

Feeling Polarized? An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Central Albertans Responses to Polarizing Content on Facebook

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ABSTRACT

Polarization is a growing problem in Canada, according to the Edelman Trust Barometer. Despite this, scholarly research shows that most studies examining digital polarization focus on the content or technologies driving polarization rather than on users' lived experiences interacting with polarizing content. This research sought to address this gap by exploring the lived experiences of Central Albertans of encountering polarizing content on Facebook. Following an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, this study illuminated the roles of echo chambers, out-group animosity, fundamental attribution errors, and algorithms in the process of affective polarization. As IPA is concerned with the affective experience of the participants, the use of IPA as a methodological approach enabled an in-depth examination of the meanings that the participants ascribed to the emotionally laden phenomena of affective polarization based on their own personal reflections (Kurniawati, 2025). The findings show that when users see emotionally charged, algorithmically generated content, they interpret it and make negative assumptions about those posting in Facebook comment threads. This process is leading to greater out-group animosity and demonstrates that these four conditions significantly shape the conversation about affective polarization within communities.

Keywords: affective polarization, algorithms, comment threads, echo chambers, emotions, Facebook, fundamental attribution errors

Introduction

Milloy (2023) argued that a variety of concerning polarizing issues exist in Canada. Examples include ideology, race, ethnicity, religion, and regional tensions (Boulianne & Belland, 2022; LaFleche, 2023; Marchand et al., 2020; Milloy, 2023). In this paper, I argue that such polarizing issues are confounded by two partner factors: social media and emotions, with emotions in the analytical foreground. Social media platforms, like Facebook, confound polarization via their inherent creation of asynchronous communication and the potential for the creation of echo chambers (Arora et al., 2022). Echo chambers are environments in which people with the same interests or views interact primarily with others who conform with their beliefs. (Cinelli et al., 2021; Marino & Iannelli, 2023). Furthermore, people then seek and share information that conforms to the norms of their group and reinforces existing beliefs (Cinelli et al., 2021; Dubois & Blank, 2018; Flaxman et al., 2016).

A society is polarized when the population divides into groups, whose members agree with each other, and fully disagree with the out-group (Flache & Macy, 2011). Affective polarization occurs when polarizing topics become imbued with negative emotions (Hodson, Owen, et al., 2025) and the animosity between opposing parties or groups results in emotional attachment and repulsion, rather than ideology and material interests (Ahn & Mutz, 2023; Baldassarri & Page, 2021; Hodson, Owen, et al., 2025). These strong negative feelings towards the out-group make it challenging to engage in democratic discussions with others, or at its worst, rarely possible (Hodson, Owen, et al., 2025; Schedler, 2023).

Through this project, I sought to identify the emotions and other unconscious drivers that influence people's experiences of polarizing content on Facebook, how people make sense of their experiences, and the explanations people give for these emotions. Facebook was selected because: a) recent literature has shown that Facebook users tend to form echo chambers (Del Vicario et al., 2016); and b) Facebook remains the most popular social media platform in Canada with 82% of online Canadian adults report having a Facebook account and 71% of users reporting to log in daily (Gruzd & Mai, 2025). To that end, affective polarization experienced by Facebook users is shaped by their age and political positioning (see: Gruzd & Mai, 2025). These national demographics are secondary to the demographics of my study population, who were intentionally selected (see: Methodology and Methods section).

The study focused on a small sample of Central Alberta Facebook users and their emotional responses to polarizing content, examining affective polarization as a form of polarization. By using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to examine the data more deeply and interpretively, the findings illuminated the lived experiences of encountering select samples of polarizing content on Facebook.

This paper begins with a review of current literature. Then, Facebook polarization in praxis is followed by a brief description of the methodology and method utilized. The research findings and discussion work together to address the guiding research question: What are the lived experiences of Central Albertans of encountering different examples of polarizing content on Facebook? This paper closes with the final conclusions drawn from the study.

Literature

Affective polarization represents the emotional divide and a shift from simply disagreeing on a particular issue to developing strong "us versus them" emotional divisions (Nettasinghe et al., 2025; Rathje et al., 2021) and has become a growing problem in Canada (Boulianne & Belland, 2022; LaFleche, 2023; Marchand et al., 2020; Milloy, 2023). Despite this, most studies examine digital polarization via the content or technologies driving polarization, rather than the lived experience of users interacting with polarizing content (Boccia Artieri et al., 2021; Brady et al., 2017; Goldenberg & Willer, 2023). Time spent with relevant literature framed my interpretation of the lived and affective experiences of Facebook users when exposed to polarizing content.

Emotions

Central to this inquiry is the concept of human emotion. Without a consensus for an academic definition of emotion (Cabanac, 2002; Mulligan & Scherer, 2012), this project draws upon the American Psychological Association (2023) approach whereby people attempt sensemaking of a significant matter or event, including the experiential, behavioral, and physiological aspects. The complex, complicated, and interdisciplinary study of emotions (Ortony, 2022; Wang et al., 2020) is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the concepts of emotion generation (Ekman, 2016; Wadley et al., 2020), emotion labeling (Ekman, 2016; Torre & Lieberman, 2018; Vlasenko et al., 2021), and emotional regulation (Gross, 2015; Gross et al., 2011; Tamir, 2016; Wadley et al., 2020) in relation to Facebook are relevant. Specifically, the practice of emotional regulation could be a strategy to help users understand, make sense of, and manage the emotions they experience in response to polarizing content on Facebook and to guard against making assumptions about those who post in Facebook comment threads.

The dominant social media engagement business model is grounded in the use of algorithmic filtering that influences the content in users' feeds (Hill, 2016; Lazer, 2015; McKelvey, 2014). Engagement algorithms put polarizing content in front of people because it results in more time spent online, which garners more views for advertisers (Garibay et al., 2019; Levy, 2021; Van Bavel et al., 2021). Social media users' attention is grabbed by messages, ideas, and posts that produce strong negative, angry, or outraged emotions (Törnberg & Uitermark, 2022; Zuboff, 2019). These types of messages generally receive more clicks and shares, and are spread in the public discourse more than positive ones (Asker & Dinas, 2019; Baptista & Gradim, 2021; Törnberg & Uitermark, 2022; Zuboff, 2019). As such, social media fosters polarization among users over time through algorithmic and human engagement choices.

It's Not Me, It's You: Making Assumptions

According to Reeder and Trafimow (2005), perceiving motive enables the perceiver to make sense of behavior patterns. Thus, making inferences about a person's motives offers a way to explain their behaviour and make sense of daily events (Reeder & Trafimow, 2005). By extension, it has been argued that, in the world of social media, it is difficult to intuit the commenters' motivation, meme context, or humour in Facebook comment threads where context may not translate to the written word (Dynel & Chovanec, 2021). Additionally, the false attribution error of self-enhancing attributions (Gill et al., 2024) lends to the belief that others are polarized, but not themselves (e.g. "it's not me, it's you") (Tan & Hsu, 2023). This fundamental attribution error, occurring in the context of polarized social media, allows people to excuse their own polarized viewpoints and behaviors while blaming other's character flaws to explain the other's viewpoints and behaviour (Zell et al., 2021). Fundamental attribution errors are considered a cognitive bias (Luong & Butler, 2023) and, as a social process (Oeberst & Imhoff, 2023), the clustering of individuals who make the same or similar false attribution errors about

others marks one's social identity and, perhaps, the initial formation of one's in-group (Finuras, 2023).

Social Identity

One's social identity refers to the knowledge or perception of belonging to different social groups. According to Harwood (2020), once "in" a group, it becomes one's in-group, and one seeks positive feelings from membership. To achieve these feelings, the in-group is viewed more positively than other groups, or the out-groups (Harwood, 2020). The sense of belonging and group membership is bound by some emotional significance of value (Hu, 2025; Zhang et al., 2012).

Group polarization plays a role in the animosity seen on Facebook (Rathje et al., 2021). The intrinsic motivation for relatedness (Vandercammen et al., 2014) and to find one's affinity group (Samson, 2023) becomes apparent in the formation of one's social identity (Zhang et al., 2012). According to Boccia Artieri et al. (2021), the question is not if social media platforms, such as Facebook, determine affective polarization through their own algorithms, but rather, if specific "modes of feeling" through platforms become the social glue for the formation of emotionally cohesive groups, such as echo chambers.

While social media are often blamed for causing uncivil discourse, discord, and polarization (Bisiada, 2022; Darius & Urquhart, 2021; Dubois & Blank, 2018; Gupta et al., 2021; Jungkunz, 2021), the specific element of social media leading to polarization may be out-group animosity (Rathje et al., 2021). According to Rathje et al. (2021), negative content aimed toward a social media users' out-group goes viral more rapidly than positive posts about an in-group. Therefore, understanding the role of in-group favouritism and out-group animosity may lead to a better understanding of how and why certain emotions drive the viral spread of polarizing content (Iyengar et al., 2019; Rathje et al., 2021).

In the case of Facebook groups/communities, membership in in-groups help individuals define who they are as they begin to conform to their online communities' social norms (Zhang et al., 2012). This step of socially identifying in an in-group is consistent with the beginning of the formation of echo chambers on Facebook (Zhang et al., 2012).

Affective Polarization

Polarization is expressed as a resistance to an alternative worldview (Arora et al., 2022). Rollwage et al. (2019) considered polarization of opinions, beliefs, and political positions to be one of the most concerning challenges facing today's society. Affective polarization arises when ideological or political polarization becomes permeated with such strong negative feelings that it results in disgust or disdain for those with opposing viewpoints (Hodson, Owen, et al., 2025).

The literature largely discusses the effect of polarizing Facebook content via individual actions and what inspires users' decisions to post a response in comment threads (Suhay, 2015).

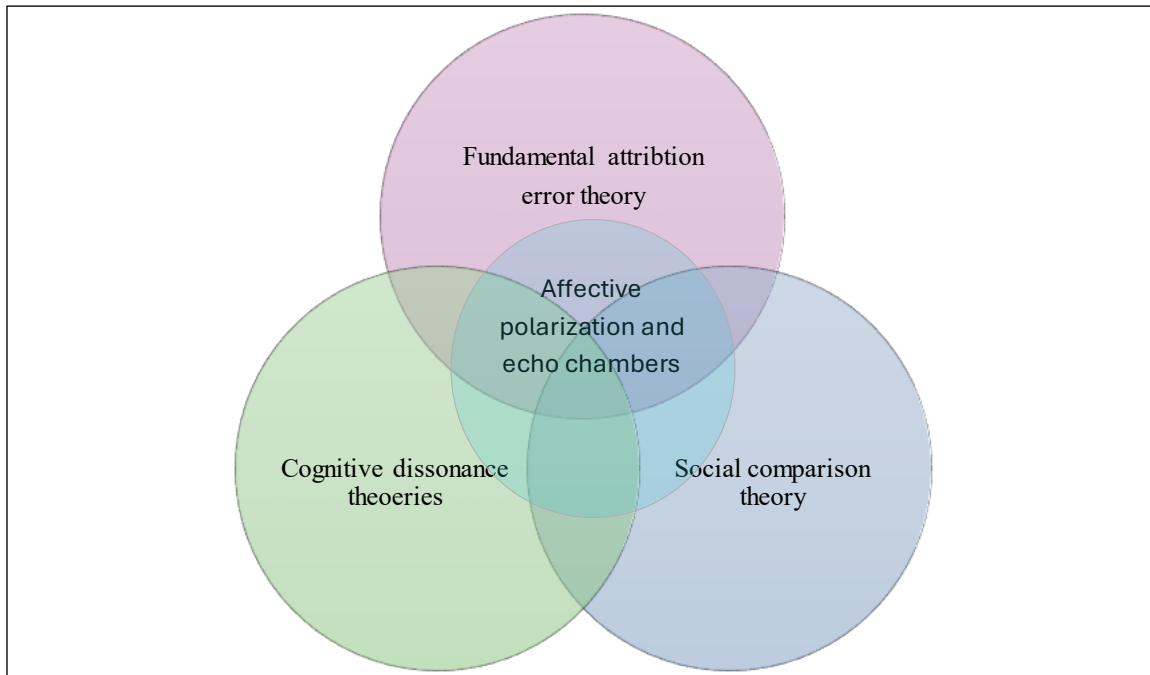
Confounded by the toxic disinhibition effect, as defined by Lapidot-Lefler & Barak (2012), user-generated information on the internet is often emotionally charged (Kwon & Cho, 2017). This is especially true when social media users are emotionally motivated to reject information in posts that challenge their own views and develop counter-arguments to rationalize their heightened emotional response (Asker & Dinas, 2019).

Recent studies claim that concerns over the polarizing power of social media and the risks of manipulation of individual choices and opinions have been exaggerated, and that there is no conclusive evidence that the internet and social media make the online debate more polarized than it is in person (Darius & Urquhart, 2021; Dubois & Blank, 2018; Iandoli et al., 2021). Yarchi et al. (2021) maintained, in the case of Facebook, it is the collection of the platforms' affordances that make it susceptible to the formation of echo chambers and polarization. These affordances include: the free availability of users to engage in political activism on public pages (Yarchi et al., 2021); the toxic online disinhibition effect (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012; Suler, 2004) and indirectly, out-group animosity (Rathje et al., 2021). In the same vein, out-group animosity on social media may lead to an erosion of empathy in addition to negative content and negative emotions (Iyengar et al., 2019; Wojcieszak, 2010; Yarchi et al., 2021).

The increased use of social media platforms, like Facebook, means that political and other discussions that may have once occurred in the local coffee shop, during lunch breaks, or over the dinner table are now often held in a public sphere and available for any user to participate in, if they so choose (Yarchi et al., 2021). This inquiry offers the opportunity to understand how polarization can become imbued with negative aspects and how social media platforms, such as Facebook, have impacted affective polarization (Arora et al., 2022). My viewpoint aligns with Gupta et al. (2021) and Jain et al. (2022), who argue that echo chambers matter and significantly shape the polarization conversation.

Facebook Polarization in Praxis

In light of the above literature, there are likely psychological, technological, and social processes that drive polarization. As a theoretical proposition, I suggest the following mechanisms may be in play. When reading Facebook posts and comment threads, Facebook users may be making fundamental attribution errors about the character of the individual who post on Facebook (e.g. that person is an idiot) (Coleman, 2013; Zell et al., 2021). By socially comparing themselves to the one who made the post (e.g. "I am educated, they are not"), Facebook users begin to engage in protecting their identity within their affinity group (e.g. education, profession, faith) (Wischniewski & Krämer, 2021). A strategy to protect their identity and manage their emotions is to selectively choose or avoid what they see in their Facebook feeds (Rivera Otero et al., 2023). This series of behaviours further reinforces echo chambers and, ergo, affective polarization. Figure 1 illustrates how these theories weave together to create echo chambers and affective polarization on Facebook. In the paragraphs that follow, I further illuminate each mechanism.

Figure 1*A Visual Representation of Factors Promoting Polarization****Fundamental Attribution Error Theory***

In psychology, fundamental attribution error theory is a way to interpret an individual's response when explaining the behaviour of others and, by extension, justify their own behaviour (Ross, 1977). Such an error occurs when, in an actor-observer situation, the observer assumes that is a character or dispositional flaw that causes the actor's behaviour, not the situation (Coleman, 2013; Ross, 1977, 2018). However, for those performing the action, their actions are attributed to the situation (Coleman, 2013). Within the fundamental attribution error theory is the tendency to blame others for their character flaws and their behaviour, while at the same time giving oneself grace in the same or similar situations (Zell et al., 2021). Ross (2018) suggested that people make assumptions about others' traits and abilities rather than showing empathy or understanding of situational factors. Fundamental attribution error theory has been applied to political parties (see: Zell et al., 2021) and sports teams (see: Allen et al., 2019). In the same spirit, through this study, I see an application for the fundamental attribution error theory in understanding beliefs about Facebook echo chambers and the individuals who occupy them.

Social Comparison Theory

Social comparison “consists of comparing oneself with others in order to evaluate or to enhance some aspects of the self” (Suls et al., 2002, p. 1). This theory may aid in understanding social identity and in-group formation, leading to the creation of echo chambers by creating a feeling of

superiority between one's in-group and the out-group. I proffer that social comparison theory is a building block of one's social identity and the need to protect it within an echo chamber.

Cognitive Dissonance Theories

Identity-Protection Cognition. As the conditions outlined in the literature show, social media platform architecture supports the formation of online echo chambers (Iandoli et al., 2021). One binding factor that strengthens the bond between echo chamber members is identity-protection cognition (Hillman et al., 2023; Samson, 2023). Identity-protection cognition refers to avoiding the cognitive discomfort when one's deeply held values and identities are challenged (Motta et al., 2023). This theory holds that it is reasonable for an individual member of a group, or an echo chamber, to reject information that is contrary to the group to protect their status or membership in the group (Wischniewski & Krämer, 2021). Samson (2023) contended that identity-protection cognition is at the core of one's perception of the truth. Thus, individual well-being is tied up with group membership, where the group provides psychological benefits such as validation of beliefs, self-esteem, and status (Kahan et al., 2007; Samson, 2023). Identity-protection cognition has an important role in affective polarization, as the fanatical or over-zealous social sameness of in-groups and out-groups can lead to extreme polarization (Kahan, 2010, 2017; Sunstein, 1999).

Selective Exposure and Selective Avoidance. Drawing on Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019), the companion theories of selective exposure and selective avoidance may jointly explain why Facebook users see the content they do. As a strategy, people use selective exposure to manage their information consumption, and the theory argues that they will choose information that supports their beliefs over information that challenges them (Dahlgren, 2021; Garrett, 2009). Selective avoidance is another strategy used to cope with information that may make people feel uncomfortable (Case et al., 2005; Zhou & Xie, 2023), as exposure to unwanted and disagreeable content on Facebook has been named as one of the main stressors in social media interactions (Guo et al., 2020; Malinen et al., 2018). Selective exposure and selective avoidance may contribute to the formation of echo chambers and also serve as predictors of users' disengagement from social media platforms, such as Facebook (Guo et al., 2020). Such disengagement results from social network fatigue, individual time pressures, information overload (Guo et al., 2020), and cognitive overload (Apuke et al., 2022). Lastly, these strategies have implications for the commercial value of social media platforms, as fewer users mean lower advertising revenue (Törnberg & Uitermark, 2022).

Methodology and Methods

Research Objective(s)

RQ: What are the lived experiences of Central Albertans of encountering different examples of polarizing content on Facebook? This research question was informed by two sub-questions:

SQ1: What emotions are most associated with these experiences, and how are people making sense of them? What are the explanations people give for these emotions?

SQ2: In order to make sense of their emotions or feelings, what is the story that people are telling themselves about polarizing content on Facebook? What are the assumptions that people make about the content, the people who may have posted it, and those people on either side of the issue?

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

This study and the research questions were suited to IPA as a qualitative research methodology. IPA is designed to investigate individuals' lived experiences (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021) through "exploring the experience in its own terms" (Smith et al., 2022, p. 1).

IPA values the richness of qualitative insights over quantitative significance, and therefore, recruitment of participants in IPA research tends to be small and purposeful as opposed to random (Smith et al., 2022; Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Royal Roads University Research Ethics Board (RRU REB), Canada, in July 2024. This study was located in the Central Alberta region of the Province of Alberta, Canada. The participants resided within the City of Red Deer or Red Deer County. Eight participants (see Tables 1 and 2) were recruited through referrals, opportunities from my own contacts, and a seed-and-snowball approach (Smith et al., 2022). This approach was deliberately chosen to gain insights into how social groups influence polarization. As a result of these recruitment strategies, the participants formed a particular demographic. The study participant group consisted of a civil servant, new teachers, a post-secondary student, a public-facing figure, a seasoned educator, and a professional communicator. Seven of the eight participants had completed some post-secondary education. Table 1 provides the most recent municipal census data, and Table 2 shows the demographics of the study population.

Table 1: Municipal Census Data

Municipal Census Data		
	City of Red Deer	Red Deer County
	2021	2021
Population	100, 844	19,933
Average age of residents	39.5	43.7
Female	51,050	10,465
Male	49,800	9,470
Median total income among recipients (\$)	42,800	43,600

(Source: Statistics Canada, 2023)

Table 2: Study Population Demographic Data

	Study Population
	2024
Urban	4
Rural	4
Age: 25-49	5
Age: 49+	3
Male	3
Female	5
Years Lived in Central Alberta:	
Less than 25 years	6
More than 25 years	2

The Semi-Structured, Elicitation Interview

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview format, with social media elicitation to add context and additional data. Inspired and informed by Hogan et al. (2016), I adapted the elicitation interview to a semi-structured interview format to be consistent with IPA standards, and as an elicitation interview is a method for gathering “precise and detailed information about people’s lived experience” (Hogan et al., 2016, p. 3). Several studies in the academic literature have employed IPA and elicitation interviews to examine both social media and emotions (see: Bottrell, 2017; Crawford et al., 2022; Rivera et al., 2022). Like Crawford et al. (2022) and Bottrell (2017), I used Facebook as an elicitation prompt during the interviews, in a manner similar to Rivera et al. (2022). Select Facebook pages were the elicitation tool to prompt a lived experience of encountering polarizing content. Hogan et al. (2016) suggested that the elicitation interview technique is a critical method for collecting in-depth insights into participants’ subjective experiences and interpretations of the elicitation prompts. This technique also minimizes the potential for post-rationalization of the study participant’s experience of the elicitation prompts (Hogan et al., 2016).

My study was designed to elicit emotional responses by showing the participants three pre-selected, public Facebook pages. Background research on Facebook yielded three current, salient, and enduring divisive topics represented on Alberta Facebook pages: Indigenous issues in Canada; energy production in Alberta; and reproductive choice for Albertans. The elicitation posts viewed are available to view in Appendix A.

Data Collection and Analysis

The purposeful interview conversations were guided by the specific interview questions and Facebook elicitation prompts. These conversations drew out the participants' lived experiences that encompassed the meaningful stories of their personal experiences of emotions (Mueller, 2019; Squire, 2013). To begin the interviews, I logged into my Facebook account and opened the predetermined public pages one at a time. For each of the three pre-selected Facebook pages, the participants and I viewed the initial selected post and then scrolled through the comment threads together until they came upon a comment that sparked an emotional reaction. At this point, we engaged in conversation led by the interview questions. The idiographic nature of IPA means that each interview was an individual experience. Consistency across the interviews was maintained by following the interview questions in the same order for each interview, and, as the interviewer, maintaining an open, inquisitive, empathetic stance with each participant, and, finally, theming the data with a high degree of reflexivity. The interview questions can be viewed in Appendix A. The interviews were audio-recorded, and screenshots of the relevant Facebook posts were taken for analysis.

A foundational piece of an IPA research project is the circular, iterative, and interpretative process of building a relationship with the data (Smith et al., 2022) using the 6-step process outlined by Smith et al. (2022). Figure 2 (page 11) is based on the work of Jay et al. (2023) and beautifully illustrates the process of IPA data analysis.

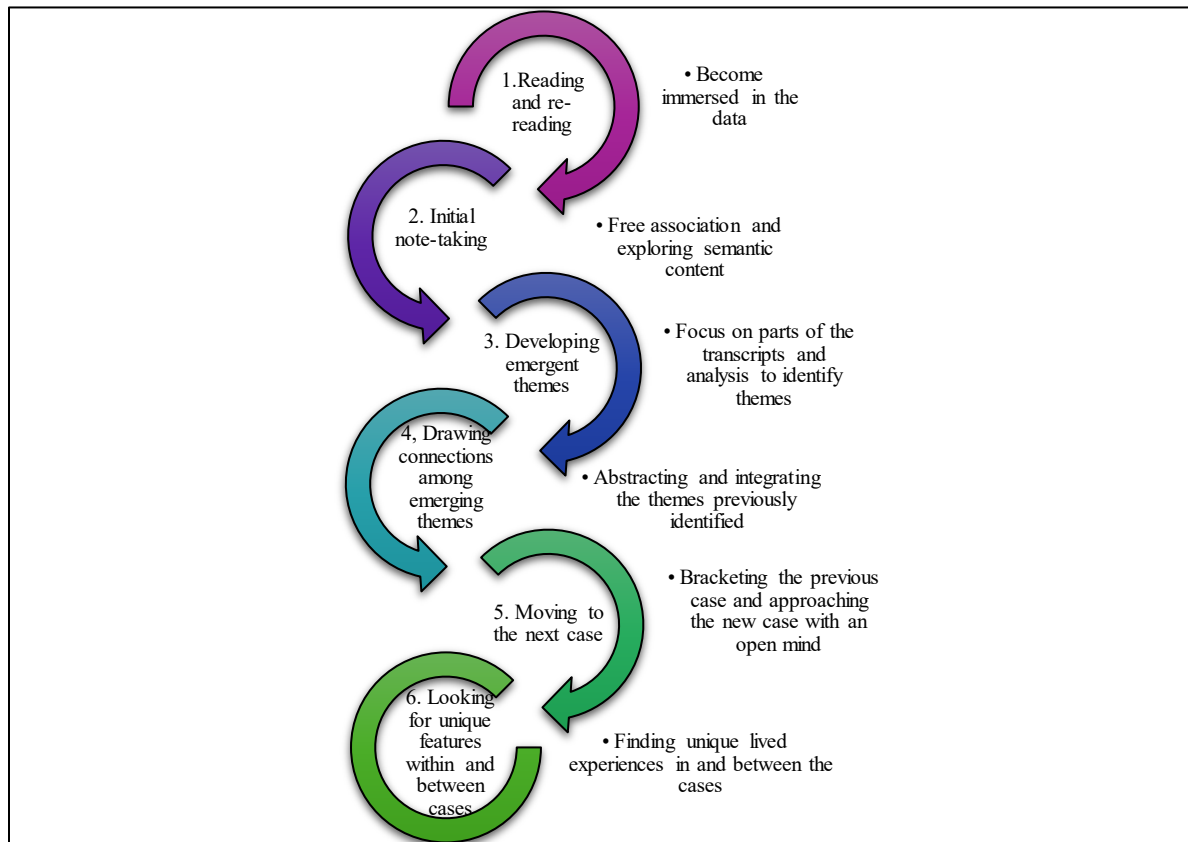
Researcher Reflexivity

This project was largely inspired by both the COVID-19 pandemic and the "Freedom Convoy" that occupied Ottawa, Ontario Canada, in early 2022. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I witnessed an upsurge of divisiveness in Canada, exemplified by the now infamous Freedom Convoy. This phenomenon led me to the question: How did Canadians get to this state of polarization?

Reflecting on my social media use, while I am not an active social media user, I did bear witness to this upsurge of divisiveness and polarization present on various social media platforms, such as Facebook. As I only use Facebook to check in with friends and family and I do not search for anything or click on algorithmically generated items that appear in my Facebook feed, I feel like I could take on the role of an objective outsider with respect to the platform.

Study Findings

The following findings from the study reveal the participants' affective responses and resulting actions and behaviours when shown polarizing content on Facebook. The findings use pseudonyms and gender-neutral pronouns when referring to the participants.

Figure 2*A Visual Representation of The IPA Data Analysis Process*

Emotional Responses to Polarizing Content on Facebook Expressed by The Participants

In their own words, the participants described the emotions that the Facebook comments elicited. Collectively, participants expressed three of the five negative basic emotions: anger, disgust, and sadness (Ekman, 2016). Other emotional responses to polarizing Facebook comment threads included feeling annoyed, frustrated, intrigued and perplexed, mad, distressed, and yucky and gross. Only one participant reported a feeling of happiness.

Anger-Related Emotions Were the Most Common Emotions Expressed by The Participants

Feeling Angry and Mad. Several participants identified anger in response, and their anger was directed in different ways. Beth, who holds a public-facing role in their community, expressed anger while reading profane, accusatory posts. Comments that belittle what others have posted angered Leah, a civil servant. Leah also expressed their anger with algorithms and commented, “I would be so angry at Facebook or Google for making me read something if it wasn't something I wanted to see.” When asked what they do on Facebook, Leah responded, “Mostly I

get mad at all the advertisements lately.” Beth gets mad when people badmouth politicians. According to Beth, it is not okay that such behaviour becomes normative. Mark, a teacher, felt that getting mad at Facebook comments is a choice. For Mark, Facebook is mostly just entertainment; therefore, they make sense of feeling mad by viewing it as a form of entertainment. Mark felt that it was always a choice of how to feel and whether or not to respond to comments on Facebook.

Feelings of Frustration. Leah, Beth, and Mark all expressed frustration when reading the comment threads in the three Facebook cases for this study. In general conversation, Leah expressed frustration that “people use social media for this stuff [making polarizing comments]. It's not how we have dialogue.” Mark was frustrated with the balance between moderation and censorship, “I almost wish that there was a moderator to say, ‘okay that’s enough’ but then you're censoring, right?” Mark, like Beth, also gets frustrated with “unintelligent conversation” littered with profanity and misinformation. Mark would rather have an intelligent, fact-based conversation online or in person.

Feeling Annoyed. Annoyance with polarizing Facebook posts was expressed by Tim, Mark, Sean, and Jennica. As a devout Catholic and teacher, Tim was both annoyed and offended by a comment on the Indigenous Issues page that used the words “those Catholic people.” Tim felt this was an attack on his faith. Mark was annoyed when commenters appeared not to read the comment threads in their entirety or when commenters took the threads “off the rails and lost the plot” from the original post or topic. Jennica, a professional communicator, felt annoyed by two concepts: algorithmically-generated content that is shared on their Facebook feed and when Facebook users “can’t stop beating a dead horse.” Jennica would rather agree to disagree and move on. On the other hand, Sean, a university student, felt the annoyance abate when they took the time to investigate a posters’ Facebook page and tried to learn about them, so “maybe I care a little bit more knowing about the person.”

Feelings of Disgust. While Mark was annoyed, Sean felt disgusted when the comments jumped from topic to topic, rather than staying on point. To make sense of this, Sean considers that these commenters selectively choose what they want to argue about, namely what they know about, and are not actually addressing either the topic of the post or the discussion in the comment threads. Sean finds this lack of full engagement with the issue drives them from “eye rolling to disgust.” Beth expressed their disgust with both the unnecessary use of strong/offensive language and the “awful back and forth” between users. As an expression of disgust, Jennica used the terms “yucky and gross” several times when describing their feelings in response to polarizing content. For example, when asked how Jennica would respond if a post like the ones we viewed appeared in their Facebook feed, they replied, “There is a point where I would probably choose to just turn it off and walk away, okay? It feels yucky and gross.”

The Participants Expressed Feelings of Being Sad and Distressed.

Several participants expressed feelings of sadness and distress. While reviewing the comment thread for the Indigenous issues case, Leah came across a “very belittling comment” and immediately felt sad. Leah expressed feeling “just so sad, sad” for the future when reading the comments in the reproductive choice case, because, as a [post], “this will be here, forever, and ever. And at some point, these people's children are going to read this and go, ‘oh, I'm horrified.’” Beth started to feel sad when they read posts that they felt were “coming from a place of hurt and anger and from somebody who needs to heal, and then my heart kind of turns to compassion.” Jennica, Leah, and Beth also indicated they felt sad and distressed, respectively, when posts were hostile or made personal attacks.

The Participants Physical Responses to Polarizing Content on Facebook Were Observed

During the interviews, there were times when the descriptions of the participants' physical actions, postures, and other physical cues were narrated for the recording as they were describing how their bodies felt in response to the content viewed on Facebook. For example, while engaging with Beth, I noticed they were pursing their lips and clenching their fists. Tim, Shawna, and Leah all described the physical feeling of exhaustion. Tim described their exhaustion, “it takes an emotional toll on you eventually... I get second-hand, emotional exhaustion from it.” Shawna, a teacher, finds it exhausting when it seems like “we're having the same conversation over and over and over again, and not going anywhere.”

The Participants Made Assumptions About Facebook Commenters

When documenting, analyzing, and reporting the participants' assumptions, the potential for tension between documenting participants' assumptions and reproducing those assumptions uncritically was mitigated due to the double hermeneutic nature of IPA as a research approach (Smith et al., 2022). According to Smith et al. (2022), double hermeneutics refers to acknowledging the researcher's active role in interpreting the participant's sense-making.

Assumptions About Education Level of Facebook Commentors. Several participants made assumptions about the educational level of those who wrote polarizing Facebook comments. Both Tim and Shawna viewed those who post as uneducated people with too much time on their hands. Tim offered that these types of posts come from a place of emotion rather than thoughtful intellect. Tim suggested the irony that commentators may be trying to elicit conversation, but their method and language have the opposite effect. That is why Tim does not engage. Beth noted that spelling is important, “carbon capture is a phallacy” [*sic*]. Is it? I don't think that's how you spell it.” For Beth, misspelling is an indication of a lower level of education. Tim made their assumptions about those who post on Facebook clear: “I assume most of them are idiots, so I don't take them seriously, which is a little harsh and probably not true.” Tim finds it easier to ignore emotional posts because the poster is not coming across as rational. Generally speaking,

Mark thought that people who post on Facebook are politically motivated and politically minded, but uneducated and “want their 15 milli-seconds of fame.”

Assumption that Facebook Commentors are Right Fighting. To the participants, Facebook is not conducive to conversation, debate, discussion, or dialogue. Leah assumed that those who engage on public Facebook pages are only interested in hearing their own voices and not in engaging in any reasonable discourse. Therefore, Leah does not engage with the content, reflecting, “It is not a conversation. I call that right fighting.” Tim concurred, “... they don’t seem to be interested in having a conversation. ... maybe there’s some irony in there. They’re trying to elicit a strong response, but it’s actually disengaging because they’re not actually promoting conversation.” These assumptions temper participants’ emotional responses when deciding whether to engage with a comment thread.

Assumption That Facebook Commenters Believe Their Posts Will Prompt Change.

Participants assumed that people were posting to change others’ minds, which often had the opposite effect, making readers feel less receptive to the comments. Sean said, “I think the core of what they just tried to comment is actually good, but it makes me feel less because of how much it’s trying to make me feel more.” Beth felt, “What is the point of commenting? What are you trying to do, right? I don’t think you’re going to change the world with a Facebook post.” Jennica and Leah were perplexed by “flag-planting” and the idea of making others agree with you without being open to discussion. Leah also became perplexed by “where people take these things [in the comment threads]. Like, why did you feel that? Why do you feel the need to chime in and say things?” Generally speaking, Jennica thought that people who post on Facebook are average people who have a range of opinions and choose to hide behind the anonymity of the keyboard.

Assumption That Facebook Commentors Are Angry or Hurt. While reading the comment threads, Beth felt that “there’s a lot of people out there who carry around a lot of hurt and anger, and I start to feel sad.” Such hurt and anger led the participants to believe that Facebook users are unable to regulate their emotions or thought processes. The toxic disinhibition, anonymity, and “hot head” behaviour had Beth commenting, “this [post] is from a place of hurt and we need to be a more healing community rather than putting this stuff out there like this, what is this particular post doing to help people heal?” When viewing the homemade poster in the photo in the Indigenous issue case, Mark quizzically mused that, “the poster [in the photo] is trying to give you distress because I understand that an upside-down flag is distress, right?” Mark noted, in their interpretation of the comment thread, that others are also feeling that same distress and continue to comment on the same topic. Mark, like Sean, observed that the readers of Facebook comment threads began to feel what the commentors in the comment threads are feeling. Mark tried to understand the motives of those who post and wondered, “Maybe they’re frustrated? Do they have a concern? And they’re distressed. So, they’re trying to get people’s attention by saying: ‘there’s a problem here, let’s deal with it.’ Right?” While reading posts on the Indigenous issues page, Leah was interested in a comment made about residential schools in Canada.

They thoughtfully wondered, and also assumed, that the commentor was, “trying to distance yourself from the issue at hand or at play. In terms of feeling, that always makes me feel people are running away from owning their own stuff.” Beth suggested that the commentors might be trying to be funny, which can be misconstrued or taken out of context. Beth hinted that people who want to be funny, “could just post a cartoon rather than get into an argument with somebody...”

Participants Owned Their Assumptions About Facebook Commentors. Some participants recognized they were making assumptions about the posters of the polarizing comments. For example, while reading in the reproductive choice posts, Jennica declared to be assuming the gender of a commentor, “I’m assuming Terry spelled with a Y, is a male who has never been in that situation to make that choice [to terminate a pregnancy for medical reasons] or had been at all in any way related to that situation.” Reading in the energy production page comment threads, Leah commented, “...making a major assumption that a whole group of people is about something [reclamation]... You either have to be for it or against it, but there's no middle ground.” Finally, Leah commented that, “In some cases you start to see people, make an assumption, and put people in boxes. You are this. You are that.” Leah astutely continued, “which automatically creates the polarization.” Both Sean and Leah suggested they might take the time to learn more about those posting polarizing content on Facebook to either verify or disprove the assumptions they had made. Sean conceded that, while reading an individual’s post, “you're starting to put a person in your mind together, even if it's very loose.” Both Sean and Leah may click on someone’s profile to learn about the individual’s story, understand the motivation behind their post, and make sense of why they are saying what they are. This way, they can “care about their side a little bit more.” During a general conversation about posts in the study cases, Beth expressed that they may wish to “seek more information if it was something that I thought was worth looking into.” However, these exercises require a willingness to invest time.

The Participants Felt Their Identity Being Threatened

Whether it be community, faith, family, or professional, participants responded to the polarizing Facebook content through their social or group identity (Hu, 2025; Zhang et al., 2012). Leah identified as a proud community member of the City of Red Deer and was saddened by comments on Facebook about the community. They noted that if anyone not living in Red Deer Googled the city, “it's horrible what you read. That is so not who we are, and I know that, but those things stay in the air an awful lot longer than the good stories.” It is not uncommon for comment threads to devolve into personal attacks and name-calling, and, according to Leah and Beth, this is unfortunately quite commonplace in Central Alberta. In a region like Central Alberta, the anonymity Facebook offers users may not be guaranteed. Users can be found by members of their communities, who are then making assumptions about them that could result in lost opportunities for healthy debate or even relationships. For Tim and Mark, participation on Facebook was governed by their professional and faith group identities, even though they may have wanted to have their voices heard in Facebook comment threads. Tim has made the choice

to leave all social media platforms because they consider this course of action to be easier, frees up time, and is better for their mental health.

Tim and Shawna found comments directed at their faith to be offensive. Shawna commented on comments in the reproductive choice page, “There's lots of people who aren't Catholic who are pro-life. Pro-Life isn't just a Catholic movement, right?” Regarding the same reproductive choice page, Jennica expressed feeling that their identity as a woman and pro-choice believer was threatened. As a mother and having a daughter who someday may carry children, “I have very strong opinions on these issues.” Being in a public-facing role in their community, Beth felt threatened by some comments against politicians, “people may disagree with what I have voted on an issue, and that's fine. Absolutely. But don't tell me I'm a bad person.” Tim, Shawna, Kate, Bev, and Jennica all felt threatened by attacks on the oil and gas industry. These participants have ties to the oil and gas industry through family, with Bev and Jennica stating, “Yes, oil and gas paid for my house.”

The Participants Questioned Facebook as a Community Builder

This concept repeats itself in the findings in various ways. Polarization on Facebook is described by the participants as “right fighting” (Leah), “flag-planting” (Jennica), “there is no longer a middle ground” (Tim), and “in the extreme, polarization may be considered normative” (Beth). The Facebook experience of the participants seemed to be one of no middle ground, and topics were driven to extremes. This hollowing of the centre space, as Jennica commented, it is a sad statement of where we are as a society.

Both Leah and Jennica shared stories of polarization in their community, directly resulting from polarizing content on Facebook. Leah spoke of their experiences as a family when a particular family member makes anti-government posts on Facebook, and Leah feels that “I can't unfriend him because he is [related], so I have to put a healthy boundary around [the relationship].” While the issues their family member posts about may come up at family gatherings and create uncomfortable situations, they are “not going to fight with [relatives] at the family barbecue because [the relative] hates [former Prime Minister] Trudeau.”

Jennica recounted how being exposed to polarizing content on Facebook influences and hinders their relationships in the community. There are “certain topics I won't discuss with people, period.” Jennica told of how, in a small city like Red Deer, “a lot of people run in the same circles.” In their role as a professional communicator, Jennica may have read, seen, reviewed, or received hateful comments on Facebook, and as a result, “I choose not to engage [in person] because I don't want to be associated with people who carry themselves that way.” Each of these scenarios demonstrates Facebook's reach and its role in affective polarization within the community.

Discussion

The findings suggest that while on Facebook, participants make assumptions that lead to false attribution errors about those who engage in comment threads. As part of their lived experience, participants reported feeling that their identities were threatened and may choose to disengage from Facebook's affordances. Although the participants are aware of recommendation algorithms, they did not consider the deeper influence that algorithms may have in creating echo chambers and the role they may play in affective polarization. The study findings further extend the existing literature and mechanisms described above (see: Facebook Polarization in Praxis section) by illuminating how emotionally charged, algorithmically generated content, and fundamental attribution errors are directly linked to the formation of echo chambers. The study findings further show that often what happens on social media platforms does not always stay online. As such, the connection is made between false attribution errors, out-group animosity, and affective polarization. Finally, the link between the conditions creating online polarization extending to face-to-face interpersonal interactions that can fracture communities is made.

The following discussion centres on people's emotions, their identities, the making of false attributions, and algorithms and how these conditions matter in the affective polarization conversation.

Feelings are Part of Identity and Core to Polarization on Facebook

The data collected draws a connection between Facebook users' feelings, their various identities, and affective polarization. Tim observed that people have emotional responses to Facebook comments that contradict their beliefs and perceive them as personal attacks. Affirming that feelings are an important part of one's identity, and when their feelings are challenged or threatened, identity-protection cognition comes into play. In this vein, the findings suggest that users' feelings may be at the core of polarization. Beth, Sean, and Jennica may be experiencing identity-protection cognition when they sense that other Facebook users threaten their own feelings. The inference, or assumption, of the participants is that the comments are intended to do more than just change someone's opinion or mind on a topic; they are meant to change how they feel.

The theory of social verification (Hillman et al., 2023) holds, and when combined with identity-protection cognition (Wischniewski & Krämer, 2021), suggest that Facebook users like Beth, Sean, and Jennica begin to engage in identity-protection cognition (Kahan et al., 2007) in order to protect their emotions. This is critical to polarization because one's social identity will end up in first place, over truth or other experienced dissonances (Hillman et al., 2023; Kahan, 2017; Nguyen, 2018; Samson, 2023), leading to greater, deeper, and emotionally saturated polarization between the in-group and out-group every time (Samson, 2023) .

Making Fundamental Attribution Errors About “The Other”

The study participants engaged in both making fundamental attribution errors and engaging in social comparisons, judging Facebook commenters as uneducated, incapable of emotional regulation, and wasting their time. They also believed that Facebook commenters are not fully reading or understanding the comment threads. By comparing themselves to the Facebook users who post in the comment threads, the participants are endeavouring to elevate themselves as better educated, emotionally literate, and spending their time constructively, thus making fundamental attribution errors about “the other” (Coleman, 2013; Ross, 1977) and social comparisons (Suls et al., 2002) to “the other.”

Jennica felt that humans naturally make assumptions. Spurred on by negative feelings, Facebook users make false attribution errors about those who are posting on Facebook. The literature suggests that the theories of fundamental attribution error and identity-protection cognition hold and contribute to the formation of echo chambers. Sparked by an emotional response to comment threads considered to be incendiary, Facebook users make false attributions about “the other”, driven by the need to protect one’s identity and place within one’s in-group. Grounded in evolutionary psychology, identity-protection cognition affirms the human need for protection and belonging from one’s in-group (Wischniewski & Krämer, 2021). In the instance of Facebook, one’s in-group consists of those who validate one’s own beliefs, which is what occurs in an echo chamber (Cinelli et al., 2021; Dubois & Blank, 2018; Flaxman et al., 2016; Jain et al., 2022). The end result is blaming “the other” for being in an echo chamber. It follows that humans are happiest when they are in an in-group with their own people. While each in-group considers a particular out-group polarizing, each party has found its affinity group within it.

The relatively high education level of the participants may have influence on their interpretations of polarization on Facebook due to their critical thinking, discernment skills, and life experience. As well, this level of education of the participants may have influenced how they approach polarization, both online and face-to-face.

The Role of Algorithms in Affective Polarization

The participants spoke to the assertion that algorithms are driving polarizing content, echo chambers, and disengagement. This addresses both the formation of echo chambers by Facebook and the commodification/monetization of users’ attention on social media. By engaging in both selective exposure (Dahlgren, 2021; Garrett, 2009; Malinen et al., 2018) and selective avoidance (Case et al., 2005; Zhou & Xie, 2023), users are choosing to disengage from the algorithmic echo chambers and Facebook, further affecting Facebook's revenues. Choosing to disengage as a step to prevent polarization may be making it worse by creating space for continued affective polarization (Hodson, Morales, et al., 2025).

Rathje et al. (2021) maintained that negative content aimed toward a social media user’s out-group goes viral more rapidly than positive posts about an in-group. Thus, when negative-

leaning content that stirs negative emotions is present on social media, do platforms' algorithms encourage fundamental attribution errors? The findings from this study suggest this is happening and suggest that changes to the way Facebook moderates the platform could alleviate polarization. Finally, the concept of fundamental attribution error can lead to further in-group/out-group polarization.

The literature supports the role that algorithms play in the creation of echo chambers (Jain et al., 2022) through the influence on what individuals see in their Facebook feeds. Several participants concurred that algorithms are driving what they see on Facebook and exacerbating polarization. To this point, Tim does not regret leaving Facebook.

Through this research project, my own Facebook page became a worrisome example of engagement algorithms at work. Searching for polarizing content on Facebook resulted in my Facebook page being flooded with recommendations relating to the polarizing topics I had been searching for. These algorithmically generated recommendations are not of interest to me outside this study. Like Leah, I became angry at the algorithms that showed me content I didn't want to see. And, like Tim, I am very comfortable with my choice to not have an active social media presence.

Limitations and Recommendations

This study extends beyond the current literature by deepening the understanding of the complex nature of emotional responses to polarizing content on Facebook. This study is limited by the use of a single social media platform, the selection of cases, and a small study population. A larger study could determine if the link between emotions, out-group animosity, fundamental attribution errors, and polarization exists in the broader population.

Conclusion

The findings of this study show that the path to polarization begins when algorithmically-generated negative content seizes Facebook users' attention, and they begin to comment on and share such content. When viewing negative and polarizing content, Facebook users experience an emotional response and begin making fundamental attribution errors about those who post in comment threads. Facebook users may feel that content that is contrary to their values and beliefs may be a threat to their identity. Strategies for identity protection include selectively choosing what they do and do not see on Facebook. This series of behaviours and responses further reinforces echo chambers and, ergo, affective polarization. In the end, it can be seen that algorithms serve only the platform's corporate interests and are not in service of community building, either online or in person.

This study supports the interpretation that Facebook has not lived up to its original stated purpose of bringing people together (Meta, n.d.); instead, it is breaking up communities by promoting polarization and creating echo chambers. Moreover, Facebook is not considered an emotionally safe space for conversations, discussions, or debates on polarizing topics. When this

trend of not engaging in civil discourse extends to in-person interactions, healthy discussion and debate are not happening in the public square, and this is bad for democracy.

To conclude, my data suggest that to overcome this, we first need to re-frame how we think about others. Secondly, we need to learn how algorithms prioritize negative content and emotions, making us more susceptible to making false attribution errors about others. In the absence of changes, the call to action of this study is to raise awareness of the situation.

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Appendix A: Elicitation Posts and Interview Questions

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Facebook Elicitation Posts

Facebook Elicitation Posts	
Indigenous Issues in Canada	
Public Facebook Page Description	Link
<p>The public Facebook page for the Indigenous Issues in Canada case was a post on the Rants and Raves Red Deer page.</p> <p>The page is self-described as “Everyone needs a place to vent, well here it is, the good and the bad we want to hear it, but these rules apply, no bullying, no naming names, and no spam.,. If u can't follow these rules u will be blocked, and deleted thanks admin.” [sic]</p>	<p>https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=4509300835755349&set=gm.4903260756367608</p>
Energy Production in Alberta	
Public Facebook Page Description	Link
<p>The public Facebook page used for Energy Production in Alberta case was a page called Oil and Gas World/Oil Sands Strong.</p> <p>The introduction to the page reads, “Standing up for the world's energy industry!” The Facebook page is connected to the oilsandsstrong.com and oilandgasworld.ca websites.</p>	<p>https://www.facebook.com/OAGWxOSS/posts/pfbid025yAU7yPLiHLrAypA8QZzyBU9ofTZZZtXXuUAs2iTCoBgCWsYpNutu6u4iXwnB4A1</p>
Reproductive Choice for Albertans	
Public Facebook Page Description	Link

The Facebook page chosen was Red Deer & Area Pro Life.	https://www.facebook.com/RDprolife/posts/pfbid02nFc3qrBiFccMw3DKWYb3oTfXg6rxm2d8z9hp7oZAkkEtQXxL4JMaUa1kpKUG6mk5l
The introduction describes the page as, “Celebrating Life at all stages!! The specific post chosen was an announcement of an essay contest for high school students.	

Semi-Structured Elicitation Interview Questions

The general background section questions were asked directly, while others may evolve organically in the conversations, and others may be asked during the follow-up interviews.

General Background

- Where do you live in Central Alberta?
- How long have you lived in Central Alberta?
- How often do you log onto your Facebook account?
- How much time do you generally spend on Facebook?
- What do you do when you are on Facebook?
- What are all the ways that living in Red Deer and Central Alberta may influence/inform your beliefs?

Experiences of Polarizing Content

- Do you feel that Facebook is a safe place to engage in conversation about controversial topics?
- Can you describe a recent instance when you encountered polarizing content on Facebook?
- What kind of content do you find most polarizing on Facebook?
- What is it about Indigenous issues, energy production, and reproductive choice that would motivate you to post?

Emotional Responses and Sense-Making

- How does your body feel when you read this post? Let’s take a minute and check in. (When we stop, look, and read).
 - Ask prompting and probative follow-up questions to get to the emotional feelings
- Can you describe in more detail the specific emotions you feel when you encounter such content? How do these emotions evolve as you continue to engage with the content?
- Does this feel similar or different than when you've encountered similar content in the past?
- How important is it to you that your voice is heard in these Facebook threads?
- What is it that motivates you to post? What do you think motivates others to post in these threads?
- If you saw a post like this in your feed, walk me through how you would respond.

- What thoughts run through your mind as you decide whether or not to respond? How do you make sense of these thoughts and emotions?

Strategies and Coping Mechanisms

- Given that you are feeling (anxious, mad, sad...), what strategies do you use to manage your emotional responses to polarizing content on Facebook? Which of these methods do you find particularly effective?
- Have your reactions to polarizing content on Facebook changed over time? If so, how and why do you think these changes occurred?

Narrative and Assumptions

- Let's take a look at the comments and see how a same or oppositional post makes you feel.
- Tell me what you think about the person who posted this? Who do you think they are? What do you think their motivation to post is?
- If you met this person who held these views on the street or face-to-face, how would you respond to them?
- If this person has these views on Indigenous (or energy production, or reproductive choice), what would you suppose they think of the other issues?
- How do you think your assumptions about the poster and their motivations affect your emotional response and decision to engage or not engage with the content?

Closing Questions

- Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences with polarizing content on Facebook?
- How do you feel about the potential impact of this research on understanding polarization and emotional responses on social media?

Broader Implications and Reflections

- How has encountering polarizing content on Facebook influenced your interactions and relationships outside of social media?
- How do you perceive the overall impact of Facebook on societal polarization? Do you think your personal experiences reflect a broader trend?
- Have you ever found yourself changing your views or feelings about a topic after engaging with polarizing content on Facebook? Can you describe such an instance?
- What strategies do you think could help people better manage their emotional responses to polarizing content on social media?