

Mapping Collective Cynicism: How Discourse Narrowing Undermines Institutional Trust on College Campuses

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1 Abstract

Student-run media offers a unique window into the evolving mindsets of future leaders and the sociocultural climate on college campuses. This paper applies state-of-the-art embedding and LLM-based text analysis to student opinion articles from eight leading US universities from 2010 to 2024, tracing shifts in sentiment and cynicism alongside changes in the diversity of discourse. Using sentiment analysis, semantic vector embeddings, lexicon-based scoring, and large language model classification grounded in Moral Foundations Theory, we detect a significant rise in cynical tone and negativity over time, alongside a measurable decline in the diversity of viewpoints within campus discourse. Our findings suggest that student writing has become increasingly homogenized and skeptical of institutional authority, reflecting broader undercurrents of eroding institutional trust and changing values. We discuss how correlating these linguistic trends with current events provides insight into potential drivers of sentiment shifts across colleges. This interdisciplinary study highlights how AI techniques can uncover hidden campus dynamics in text by combining computational tools with insights from psychology, sociology, and political science. Our results demonstrate a novel approach for educators and policy makers to monitor public trust, civic attitudes, and the health of discourse within institutions.

2 Introduction

Cynicism—an attitude of suspicion and mistrust toward the motives of others—poses a growing challenge to social cohesion and collaborative progress. In uncertain times, cynicism can become a default stance, undermining the moral and cooperative fabric of communities [1]. Recent analyses warn that Americans’ trust in key institutions is at a historic low. For example, a Harvard Youth Poll in 2024 found that a majority of young adults report trusting public institutions “only some of the time” or never [13]. This deepening mistrust of institutions [3] has grave implications: When people assume that institutions are self-interested or ineffective, collective action and democratic engagement suffer (cf. Zaki’s discussion of the growing societal cynicism [14]).

Universities provide a critical microcosm for examining how such attitudes develop and spread. Elite campuses like Stanford and the Ivy League universities have a tradition of open discourse, but are not immune to broader polarization

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and erosion of trust. Student newspapers like The Stanford Daily and The Harvard Crimson offer a rich archive of student opinion, reflecting evolving campus sentiments year by year. In these settings, cynicism might manifest as biting op-eds questioning administrative decisions, skeptical commentary on diversity and inclusion efforts, or general disillusionment with campus and national politics. Paradoxically, many universities in the past decade have intensified the message around diversity and inclusion, aiming to create welcoming environments for all voices. However, if only certain viewpoints are deemed acceptable within this discourse, students can perceive a gap between institutional rhetoric and reality. Our preliminary analysis of Stanford and Harvard opinion pieces found that as the talk of “diversity” increased, the range of perspectives narrowed, potentially breeding cynicism among students who feel unheard.

This study extends that initial insight to eight universities, asking: Why are we cynical and how is this reflected in student media? We quantitatively track lexical diversity (breadth of words and topics), semantic diversity (breadth of ideas), sentiment polarity, and moral foundations of cynicism in thousands of opinion articles from 2010–2024. We then compare patterns between institutions to identify cultural or contextual factors that might explain differences. By bridging computational text analysis with sociocultural interpretation, our goal is to shed light on the interplay between institutional narratives (like diversity initiatives) and student trust or skepticism. Our findings not only illuminate campus dynamics, but also carry broader implications for technology and society, including how media shapes trust and how emphasizing diversity of thought might combat growing cynicism.

3 Methodology

3.1 Data Collection

We collected opinion articles from the student newspapers of eight elite universities: Brown (Brown Daily Herald), Cornell (Cornell Daily Sun), Dartmouth (The Dartmouth), Harvard (The Harvard Crimson), Princeton (The Daily Princetonian), Stanford (The Stanford Daily), University of Pennsylvania (The Daily Pennsylvanian) and Yale (Yale Daily News). These institutions were chosen for their prominence and the availability of archives. Using custom web crawlers, we scraped all opinion section articles published from 2010 through 2024 for each newspaper. This timeframe (15 years) captures a full generation of student writers and several distinct socio-political periods (e.g., pre-2016, post-2016 election, pandemic era), allowing analysis of temporal trends. In total, our dataset comprised over ten thousand opinion articles (ranging from about 800 at the smallest corpus to over 2000 at the largest). Each article’s text was cleaned to remove author names, section headers, and other metadata not part of the opinion content. We retained punctuation and capitalization for sentiment analysis, and we tokenized the text for lexical analyses using the NLTK toolkit. For certain analyses, articles were grouped by year to examine yearly trends.

3.2 Semantic Diversity Analysis

We define semantic diversity as the breadth of ideas and topics discussed in the opinion articles, which we operationalize using embedding-based distance measures. Using a state-of-the-art language model for text embeddings (OpenAI’s text-embedding-3-large), we transformed each article into a 1536-dimensional semantic vector \mathbf{v} . In this embedding space, the cosine similarity between two article vectors indicates how similar their content is in meaning. For each year and each newspaper, we computed the average pairwise cosine distance ($1 - \text{cosine similarity}$) between all article vectors in that year’s corpus \mathcal{C} . This metric captures how far apart articles tend to be in topic/meaning; a larger average distance means articles cover more divergent subjects (higher semantic diversity), while a smaller distance means many articles cover similar ground (lower diversity). We normalized the calculation for the number of article pairs n ,

yielding a consistent “semantic diversity index” per year. We then analyzed the trajectory of this index over time for each institution.

We also conducted a clustering analysis on the embedding vectors. Using k-means clustering (with k chosen via silhouette scores for each corpus), we identified dominant thematic clusters of opinions within each university’s articles. The number of clusters and their content helped indicate how many distinct topics were regularly present. We observed whether the number of clusters or the distribution of topics changed over the years—for example, did the opinion sections move from a multitude of varied topics to just a few recurring themes? This qualitative check complemented the quantitative distance measure of semantic diversity.

3.3 Cynicism Classification and Moral Foundations

We attempted a direct classification of articles as “cynical” or “not cynical.” Rather than manually labeling hundreds of articles, we leveraged a large language model (LLM) (gpt-4o) in a zero-shot classification paradigm. We crafted a structured prompt incorporating Moral Foundations Theory to guide the LLM in identifying cynicism. The prompt described the hallmarks of cynicism (distrust, skepticism toward institutions, etc.) and asked the model to output whether the tone of a given article is cynical, and if so, which moral foundation the cynicism is most related to (Authority, Fairness, or Loyalty). This approach was inspired by recent work using LLMs for text classification with moral context . Specifically, we mapped: cynicism about Authority (e.g., disrespect or distrust toward leaders, administrators, government), cynicism about Fairness (e.g., complaints that systems are unjust, “rigged” or biased), and cynicism about Loyalty (e.g., feeling betrayed by one’s institution or community). The LLM output for each article included a flag for cynicism (yes/no) and the predominant foundation category if cynical.

We validated this automated classification by manually reviewing a sample of articles and the model’s judgment. The LLM was generally accurate in flagging overtly cynical pieces (e.g., an op-ed titled “The Administration’s Empty Promises” clearly was labeled cynical and tied to Authority/Subversion). However, there were occasionally borderline cases. For instance, satirical pieces were sometimes flagged as cynical due to their tone. We refined the prompt to clarify distinctions and ultimately achieved a consistent classification. Using this tool, we computed, for each year and each newspaper, the percentage of opinion articles classified as cynical. We also tallied which moral foundation was most frequently invoked in the cynical articles for each year.

By combining these methods—lexicon-based scoring, sentiment analysis, semantic clustering, and LLM classification—we created a multi-faceted picture of how cynicism is expressed and how it correlates with the breadth of discourse. Statistical analysis was performed in Python with pandas and SciPy: we report trends as significant if $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed) in the regressions over time.

4 Significance

Our research reveals a concerning trend: rising cynicism among college students, particularly at elite universities, amidst a growing emphasis on diversity and inclusion. This cynicism stems from a perceived disconnect between institutional rhetoric and actions, coupled with a shrinking space for diverse ideas and the influence of social media echo chambers.

To foster a more constructive and inclusive campus environment, we propose the following strategies:

- **Promote Viewpoint Diversity:** Actively encourage a wider range of perspectives in classrooms, discussions, and student media. Host structured debates or opinion essay competitions, ensuring multiple sides are represented.

- **Student Media Training and Support:** Provide training for student journalists and editors to recognize biases and promote balanced coverage. Encourage them to solicit op-eds from under-represented voices and publish point-counterpoint articles. Consider creating an ombudsperson role to monitor diversity and flag potential bias.
- **Institutional Transparency and Accountability:** Increase transparency in decision-making and follow through on promises. Invite student representatives to discussions on diversity initiatives to foster trust and collaboration.
- **Critical Media Literacy for Students:** Integrate media literacy and critical thinking training into the curriculum. Empower students to analyze arguments, recognize echo chambers, and contribute more nuanced opinions.

Future research could expand this analysis to a broader range of institutions and examine non-opinion articles to gain a more comprehensive understanding of campus climate. Developing sophisticated models for cynicism detection and conducting longitudinal intervention studies could directly inform best practices.

The rise of cynicism among today's youth signals a need for introspection in our educational communities. By leveraging insights from computational analysis and committing to genuine inclusivity, universities can strive to turn cynicism into constructive skepticism and reinvigorate trust and open-mindedness in the next generation.

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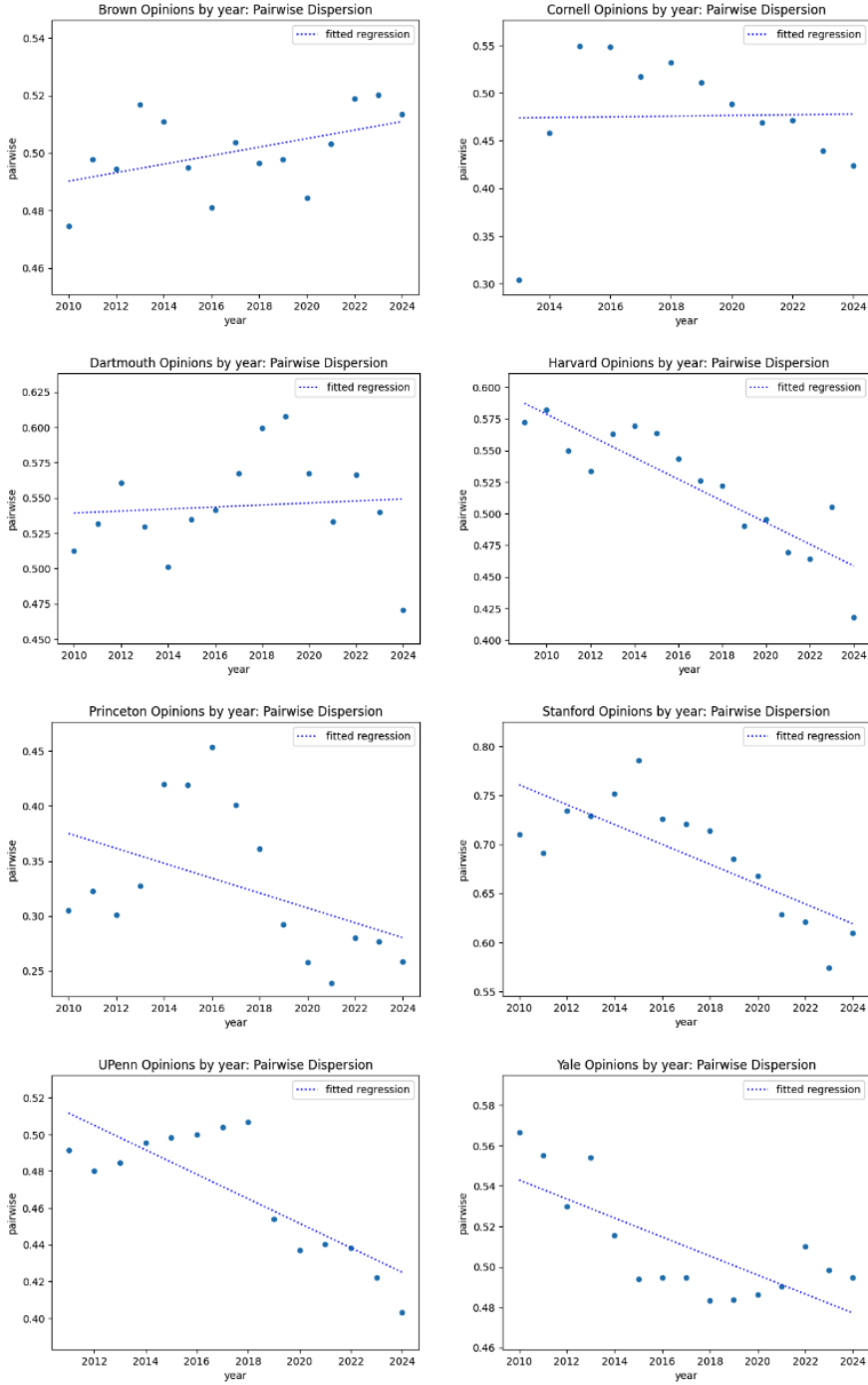


Fig. 1. Normalized opinion embedding pairwise dispersion

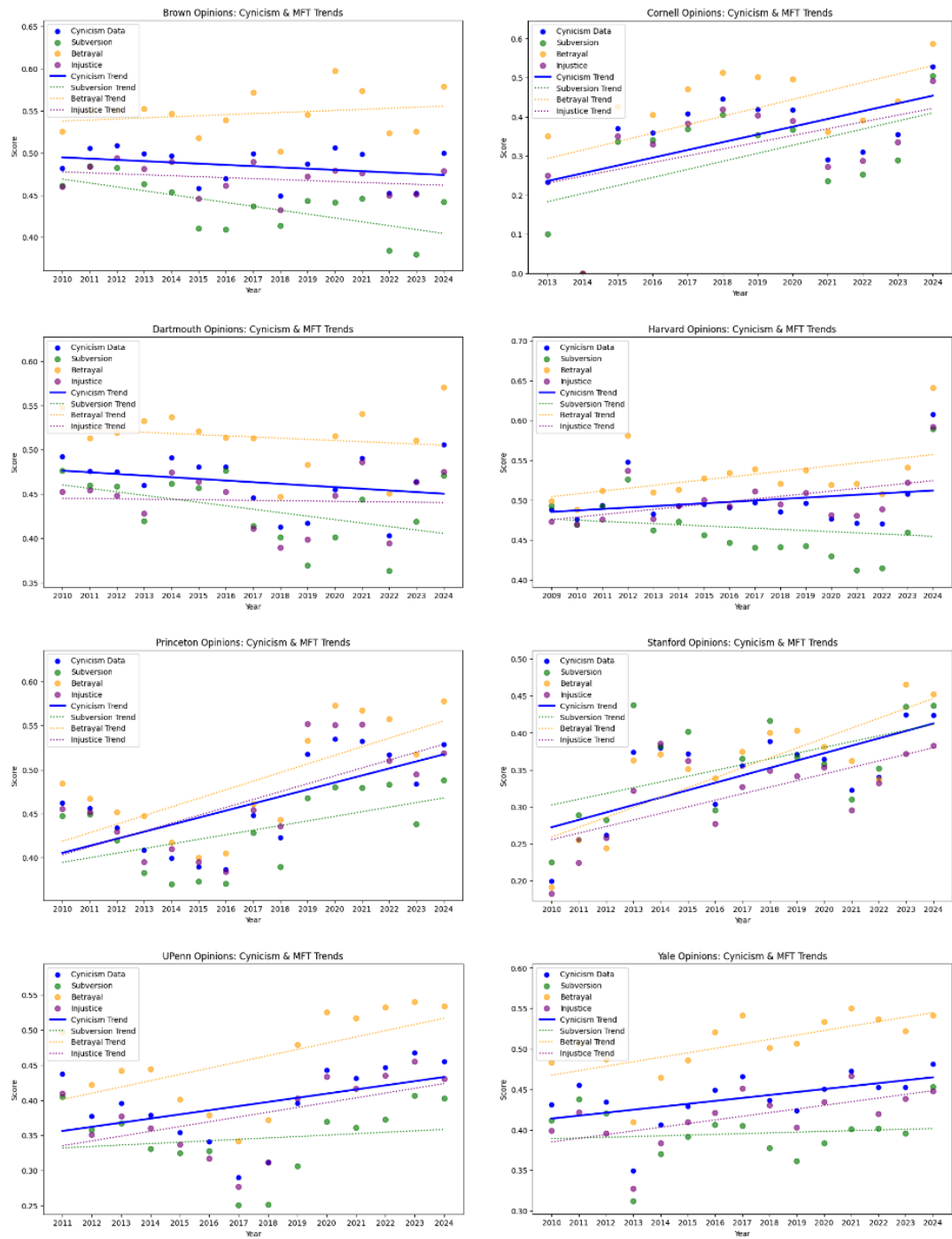


Fig. 2. Measuring cynicism using 3 key dimensions of Moral Foundation Theory