

'WhatsApp Aunts'

Ageism, Sexism, and the Marginalisation of Older People in Brazilian Politics

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Abstract: *The rise of the former far-right Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro has shed light on his supporters' age aspects thus evidencing his opponents' use of ageist tropes to counter Bolsonaro's discourse. National surveys indicate that many of the government's "die-hard" supporters tend to be men and people over 60. As a result, Bolsonaro's left-wing opponents use ageism coupled with sexism to vilify his electors instead of standing for a more reasonable debate. In our chapter, we analyse how issues of age and gender coincide with the stereotype and meme of "tia do zap" ("WhatsApp aunt") that circulate on the Internet. This stereotype/meme contrues right-wing older people as people who spread fake news on social media. By examining the left's and right's use of this stereotype in Brazil, we problematize them both, highlighting the lack of intersectionality from the left. While the meme is an ageist oversimplification, it also indicates that old people's support for Bolsonaro coincides with their retrieval of political and social agencies. We also present the political background of Brazil; discuss the far-right's use of social media to disseminate fake news, a factor that reinforces the idea that conservative old people share false information on the Internet; analyse some of the memes; present an example of an older person who has used this stereotype to reclaim her political and social agencies and do a critique of the left to which ageism has become a blind spot.*

Keywords: *ageism; WhatsApp; tia do zap; fake news; politics; gender; Jair Bolsonaro; Brazil; far-right; left-wing*

Introduction

In Brazil, the rise of the far right, a growing distrust in the left, and the lack of conversations about ageism, among other factors, have created the perfect conditions for the appearance of an internet meme based on a stereotype about old people who support former President Jair Bolsonaro. ‘Tia do zap’¹ (in English, ‘WhatsApp aunt’) is a derogatory term that refers to old, right-wing people (both women and men) who are considered to be politically active online. It seems to be an ageist, not to mention sexist, construal of the Brazilian left, as it represents most of President Jair Bolsonaro’s supporters as older women who spread fake news on social media. There is some truth to this stereotype in the sense that it indicates Brazilians’ increasing use of social media and message applications (apps) to access and read the news.² However, the use of social media and message apps alone does not explain the emergence of this stereotype, which later started to circulate as a meme, and, as a result, may have possibly inspired older people to become even more politically active online. The emergence of ‘WhatsApp aunts’ coincides with the rise of the far right after 2013³ and their effective yet question-

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- 1 In Brazilian Portuguese, WhatsApp is often referred to as ‘zap’ or ‘zap zap’.
 - 2 Most Brazilians get informed online instead of watching the news on TV (Lapper 2021, 38), which was the prevalent media before the popularisation of the internet (Damgaard 2019, 24). A study by the Getúlio Vargas Foundation indicates that by 2018 there were more than 220 million smartphones in use in this country and that Brazilians consult the internet more than 30 times a day (Lapper 2021, 40; Moura and Corbellini 2019, 101). Moreover, according to Pesquisa Globo, 140 million Brazilians access social media platforms (“Pandemia e o Consumo De Notícias Nas Redes Sociais” 2020) and, in 2021, the Digital News Report highlights that, together, Facebook (47%) and WhatsApp (43%) are Brazilians’ main source of information (Carro 2021). When it comes to people aged 55 or older, WhatsApp is the platform of choice, closely followed by Facebook and YouTube (Souito 2021).
 - 3 Richard Lapper (2021, 85) describes the events of June 2013: “What started out at the beginning of the month as a protest against higher bus fares had by the end of the month become a broad-based attack not just on political corruption but on the entire political class itself”.

able use of the internet in the 2018 presidential campaign that elected Bolsonaro. More importantly, the term 'WhatsApp aunt' is also an ironic reference to Bolsonaro's use of WhatsApp bulk message senders disseminating mainly fake news to boost his online presence.⁴

In this chapter, we will analyse how issues of age and gender coincide with the meme of 'WhatsApp aunt', which will allow us to explore ageism in Brazilian society and politics. By examining the left's and right's use of this stereotype, we want to problematise them both, but we especially want to highlight the left's lack of critical engagement with their own uses of ageism, which has become a blind spot. We also want to acknowledge that not all older people are conservative. In Brazil, many of those who are considered to be old now were involved in politically progressive agendas such as ending the dictatorship in the 1980s. Moreover, we want to highlight that even though the expression 'WhatsApp aunt' may resonate with the 'OK, Boomer' meme,⁵ the former comes from a different context and has a different function as the example of someone who identifies as a 'WhatsApp aunt' and uses this expression to feel empowered will show.

To analyse the phenomenon of 'WhatsApp aunts', we are going to present the political background from which this stereotype and meme emerged. After that, we will discuss the far-right's use of social media to

4 In her work on "digital populism," Cesarino (2021, 3) describes the "Whatsapp aunt" as a portion of Bolsonaro's electorate that was gradually captured by the digital apparatus and mechanism of mobilisation created to build his hegemony on- and offline.

5 In the second semester of 2019, after Greta Thunberg's arrival in New York and due to the increasing popularity of her "Fridays for Future" movement in North America, newspapers started to write stories about youth going on school strikes. Initially, they are portrayed as a means for young people to voice their opinions and pressure the government. Soon, the discourse changed as signs from these youth become more aggressive towards older people ("Boomers, we will not forgive you"). However, the intergenerational conflict only became official when the New York Times published a story explaining that the popularity of "OK Boomer" was due to the: "[r]ising inequality, unaffordable college tuition, political polarization exacerbated by the internet, and the climate crisis all fuel anti-boomer sentiment" (Lorenz 2019).

disseminate fake news, a factor that reinforces the idea that conservative old people share false information on the internet and explains, along with the political context, the victory of Bolsonaro. Then, we are going to analyse some of the memes to understand which ideas about older people, especially older women, have been circulating and how these are used in the political discourse. Next, we will discuss the legitimacy of older protesters and how political engagement can be an alternative for marginalised ageing people to regain political and social agencies. We will end the text with a critique of the Brazilian left due to their exclusion of age in debates that strive to be intersectional.

Political Background

On October 28, 2018, Bolsonaro won the election with 55.13% of the votes in the second-round poll. Almost 58 million Brazilians democratically elected the man who, despite his public flirting with authoritarianism, became the leader of the largest South American country, putting an end to years of progressive politics that began in 2003 with the election of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, leader of the PT (Workers' Party). Bolsonaro's victory happened in the wake of the parliamentary coup that culminated in the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in 2016 and the temporary mandate of then Vice-President Michel Temer.

After this parliamentary coup, the public's distrust of the PT and other left parties became exacerbated. Bolsonaro's allies further encouraged this distrust with fabricated corruption scandals involving former President Lula. This active scandal campaign fragmented the left, which prevented leftists from forming a united front against Bolsonaro. The resulting democratic instability also facilitated the re-emergence of far-right movements that had been apparently dormant since the end of the military dictatorship in 1985. These movements have rarely been held accountable for the damages they caused to the country, due, mainly, to Brazil's 1979 *Lei da Anistia* (Amnesty Law), a dubious attempt to foster democracy that benefited both those who had been politically persecuted and their torturers. In the long run, this law made the Brazilian

judicial system incapable of settling matters with the armed forces or even judging crimes committed by and in the name of the Brazilian government. The Amnesty Law, created as an attempt to turn the page, eventually became a tool in the effort to dodge a crucial political debate about the scars that the dictatorship left in Brazilian politics, society, and institutions.

Without proper address and after time, the memory of the military dictatorship became diffuse and even questionable to partisans of conspiracy theories with authoritarian tendencies. They soon found the perfect fora on the internet to discuss topics that the constitutional pact of the re-democratisation after the dictatorship had unofficially banned from politics. Gradually, in face of the rising crisis during Rousseff's government and the consequent distrust in the left that it triggered, the initially timid public support that far-right parties and politicians received turned into a tsunami and generated a crisis of narratives: the 1964 military coup was renamed a "revolution" and torturers became "heroes" that were praised in Congress.⁶ At the same time, part of the public increasingly urged for the armed forces to intervene, since purging the Congress and the Supreme Court became, according to them, the main possible solutions for the problems faced by the country. The result is what Machado and Miskolci (2019, 956) call "moral entrepreneurs," that is, right-wing dissidents that use anti-institutional discourses to oppose the debate and advancement of matters related to culture and social conventions. The anti-corruption rhetoric is the main revindication of these moral entrepreneurs, who are often haunted by the imminent possibility of a communist revolution coming to conquer the world (and that is due to start in Brazil) and introduce so-called 'gender ideologies', among other 'monstrosities' that would result in the end of many established institutions such as the patriarchal family and private property.

The strategy of creating an enemy that elicits fear and paranoia has been used before. During the Cold War, for instance, the USA and the

6 In 2016, during Rousseff's impeachment hearing, Bolsonaro gave a speech in Congress defending her ousting and dedicating his vote to the memory of Colonel Carlos Brilhante Ustra, one of Rousseff's torturers.

USSR both fabricated enemies to justify the governments' actions and help in the maintenance of nationalism (de Albuquerque and Quinan 2019). A well-known example is McCarthyism, which persecuted screenwriters, actors, directors, musicians, and other professionals of the entertainment industry in Hollywood due to their supposed links to the Communist Party in the USA. Recently, the dissemination of fear and hate to scare 'concerned citizens' has become more elaborate and systematic with the use of message apps and social media platforms. With the massive distribution of fake contents through these media, the voices of far-right movements have become amplified, creating democratic instability not only in Brazil but also in other countries such as the USA, Poland, and Hungary, where authoritarian governments currently prosper or have prospered with the support articulated in the digital world.

A large portion of the far-right material that circulates on social media pertains to fabricated realities and misleading interpretations of facts. These are fake news, which are deceitful or have the aim to misinform the public (Recuero, Bonow Soares, Vinhas, Volcan, Zago, Marchioro Stumpf, Viegas, Hüttner, Bonoto, Silva, Passos, Salgueiro, and Sodré 2021, 10). This content is spread with light speed through social media thanks to the help of technical devices (robots) and humans. In 2020, Patrícia Campos Mello (2020), a reporter of the *Folha de São Paulo* (FSP), one of the major dailies in Brazil, investigated the use of the fake news industry during the 2018 presidential electoral campaigns. In her book, she exposes how complex fake news dissemination networks sponsored by those interested in the election of Bolsonaro were able to dodge state juridical apparatuses. The investigative story Campos Mello wrote for FSP was crucial to legally contest Bolsonaro's campaign and change the rules about WhatsApp bulk sender services.

'Data-Aunt'

In October 2020, during an interview in a Brazilian TV show, Campos Mello answered why she thinks 'WhatsApp aunts' have credibility (Tas 2020). She mentions that while real news tends to be less spectacular,

fake ones generate engagement. Similarly, Ernesto Perini-Santos (2021, 351) highlights that fake news tends to be more "attention-grabbing". In a book about the collapse of democracy in Brazil, Perini-Santos (2021, 343–344) examines how "post-truth", a distrust in institutions that mediates knowledge and information, operates in Brazil. The spread of fake news is a consequence of this distrust, especially on the internet where anybody can produce and share content.

Even though Campos Mello acknowledges the role and relevance of 'WhatsApp aunts' in the fake news machinery created by Bolsonaro and his allies, she does not give them enough attention in her book. It is difficult to say when exactly this expression started to circulate, but, since 2014, Brazilian newspapers have published stories about the popularization of WhatsApp family groups (Fischberg 2014). One study highlights that Brazilians' favourite online pastime is to check WhatsApp group messages (Lapper 2021, 40; Moura and Corbellini 2019, 101). In the context of isolated older people, understanding the creation of public online spaces where they can interact and share news and memes with family members is essential for analysing the advent of this meme and stereotype. In 2015, as Brazilian society increasingly became more polarised after Rousseff's election, merely one year away from her impeachment and with many WhatsApp family groups already consolidated, newspapers started to publish stories using the expression 'WhatsApp aunts' (Cardoso 2015).

It is not the first time that the image of an older woman is used in the Brazilian imaginary. In an article about the intersection of widowhood, memory, oral history, and military dictatorships in Latin America, Lídia M. V. Possas (2011) has noticed an increase in the use of the word "viúva" (in English, 'widowess') in Brazilian newspapers since 2003. The author observes that this word is used loosely and in different political contexts, but, in all of them, it has negative connotations. This implies that 'widowesses' have become near-abject non-beings, forgotten by both the militaries and human rights activists who mainly establish their political agendas with the idea of a family in mind (Possas 2011, 89). In Brazil, a well-known expression is "viúva da ditadura" ('widowess of the dictatorship'), which does not merely refer to a woman whose hus-

band died during the dictatorship in Brazil as it may seem at first. More importantly, this expression refers to those (no matter what gender or age) that miss the dictatorship and want it restored. We did not find any scholarly articles on this specific use of language, which emphasises the left's lack of self-awareness. However, a 2018 story, published by the left-leaning Brazilian Intercept less than a week after Bolsonaro was allegedly stabbed, uses this expression in its headline: 'While Brazil can still elect 'widowesses of the dictatorship,' Chile continues to punish its military' (Brum 2018). This story hints not only at Brazil's lack of commitment to reassessing its past and punish those involved in the dictatorship, but also at the limited discussions among Brazilian left-wingers that exclude gender and age while at the same time othering older women and excluding them of political discussions. With this precedent that it was already acceptable to speak about (older) women in such atrocious terms, it is likely that the term 'WhatsApp aunt' is a development that reflects the current political context and the increasing use of social media.

Moreover, even though we are hesitant and careful not to collapse all older people in the politically conservative category, it is true that Bolsonaro's approval rate among people over 60 is still rather substantial.⁷ Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic and with the deaths of more than 600,000 Brazilians, his support has progressively decreased especially due to his mismanagement of the pandemic and the consequent economic crisis. But, in 2021, during the third year of his term, which, doubtlessly, represents a moment of discontentment even among Bolsonaro voters and supporters, some remain supportive. The 'WhatsApp aunt' is believed to be one of them.

In a 2020 YouTube interview to his son and Congressman Eduardo Bolsonaro, the president recognised the engagement of the 'WhatsApp

7 According to PoderData, in September 2021, President Bolsonaro's government is better evaluated by two age groups: those between 25 and 44 years old (30% of them consider it good/great) and those over 60 (28% of them consider it good/great). In other age cohorts, such as 16- to 24-year-olds and 45- to 59-year-olds, only 16% of respondents evaluate Bolsonaro's government as good/great (Lopes 2021).

aunts' and he even attributed the Internet activism that helped him win the 2018 election to them.⁸ In the video, he seems upset with the opponents' critique that 'WhatsApp aunts' are an 'alternative' source of information. He emphasises the importance of 'WhatsApp aunts' who defend the government daily and opposes the left's urge to silence them and other websites that distribute news favourable to him. According to the perception of the left and right, 'WhatsApp aunts' are part of the 'die-hard' Bolsonaro supporter core, that is, they are the group of voters that will hardly change their mind, are horrified by left-wing protesters, and take Bolsonaro's 2018 slogan seriously: "Brazil above everything, God above all."

'WhatsApp Aunt' Memes

As seen with the expression 'widowesses of the dictatorship', the left's use of ageism and sexism in the political discourse is not new. In 'WhatsApp aunts', the coupling of age and gender creates another stereotype of old women in a different political context, which again expels older people from the political discourse while, at the same time, tries to explain Bolsonaro's supporters backing of antidemocratic agendas. 'Othering' is a process that identifies certain people as those that do not belong or stand at the margins of society. Through othering stereotypes, or, in the words of Patricia Hill Collins (2000), "controlling images" are created. Hill Collins writes about the stereotypes concerning Black women, whose main function is to justify racial oppression thus perpetuating it (2000, 73), but her insight is helpful to understand how the left's othering operates: By using these stereotypes to marginalise 'older women', their discourse is dismissed with the justification that these are not coherent people.

8 The video was removed by YouTube for violating Covid-19 incorrect medical information policies, but the Brazilian daily *Gazeta do Povo* published a story on this interview ("Bolsonaro Celebra 'Tia Do Zap' e Deseja 'Bom Fim De Ano e Excelente 22 Para Todos Nós.'" 2020).

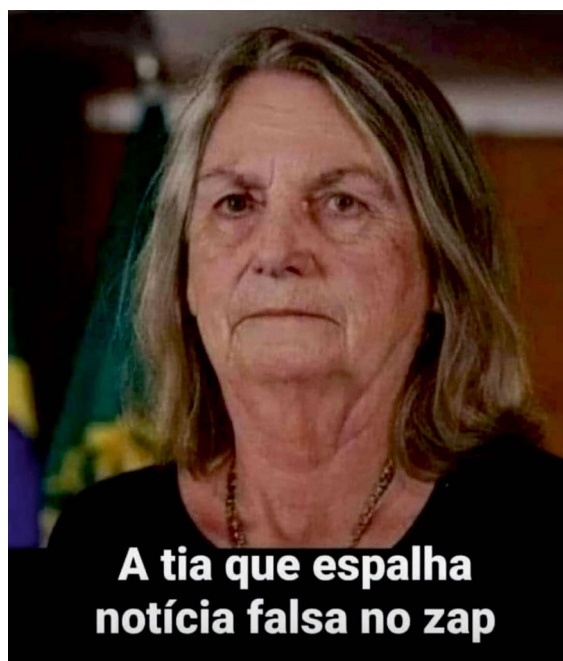
Another important idea about the use of stereotypes comes from Viktor Chagas (2018, 7), who highlights that they create narrow perceptions about reality, which simplify and help democratise the political discourse. Chagas' idea makes sense especially if we take the growing political polarisation after 2013 and the increasing access to social media and message apps into account. The definition of a meme is rarely a consensus, but Anastasia Denisova (2019, 10) provides an accessible description that indicates that memes may have a starting point in an image or stereotype: "A meme is an imitable text that Internet users appropriate, adjust and share in the digital sphere. The initial text may be [...] any digital unit of expression, as long as it conveys certain meanings or emotion and encourages others to either add something to the content or shape". She also highlights that memes tend to change as they circulate on the internet (Denisova 2019). By analysing some of 'WhatsApp aunt' memes, we want to highlight how the original image of 'older women who share fake news' changes to convey different meanings.

The first two memes are left leaning, while the last two show how the Brazilian right appropriated the 'WhatsApp aunt' for its political propaganda. The first one is a poster that says 'Beware! Elderly confused in green and yellow' (Figure 1). The use of these colours is a reference to the colours of the Brazilian flag, and it is also an allusion to the use of the Brazil soccer jersey, which, since 2013, has become a symbol for right-wingers.

Image 1 – 'Beware! Elderly confused in green and yellow'



Doutor de Mente 2021

Image 2 – ‘The aunt that spreads fake news on WhatsApp’

Simão 2022

The second meme (Figure 2) shows Bolsonaro portrayed as an old woman, and it reads ‘The aunt that spreads fake news on WhatsApp’. This is clearly a reference to Bolsonaro’s use of WhatsApp bulk senders. Both the text and the message identify Bolsonaro’s pivotal role in the spread of fake news implying that it was not only old women who spread fake news. At the same time, the meme is still highly problematic as it portrays the president as an old woman. This meme combines ageism and sexism for a comic effect, implicitly relying on the widespread belief that old women should not be taken seriously in the realm of politics. That is, by presenting the president as an old woman, the meme implies that Bol-

sonaro should not be taken seriously because the opinions of old women are not respected.

The third meme (Figure 3) depicts a conservative old woman. The image was manipulated to add the 'thug life' glasses, a reference to a Snoop Dogg song, which often includes the soundtrack of memes that portray someone acting 'like a boss'. The text says: 'WhatsApp aunt, the terror of the left', indicating that older women act 'like bosses' because of their support.

Image 3 – 'WhatsApp aunt, the terror of the left'



Source unknown

The last meme (Figure 4) depicts an old woman using her cell phone. The text reads: 'Thank you, WhatsApp aunt, for freeing Brazil from another four years of PT's government'. Unlike the other memes, the origin of the fourth meme is clear: it stems from a politician that supports Bolsonaro. This meme also acknowledges the stereotype of old women spreading (fake) news, suggesting that these women were responsible for the election of Bolsonaro.

Image 4 – ‘Thank you, WhatsApp aunt, for freeing Brazil from another four years of PT’s government’



Zambelli 2018

These memes are just a few examples that showcase the use of stereotypes about older, politically engaged women. As seen in the memes, ‘WhatsApp aunts’ as a stereotype is used by the left and the right. The memes from the left tend to depict Bolsonaro voters as confused or gullible older women, thus using age and gender as pejorative categories. Consequently, the left denies the agency of older women, while the right celebrates these ‘aunts’ and grants them some political agency. Even though the right’s use of stereotypes is more positive, they are still referencing a controlling image that may propel some older women to reclaim political participation. What also calls our attention is the absence of racialised people from the discourses about ‘WhatsApp aunts’. In the highly unequal landscape of Brazil, racialised citizens do not have much space to articulate their opinions and are often entirely excluded from the political discourse as seen in the memes. Moreover, the stereotype and the portrayal of ‘WhatsApp aunts’ in the memes also points to an exclusion of poor populations, many of them racialised, who may not have access to a cell phone or social media, or even might not have learned how to read.

WhatsApp as Means to Reactivate the Agency of 'Aunts'

In a book analysing the discourses around programs for older people, Eneida G. M. Haddad (2017) studies the construal of old age in Brazil. Examining the medical discourses that justify many of these programs, Haddad recognises that they echo the capitalist idea that people are valuable as long as they work (2017, 74), hence they should remain active in old age (2017, 71). Once they retire, older people are thought to be inactive and their worth consequently diminishes (Haddad 2017, 70–71). The researcher acknowledges the class component imbued in the discourse of remaining active: it does not take into consideration members of the working class whose tired bodies may have been unwillingly deteriorated due to the constant wear and tear of work (Haddad 2017, 53) and who, in their retirement, may want to rest and/or do leisure activities. Haddad's research indicates what becomes of old people in Brazil when they retire: they are dismissed as disposable. This reality is not much different from what happens to older people elsewhere. The increasing number of older populations has prompted the discourse of the 'grey tsunami' in several contexts and publications. But what if being old and a woman can empower you?

Take the example of Lilian Gardino. She refuses to be fazed by the stereotypes used to discredit her just because she is old. Instead, she uses the 'WhatsApp aunt' epithet to reclaim her agency, feel empowered, and promote her YouTube channel. In a video posted on November 21, 2019, Gardino, a chipper old white woman, introduces herself: "I'm not a robot, I am a human in flesh and bones, OK? [...] I'm just like you on the other side of the screen. I'm neither part of the digital militia nor earn money for my engagement" (Lilian Tia do Zap 2019). She is wearing a green and yellow T-shirt that reads 'My party is Brazil', indicating that, in the highly polarised Brazilian political scenario, Gardino is right leaning. She is sitting on her living room couch and has an improvised script in her hands. For twenty minutes, she talks about herself: she is 60,⁹ has two

9 In Brazil, old age officially starts at age 60, so, in our analysis, we comply with its current start.

children, is married, works as a public-school teacher in the state of São Paulo, does handcraft as a hobby, and often uses *Sistema Único de Saúde* (SUS), Brazil's network of public health services. In addition to her introduction, in this video, she broaches some of the topics that she wants to debate in her YouTube channel: criticism of politicians (including the ones she voted for), abortion, religion, immigration, 'gays', and the military dictatorship, which she affirms was 'very different from what people preach' (Lilian Tia do Zap 2019). This is her second YouTube video, and the name of her channel is "Lilian Tia do Zap", a reference to the well-known figure of 'WhatsApp aunt.'

In her channel, Gardino is friendly and proud to be a 'WhatsApp aunt' because she views the negative stereotyping as an inaccurate representation of her experience and discernment, which only comes with time. 'We are aunties and uncles, we are the elderly, but we are not dumb, and people underestimate our intelligence', she vents and then mentions that she is committed to rescuing 'the values of our parents and grandparents' (Lilian Tia do Zap 2019). For these purposes, she believes it is necessary to engage in activism to free Brazil from the legacy of corruption that the left has supposedly bequeathed.

Every three to four days, Gardino uploads a new video. As promised, she comments on the latest news. Almost all videos reproduce ideas that circulate in the right-wing informative bubbles (Pariser 2011) of social media. These contents are shared by either bots or humans within polarised groups, reinforcing the members' already established perspectives and ways of thinking. This 'echo chamber' functionality of social media sharing reinforces consistent beliefs and creates the impression that 'everybody thinks like me', which, in turn, encourages even more political polarisation.

But why would someone believe in fake news? Because of the distrust in the already established media, Perini-Santos (2021, 350) emphasises that people seek alternative news sources that corroborate their world views and explains that this is a move people do to help them confirm and maintain their identities. That is, identity enables us to understand the investment of many of these 'WhatsApp aunts' in their informative bubbles. But identity does not only explain why people believe in fake

news, it is also one of the main reasons someone may engage in politics in the first place. In their study of social movements, Rob Rosenthal and Richard Flacks (2012, 7) analyse why people engage in politics, when this can pose a risk to their well-being. They argue that collective and personal identities are connected to political activism in the sense that participating in a social movement enables a person to elaborate on their role in society and find fulfilment. In other words, 'WhatsApp aunt's' political participation points to an important intersection of informative bubbles, old age, and identity, indicating that political activism is an appealing alternative to those who feel disposable and marginalised.

In Gardino's case, we notice that she uses her age to emphasise her legitimacy in being politically active, but she also portrays herself in gendered terms when she claims the identity of an 'aunt' as seen in how she describes herself and in the name of her channel. That is, gender is also part of the equation that explains her political activism because as an older woman, she likely experiences more marginalisation. Einwohner, Hollander and Olson (2000, 684–690) argue that social movements are always gendered in at least one or more of their layers: composition, goals, tactics, attribution, that is, how they are seen by the public, and identity. Data shows that most of Bolsonaro's supporters tend to be older men instead of women (Lopes 2021). As for the goals, if Bolsonaro supporters are aligned with his politics (Kaiser 2018), they are likely not fighting for gender equality or any gender-related revindications. Also, going to protests and sharing (fake) news are practises that are not limited to one specific gender. The main layers that interest us are attribution and identity.

The use of 'aunt' instead of 'uncle' in the expression 'WhatsApp aunt' and the memes featuring older women highlight that the public, in general, and the left, in particular, make gendered assumptions about who is politically active online. These assumptions are highly problematic because the stereotype about older women who are politically active online points to the supposed lack of legitimacy that these women would have as a social movement. Similarly, by using the word 'aunt', the left expels old women from the public arena where politics takes place, constraining them to domesticity by identifying them in relation to a family group,

outside the public space. This creates a double standard at the intersection of age and gender when it comes to how the left represents its opponents, as Bolsonaro's male supporters are not associated with the stereotype or meme. Rosenthal and Flacks (2012, 6) affirm that the success of a social movement depends on how it will present itself to the public and the consequent legitimacy that the public may or may not attribute to it. That is, the more familiar a movement frames itself, the more likely it is to be successful (Einwohner, Hollander and Olson 2000, 691). With the Brazilian left in mind, these claims are also true when it comes to the rebuttal of a political position. In face of the widespread use of the expression 'widowess of the dictatorship' discussed previously, the left's framing of politically active older women as 'WhatsApp aunts' accesses a prominent public bias that is used to disempower older women by emphasising their supposed lack of legitimacy and critical thought.

These negative attributions do not stop older women from participating in the political discourse as seen in Gardino's YouTube channel (Lilian Tia do Zap 2019). Her most eloquent moments coincide with her participation in public demonstrations in favour of Bolsonaro in the streets of São Paulo. Even during the Covid-19 pandemic, she is not afraid to go to the streets to demand the purging of the Supreme Court, the ousting of the president of the Congress, military intervention, among other revindications, all part of Bolsonaro's antidemocratic and denialist agenda. Through her actions, Gardino exercises her political and social agencies: not only does she invite her viewers to join her, but she also often goes live on YouTube reporting from the event, socialising with other protesters dressed in green and yellow, 'fangirling' other youtubers with similar political beliefs and meeting some of her followers (Lilian Tia do Zap 2019). In a 2021 video shot during Brazil's Independence Day's festivities, she is visibly enjoying herself while she sells DIY 'WhatsApp aunt's' T-shirts (Lilian Tia do Zap 2021).

For 'WhatsApp aunts', political protests are the pinnacle of their engagement because their activism happens in the abstraction of social media platforms, where people often connect with others who they may not know well, either due to a common interest, or even the hatred fuelled by the political discontentment that the circulation of fake news ex-

acerbates. At home, in the solitude of cell phone or computer screens, their political engagement becomes crucial not only for their own articulation of their identities, but as a means to survive the isolation intensified by the pandemic, which has occurred during most of Bolsonaro's term. Old people that are active in the (far) right are usually motivated by their outrage, which might distance them from the often projected images of wise and resilient old age. Even though political activism and protests from both left and right-wing movements are represented as an expression of outrage over oppression, triggered by injustice, in the case of old people, this outrage is misread as lack of sanity and coherence. Félix and Debert (2021) confirm this idea when they assert that old people's social criticism is then dismissed and diminished and often interpreted as a symptom of one of the pathologies that are often linked to later life (dementia, depression, etc.).

Conclusion

On January 8, 2023, following the defeat of Bolsonaro in the 2022 election, his most radical supporters invaded and vandalized the three main government buildings in Brasília, capital of Brazil: the National Congress, the Federal Supreme Court and the presidential palace. The act was a direct attack on Brazilian democracy as it intended to remove current President Lula, legitimately elected by popular vote for a new term inaugurated on January 1, 2023. While users in social media and part of the press emphasize the participation of older people by showing them in most images of the invasion that were shared and reposted, the police affirms that they arrested approximately 1,200 invaders and among them only 40 were older people (3.5%) (Caramori 2023). In fact, most of the prisoners' ages ranged mainly from 50 to 59 years old (34.5%) and 40 to 49 years old (32.6%) (Caramori 2023). That is, again, older people are the main targets of anger and mockery in connection to the invasion and one more time presumed guilty while the press attributes their supposed radicalism to advanced age. And yet the real participation of older people in this invasion (the 3.5%) still needs to be complicated

and examined in terms of their motivation and identification with the stereotype and then identity of 'WhatsApp Aunts.'

However, in spite of the ongoing misinformation spread in right-leaning informative bubbles and how it is used in the construal of the 'WhatsApp aunt' stereotype and memes, we, as authors of the text, reject the beliefs that older people (and especially older women) are gullible or liable for Bolsonaro's victory in 2018 or were the main actors of the depredation that happened in Brasília in January of 2023 (as the police reports confirms). Similarly, even though we distance ourselves from positions such as Gardino's, we do not believe that her political opinion is due to her age, gender or the intersection of both. Research shows that people over 60 are only *one* of the different age groups that consistently shows support for Bolsonaro (Lopes 2021). This data highlights that, in Brazil, the spread of misinformation is connected to issues of structural inequalities due to legacies of colonisation and of consequent precarious relations with countries of the Global North. The lack of conversations about the military dictatorship and attempts to sweep this issue under the rug such as the Amnesty Law also contribute to a growing distrust in institutions which, in turn, is one of the factors that explain the enduring distribution of fake news by right-wing partisans in Brazil.

Lastly, we recognise that it is problematic to collapse all left movements under an umbrella term. In the Brazilian scenario, the lack of dialogue among different left movements is notorious and is, in part, due to the range of differences that are seemingly unbridgeable. However, one commonality between these left movements is the dismissal of age as a factor that adds to marginalisation. Having said that, it may be idealistic on our part to expect that the left starts a debate and a praxis that includes age or ageism. On the other hand, if the left who strives for social justice and change does not do it, who else will?

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