Wearing it on her Sleeve:

A Case Study Analysis Examining the Visual Rhetoric of First Lady Melania Trump's

Fashion

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COM 7200: Rhetoric of Visual Culture

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December 13, 2021

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While the role of the first lady of the United States (FLOTUS) has never officially been defined, the spouse of the sitting president serves as the official host of the White House and has historically played a prominent role in American politics and culture. The high-profile role, which is unpaid, has evolved over time to become more professionally integrated with the respective administration's political goals (Eksterowicz & Paynter, 2019; Mayo, 2019; Parry-Giles & Blair, 2002). Although modern first ladies now play an active role in political campaigns and champion social causes, lingering expectations grounded in patriarchal tradition have upheld the public's expectations, requiring the FLOTUS to be a nurturing, mother-like role-model-in-chief for the nation (Caroli, 2019; Haynes & Block, Jr., 2019). This gendered role also includes expectations about how the FLOTUS should behave and look (Parry-Giles & Blair, 2002).

As such, the FLOTUS's fashion sense and style have become a topic of public conversation and influence—and an avenue for them to send a message. For decades, sartorial scrutiny has been projected onto first ladies across the political spectrum, and their fashion choices have often aligned with their respective administration's goals and personas (Combs, 2013). Jacqueline Kennedy's chic, trendy style was seen as a representation of the youthful optimism associated with Camelot (White, 2013). Celebrated by some and criticized by others, Nancy Reagan's penchant for designer gowns in bold, embellished styles were viewed as an extension of her family's glamorous Hollywood connections and the prosperity promised by Reaganomics (Muir & Mooney, 2004). Barbara Bush's white hair and ever-present pearls were seen by some as a symbol of quiet strength and conservative tradition, while others chided them as matronly (Combs, 2013). Hillary Clinton's pantsuits reflected the progressive goals of her

administration and remain an enduring icon of feminism or emasculation, depending on the audience (Edwards, 2018; Templin, 1999). No matter the perception, the FLOTUS has historically used fashion as a form of visual rhetoric to send messages about themselves and their administration.

Background and Significance

The role of the FLOTUS continues to evolve, and the individuals holding the title have become increasingly diverse. The last two women to hold the title, as well as the current FLOTUS, have each been a first in their own right. Michelle Obama was the first African American FLOTUS, and Slovenian-born Melania Trump was the first to be a naturalized citizen and to speak English as a non-native language. Jill Biden is the first to hold a job outside the White House. As the individuals holding the FLOTUS title become more diverse, so too will their communication styles (Gutin, 2019). Both Obama and Trump were subject to the expected political criticisms, but also to additional stereotypes and hate-based criticisms based on their respective race (Block, Jr., 2017; William-White & White, 2011; McAlister, 2009) or ethnicity (Perger & Gaber, 2018; Wiedlack, 2017; Aydarova et al., 2016). Presidential scholars have noted Obama's ability to embrace and thrive in the public nature of the role (Bickham, 2020; Elder & Frederick, 2019; Cunningham, 2017) while also observing Trump's hands-off, more ceremonial approach (Vigil, 2019; 2020).

While Trump may not have been as vocal as some of her predecessors, her fashion choices made headlines throughout her tenure as FLOTUS. Trump's public persona was based largely on her meticulously curated appearance, and as a former model, she understood the ability of clothing to convey a message (Vigil, 2020; Bennet, 2019). In an administration hyper-focused on appearances, fashion was easily politicized (Vigil, 2020). Fashion was made almost

immediately political during the Trump administration when a host of designers, including Tom Ford, Marc Jacobs, and Zac Posen, announced upon Donald Trump's election that they would refuse to dress the first lady—a traditionally coveted opportunity—in protest (Bonner, 2017). Further, media have speculated that Trump used her fashion choices as a form of her own opposition to silently protest and distance herself from some of her husband's inflammatory behavior and politics (Cranley, 2019; Mahdawi, 2018).

This case study will examine the roots of that speculation through a rhetorical analysis of Trump's fashion choices during critical points of her husband's presidency. In this case study, I explore the background of the political maelstroms that engulfed the Trump presidency and demonstrate how the FLOTUS's fashion choices were perceived as visual messages about her husband and his administration.

Artifacts of Study

The artifacts of study are photographs of the FLOTUS. This project will examine the pink pussy bow blouse worn at the presidential debate on October 9, 2016 (Le Vine, 2016), the white pantsuit worn at the State of the Union address on January 30, 2018 (Friedman, 2018), the green parka featuring the text "I REALLY DON'T CARE, DO U?" worn to visit detained immigrant children at a Texas border facility on June 21, 2018 (Robbins, 2018), and the white pith helmet worn while touring Africa in October 2018 (Rogers, 2018a). It is of note that the first two fashion choices were early in the administration and worn to occasions the FLOTUS attended where her husband was present. The last two fashion choices were made later during Trump's tenure as FLOTUS and at occasions attended without her husband.

Figure 1

Melania Trump Wears a Pink Pussy Bow Blouse to the Presidential Debate on October 9, 2016

Scott Olson / Getty Images.

Figure 2

Melania Trump Wears a White Pantsuit With Monochromatic Accessories to the State of the

Union Address on January 30, 2018

J. Scott Applewhite / AP Photo.

Figure 3

Melania Trump Wears a Green Parka With the Text "I REALLY DON'T CARE DO U?" While

Traveling to Visit Detained Immigrant Children at the Border on June 21, 2018

Mandel Ngan / Getty Images.

Figure 4

Melania Trump Wears a White Pith Helmet While on Safari During a Humanitarian Tour of

Africa in October 2018

Doug Mills / The New York Times.

Rhetorical Situation

The FLOTUS was a frequently photographed public figure, and these artifacts present a nuanced rhetorical situation in which Trump is the author. The first lady is inextricably linked to the president and often seen as a direct extension of her spouse (Eksterowicz & Paynter, 2019; Mayo, 2019). Therefore, Trump's role as the FLOTUS places her every action and choice—including the outfits captured in the artifacts—in the context of the administration. While carrying out her public duties, she was viewed as a representative for her husband's administration. Because of the FLOTUS' public role, the audience for these artifacts is incredibly broad and includes all those attuned to American politics. However, the audiences most inclined to pay close attention to Trump's fashion choices include those who most passionately supported and opposed the Trump administration, as well as those with a particular interest in fashion and design.

This case study treats the media as the primary audience for these artifacts because they serve as a direct liaison between the public and public figures, and their reactions and perceptions have been extensively documented through news coverage. The administration had a largely adversarial relationship with the press, and the president openly criticized both left- and right-leaning media (Meyer-Gutbrod & Woolley, 2020; Mourao et al., 2018). This relationship with the media suggests that both the FLOTUS and the media were mindful and deliberate in their interactions, including the photographed events captured in the artifacts. The purpose of Trump's fashion choices is rhetorical in nature, although the nonverbal, indirect context of her choices leaves the message open to the potentially subjective interpretation of the media and secondary audiences.

Literature Review

FLOTUS Rhetoric

   While much of the existing scholarship around the FLOTUS is grounded in the historical analysis of the role's evolution (Caroli, 2019; Eksterowicz & Paynter, 2019), more recent scholarship has explored the communication strategies of the first lady. Historian and communication scholar Myra Gutin (2019) asserted that first ladies can be divided into three distinct categories based on their public communication style. The first group includes social hostesses and ceremonial presences, who have limited contact with the public and rarely express their beliefs. The second includes emerging spokeswomen, who seize opportunities to express their beliefs. The final group consists of political surrogates and independent activists, who actively create opportunities to express their beliefs using all available channels. Modern first ladies are typically categorized as either emerging spokeswomen or as political surrogates and independent activists (Gutin, 2019). Scholars have also noted that a FLOTUS's personality and marriage can impact both how they approach the role and their public perception (Eksterowicz & Paynter, 2019).

   Communication scholars have analyzed the FLOTUS's use of public speeches, noting especially Clinton's use of personal disclosures and the adoption of emotional appeals (Campbell, 1998), as well as Obama's linguistic style, which includes a more casual delivery and a softening of hard consonant sounds (Holliday, 2017). While further research is needed, scholars have also begun to explore the FLOTUS's use of social media, including Obama's use of Twitter to promote her role as an activist and mother (Newly & Perreault, 2018).

   The symbiotic relationship of the FLOTUS and the media remains a largely one-sided area of research, with the majority of existing scholarship focused on the media coverage of the

FLOTUS. Studies have explored the media framing of specific first ladies, including Obama's influence as the first Black FLOTUS (Block, Jr., 2017; Mortensen, 2015; Combs, 2013), and the idolization or vilification of Clinton, who was one of the most politically involved first ladies (Edwards, 2020; Templin, 1999; Campbell, 1998). While limited research has been conducted to better understand the first lady's strategic, planned use of the media, Burns (2020, 2008) and Wertheimer (2004) have asserted that, regardless of party, the FLOTUS was most successful with media and public relations when working with an experienced team of communications professionals.

Studies have also examined how various women have leveraged their influence as FLOTUS to benefit their administration's public approval and further policy. Presidential scholars have argued that the unique ability of the FLOTUS to support an administration's goals in an almost non-partisan way is partly due to the role's historically ceremonial nature (Fu & Savel, 2020; Watson, 2001). Scholars have noted the public relations power of certain charismatic first ladies, including Obama, whose approval rating and popularity frequently surpassed those of her husband (Elder & Frederick, 2019), and Laura Bush, whose children's advocacy work often served as a foil to soften some of her husband's gaffes (Dubriwny, 2006). Both Rosalyn Carter (Maddux, 2010) and Clinton (Hastedt & Eksterowicz, 2006) were able to further international diplomacy during their time as first lady.

FLOTUS Fashion

A growing body of scholarship exists on the role and influence of the FLOTUS, but very little scholarly attention has been given to first ladies' fashion as a form of rhetoric. Evalds (2014) explored the importance of fashion in Grace Coolidge's time in the White House during the 1920s, which coincided with the growing presence of cameras and media and a subsequent

focus on appearance among the American public. Evalds (2014) argued that early first ladies, like Coolidge, were less vocal and, thus, used their clothing as a method of communication. Coolidge and her attire were the frequent subject of newspaper articles, and she was always meticulously coiffed and wearing fashionable dresses and hats (Evalds, 2014).

Various studies have also explored the impact of first ladies' fashion choices on the fashion industry and on the fashion choices of other women. Following a visual assessment of the fashion choices of politically prominent women, Young (2011) asserted that first ladies and female politicians are often judged on their fashion choices and that there are unspoken style rules for women in the public eye. Presidential and political scholars have found that while partisanship remains the largest influence on perception, a judgment about a candidate or their spouse's appearance can also impact public perception (Elder et al., 2018; Elder & Frederick, 2017).

Additional studies have focused on the style and influence of particular first ladies. Scholars have explored Kennedy's enduring influence as a fashion icon whose style has been emulated by women for generations (Mulvaney, 2001; Richard, 1999). Scholars have also examined Obama's love of fashion, including the influence she had on women's apparel choices and increased awareness of Black designers (Matthews et al., 2015). Yermack (2011) discussed the positive financial impact on fashion brands when worn by the FLOTUS. Additional studies have focused on the relationship between the FLOTUS and fashion designers. These considered the potential for the role to serve as a celebrity brand ambassador, looking at Kennedy's relationship with Oleg Cassini (Barron, 2019) and Reagan's relationship with James Galanos (Muir & Mooney, 2004).

Existing research on the communication style of the FLOTUS has primarily focused on verbal forms of rhetoric, and little scholarship exists about modern first ladies who have opted to embrace the role in its more historical ceremonial sense. Historians have explored the gendered nature and expectations of the role, but scholars have not yet fully examined how the FLOTUS might use those expectations as an advantage when shaping communications strategies. Additionally, scholars examining the fashion choices of the FLOTUS have not yet considered the potential of modern first ladies to adopt Grace Coolidge's (Evald, 2014) visual rhetoric strategy of using clothing to send a message.

Methodology and Theoretical Approach

This case study was designed to address gaps in the existing literature and contribute to forthcoming literature by asking the following research question: To what extent could Melania Trump's use of clothing be construed as visual rhetoric used to convey a message about her husband's administration?

To address this question, I conducted a visual and contextual rhetorical analysis of Trump's fashion choices during critical points in her husband's presidency. To understand audience perception, I also conducted a review of media responses to each artifact, looking closely at the differences in coverage between left- and right-leaning outlets. To determine the bias of the various outlets, I used the definitions provided by the Poynter and AllSides media bias charts (2021). I conducted this rhetorical analysis inductively, beginning first with an exploration of the artifacts, which then generated rhetorical theories (Foss, 2009).

In seeking to understand Trump's values and beliefs through visual analysis, my case study was guided by an ideological criticism framework. Developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s as scholars sought to understand the use of visual elements in recent social and political

movements (Wander, 1983; 1984), ideological criticism holds that values, beliefs, and ideas can be embedded into, or muted by, an artifact. Ideological criticism is frequently used as a lens for understanding in cultural studies and is based on deciphering ideographs, which are traces of ideology within an artifact that represent more than the artifact itself initially presents (Foss, 2009). In keeping with a critical analysis method outlined by Foss (2009), this case study includes the identification of the ideology in the artifact, an analysis of the interests the ideology serves, and an exploration of the author's use of visual cues to promote the ideology.

Case Study Analysis

Pink Pussy Bow Blouse

The second presidential debate between Republican nominee Donald Trump and Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton was held on October 9, 2016, two days after *The Washington Post* released hot-mic audio of Trump making lewd comments about women in a 2005 conversation with Billy Bush (Le Vine, 2016). Donald Trump was recorded describing his attempts to have sex with women, stating, "Just kiss, I don't event wait…When you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything. Grab them by the pussy" (*The New York Times,* 2016). At the time, he was already facing accusations of sexism and misogyny following derogatory comments about women (Khomami, 2016; Nelson, 2016). Following the release of the tapes, additional women came forward in media interviews to say that the Republican nominee had kissed them or touched them without consent (Nelson, 2016). The audio tape's release and subsequent accusations intensified critiques of Trump, who was competing with Clinton, the nation's first female presidential candidate from a major political party and a public figure celebrated by many as a feminist icon (*Bloomberg Politics*, 2016; Foran, 2016). On October 17, 2016, Melania Trump issued a statement and participated in an interview on *CNN*, in which she

defended her husband, dismissed his accusers, and claimed her husband had been "egged on into boy talk" in the tapes (Bradner, 2016).

Melania Trump attended the debate wearing a silk crepe pussy bow blouse in a vibrant shade of pink by Gucci (Figure 1). In addition to the obvious similarity in name to her husband's profane slang reference to female genitalia and the concept of traditional femininity associated with the color pink (Mora, 2021; Koller, 2008), the blouse's style has a feminist history. The style, which is also known as a tie-neck blouse or a secretary blouse, was popularized by women taking on corporate jobs in the 1970s and 1980s and mirroring the attire—including neckties—of the previously male-dominated workforce (Morrissey, 2013; Molloy, 1977). By the 1990s, the style had faded in fashion, along with shoulder pads, double-breasted blazers, and other menswear-inspired styles. This was a result of the diversification of the workforce and women starting to push back against dress codes that forced them to blend in with men to be taken seriously (Rafaeli et al., 2017; Peluchette et al., 2006). The style experienced a resurgence in popularity in the mid-2010s, in part due to trends that favored retro styles and "girl boss" culture, and was featured prominently in the annual collections by fashion designers like Gucci, Haider Ackermann, and Bottega Veneta (Bain, 2015; Morrissey, 2013).

Media coverage of Trump's fashion choice largely focused on the irony of the style's name in the context of her husband's remarks. Left-leaning *Huffington Post* claimed the choice was "not a joke" before detailing the style's feminist history (Mazza, 2016). Left-leaning *NBC*'s coverage cited Trump's blouse as the "star of the debate," noting the "deeper meaning" of the choice before outlining the style's history in the context of her husband's vulgarities (Wang, 2016). *USA Today,* also left-leaning, presented the blouse in the context of its feminist history and asserted that it "made a statement" regardless of intent (Kelly & Jensen, 2016). Right-

leaning *Fox News* was notably silent on Trump's fashion choice, while right-leaning *The New York Post* claimed her choice "spoke volumes" before reiterating Trump's statement about her husband's lewd remarks, in which she encouraged people to accept his apology (Salo, 2016). After detailing Trump's acceptance of her husband's public apology, right-leaning *Breitbart* claimed Trump was "trolling the Clintons" with her blouse, which was described as a reference to President Bill Clinton's treatment of women and Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton's treatment of his accusers (Pollak, 2016).

Although a spokeswoman insisted that the fashion choice was unintentional (Kelly & Jensen, 2016), and Trump publicly defended her husband's character and behavior in the days following the debate (Bradner, 2016), her choice to wear a pink pussy bow blouse was of consequence. Given the political context of the debate and campaign, the blouse's history made it an ideograph representing feminist ideology (Foss, 2009). The media interpreted that ideograph through their own subjective biases. Left-leaning outlets interpreted Trump's fashion choice as a feminist statement against her husband's treatment of women, whereas right-leaning outlets interpreted it as either a coincidence or a feminist statement against political rivals.

White Pantsuit

On January 30, 2018, President Trump delivered his first State of the Union address, ten days following the second annual Women's March, which was adapted from the women's rights movement as a form of protest against his perceived misogyny and prejudices following the 2016 election (Smithsonian, n.d.). On January 12, 2018, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that the president's lawyer had arranged a $130,000 payment to adult film star Stephanie Clifford in exchange for her silence about an alleged affair dating back to 2006, sparking ethical and legal questions about whether the payment violated federal campaign finance law (Rothfeld &

Palazzolo, 2018). *The New York Times* reported that the FLOTUS was "blindsided and furious" about the alleged affair and payment, noting that she had canceled a trip abroad with her husband and all public appearances the week following the allegations (Rogers & Haberman, 2018). In a departure from presidential tradition, the FLOTUS arrived at the address separately from her husband, and the event marked Melania Trump's first public appearance following the allegations of an affair that would have taken place a year into her marriage and weeks after she had given birth (Friedman, 2018).

Trump attended the address wearing a white pantsuit by Christian Dior paired with a monochromatic blouse and accessories (Figure 2). Trump's attire contrasted starkly with many of the Democratic representatives in attendance, who opted to wear black as part of the #MeToo movement opposing systemic sexual harassment and abuse (Freidman, 2018). The choice was notable for its monochromatic color, known in political circles as "suffragette white" (Steiner et al., 2020; Parkins, 1995). Suffragette white is symbolic of the women's rights movement, dating back to the early 20th century when suffragists in America and Britain showed their solidarity—and the purity of their intentions and character—by wearing all-white dresses as they advocated for women's right to vote (Steiner et al., 2020; Parkins, 1995). Modern interpretations of the color view it as a broader symbol of fighting for any marginalized group (Steiner et al., 2020). The symbolic use of all-white outfits has become a visual cue of feminist ideology among modern politicians, particularly those representing the Democratic party (Blakemore, 2021; Lang, 2019). Trump's outfit was reminiscent of the monochromatic white suits worn by members of the Democratic party at Trump's 2017 joint address to Congress as a coordinated statement against what Representative Lois Frankel described as "Republican attempts to roll back women's progress" (Friedman, 2018). Democratic Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi

documented the coordinated ensembles on Twitter and called attention directly to Trump, noting that "Tonight, our Democratic #WomenWearWhite in support of women's rights – in spite of a @POTUS who doesn't!" (Friedman, 2018).

Beyond the symbolic color, Trump's fashion choice is also notable for its pantsuit style. The suit has long been a symbol of masculine power, and the style was adopted for women seeking to blend into male-dominated spaces in the 1970s (Hillman, 2013). While the style has become more gender-neutral in recent years, it remains a popular staple of working women and a symbol of empowerment and equity (Edwards, 2018). Further, the personal brand of Hillary Clinton has become synonymous with pantsuits (Edwards, 2018; Mandziuk, 2008; McGinley, 2008), and the prominent Democrat notably opted for a monochromatic white style at critical points of her political career, including at her acceptance of the 2016 presidential nomination (Friedman, 2016a), during the 2016 presidential debates and on Election Day (Friedman, 2016b), and at Trump's 2017 inauguration (Harwood, 2017).

The media drew connections between Trump's fashion choice and the symbolism associated with the style and color, also noting the similarities between her choice and those made by many of her husband's political opponents. Left-leaning *The Daily Beast* focused on the Trump marriage and speculated that her fashion choice was a statement of independence and separation from her husband, as well as a potential "nod" to Clinton as a jab against him (Teeman, 2018). Left-leaning *The New York Times* focused on the feminist and progressive history of the white suit, as well as Hillary Clinton's preference for the style, before describing the outfit as "something of anti-Trump uniform" (Friedman, 2018, para. 2). Right-leaning *New York Post* questioned whether Trump was "trolling" her husband with the suit and reported that her look "just might be a calculated and potentially feminist choice" (Kast, 2018, para. 3). Right-

leaning *Fox News* wondered whether the suit was a personal statement or "just a nice outfit" before detailing the alleged affair and subsequent denials from both the FLOTUS and the president (Puhak, 2018). *Fox News* also published an opinion piece refuting left-leaning outlets' interpretations of the outfit as "fake news" (Curl, 2018, para. 5), claiming that the suit was cream-colored, not white, rendering any Democratic similarities or feminist statements null.

With the exception of the *Fox News* opinion piece, both left- and right-leaning media interpreted Trump's fashion choice as more of a statement of frustration against her husband than as a political one, in which she subtly adopted the behaviors of his political opponents as a means of separating herself from him following the public humiliation related to the alleged affair. The color and style of a monochromatic white pantsuit have made it an ideograph for women's equity (Foss, 2009) that is frequently employed by female politicians. Whether or not Trump was using her fashion choice to express anger toward her husband, her ability to do so was grounded visual symbolism.

Green Parka

On June 21, 2018, Trump wore a green parka with the text "I REALLY DON'T CARE, DO U?" printed in white, graffiti-style lettering on the back while departing for and arriving at Joint Base Andrews for a visit with detained immigrant children separated from their parents at the U.S.-Mexico border in Texas (Figure 3). The visit took place at the height of the public outcry against the Trump administration's zero-tolerance policy for illegal border crossings that resulted in the separation of families, ultimately placing more than 300 children in facilities that were widely criticized for poor conditions and inhumane treatment (Domonoske & Gonzales, 2018). The FLOTUS, herself an immigrant, reportedly encouraged her husband to change the policy of separating families at the border (Taylor, 2018). The president ultimately amended the

policy to allow for families to be detained at the border together, but not before photos of caged children sleeping on the floor with foil sheets intended to serve as blankets were widely distributed by the media (Higgins, 2018; Zhou, 2018). Photographs of the FLOTUS at the detention facility show that she did not wear the jacket during the visit (Parks, 2018). However, her fashion choice sparked much media speculation and public outrage.

Trump's fashion choice was a departure from her typical wardrobe in two ways. First, the $39 jacket from fast-fashion brand Zara was unlike her typical luxury brand wardrobe. Second, the bold lettering was unusual because the FLOTUS was rarely photographed in clothing with text or logos of any kind (Robbins, 2018). The lettering leaves little room for interpretation, with the text "I REALLY DON'T CARE, DO U?" serving as a bold, direct declaration of apathy.

At the time, the first lady's communications director Stephanie Grisham insisted that it was "just a jacket" without any hidden message. She dismissed speculation about the outfit and encouraged the media to "spend their time and energy on her actions and efforts to help kids" (Chamberlain, 2018). In direct contradiction, the president tweeted that the jacket was a message intended to anger the "Fake News Media" (Klein, 2018). Months after the visit, in an interview with *ABC News*, the FLOTUS said that the jacket was intended to be a message. In the interview, she criticized the media's focus on her attire and claimed, "It's obvious I didn't wear the jacket for the children, I wore the jacket to go on the plane and off the plane. It was for the people and for the left-wing media who are criticizing me to show them I don't care. You could criticize whatever you want to say, but it will not stop me to do what I feel is right" (Haslett & Bruggeman, 2018).

While the FLOTUS appeared to answer questions about the controversial jacket and her intentions in the interview, she did so months after the trip and heavy media coverage. Left-

leaning *CNN*'s coverage focused on the President's negative reaction to the FLOTUS's choice and speculated about the origins of the public response that explained the choice as a statement against the liberal media (Klein, 2018). Left-leaning *The New York Times* described the president's angry reaction to the jacket before asserting that the FLOTUS "knew the power of her choice" (Rogers, 2018a, para. 8). The article then pointed to the potential of the first lady's visit to soften the Trump administration's persona and noted her empathic behavior with the children on the trip. Left-leaning *Vox*'s coverage focused on the backlash about the "tone deaf" jacket, stating that the Trump administration had been characterized by "outright falsehoods" before speculating that the jacket was an intentional publicity stunt that the FLOTUS used to create additional negative attention around the border crisis (Jennings, 2018, para. 11). Right-leaning *Fox News* first focused on the FLOTUS's choice to remove the jacket during the time with children. It then restated Grisham's response to the media, noting her dismissal of the speculation about the outfit and her request that the media "spend their time and energy on her actions and efforts to help kids" (Chamberlain, 2018). Right-leaning *Breitbart* described the jacket as a "brave choice" and "*Top Gun* chic" (Binder, 2018a, para. 5). It then claimed the media coverage of the jacket was "sad," reiterating Grisham's statement and concluding that the FLOTUS's choice was a mocking statement about the establishment media and Hollywood elite.

Media coverage of the FLOTUS's fashion choice almost rivaled that of the humanitarian crisis at the border, regardless of her stated intentions or her publicists' remarks. The jacket's direct message served as an ideograph for callous apathy (Foss, 2009), which was then further interpreted through left- and right-leaning biases. Left-leaning media coverage tended to view the FLOTUS's jacket as an intentional choice to create negative publicity or as a tone-deaf one that they presented as reflective of the Trump administration's callous immigration policies.

Right-leaning media welcomed the opportunity to republish the FLOTUS's spokeswoman's statement defending the choice and dismissing the media attention it garnered. While Trump claimed the jacket was a message for the liberal media, the backlash prompted by her choice called more attention to the border crisis, which aligned with the FLOTUS's own stated desire to influence change in her husband's immigration policies (Taylor, 2018).

White Pith Helmet

In October 2018, the FLOTUS took a solo trip to Africa, where she visited Ghana, Malawi, Kenya, and Egypt to promote children's welfare. On October 6, 2018, Trump wore a white pith helmet during a safari at the Nairobi National Park in Kenya on her final day of the tour (Rodgers, 2018b). Earlier in the year, President Trump referred to Haiti, El Salvador, and African nations as "shithole countries" during an international meeting about the restoration of immigrant protections (Fram & Lemire, 2018). The president denied the comment, but his refutes were contradicted by multiple national leaders present during the meeting. His behavior was widely criticized as racist, shameful, and detrimental to international diplomacy (Barron, 2018; Dwyer, 2018). Months later, the FLOTUS visited one of the countries her husband denounced as a "shithole," in one of the administration's few trips to the continent following strained U.S.-Africa relations. The pith helmet worn by the FLOTUS in Kenya has historical links to colonial rule in Africa, as the style was worn by high-ranking colonial military personnel who feared radiation exposure in the tropics (Rovine, 2019). While that unscientific theory has been long debunked, the pith helmet has become a symbol of imperial oppression, and it is often used as a visual cue in white savior tropes in which "savages" are tamed by Europeans (Rovine, 2019; Deutsch, 2010).

The FLOTUS's fashion choice again made headlines. Left-leaning *USA Today* aggregated social media posts criticizing the first lady's attire, which it described as "colonizer garb" (Moniuszko, 2018). Left-leaning *The New York Times* (Rogers, 2018b) and *CNN* (Klein & Bennet, 2018) focused on the colonial history and racist implications of the helmet. Left-leaning *Vox*'s coverage had a similar focus but also described the choice as "*Out of Africa*-esque" (Del Valle, 2018, para. 5) in reference to the costume-like attire worn by actors in the 1985 movie. The article then claimed that the outfit was reflective of the Trump administration's "outdated, monolithic view of the African continent and its people" (para. 9). Right-leaning *Fox News'* coverage included the comparisons to colonial symbols but also mentioned the president's compliments of the FLOTUS's advocacy on the trip (Joyce, 2018). Right-leaning *Breitbart* described Trump's pith helmet as a "beautiful white safari hat" and included photos of the FLOTUS feeding baby elephants on her trip, which they described as "nothing short of breathtaking" (Binder, 2018b).

When the historical symbolism of the FLOTUS's pith helmet is considered in the context of the president's "shithole countries" remark, the garment can be interpreted as an ideograph (Foss, 2009) for racist, oppressive behaviors and beliefs. That ideograph was generally interpreted by left-leaning media as an extension of Trump's inflammatory remarks. However, right-leaning media either softened the connection or ignored it entirely, choosing instead to focus on the FLOTUS's humanitarian work with children and animals. Although the FLOTUS never directly commented on her husband's remarks or her pith helmet, the media was left to interpret a message from her nonverbal choice.

Suppositions and Implications

Trump was largely a private FLOTUS, rarely participating in interviews and primarily serving in ceremonial roles (Vigil, 2020). Although she gave very few interviews, she did criticize the emphasis put on her appearance over her actions (Haslett & Bruggeman, 2018). This critique, along with her decades-long career as a model, suggests that the FLOTUS was keenly aware of the power held by her sartorial choices. During her tenure as FLOTUS, Trump largely adhered to the standard FLOTUS stylebook, favoring conservative dresses and suits in neutral shades, with a few notable exceptions (Vigil, 2020). While both the left-leaning media's "liberal fantasy" of Trump's use of fashion to denounce her husband (Demopoulos, 2021; Wright, 2018) and the right-leaning media's depiction of her as an ideal conservative style icon (Binder, 2018b) are clearly biased, the shared emphasis on her clothing exemplifies that it was understood as a primary channel of communication between the FLOTUS and the media.

While the FLOTUS's true intent in her attire may never be known, the deep symbolism associated with some of her choices at multiple critical points of her husband's presidency suggests that the clothing choices were beyond the realm of coincidence. Both the pink pussy bow blouse and the monochromatic white pantsuit were representative of feminist ideology and women's empowerment. When considered in the context of the president's vulgar remarks and alleged misogyny, they appear to express clear dissent from the administration. The green jacket represented apathy, and the pith helmet pointed to a history of racist oppression. When considered in the context of the president's remarks and policies, they appear to align with the administration's views and policies.

Conclusion

This case study sought to understand whether Melania Trump's use of clothing could be construed as visual rhetoric to convey a message about her husband's administration. Following an analysis of some of her fashion choices, I found that she did use her clothing as visual rhetoric, even though the messages were at times unclear.

In an interview with *The Washington Post*, social media scholar Jennifer Golbeck stated that "if Donald Trump was the Twitter president, Melania Trump was the Instagram first lady" (Thompson, 2018, para. 14), pointing to the visual emphasis of the latter platform. Kate Bennett (2019), a political correspondent with *CNN* was the only journalist in the White House press corps to cover solely the FLOTUS, argued that Melania Trump made no accidents and there were no coincidences with her sartorial choices, noting the former model's unique ability to publicly be very quiet while still speaking very loudly. Bennett (2019, p. 12) argued that, "having covered her for as long as I have, each thing she does has meaning to it, even the clothing she wears." Although the FLOTUS never revealed the meaning behind most of her choices, she was likely very thoughtful and deliberate in her attire. Media were quick to interpret messaging, often through the lens of their own political bias, while scholars are left to further question rhetorical meaning.

While Melania Trump was almost as quiet in the White House as her husband was loud (Vigil, 2020), her more indirect political communication style is worthy of further exploration. This case study analysis of her fashion choices offers insight into the increasingly diverse nature of the FLOTUS's role and communications style, while also exploring the potential of fashion as visual rhetoric. Future scholarship should continue to explore the nuances of media bias and political media strategies as communication styles diversify.

While the true intention of Trump's choices may never be known, the symbolism, timing, and context of some of her more widely-publicized attire suggest that she used fashion, by way of media coverage, to send messages about her husband and his administration. In an interview about fashion with *Elle,* the FLOTUS explained, "I style myself and choose what to wear based on what I feel good in," (Phelan, 2016, para. 2) expressing a dislike for expectations about her role, not entirely unlike her husband's approach to the presidency.

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