



In America: A Content Analysis of the 2021 Met Gala

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Keywords: communication, American culture, red-carpet fashion, fashion interpretation, constant comparison

Introduction: The Met Gala has been described as the “Oscars of the East Coast” and the “Super Bowl of Fashion” (Chilton, 2018). At its core, the Met Gala is a fundraiser for the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, celebrating the opening of the spring exhibit (The Costume Institute, n.d.). Attendees are encouraged to dress according to the theme, which can make for unique red-carpet attire (Friedman, 2017). In 2021, the Met Gala commemorated the exhibit titled “In America: A Lexicon of Fashion” (Okwodu, 2021). Because “language is the core theme of the exhibition” (Okwodu, 2021) and appearance is often considered a type of language (see Lurie’s [1981] *The Language of Clothes*), this concept led to the research question of: How did attendees of the 2021 Met Gala interpret the theme through their red-carpet attire?

Literature Review: In *Fashion as Communication*, Barnard (1996) expands upon the idea in his title by arguing that “clothing and fashion, as communication, are cultural phenomena in that culture may itself be understood as a signifying system, as the ways in which a society’s experiences, values and beliefs are communicated” (p. 26). Furthermore, Jablon-Roberts (2019) argues that costume designers in particular use appearance as a tool for communication. Because the Met Gala encourages attendees to dress according to the theme, they resemble a costume of sorts. These concepts suggest that the Met Gala red carpet dress is means of communication and a signifier of American culture, regardless of the theme.

This brings up questions about what American culture is. In *The American Way of Life*, Samuel explains that “the American Way has represented many things to many people,” and that “there really is no single, identifiable American Way and never has been” (Samuel, 2017, p. vii). However, Samuel continues that “a consumerist lifestyle supported by a system based in free enterprise has been the ideological backbone of the American Way, but the term has been attached to everything from farming to baseball to barbeque” (Samuel, 2017, p. vii). Despite the inherent ambiguity and vastness in the word “America,” capitalism has been a strong influence in American culture (Crunden, 1994). Hollywood is another American symbol. Decherney says that “by the end of World War II, Hollywood had assumed its role as a national art form and a propagator of Americanism” (2005, p. 11). Moreover, Fishwick (2014) says that celebrities have the ability to “bewitch” the average person (p. 75), and he even titles a chapter “The Celebrity Cult” in his book *Popular Culture in a New Age*. Finally, Știuliuc (2011) describes how the United States has become home to immigrants from around the world and has been described as

“a melting pot, a salad bowl, a kaleidoscope or a mosaic” (p. 366). She discusses how this theme is central to the concept of the American dream which, “born in the collective imagination, lays the foundation of American culture and literature” (2011, p. 363).

Method: To effectively answer the research question, a combination of methods was used. The primary source of data collection was through content analysis of photographs of 2021 Met Gala attendees. Content analysis is a way to systematically classify themes/concepts in any type of communication (GAO, 1996). To analyze images, a coding sheet was developed to document person-related variables (like age, gender, race/ethnicity, which were all coded per visual cues) and clothing-related variables (like designer, colors, influences, motifs, and materials). Based on the formal occasion and traditional clothing construction, some assumptions were made about materials. For instance, men’s tuxedos were coded as wool. An audit coder was utilized to ensure that the coding process stayed consistent and that inconsistencies were agreed upon. The images were gathered via the Internet, on pages like *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, and others, and social media. Not all data was visually identifiable (e.g., designer, some influences). Therefore, the primary source of data collection was supplemented with additional Internet research to fill in gaps.

The guiding method of this study was constant comparative analysis (CCA). Fram (2013) discusses how CCA is often associated with grounded theory, but she makes the argument that there can be an appropriate application of the method outside of grounded theory. She says that CCA can be used to “identify patterns in the data and to organize large amounts of data so as to abstract categories” (Fram, 2013, p. 20).

Results: In total, 225 images depicting 249 people were analyzed, including 167 women and 82 men. About half of the attendees, mainly women, (n=124), wore silk and 61 attendees, mainly men, wore wool (these categories are not mutually exclusive). These are traditional red-carpet materials, and this result is to be expected, even though the Met Gala red carpet is non-traditional. Additionally, 48 attendees exhibited floral motifs. This is also an anticipated result as flowers have long been an integral motif in fashion (Lemire, 2003). A few individuals wore florals in ways that specifically addressed the theme. For example, Lili Reinhart wore a dress adorned with the 50 state flowers (Vogue, 2021b) and Karlie Kloss wore a dress inspired by the U.S. national flower, a rose (Vogue, 2021a). Similarly, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez wore the Flor de Maga, which is Puerto Rico’s flower, on her shoes and in her hair (Brother Vellies, 2021).

Further patterns in the data indicated other ways in which attendees viewed the idea of America. Seventy-six attendees wore red, white, and blue, either individually or together. Nine attendees wore denim or were inspired by traditional denim detailing. There were 54 known occurrences of attire influenced by 34 different icons. Most of the icons were American, but all were associated with the United States in some way (e.g., non-American Hollywood stars). Of the 54, five were influenced by Marilyn Monroe, five were influenced by Audrey Hepburn, and five more were influenced by the Barbie doll. Other icons include Josephine Baker, Rita Hayworth, and Diana Ross, to name a few.

In addition to attendees that were influenced by icons, others were inspired by general time periods. For example, there were at least 10 known occurrences of attendees that were influenced by the “Old Hollywood” period, a total that increases to 30 when Old Hollywood-era icons are taken into account. The Old Hollywood period is a loosely defined term but can be described as era of American film from the 1930s to the early 1960s (Chiarulli, 2021; King, 2004). The data also showed that some attendees (n=8) chose to express their idea of America by focusing on their personal heritage. Examples include Naomi Osaka, who wore a dress with a koi fish motif to honor her Japanese heritage; Amandla Stenberg, whose hair was done to mimic a durag; and Saweetie, whose dress featured the Black American Heritage and Filipino flags.

Conclusion: The findings of this study offer an interesting perspective on what the definition of America is to a small subset of upper-class individuals. These results support the arguments that Hollywood is a vital part of American culture, and that America can be represented as a melting pot. They also suggest that there is a particular interest in the “Old Hollywood” period and that icons from that era are still influential today. This shows that interest in celebrities is not a new phenomenon, and that celebrity fascination transcends time. What is also evident is the variety of interpretations of what “America” is. There was no single common interpretation of the Met Gala theme amongst all of the attendees, and from that, it can be concluded that the definitions of America and American culture are complex and multi-faceted.

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