

Gender Representation in Two American News Outlets Before and After #MeToo: A Corpus-Based Study

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Abstract

This study investigates the linguistic representation of gender in two ideologically distinct American news outlets, *HuffPost* and the *Washington Examiner*, before and after the #MeToo movement gained prominence in late 2017. It focuses on the adjectival evaluation of (pro)nominal expressions (typically in terms of positive or negative meaning) used for the portrayal of men and women, and on the semantic roles and syntactic functions of these expressions. Key findings indicate a general decrease in the frequency of such evaluation, suggesting a shift towards more cautious or restrained use of language following #MeToo. While some traditional gender stereotypes persist, there is noticeable change in gender depiction, with *HuffPost* increasing the representation of women as experiencers; *HuffPost* also maintains a higher representation of expressions with female reference in agentive roles compared with the *Washington Examiner*, despite a decrease in frequency after the movement. Conversely, the *Washington Examiner* shows more conservative tendencies but also notable shifts, such as a more frequent portrayal of men as undergoers or affected by external actions, indicating an emerging focus on male vulnerability. The results highlight the complex interplay between the #MeToo movement, media representation, and language use, suggesting that while the movement has prompted scrutiny of gender portrayals, the changes also reflect broader societal dynamics and the ideological leanings of the media outlets.

Keywords: gender representation; #MeToo movement; evaluation; semantic roles; syntactic analysis; news media

1. Introduction

This study examines the representation of males and females in American media before and after #MeToo. The #MeToo movement, which gained widespread attention in late 2017, has sparked global conversations about

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gender, power, and sexual misconduct.¹ By encouraging individuals to share their experiences of harassment and assault, #MeToo has not only raised awareness but also challenged traditional gender norms and power dynamics (Chandra and Erlingsdóttir 2021; Fileborn and Loney-Howes 2019; Mendes and Ringrose 2019). In this context, it becomes crucial to investigate whether and how this movement has influenced the portrayal of males and females in language, particularly in news media, which play a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions and attitudes.

The present study comprises a comparative analysis of pre-#MeToo and post-#MeToo periods in order to identify possible changes in language use and examine if there are significant differences in the way gender is represented in two news networks. The focus is on evaluative tokens (e.g., *powerful*, *nasty*) co-occurring with (pro)nominal expressions (e.g., *man*, *she*), as in examples (1) and (2).² The targets of investigation include (i) the evaluative tokens, which comprise adjectives typically carrying positive or negative meaning, (ii) the semantic roles of the (pro)nominal expressions, and (iii) the syntactic functions of these expressions, focusing on their roles as subjects or non-subjects and their placement in main or subordinate clauses.

- (1) A *powerful* man taking advantage of the women he has power over [...] is barbaric at best. (*Washington Examiner* 2016)
- (2) ... she had to be ‘*nasty*’ to him for a political hit. (*Washington Examiner* 2017)

Semantic roles, or thematic relations, denote the functions of noun phrases in relation to the action or state conveyed by the main verb of a clause. In this study, (pro)nominal expressions were classified based on their semantic roles to identify whether males and females are portrayed as actively doing and experiencing things or as undergoing actions. Concerning the syntactic functions of the (pro)nominal expressions, the

¹ Although the phrase “Me Too” was first coined in 2006 by American social activist Tarana Burke, the movement gained significant momentum in October 2017, spreading virally as a hashtag on social media after the public exposure of sexual abuse allegations against American film producer Harvey Weinstein (Chandra and Erlingsdóttir 2021: 1).

² In the numbered corpus examples, relevant evaluative tokens are italicized and (pro)nominal expressions are underlined.

focus is on whether the expressions are used in utterances as subjects or non-subjects. *Subjects* typically represent the topic of the clause, setting the stage for what the sentence is about (Aarts 2018: 8–9; Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 235). The analysis is grounded in studies like Pearce (2008) that have shown that MAN typically appears as a subject with strong, active verbs (e.g., *dominate*, *lead*), while WOMAN more often appears as a victim or recipient of actions (e.g., *coerced*, *marginalized*). My study can thus uncover patterns in how the gender groups are positioned in news discourse and provide insights into whether one gender is more frequently framed as the central topic of discussion. Concerning the occurrence of (pro)nominal expressions in main or subordinate clauses, Wårvik (1990) has shown that entities appearing in main clauses are often foregrounded, emphasizing their prominence in the narrative. The clausal distribution of these expressions thus sheds light on how news discourse foregrounds or backgrounds male and female referents.

Despite a growing body of work on gendered language in American English, few studies have examined evaluative adjectives and (pro)nominal expressions in the context of the #MeToo movement. Aull and Brown (2013) and Konnelly (2020) investigated gendered nouns and adjectives in US sports reportage and broader media discourse, respectively, while Baker (2015) analyzed historical representations of American males in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, no study to date has examined how such patterns differ in news media before and after the #MeToo movement. By combining analysis of evaluative tokens with the semantic roles and syntactic functions of the (pro)nominal expressions whose referents are evaluated, the present study offers a multidimensional perspective on gender representation in contemporary news discourse.

The study focuses on comparing two politically affiliated news networks to examine whether their political affiliations impact gender representation: the ideologically left-of-center news website *HuffPost* and the conservative, right-of-center news website *Washington Examiner*. The ideological placement of the two news websites is supported by the Pew Research Center's (2020) study of news outlet and viewer ideology (see Figure 17 in the Appendix). The present study addresses the following research questions:

- (i) How does the evaluation of males and females in American English news reporting differ between the pre-#MeToo and post-#MeToo periods?
- (ii) Are there differences in the semantic roles assigned to (pro)nominal expressions referring to males and females?
- (iii) Do the syntactic functions (subject vs. non-subject) and clause positions (main vs. subordinate) of (pro)nominal expressions differ for males and females, and what patterns can be observed in this regard?
- (iv) Do the politically affiliated news networks *HuffPost* and the *Washington Examiner* exhibit differences in their portrayal of gender?

Due to the societal impact of the #MeToo movement, which has heightened awareness and scrutiny of traditional gender norms and power dynamics, it is hypothesized that there will be a notable shift in language use post-#MeToo, reflecting greater sensitivity and equity in the portrayal of genders across news media. Additionally, the left-of-center *HuffPost* is expected to demonstrate a more progressive and equitable approach to gender portrayal compared to the conservative, right-of-center *Washington Examiner*.

2. *Material and method*

The study involved the compilation and analysis of four sub-corpora from the News on the Web (NOW) corpus (Davies 2016): pre-#MeToo *HuffPost*, pre-#MeToo *Washington Examiner*, post-#MeToo *HuffPost*, and post-#MeToo *Washington Examiner*. The choice of the two outlets was based on (i) their distinct ideological leanings indicated in the Pew data, (ii) their comparability (e.g., both operate as online news outlets), and (iii) their availability in the NOW corpus during both pre- and post-#MeToo periods. Data for the pre-#MeToo sub-corpora were sourced from the years 2015, 2016, and up to September 2017, with the *HuffPost* sub-corpus containing 800,717 words and the *Washington Examiner* sub-corpus containing 801,050 words. Data for the post-#MeToo sub-corpora, drawn from the years 2020 and 2021, included 801,590 words for *HuffPost*

and 800,890 words for the *Washington Examiner*.³ The total compilation for all sub-corpora amounts to 3,204,247 words. A roughly equal number of words per year from both sources were collected, and articles from each year were selected in random order. Using AntConc (Anthony 2022), the four sub-corpora were searched for a set of pre-selected male and female nominal expressions (see Table 2 in the Appendix for the list of the nominal expressions) and the gender-specific pronominal expressions *he* and *she*.⁴ The next step involved collecting valid evaluative tokens (adjectives) co-occurring with the retrieved (pro)nominal expressions. For a token to be considered valid, a (pro)nominal expression had to co-occur with an adjective that explicitly evaluated the referent of that expression. The instances of (pro)nominal expressions were examined in random order, and 300 valid tokens were manually collected (150 male-referring and 150 female-referring tokens) for each of the four sub-corpora. To ensure consistency, an equal number of nominal and pronominal tokens were collected from each sample, i.e., 75 nominal and 75 pronominal tokens for each of the eight samples. This process resulted in the collection of a total of 1,200 tokens, which was deemed to be a sufficient and representative sample of data for this study. Table 1 shows the frequency of instances retrieved by AntConc, as well as the number of tokens examined to collect the valid tokens within each sample. As can be seen in the table, the process of collecting the 1,200 valid evaluative tokens required the examination of a total of 20,039 tokens.

³ The target of approximately 800,000 words for each sub-corpus was set based on the minimum amount of data available across the sub-corpora in the NOW corpus.

⁴ The nominal expressions used in this study were originally collected from a sub-corpus of the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA) (Davies 2008) for my previous research on gender evaluation (see Kathon 2023), and then expanded using the WordNet database and the Historical Thesaurus of the OED. Regarding gender-specific pronominal expressions, the present study focuses on *he* and *she*, as evaluative tokens were predominantly found to co-occur with these two pronouns in Kathon (2023).

Table 1: Number of hits retrieved by AntConc, tokens subjected to examination, and valid tokens collected for the study and their frequencies per 10,000 words

			Hits	Tokens examined	Valid tokens collected	Frequencies (per 10,000 words)
Pre- #MeToo	HuffPost	Male	5,432	1,844	150	5.5
		Female	4,041	1,668	150	4.8
	Washington Examiner	Male	5,904	1,828	150	5.4
		Female	2,464	2,299	150	2.0
Post- #MeToo	HuffPost	Male	5,227	3,469	150	2.7
		Female	3,669	2,687	150	2.5
	Washington Examiner	Male	8,230	3,099	150	4.6
		Female	3,205	3,145	150	1.9
Total			38,172	20,039	1,200	3.7

Frequencies of the evaluative tokens (per 10,000 words) show gender differences across the two news websites.⁵ While *HuffPost* exhibits a relatively balanced frequency of evaluative tokens for both genders, the evaluation of females is much rarer compared to the evaluation of males in both periods for the conservative, right-of-center news website *Washington Examiner*. Additionally, evaluative expressions have become less common following the #MeToo movement across both news websites, particularly in *HuffPost*. Although it is beyond the scope of the present study to examine why this reduction in frequency occurred, it potentially reflects a broader shift in the media's approach towards more cautious or reserved evaluative language in news reporting in the wake of the movement's impact on gender discourse.

As mentioned in section 1, the evaluative tokens in the study comprise adjectives typically carrying positive or negative meaning. The selection of positive and negative evaluative tokens was guided by a principle established by Persson (1990) and subsequently applied in research such as Sveen (2005: 58–59), Bäcklund (2006: 23), Lilja (2007: 176–177), and

⁵ The frequencies were based on the proportion of valid tokens among those examined. First, the precision rate of each random sample was calculated to estimate the raw frequencies of evaluative nominal and pronominal tokens within the samples. These estimates were then aggregated, and the resulting frequencies were normalized (per 10,000 words).

Kathon (2023: 44). This principle involves assessing whether, for a given adjective X, it is typically perceived as “better to be X than not to be X” (Persson 1990: 52). An adjective was classified as positive if the answer was affirmative (e.g., *capable, prudent, famous*). A reversed question was asked to identify negative uses of adjectives (e.g., *corrupt, abusive, incompetent*). Non-evaluative tokens were excluded, such as tokens referring to a person’s nationality/race (*American, African-American*), political orientation (*conservative, democratic*), marital status (*single, divorced*), and skin color (*dark-skinned, white*), as these tokens typically *describe* rather than explicitly *evaluate* a human being, and do not necessarily denote a positive or negative meaning.⁶

In order to examine what aspects or traits of the referents the evaluative expressions denote, the 1,200 valid evaluative tokens were classified following an inclusive classification system that was used in my previous studies on gender evaluation (see Kathon 2024). The system included five semantic categories: Appearance, Personality Trait, Appeal, Capacity, and Importance.⁷ The category of Appearance evaluates an individual’s physical features, as in (3). Personality Traits encompass the evaluation of a person’s mental, emotional, and behavioral characteristics, as in (4). Tokens categorized under Appeal assess the overall likability or lack thereof of an individual, as in (5). Capacity pertains to the assessment of an individual’s skills, abilities, and acuties, as in (6). Finally, the category of Importance involves the evaluation of an individual’s worth, influence, and societal value, as in (7).

- (3) ... it started out with just a bunch of guys who wanted to get drunk with friends and check out some *pretty girls* ... (HuffPost 2017)
- (4) He is a man so *unpredictable*, so *reckless*, so *petulant*, ... (HuffPost 2017)
- (5) She brought a *wonderful stepfather* into my life ... (HuffPost 2015)

⁶ Some of these tokens may have positive or negative connotations depending on the context. However, analyzing the connotative meanings of the tokens is beyond the scope of the present study.

⁷ In developing the semantic classification system in Kathon (2023), insights from earlier research (e.g., Bäcklund 2006; Caldas-Coulthard and Moon 2010; Martin and White 2005; Sveen 2005) were incorporated.

- (6) She's incredibly *accomplished* and has transformed our organization—and our company—into a customer-first company. (*HuffPost* 2017)
- (7) How utterly predictable that Politico would run the zillionth hit piece on a prominent woman, ... (*Washington Examiner* 2021)

As mentioned in section 1, the study examines semantic roles of the (pro)nominal expressions in the context of male/female evaluation. First expounded by Fillmore (1968) and Gruber (1976), semantic roles describe the roles taken by participants in an event. The tokens were classified for semantic role based on criteria from, e.g., Dowty (1986: 340), Palmer, Gildea and Xue (2010: 4), and Saeed (2016: 186–190). An *agent* is defined as the entity that causes or initiates an event. The agentive role is exemplified with an active subject in (8) and a *by-agent* in (9).⁸

- (8) [Her husband] had been *abusive* to her, ... (*HuffPost* 2017)
- (9) We remain governed by [a *soulless* man] ... (*HuffPost* 2020)

The *patient* is the entity involved in or affected by the action. This is exemplified with an active direct object in (10) and a passive subject in (11).

- (10) If I offended [anyone, particularly the *wonderful* women in my life], I apologize. (*Washington Examiner* 2017)
- (11) [Our *brave* boy, Reed,] was diagnosed a month after turning 3, March 2017, with intermediate risk rhabdomyosarcoma of the prostate. (*HuffPost* 2017)

The *theme* is an entity being described (i.e., not performing an action), as in (12), while an *experiencer* denotes the entity undergoing a feeling, perception, or state, as in (13).

- (12) [He] was *infamous* for his fiery temper, ... (*HuffPost* 2016)
- (13) These days [Dad] is often *sad*. (*HuffPost* 2015)

⁸ In the discussion of the semantic roles and syntactic functions of the (pro)nominal expressions, relevant noun phrases in corpus examples are placed in square brackets.

A *beneficiary* is the entity that benefits from the action of the verb. In (14), the beneficiary *an incompetent man* is depicted as gaining from the situation in which a competent woman loses her job.

- (14) A competent woman losing a job to [an *incompetent man*] is not an anomalous Election Day surprise; ... (*Washington Examiner* 2017)

When an agent uses another entity to perform an action or performs an action together with another entity, that entity takes on the role of an *instrument*, as in (15).⁹

- (15) Along with [his *beloved wife* Marion] and the foundation that bears his name, he raised his voice, ... (*HuffPost* 2016)

It should be noted that different scholars may classify individual tokens differently on such semantic parameters. The primary objective of this study was to ensure internal consistency in the classification process.

The semantic roles mentioned above can be grouped into two semantic macroroles—actor and undergoer—that are generalizations across thematic relations. Actor is a generalization across agent, experiencer and instrument, while undergoer is a generalization subsuming patient, theme and beneficiary (Van Valin 2005: 53).

In addition, the study examines the syntactic functions of (pro)nominal expressions, focusing on their roles as subjects or non-subjects and their placement in main or subordinate clauses. (The subject vs. non-subject distinction in the study is relevant only to nominal expressions, as the pronominal expressions *he* and *she* occur only in positions classified as subject slots). In addition to syntactic subjects, the category of *subject* includes subject complements, as in (16), where *a courageous man* is coreferential with the subject noun phrase (*Josh Hawley*); semantic subjects, e.g., *a lot of nice girls* in (17), where *there* functions as the grammatical subject; and focused elements in *it*-clefts,

⁹ While traditional theories (e.g., Fillmore 1968) often restrict instruments to inanimate entities, the present study expands the semantic boundaries of the instrument role to encompass a broader range of relationships between agents and their companions or collaborators in an action.

e.g., *her mother* in (18), where the subject of the non-cleft version (*Her mother is desperate for Kai ...*) has been topicalized.

- (16) Josh Hawley is [a *courageous* man], ... (*Washington Examiner* 2021)
- (17) There are [a lot of *nice* girls] in school ... (*HuffPost* 2017)
- (18) It is [her mother] who is *desperate* for Kai to follow in her pageant footsteps ... (*HuffPost* 2020)

The category of *non-subject* includes objects (e.g., *these kinds of unscrupulous men* in (19)), adverbials (e.g., the *by-agent two (stunning) Dutch females* in (20)), and tokens such as (21), where *his unbalanced mother* is not the head of the subject noun phrase.¹⁰

- (19) The Constitution's speech and debate clause protects [these kinds of *unscrupulous* men] ... (*Washington Examiner* 2021)
- (20) Befriended by [two (*stunning*) Dutch females] in the line, we waited together to get in ... (*HuffPost* 2016)
- (21) His recounting of physical, emotional, and, horrifyingly, sexual abuse at the hands of [his *unbalanced* mother] takes up a significant portion of the book. (*HuffPost* 2016)

In this study, the subject/non-subject distinction was made with regard to the clause where the clause element occurs. For instance, in (22), *his beloved wife* has been classified as a direct object (i.e., non-subject) of the non-finite subordinate clause *to protect his beloved wife*, while in (23), the noun phrase *a violent man ... in the home* is considered part of the direct object of *remarried* in a main clause (even though the nominal expression *man* is the antecedent of a relative clause). However, when the (pro)nominal expression occurs within the relative clause, as in (24), I classified it from the perspective of that relative clause: since the noun phrase *a righteous man* is the subject complement of a subordinate clause, it was classified as a subject.

¹⁰ Regarding the semantic role of expressions that are not the head of the noun phrase, as in (21), the role was determined based on the expression's function within the broader noun phrase. In this example, *his unbalanced mother*, as the entity causing or initiating the action of abuse, takes on the role of the agent.

- (22) A husband died to protect [his *beloved* wife]. (*Washington Examiner* 2017)
- (23) After Montgomery's father left, her mother remarried Jack Kleiner, [a *violent* man who terrorized the children in the home]. (*HuffPost* 2021)
- (24) 'They've done the cruelest, nastiest ads I've ever seen to destroy Jude Moore, who is [a *righteous* man], and his family,' Bannon said. (*Washington Examiner* 2017)

Note that in examples (20) and (21), even though the expressions function as non-subjects, they assume the role of an agent. Similarly, example (23) features an expression functioning as a non-subject in a main clause, while in example (24), the expression is a subject within a subordinate clause. These examples demonstrate the necessity of including semantic roles as well as syntactic functions and clause placement in the analysis.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Semantic categories of the evaluative tokens and positive vs. negative evaluation

Results for the semantic categories offer some intriguing insights into how gender evaluation has shifted from the pre-#MeToo to post-#MeToo periods. Figures 1 and 2 show frequencies (per 10,000 words) of male and female evaluative tokens in the five semantic categories.¹¹ Raw frequencies are given in Table 3 in the Appendix.

¹¹ In Figures 1 and 2, the Y-axes are not to the same scale given the higher frequencies of male evaluation.

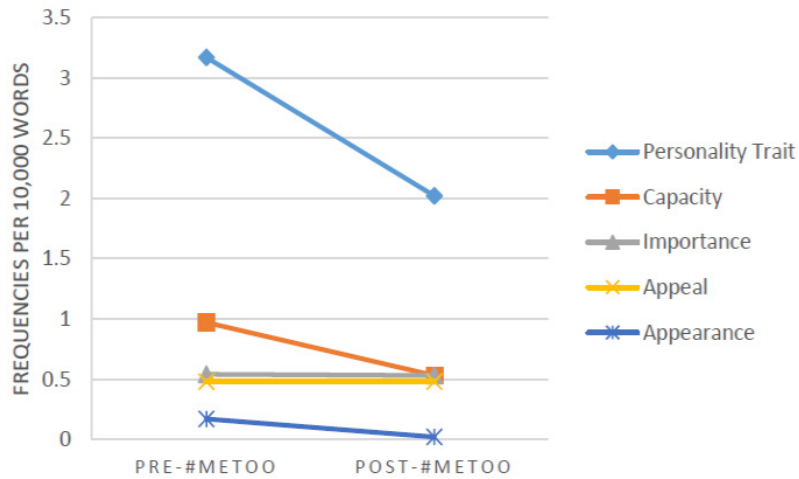


Figure 1: Male evaluative tokens by semantic category and period (frequencies per 10,000 words)

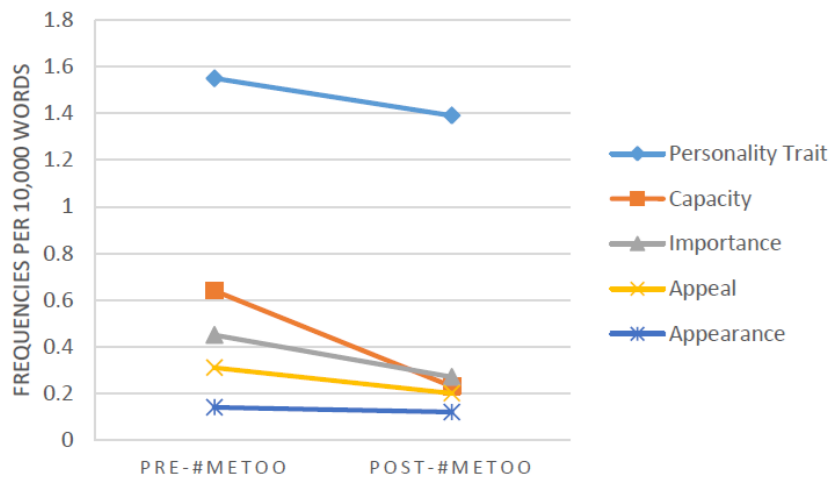


Figure 2: Female evaluative tokens by semantic category and period (frequencies per 10,000 words)

For both males and females, there is a general decrease in the frequency of evaluative tokens in the post-#MeToo period across most categories,

but more noticeably so for males in the Personality Trait category which evaluates a referent's mental, emotional and behavioral characteristics. This might suggest a shift towards more cautious or restrained use of language that evaluates or characterizes individuals, potentially as a response to increased awareness and sensitivity around gender issues spurred by the movement. In the pre-#MeToo period, males were evaluated more frequently than females in categories such as Personality Trait, Capacity, and Importance. This trend largely persists in the post-#MeToo period, but with an overall decrease in frequency. This might indicate that traditional gender roles and perceptions that prioritize male attributes in professional and personal narratives continue to prevail, though perhaps with a slightly reduced emphasis following the movement.

Interestingly, the evaluation based on Appearance shows a decrease for males but remains almost constant for females, which indicates persistent gender biases where women's physical appearances continue to be a focus in media narratives more often than men's. Examples of post-#MeToo appearance tokens evaluating women's looks, bodily construction, or sexual attractiveness include *attractive*, *pretty*, *glamorous*, *nice-looking*, and *slender*. In contrast, the reduction in the focus on male appearance suggests that physical attributes are becoming a less relevant factor in the evaluation of men, aligning with more traditional views of male identity being less tied to looks. Thus, the data suggests that gender stereotypes, such as men being primarily evaluated by their capabilities and importance and women by their appearance, continue to persist, albeit possibly less overtly. The presence of such stereotypes echoes the traditional patterns of gender evaluation observed in previous research, e.g., Sveen (2005), Bäcklund (2006), Konnelly (2020), and Kathon (2023, 2024). The findings indicate that the hypothesis posited in section 1 is only partially supported. Although there is some evidence of increased sensitivity in the data, and while #MeToo has drawn attention to overt acts of sexism, it has yet to penetrate to the deeper layers of language usage, which is not always conscious.

Proportions of the evaluative tokens offer further insights into gender patterns. Figures 3 and 4 show percentages of male and female evaluative tokens across the five semantic categories.

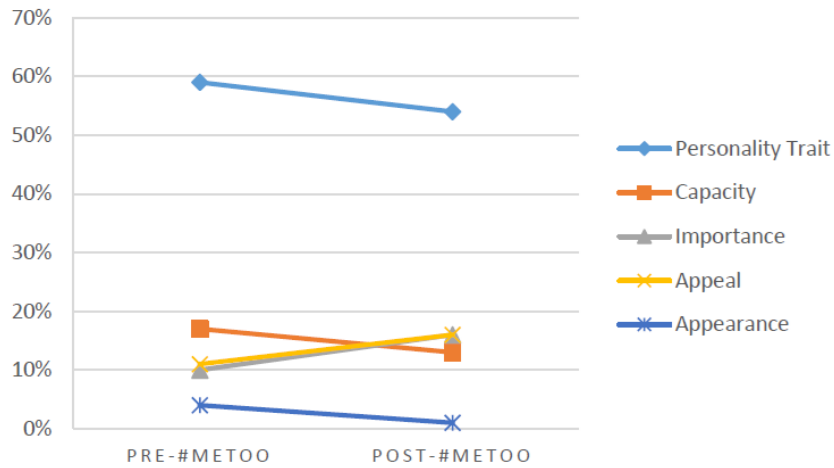


Figure 3: Male evaluative tokens by semantic category and period, presented in percentages

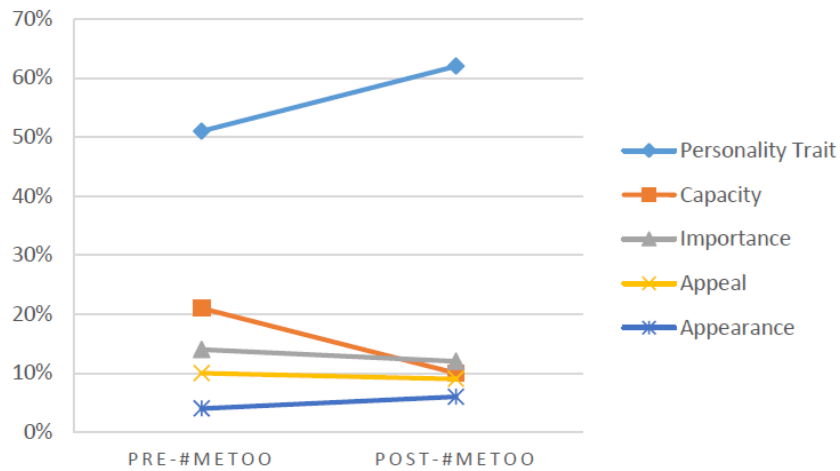


Figure 4: Female evaluative tokens by semantic category and period, presented in percentages

Before the #MeToo movement, a higher proportion of evaluative tokens for males were related to personality traits compared to females. However, in the post-#MeToo period, the proportion decreased for males (from 59%

to 54%) and increased for females (from 51% to 62%). While females are evaluated less frequently after #MeToo, the category of Personality Trait is more predominant when they are evaluated. This implies a heightened focus on scrutinizing female behavior and characteristics after the movement. Further analysis of positive vs. negative evaluation of Personality Traits, which is by far the largest category in the data (57%, 678 tokens out of 1,200), offers some intriguing insights into gender portrayal by the two news networks. Figure 5 displays the proportions of positive personality traits. This figure presents only the proportions of positive evaluation, since positive and negative evaluations are mutually exclusive (i.e., the proportion of negative evaluation = 100% minus the proportion of positive evaluation).

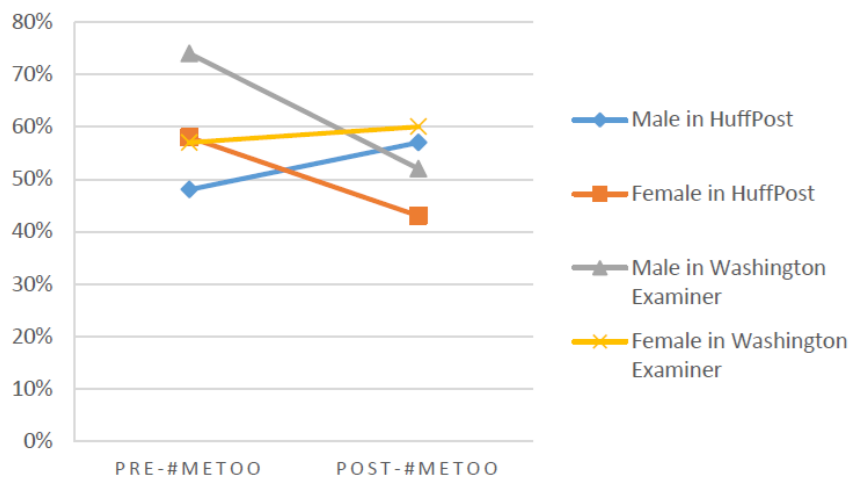


Figure 5: Positive Personality Traits by gender, period and news network, presented in percentages. Raw frequencies are given in Table 4 in the Appendix.

One key finding in Figure 5 is the decline in positive evaluations of female traits in *HuffPost*, suggesting a shift towards a less favorable portrayal of women in progressive media. Similarly, a noticeable decrease in positive evaluations of male traits in the *Washington Examiner* indicates a move towards more critical portrayals of males, possibly in response to societal demands for greater accountability in conservative circles.

A closer examination of the negative traits attributed to women in *HuffPost* and to men in the *Washington Examiner* reveals distinct trends in the post-#MeToo period. While *HuffPost* focuses more on the emotional and psychological complexity (or vulnerability) of women, the *Washington Examiner* highlights ethical or moral failings in men. In *HuffPost*, women are described as *hysterical, sad, broken, (emotionally) distant, cold, frustrated, and hopeless*. Such portrayals address issues related to violence or emotional challenges faced by women. For instance, example (25) illustrates the vulnerability of a convicted woman. Similarly, example (26) describes the mental and emotional predicament of a former Miss World following her botched cosmetic surgery; this example highlights the emotional toll that physical alterations and societal expectations can have on women, particularly in industries where appearance is heavily scrutinized.

- (25) Her regular clothing had been taken away, including her bra and underwear, leaving her distraught. Whenever she squatted or crouched, she told her lawyers, her breasts and genitals were exposed to the male guards watching her. She wasn't sleeping because she felt *exposed* and *unsafe*. (*HuffPost* 2021)
- (26) '... My face looked completely different. I wasn't me anymore,' the former Miss World wrote, saying she felt '*devastated* and *hopeless*'. (*HuffPost* 2021)

Conversely, the *Washington Examiner* portrays men with traits such as *unscrupulous, corrupt, and racist*. Such traits are notably severe and ethically charged, which could reflect a more critical stance towards male figures, particularly in political or public spheres. Instances such as (27) could be seen as a broader critique of male leadership or personalities in the news media, aligning perhaps with a broader cultural expectation of integrity and ethics in leadership brought to the fore by the movement. Even when the emotional and psychological complexity of men is described in the post-#MeToo *Washington Examiner*, it emphasizes danger and instability, portraying men as potential threats to themselves or others, as in (28).

- (27) During his presidential campaign, Mitt Romney was smeared as a virulent sexist for remarking that he had compiled 'binders full of

women' when he had attempted to hire a more diverse staff as governor of Massachusetts, deemed irredeemably *racist* by both the media and the Democratic establishment, ... (*Washington Examiner* 2020)

- (28) ... this guy is a seriously *unstable* individual with anger management issues, erratic behavior, and an inability to control his emotions. He's a hothead with no humility, poor discretion, and a superiority complex. (*Washington Examiner* 2020)

The findings thus indicate that both progressive and conservative media outlets are adjusting to societal changes by modifying how they portray gender, although the focus and implications of these changes vary. While the emotional traits of women in *HuffPost* are portrayed in a way that may evoke sympathy or concern, highlighting vulnerability and perhaps victimhood, the *Washington Examiner's* portrayal of men might emphasize male aggression and instability, which are typically perceived as threats rather than vulnerabilities.

3.2 Semantic roles and syntactic functions of the (pro)nominal expressions

This section first examines the thematic relations of the (pro)nominal expressions within each macrorole, followed by an analysis of the syntactic functions of the expressions. As mentioned in section 2, actor is a generalization subsuming agent, experiencer, and instrument. Frequencies for agents and experiencers (per 10,000 words) are given in Figures 6 and 7, with raw frequencies in Table 5 of the Appendix. The semantic role of instrument is not presented in a figure due to its low occurrence in the data, representing only one percent (12 tokens out of 1,200).

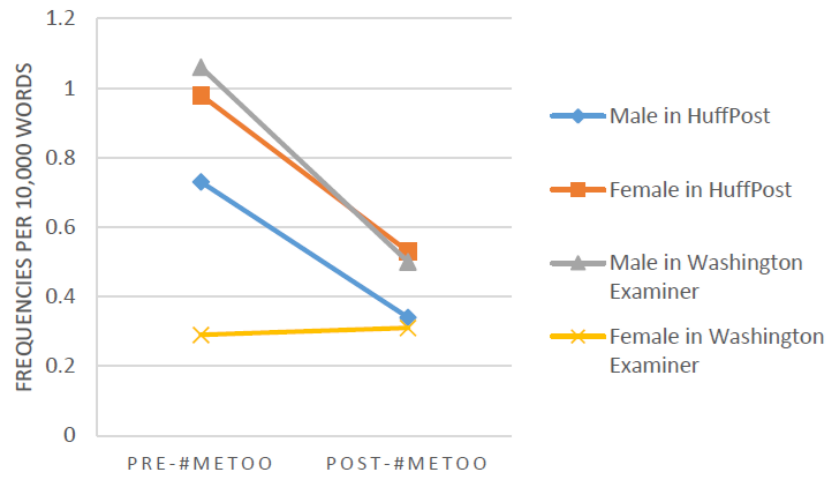


Figure 6: Male and female (pro)nominal expressions as agents (frequencies per 10,000 words)

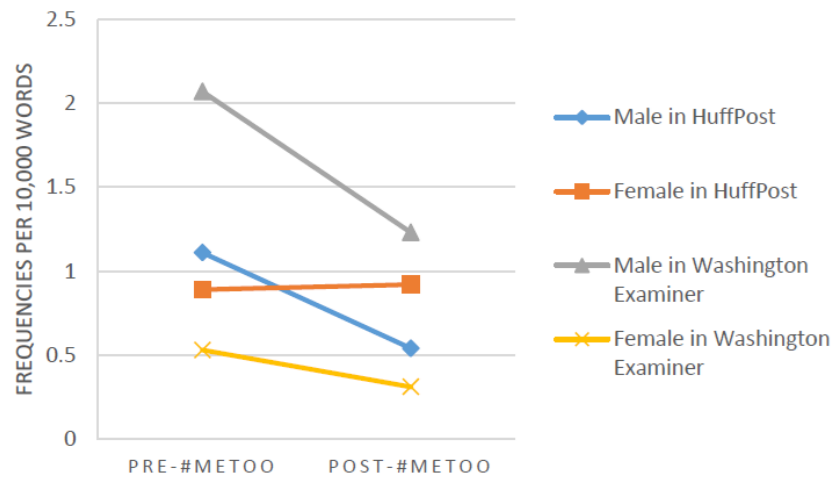


Figure 7: Male and female (pro)nominal expressions as experiencers (frequencies per 10,000 words)

Regarding the agentive roles, it is notable that in *HuffPost*, female agents outnumber male agents in both pre- and post-#MeToo periods, although

the frequencies of both genders decline after the movement. This trend contrasts with the *Washington Examiner*, where female agents start at a lower frequency but increase slightly in the post-#MeToo period. Concerning the semantic role of experiencer in the *Washington Examiner*, male experiencers consistently outnumber female experiencers, although both categories see a decline in the post-#MeToo period. Conversely, in *HuffPost*, the frequency of female experiencers increases slightly from the pre- to the post-#MeToo period, and notably exceeds that of male experiencers in the later period. A closer examination of female experiencers in *HuffPost* reveals the outlet's heightened focus on women's emotional experiences, as in (29) and (30). In (29), the depiction of a woman experiencing fear as she recounts coercion into a sexual act illustrates the emotional turmoil and the subsequent life changes impacted by such experiences.

- (29) One woman alleges Holtzclaw coerced her into giving him oral sex. She cried as she spoke, [...] She talked of how *afraid* [she] was to go to police, of how images of her alleged attack haunt her. Enveloped in fear, she said she slipped further into drugs. (*HuffPost* 2015)

This example shows *HuffPost*'s role in bringing to light the profound personal and psychological impacts of assault, aligning with feminist narratives that seek to validate and articulate women's experiences. Example (30) involves a woman experiencing confusion over the reaction to her feminist stance.

- (30) In a recent shoot for the magazine, the 26-year-old 'Beauty and the Beast' star appears in a white crocheted jacket with no shirt or bra. The pictures [...] sparked backlash across social media and from some media outlets. Watson told Reuters that [she]'s simply *confused* by some of the flak she's received. 'It just always reveals to me how many misconceptions and what a misunderstanding there is of what feminism is', she said. 'Feminism is about giving women choice, [...] I really don't know what my tits have to do with it. It's very confusing.' (*HuffPost* 2017)

This example shows the complexities of public responses to feminism and female autonomy, particularly in how women's choices are often scrutinized.

A closer look into the semantic macrorole of undergoer, a generalization subsuming patient, theme and beneficiary, offers further insights into gender portrayal. The frequencies of (pro)nominal expressions as patients, themes and beneficiaries are given in Figures 8, 9 and 10, respectively. Raw frequencies are given in Table 6 in the Appendix.

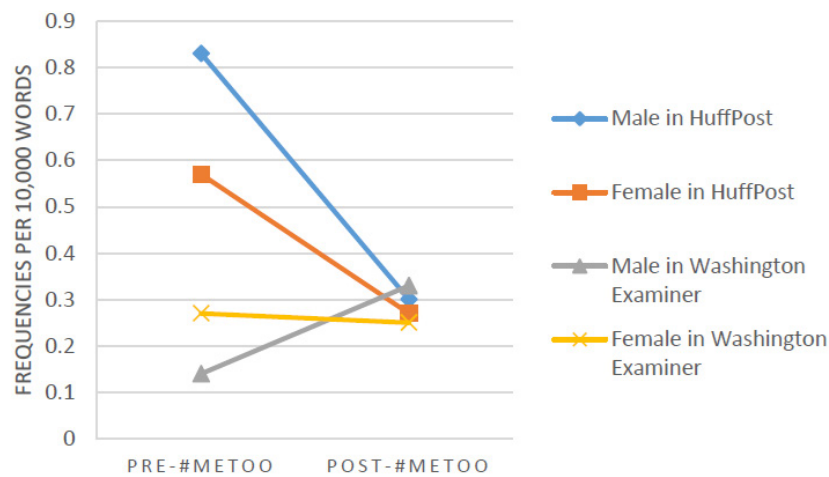


Figure 8: Male and female (pro)nominal expressions as patient (frequencies per 10,000 words)

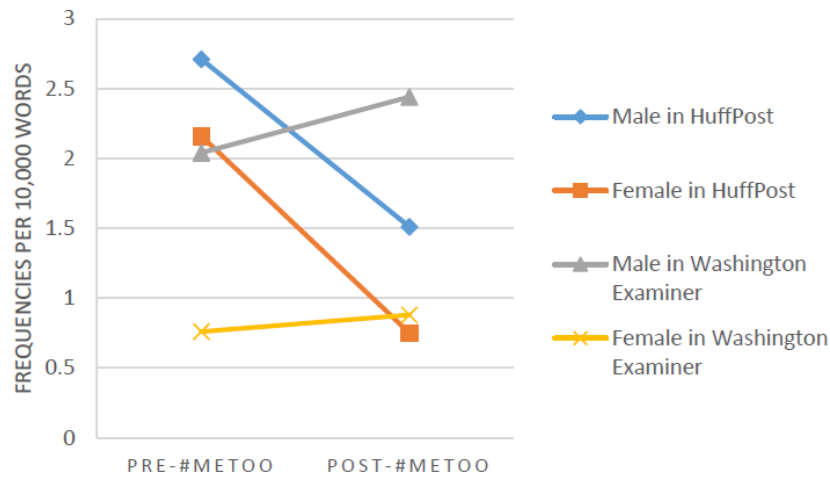


Figure 9: Male and female (pro)nominal expressions as theme (frequencies per 10,000 words)

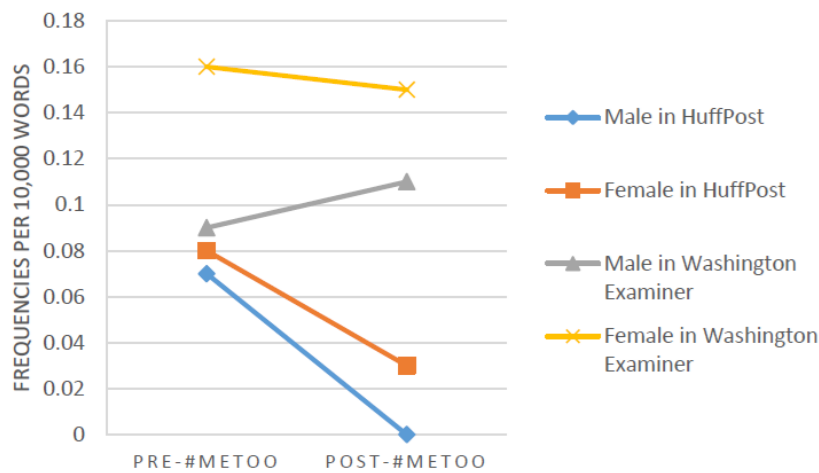


Figure 10: Male and female (pro)nominal expressions as beneficiary (frequencies per 10,000 words)

Analysis of these frequencies reveals dramatic shifts, particularly in the portrayal of males in the *Washington Examiner*. In the post-#MeToo period, there is a marked increase in male patients, a role traditionally

associated with victimhood and less commonly attributed to males (Konnolly 2020; Pearce 2008). Before #MeToo, males as patients were notably less frequent in the *Washington Examiner*, but post-#MeToo, their frequency not only increased but also surpassed other categories. Additionally, there has been a significant rise in the portrayal of males as themes. This shift contrasts sharply with the drastic decline in the portrayal of males as agents and experiencers noted earlier (see Figures 6 and 7). The more frequent portrayal of males as patients and themes indicates a shift towards depicting men as more vulnerable or affected by external actions. Examples (31)–(33) from the *Washington Examiner* show men navigating a range of challenges, including situations where they are not in control. For instance, (31) describes a man affected by outdated laws, showcasing him as a patient suffering from the consequences of a rigid legal system.

- (31) Paul Thompson wanted to sell a rare, 15-year-old bottle of the Weller Kentucky bourbon for a modest \$750. [...] In Pennsylvania, the sale of liquor without a license, even a single bottle, is illegal. And so two agents [...] created a fake email to set up a sting and went undercover to seize the bottle. Now Thompson faces a misdemeanor for the unlawful sale, possession, and transportation of liquor. [An otherwise *honest man*], he's been made into a crook by a dishonest and out-of-date law. This is ridiculous. [...] The seller just tried making a buck off of a single bottle of bourbon. That's really not uncommon. (*Washington Examiner* 2017)

Example (32) illustrates a young man deeply affected by social and institutional reactions to accusations, perhaps unjustly.

- (32) The stories of innocent students found responsible by ill-trained and biased tribunals are often absent or lightly dismissed from the discussion of how schools should address allegations of sexual assault on their campuses. 'He must have done something wrong to be expelled' is something some of us would have said before we came to know these students and the circumstances which brought them to us. Terrified to tell his side 'publicly' lest the mob of social justice devour him and devastated by having lost nearly

everything, [an *innocent* young man] becomes a social outcast without a future. That is, unless he is one of the very fortunate few who can afford an attorney who capable of demonstrating the student was a victim of a severely skewed system. (*Washington Examiner* 2017)

Example (33) describes a male political figure, emphasizing his diminished public stature and susceptibility in the political arena.

- (33) ... his approval ratings are in free fall after signing an abortion ban [...] [He] has never been so *unpopular* and so *vulnerable*, and he is in trouble. (*Washington Examiner* 2021)

These examples depict men undergoing significant adversity, whether through legal entanglements, societal judgments, or political vulnerabilities. However, this portrayal of men as vulnerable or victimized might also be viewed through a critical lens, drawing on Fairclough's (1992) analysis of how power dynamics can shape discourse. Fairclough discusses the concept of simulated change within linguistic practices, where those in power might adopt superficial changes in discourse to appear aligned with new societal norms. The increased portrayal of male undergoers in the right-wing outlet could be seen as a form of lip service to the ideals of gender equality, while subtly reinforcing traditional power dynamics by focusing attention on men's vulnerabilities as a response to societal changes, rather than on women's empowerment or victimization. By focusing on male vulnerability, especially in scenarios traditionally associated with female victimization (as in (32)), the outlet could be attempting to counterbalance the narrative of female victimization that the movement has brought to the forefront. This approach may be seen as shifting the discourse from women's experiences of abuse and assault to the adversities faced by men.

Regarding the syntactic functions of the (pro)nominal expressions, the distinction between subjects and non-subjects, as mentioned in section 2, applies only to nominal expressions. The frequencies of the nominal expressions as subjects and non-subjects are displayed in Figures 11 and 12, respectively. Raw frequencies are given in Table 7 in the Appendix.

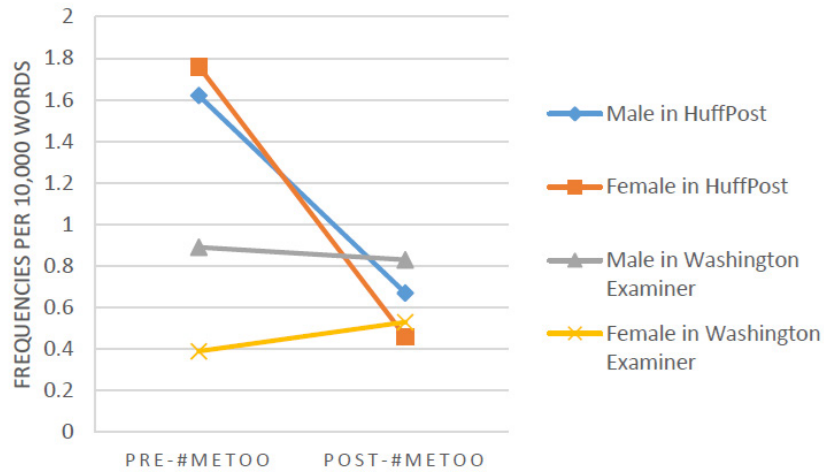


Figure 11: Male and female nominal expressions as subjects (frequencies per 10,000 words)

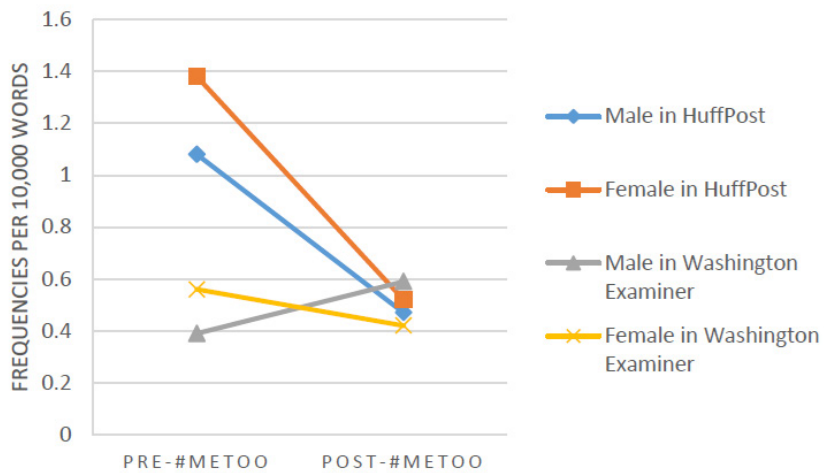


Figure 12: Male and female nominal expressions as non-subjects (frequencies per 10,000 words)

The data shows a decline in the frequencies of both male and female nominal expressions as subjects and non-subjects in *HuffPost*, indicating

a general decline in overt evaluation of topical referents. In contrast, the *Washington Examiner* exhibits a persistent gender gap in the portrayal of subjects, although this gap narrows slightly in the post-#MeToo period. Notably, female subjects in the *Washington Examiner* are the only category to experience an increase after the movement, rising from 0.39 to 0.53 per 10,000 words. This increase, though modest, suggests a shift towards enhancing the visibility of women as topics in narratives, aligning perhaps with a broader societal push for gender inclusivity. Meanwhile, the frequencies of nominal expressions as non-subjects generally decline across both news outlets, except for males in the *Washington Examiner*, which increase from 0.39 to 0.59 per 10,000 words. The convergence of frequencies in the post-#MeToo period, where distinctions between the two outlets become less pronounced, potentially reflects a shift towards more balanced gender representations. Also, as shown in Figure 13, the proportion of female subjects in the *Washington Examiner* notably increases between the two periods.¹²

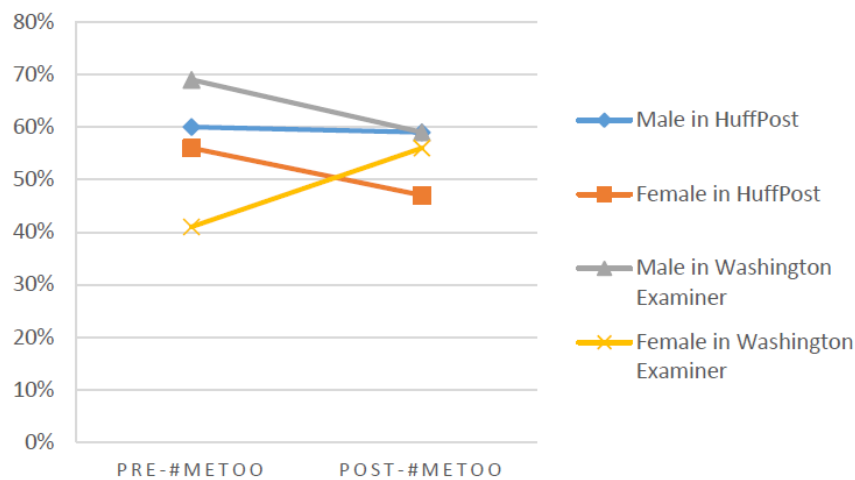


Figure 13: Male and female nominal expressions as subjects, presented in percentages.

¹² Figure 13 shows only the proportion of subjects, since subjects and non-subjects are mutually exclusive.

This rise not only complements the frequency data but also underscores a significant shift towards framing women more as a topic of discussion. Consider, for instance, example (34), which highlights a female subject in a significant, high-stakes scenario.

- (34) [A U.S. woman who fought through a smoke bomb and gunfire to escape Kabul] has been left *shocked* and *traumatized* at the Biden administration's failure to keep Americans in the loop ahead of their botched evacuation. (*Washington Examiner* 2021)

This example places a woman at the core of the narrative and emphasizes her experiences and reactions at the forefront of a major international event. However, the woman's reported feelings are used by the right-wing news outlet to implicate the Democratic president of the US. This might raise the question of whether the *Washington Examiner*'s main aim is to bring the woman's experience to the forefront or to strike a blow at the Biden administration.

Regarding the placement of male and female (pro)nominal expressions in main and subordinate clauses, the data reveals notable differences across periods and news websites. In *HuffPost*, there is a noticeable decrease in the frequency of both male and female expressions in main and subordinate clauses (see Figures 14 and 15; raw frequencies are given in Table 8 in the Appendix). This suggests that the news website adopted a more cautious approach to portraying foregrounded individuals following the movement's impact on societal and media discourse about gender.

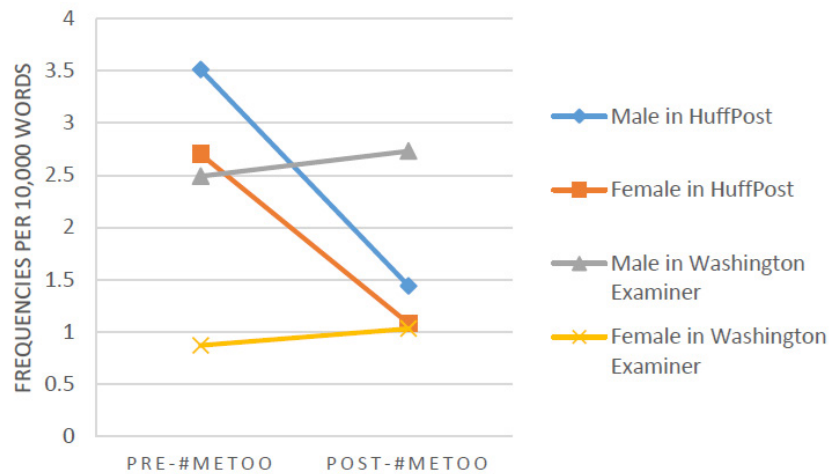


Figure 14: Male and female (pro)nominal expressions in main clauses (frequencies per 10,000 words)

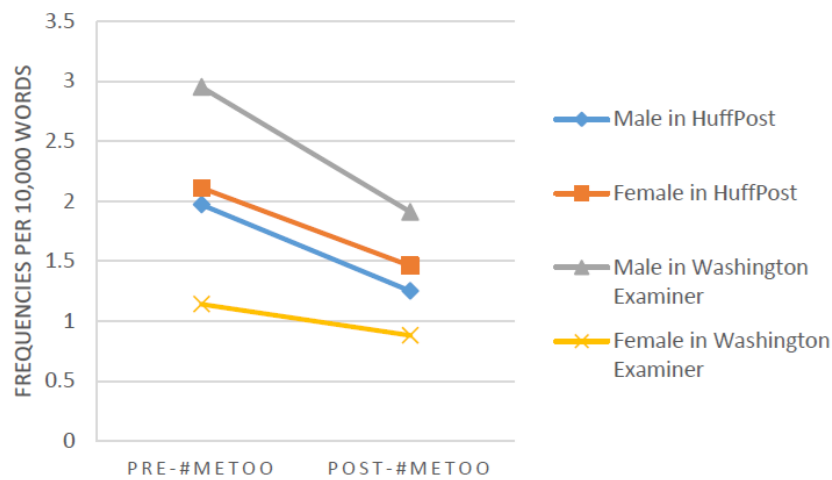


Figure 15: Male and female (pro)nominal expressions in subordinate clauses (frequencies per 10,000 words)

Conversely, in the *Washington Examiner*, the frequency of both male and female expressions in main clauses increases slightly. Examples (35) and (36) illustrate the news outlet's foregrounding of male and female

expressions, respectively. However, similar to the portrayal of a female subject in (34), the right-wing outlet's main aim of foregrounding the female referent in (36) could also be viewed as a critique of a Democrat.

- (35) There's no question that if Donald Trump were to run for president in 2024, [he] would be *formidable* and would likely clear the Republican field, rendering much of this discussion moot ... (*Washington Examiner* 2021)
- (36) Democratic Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York may play the role of the young, clear-eyed socialist. [...] But when it comes to generating wealth for herself and her friends, [she] is as *shrewd* and *conniving* as the most unscrupulous oil baron. (*Washington Examiner* 2021)

Another salient finding is that, in contrast to *HuffPost*, the *Washington Examiner* exhibits a noticeable gender difference in the frequency of referents in both main and subordinate clauses, with males being foregrounded or backgrounded more often than females. Corroborating the frequency analysis of main clauses, the proportion of males in the *Washington Examiner* increases from 49 percent to 61 percent, and that of females from 43 percent to 54 percent (see Figure 16).¹³ This trend suggests an increasing effort to foreground both male and female referents in this outlet, though males still maintain a higher presence in both outlets.

¹³ As the proportions of main and subordinate clauses are mutually exclusive, Figure 16 presents only the proportion of main-clause occurrence.

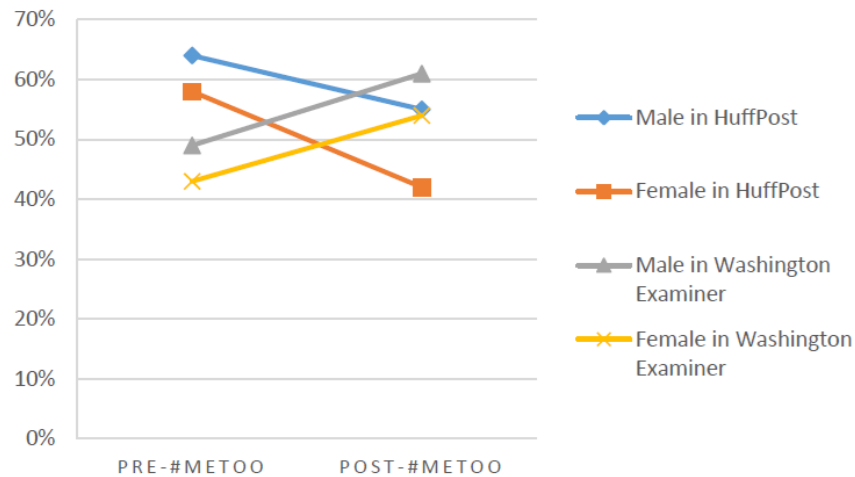


Figure 16: Male and female (pro)nominal expressions in main clauses, presented in percentages

These findings highlight the complex and varied ways in which gender representation in news discourse has shifted between the pre- and post-#MeToo periods. The overall implications of these patterns will be elaborated on in the concluding section below.

4. Conclusion

This study has investigated gender portrayal in two American news media, focusing on evaluative tokens, and the semantic roles and syntactic functions of (pro)nominal expressions before and after the #MeToo movement gained prominence. The findings revealed notable shifts in media discourse, with a general decrease in the frequency of evaluative tokens, particularly for males in the Personality Trait category. This suggests a move towards a more cautious or reserved use of language that characterizes individuals, possibly as a response to heightened sensitivity to gender issues prompted by the movement. The increase in negative evaluations of female traits in progressive outlets like *HuffPost* and a similar increase in critical portrayals of males in conservative outlets like the *Washington Examiner* highlight a broader societal shift towards more critical scrutiny of both genders, aligning with the movement's emphasis on addressing power imbalances and misconduct. While these patterns

may align with increased scrutiny and sensitivity prompted by the movement, it is also possible that the observed shifts—particularly the reduction or redirection of evaluative language—reflect a backlash or strategic response by media outlets aiming to reduce their vulnerability to criticism related to the #MeToo movement. Despite these changes, certain traditional gender stereotypes persisted: males continued to be evaluated more frequently than females in categories such as Capacity and Importance, while females were more frequently evaluated than males in the category of Appearance. These observations suggest that while the #MeToo movement has made significant inroads into public discourse about gender, it has yet to make an impact on the deep-seated linguistic representations of gender.

Regarding the semantic roles and syntactic functions of (pro)nominal expressions, the analysis highlighted differences between the two news networks. *HuffPost* exhibited a progressive stance by increasing the representation of women as experiencers and maintaining a higher representation of them as agents, despite a post-movement decrease in frequency for this role. In contrast, the *Washington Examiner* displayed more conservative tendencies but also showed notable shifts, such as an increased portrayal of males as undergoers, suggesting a complex and reflective approach to depicting male vulnerability. However, this portrayal of men by the right-wing outlet could also be interpreted as a strategic response to societal shifts, potentially simulating change to align with new norms without substantial shifts in narrative focus. In the syntactic analysis of nominal expressions, *HuffPost* exhibited a general decline in the usage of both male and female subjects and non-subjects, indicating a broader reduction in overt evaluation. Conversely, the *Washington Examiner* displayed a modest increase in female subjects while maintaining a gender gap. Further disparities between the two outlets are evident in the placement of male and female expressions in main and subordinate clauses. *HuffPost*'s reduced frequency across both genders might signify a more cautious stance. In contrast, the *Washington Examiner* not only increased its depiction of male expressions in main clauses but also slightly raised the frequency of female expressions, suggesting an intent to foreground both genders in narrative roles. However, the qualitative analysis shows that the contexts in which female referents are presented—politicized or subjected to critique—indicate that this foregrounding may serve more as strategic narrative framing rather

than a genuine shift towards gender parity. Overall, the findings suggest that the outlets appear to be adjusting to changing perceptions of gender spurred by the movement.

While we cannot assume a direct causal relationship between the #MeToo movement and the observed changes in language use, some of the developments may nevertheless have been influenced by it. In addition to the hypothesized #MeToo influence, there may have been other potential factors that prompted linguistic adjustments in these news outlets. For instance, the gender composition of media creators and the structural power within media organizations are also crucial. Since most political news content is produced by men (GMMP 2020), this imbalance may affect gender portrayal in the media, favoring male perspectives and potentially skewing the coverage of gender issues. Moreover, although the investigation of *HuffPost* and the *Washington Examiner* enabled a comparison of ideologically distinct outlets, some of the differences in gendered language use observed in this study may also reflect variations in scope, text type, or target audience appeal, rather than ideological orientation alone. These factors warrant further investigation in future studies.

In sum, this study's approach of examining both evaluative tokens and semantic and syntactic aspects of the (pro)nominal expressions whose referents are evaluated has offered a detailed view of gender portrayal in news discourse. The findings highlight the complex interplay between the #MeToo movement, media representation, and language use in the context of gender. While there are indications that the movement has prompted increased scrutiny of gender portrayals, the resulting changes are uneven and complex, reflecting broader societal dynamics and the varying ideological leanings of media outlets. Future research could expand on this work by exploring these dynamics across various media types and cultural contexts to better understand the global impact of this and other movements on media discourse. Additional studies on the intersectionality of gender with other identities, such as race and class, and on media's influence on public perceptions of gender beyond binary categories, including the representation of non-binary and transgender individuals, would also be invaluable.

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Appendix: Figures and Tables

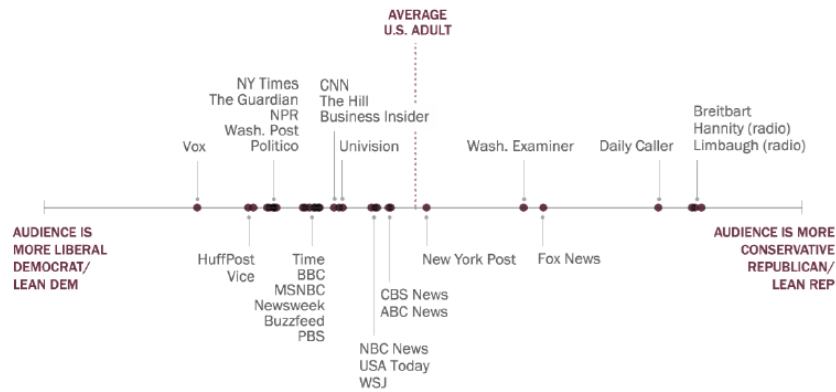


Figure 17: Ideological placement of news networks' audience (Pew Research Center 2020)

Table 2: Male and female nominal expressions

Male nominal expressions	Female nominal expressions
<i>bachelor, bloke, boy, boyfriend, bridegroom, bro, brother, brother-in-law, dad, daddy, dandy, dude, ex-husband, father, father-in-law, fella, fellow, fiancé, gent, gentleman, granddaddy, grandfather, grandpa, grandson, groom, guy, half-brother, hubby, husband, kinsman, lad, male, man, nephew, son, son-in-law, stepbrother, stepfather, stepson, suitor, uncle, widower</i>	<i>aunt, bachelorette, bride, bridesmaid, crone, dame, damsel, daughter, daughter-in-law, ex-wife, female, fiancée, gal, girl, girlfriend, granddaughter, grandma, grandmamma, grandmother, hag, half-sister, kinswoman, lady, maid, maiden, mamma, mom, mommy, mother, mother-in-law, niece, sis, sister, sister-in-law, spinster, stepdaughter, stepmother, stepsister, widow, wife, woman</i>

Table 3: Raw frequencies of evaluative tokens by semantic category

		Personality trait	Capacity	Importance	Appeal	Appearance	Total
Pre- #MeToo	Male	176	51	30	32	11	300
	Female	153	63	42	29	13	300
Post- #MeToo	Male	162	39	48	49	2	300
	Female	187	31	36	28	18	300
Total		678	184	156	138	44	1,200

Table 4: Raw frequencies of positive and negative Personality Traits

			Positive	Negative	Total
Pre- #MeToo	HuffPost	Male	42	45	87
		Female	45	32	77
	Washington Examiner	Male	66	23	89
		Female	43	33	76
Post- #MeToo	HuffPost	Male	47	36	83
		Female	46	60	106
	Washington Examiner	Male	41	38	79
		Female	49	32	81
Total			379	299	678

Table 5: Raw frequencies of (pro)nominal expressions as agent, experiencer, and instrument

			Agent	Experiencer	Instrument	Total
Pre- #MeToo	HuffPost	Male	20	30	1	51
		Female	29	33	3	65
	Washington Examiner	Male	26	38	3	67
		Female	22	38	0	60
Post- #MeToo	HuffPost	Male	20	26	0	46
		Female	32	47	3	82
	Washington Examiner	Male	20	31	1	52
		Female	24	24	1	49
Total			193	267	12	472

Table 6: Raw frequencies of (pro)nominal expressions as patient, theme, and beneficiary

			Patient	Theme	Beneficiary	Total
Pre- #MeToo	HuffPost	Male	23	74	2	99
		Female	16	67	2	85
	Washington Examiner	Male	8	70	5	83
		Female	21	56	13	90
Post- #MeToo	HuffPost	Male	20	84	0	104
		Female	19	47	2	68
	Washington Examiner	Male	15	77	6	98
		Female	20	69	12	101
Total			142	544	42	728

Table 7: Raw frequencies of nominal expressions as subjects and non-subjects

			Subject	Non-subject	Total
Pre- #MeToo	HuffPost	Male	45	30	75
		Female	42	33	75
	Washington Examiner	Male	52	23	75
		Female	31	44	75
Post- #MeToo	HuffPost	Male	44	31	75
		Female	35	40	75
	Washington Examiner	Male	44	31	75
		Female	42	33	75
Total			335	265	600

Table 8: Raw frequencies of (pro)nominal expressions in main and subordinate clauses

			Main	Subordinate	Total
Pre- #MeToo	HuffPost	Male	96	54	150
		Female	87	63	150
	Washington Examiner	Male	74	76	150
		Female	65	85	150
Post- #MeToo	HuffPost	Male	82	68	150
		Female	63	87	150
	Washington Examiner	Male	91	59	150
		Female	81	69	150
Total			639	561	1,200