and construction of the body. From the perspective of aesthetic pressure, the consequence of Barbie's secluded period is the end of beauty. The silhouette loses the hourglass shape and gains a prominent belly, where the fat excess obtained, as exposed in the meme by overconsumption of ice cream, stands out. The hands that used to hold the halter for physical exercises now hold the jar of candy.

Throughout history, culture has made the belly a feared subject and a weight gain indicator. In the middle of the twentieth century, the duty to cultivate the waistline also extended to the belly, which should be kept thin and fit (Sant'Anna, 2016). Nowadays, aesthetic worship has built the flat, "negative" belly stereotype, that is, without fat. For those who do not fit into the ideal profile, options are offered such as physical exercises and abdominoplasty, plastic surgery focused on the abdomen. In this sense, the discourse present in the meme contributes to transmitting the message during the COVID-19 pandemic: stay active to stay beautiful.⁴

On the other hand, it is interesting to reflect that, among the precepts developed from the fat body, considered deviant from the norm, there is the reference to a sedentary profile, considered to be sick. This idea has been developed since 1990 when the concept of the body as a "resource platform" capable of providing emerged. In this reality, the fat and potbellied body figures around the sedentary profile, whether a real condition or constructed in the imaginary (Sant'Anna, 2016).

The condition of difference exposed between the two dolls still emphasizes the belief of a successful female profile, which is related to capacity and autonomy under the one who has the body according to the aesthetic ideal. At the same time, it represents the fat female body from the stigma of being sick and sedentary, blaming fat women for their bodies.

Female rivalry and Dehumanization of the fat body

The identity built from the body shaped through physical exercise is associated with a "re-signification of the body" that occurred in the twentieth century, which privileged lean, muscular, and tanned bodies (Mattos, 2012). In this sense, the discourse of Figure 3 builds the thin bodies, exposed to the sun, with the silhouettes defined as a symbol of success and beauty from the practice of physical activities.

In contrast to the other women, the one who did not exercise during quarantine is consigned to idleness and weight gain. The phrase "When I discover that ma girls were training in quarantine and I was not" blames the woman who got fat in quarantine. The female body addressed to the pig refers to dirt, which, in turn, represents the impure body, which is in disagreement with the social environment. We point out that the reference of the fat female body to the pig is a recurring practice in the fatphobic discourse, which relates fat women to characters such as Peppa Pig and Miss Piggy. The social discourse is clear: "Fat as impurity - or dirt - cannot be included in the subject's body to maintain the hegemonic standard of the fit body" (Mattos, 2012).

⁴ The expression became popular through model Candice Swanepoel in 2012. It refers to the concave belly, without fat and with the hip bones in evidence.

Figure 3 - Aesthetic Pressure

Qdo descubro que azamigas tavam
 treinando na Quarentena e eu não.



Source: Instagram

The representation of a single ideal body creates a scenario of power dispute, which gains new developments in a patriarchal society. According to Wolf (1992), the essence of the Myth was the ability to divide from rivalry, the resentment, and hostility it provokes. By placing women in positions of inferiority and superiority based on body shapes and sizes, the sexist culture disseminates the belief of a female rivalry through physical appearance, as manifested non-discursively in the meme. The image that the woman represented by the pig constructs of herself is conditioned to her friends' body image.

On the other hand, the comparison to a pig is an artifice that dehumanizes the fat body, which when breaking with the ideal model becomes animalistic. Memes denying humanity to fat women bring a metaphorical sense of loss of rights:

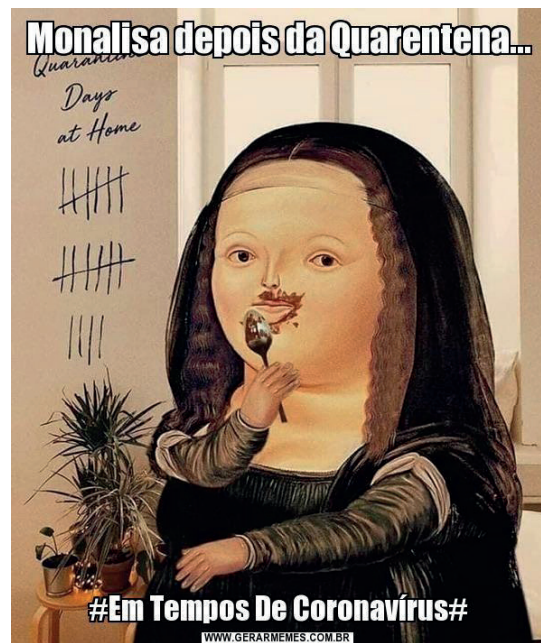
One loses the right to sit in a comfortable chair in public spaces like restaurants, movies, bars, to pass through a bus turnstile without embarrassment, to buy a blouse in any neighborhood store, to go to the doctor to treat one's headache and leave there without a diagnosis of morbid obesity and a referral for bariatric surgery, to go to the gym and not see on your exercise plan that your goal is to lose weight (Jimenez-Jimenez & Abonizio, 2018).

In addition to the daily embarrassments experienced due to the lack of, for example, accessibility, the fat person is again blamed for the loss of rights (Jimenez-Jimenez & Abonizio, 2018). This pattern based on the withdrawal of the constitutional right to accountability endorses the construction of the thin body considered normal while the fat body is symbolically structured as deviant.

Gluttonous female body

The meme culture constructs a discourse that food consumption is a reason for body image condemnation during the COVID-19 pandemic. The meme below presents the logic of a body restricted to social isolation, anxious and destined to eat by compulsion. To the fat body falls the stigma of being a glutton, built from the habit of uncontrolled eating, as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4 - Fatphobia



Source: Instagram

Initially, it is interesting to point out that the meme above is built from a re-signification of the work *Mona Lisa at Twelve Years Old* (1958) by Colombian painter Fernando Botero. Under an implicit perspective of "before and after" the construction of the image of the figure of *Monalisa* is conditioned to gluttony. Confined and counting the days of seclusion at home - as indicated by the marks on the wall - she lives consuming food in an uncontrolled manner. A behavior that falls back to the idealized accumulation of weight in such a short time.

The disgust toward fat still involves eating disorders. According to dos Santos et al. (2020), the incidence of anorexia and bulimia is higher among adolescent girls and young women. Despite this classification, the authors point out that anorexia nervosa can start in childhood through dietary restrictions. The common characteristics among these pathologies, according to the researchers, are: excessive concern about weight, fear of getting fat, lack of perception of one's own body, and excessive analysis of the physical aspect. Thus, it is noted that the constructions of social behaviors and eating disorders are submitted to the body culture that raises ideals to be followed.

Hostilization through humor

As Lunardi (2018) argues, humor is a recurring discursive strategy in meme culture. In the context of our discussion, it is necessary to consider that humor has a long history of exploiting fat as a source of laughter. In this country, according to Sant'Anna (2016), body weight was a joke topic in the press since the first decades of the twentieth century. Among the practices addressed of humor in the social environment, was the construction of the obese person as a phenomenon instigated by the extraordinary size of the body. A factor that turned them into an attraction of circus shows and fairs.

This laughter, often provoked in a subtle, allegorical way, softened by the joking tone or by the childish presence, is a potent strategy for maintaining prejudice and hostility towards fat bodies. The memes analyzed so far or as the one presented in Figure 5 foment the stereotype that the fat body is funny and useful for entertainment. The trivialization of the fat woman as laughable from a perspective of inferiority is recurrent in comedy, characters in movies, series, soap operas, and advertising.

The caption "First meeting of friends after quarantine" refers to possible weight gain during the period of seclusion. In addition to creating mockery with the body aspect that would have been acquired during the quarantine, the meme also features one of the fat-bodied women with difficulty getting out of the car, in need of support. Therefore, there is a symbolic construction that the fat body is too large to occupy certain spaces and move around.

Figure 5 - Fatphobia



Source: Google⁵

A research developed by Melo et al. (2013) turned to the analysis of the roles of fat people in commercials from the perspective of thin consumers. The result of the research showed that fat people were seen not only with the stigma of comical (funny, clownish, clumsy, and silly) but also of weird (objectionable, repugnant) and weak (lazy, sloppy, injured, and incapable). It can be seen, therefore, that the construction of symbols around the large body involves several stigmas.

Final considerations

Patriarchal society has, over time, developed practices of control and de-legitimization of women's bodies, whether fat or thin. The pleasure and the status conditioned to the social construction of the body prevail logics of domination and power over the feminine. This system is exposed in a sociocultural context, in which the perpetuation of female behavior and image has been based on the construction of women without a voice and based on the millennial discourse of biological difference. The development of a new social reality with the advancement of women in the employment market and the achievement of financial independence emerged new forms of oppression, in which beauty became a form of female control.

In this paper, we discuss how the constructions of aesthetic pressure and fatphobia are engendered in the representations of female bodies present in memes disseminated in Brazil during the COVID-19 pandemic. We understand that the image of the woman is imposed from a condition and a behavior: be/stay thin and beautiful. Thus, memes reflect control images under the female. The concept was built by the American black feminist Patricia Hill Collins and, in Brazil, is reflected by Bueno (2020). Although it was developed to observe the conditions of oppression of black women, the concept also helps to reflect other forms of domination and power, such as in the construction of beauty and the body.

⁵ The image has been digitally altered to protect children's identities.

There is a hierarchical structure of power from aesthetic pressure and fatphobia that performs the domination maintenance of the thin female body and the subordination of the fat female body. Such logic is based on opposite structures that build the image of the thin woman as a symbol of social success, in addition to aesthetics: beautiful/ugly, accepted/excluded, agile/lazy. This binary thinking constitutes the images of control, which function from differences and in dependence on the existence of one category with the other (Bueno, 2020).

In this social context, the discourses found in the analyzed memes operate to distinguish and classify women based on their body fat. The coercion under the female body in the memes referring to aesthetic pressure showed institutionalized speeches in the patriarchal and capitalist culture: women in a position as competitors in the search for beauty in order to shape and control bodies and behaviors, under the optic of the beauty standards since childhood. Therefore, these are narratives that perpetuate structural violence and gender violence in contemporaneity through a construction of the body image considered ideal.

From the material analyzed, it was also found that the fear of getting fat during the COVID-19 pandemic represents disdain for fat women. More than aesthetics, this disgust is based on fatphobia through practices of hostility and exclusion of the fat female body. The memes analyzed in this research reflect several discourse strands that perpetuate fatphobia under the female body: ugliness, unhealthy and sedentary lifestyle, gluttony, comical/ridiculous body, and animalistic/out-of-standard woman. In this way, the memes highlighted that fatphobia is a structural violence present on the Web, but also in the medical discourse, in the family, in the beauty industry, and in the center of the physical exercise practice.

We understand that fatphobia is part of the construction of body stigma, aimed at men and women. However, we understand that the symbolic forms under the female gender found in memes indicate a prejudice from weight being operated as a punishment more specifically to women's images. Therefore, we realize that the meanings constructed about fat women's bodies in the research corpus are also part of a gender violence.

The same society that promotes discourses of control and hostility through the female body also follows the development of resistance discourses. Fatphobia is brought into the debate in virtual and physical media through the fat movement that acts by questioning, welcoming others, and debating about stigma. Thus, it is organized as activism that operates in different ways to promote social change (Jimenez-Jimenez & Abonizio, 2017).

Finally, the challenge of promoting awareness about the practices of control over the female body is perceived. The anti-fatphobia mobilization and other actions, such as those of the body-positive movement, are even more relevant in the face of the dissemination of prejudice and aesthetic pressure that marked the spread of memes during the seclusion of people in homes in the new coronavirus pandemic. Besides the online media, the academic segment, especially that of communication, becomes an important space for reflection and mobilization in face of the issues presented in this article. After all, it is a matter of verifying how the discursive practices that operate hierarchical and stereotyped structures of the female body, especially the fat one, are engendered by the media or by productions coming from social subjects.

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