WOMEN FOR OBAMA:
A METAPHOR CRITICISM OF POLITICAL FACEBOOK USE

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ABSTRACT

The political rhetoric of U.S. Presidential Elections has been studied for years, but not significantly through the lens of social media. While the statistical relevance of social media as a political communication tool is not yet widespread, the numbers have grown drastically since 2008. This increase in usage prompted the author to determine how rhetoric is most effectively communicated over social media to key audiences. This study is a metaphor criticism of the Women for Obama Facebook page as it appeared during the final 90 days prior to the 2012 U.S. Presidential Election. Four metaphors are used to describe the superior positioning of campaign rhetoric on the Women for Obama page to target female voters. The Genderlect theory of Deborah Tannen is used to substantiate the assertions of effectiveness made within the metaphors. Through these assertions, Women for Obama is shown as a prime example of how to successfully target female voters over social media.

*Keywords:* rhetoric, politics, social media, presidential elections, Facebook, metaphor, rhetorical analysis, Barack Obama, Women for Obama, Genderlect, Deborah Tannen
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION
- Importance of the Study .................................................. 1
- Statement of Purpose .................................................. 2
- Definitions of Terms Used ............................................. 2
- Organization of Remaining Chapters .............................. 4

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE
- Philosophical and Ethical Assumptions ............................ 5
- Theoretical Basis .......................................................... 5
- The Literature ............................................................ 6
- Research Question ........................................................ 13

## CHAPTER 3: SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY
- Scope of the Study ........................................................ 15
- Methodology .............................................................. 15
- Data Analysis ............................................................. 16

## CHAPTER 4: THE STUDY
- The Study ..................................................................... 18
- Discussion .................................................................. 31

## CHAPTER 5: SUMMARIES AND CONCLUSIONS
- Conclusions ................................................................. 33
- Limitations of the Study .............................................. 34
- Recommendations for Further Study .......................... 34

## REFERENCES .................................................................. 36
Chapter One: Introduction

**Importance of the Study.** In the 2012 U.S. Presidential Election, social media was consistently in the forefront of political discussion. In the peak of election season, Twitter hash tag trends were covered on television news during the debates, Mitt Romney and Barack Obama appealed for votes on Facebook, friends asked friends to vote for their candidate on social media, and YouTube videos packed with celebrity endorsements were shared all over the Internet. On November 6, 2012, incumbent Democratic President, Barack Obama, was re-elected President of the United States by a significant margin of 332 Electoral College votes over his Republican challenger, Former Massachusetts Governor, Mitt Romney’s 206 Electoral College votes. Obama’s victory was quickly attributed to significant support by women, African Americans, and Hispanic Americans as well as superior campaigning in swing states (Cohen, 2012; Dickerson, 2012; Pew, 2012a). What arose from this dominating victory was the question of what Obama’s team did to communicate his rhetoric so effectively. How can this be emulated in future campaigns to win more votes? One new communication trend that warrants further study in this discussion is that of social media. A curiosity in to the significance of social media as a political communication tool is what prompted the undertaking of this analysis.

The political rhetoric of presidential elections has been studied for years, but not significantly through the lens of social media as a communication medium. Various statistics exist on how much social media use occurred in the 2012 Presidential Election, but this review and subsequent study will focus on the campaign rhetoric presented on social media as a communication medium, specifically Facebook, to analyze how rhetoric was positioned to reach key audiences. It will review how the winning Barack Obama
campaign may have targeted women voters through its Facebook page *Women for Obama*. The method of metaphor criticism will be used to unearth the underlying rhetoric communicated on this Facebook page. The embedded metaphors will help reveal the strategy used by the Obama campaign team to reach his key audience of female voters. In order to analyze the effectiveness of Obama’s communication to females without the need for a different type of research method, the Genderlect theory of Deborah Tannen (1990) will be used to show how Obama’s rhetoric was effectively communicated to women on the Facebook page *Women for Obama*.

**Statement of Purpose.** This study will analyze how social media can facilitate effective communication of political rhetoric to key voting audiences.

**Definition of Key Terms.** In the study, a variety of key terms are used frequently that the reader should be familiar with in order to fully grasp the implications of the study. These terms are also explained in further detail, when necessary, within the text itself.

**Social Media.** Social media consists of a variety of social networks (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, MySpace, Google+) that provide opportunities for individuals to establish and maintain connections with friends, family, co-workers, acquaintances, or strangers online.

**Rhetoric.** In this study, the term rhetoric is used to describe how a speaker uses language to communicate effectively.

**Metaphor Criticism.** A metaphor criticism is a form of rhetorical analysis in which metaphors are used to show the significance of a particular curious artifact (Foss, 2009).
Genderlect Theory. Deborah Tannen’s Genderlect Theory (1990) is a series of strategies that men and women can use to communicate with one another more effectively. Since men and women have different communication goals, the method in which each communicates is also different. In communication, men attempt to show status and grandeur whereas women seek to establish connections and gain acceptance from their peers (Tannen, 1990).

U.S. Presidential Election. The Presidential Election this study is concerned with is the 2012 U.S. Presidential Election between the incumbent Democratic President, Barack Obama, and Republican challenger, Mitt Romney.

Facebook. Facebook is a popular social networking website (www.facebook.com) that is built on the premise of friendship and sharing. Users can have open access pages, or only allow friends to see their personal information. Many individuals and businesses use Facebook as a tool to promote their individuality or corporate identity.

Facebook Page. Both individuals and businesses can have Facebook pages. An individual page is built around friends whereas a business page is built around followers. The popularity of businesses and organizations can be judged based on how many Facebook followers they have.

Facebook Post. A Facebook post is a personalized message, created by the page owner, that is stamped on to a person or business’ Facebook page, and then automatically sent to the news feed of friends or followers so that they can read the message the next time they view Facebook.
Organization of Remaining Chapters. Chapter Two is a comprehensive literature review of political social media use. It also includes philosophical considerations and the theoretical basis of the study. Chapter Three discusses the scope and methodology of the study, which defines the process involved in performing a metaphor criticism. Chapter Four is the criticism itself, which reveals the four metaphors contained in the Women for Obama Facebook page with a subsequent discussion of the findings. Chapter Five shares conclusions, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future academic endeavors in this research area.
Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

Philosophical and Ethical Assumptions

This study is rooted in the rhetorical tradition of communication. One element of rhetoric is persuasion, and how a speaker influences his or her audience (Griffin, 2012). Persuasion has several ethical implications that are worthy of mention. Is the message truthful or misleading? Does the persuader have ethical intentions? Does the message hurt anyone? Who serves to benefit the most from the persuader’s success? Did the persuader take advantage of his or her friends to achieve success? As we discuss political social media use all of these issues are pertinent.

The role of friendship in persuasion is particularly relevant with Facebook use, since friendship is a cornerstone of the design of Facebook. Aristotle (n.d./2012) describes good friends as those who are: are there for you, morally sound, non-critical, and similarly interested. Aristotle (as cited in Garver, 1994) also believed that speakers who emulate the ideal friend are more inclined to have their rhetoric accepted as truth. This has relevance to friendship and page followings on Facebook because Facebook is built around the premise of friendship. A friendship of this type is ethically sound as long as both parties benefit from the friendship.

Theoretical Basis

**Genderlect communication styles.** The Genderlect theory of Deborah Tannen (Tannen, 1990) may help link how Obama’s campaign used Facebook to communicate rhetoric with women voters over social media. Facebook represents a perfect platform for women to make connections and friendships with others, including a feeling of personal
relationships with people they may have never even met, such as public figures.
Developing connections is an essential feature of successful communication with women (Tannen, 1990) and social media outlets such as Facebook help mimic these valuable connections. Tannen (1990) describes the communication style of women as constant “negotiations for closeness in which people try to seek and give confirmation and support” (p. 25). Through social media outlets like Facebook, women can follow their favorite public figures posts, make comments in return and even get responses back from questions they raise. Social media also enhances what Tannen (1990) describes as “rapport talk” (p. 77) where women work to increase the connection they have with others. Even when a person is not in a close group of friends, the casual closeness and conversational tone that can arise from social media emulates “rapport talk” (Tannen, 1990, p. 77) deepening a woman’s connection and trust in others. This style and nature of communication, when applied to the Facebook page Women for Obama, may help scholars answer questions regarding influence of women voters over social media.

The Literature

The rhetoric of Barack Obama. Barack Obama is an innovator in terms of keeping up with political communication trends. From his personalized social network in 2008, to his widespread social media use in 2012, Obama has attempted to reach each and every voter. This strategy would be less effective if he did not have the appropriate message and content to communicate to the voting public through various communication media. Obama has long been touted a successful and motivational public speaker who can captivate an audience. He first appeared on the national political radar thanks to his televised speech at the 2004 Democratic Convention, where he urged others
to hope and spoke with confidence that an administration under the Democratic nominee, Senator John Kerry (D-MA) would help give every American a shot at the American dream (NPR, 2004). Like most political discourse, Obama’s rhetoric has been praised and criticized. Jenkins and Cos (2010) describe Obama’s rhetoric as a “synthesis of a commonsense, moral voice with pragmatic rhetorical practice” (p. 200). Obama is successful with his rhetoric when he speaks a stylistically different message to each audience, but still delivers similar content (Isaksen, 2011). In doing this he shows he is fluent in “keenly negotiating oppositional tensions” (Isaksen, 2011, p. 468). Another feature of his successful discourse is when he “draws upon the two most important American secular political myths, American Exceptionalism and the American Dream, often weaving references to the two myth systems together” (Rowland, 2011, p. 704). Among his criticisms are attacks “for making complex arguments rather than connecting directly with the people” (Rowland, 2011, p. 704) and for speaking too eloquently without enough substance (Stuckey, 2010).

Communication scholars have studied the rhetoric of the United States Presidency for at least 25 years (Stuckey, 2010). In that time, the nature of Presidential discourse has transformed because of the emergence of communication technologies that make Presidential rhetoric more accessible to the average citizen on a daily basis (Stuckey, 2010). Social media is yet another communication tool to enhance the reach of the President’s rhetoric. Barack Obama has used the viral nature of social media to his advantage, both during his U.S. Presidential Campaigns and his presidency. How Obama’s rhetoric was communicated through social media in the 2012 election season is
an area worthy of further study, specifically in how his rhetoric targeted key demographic groups such as women.

**The significance of social media.** Social media today consists of a variety of networks (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, MySpace, Google+) that provide opportunities for individuals to establish and maintain connections with friends, family, co-workers, acquaintances, or strangers. Users have the ability to share unlimited information as well as observe the world around them. Many use social networks to expand their social reach or project their individuality on others. People have embraced social media outlets for the networks they create and the opportunities they afford. Rainie and Wellman (2012) attribute this modern shift in communication habits, in part, to abundant Internet and social media access. With greater access to social media, greater usage often follows. Today, 69 percent of online American adults use social networking sites, as well as 63 percent of online men and 75 percent of online women (Brenner, 2012), which is a significant portion of American society. In 2008, Facebook was one-tenth the size it was in 2012 (Goldman, 2012), an astounding difference. With the list of social networks consistently growing, people have a variety of choices for how they want to connect with others via social media, including if they want to engage in political dialogue with their representatives, candidates, or friends.

**Historical context of presidential election social media use.** The 2008 Presidential Election between Senator Barack Obama (D- IL) and Senator John McCain (R-AZ) was the first time social media was even in the discussion as a potential factor in election outcome. The Obama campaign is widely considered a pioneer of election social media success, along with Howard Dean, who used social media successfully to fundraise
during his 2004 primary campaign (Towner & Dulio, 2012). Obama had a much stronger social media presence than John McCain in the 2008 Presidential Election, with a larger following on every relevant platform. Obama even had a personalized social network (http://www.mybarackobama.com), where supporters could organize events and learn about volunteer opportunities. Obama also had roughly five million supporters on social networks, including approximately 2.5 million Facebook supporters and 115,000 Twitter followers, four and twenty-three times more, respectively, than McCain had. The number of Facebook followers is quite remarkable considering that, at the time, Facebook was one-tenth the size it was in 2012 (Goldman, 2012). The video sharing website YouTube also rose in popularity during the 2008 election. Viewers spent 14 million hours watching Obama YouTube videos; four times that of McCain’s viewership (Aaker & Chang, 2009).

In addition to increased use of the candidates’ own social media accounts in 2008, user-generated political social media use also rose. Political content was often posted on a website like Twitter and within minutes it was trending nationwide thanks to the links between users (Metzgar & Maruggi, 2009). User-generated groups, in support of or objection to, the candidates also became popular. Obama centered groups were more popular than McCain’s and also had a more positive tone (Woolley, Limperos, & Oliver, 2010) while McCain’s unofficial groups were “overwhelmingly negative” in their tone (Woolley et al. 2010, p. 647). Even though Obama’s groups were more positive, both candidates had false and defamatory comments posted about them in user-generated groups (Metzgar and Maruggi, 2009).

With Obama clearly having a stronger social media presence than McCain (Aaker & Chang, 2009), scholars Baumgartner & Morris (2010), Kushin & Yamamoto (2010),
and Zhang et al. (2010) began to question whether or not social media was relevant in different aspects of the modern political process. Op-ed columnists speculated Obama would win the election because of his superior use of technology for fundraising, organizing, and promoting his campaign (Cohen, 2008). Despite this presumed connection to election success, scholarly opinions (Baumgartner & Morris, 2010; Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010; Zhang et al. 2010) after the election asserted that social media does not yet play a significant role in the modern political process. In multiple academic studies, researchers (Baumgartner & Morris, 2010; Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010; Zhang et al. 2010) found no evidence that social media use can be attributed to a specific candidate earning more votes or increasing an individual’s likelihood to vote in general (Baumgartner & Morris, 2010; Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010; Zhang et al. 2010).

Baumgartner and Morris (2010) and Parmalee, Davies, and McMahan (2011) also found that social media users only sought information confirming their pre-existing point of view on social media.

Although scholars were unable to prove that social media was a factor in a candidate earning more votes, they were able to make other connections regarding the importance of social media in political communication. Several studies (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010; Zhang et al. 2010; Baum & Jamison, 2006) asserted that the conversational nature of social media made it an ideal medium for users to discuss issues and develop a stronger interest in politics. The conversational nature of social media for political use is important to this study because it serves as a starting point to which future political social media use success can be measured.
2012 election social media use. With such a significant portion of the electorate using social networking sites today, a campaign would be misguided to believe that social media does not play at least some role in a modern political campaign. The 2012 Obama and Romney Presidential campaigns established themselves early on a variety of social media platforms. The Obama campaign had the edge in: content volume, frequency, and the number of utilized outlets (Pew Research Center, 2012a). The Obama campaign was on nine different social networks in 2012, while the Romney campaign was on seven, but at least three of Romney’s were not started until late in the election season (Pew Research Center, 2012a). Obama also had more followers on every platform (Pew Research Center, 2012a).

The way in which voters used social media evolved over the course of the election. In early 2012, only 25 percent of social network users said they were very/somewhat likely to discuss a political issue with others, with Democrats being more likely than Republicans to do so (Pew Research Center, 2012b). 25 percent were more active about a political issue after reading about it on a social network, and 16 percent had changed a political view after reading about it on a social network (Pew Research Center, 2012b). As national interest in the election grew, so did political social media usage. Late in election season, 40 percent of voters had political videos recommended to them on social media (Pew Research Center, 2012d). By the end of the election, 22 percent of registered voters let other people know how they voted on a social networking site (Pew Research Center, 2012e) and 30 percent of registered voters said they were encouraged to vote for either Barack Obama or Mitt Romney via a social networking site (Pew Research Center, 2012e).
The Obama campaign spent significant time and assets developing a highly targeted and analytically supported campaign across all communication mediums, including social media. They invested in an analytics team five times the size of their 2008 analysis staff to evaluate data provided by donors, volunteers, and interested parties, and combine it with general voter registration information in key states to enhance campaign communication (Scherer, 2012). The Obama campaign used social networks to make personalized appeals to significant demographic segments of registered voters. Obama had 18 personalized groups, while the Romney campaign had only eight (Pew Research Center, 2012a). The Republican Party is aware of this technological discrepancy as a possible clue to Romney’s loss and is already regrouping. In December 2012, they had already held meetings to discuss the importance of improving future digital efforts in the 2016 campaign (Schultheis, 2012).

While the 2012 Presidential Election usage statistics show social media use has increased for political purposes, no overwhelming data exists to show that social media was influential in earning a vote for a particular candidate in this election. Continued analysis of social media use in the 2012 Presidential Election should be focused on what type of rhetoric is effective to reach key audiences. This bears the most pertinence to future elections.

Rationale

Social media has become increasingly relevant in American society over the last several years. The success of this communication medium is relevant to many disciplines including politics. While social media use has not been attributed to a candidate earning
more votes, it has been linked to sparking stronger interest in politics, and potentially creating a more informed and connected voting public.

This analysis will review how Barack Obama’s social media rhetoric presented Obama in order to better connect his message with key voters. The population selected for this analysis is women voters because in the 2012 election, Obama won 56 percent of women’s votes, the largest winning margin on record (Gallup, 2012). The analysis will use the Women for Obama Facebook page as a significant artifact. Facebook was selected as the sample social media site because it is the top social networking site, accounting for one in every ten visits to the Internet in the United States, with the average user spending 20 minutes on the site per visit (Experian Marketing Services, 2012). The artifact will be examined over the course of August 15, 2012 to November 7, 2012, 90 days prior to the election.

At this point, Obama’s success with women voters cannot be statistically attributed to social media use, although we can infer that since social media was a portion of Obama’s larger communication strategy that social media had some role, whether positive, negative, or neutral, in how Obama communicated his rhetoric to women. While the degree of influence cannot be quantifiably determined through a rhetorical analysis, we can look at how Obama’s rhetoric was positioned to successfully reach women on social media through the metaphor method of rhetorical criticism. This information will be valuable to scholars who may later be able to statistically tie social media’s significance to political elections and then need to know how to successfully do so.

**Research Question**
Based on this review of literature, the following research question is posed:

RQ1: How was the rhetoric of Barack Obama presented on the *Women for Obama* Facebook page to appeal to women voters during the U.S. 2012 Presidential Campaign?
Chapter Three: Scope and Methodology

Scope

This study will be a metaphor criticism of the Women for Obama Facebook page. Metaphor in this context is a “means for constituting reality” (Foss, 2009, p. 268). In the analysis, the Facebook page will be reviewed from August 15, 2012 to November 7, 2012 for examples of how the campaign used Facebook as a setting to communicate the reality of Barack Obama, the Presidential Candidate, to women voters. Deborah Tannen’s Genderlect Theory will be used to explain how within the metaphors, the content was positioned to reach women voters.

One Facebook page used by women voters was selected for analysis. The selected page is the female-focused, Women for Obama, Facebook page. Obama for America, the official campaign team of Barack Obama, managed this page during the election, not Barack Obama personally. His input into the actual submitted content of the pages is unknown, although Obama for America acted as his agent for his campaign under his namesake. The breadth of this analysis is moderate, considering the analysis time frame of August 15, 2012 to November 7, 2012 is 90 days prior to the 2012 U.S. Presidential Election and the pages were very active. To make the content manageable for this analysis, user comments will not be analyzed and other Facebook pages that could have also been used by women (i.e., Barack Obama, Latinos for Obama, Veterans for Obama, and African Americans for Obama) will not be included.

Methodology
Metaphor criticisms are a widely accepted method of communications research (Foss, 2009). To collect data for this analysis and present the best-suited metaphors that represent Barack Obama to women on the *Women for Obama* Facebook page, key points outlined by Foss (2009) to perform a metaphor criticism will be followed:

- Examining the artifact for a general sense of its dimensions and context (p. 272)
- Isolating the metaphors in the artifact (p. 272)
- Sorting the metaphors into groups according to a vehicle or tenor (p. 272)
- Discovering an explanation for the artifact (p. 272)

Each post on the *Women for Obama* page will be reviewed in its entirety, including: text, photos, and videos. Links to external websites that were included in posts will not be reviewed, with the exception of videos, due to some of the web links no longer being active in March 2013, the period in which this analysis was performed. After the content is reviewed, an explanation will emerge to explain how the “rhetor’s identity or actions are shaped by the metaphors selected” (Foss, 2009, p. 274).

**Data Analysis**

Data collected through a qualitative analysis of these artifacts will help determine an explanation for the artifact’s significance (Foss, 2009). Metaphors play an important role in “framing perceptions and thus action and argumentation” (Foss, 2009, p. 271). The end goal is to provide an argument for the relative significance of the artifact as a targeted political communication tool for campaign rhetoric. The information presented
on the *Women for Obama* Facebook page should provide adequate substance to perform this analysis.
Chapter Four: The Study

Metaphors “contain implicit assumptions, points of view, and evaluations. They organize attitudes toward whatever they describe and provide motives for acting in certain ways” (Foss, 2009, p. 269). The metaphors contained on the Facebook page Women for Obama, serve as a valuable medium to define Barack Obama’s overall communication strategy in the 2012 U.S. Presidential Election. The intent of Women for Obama is to showcase to women voters what Barack Obama could do for them as the next President. Women for Obama successfully did this through the use of four metaphors to describe Barack Obama as the ideal President for women. Through this metaphor criticism, the different representations of Barack Obama, the Presidential Candidate, will be revealed.

The Women for Obama Facebook page is indexed as a politician page on Facebook (http://www.facebook.com/WomenforObama) and is administered by the 2012 Obama for America campaign team. The page was used primarily during 2012 for campaigning purposes, although there have been several posts after the election, even in 2013. During the time period of August 15, 2012 through November 7, 2012, 47 total Facebook posts were made. The posts consisted of 41 posts containing images with accompanying text, five containing video clips with accompanying text, and one that was text only. Of those posts, 33 offered links to more information and 14 suggested sharing information on the page with friends. While the initial number of Facebook posts seems low for a 90-day time period, the reader should keep in mind that this is a secondary page to Obama’s primary Barack Obama Facebook page, which had a much higher volume of posts. For an analysis of this type, this secondary, more targeted page was more
appropriate to use to see how Obama specifically targeted women, as the Barack Obama page makes attempts to reach multiple audiences and would not give the same type of information about women as Women for Obama.

A vast majority of the 47 posts on the Women for Obama Facebook page represent four metaphors for Barack Obama, the presidential candidate. These metaphors portray Obama in a light appealing to women voters. The metaphors are Obama as: the ideal man, commander-in-chief extraordinaire, the icon, and the guardian of women’s rights. These posts were derived through Foss’ (2009) method of performing a metaphor criticism. After an initial coding, the metaphors were revealed to the author through common themes that appeared frequently within the artifact. The themes were then developed into metaphors that best fit the presumed intention of the content on the Women for Obama Facebook page. Some posts fell into multiple metaphors, while a select few into no metaphors at all. Of the posts that fell into no metaphors, most were focused on urging voters to vote on Election Day, or earlier if possible. When a post fell into multiple categories, a vote was counted in the category that it was most associated with. The content was represented on Women for Obama in the following proportions:

![Figure 1. Number of Posts by Metaphor](image.png)
The overwhelming majority of the data focused on Obama as a Guardian of Women’s Rights, with 49 percent of posts congruent with this metaphor. The remainder of this criticism will be structured from the metaphor Obama as the ideal man, followed by Obama as Commander-in-Chief extraordinaire and Obama as an Icon, and build to that of the most frequently-used metaphor, Obama as the Guardian of Women’s Rights.

Results of the Study

**Obama as the ideal man.** The first metaphor incorporated into the *Women for Obama* Facebook page is that of Barack Obama as the ideal man. While the primary role of Barack Obama, to the public, is President of the United States, to his family, he is a husband and father first. Content on the *Women for Obama* page directs its audience to view the President in a more human and personable role, as an ideal husband and father. In a series of photos, Obama is shown as the ideal husband. In *Figure 2*, he is portrayed showing love for his wife through hugs and a courtside kiss at a basketball game. At the basketball game he embraces his wife with his arm around her neck and holding her arm. Her face is not even visible. She also holds onto his arms adoringly. His daughter, Sasha, and Vice
President, Joe Biden, are next to the couple watching the kiss from the mega-sized viewing screen atop the stadium that it was broadcasted on. The caption on Women for Obama Facebook read, “For all you romantics out there- it’s a pretty cute story” (Women for Obama, 2012a). What the page did not reveal was that this was the second attempt at a successful kiss cam kiss and that the first lady had denied the first attempt (Roberts & Argestinger, 2012). Luckily, based on the content of this post, Facebook fans were none the wiser and view Obama as a loving, romantic husband whose sole focus is always his wife.

In Figure 3, which is another post, Obama is shown on a possible date night, laughing and having a witty conversation with his wife while eating sundaes. They stare adoringly at one another, while laughing and possibly accounting a funny thing that happened at work today.

The text that accompanied this photo read, “Last call! The President is sitting down with grassroots supporters for the final Dinner with Barack of this election. Enter to be one of them now” (Women for Obama, 2012b). What this text emphasizes is that if you won the contest, through a campaign donation, you would be transported into an intimate setting with
Barack and Michelle the perfect couple, not the President and First Lady. Together, the three of you would discuss your day, or other variations of small talk, which is effective in building camaraderie (Tannen, 1990). This post infers, that in all likelihood, you would leave dinner with two new best friends, Barack and Michelle. This visualization enhances the viewer’s sense of intimacy and connection with Obama the ideal man. This in itself is ideal for effective rapport talk with women (Tannen, 1990). In another photo, not pictured, he is shown as a carefree, funny husband, dancing, paying attention to, and giving public affection to his wife at an event. This reiterates how fun and normal these two individuals are as a couple, and as your friends. This openness into the President’s personal life gives the appearance to the viewer that President Obama’s date night is the same as another friend’s that also appears on your Facebook feed. This fictional intimacy enhances the connection that the user is meant to feel for Obama, the ideal man, and thus, Obama, the Presidential candidate.

Obama also shows himself as the ideal man by showing what a good father he is, regardless of how busy he is as the sitting U.S. President. He is shown often doing simple fatherly things with his adoring daughters. Figure 4, in particular, is a photo of his family moving in unison to watch something at a school they are visiting. The body language in this photo shows that Obama’s interest is in doing everything together as a family, which is contradictory to typical campaign photos of families where the family adoringly looks at the candidate as the sole center of attention in the family. (Tannen, 1990). The connection in this photo between the school setting and his family, gives the viewer the symbolic impression that he is involved in his children’s education, which is a very admirable trait. The text that accompanies the post reads, “Being married to Michelle,
and having these tall, beautiful, strong-willed girls in my house, never allows me to underestimate women.” –President Obama” (Women for Obama, 2012g). This makes Obama very relatable to women who seek strong, consistent fathers as partners in everyday life, as well as relatable to women who yearn for stronger father figures. The vision summarized by this metaphor is not only is Obama an effective President of the United States, but he also prioritizes the role loving husband and father to the women in his life. If he takes such good care of the women he loves most, he will also take care of all American women.

**Obama as commander-in-chief extraordinaire.** The second metaphor used in the Women for Obama Facebook page is Obama as a commander-in-chief extraordinaire. The incumbent President always has a perceptual advantage of looking more presidential, because no one has to imagine what they look like or would act like as President. Just being called Mr. President in the debates gives the incumbent an automatic level of authority over his opponent. Women for Obama reminded its users that Obama was a charismatic, strong, confident, and vividly successful President on an ongoing basis.
While the validity of Obama’s success as President is subject to political opinion, *Women for Obama* was clear in its motivations to shine Obama’s presidency in the best light possible.

*Figure 5*, in particular, shows both Obama and Vice President Joe Biden posing in the White House with their arms crossed, ready to defend the White House against intruders who stand in their way of reaching a second term. The symbolism behind the crossed arms, which implies they are unwelcoming, shows they are trying to be tough and play hardball with their opponents. The text that accompanies the post, “Share to say you’re on Team Obama-Biden” (Women for Obama, 2012d) would be a great way for them to add to their team of White House defenders.

Another powerful image, *Figure 6*, asserts Obama as the Commander-in-Chief is one where Obama is only seen from behind from the ears up. The more predominant image is that of his boardroom chair that has an engraved gold plaque that reads “The
This plaque is an authoritative symbol of the power that Obama held as the incumbent President of the United States running for his second term. The accompanying quote that completes the graphic is one from Vice President Biden regarding the President; “he has courage in his soul, compassion in his heart, and steel in his spine.” This is a powerful quote that evokes only good images about what Obama does as President of the United States. It also foreshadows the strength he would shoulder as a leader in his second term. The assumed power of Obama as the current Commander-in-Chief simply radiates from this imagery.

Obama as a Commander-in-Chief extraordinaire initially appears to be the opposite of what Tannen (1990) emphasizes as successful female communication, and instead sounds like the status seeking communication that is more prevalent with men. There is no more powerful position in the United States than the President, so how can
the power factor be played up while appealing to women voters? In Figure 6, the boardroom chair image, the accompanying text reads, “share if you agree: President Obama won tonight’s debate because his leadership has made America stronger, safer, and more secure than we were four years ago” (Women for Obama, 2012h). Just including the word share, is alone enough to make this more female-targeted communication because sharing emphasizes community and intimacy. In addition to this connection, this post creates an imaginary short story of a safer America under Barack Obama’s leadership. After reading the lead in, the user automatically thinks about his or her life over the last four years, and how President Obama’s choices affected their own personal outcomes. The reader is also transported to the debate, where the stories told there would also resonate in their mind. Through these strategies, the male communicative goal of power and status has been transferred to a female audience who is now able to better relate to the concept and its implications.

**Obama as an icon.** The third metaphor engrained in the Women for Obama Facebook page is that of Obama as an icon. As the current President of the United States, Barack Obama is already a celebrity. He is known worldwide simply from holding that office. Icons hold significance in American culture as symbols of what we want most, and who we wish to be. Obama can accomplish this task on

![Figure 7. NYC with Barack, Beyoncé, and Jay-Z. This figure highlights Obama’s celebrity appeal as an icon.](image)
his own, but his powerful friends anchor the strength of his case. In one post, which includes Figure 7, users are enticed to donate to the campaign and be entered to not only meet Barack and Michelle Obama, but also meet rapper, Jay-Z, and megastar, Beyoncé Knowles in glamorous New York City. The font choices and black and white color scheme of the photo, give an aura of sophistication to the campaign and this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for a lucky donor. Obama’s use of celebrity endorsers appears on numerous occasions on the Facebook page. Celebrity endorsements are used so widely in American culture, it is not shocking that politics is following suit.

The other portrayal that appeared several times on Women for Obama was the image of crowds. Crowds are a strong reinforcement for Obama’s icon status because it shows people want to see him. Time after time crowds of adoring fans were pictured, often holding Obama or Women for Obama signs. These were not portrayed to look like small rallies. Instead they looked

![Team Obama Crowds](image)

*Figure 8. Team Obama Crowds. This figure illustrates the vast number of supporters Obama has and what each supporter is willing to do just to get a glimpse of him.*
more like a concert hall in the 1960’s waiting to hear *The Beatles* perform. They seemed energetic, loud, often screaming, and motivated to support Obama and simply get a glimpse of him. In *Figure 8*, Team Obama is shown with a huge crowd with supporters who are packed liked sardines waiting to hear Obama’s words. Their faces are not viewable towards the rear of the photo, emphasizing that even from far away, many people were desperate to see President Obama. The accompanying text read, “Team Obama had a big win in the second debate—and it's because the President has the right plan to move us forward” (Women for Obama, 2012f). This photo after a very important debate where Obama had a strong showing gives the impression to the page audience that everyone supports Obama and everyone agrees with his plans for a second term. Obviously, in the United States no political decision ever has 100-percent agreement, but these posts certainly make it look as if they do. Obama as an icon plays in to Tannen’s (1990) Genderlect principles on the basis of communal decision-making. If the community as a whole supports one candidate, it makes it easier for everyone to feel they have made the best choice.

*Obama as the guardian of women’s rights.* The final metaphor integrated in the *Women for Obama* page is that of Obama as the guardian of women’s rights. This is the most used metaphor on the *Women for Obama* page. In one striking image, high-heeled women are portrayed talking with girlfriends. The reference to the 1950s along with the style of clothing leads one to assume these are modern women imagining themselves transported to the 1950s at a time where women’s rights and roles were much different. At first glance in the image alone, it looks as if these are women in the 1950s talking. The significance of this is that in the 1950s, the birth control pill emerged and gave women a
newfound independence and sense of control over their bodies that they thought was otherwise unattainable due to extensive married years of fertility. It is effective in reaching women voters because of the concept Tannen (1990) describes as troubles-talk. Through communal bonding over troubled times, women are able to unite with one another and understand each other’s feelings. This post is an example of this type of bonding and also emphasizes subliminally that a vote for Obama is a vote to strengthen women’s rights. No woman wants to go back to a time where her rights did not matter.

Within the same metaphor, there is another series of posts that portray Romney as an inept villain, without exactly saying so. Figure 10 was introduced with the text, “keep this in mind while you’re watching Mitt Romney in the debate tonight” (Women for Obama, 2012e). This method of framing the opposition fits in with Tannen’s (1990) explanation of women and conflict. Tannen (1990) believes women avoid conflict at all costs because it is a threat to connection. Even animosity towards someone with opposing viewpoints, is not ideal. A way to avoid conflict is to frame critical remarks as “I think you should know” (Tannen, 1990, p. 150) which takes
away the direct conflict from the situation. When information is shared with friends in a communal setting, it emphasizes that the only reason conflict is necessary is because the personal creating the conflict cares deeply about community. The Obama campaign used this gentle attacking method to get out information about Romney’s controversial opinions and remarks, without bluntly saying how horrible they believed him to be.

In *Figure 11*, the representation continues, but this time in a more emotional, connective manner. The symbol of hands over hearts was repeated often throughout the artifact. Sometimes the women were celebrities; other times they were everyday, unrecognizable women. The combination of these two types of posts, all with women holding hands over hearts elaborates on the need for connection with others. This photo in particular accompanied the text, “Cast your vote for women’s rights. The first step is registering: http://ofa.bo/KJK9XX Natalie Portman supports President
Obama because she believes in women's rights for all” (Women for Obama, 2012c). The repetition of the hands-over-the-heart imagery symbolizes the story of each woman, which lies in her heart. Each woman must follow her heart to stand up for women’s rights. The notion that each woman has a story in her heart, once again emphasizes the ties of a community of women, uniting through personal experiences (Tannen, 1990).

One of the strongest pieces to summarize Obama’s position as a guardian of women’s rights is the Women's Voices video (BarackObamadotcom, 2012), which is an embedded YouTube link on the Women for Obama page. This short video uses several female celebrity endorsers to tell stories about why they support the President. This is all done in a very informal, personal manner. It emphasizes that a vote for Obama is a vote for women’s rights. This message, combined with the telling of it in a storytelling format is very conducive to forming connections, community, and rapport-talk that Tannen (1990) so frequently describes.

Discussion

The rhetoric of Barack Obama was presented strategically on the Women for Obama Facebook page through four metaphors to showcase all of Obama’s strongest features to women voters. Obama as the ideal man, commander-in-chief extraordinaire, the icon, and the guardian of women’s rights are all metaphors that help women make connections with Obama as their potential President. The communicated rhetoric within these metaphors was more likely to be accepted on Facebook as a whole, due to the conversational nature of social media use, which gives the feeling of a personal connection that women thrive on (Tannen, 1990).
Earlier in the review, it was mentioned that social media has not been shown to increase votes for a candidate. Despite this, the potential of Facebook as a political communication tool should not be ignored. Future political social media use should focus not on changing or earning votes through social media, such as Facebook, but building off of existing supporters networks to create a more enthusiastic base. This is particularly successful with women voters who are especially involved with social media because of the close friendships and connections it encourages. If women continue to be a driving force in electing the next President of the United States, social media could prove to be an even stronger persuasive tool to women in the 2016 campaign season.
Chapter Five: Conclusions

The results of this analysis suggest that it is possible to use Facebook to successfully target specific voters, such as women, through targeted campaign rhetoric grounded in interpersonal communication theory. The rhetoric of Barack Obama, portrayed through four metaphors, enabled the success of *Women for Obama* as a targeted communication vehicle to energize Barack Obama’s female supporters. The metaphors embedded in *Women for Obama* establish Barack Obama in a context desirable to women voters who are open to Barack Obama as a Presidential option and seek information about him on the female-focused Facebook page, *Women for Obama*. The metaphorical representations of Obama as: the ideal man, commander-in-chief extraordinaire, the icon, and the guardian of women’s rights, are designed to showcase Obama in the best possible light. Deborah Tannen’s Genderlect theory (1990) was used throughout the criticism to show how the communication between friends nurtures human connection and helps messages gain acceptance. Facebook is an ideal medium for this because it is built around connections and friendship. Aristotle (as cited in Garver, 1994) also believed that friends could influence friends more than a stranger. The connection with Facebook and the influence women place on friendship should not be ignored, as it may turn out to be a valuable tool for political communication in 2016.

In the literature review, several studies were discussed (Baum & Jamison, 2006; Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010; Zhang et al. 2010) that asserted the conversational nature of social media made it an ideal medium for users to discuss issues and develop a stronger interest in politics. This study affirms this conclusion. The rhetoric shared on *Women for Obama* may have helped create a more enthusiastic Obama base. When an enthused
supporter goes about her daily life, she may be more inclined to discuss election politics with her friends and possibly help gain votes for Obama outside of the realm of social media. A stronger female voting base could also volunteer time for the campaign, which could hypothetically result in more votes.

Overall, *Women for Obama* was a strong example of how campaigns can specifically target key voting audiences on social media if they align their message in a way that is more amiable to their target audience. Facebook should continue to be utilized as an effective campaign tool to reach female audiences, given the nature of women’s communication and design of Facebook. The 2012 Obama campaign was run flawlessly in this regard and the rhetoric used should be a model for effective positioning for future elections.

**Limitations of the Study.** An analysis of this type is subjective, considering the assertions made are based on the author’s personal interpretations of the artifact. Multiple coders were not used to confirm the data interpretations. While the Genderlect theory of Deborah Tannen (1990) helps validate to the assumptions made in this study, application of this theory cannot be a complete replacement for multiple coders or statistical validation of the findings through research methods other than a rhetorical criticism.

In addition, this type of analysis should be completed during and immediately following an election cycle so that all of the links to the campaign websites are still active. This limitation was an unfortunate side effect of performing the analysis several months after the election ended. The consideration of content on inactive links may have directed the author to make different assertions about the artifact.
**Recommendations for Further Study.** Due to the subjective nature of the analysis, additional research should be completed using the same method, to either confirm or disprove the author’s coding process and assignment of metaphors. A duplication of this study would increase the validity of the findings as well as the acceptance of Facebook as an influential communication medium for targeted political rhetoric. Once the assertions made in this study are confirmed qualitatively through multiple coders, further quantitative analysis should analyze what actions happen next after a user reads targeted political information on Facebook, to better judge the effect of Facebook on stimulating future political involvement.

The implications of the results on future elections will need to be judged based on the degree in which social media usage in general grows as the next U.S. Presidential Election draws nearer. If social media usage declines significantly between 2013 and 2016, the utility of Facebook as a political tool would most likely also decline. If Facebook and other social media sites continue to grow leading up to 2016 then it is more likely that these results will have increasing importance for future campaigns as they attempt to build influential social media sites to target key voters.
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WOMEN FOR OBAMA


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