

The Generation Gap

A Digital Intelligence Audit of How College Students Understand Antisemitism and Anti-Zionism (2026)

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I. Executive Summary

Campus leadership has observed a widening divergence between how undergraduate students, faculty, and administrators interpret politically charged terminology — antisemitism, anti-Zionism, decolonization, apartheid, and "Free Palestine." These differences are not merely ideological. They are produced by distinct digital information environments with which institutions do not currently engage. This white paper reports the findings of a five-team digital intelligence audit conducted by the SMACC Intelligence Lab between February and April 2026, triangulating five-year Google Trends data ([Google Trends, 2021–2026](#)), 30-day Brand24 social listening across TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and X ([Brand24, 2026](#)), Comscore audience and engagement analytics for February 2026 ([Comscore, 2026](#)), and a multi-model AI "stress test" across Claude, ChatGPT, and Gemini (SMACC Intelligence Lab, 2026).

Three findings recur across every dataset and therefore satisfy the project's triangulation rule. First, journalistic and student vocabularies have structurally decoupled: in 42 U.S. states, "antisemitism" accounted for 100% of Google News search interest among the five tracked terms over 2021–2026, while "anti-Zionism" entered Google News search in only two states (New York and California) in the same window — yet every "anti-Zionism" query on YouTube and web search registered as a Breakout term (above +5,000% growth) ([Google Trends, 2021–2026](#)). Second, the hashtag "#antisemitism" appeared 24 times inside the Brand24 anti-Zionism dataset itself ([Brand24, 2026](#)), and "is antizionism antisemitism" emerged as a Breakout query on Google web search ([Google Trends, 2021–2026](#)) — two independent signals that the definitional boundary between the two terms is being actively contested in public search and social behavior. Third, Comscore data for February 2026 indicates that Generation Z college students constitute roughly 2.9% of the 244.2 million U.S. adult internet audience, yet the content they are most likely to encounter about this conflict is produced by external influencers, entertainment brands, and international news publishers rather than by campus institutions ([Comscore, 2026](#)).

This paper does not attempt to adjudicate competing political or definitional claims. It analyzes how those interpretations are formed, distributed, and experienced within contemporary digital ecosystems, and it recommends three realistic institutional actions: recalibrate communication channels to match student media consumption, update dialogue and incident-response frameworks to reflect the vocabulary gap, and build a standing digital intelligence capability.

II. Introduction & Background

Since October 7, 2023, American universities have faced sustained, simultaneous increases in reported antisemitism, Islamophobia, and student protest activity. The Anti-Defamation League documented a dramatic rise in U.S. antisemitic incidents immediately following the Hamas attacks ([ADL, 2023](#)) and, in its most recent audit, recorded 9,354 antisemitic incidents in 2024 — the highest annual total in the organization's 46-year history and an 84% increase in incidents on college campuses over 2023 ([ADL, 2025](#)). The Council on American-Islamic Relations recorded a parallel surge in anti-Muslim complaints after October 7 ([CAIR, 2023](#)). Peer-reviewed research from the University of Connecticut's Department of Communication, based on a sample of 267 undergraduates surveyed in late 2023, finds that antisemitism and Islamophobia are strongly correlated among Gen-Z students ($\beta = .78, p < .001$), that doomscrolling is a significant positive predictor of both, and that online political efficacy moderates those relationships ([Shoieb, Romann, Christensen, & Atkin, 2025](#)).

The institutional challenge is not that these phenomena exist. It is that administrators and students encounter them through structurally different information environments. Administrators rely on incident logs, faculty reports, and legacy media; students, who are part of the 18–29 cohort in which TikTok news consumption quadrupled to 44% between 2020 and the present ([Pew Research Center, 2023](#)), experience the same events through algorithmic feeds, creator content, and search. Pew also reports that Gen Z is roughly evenly split in favorable views toward Palestinians (58%) and Israelis (42%), a distribution markedly different from older cohorts ([Pew Research Center, 2022](#)). Public confidence in mass media remains near historic lows, further eroding the agenda-setting role of traditional journalism ([Brenan, 2023](#)). For many students, this decline in trust is not only about perceived bias, but about a broader sense that their generational perspectives, political language, and moral urgency are underrepresented or filtered through institutional media editorial frameworks. As the 2025 Gallup poll confirms, trust is significantly lower among younger cohorts ($\leq 28\%$) than older adults ($\sim 43\%$) ([Brenan, 2025](#)). The institution therefore faces a vocabulary gap and an information gap simultaneously: terms used by students may not be the same terms used by faculty, administrators, or the national press, and the platforms on which those terms circulate are not the platforms on which the institution speaks. This audit maps that gap. Its scope is deliberately narrow — digital traces (search, social content, engagement metrics, AI outputs) among 18–24-year-old U.S. English-language users — and its intent is to inform, not to adjudicate.

III. Evidence and Analysis

Methods. Team 1 analyzed five years of Google Trends data (2021–2026, United States) across YouTube search, general web search, and Google News search for the terms Antisemitism, Anti-Zionism, Decolonization, Apartheid, and Free Palestine ([Google Trends, 2021–2026](#)). Team 2 conducted 30-day Brand24 social listening on four discrete keyword environments (Antisemitism, SMACC White Paper, Campus Youth/Jewish Students, and Anti-Zionism), sampling TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, X, and news sources in late March and early April 2026 ([Brand24, 2026](#)). Team 3 used Comscore demographic and Content Explorer datasets for February 2026 to

measure audience reach and engagement ([Comscore, 2026](#)). Team 4 administered a cross-model AI prompt audit of Claude, ChatGPT, and Gemini on the five target terms, and Team 5 conducted AI-powered quality-assurance tests on the data generated by all teams (SMACC Intelligence Lab, 2026). Throughout, Google Trends results are framed behaviorally ("search behavior indicates...") rather than attitudinally, because Google Trends cannot be filtered demographically and the YouTube-as-18–24 mapping is an inference, not a direct measurement. Brand24 results are reported as 30-day snapshots (some slides compare the first 14 days with the most recent 14 days within that window); all figures are current as of the audit window and should not be read as longitudinal trends.

III.A. The Signal — Shifting Search Vocabulary

Google Trends data reveals three structurally different modes of engagement with political vocabulary across its platforms ([Google Trends, 2021–2026](#)). YouTube functions as a cultural-discovery layer where political terms enter search through celebrity and creator content; web search functions as a comprehension layer dominated by definitional queries ("antisemitic meaning" registered at +2,750%); and Google News search functions as an institutional framing layer in which editors, not audiences, set the vocabulary. Across the 2021–2026 window, only Antisemitism travels the full pipeline from cultural discovery through comprehension to journalistic institutionalization. Anti-Zionism displays what the synthesis calls "discovery without institutionalization": every query is a Breakout term on YouTube and on web, yet Google News search for the term registers in only two states over five years ([Google Trends, 2021–2026](#)).

Two further patterns have direct relevance for campus leadership. First, a celebrity-catastrophe inversion: on YouTube and web search, the October 2022 Kanye West and Kyrie Irving controversies produced larger relative spikes in antisemitism searches than did October 7, 2023, while on news search the reverse is true ([Google Trends, 2021–2026](#)). Cultural incidents travel further through the platforms students use; geopolitical catastrophe travels further through the platforms journalists use. Second, vocabulary adoption follows platform logic rather than institutional endorsement. "Apartheid" has been deployed by Amnesty International ([Amnesty International, 2022](#)), Human Rights Watch ([Human Rights Watch, 2021](#)), and proceedings at the International Court of Justice ([ICJ, 2024](#)), yet registers near zero on YouTube and near zero on news search over five years. "Anti-Zionism," by contrast, is largely absent from mainstream journalism but has developed a national web footprint reaching 49 of 50 states ([Google Trends, 2021–2026](#)) — indicating the inability of legacy media to adapt the language prevalent in the ongoing discourse. The interpretive implication for leadership is modest but consequential: search behavior indicates that students are encountering a rights-based, decolonial vocabulary primarily through creator content, and are turning to web search to understand it — often arriving at queries such as "is antizionism antisemitism," which itself registers as a Breakout query ([Google Trends, 2021–2026](#)).

III.B. The Evidence — Social Sentiment and Media Framing

Brand24's 30-day social listening produced four complementary datasets, each with documented limitations that are disclosed ([Brand24, 2026](#)). The Antisemitism dataset (2,210 mentions, approximately 24 million total reach, 24% negative sentiment, 73% from news and non-social sources) is dominated by a single viral TikTok post from the account @uh1269, a micro-account with 471 followers whose Coachella-shaming video generated an estimated 1.3 million reach and 33.2% of the dataset's total share of voice ([Brand24, 2026](#)). All reach-based figures for this dataset must be read with that outlier in mind; CNN's TikTok account, with 14 million followers, generated less than half the reach of that single viral post. The anti-Zionism dataset (310 mentions, 4.4 million reach, 35% negative, 6% positive) shows the cross-team signal most relevant to institutional interpretation: within the anti-Zionism keyword environment itself, the hashtag "#antisemitism" appears 24 times ([Brand24, 2026](#)), confirming at the hashtag level what Google Trends confirms at the query level — the boundary between the two terms is being actively contested in student and near-student discourse. Prior research on TikTok has independently documented how antisemitic content spreads through the platform's recommendation architecture ([Weimann & Masri, 2021](#)).

Read together with the Google Trends data, the Brand24 results indicate that students are not simply using different words from administrators. They are encountering a vocabulary in which "antisemitism" and "anti-Zionism" are adjacent, overlapping, and contested, and in which mainstream journalism is a minority voice. External evidence corroborates the severity of the climate this vocabulary describes: a January–February 2026 survey of 1,000 Jewish students conducted by the Union of Jewish Students in the United Kingdom found that nearly one in four had personally witnessed on-campus behavior targeting Jews, and roughly one in five were reluctant to share housing with a Jewish peer ([Union of Jewish Students, 2026](#)). In the United States, the Chicago Commission on Human Relations found a 58% rise in anti-Jewish hate crimes between 2023 and 2024 while hate crimes against most other protected groups declined ([Fox 32 Chicago, 2026](#)), and ADL's national audit recorded an 84% increase in antisemitic incidents on college campuses in 2024 ([ADL, 2025](#)). The data is consistent with the UConn communication research finding that doomscrolling predicts both antisemitism and Islamophobia, and that the two are strongly correlated ([Shoieb et al., 2025](#)).

III.C. The Pattern — Who Owns the Conversation

Comscore's February 2026 demographic profile places Generation Z College Students at approximately 7.07 million U.S. adults, roughly 2.9% of the 244.2 million-person adult internet audience ([Comscore, 2026](#)). The publishers with the deepest Gen-Z reach are, in order, NYTimes.com (30.0% reach of that segment), BBC News (14.1%), Inside Higher Ed (12.5%), NPR (7.6%), AP News (5.4%), and The Guardian (between 2.9% and 4.8%) ([Comscore, 2026](#)). The practical inference is that campus-specific sources — Inside Higher Ed aside — are structurally underrepresented in the information environment of the very cohort whose discourse campus leaders seek to understand. Comscore figures are proprietary panel estimates and should be treated as directional rather than exact.

The Content Explorer data reinforces the asymmetry between conversation and authority. Across the February–April 2026 sample, the highest-engagement posts tied to the conflict came from entertainment and celebrity accounts, not from universities or campus organizations: a Variety post associated with the Javier and Carlos Bardem Oscars moment generated roughly 978,993 total actions, an Angelina Jolie post on Gaza generated 695,861, and a Vic Mensa post generated 672,756 ([Comscore, 2026](#)). By contrast, a Fox News post on the U.S. Department of Justice's inquiry into Harvard's handling of antisemitism complaints generated only 12,091 actions against a potential audience of approximately 34.8 million ([Comscore, 2026](#)). The platform distribution compounds the effect: posts framed around antisemitism concentrate on Facebook and cable-news platforms (older audiences), while posts framed around anti-Zionism and Palestinian solidarity concentrate on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube (Gen Z audiences) ([Comscore, 2026](#); [Brand24, 2026](#)). The AI stress test produced a consistent pattern of inconsistency: across Claude, ChatGPT, and Gemini, definitions of "anti-Zionism," "decolonization," and "apartheid" vary in length, framing, and the number of caveats returned, while definitions of "antisemitism" are comparatively stable (SMACC Intelligence Lab, 2026). Students asking these systems to explain contested vocabulary therefore receive answers whose content depends on which model they happen to open.

The interpretive synthesis is straightforward. Students' primary information environment for this issue is managed by a coalition of creators, entertainment brands, international news publishers, and large-language-model interfaces. Institutional accounts are rarely structurally competitive in that environment, and the vocabulary in these environments vary from the vocabulary that dominates institutional statements.

IV. Recommendations for Campus Leadership

Recommendation 1. Recalibrate institutional communication channels.

Email and press-release communication cannot compete with the engagement profile documented in the Comscore data ([Comscore, 2026](#)). The university should pilot short-form, student-facing explainer content — delivered on the platforms where the 18–24 cohort actually reads ([Pew Research Center, 2023](#)) — that directly addresses contested vocabulary in clear, non-punitive language. That pilot should be resourced as a communication function rather than a public-relations one; its measure of success is comprehension and reach within the campus population, not reputational defense. A foreseeable trade-off is the risk that engagement-oriented communication is read as institutional advocacy on contested questions. The pilot should therefore be bounded by editorial guidelines that prioritize definitional clarity over position-taking, and it should be reviewed regularly by faculty whose expertise spans Jewish studies, Middle East studies, Islamic studies, and communication.

Recommendation 2. Update dialogue and incident-response frameworks to reflect the vocabulary gap.

Training, dialogue programs, and incident-response protocols that do not name "decolonization," "anti-Zionism," "apartheid," and "Free Palestine" cannot engage the vocabulary students are actually using. The Google Trends and Brand24 evidence shows that these terms are not fringe; they are the dominant search and social vocabulary of the YouTube-and-TikTok-inflected discourse ([Google Trends, 2021–2026](#); [Brand24, 2026](#)). Existing programs — town halls, teach-ins, restorative practices, and bias-response protocols — should be revised to engage this language directly, to distinguish (as Shoieb et al. do, following [Klug, 2004](#)) between criticism of the Israeli government and antisemitism, and to acknowledge both Jewish student safety and Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim student safety as legitimate and simultaneous institutional concerns ([ADL, 2025](#); [CAIR, 2023](#)). The principal trade-off is perception: naming contested vocabulary risks being read as endorsement. That risk is real but smaller than the risk of appearing, to the affected students, to be speaking past the issue.

Recommendation 3. Build an ongoing digital intelligence capability.

The workflow developed by the SMACC Intelligence Lab for this audit — Detect, Observe, Contextualize, Interpret — can be adapted as a periodic, research-oriented function to help the institution better understand how public discourse evolves within the 18–24 age cohort (SMACC Intelligence Lab, 2026). Rather than serving as a monitoring or enforcement mechanism, this effort should focus on analyzing aggregate, publicly available patterns in language, sentiment, and platform use to inform institutional communication and dialogue strategies. A periodic (e.g., quarterly) briefing could help leadership remain aware of emerging vocabulary, shifts in framing, and the sources most influential in shaping student understanding.

This capacity should be explicitly bounded: it should not track or profile individual students, nor should it be used for disciplinary purposes. Its purpose is interpretive, not supervisory — to help the institution avoid misreading or speaking past the discourse already taking place. The principal trade-off is perceptual. Even aggregate analysis of digital discourse may be misunderstood as surveillance if not communicated transparently. For that reason, the scope, limits, and intent of this function should be clearly articulated and publicly accessible.

V. Conclusion

The central insight of this audit is not that students and administrators disagree about events or positions. It is that they often operate inside different informational and interpretive environments, shaped by digital architectures that favor creator content, algorithmic amplification, and platform-specific vocabularies over institutional framing. This divergence is reinforced by a broader decline in trust in legacy media, particularly among younger cohorts, for whom traditional journalistic frameworks may appear misaligned with the language, priorities, and interpretations circulating within their own networks. As a result, students do not simply consume different information; they often assign different levels of credibility to institutional and non-institutional sources, turning to social platforms not only for access but for interpretive alignment.

Journalism has largely retained "antisemitism" as its primary analytical category ([Google Trends, 2021–2026](#)); YouTube, web search, and the social platforms in which Gen Z spends most of its news-consumption time have produced a parallel vocabulary centered on anti-Zionism, decolonization, and Palestinian solidarity ([Brand24, 2026](#); [Comscore, 2026](#)), with the boundary between that vocabulary and antisemitism actively contested in searches, hashtags, and chatbot replies (SMACC Intelligence Lab, 2026).

Bridging this gap does not require enforcing consensus, and it should not. It requires institutional capacities that the university does not yet possess: the ability to understand and interpret evolving student discourse, to acknowledge student discourse as a legitimate perspective even where it diverges from institutional framing, considering the loss of trust in legacy media, to integrate digital intelligence into communication and response decisions, and to design interventions that hold Jewish safety, Palestinian and Arab and Muslim safety, and the full political vocabulary of student free expression as simultaneous obligations. If leadership acts on these recommendations, the university can narrow the gap and respond more effectively to an evolving landscape. If it does not, the gap will not close on its own; the platforms will continue to set the vocabulary, and the institution will continue to be surprised by discourse it never saw take shape.

VI. References

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