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## The Joker Controversy: An Origin Story

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The *Joker* Controversy: An Origin Story

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### Abstract

The Joker has been in the Batman comics for over 80 years and appeared on small and large screen as Batman's violent arch-nemesis. In the month prior to its theatrical release, commentary about the 2019 film *Joker* spurred a viral media reaction with concerns about the film inciting violence. To understand this phenomenon, we used Google Trends to trace a timeline of online media reactions mapped to events. Then, we analyzed over 200 news stories, commentary articles, and film reviews for explanatory narratives. We noted four key moments: the Venice Film Festival; an open letter by family members of victims of the 2012 mass shooting at an Aurora, Colorado theater playing *The Dark Knight Rises*; the reaction of the film's star to questions about inspiring violence; and military warnings about possible violence at theaters. We also discovered that a handful of influential movie reviews facilitated the framing of the wider media narrative around socio-political hot topics, particularly mass shootings and "incels." The individual events, wedged into this narrative, gave the story legs. This fueled a short-burst media frenzy about the so-called controversy surrounding the film, which abated shortly after the film's release. We argue that pop cultural beliefs about the Joker character, media environments, social context, and the parceling of sensational storylines contributed to the viral reaction.

*Keywords:* Joker, media violence, viral media

## Introduction

The Joker has been in the Batman comics for over 80 years and has repeatedly appeared on the small and large screen as Batman’s violent arch-nemesis since the 1960s, yet it was not until the 2019 film *Joker* (Phillips, 2019) that concerns about the eponymous character inspiring violence were widely expressed. Notably, speculation about the film inspiring violence occurred even prior to *Joker* receiving theatrical release. The growing controversy involved several key players and events, which generated a viral media response. At the end of August 2019, the extended trailer for *Joker* was released, leading into the film’s debut screening at the Venice Film Festival. In the weeks that followed, the movie continued to generate buzz. By the end of September 2019, concerns appeared to grow rapidly about the upcoming movie inciting violence. A particularly high-profile open letter was issued by a group of people whose loved ones were murdered in the 2012 mass shooting at an Aurora, Colorado theater during a showing of *The Dark Knight Rises*.

A burst of online and social media activity in the form of articles, movie reviews, and news stories accompanied these events. Such reporting and commentary culminated in the presence of undercover police stationed at a handful of theaters playing *Joker*, some theaters banning costumes and masks at showings, and others either not showing the film or closing entirely for safety concerns (Zeitchik, 2019a). Nevertheless, after its October 2019 opening, *Joker* became the first R-rated film to gross over one billion U.S. dollars and was one of the most profitable in the superhero genre given its smaller budget relative to other blockbusters (Rubin, 2019). Some of that revenue may have been generated by the free publicity created by the viral controversy surrounding the film (Zeitchik, 2019a). The commercial success of *Joker* is particularly notable given some claims that the relatively small budget (at least for a film about a famous comic book character) reflected a lack of studio enthusiasm and perhaps even some resistance to the film being made (e.g., Master, 2019).

Film controversy is nothing new. For example, as far back as 1908 local authorities successfully banned the silent film *Night Riders* from playing (Vaughn, 1990). A more systematic way of regulating social morality and violence in films occurred with the establishment of the Production Code. From 1934 until the mid-1950s, the Production Code was used to evaluate over 20,000 films with the goal of having “each film clearly identify evil, make sin and crime appear as deviant behavior, [and] have strong character ‘stars’ play roles representing good” (Black, 1989, p. 187). The Production Code was replaced by the modern motion picture ratings system in 1968, but controversies around film have continued, with both *Clockwork Orange* (Kubrick, 1971) and *Natural Born Killers* (Stone, 1994) being accused of inspiring murders (Phillips, 2008).

Criticism of films has also focused on the timing and socio-political context of when films are released. For example, the film *Phone Booth* (Schumacher, 2003) was postponed after the sniper attacks in Washington D.C. (Welkos, 2002). Netflix postponed events for its streaming show based on Marvel Comics’ *The Punisher* in response to the mass shooting in Las Vegas (Cavna, 2017). The effect of broader social events on how films are evaluated was also seen with the rebooted *Death Wish* (Roth, 2018), which starred Bruce Willis as the gun-toting, homicidal, white vigilante. The film was decried as being offensive and tone-deaf following the Parkland, Florida mass shooting, the rise of white supremacy, and high-profile cases of police brutality (Gleiberman, 2018). Criticism of this film began with the initial trailer, with an article from *Collider* stating that the trailer feels “particularly icky considering our politics and cultural environment” because the film gives the impression of “a white knight fantasy where a white guy gets to be a famous hero by killing off criminals” (Goldberg, 2018).

In the viral media flurry surrounding *Joker*, concerns about copycat killings and the appropriateness of the film’s message were voiced repeatedly. Although neither of these qualities were unique to *Joker*, a deeper explanation is needed to explain how *Joker* became engulfed in such a controversy more than a month before its public release. This case study of *Joker* also provides insight into the processes underlying so-called “viral” reactions to perceived controversies. This paper argues that a controversy as large as the one that loomed over

*Joker* was constructed from several elements, including the qualities of the Joker character himself, the public's cognitive associations with the Joker, key media sources, online entertainment news and social media, and a ripe socio-political context. In this study, we used qualitative media analysis to trace the origins and development of the viral reaction over *Joker*, analyzing how the different pieces of the Joker character, past and current social and political events, media environment, and key media players all contributed to *Joker* being one of the most controversial films in recent memory.

### Literature Review

According to affective disposition theory, audiences form moral judgements about characters in media content, and their enjoyment of media content is boosted when moral characters are rewarded and immoral characters are punished (Zillman & Bryant, 1994). Script writing also capitalizes on this psychological tendency, with characters who transgress moral precepts and engage in anti-social behavior more likely to be killed (Ménard et al., 2019; Welsh, 2010). Audiences can form initial judgements about a character being a hero or villain, which then influences how they perceive the unfolding behavior of the character (Raney, 2004; Sanders, 2010). Thus, if audiences perceive a character as a hero, they may interpret that individual's behavior more charitably than if they perceive someone as a villain. Moreover, the presence of a definitive villain can heighten perceptions of the hero being heroic (Grizzard et al., 2018).

Not all characters, however, are presented as purely good or evil. Antiheroes are characterized by their flaws, morally ambiguity, and even selfishness, but also have a story arc of redemption or act on the balance as a force for good (Shaffer & Raney, 2012; Ulqinaku et al., 2021). Films typically provide sympathetic moral reasons for why antiheroes might engage in questionable behavior, which allows viewers to “look beyond the particular sins, assume that a greater good is being served, lend their emotional support to the protagonist, and enjoy the show” (Shafer & Raney, 2012, p. 1038). Audiences may even feel warmly toward a villain if the character behaves less evil than expected (Bonus et al., 2021).

Relatedly, the type of character who uses violence and to what end also may affect how a film is received. Phillips (2008) notes that film violence tends to engender controversy when it is used to challenge the status quo, whereas violence is more palatable when it is used to reinforce the status quo. Film violence depicting the U.S. military, law enforcement, or cowboys has long been tolerated by film critics, the Production Code, and modern movie ratings. In contrast, depictions of violence by mobsters like *Scarface* (Hawks, 1932) and *Bonnie & Clyde* (Penn, 1967), by serial killers in movies like *Clockwork Orange* or *Natural Born Killers*, or by racial minorities in movies like *Do The Right Thing* (Lee, 1989), generate much more controversy about the ethical considerations of film violence.

In order to become a viral national controversy, an event or film must receive sustained media coverage. An existing problem or issue often gets national news coverage when a striking event serves as a catalyst for a larger discussion (Downs, 1972). Journalists process and interpret an event by drawing on like-minded constructs in their stored memory, as well as contemporary events (Zhong & Newhagen, 2009). They often try to peg an emerging news story to a broader, trending topic to increase the story's relevance (Allsop, 2021). Similarly, journalists sometimes draw on news icons, in which they use a well-known event as a symbol for broader concerns, even reconstructing the meaning of the event to fit current interpretations. Examples of this include the Tiananmen Square crackdown as symbolic of Chinese communist dictatorship and later of human rights abuses (Lee et al., 2011), the beating of Rodney King as a symbol of police brutality and racism (Lawrence, 1996; Solomon, 2004), and later the protests surrounding the deaths of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown as emblems of the Black Lives Matter movement (Kilgo et al., 2019). Thus, current events can help structure the ways in which journalists interpret and contextualize their stories, which can lead to an event (or film) being seen as emblematic of some larger issue.

The journalistic decision on whether and how to cover something may also depend on its perceived newsworthiness. Traditional journalism, such as *The New York Times* or *CBS Evening News*, tends to be among the most committed to journalistic standards of accuracy, balance, and emphasizing public affairs stories, whereas other outlets focus more on scandal, political advocacy, and human interest stories (Entman, 2005). In the changing media landscape, traditional news media have increasingly focused less on hard public policy stories and more on stories characterized by personalization, sensationalism, human interest themes, entertainment, and crime (Balmas & Sheaffer, 2013; Henderson, 2020; Seo, 2018). This latter tendency is especially pronounced in the rise of online “clickbait media,” putting even traditional media outlets under pressure to provide eye-catching headlines and entertaining stories to capture audience attention (Munger, 2020). Importantly, content that has the capacity to stimulate anger or anxiety (Berger & Milkman, 2012) and that appeals to curiosity and “what people are talking about” (Rayson, 2017) is more likely to capture attention. In the current media environment, an event’s newsworthiness is shaped by news values, such as conflict and controversy, entertainment and drama, cultural relevance, arresting audio-visual elements, shareability, and follow-up on stories already in the news (Harcup & O’Neill, 2017).

Sources also play an important role in the construction of news stories, providing critical building blocks for framing a story. Historically, journalists generally prefer elite sources that are perceived to be well-known, high profile, and/or legitimate sources of information, such as politicians or representatives of the government or corporations (e.g., Fishman, 1980; Hayes & Guardino, 2010; Tuchman, 1972). Such routine sources have also come to include other media via re-reporting other outlets’ high interest stories or exclusive interviews (Wheatley, 2020a). Decisions regarding how to cover and frame a story depend in part on how these elite and routine sources are discussing an issue (e.g., Bennett, 1990; Entman, 2003; Henderson, 2020). However, there are situations in which non-elite and institutionally unaffiliated sources break into news stories, including people associated with leaks and unexpected events (Wheatley, 2020a). Non-elite, non-routine sources are accorded news coverage when they have a personal, emotive link with an issue (Bosch, 2014; Wheatley, 2020b). When deciding to include non-elite sources, journalists seek perceived authenticity, emotional pull, and impromptu testimonials (Sobieraj, 2010). For example, following the Parkland, Florida mass shooting several students from Douglas High School received national media attention in outlets like the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Time* magazine as gun control activists (Alter, 2018; Ottesen, 2019; Turkewitz & Chokshi, 2018).

Once a story receives sufficient news coverage, self-reinforcing elements help sustain coverage. Media outlets search for (seemingly) related stories that parallel the event to provide additional context (Boydston et al., 2014). News stories are also sustained by the tendency of journalists to imitate each other and a willingness to lower gatekeeping standards once a story is in the news cycle, such that less elite sources are considered (Boydston, et al., 2014). Indeed, contemporary media environments involve multiple gatekeepers, including elite sources, journalists and writers across a variety of platforms, and the audience/users who share stories across their social media networks (Kraft et al., 2020). Social media buzz therefore plays another important role in influencing news media and sustaining a story (Jang et al., 2019). In a news media landscape that has come to rely on pageviews to create revenue, public affairs news is far less profitable than popular content (Nelson, 2021). Moreover, social media algorithms favor popular content; news outlets are pressured to publish online content that appeals to these algorithms in order to generate clicks. Editors and journalists, in their role as marketers of stories, create more (and more) of the content people are likely to share (Henderson, 2020; Tandoc & Vos, 2016).

### A Case Study of *Joker*

Prior scholarship emphasizes that characters, current social context, and media environment are key elements that catapult films into controversy and spur viral reactions. We used *Joker* as a case study to understand viral media reactions about film and other media. Our process began organically, as we watched these events emerge in real-time on social media (i.e., Twitter trends for “Joker” and #Joker) in late summer and early Fall 2019. During that time, we began flagging and cataloguing stories as we saw them appear, as well as reviewing Google search trends.

In late fall 2019 and early 2020, we began a more systematic effort to collect articles via Google searches, using trend data as a guide and placing parameters by dates. To collect our sample, we would search “Joker” on Google, and limit the search to “news” using the search menu. The news limitation was used to keep the focus on journalistic publications rather than blogs and the like. Then, using “tools” we selected a date range, monthly for the periods when interest was low (e.g., February 1, 2019 – February 28, 2019) and weekly for periods when interest was piqued (e.g., September 1, 2019 – September 7, 2019). The subsequent results were driven by popularity and algorithm, and we reviewed the results with selection criteria in mind. We focused on established commercial entities/publications and English-speaking sources, primarily in the United States. We gave preference to well-known news and entertainment sources, although we included articles from sites that more narrowly focus on comic book-related entertainment. The film, its cast/director, and/or the reaction to them had to be the primary topic of the article in order to be selected. If an article was reposted or updated, we made note of the date but coded the first occurrence.

Our approach relied on qualitative media analysis (QMA; Altheide & Schneider, 2013), developed from Altheide’s (1987) ethnographic content analysis. The goal of QMA is to discover how mediated materials communicate meaning, and the emphasis is placed on gathering descriptive, conceptual, and contextual data, rather than simply counting occurrences of pre-designated terms or themes. The procedures for data collection, analysis, and interpretation are also reflexive, with researchers deliberating over observations as the process unfolds and accommodating conceptual or theoretical nuances. For example, when it became clear early in our project that news and entertainment stories were quoting and/or hyperlinking to prominent movie reviews, we also incorporated online movie reviews into the study. We followed a similar procedure as above for gathering movie reviews via Google but more narrowly limited the dates to center around the Venice, Toronto, and New York film festivals and the movie’s theatrical release.

QMA coding protocols are oriented conceptually rather than categorically, so that data collection was guided by a rubric that passed through several stages of theoretically- and empirically-driven development. The final coding rubric included: whether certain terms appeared in the article, allowing for open-cataloguing of synonyms (e.g., mental illness; violence; incel;<sup>1</sup> mass shooting; dark; danger; fear; nihilist); what other movies or movie characters were referenced; what real-world criminal events and suspects/offenders were named; and whether the article contained certain themes, again allowing for open-ended coding (e.g., stigmatizes mental illness; incites/inspires violence; triggers receptive people; elicits empathy; elicits discomfort; racism; classism; sexism; political commentary; social commentary).

As with any content analysis, however, it is important to acknowledge the limitations posed by human coding. Although the open-ended format of the protocol precluded the use of standard metrics to assess inter-rater reliability, in accordance with the reflexive nature of QMA, our three-person research team met during the data collection process to discuss both recurrent and emergent themes. We compared notes, discussed our coding and interpretations, and made adjustments to achieve understanding and consensus, which facilitated

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<sup>1</sup> “Incel” is the popular term for “involuntary celibate,” referring to men who express distrust of women and misogynist and anti-feminist views, perceiving challenges to their masculinity that affect romantic relationships (Daly & Reed, 2022).

consistency across our observations. Other researchers engaged in their own reflexive processes may distill different themes or find unique relationships among elements within and across articles/reviews. In the future, such analyses would yield additional insight into the results detailed here.

All together, we analyzed 175 articles and 45 reviews. First, we traced a timeline of the reactions using Google trends as a starting point, followed by an analysis of trends across articles. Then, we analyzed the content and connections among news and entertainment articles and movie reviews in order to discover what narratives about the movie emerged and how they contributed to the viral reaction. Additionally, we watched both the April 2019 teaser trailer and the August 2019 final trailer (available at <https://www.joker.movie/>).<sup>2</sup>

## Results and Analysis

### Internet Trends

[Google Trends data](#) have been employed across of a range of research applications, given its broad utility in tracking the public's online information-seeking activities (Gummer & Oehrlein, 2022; Jun et al., 2018). Google Trends data takes a random sample of searches from the billions of searches made every day, filtering out as much as possible duplicate searches (those from the same user over a short period of time). Google Trends data are also normalized as a proportion of searches during the specified time period and geographic location. A "spike" in a topic means that many users are performing a search about the topic, not popularity per se, nor should it be interpreted as a scientific poll about interest in a topic. Rather, spikes reflect an abrupt acceleration of search interest compared to baseline interest in the search term, and a value of 100 represents peak search interest in the period (Rogers, 2016).<sup>3</sup>

As a starting point, we examined Google Trends non-realtime data to see how searches for the term "Joker" trended over time the month leading into summer film festivals (August 1, 2019) to the month after the film's release (November 30, 2019). The United States was the geographic parameter for the sample. We also examined similar searches narrowing by the categories "arts and entertainment," "news," and "law and government" to gain additional understanding of how *Joker* moved from general and entertainment interests (e.g., film festivals) and into crime and law-related interests (e.g., mass shootings). Trends were generally the same, and there was consistency in key dates (see Figure 1). The highest point of interest, to which other points on the figure are scaled, was the day after the movie's premiere (October 5). The "buzz" began with the release of the full movie trailer (August 28), the screenings for critics and attendees at the Venice film festival (August 31), and the Toronto film festival (September 9, 2019). On September 23, a group of Aurora families released an open letter regarding the movie (more on this below), and the trend lines begin increasing rapidly. There was also a noticeable increase in the "law and government" subcategory.

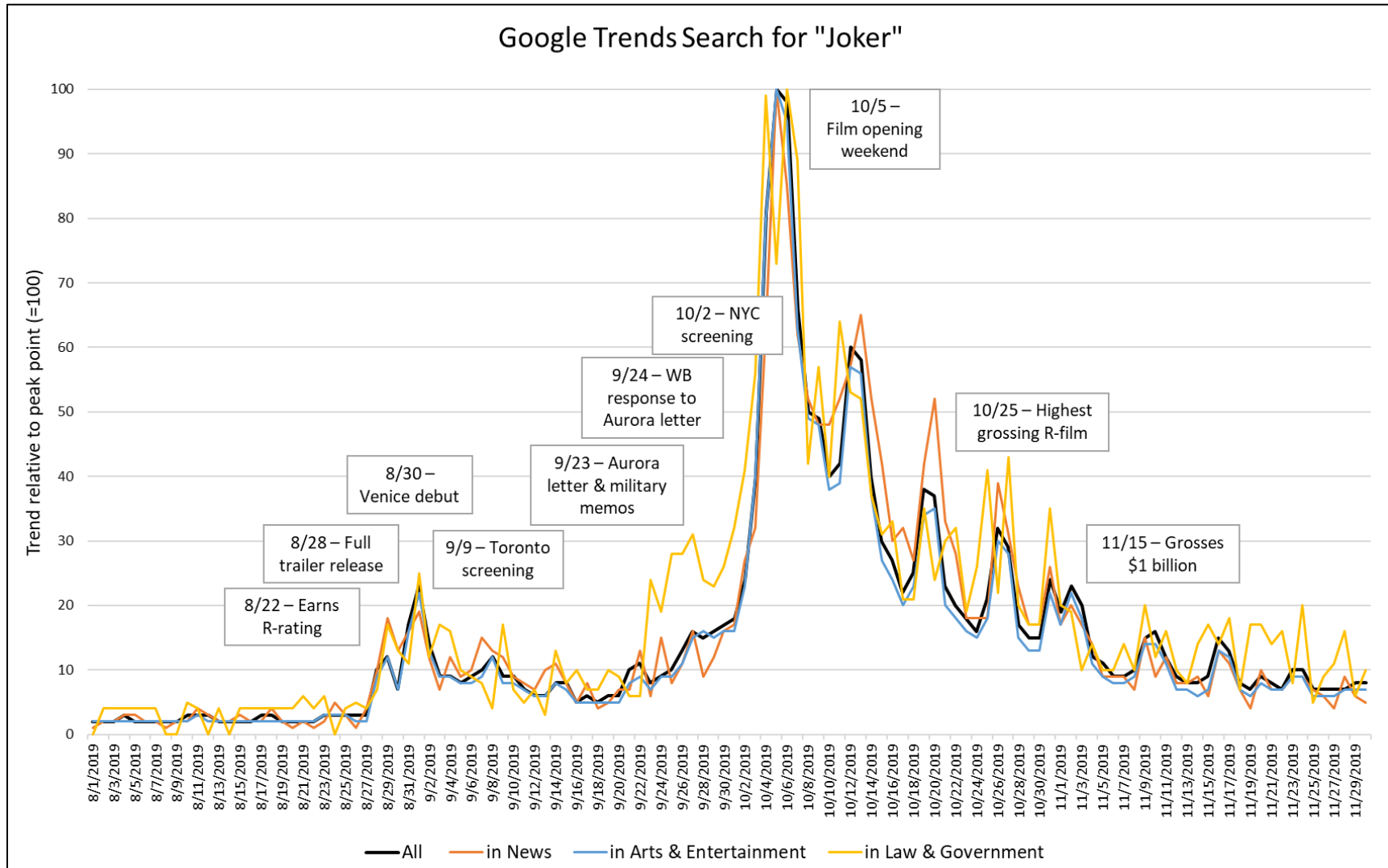
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<sup>2</sup> In order to keep our focus on the conversation and narratives leading into the film, we intentionally refrained from viewing the film itself until our analysis neared completion.

<sup>3</sup> See also Google Trends frequently asked questions at <https://support.google.com/trends/answer/4365533?hl=en>



Figure 1. Google Trends Search for “Joker” August 1, 2019 to November 30, 2019



Following opening weekend, the trend lines decline; the peaks are associated with weekends, presumably when more people were seeing the film in theaters. Likely, these peaks reflect searches for movie listings and pieces in weekend news outlets. Other noteworthy points, not shown in the figure, but noticeable on a February 2019 to February 2020 trend were the debut of the teaser trailer at CinemaCon (April 2-6, 2019), and points during nomination and movie award season in late 2019 and into 2020. The film's star, Joaquin Phoenix, was nominated for several major best actor awards, and the film itself received nominations in best picture and best director categories, among others.<sup>4</sup>

## Article Trends

The trend lines confirmed what our in-the-moment observations suggested: the buzz generated around the film festivals and a subsequent “viral jump” in the number of articles at the end of September 2019. Our sample includes 13 articles collected in the spring and early summer, from February 20 to July 8, 2019, and 16 articles collected in the winter film awards season from December 27, 2019 to February 10, 2020. In the four months corresponding to our Google Trend data (August through November 2019), 87% of our sample (101 articles and all 45 reviews) was published. In the 12 days between the release of the Aurora letter (September 24) and the movie's release (October 5) associated with the rapid increase and peak of the Google Trend curve, 65 articles and 20 reviews were posted – 39% of the sample. The month following (October 6 through November 6) contained only 18% of the sample. Together, the spike in searches for “Joker” from September 24 to November 6 corresponded to 56% of articles and reviews in the sample.

Our qualitative media analysis revealed trends in the articles themselves. There were consistencies: contrasts to other actors who have played the Joker, especially Heath Ledger and Jack Nicholson; frequent comments about the influence of Martin Scorsese films, particularly *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *The King of Comedy* (1982); and uniform references to mental illness, violence, darkness, and nihilism. Indeed, Warner Bros.' own description of the film reflects these connotations: “The exploration of Arthur Fleck, a man disregarded by society, is not only a gritty character study, but also a broader cautionary tale”([www.warnerbros.com/movies/joker](http://www.warnerbros.com/movies/joker)).

Prior to the full trailer release and the movie's screening at the Venice Film Festival, commentary in the bulk of the articles we collected largely fixated on discussions about the Joker character in the Batman universe, and comparisons among comic book arcs, as well as among television, films, and actors. Articles from the spring and early summer, prior to the extended trailer and film festival premiers, portended things to come. A February 2019 article about the film's production ponders:

A grim and sometimes disturbingly violent drama released in an era when mass shootings have become terribly common – and when there's understandably increased scrutiny on media that indulges in that type of aggression – *Joker* can't help but be shadowed by the headlines of its era. (Ravenola, 2019)

Following the release of the teaser trailer in April 2019 at CinemaCon, a few entertainment reporters took notice, writing about the film's distance from typical comic-inspired films and its Scorsese-style flair (Cavna, 2019). By mid-August, in the wake of the film being labeled with an R-rating, there was reference to the growing interest in – and speculation about – the film: “With a character that is known and a film that doesn't seem to fit any mold of what's come before, some wildly inaccurate information has circulated around the internet” (Bahr, 2019a).

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<sup>4</sup> *Joker* awards and nominations ([https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7286456/awards/?ref =tt\\_awd](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7286456/awards/?ref =tt_awd))

Shortly after the full trailer's release in late August, the focus of the articles shifted, moving beyond niche comic or entertainment sites and into news/commentary sites, and introducing specific real-life crimes or offenders. For example, on August 30 the *Washington Examiner* ran a commentary piece based on the author's viewing of the trailer:

So when considering *Joker*, it's hard not to think of the mass shooters that have seized on the anxieties of so many Americans. When these individuals commit massacres and end up on the news, their profiles are never identical, but they certainly have common elements. And Arthur Fleck appears to mesh pretty well with that profile. (Kent, 2019)

Kent continues by listing mass shootings at Charleston, El Paso, Dayton, Las Vegas, and Aurora. On August 31, articles and reviews singling out Aurora and the "shooting at *The Dark Knight Rises*" appear. By September 2, articles began naming specific criminals, drawing parallels to perpetrators purportedly "inspired" by movies including John Hinckley,<sup>5</sup> a couple implicated in *Natural Born Killers* copycat crimes, perpetrators who fit the lone disaffected "incel" male profile (e.g., Eliot Rodger, perpetrator of a 2014 spree murder in Isla Vista, California), and Aurora perpetrator James Holmes. Reviews were more reticent about naming names, and seemed more interested in Hinckley and in drawing comparisons to the 1984 offenses of Bernie Goetz as a man "fed-up" with 1980s New York crime who shot four African American teens who approached him for money on a subway.

Articles' references to other films also shifted in response to trends. *The Dark Knight* (Nolan, 2008) was routinely mentioned, certainly because it featured Heath Ledger's Oscar-winning performance as the Joker. *Suicide Squad* (Ayer, 2016) and *Batman* (Burton, 1989) were also discussed; these films also feature the Joker as an antagonist (starring Jared Leto and Jack Nicholson, respectively). *The Dark Knight Rises*, which does not feature the Joker, was mentioned only twice by name until September 24. After that date – in the wake of the Aurora letter (details below) – *The Dark Knight Rises* figured prominently in the articles. Whereas earlier articles tended to list several movies (e.g., several superhero films), at this point *The Dark Knight Rises* was often the only one listed or listed with one or two others. However, in the weeks after the film's release, *The Dark Knight Rises* slowly fades, replaced again by lists of several films, reflecting the new buzz around likely award nominations. Unlike the articles, the reviews never really picked up the narrative around *The Dark Knight Rises*, favoring instead comparisons to Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* and *The King of Comedy* – both of which feature *Joker* co-star Robert DeNiro – or listing several films like early articles did.

Reporters and reviewers at the Venice Film Festival were under an embargo regarding what they could write about the film, limiting pertinent plot points and content to avoid spoilers (Kiang, 2019). For the full month of September, the only thing most people – outside of attendees at Venice or Toronto – had for context about *Joker* were trailers for the movie, movie reviews, and interviews with the actors and the director. Yet, there was no shortage of speculation and commentary about *Joker*. Almost immediately, the film generated "controversy" (a term first mentioned August 31). In lieu of reviews and original reporting, commentary articles or "think pieces" repackaged ideas gleaned from reviews or social media posts, particularly tweets. During the early weeks of September, two overlapping themes emerged from these articles: the movie celebrating incels and the movie inspiring violent crime. These themes were frequently couched in the context of three mass shootings that occurred in the month prior to the Venice Festival (Gilroy, California, July 28; El Paso, Texas, August 3; Dayton, Ohio, August 4).

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<sup>5</sup> John Hinckley attempted to assassinate President Ronald Reagan in 1981. Hinckley had become obsessed with *Taxi Driver* and its star, actor Jodie Foster.

The slow churn of speculation about the portrayal of the Joker character, incels, and mass shootings caught the attention of a subset of family members and friends of people murdered in an Aurora, Colorado movie theater during a showing of *The Dark Knight Rises* in 2012. In their [open letter](#) to the CEO of Warner Bros. delivered on September 23 (Phillips et al., 2019), and subsequently reported by *The Hollywood Reporter* on September 24 (Parker, 2019), the writers described the Aurora event as “perpetrated by a socially isolated individual who felt ‘wronged’ by society,” echoing a common theme in the media. “When we learned that Warner Bros. was releasing a movie called ‘Joker’ that presents the character as a protagonist with a sympathetic origin story, it gave us pause.” They called on Warner Bros. not to censor or pull the movie from release, but rather to use their influence to lobby for gun safety and gun reform. One of the letter’s authors, however, told *The Hollywood Reporter*:

My worry is that one person who may be out there – and who knows if it is just one – who is on the edge, who is wanting to be a mass shooter, may be encouraged by this movie. And that terrifies me. (Parker, 2019)

Like others who were writing prior to the movie’s opening, the authors of the letter had not seen the film and were presumably writing based on details of the film reported in the media.

In the same window as the Aurora letter, two other events piled on the fuel. First, in an interview with *The Telegraph*, reported on September 23 in other outlets, the film’s star Joaquin Phoenix left an interview when the reporter asked about the film possibly “inspiring exactly the kind of people it’s about, with potentially tragic results” (Pulliam-Moore, 2019). Phoenix reportedly called Warner Bros., then returned to the interview, saying he had not thought about the issue until the question was asked (Schwartz, 2019). The interview itself went “viral” (Sharf, 2019), and subsequent coverage continued to highlight the perceived controversy of the message and possible effects of *Joker* (e.g., Murray, 2019).

The next day, news broke that the U.S. military had issued two separate internal warnings regarding possible threats to theaters on *Joker*’s release (Cameron, 2019). The first of these warnings specifically referred to “involuntary celibate (‘incel’) extremists replicating the 2012 theater shooting in Aurora, Colorado.” The second referred to “an intelligence bulletin regarding a credible potential mass shooting to occur at an unknown movie theater during the release of the new Joker movie.” Both advised situational awareness for those who may attend the movie. Shortly thereafter, the FBI and U.S. Department of Homeland Security issued a similar intelligence bulletin to law enforcement (Shortell, 2019). Some movie theaters reacted by beefing up security (Celona & Moore, 2019; Shalby, 2019), setting no-masks and other rules for movie-goers (Telford, 2019), and, in the case of the Aurora theater, deciding not to show the movie (Butzer, 2019).

Responses to the Aurora letter and other statements made by Warner Bros. (Whitten, 2019), director Todd Phillips (Donnelly, 2019; Hibberd, 2019), and Phoenix (Vejvoda, 2019) drew additional media attention. Outlets were quick to report on these reactions as stand-alone stories. Together, these series of events fueled a large burst of articles, both in commentary and news forms. Articles absorbed these news elements (i.e., Aurora letter, military warnings, theater security, interviews) into their broader reactions to the growing controversy (e.g., Bahr, 2019b; Cornish, 2019; Dickson, 2019; Sims, 2019). For instance, reporter Mike Chericco (2019) opined, “There is nothing funny about the controversies surrounding Warner Bros.’ ‘Joker’ movie.”

Despite the concerns elevated in the media, there were only a handful of reports about minor incidents during the film’s opening weekend (Rawden, 2019; Reeves, 2019). None of the mass violence portended by the military, journalists, and pundits materialized. Nevertheless, older articles and reviews that had first appeared in late August and early September were updated to reflect on the controversy, then reposted to social media (e.g., Jones, 2019; Vox, 2020). New reviews and articles duly reflected on the controversy, embedding those issues into their pieces (e.g., Coyle, 2019; Ware, 2019). Over the course of six weeks post-opening, *Joker* grossed one

billion dollars, setting a record for an R-rated film (Rubin, 2019). As a broader audience saw and digested the film, the rush of commentators to posit “what-ifs,” to issue cautions, and to condemn the film abated. Writers praised (or panned) the performances, the story, the editing, and the cinematography. Many alluded to the controversy that arose before the release, briefly rehashing it before offering their critiques of both the film and the frenzied furor itself (e.g., Malkin, 2019; Harris, 2019). In this way, the controversy was kept alive but subtly moved to the periphery of the story, especially as the film was nominated for awards and the players did press rounds (Boucher, 2020; Gross, 2020).

### Understanding the Viral Response

Media attention to a topic is inherently transient; stories need new information (Downs, 1972). Viral content appeals to curiosity and what people are talking about (Rayson, 2017) and stirs emotions (Berger & Milkman, 2012). In the case of *Joker*, popular cultural knowledge about the character, and the film’s connections to hot socio-political topics like mass shootings and incels shaped media framing of these conversations and spurred the cycle of reactions.

### *Character*

The origins of the controversy surrounding *Joker* may stem in part from the perceived attempt to transform the origin story of a widely known pop culture villain into a morality tale about a sympathetic antihero (e.g., X. Brooks, 2019). (Recall the film’s description as “a gritty character study...also a broader cautionary tale” [Shanley, 2018]). Film critic Jack Coyle (2019) wrote that by borrowing the Martin Scorsese and Robert DeNiro aesthetic of *Taxi Driver* and *The King of Comedy*, the film “elevated the Joker from DC Comics villain to ‘70s movie anti-hero.” As Batman’s most famous antagonist, with the most appearances in film of any Batman villain, the Joker is firmly rooted in popular culture as dangerous, ruthless, unpredictable, and violent. Going back to his comic book debut in 1940, the Joker was labeled as a “crazed killer” with the “smile of death,” murdering people with his lethal Joker venom (Finger & Kane, 1940). The Joker’s comic book career in the 1980s and 1990s was highlighted with evil acts, such as savagely murdering Jason Todd (the second Robin), assaulting and paralyzing Batgirl, and coldly killing Commissioner Gordon’s wife (Lapin-Bertone, 2020). Although the 1960s TV series played the Joker for camp and laughs, the cartoon series of the 1990s and 2000s leaned into his depravity (Weldon, 2016). The Joker is seen as an “expression of anarchy” in *Batman* (Debona, 1997), and in *The Dark Knight* he declared himself to be “an agent of chaos.” Brown (2021, p. 9) argues that the Joker “is a symbol of chaos and destruction, an embodiment of anarchy and total disregard for social regulations,” and that the struggle between Batman and the Joker represents “a very specific conflict between enforcing social conformity and rejecting it.”

Critics and viewers of the *Joker* trailer likely reacted with this characterization of the Joker-as-evil-villain in mind (e.g., Child, 2019; Robinson, 2019; Robinson et al., 2019). As noted above, films invite controversy when their primary characters use violence to challenge the status quo (Phillips, 2008), and Phoenix’s Joker was believed to do just that: “...a fictional character that has gone far beyond mere Batman villain and transformed into a one-man cult, mood and toxic lifestyle guru to internet trolls” (White, 2019). While Jack Nicholson was nominated for a Golden Globe for expressing anarchy, and Heath Ledger won an Oscar and Golden Globe for portraying an agent of chaos, “Phoenix’s Joker...is a villain we’ve seen before—not as the nihilist clown to an archetypical Batman, but as the angry white man obsessed with validation” (Ransome, 2019). Moreover, unlike the Jokers of Nicholson and Ledger – who ended their films dead or in prison – Phoenix’s portrayal of the character was panned by some precisely for elevating the bad guy,

potentially excusing his violence as mental illness, and even escaping justice because there was no Batman (e.g., Greenblatt, 2019).<sup>6</sup>

### *Mass Shootings*

In the summer of 2019, a series of mass shootings occurred within a relatively short period, notably Gilroy, California (July 28), El Paso, Texas (August 3), Dayton, Ohio (August 4), and Odessa-Midland, Texas (August 31) (Keneally, 2019; Silverstein, 2020). These coincided with the release of the *Joker* trailer and the Venice Film Festival. In an intriguing parallel, Universal Pictures suspended promotion of *The Hunt* (Zobel, 2020), a satirical film in which liberals hunt conservatives for sport, stating, “Out of sensitivity to the attention on the country’s recent shooting tragedies, Universal Pictures and the filmmakers of *The Hunt* have temporarily paused its marketing campaign and are reviewing materials as we move forward” (Bradley, 2019). Writers covering *Joker* made connections. For example, critic Herb Scribner (2019) argued that in the wake of these shootings and *The Hunt* being suspended, perhaps *Joker* should not be shown. In a review of *Joker* from the Toronto Film Festival, Steven Zeitchik (2019b) mentions that recent mass shootings have created a “climate” that can lead to canceled movies, citing *The Hunt* as evidence.

As described above, the 2012 mass shooting at an Aurora, Colorado movie theater during *The Dark Knight Rises* came to play a key role in the controversy surrounding *Joker*. In the Aurora case, it was initially and widely reported that the shooter said that he “was the Joker” and that the shooter dyed his hair like the Joker (Esposito et al., 2012). Although this claim was debunked, the rumor endures because it is narratively cohesive and intuitive (Desta, 2019). Indeed, the myth was often repeated but rarely debunked in articles about *Joker*.

As noted earlier, non-elite sources can gain prominence in the news when they have a proximate, personal, and emotional connection to an issue (Wheatley, 2020b). Families of the Aurora shooting victims meet these criteria. The connection to the Aurora mass shooting was cemented by the letter regarding *Joker* published by victims’ families in September, which was covered in such nationally prominent outlets as *The Associated Press* (Anderson, 2019), *The New York Times* (Barnes & Sperling, 2019), and *USA Today* (Mandell & Alexander, 2019). The Aurora shooting created a cognitive link between the Joker character and mass shootings. Subsequent reactions by actor Joaquin Phoenix and director Todd Phillips to questions about the film inciting violence and news stories about potential threats helped prime these connections as publicity for the film increased.

### *Incels*

Feeding into the discourse on mass shootings was growing media interest and public awareness about the incel community. Frustrated by a sense of marginalization from hegemonic masculine norms and by perceived challenges to their masculinity that affect romantic relationships, incels express distrust of women, and misogynist and anti-feminist views (Daly & Reed, 2022). As a result, some incels, individually or collectively, openly encourage and/or engage in violent attacks (Hoffman et al., 2020). The connection between mass shootings and incels can be traced to the 2014 Isla Vista spree murder perpetrator, Eliot Rodger (BBC, 2018; Los Angeles Times, 2014). In the month prior to the *Joker* trailer release and the Venice Film Festival,

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<sup>6</sup> Joaquin Phoenix won a 2020 Oscar and Golden Globe for lead actor. Unknown at the time of the viral response, in terms of content, the film arguably struggles to transform the Joker into an antihero or even sympathetic character. The film is less a story of redemption or being a force of good, and more simply a depiction of what transformed the Joker into a violent psychopath. The absence of any redemptive story arc (or any real concrete villain to play against) limits the amount of audience sympathy for the Joker (e.g., Donaldson, 2019).

media speculated about incels around the July murder of Bianca Devins (e.g., Dastagir, 2019a; Lohmann & House, 2019) and the Dayton mass shooter (e.g., Smith et al., 2019). Concern about incels and their propensity for violence was exhibited by several national media outlets during August, such as the *USA Today* headline “Mass Shooting and Misogyny: The Violent Ideology We Can’t Ignore” (Dastagir, 2019b) and *The New York Times* headline “A Common Trait among Mass Killers: Hatred Toward Women” (Bosman, Taylor, & Arango, 2019). On television, a story about incels was featured on *ABC News* (Brown et al., 2019), as well as in an *ABC Nightline* special.

### *Media Framing*

These three important elements of character, mass shootings, and incels coalesced to help form a viral reaction. First, there was the potentially problematic attempt to fashion a character that has been a villain for nearly 80 years into an antihero. Second, a linkage was made between the Joker character and mass shootings. Third, the spate of mass shootings and a search for answers focused on incels and similarly alienated white men. Meanwhile, nationwide discussions about these issues were occurring in the weeks before and around the Venice and Toronto Film Festival screenings for *Joker*. In order to generate a controversy around *Joker*, these connections had to be clearly and succinctly articulated by influential people or institutions. The swirling news surrounding mass shootings, the older Aurora theater shooting, and discussions of incels proved a fertile framework for critics, journalists, and commentators writing about the film. To borrow from one film reviewer, *Joker* became “an outrage-culture cypher, a clown for all mad-as-hell seasons” (Fear, 2019).

Some of the initial reviews out of Venice provided the nationally prominent framing necessary for a viral controversy by drawing on these different elements. Writing for *Vanity Fair*, Richard Lawson (2019) opened his film review by focusing on mass shootings: “For so many tragic reasons, the American imagination has of late been preoccupied with the motivations of disaffected white men who’ve turned violent – a nation (or part of one) trying to diagnose and explain them, one mass killing after another.” Lawson wrote that he reflected on mass shootings “a lot” while watching the film and remarked that audiences were “in some grim way, asked to sympathize with angry loner mass shooters.” One of the most widely cited (i.e., hyperlinked) reviews was written by Stephanie Zacharek (2019a) for *Time*. She declared, “There’s a mass shooting or attempted act of violence by a guy like Arthur practically every other week. And yet we’re supposed to feel some sympathy for Arthur.... He could easily be adopted as the patron saint of incels.”

Themes of mass shooting and incel identity also populated other less mainstream reviews. For example, following the screening at Venice, Stephen Kent (2019) of the *Washington Examiner* directly linked the film with Aurora and mass shootings:

The mention of Aurora is important in this context, as the Aurora shooter dyed his hair and even called himself the Joker.... This is exactly what we’re seeing time and time again on the most horrific days of national news, when we’re forced to grapple with yet another mass shooting.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, reviews in *IndieWire* warned that the film was “a toxic rallying cry for self-pitying incels” (Ehrlich, 2019) and described the film as “incel friendly” (Lattanzio, 2019). *Mother Jones* editor-in-chief Clara Jeffery (2019) had not seen the film but tweeted on August 31 – the day that the Venice reviews were first released – that it was “hard to read reviews of the Joker...that make no mention of the Aurora shooting. Seems pertinent. Seems dangerous.” Another commentator believed that the Aurora shooting “predestined a lot of the narrative around *Joker* from the start” (Wilkinson et al., 2019). Sergio Pereira (2019) of *CBR* framed an article around

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<sup>7</sup> Again, the notion that James Holmes modeled himself on the Joker has been debunked (Desta, 2019).



this larger controversy. Pereira references an unspecified “group” of people that he claimed believes that “explaining a white male's descent into madness and violence is insensitive, considering the wave of white terrorist crimes in recent years.” Pereira then repeats the Aurora myth: “Some people might sympathize with the devil...as unfortunately seen in the devastating 2012 Colorado shooting where the murderer was inspired by *The Dark Knight's Joker*.”

Although many critics' reviews of the film following the Venice screening did not specifically discuss these themes, their general tenor was grounded in the dark atmosphere the film proffered. The articles that focused on crimes and criminals proved to be influential to other media, as additional reviews were published after the Toronto Film Festival and the volume of think pieces erupted through September before the film's debut weekend. For example, the reviews by Zacharek (in particular) and Ehrlich were directly quoted in such mainstream outlets as *The Washington Post* (Zeitchik, 2019b), Fox News (Betz, 2019), *The Guardian* (Rose, 2019), *The Atlantic* (Sims, 2019), *Rolling Stone* (Dickson, 2019), *The New York Times Magazine* (D. Brooks, 2019), *National Review* (Smith, 2019), and *Fortune* (Bernstein, 2020), as well as internet-based outlets such as *Vice* (Ransome, 2019), *The Daily Beast* (Stern, 2019) and *HuffPost* (Kappler, 2019). This rollover illustrates how journalists and media outlets are influenced by how other media cover stories (Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2008), and how controversial content tends to be deemed newsworthy (Harcup & O'Neill, 2016) and go viral online (Kim, 2015).

Whereas initial discussion leading up to *Joker* and most reviews out of Venice focused on the character and the movie itself, the handful of reviews that ginned up controversy with references to crime and potential threats provided a powerful alternative frame. In doing so, these reviews helped shift the discussion of *Joker* from being simply about film criticism to one that invited repeated social commentary. Influential as these initial reviews were, this framing was amplified by other platforms – traditional news media and online commentary “think pieces” – which reached a wider audience. As media outlets used other outlets as sources (Wheatley, 2020a), it had the effect of building viral content by narrowly focusing on and reproducing controversy (Kim, 2015). With the framing in place around the distastefulness of the Joker character, mass shootings, and incels, additional information (the Aurora letter, Warner Bros.' responses, sound bites from Phillips and Phoenix) was paired with the military warnings and actions by a handful of theaters, integrated into new articles, and readily wedged into the controversy narrative.

## Discussion

*Joker* makes for a fascinating case study of how character/content, socio-political context, and the media landscape dynamically work together to embroil a film in viral controversy. Our analysis revealed several key moments: reviews from the Venice and Toronto film festivals; a reaction of the film's star to an interviewer's question about violence; an open letter penned by some of the Aurora mass shooting victims' family members; and a warning about possible violence at theaters issued by the military. These individual stories gave the larger framing about potential violence and incels legs, fueling a short-burst media feeding-frenzy that abated shortly after the film's release. For example, although Zacharek (2019a) referred to the Joker as an incel in her tweet (2019b) and initial review out of Venice, she made no direct reference to incels in a review published after the Oscar nominations were announced, although she did count herself among those that viewed the film as “toxic” (Zacharek, 2020). By late 2019, the conversation about the film shifted and concerns about violence became a footnote to film award season. This arc is reminiscent of Downs' (1972) issue-attention cycle, where news



coverage momentarily highlights a salient topic before inevitably moving on as the topic proves intractable and less interesting to audiences over time.<sup>8</sup>

Why was *Joker* scrutinized differently than other contemporary violent films that were either pulled indefinitely from release (*The Hunt*) or not similarly vilified (*John Wick Chapter 3* [Stahleski, 2019])? The blunt politics of *The Hunt* were perhaps deemed too distasteful in the wake of the August mass shootings. Crucially, reactions to *The Hunt* (like *Joker*, a plot only known from trailers) were based on the alleged liberal bias of a film about “deplorables” being hunted for sport (Flood, 2019). The film was quickly shelved in the face of this conservative criticism and a scathing tweet by President Trump (Lattanzio, 2019). In contrast, while critics and commenters alike noted that *Joker* could be read as social and political commentary (both liberal and conservative), the character himself did not appear to be directly motivated by them (Robinson et al., 2019; Rozsa, 2019; Wilmore, 2019). Put differently, concern about *The Hunt* was based on the perceived treatment (both on and off screen) of Trump supporters, while the lack of an overtly partisan lens helped *Joker* evade the fate of the temporary shelving of *The Hunt*.

John Wick, despite his violent actions, is a hero guided by an “internal system of morality” (Wilkinson, 2019). *Joker* positioned a well-known character who historically is depicted only as a villain – and a caricature of a villain at that since there is generally limited backstory – as a central character with a biography that frames his motives. Some worried that would make this villain look like a hero in the eyes of others so motivated (Rozsa, 2019; Wilkinson, 2019). The text of *Joker* teased in the trailer and earlier media discussions of the character’s portrayal contained certain elements that likely contributed to some level of unease (e.g., Bundel, 2019; Sims, 2019). Phoenix’s Arthur Fleck seems to lack the sadistic, scheming traits of a proper villain (e.g., comic portrayals, Ledger’s *Joker*), the larger purpose of a traditional comic book anti-hero (e.g., the Punisher), and the humorous and campy qualities associated with the more endearing versions of the character (e.g., Caesar Romero, Mark Hamill). Rather than a villain, Fleck is cast as a pathetic nobody teetering on mental illness, with *Joker* attempting a more sympathetic representation by looking at the various factors that transformed Fleck into the *Joker*. Whereas Wick’s violence is aimed at clearly identifiably bad individuals, *Joker* takes broader aim at upending a society that has seemingly wronged him.

*Joker* was not the first time this character had received a backstory or even a somewhat sympathetic origin story. Similar to *Joker*, the unnamed pre-*Joker* character in the graphic novel *The Killing Joke* (Moore et al., 1988) is a self-described victim of “random injustice” who only becomes involved in crime in order to support his family. However, on this “one bad day,” the pre-*Joker* character loses his pregnant wife and falls into a vat of chemicals during a failed heist, resulting in his insanity and leading to his sadistic crimes. The *Joker* is ultimately apprehended by Batman at the end of *The Killing Joke*, just as he is in the movies *Batman* and *The Dark Knight*. In stark contrast, Batman is entirely absent in *Joker*. Moreover, audiences prefer content that rewards liked characters and punishes disliked characters (Zillman & Bryant, 1994). *Joker* without Batman could have made people uncomfortable, because the default and easy moral framing and attempts to restore order and justice found in most Batman media were absent (Bosch, 2016; Kort-Butler, 2012; Lockhart, 2018).

The construction of *Joker* into a viral media controversy was facilitated by contemporary events and social issues that were exogenous to the film. In the same way that gangsters, serial killers, and race riots were of heightened concern in other eras (Phillips, 2008), the socio-political context of when *Joker* was released

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<sup>8</sup> A reviewer thoughtfully suggested we look into how the political happenings of fall 2019 may have altered *Joker* coverage. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi announced the impeachment inquiry into President Donald Trump on September 24, the week before the film released. Inquiries occurred through October, but the official impeachment was not until December. We ran a “compare” Google Trend for “Trump” overlaid with “Joker” for the dates 8/1/2019-11/30/2019. The Trump baseline “noise” is generally higher than *Joker*; the Trump trendline peaks on September 24. *Joker* surpassed Trump on 10/4-10/7, but then fell back below it on all but 10/13. In short, the Trump trend does not show “spikes” that suggest it pushed *Joker* out of trending topics; in fact, *Joker* held the stage briefly despite the impeachment process.

meant that representations of mass shooters and loner incels were of particular concern. However, media commentators often added supplemental context and hints of danger to their pieces in order to make this connection. Articles often repeated the myth that the Aurora perpetrator claimed to be emulating the Joker, but only some also debunked the myth. Repeating the myth, even when debunked, arguably strengthened the association between the Joker character and the potential for violence by susceptible individuals, facilitating the possible creation and subsequent reception of the Aurora letter. The string of recent high-profile mass shootings and shelving of *The Hunt* seemed to have encouraged commentators to evaluate the film more in terms of timing, moral responsibility, and the potential danger of inspiring future mass shooters.

The discussion of incels illustrates how external news stories played a critical role in shaping the prism through which media commentators viewed *Joker*. Despite Zacharek's (2019a) influential film review that said Fleck "could easily be adopted as the patron saint of incels," there was nothing specifically stated about the topic in the trailer or in press interviews with people associated with the film. Rather, reviewers and commentators seemed to have drawn this conclusion based on the trailers showing Fleck as an isolated odd white male who lacks female companionship beyond his disquieting relationship with his elderly mother and who is awkwardly interested in his female neighbor. Nonetheless, some articles concerned with incels made connections to Eliot Rodger or John Hinckley, again implying the potential for the film to inspire violence. Ultimately, the connection to incel-type violence was tenuous at best in the film, as the main drivers of Fleck's downfall and eventual targets of his wrath are a derisive TV talk show host and Gotham's "indifferent wealthy" (Burgos, 2019; Robinson et al., 2019).

The changing media landscape also affected the discourse surrounding *Joker*. The last film that received similarly high-profile concerns about glorification of unsavory characters and copy-cat killings is arguably *Natural Born Killers*, when the Internet was still in its infancy. In contrast, *Joker* appeared in a moment when outrage was easily packaged and commodified for TV, news and entertainment websites, and social media (Henderson, 2020; Kraft et al., 2020). The extended trailer for *Joker* coupled with reviews emerging from the relatively small group of people who saw the movie at festivals drove the speculation featured in other outlets. The buzz surrounding *Joker* met several of Harcup and O'Neill's (2016) criteria for newsworthiness: controversy, celebrity, entertainment, drama, cultural relevance, audio-visuals, and importantly, shareability. For instance, Zacharek's (2019a) review dropped buzzwords and tantalizing details that were widely repeated and mused upon by authors who had not seen the film. Every new detail that appeared in the media writ-large created new rounds of speculation that rehashed then re-spun the original narrative, at least until the film's actual release. Articles generally embedded hyperlinks to other sources, either earlier articles posted on the same site and/or to high-profile movie reviews or news outlets. Recent mass shootings and linkages to incels not only primed some media commentators to evaluate *Joker* through this lens, but also allowed them to peg *Joker* to larger social issues. This linkage, in turn, made *Joker* more relevant and facilitated titles and quotes that were more "clickable."

### Limitations and Directions for Future Research

There are several limitations to our study. A film like *Joker* may be something of an outlier, as previous controversial films often did not showcase a protagonist that has been a pop culture icon (and villain) for more than half a century. On the other hand, compared to earlier times when viewers only saw long trailers in theaters or TV commercials, social media like Twitter has the tendency to amplify trailers for blockbuster hero-genre films. Whether other titular villainous characters can spawn such viral reactions is a continuing empirical question.

Although we illustrated how several events were important to the establishment and maintenance of *Joker* as a national controversy, we could not isolate how definitive any one factor was or how interrelated they

were. For example, it is possible that the controversy would have quickly fizzled without the military warnings. On the other hand, it is possible that the military memos would have not materialized without the influential *Time* review by Zacharek, which in turn may have taken a different form had it not been for recent national media coverage on mass shootings and incels. Thus, while it seems that the full development of the controversy may have required several key moments being essentially daisy-chained together, no definitive proof of this is possible. More prospective research that tracks emergent reactions to films is necessary to more fully understand the process by which certain trailers and reviews garner attention from other media and what socio-political forces shape that attention. Subsequent research could then examine the effectiveness of media outlets and social media platforms in crafting dominant narrative frames when certain films are deemed controversial.

Despite the *Joker* character being co-opted in public protests spanning the political spectrum across the years (Brown, 2021) – and thus potentially ripe for moving beyond viral reactions and into moral panic – the “cautionary tale” about *Joker* inspiring murder and mayhem fell flat. The viral controversy surrounding *Joker* was met by a largely indifferent public and never blossomed into a classic moral panic (Ferguson, 2008; Mathijs, 2021; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014). Not only did the controversial framing around *Joker* fail to be adopted by politicians or experts in ways typically associated with moral panics, but much of the news media also had only fleeting interest in the framing of *Joker* and violence. Future research is needed to determine how viral media reactions result (or not) in moral panic, and under what conditions online commentary about films or other media are most likely to catch fire, be broadly adopted by leading authority figures, and affect the public.

The controversy surrounding *Joker* is important for what it represents in its sociohistorical context, as well as its potentially broader effects. Film itself is a reflection of culture as “film creators tap into the events, fears, fantasies, and hopes of an era” (Kellner, 2009, p. 4). The sustained discourse surrounding *Joker* mirrored Americans’ ongoing anxieties about alienated male shooters, incels, mass shootings, copycat killers, and the influence of media violence. In a different era where these concerns might be a less tangible threat, perhaps commentators would have been more receptive to *Joker*’s social critiques, rather than denouncing the film for romanticizing (if not encouraging) some of the most disturbing aspects of American society. Interestingly, Warner Bros. previously faced an analogous situation in the 1930s. The studio was criticized for irresponsibly glorifying mob violence in its gangster pictures during a period when organized crime was in the headlines, and some cautioned that such films could spur juvenile delinquency (Springhall, 1998). Although we are not arguing that the controversy about *Joker* necessarily presents a case study in moral panics, Falkof’s (2020, p. 228) observation that moral panics are “stories that we tell ourselves and each other to help us make sense of insecurity and social change” seems fitting.

The treatment of mass shootings in discourse surrounding *Joker* is also relevant to American conversations about gun control. As noted earlier, criticisms about *Joker* often focused on the possible dangers of the wrong type of people watching the wrong type of film, the perceived social irresponsibility of the film itself, and the possible need for security at movie theaters. It is worth highlighting that this discourse mirrors ongoing discussions about gun violence in America, such as the idea that people (rather than guns) are the problem, the causal attribution of mass shootings to media violence, and the possible need for armed personnel at schools. Notably absent from the discussion of *Joker* and gun violence was ongoing public debate about the possible role of gun laws in mass shootings. These types of details matter because research suggests that mass shootings’ influence on an individual’s support for gun control is contingent on believing that gun availability was at least partly to blame (Stroebe et al., 2022). In sum, the controversy surrounding *Joker* might not only provide a window into how the public felt about the link between gun violence and media content, but may also inform subsequent thinking about this link.

### Conclusion

The media churn around *Joker* – with news tidbits emerging and being repackaged in a specific frame, with elite sources like film reviewers and mainstream journalists blurring into non-elite sources like online commentators and the Aurora letter-writers – provided both new information and tantalizing innuendo about a film most people had yet to see. In the case of *Joker*, a handful of prominent film reviews as well as high-profile media stories on mass shootings and incels seemed to shape a particular controversial framing, a framing that was ready-made for a media landscape driven by clicks and pageviews. We conclude that media environments, socio-political context, and the parceling of sensational storylines drew on (and possibly fueled) social myths about the media’s effect on violent behavior and contributed to the viral reaction to *Joker*.

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