

Changing Narratives of Self-Improvement: Self-Help Literature Across Two Eras

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Abstract

This project explores how the narratives of personal growth in self-help literature have evolved between the 1970s and the 2010s. The goal was to identify which themes persisted across eras and how others shifted in response to broader cultural and technological changes. I hypothesized that 1970s texts would emphasize self-control and traditional success, while 2010s texts would highlight flexibility, mental well-being, and authenticity, with some shared focus on motivation and habit-building.

To test this, I selected five bestselling books from each decade and applied Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic modeling using a Colab-based notebook. The top 30 most salient terms generated for each corpus were then analyzed to derive dominant themes. The results confirmed my hypothesis: the 1970s literature was shaped by themes of moral authority, discipline, and religious framing, while the 2010s emphasized emotional resilience, personal agency, and authentic self-expression.

Despite these differences, both eras maintained a strong emphasis on growth and action, reinforcing the genre's consistent aim of empowering individuals to pursue a “better self”, even as the definition of self-improvement continues to evolve.

Introduction

Throughout history, self-help literature has provided readers with practical tools for personal growth and self-actualization. In the modern era, it remains a highly relevant genre, endorsed by influential public figures such as Bill Gates, and has evolved in form from printed books to e-books and audiobooks. While the medium has clearly modernized, this project explores whether the content of self-help literature has also transformed in response to broader technological and cultural shifts.

Focusing on the personal growth subgenre, this study investigates how dominant themes in self-help literature have changed over the past fifty years. Using topic modeling to analyze bestsellers from the 1970s and the 2010s, I aim to identify recurring patterns and emerging differences in how these texts define the pursuit of a “better self.” Do older books emphasize discipline, conformity, and external control, while newer ones prioritize authenticity, emotional well-being, and personal freedom? What themes remain consistent across both eras? And how might modernization influence our evolving understanding of self-improvement?

Methodology

For this project, I selected five bestselling self-help books in the personal growth subgenre from the 1970s and five from the 2010s. These texts were converted from PDF to plain text format and organized into two separate corpora, one for each decade. Using the Colab Notebook provided on the IPHS website, I applied Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), a topic modeling algorithm that identifies recurring word co-occurrence patterns to extract hidden themes within large bodies of text.

Preprocessing steps included lowercasing, tokenization, removal of standard and custom stopwords, lemmatization to reduce words to their base forms, and phrase detection to combine frequent two-word expressions. A dictionary and corpus were constructed for each decade. I experimented with a range of topic numbers (1 to 100) using the interactive slider, selecting 10 topics for the 1970s corpus and 12 for the 2010s corpus based on interpretability and minimal overlap in the intertopic distance maps (Figures 1 and 2).

After training the LDA models, I extracted the top 30 most salient terms for each topic and visualized them using bar charts. I then manually reviewed and grouped these salient words to identify overarching themes for each decade.

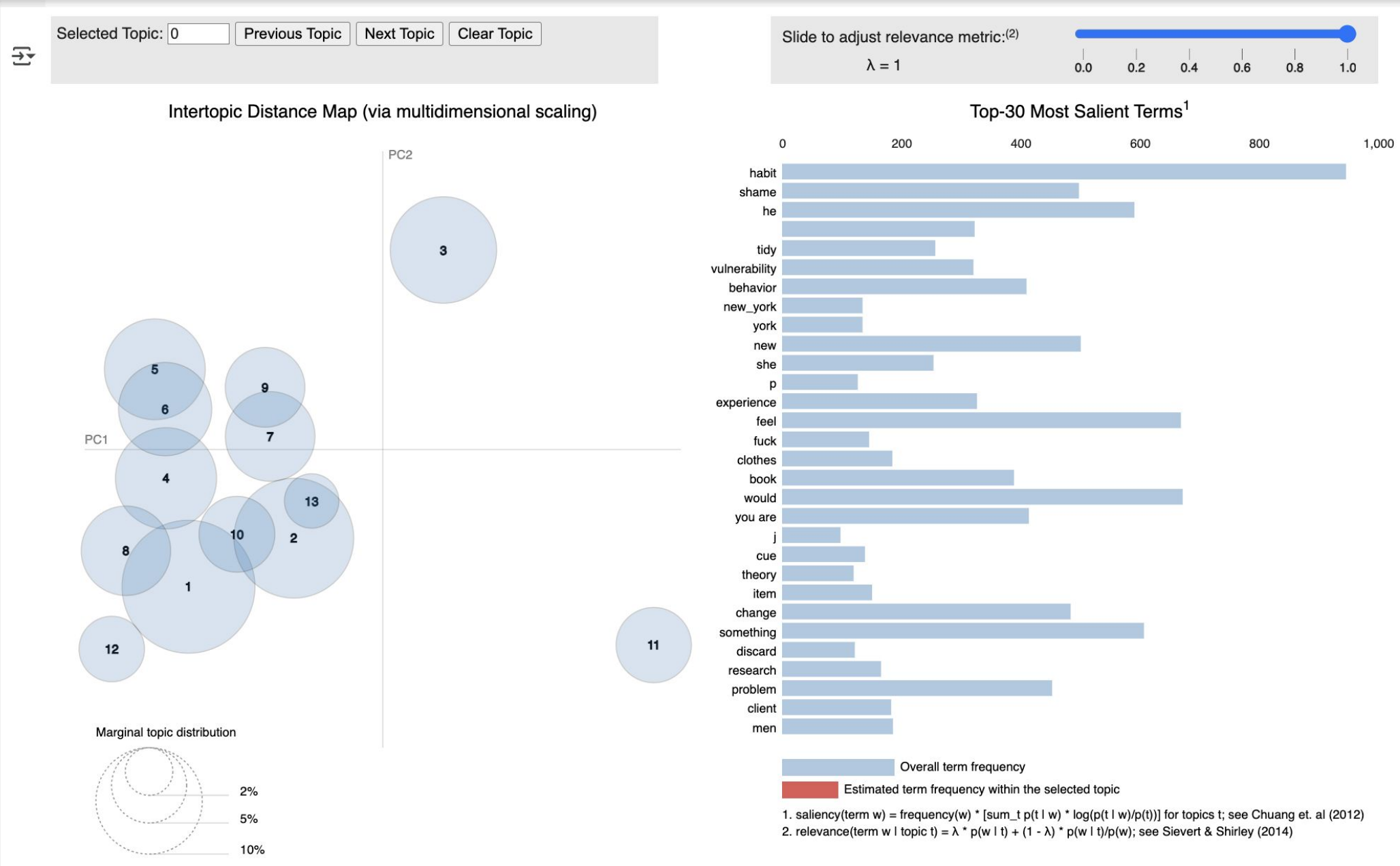


Figure 1: Intertopic Distance Map and Top-30 Most Salient Terms for 2010s corpus

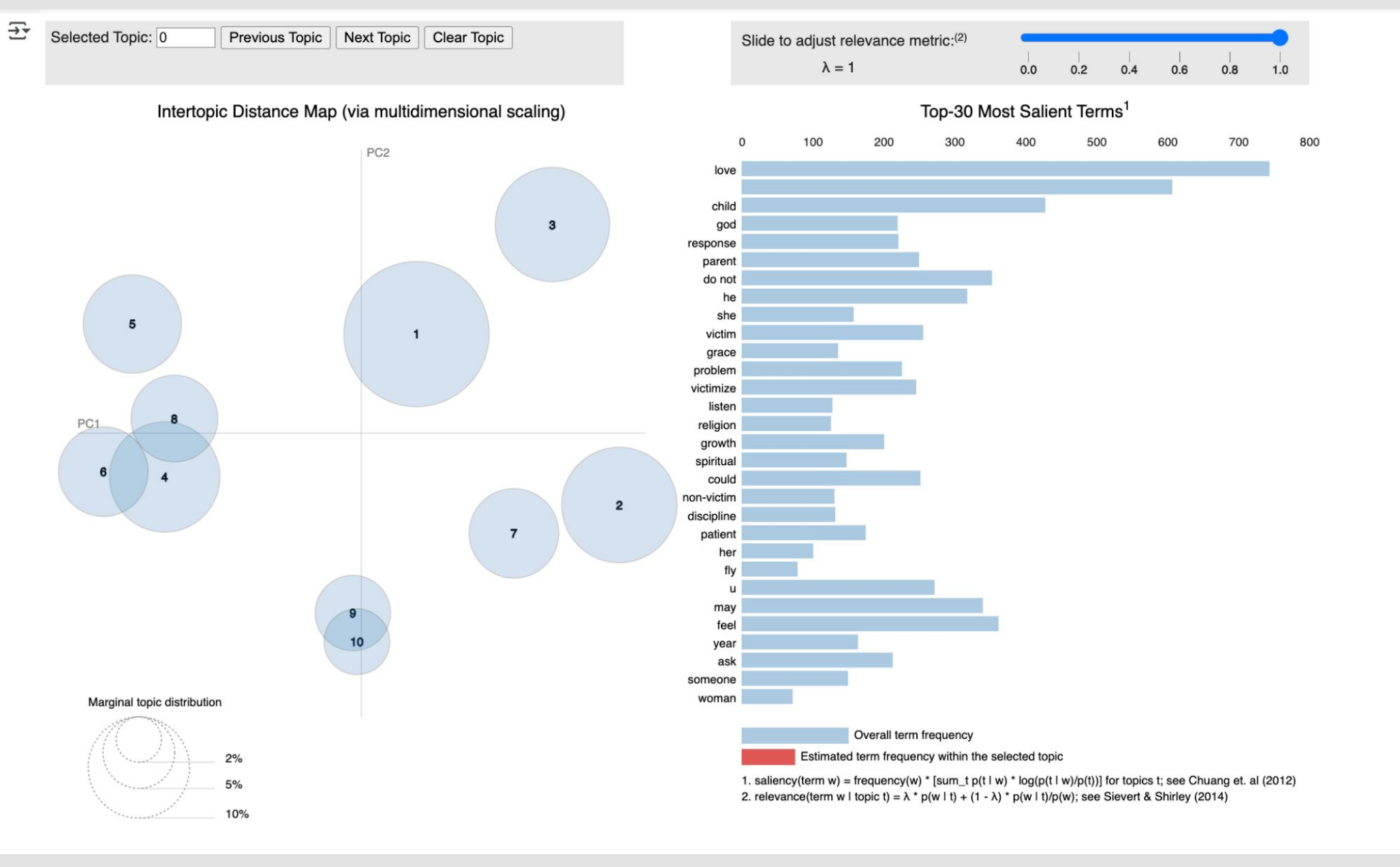


Figure 2: Intertopic Distance Map and Top-30 Most Salient Terms for 1970s corpus

Results

After training the LDA models on each corpus, I extracted the top 30 most salient terms for each decade. These terms represent the most thematically distinctive vocabulary used in 1970s and 2010s self-help literature and formed the basis for identifying major themes in each era.

The list of Top-30 Most Salient Terms for 1970s were love, child, god, response, parent, do not, he, she, victim, grace, problem, victimize, listen, religion, growth, spiritual, could, non-victim, discipline, patient, her, fly, rule, may, feel, year, ask, someone, and woman. These terms suggest themes of moral authority, religious framing, and traditional family dynamics.

The list of Top-30 Most Salient Terms for 2010s were habit, shame, he, tidy, vulnerability, behavior, new_york, york, she, new, experience, feel, fuck, clothes, book, would, you are, just, cue, theory, item, change, something, discard, research, problem, client, and men. These terms reflect themes of emotional wellness, habit-building, and authenticity.

Analysis

Based on the top 30 most salient terms identified across both corpora, several key themes emerged for each decade. In the 1970s corpus, dominant topics reflected themes of self-control and moral authority, with terms such as discipline, do not, patient, rule, and non-victim. These suggest an emphasis on mastering impulses and conforming to externally imposed behavioral norms. Another prominent theme was spiritual and family framing, indicated by words like god, grace, spiritual, religion, parent, child, victim, and victimize. This grouping points to a worldview rooted in traditional roles, religious guidance, and moral absolutes.

In contrast, the 2010s corpus was characterized by themes such as habit formation, emotional resilience, and authenticity. Words like habit, cue, change, and behavior reflect a shift toward self-designed, incremental routines over fixed rules. The emphasis on shame, vulnerability, and feel highlights the growing importance of mental wellness strategies and emotional intelligence in contemporary self-help discourse. Another noteworthy theme, authenticity and context, appears through terms like you are, fuck, experience, tidy, discard, clothes, and New York, signaling a cultural turn toward embracing individuality, emotional directness, and personalized spaces.

Notably, a shared theme of growth and action emerged across both decades. Terms such as love, growth, feel, and problem suggest a persistent focus on self-esteem, motivation, and practical change, underscoring the enduring aim of self-help literature to empower readers toward personal betterment, regardless of the cultural framework.

Conclusion

The results and analysis support my initial hypothesis: while some themes persist across both decades of self-help literature, there is a clear shift in emphasis. In the 1970s, personal growth texts were largely shaped by external authority, emphasizing moral rules, discipline, and traditional social roles. In contrast, the 2010s literature centers on internal agency, personalized habit-building, emotional resilience, and authentic self-expression.

This thematic evolution reflects broader cultural and technological shifts, from New Age spirituality and family-centered guidance to the rise of the quantified-self movement, digital minimalism, and mental health awareness. One theme that remains consistent across eras is growth and action, as both decades emphasize practical change and motivation, signaled by shared terms such as love, growth, feel, and problem.

Importantly, the shift from externally imposed behavioral standards to internally crafted routines and emotional strategies parallels the changing format and delivery of self-help content, from print books to e-books, audiobooks, and digital wellness tools. Despite these transformations, a persistent core remains: the self-help genre continues to empower readers in their pursuit of a “better self.”

Recommendations

Cross Cultural Analysis inspired by this study would be really interesting, where self-help literature in different languages and cultural contexts is studied to understand how local values shape personal-growth narratives, and how it differs across cultures and how it does not. Also, expanding the data beyond fifty years or two decades would be useful in getting a more concrete understanding and generalizability of these trends.

References

Five self-help bestsellers on personal growth subgenre from 1970s and five from 2010s were used for this project . LDA Colab Notebook provided in IPHS website was used to perform topic modeling. Books used for 1970s were Pulling Your Own Strings (Wayne W. Dyer, 1978), The Road Less Traveled (M. Scott Peck, 1978) ,How to Stop Worrying and Start Living (Dale Carnegie, ‘70s), Your Erroneous Zones (Wayne W. Dyer, 1976), and Illusions: The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah (Richard Bach, 1977) Books used for 2010s were Atomic Habits (James Clear, 2018), The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck (Mark Manson, 2016), 12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos (Jordan B. Peterson, 2018), The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up (Marie Kondo, 2011–14 US release), and Daring Greatly (Brené Brown, 2012) [LDA Colab Notebook](#) & ChatGPT

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