



Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Bachelor in Global Communication

Final Dissertation

Analysis of Fashion as
an Asset in Michelle
Obama's Public
Appearances during
President Obama's 2nd
Term in Office (2013-
2017)

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Madrid, June 2022

RESUMEN

Michelle Obama ha sido aclamada como una de las grandes primeras damas de los Estados Unidos de América por muchas razones. Una de ellas, así como el tema de este artículo, es su uso de la moda. La moda puede ser una herramienta poderosa para la comunicación sutil y Michelle Obama ha sabido utilizarla a su favor y al de la gobernanza de su marido. Este artículo analiza las decisiones de la primera dama americana en lo que respecta a la moda durante la segunda legislatura presidencial de Barack Obama (2013-2017) y cómo estas decisiones influyeron y se convirtieron en una ventaja para su comunicación política.

Palabras clave: primera dama, comunicación política, moda, medios, encuadre

ABSTRACT:

Michelle Obama has been hailed one of the great first ladies of the United States of America for many reasons. One such reason, as well as the subject of this paper, is her use of fashion. Fashion can be a powerful tool for subtle communication and Michelle Obama has known to wield it to her, and her husband's administration's advantage. This paper analyzes First Lady Obama's choices when it came to fashion during her Barack Obama's second presidential legislature (2013-2017) and how these choices impacted and became an asset for her political communication.

Key words: first lady, political communication, fashion, media, framing

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1. INTRODUCTION

Michelle Obama was the first African American First Lady, standing alongside the first African American President of the United States of America. Together, they resided in the White House for two presidential terms, between 2009 and 2017 (President Barack Obama, n.d.). The First Lady was both adored and criticized by millions in the country and around the world, be it because of the issues she brought awareness to, her husband's politics, or her own ideologies. However, everyone can agree that Michelle Obama stood out among all the first ladies of America for her image, specifically, the clothes she chose to wear and how she wore them (Fancy, 2014).

While it is common for first ladies' and female leaders' images and fashion choices to be highly scrutinized and deliberated, there are only a handful that are internationally recognized in this sense. Jackie Kennedy, Margaret Thatcher, Lady Diana, Carla Bruni, and now, Michelle Obama come to mind as powerful women in politics and fashion (Fancy, 2014). Mrs. Obama earned her way into this group of women by "understanding the power her choices had" (Poplin, 2019). She understood that fashion can be a useful tool when it comes to communication, and she used it to bring awareness to the issues she cared about the most, and as a form of cultural diplomacy.

Furthermore, Michelle Obama carefully curated the image she wanted to portray to the American people, not only as First Lady, but also as a black woman in power. The designers she chose came from diverse backgrounds, many of them immigrants and people of color. On the other hand, Mrs. Obama also made an effort to showcase young American designers, bringing international attention to previously unknown artists. Such are the cases of Jason Wu, and Prabal Gurung (Fancy, 2014).

She also mixed luxury fashion with everyday brands, positioning herself as a woman of class while also maintaining a certain level of relatability to the American public. When choosing to wear designer labels, on many occasions, for State dinners or visits to foreign countries, Mrs. Obama made conscious decisions regarding the nationality of her designers, thus engaging in cultural diplomacy. This can be observed with her choice to wear a gown designed by Vera Wang, a Chinese American, to the State Dinner with the Chinese President and First Lady, Xi Jinping and Peng Liyuan. She also wore an Italian design to the State Dinner

with Italian Prime Minister and First Lady, Matteo Renzi and Agnese Landini (Harwood E. , 2016).

Obama's use of fashion as a political and communicative tool has positioned her as one of the great first ladies of the United States. In addition, the fact that the Obamas were the first African Americans in the White House, not only drove up the level of scrutiny on their actions and images, but it also put them under more pressure and responsibility in their representation of their race. Because of this, Michelle Obama was all the more conscious of her style choices and will forever go up in history for the image she portrayed, showcasing her causes as well as her personal individuality while embodying the American Dream (Poplin, 2019).

1.1. OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this thesis is to observe Michelle Obama's use of fashion as a political communication asset during her husband's second presidential term (2013-2017). This analysis will be focused on her mediated appearances at official public events, in which, through her attire, she may have created awareness surrounding her husband's political agenda and her own initiatives and ideology, as well as engaging in cultural diplomacy during official State visits.

In terms of specific objectives, they are the following:

- Study the variety of garments used in Michelle Obama's chosen national public appearances in official events.
- Observe the link between Michelle Obama's choice of clothing and how it influenced cultural diplomacy during official State visits.
- Compare Michelle Obama's use of low-cost clothing with luxury attire in chosen national public appearances in official events.

1.2. RESULTS

Specifically, this thesis will study the variety of garments used in Michelle Obama's public appearances according to the type of event. For the purpose of this thesis, these public appearances will be categorized by official presidential events enacted annually by every

President of the United States, State dinners, holiday appearances, such as the Easter Egg Roll, and events related to her own initiatives, namely *Let's Move!* and *Joining Forces*. When creating this analysis, some things to be taken into account will be what kind of attire Mrs. Obama chose, the patterns used, her use of sleeveless or form fitting dresses, the commodity or practicality of her clothes during such appearances, and the accessories she wore. This thesis will also compare Michelle Obama's use of low-cost clothing with luxury attire. The First Lady is known for mixing and matching clothes from department stores such as J. Crew and Target with high end luxury brands and designer clothing.

Furthermore, this thesis will **observe the link between Michelle Obama's clothing and Barack Obama's political agenda**, specifically his domestic policies, especially when it comes to cultural diplomacy. Such is the case of the First Lady wearing styles in accordance with the country being honored in official State visits as well as using designers of a certain nationality to bring attention to successful actions by the President.

There will also be an examination of Michelle Obama's choice of designer. During her husband's time in the Oval Office, her support of designers of color, immigrants, and Americans with immigrant roots has stood out. On the other hand, Mrs. Obama made a point of choosing young American designers that were relatively unknown before she wore their clothes (Fancy, 2014). She didn't stick to the norm by using only known and brands traditionally worn by American first ladies like Carolina Herrera and Michael Kors. The impact she had on choosing certain designers or wearing clothes from department stores was huge. Each of her appearances in a company's or designer's clothes were worth \$14 million on average (Yermack, 2011).

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To analyze Michelle Obama's influence as a political figure through fashion it is first necessary to define the communication theories that could aid this analysis. Firstly, it is useful to have a clear understanding of mass media, specifically in the political context. Political communication and media relations will be an outstanding factor in Michelle Obama's use of fashion and how this was implemented through her visual identity. Non-verbal communication (through personal appearance) will also be an important element as well as framing and agenda setting, and fashion communication.

2.1. MASS MEDIA

The media has a decisive role in how public figures are viewed. It is used as a narrative tool that presents social, cultural, and political discourse while aligning with a certain ideology (McIntosh & Warren, 2013). The public relies on the media for political information. The need for immediate information is ever increasing which has led to a high dependence of individuals on mass media. Moreover, media outlets have control over what subjects are newsworthy and how they will be framed (Mortensen, 2002). This is how the media achieves influence over public opinion and constructs the image of the actors it portrays. The depictions of political leaders or situations in the media directly impact how voters view a political party or leader, thus, influencing their decision on election day.

When it comes to women in the media, their image has been historically objectified or used for entertainment. Their physical appearance tends to be the first and most important aspect the media focuses on. There is an obsession over women's physique and fashion choices. This has become detrimental for women leaders as the focus is shifted from their practical abilities and skills. Furthermore, the media perpetuates gender stereotypes which leads to a distortion of representation (McIntosh & Warren, 2013).

The relationship between the media and first Ladies, notably American first Ladies, is especially interesting to look at. According to Watson (2000), first ladies are an institution in and of themselves, exercising political influence in their nations' foreign and domestic affairs (Watson, 2000). They do this through soft power, meaning that they have an "ability to affect others through the co-operative means of framing the agenda, persuading, and eliciting

positive attractions for their desired outcomes in international affairs” (Nye, 2011). Media discourse plays an important role in soft power, as it can “bear material effects on the world through its choices in presentations of events and people” (Zhang, 2017). The events the media chooses to pick up must be noteworthy, and as an international icon (Fancy, 2014) anything a first lady, says, does, or wears, becomes newsworthy. In this manner, they have a special influence on policy through their actions and public appearances and how their relationship with the media unfolds.

In Western cultures, there has historically been media interest in first ladies. Regarding the United States, the presidents’ wives are considered the “symbol of American womanhood” according to Wertheimer (2004) and as cited by Zhang (2017). Not only does the media have an interest in a first lady’s political involvement, it’s also quite concerned on her personal life and social activities (Zhang, 2017). Furthermore, the perception of these women is a social construction that “varies as the public view on women evolves” (Zhang, 2017). The representation of first ladies is constructed by media quotes, journalists, and editors, all of which influence the public’s perception of them as they lack an “interpersonal connection” with them (Wertheimer, 2004). The fact of the matter is that the media has an extremely important role in shaping how people view the first ladies, as they create the public’s political reality. The media chooses what to report on and how they will frame what is being said and done. However, it’s also important to note that the choices made by media actors are also influenced by the public, insofar as how social, cultural, and historical elements affect reality (Zhang, 2017).

2.2. NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

On another vein, non-verbal communication is also an essential factor in Michelle Obama’s communication strategy and influence on the media. The study of the phenomena of non-verbal communication has its origin in Charles Darwin’s *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, published in 1872, although social-scientific investigation in this area truly began in the 1950s (LaFrance, 2002). Non-verbal communication is defined as those actions that are distinct from speech. These actions include facial expressions, gestures, postures, appearance, movements, etc. (Mehrabian, 2017). Another definition refers to this type of communication as “the expression and perception of nonlinguistic signals between

people”. Furthermore, non-verbal communications can include “physical attractiveness, babyfacedness, and other physical attributes, odor, and features such as hair, clothing, and adornment” (LaFrance, 2002).

The importance of non-verbal communication is evident because it contributes to the communicative process. Without it, it would be impossible to convey a number of elements that provide more information and influence on the receptors of the message. Tone of voice, posture, gestures, and physical appearance all provide important details relative to the message the transmitter wants to convey. In today’s world, it’s essential to have knowledge and control over non-verbal communication as everything is televised, especially when it comes to someone that lives in the spotlight, and more so in the political scene. Because of this, a first lady must be aware of what her non-verbal cues are saying. Anything her body language does, or her clothes say can be misconstrued or distorted and reproduced again and again on media channels.

For the purpose of this thesis, the principal type of non-verbal communication that will be considered is that of physical appearance. This includes physical attractiveness and clothing (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1998). In the case of clothing, it has historically had non-verbal importance and it can convey information about status, personality, and wealth. Furthermore, one must keep in mind the “numerous functions clothes fulfil such as decoration, protection (physical and psychological), sexual attraction, group identification, and status” (Simončić, 2016). In a 2016 study developed by Ivana Simončić, the relationship with students and their teachers was analyzed based on non-verbal communication. This relationship can be translated into that of a person in power or a leader (the teacher), and those looking up to or being influenced by said leader (the students). This study found that the way teachers dressed influenced the opinion their students had of them beyond their professional competence. It also influenced the type of relationship they had with their students. For example, if a teacher dressed very formally, this could indicate that they were above their students, which led to a distance in the communication and relationship between them. On the other hand, when dressing in a professional but more casual manner, teachers were able to create a more friendly atmosphere with their students (Simončić, 2016).

With this case study in mind, it becomes clear that a person's choice of clothing has an influence on those around them, especially when it comes to situational context. For example, the kind of garments used in certain situations may or may not be appropriate or adequate. In the case of public figures, their audience pick up on the context and appropriateness of their clothing and judge them based on these elements. Furthermore, the choice of clothing must also go in accordance with the wearer's perceived personality and role.

2.3. FRAMING

Framing is also an essential aspect that determines how an event or person is viewed. The media frames the messages it transmits by frequently highlighting certain aspects of any given situation. This gives the message a frame from which the audience will interpret it (Álvarez-Monsiváis, 2020).

When it comes to the figure of a first lady of any country, she tends to be put into the categorical frame of wife and mother and as a representative of all the women in her home country. She is mostly observed "hugging citizens, promoting family values, and accompanying her husband to events" (Álvarez-Monsiváis, 2020). In this way, she demonstrates her femininity, which will give her an empathetic air in the media and towards the public (Goffman, 1979).

According to Edrei Álvarez-Monsiváis (2020), there are six distinct frames that are utilized in the media when reporting on first ladies: presidential escort, hostess of the nation, altruist, director of an organism or project, public official, and celebrity. These frames can be divided into traditional and nontraditional frames (Winfield, 1997), being the former those in which she is shown as a presidential companion, as a hostess or as a leader of charity project. The latter is utilized when the First Lady exercises more political roles, be it as an advisor or as an executer.

A first lady is represented as a presidential escort when she is shown accompanying her husband to an event and as "moral support" (Winfield & Friedman, Gender politics: News coverage of the candidates' wives in campaign 2000, 2003). Here, she enters the ideal role of wife and mother, meaning that media coverage of her is based not on herself, but on the

relationship she has to the presidency. This frame brings not only her, but the President closer to the public by representing his more emotional and humane side (Álvarez-Monsiváis, 2020).

When it comes to the second frame, we find that of hostess of the nation, which represents the First Lady as the perfect housewife. This frame is used when the media covers formal dinners, state visits, event planning, decoration, etc. (Álvarez-Monsiváis, 2020). During these types of events, first ladies must dress impeccably while maintaining a low profile and leaving a good impression on her guests and all that are watching (van Wyk, 2017).

Altruism is another frame that can influence how the public sees the First Lady. Charity and voluntary work have “historically been led by women, because of their do-for-others nature” (Álvarez-Monsiváis, 2020). Beasley finds that first ladies are generally seen at the forefront of crises and tragedies of national impact (Beasley, 2005) while Matějčková explains that they must “balance out difficult situations” (Matějčková, 2019). When it comes to charity balls, activism, and other events of the sort, are left in the hands of the First Lady while her husband, the President, deals with political decisions. According to this altruistic frame, as a woman, a first lady is found to have an “innate social conscience”, which is why her role is to come into contact with “the people” (van Wyk, 2017).

Entering nontraditional frames, first ladies may be represented by the media as leaders of organizations or projects that can be either separate or parallel to the President’s agenda. Given gender roles that are clearly always present in the representation of a first lady, the projects she leads tend to focus on social issues, especially those concerning women, family, and children (Guerrero-Valencia & Arano Araya, 2019). Examples of such projects include Nancy Reagan’s “Just say no” campaign against drug use and Michelle Obama’s “*Let’s move!*” campaign to fight child obesity.

Possibly the frame that generates the most controversy is that of public official. This occurs when the media decides to report on first ladies’ political opinions. This frame shows the first lady’s figure as more independent from her husband and his agenda, allowing her to develop “complementary tasks” (Álvarez-Monsiváis, 2020). Her political preferences have the power to influence nominations, campaigns, and elections. When this frame is used, a first lady can break from the chains of tradition so as to create a closer relationship with the public

(Gonella-Platts & Fritz, 2017). First ladies can also be framed as public officials when they substitute their husbands in public events, especially those of international scope (Álvarez-Monsiváis, 2020). The controversy comes because this type of frame tends to “generate negative media coverage and resistance from the public” (Álvarez-Monsiváis, 2020) because both the media and the public prefer to highlight a first lady’s traditional role rather than her public and political contributions (Kitsch, 2017).

Lastly, but not least important, is the celebrity frame. First ladies are personalities of national importance, with all eyes on her every move. Especially in the case of American first ladies, the interest becomes international. That, together with the trend of political affairs news towards entertainment in which the actions of those reported are trivialized, stereotyped, and simplified, firmly place the President’s wife into the celebrity frame (Álvarez-Monsiváis, 2020). In this case, the most covered aspects of a first lady are her clothing, makeup, hairstyle, and personal life (Álvarez-Monsiváis, 2020). However, this trivialization also has its upside. Her status as a celebrity gives her and her husband’s agenda more media presence with which state policies can reach more audiences in a better way.

2.4. FASHION COMMUNICATION

Another essential element that must be investigated in order to analyze the subject matter is fashion communication, or communication through fashion. According to Casablanca & Chacón (2014), fashion goes further than the mere necessity of protection or survival for which clothes were originally intended. Fashion represents a façade or an image of the person utilizing it. In today’s Occidental society fashion is a matter of luxury. It exists in affluent, mediated societies in which there is abundance and consumerism perseveres. In the political sphere, it’s widely accepted that politicians have a stylist, given that the image a leader projects is fundamental for the credibility of their message (Casablanca & Chacón, 2014). This becomes especially apparent when taking into account what Prada and Miu Miu’s creative director, Miuccia Prada, stated in The Sunday Times Magazine in 2012, assuring that fashion is intimate and says a lot about the person wearing it (Tidele, 2021).

Fashion as such has its origins in European courts from the XIV century onwards (Casablanca & Chacón, 2014). In fact, fashion was utilized by the new bourgeoisie to communicate class. It represented luxury because it served no function, rather fashion

distanced itself from any function other than demonstrating an individual's social standing and purchasing power (Veblen, 1994). Furthermore, the use of clothing as a communicative tool is considered by Lurie (2002) to be the "first language" used by humans. Lurie states that just by passing someone in the street it is possible to ascertain a person's gender, age, and social class through the clothing they are wearing. It's even possible to receive information regarding that person's profession, provenance, or personality, among other things. All this information is "registered subconsciously" (Lurie, 1981), signifying that fashion constitutes a language in and of itself.

Once human beings began ordering themselves in societies, clothing became a signifier of hierarchy and prestige. Priests, warriors, and nobility were easily recognizable through the garments they were wearing. This is how a garment or accessory passed from being a functional item to a symbol of an individual's status or level of power and an indication of that person's social class (Casablanca & Chacón, 2014), a phenomenon which is still apparent today.

The use of clothing and the existence of fashion expresses a person's or society's set of values and beliefs such as conformity, rebellion, status, aspirations, or even persuasion. Thus, the motivation of fashion is to decorate one's body as a way of expressing one's identity (Tidele, 2021). Along this line, clothing also "reflects conditions of everyday life" while clothing and social persona influence one another (Saltzman, 2004).

Fashion constitutes "a sociological aesthetic representing an era's sensibilities" (Casablanca & Chacón, 2014). It can be used both as an act of rebellion and non-conformance (punk, grunge) as it can serve to amplify conservatism or tradition. Such is the case of the suffragette movement, which used fashion as a political tool during the beginning of the XX century. The suffragettes used broches with the colors associated to their cause to recognize each other: green, white, and violet, also corresponding to their slogan, "Give Women Votes". The use of these broaches made it "possible to visualize the power of clothing and the use of color as an instrument to communicate ideology (Tidele, 2021). Furthermore, they dressed in a feminine but practical way, reversing stereotypes on the how feminists should look. Once the suffragettes accomplished women's voting in the UK in 1928, it became clear that political competency could go hand in hand with personal style (Tidele, 2021).

During the “roaring twenties” the figure of the flapper girls came into view. These women ditched their corsets for short skirts and their long hair for bob haircuts, becoming the image of women’s liberation. They rebelled against societal norms and used fashion as a means to do it (Tidele, 2021). Through their use of clothing, they expressed their nonconformity with the time’s conventions. Many other such examples of fashion as a communicative and political tool exist throughout history whether to express nonconformance or compliance with societal norms, making clear that this phenomenon has become common practice. In Casablanca & Chacón’s words (2014), “in the 21st century, fashion has become a resource of the spectacle society; considering that while the fashion system continues to exert power over the masses, it allows each individual to disarticulate that system and build his or her own identity”.

This is especially evident when analyzing presidential couples. In the case of the Bush family, fashion has been used as a symbol of tradition, in line with the Republican ideology and the Bush family’s social and political status. Pearl necklaces, pastel colors, covered shoulders, etc. When looking at the Obama administration, the first African American family in the Whitehouse, from the middle-class, no less, what can be seen are bright colors, sleeveless dresses and, in many cases, low-cost or accessible attire. All these elements represent each of the families in question, their social status, and their political ideologies. In short “fashion has become part of the political concerns associated with democratization” (Casablanca & Chacón, 2014).

When it comes to women’s relationship with fashion, for a long time there has been a belief that power and femininity do not go hand in hand. In order to obtain and maintain credibility, many women in power have opted for the use of pantsuits, short haircuts, and more masculine attire in general. Such is the case of Hillary Clinton with her colorful pantsuits during her tenure as First Lady as well as during her time as Secretary of State and throughout her presidential campaign in 2016. However, today the belief surrounding the antagonism between fashion and strong, successful women is questioned by designers such as Prabal Gurung, one of Michelle Obama’s designers of choice. In 2013, Gurung stated that it is “not necessary for a woman to resign her femininity or style in pursuit of gaining power, respect, or authority” (Tidele, 2021). Moreover, “fashion cannot be separated from politics” (Lobodá,

2017) while women have learned to use fashion as a tool for empowerment and an expression of identity.

3. METHODOLOGY

The principal sources of information used for this paper were articles found in the Universidad Pontificia de Comillas library, Research Gate, ProQuest, Dialnet, and Google Scholar. A very important source that was essential to acquire details regarding Michelle Obama's clothes in certain events was the popular blog, Mrs. O. This blog traced the First Lady's outfits after the Democratic National Convention in 2008 (Tomer M. , Mrs. O., 2008) until 2014 (Tomer M. , Mrs. O., 2014). There was a complication regarding the acquiring of information for the events chosen to analyze because of the gap between the end of the Mrs. O. blog posts in 2014 and the end of the Obama Administration in 2016. To solve this problem, fashion magazines of renown were also consulted to determine the First Lady's clothing choices, especially when it came to naming the brands of her clothing. These magazines were Harper's Bazaar, Vanity Fair, Vogue, and InStyle. However, the information was limited with respect to that found in Mrs. O, especially for certain events that were less mediated or popular in terms of what Mrs. Obama chose to wear. This is mostly in regard to the Easter Egg Roll, White House Kitchen Garden Spring planting, and Joining Forces Military Mother's Tea. For these events, images were relatively easy to find, however, finding the brands of her clothing was a difficult task. As a consequence, the richness of the information regarding the First Lady's clothes slightly descended from the events mentioned held from 2014 onward.

The investigation technique used to carry out this paper was the content analysis method. This method is based on analyzing the content of a variety of data. In the case of this paper, the data analyzed was visual. Furthermore, content analysis "enables the reduction of phenomena or events into defined categories so as to better analyze and interpret them" (Harwood & Gary, 2003). The variables used for this particular analysis were related to the clothes Michelle Obama wore to various annual official events in the United States as First Lady during the Obamas' second legislature. The events that were considered were the following: Obama's second swearing in and inauguration ceremonies, including the inaugural address and the inaugural ball, the State of the Union addresses, the Easter Egg Roll, the White House Kitchen Garden Spring plantings, the Military Mother's Day tea, the Kids' State Dinner, and all the State Dinners during the legislature (France, Japan, China, Nordic countries, Singapore, and Italy). The variables observed in each event were: the type of garment Mrs. Obama was wearing, the brand or designer, the color and pattern, whether the

outfit was previously worn on another occasion by the First Lady, whether she mixed low-cost clothing with luxury wear, and the accessories she chose.

When deciding which events to choose for analysis, I believed the best course to take would be events repeated each year and were equal or similar to official events normally attended by all first ladies. Such is the case of the public swearing in, the inaugural events, the annual State of the Union, the holiday events, and State dinners. The other three annual events were unique to Michelle Obama's administration as they were related to her own initiatives, namely *Let's Move!* and *Joining Forces*. These were the Kitchen Garden spring planting, the Joining Forces military Mother's Day tea, and the Kids' State Dinner. These specific initiatives were because they were the first initiatives championed by Michelle Obama, *Let's Move!* in 2010 and *Joining Forces* in 2011. This makes them representative of the First Lady's tenure and has also allowed them to fully develop and lead to the creation of annual events such as the ones chosen for analysis.

4. ANALYSIS

4.1. DESIGNERS

For the analysis portion of this paper, 29 official events were chosen to observe Michelle Obama's fashion decisions. Out of these events, the most concurred designers or brands were Jason Wu, Carolina Herrera, Michael Kors, and J. Crew. This can be seen in figure 1.

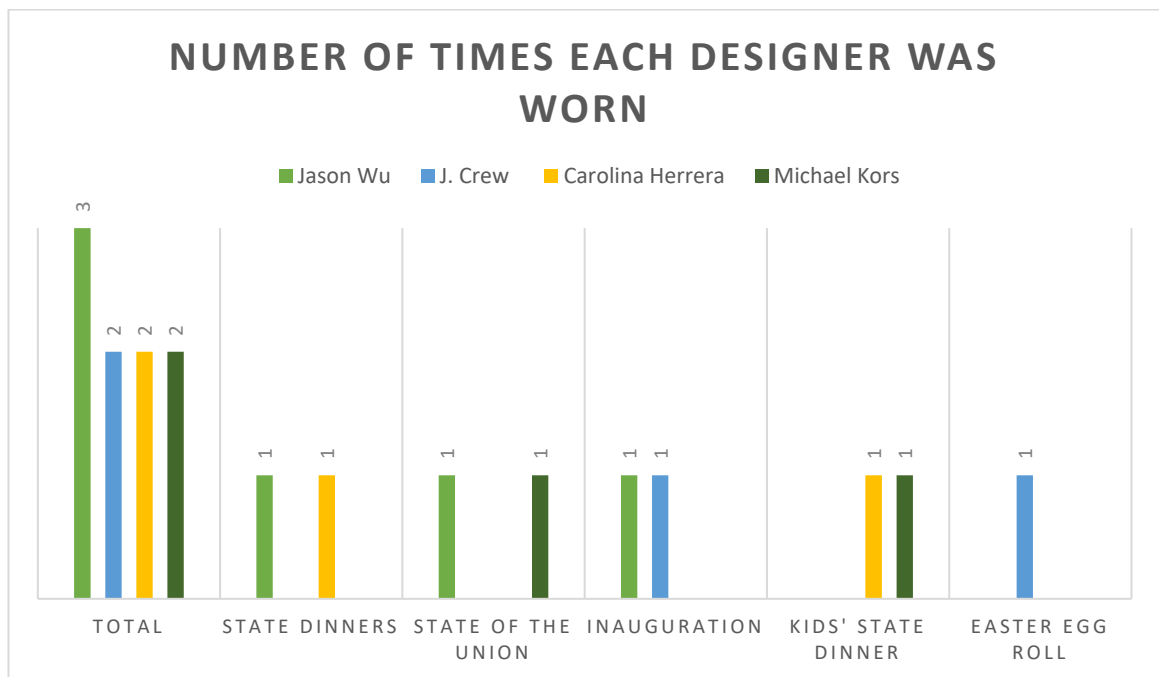


Figure 1. Number of times each designer was worn.

At first glance, it is already observable that the First Lady was not afraid to use more accessible clothing from department stores, as is the case with J. Crew. Of the events included for the sample, she used the brand in her accessories (belt and gloves) for her second Inaugural Address outfit, and in her T-shirt for the Easter Egg Roll in 2013. In the case of the Inaugural Address, Mrs. Obama combined her J. Crew accessories with a Thom Browne dress, demonstrating ability to mix and match luxury attire with low-cost clothing. By doing this, Michelle Obama was able to demonstrate her capacity at being a classy, elegant First Lady while also relating to the average American that shops in department stores.

In terms of the designers she wore the most, Michelle Obama is known for having skyrocketed young New York-based designer Jason Wu to the top. She used his designs in

3 of the 29 events chosen as a sample for the analysis. She first wore one of his designs during the Obama's first Inaugural Ball in 2009. Her choice of designer plucked a previously unknown Jason Wu from obscurity and thrust him into the spotlight. Throughout the Obama administration, the First Lady has chosen Wu for many important events, including the Obama's second Inaugural Ball, in which she wore a red gown by the Taiwanese-Canadian designer.

Michelle Obama wore a custom-made Jason Wu design for Barack Obama's second Inaugural Ball, in the form of a "long ruby-colored chiffon gown, with a cross-halter strap neckline and deep back" with velvet details (National Museum of American History, 2014). This made headlines as she repeated the designer for the same event, 4 years later. She also made headlines by wearing another Jason Wu dress less than a month later for the 2013 State of the Union Address. This time, she encountered some controversy with what she decided to wear. The design was a sleeveless organza tweed flounce dress in red and black. According to the Huffington Post (2013), many Twitter users criticized the dress, describing it as inappropriate attire for, admittedly, one of the most important presidential events of the year. "Michelle Obama is in a stunning dress but appears ready for a cocktail party rather than a speech," Carol Joynt, Editor at Large for The Washingtonian, tweeted (Adams & Krupnick, Michelle Obama's State Of The Union Dress 2013 Is A Glittery Sheath (PHOTOS) , 2013). In another article published by the Wall Street Journal (2013), the author questioned whether the colors of the dress symbolized bipartisanship (Ramirez, Is Michelle Obama's State of the Union Dress Bipartisan? , 2013). With a comment such as this, the choice of colors and the importance of their meaning and political subtext becomes evident as red is known for being the Republican party color while Blue is the Democrat party color.

The other event on the list for which the First Lady wore Jason Wu was for the Canada State Dinner in 2016. It was a strapless jacquard gown with an asymmetric draping. The dress was midnight blue with a red and yellow floral pattern. In this case, the choice of designer can be linked to cultural diplomacy, as Jason Wu was raised in Canada. This type of diplomacy will be further discussed later on.

Michelle Obama's next most used designers were Carolina Herrera and Michael Kors, both more traditional choices for a First Lady. Mrs. Obama wore Carolina Herrera for the

France State Dinner in 2014, sporting a dress with a “lace bodice and substantially trained silk-faille skirt” in a color described as liberty blue (Schwiegershausen, Michelle Obama wore Carolina Herrera to a State Dinner, 2014). As has been mentioned in other articles and is also evident in the content analysis made for this paper, this was the first and only time Michelle Obama has worn sleeves to a State Dinner. This aspect of her style is, at times, controversial, and is especially interesting to look further into in another section.

The First Lady wore Carolina Herrera again at the 2015 Kids’ State Dinner. This time, it was a floral-patterned shirt dress accessorized with green suede pumps. Given that this event is less formal than State Dinners, Mrs. Obama’s dress was also semi-formal.

Obama wore Michael Kors to the 2013 Kids’ State Dinner, in the form of a sleeveless yellow metallic silk matelassé sheath dress accessorized with Alex Bittar bracelets. This dress was previously worn in 2009 at the Chicago 2016 presentation (for hosting the Olympics) at the Bella Centre in Copenhagen (Tomer M. , 2009). The next time she chose Michael Kors for an event of the analysis was in the 2015 State of the Union. Mrs. Obama wore a form fitting grey tweed skirt suit with a wide collar and a zipper detailing. This outfit was highly commented by social media users and fashion magazines as the same model was worn by the main character of a well-known legal drama series, *The Good Wife* (Grossman, 2015). Its grey monochromatic tone also departed from Obama’s usually colorful outfits.

4.2. EVENTS

The official events chosen for the study that Michelle Obama attended are all annual and mediated events, with the exception of the Public Swearing in, Inaugural Address, and Inaugural Ball. They vary in terms of their formality and purpose. Some are attended by the President and others feature the First Lady acting on her own. In these events, it is possible to observe the role the First Lady plays and how she is framed.

4.2.1. Inaugural events (2013)

During the inaugural events of 2013, Michelle Obama is presented as presidential escort, and as such, she represents herself as a wife and mother in support of her husband, the President. This may be represented in her clothing as well, as she is dress more or less modestly and traditionally, especially in the more somber ceremonies. During

the public swearing in of 2013, Mrs. Obama wore a Reed Krakoff ultramarine shift dress with a cardigan to match, a traditional outfit for the ceremony. That same day, for the inaugural address, she changed into a Thom Browne, long sleeved, coat dress, which she matched with J. Crew gloves and belt. This also meant a conservative dress, although in Michelle Obama style, mixing and matching luxury attire (Thom Browne) with low cost, accessible accessories (J. Crew) (Friedman, 2017). Finally, during the Inaugural Ball, Michelle Obama went more towards the liberal route of wearing a long red Jason Wu dress with bare shoulders, a trademark for this particular First Lady. This last dress was very commented (Moore, 2013) as she also wore Jason Wu in her first Inaugural Ball in 2008, catapulting the unknown designer into the spotlight and transforming him into a household name in America.

4.2.2. State of the Union Address

The State of the Union Address is an annual event that is very important to the American government. In it, the President presents the objectives and initiatives that will be carried out during the year and how he intends to carry them out (Ray, s.f.). The role of the First Lady during these events is also as Presidential Escort, showing support for her husband's policies.

For the 2013 State of the Union, Michelle Obama chose to wear Jason Wu again, just a few weeks after she wore one of his designs for the Inaugural Ball. This outfit may be seen below, in *Figure 2*.

She opted for a red sleeveless organza tweed dress and received quite some backlash for it, though also, as usual, quite some praise. Before diving into the controversy surrounding the dress, it is interesting to note the choice of color and how that may have been interpreted by the general public. The party colors in the United States are blue for the Democrats (Obama's party) and red for the Republicans. The fact that Mrs. Obama wore a red dress to the State of the Union, an event attended by all the members of government and of special political importance, may have been a nod towards bipartisanship and collaboration between the two opposing parties (Ramirez, 2013). The main issue with the dress for many people was that it was deemed more appropriate for a "cocktail party" (Adams & Krupnick, 2013). It may be important to note that the State

of the Union is done in February, making the sleeveless nature of the dress seem even more inappropriate and unnecessary. The State of the Union Address has usually been seen as a somber and very proper event as it deals directly with what are considered the country's most pressing issues. In this particular address, some of the issues that President Barack Obama's speech focused on were reinvigoration of the economy, gun control, and immigration (Markon, 2013). The criticisms on Michelle Obama's outfit were that it wasn't very much in line with the serious nature of the speech.

Perhaps this is the reason behind Mrs. Obama's next State of the Union outfit in 2014, as seen in *Figure 3*, in which she wore a much more traditional and conservative dress with a cropped jacket by Azzedine Alaïa. For this dress she didn't receive backlash, although it was the first time she departed from an American designer for her State of the Union outfit, as Alaïa is Tunisian (Krupnick, 2014).

In 2015, her outfit was also more towards the conservative side, although it is noteworthy because the same was worn by the main character of a well-known legal drama series, *The Good Wife*. Because of this, Mrs. Obama's choice of clothing was topic of much discussion (Keneally, 2015), which also served to generate attention towards the President's speech at the State of the Union.

Finally, for her last State of the Union, Michelle Obama wore an orange sleeveless Narciso Rodriguez dress in marigold (bright orange), which can be seen in *Figure 4*. This choice of designer was of great importance as Narciso Rodriguez is a Cuban American designer and the normalization of relations between Cuba and the United States in 2014 has become part of Obama's legacy (Bain, 2016). The dress, with its optimistic and bright color, coupled with the nationality of the designer, is a testament to the Obama administration, what it stood for and its success.



Figure 2. Source: Michelle Obama chooses Jason Wu again for State of the Union dress. Jessica Derschowitz, CBS News, 2013. Retrieved from <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/michelle-obama-chooses-jason-wu-again-for-state-of-the-union-dress/>.



Figure 3. Source: Michelle Obama State Of The Union Dress 2014 Is A Conservative Alaia. Ellie Krupnick, Huffpost, 2014. Retrieved from https://www.huffpost.com/entry/michelle-obama-state-of-the-union-dress-2014_n_4676593.



Figure 4. Source: At State of the Union, Michelle Obama Wears Her Optimism for All to See. Vanessa Friedman, The New York Times, 2016. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/14/fashion/michelle-obama-fashion-state-of-the-union.html>.

4.2.3. Casual events

Michelle Obama was never afraid to wear casual outfits for certain events, like the Easter Egg Roll and the White House Kitchen Garden planting. When looking back at former first ladies' outfits at events such as these (in particular the Easter Egg Roll), they have mostly worn more formal attire, and thus, participated less with the public and games during such events. Below, in Figures 5 and 6, a comparison can be made between Michelle Obama's outfit for the 2013 Easter Egg Roll and Melania Trump's dress for the 2017 event. Obama opted for a colorful striped T-shirt, white pants, sneakers, and a blazer, in which she can be seen comfortably running and playing with the children on the White House lawn. On the other hand, in 2017, Mrs. Trump wore a flowy pink dress and flats as she watched the activities from the sidelines. These fashion choices framed each first lady in a particularly different way. While Michelle Obama was seen as relatable and participatory, Melania Trump represented herself in a more reserved, and some can say, elitist way.



Figure 5. Source: Austerity fails to halt Obamas' Easter Egg Roll. AFP, 2013. Retrieved from <https://archive.shine.cn/world/Austerity-fails-to-halt-Obamas-Easter-Egg-Roll/shdaily.shtml>



Figure 6. Source: Melania Trump Wore Millennial Pink Dress to the White House Easter Egg Roll. Erika Harwood, Vanity Fair, 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2017/04/melania-trump-millennial-pink-easter-dress>.

In the case of the White House Kitchen Garden planting events, Mrs. Obama always wore adequate clothing for gardening. In all such instances, she opted for simple jeans, sneakers, and garden gloves, as she was expected to be on her knees in the dirt, planting vegetables with children.

4.2.4. Semi-formal events

The events that have been considered, for the purpose of this study, to be semi-formal, are the Kids' State Dinner and the Military Mothers' Day Tea. Both these annual events are specific to Michelle Obama's time as First Lady and are a part of two of her initiatives, the former, *Let's Move!*, and the latter, *Joining Forces*. In these particular events, Michelle Obama is framed as the leader of an organization or project. These initiatives are separate from her husband's role as President, although they are of course in line with his policies.

Let's Move! dealt with childhood obesity. The objective of the initiative was to create national public awareness to improve the health of American children. To do this, the First Lady centered on healthy eating and physical activity campaigns (Let's Move!, n.d.). It is in this framework that the annual Kids' State Dinner arose. This event invited children to the White House to have a healthy lunch with Michelle Obama. In all the Kids' State Dinners between 2013 and 2016, the First Lady wore short dresses from luxury brands such as Michael Kors, Carolina Herrera, and Barbara Tfank. Mostly, she attended in bright colors and/or floral patterns. It is interesting to highlight the 2013 Dinner, because Mrs. Obama opted for a dress she had previously worn twice before. This was a yellow metallic Michael Kors sheath dress. For an individual in such a public position of power and influence, repeating

outfits is a bold statement. On the one hand, the individual is proving that they don't conform to conventional societal norms or do what is most expected of them by media standards. On the other hand, this action may be a calculated communication tool to close the distance between the First Lady and the public, demonstrating once again that she is relatable.

The Military Mothers' Day Tea was an annual event within the framework of *Joining Forces*, an initiative spearheaded by Michelle Obama and the Vice-president's wife, the Second Lady, Dr. Jill Biden. It is a "White House initiative to support military families" (The White House, n.d.). For each of the Mothers' Day Teas, Michelle Obama wore short dresses with floral patterns. During the period studied for this paper, Mrs. Obama repeated her outfit twice out of the three Military Mothers' Day Teas she attended.

4.2.5. State Dinners

State dinners are some of the most important events in terms of foreign policy and diplomacy in the presidential calendar. These dinners honor visiting foreign Heads of State and are hosted by the President and the First Lady, where she plays the role of hostess of the nation. These dinners are given after the dialogues between the two heads of state. Usually, they will each give a toast with which they can "offer an important and appropriate platform for the continuation of the serious dialogue that has taken place earlier in the day" (Monkman, n.d.). As one of the most glamorous events surrounding the Presidency, a State Dinner also has much of the public's eye on it, especially on the clothes worn, which tend to be an important topic of discussion in the media.

For the First Lady especially, state dinners present a great responsibility, as she and her staff must plan the entirety of the event. This involves "the creation of invitations and guest lists, menus, flowers, table settings, seating arrangements and entertainment for the evening" (Monkman, n.d.). Because of this, all eyes are on her, on how she hosts the event, and particularly, on what she chooses to wear. Clothing plays an important role in State Dinners, both for the hosting leaders as for the visitors, being that it represents a large part of international protocol.

"Protocol has been applied throughout history as a means of effectively channeling communication between countries. All elements count, especially visual language, in this era of images."

- Blanca López Caballero, International Protocol expert (full interview in Annex 2)

The way in which clothes communicate in international protocol is through using elements of an outfit to give nod to the host or visitor, and, in that way, “strengthen the nexus of union between the two countries. Leaders, but especially first ladies must be careful when choosing the outfits, they wear when attending such international events that not only have the domestic public’s attention but also the attention of the visiting State’s public.

“There have also been cases in which an incorrect choice of clothing could have led to a mishap or cooled relations between countries. Or such is how a sector of society, or the press has tried to “sell” it to the public.”

During Barack Obama’s second legislation (2013-2017), there were 7 State Dinners: France (2014), Japan (2015), China (2015), Canada (2016), the Nordic countries (2016), Singapore (2016), and Italy (2016). Michelle Obama very adequately matched the nationality or ascendance of her designer to the nationality of her visitors in 4 of these occasions for the State Dinners with Japan (Tadashi Shoji), China (Vera Wang), Canada (Jason Wu), and Italy (Versace). Blanca López, international protocol expert, stated in an interview for this thesis that state leaders no doubt appreciate the use of clothing from designers of their own nationality. As such, the choice of designer has become an important diplomatic tool. These seemingly small details “facilitate relations between people and delegations”.

The State Dinners for which Mrs. Obama wore designers of differing nationalities were France, the Nordic countries and Singapore. For the French State Dinner in 2014, the First Lady wore a Carolina Herrera black and blue dress with a lace bodice. It was noted that this was the first time Mrs. Obama wore sleeves to a State Dinner (Schwiegershausen, 2014) and it happened to be the only time this happened. Her love of sleeveless dresses is well known and has stirred controversy over the years of the Obama administration, especially during the President’s first legislature when the media and the public had not yet become accustomed to her style choices. During the investigation of this thesis, it was found that Mrs. Obama has left her arms bare in 41% of the studied events, as can be seen in Figure 7.

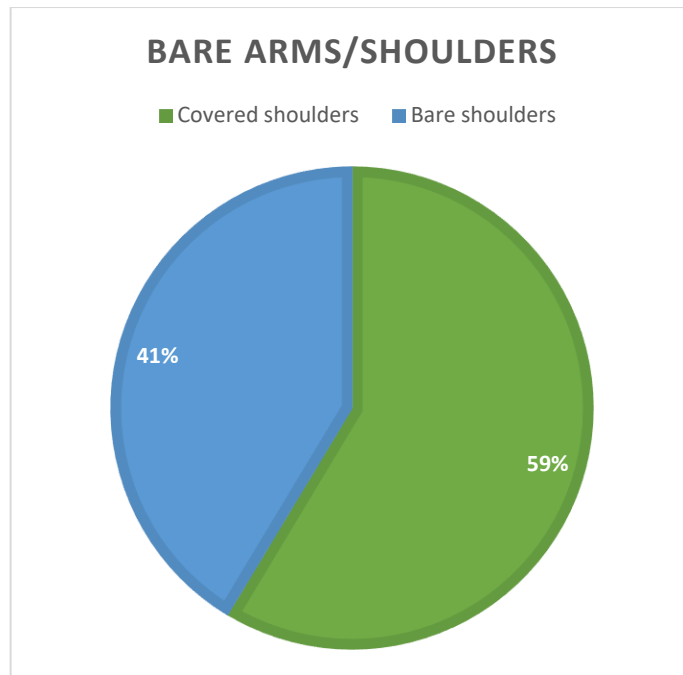


Figure 7. Obama's use of bare-armed attire.

Her toned arms became the main topic of discussion in a variety of articles of different publications, including ABC news, “Obama's Choice to Bare Arms Causes Uproar”, and the New York Times, “Michelle Obama Goes Sleeveless, Again” (Silva, 2017). Both on the news and on social media, Mrs. Obama’s choice to show her arms was criticized as being “inappropriate”, “informal”, and “distracting” (Ibanga, 2009). However, these criticisms are mostly unfounded and based on a traditional and conservative manner of thinking vis a vis what may be considered a radical change of how an American first lady presents herself in comparison to what may be considered the prototype. Returning to the case of State Dinners and attire, women baring arms is not considered an offense. This statement is supported by protocol expert, Blanca López:

“When "etiquette" (i.e., the clothing required of a guest for a particular event) requires tailcoats or dinner jackets for gentlemen, the corresponding etiquette for women is a cocktail suit or long dress, both of which can be worn bare-shouldered. Complying with the required etiquette for a given event is a symbol of respect towards the organisers, towards the host of the event.”

4.3. MICHELLE OBAMA'S STYLE

When it comes to Michelle Obama's style, all in all, it may be said that she has a very unique sense of fashion. Her outfits are known for their variety. In the case of this study, and for the events that were analyzed, six distinct styles were found to be worn by the First Lady: floral, vibrant, deep, bold, monochrome, and casual. The use of these styles can be observed in figures 8 and 9.

One of her most used styles of the selected events was casual. This style was present in the Easter Egg Rolls and the Washington Kitchen Garden plantings (see Figure 8). Her choice of attire in these cases was truly appropriate. Few, if any, first ladies before Michelle Obama ever wore casual outfits to any mediated events. They may have dressed down, but they always maintained a certain level of business-like style. This aspect has been mentioned in a previous section, but should be repeated and highlighted, as it represents the Obamas' policy of remaining relatable to the American people. By dressing in this way Mrs. Obama was saying to the public, "I'm like you". Both the President and the First Lady grew up in black, middle-class families and worked their way up to the immense success they later achieved. They personify the American dream and Michelle Obama chose to represent that dream for all to see.

In the case of floral prints, the First Lady wore outfits of this style in 18% of the analyzed events. Floral prints were especially present in the annual daytime events of the Mother's Day Tea and the Easter Egg Roll (see Figure 8). This print may be considered optimistic and joyful, coming into line with the theme of the events.

Many of Michelle Obama's outfits were bold (16%), featuring strong colors. Most of her bold outfits were worn during State Dinners, giving the impression that with her clothing choices in this highly mediated event she wanted to give a statement, she wanted to be noticed. Many of the State Dinners were also monochromatic (see Figure 9), which, coupled with a bold color, may be seen as simple yet strong.

In short, the First Lady's styles went in accordance with the event she was set to attend, most of the time. With this, it is possible to conclude that Obama was very much aware of the effects of her choices, and, as such, made calculated decisions when it came to her clothing.

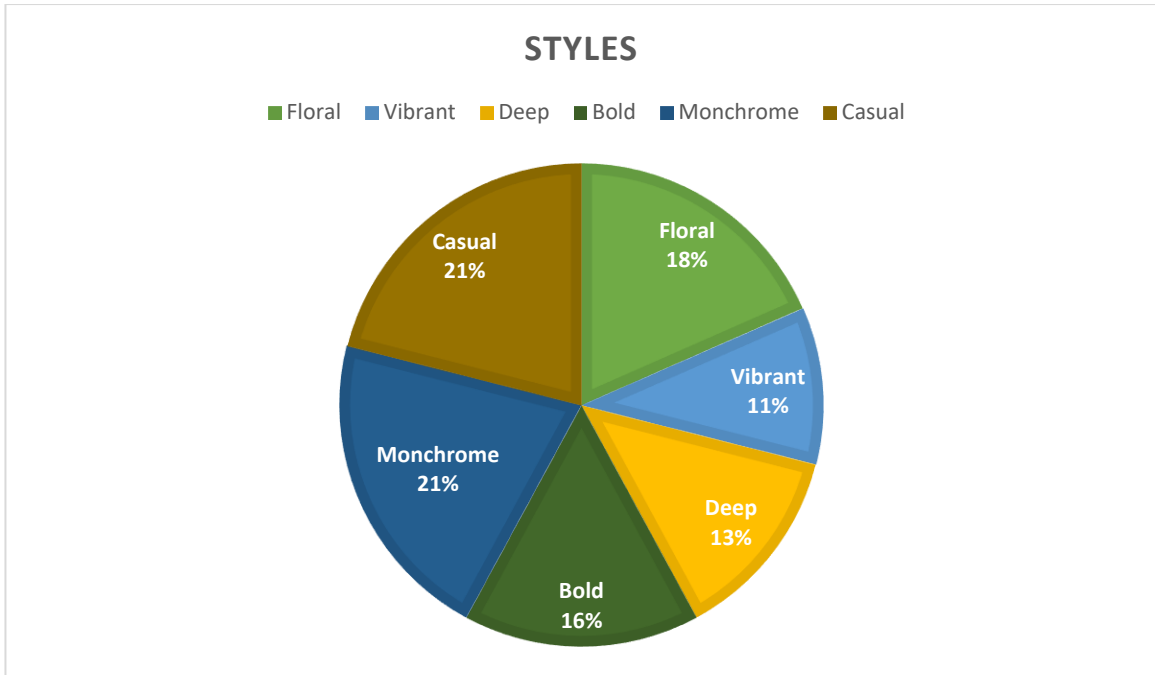


Figure 8. Michelle Obama's most used styles.

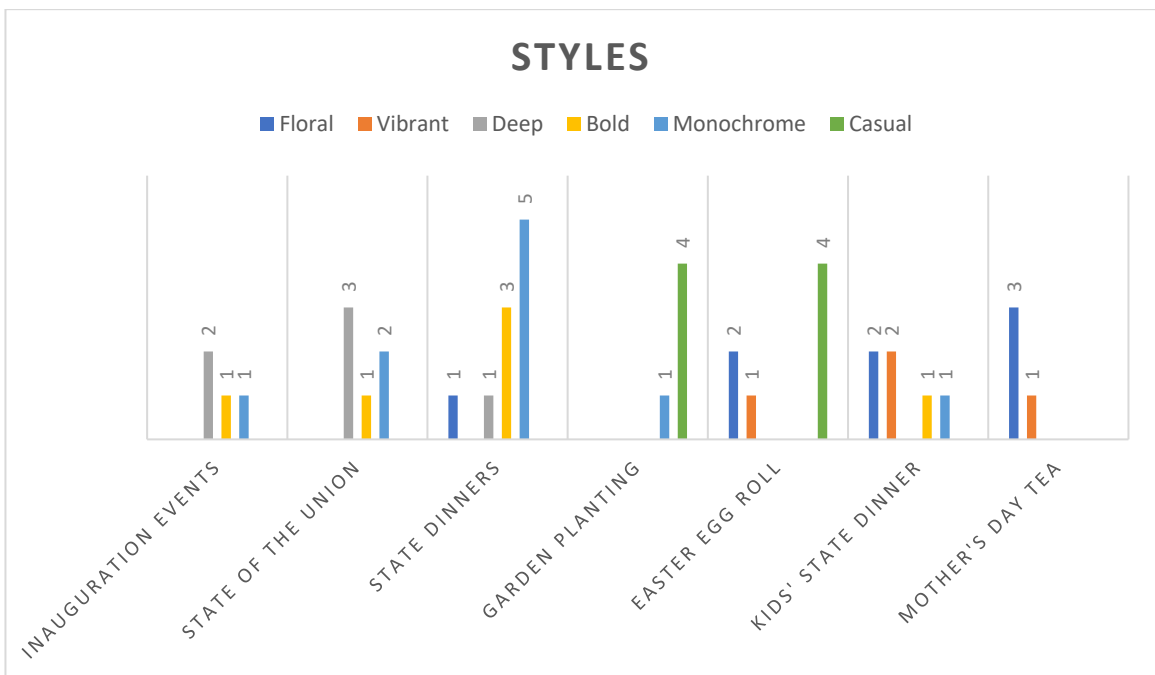


Figure 9. Michelle Obama's styles by event.

5. Conclusion

Michelle Obama undoubtedly made history as First Lady of the United States. For the purpose of this study, I focused on her role as a so called “fashion icon”. Her use of clothing and fashion was a widely debated subject both in American media as in international outlets. She received criticisms as well as support.

Whether her choice of clothing caused criticism or support, it has become clear that it served as an effective communication instrument. The colors, patterns, garments, and designers used were not a result of random and unconnected choices. Mrs. Obama has proved to understand the effect her image has on the public and how this can impact her and her husband’s initiatives and policies.

The “First Lady of fashion” used casual clothing and department store outfits to close the gap between the American public and her seemingly faraway and unattainable role. She became living breathing proof that it is possible to make the American dream come true. She also showed average citizens that the occupants of the White House are also human. This anti-elitist way of representing herself allowed her to garner loyal support from voters.

Michelle Obama also realized that her choices represented not only her status as First Lady but also her race and gender. She made of point of supporting black causes as well as showcasing Americans with Asian or Latin American heritage, that is, those that, like her, don’t have the advantage of white privilege. In the case of fashion, she did this by often wearing previously unknown designers, such as Jason Wu and Isabel Toledo. She knew that with actions such as this she would be gaining additional support from non-white voters while also bringing these designers into the spotlight.

As a woman, Mrs. Obama also made sure to empower herself and other women. The role of first lady in the United States had always been a very traditional and conservative role. What has generally been expected of Presidents’ wives, independently of their political party, is the representation of the perfect wife and mother of the nation. However, this representation of womanhood is that of housewife, not careerwoman. She must be a good hostess, support her husband in everything, and dress accordingly, in a conservative and simple fashion. She must dedicate herself to causes centered on family and children, and never on anything controversial. A first lady is not expected to innovate.

Michelle Obama was an innovative first lady. Instead of trying to fit in as much as she could and go the traditional way, she decided to use her position to attempt to create change in the White House from within. She was able to touch the public in a way no other first lady has done before. A large part of this phenomenon was thanks to her clothing. When she realized the impact her choice of clothing had, she decided to utilize it to her advantage, rather than succumb to the chains this has locked many other women in in her position before.

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7. Annex

7.1. Annex 1.

	Events	Type of garment	Brand/designer	Color/pattern	Repeat	Luxury/low-cost mix	Accessories	Photo	Date
2013	Public swearing in	Shift dress	Reed Krakoff	Ultramarine	NO	NO	Cardigan		21/01/2013
	Inaugural address	Long sleeve coat dress	Thom Browne/J. Crew	Checkered	NO	YES	Gloves and belt (J. Crew)/Reed Krakoff boots		21/01/2013
	Inauguration ball	Sleeveless/backless gown	Jason Wu	Red	NO	NO	Kimberly McDonald ring		21/01/2013
	State of the Union 2013	Sleeveless organza tweed flounce dress	Jason Wu	Black/red	NO	NO	Alexis Bittar Lucite flower pin		12/02/2013
	Easter egg roll	T-shirt, pants, and jacket	J. Crew/Tailbots	Floral/striped	YES	YES	N/A		02/04/2013
	Kitchen Garden spring planting	Jeans/drape necked top/anorak	N/A	Printed/striped/yellow	NO	NO	Gardening gloves		07/04/2013
	Joining Forces Military Mother's Day Tea	Short sleeve dress/covered shoulders	Priabal Gurung	Floral print/white, red, blue	YES	NO	Statement bracelet, earrings, ring		09/05/2013
Kids' State dinner	Metallic silk matelasse sheath dress	Michael Kors	Yellow	YES	NO	Alexis Bittar bracelets		09/07/2013	
2014	State of the Union 2014	Dress/cropped jacket	Altaia	Green/stripes	NO	NO	Oversized belt		28/01/2014
	State Dinner France	dress with sleeved lace bodice and silk tulle skirt	Carolina Herrera	Black/liberty blue	NO	NO	N/A		11/02/2014
	Kitchen Garden spring planting	Top/skinny jeans/anorak	AG Adriano Goldschmied	Grey/olive green	NO	NO	Black leather sneakers		09/04/2014
	Easter egg roll	Shirt/trousers	N/A	Plaid shirt	N/A	N/A	Flats		21/04/2014
	Joining Forces Military Mother's Day Tea	Shirt/dress	N/A	Embroidered floral/white/pink/grey	YES	N/A	Nude heels/silver belt		12/05/2014
	Kids' State dinner	Sleeveless dress	Mary Katrantzou	Floral print/striped	NO	NO	beige pumps		19/07/2014
2015	State of the Union 2015	Skirt suit	Michael Kors	Wide collar with zipper detailing/floral/white/grey	NO	NO	N/A		20/01/2015
	State Dinner Japan	Sleeveless gown	Tadashi Shoji	Purple tulle	NO	NO	N/A		28/04/2015

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2015	Kitchen Garden spring planting	Sweater, jeans, top	N/A	Maroon/black/gray	N/A	N/A	Garden gloves/sneakers		15/04/2015
	Easter egg roll	Top, cardigan, trousers	N/A	Floral print/orange/black	N/A	N/A	Flats, silver hoop earrings		06/04/2015
	Joining Forces Military Mother's Day Tea	Sleeveless dress	Peter Soronen	Floral print	YES x3	N/A	N/A		08/05/2015
	Kids' State dinner	Skirt/dress	Carolina Herrera	Floral print/white/green	NO	NO	Green suede pumps		10/07/2015
	China State Dinner	Sleeveless mermaid gown	Vera Wang	Black	NO	NO	N/A		25/09/2015
2016	State of the Union 2016	Sleeveless crepe dress	Narciso Rodriguez	Marigold	NO	NO	N/A		13/01/2016
	State Dinner Canada	Strapless jacquard gown/asymmetric draping	Jason Wu	Midnight blue/floral	NO	NO	N/A		10/03/2016
	Kitchen Garden spring planting	Jacket/trousers	N/A	Shiny green jacket/	N/A	NO	Sneakers/garden gloves		05/04/2016
	Easter egg roll	Asymet/asymmetric top/trousers	N/A	Green top/striped skirt/	N/A	NO	Sneakers		28/03/2016
	Joining Forces Military Mother's Day Tea	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
	State Dinner Nordic Countries	Asymmetric strapless gown	Naseem Khan	Blush	NO	NO	N/A		13/05/2016
	Kids' State dinner	Sleeveless dress	Barbara T'Jan	White/gray/black/ black bows	NO	NO	N/A		14/05/2016
	State Dinner Singapore	Strapless orange crepe gown	Brandon Maxwell	Ivory	NO	NO	N/A		02/08/2016
	State Dinner Italy	Asymmetric off-shoulder gown	Versace	Rose gold chainmail	NO	NO	Le Vian diamonds		18/10/2016