

Analyzing Indigenous Representation and Engagement on TikTok

By

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Dedication

For my grandpa and grandma, Pa and Ma, who always supported my passion for learning.

Their enduring love and confidence in me have made this possible.

Acknowledgements

Land Acknowledgement

I would like to acknowledge that what I call Alberta is the traditional and ancestral territory of many Indigenous Peoples and communities presently subject to Treaties 4, 6, 7, 8, and 10. This includes the Blackfoot Confederacy, Kainai, Piikani, Sisika, Cree, Dene, Saulteaux, Nakota Sioux, Stoney Nakoda, the Tsuut'ina Nation, and the Métis People of Alberta (Empowering the Spirit, 2017). I am personally committed to continuous acknowledgement, meaningful learning, and supporting reconciliation. I have the utmost gratitude for those whose territory I reside on and write about.

Positionality Statement

I acknowledge my position as a settler and immigrant residing on Treaty 6 territory — traditionally named Amiskwaciy Waskahikan (Amiskwaciy History Series, 2015). I am dedicated to approaching this research with cultural humility, reflexivity, and profound respect for Indigenous Peoples. As a South African, born in a country with its own history of colonization, I have a personal understanding of the intricate and complex experiences that stem from living in a colonized nation. This awareness strengthens my commitment to conducting this research with empathy.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to the Indigenous Peoples whose TikToks inspired this study. My commitment remains unwavering in ensuring that their perspectives are acknowledged, honoured, and respectfully represented throughout the entire research process.

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Abstract

TikTok has transformed how we consume entertainment, gather information, build digital communities, and connect. Indigenous TikTok has emerged from Indigenous Peoples' desire for amplified and authentic visibility in digital spaces. Indigenous TikTokers use this social media application to educate users, revive cultural traditions, and express humour. Despite the thriving presence of Indigenous TikTok as a digital space for storytelling, learning, and socializing, fewer studies examine how audience engagement reflects interactions with and perceptions of Indigenous TikTok content. Rather than studying the work or experiences of Indigenous Tiktokers themselves, this research focuses on exploring how engagement metrics — likes, comments, saves, and shares — reflect the representation of Indigenous Peoples on TikTok. This qualitative study will employ an in-depth analysis of publicly available engagement data from videos of four influential Indigenous TikTokers located on Treaty 6 territory, carefully selected to represent a range of follower counts and engagement rates. The analysis will provide insights into how Indigenous TikTokers' content on online platforms resonates with their audiences and contributes to the co-construction of cultural narratives. The findings will contribute to a better understanding of how audience engagement with Indigenous TikTok plays a role in Indigenous representation, knowledge sharing, and community building.

Keywords: Indigenous TikTok, social media, audience engagement, representation

Introduction

In a time where TikTok's influence spans the world with 1.1 billion active users as of mid-2024, my Capstone Project dives into a relatively unexplored yet interesting community area: How Indigenous TikToks are using the platform to amplify their voices, increase visibility, and teach (Shewale, 2024). There is a gap of understanding around how audience members engage with content posted on TikTok by self-defined Indigenous influencers. The purpose of my Capstone Project is to delve into the intersection of communications and technology by researching Indigenous TikTok's role in bringing together Indigenous People, communities, and non-Indigenous people alike. I am aiming to analyze how audience members respond to the efforts of Indigenous TikTokers' strategic use of the platform to express themselves, learn, and teach — which hopefully contributes to a more diverse and inclusive digital landscape.

My goal is to highlight the unique and differing dynamics of Indigenous representation in digital media whilst also providing insights into the broader implications of social media as a tool for cultural expression and community building. My Capstone Project seeks to learn how audience members respond to how Indigenous TikTokers leverage the platform for representation and increased visibility. This will be vital in highlighting the unique ways Indigenous individuals utilize digital spaces for storytelling and cultural expression — a crucial aspect in the broader context of media and identity. It offers insights into how social media can empower marginalized and equity-deserving people, which underlines the importance of inclusivity and diversity across digital communication.

Purpose of Study

My research question, based on an extensive literature review, seeks to understand how audience engagement through likes, comments, saves, and shares reflects interactions with and perceptions of Indigenous TikTok content. This study aims to identify how audience members respond to how Indigenous TikTokers enhance Indigenous representation in this digital space. Additionally, it explores how audience engagements amplify Indigenous voices and promote their cultural narratives. By focusing on audience engagement metrics, this research contributes to the broader understanding and discussion around cultural expression on social media platforms.

My Capstone Project findings can enhance the current research in communications and technology, as it provides a focused exploration of Indigenous representation and visibility on this major social media platform. Examining Indigenous TikTokers' content will offer a deeper understanding of how digital platforms can be used as tools for cultural empowerment and narrative (re)shaping. The insights gained from my Capstone Project have the potential to contribute to how Indigenous TikTok plays a role in efforts to reclaim their narratives, challenge prevailing stereotypes, and build safe, inclusive digital spaces. Furthermore, my Capstone Project's findings will help emphasize the importance of authentic Indigenous representation in media, which is crucial for promoting cultural learning, unlearning biases, and fostering meaningful connections between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

My Capstone Project faces certain limitations due to its scope and logistical constraints. First, my plan to have a small sample size of Indigenous TikTokers will not fully capture the diversity and breadth of creators and content strategies used across the platform. This limitation will lead to some unavoidable generalizations of my findings. Secondly, I relied solely on

publicly available information and did not interact with the Indigenous TikTokkers directly. This approach limits the depth of understanding and context that could be gained from personal interactions and relationship-building, potentially restricting a more comprehensive insight into the influencers' experiences and perspectives.

Situating My Topic

My Capstone Project is centred around analyzing the audience engagement with Indigenous TikTokkers, who are building a vibrant and growing community. TikTok, known for its short-form video content, has emerged as a dynamic digital space where users and communities can express their identities and share narratives (TikTok, n.d.). By researching the engagement metrics — likes, comments, saves, and shares — of Indigenous TikTokkers' content, my Capstone Project aims to understand how these interactions reflect the audience's perceptions of and interactions with Indigenous voices and cultures. As well as, how TikTok serves as a medium for amplifying these voices and fostering cultural exchange with a diverse, larger audience. My study does not focus on audience characteristics; for example, the audience includes both Indigenous Peoples and non-Indigenous folks.

Social media platforms, especially TikTok, have evolved into powerful and influential tools for self-expression, community building, and identity shaping (Weisgerber & Butler, 2016, p. 1,353). This is particularly important for Indigenous Peoples, as they have and continue to face marginalization in mainstream media — their voices and representations have been significantly underrepresented or misrepresented (Wente, 2022). My research aims to understand and showcase the ways Indigenous TikTokkers are using TikTok to reclaim narratives and ensure accurate representation, which broadly addresses the need to dismantle barriers to truthful and

authentic Indigenous representation across media. According to Loyer (2020), Indigenous TikTok has emerged from a desire among Indigenous Peoples for greater “access to digital media technologies” and to “develop new forms of cultural knowledge.” This digital space has evolved into one for cultural revitalization, activism, and education. Similarly to other social media platforms, Indigenous Peoples use TikTok to employ various content strategies such as storytelling, meme creation, and cultural teachings (Loyer, 2020; Ruddell, 2013, p. 38). By engaging in mainstream TikTok trends, Indigenous TikTokers are also able to reach a broader audience (Loyer, 2020).

Despite TikTok’s popularity, there has been limited research dedicated to studying the content on the platform (Montag et al., 2021). There have been studies that explored the platform’s role in representing Black, Indigenous People, and People of Colours’ (“BIPOC”) experiences, Indigenous online political engagement, and social movements such as Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirited People (“MMIWG2S”), but they remain scarce (Hung et al., 2023; Moir, 2023; Leinhauser, 2022, p. 3). These studies underline the potential of TikTok in (re)shaping public discourse and empowering marginalized communities, but also reveal the research gaps specifically focusing on how audience members respond to Indigenous Peoples and their use of the platform.

Positioning Statement

My South African heritage provides me with a unique lens through which I view and understand the complexities of post-colonial societies. Furthermore, as a Canadian immigrant, I am also a settler and have that lens. My perspective is important to state, as it influences how I approach my Capstone Project and my intentions to conduct my research with empathy and

respect for the intricate histories and lived experiences of Indigenous Peoples and their communities.

My professional experience in strategic communications and public relations provides a solid foundation for my Capstone Project. I have dedicated my academic career to exploring the dynamics of digital communications and its societal impacts, especially within marginalized communities. My Capstone Project aligns with my expertise and interests, whilst offering the most valuable opportunity to explore the intersection of culture, representation, communications, and technology. This is more than an academic fulfillment to me — it is a chance to apply my skills to an important discussion whilst hopefully enhancing the presentation and visibility of Indigenous voices.

As a born-and-raised South African with a personal history rooted in being a colonized person, I have a deep understanding of the complex and multifaceted experiences that can happen from such a background. My ingrained awareness and shared understanding fuels my commitment to conducting my Capstone Project that is respectful and sensitive to Indigenous Peoples' lived experiences and history. Additionally, my commitment to learning more about Indigenous culture is driven by a desire to contribute to the conversation on diversity and representation in digital spaces, recognizing the power of platforms such as TikTok in shaping cultural narratives and identity formation.

My journey as a biracial woman growing up in South Africa and Canada deeply influences my approach to this research. Living at the crossroads of diverse cultures, I have familiarly felt the impact of underrepresentation and the complexities of identity. My personal history has not only heightened my sensitivity to these issues, but also made me acutely aware of my own biases and the limits of my perspective, particularly as an outsider to the Indigenous

communities I hope to study with. Therefore, I approach my research with humility and a commitment to continuous learning. My Capstone Project is more than academic for me; it is a path to greater empathy and a deeper connection with truths that deserve to be heard and understood.

Preview Literature

My Capstone Project situates itself within a broader academic context that intersects the fields of digital media, cultural representation, and Indigenous studies. It contributes to the expanding literature on how social media platforms are used by marginalized communities for self-representation and narrative control. My research will align with existing research on digital storytelling, media representation of Indigenous Peoples, and the use of Information and Communication Technologies (“ICTs”) in community building and cultural preservation. I am aiming to fill a gap in the current literature by specifically focusing on Indigenous TikTok, a topic that has received limited academic attention to date.

My research is informed by several key areas in the literature review. Firstly, it builds on research discussing the historical misrepresentation and stereotyping of Indigenous Peoples in mainstream media. This includes research focused on the impact of these portrayals on Indigenous communities and the wider society. Secondly, it explores the literature about the importance of authentic Indigenous representation in media, particularly in terms of identity formation and cultural preservation. Thirdly, it is influenced by research on content strategies used by Indigenous social media users, such as storytelling, meme creation, and cultural teachings. It understands how these strategies serve as tools for empowerment and preserving

cultural heritage. Additionally, the study is informed by literature on the role of ICTs in fostering community engagement and social learning within Indigenous communities.

My extensive research for the Literature Review involved delving into a wealth of academic journals, books, videos, and articles, each contributing significantly to the development of my Capstone Project. Key works such as those by Harding (2006) and Winter (2018) have shed light on the harmful portrayal of Indigenous Peoples in mainstream media, an issue further modernized in the analysis provided by Cripps (2021). The insightful research of Fellows & Smith (2022) and Harriger et al. (2023), focusing on the crucial role of authentic representation in shaping identity, has been particularly enlightening. The studies by Ruddell (2019) and Carlson (2013) eloquently highlight the empowering potential of social media. Furthermore, the research by Hung et al. (2023) and Moir (2023) offers valuable perspectives on community building through social media. Together, these academic works create a comprehensive framework, situating my study within the ongoing scholarly discourse on Indigenous representation in digital spaces.

Preview Methodology

The methodology I chose for my Capstone Study is a mixed-method approach comprised of qualitative and quantitative data gathering and analysis. This approach is appropriate for exploring and analyzing the engagement metrics — likes, comments, saves, and shares — associated with Indigenous TikTokkers. The content analysis will focus on examining themes and categories within the engagement metrics to provide a comprehensive understanding of how audiences interact with and perceive Indigenous TikTok content.

My rationale for selecting qualitative in-depth analysis is grounded in its ability to capture rich, detailed data that is essential for understanding the complexities of audience engagement. This method allowed for an exploratory approach, where the nuances of engagement metrics can be interpreted to provide depth and context that purely quantitative research methods might not capture. This also offered flexibility to delve into unforeseen patterns that arose, enhancing the depth of understanding of audience interactions.

While other research methodologies, such as quantitative surveys or ethnographic studies, were considered, they were not chosen for my Capstone Project. Quantitative methods, though useful for generalizing findings to a larger population, often lack the depth needed to understand the intricacies of cultural representation and identity expression in digital spaces (Bray, 2023a). Ethnography, while rich in cultural context, would require a more extended period for data collection, which is not feasible within the scope of my Capstone Project (Bray, 2023b). My chosen methodology of mixed-methods analysis, focusing on engagement metrics, strikes a balance between depth of insight and practicality, aligning well with my research question and the constraints of the project.

Summary

My Capstone Project focuses on understanding how audience engagement metrics reflect interactions with and perceptions of Indigenous TikTok content. It aims to explore how these engagement metrics indicate the effectiveness of the content strategies used by Indigenous TikTokers to amplify their voices and share their cultural narratives. My goal is to provide insights into the role of social media as a tool for cultural expression and community building, particularly in the context of Indigenous communities. This research highlights the

transformative potential of digital platforms in empowering marginalized voices and fostering diverse, inclusive online communities.

My Capstone Project is structured to comprehensively explore the intersection of Indigenous identity, community building, and digital media. It begins with an introduction that establishes the significance of Indigenous TikTok within the broader realm of social media. This is followed by a Literature Review, which examines existing research on media representation of Indigenous Peoples, the importance of authentic representation, and the role of social media content strategies in cultural preservation. The Methodology chapter outlines the mixed-method approach to analyzing engagement, detailing the methodology and its relevance to the research questions. Subsequent chapters present the findings, discussing how these align with existing literature, followed by a discussion on the implications of the study for both academic understanding and practical application in the field of digital media and cultural representation. Finally, I will share the limitations and gaps within my research.

Each chapter builds on the previous one, starting from the introduction of the topic to the detailed exploration of the methodology, and culminating in the analysis and interpretation of the findings. The Literature Review, which is the next chapter, sets the foundation for understanding the context and significance of my research question. It delves into the current academic discourse around Indigenous representation in digital media, paving the way for a deeper understanding of Indigenous TikTok. This systematic approach ensures a thorough understanding of the subject matter in preparation for the detailed findings and discussions that follow in the Literature Review.

Literature Review

Indigenous TikTok has become a vibrant and transformative digital community. In this dynamic space, Indigenous TikTokers “add their own spin to memes and contribute to a new language emerging from these digital spaces” (Loyer, 2020). Indigenous TikTok provides Indigenous Peoples and communities with a unique platform for sharing, celebrating, and preserving their cultures (Loyer, 2020). Traditional media, which plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions, often perpetuates stereotypes and marginalizes Indigenous narratives (Harding, 2006, p. 215). Indigenous TikTok stands as a powerful alternative digital space, empowering individuals and groups to authentically share their knowledge beyond mainstream media’s limitations.

My Literature Review chapter explores the multifaceted dynamics of Indigenous TikTok within the broader context of digital media and cultural representation. It aims to showcase how Indigenous TikTok could act as an essential platform for cultural preservation and the expression of Indigenous identities. Additionally, it seeks to offer insights into the opportunities and challenges presented by social media in addressing representation, identity, and community building amongst Indigenous Peoples and non-Indigenous folks.

Loyer (2020) emphasizes Indigenous TikTok’s role in amplifying Indigenous voices, offering a space for cultural expression that challenges and reshapes damaging perceptions. Peña-Fernández et al. (2022) further underscores the significance of TikTok communities, emphasizing their potential to reclaim narratives and foster strong community bonds (p. 2). As social media increasingly shapes modern self-expression and identity formation, understanding the intricacies of Indigenous TikTok is crucial for understanding how it is used to preserve and share cultural practices, languages, and stories.

Overview of the Field of Study and Methodology of Literature Search Process

Key Areas of Literature

The academic literature surrounding Indigenous media representation is multifaceted, as it encompasses historical misrepresentations and the transformative potential of digital platforms. The opening paragraphs uncover the nuanced and overt ways that traditional media has perpetuated stereotypes and marginalized Indigenous narratives. These academic journals and studies reveal a reoccurring theme about how the Eurocentric control over Indigenous media representations contributed to a long-standing narrative that undermines Indigenous Peoples' identities, cultures, and contributions (Winter & Boudeau, 2018, p. 40).

Consequently, Indigenous Peoples, including various marginalized communities, are increasingly turning to digital media as a means of self-expression and resistance. The following section highlights how digital platforms are being presented as ways to communicate and share authentic Indigenous narratives. The academic journals and studies emphasize the importance of digital media in providing alternative spaces for Indigenous and marginalized voices, whilst acknowledging the inherent challenges, such as maintaining cultural authenticity and navigating digital divides.

Emerging research on social media's role in Indigenous representation, particularly through platforms like TikTok, introduces a new dimension to this academic discussion. Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin (2022) and MacKay (2021) explore how Indigenous users utilize TikTok for storytelling, meme recreation, and cultural teachings — highlighting the platform's ability to build communities and amplify marginalized voices.

The literature collectively presents a comprehensive examination of Indigenous media representation overtime, integrating optimistic views of these digital spaces as paths for

empowerment and cultural preservation with critical insights into their challenges (Botangen et al., 2017; Fellows & Smith, 2022; Karizat et al., 2021; Matamoros-Fernández, 2023). These viewpoints highlight the complex landscape of Indigenous media representation, showcasing the strides achieved as well as the persistent and developing challenges.

Research Questions and Research Design

My Literature Review blends insights from an array of academic sources to inform my research question and design. It provides the history of Indigenous media representation followed by the dynamic shifts within digital spaces. By weaving together both optimistic and critical views, my Literature Review provides a detailed overview of Indigenous media representation's variation, celebrating its progress while reflecting on its obstacles.

Literature Location, Selection, and Review

My methodology for sourcing, selecting, and analyzing the literature was methodical. I utilized academic databases, such as the University of Alberta Library databases, Google Scholar, and Elicit. The scoping search was guided by keywords including “Indigenous representation,” “Indigenous Peoples,” and “TikTok” (Booth et al., 2021, p. 129); (see Appendix B). Further criteria focused on the relevance to Indigenous representation, emphasis on digital media, and the potential to deepen understanding of how media shapes marginalized peoples’ identities and cultures. I aimed to exclude works that did not directly engage with marginalized or Indigenous perspectives.

Literature Research

Overall, my literature research was guided by a purposeful selection of recent and foundational academic sources, peer-reviewed for credibility, and supplemented by essential non-academic perspectives. Additionally, I incorporated vital non-academic perspectives that showcased the importance of including diverse Indigenous perspectives.

Review of Literature

Strengths and Weaknesses

Strengths are evident in the depth of historical context as it outlines the prevalence of Indigenous Peoples' misrepresentation and its ongoing cultural ramifications. The research selected offers a foundation for understanding the current landscape of Indigenous media portrayal and the significant role digital platforms now have. Furthermore, the researchers provide critical insights into the intersectional impact of media portrayals and the emerging use of social media for accurate cultural representation.

However, a weakness lies in the relative novelty of platforms, such as TikTok. This means that there is limited empirical research focused specifically on Indigenous TikTok users' use and the platform's algorithmic influence on content distribution and engagement. To address this limitation, I have incorporated news articles from digital media sources into my Literature Review. While these may not provide the depth of analysis typically found in academic studies, they are essential for preserving a wide range of perspectives that might otherwise be missing.

Perspectives and Conflicts

The spectrum of perspectives on the role of digital media in Indigenous representation reveals a dichotomy between critical and optimistic viewpoints. Many scholars share a positive view about the potential for social media to empower marginalized groups, while others indicate that digital media could be a perpetuator of stereotypes. There are varying views on whether TikTok can be a tool for dismantling damaging portrayals.

This divergence is significant as it highlights the debate regarding the value and impact of social media on Indigenous communities' ability to self-represent and effect change. These differing views underscore an ongoing discourse about the role and responsibilities of digital platforms in identity formation, community building, and cultural representation.

Research Gap

A significant gap identified in the research is the lack of exploration into TikTok's impact on the visibility and sharing of Indigenous content. This gap points to the need for a detailed analysis of the digital mechanisms that influence the reach and engagement of Indigenous narratives on this specific platform.

Trends

The trends in the literature reflect a growing awareness of the role that platforms have in the cultural and self-representation of Indigenous Peoples. The literature also indicates a shift towards viewing digital spaces as arenas for cultural negotiation and identity formation, emphasizing the platform's empowering potential for marginalized communities.

Analysis of Findings from Literature Review

Historical Media Representation of Indigenous Peoples and its Impact

Consistent damaging portrayal of Indigenous Peoples in mainstream media

Historically, media representation of Indigenous Peoples, specifically in mainstream media, has been a pattern of misrepresentation, appropriation, and marginalization. Winter & Boudeau (2018) critique how media and technology have been used to alter Indigenous Peoples' realities, particularly through the romanticized and static portrayals of cultures (p. 38). They argue that these media representations serve to "control the way that society views Indigenous [Peoples] and cultures" and perpetuate Eurocentric perspectives (Winter & Boudeau, 2018, p. 38). According to Winter & Boudeau (2018), this portrayal significantly undermines Indigenous contributions to media and technology (p. 40).

Harding (2006) extends this discussion by analyzing the evolution of news discourse about Aboriginal People. Despite changes over time, Harding (2006) finds that the consistent narrative is to "protect dominant interests and signify [Aboriginal People] as a threat" (p. 205). This has perpetuated inequality and justified colonial and assimilation tactics (Harding, 2006, p. 214). The media's role in reinforcing these damaging narratives is impactful, as it maintains biases and prejudices (Harding, 2006, p. 225). In a more recent study, Harding & Ray (2022) highlight that this practice persists, underscoring the necessity for newsrooms to adopt an "Indigenizing" approach to ensure that news coverage is both balanced and informative, moving towards a more inclusive representation (p. 18).

Similarly, Cripps (2021) further emphasizes the intersectional impact of such damaging media portrayals, as they focus on Indigenous women located in Canada and Australia. Cripps (2021) found that the media's damaging portrayals contribute to the marginalization of

Aboriginal women, labelling them as “hopeless and helpless” (p. 315). This is coined as the “Aboriginal violence template,” which magnifies negative stereotypes and positions Indigenous women as blameworthy in crimes committed against them (Cripps, 2021, p. 315–316). Cripps (2021) highlights the need to assess these narratives whilst stressing the media’s role in shaping perceptions and responses to Indigenous issues (p. 316).

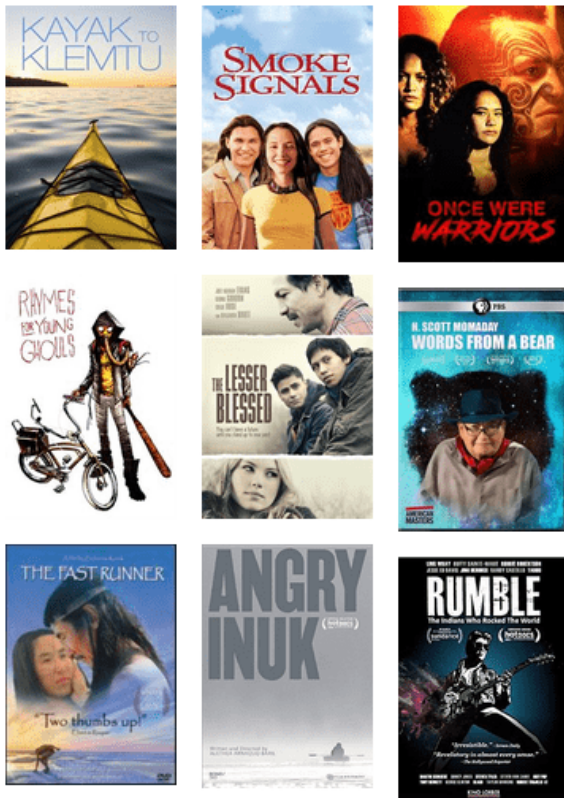
The historical stereotyping of Indigenous Peoples in mainstream media

The historical media representation of Indigenous Peoples has been a consistent pattern of marginalization and stereotyping. Francis (2011) explores the concept of the "Imaginary Indian," a social construct that has been embedded in North American consciousness. This imagery, derived from European preconceptions and prejudices, has significantly influenced public policy and societal misconceptions across Canada (Francis, 2011, p. 22). The portrayal of Indigenous Peoples as disappearing figures in history has been a recurring theme in Canadian media, which blatantly ignores Indigenous Peoples’ experiences and cultures (Francis, 2011, pp. 23; 30).

Burns & Shor (2021) provide a compelling analysis of the variations in Canada’s media coverage, where Indigenous Peoples and communities are often depicted in “dehumanizing and racially stereotyping ways,” in comparison to non-Indigenous folks. This biased reporting disregards the “historical and structural context” that has shaped Indigenous Peoples’ current community conditions, lived experiences, and privileges (Burns & Shor, 2021).

Indigenous-made documentaries and digital games

Figure 1: Indigenous films and documentaries.



Note. By Edmonton Public Library, n.d., Graphic.

Leuthold (1996) discusses the emerging use of documentaries as a prevalent genre in Indigenous media to dismantle mainstream media's misrepresentations and provide "a way of accurately recording and presenting both history and contemporary lives" (p. 30). Indigenous Peoples continue to "hope that through electronic media they can present role models to young [Indigenous People] and expose non-[Indigenous folks] to cultures that they might not encounter otherwise" (Leuthold, 1996, p. 31). This collective effort to share authentic documentaries helps establish a meaningful dialogue and understanding between Indigenous People and non-Indigenous folks (Leuthold, 1996, p. 37).

As well, Nijdam (2023) explores how digital games, such as "Gufihtara eallu," serve as a form of digital storytelling and education about Indigenous knowledge systems and cultural heritage (p. 3,093). These games are collaboratively developed with the respective Indigenous community to ensure that they are authentic, respectful, and "speak to and represent Indigenous experience[s]" (Nijdam, 2023, p. 3,095). Nijdam (2023) emphasizes that these digital games are more than entertainment; they embody Indigenous methodologies and present storytelling traditions as "contemporary, interactive, and evolving" (p. 3,095). This approach to game design reflects Indigenous ways of knowing and practices, which ultimately contribute to cultural preservation and revitalization (Nijdam, 2023, pp. 3,104).

The Importance of Authentic Indigenous Representation and Visibility

The role of authentic media representation in shaping identities

The significance of authentic media representation in shaping Indigenous Peoples' identities is multifaceted. Fenelon & Murguía (2008) highlight the importance of maintaining an Indigenous perspective in analyses and narratives, emphasizing the necessity for Indigenous Peoples to resist dominant narratives and revitalize their cultural practices and languages (p. 1,656). They argue that such resistance is crucial for empowering Indigenous Peoples to explore their identities against dominant societal portrayals (Fenelon & Murguía, 2008, p. 1,657).

Leavitt et al. (2015) describe the consequences of the lack of contemporary Indigenous representation in mass media as "creating narrow and limiting identity prototypes." These normalized media depictions restrict Indigenous Peoples' imaginations about their potential within society and encourage self-stereotyping. The stereotypical and historical portrayals

contribute to distorted self-perceptions and impede the development of a well-rounded identity (Leavitt et al., 2015).

Furthermore, Harriger et al. (2023) address the broader context of media representation and its impact on body image, as media portrayals significantly influence self-perception and identity. Although social media offers opportunities for diverse representation and engagement, it often perpetuates unrealistic beauty standards and Eurocentric ideas of attractiveness (Harriger et al., 2023). This shows the importance of diverse and authentic media representation, as it directly impacts how individuals perceive themselves (Harriger et al., 2023).

In contrast, Fellows & Smith (2022) share the hope that comes with the power of social media as a tool for Indigenous representation and activism (p. 256). Specifically, social media has mobilized support for various Indigenous causes — this includes the #IdleNoMore movement, National Day of Awareness of MMIWG2S, and various land and water protector movements (Fellows & Smith, 2022, pp. 256–257). Social media has also provided a digital space for Indigenous Peoples to share their stories and perspectives, whilst challenging the colonial and stereotypical narratives (Fellows & Smith, 2022, p. 260).

The role of digital storytelling in healing and identity construction

Digital storytelling has emerged as a transformative tool to assist with identity construction and healing, especially within marginalized communities. This involves multimedia elements — photos, artwork, text, music, and voiceovers — to create personalized narratives (Cunsolo et al., 2013, p. 132). Cunsolo et al. (2013) highlight its effectiveness within Indigenous communities, emphasizing the empowerment and self-representation it fosters (pp. 136; 139). Participants create digital stories as a form of self-expression and knowledge sharing, often

addressing complex and interrelated issues such as cultural practices, environmental changes, and personal histories (Cunsolo et al., 2013, p. 136; Barrett & Cocq, 2019, p. 93). This participatory approach allows individuals, “who have been historically silenced, marginalized, and/or tokenized,” to reclaim their narratives whilst building community connections (Cunsolo et al., 2013, p. 142).

Wuthnow (2023) extends this to higher education, where digital storytelling is used to improve critical reflection skills, digital media literacy, and personal insight among students (p. 3). This educational strategy uses digital storytelling’s emotional and narrative depth to facilitate deeper understanding and personal development (Wuthnow, 2023, p. 6). A few of the positive impacts are the skill development of “critical thinking, questioning, and innovating” (Wuthnow, 2023, p. 6). Juppi (2023) further explores digital storytelling in the context of career guidance, to be used as a self-reflective tool (p. 49). By encouraging self-reflection, digital storytelling enables participants to construct an identity as well as facilitate a sense of agency, self-awareness, and resilience (Juppi, 2023, p. 55).

Social Media Content Strategies

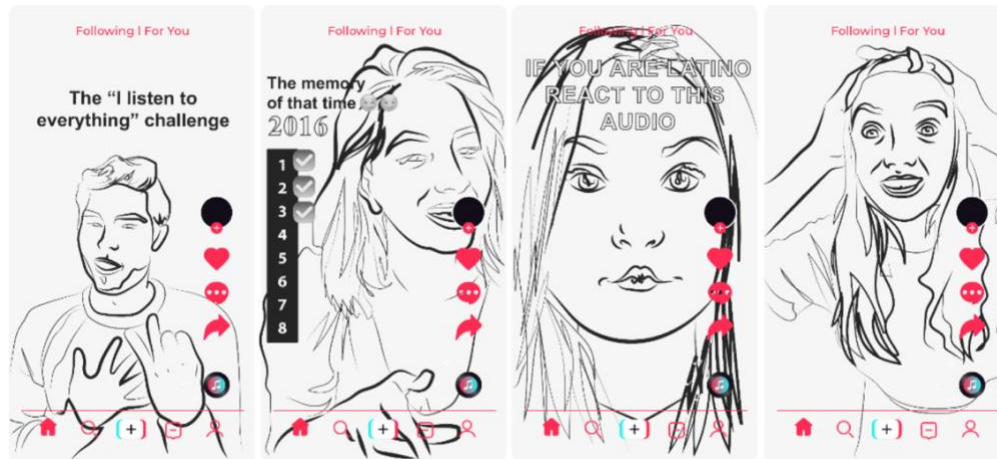
Storytelling, meme recreation, and cultural teachings

Social media is used as a tool for active engagement and participation with diverse audiences (Ruddell, 2013, p. 38). Across various platforms, Indigenous users use a blend of storytelling, meme recreating, and cultural teachings to share their Indigeneity and build a sense of community (Ruddell, 2013, p. 38). To grow their communities, using content strategies is vital — engagement is measured through action-oriented actions such as likes/reactions, comments, and shares (Kordzadeh & Young, 2022, p. 128). Specific content strategies are needed to ensure

that the content resonates with audiences; this varies based on context, industry, and cultural differences (Kordzadeh & Young, 2022, p. 130).

TikTok storytelling codes: musical diversity

Figure 2: TikTok music challenges.



Note. By Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2022, Graphic.

On TikTok, Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin (2022) explored storytelling and memes, specifically around music challenges. Users express their identity and emotions using digital resources, such as music, which becomes a critical component of transmedia storytelling (Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2022, p. 886). Carlson (2013) powerfully states that “[Indigenous People] do not stop being [Indigenous] because they are online” (p. 148). This style of TikTok storytelling assists in creating immersive narratives and supporting a sense of belonging (Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2022, p. 886). It also amplifies the “voices of Indigenous communities [to] be heard in ways that were rare even twenty years ago” (Barrett & Cocq, 2019, p. 90).

A further example is MacKay’s (2021) examination of the intersection of Indigenous and transgender identities in digital spaces, focusing on Smokii Sumac's poetry (p. 40). Smokii

Sumac's work, shared on Facebook and Instagram, showcases how digital spaces can foster self-exploration and community for marginalized groups (MacKay, 2021, p. 43). McKay (2021) argues that Smokii Sumac's openness and vulnerability have built a "welcoming space for trans* and Indigenous [People] to find community and develop communal identities unaffected by distance" (p. 42).

The use of content strategies as a tool for empowerment and cultural preservation

In digital spaces, content strategies play a crucial role in empowering Indigenous communities. Botangen et al. (2017) emphasize the transformative impact of social media platforms, such as Facebook, in sustaining and mobilizing Indigenous knowledge amongst Igorot migrants (p. 2,303). These online spaces deepen the bond of community members as they share their traditional culture and counteract the potential loss of cultural identity (Botangen et al., 2017, p. 2,305; Carlson, 2013, p. 147). Social media platforms inherently have a participatory and collaborative environment where Indigenous knowledge can be preserved and revitalized — playing a significant role in the learning and sharing of Indigenous cultures (Botangen et al., 2017, p. 2,303).

Furthermore, ICTs have revolutionized how Indigenous knowledge is preserved and mobilized. Botangen et al. (2017) share that irrespective of globalization's complexities, where Indigenous Peoples are often overshadowed by dominant cultures, ICTs still offer opportunities for cultural preservation and celebration (p. 2,303). Specifically, social media platforms provide Indigenous communities with a space to document, share, and reinforce their unique cultural elements, including language, arts, rituals, and social justice practices (Botangen et al., 2017, pp. 2,304; 2,310).

ICTs' Role in Community Building

The community-building aspect of niche social media groups

Harris & Harris (2011) highlight how ICTs contribute to the social development of rural Indigenous communities. They discuss the significance of ICTs in preserving unique cultural traditions, emphasizing how they facilitate consistent sharing (p. 4). This is particularly evident in their analysis of a rural community in East Malaysia, where they suggest the use of ICTs reinforced social processes for cultural transmission (Harris & Harris, 2011, p. 1). ICTs were instrumental in promoting local culture, mitigating isolation, and fostering public debate on community issues (Harris & Harris, 2011, p. 4).

Hung et al. (2023) offer another perspective as they reveal how social media platforms enable the formation of supportive communities around sensitive topics, such as racial trauma (p. 298). Social media platforms are providing a space for “questioning and challenging oppression, denial, and privilege” whilst forming solidarity and reliable networks (Hung et al., 2023, p. 302). This intersection highlights ICTs’ impact on enabling communities to connect, share, and grow, even when faced with challenges (Harris & Harris, 2011, p. 16).

Social learning and knowledge sharing

Arobba et al. (2010) discuss the role of platforms, such as “LiveAndTell,” in fostering community engagement and language preservation for Lakota-speaking communities in the Western United States. “LiveAndTell does not create or own the content, rather, it provides an environment for Lakota speakers to create their own content” (Arobba et al., 2010). This model is especially relevant for languages and traditional knowledge that are at risk of disappearing. By providing a platform that is low-cost, culturally sensitive, and open for future innovation,

“LiveAndTell” acts as a gateway for Lakota speakers to share, learn, and preserve their language and culture (Arobba et al., 2010).

Similarly, Noronha et al. (2021) focus on the use of mobile applications (“apps”), such as “JoyPop™,” in supporting Indigenous youth well-being across Canada (p. 124). The authors explored how digital platforms enhance cultural self-expression and personal agency among Indigenous youth (Noronha et al., 2021, p. 124). The “JoyPop™” app incorporates features designed to foster resilience, such as mood ratings and activities for emotional regulation, reflecting the Haudenosaunee values of personal agency, skill development, and a community-based approach to wellness (Noronha et al., 2021, p. 126). This initiative offers tailored digital tools to improve mental wellness and resilience among Indigenous youth (Noronha et al., 2021, p. 130–131).

Sharing the use of ICTs in preserving Indigenous culture

The integration of ICTs into Indigenous cultural preservation demonstrates an empowering intersection of tradition and modernity. Indigenous Knowledge Centres (“IKCs”) worldwide utilize digital technologies to revitalize endangered cultures, improve the economic sovereignty of Indigenous communities, and increase community-based involvement in decision-making (Hunter, 2005, p. 109). IKCs leverage information technologies to manage and disseminate knowledge, encompassing cultural heritage, traditional practices, and local wisdom unique to each community (Hunter, 2005, p. 109). Hunter (2005) discusses the use of digital tools in Indigenous knowledge management, particularly noting the need for robust, reliable information technology (“IT”) security systems, simple user interfaces, and low-cost and scalable software solutions (Hunter, 2005, p. 114).

Abidin (2021) discusses the role of social media, particularly TikTok, in shaping “internet celebrity cultures” and how it influences Indigenous youth (p. 77). The platform's emphasis on short-form video content and its unique algorithm has led to new forms of visibility labour and internet celebrity, contrasting with traditional models seen on platforms such as Instagram and YouTube (Abidin, 2021, p. 77). The platform's capacity for storytelling, humour, and advocacy presents opportunities for Indigenous voices to be heard and cultural narratives to be shared widely (Abidin, 2021, p. 80).

Social Media and Indigenous Empowerment

Social media as an empowering agent, especially within marginalized groups and communities

Social media has emerged as an empowering agent, especially for marginalized groups and communities. Gurumayum et al.'s (2021) research on social media empowering Meitei women in Manipur, India, is a valuable example (p. 3,446). The authors reveal how social media challenges traditional, male-centric media narratives by offering women a platform for self-expression, advocacy, and mobilization against gender discrimination (Gurumayum et al., 2021, p. 3,446). This empowerment has resulted in greater public accountability and advanced women's rights more broadly (Gurumayum et al., 2021, p. 3,447). Similarly, Kopacz & Lawton's (2013) study on YouTube videos demonstrated how user-generated content alters public perceptions of Indigenous People (p. 17). YouTube provided alternative depictions of marginalized groups, fostering discussions about racial issues and challenging the stereotypical representations that still persist in mainstream media (Kopacz & Lawton, 2013, p. 18). Their findings suggest that an introduction to diverse and inclusive content can decrease prejudice and

stereotyping, therefore empowering marginalized communities to reshape dominant views (Kopacz & Lawton, 2013, p 19).

Social media's empowering role extends to Indigenous activism in Canada, as discussed by Roburn's (2021) qualitative examination of the Kwawaka'wakw First Nations' advocacy efforts in British Columbia (p. 201). This study highlights social media's crucial role in documenting and disseminating the Kwawaka'wakw First Nations' community perspectives on issues such as fish farming, rights, and governance (Roburn, 2021, p. 205). The Kwawaka'wakw First Nations had the ability to reach wider audiences, pressure the government, and create substantial policy changes (Roburn, 2021, p. 205). This exemplifies how social media serves as a powerful tool for Indigenous communities in advocating for their sovereignty and rights. In addition to these insights, MacDonald's (2023) research on an Inuit community underscores the potential of social media in facilitating second-language learning and intercultural communication (p. 784). Despite a significant research gap about the Inuit people and their culture, MacDonald (2023) highlights how social media has been used to “maintain ... cultural identity amid the influences of globalization” (p. 791).

Further emphasizing social media's empowering role, Paulino's (2021) thesis indicates how social media has become an accessible avenue for expressing and maintaining cultural identities (p. 5). Integrating these studies with those of Gurumayum et al. (2021), Kopacz & Lawton (2013), and Roburn (2021) provides a comprehensive view of social media's crucial role for marginalized groups and communities. These platforms enable marginalized folks to preserve their languages, share cultural narratives, and advocate for their rights and well-being on their own terms.

Indigenous journalism empowers individuals and communities

Indigenous journalism significantly contributes to the empowerment of individuals and communities by providing community-built platforms for sharing Indigenous narratives.

Hanusch (2013) highlights the important role of Indigenous journalism in contributing to Indigenous politics and identities (p. 251). It offers a counter-narrative to mainstream media reporting, aiding in the empowerment and revitalization of languages and cultures (Hanusch, 2013, p. 954; Bhroin et al., 2021, p. 186). Māori journalists in New Zealand, for example, view their role as crucial in providing this counter-narrative and acting as “watchdogs” within a culturally specific framework (Hanusch, 2013, p. 955).

Our media connects our communities

Figure 3: Naomi Moran, Chairperson of First Nations Media Australia.



Note. By First Nations Media Australia, 2017, Photograph.

This much-needed rise of Indigenous media, facilitated by new technologies, has enabled Indigenous Peoples to reach their own communities more effectively and share their stories broadly (Featherstone et al., 2021, p. 55). This development has led to increased attention to the role of media led by Indigenous People in contributing to “Indigenous public spheres” and

positive representations (Hanusch, 2013, p. 952; Featherstone et al., 2021, p. 55). Indigenous journalism, with a history dating back to the nineteenth century, plays a key role in empowering Indigenous societies (Hanusch, 2013, p. 957). It provides an alternative public space where Indigenous Peoples can discuss their “own issues” on “their terms,” acting as “symbols of empowerment and means for political mobilization” (Hanusch, 2013, pp. 952; 954; Bhroin et al., 2021, p. 184).

Indigenous TikTok

Exploring TikTok’s global reach and its popularity

TikTok's global reach is evident in its rapid growth and unique features that have captivated diverse audiences (McLachlan, 2023). Abidin (2021) notes that TikTok's popularity surged with more than two billion downloads in 2020’s first quarter, making it one of the most downloaded apps worldwide (p. 77). This growth is partly due to TikTok's distinctive features, such as its focus on “post-based virality” over “persona-based fame” and its emphasis on memes as the driving content template (Abidin, 2021, p. 79). This contrasts with existing social media platforms, where fame is more profile-anchored and based on a “coherent persona” or online identity (Abidin, 2021, p. 79).

The platform's adaptability, drawing inspiration from its sister-app Douyin, has played a significant role in its success (Abidin, 2021, p. 77). The rivalry between TikTok and Instagram illustrates the competitive nature of social media platforms and TikTok's rising influence among youth (Abidin, 2021, p. 82). This resulted in “seismic shifts” amongst influencers, with TikTokers pioneering new content creation and engagement models — ultimately moving away from the “Instagrammable” lifestyle to more relatable content (Abidin, 2021, p. 84).

Hiebert & Kortes-Miller's (2023) study further emphasizes TikTok's role in creating supportive communities, particularly for gender and sexual minority youth (p. 800). Their study highlights how TikTok served as a vital platform for youth, providing a space for “identity formation, community building and belonging, and sharing knowledge and information” (Hiebert & Kortes-Miller, 2023, p. 800). Hiebert & Kortes-Miller (2023) discuss TikTok's potential to foster resilience and connection within marginalized communities, challenging traditional ideologies, and offering a sense of belonging and support (pp. 811–812).

The emergence of Indigenous TikTok

The emergence of Indigenous TikTok represents a significant shift in the way Indigenous Peoples engage with digital media — it allows for self-expression, cultural preservation, and activism. Indigenous creators have leveraged this to express their cultural identities, humour, and resistance against appropriation, discrimination, and stereotypes (Loyer, 2020; Vadeboncoeur, 2023).

Abozaid (2023) provides insight into how TikTok has become a platform for cultural learning and healing, particularly for Sophia Whiteye, a Delaware Nation member, and Jori Waskahat, a Plains Cree artist. Sophia Whiteye and Jori Waskahat turned to TikTok to connect with their culture, address intergenerational trauma, and educate others about their traditions and experiences (Abozaid, 2023). Through TikTok, Sophia Whiteye “found no better method to feel better than to get close to her culture that she never got a chance to practise growing up” (Abozaid, 2023).

Figueroa-Zepeda (2022) explores this from a broader perspective, examining how Indigenous People in Latin America use TikTok for self-representation and resistance (p. 1). The

study found that “the main motives for TikTok video-creation are education and visibility of their culture with humour, involving the depiction and reinforcement of ... empowerment” (Figueroa-Zepeda, 2022, p. 1). It affirms that TikTok videos go beyond entertainment as they can act as cultural artifacts and instruments of political identity and resistance (Figueroa-Zepeda, 2022, p. 2).

The importance of Indigenous narratives and experiences in digital spaces

Adelson & Olding (2021) highlight the role of digital storytelling as a medium to heal and decolonize. These digital stories, often autobiographical, play a crucial role in shaping a dynamic process of identity construction, rather than presenting a singular portrayal of Indigenous identity (Adelson & Olding, 2021). Carlson & Mongibello (2021) explain that “digital devices have been appropriated by Indigenous [Peoples] in many ways that are creative, powerful, and political” (p. 3).

Crandall (2023) expands on this by examining the work of N’we Jinan, a group of young Indigenous artists who leverage digital media to articulate and preserve Indigenous identity (p. 1). By integrating Indigenous languages, melodies, and cultural symbols with contemporary music and video production, N’we Jinan facilitates a powerful form of cultural expression and resistance to the “colonizing gaze” (p. 2). This is the influence digital media can have in repairing relationships and understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities (Crandall, 2023, p. 2).

TikTok and self-expression

Toledo's (2023) research explores TikTok's role in facilitating self-expression and identity negotiation among New Zealand youth (p. 3). This study highlights the development of hybrid identities, reflecting a dynamic process of self-representation (Toledo, 2023, p. 2). Youth on TikTok are using "different coping strategies to navigate communication dilemmas on social media between their ethnic and cultural identities and dominant discourses in New Zealand society" (Toledo, 2023, p. 2).

Furthermore, Toledo's (2023) research emphasizes the use of "self-directed ethnic humour" on TikTok as a key coping mechanism for these youth, aiding them in diffusing tensions and fostering social acceptance while addressing complex topics (p. 2). The study is significant in illustrating TikTok's pivotal role in the "identity negotiation," since it offers a platform for articulation and experimentation (Toledo, 2023, p. 1).

Limitations and Challenges

The Challenges of Social Media

Bouchard et al. (2023) warn of social media platform's tendency to polarize opinions and its focus on "quick validation," which can undermine meaningful discourse (p. 98). They note how online activism can also "feed into moral panic" (Bouchard et al., 2023, p. 98). Kennedy and Frazer (2021) further acknowledge social media's empowering effect on Indigenous communities, yet also point out its role in facilitating "racist abuse in many forms: hate speech, trolling, cyberbullying, online harassment, digital sexual abuse, and police surveillance" (p. 4). They stress the need for algorithms to identify culturally specific violence, illustrating how social media can perpetuate colonial beliefs through seemingly harmless content (Kennedy & Frazer,

2021, p. 6). Overall, these insights showcase the need for a critical analysis of social media, recognizing its duality to empower and harm.

TikTok's Limitations

Matamoros-Fernández (2023) highlights challenges in moderating humour on TikTok, where features such as "Use This Sound" and "Duet" can quickly spread harmful content (p. 1). Jones (2023) points out how TikTok's algorithm-driven "For You Page" ("FYP") may create echo chambers and marginalize certain groups, indicating a reinforcement of societal biases (pp. 1,193–1,196). Karizat et al. (2021) also found user concerns about the algorithm suppressing certain marginalized identities (p. 305:5). While TikTok offers a dynamic platform for expression and community building, its limitations — particularly in terms of content moderation, algorithmic biases, and representation of diverse identities — pose noteworthy challenges (Karizat et al., 2021, p. 305:5). These issues can impact and perpetuate broader societal issues.

Summary

In conclusion, the academic literature provides a comprehensive overview of the transformative role that the use of digital spaces can have for Indigenous Peoples. These platforms have emerged as spaces for cultural preservation, community engagement, identity formation, and self-expression. The novelty of Indigenous TikTok presents a gap in the academic literature, underscoring the need for further research to unravel the distinct ways in which this community contributes to the amplification of Indigenous Peoples' experiences and cultures.

My Capstone Project seeks to fill this research gap by examining how audience engagement metrics reflect interactions with and perceptions of Indigenous TikTok content. It focuses on the research question: How does audience engagement through likes, comments, saves, and shares reflect interactions with and perceptions of Indigenous TikTok content? My Capstone Project will utilize a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative analysis of publicly available engagement metrics with qualitative thematic coding of comments on videos from four Indigenous TikTokers. I am hopeful that my findings will contribute to academic discourse while amplifying authentic and respectful representation of Indigenous Peoples in digital spaces.

The next chapter will detail the methodological framework adopted for my Capstone Project, including the approach I will use for data collection and analysis. This framework is designed to capture the complex dynamics of Indigenous representation on TikTok, building on the theoretical insights garnered from my Literature Review and addressing the identified research gaps.

Methodology

This chapter outlines the research design and methodology employed in my Capstone Project. Utilizing a mixed-method content analysis, I leveraged both qualitative and quantitative approaches to extract and interpret themes from the audience engagement metrics.

While qualitative data analysis is primarily concerned with the analysis of talk and text, my Capstone Project also incorporates the analysis of images and videos within small-scale social research (Denscombe, 2010, p. 279). As summarized in *Figure 4* below, content analysis and narrative analysis offer different perspectives on the role of words, ranging from conveying facts to uncovering hidden meanings and understanding social interactions (Denscombe, 2010, pp. 279–281).

Figure 4: The analysis of text and talk.

	Content analysis	Narrative analysis
Purpose of analysis	Look for hidden message	Depict constructions of personal identity and social words
Data	Text and talk	Text and talk
Work done by words	Denote things	Construct things
Significance of data	Frequency of occurrence	Implied meaning
Focus of attention	Surface content	Structure or meaning of content
Units of analysis	Words and phrases	Whole story or text
Treatment of data	Measured (based on frequency and position)	Deciphered (to find the symbolic significance of story)
Data analysis	Quantification of text	Structure or social implications of the text

Note. Adapted from *The Good Research Guide: For small-scale social research projects*, by M. Denscombe, p. 280. Copyright 2010 by Open University Press.

The analysis of Indigenous TikTok content involves interpreting the explicit messages conveyed and underlying social contexts. This is significant for developing an understanding of how words, images, sounds, and videos, contribute to the construction of cultural narratives and social interactions within the Indigenous TikTok community. While some forms of content analysis may isolate individual words or phrases, approaches such as narrative analysis

emphasize the importance of contextualizing the units of analysis within their broader social context (Denscombe, 2010, pp. 279–281).

By integrating these qualitative research approaches with an analysis of engagement metrics, my Capstone Project aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of Indigenous TikTok content, its themes, and audience interactions.

Research Question

My Capstone Project was guided by the following research question:

RQ: How does audience engagement through likes, comments, saves, and shares reflect interactions with and perceptions of Indigenous TikTok content?

This research question also navigated the selection of sample size, data collection strategies, and analytical approaches, aiming to uncover the nuanced ways Indigenous cultures and identities are expressed and understood through TikTok.

Design

In designing my Capstone Project, I employed a mixed-method approach that integrated both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, as it closely aligned with answering my research question. This design aimed to facilitate a holistic exploration of Indigenous TikTok, allowing for a nuanced analysis of content creation, audience engagement, and cultural narratives.

My data collection method involved the selection of four Indigenous TikTokers who identify as being located on Treaty 6 territory, which gathered a diverse range of perspectives

and cultural expressions whilst being in the same geographical region (Empowering the Spirit, 2017). Treaty 6, signed by Crown representatives and Cree, Assiniboiné, and Ojibwé leaders in 1876, established the terms for land rights and protections between the federal government and Indigenous Peoples in Alberta and Saskatchewan (Filice, 2016). This historical context is important for understanding the perspectives and content shared by the influencers.

From here, I selected three different videos from each Indigenous TikTokkers' account to analyze. By curating a dataset comprising multiple creators and videos, I aimed to uncover the breadth and depth of Indigenous TikTok content, transcending individual narratives to reveal broader thematic patterns and community dynamics.

Furthermore, the integration of quantitative metrics — such as follower count, date posted, likes, comments, saves, shares, and views — provided valuable insights into the reach and resonance of the content. This quantitative analysis complemented the qualitative examination of the themes, categories, and codes, which offered a more comprehensive understanding.

By synthesizing quantitative metrics with qualitative insights, I was able to analyze the intersection of identity, culture, and digital expression within Indigenous TikTok. This hopefully will contribute to a deeper understanding of Indigenous digital sovereignty and cultural resilience in the digital age.

Participants

In selecting participants for my study, I employed criteria derived from more than two years of observation and engagement with Indigenous TikTok content. Specifically, I focused on TikTokkers who identified as Indigenous and from located on Treaty 6 territory, situated in

Alberta (Empowering the Spirit, 2017). This geographical scope aimed to capture a diversity of Indigenous perspectives within a specific regional context.

Moreover, I prioritized inclusivity by selecting TikTokers representing various gender identities, as indicated by their preferred pronouns on their profiles. Additionally, I intentionally chose a varied sample in terms of follower count, ranging from nano (1,000 to 100,000 followers) to mega influencers (1,000,000 plus), to ensure a comprehensive representation of the Indigenous TikTok community.

Ethical Considerations

Given that my Capstone Project involves the analysis of publicly available TikTok content, which falls within the category of internet research and social media analysis, it was considered low-risk and non-invasive, with no direct interventions, privacy, or confidentiality concerns (University of Alberta, n.d.). As such, I obtained ethical approval from the University of Alberta's Research Ethics Board (REB) 2. This approval ensures that my research adheres to ethical standards and respects the privacy and confidentiality of the individuals and communities involved.

To ensure a representative sample of Indigenous TikTok content, I utilized a purposive sampling approach, specifically selecting TikTokers who identified as from Treaty 6 territory (Bray, 2023; Empowering the Spirit, 2017). This sampling strategy allowed for the inclusion of diverse voices and perspectives within the Indigenous communities, enhancing the depth of my content analysis. Given the nature of my Capstone Project, there was no direct recruitment of TikTokers as participants. Denscombe (2010) refers to this as “the use of ‘found’ images,” which

can be also referred to as “found” videos in my context — the TikToks were “produced by other people for reasons not directly connected with [my] investigation” (p. 230).

In ensuring the integrity of the analysis process, I adhered to confidentiality and anonymity measures, refraining from sharing any personal information. Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin's (2022) examination of music challenges on TikTok underscored the complexity when it comes to understanding the TikTokers' motivations — whose aspirations are unknown and span from ordinary users to aspiring microcelebrities — thereby complicating my comprehension of their visibility-seeking behaviours on the platform (pp. 888–889). In light of learning this, I anonymized the Indigenous TikTokers by excluding personal information, such as their names, preferred pronouns, and usernames (Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2022, pp. 888–889).

Setting

The study was conducted remotely from my home environment. This setting provided a conducive atmosphere for focused analysis, offering privacy with little to no distractions. I anticipated the potential need for virtual engagement, so I planned to structure my Capstone Project with remote accessibility in mind, ensuring that all aspects of data collection and analysis could be seamlessly and confidentially executed from a virtual setting.

Additionally, the familiar and controlled environment of my home fostered a sense of ease. Overall, conducting the study from home offered a practical and effective approach to data analysis, optimizing the research process, and maximizing the potential for insightful findings.

Instrument

For data collection, I employed a methodological approach that integrated both quantitative metrics and qualitative analysis. The primary technique involved systematically gathering publicly available data from Indigenous TikTok content creators and their videos. This entailed extracting quantitative metrics such as follower count, date posted, views, likes, comments, and shares from the TikTok platform's analytics. Additionally, qualitative analysis involves a thorough examination of the videos and comments, including narrative analysis to identify recurring themes, cultural narratives, and community engagement dynamics (Denscombe, 2010, p. 280). By combining quantitative metrics with qualitative insights, this approach allowed for a comprehensive exploration of Indigenous representation on TikTok, capturing both the reach and resonance of content as well as the underlying meanings and cultural resonances embedded within it.

In the analysis phase, I conducted manual coding to explore the themes and categories within the data. My key considerations in designing this approach included ensuring accuracy in data extraction, maintaining consistency in coding and analysis procedures, and adhering to the University of Alberta's ethical guidelines for the responsible use of the data. Overall, this technique provided a robust framework for generating data that was responsive to my research question, offering valuable insights into the complexities of Indigenous digital cultures within the TikTok platform.

Procedures

The steps to conduct my Capstone Project were outlined to ensure clarity and replicability. First, I systematically identified Indigenous TikTok content creators located on

Treaty 6 territory. This involved searching for relevant hashtags, exploring my "For You" page, and reviewing Indigenous creators' profiles (see Appendix B). Next, I selected a diverse sample of four TikTokers, considering factors such as gender identity, follower count, and content diversity. The TikToks selected spanned over four years — from 2020 to 2024 — to capture the evolution of their content and audience engagement metrics. The data collection involved extracting quantitative metrics such as follower count, date posted, views, likes, comments, and shares from TikTok's analytics dashboard, alongside qualitative analysis of themes and categories.

These steps were chosen to ensure a comprehensive exploration of Indigenous representation on TikTok, encompassing both quantitative metrics and qualitative insights, whilst also recognizing time constraints. By systematically curating a diverse sample and analyzing content over a multi-year timeframe, my Capstone Project aimed to capture the breadth and depth of Indigenous Peoples' digital cultures within the platform.

To validate these steps, I drew upon insights from the methods literature. Leavitt et al. (2015) emphasize the importance of considering the diverse aspirations, which informed the selection of TikTokers representing a range of follower counts and content styles. Additionally, Toledo (2023) highlights the ethical considerations surrounding the public display of data and the "limbo of public and private" on social media platforms, underscoring the need for responsible data extraction and analysis practices (pp. 24–25).

Despite careful planning, ensuring the privacy and anonymity of TikTokers while conducting content analysis posed challenges, requiring thoughtful consideration and adherence to the University of Alberta's ethical guidelines. In response to these challenges, adjustments were made to the data collection procedures, including refining search strategies and well-

defined data anonymization. These adaptations were crucial in maintaining the integrity of my Capstone Project, while navigating the complexities of conducting research within a digital platform.

The data collection process involved four anonymized TikTok influencers, labelled Influencer 1, Influencer 2, Influencer 3, and Influencer 4. Each of the influencers self-identified as Indigenous and as located on Treaty 6 territory. The influencers create content focused on Indigenous cultures, traditions, and contemporary issues. For the quantitative analysis, engagement metrics were systematically recorded for each influencer's videos, providing a baseline understanding of audience interaction levels.

Qualitative Thematic Coding

I manually coded each of the comments from the videos to identify the recurring themes and categories. I utilized Duncombe's (2010) qualitative data research guide, which indicated to "look for obvious recurrent themes or issues" and to "group the codes into categories or themes" (p. 240).

The themes I identified included (1) Cultural Identity, (2) Support and Respect, (3) Education and Awareness, and (4) Negativity. Each theme was further broken down into categories such as (1.1) Indigenous Identity, (1.2), Cultural Preservation, (2.1) Activism, (2.3) Questions and Learning, (3.1) Affirmation, (3.2) Encouragement, (3.3) Humour, (4.1) Hate, and (4.1) Misunderstanding.

Quantitative Data Gathering

For the quantitative analysis, I collected publicly available engagement metrics from each influencer's videos. These metrics included the number of likes, comments, saves, shares, and views. Additionally, I documented each influencer's number of followers to provide a measure of their reach. This data was compiled into a comprehensive table (see *Figure 5*) to highlight the overall interaction levels with each influencer's content.

Given the manual nature of the qualitative coding process, I selected videos with fewer than 200 comments from influencers with higher follower counts to manage time constraints effectively. In total, I coded 290 comments from Influencer 1, 350 comments from Influencer 2, 145 comments from Influencer 3, and 232 comments from Influencer 4 (see *Figure 5*). This approach ensured a manageable and thorough analysis without compromising the integrity of the data collection process.

Data Presentation

The quantitative data was systematically presented in a table, organized by each influencer (see *Figure 5*). Additionally, a supplementary table was provided, offering a brief overview of each influencer along with a high-level explanation of each selected video (see *Figure 6*). Following this, the qualitative data were organized into themes and categories, with direct quotes from comments as justification (see *Figures 7.1 to 10.4*). The visual representations included graphs and charts for each influencer and were used to provide a detailed analysis of audience engagement and perceptions.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure the reliability and validity of my findings, several measures were implemented in the analytical procedure. Reliability concerns were addressed through systematic data extraction and coding procedures, ensuring consistency, precision, and reproducibility in the analysis process (Duncombe, 2010, p. 298). Validity was addressed through triangulation, comparing findings from quantitative metrics with qualitative insights to contextualize the results. This approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of Indigenous representation on TikTok while aiming to minimize the risk of misinterpretation.

In conducting the data analysis, I remained mindful of my positionality as a settler and immigrant residing on Treaty 6 territory. I remained grounded in my position, which acknowledges my cultural heritage and colonial background. I approached the research with cultural humility, reflexivity, and profound respect for the Indigenous influencers. I hold a personal understanding of the intricate and complex experiences that stem from living in a colonized nation. This awareness served as a constant reminder of the importance of moving forward with my Capstone Project with integrity.

Despite rigorous analytical procedures, several limitations and unresolved concerns emerged during the data analysis phase. One limitation relates to the inherent biases and limitations of TikTok's analytics dashboard, which may not fully capture the nuances of content engagement and audience dynamics. Additionally, the qualitative analysis relied on my subjective interpretations of content, which introduced bias and potentially overlooking important contextual factors that I may not understand. Furthermore, the anonymization of TikTokers' identities in the analysis may limit the depth of understanding of individual creators and their contributions to Indigenous representation on the platform. Finally, another constraint

arose from the limited quantity of Indigenous TikToks analyzed, which was due to time constraints.

Summary

In summary, my Capstone Project on Indigenous TikTok underscores the complexity and richness of this niche community within the platform. By integrating qualitative and quantitative methodologies, my research offers an exploration of Indigenous representation and engagement on TikTok, showcasing the intricacies of cultural narratives and social interactions.

By embracing cultural humility, reflexivity, and profound respect for Indigenous Peoples, researchers can navigate the digital landscape with integrity, ensuring that Indigenous perspectives and experiences are accurately represented and honoured.

Findings and Discussion

Research Question

My Capstone Project was guided by the following research question: How does audience engagement through likes, comments, and saves reflect interactions with and perceptions of Indigenous TikTok content? This research question also navigated the selection of sample size, data collection strategies, and analytical approaches, aiming to uncover the nuanced ways Indigenous cultures and identities are expressed and understood through TikTok. The analysis revealed significant insights into the audience engagement patterns and responses to Indigenous TikTok content.

To address my research question, a mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative analysis of publicly available engagement metrics — likes, comments, saves, shares, and views — with qualitative thematic coding of comments. As discussed in the methodology chapter, data was collected from four anonymized influencers, labelled Influencers 1 through 4, each creating content focused on Indigenous cultures, traditions, and contemporary issues. This dual approach led to a comprehensive understanding of how Indigenous content is received and interacted with by audiences on TikTok.

Overview

This chapter is structured into several sections. First, the quantitative analysis of engagement metrics provides a baseline understanding of audience interaction levels. The subsequent section delves into qualitative thematic coding, offering a detailed examination of comment themes and categories (Denscombe, 2010, p. 240). The comments analyzed were from both Indigenous Peoples and non-Indigenous people — therefore, my analysis does not make

any distinctions or claims based on the identity of the commenters. Each influencer's content is analyzed separately to highlight specific patterns and audience responses. The chapter concludes with a synthesis of quantitative and qualitative findings, as I discuss their implications for the representation of Indigenous cultures on social media. This structured approach ensures a comprehensive and cohesive analysis, providing clear answers to the research question and contributing to the broader discourse on the digital representation of Indigenous identities.

The findings and analysis are systematically organized to directly address my research question. The presentation begins with a detailed quantitative analysis of engagement metrics, highlighting the overall interaction levels with each influencer's content, as well as a high-level explanation of each video. This is followed by an in-depth qualitative thematic analysis of comments, categorizing data into themes such as Cultural Identity, Support and Respect, Education and Awareness, and Negativity. Each theme is examined with examples and interpretations to understand the nuances of audience engagement and perceptions. The analysis then integrates these insights regarding research literature to draw broader conclusions about the impact of Indigenous TikTok content on its audience.

Data Presentation

This section includes tables with quantitative data, brief information about each influencer, descriptions of each video, and qualitative data that encompass themes, categories, and codes pulled directly from comments. The visual representations include theme charts and category graphs for each influencer. This provides a comprehensive analysis of audience engagement with this Indigenous TikTok content.

Quantitative Data Presentation

Figure 5: TikTok Influencer Engagement Metrics

Figure 5 presents the engagement metrics for four TikTok influencers, labelled Influencer 1, Influencer 2, Influencer 3, and Influencer 4. The table includes the number of followers and each video's engagement metrics (date posted, likes, comments, saves, shares, and views). This quantitative data is integral for understanding the level of audience engagement in these four examples of Indigenous TikTok content.

Influencer	Followers	Video	Date Posted	Likes	Comments	Saves	Shares	Views
1	2,986	1	April 2023	1,460	145	30	26	8,825
		2	February 2023	221	2	9	4	1,350
		3	March 2022	7,411	143	96	150	31,400
2	260,043	4	January 2023	4,283	150	95	30	57,100
		5	May 2023	9,034	173	415	602	65,800
		6	March 2022	566	27	14	3	10,500
3	51,209	7	April 2024	219	41	1	1	4,792
		8	October 2022	2,260	59	96	68	44,000
		9	May 2024	14,600	45	535	1,061	185,800
4	4,478,256	10	July 2024	3,879	32	92	51	31,000
		11	June 2023	7,999	56	441	89	179,900
		12	October 2020	30,200	144	195	291	206,100

Note. The follower count and engagement metrics are as of July 2024.

Qualitative Data Presentation

Figure 6: Descriptions of the Indigenous TikTok Influencers and Their Videos

Figure 6 provides detailed descriptions of the four Indigenous TikTok influencers. Each influencer's background is briefly summarized, followed by descriptions of their respective videos. These descriptions highlight the themes and messages conveyed in their content, showcasing how each influencer uses TikTok to share their culture, raise awareness, and engage with their audiences.

Influencer	About	Video Descriptions		
1	Influencer 1, an Indigenous photographer based on Treaty 6 territory, creates and shares a diverse array of TikTok content. Their portfolio includes vlogs, engaging photo slideshow videos set to popular sounds, and insightful behind-the-scenes glimpses into their creative process.	1: Influencer 1 reflects on the completion of their first year of university, highlighting the significance of breaking barriers, and achieving success. They emphasize the importance of Indigenous students' accomplishments, asserting that "Indigenous students succeeding is the best."	2: Influencer 1 utilizes the audio track from a Billboard (2020) song, featuring empowering words such as "beautiful," "elegant," "intelligent," "capable," "loving," and "majestic." This soundtrack accompanies a visual montage of Indigenous individuals adorned in diverse traditional regalia, celebrating their cultural heritage and identity.	3: Influencer 1 presents a series of photographs featuring Indigenous women dressed in an array of traditional regalia, accompanied by the declaration that "the matriarchs are taking over." This visual narrative is set to a song by Migos ATL (2016), enhancing the message of empowerment and cultural pride.
2	Influencer 2, based on Treaty 6 territory, actively raises awareness about Indigenous Peoples' issues through their content. They participate in popular Indigenous TikTok trends and engage with mainstream trends from an Indigenous perspective, thereby fostering greater understanding and visibility of Indigenous experiences and perspectives.	4: Influencer 2 participates in the "Are you native?" trend on TikTok, wherein influencers inquire about their audience's Indigenous heritage (see Appendix A for trend definition). In their video, Influencer 1 responds by sharing that they are Plains Cree from Treaty 6 territory.	5: On May 5, 2023, Influencer 2 posted a video to raise awareness for MMIWG2S in observance of the National Day of Awareness for MMIWG2S. The video begins with Influencer 2 seated in the passenger seat of a car. This is followed by a series of short clips featuring a woman and a child in ribbon shirts walking through the plains at sunrise. The video concludes with an image of a poster depicting a red handprint, the date May 5, and the words: "National Day of Awareness for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit Relatives." The video is set to a song by Fawn Wood – Topic (2015).	6: Influencer 2 engages in a popular trend that begins with the prompt "Where do you want to be?" and is followed by a photo slideshow offering the audience several choices. The options presented include: "Around the campfire with cousins," "Fishing with Dad," and "Bingo with Kokum." The slideshow is accompanied by a song by TikTokTunes (2020).

3	<p>Influencer 3, based on Treaty 6 territory, is a multifaceted individual engaged in acting, fashion design, food blogging, and vlogging. Their TikTok content includes a variety of vlogs, food reviews, enthusiastic hockey cheering, and participation in popular trends.</p>	<p>7: Influencer 3 responds to a discriminatory comment questioning their Indigenous heritage and labelling them as privileged by creating a light-hearted video. In the video, Influencer 3 smiles and forms a heart with their hands, using the popular sound “Mwah ... blocked.” In the caption, Influencer 3 explains their commitment to blocking negativity and protecting their peace, concluding with a message of love directed at the commenter.</p>	<p>8: Influencer 3 creates a vlog documenting their family's travel adventure across Canada to participate in a popular game show. The vlog features a series of short videos and pictures capturing the journey. Accompanied by a voiceover, Influencer 3 expresses their excitement about the opportunity, emphasizing the significance of representation. There is a text overlay on the video that reinforces this message, stating that "representation matters."</p>	<p>9: Influencer 3 surprises a fan at a local restaurant with a new drum, a stuffed animal, and hockey memorabilia. This gesture was in response to the fan having their drum confiscated at a hockey event. Through these acts of kindness, Influencer 3 brings hope and uplifts the fan's spirits, demonstrating their commitment to supporting and encouraging their community.</p>
4	<p>Influencer 4, based on Treaty 6 territory, is a traditional dancer whose TikTok content primarily revolves around this art form. They are a Pow Wow dancer, performer, creative hoop dancer, and performer. Their TikToks include tutorials on how to perform specific dance moves, educational content about néhiyaw (Cree) traditions, and participation in popular trends (Preston et al., 2023).</p>	<p>10: Influencer 4 shares a TikTok video of themselves participating in traditional dancing at a Pow Wow. The video features a text overlay where they describe their journey from starting as a break dancer to becoming a traditional dancer who incorporates their unique style and moves. The video concludes with the powerful statement: “To be deadly means to be yourself.”</p>	<p>11: Influencer 4 collaborates with the Google Arts & Culture platform to share the story of their heritage and ancestors. They discuss how they use art as a medium to convey their story and preserve their culture for future generations. Educating their audience on the significance of the colour turquoise in their regalia, Influencer 4 explains that it represents the balance of land and sky. They conclude by emphasizing that images and artifacts hold powerful stories of their ancestors' memories and asserting the importance of Indigenous People continuing to share and celebrate who they are.</p>	<p>12: Influencer 4 begins the video by putting on their traditional regalia, accompanied by a text overlay expressing pride in their present-day self and their culture. This is followed by a second clip where Influencer 4 is dressed in a cap and hoodie. The sound "Wow, well done, well done" plays in the background, with a text overlay indicating that this represents their 12-year-old self looking up and feeling proud of who they have become.</p>

Explanation: Figures 7.1 to 10.4***Themes, Categories, and Codes***

This section covers the qualitative themes, categories, and codes from the TikTok videos, based on Denscombe's (2010) five main stages of qualitative data analysis (p. 240). Over the past two years, I have viewed Indigenous TikTok content, which has informed my manual coding of these data. This subjective process involved interpreting the comments through my own understanding, with the codes being direct quotes from the comments to provide a clear picture of audience engagement. Here, I coded a total of 1,017 comments across the influencers' twelve videos.

The categories offer a structured framework for understanding the varied interactions and perceptions audiences have with the Indigenous TikTok content. Below are the explanations for each theme and category:

- Theme 1: Cultural Identity: Reflecting a connection to and pride in Indigenous heritage, traditions, and identity.
 - a. Indigenous Identity: Expressed pride in being Indigenous and highlighted the connections to Indigenous heritage and community.
 - b. Cultural Preservation: Focused on the importance of maintaining and passing down cultural traditions and practices.
- Theme 2: Education and Awareness: Indication of learning, curiosity, and the spread of knowledge about Indigenous cultures and issues.
 - a. Activism: Supported social justice efforts and advocacy for Indigenous rights, sovereignty, reclaiming land, and issues.

- b. Questions and Learning: Sought to understand more about Indigenous traditions, histories, and issues — often asking for further information or clarification.
- Theme 3: Support and Respect: Expressing admiration, encouragement, and respect for the influencers and their cultural representations.
 - a. Affirmation: Validated and positively reinforced the influencer's efforts, art form, and identity.
 - b. Encouragement: Offered support and motivation for the influencer to continue their work, art form, and advocacy.
 - c. Humour: Used humour to connect with the influencers, often reflecting shared cultural jokes or light-hearted interactions.
- Theme 4: Negativity: Reflecting discrimination, misunderstandings, or negative perceptions.
 - a. Hate: Included discriminatory language towards Indigenous Peoples and cultures.
 - b. Misunderstanding: Reflected ignorance or misconceptions.

Using this setup of themes and categories, I analyzed comments related to each individual influencer separately. This approach was necessary because, despite being part of the broader Indigenous TikTok community, each influencer shared unique videos that generated comments. This warranted an independent analysis of each of the video's comments. This method ensured a comprehensive understanding of the distinct interactions and perceptions elicited by each influencer's content. In the discussion section, I reflect on the implications that this analysis holds for understanding Indigenous TikTok more generally. Lastly, the figures are organized from Influencers 1 through 4, to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

The figures below are structured as follows:

- Figures ending in .1: These visualizations represent the (1) theme, (2) category, and (3) codes utilizing direct quotes from the comments.
- Figures ending in .2: These pie charts depict the distribution of themes, providing a clear overview of the thematic composition present for each influencer's content.
- Figures ending in .3: These bar graphs show the distribution of categories, offering a detailed breakdown of how comments are categorized within each theme.
- Figures ending in .4: These tables provide direct quotes from the comments that stood out as significant examples, highlighting key sentiments or insights within each theme and category.

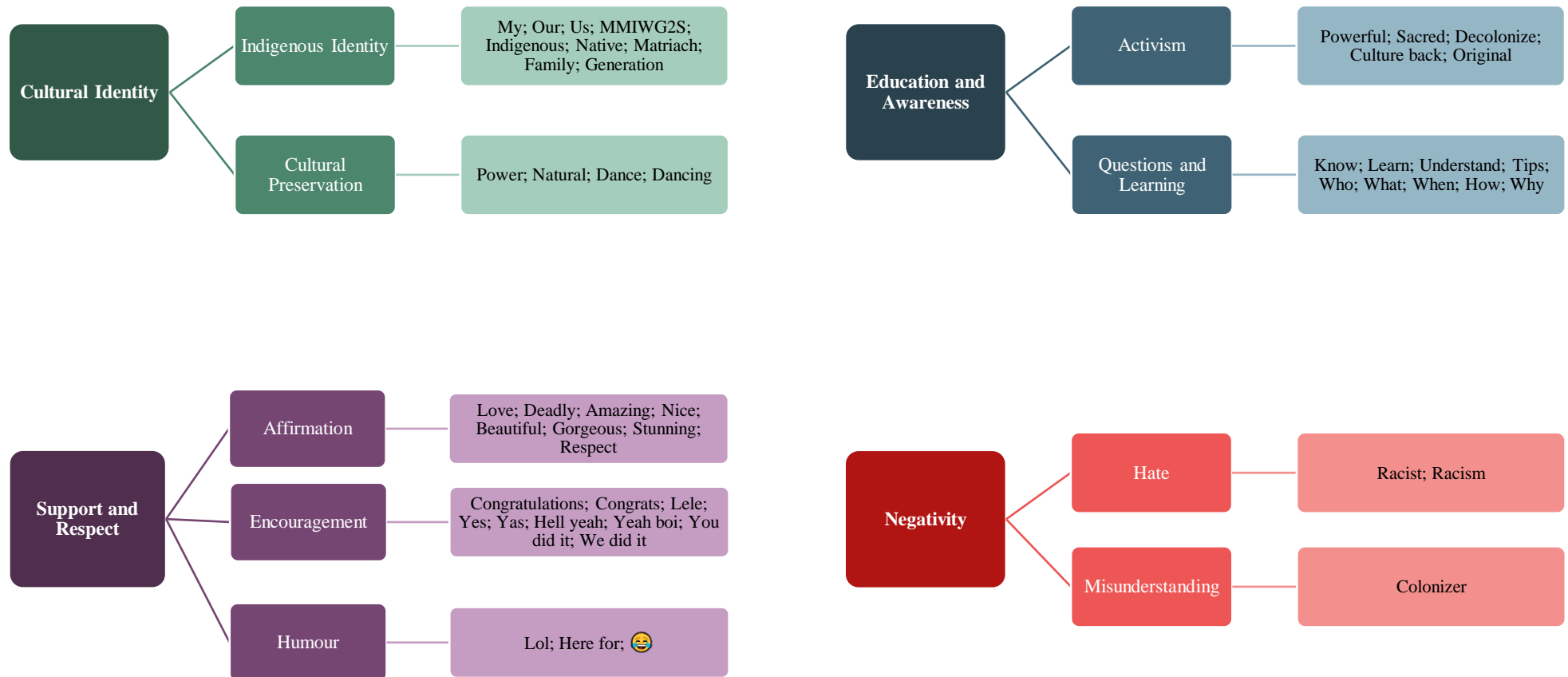
Figure 7.1: Influencer 1's comment section themes, categories, and codes.

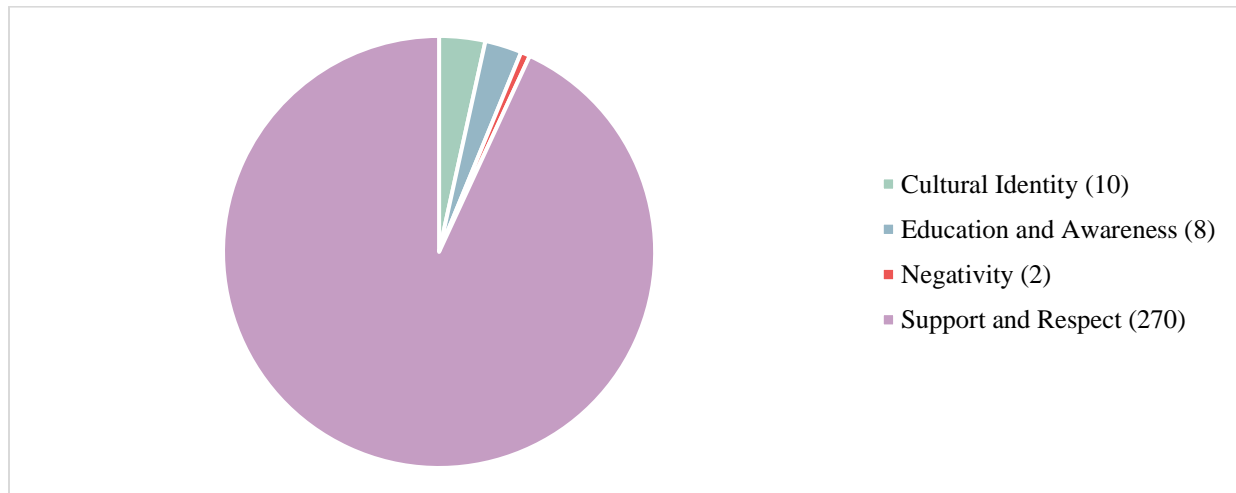
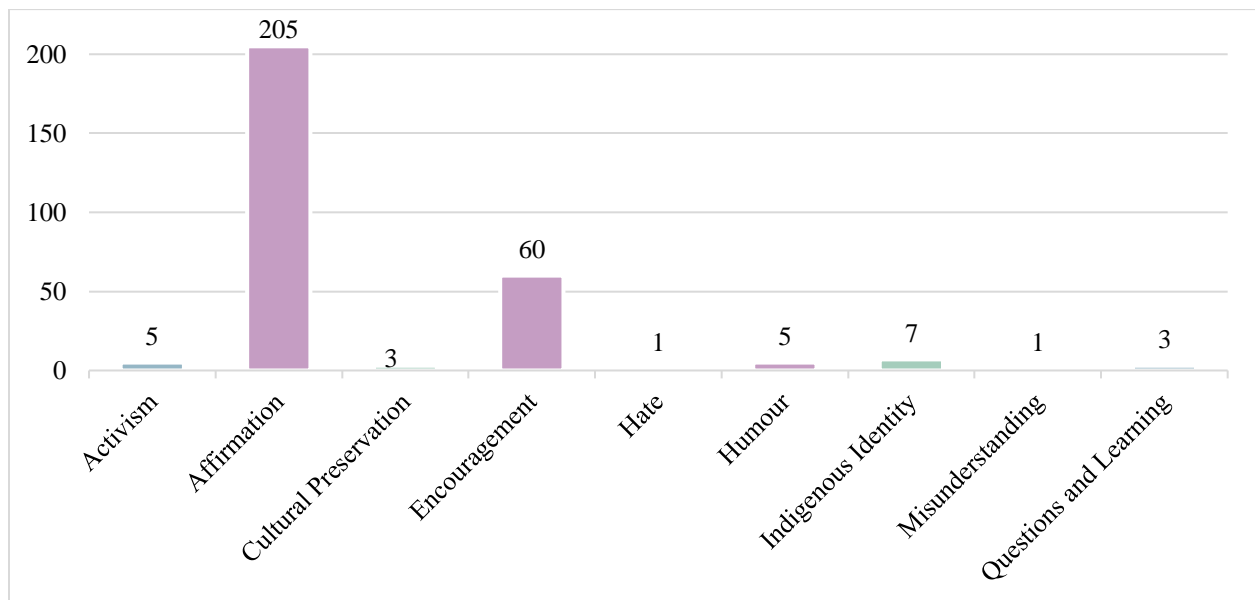
Figure 7.2: Influencer 1's comment section distribution of themes.**Figure 7.3:** Influencer 1's comment section distribution of categories.

Figure 7.4: Highlighted comments (direct quotes) on Influencer 1's posts, organized by theme and category.

Theme	Category	Direct Quotes
Cultural Identity	Indigenous Identity	"this is why I love my culture 🥰"
		"Osyio. MMIW MMIWG MMIWG2S No More Stolen Indigenous Sisters."
		"idk you but I am PROUD of YOU! ❤️ I love seeing Indigenous people succeed"
	Cultural Preservation	"Just sacred dancing in the snow for everybody" "so much power!"
Education and Awareness	Activism	"This is everything. Gorgeous, but a powerful message as well ❤️" "All Original Beings... 🥰"
	Questions and Learning	"Any tips for people who are thinking of starting?!?"
Support and Respect	Affirmation	"So amazing. Thanks for doing what you do." "🔥🔥🔥 goosebumps 🥰 I got a lump in my throat. It's so beautiful and powerful to see indigenous women making waves." "Indigenous woman are absolutely gorgeous 🥰 Dope video"
	Encouragement	"Yesss!!! You did it!!! Celebrate this time of the year!! Rest, reflect and rejuvenate and prep to take it on again!" "I just finished my first course in my master's program... we can do it!!" "hell yeah bro glad I found you"
	Humour	"Here for the GRWM gorgeous mane addition" "I remember how shocked I was when I finished my first year and then I went and did seven more. 😂😂"
	Hate	"I'm sure it wasn't easy in the most racist volatile institution in Alberta."
Negativity	Misunderstanding	"colonizer"

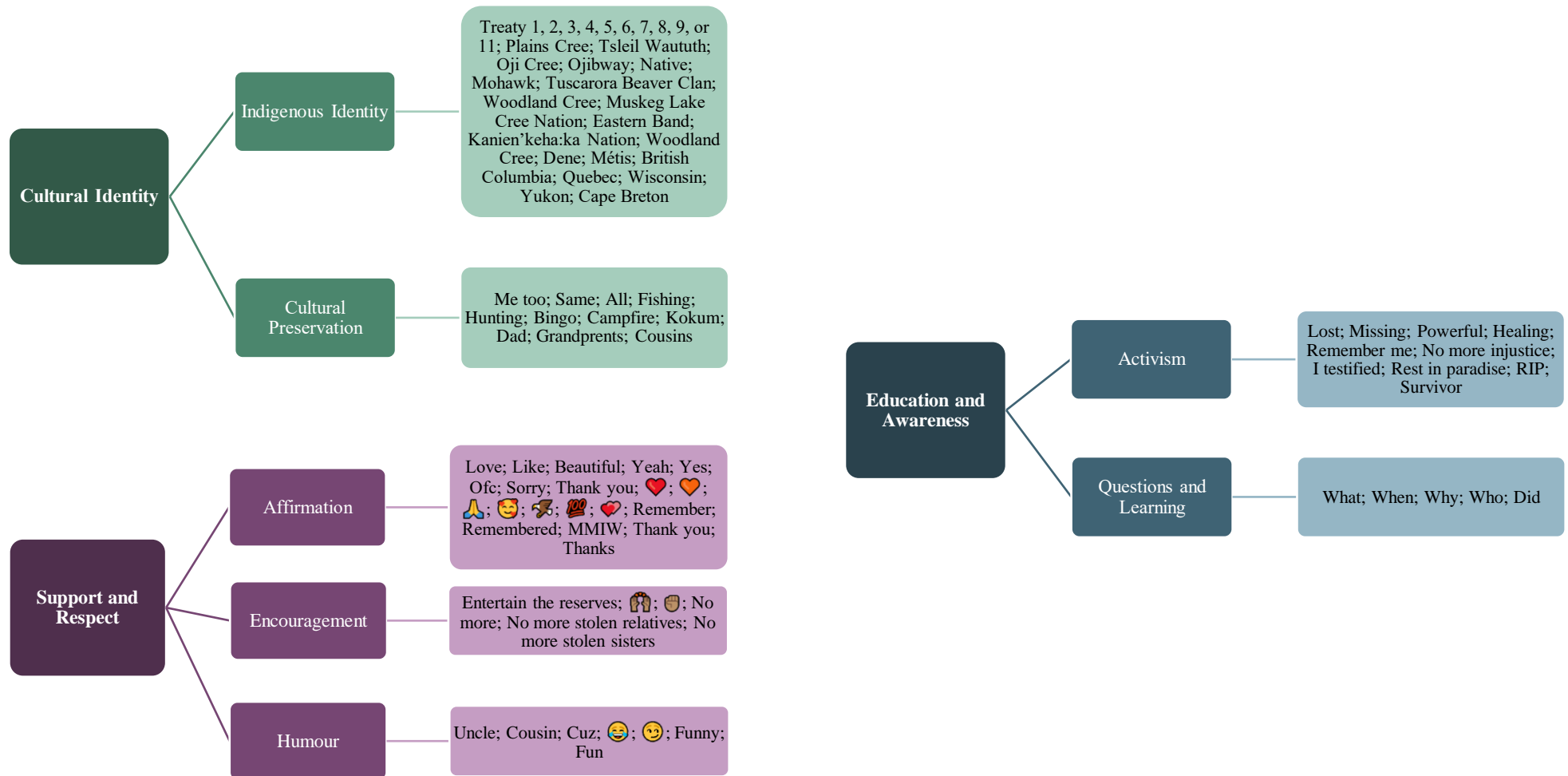
Figure 8.1: Influencer 2's comment section themes, categories, and codes.

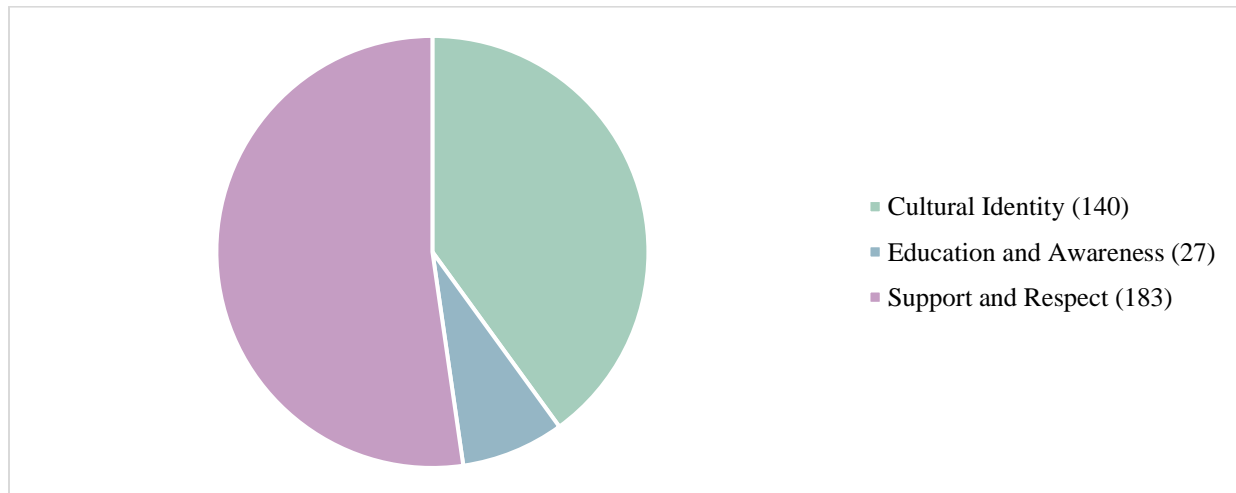
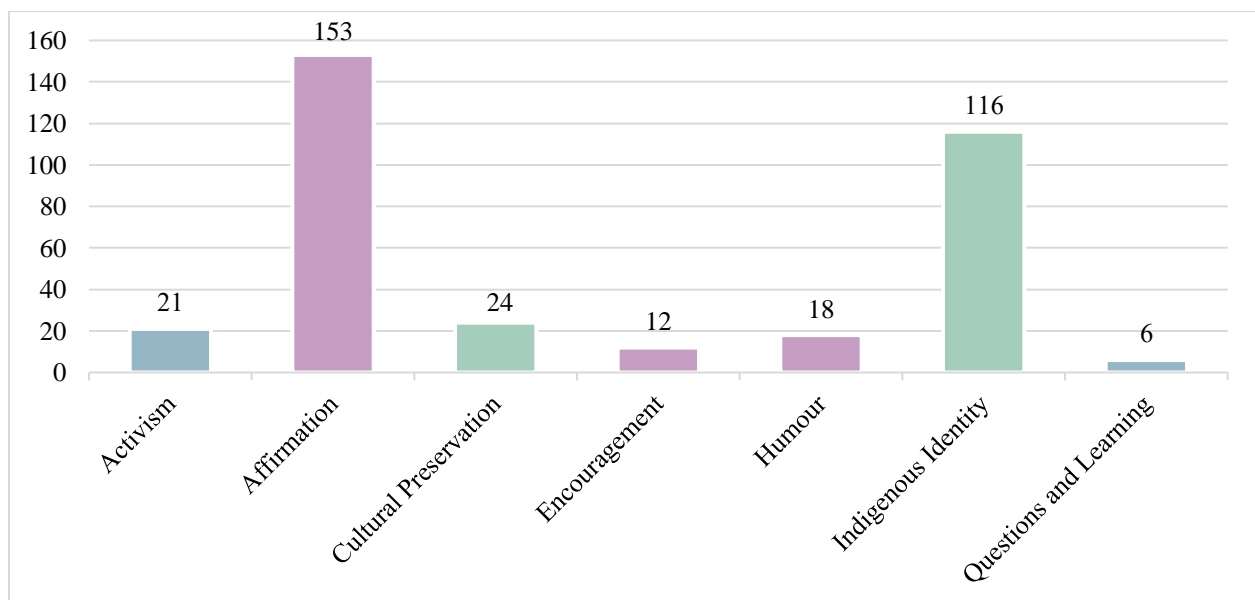
Figure 8.2: Influencer 2's comment section distribution of themes.**Figure 8.3:** Influencer 2's comment section distribution of categories.

Figure 8.4: Highlighted comments (direct quotes) on Influencer 2's posts, organized by theme and category.

Theme	Category	Direct Quotes
Cultural Identity	Indigenous Identity	"Nice to me you 🍷🌟 I'm Apsaalooke from the Crow Nation! 🙌❤️🌟"
		"Minnesota Chippewa Tribe Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe very proud to be a native woman"
		"My fiancé is First Nations from British Columbia I don't remember the band but my daughter is half First Nations as well 😊 and I'm Metis"
	Cultural Preservation	"Definitely bingo with koks n fishing with pops"
		"All of them I'm so far away from cousins and my grandparents and dad passed that would mean the whole world 😊😊"
Education and Awareness	Activism	"What a powerful, beautiful, bittersweet video. To anyone who has MMIW, my deepest sympathy."
		"Not today, but each and every day..."
		"Remembering. Today and every day. ❤️❤️❤️"
	Questions and Learning	"Why are treaty's numbered?"
		"Seriously though. I wanna know why so many are going missing. So scary and sad 😞"
Support and Respect	Affirmation	"beautiful video. well done sir!"
		"love your content!!"
		"This is so powerful ❤️👏"
	Encouragement	"You need to go on tour with your character!!! Ppl would pay to have you come entertain the reserves 🙏"
		"No More Stolen Sister 🔥🔥🔥"
		"no more"
	Humour	"😂 you funny guy..."
		"you guys are all cousins 😂"
		"Sup cuz? You don't know me, but our ancestors prolly did 😂💙"

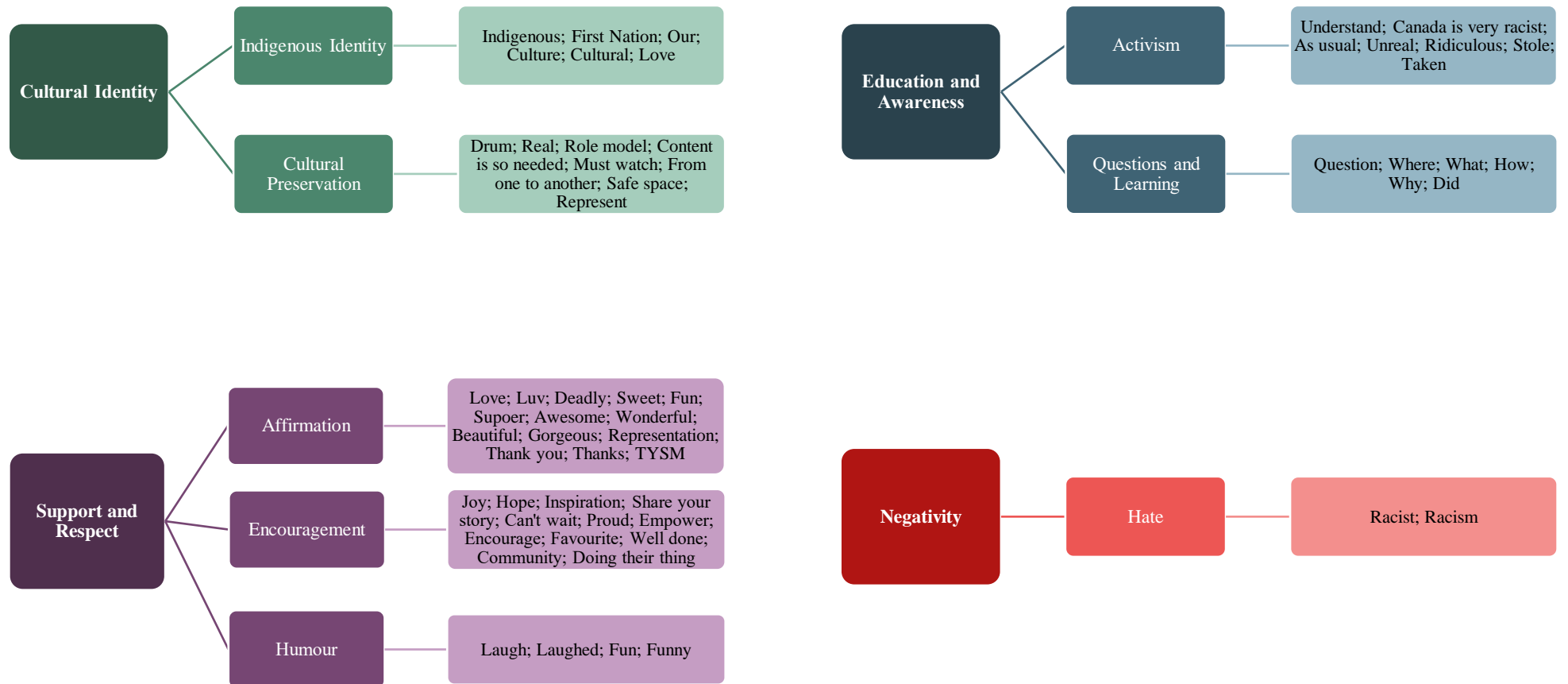
Figure 9.1: Influencer 3's comment section themes, categories, and codes.

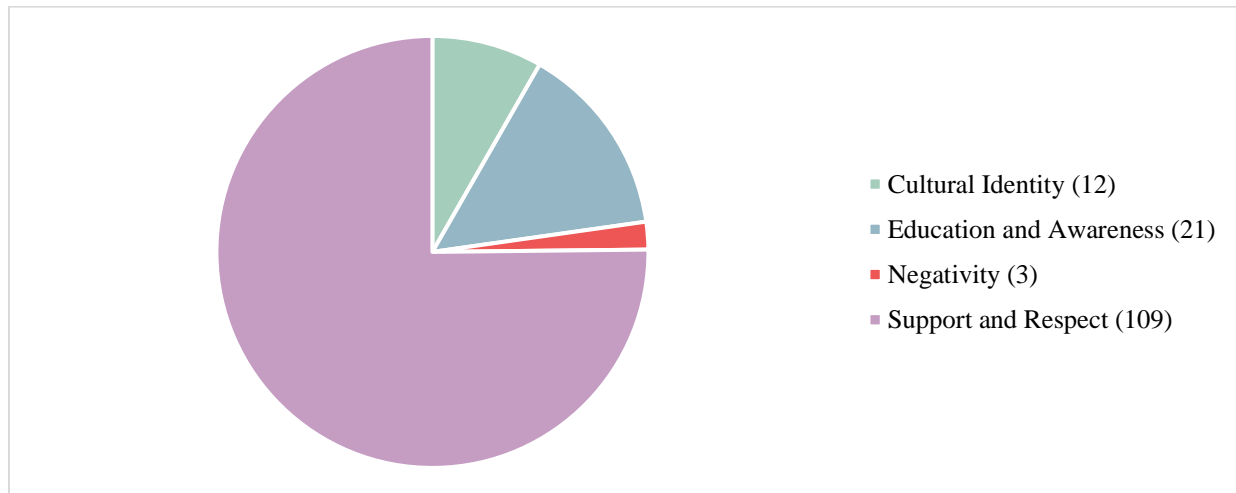
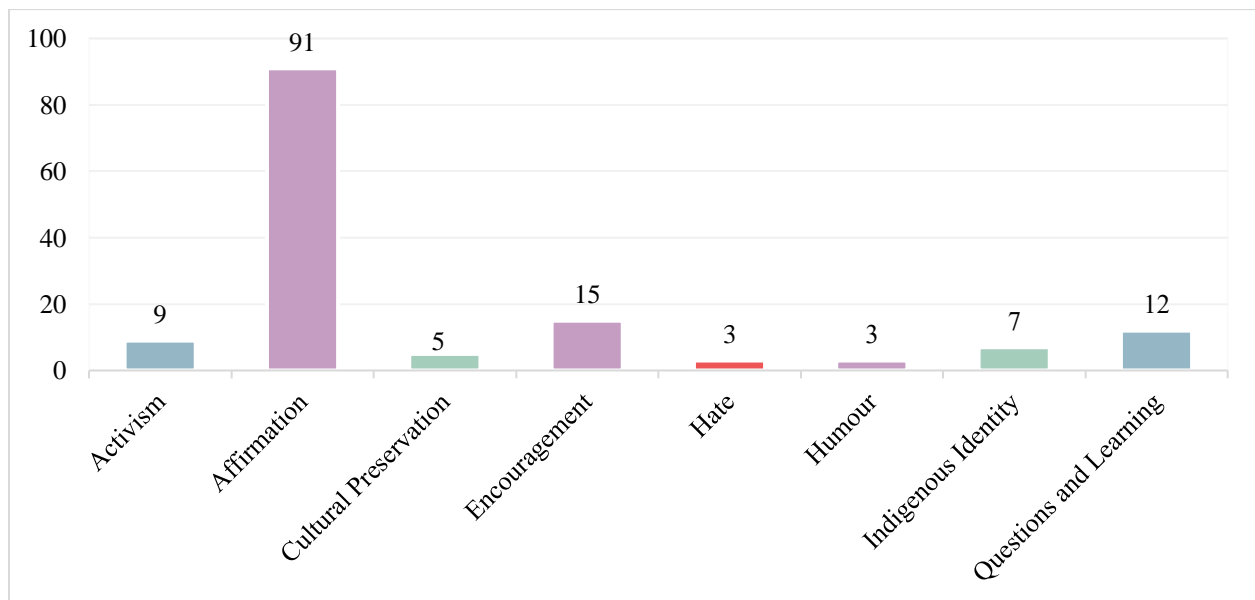
Figure 9.2: Influencer 3's comment section distribution of themes.**Figure 9.3:** Influencer 3's comment section distribution of categories.

Figure 9.4: Highlighted comments (direct quotes) on Influencer 3's posts, organized by theme and category.

Theme	Category	Direct Quotes
Cultural Identity	Indigenous Identity	"it's our own culture"
		"First Nation peeps much love"
	Cultural Preservation	"You literally look like a safe space to be ourselves." "well to me you're a role model for our younger generation 🙌❤️ it shows that you can do anything you put your mind too 😊 and yes you are Humbled in the most indigenous way ever!! lol ❤️ love youuu"
Education and Awareness	Activism	"They took it because of where he comes from. Canada is very racist to this day." "Really? Unreal"
	Questions and Learning	"What happened?"
		"Why did they take away his drum? 🙄 Thank you for doing this"
Support and Respect	Affirmation	"Ppl that hate the most, need love the most. As hard as it is not to take it personally we must remember it never is. Send them love and prayers" "100% DISAGREE!!! I love your content ❤️" "❤️ You're such an inspiration!"
	Encouragement	"Can't wait to see this!!!! Congrats!!!" "Lelelelelele"
		"Excellent way to help a fan along. Great presentation."
	Humour	"Lol we laughed the whole time"
		"I had to re watch because I was like wait, "mom"?! I thought sister 😬😂"
	Hate	"Racist much?"

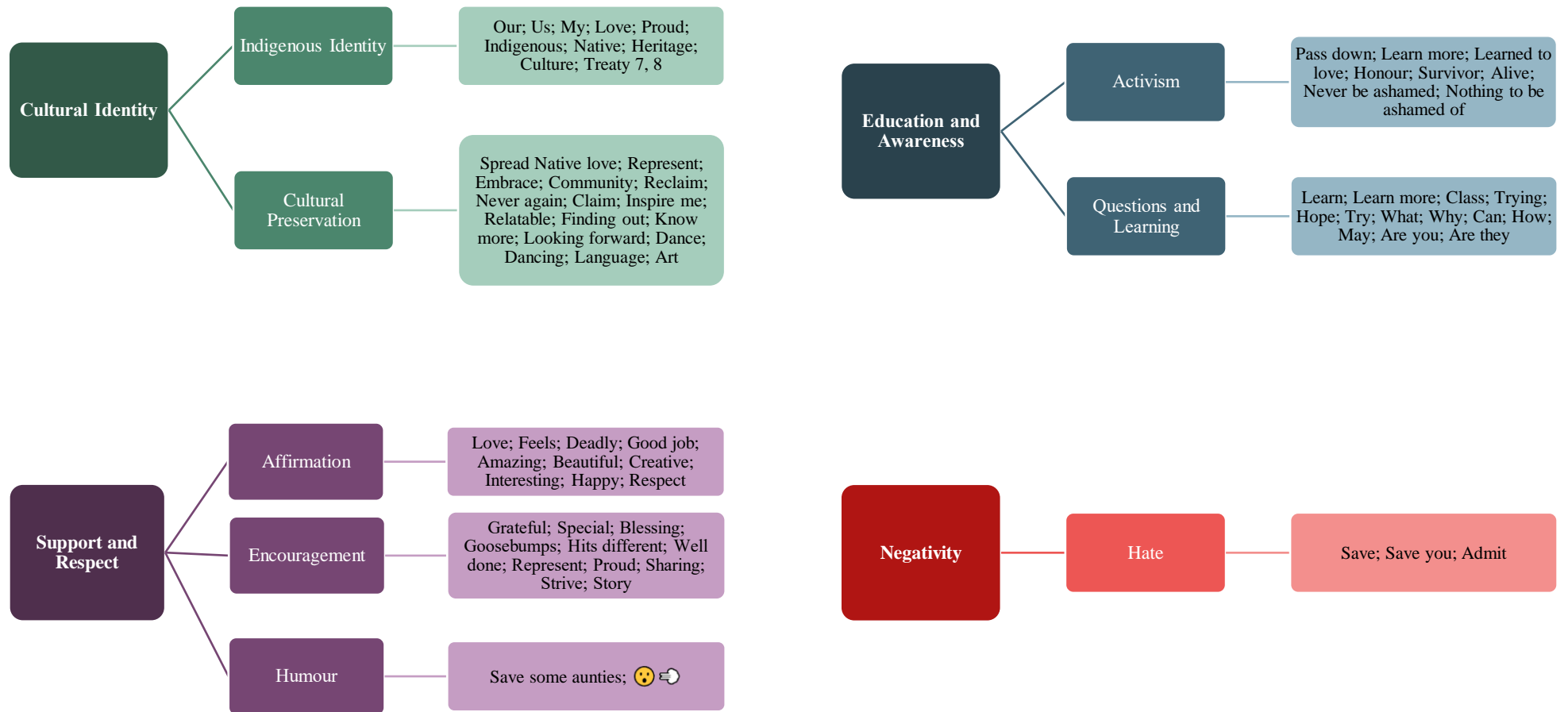
Figure 10.1: Influencer 4's comment section themes, categories, and codes.

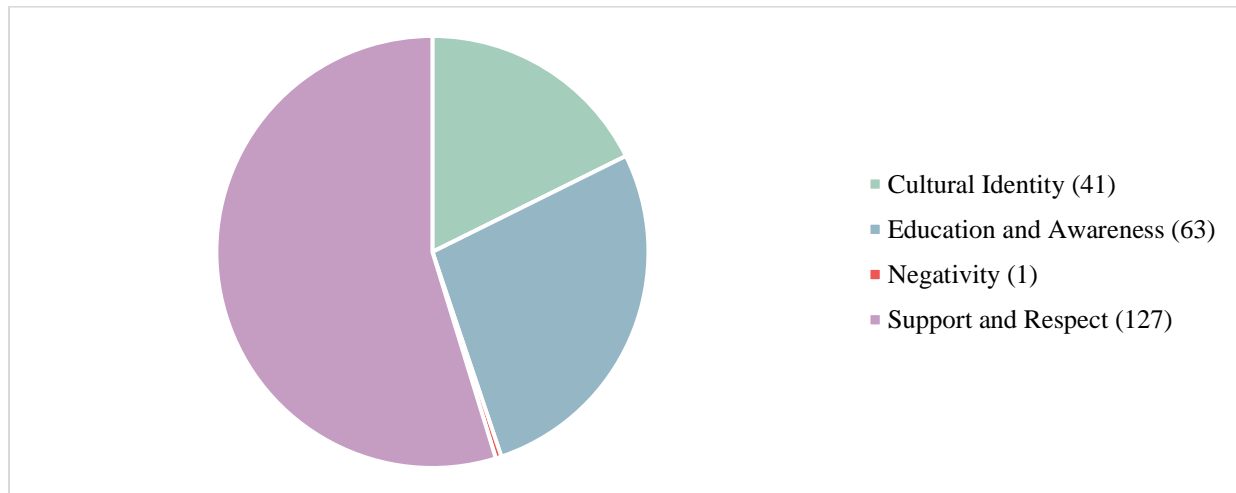
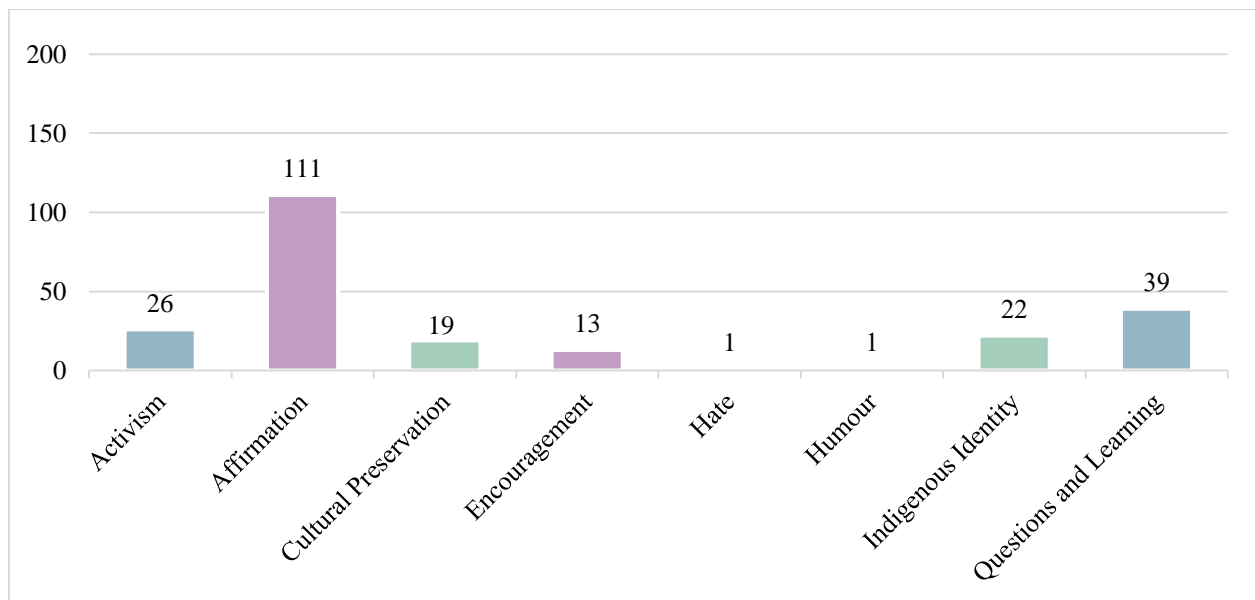
Figure 10.2: Influencer 4's comment section distribution of themes.**Figure 10.3:** Influencer 4's comment section distribution of categories.

Figure 10.4: Highlighted comments (direct quotes) on Influencer 4's posts, organized by theme and category.

Theme	Category	Direct Quotes
Cultural Identity	Indigenous Identity	"This made me tear up a little. I got bullied by natives for being "too white" and told I wasn't "native" but I'm slowly trying. A proud Ute ❤️"
		"our culture is beautiful"
		"We are a beautiful people with all our families friends creator and spiritual heritage"
	Cultural Preservation	"Sad that I was made to feel ashamed that I was Native...NEVER again 😊😊😊ty for sharing w/ all"
		"Better late than never. I was 20 before I knew my Native heritage. That was 26 yrs ago. Now my kids have grown up knowing it and I'm so proud of that."
		"I relate tooooo much to this. Grew up adopted in a white family knowing nothing, but making indigenous friends and learning bout my culture... I'm proud"
		"My 49 year old self just beginning to discover 😊"
Education and Awareness	Activism	"Thank you for sharing your culture. The school system doesn't teach us. It's amazing"
		"Everyone need to know and hug our heritage"
		"You are such an inspiration! My Grade 11 indigenous literature class watched some of your tik toks and we were truly inspired keep it up 👍"
	Questions and Learning	"Beginning Learning my culture is one of the best things I've ever done I'm my life. I'm Suree we all look up to you"
		"I grew up not knowing mine either! I'm learning now!"
		"I have a question and i ask with respect 🙏 why if you are native American have a white men name or last name ?"
Support and Respect	Affirmation	"How did you find out about your culture? I have a very small amount of indigenous heritage/blood/DNA but we don't know for sure which tribe(s)."
		"love your content so much! thank you for always sharing with us ❤️"
		"My heart!!! 😊 This is so wholesome!! Sending you so much love brother 🤝❤️"
	Encouragement	"Love it! And it's NEVER too late to learn and embrace!"
		"Your content is something special!"
		"this just hits different. teared up right away. Saaaaame!!!"
Negativity	Hate	"You are my favorite and one of the reasons is you are true to yourself!"
		"save some aunties for the rest of us 😊👉😊👉😊👉"
		"3 step to be saved first admit that you are a sinner in need of repentance second believe that only Christ can save you"

Findings

Qualitative Findings

Influencer 1

Influencer 1, an Indigenous photographer, effectively utilized TikTok to engage their audience through content reflecting Cultural Identity and Support and Respect. The April 2023 video, which highlighted their university achievements, received an overwhelmingly positive response. This suggests that narratives of personal success resonate deeply with their viewers. Comments such as "idk you but I am PROUD of YOU! ❤️ I love seeing Indigenous people succeed" indicate a collective pride and support for Indigenous accomplishments, reinforcing the category of Encouragement.

The February 2023 video featuring a montage of Indigenous individuals in traditional regalia underscored the audience's appreciation for cultural preservation. Comments praising the beauty and elegance of the models, such as "Just sacred dancing in the snow for everybody," highlight the audience's admiration for cultural traditions and heritage. The March 2022 video, which showcased Indigenous women in traditional regalia set to the song "Bad and Boujee" by Migos, elicited strong affirmations of cultural pride and empowerment. This response suggests that content highlighting the strength and resilience of Indigenous matriarchs resonates powerfully with the audience, as seen in comments like "You literally look like a safe space to be ourselves."

Influencer 1's content strategy effectively harnesses the power of visual storytelling to engage audiences and foster a sense of pride and community. The overwhelmingly positive reactions to their videos suggest that viewers find value in seeing Indigenous identities represented in diverse and empowering ways. This indicates that visual content highlighting

cultural heritage and personal achievements can significantly impact audience engagement and foster a supportive online community. The consistent themes of Cultural Identity and Support and Respect across different videos underscore the influencer's role in building a community.

Influencer 2

Influencer 2's content focused on raising awareness about Indigenous issues and fostering a sense of community. The January 2023 "Are you native?" trend video highlighted the importance of shared identity and heritage, as reflected in comments like "Nice to meet you 🍷🌟 I'm Apsaalooke from the Crow Nation! 🙌❤️🌟."¹ This suggests that identity-focused content effectively engages viewers by allowing them to connect by sharing their personal cultural experiences and choices.

The May 2023 video marking the National Day of Awareness for MMIWG2S received heartfelt responses emphasizing remembrance and action. Comments such as "What a powerful, beautiful, bittersweet video. To anyone who has MMIW, my deepest sympathy" reflect the audience's deep emotional connection to the MMIWG2S movement and their appreciation for the influencer's advocacy efforts.

In contrast, the March 2022 video, which engaged viewers with the "Where do you want to be?" trend, prompted nostalgic and personal responses, as seen in comments like "Definitely bingo with koks n fishing with pops." This indicates that content evoking personal and familial memories can effectively engage viewers on a sentimental level, even if it had less social engagement compared to more pressing social issues.

¹ The Apsaalooke Nation, also known as the Crow Tribe or Crow Nation, primarily live in Montana, United States of America. See Crow Tribe (n.d.).

Influencer 2's approach to raising awareness and engaging with social justice issues resonates deeply with their audience. The significant engagement with content addressing Indigenous identity and social activism suggests that viewers are not only interested in personal stories, but also in broader cultural and societal themes. The strong emotional responses to their MMIWG2S content highlight the impact of using TikTok for advocacy and remembrance. This engagement reflects the audience's desire for content that is both personally relevant and socially significant, reinforcing the importance of social media as a platform for cultural activism.

Influencer 3

Influencer 3's multifaceted content, blending personal experiences with social commentary, garnered significant support from their audience. The April 2024 video addressing discriminatory comments received an overwhelmingly positive reaction, with comments like "Ppl that hate the most, need love the most. As hard as it is not to take it personally we must remember it never is. Send them love and prayers" reinforcing themes of Support and Respect. This suggests that addressing negativity with positivity and self-love resonates strongly with viewers.

The October 2022 vlog documenting the family's participation in a game show highlighted the significance of Indigenous representation in mainstream media. Comments such as "love your content!!" and "❤️ You're such an inspiration!" underscore the importance of visibility. The May 2024 video, where Influencer 3 surprised a fan with gifts, elicited deeply emotional responses, reflecting themes of Community Support and Encouragement. This indicates that content showcasing acts of kindness and community engagement strongly

resonates with viewers, as evidenced by comments like "well to me you're a role model for our younger generation 🙌❤️ it shows that you can do anything you put your mind too ..."

Influencer 3's content demonstrates the effectiveness of sharing personal narratives and experiences. Their ability to address discrimination with humour and positivity garnered substantial support, indicating that audiences appreciate a multifaceted representation of Indigenous experiences. The strong community response to acts of kindness and representation in mainstream media further underscores the importance of visibility and support within the Indigenous community. Influencer 3's success in fostering a positive and supportive online environment highlights Indigenous TikTok's ability to provide a platform for authentic self-expression and mutual support.

Influencer 4

Influencer 4 effectively used TikTok to share their journey and educate others about néhiyaw traditions. The July 2024 video detailing their transition from break dancer to traditional dancer received comments celebrating their dedication and unique style, such as "our culture is beautiful." This reflects the audience's appreciation for personal growth, authenticity, and cultural expression.

The collaboration with Google Arts & Culture received substantial engagement, with viewers expressing interest in the educational content. Google Arts & Culture (n.d.) "build[s] tools and technologies for cultural organizations to showcase and share their cultural treasures and stories with a global audience online." Comments like "Thank you for sharing your culture. The school system doesn't teach us. It's amazing" highlight the role of TikTok in providing educational opportunities and raising cultural awareness. The third video where Influencer 4

juxtaposed traditional regalia with casual attire resonated strongly with viewers, who celebrated their pride in their culture and journey of self-discovery. Comments such as "My heart!!! 😞 This is so wholesome!! Sending you so much love brother 🙌❤️" emphasize the importance of honesty, representation, and personal identity.

Influencer 4's content effectively combines cultural education with personal storytelling to engage and educate their audience. The enthusiastic responses to their traditional dance videos and collaborations with educational platforms demonstrate the audience's appreciation for learning about traditions and personal journeys. This engagement suggests that educational content, when combined with personal narratives, can significantly impact audience interest and support. Influencer 4's ability to inspire and educate through their content highlights the role of TikTok as a powerful tool for cultural preservation.

Overall Qualitative Themes

As seen in the figures, there are both commonalities and distinctions in the themes explored by each influencer. While Cultural Identity and Support and Respect are recurring strong themes, how these are expressed varies significantly, ranging from traditional dance videos to social justice commentaries. These thematic differences highlight the unique approaches each influencer takes to engage their audience. The figures also reveal how influencers navigate different aspects of their identities and experiences, reflecting the diversity within Indigenous TikTok.

TikTok's Role in Fostering Pride and Advocacy

Overall, the high engagement with content focused on cultural pride and activism suggests that TikTok is an effective platform for promoting awareness and fostering community support among Indigenous audiences. This aligns with Loyer's (2020) argument that TikTok offers a digital space for cultural expression. Additionally, it also underscores Fellows & Smith's (2022) point that social media can be a powerful tool for Indigenous representation and activism (p. 256). TikTok has the potential to be used as a medium for marginalized communities to share their stories and advocate for their rights (Kopacz & Lawton, 2013, p 19).

The active engagement of audiences through supportive comments and questions indicates that TikTok serves as an interactive space for education, understanding, and solidarity. Themes of Support and Respect and Education and Awareness highlight the platform's role in building a supportive and inquisitive community around Indigenous issues. This engagement through likes, comments, saves, and shares reflects a positive interaction with and perception of Indigenous TikTok content, demonstrating that the platform is effective in fostering community and increasing awareness about Indigenous cultures and issues.

Surprising Findings

One surprising finding was the relatively low frequency of negative comments, despite other research that has identified the prevalence of online harassment (e.g. Kennedy & Frazer, 2021, p. 4). This could suggest that the specific TikTok community analyzed is particularly supportive or that effective moderation practices are in place to filter out negative interactions, creating a more positive engagement environment.

Specifically, TikTok's (2024a) Community Guidelines state that "... we remove content—whether posted publicly or privately—when we find that it violates our rules." TikTok's (2024b) rules are centred around three themes: "Balancing harm prevention and expression, embracing human dignity, [and] ensuring our actions are fair." This process is part of a broader framework known as "content moderation," which encompasses the receiving, evaluating, and decision-making about the dissemination of contributions in "open, online environments" (Haythornthwaite, 2023). Haythornthwaite (2023) describes content moderation as "managing extremes, and in social media this means removing the extremes of offensive content and/or offensive perpetrators." On corporate social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok, this process requires both human and algorithmic intervention due to the volume of postings (Haythornthwaite, 2023). This best practice approach ensures that social media can be a safe and respectful environment for all users.

Another unexpected result was the high engagement with content that included elements of humour. Influencer 3's response to a discriminatory comment with a light-hearted video exemplified this. The use of humour suggests that audiences appreciate a multifaceted representation of Indigenous experiences, blending serious cultural themes with untroubled content. This finding aligns with Figueroa-Zepeda's (2022) theory that humour is used as a form of empowerment and resistance (pp. 1–2).

This point is supported by research on TikTok content. For example, Loyer (2020) further supports Figueroa-Zepeda (2022), stating that Indigenous TikTok creators "are taking it further than simple recitation by turning inward to express what is sometimes truly weird insider humour." This highlights their awareness of their audiences and refusal to conform to specific expectations. This blend of humour and serious themes in their content showcases the creators'

ability to "delight in the repetition" and create joy within their communities despite the challenges (Loyer, 2020).

Quantitative Findings

The quantitative analysis of engagement metrics — encompassing likes, comments, saves, shares, and views — reveals significant insights into audience interaction with diverse Indigenous TikTok influencers.

Influencer 1's content, particularly a video from April 2023 reflecting on their first year of university, underscores the audience's resonance with themes of breaking barriers and achieving success. This video saw high engagement, indicative of the audience's appreciation for narratives of personal achievement. Similarly, the February 2023 video leveraging the "Baby Girl" audio, while receiving lower engagement, highlights the varied responses to different content styles. The March 2022 video, showcasing Indigenous women in traditional regalia, stands out with exceptional engagement, underscoring the community's strong connection to cultural pride and representation.

Influencer 2's participation in the "Are you native?" trend in January 2023 captured significant interest, reflecting the audience's fondness for enthusiasm for discussing and sharing heritage and Treaty connections. Their May 2023 video for the National Day of Awareness for MMIWG2S garnered notable engagement, highlighting the audience's investment in and dedication to social justice issues. In contrast, a March 2022 "Where do you want to be?" photo slideshow trend video on activity preferences saw lighter interaction. This indicates variability in audience engagement with different content types.

Influencer 3's response to discriminatory comments with a light-hearted video in April 2024 demonstrates the audience's engagement with content addressing social issues in a relatable manner. Their October 2022 travel vlog for a game show participation emphasizes the importance of representation, as seen through substantial audience interaction and viewership. The May 2024 video where they surprised a fan with gifts at a local restaurant received overwhelming support, showcasing strong community engagement and audience likeness for personal connection stories.

Influencer 4's traditional dance video from July 2024 illustrates the audience's appreciation for cultural expression and storytelling, evidenced by significant levels of engagement. Their June 2023 collaboration with Google Arts & Culture highlights the educational value of their content, attracting substantial interaction. The October 2020 video featuring traditional regalia, with its profound engagement, underscores a deep audience connection to cultural heritage and pride.

Overall, this analysis highlights the nuanced ways in which different types of content resonate with audiences, reflecting broader themes of cultural pride, social justice, personal achievement, and community engagement.

Limitations

My Capstone Project had multiple limitations. Firstly, the inherent biases and limitations of TikTok's analytics dashboard may not fully capture the nuances of content engagement and audience dynamics. The quantitative data, while comprehensive, might miss out on subtler forms of interaction that are not easily quantifiable.

Secondly, the qualitative analysis relied on subjective interpretations of content, introducing researcher bias. Despite efforts to ensure coding consistency reliability checks, the interpretation of themes and categories remains influenced by my personal understanding and cultural background. The anonymization of TikTokers' identities further limited the depth of analysis, as it constrained the ability to contextualize individual creators' contributions within their broader social and cultural environments.

Thirdly, while a mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative analysis of publicly available engagement metrics — likes, comments, saves, shares, and views — with qualitative thematic coding of comments, the public metrics have limitations. These metrics can be superficial and do not necessarily reflect deeper audience engagement or the impact of the content. Public metrics might overlook the quality and context of interactions, leading to an incomplete understanding of audience perceptions and the true influence of the content.

Lastly, the study's scope was limited by the relatively small number of TikToks analyzed and time constraints. As a sole researcher, the capacity to analyze a larger dataset was restricted, potentially overlooking broader trends and patterns within the Indigenous TikTok community. This reduces the generalizability of my study. Additionally, diverse audiences, including both Indigenous and non-Indigenous audience members, were not analyzed. This presents an area for further research to explore more detailed audience characteristics and their impacts on engagement.

My Capstone Project highlights the significant role of TikTok in promoting Indigenous representation and fostering community engagement. While the findings are insightful, they also underscore the importance of ongoing research and collaboration with Indigenous communities

to ensure that digital platforms can continue to serve as inclusive and empowering spaces for cultural expression, representation, and activism.

Summary

My Capstone Project revealed significant insights into audience engagement with Indigenous TikTok content. Quantitative analysis showed high interaction levels with videos focusing on cultural pride and activism, suggesting that TikTok serves as an effective medium for Indigenous creators to promote awareness and build community support. For instance, videos addressing social justice issues and cultural identity garnered substantial likes, comments, shares, and views.

Qualitative analysis further illuminated this engagement, identifying strong themes such as Cultural Identity, Support and Respect, and Education and Awareness. The comments reflected a deep appreciation for cultural representation and a strong sense of solidarity and support within the Indigenous community. The study also highlighted the diverse ways in which audiences engage with content, including expressions of admiration, curiosity, and encouragement.

These results underscore the importance of TikTok as a platform for Indigenous representation and cultural activism. The high engagement levels with content that celebrates Indigenous identity and addresses social justice issues indicate that TikTok amplifies Indigenous voices whilst fostering a supportive and interactive community. The findings demonstrate that audience engagement is multifaceted, encompassing both quantitative metrics and qualitative themes that reflect a deep connection to and appreciation for Indigenous cultures. This

comprehensive understanding of audience interactions highlights the potential of social media to contribute to cultural preservation and advocacy.

Conclusion

My Capstone Project sought to understand how audience engagement metrics such as likes, comments, saves, and shares reflect interactions with and perceptions of Indigenous TikTok content. This final chapter restates my research question and provides an overview of the subsequent sections.

The analysis revealed that content focused on cultural pride and activism garnered the highest levels of engagement. Videos that addressed social justice issues and highlighted Indigenous cultural identity gathered substantial interaction, suggesting these themes deeply resonated with the influencers' audiences. The qualitative thematic coding of comments unveiled predominant themes such as Cultural Identity, Support and Respect, and Education and Awareness. These findings underscore the role of TikTok as a significant platform for Indigenous creators to amplify their voices and sustain a supportive community. The quantitative engagement metrics and qualitative data both illustrated a profound appreciation for cultural representation and solidarity within the Indigenous TikTok community, demonstrating how audience interactions are reflective of deeper social connections and support.

My Capstone Project contributes to the scholarly discourse on digital media and Indigenous representation by providing a nuanced analysis of Indigenous TikTok. It has a part in showing the potential of social media platforms to function as tools for cultural empowerment and narrative reshaping. The findings suggest that TikTok can be a powerful medium for marginalized communities to disseminate their stories, challenge entrenched stereotypes, and construct inclusive digital spaces. For my professional practice, this research underscores the critical importance of authentic representation in media and the pivotal role digital platforms play in fostering cultural education and community solidarity.

Despite the valuable insights gained from this study, several avenues for future research on Indigenous TikTok remain unexplored. Firstly, future research should aim to include a larger and more diverse sample of Indigenous TikTok influencers. Another promising area for future research is the role of TikTok's algorithm in influencing the visibility and reach of Indigenous content.

This research encountered several limitations, including the inherent biases and constraints of TikTok's analytics dashboard, the subjective nature of qualitative analysis, and the limitations imposed by anonymizing the influencers' identities. These factors restricted the depth of analysis and the ability to fully contextualize each influencer's contributions to the Indigenous TikTok community. Additionally, the small sample size and time constraints posed the generalizability of the findings.

In conclusion, my Capstone Project aids in addressing the significant problem of understanding how audience engagement metrics reflect interactions with and perceptions of Indigenous TikTok content. My research question integrated quantitative analysis of engagement metrics with qualitative thematic coding of comments. The key findings highlighted TikTok's pivotal role in enhancing Indigenous representation and fostering community engagement. This study contributes to the literature by demonstrating the transformative potential of digital platforms in empowering marginalized voices and fostering diverse, inclusive online communities. The insights gained from this research emphasize the necessity of ongoing efforts to ensure authentic Indigenous representation in digital spaces and identify rich opportunities for future research in this dynamically evolving field.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Definitions

<i>Indigenous TikTok</i>	<p>Indigenous TikTok is a community within the TikTok social platform. Indigenous creators, or Indigenous TikTokers, “perform Indigenous cultures for voyeurs, they educate about Indigenous languages” (Loyer, 2020).</p> <p>The creation of Indigenous TikTok stems from Indigenous Peoples’ desire for amplified and truthful visibility in digital spaces (Loyer, 2020).</p>
<i>TikTok</i>	TikTok is a social media platform for short-form mobile videos (TikTok, n.d.).
<i>TikTok community or niche community</i>	A TikTok niche community is a group of people brought together by a common interest, value, or goal (Open Influence, 2021).
<i>TikToks</i>	TikToks is used as a synonymous term with videos. TikToks are specific to the platform.
<i>“For You Page” or “FYP”</i>	The “For You Page,” also known as “FYP,” is the first page a user lands on when they open the TikTok app (Buffer, n.d.). “TikTok uses this space to curate content based on a person’s activity on the platform” (Buffer, n.d.).
<i>“Are you native?” trend</i>	This trend involves Indigenous TikTok influencers creating videos with a text overlay asking their audience, “Are you native?” or a variation of this question. In response, the influencer shares their own heritage and/or specifies which Treaty land they reside on.

Appendix B: List of Preliminary Keywords

- Indigenous representation
- Indigenous Peoples
- TikTok
- Indigenous TikTok
- Social media and marginalized communities
- Social media and diverse communities
- Indigenous media portrayal
- Indigenous media and Canada
- Canadian Indigenous media
- First Nations media
- Métis media
- Indigenous digital narratives
- TikTok community

Appendix C: TikTok Hashtags and Search Terms

- #IndigenousTikTok
- Indigenous TikTok
- #IndigenousTikToker
- #Indigenous
- Indigenous
- #RezTok
- Uncle
- #Uncle
- #NativeUncle
- #IndigenousInfluencer
- #Treaty6
- #TreatySix
- #Treaty7
- #TreatySeven
- #FirstNations
- Métis
- #NativeTikTok
- #Cree
- #IndigenousWomen