



The Discourse of Transgender Identity in the United States Military

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ABSTRACT

Trans men and women, whether serving or retired in the United States military, constitute a distinct site of gender identity discourse—one that is fundamentally different from civilian constructions of gender in several key aspects. In the wake of the Trump's administration's proposed ban, which labels them as individuals with “gender dysphoria”, trans identity and the discourse around it is now shaping military narratives within America and the world at large. To validate this view, this study collects data samples from two (2) serving and a one (1) retired military personnel in the United States military online (You tube). Using Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach, the study subjects the data collected to content analysis while focusing on Discursive Strategies, Exclusion and Intertextuality. The findings reveal that digital spaces provide a unique platform for transgender individuals to perform their identities, challenge notions of gender disparity, mobilise social support and activism, and advocate for a more inclusive gender representation in the military. This is done through logic, empathy and global awareness of what it means for trans men and women to serve at the highest levels in the United States military. Therefore, this study recommends that it is imperative to look beyond trans issues, and instead examine, rather critically and holistically the divisiveness and dangers that the lack of military merit, internal diversity, and exclusion can create for any military globally by making sure performance-based meritocracy governs the institutional and legal framework for awarding, rewarding and promoting service men and women.

Keywords: Transgender; Digital Spaces; Identity; Technology; Activism; Content Analysis

INTRODUCTION

Gender discourses like transgender discourse are gaining popularity over the online space in recent times. This is partly because of the trendy nature of spoken words on the Internet, and their frequent appearance in *YouTube videos*, *Instagram stories* and *TikTok* reels. Life performances, which used to be the main thing, have given way to digital reality with the advent of the Internet. Modern reality is that communication occurs almost seamlessly and instantly across geographical space in time (Bearder 45-62). Hence, the trans gender community people have taken advantage of the digital space to negotiate and construct trans discourses and narratives to draw empathy, solidarity or just simply to advocate for recognition and acceptance especially in anti-trans societies or communities (Ekins and King 28; Ruberg 203; Raun 376; Rauch 15), and this has helped to promote trans identity and activism (Roach 14; Preciado 129). This study focuses on gender-based identity discourse in the U.S. military using Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach, and what such an identity spells for service men and women in different militaries around the world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research has shown that digital spaces provide a unique platform for individuals to perform their identities and challenge traditional notions of gender on line space. Buss et al. are of the view that transgender individuals engage in continuous, multi-platform “identity work” which help them to navigate and define their sense of self within the social media ecosystem (1-28). In their study, 20 transgender users are interviewed, and the researchers identified that managing an online identity is not neither an easy task or a one-time event but a continuous process. The process involves strategically utilising various platforms and, and often requires maintaining multiple accounts on the same site to fulfill specific personal and social objectives.

The study further reveals that this management extends far beyond simple self-presentation to a more comprehensive form of digital curation. Participants actively shaped their experiences by making deliberate choices about the content they shared, the networks they joined, and the information they consumed. This approach allows the users to control not only how they are perceived by others but also helps to define the type of environment they control online. One thing is clear from this research that because there are different digital environments, transgender users create different digital social media worlds to meet their unique self-presentational requirement needs and social requirements.

Akpan also interrogates how digital platforms like X (Twitter), Facebook, and WhatsApp, while essential for activism, also function as gendered spaces where women face significant backlash. This study uses the technofeminism and intersectionality frameworks to explore how overlapping identities of 16 African women from Nigeria, Senegal, and Kenya intensify their experiences of online hostility. The study argues that these digital spaces are deeply embedded in societal power structures, and that these structures often police women's behaviour and censor their speech accordingly in order to maintain traditional gender norms (112-134).

The findings in this study highlight that for these women, everyday digital presence and expression constitute a form of activism that frequently makes them targets for harassment. This reality challenges conventional definitions of what it means to be an activist. One of the major discoveries of this study is that unveils the role of silence, framing it as a “subverted agentic act”. Thus, women strategically choose between silence and vocal engagement based on their specific social circumstances and the need for self-protection. Nevertheless, this strategy often emboldens their abusers.

Another critical stance of this paper is the backlash it provides by focusing on the specific experiences of women in Low-and Middle-Income Countries. It critiques the existing technofeminist theory for depending on external factors and failing to capture the complex, intersectional realities of African women. To this end, the research calls for digital agency, and it urges scholars to recognise the protective and subversive power of silence in the face of systemic online violence calls for a re-evaluation of digital agency, and urges scholars to recognise the protective and subversive power of silence in the face of systemic online violence.

Amadu et explore “slideshow activism” as a specialised digital strategy used by queer Nigerian collectives and their allies on Instagram. In a national context where homosexuality is heavily criminalised-carrying sentences of up to 14 years or the death penalty-these digital spaces serve as critical tools for survival and resistance against both state and social violence. The study applies Nancy Fraser's theory of “counterpublics” to an analysis of advocacy-focused images, the study demonstrates how the visual and text-based architecture of Instagram allows marginalised groups to create safe, alternative spheres for communication and activism (1-12).

The study identifies three primary objectives achieved through these digital slideshows: challenging heteronormative standards by emphasizing themes of love and

equality, asserting queer identities with boldness and pride, and providing vital education regarding gender and sexual diversity. These functions transform Instagram into a tactical “counterpublic” where users can reclaim their agency. This allows the queer Nigerian community to navigate their sexuality and advocate for their rights despite the constant threat of state-sanctioned persecution. On the whole, this research highlights the significant role of visual rhetoric in the survival of African queer communities. It focuses on the intersection of technology and resistance, the study expands the understanding of digital activism, and shows that for queer Nigerians, social media is more than a platform for visibility-it is a vital environment for reclaiming space and sustaining a community under pressure. Many other authors affirm social media activism or digital activism, and that can lead to identity formation and create agency for transgender people and non-binary (Li et al 255; Turner; Jenzen; Vivienne 1626-41; Tortajada et al. 1091–1107; Schmitz et al. 271-90), but regardless of these dissenting voices, there are tensions and conflicts, and marginalisation (Kender and Spiel 1). In fact, Philips observes that there are rising hate crimes against LGBTQ+ youth in British schools (1-2), among many other related trans gender violence.

The Gap Identified and Addressed

While many authors have addressed issues relating to trans community, the current study focuses on interrogating identity and activism within the United States Military. This is against the backdrop of a recent executive order in April 2026 in which the Trump administration has officially reinstated the prohibition of transgender individuals in the U.S military. This directive mandates that the Pentagon begin the process of discharging transgender troops, a move that the Supreme Court has allowed to proceed. Unlike other studies, the current explores how this trans community, who are strictly military personnel, voice their collective identity on the online space.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Ruth Wodak's Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) is considered the most effective Critical Discourse framework for the current study because of how it uses “Us vs Them” to construct the identities of US trans military personnel. It is adopted for its emphasis on exclusion, intertextuality and discursive strategies (nomination, predication, argumentation). Since data is collected online, this theory can help to analyse the discourse of online transgender identity which is a reference to how pro-trans activists especially those within the ranks of the US military defend their identities on digital platforms like YouTube.

METHODOLOGY

The study employs qualitative design majorly content analysis. The sample consists of 5 (five) vocal and popular military personnel who use digital platforms to express their identity in the wake of Trump administration's bid to sack all trans service men from the United States military. This is made possible through the Google search engine. Out of this group, this study focuses on only two of them who are actively serving in the US military. Another military personnel, out of the “not-too-popular-category”, also is randomly selected out of ten (10) on the Internet space. This brings the total sample for this paper to only three (3). The data is numbered 1 to 3 are discussed simultaneously in line with the major components of Wodak's DHA mentioned earlier in theoretical framework. Therefore, this study utilises online data collection, specifically performing a content analysis of You Tube posts of either active-duty military personnel or retired ones. Through this method, this research identifies transgender service members who have openly resisted service restrictions by participating in legal battles or making appearances to criticise this discriminatory military policy:

1. Commander Emily Shilling: A decorated Navy pilot who challenged the ban and spoke publicly about her experience, and includes her 60+ combat missions.

2. Major Erica Vandal
3. Leiland Island (A Retired US Transgender Military Personnel)

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Data 1, 2 and 3 are discussed simultaneously beginning with Discursive Strategies, Exclusion and finally Intertextuality.

1. Discursive Strategies

Under discursive strategies, the following components are discussed as buttressed in the methodology of this paper:

Nomination (How are they named/constructed?)

Across the three samples, the speakers reject being labelled as “medical conditions” or “distractions” in the United States Military. In particular, they have been labelled as individuals with “gender dysphoria”. This is a reference to a condition in which there is a significant clinical distress arising from a mismatch between an individual's internal gender identity and their sex assigned at birth. They prefer to be labelled by more professional titles having served in one of the most revered institutions in the world, which is the United States Military. They prefer labels like “Commander”, “Navy Pilot”, “Test Pilot”, “Officer”, “leader”, and “second lieutenant which categorically puts them in a place of awe admiration rather just to be labelled as a medical condition. These professional labels depict them with medals of honour and distinction. Again, the use of “Whole self” in data 1 and 3 introduces the concept of “full self” or “live authentically”. There is implied unique and total in humanistic expressions and tendencies captured in these words as if to say being trans makes it possible to be the real you. It is seen as medium of self-expression and self-actualisation compared to other types of identities in modern America. Thus, being transgender is hereby nominated as complete individuals with high performing tendencies compared to those who have not altered their biologically assigned sex in the US military. There is a reference to collectivism in the data too. Phrases like “battle buddies” and “thousands of other transgender troops” further create a sense of numerical value, acceptance and legitimacy across board. It points to an already established and flourishing community of trans individuals and not a case of isolated anomalies or “woke insanity”. Therefore, there is a sense of both pride and solidarity within this very community of trans service men and women in the United States military.

Predication (What qualities are attributed?)

The speakers attribute positive, military-centric traits to transgender identity to counter the ban's logic. They accredit themselves with resilience and bravery. These are core virtues needed in any military in the world whether a third or more sophisticated military like the United States Military: being resilient and brave. The speakers accredit the transgender officers with the identity of courage and bravery. The transition to trans makes them even better suited for combat as it is the highest display of courage and bravery than regular service men. Again, the speakers especially in data 2 and 3 categorise their medical needs and physical requirement of service men as mundane, nothing out of the extra ordinary to warrant any kind of negative connotation. Consider the use of phrases like “shelf stable pill” and “just like anyone else...put our pants on” as they go about doing their job with the utmost degree of preparedness and willingness. In a way, the speakers tend to predicate the trans experience as absolutely “low-maintenance” and part of regular “military routines”. Besides, they claim that being trans, for many of them, mean being “number one”, and “decorated” with “honor” and “distinction”.

Argument (Topoi)

The speakers use several topoi to dismantle the logic of the ban against trans in the US military. There is the Topos of Comparison being deployed. Take for instance, Data I compares transition-related care to normal injuries like knee or back pain. This implies that if the military

can treat these injuries and return soldiers back to the battle ground, the same should be turn for gender-affirming care: treat trans service men and return them to action. There is also the use of the Topos of Economy and Functionality. Data 1 uses a “percentage argument” to drive this point home: If a soldier hides their true “identity”, you only get %80 of the individual. Thus, unlike regular soldiers, trans individuals are the ones who have really come to terms with their hidden identities and have expressed them in being trans. This is one of the only way, perhaps the only way, to maximise human capital. The Topos of History is seen too in the data. In Data 1 and 3, the speakers argues that every attempt to exclude a group based on their race, religion and even gender has been historically proven not only to be wrong but also fatal. This ban is one of such: to be “proven wrong in the end”.

Also, the Topos of Threat is also emphasised. The speakers affirm that trans people are not a threat to the US military but a great addition of special and unique individuals. Therefore, ban is seen as a threat not only to trans men and women but to the military which could be deprived of these specialised individuals. On the whole, it is causing “devastating” loss of income, housing and killing the morale of the troops and other service members including trans individuals who might be willing to join the force.

2. Exclusion

In the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA), there is the passivity of interrogating exclusion. Within the content of the data presented in this study, the possibility of Exclusion in terms of Institutional Erasure is seen. The speaker points out that the ban attempts to exclude their history. One particular example is in expressions like “nearly twenty years” of service, and being “a decorated pilot” all highlight how the ban will delete decades of proven loyalty and expertise. Consider also the mention that 73% of trans individuals are senior enlisted. If removed, this historical achievement and contribution to the US military will all be erased. Thus, this is a pointer to the exclusion of facts in public discourse-one that refuses to see trans service men and women as the backbone of American fighting force, but rather they are consider as the Invisible Majority. The speakers argue that within the frame of this ban, they are “spoken about” as a policy problem. These samples, therefore, represent a reclaiming of agency.

3. Intertextuality

These samples are in a dialogue with several other historical and social texts. The data, for instance, highlight The Civil Rights Discourse (or movement). Data 1 and 3 link the trans ban to past exclusions based on “race” and “religion”. This, no doubt, recontextualises the trans struggle within the broader socio-political narratives of US history. Again, the “Don't Ask, Don't Tell” (DADT) draws a direct link between the current ban and a policy that is now widely regarded as a historical mistake, borrowing from the moral weight of the debate in the data presented thus far. The “Melting Point Myth” aligns America's military service with the foundational ideology of the United States of America- at least that is what the trans community is suggesting-an America that is all-embracing not selective of gender. And finally, the DEI Policy which means “Diversity, Equity and Inclusion” underscores “The Melting Point Myth”. If trans military personnel are removed, the speakers argue that America will be acting against itself by neglecting one of its most fundamental frameworks, which is the DEI, in addressing disparities in corporate, academic and government structures.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Under this section, the researcher domesticates the data, and therefore asks one fundamental question: how does trans gender issues in the United States of America's military, and the identity crisis that goes along with it applies to the Nigerian military setting? It is worthy to mention that Section 26 of the Updated Armed Forces Terms and Conditions of

Service (HAFCTCS), which was signed by Bola Armed Tinubu on the 16th of December, 2024, clearly prohibit all military personnel from engaging or belonging to activities associated with Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex, Asexual or Agender, Two-Spirit (LGBTQIA2S+) group (Nigeria, Ministry of Defence paragraph.26.09). Nevertheless, there are many things in the data sampled for this paper that can be domesticated within Nigerian military discourse. Three of these issues are addressed in this paper: Military Merit and Performance, Internal Diversity, and Exclusion.

From the data, it is seen that Military Merit is based on Performance. Data has shown that merit is rewarded based on performance regardless of who you are or who you know. It is simply based on what you have achieved or what you can bring as an addition to the military. The data shows how trans individuals, forbidden in the Nigerian military, have risen to the highest point in the military hierarchy without The Godfather Syndrome or nepotism that is evident in Nigeria (Offor et al. 271-275). Many of these trans individuals are actively engaged in the fore front of the battles against the enemies of America or their allies. Another thing the data highlights is that Military personnel should be battle-tested and battle ready. Consequently, Performance-Based Military Culture should drive military promotions at all levels and arms of the Nigerian Armed Forces.

According to the data, there is the need for the Nigerian military to manage “Internal Diversity” within the ranks and file of its armed forces. This is because Nigeria is a multi-cultural and multi-religious state. The Nigerian military must be seen to be one-formidable force against the forces that seek to divide her today. Ethnic and religious sentiments must not be allowed to define the identities of the NAFs. They must be completely loyal to the force and the Commander-in-Chief, and this is achievable only when soldiers bring their “full self” to the service of the nation just like the trans community is doing in the US military.

In addition, just the way the data for this paper argues against the ban to exclude trans in the US military, same also applies to the exclusion of women in combat roles in the Nigerian Armed Forces. Interestingly, most of the trans identity as women. Based on Palm Centre Data of trans population in the US military, an estimated 22% are transgender men and 78% are transgender women (Palm Center 2). Although other similar smaller studies have challenged this statistic, the point is that, more “women” than men constitute the trans community, and are actively involved in frontline activities. In Nigeria, there is a slow integration of women into combat roles. On the whole, the data argues that excluding any group especially based on gender identity rather than merit (as argued in data 3) can lead to brain drain of highly trained, specialised officers whether in the US military, the Nigerian Armed Forces or any other state-owned military actors.

CONCLUSION

Through the lens of the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), the narratives of the United States' trans service members functions as a powerful counter-hegemonic discourse that seeks to reframe the transgender identity from a “disruptive pathology” to a “military asset”. The study uses the Topoi of Merit and History, especially, aiding the speakers to effectively dismantle the logic of the ban, and argues that institution exclusion not only erases decades of proven expertise but also diminishes the “lethality” of the force as it might prevent soldiers from bringing their “full selves” to the mission. On the whole, the analysis here reveals that the struggle for inclusion in the U.S. Military is less about individual gender identity but more about institutional evolution: a shift away from traditionalist, exclusionary “othering” and a modern, performance-based professional culture where “battle-ready” resilience is the primary metric of belonging.

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Appendix

Data 1: Commander Emily Shilling: A decorated Navy pilot who challenged the ban and spoke publicly about her experience, and includes her 60+ combat missions:

So far, we have thousands of transgender troops currently serving in our armed forces today and they are deployed across the world embedded in units today. And these executive orders and the discussion around transgender service has an immediate effect on them from the overzealous commanders who are taking executive orders as actions to just a detriment to the morale of these individuals and their ability to focus on the mission that they have signed up to volunteered for...

I just wanna keep serving. I have served for nearly twenty years... Ah I am combat aviator, test pilot and I have served with honour and distinction... and all am saying is for myself and the thousands of other transgender troops just like me to be allowed to continue to do what we want to do which is to serve the American public...

You know the first thing you learn as an officer and a leader is the first rule of leadership is to take care of people. That means take care of all your people. Now when you take care of your people, you have an effective combat ready force. We don't necessarily get to choose who is going to volunteer to serve our nation. We are a melting pot in America, and our Armed forces represent that great diversity of our country...

There are other medical conditions and healthcare that preclude people from service but 73% of us, 73% of transgender individuals are senior enlisted in the military. That means that they have been there over 12 years. When somebody injures their knees or injures their back, we send them for healthcare, and they are down for a little bit of time, and we get them the healthcare they need and then we return them to combat. We return them to the force. This is the same case scenario in this instance.

People just need healthcare and it is our duty to give them that and return them to the fight... First let's say what DEI stands for. That's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. And when you actually say the word, you realise what we're trying to do. We're trying to create an environment where our service members feel like they belong. That they are with their battle buddies. That they are with somebody that they can trust and count on when they are in the fox hole. When you create an inclusive environment for others then they bring their whole self. If they have to leave some portion of them at home, you are only getting 80% of the individual. When they are allowed to bring all of themselves, then end up being better service members and they end up being better leaders. For myself, when I was able to start showing up to work as my full self, across the board, I got better reviews, I excelled as a leader, actually I ended up promoting to commander with merit roster to number one as transgender women in the U.S Navy.

So transgender individuals are no different than any other American. We are going to have those individuals who excel. We have those that are mediocre. We are no different. But across the board the thing that stands out is how resilient these service members are. Think about how hard it is to come into service or to come out as transgender in the current environment. Aren't those type of people that you want to go into combat for you. That amount of courage, and that amount of bravery to just be who they are and to show up fully?

I think it is reputation. We have allowed individuals to serve from all different creeds, all different backgrounds. And every single time that we have tried to exclude a group of

individuals, whether it was by race, religion, gender, we have always been proven wrong in the end. The same arguments are made time and time again. We are going to have to learn that those same arguments are false once again.

Data 2: Major Erica Vandal:

I was born into a military family. Spent my entire childhood moving from military post to military post. I have been serving now for 14 years as of yesterday. Graduated high school in 2007, immediately went to West Point. Following that, four years there, and then I commissioned in 2011 as a second lieutenant. The army is literally the only lifestyle I have ever known, and I think it is incredibly difficult knowing that it is likely going to be taken away here in the coming weeks.

Overall it's been a massive net positive. It made me more emphatic, more approachable, more open and honest to my soldiers. When you're living authentically, I think soldiers see that and they can reflect back on you. It kind of instills that trust, I think.

No. Gender affirming care has zero impact in our ability to deploy, our ability to be ready, and our ability to meet standards. As far as my medicines that I'm taking. It is shelf stable pill I take twice a day. No different than, you know medications of whatever variety that thousands of troops take daily...

It is going to be devastating should that occur. I will lose this core component of my identity that has been with me my entire life. I will lose the single source of income right now for my family, the healthcare, the benefits associated with that, the post on housing that we have. Just ...we'll lose everything at that point.

Data 3: Leiland Island (A US Transgender Military Personnel):

We are currently at the forefront of the fight for equality. For the right to even exist. People who are not in our position would never understand that but by sharing our stories and struggles and obstacles, by being, you know visible, not only are we writing history, we are creating it. I believe in and have fought for an America that was built on absolute diversity nurtured by the belief that we are all equal and deserving of dignity and respect.

Being transgender in the military is, was hard. Prior to 2016 it was like serving under Don't Ask and Don't Tell, where you kind of just hide your identity specifically transgender people are having to prove themselves over and over again on a daily basis. Now it is a lot easier than it was before but we have so much work to do to really be inclusive and really inclusive and smoothly integrate people like myself and my husband and friends of mine into the work space where people don't see us for our gender identity rather they see us for the merit of our performance, the merit of our jobs.

Being trans in the military is just like being anyone else serving in the military. We wake up put our pants on, left foot or right foot first, and we go to work and we do our job. We all have one thing in common, we rose our hand and solemnly swore to protect and defend the United States. I am very proud to have served in the military. My service record will go to show that I was a great soldier. I was a great leader. I was a great team member.