

## The Intersection of Twitter and the Pro-Oil Movement

Since the fateful U.S. presidential election of 2020, “misinformation” is a word that has been talked about more and more in relation to social media sites like Facebook and Twitter. According to Dartmouth College political scientist Dr. Brendan Nyhan, “People become more prone to misinformation when ... conditions in society make people feel a greater need for what social scientists call ingrouping — a belief that their social identity is a source of strength and superiority, and that other groups can be blamed for their problems” (Fisher). One way people can “ingroup” and strengthen their social identity is through interacting with social media posts that align with their views—regardless of factuality—along with others in similar positions. In *“Our Oil”: Extractive Populism in Canadian Social Media*, the authors describe the “hermeneutic labor signified through posting, sharing, liking, and commenting on specific pieces of media [that] occludes the institutional origins and authority of extractivist discourse, dynamically repositioning it as a form of “common sense” emerging organically from the collective wisdom of communities of like-minded people” (200). The key motivator for interacting with misinformative posts, or posts in general, is the desire to strengthen one’s position within a group of like-minded people.

One such group of like-minded people are those in the pro-oil community, more specifically those who can be considered to be “petro-masculine.” In *Petro-Masculinity: Fossil Fuels and Authoritarian Desire*, Cara Daggett describes petro-masculinity as an extension of hypermasculinity which “arises when agents of hegemonic masculinity feel threatened or undermined, thereby needing to inflate, exaggerate, or otherwise distort their traditional

masculinity” in relation to fossil fuels and oil (33). Joshua Nelson, author of *Petro-Masculinity and Climate Change Denial among White, Politically Conservative American Males*, expands on Daggett’s definition to address how this group of white, conservative, petro-masculine males possess their views on climate change and fit petro-masculinity descriptions primarily due to underlying trauma and to being a part of a group where they find security and validation through consuming and mining fossil fuels and denying climate change (283-284). A clear example of the search for validation and security among petro-masculine men is the Oil Sands Strong (OSS) Twitter page. In analyzing the number of interactions with OSS tweets, there is a clear trend toward successful posts being related to petro-masculinity. The question is—why?

Twitter is a great tool for circulating information as it has a high potential for offering users a large audience. Users’ feeds consist of not only tweets from accounts they follow but also trending tweets or tweets that their friends and followers have interacted with. Because you can see tweets from users you don’t follow, Twitter, as a circulation format, has a high potential for large reach and circulation. However, the key factor for having a well-circulating tweet is to have many interactions with the tweet—likes, comments, replies, retweets, or quotes. A successful tweet could be considered to be one that has accumulated many, or relatively many, interactions and an unsuccessful tweet to be one with few to no interactions.

Although Twitter is good for spreading information, using a tweet as a communication medium has the potential to make information less impactful. Tweets are limited to a maximum of 280 characters, so it is quite simple to make a tweet that is not thought out, meaningful, well-researched, or even true. Because of the nature of tweets, likes are what generally give posts legitimacy. People are more likely to read and believe something if many people have done the same before them. So, does a high number of un-liked tweets lower the credibility of a Twitter

account? Perhaps it does; however, there are plenty of examples of Twitter accounts with very few successful tweets but an occasional post that does take off. One such account is that of the Oil Sands Strong group.

The Oil Sands Strong Twitter page offers a variety of propaganda-style pro-oil, pro-Canada “infographics” to “combat the misinformation against Canada’s energy industry”(Oil Sands Strong). On Facebook, the OSS is quite successful, having accrued nearly 39,000 likes in 2018 (Gunster et al., 2014). Their Twitter account is a different story. Although the page has a high volume of “educational” posts, they rarely succeed on this youthful social media platform. The majority of Oil Sands Strong’s infographic tweets have almost no interactions. A Twitter account with a large number of infographic tweets with very few likes and a few tweets with many likes tells us the content is not well-thought-out, meaningful, or researched. The page owner is simply saying anything they can think of until something sticks. Even though the OSS Twitter page’s original content is severely lacking in interaction, it still manages to get the occasional tweet to “stick.” In general, the tweets that “stick” can all be categorized as petro-masculine.

The majority of Oil Sands Strong’s tweets that do well perpetuate petro-masculine stereotypes. According to Joshua Nelson, petro-masculinity stems from being a part of a group where men find security and validation through consuming and mining fossil fuels and denying climate change. We can categorize successful OSS tweets into three groups: those that assert nationalistic platitudes, those that claim environmental protection in relation to oil production, and those that do both. For our purposes, we will consider those tweets that have a minimum of five likes and/or retweets to be successful and those that have zero interactions to be unsuccessful.

In returning to Daggett's description of petro-masculinity, we see how, generally, white, conservative men feel the need to inflate their petro-masculinity in order to avoid feeling threatened or undermined. One way to do this is to seek out validation of their cause. The Oil Sands Strong infographics that convey Canada as better than the rest of the world in terms of oil production gather relatively many interactions, compared to those tweets that do not promote nationalistic values. One tweet, with 20 interactions, declares that "LNG CANADA WILL SUPPLY THE WORLD WITH CLEAN RELIABLE ENERGY TO SUPPORT A GROWING POPULATION" (Oil Sands Strong). This infographic promotes the idea that Canada will be the one to supply the world's growing population with energy because Canada is the best in the world. Another, with 11 interactions, simply states, "CANADIAN OIL AND GAS ARE THE MOST RESPONSIBLY PRODUCED HYDROCARBON RESOURCES IN THE WORLD" (Oil Sands Strong). Once again, due to the "fact" that Canadian oil and gas are the most responsibly produced in the world, it can be further reasoned that, therefore, Canada is the best in the world. One final example is an infographic with seven interactions that says, "THE DEVELOPING WORLD NEEDS MORE CANADIAN OIL AND GAS, NOT LESS" (Oil Sands Strong). With this post, it can clearly be inferred that if the developing world needs more Canadian oil and gas, Canada must be the best in the world. These particular tweets are successful because petro-masculine men feel validated and secure in believing that their cause, Canadian-produced oil, is the best oil in the world.

Although Oil Sands Strong's successful tweets are commonly pro-Canada, they tend to be pro-Canada against the world. Tweets that praise oil production within Canada, praise Canada for not being dependent on "tyranny oil," or tweets that criticize the Canadian government with respect to oil production tend to get few or zero interactions. This is because Canadian oil being

the best within Canada is not as validating or as big a deal as Canadian oil being the best *in the world*. So, these tweets have less pull with petro-masculine people, as they don't go to extremes to inflate their petro-masculinity.

Tweets that claim Canada's oil production mechanisms are the best for the environment also do very well because they validate petro-masculine people's participation in the oil industry and reflect the "men as protector" stereotype. One post queries, "DID YOU KNOW THAT FORT MCMURRAY CANADA HAS ONE OF THE WORLD'S CLEANEST AIR QUALITIES"(Oil Sands Strong)? And another claims, "STUDIES SAY CANADIAN LNG IS 20% LOWER IN EMISSIONS THAN EVEN HIGH-EFFICIENCY COAL POWER PLANTS IN CHINA"(Oil Sands Strong). Neither of these tweets offers sources or proof of their claims, but that doesn't matter because they reassure followers that their role in supporting Canadian oil is valid. They also provoke the "men as protector" stereotype because in supporting Canadian-produced oil, these men are protecting the world from dirty energy sources like those in China. The post's claims do not have to be true because the people interacting with the post are not looking for proof or to actually protect the environment. They are really looking to be a part of a group where they can find security and validation through consuming and mining fossil fuels. By liking tweets such as these, these people become a part of a group with the same ideals as OSS and the other likers of the tweet.

People looking for security and validation in their pro-oil lifestyle brings us to the Oil Sands Strong's most-liked tweet that perpetuates petro-masculine ideals. With 84 total interactions, it states, "CANADIANS SHOULD NOT BE ASHAMED FOR INVESTING IN THE PRODUCTION OF RELIABLE ENERGY AND IMPROVING QUALITY OF LIFE" (Oil Sands Strong). This tweet has one key difference from the rest: it focuses on removing

shame from pro-oil Canadians. Once again, we see the validation that petro-masculinity craves, but in a more direct manner. Nationalistic and environmental tweets also provide validation by telling people, “you’re the best.” This tweet, however, gets right to the root of the problem: the search for security and validation through like-minded people and says, “do not be ashamed, because you are right, and all 62 other people who liked this tweet are just like you; you are not alone.” Unlike other tweets, this one does not attack other countries or people. It focuses on building up its community and providing security.

The Oil Sands Strong Twitter account may provide comfort and security for petro-masculine men, but it is riddled with unsupported claims, misinformation, and exaggerated statements that all attempt to validate the pro-oil movement. In *Our Oil*, Gunster and others discuss how “Canadian extractive populism rests upon the presumption that all Canadians... benefit extensively and equally, from fossil fuel development” (220). Claims that circulate on social media, like those on the OSS Twitter, exaggerate and decontextualize claims to gain support and traction. For example, the fact is that “the vast majority of economic benefits from [pipeline] projects would accrue to predominantly corporate actors outside the provinces where they would be built” (220). However, circulating posts on social media fail to mention this fact and instead vaguely praise the oil industry for economically benefiting Canada in general. Although petro-masculine men find validation and comfort in OSS Twitter posts and the pro-oil movement, they will never receive the concrete benefits, such as a booming local economy, that the posts they like imply. petro-masculine men’s “brains [are] switch[ed] into ‘identity-based conflict’ mode, [they] become desperately hungry for information that will affirm that sense of [them] versus [the rest], and much less concerned about things like truth or accuracy”(Fisher). As Nelson proposes in *Petro-Masculinity and Climate Change Denial among White, Politically*

*Conservative American Males*, the only way forward and past the age of misinformation circulation among the petro-masculine community is to find a new group, although still a group that perpetuates typical masculine desires, where climate change is acknowledged and through which positive change can happen. In this new group, these men can find the security and validation they crave but in a way that concretely benefits them, the environment, and the world.

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