

## THE JOKER MYTH AS MEDIATED STEREOTYPE IN INTERNATIONAL MEDIA DISCOURSE

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### ABSTRACT

This study is a critical mixed-methods investigation of the Joker's ubiquity within international media discourse. The research comparatively examines the myth's presence within *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*' news reporting (1999–2020), and determines intermedia agenda-setting processes. Using a corpus linguistics approach, the paper also analyses news media's deployment of the Joker as a figure of speech, with the purpose of identifying prominent news values. The results indicate a high prevalence of consonance, eliteness, proximity, negativity, and superlativeness. Moreover, the study investigates the role that user-generated media plays in perpetuating or countering dominant hegemonies, by semiotically analysing internet memes that use the myth within the r/meme subreddit community. Overall, the study finds that the Joker is a popular resource for the mediated construction of a derogatory stereotype, associated with sexist, racist and ableist myths, often in connection to political elites (Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, Barack Obama), and serves as a tool for mockery, shame, and dramatization of events.

**Keywords:** intermedia agenda-setting, Internet memes, news values, semiotics, stereotype

### *Introduction*

Myth narratives permeate all forms of factual and fictional storytelling, and they occasionally generate cultural symbols, which inform audiences' social reality by perpetuating certain constructs and representations of identity. Such is the case of the Joker, a fictional character popularized as an anarchic villain and Batman's antagonist since the 1940s, through comic books, graphic novels, animation and television series, video games, and films. Considering the growing wave of angry populism

(Wahl-Jorgensen 2018) and worldwide anti-establishment protests (2019–2020), where protesters wore “Joker” masks and costumes, the powerful effects the symbol has had on audiences has become undeniable and therefore worth exploring. The present paper looks to contribute to the field of social knowledge by filling the gap identified in the literature review, which calls for an analysis of the Joker’s presence and deployment in both news media discourse and user-generated media. What this study aims to add to the body of knowledge on the Joker text/myth is a critical investigation of the Joker’s mediatic pervasiveness as observed through analyses of its use in news media discourse and participatory culture. To that extent, the larger research question, which the present study aims to answer, is centred on how the Joker is deployed in international media discourse.

Therefore, the study investigates the symbol’s pervasiveness within news media discourse and determines intermedia agenda-setting processes (Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2008; Coleman and Campbell 2019). News media’s deployment of the Joker stereotype is further analysed through a corpus linguistics approach in determining the news values that construct the use of the myth (Bednarek and Caple 2014; Caple 2018). Furthermore, considering the competing nature of capital-driven media industries and the production and distribution of the most widely consumed Joker-related films through Hollywood, the present study follows Douglas Kellner’s direction in exploring cultural artifacts from several critical perspectives, and investigates user-generated media that make use of the Joker text/myth, through analyses of their politics of representation signifying practices, using Stuart Hall’s representations of identity theoretical framework, and Roland Barthes metalanguage model (Barthes 1991; Hall 1997c; Kellner 2020). The multiperspectival aspect of such an approach allows for comprehensive evaluations of the Joker’s mediatic prevalence, and the role that user-generated media plays in perpetuating or countering dominant hegemonies.

### *Literature Review*

The large variety of faces and performances that the Joker has embodied over the years make it difficult to discuss the character as a singular persona. The Joker functions as a “cultural thermometer” (Burke et al. 2020), a “mythic palimpsest” (Alex Evans in Burke et al. 2020), a universal Trickster (Harris 1997) who continues to morph and adapt to the cultural and political zeitgeist, thus generating some of popular culture’s most transgressive symbols. Media scholar Henry Jenkins stresses the importance of superhero narratives, as they are “culturally pervasive, and thus handy for political deployment” (2020). To Jenkins, the supervillain symbol represents current social and political struggles. This is credited to superheroes and supervillains’ ever shifting narratives and increasing popularity, which reconstruct, counter, or perpetuate hegemonic ideology (Jenkins 2020).

As a stereotype, the Joker is widely recognized as a mentally ill outlaw, a criminal mastermind type of supervillain, characterised by victimhood mentality, intellectual

prowess, lack of morality, and manic behaviour (Coogan 2006). He serves the role of antagonizing the hero of the stories which generated the character, as a sadistic supervillain, an eccentric prankster, a thief, a serial killer, and a mass murderer, with nicknames such as: The Clown Prince of Crime, Jester of Genocide, King of Arkham Asylum, Ace of Knives, Harlequin of Hate (Langley 2012; Peaslee and Weiner 2015; Burke et al. 2020).

The first Joker was born in 1940, along with DC's comic book *Batman#1*, at the hands of artists Jerry Robinson, Bob Kane, and writer Bill Finger. His purpose was to antagonize Batman as a clever supervillain with a penchant for irony, which is seen in his choice of weapon: lethal laughing gas that would paralyse the victims' faces in a smirk similar to his own (Peaslee et al. 2015). The Joker's bleached skin, green hair, and spooky grin were explained as the result of the chemical accident ("The Joker: A History", documentary, 2019). However, Joker's own stories of his life, upbringing, and disfigurement, are unreliable: "I'm not exactly sure what it was. Sometimes I remember it one way, sometimes another. If I'm going to have a past, I prefer it to be multiple choice!" (Moore et al. 1988, p. 43).

The Joker's international popularity grew in the 1980s, when comic books became darker and more violent (Peaslee et al. 2015). The by-product of Batman stories' general tenebrous turn is seen in subsequent renditions of the character. Jack Nicholson's Joker in *Batman* (1989) embodied the evil and chaos to Michael Keaton's good and ordered Bruce Wayne/Batman. The film included an origin story, where a younger Joker, a crime boss named Jack Napier, is depicted as having killed young Bruce Wayne's parents. The two characters' stories are intertwined even in their hero/villain origins. They birthed each other: Bruce's parents' death was the underlying motivation for Batman's crime-fighting existence, while Joker's origin as a result of a vat-of-chemicals accident was caused by Batman. This toxic co-dependency is found in other manifestations of these stories, following Tim Burton's *Batman*: "You complete me" (*The Dark Knight*, 2008); "I'm fine with you fighting other people if you wanna do that, but what we have is special" (*The Lego Batman Movie*, 2017).

Christopher Nolan's second film in his Batman trilogy put a nihilistic and ruthless Joker, as played by Heath Ledger, front-and-centre of the story. This Joker's jokes are purposeful in a way that has not been explored before: he seeks to undermine societal values in a strategic manner, by working to test everyone's sense of morality, to prove that nobody is exempt from villainy under tragic enough circumstances. The layered character embodies complex contradictions: he is impulsive and chaotic, yet calculated, controlled, and purposeful. The film was an immense box-office success, making it the first comic book-based film to earn over 1 billion dollars worldwide, the first Oscar to be awarded for a Joker role, and the highest number (5) of Oscar nominations for any superhero films made until then (Peaslee and Weiner 2015).

The film's success lingered, enhanced by Heath Ledger's widely mediated death and posthumous Oscar win, and more high-grossing films followed: *The Suicide Squad* (2016), which has Jared Leto play an even darker and tougher crime-lord Joker, and *The Lego Batman Movie* (2017), an animated comedy film. In Todd Phillips' *Joker* (2019), which is an alternative origin story similar to the *The Killing Joke* (Moore

et al. 1988), the limits of bleakness are pushed further than ever before. Here, Arthur Fleck (Joker) is an alienated, unsuccessful stand-up comic with mental disorders, for whom killing is presented as a justified reaction to an abusive and oppressive society. The film stirred controversy due to a confusing political undertone and an intense humanisation of a previously inhumane manifestation of cruelty. It quickly became a box office success, and the first R-rated film in film history to earn over 1 billion dollars worldwide. Joaquin Phoenix's interpretation of Arthur Fleck/Joker won multiple awards, including an Oscar, and news media attention.

Jason Bainbridge's "*This Land is Mine!*": *Understanding the Function of Supervillains*, published in 2020, offers some insight into the Joker character's thematic, narrative, and political function. Bainbridge differentiates the superhero narrative function as a screen that audiences project their hopes onto, from the supervillains' narrative function, which is to act "as a mirror for our worst traits, [since supervillains] speak to societal fears by individualizing them" (Bainbridge 2020, n.p.). The trope serves a thematic function, as it individualizes societal fears through its embodiment of collective fears of pure evil. Through its disruptive characteristic, the Joker also serves as a narrative engine, as the reason Batman needs to put on a cape and take on the role of superhero, making the Clown Prince of Crime a disruptor and an agent of change. The Joker's political function is inscribed in its key role label, as a supervillain. The "super" prefix implies it, and it is a relative term, which exists in relation to that which is not "super" – the state and its citizens. Supervillains justify their deeds under the umbrella of superiority. An enabling element for both Batman and Joker is the state's failure to deal with the Joker, who is bent on replacing order with chaos. Thus, the juridical process is replaced by the disciplinary process, imposed by the superhero. According to Bainbridge, the supervillain's function is to question society, and their personification of a relevant threat/crisis helps challenge the state's sovereign power, by eluding the law, while simultaneously legitimizing the superhero's violence, and their precarious relationship with the law, thus revealing nuanced and complex societal correlations between power, violence, and punishment (Bainbridge 2020, n.p.).

With regards to academic explorations of the Joker narrative, the myth has received scholarly attention which either focuses on discursive aspects of the trickster myth in Tim Burton's *Batman* (Lewis 1997; Harris 1997), characteristics of Heath Ledger's Joker (Brodesser-Akner 2008; Bellinger 2009), *The Dark Knight's* (Nolan 2008) representation of mental illness as dangerous (Camp et al. 2010), and the villain's rivalry with Batman as explored through its representation of class dynamics (Tyree 2009; Nichols 2011; Mizsei-Ward 2012; Silvers 2016). Since the release of the 2019 Joker film, increased academic attention has been awarded to the study of the Joker text/myth and its effects, as seen in analyses of the polemical aspect of news media discourse on the film (Mathijs 2021), the story's recontextualization of hegemony (Brown 2021), the film's sound design (Kerins 2021), the deformed masculinity of Joaquin Phoenix's Joker (Kavka 2021), the film's effects on audience negative perception of mental illness as dangerous (Durham and Wilkinson 2020; Hulatt 2020), critical explorations of the 2019

Joker's politics (Žižek 2019), and the story's representation of gender violence and mental illness as violent (Redmond 2021; Skryabin 2021).

### *Theoretical Framework*

Mircea Eliade (1962) defines myths as descriptive stories of certain primordial events, such as birth, death, creation. Marshall McLuhan stresses that myths “can be viewed at the same time as intelligible explanations of great tracts of time and of the experience of many processes, and they can be used as a means of perpetuating such bias and preference as they codify in their structure” (McLuhan 1959, p. 346). Roland Barthes describes myth as “not an object, a concept, or an idea; it is a mode of signification, a form” (Barthes 1991, p. 107). To myth scholar Joseph Campbell, myth is “the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation” (Campbell 2004, p. 1). Arthur Asa Berger's *Media, Myth, and Society* (2013) defines myth in its pervasive aspect, by exploring the ways in which myth narratives are present in all types of discourse, constructing reality. Myths are stories generated by all cultures and passed down through diverse forms of communication. They are narratives which explain origins, validate certain belief systems, habits, rituals, and explain socio-cultural and political aspects of life. Berger points out that looking “beneath the surface of many texts, you can often find a myth—an example of intertextuality” (Berger 2013, p. 13). He proposes a myth model which explores how these narratives inform culture, as observed through psychoanalysis, historic perspectives, mass media discourse, and myths' manifestation in elite and popular culture.

The concept of stereotype is defined by Stuart Hall as the representational process of dividing the normal and socially acceptable from the abnormal and unacceptable, the process of reducing an individual's traits to a universally recognisable caricature (Hall 1997b). This process is facilitated by binary oppositions, which classify and establish differences. Hall notes that stereotyping occurs as a result of tremendous discrepancies in power dynamics, when one culture's norms and discursive practices dominate, therefore deciding which group to exclude, to govern, and how to generate and perpetuate knowledge. Power creates hierarchy, and leads to the construction of stigmatizing and discriminatory knowledge of the *Other*. The power/knowledge argument determines the socio-political aspect of discourse (Hall 2003).

While agenda-setting is preoccupied with what audiences believe or think (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Scheufele 1999), theory on *intermedia agenda setting* delves into mass-media's potential to influence other media organisations or other mediums. Media scholar Everett M. Rogers suggests that “intermedia processes occur when a mass media message leads to interpersonal communication among peers, which in turn influences behaviour change” (Rogers 2002, p. 201). Rens Vliegthart and Stefaan Walgrave (2008) note that intermedia agenda setting is preoccupied with what a medium does, and it often requires quantitative methods

of investigations. Intermedia effects are empirically studied in various research which focus on entertainment media's relationship to other media (Markovits and Hayden 1980; Soroka 2000; Abad 2016; Coleman and Campbell 2019).

Criticism of intermedia agenda-setting theory focuses on its lack of in-depth analysis of news stories, since it insists upon the sufficiency of time series-analyses to measure agenda (Harder et al. 2017). Therefore, to zoom in on news media discourse which employs the Joker, the present study additionally explores the corpus of analysis from a critical discourse analysis (CDA) perspective, with a focus on news values. CDA encompasses methods of analysing the way that Individuals and Institutions use language, and the specific ways in which language shapes our identities, and our social and political world (Van Dijk 1993; Richardson 2007). Monika Bednarek and Helen Caple (2014) define news values as the selection, ordering, and reporting criteria by which journalists/news workers determine what is newsworthy. The authors suggest news values are not neutral, but ideological in construction, and propose a discursive approach to their analysis. Examples of news values are: timeliness, consonance, negativity, impact, proximity, unexpectedness, superlativeness, personalisation, eliteness (Bednarek 2016; Caple 2018).

To facilitate a critical analysis of representations of identity in user-generated media, the study also employs British cultural studies' principles of critical and interdisciplinary approaches to media discourse and culture. British cultural studies deconstruct the distinction between *culture* and *communications*, and emphasize the heterogeneous connections between media communication, culture, and politics. Douglas Kellner elaborates on Gramsci's model of hegemony and describes the concept as encompassing "ruling, social and cultural forms of domination" (Kellner 2003, p. 31), and ideology as a system of domination that legitimates repressive and oppressive forces and institutions. The author recommends a critical approach to the analysis of class, gender, and race representation, for an extensive exploration of politics of representation (Kellner 2020). Class identity is understood as the link between individuals' attitudes, beliefs, interests, and their socioeconomic position, while race identity is constructed within groups which share a common heritage (Kellner and Share 2019). Gender identity is constructed based on male/female biological and socio-cultural categories of differentiations, which are often internalized as concepts of self on an individual level (Luo and Zhang 2020; Kellner and Share 2019; Erigha 2015).

Since the research is also preoccupied with the representation of mental illness as violent, we define mental illnesses as psychological and neurological health conditions which often generate distress through changes in thought patterns, emotions, behaviour, and the ability to function in social or personal environments (APA). The stereotype of mentally ill portrayal in films often includes an ableist representation of violence and danger associated with mental health issues, which has been proven to shape audiences' understanding of mental disorders, thus generating stigma (Wahl and Lefkowitz 1989; Hylar et al. 1991; Pirkis et al. 2006). Studies focused on Joker films also hone in on the myth's representation of mental illness as violent and their stigmatizing effects (Camp et al. 2010; Durham and Wilkinson 2020; Scarf

et al. 2020). For a semiotic approach to the analysis of user-generated media's politics of representation, the research turns to Stuart Hall (1997), who recognizes Roland Barthes' theoretical contribution to Ferdinand de Saussure's approach, which enables the analysis of meaning to consider myth as metalanguage (Barthes 1991).

Douglas Kellner (2003) posits that media and consumer culture are interdependent in terms of value conformity and institutional practices. Media culture supplies resources, which audiences can either accept, appropriate, remix, modify, or else reject, which is observable through analyses of user-generated media. Media scholar Bradley E. Wiggins explores the relationships between ideology and the construction of meaning through user-generated media as visual arguments, as a signifying practice with intertextual ramifications (Wiggins and Bowers 2015; Wiggins 2019). Intertextuality "means that a given text does not exist as an independent or closed unit or system" (Wiggins 2019, p. 34), for it contains references to elements outside the subject-matter. Internet memes are defined as artifacts of participatory digital culture, due to their virtual physicality, their recursive production, and their community-based consumption (Wiggins 2019). Participatory culture is defined by Henry Jenkins as a culture of social and digital connections which encourage and sustain creative production, expression, and collaboration (Jenkins 2020).

### *Methodology*

In terms of methodology, this study employs a mixed-methods research design, which facilitates a thorough analysis of the sampled data: European and American news media articles that use the word "joker", and international user-generated content in the form of Joker-specific memes. The underlying hypothesis is that the myth's pervasiveness can be observed within news media, outside of discourse which is immediately concerned with reporting on film releases, interviews, actors playing the Joker, film/comic book/video game reviews, which means the Joker trope will be used in articles reporting on matters unrelated to Joker products.

An additional hypothesis is that the Joker story's representation of gender, race, class identities, as well as mental illness as dangerous and associated with violence, will be at least partially reflected in user-generated media discourse. To that end, we ask two main questions:

- RQ1: How is the Joker deployed in news media discourse?
  - » RQ1.1: How do *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* deploy the Joker as a figure of speech over time?
  - » RQ1.2: Which news values construct *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*' discourse that employs the Joker as a figure of speech?
  - » RQ1.3: What type of actors do *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* associate the Joker with?
- RQ2: How is the Joker deployed through user-generated media?
  - » RQ2.1.: How does the r/meme Subreddit community deploy the Joker?

- » RQ.2.2: What type of actors is the Joker associated with by the r/meme Subreddit community?

The first step in the analysis uses the keyword “joker” to search and obtain news media articles which use the word, from a European elite news media outlet, *The Guardian* (n=2715) and an American one, *The New York Times* (n=1489) within a timeframe between January 1st 1999 and December 31st 2020. To identify the articles that employ the Joker as a figure of speech, both corpora were manually coded using the MaxQDA software. Considering the different meanings of the word “joker”, the study thematically codes the articles based on variables dependant on the meaning of the word, as used, with one article set as a single unit of analysis. To answer the first research question (RQ 1.1), the relevant subcorpora were both isolated and investigated based on their frequency of publication (Soroka 2000), through quarterly time series analyses using Tableau Public, which treats the two sets of data variables as interdependent. The purpose of this type of analysis is to examine potential intermedia agenda-setting processes (Soroka 2000; Vliegthart and Walgrave 2008; Abad 2016).

Using a computer-assisted data analysis tool, KH Coder (Higuchi 2016), the subcorpora of articles which employ the Joker as a figure of speech, coded as “The Joker” (n=183/*The Guardian*; n=96/*The New York Times*) are quantitatively analysed through word frequency by POS tags lists, which are generated based on the term frequency analysis of 206,383 words (*The Guardian*), and 132,334 words (*The New York Times*). To answer the next research question (RQ 1.2), the first 100 most frequently-occurring terms of every word form is qualitatively investigated (Bednarek and Caple 2014), therefore manual analysis using concordancing is employed for context and accuracy in interpreting the data.

To answer RQ 1.3, the study employs a word association analysis with the word “joker” as the tagged corpus. The subcorpora of news articles from *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* are analysed as an entire corpus (n=280, word count=338,717), the purpose of which is to determine a general typology of news actors, since the separate analysis of both subcorpora found similar patterns of word use and prevalence of news values. The search entry in KH Coder was set to find associations with Proper Nouns, using H5 (entire article) as a unit of analysis. Manual qualitative analysis of the top 100 most frequent proper nouns associations with the “joker” word, using concordancing, facilitated the categorisation and quantification of a news actors typology.

To investigate the deployment of the Joker myth within user-generated media, the relevant data sample was extracted from highly frequented/followed online meme communities: r/meme Subreddit, where 200 memes were obtained. The data was extracted using an automated data collection tool, Octoparse. The research follows a similar approach in finding the relevant data as with news media discourse, by using the keyword “joker” in the Reddit search engine, since it is necessary to quantify the various uses of the word “joker”, to determine the myths’ pervasiveness in media discourse.



The first step in the analysis uses a qualitative method, namely thematic coding of the data variables, based on the meaning of the word “joker”, and then quantifies the data. To answer RQ 2.1, the analysis focuses on the Joker-related memes and investigates them in terms of form and stance (Wiggins 2019). The data sample is analysed using a qualitative approach: semiotic and intertextual analysis, based on the representation of identity codes: class, race, gender, mental illness in association with violence. RQ 2.2 is answered based on a quantification of elements of intertextuality, which facilitate the determining of an actors’ taxonomy.

### *Analysis and Findings*

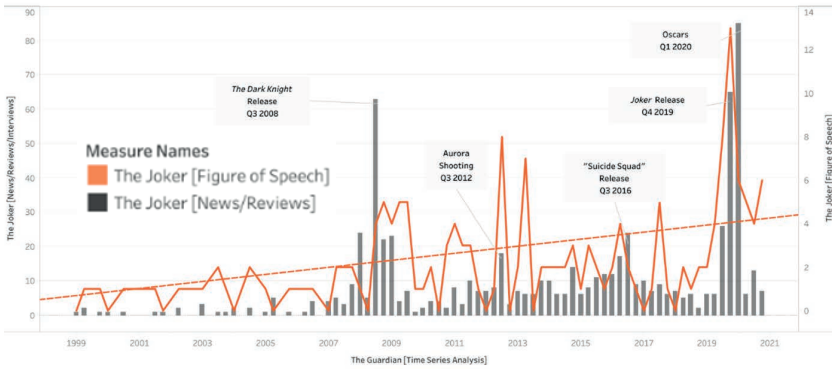
*The Guardian* and *The New York Times* corpora are thematically coded based on the different meaning of the word “joker”: Clown/Practical Joker, The Joker/Batman Film/Story (articles reporting on the films/stories), The Joker (articles using the Joker as a figure of speech in the process of characterizing different news actors), Person/Entity Name, Joker in the Pack, The Joker Card, Joker Sports and Joker Fence.

*The Guardian* used the Clown/Practical Joker meaning of the word in a proportion of 45.4% (n=1223), The Joker/Batman Film/Story 25.7% of times (n=707), The Joker was used 6.74% of times (n=183), Person/Entity name was used 6.7% (n=181), Joker in the Pack was used 6.1% (n=156), The Joker Card, 4.9% (n=133), Joker Sports, 4.7% (n=127), and Joker Fence, 0.1% of times (n=2). *The New York Times* used the Clown/Practical Joker meaning of the word in a proportion of 39.48% (n=588), The Joker/Batman Film/Story 32.3% of times (n=481), Person/Entity name was used 15.4% (n=229), The Joker was used 6.44% of times (n=96), The Joker Card, 4.7% (n=70), Joker in the Pack, 1.2% (n=18), and Joker Sports, 0.5% (n=7). Comparatively, the two outlets use the different meanings of the word “joker” in similar proportions. The Joker as a figure of speech is similarly employed by both news media outlets (6.74% – *The Guardian*; 6.44% – *The New York Times*).

#### *The Guardian – Time Series Analysis*

As seen in fig. 1, the time series analysis reveals a trend of increased frequency of use of the Joker in *The Guardian*’s discourse. After the release of *The Dark Knight* (Nolan 2008), in the third quarter of 2008, the frequency of reporting on the film peaks, and so does the frequency of use of the Joker as a figure of speech. In 2012, following the movie theatre shooting in Aurora, Colorado, United States, attributed to a person who is associated with the Joker character, the use of the Joker as a figure of speech peaks again. The release of *Joker* (2019) in the fourth quarter of 2019 coincides with peaks in both the news reporting on the film (n=65/quarter), and the use of the Joker as a figure of speech (n=13/quarter). In 2020, the frequency of publication on the *Joker* film peaks again around the time of the Academy Awards, where the actor who plays the Joker is awarded (n=85 in 2020, Q1), and the use of the trope is at an average of n=5.5/quarter for the year 2020.

Figure 1. *The Guardian*: Time Series Analysis



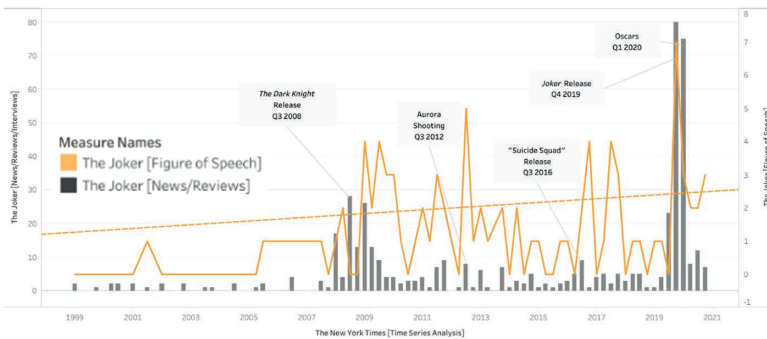
Source: *The Guardian*, Time Series Analysis

The general frequency with which *The Guardian* news reporters employ the Joker trope seems to be dependent on the frequency of news reporting on Batman/Joker stories.

*The New York Times – Time Series Analysis*

As seen in fig. 2, the time series analysis reveals the presence of the same trend of increased frequency of use of the Joker in *The New York Times*'s discourse as *The Guardian*. Although *The New York Times* employs the Joker trope on fewer occasions, the pattern of use is similarly dependant on the popularity of Joker-related products.

Figure 2. *The New York Times*: Time Series Analysis



Source: *The New York Times*, Time Series Analysis

*The Guardian and The New York Times – News Values Analysis*

The analysis of the relevant subcorpora reveals the following news values. Eliteness is similarly constructed by both news media outlets through discourse including nationally and internationally recognisable names (Trump, Obama, Johnson, Clinton, Cameron), role labels, and status markers (Caple 2018), notable examples seen in fig. 3.

Figure 3. High frequency eliteness-constructing words

<b>Word</b>	<b>POS</b>	<b>TF: The Guardian</b>	<b>TF: The New York Times</b>
(Donald) Trump	ProperNoun	293	120
(Barack) Obama	ProperNoun	133	105
(Hillary) Clinton	ProperNoun	52	90
(The White) House	ProperNoun	68	60
President	ProperNoun	46	34
president	Noun	103	79
famous	Adj	43	N/A

Source: own analysis

Proximity is constructed through cultural and community-relevant references and mentions of places or nationalities which are either geographically or culturally close. The ubiquity of the occurrence of proximity-constructing terms is evident in the study’s subcorpora (fig. 4):

Figure 4. High frequency proximity-constructing words

<b>Word</b>	<b>POS</b>	<b>TF: The Guardian</b>	<b>TF: The New York Times</b>
England	ProperNoun	180	N/A
America	ProperNoun	98	50
(The White) House	ProperNoun	68	60
London	ProperNoun	56	N/A
UK	ProperNoun	103	N/A
Broadway	ProperNoun	N/A	43
Los Angeles	ProperNoun	N/A	33
country	Noun	99	72
government	Noun	76	N/A
american	Adj	84	96

Source: own analysis

Negativity is also construed in both subcorpora, through the prevalent use of negative lexis and evaluative language, as well as references to certain negative attitudes or conflicts (fig. 5). Positivity is also constructed here through positive lexis (fig. 6), however, this particular value is not foregrounded, as negative lexis is more prevalent.

Figure 5. High frequency negativity-constructing words

Word	POS	TF: The Guardian	TF: The New York Times
police	Noun	79	71
protest	Noun	N/A	65
gun	Noun	75	N/A
war	Noun	68	25
villain	Noun	53	N/A
attack	Noun	52	36
bad	Adj	80	43
wrong	Adj	59	18
difficult	Adj	31	17
angry	Adj	27	N/A
hard	Adj	24	53
kill	Verb	69	36
fight	Verb	42	N/A
shoot	Verb	N/A	28

Source: own analysis

Figure 6. High frequency positivity-constructing words

Word	POS	TF: The Guardian	TF: The New York Times
good	Adj	203	87
best	Adj	N/A	60
great	Adj	N/A	58
nice	Adj	52	N/A
happy	Adj	21	N/A

Source: own analysis

Superlativeness, as constructed in the corpora, indicates a dramatized intensity of discourse using quantifying and intensifying language (fig. 7):

Figure 7. High frequency superlativeness-constructing words

Word	POS	TF: The Guardian	TF: The New York Times
just	Adv	441	271
really	Adv	179	86
completely	Adv	38	14
increasingly	Adv	27	14
especially	Adv	N/A	22
best	Adj	124	60
huge	Adj	29	N/A
powerful	Adj	28	N/A
important	Adj	N/A	32
major	Adj	N/A	27

Source: own analysis

Consonance is constructed through the widespread use of the Joker trope as a metaphor/simile/metonymy in reference to several types of news actors. The ideological construction of events/actors is firstly evident in the high frequency of occurrence of the “Joker” word as a proper noun, but also the use of other variations and forms of the same word (fig. 8):

Figure 8. Word frequency list of the “joker” word

Word	POS	TF: The Guardian	TF: The New York Times
Joker	ProperNoun	177	103
joker	Noun	27	42
Joker-like	Adj	4	7
jokerise	Verb	2	N/A
joker-esque	Adj	1	2
joker-inspired	Adj	N/A	2
joker-style	Adj	1	2
Joker-Batwoman	ProperNoun	N/A	1
Joker-Obama	ProperNoun	1	N/A
Joker/Obama	ProperNoun	1	N/A
Obama-as-the-Joker	ProperNoun	1	N/A
Obama-as-Joker	ProperNoun	N/A	1
Joker-in-Chief	ProperNoun	1	N/A
Nicholson-is-the-Joker	ProperNoun	1	N/A
Nicholson-as-Joker	ProperNoun	N/A	1
Joker-cum-Cruella	ProperNoun	1	N/A
Jokerised	ProperNoun	1	N/A
joker-era	Noun	1	1
joker-gape	Noun	N/A	1
jokerstairs	Noun	1	N/A
joker-lite	Adj	1	N/A

Source: own analysis

The foregrounding of this news value, which is a highly prevalent value identified in the corpus of analysis, discursively construes events as stereotypical via the Joker symbol, and is worth exploring further. Descriptive and comparison lexis places the Joker in a position of association with other actors in both subcorpora (fig. 11). Concordancing also shows that references to Joker include an assessment of physical features and commodity (fig. 9 and fig. 10), and it further illustrates the construction of newsworthiness through consonance.

Figure 9. “Joker” concordance: *The Guardian*

disdain . They describe him like a Marvel Comics villain - the Joker of genetics , bent on world domination . Even the more mod  
 can be found on the latest Lincoln Town Car . It grins like the Joker , which is just the right allusion , for this sexy limo looks as  
 word with her make-up artist - she 's starting to look like The Joker . -RRB- So I asked Em , as a connoisseur of the lipstick wo  
 i flapped and soared and swooped , like Batman spotting the Joker . " The prime minister should be embarrassed by a wholly il  
 ild have gone to Catherine Zeta-Jones . Jack was playing the Joker . When Moore got up on stage , sandwiched between Stree  
 : Camilla Parker Bowles as Catwoman ; Prince Philip as the Joker ; Derry Irvine as Judge Dredd . ◇ The prime minister arrived  
 id " Right ! " and favoured us with his Jack Nicholson as The Joker grin , the one which looks as if the corners of the mouth will  
 n't know about , reminds me more of Jack Nicholson as the Joker in Batman . At one point , he is watching the Mayor promisi  
 ine Zeta-Jones is tricky . She tries a little too hard , with that Joker smile and fake American accent . On the other hand , she b  
 soap operas and even soapier operas . Like Batman and the Joker , Grant and Phil Mitchell , and Arsenal and Spurs . Yes , ye

Source: own analysis

Figure 10. “Joker” concordance: *The New York Times*

...my Olsen is likened to David Bowie and Madonna, as is the Joker, Batman's nemesis; and Batman is "the Rolling Stones to ...  
 ...ist a lump came into focus. Ms. Becker compared him to the Joker in "Batman": "He has this big white bib and a huge grin."  
 ...and leering with a wicked smile modeled after Heath Ledger's Joker in "The Dark Night." "Ce n'est pas Américain -- c'est Fra  
 ...or a runaway hippie teen. His grin is wide and white, like the Joker's, and when he's laughing, really he's braying. But most  
 ...cene, he seems to be evolving from Mr. Green Jeans into the Joker, with crazily pomaded hair and a blood-red zoot suit -RRB-  
 ...revolting signs. Some showed Barack Obama as a whiteface Joker, and some as Mao and Hitler. The Democrats were traitors a  
 ...to some donors that included depictions of Mr. Obama as the Joker and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid as Scooby Doo. The l  
 ...ler herself, who posted a Photoshopped picture of Johnson in Joker makeup, was exactly on the high road. -RRB- Traffic at her s  
 ...He looks very much like the Batman cartoon he looks like the Joker," said Mr. von Trier, who previously directed Mr. Dafoe in his  
 ...ng that filled it at a recent rally: the president depicted as the Joker and taunted by the declaration that "Hitler gave good speech

Source: own analysis

Consonance is reinforced by other news values seen in language which construes proximity, eliteness, negativity/positivity, and superlativeness. As seen in fig. 11, frequent lexis that is employed in the process of characterisation constructs the Joker stereotype, and the association of descriptive lexis with frequent references to Joker media products establish the connection to the relevant news actors.

Figure 11. High frequency consonance-constructing words

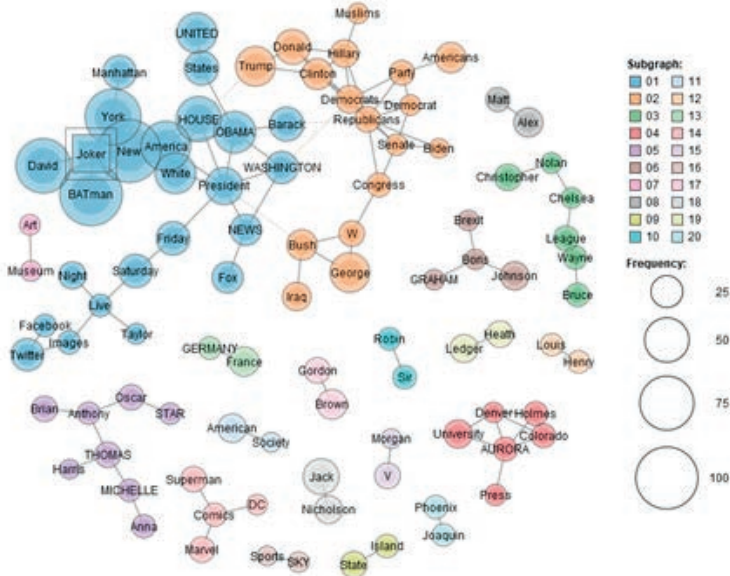
Word	POS	TF: The Guardian	TF: The New York Times
film	Noun	212	156
movie	Noun	N/A	161
story	Noun	107	76
face	Noun	90	65
clown	Noun	73	N/A
smile	Noun	41	42
villain	Noun	53	N/A
superhero	Noun	52	N/A
look	Verb	N/A	145
wear	Verb	N/A	51
political	Adj	85	57
dark	Adj	70	43
dangerous	Adj	26	N/A
violent	Adj	N/A	29
evil	Adj	N/A	17
crazy	Adj	N/A	16
Trump	ProperNoun	293	120
Obama	ProperNoun	133	105
Batman	ProperNoun	139	49
America	ProperNoun	98	50
England	ProperNoun	180	N/A
Arsenal	ProperNoun	52	N/A
Manchester	ProperNoun	33	N/A
Democrats	ProperNoun	N/A	48
Republicans	ProperNoun	N/A	23

Source: own analysis

*News Actors Analysis*

The word association frequency list and resulting co-occurrence network illustrates the top 100 most frequently co-occurring terms (fig. 12):

Figure 12. Word Association Co-occurrence Network



Source: own analysis

It is notable to observe that the construction of binary opposition through comparisons facilitated by consonance lexis, which is further reinforced by superlativeness and negativity/positivity news values, and sustained through eliteness, is also seen in the association with words such as “V” (vs/versus) (document frequency=46).

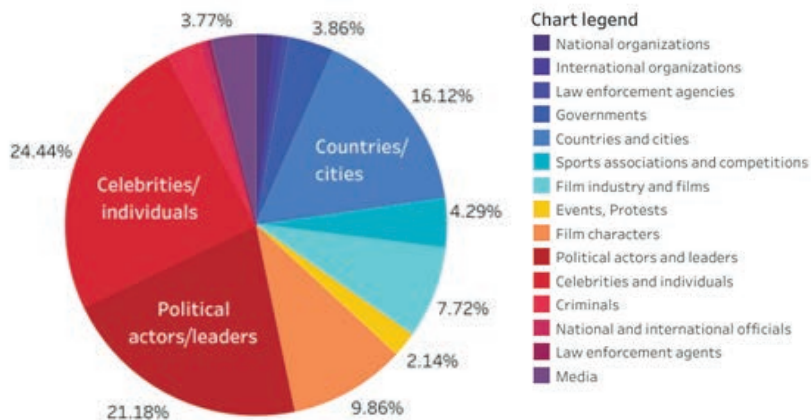
Figure 13. “V” concordance

is at what passes for the pointy end of American politics : protesters v supporters at Donald Trump rallies . There were protests at almost ev  
 se of unity on the right , which is no good for Fox 's narratives of right v wrong , secular liberals v decent Americans . Then there 's just Trump  
 which is no good for Fox 's narratives of right v wrong , secular liberals v decent Americans . Then there 's just Trump 's unpredictability . Lach  
 devil himself . I 'd even be tempted to reframe the series as Daredevil v Kingpin and make the whole thing a sprawling cat-and-mouse two-har  
 patsies to enact it . There is so much of this to Cummings ' ' people vs parliament \* brand of politics , but the patsies -- the Tory MPs -- are y  
 ting a tiki torch and standing a post , let me tell you what a ' ' people vs parliament \* election ultimately means for you . First , if you whip up i

Source: own analysis

The actor types (fig. 14) associated with the Joker are celebrities and individuals (f=438) such as David Beckham, Willem Dafoe, Catherine Zeta-Jones, political actors and leaders (f=379), such as Donald Trump, Barack Obama, George Bush, David Cameron, countries and cities (f=289) like America, England, London, Los Angeles, film characters (f=178), film industry and films (f=139), sports associations and competitions (f=76), criminals (f=55), governments (f=68), media (f=69), events and protests (f=40), national organisations (f=29), international organisations (f=12), law enforcement agencies (f=10), national and international officials (f=9), law enforcement agents (f=5).

Figure 14. News actors typology



Source: own analysis

### Subreddit r/meme Analysis and Results

Since the research is preoccupied with aspects of identity representation present in the deployment of the Joker myth, the relevant sub-codes for semiotic analysis are: class, gender, race (Luo and Zhang 2020; Kellner and Share 2019; Erigha 2015), and mental illness (Chandler 2007; Camp et al. 2010), wherever present. In terms of class, the sub-codes of interest for meme analysis are appearance, commodity, and text/language. As for gender and race, the corpus of analysis is coded depending on numerical representation and quality of representation. For mental illness, the relevant sub-codes are appearance and language.

To examine the corpus of analysis (n=200), the memes are thematically coded based on the meaning of the joker word. Out of 200 memes, 134 (67%) reference the Joker, while 62 (31%) use the word “joker” as Clown/Practical Joker, and 2 (1%) refer to the Joker Card. The following step of the analysis focuses on the 134 Joker memes and investigates them in terms of form, and stance (Wiggins 2019). Most memes had an image-macro form (n=115; 86%), while the rest of the memes were images inserted in another image (n=19; 14%). As for stance, the study found elements signifying class dynamics in (n=11; 8.33%) of the data sample, where class struggle is associated with dilapidation in terms of commodity. In the sample data which present signs of class dynamics (n=2; 18.18%), criminality is associated with lower class. However, 81.81% (n=9) hold a counter-hegemonic stance, based on awareness of what a lack of access to healthcare can cause/lead to.

The analysis of gender representation reveals a high prevalence of sexist myths: in terms of numerical representation, 79.85% (n=107) of memes feature no women, while only 20.14% (n=27) feature one or more women. Out of the memes which feature women, 51.85% (n=14) feature an equal number of women/more women than men, which suggests a counter-hegemonic tendency towards diverse gender



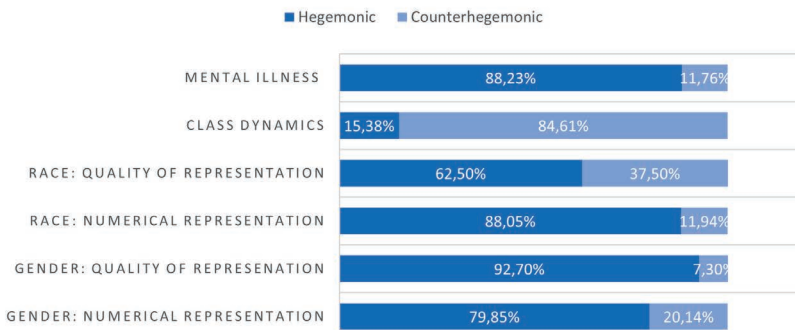
representation. However, in terms of quality of representation, 40.74% (n=11) of the data present women as irrational, or chaotic, 29.62% (n=8) connote the angry woman myth, 22.22% (n=6) present elements of sexual objectification, while only 7.3% (n=2) embody counter-hegemonic stances of gender equality.

The analysis of race representation reveals a high pervasiveness of whitewashing: in terms of numerical representation, 88.05% (n=118) of memes feature no people of colour, and of the 11.94% (n=16) of memes which do feature people of colour, 18.75% (n=3) present a counter-hegemonic stance, in terms of equality of numerical representation, while 81.25% (n=13) of memes which feature a person of colour, the numerical underrepresentation points towards myths of a White-centric world, and 62.5% (n=10) connote myths of the “angry Black woman”.

The analysis of mental illness as dangerous and violent reveals that 25.37% (n=34) of memes present elements which signify mental illness. Out of this data sample, in terms of appearance, 73.52% (n=25) of memes present mental illness as horrific/frightening, in terms of language, 85.29% (n=29) present stereotypes of mental illness as dangerous and violent (“murderous maniac”, “evil”, “depressed and mentally broken”), while 11.76 % (n=4) present mental illness through counter-hegemonic stances.

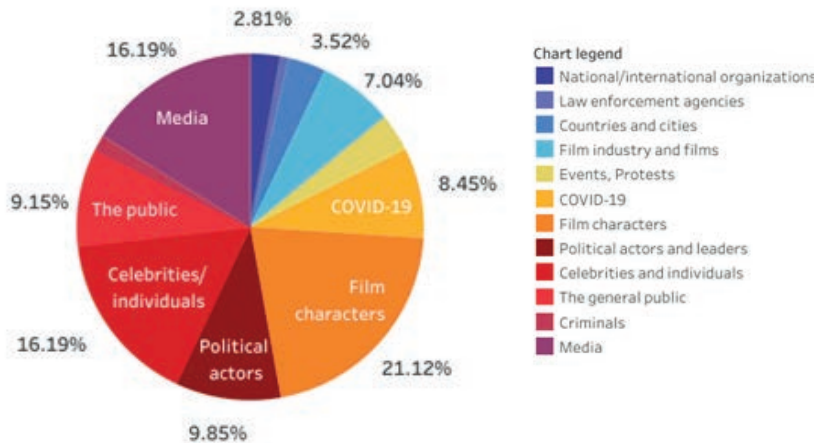
Overall, the corpus of analysis presents elements of hegemonic representations of identity, however, class dynamics stands out as one identity which is counter-hegemonic in its representational stance (fig. 15).

Figure 15. *r/meme* analysis: stance



Source: own analysis

The analysis of elements of intertextuality (fig. 16) reveals some notable and frequent associations with: film characters (n=30; 21.12%), such as Catwoman, Batman; celebrities and individuals (n=23; 16.19%) like Jared Leto, Joaquin Phoenix; media (n=23; 16.19%), which includes video games, social media, and internet meme culture; political actors and leaders (n=14; 9.85%), such as Donald Trump, Bernie Sanders, Adolf Hitler; the general public (n=13; 9.15%); COVID-19 (n=12; 8.45%); countries and cities (n=5; 3.52%); events and protests (n=5; 3.52%); national and international organizations (n=4; 2.81%); criminals (n=2; 1.40%); law enforcement agencies (n=1; 0.70%).

Figure 16. *r/meme* subreddit actors typology

Source: own analysis

## Discussion and Conclusions

The superhero genre presents supervillains as negative heroes, whose lack of morals and justice-based mission statement distinguish them from the heroes whom they antagonize. The Joker does not only elude the law, but through his criminality, automatically legitimizes Batman's violence, vigilantism, and the hero's own precarious relationship with the law. The co-dependent relationship between them and the various historically evolving elements of binary oppositions which they represent reveal the myth's quality as a cultural thermometer. In recent history, the Joker myth's cultural politics was constructed around the opposition of hero-villain dynamics in *The Dark Knight* (2008), and anti-hero/victim-turned-perpetrator against an oppressive society in *Joker* (2019). What was packaged as the spirit of chaotic, anarchic terrorism and underlying criticism of the Bush-Cheney era's corruption and violence through *The Dark Knight's* Joker, turns into an embodiment of lower-class struggles and escalating mental illness state due to lack of access to healthcare through Arthur/Joker's 2019 origin story, which reflects the socio-economic and political morass of the 2010s, and suggests a critical stance towards neo-liberal values. This shifting narrative makes room for a historically-evolving political deployment of the myth, as reflected in news media discourse, as well as user-generated media discourse, seen in various associations found between the Joker and political elites.

This study's analysis of news media discourse reveals manifestations of intermedia agenda-setting processes, as seen in the connection between the release of the highest-grossing Joker-related films and the frequency of use of the Joker myth as a figure of speech in association with different news actors. Furthermore, news

media which employs the Joker as a figure of speech discursively construes events and actors as stereotypical, through the prevalence of consonance, as binary oppositions are built on comparison lexis and the use of the word “versus”. Descriptive and negativity-relevant words such as “villain”, “dangerous”, “crazy”, “evil”, and “violent” construct a stigmatising stereotype through their ableist reference to mental illness as dangerous. Consonance is further reinforced by other news values seen in language which construes proximity, eliteness, and superlativeness, the high prevalence of which makes the Joker myth into a popular resource for the mediatic construction of a derogatory stereotype, often used in association with celebrities such as David Beckham, Willem Dafoe, Catherine Zeta-Jones, and political elites such as Donald Trump, Barack Obama, George Bush, Boris Johnson, and David Cameron. Frequent associations with words such as “political”, “democrats”, “republicans”, and “conservative” perpetuate the Joker’s political function, also manifested in various worldwide protests which were heavily sustained throughout Donald Trump’s US presidency.

In addition, the study finds that the ideological narratives constructed through the Joker myth are partially carried over into user-generated discourse as well. The semiotic analysis of the data reveals that both racist (whitewashing) and sexist (male-centrism) myths are prevalent within the deployment of the Joker myth. This can be explained by the fact that the leads of the Joker/Batman films are male and White, therefore their image is bound to be replicated and remixed. However, in the rare occurrences of racially diverse representation, most images and texts contain elements of sexism and racism. The analysis of class dynamics suggests a general counter-hegemonic stance against perpetuating stigmatising myths regarding poverty. Elements signifying mental illness as violent, though numerically rare in the data sample, connote a hegemonic stance towards mentally disabled individuals, thus revealing underlying ableism.

The analysis of elements of intertextuality within the *r/meme* data sample brings to light patterns of associations that are similar to news media discourse. As such, political actors and celebrities are the prevalent types of actors associated with the Joker (Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, Bernie Sanders). However, the focus on the public and the COVID-19 pandemic is only prevalent in user-generated media. Overall, it can be concluded that meme culture partially perpetuates values which are present in news media discourse, as well as the Joker’s cultural politics, while maintaining counter-hegemonic stances with regards to class identity, and a focus on the public. This suggests, as media effects theories posit, that audiences’ belief systems and attitudes are sometimes encouraged by certain media, and other times audience members can discern between certain social realities and the homogenous, ideological meaning-making within Hollywood mass-produced media and other institutions.

This study’s analysis of international media discourse indicates that some forms of mass-produced media can function as an agenda-setter in relation to other mediums. The research reveals discrepancies in power dynamics, as the Joker stereotype serves as a tool for mockery, shame, and dramatization of events. As Henry Jenkins

posits, the supervillain symbol represents current social and political struggles, and this can be observed through this study's findings, which reveal a tendency for international media discourse to associate the Joker with power elites. The pervasiveness of the myth is visible in different forms of media discourse, which indicates the high level of reach that a mass-produced, mass-distributed Hollywood film can have. In conclusion, Joker epitomizes how a myth narrative can adapt and permeate multiple media forms, even step outside of screens and into real life.

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## STRESZCZENIE

### **Mit Jokera jako zapośredniczony stereotyp w międzynarodowym dyskursie medialnym.**

Niniejsze studium jest krytyczną analizą wszechobecności Jokera w międzynarodowym dyskursie medialnym. Badanie porównawcze analizuje obecność mitu w tekstach *The Guardian* i *The New York Times* (1999–2020) oraz określa procesy ustalania agendy intermedialnej. Wykorzystując podejście lingwistyki korpusowej, artykuł analizuje również wykorzystanie Jokera jako figury retorycznej w mediach w celu zidentyfikowania ważnych wartości informacyjnych. Wyniki wskazują na przewagę: współbrzmienia, elitarności, bliskości, negatywizmu i superlatywizmu. Ponadto w badaniu zbadano rolę, jaką media tworzone przez użytkowników odgrywają w utrwalaniu lub zwalczaniu dominujących hegemonii, poprzez semiotyczną analizę memów internetowych. Badanie wykazało, że Joker jest popularnym źródłem do konstruowania obraźliwego stereotypu związanego z przekonaniami seksistowskimi, rasistowskimi i dyskryminującymi, często w powiązaniu z elitami politycznymi (Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, Barack Obama) i służy jako narzędzie do kpin, wywoływania wstydu i dramatyzacji wydarzeń.

**Słowa kluczowe:** ustanawianie agendy, *agenda-setting*, memy internetowe, wartość informacyjna, semiotyka, stereotyp

