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Correlating Sentiment and Public Opinion: A Study of YouTube Commentaries on Affirmative Action Rulings

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Abstract. This study mainly illustrates the relationship between the expression of positive and negative sentiments by YouTube users' comments on the 2023 Affirmative Action ruling and the attitude of the commenters towards the Supreme Court ruling. At the same time, the study also examines social media comments and how the positive and negative sentiments expressed by the digital audiences on social media, which can be related to the audience's attitudes in favor or against the rulings. Furthermore, the study seeks to use the sentiment analysis to identify the different emotions expressed in the comments such as comments written with expressions of hope, social justice, trust, etc. and comments expressed with expressions of discontent, distrust, etc. by placing these emotions in the discourse on race, equality, and constitutional principles; how does emotion meet ideology and interact in digital public discourse? This study intends to provide a new perspective for academic debates on affirmative action and digital political communication, that emotional expressions on social media are not only a reflection of public attitudes but also a way through which collective attitudes are formed.

Keywords: Affirmative Action, Sentiment Analysis, Social Media Comments, Digital Political Communication, Public Attitudes

1. Introduction

In the United States, affirmative action in college admission refers to policies that consider applicants' race and ethnicity as one factor in the holistic review process, aiming to address racial inequality, ensure equal educational opportunities for all races, and promote racial diversity in higher education. Originating in the civil rights movement during the 1960s, affirmative action, designed to ensure equal opportunities for minorities, has long been both celebrated as a tool for social justice and criticized and challenged as a form of reverse discrimination against whites, causing white resentment. Decades of the education system have engrained its presence in the minds of the people and brought up controversies throughout the country over the virtue of the action. In 2023, the United States Supreme Court's decision in the cases Students for Fair Admission, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College (SFFA v. Harvard) and Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. University of North Carolina (SFFA v. UNC), with SFFA holding the view that the colleges' race-

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conscious admissions violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment which prohibit any distinctions based on race or color, reignited the nation debate, drawing the passionate responses across the country [1]. Although part of the reaction was captured by offline discussions and news coverage, the online environment, and, in particular, social media, which would be available to everyone, provided a comprehensive perspective of personal feelings. Specifically, the comment section in social media enables the user to express themselves without being limited by time, physical space, and any social norms, which may lead to a more open expression of personal ideology.

YouTube specifically offers a more interesting place to view these reactions. It is a kind of synthesis of audiovisual reporting with interactive commenting sections that allow the audience to react in real-time, creating a personal, emotional, and collective discourse. The content of videos about the 2023 affirmative action decisions captured great attention and generated thousands of comments, which indicated that people strongly feel about the policy itself and the arguments of the Court. They were both celebrations of the fact that the Court has reaffirmed its commitment to colorblind ideals and criticisms that the decision would politicize racial equity in higher education.

This essay seeks to analyze these online responses in a bid to show how the worlds of sentiment and position overlap in the public interaction with the decisions made by the Court. Through a comparison of positive and negative expressions of comments left on YouTube, the research aims to track the trends of liking and disliking, as well as point at the magnitude of reactions that people showed. Through this approach, the essay sheds light on how the 2023 affirmative action decisions were interpreted, contested, and emotionally negotiated within online spaces of public discourse.

2. Literature review

2.1. Definition and origin

Sentiment analysis is the process of gathering and analyzing people’s opinions, thoughts, and impressions regarding various topics, products, subjects, and services, typically positive or negative, or neutral [2,3]. It is used to study public opinion, political attitudes, behavior and potential reactions towards various social events. Although sentiment analysis focuses on how people feel and their internal emotions, stance detection extends emotion-based research to what position people hold. In other words, stance detection shows whether people support, oppose, or remain neutral towards an event [4]. Social media platforms are popular for gathering information and work as a forum for analyzing sentiment and stance. In particular, YouTube comments, which are the public's spontaneous and real responses, could not only show an individual's expressed emotion, but also reveal their inclination towards controversial topics [5].

The 2023 U.S. Supreme Court rulings on affirmative action in higher education which effectively ended race-conscious admission programs at colleges and universities, led to widespread debates on social media platforms [6]. In this context, “positive sentiment” aligns with a supported stance. On the other hand, “negative sentiment aligns with the opposite stance. However, sentiment does not always relate to an equivalent stance; researchers must investigate the interplay between emotions and positions [2].

The origins of sentiment analysis can be traced to the text subjectivity analysis performed by the computational linguistics community in the 1990s, demonstrating that texts could be recognized as positive or negative with high accuracy [7]. Subsequent studies extended sentiment analysis to online product reviews and the growing spread of social media [3]. Stance detection emerged slightly later, responding to the need to distinguish between emotional tone and positions on

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controversial topics, which enabled the research to reach the goal more directly [4]. In most studies, researchers could use advanced machines to classify posts as “in favor”, “disappointed” or “neutral”. This inhibits the possibility of misinterpreting emotions with irony or context [2].

Research on YouTube comments also expanded these applications, which allowed users to express their emotions towards court’s rulings or debate political affairs. Compared to platforms set limits, YouTube platforms provided commenters more freedom on language expression, which made it possible for researchers to find the nuances of sentiment and stance [5]

The 2023 Supreme Court affirmative action rulings function as a case study for these methods. The decisions caused wholly different reactions. While some commenters lauded them as a breakthrough towards race equality, others criticized them as undermining educational fairness based on racial standards [6]. By applying sentiment analysis to YouTube comments, scholars can interpret how positive and negative expressions align with broader public stances toward the Court’s rulings. Situating this approach within the research of sentiment and stance continues the earlier studies’ developed research method and creates the originality of integrating them into the affirmative action movement [2].

2.2. Most recent studies

Recent studies on sentiment and stance analysis mainly started from public reactions to political debates, court decisions, and online discussions to make further exploration [4,8]. This research shows how computational models can investigate the correlation between both emotional tone and positions expressed by the public on social media platforms, which is very similar to our research—how do expressions of positive and negative sentiment in YouTube comments about the 2023 affirmative action rulings correlate with commenters’ stances toward the Supreme Court’s decisions.

A social-media study analyzed reactions to the June 2023 Supreme Court rulings, especially focused on affirmative action and student-loan decisions across platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, and Instagram, analyzing more than 150,000 posts [9]. This study highlighted significant negative emotions after the rulings, which characterize volume spikes after rulings.

YouTube comment research gradually became a container for sentiment and stance analysis work. The DIVERSE: A Dataset of YouTube Video Comment Stances with a Data Programming Model released a large, YouTube-based corpus labeled stance (supportive/neutral/oppositional) for each video using a data-programming model with a weak supervision method [10]. The results found that the stance distribution was generally balanced among supportive, oppositional, and neutral comments, with a slight skew towards oppositional versus supportive comments.

Applied YouTube studies also showed the importance of the correct relation between sentiment and stance. For example, recent analyses of Sentiment analysis of the Hamas-Israel war on YouTube comments using deep learning found that carefully annotated sentiment and stance classifiers can show polarized sentiments and clusters of hate speech [5]. The study accentuated careful annotation and task framing when conducting classification beyond simple grouping. Such work reveals that the nature of YouTube comments is rich and complex, requiring robust models and ethical considerations [8,11].

According to these studies, we can summarize some trends from them. First, sentiment and stance are not always equivalent, so it is important to consider the context of both [2]. Second, YouTube is becoming a significant forum for doing research. It’s useful that some computational models could help label videos and classify sentiment and stances to generate important results. There might be more valuable computer models invented in the future to analyze YouTube comments [10]. Third, sentiments expressed in the comments are timely. Public emotions may face their volume spike

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when court rulings or decisions are just announced. As time passes, these sentiments may shift and stand for another stance. These trends show that researchers need to pay more attention to the characteristics of the platform's comments when thinking and continue to perfect the computer models used.

2.3. The timeliness and significance of the research

In 2023, the U.S. Supreme Court abolished the consideration of race in the admission of students to universities in Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard and Students for Fair Admissions v. University of North Carolina, thus ending the implementation of affirmative action, which has been gradually forming since the 1970s and continues to this day [1]. It is a milestone event in American higher education, not only because it completely changed the institutional logic of the admissions system, but also because it greatly affected people's understanding of equality and racial justice. After the ruling, the controversial reactions appeared rapidly in all social strata and groups: supporters highlighted the equality of individuals and "race-neutral" admission systems, believing that the ruling was in line with the constitution, while opponents believed that the ruling ignored the fact that there was racial discrimination and destroyed the efforts made by all parties to narrow the gap in education [12]. Therefore, the Affirmative Action ruling triggered lasting debates in the legal, political and public spheres, which provides an important opportunity to observe the division of contemporary American society [13].

In addition, the widespread use of social media endows the transmission and discussion of political issues with new digital characteristics. Especially in the United States, in addition to being the main source of public news and political information, social media is also an important place where people from different groups express their opinions and compete for influence [14]. In the process, users' emotional expressions are crucial. Anger, frustration, hope, inspiration, etc. the emotions people feel about events do not only reflect their attitudes towards events, but are also spread, resonated, and contested in the public sphere, thus forming collective attitudes and cognitive styles. Most researchers believe that emotional expression is one of the most important links in digital political communication, which can not only promote group mobilization, but also cause social polarization.

Among all kinds of social media, there are several notable differences in the characteristics of YouTube. As one of the most popular video platforms in the United States, in addition to being a platform that simply collects entertainment information, YouTube has become the main entrance to obtain current affairs and political information for many people. Compared with X (Twitter) or Facebook, the number of users in the comments section of YouTube videos is enormous, and the length of text is longer, and more importantly, the discussion is very passionate in the comments based on the videos. Therefore, the comments section of YouTube is an ideal data source to observe public opinion and sentiment. Especially when the video involved is a major social event, the comments on the video can reflect the distribution of public opinion and the change of sentiment very vividly [15]. Therefore, using the YouTube comments as an entry to observe the public reaction after the Affirmative Action ruling can fully capture the interaction between sentiment and stance in the digital communication process.

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From a temporal perspective, the Supreme Court's 2023 judgment is a "historical turning point event". On the one hand, the judgment ended the policy practice for half a century. On the other hand, it quickly sparked widespread attention and discussion across American society. As for the research on political communication, digital public opinion and social sentiment, the "inflection point events" have rich and valuable academic significances for two aspects: one is that researchers can directly observe the public responses to the major institutional changes and the diffusion process of these responses to promote communications, debates, and even conflicts through social media; the other is that studying the relationship between emotional expressions and political stances on YouTube comments at the historical turning point is urgently important and has important references for the political communication in American society.

Furthermore, the relationship between emotions and political stances becomes a research hotspot in the research of political communication. For a long time, scholars have always paid more attention to the rational part of public opinion, that is, the approval rating of policies, value distribution and political orientation. However, with the development of social media, emotions have proved to be not only a concomitant variable of attitudes but also a major engine that promotes the formation of stance and group polarization. That is, negative emotions are more likely to spread and get responses on social media, and the former promotes the emergence of dissenting opinions, while the latter is used to identify and consolidate groups. The case of affirmative action provides a clear example of this dynamic. The supporters of the policy may express their expectations for an inclusive society with positive emotions such as "hope" and "fairness", while the opponents may express their negative emotions such as 'anger' and "dissatisfaction" to condemn the fact that the system is unfair to them. These emotional expressions not only reflect the attitudes of individuals, but also accumulate within public discourse, ultimately forming collective opinions characterized by specific ideological stances.

2.4. Research gap

Even as a research topic, YouTube also has some limitations in terms of representativeness and comparability. The audience of YouTube is different from the general public in terms of age, interests, and media use habits. The recommendation mechanism of algorithms also enhances the matching between the content and the audience. The comments section of different channels or videos may present two completely different emotional tones and ideological tendencies. This difference makes it necessary for researchers to strictly control independent variables in comparative studies, or they may obtain incorrect results [17]. In addition, affirmative action is a very sensitive topic, and it involves race, education, and social justice in many aspects. Research on it has very strict requirements for ethical norms and compliance. How to maximize the exposure of real public opinion while protecting data privacy and compliance is an urgent problem in our studies at present.

Another is the lack of consideration of multimodal factors. YouTube comments are closely related to the visual, auditory, and narrative content of the videos themselves. The attitudes of users may also be affected by speakers, visual styles, or communicative context. However, most of the

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existing sentiment analysis is single processing of comments, ignoring the interaction between comments and videos, which hinders our overall understanding of the correlation between sentiment and stance, and affects our overall understanding of digital public opinion. It is not sufficiently reflective of digital public opinion.

Therefore, the affirmative action ruling, as a significant turning point in society, provides an opportunity to study the interaction between emotion and stance in digital discourse. There is still a large gap in academia in terms of time, method, data, and compliance. If we conduct systematic research on YouTube comments, we can fill the gap in understanding the public's response to affirmative action rulings and broaden the scope of digital political communication studies [18]. Theoretically, this new direction enriches our understanding of how emotions influence political stances. Practically, it provides new perspectives for observing public opinion polarization and democratic communication problems in extremely controversial issues.

Although there is a large amount of research on affirmative action in the fields of law, education, and sociology, academic exploration is scarce in the field of digital discourse--especially in the relationship between emotion and stance in YouTube comments. The 2023 Supreme Court's SFFA v. Harvard and SFFA v. UNC rulings not only institutionalized half a century of admissions practices and sparked intense social debates, but also will continue to heat up. Academic research always needs time to accumulate. Most of the existing studies focus on analyzing legal precedents, policy effectiveness, or long-term impacts on education equity, while rarely exploring the immediate appearance of expressions of emotion and the construction of stance in the digital public sphere [19]. This temporal gap makes the research on how the public sentiment reflects, and even constructs the attitude toward the ruling as an academic void.

At the methodological level, several problems also arise in research on YouTube comments. YouTube is the world’s largest video platform. The data available for public opinion analysis in its comments section are extremely rich. However, the way in which this data is presented and obtained is conditioned by the platform. Comment visibility is conditioned by ranking processes and different actions of community management, whose criteria are opaque. This implies that, at the time of collecting data, researchers cannot guarantee full control over the reliability and representativeness of their samples. In turn, the emotion expressed in the text is not always congruent or directly proportional to the position of the commenter. There is sarcasm, irony, mixed emotions, and other peculiarities of the platform that make sentiment analysis a challenge not only from a technical perspective but also from the point of view of a problem that must be addressed by interpreting meaning in context [20]. Without adequate attention to these pragmatic aspects, the results obtained may appear vacuous.

3. Study design and data analysis

To investigate how online audiences responded to the 2023 Supreme Court rulings on affirmative action, we selected six YouTube videos from MSNBC and Fox News for case studies. For clarity, these videos were identified as: V1 (56T4XKFYgNE), V2 (bsmEz0clCYU), V3 (SJ9qVkBV21A), V4 (lwivZI46e74), V5 (YsadG-lTXsk), and V6 (nkwj9YKJHhA). Because all six videos were produced by major media outlets and had high view counts and extensive comments, selecting these videos ensured the credibility of the content while having sufficient audience engagement.

In order to analyze this data, we applied the Sentiment and Emotion Network Analysis (SENA) framework, aiming to represent the distribution and the correlation among emotions in the digital texts. Since remarks on political matters often feature ambivalent or mixed-felted content of a

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comment, which is at once angry and trusted, the SENA was chosen over less qualitative sentiment analysis methods.

SENA evaluates sentiment along two dimensions, including intensity and distribution. Intensity is the degree to which a certain comment is expressed in terms of emotion. An example is intensity, which determines that a comment like “This decision is disgraceful” expresses more anger than a comment like “I am not sure that this ruling is the best choice.” Distribution, the commonality of every form of emotion (e.g., trust, anticipation, anger, disgust) in the dataset as a whole, would provide an understanding of which emotion is being used by the masses.

Group distributions to be displayed in analyses

	Var1	Freq
1	56T4XKFYgNE	1262
2	bsmEzoclCYU	46
3	lwivZI46e74	433
4	nkwj9YKJHhA	1014
5	SJ9qVkBV21A	785
6	YsadG-lTXsk	1596

Showing 1 to 6 of 6 entries Previous 1 Next

Figure 1. Group distributions to be displayed in analysis in SENA

Besides, the framework was described in network visualization to be understood better. Individual comments in the network were represented, and emotions were represented as emotion nodes. Comments were linked to emotion notes with the help of edges and the same comment could be attached to many nodes connected to emotions in case it consisted of several expressions. Such mapping points out intricate connections between emotions and comments made by individuals, showing not only how frequent this or that comment or emotion is, but also how various emotions can be expressed in a comment.

Entropy and consistency were also determined in order to complement the network analysis. Entropy is used to measure the diversity of the categories of emotions in the dataset. A large entropy indicates that feelings are equally spread in a multitude of categories, and a small entropy indicates that the general response is focused on a few emotions. Consistency is a measure of the frequency of recurrence of similar categories of emotions in multiple comments and indicates the predictability of the responses. When the consistency is low, it means that the comments have a more varied emotional profile, and when the consistency is high, the dataset yields the same emotions. These measures come in particularly handy in finding out the extent to which the online conversations are more split into a variety of emotional responses or are centered around repeated affective tropes.

Notably, the analysis of child comments under the videos was not carried out; the analysis of parent comments was conducted. In this methodological choice, the independent responses to video content were done directly before the conversation that would be shared among the commenters. Reactions in the nature of parent comments often become personal disputes, which are often highly emotional-colored, yet not always reflective of the views on the content of the video and the video topic by the commenters. The analysis that focuses on the comments made by parents would be more indicative of the direct impact of video framing on the sentiment of the audience.

On the whole, through a multi-layered analysis of the different gauges, we managed to analyze the patterns of co-occurrence of the audience reactions to affirmative action, as influenced by the contents of the video, as well as the frequency or intensity of the emotions, across the dataset.

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4. Result

The findings indicate that positive sentiments are more prevalent throughout the dataset (mean proportion = 0.643) than negative sentiments (mean proportion = 0.357). Specifically, according to the result, comments that expressed trust, anticipation, or joy were more common than those that expressed anger, disgust, or sadness. This does not, however, necessarily indicate support for affirmative action; rather, it illustrates how feelings of the audience were allocated according to each video's narrative focus.

At the aggregate level, the data shows high consistency and low entropy (mean entropy = 0.26), indicating that emotions were concentrated in a small band that re-occurred frequently across comments rather than being widely distributed across all categories. Put it in another way, even though various videos promoted various emotional targets—whether they were students, politicians, or racial issues—the expression patterns remained remarkably consistent, with the same emotions being expressed repeatedly across different contents.

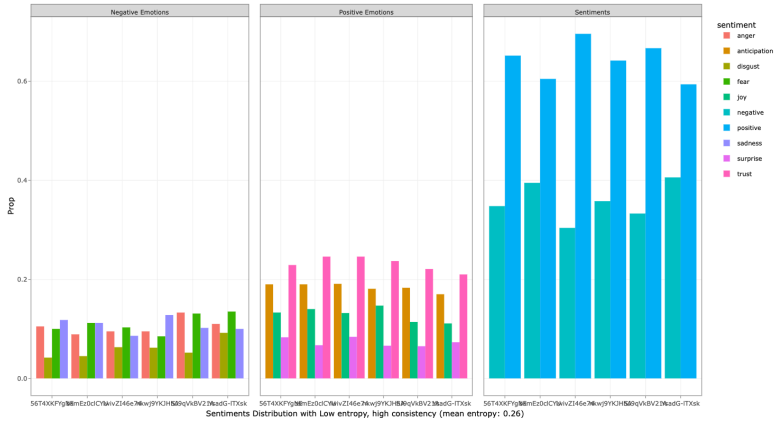

Figure 2. Sentiment distributions across selected videos

Nonetheless, a closer analysis reveals how the focus of the various videos on various subjects and reporting on them differently affected the audience with respect to the emotional expression of the audience members through their comments. As an illustration, a video that is predominantly made up of an interview of students who are victims of the affirmative action problem (V1) has a higher number of mentions of the word student as a comment, showing that most users responded to the issue of students in the video, and not to the decision of the Court. The provocative and confrontational nature of V2 when two speakers talked about college admissions policies, emotions were elevated, and expectancy was often cast at the result of the debate or the speakers themselves as opposed to affirmative action policy. In V3, the focus of the video on the ideological transformation of the Court and the possible crisis of its credibility has caused a high response to generalized fears about the legitimacy of the Court and not specifically about the policy of affirmative action.

The same can be observed in the other videos. In V4, where the constitutional explanation of the decision was tested, it is often said that they are confident or expectant of the constitutional arguments that were discussed in the video. The constant reference to AOC in the comments in V5 is an example of how emotions like anticipation were mostly ascribed to her as a political personality on whom the video content directed attention in a positive or negative way, thereby taking the attention off the real ruling of the issue. The high frequency of such words as black, white, and people in the word cloud, V6 demonstrates that the discussion often covered the theme of racial

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relations in general, and the emotionally colored commentary was based on anticipation and trust in the American society in general.



Figure 3. V6 word cloud

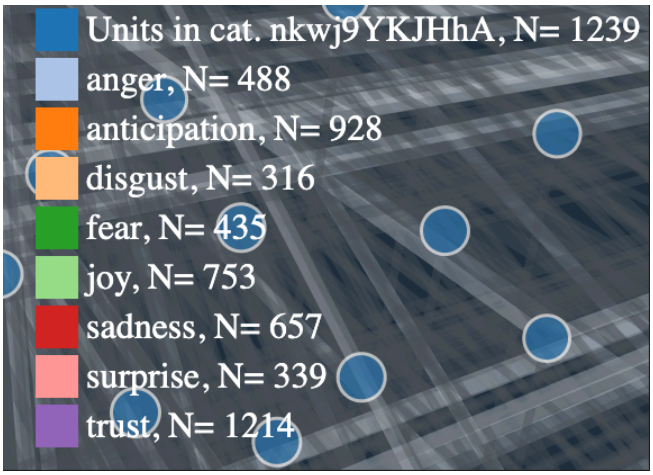

Figure 4. V6 comment-emotion map



Figure 4. V6 comment-emotion map

Nevertheless, the results need to be interpreted with caution. The increased frequency of positive emotions like trust and anticipation does not necessarily indicate that commenters agreed with the Court's ruling or addressed true anticipation toward the future of the rulings. Rather, the emphasis of the videos frequently influenced these feelings. According to V6, for instance, when we look at the

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comments that only contribute to the emotion "anticipation," claims like "Affirmative action was never meant to be permanent, the virtue signaling has to stop (ID: 5498)" show anticipation that is directly related to the future of admissions policies, while statements like "I will never listen to this man again! ever! (ID: 5558)" show anticipation that is more related to reactions to the media figures featured than it is to affirmative action. In other words, viewers had strong reactions to the videos' personalities, framing, and side topics in addition to the actual policy discussion. Because emotions are mediated by the video content, sentiment patterns deviate from simple interpretations of stance, resulting in expressions that do not neatly fit with support or opposition to affirmative action.

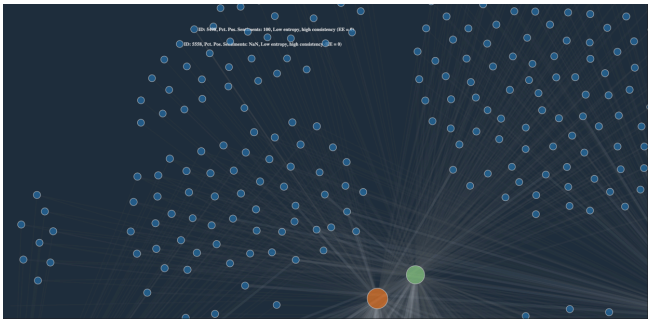

Figure 5. V6 comment-emotion map with comment 5498 and 5558 labeled

5. Discussion

This study focused on how positive and negative emotions in YouTube comments about the 2023 Supreme Court affirmative action rulings relate to commenters' positions, using SENA for sentiment analysis. Although sentimental analysis can help find common emotions, there are limits. Positive emotions do not always align with supported stance for the Court's rulings. People's sentiments can be influenced by how the video was made, who or what appeared in it, or what languages were used. Furthermore, other commenters were ironic or put their comments in perspective. This demonstrates that sentiment analysis would not work well in interpreting the sentiment of people, and would not represent their position.

Simultaneously, sentiment analysis is increasing and handy. The YouTube comments are elaborated and thorough, and they are representative of the thoughts of the general population in a balanced manner. Specific computer models such as SENA are able to handle a great deal of data and distill the trend of sentiments within a short time. Sentiment analysis + the stance detection would allow getting a more accurate impression of what the people think.

In future studies, it would be best to include the sentiment analysis with the cautious examination of comments or topics depending on various contexts, including the nations or races of the commenters. Besides, the creation of models capable of identifying the irony will help to make the results of the analysis more correct. Moreover, the way the opinion of people evolves could also be observed studying how the emotion is changed in the course of time following large events.

In conclusion, sentiment analysis can be helpful in locating how the general opinion correlates with their positions, although it has constraints in locating how people are positioned. The integration of the newest computer models with detailed analysis might result in a deeper insight into the relationship between the opinions of people, and their standings in relation to the controversial issues on the internet.

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6. Conclusion

The discussion indicates that sentiment analysis is a helpful instrument of mapping emotional patterns in online conversation, but the outcomes of this tool must be contextualized. The prevalence of positive feelings like anticipation and trust in all the six videos do not directly show how the decision of the Court was generally accepted or rejected. Rather, the framing of the videos, the presence of political or media figures, and the wider issues generated in the society, tended to be the causes of the emotions. The high consistency and low entropy of the data indicate that the reactions of the audience were concentrated around a few categories of emotions, but the definitions of these categories varied across the situation.

Finally, this paper underscores the drawbacks of sentiment analysis to intricate political speech. Emotional categories will be able to disclose the prevalent affective tendencies, but not all the political or ideological stand of commenters. Future studies ought to thus integrate both computational methods and more qualitative analysis especially with respect to studying individual comments that are disproportionately represented in major emotions. This will enable us not only gain a better understanding of the proliferation of emotions but also the contexts and motivation that influence the expression and challenge of opinions about affirmative action with others in digital arenas, thus giving us a more depth description of how opinion about affirmative action is voiced and debated by the masses.

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