

Identifying changes in popular news media articles about the transgender community from 1990 to 2023

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Abstract

In the past few decades, newspaper articles about transgender people and the transgender community have become increasingly more common. At the same time, language used in this type of media has continued to evolve. In order to better understand the way public discourse around the trans community has changed, this study uses a linguistic analysis of newspaper articles from the ten most widely circulated newspapers in the United States. A sampling of articles from each year from 1990 to 2023 was analyzed using the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) program to capture the authors' attitudes. Correlation analyses were used with the LIWC categories to explore if any of the linguistic terms changed over the study period. In addition, change in the use of the terms "transsexual" and "transgender" was tracked over the same 34 year period. Results showed a statistically significant decrease in negative language used in articles about transgender people over time and a significant change in the use of the terms "transsexual" vs. "transgender". Linguistic changes in these newspaper articles parallel changing attitudes about the trans community in mainstream American culture at large.

Keywords: Transgender; News media; Linguistic change; Language; Media representation

1 Introduction

Beginning in the 1990s, more non-profits and activist groups began to include issues concerning gender identity in discourse related to the lesbian, gay, and bisexual community, leading to the expansion of the "LGB" moniker to include the transgender community under the "LBGTQI+" umbrella more commonly seen today (Velasco and Paxton, 2022). Historically, issues related to the transgender community have been underreported until recently. In the previous decade, transgender lives represented in news media have come to include much greater diversity and nuance (Capuzza, 2015). However, more widespread visibility of transgender narratives has paralleled an increase in violence directed towards transgender people (Berberick, 2018), indicating that news media's portrayal of the trans community remains significant.

Traditionally, media representations of transgender people have not been impartial and much of the conversation has been directed by both subtle and blatant transphobia (Capuzza, 2015). Previous studies of news media representations of transgender and transsexual people have shown the ways that transgender identity can be dismissed or disregarded, often through consistent misgendering and use of deadnames (Barker-Plummer, 2013; Osborn, 2022) or other misrepresentations what it means to be transgender (Capuzza, 2015). In other cases, media has portrayed transgender people as sexual deviants (Anzani et. al., 2023) or as people whose intention is to deceive or manipulate others by pretending to be another gender (Barker-Plummer, 2013). Similarly, historically, topics of newspaper articles on

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transgender people focused on intentionally provocative topics such as murder victims (DeJong et al., 2021; Panter, 2023; Seely, 2021), celebrities and public figures (Capuzza, 2015), and the medicalization of the trans body (Becasen, 2019; Tordoff et al., 2022). As these strategies dominated traditional news media coverage of transgender people, media representation often othered and delegitimized the transgender community as a whole (Billard, 2016).

News media representation of marginalized minority communities like transgender people is significant as previous research has shown the impact of news media on public opinion (Chomsky and Barclay, 2010). Previous research also demonstrates that more nuanced representation of transgender people can indicate more public acceptance of the trans community (Bond and Compton, 2015) and advancements in social understandings of transgender identities (Capuzza, 2015). Within this context, this study sought to explore linguistic changes in mainstream media representation of the transgender community in order to assess portrayal of the community over time.

This study uses a linguistic analysis of newspaper articles about transgender people in order to evaluate if the public discourse about the trans community has been changing. While previous studies have considered the topics of news articles about transgender people (Billard, 2016), no studies exist of the linguistic choices of newspaper article authors who write about and represent transgender issues. This study analyzed three decades of mainstream newspaper media text of transgender stories to determine potential linguistic attitude changes.

2 Material and methods

2.1 Sample

We used a subsample of text from newspaper articles about transgender people published between 1990 to 2023. Two articles per year were selected from each of the 10 most widely circulated newspapers in the United States (Majid, 2023): Wall Street Journal, New York Times, Washington Post, New York Post, USA Today, Los Angeles Times, Star Tribune, Newsday, Chicago Tribune, and Tampa Bay Times. Article text was accessed via Factiva or LexisNexis as available. In order to meet search criteria, search terms had to appear in the title or first 50 words of the article, to ensure article relevance. In years with two or more articles equally relevant to the search terms, articles closest to the front page were chosen, assuming that this represented greater visibility for the article. Search terms used included “transgender”, “transsexual,” “gender bender”, “sex change,” “cross-dresser,” “tranny,” and “sexual reassignment,” including variations of the words. Not all newspapers had articles which met search criteria for every year. A total of 642 articles were included for text analysis (see Table 1).

Table 1 Number of articles used in text sampling for analysis

Newspaper	Total articles sampled between 1990-2023
Wall Street Journal	48
New York Times	68
Washington Post	68
New York Post	58
USA Today	66
Los Angeles Times	68
Star Tribune (Minneapolis)	66
Newsday	65
Chicago Tribune	68
Tampa Bay Times	67
Total	642

In addition to collecting articles based on search terms, we searched each newspaper for the total number of articles each year which used the term “transsexual” or “transgender” between 1990 to 2023. These totals were tracked per year.

2.2 Data Analysis

We converted all articles to text-only including both the title and the body of the article and examined the texts by year using the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) program. LIWC software quantitatively identifies informational features of text revealing words reflecting the beliefs, fears, thinking patterns, relationships, and views of the author (Pennebaker et al., 2015). The LIWC program compares each word in a document with programmed dictionaries of 74 dimensions and then calculates the percentage of words which fall within each dictionary's vocabulary. The LIWC program is based on several decades of research about narrative voice (Pennebaker, 1993; Pennebaker and King, 1999) with content and construct validity (Francis and Pennebaker, 1992; Stirman and Pennebaker, 2001). Categories of examined words included function words (e.g., pronouns, articles); social process words (e.g., family, friends); affective process words (e.g., anxiety, sadness); cognitive process words (e.g., think, know, consider); perception words (e.g., seeing, hearing); biology words (e.g., health, sex); and personal concern words (e.g., work, leisure).

We conducted correlation analyses with the categories above exploring if the use of these linguistic terms changed over the study period. In addition, we used ANOVAs to examine possible differences in the use of the terms “transsexual” and “transgender” across the research period. Finally, we conducted correlation analyses to examine relationships between the LIWC categories and the use of “transsexual” versus “transgender” words.

3 Results

When categories of affective process words were examined, we found a significant negative correlation with negative emotion words, indicating fewer negative feelings expressed in the news text in more recent years than in earlier years ($R=-0.593$, $p<0.000219$). No significant linguistic change in the use of positive emotion words within the affective process word category, and none of the other categories included significant findings.

Article searches across the ten papers between 1990 and 2023 identified 31,249 total articles using either the term “transsexual” or the term “transgender”. The distribution of the articles by year is shown in Figure 1. Unpaired t tests were used to compare the use of the terms over time. Results revealed a significant difference between the use of the term “transsexual” versus the term “transgender” over time. A correlation test showed a significant negative correlation between the terms, such that use of the term “transsexual” decreased significantly over time and the use of the term “transgender” increased significantly over time ($R=.6457$, $p<0.0001$). For almost all years between 1990 – 1999, the term “transsexual” is a much more commonly used term across articles than “transgender”. As shown in Figure 1, beginning in 2000, there is a permanent shift in language use wherein “transgender” is used more commonly in newspaper articles. With this in mind, LIWC data from the years 1990 - 1999 was compared to text from 2000 – 2023 to show any differences in word choice between articles that used the term “transsexual” and articles that used the term “transgender.” ANOVA showed significantly more positive emotions used in articles that use “transgender” ($M=.56$, $SD=.06$) compared to articles which used the term “transsexual” ($M.40$, $SD=.14$) ($p<.0196$).

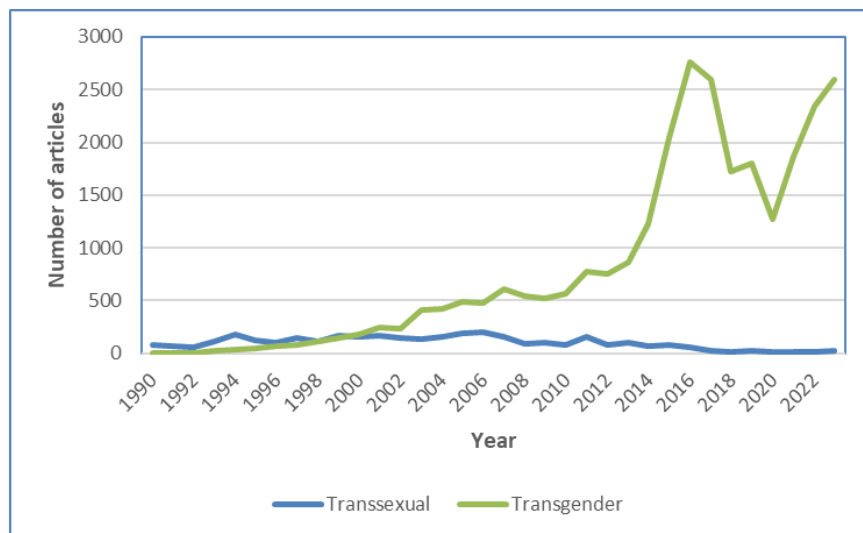


Figure 1 Articles using the term “transsexual” and “transgender” published in the top 10 most widely circulated American newspapers between 1990 and 2023

4 Discussion

This study evaluates the changing narrative of how transgender people have been represented in mainstream news media using a validated natural processing approach. While most word categories did not show significant differences over time, our analysis did show a significant shift in the use of the term “transsexual” to “transgender” over time and a significant reduction in negative emotions among authors writing on the subject. These linguistic changes parallel an overall change in public perception of the trans community in the previous three decades.

In the past few decades, the term “transgender” has gained popularity as an umbrella term capable of capturing a variety of identities and diversity of experiences for anyone whose gender is not aligned with the gender they were assigned at birth. Studies of the etymology of the term describe that, beginning in the 1990s, the term was adopted more widely as a category separate from “transsexual,” the latter of which was seen to emphasize the medical and pharmacological interventions for changing sex within a male-female binary (Vicente, 2021). Overtime, the term “transsexual” became less popular because of its close connection to the body and, more specifically, medicalization of gender-nonconforming bodies (Valentine, 2007). This same linguistic shift is well documented within the data of this study and the switch between the use of “transsexual” and “transgender” over the study period.

Our data show a sharp increase in the number of articles written on topics related to the transgender community, largely beginning in 2015. That year, notably, was named by *Vogue* magazine as “the Year of Trans Visibility” (Taylor, 2015). The magazine largely credited the visibility of trans celebrities and their inclusion in popular media for the increased visibility. It was also the first year that the term was used by a president in a State of the Union address, when President Obama condemned the persecution of “people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender” in January 2015 (Griggs, 2015). With these factors in mind, it is unsurprising that the number of mainstream news articles about the trans community increased considerably beginning in 2015 and continuing into recent years. The significant change in affect of the news media authors (via the demonstrated decreased in negative emotion words) suggests that the majority of more recent media about the trans community has remained neutral or positive, at least within the most widely circulated newspapers.

At the same time, previous research recognized that as trans lives become more visible, transgender individuals are at increased risk of becoming targets of violence (Berberick, 2018; Butler, 2005; Vicente, 2021). Indeed, a legislative struggle exists over transgender identity and equality that has accelerated in recent years with record numbers of bills across the US designed to limit things like access to bathrooms, participation in sports, and access to gender-affirming care (Kinney, Pearson, and Aoki, 2022). In 2021 alone, 150 anti-trans and anti-LGBT bills were introduced into state legislatures, at least 15 of which were signed into law (ACLU, 2021). When considered alongside the demonstrated increase in news articles about the transgender community, it is clear that discussion about the trans community and its place in American society has become more mainstream. Importantly however, within this context, the continued decrease in negative emotion words by news authors, despite the drastic increase in articles, suggests that the mainstream news narrative around the trans community has not been as heavily influenced by negative political attacks against the community.

There are limitations to this study. Newspaper articles that were selected for analysis represent a targeted subsampling of the total number of articles written about the transgender community. While steps were taken to ensure that the text represented as illustrative of a subsection as possible, text analysis of all articles that discuss the trans community could have yielded a different result. In addition, this study only uses text that was published in newspaper articles. It did not include media distributed in any other form (e.g., social media, television shows). While these mediums were beyond the scope of this study, they represent important sources of information that could be included in future research.

5 Conclusion

Analysis of the text of newspaper articles written about transgender people between 1990 to 2023 did reveal linguistic changes. Specifically, the use of the term “transgender” has significantly increased overtime as the use of the term “transsexual” has significantly decreased, reflecting an adoption of identity-centered language over medicalized language. In addition, articles about the transgender community have become significantly less negative overtime as the community has become more visible. Because of increased political targeting of the transgender community in

recent years, more research is needed on the ways that media describe transgender issues and how language reflects changing social attitudes as a whole.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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