Media Attention To The Physical Appearance And Clothing Of Male And Female Politicians

Does the physical appearance and clothing of male and female politicians/news anchors affect them by the way they are presented in the media? All signs point to “yes.” In Psychology of Women, Margaret Matlin addresses three points regarding how media can influence people’s perspective of others. First is how accurately media reflects reality, second is how media can influence reality by changing peoples’ attitudes, and third is how media can also influence a person’s attitudes toward other people (Matlin, 2012, p. 44). Additionally, Matlin draws eight distinct conclusions regarding female representation in said media. These conclusions include how women are seen as relatively invisible and inaudible, seldom working outside a home setting, and doing housework, if shown working at all (Matlin, 2012, p. 45). Additionally, when compared to men, women as a whole, especially in reference to their bodies, are represented differently (Matlin, 2012, p. 46). Lastly, with what representation women have as a whole, there is an underrepresentation of women of color and lower-social-class, with said representation being rather biased (Matlin, 2012, p. 46). When researching the modern social climate with regards to politics and news, Matlin’s perspective on the media’s approach towards those males and female professionals prove to be accurate.

Appearance and Attire Compliance

One study done by Hayes, Lawless & Baitinger (2014) answers these questions by doing an experiment on whether a candidate’s appearance influences election outcomes. They did this by showing 961 adult subjects to newspaper articles representing two theoretical congressional candidates: one male and one female. They had written newspaper article regarding the candidate’s view on an education bill. The newspaper had different versions, which included basic information about the candidates and addressed how each candidate was dressed. They found that respondents rated both the male and female candidates “less favorably when they were described as “disheveled and sloppy” and wearing “ill-fitting” and “tattered” clothes” (Hayes, Lawless, & Baitinger, 2014, p. 1201). This proves Matlin’s view that the media can influence our attitudes toward other people (Matlin, 2012, p. 48). Moreover, Hayes, Lawless & Baitinger (2014) suggest that a candidate’s visual appearance, including attire, is most likely to matter when it draws negative attention from the news media (p. 1205). It seems that people who rely on the media remember more of the negative side of the politicians than anything else.

Studies have shown consistently that how the media presents politicians has a correlation with how people view them by the way they are presented. Alongside clothing, the physical appearance of a politician can also influence peoples’ perceptions of them. According to Hayes, Lawless & Baitinger (2014), “candidates’ physical appearance can shape the way that citizens evaluate them” (p. 1195). Furthermore, they point out that “voters who see attractive images of candidates assess them more favorably than those exposed to unflattering visuals” (Hayes et al., 2014, p. 1195). These comments show that a politician’s appearance does play a role in how voters assess them. Additionally, when it comes to comparing male and females by the way people view them, “voters respond similarly to appearance coverage of female and male candidates” (Hayes et al., 2014, p. 1195). This tells us that a female’s appearance is not

judged differently from a male. The general conclusions the research has found are similar to Maitlin's regarding how media can affect people's attitudes towards individuals that the media presents.

Female Candidates in U.S. Politics

What this potentially implicates when it comes to the physical appearances of male and female politicians is that there should be a marked difference with representation in terms of gender and body focus. Indeed, when looking to what scholars have observed in modern media, Heldman and Wade's analysis comes to the forefront, as they expound on the works of their predecessors, Helflick and Goldenberg, who have found that female sexual objectification was in fact linked to "negative perceptions and poor performances of female candidates" (Heldman & Wade, 2011, p. 156). Heldman and Wade insist that sexual objectification persists and affects female candidates even more in modern times (the phenomenon notable in the United States), from their success in office to gender equality with politics (Heldman & Wade, 2011, p. 156).

These speculations are not unfounded, as findings in other studies do support the notions carried out by Heldman and Wade. In a study coordinated by Knapen and company regarding perception of formidability with politicians, it is suggested that "size is linked not only to status in terms of dominance, but also in terms of prestige" (Knapen, Blaker, & Pollet, 2017, p. 24). Furthermore, they found that "individuals have a motivated perception to see competent leaders as more formidable" (Knapen et al., 2017, p. 22). With a focus on appearances, anything perceived as lacking with female politicians regarding physical features, such as height and weight, may further impede beliefs in the competence of those women. Furthermore, backed by a study by Bauer in 2014, Hayes, Lawless, and Baitinger caution that "gendered coverage throughout a campaign could activate voters' propensity to rely on gender stereotypes or exhibit gender bias" (Hayes et al., 2014, p. 1208).

There was marked focus on appearance when Heldman and Wade were evaluating headlines and media trends with specific female politicians. Sarah Palin's appearance was remarked upon 14 percent of the time during her campaign (Heldman & Wade, 2011, p. 162). When Geraldine Ferrarro ran for Vice President in 1984, her physical attractiveness was given more focus than with male candidates (Heldman & Wade, 2011, p. 162). Elizabeth Dole was presented in a "sexualized and domesticated" manner in political cartoons during her run for president in 2000 (Heldman & Wade, 2011, p. 162). Finally, Hilary Clinton received remarks regarding her cleavage and laugh back in 2007 (Heldman & Wade, 2011, p. 161). It is worth noting that the trend with Hilary Clinton persisted nearly 10 years later during the 2016 presidential election, and Lawless pointed out that when Hilary was described as 'weak' and 'faltering' by journalists regarding her bout with pneumonia, "it taps into broader notions of a weak woman" (Warren, 2016, para. 5).

As the data suggested, Heldman and Wade did end up finding that media coverage delegitimized female candidates by focusing less on the policy issues the candidates tried to push for in favor of sensationalizing a "first woman" narrative (Heldman & Wade, 2011, p. 161). This occurred even as more female politicians came up over the years. Additionally, the findings end up serving as a predecessor to Hayes, Lawless, and Baitinger's warnings, since Heldman and Wade had concluded that with voter turnout "men are more likely to be biased against women, but a sizable portion of both groups—nearly a quarter of Americans—still believe that

men are better suited for politics than women” (Heldman & Wade, 2011, p. 161).

Hilary Clinton vs Bill Clinton: A Case Study

Suleiman and O’Connell (2008) noted that Bill Clinton was asked in one of his interviews if he thought that one time he might have been married to a senator (p. 33). At that time, Hillary Clinton was the senator. Moreover, there is no evidence that Hillary Clinton was ever asked the corollary question regarding being married to a president. Also, in that same interview, David Letterman asked Bill Clinton about Hillary Clinton’s performance as senator. This situation arises the question what might happen if David Letterman had asked Hillary Clinton about Bill Clinton performance as president. Again, there is no evidence that this corollary question was ever asked to Hillary Clinton. The chosen question and reference might be due to the pressure of the media on politicians to produce talk: if there is more controversial talk, that means more market value (Suleiman & O'Connell, 2008, p. 36). It is noted that the middle class is the target audience for media consumption.

Moreover, there is a focus on the use of the intensifier “so,” use of the hedge “you know,” use of non-standard pronunciation, use of laughter, and the turn transitions between interviewer and interviewee (Suleiman & O'Connell, 2008, p. 36-37). There is evidence that notes the way Hillary Clinton used the hedge “you know” more than did Bill Clinton, and Bill Clinton used the intensifier “so” more than did Hillary Clinton. This fact is interesting because Matlin (2012) advises the use of the word “you” because it is less sexist (p. 44). However, it is noted that men and women talk differently (Suleiman & O'Connell, 2008, p. 37). For instance, men tend to express control and dominance and their world is perceived of socially hierarchical. On the other hand, women interactions are those of solidarity and building support. Another important distinction notice was that male interviewers tend to refer to Hillary Clinton by her first name, while female interviewers did not. It was noted that Hillary addressed her interviewees with their first name (Suleiman & O'Connell, 2008, p. 43). Calling someone with their first name is considered diminutive. Suleiman (2008) noted that women tend to be referenced by their first name in public settings than are men (p. 43). Finally, in respect to laughter, Hillary Clinton tended to use more laughter than Bill Clinton. However, they laughed at different points and times of their speeches. For instance, Hillary Clinton used her laughter for back-channeling whereas Bill Clinton used his laughter to overlay his own speaking (Suleiman & O'Connell, 2008, p. 44).

News Anchor Hurdles

When it comes to obtaining news, people turn to their local or national news channel, with the on air-personalities being the face of these organizations. Critics claim that over the years in news media, the conditions have worsened for women, who not only face age discrimination, but for those associated with [people of] color, are expected to conform to standards outside the norm of their ethnicity (Bock, Chacon, Jung, Sturm, & Figueroa, 2018, p. 440). The standards of beauty for men that favor them are different than those for women, which punish them for getting older.

Diversity in the newsroom has been an issue for decades. In 1967 President Lyndon B. Johnson appointed the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (the Kerner Commission), who in turn criticized news organizations for neglecting their reporting on the

inequality during that time period that had led to unrest and sensationalizing events (Bock et al., 2018, p. 441). Since the report, very little has changed with a white-dominated newsroom that portrays minorities in negative light such as poor or criminal (Bock et al., 2018, p. 442). A more diverse group in a newsroom, such as more women and journalists of color, means diversity in sources and results in the inclusion of more stories about underrepresented areas of their communities (Bock et al., 2018, p. 442). Research has even shown that diversity in the newsroom better identifies problems facing marginalized populations and works towards demystifying racial groups, which helps contribute to the eradication of modern racism (Bock et al., 2018, p. 442).

With the standards of beauty for women in TV journalism, they are expected to be attractive, but they must be attractive in a way that favors men and white standards of beauty (Bock et al., 2018, p. 440). Female news anchors believe that they have been judged within a narrower scope for standards of beauty, where male anchors are able to age while women are not allowed to. Research has even show that older men are perceived to be more credible than women anchors. In a study, an anchorwoman was dressed in two different styles with one being business attire, and the other red-lipped and “sexy.” The results of the study showed that men believed the “sexy” anchor was more professional while also believing that she was less likely to be able to report as a war correspondent (Bock et al., 2018, p. 443). This study showed that women were punished on both sides: they have to be pretty enough to be able to be on TV, while if they were deemed too pretty, they cannot be taken seriously as reporters.

Women were integrated into the industry with the intention of addressing gender equality alongside an added desire to increase viewership and ratings, which over time brought more news stations to exploit female sexuality. Women of color have an even tougher time with this, where they would have jobs with local TV as long they conform their appearance to heteronormative, white, and western standards (Bock et al., 2018, p. 452). The research has shown with empirical evidence that TV news groups tend to hire women with tighter standards for attractiveness, with standards favoring one race over others—standards that do not reflect the greater diversity of the community.

Conclusions

Appearances matter. Matlin was right regarding her points about media and female representation. Differences between women and men are noticeable in the media. Even politicians tend to be portrayed with specific skills, depending on their gender. Much like how the physical appearances of women and men tend to be portrayed in the media, it is important to highlight the differences in language used at both. With news anchors, there are three different hurdles that women have to get through: newsroom diversity, television attractiveness, and the way people perceive beauty. Awareness is the first step to addressing these issues.

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