

From Inclusion to Contention: Analyzing DEI and “Woke” Narratives on Reddit

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Abstract. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) policies have recently become extremely controversial, with many companies vowing to end their support. This has led to mixed reactions online. This was intensified by the ongoing “woke” vs “anti-woke” culture war. Both groups defend and consume content that aligns with their ideologies. In this context, understanding the discourse surrounding these issues online is essential, as such movements have the potential to lead to real-world harm. For this reason, we conduct a large-scale study around the DEI and “woke” discussion on the Reddit platform from 2020-2024, finding that it has grown significantly during the studied period, spreading across a large variety of seemingly unrelated topics. Finally, we note that the discourse has become increasingly polarized, with a growing trend of toxicity and negative sentiments, coupled with changes in the meaning of the terms “woke” and DEI on the platform. These findings have important implications for public policy related to social issues.

Keywords: Culture War, Woke, Social Media, Toxicity, Topic Analysis

1 Introduction

Over the past decade, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) policies have been implemented with the goal of ensuring equal opportunities, fostering unbiased organizational practices, and cultivating a sense of belonging within institutions [17]. Despite evidence suggesting that such policies can be beneficial to overall company performance and innovation [13], DEI has become a highly controversial topic. The adoption of such policies has faced resistance from members of socially advantaged groups, who may perceive them as threatening their access to opportunities or being forced to adapt to unfamiliar values and expectations [15, 29].

This kind of discourse has closely intertwined with the rise of the anti-“woke” movement, which intensified during the lead-up to the 2024 U.S. Presidential

Election. DEI initiatives became prominent targets of Donald Trump’s anti-‘woke’ stance during and after his campaign⁴.

Originally a slang term for awareness of social injustice, “woke” has since been co-opted as a catch-all for progressive or leftist ideologies, including DEI [34]. The polarization between “woke” and anti-“woke” ideologies has contributed to what many describe as a *culture war* [4, 8, 32], marked by ideological clashes, incivility, and a deepening “us-versus-them” mentality.

These dynamics are particularly visible on social media platforms. Conspiracy theories such as the so-called “woke agenda” have proliferated across different domains (e.g., video games [20]), often fueling radicalization, harassment, and hate speech. Reddit plays a central role in this ecosystem. Its support for long-form posts, structured subreddit communities, and community-driven moderation enables close observation of how controversial discussions evolve organically over time. Moreover, Reddit has shown real-world influence: the 2021 U.S. Capitol invasion was, partially, organized through alt-right Reddit communities [22]. Given its significance, it is essential to investigate not only *what* is discussed on Reddit, but also *how* it is discussed, especially when it comes to politically charged terms like “woke” and “DEI”.

In light of these developments, this paper examines how the meanings and uses of terms like “woke” and “DEI” have changed over time on Reddit, and what these shifts reveal about broader social and political trends. In particular, “woke” appears to have shifted in meaning around 2020, from promoting ideas of social justice and equality to becoming a pejorative label associated with toxic discourse and political radicalization [30]. Reddit serves as a compelling case study for analyzing this transformation, given its well-documented role in hosting and fostering radical and conspiratorial communities [19].

To that end, this paper explores the evolution of “woke” and DEI-related discourse on Reddit from 2020 to 2024. In particular, we address the following research questions:

- **RQ1:** How was the discourse around DEI policies and “woke” amplified and transformed over time?
- **RQ2:** To what extent has the tone around the DEI and woke discussion changed over time on Reddit?
- **RQ3:** What kinds of topics and themes are associated with DEI and “woke” on Reddit?

This paper contributes to ongoing debates about the social-political impact of online platforms. It provides empirical evidence on how online discourse around social justice, specifically DEI and “woke”, has evolved in both tone and toxicity. We show how digital spaces can influence, sometimes distort, and even radicalize these conversations. These findings have important implications for content moderation, platform governance, and the development of public policies that address online radicalization and foster healthier discussions about social issues.

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/mar/26/donald-trump-war-on-woke-science-diversity>

2 Related Work

2.1 Computational Approaches to Discourse Analysis

Recent methodological advances have enabled increasingly sophisticated analyses of large-scale social media discourse. Topic modeling approaches [3] have long been applied to identify thematic patterns in discussions of controversial social issues. More recently, neural network-based methods, such as BERTopic[11] and automatic hate speech detection techniques [31], have enabled more nuanced semantic analyses of the short, context-dependent texts typical of social media platforms. These techniques allow researchers to capture subtle shifts in meaning and tone over time.

By leveraging such tools, researchers have tackled challenging problems in computational social science. For instance, Locatelli *et al.* [21] identified highly politicized topics on YouTube, while Magno *et al.* [23] used word embeddings to infer political and social biases in online behavior, showing strong correlations between online discourse and offline cultural values such as religiosity.

These works highlight the utility of computational methods for tracking the evolution of politically charged language, around topics like DEI and “woke”, particularly on platforms like Reddit, where decentralized moderation leads to highly heterogeneous discourse norms across communities.

2.2 Radicalization on Social Media

Social media ecosystems often foster ideological polarization through phenomena such as echo chambers [5] and filter bubbles [6], which reinforce in-group narratives. This kind of environment can contribute to a gradual process of radicalization, as observed by Ribeiro *et al.* [28] on YouTube, where recommendation systems tend to push users toward increasingly extreme content. On Reddit, Klein *et al.* [19] show that changes in language use can serve as early indicators of conspiratorial thinking and ideological shifts. These shifts are often accompanied by semantic shifts, where users progressively adopt and reshape the meanings of specific terms to fit emergent ideologies and group identities.

For example, Assenmacher *et al.* [2] show how the term “bot” evolves from referring to an AI or automated system to being associated with trolls or political actors, and eventually becomes a dehumanizing label used as an insult. A similar shift can be observed in the terms related to DEI and “woke” discourses, which have gradually evolved from promoting public good to becoming focal points in an ongoing culture war, where opposing viewpoints are often de-legitimized [4].

Despite growing attention to these trends in public discourse, including extensive media coverage in the U.S. and around the world, few studies have focused specifically on tracing how the meanings of DEI and “woke” have changed over time in large-scale social media data. One exception is Gomez *et al.*[10], who show how terms like “woke” and “cancel” have become mainstays for criticizing ads that fail to meet user expectations. Another example is Letzi *et al.* [20],

who present a case study of the *r/thelastofus2* subreddit, evidencing how political agendas and marketing failures can radicalize online communities, especially when users perceive their values as under threat, such as the “war on woke”. They report evidence of harassment and hate speech as outcomes of this radicalization.

Our work builds on and extends these previous studies by analyzing Reddit as a whole, rather than focusing on isolated communities or specific events. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first large-scale study to investigate the broader dynamics of DEI and “woke” discourses across Reddit platform.

3 Methodology

This section describes our dataset and the methods used to analyze the data.

3.1 Reddit Data

We collected all Reddit comments posted between 2020 and 2024 using the Pushshift Data Dumps, available via Academic Torrents [33]. To identify content relevant to our study, we applied a keyword-based filter to extract all comments containing the terms “Woke” or “DEI”. Since these terms can appear in contexts unrelated to the culture wars or political debates—e.g., *dei* is common in Italian, Portuguese, and Latin, and *woke* is frequently used as a verb (e.g., “woke up”)—we implemented two additional filtering steps. First, we used a fastText language classifier [18], a tool for identifying the language of text, to ensure that only English-language comments were retained. Next, we employed part-of-speech (POS) tagging [12] to filter out instances where “woke” was used as a verb (e.g., ‘woke up’). These filtering steps aimed to isolate the use of these terms in the cultural and political sense relevant for our analysis. For each selected comment, we also collected the associated Reddit post.

Our final dataset comprises approximately 1.47 million comments containing the term “woke” and over 400,000 containing “DEI”. About 10,000 comments contain both terms. These comments were posted by 675,000 and 211,000 unique users, across 890,188 and 202,918 unique Reddit posts, respectively, spanning 30,115 subreddits.

3.2 Semantic Shift of Terms Over Time

Word embeddings capture semantic relationships by modeling the proximity between terms in a vector space. Inspired by Garg *et al.* work [9], we track the evolution of the meanings of “DEI” and “woke” to identify when these terms began acquiring more politicized or controversial connotations. For that, we trained a separate Word2Vec model for each semester of data using Gensim’s implementation⁵, with the CBOW architecture and negative sampling. For each period, we retrieved the top terms closest to “DEI” and “woke” using cosine similarity.

⁵ <https://radimrehurek.com/gensim/models/word2vec.html>

To improve robustness, we trained five models per time slice with different random seeds and only retained words consistently appearing across all five models, following the procedure described in [2].

3.3 Sentiment and Toxicity Analysis

To assess how “DEI” and “woke” are emotionally and morally framed, we analyzed both sentiment (i.e., positive or negative) and the presence of hate or discriminatory language (i.e., toxicity). For sentiment analysis, we employed VADER [14], a rule-based model optimized for social media texts. For toxicity detection, we applied a RoBERTa model fine-tuned for multiclass hate speech classification [1], which assigns each comment to one of the following classes: sexism, racism, disability, sexual orientation, religion, other, or not hate⁶.

3.4 Topic Modeling with BERTopic

To uncover the main themes associated with “DEI” and “woke” on Reddit, we applied topic modeling using BERTopic [11], which combines transformer-based embeddings with clustering techniques to generate interpretable topics.

We first encoded each comment using Sentence-BERT [27]. Sentence-BERT is a model designed to capture semantic content in short texts, making it particularly effective for analyzing Reddit comments. We then applied UMAP for dimensionality reduction, followed by HDBSCAN to cluster the resulting embeddings into semantically coherent groups.

4 Reddit Discussions of “DEI” and “Woke”: Key Trends

In this section, we present the main findings of our analysis of Reddit discussions involving the terms “DEI” and “woke” between 2020 and 2024. We first describe the volume and distribution of relevant comments in the broader context of Reddit activity, followed by an analysis of the terms’ semantic evolution, sentiment trends, and dominant conversation topics.

4.1 Presence of “DEI” and “Woke”

Reddit has experienced substantial growth in recent years, reporting 213 million daily users in 2022 and reaching 379 million by the end of 2024. In 2023, Reddit users generated 2.8 billion comments across 469 million posts⁷. This expansion has amplified discussions around “woke” and “DEI”, both of which have gained increasing visibility since 2020.

Figure 1 illustrates the growth in the frequency of these terms in Reddit comments over time. Both have seen a significant rise in usage, with mentions

⁶ <https://huggingface.co/cardiffnlp/twitter-roberta-base-hate-multiclass-latest>

⁷ <https://backlinko.com/reddit-users>

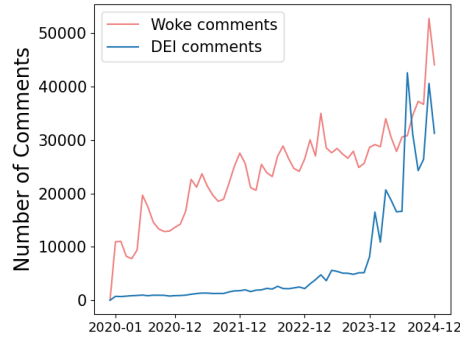


Fig. 1: Frequency of “woke” and “DEI” in Reddit comments from 2020 to 2024.

Rank, Subreddit, Term frequency								
1	r/KotakuInAction	37,803	6	r/Gamingcirclejerk	25,373	11	r/conspiracy	14,553
2	r/politics	33,604	7	r/facepalm	24,174	12	r/JoeRogan	13,582
3	r/AskReddit	33,384	8	r/neoliberal	22,863	13	r/JordanPeterson	13,488
4	r/Conservative	26,943	9	r/stupidpol	21,528	14	r/Asmongold	12,751
5	r/PoliticalCompassMemes	26,194	10	r/WhitePeopleTwitter	20,903	15	r/samharris	12,259

Table 1: Top 15 subreddits by number of comments mentioning “woke” or “DEI”.

of “DEI” more than quadrupling from early 2023 to the end of 2024. Albeit less dramatic, usage of “woke” has also significantly increased, particularly during 2024. This surge may be partially attributed to the anti-DEI discourse promoted during Donald Trump’s campaign [16]. Importantly, this trend cannot be explained solely by Reddit’s overall growth, as the total number of comments posted annually has remained relatively stable⁷.

Table 1 presents the 15 subreddits with the highest number of comments mentioning either “woke” or “DEI”. Together, these communities account for approximately 18% of all such comments. Although many of the subreddits are difficult to categorize under a single theme, most focus on gaming, political discussions, political memes, or political and cultural figures. A few subreddits present clear ideological leanings, for instance, *r/Conservative* and *r/JoeRogan* align with right-wing perspectives, whereas *r/stupidpol* and *r/Gamingcirclejerk* tend to reflect left-leaning or liberal viewpoints. Others, such as *r/AskReddit*, *r/politics*, and *r/PoliticalCompassMemes*, have more ideologically diverse or ambiguous user bases, requiring closer contextual interpretation. This distribution suggests that conversations about “woke” and “DEI” are not confined to ideologically homogeneous spaces, but are instead dispersed across a wide range of Reddit communities.

Period	Words
2020-01 – 2020-06	really, literally, work, also, one, way, something, think, another, things, like, newsworld, still, actually, even
2020-07 – 2020-12	one, thing, also, really, like, actually, everything, probably, gt, different, still, never, something, good , always
2021-01 – 2021-06	really, think, company, manager, good , always, team, school, actually, definitely, sometimes, one, ok, thing, bad
2021-07 – 2021-12	diversity , one, maybe, really, anyway, actual, actually, also, company, larger, whole, hr, place, fair , well
2022-01 – 2022-06	diversity , actually, company, one, really, good , also, new, basically, shitty , workplace, usually, magnum, hr, performative
2022-07 – 2022-12	diversity , really, hr, also, company, work, honestly, woke , salary, performative , university, specific, leadership, rxx, however
2023-01 – 2023-06	diversity , hr, mandatory, antiracism , leadership, inclusivity , bloated , woke , wasteful , ideological, outreach, actually, company, diverse , marketing
2023-07 – 2023-12	diversity , hr, woke , actually, implemented, pr , diverse , company, performative , hiring, corporate, exclusionary , equity , corporations, companies
2024-01 – 2024-06	diversity , inclusivity , esg, corporate, woke , defection, sbi , superfluous , hr, dinapoli, aa, reaffirms, wokeness , inclusion , disney
2024-07 – 2024-12	diversity , inclusivity , woke , rbl, sbi , sweetbabyinc , mcdaniels, tokenism , performative , wokeness , grady, esg, natalism, theee, lspd

Table 2: Top 15 words closest to “DEI” in the embedding space over time (2020-2024). Over the years, an increasing number of these terms reflect negative or culture war-related connotations⁸ (highlighted in red), while the presence of positive or descriptive associations (in blue) remains relatively stable. Notably, the term “woke” emerges as semantically close to “DEI” in the second half of 2022, making a shift in the discourse as the two terms become increasingly mixed.

4.2 Semantic Evolution of “Woke” and “DEI”

To explore how the meanings of the terms “DEI” and “woke” evolved over time on Reddit, we analyzed their semantic contexts using word embeddings trained on data from each semester between 2020 and 2024. Table 2 shows the top 15 terms closest to “DEI” in the embedding space for each period. Words in blue are classified as descriptive or positive, while those in red are negative or associated with criticism and polarization.

In the early stages (2020–2021), the terms surrounding “DEI” were largely generic or neutral—words like *really*, *also*, *one*, and *thing* dominated, suggesting an ambiguous or emotionally neutral context. Starting in mid-2021, we observe the emergence of terms more explicitly linked to workplace settings, such as *company*, *manager*, *hr*, and *team*. This indicates that “DEI” discussions increasingly occurred in professional or organizational contexts. By early 2022, a noticeable shift emerges: terms with negative or culture war-related connotations, like *performative*, *shitty*, and eventually *woke* itself, begin to appear. From this point on, “woke” becomes one of the terms most closely associated with “DEI”, revealing a convergence likely shaped by the growing political and cultural polarization.

This trend intensifies through 2023 and 2024, with increasingly critical terms such as *bloated*, *wasteful*, *superfluous*, *tokenism*, and *exclusionary* becoming more frequent. However, positive associations like *diversity*, *inclusivity*, and *equity* persist, revealing a semantic tension in which “DEI” is simultaneously framed in idealistic and critical terms.

A similar trend is visible for the term “woke”, as shown in Table 3. However, unlike “DEI”, “woke” has been consistently associated with negative and critical terms since 2020, including *crazy* and *annoying*. Still, the broader semantic field around “woke” has shifted in meaningfully over time. In fact, during 2020, although predominantly negative, the associated terms reflect critiques of *cancel culture* [25] and the so-called “Social Justice Warriors” [26], with less direct political engagement. Terms like *insufferable*, *annoying*, and *cancel* signal early cultural criticisms that align with broader debates about political correctness. These critiques, however, remain inherently political, reflecting societal divisions and ideological fault lines [35].

From 2021 onward, and more clearly throughout 2022, the semantic field surrounding “woke” incorporates more politically charged terms. A noticeable shift begins mid-2021, with terms like *leftist* and *wokescold* gaining prominence, indicating the growing politicization of “woke”. By this stage, the term is used not only pejoratively, but also as a marker in ideological debates. This trend intensifies from late 2022 through 2024, with the emergence of both left-leaning labels (e.g., *progressive*, *lib*, *leftist*) and right-leaning ones (e.g., *antiwoke*, *maga*, *rightwing*). The coexistence of these opposing labels suggests that “woke” has become a central term in polarized political discussions, especially within the culture war. In the most recent period (2024-01 to 2024-06), terms like *racist*

⁸ Sweetbabyinc or sbi is a Game narrative studio targeted by anti-woke groups due to their DEI practices: <https://aftermath.site/sweet-baby-detected-conspiracy-theory-steam>

Period	Words
2020-01 – 2020-06	pc, sjw, insufferable, annoying, progressive , popular, cancel, trendy, pretentious, hardcore, dumb, obnoxious, pious, cringy, retarded
2020-07 – 2020-12	pc, sjw, progressive , regressive, crazy, cancel, annoying, irritating, hysterical, pretentious, hypocritical, lefty , wokie, retarded, popular
2021-01 – 2021-06	pc, sjw, progressive , cancel, radical, annoying, braindead, leftist , crazy, gullible, hysterical, rightoid , performative, hypocritical, wokescold
2021-07 – 2021-12	pc, sjw, progressive , cancel, leftist , crazy, insufferable, obnoxious, butthurt, liberal , radlib , trendy, vaxer, braindead, maga
2022-01 – 2022-06	pc, sjw, leftist , progressive , reactionary, radical, cancel, annoying, hysterical, pandering, lib , liberal , sjws, mainstream, nowadays
2022-07 – 2022-12	pc, sjw, progressive , leftist , antiwoke , rightwing , pretentious, stupid, annoying, cancel, reactionary, liberal , radical, crazy, mainstream
2023-01 – 2023-06	pc, sjw, progressive , liberal , wokeness, leftist , antiwoke , radical, cancel, nowadays, stupid, reactionary, chickenshit, regressive, dumb
2023-07 – 2023-12	pc, sjw, leftist , progressive , liberal , wokeness, pandering, braindead, radical, stupid, reactionary, nowadays, reeee, crazy, cancel
2024-01 – 2024-06	sjw, progressive , wokeness, pc, antiwoke , leftist , reactionary, stupid, liberal , radical, dei , annoying, wokism, cancel, racist
2024-07 – 2024-12	sjw, pc, wokeness, dei , progressive , stupid, vaxxer, antiwoke , crazy, semitic, vaxxers, natalism, feminazi, annoying, vaxx

Table 3: Top 15 words closest to “woke” in the embedding space over time (2020-2024). Early associations (2020) reveal a consistent link to negative and critical terms, suggesting cultural critique related to ‘cancel culture’ and the ‘social justice warriors’ (SJWs). As time progressed, the number of political terms increased (left-leaning terms highlighted in blue, right-leaning in red), suggesting the growing politicization of “wokeness”.

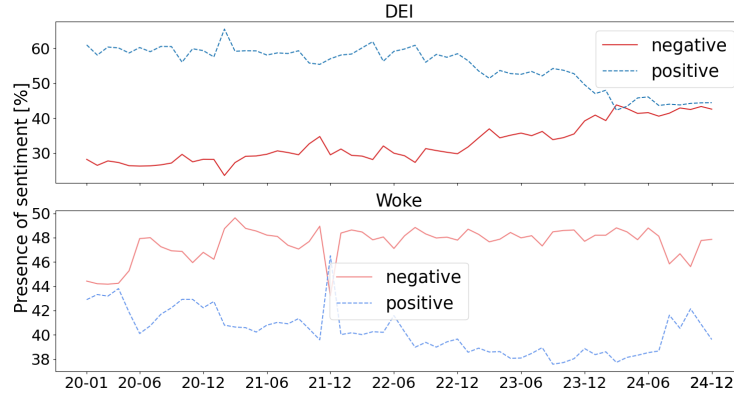


Fig. 2: Sentiment presence for “woke” and “DEI” comments over time.

emerge among the closest associations, reflecting intensified debates on racial justice and the growing conflation of “woke” discourse with accusations of racism or performative activism [24].

Interestingly, the top terms associated with both “woke” and “DEI” reveal the multifaceted and diffuse nature of the culture war discourse. This discourse spans a range of seemingly unrelated topics from video games (*sweetbabyinc*) to politics (*liberal*, *rightwing*), feminism (*feminazi*), racism (*racist*), religion (*semitic*), and public health (*vaxxer*). Understanding how this discourse is structured is crucial for identifying and mitigating the potential harms it may generate. Moreover, the wide thematic range of these associations indicates that the culture war is no longer confined to specific online niches, but has become pervasive across the entire platform, as further evidenced by the high number of unique subreddits where these terms appear (§3.1).

These analyses suggest that while “DEI” initially appeared in more neutral or administrative contexts, and “woke” once referred to social awareness, both terms have gradually acquired more ideological and critical meanings. This semantic shift reflects broader social and political tensions present in online discussions.

4.3 Emotions and Hostility in Reddit Discussions

Alongside the semantic analysis, trends in sentiment and hostility provide valuable insights into how “woke” and “DEI” are socially perceived. Figure 2 shows the evolution of sentiment in comments mentioning these terms. As early as 2020, “DEI” was predominantly associated with positive sentiment, while “woke” already carried negative connotations. Over time, positive sentiment declined for both terms. By 2024, “DEI” had approached neutrality, while “woke” had become increasingly negatively charged.

Hostility toward both terms follows a similar trajectory. Figure 3 shows the presence of different types of hate speech in comments. On average, hateful content accounts for about 1% of all comments analyzed per month. For “DEI”,

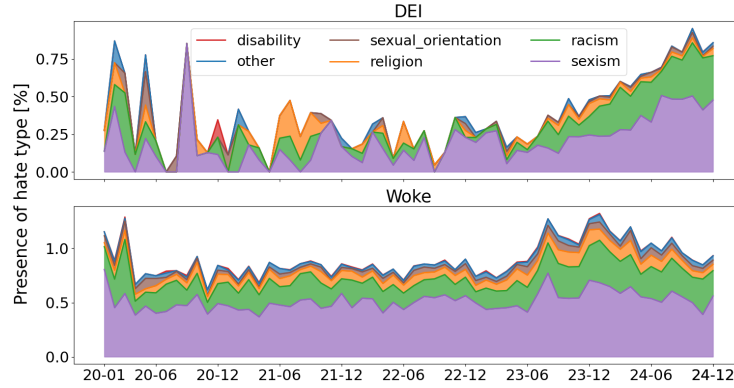


Fig. 3: Types of hate speech present in “woke” and “DEI” comments over time.

the rise in hostility aligns with the growth in comment volume and negative sentiment. A spike in sexist language in the second half of 2020 stands out and may be related to changes in policies or public criticism of DEI initiatives, potentially influenced by statements from political figures like Donald Trump during his administration⁹.

Toxicity in discussions surrounding “woke” reflects overall sentiment trends, starting at already high levels and continuing to rise over time. For both terms, hostile comments are primarily concentrated in two categories: sexism and racism. This suggests that discussions involving these terms are often embedded in broader debates around identity politics and social justice.

These patterns complement the semantic shifts described in §4.2. In particular, the decline in positive sentiment toward “DEI” corresponds with its transformation into a controversial and even vilified concept, reaching peak hostility in 2024. In contrast, “woke” has maintained mostly negative sentiment since 2020, with growing opposition over time. Combined with previous analyses of co-occurring terms and contexts, these findings suggest that “woke” and “DEI” have increasingly been weaponized, not just as descriptive terms, but as emotionally and ideologically charged labels used to discredit individuals, actions, or institutions.

4.4 Key Themes in “Woke” and “DEI” Debates

As seen in §4.1, discussions around “DEI” and “woke” are widespread on Reddit and span multiple ideological perspectives. Topic analysis helps identify the dominant themes associated with these terms, allowing us to quantify their diversity and breadth of usage. Based on semantic similarity, we manually grouped related topics into “semantic bubbles” that aggregate the overall meanings of thematically connected clusters. Figures 4a and 4b show reduced embeddings generated

⁹ <https://www.npr.org/2020/09/17/914127266>

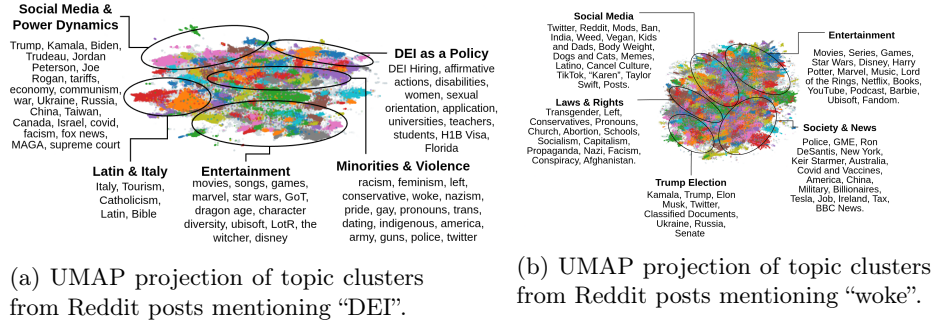


Fig. 4: UMAP projection of Reddit topic clusters for “DEI” and “woke”.

by BERTopic, using posts that mention “DEI” and “woke”, respectively. A total of 164 topics were identified for “DEI” and 301 for “woke”.

In the “DEI” figure, a group of topics in the lower-left corner relates to Latin and Italy contexts, illustrating how the term “DEI” may appear in other languages or in unrelated religious discourses. Nearby, discussions about tourism in Italy also emerge. This is the only data segment without any political connotation, and it represents a small portion of our dataset (approximately 5%).

The remaining clusters highlight the diverse environments where “DEI” discourse permeates. Notably, the original use of “DEI” to denote inclusion-focused hiring policies appears in the top-right cluster. More recent topics, aligned with the semantic shifts discussed in §4.2, are reflected in other areas. For instance, the Entertainment cluster captures 2024 trends that frame “DEI” negatively in video games and television. One highlighted case is *Dragon Age: The Veilguard*, which faced criticism from the gaming community, accusing the game of being “woke” and overly “DEI”¹⁰. This reinforces previous findings that “DEI” has become a subclass of “woke” and often serves as a negative label. This intercession in the Entertainment domain is also visible in the “woke” clusters, with overlapping references to companies such as Ubisoft and Marvel.

The “woke” clusters follow a pattern similar to those observed for “DEI”, with discussions centered on entertainment, social media, and politics, highlighting how deeply embedded the term has become in public discourse. Political topics are consistent across both terms, with frequent mentions of figures like Trump, Kamala Harris, and Elon Musk, reflecting how “woke” and “DEI” have both acquired political connotations. However, discussions involving “woke” cover a wider range of specific issues, such as *Roe v. Wade* and the *Joe Rogan* podcast. This is likely due to the term’s broader and longer-standing usage on the platform.

¹⁰ <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/events/dragon-age-the-veilguard-reviews-controversy>

Additionally, near the center of Figure 4b, we observe instances of “woke” used as a verb rather than an adjective, which falls outside the scope of our analysis. This represents a small portion of noise in our dataset (less than 1%).

5 Conclusion

During the 2024 American election, the culture war surrounding “DEI” policies and the “woke”/ anti-“woke” movements were brought to the forefront, fueled by then-candidate and now President Trump’s vows to end “wokeness”, in contrast to the more favorable views by Biden and Kamala Harris. This issue served as yet another point of division between Republicans and Democrats. However, it did not emerge from nowhere, as the topic had already been gaining traction on social media, influencing a wide range of communities, from those centered on politics to those focused on memes.

To better understand how the “woke” culture war has taken shape, we analyzed discussions around “woke” and “DEI” on Reddit from 2020 to 2024. We found that mentions of these terms increased rapidly over the years, becoming two and five times more frequent by the end of the period, respectively, far surpassing Reddit’s overall growth. Furthermore, the tone of the discourse has shifted, with both terms increasingly associated with negative and political connotations, especially after 2022. This shift was accompanied by a rise in negativity and toxicity – particularly racism and sexism – suggesting that these topics have become more controversial and polarized. Our findings highlight some of the potential harms of online discussions as they become politicized.

Gaming subreddits offer a compelling example of how culture wars can emerge in seemingly non-political spaces. Echoing the *Gamergate* scandal [7], discussions across various subreddits reveal a persistent tug-of-war between groups resistant to change and those advocating for greater inclusion. With each new game perceived as “woke” or anti-“woke”, design choices are often met with criticism, sometimes grounded, but frequently radicalized, as seen by the controversies surrounding “The Last of Us 2” [20] and, more recently, “Dragon Age: The Veilguard”.

Although we explored the broad landscape of the “woke” culture war on Reddit, this work focuses mostly on the linguistic and discursive aspects of the phenomenon. Understanding how users begin engaging in such debates and which communities are more prone to radicalization remain important directions for future research.

Limitations. While our study provides a analysis of DEI and “woke” discourse on Reddit, there are some limitations that must be acknowledged. Our reliance on keywords, “DEI” and “woke”, for data collection risks both over- and under-inclusion. While we attempt to mitigate some of that by using part-of-speech tagging to reduce noise, it is still possible that relevant content was omitted or that non-political uses were included, especially in edge cases. By focusing on Reddit, we neglect to explore the discourse on other platforms which could be significantly different depending on demographic factors, moderation, etc.

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