# 2023
# SCOTUS REPORT

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## Center for
## Strategic
## Communication

Montclair State
**SCM**

# Americans Reacted with Disgust and Sadness toward the SCOTUS' Recent Rulings

**By: Dr. Yi Luo, Dr. Bond Benton, Dr. Jin-A Choi, Dr. Keith Strudler and Keith Green**

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# Researchers

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Dr. Luo has conducted research in the areas of organizational change, sensemaking, leadership, social media and communication management, activism, organizational justice, and global public relations. Dr. Luo received her Ph.D. in Communication from the University of Maryland, College Park. Dr. Luo's research has been published or accepted to be published in Public Relations Review, Journal of Public Relations Research, International Journal of Strategic Communication, Journal of Applied Communication, New Media and Public Relations, Global Media Journal, and Asian Journal of Communication. Dr. Luo teaches a variety of courses in organizational communication and public relations such as Cases and Campaigns, Communication Theories, Communication Research, Global Public Relations, Public Relations Ethics, New Media Applications in Organizations, and Digital Production.

## Dr. Bond Benton
**Associate Professor, School of Communication and Media**

Dr. Benton's doctorate is from the University of Vienna with his dissertation focusing on the influence of culture on meaning. A particular focus of Dr. Benton's research is the interaction of media, branding, and cross-cultural communication as it relates to the values and decisions of constituencies. Dr. Benton's essays and research articles have appeared in journals and anthologies including The Journal of E-Learning and Digital Media, Public Relations Tactics, Cases in Public Relations Strategy, The Journal of Popular Culture, The Journal of Applied Security Studies, and Studies in Communication Sciences. His first book, The Challenge of Working for Americans: Perspectives of an International Workforce, was released in 2014.

## Dr. Jin-A Choi
**Assistant Professor, School of Communication and Media**

Dr. Choi received her PhD from the Stan Richards School of Advertising and Public Relations at the University of Texas at Austin. Dr. Choi's scholarship focuses on target advertising celebrity/social media influencer endorsements, digital advertising, text mining, and data analytics. Her research has been published in numerous conference proceedings, book chapters, and appears in journals such as Journal of Global Marketing, Communication Studies, and Journal of Media Psychology among others. Dr. Choi teaches a variety of undergraduate and graduate courses such as Social Media Analytics, Influencers and Opinion Leaders and Integrated Communications.

## Dr. Keith Strudler
**Director, School of Communication and Media**

Dr. Keith Strudler joined Montclair State University in 2017 as the director of the School of Communication and Media, where he oversees the continued growth of a broad range of majors, programs, partnerships, and co-curricular activities, working collaboratively with a nationally regarded faculty and staff as well as industry and community partners. Dr. Strudler received his Ph.D. in Mass Communication from the University of Florida, an MEd from the University of St. Thomas (Houston), and his BA in English from Cornell University.

## Keith Green
**Coordinator of Stragetic Communications, School of Communication and Media**

Green is a two-time graduate of Temple University, where he earned a B.A. in Journalism and M.Ed. in Sports Administration. Over more than three decades, his career includes executive positions at the Philadelphia 76ers, NASCAR, and Guinness World Records, where he was a creative driving force around promotional, public relations and community outreach efforts for those companies and their clients and corporate partners. In his current role at Montclair State, he also leads Hawk Communications, a student-run firm that allows its practitioners to gain hands-on experience in PR, promotional and social media tactics. He also oversees the operations for the Joetta DiBella and Fred C. Sautter III Center for Strategic Communication.

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# Introduction

  The 4th of July holds a special place in the hearts of Americans as they celebrate unity and the defining values (e.g., freedom, equality, and liberty) upon which the nation was built. For some, however, this year's celebratory spirit was perhaps dampened by despair and sadness, two emotions expressed on social media by many Americans over the two recent landmark rulings by the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS).

  On June 29, SCOTUS struck down affirmative action, ruling the race-conscious admissions programs at colleges and universities unconstitutional (Barnes, 2023; Liptak, 2023). Then, on June 30, SCOTUS handed down another landmark ruling which outlawed student loan forgiveness and terminated President Biden's plan to provide student loan reliefs for tens of millions of Americans (Barnes & Douglass-Gabriel, 2023). This high court's decision on student loans will likely affect one in eight Americans (Turner, 2023), leaving student loan borrowers feeling frustrated, defeated, and angry (Carrillo & Lee, 2023; Pager, 2023). As the nation contends with existing divides on a range of political, cultural, and social fronts, these two

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momentous rulings seemed to intensify the remarkable depth of political divisiveness in the United States (Cavaliere, 2023).

These recent rulings have triggered angst among both proponents and opponents of two highly politically and socially charged issues: affirmative action and student debts (Bernstein, 2023; Cavaliere, 2023; Espinoza, 2023). As online media have increasingly played a central role in facilitating civic engagement and shaping individuals' decisions on contested issues (Lee, 2022; Zhang et al., 2022), it is thus valuable to examine how social media users have reacted toward these two landmark decisions by SCOTUS. Specifically, we seek to explore the following questions:

RQ1: What are the general sentiments among Americans toward the SCOTUS' recent rulings?

RQ2: What are the major topics related to the SCOTUS' recent rulings trending across social media platforms?

# Method

To probe the above questions, researchers at the Center for Strategic Communication at Montclair State University's School of Communication and Media utilized social media data analytics platforms Keyhole and Brandwatch, which specialize in uncovering business insights and trends through AI-powered social listening. Particularly, this study examined more than 150,000 social conversations between June 27 and July 3, 2023 that occurred on major social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, Twitter, etc.). The research team built search queries on Keyhole and Brandwatch to discover how social media users in the U.S. conversed about the Supreme Court's recent two landmark rulings regarding Affirmative Action and Student Loan Forgiveness. Trending hashtags, key words, and mentions surrounding each topic (e.g., #AffirmativeAction, #affirmative, #SCOTUSRuling, college loan forgiveness, #StudentLoan, #studentloandebt, etc.) were employed to build relevant search queries[1].

# Results

Explosive Increase of Social Conversations

The 7-day period (June 27 – July 3, 2023) witnessed an explosive spike of conversations related to both topics -- "Affirmative Action" and "Student Loan Forgiveness" -- across social media platforms. Unique social posts about "Affirmative Action" surged 8610% (see Figure 1) with the peak volume reaching over 40k on June 29, compared to the previous week's meager 647 posts. A similar astonishing rate of increase was also found among social media users commenting on "Student Loan Forgiveness." A staggering increase of 13k% (see figure 2) for unique authored social media posts on SCOTUS' student debt ruling was recorded from June 27 to July 3, with the peak volume hitting over 30k social posts, a sharp contrast to the previous week's 210 posts. Twitter was the dominant platform for such social conversations compared to other social media platforms such as Facebook, Reddit, Tumblr, blog sites, YouTube, and others.
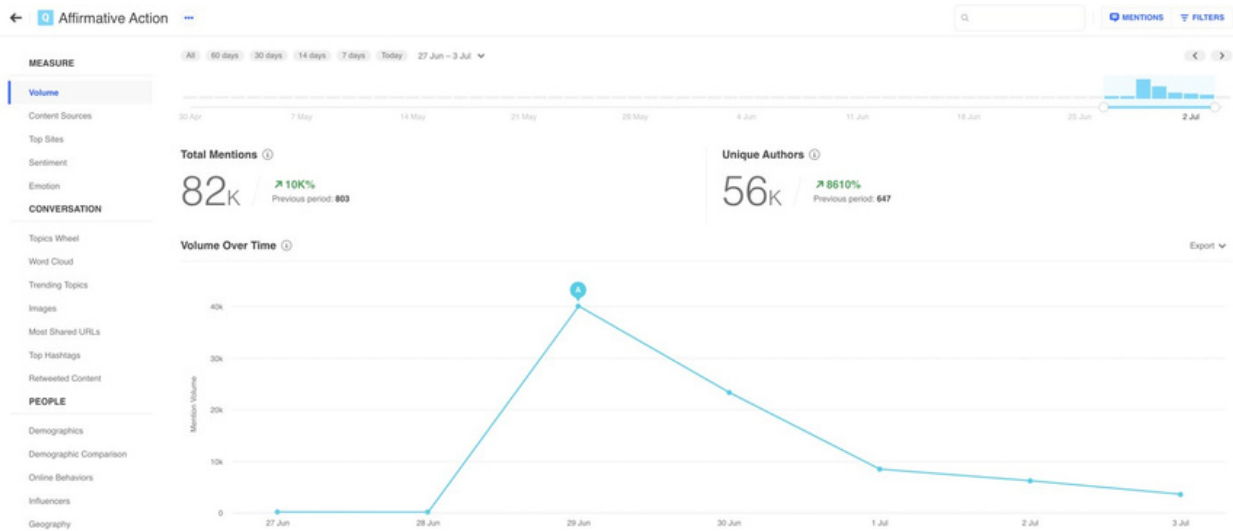
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[1]All search queries were geographically limited to the U.S.

# Results

Figure 1: Social Media Conversations Volume regarding "Affirmative Action"
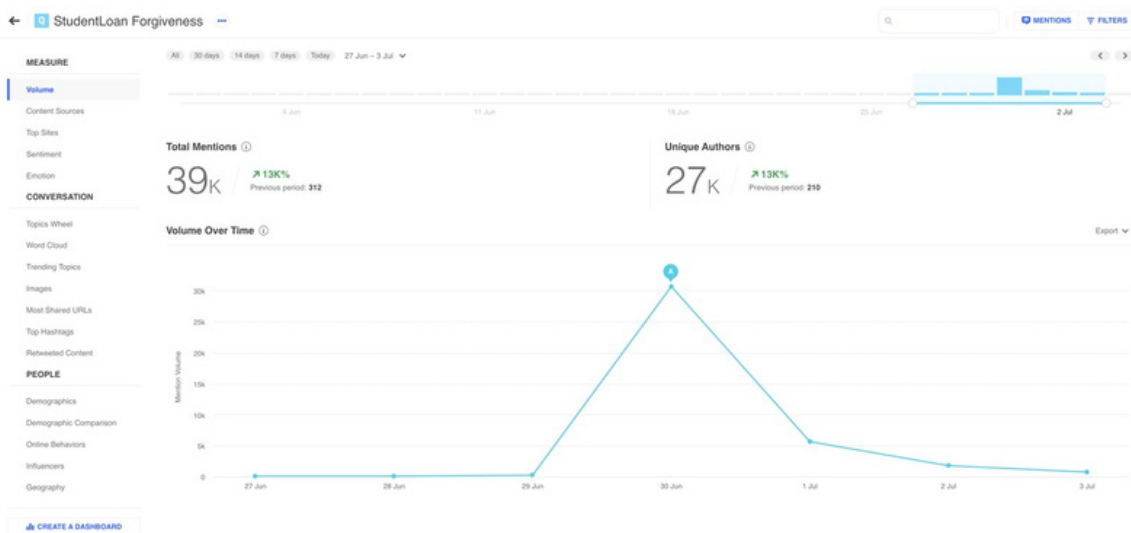
# Results

Figure 2: Social Media Conversations Volume regarding "Student Loan Forgiveness"



### Disgust and Sadness Characterizing Online Users

In response to the two SCOTUS rulings, American social media users most prominently exhibited sentiments of disgust and sadness. On the topic and ruling of "Affirmative Action," the sentiments of disgust and sadness saw an astounding increase of 19,483% and 25,085% respectively (see Figure 3), with sadness being the most widely expressed sentiment. Feelings of disgust, sadness, and anger accounted for 72% (see Chart 1) of the emotions expressed by users

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across major social media platforms on these two rulings. Specifically, the feeling of sadness identified among social media users was associated with the following constructs: disparities among different races in college admissions, institutional blocks facing Black people, unfair legacy admission practices, compositions of supreme court justices, disillusion of achieving racial justice, and other practices based on race perceived as unfair. Feeling of disgust among online users appeared to be associated with the following constructs: dissatisfaction with current problematic practices and policies (such as existing racial preferences), lack of substantive support for Black people, discrimination based on race, and hypocritical admission policies. Notably, a sizable number of social posts expressed sadness as well as disgust about the impact of reversing affirmative action in eroding racial equity in higher education.
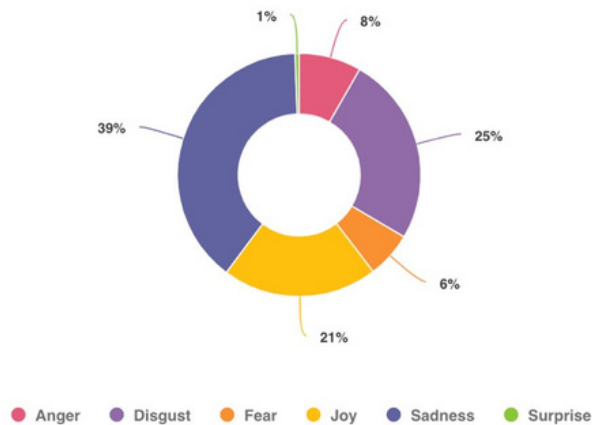
Figure 3: Emotions Breakdown for Social Media Conversations Related to "Affirmative Action"
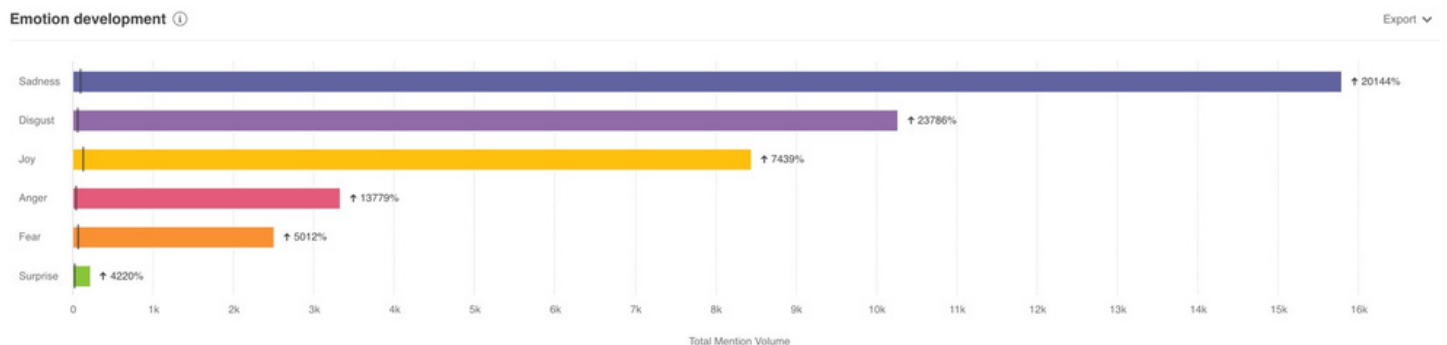
# Results

Chart 1: Pie Chart of Emotion Breakdown for Social Media Conversations Related to "Affirmative Action
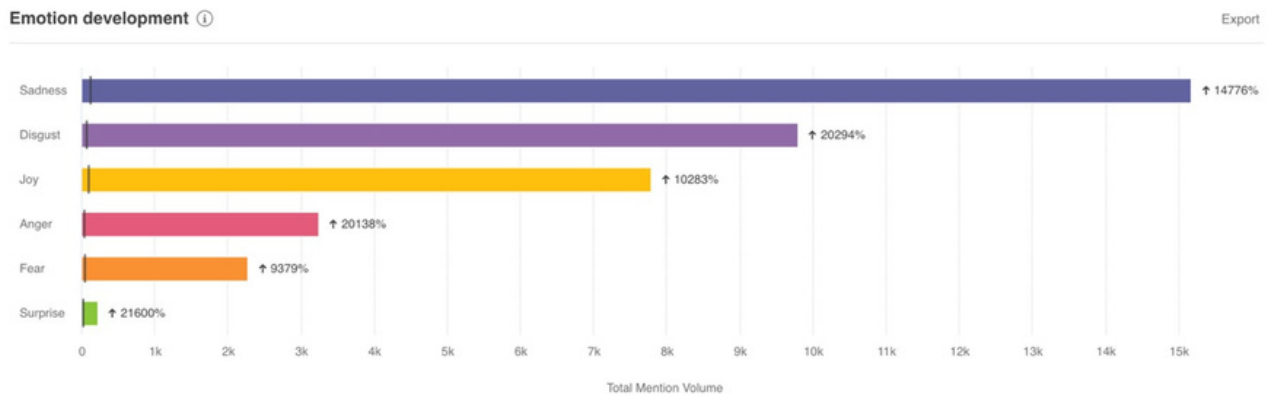


Results regarding American social media users' sentiments about "Student Loan Forgiveness" showed similar patterns (see Figure 4). Particularly, the dominant sentiment of sadness experienced an increase of 14,776%. A considerable number of social media users lamented what they perceived as inconsistent and hypocritical practices on loan forgiveness granted to celebrities, billionaires, politicians, and mega corporations.

# Results

Figure 4: Emotions Breakdown for Social Media Conversations Related to "Student Loan Forgiveness"



**Emotion development** ⓘ

Export

| Emotion | | Value |
|---|---|---|
| Sadness | | ↑ 14776% |
| Disgust | | ↑ 20294% |
| Joy | | ↑ 10283% |
| Anger | | ↑ 20138% |
| Fear | | ↑ 9379% |
| Surprise | | ↑ 21600% |

Total Mention Volume

**Trending Topics**

Interestingly, trending conversations across various social platforms regarding these two impactful SCOTUS rulings invariably focused on unjust social and institutional practices, such as preferential treatment, racial preferences, or elite privilege (see Figure 5 and Figure 6). On the topic of "Affirmative Action," discussions of Black people related to racism, rights, success, students, and admission processes have increased 92% in the chosen period. Barack and Michelle Obama's responses on Twitter on SCOTUS' overturning affirmative action garnered the highest engagement (see Figure 7).
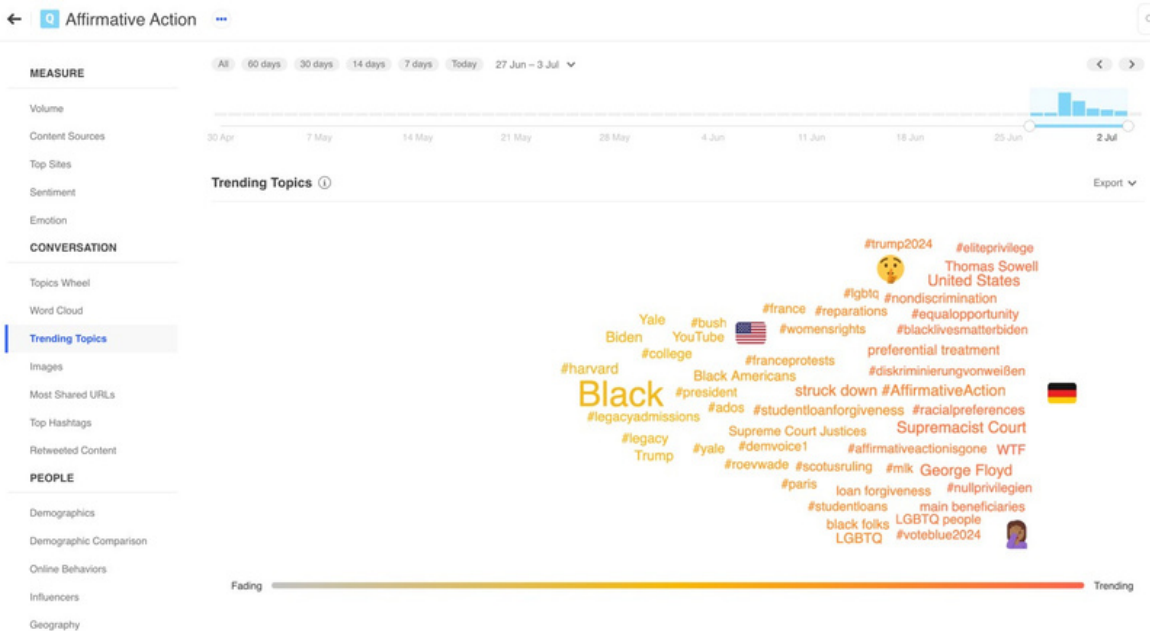
Regarding the topic of "Student Loan Forgiveness," users flooded to social media to

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denounce perceived hypocrisy of forgiving PPP loans for wealthy Americans, politicians, corporations, and celebrities. There was also trending discussion of the perceived negative future impact of this ruling on America. An example of this came from @EricLeiderman's tweet that reached 1 million users: "By striking down student loan debt, the US is likely to enter an immediate rescission this fall when tens of millions of Americans will resume payment of loans in place of their current disposable income. #SCOTUS #StudentLoanForgiveness."
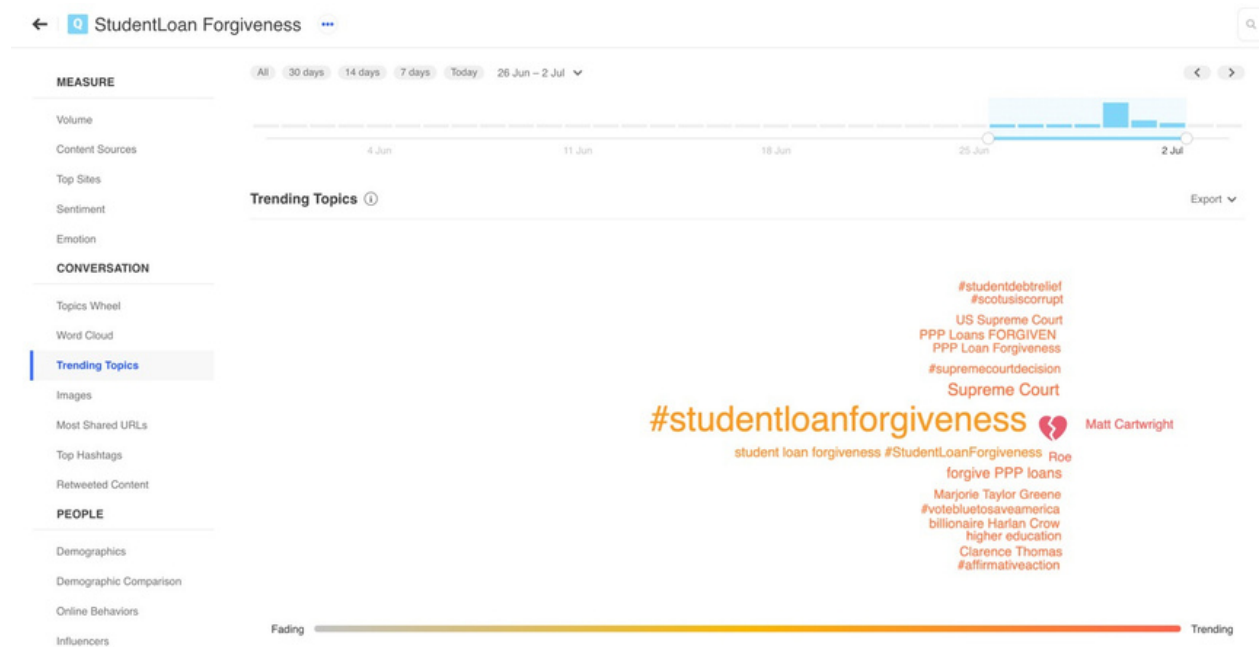
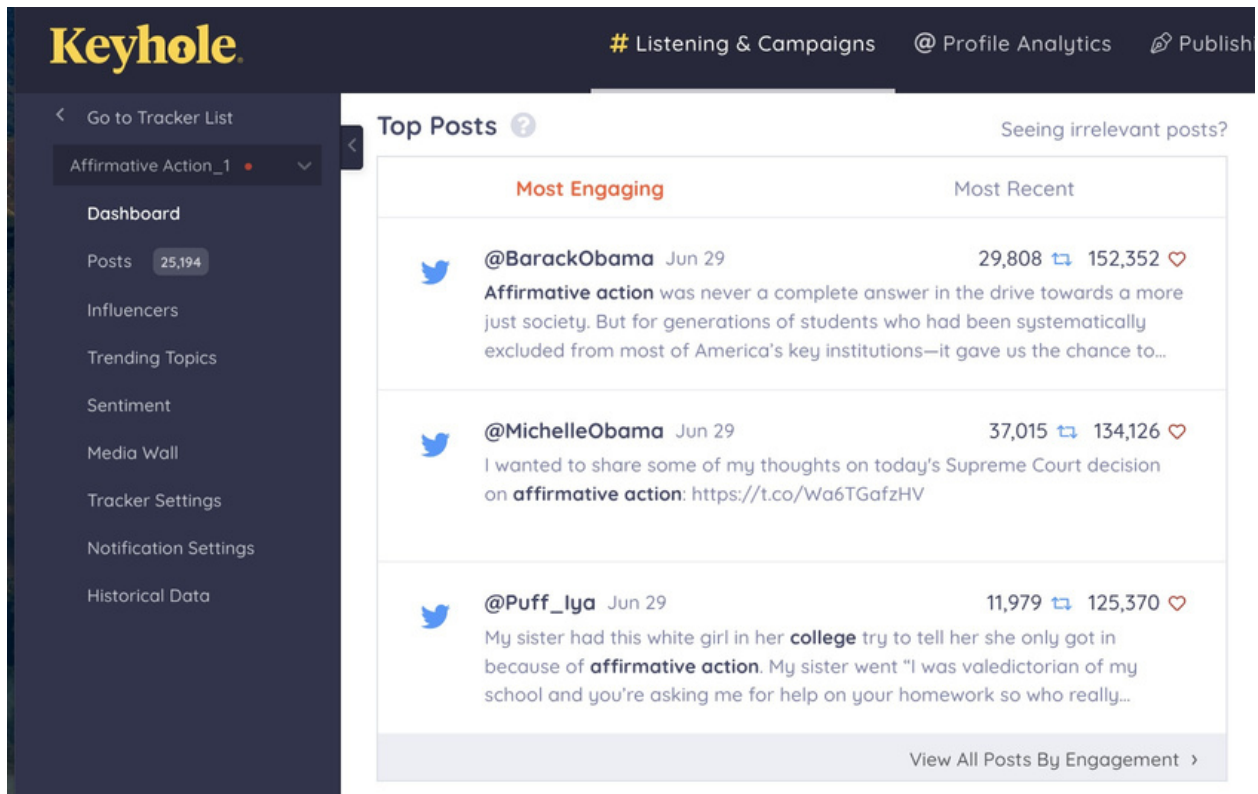Figure 5: Trending Topics for "Affirmative Action"

# Results

Figure 6: Trending Topics for "Student Loan Forgiveness"

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Figure 7: Most Engagement Posts Related to "Affirmative Action"

# Discussions

According to our findings, these two recent Supreme Court decisions have triggered a dramatic increase of negative feelings among Americans who used social media platforms to increasingly discuss these topics. This data suggests that Americans are feeling particularly divided over both ruling, driven by feelings of sadness and disgust over perceptions of unfairness, challenges of achieving diversity, and questions of discriminatory practices. Beyond and in conjunction with these sentiments, there were also increasing calls for advocacy against these rulings, as online users increasingly advocated participation in future political elections. Two such calls came from the use of #votebluetosaveAmerica and #vote2024. Therefore, this research suggests that these SCOTUS rulings could have a behavioral impact on political engagement and voting behaviors in the upcoming 2024 election cycle.

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# SCOTUS Report

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*Thank You!*

About the School of Communication and Media: Founded in 2012, the School of Communication and Media offers a range of dynamic programs in communication and media to a talented and diverse student population of over 1,800. Offering degrees in film and television, social media and public relations, advertising, journalism and digital media, sports communication, communication and media studies, animation and visual effects, and an MA in public and organizational relations, the School prepares the next generation of communication and media practitioners and leaders. The School houses award-winning student programs that include WMSC Radio, The Montclarion newspaper, Hawk Communications Agency, the Red Hawk Sports Network, Hawk+ OTT streaming platform, and News Lab, as well as the Center for Cooperative Media, which serves the public by working to grow and strengthen local journalism. Student projects and programs have recently received national recognition from PRSSA's Bateman Competition, an Edward R Murrow Award, several Marconi Award nominations, and a College Television Award from the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences.