

Frames and Triggers of Extreme Speech: The Case of Transphobia

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Abstract

This research explores, from a critical discourse perspective, the following questions: What frames are used to construct transphobic argumentation and its counterargumentation? What triggers the discriminatory comments? Answers to these questions will help in understanding what motivates transphobia and how to improve counterspeech. Our data comprises 1137 annotated comments discussing trans personnel in the UK army. The annotations and our analysis focus on the argumentation used in transphobic speech to construct the topos of threat and its counterspeech. We adopt both a quantitative and a qualitative approach and identify two main argumentative frames (the medical and misfit frames), their counterspeech, which is mainly based on logic and facts, and the triggers of transphobia, namely gender ideology based on binarism as well as the role played by public figures such as politicians in spreading disinformation and prejudice. Our results include suggesting an argumentation schema (argument, premise, conclusion and claim) based on the topos of threat, a schema which may be used in automatic counterspeech.

Keywords

counterspeech; misfit and medical frames; argumentation; topos of threat; triggers of transphobia; Trump

1. Introduction

On 27 January 2025, President Trump signed an executive order banning trans people from the army (“Trump signs order,” 2025). This article focuses on transphobic speech posted on social media after Donald Trump had taken similar steps in 2017. Transphobic online comments have not yet been addressed from a critical discourse analysis perspective, except for a study by Colliver et al. (2019) that adopted a critical discursive psychology framework. Indeed, in the relevant literature, we can find research targeting offline representations and perceptions of trans people (Craig et al., 2015; McInroy & Craig, 2015) and

representations of trans identities in the press (Baker, 2014; Turner et al., 2009; Zottola, 2021). In the present study, we examine the discursive strategies used to construct the othering of these specific non-heteronormative identities by using the topos of threat and the counterspeech used to deconstruct these strategies. Based on our analysis, we suggest a schema of argumentation to potentially automatically create counterspeech. Our data consists of online and annotated computational data (IMsyPP project, 2019–2022). To begin, we describe the fundamental concepts underpinning this study, i.e., by explaining what distinguishes hate speech from extreme speech, and how we define the concepts of frame, trigger, and topos. We next undertake a brief literature review, followed by a discussion of the data and quantitative results. We present our analysis of the main frames of transphobia and their counterspeech, as well as the triggers of such frames. We conclude by suggesting a schema of argumentation which could be used in automating counterspeech.

2. Fundamental Definitions

2.1. *Extreme Speech and Hate Speech*

In this study, we use the term “extreme speech” to describe the hurtful discourse targeting trans people. We do not use the label “hate speech” because the legal definition used in the European legal space (EU Council Framework Decision of 28 November 2008, 2008) restricts hate speech to a statement that fulfils three essential criteria: (a) the speaker/writer’s intent to incite the audience to do harm against a targeted group; (b) the speaker advocates violence and/or hatred; (c) the speaker targets a group that is historically disadvantaged and vulnerable (see Baider, 2020; Guillén-Nieto, 2023). Examples of transphobic hate speech would include comments such as “trannies ought to be shot dead” because it includes a call for violence and demonstrates hatred. Although hate speech is often accompanied by abusive language, not all abusive statements can be classified as hate speech (Ibrohim & Budi, 2023). Indeed, the above criteria defining hate speech do not fit our data, as most comments analysed in the present study constitute discriminatory and/or offensive speech that manifests in the form of prejudiced statements and judgements, such as “transgenders suffer from mental illness.” They do not call for acts of violence or hatred directed at trans individuals and are not threatening. We have therefore labelled such prejudiced speech “extreme speech” (see Baider & Gregoriou, in press).

Extreme speech can express anxiety, anger, and/or grievance and frustration (van der Vegt et al., 2021). It “pushes the boundaries of civil language,” as suggested by several authors (e.g., Udupa & Pohjonen, 2019; Udupa et al., 2021), and it is not always aimed at a disadvantaged individual or a group, which is the case in hate speech definitions. Although it may be socially reprehensible discourse, it is still protected by freedom of expression laws (Baider, 2018; Maynard & Benesch, 2016; Udupa et al., 2021; Udupa & Pohjonen, 2019). Indeed, speech that is offensive or aggressive is not generally considered a human rights violation, and most social media watchdogs do not take down extreme speech (Cohen-Almagor, 2014). The label “extreme speech” for such derogatory discourse is useful in the sense that it allows researchers to examine and analyse extreme comments and posts, as these may lead the audience to accept hate speech. Understanding extreme speech and its argumentation helps in composing convincing counterarguments that, for example, can debunk the disinformation typically found in extreme speech. Therefore, by labelling and analysing extreme speech, we hope to find a way to effectively derail a potential spiral of verbal violence.

2.2. Frame, Topos, and Trigger

The concept of framing is widely used in sociology, and it is also a concept commonly used in linguistics (Baider, 2018; Kecskes, 2006; Rácz, 2013). Among different definitions and interpretations of a frame (Entman, 1993; Fillmore, 1982; Goffman, 1974), we decided to work with Fillmore's (1982) and Entman's (1993) definitions. Both theoreticians refer to framing as the process of selecting the most salient elements with which individuals organise their understanding of a given situation (Rácz, 2013); in turn, this selection of some aspects of reality influences the interpretation and evaluation of the events, ideas, and people:

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. (Entman, 1993, p. 52)

In other words, framing means choosing or identifying lexical items, grammatical structures, and rhetorical devices that knowingly or unknowingly fit a specific worldview (Entman, 1993; Fillmore, 1982). Alternatives to the word "frame" include the words "schema," "script," "scenario," or "cognitive model" (Fillmore, 1982, p. 11). Fillmore (1982) explains how inferences, a most important characteristic of extreme speech, are subsequently made based on elements in the frame:

Any system of concepts related in such a way that to understand any of them you have to understand the whole structure in which it fits; when one of the things in such a structure is introduced into a text or into a conversation, *all of the others are automatically made available*. (p. 11, emphasis added)

Framing is a cognitive structure wherein all elements are interdependent; as such, when one of the elements of such a structure is found in a text, all the other elements may come to mind. For instance, framing non-heterosexuality as a social/moral threat (Baider, 2018, 2020) allows commenters to interpret the pride parade as a social/moral provocation rather than a celebration of human rights and freedom. The frames in our data will be associated with the most salient concepts in the debates, which can be identified by finding the most frequent lexical entities in the data (Müller et al., 2022).

While identifying frames is key to understanding the cognitive structures characterising a specific extreme speech comment, it is also essential to identify what triggers such frames to be able to foresee discriminatory debates. A noun or a verb *trigger* refers to the release and the cause of another event, as, for example, in a chain reaction. Triggers can be people, texts, or topics that tend to elicit or release toxic comments. It should be noted that often it is not the events themselves but their coverage by the media that triggers extreme reactions and comments (Legewie, 2013).

2.3. Transphobic Speech Studies

In our literature review, we found that the noun "transgender" was used in the press; however, the word "trans" has been recommended by some researchers (Colliver et al., 2019) and by the community itself (Stonewall, 2023). For that reason, we will use the terms "trans/trans people" in our research, but we will use the word "transgender" when quoting our data. Hill and Willoughby (2005, p. 533) described transphobia as "emotional disgust toward individuals who do not conform to society's gender expectations"; it "involves the feeling of

revulsion to masculine women, feminine men, cross-dressers, transgenderists, and/or transsexuals.” It refers to hostile responses to people who are perceived to be trans and who do not comply with the gender standards of society. The “phobia” suffix implies “an irrational fear or hatred, one that is at least partly perpetuated by cultural ideology” (Hill & Willoughby, 2005, p. 91). Homophobia (Weinberg, 1973) has been defined in the same way, i.e., as a dread of being close to homosexuals. Both transphobia and homophobia are literally based on a fear of non-heterosexuality, which is then felt and thought of as a threat. Transphobia and homophobia are, therefore, closely related to the topos of threat to heterosexuality. The topos of threat is here based on Reisigl and Wodak’s (2009, p. 102) proposal: If a political decision carries specific threatening consequences, it should be prohibited. Comments examined in the present study are deploying argumentation to sustain or resist this topos.

Discourse studies focused on homophobic speech (Baider, 2018; Brindle, 2016; Lillian, 2005; Mongie, 2016; Reddy, 2002) have identified the most common frames used to construct a homophobic discourse: a threat to national or individual security, family values, and morality, to social fairness, or as a physical threat (Lillian, 2005). In fact, Nagoshi et al. (2008) concluded that transphobia was positively correlated with homophobia, political conservatism (strong support for social conventions), gender role beliefs (concerning traditional values and roles), and religiosity. In this respect, transphobic speech implies not only sexual prejudices but also negative attitudes toward outgroups in general (Norton & Herek, 2013, p. 749). Research has also noted significantly greater negative attitudes towards transgender people than towards members of other sexual minorities (Chakraborti & Hardy, 2015; Norton & Herek, 2013, p. 749; Turner et al., 2009), hence the importance of working on transphobic speech. Speech acts that convey such a discriminatory attitude/belief manifest themselves in the form of prejudice, discrimination, harassment and acts of violence (Bandini & Maggi, 2014). Discriminatory comments (44%) and verbal abuse (27%) are the most common forms of harassment targeting trans people (Turner et al., 2009, p. 20); understanding such hurtful discourse can help us create counterspeech that can address such verbal violence. As noted in the introduction section, Baker (2014), Colliver et al. (2019), and Zottola (2021) are among the few studies devoted to representations and construction of trans individuals’ identities online or in the press. The studies by Baker (2014) and Zottola (2021) aimed to determine if the discursive strategies used to represent transgender identities reflect specific political and ideological stances. Colliver et al. (2019) is the only study that analysed online comments, albeit with a specific focus on the debate triggered by gender-neutral toilets. They found similar discursive strategies as the ones found in homophobic speech. Our study will attempt to generalise the specific frames and argumentation that construct the topos of threat regarding trans people and identify the triggers of such a topos.

Therefore, our research questions are the following:

- RQ1. What frames are discursively building transphobia and therefore the topos of threat?
- RQ2. What strategies are used to respond to these frames?
- RQ3. What schema of argumentation can summarise these strategies and frames?

3. Data, Methodology, and Identification of Frames

3.1. Data and Methodology

We worked with data from the IMsyPP EU project (2020–2022) that focused on LGBTQ+ issues: 3,000 Facebook posts annotated as “extreme speech” and counterspeech that were extracted from a total of 15,000 annotated and other comments related to a variety of topics, e.g., migration. The dataset was annotated in the EU IMsyPP project and is described in Baider (2023). More specifically, we annotated the discursive strategies used in extreme speech, i.e., distinguishing a rhetoric category, subdivided into argumentation (and further divided into logic/reasoning, statistics, examples, history, and other facts) and affective rhetoric (subdivided into insult, personal attack, empathy with acknowledging grievances, displaying positive emotions, displaying negative emotions, and sarcasm).

Among the 3,000 annotated comments focusing on LGBTQ+ issues, we noted two press articles that triggered more than 1,000 comments—one of which was the only article focusing on trans people. It comprised approximately 1,137 Facebook comments posted in 2017 in English. The comments were posted under an article on the BBC website focusing on the presence of trans people in the British army. The article was titled “UK Military Chiefs Praise Transgender Troops” and the first paragraphs read as follows:

Commanders from British armed forces have opposed any ban on transgender people serving in the military.

[This position] comes after Donald Trump said that transgender people would not be allowed in the US military due to “tremendous” medical costs and disruption. But British officials have supported people serving in the Army, Royal Navy and Royal Air Force. Commander of UK Maritime Forces Rear Admiral Alex Burton tweeted: “I am so glad we are not going this way.”

The Obama administration decided last year to allow transgender people to serve openly in the US military. But in June, Defence Secretary James Mattis agreed to a six-month delay in the recruitment of transgender people. (“UK Military Chiefs,” 2017)

We analysed our data with corpus linguistic tools (Baker et al., 2008; Brindle, 2016), including the AntConc software, as well as with a qualitative analysis, to identify the frames and triggers. For the qualitative analysis, the choices related to the lexicon (lexical paradigm) and those related to rhetoric (for instance, sarcasm and metaphors) were investigated.

3.2. Identification of Frames

Based on Love and Baker’s (2015, p. 64) view that keywords signal the most important themes in a text, we identified the most frequent words. We believe that these will reveal the most salient concepts in the thread we are examining (Baider, 2018; Giora, 1999; Müller et al., 2022) and these are the concepts that will frame the debate.

As the most frequent words in any text will include grammatical prepositions, articles, adverbs, etc., and the verbs “to be” and “to have,” we did not include these in our word count. The adjective “mental” was the only adjective to show the same frequency as a noun (69) and we discuss this later. Table 1 illustrates the most frequent nouns in our data.

Table 1. Most frequent nouns in the thread (word types = 4549; word tokens = 33,093).

Nouns	Number of occurrences
People	243
Military	158
Transgender	156
Gender	114
Country	94
Trump	75
Women	71
Army	55
Trans	52
Gay	49
Man	47
Sex	47
Illness	47
Life	46

What can these keywords tell us about the likely frames of the debate? Not surprisingly, the words “military,” “transgender,” “trans,” “gender,” “army,” “sex,” and “gay” are high on the list, given that they are the main themes of the article (focusing on trans people in the army). However, the words “Trump,” “women,” “illness,” and “life” are less expected and more revealing of the specificities of our data; therefore, we focused our attention on these keywords and the comments in which they appear. In other words, we returned to the textual context using the Key Word in Context (KWIC) extracts; as such, we were able to understand the role of these keywords in the argumentation for and against trans persons serving in the army, as well as how these arguments fit into a common frame.

The presence of the name Trump indicates, foremost, that the words of the American president have a strong influence on the debates. Trump stated that allowing trans in the army would lead to “tremendous” medical cost and disruption. Indeed, looking at comments containing the noun “Trump,” the medical burden argument is used extensively against trans. The concept of “disruption” is derived from analysis of the contextual use of the keyword “life”: Trans will disrupt the objectives of an army to serve and protect the nation because they are too physically weak—not only are they unable to save lives, but they would also endanger lives. Trans are seen as unfit to serve in an army.

The frequency of the word “women” indexes a contiguity between the concept of transgender and the female body/femininity. In numerous KWIC extracts, commenters describe women as too physically weak and “too emotional” to serve in the armed forces. This contiguity also testifies to the association of transphobic speech with the heterosexism inherent in traditional misogyny, here using the typical

stereotypes of frail and emotional women. These stereotypical female traits are incompatible with a life in the armed services. The noun “illness,” in expressions such as “mentally ill,” “mentally unstable,” or “mental illness,” explains the high frequency of the adjective “mental” and is suggestive of a psychopathological stereotype associated with trans people.

Most of the arguments supporting the claim that trans should not be in the army because they will pose a threat involve negative stereotypes such as physical and psychological weaknesses, medical costs and psychological disease. From these, we can identify two main frames: the misfit frame, where trans are physically and psychologically weak—like women—and unable to adapt to military life; the medical frame, where trans are seen as posing a medical burden and a psychopathological hazard to the army. These two frames derive from Trump’s (quoted above) view against trans people in the army—a result that confirms the important role of politicians and the media in setting the agenda of online debates and in influencing the argumentation and opinion of commenters. The president’s statement quite literally framed the debates (cf. Section 6 on triggers).

4. Qualitative Analysis of Identified Frames

4.1. Misfit Frame

The misfit frame is present in 85% of comments, which is unsurprising as the thread under study is about serving in the army. This frame is built on arguments that transpose a danger to other soldiers owing to their weak character and/or their physical weakness.

4.1.1. Physical Weakness

In our literature review, we noted that Nagoshi et al. (2008) found a strong correlation between transphobia and political conservatism (strong support for social conventions, including traditional gender roles). These correlations, and more generally, gender stereotyping and heterosexism are evident in most transphobic comments.

Comment [595] calls for banning not only trans persons but also women from combat:

[595] The military/war in general is a brutal place....Just because you can, doesn’t mean you should....I’m all for women being aircraft pilots, submarine commanders, battleship commanders, but certain jobs are not meant for everyone. That goes for transgenders. We always have to be ready to fight and win conflicts, be at our peak without jeopardizing standards....The military isn’t a social experiment, it’s a place where we train to slaughter our enemies and create warriors.

Hegemonic masculinity, evident in the comment above, is stereotypically associated with virility, evident in the vocabulary (“brutal,” “slaughter,” “warrior,” “fight,” “win”) used to describe actions that only “real” men are capable of, as in the comment below:

[1206] They need real men on the battlefield, not the ones covered with make-up and worried about their nails and mascara.

Commenters seem to believe that the participation of both women and trans people in combat would threaten the survival of a nation at war, ultimately leading to its defeat.

4.1.2. Character Weakness

We found that the argument for character weakness was even more frequent than the argument citing physical weakness.

Comment [518] makes a forceful discriminatory speech, which can here be associated with hate speech, dehumanising trans people as “mentally ill creatures,” an expression that equates them with some sort of monster:

[518] Our *brave* Christian men and women that fight to defend our Christian *nation* should not have to fight side by side unstable mentally ill creatures. I pray that Trump moves forward with banning ALL LGBT from the military. This is the only way forward for a more powerful and efficient military force.

The quotation above takes Trump’s call for a ban to the extreme, asking for a ban on *all* (emphasised) LGBTQ+, including gays, bisexuals, and lesbians, not just trans people. This broad generalisation infers that all LGBT people are “mentally ill creatures,” the expression expressing utter contempt. The comment also sets US (good) against THEM (bad) using the ideological square (Allport, 1954; van Dijk, 1993): The “good ones” are those Christian men and women who are brave and, therefore, able to defend the nation. These Christian soldiers are associated with power and efficiency, while the emphasis on men *and* women reinforces both the sexual dichotomy and heterosexism. In contrast, the “bad ones” are the entire LGBT community who are supposedly not brave, surprisingly not Christian, and who would certainly disrupt the efficiency of the army.

Distrust is core to the argumentation of commenter [1108], who opens with a sarcastic remark questioning other commenters’ knowledge of the topic in relation to specialists in the field. The distrust of trans people (“don’t trust them,” “wouldn’t feel safe”) is based on the fact that trans are, for the commenter, confused: The desire to change gender is repeatedly interpreted as “not even understanding what gender they are” and to not “even understand their own ‘gender.’” Following a rather twisted logic, this means that the trans person would not understand what to do in a war zone. The statements “most of the enlisted” and “other soldiers agree” are intended to be an argument for authority, i.e., that the majority concur with the commenter:

[1108] Glad you guys know more than medical doctors who spent their entire lives researching this....People who have no idea what gender they are have no business in a war zone. Most of the enlisted, and I was one, don’t trust them because they don’t even understand their own “gender.” I wouldn’t feel safe in a foxhole with one, and other soldiers agree.

Although comment [459] expresses the same mistrust more laconically, its brevity actually serves to heighten the absurdity of the argument, which is, in fact, a syllogistic fallacy (Riesigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 102): The desire for a gender/sex change is interpreted as holding labile beliefs in *all* matters, which in the army would result in endangering their fellow soldiers:

[459] ...if they can change their sex, they can also change the side they are fighting for.

Therefore, the “labile” trans person is even potentially a traitor to their comrades and the nation, an accusation also found in homophobic data (Baider, 2018).

In summary, this misfit frame is argued by stating that trans display inherent physical, psychological, and moral weakness, making them completely unsuitable as soldiers. Worse, they are a threat to their comrades, to the army, and to the nation.

4.2. Medical Frame

The medical/scientific discourse functions as an argument for authority to back up the claim that trans cannot enrol in the army. This medical frame is essentialist in that it dehumanises trans people either explicitly or implicitly as psychopathological individuals (cf. “mentally ill creatures” in the previous comment [518]). Quantitatively, this frame is present in 75% of the comments, and from the very outset of the thread [496] through to its end [1500]. It is constructed throughout with the repetition of such expressions as “mental illness,” “gender dysphoria,” “confused,” which express the idea that “they do not know what gender they are.” In fact, these expressions can be considered as linguistic markers of transphobic discourse.

4.2.1. Psychopathology

In our data, “mental illness” is the term that most frequently co-occurs with the term “transgender.” Although this expression can refer to a psychopathology that affects only *some* trans individuals, as in the comment below, it is generally argued that it would be risky to have *any* trans people in the army:

[1474] Also, mental illness is sky-high in transgenders (not all, but why would you run the risk). Does anybody seriously think that this makes the military stronger?

Comments [870] and [1367] consider mental illness to be intrinsic to trans individuals’ psychological make-up. This conclusion is based on disinformation related to gender dysphoria—the commenters misinterpret this dysphoria as “they do not know their gender” (when in fact they know very well what gender they are):

[870] They don’t know their gender!? That’s mental illness. If you are a girl, then you are a girl. If you are a man, then you are a man. How can you not know your gender? I call it mental illness.

[1367] Transgenderism is a proven mental disorder, and the military has more important things to worry about and deal with than people confused about who they are!

Commenters even use both expressions, “mental illness” and “gender dysphoria,” in a dehumanising way, metonymically referring directly to trans people, reducing their identity to this supposed illness, such as in the quotations below:

[518] THANK YOU President Trump for keeping mental illness out of our military!

[1161] Gender dysphoria is the same thing as transgender.

Deciding that there is a “mental illness” involved allows commenters to again draw absurd parallels, e.g., associating trans people with mediocrity, as we see in comment [1080], or a lack of decency in [789], and considering them morally and cognitively lacking because of a gender identity mismatch:

[1080] We celebrate mediocrity and mental illness now.

[789] ...both concepts [transexual and transgender] are as confusing as the individuals who practice it. No decency or sense of direction.

However, medical discourse is the most powerful way that commenters validate these transphobic assessments. Science and medical authorities, for example, are cited in comment [1100] to prove that trans people are mentally ill, and their authority is underlined through emphasis on the title of the source, University *Distinguished Service Professor*, and his lengthy study (40 years).

[1100] Let’s talk facts and real science. Genetically, there are two genders in our species: male and female. They make up 99.93% of the population as either XY or XX chromosome pairs....The science is settled. 96.2% of doctors and scientists agree....The science is settled, transgenderism is a mental disorder! For forty years as the University Distinguished Service Professor of Psychiatry at Johns Hopkins Medical School...he has been studying people who claim to be transgender.

The commenter adopts a sententious tone (“let’s talk facts and real science”), which relegates any counterarguments to fantasyland and fake science; the repetition of the phrase “the science is settled” and the extraordinary numbers given (“99.93% of the population,” “96.2% of doctors and scientists”) aim to convince forum participants that if they disagree, they belong to a negligible minority. The verb “claim” points to the writer’s conviction that such dysphoria does not exist and is only a “perception disorder” (see below in [1100]). As Colliver et al. (2019, p. 223) also observed, the scientific discourse serves not only to prove that binarism is the only “tangible” reality but at the same time “negate[s] the possibility of transgenderism as [being] real or *authentic*” (emphasis added).

The commenter also notes the consequences of being trans which may endanger the trans person (suicide or other severely dysfunctional behaviour), but more importantly, which may affect the other soldiers; trans individuals are, therefore, a medical threat to those around them:

[1100] He [the professor in the quote above] notes this is a perception disorder (gender dysphoria) that must be treated as such, or extremely detrimental consequences will likely occur. He cites a long-term study that indicates high rates of suicide and other severely dysfunctional behaviour...

The medical frame is also obvious in comments averring that accepting trans people in the army would pose an economic threat or a financial burden for both the army and society at large.

4.2.2. Medical Burden

Trans individuals who opt for a surgical sex change undergo costly procedures, which is a central transphobic argument in the medical frame. The cost of medication is central to comments [546] and [1474]:

[546] [This is] not a gender issue. It's a medical condition issue....Are they willing to give up daily medications to serve, if needed?

[1474] It's the constant medical treatments and hormone injections that transgenders need which is a costly and inconvenient procedure.

And although it was Trump who raised the issue, a few commenters went further by spreading the fake news that trans people enlist *solely* to have sex change operations paid for, as in [456] and [1313]:

[456] No, they sign up to get a free sex change and drain our tax dollars just like every other liberal.

[1313] Let the UK take over the trans take care of their medical cost surgeries.

A final central argument is the interpretation of transgenderism as being a pre-existing condition, which should disqualify people from serving, as there are other illnesses that exclude people from the army. Therefore, allowing trans people to serve would make them a privileged minority compared to people with other "illnesses":

[1170] There are hundreds of medical and mental disorders that disqualify many.

[1175] That's why people with pre-existing conditions are precluded from military service.

Here, we see a reversal of the gender equality argument: it is a question of fairness and equality to reject trans persons from enlisting in the army, just as others with certain illnesses are disqualified.

5. Countering Transphobic Comments

Qualitative analysis is essential to identify the strategies that can successfully derail verbal violence; it is also essential to generate automatic production of counterspeech (Chung et al., 2019). Counterspeech strategies include debunking mis- and disinformation by providing testimonies and facts (Benesch, 2020; Ullmann & Tomalin, 2023).

5.1. Counterspeech Strategies

It has been suggested that to stop extreme or hate speech, we should ignore it (Cohen-Almagor, 2014; Vedder, 2001). However, many activists and researchers alike have underlined the fact that ignoring such speech against a community could serve to legitimise the disinformation and the prejudiced statements, and therefore may even encourage such talk. It also shows a lack of solidarity towards the targets of this symbolic violence, and ultimately leaves the online space to the extremists, discouraging any intervention in this intimidating environment (Howard, 2021).

We might define counterspeech as comments that respond to offensive statements or trolls and strive to affect the behaviour and thinking of people who spread or may sympathise with these prejudiced statements (Benesch, 2020; Ullmann & Tomalin, 2023). Researchers have identified a few discourse

strategies (Cohen-Almagor, 2014; Maynard & Benesch, 2016): correcting misstatements or misperceptions; discrediting the transphobic author/accuser; denouncing the speech as hateful; using humour to de-escalate conflict; adopting a positive tone to appeal to the other participants; or adopting hostile language to potentially persuade a participant to delete their message.

Most studies focusing on counterspeech have concluded that the most effective counterspeech is speech that fosters critical thinking (Braddock & Horgan, 2016; Gagliardone et al., 2015; Hangartner et al., 2021; Ullmann & Tomalin, 2023; Woo & Cho, 2023). Another effective strategy is to express positive feelings such as empathy and to acknowledge grievances (Baider, 2023; Wachs et al., 2023). However, our earlier studies found that counterspeech using positive emotions on social media was rare, while anger and contempt were the most common emotions. Sadly, therefore, even if such a strategy could be effective, it is rarely used and seldom leads to a favourable change in discourse (Baider, 2023; Howard, 2021; Konikoff, 2021). In our earlier research, and for this study, we drew on these suggestions and focused the annotation on the same rhetoric categories as we did for extreme speech, i.e., argumentative rhetoric and/or affective rhetoric.

In our data, we found a high degree of counter speech: From a sample of approximately 700 comments, we recorded 191 counternarratives against 506 transphobic comments, thus 38% counternarratives. Consider this in relation to earlier research focused on LGBTQ+ data, where counternarratives represented only 10% of responses (Baider, 2023; Chung et al., 2019). The strategies used to answer the two frames primarily focused on the use of logic and arguments (55%), followed by the use of statistics and facts (17%) and, finally, personal examples (8%). The other 20% are using affect, mainly displaying negative emotions towards the commentator.

5.2. Challenging the Misfit Frame

5.2.1. Logical Argumentation

Logical argumentation was one of the main strategies we recorded for counterspeech to the misfit frame. Some commenters argued against a link between sexuality/gender and fitness for battle, as in comment [631]:

[631] A person's gender or sexuality has no bearing on their "toughness." You could be a straight man and be weak, or a transgender man/woman and be tough.

Comment [608] supports the same argument with the logical explanation that passing the army test means you are fit to serve:

[608] If someone passes the tests and meets the standard set in those tests, then they are fit to be there, regardless of their gender or anything else.

Another example includes comment [584], which discusses what issues are problematic when recruiting for the army, such as "addictions [that] impair judgment," and notes they have no connection to trans people. Qualities that should be sought are a sense of responsibility, consideration, etc., and there is no evidence to suggest that trans do not display these very qualities:

[548] I was in the military. I wouldn't have had any issue serving with transgender people. Smokers and excessive drinkers were more of a problem. Those addictions impair judgement and give away locations. I wanted to serve with responsible, considerate, hygienic people who knew, and did, their role well. Nothing except that mattered/s.

5.2.2. Providing Data, Statistics, and Facts

The other most common argumentative strategy involved providing data to discredit false information, namely that trans cannot fight. The number of trans people already serving is cited, as in comment [659], which is only one among many comments noting that important fact:

[659] There are already 15,000 trans people serving. This from John McCain: "There is no reason to force service members who are able to fight, train, and deploy to leave the military—regardless of their gender identity...any American who wants to serve our country and is able to meet the standards should have the opportunity to do so—and should be treated as the patriots they are."

The qualification "patriot" in comment [659] is especially important. On the one hand, it responds to the earlier suggestion that trans people are potential traitors to the nation, while it also counters criteria disqualifying trans people from the army on the basis of patriotism—see comments [518] and [508], where a patriot is objectively defined as "any American willing and able to serve their country." The textual contiguity of the terms *trans people* and *respect* in comment [659] is particularly significant, as hostile comments typically associate trans persons with the opposite emotion: contempt.

The tremendous influence of Trump's comment is undermined by quoting other politicians such as McCain and military authorities (Pentagon, career military officers) who supported or support the enrolment of trans as in comment [695]:

[695] The decision to allow openly transgender persons to serve was taken with the support of the Pentagon. There are thousands of transgender persons in active service now....Politicians and career military officers have also gone on the record supporting the military's first steps into the modern world.

Furthermore, the commenter above considers that accepting trans people in the military indicates being in tune with progress ("supporting the military's first steps into the modern world"), which implies that any opponents are reactionaries and, therefore, preventing the army from evolving or progressing.

Finally, the most factual and objective comment, which renders the post even more powerful, debunked the "disruption" argument put forward by Donald Trump by quoting a survey and offering scientific evidence to counter the transphobic argument:

[1428] 1) There was a study performed by RAND Corp. in 2016 to determine the effects of having transgender people in the military, and the cost was determined to be negligible. 2) That study also examined several other military forces around the world that have transgender people enlisted and found no significant instances of loss of unit cohesion or morale. 3) That same study again noted that

the number of transgender people serving was between 1320 and 6630....Here's the study, if you're interested: <https://www.rand.org/news/press/2016/06/30.html>

However, no one commented on the information given. Hence the question whether such an objective and factual comment silenced contradictors who found the arguments to be valid or in contrary has no impact and was bypassed by the commenters.

5.3. Challenging the Medical Frame

Counterarguments that challenge the medical frame also include logical arguments to discredit disinformation about trans people suffering from mental illness, but the more frequent use of personal testimonies signals a difference with the misfit frame.

5.3.1. Logical Argumentation

To fight the stereotype of trans being mentally ill, commenter [900] argues that, confused or not, trans people are aware of their gender, thus contesting a claim about trans persons being confused and, therefore, mentally unstable:

[900] They know what gender they are. It's you who is confused.

This leads to the conclusion that it is the commenter who is confused, reversing the argument and the stigma, while also hinting at the ignorance of the other commenter.

5.3.2. Providing Data, Statistics, and Facts

Scientific authorities are also invoked to counter the mentally ill label:

[607] Being transgender isn't a mental illness. A psychologist or psychiatrist cannot diagnose you with transgenerness according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Illness.

One of the most frequent attacks against the commenters defending trans rights is to accuse them of never having served and, therefore, of not knowing what they are talking about: 20% of the counterspeech comments start by asserting their legitimacy and offering personal testimonies, which preemptively disarm commenters. We found that this is the most effective strategy:

[666] As a current serving member with over 21yrs service in the infantry and as a firefighter, I have served with and currently serve with women and transgender....We also have transgender firefighters at some of our firehalls. There has never been a time that their abilities, dedication, sacrifice, motivation, fitness, has ever come into question. Too many men still feel insecure. They somehow try to use the excuse...it's a distraction, they can't meet the same physical standards, etc. There's so much ignorance going around. It blows my mind.

The argument about medication and surgery costs is addressed with facts, such as the clarification that cost would be covered by the NHS, that the NSH pays also for Viagra. This argument does not apply for the American medic system, though:

[457] You mean the drugs that the NHS provide?? Yeah. What a drain on the system.

[528] You okay with \$90M worth of Viagra?

Another commentator argues that it was unlikely that someone would enlist solely to undergo a sex change, however not providing any statistics nor research to back up the “unlikeliness” of such request:

[458] NOBODY signs up TO GET KILLED in order to get a free sex change—and IN THE UK IT’S FREE.

These few examples show how important it is that a counterargument is well-prepared, applicable, and based on facts. Otherwise, there is the risk that the dialogue will spiral out of control and lead to even more destructive comments, with the counterspeech representatives’ credibility compromised. Effective arguments demand that the commenter has equally strong arguments as their opponent.

6. Triggers of Extreme Speech

In this study, we distinguished three types of triggers: those that occur at the macro, meso, and micro levels (Fairclough, 2015). The comments are triggers found at the micro level: these involve the detailed critical analysis of the language used in the online conversations; at the meso level are the articles that triggered the comments and the specific context; triggers at the macro level implicate the broader social and cultural structures that shape the comments under scrutiny, especially the social/power relations, ideologies, and institutional practices that are at stake.

6.1. Triggers at the Macro Level

The language of denigration and the topos of threat we examined in this study do not happen in a social vacuum; it is a response to a broader agenda (Colliver et al., 2019; Mongie, 2016, pp. 164–165) related to the sexual and gender order. Our study topic, transpeople, is an example of a controversial topic (insofar as it is sensitive and disturbs the societal heterosexism) that contains multiple points of view that could *trigger a debate* (Wang et al., 2024). Discursive transphobia is assimilated into a symbolic, sexual, and gendered violence that reinforces the ideals of a patriarchal state (Mongie, 2016, pp. 164–165) and involves the broader issues of language, gender, sex, and sexual orientation (Colliver et al., 2019). Indeed, binarism ideology had been advocated by Donald Trump before he signed the executive order in 2025. Therefore, specific topics such as migration, gender, sexuality, or nationalism will trigger extreme speech.

6.2. Triggers at the Meso Level

The meso level concerns the language used by public figures such as politicians and then by journalists who report what politicians have said: Both function as the main *triggers* of discriminatory speech and represent “a source of transphobic attitudes observable within society and an instrument which reinforces them

further” (Derecka, 2019, p. 107). In our data, for example, Trump’s statement, uncritically mediated by journalists, played a major role in the arguments used in transphobic speech: his reference to the high cost of trans serving in the army was used in 50% of comments in the medical frame. His position as president of the USA at the time lent his words an authority, which was called on to reinforce an argument.

6.3. Triggers at the Micro Level

At the micro level, we consider the triggers that emerged during the online thread and from the analysis of the comments. Disrespectful comments against transpeople triggered fewer than eight reactions. Only three comments led to a significant number of responses. Comment [595] elicited 12 reactions. The comment was sexist and used the most dehumanising expression (“social experiment”); comment [700] elicited 25 reactions. The comment stated that too many privileges were given to a minority. Comment [846] elicited 71 comments and was a one-line summary of the main transphobic claim that not knowing your gender should forbid you from enrolling, yet it triggered the most responses. The same comment also produced the most uncivil counter speech, 80% being ad hominem attacks against the commenter (such as “assnoodle”), whilst comment [595] was more verbally violent. Thread dynamics must be considered to explain such results (Horawalavithana et al., 2022). Counterspeech citing unverified research and statistics triggered the most hostile responses. For instance, the transphobic comment [1100], which had the most impact on the thread, referenced a medical journal to refute an earlier counterargument that had also quoted a medical source; this shows how counterspeech can easily backfire (Howard, 2021, p. 934).

7. Conclusion

In this article, we examined how the well-known topos of threat in LGBTQ+ data (Baider, 2018; Brindle, 2016; Colliver et al., 2019; Lillian, 2005) is discursively constructed in transphobic comments. We identified the two main frames—the misfit frame (trans are weak) and the medical frame (trans are sick)—that are used to sustain the conclusion that trans persons should not be allowed to enlist in the army. We further subdivided these frames to categorise the two main threats: on the one hand, “physical weakness” and “character weakness”; and on the other, “psychopathology” and “medical burden.” These frames are similar to those found in Colliver et al.’s (2019) study, despite our different data (1100 comments focused on the specific societal role of being a soldier). Similarly to our findings, a trans person is described in Donald Trump’s 2025 executive order as a person whose mental and physical health conditions are “incompatible with active duty” (“Trump signs order,” 2025). To summarise our findings, we suggest the following argumentation schemes (Table 2) that illustrate how this topos functions in our data, using the example of the medical frame (“trans are sick”).

Table 2. Argumentation schemes of the threat topos, for the medical frame.

Medical frame	Argumentation scheme 1	Argumentation scheme 2
Argument	Trans people are mentally confused	Trans people need medication and surgery
Premise	The army does not enlist sick people because it endangers the security of soldiers and the nation	Medication and surgery are expensive
Conclusion	Trans people endanger national and individual security	Trans people will inflict a tremendous cost on the army
Claim	The army should not enlist trans people	The army should not enlist trans people

Arguments 1 and 2 are backed up by a premise that is accepted by most commenters; this accepted premise leads to the conclusion; this conclusion, in turn, supports the claim which is the main proposition that transphobic speech puts forward. Working further on this suggested argumentation scheme may offer a way to build counterspeech automatically and systematically. We found that the counterspeech examined in this article attempted to undermine each of the elements of the schema: It undermines the conclusion (the army should not enlist trans) by stating a fact (trans people are already serving); it undermines argument 1 (trans people are mentally confused) by quoting a scientific report that explains gender dysphoria; it undermines the claim (trans people endanger national and individual security) by listing problematic characteristics that pose a danger to the army that are unrelated to gender. Therefore, automation of such counterspeech based on such argumentation scheme may be an avenue of research. Indeed, while counterspeech may not affect the online debate, it is effective in defending the dignity and rights of the victim, strengthening their will to fight back (McInroy & Craig, 2015), and possibly enhancing critical thinking among commenters and readers. We also identified certain triggers of transphobia, especially the role played by public figures, such as politicians, in spreading disinformation and prejudices and by the media uncritically relaying such discourse. This leads us to emphasise the importance, in parallel with an online presence of counterspeech, of learning and teaching others how to recognise and challenge prejudices and disinformation in everyday life, thus sensitising young people to the complexities of various hate-motivated social attitudes that contribute to the production of social, economic and political hierarchies of domination (Woo & Cho, 2023).

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