Anishinaabe Art on Social Media: Viewers' Comments and a Measure of Culteral Literacy

Taylor Van Eyk

Abstract

This study lies within the topic of online Indigenous art perception with the objective of measuring Indigenous cultural literacy on this topic. Indigenous communications and new media research is a niche which is extremely relevant in a media-reliant time. It is also considerably under researched within the whole of communications research, prompting creation and exploration within this field. The increased recognition of Indigenous peoples both off and online makes it reasonable to expect an increase in audiences' cultural literacy. This study aims to measure cultural literacy among audiences interacting with online Indigenous arts. Through a literature review, this study was situated between the gap of existing research focusing on the construction of Indigenous Identity and Culture online as well as perception surrounding Indigenous culture and online art. This research was conducted with the goal of filling this gap between existing research by focusing on a narrow sample within the larger topic. This aims to remedy the lack of Indigenous communications and new media research by studying niches which have been previously generalized or overlooked. Studying the audience perception of online Anishinaabe artists, more specifically the level of cultural literacy within the comments, is certainly a niche yet to be thoroughly addressed. This paper's research of the topic is conducted through a critical discourse analysis of the artists' comment sections followed by the filtering of these findings through a definition for cultural literacy. This is done for the purpose of determining the compatibility of the discursive identity of the comments with cultural literacy, which produces our findings. Overall, this study found that the level of cultural literacy in the sample was healthy, explorative, and growing. Suggesting a shift to more positive views of Indigenous arts which serves as an important indicator of the greater state of Indigenous cultural literacy.

Keywords

Cultural literacy, Anishinaabe, Indigenous Art and Culture, comment sections, critical discourse analysis

Research Objectives

This study looks at nine social media posts from Anishinaabe identifying artists and the comment sections attached to these posts. These posts display visual Indigenous art, the comments respond to the post and convey perceptions that create narratives which inform the greater discourse of the comment sections. The focus of this study lies in the discursive event of the comment section. The perceptions, opinions, and sentiments of all the comments create a single discursive event. The objective of this study is to determine the level of cultural literacy within these discursive events. When the language choices and signs of the texts in this discourse are broken down and filtered through a definition for Indigenous cultural literacy, a measure for the level of cultural literacy in these comments and thus the audience is then revealed.

The objective of this research is to gain a sense of the level of cultural literacy present online surrounding Indigenous culture. More specifically, how Indigenous cultural literacy is made known within the textual communities of the comment sections in Anishinaabe artists' social media posts. This research was designed with the idea that specific language choices and textual symbolisms can and do signify a measure of cultural literacy. This study had no intention of seeking specific sentiments or opinions, positive or negative, but wished simply to seek out the ways cultural literacy is expressed and measure it to gain a sense of the typical level of cultural literacy present within the given text genre.

Guided by the research question: "*What do the top comments of Anishinaabe artists' social media posts tell us about the cultural literacy of online populations in recent years?*" this study and its subsequent paper aim to present the discourses present in the comments sections through the lens of cultural literacy. The raw data, the discursive texts comprising the comment section, are not explicitly expressive of cultural literacy, so therefore the findings in this paper will not consist of raw data. But its textual signs will be broken down through critical discourse analysis (CDA) and compared with the key language choices and signs within the Indigenous cultural literacy definition from Life Literacy Canada to determine a level of cultural literacy. These signs taken together, with the definition "being able to understand the traditions, regular activities and history of a group of people from a given culture. It also means being able to engage with these traditions, activities and history in cultural spaces like museums, galleries and performances" (2023, para. 1) produce the data that will determine the findings presented in this paper.

Studying a textual phenomenon that exists within social media and analyzing these texts through discourse focused analysis effectively situates it within the communications field, despite the goal of measuring cultural literacy surrounding Indigenous arts.

Situation of Research Question and Study by Way of Literature Review

The research question: *"What do the top comments of Anishinaabe artists' social media posts tell us about the cultural literacy of online populations in recent years?"* Informs a literature review guideline that seeks out how Indigenous identity and arts are governed, influenced, and constructed online, what governs and influences the audience's perceptions of these online constructions, and the way Indigenous art is perceived offline in a broader sense. All of these aspects are measures or at least influenced in some way by the cultural literacy of the online creator, online audience, or generalized audience.

Literature dealing with the ways Indigenous identity and art are constructed online is vital for understanding what governs the samples that this research yields its data from. This literature is also vital for understanding where Indigenous-related studies are currently situated within communications. Understanding what contributes to the Indigenous content we see online contributes to an understanding of the significance and the indicators of online Indigenous cultural literacy and is also an active practice contributing to an individual's sense of Indigenous cultural literacy. Carlson and Frazer (2020) discuss, for the purpose of this study, the creation of Indigenous social media content. The helpful idea of the "settler gaze" (Carlson & Frazer, 2020, p. 5) informs us that the online actions of Indigenous peoples have impacts that extend past the individual. Here, cultural responsibility is expressed as being a key determining force for what Indigenous peoples share online. This is key for situating the study and understanding the topic because it gives vital information on the ramifications of onlookers' perceptions. This informs insight into the potential findings of this study, but more importantly, it helps us understand the posts that this study considers are crafted with the 'settler gaze' in mind, affecting findings in the perception of these posts. Also related to content creation, Lumby (2010) addresses the governing forces of Indigenous online creation specific to social media. This paper discusses the reasons why and how Indigenous identity is constructed online. Key to this study is the idea of validating Indigeneity through Facebook audiences, either Indigenous or not. "Surveillance and self-surveillance" (Lumby, 2010, p. 71) are ideas that describe an individual's need to present

and post as 'Indigenous' as possible online, out of fear of being an Indigenous poser or appearing not Indigenous enough to fit in with the community. These governing forces are good to keep in mind as they motivate the content that informs perception and literacy around Indigenous culture. With this in mind, it is possible the perceptions recorded could be of an almost 'played up' version of Indigenous culture that may not be reflective of the truth offline.

Literature that discusses the formations of perceptions around Indigenous art is crucial to understanding the data that informs the findings of this study. Gaining an understanding of the existing perceptions of Indigenous Culture is helpful for making sense of the signs that are found in the sample, what inspires the expressions here? Leddy and O'Neil (2022) explore individuals' existing perceptions of Indigenous art and asks them to evaluate them for the purpose of greater inclusion of Indigenous Culture within the classroom. Though this paper lies within the topic of education, the measurement of onlookers' perceptions of Indigenous art, compared with their informed perceptions aimed at inclusion is truly relevant. The findings suggested in this paper could very well mirror the findings of my study. I predict that this study's findings will largely be that people are looking to alter their perceptions of Indigenous art in a positive way, becoming more culturally literate as a result. "Through even the most initial level of phenomenological exploration, participants began to view art not merely as decorative, but as communicative. They began to detect their own knowledge gaps, and better still to understand how they might be able to fill them in. They began to develop new levels of literacy for working in decolonizing ways" (Leddy & O'Neil, 2022, p. 14). This paper is again relevant because it evaluates the process of Indigenous art perception, and it discusses connections and challenges onlookers face when developing a perception of Indigenous art. Despite not being relevant to social media, this paper does an excellent job of communicating the type of findings I wish to discover. Similarly, Robinson (2017) and Dion (2009) also discuss the perception of Indigenous Culture by non-Indigenous and Indigenous parties. Though this description is a simplification and both studies have focuses that explore varying facets of Indigenous art, boiled down, they both rely on the perceptions of onlookers to exist. The 2017 Robinson study focuses on the presence of Indigenous language in public. The public nature of this study of course lends itself to the voicing of opinions and narratives. More importantly, this study explores the intended impact of these public language arts. "'Welcome to our community. How do you recognize it?' Through this address, readers are asked not whether they recognize Anishinaabe sovereignty and the

history of the location, but rather how they do. It is an explicit call to perceive place differently" (Robinson, 2017, p. 96). This type of purposeful challenge to perception is significant for my study because it addresses the impact that the art creators explicitly ask from their viewers, I will study how they choose to answer. The 2009 project by Dion asks this in a way as well. Chapter 3 focuses on how audiences choose to answer this. Addressing how preexisting assumptions about Indigenous peoples guide the perceptions and narratives created when these individuals are 'asked' to reassess or reinvent their current stance.

Data Collection and Data Analysis Methods

The whole of this study can be described as a qualitative cross-sectional analysis of discourse that looks at nine posts from three different Anishinaabe artists' Facebook and Instagram pages, (Kewageshig, Pawis-Steckley, and Angeconeb, 2023) and the comments on these posts to gain a sense of what is typical in the discourses of this field/topic. The sample of this study was collected through purposive sampling that followed a set of criteria that assured the relevancy of the sample for the objectives of this study. The samples constituting this cross-sectional had to be from Anishinaabe identifying artists, the artist accounts must have a following of over 8000, the posts must be displaying Indigenous visual art, and the posts had to be fruitful in comments. I did not implement criteria for the content of the comments because I did not want to cherry-pick the results of the findings, I simply wanted to define the sample within a genre. The 'top comments' that represent the discourse that will be studied are selected through the social media sites' relevancy comment filter which placed the most popular and most relevant comments towards the top of the comment thread. The most popular comments are studied with the idea that they capture the majority sentiment of the whole comment thread. These are the comments used in this study.

Data analysis was conducted using many qualitative research methods, before I began breaking down sign meanings with CDA I put the data through a thematic analysis. I felt it would be helpful to have a count and description of the most popular themes or categories within the comments. Conducting a brief thematic analysis allowed me to create categories for the different types of comments, which can be boiled down to positive, negative, and indifferent (usually leaning towards positive). Creating these categories and reviewing the sample with these

categories allowed me to make approximations to the number of comments in each category. This is how I discovered the overwhelming positive discourse within the comment section.

The critical discourse analysis surveys the comment sections as a whole discursive event, as a single unit. I handled the individual comments through thematic analysis and used the most popular sentiments from there to establish a single discursive event. From this 'text' I determined genre, style, discourse, and order of discourse. Determining the genre was the starting point of this analysis, the thematic analysis helped define the genre and the majority style of text in the genre, helping to define the discourse's characteristics. I then identified the primary discourse as 'positive' and then identified the most popular subnarratives that inform the 'positive' discourse. These are 'experience sharing' and 'narratives around healing.' The primary 'positive' discourse is of course comprised of the majority of to-the-point texts that are obviously supportive. The discourses of each comment section were unified through the repeat positive sentiments, this is how the average sentiment of the comment section findings was affirmed. Overwhelming positivity and experiencing sharing may not be characteristic of all discursive texts, and the to-the-point style of the language is stylistic to online comment sections. These characteristics define the genre or personality of the discursive event. All these things taken together define a narrative that is fairly unique to the genre of online Indigenous art perception.

Findings

Both the thematic analysis and CDA helped produce a well-defined identity for a positive and supportive text comprised of healing narratives, personal audience experiences, opinions on topics relevant to the initial post, and of course to-the-point positive words of affirmation. With this well-established discourse identity attached to the data, how can this identity inform the measurement of Indigenous cultural literacy among online audiences? How will this discourse's identity satisfy the study's objective? We now filter this identity and the discursive elements that comprise it through our chosen definition of Indigenous cultural literacy. Life Literacy Canada's definition of Indigenous cultural literacy is "being able to understand the traditions, regular activities, and history of a group of people from a given culture. It also means being able to engage with these traditions, activities, and history in cultural spaces like museums, galleries, and performances" (2023, para. 1) is used to evaluate this discursive identity.

Interpretation of Discursive Cultural Literacy Findings

When reflecting on this definition's criteria for what constitutes Indigenous cultural literacy, the words 'understand' and 'engage' stand out. These are the actions which can be taken to practice cultural literacy. To point out what may seem obvious, the very existence of comments on a post of Indigenous art is engagement with Indigenous culture. The existence of the comments affirms that this discursive event is suitable for measuring Indigenous cultural literacy.

The term 'understand' in the definition raises some questions, how is an understanding of Cultural Literacy expressed in discursive texts? An understanding, specifically of Indigenous culture, is not necessarily an explicit thing. As demonstrated in this study, it is expressed through support and positivity towards the culture. In the discursive event of this study, I have found that the comments which demonstrate the healthiest cultural literacy are those which make personal connections or share experiences. Not only do these comments engage in a positive way, but they also show an advanced understanding of the significance of the art. Comments that make relevant connections between the individual's experience and existing knowledge and the post featuring Indigenous Culture demonstrate healthy cultural literacy because that individual is able to thoroughly understand the artifact and not only engage with it appropriately but in a way that effectively creates a narrative on the topic of the post. Though comments of this nature demonstrate a well-developed sense of cultural literacy, posts that are merely positive also indicate a developing sense of cultural literacy. To an extent, positivity in response to Indigenous Culture demonstrates an understanding of culture. When considering that historical post-colonial rhetoric around Indigenous Culture demonized it and informed a negative perception, the expression of positivity indicates a perception informed by an understanding of Indigenous tradition and not racist rhetoric or legislation.

Largely, the discursive identity of the Anishinaabe artists' comment sections is one made up of positive and occasionally well-developed comments that indicate a healthy emerging level of Indigenous cultural literacy amongst online audiences. Despite a majority of comments indicating good cultural literacy, there are also a handful of comments which demonstrate poor cultural literacy. There are occasional comments in the sample which voice negative perceptions of the art or simply admit to not understanding the point of it. Negativity in response to Indigenous Culture may indicate a perception formed by a misunderstanding of Indigenous

Culture. Indigenous art does not usually ignite negativity of its own volition. Comments stating a blatant lack of understanding indicate poor cultural literacy because it does not meet the basic criteria of the definition.

The majority of positive comments inform a healthy emerging level of Indigenous cultural literacy. Negative comments and comments that lack understanding demonstrate Poor Indigenous cultural literacy, but since these types of comments make up a very small portion of the sample's discourse, the findings of this study are the comment sections of Anishinaabe artists' social media posts indicate a healthy emerging level of Indigenous cultural literacy amongst online audiences.

Implications and Limitations of the Findings

What is so important about deciphering healthy cultural literacy amongst the audience of online Indigenous artists? It implies a better education on Indigenous culture which is vital to reconciliation efforts. Healthy cultural literacy requires exposure and quality education on the cultural topic. The calls to action by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada explicitly "call upon the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada to maintain an annual commitment to Aboriginal education issues" (2015, p. 7) as a reconciliation effort. Since cultural literacy requires understanding that is achieved through education, it is reasonable to conclude that the indication of healthy cultural literacy may be the result of effective reconciliation efforts. The findings of this study can imply the effectiveness of reconciliation efforts. Reconciliation efforts actively work to dismantle racist rhetoric and sentiment through many facets of life and instead replace them with well-informed sentiments that do not harm Indigenous populations or any other population. By this standard, not only do the findings of this study imply the effectiveness of reconciliation efforts they can also imply the want of audiences to create, participate, and inspire reconciliation in their regular online interactions. Looking at positive comments inspired by cultural literacy in this way can imply a significant presence of grassroots reconciliation efforts. This implication has the potential to identify online creators and audiences as being changemakers within Indigenous communities. It is well known that changemakers and reconciliation efforts do not just operate at advanced levels, and work is done on the ground floor. Comments and discourses displaying healthy cultural literacy, like the ones in these

findings, could be used to identify these ground-floor grassroots changemakers and the focuses of their reconciliation efforts.

These findings are limited by the sample which they come from. Arguably, an online sample of three Indigenous artists whose heritage stems from a similar region of North America/Turtle Island can not produce findings that are diverse enough to make generalizations on the level of Indigenous cultural literacy amongst all audiences of Indigenous culture. My own interpretation also limits the findings. Since I am a single researcher who can only speak and interpret from my own experience and education, I am limited in the interpretations I can apply to the discursive identity of the comments. Other individuals may have interpreted the definition of Indigenous cultural literacy differently, assigning a different meaning to the sample findings. They could have considered simply positive comments to be indifferent to a display of cultural literacy. Thus, the cultural literacy findings wouldn't have indicated as healthy of a presence of cultural literacy as they did through my interpretation.

Researcher's Evaluation of the Study

This study was a multistep evaluation of Indigenous cultural presence online. Learning about the governance of online Indigenous Identity and the factors behind audience perception of Indigenous creation helped situate the study's objective and concept within an academic tradition and the field of communications. Though it was hard to pick a clear track for the research to take, new possibilities were constantly becoming apparent, and it made me question the direction of the study. Do the sample and methods make sense for my objective? Is there something more efficient I could be doing with this study?

As addressed in the findings section, this study is limited in its scope and objectives. Considering the vast research opportunities in this field, the scope of this study is quite niche. Sampling such a slim portion of online Indigenous arts with the specific objective of measuring cultural literacy creates obvious limitations for the study's potential. It would have served the study better to use a broader sample, this would help confidently make generalizations on cultural literacy. This would be a surefire way to mitigate limitations. If this study were to have moved away from the measure of cultural literacy all together and instead focused on discursive identity the study would have been less limited by its objectives. Overall, taking a niche approach to a study that could have been more effective in seeking generalizations is likely the

largest limitation here. The vast research gaps in theis field call for research that can effefitvely fill these gaps and providesubstantial knowledge on the related topics.

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