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The First Lady Of Social Media: The Visual Rhetoric Of Michelle Obama's Twitter Images

By: **Newly Paul** and **Gregory Perreault**

Abstract

While American first ladies have long used media to craft their image, Michelle Obama is the first contemporary first lady to use social media to promote her public persona. We use the lens of symbolic convergence theory to explore the fantasy themes incumbent in images shared through Michelle Obama's Twitter account. Since first ladies have long been perceived as representing the American "everywoman," understanding the fantasies built into the social media image of the first lady extends knowledge about the perception of American women more broadly. Our findings indicate that Michelle Obama's Twitter images are strategic in that they reflect the visual themes that the media traditionally use in their coverage of first ladies. Specifically, Michelle Obama's social media messaging portrays her as an activist mother - who espouses noncontroversial causes such as education and children's health - and a nonpartisan figure with deep familial ties.

The first lady of social media: The visual rhetoric of Michelle Obama's Twitter images

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ABSTRACT

While American first ladies have long used media to craft their image, Michelle Obama is the first contemporary first lady to use social media to promote her public persona. We use the lens of symbolic convergence theory to explore the fantasy themes incumbent in images shared through Michelle Obama's Twitter account. Since first ladies have long been perceived as representing the American "everywoman," understanding the fantasies built into the social media image of the first lady extends knowledge about the perception of American women more broadly. Our findings indicate that Michelle Obama's Twitter images are strategic in that they reflect the visual themes that the media traditionally use in their coverage of first ladies. Specifically, Michelle Obama's social media messaging portrays her as an activist mother—who espouses noncontroversial causes such as education and children's health—and a nonpartisan figure with deep familial ties.

Introduction

First ladies have long captured the public's imagination as embodiments of "femininity, strength, maternity, humility, grace … and restraint" (Joseph, 2011, p. 56). Following the emergence of mass circulation magazines and human-interest journalism in the 1900s, first ladies have turned into political celebrities who are under constant media and public scrutiny (Gould, 1986). In response, first ladies have used various methods to build their image and disseminate their messages to the public. Eleanor Roosevelt wooed the press by organizing special press conferences for female correspondents. Nancy Reagan appeared down-to-earth by performing on talk shows and sitcoms, and Hillary Clinton sought to soften her image by sharing her chocolate chip cookie recipe with the public. But few first ladies have possessed the outreach methods that First Lady Michelle Obama possessed.

In addition to appearing in White House press conferences and celebrity television shows, Michelle Obama has a strong social media presence that allows her to interact closely with the American public. Michelle Obama, who joined Twitter during the 2012 election campaign, used the Twitter handle @Flotus (an acronym for First Lady of the United States) and had 5.06 million followers (in 2016). She also had accounts on Facebook, Flickr, and Instagram. Given that she is the first to use social media extensively for public outreach, this article examines a little-researched aspect of her outreach strategy—her Twitter account. Specifically, we analyze the visual fantasies present in her most popular tweets (as evidenced by the number of retweets) and theorize the rhetorical vision that emerges from these particular visuals.

This study argues that the first lady's visual messaging tactics are dependent on two factors—media coverage and people's retweeting habits. Positive media coverage depends on how successfully the first lady fulfills the traditional roles of hostess, companion, and style icon that first ladies are expected to play (Scharrer & Bissell, 2000; Winfield, 1994). Because the media are largely responsible for shaping public

opinion about the first lady, we argue that Michelle Obama's tweets are likely to reflect the frames popularized by the media. We also argue that the Twitter visuals will contain elements that are known to make people retweet them. Previous research indicates that the presence of humor and emotions increases the chance of a message being retweeted, as do other factors such as agreement with the tweet (Boyd, Golder, & Lotan, 2010); use of hashtags and trending words (Petrovic, Osborne, & Lavrenko, 2011); and trustworthiness, expertise, and the attractiveness of the source (Liu, Liu, & Li, 2012).

We believe this study is timely and important for several reasons. Although previous studies of first ladies have examined the visual frames in media coverage of the White House's press materials (Burns, 2004; Colbert, 1995; Mortensen, 2015; Scharrer & Bissell, 2000), none have examined the visuals in a first lady's social media accounts. Given that around seven in 10 Americans use social networking sites (Pew Research Center, 2017) and 21% use Twitter, it is important to examine how the first lady presents herself visually on social media. Research indicates that politicians use social media to form interactive and intimate connections with potential voters (Grant, Moon & Grant, 2010; Larsson & Moe, 2012). They use Twitter for political engagement (Grant et al., 2010), for get out the vote efforts, to spread information about issue positions (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010), and to raise campaign funds (Bykowicz, 2015). Even though first ladies strive to appear as nonpartisan figures and function differently from political candidates, they are associated with the administration currently in power, and we expect them to use social media in strategic ways to inform and influence the American public.

Michelle Obama, though not a candidate, used Twitter to build connections with people and spread information about issues. She seeks to communicate her own narrative of "American women" by developing new storylines and reacting to ongoing storylines. She often does this through sharing images and videos on social media. As the first lady of the United States, Michelle Obama's public persona served as a societal model for women in the United States (Finneman & Thomas, 2014). Yet the public persona is not created unilaterally by the public figure (Colapinto & Benecchi, 2014). Social media helps shape a public persona, and a savvy social media user can leverage it to support a civic or political message (Owen, 2010). It is important to mention here that Michelle Obama's account was usually handled by a public relations team from the White House, which tweets on her behalf. (The tweets that the first lady personally composes are signed "mo.") Thus, the tweets and pictures in the account could be motivated by image-building strategies followed by public relations practitioners (Hwang, 2012; LaMarre & Suzuki-Lambrecht, 2013).

In this study, we conduct a theoretical treatment of Michelle Obama's Twitter images during her second term at the White House. Through the lens of symbolic convergence theory (SCT) and its related method of fantasy theme analysis (FTA), we explore her social media visuals to identify her patterns of messaging. SCT argues that people arrive at shared narratives of social reality through the sharing of visuals (Bormann, 1985). Such analysis involves using FTA to look for meaning inherent in the people, scenarios, and narratives presented to the public through the images (see Page & Duffy, 2009; Page, Duffy, Frisby & Perreault, 2016). In the following sections, we review literature on the frames used by the media and the White House to represent the first lady. We then review literature on retweeting behavior and strategic message creation. Last, we examine the visual themes in the most popular tweets and determine the elements that cause the storylines to become reified through retweets.

Our study focuses on Twitter visuals for a number of reasons. Images work along with text materials to create comprehensive messages (Foss, 2005). Visuals are known for their enhanced emotional quality (Iyer & Oldmeadow, 2006) and their compelling and attention-grabbing nature, which makes them persuasive (Garcia & Stark, 1991). People tend to understand the content of images faster than text messages (Barry, 1997) and are more likely to remember visual messages (Newhagen & Reeves, 1992). Visuals help frame and prime messages in the minds of audiences (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007) and can affect public opinion and behaviors (Powell, Boomgaarden, De Swert, & deVreese, 2015). On social media sites such as Twitter, users are known to engage more with images rather than text (Safko, 2010). As a result, political candidates and campaigns often use visuals to influence people's understanding of events (Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000; Willis & Todorov, 2006). Given the popularity of images in everyday

communication, it is important to understand how colors, backgrounds, light, and expressions in Twitter images are combined with textual components to influence the audience.

Literature review

Media representation of first ladies

Although first ladies do not have a clearly defined role (Caroli, 2003), they occupy an important position in American politics. Studies examining the first ladies' print/textual media coverage (Burns, 2004; Shoop, 2010) as well as those examining the visual representation of first ladies in the media (Beasley, 2005; Colbert, 1995; Mortensen, 2015) have found that the press uses a few popular frames to cover the first lady. From the beginnings of the American presidency through the first half of the 20th century, the print media covered the first lady primarily as a hostess. The trend shifted somewhat with the Roosevelt presidency in the 1940s when Eleanor Roosevelt involved herself directly with the press through her newspaper column and press conferences for female reporters (Caroli, 2003). On the whole, though, news coverage of first ladies reflects gendered expectations. Media coverage of first ladies focuses on female stereotyped areas, namely, "an escort with her husband; a protocol role for leading fashionable, ceremonial and social events; and a noblesse oblige role with charitable works" (Winfield, 1997, p. 241). The successful performance of these roles garners positive press coverage.

On the other hand, wives of public personalities who develop a separate image for themselves attract negative press coverage (Templin, 1999). They are seen as violating "society's stereotypical standards of proper behavior" (Papanek, 1973, as cited in Winfield, 1997, p. 242) and are perceived as "perversions of good women" (Saxonhouse, 1992, p. 6). Thus, a first lady who asserts political influence or tries to implement policy changes receives negative press coverage (Winfield, 1997). In addition, first ladies possessing prior political experience are labeled as tough and assertive and their husbands ridiculed as powerless (Gardetto, 1997). For example, Jacqueline Kennedy, who did not express an independent political agenda, fit neatly into the traditional role of first ladies, and the media covered her primarily in terms of youth, beauty, and fashion (Winfield, 1997). In contrast, the media were unprepared to cover Clinton, who had years of experience as a corporate lawyer and strong positions on healthcare reform. Because she did not fit into the traditional frames employed by the press to cover first ladies, media coverage criticized her "violations" of the first lady's role (Winfield, 1997).

In their visual coverage of the first lady, the press repeated these frames. For example, Colbert (1995) examined the photographs of Hillary Clinton in the *New York Times, Washington Post, Time, Newsweek*, and *US News & World Report* between 1993 and 1995 and found that the photos were highly conventionalized. She was more likely to be photographed with her family and was seldom pictured in speaking roles—rather, she was depicted in passive roles, that is, listening to others or reacting in nonverbal ways. Similarly. Burns (2004) found that historically the media tend to photograph first ladies with their children and as fashion icons. In a recent study comparing the images disseminated by the White House and mainstream media, Mortensen (2015) found that the White House displayed Michelle Obama more traditionally than did journalists but that both used the same traditional ideals of femininity. For example, both portray her in a nurturing, motherly role, surrounded by children, and both were likely to portray her in positions of subordination. Although most studies found that the media tend to depict first ladies through stereotypical images, a few noted that the photos differed depending on the type of medium and the geographic location of the media organization. Colbert (1995) found that prominent East Coast newspapers catering to an urban audience were more likely to represent Hillary Clinton as a professional lawyer than as a fashion icon or a hostess. Similarly, Scharrer and Bissell (2000) found that politically active first ladies tended to receive less stereotypic visual coverage.

The traditional roles of first ladies have evolved to some extent in recent years, where in addition to being hostesses, first ladies are also expected to be spokespersons for their husband's political agenda (Sulfaro, 2007; Zeldes, 2009). In recent years, the rise of the neo-feminist movement and women's involvement in public life has changed people's attitude about gender stereotypes (Dolan & Lynch, 2014). However, given that only women have held office as first ladies so far, the office maintains its gendered nature (Winter, 2000). This places certain limitations on the political conduct of first ladies. First, the office requires that first ladies display warmth and compassion, traits that are usually associated with women (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993). Second, though they are closely associated with a partisan office, first ladies are expected to appear impartial (Eksterowicz & Sulfaro, 2002). As a result, most first ladies patronize noncontroversial issues during their time at the White House and concur with the president's policy agenda. In short, the White House portrays the first lady as an impartial "American everywoman" (Finneman & Thomas, 2014), and the media reinforce and reflect this image.

Michelle Obama and the media

The beginning of the 2008 campaign season was harsh for Michelle Obama. Michelle Obama faced familiar stereotypes of Black women: mammies, lazy welfare mothers, angry and oversexualized jezebels, or "oreos" aspiring to be White (Tyree, 2011). She was depicted as "unpatriotic"; as an "angry Black woman" who "simmers with undigested racial anger"; as "Mrs. Grievance"; and as a tough, combative woman (Powell and Kantor, June 18, 2008). In response to the negative press, the Barack Obama campaign immediately set about repurposing Michelle Obama's public image to portray her as a warm and likable person. During her years at the White House, her image transformed from that of "a lawyer trying to win an argument" (Powell and Kantor, June 18, 2008) to that of "mom-in-chief" (Belkin, 2012).

Given that Michelle Obama was the first African American first lady in the White House, several studies used a racial lens to conduct textual analyses of media coverage. Shoop's (2010) comparison of Michelle Obama and Cindy McCain's newspaper coverage during the 2008 campaign found that media coverage of Obama's "domestic style," that is, "her bodily aesthetics, home decorating, and social decorum" (p. 312) were depicted in contrast to the formal styles of previous first ladies and evoked ideas of racism and classism. McAlister argued that the media's focus on Obama's muscular arms, which were considered unfit for public display; her clothes; and home décor, which were bought from everyday retail stores such as Pottery Barn and Target, implied that she was out of place in the White House. Studies documenting Michelle Obama's response to media coverage indicate that in talking about her American Dream, her journey to Princeton, and her pride for her country, she uses language that subverts racism and misogyny (Joseph, 2011; Kahl, 2009).

Twitter and retweeting

Although the news media provide one platform for discussing the first lady, social media provides an open platform in which news institutions, political figures, American individuals, and the first lady herself all play a role in shaping her image. Twitter "offers a platform for users to work together to create content, in part by engaging in discussions as a way of creating better content collaboratively and by coming to a shared understanding of the content created" (Spence, Lachlan, Westerman, & Spates, 2013, p. 4). Retweeting is the social media equivalent of having a conversation. Because Twitter followers of politicians and celebrities cannot have a face-to-face chat, retweeting allows them to participate in a conversation. As Boyd et al. (2010) argued, retweeting "is a form of information diffusion and as a means of participating in a diffuse conversation. Spreading tweets is not simply to get messages out to new audiences, but also to validate and engage with others" (p. 1). Their research indicates that people who retweet do so to share information, register their presence as a listener, publicly agree with the original statement, validate others' thoughts, or as an act of "friendship, loyalty or homage" (p. 6).

Content analyses of social media show that emotional appeals are most successful in viral media, that is, media that tends to chain; for example, for Twitter, an example of successful "chaining" would be the number of retweets. Such emotional appeals often include the use of humor, violence, children, and celebrities (e.g., Golan & Zaidner, 2008; Porter & Golan, 2006; Southgate, Westoby, & Page, 2010). Another method to ensure chaining, according to Yang and Wang (2015), is to make use of topics, videos, and images that are already chaining on social media. This allows social media users to ride the social media "wave" by inserting their take on a topic that is already viral (Yang & Wang, 2015). Research also indicates that chaining occurs more commonly for tweets that contain URLs and hashtags (Suh, Hong, Pirolli, & Chi, 2010), have an entertainment or educational value (Brown, Bhadury, & Pope, 2010), or come from accounts with a large number of followers (Boyraz, Krishnan, & Catona, 2015).

Theoretical lens

Symbolic convergence theory and fantasy theme analysis

To understand Michelle Obama's visual rhetoric on social media, we use SCT and its critical method, FTA. SCT builds on the concept that social reality is constructed through communication (Bormann, 1985). As Park, Lee, and Hong (2016) explained, "SCT is based on the idea that members in a group must exchange symbols and their underlying meanings or themes interpreted to form a cohesive group" (p. 710). Scholars have used SCT to identify the narratives—or "rhetorical visions"—embedded within political visuals (see, e.g., Underation, 2012).

Durand and Van Leeuwen (1983) argued that public-relayed images can tap into certain fantasies through the narrative constructed. SCT's emphasis on exploring the shared narrative as they appear in symbols make it a useful theory to apply to the Michelle Obama's tweeted images. SCT offers a set of structural elements (Cragan & Shields, 1995) that provide guidelines for examining various forms of communication. These include characters, plotline, the scene, suggestions of motives, and values (Page, Duffy, Frisby, & Perreault, 2016). The characters are the people who appear in the photographs—they could be heroes or villains, plotline is the story or action visible in the image, scene is the backdrop against which the characters and the story occurs, motives are the aims of the characters as implied by their actions in the images, and values are the broader meanings inherent in the actions. These five elements combine to form fantasy themes (Page et al., 2016).

The process of examining a message and identifying the structural elements and fantasy themes is known as FTA. Thus, FTA is a dramatistic method of rhetorical criticism that "identifies aspects of a message/story that contain hidden meanings or display underlying themes of that message/story" (Park, Lee, & Hong, 2016, p. 710).

These fantasy themes merge to form a unified rhetorical vision (Roth, 1993) through the process of "chaining" (Bormann, Cragan, & Shields, 2003). To determine the visual rhetoric, the meaning of visuals is based on the viewer's prior cultural and media experiences, and these are assigned through stock conventions, juxtapositions, and popular references.

Recent studies have used FTA to explore the visuals shared during the 2012 Obama/Romney debates (Duffy & Page, 2013), the competing pro-Obamacare and anti-Obamacare ads (Page, Duffy, & Perreault, 2014), and the social media conversation following comments by American football player Richard Sherman (Page et al., 2016). These analyses have shown that political images aim to promote shared views among audiences. For example, Duffy and Page (2013) argued that the citizen-to-citizen interaction that occurs through social media "is not merely the sounding and sharing of opinions, it is a political socialization process that nurtured shared worldviews and spurs political action" (p. 25). Scholars also found that certain emotional elements in the visuals make them more likely to be popular than others. In their analysis of Obamacare ads, Page et al. (2014) found that the most successful anti-Obamacare ads—successful in that they were heavily "chained"—used rhetorical

techniques that are "deliberately provocative and humorous and likely to appeal to youthful audiences" (p. 22), who are most active audience on social media (Owen, 2010).

Methodology

This study builds on this existing research by conducting FTA on the visuals shared via Michelle Obama's Twitter account. We examined all the tweets from Michelle Obama's Twitter account between January 17, 2013, and October 1, 2015. The selection of this period was necessitated by the availability of tweets. Twitter feeds are visible up to a period of 2 years. Thus we could access Michelle Obama's tweets only to January 2013. The average number of retweets that her Twitter account gets for images is about 500. All images found in the Twitter sample from 2013 to 2015 were considered when deriving narrative themes but emphasis was placed on those that chained the most. Chaining was measured by the number of retweets, which indicates sharing, and the number of "favorites," which indicates a degree of approval. Thus, for this analysis we chose her 10 most heavily chained images, all of which received more than 2,000 retweets (see Table A1). This same approach to chaining was modeled in McKewon (2012) and Page et al. (2014).

To determine the fantasy themes, we followed the method outlined in Page et al. (2016). We first viewed the Twitter images multiple times to find each of the five structural elements of SCT (i.e., characters, plotline, the scene, suggestions of motives, and values). We then categorized similar elements together to form broad fantasy themes (see Table A2). The two primary researchers examined the images separately and determined the central character(s), supporting characters, and the plot or basic scenario that the image was representing. This was done by examining the placement of characters in the visuals, the expressions on their faces, and the lighting and background set up (including items such as props, furniture, and location of the picture if decipherable). Characters facing the camera, occupying the center of the image, or photographed from eye level/low level were deemed the main characters (Fahmy, 2004; Meyers-Levy & Peracchio, 1992). Those pictured off-center or leaning on the central character were seen as supporting characters. The overall story or plot of the image was determined by examining the combined effect of the placement of the characters and the background in which the picture was taken (Grabe & Bucy, 2009). For example, if the background had elements from family life, such as children and family photographs, the image was seen as highlighting the role of the first lady as mother and wife. The text accompanying the photo was also considered as part of the context for the narrative. The images were then compared with one another to ensure reliability of findings.

We examined the images for recurring themes and insider cues that signaled the underlying narrative. By doing this, we were able to ascertain how events were being framed for the audience and how social reality was being depicted in the images (Arsenault, 1997). For example, Image A depicted Michelle Obama alone, in the backdrop of the White House, holding a sign referencing an international crisis on girls who had been abducted from a school. We interpreted this picture as an example of her using her platform as first lady to advocate for a cause. In Images B and C, she appeared in posed images with the president, carrying various props. The framing of the images and the accompanying text showed that the first lady was giving a message about education and healthy living. We interpreted these images as indicative of her role as a wife and mother, as well as showcasing various causes. In all the other images, she appeared with various family members but was not explicitly advocating a cause, and we interpreted these images as indicative of her role as a member of a traditional family.

Following the recommendations in Shenton (2004), we adopted a few different methods to ensure validity of our findings. First, we used the method of FTA, which is a well-established method of qualitative investigation. We followed the line of questioning and data-gathering method as prescribed by FTA and used by other similar projects (see, e.g., Duffy, Page, & Perreault, 2014; Page et al., 2016; Page & Duffy, 2009). Second, we offered well-defined parameters of our study by providing detailed context to our findings regarding the setting, subjects, and interactions in the Twitter visuals. As Shenton noted, detailed description promotes credibility by helping the reader "determine the extent to

which the overall findings 'ring true'" (p. 69). Last, our findings are congruent with the findings of previous research examining the media's representation of first ladies, further adding to the reliability of our study (Silverman, 2006).

We used FTA to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What fantasy themes emerged from the most privileged images on Michelle Obama's Twitter account?

RQ2: What do these visual images imply about a shared rhetorical vision regarding the role of the first lady?

Results

Two primary fantasy themes were identified in our analysis of the visual images on Michelle Obama's Twitter: a fantasy of active motherhood and a fantasy of family normalcy. (Please see Table A1 in the appendix for details on tweets and the number of times they were retweeted.)

Active motherhood

A popular visual theme that runs through the most retweeted pictures is that of an activist mother. For example, in Image A, Michelle Obama appears holding a sign that refers to the nearly 300 schoolgirls who were abducted by Boko Haram terrorists in Nigeria in 2014. She tweeted the image on May 7, 2014 (see the appendix).

One of the causes especially close to Michelle's heart is girls' education, and in this picture she appears as a powerful spokesperson for this cause. This picture, retweeted 67,256 times and favorited 54,024 times, is the most retweeted image in this sample because it depicts her not just as a first lady who cares about women's education worldwide but also a mother of two girls who is in the position of understanding the situation of the parents of these abducted girls. The backdrop of the White House and Michelle's centering in the photo serve to create a focus on her and her position as a powerful spokesperson. This is juxtaposed with her expression, which clearly reflects emotion—a mix of sympathy and concern—and links to her role as mother. As Kahl (2009) argued, "Michelle's focus on her family—and on the families of others—affords her a nuanced rhetorical platform that is nonthreatening, wholesome, and comprehensible" (p. 217). In appearing emotional and using the platform of family and education, Michelle is in sync with the traditional image of the first lady as a mother and a spokesperson for noncontroversial issues and appears to strike a chord with her followers. In addition, the hashtag displayed in the image was one that was trending at the time, and by incorporating it in her image, she found the perfect way to align herself with a popular cause.

The second and third popular pictures in this theme (see Images B and C) emphasize education and healthy living but have a lighter, humorous aspect to them compared to Image A. Image B, retweeted 6,951 times and favorited 13,875 times, refers to college education. It is part of a photo shoot conducted by the White House to publicize the May 1 college sign-up deadline typically used by college admission offices. (This particular image was tweeted on May 1, 2015.) The first lady and the president appear wearing T-shirts from their alma maters. Both appear smiling and relaxed. The pose of the first couple in this picture appears to be that of mock rivalry. Their backs are slightly turned to each other, and the president has his arms crossed in a mock serious manner. This tweet reminds people of the first couple's Ivy League education background, but the lighthearted manner of the pose delivers a friendly message about the importance of college education. The picture celebrates American education and subtly encourages students to push forward and attain their career goals. To those who know that the first lady is a first-generation college graduate, this picture has an added layer of meaning because it shows a woman who used education to attain success.

Image C, retweeted 6,386 times and favorited 13,162 times, refers to healthy living and was part of a photo shoot conducted by the White House during Easter. To commemorate 5 years of Michelle Obama's "Let's Move," a healthy-eating initiative for schoolchildren, the Easter egg hunt was conducted on Twitter using the hashtag "Gimme Five," which encouraged Americans to share five things they were doing to lead healthier lives. The image, tweeted August 6, 2015, shows the president in a mock boxing pose wearing gloves and the first lady carrying a dumbbell. Although the picture attempts to appear playful, the image is centered on the president, who appears more dressed up than the first lady. He is clad in a formal shirt and pants, whereas she appears in workout clothes. Their facial expressions are also slightly different, with the president appearing more serious than the first lady, who is smiling. The popularity of this picture hinges on the humor and contrasting emotions exhibited by the first couple. The president, in his formal clothes and serious expression, appears as a perfect foil to the more relaxed first lady. The underlying message about healthy living is clear, yet the messengers deliver it in a lighthearted way, which adds to the popularity of the tweet.

Normal family

Another visual fantasy present in the most popular tweets is the depiction of the first family as a "normal American family." The strategy employed in these images is to humanize Michelle Obama by showing her to be similar to other American women. Obama employs this strategy by sharing photos that are outside of the White House setting and often include photos that were taken before Barack Obama was elected president. These tweets made use of significant dates for all of these images—their anniversary, Valentine's Day, Christmas, and Barack Obama's birthday—and it likely contributed to their chaining. The images all also include Barack Obama as a central figure, with the tweeted text often pointing attention to him as well. As research on media coverage of Jacqueline Kennedy found, the first lady was respected for being independent of politics (Winfield, 1997), and that is the image Michelle Obama creates for herself in these tweets—she is a doting, supportive wife who remembers and commemorates the important dates in their lives but does not push an explicit political agenda.

Image D, tweeted on August 4, 2013, had 9,143 retweets and was favorited 8,027 times. The photo is in black and white, which also reinforces the idea that this is an *old* photo, in that the majority of the photos on her account are in color. It shows Michelle Obama seated on a couch with the president. She leans into him, with her hands folded on his knee. They both look at the camera with a slight smile. The pictures above their heads hang a little off-kilter. The tweet accompanying the photograph draws attention to Barack Obama's birthday: "Happy birthday, Barack! Your hair's a little grayer, but I love you more than ever. -mo." The "mo" signed at the end of a tweet demarcates tweets that Michelle herself has written. The off-kilter photographs in particular reassert the fact that they are in a home that is lived in, and as such it is hard to keep things orderly. Similarly, the clothes Michelle Obama wears are classic but by no means *presidential*. This parallels what McAlister (2009) found regarding media coverage of Michelle Obama. Although the media coverage was critical of her style as being unfit for public display, on Obama's own social media account she's not shy about showing her style prior to the White House. Showing that style creates an appearance that is achievable and reinforces her role as an American everywoman (Finneman & Thomas, 2014).

Image E, tweeted October 3, 2014, similarly depicts the Obama wedding with Michelle and Barack in a candid photograph. Image E was retweeted 4,241 times and favorited 8,224 times. Michelle Obama is in her wedding dress, and she and Barack are looking away from the camera. Again the photo is black and white to support the idea of this photographed moment occurring prior to their entry to the White House. The tweet accompanying this image is "22 years. #HappyAnniversary." This builds on the fantasy of Michelle Obama as belonging to a normal family in that many families have images quite similar to this one: candid photographs at a wedding; the celebration of an anniversary is considered a yearly routine. Her observation of the day reflects the warmth and compassion expected of the first lady (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993).

Image F, tweeted December 25, 2014, depicts the Obamas in front of the Christmas tree with Barack Obama centered. The Christmas tree is in the background to one side, and Michelle is embracing Barack from the other side. The text "Merry Christmas!" accompanies this tweeted image. This picture is in color but shows grain—the grain indicates a sense of age to show that this occurred prior to their entry into the White House. This image was retweeted 6,156 times and favorited 12,155 times.

Image G, tweeted on February 14, 2014, shows a series of three images taken in quick succession. One image shows Michelle Obama performing a humorous dance, the second shows the Obamas laughing, and the final image shows Barack kissing Michelle on the cheek. The text accompanying the image is "Hey Barack, I'll always be your valentine! #HappyValentinesDay-mo." It was retweeted 4,861 times and favorited 6,150 times. This image shows the Obamas at a ceremonial or social event and lines up with the media's expectations of the first lady as the president's guide to ceremonial or social events (Winfield, 1997). Although the background appears to be formal, and the president and the first lady are both dressed in formal clothes, the playfulness depicted in the photographs indicate that the couple is very much like an average American family.

Image H is set outside the White House and is the rare image that explicitly includes the entire family—the presence of the family is often implicit in the image. The Obama family has been notoriously outspoken about keeping their children out of the public eye during his tenure as president. This image was tweeted on Father's Day—June 15, 2014—with the accompanying text "#HappyFathersDay, Barack! Our girls are lucky to have such a great Dad. –mo." The image was retweeted 2,252 times and favorited 4,463 times. The image has them all looking at the camera, smiling, and is cast in black and white—again emphasizing the age of the photograph. It places the time of the image as before entering the White House and emphasizes Michelle Obama's role as a "mom-in-chief" (Belkin, 2012).

On the occasion of Easter, Michelle Obama tweeted "Happy Easter from these two!" In Image I, both Barack and Michelle are off-center. Michelle is flashing a girlish smile, holding Barack, and looking at the camera. Barack, by contrast, is somber with his face downturned. This image, retweeted 2,431 times and favorited 6,054 times, is one of two images set in the White House; it is worth noting that the images set in the White House chained less than those outside the White House. In the background of the image, there is a painting of George Washington and a flag emblazoned with the presidential seal. It creates a sense of Michelle Obama bringing joy into her husband's life, despite the many demands on him.

In a 2015 Valentine's Day visual (see Image J), Michelle Obama tweeted "Love is all you need. #HappyValentinesDay, Barack. –mo." This image, retweeted 3,009 times and favorited 5,912 times, again places Barack centered in the photograph, and Michelle Obama hugs him close while holding a card, presumably from her husband. This image is set in the White House, with the presidential seal in the background. With Barack's face not pictured and Barack not hugging back, this composition creates the sense that this image was captured while Barack was busy, between activities. This again creates the impression of Michelle bringing joy into her husband's life—catching him for a brief moment during the day.

In the Discussion section, we connect these findings back to our research questions and elaborate on how this research builds on our understanding symbolic convergence theory and the mediated role of the first lady.

Discussion

The preceding section addressed the first research question by indicating the dominant fantasy themes that are foundational in the images Michelle Obama tweeted from the @FLOTUS Twitter account. We found two dominant fantasy themes, which align closely with what research on media coverage of first ladies has found in the past: a fantasy of active motherhood and a normal family fantasy. The active motherhood fantasy theme showed Michelle Obama combining her role as a mother with the causes she espouses as a first lady. The normal family fantasy theme depicts the

presidential family largely out of the White House context and imagines them as little different from other Americans in style, clothing, celebrations, and values.

FTA draws out fantasy themes in order to arrive at a shared rhetorical vision (Page & Duffy, 2009), which we address here in regards to our second research question. This shared rhetorical vision is one of the first lady as a model of traditional womanhood, perhaps even as a traditional housewife. This is indicated via an emphasis on imagery of the first lady with her husband, imagery of her family life, imagery that evokes emotion or humor, and imagery that is timely in conjunction with the events of the day.

The findings indicate that the first lady's role is closely intertwined with that of the president. The images that chained the most show an emphasis on her husband—he appears either beside her or in the center of the pictures, indicating that people tend to identify more closely with the first lady when she appears with her husband. The only exception to this in our findings is the picture in which she is advocating on behalf of the kidnapped Nigerian schoolgirls. That image is notable because, although the first lady is expressing support for a political event, the visual is framed in an apolitical way. The backdrop of the White House, the hashtag, and her empathetic expression all indicate her support for the cause of the girls and education but without a partisan tenor. This supports the concept of the first lady as an "American everywoman" who is passionate about causes but is above the partisan fray (Finneman & Thomas, 2014).

Both fantasy themes emphasize the family life of the first lady. As noted in the prior element of rhetorical vision, imagery with her husband largely tended to chain. However, her children are often implicit in the images. In particular, on the image of college day, Michelle and Barack Obama are dressed in college swag. An implicit message of the image is of parental pride in their children choosing colleges and preparing for college. Malia Obama was currently visiting colleges during the time of this study and in the months following the dissemination of the tweeted image.

Another element of the rhetorical vision is the idea of the first lady as being playful and humorous. In this sample, we found that Michelle Obama's more serious messages on health chained far less often. In contrast, health messages that were playful or humorous were far more popular. Image C, for instance, shows the Obamas with props—Michelle with weights and Barack with boxing gloves. The playful tone of the image underlies its timing on the fifth anniversary of Michelle Obama's "Let's Move" initiative. This sort of playfulness makes the first lady an accessible link to the presidency. Her images contain no explicit connection to any of Barack Obama's noteworthy political victories—to Obamacare, to the legalization of gay marriage, or to the turnaround in the American economy. The exception to this element of the vision is Obama's #bringbackourgirls image, but it is worth noting that even there she is still eliciting emotion that all Americans can get behind. The plight of the Nigerian girls was of interest to all Americans, though suggestions on how they be retrieved may have resulted in different opinions.

Finally, previous literature indicates that the media and the White House tend to portray the first lady as a hostess and companion to the president. Our findings indicate that when people see the first lady portrayed in these ways, they tend to appreciate and agree with the framing (as evidenced by the retweeting, or chaining, of the image). The first lady is the president's guide to social/cultural events. The picture in which Michelle is holding a sign in support of the kidnapped Nigerian girls (Image A) demonstrates not just her role as the president's companion but also her social media savviness in exhibiting timeliness. By incorporating a hashtag that was trending on Twitter and an issue that was receiving heavy media coverage at the time, the first lady appears to fulfill her role as a social guide. This theme also emerges in the tweets featuring family pictures. The pictures frame the first family in a lighthearted manner; humanize the president; and show the first lady successfully playing her part as a wife, mother, and hostess.

This rhetorical vision sheds light on existing research and addresses a gap in the research on how the first lady presents herself, and is presented, via social media. Because Michelle Obama was the first first lady of the social media era, this study is among the first to examine how the White House uses visual fantasies to present the first lady on social media. The results indicate that regardless of the medium of expression, the White House tends to use imagery that largely aligns with the media and the public's perception of the ideal image of first ladies. Rather than portray her as different, the White House strategically uses visual elements

to align her with the other first ladies who came before her. Previous studies found that media and the White House tend to highlight the role of first ladies as hostesses and companions who have a passionate cause but no independent voices of their own. On social media, the White House seeks to promote the same message. Rather than focus on her race, her background as a lawyer, or her opinions on political issues, the White House strives to use social media to draw similarities between Michelle, the previous first ladies, and American women in general. In doing so, they create a narrative showing that the Obamas fit seamlessly into the White House.

Furthermore, this research builds on extant literature on symbolic convergence theory in that although presidents and presidential candidates have been studied for their use of symbols before (e.g., Page & Duffy, 2009), few studies have explored the use of symbols among first ladies despite their role as being their husband's apolitical counterpart (Finneman & Thomas, 2014). This study adds to SCT a sense of a shared rhetorical vision regarding American women. SCT picks apart the process by which reality is socially constructed by deriving fantasies in order to arrive at a shared rhetorical vision—which is evidenced through the use of chaining by those who share in the vision (Bormann, 1985). As noted earlier, this chaining is a process of political socialization (Duffy & Page, 2013). If one accounts for the role of the first lady as America's female role model and an "everywoman," then this vision implies an understanding of what women should be in America. As is implied in the literature and the findings, this understanding of what women should be in America is rather regressive. Hillary Clinton's experience as first lady placed her in stark contrast to other first ladies, in that she came to the office as a competent, politically oriented lawyer (Sulfaro, 2007). Yet this drew media derision, and Clinton was regularly pictured negatively in the media for not fitting within the preexisting media framework for the first lady. Michelle Obama uses the existing media framework for the first lady to push agendas for health and education. Yet by extension, she reifies a traditional understanding of the role of women in American households as individuals whose value is primarily found in relation to their husband and families.

Although this study contributes to theory building and adds to extant research on the visual presentation of first ladies, it suffers from the limitation of subjectivity (Pauly, 1991). Our results are based on the literature we cited in the article and our interpretation of the sample of tweets we selected to analyze. But readers could arrive at different conclusions based on their reading of the materials and their prior knowledge of the topic. In addition to the contributions our study makes to the field of social media communications, the study also raises several questions for future studies. One rewarding avenue for future research could be in conducting a comparative analysis of Michelle Obama's Twitter images with her images on other social media platforms. Another way to extend this study would be to compare Barack and Michelle Obama's Twitter images to examine the similarities and differences in the fantasy themes that emerge from the two accounts.

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Appendix

Table A1. List of photographs analyzed from Michelle Obama's Twitter feed.

Image	Retweets and Favorites
 Image A	Retweeted 67,256 times Favorited 54,024 times
 Image B	Retweeted 6,951 times Favorited 13,875 times
 Image C	Retweeted 6,386 times Favorited 13,162 times
 Image D	Retweeted 9,143 times Favorited 8,027 times

(Continued)

Retweeted 4,241 times
Favorited 8,224 times

Image E

Retweeted 6,156 times
Favorited 12,155 times
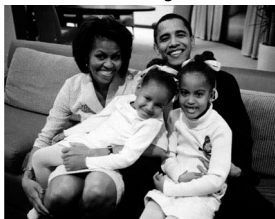
Image F

Retweeted 4,861 times
Favorited 6,150 times

Image G

Retweeted 2,252 times
Favorited 4,463 times

Image H

Retweeted 2,431 times
Favorited 6,054 times

Image I

Retweeted 3,009 times
Favorited 5,912 times

Image J

Table A2. Fantasy theme analysis for Michelle Obama's Twitter photographs.

Fantasy Themes	Taxonomies (Symbolic Convergence Theory's Structural Terms)
Active motherhood	Dramatis personae: Michelle and Barack Obama Plot line: concerned, speaking out, promoting a cause Scene: White House, unknown Motives: to inform, to draw attention to the cause, to make people empathize with the victims Values: advocacy, concern, action
Rhetorical vision: Michelle Obama is a mother and a spokesperson for noncontroversial issues.	
Normal family	Dramatis personae: Michelle, Barack, Malia, and Sasha Obama Plot line: feeing happy, content, goofing around at a public event, celebrating Scene: apartment, wedding venue, White House Motives: express comfort and intimacy, love and affection Values: family ties
Rhetorical vision: Michelle Obama is a first lady who embodies the ideas of traditional womanhood and family values.	