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THE STUDENT DEBT DILEMMA REPORT

INSIGHTS FROM SOCIAL MEDIA ON THE NEED FOR MORE EFFECTIVE RELIEF SOLUTIONS

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified focus on the critical issue of student loan debt, which totals $1.7 trillion nationwide and affects over 45 million borrowers, prompting unprecedented relief measures. While the initial pause on student loan repayments was widely welcomed, the following relief proposals—such as the Biden administration's debt cancellation and more generous income-based repayment plans—have become focal points of political and legal debate.

This report analyzes public sentiment surrounding these developments by examining millions of online conversations using advanced social listening tools. Conducted collaboratively at Babson College, the study leverages Brandwatch—a leading platform traditionally used for market analysis—to explore public discourse on this critical social issue. By integrating artificial intelligence (AI) and natural language processing (NLP) technologies, the report contributes to the emerging field of using AI-driven tools to gauge public attitudes on significant societal matters. The goal is to assess the effectiveness of these platforms in analyzing sentiment beyond commercial applications, providing insights into a range of social and political issues.

Key findings

1. **Predominant Negative Sentiment Reflects Widespread Dissatisfaction:** The analysis reveals a pervasive negative sentiment toward current student loan relief policies, extending even among those who might be expected to support such measures. Following President Biden's debt cancellation announcement, 50% of online conversations were negative, with only 3% positive. Similarly, after the Supreme Court blocked the plan, negative reactions persisted from both supporters and opponents. The intensity of negativity exceeds what is commonly attributed to the general negativity bias prevalent on social media platforms. This heightened negative response suggests that the scope and complexity of the student loan debt crisis render it exceptionally challenging to address in a manner that meets public expectations, leading to polarized reactions regardless of specific policy initiatives.

2. **Significant Spikes in Public Discourse Correlate with Key Events:** The analysis identified over 8.28 million mentions of student loans between June 2022 and June 2024, with major spikes following key policy events—nearly 1.4 million mentions after the debt cancellation announcement in August 2022 and around 800,000 after the Supreme Court ruling in June 2023. These spikes underscore strong public interest and highlight that major news events drive social media activity. However, the underlying discontent suggests that deeper systemic issues remain unaddressed.

3. **Deep-Seated Dissatisfaction with Loan Servicers Compounds Frustration:** The report uncovers substantial dissatisfaction with loan servicers, particularly MOHELA and Nelnet. MOHELA, managing 22% of borrowers' accounts by 2024, received over 71,000 social media mentions, 52% of which were negative. Common grievances included service delays, poor communication, and technical issues, exacerbating borrower anxiety, especially as repayment schedules resumed. This dissatisfaction underscores systemic problems in loan servicing that intensify the broader challenges of the student debt crisis.

4. **Broader Economic Factors Fuel the Crisis:** The student debt crisis is intertwined with broader economic issues such as rising education costs, stagnant wages, and reduced public funding for higher education. These factors have made debt repayment a significant burden for many, fueling debates about the fairness and sustainability of current policies. Public sentiment reflects deep-rooted frustrations with these systemic challenges, emphasizing the need for comprehensive solutions that address the root causes.

Conclusion

The findings reveal that temporary fixes and partial relief measures for the student loan crisis have not only fallen short of public expectations but have also generated widespread frustration and polarization. The predominantly negative sentiment—even among those who typically support relief efforts—signals a clear demand for more substantial and innovative solutions that address the underlying causes of the crisis. Systemic issues such as rising education costs, stagnant wages, and flawed loan servicing systems complicate debt management and exacerbate the situation, emphasizing the need for improved oversight, transparency, and comprehensive policy reforms. Without confronting these root problems, public dissatisfaction will persist, and polarization around student debt relief will intensify.

Although AI-powered sentiment analysis tools like Brandwatch provide valuable insights, the study acknowledges their limitations in capturing the full nuances of public discourse. Potential biases and the complexity of online conversations require cautious interpretation of the data. A more nuanced analysis is needed to fully understand the drivers of public sentiment and to inform effective, data-driven policy recommendations.

Ultimately, this study underscores the critical need for comprehensive strategies that address both the symptoms and underlying factors of the student debt crisis. By leveraging advanced analytical tools and acknowledging their limitations, policymakers and stakeholders can better understand public attitudes and craft solutions that align with the needs and expectations of borrowers across the United States.

Full Report

As the United States faced the unique challenges of the pandemic, the critical issue of student loan debt, amounting to $1.7 trillion for 45 million borrowers, received heightened focus. The student debt crisis highlights broader economic problems in the U.S.: namely, rising education costs and the difficulty of loan repayment amid stagnant wages. The crisis has deepened over decades, exacerbated by reduced public funding for higher education. This chronic underfunding forced many American families to incur debt, contributing to student loan balances surpassing all other consumer credit growth and becoming the second-largest category of household debt after mortgages. While policies like the income-driven repayment (IDR) plans were developed to alleviate borrowers' strain and improve financial health, they are complex and hard to navigate, challenges compounded by the inefficiencies and self-interest of the student loan servicers contracted by the government to oversee these accounts.

Recognizing the combined economic impact of looming student loan payments and hardships stemming from the pandemic, one of the Trump administration's early actions in March 2020 was to pause student loan repayments and waive interest through executive power, providing immediate relief to borrowers with federal loans. Private student loans, however, were not covered as they fall outside government control. The CARES Act continued this policy, instructing the U.S. Secretary of Education to extend the federal loan payment suspension until September 30, 2020. The Trump administration later prolonged this pause to January 31, 2021. Upon entering office in January 2021, President Biden announced further extensions, resulting in a total of eight through November 22, 2023.

President Biden's presidential campaign centered on a promise of comprehensive student loan relief through widespread debt cancellation. After extensive debates over the legal authority to cancel student debt, the Biden administration announced a plan in August 2022 to cancel up to $20,000 in debt for Pell Grant recipients and $10,000 for other borrowers via executive action. This plan faced significant political and legal challenges, ultimately leading to a Supreme Court decision blocking the debt cancellation. Below is a detailed timeline from April 2022 to June 2024, highlighting the period when discussions on student debt relief intensified, and the analysis that follows will take a specific focus on these two critical moments

Timeline of Students Loan Debt Relief Efforts and Legal Obstacles

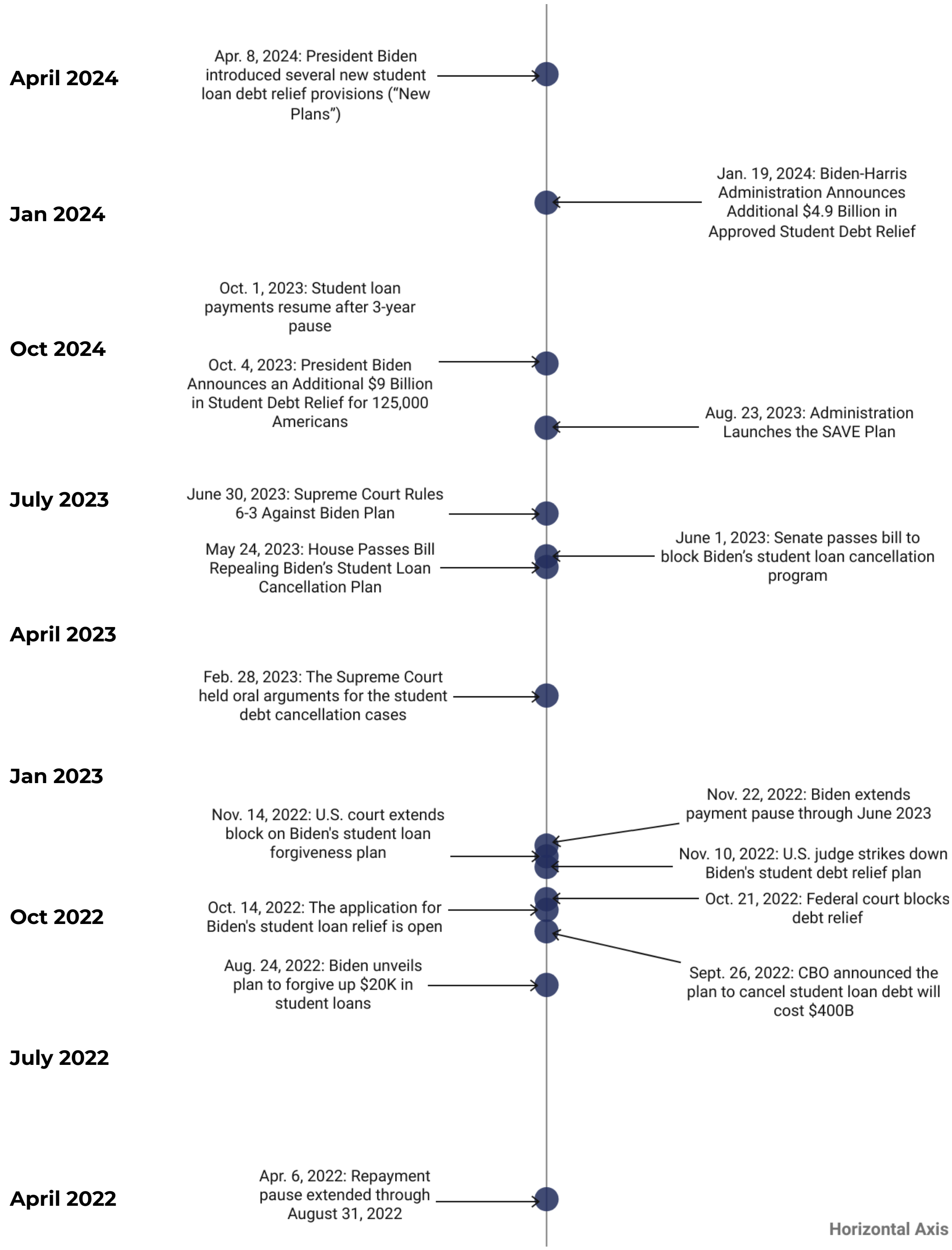


Chart: Hildreth Institute - Source: Complied by the Author from Various News Reports - Created with Datawrapper

As efforts to provide student debt relief and cancellation spearheaded by President Biden became increasingly contentious, the discourse on social media platforms became more polarized. Today more than half of U.S. adults, especially those younger than 49, routinely access their news on social media. This shift towards social media for information dissemination has heightened concerns about its role in amplifying political polarization and vice versa.

According to a 2022 poll, 2 in 5 borrowers overall (41%) report having trouble in the past working with servicers, and 33% report having received bad, misleading or fraudulent information about student loans or repayment plans. According to the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, the most frequent complaints about student loans stem from issues with lenders or servicers. The last section of this report will focus on the volume of conversations by student loan servicers as during the pandemic, further confusion was recorded regarding the extensions of repayment pauses, proposed changes to the federal loan program, and various forgiveness initiatives, such as the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program.

Against this backdrop, the study delves into the volume of social media conversations about student loan relief, tracking fluctuations in response to specific policy announcements or news events and examining the nature of these discussions. The research aims to dissect the prevailing sentiments within these conversations, providing insights into how the public perceives these debt relief measures.

Methodology

This study was conducted as a collaborative classroom initiative at Babson College, involving various student teams under the guidance of Professor McGuirk, an expert in data science and AI-enabled social listening platforms. The project utilized Brandwatch, one of the leading social listening platforms used by analysts and market research professionals providing organizations with the ability to understand consumer opinions, trends, and behaviors across the internet. Brandwatch's consumer intelligence platform contains 1.7 trillion historical conversations dating back to 2010 with 500 million new conversations collected every day. The data is collected through a diverse suite of sources such as social media sites, blogs, reviews, news, and forums. The platform analyzes the data, tracks mentions, understands sentiment, and identifies trends in real-time, providing insights into public perception and emerging issues.

Query Formation

Each team explored the same research questions (see Appendix 1) and developed their own queries. A query consists of search strings designed to match conversations related to a specific topic of interest. These queries use Boolean operators and search functions to filter data relevant to the topic.

The one aspect that varied was the volume of mentions. Narrower queries resulted in fewer posts but maximized data accuracy and relevance. In contrast, broader queries captured a significantly larger discussion volume—up to 2 million mentions weekly, four times the amount identified by the stricter queries. Despite this difference, even broader queries showed remarkably consistent trend lines, peaks, lows, and sentiments.

This consistency across different query scopes attests to the reliability of the insights gathered. It reinforces our confidence in the accuracy of the identified public sentiments, demonstrating that the data reliably reflects the studied topics, regardless of the query's scope, thereby validating the collective findings.

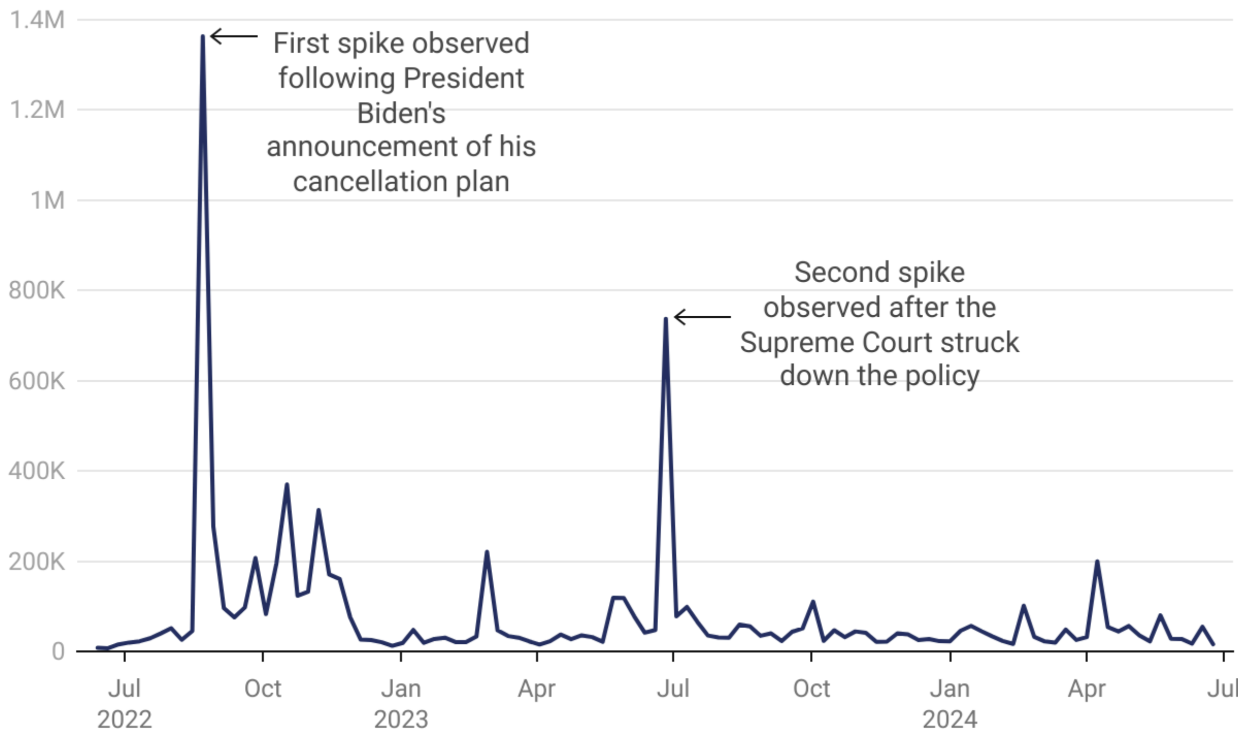
Analysis

The findings presented below were generated by Prof. McGuirk, who developed a query informed by the students' experimentation. He vetted both the results and their interpretation. The authors of this report have synthesized and compiled these results and findings.

In the time period studied (June 2022 to June 2024), the analysis captured 8.28 million mentions of student loans. There were two significant peak periods:

1. The first spike occurred the week of August 22nd, 2022, with almost 1.4 million conversations following President Biden's announcement of his cancellation plan.
2. The second major resurgence in discussions took place the week of June 26th, 2023, when the Supreme Court struck down the policy, resulting in nearly 800,000 conversations.

Volume of Student Loan Related Conversations



Source: Graph generated by the Hildreth Institute using data gathered by a Collaborative Classroom Project with Professor M. McGuirk at Babson College utilizing the Brandwatch Software • Created with Datawrapper

It is interesting to note that although over 20 million federal student loan borrowers began making payments for the first time in three years in October 2023, reporting widespread issues, by far the most pronounced spikes in interest corresponded to significant news events related to debt cancellation. According to the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, the repayment restart caused an 87% increase in complaints about federal student loans. Borrowers reported persistent difficulties accessing customer service, delays in refunds for payments made during the COVID-19 payment pause, processing delays for different repayment programs, and problems with qualifying payment counts for forgiveness programs. Despite these significant issues, they were not fully reflected in social media conversations. This suggests that spikes in discussions are more related to news and policy changes than to personal struggles.

Below, we provide a detailed analysis of these and other spikes, explaining their correspondences. We also delve into the sentiment analysis of these discussions over time, detailing weekly mention volumes to better understand reactions to specific news and announcements.

About Sentiment Analysis

Sentiment Analysis is the process used to determine the emotional tone conveyed in a body of text, helping to understand the attitudes, opinions, and emotions expressed within an online mention. Brandwatch leverages an advanced AI methodology combining deep learning and NLP to classify sentiments as positive, negative, or neutral. This method examines linguistic features such as word choice, sentence structure, and context for precise sentiment interpretation. Despite its sophisticated analysis of language use and context, sentiment analysis remains subjective, with even human interpretation showing about 80% agreement in clear-cut cases like tweets. Brandwatch's system, aiming for reliability, typically achieves 60-75% accuracy, depending on language and context.

Sentiment Analysis Categorizes Text into Three Primary Sentiments

Negative

Captures expressions of unfavorable emotions such as dissatisfaction or anger, indicating a critical or adverse response.

Neutral

Applies to texts that express neither positive nor negative emotions, often factual or indifferent in nature, providing an objective standpoint.

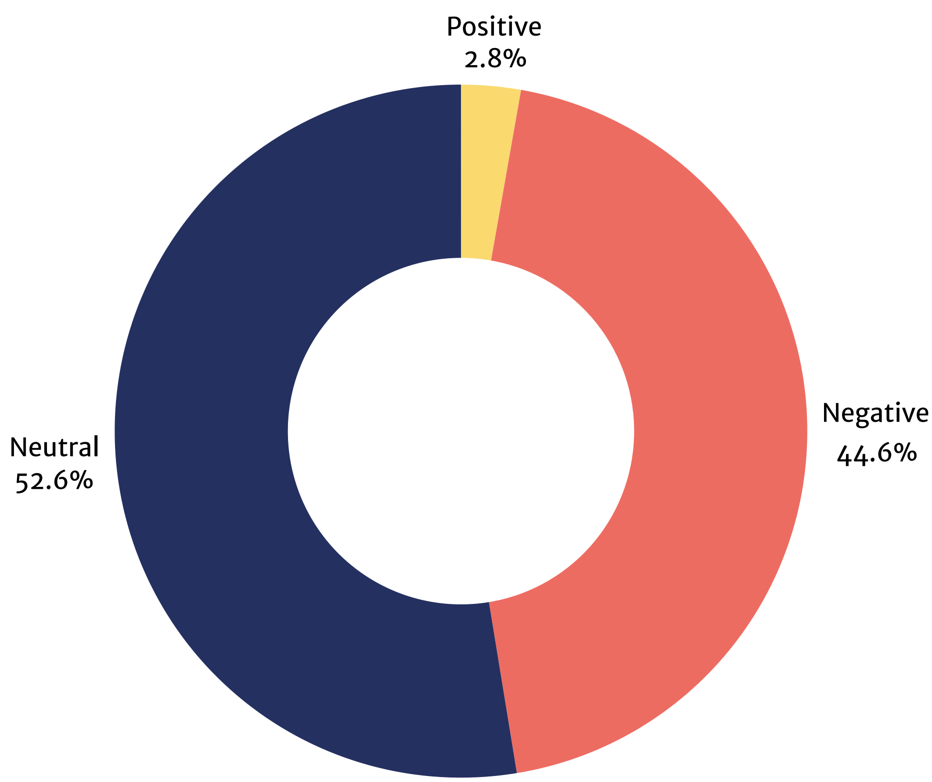
Positive

Identifies expressions of favorable emotions like approval or joy, suggesting a positive reaction or satisfaction with the subject matter.

The graph below shows that over the two-year time period studied, 53 percent of the content on student loan debt was neutral, 45 percent was negative and 3 percent was positive. It is unsurprising that a majority of the content was categorized as neutral since much of it is attributed to news outlets disseminating information through their various online platforms, as the frequency of announcements and political discussions regarding student loan debt escalated. However, it is somewhat unexpected that despite comprehensive efforts for student debt relief – including the announcement of debt cancellation and the substantial cancellation of student loans through targeted improvements to repayment programs, such as the Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) —posts expressing positive sentiments only constituted three percent of the discourse online.

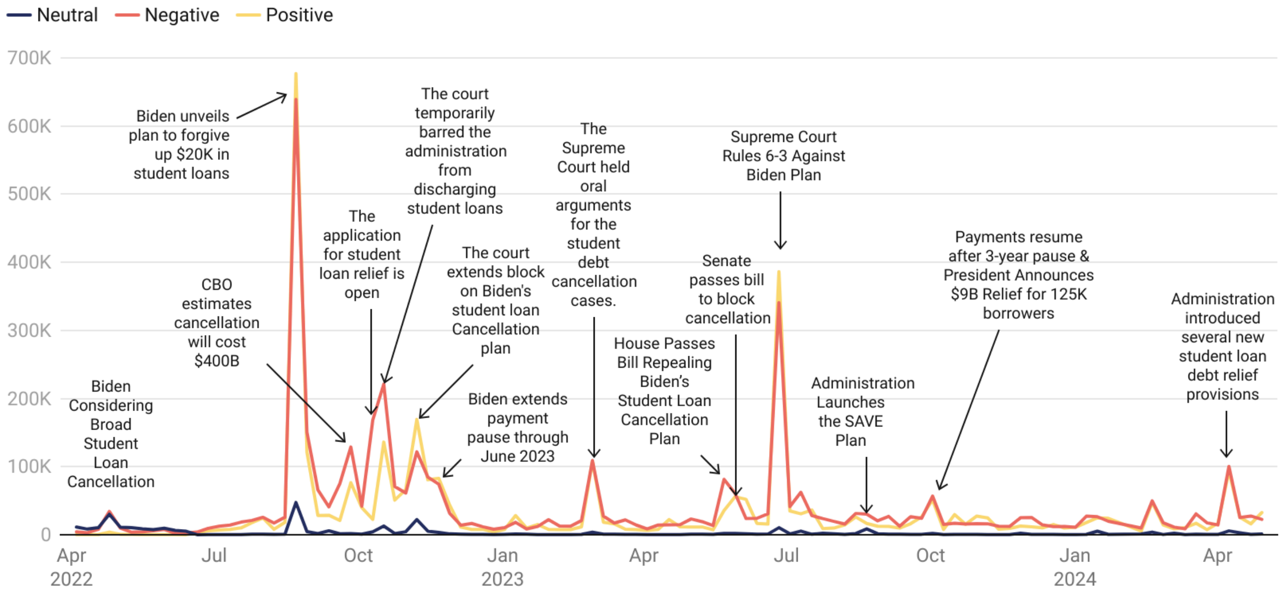
Overall Sentiment Analysis

Sentiment breakdown of Conversations on Student Loans in the United States



Source: Graph generated by the Hildreth Institute using data gathered by a Collaborative Classroom Project with Professor M. McGuirk at Babson College utilizing the Brandwatch Software • Created with Datawrapper

Mention Volume over Time Broken Down by Sentiment



Source: Graph generated by the Hildreth Institute using data gathered by a Collaborative Classroom Project with Professor M. McGuirk at Babson College utilizing the Brandwatch Software • Created with Datawrapper

The First Spike: President Biden Announces Broad Debt Cancellation

In the week following the announcement of President Biden's debt cancellation plan, the conversation was predominantly negative: 50% of mentions were negative, 47% were neutral, and only 3% were positive.

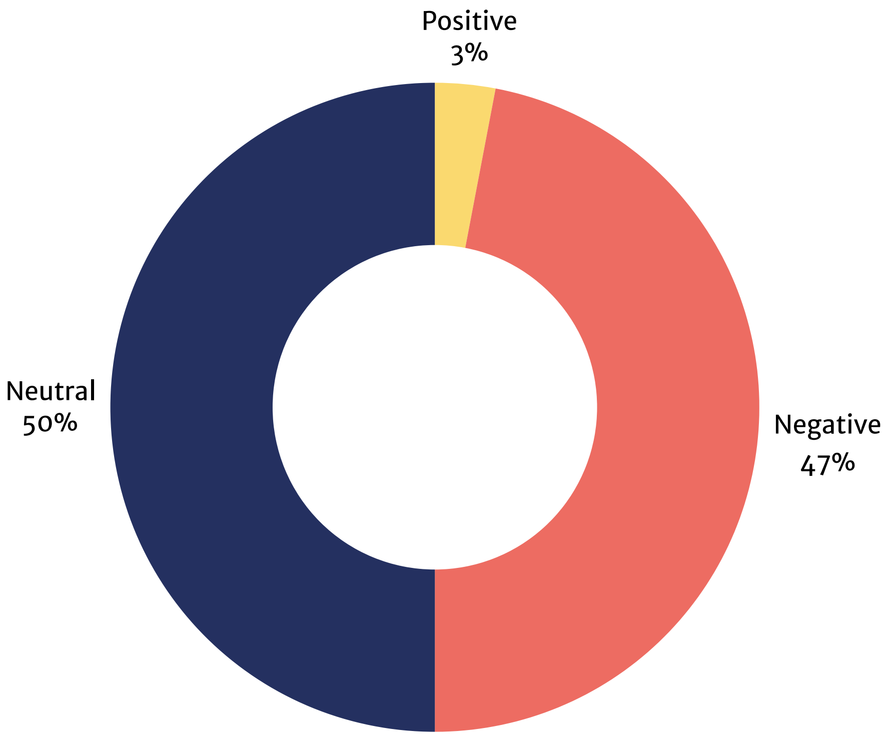
A deeper examination of these conversations reveals a complex reaction. As expected, those who opposed the plan expressed their disapproval – but there were also negative feelings among proponents of debt cancellation. Many supporters were disappointed by the amount of debt to be canceled, having hoped for a larger or even full cancellation. Additionally, there was significant anger towards those who immediately attacked the plan and threatened legal challenges.

This combination of disappointment and anger among supporters – coupled with opposition from detractors, contributed to the overall negative sentiment observed during that period.

Below, you can find detailed summaries of negative and positive mentions surrounding that period – which were generated using Brandwatch's OpenAI feature.

Sentiment Analysis: Impact of President Biden’s Broad Debt Canellation Plan Annoucement

The week of August 22nd 2022



Source: Graph generated by the Hildreth Institute using data gathered by a Collaborative Classroom Project with Professor M. McGuirk at Babson College utilizing the Brandwatch Software • Created with Datawrapper

Summary of Negative Mentions Related to First Spike

- **Backlash and opposition:** Some individuals felt disrespected by the plan to cancel debts, as they had worked hard to pay off their own.
- **Increased inflation concerns:** There were worries that student loan cancellation would incentivize universities to raise prices, exacerbating economic inflation.
- **Claims of illegality:** Some alleged that the President's student loan cancellation plan was illegal and unconstitutional – among them some notable political figures.
- **Disappointment about the amount:** While some supported the initiative, they were negative criticizing the application processes and the amount of cancellation provided.
- **Wealthier beneficiaries:** Concerns were raised that the cancellation plan did not adequately benefit those in need, instead mainly supporting high earners with better prospects.

- **GOP outrage:** The Republican Party criticized Biden's debt relief plan as unfair and a tactic to gain votes.
- **Charges of Republican "hypocrisy":** Republicans faced criticism for opposing student debt cancellation while benefiting from and remaining silent on other forms of debt relief, such as Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loans provided during the pandemic.

Summary of Positive Mentions Related to First Spike

Although positive reactions were limited, a few key themes emerged from those who expressed support for President Biden's debt cancellation plan:

- **Relief for Low- and Middle-Income Borrowers:** Some expressed excitement and gratitude for the plan, highlighting its potential to alleviate financial burdens and stimulate the economy.
- **Recognition of Progressivity and Equity**: Some praised the inclusion of Pell Grant recipients and the income cap of $125,000 as steps toward addressing economic and racial equity, viewing the plan as a progressive effort to support those most in need.

These positive sentiments were overshadowed by broader frustrations, but they represent a segment of the population that viewed the announcement as a meaningful, though limited, step toward debt relief.

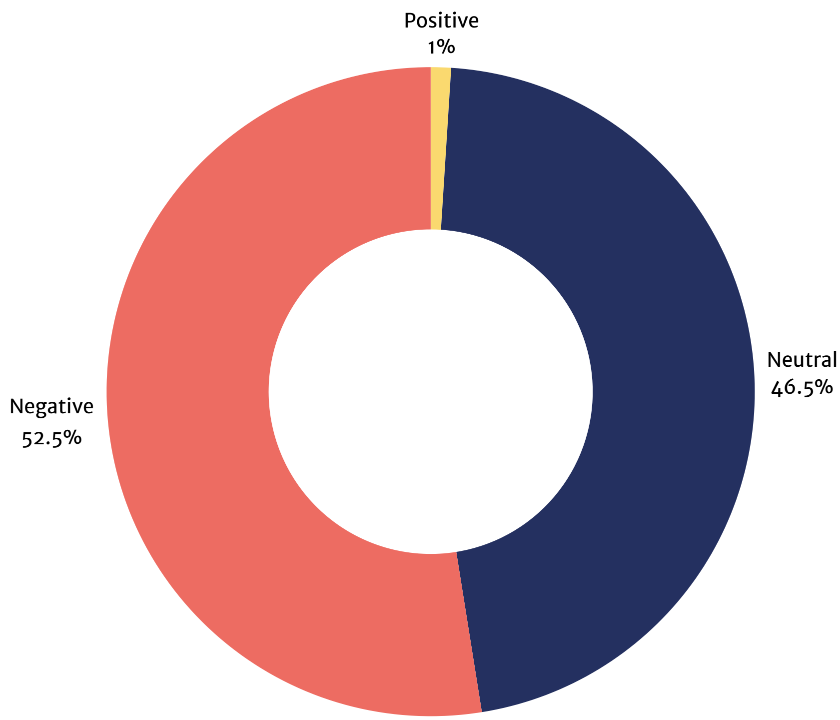
The Second Spike:The U.S. Supreme Court Rules Against The Biden Plan

When the Supreme Court ruled against President Biden's debt cancellation plan, sentiment remained predominantly negative—52% of mentions were negative, 46% neutral, and only 1% positive. While one might expect opponents of debt cancellation to react positively to the ruling, the data shows a more complex emotional landscape. Similar to the response to the plan's initial announcement, both supporters and opponents expressed negative sentiments, but for different reasons.

The negative responses from supporters of debt cancellation were driven by deep disappointment over the Supreme Court's decision, which dashed their hopes for some relief. Opponents of the plan, who might have been expected to celebrate the ruling, continued to express negative sentiments, further criticizing the concept of debt cancellation itself, which contributed to the overall negativity. This dynamic—where both supporters and opponents of the plan engaged in critical discourse—highlights the persistent polarization around the issue of student debt relief

Sentiment Analysis: Impact of Supreme Court's Ruling on Debt Cancellation Plan

The week of June 26th 2022



Source: Graph generated by the Hildreth Institute using data gathered by a Collaborative Classroom Project with Professor M. McGuirk at Babson College utilizing the Brandwatch Software • Created with Datawrapper

In summary, the high negative sentiments during both contradictory events highlight a complex emotional landscape. Disappointment about the policy's specifics coexisted with a general support for the idea of debt cancellation, reflecting a nuanced public response to the issue.

Below, you can find a summary of negative and positive mentions surrounding that period, generated using Brandwatch's OpenAI feature.

Summary of Negative Mentions Related to Second Spike

- **Disappointment:** The Supreme Court's ruling against Biden's cancellation plan sparked widespread disappointment.
- **Accusations of Republican Hypocrisy:** GOP members who benefited from PPP loans were criticized for opposing student debt relief, leading to accusations of hypocrisy and self-interest.
- **Claims of Political Corruption:** Some critics viewed the ruling as part of a broader trend of conservative decisions undermining the legitimacy and fairness of the court.
- **Worsening Economic Inequality:** Critics argued that the ruling would exacerbate economic inequality, leaving millions of Americans without relief and further dividing society.
- **Calls for New Relief Approaches:** Biden and his supporters responded by seeking alternative paths to debt relief, driven by frustration over the court's decision.
- **Broken Democratic Promises:** Backlash grew against Democrats for failing to deliver on promises of debt cancellation, with some questioning the viability of the plan from the start.

Summary of Positive Mentions Related to Second Spike

While positive mentions were limited—only 1% of the total—a few key themes emerged among those expressing support for the Supreme Court's decision:

- **Support for Upholding Traditional Values:** A few mentions praised the ruling, interpreting it as a defense of traditional American values against broad debt cancellation.
- **Approval of Reduced Burden on Taxpayers:** A small number of individuals expressed relief that taxpayers would not be responsible for covering the cost of student loan forgiveness.
- **Recognition of Biden's Continued Efforts:** Some posts acknowledged President Biden's immediate response to the ruling, commending his commitment to finding alternative paths to debt relief despite the court's decision.

These limited positive reactions stand out against the broader, overwhelmingly negative sentiment, underscoring the polarized nature of the discussion on student debt relief.

In conclusion, the analysis of the volume of mentions and sentiments surrounding the two major spikes in discussions about student loans—following President Biden's debt cancellation announcement and the Supreme Court's subsequent ruling against it—highlights that significant news events are the primary catalysts for surges in social media activity. These findings indicate that while such events drive conversation peaks, they also elicit strong, predominantly negative emotional responses, underscoring deep-seated frustrations and polarized opinions within public discourse on student loans. Interestingly, ongoing borrower challenges, such as the resumption of payments and issues with loan servicers, did not spark comparable levels of public discussion. This suggests that while major policy developments drive conversation spikes, they tend to do so by eliciting strong, primarily negative reactions, with borrowers' day-to-day challenges receiving less sustained attention. The following section will explore conversations specifically related to loan servicers, providing further insights into borrowers' experiences.

A Special Look at Student Loan Servicers

The Department of Education partners with designated companies to service federal student loans and has periodically updated its roster of loan servicers over the years. A notable change occurred when PHEAA (FedLoan Servicing), which had managed the Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) program, decided to exit the federal student loan servicing business. In response, the Department transferred the management of the PSLF program to Missouri Higher Education Loan Authority (MOHELA), completing this transition by 2022. This move made MOHELA a primary servicer for the PSLF program and a broader portfolio of federal student loans, aligning with the Department's strategy to consolidate and streamline loan servicing.

In April 2023, the Department further announced a plan to simplify the process for borrowers, particularly in light of the departures of major servicers like FedLoan. Beginning in 2024, only the following companies, referred to as the "Big 4," started servicing federal student loans: MOHELA, Nelnet, EdFinancial, Maximus Education, and Central Research, Inc.

By May 1, 2024, due to systemic failures in processing the Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) and Teacher Education Assistance for College and Higher Education (TEACH) Grant programs, the management of these programs was transferred to the Department of Education, removing their oversight from the designated loan servicer.

These substantial changes and system failures created uncertainty and confusion among borrowers, particularly during the study period. Below is a list of student loan servicers, including the total volume of outstanding debt they manage and the number of borrowers they served during this timeframe.

Student Loan Servicers: Outstanding Debt and Borrower Volume Overview

From June 2022 to March 2024

	6/30/2022			3/31/2023			6/30/2023			3/31/2024		
Servicers	Dollars Outstanding (in billions)	Recipients (in millions)	% of Recipient Served by Servicer	Dollars Outstanding (in billions)	Recipients (in millions)	% of Recipient Served by Servicer	Dollars Outstanding (in billions)	Recipients (in millions)	% of Recipient Served by Servicer	Dollars Outstanding (in billions)	Recipients (in millions)	% of Recipient Served by Servicer
Nelnet	$322.60	8.9	24%	$421.20	13.11	33%	$548.60	15.6	40%	$530.60	15.35	38%
AidVantage	$301.10	7.91	21%	$308.70	8.23	21%	$334.20	9.68	25%	$323.90	9.59	24%
Great Lakes	$253.40	7.61	20%	$149.00	3.44	9%						
PHEAA	$164.70	2.01	5%									
Not-for-Profit Servicers	$291.60	11.28	30%									
OSLA				$28.80	1.54	4%						
MOHELA				$355.60	8.17	21%	$359.80	8.21	21%	$380.60	8.65	22%
EdFinancial				$121.40	4.95	13%	$139.60	5.7	15%	$158.20	6.39	16%
TOTAL	$1,333.40	37.71	100%	$1,384.70	39.44	100%	$1,382.20	39.19	100%	$1,393.30	39.98	100%

Source: generated by the Hildreth Institute using Servicer Portfolio by Loan Status data from the U.S. Department of Education (ED) https://studentaid.gov/data-center/student/portfolio • Created with Datawrapper

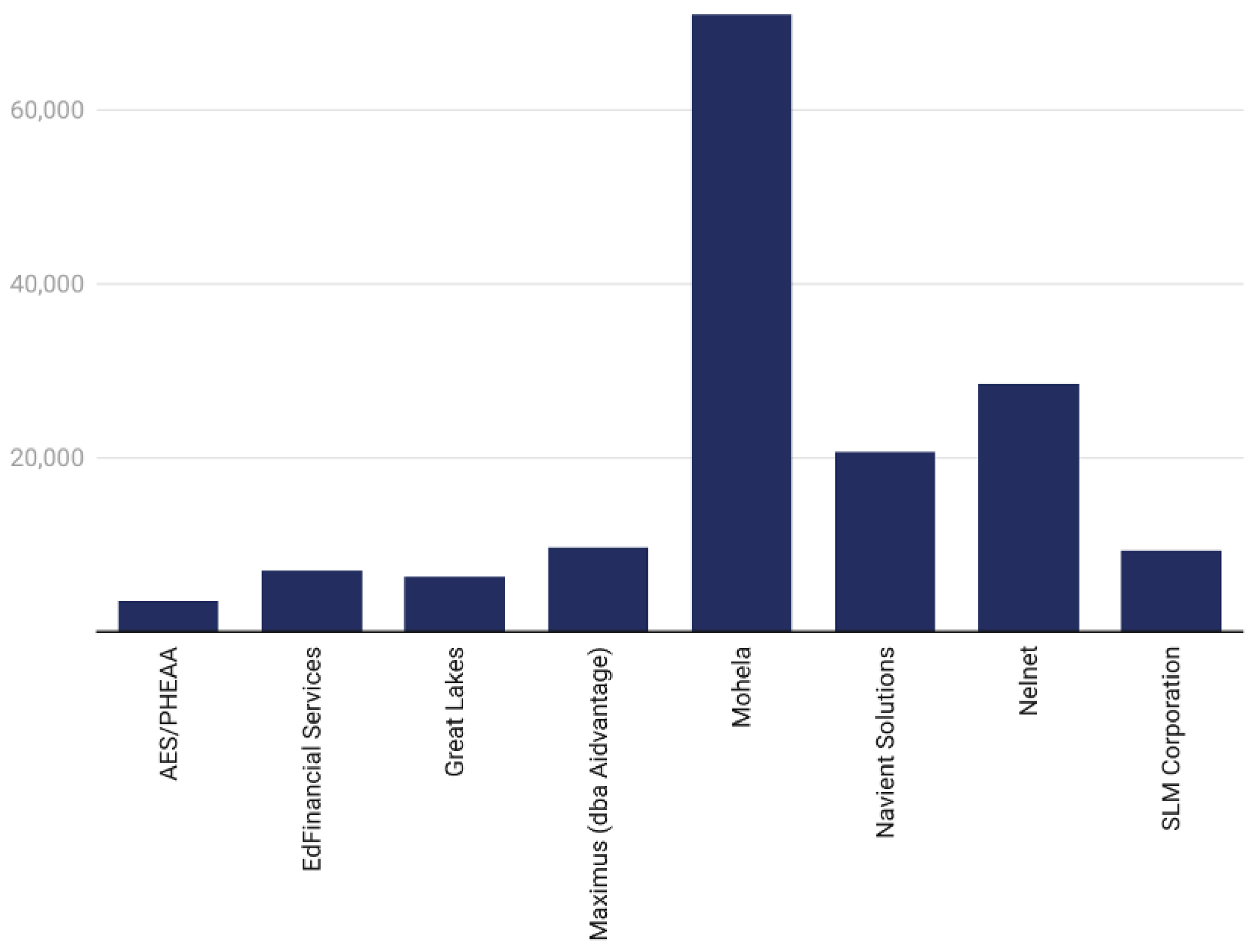
Over the past two years, Nelnet and AidVantage have significantly expanded their share of the student loan portfolio and the number of borrowers they service. Together, these two servicers managed 46% of borrowers in 2022, which increased to 62% by 2024. This shift indicates that more than half of all borrowers experienced changes in their loan servicers within this period, coinciding with the resumption of payments and the introduction of several changes to repayment plans.

MOHELA – traditionally managing a smaller share of the student loan portfolio since 2011 and categorized under "not-for-profit servicers" in 2022 in the table above – saw its presence grow, such that it managed 22% of borrowers' accounts by 2024. However, MOHELA has faced criticism from student borrowers regarding its handling of loans transferred to its management. The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) reported a surge in complaints against MOHELA, which were disproportionately high relative to the size of the loan portfolio it services. This trend is also reflected in the increased volume of social media discussions about MOHELA, indicating a significant level of borrower dissatisfaction. Following the resumption of student loan payments in October 2023, MOHELA was fined by the DOE for failing to send billing statements to student loan borrowers on time.

During the period under study, a similar pattern emerged, with MOHELA receiving the highest number of social media mentions, with a total of 71,000. This was followed by Nelnet, which garnered 29,000 mentions, and Navient Solutions, with 21,000 mentions.

Social Media Mentions of Student Loan Servicers from June 2022 to June 2024

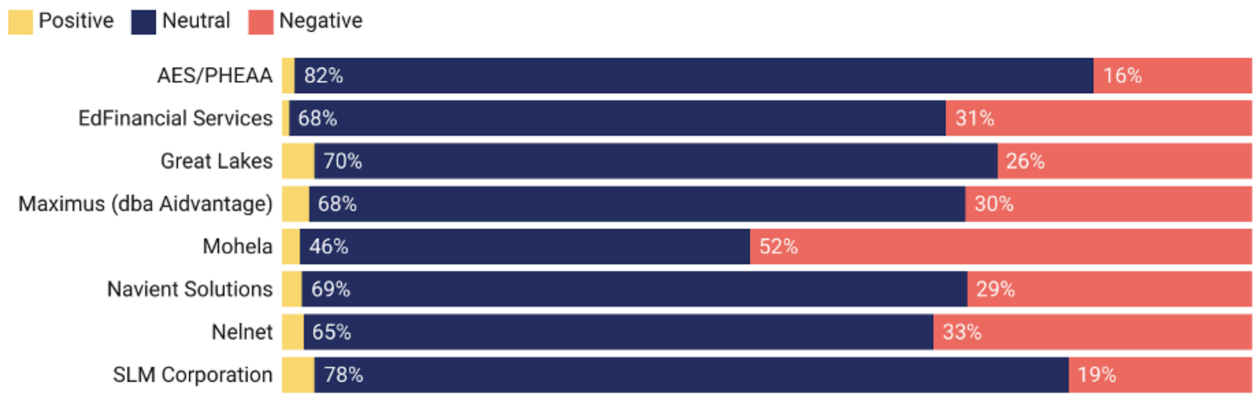
MOHELA Leads with 71K Mentions, Disproportionate to its Market Share Compared to Nelnet (29K) and Navient Solutions (21K)



Source: Graph generated by the Hildreth Institute using data gathered by a Collaborative Classroom Project with Professor M. McGuirk at Babson College utilizing the Brandwatch Software • Created with Datawrapper

MOHELA also had the highest percentage of negative mentions, with 52% of its 71,000 mentions classified as negative. In contrast, 46% were considered neutral, and only 2% were classified as positive.

Sentiment Analysis of Social Media Discussions on Student Loan Servicers



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Below is an in-depth analysis of the two loan servicers with the highest number of negative mentions, highlighting key themes and recurring issues from these discussions.

MOHELA: Key Themes and Recurrent Issues in Negative Mentions

- **Service Issues:** MOHELA has come under fire for significant delays in processing student loans, which has caused confusion and frustration among borrowers. Many have reported long wait times for customer service and delays in the application of payments, contributing to a negative customer experience and increasing borrower anxiety over potential credit impacts.
- **Impact on MOHELA:** In various legal actions related to student debt relief, accusations have been made about MOHELA's alleged mismanagement and its potential financial harm. However, critics argue that these claims are overstated and do not accurately reflect the actual impact on the servicer's financial stability or operational capacity.
- **Company Fines:** The U.S. Department of Education has imposed fines on MOHELA for a series of service errors, including inaccurate billing and payment miscalculations. These mistakes have led to financial discrepancies for borrowers, prompting regulatory scrutiny and calls for improved oversight and operational reforms within the company.

- **SCOTUS Case Impact:** The recent Supreme Court case addressing student debt relief raised concerns about the potential financial harm MOHELA could face if debt cancellation were implemented. However, critics assert that these claims were exaggerated in the case, arguing that MOHELA's financial exposure was misrepresented to influence the court's decision.
- **Calls for Investigation:** Democratic senators have publicly called for a thorough investigation into MOHELA's practices, highlighting allegations of borrower mistreatment and systemic issues within the organization. They have proposed measures to protect borrowers, including enhanced oversight, stricter compliance requirements, and potential reforms to ensure fair treatment.

Nelnet: Key Themes and Recurrent Issues in Negative Mentions

- **Loan Servicer Changes:** A significant number of student loans have been transferred to new servicers, including Nelnet, causing confusion and disruption for borrowers. These transfers often resulted in delays in payment processing and challenges in navigating the new servicer's system, complicating the repayment process and leading to increased borrower anxiety.
- **Communication Problems:** There has been widespread criticism regarding Nelnet's lack of clear and timely communication with borrowers. Many borrowers report difficulty in obtaining accurate information about their loans, repayment options, and the status of their applications, contributing to a sense of uncertainty and distrust towards the servicer.
- **Technical Issues:** Technical problems, such as system crashes and website malfunctions, have plagued Nelnet's online platform, causing delays and frustration for borrowers attempting to make payments or access their accounts. These outages have led to missed payments and increased concerns about the reliability of Nelnet's services.
- **Debt Relief and Repayment Plans:** Recent initiatives and reforms by the Biden administration have introduced new debt relief programs and repayment options aimed at easing the burden for struggling borrowers. However, the implementation of these programs has been inconsistent, and servicers like Nelnet have been criticized for not adequately communicating changes to borrowers, leading to misunderstandings about eligibility and benefits.

- **Student Loan Scams:** The confusion surrounding student loan repayments and forgiveness created opportunities for scammers to exploit borrowers. Fraudulent entities are impersonating loan servicers like Nelnet, misleading borrowers into providing sensitive information or making unnecessary payments under the guise of debt relief or consolidation.

Conclusion

The findings of this report reveal a critical disconnect between current student loan relief measures and public expectations, affecting not just opponents of debt cancellation but also many who support such initiatives. Despite the intent to provide relief, a significant portion of potential supporters expressed dissatisfaction, feeling that the proposed measures did not meaningfully address their financial burdens. This frustration is evident in the overwhelmingly negative sentiment seen in the discourse following both President Biden's announcement and the Supreme Court's ruling against the cancellation plan.

While some of this negativity can be attributed to a broader negativity bias inherent in social media conversations—where users are more likely to express frustration or criticism—the overwhelming volume of negative sentiment suggests that the issue goes beyond bias alone. The data reflects a deeply polarized and frustrated public, where both supporters and opponents of debt relief express dissatisfaction in different ways. Supporters are disillusioned by the limitations of the relief, while opponents remain critical of the idea of debt cancellation itself, even in the wake of the court's decision.

This pervasive negativity signals a broader public demand for decision-makers to move beyond the current, incremental approaches to student debt relief. The public is clearly calling for more innovative and substantial solutions that address the underlying causes of the student debt crisis. As systemic issues with loan servicers, rising education costs, and stagnant wages continue to exacerbate the burden, temporary fixes are no longer enough to meet public expectations or provide meaningful debt reduction.

This report, utilizing advanced AI and social listening tools, offers valuable insights into the complexity of public sentiment surrounding student debt relief. However, it also highlights the need for further exploration of negativity bias and how it shapes online discourse. Nonetheless, the strong and widespread negative reaction suggests that the underlying frustrations are real and require immediate attention. Moving forward, policymakers must consider innovative, long-term solutions to the student debt issue that address both the financial and emotional toll on borrowers across the country.

Appendix 1:

Background of the Study

This project was the result of a partnership between the Hildreth Institute and Associate Professor of Practice Mike McGuirk at Babson College. Professor McGuirk teaches courses designed to bridge the gap between the art and science of marketing, helping students develop skills in digital analytics and customer insights. Before joining Babson in 2020, he served as a Senior Executive-in-Residence and Graduate Program Director for the Digital Marketing and Data Analytics master's program at Emerson College.

With over 25 years of experience, Professor McGuirk has a proven track record of helping Fortune 1000 companies harness data-driven insights to drive successful marketing, sales, and customer experience programs. His clients have included General Motors, Harley Davidson, Dunkin, CVS Pharmacy, Microsoft, and several nonprofit organizations. He has deep expertise in descriptive, predictive, and prescriptive analytics and has led consulting teams at companies such as Epsilon and iKnowtion, the latter of which was acquired by TTEC. Known for his leadership and analytical acumen, McGuirk has consistently been recognized for his contributions to a broad range of industries. He is passionate about driving the adoption of analytics in progressive, customer-centric organizations.

The project emerged as researchers from the Hildreth Institute sought to explore whether AI-enabled social listening tools could provide valuable insights into public opinion on social and public policy issues. The goal was to determine if these tools could be leveraged effectively to generate timely data and help inform policy recommendations.

To investigate this, Professor McGuirk integrated the project into his advanced-level course, Digital Analytics (MKT4530), at Babson College. This course prepares students to utilize industry-leading digital analytics tools to collect and analyze consumer data to support decision-making and the development of marketing strategies that are informed by those insights. This includes social media listening, consumer sentiment monitoring, and share of voice competitor analysis. Students use a web analytics platform to learn how to track, segment, and measure the online and mobile device usage behaviors of customers and visitors. Students also learn how to construct digital marketing experiments, perform A/B testing, and measure the ROI of digital campaigns.

Nine teams, each comprising 4–6 students, worked on the project over six weeks, using various queries to explore the volume and nature of conversations surrounding student debt relief and related issues. They aimed to understand whether the data they gathered could lead to statistically valid insights and explored different facets of public sentiment on the topic.

At the conclusion of the project, the four best teams presented their findings to the Hildreth Institute and the class. Building on these initial explorations, Professor McGuirk developed a final query, synthesizing the students' approaches and refining the analysis to capture the most relevant discussions. His work spanned a two-year period, from June 2022 to June 2024, providing the basis for the in-depth sentiment analysis presented in this report.

Query Formation:

Teams were asked to focus on three main areas with related questions:

1. **Navigating the student loan repayment landscape** - This includes chatter about navigating the repayment process. It includes those seeking relief, seeking to enroll in an income-based repayment plan, dealing with servicers, understanding private loans vs. federal loans. Some questions to consider might be: What are borrowers saying about navigating the system? What are they saying in regards to debt relief? Are they experiencing difficulty opt-ing into a specific plan? What is their understanding of the new income-based repayment plan (SAVE) or other repayment plan? Are they having trouble with servicers? Do they understand the types of loans they have? What types of issues are they having with servicers?

2. **Beliefs and sentiments around student loans -** This includes analyzing what borrowers are saying/feeling in regards to beliefs around repayment, likelihood of defaulting on loans, and the financial hardship they are experiencing. Some questions to consider might be: What are the beliefs around repayment? Are borrowers experiencing financial hardship? Are borrowers feeling remorse for having borrowed student loans? Are borrowers talking about defaulting on loans? What is the general emotion around repayment?

3. **Attitudes towards borrowing -** This includes what potential borrowers are saying in regards to the affordability or value of taking out loans. We would like to understand whether aversion to borrow and fear of accumulating burdensome debt are among the factors that explain the decline in college enrollment. This will touch on the affordability of student loans, fear of borrowing, general attitudes towards borrowing for college, and the value of a higher education. Some questions might be: What are people saying about borrowing and the propensity or aversion to borrow for college? Is there fear around borrowing and accumulating burdensome debt? Are students talking about the value of borrowing for an education? Can we get a sense of the drivers of enrollment? And the attitudes towards borrowing?

Keywords

The following keywords were provided to assist them in their creation of queries to probe the unstructured data ecosystem:

- Student loan forgiveness/cancellation
- Financial hardship repaying student loans
- Who is my student loan servicer (Aidvantage (formerly Navient), Nelnet, Mohela, Great Lakes, etc..)
- Student loan pause, repayment restart
- Student loan refinancing
- Student loan consolidation
- Student loan IBR (income based repayment repayment)
- Student loan IDR (income driven repayment plan)
- Public Service Loan Forgiveness
- Student debt relief
- SAVE plan
- Forbearance / Deferment
- Delinquency
- Default
- Value of a degree/cost of college
- Interest capitalization/accumulating interest
- Boycotting loan repayments

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