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Dr Tristan Kennedy

Department of Indigenous Studies, Macquarie University



Indigenous Peoples' Experiences of Harmful Content on Social Media



MACQUARIE
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Dr Tristan Kennedy



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Background

It is of vital importance to remain abreast of the changing social media and digital technology landscape. Indigenous Australians are deeply engaged with social media and use it at greater rates than non-indigenous people on a per capita basis (Carlson & Frazer 2018).

This project addresses an urgent need to understand the changing nature of negativity, harmful and hate speech on social media as experienced by Indigenous peoples in Australia. It will also present findings on a more positive note, as participants of this study routinely pointed out the key positive impacts and possibilities presented by their use of social media platforms.

Perspectives and stories from Indigenous peoples across Australia were sought. Participants were mostly located in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, and South Australia. Many participants regularly highlighted the considerable importance of an investigation such as this. They often noted that this type of research, which provides a detailed account of the state of play for Indigenous people on social media is well overdue. As one participant stated, the enthusiasm to support such a project is indicative of a “perception in the Indigenous community that social media terrain is fraught with risk and is often an unsafe space”.

The findings of this study suggest that all participants have experienced some form of negativity regularly over the six months prior to the survey. Participants overwhelmingly reported frequent exposure to negative content, harmful and hate speech. 97% of participants indicated that they encountered negative content at least weekly. Despite this considerable statistic many participants described innovative and conscientious strategies to promote self-care and facilitate community support for the digital Indigenous community. Encounters with positive content were just as frequent, with all participants identifying they encountered positive content at least weekly and 83% indicating they see positive content on a daily basis. Many noted the immense potential for social media products to offer far reaching positives for individuals, communities, families, and organisations. With Indigenous peoples identifying unique benefits such as community building, cultural revitalisation, and connection to country as amongst the many positives provided by social media, it is critically important to address culturally specific challenges presented on these platforms.

This preliminary report is published for use by social media organisations and corporations, policy makers, and Indigenous community members to inform their steps to respond quickly and effectively to incidents of hate speech and harmful content as they might arise today and into the future. It is also hoped that the findings of this report will inform strategies to amplify and promote positive contributions by Indigenous peoples and communities. The findings are based on an online survey, focus groups, and interviews conducted during the months of July and August 2020. Several participants noted that the task of addressing negative and harmful content and promoting positive content on social media is no small one. Such a task is likely to involve a concerted effort to develop multi-tiered and future focused strategies. This report, informed by Indigenous peoples, provides an account of the cultural specificities of social media use and encounters with negative and positive content that will inform future strategies.

An Indigenous Research Methodology

This project recognises the uneasy history of research for Indigenous peoples. As such, this project embraced an ethical and moral standpoint which recognises the imperative that research with Indigenous peoples must provide benefit to Indigenous communities and that it is conducted in a culturally appropriate manner (Smith 1999; Rigney 2001; Nakata 2006).

In the case of this research the benefit to Indigenous communities is one which was clearly identified by Indigenous community members: to provide policy makers, social media organisations, and community with an up to date understanding of Indigenous peoples' experiences of negativity on social media. It is hoped that the findings of this project will signal a starting point for on-going engagement with Indigenous communities and the social media industry.

Recent research conducted into Indigenous Australians' use of social media has identified a need to investigate an ever-changing social phenomenon (Carlson and Frazer 2018; Callinan, 2014). Preliminary discussions with Indigenous community members led to the identification of a current need to examine the negotiation of harmful and hate speech on social media. As such this research project is focussed on the following questions: How do Indigenous peoples in Australia identify harmful and negative content and interaction on social media?

What strategies do Indigenous social media users deploy to negotiate safety and wellbeing on social media? These questions were aimed at uncovering culturally specific interpretations of harmful and hate speech on social media platforms. They also proceeded further to consider some of the important coping strategies facilitated by social media technology and deployed by Indigenous peoples.

COVID-19 presented unforeseen hurdles for this project, as it will have for many others, during the course of 2020. Indigenous Australians are considered high-risk citizens in the face of COVID-19 and face-to-face interviews and focus groups would have been irresponsible. Key considerations of conducting culturally appropriate research with Indigenous peoples include relationship building and conversational method (Kovach 2010, Bessarab & Ng'andu 2010). These two tenets rely on proximate knowledge sharing and reciprocity and are particularly hindered by social distance guidelines outlined by New South Wales Health and Macquarie University. While very little research has been conducted that addresses the implementation of digital qualitative research with Indigenous peoples it was necessary to deploy such an approach. In these mostly uncharted waters, it was decided that the recruitment would draw on existing networks held by the chief investigator. Upon reflection, this did not appear to adversely impact the sample size or disposition. As this research progresses it is expected that social distancing restrictions will gradually lift, and more traditional conversational methods may be deployed.

How do Indigenous peoples in Australia identify harmful and negative content and interaction on social media?

METHOD

This project employed a mixed methods approach. A digital quantitative survey was deployed to provide background 'bigger picture' data about platform usage and preferences. Digital quantitative surveys were appropriate to gather preliminary data for this project due to their "wide application potential", benefits including "reduced financial and time costs", and participant reach across heterogeneous populations (Pecáková, 2016, p. 4). This data provided a clear overall picture of Indigenous social media users' engagement with platforms and encounters with negative and positive content.

Detailed qualitative data was gathered in focus groups and interviews which provided opportunities for 'yarning' or conversational method – a culturally appropriate means to share knowledge respectfully (Kovach, 2010, Bessarab & Ng'andu 2010) – albeit through digital means. These sessions yielded highly valuable data which emerged through researcher-guided participant discussion. Their stories, experiences, and opinions were recorded in detail and analysed through a process of coding by the chief investigator.

A content analysis of posts on various social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube) was undertaken to triangulate the data collected in the focus groups and the online quantitative survey. This data was collected, interpreted, and analysed at the same time as the conversations with participants were taking place. This enabled a process of clarification and 'respondent validation' (Torrance 2012) to confirm the researcher's interpretations.

Participants are not identified in any way in this report. A decision was made to remove pseudonyms and references to the usual meta-data (age and gender) as this information was not required within the scope of the research.

TERMINOLOGY

This report will use the term 'Indigenous' to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as well as people who are Indigenous to other parts of the world. This research is focused on Indigenous peoples' use of social media in Australia however it attracted Indigenous peoples from other countries who currently reside, study, work in or have close connections to Australia. In some cases, quotes from participants may use terms that are specific to their cultural background.

Indigenous Peoples Use of Social Media

The response to the online ‘Indigenous people and social media survey’ was positive. It was deployed within a two-week frame in order to gather preliminary data on social media use and expectations of Indigenous peoples’ in Australia.

The response rate (n=60) is relatively low however this reflects the narrow temporal window within which the survey was delivered. In order to further enrich the data gathered via this tool, respondents were given several opportunities to expand on ideas and offer written reflections on negativity, positivity, and general impressions of social media use. The findings of this survey suit the purpose of gathering an initial feeling for current social media use among Indigenous peoples in Australia. They also complement data collected through focus groups, interviews, and content analysis in this mixed method study.

The respondent cohort identified as 70% Aboriginal, 3% Torres Strait Islander, and 23% Indigenous to other parts of the world. The underrepresentation of Torres Strait Islander responses is typical of the networks which were drawn upon to recruit respondents (primarily from New South Wales, Victoria, and South Australia). It is intended that findings from this research will inform an expanded approach to research with Indigenous peoples in other parts of the Australian continent. While findings of this research may be extended to provide a general overview of Indigenous peoples encounters with harmful and hate speech (and positivity) online, the diversity of Indigenous communities must be taken into account when making decisions based on any large data set.

97% of respondents access some form of social media

62% reported daily social media use

12.56 approximate hours per week connected to social media

TIME SPENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA

There is an emerging body of literature which highlights the degree to which Indigenous people use social media (Carlson & Frazer 2018, 2016; Carlson & Dreher 2018; Moeke-Pickering et al 2018; Carlson et al 2017; Duarte 2017; Wilson et al 2017). The findings of this research suggest that Indigenous peoples are avid social media users. The present study found that 97% said that they access some form of social media and 62% reported daily social media use. On average, participants indicated that they spent 12.56 hours per week connected to social media. It has been noted by Ernala et al (2020) that self-reporting social media use is notoriously unreliable and that participants tend to overestimate their screen time. Ohme et al (2020) however found participants tended to underestimate their screen time compared to log-data from the same population. The figure above is less a reliable metric of actual screen time and more an indication of participants qualitative estimates of their own use.

Participants commented on the specific social media platforms and products that they preferred. It is clear that Facebook is the front-runner in terms of Indigenous participation with 62% of respondents indicating that they use the platform on a daily basis. Instagram and Twitter were noted as second most popular with 41% of participants using each of these platforms daily. Unsurprisingly, focus group participants suggested that the differences in these platforms dictated the type of use. For instance, Facebook tended to be used by Indigenous participants to maintain connection to community and engage with friends and family. Instagram was also used for more social and family type connections. Twitter was noted as being popular with Indigenous people and a site where conversations get most visibly heated. While Facebook and Instagram facilitate the sharing of political and activism related content, Twitter was noted as a site of greater political activism than others. On the varied character of social media platforms one participant stated “...on Twitter it’s really about my work and I’m very political and really up front about it”. It was noted that LinkedIn, Academia.edu and similar platforms were used mostly for career networking and advancement but were still recognised as part of the broader social media landscape.

CONNECTING TO SOCIAL MEDIA

Respondents were asked to consider their means of connection to social media. Given the options of mobile phone, tablet, desktop / laptop PC, and 'other' the vast majority (97%) indicated that they access social media predominantly through their mobile phone. Nearly 70% indicated that they also used a desktop / laptop PC and 33% stated that they accessed social media via their tablet device. These data are not unexpected given that in 2019 approximately 90% of Australians were reported to own a smartphone (Oviedo-Trespalacios et al 2019). While these findings may be indicative of the increased compatibility social media platforms have with new mobile digital technology it may also reflect levels of Internet accessibility among participants. Mobile devices, for instance, have the ability to access the Internet through mobile (or cell) data plans as well as through public Wi-Fi hotspots.

Respondents were asked to estimate time spent on social media on a weekly basis. This particular cohort indicated an average of 12.56 hours per week spent on social media. 10% of participants indicated that they spent more than 40 hours per week on social media and 45% indicated that they spent between 10-20 hours per week on at least one social media platform. However, several participants noted in their response that they spent 'too much' time on social media. From this, and as other research suggests (Garth 2020; Domingues-Montanari 2017; Kuta 2017), it may be deduced that participants perceive frequent use of social media or 'screen time' as increasingly codified as harmful or undesirable particularly among youth.

PLATFORMS

Respondents were asked to indicate time spent on various well-known platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, Pinterest, Reddit, LinkedIn, or 'other'). 62% of respondents indicated that they accessed Facebook on a daily basis with 87% indicating that they use Facebook at least occasionally. Twitter was the second most visited social media platform among Indigenous participants with 72% accessing the platform either 'regularly' or 'every day'. 49% also indicated that they used Instagram 'regularly' or 'every day'. These statistics were supported by discussions in the face to face

focus groups and interviews. Participants noted that Facebook and Twitter were the two most popular sites for Indigenous peoples and that they both offered decidedly different types of communication and content.

It was noted by participants in the focus groups and interviews and confirmed through content analysis that each site presented its own specific purpose. Facebook was used by Indigenous peoples primarily as a site for connecting and sharing positive messages. Making links to friends and family and staying in touch with community. It is a platform that easily enables the dissemination of information by community organisations. Some participants nominated Indigenous-led Facebook groups that they considered popular including: Nungas Community, Noongars Be Like, Blackfulla Revolution, and The Yarning Circle. It was clearly identified that while all platforms yielded varying degrees of political engagement and activism, Twitter was clearly most suited or most popular for engaging in political discussions and activism.

Snapchat, Pinterest, and Reddit were least preferred platforms. 72% indicated that they either used these platforms only 'once or twice' or 'not at all'. While 54% noted that they used LinkedIn only rarely, a quarter of respondents indicated that they use it occasionally. As one participant noted "I am also on LinkedIn but I call that more of a professional social media". Focus group and interview data suggests that this is commensurate with participants' expectations that LinkedIn is useful for securing employment and building career networks but less for social connections.

TikTok wasn't listed as an option in the design of this survey. On-going content analysis and participant observation indicates that it is gathering increased popularity among Indigenous peoples in line with findings by Weimann and Masri (2020). Focus group and interview discussions identified TikTok as the 'newcomer' four years after its 2016 launch. At the time of this study, participants had observed its arrival and growth in popularity (pointing to several videos they had seen of relatively well-known Indigenous comedians and actors) but had little to no familiarity with using TikTok to present themselves. It is expected that Tik Tok and other short video apps will continue to gain popularity among Indigenous peoples in the future.

The Role of Social Media: Community, Communication, Activism

A core affordance of social media for Indigenous peoples in Australia is stated, unsurprisingly, as the ability to establish and maintain connections with family and community.

Respondents noted that geographical distance between individuals, family, and community is common amongst Indigenous peoples. This is particularly the case for young people who are encouraged to travel to attend schooling, university, and gain employment away from their home Country. “It can be beautiful, it helps me keep up with what people are doing ... and I can share things so people know what’s going on with me”.

Accessing news that covers issues that are relevant and important to Indigenous peoples and communities was identified as another key affordance of social media for respondents. One third specifically mentioned that the ability to access news sources which delivered Indigenous perspectives was important to them. Many identified that mainstream news media in Australia was often not relevant or excluded Indigenous perspectives. “I am able to get news updates from media sources other than mainstream which often presents a biased one-sided opinion”. Indigenous peoples see social media as allowing avenues for self-publication of material which is important to them. Focus group and interview data reveal widespread recognition that social media facilitates the dissemination of a range of opinions and perspectives that are relevant to a diverse Indigenous population and run counter to mainstream media content.

Activism and political mobilisation are key affordances of social media for Indigenous peoples and communities. There was unanimous agreement between respondents that there are clear and valuable avenues for political activism presented by social media. Heightened visibility of Indigenous activism and the ability to mobilise political movements via social media was highlighted as a core positive aspect of social media technology. Respondents noted that social media activism was a source of empowerment and contributed to unity among the broader Indigenous community. This is supported by recent global scholarship focusing on Indigenous social media activism (Carlson & Berglund 2021). As one participant detailed:

“A lot of us are counteracting [negativity in mainstream media] by posting personal stories. We are slowly outweighing all the negativity that’s on Facebook because we are all uniting”.

In May 2020 (not long before the commencement of this research), the Black Lives Matter movement gained substantial renewed attention in the United States and in Australia. Indigenous peoples used social media platforms to draw renewed attention to the history of Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and disproportionate incarceration rates among Indigenous peoples. Participants recalled several high-profile examples of mainstream media mishandling the response to the Black Lives Matter movement. They noted the value of social media for Indigenous peoples to “get united and to educate” on these issues. The social media response in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement has seen political discussion about issues such as Aboriginal Deaths in Custody gain further momentum. Participants noted that social media and digital technology presented unprecedented opportunities for political mobilisation and bringing Indigenous voices to the fore.

“It can be beautiful, it helps me keep up with what people are doing ... and I can share things so people know what’s going on with me”

“I am able to get news updates from media sources other than mainstream which often presents a biased one-sided opinion”

“A lot of us are counteracting [negativity in mainstream media] by posting personal stories. We are slowly outweighing all the negativity that’s on Facebook because we are all uniting”

“get united and to educate”



Social Media and Negativity

It is commonly accepted that social media platforms present diverse opinions, various news sources, as well as intentionally negative content. Companies such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google are all visibly working towards identifying the ever-changing nature of negative content on their platforms.

Governments across the globe are debating the degree to which they will intervene in the management of false information and negative content on social media. Digital technologies, however, are evolving quickly, making the job of staying on top of these issues all the more difficult. The moderation of an increasingly large volume of content requires vast resources including Artificial Intelligence (AI), software coding, and human moderators.

A core problem faced by social media platforms lies in the cultural nuances of negative content. Differences in ontological and epistemological conceptions of culture and knowledge present complex challenges in identifying, responding to, and preventing negative content on social media. This project sought out the specific nuances and tropes of negative content as observed, experienced, and negotiated by Indigenous peoples in Australia. In general, the feeling from Indigenous peoples was that negative content was rife on social media. 97% of respondents to this survey indicated that they encountered negative content on social media at least every week.

RATES OF NEGATIVITY

It was identified that almost all respondents had witnessed negative content on social media in the previous six months. 62% indicated that they had encountered negative content on social media on a daily basis and 35% indicated that they had encountered negative content on social media on a weekly basis. 81% said they had reported negative content to moderators with nearly half (48%) claiming that they had reported content more than five times. Participants noted a degree of frustration that reporting negative content was often ineffective due to cultural misunderstandings. They underscored the need for social media providers and wider populations to understand cultural aspects of negative content.

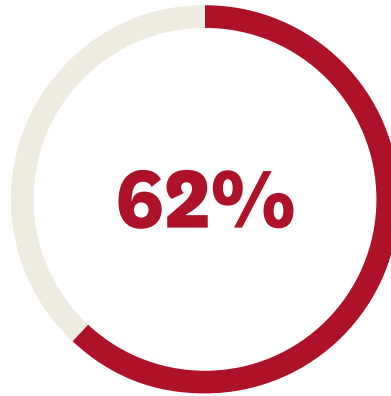
Over a six-month period, respondents indicated that 78% had witnessed hate speech at least weekly with half of respondents indicating they witnessed it daily. 62% said they had witnessed cyberbullying over the same period. One respondent suggested that “in [their] experience it [cyberbullying] has become more and more common”. The data suggests that there are two distinct understandings of negative content on social media. Firstly, harmful content in the form of lateral violence where Indigenous peoples engage in violent or harmful interactions with or against other Indigenous peoples. Secondly, racism from “mainly non-indigenous people commenting on posts to incite debate and discredit Indigenous knowledges and people”.

DEFINING ‘CYBERBULLYING’

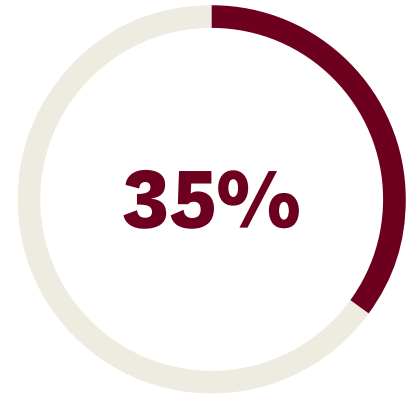
There currently exists considerable scholarly debate about the definitions of cyberbullying (Alipan et al 2020, Ranney et al 2020, Englander 2019, Bauman et al 2012). The term has been deemed outdated by some, while others identify further definitional complexity. Research has suggested that individuals who experience what was traditionally known as cyberbullying would not name it as such and that a much more nuanced understanding of the concept is required (Kofoed & Staksrud, 2019). One respondent in this study suggested that lateral violence in Indigenous communities on social media was indeed a negative aspect of social media but claimed they were “not sure if this is included as cyber bullying”.



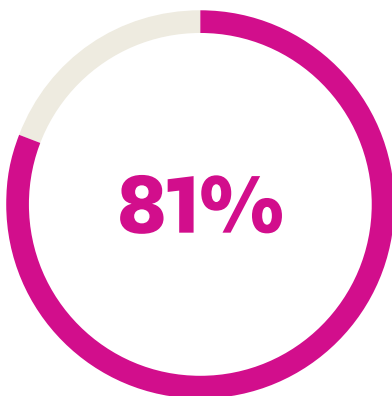
of respondents indicated that they encountered negative content on social media at least every week



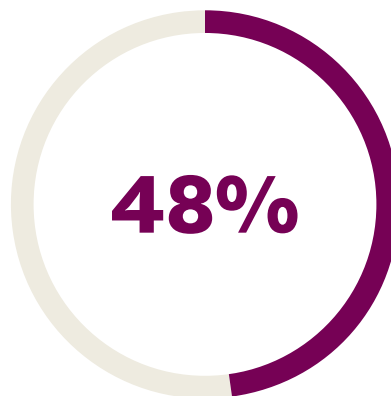
of respondents indicated that they had encountered negative content on social media on a daily basis



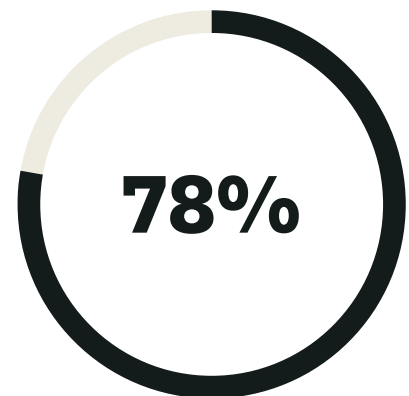
of respondents indicated that they had encountered negative content on social media on a weekly basis



of respondents said they had reported negative content to moderators



of respondents claimed that they had reported content more than five times



of respondents had witnessed hate speech at least weekly over a six-month period

Such a feeling suggests that not only is the term 'cyberbullying' more complex than was originally posited, but mainstream definitions of cyberbullying may not suffice to identify negative behaviours and content from Indigenous peoples' perspectives.

Olweus and Limber (2018) suggest that cyberbullying should be understood as a sub-category of bullying that is distinct from cyberaggression and cyberharassment. Their position is clear that cyberbullying must remain in reference to repeated longitudinal exposure to negative actions (2018).

Respondents who noted difficulty in establishing a definition or determining a frequency of exposure to cyberbullying often highlighted that what is generally meant by the term actually referred to various forms of aggression, harassment, and digital violence. A key finding of this report is that the term 'cyberbullying' is unhelpful and an outmoded means of identifying negative content and experiences on social media; a more nuanced approach is required which identifies specific forms of violence, aggression, and harassment in a culturally appropriate context.

Naming Negative Content

Definitions of negative content, hate speech, and harmful speech on digital platforms is of primary concern to social media providers, communities, and individuals.

A key finding by Weber et al was that exposure to negativity on social media could be seen to “provoke anti-social attitudes and ultimately lead to less pro-social or more aggressive [offline] behaviour” (2020, p. 1). Exposure to racism on social media has been linked to considerable negative impacts on health (Criss et al 2020) and “psychological, behavioural, academic, and social wellbeing” (Stewart et al 2019, p. 508). Identifying specific and nuanced forms of negative content is key to an effective response by social media providers and policy makers. Mossie and Wang stress that “there exists no consensus in the definition [of hate speech] because of prevailing social norms, context, and individual and collective interpretation” (2020, p. 3). This project was squarely aimed at identifying the character of hate speech and harmful content from the perspectives of Indigenous Australians. It was noted by participants that the most harmful content commonly encountered on social media today includes threats of violence against individuals; racism (including racist name calling, general racist language, and joke telling) and references to white supremacy; and, challenges to Indigenous identity and lateral violence.

THREATS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST INDIVIDUALS

Identified as one of the most extreme and damaging types of negativity on social media (by 92% of respondents), threats of violence against individuals are common. The types of violence observed in the content analysis range from homicidal ideation, physical assault and battery, rape, public humiliation and lynching. Participants were less likely to directly nominate specific instances and details however they referred to recollections as “awful”, “disgusting”, and “deliberately intended to hurt people”. Several participants highlighted that there is a perceived lack of accountability on social media which provides “few ramifications for people being racist, bullying or inappropriate”. While many appeared to consider this type of cyberaggression extreme they noted that it mostly remained online. Of particular concern however was the increasing instances of ‘fight club’ style violence being organised via social media platforms. One participant suggested that this was becoming a real problem in Indigenous communities where mostly young people were arranging offline meetings where individuals and groups would engage in physical violence and broadcast it via social media.

RACISM AND WHITE SUPREMACY

There is a feeling among participants that racism, violence, and sexist content is increasingly being encountered on social media. They note that this content is visible in both direct and indirect forms. That is, many participants feel they receive racist or sexist attacks in posts directed at them as well as in the posting of general material or content such as memes, short videos and through text and emoticons. One participant noted: “I think that I’ve seen a surge in people putting the emoticon of a monkey and things like that on peoples’ comments”. The reference to monkeys and primates is a well-worn racist trope in Australia which follows the colonial ideology that Indigenous peoples were a less civilised and primitive race of human (Philpott 2017).

Focus group participants were asked to consider what might be fuelling this surge in racism. Many suggested that evidence of racism online appears to reflect racism in mainstream media. Many noted that when controversial media commentators are called out for racist and white supremacist views on commercial television and radio, racist rhetoric and sentiment flows through to social media channels. "Posting these stories on social media as a news item, only serves to just basically invite hundreds more comments of horrible racist rhetoric from fragile white people". Weber et al discovered that while a small number of individuals post comments related to these types of news articles, they are visible to many. They also found that up to one third of this commentary "contain aggressive, derogatory, and disrespectful statements" (2020, p. 1).

Participants noted the recent rise in visible evidence of white supremacy as a particular form of racism on social media. There is significant danger in this rise. As noted by Scrivens et al, online fora are key sites for right-wing extremists to become more extreme (2020). Additionally, Bliuc et al demonstrate that "most polarisation (in the form of increased hostility) ... revolves around themes relevant to group identity" (2020, p. 827). The Indigenous participants in this study witnessed staunch defence of the ideologies of colonisation. That is, discrediting Indigenous knowledges, evoking fictitious and highly negative tropes of Indigenous people as primitive, uncivilised, and beast-like. Many participants noted that harmful stereotypes were common and were used to reinforce colonial ideology. The increase in white supremacist rhetoric has been observed by participants to be creating a noticeable divide between Indigenous peoples (and their allies) and racist and white supremacist actors on social media.

CHALLENGES TO INDIGENOUS IDENTITY AND LATERAL VIOLENCE

Challenging Indigenous identity is one particular aspect of negative and harmful speech specifically experienced by Indigenous peoples. It was noted by survey respondents as considerably harmful and follows colonial tactics of dispossession, marginalisation, and ostracization. As Attwood illustrates, the colonial strategy to undermine Indigenous peoples' connection to and custodianship of the Australian continent relied on the positioning of Indigenous peoples as primitive and a 'dying race' (2020). Assimilationist policies were predicated on this ideology and were aimed at 'breeding out' Indigenous people. Challenging Indigenous people as inauthentic or illegitimate follows this ideology. The impact of this particular form of racist rhetoric has been linked to increased chances of suicide and suicidal ideation, self-harm, violence, and lateral violence (Hunter & Milroy, 2006; Clark & Augoustinos 2015).

It was noted by participants that challenges to Indigenous identity and authenticity came from both non-Indigenous and Indigenous community members. Lateral violence, also known as horizontal violence, refers to "behaviours enacted by individuals and/or communities which are damaging in nature to both the party performing the behaviours and those they are directed toward" (Bailey 2020, p. 1035). One participant noted "There's a lot of shaming online for people who didn't grow up with culture or, you know, don't live on country or don't have a close connection." The shaming or ostracization of Indigenous individuals for their lack of connection to culture (particularly by other Indigenous people) reflects an internalisation of destructive colonial ideology.

**"It's not just whitefellas.
I've seen more than enough
lateral violence"**

Another particularly damaging example of lateral violence reported by participants was the internalisation of colonial heteropatriarchal norms and the resultant aggressions toward Indigenous peoples from the LGBTIQ2+ community. One participant noted that lateral violence was “pervasive” and included “rampant misogyny and sexism”. Another suggested that memes and short video content are “becoming increasingly violent, racist, homo/transphobic, and sexist”. According to Betasamosake-Simpson, “we simply must stop practicing heteropatriarchy” as it is a “foundational dispossession force, ... a direct attack on Indigenous bodies as political orders, thought, agency, self-determination, and freedom” (2017, n.p.). The concern, raised by participants, was that lateral violence, grounded in heteropatriarchy, was a particular form of insidious violence which was especially prevalent on social media and the reason many would regularly switch off in the interests of self-care.

Participants also noted other types of negative content such as references to news stories that include violence against Indigenous people; references to violence generally, references to the death of Indigenous community members, and commenting behind someone’s back (gossiping). These types of negative content were identified by participants in the focus groups and interviews as well as by respondents to the online survey as negative, highly visible, but as carrying less harm than overt racism, lateral violence, white supremacy, and challenges to Indigenous identity.

RESPONDING TO NEGATIVE CONTENT

As this report highlights, the volume of negative content encountered by Indigenous peoples on social media is immense. Despite the negativity that many Indigenous peoples encounter daily, the positives for Indigenous peoples present a vital aspect of their daily lives. For Indigenous participants then, it is imperative to develop strategies for self-care and staying safe on social media. Participants shared their strategies for negotiating personal encounters with negativity so that they may continue to enjoy the positive aspects of community connection, empowerment, and social and political engagement.

Participants highlighted the utilisation of the full suite of tools already available on social media platforms such as managing friends / followers, muting and blocking negative individuals and groups, reporting negative content consistently and intermittently pausing social media use or deleting their own accounts. “I’ve curated my online consumption carefully to avoid racist and homophobic / transphobic rhetoric”, one participant states. Others make pragmatic decisions about their level of engagement on these platforms. “I don’t put up my family photos, nothing, anywhere, you can’t find them. Because my family’s lives have been threatened by non-Indigenous people. It’s a no-go zone for me”.

Community members’ efforts to keep others safe were recognised for their positive contributions to group safety. “It is good when people use CW or TW when they post material that might contain triggering content. It helps to keep myself safe”. However, many of the participants in this study identified their feeling that social media organisations could do more to address the negative encounters on their platforms. In particular, there was a general feeling among participants that social media companies ignored or were unable to recognise the cultural specificities of negativity that they reported.

Social Media and Positivity

Participants noted that, despite the prevalence of negative content, they also frequently encountered positivity on social media.

When asked to consider the previous six months, all survey respondents signalled that they had encountered positive content at least weekly with 83% indicating that they observed or engaged with positive content daily. While participants were divided on whether they would share positive stories about themselves or their families, the majority suggested that they would share funny memes and positive stories about Indigenous people more generally. Participants also noted other positive aspects of social media as: links to fundraising for Indigenous peoples and community organisations; cultural skills sharing (cooking, weaving, and cultural knowledges); and shared stories of Indigenous peoples' successes and achievements. Two core positive aspects of social media that were identified by a considerable number of participants were the opportunities for sharing positive counter-stories and individual and community empowerment.

POSITIVE COUNTER-STORIES

"A lot of us are kind of counteracting that [negativity] by posting personal stories and circulating [stories about] people who are doing really good"

One of the most notable Indigenous counter-stories from the past five years is #IndigenousDads. The hashtag was noted by some participants for its considerable value in counteracting negativity. Originally, this was a hashtag attributed to Joel Bayliss, an Aboriginal father, who launched the Twitter hashtag in response to Bill Leak's racist cartoon depiction of Indigenous fathers in *The Australian* in August 2016. The hashtag trended strongly with pictures of proud Indigenous fathers who had strong relationships with their families. The campaign also led to Bayliss recording a TEDx Talk about the affordance of social media to counteract negative content. Participants noted a continued focus on support for Indigenous fathers, and parents in particular, as well as various other counter-stories modelling positive family relationships among Indigenous communities.

Counter-stories also appear in the sharing of Indigenous creative arts. One participant rejoiced at the ability for Indigenous peoples to share positive cultural and artistic outputs via social media. "I love how many people are sharing the writing of Black writers. I love how supportive and fun it can be". As Kennedy (2021, 2018) suggests, digital technology affords a degree of disintermediation. That is, no longer must the sharing of art, music, and literature be mediated by third parties. Prior to the 'Web 2.0' era, the distribution of creative works was mediated by record companies, publishing houses, and other mainstream parties. Too often, economic business models (with the possible, but often uncomfortable, exception of the tourism industry) ignored the distribution of Indigenous stories. As participants identified in this project, the ability to quickly and easily post images, videos, and stories to various platforms with ease allows swift and creative responses to mainstream negativity. "Overwhelmingly we can reach people/places with our truths now without the whitewashed media versions".

SOCIAL MEDIA AND EMPOWERMENT

One of the most commonly cited positive elements of social media for Indigenous peoples is empowerment. Most participants note that the ability to share stories and content readily is a source of empowerment for Indigenous peoples. This is in response to 250 years of oppressive policies and actions which were explicitly aimed at disempowering Indigenous peoples in this country. Participants noted, "all of us sisters are coming together and you know, we're actually motivating each other". According to Petray, "Web 2.0 has the potential to democratize and decentralise large social movements. These interactive media, particularly the creation of videos for YouTube, support the empowerment of Aboriginal people" (2011, p. 936). Digital technology has come a long way in the last ten years. The multitude of opportunities for Indigenous peoples to express themselves in ways that are relevant to them through video, audio, image, and text provide channels for Indigenous voices to be heard. The enthusiasm with which Indigenous Australians are embracing new technologies suggests that this trend will continue.

Conclusion

“Like lots of things in life, the narcissists and psychopaths will try to take over”

“I would hate it if it didn't exist”

Social media, and particularly the affordance of disintermediation, has introduced a dynamic and far reaching platform for the dissemination of Indigenous stories of survival and resistance and presents a site for community building and revitalisation. The volume of positive opportunities presented by social media, unfortunately, sees a commensurate volume of negativity. Hate speech and harmful content on social media has unique and profound impacts on Indigenous peoples. Digital media is emerging as a new core platform for the exercise of colonial violence. Indigenous peoples have experienced racism in all its forms since the arrival of Europeans in the late eighteenth century. Evidence of intergenerational trauma is rife in Indigenous communities as a direct result of the systematic dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their lands. Citing a perceived lack of accountability for perpetrators and social media providers' misunderstandings of the cultural nuances of negative content, participants in this study identified the nuances and peculiarities of negative content, including harmful and hate speech, as they encounter them on a daily basis.

This study and the findings in this preliminary report are based on the key research questions: How do Indigenous peoples in Australia identify harmful and negative content and interaction on social media? And, what strategies do Indigenous social media users deploy to negotiate health and wellbeing on social media? The findings covered three core areas: a general overview of access to and use of social media by Indigenous peoples; the identification of negativity and examples of responses to it; and the identification of positive aspects of social media from a uniquely Indigenous perspective.

Firstly, this report highlighted general information about Indigenous peoples' social media use. Participants identified that they used social media with high frequency (either weekly or daily) and most accessed social media through their mobile devices / smartphones. They discussed the variations in utility of different platforms for community and personal connection, employment and vocational activity, and political action and engagement. Facebook and Instagram were considered the most popular for engaging with friends and family and sharing positive and fun messages. Academia.edu and LinkedIn were identified as necessary for career progression and job seeking, and Twitter was widely cited for its facilitation of political debate and discussion.

The second part of this report detailed participants' experiences of negative content on social media. Most participants stated that negativity was a daily occurrence. Disturbingly, eighty percent of participants noted that they had witnessed hate speech at least weekly. Responses appeared to confirm wider research which indicates that there is some uncertainty regarding a solid definition of the term 'cyberbullying'. A key finding of this report is that the term cyberbullying is perhaps past its use by date. A more detailed understanding of the specific forms of negative and anti-social behaviours online was offered. Another key finding of this report is that participants indicated that the most damaging and concerning types of negative content from an Indigenous perspective included direct threats of violence; racism and white supremacy; and, challenges to Indigenous identity and lateral violence. Findings suggest that Indigenous peoples deploy strategic responses to such content in order to maintain personal safety.

The third section highlighted some of the many positive aspects of social media that participants were keen to identify. One of the core positive affordances provided by social media was the ability to share counter-stories that challenged and resisted dominant colonial thinking. Participants noted sharing of personal successes, creative outputs and artworks and language and cultural revitalisation as some of the more positive ways that Indigenous peoples and communities are resisting negative content online. This report also found that social media is a recognised and valued path toward personal and community empowerment. This sentiment reflects recent research (Carlson & Berglund 2021) which outlines the immeasurable value in social media as a site for mobilisation and engagement in local and global political activism.

These findings offer a culturally nuanced understanding of the experience of negative social interaction and content on social media. This project has clearly identified that experiences of social media are contingent upon a wide array of cultural factors. Indigenous peoples continue to be avid users of social media; however, they also continue to experience unique challenges to personal safety, identity and general wellbeing. As many of the participants indicated, there is an expectation that social media providers will lift their efforts to identify, eradicate, and prevent negative content and to foster and promote positive content in line with Indigenous cultural perspectives. It is hoped that this report, and the continued research in the Department of Indigenous Studies at Macquarie University, will continue to inform culturally appropriate and timely policy decisions that respond to the changing nature of digital technology and a tempestuous global political climate for the benefit of Indigenous peoples in Australia and throughout the colonised world.

Future Research

There are two recommendations for future research which emerge from this project. Firstly, findings from this project indicate that Indigenous peoples are well aware of and engage with both negative and positive content on social media. Many noted the velocity with which digital technology is developing. Participants cited recent improvements in short video sharing applications and products like Snapchat, TikTok, and Facebook Live. As such it will remain important for research to respond to the changing nature of digital technology. Findings of this research suggest that future investigation into new and emerging definitions of hate speech and harmful content will be required.

Secondly, this project was localised to Indigenous peoples within Australia. It has long been known that social media is a disintermediated and deterritorialised site for the production, consumption and reproduction of culture (Brabazon 2014; Kennedy 2021). With this, and the continued expansion of a global marketplace, in mind, it remains necessary to recognise the changing character and responses to hate speech and harmful speech in global Indigenous communities.

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