
Land of woke and glory? The conceptualisation and framing of "wokeness" in UK media and public discourses.

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Land of Woke and Glory?:
the conceptualisation and
framing of 'wokeness' in
UK media and public
discourses.

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A brief history of wokeness?

Origins of wokeness

To be a socially conscious Black American
Marcus Garvey (1923), Leadbelly (1938): activism
William Melvin Kelley (1962): “if you’re woke you dig it”
2014: BLM, following murder of Michael Brown - “stay woke”
Google Trends: surge in USA searches since 2014, UK since 2019

Wokeness today

Prime ministerial race 2022: all candidates
War on wokeness: shows, books, films, news channels
Centre for Policy Studies (2021): third most concerning ideology, > homophobia
YouGov (2021) 12% of the UK identify as woke, but 60% do not know what it means
What is wokeness?

Current use

Positive

• Crucial for pedagogy (Babulski, 2020)

• Aspirational: not achieved (Whiteout, 2018)

• Essential part of holding others to account despite the online discourse (Atkins, 2020)

Negative

• Tenet of anti-racist religion (McWhorter, 2021)

• Basking in work being “complete” (Boyce, 2019)

• ‘Madness’ taking over educational institutions (Peterson, 2021)

• Weapon to silence/shame people into staying quiet on issues (Mwansa, 2022)

• Rhetorical style, upholds white power structures (Zavattaro & Bearfield, 2022)
The present study

Land of woke and glory?

• How is wokeness conceptualised by the press and public?

Research questions:
1. How is the concept produced? (press)
2. How is the concept reproduced? (social media)
3. How is the concept maintained? (general public survey)

Method
• Press analysis: items using the term in May 2022
• Social media analysis: subset from Twitter scrape in May 2022
• Survey: open/closed questions, distributed to the general public
  What is wokeness, what are woke behaviours/institutions? Etc.

Sample
• Newspaper articles
• 1200 tweets (300 from 4 different weeks)
• 116 participants who did the survey
Press analysis

Method

- Lexis library ‘news’ articles
- May 2022, search term: woke
- Order from oldest to newest
- Every tenth article download
- Remove any duplicates
- Filter for relevance

Sample

- Final yield: 64 articles
- From regional/national newspapers

Each analysed for:

1. Specific term used
2. Meaning ascribed to the term
3. General context of the article

Meaning of ‘woke’ in news articles

- anti-comedy
- left politics
- anti-british
- cancel culture
- insult
- anti-racist
- pro-environment
- pro-trans rights
- feminist
- moral absolutism
- identity label
- diversity/multiculturalism
Press analysis

Summary of use

• Generally used more by right-leaning press

• Of all variants, ‘woke’ remains the most used

• Its use is generally derogatory—especially in right-leaning media

• Byword for left-wing politics and characteristics perceived to be related to left-wing politics including:
  ➢ Feminism/gender identity
  ➢ Environmental activism
  ➢ Anti-racism
  ➢ Cancel culture

• In some instances, left-wing political tenets grouped together as ‘woke’ are framed as anti-British thus raising further questions about perceived national identity, e.g., Brexit vs. wokeness.
Anger over companies pandering to woke agenda

Viewed as a marketing ploy and judged as insincere

Refusal to comply or fund such attempts. Boycott woke.

Get woke, go broke

Pleasure at seeing companies that appear to attempt this fail.

Brand/ Company no longer reflects my values and morals.

Stay woke

Used positively: compassion and embracing diversity

LGBTQIA+, CRT, women, teaching ‘real’ history.

If ‘X’ means woke, then I must be woke

Having to make a stand to make a difference

Used ironically: auto-antonym

Self-regarded as enlightened
Twitter analysis

The weak woke

- Misguided and naive. Brainwashed by ‘agenda’.
- Bleeding heart liberal hippies
- Idiot children who can’t even define ‘woman’: diversity over logic.
- Shallow/hollow attempts for approval of others

The woke agenda/ anti-woke agenda

- Straw man arguments that no one asked for.
- Feminism, BLM: divisive/contradictory
- Non-defined liberal legacy media
- Agenda of creating and imposing culture
- Active attempt to subjugate vs weak ignorance/stupidity
- Cancel culture to control what people say and think
Survey

Findings

Wokeness:
  • I am woke (M = 3.2, SD = 1.3)
  • I would openly identify as woke (M = 2.6, SD = 1.3)
  • I do not think my society is woke enough (M = 3.1, SD = 1.4)
  • Total (M = 8.9, SD = 3.6)

Anti-wokeness:
  • I am anti-woke (M = 2.1, SD = 1.2)
  • I would openly identify as anti-woke (M = 2, SD = 1.2)
  • I think my society has gotten too woke (M = 2.6, SD = 1.4)
  • Total (M = 6.8, SD = 3.6)

Patterns:
  • No significant gender or age diffs p > .05
  • More woke vs. anti-woke t(115) = 3.43, p < .001
  • Less likely to openly identify by label: both sides
    • Wokeness diff: t(115) = 6.40, p > .05
    • Anti-woke diff: t(115) = 3.02, P < .004 - sig

Identification with anti-woke < strong disagreement with woke: apathy?
Survey

Themes

Woke as a positive trait
The aware woke

Woke as a non-existent or neutral trait

The privileged woke
The superficial woke
The religious woke
The authoritarian woke

Woke as a negative trait

Woke institutions or groups
Activists, NGOs, LGBT+ communities, media, education (social sciences), social workers, young people, digital vs. real world, the establishment?
Discussion

Conclusions

• Multi-faceted: individual/group/corporate

• Awareness, compassion vs. weakness, puritanism

• Shift: minority to majority behaviours: being a good ally

• Promotes cultural vs. political agenda: insurgents, not legality

• Overwhelmingly negative portrayals in the press/Twitter samples

• Survey: Participants mostly identified as being woke - sampling bias?

• Further research: Can woke vs. neutral framing impact support for policies?

• E.g., ‘Privilege’ drops white support for renaming (Quarles & Bozarth, 2022)