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ANTI-INDIGENOUS CYBERHATE ON YOUTUBE: A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF SETTLER-COLONIAL RHETORIC IN CANADA

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Abstract

Right-wing and extremist views are readily shared across online platforms, including YouTube. In these instances, users post hate-filled and discriminatory perspectives that are visible to all viewers. The discourses are also, quite often, sources of misinformation that serve to polarize broader social and political opinions and attitudes by accentuating the criticisms and perceived injustices of government policy and practices that favour initiatives related to multiculturalism and diversity. The study examines the hate speech shared on YouTube platforms that resonate with the same settler colonial ideologies that are normative constructs of Eurocentric hegemonic traditions and positioned to target the interests and welfare of Indigenous Peoples. Discourse theory was used to examine larger sequences of communication exchanges as they were shared in the comments section of two YouTube video presentations as they relate to National Indigenous Day in Canada. The June (2020) video received 9,100 viewers and included 63 comments. The June (2021) video received 14,624 views and had 333 comments. Two data sets were established from a representative sample of

the comments section of the two online videos and labeled into two subsets identified as hateful and racist. The respective discourses were extracted from the data and coded. Two themes emerged, including Refuting Racism and Settler-Canadian Hostility. The discourse analysis shed light upon the ideological associations of the respective words, descriptions, and metaphors of the posts, including the criticisms of the social phenomena under discussion. Distinct to the comments and representing a major contribution of the study is the troubling and entrenched tone of anti-Indigenous racism that employs a provocative rhetoric of intolerance on behalf of discontented settler-Canadians.

Keywords:

Anti-Indigenous Racism, Digital Extremism, Discourse Analysis, Online Hate Speech, Youtube

1. Introduction

As an online sharing electronic platform, YouTube has a global reach and is among the most popular virtual sites on the World Wide Web with approximately six billion hours of video watched monthly (GCF Global, n.d.). Typically, users can post comments in response to the YouTube videos. However, these opportunities to openly communicate with other viewers also offer a platform for the sharing of hate-related content. According to Perry and Scrivens (2016), online platforms can create a community of users that are like-minded in their right-wing extremist views and far-right beliefs. Right-wing extremist ideologies underscore racial and ethnic hierarchies, endorse nationalist principles, and “defend the imagined community” (Perry & Scrivens, p. 821). These ideologies also tend to honour tradition and have a propensity to share the respective grievances held towards social, political, and cultural initiatives (Parent & Ellis, 2014).

The discourses under discussion are sources of misinformation that serve to polarize broader social and political opinions by accentuating the criticisms and perceived injustices of inclusive and multicultural government policy and practices (Government of Canada, 2024). Hence, settler-Canadians that feel economically vulnerable and politically disadvantaged are especially drawn to these extremist far-right narratives that justify both their perceived victimization and insecurity about future prosperity (Moonshot, 2024). It is important to distinguish that Canada is a settler state and that Indigenous peoples continue to advocate for the recognition of their sovereign rights (Grafton & MacDonald, 2026). Despite recent

government-led commissions and reports, the reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and settlers remains contentious given the lack of recognition regarding the inequitable policies and practices of settler colonialism (Asch et al., 2018; Veracini, 2021). Yet, there remains limited research on the implications of hate-filled discourse and anti-Indigenous cyberhate, despite the fact that social media channels are the foremost avenues for circulating hateful and racist textual discourse (Mody et al., 2023). This pressing and timely need for this research stems, thus, from the view that Canada “wrapped itself in a comforting historical metanarrative that naturalized dispossession while tracing a line of continuity” to imply that the nation-state of Canada was inherent upon colonial arrival (Greer, 2019, p. 79). The resistance to the countering of this historical metanarrative seems to be flourishing across social media and, hence, deserving of further analysis.

2. Contextual Framework

The harmful implications of hate speech on targeted groups in Canada, including Indigenous Peoples, is pressing and deserving of further attention (Cherubini, 2023; Mahoney, 2009). Online video websites, like YouTube, have made the hate speech characteristic of the far-right far more publicly accessible and participatory (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Of particular significance to this analysis is the fact that these social media platforms have become a means for users to express extremist and racist opinions and perspectives under the guise of anonymity. In this way, users can express sentiments they otherwise would not in public spaces. It becomes especially pertinent, therefore, to interrogate the topic of online hate as it is emerging in cyberspace since it is in fact one of the most prevalent sites for individuals to share racist and discriminatory perspectives.

The hateful comments shared on YouTube platforms and under examination resonate with the same settler colonial ideologies that are normative constructs of Eurocentric hegemonic traditions and positioned to target the interests and welfare of Indigenous Peoples (Moreton-Robinson et al., 2008; Moreton-Robinson, 2015). It is a colonialist rhetoric reflective of the dominant narrative of settler-history that in turn negates the presence and legitimacy of Indigenous Peoples’ cultures and traditions (Furniss, 1999). Moreover, it is a reflection of how digital platforms have given rise to new manifestations of nationalism (Malešević, 2026). Much like national television has a profound influence on concepts related to national identity, the discourses across social media channels like YouTube convey nuanced depictions of reality (Erikson, 2001). Of particular interest to this analysis is the troubling notion that recent national commissions that highlighted the severe harms of residential schools on Indigenous

communities (see Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015) and the disproportionate harms upon Indigenous women (see National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Report, 2019) co-occur in the respective posts “with a denial of Canadian settler colonialism” (Muddle, 2020, p. 48). Despite the public acknowledgements and heightened awareness of the adverse realities and outcomes experienced by Indigenous Peoples, the selected comments position Indigenous viewpoints in highly discriminatory terms and subject to interpretations of colonial history (Smith, 2021). Although the efforts of major reports and commissions have brought necessary attention to the disparate impact of discrimination, Indigenous Peoples continue to be racialized by white-nationalist sentiments that underscore their perceived racial superiority. According to Neylan (2018),

European understandings, policies, and practices related to governance, land ownership, and education have resulted in significant mistreatment and injustice experienced by Indigenous Peoples throughout Canada’s history, the impact of which still persists today. (Cited in Sutter & Esses, 2021, p. 4)

The emergence of internet communication and social media has heightened hate-based expressions, and other injurious behaviours (Shahid & Sumbul, 2017; Sutter & Esses, 2021). It should be noted that cyberhate, understood as hate-filled sentiments, are intensifying across online environments including targeted attacks against particular groups and races (Reichelmann et al., 2021; Weimann & Masri, 2020). Among the adverse outcomes of exposure to cyberhate are the tangible and intangible harms upon individuals and groups where feelings of social mistrust are bolstered by racist and discriminatory sentiments (Bedrosova et al., 2023; Nienierza et al., 2021). It is timely to examine the discourse across the comments posted on two YouTube channels as it relates to anti-Indigenous racism couched in a context of hate.

3. Methodology

The qualitative method of discourse analysis is best suited for this study. Discourse analysis examines the language employed in a specific context for an intended purpose and is an analysis of how people communicate (Vine, 2023). The suitability of this methodological approach rests in its focus on language use and how discourse establishes both meaning and influences social perceptions. Data, for the purpose of this methodology, consists of the language used during communication (the posts in response to the respective YouTube videos) and accounts for those doing and receiving the communication, and their intended purposes.

YouTube was selected for its popularity as a dominant platform for video sharing given that it typically attracts in excess of 2 billion monthly users (Shen, 2024). Its prominence is due in large part to the high-quality interaction viewers enjoy with the video content (Jang & Song, 2017). In fact, YouTube is the largest video repository of social media channels and the second most prominent search engine in the world (Halim et al., 2022).

The two YouTube videos downloaded from a major Canadian newscast (Global News) are entitled “Confronting Racism in Canada on National Indigenous Peoples Day” (YouTube, 2020) and “Extreme Shame: Canadian Government Faces Criticism on National Indigenous Peoples Day” (YouTube, 2021). Both are national news agencies that have widespread reach across Canada. The videos were selected because they both focus on major news stories that have national implications. The first video (three minutes and four seconds) is described as a commemoration of National Indigenous Peoples Day. The video brings attention to the voices of Indigenous communities that continue to experience discrimination and violence with the “hope that more Canadians will start paying attention amid a renewed focus on systemic racism.” The second video under discussion (three minutes and 36 seconds) is also shared in the context of National Indigenous Peoples Day and discusses the Canadian Government’s unresponsiveness to the inequitable living conditions experienced by some Indigenous communities. In addition, the video also chronicles discriminatory practices against Indigenous children, made worse by the discovery of 215 unmarked graves of Indigenous residential school students in British Columbia (Canada). The June (2020) video received 9,100 viewers and included 63 comments. The June (2021) video received 14,624 views and had 333 comments. Those comments that either denoted or connotated anti-Indigenous sentiments were used as data.

The posts on the social media channel are considered data since the language in the commentaries is an indicator of how certain conventions emerge in the context of respective relationships (Taylor, 2013). The focus on language points to the socio-political and socio-cultural context that frames the discourse (Vine, 2023). Discourse analysis is instrumental in examining the language used to depict a collective perspective or view since it describes the manner in which people understand, prioritize, and locate relationships as they engage in their social interactions and relationships (Taylor, 2013). By focusing on vocabulary, the discourse analysis shed light upon the ideological associations of the various words, descriptions, and metaphors, including the criticisms of the social phenomena under discussion (Clyne, 1994). Two data sets were established from a representative sample of the comments section of the two online videos and labeled into two subsets identified as hateful (posts that stemmed largely

from emotional outbursts characteristic of animosity) and racist (comments reflecting discriminatory points of views across social, political, and economic subjects). The respective discourses were extracted from the data and coded by theme. Each of them was developed in detail for cross-validation to distinguish patterns. The respective relationships were subsequently analyzed for language accuracy, unnecessary terms and expressions, and rhetorical strategies. The interpretation of findings that inform the discussion of this analysis relate to the broader significance of the study – anti-Indigenous cyberhate as it implicates the fundamental associations and social perspectives of online discourse

For the purpose of this study, it is also understood that the racist and contemptible language used by the commentators is intrinsic to the social phenomenon of right-wing extremist ideologies and express a version of accepted truth; in this way, the communication “implicates knowledge with power since the workings of the social world will be closely connected to the accepted truths of that world and [to those that] have the power to dictate or influence the accepted truths” (Taylor, 2013, p. 10). According to Gee (2017) among others, the discourse involves manners of interacting in order to enact the social practice of the collective and can reflect the group’s attitudes, positions, and social identities as members of the network. A social constructionist framework associated to discourse analysis was used to examine the identity of the commentators by way of their interaction and language as they both represented and constructed the social world (Vine, 2023). The enactment of a commentator’s identity often reflects their beliefs and attitudes concerning the social practice; thus, users manage and navigate meaning since it is an outcome of the collective (Foster & Bochner, 2008).

The limitations of the study include potential research bias in the curation of the subsets. The coding and thematic analysis is also subject to the researcher’s interpretation. Moreover, the findings may not necessarily be generalizable due to the sample size consisting of the two YouTube video data sources. Last, it is important to account for the significant challenges of interpreting anonymous online posts in the absence of any contextual information about the commentators.

4. Findings and Discussion

The two YouTube videos are from an independent national news source in Canada (Global News) posted on National Indigenous Day (June 21, 2020, and 2021) and speak to the call for a renewed focus on systemic racism. Two themes were grounded in the discourse analysis and include: Refuting Racism and Settler-Canadian Hostility.

4.2 Refuting Racism

To begin with, the resentment in respect to the posts under analysis in response to the June 21, 2020 news story is abundantly evident. Posts are couched in a flippant rhetoric that trivializes the glaring accounts of racism. The posts are typically brief outbursts that do not engage the critical consideration of the systemic racism presented in the video and instead use discursive frames of reference that antagonize other like-minded viewers. The posts that address the discrimination highlighted in the news video conclude, like this one, that “no one is racist go get a job,” and even, “Racism DOES NOT Exist. It’s only in the fantasy of a very few people.” In these gross misrepresentations the language is deliberately conclusive. The first user outrightly dismisses racism, and in the same sentence, reinforces the declarative tone to imply that Indigenous Peoples would be better served to find employment rather than invest their attention in harbouring feelings of racism. The language itself, quite absurdly, is racist and defers to inaccurate stereotypes of Indigenous Peoples exploiting social assistance. In these instances, settler-colonial discriminatory views are transparently clear since commentators are disconnected from the colonial legacies that continue to challenge Indigenous communities. Instead, the commentator uses the anonymous online platform to seemingly restore the confidence of like-minded settlers that racism needs to be refuted in contemporary contexts. In response, the rhetoric and style of the second post affirm the mistruth cited by the first user to conclude that racism is not an issue in Canada.

Subsequent posts employ similar discursive frames of reference to vilify the claims that racism is a social and political reality in Canada. Note the language in the following post that fuels right-wing extremist sentiments and incorporates a rhetoric of violence:

Just as I thought, now that one group of people have cried about how so hard done by they are, they all are using the racist card. I believe that it is only going to drive people against other races with all the whining and complaining they are doing Perhaps we need a civil unrest to let us all blow off steam against each other.

The user rejects the unique adverse realities that, as an outcome of colonialism, confront Indigenous Peoples in Canada. Using a conversational phrase to introduce the post, “just as I thought,” the user confirms their initial impressions that “the racist card” is just a strategic ploy by Indigenous Peoples to garner public attention for self-serving interests. The user suggests that civil unrest may be the best recourse to address the overwhelming frustration between settler Canadians and marginalized peoples. It is interesting how the commentator repositions the colonial violence experienced by Indigenous people in Canada to suggest that settler-Canadians may be best served to exercise their aggression in the face of the issues

discussed in the YouTube video. The statements are apparently emotional outbursts that are grounded in what may be best described as irrational sentiments. The commentators employ radical discourse to arouse the feelings of other settler-Canadians.

The language in other posts accuses liberal Canadian news channels as sources of the crisis. The rhetorical frames of reference deflect the attention of the profound challenges experienced by Indigenous Peoples (as discussed in the news video) to the news media that complicate the issues. “The liberal media [is] creating problems where there were no problems, now we are in a full-blown race war.” Here, too, the language is couched in conflict and appeals to users’ emotions. The solution, for others, is offered in oversimplified terms: “If the media was defunded most of our problems would disappear.” The tone evokes a simplistic explanation to address what has otherwise been constructed as an overly complex and unmanageable “full blown war.” Other posts are equally inflammatory: “Global news is racist and projecting its racism on the public.” The language is accusatory of the media’s exploitation of left-wing sentiment to influence public perception. One user directly entices others by addressing them in the second-person pronoun: “You’re a fool to think they [left-wing mainstream media] just give facts. Opinion has leached into news and the stories they choose to cover, and the way it’s covered, is bias towards the left.” The insulting rhetoric challenges users to consider the subjective stance and persuasion of national news media outlets. Typical of the anti-Indigenous racism that exists systemically, the discriminatory views on this online platform aim to aggressively maneuver public sentiment in a discourse context that lacks objectivity. The comments reflect broader right-wing extremist ideologies that position Indigenous peoples as the Other in highly deficit-based language. The comments imply the superiority of settler-Canadians that need not be biased by left-wing media coverage of the issues related to Indigenous peoples’ sovereignty.

The discourse that contributes to the construction of the social reality in these and other posts is one of steadfast intolerance. The concern for the marginalized experiences of Indigenous Peoples is intentionally diminished. Users willfully neglect the implications of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report (2015) published only five years prior to this video. Nor are users swayed by the public governmental apologies on the part Canada’s then Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, that only one year prior to this video (2019) spoke (on behalf of all Canadians) to the injustices experienced by residential school survivors in Newfoundland and Labrador, apologized to Inuit communities for the hardships they experience, and brought to light the violence against Indigenous women by stating publicly that such violence is “not a relic of Canada’s past,” but part of its present (2019).

Despite the public attention, the language employed in the posts under discussion remains contemptuous and disturbing. The rhetorical construction of the posts positions the commentators as speaking on behalf of all settler-Canadians that, somehow inexplicably, refuse to accept the injustices suffered by First Nations communities in colonial Canada. The rhetorical questions point to a blunt negation of these contemporary truths: “Why is racism such a popular topic[?] [T]here is basically [zero] racism in Canada, get real.” Apparent in these discourses, thus, is the settler-colonial ideology that drives a reframing of the injustices related to Indigenous peoples’ self-determination. The racist comments aim to establish a discursive control over the online narrative and in the process undermine the challenges of Indigenous communities.

4.2 Settler-Canadian Hostility

The sense of intolerance embedded in anti-Indigenous racism is also apparent in the rhetorical construction of the posts in response to the second YouTube video. Consider the following examples: “Minority privilege is a major problem” and “Victimhood mentality is so in right now.” In both instances, the respective voices of marginalized Peoples are captured in a rhetoric of outright dismissal. The discourse contributes to a social construction of reality suggesting that minority interests have prevailed, have extensive unfavorable consequences upon broader society, and that marginalized peoples readily exploit their victim status to capitalize on inclusive liberal social and political agendas. The language of racialized nationalism complements the call to settler-Canadians for a socio-political adjustment in terms of how minority rights are considered and enacted. Couched in nationalistic ideologies commentators distinguish for viewers what they believe to be distinct challenges related to minority privilege that destabilize settler-Canadian interests. The language reflects an intolerance for the issues of systemic racism discussed in the video. As a different user states, “the tone in the comment section shows that people are really sick of parasites.” Note the disturbing metaphor in this particular construction of social reality suggesting that settler-Canadians, despite the well-documented harms of colonial and contemporary truths, perceive Indigenous Peoples as exploiting the support of the tax-paying public much like an organism exploits their host. The discourse is not only highly inappropriate and disrespectful, but reflective of a Eurocentric sense of superiority that deliberately employs upsetting imagery to elicit other like-minded narrative responses. The language appeals to the self-actualization of settler-Canadian identity as a distinct, sustaining, and healthy race.

The posts from two different viewers contribute to the hate-filled discourse: “I am so sick of it I can throw up” and “sorry to tell you but the whole identity politics thing has

pas[ed] its best before date.” The discursive climate is one of illness and discord. Viewers elucidate the extent of their intolerance despite the obvious urgency of the circumstances described in the news report. The issues are disregarded as mere “identity politics” meant to exploit an already generous Canadian citizenship. As a different user posts, “I don’t feel bad for people who cry cultural appropriation while appropriating oppression. Give them the entirety of their money, let them destroy themselves, I’m sick of having this conversation.” Note both the lack of sympathy and the impatience for those that depict themselves as cultural victims. The language evokes a confrontational tone to manipulate the public misperception that vast amounts of funding from governments and agencies have been invested in Indigenous community welfare yet Indigenous Peoples have squandered the assistance. For some, the calls from Indigenous stakeholders for equitable treatment are readily dismissed as appeals for more financial assistance. As one post states, “Money[.] [T]hey want truckloads of cash.” Here, too, the user’s language embellishes the quantity of finances to elicit an emotional response from viewers, overstates the argument, and diverts attention from the issues of systemic racism discussed in the news report. Here, as well, settler-colonial ideology is couched in an extremist language of nationalism. The calls from the respective commissions and reports for reconciliation between Indigenous and settler-Canadians are willfully ignored. Instead, the commentators point to more of a collectivist ethos, grounded in the shallowness tone of Eurocentric superiority, to express their infuriation. There is no willingness on the part of commentators to reach across cultural divides in a spirit of understanding but rather to express their sheer hostility towards Indigenous peoples.

For others, the sense of intolerance has contributed to a disturbing outcome: “At some point you have to ignore your supposed circumstances and just get it done for yourself without waiting for someone else to fix your problems.” The tone is custodial and condescending. It is implied that Indigenous Peoples lack the initiative to address their circumstances and need to stop relying on settler-Canadians. Some posts utilize highly upsetting and demonstrative language to convey the intolerance experienced by settler-Canadians obligated to cater to Indigenous Peoples’ needs: “It will never be enough. Enough money [is] given, enough apologies given. We are all responsible for our own healing in this world.” In this instance, the repetition of the word “enough” points directly to an intolerant Canadian tax-paying public. The user suggests that the circumstances discussed in the video are evidence of Indigenous Peoples’ inability to manage their own predicaments. Regardless of the national news coverage of the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and the discovery of intact grave sites at former residential schools that was reported one month before

this broadcast, the language in this and similar posts suggests that the onus to remedy the discrimination and inequities experienced by Indigenous Peoples rests squarely on their shoulders. For a different user, the continued media coverage of Indigenous Peoples' realities is simply a means of fostering a culture of dependence: "Time to end this eternal victim handout culture. Be Canadian or get out." The language presents Indigenous users with a scandalous ultimatum that disregards entirely the residual consequences of cultural assimilation experienced by Indigenous Peoples.

The rhetoric of intolerance is accentuated by commentators that have relinquished any support for the challenges experienced by Indigenous communities. Typical of others, one user concludes, "Funny I feel zero shame." For this and other viewers, the systemic racism chronicled in the news video elicits no remorse. The language is shallow and emphasizes the relative ease in which the user can set aside the generational and discriminatory consequences of colonial practices experienced by Indigenous Peoples. The social platform in effect houses the same hate-filled attitudes and opinions that cannot be shared in other public forums and represents a space for all viewers to read and participate in the discourse and in the perpetuation of these extremist ideologies.

5. Conclusion

The YouTube videos that commemorate National Indigenous Day (2020 and 2021) discuss the serious struggles with discrimination and racism experienced by Indigenous Peoples in colonial Canada (Cherubini, 2024). A discourse analysis of select posts in the Comments section reveals anti-Indigenous and hate-filled rhetoric, and include the two themes grounded in the analysis of this paper – Refuting Racism and Settler-Canadian Hostility. Discourse analysis was instrumental in the study design given its focus on language and the production of social reality. Although a mainstream social media platform, individuals freely post right-wing and often extremist views that target Indigenous Peoples and communities. Among the significances of the findings are the analyses of the discourses that represent misinformation and polarize social and political point of views by underscoring the perceived injustices felt by settler-Canadians in the context of addressing the social injustices experienced by Indigenous communities by way of government policy, practices, and action. The paper discusses the rhetoric embedded in racialized nationalism to distinguish the alleged superiority of Eurocentric ideologies and worldviews. The analyses suggests that these and other web-based sites have, therefore, become channels for the distribution of hate-filled sentiments. The language contributes to the creation of social realities and practices that undermine the adverse

impact of colonial legacies on Indigenous people, despite the fact that the nation of Canada is a settler-state whereby Indigenous peoples have the right to exercise their inherent treaty rights, including self-governance (Cherubini, 2026). The discourse is dangerous and intolerant. It is anti-Indigenous cyberhate that spreads racist textual discourses.

For content moderators of online channels and for the forum administrators of online posts, the findings of the study point to the need to oversee discussions to ensure compliance with the policies regarding the respectful use of the platforms in a racist-free environment. Further, online platform managers must ensure that accountability measures and procedures are in place and readily accessible to users. The Canadian Federal Government, too, need to be diligent in these regards. The Safe Social Media Act, Bill C-34 (June, 2026), provides a framework to address online safety and includes a Digital Safety Commission of Canada to administer the Act and offer support to those that experienced online harm. Online platforms and users of these channels should know that Bill C-34 includes harmful content that spreads hate and incites violence. For social media providers, it is imperative that they mitigate all risks regarding hateful content and, according to the Safe Social Media Act, provide transparent means of flagging inappropriate content and blocking users. Of note, the European Union has also implemented policies governing harmful content online (Ramaswamy, 2023).

It is recommended that future research strengthens the findings of the study. Cross-platform social media investigations would inform the development of the two themes under discussion, while more longitudinal studies could trace the development of anti-Indigenous cyberhate in parallel with even more recent current events related to Indigenous and settler-relations. Particularly informative may be open-ended qualitative interviews and focus groups with Indigenous peoples that have been victimized by online hate forums to better understand their individual and collective experiences.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that commentators can readily post their disdain for Indigenous community welfare, just as they can imply a denial of settler-colonial harms, across online media platforms. Significant to this analysis, it is clear that the right-wing and extremist ideologies that may have once been the exclusive property of private chat rooms and fringe social media platforms, have permeated more mainstream channels and in the process widened their reach.

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