Social media discussion of British school exams

Conference Paper Abstract

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Abstract

Externally-assessed public exams are taken by British students at ages 16 and 18 according to a common timetable. In recent years, there has been increasing social media discussion by candidates taking these exams, especially about the content of particular questions. This has resulted in coverage in the national media, which may in turn affect public perceptions of exams and standards. This paper provides quantitative evidence about the discussion of public exams by candidates, using data collected from Twitter on 6.44 million exam-related tweets during the June 2016 exam session. We investigated the extent of this phenomenon and the topics being discussed, and quantified sentiment by monitoring the occurrence of frequently used emoji within the tweets.

We found that the overall volume of exam-related tweets followed weekly and daily patterns, with activity peaking in the periods just before and after exams. Discussion of particular subjects was concentrated on days when relevant exams took place. Across the session as a whole, there was a declining trend in the number of tweets. There were few clear overall trends on sentiment, but when we focused on a particular exam by further filtering of the tweets, we were able to identify several distinct phases based on the words and emoji used. Discussion moved from revision, and wishing others luck before the exam, to discussion of the details of the paper, its perceived difficulty, along with an emotional response. When we looked at the sentiments expressed via emoji, we found a similar pattern, although perhaps more negative feeling before the exam than was expressed with words.

The research demonstrates how education professionals might use social media data sources to gain new insights on the experience of examination candidates and how such public discussions might shape wider public perceptions of educational assessment.