SUPER BOWL QUARTERBACKS AND TWITTER CONVERSTATIONS: DOES IT MATTER IF YOU’RE BLACK OR WHITE?

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ABSTRACT

This research examines Twitter conversation surrounding the two quarterbacks in the 2016 Super Bowl. The NodeXL plugin was used to gather conversations both before and after the game to enlighten research questions on whether race was a focus of the conversation and the sentiment toward the players. After identifying racially charged words, the data indicate that race was a topic of conversation only for the African American quarterback. Sentiment analysis identified a larger percentage of negative term usage and a smaller percentage of positive term usage for the black quarterback compared to the white quarterback.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Playing quarterback in the National Football League is widely regarded as one of the most crucial leadership positions in all of sports. While, African American athletes have broken down many racial barriers throughout the world of sports, the walls at the quarterback position come with specific biases. While almost 70% of the NFL was made of African American players in 2007, only 18 of the 96 quarterbacks in the league (19%) were black (Mercurio and Filak 2010). Surprisingly, that number has stayed relatively consistent with 17 black quarterbacks in 2014 and 18 in 2015 (Gray 2015).

Prior research has shown a historical bias in the media depicting African-American athletes as physically gifted but without the mental skill to be the leader of the team (Murrell and Curtis 1994). This bias perpetuates in subtle, seemingly harmless ways. For instance, announcers often focus on and credit physical skill when talking about black quarterbacks while complementing cognitive ability more often for their white counterparts (Niven 2005).

Cam Newton vs. Peyton Manning

Super bowl 50 offered a unique glimpse into the racial issues that exist at the quarterback position relating to expectations and perceptions of both the media and the public. The matchup featured two gifted athletes who represented the face of their franchises. While their accolades may be similar, there were also some key differences. Manning was at the end of his career, while Newton is still early in his. Manning is stoic and calm while Newton is best known for his endzone dance and personality. And, the one difference, that the media could not get enough of in the weeks...
leading up to the super bowl, Manning is white and Newton is black. In the weeks leading up to the Super bowl, Cam Newton spoke candidly about how race effected perceptions of his play, “I’m an African-American quarterback that may scare a lot of people, because they haven’t seen nothing that they can compare me to,” he commented after his NFC Championship win.

The goal of the current research is to investigate public opinion of the two Super bowl 50 quarterbacks to identify if certain themes emerge in Tweets about Manning and Newton. I look to answer two specific research questions:

RQ1: Were people talking about race

RQ2: Was there a difference in the sentiment toward each of the players

METHOD AND RESULTS
To gain insights into these questions, I used the NodeXL extension for Excel (Smith et. Al. 2010). This plugin allows users to gather user tweets containing search terms in the hour prior to the data pull. This includes original tweets, retweets and mentions containing the term.

Race
To answer the first research question, I scanned the most commonly used words contained in the gathered tweets for words with specific racial connotations. There were a total of 3,639 tweets about Peyton Manning and 4,142 tweets about Cam Newton in a one hour span on the day following the Super bowl. Specifically, the words nigger, nigga, black, white race and racism were examined looking for racially charged language. In tweets containing Cam Newton, there were 155 cases of the word black (plus 3 instances of blacks), 50 cases of the word nigger, 30 cases of the word nigga, 74 cases of the word white, 17 cases of the word race and 5 mentions of the word racism. This makes a total of 334 potential racially motivated mentions. On the other hand, tweets containing Peyton Manning included 4 cases of the word black, 2 cases of the word nigger, 7 cases of the word nigga, and 4 cases of the word white—a total of 17 racially motivated words.

One important insight from the tweets is that commenters were mostly concerned with race for the black quarterback. While there were some mentions of “white people” black versus white the majority of the language was not personal. In comparison, not only did Cam Newton evoke exponentially more conversation related to race, many of the tweets were personal and derogatory not just for his play on the field but his existence as a person.

Another important insight is that all mentions of race are not negative. While there were 158 cases of black, many of those signified some level of solidarity with Newton as a human being and fellow black person. Thus, black was often used as an adjective describing Newton or used in a context where commenters were defending him. Similarly, the word white was often used in conjunction with the word black. Amusingly, most of the posts using the word white related to actress Betty White based on a story that she taught Cam Newton how to ‘dab.’
Not surprisingly, one word bore the force of the personal attacks—nigger. The word is used repeatedly to describe Newton in a derogatory way—with no justification. Tweet after retweet called him a name beyond sore loser or poor sport. The words race and racist were met with mixed valence. Race was used to defend that race was not the issue, with the negative connotation that Newton was being fairly treated and acting like a crybaby. Racist, on the other hand, was mostly used to point out the amount of racist language being used to describe Newton.

Positive, negative, or neutral, the results from this one sample of Twitter conversation directly following Super bowl 50 indicates that race was a topic with regards to Cam Newton.

**Sentiment**

The next question seeks to ask if there is a different level of negativity for Cam Newton versus Peyton Manning. I began looking at this question by categorizing tweets gathered the night before the Super bowl to eliminate the potential effects from losing the game. A total of 1,668 tweets were gathered for Cam Newton and 992 tweets were gathered for Peyton Manning in the hour prior to 7 p.m. on February 7, 2016. The graph metrics feature in NodeXL was used to categorize commonly used words in the tweets along with valence for these words. As a second step, terms noted as negative were searched within the tweet text to be sure that the context was indeed negative (for example, blow was coded negative but used in context of a blow out, it was used positively). The term did not need to be aimed negatively at the athlete to still have negative connotations. Only terms with at least three occurrences were considered.

This process identified a total of 147 negative mentions for Newton and 23 negative mentions for Manning. This is a total of .09 negative words per tweet for Newton compared to .02 negative words per tweet for Manning. A total of 21 negative terms were identified and confirmed within the tweets. Slander was the most commonly used term with 31 mentions followed by lose mentioned 19 times for Newton and 9 times for Manning and fuck mentioned 13 times for Newton and 5 times for Manning. Other negative terms identified included hate, slave, trash, nigger, thug, cocky, and ghetto among others. The conversation about Newton was considerably larger than the conversation around Manning, so it is no surprise that there is more negative sentiment, but there are over 6 times as many negative occurrences and more than triple the number of negative terms used.

On the other hand, when we look at positive comments, the numbers are much closer. There were 1157 positive comments about Newton with 774 positive comments about Manning. We see .69 positive mentions per tweet for Newton with .78 positive mentions per tweet for Manning. Newton has around a third more positive words then Manning, while accounting for a 40% greater number of tweets. The most popular positive term was mvp followed by super and win. Other positive terms included favorite, support, greatness, congrats, history, best good, fun, legend, and valuable. There were a total of 69 unique positive terms used among the two players.
DISCUSSION

This examination of consumer Twitter data both before and after the Super bowl indicates that race is relevant and bias exists in perceptions of NFL quarterbacks. For Cam Newton race was a reoccurring theme in Tweets the morning after the Super bowl. While many of these posts were positive, it still indicates that race was an important part of the conversation. The disparity in the quantity of posts with racially relevant language is undeniable.

The research also showed disproportion in both the negative and the positive sentiment toward the two quarterbacks prior to their Super bowl appearances. The overall sentiment toward Cam Newton was more negative and less positive (based on the percentage of tweets about each athlete) compared to Peyton Manning. This research cannot confirm the motivation for that sentiment as it could be at least partly a product of a variety of things including race, youth, team, and personality. Together these results do encourage more of a conversation of our prejudice and racial expectations.

REFERENCES


