Not Racist, but…: ID Canada and the Mainstream Marketing of Fringe Ideas

Jordan Derkson*

Abstract

This paper is a mixed methods case study of ID Canada, an outspoken anti-diversity, white nationalist, grassroots Canadian "Identitarian" group. The paper aims to answer the question: "What strategies do groups with views outside of mainstream acceptability use to appeal to the public?" To this end, I performed a thematic analysis on their published web content and attempted to integrate these insights with the group's history and relevant sociological theory. I extracted four main themes: the endorsement of "White Supremacist Beliefs", the cultural "Struggle for History", an insistence on "Victimhood", and various direct attempts at "Distancing from White Supremacy". I explore the connections between these strategies and fascism as described by Umberto Eco (1995), as well as the performative nature of ID Canada and its place within different conceptions of the public sphere.

Keywords: Identitarianism, white supremacy, nationalism, fascism, thematic analysis, performativity, public sphere

Introduction

White nationalism, long dismissed as a defeated fringe ideology, has gained a disconcerting degree of influence on mainstream western politics in recent years. Examples are plentiful. The election of the manifestly racist former president of the United States and Europe's nativist reaction to the influx of middle eastern refugees (Toubeau, 2017) both exemplify this trend, and Canada is not immune. The running of the People's Party of Canada on an alarmist anti-multiculturalism platform (People's Party of Canada [PPC],

2020) makes this clear. White nationalism also exists on a local scale. This can be seen in the posters placed in downtown Saskatoon (Modjeski, 2019) by a group called ID Canada, which claims on its website to be "Canada's leading Identitarian movement" (ID Canada, Banner Title, n.d.).

ID Canada was allegedly created in order to defend "Ethnic Canadian" (ID Canada, para. 1, n.d.) identity from the "decaying ideals of political correctness and 'diversity'" (ID Canada, para. 1, n.d.). The racism implicit in their rhetoric and warnings of the dire consequences of a less homogeneously white, "minority-majority" (I.D. Canada,

* Affiliation (Department of Sociology, College of Arts and Science, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, SK, Canada)
Correspondence: **jordanderkson@hotmail.com**

n.d.) population, is difficult or impossible to ignore, yet the group strenuously denies holding any racist beliefs. This denial is enabled by the use of coded language, or "a word or phrase chosen in place of another word or phrase in order to communicate an attitude or meaning without stating it explicitly" (Merriam Webster, n.d.). ID Canada, for example, never mentions race or skin colour by name. These constructs are referred to with codes like "Old Stock Canadian" (white) or "Third-World" (non-white) (ID Canada, n.d.). These codes, ostensibly less associated with racism than outright claims of white superiority, are intended to connect with and appeal to potential new members without triggering accusations of racism. Such use of coding, sometimes called "dog-whistling" (Safire, 2008) is well-studied, especially as it operates to perpetuate structural racism (e.g. Bunting, 2018; Burke, 2017).

These efforts to code, minimize, and otherwise obfuscate their connection to racism inspired the central research question of this paper: What strategies do groups with views outside of mainstream acceptability use to appeal to the public? In order to address this question, this paper draws from a thematic analysis of the home webpage of ID Canada. This analysis revealed several overlapping methods, including an insistence on their own victimhood, a cultivated mistrust of mainstream historical knowledge, veiling references to race in coded language, and a variety of more direct denials of white supremacy (ID Canada, n.d.). All of these approaches aim to present ID Canada as revolutionary enough to challenge mainstream discourse while maintaining plausible deniability of racism.

Paper Structure

This paper presents findings from a mixed-methods case study consisting largely of a thematic analysis of ID Canada's homepage based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach, outlined below. Once the analysis was complete, I attempted to situate ID Canada within a broader context by reviewing media coverage of relevant world events and related groups. Finally, I have included a discussion of ID Canada as it relates to different sociological theories; These include ID Canada's connections to fascism as described by Umberto Eco (1995) and the necessity of understanding this group and its methods in performative terms.

Regarding fascism, ID Canada exhibits most of the hallmarks of fascist ideology identified by Umberto Eco (1995). Particularly relevant to ID Canada's marketing mission is their inability to present a coherent vision of either problem or solution. This is a common trait of fascism which arises from the conflict between inflating fears of a common enemy and assuring adherents of eventual victory (Eco, 1995).

ID Canada is a publicly vocal entity, and thus a part of the "public sphere". However, the public sphere was originally conceived of as an arena of purely rational debate (Kruse et al., 2018). Despite bids for intellectual legitimacy, ID Canada's rhetoric is mostly emotional, appealing to inflated fears or ancestral pride (ID Canada, n.d.). This kind of discourse challenges rational notions of public debate and can only be understood by more "performative" models of the public sphere. These models emphasize symbolic rather than rational struggles for shared meaning, identity, and understandings of history (Tucker, 2005).

ID Canada's History

ID Canada has a difficult history to research. They have very little social media presence, which they attribute to the de-platforming of dissenting voices (ID Canada, 2019) in a comment on one of their two videos remaining on YouTube. News coverage is likewise sparse. However, their website contains a section titled "ID Canada's History", which reveals that "ID Canada started off as Generation Identity – Canada back in December of 2014" (ID Canada, "ID Canada's History" section, n.d.). A leadership change in August 2017 coincided with a decision to rebrand as ID Canada (ID Canada, "ID Canada's History" section, n.d.). This is all the history that ID Canada provides, but it indicates two vital pieces of information. First, ID Canada's original branding indicates at least a superficial connection to Generation Identity. This group is much more well known, and is identified by one of its Austrian leaders as a "Pan-European youth movement" aiming to "defend the identity of Europe" (Special Broadcasting Service [SBS] Dateline, 2017, 2:16) through open, public debate. Generation Identity is known for their publicity stunts, most notably the placing of a burqa on a famous public statue in Vienna (Williams, 2017). They go to great lengths to brand themselves as a moderate alternative to what they see as a binary choice between "dogmatic multiculturalism and diversity and the fringe group of neo-Nazis" (SBS Dateline, 2017, 5:22). Generation Identity is adamant that they do not espouse racist ideals or violence (British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC], 2019; Williams, 2017) and have even sued an Austrian TV channel for labelling them a Nazi group (Williams, 2017). Branding is clearly a central issue for this group. ID Canada does not mention any official connections to or personnel overlap with Generation Identity, but their matching original name, current ideology, and tactical approach are unlikely to be coincidental.

Secondly, ID Canada's leadership change and rebranding decision occurred in August 2017. On the 12th of this month was the "Unite-the-Right" protest in Charlottesville, USA (Hanna et al., 2017). At this rally, white nationalist and far-right groups clashed with counter-protestors, eventually injuring 19 and killing one person by driving a vehicle into a crowd (Hanna et al., 2017). A rallying cry for the white nationalists assembled was "You will not

Figure 1: Thematic Analysis of ID Canada's Homepage
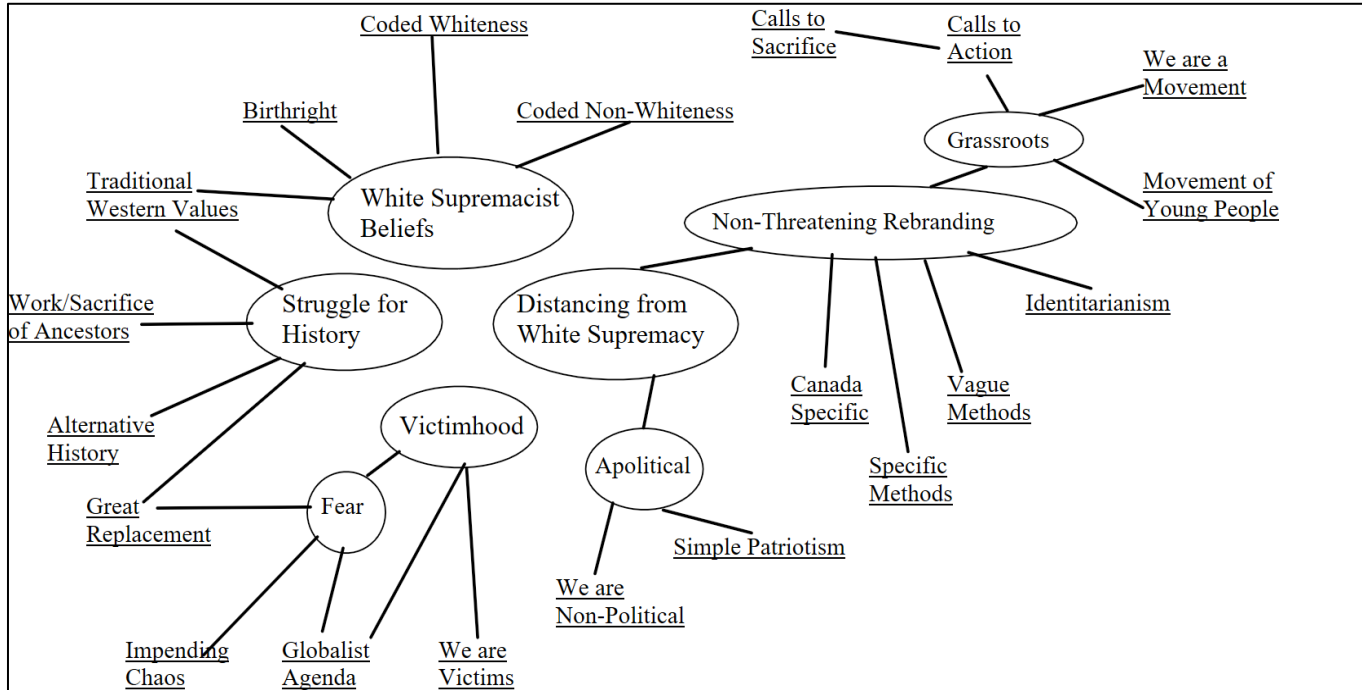
replace us" (Young, 2017), a slogan with obvious analogs in ID Canada's warnings of "demographic replacement of Old Stock Canadians" (ID Canada, "ID Canada's History" section, n.d.). Represented alongside the confederate battle flags and neo-Nazi symbols were shields bearing the logo of Generation Identity (Hanna et al., 2017). For a group which so strenuously distances themselves from neo-Nazism, this connection to white supremacist violence is a powerful incentive to rebrand.

Thematic Analysis

Methods

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) method, I performed a thematic analysis of the homepage of ID Canada's website. Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method with six steps: "1. Familiarizing yourself with the data, 2. Generating initial codes, 3. Searching for themes, 4. Reviewing themes, 5. Defining and naming themes, and 6. Producing the report" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). It is important to note that "codes" in this context are not veiled allusions to socially unacceptable ideas, but labels for "the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88) which can be coherently analyzed. Thematic analysis is a process of creating a deep familiarity with the data and using this knowledge to identify and organize increasingly significant patterns of meaning; It is a process of building

subthemes and themes from the building blocks of codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

ID Canada's homepage was one of four webpages on the group's website, and one which I read many times during my analysis in August of 2020. The website is no longer operational as of January 31, 2021. The others were titled "Resources", which promised that pdf versions of their posters would soon be available and contained a reading list for interested parties (ID Canada, 2019); "Donate", which featured links to give an amount of your choice (ID Canada, 2019); and "Join", which consisted of eligibility questions and a link to an application form (ID Canada, 2019). While these pages all contained relevant data, I focused on the homepage, which explored ID Canada's ideology, methods, and history in the most detail.

Identification of Themes

I identified four main themes (figure 1) in this data. I labelled these "White Supremacist Beliefs", "Struggle for History", "Victimhood", and "Distancing from White Supremacy". Each theme is made up of various codes, and "Victimhood" and "Distancing from White Supremacy" are further organized into sub-themes ("Victimhood" includes the sub-theme "Fear" and "Distancing from White Supremacy" includes "Apolitical" and "Non-Threatening Rebranding"). Each theme captures a significant element of the data, and all are related and overlapping.

Exploration of Themes

It is best to begin with the theme "White Supremacist Beliefs", as the other three themes mostly contain data that function to justify and disguise these beliefs. This theme includes four codes (see Figure 1), the latter two of which overlap with "Struggle for History". The codes "Coded Whiteness" and "Coded Non-Whiteness" contain data that indirectly refer to racial differences, and were applied whenever the racial subtext was too obvious to reasonably ignore. Latent within these data is the assumption that white people, referred to in code as "Old Stock Canadians", "Ethnic Canadians", "Europeans", or descendants of European settlers, are uniquely legitimate as Canadians (ID Canada, n.d.). People of colour were correspondingly referred to in ways that both insinuated their illegitimacy as Canadians and highlighted their foreign origins, for example as part of a wave of "increased third-world immigration" (ID Canada, para. 1, n.d.) with dire consequences. Nowhere were their needs, histories, or humanity acknowledged as valid or legitimate. This is especially obvious when juxtaposed with ID Canada's admiration of European settlers doing the same thing they are worried about non-white people doing: moving to a new continent for a better future. Data that explicitly articulate this assumption of ownership were coded "Birthright". The most obvious example is the following passage:

> The pioneers who came to this country didn't do so to create a nation that would eventually be sold out by globalists and cultural Marxists. They came here for a fresh start – a new life. They came here to be a part of history, and to build a safe, prosperous nation their children and grandchildren could call home. We are their descendants. We are the rightful heirs to this nation, not those who come here to reap the benefits of our social assistance, healthcare, education and most importantly – the labours and sacrifices of our forefathers. (ID Canada, "Our Mission" section, n.d.)

This claim of ownership depends upon a vision of North American colonization which contradicts history as it is usually understood. "Birthright" and "Traditional Western Values" are therefore also included in the theme "Struggle for History". This struggle over historical understanding is an attempt to solve a very specific problem: ID Canada's ideology is supported by a robust internal logic, but is incompatible with historical fact. The assertion of white victimhood is a major theme of their website and serves to justify their existence and facilitate a collective self-image as defenders of the downtrodden. Both historical and current white victimhood in North America, however, is incompatible with the well-documented history of cultural genocide of Indigenous people (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC], 2015), abduction of Indigenous children into residential schools (TRC, 2015), settlers' use and endorsement of slave labour (Afua, 2007; Smith, 2020), and the ongoing slow violence of governmental neglect towards Indigenous people (Beaumont, 2017a; 2017b). Historical context is conspicuous in its absence and is replaced with a convenient narrative of European settlers as self-sacrificing heroes and the source of all values and culture worth celebrating (ID Canada, n.d.).

The embrace of alternative history is in turn supported by an embrace of conspiracy theories. Established historical knowledge is portrayed as an attempt to "re-write history ... to protect the decaying ideals of political correctness and 'diversity'" (ID Canada, para. 1, n.d.). Challenges to the supporting narratives of white victimhood or the seriousness of an imminent "Great Replacement" are discounted as propaganda of a "Globalist Agenda" (ID Canada, n.d.). ID Canada is primed to dismiss anything short of agreement as conspiracy, propaganda, or brainwashing. In this way, the group protects itself from rational challenge even while advocating for open debate.

These refusals to acknowledge racialized violence, share resources or space, or describe non-white people as fully human are all supporting characteristics of contemporary and historical white supremacy (Gibbons, 2018). ID Canada goes to great lengths to obscure this connection in a reader's mind. The final theme, "Distancing from White Supremacy" does this most directly. These data are complex and varied, but the most important strategies within them are as follows. The first approach is labelled "Apolitical". It consists of both direct assertions that "ID Canada has no official political positions, nor does it have a political platform" (ID Canada, "ID Canada's History" section, n.d.), and references to themselves as merely patriotic, a politically bland and therefore benign adjective. The second strategy is "Non-threatening Rebranding". This captures various creative uses of language to break associations with white supremacy. For instance, the alarming term "White Nationalist" is replaced with the relatively unknown label "Identitarian", although both advocate for the creation of white ethno-states (BBC, 2019). Finally, a benign public image is supported by a pervasive vagueness in communication. Goals and methods alike are communicated in metaphors like "change the tide" (ID Canada, "ID Canada's History" section, n.d.) or "join the fight" (ID Canada, "ID Canada's Role" section, n.d.). When concrete strategies are described they are jarringly innocuous, like "hosting our own cultural events" (ID Canada, "Join ID Canada" section, n.d.) and the mismatch in scale between problem and solution is never addressed.

Theory

ID Canada and Ur-Fascism

ID Canada's fascist character has already been mentioned, but it deserves further emphasis. Fascism is a nebulous term, and its ambiguity is not helped by its convenience as a political insult (Harari, 2018). Umberto Eco's (1995) essay "Ur-Fascism" can help alleviate this confusion. In it, Eco identifies 14 features that are common across fascist regimes (1995). ID Canada exhibits many of these features. Most obvious is ID Canada's embrace of a cult of tradition (Eco, 1995). Implicit throughout their writing, this is clearest in their emphasis on "Traditional Western Values" (ID Canada, n.d.). These values are considered worth sacrificing all of life's comforts for and are cast as the very foundation of modern society, but are never once described in even the slightest detail. Although the cult of tradition is the most obvious ID Canada also shows a dependence on the exploitation of natural fears of difference and an inability to form a coherent vision of their opponents, both traits highlighted by Eco (1995).

Secondly, ID Canada exploits natural fears of difference. This has been explored in the thematic analysis, but it is worth identifying data coded "Great Replacement", "Impending Chaos", and "Globalist Agenda" with fascism's reliable exploitation of xenophobia (Eco, 1995). This strategy manufactures collective identity as well as fear. Eco observes that "the only ones who can provide an identity to the nation are its enemies" (1995, p. 7). Despite its well known effectiveness, it is debatable whether xenophobia is the only way to forge a national identity; Cultures can coalesce around shared foods, traditions, hobbies and sporting achievements, even a national self-image of openness and multiculturalism.

Thirdly and finally, fascism is constitutionally incapable of understanding the enemies which it manufactures and depends upon (Eco, 1995). Eco argues that to justify their existence and actions a fascist group must make their enemies seem overwhelmingly powerful and sinister; while to give adherents hope of victory in their struggle these enemies must also seem weak (Eco, 1995). ID Canada exhibits this tendency clearly. "Old Stock Canadians" are portrayed as victims of the shadowy forces of globalism, Marxist culture, and an overwhelming wave of demographic replacement (ID Canada, n.d.). Simultaneously, the most concrete strategies endorsed are "Publicity stunts, hosting our own cultural events, and helping our communities on a more intimate level" (ID Canada, "Join ID Canada" section, n.d.). This mismatch between existential threats and benign solutions is a direct result of fascist confusion, and more importantly positions Identitarianism as innocuous, friendly, and distant from racist ideologies known for violence (BBC, 2019).

Common and essential to all of these strategies is ID Canada's vague communicative style. Intentional or not, this vagueness serves an important function in increasing ID Canada's mainstream appeal. As already mentioned, ID Canada never describes their guiding "Traditional Western Values" in even the slightest detail, leaving them free to take the form of whatever one prizes. Likewise, the nefarious "Globalists and Cultural Marxists" (ID Canada, "Our Mission" section, n.d.) can conform to any potential reader's pre-existing fears. ID Canada is positioned as the defender of whatever a reader values most against whatever they fear or despise. Not only does this broaden their appeal, it leaves them a rhetorical escape from accusations of racism. To the extent that their ideology is undefined, the option remains to redefine it in a favourable light.

Public Spheres and Performativity

The public sphere, a concept introduced by Jurgen Habermas in 1962 (Goldfarb, 2018), was understood by its creator as "a place where 'private people come together as a public' for the purpose of using reason to further critical knowledge" (Kruse et al., 2018, p. 62). In Habermas' public sphere, rational arguments overrule status and tradition (Johnson, 2001), information is free, and equal participation is guaranteed to all (Kruse et al., 2018). Habermas and his critics alike were skeptical of the feasibility of a rational public sphere in modernity (Duelund, 2010; Kruse et al., 2018; Tucker, 2005).

One criticism of Habermas' public sphere concerns its focus on reasoned argument to the exclusion of all else (Tucker, 2005). Habermas tends to dismiss fashion, art, and the "non-linguistic and playful dimensions" (Tucker, 2005, p. 42) characterizing public interaction. This cultural vacuum can be filled by different understandings of the public sphere, in this case, a "performative" one (Tucker, 2005). A performative public sphere is defined by cultural rather than rational struggles over historicity, shared meaning, and the contentious issue of which identities are legitimate (Tucker, 2005). This parallel public sphere is creative, emotive, and, if sociologist Alain Touraine is to be believed, a product of subjectivation, or the "effort of each individual or group to create itself as a principle of integration of more and more diverse experiences" (Touraine, 2002, abstract). Rephrased briefly, Touraine's public sphere encompasses all of the cultural and symbolic battles that arise as individuals seek to integrate the divergent forces acting upon them in modern life.

Despite appeals to public debate and discussion, ID Canada's mistrust of mainstream history, appeals to emotion, motivation to defend a given identity as legitimate, and methodological focus on performance (ID Canada, n.d.) locate them firmly within the performative public sphere. Even their central project of distancing themselves from

publicly unwelcome ideologies is essentially a "struggle over the control of the cultural beliefs informing a society" (Tucker, 2005, p. 53) typical of the performative public sphere. However, a problem remains for ID Canada. Both Touraine's subjectivation and Habermas' rational discourse are integrative processes, seeking to reconcile in different ways the democratic necessity of forming common interests with the modern fact of cultural plurality (Johnson, 2001; Touraine, 2002; Tucker, 2005). In sharp contrast to these attempts at integration are approaches like Carl Schmitt's, who is infamous for his view that democracy cannot coexist with pluralism and requires a homogenous national culture imposed by an authoritarian government to function (Johnson, 2001).

Identitarianism follows Carl Schmitt's thinking closely. ID Canada's dismissal of cultural diversity as "our greatest weakness" (ID Canada, para. 1, n.d.), or one German Identitarians assertion that "democracy only works if it is largely an ethnic democracy" (BBC, 2019) are both clear examples of this dualistic attitude. Identitarianism is therefore not a process of subjectivation as Touraine understands it. This does not exclude it from the performative public sphere. It is still true that Identitarian activism is enacted and remains best understood within a performative framework. Touraine named the clash between communitarian, conformist forces such as this and the creation of integrative Subjects as a central conflict of modern society (2002). My analysis suggests that this clash is indeed a symbolic, performative one.

Conclusion

This examination has attempted to understand the strategies of one small group in a right-wing populist ecosystem. It is apparent that ID Canada uses coded language to disguise ideologies of racial superiority, while appealing to and deliberately exacerbating fear of immigrants. Narratives of victimhood are justified by a cultivated mistrust of mainstream historical narratives and accusations of racism are deflected with a pervasive rebranding campaign. New language is invented and employed to distance ID Canada from white supremacy as such, and they describe themselves and their methods in vague, innocuous ways that do not match either their dramatic calls to "Stand for something or die for nothing" (ID Canada, Bottom Title, n.d.) or their estimation of the seriousness of the present threat.

It is tempting to demonize this group, or to dismiss them as intentionally deceptive in applying these techniques. However, to do so prevents any true understanding of their motives and conveniently excuses us as observers from serious self-examination. Gibbons (2018) argues that passive support of white supremacy in the form of deliberate white ignorance is fueled by a need for privileged individuals to see themselves as decent in spite of the racial injustice on which their lifestyles depend. This need for positive self-regard is universal. Acknowledging this allows us to view ID Canada not as a group of duplicitous liars, but true believers whose actions are motivated by reactionary defensiveness. This in no way negates or excuses the consequences of white supremacist rhetoric. Rather, understanding fascism's appeal as a "shortcut" to self-esteem (Harari, 2018) enables us as a public to better inoculate ourselves against it, and to engage with its adherents in good faith and the hope of building bridges which people can eventually cross in their journey away from reactionary xenophobia.

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Appendix A: Note on Reflexivity

Politics are contentious, and despite protests to the contrary (ID Canada, ID Canada's History section, n.d.), both ID Canada and the ideology of "Identitarianism" are deeply political. Not only the subject, but also my chosen approach of thematic analysis necessitates an explicit discussion of my own assumptions and values (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Research generally, and qualitative research especially, is an interpretive process in which researcher assumptions and biases play a role, and understanding this role is essential in understanding the research itself (Finlay, 2002).

Briefly, it should be said that I am studying a group with which my own values clash. For example, the understanding of Canada as a nation of "Europeans values, traditions, customs and culture" (ID Canada, para. 1, n.d.) runs counter to the mainstream value of multiculturalism and respect for difference which I have been steeped in for much of my life. For example, I and much of my generation, grew up in an educational and cultural environment which, at least rhetorically, acknowledges historical atrocities committed by Europeans against Indigenous people. This is not to say that mainstream society takes their current struggles seriously, or that Eurocentric backlash is absent, only that ID Canada represents a worldview which I was raised to believe had no place in modern, multicultural society.

I also acknowledge that I am, at least demographically, a likely part of the target audience for this group. They brand themselves "an organization of concerned youth aged 18-35" (ID Canada, "ID Canada's History" section, n.d.). I am a concerned, 28-year old, white man. My biases against white nationalism and my identity as a likely target for recruitment have combined and caused me to approach this group with cautious animosity. I have sought to minimize the distorting effects of these biases both by disclosing them, as Finlay (2002) advises, and implementing a set methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2006) into my analysis.