

A Computational Analysis of the Emergence of Therapy-speak in Social Media



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Introduction

We investigate semantic change in 13 psychology-related concepts across **scientific** and **social media** texts. We assess patterns of change over **15 years** and compare word usage in corpora of **psychology journals abstracts** and **Reddit comments**, testing whether specialized communities on social media align with psychology experts.

Key Concepts

The Concept Creep Hypothesis: harm-related concepts are particularly prone to broaden their meaning over time so as to encompass both new and milder phenomena

The increasing permeation of medical terminology into everyday dialogue has led to the advent **therapy speak** - “the imprecise and superficial integration of psychotherapy language into everyday communication”

Aims

- 1) Analyze whether psychology-related terms undergo similar patterns of semantic transformation over time in both professional literature and social media, testing the concept creep hypothesis.
- 2) Determine whether, within the same time period, the use of psychology-related terms differs significantly between the specialized corpus and the general domain

Corpora (2010-2025)

- Psychology Corpus
- Reddit General Corpus
- Reddit Psychology Corpus

Measures

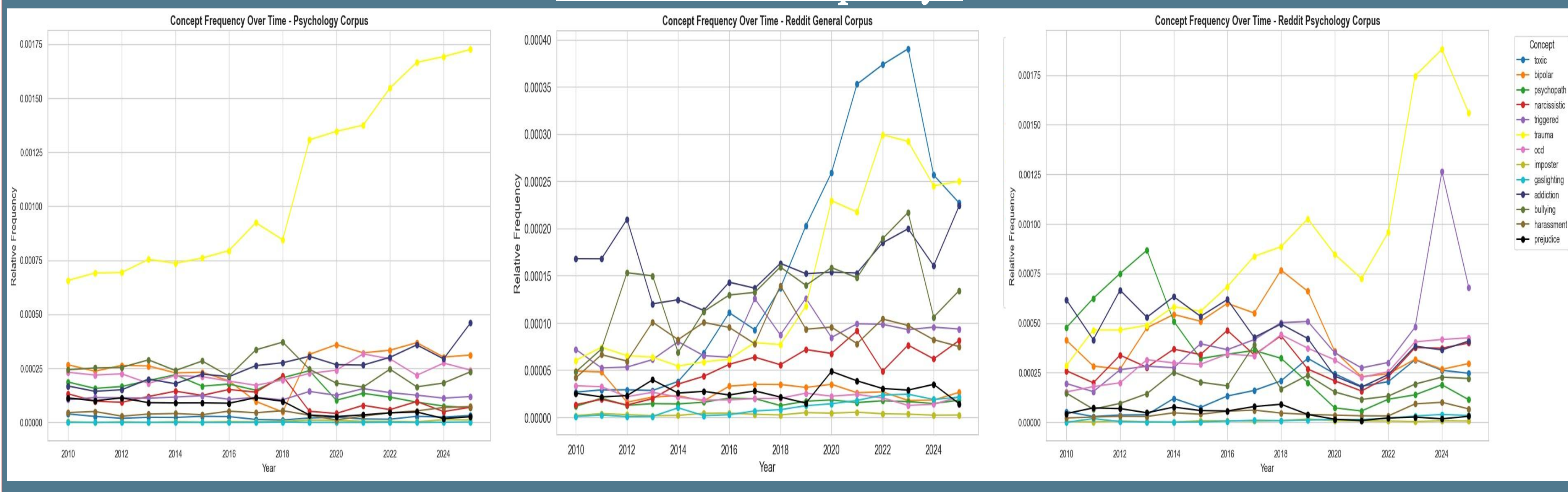
Relative Term Frequency: Concept frequency across corpora

Semantic Breadth: Context similarity using Word2Vec and BERT embeddings

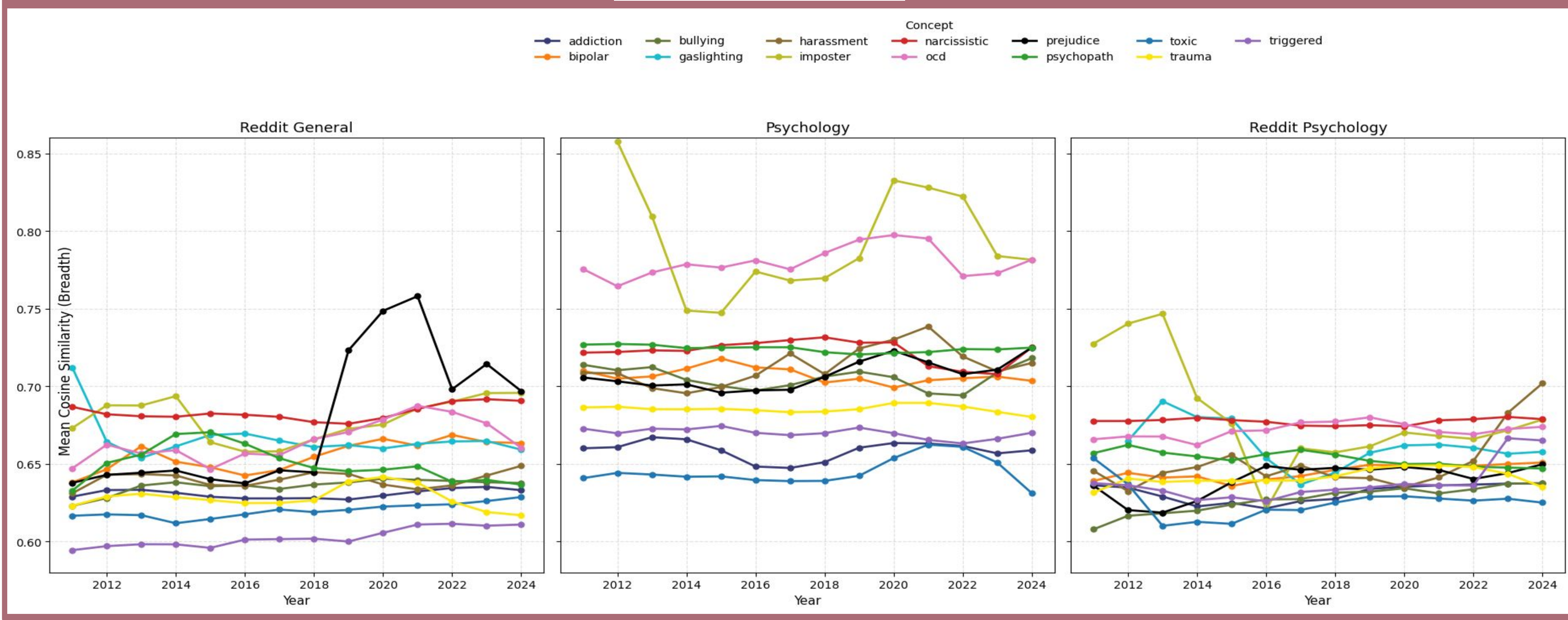
Semantic Displacement: Yearly cosine distance between concept embeddings (Word2Vec and BERT)

Neighbor Similarity Evolution: Top-5 nearest neighbors per concept; track cosine similarity changes over time (Word2Vec)

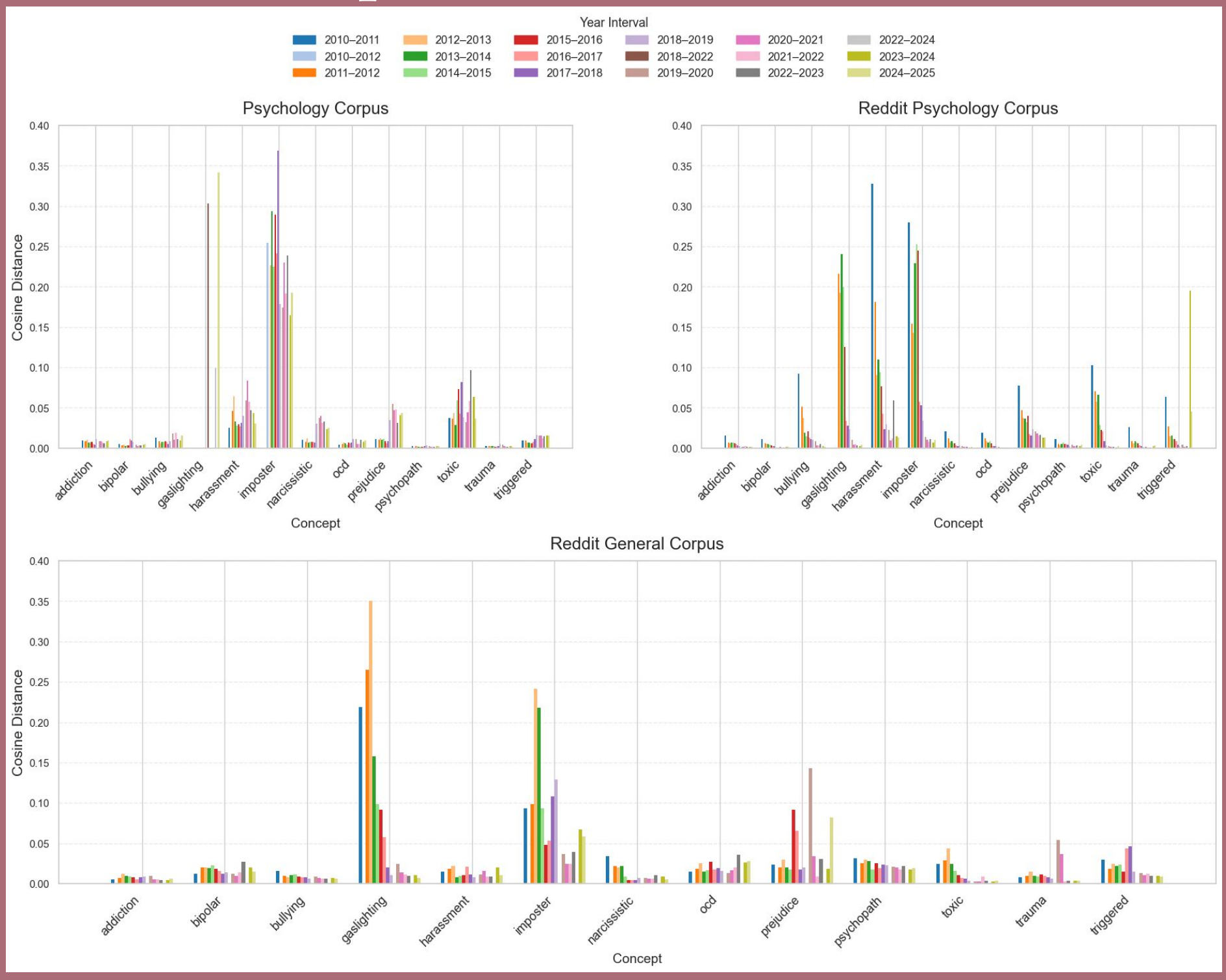
Relative Term Frequency



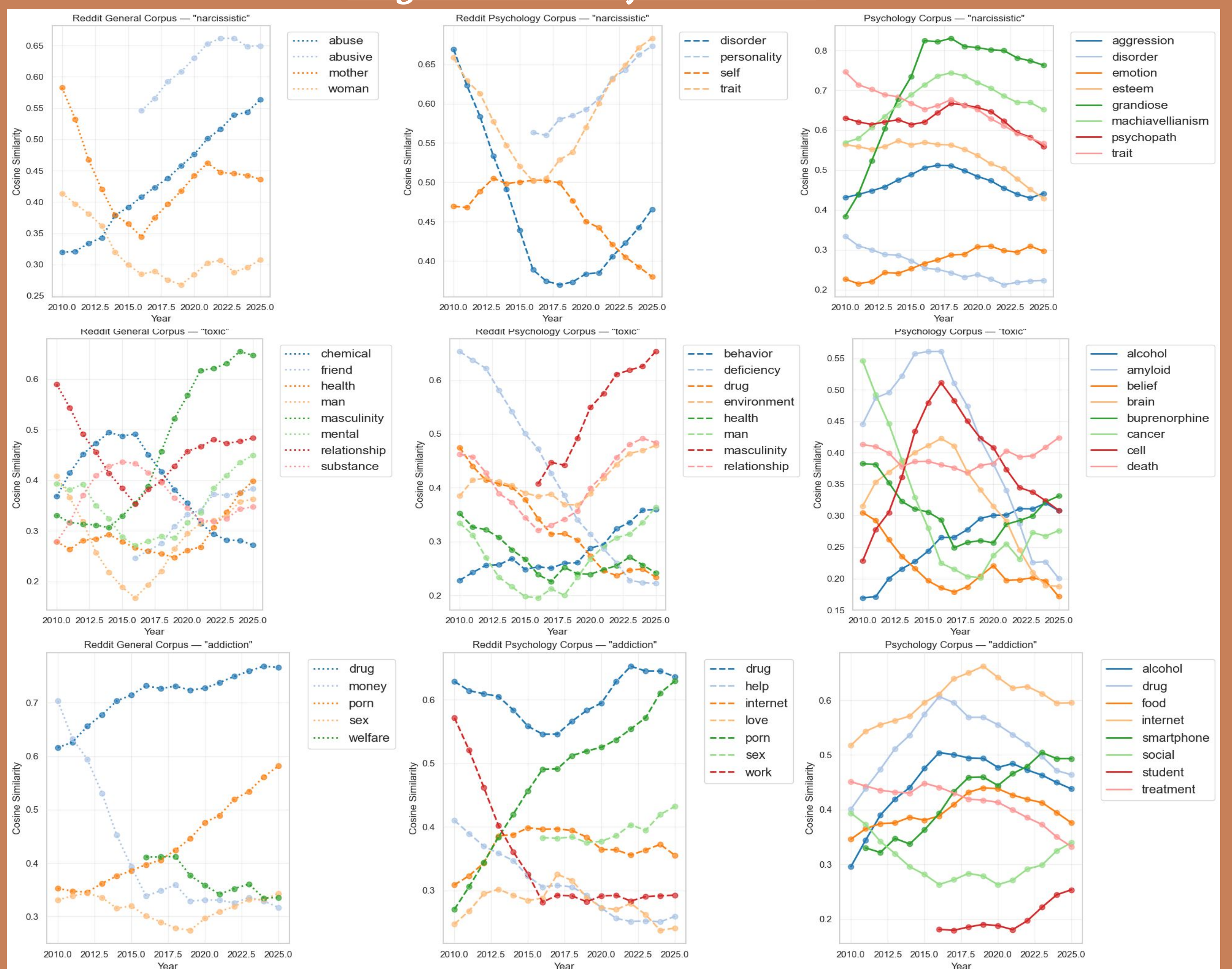
Semantic Breadth



Semantic Displacement



Neighbour Similarity Evolution



Main findings

- Concepts shift semantically both diachronically, throughout years, and concurrently - when they are adopted from a specialized domain into general usage
- Some terms adopted from specialized terminology are integrated into everyday language with distinct nuances (such as *narcissistic*, *addiction*, etc.)
- Some terms were likely not derived from specialized psychology vocabulary, either because their usage in the specialized corpus differs substantially (as in the case of *toxic*) or is almost entirely absent (as with *gaslighting*)
- Reddit psychology forums show intermediate usage, positioned between specialized psychological discourse and general Reddit language

Acknowledgements

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