Between Hagiography and Self-Trolling: Multimodal Analysis of Memes for Boric in the 2021 Chilean Presidential Election

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We use the concept of hagiography to analyze the absurd content found in the memes that circulated after the first round of Chile's 2021 presidential election. We examined 201 video and image memes to elucidate how the supporters of the then-candidate Gabriel Boric created a narrative of the political moment. A qualitative multimodal analysis shows the use of absurdity to create a heroic idealization of the leftist politician who eventually won the presidency. Social media users depicted the election as a climactic moment where democracy was in danger and portrayed Boric as the hero who appeared at just the right moment with the right message. The term hagiography refers to stories about saints that were read collectively and contributed to the creation of worship communities in medieval Europe. This notion, together with multimodal analysis, helps us understand absurdity not only as a matter of form and content but also as a mode of interaction mediated by memes.

Keywords: Hagiography, multimodal analysis, political memes, Boric, Chilean politics

Research in the field of political communication is increasingly interested in memes as an object of study. Memes were initially defined as units of culture that are passed from one person to another through imitation and that can gradually be modified through each replication like evolving genes (Dawkins, 2006). The study of memes in politics shows that they allow official discourses to be re-signified by audiences (Collado Campos, 2020; Ross & Rivers, 2017) and, by doing so, make their users part of an interpretive community (Frazer & Carlson, 2017). In this article, we underscore the role of absurdity in these processes of creating interpretive communities enabled by Internet memes. We analyzed 201 images and videos of memes produced and disseminated Gabriel by Boric's supporters the week after the first round of the 2021 Chilean presidential election. We found that users built an absurd account of the election, portraying Boric

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as the principled hero coming to save the day from the resurgence of *Pinochetismo,* and they trolled themselves for having to settle for a not-that-leftist candidate.

To make sense of the analyzed material, we draw on the notion of hagiography, which refers to writings about saints that are read and interpreted collectively (Salih, 2006) and which, in medieval Europe, allowed for the assembly of worship communities (Eisenbichler, 1996). The combination of multimodal analysis and this idea of hagiography highlights the role of absurdity not just as an aspect of form and content but also as a mode of interaction between the creator and the viewer of the memetic image. The story within and the way it is constructed may seem nonsensical to an outside observer, but the memes analyzed also use absurdity to build a relationship of massive self-trolling among the community of supporters of candidate Boric. Within that group, the story seems to make sense, and this shared hagiographic interpretation has the potential to generate political support.

Memes: An Invitation to be Part of a Virtual Community

The seminal definition offered in 1976 by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins (2006) suggests that memes are a form of ideational replication that allows culture to reproduce itself, just as genes allow species to evolve. However, the author observes that culture evolves faster than bodies, and the term "memes" allows that distinction to be made. While genes spread through sperms and eggs, "memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation" (Dawkins, 2006, p. 192). More recent definitions acknowledge the impact of the Internet and social media on this propagation process. For Shifman (2013), Internet memes are "units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience" (p. 367). The author argues that the key element in the circulation of memes is that they are created with an awareness of the experience of others. She thus makes a clear distinction between viral content and memes, defining the former as material that spreads in the digital world without undergoing significant changes, whereas the latter invites co-creation as if it were a call to imitate, remix, and join a "participatory culture" (Shifman, 2012, p. 190). This may explain why memes have become the "lingua franca" of the Internet based on references to a shared previous experience (Milner, 2013a, p. 2), allowing users to develop a "'horizontal' dialogue and discussion with those with whom one shares experience and status" (Burton, 2019, p. 7).

Approaching memes as if they were invitations—or "lures," as Shifman (2012) puts it—makes it easier to grasp their community-building potential. Content can become a meme only by virtue of human agency and "persist due to the dynamic interaction among members of participatory digital culture" (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015, p. 1893). In this progression from mere content to a meme, agential action "on the memescape implies not only the creation of memes but of structures associated with memes which then recursively constitute the structure in which the agential action takes place" (Wiggins, 2019, p. 46). Put another way, a meme needs a community to replicate and can simultaneously bring about that community through its replication. We suggest that absurdity and apparently nonsensical humor play a fundamental role in fueling this process of memetic replication, but this aspect remains undertheorized in the literature on political memes.

When it comes to electoral politics, memes do not seem suitable to convey factual information about policy proposals (Kulkarni, 2017; McLoughlin & Southern, 2021), but they can be used to re-signify candidates and their actions by suggesting humorous intertextual connections with the broader political culture and the circulation of emotions (Halversen & Weeks, 2023; Saint Onge, 2018). The strategic political outcomes of these intertextual references can vary from case to case. For example, the attempts and failures of Hillary Clinton's successive candidacies to overcome gender stereotypes about women in politics (Anderson & Sheeler, 2014; Nee & De Maio, 2019) contrast with the case of the then president and vice president, Barack Obama and Joe Biden, as Internet users subverted ideas of masculinity by constructing a memetic bromance between the two (Erlichman & Pluretti, 2023). Obama himself was "trolled" with memes claiming he was unpatriotic in the 2012 presidential campaign (Burroughs, 2012). In 2016, Internet users related candidates Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton with referents from popular culture to create a negative image of them, thus reducing their legitimacy through "strategies of authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis" (Ross & Rivers, 2017, p. 12).

In Brazil, memes also played a role in legitimizing the otherwise unacceptable hate and violent discourses against political opponents advanced by the far-right Jair Bolsonaro's candidacy for the 2018 presidential election (Fernández Villanueva & Bayarri Toscano, 2021). During the campaign for the 2018 election in Mexico, Internet users created memes to mock the discourses of the outgoing president, Enrique Peña Nieto, about his corruption and overall mismanagement (Collado Campos, 2020). In the Spanish general elections, Internet users took advantage of special political occasions, such as debates, to ironically express their contempt for political leaders (Meso-Ayerdi, Mendiguren-Galdospín, & Pérez-Dasilva, 2017).

This process of participatory redefinition of political discourses can create a sense of community among meme users (Kim, Collier, Murray, & Jomini Stroud, 2023). Memes invite people to create and share so that each user can add their own layer to the whole image (Gal, Shifman, & Kampf, 2016). For Gerbaudo (2015), memes might not be substitutes for political action, "but are crucial in creating that sense of 'we' which constitutes a fundamental pre-condition for protest movements to emerge" (p. 929). This redefining potential of memes not only is useful to counter top-down discourses but can also be used to engage in horizontal debates with political opponents (Milner, 2013b), although their potential to cause a persuasive effect has not been proven (Galipeau, 2023).

Sharing memes allows for bonding with like-minded peers, strengthening collective identification (Frazer & Carlson, 2017). The humor inherent in this content "helps communities face the daily challenges of the political world together" (Penney, 2020, p. 800). Browning (2018) noted this when analyzing memetic activity after the Paris terror attacks in 2016 and found that the community used the "Je suis Charlie" motto to collectively respond to ontological anxieties "about nonbeing—in the form of anxieties about death, meaninglessness, and guilt—that the attacks generated" (p. 258). In Manchester, the 2017 bombing of a concert venue was also followed by intensified memetic activity that contributed to a sense of post-terror togetherness (Merrill & Lindgren, 2021). Memes can also allow users outraged by police racial repression to "weaponize hyperbole to ruthlessly ridicule and shame the officer, demonstrating his gross overreaction" (Mielczarek, 2018, p. 78).

This combination of memetic response and humor also helps define a community, since the political joke needs a certain degree of ideological consonance to be correctly understood (Wiggins, 2019). In Latin American politics, Internet memes have been used to collectively re-signify moments of political relevance by tapping into the intertextuality inherent in this kind of material. This could be seen in protests against global financial organizations in Argentina (Canedo, Urbanitsch, & Sierra, 2020) or pro-abortion feminist movements (Vacarezza, 2022). However, memes' potential for community building does not imply that they are inherently edifying, as they can also be used to spread hate, violence, and populist politics (Fernández Villanueva & Bayarri Toscano, 2021; McSwiney, Vaughan, Heft, & Hoffmann, 2021; Nørgaard Kristensen & Mortensen, 2021; Trillò & Shifman, 2021). Ultimately, there is a political context informing their production and circulation, and if this context is marked by political polarization, so will the created material (Paz, Mayagoitia-Soria, & González-Aguilar, 2021).

Research has demonstrated that memes serve as a valuable platform for investigating how individuals reinterpret political events through intertextual references. Furthermore, they offer insights into the types of communities that can emerge through this unique form of communication. In this article, we highlight the role of absurdity present in political memes and reflect on its role in the processes of re-signifying political situations and creating a sense of community.

The Chilean Context: The Young Leader and the Threat of *Pinochetismo*

The political moment in which this study was conducted seemed especially dramatic for Chilean democracy, as it marked the first time that a blatant defender of Augusto Pinochet's neoliberal dictatorship, José Antonio Kast, won the first presidential round. His opponent in the runoff, the leftist Gabriel Boric, became notorious in Chilean politics when he was elected president of the country's largest university student union in 2012. Since then, he has become a young leftist leader active in public demonstrations and student strikes. He was elected to the Chilean Parliament in 2013, representing his hometown, Punta Arenas, and was reelected in 2017. In 2021, he was 35 years old and emerged as the unanticipated candidate for the leftist coalition *Frente Amplio* and the Communist Party. Boric won the primary election and reached the second presidential round.

José Antonio Kast, on the other hand, is an experienced politician who has cultivated a profile as a relentless supporter of Augusto Pinochet, the military dictator who came to power after a coup in 1973 and remained in office until 1990, when he was rejected in a referendum. Kast participated as a student leader in the campaign for that vote in 1988 and often praised the neoliberal reforms implemented under the Pinochet dictatorship while downplaying the regime's human rights violations and corruption. This made him a leading figure in Chile, and for the first time since the fall of the dictator, there was a real prospect for that political vision to win the presidency.

Qualitative Multimodal Analysis: Unlocking the Interplay of Images' Meta-Functions

From the previous review, it can be concluded that Internet memes lend themselves to at least two functions in politics: re-signifying political discourses and creating interpretive communities. Given this, we understand memes' force in political communication not only as a matter of the form and content of the

message but also of the interaction among users. To better grasp the interplay of these elements, we applied Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) principles of multimodal visual discourse analysis. With a qualitative emphasis, we sought to elucidate the semiotic meta-functions that images unfold to construct their meaning or act in their ideological dimension. The first function, according to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), is the ideational meta-function, through which "any semiotic mode has to be able to represent aspects of the world as it is experienced by humans" (p. 41). The second corresponds to the interpersonal meta-function, through which a social relation is projected between "the producer of a (complex) sign and the receiver/reproducer of that sign" (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 42), creating a certain mode of relations between them. The third, the textual meta-function is observed, which relates to the composition of the image and its potential to "form texts, complexes of signs which cohere both internally with each other and externally with the context in and for which they were produced" (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 42).

The corpus consisted of memes that circulated the week after the first round of the presidential elections on December 21, 2021, in Chile. During this period, there was a flow of memes on social networks supporting the progressive candidate Gabriel Boric. To produce a corpus that truly reflected the memetic activity carried out by Boric supporters, we collected material from various sources where they interacted. We first collected images and videos that reached us through personal instant messaging applications, and then we drew on those shared by users on Twitter to access otherwise unreachable material. The first Twitter account we checked belongs to the progressive political weekly *The Clinic*, which stands out in Chile for its use of satire to present current affairs (The Clinic, n.d.). The second account belongs to Gamba.cl, a political satire website published by user Hans Hanzinho, who openly called on people to vote for Boric (Gamba, n.d.). Finally, the account Shitpost Boris was created that week by an anonymous user to share memes supporting Gabriel Boric (Shitpost Boris, n.d.). We checked other accounts on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, but we found nothing new; it was basically the same material replicated over and over. Table 1 shows the number of memes taken from each source. From the initial 248 memes, we discarded 22 duplicates and 25 user-generated campaign materials with no humorous content—mostly portraits of the candidate with "Vote Boric" text. The final corpus consisted of 201 memes, including 180 images and 21 videos. The nonhumorous images discarded were all collected by our personal accounts, which suggests that the three Twitter accounts curated the material to select only the humorous ones, constituting an additional bias beyond electoral support.

Table 1. Sources of Collected Material.

Account	Author	Memes collected
Shitpost Boris (n.d.)	Anonymous user	147
Gamba (n.d.)	Hans Hanzinho	67
The Clinic (n.d.)	*The Clinic*	15
Researchers' IM accounts		19
Initial number collected		248
Final number after revision		201

Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) principles of multimodal analysis have previously been used in the study of memes (Collado Campos, 2020; Martínez Rolán & Piñeiro Otero, 2017; Yoon, 2016). However, the work of Hakoköngäs, Halmesvaara, and Sakki (2020) served as inspiration for organizing our study, as

they were also interested in observing memes in political communication, not only as a matter of form and content but also of users' interaction. Similarly, our analysis process was conducted by all the authors, beginning with a general familiarization with the material to detect patterns connecting different memes. This stage resulted in three groups of memes relating to the figure of candidate Boric, the political context, and the people supporting him. Once the material was organized, the analysis began with the ideational meta-function to elucidate what the creators were trying to represent through these memes. This stage began inductively through a thematic analysis, from which the hero narrative emerged across almost all material. We drew on the relevant literature in heroic narrative to construct subcategories to group the material, resulting in a coding scheme with four types: the hero, the context, the ancient heroes, and the people. Using this scheme, we revisited the entire material twice until 187 memes were allocated to each category, while 14 unrelated to the heroic narrative were categorized as "other memes."

After this codification, the ideational meta-function was identified. Users represented the political situation as a dramatic moment for Chilean democracy, demanding a hero to save the day. Next, we identified the textual meta-function, consisting of the text created by the image composition. In this case, the formal aspects of the memes suggest a naïve idealization of a candidate that reinforces the absurd heroic narrative found in the ideational meta-function. Finally, we analyzed the interaction meta-function, whereby the image constructs a producer/viewer relation, which in this case turned out to be an intimate one among in-group members.

Results: Idealizing Boric as the Perfect Hero

The idea of a hero who comes to save Chilean democracy from the threat of the resurgence of *Pinochetismo* is the main theme found throughout almost all the material analyzed. When compared with studies in this class of narratives, memes can be grouped into four subcategories that reveal the characteristic aspects of a saving hero narrative. In the first subcategory, the second electoral round is presented as a dramatic moment, a political climax in which the threat of *Pinochetismo* hangs over democracy. Second, the narrative suggests that Boric emerges at the precise moment as the candidate who comes to save the day with his daring exploits, good judgment, and nobility of purpose. The third subcategory shows memes narrating how older heroes, such as sports celebrities (Arturo Vidal or Alexis Sánchez) and left-wing politicians (Michelle Bachelet or Carmen Frei), will appear, supporting him in his fight against evil. Finally, the underdogs come together to pin their hopes on the candidate. The construction of this narrative requires the interaction between the different meta-functions indicated by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), and this integration is presented below.

This section is primarily descriptive, as our analysis necessitates integrating four elements that may not be immediately familiar to the reader. These include Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) conceptualizations of meta-functions, the political context surrounding the memes, the intertextual references in each meme, and the literature on heroic narratives. The images illustrating each section are meant to help the reader observe how these four elements are put together in the material, so we chose the ones that made these connections more explicit. It is crucial to delve into detailed descriptions of these elements to aid the reader in navigating our analyses effectively. Therefore, we defer discussions and conclusions to subsequent sections, concentrating here on suggesting connections among disparate components.

The Threat of Pinochetismo

About the ideational function, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) observe that images can represent the world in either a narrative or conceptual way. The former shows dynamic actors who unfold actions aimed at a goal, whereas the latter presents a participant who "*means* or *is*" (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 105; emphasis in original) without necessarily carrying out actions. The first of the four elements of the analyzed narrative consists of 17 memes with a conceptual representation in which *Pinochetismo* appears to be unfolding a "symbolic suggestive process" (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 106) whereby "image detail tends to be de-emphasized in favor of what could be called 'mood' or 'atmosphere'" (p. 106).

***Figure 1. The image suggests a threatening atmosphere from which protection is needed
(Risetka, 2021).***

Figure 1 shows the packaging of high-visibility reflective vests sold in Chile for car drivers. It reads, "It's yellow, it's ugly, it goes with nothing, but it can save lives" (Risetka, 2021). The only change made to the picture is the addition of the *Boric Presidente* logo. The text is shown as it appears on the original bag. In Chilean political culture, yellow is a derogatory term used to suggest that a politician is not leftist enough, and this jargon appears in other elements of this category.

Figure 2. The victory of Kast in the first round creates a threatening atmosphere (G. Esteffan, personal communication, December 26, 2021).

The meme in Figure 2 is a retouched version of a meme called Skeleton Looking at the Explosion. It portrays the mascot of the band Megadeth, Vic Rattlehead, in three different poses. In the first, he is depicted with an unfinished sentence that is interrupted by a nuclear bombing of the United Nations headquarters. In the final image, the character changes his mind and says the opposite. In this case, Rattlehead was saying, "I can't stand that Bor . . ." (G. Esteffan, personal communication, December 26, 2021) but the nuclear bomb appears in the form of a bar chart with Kast winning the first round of the election. In the final picture, the character changes his mind: "As I was saying, Boric for President" (G. Esteffan, personal communication, December 26, 2021). Kast's first-round victory is meant to provide enough evidence to make anyone change their mind. No matter what a voter may think of candidate Boric,

the situation is serious enough to set aside personal opinions. Kast himself does not appear, but his victory in the first round creates a framework of circumstances that forces a reaction.

Figure 3. Kast and his victory remain absent in these memes, but the danger his victory poses is suggested (D. Toro, personal communication, January 04, 2022).

Based on the TV series *Malcolm in the Middle* (Boomer, 2000–2006), the original scene shows Malcolm's grandparents visiting his family and ordering pizza. Grandpa Victor looks at Reese, Malcolm's older brother, and proudly says, "Look at him eat! Like an animal! Not like Mr. Pizza, with a knife and fork!" (Boomer, Murphy, & Thompson, 2001). Then, the camera shows Malcolm eating with cutlery. The meme in Figure 3 changes the original phrase and reads, "Look at him! Doing anything he can to stop the fascists! Not like the sissy boy 'I'm fleeing Chile'" (D. Toro, personal communication, January 4, 2022). The meme suggests that the political atmosphere calls for decisiveness and a willingness to stay and fight rather than hesitation and cowardice.

In these memes, neither Kast nor Pinochet nor any identifiable actor related to that political side appears to carry out actions. The victory of the far right in the first round rather appears as what Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) call a "suggestive symbolic structure," (p. 110) creating an atmosphere of a climactic moment when democracy is at stake. Boric's supporters, on the other hand, are "reacters"

(Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 67) faced with a phenomenon—Kast's victory—with no option other than supporting the "yellow one," however reluctant they may be. This unconditional surrender of the voter to Boric is emphasized through the composition of the image, or what the authors call its textual meta-function. Salience in these memes tends to focus on Boric's supporters and their moment of having to accept a candidate who would otherwise be rejected for his political inconsistency. For Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), salience "can create a hierarchy of importance among the elements, selecting some as more important, more worthy of attention than others" (p. 201). Thus, memes in this subcategory are not about Kast, his followers, or his ideas, but about supporters endorsing Boric in a trade-off against their own political ideals.

In terms of the interactional meta-function, the image performs an "intimate/personal" sort of social relation between the image's producer and observer (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 149). The framing tends to show people at a close distance, creating images where "the object is shown as if the viewer is engaged with it as if he or she is using the machine, reading the book or the map, preparing or eating the food" (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 127). Memes in this subcategory represent an atmosphere of political climax, forcing users to give in to political ideals. Images create a close relationship between users and observers, as if they were all engaged in the internal musings of a reluctant voter on having to support a "yellow" candidate.

The Ideal Hero Who Comes From Above and Makes us Fall in Love With Him

It is common for candidates to frame an election as a climactic moment to position themselves as the hero coming to save the day. Alexander (2010) explains that during elections, "a cultural framework is always constructed that declares unprecedented dangers and opportunities, domestic and international troubles that threaten to derail the nation's triumphant mythical history" (p. 17). This allows politicians to present themselves as what Klapp (1948) calls a "delivering hero (. . .) who comes in times of need to save people in danger or distress" (p. 137).

In the analyzed narrative, the threat of a resurgence of *Pinochetismo* has reached its peak, and, as the literature on heroic tales suggests, the moment calls for a savior. Goethals and Allison (2012) argue that the chosen one cannot be just anyone, but rather someone who has demonstrated competence and moral judgment in previous dramatic situations. Heroes, they observe, are socially constructed, and their personal traits are less important than the role they are called upon to play. In these critical moments, the community expects heroes to display a "nobility of purpose" or commitment to moral principles, as well as an exceptional level of competence demonstrated through "bold exploits" (Goethals & Allison, 2012, p. 187). If the representation of the *Pinochetista* threat was conceptual, in this case, it is narrative. Following Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), the 55 memes in this subcategory show an actor who performs actions on the way to a goal (p. 46). The actor is Gabriel Boric; he is the hero who rushes in to save the day, and his actions are a demonstration of his good judgment and nobility of purpose, especially at climactic moments.

Figure 4. Narrates the story of a hero appearing at the right time with the right message (I. Videla, personal communication, December 30, 2021).

The meme in Figure 4 tells the story of a group of friends who were having a good time until they ran out of beer. The meme reads:

> Just as we began to lose hope, someone knocked on the door. We opened it, and there
> he was, holding a litre of *pisco*, a fizzy drink, and ice. He smashed the ice on the floor with
> presidential force and served the drinks up fairly, guaranteeing our rights. That man was
> Gabriel Boric. (I. Videla, personal communication, December 30, 2021)

The picture of Boric holding a beer is real and is used to tell the absurd story of a man who arrived at just the right time to do the right thing in a competent and principled way—two elements that make a hero.

Figure 5. The idealized hero candidate comes from above while the supporters are placed below (A. Venegas, personal communication, December 26, 2021).
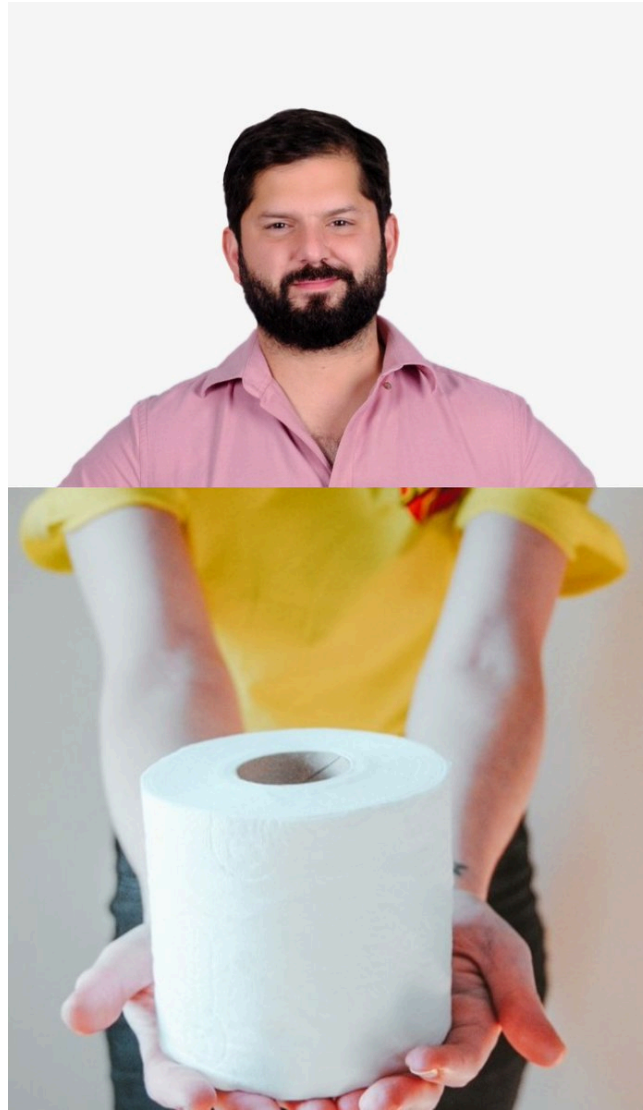
Figure 6. The candidate comes from above to solve absurdly earthly problems (G. Esteffan, personal communication, December 26, 2021).

Memes in Figures 5 and 6 feature a compositional element not found in the other subcategories. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) note that some images organize their elements along a vertical axis, where the top represents idealization and the bottom signifies earthly and concrete. These illustrations show Boric in the ideal realm—above—while those who support him are depicted below, dealing with real-world problems that require timely and competent action, such as arriving with toilet paper. This interaction between ideational (heroic story) and compositional (idealization) modes is evident in these images.

Figure 7. Scientists discover the perfect son-in-law, suggesting a close relationship with the viewer (Contreras, 2021).

Figure 8. The candidate fused with the singer Chayanne. The composition demands romantic engagement from the viewer (J. Bermúdez, personal communication, January 5, 2022).

Figures 7 and 8 highlight the third meta-function of this subcategory. The narrative of a hero coming down from the ideal realm to save a pressing situation on Earth is reinforced by an interactional meta-function that turns Boric into an object of romantic interest for the viewer. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) observe that images can position the observer through visual acts with performative potential similar to speech acts. One type of image is a "demand," where the producer requests that the viewer engage in some imaginary relation with the subject, often signified by facial expressions (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 118).

This demand function is also present in the beer meme (Figure 4), but in Figures 7 and 8, the intention to form a romantic relationship with the candidate is more evident, reflecting the theme of falling in love that is prevalent in this subcategory. One meme presents Boric as the ideal son-in-law—handsome, helpful, and respectful—while another merges his face with that of Chayanne, a romantic Puerto Rican singer. The interactional meta-function, therefore, demands romantic affection for this ideal hero who arrives to resolve pressing issues.

The Support of Heroes of the Past

Given the intrinsic threat posed by Kast's victory in the first round, a hero descends to save the situation with actions demonstrating nobility and competence, making everyone fall in love with him. The hero narrative typically includes a character chosen to provide assistance, advice, and wisdom from previous experiences (Goethals & Allison, 2012, p. 197). In literature, they act as mentors or sidekicks but eventually leave the hero to their own devices. Seventy-two memes show two sets of actors supporting Boric to ensure his victory over Kast: One group consists of musicians or sports celebrities, mainly men, known for their own bold exploits, whereas the other includes older female center-left politicians with considerable experience.

Figure 9. The old heroes of the golden football generation come to support Boric (Muñoz, 2021).

One group of former heroes supporting Boric includes prominent sports or popular culture celebrities. Figure 9 features members of the "Golden Generation" of Chilean football—Claudio Bravo, Gary Medel, Alexis Sánchez, and Arturo Vidal—leaders of the team that won *Copa América* in 2015 and

2016. Their presence suggests the support of old heroes who triumphed in Chilean sports' critical moments. This image is edited to include Boric's portrait on each jersey, although none of these players explicitly supported or opposed him. The actor Pedro Pascal was the only celebrity in this subcategory who publicly supported Boric.

Figure 10. Former political leader Michelle Bachelet, motherly protecting Gabriel Boric (C. Lagos, personal communication, December 26, 2021).

Another line of support comes from former political heroes. Figure 10 depicts former Chilean President Michelle Bachelet "protecting her son," Gabriel Boric (C. Lagos, personal communication, December 26, 2021). The caption, written in a stereotypical accent associated with poor or less-educated women, emphasizes maternal protection. Bachelet's face appears in several memes as a senior politician offering her experience and wisdom, often combined with fictional characters symbolizing competence, such as Miranda Priestly and Goku. This is also true of other female leaders from the *Concertación*, the coalition that overthrew Pinochet's dictatorship in 1988, like Yasna Provoste or Carmen Frei.

The ideational meta-function of representing support from past heroes interacts with what Kress and Van Leeuwen call the "frame" of an image's internal elements. The frame can be explicit, grouping elements as a single unit, or implicit, suggested by color or position. If different elements appear in the same frame, they are somehow connected. When Boric is featured with singers or athletes, he is framed as one of them—competent, young, attractive, or romantic. Conversely, when older political leaders appear, Boric is out of the frame or in a different section of the image, only framed with young politicians like himself.

Figure 11. Boric framed together with pop singers (C. Salas, personal communication, December 23, 2021).
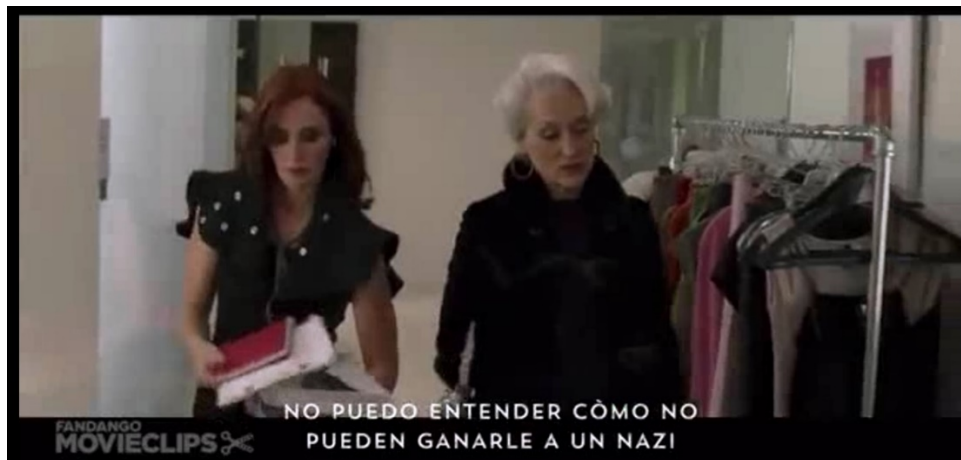

Figure 12. Boric outside the frame of experienced politicians (D. Toro, personal communication, January 4, 2022).

Figures 11 and 12 emphasize this framing difference: Boric is closely connected with celebrity supporters in one case and distanced from political heroes in another. Figure 12, for example, shows that Bachelet merged with Miranda Priestly from *The Devil Wears Prada* (Frankel, 2006). This video, altered only by changing subtitles to Spanish, humorously suggests that Bachelet arrives at Boric's office to restore order

to a poorly managed campaign. Such imagery implies a different frame for Boric and his young political partners compared with experienced political heroes.

The relationship between the observer and producer in the memes included in this category is mostly defined by a frontal angle, with elements organized along the x- or y-axis, rather than an oblique angle. The frontal angle suggests involvement in what is being viewed, whereas the oblique angle indicates detachment (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 136). An oblique angle positions the viewer outside of what is happening in an image, the authors say, while a frontal angle suggests a sense of participation alongside those portrayed. Images allow for a gradation of this sense of involvement, ranging from an oblique angle signifying "theirness" to a frontal angle suggesting "ourness" (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 140).

Figure 13. Boric with the South Korean pop band Shinee in an oblique line, suggesting some degree of detachment (The Clinic, 2021).

Figure 14. Boric with the Jedis at a frontal angle to create a sense of involvement (Na Cabro, 2021).

Figure 13 shows Boric with the members of South Korean pop band Shinee arranged in a slightly oblique line, whereas Figure 14 depicts Boric in a frontal angle with Jedis from *Star Wars: Episode VI—Return of the Jedi* (Marquand, 2004) arranged along the x-axis. Only two of the 55 images in this subcategory use an oblique line (Figure 13), while nearly all the memes create a sense of involvement or ourness (Figure 14), as if the observer is invited to join this world of celebrities, experienced left-wing politicians, and the heroic candidate receiving support from all sides.

The Weakest of the Weak Support Boric

A fourth element in the representation function, present in 43 memes, is identification with the weaknesses and personal struggles of the chosen one. Boric entered the second round at a disadvantage, as his rival had won the first round and right-wing candidates had received 53% of the vote, while all left-wing candidates combined had only 47%. This made Boric the underdog facing the challenge of countering the rise of *Pinochetismo* on his own. "Identification with the struggle" is a typical feature of heroic narratives, where the protagonist endures great pain and hardship and a unique "weakness or Achilles heel that renders them vulnerable" (Goethals & Allison, 2012, p. 210). This identification helps the audience relate to overcoming obstacles and achieving heroic status. By leveraging the humorous potential of memes, users created absurd groups that identified with Boric's struggles and suffering.

Figure 15. Color blindness is not a weakness but a reason to support Boric (I. Paredes, personal communication, December 26, 2021).

In his campaign videos, Boric is shown climbing a tree in his hometown of Punta Arenas, a symbol of his childhood hiding place. This green tree became a campaign symbol and an avatar on supporters' social media profiles. Figure 15 features a red tree with the caption "The color blind for Boric" (I. Paredes, personal communication, December 26, 2021), humorously suggesting that color blindness is a reason to support him.

Figure 16. Tame Cheems Doge braves to show the right course of action (I. Paredes, personal communication, December 26, 2021).

This meme references Swole Doge/Cheems Doge, with Swole Doge representing strength and Cheems Doge symbolizing weakness. Figure 16 reads "I vote Boric without an(m)xiety," including Cheems Doge's misspelling (m as n) to emphasize weakness (I. Paredes, personal communication, December 26, 2021). The image suggests that those perceived as weak identify with Boric as a candidate. As previously mentioned, the actors in an image that provides a narrative representation of the world are distinguished by "vectors" (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 59), unlike conceptual representations where symbols signify their presence alone. The "vector" in this category is the logo "Boric Presidente" or "X Boric Presidente," showing the course of action taken by the depicted actors.

About the ideational meta-function, this category portrays absurd groups identifying with the weakest candidate in the race for the second round. This meta-function is integrated with the textual one, where the composition prioritizes the groups over other elements, including the candidate. The sign chosen highlights the weaknesses or suffering of these groups, such as the misspelling of doctors, dyslexics, or frustrations with premature ejaculation. The composition underscores the weakness, and the interaction fosters a close or intimate relationship similar to the dramatic moment category, where close framing suggests that what is represented is within reach or that suffering can be experienced firsthand.

Discussion: Hagiographic Memes and Collective Self-Trolling

Throughout the analyzed material, there is an idealization of the candidate as a savior in a situation that users portray as extremely threatening: the rise of *Pinochetismo*. This idealization in itself is not necessarily problematic, as it can be seen as a step in the broader process of establishing legitimate

charismatic authority (Weber, 1968, p. 46). This process involves followers' "perceptions and behavior" (Theobald, 1980, p. 84) recognizing the leader as possessing a certain "specialness" (Camic, 1980, p. 9). The humorous potential of memes emerges when this social attribution of specialness is informed by absurdity, turning it into hagiography. This term literally means "writing about saints" and "refers to edifying compositions about the life and deeds of a holy man or woman," created to promote their veneration (Talbot, 2008, p. 862). Hagiographic tales circulated in the European Middle Ages and refer to exceptional people with an "ability to understand disciples' needs and personal lives and conduct that served as an example and inspiration for others" (Rapp, 2020, p. 124).

As previously mentioned, the literature on the use of memes in political communication can be divided into two main categories. The first includes studies showing how users leverage meme language to provide new meanings to various political discourses (Collado Campos, 2020; Meso-Ayerdi et al., 2017; Mielczarek, 2018; Ross & Rivers, 2017). The second category demonstrates how this process of re-signification can foster a sense of community among those who produce and share such material (Browning, 2018; Frazer & Carlson, 2017; Gal et al., 2016; Gerbaudo, 2015; Penney, 2020). The hagiographic idealization observed relates to how the prevailing political situation in Chile was re-signified in the 2021 presidential runoff, elevating the ideal hero candidate against the looming threat of *Pinochetismo*.

The hagiographic dimension also links to the second type of studies, as these idealizing and absurd narratives about saints and martyrs helped form interpretive communities (Eisenbichler, 1996). Medieval hagiographies were more about piety than doctrine; for instance, apparently nonsensical stories like Saint George slaying a dragon were meant to foster a community of believers rather than persuade nonbelievers to convert to Christianity. These stories are characterized by "no pretense of objectivity or judiciousness: a saint is by definition always in the right, and hagiography's task is to stir up affective engagement with them" (Salih, 2006, p. 19). The shared interpretation of those tales created "textual communities" where hagiography "provided the locus of authority and the means of community formation" (Campbell, 2008, p. 122). Similarly, the literature on Internet memes in politics suggests that this sense of community may arise from co-interpreting politics rather than from top-down indoctrination (Henken, 2003).

This might explain why the analyzed material contains no arguments to debate with Kast's supporters. Instead, it reinforces a community of converts. On one hand, the ideational meta-function portrays Kast and his victory as a circumstance without any associated action vectors. The interactional meta-function fosters a close, personal, and intimate relationship between the producer and the observer, as if the memes were intended for self-reflection rather than external critique. However, some elements suggest that this devotion is not as intense as in the pious communities of the European Middle Ages. Memes depict users as defenseless victims forced to overlook their reservations about Boric as a representative of the left. He is labeled "yellow" and shown alongside celebrities but disconnected from seasoned politicians who must defend him. Supporters' reactions to Boric are mocked as youthful infatuations, highlighting his shortcomings as a leftist politician. This self-mockery in memes suggests a critical distance from supporting an unsatisfactory candidate.

Following Castells (2019), we argue that memes in politics function as a form of mass self-communication "enacted via horizontal, digital communication networks" (p. 84). This communication is "self-generated in terms of content, self-directed in emission, and self-selected in reception by many that

communicate with many" (Castells, 2019, p. 90). Building on Castells (2019), Boric's hagiographic idealization can be viewed as a form of mass self-trolling—self-generated, self-directed, and self-selected—primarily for Boric's community of followers. Viewed this way, absurdity can be highlighted as a mode of interaction where individual critical judgment about the text that brings people together is suspended in favor of the intention to form a community, initiated in this case through images in which the community engages in massive self-trolling. However, this interpretation is limited to analyzing the material and does not account for the creators' actual intentions. Techniques that reveal the actions of these user-content producers could provide further insights.

Conclusion: A Meme-Based Form of Political Analysis

Our interpretation of the analyzed material, based on existing literature, highlights the potential of memes as a space for re-signifying political situations and fostering community building. However, another aspect warrants attention as a suggestion for future research to overcome the limitations of content analysis. The observed memes reflect a sophisticated dialogue, demonstrating the users' ability to analyze the situation and the consequences of various decisions. Users seemed to perceive the risk of abstaining from voting for Boric, potentially allowing Kast to secure the majority. These memes appear targeted at undecided individuals or those skeptical of the progressive candidate, presenting both a course of action and tools to persuade and motivate them. Memes became a space where users shared this diagnosis and convinced themselves of the best course of action.

This diagnosis also prompts a critical reflection on users' political actions. Users seemed resigned to the limited possibilities provided by the second round of elections against a Pinochet supporter. In this sense, memes may reveal how creators not only analyze their real possibilities but also experience the political scenario (Ahmed, 2004). Thus, memes can be a venue where the cognitive and affective aspects of political communication converge (Barnhurst, 2011). Future research, especially ethnographic studies, is needed to explore the meaning users attach to the social practice of creating and sharing political memes.

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