RIGHT-WING EXTREMIST YOUTH: PRESENCE AND IMPLICATIONS ACROSS ALTERNATIVE PLATFORMS

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Abstract

Alternative social media platforms exist across various channels and are used by Right-Wing community members to endorse extremist views and promote radical ideologies. The presence of Right-Wing Extremist groups and the proliferation of their hateful ideologies on social media alternative platforms has become a pressing concern in both Canada and the United States, reflecting a more global reality that resonates in Australia, New Zealand, and Europe. Concepts related to nationalism are fueling Right-Wing Extremist groups and contributing to a continuing emergence of hate speech on these social media platforms. These racist and intolerant ideologies espoused on alternative platforms have particular appeal to youth. The rhetoric used in the alternative Right-Wing Extremist media platforms is rooted in a sense of identity and exploits hateful and racist sentiments to heighten the fear that a viewer's core identity is threatened by anti-nationalist social and political agendas. This critical reflection uses poetic inquiry, as a research tool ideally suited to this study, to share the researcher's encounter with the literature related to the appeal of Right-Wing Extremist alternative platforms for youth. The intent of this critical reflection is to facilitate the reader's experience and understanding of the topic in these poetic frames of reference. Poetry is used to interpret the encounter between researcher and data, and in the process, provide readers with a contemplative space to consider the immediacy of the descriptions in their own encounter with the experience.

Keywords: *Alternative social media platforms, extremism.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Right-Wing Extremist groups utilize alternative platforms across social networks to spread hateful and racist sentiments targeted at specific groups of people. These alternative platforms, understood as social media websites used by Right-Wing Extremist community members that tolerate extremist views, are for the most part not regulated by the same standards as mainstream sites (Hammer et al., 2022). These platforms, as they exist across social media channels, facilitate the communication and interaction of Right-Wing Extremist community members, foster a relatively seamless dissemination of extremist views, and promote radical ideologies in their messaging (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Rone, 2021).

The rise in hate groups, including in the emergence of an online presence, has become a global reality. Canada is certainly reflective of this trend. There is an alarming rise in hate speech in virtual communities and social media platforms across Canada. In fact, according to Davey et al.'s comprehensive report, *An Online*

Environmental Scan of Right-Wing Extremism in Canada," (2020), "the number of hate groups operating in the country has tripled" (see, as well, Kielburger & Kielburger, 2019). Concepts related to nationalism are fueling Right-Wing Extremist groups and contributing to a continuing emergence of hate speech – understood as targeted communication that slanders and maligns a specific group of people.

Of particular note to the critical reflection under discussion, however, is the manner whereby racist and intolerant ideologies (as espoused on alternative platforms) appeal to youth. Youth, after all, are among the highest demographic of digital media consumers (Daniels, 2009) and are identified by some as Generation M (understood in the broader context of Media) since they frequent the internet with great regularity and consider digital media as a fundamental aspect of their social lives (Lenhart et al., 2005; Rideout et al., 2010).

The intent of this critical reflection is to use poetic inquiry to share the researcher's encounter with the literature related to the appeal of Right-Wing Extremist alternative platforms for youth in order to then facilitate the reader's experience and understanding in these poetic frames of reference (Cherubini, 2023a; Furman, 2004). The poems are a first-hand interpretation of the researcher's impressions of the literature that describes not only the skewed interpretations of hate and racist material of on these alternative platforms, but of how they manipulate impressionable youth into racist actions and emotions that are reflections of a worldview where they themselves feel disenfranchised from the political and social realities that, in their estimation, undermine nationalist sentiments and values. While the methodology may not necessarily reflect the more traditional qualitative approaches to research, it is especially relevant to the issues under discussion since it positions research as a socially conscious undertaking (Holman Jones, 2005; Sikes, 2021; Spry, 2016).

2. CONTEXT

The presence of Right-Wing Extremist groups and the proliferation of their hateful ideologies on social media alternative platforms has become a pressing concern in both Canada and the United States, reflecting a more global reality that resonates in Australia, New Zealand, and Europe (Blazak, 2022; Perry et al., 2022; Wilson & Halpin, 2022). What is especially interesting is the manner in which these Right-Wing Extremist groups use the Internet to not only create online communities that share common views and extremist sentiments (Reid & Valasik, 2020), but have exploited social media platforms – including those considered alternative sites – to share their widespread message with users who may not have been intentionally looking for hateful ideologies (Hawley, 2021; Paxton, 2018). Those Right-Wing Extremist groups based in Canada seem to be significantly influenced by the social and political issues in the United States, especially as it concerns Donald Trump (Hart et al., 2021). The groups that host their communities on alternative social media platforms also seem to reflect more racist and violent discourses to underscore their superiority and, in the process, undermine others in racist and hateful language (Canadian Security Intelligence Service, 2020; Hart et al., 2021).

Among the detrimental consequences of hate speech and the proliferation of right-wing extremist views is the appeal it has for some youth. According to the literature, youth interact in sociocultural contexts that are typical of systemic racial inequity that, in turn, has implications on their understanding of ethnic and racial identity development (Kendi, 2019; Rivas-Drake & Umana-Taylor, 2019; Williams et al., 2020). The development of the racial identity of white youth is, in the context of the above understanding, typical of white normative and supremist worldviews since white normativity is the accepted standard (see, for example, Feagin & Ducey, 2019). Consider, in this light, that "white supremacy is more than racial violence or far-right ideology; it encompasses a system of practices, beliefs, and policies that privilege whiteness and center the interests and experiences of white people" (Moffit & Onnie Rogers, 2022, pp. 815-816).

Note, as well, the theory that the socialization of white youth across societal sectors rewards both being white and standing separate from issues of racism (Helms, 2020; Rogers & Way, 2021). Less surprising, in consideration of these theories, is the appeal of extremist views to white youth that self-identify with their demographic and with a strong sense of nationalism (Costello et al., 2019). The rhetoric used in the alternative Right-Wing Extremist media platforms is rooted in a sense of identity and exploits hateful and racist sentiments to heighten the fear that a viewer's core identity is threatened by anti-nationalist social and political agendas (Nagle, 2017). Youth are attracted to a social identity that promises a sense of belonging in community that heightens their self-esteem (Ellemers et al., 2002; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). These social media environments welcome divisive messages that deliberately other groups of difference.

3. METHODOLOGY

Poetry is instrumental in the presentation of data. It is a research tool ideally suited to bridge the encounter between the researcher and the literature (see, for example, Prendergast, 2009). Among the goals of this qualitative approach to data analysis is to invite an emotional response from the reader in direct relation to the researcher's experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002). According to Todres and Galvin (2008), the poetic language used in the presentation of data creates the opportunity for readers to immerse themselves in the experience of reflection and analysis. It is an understanding of experience (in relation to a specific context) as it is presented in the data (Cherubini, 2023b; Moon & Strople, 2016). It is a process that "requires that we observe ourselves observing [and] that we interrogate what we think and believe" (Jones et al., 2016, p. 10; see, too, Lee, 2022).

The data consists of the researcher's detailed notes of peer-reviewed academic articles related to right-wing extremist groups' online social media presence from 2018 to 2019, particularly in relation to youth. The data were systematically coded and then sorted by themes. The researcher considered it necessary to wait six weeks in advance of reexamining the data, allowing for sufficient time to engage in an analysis of the original themes. The poems shared in this analysis originate from the themes that were identified throughout the literature review and are considered significant to the discussion of right-wing extremist groups that include a significant youth membership.

4. DISCUSSION AND PRESENTATION

The themes that emerged during the research process represented those concepts that materialized in the data. Without a doubt, the alternative social media platforms used by Right-Wing Extremist groups not only heighten their exposure across virtual communities, but also increase their reach, including youth. The

platforms then become a means to mobilize radical thought by evoking false interpretations and obligating members to compulsory action. The false claims give credence to the conditions and circumstances that destabilize nationalist principles and present tradition in contested terms. The threat to notions of what once were, as understood by fundamental beliefs and values that govern a nation, provides added impetus for youth to reclaim and revive tradition in order to ensure its preservation. The right-wing sentiments are framed in issues that are immediate to youth that feel threatened and seek an identity in these virtual communities that conjure a sense of belonging.

In this way, the rhetoric between members tends to mirror radical ideologies that socially integrate the community. The alternative social media platforms serve to foster social ties and, in some cases, obligate members to what is considered imperative action. Right-wing extremist groups exploit false claims, grounded in social, cultural, and political untruths, that aim to showcase what they perceive as the various crises in contemporary society caused by out-groups in order to make the threat both discernable and authentic. The deceptive statements that contribute to the rhetoric have a particular function. They position members, and in the process target youth, in the tension between the fabricated crises and individual's vulnerability during these apparent uncertain and unstable times.

The poems, to a large extent, describe the researcher's understanding of the issues but perhaps more significantly, their negotiation of the harsh outcomes evoked by right-wing extremist rhetoric as it is described in the literature.

4.1. Divisive Discourse

Senseless chatter that confounds.

Emotions that reflect belief.

Belief in a view

Distorted and warped

Confused and misinformed.

Rhetoric.

Against the backdrop of …

Animosity.

Of the Other.

Different from you.

Intolerably different.

A rage against tolerance.

Invigorated by futile endurance.

Exhilarated by loathing.

The loathing of another.

But not another that is tangible.

Merely misinformed illusions

That arrogantly disregards scrutiny.

No time to be mindful.

An influx of emotion.

Fuel to the demonic fire.

Cannot stand apart.

Must be involved in the talk.

Contribute with the words that

Unmistaken

Make the red cybernetic fire roar.

Words are activism.

They are ferocious

In their temptation.

In their invitation.

To shed light on the truth.

That the way it was …

Is crumbling.

Before our listless eyes.

Need to take action.

And restore …

History.

Tradition.

Beliefs.

What we were.

And resist what we cannot be.

Cannot become.

Our talk will be the resistance.

4.2. Relishing in the Disguise

A disclosed anonymity

To exclaim

To whisper

To cry

To lament

The injustices.

Not few.

The corruption of order.

Social order.

Political order.

Corruption that transcends

Even passing interest.

Corruption

That rests in the undercurrent

Of equity and justice.

People scream into the keyboard.

They roar at the unfairness.

Can see them punching the keys

That accentuate their voices.

In the comfort of the darkness

The darkness of anonymity

That is virtual community …

They can shout with conviction.

4.3. The Influence of Ignorance

What is it that appeals?

To youthful innocence.

Corrupted innocence?

To have lost the …

Evolutionary incentive

To be kind.

Thoughtful.

Accepting.

Humble?

There is a flair in the fire of hatred

That is   …

One can only imagine

Fully combustible.

To the youth that cannot feel

The solace of the warmth

That comforts the rest.

No.

For these,

The heat is devastating.

Vicious.

Disparaging.

An inferno of revulsion

That once scorched their inclusion

From the blaze of the collective.

A fragile adolescence

Weakened and vulnerable

By the illusion of belonging.

Now they belong.

But to what?

To whom?

The flames mere light

To the virtual eyes

That blink in the simulated darkness.

What is their identity?

In these replicated spaces

That induce a twisted fundamental …

Culture

Of racism.

It is an identity that rests in the locus

Of vulnerability.

A fear that stems

One can merely surmise

From being erased.

Eliminated.

Wiped-out …

From the national narrative.

The empire's story.

A distorted desire to belong.

In a forged and fragile company.

Of others.

Endangered by Others.

A camaraderie that is suspicious

And selective

Of tendentious discernments

That discriminate against Reason

And even Empathy.

A youthful

But faceless presence.

A leery occurrence

In a suspect group.

Feeling integrated …

Into fragmentation?

A show of strength …

In a brittle posture

Held fast by the uncertainty

And instability

Of intolerance.

A fully unsophisticated center

Susceptible and brittle,

Reduced to fanatic missives

That quiver in the light of credibility.

Of truth.

What is it

Then,

that appeals?

To youthful innocence.

Corrupted innocence?

To have lost the …

Evolutionary incentive

To be kind.

Thoughtful.

Accepting.

Humble?

4. CONCLUSION

The alternative online social media platforms, as discussed in the literature, invite youth into contentious and calculated discourses that promote the exclusion of the *other* in favour of drawing attention to the superiority of nationalist beliefs and ideologies. Poetry is used to interpret the encounter between researcher and data, and in the process, provide readers with a contemplative space to consider the immediacy of the descriptions in their own encounter with the experience. It is a specific and unique interaction that gives the issue of right-wing ideology and social media presence the urgency it deserves.

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