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Additional Information

# **A fictional character in a real pandemic: personification of the Covid-19 virus as a parody account on Twitter.**

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The aim of this work is to understand the role of parody characters on Twitter as drivers of digital narratives connected to ongoing crises. Using a paradigmatic case study methodology, we will focus on the hugely popular Spanish parody account @Coronavid19, where the virus, presented as a fictional character, has been offering a humorous chronicle of an unprecedented social and health crisis, from the early beginning and in almost real time. This case has been chosen considering its popular impact in terms of media repercussion and growth (almost half a million followers in less than a week), but also its peculiarities as a fictional character and a privileged chronicler in the first person. Our goal is to understand how this kind of fictional parody characters are built, how narrative and character traits evolve along time, and to observe to which extent they serve as a tool to cope with hard times, fostering collective empowerment, empathy and stressing official recommendations by mocking irrational behavior. We conducted a systematic extraction of tweets during nineteen weeks (n= 954 tweets) for analysis, plus a semi-structured interview with the author behind the account. Results point to a character-driven narrative with a transformation arc in an otherwise unpredictable plot, and where: (1) the threat is made tangible and vulnerable through humanization; (2) the bleakest implications of the pandemic are side-lined in the process; (3) there lies a tension between character coherence, relevance and the authorial ethical dilemmas faced in front an unpredictable, far-reaching crisis.

Keywords: digital storytelling; twitter narratives; humor; parody accounts; fictional characters; social crisis

## **Introduction**

Parody accounts have become an important part of the Twitter ecology (Thomas, 2016), becoming as popular as controversial. Although most of these profiles are explicitly defined as parody, like Tilda Swinton (@NotTildaSwinton), Elizabeth Windsor (@Queen\_UK) (Highfield, 2015), Doña Merkel (@GobiernoAlem) or Vladimir Putin (@TheBigBossPutin), sometimes they are (mis)identified as official institutions or public figures and, occasionally, its humorous content has been shared as actual news. However, there is a huge diversity of fictional parody characters, many of them offering observational chronicles (Sadler, 2018) and in some cases with a narrative orientation. An analysis of these accounts as character-driven narratives on Twitter can contribute to a better understanding of the diversity of fictional digital narratives and parody accounts. Specifically, the case presented in this article allows us to obtain a better insight of a specific type of narrative form where plot development is linked to current events, with undetermined, outcomes and duration. This way we can obtain a more accurate insight of how character-driven narratives can be built following current events, where humor is considered as a privileged space to cope with difficult situations (Demjén, 2016; Dynel & Poppi, 2018).

## **Case overview and research questions**

In February 2020, news media were reflecting disturbing information on the spread of a new virus across the globe. Alarming news about an outbreak in Italy was a sign that the so-called Covid-19 virus would eventually arrive in

Spain. At this point it was still too soon to assess the unprecedented magnitude of the upcoming health and social crisis. In this dubious environment, a Twitter parody account monopolized attention in Spain on February 24. The user *@Coronavid19*, presented as the virus itself, appeared out of the blue, showcasing an ability to master the art of dark humor and sharp social observation, closely following news events. Through a window of opportunity, this parody account assumed the real-time development of events, connecting with thousands of Twitter users ready to laugh at a threat that was being, in retrospective, greatly underestimated (also by the author himself, according to the interview). In three days, the account already accumulated more than 450,000 followers and, one year later, close to one million.

We consider *@Coronavid19* as a paradigmatic case (Flyvbjerg & Murillo, 2005) of a character-driven narrative on Twitter. The notion of character-driven is used to highlight those narratives where characters become the basis for the creation of a set of potential stories (Mariani & Ciancia, 2019), like in videogames or interactive storytelling. Additionally, we emphasize the character-driven nature of our case as opposed to plot-driven, scripted stories, which have been the main focus of research on social media storytelling. The case is also significant due to its sustained social impact, to the point of becoming a staple of the social response to the Covid-19 crisis in Spain. -The case allows us to examine in which ways parody accounts can act as chroniclers of an ongoing crisis and to identify key factors of self-presentation, interaction and evolution as fictional characters, along a timeline marked by uncertainty.

Drawing from these general objectives, we propose the following research questions: (1) what are the implications of a fictional parody account like @Coronavirus19, which follows an ongoing crisis, as a Twitter narrative?; (2) which narrative resources are used in this kind of character-driven narrative?; (3) how the fictional character and its transformation arc are linked to key news events?; (4) how key agents in the unfolding narrative (character, author, followers) are connected over time?

### **New narratives on Twitter**

As extensively stated, narrative can be considered among the primary cognitive mechanisms available to us for making sense of the world, and a basic human strategy to cope with time, process and change, providing a sense of coherence and continuity to a series of disparate events (Mishler, 1990; Herman, 2009; Sadler, 2018). The power of narratives comes particularly from an emphasis on causality regarding explanations and implications of lived situations (Sadler, 2018).

Twitter can be seen as a database of millions of collective contributions, in what has been labelled as searchable talk, thus fostering approaches based on data analysis and visualizations (Zappavigna, 2015). However, different authors highlight the relevance of narrative approaches to Twitter. Some key qualities of Twitter narratives are the illusion of real-time (Thomas, 2014; Andersen, 2017; Sadler, 2018; Andersen & Linkis, 2019), the fragmented and distributed nature of storytelling, reflecting the narrative practices of everyday life (Thomas, 2016) and the uncertainty coming from unfolding events and user interaction (Bray, Gibbons & McHale, 2012; Thomas, 2016). Altogether, Twitter

narratives can provide a way to build the impression of collective sense-making of complex phenomena.

Sadler (2018) identifies four main features of narrative as a sense-making tool: *relationality* - potential to establish relations among contributions through timelines, mentions, hashtags, threads and external links-, *temporal and spatial specificity* - emphasis on events tied to a specific time and space-, *causal enplotment* -potential to establish chains of cause and effect- and *wholeness* -the illusion of coherence and at the same time the exclusion of events seen as superfluous to the overarching narrative-. As tweets tend to be presented in reverse chronological order, events resemble real time, matching a real-world chronology. Sadler identifies the resemblance of Twitter narratives -particularly those based on real-life events- to the notion of chronicle (Cronon, 1992), that is, chronologically ordered events with a comparatively weaker narrativity, even if their constituent elements easily connect to an overarching plot and may end up positioning themselves within a narrative whole. Other authors underline the serialized nature of Twitter narratives. For Andersen and Linkis (2019), Twitter has provided new avenues of distribution and new narrative possibilities for serial fiction, from interacting with other users to mentioning breaking events. This is what some authors call concurrent narration (Margolin, 2019) or real-time narration (Page, 2013). Andersen and Linkis exemplify the immersive quality of these stories through the case study of “@I\_Bombadil”, a first-person Twitter story created as a promotional device for a novel, allowing for the expansion of a character’s narrative arc beyond the limits of a book (Purcel, 2019). In Spain, a notable example is the serialized phenomenon of writer Manuel Bartual (@ManuelBartual), who used his Twitter

account to tell a doppelganger story as if it was actually happening (interview by Authors). A similar blend between a real person and a character was found in the anti-Trump statements by actor Chris Evans, renowned by his role as Captain America in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. These tweets resonated among many US citizens almost if they had been expressed by the quintessential American hero (Schmid, 2020).

### **Humor in troubled times**

In digital storytelling, humor can be considered as a particularly relevant mechanism of defense against adversity (Gibbs, Samermit & Karzmarket, 2018). Some authors have analyzed reactions based on humor to traumatic situations like terrorist attacks, political upheavals or stressful emotional experiences (Raymond & Gibbs, 2002; Dynel & Poppi, 2008; Fernández Poncela, 2012). Conversational humor fosters an individual and collective sense of empowerment and a context where people can create spaces for solidarity and mutual understanding (Demjén, 2016). Authors like Highfield (2016) have focused on parody accounts as relevant observers of ordinary and extraordinary events through the lenses of humor, while highlighting the tensions between character, followers and author through the 'dilemma of making fun of important conflicts' (Highfield, 2015: 2041). Parody accounts also tend to showcase remarkable popular culture skills that allow them to connect with a wide audience through intertextuality (Denisova, 2017).

Other authors have found similar ways of dealing with the Covid-19 crisis through humor and irony. In their study of the early response to the pandemic in Italy, a country geographically and culturally close to Spain, Vicari and Murru

(2020) state that “when life becomes hard, irony is a tactic of displacement that lightens bad feelings and frames them from a detached perspective” (Vicari and Murru, 2020: 2).

## **Theoretical framework**

A narrative approach to Twitter is particularly useful to analyze a specific embodiment of a Twitter narrative as a singular chronicle of a real-world event. We consider that through the engagement with a fictional parody character it is possible to make sense of a complex unfolding phenomena, like a global pandemic, in a specific setting - in this case Spain-. This can take the form of a chronicle of events through the lenses of parody but also through a sense of coherence and continuity emanating from the fictional character, taking advantage of Sadler’s key narrative features of Twitter: relationality, temporal and spatial specificity, causality and wholeness.

Through the recognition of a psychological and action unity, a fictional character can showcase a series of psychological and social features in its interactions and particular reactions to narrative events (Chatman, 1980; Seger, 1994). For our analysis, we have adapted Pérez-Rufi’s transdisciplinary approach (2016) to complex characters in fiction. Pérez-Rufi states that a complex character must go through three key changes in its process of transformation (Pérez-Rufi, 2016: 542):

- Change of traits (ways of being in the world)
- Change of attitude (ways of thinking)



- Change of behaviour (ways of doing)

This character-centered approach is an interesting starting point for our analysis, and we have re-evaluated and recontextualized it for social media fiction. This way, we can observe how character traits, attitude, role or behavior change over time. Our proposal is shown on Table 1.

**Table 1.** Factors for analysis in character-driven narratives.

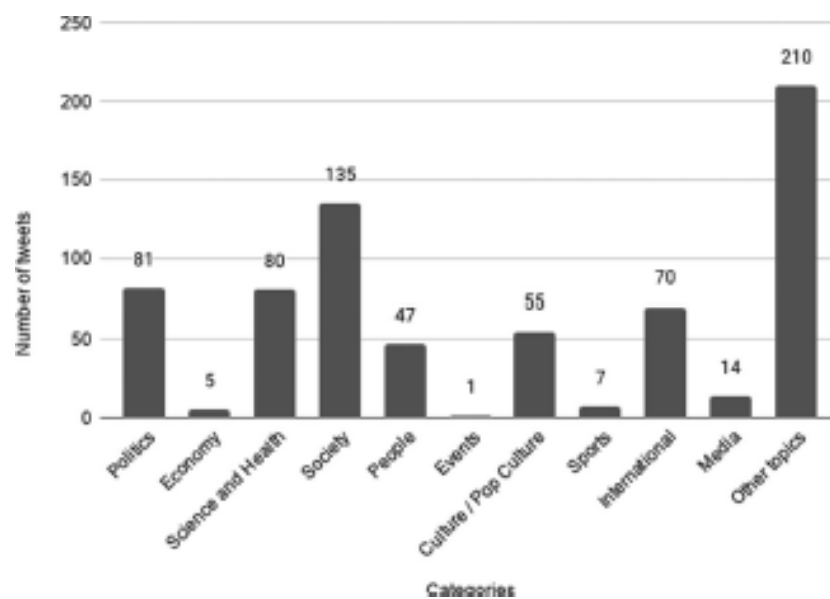
Factor	Application to case study
Verbal expression	Ways of expression, use of sarcasm, tone, connection to local popular culture or politics
Personality traits	Observed actions, reactions to events (mainly news), singularization from others, reinforcement of specific traits and self-image
External life	Relationship with other imaginary or factual characters (other parody accounts, journalists, personalities, politicians, common users..).
Goals and motivations	Goals established for actions and possible motivations – including basic impulses – of the fictional character.
Discourse elements	Use of codes (like catchphrases), memes, emojis, links or image captures.
Extra discourse elements	General expectations on fictional characters on Twitter, platform affordances, and specific expectations on the character along time.
Role	Correlation between the character and the narrative as it unfolds, based on the intentions of the author.

Note: Own elaboration, based on Pérez-Rufí (2016).

## Methodology

We carried out a day-to-day participant observation of account activity for nineteen weeks, from February to July 2020. This period covered what could be considered a narrative cycle: from the early presence of the virus in Spain to its dramatic expansion, the health measures taken to stop the pandemic, lockdown, the likely demise of the virus and, finally, its first signs of resurgence. We conducted recurrent tweet extractions using the R Studio tool in two rounds: the first round (8 weeks, n=705) allowed us to observe the connection between posts and current events and news, leading to a taxonomy proposal (see Chart 1); in the second round (nineteen weeks, n=954), we focused on observed

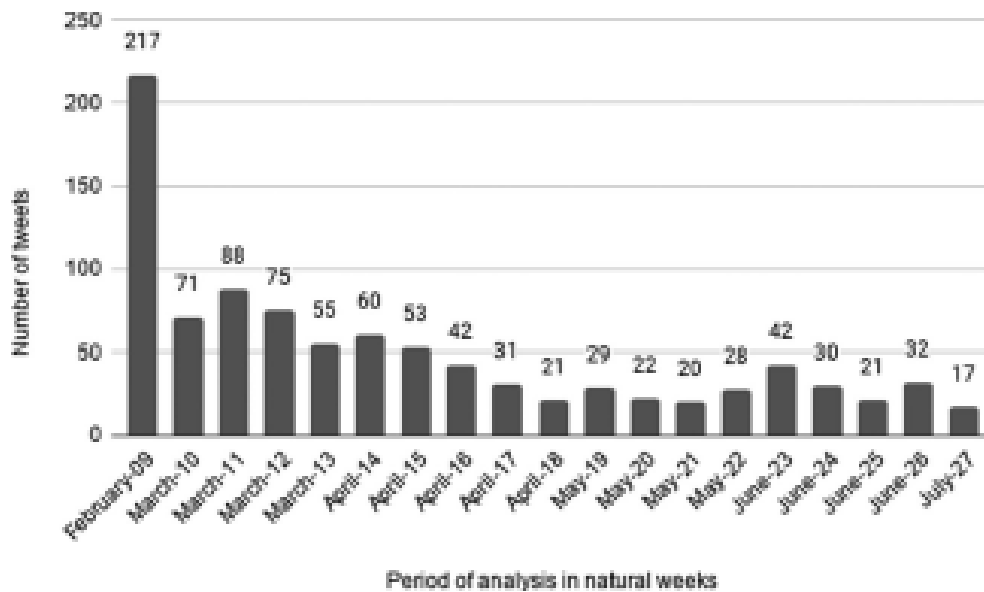
character traits and expression, playful and non-playful reactions by followers (that is, addressed either to the character as part of the narrative or to the author, outside the narrative framework), key mentions and the overall unfolding of the narrative. Further additional extractions from frequently mentioned users were done at specific moments. At three points in time, that is, March, May and July 2020, we undertook a retrospective analysis to check possible narrative turning points and to better get an impression of wholeness. Finally, we carried out an in-depth analysis of different narratives strategies, relation to key news events (including those overlooked by the character), recurring topics and significant interactions with other users, be it individuals, other fictional characters or institutions.



As we see in Chart 1, about a third of the posts are not openly related to current affairs (*Other topics*, which can be seen as a more timeless kind of humorous content), while the rest of popular typologies are related to everyday social behavior (*Society*, almost a 20% of the total), national politics or political

leaders (*Politics*, 11,5%), news on health, scientific knowledge or research (*Science and Health*, 11,35%), content echoing news from other countries (*International*, 10%); Spanish popular culture (*Culture/ Pop culture*, 7.8%) and celebrities (*People*, 6.6%). As we will see in the analysis, these categories are essential elements in the shaping of this character-based narrative.

Additionally, we did a semi-structured interview with the user behind the account in April 2020, respecting anonymity and conducting it in two rounds. The interview was considered essential to obtain the necessary insight from the authorial perspective. It also holds a special value as the author -presented as a male- rarely accepts interviews and made an exception in our case due to its research purposes. Eighteen questions were passed, revolving around four key questions: authorial profile (six questions), account management (four), narrative style and twists (four) and interaction with other accounts (four). The period of analysis began with the earlier manifestations of the character (late February) and ended with its unexpected comeback (early July), which allowed us to include key narrative twists and significant expressions of character features, tracing a character arc. The unexpected 'comeback' twist altered the prospects of a narrative conclusion in the form of the demise of the character, expanding our initially planned timeline. Chart 2 shows the activity of the parody account in the total number of tweets per week identified by common week numbering and month.



As it can be observed, after a very strong -and anomalous- set of posts during the first week, average tweets per week peaked during week 11 (mid-March) to slowly descend, reaching less than 50 a week by mid-April, and minimum figures in May, until a relative surge in late May and June. Of course, these figures depend on a variety of factors attributable not only to the character, but also to the author (e.g. publishing fatigue, according to the interview), but it is nevertheless relevant as published tweets are the main component of the narrative, and it can help to map certain narrative twists.

We also discussed key events along the studied timeline, connecting them to the taxonomy, and created a secondary database to compare narrative twists with significant news events. These events define in the unfolding overall narrative, thus influencing plot turning points and character transformation. Furthermore, it also helps to identify the kind of key events that are downplayed.

## Analysis

In this section, we will analyze this character-driven narrative through main character traits and the narrative arc observed along the timeline, using the key factors depicted in Table 1 and comparing the results to news events. We have identified a series of narrative phases that we have conventionally -and playfully- labelled as 'Chapters'. Analysis has also been complemented by the interview. It is important to note that Chapters do not have an exact beginning nor end: they correspond to observable gradual shifts in the ways of reacting to chains of events.

### ***Chapter 1. The nasty new kid in town (February, week 9)***

As seen on Chart 2, the first week of activity of @Coronavirus19 is singular, accounting for almost 23% of tweets published in the analyzed period. Beyond the number of tweets, the first week is of particular importance as it establishes the main features of the character and hints at future evolution.

Early tweets are characterized by daring and aggressive statements, stepping into dark humor. @Coronavirus19 presents itself in a direct, aggressive and even offensive way: it is a tough character, the new nasty kid in town, more powerful than known viruses, extremely self-confident and with clear goals: to spread globally as much as possible and exhibiting a motivation to infect and to kill. For instance, he uses sarcasm regarding the first chain of cancellations due to prevention, like the Mobile World Congress (prompting it to say 'I cancel events on request'), the foreseeable cancellation of upcoming popular Spanish festivities (like Easter festivities) or global events (like the Olympic Games).

At this early stage, the character shows individuality, exhibiting 'human traits' and desires ('We all like to travel', 'I'm going to take a nap, take this chance to do some errands'), introducing political comments (which is common to other parody accounts), mentions to infecting hosts of controversial TV shows or identifying itself as a celebrity. This kind of self-directed humor encourages users to take matters less seriously, promotes group solidarity, identification and makes the character seem more human (Becker and Haller, 2014). This humanization process is also emphasized by the idea of spreading by travelling (use of public transport like planes or trains, or jokes about the popular Erasmus trips), using local languages and idioms to mark the arrival to a region or using local cultural references. This way, the author is shaping a personality that could make sense indistinctly as a mischievous and cheeky acquaintance or an upfront menace. This helps to build a sense of empathy with readers ('We have to stand together', 'Even I am tired'). Empathy is an essential narrative mechanism (Caracciolo, 2014), but, in parody accounts, it is more common to keep a distance from events and from readers. On the contrary, @Coronavirus19 plays with both distancing and proximity. This can be observed in the ways of interaction, like addressing directly to its imagined or actual audience ('Don't cry for me Argentina' or the daily ritual greeting message to its followers), or self-describing as a blue-collar worker ('What I find more difficult to cope with infecting is having to wake up so early').

Humanization and empathy contrast to other expressions, that remind us that it is a lurking menace. For instance, the virus confronts users by asking whether they are experiencing shivering or fever. It also plays with its nature: as a virus, it lives inside other people ('I'm live-tweeting from your airway'), a

perspective also used to satirical effect by being inside controversial political figures.

At this point, users engage in playful communication with the virus with unwelcoming humorous replies. The character interacts quite a lot with its followers, but that would subsequently change. It tends to react aggressively, threatening to infect them using harsh language, always in character and keeping any insult in a playful context. The character addresses users directly in its communications and it is at this early stage when dark humor quotes are more frequent ('Come you all to me, dying together is a lot of fun', 'Have you thought of an epitaph', 'I've come here to kill, not to debate!'). Soon the character warns users that it is extremely busy ('I can't answer to you all, I'm infecting') and eventually will interact much less, and only with specific users.

Discourse elements that will continue to be present along the whole narrative are mainly mentions, attachments of news headlines and, occasionally, emojis. Hashtags, extensively used in pre-scripted Twitter narratives to organize context (Andersen & Linkis, 2019), are avoided. As stated in the interview, the author shows no interest in using such classification resources. And regarding extra discourse elements, we must consider how the character uses Twitter affordances to its advantage, particularly character limitation: most of @Coronavirus19 tweets are less than 70 words long and are mostly one-liners or two closely related short sentences. This contributes to humor while differentiating from other Twitter storytelling styles that use up all length available (Thomas, 2016; Andersen, 2017).

In just a few days, the mentions became more selective. An example is the quarrel with @gripecomun, another parody account embodying the common

flu, who tweeted for the first time on February 26, and gained more than 100K followers following a similar strategy. This apparent dialectical confrontation between fictional antagonists, in fact, an improvised playful interaction between two completely unrelated accounts (according to the interview). It is interesting to note that other much smaller (in terms of followers) parody accounts embodying serious illnesses (Spanish Flu, Bubonic Pest, Yellow Fever) or even medications (Coronavirus vaccine, Dalsy) were already busily replying to @Coronavid19 posts. This can be considered as opportunistic, but nevertheless opens the scope of the narrative. In a complementary analysis, we observed that most of them had been created just a few days after the successful appearance of @Coronavid19 and they immediately tried to engage in conversation. But this strategy, that could have fostered the introduction of new characters and subplots, had little success. No other account (of a total of 155 identified) reached a similar impact, and they got very few interactions from @Coronavid19. Most 'copycat' accounts went on hiatus after just a few months, like @LaPeste\_Oficial (last tweet in March 2020), @Polio\_la (last tweet in April 2020), @FiebreAfricana (last tweet in May 2020); some were deleted (@BacteriaColera or @denguevirus) and those still active are comparatively irrelevant in terms of following (@herpes\_oficial, with just 1,2K followers or @VirusH5N12, with 1,7K).

Instead, @Coronavid19 kept on interacting with established Spanish parody accounts like @magnateUSA (Donald Trump parody, 90K followers), @norcoreano (Kim Jong-Un parody, 1M followers) or @Diostuitero (God parody, 500K followers). As stated in the interview, the author wanted, at this



point, to be seen as connected with popular parody accounts and local celebrities for self-promotion purposes.

Beyond self-presentation and interaction, the character also reacts to external statements referred to the virus spread and welcoming -of course ironically- weird advices and erratic behavior like compulsive acquisition of toilet paper ('With all these fucking advices I will have all you killed in less than a month', 'Well, in the end it will be true that human stupidity spreads faster than me' or 'Merit is not only mine, I couldn't spread without you'). On the contrary, the character will undervalue official statements but using much less harsh words ('Pay attention to me' is a candid response to claims of the official Health Ministry account to keep updated through official means).

The character also shows explicit political leanings, mocking controversial commentarists and politicians, mostly affiliated to the right. This sparked some heated non-playful reactions from followers, addressed either against the character, the author or against other users. In fact, every political tweet will eventually spring non-playful criticism from different sides of the political spectrum, but particularly from the right. Even if expressed in different ways, negative reactions suggest that these posts go against character: it should avoid political comment and focus on 'just joking and having a good time' (taken from a reaction to a post from February 28).

In terms of role, in this first chapter, a less humorous post points to the first ethical issues faced by the author once the crisis is revealed to be much more serious than expected (confirmed by the interview). Thus, on the 29th, it declares: 'The WHO seems to be overreacting even to me', when the World

Health Organization rose to 'very high' the level of perceived menace to the World.

## ***Chapter 2. The naughty star. (February week 9 - March week 10)***

Our second chapter shows a more self-conscious character, less harsh and enjoying its unexpected and quickly-found success (evidenced in followers, retweets and also media mentions and anonymized interviews on radio and television). We consider that, at this stage, motivations and goals evolve. The character shows less motivation to cause direct harm: its impulse seems to be to spread, and the goal, to be a global celebrity. The virus becomes a rising star that wants to be feared but also loved.

An important recurrent trope is its daily 'GOOD MORNING!' message, which emphasizes a sense of empowerment and fate. The character uses more and more societal, cultural and, also, political references, letting the author show a critical position close to the Spanish political left ('What I would stand for is for finding a vaccine against sexism'). As previously mentioned, this is met with non-playful criticism from users mostly aligned with the political right, pointing to an account supposed to 'be' about having some laughs; instead it is accused of having turned into just another 'progressive account'. These reactions fostered off-topic, non-playful arguments reflecting the polarizing political climate in Spain. These confrontational attitudes became more evident after the increase of sarcastic explicit comments on right-wing politicians.

Self-promotion, understood as positive self-references on perception of success, is a common trait of parody accounts. In the case of @CoronaVid19,

self-promotion is used mainly in three ways: to highlight its growing audience (connected to the spread narrative), to publicize its activity on Instagram, where it mostly replicates Twitter content for a younger audience and, finally, to showcase mainstream media impact

### ***Chapter 3: The fight back (March weeks 11-12)***

In this chapter we will find, for the first time, some complaints as a reaction to measures of social distancing. Furthermore, different posts will hint at the character's vulnerability. Thus, new government prevention measures like the declaration of the State of Alarm in Spain will prompt reactions like 'This goes totally against my social integration. I will sue', 'This goes against my freedom of infection' or 'Is there really nothing else you could be doing?'.

The character keeps on doing political and social comment, acting as a sort of privileged observer, marking distinctions between what is good for the citizens and what is good for the virus ('Who's showing that you need a good public health system?'). But there are more and more entries that suggest the arrival of a new phase in which the virus is being effectively counteracted, putting its impunity to an end ('I have reduced my strain's infection commission'). This turn of events makes the character express feelings of being 'chased' and 'not feeling well'.

There are no further mentions of killing or infecting, not even of spreading, at least in Spain. The character seems to have achieved its initial goal, with the notion of spreading turned as a synonym of becoming famous. Having achieved a status as a celebrity, its renewed goal seems to be a

relevant presence among us. There are hints to emotional attachment ('I miss you', 'I feel emotionally distressed. You are not moving from home!') and vulnerability and eventually death ('If this confinement goes much longer, I will die', in which 'die' could refer to literal extinction or extreme boredom as having nothing to do). It even suggests for the first time that he could disappear soon ('I might be given Holidays in June'), following some news pointing to the virus dying under high temperatures.

The character also tries, in different ways, to be seen in a more favourable light. Thus, some posts show actual positive side effects of the crisis, like having less pollution, less traffic jams, less accidents, less interaction with strangers, more family time or less massive tourism. More and more frequently, @Coronavid19 shares news that may be good for us, but not for it, using irony again to reinforce valuable information for readers. This kinder self-presentation prompts affective replies from users (*'You know that deep inside, we love you even if you behave like a badass'*).

#### ***Chapter 4: We can win! (March week 13- April week 17)***

By the end of March, the character is showing signs of being tired ('I need holidays'), frustrated ('I've never been so bored in my life') and even worried. For the first time, it talks about the possibility of going on a strike in Spain if people keep staying at home, because according to its 'self-employment records', it earns 'less and less every day'. The shadow of a redundancy plan looms over its 'head' (and that of its strains), in one of the few references to economic consequences of the crisis. The now self-presented 'multinational

manager' uses a discursive resource to mock formal statements, like 'This week it has been reported a decrease of contagions. I want to send my strains a message of calm'. These are different examples of empathy and humanization, which mark an enormous difference from the badass of Chapter 1 and the celebrity of Chapter 2.

A second extension of the State of Alarm at the beginning of April causes more and more hints at vulnerability ('This is killing me'). A further extension even causes feelings of anxiety ('Two more weeks! I swear I will end up having a nervous breakdown'). As in the previous chapter, the character expresses its motivation of being 'with you all', and feels sad of not being able to (reinforcing the fact that users are behaving correctly by following security measures). Chapter 4 shows a character getting closer to despair, acknowledging that its current goals might not be achieved due to the strict lockdown.

Other things haven't changed, or have just evolved from previous chapters. Political jokes still abound, enraging users aligned with the Spanish right-wing and Catalan pro-independence followers. User reactions range from the playful ('When you enter my body I will settle accounts with you') and non-playful expressions of offense, for example accusing the author of being pro-Spain or leftist, threatening to stop following the character, declaring it not being funny anymore, or 'blocking' it as an expression of disdain. More and more frequently, accusations quickly shift from being addressed to the character to prompt confrontation among users in a typically Twitter fashion. The character never engages in such discussions.

Some other noteworthy mentions at this point are some replies by users that have suffered the disease but are still willing to laugh about it ('You have

had my father very ill, but, seriously, I have never seen an account so bold. I hate you very much, but I can't stop giving like to your tweets'), which is consistent with other studies on humor and illness (Demjén, 2016).

### ***Chapter 5: The light at the end of the tunnel (April week 17- May week 22)***

The character shows discouragement, as things are clearly going against its plans. Furthermore, this chapter is coincident in time with the first stages of the de-confinement, and the light at the end of the tunnel towards the so-called 'new normality'. At this stage, the author is leading the character to face a foreseeable defeat, and many interventions express sadness ('Infecting the 1,5%, you lose your will to live', a reaction to the decrease of infection rate).

Prospects about the end of the crisis are reflected on posts showing impermanence and weakness, as well as losing agency: the 'multinational manager' now is presenting himself as an employee, even being challenged by its strains ('By the end of June my contract comes to an end and they don't want my contract renewed', 'This year I won't have my bonus' or 'My strains have formed a union'). This blue mood is reflected also in its daily morning greeting messages. Once used to boast superiority, now they exhibit dejection ('Good morning! Now compulsory face masks. What else?'). Even if the character hasn't lost its edge completely ('You don't dare to say that to me in my face!', an enraged answer to an infectologist claiming the Coronavirus is on its latest stages and that it will soon be marginal), there are more expressions of melancholy, longing for good times past ('What are you going to talk about if I die?').

## ***Chapter 6: Is this the end? (June week 23 - 24)***

Continuing where Chapter 5 left off, the character appears to be saying its goodbyes and, sensing its demise near, expresses satisfaction of having achieved its goals ('The experience? Very satisfactory, I've met a lot of people'). The character also appropriates some iconic elements of the psychological fight against the virus, like the Spanish song *Resistiré* ('I will resist'), to 'get myself in higher spirits' and shows its aspiration to receive some sort of recognition, following the official honors granted to the public health collective in Spain ('I deserve the prize for International cooperation').

We are, however, on the verge of a turn of events: soon afterwards, the character states that it is 'seeing the light at the end of the tunnel' thanks to crowd street drinking, which in fact would become a major problem for authorities in the weeks to come, or crowded beaches ('thanks for the hospitality').

By mid-June, we find a paradox which reflects the uncertainties of the situation: tweets expressing sadness are present ('What a losing streak. I will end up joining Tinder') but there are more and more uplifting ones, which remit to previous chapters (for instance the return of the ritual 'thanks to whom...' messages, or 'I might retake some subject in September'), hinting at the possibility that not everything is lost.

## ***Chapter 7: Virus reborn (June week 25 - July week 27)***

Chapter 7 starts with an important statement made on June 16th: 'I've been born again', after news of a new outbreak in China. Suddenly the narrative embraces the last-minute resurgence trope. As shown on Chart 2, June marks a slight increase in the number of Tweets and the character seems energized and in a better mood. It is back to business, mentioning news on a possible new wave of contagion in China, its homeland, while it keeps on mocking anti-vaccines and negationists. These tweets are juxtaposed, like in the previous chapter, with others pointing to an eventful fate related to upcoming vaccines ('First lab to produce a vaccine massively should pay for my burial').

The most important expression that characterizes this chapter is the resource to a 'second coming' narrative, likening it to film sequels, television or music (the 'second season in South Korea' or 'Beginning the 2nd album tour in small theatres and auditoriums' with the help of some negationist artists as guests).

In some ways, Chapter 7 shares some tropes with Chapter 3, but with more explicit expressions pointing to its eventual defeat, only happening later than expected, and seen as a dignified last bow. It complains about the effectiveness of the public health system and observes in awe the advances towards a vaccine.

### **Discussion and concluding remarks**

We have identified different bounded, narrative units that, put together, offer a coherent interpretative wholeness (Sadler, 2018). These stages or Chapters, as we have called them, define a serialized, open, evolving character-driven



narrative. In this sense, adapting the character-centered narrative approach by Perez-Rufi (2016), outlined in Table 1, has proven fruitful. The previous section has showcased many explicit examples of verbal expressions and personality traits. Other notions like 'external life' have allowed us to observe the expression of traits like individualization, self-perception and self-presentation: as a celebrity, as an influencer, as a manager, as a team leader, as a worker on the verge of being made redundant or as a performer... Interactions have shifted from common users to well-known personalities (journalists, TV hosts, artists) and other relevant parody accounts, thus strengthening social capital. As a singular personality trait, the character often expresses itself reacting to news as being directly alluded to by them, or using extensive common knowledge and popular culture as a source of humor. On the other hand, we have observed that extra-discourse elements -mostly linked to platform affordances-, have proved to be mainly stable over time and built around one-liners (due to Twitter's character limitations), memes, image captures of news, and to a lesser extent, mentions and rarely emojis.

The notion of 'role' has become key to identify different tensions appearing in the narrative over time: first, tensions between the need for character coherence -manifested through verbal expressions and behavior- and the need to adapt to a changing situation to keep followers engaged; second, tensions coming from the author's side, keeping a balance between staying in character and coping, as a citizen, with the same serious and unpredictable situation as everyone. According to the interview, many decisions in this character-based narrative are made from the privileged position of being

in the spotlight to state his individual political and social views. But also taking over an ethical position by backing official protection measures. Had these choices been different, many elements of the narrative might still be the same, yet they help shape the unique personality traits of the character. Parody offers a kind of critical interpretation, which makes it suitable for social and political activation (Becker, 2014). Therefore, parody accounts are not 'just for laughs and having a good time', they also have a goal and an ideology. They might tend to be anonymous, but they are not authorless. Of course, some essential authorial decisions are driven by the need to keep the account relevant in the long run. In this case, downplaying dark humor and avoiding mentions to the bleakest consequences of the crisis are aimed at making the fictional character more likeable, close and complex. This is what we have identified as a process of humanization of a non-human character, expressed specially through self-reference (Becker and Haller, 2014).

As for the notions of 'goals and motivations' of the characters, they have evolved due to the aforementioned-tensions, sometimes in subtle ways. The character arrived with the goal of spreading globally, associated with the motivational impulses of ruling the world, infecting and killing. This was quickly replaced by self-references to fame and becoming a privileged everyday presence, driven by the need to be close to us and even to receive acknowledgement and affection. Later, goals and motivations evolved towards staying with us, then survival, and finally regaining strength to stay with us a little longer than expected, in a dignified final bow and as a better way to get closure while hinting at its possible return.

After reviewing the literature on parody accounts and coming from our own observation of other pandemic-related Twitter parody characters, we consider that @Coronavirus19 shares some common features with other parody accounts, like impersonation, a touch of surrealist humor, use of local idioms and popular culture references, social comment, political leanings, sarcasm, self-promotion and connection to current events. But at the same time there are some noticeable differences. First, the character is not a distanced observer. It is the core character of a global-scale narrative, so, in some ways, it acts as a first-hand, sense-making chronicler of a puzzling situation. Second, it does not impersonate a human character: it makes an invisible, non-human menace, tangible, and therefore it opens a way for users to collectively channel fear, apprehension, uncertainty or bewilderment through humor. We consider that this sort of collective catharsis, fostered through the emphasis on the social everyday and popular culture helps to overcome the dilemma of making fun of serious issues stated by Highfield (2015). Third, this character changes over time. Being an openly fictional character gives more creative space for character evolution: thus, many posts from later chapters convey hope and the need of adopting protective measures, keeping the balance between story coherence and the sarcastic edge the character has become renowned for. Many followers end up rooting for the character, waiting for the next witticism at the expense of a given turn of events.

We want to emphasize the importance of focusing on 'character' instead of 'account', as this introduces relevant nuances, leading to a better understanding of parody phenomena on Twitter. At the same time, @Coronavirus19 is an exponent of a fictional character coming up from a very

real and disrupting global environment. This demands a situated analysis, considering the changing context affecting the evolution of the character, the relation with its followers and with news events. As stated by authors like Raymond & Gibbs (2002), Dynel & Poppi (2008), Fernández Poncela (2012), Demjén (2016) or Gibbs, Samermit & Karzmarket (2018), humor plays an essential part in dealing with adversity. But this case has also shown that parody characters can exert a social role through an ethical commitment towards reinforcing safety measures, dissemination of scientific facts, and encouraging citizen responsibility through irony and observational, but not too distant, social humor.

Even if it is still probably too soon to assess how humor has been used to deal with the pandemic in other countries, we have found interesting connections with the work of Vicary and Murru (2020), focused on Italy. Thus, the references to political conflicts and popular catchwords on Twitter, particularly related to right-wing positionings are staggeringly similar. However, while Vicary and Murru focus on social response, we have focused on narrative agency, channeled through a single fictional character that provides a sort of narrative unity to a messy situation.

Future research will be focused on more specific issues. First, the relationship between @Coronavirus19 and mainstream media, as the account makes extensive use of news items published in news media and television to generate more engagement. We would like to explore to which extent fictional characters can become information agents, highly engaged in news sharing and comment, as well as a way to debunk fake news. Another research already in the works is to assess what has changed one year later. Here, we want to

observe the evolution and consolidation of the character, the account, the author and a narrative is still unfolding,

Researching an ongoing phenomenon is inherently limited by the course of events and, at the time of writing, the pandemic is still far from over. Even if we hope that the global crisis that has brought to us the lives and times of @Coronavirus will be unique, this case has proved very valuable to acquire a better understanding of fictional parody accounts in social media. And how to create engagement in hard times through witty humor, but also empathy, complex character design, everyday proximity, personal ethical stance, a process of selection of events suitable for jokes and, ultimately, adapting narrative strategies to uncertainty.

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Table 1. Factors for analysis in character-driven narratives. Own elaboration, based on Pérez-Rufi (2016)

Chart 1. Categorization of posts related to current affairs and news. Source: authors.

Chart 2. Number of tweets per week during the period of analysis. Source: authors.