

Vogue's Kamala Harris cover photos spark controversy: 'Washed out mess'
First woman of color elected vice-president is February cover star but users complain about lighting - Mon 11 Jan 2021

1. What did you think of the article?
2. How easy was it to understand the main ideas?
3. What do you think of the photographs released by Vogue on Twitter?
4. How do you think they compare with Harris' skin tone?
5. Do you think it is the backdrop or lighting that might have affected the colour of her skin? Or do you think they have "whitened" her skin tone?
6. Do you agree with one user that described it as a "washed out mess of a cover"?
7. What about another comment that it was "Like homework finished the morning it's due." What do you think?
8. If you could have photographed her how would you have done it?
9. Why do you think Vogue decided not to go with the choice of photograph that Harris wanted?
10. Which photograph do you think they will finally use when Vogue goes out in its print version?
11. Why do you think that Melania Trump was never photographed by Vogue?
12. Final thoughts.
13. Now let's check some of the vocabulary:

Vogue magazine became **embroiled** in a "whitewashing" controversy on Sunday when it tweeted photographs of its February cover star, Kamala Harris.

Two images of the US vice-president-elect were released. One, a full-length shot in front of what appeared to be a glossy pink silk drape, drew the **ire** of social media critics.

One user called it a "washed out mess of a cover".

"Kamala Harris is about as light skinned as women of color come and Vogue still fucked up her lighting," they wrote.

Others criticized Vogue's editor-in-chief.

"What a mess up," wrote the New York Times contributor Wajahat Ali. "Anna Wintour must really not have Black friends and colleagues. I'll shoot shots of VP Kamala Harris for free using my Samsung and I'm 100% confident it'll **turn out better** than this Vogue cover."

The August edition of US Vogue, featuring Simone Biles, was criticised for the bad lighting of Biles' skin tone. "I hate the toning, I hate how predictable they are ... and I super-hate that Vogue couldn't be **bothered** to hire a black photographer," tweeted Morrigan McCarthy, the national picture editor at the New York Times at the time.

The issue of lighting black skin properly in magazine editorials and on the screen has been an issue for years. In 2019 Melina Matsoukas, director of the film Queen & Slim, said:

“There’s a belief in the industry that black skin needs an incredible amount of light or a certain traditional way of lighting in order to be visible, and it’s just not true.”

The black cinematographer Bradford Young, who worked on the film *Selma*, told *Deadline*: “I’m never satisfied with the way I see my people photographed in movies. I think it comes from a [lack of consciousness](#) – if you grew up in a community where you don’t know black people, I wouldn’t suspect you would photograph them in a concerned way.”

Last year, Wintour apologized to staff members in a letter for “mistakes” in publishing photographs and articles seen as insensitive to minorities.

“Vogue has not found enough ways to elevate or give space to Black editors, writers, photographers, designers, and other creators,” Wintour wrote. “We have made mistakes too, publishing images or stories that have been hurtful or intolerant. I want to take full responsibility for those mistakes.”

Vogue denied to the *New York Post* it had lightened Harris’s skin after the shoot, but the assurance failed to [quell the wave](#) of disapproval.

“The pic itself isn’t terrible as a pic. It’s just far, far below the standards of Vogue. They didn’t put thought into it. Like homework finished the morning it’s due,” the LGBTQ activist Charlotte Clymer tweeted.

According to the *Post*, Harris and her team had control over her clothes, hair and makeup. She chose her own casual black jacket and pants and a pair of Converse Chuck Taylor boots for one photo, a powder blue Michael Kors pantsuit for the other. Each image was shot by Tyler Mitchell, who was 23 when he [came to prominence](#) photographing Beyoncé for *Vogue* in 2018. Mitchell has only posted one image – the Michael Kors one – on to his official Instagram account.

The *Hollywood Reporter* has said Harris’s team were “[blindsided](#)” that her choice of cover (the one featuring the Michael Kors pantsuit) was not the one the publication decided to go with. “Harris’s team was unaware that the cover photo had been switched until images [leaked](#) late Saturday, according to a person involved in the negotiations over how Harris would be featured on the cover,” says the article. “The person with knowledge of the negotiations said Harris’s team has expressed to *Vogue* its disappointment over the magazine’s decision.”

Vogue has not confirmed which of the two photographs it will use for its print cover, or if it will publish both but in a statement, a Vogue spokesperson told the *Guardian*: “The team at Vogue loved the images Tyler Mitchell shot and felt the more informal image captured Vice President-elect Harris’s authentic, approachable nature -which we feel is one of the hallmarks of the Biden/Harris administration. To respond to the seriousness of this moment in history, and the role she has to play leading our country forward, we’re celebrating both images of her as covers digitally.”

Harris's appearance on the Vogue cover is likely to **attract the attention** of Donald Trump, who complained last month that his model wife, the first lady, Melania Trump, had not **graced** a single magazine cover in his four years in the White House, having been **snubbed** by "elitist snobs" in the fashion industry.

The previous first lady, Michelle Obama, featured in numerous fashion shoots, including the cover of Vogue in December 2016.