The Life of Kanye West: Examining the Public Perception of West's Radical Political Views

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Problem Definition

One of the most polarizing figures in pop culture, Kanye West, has an undeniable influence on cultural discourse. For years, West's persona as a rapper and a stalwart for free-thinking has been critiqued, lauded and scrutinized. With his open support for the controversial U.S. President, Donald Trump, his frequent public outbursts have overshadowed his artistic capabilities. Using his pro-Trump tirade on Saturday Night Live (SNL) as a pivot point, our project focuses on the public perception of him and his forthcoming album on Twitter. We would like to place this project within the wider context of using Twitter as a form of social and political expression and a medium for affective public discourse.

Background

Microblogging sites, like Twitter, allow millions of people, everyday, to share their thoughts owing to their "short and simple manner of expression" (Kumar, 2012). Sentiment mining from Twitter can be done in numerous ways. Kumar and Sebastian (2012) "extracted opinion words (a combination of the adjectives, along with the verbs and adverbs) in tweets, after which they calculated an overall sentiment score for each tweet.". Mixed-method approaches, "incorporating descriptive statistics, content analysis", sentiment analysis, topic modeling and data visualization have also been used. This was adopted by Benjamin Gleason (2013) who examined the rise of the Occupy Wall Street movement on Twitter using a hybrid approach of content analysis, descriptive statistics and a case study. He found that Twitter is the perfect platform for individuals to participate in political movements due to the ease of "creating, tagging and sharing content" along with "reading, watching and following a hashtag".

Kanye West has always been viewed as an individual who "resisted groupthink" (White, 2018), a position that led to the height of his popularity. In September 2018, West announced that his new album, "Yandhi" would be released by the end of the month after he performed on SNL. Online buzz on Twitter about the album had been mixed as loyal followers wrestled with separating his public opinions from his work. In actuality, he did not release the album but instead, went on a pro-Trump tirade. Additionally, he posted an image on Twitter with the infamous "Make America Great Again" hat, a slogan of Trump's movement, proclaiming that it represented a new

America. For West, Twitter moves into a realm in which he is able to self-reflect and self-diagnose his political leanings to his massive following.

With his behavior analyzed by pundits, we can hypothesize what sentiments we might be able to uncover. His past outbursts, including a tirade on a radio show where he was unable to make eye contact with the host, have been speculated to stem from mental illness. Furthermore, some deem his behavior to be the result of inflated narcissism, misunderstanding and even, artistic genius (Kitson, 2016). We expect to find similar sentiments in our data and to contribute to the corpus of literature that examines Twitter as an example of an online technology that "collapses the public and private boundaries" to afford opportunities for "expression that may simultaneously empower and compromise individuals" like Kanye West (Papacharissi, 2014).

Data Processes

Obtaining data and ensuring its quality is suitable to conduct any analysis is fundamental. By using packages in Python, such as "tweepy", "nltk" and "unicodedata", we achieved adequate data standards to conduct our analysis. The data was collected with the hope of determining public response following West's performance on SNL on September 30th, the live streaming of his album, "Yandhi", in Uganda on October 13th, and his tweet on October 30th where he states: "My eyes are now wide open and now realize I've been used to spread messages I don't believe in. I am distancing myself from politics and completely focusing on being creative !!!".
The tweets were collected via the Twitter's Application Program Interface (API) using Python's "tweepy" library. For each tweet collected, a JSON file format was returned where the attributes: tweet_id, created, tweet, location, and hashtags were selected to be stored. Our data consists of original tweets only, a decision made to avoid collecting an excessive amount of media links used for promotion or spam accounts delivering the same tweet for multiple instances.

The queries used to fetch the data were: "Kanye West", "Kanye on SNL", and "Yandhi".

Key Word	Kanye West	Kanye on SNL	Yandhi
Number of Tweets (Before processing)	20, 867	8,000	10,143
Number of Tweets(After processing)	20,643	7, 914	10, 091

Table 1: Number of tweets before and after processing the data per keyword.

The data was collected throughout the month of October 2018 (Table 2). “Yandhi” did not return as many results as the other keywords as the data was collected in a one hour time period and the rate limiting value to use the API was reached. This was an inconsistency due to the data not being manually inspected immediately after collection, which led to technical issues that were handled during the cleaning process. In addition, querying for tweets was done inclusively so our data includes tweets that have for example, either “Kanye” or “SNL”. Future work for a similar analysis will take these issues into account to ensure accurate and clean results are delivered.

Keyword	10/7	10/12	10/14	10/15	10/15	10/15	10/21	10/22	10/26	10/29	10/30
Kanye West	2000	2000	2000	2000	2000	2000	2000	2000	867	2000	2000
Kanye on SNL	2000	2000				2000	2000				
Yandhi	667	675	686	686	672	1054	1917		1786		2000

Table 2: When the data was collected, and amount collected per keyword.

After the collection of data, the data was subjected to a cleaning code which used Python’s “nltk” package to process the text data. The corpus was used to remove the stop words which would aid in enhancing the sentiment analysis. As a part of the cleaning, we removed the punctuation marks using function modules and converted all the data to lowercase to make the data uniform. As a part of the normalization, we imported the “unicodedata” package to remove the non-ascii words. The initial challenges during the data cleaning process were removal of URLs and slangs and the location data that was input by the users.

Results

The processed data was analyzed using sentiment scores provided from the Python library “TextBlob”. The sentiment data was analyzed using Python’s “Pandas” library to generate time series plots based on sentiment scores and sentiment scale. In order to analyze which words appeared most frequently in each dataset, we generated frequency distributions and word clouds using the Python libraries, “nltk” and “WordCloud”. Furthermore, we used VOSViewer, a visualization software that uses Latent Dirichlet Allocation to generate clusters from a text document. After isolating the tweets within each dataset, we used the software for topic modeling to analyze which words could be grouped together to created topics. The parameter set for the clustering was a minimum of 20 occurrences for each word in the dataset. The output

from VOSViewer was further analyzed using “Pandas” to generate groupings of words.

Sentiment Analysis

As mentioned, the goal was to analyze the sentiment surrounding the three major Kanye West public outbursts. Figure 1 to 3 show the overall sentiment response. Note in Figure 1 that October 15th has a spike in the sentiment response, this is because the data collected on this day was greater than the others. Conversely, the data collected for October 27th was no more than 500 tweets, hence the dip.

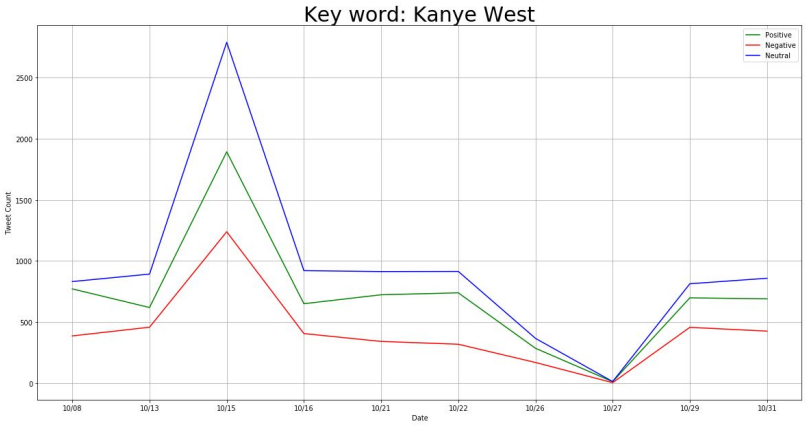

Figure 1: Time-series plot of “Kanye West” keyword.

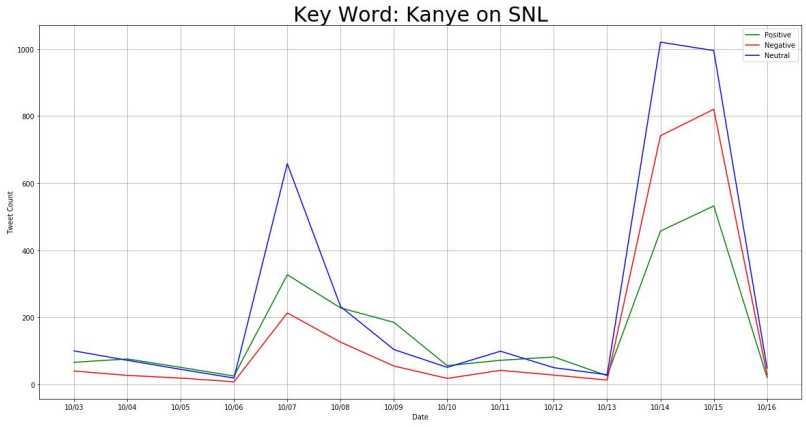

Figure 2: Time-series plot of “Kanye on SNL” keyword.

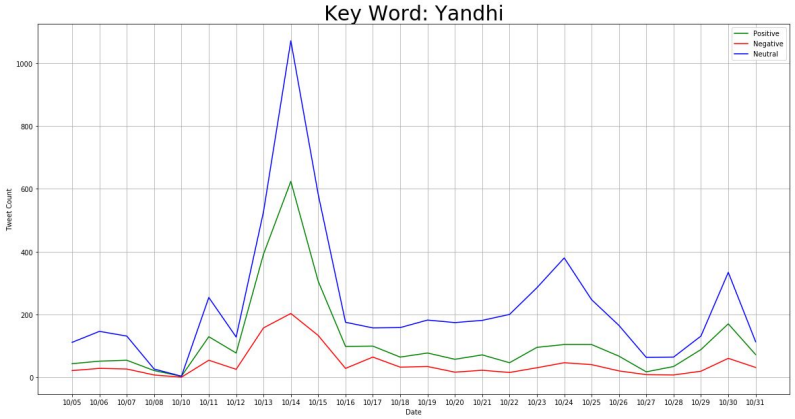

Figure 3: Time-series plot of “Yandhi” keyword.

Based on the figures, it appears that Kanye West exhibits an overall positive response. Although in Figure 2, we see that on the 14th and 15th the negative sentiment outweighs the positive sentiment -- which is when West live streamed Yandhi implying that the public perception exhibited a shift in their view.

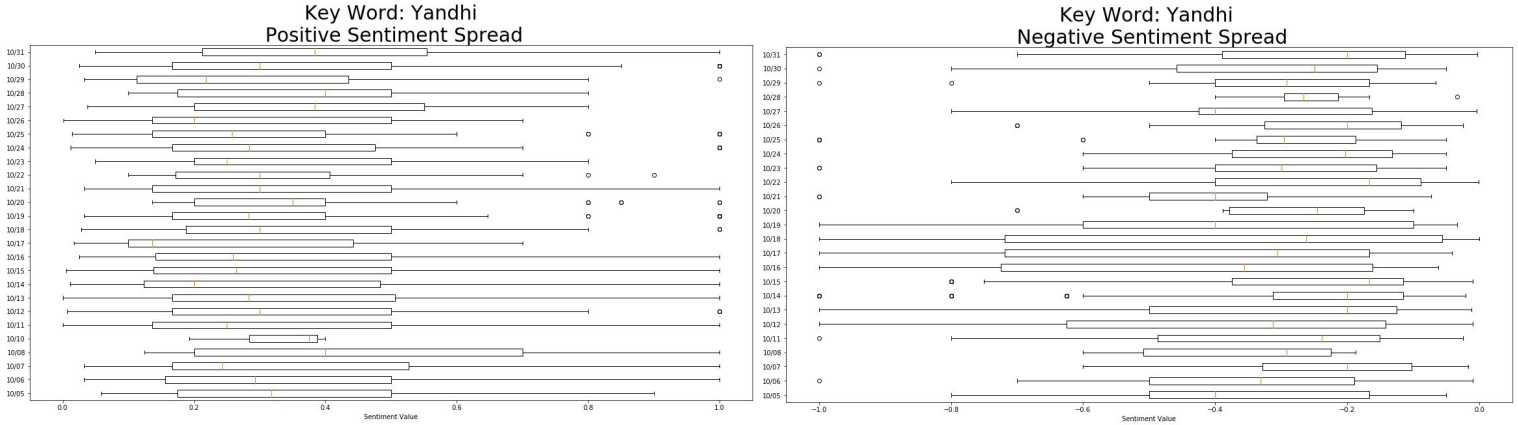

Figure 4: Box-and-whisker plot of sentiment value scores for keyword “Kanye West.”.

When inspecting the sentiment values, separating positive and negative, it was discovered that the distribution was skewed left and skewed right, respectively. Without loss of generality, Figure 4 displays the spread of sentiment scores for the keyword “Yandhi.” As a result, a deeper look into the sentiment values was done by using the following scale: Very negative [-1,-0.6], Negative (-0.6,-0.4], Neutral (-0.4,0.4], Positive (0.4, 0.6], and Very Positive (0.6,1].

Figure 5: Time-Series plot of sentiment scores based off sentiment scale for keyword “Kanye West.”

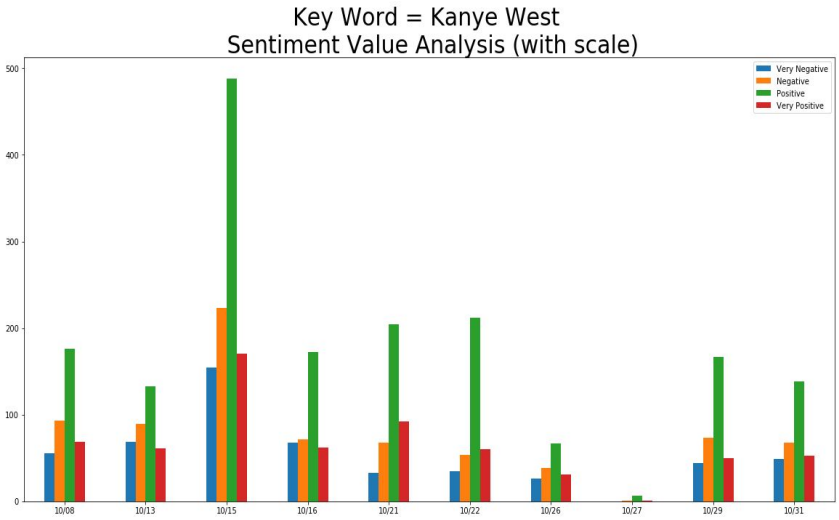

Figure 5 utilizes the sentiment score scale and presents the results for the keyword “Kanye West.” Note that the neutral values were omitted to be able to focus on negative and positive

sentiment values. Following his appearance on SNL, West begins to receives a higher negative response over a very positive response up until the 21st. In addition, after his live stream of his upcoming album, the ratio of the length between the sentiment bars for each day increase past October 13th indicating that he received a larger result of positive responses from the public in favor of his album. Yet, leading up to West's tweet on the 30th he, again, maintains a negative response over a very positive perhaps implying that aside from his artistic capabilities the public has not completely disregarded his controversial outbursts.

Trend and Frequency Analysis

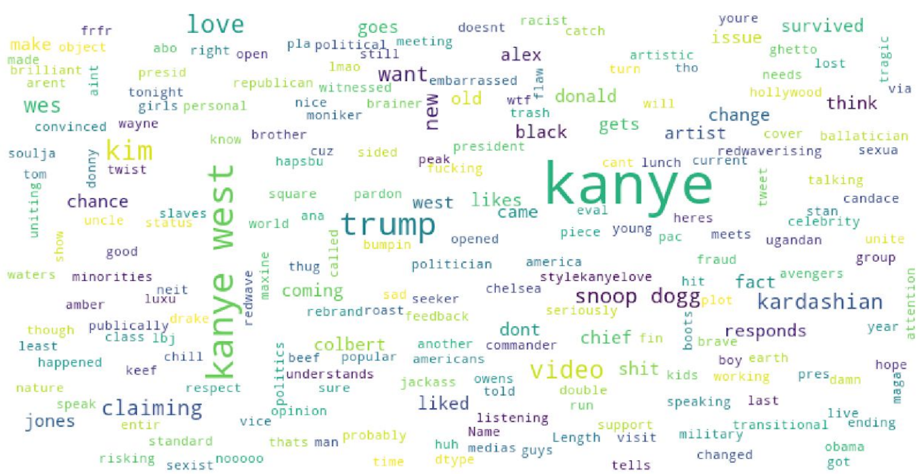

Figure 6: Word Cloud for keyword "Kanye West"

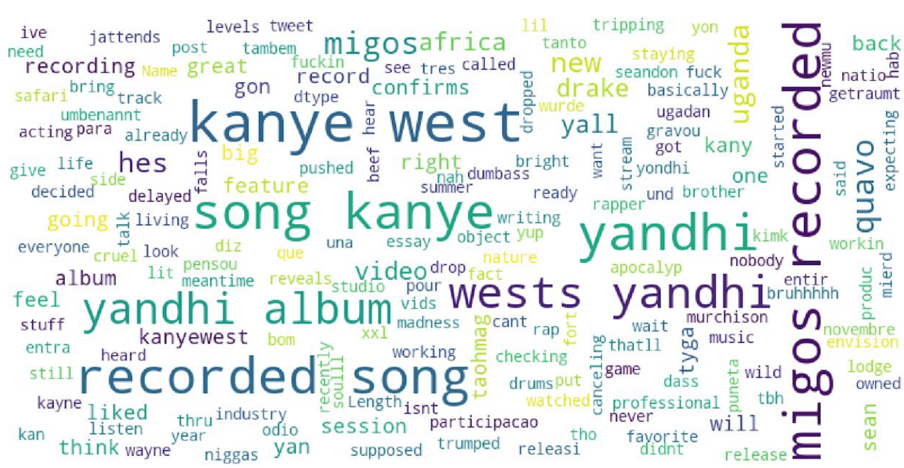

Figure 7: Word Cloud for keyword "Yandhi"

Obviously, the most frequent words would be "Kanye" and "West", however, looking at the remaining frequent words, we can identify salient trends in the composition of the tweets. While we created word clouds for all datasets, we believed these two had the most significant trends. In Figure 6, we noticed several other names pop up in the tweets about Kanye West. These include political figures, like Donald Trump, conservative commentators, like Alex Jones,

musicians, like Snoop Dogg and West's wife, Kim Kardashian. Perhaps, in reconciling their emotions about West, individuals point at others who might have influenced his views, like Jones, and those affected by them, like his family. Furthermore, West's political stance is also speculated upon, despite his history of resisting groupthink, with words like "political", "Republican" and "redwave rising" emerging in the word cloud. In addition, we see words like "tragic", "embarrassed", "brave" and "brilliant" that further implicate the mixed reactions towards West's public outbursts which links to the mix of negative and positive sentiment exhibited in the time series analysis. There seem to be individuals who still view him as a prolific musician, while others believe he is reinventing himself in a negative way.

In Figure 7, the words associated with the tweets about "Yandhi" focus on the factual aspects of the albums. These include the musical trio, Migos, recording a feature for it and the fact that West recorded and live streamed it in Uganda. For this reason, "Uganda", "Migos", "Africa" and "recorded" appear in the cloud. This suggests that the album might be viewed as a separate entity from his public persona as the chatter around it focuses on the announcements made about its recording and composition. Thus, his SNL tirade would not affect the perception of his album, more so due to his attempt to dissociate himself from politics as the release date approached.

Using VOSViewer and the frequency parameter of 20 occurrences for a word, we were able to use the tools of the software to generate three topic models, one for each dataset. In the "Yandhi" dataset, 214 words met the frequency parameter, while in the "Kanye on SNL" and "Kanye West" tweets, 120 and 210 words did so, respectively. While we generated three topic models, the most interesting clusters (Table 3) were generated from the "Kanye West" dataset. As found in the sentiment analysis and word clouds, there is a general sense of confusion about his behavior and several explanations are thrown out, from his political views (Cluster 2 and 3) and his mental health (Cluster 4). In addition, the consequences of his behavior (Cluster 1) are also mentioned, including the subsequent SNL commentary by Pete Davidson and the impact on his shoe brand 'Yeezy'. As such, we can assume that the reaction to him has been polarized.

Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4
cnn comment	13th amendment artist	african american black	album charlamagne

donald trump cold follower kanye west kim kardashian kanye west return lemon meeting new music pete davidson president trump president uganda snl social medium video watch west white house yeezy	attention choice day dude friend job nobody side slavery something sound way white supremacist year	black person black voter blexit democrat democratic party hat kanyewest party racist Rally shirt	fan god kanye wests mental health talk kanye wests yandhi album mental health migo news quavo talk track week

Table 3: Top 4 clusters in the "Kanye West" dataset

Conclusion

On a higher level, we aimed to investigate the use of Twitter as an outlet to dissociate an artist from their controversial views. Using the example of Kanye West and his support for Donald Trump, we set out to investigate whether his public tirades on Twitter and SNL would affect the sentiment towards his delayed, forthcoming album. After scraping three datasets of tweets associated with "Kanye West", "Kanye on SNL" and "Yandhi", we cleaned our data to remove noise and repetition. Then, we conducted a sentiment analysis on the tweets and identified frequency trends with word clouds and topic models. Through this mixed-method analysis, we were able to conclude that sentiment towards West was mixed, oscillating between negative and positive, whereas the perception of his forthcoming album was rather positive.

For future analysis, it would be beneficial to view geographic differences in sentiment towards West. While we extracted location from the Twitter API, this attribute was user-generated, leading to a significant amount of noise in the data. With this attribute, users are more likely to conceal their locations which would result in an inconclusive spatial analysis. Additionally, it would be conclusive to our analysis if we collect data following the album release to view the public response towards it to determine if it compliments our pre-album release analysis.

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