

*,,I WISH WE
COULD SEND IN
IRON MAN”*

A qualitative content analysis of superhero
references in presidential communication in the US
after 9/11



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Hertie School, Master of Public Policy, 2022
12159 Words

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There is ample research on the relationship between popular culture and politics. These studies seek to either teach their readers the pedagogical use of pop-cultural artefacts, interpret the artefacts themselves politically, or attempt to explain the influence of a pop-cultural artefact on politics (Milkoreit, 2019). However, there is a lack of empirical research on the constitutive effects of popular culture on politics. To claim an influence on the political arena, research therefore has to investigate the pop-cultural mobilization of these artefacts, that is the ideational power contained in pop-culture.

This thesis seeks to contribute to this field of research by broadening the research focus from artefacts to actors. This is done through empirically analyzing the interpretation and framing of references to superhero culture by US-American presidents after 9/11. The genre of superhero culture is well-fit for research due to its immense and longstanding popularity in American culture. Through conducting a qualitative content analysis deploying both thematic analysis and frame analysis, this thesis attempts to answer the question: How do American presidents after 9/11 interpret and frame references to superhero pop-culture in their communication?

The analysis of 17 documents yields four major themes which interact with different generic frames. Superhero references are used to equal humans with superheroes, create utopian realities, discuss representation, and deploy superhero ethics. They thereby serve to both depoliticize critical issues of foreign policy, war, or economic crisis whilst being deployed to create consensus, and shine a benevolent limelight on the actors involved. The mechanism of a limelight is crucial in two ways. It brings attention to an actor, a policy, or a conflict, but it does so by leaving the associated political struggle involved in the shadows. To summarize, the similar, yet apolitical and ahistorical reality depicted in superhero culture, the solutions to conflicts through supernatural power demonstrate the ideational power contained in pop-cultural mobilization through superhero references.

This thesis thereby contributes to the growing body of literature on the influence of pop-culture on politics by adding actor-centric empirical findings to the pop-culture – politics nexus. Future potential research on framing effects would further stress the power of grand pop-cultural industries such as Hollywood and their ties to politics.

“I may be an embarrassing figure of public ridicule, but at least I know absolutely nothing about Marvel movies.”

El Hotzo (2022)

1. Introduction

There was a great surprise at the German weekly news magazine *Der Spiegel* when the US ambassador called the magazine in early 2002. The ambassador ordered several poster-sized enlargements of the cover page that was published only a few weeks earlier to mock the American plans for invading Iraq as a retaliation after 9/11 (Hassler – Forest, 2011). The cover depicted President Bush and his cabinet members as stereotypical superheroes on the title page which read *Die Bush Krieger: Amerikas Feldzug Gegen das Böse* (“The Bush Warriors: America’s Crusade Against Evil”). What was meant as a satirical attack on the framing of the US administration’s reaction to the 9/11 attacks, was taken as a grand compliment. Apparently, the US administration did not see any reason for offense in their portrayal but interpreted the depiction as a great potential for their campaign (Hassler-Forest, 2011). This conflation of politics and pop-culture takes another material dimension in the cooperation between the US military and the Marvel studios. The military funded several movies of the Marvel franchise and provided military equipment as movie requisites (Olla, 2021). Even though this cooperation has not continued through the production of all Marvel movies, the heavy funding of a fictional universe may seem odd. The Pentagon, however, sees great campaign potential in the movies (Olla, 2021).

These two anecdotes demonstrate interesting trends. Firstly, there is an increasing tendency of pop-cultural references and portrayal in politics: politicians refer to themselves as superheroes or are depicted as such by the media (Schneiker, 2020; Treat, 2009). Secondly, there exist clear political interpretations of these pop-cultural artefacts that transcend their superficial escapist appearance (Dittmer, 2015). These interpretations, however, differ across audiences. Both examples further demonstrate that there is a reciprocal relationship between politics and pop-culture: whilst the political realm informs, funds, and inspires the cultural realm (the military funds Marvel movies), the pop-cultural realm offers frames that in turn shape our interpretation of reality (the analogy between superhero quests and the invasion of Iraq) (Carpenter, 2016). To research the relationship between pop-cultural artefacts, such as movies, books, or performances, and politics bears relevance for both sides of the relationship.

There exists a significant body of research on the pop-culture – politics nexus. These studies seek to either teach their readers on the pedagogical use of pop-cultural artefacts, interpret the artefacts themselves politically, or attempt to explain the influence of a pop-cultural artefact on politics (Milkoreit, 2019). However, Milkoreit (2019) identifies three

major shortcomings in the current literature: firstly, there is an enhanced focus on the pop-cultural artefact itself rather than on those actors who serve as interpreters to audiences. Secondly, there is a lack of attention to the different interpretations of the same artefact. For example, to assume that a literature critique reads and interprets a book the same way that a high school student does, ignores the potentiality of different impacts a book can have. Thirdly, there is a lack of empirical studies researching and conceptualizing the relationship between pop-culture and politics. To understand moments of visibility of this influence of pop-culture on politics, one has to ask in what way the pop-cultural artefact has a constitutive effect on real-world political action. Adding to the general lack of empirical studies in the field, there exist no systematic analysis of pop-cultural references made by politicians themselves. Hence, the great joy of the US administration over a satirical cover of a German news magazine, continues to be a puzzle without a structured answer.

To advance our understanding of this puzzle empirically, this thesis investigates the following question: how do politicians frame and interpret references superhero pop-culture in their communication? The case of superhero pop-culture was chosen because it offers a promising field of research. There is a broad range of interpretive studies on superhero culture (Dittmer, 2012; Hughes, 2006; Moore, 2003). These studies acknowledge and postulate a great political role of superhero movies and comic books to restore a sense of American identity after the terror attacks of 9/11 (Dittmer, 2012; Treat, 2009). Hence, the political reading and study of this influence becomes especially important in the 21st century. To better understand the great interest of politicians in seemingly harmless fictional universes, one must address how politicians interpret and frame these universes to mobilize support. This interest is advanced through Milkoreit's (2019, p.7) notion of pop-cultural mobilization, which acknowledges pop-cultural artefacts as a "currency of ideational power" in political strategy. To understand how politicians interpret and frame superhero references is to decipher their process of pop-cultural mobilization through superhero culture. This understanding adds a piece to the puzzle that is the influence of pop-culture on politics.

To answer this question, references to superhero pop-culture in presidential communication from 9/11 until today are investigated through a latent qualitative content analysis which deploys both frame analysis and thematic analysis. This thesis is structured as follows: Firstly, in chapter 2, a literature review is conducted in two main domains: academic work on the relationship between politics and pop-culture and its short-comings, and on academic work on the political interpretation of superhero pop-culture. It is followed by the theoretical perspective guiding this research and by chapter 3 on research design. This

chapter further explains the methodology and data collection of this research. Chapter 4 and 5 present and discuss descriptive and analytical findings. It will be found that superhero references serve political communication through four themes of equalizing humans with superheroes, creating utopian futures, discussing matters of representation, and superhero ethics. The framing of these themes serves as a consensus-seeking strategy, which shines a benevolent, yet apolitical limelight on the actors, policies, and conflicts addressed.

2. Literature Review: What we know about politics and pop-culture

2.1 The Pop-Culture – Politics Nexus

The academic tradition of researching the pop-culture – politics nexus has been first categorized by Carpenter (2016). She describes the central quest of the growing body of research on the relationship between pop-culture and politics as investigating the relationship between science fiction as a set of counter-factual narratives about world order and world politics as it is constituted in present-day reality. There have been different approaches towards researching this relationship: the pedagogical approach, the interpretive approach, and the explanatory approach (Carpenter, 2016).

The first approach describes the deployment of pop-cultural artefacts in educational settings. For example, Ruane and James' (2008) *International Relations in Middle Earth* explains scholars' real-world themes of international relations in the fictional settings of the *Lord of the Rings* saga by Tolkien. Carpenter (2016) notes that, whilst these deployments make up a large proportion of the pop-culture – politics nexus, they do not serve to explore the influence of pop-cultural artefacts on real-world politics. Hence, they do not enrich our knowledge of the directional relationship between fictional narratives and politics.

A second branch of studies, the interpretive approach, studies the pop-cultural artefacts themselves to draw conclusions on real-world politics. Carpenter (2016) describes this work as interpreting pop-cultural artefacts as reflections of the real world, seen through a fictional layer. This approach has important epistemological implications: firstly, the pop-cultural artefacts is not seen as separate from real-world politics, rather as embedded in it and thereby a reflection of it. Secondly, this embeddedness makes pop-cultural artefacts legitimate sources for political theory construction. Plainly spoken: if war movies are just as much a reflection of our societal narratives as the wars we lead, these movies will tell us just as much about our rationales and narratives as the war itself. Milkoreit (2019) criticizes this

approach as limited towards the understanding of the pop-culture-politics nexus. According to her, the interpretive approach implicitly assumes that the pop-cultural artefacts have an underlying objective meaning, equally accessible to all audiences. By explicating the lessons drawn from fiction, the scholars presume interpretive authority and ignore pluralist, even conflicting interpretations of the artefact (Milkoreit, 2019). This does not only teach us little about the effect of pop-culture on politics, but it also makes the research vulnerable to altering interpretations.

The third framework is what Carpenter (2016) and Milkoreit (2019) call the explanatory approach. This approach reverses the question of interest, namely in what way pop-culture has a causal or constitutive effect on politics. Neumann and Nexon (2006), for example, theorize that certain depictions in science fiction can normalize or problematize real-world events thereby impacting political beliefs of their audiences. However, despite theoretical insights, many studies lack empirical backing (Milkoreit, 2019). Carpenter (2016) herself reacts to this criticism by investigating the impact of science fiction on political campaigns through observational and interview data.

Unlike Carpenter (2016), Milkoreit (2019) identifies a fourth approach in the pop-culture – politics nexus: reception studies. These studies, also commonly referred to as media effect studies, advance explanatory studies insofar as they focus heavily on empirical research to investigate how audiences react to pop-cultural artefacts. Reception studies make use of book reviews, audience engagement, and consumption behavior. However, though bringing in an empirical dimension, the approach is limited to a narrow sphere of influence: rather than linking pop-culture to broader political developments, the direct impact of consumption is linked to behavioral impacts, making it only useful to a limited extent. Milkoreit (2019) adds to this that reception studies tend to view the audience as passive and not as active agents engaged in the broader process of interpretation of pop-culture, thereby ignoring audience members as active nodes in information networks. She further adds that rather than receiving one uniform message from pop-cultural artefacts, the audience members tend to interpret these in a way that reaffirms their existing worldviews.

It follows that Carpenter (2016) and Milkoreit (2019) have both summarized and criticized the major approaches towards the pop-culture-politics nexus in scholarly work so far. Both contribute to the literature by adding empirical research to the explanatory body and advancing the theoretical understanding of this influence through political mobilization theory (Carpenter, 2016; Milkoreit, 2019). Hence, they do not propose entirely different

approaches, but aim at clarifying the underlying causal questions and improving the existing approaches through their own work.

2.2 The Empirical Way forward: Studies building on Milkoreit's and Carpenter's Insights

By now it should have become apparent that to understand the influence of pop-culture on real-world politics, the explanatory approach offers a focus on empirical insights, as is the goal of this thesis. Enriching this approach by empirical means is not limited to qualitative research alone: Carpenter (2016) distinguishes between constitutive and causal analysis of influence. The former is spread more widely in the literature and refers to “constructivist arguments about the role of norms, ideas, and identities ‘constituting’ the framework of socio-political reality in which actors operate.” (Carpenter, 2016, p. 55). Hence, rather than measuring direct effects, the pop-cultural artefacts are understood as to provide frameworks for interpreting political actions. Contrarily, Gierzynski (2013) conducts quantitative research on the influence of pop-culture on politics through survey data from college students. This potential pluralism of research methods of pop-cultural influence evokes the question how scholars have built on the summary and criticism by Milkoreit (2019) and Carpenter (2016).

There have, however, been only few studies building on these theoretical and empirical advancements. Young and Carpenter (2018) investigate the influence of pop-culture on politics through a survey experiment on American attitudes toward fully autonomous weapons. They find that the consumption of fictional narratives of fully autonomous weapons significantly influences real-world attitudes, too. Another study by Schneider-Mayerson (2019) systematically analyzes the real-world lessons readers receive from a fiction book on climate change impacts. She finds that rather than retrieving one conclusive message, readers find their own worldviews confirmed.

Despite the diverse literature on the subject, no research has been conducted on advancing the explanatory research branch until today: firstly, there is almost no research that acknowledges Milkoreit's notion of the active audience: studies on how actors in explicit political contexts interpret and then further instrumentalize pop-cultural artefacts are missing. A notable exception is a study by Garett (2014). Analyzing the incorporation of superhero imagery and rhetoric in the social movements of Hong Kong, he argues that superheroes turn into “devices of visual mobilization, dissent, and counter-hegemonic resistance” (Garett, 2014, p.112). Secondly, despite the grand question of the influence of

pop-culture on politics, there is no research on this relationship in the narrow sense: The influence on politicians themselves, democratic institutions, or policy agendas. Despite the methodological difficulties that arise with such an ambitious task, the empirical question remains crucial to be answered if the field of research is serious in advancing its academic generalizability.

This thesis aims to contribute to this question by addressing the two mentioned shortcomings systematically. By analyzing the use of pop-cultural references made by politicians in public contexts, the role of the politician as the audience is both passive – the reference informs us about her¹ understanding of the artefact – and active: the reference tells us about the instrumental usage to convince a secondary audience of her reading of the pop-cultural artefact. Furthermore, the clear focus on the political arena advances previous studies that investigate political attitudes, but not the active engagement of the audience in question, hence lacking the additional empirical verification to investigate influence.

2.3 Theoretical Perspectives

2.3.1 Pop-cultural Mobilization and Framing effects

The theoretical framework guiding this research is based on the notion of political influence of pop-culture as defined by Carpenter (2016) and Milkoreit (2019) and rooted in political mobilization theory. Following Carpenter's approach, this thesis seeks to investigate the pop-cultural artefact as a constitutive factor for real-world political action. Rooted in interpretivism, the political ideas, narratives, and ideologies are not assumed to have a direct causal effect but constitute a framework against which real-world experiences are structured and compared to, and a lens that allows for interpretations of real-world events. Milkoreit (2019) advances this understanding of influence through the concept of *pop-cultural mobilization* to understand the constitutive effect of pop-culture as a process of political mobilization. According to her, the pop-culture artefact becomes a “currency of ideational power” in political strategy (Milkoreit, 2019, p. 7). Hence, through references, politicians do not only share their interpretation of the artefact, they also make use of this interpretation to mobilize political support, thereby potentially creating additional frameworks of interpretation of the artefact itself for the audience. Hence, the instrumental use of pop-

¹ A remark on pronouns: Even though this thesis started out with the not-unbiased intention of evoking images of female rather than male politicians when making use of unspecified pronouns, it could not be upheld. This is mainly because the research is based on presidential speeches, and so far, all American presidents have been male.

cultural artefacts with the intent to have causal effects on the audience is understood to be a “political strategy facilitated by pop-cultural resources” (Milkoreit, 2019, p.7).

Placing pop-cultural references in the sphere of political communication allows us to investigate their strategic deployment and potential influence systematically through the link between political mobilization and framing theory: The concept of framing assumes that the media, political elites, and social movement frame their causes in an attempt to mobilize support among their audiences. There is ample research on the mobilizing effect of framing in mass communication. Plantan (2014), for example researches different framing effects in individual perceptions and people’s willingness to mobilize for a particular social movement. Slothuus and de Vreese (2010) argue that framing is one of the most important means of elite influence on public opinion. “A hate-group rally could be framed as protecting free speech or risking public order” (Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010, p. 1). The way it is framed can have long-term persistent effects on the respective audience (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2011). They further demonstrate instrumentally that framing shows stronger effects on citizens sympathizing with the party responsible for framing, which supports the intuition that it is easier to mobilize supporters for a cause than adversaries.

To tap into the knowledge on framing effects, however, it is necessary to understand how pop-culture is contained in political communication itself and how it interacts with the framing of other content in speeches. To identify the political influence of pop-culture, means therefore first and foremost understanding both the way it is strategically deployed in communication and the meaning it provides. Consequently, this thesis focusses on investigating framing of pop-cultural references in speeches. To broaden the focus from the pop-cultural artefact itself onto the actors interpreting them, this thesis systematically analyzes how politicians interpret and frame references to superhero culture in their communication. To answer this question, a qualitative content analysis is deployed. The following section on research design will explain the case selection of presidential communication after 9/11 and the methods of thematic and frame analysis deployed.

3. Research Design

3.1 Case Selection

The relationship between superhero pop-culture and American politics proves especially interesting for several reasons. Firstly, there is a vast body of interpretive literature on superhero pop-culture and its (a)political messages (Costello & Worcester, 2014). Scholars have long written and argued about the politics of superheroes, their villains, and plots.

Hence, any references to superhero culture will not only serve as rhetorical means or metaphors but carry ideological weight. Secondly, almost all superheroes in the Marvel and DC universe depict a fictional American society. In his essay *What makes Superman so darned American?*, Engle (1992) argues that heroes like Superman represent ideals of the American dream and thereby reaffirm core elements of the American identity. However, even when references are not found to be that explicit, fictional cities like Gotham are intended to be read and imagined as US cities (Brady & Williams, 2000). Thirdly, the very fact that political institutions such as the US military maintains a propaganda interest in funding superhero movies tells us that the actors creating the movies and books assume the impact of ideological messaging themselves.

Having identified superhero culture as a variable of interest, the second variable of interest that requires operationalization is American politics. A first assumption to allow for concentrated empirical results is to assume that pop-culture references are usually deployed as a means of persuasion with a public audience in mind. As will be discussed in further detail in section 3.2.1, the *framing* of pop-cultural references is essential to understanding their political influence. Here, presidential speeches provide a fruitful empirical focus since presidential communication addresses the American public to motivate reelection, support for policies, and to represent the nation itself (Ryfe, 2005). Even though presidents no longer represent ‘the leader[s] of the free world’, their communication still gathers large audiences and serve in part as a “unifying, national experience for the body politic” (Katz as cited in Scacco & Coe, 2016, p. 3). Presidential communication thereby serves both as a currency of political mobilization and as an act of representation to the public, its meaning can hardly be underestimated (Ryfe, 2005). To summarize, presidential communication proves vital for analysis due to the president’s significance for the construction of American political identity.

Lastly, the time frame of the analysis is concentrated on superhero culture after 9/11. This choice is made since the pop-cultural relevance of superhero culture has reached the American mainstream only after the terrorist attacks in 2001 (Rosenberg, 2021). Many of the best-selling movies of the Marvel and DC universes were produced in the years after the attacks, and several scholars argue that it is precisely because of the attacks that superhero culture has conquered popular culture so successfully: Dittmer (2012) argues that the terrorist attacks of 9/11 disturbed the insight-outside dialectic of American politics through the attacks on the World Trade Center on American ground. Hence, he argues, post-9/11 Captain America is an attempt to reterritorialize the American identity by returning to a geopolitical script that is free of earlier introduced complexity and ambiguity. Treat (2009)

provides us with a critical reading of the rise of superhero movies after 9/11. The common narrative elements of the superhero genre commonly preclude an Edenic community, which is threatened by evil whilst democratic institutions crumble facing the problem (Treat, 2009). The selfless superhero with superhuman powers then uses questionable means like violence, sometimes presenting antidemocratic values to restore the paradisical conditions. Treat (2009) categorizes this status quo bias of superhero culture as inherently reactionary, where harmony is only present in the absence of a villain, and any problem definition must stem from a personal evil (the villain) rather than social evil, which would be more complex to address.

Treat (2009) is not the only scholar observing a trend of merging superhero culture and politics. Several other politicians such as Boris Johnson, and senator Ted Stevens use superhero imagery at public events (Schmid, 2019; Killough, 2017). However, the only coherent empirical analysis of such superhero referencing is provided by Schneiker (2020). According to her, Donald Trump based both his election campaigns as well as the legitimization for policies on his performative depiction as a superhero politician. The framing of a superhero politician diverges from the role of politicians in superhero culture itself, where politicians are usually passive bystanders and fail the public (Treat, 2009). Turning the politician, however, into a superhero of the real world offers great simplification of the social world. Rather than addressing the complexity of problems, a good versus evil dichotomy rules decision-making (Schneiker, 2020). Furthermore, Trump himself is seen as the strong man who takes tough choices whilst the public may rest in passivity. The legitimacy for his actions, then, arises not necessarily from democratic election, but from his superpowers of being best fitted for the task of governing (Schneiker, 2020).

To summarize, the theory, context, and time frame of superhero culture in the US suggests an escapist notion of mainstream superhero comic books and movies after 9/11. Several scholars have argued for a reactionary and depoliticized narrative, in which power is not legitimized through electoral behavior or deliberation, but through inherent supernatural traits. The conflation of superhero culture and politics, however, remains under-researched despite granting both reliability to the analysis of the interpretive strand of the pop-culture – politics nexus as well as giving us insight into the strategic deployment of pop-culture in the political arena.

3.2 Methodology

3.2.1 Framing Analysis and Thematic Analysis

Framing theory is a concept that guides the understanding of meaning making in social contexts. The concept is rooted in sociology but shares its interpretivist and constructivist epistemology with psychology. Despite its wide deployment, framing remains a vague and contested concept. According to Brugman et al. (2017, p.1), “framing has also been associated with diverging research approaches, ranging from a focus on the psychological causes of social perceptions to the attitudinal effects of presenting information in different ways”. Entman (1993) defines framing as a process by which groups create shared understandings of issues, grievances, and their causalities. Frames thereby function to both select aspects of reality and make these aspects more salient (Entman, 1993). They define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgements, and suggest remedies (Entman, 1993).

However, as Cacciato et al. (2016) contend, this concept is not feasible as a coherent methodological approach and is easily conflated with other concepts such as agenda setting and priming. The authors therefore propose a more rigid definition of framing as *equivalence-based framing*, which is “more directly tied to alterations in the presentation of information rather than the persuasive value of that information” (Cacciato et al., 2016, p.16). Frames, then, are focused on applicability rather than accessibility effects, which evoke certain interpretive schemas in the audience (Cacciato et al., 2016). This interpretation demonstrates its usefulness in the context of pop-cultural referencing in speeches: information is presented in a cultural context that is shared by the audience, which allows them to process information against a “cognitive template” (Minsky as cited in Cacciato et al., 2016, p. 11). This allows framing effects to alter according to individual predispositions, norms, and values (Gross & Ambrosio, 2004).

Thematic analysis, as an additional core element of qualitative content analysis hints less at the counterfactual representation of facts, but at grouping meaning of categories contained in text toward coherent *themes* (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). This inductive and intuitive method is useful to answer the initial question of identifying and grouping the interpretations of superhero culture by politicians. Theme development thereby transcends category development whereby the latter can help the former through descriptive elements and subcategories. The resulting themes, however, hint at underlying meaning, adding an interpretative level to the findings (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Even though this approach is a recognized research approach to deal with explorative questions such as the one at hand, in order to hint at the pop-cultural mobilizing character of the references, the frame analysis

provides an additional layer of research aimed at identifying the strategic deployment of frames. Researchers such as Clinton et al. (2020) stress that frame analysis can improve thematic analysis through linking the contextualized meaning to purposeful social interaction. Both frames and themes thereby complement each other in this thesis.

3.2.2 Qualitative Content Analysis

In this thesis, frame analysis and thematic analysis are combined in a qualitative content analysis. This qualitative content analysis is a common methodology for the analysis of texts such as the ones at hand. Furthermore, due to the limited available material and the focus on interpretation rather than generalization, a qualitative methodology of a *latent content analysis* proves useful through its focus on thick descriptions at the interpretive level of content (Berg as cited in Bengtsson, 2016). Though used both qualitatively and quantitatively in previous academic work, content analysis in a qualitative sense is defined as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (Krippendorff as cited in Bengtsson, 2016, p.9). This research follows a mainly inductive and explorative approach with partial deductive work on framing, which means that conclusions and hypotheses are developed from the data. The unit of analysis for the content analysis are the written texts of presidential communication. Hence, other potential analytical units such as nonverbal communication, style, and performance are excluded.

To identify this underlying meaning, a mix of inductive and deductive methods is deployed: the inductive coding aims at identifying *themes* in superhero referencing. *Thematic analysis* in qualitative content analysis is deployed to answer the research question through an implicit topic that organizes a group of repeating ideas (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Contrary to frame analysis, themes are not necessarily linked to a functional role with an audience in mind and are therefore helpful to gain insights into the various forms of meaning contained in the references. In a deductive approach, *generic frames* around the themes are identified to analyze the directionality and functions of the themes. Such generic frames transcend thematic limitations and can be identified in relation to different topics, cultural contexts, and times (de Vreese, 2005). Hence, this deductive approach ensures comparability between the speeches, which cover a range of different times, contexts, and policy domains. The deductive approach, therefore, keeps the audience in mind, whilst the inductive approach focuses on the interpretation of the subjects themselves. Hence, the thematic analysis answers the question: how do the actors interpret the pop-cultural references at hand?

Whilst the frame analysis answers the question how the subjects strategically link the references to their arguments.

The reasoning behind this methodological approach is to identify the linkage between references and frames: references point toward a specific evoked meanings of frames whilst frames in turn point toward a specific interpretation toward the audience. A reference to Superman, for example, will evoke different ideas when used in connection to the *Human Interest Frame*, which is used to evoke sympathy and emotional interpretations, to when it is used in connection to the *Conflict Frame*, which heightens opposition between parties. This linkage therefore is the foundation to identifying the influence of pop-culture on politics as it demonstrates which concepts from superhero culture are used to interpret real-world politics and how these concepts are deployed in speech. The table below provides an overview of generic frames and the textual identifiers to code them accordingly as developed by scholars such as Semetko and Valkenburg (2003), Kozman (2016, p.797), and Abdullah (2021). Since the thematic analysis follows an inductive approach, such textual identifiers were not categorized in advance. However, the process of inference from codes to categories to themes are made transparent in Appendix A.

Table 1: Generic Frames and their Textual Identifiers

Generic Frame	Description	Identifiers in Text
Human interest frame	A narrative that tends to draw on emotion, evoke sympathy on issues, favoring a humane approach to dealing with problems, personalizes, dramatizes, and emotionalizes the story.	Does the text bring a human face or an emotional angle to the presentation of the event? Does it include vignettes/anecdotes that generate sympathy and compassion? Does the text discuss the private lives of the people?
Economic consequences frame	This frame focuses on economic consequences of an action or inaction or choice, frame refers to the presentation of a story by an individual with interest in the double bottom line of profit and loss, the broad values of capitalism	Does the text present the issue in terms of financial/economic losses or gains? Does the text mention the costs or expenses of the issue? Does the text suggest there might be economic consequences related to pursuing or not pursuing a course of action?

Conflict frame	This is one of the most common frames in US media. It displays conflicts between individuals/parties and depicts us/them dichotomies and polarization	Are there disagreements between two or more groups (such as individuals, teams)? Does the text refer to winners and losers? Does one side disapprove/reproach another?
Morality frame	The Morality Frame describes narrative style that employs moral values and moral-laden statements in narrating a story	Does the story contain any moral message? Does the text make references to morality (such as cheating) Does the text offer specific social recommendations about how to behave?
Attribution of responsibility frame	This frame presents an issue or a problem in a manner of attributing responsibility for causing or solving a problem to an individual/group.	Does the text attribute responsibility for its cause to a group? Does the text suggest a group has the solutions? Does the text suggest the problem requires urgent action?

3.2.3 Data Collection

To identify the empirical material of this thesis, *The American Presidency Project*, a digital record of presidential communication was used as the main database. This database is hosted by the University of Santa Barbara and contains 146,329 presidential and related records. These records include speeches, press releases, legal documents, and many other sources. The main challenge lay in defining search terms to identify relevant documents. A reference to superhero culture does not necessarily have to entail the name of the superhero, a mere quote from the comic books or movies can suffice to make a recognizable statement to the audience. Therefore, the creation of a list of search terms included three review rounds, and the data collection methods included a triangulation process to ensure further reliability². 17 documents were retrieved from the database that were deemed relevant to answering the research question at hand.

² The extended processes of triangulation and review can be found in the Appendix.

3.2.4 Limitations

The above outlined research design is subject to several limitations and potential pitfalls. The following sections addresses some of these shortcomings and argue for a systematic approach towards damage control. Firstly, though this study focuses on federal-level American politics, it focuses on presidential speeches only. One could therefore legitimately argue that by excluding congressional politics, a large source of pop-cultural references is ignored. This is true, however, there are two reasons which may convince critics of the legitimacy of this exclusion. The first reason lies in the epistemology of this study. Pragmatically speaking, the content has to be limited to perform meaningful qualitative analysis within the scope of the thesis. It is also common for interpretive research to seek thick descriptions of context and perspectives rather than prioritizing generalizability to larger populations. Hence, a focus on a smaller amount of data means an inductive approach that allows for identifying factors that were not part of the original research focus (Gray, 2021). Secondly, a small sample could have still included material from both Congress and the president. However, due to the unique status of power and focus on the office of the president, one would expect greater media attention and hence greater influence than from single members of Congress. Therefore, to make the material relevant for answering the question of political influence of popular culture, only presidential speeches were chosen.

A second potential criticism regards the coding procedure of the material. Even though it is widely acknowledged that coding may follow an intuitive and less pre-structured method to allow for inductive rather than deductive knowledge, researchers have to address potential issues of subjectivity and bias. Therefore, several steps were undertaken to increase reliability. Firstly, during the open coding process, coding lists were created, and the codes found were explained in the description of the code. This process helps to avoid cognitive change and reinterpretation of codes (Bengtsson, 2016). Next, several coding rounds were performed which started with different sources and created a second layer of codes. This way, a change of meaning from the original coding to the next could was made transparent. Lastly, a process of *recontextualization* followed: the original sources were read in parallel to the coded sources to decide on whether and how to include unmarked text passages and to verify the codes (Bengtsson, 2016). Common other steps to increase reliability of the coding procedure involve parallel coding of two researchers, and verification of codes through a second researcher. However, these methods were not available for this thesis.

A third limitation addresses the process of data gathering. It can be argued that even though many references to popular culture may appear in written and oral form, some other

usages of superhero iconography through politicians can take very different, nonverbal forms. The example of the former Alaska Senator Ted Stevens wearing a tie displaying the Incredible Hulk is a prominent example of superhero references not captured through this research approach. Other references such as imitating prominent postures of superheroes or wearing a cape are similarly not captured by this thesis. These potential references display indeed promising material for analysis. However, these types of nonverbal communication would require a different methodology, and do not fit the foreseen coding scheme. Even though they are therefore excluded from this thesis, future research could very well investigate nonverbal types of superhero references. Such a quest would certainly enrich the findings of this thesis.

4. Empirical Results

4.1 Descriptive Results

This section focuses on the descriptive elements of the analyzed texts. The presidents, types of communication, references, policy issues, and frames are summarized and structured in the following section to gain an overview of the material.

4.1.1 Presidential Communication

Seventeen documents were retrieved from the database, of which all contain transcripts of oral presidential communication at press conferences (3), question-and-answer sessions (2), campaign events (2), and presidential speeches (14). The documents range from May 18th, 2010 to October 17th, 2020, and contain communication by Barack Obama (in office 2009–2017) and Donald J. Trump (in office 2017 – 2021). Even though George W. Bush and Joe Biden’s presidencies fall into the search period of 2001 – 2022, the search did not yield any results. This can be partially explained by the relative time-lag between the mainstream dominance of superhero movie culture and the Bush presidency. Despite Bush’s silence regarding superhero culture, Marvel granted him a stylized portrayal in the superhero comic series “Ultimate X-Men” (Millar et al., 2006). Furthermore, Biden’s silence on superheroes can be partially explained by the short time-period of his current presidency, which shows only one year overlap with the search period.

4.1.2 Superheroes, References, and Policy Issues

The 17 documents contain 21 references to superhero culture in total. These references can be subdivided into two main types. *Explicit references* refer to the pop-cultural artefact as such: the president talks about the movie or the comic book of a certain superhero. *Metaphors* constitute references which allude to the movie through mentioning the characters, quotes, or gadgets. The latter type constitutes the majority of the references with thirteen references in total. *Superman* (8) is by far the most mentioned superhero, followed by *Iron Man* (4) and *Batman* (3).

Figure 1: Frequency of Superheroes in the Documents

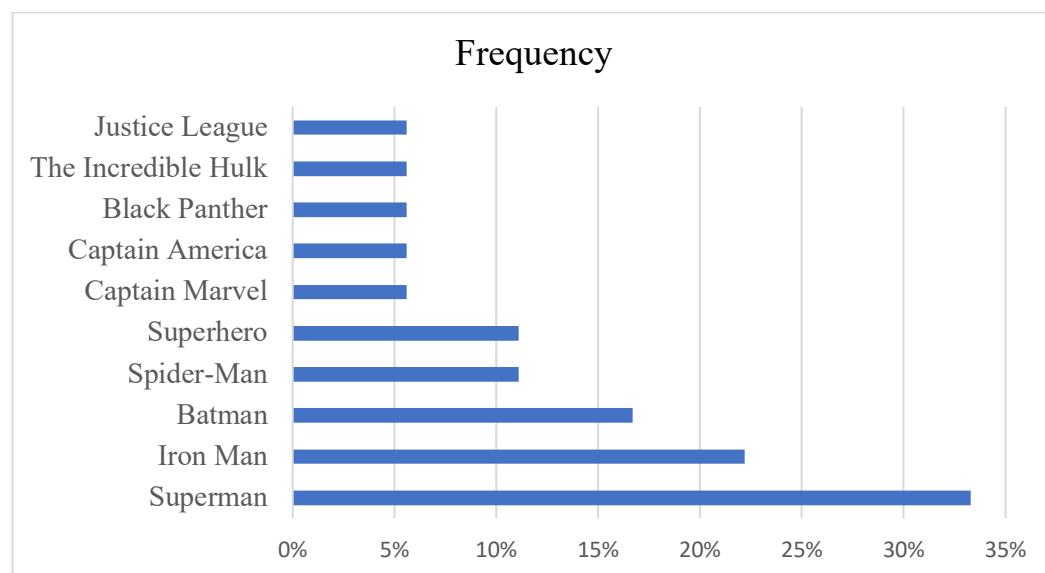


Table 2: Superheroes and Reference Types

Superhero	Explicit Reference	Metaphor
Batman	2	1
Black Panther	1	0
Captain America	1	0
Iron Man	0	4
Justice League	0	1
Captain Marvel	1	0
Spider-Man	1	1
Superman	2	6
The Hulk	0	1
Superhero	1	1
Total	9	13

The speeches covered nine different policy issues, headed by *economic policy* (11), which was present nine times in Obama's communication and two times in Trump's communication. *Identity politics* (8) with an enhanced focus on representation, and the *presidential race* (4) were also present in both presidents' communication.

Table 3: Policy Issues

Policy Issue	Frequency	President
Corruption	1	Trump
Economic Policy	11	Obama (9), Trump (2)
Educational Policy	1	Obama
Foreign Policy	3	Obama
Human Rights	1	Obama
Identity Politics	8	Obama (5), Trump (3)
News/ Media	1	Trump
Pandemic/ Health Policy	2	Trump
Presidential Race	4	Obama (2), Trump (2)

4.1.3 Generic Frames and Emergent Themes

Even though all five generic frames are present in presidential communication, not all of them showed interactions with referenced superhero culture. To identify this interaction, four emergent themes were identified in the texts, which group the range of conceptual content and additional meaning contained in the references. *Humans = Superheroes* (9) refers to the use of references to show an equivalence between politicians (5), artists (2), soldiers (2) and superheroes. *Representation* (8) refers to the contribution of children (1), Jews (1), women (1), and people of color (5) to superhero culture and is closely linked to *Identity Politics*. *Utopian visions* (9) provide idealized future visions of American society, promises, and in one case an alternative reality in contrast to the current state of affairs. *Superhero ethics* (4) evokes the morale and actions of superheroes as suggested moral frameworks for others to follow suit. It is closely linked to the *Morality Frame*. All four emergent themes are referred to by both presidents, albeit in sometimes diverging manner as will be explored in further detail in section 4.2.

Even though economic policy emerges as the dominant policy issue, the Economic Consequences Frame is the least present one, which also does not interact with any of the emergent themes. Rather, the consequences of economic recession or growth are discussed through the Human Interest Frame, which also shows the most frequent appearance in communication, followed by the relatively equally represented remaining frames. The interaction with emergent themes was coded as an interaction when the reference stood in direct relation to the framed issue or when it was discussed through one of the frames itself.

Table 4: Frames and Themes

Generic Frames	Frequency	Interaction with Themes
Attribution of Responsibility Frame	19	Utopian visions, Superhero ethics, Representation
Conflict Frame	19	Humans = Superheroes
Economic Consequences Frame	12	
Human Interest Frame	39	Humans = Superheroes, Utopian visions
Morality Frame	20	Superhero ethics

4.2 Analysis

To identify the themes and their framing in a meaningful way, the interaction between frames and themes identified in the descriptive results are particularly useful. This analytical part of the results describes the themes and the frames deployed in depth and examines the patterns emerging from this interaction.

4.2.1 A Matter of Representation

Both Trump and Obama make use of superhero references to stress the representation of societal groups. Both the theme itself and the interacting framing thereby show great coherence for both presidents. Representation is used in connection to explicit references, that is societal groups are mentioned when having contributed to the success of superhero comic books and movies or if these artefacts demonstrate the success of these groups:

“American Jews have even brought us our greatest superheroes – Captain America, Superman, and Batman” (Trump 2, p.2-3)

These references are furthermore always framed positively as though to stress the promising level of representation and often used in connection to the contribution of these groups to American culture. Every quote further interacts with the Attribution of Responsibility Frame, which stresses that the individuals and groups mentioned are successful through their work and contribution. As Obama states at the traditionally African American Howard University:

“And because of those who’ve come before you, you have role models to follow. You can write a book that wins the ‘National Book Award’. Or you can write the new run of ‘Black Panther’. Or, like one of your alumni, Ta-Nehisi Coates, you can go ahead and do both” (Obama 3, p.12).

The theme of representation emerges similarly in the case of women and children (Obama 5, p.31; Obama 8, p.2). The use of explicit references and the interaction with the Attribution of Responsibility Frame demonstrates two main findings: First, these references in connection to the idea of success stress the importance of superhero culture to American culture, and secondly, the Attribution of Responsibility Frame alludes to the fulfilling of a societal promise: the ability to succeed in this country regardless of your background. This common narrative of the American Dream with a focus on individual responsibility is both a common national narrative that appeals to norms of freedom and opportunity, and a core element of superhero culture (Karaminas, 2005).

However, this interaction between representation and its framing disguises both the alternate character of the artefacts at hand and the struggles connected to the success of the pieces. Superman, for example, is an American-Jewish creation, but one that channels the struggle of Jewish identity aspiring to assimilate yet having to hide Jewish culture and expression through much of the 20th century (Sommerlad, 2018). Superman, too, has to hide his superhuman identity to be accepted by society. A similar mismatch is created by Obama when citing Captain Marvel as representation of female success in the US (Obama 8, p.2). Even though the movie was a financial success, it was quickly rated the worst movie in the history of the Marvel Universe and heavily criticized for being too feminist (Buckley, 2019). Black Panther endured a similar backlash, fueling anger towards a suggested political agenda by Marvel (Smith, 2018). The movie itself furthermore depicts an alternate universe which never experienced the horrors of colonialism enabling a thriving economy of its fictional

country. Consequently, the conflictual context of the representation is not addressed in the theme.

Hence, the theme of representation interacting with a frame of individual success evokes an image of American society as both deeply connected to superhero culture, and as enabling and inclusive. This is not entirely contrasted, but heavily damped by the cultural roots of the superheroes cited, their depicted struggles, and the factual publicity these heroes created. This obliviousness in the deployment of superhero culture leads to conclude that the common imagery of individual success, rather than the political struggles connected to the artefacts at hand are used as appeals to the audience. The very fact that the superheroes are used despite this fractured fantasy, however, alludes to the immense appeal of their stories of individual success and heroism.

4.2.2 Humans = Superheroes

The theme of humans being compared and stylized to superheroes is made use of by both presidents, in albeit different manner. The most striking example of this image is Trump's comparison of himself to Superman: "I wasn't feeling like your president is supposed to feel. I wasn't feeling like Superman" (Trump 1, p.12). This clear attribution of superhuman powers to the presidential office becomes evident through the interaction with the Conflict Frame: in the context of Trump's campaign against Biden, this superhuman quality of being like and feeling like Superman demonstrates the main conflict between him and his opponent, in which Trump's equation to Superman trumps Biden's lack of these qualities and declares the former the winner. Hence, the superhero theme turns into Trump's vantage point over Biden. The Human Interest Frame, which evokes empathy and emotionalizes the issue of the pandemic in the quote above demonstrates another feature: the necessity of having superpowers whilst the (temporary) lack of access to those is deserving of pity and empathy.

This branding is coherent with Schneiker's (2020) analysis of Trump's branding as a superhero politician: "a superhero is needed to solve the problems of ordinary Americans and the nation as such, because politicians are not able to do so" (Schneiker, 2020, p. 217 – 218). Hence, the theme of equating people with superheroes firstly conveys an interpretation of politics as a realm of superhuman powers and excluding of ordinary citizens. This framing, built on a clear othering between Trump and other politicians, is further consistent with the interaction of both the Human Interest Frame and the Conflict Frame. The references, however, go beyond Schneiker's term of superhero politicians: first, they demonstrate that the image of superhero politicians is not only evoked through implicit stereotypical behavior or rhetoric, which - through its charismatic leadership - evoke the

image of superheroes, but also through explicit comparisons. This relieves the audience from interpretative action and delivers the equation in the most direct manner possible: to be president means to be Superman. Secondly, the theme reveals that this superhuman status is not conferred to presidents alone.

Hence, Schneiker (2020) is right when arguing about the inherently populist character of superhero comparisons, but this use of populist imagery is not confined to populist politicians alone. Rather, this imagery is both inclusive and exclusive: since both Trump and Obama extend this quality to soldiers and artists in cases of extraordinary achievements, this elevation of people signals two features: on the interpretive level, the theme demonstrates exclusiveness, which ignores the democratic legitimacy intended in politics (Trump 5, p.6; Obama 7, p.7). On the functional level, however, it signals inclusiveness both through inclusive framing and through the elevation of ordinary citizens to the superhero realm, too.

4.2.3 Utopian Visions

The utopian theme makes use of references to superheroes to provide idealized futures or alternative visions of reality. Though one would expect presidents from different parties to alter in their utopian views, both presidents demonstrate a surprising overlap in their use of references to describe utopias. Both presidents, for example, stylize a future prospering American society through economic growth and innovation. Obama refers to Iron Man when visiting Research and Development centers and industrial sites to highlight the importance of high-tech:

“Basically, I am here to announce that we’re building Iron Man. I’m going to blast off in a second. [...] But keeping America at the cutting edge of technology and innovation is what is going to ensure a steady stream of good jobs in the 21st century. [...] To put America at the forefront of 21st century manufacturing. [...] We’ve got to build an economy that works for everyone, not just a fortunate few. We’ve got to restore opportunity for all people.”
(Obama 2, p. 3)

Trump, after having stressed Biden’s lack of resemblance with Superman, continues: “Under my leadership, prosperity will surge. Normal life, oh, I love normal life. We wanna get back

to normal life. We'll fully resume. The Florida tourism and hospitality industries will reach record highs". (Trump 3, p.6)

These quotes further demonstrate the subtle differences in superhero culture for both presidents. Trump, once more, creates a utopian vision of the US through the figure of the action hero Superman, which is deeply intertwined with the theme of humans as superheroes. Because of an idealized vision of presidency, a utopian state can be reached. Obama, on the other hand, uses the worlds of Iron Man and the Hulk to elevate technology and research into superhuman worlds (Obama 9, p.2). Importantly, Iron Man does not possess any superhuman powers himself, he joins the realm of superheroes only through his technological skills. Similarly, the Hulk has superhuman powers only because he is turned into a superhero by scientists. Here, the world of superheroes reaches further than simply attributing superpowers to people, it is turning professions and industries into the engines of pop-culturally stylized utopian futures. Hence, the references to superheroes rhetorically create a path to utopian futures.

The interaction with the Human Interest Frame demonstrates this utopian framing further: neither president talks about the economic vision of the future through the Economic Consequences Frame. Rather, economic growth is framed both emotionally and empathetically as an economy for the people, or an economy to love (Trump 3, p.6). Hence, superhero references, together with Human Interest framing paint a picture of a humanized utopia: one that is elevated through pop-culture, yet easily understood as familiar through the very same pop-culture. Similarly, for both presidents the interaction with the Attribution of Responsibility Frame points towards their own personas, which both indicates their personal devotion and their connection to the dreamed-up utopia.

In almost all cases, the utopian theme is thereby deployed to provide superficial ideas of a future blooming American society. One important exception is, however, is the use of Iron Man as an alternate reality to demonstrate the harsh reality of civilian casualties in modern warfare. In a Question-And-Answer Session, which addresses the use of drone strikes in war, Obama argues:

"And I wish I could just send in Iron Man, or – no I don't mean that as a joke. I mean I wish I – that the tragedy of war, conflict, terrorism, et cetera, did not end up creating circumstances where we, wielding kinetic power, didn't end up hurting who shouldn't have been hurt." (Obama 11, p.45)

This creation of an alternate utopia is a noteworthy exception because Iron Man, here, demonstrates not a futuristic technological culture, but a standard of superhuman precision that is simply unreachable. The striking absence of a responsibility frame thereby allows Obama a unique framing: because it is obvious to everyone that the realm of Iron Man is a fictional reality, the tragedy of warfare is left as a harsh reality that people simply have to face. The audience is not left questioning whether one should not also try to avoid casualties in this world, whether a potential ban on drone strikes would not be worth a discussion having. Instead, war as it is, stands without alternatives. Though this is a singular use of superhero reference, in its proximity to the others it demonstrates a great example of the breadth of meaning of superhero reference. The same theme and the same superhero can *both* create potential utopian futures as desirable *and* declare the current reality as the only one possible.

4.2.4 Superhero Ethics

Superhero ethics, as the smallest theme deployed in presidential speeches, highlights ethical frameworks contained in superhero culture to guide real-life political action. A coherent example is Obama sharing Spiderman's wisdom that "with great power comes great responsibility" with the Chinese vice president at a press conference (Obama 3, p.6; Isaak, 2022, para.1). The wisdom itself is broadly applied to a general struggle of superhero characters who, in times of hardship, realize the weight of their abilities and their extraordinary obligation to better society, and to restore justice and peace in the world (Robichaud, 2005). It is, though, never a political or progressive quote in a sense that asks superheroes to systematically change the status quo. Superhero realities, instead, are designed as Eden-like communities in which only explicit evil intervention through villains brings imbalance. The task of superheroes, thereby, is a reactionary one: to *restore* harmony rather than *create* it (Treat, 2009). Similarly, Obama's remark to the vice president cannot be understood as a serious suggestion to question prevalent grievances in world politics. Rather, the reference allows Obama to allude to the possibility of future conflict, in which China, now a superpower itself, must act, if it were to take its role seriously.

In contrast, Trump addresses regime change directly through a superhero reference. In his inauguration speech, he compares himself to the Batman villain Bane and stresses the task that he, just like Bane, aims at transferring power back to people after corrupt forces have taken over Washington (Trump 6, p.1). This ethical framework seems similar to Spiderman's ethos of using the power given to one in a responsible manner, which, in the

case of the presidential office, is restoring democracy. However, the context of the quote in the Batman movie itself, makes this meaning less straight-forward: the villain Bane, though framing his taking control over Gotham in precisely the same manner as Trump, subsequently demonstrates the terror of his regime through marital law, freeing of criminals, and riots (UGO, 2005). Though it is hard to believe that Trump alludes to these possible consequences of his presidency, it does fit his orchestration as anti-establishment. The reference to superhero culture does not make a clear suggestion of his path but serves the cause of creating a common enemy of corrupt Washington elites through the recognition value of the reference.

A third instance of deploying superhero ethics marks a slightly different connotation to the ethical framework: rather than suggesting that great power creates the need for ethical action, it is the heroic action that makes superhero. Again, interacting with the theme of humans being superheroes, the heroic action of a soldier commemorated in Obamas speech turns him into a superhero:

“And when he watched the Twin Towers fall that awful September day, Rob found his calling to serve his country. A prodigious Army Ranger who took care of his fellow soldiers just as he did his own family, he’d tell Wendy, “Mom... I’m your Superman” (Obama 7, p.5)

Superman serves as an idealized version of the American soldier fulfilling their duty to protect the country. This ability of the ordinary to be elevated into something both supernatural and morally supreme is further discussed by Robichaud (2005) to explain the great appeal of superhero culture. All three instances that have been discussed above further interact with the Morality Frame, which suggests that ethical action for the issue at hand can be found in these fictional role models. Real-world problems like foreign policy are suggested to have straight-forward ethical solutions.

However, the theme of superhero ethics is at the same time not suggestive of any extraordinary ethical framework. After all, the notion of having to use the power gifted to you responsibly does not originate from Spiderman. Rather, superhero culture serves as a common point of identification when reiterating these values. Just like in the case of Spiderman, the soldier turning into Superman through his service does not aspire systemic change: he aspires to restore justice. This apolitical notion of ethical frameworks is only really broken by Trump’s reference to Bane who claims to have properly achieved system

change of a political system. His presidential campaign of anti-establishment populism reaches a moment of success and could have suggested a highly politicized deployment of superhero culture were it not for the ambiguity of the quote's context. No one can *in all seriousness* suggest that Trump aspires Bane's regency. Rather, here too, the quote's use and connotation succumb to a flat catch-all phrase which appeals through recognition value. Hence, the theme functions as a justification for political action, not necessarily through the actual moral frameworks contained, but through its catch-phrase character and the morality framing.

4.2.5 Interpreting and Framing Superhero References

The themes and frames contained in presidential communications show several significant findings. First, despite expecting differences in framing between Obama and Trump based on political affiliation, the results show great similarities between the two actors. Superhero references are framed exclusively positively – even their variation of themes: as demonstrations of success, as a humanizing and consensus seeking anecdote, as idols to aspire for, as utopian futures. Second, the themes and frames demonstrate diverging directions: on the one hand, presidents specifically address political representation through superhero culture and thereby acknowledge the struggles of the groups at hand. On the other hand, they do so through the depoliticizing frame of individual responsibility thus diverging attention from political conflict. The latter function is a prominent feature in all themes: even in political conflict such as during presidential campaigns, superhero references are deployed to create consensus, and to shine a benevolent limelight on the actors involved.

The only striking difference of use between the two presidents can be found in the persistent image of presidents as superheroes in the case of Trump. Even though Obama does, too, frame people as superheroes, Trump creates a superhero persona, elaborately analyzed by Schneiker (2020). This populist turn, however, also displays a clear depoliticizing effect: supernatural powers, rather than the content of the political agenda, qualifies for presidency, and democratic competition becomes obsolete. These findings are further consistent with the frames found interacting with the superhero themes: the clear dominance of the Human Interest Frame, in combination with the Attribution of Responsibility Frame (mostly directed at self-responsibility) is consistent in its emotional appeal and focus on individual success. The absence of the Economic Consequences Frame, too, shows how policy issues in connection to superhero culture, are not framed in their perhaps complex or dry consequences, but through plain positive utopian eyes.

The *mechanism* of a limelight is crucial in two ways. It brings attention to an actor, a policy, or a conflict, but it does so by leaving the associated political struggle involved in the shadows. A politician is fit for office thanks to their superpowers not thanks to their policies, female main characters are important and successful, but the backlash endured is ignored, and steel manufacturing sites are the future not because it is a choice of economic policy, but because they can create supernatural gear. To summarize, the similar, yet apolitical and ahistorical reality depicted in superhero culture, the solutions to conflicts through supernatural power demonstrate the ideational power contained in pop-cultural mobilization through superhero references.

5. Discussion

What can be learned from these functions of superhero referencing in political communication? Firstly, the themes and frames discovered in this research do not assume a straightforward influence on the political audiences of presidents. Previous studies have shown that both general framing effects as well as effects of pop-cultural mobilization depend heavily on pre-existing political beliefs. Politicians, assuming such enabling effects, deploy pop-cultural references nonetheless in various forms. As this thesis focuses on written and spoken referencing of superhero pop-culture, the framing and interpretation of superheroes by political actors was the focal point of the analysis, and the consensus-seeking mechanisms of the themes deployed its main finding.

The themes explored in the analysis partially support previous findings. As Young and Carpenter (2016) contend, pop-cultural references can be deployed for and against the very same agenda. The theme of representation in the case of superhero pop-culture demonstrates a similar case. Both Trump and Obama positively link representation and the superhero genre as to display a successful pluralist American society. Traditionally, however, Republicans strongly oppose the so-called diversity-agenda or identity politics in popular culture (Babcock, 2020). The additional obliviousness towards the struggles connected to the success of disadvantaged groups in Hollywood demonstrates a striking feature of superhero referencing in political speeches: without having to allude to grassroot-political activism, large-scale systemic change or power struggles, superhero pop-culture serves as a silver bullet to use for positive imaging and little political content. One is easily swayed to conclude that the political enabling factor of superhero culture is in fact one of framing policy in apolitical terms.

However, acknowledging the context and complexity of the themes, two arguments stand in opposition to this conclusion: first, the focus on individual success both featured in the theme of representation and humans=superheroes, is deeply tied to the American Dream, a narrative stressing individuality and equality of opportunity. This narrative is deeply tied to superhero culture and is not at all a simple diversion of political struggle onto the individual: it is a deeply political narrative itself (Monteyne, 2004). Both the usage of humans= superheroes and representation feature visions of America, in which this American Dream is alive and being lived by individuals. Featuring people in political speeches tied to this narrative can therefore be seen as an attempt to convince the audience of political success: the USA do not only create fictional stories of heroes in capes, they turn citizens into Supermen as well.

Secondly, it is true that the issue of representation sweeps group struggle under the political carpet. However, the very fact that references of superhero culture are so neatly tied to addressing issues of race, class, and gender, both in their diversity and in their frequency, demonstrates a different political layer: one of the political artefacts themselves. Race, class, and gender in the context of superhero pop-culture have been extensively discussed by scholars such as Brown (2021) and Andreassen (2019) who stress the enormous potential of inclusive casts and scripts. The theme of representation in presidential speeches grants these issues a political arena: though struggles are overlooked, these topics are given visibility and acknowledgement as highly influential and successful feature of American culture.

To summarize, identifying and contextualizing these themes of superhero referencing matter as they “carry with them theoretical significance for those interested in the determinants of public opinion on global norm development” (Finnemore and Sikkink; and Simmons as cited in Young and Carpenter, 2018 p. 563). The dominant use of references to depoliticize or simplify policy issues is in line with the vast literature on the genre. However, the clear link between representation of the reference and the pop-cultural artefacts themselves in a non-metaphorical way demonstrates a different turn: the movies and books themselves have turned into a political arena that is picked up by political actors. The limelight mechanism thereby demonstrates this two-way function of both politicization and depolitization through superhero culture.

These findings should nonetheless be contextualized against the background of the limited scope of available material and subjects. It is neither the nature nor the ambition of this qualitative textual analysis to identify generalizable patterns in reference use. It would, for example, be interesting to identify shifts in frames and themes before and after electoral

campaigns, as it would equally make sense to identify broader usage of superhero culture in political communication beyond the presidential office. Nonetheless, the themes and frames identified in this thesis contribute significantly to the theoretical knowledge of the field as they demonstrate the empirical entry point of pop-cultural ideas into the political arena. Due to the significance of presidential communication to the construction of American political identity, its potential impact and consequently the impact of superhero culture itself is safe to assume. It will be the task of future research to identify and deconstruct this empirical impact further.

6. Policy Implications

The findings of this research could have significant implications for both pop-cultural and federal policy. To argue for these, however, implies to assume that future research will further contribute to the understanding of the pop-cultural mobilization. So far, the themes and frames in presidential communication have been explored, but their effect on audiences has yet to be examined by future research on framing effect studies. If these studies find robust results on the mobilizing influence of pop-culture, then the themes and frames identified in this thesis have several implications.

Firstly, since references to superhero pop-culture were shown to avoid talk on political controversy and policy choices, these references can prove as useful rhetorical means for politicians to frame conflict in terms of ostensible consensus: the books and movies provide a template for good and evil, hero and villain to project real-world conflict onto. Hence, for the discipline of speechwriting in the US context, superhero references can serve as a means reduce complexity and create a shared understanding of problems. Applying these means, however, would have crucial normative consequences. If the creation of a superhero persona as president, for example, has significant effects on the public's perception of democracy as a competition of ability rather than ideas, then this framing could motivate the exclusion of groups or people from the political arena: a superhero president comes in to save a passive public, not to be elected and challenged by it. Hence, assuming significant framing effects, the themes discovered could serve as fruitful rhetorical means which require normative deliberation.

Secondly, for the industry of superhero pop-culture, the recognition of representation has important consequences. Not only does the use of superhero pop-culture signify the relevance of this genre to the American public, it also acknowledges the increasing diversity

of the books and movies. The implications, however, are inconclusive: on the one hand, introducing increasingly diverse casts does reach the political arena and can inspire those groups previously excluded: female and black main characters, sexually diverse and non-binary casts reach the public and their cause is recognized by politicians. Hence, it is recommended for the superhero industry to continue this endeavor. However, this research has also shown how the limelight cast on representation leaves the immense backlash against this policy in the shadow. Hence, it is to be feared that diverse superhero culture can delude rather than acknowledge the struggles of minority groups and thereby serve as a political excuse for inaction in other fields. To address this danger, it is recommended for the industry to not only diversify their casts, but also the conflicts addressed. To include a black cast, for example, should also mean to include black history.

Lastly, finding robust framing effects of superhero referencing would also have implications on the ties between politics and pop-culture. If superhero pop-culture does indeed frame our understanding of political problems, then the content displayed in these movies should be critically understood as potential propaganda. Hence, both the provision of material through the US military in superhero movies and the financing of movies should be made transparent. Scholars have argued that such a quest is factually impossible since superhero culture was, from its very origins, intended as military propaganda, and any serious diversion would also mean to essentially alter the genre (Wright, 2018). However, as for instance by increasingly becoming more diverse, superhero culture has changed significantly over time. To be transparent about the creation of a movie would therefore be a pathway to alter the prospective influence of political actors.

7. Conclusion

“The notion that aspects of popular culture might shape [...] policy attitudes [...] deserves serious attention.” (Young and Carpenter, 2018, p. 562). This thesis constitutes an addition to the growing body of research that seeks to identify the influence of pop-culture on politics. For that purpose, the references of superhero culture in presidential communication after 9/11 built the basis for research. A qualitative content analysis, deploying frame and thematic analysis as mechanisms to explain the ideational power contained in these references, was conducted, and evaluated 17 documents in total.

Four themes crystalize from the analysis: superhero references are used to equal humans with superheroes, create utopian realities, discuss representation, and deploy

superhero ethics. They thereby serve to both depoliticize critical issues of foreign policy, war, or economic crisis whilst re-politicizing the superhero genre commonly discussed as dominantly escapist. The superhero genre thereby helps to bridge an apparent paradox: to advocate for idealized states through utopian futures, superhuman capacities, and morale, whilst negating power struggles or any need for political change. Instead, superhero references serve as a benevolent limelight to actors, policies, and conflicts, to create ostensible consensus.

These findings prove important as scholars have previously discussed both escapist and conformist notions of superhero culture but have not identified the precise ways in which these issues reach the real-world political realms. This study further proves relevant to the strand of research on the pop-culture-politics nexus, which demonstrates a lack of empirical studies. Hence, these findings grant reliability to the interpretive literature, which for long has outlined the ideological importance of superhero culture to American culture. Furthermore, the identification how pop-culture is used to motivate policy implies social consequences: it points toward the mobilizing influence of artefacts and thereby to the underlying political power of their makers. Hence, to trace the appearances of pop-culture in politics is relevant to trace the (un-)intentional political power of pop-cultural industries.

However, identifying the themes and functions of superhero culture in political communication is only one piece in the puzzle of pop-cultural mobilization. Whilst this research provides a comprehensive overview of the conceptual content and framing of superhero culture, future research needs to prove the ideational power contained in these references. In the empirical strand, framing effect studies as well as more detailed research on the link between certain policy issues and superhero culture are needed to further understand the working and influence of pop-cultural mobilization. Such robust findings would further stress the power of grand pop-cultural industries such as Hollywood and their ties to politics. Finally, they would also give credit to the work of the many who have for long been working on identifying the various ways in which the *creative* and the *fictional* inspires real-world action.

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Appendix A: Methodological additions

A.1 Annotations to the Coding Procedure

In the case of themes, intuitive and inductive coding formed the first stage of the analysis. These codes did not stem from previous literature but were used to understand the general tone and context of the references. In the case of the theme of *utopian visions*, these first codes were, for example “positive vision” and “futuristic”. Nineteen of these codes were gathered in total and then grouped into themes in a second step. This process, too, was an inductive procedure designed to identify broader groups of meaning from the codes. It was, however, accompanied by the process of recontextualization: here, the unmarked text is revisited in relation to the marked text. This step helps to identify whether and how to include certain parts of unmarked text in the analysis for additional contextualization (Bengtsson, 2016). Even though the additional steps of recontextualization, coding lists, and descriptions were designed to decrease subjectivity, the emergent themes are fundamentally subjective. Furthermore, intercoder reliability procedures could not be conducted throughout the research phase. This is one of the main limitations of this research.

After receiving the results, these were linked back to the literature on interpretive studies in the pop-culture – politics nexus to identify broader ideological ‘packages’ and the ideational power contained in these references. This step also serves to check how the findings correspond to the literature and whether these findings are reasonable (Bengtsson, 2016).

A.2 Annotations to the Data Collection

In a first step, several blogs and web-archives were searched for a complete overview of superheroes of the DC and Marvel Universe. The blogs included Britannica.com and superherodb.com and were compared to a list of superheroes on RollingStone.com. The final list included 46 superheroes. In a second column, additional search terms were listed based on their villains, side characters, famous quotes, and plots. This information was also partly based on descriptions on Britannica.com and RollingStone.com. After creating a first draft list, the second step included passing around the initial search terms among other students. They were not asked at the same time, but after one another and did not communicate with each other. The step was mostly done to decrease the subjectivity of the list. In a last round, the enriched sheet was posted on the platform Reddit.com in a forum related to superhero comic books and movies. There, members of the subreddit had the opportunity to add more

search terms and heroes. Since visibility decreases rapidly on Reddit, the list was declared final after 48 hours.

The first round entailed 95 search terms. These were enriched by 59 search terms in the second round. In the third round, a total of 162 search terms were collected, which were only enlarged by one additional entry in the fourth and last round of revisions. After these final rounds, the term superhero in various case-sensitive forms was added to the list. These search terms were entered in the database of presidential communication in various combinations between January 10th and January 20th, 2022. In total, 25 potential written sources were identified of which sixteen sources were deemed relevant in a first screening. These sources have very different origins: some of them are speeches held in person, some are radio- or TV interviews, and some are written statements only. To further increase the reliability of the results and avoid potential omissions despite the refined list of search terms, the database review was accompanied by a Google search. Here, the names of presidents after 9/11 were entered in addition to the names of superheroes. This additional search was conducted based on the assumption that secondary sources would report the name of superhero in addition to the reference. This search yielded one additional reference, which was not found through the search terms: a quote of Bane, a Batman villain, by Trump during his inauguration speech in 2017.

Appendix B: Documents and Themes

B.1 Overview of Documents

Obama: List of Documents (order according to search results)

Number	Date	Title
1	February 25 th , 2014	Remarks Announcing New Manufacturing Innovation Institutes
2	February 14 th , 2012	Remarks prior to a Meeting With Vice President Xi Jinping of China
3	May 07 th , 2016	Commencement Address at Howard University
4	May 18 th , 2010	Press Release: Remarks of President Barack Obama in Youngstown, Ohio – As Prepared for Delivery
5	October 21 st , 2010	Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session in Seattle, Washington
6	April 21 st , 2011	Remarks at a Democratic National Committee Fundraiser in Culver City
7	May 26 th , 2014	Remarks at a Memorial day Ceremony in Arlington, Virginia
8	March 16 th , 2016	Remarks at a Women's History Month Reception
9	March 15 th , 2016	Remarks at Argonne National Laboratory in Lemont, Illinois
10	March 05 th , 2014	Remarks at Central Connecticut State University in New Britain, Connecticut
11	April 07 th , 2016	Remarks During a Question-and-Answer Session on the United States Supreme Court at the University of Chicago Law School in Chicago, Illinois

Trump: List of Documents (order according to search results)

Number	Date	Title
1	October 17 th , 2020	Pool Reports of October 17, 2020
2	April 28 th , 2017	Proclamation 9596 – Jewish American Heritage Month, 2017
3	September 24 th , 2020	Remarks at a “Great American Comeback” Rally in Jacksonville, Florida
4	March 03 rd , 2018	Remarks at the Gridiron Club Dinner
5	October 26 th , 2018	Remarks at the Young Black Leadership Conference
6	January 20 th , 2017	Inaugural Address

B.2 Overview of Superhero References in Themes and Links to Frames

Humans = Superheroes

Quote	Context	Surrounding Frames	Superhero Reference
“I wasn’t feeling good. I wasn’t feeling like your president is supposed to feel. I wasn’t feeling like Superman”	Trump, October 17 th 2020, Pool Reports during presidential campaign	Human Interest Frame, Conflict Frame	Superman
“He’ll be like Superman for about 15 minutes.”	Trump, September 24 th 2020, remarks at “Great American Comeback” rally in Florida, on Biden during approaching debate	Human Interest Frame, Conflict Frame	Superman
“A proud Army Ranger who took care of his fellow soldiers just as he did his own family, he’d tell Wendy, “Mom... I’m your Superman”	Obama, May 26 th 2014, remarks at a Memorial Day Ceremony in Virginia	Human Interest Frame, Morality Frame	Superman
“She’s reminded that although he is gone, he will always inspire her and will	Obama, May 26 th , 2014, remarks at a Memorial Day Ceremony in Virginia	Human Interest Frame	Superman

always be her Superman”			
“Ms. Marvel may be your comic book creation, but I think for a lot of young boys and girls, Sana is a real-life superhero. And there are a lot of them in the room.”	Obama, March 16 th , 2016, Remarks at a women’s history month reception	Attribution of Responsibility Frame, Human Interest Frame	Captain Marvel, superheroes
“This is like a Governor supergroup. It’s like the Justice League of Governors.”	Obama, March 5 th , 2014, remarks at Central Connecticut State University in Connecticut	Human Interest Frame, Morality Frame	Justice League
“And Kanye came up, and he hugged me, and he’s wearing the “Make America Great Again” cap, and he said, “This cap, I feel like Superman.”	Trump, October 26 th , 2018, remarks at Young Black Leadership Conference	Human Interest Frame, Conflict Frame	Superman

Utopian Visions

Quote	Context	Surrounding Frames	Superhero reference
“Basically, I’m here to announce that we’re building Iron Man. I’m going to blast off in a second.”	Obama, February 25 th , 2014, remarks announcing new manufacturing institute	Human Interest Frame	Iron Man
“I saw your 85-ton electric furnace. I didn’t see any evidence, but I know you’re building Iron Man’s suits here somewhere.”	Obama, May 18 th , 2010, in Youngstown at Industrial Facility	Human Interest Frame	Iron Man
“He’ll be like Superman for about 15 minutes.”	Trump, September 24 th , 2020, remarks at “Great American Comeback” rally in Florida, on Biden during approaching debate	Human Interest Frame, Conflict Frame	Superman
“I told them I’d come out looking like the	Obama, March 15 th , 2013, remarks at	Human Interest Frame	The Incredible Hulk

Hulk. They didn't believe that."	Argonne National Laboratory I Illinois		
"This is like a Governor supergroup. It's like the Justice League of Governors."	Obama, March 5 th , 2014, remarks at Central Connecticut State University in Connecticut	Human Interest Frame, Morality Frame	Justice League
"And I wish I could just send in Iron Man, or – no, no, I don't mean that as a joke."	Obama, April 7 th , 2016, Q & A session at University of Chicago	Human Interest Frame, Morality Frame	Iron Man

Representation

Quote	Context	Surrounding Frames	Superhero Reference
" You can write a book that wins the National Book Award, or you can write the new run of "Black Panther." Or, like one of your alumni, Ta-Nehisi Coates, you can go ahead and just do both."	Obama, May 7 th , 2016, commencement address at Howard University, on the future careers of people of color	Attribution of Responsibility Frame, Human Interest Frame, Morality Frame	Black Panther
"Well, Michelle and I did see 'Waiting for 'Superman'.'"	Obama, October 21 st , 2010, Q&A session in Seattle, on children's rights and education	Human Interest Frame, Morality Frame, Attribution of Responsibility Frame	Superman
"America Jews have even brought us our greatest superheroes – Captain America, Superman, and Batman."	Trump, April 28 th , 2017, Jewish American Heritage Month		Superheroes, Captain America, Superman, Batman
"Ms. Marvel may be your comic book creation, but I think for a lot of young boys and girls, Sana is a real-life superhero. And there are a lot of them in the room."	Obama, March 16 th , 2016, Remarks at a women's history month reception	Attribution of Responsibility Frame, Human Interest Frame	Captain Marvel, superheroes

Superhero Ethics

Quote	Context	Surrounding Frames	Superhero Reference
“We have tried to emphasize that because of China’s extraordinarily – extraordinary development over the last two decades, that with expanding power also comes increased responsibilities.”	Obama, February 14 th , 2012, remarks prior to meeting with Vice President Xi Jinping of China	Morality Frame	Spiderman
“And I wish I could just send in Iron Man, or – no, no, I don’t mean that as a joke.”	Obama, April 7 th , 2016, Q & A session at University of Chicago	Human Interest Frame, Morality Frame	Iron Man
“Because today we are not merely transferring power from one administration to another or from one part to another, but we are transferring power from Washington DC, and giving it back to you, the people.”	Trump, January 20 th , 2017, Inaugural Address	Morality Frame, Attribution of Responsibility Frame	Batman

Statement of Authorship

I hereby confirm and certify that this master thesis is my own work. All ideas and language of others are acknowledged in the text. All references and verbatim extracts are properly quoted and all other sources of information are specifically and clearly designated. I confirm that the digital copy of the master thesis that I submitted on May 9th, 2022 is identical to the printed version I submitted to the Examination Office on May 10th, 2022.

DATE: May 9th, 2022

NAME: Frida von Zahn

SIGNATURE:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Frida von Zahn".