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The Michelle Obama influence: an exploration of the first lady's fashion, style, and impact on women

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Abstract

Given keen national interest in the fashion sense of First Lady Michelle Obama, few studies have examined the appeal of the first lady's style and if her example influences women to modify their styles and shopping behaviors. To address this paucity in the research, the purpose of this study was to explore the impact of Michelle Obama's apparel choices on women. To address this purpose, ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with women who follow Michelle Obama's fashion and rated her style as appealing. Qualitative analysis of the interviews revealed three themes: (1) relating through authenticity, (2) permission to defy norms, and (3) brands and the impression of endorsement. Findings reveal that Michelle Obama's apparel choices make her relatable to everyday women. Participants noted that the first lady's fashion choices gave them permission to challenge fashion norms for women, and adjust their personal styles. Lastly, several retail brands were thought of more positively by participants, given Michelle Obama's implied endorsement.

Keywords: Women, First Lady, Michelle Obama, Fashion, Style, Retail

Introduction

“Previous first ladies seemed to feel the need to wear a sort of uniform, whereas Michelle Obama likes fashion and is very comfortable in fashion. She's happy to mix high and low, and she loves emerging designers. That will do nothing but good for our industry... She is going to send that message to women all over America—they can wear beautiful clothes and still be taken seriously.”—Anna Wintour (Editor-in-Chief, Vogue Magazine).

In recent years, the fashion sense of First Lady Michelle Obama has created a great deal of “buzz” among women, and has been a topic of keen interest. Recently, Anna Wintour, the Editor-in-Chief of Vogue magazine, heralded the comfort by which the first lady wears her clothes, her ability to mix “high and low” brands, and her willingness to wear “emerging designers” (Dodes 2009). The Vogue Editor-in-Chief goes on to say that Mrs. Obama will send a new message to women in America regarding the outlook of fashion. Given the notable blogs, websites, and news sources that have chronicled her clothing and style choices, there indeed is evidence that Michele Obama is making her

mark on fashion, just as Anna Wintour suggested. She has been deemed such a fashion icon that the Mrs. O website, Michelle O. Style blog, the Huffington Post, Vogue Magazine, In-Style Magazine, Essence Magazine, ABC news, and many others have continued to follow her fashion choices. Yet the question bears mentioning, what do women find so appealing about her style, and how does her approach to fashion impact them?

Although the fashion choices of Michelle Obama have gained notoriety in the media, her fashion appeal has not been assessed from a scholarly perspective. To date, past research has focused mainly on her political and cultural impact (Chaney 2013; Chaney and Fairfax 2013, Colbert 2009, Lightfoot 2009; Quinlan et al. 2012; White 2011). For instance, Chaney (2013) examined the impact of Michelle Obama from a leadership perspective, and how this impacts notions of race and gender, while Lightfoot (2009) examined the first lady from a biographical perspective, highlighting her career and path to the White House. While these works have contributed to our understanding of Michelle Obama, they do not make reference to the clothing style that she uniquely is known for. Further understanding of the first lady's fashion choices is especially needed given past data that showed an increase in the stocks of clothing brands that Michelle Obama wore during appearances (Yermack 2010). Thus, an examination of how the first lady's style may influence women's perception of fashion and impact their apparel purchases should be explored. Using a qualitative research design, the purpose of this study was to assess the appeal of Michelle Obama's style, and determine the specific impact her apparel choices have made on women. To address this purpose, the perspective of women who were admirers of Michelle Obama's fashion was examined. The perspective of this group was assessed since these women would be well versed in her past and present fashion choices.

Literature review

Over the years, across numerous presidents, first ladies have been a prime topic of discussion (Burns 2008; Butler 2013; Caroli 1995, 2010; Edwards 2003; Evalds 2014; Ross 1962; Sferrazza 1990). In particular, these reviews have focused on the presidential framing of first wives (Burns 2008), the political successes and failures of first wives (Caroli 1995, 2010), the impact of first lady Grace Coolidge specifically (Edwards 2003; Evalds 2014; Ross 1962), as well as the emerging power of first wives over time (Sferrazza 1990). Yet, few studies have examined first ladies from a fashion perspective.

Evalds (2014) paints a picture of the fashion influence of first ladies during the 1920's in her examination of First Lady Grace Coolidge. As Evalds (2014) discusses, Grace Coolidge served as first lady during a time where appearance was of great importance, as cameras and media became more present at this time. Moreover, because first ladies of that era were not as vocal, clothing was a means of communication (Evalds 2014). Specifically, this era brought about press conference and even motion picture appearances of the first lady, thus, the pressure to "dress the part" was more evident (Evalds 2014). This attention to Grace Coolidge's appearance is apparent given the numerous newspaper articles that were written about her at the time that focused solely on the apparel she wore. The Washington Post, for example, applauded her for setting a standard for American women by stating that Grace Coolidge was "Always meticulous in the matter of dressing in her role as first lady of the land, she sets a high example of clothes, taste,

and appropriateness" (Wilson 1924). This statement suggests that even in the 1920's, first ladies may have had influence on other women regarding their fashion choices, as Grace Coolidge's example was of great interest. Consequently, more research is needed to understand how the apparel choices of women may be impacted by the examples of first ladies.

Even from a global perspective, the fashion choices of first ladies have had an impression on the masses. Given this, various works have examined the fashion of first ladies (Betts 2011; Sonya 2009; Young 2011). Specifically, Young (2011) explored the role of fashion and style for first ladies and women politicians. The author discusses how first ladies are often judged by their fashion choices, and how what they choose to wear impacts the views the public has of their husbands (Young 2011). Thus, Young (2011) suggests that unspoken fashion rules that first ladies should abide by since the public takes notice. Young goes on to give examples of this notion from the examination of global first ladies and women politicians including Mrs. Roosevelt, Margaret Thatcher, Queen Rania of Jordan, Jackie Kennedy, and Hillary Clinton among others. However, Young's (2011) assessment is more of a visual examination of these public figures, and does not make reference to how these public figures' examples of dress may influence others.

The topic of Michelle Obama and her variety of fashion has garnered attention from scholars (Betts 2011; Norwood 2009; Swimmer and Osthold 2009). Betts (2011), for example, traced the fashion journey of Mrs. Obama from her youth, to Princeton University, and, finally, to the inauguration ceremony of January 2009. She noted that Michelle's love for fashion began during her younger years before she became America's first lady. As a college student during the early 1980s, Michelle Obama and other Black students organized and modeled in a fashion show in which they showcased clothes they had sewn. Betts (2011) further noted that Michelle Obama exhibited an early interest in fashion, and that Michelle Obama's style encouraged women towards the individuality of style and has greatly influenced the empowerment of women (Betts 2011). Given Betts' observation, it is essential to further understand whether Mrs. Obama's style has impacted women and to what extent. Moreover, marketers and retailers need to explore the impact Michelle Obama has on the apparel choices of women, as her influence may impact the sales and performance of fashion brands.

While limited academic work has focused on the fashion appeal of Michelle Obama, David Yermack assessed the impact of Michelle Obama's sway on key fashion brands. Specifically, Yermack examined the stock prices of 29 apparel brands whose merchandise was worn by Michelle Obama in public appearances (Yermack 2010). Yermack's findings confirmed the first lady positively influenced the 29 apparel brands, as there was an aggregate gain of \$2.7 Billion in stock value across the 29 apparel brands she wore during her numerous appearances (Yermack 2010). Although Yermack (2010) examined the financial impact of Michelle Obama's fashion choices, no study to date has assessed specifically how the first lady's style may influence women and impact their apparel purchases. This understanding is especially needed given Yermack's evidence of stock increases in the apparel brands Mrs. Obama wore, since this suggests an increase in sales of the brands may have also occurred during this time. Thus, the main goal of this research was to explore the appeal of Michelle Obama's style, and determine the specific

impact her apparel choices have made on women. In addition, given the public position of Michelle Obama, it was expected that discussions regarding Michelle Obama from a social viewpoint would surface as well. Thus, this research provides a holistic understanding regarding the influence of Michelle Obama on women.

Methods

An exploratory study was conducted to address the lack of research concerning the fashion appeal and impact of Michelle Obama. A qualitative research design was employed which included primary data collection. Primary data included ten semi-structured interviews with females, aged 25–62. Women from a broad range of ages were chosen to obtain a better understanding of the appeal of Michelle Obama across different generations.

Upon Institutional Review Board approval from the university, recruitment was conducted through an initial Internet-based survey. The population of interest included adult women living in the United States. Thus, a convenience sample of women were solicited through e-mail from several professional organizations that the researchers were members of. Within the survey, respondents were asked to rate their appeal of Michelle Obama’s fashion and apparel choices using a 5-point Likert scale. Respondents who rated Michelle Obama’s style as “very appealing” or “appealing” were invited to participate in the study, since these respondents would be most likely be followers of her fashion appearances. After the initial recruitment, some respondents were recruited via snowball sampling, as a few of the women had friends that also followed the fashion choices of Michelle Obama. The women recruited from snowball sampling were also required to take the initial survey to assess their rating of Michelle Obama’s style. Table 1 includes information about each participant, including age, ethnicity, marital status, and occupation. To protect the anonymity of the women, pseudonyms were used.

Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 min and were audio-recorded with the participants’ consent. The following statements and questions, among others, were posed during the interviews: (a) *Describe your own personal style* (b) *How would you describe Michelle Obama’s style?* (c) *What words would you use to describe Michelle Obama overall?* (d) *What do you find appealing about Michelle Obama’s apparel choices?* (e) *What retailers do you currently shop from?* (f) *Would you find a Michelle Obama endorsement*

Table 1 Name, age, ethnicity, marital status, and occupation of the participants

Name	Age	Ethnicity	Marital Status	Occupation
Connie	29	Hispanic	Married	Manager
Dana	62	African–American	Married	Education administration
Devin	35	African–American	Married	Project manager
Eden	25	African–American	Single	Student
Faith	25	African–American	Single	Student
Gina	57	African–American	Married	Retired
Hannah	33	Caucasian	Married	Stay-at-home mom
Nia	33	African–American	Single	Public relations manager
Safiya	38	African–American	Single	Project manager
Tameka	29	Indian	Married	Marketing manager

of an apparel brand/retailer appealing? In addition to the semi-structured interviews, participants were asked to collect three media images of Michelle Obama's style they found especially appealing, and discuss specifically what they found appealing about her choice of apparel.

Upon completion of the data collection, all interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed through an iterative process of analysis (Spiggle 1994). Interview responses were first assessed and compared by the three researchers for commonalities and differences expressed by the participants. This was done by having the researchers code the content for common meanings that emerged across all the interviews. Thereafter, the codes were then categorized by common issues that emerged from the data. Lastly, the categories were then compared and contrasted and developed into themes used to explain and structure the interpretation of data (Spiggle 1994). An initial interpretation was established by one of the researchers. Subsequently, all three researchers then worked together to refine the themes.

Results and discussion

Three themes were identified from the interviews: (1) *Relating through Authenticity*, (2) *Permission to Defy Norms*, and (3) *Brands and the Impression of Endorsement*. Each theme speaks to the impact of Michelle Obama's fashion choices from three different perspectives. The *Relating through Authenticity* theme entails how Michelle Obama's fashion choices cause her to be viewed as genuine and relatable by participants. The *Permission to Defy Norms* theme discusses how the first lady's fashion choices gave participants permission to challenge traditional social fashion norms for women. Lastly, the *Brands and the Impression of Endorsement* theme entails participants' positive assessments of several fashion brands, given the impact of Michelle Obama's implied endorsement of those brands.

Relating through authenticity

Qualitative analysis of the data revealed the participants viewed Michelle Obama as genuine and authentic, given her unique approach to fashion and her open persona. In addition, participants noted that her choice to buy apparel from affordable mass-merchants was rare and unexpected for a first lady, which in turn made her more relatable.

More often than not, participants used the word "authentic" when they described Michelle Obama. One manner in which this authenticity was conveyed to participants was through her choices in clothing. Participants often mentioned how the first lady's willingness to wear more casual clothing options made her seem more genuine. For example, a 35-year old married African American mother by the name of Devin discussed how Michelle's casual clothing translated to a more authentic first lady:

Devin: She is really authentic... cause I have seen pictures of Michelle walking out of that house with a bun in the back of her head and some jeans, a T-shirt, and some tennis shoes on. She doesn't have to put on make-up. She doesn't always have to put on the pearls.

For Connie, a 29-year old married Hispanic mother, Michelle Obama's authenticity centered not only on her clothing choices, but where the first lady chooses to buy her

clothes. For Connie, the fact that Mrs. Obama shops at Target made her relatable. She used these words to express herself:

Connie: I definitely think she is down-to-earth. A couple of years ago she talked about how she likes to shop at Target... I think she's worn like Target outfits and things like that. So, I think she's someone we can relate to more [than the other first ladies].

As Connie stated, she viewed Michelle in a different light than other first ladies, given her choice to shop at an everyday retailer like Target.

Although not directly related to Michelle Obama's clothing, another manner in which authenticity was conveyed to participants was through the honesty she expressed in her public interviews, which made her seem genuine. Dana, a 62-year old married African American female explained how she has witnessed this in her observation of Michelle Obama:

Dana: During interviews, she has no problem speaking up and sharing her opinion. She lets you know what she is thinking, and I think it's an honest opinion. It's her opinion... and not always his [the president's opinion].

According to Dana, the persona Michelle Obama conveyed during interviews was willing, open, and honest, which, in turn, spoke to Michelle's genuineness. Gina, a 57-year old retired, married African American female, shared Dana's sentiments, "I think she is very honest and frank. She speaks on things that she really cares about. She's authentic and unique."

Permission to defy norms

The idea that the first lady's fashion choices gave the participants permission to challenge fashion norms was frequently mentioned. In particular, participants spoke about adjusting their personal styles based upon Michelle Obama's example (i.e. sleeveless dresses). In that same vein, participants also felt Mrs. Obama gave them authorization to defy traditional social norms for women regarding dress, and empowered them to try more contemporary options.

The phrase "comfortable in her skin" was frequently used when respondents described Michelle Obama. The majority of the time, this phrase was used when making reference to Mrs. Obama's controversial clothing choices. Specifically, participants discussed how the first lady has taken risks in her clothing by choosing not to conform to the conservative norm, and instead opting for more contemporary-styled clothing. Faith, a 25-year old single African American student shared how Michelle Obama's choices have inspired her:

Faith: I guess for me personally, I insist on being comfortable in my own skin. And I think women feel that they have to conform to certain ways. But, I feel like just seeing her [Michelle] dress the way she wants to dress and do the things she wants to do is showing women that it's okay to be who you want to be, regardless of what people expect of you.

For Faith, Mrs. Obama's courage to defy expectations has made Faith even more comfortable in her skin. Hannah, a 33-year old Caucasian stay-at-home wife and mother also found inspiration in Michelle Obama's contemporary clothing choices, and was encouraged by her steadfastness despite her critics.

Hannah: I feel like there were so many critics of her, especially early on. During the beginning of her campaign, people were saying 'Oh, my goodness... she's showing her shoulders! Her dress is so fitted!' But she never changed. She didn't change the way that she was dressed... she didn't change her accessories... she didn't change any of it. And, as a female, I think you have to appreciate that.

One of the most frequently mentioned styles of clothing cited by participants were Michelle Obama's sleeveless dresses. Women from different age groups within the interviews discussed how the first lady changed their view of showing their shoulders and arms, thus, giving them permission to go sleeveless as proudly as Mrs. Obama. Gina, a 57-year old retired, married African American female, discussed how she has watched the trend evolve:

Gina: I've never seen so many women with sleeveless dresses until she [Michelle Obama] put that out there. It seemed like women always had sleeveless dresses on, but they always had a cover over it. Now, everybody's baring their shoulders from young to old... and you just never saw that before.

Based on Gina's observation, Michelle Obama indirectly assured women that it was okay to wear sleeveless dresses and follow her lead, without verbally saying it. Through her example, women of all ages have adopted the trend. For Hannah, Michelle Obama's example was so substantial that it has inspired her to now wear sleeveless dresses, even though she did not consider this option in the past.

Hannah: I would never have just worn a dress without a jacket before she came on to the scene. She always looks put-together, and I never thought that I could do that. She just made me feel much more comfortable about it.

Through Hannah's example, we see an actual behavior change in her choices in clothing, given Michelle Obama's image. Since she dared to display her shoulders and arms, this gave Hannah the permission to do the same.

Safiya, a 38-year old single African American, shared sentiments similar to Hannah's, regarding the first lady's example to encourage her to dress more contemporary. Michelle's influence gave her permission to remove something from her wardrobe—stockings. She welcomed this freedom, as she was never a fan of stockings. She explained:

Safiya: I like that she didn't wear stockings, cause I was never one to wear stockings. I like that when she came on the scene, I could use that as my excuse. Like, if the first lady doesn't have to wear stockings, then I know I don't have to wear stockings!

Safiya felt validated in her choice to not wear stockings. While pantyhose were once a requirement and standard for women, even today, not wearing pantyhose in formal environments is viewed as a rebellion (Boncompagni 2012). Thus, Michelle Obama's example

has given Safiya confidence in her decision, despite her perhaps being questioned about it before. The first lady has now given her the freedom to defy the traditional custom of stockings.

Based upon the experiences of the participants, there are norms and traditions in fashion and society that women are expected to adhere to. However, Michelle Obama has shown them that there is room to challenge these norms. Her example gives women the freedom to represent themselves from a more diverse perspective—be it through the distinctive attributes of clothing.

Brands and the impression of endorsement

Several apparel and retail brands were thought of more positively by participants, given Michelle Obama's implied endorsements of those brands. While formal endorsements of the merchandise were not given by the first lady, participants' impression of an endorsement made them seek out the brands or retailers she wore in her appearances. This confirmed the financial impact exhibited in Yermack's study (Yermack 2010).

When participants described their personal styles, they often used the word "classic" and frequently mentioned Michelle Obama's style as an aspirational one. Given this, participants seemed to emulate the first lady by choosing apparel and retail brands that mimic what they observed from her. Interestingly enough, many of the retail brands noted by participants were brands assessed in Yermack's study, namely J. Crew, Nordstrom, and Macy's (Yermack 2010).

For Tameka, she is able to achieve the classic look she aspires to through both the Tory Burch and Kate Spade brands she purchases. She explained the aesthetic of both of these brands as it related to her style:

Tameka: It's [my style] classic and maybe elegant... I think Tory Burch to me is an elegant look, but it's not overdone. It's slightly preppy, but not casual... I do tend to gravitate towards things that are more classic and elegant, and not too haute couture. I think Kate Spade to me is very comparable to Tory Burch in that I think she has a lot of what I qualify as a classic look, and clean lines.

Hannah also sought out "classic" clothing, however, J. Crew was the retailer that met that standard for her.

Hannah: I feel like when I think about style, I think about the style I want to emulate and that's something classic. I would say J. Crew is probably in my top five. Their styles are easy to wear and very classic.

Nia seemed to share in Hannah's views. J. Crew also allowed her to create the classic look with a hint of femininity. She expressed herself in this way:

Nia: The store [J. Crew] is visually appealing to me, and I kind of like the mixture of classic stuff and things that are really feminine... and then they always have really great accessories. The style of the store really fits my personality.

For Connie and Eden, Macy's was a retailer they turned to, given the breadth of options they have. Connie and Eden explained:

Connie: I really like Macy's because they've got tons and tons of clothing. Their style is like... almost anyone can find something that fits their [style].

Eden: The first store that popped into my mind was Macy's... I think it's because they have such a variety. I think you can find things in there where they have pretty good deals.

Nordstrom was a retailer frequently mentioned by respondents. The retailer was known for having higher quality and distinctive items, as Faith and Devin stated:

Faith: I really do like Nordstrom when I can catch a good sale, because I feel in comparison to a store like Macy's... I feel like Nordstrom has better quality clothes. You know, for me, I like to buy clothes that are good quality and good price because I like stuff that lasts longer.

Devin: Oh, Nordstrom! It's by far my favorite, and one of the reasons is because they carry unique items. Their customer service is at a level that I wouldn't mind paying full price for some items.

Although the majority of respondents stated they preferred more classic merchandise, a few of them discussed seeking out trendier items for specific occasions. One online retailer, ASOS, was the retailer that seemed to meet their trend needs. Hannah and Nia explained what they found appealing about the U.K. retailer ASOS:

Hannah: I love ASOS! Their prices are number one... and I feel like I go to ASOS for the trendier pieces because they're more affordable.

Nia: The main store that I shop on online is ASOS... that's kind of my go-to online store for clothing. That's where I'll get some of my trendier pieces. I get mainly dresses from them... and they look flattering.

Although the first lady is not a paid endorser of any apparel brands or retailers, participants got the impression that she endorsed the brands or retailers when she wore items publicly. Oftentimes, this led participants to consider apparel brand or retailer options they had never considered before. Nia explained how this instance was true for her:

Nia: I can't remember what cover it was, but she was on the cover of some magazine... and they said the dress was from Talbots. I remember I said 'Oh, I didn't think that they had anything modern for my age group!'

For Nia, she may not have ever considered Talbots as a store that could meet her needs. By appearing on the cover in their dress, Mrs. Obama caused the retailer to instantly gain credibility with Nia. Devin discussed how her perception changed as well, after a retailer was indirectly endorsed by Mrs. Obama:

Devin: I would say that before she [Michelle Obama] mentioned that she wore J. Crew a lot, I would shop in J. Crew. But, when she said it, it made me look at J. Crew differently. It made me not hesitate to buy it. It basically took J. Crew to a different level in my mind.

While Devin shopped at J. Crew before, once Michelle Obama mentioned that her clothes frequently came from J. Crew, it validated her decision to buy from the retail brand.

For some respondents, the first lady's assumed endorsement actually resulted in purchases. For instance, Hannah shared an occasion when she actually sought out a retailer and made a purchase based on an item she saw the first lady wearing from the retailer, "I can't remember what item she wore from Kohl's. But, I had never really been into a Kohl's before.... And I got a really cute dress!"

Given the perspective of participants, there are several key retailers and brands that meet their needs. These retailers allow them to communicate their classic looks, and also communicate trends when they feel it is appropriate. To sweeten their interest in these retailers, oftentimes Michelle Obama indirectly endorsed apparel or retail brands. When this occurred, a greater curiosity in those brands was sparked. Thus, even with just an impression of an endorsement from the first lady, participants took note.

Conclusion and implications

Results of this study shed light on the appeal of Michelle Obama from a fashion and style perspective. Moreover, this study provides every day perceptions of the First Lady from a consumer perspective, which is not present in past literature. The findings suggest that Mrs. Obama's style makes her more relatable to women, and also causes them to view her role as first lady positively. This data is essential, as no studies to date have discussed how a first lady's style may cause the general public to view her as more accessible. Butler (2013) and Evalds (2014), for instance, confirmed that the media in particular was interested in the physical appearance and attire of first ladies, however, they did not assess whether women specifically also had a vested interest in the attire of first ladies. Therefore, this study provided evidence that women are generally interested in the attire of first ladies, and may make assumptions about these women based on their attire choices. In this study, participants had a noted interest in Michelle Obama's attire choices, and frequently referenced her being down-to-earth and approachable because of her choices, namely her willingness to shop at the everyday retailer Target. This implies that even though the social mission of first ladies may be important, it is also vital that the first ladies' appearance be appropriate, yet also relatable, as participants in this study suggested that this made Mrs. Obama seem more genuine in nature. This finding may be valuable for political strategists in their branding and marketing of future first ladies.

In addition, given Mrs. Obama's public position, consumers may seek to adopt the fashion and style of Michelle Obama in light of the genuine demeanor she represents. While Young (2011) noted that Jackie Kennedy, for example, was widely known for her impeccable wardrobe, the author did not show evidence of women thus adopting the style of Mrs. Kennedy. While this no doubt occurred, few academic articles to date have extensively addressed consumer adoption of trends given the example of a first lady. Thus, this article shows evidence of women adapting their styles to mirror that of a first lady – Michelle Obama. Whether it be adapting their fashion choices to include sleeveless dress, flats, or bold jewelry, Michelle Obama has caused them to take more risks in their fashion choices. Hannah testifies to how this is true for her in her adoption of chunky necklaces:

Hannah: This is another thing that she inspired me to do too... you can wear a simple white blouse and wear a chunky, funky necklace with it. She's obviously giving a speech, but I never thought that I could wear something so girly and still be taken seriously. And she looks fantastic... So I started rocking big necklaces with black suits.

Lastly, participants mentioned being more drawn to certain apparel and retail brands, given Michelle Obama's implied endorsements of those brands. While formal endorsements of certain merchandise were not provided by Mrs. Obama, participants' impression of an endorsement made them seek out the brands or retailers she wore during her appearances. This confirmed the financial impact exhibited in Yermack's study (Yermack 2010). Yermack confirmed the financial impact of apparel brands and retailers that Michelle was featured in, but no study to date has examined the consumer appeal of these apparel brands and retailers. This study suggests that even an implied endorsement by Michelle Obama can cause women to seek out apparel brands and retailers, as a large majority of the women gave instances of when they have done just that after seeing Mrs. Obama in a certain type of clothing. This implies that apparel brands and retailers should look further into the impact of Michelle Obama, and how an implied yet formal endorsement by Michelle Obama might impact the sales and the overall image of their apparel and retail brands. As one of the first academic studies to explore the influence and appeal of Michelle Obama's style, it also points to the pressing need for further research on the topic.

Limitations and future studies

Although this research has made a valuable contribution to the scholarly literature, the limitations must be noted. For one, the majority of respondents were ethnic minorities, specifically African American. Therefore, future studies should consider more diverse population segments. Second, as the majority of women in the study were highly educated, the sample lacked socioeconomic diversity. Future studies with women from a lower socioeconomic level might confirm the major findings herein, or reveal very different themes. Third, since the participants in this study resided in the southeast region of the United States, it would be advantageous if future studies examined whether women from other geographical regions share the same views as the ones in the present study. Lastly, for this qualitative study, data was solely collected from in-depth interviews. However, given the prevalence of blogs and websites that have solely focused on Michelle Obama's fashion, further studies should examine data from websites dedicated to the fashion of Michelle Obama. Future research could utilize a comparative analysis of the fashion and social influence of Michelle Obama versus former first ladies.

Authors' contribution

DM and CC contributed to develop the manuscript from introduction to future studies. As a graduate student, JAO contributed to the literature review. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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