



Deception and extortion: Exploring the effects of impersonation through parody social media accounts

Nana Kofi Annan*

School of Computing and Technology
Wisconsin International University College
Ghana
nk.annan@wiuc-ghana.edu.gh

Samuel Aboagye Mensah

School of Computing and Technology
Wisconsin International University College
Ghana
Ghana
samuelmensah36@gmail.com

Jonathan Nii Barnor Barnor

Department of Management Sciences
University of Education, Winneba
Ghana
jnbbarnor@uew.edu.gh

***Corresponding author**

Abstract:

The study aimed at expanding the literature on parody and fraud by examining the dark side of parody accounts. To this end, we adopted a qualitative approach by interviewing twelve former and six active parody account handlers. Further we also covertly engaged fraud parody accounts while also entreating individuals who have had interactions with such people to voluntarily provide screenshots to unveil their modus operandi. We further adopted Miles and Huberman's Qualitative Data Analysis Interactive Model to analyse data. Findings from the study indicate that parody is an essential part of the social media ecology with clear guidelines in the creation and management of such accounts. While individuals take advantage of this provision to build brands for themselves, others also ride on the anonymity provided by such to engage in fraudulent activities. This study deviates from previous studies on parody accounts as a satirical tool in politics and crisis to study the phenomenon in relation to fraud. Lastly, considering the scarcity of literature in this stead, this study serves as a starting point for researching the area of parody social media accounts and fraud.

Keywords: Parody; Social media; Fraud; Twitter; Covert Research; Deceit

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1. Introduction

Access to information and the development of opinions have fundamentally changed as a result of social media. While social media presents avenues for individuals and organizations to disseminate and receive information to improve product development and services, it also presents individuals with opportunities to connect with family and friends while also having fun. Social media has evolved beyond its original purpose of connecting prominent personalities like politicians, celebrities, and athletes with the general population (Pershad et al., 2018). Statista (2022) for instance reports that over 3.6 billion people are using various social media platforms worldwide and that figure is projected to increase by almost 22 per cent in 2025. Further, according to Statusbrew (2021), Facebook had about 2.8 billion daily active users in the third quarter of 2021 while Twitter totalled 211 million daily active users in the same period. Twitter is a social media platform that facilitates computer-mediated online communication and helps to develop a new social structure. Unlike on most online social networking sites, such as Facebook or MySpace, following and being followed requires no reciprocation (Karami et al., 2020). The increasing usage of social media platforms such as Twitter has sped up the process of exchanging information and expressing opinions about current events. However, due to the ease of the creation of user accounts and the significant increase in the number of fraudulent accounts, parody accounts, and accounts used for hate speech and violence, recognizing a user's identity on social networks is becoming a major issue.

Parody accounts have become an important part of the Twitter ecology, becoming both popular and controversial (Roig & Martorell, 2021; Thomas, 2016). They have established their presence on Twitter, providing a means to lampoon public figures and contemporary issues. These accounts post comments framed within the context of their fictional universes or stereotypes of their subjects, responding in character to topical events (Highfield, 2016). Such accounts can provide irreverent responses to topical discussions using devices such as juxtaposition, incongruity, popular culture references, intertextual content, parody, and irony (Stein et al., 2014). These responses can be both participatory, in that others can create their versions, and spreadable comments of interest across networks of friends and followers (Highfield, 2015). For example, Prince George, the son of Prince William and Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge, is born to a flurry of media attention throughout the world. Regular tweet updates are provided by Queen Elizabeth II (Elizabeth Windsor: @Queen UK). Unless, of course, this is not the real monarch of the United Kingdom.

Parody accounts are not new within the Ghanaian Twitter space as prominent personalities such as Ghana's President and key public institutions have had their accounts parodied for various reasons best known to the handlers of parody accounts aside from satires. While such accounts are managed following Twitter's parody account guidelines, there exist numerous parody accounts that are used for deceitful intents. The literature on parody accounts has covered a wide range of areas including politics (Denisova, 2017; Maronikolakis et al., 2020), misinformation and fake news (Shuraddin & Abd Latiff, 2022; Young, 2018), social media culture and satire (Highfield, 2013), Covid 19 (Roig & Martorell, 2021), among others. Studies on the use of parody accounts to commit fraud however seem missing in the literature. To expand the literature on parody and fraud, this study aims at examining the dark side of parody accounts by interviewing twelve former and six active parody account handlers, and also covertly engaging fraud parody accounts to unveil their modus operandi.

The rest of the article is laid out as follows: A brief overview of parody social media accounts is presented in the next section. We discuss the methodological approach adopted for the study in the following section, followed by a summary of findings, and we conclude with discussions, conclusions and implications.

2. Literature Review

Parody is a figurative device that is used to copy an entity for comic or critical purposes, and it has become a huge phenomenon on social media thanks to a slew of prominent parody accounts (Maronikolakis et al., 2020). They purport to present the views of the official spokesperson while posting satirical messages (Wan et al., 2015). Denisova, (2017) for instance, avers that alternative voices can use the digital space to reach out to the public and compete on an equal footing with hegemonic mouthpieces. Whereas the concept of parody is not new in the social media space, research on the phenomenon seems sparse. Again, there seems not a clear direction of literature on parody in social media space. However, the few studies conducted so far have been largely politically focused (Denisova, 2017; Lim & Golan, 2011; Maronikolakis et al., 2020). For example, Highfield (2013) used exploratory research to assess the role of parody accounts in Twitter discussions about political communication, pop culture, sporting events, and other media events, including political campaign coverage. The study, which used a mixed-method approach and data collected between 2011 and 2013, discovered that hilarious or satirical content, as well as content from professional comedians (or rebroadcast by them) and parody or gimmick accounts, accounted for the majority of retweets. Even though the findings of the study are relevant for the conduct of the current study, they remain circumstantial. In another study to examine the impact of humour used by brands and brand parody accounts on social media, Eckman (2018) suggested that parody Twitter accounts, particularly those using disparagement-style humour, may be advantageous to the real brand in terms of viewers' purchase intentions and intentions to spread positive word of mouth about the real brand. Yet, brands' own use of disparagement-style humour on Twitter could lead to lower purchase intentions in comparison. Again, while the findings of the study are valuable and set a fertile ground for further studies to build on, it implores future researchers to continue exploring the effects of parodic tweets so that public relations and social media professionals will have a better understanding of how humour can affect the brands for which they are cultivating mutually beneficial relationships. In a similar study, Wan et al. (2015), using the Social-Mediated Crisis Communication model as a theoretical lens, sought to examine parody social media accounts and their impact on organizations in times of crisis. The authors concluded that organizations need to determine when to take action against parody accounts and when to leave them alone.

As a selected social media platform for this study, Twitter is not new to parody accounts as the social media company embraces the creation and management of parody accounts under strict guidelines outlined by the company. The company's policy states explicitly that "*Users are allowed to create parody accounts...*" provided that the accounts follow the company's parody account requirements. The policy states as follows:

Bio: The bio should clearly indicate that the user is not affiliated with the subject of the account. Non-affiliation can be indicated by incorporating, for example, words such as (but not limited to) "parody," "fake," "fan," or "commentary." Non-affiliation should be stated in a way that can be understood by the intended audience.

Account name: The account name (note: this is separate from the username, or @handle) should clearly indicate that the user is not affiliated with the subject of the account. Non-affiliation can be indicated by incorporating, for example, words such as (but not limited to) "parody," "fake," "fan," or "commentary." Non-affiliation should be stated in a way that can be understood by the intended audience.

Inasmuch as Twitter embraces the concept of parody as captioned above, there exist a myriad of challenges that accompany such accounts. Such include impersonation, the spread of false and fake news and fraud. As earlier pointed out, the literature on parody social media accounts even though is gaining ground in academic studies remains silent on its dark side. Thus, how individuals use the concept of parody for deceit and other ill-intended motives on social media platforms.

3. Methodology

To achieve the purpose of this study, a qualitative approach of enquiry was adopted. This approach is best suitable for studying individuals and entities within the context in which they act. Again, a qualitative study is appropriate in studying complex situations where the relevant variables associated with an outcome are not apparent. This is geared toward increasing our understanding of the phenomena (Black, 1994). In this regard, two approaches to data collection were used. First was the use of semi-structured interviews with twelve former and six active parody account handlers. A purposive sampling technique was adopted in identifying the first respondent and subsequently snowballing in identifying the active parody account handlers. Interviews were scheduled and held between forty-five minutes to an hour with the respondents.

The second approach is the use of covert research with suspected fraud parody Twitter accounts. Despite the ethical dilemmas associated with the use of covert research in past years (Calvey, 2017; Marzano, 2021), it has been touted as a go-to approach when covering sensitive topics in ways that traditional ethnographies would have been stifled by ethical regimes (Calvey, 2017). In adopting this approach, we engaged some suspected fraud parody Twitter accounts. These accounts were parody accounts of prominent Members of Parliaments in Ghana. We also sought screenshots of conversations of Twitter users who have been contacted by such accounts and chronicled their experiences.

Data analysis was done using Miles & Huberman's (1994) qualitative data analysis technique. This entails four iterative stages: data collection, data reduction, data display and drawing conclusion and verification. At the data reduction stage, the raw data obtained in the field was organized via coding, which compressed the data into meaningful parts and given labels for further research. The following step was to generate summaries of the coded data, which involved condensing the weighty comments made by our respondents into fewer words in order to get closer to the goal of our research. While doing so, we were careful not to lose the data's substance as a result of data reduction. We also made use of tables and diagrams to help simplify the nature of the phenomenon. We finally drew conclusions from the data collection, reduction and display. However, conclusions drawn at this point remained tentative pending further review and were organized for presentation during analysis when all data had been collected and reduced.

4. Summary of Findings and Analysis

Parody accounts are not new to the Ghanaian Twitter space as individuals have created various accounts to shadow prominent people in society as well as public institutions for various reasons. Data for this study was in that regard collected from twelve respondents who had managed parody accounts in the past and six active parody account handlers. For ethical reasons, the identities of the respondents and their accounts are not disclosed in the discussion. To achieve the purpose of this study, we also engaged accounts suspected to be engaging in parody fraud. This section of the study presents the evidence of data collected and subsequent analysis.

4.1 Parody Accounts: The Numbers Game and Expensive Jokes

For an account to pass for a parody account, it must follow Twitter's parody account requirements. That is, the bio of the account must state a clear non-association from the original account. Further, the account name must state clearly that the account is a parody account so as not to stray followers of the said account. While these are a few of the guidelines for running parody accounts, many accounts created in the name of parody accounts have been used several times to peddle false and fake news about celebrities. For example, during the height of the Covid 19 pandemic in 2020, with flights grounded as a result of border closures for Ghanaians and other nationals, a Twitter account, @TracySarlcness, ostensibly parodying the spouse of the Ghanaian rapper Sarkodie posted "*Welcome to Ghana. @sarkodie and myself with Titi have arrived in Ghana. Thank you for the travelling mercies.*" This post was however responded to by the parodied account; @TracySarkcess amidst public backlash "*Can you stop this nonsense and fake account please? Impersonating someone is a crime! If*

it's a parody account fine but let it be known and stop deceiving people. It's my name you are playing with. Thank you & good morning". The parody account was since reported and taken down.

Another instance involving a prominent figure and an issue of pronounced public interest is a post by a parody account @ASAMAQH_GYAN3 ostensibly shadowing the former National Soccer Team Captain Asamoah Gyan (@ASAMAQH_GYAN3) that *"I intentionally missed the penalty because of my ex. I wanted to break her heart."* Again, being an issue of national interest, the tweet received huge attention despite being posted by a parody account. The original account, therefore, responded to the post *"Disregard this fake and criminal page portraying my image as my official Twitter handle. My account is duly verified. Pls take note and deal with that faceless person accordingly as criminal, anyone with info about him should alert my manager Samuel Anim Addo to take action,"* The account has subsequently been suspended.

Data collected over the period of this study was indicative of the fact that individuals who create parody accounts do so for various reasons. One of such reasons is to garner followers. A former owner of a parody account avers that *"Twitter is a fun place to be ... the larger the audience you have, the more influential you are in that space"*. Attracting followers according to the respondents is spontaneous and demands a lot of effort from the handler of the accounts. Thus, *"... from the creation of the account, you must know what you are aiming to achieve with the account you are creating"* a respondent claimed. Further, this venture demands one *"to have a great sense of humour not to take everything people say personal because you will defeat the purpose of Twitter parody accounts if you do..."* another handler stressed. Gaining huge followership on social media accounts enables individuals to switch from being parody account handlers to becoming social media influencers. These further aids account owners to monetize their accounts.

4.2 Parody Accounts: Exposing the Dark Side

Even though running parody accounts is an activity that is accepted by Twitter and the social media community at large, it is important to note that there are individuals who engage in running such accounts to defraud unsuspecting social media users. Such people most often than not pose as political figures and use their position of influence to defraud individuals through schemes such as employment fraud by using social media platforms as a medium for such duplicitous motives. Whereas accounts meant for satirical activities may follow the Twitter guidelines, such accounts do not, while mirroring the appearance and bios of the original accounts. A cursory search of the fraud account engaged for his study indicated about six different accounts a Member of Parliament (MP) impersonated. Such exercises by fraudsters make it near impossible to identify the original account if it has not been verified by the social media platform.



Figure 1: A screenshot of a chat with a parody fraudster

In order to identify such accounts, it is important to note that they are more often than not first to initiate conversations which is uncharacteristic of politicians and as such MPs (See figure 1). Further, they ask of the allegiance of their targets to establish the legitimacy of their contacts by asking if they are affiliated with the sitting government and whether they are registered members of the party. While at this, they also prey on the needs of their targets by asking which forms of assistance they could offer them. These conversations may travel for as long as the target is willing to engage.

It is worth mentioning that parody fraudsters have different schemes. These include but are not limited to scholarship, loan assistance, employment fraud, travelling and visa fraud among others. In all the schemes, they ask their targets to contact their assistants who in most instances are the faces behind the accounts to acquire *protocol order/endorsement forms* (See figure 2).



Figure 2: A screenshot of a chat with a parody scammer

Evidence from the data collected was also indicative of the fact that while many accounts operate under such schemes on the Twitter platform, there seems to be consistency in their mode of operations. However, we could not authenticate if the accounts are related as the phone numbers provided under each circumstance seemed different. Our inquiry however pointed to the fact that the scammers keep single numbers for particular schemes. For example, recruitment scams have a dedicated phone number and a consistent name to be contacted and so are scholarship scams. Finally, it is essential to note that scammers in these scams are insufferable and will fling invective at the slightest sign of resiliency or exposure. They also block their targets when exposed and are first to report their targets' accounts to Twitter; again, using their supposed positions of influence.

5. Discussion of Findings

According to Highfield (2016), a parody account is a recognized, actual person who is used for blatantly comic purposes. These accounts play with misconceptions of these personalities or juxtapose their public image with a different, behind-closed-doors persona; there should be no risk of mistaking their tweets for their subject's true beliefs. Analysis of the findings points to a number of reasons why individuals create parody social media accounts. This includes the need to amass followership on various social media platforms which in itself is not the end but to transmogrify into influential accounts for business purposes. In several cases analysed for this study, it was revealed that many Twitter posts have in the past been misconstrued to be emanating from the original owners of the accounts hence creating public disaffection. Again, the analysis was indicative of the fact that parody accounts have most often than not misled to a large extent even media houses into carrying news which were originally meant to be satirical. Presented in figure 3 is a tweet by a then parody account of the President of Ghana attributing a quote to Peter Drury; an English football commentator and a subsequent carriage by a media house in Ghana. While this may sound misleading or a misrepresentation of facts, previous literature with regards to the prosecution of parody accounts projects that parody accounts are shielded by the first amendment as evident in the case of *Levitt v. Felton*; where a fake account mocked Levitt by making references to drinking and partying, casting doubt on his legal ability. The court, on the other hand, determined that the narrative was clearly a parody when read in context. Levitt's standing as an attorney, as well as his performance as a professor, are all mocked in the tweets. No rational person would view them as anything other than an attempt to mock and caricature Levitt's own tweets when read in context (Lux, 2021).



Figure 3: A parody tweet and a subsequent carriage by a media agency

Second, our analysis of the data revealed that malicious actors use the anonymity provided by parody accounts to engage in fraudulent activities, deceiving their targets into parting with huge sums of money in what appear to be employment, travel and visa, and scholarship scams via social media. While the literature on this seems non-existent this study presents a worthwhile starting point for starting scholarly engagements in parody accounts and fraudulent activities on social media platforms. As indicated by Keretna et al. (2013), the use of parody accounts to engage in criminal actions creates moral and legal difficulties that affect the social lives of innocent individuals. Electronic identity framing is common among celebrities in the media, entertainment, and political realms. Due to the ease with which fraudulent accounts may be created, the growing use of social media has added to the complexity of the situation.

While we could not validate the demographics of the faces behind the accounts, we established that such fraudulent accounts target mostly unemployed young individuals by using political figures and key institutions. Again, analysis of the findings was indicative of the fact that such scammers may not be entirely illiterates but are unaware of minor details of the engagements of the political figures they impersonate. For example, while the Minister of Finance is not a member of Parliament and as such does not attend parliamentary sittings, the account usually requires their targets to meet him at the Parliament House. Furthermore, scammers in these schemes do not pay attention to the fact that phone numbers given out could be tracked for subsequent deactivation or apprehension.

6. Conclusion and Implications

The study sought to explore the operations of parody social media accounts and to unveil the dark side of a phenomenon meant to be satirical in nature. Using a qualitative approach, eighteen individuals; twelve of whom are former parody Twitter account handlers and six active parody account handlers were interviewed for the study. Further, we employed a covert approach in investigating the activities of such fraudulent parody accounts.

The findings of the study revealed that parody is an essential part of the Twitter ecology and as such there are various reasons that individuals associate with the creation of parody social media accounts. This includes but is not limited to the amassing of followership which later translates into becoming social media influencers and subsequent monetization of the accounts. While this is evident with individuals who follow Twitter's guidelines concerning the management of parody accounts, some of these accounts largely have misled the public on some occasions. Again, analysis of the findings revealed that scammers also take advantage of the anonymity provided by the creation of parody accounts and running on the back of political figures, use this opportunity to scam unsuspecting individuals.

The originality of this study stems from the fact that it serves as a pioneering study towards understanding the activities of fraudulent parody social media accounts considering the fact that research in this area seems sparse if non-existent. This contribution cannot be overlooked as the study contributes to the existing knowledge of parody accounts in social media space.

Concerning practice and policy, this study seeks to serve as a basis on which social media platforms can rely to amend their policies on the creation and keeping of parody accounts by individuals. Again, it has become imperative for government agencies responsible for communication to protect the images of Members of Parliament and key government appointees by establishing cordial contact with social media platforms to verify such people to avert running down the hard-earned images of same.

Despite the valuable contribution of this study to the body of knowledge, there seem to be a few limitations that future studies can build on. For instance, owing to the embryonic nature of the phenomenon of parody social media accounts and fraud, future researchers can build on this by exploring how social theories can aid in better understanding the phenomenon in other contexts.

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Biographical notes**Nana Kofi Annan (PhD)**

Is an information technology consultant and a senior lecturer. He is an expert in the application of ICT for development. He has worked as a consultant on World Bank and UN projects for the Ministry of Communications, with over 15 years of experience as a lecturer. He has been involved in developing several ICT oriented policies for the Ministry of Communications, Ministry of Food and Agriculture, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection. Currently, he is the ICT Advisor for the Canadian High Commission under Global Affairs Canada assigned to the Ministry of Food and Agriculture to facilitate the digitalisation of E-Agriculture under the Modernising Agriculture in Ghana (MAG) programme. Nana Kofi Annan had his education in Ghana, Denmark and India.

**Aboagye Mensah Samuel**

Aboagye Mensah, Samuel is a lecturer at School of Computing and Technology, Wisconsin International University College, Ghana. He has a Master of Philosophy Degree in Management Information Systems from the University of Ghana Business School. Artificial Intelligence, Machine Learning, Digital technologies, Sharing Economy, Information Systems Security and Information systems adoption are among Samuel's research interests. He can be reached via samuel.mensah@wiuc-ghana.edu.gh and samuelmensah36@gmail.com

**Barnor Jonathan Nii Barnor**

Barnor, Jonathan Nii Barnor is a lecturer at the Department of Management Sciences, University of Education, Winneba. He has a PhD in Information Systems and a Master of Philosophy Degree in Management Information Systems, both from the University of Ghana Business School.

Cybercrime, information systems security, information systems adoption, ICT for growth, digital mobile maps, and digital technologies are among Jonathan's research interests. He can be reached via jnbbarnor@st.ug.edu.gh