

Looking the Part: Aesthetic Standards and Female Presidencies in Latin America

Lauren Hanley

Program in International Affairs

University of Colorado, Boulder

Honors Committee:

Dr. Lorraine Bayard De Volo, *Primary Advisor*

Professor in the Department of Women and Gender Studies

Dr. Doug Snyder, *Honors Council Representative*

Assistant Teaching Professor in the Program in International Affairs

Dr. Carew Boulding, *Secondary Reader*

Professor in the Department of Political Science

Eric Klinger, *Outside Reader*

Teaching Associate Professor in the Office of Undergraduate Education

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I. Introduction

In recent Latin American history, the intersection of gender and politics has been marked by struggles, complexities, and controversies. Across all Latin American countries, women are politically underrepresented, with only two current heads of state and a mere 15.5% of mayors and 27.3% of city council members being women (Muñoz-Pogossian & Freidenberg, 2020). However, despite the lack of overall political representation for women, Latin America has elected more female presidents than any other region, having done so eight times since 2006 (Piscopo et al., 2022). Upon closer examination, however, it is crucial to recognize that this increase in female presidencies exists in the context of a pervasive culture of gender inequality and a male-dominated status quo, referred to as machismo. Therefore, the shift toward more female presidencies does not seem to be based on widespread and authentic support for female political authority (Morgan & Buice, 2013). Consequently, it has only led to temporary and superficial progress for women, as female politicians are constrained by the gender norms dictated by machismo and held to unfair expectations in how they look, dress, and behave.

Latin American women who run for political office, especially for the role of president, face barriers unimaginable to male candidates, have a significantly harder time securing campaign funds, and deal with a myriad of misogynistic stereotypes, both from the general public and their colleagues (Došek et al., 2019). In order to mitigate these issues and find success in a political space designed to reject women, female candidates typically resort to framing their candidacy around the maternal, sexual, and aesthetic expectations of a woman under the machista ideology. When looking at women in politics in Latin America who have had successful careers, one will discover that female presidents often portray meticulously crafted personas to the public that appeal to beauty, maternalism, and femininity.

The two personas I focus on in my thesis are the transformative swan and the beauty queen. The transformative swan persona encapsulates a woman once regarded as too rough around the edges but, over time, softened the unappealing parts of herself and became more physically beautiful to the public. The beauty queen persona epitomizes a hyper-feminine individual who wears heavy make-up, buys designer outfits and shoes, and maintains a general focus on being conventionally attractive.

In my thesis, I explore how aesthetic standards and self-representation, especially in media, have been used as both a barrier and a pathway to political success for women in a deeply misogynistic culture. The current research on female politicians in Latin American deals with the impact of maternalism on the personas that candidates portray to the public to gain support (Franceschet et al., 2016). According to this research, female politicians appeal to voters through the domestic values and expressions associated with motherhood, such as by painting themselves as the mother of their country or concentrating mainly on legislation pertaining to women and children.

By framing my thesis around the transformative swan and beauty queen personas, I explore a different angle of femininity besides motherhood. Through these personas, I examine the connection between the power of beauty and the electability of female candidates. Moreover, I investigate how, for female politicians, aesthetic standards only advantage women to a point. While building their campaigns and presidencies around traditional beauty standards allowed women to win political office, the female politicians I researched reached a stage in their careers where their visual personas no longer protected them from gendered critiques and irreparable declines in their public approval.

Two female presidents in particular – Dilma Rousseff, former president of Brazil, and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, former president of Argentina – illustrate the limitations female candidates face when running for office and the advantages of constructing a feminine persona for their campaigns. Rousseff, whom the Brazilian media deemed too unpolished and masculine, underwent a makeover during her 2010 presidential campaign. Her visual persona, that of a transformative swan, embodies the perils of the harsh beauty standards in Brazil and the rewards reaped from conforming to them. Fernández de Kirchner also appealed to cultural beauty standards during her presidential campaign in Argentina. Unlike Rousseff, Kirchner had always portrayed a feminine image to the public, but she began to amplify her femininity to an even greater degree during her husband’s presidential campaign and continued the beauty queen persona throughout her presidential campaign and office.

While femininity benefited both women at the beginning of their presidencies, as economic struggles, corruption scandals, and sociopolitical tension began to mount, their credibility was ultimately undermined in gendered ways, mainly through being called ugly, sexualized, or patronized by their critics. Thus, the effectiveness of the transformative swan and beauty queen personas reached an expiration and no longer shielded the women from the distinctively gendered demise of their presidential terms.

In my thesis, I analyze the media portrayal and general public perception of both female presidents to demonstrate the scope and success of their gender expressions. In Brazil and Argentina, the media, including daily newspapers, journalistic websites, and tabloids, plays a pivotal role in spreading information about presidential candidates to potential voters. In Rousseff’s and Kirchner’s cases, the positive and negative ways that the media reported on their

femininity influenced their support from constituents and even their national and international credibility as politicians.

Investigating the gender portrayals of female presidential candidates in Latin America is important because it highlights the prevalence of sexism in politics and the unfair beauty standards for female politicians. Implicit and explicit biases toward female politicians due to their physical appearance impede their access to political leadership across the globe. Reducing the value of female politicians to their appearance objectifies them, undermines their credibility, and prevents them from being able to freely and authentically express themselves. Thus, unpacking these invalid and misguided assumptions about female politicians will foster an environment where women are considered for political positions due to their experience, ideas, and hard work, instead of their physical features.

II. Background

Machismo

To understand the challenges female politicians face in Latin America, one must acknowledge the prevalence of machismo. In virtually every region of the world, cultures prioritize masculinity over femininity; machismo is the Latin American variant of this phenomenon. Machismo is a concept deeply woven into the fabric of Latin American societies, referring to the traditional cultural norms that determine male behavior, characteristics, and relationship to women (Basham, 1976). Machismo is damaging and oppressive, especially to women and members of the LGBTQ+ community, who experience discrimination and abuse due to this ideology.

Machismo is rooted in the belief that men are naturally superior to women. According to machismo, men should automatically assume the role of the leader and provider for their families and communities (Basham, 1976). Machismo enables circumstances in which society expects men to be the breadwinners, while women are confined to domestic responsibilities, such as cooking, cleaning, and taking care of children. Often, the machista ideology causes women to be trapped in a cycle of poverty and oppression, as they do not have adequate access to educational and employment opportunities. Moreover, the machista ideology aligns with traditional gender stereotypes. Men must be strong and stoic, while women are fragile, nurturing, and often overly emotional. These stereotypes are toxic to men and women and prevent both genders from expressing themselves in healthy, productive ways.

Machismo has had a profound impact on the role of women in Latin America in general but especially in the political sphere. When a woman participates in politics, she deviates significantly from her expected societal role. As a result, women who challenge machismo and seek political authority are often subjected to harassment. According to machismo, men are inherently entitled to leadership roles, and thus the possibility of a woman holding a position of power is a threat to men and the natural order of society (Basham, 1976). As a result, machismo is a substantial obstacle to women's participation in politics, contributing to a climate of intimidation and a culture of abuse that discourages women from running for office.

Pink Tide in Latin American Politics

Despite the prevalence of machismo in Latin American society, the beginning of the twenty-first century promised a profound transformation in Latin American politics, with a widespread shift toward progressive, left-wing governments known as the Pink Tide (Friedman, 2019). By 2005, the majority of the region was governed by states whose executives and

legislatures identified as left on the political spectrum. Inspired by a variety of progressive ideologies, including socialism, populism, and liberalism, these pink-tide politicians sought to challenge deep-rooted social, political, and economic inequalities.

Dilma Rousseff and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner are both politicians from the Pink Tide movement. Rousseff is a member of the Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, or PT), a center-left to left-wing political party in Brazil. Founded in 1980, scholars originally classified PT as socialist, but in the 21st century, the party changed its classification to social democratic (Sirohi & Bhupatiraju, 2021). Elected in 2003, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva was PT's most prominent member. After his presidential term ended, Lula supported Rousseff as his successor. Another politician from the Pink Tide, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner aligned with the Justicialist Party, which stemmed from the populist and left-wing Peronist movement (Friedman, 2019). Although the Pink Tide administrations claimed to advocate for gender equality, advancements were uneven in areas of social welfare, violence against women, women's bodily autonomy, and political representation.

Brazil: Political and Economic Overview

From 2013 onward, the Brazilian political landscape has been incredibly tumultuous (Stuenkel, 2021). In the nearly twenty years before 2013, Brazil experienced relative democratic stability. The center-right Brazilian Social Democracy Party governed the country from 1995 to 2002. In 2003, the center-left Partido Trabalhadores (PT, or Workers' Party) took power under the leadership of President Lula. Dilma Rousseff succeeded Lula from 2011 until 2016.

As Brazil's first female president, Rousseff's presidency was an important historical milestone for Brazil. Rousseff's political career began in the early 1970s when she became

involved in the opposition to the Brazilian military dictatorship (Dos Santos & Jalalzai, 2021). In 1970, the military government arrested, imprisoned, and tortured Rousseff for two years. After the dictatorship ended and the military released Rousseff from prison, she joined the PT, and the party appointed her as the Chief of Staff to President Lula in 2005. In 2010, the PT nominated Rousseff as its presidential candidate, and she was elected in October of that year.

Dilma Rousseff's presidential election was unconventional for women national leaders in Latin America. Rousseff had not run for office previously and was largely unknown to the Brazilian public (Dos Santos & Jalalzai, 2021). Moreover, Rousseff was elected without any help from family ties to politics, which, in the past, had been the primary path to power for female leaders. Rousseff was an attractive political candidate for her party because the sitting president, President Lula, backed Rousseff. Lula was the first working-class president in Brazil and wanted to leave a progressive legacy after his presidential term. Publicly supporting the first female president of Brazil to continue his political agenda would be seen as a positive progression both within Brazil and on an international scale. The PT also contained many gender disparities within its party structure, so endorsing a female president would bolster the party's overall reputation with progressive voters.

After her election in 2010, Rousseff encountered many obstacles. The most volatile period of her presidency was in 2013 when massive protests broke out in all major Brazilian cities, a phenomenon not witnessed in Brazil since the 1980s (Stuenkel, 2021). Originally sparked by anger over economic issues such as bus and subway fare increases, protestors began also contesting inadequate social services and, eventually, systemic corruption across the political ruling class. After a harshly fought re-election, the PT and Rousseff secured a second term in 2014. However, Rousseff's second term proved to be dysfunctional, and the intense PT

vs. anti-PT polarization across Brazil resulted in Congress refusing to approve any of Rousseff's legislative projects.

Another major challenge that Rousseff faced during her presidency was the severe economic downturn in 2014. From 2003 to 2008, Brazil experienced economic growth and price stability (Vartanian & de Souza Garbe, 2019). In 2009, however, Brazil's real GDP had negative growth due to an international financial crisis that had begun in the United States. Although Brazil's economic growth began to decline, the fiscal stimulus policies due to increased spending and tax cuts combined with a monetary policy that was more forgiving with inflation continued to stimulate the Brazilian market until 2014. From 2014 to 2016, the Brazilian economy experienced one of the worst recessions in history. According to the Business Cycle Dating Committee of the Getulio Vargas Foundation, the Brazilian economic crisis lasted for 11 consecutive quarters due to a commodity price shock that negatively impacted Brazil's exports and reduced the flow of foreign capital into the economy (Vartanian & de Souza Garbe, 2019).

In 2014, the largest corruption scandal in Brazilian history further damaged Rousseff's presidency (Klobucista & Labrador, 2018). The scandal involved the indictment of dozens of high-level businesspeople and politicians as part of an investigation under the code name Lava Jato ("Car Wash") alleging prominent Brazilian corporations had bribed officials of Petrobras, Brazil's state-owned oil company, and PT members, including Rousseff, with millions of dollars in exchange for contracts with Petrobras. The investigation did not come to light until after Rousseff's re-election in October 2014. By the time of her second inauguration on January 1st, 2015, Rousseff's approval rating had plummeted to 14% and nearly two-thirds of the Brazilian public blamed her for the Petrobras scandal (Latinobarómetro).

In 2016, Rousseff was impeached amid the major economic downturn and devastating corruption scandal (Stuenkel, 2021). The impeachment was a painfully divisive process that demonstrated how extreme polarization between PT vs. anti-PT and, on a larger scale, establishment vs. anti-establishment had become in Brazil. Rousseff's short-lived second term and the selection of her successor as the unpopular vice president Michel Temer emphasized the Brazilian public's skepticism regarding the rampant corruption of the political elites.

Argentina: Political and Economic Overview

In 2001, Argentina experienced a turbulent start to the new century with an economic crisis that had consequences that would reverberate for decades to come (Fontevicchia, 2021). Before the collapse, during most of the 1990s, Argentina outperformed the majority of Latin American countries in economic growth. However, in the late 1990s, Argentina's hard currency peg to the U.S. dollar coupled with pro-cyclical fiscal policies and extensive foreign borrowing left the country in an economically-vulnerable position. Between December 2001 and January 2002, Argentina plunged into a devastating economic crisis due to a partial deposit freeze, a partial default on public debt, and an abandonment of the fixed exchange rate that led to a collapse in economic output, high levels of unemployment throughout the country, and widespread political and social unrest.

In January 2002, Eduardo Duhalde was appointed president, becoming Argentina's fifth president in two weeks (Fontevicchia, 2021). While Duhalde's presidency was short-lived, he paved the way for more than a decade of Kirchnerismo, an Argentine political movement based on populist ideals formed by the supporters of Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. Néstor Kirchner took power in 2003, leading the country through one of its strongest periods of economic growth. Notably, Kirchner expanded the use of social plans to mitigate the

loss of formal employment after the 2001 crisis. He also began negotiations with creditors under his debt relief program.

After serving for one presidential term, Néstor stepped down to allow his wife Cristina to run for president. The trajectory of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's political career was unique. Before Néstor's presidential election, she served as a senator, eventually transitioning to first lady, president, and then vice president in 2019. While not as popular as Néstor, Fernández de Kirchner's presidential bid was still well-received by the Argentine public. However, after being elected in 2007, Fernández de Kirchner's support declined as she gained a reputation for being combative. Her popularity only began to rise again after the unexpected death of Néstor due to a heart attack in 2010 (Brice, 2010).

During Fernández de Kirchner's presidency, which lasted until 2015, the economy fluctuated, with a recession in 2009 that saw a dip in GDP growth to only 0.8%. In 2014, Argentina had one of the highest rates of annual inflation in the world, at 39.9%. In July 2014, a ruling from a New York court ordered Argentina to pay the remaining holders of the bonds defaulted in 2002, which were mostly American Vulture funds. The Fernández de Kirchner administration refused, resulting in Argentina defaulting on its debt again (Fontevicchia, 2021).

Beyond unstable economic policies during her presidency, the Fernández de Kirchner administration was involved in several corruption scandals. The most well-known scandal was in January 2015 when special prosecutor Alberto Nisman, who had been investigating the 1994 vehicle bombing of a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires, was killed (Wylde, 2016). On January 18th, the day before he was scheduled to testify before Congress and several days after releasing a report in which he accused Fernández de Kirchner of attempting to undermine his investigation, he was found dead in his apartment due to a gunshot wound to his head. After

beginning his investigations of the bombing in 2004, Nisman concluded that the Iranian government was responsible for the attack, and Fernández de Kirchner had engaged in negotiations to protect Iran in return for a trade deal. After originally announcing her belief that Nisman's death was suicide, Fernández de Kirchner later declared on social media that Nisman was the victim of foul play and rogue intelligence agents had misled the public into believing that she was involved in the cover-up of the bombing.

After leaving office in 2015, scandals revolving around Fernández de Kirchner continued. One corruption case related to Fernández de Kirchner pocketing government funds allocated for public works projects. Another case alleged that she manipulated currency markets, while another accused Fernández de Kirchner's family real estate company of profiting by renting properties in exchange for granting government contracts and other favors (Wylde, 2016).

In 2019, despite the series of scandals, Fernández de Kirchner was elected Vice President to Alberto Fernández. Before she took office, she became involved in the Vialidad case, a criminal conspiracy that involved public works funds being funneled to Lázaro Báez, a friend of Fernández de Kirchner (Wylde, 2016). In 2022, after the Vialidad trial was interrupted due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Fernández de Kirchner was sentenced to 12 years in prison and prohibited from ever holding public office again (Elliot, 2022). Fernández de Kirchner refuted the charges, claiming to be a victim of political and judicial persecution.

Demonstrators began appearing outside Fernández de Kirchner's Buenos Aires home and clashed with the police (Elliot, 2022). On September 1st, 2022, a man with a handgun attempted to assassinate Fernández de Kirchner, but his weapon failed to discharge. In December 2022, Fernández de Kirchner was found guilty of fraudulent administration in the Vialidad case. Despite being sentenced to six years in prison and banned for life from holding public office, the

combination of immunity granted to Fernández de Kirchner due to her role in the government as well as the extensive appeals process make it doubtful that her conviction will be enforced. Fernández de Kirchner is the first Argentine vice president ever convicted of a crime while in office.

III. Literature Review

One of the main components of my research involves investigating the role that aesthetic standards play in women's lives, especially those of female politicians. There is limited literature on beauty standards in postcolonial Latin American countries; however, the existing literature is rooted in westernized and white ideology. Gruber, Kalkbrenner, and Hitter (2022) unravel how beauty relates to power in Latin America, which is mainly based on race. Latin America's history of forced racial mixing between indigenous people and African enslaved people with European settlers called *mestizaje* has created a hierarchy within beauty standards. Individuals on the "lighter" end of the spectrum are given more privilege and perceived by society as the beauty ideal (Gruber et al., 2022, p. 432-442). The media presents a beauty standard that glorifies Eurocentric features, such as small noses and light skin and hair shades while simultaneously idealizing curvaceous feminine bodies. In their research, the authors concluded that Latinx women face many unique pressures to meet these unrealistic beauty standards intertwined with centuries of racism and cultural norms.

Figuera and Moore also address the connection between beauty and *mestizaje* but focus more on how beauty trends in Latin America have changed in the current context of neoliberalism and multiculturalism. Additionally, they look further into how beauty standards reflect and emerge from different political and cultural conditions in Latin America. They approach beauty in Latin America, specifically in a political and socioeconomic context, as not

so much a moral topic but a pragmatic one, examining how beauty is “defined, deployed, defended, subordinated, marketed, [and] manipulated” (2013, p. 131). Ultimately, they conclude that beauty has become an increasingly important tool in the political sphere to gain support. In my thesis, I build on this research by connecting the ideas of beauty in Latin America with the specific ways that the general public views and treats female politicians.

Despite the limited literature on beauty standards in Latin America, several articles have explored beauty ideals, especially regarding plastic surgery, in Brazil. Jarrin (2015) and Edmonds (2007) argue that biopolitics within Brazil, which refer to the biological factors that influence political behavior, have created an aesthetic hierarchy in which non-white facial characteristics are considered undesirable. These articles contribute to the literature that connects science and medicine with the history of political racialization in Latin America and how beauty and race intersect to enable social inclusion and exclusion. These articles do not discuss the effects of plastic surgery and beauty standards on the political figures in Brazil; however, Dilma Rousseff is a key politician that I investigate in my thesis, and her makeover during her 2010 presidential campaign is clear evidence of the impacts of the beauty industry on political candidates.

Another important theme in my thesis is femininity and media representations of women. Matos (2017) addresses how gender and politics relate to one another and how this relationship manifests in the media. The book focuses on Brazil as a case study, so I expand this research to other countries in Latin America, specifically Argentina. Matos discusses the prevalence of the standard “Brazilian woman” portrayed in the media, which lacks racial and cultural diversity. The book further explains what gender politics are and how the media perpetuates gender stereotypes that discriminate against women in politics. Gender politics studies the relationship between women and their political involvement. Due to the media’s fascination with the physical

appearance of female candidates, women not considered conventionally attractive are more intensely scrutinized. Additionally, due to the expectation that women are responsible for their maternal duties to their children and the household, female politicians face backlash for leaving their families to pursue a political career (Franceschet et al., 2016).

The idea of public awareness connects to Funk, Hinojosa, and Piscopo's research (2021). Their article delves deeper into not only the media perception of women but also the media perception of female politicians and their party nominations. Funk, Hinojosa, and Piscopo outline how gender stereotypes determine when women can successfully run for office and govern. The article addresses how voters perceive candidates in gendered terms, as they often regard women as less corrupt and more trustworthy than men. As a result, in times of political distrust and corruption, women are more likely to be nominated. The strength of Funk, Hinojosa, and Piscopo's research is that it pulls from two waves of data from over 100 political parties in 18 Latin American countries. In my thesis, I build on this research by looking further into general voter perception of women, not just during periods of public discontent.

In order to appeal to the public and win their support, modern female politicians have followed a pattern of employing a few different cultural frames that allow them some flexibility beyond the traditional wife and mother roles. Franceschet, Piscopo, and Thomas (2016) discuss four frames for women in politics to center their public persona around: traditional supermadre, technocratic caretaker, macho minimizer, and difference denier. The traditional supermadre presents motherhood as central to her political identity. The technocratic caretaker is a female politician who highlights her professional skills over her identity as a mother. The macho minimizer softens her aggressive and masculine qualities to appear more feminine. The difference denier dismisses any claims that sexism exists in politics altogether. Franceschet,

Piscopo, and Thomas' research is imperative because it exposes the limited personas that women can frame their candidacy around to garner public approval. I expand on this research by investigating the aesthetic aspect of the personas that female candidates utilize and analyzing how female politicians have presented an intentionally crafted version of themselves to the media.

The expression of the female identity in politics is central to my thesis. In their research, Franceschet, Piscopo, Thomas, and Carroll explore the “double bind” women in politics face (Franceschet et al., 2016; Carroll, 2007). Carroll argues that women are not well-received when they occupy male-dominated roles and use stereotypically male leadership styles, which is often the case in the political sphere. The role of a presidential candidate is demanding – women must demonstrate their ability to be assertive and their highly-publicized campaigns require self-promotion and frequent disagreement with their opponents' perspectives.

Social psychological literature indicates that women engaging in these behaviors during their presidential campaigns often costs them support due to their gender, especially among male voters (Carroll, 2009). Moreover, social psychological research suggests that women are perceived as “communal” – warm and selfless – while men are “agentic” – assertive and instrumental (Carroll, 2009, p. 6). Women who seek a more agentic role, such as president, get caught in a double bind. In proving they are qualified to lead, they appear to be not communal and thus insufficiently feminine. To be successfully elected, female politicians must strike a delicate balance between agentic behavior and communal characteristics.

Women in politics risk facing attacks and criticism no matter what they do. The media, political opponents, and the general public chastise women with families who run for office for ignoring their familial responsibilities, yet childless women who do not conform to gendered

associations are also criticized, which is a similar concept to what Matos (2017) explores within the Brazilian media in her research. Moreover, Franceschet, Piscopo, and Thomas (2016) focus on how women are repeatedly held back from reaching their full leadership potential once they are elected due to the double bind. In my thesis, I apply the concept of the double bind to more case studies of Latin American politicians.

The literature on beauty standards for Latin American female politicians is limited yet supports the notion that beauty standards stem from racial and economic inequities and hinder female politicians from achieving their full potential. Beauty, however, can also be a tool that politicians can manipulate to garner public approval and win elections. In their research, Franceschet, Piscopo, and Thomas concluded that female politicians in Latin America can leverage a few different versions of femininity to win presidential elections in a culture rife with sexism. Although the frames can be beneficial, they are also constraining for women and do not allow them to challenge machismo and traditional gender roles. My thesis combines and expands upon the existing literature by applying visual frameworks to Latin American politicians and analyzing the media portrayals and public perceptions of these politicians.

V. Theory

I explore my topic through the analytical lenses of feminist theory and gender politics. Gender politics is a subset of social science that evaluates political systems, regimes, and social movements through gender roles and the overall status of women. It is imperative to note that the scope of gender politics is not just limited to women but engages the world through intersectional perspectives (Ferguson, 2017). Thus, in my research, I not only critically examine the limitations female politicians face due to aesthetic standards but also try to understand how this can be improved to better the lives of women, men, and children in Latin America. Gender

norms and machismo are not just damaging to women. Bringing awareness to the unfair aesthetic standards for female politicians is crucial for all individuals in the pursuit of building a more equitable society.

An integral component of gender politics is the connection between gender identity and political beliefs. Gender identity is a particularly intriguing aspect of gender politics because the public personas that female presidents in Latin American construct are tied to their individual gender expressions. Moreover, gender politics scholars explore how societal ideas of gender influence how political institutions are structured and function (Ferguson, 2017). Associating men with authority has led to widespread male domination in politics and a tendency to alienate women who attempt to break into politics and assume positions of power.

Feminist theory is rooted in the belief in full economic, political, and social equality of the sexes. The idea that men and women experience the world differently is central to feminist theory. The world, especially the political arena, is gendered. In the words of Shulamith Firestone, “there exists a wholly different reality for men and women” (Grant, 1994, p. 41). In politics, a man and woman can run for the same position, be a part of the same party, and hold similar beliefs; yet, their experiences will be vastly different, as the public will treat them in distinctly gendered ways. Unlike men, when a woman runs for office, she encounters sexism, harassment, and unfair standards. For example, potential voters constantly question a female candidate’s competency and intelligence, often believing that a woman is too emotional to make well-informed political decisions.

While my research focuses on the traditional sense of politics, another major component of feminist theory and my thesis is “personal politics” (Grant, 1994, p. 42). A woman’s personal experiences are inherently connected to their political circumstances and inequality. Politics are

not limited to the government and exist everywhere in daily life. In my research, I not only look at politics from the larger scale of elections and political office but also the internal self-expressions and gender identities of female politicians. Grant justifies this idea by emphasizing that experiences matter and, as also previously asserted by Firestone, women exist in an entirely different reality than men.

In 2000, Mitchell introduced new ideas about personal politics by suggesting an analysis of society from the perspective of one's self. Mitchell argues that women, unlike any other group, are oppressed in all societal realms, beginning in the home. Because this structural domination is tied to a woman's gender expression, it is necessary to first look at individual women's experiences and perspectives to better understand the larger political, economic, and social structures that subjugate women. MacKinnon (1989) further argues that knowing women's personal lives is crucial to understanding the politics of a woman's situation; according to MacKinnon, at its core, feminism is the theory of women's point of view. Thus, in light of feminist theory, I focus on the individual experiences of Dilma Rousseff and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and how their gender expressions intersect with Latin American media and politics.

VI. Methodology

In my thesis, I conduct research on the presidencies of Dilma Rousseff and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner through a combination of case studies and data sets. For each female political leader, I analyze their backgrounds, paths to political success, and public image and perception. I also analyze specific pieces of media from these women's political campaigns. Additionally, including statistical data from Latinobarómetro, a non-profit based in Chile, about female political leaders' approval before, during, and after their presidencies as well as any other relevant statistics from their presidencies or political careers helped me understand how they

were received by the public throughout their political careers. In my research, I pull from articles, propaganda, photos, and any other forms of media relating to the political campaigns and careers of presidents or leaders in Latin America.

Because the aesthetic component of Rousseff and Fernández de Kirchner's public personas is central to my thesis, I included relevant images, such as Rousseff's mugshot, tabloid headlines of Fernández de Kirchner, and makeover comparison photos. I derived these images from American sources, such as the *Associated Press* and the *Wall Street Journal* and Latin American sources, such as *Ámbito Financiero*, *Veja*, and *HACER Latin American News*. In addition to these images, through these sources, I found supplementary material, such as speeches and quotes from Latin American journalists, that provided pertinent information directly from either Rousseff and Fernández de Kirchner themselves or other individuals involved in politics in Brazil and Argentina. By pulling from a variety of sources, including magazines, newspapers, journalistic websites, and even tabloids, I was able to piece together a dynamic and cohesive picture of how the media perceived both presidents.

VIII. Analysis

Dilma Rousseff Analysis: The Transformative Swan

Brazil: Media Overview

In Brazil, the media is heavily anti-Partido Trabalhadores (PT) and controlled by a small group of wealthy, right-wing families (Bevins, 2013). After left-leaning President Joao Goulart was deposed in 1964, the right-wing Brazilian government censored the newspapers and television stations that the families operated during a 21-year dictatorship. In 2002, despite the

election of Lula bringing an end to the conservative government, the progressive PT did not attempt to change or engage with the media, which remained under the control of the original right-wing families. As a result, the Brazilian media was relentlessly critical of the PT. In fact, not a single major news outlet supported Rousseff or even promoted the left-of-center viewpoint.

According to Laurindo Leal Filho, a media specialist at the University of Sao Paulo in Brazil, because Brazilian society was based on slavery for over 300 years and has been run by the same “social strata,” the media still reflects the values and interests of this old-school elite class (Bevins, 2013). While the Brazilian public has praised the news media for its in-depth investigations of the Lula and Rousseff corruption scandals, government supporters assert that the media does not address the clear evidence of corruption that involves other political parties besides the PT. In 2013, Reporters Without Borders issued a report criticizing the narrow media concentration in Brazil, suggesting a reexamination of the laws regarding the media (Barbosa, 2017). The Brazilian government, however, has taken a relaxed approach to these recommendations, and, unlike other Latin American countries, has not engaged in open battles with private media critics.

Moreover, analysts argue that any efforts by the Brazilian government to change the media could be “politically impossible” (Bevins, 2013). Some members of Congress have close ties between parts of the media and even vote to grant licenses to outlets they own. Thus, navigating these complexities posed a challenge to Rousseff and the PT. PT supporters view the major newspapers, especially *Folha* and *O Estado de São Paulo*, and the television network and newspaper run by the Globo group as decisively anti-Rousseff (Barbosa, 2017). The power of the Globo group was evident in Lula’s first presidential bid in 1989, in which the Globo TV station extensively edited his final debate with opponent Fernando Collor de Mello. Globo’s edit cut

Lula's time down substantially and highlighted Collor's best moments. As a result, the polls favored Collor, who was elected and later impeached due to corruption allegations.

Despite dealing with an overwhelmingly unsupportive media landscape, Rousseff was not discouraged by the criticism, especially during her first campaign and presidential term (Bevins, 2013). Rousseff even periodically reaffirmed her belief in freedom of speech. Her mentor Lula shared the same attitude toward the media, acknowledging that "Globo distorts the truth... But it's not so bad. Who cares? They can say whatever they want" (Bevins, 2013).

Despite Rousseff's and Lula's moderate approach, the media's unfavorable treatment of Rousseff had significant implications for how her transformative swan persona was portrayed to and received by the Brazilian public. Especially as her popularity began to decline due to the economic struggles and corruption allegations, the media brutally attacked Rousseff, in many cases using her gender in particular to degrade her. In the following analysis section, Rousseff's contentious relationship with the media will further demonstrate how her makeover and feminine appearance were advantageous for her campaign and initial presidential term until she reached a breaking point in her political career.

Brazil: Beauty Culture Overview

Brazilians perceive beauty as central to the job market, crucial for finding a spouse, and essential for upward mobility in the social, political, and economic domains (Jarrin, 2018). Consequently, Brazil is the world's second-largest consumer of plastic surgery, with 1.2 million surgeries carried out annually (Sales, 2023). "Beautiful" bodies in Brazil are produced and maintained not only by plastic surgeons but also through the efforts of nurses, facialists, body therapists, hairdressers, manicurists, and sellers of beauty products (Figueiredo, 2006). With the low costs of cosmetic procedures and poor governmental regulation of beauty clinics, Brazilian

women are increasingly inclined to undergo plastic surgery. While there is no ideal Brazilian body shape, plastic surgeons follow a common thread of beauty that incorporates African curves, a thin white-European nose, and a glowing, tropical tan (Sales, 2023).

Beauty denoting class is a concept that extends throughout Brazil. The ability to modify one's physical appearance is a primary indicator of social status. According to anthropologist Roberto DaMatta, the body is one of the "ultimate arenas for establishing social hierarchies" (Figueiredo, 2006, p. 214). Beauty, cleanliness, and other aspects of one's physical presentation serve as markers to differentiate individuals into desirable and undesirable categories. This power of beauty also connects to the reception of public figures, especially female politicians. When a candidate is aesthetically-pleasing and conventionally attractive, they become more interesting, valid, and, most importantly, electable to the public (Jarrín, 2015).

The Transformative Swan Persona

Dilma Rousseff exemplifies the transformative swan archetype because she had to soften her masculine qualities to appeal to Brazilian voters. The *marqueteiros* (political campaign marketers) worked to portray Rousseff as both a competent candidate and a feminine woman. The *marqueteiros* gave Rousseff a physical makeover to conform to traditional beauty standards and encouraged her to downplay the traumatic events that occurred in her life, such as being tortured by the Brazilian dictatorship and surviving cancer, to appear less masculine (Gomes, 2011).

Rousseff's infamous makeover relates to the "double bind," which is the idea that the public will judge feminine women as incompetent but also view competent women as unfeminine (Carroll, 2009). Regardless of what female politicians do or how they portray themselves, potential voters will critique them more harshly than their male counterparts

(Jamieson, 1995). As a result, it is both a drawback and an advantage for female politicians to emphasize their femininity, and striking a satisfying balance between masculine and feminine qualities is a difficult task. In Dilma Rousseff's case, she temporarily overcame the double bind, as she won the presidential election in 2010 (Dos Santos & Jalalzai, 2021).

The Presidential Campaign

A distinct tension between Rousseff's competency and her femininity characterized her 2010 presidential campaign. The PT primarily selected Rousseff as its presidential candidate as a strategic move backed by the sitting president Lula. Thus, President Lula's support heavily shaped Rousseff's campaign. As a result, the Brazilian media began pushing the narrative that Rousseff was merely Lula's appointee and had only achieved the presidential candidacy because Lula was her "godfather" (Dos Santos & Jalalzai, 2021, p. 20). Throughout Rousseff's campaign and presidency, the Brazilian media continued to spread this narrative, which contributed to the idea that Rousseff was incompetent and unfit to hold the office of president.

As Rousseff's campaign progressed, her masculine personality grew to be another notable campaign issue, as it did not conform to gender standards in Brazil. As discussed in one weekly Brazilian newspaper, Rousseff possessed a couple of traditionally feminine traits, but her personality and leadership style were distinctively masculine. Rousseff became known by the media as having a brash and unfiltered personality. For example, she frequently swore during meetings. In March of 2009, during a conference called "More Women in Power," Rousseff, who was Chief of Staff at the time, referred to herself as a "tough woman" and argued that "[i]n spheres of power, [when] a woman stops being seen as fragile, that's unforgivable. This is where the history of the tough woman starts" (Jalalzai et al., 2022, p. 2). During her career leading up to the presidential campaign, observers in the political sphere regarded Rousseff as an "intransigent

and technical negotiator” who was more “top-down and individualistic rather than collaborative” (Biroli, 2010, p. 281). Many people speculated that Rousseff’s strong temperament would not translate to a successful transition to president.

Another one of Rousseff’s unappealing masculine qualities was her survival of torture in the early 1970s. In 1970, the Brazilian dictatorship captured and imprisoned Rousseff on charges of participating in an armed militant group. She spent three years in prison, during which she was tortured repeatedly with electric shocks. Despite the resiliency that she demonstrated by surviving such traumatic events, Rousseff rarely discussed her torture throughout her political career. An exception to her silence was in 2014 during a speech commemorating the release of the Truth Commission Report, in which Rousseff became emotional while recounting her experience and that dark period in Brazil’s history.

However, for the majority of her political career, Rousseff did not mention her torture because, as a woman, she knew that her opponents, especially those that were

prominent military figures, would question her torture and, as an extension, the validity of her presidential candidacy (Romero, 2014). She feared her opponents would belittle her experience or, even worse, accuse her of lying.

In addition to concerns regarding her competency, the Brazilian media also disputed Rousseff’s femininity, especially by dissecting her physical appearance. For example, a writer for *Veja*, one of Brazil’s most popular magazines, analyzed Rousseff’s fashion style during her



Figure 1. Mugshot of Rousseff after the Brazilian dictatorship captured her in 1970. (Source: The Intercept, 2016)

campaign, noting that “[l]ess skin means more credibility” and Rousseff’s “blazer shows seriousness, but the ones she uses are too short [and] accentuate her hips” (Queiroz & Martins, 2011, p. 137). By discussing her physical appearance in detail, *Veja* makes a clear connection between Rousseff’s fashion choices and her electability.

As Rousseff’s wardrobe became a greater topic of discussion in the press, Lula recruited a team of stylists to choose outfits for Rousseff. Moreover, recognizing that Rousseff did not share his charismatic personality, Lula also asked Rousseff to change her stoic facial expression when dealing with the media (Gomes, 2011). Lula’s request reflects the common stereotype that women must always present an agreeable disposition. While campaign managers rarely instruct male candidates to smile more, the public expects female politicians like Rousseff to constantly maintain a placid smile to convey a warm and friendly demeanor (Koo, 2022).

Crafting Dilma Rousseff’s feminine persona soon became a campaign strategy that Lula and the PT focused heavily on.

Rousseff embarked on what the media coined as her own version of Brazil’s economic Growth

Acceleration Program (Programa de Aceleração do Crescimento in Portuguese, or PAC) called her Plan for Cosmetic Improvement. The first step of Rousseff’s metamorphosis was in April 2009 when she underwent a dental treatment to fix her teeth and achieve a softer smile. Her



Figure 2. Rousseff is depicted in a photo taken in 2004, left, and in a photo released by the Brazilian Presidency during a ceremony in São Paulo, Jan. 12, 2009 at right. (Source: The Associated Press, 2009)

treatment included several aesthetic procedures, mainly dental alignment, clearance, and filling (Gomes, 2011).

In December 2009, Rousseff acquired a more youthful appearance and a less irritable facial expression through cosmetic lifting and blepharoplasty (eyelid surgery). Rousseff also sought many cosmetic treatments from well-known dermatologist Denise Steiner, whose patients also included the former mayor of São Paulo and Rousseff's PT colleague, Marta Suplicy (Costa, 2011). Overall, the Brazilian media supported Rousseff's makeover. In a 2009 article in *Veja* magazine, the author wrote that "[w]ith diet, plastic surgery, and a radical change in her haircut, Dilma Rousseff shows the good results of her own PAC... [i]t is the first step in her way to become Lula successor" (Gomes, 2011, p. 23). By changing her appearance, Rousseff's *marqueterios* constructed a more feminine and sexually-appealing persona for Rousseff. Rousseff's new visual persona was inspired by the idea of a light and docile woman in politics, a gendered version of the ugly duckling transforming into an electable swan.

On April 25th, 2009, during a press conference, Rousseff revealed that she was undergoing treatment to remove an early-stage lymphoma, discovered by her doctor in her left armpit during a routine mammogram. Dilma underwent four sessions of chemotherapy over four months to eliminate the cancer, and, during this time, the press raised concerns about her ability to run for president amid such a serious health crisis. *Estadão* (2009), the third largest newspaper in Brazil reported that, due to hair loss caused by the chemotherapy, Rousseff began wearing a wig. In mid-May 2009, Rousseff was hospitalized in the Hospital Sírio Libanês in São Paulo, due to experiencing severe pains in her legs. The diagnosis was a myopathy, a muscle inflammation caused by her cancer treatment. In early September 2009, Rousseff announced that she had finished her radiotherapy treatment and was cured of the myopathy (Ribeiro, 2009).

Rousseff's oncologist estimated that her chances of making a full recovery from her cancer were 90 percent. When it became evident that Rousseff would beat the cancer and continue with her responsibilities as chief of staff and as a presidential candidate, the media shifted its focus back to her appearance. News outlets concentrated on the fact that she was wearing a wig after her chemotherapy and radiotherapy treatment and also extensively covered her hairstyle after she stopped wearing a wig. One Brazilian journalistic website, *Congresso em Foco*, reported that Rousseff first publicly admitted to wearing a wig in May when she jokingly referred to it as a "basic little wig" (Sardinha et al., 2010). In November, she announced that she would be retiring her wig as soon as her hair grew longer. According to Rousseff, her hair was still "full of holes," which was the reason she could not take off her wig until late December (Sardinha et al., 2010). After seven months of wearing a wig, Rousseff wore her natural dark brown hair at the launch of the 3rd Human Rights Program on December 21st, 2009.

After her lymphoma treatments concluded, Rousseff underwent additional physical changes. She began using sunscreen as well as wearing lipstick and powder blush (Costa, 2010).



Figure 3. Carolina Herrera in 2007.
(Source: The Cut)

In August 2010, Rousseff's campaign coordinator Fernando Pimental brought famous Brazilian hair stylist Celso Kamura from São Paulo to Brasília to cut Rousseff's hair. Kamura selected a haircut inspired by Venezuelan fashion designer Carolina Herrera. Rousseff agreed to the haircut, which required dyeing her hair a lighter shade of brown. Kamura also designed Rousseff's eyebrows in an effort to soften her "aggressive" eyes because, according to Kamura, arched eyebrows make a

woman Rousseff's age appear angry instead of sexy. During the remainder of her campaign, Kamura met with Rousseff every two months to touch up her look. Rousseff's campaign coordinators also hired a makeup artist to travel all over Brazil with her before the presidential election (Costa, 2010).

The final step of Dilma Rousseff's PAC involved changing her wardrobe. Rousseff's campaign coordinators hired Brazilian stylist Alexandre Herchovitch to dress Rousseff but quickly found that Rousseff was quite stubborn with her fashion choices. Herchovitch struggled to convince Rousseff to get rid of certain pieces or wear fancier clothes. Due to gaining over 13 pounds during her cancer treatment, Rousseff preferred more comfortable outfits. After a month, Herchovitch quit and announced on his Twitter account that none of the outfits Rousseff wore were designed by him (Costa, 2010).

The Presidency

After Dilma Rousseff's election in 2010, her approval rating gradually declined throughout her presidency. In 2011, 72.4% of voters approved of how Rousseff was running the country, with this percentage dropping to 60.2% in 2013 and then plummeting to 30.7% in 2015 (Latinobarómetro). As economic concerns and corruption scandals became the forefront of Rousseff's presidency and her impeachment laid on the horizon, the Brazilian media started to push a misogynist narrative about Rousseff's perceived incompetence, distributed sexually violent social media posts about Rousseff, and popularized the demeaning expression "*tchau querida*," which translates to "bye, dear" in English (Dos Santos, 2021).

After her election, Rousseff announced she wanted the public to address her as "presidenta," the feminine version of president (Dos Santos, 2021). This term was a symbolic way of normalizing women in the traditionally masculine political arena. Most media outlets,

however, in an effort to undermine her credibility and challenge her role as president, refused to refer to Rousseff as presidenta. Rousseff's desire to be called presidenta resulted in a derogatory and satirical nickname: presidanta. Presidanta combined the word president with the word anta (a large mammal that resembles a pig), a popular expression in Brazil referring to an individual that is stupid or incompetent.

One of the earliest uses of this term was in 2010 when journalist José Simão wrote in his *Folha de São Paulo* column that "Dilma doesn't even know how to get down from a treadmill? Presidanta! Thankfully she uses botox. The botox softened the fall." In this column, Simão not only repeatedly used the mocking term "presidanta" to describe Rousseff but also viciously attacked her weight and made allegations that she had undergone cosmetic procedures. As Rousseff's presidency progressed, the use of presidanta only increased. According to Google Trends, 2014 and 2015 marked the highest levels of popularity for the term in the forms of text and images circulating online (Dos Santos, 2021). Memes including the word presidanta became especially popular during the 2014 election period and at the end of 2015 when Rousseff's impeachment process began.

Rousseff also experienced brutal gendered attacks in July 2015 in a country-wide protest against high gas prices (Hertzman, 2016). According to an article published by *Veja São Paulo*, a Brazilian woman began selling car stickers online that fit around the gas tank and depicted Rousseff in a sexual position in which her legs were open, inviting drivers to penetrate her as they filled up their car with gas ("Anúncio de adesivo com montagem de Dilma foi feito por uma mulher | Últimas de São Paulo," 2017). The Brazilian government, through the Secretariat for Women's Policies, condemned the sticker, as it not only offended Rousseff but also normalized rape (Hertzman, 2016). Although the website used to sell the sticker quickly suspended the sale

and distribution of the sexually violent product, people still found ways to acquire the sticker and popularized its use across social media platforms.

In March 2016, at the height of the presidential crisis, Rousseff continued to be attacked due to her gender. At this time, Rousseff asked Lula to be her chief of staff, a decision that signaled Rousseff's attempt to negotiate with her voter base by bringing back a popular politician and protected Lula during Operation Car Wash (Dos Santos, 2021). Due to his cabinet nomination, the Superior Tribunal Court would hear any accusation made against Lula instead of the previous judge Sérgio Moro. On March 16th, during a wire-tapped phone call between Lula and Rousseff that discussed Lula's cabinet nomination, Lula ended the call by saying, "Tchau, querida" (Bye, dear) (Dos Santos, 2021, p. 51).

While Lula intended the term to be a form of endearment, opponents of Rousseff in favor of her impeachment twisted the expression into a belittling catchphrase (Dos Santos, 2021). A #tchauquerida hashtag began circulating across social media and in protests to oust Rousseff from her presidential office. The



Figure 4. Man holding “Tchau querida” sign during a protest. (Source: The Cut, 2016)

condescending use of the word “querida” extends beyond political mockery into psychological violence against women in power (Nagel, 2016). The hostile behavior and abuse surrounding the catchphrase intended to cause emotional damage to Rousseff.

In 2017, after her impeachment, the former president reflected on the misogynist end to her term:

There was a very misogynist element in the coup against me. They had double standards for men and women. They accused me of being overly tough and harsh, while a man would have been considered firm, strong. Or they would say I was too emotional and fragile, when a man would have been considered sensitive. I was seen as someone too obsessed with work, while a man would have been considered hard-working. There were also other very rude words used. I was called a cow about 600,000 times (Dos Santos, 2021, p. 46).

Thus, while femininity and beauty standards advantaged Rousseff during her presidential campaign, her infamous makeover was not enough to sustain her power and favor amongst the Brazilian population. Although there were also outside factors at play that contributed to a tumultuous end to Rousseff's presidency, opponents undermined Rousseff in a decidedly gendered manner. Critics often discredit women in power in three classic ways: calling them ugly, sexualizing them, and patronizing them. Through the *presidanta*, gas tank stickers, and *tchau querida* events, opponents of Rousseff utilized all three strategies to demean and harass her. Rousseff's impeachment proves that using feminine personas that appeal to traditional beauty standards is an unsustainable – and even harmful – practice under the current climate of machismo in Latin America.

Cristina Fernández de Kirchner Analysis: The Beauty Queen

Argentina: Media Overview

Throughout her political career, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner had a contentious relationship with the Argentine media. Whereas all other democratically elected presidents since Argentina's transition to democracy, including Néstor Kirchner, had protected the interests of the growing media groups in Argentina, Fernández de Kirchner refused to play along (Dembroucke,

2014). Her stance against the mainstream media was evidenced by her promotion of a new media law that would replace a previous one dating back to the 1970s dictatorship. The existing law allowed media conglomerates to acquire media outlets without any restrictions, which confined the circulation of free speech to only a couple of major media groups, namely *Clarín* and *La Nación*, that owned all television and cable holdings, radio stations, newspapers, magazines, and internet companies. While opponents of the new media law called it an attack on freedom of expression and a sign of authoritarianism, supporters argued that the original law came from a time of a dictatorship and put the control of the media into the hands of a select few groups. The new media law, *Ley de Servicios de Comunicación Audiovisual*, was passed in 2009 (Dembroucke, 2014).

Argentina: Beauty Culture Overview

As a country, Argentina fosters a toxic culture surrounding women's appearances, especially for women in positions of power. According to a survey conducted by the University of Palermo, Argentines believe that success comes from luck and beauty instead of hard work and effort. This widespread belief works to the disadvantage of many women, as their looks largely dictate their social and economic status. Winning male approval has become an ingrained facet of Argentine beauty culture. For example, when a survey revealed that more than half of the women in Buenos Aires felt that unsolicited verbal taunting in the streets from men made them feel unsafe, the former Mayor of Buenos Aires belittled these concerns and accused the women of lying, stating that in reality these women believe catcalls are a form of flattery (Maldonado-Salcedo, 2017).

Because a woman's value in Argentine culture is tied so closely to her appearance, women often believe that their life choices and chances of success diminish rapidly with age.

Popular culture constantly pushes the narrative that men like their women like they like their cars, “a younger and newer model is always preferable” (Maldonado-Salcedo 2017, p. 21). Argentine culture even suggests that a woman’s beauty is the primary reason for a man’s existence. In 2014, Argentine President Mauricio Macri declared to the public that “[t]here is nothing more beautiful than the beauty of women, right? It’s almost the reason that men breathe” (Maldonado-Salcedo, 2017, p. 21).

These oppressive aesthetic standards drive the booming beauty industry in Argentina, which appears to be recession-proof despite Argentina’s economic decline over the past few decades. In Buenos Aires, the “hottest commodity” is maintaining a beautiful and youthful appearance, as it can lead to a plethora of opportunities (Maldonado-Salcedo, 2017, p. 21). Thus, women dedicating time and money to improve their bodies and overall appearance is a strategic investment in their future success in the economic, social, and political spheres.

Argentina’s obsession with women’s physical appearances and the consequent unattainable ideals of perfection has resulted in Argentina having some of the world’s highest rates of eating disorders among women (Romero, 2014). The Argentine government further promotes unhealthy behaviors and attitudes by subsidizing plastic surgery for its citizens, thus making cosmetic procedures free or low-cost in public hospitals. While it is valid to criticize Cristina Fernández de Kirchner for choosing to construct a visual persona that aligns with beauty standards in Argentina, it is imperative to remember that her actions also exist in the “context of a culture that places an extraordinarily high premium on aesthetics because of patriarchy, heteronormativity, and neoliberal capitalism” (Maldonado-Salcedo, p. 22, 2017). Moore and Kosut emphasize that bodies like Fernández de Kirchner’s need to conform to impossible beauty standards because women are “citizens of larger social bodies (the communities and institutions

[that their] bodies populate)” and “are responsible for keeping [their] bodies functioning in the pursuit of national goals and economic agendas” (p. 22, 2009).

The Beauty Queen Persona

Cristina Fernández de Kirchner represents the beauty queen persona as she portrayed a glamorous, sexualized, and highly visual persona during the 2007 presidential election. A beauty queen focuses on being perceived as conventionally attractive, as evidenced by Fernández de Kirchner’s styled hair, designer clothes, heavy makeup, alleged cosmetic procedures, and penchant for shopping. The beauty queen persona exudes feminine appeal and relies on a highly visual approach to gain supporters.

Like Dilma Rousseff’s infamous transformative swan makeover, the beauty queen persona relates to the “double bind” (Carroll, 2009). Beginning with Néstor Kirchner’s presidential election, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner succeeded in balancing her hyper-femininity and her aptitude for political office, with her beauty even adding credibility to her husband’s image. Over time, however, the Argentine public began to question Fernández de Kirchner’s competency during an economic decline and several corruption scandals. Thus, the beauty queen persona demonstrates the advantages and disadvantages of intertwining femininity so tightly within a politician’s public image.

The Presidential Campaign

Cristina Fernández de Kirchner’s political career began after completing her law studies at the University of La Plata and moving to Patagonia with her husband Néstor Kirchner (Carroll & Goni, 2007). In 1987, she was elected to the provincial legislature, while Néstor was elected mayor of Río Gallegos. In 1994, Fernández de Kirchner was elected to the national constituent

assembly that amended the Constitution of Argentina, and a year later, she was also elected as a national senator. During her term as a senator, Fernández de Kirchner presented herself as a young politician who “was considered smartly dressed and attractive, but relatively low-key” (Caroll & Goni, 2007).

However, during her husband Néstor’s presidential campaign and election in 2003, Fernández de Kirchner’s appearance changed dramatically. She began wearing heavier make-up, expensive jewelry, designer outfits, and accessories, such as wide belts, lacy fans, and red berets. The public’s increasing interest in Fernández de Kirchner’s fashion choices and beauty fueled her popularity during her husband’s campaign and presidency, causing much of the media coverage of the couple to revolve exclusively around Fernández de Kirchner’s physical appearance. Many spectators even attributed Néstor Kirchner’s “extraordinary approval ratings” during his presidency “to his wife, whose lithe attractiveness balances her husband’s low-wattage style and earns her credit in a country obsessed with appearances and physical beauty” (Sax, 2004). In the context of her husband’s bland and unpolished appearance, Fernández de Kirchner amplified her beauty to an even greater degree. In a superficial culture that equates beauty with success, Fernández de Kirchner was able to garner more support for her husband and herself through her attractiveness.

According to David Sax (2004), Argentines are infatuated with the corporeal. In Argentina's highly visual culture, the image of women in power is especially intriguing. Women in positions of authority, like the first lady or president, must maintain physical appearances to sustain their power. By focusing on her beauty, Fernández de Kirchner became a source of curiosity and discussion among the Argentine public. Admirers of Fernández de Kirchner praised

her “flowing hair, infectious smile, and rousing speaking style... as something special: a magnetic force ready to scale the final ramparts of macho governance” (McDonnell, 2010).

Fernández de Kirchner’s new glamorous persona contrasted sharply with her husband, who often went tieless and frequently wore rumpled suits to public appearances. As speculation grew that Fernández de Kirchner herself would be running for president, the Argentine media began comparing her style to her husband’s, concluding that Fernández de Kirchner is “certainly more stylish than [Nestor] is, sporting a Jackie Kennedy-like designer collection and a shoe closet rivaling that of [First Lady of the Philippines] Imelda Marcos” (McDonnell, 2010). During this time, Brazilian sociologist Paula Miguel noted that the general public perceived Néstor and Cristina’s appearances very differently, arguing that both “[m]en and women have aides who tell them what to wear or how to fix their hair or teeth... these images are constructed and whenever a woman holds an important post, she is doubly scrutinized” (Burke, 2007).

The glaring contrast between Fernández de Kirchner and her husband exposes the higher expectations that Argentinian voters place on the physical appearances of female politicians and the intense criticism that they encounter when navigating the complexities of constructing a public persona. Like many female politicians, Fernández de Kirchner experienced the repercussions of the double bind. As she began to focus more on her femininity, the Brazilian public questioned her ability to lead in the traditionally masculine role of president (Burke, 2007).

Caras is one Argentine tabloid magazine that was especially obsessed with Fernández de Kirchner’s appearance during her husband’s presidential term. In 2004, while still a senator, Fernández de Kirchner visited New York, a trip that the Argentine media covered extensively. Unsurprisingly, *Caras*, which translates to “faces” in Spanish, did not report Fernández de

Kirchner's speech to the Council of Americas during her trip but rather her "strategic image change" that included wearing less mascara and lip gloss instead of lipstick, likely to appeal less ostentatious to the Council of Americas. The magazine also produced stories on Fernández de Kirchner's debut of new hair extensions on the trip and her wardrobe choices, especially her use of a red suit.

Caras reported that Fernández de Kirchner was a "beautiful, rich, and powerful woman" similar to a character in a Hollywood movie. Despite the superficial nature of *Caras* articles, headlines that discussed Kirchner's beauty provided an "island of escapism" for readers. After experiencing the aftermath of the economic collapse triggered by massive anti-government protests in 2001, the Argentine media began producing more flashy, superficial content for readers to serve as a momentary distraction from real-world perils. According to Hector Maugeri, the executive editor of *Caras*, "[n]ow, more than ever, people need to have dreams, and *Caras* provides them" (Moffett, 2004).



Figure 5. Cristina Fernández de Kirchner on the cover of *Caras* magazine in 2003. (Source: The Wall Street Journal, 2004)

After serving as Argentina's First Lady from 2003 to 2007, Fernández de Kirchner transitioned to the role of president after Néstor did not run for reelection, becoming the 2007 candidate for the Front of Victory party, a center-left Peronist electoral alliance and a faction of the Justicialist Party. By the time Néstor announced that he was stepping down to let Fernández de Kirchner run for president, observers noticed that she had fuller lips, tighter skin, and more

voluminous hair, thus prompting intense speculation in the Argentinian media about Fernández de Kirchner undergoing cosmetic surgery and getting hair extensions (Caroll & Goni, 2007). Reports from the beginning of her presidential campaign focused on Fernández de Kirchner's physical appearance and fashion choices, as one 2007 article discussed Fernández de Kirchner's "figure-hugging white Armani suit and diamond necklace" (Balch).

During the presidential election, Fernández de Kirchner centered her campaign around "political glamor," evoking the image of the beloved Eva Perón, an iconic Argentine figure. Eva Perón, also referred to as Evita, was an Argentine activist, actress, and philanthropist who served as First Lady of Argentina from June 1946 until her death in July 1952, as the wife of President Juan Domingo Perón. Evita portrayed a special kind of charm to the people of Argentina. Sarlo asserts that Evita's physical appearance was crucial in promoting "abundance, freedom, and political agency" in the 1950s (2008, p. 93). Her "estado de bienestar a la criolla" (Creole welfare state) included direct government assistance for the people of Argentina and featured the graceful, exquisitely dressed first lady visiting impoverished villas in Buenos Aires to distribute money, clothes, and other necessities. As an elegant, blonde actress who advocated for the poor, labor rights, and women's suffrage, among other endeavors, Evita became known as Argentina's *abanderada de los descamisados* (flag-bearer of the shirtless poor). She and her husband ushered in a new political ideology, referred to as Peronism, which is founded on ideals of social justice, economic independence, and political sovereignty (Nasi, 2016).

Few individuals have captured the essence of Evita, which explains Argentina's fascination with Fernández de Kirchner. Often evoking the image of Evita throughout her candidacy, Fernández de Kirchner ran with the promise of expanding social welfare programs, advocating for the poor, and reducing the income gap. Fernández de Kirchner would often stand

before images of Evita and imitate Evita's gestures and style choices. One spectator during a rally for Fernández de Kirchner in 2007 expressed that supporters were "certainly hoping for a reincarnation of Evita" (Carroll & Balch, 2007). Given the aesthetic-obsessed culture of Argentina, concentrating on appearances clearly benefits female politicians like Evita. Evita created and maintained an identifiable image of herself now ingrained in recent Argentine memory. Through her evocation of Evita, Fernández de Kirchner recognized the power of Evita's visual persona while also adapting it to serve her own political agenda.

Transforming herself into a pin-up style with designer suits and spiky heels, Fernández de Kirchner gained a reputation for being the "Queen of Botox" who changed her outfit up to four times per day (Carroll & Goni, 2007). Fernández de Kirchner's political rivals began questioning her competency to run for president in light of her obsession with aesthetics. Political cartoonists mocked Fernández de Kirchner's hair extensions and shopping habits, and the leading daily newspaper in Argentina, *La Nacion*, reported regularly on the high prices of her suits and shoes. An opposition candidate for governor of the Buenos Aires province criticized Fernández de Kirchner, arguing that she spent too much time at the mall instead of at the vegetable shop to emphasize her ignorance about high food prices in Argentina, a central campaign issue. Silvina Walger, an Argentinian journalist who followed Fernández de Kirchner's evolution, suggested that Fernández de Kirchner's physical makeover reflected her inauthenticity, as "[Fernández de Kirchner] was more real as a person when she was a lowly senator, but now she has transformed herself" (Carroll & Goni, 2007).

Walger was not the only public figure in Argentina to question Fernández de Kirchner's authenticity. Nito Artaza, an activist in the opposing Radical party, referred to Fernández de Kirchner's public persona as "very ostentatious" (Nasi, 2016). Elisa Carrio, one of Fernández de

Kirchner's political rivals in the 2007 presidential campaign, criticized her attempts to emulate Eva Perón, saying that "Eva was a political heroine, a real queen, not a Botox queen" (Carroll &



*Figure 6. Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, left, and Elisa Carrió, right. (Source: *Ámbito*, 2022)*

Goni, 2007). Carrió, who was once a beauty queen herself, declared to the public that she had gained weight and began wearing cheap clothes as part of her statement against the corruption in Argentina's political class and as evidence that she was a more genuine candidate compared to Fernández de Kirchner.

At a campaign event in September 2007, Fernández de Kirchner addressed the widespread criticism of her appearance, arguing that the critics' true target was not her physical makeover or fashion choices but her pro-poor, populist platform. Speaking to her husband, Fernández de Kirchner stated: "Mr. President, you say people criticize you for wearing loafers and double-breasted suits. Those same people criticize me for dressing up too much. In reality, they aren't bothered by your loafers or your suit, or my makeup, or my hair. They are bothered because we've threatened their interests" (Burke, 2007).

The Presidency

After winning the presidential election in 2007, comparisons between Fernández de Kirchner and Perón began to decline as Fernández de Kirchner gained a reputation for being combative and primarily interested in international relations instead of issues pertaining to her support base in Argentina. By 2009, Fernández de Kirchner's approval rating had plummeted to 26.7% (Latinobárometro). Her popularity only began to rise after the unexpected death of her husband in October 2010, resulting in an increase in her approval rating to 60.3% in 2011.

During this time, Argentines sympathized with Fernández de Kirchner's loss and expected less political confrontation (Miami Herald, 2011). On October 23, 2011, Fernández de Kirchner was re-elected after a year of frequently evoking Eva Perón's memory with tributes and references to the former first lady during the Argentine Bicentennial celebrations of 2010 (Merco Press, 2011).

Despite the improvement in Fernández de Kirchner's approval ratings in 2011, the Argentine media still criticized her shopping habits, especially in light of Argentina's high debt. In September 2011, *HACER Latin American News* reported that while staying in Paris to meet with French president Nicolas Sarkozy,

Fernández de Kirchner spent over \$100,000 on shoes. During the trip, Fernández de Kirchner and her daughter stayed at the luxurious George V Hotel, which cost between \$1,500 to \$12,500 per night. *HACER* reported that before she met with Sarkozy and other French officials, Fernández de Kirchner requested that



Figure 7. Image depicting Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's 2011 Paris shopping spree. (Source: *HACER Latin American News*, 2011)

the George V Hotel's personal shoppers bring her a variety of purses and shoes to try on in her suite. She purchased Louis Vuitton, Hermès Birkin, and Kelly purses as well as 20 pairs of Christian Louboutin shoes, at approximately \$5,500 per pair. The *HACER* article also notes that Fernández de Kirchner's lavish shopping spree occurred during intense political tension over her 2012 budget call for \$5.67 billion of the central bank's foreign-currency reserves to be used toward Argentina's debt payments. At this time, economists estimated that the Argentine government's debt obligations would total around \$6.8 billion in the following year. Argentina also had deliberately neglected repayment of a \$100 billion debt default since 2002. Given

Fernández de Kirchner's numerous corruption scandals, many speculate that Fernández de Kirchner may have funded her shopping sprees and expensive lifestyle by siphoning money from the Argentine government. The *HACER* article humorously concluded that "[r]egardless of her political detractors [Fernández de Kirchner] is sure to look good when debating them."

While Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's extravagant beauty queen persona appealed to voters and garnered substantial support for her and her husband during their respective presidential campaigns, her excessive antics and flashy image reached a tipping point toward the end of her presidential campaign. Fernández de Kirchner left office in 2015 amid many high-profile corruption scandals, namely the Alberto Nisman and Vialidad cases, and faced a plethora of other minor corruption allegations (Kahn, 2022). As a result, Fernández de Kirchner has become one of Argentina's most polarizing political figures, seen by her loyal base as a champion of the poor and a strong-willed populist leader while also viewed by her critics as a selfish, corrupt, and even evil politician who is responsible Argentina's continual economic issues (Fontevicchia, 2022). After being found guilty of corruption in the Vialidad trial which concluded in late 2022, judges sentenced Fernández de Kirchner to six years in prison and a lifetime ban from holding political office. Thus, Fernández de Kirchner's beauty queen persona allowed for her successful presidential election but did not protect her from her many scandals and the subsequent end of her political career.

IX. Conclusion

Dilma Rousseff and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner are two essential cases to investigate when researching the factors that have allowed for the recent increase in female presidents in Latin America. Although they were elected to the office of president, in pursuing their political aspirations, both women had to construct public personas that reflect the oppressive beauty

standards and gender norms under the machista ideology. By expanding on the current literature about the cultural frames female politicians use in Latin America, I created my own terms – the transformative swan and beauty queen personas – to describe the makeovers that Rousseff and Fernández de Kirchner underwent during their presidential campaigns.

Unlike the cultural frames created by Franceschet, Piscopo, and Thomas (2016) that connected a female candidate's electability to her expression of motherhood, I focused on examining the aesthetic portrayals of two prominent Latin American presidents. Through researching the execution and impact of the transformative swan and beauty queen personas, I discovered that they only served the women to a point until Rousseff and Fernández de Kirchner were no longer shielded from gendered attacks and criticism that ultimately ended their political careers.

Rousseff's transformation into a more conventionally attractive and feminine candidate secured her two presidential terms. However, Rousseff faced immense criticism from the sociopolitical tension and economic struggles during her presidency, which resulted in harsh gendered attacks through events like the *presidanta*, gas tank sticker, and *tchau querida* events and her eventual impeachment. Fernández de Kirchner noticeably amplified her beauty queen persona during her husband's and her presidential campaigns, but she also crossed a boundary in her obsession with aesthetics. Consequently, she has become a highly divisive figure in Latin American politics, widely regarded as a corrupt criminal.

The presidents of Dilma Rousseff and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner expose the sexism that women in politics continue to experience and the need to dismantle the harmful system of beauty standards and machista culture in Latin America. Despite implementation of gender quotas since the 1990s and the enactment of gender parity political-electoral laws in 2019 and

2020, Latin America still has a long way to go in addressing the barriers that female politicians encounter (Llanos, 2021). These institutional reforms have proved to be surface-level, incoherent, and largely ineffective, as women remain politically underrepresented and the women that are elected, such as Rousseff and Fernández de Kirchner, are relentlessly criticized due to their gender. Thus, Latin American governments have not succeeded in improving the status of women because they have failed to address the political, economic, and social restrictions that contribute to a continuous cycle of rampant inequality (Del Campo, 2005).

Gender quotas and parity laws do not eradicate the obstacles female politicians face and ignore the need to fix the broader cultural inequities, such as machismo and unfair beauty standards, that hinder women in positions of authority. Furthermore, increasing female political leadership in Latin America without rectifying the current climate of gender inequality can even be counterproductive for women (Morgan & Buice, 2013). As women make advancements in politics and become more powerful, the men who experience a loss of status as a result will react adversely to this adjustment and grasp onto traditional gender norms to an even further degree. Thus, while the presidencies of Rousseff and Fernández de Kirchner exemplify necessary milestones for women in politics, each presidency represents primarily superficial progress for women, as they each had to rely on gender stereotypes and machismo in order to win the presidency. The future of women's authentic participation in politics in Latin America depends on the support of women for reasons beyond their maternal, sexual, and, as I argue in my thesis, aesthetic characteristics and the end of the machista ideology.

The cases of Dilma Rousseff and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner are not isolated incidents of sexism. Instead, their experiences are symptoms of a larger culture of weaponizing beauty standards to demean, objectify, and undermine women who seek positions of power, not

only in Latin America but all over the world. Future research can expand upon other visual personas besides the transformative swan and beauty queen that female politicians use.

Additionally, researchers can apply these personas to politicians in other regions beyond Latin America to analyze the patterns of inequities that exist amongst different countries, cultures, and governments.

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