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# LAND OF WOKE AND GLORY? THE CONCEPTUALISATION AND FRAMING OF “WOKENESS” IN UK MEDIA AND PUBLIC DISCOURSES

David S. Smith , Lee Boag , Connor Keegan and  
Alice Butler-Warke 

*Though the term originated in the early twentieth century, it is only recently “wokeness” has become a staple of British media discourse. Typically, the concept features in commentaries and exchanges about institutional power, censorship, minority rights/representation, and structural racism, i.e. “culture wars” discourses. Polling suggests that the public considers wokeness a threat despite lacking clarity or consensus on its specific meaning. This study addresses this ambiguity, combining an analysis of coverage in the UK press with posts on Twitter and a questionnaire, asking UK respondents to define and exemplify wokeness. All samples revealed a multi-faceted concept observed at individual, group, cultural and corporate levels. A range of positive and negative framings were found, e.g. awareness and compassion vs. weakness and puritanism. Broader narratives constructed around wokeness include aspirational traits, moral posturing, a modern secular religion, and an insurgent “woke agenda.” These offer insights into how the concept is characterised and operationalised.*

**KEYWORDS** wokeness; social media; culture wars; activism; social justice

## Introduction

In recent years, the concept of “wokeness” has become a standard part of the British press and Western media discourses more broadly. The term originated in the early twentieth century to denote an awareness of socio-political pressures affecting Black Americans. However, it gained traction in 2014 through its association with Black Lives Matter protests (Richardson and Ragland 2018). It has since evolved to reflect an understanding of social justice more broadly. Positions typically considered woke include, but are not limited to, progressive causes such as anti-racism, anti-colonialism, anti-fascism, anti-capitalism, anti-sexism, anti-ableism, environmentalism, feminism, gender inclusivity, and pro-LGBTQ+ attitudes. Yet the word is most often utilised by those dismissing vs. arguing for these struggles as part of an anti-woke “culture war” (Cammaerts 2022; Sobande, Kanai, and Zeng 2022). The specifics vary, but the label loosely signals dogmatism, social deviance and knee-jerk threats to liberty.

Hostility to wokeness extends to governments, with politicians treating it as an organic social force they must use their levers of power to counter. Oliver Dowden, then

chairman of the Conservative government, called it a “dangerous form of decadence” that is “everywhere” (Mason 2022). Combating “woke nonsense” was also a recurring theme among shortlisted candidates during the 2022 leadership election (Penna 2022). But while opposing it unites a famously fractious party, the meaning of wokeness remains elusive. Even from the same speaker, it can refer to multiple things. For example, former Prime Minister Boris Johnson said there is “nothing wrong with being woke” (Coates 2021), before comparing it with the Russian invasion of Ukraine shortly after (Smith 2022). The public is similarly confused. Pollster YouGov found that only 12% of Britons identify as woke, though the majority reported not knowing what it meant (Smith 2021). Despite this ambiguity, they believed it was something bad.

## Defining Wokeness

*“So, I mean, woke is sort of the idea that ... This is going to be one of those moments that goes viral.”*

*Bethany Mandel*

The above clip, in which conservative author Bethany Mandel struggled to define the topic of her book, went viral (Serwer 2023). The only legal definition of wokeness so far comes from the general counsel of Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, who summarised it as “the belief there are systemic injustices in American society and the need to address them” (Bump 2022): a philosophy that conflicts with Western neoliberal ideals of meritocracy and agency. However, the definition and its rebuttal do not reflect the plethora of ways the term is applied. Its wide-ranging use may be why some pundits have even said it does not need to be defined since it can be a “feeling” or a “sense” (Graziosi 2023). Like the Supreme Court’s definition of pornography, “you know it when you see it.”

In the UK, wokeness has been linked to topics ranging from academic freedom and environmental activism to dwarves’ skin colour (Heritage 2022), the removal of an egg from a salad emoji (Sholli 2020), and the appearance of a computer-generated dinosaur (McPhee 2022). It is also alluded to when a perceived conflict exists between modernity and aspects of Britain’s colonial past. For example, debates surrounding statues depicting slave traders/those complicit in the Transatlantic Slave Trade or singing nationalist songs at the proms. Articles about these subjects regularly employ alarmist language to establish constructs like a woke “orthodoxy” dedicated to vaporising swathes of British heritage and culture (O’Flynn 2020). It is, therefore, presented as being at odds with national identity (Pilkington 2021).

The imprecise scattergun approach to identifying wokeness may be by design. Employing a common activist term to conflate numerous serious and trivial topics empowers critics to dismiss them all simultaneously (Cammaerts 2022). Alluding to a vague movement makes “the woke” individually unaccountable but gives the impression of their supposed ideology as a concrete threat. Like the phrase “postmodern neo-Marxism,” it is not attributed to any person or group, meaning that those against it can characterise it on their own often inconsistent terms (Brooks 2020). The result is a caricatured enemy mutually concerned with restructuring the socioeconomic system and censoring decades-old British comedies. Hence Black Lives Matter were made answerable for removing Little Britain from BBC streaming despite not campaigning for it (Milward 2020).

Collective pejorative phrases such as “woke mob,” “woke agenda,” and “woke insanity” disparage attempts to combat structural inequalities and conceive those looking to do

so as malevolent (Cammaerts 2022). Negative messages like these are observable across the nationalist print and television media alike (Pilkington 2021). Dichotomising people into woke threats vs. proud Brits can encourage individuals to express their loyalty to the country by rejecting this philosophy. By extension, and in line with the DeSantis description above, acknowledging truths behind woke causes, such as the need to address income or racial inequality, seems like an unpatriotic act. Challenges to the integrity of national institutions are of particular concern to conservatives, who are more likely to prioritise respect for their authority as a foundation of their morality (Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009). Liberals subverting this may, therefore, be seen as a salient danger.

This framing appears effective since many of the public see wokeness as both a threat and an ideology. For example, the think tank and pressure group Centre for Policy Studies found Brits identified wokeness as the third most concerning of 20 “ideologies,” finishing ahead of sexism, ageism, and homophobia (Centre for Policy Studies 2021). Similarly, an American sample claimed that combating wokeness is equally as important as immigration, more important than equality or foreign policy, and fractionally less important than healthcare (Kaufmann 2022). In that respect, the public recognises it as a threat that needs to be urgently addressed.

Yet negative attitudes to wokeness are not as simple as a backlash to “social justice warriors” on the far left. Critiques and conceptualisations among academics and the commentariat, more broadly, move it beyond the narrow parameters of a left vs. right binary. One view is that it represents self-serving social scripts that give the appearance of moral purity to oneself/others. Boyce (2021) attributes these standards to white liberals, understanding it as an assured mental state in which they think their work is complete, so they do not need to change. Wokeness can, therefore, be considered a tool for retaining a desirable self-concept.

Zavattaro and Bearfield (2022) agree, seeing contemporary wokeness as a rhetorical style designed around upholding hegemonic white power structures at the expense of improving marginalised groups’ material conditions. In the decades following its initial use they suggest its adoption into broader societal discourses and popular culture transformed it from a helpful term with a clear grounding to an emblem of a society built around symbols and ideations. Replacing the pursuit of systemic policy changes with gestures, such as kneeling, has made wokeness antithetical to addressing injustices traditionally targeted by the left. Its subsequent weaponisation by the right has also fostered an environment where legislation has reified the power structures it was conceived to oppose.

In line with this, Burgis (2021) argues that woke tendencies interfere with the left’s ability to organise and pursue emancipatory action by reducing the debate to cultural issues macropolitical shifts cannot resolve. From this angle, wokeness atomises radical movements, reducing them to infighting between competing interests. Thus, class-reductionist critics argue neoliberal societies should only be polarised along class vs. cultural lines to elevate people’s material circumstances. This attitude persists despite a tendency among progressive communities to adopt an intersectional perspective, positing class and other social categorisations as interrelated factors that mutually shape each other (Collins and Bilge 2020), e.g. nobody is race-less regardless of class, and traits such as race, gender identity, or religion may be tied to the opportunities people are granted or the occupations they are encouraged to pursue. Thus, recognition and redistribution can be mutually central aspects of modern social justice that need not be discussed independently (Fraser and Honneth 2003).

Elsewhere, wokeness is framed as a moralising tool by which the left manipulates the behaviours of others. McWhorter (2021) sees it as a pious tenet of a liberal religion devoted to anti-racism. In the name of inclusivity, activists punish others based on false accusations of heresy. Meanwhile, their narrow focus on power differentials infantilises people from empowered and disempowered groups alike, robbing them of their uniqueness and agency. Other cultural critics share concerns about homogenising members of marginalised groups, e.g. Fiocco (2022) claims discordant voices among disadvantaged groups are ignored in the name of helping them. Both accounts concern how wokeness is practiced vs. its core thesis.

Marxist scholar Žižek (2023) agrees wokeness is a secularised religious dogma perpetuated by a privileged few from elite universities for moral authority. The aim of these actions is not to alter society's hierarchical structure but to draw attention to systems of social domination in a way that empowers others to accept their guilt and powerlessness. As with how the superego holds individuals to standards they cannot meet, wokeness tells Western liberals they must try to understand marginalised groups' experiences while reinforcing their otherness because these experiences cannot affect them. Thus, wokeness' popularity distracts people from confronting more complex questions of accountability and material inequalities.

Žižek's former sparring partner Peterson (2022) shares his disregard for wokeness. However, they conceptualise it as a tool for far-left authoritarians to take over educational institutions through Diversity, Inclusivity, and Equity mandates. It is suggested that this cultural shift in educational institutions damages meritocratic hiring practices and defines individuals by their race/ethnicity/gender/sexual orientation instead of their character. Goodwin (2023) agrees that focusing on fixed group identities is an illiberal challenge to the UK's democratic values. The narrative that wokeness is at odds with Western culture is shared by other public figures from academic backgrounds, such as the so-called Intellectual Dark Web (Brooks 2020), and reactionary internet personalities, including Dave Rubin, Candace Owens and Dennis Prager (Dickinson and Cowin 2022). To some, it even presents an existential concern. For example, the then-richest man in the world Elon Musk called wokeness a "mortal threat to civilisation" that must be defeated or "nothing else matters" (Dodds 2022).

Yet, being woke is not always perceived as a negative attribute. Babulski (2020) views it as crucial for socially conscious pedagogy and a trait to be nurtured. To this end, they hope other educators will embrace the concept. Whiteout (2018) agrees that wokeness is positive, though also postulates that it is an aspirational state that cannot be achieved. Atkins (2020) agrees, seeing it as an essential part of holding others to account despite polarising online dialogue doing it a disservice. In that respect, wokeness is something that ought to be reclaimed rather than used to attack an argument or individual.

### The Present Study

In light of these conflicting interpretations of the same popular concept, we explore different narratives built around it. Our purpose is not to arrive at an ultimate definition for the term nor attempt to correct existing ones since it is not typically used concretely or consistently. Instead, the present study uses traditional media, social media and a survey to explore its current utility in contemporary discourse. In doing so, we seek to answer how the press and public conceptualise and operationalise it. The anti-woke culture war is a

fixture of traditional and social media discourses (Cammaerts 2022). Combining content from the UK press and X/Twitter (hereafter referred to as Twitter) allows us to assess similarities/differences in the direction and severity of their discussions. An anonymised open-question survey also offers insights into how members of the general public understand it outside the often-volatile exchanges on social media and the news.

Though traditional and social media operate independently, each medium also utilises the other for content. News articles inspire discussions on social media sites. However, trends/controversies online provide additional content to the press if they verify/amplify aspects of online debate, e.g. articles about trends or individuals being “cancelled.” Hence, this relationship is a complicated but symbiotic affair (Mare 2013). Traditional and social media influence the topics and angles to which the general public is exposed. However, we cannot make conclusions about participants’ engagement with these sources or make causal predictions about how much they influenced their opinions.

By converging information from open survey questions, tweets, and news outlets, we hope to better understand the complexities with which wokeness is conceptualised and operationalised across public discourses. Triangulating data from multiple sources can increase the probability that the findings and our interpretation of them are credible and that we engage with a wealth of views (Nowell et al. 2017). When trying to understand a contentious and constantly changing topic, it can give a more holistic picture of a phenomenon and reduce the likelihood of overgeneralising a finding from a single sample (Ayoub, Wallace, and Zepeda-Millán 2014). One such error may be equivocating popular media narratives with public opinion – particularly when polling shows trust in many established news outlets is low (Smith 2023). It also gives us insights into how similar or divergent these areas of discourse may be and potentially reduces sampling biases. For example, social media users tend to be younger and more educated than the general population and disproportionately politically engaged (Mellon and Prosser 2017).

### *Method*

Across all samples, analysis was completed following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step approach to thematic analysis: familiarisation, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Different researchers asynchronously analysed a sample in-depth. The team then held multiple meetings to discuss recurring themes and discourses across the whole data set, and the lead researcher extrapolated, characterised and combined the recurring themes from each sample. Finally, all researchers reviewed and collectively approved these characterisations before they were written up.

*Press analysis.* A media search was conducted via Lexis Library, a UK database of local and national media outlets. Specifying the month of May 2022, to coincide with when the team gained ethical approval, the search term “woke” was utilised. Articles were filtered for relevance and then arranged from oldest to newest. Any duplicates were removed, and of the remaining articles, every tenth was selected. This process gave a final yield of 64 articles. Each was analysed for the specific term used, the meaning ascribed to the term, and the general context of the article.

*Twitter search.* Raw data was gathered using a Python script that utilised two modules: Snsrape, a social networking service scraper that collected the required data

from Twitter, and Pandas, a tool to export the data into Excel for examination. To match the time frame of the press analysis, Tweets were gathered from May 2022. Data were scraped in four week-long batches due to the script's limitations. Researchers randomised the Tweets for each to reduce the likelihood of them relating to the same events and filtered based on relevance, e.g. removing Tweets with woke as a verb. The first 300 relevant Tweets of each week were selected, giving a sample of 1200 proportionately spanning a month. Before gathering our sample we discussed using geotags to limit the scope to Tweets from the UK. However, we chose against this strategy for three reasons: i) Twitter only allows searchers to specify miles from a specific geographical area rather than a country, ii) Twitter is a global platform, so users based in the UK are not limited to viewing Tweets originating in the UK, and iii) users Tweeting from the UK do not necessarily live there.

*Survey.* A survey measured whether respondents identified as woke/anti-woke and recorded their opinions on what wokeness means to them personally. It consisted of 17 questions, combining closed Likert questions and open questions. 116 respondents, recruited via snowball sampling originating from the Twitter hashtag #woke, completed it during July 2022. All were residents of the UK: 64 men, 47 women, one non-binary respondent, and one preferred not to say. Three respondents chose not listed above but answered in ways indicative of their views. One wrote, "I don't have a gender; my sex is female." The other two listed an Apache attack helicopter and an M4 Sherman tank: variants of a transphobic joke parodying gender diversity. Respondents spanned a range of age groups, with the most common being 35–44 ( $n = 38$ , 32.8% of total), 25–34 ( $n = 31$ , 26.7%), and 45–54 ( $n = 24$ , 20.7%). Because an account associated with the university department was the first to share the survey, its followers were likely among the first to respond to or retweet it. While the account is not overtly political, this could have led to selection bias since followers and, by extension, their personal networks will likely be interested in the social sciences. There was also a high selective dropout, with 302 people not clicking past the information page. It is possible that they felt deterred by the task demands or an aspect of the form, such as its academic framing. Those most willing to participate may also have been those with disproportionately strong opinions.

## Findings and Discussion

### *Wokeness in the Press*

Across the sample, woke was almost always employed as a derogatory label to degrade or deride a group/cause. Typically, wokeness was positioned as an undesirable push for social change that needed to be resisted to conserve aspects of the status quo, such as freedom of expression and positive narratives about Britain's military history. Articles about systemic inequalities, such as racism, sexism and anti-LGBT attitudes/legislation, were written from the perspective that they were not real problems or that attempts to address them were illegitimate on account of them being woke. For example, The Sun summarised a story about a university encouraging its students not to harass people who are transgender in the toilets with the lead "Woke university bosses have told students not to challenge other people's gender in public loos." In this case, the implication is that intentionally making somebody uncomfortable in the toilets should be acceptable behaviour, and to suggest otherwise is nit-picky or authoritarian.

The term was often included in speech marks, including in comment pieces or where it was part of a longer quotation, e.g. “Eric Kauffman has complained: ‘The growing challenge from a ‘woke’ ideology that values emotional safety over academic freedom is gaining institutional traction in academia and beyond’” (Independent). This presentation distances the author/speaker from the term, indicating that it is not one they endorse. Among conservative outlets, which account for most of the UK press, woke was generally a byword for left-wing politics and characteristics.

The word in isolation was the most common usage, though other phrases, including “woke virus” and “wokesters,” appeared several times. “Woke brigade” and “woke police” also denoted authoritarianism. The term was most often linked to political activists on the left or progressivism/modernity in a broader sense. Where it denoted specific socio-political issues, it tended to be environmental activism, censoring/opposing comedians and promoting transgender-inclusive policies. However, the variance between these issues perhaps better reflects their prominence in the news rather than any individual topic indicating a specific criterion for wokeness.

In several instances, the political tenets grouped as “woke” were framed as fundamentally anti-British, raising further questions about perceived national identity. A similar pattern has been observed in the United States of America, where anti-woke discourses characterise woke values as fundamentally un-American (Zavattaro and Bearfield 2022). Narratives emphasising in-group protection can promote polarisation and deference to the status quo, where woke affiliated groups become the de facto outgroup (Smith 2019). The recurrent motif was that people perceived to be woke were a moralising, self-righteous herd who bullied others into doing what they said.

### *Wokeness on Twitter*

Tweets were largely negative, with approximately 79% (based on week 1) being unfavourable towards wokeness. However, this includes users sharing article titles without further comment, so the proportion of hostile Tweets may be inflated by the bias of Western media (Cammaerts 2022). Right-wing accounts, particularly far-right ones, adopt irony and “trolling” in culture war discourses. Consequently, the phrase #StayWoke received a mixture of sincere and sarcastic responses, becoming an auto-antonym, e.g. “liberalism is a psychiatric disorder, #StayWoke.” Some of the intent was possibly lost on the researchers since posts may be contextualised as part of a longer thread, and parody accounts could have been misattributed. Still, though trolling tends to harness political language, it is typically used to provoke a reaction, so its intentions are usually blatant (Aspray 2019). As such, it is expected that the researchers would have been able to identify it. Data were gathered shortly after Elon Musk purchased Twitter. Since then, there has been an increase in hate speech and a decrease in moderation (Hickey et al. 2023).

### *Wokeness in the Survey*

Interestingly, the survey did not match the negativity of traditional or social media. Where these ecosystems were overwhelmingly negative, respondents tended to identify as woke or see it as a positive, even when criticising woke individuals and movements. Despite expressing discomfort with the term in their open answers, survey respondents

tended to agree with the statement “I am woke” ( $n = 34$ , 29.3% agreed,  $n = 20$ , 17.2% strongly agreed). And while some disagreed ( $n = 17$ , 14.7%) and strongly disagreed ( $n = 19$ , 16.4%), the amount who agreed ( $n = 14$ , 12.1%) or strongly agreed ( $n = 7$ , 6%) with the statement “I am anti-woke” was smaller. A t-test found a significant difference between group data on the woke ( $m = 8.9$ ,  $SD = 3.6$ ) and anti-woke ( $m = 6.8$ ,  $SD = 3.6$ ) subscales:  $t(115) = 3.43$ ,  $p < .001$ . For both measures, respondents’ scores were higher than their willingness to identify with the label publicly: (woke: agree,  $n = 27$ , 23.3%; strongly agree,  $n = 10$ , 8.6%, anti-woke: agree,  $n = 11$ , 9.5%, strongly agree,  $n = 6$ , 5.2%). However, this gap was only significant among those scoring higher on the anti-woke questions:  $t(115) = 3.02$ ,  $P < .004$ . These trends perhaps indicate mistrust or apathy for the label rather than a specific belief.

There are a range of reasons the survey respondents may be disproportionately likely to identify as woke. As per above, it may represent a sampling bias. However, the difference could indicate a shy wokeness among people who hold these values but are embarrassed to publicly state it due to how wokeness has been stigmatised elsewhere. It may also represent disengagement with the confrontational nature of the online landscape. Several respondents specifically cited wokeness as something that happened online rather than being a part of their daily lives: “It’s just social media nonsense making issues where there are none while ignoring all the real issues in the world.”

### *Characterising Wokeness*

Across all three samples, six distinct wokeness discourses emerged. These represent a combination of positively and negatively framed themes we observed across all three samples. They were constructed in line with salience rather than frequency, as recommended by Braun and Clarke’s (2019) updated guidance on inductive analysis. This approach is practical when analysing small samples since we aimed to explore the meaning, and latent coding facilitates insight beyond standard semantic groupings. Tweets are paraphrased to protect the original poster’s identity. Although their profiles are all public, meaning they have not utilised Twitter’s existing privacy measures, they may also not reasonably expect their posts to appear in a research project. Therefore, when amending their statements, we have employed synonyms. As per Smith et al. (2022), we were careful to preserve the essence of what the poster wrote, including all metaphors.

#### *1. The Aware Woke.*

*“Awareness of the often-concealed structures of power in society and how they reinforce and maintain patriarchal white supremacy in Western cultures.” (Survey)*

*“... an awareness of societal inequalities that correlate with prevalent identity markers, such as gender, sexuality, race, and socioeconomic class, and a motivation to equalise these disparities.” (Survey)*

Positive interpretations of wokeness, and even some negative ones, define it as an awareness of how privilege, injustice, and systemic inequalities are socially reinforced. This conceptualisation aligns with the historical definition, albeit generalised toward a broader range of social issues. Positive survey respondents and Twitter users explained it

as understanding that power/opportunity is unevenly distributed and appreciating different identities intersect in ways that can impact how individuals are viewed, understood, and treated. To them, wokeness meant recognising connections between experiences and the social issues contextualising them, ala the sociological imagination. From this perspective, wokeness is a virtue to be encouraged: “You are aware of the prejudices in society, and actively support those groups marginalised by a backward country” (Survey).

At its core, those using it positively see it as “compassion towards everyone in society and standing up for injustices.” These responses reflect Atkins (2020), Babulski (2020), and Whiteout (2018), for whom traditional and social media discourses have done wokeness a disservice: “There’s too much of an obsession, especially online, with getting it right all the time ... but I’d rather live in a society where people were trying badly than they weren’t trying.” (Survey). Crucially, respondents stated that awareness of social inequality and privilege is not enough, and it should lead to action and a push for meaningful change. Otherwise, it is performative self-flagellation for aesthetic reasons, i.e. virtue signalling (McWhorter 2021). In other words, “a public appearance of being aware of political and social issues.” Both people purporting to be woke and people identifying as anti-woke shared a dislike of sharing messages for social media clout. We return to this point in the third and fourth themes.

The current utility of wokeness varies from older activist discourses because it has generalised beyond race relations. While people identifying as woke in the survey and social media tended to link it to awareness of racial disparities, they also attached it to other causes. Specifically, they cited inclusive behaviours, beliefs, and attitudes relating to gender diversity/recognition as primary examples of what wokeness is and what it looks like socially. Critics also focused on “gender ideology” and “forcing someone to use certain pronouns” as examples of wokeness, suggesting transgender equality represents the current frontier in the UK culture war (Montiel-McCann 2022). Other cited topics/concerns ranged from environmentalism (car drivers = unwoke and cyclists = woke) to protecting abortion rights. Critics raised trivial things like dying one’s hair and pedantry among “fights so meaningless as to be farcical” (Survey). This broad approach could reflect how dominant groups have deployed the word to neutralise a wealth of progressive positions (Cammaerts 2022).

## 2. *The Weak Woke.*

*“Can’t wait for a woke action movie where the good guy defeats the bad guy by sitting down and talking about their emotions, insecurities and unimportant differences.” (Twitter)*

*“Having been taught that some people or past events are too dangerous to contemplate and that words themselves can be a form of violence, it is hardly surprising students then campaign to have statues torn down or speakers banned from campus.” (Sunday Express)*

Across all three samples, wokeness implied emotional and mental fragility. On Twitter, in particular, supposedly woke people were framed as “bleeding heart” liberals who are “childish,” “emotional,” and in a perpetual state of being offended. This evaluation aligns with research by Sobande, Kanai, and Zeng (2022), who highlighted discourses surrounding wokeness centered on hysterical “snowflakes.” Through concentrating on an over-the-top response to hardship, Cammaerts (2022) suggests anti-woke individuals and outlets de-emphasise the dominant group’s social harm. Indeed, most media discourse

was less concerned with the negative consequences of prejudice for individuals/society than the right for people to partake in it.

Tabloid and broadsheet publications celebrated Transmisogyny from comedians such as Dave Chappelle and Ricky Gervais. “By punching down, Ricky Gervais has the last laugh on woke comedy,” claimed the Daily Telegraph. “They see his jokes as actual hand grenades. They accuse him of bigotry and ‘literally’ killing people,” said The Sun. The recurring sense that they are “free-speech warriors” who do not cower in the face of social pressure is consistent with discourses observed elsewhere. We return to the contradiction of woke people being perceived as both feeble and omnipresent in theme five.

Not only are those considered woke supposedly unable to take a joke or debate an idea, but it is also suggested they bask in this weakness by celebrating victimhood. It is suggested that doing so represents people from marginalised groups, and often themselves, as needing to be coddled. Twitter users frequently parodied the use of microaggressions, trigger warnings, and safe spaces they saw as infantilising and pathetic. Other examples cited included affordances and courtesies such as “jazz hands instead of clapping in case the noise upsets neurodiverse people” (Survey). The understanding of wokeness as weakness extended to people designated woke also lacking intellectual capacity and the ability to think independently. They are misguided and naïve and have been brainwashed into “putting feelings over facts” to feel good about themselves (Survey).

### 3. *The Corporate Woke.*

*“... Global corporations who adorn their social media accounts in the west with LGBTQI+ flags, but not in other parts of the world where supposed support for ‘inclusion’ conflicts with their business model.” (Survey)*

*“The Woke Synthetic Left is an embarrassment to the real Left. They failed the Covid test and supported the greatest upwards redistribution of wealth in history.” (Twitter)*

*“Corporate wokery Self-righteous HR training is not going to have any effect on Westminster’s bad behaviour.” (Daily Telegraph)*

Across political persuasions, regardless of whether they saw wokeness as a positive force, people disliked how corporations employed the language and iconography of social justice activists. What varied was how sincere they thought the advocacy was. To some Survey respondents identifying as anti-woke, “Disney, Netflix, Google, and most other large corporate entities” represented a means by which the agenda gets pushed through “forced” representation of minority groups. To them, the corporations are true believers, using their powerful position to influence public conversation through indoctrination: “Almost all levels of the public and private sector—there is almost complete societal and corporate capture” (Survey). Those who have not fallen for the agenda were called upon to respond with their wallets. The popular Twitter mantra “go woke, go broke” was used to promote boycotts against ideologically compromised companies. Interestingly, these initiatives are not dissimilar to some of the cancel culture measures typically associated with wokeness.

However, other survey respondents and Tweeters were cynical of passive displays of progressivism and hollow gestures designed to “pander” to modern audiences: “Most companies have to appear woke for fear of bad publicity” (Survey). Corporate wokeness

represented a lack of commitment to real woke causes and/or the company not having the courage to do what they wanted out of fear of a backlash. Across all samples, people were cynical of marketing that adopted the language of social justice, seeing it as a shallow means of appearing virtuous without meeting or engaging in the ethically driven standards that could compromise their profits.

Like how pink and greenwashing reflect superficial and/or hypocritical engagement with LGBTQ+ representation (Sánchez-Soriano and García-Jiménez 2020) and environmental performance (de Freitas Netto et al. 2020), respectively, woke washing represents the detachment between a company's purpose/values/practices and its messaging (Vredenburg et al. 2020). Like when Gillette sought to tackle toxic masculinity while simultaneously charging higher prices for women's products, aka "the pink tax." Critics on both woke and anti-woke sides pointed to the hypocrisy of large companies saying "the right thing" as they enact policies harmful to marginalised groups, e.g. low pay and no unionisation. Likewise, the hypocrisy of them not promoting these alleged values in areas where it may harm their profitability, e.g. Disney/Marvel cutting their already limited LGBT+ representation for some international releases.

#### 4. *The Privileged Woke.*

*"Privileged white people who profess to empathise with POC, while failing to recognise the harm their policing of words/tone/opinion has." (Survey)*

*"Woke was stolen from Black people calling for awareness and action." (Twitter)*

*"Why do white middle class clergy find it so hard to accept that I don't see racism lurking in every corner?" (Mail On Sunday)*

While the concept of wokeness originated amongst marginalised communities, much of its modern framing alludes to people from privileged backgrounds: "Upper/middle-class involvement in issues for the gathering of kudos" (Survey). Across all three samples, there were frequent references to woke people as white, young, affluent, and disconnected from real social problems. They are beneficiaries of a system and enforce their will and values upon others to defend it. This angle inverts the typical concern with left-wing identity politics by suggesting wokeness is a tool of the out-of-touch middle classes.

This positioning is observable through the press focus on activism in the top higher education institutions: "Our most elite universities have been at the forefront of promoting woke ideas" (Sunday Express). Wokeness is thus depicted as a sanctimonious trait common to a specific subsection of society as much as a set of concrete aims or values. On Twitter, being woke is portrayed as snobby and judgemental: "Woke ideologies are middle-class weapons used against the working class." Likewise, in the survey, wokeness usurped the traditional leftist movement concerned with championing working classes, i.e. "identity rather than class politics." This dynamic matches Goodwin's (2023) impression of a new elite using wokeness to sculpt society in its liberal image.

In the press, the Labour Party was cautioned to "drop "woke" politics and focus on economy" to get the aspirational working class on side (The Guardian). This recalls how the Brexit campaign was promoted as a patriotic, working-class backlash against the self-righteous, wealthy orthodoxy of elites protecting their interests (Smith 2019). Remainers are, therefore, often included within the woke composite: "A globalist, referendum-

ignoring pressure group obsessed with the abolition of nationhood, especially Englishness, and taking offence, especially on behalf of others" (Daily Telegraph). Though this association went both ways, e.g. the anti-woke were characterised as "homophobic, racist Brexit supporters" (Survey).

Some critics of wokeness presented their critiques in the language of addressing systemic injustices. For example, several Twitter users and survey respondents saw its adoption by white activists as an ironic example of cultural appropriation. Other cited wokeness as historical appropriation, i.e. fortunate people today trying to be victims by focusing on historical grievances. In these instances, we see a critical approach to wokeness that challenges the assumption that it reflects a divide between left and right-wing ideologies. Instead, it is a means by which the middle class can "pat themselves on the back and feel they've made a difference" (Survey) without sacrificing anything. This interpretation recalls commentators who see wokeness as a liberal distraction from material conditions.

Like the conceptualisation of wokeness as a branding tool discussed above, this discourse sees it as a vehicle for performative allyship, i.e. costless actions motivated by the accrual of personal benefits, such as a positive self-image or receiving praise, rather than challenging the status quo (Kutlaca and Radke 2023). This is not to suggest that our samples argued that allyship is always problematic. Many participants and Tweets linking wokeness to awareness did so with acknowledgement of their own privilege. To them, it was a reason to engage more and offer their time, money, or other resources. Allyship can be beneficial, provided members of advantaged groups are morally motivated to improve the status of disadvantaged groups or elevate/amplify their voices vs. satisfying their own ego (Radke et al. 2020). As one participant wrote, the first step is "identifying [one's] own privilege and its effects on [their] life." Only after that can individuals act to reduce their complicity.

##### 5. *The Woke Agenda.*

*"A Marxist tool to destroy western culture, society, values and standards."* (Survey)

*"Yo #woke teachers! Don't radicalise our kids by indoctrinating them"* (Twitter)

*"The Church, like our Civil Service and universities, is under the control of people with the same left-leaning, woke mindset."* (Mail on Sunday)

Despite people labelled woke being viewed as weak and trivial, their ideology was simultaneously viewed as a societal threat. Interestingly, people citing a woke agenda did so through the prism of sociocultural vs. political power. Its ideas were not replicated through consensus and the electoral system but through mass entertainment and educational institutions, including schools and universities. This conjecture resembles cultural Marxism conspiracies: an apparently intentional subversion of Western society by an enemy within (Braune 2019). Often, government institutions were cited as a safeguard to this ideology. By enforcing free speech rules or, in an apparent contradiction, regulating curriculums, they could mitigate the education system's alleged indoctrination. Likewise, they were called upon to simultaneously protect controversial views as well as utilise heavy policing to deter woke activists. Like the Brexit campaign, anti-woke discourses tended to highlight the legitimacy of British institutions (Smith 2019). When supposedly woke individuals condemn aspects of Britain's colonial past, they are unpatriotically

“trying to erase parts of history that they do not agree with” (Survey). Across all samples, cited examples included the toppling of statues, race swapping on TV, and celebrating the St George flag. Survey respondents suggested “supporting and maintaining Western/British culture” was a way to defy wokeness. Believers in the woke agenda constructed two distinct but overlapping narratives around its reinforcement.

### 5.1. The Authoritarian Woke.

*“The woke virus is a larger threat than any pandemic they fake. We must fight against it not for ourselves, but for our kids and future generations.”* (Twitter)

“The woke mob” do not make others yield or comply through force or violence but by vilifying those who undermine their agenda via social media campaigns, petitions, or public shunning, ala “McCarthyism” (mentioned by all samples). A recurring claim was that woke people use social penalties because of their intolerance of opposition: “The intolerant style of activism, suggests the approach is often self-serving, and the objective is as much control as justice” (Survey). Through totalitarian behaviour, woke elites achieve the obedience of the silent majority and “silence people that don’t align with their agenda” (Survey).

In this context, all three samples raised the threat of “cancel culture,” an oppressive tool that threatens dissenters’ social standing and livelihood: “Walk the woke line or the SJWs will cancel you” (Twitter). Like wokeness, cancel culture is a vague concept that stems from activist circles, who first used it ironically (Tandoc et al. 2022). Now, it is used to signal the censuring of individuals, for example, “using racism as a sword to silence others, calling everyone a fascist” (Survey). Critics point to the irony of evoking fascism as a means of discrediting and silencing opponents of their agenda, with woke people replicating the strategies of the authoritarians they claim to oppose. The Independent reports actor Brian Cox calling wokeness “total fascism.” Parallels like this were widespread, giving the impression that anti-woke behaviour was a necessary act of rebellion.

Influential public figures were cited as insurgents and renegades, bravely fighting a faceless establishment at risk of their careers, e.g. JK Rowling, Joe Rogan, Elon Musk, Ricky Gervais, Dave Chappelle, Jordan Peterson and Piers Morgan. Despite all enjoying huge platforms, largely positive press, and most encompassing opposition to wokeness into their marketing, they are celebrated as underdogs “cancelled for stating the bleeding obvious” (Twitter). A contradiction at the heart of this discourse is that a person can simultaneously be an alleged victim of cancel culture as well as hugely successful. Their role in communicating or normalising discriminatory attitudes was rarely condemned by the press or Twitter users. Instead, most discussions about their controversies focused on their status as victims of a disproportionate response. This dynamic downplays the power differentials between millionaires with global influence and the largely powerless people criticising them for the values they have promoted (Cammaerts 2022). Moreover, had they been cancelled, these individuals would not still work with the cultural institutions and art/tech corporations dismissed as woke, e.g. Ricky Gervais and Dave Chappelle signing deals with Netflix. Since gathering our data, JK Rowling has had a videogame tie-in to her books released, published two new novels, had the fifth series of a TV drama aired on BBC and is set to produce another with a major streaming service. Framing the wealthy as victims of a culture war that has often proven lucrative for them undermines the existence/influence of a ubiquitous woke agenda. Moreover, their continued ability to thrive in industries

that are seen as captured by wokeness and work with some of the companies specifically cited as woke undermines their supposed role in pushing this agenda.

## 5.2. The Religious Woke.

*"Witness the vile personal abuse, the vicious attacks, the career blighting accusations directed at anyone who blasphemes against this new woke creed."* (Mail On Sunday)

*"... A pseudo-religious belief system which is organised around the sacralisation of racial, sexual and gender minorities and prioritises subjectivity and lived experience over objectivity and empirical evidence."* (Survey)

All samples suggested woke people had internalised a secular doctrine in defiance of reason and science. The intensity and implications of wokeness were seen as oppressive and irrational in a way that parallels religious fundamentalism or, in some cases, extremism (McWhorter 2021; Žižek 2023). Implicit to this narrative is the role of faith, the belief in a strict, prescriptive code of ethics, and moral absolutism: "Original sin might be being born as 'privileged' or being a certain race or sex" (Survey). Commentators, Tweeters and respondents frequently alluded to a lack of research or rigour in support of supposedly woke beliefs, juxtaposing rationality with subjectivism and feelings: "Putting subjective 'lived experience' above empirical data and facts" (Survey). In addition to wokeness being portrayed as a religion, woke people were depicted as pious moralists intent on punishing heretics/sinners for violations. Through this lens, the labels "TERF," "transphobe," or "racist" serve similar utility to "blasphemer." Woke dogma included the assumption of moral superiority against others, using rituals and sacred items such as sharing pronouns and flying rainbow flags, and the devout certainty of righteousness. "Witch hunts, denunciation of heretics, and demands for penance" awaited those resisting it (Survey). The purpose is not so that people change their minds through debate and discussion, as much as they suspend their disbelief and see alternative viewpoints as taboo. "All worship the church of the woke!" (Twitter).

## 6. The Anti-woke Agenda.

*"I'm starting to wonder if we could overthrow Capitalism by convincing Republicans that it's become woke."* (Twitter)

*"[Anti-woke behaviours are] pretending that discrimination doesn't exist, or that in fact privileged groups suffer from it."* (Survey)

*"Woke, is, of course, the new term used by the right to try and silence the push for any kind of social justice."* (The Times Higher Education Supplement)

In contrast to the woke agenda, others felt the term had been weaponised against those "saying something a Telegraph columnist finds disagreeable" (Survey). Its vagueness is observable in the sheer range of issues our press sample applied it to, e.g. football chants, policing, if "fisherman" is acceptable, sex education, family theatre, a new golf league, and the diverse casting of a stage show ("Woke-lahoma," Mail on Sunday). Regardless of its original meaning, they argued it had been appropriated/redefined to dismiss many concerns,

debase genuine protest movements and protect status quo interests. For example, after *Roe vs. Wade* was overthrown, survey respondents and Tweeters argued that conservatives deployed the term as a means of downplaying their own authoritarianism in favour of a hyperbolic strawman. Concerns about the weaponisation of wokeness are consistent with Cammaerts' (2022) argument that the label's function is to shut down debate and evade scrutiny. Rather than being a means for the elite to punish behaviour, wokeness is a shield to protect them from criticism. These respondents and Tweeters recognised the importance of combating structural inequalities yet suggested the term was not used to show solidarity as much opposition: "I won't EVER forgive white conservatives for stealing and bastardising the word." Its perceived misuse prompted a minor discourse on whether it should be reclaimed. As per another user, "These are coordinated campaigns by conservatives who are masters of rhetoric: fight back. I am relatively woke and proud of it."

### Concluding Remarks

Across three samples, we have identified a range of often contradictory discourses relating to the concept of wokeness. For instance, it may represent an awareness of social inequalities and the need for change. But it is more often used to denigrate the people advocating such causes as part of an anti-woke culture war. In that respect, to the extent that wokeness represents a crisis in free speech, it could be argued that the near unanimity of the media against it represents a threat to open debate. This imbalance is unlikely to improve: since 2021, two new news channels have been launched, both funded by major backers, to fight the culture war: GB News and Talk TV (Barnett and Petley 2023).

Across our samples, those pushing for wokeness are at once seen as feeble children, privileged elites, or corporate behemoths. The critical point is that anti-woke voices argue that the victims of the culture war are not necessarily members of socially or economically marginalised communities. Rather, they can be members of privileged groups, including billionaires. The relationship between wokeness and power is perhaps intentionally ambiguous. For example, even when campaigning for systemically oppressed groups, "woke" people are often framed as representing elite interests (Goodwin 2023). Yet when the media invoked the threat of wokeness, it was usually to denounce a push for social change, effectively immunising the financial/political/cultural establishment from accusations of being racist, sexist or LGBTQphobic. By dismissing structural critiques as "woke," activists are contextualised as part of an unpatriotic, authoritarian crusade launched by ideologues and the possible merits behind their claims are disregarded. Moreover, when public figures face consequences for their behaviour, such as being de-platformed/called out on social media, the ethical implications of their comments and actions are positioned as similarly or less egregious than the responses of the "woke" forces seen as threatening open democratic debate (Cammaerts 2022). This framing effectively validates racist, sexist or LGBTQphobic statements, presenting them as just another part of the public discussion: "[Woke behaviour is] cancel culture for having an alternative opinion" (Survey).

There has been a notable shift from the historical roots of wokeness, as it has gone from reflecting solidarity among activists in marginalised communities to typifying the behaviour of majority groups (Sobande, Kanai, and Zeng 2022). Whether sincere or not, the consensus appears that wokeness now represents allyship as opposed to how a person navigates systemic injustices facing them. Perhaps this was an inevitable consequence of

the term's popularisation and adoption by majority groups (Zavattaro and Bearfield 2022). Both sides' contempt for performative wokeness showed a consensus that a commitment to social justice should go beyond platitudes and empty gestures (Vredenburg et al. 2020). However, this leads to more comprehensive questions about the extent to which social inequalities represent fundamental structural failings. Perhaps the point of the anti-woke culture war and the ensuing perception of wokeness as a threat is so that public discourse does not reach this stage.

Anti-woke narratives appear to be effective for conservatives. Data shows that the proportion of Brits who admit to harbouring prejudices against people who are transgender has doubled between 2019 and 2023. Moreover, support for people who are transgender being allowed to change the sex on their birth certificate has dramatically decreased (National Centre for Social Research 2023). This variance may be partially explained by the increased visibility of transgender communities following public discussions on policy positions, such as the Scottish Government's consultation on the Gender Recognition Reform Bill. However, we cannot divorce this worrying trend from the often-toxic framing of trans-inclusive policies across traditional and social media (Montiel-McCann 2022). For many, this will be their introduction to trans identities and gender diversity more broadly.

In all three samples, attitudes/behaviour towards transgender and non-binary communities, as well as the similarly imprecisely defined "gender ideology," were among the cited measures of how woke a person is. This highlights both the salience of wider contemporary debates surrounding trans rights and how the concept of wokeness has come to conflate several forms of identity politics. When critics do this as part of an anti-woke culture war, the unique social pressures facing different communities are stripped of their nuance, and calls for rights or representation are presented as yet another aspect of a more general push for control enacted by knee-jerk liberals (Cammaerts 2022). In other words, they become another front on which the war is fought. Furthermore, if a person comes to see this loose concept of wokeness as a threat to the country or even civilisation itself, they may reflexively dismiss topics such as trans rights, along with other minority group issues, on account of them being part of the same insidious movement.

Future research could explore the polarising impact of citing "wokeness" by addressing whether woke vs. neutral framing amplifies/reduces support for policies. Research suggests that the term "white privilege" decreases support among white participants for renaming buildings (Quarles and Bozarth 2022). Perhaps conservative politicians/commentators can discredit structural changes by framing them as conflicting with the national character. The term's imprecise nature means critics can allude to it to dismiss campaigns for sustainability and discomfort over dated jokes simultaneously. Doing so stifles the debate anti-woke speakers often claim to want to have. For example, Home Secretary Suella Braverman explained her decision to punish disruptive protests promoting green policies by condemning the "Guardian-reading, tofu-eating wokerati" (Brown 2022). The hypocrisy of weaponising a word typically equated with undermining free speech to argue against public assembly is blatant.

Several survey respondents voiced frustration at woke issues being such a big part of public discourse and nostalgia for a time before the internet made "everything into a race/gender issue." It is understandable to dislike the often-vitriolic tone of social media debates. Still, it is also likely that those who think the best way to combat prejudice and discrimination is to stop talking about them were previously unaware that others saw problems

in what they considered normal. Modern activism has diversified the voices people hear, elevating the visibility of many issues and asking crucial questions about how marginalised communities are treated socially and economically. During a cost-of-living crisis and climate emergency, dismissing them because of “wokeness” may be a reflexive response to an overwhelming and seemingly endless culture war discourse. However, disengagement only helps those who benefit most from the status quo.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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