


# Internet Memes as Partial Stories: Identifying Political Narratives in Coronavirus Memes

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## Abstract

This article advances a narrative approach to internet memes conceptualized as partial stories that reflect, capture, and contribute to wider storylines. One key difficulty in studying memes as stories rests in the fact that narrative analysis often focuses on plot at the expense of roles and characters. Building on narrative psychology and, in particular, transactional and linguistic types of analysis, we propose a typology of character roles—Persecutor, Victim, Hero, and Fool—that is useful to uncover scenarios within memes and, thus, reveal their intrinsic narrative structure. We apply this framework to the analysis of political narratives embedded within 241 coronavirus memes systematically sampled from Reddit’s r/CoronavirusMemes between January and May 2020. Five main scenarios or storylines emerged from this analysis, the first four depicting a more or less common narrative of protest against the incompetence and/or malevolence of the political class—from Donald Trump and the Republicans in the United States to Boris Johnson and the Conservatives in the United Kingdom and, finally, to politicians in Asia such as Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un—while the fifth scenario brought to the fore social categories made salient by the pandemic and focused especially on the relation between people who respect and don’t respect measures. The psychological, social, and political implications of these scenarios in relation to the pandemic are discussed, as well as the broader consequences of studying memes as narrative structures.

## Keywords

narrative, internet memes, coronavirus, COVID-19, politics, narrative psychology, Reddit, social media

Making sense of the COVID-19 pandemic necessarily involves stories and storytelling. From how the virus came about to the challenges of homeschooling, from losing one’s job to losing a loved one, the stories we tell about life under COVID-19 are often tragic, but also full of irony and, sometimes, humor. They circulate widely, online and offline, oftentimes clashing with counter-narratives, for example, about the origins of COVID-19 (e.g., Bruns et al., 2020). As they circulate, stories change, grow, or disappear, leaving space for new narratives about the who, what, how, and why of the pandemic. These individual and collective acts of storytelling are also highly consequential, not only for one’s own mental health, but for the confidence we place (or not) in science and scientists, in the preventive measures taken, and in the institutions making these decisions. Ultimately, it is political narratives that make the difference between abiding by or challenging measures such as quarantine and social distancing (Mintrom & O’Connor, 2020).

Political narratives are embedded within official news and everyday conversations, both online and offline. Online, they

are highly salient in internet memes (Huntington, 2016; Smith, 2019). Memes about the pandemic and about the measures taken to mitigate its effects have been flourishing from the onset of COVID-19 (e.g., Zhabotynska, 2020), and, as we illustrate here, many of these memes function, either implicitly or explicitly, as a social and political critique (de Saint Laurent et al., under review). But do they themselves have a narrative structure or simply add non-narrative elements to broader stories about the virus and the political class?

It is easier to assume, for a number of reasons, that memes merely contribute to wider stories rather than consider them as “holders” of, in this case, political narratives. First of all,

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memes tend to be relatively “small” units of online content (Shifman, 2014) and are, in many ways, simpler and briefer than most narrative genres. Second, they are primarily associated with humorous or ironic takes on events or topics (Laineste & Voolaid, 2017; Shifman, 2014) rather than (re) tellings or explanations thereof; in other words, meme audiences typically need to have prior knowledge of these events or topics, derived from other narratives, in order for the meme to “work.” Third, and related to the above, memes need considerable contextual information to be properly understood. Memes are, thus, more similar to “inside jokes” that build relatively closed communities online (Literat & van den Berg, 2019), rather than traditional stories meant to invite a wide audience to participate in making sense of a shared event or concern.

In this article, we propose counterarguments to the points above and advance the notion that memes—in this empirical context, coronavirus memes—carry what we call “partial stories”: here, partial political narratives about and around the pandemic. They are “partial” in the sense that, indeed, any single internet meme requires other memes and textual material to depict a wider narrative, particularly about complex events; in this way, they also reflect the potentially fractured, multiple, and often incomplete nature of narrative itself. But they are still story-like, a fact we aim to demonstrate by using a series of narrative constructs, in particular those of character, role and scenario. By bringing together narrative psychology (Bruner, 1986; Murray, 2003) and theories of roles (coming out of transactional and linguistic analysis; Karpman, 1968; Klapp, 1962), our study advances a particular typology of characters—Victims, Persecutors, Heroes and Fools—able to capture the story kernels embedded within internet memes. This typology is used here to study political stories as they are reflected in COVID-19 memes, but it is useful to examine the partial stories “told” by memes in other contexts as well.

Our main aim in this study is to explore the political narratives embedded within coronavirus memes and, in doing so, to model an understanding of memes as narrative artifacts or “partial stories.” The article starts with an overview of narrative psychology and its relation to internet culture, then synthesizes work on coronavirus memes and the long-established connection between memes and politics. After outlining our proposed typology, research questions, and methodology, we report findings from an analysis of 241 memes systematically collected from Reddit’s r/CoronavirusMemes between January and May 2020. We end with reflections on how the narrative approach proposed here helps us understand reactions to the pandemic and, more broadly, how it can advance our understanding of internet memes as partial stories that are of interest for psychologists, media scholars, and policy-makers alike.

## Narratives, From Theory to Analysis

The fascination with narrativity is very old, going back at least to Aristotle’s *Poetics* (see Halliwell, 1998). What narratives essentially do is place a number of actions and events into a sequence (Ricoeur, 1980), creating order and meaning out of otherwise disjointed happenings. Because of their relation to meaning-making and, therefore, human culture, narratives are pervasive in our existence and have been so since times immemorial:

Narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting (think of Carpaccio’s Saint Ursula), stained-glass windows, cinema, comics, news items, conversation. Moreover, under this almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative (. . .) Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, trans-cultural: it is simply there, like life itself. (Barthes, 1993, pp. 251–252)

And, what Barthes could not have anticipated in the early 1990s, stories and narratives are ever-present in online spaces as well, where they are not limited to text-based content, but also embedded within images, both moving and still. To grasp this, though, we need to operate with a wider understanding of what narratives are, beyond “classic” cases such as myths, legends, fairytales, and novels. In fact, since the narrative turn in the humanities and social sciences, we started considering stories not only as a form of knowledge, but a way of thinking. Jerome Bruner (1986) famously proposed that we can think about the world either in a paradigmatic or narrative manner. The former is based on analyzing and classifying reality in distinct categories and is specific for mathematics and natural science. The latter is grounded in relating events to each other and making sense of them through the means of narrative, a way of thinking not only embraced by the humanities and social sciences but also emblematic of our everyday life.

Psychologists have been keen to explore this latter way of creating and organizing knowledge, and this interest led to the emergence of narrative psychology, a field of research “concerned with the structure, content, and function of the stories that we tell each other and ourselves in social interaction” (Murray, 2003, p. 95). As such, narrative psychology “accepts that we live in a storied world and that we interpret the actions of others and ourselves through the stories we exchange” (Murray, 2003). Accompanying this theoretical interest is a methodological one. Although narrative analysis is still an emerging area, there are already various established ways in which researchers work with stories. Bamberg (2012) referred in this regard to linguistic-based approaches, in which the focus becomes the lexical and syntactic configurations of the text, cognitive-based approaches that zoom in on plot organization,

and interactive-based ones that acknowledge the social and performative nature of storytelling.

From these, the focus on plot is perhaps the most common in narrative psychology, given that it provides stories structure, it connects the beginning with the end, and it weaves different episodes together into a coherent and meaningful whole (Murray, 2003, p. 98). Narrative scholars use different typologies to unpack the plot. A classic example is Labov's (1972) framework of abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, and coda or afterword; among these, the central component is the complicating action which contains the action core of the narrative. Beside this generic schema, there are other, less structured approaches to narrative analysis, for instance grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), that basically invites us to construct categories in a bottom up manner and without preexisting assumptions.

A main challenge when it comes to narrative analysis, and narrative psychology as a whole, is that it often focuses its attention on "complete" stories or stories that are meant to be formulated, transmitted, and understood as such. For example, life narratives are often examined using these approaches and there is even a specific form of interviewing—the narrative interview—that is specifically tailored to elicit stories from participants (see Jovchelovitch & Martin, 2000). The issue here is not the explicit elicitation of stories, but the implicit assumption that narrative-oriented inquiry requires specific stories elicited through specific methods (Hiles & Cermák, 2008). This leaves out many "naturally occurring" narratives found both in online and offline spaces. In particular, online, stories circulate in a variety of forms, some explicitly narrative in structure (e.g., those that have a clear plot and follow, more or less, Labov's typology) and those that are "loosely" narrative in nature. It is the latter that we are interested in here, focusing on the way in which these narratives are reflected in non-traditional narrative material like internet memes.

## **Memes, Coronavirus, and Politics**

Understood as digital units of culture that share common characteristics and spread online via imitation or transformation (Shifman, 2014), memes have become ubiquitous artifacts of contemporary digital culture. What is more, the COVID-19 pandemic has seen an increase in the creation and circulation of memes (see, e.g., Blair, 2020; Tiffany, 2020). In this particular context, marked by uncertainty and deep shifts in our social and professional routines, memes can serve as a form of coping, resistance, and connection (Outley et al., 2020), while making light of absurd situations (MacDonald, 2020).

In large part due to their ability to effectively articulate values (Shifman, 2019), memes often function as "visual political rhetoric" (Huntington, 2016) and both shape and reflect our political imagination (Glăveanu et al., 2018).

Indeed, research has shown that the attributes of successful memes include timeliness and topical relevance (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Literat & van den Berg, 2019); furthermore, intertextuality, that is, the embedded references or connections that a meme facilitates, further adds to their appeal and generative potential (Laineste & Voolaid, 2017).

With memes having become "a focal point for scholarship examining the relationship between informal popular culture-oriented discourse and the formal political sphere" (Penney, 2020, p. 794), a growing body of research has been examining the impact of memes on civic and political life. Studies have found that memes play a significant role in framing news events, as well as shaping political attitudes and behaviors (Ross & Rivers, 2017; Shifman, 2014); in doing so, memes can either challenge and/or reinforce hegemonic ideals (Vickery, 2014). Political memes are ideologically versatile and can either function as political propaganda (e.g., Makhortykh & González Aguilar, 2020; Smith, 2019), or—often in activist contexts (e.g., Fang, 2020; Moreno-Almeida, 2020; Soh, 2020)—can fulfill significant functions as anti-establishment political critique (e.g., Huntington, 2016; Makhortykh & González Aguilar, 2020). At the same time, recent research has identified insightful differences in this regard. For instance, analyzing the use of memes in political protests in Ukraine and Venezuela, Makhortykh and González Aguilar (2020) found that, in both contexts, pro-government memes facilitated propaganda and polarization through the use of simple emotional messages, whereas anti-government memes relied on more subtle messaging that functioned as both creative criticism and a coping mechanism. In some cases, memes can also facilitate communication across diverse political stances (Milner, 2013), yet recently, memes have been increasingly associated with hyper-polarization, far-right online activism, trolling, incivility, and the distribution of misinformation (Marwick & Lewis, 2017).

Although a robust body of work has examined the composition and messaging strategies that characterize memes as discursive texts (e.g., Huntington, 2016; Laineste & Voolaid, 2017; Shifman, 2014, 2019; Smith, 2019), research so far has not looked at memes as storytelling (although meme templates have been previously understood as expressive repertoires; Frazer & Carlson, 2017). Indeed, the narrative dimension of memes is a vital aspect to consider, and it becomes especially salient for memes that comment on current events. Here, looking at political memes surrounding the coronavirus crisis, we aim to uncover the "partial stories" embedded within political memes. The key conceptual and methodological challenge is how to study these political narratives, given their oftentimes fragmented and limited nature. For this purpose, we have devised a specific narrative framework that, we believe, can shed light on meme narratives within and beyond the political sphere or the context of COVID-19.

## A Narrative Framework for the Study of Memes

The main difficulty in devising a narrative framework for the study of memes is the fact that they rarely tell a story in the traditional sense, meaning that they don't convey a clear plot and, even when they do, this plot is open to multiple forms of interpretation. While something "happens" within the meme—either something that is shown, discussed, or implied—and there are various actors or characters that make these things happen (or to whom things happen), there is rarely an explicit organization of events that has a clear beginning, middle, and end. Instead, a meme often presents us with a scene or situation and we, as viewers, are left to understand what it means based on collective knowledge (Literat & van den Berg, 2019).

This is why, instead of trying to document a plot, which is the main aim of classic narrative analysis, we need to start from a more basic level: characters and the relations between them. Memes include or make reference to a variety of characters, from specific individuals and groups to social categories. What matters most from a narrative perspective is what these characters do and especially what they do in relation to each other. This is where the notion of role becomes useful as roles are intrinsically relational—characters always play a role in relation to something or someone else. For example, based on a close analysis of Russian fairytales, Propp (1968) identified almost a century ago key narrative roles such as the antagonist or aggressor, the giver, the hero and the false hero, the auxiliary, and the mandator or the one who sets the story in motion by initiating a mission or journey.

Of course, memes are a different genre and, therefore, they don't have a quest as a central axis. But they do show surprisingly specific roles that can be qualified with the help of a different framework: that of transactional analysis. Transactional analysis originated in the work of Eric Berne, a psychiatrist interested in how people interact with each other and, in particular, how specific roles we play "call" specific responses and lead to relatively stable interactional patterns or scenarios. In his well-known book, *Games People Play*, Berne (1964) discussed in the chapter on "The Alcoholic" three inter-related roles termed by him the "patsy," "the rescuer," and the "persecutor." However, it wasn't until the seminal paper by Stephen Karpman (1968), *Fairy Tales and Script Drama Analysis*, that these roles started being integrated into the "drama triangle" of Victim, Persecutor, and Rescuer. We can notice how these positions are intrinsically related to each other: there is no Persecutor without a Victim, and the other way around; at the same time, the Rescuer needs a Victim as well and, by implication, a Persecutor to rescue the Victim from. Interestingly, Karpman derived these ideas from a study of one of the most classic forms of narration—fairytales—and Berne himself was widely interested in stories and myths, and often used them

as resources to define interactional scripts (e.g., Cinderella). Coming from a psychoanalytical tradition, however, both Berne and Karpman saw the influence of roles as largely subconscious and the roles themselves as inter-changeable and, ultimately, negative or manipulative (an assumption rightfully criticized, see Le Guernic, 2004).

In our theoretical framework, we start from the basic triad of Victim—Persecutor—Hero (a renaming of the Rescuer that gives it a wider scope) and consider it to be the narrative kernel of virtually all storylines. Indeed, to have a story, one needs something to happen, and something happens when the normal flow of action and interaction is disturbed somehow; in other words, when our protagonist or central character is confronted with a persecutor, villain, or antagonist. This "drama triangle," to use Karpman's terminology, is widely found in memes (especially in political ones) where, as we shall see in detail in the findings below, there is often a disturbance or aggression that is called out, protested, or ridiculed. But there is also something else taking place in internet forms like memes and that relates to the role of the person who just does not "get it" or acts in an embarrassing manner—the Fool.

We need to look toward other studies to understand this figure. For example, relying primarily on an analysis of language and centered on American culture, Klapp (1962) identified three characteristics of social typing: praise, condemnation, and ridicule, which translate into three fundamental social types: Heroes, Villains, and Fools, respectively. Klapp argued that, more than mere characters, these types offer blueprints or models for action and thus become instruments of social control, reinforcing, and legitimizing social systems.

More recently, and of particular interest to our study, Jasper et al. (2020) built on this foundational work and—bringing in insights from rhetoric, cognitive psychology, literary theory, visual analysis, rumor theory, and performance theory—demonstrated the application of social types to political actors and contexts. Their character theory involves two key dimensions: moral quality (i.e., benevolent or malevolent) and power (i.e., strong or weak), which result in four character types: Heroes (benevolent, strong); Victims (benevolent, weak); Villains (malevolent, strong); and Minions (malevolent, weak). As Bergstrand and Jasper (2018, p. 230) note, this conceptualization represents "[p]artly an extension of narrative theory and partly a critique of narrative theory's focus on plots to the exclusion of characters" and thus "revive[s] a sociological tradition that saw basic characters as embodiments, attacks, or mockery of a society's basic values," in the vein of Klapp (1962).

From the above, and drawing particularly on Karpman (1968) and Klapp (1962), we propose an integrated framework of roles in the analysis of meme-based narratives, which centers on Victims—Persecutors—Heroes—Fools. These character roles are not seen as rigid and, indeed, the same actor can play various roles in different memes and, sometimes,

within one meme (e.g., a person can be a Persecutor but also a Fool in doing so, or a Victim but also a Persecutor of someone else). This focus on characters and roles, we argue, is particularly suitable for grasping “partial stories” and integrating them into wider narratives that become apparent when more memes, or memes and comments or other contextual data, are put together. They are also valuable for the analysis of a situation like the one created by COVID-19 where the virus itself can be seen as the ultimate Persecutor. Finally, this character-based narrative framework is useful for unpacking political storylines. Jasper and colleagues (2020), for instance, already advanced the application of character types to the political arena, framing politics itself as “character work.” In a political context, the authors argue, characters are used by politicians (e.g., Donald Trump) to persuade and to solidify—positive or negative—reputations, but they are also relied upon by citizens to make meaning of politics and policy. “In public characters our imaginations fuse cognitive understandings, moral judgments, emotional responses, and expectations for behavior” (pp. 2–3). In other words, they make for great storytelling.

## Methodology

This study was guided by the general aim of investigating the political narratives embedded within coronavirus memes. More specifically, we raised the following research questions:

1. What are the broader political stories that the “partial” stories embedded within coronavirus memes refer to?
2. Who are the roles of Victim, Persecutor, Hero, and Fool attributed to most often?
3. What are the main scenarios or storylines emerging from the meme corpus as reflected in the most frequent associations between Victims, Persecutors, Heroes, and Fools?

Our research site is Reddit, a social news platform where registered users can submit content in relevant forums, as well as upvote or downvote others’ submissions. Here, we used both content and thematic analysis to examine 273 memes posted on Reddit’s *r/CoronavirusMemes*<sup>1</sup> between 23 January and 17 May 2020. This is a subsample from a much larger, systematic sample of 1,544 memes, sourced using the Reddit API and explored in a previous study (de Saint Laurent et al., under review). That initial quantitative study focused on the question of meaning-making about the pandemic as reflected in coronavirus memes. The specific meaning-making processes explored via quantitative coding were objectification (i.e., references to concrete dimensions of the pandemic such as protective equipment or the transmission of the virus), anchoring (i.e., the general domains the memes made reference to such as history, politics or economics), and identification (i.e., the in-group and out-groups identified within the

memes). In addition, we also coded for the main aim of the meme, for instance, humorous or sociopolitical critique. For the present study, we focused only on the subset of memes that were coded as political in terms of anchoring (196) or as having the aim of sociopolitical critique (178), two categories with a considerable overlap between them (101).

The first step of the analysis was to check if, indeed, the sample of memes we worked with included clear political references (defined as references to politicians and parties, political behavior and the intentions behind and consequences of policies and political action). We excluded 32 memes that lacked such clear references or were incomprehensible to the three researchers. The remaining 241 memes were analyzed in the following ways:

1. Thematic analysis of the external political stories or events the memes referred to. Sometimes reference was made to multiple such events.
2. Thematic analysis of the story embedded within the meme. The story was captured in this case by retelling or paraphrasing the meme, and thus answering the related questions of “what is happening in the meme” and “what is this meme about.”
3. Content analysis of characters and roles within the meme. This included first identifying every character represented in the meme, from individuals to collectives (including anthropomorphized characters like the virus) and then coding them as Victim (i.e., the character harmed by the situation or the actions of others), Persecutor (i.e., the character who is intentionally harming others), Hero (i.e., the character who is defending Victims and/or opposing Persecutors), and/or Fool (i.e., the character who harms others and/or itself unintentionally).

The three steps of the analysis supported each other. It was by thematically clarifying what each meme was about and what people and/or events in the real world it made reference to that we were able to categorize characters accurately as Victim, Persecutor, Hero, Fool, or a combination of these roles. The process of analysis included three different coders—the authors of the article—and three stages. In the first stage, one coder performed the thematic analysis (of stories, external, and internal to the meme) and content analysis (of characters and roles). Then this analysis was passed on to a second coder who checked the themes and codes and any of the questions raised by the first coder. Finally, the third coder checked the corrections made and any new comments raised by the second coder and, for any outstanding issues of interpretation, the entire coding team was involved in deciding the final outcome for specific memes. This iterative and multi-coder approach guaranteed a close reading of the data and allowed for discussions that enriched the analysis. The objective was not, therefore, to check one reading against others (as in inter-coder reliability), but to reflect on

plausible interpretations (Barthes, 1993) that consider what is depicted by the meme, the relation of the meme with the meme culture of Reddit, and the wider societal debates the meme connects to.

In the reporting of findings, below, we will focus on (re) constructing political narratives or scenarios from the partial stories “told” by the relations between Victims, Persecutors, Heroes, and/or Fools within the memes under investigation. As noted in the methodological section, the analytical procedure also involved listing, for each meme, the external events the memes made reference to as well as writing down, in a narrative format, the meaning of the meme (i.e., we have tried to put into words what was happening in the meme, to whom, and with what effect). These pieces of information were not analyzed as such but used to contextualize the characters and roles present in each meme. Indeed, even when we know that, for example, a certain politician tends to be portrayed as the Persecutor of a certain group of people (the Victims), this information is insufficient unless we know why this relationship is postulated and in what way(s) specifically the Persecutor is harming its alleged Victims. External references and narrative retelling of the meme helped us achieve these insights and, as a consequence, give texture and meaning to an otherwise abstract set of relations.

## Findings

The analysis of roles revealed a total of five main scenarios that, together, accounted for the majority of the 241 memes included in the study. These scenarios, as expected, each feature variations in which one key role is replaced by another (or several), testifying to the general narrative flexibility of political storylines. The five scenarios and related sub-scenarios (i.e., variations of the main scenario that include one or more of their main actors), with the number of memes associated with each, are as follows:

1. Donald Trump / the US government and its agencies and also various US state governors are Persecutors that endanger US citizens (Victims) (80 memes)
  - a. Donald Trump is also a Fool who endangers others (and so are his supporters) (7 memes)
  - b. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) appears either as Persecutor, Hero, Victim, or Fool (8 memes)
2. Xi Jinping / China are Persecutors of its own people and other countries, who are all Victims (25 memes)
  - a. The virus can be a Hero for persecuting China, especially from a Hong Kong and Taiwan perspective (4 memes)
  - b. World Health Organization (WHO) joins China in Persecuting or is a Fool for its defense of China (4 memes)
3. Kim Jong-un / North Korea are Persecutors especially of North Korean ill people who are the Victims (8 memes)
4. Other world governments (e.g., UK, Australia) are Persecutors of their citizens (but not New Zealand) (13 memes)
  - a. Boris Johnson as Persecutor, Fool or Victim (but never a Hero) (7 memes)
5. While some people risk their lives to help (Heroes), those who don't respect measures, protest against them, or spread conspiracy theories Persecute the rest or are depicted as Fools (26 memes)
  - a. Doctors and essential workers are Heroes, often not treated well enough (3 memes)
  - b. People who make money off the virus or the pandemic (e.g., through the stock market) are Persecutors (especially of the vulnerable workforce who become Victims) (6 memes)
  - c. The virus Persecutes old people / boomers (often Fools for protesting the measures) who, in turn, Persecute millennials (so the virus can also be a Hero for the latter) (7 memes)
  - d. Reddit communities giving a platform to those who spread misinformation (Persecutors) play the role of Fools (2 memes)

## General Comments on the Five Scenarios

What can be immediately noticed from the above, particularly in the first four scenarios, is a wider narrative template in which politicians and governments are persecuting their citizens. This is perhaps unsurprising, given the ethos of political critique of holding those in power accountable, including through the use of humor and satire (especially on social media; see, e.g., Davis et al., 2018). However, the combination between the role of Persecutor and the other roles has in each case unique elements that are country or context specific. In addition, what sets the current findings apart is the international reach of such critiques, moving far beyond “key” actors such as the United States and China, and the multiple roles and role exchanges between these key actors (e.g., Trump is a clear Persecutor but also a Fool, the virus itself plays the role of a Persecutor in most memes, except those that turn it into a Hero, for weakening China, in the eyes of oppressed actors like Hong Kong). Finally, there is a pandemic-specific narrative that circulates widely within the memes and that is represented by the newly formed social categories of “people who respect the measures” and “people who don't respect the measures.” These novel categorizations do often map into existing social categories, already popular on social media, such as boomers and millennials or Republicans and Democrats, the former groups more inclined to disrespect measures than the latter. And this is precisely where the typical political narrative of protest is being



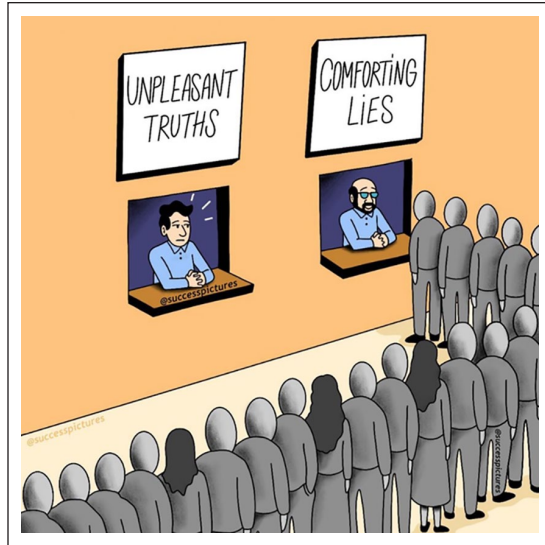
**Figure 1.** Trump as a Fool (meme 62; 8 March 2020).

reversed by the current crisis. Instead of politicians being criticized for upholding unpopular measures that restrict individual rights and freedoms—in this case those concerning the quarantine—they are now portrayed as Persecutors for not doing enough to uphold strict measures that reduce individual freedoms but would protect everyone, especially in Western democracies.

### *Donald Trump and the Republicans as Persecutors and Fools*

The vast majority of memes in our sample focused on the situation in the United States (unsurprising, given that most contributions originate from the United States) and especially on Trump or other Republican party leaders who consistently alternated between the roles of Persecutor and Fool.

The contrast between Trump's declarations and actions and those of other world leaders was particularly sharp. For example, in Figure 1 we see depicted a wide range of countries around the world (China, South Korea, Italy, Japan, Germany, France, Iran, Israel) taking the pandemic seriously while Trump, in the middle of the image, utters one of his usual slogans: "It's a hoax." While US citizens are primarily depicted as Victims of Trump's inability to grasp the seriousness of the situation, Trump supporters are depicted in other roles. Most memes depict them as either Persecuting others, primarily by protesting measures and endangering everyone's health, or as Fools who keep on trusting the lies they are told and even finding comfort in them (see Figure 2, a meme with the caption "The MAGA Line Starts Here"). Meanwhile, bodies like the CDC have a very "unstable" role in memes, oscillating between the positions of Persecutor,



**Figure 2.** Trump supporters as Fools (meme 262; 13 May 2020).



**Figure 3.** Xi Jinping as Persecutor and Fool (meme 72; 10 March 2020).

Hero, Victim, and Fool, depending on whether they stand up to incompetent politicians or, on the contrary, follow their orders.

### *Xi Jinping and China Are Persecutors*

A second main actor in coronavirus memes is, unsurprisingly, China, particularly toward the start of the data collection period, as that was the time when discussions still revolved around the origin of the virus. By and large, president Xi Jinping and the Chinese government are represented as Persecutors but, unlike US politicians, less as Fools (thus the implicit assumption of being a “competent” Persecutor); they also Victimize not only their own citizens but other countries through the spread of the virus. Some images of China and Xi Jinping in memes depict them as ominous and powerful figures, while others are deliberately humorous in nature. For instance, Figure 3 shows president Xi as “Winnie the Flu,” a reference both to him and the country (through the reimagining of the Chinese flag) as



**Figure 4.** The Virus as Hero (meme 5; 28 January 2020).

connected to COVID-19. It is also a reference to wider associations between Xi Jinping and the cartoon character Winnie the Pooh, associations that led to a ban of such depictions in China (Haas, 2018). Breaking this rule was especially frequent in protests against the Chinese authorities in Hong Kong. Given the highly unequal distribution of power between Hong Kong protesters and the authorities, it is not surprising to find memes that turn the virus into a Hero for persecuting China. This kind of depictions also bring up issues related to moral relativism (Harman, 1996) especially considering the fact that most participants in the subreddit are likely to come from Western countries where there was a rise in anti-Chinese sentiment at the beginning of the pandemic. Figure 4 depicts a meme that uses a template from the movie *Thor: Ragnarok* and shows the uneven fight between Thor (here, Hong Kong) and Hella (here, China). Finally, the WHO features in some of the memes related to China where it is mostly a fellow Persecutor (by joining China in downplaying the virus) or a Fool (by refusing to listen to its own experts).

### *Other World Governments as Persecutors, Fools, and (Rarely) Heroes*

A series of other countries and politicians appear in coronavirus memes, illustrating the global nature of the pandemic and the fact that these political narratives are widely applicable and can be found, with different actors, across the world. North Korea and the United Kingdom are featured most in memes, after the United States and China, for different reasons.





**Figure 5.** Kim Jong-un as Persecutor and Hero (meme 7, 30 January 2020).

Kim Jong-un and the North Korean totalitarian regime have long been topics of satire in online communities (see Clark, 2018) and the spread of COVID-19 offered a new opportunity to retake some of these existing narratives and adapt them to the current situation. By far the most usual scenario here is the one in which Kim Jong-un is persecuting his infected citizens by killing them before they could be recorded as coronavirus cases. The tendency of politicians to tamper with evidence and not be completely transparent in their reporting has been a wider issue of concern but, for North Korea, the assumption is that this evidence is not only hidden, but literally destroyed. Interestingly, a few memes reverse the roles by adding the quality of Hero to Kim Jong-un for not letting any tourists in and, therefore, inadvertently, turning his country into “the safest place on earth” (see Figure 5).

When it comes to the United Kingdom, a lot of the political narratives including US politicians and the American public are “translated” to a new context, even if on a smaller scale. Boris Johnson, in many ways Donald Trump’s counterpart, appears mostly as a Persecutor and/or a Fool but also a Victim. The first roles are due to Johnson’s presumed inability to deal with the crisis and his contradictory or inefficient advice on returning to school or to the workplace. The second role, that of a Victim, is largely due to the fact that Johnson had been one of the few world leaders to be in a critical condition and hospitalized because of COVID-19 (primarily, as several memes show, due to his inability to take his own advice, keep social distance and stop shaking hands). Figure 6 shows Johnson in the latter position using a meme template that features four Nigerian pallbearers ominously befriending people on Facebook. The meaning of this “partial story” is

that the UK Prime Minister, in his eagerness to be popular and make friends, might have gone too far and, given the pandemic, can now only expect bad consequences, including for himself. Finally, some other countries and their leaders were referenced in the set of memes, from example, Australia, Italy, and New Zealand. Almost always, politicians from these countries played the role of Persecutors with the notable exception of New Zealand and Jacinda Ardern in particular, seen as a Hero for the country’s initial handling of the crisis.

### *New Social Groups Emerging as Heroes, Persecutors, and Fools*

As mentioned above, one of the clear particularities of the pandemic has to do with the emergence of new social categories, key among them being “rule breakers” and “rule followers.” In the presentation so far, it became clear that some politicians, in particular Donald Trump and Boris Johnson, are rule breakers themselves and they are portrayed negatively because of it. On the other hand, “ordinary people” are all those individuals who try to respect the measures and still suffer from the incompetence of the ruling party or the foolishness of fellow citizens. A few specific social categories were featured in the memes, either in a positive light (e.g., doctors and essential workers) or a negative one (e.g., people who protest the measures, people who spread conspiracy theories, people who care about the economy and stock market more than they care for others). But, almost in each case, the narratives involved are more complex than simple binaries. For example, in Figure 7, a medical worker is seemed keeping up a groceries line because she doesn’t have enough money to pay for food. The line “I am sorry! Do you accept claps?” reveals the duplicity of treating doctors and nurses as Heroes and giving them a lot of applause but, at the end of the day, victimizing them through low payment and difficult work conditions. In Figure 8, we have a unique reversal of the usual Persecutor role attributed to people who protest staying at home and Hero for those obeying the rules. Here we are made aware of the fact that many individuals, especially those who had lost their jobs because of the pandemic, cannot afford to stay at home and do nothing because that will ultimately kill them. The political narrative in this case concerns state aid for people who are unemployed, but it also critiques those who are ready to judge others from the comfortable position of financial safety.

Last but not least, Figure 9 offers an interesting meta-reflection on Reddit and in particular the community of coronavirus memes we selected for our study. In the tradition of self-parody associated with meme culture (Shifman, 2013), the point made is that those who spread harmful conspiracy theories about the pandemic (Persecutors) can reach a larger audience more easily (Victims) when they hide behind “legitimate” communities, like those on Reddit, who might not even be aware of the role they play as massive Trojan horses (Fools).



**Figure 6.** Boris Johnson as Victim (meme 196; 7 April 2020).



**Figure 7.** Medical workers as Heroes and Victims (meme 270; 16 May 2020).

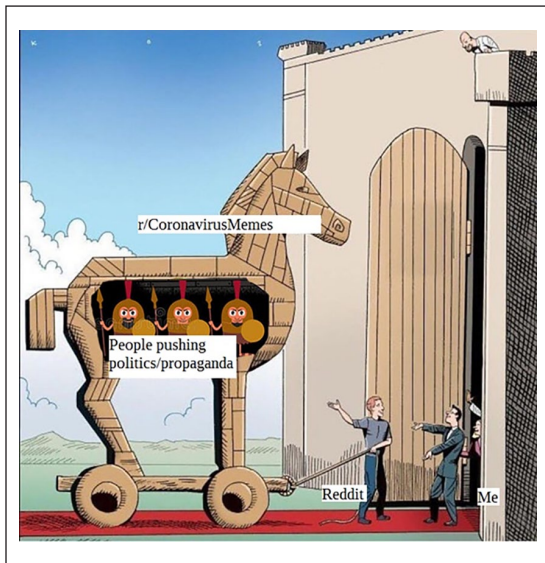
### Final Reflections on Memes, Politics, and Narrative

This article started by making the theoretical claim that a narrative framework can shed new light on the functions and



**Figure 8.** People who lost their jobs as Victims (meme 257; 10 April 2020).

processes embedded within memes. Particularly when these memes concern current events, as in the case of the coronavirus pandemic, online communities construct various storylines



**Figure 9.** People who push propaganda as Persecutors (meme 232; 24 April 2020).

organized around a number of narrative kernels or scenarios. To capture them, however, we need to temporarily bracket the traditional emphasis of narrative analysis on plot and focus instead on what lies behind the plot: characters and the relationships between them. Building on ideas advanced by Karpman (1968) and Klapp (1962), we devised a typology of four key roles—Persecutor, Victim, Hero, and Fool—and used it to analyze the partial stories revealed by coronavirus memes. This analysis allowed us to not only discover five main scenarios, but to pay also attention to the variations within them, forming a rich picture of actors and storylines circulating in online spaces such as Reddit.

What stands out from the narrative analysis of coronavirus memes as they relate to politics and sociopolitical critique is the richness of the stories depicted. Even if a single meme cannot capture a complex storyline, it certainly can grasp key elements of it that are then completed by reference to similar memes, to other online content, and to broader societal events and references. The analysis above focused on the main storylines or scenarios discovered through relating four basic positions specific for narratives in general and for online narratives in particular—Persecutor, Victim, Hero, and Fool. What emerged was a complex picture in which key actors—such as politicians—were portrayed playing various roles even in similar memes (e.g., Persecutor, Persecutor, and Fool, or even Persecutor and Hero, depending on the community or issue of reference). This brings evidence of the flexibility inherent in the partial stories “told” within memes, as well as of the fact that meme culture globally tends to encourage a meta-position from which different interpretations of a person, situation, or event become possible (Shifman, 2014, 2019). In the end, the political stories documented through the study of coronavirus memes share some similar scenarios, but they are

also “open” enough to follow current events, as they unfold, and use old visual templates for new contexts. In future work, we hope to document more closely the temporality of stories depicted within memes, so as to understand which scenarios take center stage depending on how external events unfold, and also to make comparisons between memes posted about the same topic on different social media platforms that vary in their general political orientations (as we would expect other forums might reverse some of the scenarios found here, for example, presenting people who protest measures as Heroes standing up for individual rights and freedoms).

By modeling the application of narrative analysis in this context, this study adds a novel analytical lens to the study of memes and creates valuable connections between the study of online creativity and collective expression, narrative psychology, and vernacular storytelling. The present character- or role-driven approach to narratives could certainly be expanded to other types of memes and forms of online content, just as it can be used to consider text and visual material. While it could be argued that focusing on political narratives in memes is paradigmatic given the story-like nature of political life, we believe that it is important to start an analysis on memes as “partial stories” with a case that can help us highlight and also nuance the four role typology advanced in this article. Our general proposition—by referring to memes as “partial stories”—is to recognize that any meme, taken in isolation, will have relatively limited narrative information for viewers or, to be more precise, will operate with many implicit references to people and events known by specific communities of viewers. However, when considered as a group and especially across time, memes offer valuable insights into developing plots used to make sense of a particular social and political reality like the COVID-19 pandemic which goes well beyond the realm of the biological or the medical. Indeed, political narratives are remarkably frequent in memes and coronavirus memes in particular given the overwhelming involvement of the government in solving (or, rather, failing to solve) the crisis. It was useful to observe, as we explained above, that the current pandemic led to some unexpected twists when it comes to political narratives of resistance and protest: instead of protesting the government for imposing measures that diminish individual rights and freedoms, most memes protested the government for not doing enough to uphold such measures. The role of Persecutor was played, thus, by multiple groups and factions, from Trump and his Republican fellows to Xi Jinping, Kim Jong-un, Boris Johnson, and ordinary people who fight against the quarantine or spread misinformation about the virus, protection rules, and treatment.

We believe that this type of narrative analysis can be very useful for media scholars, psychologists, and policymakers who are interested in memes, storytelling, and the narrative character of social life. The stories captured here, as humorous as some might be, are highly consequential for how we, individually and collectively, handle the current crisis and

for the chance we have to overcome it. Not only are coronavirus memes referring to a harsh reality, at a personal and societal level, but they also lend their backing—or share their disapproval—for specific belief systems and courses of action. In the particular Reddit forum we chose to analyze, there was overwhelming support for protective measures; these findings are undoubtedly shaped by the fact that many of the posters are likely Americans (in line with aforementioned platform demographics), who have had a particularly challenging experience with COVID-19.<sup>2</sup> But there are other platforms and other stories available (Motta et al., 2020), stories in which Persecutors become Heroes and Fools become Victims. Understanding these other stories and the hold they have on the mind and heart of different communities in society can make the difference between coming out of this crisis stronger, together, or letting it further divisions, polarization, and conspiratorial mentalities.

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### Notes

1. While it is impossible to ascertain the exact demographic makeup of the r/CoronavirusMemes forum, it is worth noting that the majority of Reddit users are North American: 50% from the United States, followed by 8% from Canada (Statista, 2020).
2. Interestingly, the liberal / progressive bent of these findings (i.e., support for protective measures; criticism of the Trump government) are in contrast to the otherwise conservative / pro-Republican reputation of the platform in recent years (see, e.g., Gaudette et al., 2020).

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