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The Performance of Power: Harvey Specter vs Louis Litt from *Suits*

One remains in a committed relationship for years while the other goes through a phase of transient relationships of waking up to different women every night. One had a stable family upbringing while the other’s childhood was filled with tears and lies. One is a gunslinger while the other has an aggressive and emotional delivery. One proves his worth using his billables while the other relies solely on his winnings. One seems like the most confident person in the room while the other always presents himself as an underdog.

Both hold the same law degree from the same law school. Both hold the same title in their law firm. Both wear extremely expensive suits. Both dine in only the most exclusive of restaurants. Both have loyalty as their ultimate core value. Both love being the center of attention. Both are quite ambitious men.

Presenting Harvey Specter and Louis Litt from the award-winning television series, Suits. The show is focused around the inner goings on of an American law firm, where Litt is seen constantly faced with a battle of gaining the elusive respect from his peer, Harvey. Louis is clearly a smart lawyer and with loyalty being his core value, he often wins over the hearts and minds of the audience, however he lacks confidence. Harvey, on the other hand, may not be as smart as Louis, but he oozes self-assurance and has built his career on one thing - winning. Harvey’s skills are exaggerated for dramatic effect, but they are definitely rooted in reality. The first thing you notice about Harvey is his incredible confidence and self-assurance. Harvey’s confidence is underpinned by his ability and surety in his skills or the outcome of a situation. Harvey cares deeply about the people in his life, but he has been trained by his experiences to view open love (platonic or romantic) as something his enemies can exploit, or at the very least something harmful.

Now, the performance of power portrayed by these two men, in their personal and professional lives, is extremely contrasting. **Thus, can we define a performance of power based on a set of stereotypically “likeable” traits, or a set of traits that portray a character as human?** Or is it a mix of both? Do performances of power have respect for the speaker as an unconscious pre-requisite? Or is it enough to simply establish a power dynamic in the room by being confident even to the point of cockiness? To answer this colossal question, Harvey Specter and Louis Litt will help me out. Their distinct personalities at the same position in a law firm has led to an interesting dynamic between the two, as well as with other members of the law firm. This paper will be broken down into several segments that would profile one’s ascension to a performance of power:

1. Personality and Strategy
2. Delivery
3. Appearance and Wardrobe

For each category, we will follow a compare and contrast model where we list out characteristics particular to the respective character and go on to categorize them as helpful or unhelpful towards contributing to a performance of power.

1. Personality and Strategy

Harvey’s personality unfolds with the progression of the show. The reason one likes him is that he is the kind of person we all aspire to be. His persona, his self-confidence, his sense of loyalty, his ability to get anything done, and most importantly his attitude of not accepting defeat. All these are personality traits we are constantly striving for.

* Laser focus on winning: Regardless of the situation he is in, Harvey always tries hard to win. Never in the entire series will you notice him playing it safe. He never compares himself with anyone. If Harvey can't win the argument with his wits and his words, he's going to choose his fists. It's all connected to the fact that he's not going to lose. He'll use whatever will get him by. In other words, he never gives up.
* Accepts responsibility: The quickest way to lose the respect of both your peers and managers is to try and pawn failure off on other people. Sometimes you have to accept that you may have made a mistake, embrace it, learn from it, chalk it up to experience and move forward. Harvey does this extremely well throughout the show.
* Never give in to blackmail or threats: This is the lesson he teaches Mike the first time Louis pulls a bluff and leads to one of his most famous, and recurring, lines "What are your choices when someone puts a gun to your head?"
* Emotional Intelligence(EQ): Before dealing with Craig Seidel, who had threatened to deny Rachel chance to practice law, he went into finding the roots of the problem and thereby sought leverage. While the show does this in very dramatic fashion, as they need to, it's always a good idea to understand something before getting into it. Harvey understands motivation and psychology well enough that he is able to use any snippet of emotion or information they give away against them – good lawyers worry about facts; great lawyers worry about their opponents. Once you understand your opponents, you can start using their own actions and emotions against themselves.
* Having a deep sense of loyalty: Throughout the series Harvey always backs his team with Donna, Mike, Jessica and even Louis.
* Don’t play the odds, play the man: You never see him inappropriately dressed or being shy about asking what he wants. He asks for help time and again. Asking for help isn't something to be afraid of. Harvey has a very strategic mind. Unless it gives him an advantage or based on a reaction allows him to learn something about his opposition, Harvey will never reveal his strategy. He understands how each person thinks and operates and is strategic in who he shares information with having a good idea of how they will use that information. He knows that sharing your silver bullet, just to wipe the smile off the face of your gloating opponent, while satisfying would be giving away your advantage and cutting yourself off at the knees.
* Confidence: Harvey’s skill also serves as a strong foundation for his confidence. Confidence is simply the state of being sure about something. But it’s also about translating thoughts into action. Usually, this is surety about the outcome of an event, for example, an attractive man may be confident that his advances will be welcomed or well-received by the lady he is approaching. Or a marketer may be confident about the strategy he has chosen because he knows how it will play out.[1] This surety comes from experience. Harvey is sure of his skills because they have been honed and tested repeatedly over a long and successful career.
* Don’t lose small, win big: This is more a psychological thing than anything else. If you are constantly going into every negotiation/meeting/pitch with the intention of minimizing your losses, then you are already halfway to losing. You should always be reaching for the top shelf, and always making sure that you go into things with the right mindset.[2]
* Don't bring excuses, bring solutions: “Winners don´t blame the ball, or the rim, or the wind speed”. Too often these days we find ourselves complaining about other people or situations that we may find ourselves in. Managers and CEO’s aren’t looking for you to come to them and explain why a problem exists, they want to know how you’re going to fix it. Not only will you be viewed in a better light, but you can take steps to ensure that the same issue doesn’t arise again. They hired you into the role because they believed you would be able to get the job done. This is exactly the relationship between Jessica and Harvey and he always proves her right.

On the other hand, Louis Litt is simply seen as a comic relief to the story line at the outset of the show. However, over the progression of eight seasons, one may be inclined to say that Litt is the most interesting and complicated character of the lot. He has made us feel a lot of things for himself - he has irritated us, made us love him, made us hate him, made us pity him and forced us to be impressed by him. His fatal flaw is his inability to disconnect himself from his emotions and letting his emotions control him.

* Insecure: Insecurity and need for external validation also play a big role in his many bad moments. This can be driven from the fact that he is always comparing himself to Harvey who is seen as completely perfect in all realms.[3]
* Extremely ambitious: But make no mistake - Louis is not to be taken lightly, as many people including Harvey and Jessica learnt the hard way. He is probably the most ambitious person after Jessica herself.
* Excellent at power game - Despite many obvious flaws in him, he is an excellent player in the power game. When he did not get his due, he snatched it by stone cold moves which both impress us and make us hate him a little.
* Extremely affectionate: Louis however, has another side as well. When he is in his rational mode, he is actually a good person who can be a great friend. His petty deeds threaten to jeopardize his relationships but in the end, due to his inherent love for others, he has great friends.
* Can be a complete cuckoo chap: Full of contradictions; How he destroys the juniors in the bullpen while he adores and pampers cute cats the next moment.
* Genuine and Human: He is frequently seen as a person who is perhaps a little too real. Contrary to pretending to like manly drinks like brandy or appreciating only cool music like jazz or hip hop, he isn't ashamed to go mudding or attend ballet. Furthermore, as much as lawyers love to work with people as “cool and fashionable” as Harvey or Jessica, most partners in the office are more similar to Louis Litt.
* Underdog: Whether that’s trying to steal one of his colleague’s clients or acting as Harvey with a client to feel better about himself, Louis is constantly undervalued and underestimated and has many at times resorted to mean tricks to make his presence felt.
* Emotional: He cares deeply about his friends, has a very fragile ego, and has loyalty written all over him.

1. Delivery

Harvey is a smooth talker, a gunslinger\* who knows what to say and when to say it. This gets the job done with little or no backfire. Harvey is a smooth talker, he likes innuendo and is a master of sarcasm. Both his confidence and his appearance help him with this, but his flirtatious style is what wins clients and colleagues over. He always manages to tell incredibly cheesy jokes and they hit every time.

\*a gunslinger is a person who behaves with the bravado expected of someone who would duel with guns.

Louis on the other hand, while a brilliant lawyer he is, has a lousy delivery. He is very aggressive and emotional, and this often comes back to hurt him or the firm which leaves Mike and Harvey or sometimes even Jessica left to fix it. However, he is a true genius with numbers and is a control freak that allows him to generally triple check before going to court or giving an important speech.

1. Appearance and Wardrobe

With Suits, what captivates me, apart from the interesting plot, intriguing characters, and of course Specter himself, is the way the TV series cleverly crafts each character by way of wardrobe selections. Suits is one show that recommended every corporate executive to watch [4] as it teaches you how to differentiate between ranks by looking at what they wear.

It also shows you how the way the characters style their hair, wear their clothes and choose their accessories to support and emphasise the personalities that they are portraying.

And of course, on a show named “Suits”, one cannot leave out their appearance differences. Harvey opts for a peak lapel and sometimes a 3 piece (vest under jacket). This is a bold selection.[4] Three-piece suit with peak lapels, often in navy pinstripes, spread collar shirts with a Windsor-knotted tie. The wide peak lapels own the room with confidence and power. Specter is the top closer of his firm, and his power suits convey his status at his firm perfectly. Everything in his look evokes strength. Harvey has a sense of style; he’s always clean, well-groomed and well-dressed. It doesn’t matter whether he’s at work, at the gym, or at home. Harvey understands that that appearance affects not only how other people see you but can have a huge impact on your own confidence and mood.

Louis wears 2-piece notch lapel suits. These lapels blend in more and don't scream for attention. Beneath his well-cut suit, Litt is overweight, perhaps to project a slightly clumsy demeanour and his hunger for attention. He wears a scorn on his face and his beady eyes are always suspicious of everyone around. With a receding hairline, crew cut hair and sporting thick eyebrows, Litt plays his role to perfection. Tailored-made suits that are well-fitted to his large frame. His spread collar shirts are always with an expensive looking tie, knotted to perfection with a dimple in the middle.

Harvey wears neutral ties and white pocket squares for a clean finish whereas Louis pops some colour into his outfits to express his emotional and loud personality.

One of Harvey’s quotes perfectly sums up this section- “People respond to how we’re dressed, so like it or not this is what you have to do”.

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After breaking down their characters, we come to the following conclusion. Harvey is always seen as calm, he always seems to have a plan and when things get tough, he leverages his calmness to inspire others and positions him as the leader everyone looks to. The series shows a lot about his character and his good nature which is often overshadowed by his flamboyance and confident attitude. Harvey Specter's character has much more depth than people realize. On the other hand, Louis Litt is always seen as trying to impress Harvey, but his ego, short temper and lack of control always derail his efforts to emulate Harvey’s easy-going behavior.

No one likes to see a person lose their temper. Harvey manages to keep his cool even when it seems that the world is crumbling around him. Keeping calm in the most stressful of situations can be the difference between moving up the career ladder or staying in the same role for good. It serves as the epitome of a performance of power. If you want people to respect you and have confidence in your abilities, you don’t want to be storming out of every meeting or engaging in a shouting match just because things haven’t gone quite the way you hoped they would. Harvey is adept at combining all the above, his suave talk, his boldness and knowledge of the other person’s desires to be an excellent negotiator. But then, how did Louis reach the same exclusive position with his “emotional” state of mind? Although Louis can be very judgmental and emotional at times, he is also extremely intimidating and powerful when he wants to be. Many viewers that dislike Louis' character are men and women who believe he needs to "man up" and take control over his life; however, he plays a very important role because he sets himself apart from both the rest of the cast and societal norms. His character encompasses everything that boys in society are not supposed to be and his role is crucial in teaching boys to be themselves no matter what other people say. He is a defiant character that never lets anyone bring him down or change his personality one bit.

Therefore, these two characters have very different portrayals of their personalities. However, upon further investigation, we see that both care deeply for their loved ones and are both extremely driven people. They both display performances of power by leveraging their resources and status to create an aura around them. While Specter is seen as a clear epitome of a strong and powerful man, the constant undermining of Litt’s personality is what makes his performances of power so much stronger.

Thus, as a conclusion to my research, I find that a performance of power is related to one key trait – empathy. If a speaker understands how to find an underlying connection between himself and you, be it mutual yearn for perfection or how relatable it feels when they tell you about an emotional breakdown, a performance of power, for me, is how one decides to tell a story that you will empathise with on a deep level. We empathise with Harvey’s yearning for constant perfection. We empathise with how “real” Louis seems to us. Thus, a performance of power can be based on a set of stereotypically “likeable” traits, or a set of traits that portray a character as human, or a mix of both. But they all have an underlying theme of holding one key trait to the receiver of the performance of power – empathy.

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