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Navigating the Labyrinth of Intertextuality in the Media:
A Qualitative Analysis of Reader Responses

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Abstract

This study explores how readers interpret intertextuality in American media discourse, focusing on qualitative findings from a survey of Ukrainian students. Building on previous quantitative research, the study examines how students define and replace intertextual references from Time magazine. The responses were thematically coded to identify key patterns in interpretation. Results indicate that while students recognize intertextual elements, their interpretations vary depending on background knowledge and contextual clues. Findings highlight a tendency toward overgeneralization, reliance on context, and occasional misinterpretation. The study provides insight into how readers engage with intertextuality and the factors influencing their understanding. Given that many intertextual references stem from American literature, history, and popular culture, the study also contributes to discussions in American Studies by examining how such references are perceived outside the U.S.

Keywords: background knowledge, contextual information, intertextuality, media, precedent-related phenomenon.

1. Introduction

Despite an extensive number of studies of intertextuality (Genette; Orr; Eco; Ribeiro; Wiggins; Allen), few studies focus on how readers perceive intertextuality. In our previous study (Velykoroda and Moroz), we

explored how Ukrainian students perceive intertextuality based on a survey conducted from December 2020 till March 2021 in Vasyl Stefanyk Precarpathian National University. Twenty-seven English major students participated in the survey and provided their responses (Velykoroda and Moroz 61). However, that essay focused exclusively on quantitative results, while qualitative results remained beyond the scope of the article. Among the limitations of that study, we stated that even though participants might be giving positive answers to the question of whether they recognized an intertextual reference in an abstract, this might not necessarily be a reliable indicator of identifying intertextuality. Consequently, to further test the readers' understanding and perception of intertextuality in media texts, we chose to look more deeply into the content of their responses to conduct a qualitative study of their responses.

In the interpretation of intertextuality, two main factors can help readers understand the utterance: their background knowledge and the contextual information. We assume neither is sufficient when it is not cooperating with the other, as background knowledge could generate too many associations. For example, for the intertextual reference *Cinderella*, there are a number of possible interpretations derived only from background knowledge (*Cinderella* as a story of success despite multiple challenges; *Cinderella* as a certain deadline after which the illusion falls apart; *Cinderella* as a symbol of nobility, generosity (see Velykoroda *Precedent* 78-79). On the other hand, contextual information may not be sufficient to generate a plausible interpretation without knowing the source and the associations of an intertextual reference. In our research, we attempted to identify the readers' background knowledge by asking them to define the respective intertextual element, while the request to replace the intertextual element could show how they use contextual information (complemented or not by their background knowledge) to interpret the utterance from *Time* magazine, which although historically based in the U.S., has successfully developed a global reach and influence (Dumitrica and Jones 2519-2520), and thus was chosen as an adequate source material for surveying both native and non-native speakers of English. Furthermore, *Time* provides authentic, high-quality content on current events, making it a productive source for the purposes of this study.

The current investigation aims to find qualitatively substantiated answers to how readers interpret intertextuality. In the context of the study, this was analyzed based on responses provided to abstracts from *Time* magazine by students from a Ukrainian university majoring in English. Intertextuality studies have often focused on how scholars subjectively interpret intertextual references (Velykoroda “Conceptual”; Edo). However, this empirical data (what scholars think intertextuality means) has not been tested against the experimentally received data (how readers actually interpret it), which is one of the tasks of the present survey. Another task is to see how close the readers/respondents come to identifying the “intended” meaning of intertextuality in American media discourse, and whether there could be some implications received from this for teaching EFL/media literacy. One more task of the current study is to attempt to answer some of the questions received from the quantitative analysis of the results of the survey (Velykoroda and Moroz) that remained unanswered, namely, why despite recognizing and being able to define an intertextual reference, the respondents are unwilling/unable to replace it (as seen in fewer replacement attempts).

2. Literature Review

While intertextuality has been extensively researched in recent decades from multiple theoretical and methodological perspectives (Eco; Wiggins; Allen), it remains a somewhat ambiguous category denoting cultural and linguistic phenomena ranging from plagiarism to translation, biblical allusions, and parody. Consequently, contemporary linguistics scholars (Velykoroda “Ludic”; Levko) have sometimes opted for a narrower term to study intertextuality in media discourse: precedent-related phenomena.

The theory of precedence originated in the late 1980s when precedent-related texts (such as the Bible, canonical literature, and ancient mythology) were studied in the context of linguistic persona, and they would denote texts that were cognitively and emotionally meaningful for speakers in a certain community, would be easily recognizable, and reference to such texts would regularly recur in different contexts (Velykoroda, “Conceptual” 33-34). Within a decade, a more precise term,

precedent-related phenomena, started to be used to denote linguistic and cultural phenomena that serve as obvious and recognizable yet implicit linkers to previous texts (Velykoroda, “Conceptual” 13-23). Currently, precedent-related phenomena are defined as “lingual-cognitive units, whose form and meaning are well-known within a specific lingual-cultural community; the understanding of precedent-related phenomena depends on the recipients’ background and encyclopaedic knowledge” (Selivanova 492). Precedent-related phenomena theorists often view these phenomena as culture-specific concepts. Their nucleus consists of differential characteristics (what makes them recognizable and different from other concepts), while on the periphery, there are numerous attributes (additional features that are associated with a specific precedent-related phenomenon, though they are not required for its signification) (Velykoroda “Conceptual”). Precedent-related phenomena are useful to have a larger precision when studying intertextuality in more dynamic discourses, such as media discourse. Media texts are full of instances of intertextuality: citations of politicians or experts, links to previous articles on related topics, and quotations from stakeholders. While these examples are considered to be forms of intertextuality and serve their specific functions in each context, they do not necessarily carry the same emotional and expressive effect that precedent-related phenomena do. Consequently, we would like to focus on specific characteristics of precedent-related phenomena that differentiate them from other forms of intertextuality and will be helpful for us in the current study.

While precedent-related phenomena are undoubtedly a form of intertextuality, some specific features are not necessarily shared by other forms of intertextuality. Defining those would help us set up the general framework for their analysis in media texts and separate them from similar verbal units that cannot be considered intertextual. The analysis below is the extension of ideas introduced in our previous studies (Velykoroda *Precedent*).

A. *Precedent-related phenomena are more expressive than direct nominations for the same objects.* With the help of precedent-related phenomena, authors can create contextual metaphors with a significantly higher expressive potential than direct nominations. Consider the following examples:

(1) “Far worse are the **Robert Mugabes** of the world, once genuine heroes who long outlived their welcomes” (*Time*, 17 Aug. 2009; emphasis added);

(2) “It’s an entire city of **John Dillingers**, feeling guiltless for stealing from the banks” (*Time*, 31 Aug. 2009; emphasis added).

In these examples, precedent-related phenomena not only serve as a common nomination for similar objects (*Robert Mugabe* – a ruthless dictator, *John Dillinger* – an evasive outlaw) (Velykoroda, “Nominative” 30), but they also make the text more expressive, as replacing the name with a common nomination (*ruthless dictator* or *evasive outlaw*) would not have the same effect on the reader. It should be noted that intertextuality is not necessarily meant to carry any extra expressive meaning. Yet, with precedent-related phenomena in media texts, it seems to be one of their primary functions (Velykoroda, *Precedent* 163-166).

B. The use of precedent-related phenomena may result in the utterance becoming structurally or formally incongruent yet still perfectly meaningful. The understanding of the utterance cannot be based exclusively on the surface meanings of the units in it, often even for the semantic reader of the text. Traditionally, in reading intertextuality, as suggested by Umberto Eco (222-223), the semantic reader of the text will interpret the utterance without being aware of the links to other texts. By contrast, the semiotic reader will notice these links and will complement the overall interpretation of the utterance with the additional meaning coming from pre-texts referred to in a given text (Eco 223). Yet, when precedent-related phenomena are used, even the semantic reading of the text may not be possible without knowing what they refer to. In this respect, precedent-related phenomena are somewhat similar to phraseological units, characterized by a high degree of idiomaticity, when one or more constituents will have meanings that are not common to them or when the proverbial meaning of the whole unit is not deducible from those of the individual words. Consider the following examples:

(3) “**Le Carré’d Away**” (*Time*, 12 July 2010; emphasis added);

(4) “Let’s not **Rumsfeld** Afghanistan” (*Time*, 24 Aug. 2009; emphasis added).

Example (3), which is the headline of the article about a network of busted Russian spies in the U.S., is a blend of two intertextual units: the

pen name of a famous author of espionage novels, *John le Carré*, and a phrase used by the Russian president as his reaction to the arrests, translated into English as “*your police got carried away, putting people in jail*” (Velykoroda, “Ludic” 73). Example (4), which is the headline of the article about plans to redeploy U.S. military personnel from Afghanistan, employs the proper name of the former U.S. Secretary of Defense *Donald Rumsfeld* in the unconventional function of the verb in the sentence, referring to his policies and decisions in Iraq (Velykoroda, *Precedent* 159). Hence, in this case, the only successful interpretation could come on the semiotic level, as on the semantic level, utterances (3) and (4) would make little to no sense. Precedent-related phenomena are especially often used to this effect in newspaper or magazine headlines, which are often considered a “grammatical oddity” (Fairclough 21). However, this incongruence that requires additional processing effort on the part of the recipient is also evident in the textual segments of the articles and not only in the headlines.

C. While other forms of intertextuality may be marked by punctuation, font, or explicit mention of the source, *precedent-related phenomena are nearly always unmarked* in printed media and, visually, cannot be distinguished as belonging to other texts. This is a more formal distinction, and, certainly, in works of literature, intertextuality is also commonly unmarked and has to be detected by the semiotic reader. However, forms of intertextuality other than precedent-related phenomena are more traditionally marked in media discourse. In each example (1–4), precedent-related phenomena cannot be visually distinguished as belonging to another text. The previous quotations have been examples of proper names that are capitalized (hence, arguably, this may be considered as marking), so we would like to provide examples of precedent-related phrases or expressions that are neither capitalized nor marked:

(5) “We know he [Obama] can **walk on water** – now where are **the loaves and fishes?**” (*Time*, 3 Nov. 2010; emphasis added);

(6) “**Something is rotten in the house** of Roy – literally. In *Succession*’s Season 2 premiere . . . off-brand Murdochs convene at one of their many homes, only to be greeted by the stench of putrefying flesh” (*Time*, 19 Aug. 2019; emphasis added).

In example (5), the Biblical reference is not visually distinguished from the surrounding text (Velykoroda, *Precedent* 108), while in example (6), the Shakespearean reference comes at the beginning of the article, and the only hint at intertextuality could be the post-positioned “literally” that was added to ensure that the text, in addition to the semiotic reading with *Hamlet* in mind, should also be read on the semantic level.

We should also mention here that in online editions of articles, segments that contain precedent-related phenomena are sometimes marked as hyperlinks to other news stories, image search results pages, or other sources that could either illustrate the phenomenon or give more information about it. This form of marking serves as an additional multimodal visualization tool for a specific precedent-related phenomenon which is not available in printed media, where these connections have to be made by the recipient without any visual indication of the link.

D. *Precedent-related phenomena are always intended by the author and are meant to be recognized.* Unlike other forms of intertextuality, which may be unintended, subconscious, or hidden from the recipient, precedent-related phenomena are inevitably intended and used consciously. The author does expect the reader to recognize them easily. If we return to the previous examples, we can see that in (5), the reference is being made to a well-known Biblical event, and the author intends the messianic imagery. In (6), the catchy first sentence in the article is also intended to draw comparisons with *Hamlet*, and the clarification given after the dash only proves that the author intended both the indirect meaning and the literal (possibly, the indirect meaning as an allusion to Shakespeare may even be more expected than the literal meaning).

E. One of the most important features is that ***precedent-related phenomena are always appraisive or attitudinal.*** While objectivity in media is an essential feature for the quality and relative status of the outlet, precedent-related phenomena often serve as an implicit means to express an attitude towards the objects of articles. This is one of the ways that media authors and editors may remain implicitly biased or partial. Media texts are often considered to be “the proverbial tip of the iceberg: most of its implied or presupposed meanings remain ‘hidden’” (van Dijk 31), and precedent-related phenomena are a powerful tool to express this implicit

information in media (Velykoroda, “Conceptual” 44). Let us consider the following examples:

(7) Otherwise, Facebook will continue to be cast in the role of the Web’s sketchy **Big Brother**, sucking up our identities into a massive **Borg** brain to slice, dice, and categorize for advertisers. (*Time*, 31 May 2010; emphasis added)

(8) As powerful as each piece of Facebook’s strategy is, the company isn’t forcing its users to **drink the Kool-Aid**. It’s just serving up nice cold glasses, and we’re gulping it down. The friends, the connections, the likes – those are all produced by us. Facebook is the ultimate enabler. (*Time*, 31 May 2010; emphasis added)

Both examples come from the same article, “Friends without Borders.” And while example (7), in which the social network is compared to two antagonists from George Orwell’s novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the *Star Trek* franchise, has already been extensively investigated (Velykoroda, “Conceptual” 39), example (8) has not been analyzed. It is more subtle in the ways it expresses the attitude towards Facebook. There is no explicit attitude expressed in this fragment. A reader unfamiliar with the phrase *to drink the Kool-Aid* may remain unaware of the author’s implicit meaning when they include the reference in their text. On the surface, or the semantic level, the fragment mentions a popular American brand of drink mix; however, this expression is used to refer to someone who believes in a possibly doomed or dangerous idea because of perceived potential high rewards. Gradually it evolved further to mean extreme dedication to a cause or purpose and blind obedience in politics/business and popular culture (Moore). Without much discussion about the phrase, its origin, and its controversy, we can see from example (8) how the attitude towards the objects described in the article is expressed implicitly with the help of precedent-related phenomena.

Although other forms of intertextuality may share these five features, they are more prominent and definitive in precedent-related phenomena in media. Of course, not all precedent-related phenomena will necessarily contain the five features mentioned above in specific contexts. Yet, some will inadvertently dominate their function in media texts.

It has been suggested that precedent-related phenomena function in media discourse as

cognitive hyperlinks, as a specific precedent-related phenomenon in the text will always be cognitively “highlighted” in a different color, and if the recipient “clicks” it, he/she will be redirected to another mental image in their brain that will contain most basic and common information about this idea or event. They allow readers to jump to other culturally important texts or situations and map their components onto the content of the article they are reading quickly and effortlessly. (Velykoroda and Moroz 60)

With this in mind, our objective in this study was to challenge the respondents to recognize intertextual segments in media texts (without making them visibly different from the rest of the text) and analyze their responses to see whether their associations will match the “canonical” meaning that is usually ascribed to them. While there is some disagreement about what this “canonical” meaning might include, one of the more beneficial approaches to finding it lies in the procedure by which the attributes of the precedent-related phenomenon are identified.

As such, precedent-related phenomena are viewed as culture-specific concepts. Their nucleus consists of differential characteristics (what makes them recognizable among other concepts). At the same time, on the periphery there are numerous attributes (additional features associated with a particular precedent-related phenomenon, though they are not required for its signification) (Velykoroda, *Precedent* 30). Previous studies (Velykoroda “Conceptual”; Doichyk et al.) have proved that this approach is useful for identifying and exploring conceptual metaphors expressed implicitly through the attributes of precedent-related phenomena in media discourse. A new target domain emerges from the sum of similar attributes provided by various non-related precedent-related phenomena. For instance, a target domain, ILLUSION, was identified based on the respective attributes contributed by such intertextual references as *Dumbo*, *Emperor with no clothes*, *Wizard of Oz*, “*don’t ask, don’t tell*” (see Velykoroda, “Conceptual” 41, for more details). Thus, through their attributes implied in specific contexts, precedent-related phenomena may evoke broader cognitive domains mapped on the respective concepts in media texts. However, these speculations have mostly remained theoretical, and there has been practically no effort to verify these ideas with language users.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. *Context of the Study and Participants*

This study employed a qualitative research methodology to understand how readers, based on surveys of Ukrainian students, perceive intertextuality. This qualitative analysis is part of a larger study conducted in 2020, the quantitative results of which were presented in Yuriy Velykoroda and Oksana Moroz's study titled "Intertextuality in Media Discourse: A Reader's Perspective." In particular, we randomly chose six intertextual examples from *Time* magazine (September 2019 – October 2020 issues were selected). These examples were diverse in their source of origin and contextual usage.

After selecting the examples, we recruited 27 Ukrainian students from the Precarpathian National University to participate in the study – 21 of them were female, 5 were male, and 1 preferred not to say. All but one participant fell within the 18–24-year-old age range. One participant was in the 25–34-year-old age range. Convenience sampling was employed when selecting this target group, given the participants' availability, accessibility, and the exploratory nature of the study. These students were linguistics majors whose English proficiency allowed them to express themselves freely and fluently and understand the depth of the written material.

3.2. *Instruments*

A Qualtrics survey was used to test the readers' perspective on intertextuality from a qualitative standpoint allowing the participants to describe how they understood the example and to think of a synonym. Although the survey was anonymous, each participant could see a segment of the text from a magazine article, followed by questions relating to the intertextual fragment that would show whether the respondents could identify, define and rephrase the intertextual unit. In addition, the survey had a demographics part which provided the researchers with information about the participants' age, education level,

and gender identity. As to the selected intertextual examples given to the participants in the survey, co-author 2 purposefully chose examples from various spheres, such as classical literature, modern literature, films, pop culture, and children's literature, to represent a wide variety of intertextual examples. Next, co-author 2 discussed several possible citations from *Time* magazine with co-author 1. Initially, the list had more examples, but only six were shortlisted because they best fit the five criteria for precedent-related phenomena described above. In particular, each selected example was especially relevant in terms of the second criterion, when the utterance containing the intertextual reference may seem structurally incongruent, and the explicit information in the utterance is not sufficient for the recipient to come to a plausible interpretation without the knowledge of precedent-related phenomena, their sources and/or their fixed meaning in discourse. Therefore, the following six examples were used in the survey:

1. "COVID-19 creates a childcare **catch-22**" (*Time*, 25 May 2020; emphasis added).
2. "If American political leadership has receded, its deep cultural bonds are more difficult to replace. That is the **kryptonite** to Communist China's global ambitions – to lead, it has to be liked, too" (*Time*, 25 May 2020; emphasis added).
3. ". . . she wrote the new book in part because she worries the world is trending more towards **Gilead** than away from it" (*Time*, 16 Sept. 2019; emphasis added).
4. "This has led demonstrators to adopt intricate tactics to evade **Big Brother's** all-seeing eye" (*Time*, 29 Dec. 2019; emphasis added).
5. "I love clay. I love fire. Maybe I'm a distant relative of **Prometheus**" (*Time*, 6/13 Apr. 2020; emphasis added).
6. "A President obsessed with strength and dominance could never stand to be revealed as a sick, vulnerable old man, a mortal made of flesh like the rest of us, ashes to ashes. There could never be a **Wizard of Oz** moment for [the president], with his might-makes-right brand of politics" (*Time*, 19 Oct. 2020; emphasis added).

Below is the table summarizing the precedent-related phenomena in the examples used in the survey, with their attributes determined in a

manner similar to what was applied in our previous study (Velykoroda, “Conceptual”):

	Source	Expected meaning	Attributes
<i>Catch-22</i>	A 1961 novel by Joseph Heller	<i>A paradoxical situation from which an individual cannot escape because of contradictory rules or limitations</i>	- paradox - no escape situation - insoluble problem
<i>Kryptonite</i>	Superman stories	<i>A fictional material that emits a peculiar radiation that weakens Superman has become a byword for an extraordinary exploitable weakness.</i>	- weakness - Superman - green crystal
<i>Big Brother</i>	George Orwell’s 1948 novel <i>Nineteen Eighty-Four</i> .	<i>A synonym for abuse of government power, particularly concerning civil liberties, is often specifically related to mass surveillance</i>	- constant surveillance - invisible ruler - knows what you think
<i>Wizard of Oz</i>	A 1900 novel by L. Frank Baum, <i>The Wonderful Wizard of Oz</i> , as well as its screen and stage adaptations.	<i>The ruler of the Land of Oz, highly venerated by his subjects, is later revealed to be an ordinary conman using elaborate magic tricks and props to make himself seem “great and powerful.”</i>	- trickster - believed to be the only one capable of solving everyone’s problems - liar

Table 1. Intertextual examples, their source, meaning, and attributes.

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

IRB approval (IRB Log # 20-187-IUP) was secured before the survey distribution. All students from the Department of English received an email with a link to the survey. The participants were asked to sign the consent form and create a pseudonym before accessing the survey. After two months of data collection, we received 27 survey responses and proceeded to analyze the dataset.

3.4. Data Analysis

Due to the nature of the research questions of this study, the survey data had qualitative question types regarding the definition and replacement of six intertextual examples. Therefore, data analysis was based on thematic coding with the help of Dedoose qualitative data analysis software. Similar to the process of data analysis performed by Brent et al., co-author 1 created a master document with participants' responses to the survey's questions. Next, the co-authors read the answers and coded them deductively by applying each intertextual example's attributes. These attributes are features most commonly and most closely associated with the precedent-related phenomenon. After deductive coding, we reread data for inductive coding. For a thorough qualitative analysis, each survey response was read several times. After this stage, co-author 2 started to code data line by line by looking for particular topics that emerged from the responses and assigning them to various inductive codes.

Due to the length of the comments, the coding unit was identified as either a phrase or a sentence. Less commonly, some comments were placed into two or three codes because they represented several ideas. There were 58 codes in total for definition and replacement altogether. However, some of the deductive codes were not mentioned by the participants; therefore, we put them aside. We also decided not to include codes that were mentioned only by one participant, as they could be treated as non-representative. The codes that had one answer but could be grouped later with a larger theme were considered. After merging and deleting those codes, the number of codes was reduced to 17 for definition and 18 for replacement. After the coding process, co-author 1 started to group codes into more significant thematic categories that would allow a thematic analysis. After the first round of thematic analysis, co-author 1 shared the document with co-author 2 to check and validate the codes and themes. According to John Creswell and Cheryl Poth, the researchers "play challenger, and help refine the study" during this process (194). Following this approach, and in line with Matthew Vetter et al., the co-authors validated the codes (1159). They discussed how the survey data

helped to answer the main research question of this study. At the final stage of the analysis, co-author 1 came up with larger distinct themes that emerged from the participants' responses, which were then reviewed with co-author 2 for member-checking purposes. This type of data analysis gave us a general idea of the trends across the corpus of data (Stewart).

4. Results

The following qualitative results are based on the students' responses to the survey questions on defining and replacing the intertextual examples. The following themes emerged after analyzing the data of six intertextual examples. Below is an analysis of the thematic overview within each of the six intertextual examples in definition and replacement categories.

	Definition	Replacement
catch-22	9 codes	11 codes
Difficulty	89%	91%
non-categorized	11%	9%
Kryptonite	32 codes	19 codes
Superpower	28%	0%
Weakness	25%	37%
chemical element/green crystal	34%	0%
Strength	0%	21%
Obstacle	3%	21%
non-categorized	9%	21%
Gilead	12 codes	4 codes
Christian religion	33%	25%
geographical location	33%	0%
modern technology	8%	50%
non-categorized	25%	25%
Big Brother	25 codes	26 codes
government/authority	40%	50%
totalitarian regime	4%	12%
Orwell	20%	0%
knows what you think	8%	0%
invisible war	8%	0%
surveillance/police	4%	23%
non-categorized	16%	15%
Prometheus	31 codes	16 codes

god of fire	32%	38%
Greek deity	61%	38%
Progress	0%	13%
non-categorized	6%	13%
Wizard of Oz	21 codes	12 codes
story/film	67%	0%
Magician	29%	25%
Weakness	0%	42%
turning point	0%	25%
non-categorized	5%	8%

Table 2. Main themes identified and frequency of coding.

According to the thematic analysis displayed in Table 2, most of the codes identified in students' responses regarding *catch-22* were classified as *difficulty* (89%). In the replacement category, *difficulty* was also recognized as a common theme (91%). Other codes were not representable or had a low number of occurrences.

The intertextual example *Kryptonite* was mainly defined as a *chemical element/green crystal* (34% of the codes). Interestingly, the *chemical element* or *green crystal* theme was not represented in the replacement section. The same goes for the definition of *Kryptonite* as a *superpower* (28%), while this code was not identified in the replacement section. In attempts at a replacement, the codes *strength* (21%) and *obstacle* (21%) were prevalent, while only 3% of the codes could be classified as an *obstacle* in the definition. The code *weakness* was identified in the definition (25%) and replacement (37%) sections, which shows a similarity across the two categories of definition and replacement.

The *Gilead* example received the least number of responses; therefore, fewer data were coded. Nevertheless, the theme of the *Christian religion* was identified almost equally in definition (25% of the codes) and replacement (33%). In 33% of the codes, *Gilead* was described as a *geographical location*, but this code was not identified in the replacement section. However, 50% of the codes identified in the replacement of *Gilead* were identified as *modern technology*, while this theme was present in only 8% of the codes in the definition section.

The main code of the *Big Brother* example was *government/authority* in definition (40%) and replacement (50%). *Orwell*

as a theme was identified in 20% of the codes but was not present in replacement answers. By contrast, the theme of *surveillance/police* was identified in replacement in 23% of the codes but was only defined in 4%. Other themes, such as *totalitarian regime*, *knows what you think*, and *invincible war*, did not generate a sufficient number of responses to be considered.

The main code in the *Prometheus* example was *Greek deity* (61% of the codes in definitions), which was identified in 38% in the replacement. *God of fire* was identified in 32% of the codes in definition and 38% of the codes in replacement. 13% of the answers were grouped around *progress* as a theme in the replacement category.

Finally, in the definition section of the *Wizard of Oz* example, the prevalent code was *story/film* (67%), while this code was not identified in the replacement section. However, 42% of the codes in replacement were identified as “*weakness*,” but none in the definition. A similar trend is seen with the *turning point* theme, which was present in 25% of the codes in replacement, while there were no definition attempts using this code. The theme of the *magician* was almost equally present in the definition (29%) and replacement (25%) categories.

5. Discussion

The current study aimed to understand the readers’ interpretations of intertextuality in media texts. Based on the survey results and data coding, the following key findings were distinguished: 1. Definition is provided, but replacement is missing, and vice versa 2. Definition and replacement are both provided equally. 3. Intertextual examples yielded either unusually high or low numbers of codes. 4. The respondents more often successfully interpreted references from classical literature and popular culture (which confirms the results of the quantitative survey (Velykoroda and Moroz)). 5. Overall, there is a significant overlap between the empirically identified attributes, and those received experimentally. Although in some specific cases we have observed interpretations that were either overgeneralized, or somewhat narrower than what was suggested empirically, the general trend (more than 50%) was that

interpretations by the respondents were in line with those that were identified empirically.

1. *The definition is provided, but replacement is missing and vice versa.*

According to the data we obtained from surveying the participants, the six intertextual examples received various numbers of definition and replacement attempts. At the analysis stage, the data were coded, and a general trend of participants either providing a definition or a replacement was noticed. In particular, for the example **Kryptonite**, the code *superpower* was identified in the definition category but not in the replacement. The same trend is seen with the code *chemical element/green crystal*. This speaks to the participants' ability to recognize the intertextual example and attempt to define it based on prior knowledge. However, the codes *strength* and *obstacle* were identified in the replacement but were almost not mentioned in the definition. These discrepancies suggest that the participants' background knowledge does not dictate their contextual understanding and usage of the example. In the **Gilead** reference, the *geographical location* code was present in 33% of codes, while it was missing in replacement altogether. By contrast, the *modern technology* code was identified in 50% of codes for replacement, with only 8% in the defined category. Here, we note a similar trend: when the code is mentioned in the definition, it is not present in the replacement and vice versa. For the **Big Brother** example, the code *Orwell* was noted in the definition but not identified in the replacement. This example shows that students knew the source of the reference, so the background knowledge was active. However, we might suspect that the participants also recognized that *Orwell* is not synonymous with **Big Brother**; therefore, their answers in the replacement section did not mention the author. On the contrary, the code *surveillance/police* was identified in the replacement but almost non-existent in the definition. As to the **Prometheus** example, the code *Greek deity* was prevailing in the definition while also identified in the replacement but with less frequency. Finally, the intertextual example **Wizard of Oz** was coded with *story/film* in the definition and not in the replacement. However, the codes *weakness* and *turning point* were identified in the replacement but not in the

definition. To conclude, the general trend of codes being present or missing in definition or replacement sections proves that participants rely on prior or background knowledge of intertextual references when asked to define it; however, they look for contextual cues when asked to replace that reference.

2. Definition and replacement are both provided equally.

Participants sometimes defined and replaced the intertextual examples with similar words or phrases. While this trend is not prevailing, it is essential to note the codes corresponding to the intertextual examples. They support the finding that students recognize and understand the intertextual reference based on the definition and replacement example they provided. For *catch-22*, the code *difficulty* was almost equally defined and replaced. For *Kryptonite*, *weakness* was almost equally represented in definition and replacement attempts. In *Gilead's* reference, *Christian religion* was also a common code. For the *Big Brother* example, the code *government/authority* was equally identified in definition and replacement. The *Prometheus* reference yielded *god of fire* as a common code for definition and replacement. Finally, in the *Wizard of Oz* example, the code *magician* was almost equally identified in definition and replacement. In all of these intertextual references, only one code per example was identified for both definition and replacement categories, which might suggest that those particular codes serve as a common understanding for this specific group of participants and are easier to define and replace based on both – background and contextual knowledge.

3. Intertextual examples yielded unusually high or low numbers of codes.

While analyzing the codes, we observed another trend related to the number of codes per intertextual reference. Out of the six examples, *Big Brother* received the highest number of codes in the definition and replacement categories. By contrast, the *Gilead* reference had the lowest number of codes in both categories. *Kryptonite* and *Prometheus* had a high number of definition codes, and *Big Brother* had the highest number of replacement codes. The *catch-22* example had the lowest number of codes in definition, and *Gilead* had the lowest number of codes in replacement. It is also important to mention that the intertextual reference

Gilead received the highest number of non-categorized codes and the lowest overall number of codes due to the low number of attempts provided by the participants. Based on this observation, we can suggest that **Gilead** and **catch-22** references were the hardest to define and replace for the participants, while the **Big Brother** reference was the easiest and most recognizable since it received the highest number of codes judging by the variety in codes.

4. *The respondents more often successfully interpreted intertextual references from classical literature and popular culture than the ones from modern literature or recent phenomena, which confirms the results of the quantitative study by Velykoroda and Moroz.*

The qualitative trends described above speak back to the questions posed after the quantitative results of the survey were analyzed and presented in the previous study (Velykoroda and Moroz). The study's quantitative results showed that the participants who recognized the references defined and/or replaced the intertextual examples. Those who claimed not to recognize the reference still attempted to define or replace it. In turn, the presented qualitative study proved that those attempts were successful, and the participants either provided definitions or recognized their meanings by using a synonym. For the intertextual examples of **Kryptonite**, **Gilead**, **Prometheus**, and **Wizard of Oz**, the number of codes in the definition was much higher than those in the replacement. Similar to the results of the quantitative study (Velykoroda and Moroz 75), these qualitative results showcase that examples from classical literature and popular culture had a higher number of definition and replacement codes, while those from modern literature and recent phenomena had a lower number of codes.

5. *Overall, there is a significant overlap between the empirically identified attributes, and those received experimentally. Although in some specific cases we have observed interpretations that were either overgeneralized, or somewhat narrower than what was suggested empirically, the general trend (more than 50%) was that interpretations by the respondents were in line with those that were identified empirically.*

One of the research tasks was to compare how the attributes of precedent-related phenomena determined empirically by the authors (see

Table 1) correspond to the actual responses received experimentally (see Table 2). The two main factors that helped the respondents interpret an intertextual segment are their background knowledge (this might be seen from the themes identified in definitions) and the context of the cited fragment provided to them (when trying to replace the intertextual segment in the given fragment, respondents would have to make use of the contextual information, as their background knowledge might not be sufficient to replace the unit).

The scholars empirically determined the attributes of the precedent-related phenomena based on their encyclopedic information, definitions, and associations in linguistic-cultural contexts. The codes have been identified experimentally through the analysis of the responses in the survey. A detailed analysis and comparison of both data sets (see Table 3) will help us shed some light on how readers perceive intertextual segments in isolated media fragments. The data on the codes have been split into two categories – the themes identified in definition responses and those in replacement responses. As mentioned earlier, we assumed that respondents mostly employ their background knowledge to define an intertextual segment and complement it with contextual information when attempting to replace it.

	Attributes	Codes (definition)	Codes (replacement)
<i>Catch-22</i>	- <i>paradox</i> - <i>no escape situation</i> - <i>insoluble problem</i>	- <i>difficulty</i> (89%)	- <i>difficulty</i> (91%)
<i>Kryptonite</i>	- <i>weakness</i> - <i>Superman</i> - <i>green crystal</i>	- <i>superpower</i> (28%) - <i>weakness</i> (25%) - <i>chemical element/ green crystal</i> (34%) - <i>strength</i> (0%) - <i>obstacle</i> (3%)	- <i>superpower</i> (0%) - <i>weakness</i> (37%) - <i>chemical element/ green crystal</i> (0%) - <i>strength</i> (21%) - <i>obstacle</i> (21%)
<i>Gilead</i>	- <i>totalitarian regime</i> - <i>patriarchal</i> - <i>quasi-Christian</i> - <i>control of</i>	- <i>Christian religion</i> (33%) - <i>geographical location</i> (33%) - <i>modern technology</i> (8%)	- <i>Christian religion</i> (25%) - <i>geographical location</i> (0%) - <i>modern technology</i> (50%)

	women's liberties		
Big Brother	- constant surveillance - invisible ruler - knows what you think	- government/ authority (40%) - totalitarian regime (4%) - Orwell (20%) - knows what you think (8%) - invisible war (8%) - surveillance/police (4%)	- government/ authority (50%) - totalitarian regime (12%) - Orwell (0%) - knows what you think (0%) - invisible war (0%) - surveillance/police (23%)
Prometheus	- God of fire - strives for innovation - punishment - made man of clay	- God of fire (32%) - Greek deity (61%) - progress (0%)	- God of fire (38%) - Greek deity (38%) - progress (13%)
Wizard of Oz	- trickster - believed to be the only one capable of solving everyone's problems - liar	- story/film (67%) - magician (29%) - weakness (0%) - turning point (0%)	- story/film (0%) - magician (25%) - weakness (42%) - turning point (25%)

Table 3. Attributes of precedent-related phenomena and themes identified experimentally.

In the *catch-22* example, the only definitive code identified from the survey results was *difficulty*. When we compare the empirical data with the experimental results, we can see that the experimentally received result could be considered a hypernym for the more specific empirically determined attributes. With about 90% of the codes identified in both definition and replacement categories as *difficulty*, the term is not as precise as the attributes elaborated empirically. We can say that *paradox*, *no escape situation*, or *insoluble problem* could all be categorized as some forms of *difficulty*. However, the identification of *catch-22* as *difficulty* lacks the precision it could have had if the respondents had positively related it to the respective intertextual unit. We might suggest that the respondents defined and replaced *catch-22* as *difficulty* based on the

context provided to them (*Covid-19 creates a childcare Catch-22*); it is logical that in the context of COVID-19, there are not too many other options that it can create in the given context other than difficulty or problem.

Moreover, *catch-22* is the only example (except *Big Brother*) where the replacement category generated more codes (11) than the definition category (9), while in all other examples, the definition category typically generated significantly more codes than the replacement. Thus, in this case, we can speculate that the respondents identified the meaning of *catch-22* based on the context rather than their background knowledge, as the experimentally determined codes lack the precision of the empirically identified attributes. To illustrate the lack of background knowledge on the intertextual example, here is one of the responder's comments when asked to define *catch-22*. The participants wrote that *catch-22* means "*women dropping out of job market for young children care.*" This example shows that the student relied on the context and speculated about the possible meaning of the precedent-related phenomenon based on other words in the phrase, such as Covid-19.

In the *kryptonite* example, there is far more overlapping between empirically determined attributes and the themes identified experimentally. First, we can see that the attribute *green crystal* was identified in 1/3 of the codes in definition attempts. The same goes for the *Superman/superpower* attribute and code. The fact that neither code was identified in the replacement section proves that the respondents relied on background knowledge when defining the term; however, these attributes were irrelevant in the provided context and were not present in the replacement section. The dominant code in the replacement section (37%) was *weakness*, also mentioned in the definition section (25%), and was identified empirically as one of the attributes. Another contextual code identified in the replacement section was an *obstacle* (21%). In the given context, this might even be a more precise term than *weakness* (in the definition section, this was identified as a minor theme with only 3%). Thus, *weakness* and *obstacles* constitute 58% of the codes identified in the replacement section. This results from the background knowledge combined with contextual information in the interpretation process.

However, an opposite term, *strength*, was also significantly present in the replacement section (21%). From the given context, it might be challenging to see whether the notion referred to with *kryptonite* is a strong or a weak side.

Consequently, some respondents without sufficient background knowledge of *kryptonite* might have gone for a random guess and chosen *strength* as a suitable replacement, even though it has the opposite meaning. Interestingly, participants mentioned “*currency*” and “*bomb*” when asked to replace the intertextual example *kryptonite*. While we may guess that “*currency*” comes from cryptocurrency, as it is similar in pronunciation to the first part of the word and is a popular topic, the synonym “*bomb*” makes it challenging to understand the reasoning of the participant’s answer, unless it is some form of reference to a type of weapon (hence, *strength/superpower*) that could be used by the agent in the context.

In the *Gilead* example, we defined only four codes in the replacement section and twelve in the definition section. Consequently, since very little data has been identified in this example, we propose that this data is insufficient to make definitive statements or conclusions. However, we would like to mention some examples the participants provided to define and replace the example. For example, in the definition category, one participant said, “*new trend in technology*,” and in the replacement example, “*digitalization*” was given as a synonym to replace *Gilead*. Because participants of this study are all representatives of Gen Z, who were born and had been living surrounded by technologies, we might suggest that these particular answers were given based on the respondent’s personal worldview regarding where “*the world is trending more towards . . .*”

In the *Big Brother* example, a key code identified in the definition and replacement section was *government/authority* (40% and 50%, respectively). While, empirically, such an attribute had not been identified, we can argue that the attribute *invisible ruler* overlaps with the code of *government/authority*. Even though the code was less specific, and the *invisibility* component is omitted, we can argue that there is a clear overlap between the more general code (determined experimentally) and

the more specific attribute (determined empirically). Another clear overlap is in the *surveillance/police* code and the *constant surveillance* attribute; however, this code was much more prominent in the replacement section (23%) than in definitions (4%). Here we can argue that even though, from the background knowledge, this was not a dominant theme (insignificant presence in definitions), contextual information (*evade, all-seeing eye*) triggers the respondents to activate the relevant attribute. Finally, the code *Orwell*, identified in definitions (20%), is a reference to the source of the intertextual element; however, since it is not relevant to the context, it was not observed in the replacement section. If we take a closer look at the participants' answers, we can find that words and phrases such as "God," "rich people," "persecutor," "influencer," "Illuminati," and "journalist" were mentioned by the responders. This speaks to the wide range of perceptions students have about **Big Brother**. Here again, the word "influencer" as a replacement for **Big Brother** manifests Gen Z's living experience of being absorbed in social media, and this extends their interpretations of the more canonical intertextual references.

In the *Prometheus* example, we can see a clear overlap between the *God of fire* attribute and the code observed in definition (32%) and replacement (38%). Furthermore, when we look at the context, we see that this attribute is explicitly hinted at in the context (*I love fire*); however, another attribute *made man of clay* indicated in the previous sentence (*I love clay*) was not identified in the responses. Likewise, the *strives for innovation* attribute might be expressed in the *progress* code identified in the replacements (13%). However, this code was not observed in the definitions. And lastly, like with **Big Brother**, we can observe that one of the codes is a much more general expression of one of the attributes – *Greek deity* (61% in definitions and 38% in replacements) is more general than the *God of fire* discussed earlier.

In the *Wizard of Oz* example, we again see the trend when the source of the reference is identified (or there is an attempt to refer to the source) – in the *story/film* code (67% in definitions). However, this code is never observed in replacement attempts (0%). The *magician* code (29% in definitions and 25% in replacements) only partially overlaps with the

trickster attribute. However, it is not sufficiently precise, though not necessarily inaccurate, regarding the respondents' background knowledge, as it is synonymous with the word *Wizard*. Yet, it lacks the associations with an exposure that are more prominent in the *trickster* attribute (and we expect to see less of this attribute in the replacement category). Two more codes were identified in the replacement section that had not been observed in definitions: *weakness* (42% in replacements) and *turning point* (25% in replacements). Both codes are evidence that the respondents are looking into the context to correctly identify the meaning of the intertextual element. The key sentence fragment in this example is *the Wizard of Oz moment*, with the intended meaning of the moment of disillusionment and exposure to fraud when the Wizard is seen for what he is – a *trickster*. Judging from the context and the previous sentence (*could never be revealed as a sick, vulnerable old man, a mortal made of flesh*), the respondents could attempt to guess the meaning of *the Wizard of Oz moment* as a *weakness* (even though it might somewhat contradict the *magician* code observed in definitions). While not entirely irrelevant and logically deducible from the context, it is probably not sufficiently precise, as the exposure of the *trickster* element is missing. The second code, *turning point*, is an attempt to combine the *Wizard of Oz* with the noun it denotes *moment*. While it could logically be deduced from the context that this moment is a *turning point* in some respect in this situation, it is not sufficiently precise either. Thus, as with *Kryptonite*, we again observe attempts to use the context in search of meaning to find the respective synonym or paraphrase, which might satisfy the recipients' expectations of relevance.

6. Conclusions

Based on the analysis of the qualitative results of the study and priorly described quantitative results (Velykoroda and Moroz), several concluding points are made to summarize the purpose of the study and provide future research suggestions.

First, one of the research questions that remained pending after the analysis of the quantitative results was whether the respondents

identified a specific intertextual reference as a segment that refers to other texts outside of this context (Velykoroda and Moroz). Judging from the responses we have observed, we can claim that overall, there is a trend to identify it as intertextual in most cases. This is becoming especially evident in the significantly bigger number of codes that could be seen as references to the original source in definitions compared to smaller or null numbers in replacement. For instance, *Orwell* was identified as a code (20%) in definitions for ***Big Brother***, *film/story* was identified in 67% of codes for the ***Wizard of Oz***, *superpower* (as a reference to Superman) was identified in 28% as a code in definitions for ***Kryptonite***, *Greek deity* (as the origin of the intertextual reference) was identified in 61% of definitions, and this figure dropped nearly by half in replacements for ***Prometheus***; even ***Gilead*** was occasionally identified with *Christianity*, even though it lacked the precision to be definitively traced to the works by Margaret Atwood. These codes were not usually empirically determined as attributes of the respective intertextual references; however, they were represented in the experimentally received data and dominantly in the definition section of the responses. Consequently, we can positively claim that such elements in media texts were commonly recognized by the respondents of the survey as intertextual, as references to other texts outside of the current context. The respondents are activating their background knowledge by identifying the source of the intertextual reference.

Second, it has been observed in several examples that the respondents heavily rely on the context in their search for meaning while attempting to interpret an utterance with the intertextual segment. In cases when there might be gaps in the background knowledge that prevent the respondents from precisely interpreting the respective intertextual segment, the respondents, in their search for meaning, are capable of filling in those gaps with related notions. However, these relations could take forms of either finding **the opposite** of the intended meaning (for example, the identification of ***Kryptonite*** in replacement as a *strength* (21%) rather than *weakness* (37%)) or of retreating to **overgeneralization**, finding a hypernym, a word with a much broader meaning which is not sufficiently precise for the given context (for instance, *difficulty* rather

than *paradox/insoluble problem* for **catch-22**, *Greek deity* rather than *God of fire* for **Prometheus**), or when an aspect from the attribute is missing in the codes identified in responses, for example, *[invisible] ruler* in **Big Brother**, *[constant] surveillance* for **Big Brother**.

Third, in their attempts to interpret the utterance, the respondents are perfectly capable of sorting out the attributes which are irrelevant in the current context, even though these have been identified in definitions (for instance, the *green crystal* attribute was identified in 34% of definitions, however totally absent in replacements for **Kryptonite**) or finding/remembering the correct attribute for replacement, even though it was not observed in definitions (*progress* as an attribute for *striving for innovation* for **Prometheus**, *surveillance* as an attribute for *constant surveillance* for **Big Brother**). Thus, recipients constantly go through forward and backward references in their search for meaning until they reach a plausible explanation of the given utterance. That is also the case with interpreting intertextual fragments in limited contexts when a specific association might be weak by default (seen in definition responses), but becomes more prominent when respondents attempt to replace it.

Fourth, one of the unanswered questions from the quantitative investigations into the results of the survey was why there are nearly twice as many definition attempts as replacement attempts (Velykoroda and Moroz 75). We can confirm that even though respondents do recognize an element as intertextual (seen in the number of codes in the definition category which are references to the original source, for instance, *Orwell* for **Big Brother**, *film/story* for **Wizard of Oz**, which are not identified among the replacement codes), they are reluctant or not able to replace it in the given context. This proves that, despite the knowledge of a certain intertextual reference on the semiotic level, readers treat those as (partially) irreplaceable or treat the possible replacements as inferior to what is expressed by the intertextual reference.

Fifth, one of the tasks of the current research and what has remained unanswered by the previous investigation (Velykoroda and Moroz 75) was to see how the empirical data corresponds with the experimental data, whether the respondents actually recognize the

“intended” meaning of the intertextual example in the given context. The authors have identified the attributes of each intertextual example empirically based on their background knowledge and reference literature (see Table 1). However, this data remains hypothetical. When we compare the empirical results with the experimental data (see Table 3), we can claim that, even though there is some overlapping between the empirical and experimental data, there are still a number of discrepancies: 1) some examples were poorly understood by the respondents (*catch-22*, *Gilead*); 2) in some cases the opposite of the intended meaning was identified (*strength* for *kryptonite*); 3) there is a trend at overgeneralization in replacing and defining attempts; 4) there is also a trend at higher precision in some cases when with the help of the context the respondents identified a more precise term for the intertextual reference than what had been defined empirically (*obstacle* for *kryptonite*). We can argue that the empirically defined attributes, as these are identified hypothetically, without the context, tend to be too canonical or partially irrelevant for specific situations. On the contrary, experimentally identified attributes display a self-contradictory trend when, with the help of the context, the respondents could, on the one hand, resort to overgeneralization or omission of key elements of the attributes, while, on the other hand, some attributes could be more precise than what had been defined empirically. Additionally, over-reliance on the context without proper background knowledge might lead to erroneous interpretations, as seen in the identification of the attributes that are opposite in the meaning to those “intended” by the author. These findings could bear some implications for teaching both EFL and media/digital media literacy. More attention (at least in the context of this research group) should be paid to modern sources of intertextuality (modern literature, popular culture), as these have been both less commonly commented on, and, frequently, the interpretation diverged from the “intended” meaning or lacked precision. However, mere reliance on the origin of intertextual references may not be sufficient, as these are often reinterpreted in media discourse and other discourses. Consequently, it is important to be able to identify the source of intertextuality and be familiar with contemporary cultural interpretations of this intertextual unit. In terms of critical thinking skills,

it is important to develop an ability in students to combine their background knowledge with contextual information and, most importantly, the ability to **identify any gaps** in either category. As seen in the *kryptonite* example, the replacement of *kryptonite* with *strength* is the opposite of the meaning intended by the author. While it is impossible to determine why this replacement occurred in 21% of the codes (whether it was contaminated with associations with *Superman* and *superpowers*, or it was a random guess on the axis of the opposites *strength-weakness*), such an interpretation leads to a distorted understanding of the utterance and significantly differs from the intended meaning.

7. Future Research Agenda

The findings of our study provide further research suggestions and ideas for scholars interested in the reader's understanding of intertextuality. A possible way to expand the research agenda is to study a different population in terms of the English language proficiency level, the age of the responders, and the sphere of their career or anticipated/obtained major. This would be a productive way to compare the answers of participants of the current study and those of different citizenship or native language. With the digital internationalization of education gaining popularity in recent years (Moroz), a possible way to explore language and cultural competence outcomes of online programs could be to test the students' perceptions of the precedent-related phenomenon as an indicator of acquired contextual knowledge. Another research area would be to use a different source of intertextual examples other than media texts. We suggest looking at examples from social media outlets, podcasts, interviews, and news reports. Researchers might use a different mode of inquiry, such as audio, instead of written text and focus on listening skills as part of their research agenda.

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