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## **In America: A content analysis of the 2021 Met Gala**

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*In America: A content  
analysis of the 2021  
Met Gala*

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## Abstract

This study examined the 2021 Met Gala and how its theme *In America: A Lexicon of Fashion* was applied. It answered the question of: how was this theme interpreted via the attendees' attire? This study was conducted via content analysis of the Met Gala attendees (using digital images), supplemented with additional Internet research to provide more context. The findings show that the attendees' outfits had many influences, including icons, personal heritage, activism, and red-carpet norms, to name a few. The implications of this study are that "America" can have varying meanings for different people, depending on their values and lived experiences, and that it truly is difficult to define.

Keywords: Met Gala, fashion, communication

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## Introduction

There is no shortage of scholarly research on fashion and clothing. Academic journals focusing on fashion topics from textiles to trends include *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*; *International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology and Education*; *Dress*; *Fashion Theory*; *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*; *Fashion, Style, & Popular Culture*; and more. However, there is one topic that is not extensively covered in the existing literature, and that is the Met Gala. The Met Gala is an annual event that celebrates the new exhibit at the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and is typically held on the first Monday in May, although in 2021, it was held in September due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Chilton, 2018). Exhibits always have different topics and attendees are encouraged to dress according to the theme of that year's exhibit (Friedman, 2017).

This event has been described in the past as the “Oscars of the East Coast” and also the “Super Bowl of Fashion” (Chilton, 2018). Both the Oscars (also known as the Academy Awards) and the Super Bowl are major events in the American calendar. In 2022, 99.18 million people watched the Super Bowl (Sports Media Watch, 2022) and 15.36 million people watched the Oscars (The Hollywood Reporter, 2022) in the United States. The Super Bowl and the Oscars have been researched and interestingly, Elizabeth Castaldo Lundén wrote a book titled *Fashion on The Red Carpet: A History of the Oscars®, Fashion, and Globalisation*. Considering how much attention is garnered by these two events and how they are compared to the Met Gala, it is surprising that the Met Gala has not been researched on a wider scale. This study helps to start the scholarly conversation on the Met Gala. Specifically, this research analyzes the appearance choices of 2021 Met Gala attendees honoring the theme of *In America: A Lexicon of Fashion*. It

answers the research question of how did the 2021 Met Gala attendees interpret the theme through their red-carpet attire?

This study serves a few different purposes. For one, it examines the communication of appearance, itself a major research focus (see Allen, 2011; Cantoni, et. al, 2020; Kim, 2013). However, this study examines fashion as a form of communication explicitly in the context of the 2021 Met Gala. It provides insight into how attendees of the Met Gala used the red carpet as a means to communicate their chosen message about the theme *In America: A Lexicon of Fashion*. This Met Gala, therefore, bounds this study in terms of scope. Only 2021 Met Gala attendees are analyzed, and this research only aims to study how the theme of the event translated into the red-carpet attire. This research does not, for instance, address prior Met Galas and their themes or the pieces actually exhibited inside the Met.

It also provides an opportunity to see how “America” and American culture are defined by a select group of people: celebrities and public figures. These types of people are often looked to for inspiration, so this research addresses how (or really, if) they chose to leverage the Met Gala as a platform to spread a message about what America means to them. Defining “America” in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has the potential to be a complex task. The Met Gala provided a forum to learn what America meant to many different people all at once. The results of this study could be applied to other areas of research, like sociology and popular culture studies. Altogether, this study offers an opportunity to explore a topic that has not been researched before, examine fashion with a multidisciplinary approach, and learn how attire is leveraged to communicate a message at an exclusive fashion event.

## Literature Review

To research the topic of how 2021 Met Gala attendees incorporated the theme of *In America: A Lexicon of Fashion* into their appearance on the red carpet, several areas must be explored and defined first. Those areas include what America means, how fashion and other appearance cues can communicate, and what the Met Gala is.

### Culture

America, in this context, refers to the United States of America, but before American culture can be defined, the general term *culture* must be examined first. To define culture is no easy task. In fact, in his work *Keywords: a Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Williams (2014) said that “Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language” (p. 62). Barnard (1996) mentioned that Williams explains the word “culture” differently in two of his works, *Keywords* (first published in 1976) and *Culture* (first published in 1981), which Barnard sees as proof of the word’s complexity (p. 31-32).

The word *culture* stems from the Latin word *colere*, which means “to inhabit, to cultivate, to protect and to honour with worship” (Barnard, 1996, p. 32). *Cultura* then resulted from *colere* and also relates to cultivation, so as a result, in its earliest form, culture was linked to the tending of crops and livestock (Barnard, 1996). Moreover, “process, production and refinement” were integral to this definition of culture, where seeds are planted, harvested, and further developed (Barnard, 1996, p. 32). It was not until the early 16<sup>th</sup> century that people began to use the word *culture* to metaphorically refer to human development (Williams, 2014). It was only “when people began talking of culture as human development, the idea of process, of production, they stressed the end products of that process and the idea of refinement and

improvement” (Barnard, 1996, p. 32-33). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in his book titled *Culture*, Eagleton (2016) defines culture in four ways: “(1) a body of artistic and intellectual work; (2) a process of spiritual and intellectual development; (3) the values, customs, beliefs and symbolic practices by which men and women live; or (4) a whole way of life” (p. 1). For the purposes of this research, the latter two definitions are most applicable.

Barnard (1996) details how Williams’ two existing conceptions of culture, called the “ideal” and the “documentary” conceptions (described in Williams’ book *The Long Revolution* from 1961), are ill-suited when referring to fashion (p. 33). The ideal conception can be explained by a goal of perfection. It suggests that there is a “point at which development can go no further” (Barnard, 1996, p. 33). On the other hand, the documentary conception refers to the curated amalgamation of the “best, most interesting and illuminating pieces of art, literature and music” (Barnard, 1996, p. 33). Barnard argues that these conceptions are not well-suited for fashion because fashion often changes and therefore contradicts the ideal conception, and not all would agree that fashion is of the “highest and most refined products of the human mind” (1996, p. 33).

However, Barnard (1996) does say fashion can be a part of culture in that culture is not finite in its development (unlike the ideal conception) nor is it limited in scope to only the “best” (unlike the documentary conception). This new description of culture better depicts culture as a “way of life” (one of Eagleton’s (2016) definitions, as well) and:

includes not just what has been called, by a privileged minority, the “best” that has been produced in a few limited areas of human experience, but also the whole range of what has been thought of as ordinary and everyday experience. (Barnard, 1996, pp. 34-35)

Also, it must be mentioned that this notion allows for “change and difference,” and therefore, it is compatible with fashion (Barnard, 1996, p. 35). In this way, we can see that culture is everything that composes a collective group of people’s identity or how a collective group of people choose to live their lives.

### **“America” and American Culture**

Now that the groundwork for what “culture” is has been laid, what constitutes American culture can be explored. Ştiuliuc (2011) says that “American identity is derived from adherence to particular beliefs and principles, such as constitutionalism, individualism, liberalism, democracy and egalitarianism, which make up an American creed, all having their roots in the Declaration of Independence” (p. 367). Overlapping only with the focus on democracy, Crunden, in his book *A Brief History of American Culture* (1994), claims that “American culture is essentially a peculiar mixture of Christianity, capitalism, and democracy” (p. ix).

Contrastingly, in *The American Way of Life*, Samuel (2017) 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” (p. vii). However, Samuel corroborates Crunden’s point that “a consumerist lifestyle supported by a system based in free enterprise has been the ideological backbone of the American Way,” but he goes on to say that “the term has been attached to everything from farming to baseball to barbeque” (p. vii). Despite the inherent ambiguity and vastness in the word “America,” these scholars agree that capitalism has been a strong influence in American culture.

This is supported by Cottrell (2010), who says that in the second half of the 1800s, consumption grew to become an influential driver in American culture. This was because of a

few reasons, one being the establishment of department stores, like Marshall Field's store in Chicago (Cottrell, 2010). All types of media also played a significant role in development of the "gospel of consumption" (Cottrell, 2010, pp. 25-26), like the work of Horatio Alger who integrated "rags-to-riches" themes in his stories and "time and again presented his case for the American Dream," which will be discussed later in further detail (Fishwick, 2014, p. 177).

Du Bois, in her article "The Dominant Value Profile of American Culture" (1955), supports Crunden's claim that Christianity shaped American culture and introduces a new influence at the same time when she says that "this system is rooted in the Protestant ethic and eighteenth-century rationalism" (p. 1232). She further identifies three main "focal" values that shape American culture, specifically, middle-class American culture: "effort-optimism," "conformity," and "material well-being" (DuBois, 1955, pp. 1232-1233). In this article, Du Bois uses *focal* "to designate a value about which numerous specific values cluster" (p. 1233).

Effort-optimism is "a specific instrumental value through which man strives to reach not only the goal of his own perfectibility but also the goal of mastering a mechanistically conceived universe" (Du Bois, 1955, p. 1234). It is comprised of the values of hard work, which includes working hard at having fun; education; activism, in terms of leading a busy life, or the opposite of idleness, which is evident in expressions like "let's get this show on the road"; and the "cult of youthfulness" (Du Bois, 1995, p. 1234). This cult "is borne out by the popularity of the heroes manufactured in Hollywood and in the world of sports, by the advertisements of styles and cosmetics," which has an interesting application to this study and will be discussed in depth later (Du Bois, 1955, p. 1234).

The next focal value is conformity. Du Bois (1955) makes an interesting point about conformity when she says, "Self-cultivation in America has as its goal less the achievement of

uniqueness and more the achievement of similarity” (pp. 1236-1237). Rather than striving for individuality, Du Bois explains that, in order to effectively work well with others, there has to be a degree of sameness between people (p. 1236). Du Bois gives the example of immigrant assimilation as proof of the value of conformity (p. 1237). She also describes how “conformity has replaced liberty as a focal value to which these specific traits [self-reliance and initiative] are attached. Co-operation has been added as a specific value that has facilitated the shift-over” (Du Bois, 1955, p. 1237). In other words, the focus is less on personal freedom and more on achieving common goals.

The last focal value is material well-being. Du Bois (1955) says that “in the American scene progress and prosperity have come to have almost identical meaning” (p. 1235). Because Americans have a steadfast view of what “prosperity” is (i.e., financial wealth and success), “material well-being is close to being considered a ‘right’ due to those who have conscientiously practiced the specific value of work” (Du Bois, 1955, p. 1235). Du Bois brings up materialism as “one of the most common stereotypes about the United States...What foreign observers may call materialism, with derogatory or envious innuendos, is to the American a success that carries the moral connotation of ‘rightness’ – of a system that proves itself or... ‘works’” (p. 1235). In other words, material possessions are the natural result of work. This has manifested itself in phrases like “hard work pays off,” which integrates effort-optimism and material well-being together (Du Bois, 1955, p. 1235).

Another element of America and American culture is entertainment. Three of Cottrell’s (2010) chapters in his book *Icons of American Popular Culture: From P.T. Barnum to Jennifer Lopez* integrate themes from the entertainment industry over time and are titled “Democratic Showmen,” “Stars of Vaudeville and Tin Pan Alley,” and “The Cinematic Artist and the Literary

Lion.” These chapters detail the influence that icons like P.T. Barnum, Lillian Russell, and Ernest Hemingway had on American culture. Cottrell says that at the same time that consumerism grew in the United States, “a key portion of the American economy was now based on the providing and enjoyment of entertainment” (p. 24). *The Journal of American Culture* supports how essential entertainment is to American culture. A quick glance at the articles and book reviews that the journal published from 2019 through 2021 shows titles ranging in topics from Pixar to Dracula to popular music.

One theme apparent in the titles of the journal is superheroes, often considered a particularly American genre (Chambliss, et. al, 2013). There are several titles that have either Superman, Batman, Jessica Jones, or Marvel in their title. Cottrell (2010) says that “From the inception of the United States, stories about heroes and heroines dominated the American cultural pantheon,” and he goes on to list American heroes from history, including the Founding Fathers, Rockefeller, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt (pp. 129-130). Hero is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary (n.d.) as “a person admired for achievements and noble qualities.” Because heroic stories are so engrained in American culture, it only makes sense that this archetype has bled over into the fictional world as well and helped to popularize stories of superheroes.

On the other hand, Cottrell also says that “postwar America witnessed the flourishing of the antihero” (p. 153). He does not provide a definitive definition of what an antihero is, but he does describe them as “dissenting voices” and “figures outside the pale” (p. 155). In other words, antiheroes represent people that go against the grain, hence the chapter title “American Rebels.” He does note, however, that antiheroes were not a new phenomenon in the post-war period; this archetype had already been in existence for some time (Cottrell, 2010). He gives examples of

this type of icon, both fictional and real, like Jay Gatsby from *The Great Gatsby*, Rick Blaine from *Casablanca*, and most importantly, and the focus of his chapter, Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley (Cottrell, 2010). This provides an interesting perspective because it shows that despite the prevalence of and infatuation with heroes and heroic stories, antiheroes can still achieve icon status.

Hollywood, defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary (n.d.) as “the American motion-picture industry,” is a specific manifestation of the entertainment industry and serves as another American symbol. Decherney (2005) says that “by the end of World War II, Hollywood had assumed its role as a national art form and a propagator of Americanism” (p. 11). Furthermore, Fishwick (2014) says that celebrities’ “brilliance can bewitch” the average person (p. 75), and he titles a chapter “The Celebrity Cult” in his book *Popular Culture in a New Age*. In this chapter, he details the influence that celebrities like Marilyn Monroe, Clark Gable, and Farrah Fawcett had on popular culture (Fishwick, 2014). Douglas and McDonnell (2019) plainly say that “celebrity culture has become a central, dominant, and structuring force in American life” (p. 1).

The concept of the “American dream” is another central tenet of American culture. Cottrell (2010) says how the American dream has been an ever-present theme in American history, even throughout difficult times (p. 201). In addition, Ştiuliuc (2011) explains how the United States has become home to immigrants from around the world and has been illustrated as “a melting pot, a salad bowl, a kaleidoscope or a mosaic” (p. 366), or a place where people from many different backgrounds come together to create one whole. She discusses how this idea 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). While Peach (2005) argues that analogies of the melting pot and the mosaic are not the same thing, because the melting pot

promotes assimilation and the mosaic promotes multiculturalism (p. 1), both metaphors concern a culture or location that is built upon many nationalities and ethnicities.

What is also central to the American dream is the concept of the self-made man.

Frederick Douglass said that:

Self-made men are the men who, under peculiar difficulties and without the ordinary helps of favoring circumstances, have attained knowledge, usefulness, power and position and have learned from themselves the best uses to which life can be put in this world, and in the exercises of these uses to build up worthy character. (Douglass, 1872).

Fishwick (2014) says, “the history and evolution of the self-made man in America is a wide and complex thing, involving our belief in progress, capitalism, Darwinism, the frontier, technology, and globalism” (p. 173). As previously mentioned, Horatio Alger helped to popularize this concept through his writing. Fishwick (2014) makes the same claim and says that if Horatio Alger was alive in the present age, he would be supportive of celebrities like Bill Gates, Oprah Winfrey, and Michael Jordan, as they epitomize the “self-made man.” (p. 176).

Cottrell (2010) attests that “by the last decade of the twentieth century, the possibility of achieving the American Dream appeared greater than ever based on the makeup of those who had obviously attained it” (p. 201). In his chapter on “American Dreamers,” he identifies two individuals, Michael Jordan and Jennifer Lopez (Cottrell, 2010, p. 201-202). They represented “luminous figures who dotted the cultural landscape and altered perceptions of what might be possible for other African-Americans and Hispanics” (Cottrell, 2010, p. 202). According to Cottrell, this shows that the American dream can be an achievable goal for anyone and everyone, not just white people like it had been in the past.

A final topic that must be discussed is the influence of African American culture on the whole of American culture. Verney (2003), in his book *African Americans and US Popular Culture*, details the effect African Americans have had on American popular culture throughout history in a variety of fields, like movies and music. For example, he says that “from Ragtime to Rap almost all the major developments in popular music had their origins in African American society” (2003, p. 110). Verney also discusses numerous influential African American icons (spanning many industries), like Sidney Poitier and Diana Ross, for instance. Finally, while Verney did not explore these topics, he makes mention of the significance that African Americans have had in literature, art, and religion in the United States (p. vii). In summation, it is difficult to identify American culture with one specific definition because it is multi-faceted, complex, and ever evolving.

### **Communication and Fashion as Communication**

There are two schools of thought about communication, as stated by Fiske (2011). The first is the “process” school and it “sees communication as the *transmission of messages*” (Fiske, 2011, p. 55). The second school is the “semiotic” school and it “sees communication as the *production and exchange of meanings*” (Fiske, 2011, p. 55). Fiske details the many differences between the two schools in his book, but for the purposes of this study, there is one main difference that impacts how communication can be applied to fashion, which is how each school views social interaction (Barnard, 1996, p. 29). The *process* school “defines social interaction as the process by which one person relates to others, or affects the behaviour, state of mind or emotional response of another, and, of course, vice versa” (Fiske, 2011, p. 56). On the other hand, *semiotics* “defines social interaction as that which constitutes the individual as a member

of a particular culture or society” (Fiske, 2011, p. 56). Barnard (1996) juxtaposes the two schools by giving the example of “it is the wearing of the baggy, rolled up trousers, puffa jacket, baseball cap and expensive trainers that constitutes someone as a Ragga rather than that one is a Ragga and then goes out to get the clothes,” with semiotics being displayed first, then process (Barnard, 1996, p. 30).

Barnard (1996) identifies that there are some inherent problems in the application of the process school to fashion, like determining who the sender of the message is or what a communication breakdown is. The first problem is solved with semiotics because “meanings are the result of negotiation” which is what occurs when “each reader (who can, in effect, be either the designer, the wearer or a spectator) brings their own cultural experience and expectations to bear on the garment in the production and exchange of meanings” (Barnard, 1996, p. 31).

Therefore, according to semiotics, communication is more of a two-way process, and as a result, it can better be applied to fashion. This dovetails into the second problem. Because “the semiotic method concentrates on the negotiation of meanings rather than the receiving of messages,” it is to be expected that different people will interpret meanings differently (Barnard, 1996, p. 30).

Therefore, two individuals understanding meanings differently does not mean that the communication has failed but rather that there can be multiple meanings to the same thing.

Maxwell (2021) offers an interesting discussion on nationalized clothing, which he defines “as clothes consciously designed or worn primarily to signify membership in some imagined national community” (p. 1). He argues that other scholars (including Barnard) have overlooked nationalism’s influence on and intersection with the fashion world (Maxwell, 2021, pp. 1-2). Maxwell also says, “when clothing does have national significance, however, the salience of other social variables intersects with the national meaning, revealing a social context

to the national message” (2021, p.2). Throughout his article, Maxwell (2021) reviews the complex intersection between fashion and nationalism. One of the areas he focuses on is Michael Billig’s concept of “banal nationalism” (Maxwell, 2021, p. 2). Maxwell describes how *banal nationalism* varies from a form of *passionate nationalism* and can be equated to more of an innate fact of life. He gives the example of how banal nationalism “most straightforwardly applies to clothing proscribed by the state, such as military uniforms and police uniforms, which sometimes even include flag motifs” (Maxwell, 2021, p. 3).

In his book, *Fashion as Communication*, Barnard (1996), discusses the intersection between the two titular elements. He explains 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” (Barnard, 1996, p. 26). Additionally, appearance itself is often considered a type of language (see Lurie’s [1981] *The Language of Clothes*).

Furthermore, Jablon-Roberts (2019) discusses that there is an assumption that “clothing can communicate” (p. 37). She also argues that costume designers in particular use appearance as a tool for communication (Jablon-Roberts, 2019, p. 37). This is especially useful for this study because the Met Gala encourages attendees to dress according to the theme, so their outfits resemble a costume of sorts. In totality, these concepts suggest that it is appropriate to analyze the fashion of the Met Gala as an indicator of cultural concepts because the outfits worn do communicate messages.

### **The Costume Institute, the Met Gala, and “In America: A Lexicon of Fashion”**

The Museum of Costume Art, founded in 1936, affiliated with the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1946 when it became the Costume Institute (*The Costume Institute*, n.d.). It was in 1959 that the Costume Institute became a “curatorial department” that developed exhibits, and since then, the Institute has created exhibitions like *Rock Style* in 1999, *Superheroes: Fashion and Fantasy* in 2008, and *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination* in 2019 (*The Costume Institute*, n.d.). Of course, leadership of the Costume Institute has changed over the years, with Irene Lewisohn leading the Museum of Costume Art at its inception and most recently, Andrew Bolton who is the current curator in charge (*The Costume Institute*, n.d.). Diana Vreeland, “the legendary fashion arbiter” acted as a “special consultant” to the Institute from 1972 to 1989; she was responsible for creating “a memorable suite of exhibitions, including *The World of Balenciaga* (1973), *The Glory of Russian Costume* (1976), and *Vanity Fair* (1977), galvanizing audiences and setting the standard for costume exhibitions globally” (*The Costume Institute*, n.d.).

The Costume Institute is home to “more than thirty-three thousand objects” that cover “seven centuries of fashionable dress and accessories for men, women, and children, from the fifteenth century to the present” (*The Costume Institute*, n.d.). In 2009, the Brooklyn Museum’s costume collection was moved to the Met where it exists as the “Brooklyn Museum Costume Collection at The Metropolitan Museum of Art” (*The Costume Institute*, n.d.). Together, “the combined collections now constitute the largest and most comprehensive costume collection in the world, offering an unrivaled timeline of Western fashion history” (*The Costume Institute*, n.d.). The Costume Institute’s physical space is now referred to as the Anna Wintour Costume Center after its remodel completed in 2014 (*The Costume Institute*, n.d.). The Center houses two

galleries and other “behind the scenes” areas, like The Irene Lewisohn Costume Reference Library (*The Costume Institute*, n.d.). Wintour is an influential figure in the history of the Costume Institute Benefit (Met Gala), and her exact role is described in detail below.

To honor the opening of the spring exhibit, and to secure funding for the Costume Institute’s “exhibitions, acquisitions, and capital improvements,” the Costume Institute Benefit, or the Met Gala, is hosted on the first Monday of every May (Chilton, 2018; *The Costume Institute*, n.d.). Chilton (2018) says that the Met Gala “began in 1948 as a midnight supper that invited guests could attend for fifty dollars a ticket” and that it was “the brainchild of publicity doyenne Eleanor Lambert, who dubbed it the ‘Party of the Year.’” It was when Diana Vreeland was a special consultant for the Institute that the benefit “became a grand fête for both the social and art worlds, with luminaries such as Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and Pat Buckley serving as co-chairs” (Chilton, 2018). Anna Wintour, the Artistic Director of Condé Nast, the Editor-in-Chief of *Vogue*, and a Met Trustee, has led the event since 1995 (with the exceptions of 1996 and 1998) (Chilton, 2018). She took Vreeland’s vision and elevated it to a new level by strengthening the “event into one of the most visible and successful fundraisers in the world, drawing guests from the worlds of fashion, film, society, sports, business, and music” (Chilton, 2018). The Met Gala has been described in the past as the “Oscars of the East Coast” and the “Super Bowl of Fashion” (Chilton, 2018). Additionally, attendees are encouraged to dress according to the theme of the exhibit (Friedman, 2017), which can make for unique red-carpet attire.

In 2021, the Met Gala occurred on September 13<sup>th</sup> (due to the pandemic) commemorating the exhibit titled *In America: A Lexicon of Fashion* (Okwodu, 2021). This theme is the first time since the 1998 theme *American Ingenuity* that American fashion is the central pillar (McDermott, 2022). When asked what American fashion means, Bolton, the current curator of the Institute

defines American fashion in terms of “heterogeneity, diversity, and pluralism,” but he thinks that “the idea of reducing American fashion down to one definition is totally antithetical to what the exhibition is about” (Yotka, 2021). Choosing not to reduce American fashion down to one definition supports the idea of individualism that was introduced earlier because it implies that American fashion can have different meanings to all people. Just because American fashion can have multiple meanings does not mean that America will also have many meanings (and the meaning of America is the focus of this study), but it brings up an interesting point. Finally, Okwodu says that “language is the core theme of the exhibition,” (Okwodu, 2021b).

Bolton says that the layout of “the exhibition takes inspiration from Jesse Jackson’s invocation of the patchwork quilt as a metaphor for America and its unique cultural identities” (The Met, 2021). In his 1984 Democratic National Convention speech, Jackson said that:

America is not like a blanket - one piece of unbroken cloth, the same color, the same texture, the same size. America is more like a quilt - many patches, many pieces, many colors, many sizes, all woven and held together by a common thread. The white, the Hispanic, the black, the Arab, the Jew, the woman, the native American, the small farmer, the businessperson, the environmentalist, the peace activist, the young, the old, the lesbian, the gay and the disabled make up the American quilt. (Jackson, 1984).

The exhibit includes around 100 pieces from classic American designers like Ralph Lauren, Donna Karan, and Calvin Klein, but also garments from newer designers like Conner Ives and Christopher John Rogers (Okwodu, 2021). Okwodu (2021b) also says that floral styles are integrated in the exhibit, as well.

Together, the many definitions of America and American culture, how fashion is used as a communication tool, and the history of the Met Gala and the 2021 theme establish the three-legged stool that is the background of this study. The intersections of these topics and their sub-topics led to the research question of: How did the 2021 Met Gala attendees interpret the theme through their red-carpet attire?

## **Methodology**

The research question for this project was “how did the 2021 Met Gala attendees interpret the theme of the event through their attire?” To answer the question, the main method used was content analysis, a way to systematically classify themes or concepts in any type of communication (GAO, 1996). Data was collected via photographs of 2021 Met Gala attendees. Content analysis is not limited to a particular medium of content, but rather can be used to evaluate documents, music and audio data, photographs, advertisements, movies, and other texts. (Leavy, 2017, p. 146). The systematic nature of content analysis is a strength of the method because it provides structure and a framework for the researchers to effectively and efficiently derive the desired information from the sources (GAO, 1996).

Initially, the images were gathered through *Vogue*'s Internet archive of the 2021 Met Gala attendees. Because *Vogue* is a sponsor of the Met Gala, it was assumed that this archive would provide a comprehensive collection of all attendees. However, it was later determined that this was not complete, and therefore, other Internet sources, like *Vanity Fair*, *W Magazine*, *GQ*, and social media profiles supplemented the gathered database of attendees. Additionally, on occasion, extra photos of attendees were sourced for the purpose of seeing the attendee from a better angle.

A coding sheet was created to analyze images on a variety of variables. GAO (1996) describes the definition of variables in two parts: conceptualizing the variable and specifying its categories. GAO states that “‘Conceptualizing a variable’ means identifying subjects, things, or events that vary and that will help us answer the question” (GAO, 1996). In other words, this part of the process helps to define what the researcher wants to assess. If the researcher can determine what data will help answer the research question, the variables have been conceptualized. For this study, person-related variables (like age, gender, race/ethnicity) and clothing-related variables (designer, colors, influences, motifs, and materials) were documented.

The second part of the variable definition process is specifying its categories. This “distinguishes one subject, thing, or event from others by putting them each and severally into a limited number of categories” (GAO, 1996). For example, for the materials variable, some of the categories included were silk, wool, feathers, leather, and more. See the Appendix for the coding sheet.

As many variables as possible were identified (i.e., coded) per visual cues and the coder’s best estimation. For example, colors were immediately evident. However, for the materials category, assumptions were made based on the formal occasion and traditional clothing construction, e.g., men’s tuxedos were coded as wool, unless it was obvious another material was used. An audit coder was utilized to ensure that the coding process stayed consistent and that inconsistencies were agreed upon. This was done through weekly checkpoints where progress was discussed, and if needed, the coding sheet was modified to better represent the data that was being collected (e.g., by adding new categories).

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. This applied to the person-related variables of age and race/ethnicity as well. This was accomplished via looking through social media posts by the attendees or their designers, reading articles about the attendees and their outfits, and watching videos and interviews of the attendees.

All analysis was completed manually. As the research continued, more codes became apparent in the data, and as a result, the coding sheet was modified, and some corrections and notes were made on already-completed coding sheets to ensure that each image was analyzed thoroughly. An iterative process like this is intended to help confirm that all images have been examined comprehensively and that no insights have been missed, to the best of the researcher's ability.

Once the data collection was completed, the researcher then examined all of the data and tallied up the results. Some categories were grouped together for ease of analysis. For example, over 50 attendees cited individual people as influences for their attire, so to simplify the process, all of these influences were grouped into a category called "Icons." From there, conclusions were drawn about the results.

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). The concept of "constantly comparing" data (in this case, images and the components within them), to previous data is what led to the most conclusive results.

## Findings

### Demographics

In total, 225 images were analyzed, depicting 249 people (see Table 1). To reiterate, gender was determined based on visual cues. Age and race/ethnicity were determined through Internet research; if none was available, visual cues were used. The Biracial/Multiracial category covers a variety of different iterations. For example, there were Afro-Latino attendees, attendees that were both White and Asian, and other combinations of races/ethnicities. This demographic data in and of itself yields some interesting insights. First, women outnumbered men in around a 2:1 ratio. This suggests that possibly more women were on the guest list. Second, over two-thirds of the attendees (67%) were between the ages of 20-39. Lastly, 44.6% of the attendees were white but 28.5% were Black or African American (32.1%).

Table 1: Demographic Data (N=249)

	N (%)
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	82 (32.9%)
Female	167 (67.1%)
<b>Age</b>	
10-19	10 (4.0%)
20-29	85 (34.1%)
30-39	82 (32.9%)
40-49	45 (18.1%)
50-59	13 (5.2%)
60-69	9 (3.6%)
70+	5 (2.0%)
<b>Race/Ethnicity:</b>	
Black	71 (28.5%)
White	111 (44.6%)
Asian	11 (4.4%)
Native American	1 (0.4%)
Hispanic/Latino	16 (6.4%)
Biracial/Multiracial	39 (15.7%)

### Designers/Designer Brands

The results about designers and designer brands worn offer new insights. There was a total of 72 different brands worn. This figure includes some brand collaborations. For example, two attendees wore Stella McCartney x Adidas, and one attendee wore Stella McCartney, yet they were all counted as wearing Stella McCartney. Similarly, six attendees wore Prada, and one attendee wore Prada x Homer. All were coded as wearing Prada. Different brands were counted separately even if they were led by the same designer (e.g., Altuzarra and Altu). Of the 72 brands represented at the Met Gala, 46 (63.9%) of them were American. However, only 54.6% of the attendees wore American brands.

Twenty-seven people, of many races and ethnicities, wore clothing created by Black/African American designers. They ranged from people like Pyer Moss wearing one of his own creations to Jordan Alexander and Eva Chen wearing Christopher John Rogers. The most

popular brand worn was Thom Brown (n=12), which is an American brand. Valentino and Versace, both led by Italians, each accounted for 11 outfits on the red carpet.

### **Variations on a Theme**

This last section covers the findings from the clothing-related variables (color, influences, motifs, and materials). It will be explored how the attendees leveraged (or did not leverage) these variables to align with the *In America* theme.

A discovery that was apparent at the beginning of the data analysis phase of the research was the overwhelming amount of attendees who wore classic red-carpet fabrics and fibers. About half of the attendees, mainly women, (n=124) wore silk and 61 attendees, mainly men wore wool (these categories are not mutually exclusive).

Additionally, 48 attendees exhibited floral motifs. Of those, only a few individuals (n=3) wore florals in ways that specifically addressed the theme. For example, Lili Reinhart wore a dress adorned with the 50 state flowers (Vogue, 2021c) and Karlie Kloss wore a dress inspired by the U.S. national flower, a rose (Vogue, 2021b). 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).

Many attendees wore overt symbols of the United States. Seventy-six attendees wore the colors of the American flag, red, white, and blue, either individually or together. For example, Ella Emhoff, Julia Garner, and Nia Dennis each wore solid-colored red, white, and blue outfits, respectively. The designer of all of their outfits, Stella McCartney, posted a picture on Instagram of the three women standing together at the Met Gala, showcasing the three colors (McCartney, 2021). Other people wore red, white, and blue together. For example, Debbie Harry wore a blue

denim jacket, a red and white hoop skirt, and a pin in the shape of a star, and Megan Rapinoe wore a red pantsuit with a blue button-up shirt, adorned with silvery-white sequined stars.

This leads to a review of the prevalence of star motifs. Fifteen attendees had star motifs somewhere on their outfit (including Debbie Harry and Megan Rapinoe). For example, Imaan Hammam's dress was covered in stars; a post on the Versace brand's Instagram explicitly said that the inspiration for the dress was the American flag (Versace, 2021b). Russell Westbrook also incorporated stars into his ensemble, but in a more unconventional way. His hair was colored blue with white star accents, also a nod to the American flag. The references to the American flag connect back to Maxwell's point about banal nationalism, except that in the case of the Met Gala, the attendees deliberately chose to honor the flag.

Moreover, five individuals were influenced by the Statue of Liberty. Included in that list is Hamish Bowles, who wore a black headband that is reminiscent of the Statue of Liberty's crown and Taylor Hill, whose dress is in the same shade as the Statue (Versace, 2021d). Additionally, when she was interviewed by *Vogue*, Amanda Gorman said that she "wanted to reimagine the Statue of Liberty" with her look (Andrews), and her book-shaped purse even had the words "Give Us Your Tired" on the front of it, which is the poem on the Statue of Liberty.

Denim and traditional denim styling were also seen on attendees (n=9). This distinction must be made because there were some individuals that were inspired by denim but did not actually wear it. For instance, Michaela Coel wore a cobalt blue sequined jumpsuit, but when she was interviewed by Keke Palmer on the red carpet, she said that the blue of her outfit was "kind of like an hallmark to denim" (Vogue, 2021g). Other attendees like Lupita Nyong'o, Ben Platt, and CL wore denim.

Many attendees were inspired by icons, or “American popular cultural figures, whose life stories, accomplishments, and difficulties often mirror those of the nation they represent” (Cottrell, 2010, p. ix). 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, Marilyn Monroe was the motivation for five attendees. This list includes Billie Eilish and Madison Beer. Eilish took general inspiration from Marilyn Monroe, whereas Beer referenced the orange dress Marilyn Monroe wore in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Vogue, 2021d). Five attendees’ outfits channeled Audrey Hepburn, including Kendall Jenner and Dixie D’Amelio. Other icons include Josephine Baker, Rita Hayworth, and Diana Ross, to name a few. Not all icons were human. Some were fictional characters, one in particular was a toy. Five attendees were influenced by the Barbie doll, like Carey Mulligan whose ensemble was called “Revenge Barbie” (Okwodu, 2021a) and Jackie Aina, who said that her look was a combination of Black Barbie and Pamela Anderson (Tietjen, 2021).

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 conveyed the “Old Hollywood” period, a total that increases to 30 when Old Hollywood-era icons are taken into account. *Old Hollywood* 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). Other attendees were inspired by a general sense of *vintage* style, like Jordan Alexander who wore a dress with a bustier-style top. There were also many attendees inspired by specific decades. For example, the 1970s were a popular decade to emulate. Attendees like Shawn Mendes and Camila Cabello

were influenced by Studio 54, the 1970s-era New York nightclub (Allaire, 2021), and Zoey Deutch who embodied the “American disco movement of the 1970s” (Versace, 2021e).

While not necessarily related to time periods some people incorporated types of media, like movies and books into their outfits. For instance, Megan Fox’s dress was inspired by a dress worn in the *Dracula* movie (Vogue, 2021e). The effect Fox was going for may not have been “Old Hollywood,” but it certainly was still “Hollywood.”

The data also showed that some attendees (n=11) 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, who requested that her hair be done to mimic a durag (“Amandla Stenberg”, 2021); and Saweetie, whose dress featured the Black American Heritage and Filipino flags. Furthermore, at least nine attendees specifically honored their African American/Black roots. These influences ranged from overt references, like Jeremy Pope’s slavery and cotton inspired outfit, to covert references, such as the jewelry that Kiki Layne wore as part of the #BlackisBrilliant campaign with Radvocacy and DeBeers Group (Layne, 2021). Others chose to support Black or African American designers, like Lewis Hamilton who wore Kenneth Nicholson and Keke Palmer who wore Sergio Hudson.

Activism, politics, and current events were also present in the attire of the attendees. These messages took many forms. One major subset of this category was LGBTQ+ messaging (n=8). The designer behind Jordan Roth’s extravagant coat, Michael Sylvan Robinson, said that queer activism from the 1990s is a constant influence in his work, and Roth’s outfit is no different (Borrelli-Persson, 2021). Lil Nas X also incorporated LGBTQ+ messaging in his three-part outfit, which was described as an “LGBTQ+ American fairytale” (Versace, 2021c). The

three-part outfit tells a narrative beginning with hiding one's identity, then moving into protecting oneself from injustice, and finally revealing one's authentic identity (Versace, 2021c).

Other types of activism were present on the red carpet, like feminist messaging showcased by Cara Delevingne and Carolyn B. Maloney. Delevingne wore a bulletproof vest-inspired top with the words "Peg the Patriarchy" written in red across the chest. Maloney wore a dress with sashes with the words "Equal Rights for Women" written on them. The words "ERA" and "ERA YES" were also written on the front of her dress and clutch, respectively, in support of the Equal Rights Amendment. Chamlee (2021) says that the colors of the sashes (purple, white, and gold) were the colors of the suffragette movement. Besides feminism, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez also integrated a bold message into her outfit. Her white dress had the words "Tax the Rich" in red on the back, clearly calling on her colleagues in Congress to work to reform the tax policies.

Interestingly, 18 people wore the color pink. For instance, Kate Hudson's entire outfit was pink, as was Nicola Peltz's, and Serena Williams wore a large pink feathered cape over her bodysuit. There were also 13 instances of women wearing elements of men's formal wear (suits or suit separates), and one instance of a woman wearing men's underwear; CL wore white briefs under a denim overcoat that actually appeared to be in the style of a Korean hanbok (Kim, 2021). There were also five men that wore traditional womenswear (dresses and skirts). Included in this list are Pete Davidson and Kenneth Nicholson.

Of course, men wore men's formal wear, as well. For the purposes of this research, men's formal wear is defined as tuxedos or suits (or variations on those types of outfits). A suit is defined by the Merriam-Webster (n.d.) dictionary as "an ensemble of two or more usually matching outer garments (such as a jacket, vest, and trousers)" and tuxedo is defined by the

Merriam-Webster (n.d.) dictionary as “a semiformal evening suit for men”. Suits and tuxedos are not the same thing, but they were grouped into the category of men’s formal wear. There were 63 occurrences of men wearing suits or tuxedos. These outfits were ranked on a continuum of one to five, one being a traditional tuxedo, and five being a radical interpretation of men’s formal wear. There were only 10 people who wore traditional tuxedos (ranking a one), most notably being Channing Tatum. Tuxedos with white dinner jackets (worn by people like Conner Ives) were included in that category. This is reminiscent of a style worn by Humphrey Bogart, who played Rick Blaine in *Casablanca*, which was touched upon earlier when antiheroes were brought up. People like Tom Ford, who wore a tuxedo but with a velvet jacket instead of wool, ranked a two; there were 17 people who ranked a two in total. Others decided to play with men’s formal wear a little bit more, like LaQuan Smith, who wore a brown moire dinner jacket, and therefore ranked a three; there were 14 people who ranked a three. David Byrne, who wore a suit made out of denim, and eight other people all ranked a four. Finally, there were 10 people, like Timothée Chalamet, who wore a cropped white tuxedo jacket with popped black lapels, paired with sweatpants and Converse sneakers, which embodied the “radical” nature of the other end of the spectrum, and ranked a five.

Chalamet was not the only person who wore sneakers to the Met. In total, 11 people wore sneakers, including Justin Bieber (who ranked a 3 on the tuxedo continuum) and Dominic Cooper (who ranked a 4), who both wore sneakers with their variations on formal wear. Along the same lines, five people were inspired by general sports/activewear. Activewear is defined by the Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) as “clothes that are worn for sports or other physical activities.” Additionally, seven people were inspired by specific sports or sporting events. Ella Emhoff and Nia Dennis, again, took general inspiration from sports, and in fact, their outfits designed by

Stella McCartney were actually collaborations with Adidas (Stella McCartney, 2021). Erykah Badu wore an outfit inspired by multiple sports: snow sports, fencing, football, and running and to design it, the designer, Thom Browne “pulled on his experiences as an athlete, as well as America’s love affair with sports” (Spellings, 2021a). In addition, Tyler Mitchell wore a suit that was designed to look like a baseball uniform. Interestingly, Samuel (2017) said that the American Way could even be applied to baseball. Mitchell’s look was more obviously inspired by sports, whereas the sports references in Badu’s outfit was a little more discreet. Sunisa Lee took inspiration from sports, as well, but her dress was influenced by the Olympics, which was reflected in the gold color of her two-piece dress. Closely aligned with the sports categories is the category of streetwear, which informed the appearance of three people. Streetwear is defined as “casual clothing of a style worn especially by members of various urban youth subcultures” (Oxford Languages, n.d.). For the purposes of this research, streetwear and general sports/activewear are two different categories, but they do allow for overlap because streetwear can include sweatpants and similar types of clothes, which can also be worn as activewear.

Many attendees had logos on their outfits. At least 13 people had logos somewhere on their Met Gala outfits. This ranged from a simple Prada logo at the bustline of Rita Ora’s dress to the Chanel brand being repeating motif on Emma Raducanu’s skirt, complete with a corresponding motif of Chanel No. 5 perfume bottles. Another example of branding that was evident on the red carpet was Simone Biles’s outfit. Under her crystallized dress, Biles wore a black skintight jumpsuit that was covered in a repeating motif of Athleta’s logo (Spellings, 2021b). Her outfit was a collaboration between Area and Athleta, and the brand that sponsors Biles (Spellings, 2021b). Spellings says that the catsuit is “decorated to look like a starry night sky,” and for those that are not familiar with Athleta’s logo, they might miss this extra layer of

meaning (Spellings, 2021b). The presence of logos in the red-carpet attire is directly related to the concepts of materialism and consumption. It has already been stated that Crunden (1994) and Cottrell (2010) both support how consumption is a driving force in American culture. The presence of high-fashion house logos indicate that the attendees have attained a certain status and are worthy of wearing those labels. Du Bois (1955) described this as evidence that the system “works.”

Revisiting the previous conversation on designers, designers even served as an inspiration for some of the attire. Several attendees said that the designers of their outfits were influenced by pieces from their own previous collections or even by the work of other designers. There were at least 15 instances of these ideas displayed in the Met Gala red-carpet attire. For example, Tory Burch designed all five of the Met Gala attendees’ outfits to honor the designs of Claire McCardell (Tory Burch, 2021), who is considered the “mother of American Sportswear.” (Tory Burch, 2021). Furthermore, Ciara’s football-inspired dress was similar to a collection of jersey dresses that Geoffrey Beene famously created in the 1960s (“Dress: fall/winter 1967–68”: Vogue, 2021a). See below for images of Ciara’s dress and a Geoffrey Beene dress. Likewise, Donatella Versace’s dress was actually inspired by a similar Versace dress that she wore in 1992 (Versace, 2021a).

The findings presented here only represent some of the approaches that attendees took with their red-carpet attire. Some “honorable mentions” include outfits that were inspired by artwork, like Dan Levy’s outfit; the Wild West, like Jennifer Lopez’s entire ensemble (who was previously identified by Cottrell (2010) as an “American Dreamer”); and the American dream, like Eva Chen’s colorful dress (Chen, 2021).

## Discussion

### Implications of Findings

This study has many implications. For example, the findings of this research suggest that traditional gender roles are in flux. We saw examples of shifting gender roles in this study, with some men wearing skirts and dresses and some women wearing suits or suit separates. These results imply that society is beginning to undergo a transformation, with androgyny starting to become more accepted. However, pink was a prevalent color of choice. Pink is typically a color associated with girls and women; LoBue & DeLoache even say “that both adults and young children are aware that pink is for girls and blue is for boys” (LoBue & DeLoache, 2011). This implies that despite the progress made in this area, some gender norms are still holding on and are still accepted by society. Despite the relaxation of traditional gender roles, there is still much work to be done until society no longer places expectations on people merely based on gender.

However, what Du Bois (1955) calls the “cult of youthfulness” (1955, p. 1234), is very much still in place, with 67% of attendees being between 20-39. This is not surprising considering that many of the attendees were Hollywood celebrities, and Hollywood typically emphasizes and favor youth (Addison, 2006)

There were also 14 Black and African American designers represented on the red carpet of the Met Gala, worn by 27 people. These 14 brands they accounted for 19.4% of the 72 brands present. However, these brands were only worn by 10.8% of the attendees). This implies that Black and African American designers are gaining more access to resources to build their brands. While they may not be large fashion houses yet, this is a step in the right direction. As a result, the fashion industry is starting to become more diversified. If these trends are to continue, more voices will be heard and there will be more opportunity for minority designers to make

their names known. Hopefully, these shifts in the industry will continue, and the future of the fashion industry will be much more representative than it was in the past.

Third, this study implies that assimilation is no longer as strong of a theme in American culture. As previously mentioned, assimilation is at the heart of the melting pot analogy (Peach, year). However, the results display many Met Gala attendees honoring their heritage in one way or another. This is much more reminiscent of the mosaic analogy that promotes multiculturalism instead of assimilation (Peach, 2005). Accordingly, the United States may be progressing from a melting pot or assimilation-based culture to a mosaic or multiculturalism-based culture.

The number of logos on the red carpet support the work of Cottrell (2010), Crunden (1994), Du Bois (1955), and Samuel (2017), who all pointed to capitalism, consumerism, materialism, and consumption as being integral aspects of the American experience. Although the works of these scholars span over 60 years, together they show that these elements have long been essential to American culture.

Interestingly, another implication of this study revolves around the fact that many men still wore tuxedos or suits to the Met Gala. The Met Gala provides a space where invited guests are welcome to “make a statement” and have more creative freedom with their red-carpet wear. Despite this defining feature of the Met Gala, for one reason or another, people chose to not act on that opportunity. It was not only apparent with men, either. While not discussed in the findings, there were instances where women did not appear to dress “on theme,” but rather just wear a formal dress. This may support Du Bois’s (1955) claim that conformity is a focal value of American culture and that there is a “strain for consistency” (p. 1236). This even provides an opportunity for future research to learn why the attendees made the decisions that they did.

Finally, the results of this study support the idea that “America” does not have a single definition. Different people view America through their own lenses, lived experiences, hopes and dreams, values, and everything else that comprises their identity. America cannot be defined by one blanket statement that fits everyone’s expectations and assumptions. This is the ultimate implication of this study.

### **Areas for Future Possible Research**

*In America: A Lexicon of Fashion* is actually the first of a two-part exhibition (McDermott, 2022). The second exhibit, *In America: An Anthology of Fashion*, will debut in May 2022 and “is built around the tenets of American style, and celebrates unsung heroes of US design” (McDermott, 2022). This provides an additional opportunity to research the meanings of America and American culture. Researching the second event would offer more data points and a new set of data to analyze both on its own and in comparison to the findings presented here.

Similarly, the pieces included in the actual *In America: A Lexicon of Fashion* exhibit are another set of data that could be analyzed to further develop the definitions of “America.” Learning about why the pieces were chosen for the exhibit would prove insightful, as well and would help define the Costume Institute’s meaning of “America.” The results of this potential study could be compared to the analysis of the 2021 Met Gala to see how the attendees interpreted the theme.

### **Limitations**

There are two main limitations of this analysis. When this study was initially proposed, the *Vogue* website was the only source for images of Met Gala attendees. Prior to the study

commencing, it was incorrectly assumed that *Vogue* catalogued all of the attendees. This was found to be untrue, and other sources like *Vanity Fair*, *W Magazine*, *GQ*, and social media profiles were used to supplement the *Vogue* database, which implies there is no guarantee that all attendees were analyzed in this study. No single source archived every attendee, and while steps were taken to ensure a comprehensive list, some people may have been unintentionally missed. Second, outfits were coded based on visual cues and additional Internet research to provide more context. There may have been other outfit influences that were not visually evident or found in subsequent research. Hence, the compiled list of influences may not be complete.

## Conclusion

In summation, the findings of this study offer an interesting perspective on how America is defined by a small subset of upper-class individuals. These results support the arguments that Hollywood is a vital part of American culture, and that America is home to people of many ethnic backgrounds. 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 implies 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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## Appendix

Number \_\_\_\_\_  
**Name of Attendee:** \_\_\_\_\_  
**Designer:** \_\_\_\_\_  
**Age:** \_\_\_\_\_  
**Gender:** \_\_\_\_\_  
**Race/Ethnicity** \_\_\_\_\_

What they are wearing \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

Color Red, white, blue (circle all that apply) Pink \_\_\_\_\_  
 Indigo \_\_\_\_\_  
 Army green/camouflage \_\_\_\_\_  
 Black & white (circle all that apply) \_\_\_\_\_  
 Other \_\_\_\_\_

Influences Postwar (circle all that apply) Old Hollywood General  
 Sports (which) Vintage other  
 The Wild West \_\_\_\_\_  
 Traditional Men's Wear (what kind) \_\_\_\_\_  
 Other \_\_\_\_\_  
 Unknown \_\_\_\_\_

Motifs Flowers \_\_\_\_\_ Stripes \_\_\_\_\_  
 Stars \_\_\_\_\_ Text \_\_\_\_\_  
 Patchwork \_\_\_\_\_ Logos \_\_\_\_\_  
 Flags \_\_\_\_\_  
 Other \_\_\_\_\_  
 Unknown \_\_\_\_\_  
 None \_\_\_\_\_

Materials Leather \_\_\_\_\_ Lace \_\_\_\_\_  
 Feathers \_\_\_\_\_ Sequins/beads \_\_\_\_\_  
 Denim \_\_\_\_\_  
 Silk \_\_\_\_\_  
 Wool \_\_\_\_\_  
 Other \_\_\_\_\_  
 Unknown \_\_\_\_\_

If text: \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

**Additional information learned through other sources:** \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_