

# **Narrative Strategies for Shaping Public Attitudes Towards Transgender Youth Policies: An Experimental Study of Message Effects on Sports and Healthcare Access**

## **Abstract**

Over the past few years, policymakers have increasingly passed bans on transgender youth access to sports and healthcare that affirm their gender identity. Such policies negatively impact transgender youth adolescent development, resulting in increased odds of major depressive disorder and suicide. The politicization of transgender youth rights has occurred primarily through the use of strategic communication to raise concern or alarm among the public. Because attitudes about transgender rights may not be as crystallized as views in other areas, there is a high potential that strategic communication could also be used to shape public attitudes in the other direction—in support of transgender youth rights.

Research about attitude change in the context of transgender rights policies remains relatively scarce, and even more so in the context of youth access to sports and healthcare. This study builds on evidence that sharing stories about people affected by an issue is particularly effective at inducing attitude change—especially when trying to bridge moral or political divides and in the context of transgender rights. Additionally, this study provides an empirical test of identity reassurance theory, which has been underexamined, especially in the context of transgender *youth* rights. More research is also needed in the domain of transgender rights that examines effects against a counter-message, the mechanisms through which messages induce attitude change, the role of emotions in facilitating attitude change, and the factors that account for heterogeneous effects.

This study uses a pre-registered online survey experiment to examine the effects of both anti-trans and pro-trans communication messages on attitudes towards transgender youth access to gender-affirming healthcare and sports. Additionally, this study assesses the effects of both anti-trans and pro-trans messages on anti-transgender prejudice and perceptions of threat, empathy, anti-social emotions, and pro-social emotions. Last, this study examines whether emotions mediate the link between message exposure and policy attitudes and whether treatment effects vary by factors such as political ideology, ethnoracial identity, gender, and religiosity.

The anti-trans messages will be actual video messages used in a television or internet context expressing arguments against transgender youth rights. The pro-trans messages will be narrative-focused video messages utilizing identity reassurance theory, varied by issue domain and gender of the narrator. The narrator will tell a journey story from initial emotional challenge to acceptance of a child's transgender identity, emphasize shared values of love and support, and make an appeal to let transgender kids access healthcare or play sports that affirm their gender identity.

The results of this research will add to the scarce literature on decreasing prejudice against transgender people and building support for transgender rights, particularly in the context of youth access to healthcare and sports. Additionally, this study builds evidence about how emotions induce attitude change.

A new, interdisciplinary team has been developed to conduct this project—including three early career faculty from Social Welfare, Communication and Journalism, and Political Science. This interdisciplinary lens strengthens the research approach by bridging expertise regarding video-based message effects, political psychology, emotional mediation, and attitude change that translates to practical effects on policy opinions. The OVPR Seed Grant will allow us to build a proof of concept about the ability of narrative-based communication messages utilizing identity reassurance theory to influence attitudes about transgender youth and policies. The results of this study will then lead to a greater likelihood of success in applying for external funding from the William T. Grant and Robert Wood Johnson foundations.