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Future Mrs. President or Simply Bill's Wife?: A Content Analysis of New York Times Coverage

of Hillary Clinton in 2008 versus 2016

By

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Abstract

This study analyzed New York Times coverage in January 2008 and January 2016 of Hillary Clinton. Coverage of Hillary during these two months was compared based on the number of times the categories family and appearance were mentioned. In four of the sub-categories, the results show that fewer stories mentioned aspects of Hillary's family and appearance in 2016 than in 2008. These findings support the hypotheses and indicate a change in the way media is discussing female politicians, along with the country's support of them.

Introduction

Feminists have been fighting for equal rights for women for over 100 years now. Despite that commitment to change by a large mass of individuals, women still face many inequalities on multiple levels in this country. This inequality is present in politics and female representation in government of all levels. Women are not treated as equal to men in the political sphere and our country has made it especially challenging for females to be successful politicians.

A contributing factor to this challenge is our media's representation of women. In general, the media does not accurately represent the female gender as a whole. More specifically, female politicians are not represented accurately, contributing to our country's resistance to female representation in our government. As these inaccurate representations continue to persist, people continue to believe that women are not equal and do not belong in governmental roles.

There is a very distinct difference in the way female politicians are discussed in media versus male politicians. Women also face different pressures and critiques by the media. Female politicians are critiqued about everything - from their clothing, to their hair, to the way they laugh. Why does it matter if our leader is wearing one color versus the other, don't we just want someone to make the right decisions based on their education and experience? However, that is not the case and this unequal focus on appearance and factors unrelated to professional qualifications continues to persist.

This study will narrow in on this idea of inequality, specifically with presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. It will look at the way the media has changed the way she is represented and portrayed, by juxtaposing coverage from the 2008 election with coverage from the 2016 election. This analysis will look to see if the focus on aspects of her identity outside of those that qualify her for the job of president still persists from one election to the next.

Literature Review

　　News media are guilty of underrepresenting and misrepresenting women, especially those in the political sphere. News media also often focuses more on gender norms when it comes to their coverage of women. The existing literature on Hillary Clinton in news media demonstrates this misrepresentation, as well as the focus on her gender. Some research focuses on her level of power, some on her femininity and masculinity, some on her role in Bill Clinton's life as well as his role in her life, and some on how she is portrayed in media. This literature will help answer the question posed, regarding specifically what the representation of Hillary looks like, how that is potentially specific to her gender, and how it has changed over time. The literature relevant to this topic fits into five main categories: equality in coverage, gendered language, campaign environment, clothing, and image production and power level. While each study has a different focus, there are similarities and trends among the research.

Equality in Coverage

　　The large issue at hand in this discussion is the lack of accurate and fair coverage the media gives female candidates/politicians in comparison to male candidates. Dunaway, Lawrence, Rose, and Weber (2013) state, "A basic hurdle historically faced by female candidates has been gaining equal news exposure to male candidates" (715). This study compared coverage of contests both with and without female candidates, finding that contests with females elicit more trait coverage than male-only contests, and races with females are more likely to elicit trait coverage than issue coverage. This shows that not only is there a lack of frequency of coverage of women, but also a difference in content, to the disadvantage of females.

Hayes, Lawless, and Baitinger (2014) discuss how stereotypes persist about what traits in women people should focus on. In cases where the media have drawn attention to these stereotypes in their coverage, they in turn become the focus of those consuming the media coverage. Their findings and those of past researchers in the field show that the media's focus on looks and appearance traits takes away from potential coverage of the issues they are addressing and the way they can benefit our country as a leader.

Gendered Language

Research shows that the way male and female politicians are spoken to in the media and the way they are conditioned to speak differs from gender to gender. Suleiman and O'Donnell (2008) conducted research to answer the question: does gender make a difference in the way politicians speak and are spoken to in public? This study quotes Hall (2000), "[…] social identity (which includes gender identity) is a reflection of power relations in society" (17). This research looks to Hillary's language and language spoken to her in comparison to her power level and gender to determine if there is a connection between these variables. Hillary follows, to some extent, "the historic designation of women's language as the language of the non-powerful" (45). Utilizing research done by Lakoff in the 70's, Suleiman and O'Donnell (2008) found the same result 30 years later, "[…] we do find many of the exact same features that distinguish men (powerful) from women (powerless) with respect to language choices more than 30 years later and with two of the most powerful contemporary politicians in the US" (45). This research shows these norms are embedded in the way politicians are spoken to and has created these unbreakable levels of power among genders.

Campaign Environment

During elections, the media inadvertently creates a high-pressure environment for candidates and establishes high expectations of them. Lawrence and Rose (2010) address the idea of "exit talk" in their research. This is the pressure the media puts on candidates during elections to step down from the race once it becomes more apparent that they are not going to win. During Hillary Clinton's campaign for presidency in 2008, the presence of exit talk was more frequent than for any other candidate in the past. As soon as it became apparent that she would not be in the running any longer, the media pressured her to step down, implementing more pressure than any other candidate in the past. In Ritchie's (2013) research around the representation of Hillary Clinton in illustrations during her campaign, she was portrayed as a non-human cyborg. This research implies that the idea of a female running for president can be so abnormal to some people, that the media both pressures females to step down soon and points out how strange it is for them to be running in the first place.

Research conducted by Hayes and Lawless (2015) actually presents an interesting counter or follow-up to the existing literature. This research found that voters were not influenced by the gender of the candidates but only by their ideologies. So while the media is constantly putting extra pressure on female candidates and presenting them in a negative light throughout their candidacy, the voters are still supportive of them and do not always take their gender into consideration when it comes time to vote. This research is important because it shows that we are getting closer to equality for all those in positions of power; the media is just behind on their representation of this.

Clothing

In Flicker's (2013) research, images of female and male politicians were analyzed using the Double-Bind theory. The study found that when female politicians dress within the feminine standards expected of them, they are not taken seriously. However, when they attempt to dress more masculine, they are judged for dressing outside the norm, and become trapped in the Double Bind. "The term 'Double Bind' refers to a situation in communication where two differing, conflicting messages are being received simultaneously" (Flicker, 2013, 203). In this case, females are conditioned to believe that being feminine is bad in the political world, and then attempt to act more masculine. This result, however, is also thought of as bad. So female politicians receive conflicting information from society about how they should dress and act in a powerful position.

This study shows that there is a large emphasis on the masculinity of the candidates. The media focuses on the femininity and masculinity of female candidates and allows their clothing choice and the way they carry themselves to dictate what is covered about them. The emphasis the media puts on this aspect of the candidates dictates how the candidates choose to portray themselves and their identities.

Image Production and Power Level

The media has constructed a certain image of Hillary for consumers, especially when it comes to her power. Brown (1997) looks at the representation of Hillary Clinton in the media during the time she was First Lady. Brown explains that women are just shown in public as a sign for something, but are not allowed to be public speakers, "[…] women function as sources of meaning, carrying rather than creating meaning. They are to be seen but are not given the privilege of speaking for themselves" (257). The focus groups in Brown's (1997) research found

Hillary to be "take-charge," "strong," and "powerful," recognizing that she was unfairly thought of as bitchy, while men are just seen as aggressive. "Despite the endless remakes of her image, apparently to make her seem more domestic, Hillary Clinton was seen as powerful by the members of these focus groups" (Brown, 266). Brown (1997) concludes that representations and coverage of Hillary will never be stable because she does not conform to what the media expects of women; she challenges it by speaking up and out.

In similar research, Parry-Giles (2000) focuses mainly on how Hillary's image is produced. The difference here is that Brown (1997) takes footage and shows it to participants to gauge their reaction; Parry-Giles (2000) does analysis of the footage itself. The analysis shows the progression through Hillary's life events and how each one afforded her more or less popularity and power. Parry-Giles (2000) analyzes different aspects of production for how they are intended to shape Hillary's popularity and the public's attitude toward her. Photos are still circulated from the college commencement speech Hillary gave due to the fact that she was well-liked at that point in time. As she begins to gain power and leadership, she is shown as powerful and the public starts thinking she is overbearing. This results in a decline her popularity. However, her popularity jumps right back up when she is shown in a motherly and positive light with her daughter. This popularity continues into the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal when Hillary stays by Bill's side and is a loyal wife. As soon as she continues work on public policy and appears intense about health care reform, her popularity decreases once again. This constant increase and decrease of popularity is a reflection of what our society approves as good actions for a woman to do – be a caring mother and loyal wife – but as soon as she steps out of that and puts on the politician hat – powerful and intense about laws – the public does not approve and believes this is outside of her role.

Research conducted by Vos (2013) helps compile these findings into a more generalized conclusion. The research conducted by Brown (1997) and Parry-Giles (2000) shows that people are utilizing expected gender roles to determine whether they like what Hillary is doing or not and the media is utilizing production techniques that make you think certain things about Hillary, typically negative in nature. Vos (2013) looked at television news coverage of female politicians in Belgium over a seven-year period. Vos found that those in the highest political positions receive the most television coverage, but females in the same positions as males, still receive less. So looking at all three findings together, we see that females are already disadvantaged in the amount of time on screen they receive, and then the time they do receive is constructed in a way that creates negative feelings around them, resulting in the audience having strong opinions about them as a leader.

A content analysis conducted by Busher (2006) found four different frames in the New York Times used to cover Hillary during the 2000 New York senate election. "These frames, political activity, horserace, gender stereotype and traditional first lady were used to determine how the media responded to Hillary Clinton's unprecedented decision to run for election." (Busher, 2006, 2) Coverage based on her political activity was found more than any other frame. Concepts and methods from Busher's (2006) research have been adapted to this current study.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The existing research has contributed to the development of the research questions and hypotheses for this study.

> *RQ1*: How has the representation of Hillary Clinton changed between 2008 and 2016 in New York Times election coverage?
> *RQ2*: Has New York Times coverage of Hillary Clinton changed its level of focus on the role family plays in Hillary's qualifications as president between 2008 and 2016?

RQ3: Has New York Times coverage of Hillary Clinton changed its level of focus on Hillary's appearance between 2008 and 2016?

The following hypotheses will be used to answer these questions in this study.

H1: As the country and media become more comfortable with the idea of a female president (who doubles as a wife and mom), the media will decrease its coverage of aspects of Hillary's family between 2008 and 2016.
H2: As the country and media become more comfortable with the idea of a female president, the media will decrease its coverage of aspects of Hillary's appearance between 2008 and 2016.

Methods

This study analyzed the New York Times' media coverage of Hillary Clinton in January 2008 and January 2016. All New York Times articles containing the search term "Hillary Clinton" from January 1, 2008 to January 31, 2008 and from January 1, 2016 to January 31, 2016 were downloaded from the LexisNexis database. The search from January 1, 2008 to January 31, 2008 yielded 110 results. The search from January 1, 2016 to January 31, 2016 yielded 378 results.

Include and exclude criteria was used to determine which articles would be analyzed. The articles that were included met the following criteria: 1) The article has a primary focus on Hillary Clinton, 2) the article was written by a New York Times employee, 3) the article was an actual newspaper article. Any results that did not meet these criteria were excluded (i.e. Hillary's name was only mentioned once and she was not the focus; the result only contained letters to the editor from subscribers; or, the result was just a transcript from a debate). Once the articles were narrowed down to meet the criteria, 53 articles from 2008 and 137 articles from 2016 remained. A random selection of the articles from 2016 was made using a number generator on numbers.org, so a similar amount of articles would be compared in each year. This resulted in 53 articles in 2008 and 56 articles in 2016.

A thorough reading of the articles, looking at frequent topics regarding Hillary's leadership, as well as categories analyzed in past research, shaped the categories for coding. Topics and references that occurred frequently and looked to be an area of interest became the basis for the coding categories. The two main coding categories that resulted were the role of family in coverage of Hillary Clinton and the role of appearance in coverage of Hillary Clinton. The categories coded for within the topic of family were: 1) family as a liability/weakness, 2) family as a strength, 3) family as a qualification for being president, 4) family as a disqualification for being president, 5) Hillary as primary to Bill, 6) Hillary as secondary to Bill, and 7) other. The categories coded for within the topic of appearance were: 1) hair, 2) clothing, 3) age, 4) show of emotion/tears, and 5) other. These were all coded as count variables (0-N).

All of the categories were count variables from 0-N. While reading each individual article, each mention of one of the established sub-categories was tallied, and recorded in an Excel spreadsheet, with a row for each article and a column for each category. If a category was not mentioned in an article, it received a 0. If it was mentioned once, it received a 1, if mentioned twice it received a 2, etc. The codebook for this data collection, including examples of mentions of categories is attached in appendix A.

Figure 1. Table displaying the number of articles downloaded versus the number of articles analyzed.

|	**2008**	**2016**
Total # articles downloaded	110	378
# articles that met criteria	53	137
# articles left after random selection	53	56

Results

Hypothesis 1 contends that as the country and media become more comfortable with the idea of a female president (who doubles as a wife and mom), fewer news stories will mention aspects of Hillary's family in 2016 than in 2008. Results from a t-test of the number of mentions of the sub-category "family as a liability/weakness" show that a statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) decrease between 2008 and 2016 did occur. The total number of mentions of "family as a liability/weakness" in 2008 across all 54 articles was 18 and in 2016 across all 56 articles was 5. Results from a t-test of the number of mentions of the sub-category "Hillary as primary to Bill" show that a statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) decrease between 2008 and 2016 did occur. The total number of mentions of "Hillary as primary to Bill" in 2008 across all 54 articles was 8 and in 2016 across all 56 articles was 1. Results from a t-test of the number of mentions of the sub-category "Hillary as secondary to Bill" show that a statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) decrease between 2008 and 2016 did occur. The total number of mentions of "Hillary as secondary to Bill" in 2008 across all 54 articles was 13 and in 2016 across all 56 articles was 1. T-tests of the other four sub-categories under the topic of family (family as a strength, family as a qualification, family as a disqualification, and other) resulted in a p-value that is not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$).

Figure 2. Comparison of mention counts between 2008 and 2016 for "family" coding category.
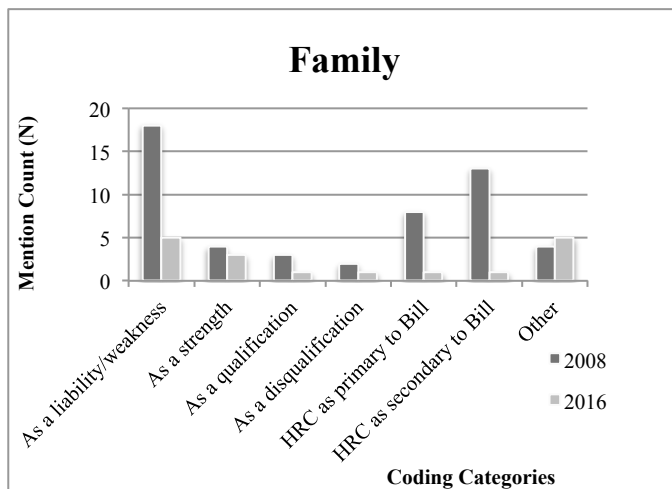
Hypothesis 2 contends that as the country and media become more comfortable with the idea of a female president, fewer news stories will mention aspects of Hillary's appearance in 2016 than in 2008. Results from a t-test of the sub-category "show of emotion/tears" suggest that a statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) decrease between 2008 and 2016 did occur. The total number of mentions of "show of emotion/tears" in 2008 across all 54 articles was 14 and in 2016 across all 56 articles was 0. T-tests of the other four sub-categories under the topic of appearance (hair, clothing, age, other) resulted in a p-value that is not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$).

Figure 3. Comparison of mention counts between 2008 and 2016 for "appearance" coding category.
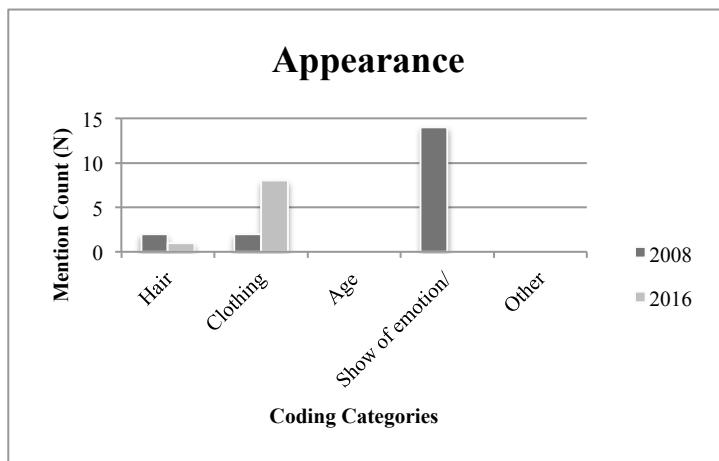
Discussion

The results of this analysis suggest that the country and our media are potentially becoming more comfortable with the idea of a female president, specifically Hillary Clinton, a candidate with a dynamic and ever-changing role in our government. In this analysis, the *New York Times*' number of mentions of Hillary's role as a wife and mom decreased between 2008 and 2016, in regards to family as a liability or weakness. This implies that the media's concern with Hillary's role as a wife and mom has decreased and the focus on her personal and family

roles is changing in regards to her success as a leader. The *New York Times*' number of mentions of Hillary's relation to Bill decreased between 2008 and 2016, in regards to her being both primary and secondary to him. This implies that the media's concern with Bill's role in Hillary's campaign and potential presidency is also changing.

Prior research found the campaign environment to be particularly high-pressure for female candidates, especially in regards to "exit talk" and the pressure to step down from a campaign (Lawrence & Rose, 2010). Past research has also shown that non-human representations of Hillary Clinton have been published, to show the abnormality of a female president (Ritchie, 2013). Ideally, as the country and media are becoming more comfortable with the idea of a female presidential candidate, this pressure will decrease and the expectations will be equal to that of the male candidates. The representations will also hopefully be more realistic, and less fantastic. More recent research is showing that voters are focusing less on Hillary's gender and more on her policies (Hayes & Lawless, 2015), the shift that needs to occur for female candidates to receive the same equal consideration as male candidates. This transition in findings shows that voters are adapting to the idea of a female president; it is the media that is still adjusting to the change. This past research aligns with the findings of this study, in the sense that people and media are becoming more comfortable with the idea of Hillary as a female president and are focusing more on her policies and qualifications for the position.

Despite the fact that gendered language (Suleiman and O'Donnell, 2008) continues to infiltrate our media and does not seem to be going anywhere anytime soon, the findings of this study suggest there is a change occurring in the portrayal of Hillary. This study looked at mentions of aspects of Hillary's life that tend to be the focus of only women in media and not as

much men – family and appearance. The findings show a decrease in the media's mentions of both, suggesting a possible change in gendered language.

Bill's role in Hillary's campaign seemed to have shifted from 2008 to 2016 and their positions in relation to each other have shifted. Going back to the idea of Hillary's popularity (Parry-Giles, 2000), it would be interesting to take a further look into where she stands with voters when Bill is more involved and when he is less involved, as well as when she is positioned in a way that is primary versus secondary to him. The change in coverage that this study found could show a change in popularity between elections similar to that found in Parry-Giles (2000). Looking at Hillary and Bill's political relationship across a longer period of time could elicit an interesting shift in her popularity. Also looking at Hillary's popularity when she is shown as being more motherly versus being merely an intense leader could bring about interesting results.

The number of mentions of clothing was not statistically significant in this study. However, in the past, Hillary's clothing has been a main topic of conversation. If this study compared multiple major events throughout Hillary's career (and not just these two elections) there may be a connection to Flicker's (2013) findings and we may see Hillary caught in a double-bind about acting feminine or masculine.

Limitations and Future Research

The main limitation of this project is the scope in comparison to the large amount of media coverage of Hillary Clinton that exists. This project looked specifically at the topics family and appearance, but a different content analysis could study many different topics – Hillary as a female/femininity, Hillary's age (with more sub-categories), double-standards she

faces, etc. There is a wide range of topics open for analysis because of how much she is covered in news media and how many different aspects of her identity are assessable.

Not only are there many different topics, there are different time frames as well that may uncover different topics. A comparison between multiple years could be made around monumental events Hillary has been involved in, other than presidential elections. Comparisons of different years, or even different months could be made. The time frame in this project is small due to the constraints of its size, but the sample size of articles being analyzed could be expanded by studying more months closer to election time. A content analysis could look at the six months prior to the election in each year, or the entire election year, for example.

Each month of coverage will bring about different events, and therefore more or less coverage of certain aspects of the election. Analysis of January coverage will be different than analysis of July coverage due to the mere differences in events occurring at each point in the year, for example. This limits and affects the type of coverage analyzed in the study.

This project looked specifically at the *New York Times* because it is considered to be a more neutral paper. Future research could look at multiple publications and compare how they each cover Hillary differently based on the perspective they write from.

Conclusion

If the inequalities we see in media continue to persist, women will struggle to ever reach a full level of equality with the men they are very much equal to. What we see in the media is a reflection of what is occurring in the world, and what is occurring in the world is a reflection of what is seen in the media. There is a cyclical relationship between the two and if people continue treating females as less than, that will continue to persist in media. If it continues to persist in

media, people will continue to exude that in everyday life. Somewhere in that cycle, someone has to work to change the inequalities so they do not continue to persist.

Changing this culture has begun and we are moving in a positive direction. We have a possible female presidential candidate and the findings are suggesting that media coverage of her is focusing less on her female attributes, and hopefully more on her qualifications and experience. Now if this change in culture can be applied to females in all aspects of media (not just politicians), people will start to change the way they think about females in everyday life. Awareness is key in changing this culture and by looking deeper into media coverage such as this, more people will be made aware of the issue and understand the importance in addressing it. In general, our country still has major inequalities when it comes to the representations of females, but it is not a permanent problem and recognizing and addressing the issue is the first step in moving toward equality for all.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Codebook

<u>Coding for Family:</u>

- Family as a liability (Count the number of times it is mentioned in the article 0-N)
    - The fact that Hillary is a wife and/or mom is threatening to her role as a leader
    - Example: "It's almost never a good idea for the boss to bring a husband/wife into management. It muddies up the lines of authority, and it lets personal relationships contaminate the professional ones. As every sentient being on the planet knows, the Clintons have an extremely complicated marriage, and sticking it smack in the middle of the chain of command caused chaos." (Collins, 2008)

- Family as a strength (Count the number of times it is mentioned in the article 0-N)
    - The fact that Hillary is a wife and/or mom is helpful to her role as a leader
    - Example: "Former President Bill Clinton also campaigned steadily for her in New Hampshire and fine-tuned his stump speech from Iowa to focus on her accomplishments." (Healy, 2008)

- Family as a qualification (Count the number of times it is mentioned in the article 0-N)
    - Hillary must be a mom/wife in order to be a successful leader
    - Example: "To some voters, Hillary Clinton's husband provides reassurance that the "calculating" senator from New York won't degenerate into a feminine hysteric if she is elected to the White House." (Howley, 2008)

- Family as a disqualification (Count the number of times it is mentioned in the article 0-N)
    - Being a mom/wife keeps Hillary from being a successful leader
    - Example: "As strongly as we back her candidacy, we urge Mrs. Clinton to take the lead in changing the tone of the campaign. It is not good for the country, the Democratic Party or for Mrs. Clinton, who is often tagged as divisive, in part because of bitter feeling about her husband's administration and the so-called permanent campaign. (Indeed, Bill Clinton's overheated comments are feeding those resentments, and could do long-term damage to her candidacy if he continues this way.)" (Editorial, 2008)

- HRC as primary to Bill (Count the number of times it is mentioned in the article 0-N)
    - Hillary is the one leading the pair, while Bill follows/stands back
    - Example: "What has gone unspoken is this: Up until this moment, Hillary has successfully deflected rough questions about Bill by saying, "I'm running on my own" or, as she snapped at Barack Obama in the last debate, "Well, I'm here; he's not." (Rich, 2008)

- HRC as secondary to Bill (Count the number of times it is mentioned in the article 0-N)
    - Bill is the one leading the pair, while Hillary follows/stands back
    - Example: "Now, Bill's role as Chief Attack Dog undermines all that. If he's all

over her campaign, he's going to be all over her administration. Instead of the original promise of the thoroughly educated Hillary, we're being offered the worst-case scenario -- that the pair of them are going to return to Pennsylvania Avenue and recreate the old Clinton chaos." (Collins, 2008)

- Other (Count the number of times it is mentioned in the article 0-N)
    - Any other mention of family life, family involvement in campaign, neutral family involvement
    - Example: "Aides said that former President Bill Clinton would go there immediately and spend the next five days campaigning in a state where he has always been strong" (Nagourney, 2008)

Coding for Appearance:

- Hair (Count the number of times it is mentioned in the article 0-N)
    - Any mention of Hillary's hair (style, color, cut, etc)
    - Example: "by now her marriage, her hair, her pantsuits, her voice and her laugh have been more minutely anatomized than her voting record on Iraq" (Kakutani, 2008)

- Clothing (Count the number of times it is mentioned in the article 0-N)
    - Any mention of Hillary's clothing (style, outfit choice, etc)
    - Example: "At Hillary's victory party in Manchester, Carolyn Marwick, 65, said Hillary showed she was human at the cafe. 'I think she's really tired. She's been under a lot more scrutiny than the other candidates -- how she dresses, how she laughs.'" (Dowd, 2008)

- Age (Count the number of times it is mentioned in the article 0-N)
    - Any mention of Hillary's age physically (i.e. wrinkles, grey hair)
    - No example available from this analysis

- Show of emotion (Count the number of times it is mentioned in the article 0-N)
    - Mention of Hillary crying, displaying emotion on her face
    - "Some advisers were so concerned that they did not e-mail video of the Monday incident to Clinton supporters, as they usually do when Senator Clinton makes positive news. "We have absolutely no idea how her getting this emotional will play with voters," one adviser said. (Healy, 2008)

- Other (Count the number of times it is mentioned in the article 0-N)
    - Any other mention of Hillary's physical appearance
    - No example available from this analysis