

Feeling Polarized? An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Central Albertans
Feelings in Response to Polarizing Content on Facebook

by

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Committee Approval

The members of Nancy Joan Owen's Dissertation Committee certify that they have read and reviewed the dissertation titled *Feeling Polarized? An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Central Albertans Feelings in Response to Polarizing Content on Facebook* and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation by portfolio requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Social Sciences:

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Final approval and acceptance of this dissertation is contingent upon the candidate's submission of the final copy of the dissertation to Royal Roads University. The dissertation supervisor confirms to have read this dissertation and recommends that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirements:

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Dedication

My doctoral journey and this work are dedicated to Joel, Luke, and Liam. You all always inspire me, I love you all, and I wish you a life that is good.

Abstract

Affective polarization has become a growing problem in Canada (Boulianne & Belland, 2022; LaFleche, 2023; Marchand et al., 2020; Milloy, 2023). Despite this, most studies examining digital polarization explore 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; A. Goldenberg & Willer, 2023). 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 affective polarization. The findings show that when users see toxic, algorithmically generated content, users then interpret such content and make negative assumptions about those who are posting in comment threads on Facebook. This process is leading to greater out-group animosity and demonstrates that these four conditions significantly shape the affective polarization conversation.

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

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Prologue

Inspiration

This synthesis paper, as a mandatory requirement for my dissertation portfolio, tells the story of my research project and doctoral journey. I have learned that graduate school and graduate research is fluid and dynamic and, as such, I found this experience to be humbling, challenging, and expanded the way I see the world. And these experiences reflect, what I think, graduate school should do. “If graduate school were easy, everyone would do it”; “resilience comes from the struggle”; and “the struggles and tears add integrity to my parchment” are the reminders I continually used as self-talk during the most challenging times. With graduate school, I would say now that the journey is the destination.

This project, and the decision to enroll in the Doctor of Social Sciences (DSocSci) program at Royal Roads University (RRU), were largely inspired by both the COVID-19 pandemic and the *Freedom Convoy* that occupied Ottawa in early 2022. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I witnessed an upsurge of divisiveness in Canada, exemplified by that now infamous *Freedom Convoy*. This phenomenon led me to the question: How did Canadians get to this state of polarization?

Kindly guided and supported by Dr. Jaigris Hodson as my supervisor, we worked together to find a unique approach worthy of a doctoral research project, to addressing polarization in Canada. After much effort and many conversations, we settled on the approach to the research as an exploration of the phenomenon of emotions as they relate to polarizing content on social media. This synthesis paper details my academic journey, from the beginning to my convocation, as a Doctor of Social Sciences from RRU.

As a social media scholar, I have an interesting and unique relationship with social media. You see, I grew up in a time before the internet and without social media. In fact, for the majority of my growing up years, our family did not have a television. We received our news and information from the radio and the printed newspaper. We were social at school and in our community. Living out on a ranch also meant our closest neighbour was six miles away. Maybe, I was pulled toward studying social media in an effort to make sense of the contradiction of connection and polarization that social media, in the case of my research, Facebook, represents.

As a locale for my study, the communities of Central Alberta are uniquely positioned in the Province of Alberta, both geographically and politically as sources for discussion on polarization. Located midway between the two major cities of Calgary and Edmonton, Central Albertans are often divided on everything from sporting teams to politics, to tensions between rural and urban living, and the long-standing debates on fossil fuel sustainability. Based on my experience as a resident of Central Alberta, such scenarios offer a deep well of polarizing topics to mine.

As described in my submitted journal article (Owen, 2025 submitted, under review), to uncover issues that may be polarizing for Central Albertans, I undertook an exercise in background research on Facebook and I made note of current, salient, and enduring divisive topics represented on Alberta Facebook pages. This early and preparatory research led me to three specific cases for this study: Indigenous issues in Canada; energy production in Alberta; and reproductive choice for Albertans.

For a successful Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) inquiry, it was necessary to purposefully consider the recipients of the knowledge generated from the project.

The sharing of the results from this research was a planned process, with consideration given to potential target audiences (Ross-Hellauer et al., 2020). Taking a transdisciplinary and applied approach, the presentation of my portfolio is in three parts. At the academic level, I wrote a publishable manuscript for an article submitted to the *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology (JCASP)*. At the organizational level, I prepared two companion pieces for the City of Red Deer: a summary report of the findings and recommendations coupled with a presentation to deliver to the City of Red Deer when scheduling permits. For the general public, I prepared a TEDx-style presentation designed to be shared and available through various channels (see: Theory of Change section).

Introduction

This synthesis paper draws together and brings to a close the research process and the preparation of my dissertation portfolio. In keeping with the reflexive practice and double hermeneutics within IPA as a research methodology (J. Smith et al., 2022), this synthesis paper contains moments of my personal reflections of my research and my doctoral journey. This paper provides an overview of the statement of the research problem, the theoretical frameworks that acted as a scaffold for the project, the methodology and methods employed, the rationale for choosing the dissertation by portfolio format and description of each portfolio piece, and finally, the theory of change and knowledge management plan. Included is a collection of academic opportunities undertaken in support of my doctoral journey

This paper is organized into sections as follows: To begin, this Prologue section contains the project inspiration and this introduction, followed by contextualization of the research, and statement of the research problem. The second section is the Synopsis of My Doctoral Research

and Dissertation Portfolio. Included in this section are the research objectives; a review of literature; Facebook polarization in praxis; the research design, findings, discussion, limitations and recommendations; the rationale for the dissertation format; a description of the portfolio components; and the theory of change and knowledge mobilization. As the final section, the Epilogue is comprised of my reflections and interpretations, a description of academic opportunities that supported my doctoral journey and dissertation portfolio, future research opportunities, and the final concluding remarks and reflections.

Contextualization of the Research

The problem I studied was Central Albertans lived experiences of encountering different examples of polarizing content on Facebook. My personal experience of witnessing the growing animosity on Facebook sparked this inquiry. With this experience in mind, I sought to identify the emotions and other unconscious drivers that influence people's experiences of polarizing content on Facebook; how people are making sense of their emotions; and what explanations people give for these emotions. Through this study, the subsequent understanding and sense-making of the emotions experienced could help people understand why they are being driven to be polarized and how they might resist it with the aim to have better and caring conversations both on Facebook and in person.

The contextual thread that weaves itself throughout this research is affective polarization. Affective polarization occurs when polarizing topics become imbued with negative emotions (Hodson et al., 2025; Owen, 2025 submitted, under review) 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 et al., 2025; Owen, 2025

submitted, under review). Facebook, as the social media platform for this study, was selected because this platform remains the most popular social media site in Canada (Gruzd & Mai, 2025) and for its propensity for the formation of echo chambers (Del Vicario et al., 2016). These powerful factors, when coupled with the emotions generated by negative content spread on Facebook, made it an ideal platform to study affective polarization.

The introduction of my submitted journal article (Owen, 2025 submitted, under review) provides a more comprehensive contextualization of the research and statement of the research problem.

Synopsis of My Doctoral Research and Dissertation Portfolio

The Research Objectives

The overarching research questions guided the project, although specific interview questions (see: [Appendix A](#)) more broadly explored the polarizing nature of Central Albertans experience of Facebook. Specifically, the research question was:

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?

Literature Review

To begin building a foundational frame for this study, time was spent reviewing relevant literature that would bring background and context to the research. The phenomenon of polarization in the context of a mid-sized Canadian city was explored by, first understanding colonialism as an origin story for polarization in Canada; then exploring polarization in present day Canada. Once the foundation of literature was laid, I then delved into recent literature on affective polarization in Canada in the context of this inquiry.

Foundational Polarization Literature

Colonialism: An Origin Story of Polarization. Colonialism as an ontological framework could be considered an origin story of polarization in this land now known as Canada. This element of Canadian history must be understood through Canada's relationship to the history of imperialism, and account for the aftermath and the impact of coloniality (Elam, 2019). Applying Giddens (1986) social theory of structuration shows how the colonialist structures of Canada translate into cultural norms that are handed down from generation to generation (H. J. Ross, 2018). Within these structures, there is evidence of an apartness, or "apartheid" (Ashcroft et al., 2013; Derrida, 1985; Mandela, 1995). *The Indian Act (1876)* and the reservation system are such structures (Joseph, 2018; King, 2013; P. Wolfe, 2006). As a result of these structures, Canada has significant inequities and disparities affecting the lives of Indigenous Peoples, including malnutrition, poverty, lack of education, and health care (Daviss et al., 2021; Gellert & Gellert, 2021). This type of racism is rooted in the colonial system that was created with the intent to benefit the settler-colonialist and their future generations (Daviss et al., 2021).

Following from the authors (Derrida, 1985; Mandela, 1995; P. Wolfe, 2006) and reflecting on the passage of time, colonialism as an ontological framework could be considered an origin story of polarization in Canadian society. This is based on the premise that, under colonialism, it is the division of people by colour and/or race by the colonial power that may set people up for polarization in other contexts. As the actors in such colonial structures, both non-Indigenous and Indigenous persons are habituated to act and think in a certain way and only a small percentage of those actions and thoughts are conscious (Giddens, 1986; H. J. Ross, 2018).

Polarization in Present Day Canada. The literature revealed that there are many faces of polarization. Of interest to this research were societal polarization (Dandekar et al., 2013; Pauly, 2022); ideological polarization (Haidt, 2012; Harel et al., 2020; Luttig, 2018) and, especially, affective polarization (Ahn & Mutz, 2023; Baldassarri & Page, 2021; Druckman et al., 2022; Iyengar et al., 2019). These categories of polarization were relevant to the inquiry because this study examined how polarized issues, imbued with ideology, can invoke an emotional response.

Polarization has been well studied in sociology and political science, yet it has been ill-defined in the literature (see: Bramson et al., 2016; Dilmaghani, 2020). For the purpose of this inquiry, the definition of polarization follows Arora et al. (2022) who expressed polarization as a resistance to an alternative worldview.

The literature often blurred the lines between societal polarization, ideological polarization, and affective polarization. For the purposes of this study, each of these categories were defined as follows. Societal polarization is generally perceived to mean an increased and consistent divergence of opinions, not just persistent disagreement (Dandekar et al., 2013; Pauly,

2022). Further, there is also a disagreement between people on what the facts are (Dandekar et al., 2013; Pauly, 2022). Ideological polarization is rooted in political conservative or liberal ideology whereby the electorate hold divergent beliefs on ideological issues (Haidt, 2012; Harel et al., 2020; Luttig, 2018). Ideological polarization is what is seen in bi-partisan politics and is exemplified by the polarizing nature of politics in the United States between Democrats and Republicans (Haidt, 2012; Harel et al., 2020; Luttig, 2018). Affective polarization can be explained as a phenomenon of animosity between the parties or groups and the emotional attachment and repulsion, rather than ideology and material interests (Ahn & Mutz, 2023; Baldassarri & Page, 2021; Hodson et al., 2025; Owen, 2025 submitted, under review).

Affective Polarization. Affective polarization, as previously defined, has become a growing problem in Canada (Boulianne & Belland, 2022; LaFleche, 2023; Marchand et al., 2020; Milloy, 2023). Affective polarization is the most concerning type of polarization for democratic communication because the possibility for democratic discussion and dialogue becomes difficult, or at its worst, impossible (Hodson et al., 2025; Owen, 2025 submitted, under review; Schedler, 2023). For this reason, I chose specifically to study affective polarization and looked at how emotion is connected to polarizing content on Facebook. A deeper and more fulsome review of literature on affective polarization can be found in my submitted journal article (Owen, 2025 submitted, under review).

The above review of the literature set the stage for a deeper understanding of affective polarization in various Canadian contexts. Building on this foundation, recent studies have noted particular cases of polarization in Canada with respect to the topics of religion, ideology and politics, immigration, socio-spatial concerns, the climate crisis, and regional inequality.

Recent Studies of Affective Polarization in a Canadian Context

Religion. In a study by Dilmaghani (2020), the author observed a deep level of religious diversity rather than a religious polarization in Canada. Dilmaghani (2020) observed patterns of “greater vibrancy” at each end of the religious spectrum with those with weak religious ties or those who identify as indifferent still make up the larger segment of the population. Wilkins-Laflamme and Reimer (2019) endeavoured to align political affiliation and religious salience among Canadian voters. At the time of the study, the authors were challenged to make such a connection between the two variables. Similar results were also experienced by Boulianne and Belland (2022) when studying Canadians voting preferences, as described below.

Ideology and Politics. According to Boulianne and Belland (2022), Canadians tend to be strategic in voting in particular elections as opposed to relying on life-long party affiliations to guide choices at the ballot box. Therefore, it is not always clear whether Canadians’ opinions align with existing party platforms or rely solely on specific policies when deciding who to vote for (Boulianne & Belland, 2022). In one of the few studies that focused on political polarization in Canada, McLay and Ramos (2021) studied Atlantic Canadians’ political views and perceptions of change to determine whether underlying forms of political polarization were present in Atlantic Canada. Interestingly, the authors found no evidence of mass ideological or partisan polarization in the region. The authors did observe that, despite the absence of ideological polarization, any extreme divergences that are aggravated by social media and echo chambers may be difficult to reconcile (McLay & Ramos, 2021).

Immigration. Winter (2023) viewed the Canadian social landscape beyond the binaries of French/English Canada and supported the inclusion of immigrants in the multicultural society

of Canada. The author suggested that Canada manages the inclusion of an ethnically and racially diverse population rather well. However; LaFleche (2023) spoke to rising affective polarization in Canada by discussing the rise in hate crimes and the increased volume of hate created by white supremacists.

Socio-Spatial. There is increasing income inequality, which is both racialized and spatially manifested, in certain major cities in Canada, namely Calgary and Toronto (Walks, 2001, 2014a). Benoit et al. (2021) provided convincing evidence for the "divided cities" concept at the inter-urban, intra-urban, and intra-neighbourhood scales, illuminating specific geographies of exclusion and belonging within neighbourhoods. The concept of divided cities represents the concept of urban spatial fragmentation (Allegra et al., 2012). Walks (2014b) provided a larger, cross-country analysis of the financialization and the connection to socio-spatial polarization in many of the major cities in Canada. Financialization is defined as the increasing size, power and influence of the financial sector in the economy and politics (Sawyer, 2014). It further refers to the creation of wealth primarily through financial channels rather than traditional modes of capital generation such as trade, labour, and commodities (Walks, 2014a).

The Climate Crisis. The climate crisis is another subject that is polarizing Canadians. Climate change based on natural occurring phenomena versus human causes has occupied the news and political policies for several years (Boulianne & Belland, 2022). In a 2022 study by Boulianne and Belland, a minority of Canadians (12.33% of respondents) said that climate change was naturally occurring and only 2% of respondents were climate change deniers. Other studies show that seven out of ten Canadians are concerned about and have strong emotional responses to climate change (Galway & Field, 2023; Rabson, 2023). Further, in Canada trust in

media and scientists are more important factors compared to trust in former Prime Minister Trudeau. It is the intersection of climate change, related to energy production in Alberta, social media, and polarization that is of growing concern (Falkenberg et al., 2022) and of interest to this study. In an interesting study on wind energy perspectives of agricultural landowners in Alberta, Holowach and Parkins (2023) found that political ideology did matter. Generally, conservative agricultural landowners were opposed to further wind development in Alberta and this highlights how wind energy could be vulnerable to polarization as the siting of upcoming wind developments in Alberta could trigger rigid, province-wide division on renewable energy topics (Holowach & Parkins, 2023). Such polarized discourses on climate are evidence or an example of the divisiveness I was drawn to study.

Regional Inequality. Finally, in a country as diverse as Canada, regional inequality within the country is likely to become a source of polarization. The regional differences from coast to coast to coast in Canada have given rise to regional resentment and much greater polarization of political attitudes and voting behavior among Canadians (Marchand et al., 2020; Spicer, 2018). This is a lived experience for residents of Central Alberta, including myself. The economic and social needs of this community are substantially different from those of communities on the East coast (Lawson, 2005). Moreover, income inequality in the form of household debt and affordable housing exemplifies the growing polarization of the classes of Canadian society (August, 2020; Walks, 2014b).

More recently, in the days following the April 2025 Canadian federal election, there has been a resurgence of chatter about the Province of Alberta separating from the rest of Canada

(CBC News, 2025; DeCillia, 2025; Gorman, 2025). The feelings of frustration experienced by some Albertans are expressed as both ideological and affective polarization (DeCillia, 2025).

Affective Polarization in Canada in the Context of This Inquiry

The three selected cases for this study were Indigenous issues in Canada, energy production in Alberta, and reproductive choice for Albertans. Literature on these cases is detailed here since they formed the basis of my research elicitation interviews (see: Research Design section)

Indigenous Issues in Canada. As previously suggested in this literature review, colonialism as an ontological framework could be considered an origin story of polarization in this land now known as Canada. Truth, reconciliation, and reparation on behalf of a successive series of Canadian governments have been under taken since the 1980's (Hier, 2020). Such efforts include removal of statues representing colonialism and various public apologies (Hier, 2020), The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, 2020), and the "land back" movement calling for the return of unceded land to Indigenous Peoples (Paulson & Tomiak, 2022). A recent example of such divisiveness occurred when Jully Black, a Canadian singer and actor, changed a single word of the Canadian National Anthem at an NBA All Star Game in February 2023 (The Canadian Press, 2023). Black altered one word of the first line of *O Canada* from "our home and native land" to "our home *on* native land" to acknowledge the considered theft of Indigenous land by settlers (Bowden, 2023). This small, yet significant act caused a viral and polarizing scene on social media (see: *The Social* <https://fb.watch/sz9pWOWRkG/>), and as such, was in alignment with the interest of my study. There is evidence that the importance Canadians place on social issues is on the rise, including

Indigenous issues, race, and inequality (Graves, 2021). According to Graves (2021), Canadians appear to embrace the ideal of multiculturalism. To this end, my study endeavoured to understand the emotions that Facebook posts about Indigenous issues evoke and offered interventions to encourage civil discourse about such issues on Facebook.

Energy Production in Alberta. With the ongoing concern for the environmental sustainability and climate change, the subject of fossil fuels and renewable energy was relevant to my inquiry and salient as it affects both the lives and livelihoods of Albertans, thus creating an emotional and historical connection to the production of fossil fuel energy in Alberta (Thomas et al., 2022). On the other hand, recent research and studies have shown that there is support for clean, alternative energy production in Alberta (Pembina Institute, 2021). Energy production in the province is also complicated by the current Alberta Premier Danielle Smith's declared moratorium on renewable energy projects (Stark, 2023). An Angus Reid poll conducted in Alberta on September, 2023 showed 47% of those surveyed support the moratorium and 40% were opposed, leaving only 13% of Albertans undecided on the renewable energy projects moratorium (Korzinski, 2023).

It is the intersection of energy production, social media, and polarization that is of growing concern (Falkenberg et al., 2022) and was of interest to this study. In an interesting study on wind energy perspectives of agricultural landowners in Alberta, Holowach and Parkins (2023) found that political ideology did matter. Generally, conservative agricultural landowners were opposed to additional wind development in Alberta and this highlights how wind energy could be vulnerable to polarization as the siting of upcoming wind developments in Alberta could trigger rigid, province-wide division on renewable energy topics (Holowach & Parkins,

2023). This shows that polarization lies in the beliefs that surround the climate crisis. Such polarized discourses on energy production are evidence or an example of the divisiveness I was drawn to study.

Reproductive Choice for Albertans. Abortion is regarded as a controversial and polarizing issue (Crawford et al., 2022). On June 24, 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Dobbs v Jackson Women's Health Organisation*, overturned the federal right to abortion established in *Roe v Wade* (Traub et al., 2022). While this was a landmark decision for reproductive choice in the USA, it does have influence on the reproductive choice conversation for Albertans. In Canada, the practice of abortion was decriminalized in 1988 and remains so (Shaw & Norman, 2020) and abortion care is available up to 23 weeks and 6 days of pregnancy (Demont et al., 2023). The search for literature on reproductive choice for Albertans allowed me to conclude that the conversation on reproductive choice for Albertans is deep, wide, lengthy, and controversial.

The debate on the complex issue of reproductive choice continues to be largely a binary argument based on either a pro-choice or pro-life position, legal or illegal, moral or amoral (Korzinski, 2022; Rye & Underhill, 2020). Beyond these oppositional and foundational binary arguments, Goldenberg (2013) presented a case for terror management theory and reproductive choice. The author offered that the rhetoric surrounding reproductive choice has women facing and fearing the “death” of their womanhood. Dyer et al. (2023) suggested that the misogynistic and white supremacist rhetoric surrounding the debate of reproductive choice implies that women lack the capacity to understand the nuances of the choice before them when faced with an unwanted pregnancy. In both these cases, the authors premise is that the binary arguments diminish the agency that women have in the decision whether or not to carry a pregnancy to term

(Dyer et al., 2023; J. L. Goldenberg, 2013). To conclude, a person's abortion identity may be considered complex as it can be influenced by both a "negative perception of abortion and a positive perception of autonomy" (LaRoche et al., 2024, p. 114).

Literature in the Context of the Inquiry

Subsequent to the above literature review, I engaged an in in-depth review of relevant literature comprising of emotions, the making of assumptions, social identity, emotions and group polarization, social media, polarization, and echo chambers. The psychosocial and emotional drivers of affective polarization are indeed complex, and thus part of my approach to understanding this issue required that I define and understand each of these phenomena. More details can be seen in my submitted journal article (Owen, 2025 submitted, under review). Interestingly, my work led to a need to understand how social media algorithms influence both our emotions, and also our sense of social cohesion, via the content we see in our social media feeds. To better understand this, I focused on Facebook since it remains the most popular social network in Canada (Gruzd & Mai, 2025). I have detailed the relationship between polarization, echo chambers, and social media in my submitted journal article (Owen, 2025 submitted, under review). It is the influence of polarizing content on the social media platform Facebook that this research focuses on, and my viewpoint follows Gupta et al. (2021) and Jain et al. (2022) that echo chambers matter and significantly shape the polarization conversation (Owen, 2025 submitted, under review).

In the next section I focus on how I chose to theorize the relationships between Facebook feeds, polarization, and the key issues described above.

Facebook Polarization in Praxis

The search for theoretical frameworks was, in of itself, a journey. In the beginning, I had considered five theories to use as frameworks for the study: social identity theory (Harwood, 2020; Zhang et al., 2012), cognitive dissonance theory (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019; Jeong et al., 2019; Thompson et al., 2012), terror management theory (Greenberg & Arndt, 2012; Pyszczynski et al., 2021; S. E. Wolfe & Brooks, 2017), group polarization theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Iandoli et al., 2021; Sunstein, 1999; Zhang et al., 2012), and the Bala and Goyal model of network formation (Bala & Goyal, 2000; O'Connor & Weatherall, 2020). This number of theories proved to be unwieldy and confusing. Thus, I focused on my data collection and analysis to help guide my engagement with theory in my final work. The decision was taken to discard terror management theory, group polarization theory, and the Bala and Goyal model of network formation. This decision proved to be correct as the data collection and analysis showed that these theories did not accurately reflect what the participants experienced.

The analysis of the data collected from the participants was an opportunity to look through a metaphorical microscope to try to understand why the participants responded to the Facebook comments the way they did. While I started with, and initially retained, social identity theory, my data revealed that social comparison, a subset of social identity theory, was a better fit. 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). The group of cognitive dissonance theories remained in play in the form of the companion theories of selective exposure and selective avoidance, which draw upon Festinger’s theory of cognitive dissonance (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019). Selective exposure is a strategy used by individuals to manage consumption of

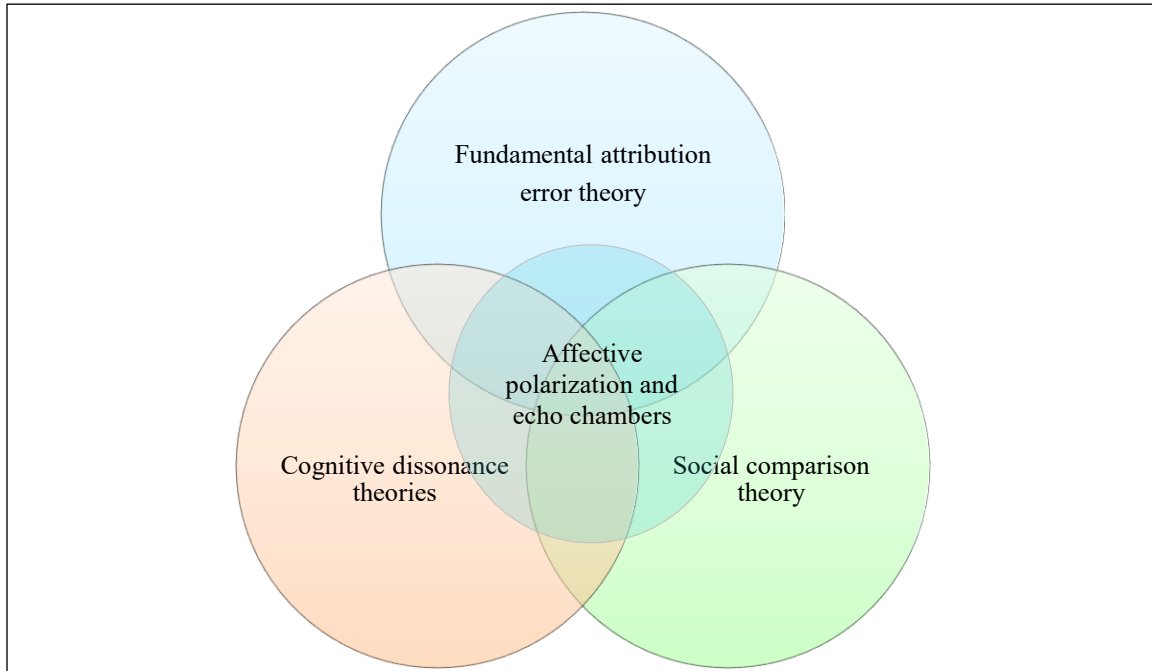
information by choosing information that supports their beliefs in favour of information that challenges their beliefs (Dahlgren, 2021; Garrett, 2009; Owen, 2025 submitted, under review). Selective avoidance is another strategy used to cope with information that may make people feel uncomfortable (Case et al., 2005; Owen, 2025 submitted, under review; Zhou & Xie, 2023). Also, part of the family of cognitive dissonance theories, identity-protection cognition emerged in my analysis of the data. Identity-protection cognition refers to avoiding the cognitive discomfort when one's deeply held values and identities are challenged (Motta et al., 2023; Owen, 2025 submitted, under review). These theories and their role in affective polarization are detailed in my submitted journal article (Owen, 2025 submitted, under review).

Important to how my participants understood polarizing content were the assumptions they made about polarizing posts and those who created them. This observation was not part of my original suppositions about how online polarization might work and came as somewhat of a surprise. In working to understand the assumptions made by my participants, I turned to fundamental attribution error theory (L. Ross, 1977, 2018) as the final piece to the theoretical framework puzzle. The concept of fundamental attribution errors is a way people interpret their response when explaining the behaviour of others and, by extension, justifying their own behaviour (L. Ross, 1977). The role that fundamental attribution errors played in the experience of polarization for my study participants is fully discussed in my submitted journal article (Owen, 2025 submitted, under review).

Fundamental attribution error theory, social comparison theory, and the cognitive dissonance theories of identity-protection cognition, selective exposure, and selective avoidance can help to explain the role of algorithms, fundamental attribution errors, and out-group

animosity in the development of echo chambers and affective polarization (Owen, 2025 submitted, under review). Figure 1 provides a visual representation of how the final three selected theories interact to explain affective polarization and echo chambers on Facebook.

Figure 1: Factors Promoting Polarization



(Owen, 2025 submitted, under review)

The following paragraphs illuminate the details of the research design, including the methodology and method selection, a discussion of the validity and reliability plan, and the data collection and analysis strategies. These are followed by the study findings and their discussion.

Research Design

The Methodology: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

As a theoretical approach, interpretivism focuses on understanding human behaviour through the belief that knowledge is constructed by one's interpretation of life experiences (Kouam, 2024). The concept of interpretivism as a theoretical approach, guided me to

phenomenology as a philosophical orientation to study the lived experiences (J. Smith et al., 2022) and emotions experienced in response to polarizing content on Facebook. The next logical step was to engage with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a research methodology, because, as a qualitative researcher, I am interested in understanding how people interpret and make meaning of their experiences, and how they construct their worlds (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

The primary topic of the study and research questions were both suited to IPA as a research methodology. As a qualitative research approach, IPA is committed to examining how people make sense of life experiences and “exploring experience in its own terms” (Owen, 2025 submitted, under review; J. Smith et al., 2022, p. 1). Within the context of IPA, “meanings” of the phenomenon are temporal in nature, denoting that such “meanings” are experienced in lived time, not chronological or clock-based time (Morrey et al., 2022; van Manen, 1990).

Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, and Ideography. IPA is phenomenological in that it focuses on individual’s perceptions of experiences, has a hermeneutic component, and is ideographic in nature (J. Smith et al., 2022). These three elements of IPA were intertwined within my study as detailed in the following paragraphs.

In the practice of phenomenology, the research is considered to be the sum of its parts, with both the participants and researchers viewpoints co-creating the research (Reiners, 2012; Sorsa et al., 2015). To this end, I did not suspend my biases nor prior engagement with the inquiry question and sub-questions. Phenomenology is best used when the research question asks participants for their meaning of the phenomenon under study (Reiners, 2012). In this instance,

the phenomenon in question is the participants' feelings and emotions in response to polarizing content on Facebook.

Hermeneutics is from the Greek *hermeneuo*, meaning to interpret, and is the study of interpretation (Føllesdal, 2001; J. Smith et al., 2022). It is the interpretation of the phenomenon in question by both the research participants and the researcher that IPA is concerned with (J. Smith et al., 2022). IPA involves both a participant and researcher, where both parties are actively engaged in the sense-making of the lived experience under study and this is known as the double hermeneutics of IPA (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2007). Because meanings are constructed by people as they engage with the world they are interpreting, it is the researcher's task to analyze the intentional experiences of consciousness to perceive how a phenomenon is given meaning and to arrive at its essence (Flood, 2010; Sadala & Adorno, 2002). Due to this double hermeneutics, there was a need for myself, as the researcher, to be reflexive due to my dual role of being situated both with-in and with-out my research. IPA is not value-free as the researcher's prior lived experiences, taken for granted assumptions, world views, and presuppositions influence their interpretations (Dennison, 2019). Thus, it was vital that I explored these conditions and be both reflexive and transparent in acknowledging them.

Ideography is concerned with the particular (J. Smith et al., 2022). In the instance of IPA, the "particular" refers to "how the understanding of a particular phenomenon have been understood from the perspective of a particular people, in a particular context" (J. Smith et al., 2022, p. 24). This IPA inquiry was concerned with the depth and detail of analysis of the particulars of the phenomenon under study, as opposed to the breadth of a study population. This is in opposition to a nomothetic study. The characteristics of a nomothetic study allows for

generalizability of the results over a broad population (Maes & Stoyanov, 2022; J. Smith et al., 2022). Accordingly, my study may or may not be generalizable to similar regions in Canada but does not preclude a similar study being conducted in such regions in Canada for comparison.

Rationale For Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

To study a phenomenon such as the emotional experiences of polarizing content on Facebook, the choice of research design became very important. IPA suited this project well because it is concerned with exploring and understanding processes where individuals are trying to make sense of things of significance that happen to them in their lives (J. Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). Within hermeneutics, context is everything (J. Smith et al., 2022) and the circular, iterative, and interpretive process of building a relationship with the research data is a foundational piece in the execution of an IPA research project (Owen, 2025 submitted, under review; J. Smith et al., 2022).

In sum, IPA is concerned with representing a perspective, not a population, as such it is concerned with the depth of the data as opposed to the breadth of a study population (J. Smith et al., 2022). With this aim in mind, IPA was well suited to a small study of the perspectives of a regional population within Central Alberta.

Table 1 provides the most recent municipal census data and Table 2 shows the demographics of the study population. The small sample size was an acceptable limitation of the findings in order to develop a richness of data and uncover the key findings. Complete details of the use of IPA as a research methodology can be found in my submitted journal article (Owen, 2025 submitted, under review).

Table 1: Census Data for Study Population

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) (Owen, 2025 submitted, under review)

Table 2: Study Participants Demographic Data

	Study Participants
	2024
Urban	4
Rural	4
Age: 25-49	5
Age: 49+	3
Male presenting	3
Female presenting	5
Years Lived in Central Alberta:	
<25 years	6
>25 years	2

(Owen, 2025 submitted, under review)

The Method: The Semi-Structured, Elicitation Interview

This research project required a data collection method that allowed for in-person interviews while viewing the three, pre-selected Facebook pages (see: [Appendix A](#) and [Appendix B](#)) and comments posted in the comment threads contained in each of these Facebook pages. To accomplish this, I used semi-structured, elicitation interviews, inspired by micro-

phenomenology (Heimann et al., 2025; Hogan et al., 2016, 2017; Petitmengin et al., 2019). A thorough yet concise description of this method of data collection is available to read in my submitted journal article (Owen, 2025 submitted, under review).

Validity and Reliability

According to Yardley (2017), “procedures for enhancing, evaluating, and demonstrating the quality of qualitative research can be broadly grouped into four key dimensions: sensitivity to context; commitment and rigor; transparency and coherence; and impact and importance (p. 295). Analysis of the data from this IPA study showed sensitivity to the participants experiences of polarizing content on Facebook, their emotional responses to it, and the stories that the participants told themselves about their emotional response to the content. Such sensitivity was expressed through active listening to the participant’s stories and being aware of how the sociocultural context of the research within Central Alberta may have influenced both what participants said and my interpretation of their stories (Yardley, 2017).

According to Smith (2022), academic rigour for an IPA study can be accomplished through a transparent account of the analytic process by bringing this process to life and being reflective rather than a step-by-step account of the process. Smith et al. (2022) suggested that during an IPA project, the researcher may choose to return to interview a participant more than once and this can be done to clarify data originally collected and to elicit further data. I found this to be unnecessary as the data collected from the semi-structured, elicitation interviews with the participants was rich and fulsome.

This synthesis paper together with the dissertation portfolio and the accompanying knowledge mobilization plan (see: The Rationale for Dissertation Format section) satisfy the

dimensions of transparency and coherence and demonstrate the impact and importance of this qualitative research project.

Reliability of the data collected during my study was accomplished through the preparation and distribution of the summary report to the participants. The data was analyzed while considering the meanings of the participants experiences and through being reflexive, not simply imposing any of my own pre-conceived ideas about the feelings and emotions of polarizing content on Facebook (Yardley, 2017). This was accomplished through meetings and conversations with Dr. Hodson and the keeping of research notes of my thoughts and reflections throughout the research phases.

Data Collection

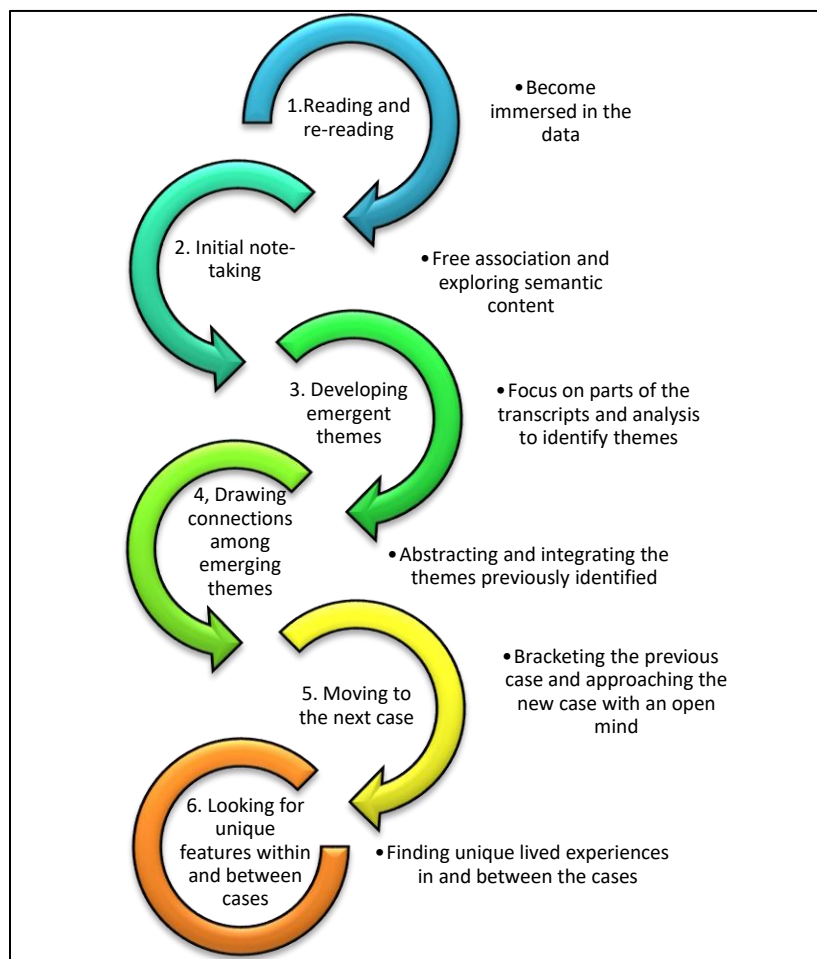
I aspired to Hennick et al.'s (2017) definition of meaning saturation as when the researcher understands everything in the data set rather than merely having heard everything, which builds on Glaser and Strauss's (1967) definition of saturation as the point where no additional data collection is needed because everything worth discovering is reflected in the data and additional interviews will repeat what is known. A concise description of the data collection process is articulated in my submitted journal article (Owen, 2025 submitted, under review). Succinctly put, I engaged in a series of semi-structured, elicitation interviews, inspired by micro-phenomenology (Heimann et al., 2025; Hogan et al., 2016, 2017; Petitmengin et al., 2019) using real Facebook pages and their comment threads as elicitation prompts. A series of phenomenological questions were used to get a sense of the embodied experience of feeling polarized while engaging with Facebook content. Interviews were recorded and anonymized for

analysis, and screen captures of the comments that participants found most polarizing were retained for analysis.

Data Analysis

Derived from the work of Jay et al. (2023), Figure 2 illustrates the six-step, iterative, and interpretative process that is IPA.

Figure 2: IPA Data Analysis Process



(Owen, 2025 submitted, under review)

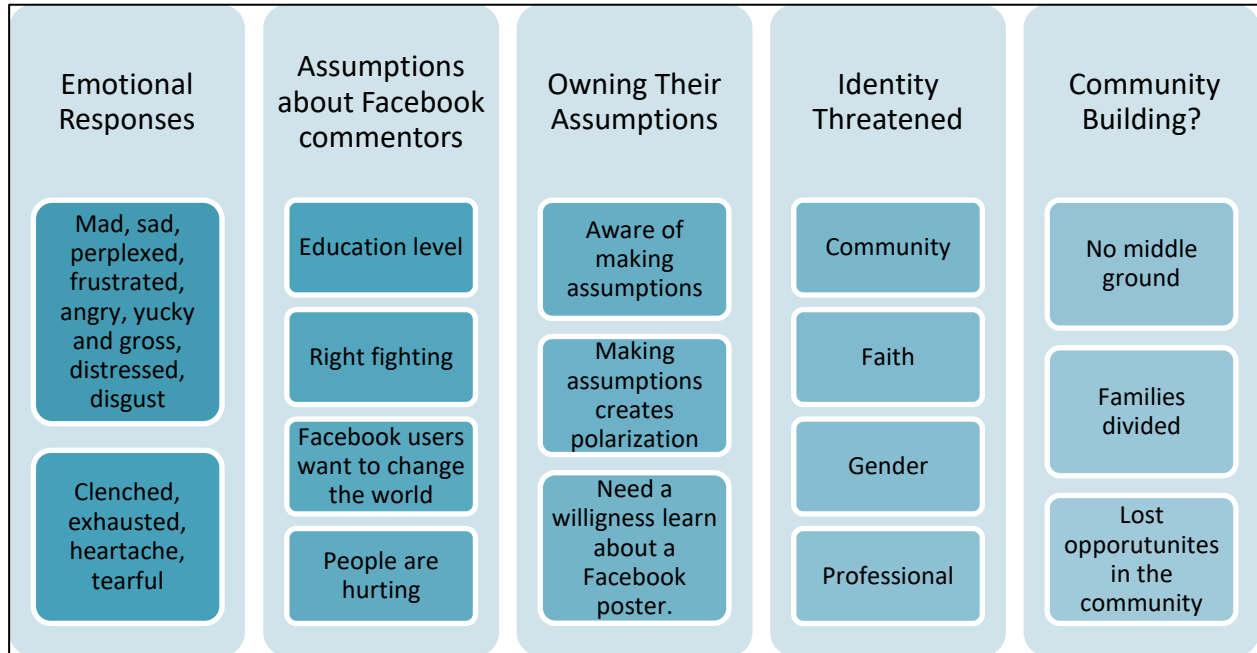
I began by building an immersive relationship with the data through reading and re-reading the interview transcripts. Next, I made some initial notetaking as a way to gather and

classify the participant responses according to the interview question categories ([Appendix A](#)).

The next step was to search each of the participant interview transcripts to identify emerging themes, approaching each individual interview with an open mind. Then, I looked both between and across all the interview transcripts and my data analysis to draw connections among the emerging themes. It is here, at this point in the analysis of the data, that the theoretical frameworks truly began to make themselves known. It is at this juncture that I recognized that the participants were making fundamental attribution errors (Coleman, 2013; L. Ross, 1977, 2018) about those who post on Facebook and that the participants were socially comparing (Suls et al., 2002) themselves to others. The participants were also experiencing moments of cognitive dissonance expressed as identity-protection cognition (Kahan et al., 2007; Motta et al., 2023; Samson, 2023). Finally, the participants were engaging in the strategies of selective exposure (Dahlgren, 2021; Garrett, 2009) and selective avoidance (Case et al., 2005; Zhou & Xie, 2023). Further details of the analysis of the data can be found in my submitted journal article (Owen, 2025 submitted, under review).

Study Findings

Figure 3: Summary of Study Findings



The key findings from the study are reported in detail in my submitted journal article (Owen, 2025 submitted, under review) and are briefly summarized in this section and in Figure 3 above.

As Figure 3 shows, when shown any one of the select Facebook pages ([Appendix B](#)) as cases for this study, the participants experienced negative emotional responses. These negative emotional responses instigated the making of fundamental attribution errors by the participants about those who posted in the Facebook threads. Based on fundamental attribution error theory, participants made assumptions about those who post, such as they are idiots, uneducated, and only want to hear their own voice. Several participants acknowledged that they were aware that they were making assumptions about those who post in Facebook comment threads. The participants experienced a negative emotional response when they felt their social identities and

affinity groups were threatened by those who post in Facebook threads. Two of the participants shared stories that demonstrated how Facebook is not bringing people together, but rather dividing families and communities. These stories and the detailed findings can be found in my submitted journal article (Owen, 2025 submitted, under review).

Discussion

Analysis of the data revealed the most significant findings worthy of mention and the notable trends when considered with the literature.

Figure 4 (below) is a visual representation of the research discussion contained in my submitted journal article (Owen, 2025 submitted, under review).

Figure 4: The Path to Polarization on Facebook



As Figure 4 shows, the path to affective polarization begins with algorithmically-generated content being delivered to Facebook users. It is negative content aimed toward a social media user's out-group that goes viral rapidly (Rathje, 2021). My data shows that Facebook users make fundamental attribution errors about those who post, share, or comment on this

negative content. These fundamental attribution errors are made in response to having a negative emotional response (e.g. anger) and feeling that the identity of their in-group is being threatened. This process leads to greater out-group animosity and the formation of echo chambers. Echo chambers form and are reinforced when individuals interact with those who share their beliefs and then seek and share information that supports these beliefs (Cinelli et al., 2021; Dubois & Blank, 2018; Flaxman et al., 2016; Owen, 2025 submitted, under review). It is within this clustering of like-minded individuals in echo chambers that leads to out-group animosity and, ergo, affective polarization.

These worthy and notable findings are articulated in the full discussion available in my journal article (Owen, 2025 submitted, under review).

Limitations

Research limitations represent the weaknesses of the study based on factors that the researcher cannot reasonably control (Jansen, 2022). I identified the following as limitations of this inquiry.

Subjectivity

The positionality of myself as the researcher and my location both with-in and with-out the research introduced me to the subjectivity associated with IPA. With this in mind, I managed my personal biases, interpretations, and theoretical orientations during the analysis of the participants' interviews through the practices of bracketing, reflexivity, and note-taking.

Time-Consuming and Resource Intensive

The line-by-line analysis of the data collected from the participant interviews was time consuming and mentally taxing. The depth of interviewing required involved resources of time,

energy/effort, and money. My ability to dedicate the necessary resources allowed me to work consistently on the project. The academic opportunities to support my doctoral journey and dissertation portfolio were beneficial to immerse myself in the data, the findings, and the portfolio development (see: Academic Opportunities in Support of My Doctoral Journey and Dissertation Portfolio section). To overcome this limitation, I had to maintain a focus on the scope of my data collection, which in turn had an impact on the generalizability of the research.

Generalizability

A limitation of this study was the small scope of population being limited to both Central Alberta and Facebook as the only social media channel. This could affect generalizability to the greater population of Canada; however, IPA is not so much concerned with population as with the perspective of the study participants. The study is limited by the use of a single social media platform, by the selection of cases for the study, and by the smaller study sample size. A larger study could determine if the link between emotions, out-group animosity, fundamental attribution errors, and polarization exists in the broader population.

Complexity of Analysis

Being new to the practice of IPA meant that I was concerned about the level of my experience to engage in the complex and iterative process of analysis that involves moving back and forth between individual narratives, psychological concepts, and my own interpretations of the data. I kept my copy of *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method, and research* (J. Smith et al., 2022) close at hand to guide me through the data analysis.

Dependence on Participants' Expressiveness

The quality of data collected largely depended on the ability of participants to be able to express themselves. Fortunately, all the participants were willing and able to articulate clearly during our interviews.

Ethical Considerations

The discussion of sensitive topics such as Indigenous issues in Canada and reproductive choice for Albertans required care and empathy. While looking at and discussing the reproductive choice for Albertans case, one participant's eyes began to well up with tears. My strategy was to pause, hold space for them to collect themselves, and continue only when they indicated they were ready.

Emotional Impact on Myself as The Researcher

Engaging deeply with participants' personal and sometimes traumatic experiences can have an emotional impact on researchers, leading to challenges such as emotional fatigue or secondary traumatic stress. The emotional impact of this study was quite negligible as the participants did not reveal any deep personal or traumatic experiences during the interviews. To engage in my own personal care during the data collection and analysis period, I spent time with my own thoughts engaging in periods of reflection.

Reviewing the above literature on colonialism and its role in Canadian history acted as an invitation for me to reflect upon my own positionality as a fourth-generation, white settler and to consider ways that I may, as both a citizen and a scholar, engage in Reconciliation.

This time and reflection allowed me to gather my thoughts and coalesce what I learned from the data to carefully and intentionally create the dissertation portfolio pieces.

Recommendations

With intention and purpose, through this inquiry I sought to explore the lived experiences of Central Albertans of encountering polarizing content on Facebook and engaged in an exploration of the phenomenon of emotions as they relate to polarizing content on social media, specifically Facebook. The recommendations that arose from this research are in service of the transdisciplinary and applied approach of the portfolio pieces.

The mandatory portfolio component is a journal manuscript to be submitted to an academic journal (see: Portfolio Components section below). The calls to action proposed by the journal article are somewhat nuanced given the complex nature of my research topic and the subject matter. The recommendations from the research are best read in the context of my submitted journal article (Owen, 2025 submitted, under review).

The first elective portfolio component is the summary report and presentation prepared for the City of Red Deer (see: Portfolio Components section below). The recommendations to be offered to the City of Red Deer are:

1. Development of case study exercises to support the communications team.
2. Emotional literacy awareness and a community messaging program.
3. Algorithm literacy awareness and a community messaging program.

See the Portfolio Components section below for the rationale and details of these recommendations.

I designed the second elective portfolio component with the general public in mind (see: Portfolio Components section below). The recommendations that this portfolio piece puts forth are in the form of calls to action:

1. Citizens need a better understanding of how algorithms are shaping our communities.
2. Citizens need a better understanding of how they are being manipulated by algorithms and social media.
3. Citizens need a better understanding of how social media preys on their negative emotions to create and spread negative content.
4. Citizens need a better understanding of how Social media spaces, in many ways, are dividing citizens, not bringing us together in community.

See the Portfolio Components section below for the rationale and details of these recommendations.

The research design was thoughtful and purposeful to allow for the data collected to be closely and interpretatively examined to be able to draw meaningful conclusions and recommendations that met the ideals of changemaking research at RRU. The data collected through the use of the semi-structured, elicitation interviews, established that algorithms, fundamental attribution errors, out-group animosity, and echo chambers are conditions that significantly shape the affective polarization conversation (Owen, 2025 submitted, under review). A fulsome discussion of these conditions and their role in affective polarization can be read in my submitted journal article (Owen, 2025 submitted, under review). The dissertation portfolio pieces outline strategic recommendations for better emotional and algorithmic literacies as algorithms are shaping the way we see society. The final call to action of this study is to re-think social media platforms, such as Facebook, as places and spaces that divide communities, not as places and spaces that unite us (Owen, 2025 submitted, under review).

The penultimate section of this synthesis paper provides my rationale for choosing to complete my dissertation by portfolio rather than the traditional monograph. This section contains a discussion of the Theory of Change and knowledge mobilization plan and a description of each of my portfolio pieces.

The Rationale for the Dissertation Format

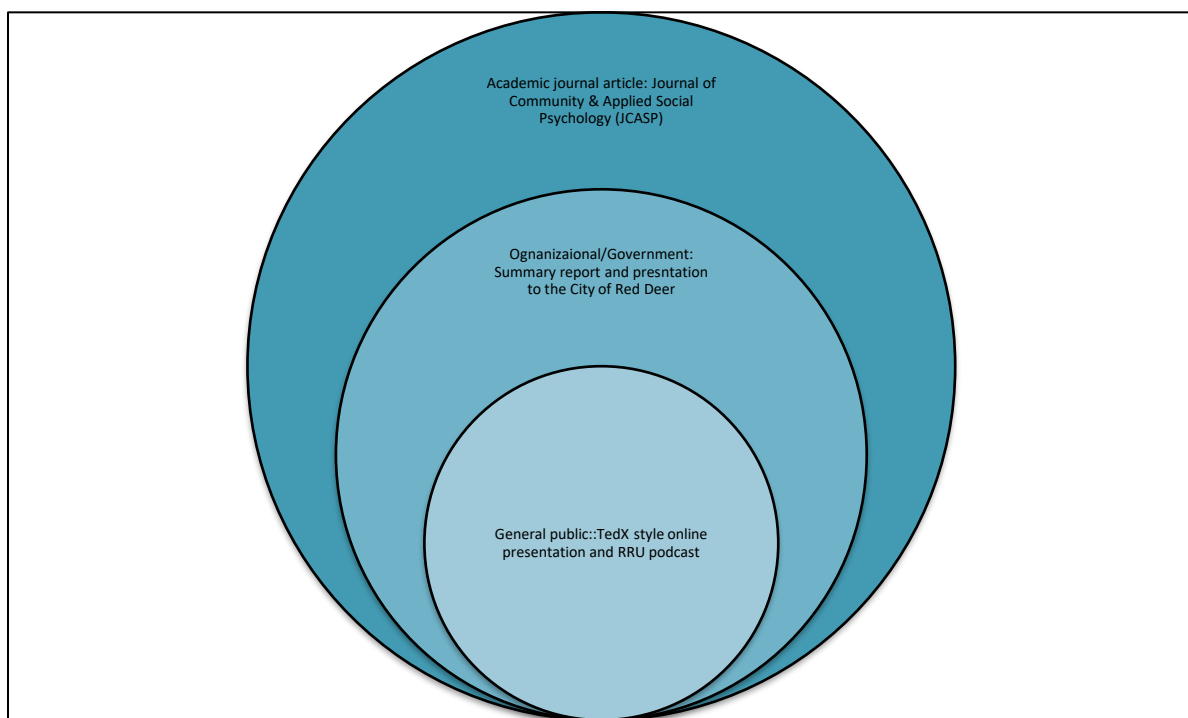
The designation as an Ashoka U Changemaker Campus drew my attention to RRU (see: <https://www.royalroads.ca/research/research-rru/research-themes>). I believe that one of the best ways to make a difference and be a changemaking researcher is to move this research through a transdisciplinary and applied approach. As the world was entering challenging and polarizing times in early 2025, I felt this study and the opportunity for change was timely.

The knowledge management and mobilization strategy through the dissertation by portfolio is crucial given the all-pervading use of Facebook and other social media channels. The findings from my study showed that when my participants encountered polarizing posts on Facebook, they made fundamental attribution errors (see: Owen, 2025 submitted, under review). Specifically, they assumed the author of the posts had a character flaw, such as being an idiot or uneducated, that caused the author to post what they did. Even though the participants were aware that Facebook algorithms deliver content they did not want to see, they did not consider how those algorithms might impact what people choose to post and comment on. Rather, polarizing posts were seen to be something that only bad or misled people respond to. This was made worse by the fact that when some participants see people offline that have similar views to polarizing posts, or if they see someone in the community who made a polarizing post, they judge that person based on their experience and assumptions made when they saw the polarizing

content on Facebook. This deepens polarization and extends digital polarization into the community (see: Owen, 2025 submitted, under review).

Following a transdisciplinary and applied approach, my knowledge management and mobilization strategy is illustrated in Figure 5 and the following paragraphs provide the details of the portfolio components.

Figure 5: Transdisciplinary and Applied Approach to Knowledge Mobilization

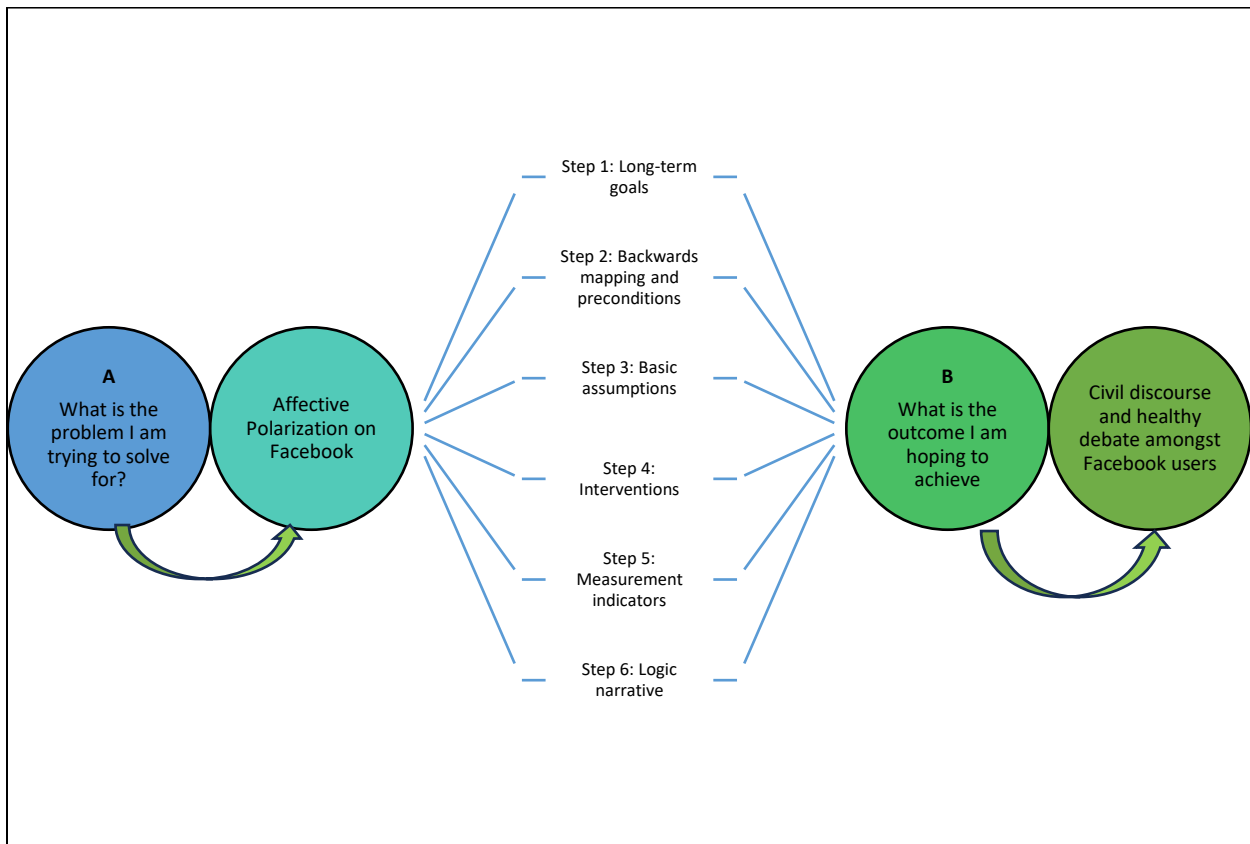


Theory of Change and Knowledge Mobilization

The Theory of Change (ToC) is a methodological way to fill in the specifics of how the research plan moved from “What is the problem I am trying to solve for?” (**A**) to “What is the outcome I am hoping to achieve?” (**B**) (see: Figure 6). This movement is facilitated through the steps of ToC (Center for Theory of Change, 2023), which begin with the end in mind and tells the story of how the project will make the change the researcher wants to see in the world

(Clarke, 2019). The ToC is comprised of six steps: 1) outline the long-term goals, 2) recognize any preconditions, 3) outline any basic assumptions, 4) imagine and document potential interventions, 5) decide on the measurement indicators, and 6) write up a logic narrative (Center for Theory of Change, 2023).

Figure 6: Theory of Change



This synthesis paper represents the final step in the ToC by telling the story of how this study answered the questions “What was the problem I was trying to solve for?” and “What was the outcome I was hoping to achieve?”

For step 1, the long-term goal for the project was sparked by my personal experience of witnessing the growing animosity on Facebook. To that end, I sought to identify the emotions

and other unconscious drivers that influence people's experiences of polarizing content on Facebook; how people are making sense of their emotions; and what explanations people give for these emotions. Through this study, the subsequent understanding and sense-making of the emotions experienced could help people understand why they are being driven to be polarized and how they might resist it in the hope of having better and caring conversations both on Facebook and in person. Change-making academic research, such as my study, can be the ignition of social change to move together as a people and as a nation, and away from the proliferation of toxic polarization that is in danger of consuming our societies (Powell, 2022).

To address the first step of the ToC, the research objectives were expressed through the research questions:

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?

Initially, step 2 asked that both the participants and projected users be a Facebook user. The conditions for this step were not entirely met. One of the study participants, unbeknownst to me at the time of initially recruiting them for the project, no longer uses any social media

channels. Although this one participant no longer has a Facebook account, their input and perspective were invaluable to the study. The primary projected recipient of one of the portfolio components included a municipal government organization which has an active Facebook account.

For step 3, my research proposal identified three basic assumptions contained in the research questions: 1) emotions are driving polarization.; 2) the way people make sense of their emotions when they experience polarizing content exacerbates polarization, thus addressing the experience and narratives related to polarizing content is necessary to resist it; 3) if people can make sense and think about their experiences on Facebook, they may change their behaviour.

The analysis of the data showed that the first assumption does hold; however, this study showed the path to polarization begins when algorithmically-generated negative content seizes Facebook users' attention and they begin to comment on and share such content. Assumption two is validated by the way that the study participants made sense of their emotional responses to polarizing content on Facebook. When viewing negative and polarizing content, Facebook users have an emotional response and begin to make 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 to engage in identity protection are to selectively choose what they do and do not see on Facebook. This series of behaviours and responses further reinforce echo chambers and, ergo, affective polarization. In the end, it can be seen that algorithms are only serving the corporate interests of the platform and are not in service to community building either online or in person. A key driver of my chosen portfolio pieces and academic opportunities in support of my scholarly work is public outreach. These opportunities

fully address the third assumption and are described in the Academic Opportunities in Support of My Doctoral Journey and Dissertation Portfolio section.

For a successful IPA inquiry, it was necessary to purposefully consider the recipients of the knowledge generated from the project. The sharing of the results from this research was a planned process, with consideration given to potential target audiences (Ross-Hellauer et al., 2020). To that end, intentional consideration was given to a transdisciplinary and applied approach and the portfolio components. The interventions to affect change for step 4 are outlined in the previous section: Rationale for the Dissertation Format and Portfolio Components.

The development of indicators to measure the outcomes to assess the performance for step 5 are shown in Table 3, which is based on the work of Belcher, et al. (2020) and Claus et al. (2023). Table 3 represents my own illustrative documentation of the deliverables of this project.

Table 3: Document Theory of Change

ACTIVITIES	OUTCOMES	
Academic attention	Research Paper	Lending to the academy a novel and new way to view affective polarization.
Organizational attention	Education	Take better care of citizens by understanding community members responses to polarizing content. Having an understanding of algorithmic manipulation. Having an understanding of the importance of emotional literacy.
Public attention	Education	Having an understanding of algorithmic manipulation. Having an understanding of the importance of emotional literacy. Having caring conversations on Facebook and during in-person interactions.

The portfolio components that follow have been designed with the ToC in mind. The required and elective portfolio pieces follow the transdisciplinary and applied approach as described in the knowledge mobilization plan and are detailed in the section that follows.

Portfolio Components

Required Portfolio Component: Mandatory Journal Article

For the mandatory journal article, I wrote a manuscript to be submitted to the *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*. As an author friendly journal, *The Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology (JCAPS)* welcomes well-conducted research in all areas of community and social psychology (see:

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/page/journal/10991298/homepage/productinformation.html>)

This journal article allows for a national, if not global, academic reach for my research.

This mandatory journal article both directly and thoroughly addresses the primary research question and both sub-questions. The article discusses the lived experiences of Central Albertans of encountering different examples of polarizing content on Facebook, the emotions most associated with these experiences, how people make sense of these emotions, and the explanations people give for these emotions. The article also delves into the stories, or assumptions, that people are telling themselves about polarizing content, the people who may have posted it, and those people on either side of the issue. As a portfolio piece, my journal article provides depth and breadth to my inquiry, illuminates the research findings and conclusions, and acts as the capstone to my dissertation portfolio and doctoral journey.

Elective Portfolio Component #1: City of Red Deer Summary Report and Presentation

The first elective portfolio piece was inspired by my conversations with the Director of Corporate and Employee Services with the City of Red Deer. In the interest of transparency, this individual was a participant in the research. They suggested that I present the findings to members of the City of Red Deer administration and staff within her portfolio. The findings revealed that the support The City of Red Deer provides to their communications staff is very good and my contact suggested that there is always room for improvement. I prepared a summary report of the research, tailored to The City of Red Deer as an organizational audience, along with a PowerPoint presentation. The summary report was emailed to the Director of Corporate and Employee Services on June 17, 2025. At the convenience of the City of Red Deer, I will present the findings and engage those in attendance in a fulsome discussion of the findings and recommendations as they relate to the City of Red Deer.

As a dissertation portfolio component, these companion pieces allow for the opportunity for my research project, the findings, conclusions, and recommendation therein to be an agent for change within my community. Though general in their nature, the research questions can be applied to the specific population of the City of Red Deer, thus presenting opportunities for the City of Red Deer to mitigate polarization in the community.

Elective Portfolio Component #2: Presentation: Audition Video for TEDxRRU

The second elective portfolio component is a video recording of a presentation as an audition piece for TEDxRRU 2026. I have applied to TEDxRRU 2026 held during the RRU Alumni Weekend. My application was submitted on July 28, 2025. Should my application be accepted, I will work with the TEDxRRU team to transform the presentation so that it will meet the expectations of a TEDxRRU talk, currently with the working title “I Don’t Need You to Tell

Me How to Feel.” I have spoken with the curator of the REDxRRU program and have a full understanding of the expectations and process of creating a TEDxRRU talk.

Should it not be accepted, I will post the video to YouTube, and will share it with the Cascade Institute, the City of Red Deer, and with my participants. Dr. Hodson has agreed to share it via her social media channels. While doing the videography for this portfolio piece, the videographer made two interesting comments. First, they commented “I’m on the edge of my seat waiting for the next slide because I want to know what is going to happen next.” Secondly, once we finished the recording, I asked them what they thought of the content. To paraphrase their reply, "I feel like you are saying what everyone is thinking. People know these things; you just said them out loud" (Ken Stead, personal communication, June 28, 2025). I appreciated their excitement, their curiosity, and their unsolicited validation of my work.

As with the first two dissertation portfolio pieces, this presentation addresses the guiding research question and sub-questions. The answers to the research questions are woven throughout the presentation. As a TEDxRRU talk, this presentation does not list specific recommendations. Rather, it offers several suggestions for awakening citizens about their engagement practices with social media. These suggestions include:

- citizens need a better understanding of how algorithms are shaping our communities,
- citizens need a better understanding of how they are being manipulated by algorithms and social media,
- citizens need a better understanding of how social media preys on their negative emotions to create and spread negative content and,

- citizens need a better understanding of how social media spaces , in many ways, are dividing citizens, not bringing us together in community.

My data suggests that there may be a path to engage in social change based on the above suggestions. First, we need to re-frame how we think about others. Then, we should be re-framing social media spaces like Facebook as spaces that divide us, not bring us together. Social media users also need to learn how algorithms are prioritizing negative content and emotions, making us more susceptible to making false attribution errors about others. Finally, in the absence of changes, the call to action of this study is to raise awareness of the polarization situation that is being exacerbated by Facebook and other social media platforms.

Additional Portfolio Component: Summary Report to Participants

As an additional elective portfolio component, I distributed a summary report to my study participants as the audience. I felt that it was important for my study participants to see the findings, and this is one more opportunity to mobilize the knowledge gained from the study. Once this project was completed and all the requirements were met, I sent this report via email to the participants.

As an epilogue, the final section of this synthesis paper details some of my reflections and interpretations of the study data, academic opportunities that brought depth and breadth to my doctoral journey, and briefly outlines my future work opportunities. The conclusion and final reflections bring this synthesis paper to a close.

Epilogue

My Reflections and Interpretations

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. These algorithmically-generated recommendations are not of interest to me outside of this study. Like several of my participants, I became angry and annoyed at the algorithms showing me content I did not want to see.

The findings, from the elicitation interviews with the research participants showed that, in this IPA study, negative feelings towards polarizing content on Facebook are the most common response. These negative emotions, when combined with the assumptions made about the commentors and the content, may be predisposing Facebook users to taking alternative courses of action to posting angry responses in the comment threads. These actions include disengaging from negative or divisive content on Facebook and to surround themselves in positive content, thus creating their own “happy” echo chambers. Secondly, such polarizing content on Facebook is encouraging users to leave the platform entirely. Thirdly, the participants in the study have become hesitant to engage in debate during in person conversations with other people based on the vitriolic language and comments seen on Facebook, thus civil discourse and debate is not happening in the public square and this is bad for democracy. These and the other findings are discussed in my submitted journal article (Owen, 2025 submitted, under review).

Metacognition

The concept of metacognition – the idea that commentors should be thinking about what they are thinking about (Kuhn, 2022) before they post - was raised by one of the participants. My study supported the notion that the immediacy and anonymity of Facebook invites both impulsive responses and users to post without doing their own research. Often users were labeled as uneducated by the participants. However, this raises the question of reliability of using the internet to do research. Perhaps, the internet in general supports echo chamber formation because people can do their own research but, in doing so, they can also only read information and/or misinformation and disinformation that supports their beliefs.

Algorithmic Literacy

What I interpreted from the findings and the literature is a need for algorithmic literacy. The participants in the study were aware of Facebook algorithms delivering content they did not want to see, yet they did not consider how those algorithms might have influence and impact on what Facebook users may choose to post and/or leave comments in the comment threads. According to Oeldorf-Hirsch and Neubaum (2023), “Even without knowing the nuances of why every post has appeared in their feeds, it is imperative that social media users understand broadly how their social media content reached them and how it may be influencing them” (para. 2). Participants are aware that Facebook is divisive, but their response is to further lean into homogenous communities like family. Thus, in keeping with Oeldorf-Hirsch and Neubaum (2023), digital literacy and algorithmic awareness should be expanded to a deeper algorithmic literacy education.

Loneliness

Taking into consideration what is being referred to as the loneliness epidemic (Greenblatt, 2023; Lin, 2023), a speculation that arose from the findings is that the formation of echo chambers on Facebook may be a response to, and a result of, the loneliness epidemic. In the instance of Facebook and the formation of in-groups and out-groups, I began to wonder if such groupings may be considered an invitation to join an in-group in response to a bid for connection that goes unanswered in offline life.

Academic Opportunities in Support of My Doctoral Journey and Dissertation Portfolio

While pursuing my DSocSci, I was encouraged to take advantage of many speaking and learning opportunities. At the behest of, and with the encouragement of, Dr. Hodson, I attended several two European summer schools and presented my research at three Canadian academic conferences. These opportunities provided depth to the journey and broadened my education. As I moved through the development of the presentations, my work continued to grow and evolve into the close to final work that was presented at the Canadian Communication Association conference in June of 2025.

I co-authored two articles on polarization with Dr. Hodson. These articles were submitted and accepted to the Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS) in Hawaii, January 2025. For the first article entitled *Mapping Solutions to Affective Polarization: An Ecological Review of the Literature* (<https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/items/381c31e7-7376-4409-b081-346ef07c10e5>), I am listed as the second author. For the paper entitled, *Using Syndemic Theory as a Framework for Understanding and Addressing Polarization and Other Anti-Social Behavior on Social Media*. (<https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/items/ec39b90d-ddd5-4580-b87e-2b118446639>), I am listed as third author.

My work as a Research Associate on the Democracy team of the Cascade Institute at RRU provided several opportunities to develop research and literature review skills. In addition, I was a guest on the *Changemaking Research podcast (working title)* hosted by Dr. Jaigris Hodson.

Future Opportunities

As a continuation of my post-doctoral work, I will be a) writing an article to pitch to The Conversation Canada based on this research, and b) writing and submitting to an academic journal a methods paper co-authored with Dr. Hodson based on the methodological approach used in this study. There is opportunity to continue to work with Dr. Hodson in a post-graduate capacity to continue our work on understanding polarization.

Final Conclusion

To conclude, more research on social media and polarization needs to be done with a holistic, transdisciplinary, and applied approach. This research endeavoured to contribute to filling this gap through the Dissertation by Portfolio strategy combined with the knowledge mobilization plan delivered through the selected portfolio pieces. Once there is an understanding of how Facebook users reach the decision to respond to polarizing content, strategies can be offered to encourage civil discourse, both online and in person, rather than angry responses.

Moreover, there is not just a gap in the literature, there is also a gap in how organizations are trying to address polarization. Through the thoughtful, intentional, and purposeful choices made for the dissertation portfolio pieces, my work addresses that gap in both practice and theory.

Final Reflections

In the waning days of the COVID-19 pandemic, two events happened almost simultaneously. First, after taking time during the lock-down period for self reflection, I chose to apply to the DSocSci program at RRU. Second, the moment that international travel restrictions were lifted, I booked my flight to England to see my extended family. I was accepted into the program, and the start date coincided with the trip! So, on July 4, 2022, I embarked on my doctoral journey and on July 7, 2022, I arrived at my family's home in England. This project and all its' components were enhanced by my expanded worldview thanks to travel. Over the past three years, my doctoral journey was supported by traveling, laptop in hand, to England, Ireland, Wales, Croatia, Belgium, Belize, Spain, Portugal, New Zealand, and Hawaii. Canadian stops included Victoria, Kelowna, Kananaskis Country, Radium, Toronto, Ottawa, Grande Prairie, and Montreal. Now, almost exactly three years later, I am finishing up the portfolio requirements and preparing to defend my dissertation portfolio pieces, and I am, once again, on my way to England on July 7 to celebrate a family member's milestone birthday.

The completion of the Doctor of Social Sciences has been a journey of personal growth that has both pushed and pulled me to expand my personal and academic horizons. Truly, a life changing experience.

My convocation from RRU was made all the sweeter as I, together with our family, am able to share the celebration with my eldest son who has completed his Master of Arts in Tourism Management at RRU.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Questions

General Background

- Where do you live in Central Alberta?
 - This addresses the rural/urban divide.
- How long have you lived in Central Alberta?
 - If they have lived here a long time, chances are they have a group. If they are newcomers, chances are their group is elsewhere.
- 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?
 - Explores changes in behaviours.
- 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?
- 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?
- Going through all of these, and then thinking about other issues that you agree or disagree with, what issues do you find most polarizing? If they say something else, given that you said trans issues are most polarizing, how do you feel when those come up in your feed? And what do you do about them?
- When is a good time to follow up? Can we follow up if I have more to ask you?

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?

Appendix B: Elicitation Posts

Images 1, 2, and 3 contained in this Appendix also appear in the Appendix to my submitted journal article (Owen, 2025 submitted, under review).

Indigenous Issues in Canada

As a result of colonial practices, Indigenous Peoples of Canada suffer significant inequities, including malnutrition, poverty, lack of education, and health care (Daviss et al., 2021; Gellert & Gellert, 2021). This type of racism is rooted in the colonial system that was created with the intent to benefit the settler-colonialist and their future generations (Daviss et al., 2021). Through these historical inequities, we can see that there are divides in Canadian society. Even though, according to Graves (2021), Canadians appear to embrace the ideal of multiculturalism, people in Canada are polarized on how to manage or solve this divisiveness. (Graves, 2021).

The selected post for this case was on the Rants and Raves Red Deer public Facebook page (see below). The post begins with an image of a homemade poster that was seen in a rural town in Central Alberta. The photo of the poster is accompanied a post on Rants and Raves Red Deer public Facebook saying, “I know everyone has the right to their own opinion but mainstreet blackfalds, [*sic*] upside down Canada flags. If it's there the next time I go uptown, it's coming down dont care what shit I may get into” [*sic*]. The homemade poster is describing the white supremacy in relation to the treatment of Indigenous People in Canada, including residential schools. Reading the comment thread sees the comments quickly devolve away from the intent of the homemade poster into posts about the upside-down Canadian flag, and rude, personal attacks on individual commenters.

Image 1: Indigenous Issues

Facebook Post	Public Facebook Page Description
	<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>

<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=4509300835755349&set=gm.4903260756367608>

Energy Production in Alberta

With the ongoing concern for the environmental sustainability and climate change, the subject of fossil fuels and renewable energy is relevant and salient as it affects both the lives and livelihoods of Albertans, thus creating an emotional and historical connection to the fossil fuel energy production in Alberta (Thomas et al., 2022). However, it is the intersection of energy production, social media, and polarization that is of growing concern (Falkenberg et al., 2022) and of interest to this study.

The selected post for this case was found on the Oil and Gas World/Oil Sands Strong public Facebook page (see below). The post was a photograph claiming to show oilsands mine reclamation, with the verbiage “From '50 shades of grey' to 50 shades of green!” in the description. The comment threads both discuss and dispute the validity of the photograph and the efficacy of the oilsands reclamation processes.

Image 2: Energy production

Facebook Post	Public Facebook Page Description
	<p>The public Facebook page used for the Energy Production in Alberta case was a page called Oil and Gas World/Oil Sands Strong. 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>

(<https://www.facebook.com/OAGWxOSS/posts/pfbid025vAU7yPLiHLSrAypA8QZzyBU9ofTZZZtXXuUAs2iTCoBgCWsYpNutu6u4iXwnB4A1>)

Reproductive Choice for Albertans

In Canada, the practice of abortion was decriminalized in 1988 and remains so (Shaw & Norman, 2020) and abortion care is available up to 23 weeks and 6 days of pregnancy (Demont et al., 2023). However, the debate on the complex issue of reproductive choice continues to be largely a binary argument based on either a pro-choice or pro-life position, legal or illegal, moral or amoral (Korzinski, 2022; Rye & Underhill, 2020) and abortion is still regarded as a controversial and polarizing issue (Crawford et al., 2022).

The selected post for this case was from the Red Deer & Area Pro-Life public Facebook page. In part, the post reads, “This year's essay topic is "Lies of Choice." The pro-choice movement has used statements that are not true. "It's just tissue." "No negative effects." "Perfectly harmless procedure." "The baby feels no pain." "My body, my choice." The list goes

on... It is as long and old as the pro-choice movement. Pick one lie and help expose the falsehood that is used to promote abortion.” There is a cash prize of \$1,000.00. The comments in response to the post are quickly polarized between the pro-choice and pro-life positions.

Image 3: Reproductive choice

Facebook Post	Public Facebook Page Description
	<p>The Facebook page chosen was Red Deer & Area Pro Life. 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.</p>

<https://www.facebook.com/RDprolife/posts/pfbid02nFc3qrBiFccMw3DKWYb3oTfXg6rxm2d8z9hp7oZAkkEtQXxL4JMaUa1kpkUg6mk5I>