# Land of woke and glory? The British war on wokeness.

SMITH, D.

2024

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

## David S. Smith

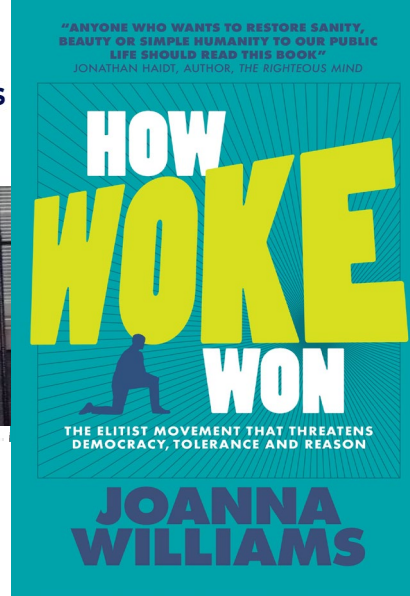### Adapted from Smith et al., (2024)

THE Sun | Menu ≡

**Esther McVey to lead 'anti woke agenda' in major role as Sunak appoints her 'Common Sense Tzar'**

NEWS | UK

Suella Braverman blames 'Guardian-reading, tofu-eating wokerati' for disruptive protests

**GB NEWS**
**BRITAIN'S NEWS CHANNEL**

"ANYONE WHO WANTS TO RESTORE SANITY, BEAUTY OR SIMPLE HUMANITY TO OUR PUBLIC LIFE SHOULD READ THIS BOOK"
JONATHAN HAIDT, AUTHOR, *THE RIGHTEOUS MIND*

**HOW WOKE WON**
THE ELITIST MOVEMENT THAT THREATENS DEMOCRACY, TOLERANCE AND REASON
**JOANNA WILLIAMS**

'Essential reading for anyone trying to make sense of the race debate'
*Sunday Times*

**WOKE RACISM**
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER
**How a New Religion Has Betrayed Black America**
**JOHN McWHORTER**

TV > News TV

**PC REX** Sir David Attenborough's BBC1 dinosaur show presents softer 'woke' version of the T-Rex

Rod McPhee
23:35, 13 Apr 2022 | Updated: 23:35, 13 Apr 2022

Sun tv

**AWAKE NOT WOKE**
★ CPAC

**Wokeness then and now**
Marcus Garvey (1923), Leadbelly (1938): William Melvin Kelley (1962)
2014: BLM slogan, following the murder of Michael Brown – "stay woke"
War on woke: "One of the biggest threats to modern civilisation" (Elon Musk, 2022)
Centre for Policy Studies (2021): the third most concerning belief, > homophobia
YouGov (2021) 12% UK identify as being woke; 60% do not know what it means

TALK TV

# 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**

- Anti-racist religion (McWhorter, 2021)
- Basking in work being complete (Boyce, 2019)
- 'Madness' taking over educational institutions (Peterson, 2021)
- The new elite (Goodwin, 2023), e.g., Gary Lineker, Carol Vorderman
- Perpetuated by privileged few elites for moral authority (Zizek, 2023)
- 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)

*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

*Triangulation*
- More holistic (Ayoub et al., 2014)
- Increases probability findings are credible (Nowell et al., 2017)
- Reduces overgeneralising, e.g., low trust in the press (Smith, 2023)

*Analysis*
- Thematic analysis:  salience vs frequency (Braun & Clarke, 2019)
- Latent coding: insight beyond standard semantic groupings

# Press analysis

## Method

- Lexis library 'news' articles
- May 2022, search term: woke
- Every tenth article download
- Filter for relevance/duplicates

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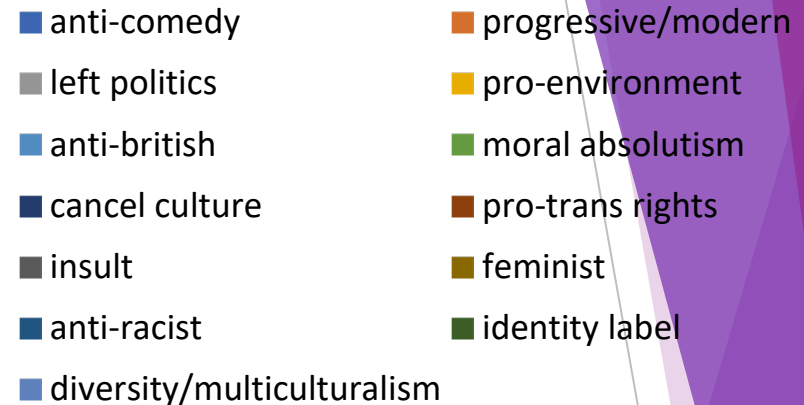- From regional/national newspapers

Analysed for:
1. Specific term
2. Meaning ascribed to the term
3. General context of the article

## Summary of use

- Used more by right-leaning press – derogatory label
- Byword for left-wing: gender identity, environmental, anti-racism, cancel culture
- Sometimes woke framed as anti-British, i.e., national identity = anti-woke
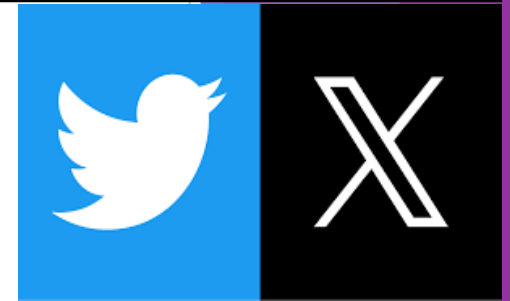
## Meaning of 'woke' in news articles

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

# Twitter analysis

**Method**

- Data gathered via Python + two modules:
    1. Snscrape: collects data from social media
    2. Pandas: exports data to Excel for examination

*Sample*
- May 2022 – search "woke" on Twitter
- Separate samples for each week – approx. 50,000 PW
- Randomised order of Tweets per week: cover range of topics
- First 300 relevant used tweets used in analysis, i.e., 1200 total
- Paraphrased: meaning and metaphor retained (Smith et al., 2022)
- No Geotags: Twitter = international platform
  - Only allows miles from post-code
  - Cannot control who is a visitor

**Summary of use**

- Very negative: 79% anti-woke (based on week 1)
- Trolling: sincere and sarcastic use – easy to tell apart (Aspray, 2019)
- Post-musk: increase in hate speech/decrease in moderation (Hickey et al., 2023)

# Survey analysis

**Findings**

- 116 participants recruited via social media

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
  - Wokenss 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?**

# Characterising wokeness

**Woke as a positive trait**

**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)

**Woke as a contrived or neutral trait**

**The anti-woke agenda**

"I won't EVER forgive white conservatives for stealing and bastardising the word." (Twitter)

**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 it conflicts with their business model"* (survey)

**Woke washing (Vredenburg et al., 2020)**
Disliked by woke & anti-woke alike: varied in perceived sincerity
Detachment between a company's purpose/values/practices and messaging

# Characterising wokeness

**Woke as a negative trait**

**The weak woke**

**The privileged woke**

**The woke agenda**

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

"Having been taught words can be violence, it is unsurprising that students campaign to have statues torn down or speakers banned from campus." (Sunday Express)

"Privileged white people who profess to empathise with POC but don't recognise the harm their policing of words/tone/opinion has." (Survey)

**The authoritarian woke**

"Walk the woke line or the SJWs will cancel you" (Twitter) Parallels: McCarthyism/fascism

**The religious woke**

"Witch hunts, denunciation of heretics, and demands for penance" (Survey)

- "Bleeding heart"
- Can't take a joke

- Pushed by elite unis
- No material analysis

**Woke institutions or groups**

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

# Discussion

**Conclusions**

- Contradictory: Feeble, privileged or elites?
    - Status quo a threat to status quo?

- Awareness, compassion vs. weakness, puritanism

- Power: Cultural insurgent vs. political/legal

- Imprecise: pressures facing different communities stripped of nuance
    - ➢ May reflexively dismiss all "woke" topics, e.g., trans rights, homophobia, climate change
    - ➢ Intentionally shrinking debate to woke vs unwoke (Cammaerts, 2022)

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

- Further research: Can woke vs. neutral framing impact support for policies?
    - ➢ 'Privilege' drops white support for renaming (Quarles & Bozarth, 2022)
    - ➢ Is near unanimity of media the real threat to free speech?

**Any questions?**