CLAIRE UNDERWOOD: HOUSE OF CARDS’
FIRST LADY & ISSUES OF FEMALE POWER

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ABSTRACT

Shifts that have taken place alongside with the rise of new media, have influenced and altered the way television product is being consumed; global streaming providers make their entrance in the traditional media scene, and meet big success and engagement, changing the viewing habits and rendering old ones obsolete. Such a case is Netflix, with one of its most popular shows being the political thriller House of Cards. Many factors have contributed to the show’s phenomenal success; the unique way of distribution, the high quality in terms of scenario, production, aesthetics, as well as the complex and multi layered character development. Both protagonists relationship (and obsession) with power cause controversy in how the audience receives them. This dissertation aims to explore the various ways in which the fictional character of Claire Underwood, the co-protagonist in House of Cards, complies with and contradicts the traditional representations of a female in power. As America’s first lady she appears to both work as the president’s support system at times, but also ignore his interest for the sake of her benefit. In times when television rethinks female representation, which for ages had been images of objectified, flat male accessories, Claire consists a voice on her own within the show, which is worth studying in terms of asserting power and having an impact just as sound as her husband’s. Claire constitutes a multi dimensional character, that shall be studied through a focus group constructed internationally. Through the analysis of Netflix’s first lady, a closer look at the structure of this symbol of female power shall be attempted, in terms of gender, feminist and power relations discourse. An unlikely female character and a perfect other half to ruthless and power-hungry Francis Underwood, Claire has created a cult around her character with followers defining their identity through everything she appears to be or look like. It appears, thus, of interest to turn attention towards how the audience reads her and what she represents on the show, as well as how her characteristics are viewed or even adopted by fans, in an attempt to model themselves after her.

KEY WORDS

First Lady, Appearance, Power, House of Cards, Claire Underwood, Dress, Feminism, Gender,
INTRODUCTION

With a female candidate, who happens to be an ex First Lady, very politically active, so close to being elected as president for the first time in US history, it is intriguing to examine how rise of female power moves away from the imaginary sphere and becomes tangible. The role of women in society as equal to that of men raises in power, and the status of women in society becomes an issue that is interesting to look upon and examine.

Women’s role has been altered by a long series of advancements, ranging from the effect of the extension of the electoral suffrage and full citizenship rights after the First World War, to the access of more women to higher education and the paid labor force. The rise of the second wave’s movement in the mid-sixties came with a shift in sexual mores and lifestyles, and major changes within families, marriage and the sexual division of labor and child caretaking within the home, as well as seeing more women in leading positions in public life.

The role of the First Lady of the United States has reflected these shifts in women’s position, and becomes a valid case study, due to its centuries’ long tradition. From merely being a decorative figure by the president’s side, to Michelle Obama’s active participation in the campaigns, government and non-governmental causes, the role’s development through the years has been pivotal in inspiring women to become more active in demanding an equal social status with that of men.

Key role in building this new image of women as powerful agents is played by appearance. Dress is one of the main ways one expresses their identity, and society uses it to distinguish gender (and impose it); therefore how one dresses conveys social meanings and has an impact on every aspect of a person’s social life: the area with the most rigid barriers being the workspace. It is worth investigating how organizational culture defines the woman at work, and what are the dressing tactics that can gain women respect as professionals- and in this way, equal chances at work with men.

This dissertation sets out to analyze all the aforementioned themes, and explore how the pursued equality of the sexes, as well as the role of power and its relation to appearance, are seen through the character of Netflix’s political thriller, House of Cards (HoC) (2013- ), Claire Underwood. An excellent example of all themes this
dissertation wishes to explore, she appears of great interest as a female character far from all stereotypes. In doing so, apart from the literature review, an online focus group will be employed, gaining thus access to fans’ perception of Claire, and as a synecdoche, of women’s role in today’s society.

The first chapter sets out to follow the role of the first lady through the nation’s history, from covering the ceremonial aspects of the presidency, to a stronger role inspired by the ideal of the “New Woman”, that coincided with U.S.’ rise in importance as a nation. Always serving her traditional role as the country’s mother, the modern first lady functions more as a colleague to the president, serving an empowering as well as restricting role, which somehow reflects women’s position in society. What follows is an overview of the feminist movement, which rose to tackle all the inequalities experienced by females in the private as well as public life. Even though women’s interests are not unified, but specific to the problems they face in their respective communities, they do set out to achieve more in terms of accessing more forms of power, and thus empowering themselves and their fellow women. Partial role in this is played by appearance, and specifically dress, which works in assigning gender as well as social roles. Thus, women develop a rigid dress code in the workplace, reflecting male values and assimilating the male style. Power dressing derives from this process, example of which is Netflix’ House of Cards protagonist, Claire Underwood, whose power style seems so aligned with her personality, that fans copy it in an attempt of creative identity reconstruction. Through the research what is being displayed, is a sample of the audience’s perception of the character of Claire, exploring various themes such as appearance, feminism, marriage, motherhood, power, which results, then, are being analyzed and compared with the findings of the literature review.
1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 THE FIRST LADY OF THE UNITED STATES

“if women are to play society’s power game, we might as well play to win; but hopefully not just to win but to change the rules as well.”

Johnson, 1976

The institution of first ladyship is a well established one in American society, with a role as eminent, if unofficial, as the president’s. However, the importance of the president’s wife position has changed shape and form through the country’s history, closely tied to the gender and race norms at each point in time. As Caroli (2010) mentions in her thorough study of first ladies through history, their position was not much noticed in the early days of the nation, as they were barely mentioned in the documents of the time. Once the presidents started travelling, however, made possible by the building of railroads, they – along with their wives- start gaining more popularity over the local governors. Even the term “first lady” did not agree with the spirit of the time; there was an intense anti-royalty sentiment in the United States, which the term resembled. Generally, the cultural institution of first ladyship was what was of scholarly interest, as opposed to the formal institution of it that gained momentum in 1993 as Hilary R. Clinton attempted to run as chair of the president’s task force on Health Care Reform.

The role of the first lady within an administration has been unofficial, and therefore linked to the notion of “illegitimate power”, or, put otherwise, a “legal volunteer within the executive branch” (Borrelli, 2002); a role that entailed mainly celebrity status and public visibility. To them, their identity reflected “a nostalgic narrative of the nation’s identity”, having as a source existing cultural practices, on which they also built upon. However, it has shifted from clearly ritual and ceremonial, to much more active in terms of legislation. This depended, on the one hand, on the personality of each first lady and her drive to be part of her husband’s administration, and on the other hand, on the position of women within society. As Parry-Giles and Blair (2002)
suggest:” […] the discourse of these influential women must be contextualized within the gender ideology of their time” (p.566).

The nation’s need for a social creature, merely “decorative” is replaced by the idea of the “New Woman”, which emerged in the late nineteenth century, and referred to a new ideal of woman, “pious, pure, submissive, domestic, and naturally religious” (Welter, 1992, p.152) that is, still below her husband but more actively involved in “running organizations, carving out a career for herself, and speaking out for public issues” (Caroli, 2010, p.88). With the dawn of 20th century, the importance of the U.S. grows in the world, which is parallel with a stronger role for first ladies as well. As the road to equality of the sexes is being paved, so first ladies’ voice becomes louder, on topics such as health care and education, never escaping her traditional role of the country’s “mother”.

Nevertheless, even for issues that aligned with the republican motherhood ideology, first ladies such as Roosevelt, Carter and Clinton, who were involved in congressional activities, found themselves within a contested space of their position. Indeed, “historically, most women who moved their political activity from the nongovernmental sphere of volunteerism to a legislative space were criticized for overstepping the boundaries of the position” (Parry-Giles and Blair, 2002, p.581). And indeed, for a first lady to imply publicly any involvement with politics, they often downplayed or denied their activities, therefore denying their belonging in that sphere and avoiding the public’s judgment and its impact on their husbands. The need for thorough evaluation of the first ladies, expressed by former president Truman upon leaving the White House, is largely covered by Simonton’s work, who, in 1996, carried out a study assessing First ladies on different factors, and found that recent ones scored higher in the “colleague” dimension (i.e. a help to the president of an equal status), fact which implied the fundamental improvement in women of United States’ involvement in politics. The first one to ever somewhat shift this paradigm, having political achievements of her own before being a first lady, was Hillary Clinton, paving the way to the potential power first ladyship could entail in U.S. politics.

Traditionally, tasks undertaken by first ladies would be keeping correspondence, and helping the president by selecting the most important news, running campaigns, as
well as providing opinions and giving advice, having served as “policy advocates, spokespersons, campaign surrogates, and presidential partners” (Borrelli, 2002, p.28). Robert Watson (2000), attempting to classify first ladies according to their performance on eleven fundamental duties, [wife and mother; public figure and celebrity; nation’s social hostess; symbol of the American woman; White House manager and preservationist; campaigner; social advocate and champion of social causes; presidential spokesperson; presidential and political party booster; diplomat; political and presidential partner (p.72)] finds out that few of these areas are susceptible to legal codification, rendering the post almost exclusively informal in nature.

As the centuries passed, so did the role evolve, through mimicking and transforming their predecessors’ values, “in the areas of benevolent volunteering and social politicking, perpetuating and altering the ideology of republican motherhood in the process” (Parry-Giles and Blaire, 2002, p.575). The rising importance of the role becomes evident by initiatives such as the Gubernational Spouses seminar, provided for the wives of governors, since their role as state first lady draws from and is compared to the country’s first lady. What has been under scrutiny, however, and often frowned upon, is first ladies’ political influence in areas not considered a “female domain”. The problem that rises in trying to legally define the role of a first lady has its roots to historical practices and personal relationships, that by default circumvent the law. Indeed, there is no doubt that through their proximity to power, first ladies have been afforded the ability to evade bureaucratic hierarchies and to exercise direct or indirect influence; “Through persuasion, advice becomes influence” (O’Connor, Nye, and Van Assendelft, 1996, p.836). However, political scientists have not determined clearly who influences the president’s governmental decisions, since indirect influence is difficult to observe and weigh (Dahl, 1961).

On the one hand, even though the president is supposed to be independent of his advisors, however, he appears susceptible to the first lady’s scheming; that consisted a reason first ladies were under control and often marginalized. Therefore, they mainly depended on their informal private advisor role that could grant them access without the public’s scrutiny, fact that provided no opportunity of autonomy from the president. At the same time, this compliance can prove a destructive example for the public: by ceding her own career she promotes inequality of the sexes and causes
political alienation. To this day and age, and while the changes to the first ladies’ role have been monumental in terms of participation in the process of policy making, however, the frame of the role’s discourse is essentially a gender-prescribed performance, largely based on 19th century values of womanhood. Indeed, and despite the steps that have been made, this adherence to traditional ideologies works solely towards strengthening the gender nature of the post (making it hard for a woman to be perceived as presidential) and limit a first woman activities to causes related to children and women.

Yet, despite the aforementioned obstructions, the positive outcome that emerged with the end of the twentieth century, for first ladies but also for women as a whole, is the fact that their status is being institutionalized, as a result of the end of public and private political separation for first ladies. Their acts of social politicking are now more frequently practiced, and they are expected to promote their own political causes. “No longer can the political activism of the president’s wife be dismissed as the expression of one woman’s ambition” (Borrelli, 2002, p.40). This political voice given to a woman, has turned women’s issues into national issues. “First ladies’ benevolent discourse not only assisted in eroding some of the negative sentiment over women’s rhetorical-political activities, but also constructed a public and empowered role for U.S. women” (Parry-Giles and Blair, 2002, p.581). This clash over the influence of the first lady, represents on scale a larger, more general problem within the American society, that of women’s position in the political sphere; but at the same time, the progress made within the role, mirrors great achievements of women within a patriarchal society. And thus, the leaders among first ladies are the ones “who are not only aware of the potential influence of their position, but who use that influence effectively to produce change and set new precedents for what is acceptable for first ladies, and women, to do” (O’Connor, Nye, and Van Assendelft, 1996, p.848).

To fully grasp the development of the role of the first lady, it appears necessary to look into women’s history within society, and trace their way into acquiring more rights and power, as the first lady consists nothing but a reflection on women’s position as a whole.
1.2GENDER AND POWER

1.2.1Introduction to Feminism

The first move towards gender equality is placed by Inglehart and Norris (2001) as an impact of modernization, which took place in two phases: during industrialization, women are brought into paid work force and literacy, and the postindustrial phase where women move towards higher status economic roles and gain greater political influence. These two phases also bring about, on the one hand, the transition from traditional to secular-rational values, and on the other the transition from survival to self-expression values; and the rise of focus on gender issues links to the shift towards self-expression. Feminism is the political, social, economic, and literary movement advocating women’s rights and promoting their causes. The movement’s first activity was during the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century throughout the world, focusing on legal issues such as gaining the right to vote (suffrage); that era was known as the first wave of feminism. The second wave comes in the United States during the 1960s, and shifts the focus from legal rights to a wider range of issues including sexuality, domestic violence and rape, family and the workplace, and reproductive rights. Even though it has been criticized by recent theorists as “whitewashed”, excluding the voice of women of color or LGBT women, and denying that gender intersects with other forms of inequality like race, it did give feminism some of its “more important and lasting insights, most significantly the idea that sexuality is socially constructed, as well as an emancipatory politics of social transformation” (Jackson, 2001, p.284).

Ever since Beauvoir (1972) claimed that “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman”, it has been argued that femininity is a social and cultural construct rather than a natural one and that there is nothing inevitable about male dominance. Until the early 1980s, Jackson (2001) contends, feminist theory had mainly drawn from social sciences, keeping a close interrelation with Marxism, until the “cultural turn”, shifting the modernist so far agenda of early second-wave feminism towards postmodernist perspectives, with emphasis moving from “things” (such as women’s work and male violence) to “words”; that is, issues of language, representation, and subjectivity (Barrett, 1992). That turn, rising as a response to what the second failed to represent, marked the third wave, confronting “the complexities of women’s lives in a
postcolonial era with its global economy, its history of colonial diasporas, and its current labor migrations and displacements of refugees” (Jackson, 2001, p.285), with its focus being, redefining what feminism means, including marginalized women, and abolishing gender roles stereotypes. It emerged at a time when neoliberalism had a visible effect on all progressive, collective social movements, feminism included, which was already affected by the antifeminist sentiment. The 3rd wave is largely self-defined, and its main objectives were to inspire young women to become “active producers of culture of their own, rather than passive consumers of the mainstream; resisting hierarchical organizing structures [...] and focus on self-expression and identity projects” (Mackay, 2011). In Wieringa’s (1994, p.834) words: “feminism should be understood as a highly complex, multi-layered, transformative set of political practices and ethics, elements of which may be in contradiction with each other, and intersect with other transformative practices, such as the struggles against oppression on the basis of class, race, ethnicity, and sexual preference”. Finally, the fourth wave (2008 till present), known as “online feminism”, uses social media platforms to discuss, support, and uplift gender equality. The use of social media and its immediacy have created a “call-out” culture, where sexism or misogyny is challenged whether it be found on media, advertising, film, etc; fact that has altered the sensitivity with which women are marketed. It shares the agenda of the third wave, while expanding it to the use of technology, and to focus on reproductive justice, transgender support, sex work acceptance, and plus size fashion support.

Unquestionably, women have come a long way in acquiring rights equal with men within their respective societies. As it is apparent, however, this long way cannot be considered enough, or the effort towards equity finished, by women’s gaining the right to vote or working outside of home; when most societal structures around the world are still strongly patriarchal, and the progress in changing traditional gender roles is painfully slow. “We live today within a global context characterized by extremely stark and worsening material inequalities, and it is often women who are most disadvantaged by the intersections between local and global exploitation” (Jackson, 2001, p. 286). Despite having earned rights that have granted them more presence within society, there are stereotypes that hold them disadvantaged compared to men. The chasm becomes more evident as one moves up the hierarchical scale, where power positions are still scarcely a female domain. Wieringa (1994) notes that
women’s issues cannot be dealt with in isolation but instead should be seen “in the context of power relations between women and men” (p.830). As the Human Development Report of 1993 indicated, women are often excluded from positions of power, have fewer opportunities to work or to get an education. This is suggestive of the fact that despite the technological advances and overall development the world has seen in recent years, it is not however indicative of progress in gender equity; the economic developments do not guarantee social ones.

The notion of empowerment comes in feminist thought with the third wave, introduced during the 1990s, and it is one of its most important ones. Its advocates recognize feminism as not being neither recent nor western a phenomenon, and “see women’s subordination as a holistic process, encompassing all aspects of women’s lives; [...] seeking ways to empower women, not in the sense of reversing existing hierarchies, but to make their own choices, to speak out on their own behalf and control their own lives.” (Wieringa, 1994, p.832). The process to empowerment responds to the existing oppression by exposing the oppressive power of the present gender relations, critically challenge it, and creatively try to shape different social relations, with a view to constructing a collective self of women, changing how they see themselves: assertive agents, contributing to their own redefinition. For this to be achieved, political mobilization and raising of awareness are considered key factors, and women’s organizations are essential for the development processes. However liberating it might end up being, it is not an easy task, often painful, as women can be “fearful of the new”, and reluctant to move away from the security of tradition. In Vargas’ words (1992, p.86), women continually move between “submission and rebellion”, as “they cannot fight all battles at the same time, nor can they afford to discard their path altogether, however oppressive it may be”.

Thinking of women’s gender interests in a unified way, as the name predisposes, has been challenged as simplistic, as it has been pointed out that they are socio-historically specific. They should be perceived as flexible, complex elements, resulting from political processes, such as “confrontation, negotiation, alliances with men, with society, with the state, and with other women, in short with society and its powers” (Vargas, 1992). Haraway (1991) refers to women’s realities as “discursively constructed”, and deems it impossible to refer to them as objectively discernible. Instead one might perceive their experiences as “symbolical codes, subject to diverse
interpretations”. Another issue that feminist thinkers are in dispute with is the dualism that prevails in science as a way of explaining nature, where the one part is dominating the other. This ordering of reality is being questioned, and seen as a way of male scientists to control women and nature.

Power is another fundamental notion for feminism, since, the way society is currently shaped, power and gender are never independent. Max Weber (1978) defines power as “the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his will despite resistance”. Its etymological relation to the French word pouvoir and the Latin word potere, both of which mean to be able, lead Pitkin (1972) to suggest that power is something which renders somebody able to do. Power is capacity, potential, ability and wherewithal. According to Kabeer (2005), power is the ability of making choices.

Broadly, scholars’ definitions of power are divided between “power-over”, the domination and control of one person or group over another, and “power-to”, which refers to personal empowerment. Power –over can be represented at four levels of analysis: societal, organizational, interpersonal, and individual (Ragins and Sundstrom, 1989). When the centre of study is women and power, societal level of analysis administers the context. Issues of patriarchy and gender based social, economic and sexual inequalities are what the scholars observe, referring to power-over. Women’s position in the workforce, wage inequalities, glass ceilings, and the power hierarchy are being examined by organizational power analysis, which’s focus includes control over resources, rewards and punishments, information and the work environment, and work procedures (Ragins and Sundstrom, 1989). Interpersonal power-over appears in dyadic interaction (Cartwright, 1959), in which one person has the power to influence another within a specific relationship, and the centre often is marital relationships, concentrating in the areas of sexual violence and communication. What the researchers of the field contend, is that communication is used differently by the two sexes, as men often display a desire for power-over, and women aim at intimacy or connection (Deutch, 1990). Of course, more often than not, the most prominent gender differences do not originate in gender per se, but on social factors associated with gender. All in all, power-over can be thought of as an individual factor: a personality trait such as dominance, a motive, or an attitude (Yoder and Kahn, 1992). Power-to, or personal empowerment, refers to the control
one feels over one’s own thoughts, feelings and behaviors, for example will-power and personal control (Bandura, 1989), compared to individual power-over, that has as its aim to control others. Empowerment applies to the procedures by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices, acquire such an ability (Kabeer, 2005). Power-to can be achieved on individual women through therapy, tackling issues of diversity or difference. “Even though individual in focus, the physical and cognitive empowerment of women is consistent with a feminist agenda of social change” (Yoder and Kahn, 1992, p.385). Power-to and power-over are closely related with the concept of agency, explained further below. The researchers, however, maintain that it is not effective to focus only on either individual or societal level of empowerment, but instead also recognizing the importance of individuals uniting behind a common cause, with common sentiments and motivation to achieve it. Similarly, gender differences as explanations of power or power-related results are simplistic, but should not be ignored when one wishes to study the communication patterns between genders as power holds a mediating role between them.

Traditionally, men remain in control of the concrete resources of power (money, knowledge, physical strength), namely the ones that are independent from personal relationships. Therefore, according to Millett (1970) men are most of the time in the highest positions of society’s institutions of strength, wealth, and learning, such as the military, scientific, intellectual and political institutions. Even when women manage to acquire concrete power and use it directly, they are discouraged from it, and they resort to indirect forms of power. Indirect power presupposes that the source of power is hidden, therefore it is considered as manipulation. Women are thought of as being trained to use this kind of power, keeping them in an inferior position by its very nature, and since the use of direct power would be considered unfeminine or overbearing. Sexual influence (among other resources such as liking, love, affection) is stereotypically ascribed to women; first ladies are often accused to use it to influence the president, as mentioned before. Women, having internalized this idea of incompetence, often do not live up to their capabilities and resort to helplessness. One can also exercise power through reward and coercion, with coercion being ascribed as a male attribute, since it is more aggressive and unpleasant.

Therefore, in order for women to make an actual change in the system they part take, they need to get access to more forms of power; in other words, stop relying on
sources of power that conforms to expectations of them. Shirley Chishlom (1970) claims that power needs to be taken, since it is not being given away. With increased access to concrete resources and expertise, women can acquire new forms of power, not to repeat a stereotypical male agenda, but to empower themselves, to promote positive human values and support other women’s interests.

Women’s empowerment and gender equality are included in the United Nations’ Millennium Goals, and the resources through which the progress is monitored are education, employment, and political participation; namely, closing the gender gap in education, increasing women’s share of wage employment in the non-agricultural sector, and increasing proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments (Kabeer, 2005). However, for women to be actually empowered, two conditions must take place: on the one hand, there must be given alternatives, and that is, the ability to choose differently. On the other hand, these alternatives must be apparent, because “gender operates through the unquestioned acceptance of power”; Women often make choices that seem the only acceptable ones, even though theoretically they could have chosen otherwise (denial of choice). Three key concepts through which empowerment is to be explored, according to Kabeer, are agency, resources, and achievements: “agency represents the processes by which choices are made and put into effect; resources are the medium through which agency is exercised, and achievements are the outcomes of agency” (2005, p.14). Agency relates to one’s acting upon their own life choices, even if one is faced with opposition (power-to), and with the ability of violence or authority to cancel the agency of others (power-over). And since power in many cases is the absence of agency, for the latter to be effective it should not only exercise choice but also challenge power relations. Resources, dispersed through society in institutions and relationships, are the medium to exercise agency. Therefore, women can appear underprivileged if their access to resources comes through their dependence on other family members. Lastly, achievements indicate to what extent resources and agency have managed to grant people potential of living the life they want. For agency, resources and achievements to bring about substantial change within society, what needs to be ensured is that both immediate inequalities are addressed and tackled, but also long term change against patriarchy. Both individual and collective agency, both private and public action taken, in order to impact the formal arenas of struggle where power is legitimately exercised.
Even though the current education system fosters gender stereotypes of girls as shy and boys as ambitious, which results in limiting the future that girls can imagine for themselves, access to education contributes greatly to the way to empowerment: exposure to new ideas leads to questioning the status quo of male dominance, and it increases women’s capacity to take care of themselves and deal with the outside world, including government officials. Access to non-agricultural paid work shares the limits to empowerment with education in that women’s work is being excessively taken advantage of, and although both spouses work, housework and childcare burden remains on women. However, the positive effect waged work has upon their lives cannot be ignored: women with an income have been able to assert greater respect within the household, part-take in the decision making process and money spending, renegotiate abusive marriages and even escape them, resulting in reduction of domestic violence, as well as positively influencing women’s own perception of themselves (Kabeer, 2005). And of the three indicators of progress, the one most likely to bring about substantial change and lead to empowerment is women’s participation and representation in decision making processes. Although women are underrepresented in government, with an average representation around the world of 13.8 per cent in 2000 (Goetz, 2003), their presence and leadership means that “the vision and values of women’s groups and organizations across the world have been translated into technical goals to be implemented by the very actors and institutions that have blocked their realization in the past” (Kabeer, 2003, p.22).
1.2.2 Women in positions of power

“The higher you go, the fewer women there are”
Wangari Maathai

Through history, leadership has been thought of as a masculine trait, and men being better leaders than women is still a common thought today. “The cultural construction of leadership in itself instigates difference and this is only now being transformed or contested as women gain access to leadership positions” (Hojgaard, 2002, p.73). As the escape from tradition means escape from one’s comfort zone, women’s advancement has been followed by feelings of conflict. In their essay, Fong and Tiedens (2002) contend that “women in high status positions experience emotional ambivalence (simultaneous experience of positive and negative affect) and motivational ambivalence (simultaneous desires to build relationships and display power)” (p.105). Positive feelings derive from goal attainment, while negative ones usually come with society’s perception of a woman with power and control. Goal conflict derives from the stereotypical pursuits a woman should have, the notion that women feel divided between the traditional role of women as caretaker and relationally oriented, and a more contemporary role that emphasizes strength and competence (Aguinis and Adams, 1998). The pursuit of power, control, and strength should not be seen in contrast to building relationships; the reason it is so derives from the imposed duality of the masculine and feminine. By gaining power and status, women do feel more agentic; however, instead of switching roles, they accumulate them, namely they add on their traditionally feminine roles the new power-oriented ones. This simultaneous pursuit tends to create the struggle in women. “They wish for and fear the challenges of the external world” (Kiamba, 2008, p.15).

Despite the former assumption of leadership as being linked to masculinity, today it is thought of as something to be learned and developed. Growe and Montgomery (2000) define leaders as people who provide vision and meaning for an institution and embody the ideals toward which the organization strives. Clearly, women and men have different leadership styles. Women tend to follow a more participatory approach, are more sensitive and let others make contribution through delegation (de la Rey,
2005), while men stress task accomplishment, goal achievement, and the accumulation of information and winning: men view leadership as leading whereas women as facilitating (Growe and Montgomery, 2000). Even though the two styles’ difference should not mean one’s dominance over the other, stereotypes of how women lead have made it so that women, in an attempt to not be viewed as an outsider, are compelled to lead according to the norm, which is the male way.

When dealing with barriers to their progress, similar to what has been implied above, Lang (2012) argues that the “ambition gap” (that women lack ambition, shrink from opportunity, and that is why they do not achieve high status as often or easy as men) is a myth. Instead, when barriers rise to their advancement, women tend to internalize and rationalize them. They put themselves down by accepting discrimination as the outcome of their actions, which reduces their self-confidence; that, in turn, creates a self-fulfilling effect in being unable to progress. They are unwilling to raise awareness when injustice in the workplace occurs, and by a big percentage what they choose to do is leave quietly (Hamel, 2009). Another way women choose to respond to barriers is by not choosing certain male-dominated fields, such as science and math. And indeed, this lack of presence shows in the political sphere too, with statistics in the United States showing only one in seven parliamentarians being women, one in ten cabinet ministers, and one in twenty Heads of State (UN, 2000), with projections that are based on the pace with which change occurs indicating that parity in parliaments will come in a century from now. And that does not stand true only in government, but also higher education, with 18.7% of women holding full professorships, and 19.3% presidents of colleges and universities (Gumbi, 2006).

In Norris and Inglehart’s worldwide comparison project on barriers to leadership (2004), they conclude that, among other results, traditional attitudes are a major barrier in electing women to parliament, culture continues to be a significant influence to their election. Indeed, despite their entry to education and the job market, the typical role for a woman is that of homemaker in contrast with men as bread winners, (Sadie, 2005) and therefore being out in public life, where the political sphere belongs. However, the younger generation seems to dismiss these barriers, leading to value change and modernization. Their results also point to the fact that wealthy countries like the U.S., have seen the impact of the second wave movement in a manner that socioeconomic and political equality for women are interlinked, fact that is not so in
other societies where the movement’s demands have been elsewhere focused. Whether a society is postindustrial, post-Communist, or developing, it displays a whole different set of values and beliefs about men and women’s political leadership. Societies that stigmatize women for participating in public life tend to make them avoid taking the risk. Media coverage has its merit in it too, since by not covering female campaigns as much as men’s, they contribute the forming of public opinion. Religion also poses a great obstacle, as under all mainstream religions women are perceived as less equal than men. Apart from all these social factors, and much against feminist solidarity, women themselves seem to pose an obstacle to women’s way to top positions, as Pandor (2006) reports that women at senior level positions are not supportive of other women and they tend to maintain the status quo. This lack of unity is attributed to women seeing each other as a threat. It is suggested that attitudes towards women’s political leadership are strongly related to their proportion in parliament as well; generally, countries with democratic cultures tend to empower more women. However, in cases such as the U.S. or Spain, the public opinion has run ahead accepting women much more than it is being reflected in the opportunities these countries give women for office. In contrast with this come countries such as China or South Africa, where positive action strategies are far ahead from the public opinion on equality. In general, politics remain a domain where women are underrepresented; and an underlying problem for that is the difficulty in “dealing with the inherent patriarchal structures that pervade the lives of people, the processes of state and the party” (Nzomo, 1997, p.68).

To tackle all these phenomena of discrimination against women in power positions or leadership, government strategies have been developed. However effective women’s movements have been through history, in order for a drastic change to take place, the government has to take measures, as “women’s increased participation in decision-making seldom happens by some evolutionary miracle” (Sadie, 2005, p.127). The three policies adopted worldwide to ensure women’s inclusion in different structures, and these are: rhetorical statements, that have to be followed up by concrete measures in order not to remain on a symbolic level of political correctness; affirmative action, that aims to remove practical barriers for women and include training, advisory group goals, and financial assistance; and, finally, positive discrimination, that includes mandatory quotas in the selection of candidates for political or social groups; a
strategy that has been fought against as unfair, since positive discrimination entails the automatic choice of people based merely on their gender or race. But certainly, women cannot solely depend on policy, as that would result in superficial change; policy makers and political parties that implement new reforms are still male dominated. Women need to take full charge and responsibility of the changes made on issues that concern them, in order for that change to be genuinely substantial. So far, “the increase in political activism and subsequently in the number of women in positions of political power, changed the institutional cultures of political bodies, such as parliament, to better accommodate women” (Kiamba, 2008, p.20).

Power can be manifested through symbols, one of which is appearance; indeed how one looks is often used as a symbol of the power they possess, or wishes to. The next chapter will analyze how appearance consists a tool through which women can assert being viewed equally with men in the workplace, as well as in society as a whole.
1.3 APPEARANCE AND POWER: DRESSING AS A TOOL

Clothing, in the western world, is strongly connected to how identities are shaped. Identity, considered often as a binary, is assisted by clothing in forming the differences between women’s and men’s gender. However, clothing does not only divide people in terms of gender, but also based on ethnicity, class, sexual orientation: it is a tangible image of one’s identity. Goodman, Knotts, and Jackson (2007) suggest that the use of doing dress instead of dressing “expands the concept to more than putting on a pair of pants, but rather to a broader look at how individuals create and express themselves” (p.101), which implies choice and agency in managing one’s identity. Indeed, the occurrence of dressing in daily life reveals both its commonality and significance. Clothes do cover and fit the body, but not only that; they are an extension of the body that proclaims personhood, because people choose clothes that represent who they are (Becker, 1997).

The link between one’s clothes and one’s idea of their own self lies in expressions such as, “this is so me!” when one comes across an article one could see themselves wearing; in other words, clothing, by being tangible, “recovers” identity’s intangibility, and provides a way of communicating a desired image both to oneself, as well as the social world (Barnard, 2000). As the act of getting dressed, is, according to Entwistle (2000), “preparing the body for the social world, making it appropriate, acceptable, indeed respectable and possibly even desirable” (p.328), the agency in dressing comes in conflict with the constraints being accepted suggest. Indeed, dress adds to sustaining what is ‘normal’ by creating and maintaining it. Apart from it being a link between individual identity and social belonging, dress is “the visible form of our intentions, […] the insignia by which we read and are read by others, however unstable and ambivalent these readings may be” (Campbell, 1997, p.82).

There are varied ways through which the body gets subjected to power: it can be rendered meaningful and productive through institutional practices of dress. Such an example consist the styles of dress employed in the workplace as part of institutional strategies of management. Within occupational science, identity is thought of as everything but fixed, with individuals expressing multiple, changing visions of
themselves. Therefore dress as an occupation is central to creating and maintaining everyday identities. The allusions of the importance of dressing to identity creation, appear much more often in everyday life than in occupational science literature. When one thinks of gender identity, however, the societal image is more rigid, dichotomous. Gender is a socially constructed category, with the differentiation between men and women not encouraging to cross gender lines. Connell (2002), however, notes how part of the mystery of gender is how a pattern that on surface appears so stark and rigid, on close examination turns out so fluid, complex, and uncertain. Illustrative of the pervasiveness of gender norms in society, is the diagnosis of gender identity disorder to people who do not confine in gender norms, which by definition suggests it is acceptable to behave, and dress, according to one’s assigned gender. Apart from assigning gender, however, dress functions as key to assigning social roles. Social roles are “self-categorizations that individuals use to denote their sense of belonging with particular groups” (Ashforth and Mael, 1989, p.54). The assignment of social roles is also the function of organizational dress, which is thought to convey identity as well as assert control.

Within a workplace, most of the rules about dress are conveyed through the interaction with co-workers. With an exception of organizations which have formal, written dress code rules, most workplaces informally convey theirs. Dress at work is a well-defined site of gender construction (Butler, 1990), a practice through which men and women construct themselves as masculine or feminine, as well as sexual or not. In her research, Dillinger (2002) discovers the symbolic representation dress provides, of the separation between the public and the private. Wearing a suit at work provides the notion of work and home being separate domains; apart from that, dress norms are expected to “mute” one’s personality and sexuality, so that rationality and order prevails in the work sphere. In fact, business dress sets the standard to what is considered “professional”. In capitalist culture where profit is valued, business dress sets one as a serious, and therefore “real” worker. Dillinger also observes how hard it is for women to comply with the “asexual imperative”, since they are primarily defined by their sexuality, so it appears less likely that they fall within the ideal type of worker. Since neutral, corporate look is perceived as masculine, it is generally more difficult for women to keep their clothing away from the personal and the sexual. Thus, while a woman can wear a tailored suit, her identity will still be that of a female
professional, her body and gender outside the masculine norm. Even though more and more women work in male-defined arenas and thus define traditional images of femininity “the transformatory impact upon embodied feminine identity and upon the collective subordination of women in society is far from certain” (McNay, 1999, p.124).

Women through centuries conformed within these roles of femininity, and only in the turn of the last one did they begin to demonstrate an ability to manipulate and subvert them through dress. Of course, depending on their social class were they more or less able to do so, since the lower class had jobs outside the typical ‘feminine’ ones, and therefore had more freedom to wear trousers, compared to the demands and pressure that comes with being a member of the upper class. To this day, women have still not been able to subvert, nor successfully conform to gender roles. “Ordinary women struggle to bridge the gap between themselves and the available images of feminine” (Brewis et al., 1997). Fashion, defined as a system of continually changing styles, is the prevalent system controlling dress in the Western world; fashion has always been associated with power operations, setting class distinctions, while recently it has started playing an important role in establishing the barriers of sexual difference. Fashion, thus, is “obsessed with gender” (Wilson, 1985), starting with babies and continuing throughout one’s life, promoting styles that make possible to repeatedly produce gender stereotypes, even when gender appears to have lost its rigidity, such as with androgynous style. The way gender succumbs to subversion is usually through exaggeration or parody; however, despite what would be expected, some of the exaggerated performances such as drag, are thought to reinforce rather than convert gender stereotypes.

Power dressing clearly aims at success; but its adoption by professionals requires them having internalized a notion of themselves as enterprising subjects. The discourse around power dressing when it comes to women professionals, involves them acting upon themselves as part of a “project”, with a view to maximizing their chances at being successful; “wardrobe engineering” as Molloy (1980) puts it, relies on technical knowledge of dressing and its “effects”. As dress is gendered, the workspace is differently experienced by the two sexes: women are more likely to be identified with body than men, and this contributes to their greater awareness of themselves as embodied than men, whose identity is less situated in the body. How conscious of
one’s dress one is, is both gender and situation depended: women tend to derive bigger part of their self-worth or confidence from dress than men (Tseelon, 1997), and also a formal dinner, in contrast with a walk in the park, make dress less of an object in one’s consciousness.

An example of a powerful woman, who knows the effects of power dressing well and uses them to derive power from her wardrobe, is Netflix’s House of Cards’ Claire Underwood. The following chapter will present the innovations this tv series introduced for television watching, as well as look into Claire Underwood’s appearance strategy.
1.4 HOUSE OF CARDS: A REVOLUTION IN SERIES PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION

1.4.1 A new paradigm for series: Quality Drama

“The notion of television radically changes in the modern, digital era, pressuring the industry to conform into the new technological environment” (Dimitrakopoulou and Savvakis, 2015, p.1). For the last twenty years, American television is going through what Thompson (1997) called “a second Golden Age”: the innovative content, high quality manufacturing, cast from the world of cinema, that already being celebrated by both critics and the audience marked what is now considered as quality TV; What is also characteristic of quality TV is a shifted participation by the audience, who are now more socially invested in the shows, building their identities around them and consuming them both on levels of text as well as materially (Ando, 2015). Until this point, with the form TV shows used to have, there was not enough space given in terms of presentation of the characters, narrative, and plot development (Klarer, 2014). One of the most successful online television series in recent years, that falls within the category of “quality TV”, House of Cards (HoC) aired through the streaming service Netflix for the first time in 2013, and its distribution was the network’s biggest accomplishment; the first online-only series to receive Emmy awards. The big innovation of television programming of which it was part, lies both on how it was distributed, as well as on its production and subject-matter, classifying it as “must-see content” (Jancovich and Lyons, 2003). Indeed, the series stands out for a number of reasons: its excellent scripts and storyline, the aesthetically impeccable production, as well as the internationally acclaimed protagonists, but also the innovations brought about in terms of distribution, with its new TV market strategies that made the audience’s experience more immersive, and lastly, the introduction of a strong female character in the male dominated political sphere.

The introduction of quality TV, defined by its high level of textual production facilitated cult productions, referred to by scholars as the ones that draw an active and participatory fandom, which engages in creative practices around the media text (Gwenllian-Jones and Pearson, 2004), fact that reinforces the idea of television as a cultural form and a producer of imagery. HoC aired without the release of a pilot
episode, therefore no forty five minutes of establishing the plot and characters, allowing space and time for the characters to evolve and reveal themselves. A series of shifts have marked the change in the audience’s participation: The release of an entire season’s episodes together, introduced a new power in the hands of the viewers, that was unknown with the weekly release of television shows before the internet. The concept of binge watching, the practice of watching television for a long time span, which rose in popularity with the advent of on-demand viewing and online streaming, eliminated the need for tv scheduling, shifted the attention span of the audience, that now can choose how many episodes to watch in a row. The audience, in this way, is more in control; as Kevin Spacey, the protagonist of House of Cards, puts it in an interview, “in a way, it’s like picking up a novel”, reading multiple chapters together. The audience engages on a different level, less passive, much more involved with the plot and characters. “The user now, compared to the (passive) viewer of TV content, has various interactive tools at their disposal, with which they can read, write, buy, take part in polls in real time, chat with friends while at the same time watch TV” (Dimitrakopoulou and Savvakis, 2015, p.1). The ‘social TV’ phenomenon, that is the union of television and social media, has allowed the audience to build their own identities through performative self-representation, providing an expanded TV experience. “Audience members build and negotiate their gender identity and manage their social relations through a performative self-representation, using (buying and wearing) fashion-symbolic materials provided by TV” (Ando, 2015). Consumption experience is now integrated into audience’s social behavior.

1.4.2 Claire Underwood’s Appearance And Its Impact On The Audience

Samantha Power, an academic and U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, mentioned in an interview (2015) that she would be more effective, if she had Claire Underwood’s wardrobe. Indeed Claire’s wardrobe seems strategically designed, and plays an important role for the character, as well as the show’s narrative, as it adds consistency and credibility to both. The choice of Claire Underwood’s clothes is a clear reference to power-dressing, mentioned before in this dissertation, “namely, the range of consumption strategies that are strongly encoded through manuals, consultants, products, and services for women, which has been popular since the
Power-dressing aspired to provide educated, self-reliant women, who, until then, did not participate in the male dominated work and public life, with a way to handle the balance between the feminine and the professional. Power-dressing’s ultimate symbol is the tallieur, an effort for the female body to be desexualized in the organizational field, and contained within a recognizable uniform. Inspired by male conventions, power-dressing carries the status of a “working woman”, always mirroring and confirming the male look, in order for it to be considered legitimate. However male inspired, it is not any less ambiguous, as everything is around issues of dress and gender: while celebrated as mirroring the male, at the same time it is frowned upon for not being feminine enough.

Ando (2015), who performs a research on Claire’s sartorial choices using Pinterest, to figure out how the audience perceive her style and incorporate it into their own, notes that her power-dressing style is consistent and coherent through the seasons, with colors that follow the evolution of the storyline. The color combinations of her and her husband, Francis Underwood, create a coherent image and again underline the couple’s shared power. Ando goes on to describe Claire’s style as “both traditional and innovative”, as it is on the one hand, rigidly structured to resemble iconic figures of the American scene of politics such as Jackie Kennedy but also princess Diana, and on the other, despite the uncertainty of post-feminist fashion discourse, she appears efficient and systematic.

Claire’s style seems all the more powerful, as her strong, strict, consistent clothing appears in full accordance with her marble-like behavior, her control over her emotions and expressions. She is a powerful, Machiavellian character, who uses and manipulates people, and sometimes even facts to achieve what she wants: that is also reflected in her flawless appearance. According to Ando (2015) her fashion performance “is consistent with the idea expressed by the third generation of feminists about fashion as empowerment”, used, that is, as a tool of identity construction and not to accommodate the male gaze.
2. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Focus groups originated in sociology back to 1920’s but it was not until several decades later that they were used in research and gained increasing popularity in the 1990’s. A focus group is generally a group of 6-12 participants with an interviewer fulfilling the role of moderator, asking specific questions about the topic specified by the researcher. Another way to define the focus groups is as a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined environment” (Kreuger, 1998). With the increasing popularity of the Internet lead to the development of methods which in many cases are adaptations of traditional methods to the online environment; such as the case of online focus groups (OFC) (Smithson, 2007).

There are two main types of OFGs: synchronous and asynchronous. Synchronous focus groups are similar to traditional groups but use chat rooms or focus group software packages instead of real classrooms. In asynchronous groups, participants log in and answer discussion topics on their own time, through list servers, mailing lists or discussion groups. As in the case of any other method there have been noticed certain possibilities and limitations (Oringderff, 2004).

Some of the advantages and disadvantages are self-evident other are merely intuitive; but in a nutshell there are summarized as followed: a) they make it possible to involve geographically remote participants by eliminating the geographical boundaries and giving access to participants who are difficult to recruit otherwise b) they are more cost efficient by reducing the costs of hiring people and spaces c) the dynamics of the OFG’s encourage the participants to express their opinions reasonably swiftly, making great number of comments although shorter and simpler d) the participation is convenient eliminating the time zone differences and due to the anonymity the participants may express their opinion freely e) this method is more balanced in terms of the number of the comments made by the members.

As any other method for qualitative research studies, OFG’s have raised certain concerns regarding the appropriateness of the method. These include the fact that: a) only internet users can be recruited b) the attendance rate can be low c) the lack of observation of non-verbal signs such as the body language which contribute greatly to
the analysis of the discourse d) the security of information is limited due to the fact that the moderator cannot guarantee whether the participant is the person who is generating the information e) the participants may experience some technical difficulties such as loss of connection or sound delay which may be frustrating f) the interaction is made only through a computer screen leading to lack of physical communication, and g) the moderators role is much more reduced due to the lack of visual contact with the participants.

FOG’s may be a modern adaptation of the traditional face-to-face focus groups but there are some distinct differences that makes this research method more or less suitable for certain social researches. In FOG’s the interpersonal contact is through a computer screen, there is no physical proximity leading to various different consequences for the participants as they cannot relate to each other or the moderator the results may have been different due to the absence of non-verbal observation. Regarding the size of the group and the composition there are several differences; the online group size is usually 6-8 members slightly smaller than traditional groups; regarding the composition heterogeneity or homogeneity is not a key variable, given the difficulty ensuring that the participant posses the desired profile (not lying). There is also a greater difficulty in getting the members of the group to perceive that they are among similar people; and here is no guarantee that the participant matches the target population. Another key difference is the role of the moderator and even though this role has been reduced; he/she had to be highly skillful in in guiding the discussion towards the research subject, motivating all involved, enforcing order and controlling the length of turns. However, there is a great difficulty in getting subjects with little involvement in the topic to participate and keep them interested in the topic. Regarding the dynamics of this method by favoring anonymity the participants are less hesitant and the participation is egalitarian due to the small number of members. The responses are more spontaneous but less in depth as a result of the moderator’s role. However it may foster stimulus-response dynamics; leading to forced, unreal opinions.

The procedure may affect the individuals involved in a different way; many participants may be interrupted by external factors and experience technical difficulties that may be frustrating. In general, there is less involvement, sensitivity and reaction to the comments of the other participants. The strengths of the dynamics
in FOG’s may be assessed in two points; practical and financial: the speed of execution, lower cost, possibility of reaching participants who are difficult to recruit because of time and place makes it ideally for studies that require very specific target population which is difficult to recruit. Compared to the traditional focus group method the FOG method provides less in depth information and less possibility of observing non-verbal behavior.

Furthermore, there are limitations in applying the technique in studies with low involvement and face greater difficulty in applying projective techniques and generalizing group results to the target population. (Murgado-Armenteros, 2012) The social research on online environment posses several challenges to the researcher. The use of FOG research method raises concerns regarding the epistemology, authenticity, authority, representation and ethics were raised. Most of these questions existed previously but the application of the focus-group to the online environment has resurfaced them creating a level of uncertainty regarding the application and the results of this method. The analysis, interpretation and representation of digital data are yet to be fully explored, and hence any scientific claims made from online research may be subject to question. With the advent of new technologies, increased use of graphical content and an expanding online population will require online methods that are both responsive and adaptive in order to be utilize in a rapidly changing environment (F. Stewart, 2014).

In order to investigate how female power relates to dress this dissertation chooses to take as the focus point of the research the leading character of House of Cards Claire Underwood, around whom the research realizes itself. What is being attempted is to record the reception of Claire Underwood in terms of her personality, her appearance, her relationship with marriage, motherhood, power, morality, as well as her role as a first lady. For the sake of the research a qualitative method was used, and specifically an online focus group. The members of the conducted group are 16, ages 21 to 38, of Greek, American, Dutch, and Nigerian nationalities. For this reason the questions were posed both in Greek and English. The members were chosen based on their interest in the TV series and on whether they were fans of Claire’s character, so that the answers collected would be as insightful as possible; however the members vary in terms of background, interests, educational level etc., fact that adds variety to the
given responses. Unfortunately the participation was only 56.25%, despite the urges and reminders. Some members did not respond at all while others maintained their recollection of the show was not strong enough.

The questions posed were accompanied by visual material (Photos, videos), functioning as a reminder of the episode that inspired the theme of each question. The posting of the questions were daily, or with a few days’ gap, in order for time to be provided in answering the questions. The presentation of the findings will follow the conversations as they took place in the Facebook groups, and the analysis will revolve around issues that the members stress in their statements, focusing on answering the research questions of how is a woman perceived today in terms of her career, and what is the relationship of gender and power; can they truly rise to leading positions in the developed world? Furthermore, how equality of the sexes and the role of power is seen through the example of Claire Underwood. It is also attempted to identify Claire’s voice within different discourses (gender identity, power, politics) and investigate audience’s perception of Claire as a character, and her influence in terms of style. Lastly, how are symbols of power expressed through Claire, and how are these perceived by the audience.
3. FINDINGS

Claire’s Appearance

The first theme that was explored is Claire Underwood’s style, and how her appearance is being perceived, in relation to power. Robin Wright, the actress embodying Claire, in an interview characterizes Claire’s style as “classic-sexy, within the conservativism that Washington accepts”. Her Machiavellian ways, her manipulation tactics and her cold, ruthless behavior are all reflected in the way she dresses and looks. One of the participants (male, 26) mentions that Claire’s appearance is “her strongest tool” in achieving what she wants, as it manages to attract and intimidate others. He draws a comparison between her look now, and a picture of her shown with long hair, taken by her ex boyfriend, who noted how she was more “carefree” then. “She is the type of person that comprehends the importance of time and space, and her choices have become more considered now, that she is becoming a political beast. A short haircut is not what someone would stereotypically expect for a woman who represents the Conservative Party and later becomes the First Lady. She is not the kind of person that would care to make a fashion statement with a short haircut and a suit. Claire just confidently demands the “opponent’s” full attention. Someone would say that Claire’s wardrobe is her actual armor.” How calculated her appearance is, is revealed to the audience through Claire in season 4, where she answers on why she changed from brown hair back to blonde: “We changed it because blonde pulls better with the voters. There’s a whole gaggle of people who weigh in on how you look and what you wear; whether an event calls for heels, earrings, no earrings”. Even her appearance, therefore, is a means through which she manipulates. Other participants focus on how formal and driven her look makes her, “with no time for small talk”. Specifically, someone (male, 30) mentions how “her looks add to her dominance instead of stealing from it, element she shares with women in top management or political roles”, while another participant (male, 27) notes how “Claire’s appearance makes one want to be her”, expressing the audience’s tendency to draw from her personality and add to theirs, in their identity construction. As for her appearance in relation to her husband, Francis Underwood, and the shift that takes place after she becomes the First Lady, some participants found little or no
change to the way she dressed, while noting how Claire’s appearance works for the benefit of Frank, and vice versa: They are a power couple that complements one another, they both look in control and flawless. However, opinions varied, since someone else (male, 38) underlined how “it changed slightly when she became the first lady as the PR people were probably trying to make her seem less cold, calculated and career driven. She and Frank definitely complement each other, although at times I think she’s the more callous one of the two”, while another member (male, 25) goes in depth answering “Even Claire is playing safe (at least on the first two seasons) with a very specific palette of navy, white, black and beige. But I truly believe that it has nothing to do with Frank. The only apparent moment that Frank is affecting Claire’s appearance is when she becomes brunette and due to a poll she is asked by Frank and his assistant to go back to blonde, as she is more likeable to the voters. That’s the only moment that Frank is actually intervening. As for when she becomes First Lady, we can see that she adds few pale colours to her palette. On Frank’s inauguration she actually wears a total black look with black leather gloves, but despite that we see more “Stepford Wife” -ish clothes in her wardrobe. In the portrait scene, she chooses to wear a light blue dress with a very wide neckline. With that choice she lets Frank’s hand to actually touch her shoulder skin to skin, so that it could show more affection. The length of the skirts and the sleeves are becoming a bit shorter and we see wider necklines. She feels more powerful. She stills needs her armor but now she is on the top.”

Claire as an anti-heroine

Claire’s power tactics, her pragmatism and ruthlessness make her one of the biggest examples of an anti-heroine in recent TV history. Her role as an NGO head, bringing clean water to communities in Africa comes in full contrast with how her character develops, her ceaseless pursuit of power no matter the cost and her constant social play is known to repel and draw the audience to her. A participant mentions that, while he does not identify with anything in Claire, he is however magnetized and drawn to her appearance, her calculated reactions, even mentions that he wishes he had her emotionlessness and her immorality. A pair of participants finds her partnership with Frank very appealing, since they respect and support each other so
much; however, when he fails to promote her interests, she does not hesitate to leave him, showing her true independence and reliance upon herself. One (male, 38) says “I really admire her determination to get what she wants and not allow anyone, even her husband to get in her way. Something I find appealing, although quite a fallacy as it will only end in tears but still to be admired... But she needs to learn balance... As much as they are determined, you notice how cold their home always looks... At the end when you're at the top, it begs the question, was it really worth it? I don't know if I share any qualities with her.” Another participant (female, 26) goes as far as characterizing her a sociopath, taking into consideration how far she does not hesitate to go to reach her goals. Indeed, she displays psychopathic behaviors, such as being manipulative and deceptive, while appearing likable and charming, and lack of empathy or remorse, but she cannot be considered one- the way that Frank can. One member of the group finds himself inspired by her character through the first seasons, and admires her quality to function without guilt.

Claire as a feminist

When it comes to Claire and feminism, things are hard to determine: even though she appears as a symbol of female power, determined to achieve as much as she dreams disregarding the male dominance of the field she is pursuing, (Robin Wright herself does the character she plays justice by demanding equal pay with Kevin Spacey for acting on the show) she does not seem to treat her fellow women according to feminist values of support and uplift one another. On the contrary, she uses women to achieve her goals, she threatens and manipulates, using her relationship to her own mother whichever way it benefited her. Most participants agree that Claire does not respect or promote any feminist agenda, since the only agenda she is behind is that of her own interests, and in some cases her husband’s as well. One member of the group (male, 28) detaches her from gender, characterizing her as cold-blooded, regardless of her sex. She eliminates the weak attributes of women by acting in a way that always promotes her interests or what she wants, not considering her husband, her mother, the Russian president. The scene where she collapses into tears, and then after seconds composes herself and moves on, speaks volumes of how she deals with her weak moments. Another member (male, 33) finds her masculine in her behaviors more than
she appears to be feminine—therefore less likely to promote all that society assigns to femininity as traits. She has “no time for sympathy for weakness”. Another pair of participants agrees upon the case that she appears a feminist in that she has no distinction of how women or men are expected to behave, herself being ruthless and a pragmatist, as well as noting that in the kind of position she is in, where few women make it, she has to develop this defense to make it. “Claire, as an individual, has achieved most of the values that feminism is fighting for, like autonomy, respect, dignity, empowerment and equality. But all of these values are for herself. She really just does not care about other people and what they stand for. It has nothing to do with women or men. She is just out there for herself. I could say that she is doing what anyone who wants to consider themselves equal should do. She does not discriminate against anyone. She just wants the job done. She handles the pregnant assistant in the same way that she handles her ex-boyfriend, or Frank in some occasions. Effectively. It is true that she lacks of compassion and often morality, but she definitely knows what equality means.” (male, 25) And in the same vein, “Claire could be perceived as a feminist. She's going out to get hers... Without waiting for it to be handed to her. If you won't give it to her, she will take it and she does not let any excuse get in her way. She’s not complaining she’s just going... I think in her world, feminism does not exist, it’s something that slackers complain about, I think she very much has a "If I can get it I'm going for it" mentality as opposed to complaining... Don't get me wrong, it’s not easy but I feel she’s not letting any excuse define or obstruct her cause” (male, 38).

*Her relationship with her husband, Frank Underwood*

“In sickness and in health, in ambition and venality and moral gain forever and ever”, these are the vows Kevin Spacey humorously claims in a post-season 2 interview, to express what Frank and Claire’s marriage is about. Indeed, it is a relationship that grows and develops through the seasons. When Frank proposed marriage to Claire, he told her he would not offer her a conventional life; she was not to expect happiness. Instead, next to him she would never be bored, and what made her choose him was the fact that Frank did not put her on a pedestal; he saw her as his partner, not to be adored, but respected. In an interview Wright suggests that Frank and Claire rarely appear intimate, because “they have bigger fish to fry”, connoting that their pursuit of
power rises more in importance than the relationship between them. Some of the participants were doubtful as to whether Clair and Frank’s relationship is authentic; instead, it appears to be a deal out of which each one benefits from, gets what they want. Their mutual respect is thought to derive from their own arrogance in believing they are better than anybody else. Marriage being itself a relationship of power, a participant (female, 26) mentions it might have started in love, but now both parties are in to get as much as they can out of it. “It’s not a marriage, it’s an arrangement of convenience... They need each other, for NOW. I'm pretty sure if need be and someone had to get rid of the other to achieve greater heights, they would quickly dissolve this arrangement.” One answer, however, came in full contrast with the rest of the members, which wanted Claire and Frank’s marriage to be close to the ideal concept of marriage, that few people achieve to have- true understanding, support, honesty, trust, commitment, and forgiveness. This opinion offers a different angle, much closer to Robin Wright’s: “To my opinion the power couple concept has nothing to do with wealth, status quo or actual power. In my mind it refers to the strong bond that two people decide to create. Marriage is and actual partnership or more specifically it is the agreement to become partner for life with someone. The only thing that changes in this occasion is the way they both decide to use their marriage. Frank at some point refers to the moment that he proposed to Claire. He had no money, he had no power, but he was true to his intentions. He did not offer her a happy, quiet life but an interesting one. It is the moment that they both agreed to this partnership. I find this type of relationship much more able to last through the years than those which start with tones of promises that realistically will not be fulfilled. But as all relationships, it has its ups and downs. When you are so well-thought as a person, and too realistic, often cynical, you have the ability to identify every single flaw to your other half. Through the seasons we see Frank having a sexual relationship with Zoe and Claire with Adam. It is not the first time that they decide to seek someone else’s companionship for a while. But they both have full knowledge of the situation and they know exactly when and how to stop it. Even if it is by killing someone! The values of their marriage or agreement are always strong. The only time that Claire gets to feel demeaned by Frank leads to her leaving him and the White house. They both have no time for betrayal by each other. But she decides to follow him back. As Frank said this relationship is all they have and she knows it” (male, 25).
Claire and motherhood is another issue upon which there is no agreeing: from the portrayal of the relationship to her own mother, to her thoughts of attempting having a child when she was close to menopause, but which thoughts she quickly abandoned, to not hesitating to risk an unborn child’s life to blackmail her coworker, to how coldly she used the, traumatic for other women, experience of abortion to benefit her and Frank’s cause; and when she is asked by the wife of the Republican candidate, in season 4, if she regrets not having children, answering with a cold “do you regret having them?”, implying that despite the joy children bring to a woman’s life, at the same time they take something out of it, and out of her individuality. There is the idea that Claire wanted children, but followed Frank’s will. One participant (male, 38) notes “I think beneath the cold hard exterior of the hard woman image, Claire is like everyone else and would like to have someone other than herself to care for, if not mold into an heir after her passing... Frank on the other hand, I don't think he cares much for anyone or anything but himself and he's making sure Claire follows suit.” Another participant (female, 26) maintains that every woman at some point wants children, but priorities get it the way. Traumatized as she was by being raped, she denied it to herself for a long time, but when her last chance of having children approached, she did not speak to Frank about her visits to the doctor, making explicit what the most important reason of her not having children was. The decision is made easier, as it agrees with her own ambitions as well. Looking at the whole picture of her decision, a participant (male, 25) comments “There is nothing more here than someone who took a big decision many years ago, probably all by herself or after a conversation with her husband and now she is having second thoughts as anyone would. She decided to have a life without children. It is undoubtedly a huge decision to make and even when you make it, you are almost certain that there will be moments when you will regret it. I don’t believe that if she truly wanted to have a child, Frank would be a problem. She loves him, she has an agreement with him but she is not the type of person that would not rebel over something that she does not agree with. I believe that this whole back and forth is related to the fact that she reached this point in life that she has achieved almost everything (even if everything is never enough for a person like Claire). When you are young and you haven’t made it in life yet, it is
easier to make such big decisions. At this point she has the “luxury” to have second thoughts and probably even doubt herself. But as it was expected, she sticks to her initial plan and aborts the idea.”

Claire and Display of Power

How Claire uses power is very similar to her husband, Frank. She never shows emotion except to use it as a tool to achieve something, and she never lets anyone dominate her. She engages in a constant social play where facts are irrelevant; information is used to only meet objectives. She manipulates and deceives, showing no empathy or remorse, to meet her own goals, always staying calm. Her power tactics of intimidation reach its peak in season 3, where she invites a Russian diplomat into the ladies’ room where she initially did her makeup, then urinated in his presence, and asked him for a paper towel after she washed her hands. She deconstructs her image of being delicate, establishing she is not to be perceived as the First Lady only, but as a politician. According to Hein, (2015) forcing inappropriate intimacy is an effective way to communicate power. The focus group participants seem to agree on it - she tries to seduce him and stress her sexuality and its power by doing her makeup, then the fact that she urinates in front of him establishes her “as one of them”, a powerful politician who is not to be dismissed, then accents on her superiority over him by asking him a towel and mentioning ironically what a gentleman he is. Another participant (male, 25) notes, “Claire actually plays the ultimate intimidation game. She knows that people cannot handle forwardness easily. There are some stereotypical issues that even the most powerful and smart people cannot fight. She based her whole game on taboos. Men are actually not invited in the ladies’ room. It is socially unacceptable to do so. She invites the diplomat in a place where he should never be. She attacks his masculinity that way. She wants him to feel weaker. And then she forces him to observe her personal moments. Moments that he would never witness even if they were a couple. She is trying to create this whole mess in his head. She manages to make him feel uncomfortable and then, as they discuss serious issues, she uses his good manners towards women to confuse him even more. At some point in the series Frank talks about a politician, who invites people to follow him in the men’s
room, as he wants to urinate, in order to intimidate them with his big penis. Claire uses the exact same way to intimidate the diplomat.”

**Claire and Display of Emotion**

However cold-blooded and ruthless *HoC*’s First Lady is, with every of her moves being calculated, she appears to act impulsively when she publicly speaks for the activist’s suicide, shaming the Russian President; a move that acted against her and Frank’s interests at the time, or so it would seem. One of the participants makes the point that this reaction could be caused by the shock she undergone after being in the same cell with the activist for hours, and then finding him hung with her own scarf. She might have also, however, used that moment to her advantage, as negotiating over the late activist’s freedom with the Russians had brought them to a position of accepting the Russian president’s demands; somehow the activist’s death was now convenient, and her bold move reasserted the power on the American side, securing her morality (and Frank’s) against the Russian president. At the same time, another participant sees it as the young activist having touched her soul, which has limits- his idealism touched her and maybe reminded her of how she wished she was.

**Claire as a First Lady**

As for the comparison between the two characters that occupied the role of the First Lady in the show, participants agree upon them being “night and day”. Patricia Walker’s role was far more decorative next to the president, she hesitates to take part into government issues and she is tormented by how the presidency has impacted her relationship with her husband, clearly valuing it more than her role as a first lady. Claire Underwood is far more active in government, claiming the position of an ambassador for the United Nations, as well as, later on, the position of the Vice President. Even by being merely a First Lady, she manipulated people to promote her causes, and even after Frank was shot, she kept working on his behalf.
4. DISCUSSION

However limited, the conducted research proves valuable in offering an insight to the audience’s perception of Claire, as well as a comparison with the findings of the literature review, thus answering the questions this dissertation set out to make. Specifically, it appears like other non-fictional first ladies, such as Lady Bird Johnson and Hilary Clinton, so does Claire Underwood pursue her own aspirations in and outside government, by running an NGO, working on a sexual assault and a gun restriction bill within government, as well as attempting to be a UN ambassador, and the Vice President. The way the role of a first lady evolves through time, so does Claire through seasons. With the institutionalization of the first lady’s status by the end of the 20th century, a first lady is expected to promote her political causes actively, something that was reflected in how the research sample saw the two different first lady characters in terms of the contribution; Patricia Walker was criticized for her lack of action, compared to the accepted model of a much more active first lady in the face of Claire Underwood. Other than her lack of children, Claire displays all the feminine attributes assigned to her role, both in demeanor and appearance. She both appeals to men by being passive, and defies them, taking her role a step further. She shared, along with Michelle Obama, a particular brand of feminism (Williams, 2009). In terms of the reality of being married to the president of the United States, Lady Bird Johnson says: “You and your husband suddenly look at each other and say, it’s you and me”(O’Connor, Nye and Van Assendelft, 1996) something that is portrayed through Frank and Claire’s relationship as well. Overall, literature and research both agree in the role of a first lady being an alternative route to political influence when most women are closed out of many formal positions of leadership, while it also mirrors that of a woman both in its constraints and in its empowerment.

Indeed there appear to be political barriers for women’s advancement, while women try to balance between their personal aspirations and society’s traditional expectations. This notion of the burden of choice is explored in the literature as well as displayed through Claire’s second thoughts about not having children. Even though women can be “fearful of the new”, moving between submission and rebellion, Claire shows a
bold character who always moves past fear. What was found in the literature to be feminine traits in terms of use of power, are not indicative of Claire: she uses both indirect and direct power, and she is assertive of what she wants.

Power dressing appears to be a tool in the hands of women, and in particular Claire, who uses her marble posture and flawless outfits to convey power and gain respect of those around her. The audience seems to translate Claire’s style as ambitious, reflective of her consistent and always composed character, as well as fit to her role as the wife of a politician, and later a first lady. While remaining feminine as the role implies, her image manages to evoke strength and professionalism, traits in pursuit of which, the audience attempts to copy Claire’s style, and by imitating her style, reconstruct their own identity through her.

As the character develops further through new seasons, so the potential for research widens. The combination of focus group with another methodological tool would give more sound and perhaps clear results, which the restriction of this dissertation’s sample did not manage to provide.
5. CONCLUSION

Attempting to investigate audience’s perception of Claire Underwood as a First Lady, a woman, and a professional by conducting an online focus group asking questions connected to all the different thematic axes, and in combination with the literature review, this dissertation finds that first ladyship indeed has changed through time, with its role becoming more and more significant; the figure of a First Lady is no longer complementary of the president’s image, instead she is expected to have an active role in society. One could even say that, the way the public opinion condemns Melania Trump for not being a worthy successor to Michelle Obama, has an equivalent in the comparison of the fictional Patricia Walker and Claire Underwood; the research’s sample noting how being an active figure made Claire more worthy of the title.

Gender and how connected it is to access to power is an issue covered by both literature review and research, with both agreeing upon the fact that despite women having come a long way since the first women’s movement, and even though they can now achieve managerial and other top positions, they have however to fight for it in a (still) man-centered world. Often, a woman in pursuit of power has to prove herself way beyond how a man would need to, and she also has to display masculine traits to be deemed suitable or accepted in positions of power. Stereotypical gender assumptions still torture women who aim to succeed in a world that values masculinity but also disapproves of women who do not act according to their gender’s standards.

Appearance is pivotal in shaping opinions, and strongly connected to gender and identity construction. Both scholars and focus group participants agree upon the fact that the way one dresses and generally carries themselves has a major impact on how society perceives them, and thus accepts or rejects them. Women have adopted styles of work dress that imitate the male tailored suit, while adding elements of femininity. HoC’s protagonist is a grand example of style that emits power, creating a cult of fans around her who copy her way of dress, in an attempt to reconstruct their identity around her. As the series continues, and the character still develops, there is much room for further analysis on the subject, taking into account perhaps audience reception theories as well.
5. REFERENCES


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