**Build-a-Barron: the weight of audience in the collective construction of political persona. A case study of fan audience perceptions of Barron Trump.**

**Abstract**

In an increasingly politically polarized world, the phenomenon of politiced fandom has garnered siginificant attention, as a growing form of audience interaction with politics in the current age of social media. However, audience involvement in the creation of the public persona boasted by politicians is curently under-explored. While research exists into both political branding as well as the intersection between entertainment and politics, with recent research avenues particularly focusing on politicized fandom as a prominent form of politics consumption; the inner workings of politicized fandom have been less explored so far, despite their relevance for the understanding of new forms of engagement of politics in the current Web 2.0 society. Borrowing from existing research into traditional media and sports fandom and its mechanisms, the inner workings of politicized fandom are approached through an exploration of the role audiences play in the construction of a public political persona through the analysis of the case of MAGA following of Barron Trump, youngest son of US president Donald Trump. Discussions on him and his future presidency pulled from the MAGA forum Patriots Win are analyzed through qualitative content analysis, with results showing politicized fandom audiences are highly able to autonomously build a political persona for a chosen subject, without relying on copious amounts of canon material and PR-produced political branding. These findings are relevant for the understanding of how particularly disruptive and unorthodox political leaders appear to be thriving in the age of social media.

**Introduction**

In an era where politics is reaching high levels of polarization (Yarchi et al., 2024), the words “Fandom” and “Fan” have found their place in mainstream media coverage of politics to refer to followers of particular politicians. Commonly associated in recent years with the so-called MAGA movement, or American president Donald Trump’s supporters (Miller, 2020); the concept of fandom can be traced back to the sports and theatre worlds before it made the jump to science fiction enthusiasts in the 60s, who appropriated it and developed the structures of what is now considered fandom (Coppa, 2001). Nowadays, academic literature on fandom understands it as regular and emotionally involved consumption of a fan object (Sandvoss, 2005), or a set of “cultural, social, and interpretive practices” (Jenkins, 1992, 292) through which fans actively produce content based on the cultural products they enjoy (Jenkins, 1992). Fans thus transform the experience of cultural consumption into a complex participatory culture with its own set of creative practices, such as fanfiction or fan art (Jenkins, 1992).

The concrete phenomenon of political fandom emerged from the inevitable merging of politics and entertainment in the age of TV and social media (Van Zoonen, 2005), which has allowed traditional entertainment celebrities to make the jump to politics – see the case of reality tv star Donald Trump - (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019), while also forcing traditional career politicians to get involved with the new communication channels to reach their audience (Van Zoonen, 2005). A symbiotic relationship has established between entertainment media and politics: offering a close look at the politician’s “real” persona rewards the media with soaring audience numbers, while politicians benefit from entertainment-based shows because they portray them in a much more positive light than traditional news programmes (Boukes & Boomgaarden, 2016). These entertainment-based shows have now become a routine part of campaign strategy for modern politicians (Loeb, 2017); and the same is true for social media: campaigning on it is now essential to connect with an audience that is no longer concentrated on the traditional broadcasting channels, and therefore no longer guaranteed to evenly receive all political messaging (Wilson, 2011).

Politicians have thus become “celebrity politicians” by virtue of media presence (Postman, 1985), and research has been able to draw clear parallels between the activities followers of these politicians engage in and fandom practices (Dean, 2017; Hernández-Santaolalla & Rubio-Hernández, 2017). Fans support their favorite politicians by partaking in hedonic forms of political community that differ from conventional political support (Sandvoss, 2013), and in the past decades political engagement has largely become heavily fan-based across the whole world (Lee & Moon, 2021). However, while existing literature has firmly established the existence of such political fandom, its inner workings remain less explored. Politician fans are confronted with an ample array of information coming from the politicians and their PR teams, the media, other public appearances, and fellow fan accounts (Winter, 2020; Wilson, 2011; Kohleimanen, 2017); which they must then aglutinate into a coherent and shared collective idea of the politician they wish to support. This article seeks to build understanding of the autonomy fans display in this process, as they are often faced with carefully curated images crafted by politicians and their teams through extensive PR. Therefore, the research question this article seeks to answer is: **How much agency do fan audiences have in the construction of a politician as a fan object?**

To answer this question, the case of Barron Trump is examined. Youngest son of US president Donald Trump, Barron was only ten when Trump served his first term in the White House in 2016 (Todisco, 2025), and was deliberately kept out of the spotlight to protect his privacy (Sangalang, 2025). However, he has developed a following despite his lack of public presence: in recent years part of the MAGA base has expressed a wish to see him run for office, with a poll ran by the Daily Mail and J.L. Partners amongst Republican voters in 2024 revealing that 40% “would consider amending the US Constitution to lower the presidential age requirement—currently 35—so Barron, who turned 18 in March (of 2024), could run for office sooner.” (Spiering, 2025). This willingness to see Barron become president as soon as possible is seemingly at odds with how little is known about him, and thus the main point of interest when responding to a need to isolate an audience-constructed political construction from the PR constructions that full-fledged career politicians work with. Barron Trump presents no such thing on account of having been a minor until 2024, and thus audience reactions to him are ideal to analyse to what extent political fan audiences can produce a collectively imagined fan persona for a politician.

Using content analysis, this research focuses on all threads on the self-described Trump-supporter forum Patriots Win that mention Barron Trump from its creation in 2021 to the week after Donald Trump’s 2025 investment ceremony. By examining the case of Barron Trump’s audience-backed presidential momentum through discussions fn him on Patriots Win, taking into account his lack of public presence or political career to date, this study concretelly addresses (i) what sources the audience pulls from when constructing the politician as a fan object, (ii) how the information available is reinterpreted into a desirable persona, and (iii) the ways in which fan discussions add to the construction.

**Real Person Fandom, Real Person Fiction (RPF)**

Jenkins’, in his 1992 seminal work on fandom, *Textual Poachers*; describes it as “a set of cultural, social, and interpretive practices” (Jenkins, 1992, 292) which allow fans to become active producers of content based on the cultural products they enjoy (Jenkins, 1992). Fans are readers who appropriate popular texts and reread – or “poach” from - them to serve different interests, transforming the experience of cultural consumption into a complex participatory culture (Jenkins, 1992). Traditional fandom borrows from mass-produced and mass-distributed entertainment, and reworks it into “an intensely pleasurable, intensely signifying popular culture that is both similar to, yet significantly different from, the culture of more ‘normal’ popular audiences” (Fiske, 1992, 30).

This is widely known as “transformative” or “participatory” fandom (Jenkins, 1992), which has its base in community and “fan talk”, discussion of the object of fandom between fans (Deller, 2014). The process makes them active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings (Jenkins, 1992), with fans being the only audience group that has developed the practice into a communal activity and art form, a social process that shapes and reinforces individual interpretations through discussions with other readers (Jenkin, 1992). This communal textual poaching manifests into fan productions, of which fanfiction is the most recognizable. Often abreviated as “fanfic”, fanfiction consists of fan-produced stories that draw from plotlines and characters from a source, “canon” text in order to alter the storyline to a more satisfactory iteration, or imagine altogether alternative universes inhabited by familiar characters (Thomas, 2011).

Fandom and fanfiction also expand beyond the characters of film and television media to encompass the real actors that embody them, constituting a sub-genre known as “Real Person Fiction” or “RPF” (Hagen, 2015; Winter, 2020). RPF operates in the same way as any other fanfiction: by drawing from an official narrative that constitutes the “canon” in order to fill gaps or reinterpret it (Hagen, 2015). However, for real life people the canon is not set in stone in the same way that fictional media is (Popova, 2017): instead of posessing a central unified text that serves as guide, it encompasses a broad spectrum of material such as interviews, documentaries and footage of any public appearance, on top of artistic output (Hagen, 2015). The introducion of the internet and social media has also led artists to regularly post about their daily life, freely offering up additional personal canon information for the fans (Hagen, 2015). RPF canon may also encompass gossip, rumours and accounts of fan encounters (Popova, 2017), and Van den Bulck & Claessens (2013) and Busse (2006) specify that RPF also entails a process of selection in which different pieces of information are accepted or discarded according to the fan’s ideal vision of the subject. This means that, though the fandom can share a core set of official events that are perceived as seminal canon, comprising the best known publicly available information, ultimately each individual fan chooses what parts of the available information to consider canon or not, rendering it much more nebulous.

Its lines blur further with the addition of so-called “fanon”, “a fictionalized version of events and characters that is broadly agreed upon by the fan community” built by fan authors acting as ethnographers and their resulting output (Popova, 2017, p.2.1). RPF authors draw from both the real life canon as well as other fan stories to construct their own idea of the real person, resulting in a fanon that is “more a reflection of the collective desires of the participants than of reality” (Hagen, 2015, 46), but often bears the same weight for the fandom as the actual canon (Hagen, 2015). Fan writers, in their productions, portray the person in an altered way that fits their own specifications for an interesting an desirable individual, making them more intelligent, vulnerable, or any other trait that they find attractive (Busse, 2006; Popova, 2017). The subject is often painted as favourably as possible, actively depicting them as capable of development and of overcoming any character flaws apparent in their known canon, even accusations of sexual assault and rape (Popova, 2017). This favourable fictional fan depiction interweaves with the public celebrity persona, and changes the perception of the celebrity and the real person behind them in the eyes of the fandom (Popova, 2017). Thus, RPF fully blurs the line between canon and fanon, and feeds from both to construct the image of the star in the fan’s mind.

**Political Fandom, Political RPF**

In the current “post-broadcast” society, the proliferation of media channels and devices has led audiences to be highly unpredicable, as they are no longer confined to a range of regulated choices administered by television broadcasting and mostly consumed at home (Wilson, 2011). This has had significant impact on politics and the distribution of political content, forcing a switch to social media, as universal attentiveness to political events and content can no longer be assumed (Wilson, 2011). On the other hand, those in the audience who are truly interested in politics have the chance to consume more political content than ever (Wilson, 2011). Those who are intensely involved with politics can treat them as if they’re not entirely real, but rather an object towards which they have developed “deep emotional investment” (Allen and Moon, 2023), in the same way that Sandvoss (2015) defines fandom as regular and emotionally involved consumption of a fan object. Dean (2017) points to the fact that politicised fandom following of politicians is now “an established feature of contemporary politics” (408-409), observing that politicians such as labour leader Jeremy Corbyn elicit bottom-up phenomena through which fans turn the politician into their fan object, much like a rockstar; in direct contrast to their own (Corbyn’s) unassuming persona (Dean, 2017). This discrepancy points to the fact that it is the fandom that builds an image of the politician as a fan object that does not necessarily correspond to their reality, and which exceeds their personal qualities (Dean, 2017). Likewise, we are now “in an era in which fandoms have increasingly overtly embraced reactionary politics and reactionary politics has increasingly taken fannish forms” (Stanfill, 2020, 123). This means that they can utilize the mechanisms of fandom – and its subversion of canon - to organize and mobilize their backlash against those they feel threaten their conservative privilege (Stanfill, 2020).

Therefore, fandom is now fully part of the political process, on both ends of the spectrum. Twitter (now rebranded as X) is a key platform for politiciced fandom, as it allows for real time upload of content, an affordance that allowed political fans to circulate commentary and provide their own content at incredible speed and with a low threshold of skill required to publish (Wilson, 2011; Hernández-Santaolalla & Rubio-Hernández, 2017). The nebulous conversations that take place on Twitter as audiences discuss political news or public appearances by politicians in real time constitute a type of fan commentary that collectively builds meaning in similar ways to fanfiction, resulting in what Wilson (2011) terms “ambient fandom”. The productions of this “ambient fandom” are now also routinely incorporated back into mainstream broadcasting, as tv political commentary shows often interact with audience tweets in order to generate more interaction with the audience (Wilson, 2011). All in all, politizec fandom is firmly established as a form of interaction with politics, and social media presents the perfect environment for political happenings to be communaly read and discussed, and fan-interpretations produced.

Political RPF operates in the same way as traditional, media-celebrity focused RPF (Winter, 2020). In the case of political RPF, the raw canon is produced both by politicians as well as media coverage of them (Wilson, 2011). Pictures or videos of the politicians’ past – from before they stepped into the political arena and became a public figure – archived on the internet are also part of the repository of media available to fans as canon (Kohleimanen, 2017). Political advertising also factors into canon in this case, with PR firms actively working to develop emotional connections between voters and candidates, often by crafting narratives that clearly identify a “hero” and a “villain” in clear moral terms, narratives that fans then draw from for their own fictions about politicians to extend or modify their characterization (Winter, 2020). Social media users who are affectively invested in mediatized politics (Sandvoss, 2005; Wilson, 2011) take materials from these source texts to incorporate into their own personal narratives of politicians (Kolehmainen, 2017), which allow them to imagine alterative realities loosely based on each candidate’s promises.

General impressions of political candidates also factor into political RPF. As individuals necessarily simplify the onslaught of political information they receive from their environment in order to decide which candidate is more worthy of their vote, they organize received information by picking out traits they consider most desirable for political office (such as intelligence), favouring specific personal characteristics (such as friendliness or energy) depending on the political issues being evaluated; and assimilating candidates’ own personality descriptions to the positively-biased self-appraisals produced from the previous two steps (Caprara et al., 2002). Citizens also tend to make automatic inferences about various physical traits and nonverbal facial displays, with candidates who are considered to look better performing better, provided that those physical attributes are the subject of recurrent media attention (Hayes et al., 2014). If the media frequently focus on and emphasize a candidate’s physical appearance, their image gains salience and may wind up exerting more influence on voters’ evaluations (Hayes et al., 2014). Winter’s (2020) points to the fact that Bernie Sanders works on online fanfiction archive Archive of Our Own draw notably from his physical appearance, commonly describing his white hair with adjectives such as “fluffy” or “frail” and their assumed connotations: fluffy recalls a positive, pleasantly soft texture while “Frail” directly refers to his advanced age, which Winter (2020) connects to the persistent debates regarding the elevated age of the different candidates that populated the media across the 2016 election campaign, pointing to the fan fiction output clearly reflecting the media discussion.

Users who partake in ambient fandom on social media and construct RPF-like narratives around political candidates also actively incorporate pop culture references in their discussions and narratives, adding a secondary repository of “canon imaginary” to the narratives that facilitates the understanding of specific interpretations of campaigns (Kohleimanen, 2017). Donald Trump was repeatedly compared to a cowboy by his fans in the campaign leading up to the 2016 election, with the integral elements that populate the cowboy mythos in common imagination: a “display of masculine individualism and the struggle against a threatening wilderness” (Kohlwimanen, 2017, 11), a figure with very little known past and no discernible future, whose main narrative role is to enact change in the present (Kohleimanen, 2017). For Trump, the comparison to a cowboy and the projection of the mythos onto his person resulted in the image of a hardened, masculine wild west man capable of cleaning Washington of corruption (Kohleimanen, 2017), with this imagined pop culture figure seemingly overruling the precise public biography that exists for him (Kohleimanen, 2017). His supporters imbued Trump with the imagined qualities of a “cowboy” through a process that involves the same transformative properties that fanfiction does: adscribing traits to a character regardless of whether they display them in other narrative contexts (Kohleimanen, 2017). The same thing can be observed in the heroic narrative surrounding Bernie Sanders during the 2016 campaign, which was partially constructed by his audience engaging in “crossover-style narrating of the political campaign on Twitter by using references to Star Wars and Harry Potter, respectively, to add layers of mythos around the preferred candidate” (Kolehmainen, 2017, 8; Winter, 2020).

While in the past it was politicians and their paid campaign staffers’ own image building and branding that largely managed and influenced the candidates’ image and voter perception; in the modern era of social media and political fans audience participation in that branding has grown significantly, mixing with traditional official campaigns (Winter, 2020). Once fans have collectively included certain information within the canon, it then “becomes truth within the fannish universe” (Busse, 2017, 167). Overall, the fanon characteristics developed by fans in their idealized output contribute to the general branding of a politician, mixing canon sources and popular culture into the fan fiction and discarding aspects of their personality found to be less favourable, helped by professional campaigners actively promoting the more positive qualities (Winter, 2020). This creates an overall effect of both campaigners and citizens developing consumer brand loyalty to brand candidates (Winter, 2020). Fans essentially extend the branding practices at play during a campaign (coming from both officials and the press) and the politician’s brand by incorporating fanon characteristics into their persona (Winter, 2020).

**Methodology**

Following the existing qualitative methodological tradition in the exploration of fan audiences (Sandvoss, 2013), this article draws on qualitative content analysis as a method to to shed knowledge on a particular phenomenon being studied - building an understanding of the autonomy fans display in the process of constructing the socially accepted image of a politician through a process of fandom – in order to construct a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon embedded in its context (White & Marsh, 2006) to answer the question: How much agency do fan audiences have in the construction of a politician as a fan object?

The figure of Barron Trump poses the ideal case study to explore this question, as he is no a traditional politician with a carefully curated PR image; yet fans nonetheless actively call for his presidency. His complete separation from the realm of politics presents a very clear disctinction between a barely developed PR person and the political persona built by his followers, providing invaluable insight into how said political persona has been constructed within the fandom. In order to do that, an online space that concentrated fans sharing a common fan object for the purpose of holding conversations about him presented the ideal enviroment for this study, in contrast to more general interactions on general social media sites such as X (previously Twitter) or Youtube. For that purpose, the online forum PatriotsWin, site name *The Donald*, was chosen as the site to sample, due to the fact that it concentrates self-identified Donald Trump and MAGA fans, as per their own site description: “community of choice for President Donald J. Trump! Be advised this community is for serious supporters of President Trump. We have discussions, memes, AMAs, and more.” (PatriotsWin, n.d.). The forum was created in 2021 as part of a migration of users from the banned Reddit page *r/The\_Donald* to their own site (Thalen, 2021). The first threads mentioning Barron all displayed the marker “posted 3 years ago” at the moment of retrieval, 2024, which backdates them to 2021, the very inception of the forum.

The forum features user-generated threads, sorted by activity through the tabs “hot” – the opening tab, “new” – for recently created threads, “active” – for threads currently receiving a high influx of comments and interaction, “rising” – for those recently posted garnering steady interaction; and “top” – the ones with the highest interaction numbers, regardless of their age. Comments are anonymous, posted under unidentifiable pseudonyms, and the site obfuscates IPs to make them untraceable and protect its users from doxxing. Each thread features a header in which users specify the topic being discussed. Images, links, videos or posts from other social media sites can be embedded in this header, to illustrate what the author is referring to. The rest of the page is occupied by the body of the thread, which comprises a comment section in which other users can post their own responses, opinions and other contributions to the original topic. Direct responses to previously posted comments are nestled together using faint grey bars on the left margin, grouping comments belonging to the same cluster together and showing the direct relation between them. Comments can also be individually upvoted or downvoted by other users through two arrows located to the left, one facing upwards and the other downwards. These interactions are shown through a point count displayed at the top of the comment, next to the username of the original poster: positive votes are recorded as a points number, with negative votes displayed as negative (with the symbol “-“) points. The forum does not display exact dates, merely indicating how many hours, months, days or years ago the thread was created and each individual comment posted.

All threads on Patriots Win that mention Barron Trump were retrieved utilizing the forum’s in-built search function. A search of the queries “Barron” and “Barron Trump” yielded all threads in the system that mentioned the selected terms. While the dating system displayed by the forum makes it impossible to date the first threads that come up exactly, they do indicate that they were created “3 years ago” from the moment they were consulted, in 2024, which back dates them all the way back from the creation of the forum in 2021. The cutoff date was determined by the date of Donald Trump’s second inauguration as president, on the 20th of January of 2025, as Barron would be present in the event in an official capacity after turning of age. Twenty days were added to the inauguration date to allow for ample time for users to discuss it in different threads, in order to maximize the information gathered on their reaction to Barron’s first official appearance under his father’s new administration. This resulted on a cutoff point of the 10th of February 2025, and a total of 240 threads. All threads were then extracted through organized screenshots, in order to preserve the visual organization of the forum and the nestled comments, to allow for better tracking of embedded conversations.

In the process of qualitative content analysis, the threads underwent an initial overview during wich threads that mentioned Barron only tangentiably and did not present any in-depth discussion of him were taken out of the analysis group, as they did not contain any relevant analysis units. Each individual post – embedded links and images included - was classified as an analysis unit, with the vast majority presenting similarly short lenghts, with the occasional outlier long comment. The second pass focused on identifying all pieces of Barron canon present in the threads, in order to establish the existing information being disseminated and discussed in the forum as the basis of the constructions on Barron. From then on, MAXQDA software was used to code the remaining units according to the elements of canon and the construction of fanon in the context of Real Person Fiction (RPF), discussed in the previous section, with attention devoted to evaluations of Barron and his personal characteristics as related to the canon present in the threads. By addressing these distinct dimensions, and how they relate to each other, the research presents a comprehensive understanding of the process through which fans transform available information into a political persona for a citizen that does not have a curated one, shedding light on the level of autonomy in crafting a politician out of them.

# **Findings**

## **Limited canon**

The first finding is that there is very limited canon information on Barron Trump, meaning content produced by the person themselves and their teams, media coverage of them, pictures or videos of the politicians’ past or political advertising (Wilson, 2011; Kohleimanen, 2017; Winters, 2020). Barron was deliberately kept out of the public eye as much as possible while he was underage (Sangalang, 2025), which practically translates into a lack of first-hand accounts coming from Barron himself, with secondhand accounts of his character being extremely limited and coming largely only from 2024 onwards. Media coverage of Barron does exist, but it is also restricted.

Barron does not have public social media accounts, and hasn’t spoken directly to the press since he was a toddler. The closest thing to first-hand content is that coming from his parents, which is mostly reduced to Melania Trump’s office making statements on his behalf (T.55, T.114 & T.119), and Donald Trump attributing his 2024 campaign’s success on podcasts to Barron’s advice (T.111, T.137 & T.138). Secondhand accounts of personal meetings with Barron consist of two clips of Iranian-American entrepeneur and podcaster Patrick Bet-David in T.98 & T.100 in which he reccounts the same 2024 story of being invited to dinner at Mar-a-Lago by Barron; and of a podcast appearance by Mike Tyson, who met the Trumps for dinner before Barron’s 18th birthday in 2024 (T.91).

Threads also distribute various accreditted news outlets’ coverage of Barron. For this category, reports of Melania’s office statements on his behalf and of Donald Trump’s statements have been excluded. What is left is coverage of Barron’s outings around New York, often with his mother; or at official events, with emphasis placed on how impressively tall and good looking he has grown (T.1, T.2, T.4, T.6, T.21, T.92, T.95, T.145, T.151). Ocassionally, news outlets also report on threats to Barron’s well-being (T.58, T.59, T.60 & T.61). From 2024 onwards, coverage also extents to appearances at his father’s rallies, with a single New York Post article (T.129 & T.130) as well as screenshots taken by users of Fox News coverage of the rallies (T.37, T.42, T.124 & T.125). News outlets also highlight Barron’s role in his father’s podcast strategy during the 2024 presidential campaign (T.142 & T.156). Content from MAGA-adjacent news sites Citizen Free Press, Truth Conservative, Conservative Review, Defiant America, Breitbart, Right Journalism, Twitchy, Hotair.com, Revolver.news, 100percentfedup.com and the Daily Wire is also featured, and largely covers the same information as more accredited news sources. Barron’s height and his outtings with his family are recurrent (T.20, T.22 & T.40); as is coverage of Barron’s presence in Trump rallies, exacerbating his importance in headlines (T.41). Rumours are also occasionally fact-checked (T.36), but less accredited sites particularly focus on spreading stories of “liberals” threatening bodily harm to Barron (T.84, T.116, T.136). Only these types of sites sites shared the unconfirmed news that Barron had reportedly been picked by the Republican party as delegate for Florida (T.104, T.106 & T.107), which was later debunked by sites like Breitbart reporting on his mother’s statement that he would decline due to prior commitments.

Unverified information without sources circulates not just via headlines from websites, but also by way of social media screenshots, and includes multiple Barron impersonating accounts on X (previously Twitter) in T.150, T.167, T.171 & T.184. There is also user-generated content, which amounts to videos taken by private phones posted either to the forum, or to the internet at large and then reposted in PatriotsWin from 2024 onwards, when he began taking part in events for his father’s presidential campaign. These include distant shots of his high school graduation ceremony while his father watches on (T.117 & T.118), a leaked video of Barron golfing with his father after the 2024 presidential debate taken by another person at the gold court (T.122), clips of Barron shaking hands with guests at an event at Mar-a-Lago (T.76); and a video of a Trump electoral rally showing Barron waving to the crowd from behind (T.126, T.127 & T.131).

Lastly the comment section also recurrently brings up news related to events affecting Trump Sr., primarily the FBI’s search of Trump’s Mar-a-Lago home under warrant during the investigation into his handling of classified documents during his first presidency (Collins et al., 2022). These events are not featured in the form of news coverage taken into the threads, but their pervasiveness in mainstream media makes it so they are accepted as a factual canon element within the overall Trump narrative, being acknowledged as such in the comments (T.35, T.82 & T.98). Donald Trump’s prosecution and indictment in relation to the case “*The People of the State of New York v. Donald J. Trump”* also features in this category, as does the 2024 presidential campaign assassination attempt at Mar-a-Lago, though not as frequently (T.165).

Canon content for Barron, therefore, is extremely limited. His lack of social media and reduced public appearances do not give the fan audience much material from which to work their fandom.

## **Augmented canon**

The second finding shows fanon steps in to make up for the lack of canon, via the reinterpretation of the available information. Through a process of ambient fan discussion (Wilson, 2011), the limited available canon content on Barron is collectively read to constitute a fanon image of him, integrating both traits directly derived from the canon as well as traits the fans themselves perceive as desirable, forming the ideal MAGA man – and, by extension, US president - in their eyes.

*Superior Morality and Overall Greatness*

Comments in threads that emphasize admiration for his physical apperance (particularly his height) are common: “What a handsome young man. WHOA. Best looking out of the entire family.” (T.35), “Holy fuck, the sheer size of that lad.” (T.140); and this handsomeness is identified as a positive, all-american trait in itself, intimately linked to their own vision of American’s greatness and that of the MAGA movement: “Wow! Hes a giant! 👍💪 🇺🇸” (T.19), “he is as big as our win in 2024 will be! and they both just keep growing!” (T.39), “Barron growing up this much in 8 years is really symbolic of the MAGA movement too.” (T.204).

Barron’s physical appearance is also framed as a representative win for MAGA genetics: “MAGA sperm.” (T.39), “Nah. It brings me great glee to dig up all those unwarranted insults from his detractors when he was just a child and pointing out they are 5'1"manlets IRL while he became a Greco-Roman statue. There is a God.” (T.120), “The cyber expert is maturing into the most hyperalpha magachad the world has ever known, and I'm all about it. No homo.” (T.135), “Ngl my man Baron got those sigma male American Psycho vibes, you know everything is cool till Baron starts play Huey Lewis and the news.” (T.161B). Being tall and handsome appears to be perceived as an inherent moral win, in itself and over the weaker, worse looking “liberals” and their own corrupted morals.

*Superior Intelligence and Political Mastermind*

Emphasis is put on his canon parentage, with the superior genetic material derived from Trump and Melania identified as the most likely origin of an equally superior intelligence: “Genetics. Probably top 1% IQ as well.” (T.22), “Can you imagine the IQ of that kid? The child of Donald and Melania I'm sure has genius level IQ.”(T.79), “My dead dog is smarter than Kamala. Baron is on another level. He gets it from both parents.” (T.185). This perception of Barron as a highly intelligent person carries beyond the explicit connection to his genes, as it appears to be a positive trait valued by the users, and thus generally projected onto him: “I don't know what goes on behind closed doors, but dude has to know he is the defacto #1 brain for the next generation.” (T.66), “He's like a genius!” (T.138, in response to news that he picked the Adin Ross podcast for Trump’s 2024 campaign), “The genius ®” (T.138), “Stable Genius 🧠” (T.145).

The trait of political mastermind is not fully assigned to Barron until 2024 threads, when Donald Trump’s second presidential campaign was underway and he began appearing in alt-right podcasts and crediting Barron for his choices (T.111, T.137 & T.138). No other information hinting at Barron being involved with any other parts of Trump’s presidential campaign’s online strategy exists in the threads, yet users in the forum have reframed the single mention of involvement into heavy influence in the campaign’s online strategy, a notion that repeats across threads and identifies positive traits such as “influencer”, “genius” and “mastermind” from it: “That's right. He's got a primary commitment to meme his dad back into the White House!!” (T.108), “Barron is deeply invested in his father's success. Very possible he understands exactly what we are up against.” (T.157), “Behold Sir Barron Trump, Son of Donald Trump, first of his name, the King of the internet, influencer of influencers, and promoter of podcasts” (T.158), “Without his guidance, papa GEOTUS would not be in the enviable position he is today as we head in to the home stretch. Well done, young man. Well done.” (T.159), “I'd like to take a moment to toast Barron Trump, Master of Cyber.” (T.159).

*Success with women, successful man*

Success or popularity with women also appears to be a highly valuable trait for Trump fans, as it is repeatedly projected onto Barron on the basis of his attractiveness and wealth, as well as his family history: “ladies gonna love him” (T.5), “I bet they'll let him grab them by the pussy!” (T.7), “The ladies are gonna love him :D :D :D” (T.15, T.39, T.68, all by the same user), “JHC. Your not kidding. He's going to be breakbg hearts!” (T.105), “He's going to be too busy this summer drowning in pussy.” (T.108). This seems to stem from the MAGA ideal of what success looks like in a man, which Trump senior already embodies: not just incredibly wealthy, but also capable of leveraging the other great asset, attractive women, in large quantities. Good manners and seriousness are also assumed of Barron as yet another positive inter-personal trait valued by the user base, based on his attire and behaviour in various canon videos and photographs: “At the polls wearing a suit and nice shoes, taking it seriously. Not wearing sweat pants and a hoodie like a 18 year old would, and no one would think badly of him if he did. This kid is going to be something to watch, as he "grows up".” (T.161B), “He's turning into a real charmer.” (T.204).

*Mar-a-Lago raids as source of trauma*

The last audience transformative interpretation pertains to the events affecting Donald Trump after the end of his first presidency, particularly the FBI search of Mar-a-Lago. These are reimagined as sources of trauma and resentment for Barron, who is thought to have been directly present at the scene witnessing the events; and conceptualized as the source of yet another desirable trait in the audience’s eyes: cutthroatness, the reason why he migth seek power in the future in other to take revenge for what his father and his family have endured: “That kid has been living in a shit storm and putting up with shit that no kid should have to deal with.” (T.39), “They should not have tried to murder his father in front of him.” (T.165), “Attacked his father non-stop for the past 9 years. Tried to assassinate him multiple times. Lied about and persecuted the man endlessly. Yeah, Barron is on a path of retribution and I hope it will never end.” (T.166), “You sent armed agents into Mar-a-Lago to rummage through the bedrooms of Melania Trump and Barron Trump under the guise of looking for government papers” (T.178), “Send your goons in my dad's house is one thing, my bedroom, you fucked up....” (T.219). This is a narrative that is also replicated in the content from the secondary Patric Bet-Davies source covered in the previous section, but only in later threads, whilst the comments alluding to it can already be found in the early threads from years prior in what appears to be an instance of an element of canon picking up and repeating a fanon-generated piece of information.

**Fanon**

On top of the limited existing canon information on Barron that gets repeatedly distributed, discussed, reinterpreted and added-to in the threads; users also bring pure audience production to build the fanon, adscribing traits to Barron that draw from narrative formations consisting primarily on comparisons with historical and fictional characters, and fanfiction-like imagined dialogue. Following Kohleimanen’s (2017) theory of social media narratives as political fan fiction, these comparisons fulfill the same goals as Donald Trump’s comparisons to a cowboy did in 2016: the pop culture ideal of the figures chosen comes with a set of generally understood characteristics, which are then projected onto Barron by way of the comparison, operating as a form of RPF.

*Building the Surpassing Heir*

Historical figures repeatedly feature across threads, particularly various Roman emperors. It’s highly possible that the recurrent fixation with this particular historical figure stems from the fact that real life Barron is already heir to a real estate and commercial empire, and perceived to be the heir to a political one as well after his father’s time in and return to office, with hopes that he will expand it and go even further in his glory. Of all Roman emperors, Augustus/Octavianus/Octavian is the one most frequently brought up in comparisons: “Julius Caesar instructed Octavian who was very unassuming until he conquered all of Rome.” (T.138), “Trump – Baron, Julius – Augustus, Cross the Rubicon Orange Man, end this farcical charade. The left wants an empire, I say we give them an emperor.” (T.108), “The kid is a 6.9 extremely handsome and apparently socially adept genius iq son of a billionaire President. I literally cannot think of a stupider person to enrage. I doubt he will end here at age 18 This gives Augustus Cesar vibes. His speech to the Roman Senate where he has Brutus and Cassius Declared murders.” (T.166). Other Roman emperors such as Julius Caesar - “Barron is going to be our Caesar.” (T.98) and Marcus Aurelius “And so begins the rise of Barron Trump. I was curious when it would start. The guy is going to show up in about 5 years and seem like Marcus Aurelius compared to the rest of American Politics.” (T.98) are also referred to.

These famous historical names all imply certain traits which are assumed in the popular myth of the Roman emperor and conqueror: shrewd intelligence, leadership, power, political and military prowess and strategic vision, amongst others. These are then transplanted, even if Barron has never openly shown himself to embody them by virtue of being largely out of the public eye until he came of age.

Alexander the Great is referenced throughout the threads due to a perceived physical resemblance between the bust of the legendary Macedonian king and Barron’s own side profile. Side to side comparison photos appear posted in thread T.128 with the comment “Barron is Alexander the Great. See the image comparison”, and in threads T.194 and T.205. However, the physical resemblance is not the only basis for the comparison, as there are other comments that explicitly focus on Alexander’s history of glory instead: “If you know the actual history of Alexander the Great, Barron might have a legendary future.” (T.95). Alexander’s mythos shares the same traits ascribed to Roman emperors, as he fits in the same category of great king/emperor and powerful conqueror: high intelligence, military prowess, leadership and political vision are all assumed to have factored in his wondrous expansion of the Macedonian kingdom. However, comparisons with Alexander do occasionally receive pushback, due to his death at a young age - “Careful what you wish for. Alexander the Great died at 32 years old.” (T.205) - and the fact that he was a known homosexual: “Except that Alexander the Great was gay.” (T.205), a trait that is not considered acceptable, as it’s perceived as unnatural and shameful. Distinctions are clearly established between traits that are desirable to be found in Barron, and those that are to be avoided.

Genghis Khan is also featured. As the ruler who inaugurated the vast Mongol empire, Genghis Khan fits the same typology of figure as the Roman emperors and Alexander the Great, with the added detail that he is also infamous for having numerous wives and many children. This explicitly adds traits such as “seductive”, “suave” and “attractive to women due to his power” to the myth of the conqueror. Comparisons to Genghis call to both the traits of conqueror and emperor existing within the myth of the Khan: “The Great Khan shall ride again.” (T.27) as well as the great Khan’s sexual prowess, directly tying to the audience assumptions that he is or will be successful with women discussed in the previous section: “That dude is going to reach gengis khan level seed spreader.” (T.39).

*Fictional ideal of revengeful politician*

The other comparisons established are with fictional characters, with choices presenting both the same implied traits as the historical figures found in the previous section as well as new ones that connect to them. The most recurring character is Paul Atreides, also called Muad’Dib, Kwisatz Haderach and Lisan al-Gaib; protagonist of Frank Herbert’s *Dune* book series. Clairvoyant son of a duke, Paul goes on to fulfill his destiny as a chosen prophet by raising an allied army to defeat the reigning emperor, becoming the ruler of his own Atreides empire in the process (Herbert, 1965). The same characteristics present in the historical figures are identifiable in Atreides: he is intelligent, a leader, a strong politician and military man, and a great ruler and conqueror; with the added detail of also being a religious figure, a prophet with enhanced vision of the future: “When I think of Paul Atreides from Dune, I think of Barron.” (T.80), “Lisan al Gaib!!!” (T.98), “For he is the Kwisatz Haderach!” (T.98).

The other major fictional character referenced is Bruce Wayne, the Batman. This comparison directly stems from the interpretation that the events pertaining Donald Trump’s prosecution after serving in office have been traumatic for Barron, and are what drives him and will make him a fearsome president when he’s in power. Several comments name drop either Bruce Wayne or the Batman directly: “Barron is going to be a cutthroat. Fucking so excited to see where this kid ends up. This kid is going to literally be Bruce Wayne. If that's the way he talks, he's insanely intelligent. Building rep.” (T.98), “[…] The crowd started to chant "Barron... Barron!" I can't describe the look on his face. It was straight out of the batman movie when the young gorden sees his parents murdered. Right then the dice is cast... the result was destiny. […] I've never seen such a look before and never will again. He'll run the world if he wants to.” (T.171). “Of course. In the Original Batman he saw his parents murdered in front of him. It was such a horrible act of evil it turned him into the ultimate vigilante.” (T.147). Once again, the character comes with its own set of assumed traits: genius intelligence most of all, but also determination, stealth, ruthlessness, a strong aversion to corruption, a drive for revence and, of course, wealth, which Barron already posesses.

Michael Corleone, from *The Godfather*, gets singularly mentioned: “Anyone else getting Michael Corleone, Godfather vibes from Barron Trump?” (T.229). This is again a character that calls to ruthlessness in Barron, implying the users think him capable of utilising violent means to extract his revenge for the way his father has been treated. The comparison particularly emphasizes this point, as it calls back to the fact that the character only becomes a ruthless mafia boss after the assassination of his father, which he is powerless to prevent and which forces him into the world that he has tried his whole life to avoid.

Overall, the combination of historical and fictional characters, and the particular repeated traits that come attached to them seem to indicate that the Patriots Win userbase perceives Barron not only as the natural heir to his father’s power due to the connection between them, but as the heir that will increase that power and bring the greatness of his political project, the MAGA movement, to greater heights, fulfilling their revenge fantasies for the perceived crimes committed against Trump.

*Affirming the construction of ruthless politician Barron*

On top of the two forms of fictional character comparisons, a third type of fan narrative production is present across the threads - particularly later ones - which works to reinforce some of the previously adscribed traits derived from the comparisons. This consists on fanfiction-style, full-fleshed dialogue which Barron is imagined to have uttered. These types of fictional conversations are mainly found in reponse to videos of Barron shaking Joe Biden’s hand and exchanging words with him at his father’s inauguration in 2025, though the angle makes it impossible to fully read his lips. The imagined dialogue slots into the space left by the unknown real exchange, the same way that traditional fanfiction takes canon events and alters them to fit the audiences’ narrative desires (REF). In this case, the resulting dialogue appears to respond both to users’ own negative opinions of Biden as well as their attempts to formulate something that fits into the ruthless, cut-throat and out-for-revenge Barron they have collectively constructed. Some hone in on the narrative of Biden as an unfit ruler due to his posession of undesirable traits such as homosexuality and pedophilia: “"go fuck yourself, pedophile." – Barron” (T.210), ““you missed faggot “ that's what he said” (T.219); others on the FBI raids on Mar-a-Lago and Barron, attributed to Biden’s orders: ““I want my underwear back, you sick fuck.” (T.209), “Hands off mom's panties!” (T.210), “"You attacked me and my mother."” (T.219).

Yet others display a general glee at his ousting from office as well as a wish to humiliate him, be it through comparisons of Biden’s diminished physique to Barron’s much taller one, or by implications that, as a senile old man not in control of his sphincter, he has soiled himself in public: ““You're so far down there, can you speak up?” (T.204), ““I can smell the shit in your pants”” (T.219), “You're Fired!” (T.209, T.210). Finally, some of the imagined remarks go one step further, threatening violence and assassination against Biden: ““We won't miss, I promise”” (T.209, in reference to the assassination attempt on Donald Trump), “The fuck around is over, now you're going to find out.” (T.210), “We're coming for you.” (T.219).

Lastly, while there is no fanart in the traditional sense of fan-drawn images of Barron, AI-generated photo or videos appear amongst the threads, seemingly stepping in to fulfill that role. T.43 features a user-generated AI photo of an aged out Barron, while in T.158 the thread head is an AI-generated photo of Barron dressed like a king – in front of a computer, referencing the nickname “King of cyber” that circulates in the forum. T.232 features an AI-generated video of Barron singing about being president after his father, and T.236 features another video, this time of quite realistic AI-generated Barron giving his first ever public speech. These faccsimiles of traditional fan content once again reinforce several of the narrations surrounding fanon Barron: that he is the natural heir to his father, that he will be president, and that he is a genius in charge of his father’s online campaign strategy. Other user-generated image productions include memes that play off Barron’s impressive height for humour (T.3-T.239).

## **Fanon Barron: perfect man for office**

Therefore, the overall picture painted is of a tall, handsome and politically savvy young man with a ruthless streak, high IQ and good manners and countenance; a Barron who has witnessed the mistreatment of his father and family by the establishment and will ruthlessly seek revenge through political means. This coalesces into comments that make explicit links between his handsomeness, his perceived intelligence by way of good genetics, and his suitability for office: “Hes a great looking smart kid and he shares my 🎂. Hope he runs someday.” (T.127), “This guy is gonna be a lady killer. If there is still a country when he hits ~30 he will be a future President, too.” (T.47), “The kid is a 6.9 extremely handsome and apparently socially adept genius iq son of a billionaire President. I literally cannot think of a stupider person to enrage. I doubt he will end here at age 18 […]” (T.166).

The content of the threads also supports what the results of the survey ran by The Daily Mail and J.L. Partners (Spiering, 2025) had already revealed regarding the desire to see Barron Trump in the White House in an official capacity. Even if a presidency is not in the cards, part of the Patriots Win user base would at least like to see him active in the Republican Party and potentially in government in some capability. Some comments assume a future Barron presidency with absolute certainty, such as “Also, he'll be president during our country's 250th birthday. That's a pretty big deal.” (T.49), “Future president” (T.98, T.119, T.152, T.206). Others count down the years left until Barron can run for president, such as “And only 24 yrs until he can be President” (T.17), “How soon can he run for office. Heck any office?” (T. 131), “Barron prime, 2048” (T.48, T,83), “trump 2028” (T. 190). Others simply guess that he will be running president, and plot to campaign on his behalf: “My guess is he’ll be President one day” (T.37), “He's bigger than a delegate! He needs to run for office in a major role.” (T.108), “Barron Trump through the years. I can see him running for president some day.” (T.165), “Let a go ahead and get his presidential campaign underway.” (T. 204).

While none of the comments calling for his presidency explicitly name reasons why Barron would make such a good president, the previously laid sections indicate that the forum has collectively built a narrative around his personal character and a brand, as the lack of canon allows space for the audience to fill in the blanks with their desired characteristics, easily molding him into their ideal man and thus lending credence to the idea that he is the perfect candidate.

**Discussion**

This article set out to answer the question: How much agency do fan audiences have in the construction of a politician as a fan object?. The findings previously laid out support the idea that the Trump MAGA fandom has built an image of Barron based off very limited available information, showing a high level of agency and transformative capability from scarce canon. Said canon matches the typology of content that generally comprises RPF canon, as identified by Winters (2020), Wilson (2011) & Kohleimanen (2017): photographs of Barron in public disseminated by press and forum users, limited statements from figures that have direct access to him, including second hand accounts of punctual meetings; and occasional rumours or threats that are covered by less reputable media with strong ties to the MAGA movement, as well as disseminated by users themselevs through social media. By appropriating the texts that make up this meager canon and discussing them jointly, fans on the forum collectively read and poach meaning from them (Jenkins, 1992), amounting to the “ambient fandom” Wilson (2011) identifies.

 These ambient discussions present a feedback loop of traits valued by the users, as per Caprara et al. (2002); for which evidence is pulled from the canon. Barron’s physical appearance, following Hayes et al. (2014), is explicitly taken as proof of intelligence and elevated morals, two key traits that are highly desirable in political leaders. Likewise, his parentage and genetic material are factored as proof of intelligence, an equally desirable trait. Fans price good performance with women as an indicator of success, projecting it onto Barron due to both his good looks and his wealth; and his succesfull podcast recommendations to Trump are justification to brand him a politically-minded genius. To these narratives that assign characteristics based on objective facts of the canon, fans add their own productions that both reinforce the already assigned traits as well as add other related ones. The gaps left by the limited canon are filled by comparisons with characters, both historical and fictional; who display characteristics fans desire in a candidate: leadership abilities, power, strategic vision, political and military prowess, determination, stealth and ruthlessness are recurrently seen in Barron and emphasized by association to various Roman emperors, Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, Paul Atreides, Batman, and Michael Corleone.

 The depth of acceptance of these undisplayed yet assigned traits amongst the audience emerges in the fanfictive dialogue users in the forum produced in response to the videos of Barron exchanging words with Biden at Trump’s 2025 inauguration: fully-fleshed imagined dialogue that focuses heavily on revenge narratives, and reads ruthless and uncaring for Biden's feelings while attempting to be witty and funny in its delivery. The generally constructed idea of Barron’s persona shines through in the characterization users default to when writing the dialogue, which remains consistent. This consistency is, in fact, a key factor overall: the different traits or characteristics assigned form a recognizable pattern throughout the threads. Whilst they are justified by different pieces of either canon or fanon, some of which are brought up singularly or only a handful of times; the traits derived from the different justifications are repeated and consistent, emphasizing the collective agreemet that they are all desirable and fit into the projected reality MAGA fans consider ideal, and the political persona worthy of being in office after his father’s term is over. In fact, very few of the traits assigned to Barron are outright stated in the comments by their name, other than intelligence and womanizing. Rather, ambient fandom at play in the forum itself and other social media sites (which is then incorporated into the discourse taking place in Patriots Win via screenshots posted to the threads) has seemingly created an abstract miasma of personal and political persona that nonetheless permeates most of the discussion surrounding him through repeated assumptions that are accepted as fact, and which influence discussions of him in return.Virtuous traits that make a worthy ruler do not have to be earned through displayed public behaviour, rather, they are repeatedly granted by fanon association, in a circular narrative that feeds into itself.

It is also relevant to point out that this lack of canon essentially makes Barron a political blank slate, which might factor into why he is so attractive for office for a part of the audience. The audiences’ explicit desire and unshakeable belief that they will see him as president of the United States in the future draws from a self-generated idea of who Barron is and what his qualities are that is built entirely by transformative reinterpretation and association, as well as projection of the audiences’ own ideal values. The lack of available canon information might play in Barron’s favour in these constructions, as there is no evidence to confirm, but also to deny, the claims and traits that the audience has projected onto him. It might also be the reason why this part of the fanbase favours him for office over any of his older siblings, as he has not had the chance to disappoint them or contradict the fanon identity they have built for him. His lack of public presence reinforces both by leaving ample space for audience interpretation to slot into canon narratives as well as by failing to provide any contradictory evidence. While it is unclear what proportion of the MAGA voting base these Barron supporters really represent – though the DailyMail survey reported 40% of republicans - and thus how much impact they really have in electoral results, it is nonetheless relevant to understand that the audience may autonomously construct and project a figure of the politics and personal traits they want to see in them, drawing from a blank that has not contradicted them. Despite the lack of canon, a coherent picture and personality emerge for Barron amongst the threads, built primarily through audience fan efforts and compelling enough for part of it to vouch for him as president.

The findings highlight the level of involvement of transformative fandom and audience production in building a political persona for an individual, showing that it is possible for fans to kickstart the fandom process around a person with minimal canon available. Barron’s case seems to indicate that fans not only can influence politicians’ image building and branding, as stated by Winters (2020), but rather that they can construct said image almost autonomously with minimum imput from the political aparatus itself, without the need to mix with traditional official campaigns, as in this case there is none. The strength of this type of fandom is yet to be tested, as it’s not very usual – since most politicians who garner active fandom following are, in fact, in the public eye and the heart of the media storm. However, it does seem to be enough for a part of the voting base to seriously consider voting for a total unknown. Likewise, this case study also shows that the number of positive traits politicized fandom deems necessary to make somebody suitable for office is limited, and does not need to be extensively developed to earn a vote. It is enough to posses a limited number of traits (or be projected them) to build a narrative that the chosen subject could feasibly take political revenge on people the fanbase does not like.

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