

**WHOSE LAND, WHOSE VOICE? INDIGENOUS RIGHTS AND THE CORPORATE
PURSUIT OF A SOCIAL LICENSE IN THE RING OF FIRE**

by

Emily Head

Supervision by Dr. Brad Long

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Gerald Schwartz School of Business

St. Francis Xavier University

Antigonish, Nova Scotia

Canada

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the complexities surrounding the pursuit of a social license to operate (SLO) by mining companies in Canada's Ring of Fire region, particularly in the context of Indigenous relations and environmental stewardship. Through a content analysis methodology focusing on news articles, media reports, and public documents, the research critically examines corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts and evaluates how these initiatives align with Indigenous communities' expectations and legal frameworks such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and Canada's constitutional duty to consult. Findings reveal significant gaps between industry actions and community expectations, highlighting the challenges companies face in achieving meaningful engagement and genuine reconciliation. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that despite notable CSR investments and government incentives, the lack of true participatory processes and informed consent continues to impede sustainable development and community acceptance in the Ring of Fire. The research underscores the necessity of transitioning from transactional interactions to authentic partnerships to secure lasting social licenses.

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Introduction

As global demand for critical minerals intensifies in the transition to a low-carbon economy, Canada's mineral-rich regions, particularly the Ring of Fire, have become focal points for resource extraction. Mining in these areas, however, has raised urgent questions about environmental stewardship, Indigenous rights, and the ethical responsibility of corporations. For mining companies to operate sustainably and responsibly, they must secure a Social License to Operate (SLO), an informal, community-granted approval based on perceptions of legitimacy, trust, and credibility (Thomson & Boutilier, 2011). Unlike formal regulatory permits, an SLO depends on deep, ongoing engagement with affected communities, especially Indigenous groups, and requires companies to address a history of environmental and social harms associated with mining.

Securing an SLO is particularly challenging in contexts where cultural violence and social injustices are deeply ingrained. Cultural violence refers to systemic harm that erodes Indigenous cultural identities and practices, often through land encroachment, environmental degradation, and disregard for traditional governance systems (Horowitz et al., 2018). Social injustice in mining further compounds these challenges, encompassing economic inequalities, environmental harms, and limited access to decision-making processes (Keeling & Sandlos, 2009). While Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives are meant to bridge these gaps, they often fall short, with critics accusing companies of "redwashing" defined as superficial

gestures toward reconciliation that fail to address substantive grievances (Millington et al., 2019).

This research aims to explore the nuanced landscape of SLO in the Ring of Fire, focusing on how Indigenous rights and reconciliation frameworks like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's (TRC) Calls to Action, Bill C-15 (UNDRIP), and Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Inquiry have influenced corporate and governmental approaches to resource extraction. By conducting a content analysis of post Indigenous rights and reconciliation frameworks in the region, this study will examine whether industry practices have evolved toward reconciliation with more equitable and sustainable community engagement. Specifically, it will investigate shifts in environmental and social impact strategies, Indigenous engagement, and CSR frameworks to identify progress and persisting gaps in securing an SLO.

The purpose of this research is twofold: first, to assess the impact of the emergence Indigenous rights and reconciliation frameworks on mining practices in the Ring of Fire, and second, to provide actionable insights on how mining companies can better align their operations with Indigenous rights, environmental justice, and community well-being. By understanding the changes and challenges in securing an SLO post-TRC, this study seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on ethical mining practices, supporting a future where resource extraction is both socially responsible and environmentally sound.

Literature Review

The shift toward renewable energy systems to combat climate change has led to an unprecedented demand for critical minerals—elements like lithium, cobalt, and rare earth

elements (REEs) that are essential in manufacturing technologies such as electric vehicle batteries, wind turbines, and solar panels (Brown et al., 2024; Church & Crawford, 2020). This surge in demand introduces new pressures on global mineral supply chains and underscores significant socio-environmental challenges. Although essential for decarbonizing energy systems, the extraction of these minerals carries complex trade-offs, impacting both the environment and local communities, particularly Indigenous groups (Carr-Wilson et al., 2024).

The mining of critical minerals presents considerable environmental challenges. Extractive activities often lead to soil degradation, water pollution, and habitat destruction, disrupting ecosystems critical to biodiversity conservation (Carr-Wilson et al., 2024). For instance, lithium extraction in arid regions, such as South America's Lithium Triangle, significantly impacts water resources, which affects local agriculture and disrupts the natural habitat (Brown et al., 2024). Additionally, processing REEs involves complex, energy-intensive methods that generate toxic waste, exacerbating environmental degradation (Owen et al., 2023). This environmental toll reveals a paradox within the global energy transition, as green technologies, while reducing greenhouse emissions, still heavily rely on environmentally damaging mining processes.

The intersection of energy transition mineral projects with Indigenous lands poses significant risks to Indigenous rights and cultural practices. Over half of the world's energy transition mineral projects are situated on or near Indigenous territories (Owen et al., 2023). The expansion of these projects often challenges the principle of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) outlined by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Although international standards advocate for FPIC, the rapid pace of project development to meet global demand can undermine Indigenous rights. Many Indigenous groups

emphasize that land connectedness is not only integral to their cultural identity but also supports ecological stewardship (Owen et al., 2022). Consequently, the intrusion of extractive projects on Indigenous lands highlights tensions between international energy goals and local, culturally significant land use.

Critical minerals are indispensable to achieving a low-carbon energy system. However, their extraction raises questions about the viability of a truly "just transition." The International Energy Agency (IEA) projects that meeting the Paris Agreement's climate targets will necessitate mineral production on a massive scale, quadrupling the current demand by 2040 (Church & Crawford, 2020). This reliance on mineral extraction risks perpetuating economic inequalities and environmental degradation, often referred to as the "green colonialism" dilemma, where the benefits of green technologies are felt globally, but the burdens of extraction are borne by local, often vulnerable communities (Brown et al., 2024; Carr-Wilson et al., 2024).

The shift toward green energy technologies powered by critical minerals brings to light essential questions about sustainability and equity. The balance between minimizing environmental degradation, respecting Indigenous rights, and meeting global energy goals is delicate. The transition to renewable energy cannot be viewed as sustainable unless it addresses the socio-environmental and ethical complexities intrinsic to critical mineral extraction.

Canada's Commitment to Clean Energy and Transportation

As global momentum builds around the need for a sustainable energy transition, Canada has made significant strides toward clean energy and transportation as central components of its climate commitments. Canada's dedication to reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions aligns

with both its Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement and its net-zero by 2050 targets. These goals are supported by robust policies aimed at decarbonizing key sectors, including energy production, transportation, and industrial processes (Tian et al., 2023; Bataille et al., 2015).

Canada's energy transition strategy emphasizes decarbonizing electricity production, which is crucial as the country moves to electrify other sectors like transportation and heating. Canada's electricity mix is already largely decarbonized due to extensive hydropower resources, which constitute over 60% of its electricity generation (Stefanelli et al., 2019). However, Canada continues to invest in expanding wind, solar, and biomass energy to meet rising demands and reduce dependency on fossil fuels (Bataille et al., 2015; Tian et al., 2023). The Government of Canada has prioritized inter-provincial collaboration to optimize renewable energy distribution, leveraging high-potential areas to balance regional energy needs effectively (Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development, 2023).

Transportation, as a major GHG contributor, is another key focus in Canada's decarbonization strategy. The government has promoted the adoption of electric vehicles (EVs) through subsidies, infrastructure investments, and regulatory incentives. In alignment with the Zero-Emission Vehicle mandate, Canada aims to reach 100% zero-emission vehicle sales by 2035. This goal is bolstered by ongoing investments in EV infrastructure, including charging stations and grid upgrades, to support EV penetration across urban and rural areas (Tian et al., 2023; Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development, 2023).

Canada's clean energy and transportation goals are supported by comprehensive policies, including carbon pricing, clean technology investments, and international partnerships. By establishing a competitive carbon pricing system, Canada incentivizes low-carbon practices

across industries, encouraging innovation and adoption of green technologies. Additionally, Canada collaborates with international partners to align its decarbonization strategies with global best practices and to support clean technology exports, reinforcing its role in the global clean energy market (Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development, 2023).

A distinctive aspect of Canada's energy transition strategy is the role of Indigenous communities in clean energy development. Indigenous groups have been actively involved in renewable energy projects, viewing these initiatives not only as steps toward energy autonomy but also as pathways for economic empowerment and environmental stewardship (Stefanelli et al., 2019). Projects involving Indigenous leadership, particularly in remote areas reliant on diesel, exemplify a dual-purpose approach that addresses both climate change and reconciliation efforts. This integration underscores Canada's commitment to fostering nation-to-nation relationships while advancing its clean energy goals (Stefanelli et al., 2019).

Canada's commitment to clean energy and sustainable transportation is embedded within its broader climate action goals. Through investments in renewable energy, support for Indigenous-led projects, and policy-driven transportation electrification, Canada is setting a framework for a resilient and inclusive energy transition. These initiatives reflect a holistic approach that aims to align national decarbonization objectives with the broader goals of environmental justice and economic sustainability.

The Ring of Fire Mining Project: Context, Sociopolitical Landscape, and Indigenous Relations

As Canada advances its energy transition and clean technology goals, the Ring of Fire region in Northern Ontario has emerged as a critical resource area for extracting essential minerals. Located approximately 500 kilometers northeast of Thunder Bay in the James Bay Lowlands, the Ring of Fire is estimated to contain mineral resources worth \$60 billion, including significant deposits of chromite and nickel (Chong, 2014). The federal and provincial governments view the development of this mineral-rich area as a potential multi-generational economic driver that could significantly boost Ontario's GDP and support Canada's low-carbon economy through the provision of critical minerals necessary for technologies such as electric vehicle batteries (Scott, 2023).

The Ring of Fire lies within the traditional territories of the Matawa First Nations, encompassing communities such as Eabametoong, Marten Falls, and Neskantaga, who have resided on these lands for generations. The Ring of Fire lands are governed by Treaty 9, an agreement that many Indigenous communities argue has not been respected in spirit, particularly in the context of resource development (Spitzig, 2019). Indigenous communities in the region, including the Matawa First Nations, have historically faced inadequate consultation and limited participation in decision-making regarding land use, leading to longstanding grievances over land rights and sovereignty (Scott, 2023). Although Canadian law mandates the duty to consult, Indigenous leaders assert that genuine, consent-based engagement has often been lacking. This lack of consultation has intensified calls from Indigenous groups for environmental and social impact assessments that incorporate Indigenous knowledge and prioritize their jurisdiction over the lands (Atlin, 2019).

The James Bay Lowlands, which include the Ring of Fire, are one of the largest, most intact peatland ecosystems globally, playing a crucial role in carbon sequestration and

biodiversity. These peatlands hold an estimated 35 billion tons of carbon, underscoring the environmental risks tied to mining activities that could disrupt this carbon store (Scott, 2023). The unique ecology of the area, coupled with its remoteness and limited infrastructure, presents both logistical challenges and environmental risks, such as potential impacts on water quality, species habitats, and carbon emissions from peatland disturbance (Simpson & Dyczko, 2012).

Ontario's government has marketed the Ring of Fire as the "oil sands of Ontario" due to its anticipated ability to generate wealth and create jobs over the long term (Irvine, 2016). To advance the project, Ontario initially engaged in collective negotiations with the Matawa First Nations through a Regional Framework Agreement; however, these discussions encountered setbacks. Ontario then pivoted to bilateral agreements with "mining ready" First Nations, creating divisions within and among communities regarding authority and the equitable distribution of mining benefits (Scott, 2023). This change in approach has led to polarized responses, with some Indigenous communities viewing the project as an opportunity for economic development and autonomy, while others fear it threatens their lands, culture, and traditional ways of life (Gonzalez, 2023).

Indigenous communities' reactions to the Ring of Fire development are varied, largely framed by concerns over environmental integrity and the social welfare of future generations. For example, the Neskantaga and Eabametoong First Nations have voiced strong opposition, emphasizing the need for sustainable and consent-based development frameworks (Spitzig, 2019). These communities advocate for Indigenous-led environmental assessments that respect Indigenous legal orders and prioritize ecological protection, arguing that current government-led assessments fail to address cumulative environmental and social impacts (Vescio, 2018). Meanwhile, other communities, motivated by the economic potential, are engaging in

discussions on partnerships that could yield long-term benefits while mitigating environmental risks.

The Ring of Fire project exemplifies the broader tensions surrounding resource extraction on Indigenous lands in Canada. The project's future depends on balancing the need for critical minerals to drive Canada's energy transition with Indigenous rights, environmental sustainability, and community values. Moving forward, a robust, inclusive approach that respects Indigenous jurisdiction and integrates ecological considerations will be essential for ensuring that the Ring of Fire supports a sustainable and equitable resource development model.

Social and Environmental Impacts of Mining Operations

Mining operations significantly impact the environment, particularly in fragile ecosystems like Canada's North. Extractive activities lead to soil degradation, water contamination, and habitat destruction, which undermine biodiversity and disrupt ecosystems. Pearce et al. (2010) underscore that climate change exacerbates these risks, intensifying the impacts of mining through permafrost thaw, increased flooding, and extreme weather events that complicate sustainable operations in these regions. Additionally, air pollution from smelting and acid mine drainage contaminates nearby water sources, further affecting the health and livelihood of local communities and complicating efforts to secure an SLO (Dashwood, 2007).

Efforts to mitigate environmental impacts through environmental impact assessments (EIAs) have shown mixed effectiveness. Noble and Bronson (2005) point out that EIAs often prioritize physical environmental impacts, overlooking the broader socio-cultural implications for communities whose lives and identities are tied to the land. This oversight in assessment

frameworks can erode trust, as affected communities may perceive that their concerns are not being fully addressed, making it more difficult for companies to secure community acceptance.

While mining operations bring economic benefits through job creation and infrastructure improvements, they also bring socio-economic and cultural disruptions to local communities. For example, mining jobs often follow a rotational schedule, which destabilizes community cohesion and introduces a transient workforce that disrupts social structures. Gibson and Klinck (2005) observe that although mining offers high wages, the cyclical nature of employment creates instability and compounds economic dependency during non-working periods, particularly in remote regions of Northern Canada.

The cultural impacts of mining on Indigenous communities are particularly profound, as traditional land-based activities such as hunting, fishing, and gathering are disrupted. Koke (2009) highlights that mining restricts access to these subsistence practices, which are essential for both economic survival and cultural expression for Indigenous populations in regions like Nunavik and Alaska. Such disruptions threaten not only economic independence but also weaken cultural continuity, as younger generations lose opportunities to participate in these culturally significant activities.

Impact Benefit Agreements (IBAs) are used to formalize relationships and secure economic benefits for affected communities. Sosa and Keenan (2001) explain that while IBAs aim to provide financial compensation and community investments, they often fail to address the long-term cultural and social impacts of mining, as their focus remains primarily on immediate economic benefits rather than sustainable community development. The confidentiality of many IBAs further limits transparency, which can lead to resentment among community members and hinder the establishment of trust.

Mining also impacts public health, particularly through environmental contamination that poses health risks to local populations. According to the Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency (2008), pollutants from mining activities, such as toxic chemicals leaching into water systems, pose significant health hazards to Indigenous communities who rely on these natural resources. This contamination is particularly concerning in remote Indigenous communities, where reliance on traditional water sources for drinking, fishing, and hunting is central to daily life.

The Canadian Environmental Law Association (CELA, 2001) notes that long-term exposure to contaminants from mining is linked to higher rates of respiratory and cardiovascular diseases, placing additional burdens on community health systems. Moreover, the psychological impacts of environmental degradation, including stress and loss of cultural identity, are significant. Beckett and Keeling (2019) argue that environmental harm to culturally significant lands impact mental health and disrupts the spiritual and cultural practices central to Indigenous identities.

The environmental and socio-economic impacts of mining raise critical issues of environmental justice, especially concerning Indigenous land rights. Historically, Indigenous communities have been excluded from resource governance, with decision-making power concentrated in corporate and government hands. This marginalization perpetuates environmental and economic injustices, as Indigenous lands bear the ecological costs while economic benefits flow predominantly to external stakeholders. According to the Canadian Environmental Law Association (2001), the exclusion of Indigenous perspectives in resource management fosters distrust and delegitimizes mining projects in the eyes of affected communities.

Advocates, including Allard and Curran (2021), call for mining companies to incorporate Indigenous knowledge systems and respect Indigenous sovereignty in environmental governance frameworks. By adopting CSR practices that prioritize Indigenous involvement and knowledge, companies can build stronger relationships and improve their chances of achieving an SLO through authentic engagement and equitable benefit-sharing.

The environmental and social impacts of mining present significant barriers to securing an SLO, as communities frequently bear the brunt of ecological degradation and socio-cultural disruptions. Mining companies must balance economic development with environmental stewardship and cultural sensitivity, demonstrating a commitment to the well-being of local ecosystems and communities. Sustainable mining practices require long-term commitments to environmental health and social welfare, addressing not only immediate economic gains but also the socio-cultural impacts on Indigenous communities to foster transparent, respectful, and mutually beneficial relationships.

Cultural Violence and Social Injustices in Mining Contexts

Following the complex dynamics of the Ring of Fire mining project, it is essential to examine the broader issues of cultural violence and social injustices that characterize many mining projects on Indigenous lands. Cultural violence in this context refers to the systematic erosion of Indigenous cultural identities and practices due to resource extraction. This form of violence manifests through both direct impacts, such as the loss of sacred sites, and indirect effects, including the weakening of Indigenous governance and traditional cultural norms (Horowitz et al., 2018). Social injustices encompass a range of inequities, including economic

marginalization, environmental harm, and restricted access to decision-making processes—issues that contribute to Indigenous communities’ distrust of mining companies (Keeling & Sandlos, 2009).

Cultural violence in mining is often evident in the disregard shown by extractive industries toward Indigenous relationships with the land. McGregor (2021) notes that Indigenous knowledge systems view the land not merely as a resource but as an essential part of cultural identity and spiritual practices. The imposition of industrial models often devalues and disrupts these perspectives, reinforcing colonial power structures that marginalize Indigenous voices and rights. Legal frameworks in Canada, for example, often prioritize Eurocentric property laws in resource extraction projects, thereby sidelining Indigenous governance systems and cultural perspectives on land use (Anaya, 2005).

The impacts of cultural violence are often gendered. Manning et al. (2018) discuss how Indigenous women, as custodians of cultural knowledge, bear a disproportionate burden of the harms resulting from mining activities. With resource extraction disrupting traditional roles, Indigenous women face unique social vulnerabilities that deepen their marginalization both within their communities and in the broader society. This erosion of Indigenous cultural structures not only affects individuals but also destabilizes community cohesion, amplifying the effects of cultural violence over generations.

Social injustices in the mining sector are compounded by economic disparities that arise from exclusionary practices in resource development. Impact Benefit Agreements (IBAs) are frequently used to secure economic returns for communities impacted by mining. However, Scott (2020) critiques IBAs for often reinforcing rather than rectifying power imbalances, as they

primarily benefit corporations while providing limited, short-term gains for Indigenous communities.

Environmental degradation caused by mining also perpetuates social injustices. Murdocca (2010) discusses how water contamination from resource extraction, for example, has had severe health and cultural implications for Indigenous communities in Ontario. Such environmental harm exemplifies environmental racism, where Indigenous lands bear a disproportionate burden of pollution and ecological damage, and regulatory mechanisms fail to fully address or prevent these impacts. Nachet et al. (2022) further emphasize that the accountability of mining corporations is often minimal, which allows significant ecological harm to persist on Indigenous territories.

Cultural violence and social injustices inflicted by mining projects substantially erode community trust in extractive industries, undermining the legitimacy of their operations. Many Indigenous communities perceive mining corporations as entities that prioritize profit over cultural preservation or environmental stewardship. This distrust is intensified when companies disregard Indigenous knowledge systems and limit meaningful community involvement. As Gibson and Bradshaw (2018) assert, a sustainable relationship between mining companies and Indigenous communities requires more than formal agreements; it requires genuine respect for Indigenous rights and governance systems.

Environmental justice frameworks suggest that equitable relationships between industries and Indigenous communities must address historical injustices and prioritize environmental protection. However, as Keeling and Sandlos (2009) observe, mining practices in Canada's northern territories have often reduced Indigenous lands to "sacrificial landscapes," where local

populations suffer the environmental and health impacts while corporations and the state reap economic benefits.

The pervasive cultural violence and social injustices within mining contexts represent significant barriers to fair and sustainable resource development on Indigenous lands. Addressing these issues requires a shift from extraction-centered models toward frameworks that genuinely respect Indigenous rights, prioritize environmental protection, and support cultural preservation. Only through addressing these longstanding issues can mining industries foster trust and build equitable, mutually beneficial relationships with Indigenous communities.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Reconciliation, and Calls to Action

As Canada confronts its historical and ongoing injustices toward Indigenous peoples, the role of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has come under scrutiny, especially within the resource extraction industry. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) 2015 report issued 94 Calls to Action, urging institutions, including businesses, to play a role in reconciliation efforts. These Calls to Action emphasize the need for equitable partnerships that respect Indigenous rights, with a specific call for industries to align with frameworks such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which upholds Indigenous rights to free, prior, and informed consent (TRC, 2015).

CSR in the context of resource extraction holds unique challenges, particularly as Indigenous communities demand a more active role in decision-making and benefit-sharing. The CSR initiatives of many extractive companies include community investments and environmental stewardship programs; however, critics argue that these efforts often mask the

detrimental impacts of resource extraction on Indigenous lands, a practice described as "redwashing" (Millington et al., 2019). By sponsoring visible initiatives, such as sport-for-development programs, extractive industries attempt to build a positive public image while avoiding deeper engagement with community grievances and structural injustices (Millington et al., 2019).

Incorporating Indigenous perspectives on land and resource use requires a shift away from these surface-level CSR initiatives. Coronado and Fallon (2010) argue that traditional CSR practices are insufficient for Indigenous engagement, as they prioritize managerial objectives and focus on risk management rather than addressing substantive rights issues. To move forward, Long (2022) suggests that CSR in Canada must undergo a fundamental shift, embedding cultural competency, respect for Indigenous spiritual and cultural connections to land, and commitment to FPIC as essential components of CSR frameworks.

For CSR to contribute meaningfully to reconciliation, it must go beyond mere procedural adjustments. As observed by Allard and Curran (2021), initiatives such as British Columbia's Environmental Assessment Act mandate more collaborative and consent-based approaches by requiring Indigenous participation in project assessments. This approach represents a shift from mere consultation to cooperative governance, aligning with UNDRIP's framework and acknowledging Indigenous legal orders (Allard & Curran, 2021).

However, many CSR frameworks still fail to engage Indigenous communities as equals. Beckett and Keeling (2019) argue that while reclamation and remediation are often presented as positive CSR initiatives, these projects frequently overlook the historical harms inflicted by mining and prioritize technical solutions over meaningful community participation. In some cases, such initiatives can even retraumatize communities by revisiting sites of cultural and

environmental degradation without adequately addressing past injustices (Beckett & Keeling, 2019).

For CSR efforts to be genuinely transformative, they must address economic and environmental disparities faced by Indigenous communities. Bernard (2018) highlights how the continued exploitation of Indigenous lands without adequate compensation perpetuates economic and environmental injustices, reinforcing intergenerational trauma linked to colonial resource exploitation. These injustices are rooted in a history of imposed development that often disregards Indigenous governance systems. Curran (2019) underscores the importance of integrating Indigenous knowledge and governance into CSR initiatives as a way of honoring Indigenous authority and fostering truly equitable partnerships.

Remediation efforts, often viewed as corporate gestures toward environmental responsibility, can also be re-envisioned within a reconciliation framework. Keeling and Sandlos (2019) argue that rather than limiting remediation to technical cleanup, it should encompass a broader commitment to environmental justice and community healing. This approach requires viewing remediation as a relational process that respects Indigenous stewardship and promotes long-term ecological sustainability (Beckett & Keeling, 2019). Integrating this perspective within CSR offers companies the opportunity to address historical harms and foster healing, rather than simply mitigating environmental risks for regulatory compliance.

Moving Forward: CSR as a Mechanism for Reconciliation

For CSR to fulfill its potential as a tool for reconciliation, resource companies must adopt a fundamentally new approach—one that aligns corporate practices with the Calls to Action

issued by the TRC. Long (2022) argues that CSR must be reframed to incorporate not only economic and environmental concerns but also social equity and Indigenous sovereignty. This transformation would require companies to recognize Indigenous peoples as rights-holders, rather than stakeholders, thus shifting power dynamics to allow Indigenous communities to co-create CSR policies and practices. Meaningful CSR in this context involves creating frameworks that go beyond token gestures, supporting initiatives that acknowledge the spiritual and cultural connections Indigenous communities have with their lands. This aligns with the broader environmental justice movement and helps build trust in corporate intentions, addressing issues of redwashing and genuinely contributing to community resilience and environmental sustainability (Millington et al., 2019).

Transforming CSR to serve as a vehicle for reconciliation requires a commitment to honoring Indigenous rights, addressing historical injustices, and involving Indigenous communities as equal partners. By prioritizing Indigenous values and authority within CSR initiatives, resource companies can contribute to a more just and sustainable model of resource extraction in Canada. Embracing this vision would allow CSR to transition from being a superficial public relations tool to a meaningful contributor to the reconciliation process.

Conceptual Framework: The Social License to Operate in Mining Projects

Building upon the examination of the environmental and social impacts of mining, cultural violence and injustices in mining contexts, and the new mandate for CSR, the concept of the Social License to Operate (SLO) emerges as a critical framework for understanding how mining companies can achieve and maintain community acceptance. The SLO concept,

particularly relevant in contexts where communities have experienced marginalization and cultural harm, represents an informal “license” granted by the community that allows companies to operate based on perceived legitimacy, credibility, and trust (Thomson & Boutilier, 2011). Unlike formal regulatory permissions, an SLO is grounded in the quality of the relationship between the company and the community, demanding genuine engagement and respect for local values, rights, and concerns (Prno, 2013). This section examines the importance of these relational elements within the SLO framework, referencing Boutilier and Thomson’s model, and explores how SLO is dynamic, evolving with stakeholder interactions and perceptions over time.

Boutilier and Thomson’s (2011) model of SLO is foundational in understanding this concept. Their model describes SLO as comprising four levels: withdrawal, acceptance, approval, and co-identification, with each level requiring progressively deeper trust and alignment with community values. At the base level, withdrawal implies a complete lack of social license, where communities may actively oppose the project. As a project gains legitimacy and credibility, it moves up to acceptance and approval. The highest level, co-identification, reflects a scenario in which the community identifies with the project and its success (Boutilier & Thomson, 2011).

The foundation of SLO is built on three core elements: legitimacy, credibility, and trust, each essential for progressing through the SLO levels. Legitimacy refers to the alignment of the company’s operations with societal values and norms, as perceived by the community. Achieving legitimacy requires the company to act in ways that the community sees as morally and ethically sound (Parsons et al., 2014). Credibility, on the other hand, is established through transparency and consistent actions that align with the company’s commitments, such as adhering to environmental and safety standards (Moffat & Zhang, 2014). Trust, the most

challenging and complex component, arises when the community feels confident that the company will act in their interest, particularly in unregulated areas. As Prno and Slocombe (2012) emphasize, trust is critical for stabilizing and maintaining a high level of social license.

SLO is inherently dynamic, evolving based on stakeholder perceptions and the quality of interactions over time. Prno (2013) highlights that SLO is not a static achievement but rather an ongoing process that demands adaptability to social, environmental, and economic changes. This dynamism is especially pertinent in the mining sector, where the impact of environmental incidents, shifts in community expectations, or changes in corporate policy can either strengthen or erode an SLO (Bice & Moffat, 2014). The evolving nature of SLO emphasizes its dependency on regular engagement with stakeholders, transparency, and responsiveness to community concerns. Moffat and Zhang (2014) further elaborate that an SLO can rise and fall depending on the company's efforts in maintaining legitimacy, credibility, and trust through consistent and respectful dialogue.

Achieving and maintaining an SLO requires strategic community engagement, which is increasingly recognized as integral to mining projects. Community engagement goes beyond public relations; it requires companies to establish meaningful dialogue with local stakeholders, including Indigenous groups, environmental organizations, and government entities (Dare et al., 2014). As a result, we suggest that SLO would be a natural outcome of meaningful, transformative CSR efforts. In the Ring of Fire, for example, Indigenous communities are pivotal stakeholders whose perspectives on land rights and environmental sustainability directly influence the project's SLO. Boutilier (2014) and Prno and Slocombe (2012) underscore the importance of understanding stakeholder networks, noting that diverse groups may hold differing views on the project, each affecting the SLO differently. Effective engagement strategies must

thus address these varied perspectives to foster a unified SLO that minimizes the risk of opposition and enhances community support.

SLO can be conceptualized as an informal social contract where community acceptance is conditional upon the company's actions and adherence to community values and expectations (Hall et al., 2015). This informal "contract" reflects societal shifts towards expecting higher accountability from corporations in terms of environmental and social responsibility. As communities demand greater involvement in decision-making and a fair distribution of project benefits, companies are increasingly obligated to address these demands proactively (Prno, 2013). Research indicates that when mining companies fail to uphold these expectations, communities may withdraw their SLO, leading to costly disruptions or even project shutdowns (Bice & Moffat, 2014; Meesters et al., 2021).

Implications for Mining Projects

For mining operations, particularly in sensitive regions like the Ring of Fire, the ability to secure and sustain an SLO is crucial for long-term project viability. Failure to achieve an SLO can result in significant delays, financial losses, and damaged reputations. As Dare et al. (2014) emphasize, SLO considerations should be integrated into project planning from the outset, recognizing that securing an SLO is an iterative process involving regular dialogue and responsiveness to community feedback. Moreover, with cumulative regional impacts from multiple operations, companies must consider SLO not only at the local project level but in a broader, regional context (Hall et al., 2015). This comprehensive approach to SLO helps to align corporate actions with community values, supporting both sustainable development goals and local well-being.

The Social License to Operate provides a crucial framework for understanding community acceptance in mining projects. Thomson and Boutilier's model highlight the importance of legitimacy, credibility, and trust, emphasizing the dynamic nature of SLO and its reliance on consistent engagement and adaptability. For mining companies operating in sensitive areas, securing an SLO is not merely a strategy for risk management but an ethical imperative that aligns with broader societal expectations for responsible resource development. Through respectful engagement, transparent practices, and a commitment to addressing community concerns, mining operations can foster sustainable and mutually beneficial relationships with host communities.

Recent Developments and Challenges for Noront Resources in Securing a Social License to Operate (SLO)

As Noront Resources navigates its operations in Canada, particularly in the sensitive and ecologically significant Ring of Fire region, the company faces substantial challenges in securing a Social License to Operate (SLO). These challenges are shaped by a history of colonial practices in resource extraction, the expectations of Indigenous communities for reconciliation, and the heightened standards for corporate accountability outlined in frameworks such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Calls to Action, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), and the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG). Noront's acquisition of the Ring of Fire from Cliffs Resources in 2015 marked a turning point, necessitating a reevaluation of approaches to Indigenous engagement and reconciliation.

Reconciliation Initiatives

A primary prerequisite for Noront Resources in securing an SLO is ensuring that its reconciliation efforts with Indigenous communities are both substantive and aligned with the principles of UNDRIP and the TRC. Noront has publicly acknowledged the importance of addressing the history of cultural violence in resource extraction in Canada, emphasizing its commitment to fostering partnerships with Indigenous communities (Noront Resources Ltd., 2020). The company has highlighted its intent to operate in a manner that reflects respect for Indigenous rights and has cited its participation in community engagement sessions and collaborative land use planning. However, these efforts are continually scrutinized for their depth and sincerity. Illustratively, while Noront has signed agreements with some First Nations, critics argue that meaningful power-sharing remains limited, and many communities remain wary of corporate motives.

Noront has aimed to integrate Indigenous knowledge systems and governance structures into its operational planning. It has referenced intentions to co-develop environmental management practices and adapt operations based on community input (Noront Resources Ltd., 2020). While this represents a positive step, critiques from scholars such as Millington et al. (2019) highlight that effective reconciliation requires sustained efforts to support Indigenous sovereignty, cultural preservation, and gender-sensitive approaches. The MMIWG Inquiry underscores the unique vulnerabilities of Indigenous women, urging corporations to address the gendered impacts of industrial activity. Noront's success in meeting these expectations remains uneven. Although it has committed to building inclusive consultation processes, gender-inclusive policies and practices are still in preliminary stages, and there is little publicly available information detailing how these are implemented or monitored.

Noront Resources faces ongoing criticism for the environmental impacts of its proposed mining projects, particularly concerning water contamination, habitat destruction, and disruption of traditional land use (Noront Resources Ltd., 2021). Indigenous communities reliant on these ecosystems for subsistence have expressed concerns over the adequacy of Noront's environmental assessment processes. Noble and Bronson (2005) argue that such assessments often fail to encompass socio-cultural dimensions, a shortcoming that reinforces community skepticism about mining operations. In light of this, Noront has sought to adopt more holistic approaches to environmental stewardship, emphasizing community-driven land use planning and sustainability. For example, the company has noted plans to integrate traditional knowledge into monitoring systems and reclamation practices. However, the climate change-induced vulnerabilities highlighted by Pearce et al. (2010) demand more robust adaptive strategies. Noront has yet to fully implement comprehensive climate resilience measures, leaving it open to criticism for insufficient long-term planning.

Noront Resources has emphasized its commitment to community benefit agreements, including Impact Benefit Agreements (IBAs), to ensure that Indigenous communities share in the economic benefits of mining. The company points to signed IBAs with several First Nations as evidence of its commitment to equitable development (Noront Resources Ltd., 2020). However, as Sosa and Keenan (2001) observe, IBAs often prioritize short-term financial compensation over long-term sustainability. Noront has faced similar critiques, with some communities voicing concerns about transparency and equitable benefit-sharing. Additionally, the socio-economic model tied to rotational employment poses challenges, as noted by Gibson and Klinck (2005), who identify such practices as disruptive to family and community cohesion. Noront's current employment models have not sufficiently addressed these critiques, prompting calls for more

stable, community-based employment strategies that align with Indigenous goals for self-determination and long-term development.

To secure an SLO, Noront must prioritize meaningful reconciliation efforts that align with UNDRIP, TRC Calls to Action, and the principles of the MMIWG Inquiry. This includes recognizing Indigenous land rights, incorporating traditional knowledge systems, and advancing gender-sensitive and community-centered approaches. Beckett and Keeling (2019) suggest that remediation efforts framed as opportunities for community healing and environmental justice can help foster trust and partnership. Noront can take concrete action on these fronts by transparently reporting progress, co-developing governance structures with Indigenous partners, and embedding reconciliation into all levels of its corporate policy. By embedding reconciliation and sustainability into its core practices, Noront has the potential to redefine its relationship with Indigenous communities and the broader social context of resource development. In summary, Noront Resources' path to achieving an SLO in the Ring of Fire is fraught with challenges but presents an opportunity to model reconciliation-driven resource development. By integrating Indigenous values and sustainable practices, Noront can position itself not just as a resource company, but as a partner in advancing social, cultural, and environmental well-being.

Conclusion

The exploration of social and environmental impacts, cultural violence, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and the Social License to Operate (SLO) highlights the complex and multi-layered challenges facing resource extraction projects in Canada, particularly in Indigenous territories. The case of Noront Resources in the Ring of Fire exemplifies the critical barriers that

many mining companies encounter in trying to secure an SLO, including significant environmental degradation, socio-economic disruptions, and a lack of meaningful reconciliation with Indigenous communities. Indigenous communities bear a disproportionate share of mining's social and environmental costs, yet they frequently remain marginalized in decision-making processes regarding land use and resource management. Cultural violence—manifested through disrupted traditional practices, loss of land, and limited acknowledgment of Indigenous rights—compounds these challenges, as communities seek to preserve their identities, economies, and ways of life in the face of industrial encroachment.

CSR practices, while designed to build community goodwill, are often criticized for lacking depth and genuine commitment, as “redwashing” tactics overshadow efforts at genuine engagement. In this context, companies face an uphill battle in establishing credibility, legitimacy, and trust—the pillars of an SLO. While efforts such as Impact Benefit Agreements (IBAs) and environmental impact assessments (EIAs) have aimed to mitigate some impacts and formalize relationships with communities, these initiatives often fall short in addressing the broader socio-cultural and environmental implications of mining. As discussed, sustainable SLO strategies demand more than compliance; they require a commitment to equitable partnerships, environmental justice, and a genuine respect for Indigenous governance and cultural heritage

Research Questions

Building on these discussions, this study employs a content analysis approach to scrutinize how initiatives related to SLO have evolved in the Ring of Fire following the implementation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada's Calls to Action

and other Indigenous rights and reconciliation frameworks. The research will assess shifts in industry practices, community engagement, and policy initiatives to identify meaningful changes and persistent gaps in achieving a socially and environmentally just approach to mining. This investigation will provide insights into whether Indigenous policy influences have fostered substantive progress in securing SLO or if enduring challenges in CSR, environmental stewardship, and Indigenous engagement continue to hinder sustainable and respectful resource development. Consequently, this leads to the central research questions:

How have Indigenous rights and reconciliation frameworks influenced mining companies' efforts to secure a Social License to Operate (SLO) in the Ring of Fire, and to what extent have these frameworks addressed the dimensions of legitimacy, credibility, and trust? What components remain insufficiently addressed? These questions break down as follows:

1. What is the state of the SLO in the ROF, with specific reference to the dimensions of legitimacy, credibility and trust?
2. Have Indigenous rights and reconciliation frameworks, components perhaps of broader CSR and stakeholder-focused mandates, influenced mining companies' abilities to secure an SLO over time, and if so, how?
3. Can the SLO construct be used to help explain some of the delays and challenges with the ROF development?
4. What are the key lessons to be learned from this case study that will help accelerate Canada's transition to a low-carbon economy in ways that are sustainable and responsible?

Methodology

Research Design

To answer the research question on how Indigenous rights and reconciliation frameworks have influenced mining companies' efforts to secure a Social License to Operate (SLO) in the Ring of Fire, this study employs a qualitative content analysis methodology. This approach is specifically chosen for its effectiveness in systematically examining forms of communication and narratives within documents and media that influence public perception and policymaking (Thomson & Boutilier, 2011). The research will delve into the interactions between mining companies and Indigenous communities, focusing on the dimensions of legitimacy, credibility, and trust, key pillars for achieving and maintaining an SLO (Boutilier & Thomson, 2011).

A case study approach is particularly well-suited for this research due to the complex and context-specific dynamics of the Ring of Fire. Case studies are valuable for exploring phenomena within real-life contexts where multiple variables interact, enabling a nuanced understanding of interconnected social, environmental, and economic dynamics (Yin, 2018). The Ring of Fire provides a unique context where critical minerals development intersects with Indigenous rights, reconciliation frameworks, and environmental sustainability. This focus allows the study to address specific challenges and dynamics while contributing to broader academic discourse on sustainable resource extraction and stakeholder engagement (Owen et al., 2022; Carr-Wilson et al., 2024).

By applying a qualitative content analysis approach to a variety of data sources, the study is expected to deliver valuable insights into the dynamics at play between mining companies,

Indigenous communities, and regulatory frameworks within the Ring of Fire. First, it will assess the effectiveness of Indigenous rights and reconciliation frameworks in being integrated into the operational strategies of mining companies. This evaluation will highlight best practices and pinpoint how these frameworks have shaped corporate approaches to securing an SLO.

Importantly, the research will identify specific areas where current practices may be insufficient in meeting the expectations and needs of Indigenous communities, particularly in terms of legitimacy, credibility, and trust (Millington et al., 2019; Scott, 2023).

Additionally, this study will explore the integration of Indigenous rights into mining practices post-2015, focusing on the period following significant legislative and policy initiatives such as the TRC's Calls to Action and the enactment of Bill C-15, which affirms the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). While this study outlines the current state of integration and discusses developments within this temporal scope, it does not perform a temporal analysis of industry actions over time due to the lack of pre-2015 data for comparison. This approach helps identify the current challenges and progress made in integrating Indigenous rights into mining practices (Millington et al., 2019; Keeling & Sandlos, 2009).

Based on these findings, targeted recommendations will be developed for mining companies and policymakers to improve the integration of Indigenous rights into mining operations, enhance stakeholder engagement processes, and strengthen the frameworks for securing a Social License to Operate (SLO). These recommendations aim to provide actionable insights to guide future operations and policy formulations (Thomson & Boutilier, 2011)."

Furthermore, this study will systematically analyze and present comprehensive data on a critical issue, making significant contributions to both academic and practical discourses related to sustainable mining, Indigenous rights, and environmental stewardship. By addressing existing

knowledge gaps, the research has the potential to influence future research and policy development. Lastly, the study will enhance understanding among stakeholders including Indigenous communities, policymakers, and the mining industry of each other's perspectives and concerns. This improved understanding is expected to foster more informed and constructive dialogues about resource development in Indigenous territories, promoting more respectful, sustainable, and mutually beneficial mining practices. By embedding these outcomes within the research design, this study aims to be a resource for navigating the complexities of mining in culturally sensitive and ecologically significant areas like the Ring of Fire (Carr-Wilson et al., 2024).

Research Scope

This research specifically examines the Ring of Fire as a case study to explore the intersection of resource development, Indigenous rights, and reconciliation frameworks. This region is uniquely appropriate for analysis due to its socio-environmental complexity and the ongoing challenges mining companies face in securing a Social License to Operate (SLO). Focusing on the dimensions of legitimacy, credibility, and trust allows for a structured evaluation of how interactions between companies and Indigenous communities shape these critical aspects of the SLO in a practical, real-world context (Thomson & Boutilier, 2011).

The temporal scope of the research spans from 2015 to the present, a period that includes key developments such as the implementation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Calls to Action, the enactment of Bill C-15 affirming the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), and significant corporate changes such as the

acquisition of Noront Resources by Wyloo Metals in 2022. Following this acquisition, Noront was rebranded as Ring of Fire Metals, with Wyloo Metals resuming critical activities like the Eagle's Nest project (Newswire, 2022). However, neither company publishes Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) reports or other comprehensive non-financial disclosures, underscoring the importance of relying on alternative data sources to assess their approaches to legitimacy, credibility, and trust.

By situating the Ring of Fire case within broader global discussions about sustainable resource development and reconciliation frameworks, this study aims to generate targeted recommendations for improving mining operations, enhancing stakeholder engagement, and strengthening governance frameworks. Ultimately, the insights gained from this research will inform policy and practice, fostering more respectful, sustainable, and mutually beneficial mining practices globally (Boutilier & Thomson, 2011; Owen et al., 2022; Carr-Wilson et al., 2024; Keeling & Sandlos, 2009).

Data Collection

The data collection strategy for this study was designed to gather a comprehensive and representative dataset, capturing the complex interactions among mining companies, Indigenous communities, and government bodies in the Ring of Fire. The array of sources includes corporate documents, Indigenous perspectives, media articles, governmental reports, and academic publications, each selected for its unique contribution to the study's multifaceted narrative.

Corporate documents from Ring of Fire Metals (formerly Noront Resources), such as press releases, provide insights into the company's public disclosures on environmental practices

and community engagement. These documents are crucial for understanding the corporate narrative and strategic intentions within the mining sector.

Media coverage from local outlets like the Northern Ontario Business, along with national coverage from CBC News, plays a pivotal role in this research. These articles provide a threefold perspective: they relay the viewpoints of local First Nations communities through interviews and commentary, track corporate responses and strategies via official statements, and cover governmental actions and policy updates relevant to the mining project. This media perspective is instrumental in constructing a comprehensive view of the ongoing developments and the diverse opinions surrounding the Ring of Fire project.

Government documents accessed from Ontario's official portals, including environmental assessment reports and public consultation summaries, are indispensable for outlining the regulatory and policy environment influencing the mining operations. These documents detail the legal frameworks and governmental stances that shape the operational landscape of the Ring of Fire. Additionally, public statements and reports from the Matawa First Nations websites provide direct insights from the Indigenous communities affected by the mining activities, highlighting their cultural and environmental concerns as well as their interactions with mining entities and government agencies.

Lastly, academic insights from scholarly articles in databases such as Regional Business News provide a theoretical context to the empirical data, offering critical analyses and frameworks that help situate the study within broader discussions on sustainable mining practices and Indigenous rights.

Data collection was conducted systematically using the search terms: “Ring of Fire,” “Indigenous engagement in mining,” “Social License to Operate,” and “reconciliation and mining.” The inclusion criteria ensured that documents and articles were published from 2015 onward, aligning with the study's temporal scope, and that they directly addressed the Ring of Fire with a focus on Indigenous rights, environmental impacts, and corporate practices. Each source was evaluated for credibility and depth, prioritizing those that provided comprehensive analyses and diverse stakeholder perspectives. In total, the study analyzes 150 documents from these varied sources, ensuring that the research captures a balanced and in-depth view of the dynamics at play in the Ring of Fire, reflecting the complexities and the multiple perspectives of all stakeholders involved. All data sources were uploaded into NVivo 14 to facilitate the coding process that is described below. Table 1 summarizes the data collection effort by source of authorship, where the ‘number of documents’ represents the count of individual website pages, reports, journal articles, and newspaper articles.

Table 1: Data Collection Summary

	Government	Corporate	Media	First Nation	Academic
# of documents	10	4	103	8	25

Coding Framework

The coding framework for this study was developed to systematically analyze how Indigenous rights and reconciliation frameworks have influenced mining operations in the Ring of Fire. This framework centers on the dimensions of legitimacy, credibility, and trust key pillars of the Social License to Operate (SLO) (Thomson & Boutilier, 2011; Boutilier & Thomson, 2011). The structured approach to coding ensures a thorough exploration of the interplay

between corporate practices, Indigenous rights, and reconciliation efforts, enabling a nuanced understanding of these dynamics.

The coding framework was deductive, guided by pre-defined categories informed by existing literature. Legitimacy, for instance, was operationalized by examining adherence to environmental standards, legal compliance, and socio-political integration. Emphasis was placed on moral legitimacy as distinct from legal compliance, focusing on predefined theoretical constructs derived from the literature (Mele & Armengou, 2017). This included assessing how companies incorporated Indigenous input into decision-making processes and their respect for traditional lands and cultural practices (Keeling & Sandlos, 2009).

Credibility focused on the transparency and consistency of corporate communications. Codes within this dimension tracked alignment between public statements, actions, and commitments, particularly regarding reconciliation efforts and adherence to Indigenous rights frameworks such as the TRC Calls to Action and UNDRIP (Millington et al., 2019). Trust was analyzed at two levels: interactional trust and institutionalized trust. Interactional trust considered the quality of direct engagements, such as respectful dialogue and reciprocal relationships with Indigenous communities, while institutionalized trust examined longer-term commitments, including partnerships and agreements that demonstrated sustained corporate investment in community priorities (Scott, 2023; Prno & Slocombe, 2012).

The coding process followed a multi-stage approach to ensure methodological rigor and depth. Initial coding applied the pre-defined dimensions of legitimacy, credibility, and trust to the dataset, and as analysis progressed, axial coding was employed to explore relationships between codes and uncover broader patterns (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The analysis employed a strictly deductive approach, starting with 39 pre-defined codes based on the existing literature

related to Social License to Operate (SLO). These codes were directly applied to the dataset without the development or refinement of additional themes. As such, the coding process did not involve thematic analysis or iterative refinement of the codes, but rather a straightforward application of the established codes to analyze the content relevant to SLO. The hierarchical structure of themes, codes, and sub-codes initially planned was maintained strictly to reflect the nuances captured directly by the predefined codes. Further details on the coding structure and the application process are comprehensively outlined in the Appendix to ensure clarity and transparency of the methodology.

To enhance the reliability of the qualitative content analysis, the coding process included an inter-coder reliability check, where my supervisor independently coded 15 of the 156 articles (approximately 10%) using the established coding framework. To quantify the agreement, we compared the coded documents directly. We determined that there was approximately 80% agreement by calculating the percentage of codes that matched over the total codes applied. This direct comparison method was used instead of statistical measures such as Cohen's kappa, as the coding by my supervisor was performed outside of NVivo, which is typically used for such calculations.

Discrepancies in coding were discussed to refine and clarify the coding framework further, ensuring consistent application across the dataset. This process of discussing and resolving differences not only reinforced the accuracy of the coding but also enhanced the transparency and reliability of the coding process. For a detailed breakdown of the themes, codes, and sub-codes used in this study, refer to Appendix A. This appendix provides a comprehensive coding structure, including how data excerpts were categorized under each theme.

Ethical Considerations

This study's ethical framework is designed to uphold the necessary standards of research integrity, especially given its focus on sensitive topics involving Indigenous communities and environmental impacts. The primary consideration is to conduct research that respects the dignity, rights, and cultural sensitivities of Indigenous groups and all stakeholders involved, relying exclusively on publicly available sources.

The research recognizes the sovereignty and cultural values of Indigenous peoples. It approaches the analysis of publicly available data with cultural humility, ensuring that interpretations are respectful of Indigenous traditions and perspectives. This consideration is critical given the historical and ongoing impacts of colonialism. All data utilized in this study will be sourced from public domains, such as corporate websites, news outlets, official reports, and public statements from Indigenous and environmental organizations. This approach ensures that no personal or sensitive information is gathered directly from individuals, thereby avoiding issues related to informed consent and anonymity. The analysis of environmental and cultural impacts from mining activities will be handled with care to ensure accuracy and respect for the ecological and cultural significance of the regions and communities discussed. The study will avoid speculative or biased interpretations that could misrepresent the conditions or views of the communities.

The findings will be reported in a manner that is respectful and constructive, aiming not only to document impacts but also to contribute positively to ongoing dialogues about sustainable practices and respect for Indigenous rights in mining operations. The study is committed to framing issues in ways that do not perpetuate stereotypes or biases. By integrating

ethical considerations into every aspect of the study, the research upholds a respectful and responsible approach to examining how mining companies in the Ring of Fire address the complex interplay of Indigenous rights and environmental stewardship. This ethical framework not only guides the methodology but also enhances the credibility and reliability of the findings, contributing responsibly to discussions on Indigenous rights and corporate accountability in resource extraction sectors.

Limitations of Study

While this study provides a comprehensive analysis of the influence of Indigenous rights and reconciliation frameworks on mining companies' efforts to secure a Social License to Operate (SLO) in the Ring of Fire, it is not without limitations. These limitations are acknowledged to provide context for the findings and highlight areas where future research could build upon this work.

First, the study relies exclusively on publicly available data, including corporate documents, media articles, governmental reports, and public statements from Indigenous groups and environmental organizations. While this approach ensures transparency and adherence to ethical research practices, it may limit access to private communications or internal corporate documents that could provide deeper insights into decision-making processes and negotiations. Consequently, the findings may not fully capture the complexities of corporate strategies or the nuances of stakeholder interactions (Thomson & Boutilier, 2011).

Second, the qualitative nature of this study inherently involves some degree of subjectivity in the interpretation of data. While the coding framework was developed

systematically and inter-coder reliability measures were implemented to mitigate bias, the analysis is ultimately shaped by the researcher's perspective and preconceptions (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). However, alternative interpretations may arise from different analytical lenses or methodological approaches.

Third, the study does not assume homogeneity of Indigenous perspectives. Indigenous communities in the Ring of Fire region have diverse histories, cultures, and governance systems, which influence their views on mining and reconciliation. While efforts were made to include a broad range of Indigenous voices through public statements and documents, the study may not fully capture the full spectrum of perspectives, particularly from communities with limited access to public platforms (Keeling & Sandlos, 2009).

Fourth, the study's temporal scope is confined to the period from 2015 to the present. While this timeframe aligns with significant developments such as the TRC's Calls to Action and the enactment of Bill C-15, it may exclude earlier events that shaped the current dynamics in the Ring of Fire. Historical factors, including past interactions between mining companies and Indigenous communities, may still exert an influence that is beyond the scope of this analysis (Millington et al., 2019).

Lastly, this research examines a single case study, the Ring of Fire, which offers valuable insights into the interplay between reconciliation frameworks and resource extraction. However, the findings may not be directly generalizable to other regions or industries. Instead, they provide a detailed understanding of one context that can inform broader discussions and comparisons in similar settings (Yin, 2018). Despite these limitations, this study contributes to a growing body of literature on Indigenous rights, reconciliation, and sustainable mining practices. By

acknowledging these constraints, the research provides a transparent foundation for interpreting its findings and emphasizes the need for continued investigation into this critical area of study.

Findings

This section presents detailed findings derived from a comprehensive qualitative content analysis aimed at exploring how mining companies and governmental bodies operating within the Ring of Fire region address the critical dimensions of legitimacy, credibility, and trust in their efforts to secure a Social License to Operate (SLO). The analysis synthesizes diverse data sources, including media reports, government publications, Indigenous community statements, and environmental advocacy materials. Employing the frameworks established in SLO literature (Boutilier & Thomson, 2011; Prno & Slocombe, 2012), this research foregrounds Indigenous perspectives, emphasizing community voices and highlighting their concerns, expectations, and perceptions regarding mining development on their traditional territories.

The results highlight complex corporate-Indigenous interactions, addressing the extent to which current corporate practices align or diverge from community expectations, regulatory frameworks, and broader socio-political realities (Millington, Shaw, & Wyndham-West, 2019). Key dimensions—legitimacy, credibility, and trust—serve as critical components influencing a company's long-term success in sustainably engaging with Indigenous communities and the public (Jenkins & Yakovleva, 2006). Specifically, legitimacy assesses the alignment of corporate actions with legal, environmental, and socio-political standards, particularly regarding Indigenous rights and environmental stewardship (Allard & Curran, 2021). Credibility evaluates

transparency, consistency, and responsiveness of corporate communication and operational practices (Thomson & Boutilier, 2011). Trust examines the depth and quality of relationships, the meaningfulness of engagements, and the effectiveness of institutional frameworks supporting mutual agreements and conflict resolution (Kemp & Owen, 2013).

Findings presented are structured around these three core dimensions, with subsections delineating the specific themes and patterns emerging within each category. Additionally, this analysis includes an in-depth case study of Noront Resources (now rebranded as Wyloo Metals), providing practical examples of corporate strategies and community responses, and offering insights into specific challenges encountered by resource companies in this region (Northern Ontario Business, 2025).

Furthermore, this section addresses the evolving nature of SLO practices and Indigenous engagement following significant policy developments, notably the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Calls to Action (TRC, 2015) and Bill C-15, which incorporates principles of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) into Canadian law (Government of Canada, 2021). This historical and policy context provides deeper insight into shifts in corporate approaches, highlighting progress made and areas requiring substantial improvement. In summarizing the findings, the section underscores critical themes and persistent challenges within corporate-Indigenous dynamics, offering context for discussions aimed at improving corporate responsibility, enhancing Indigenous participation, and fostering genuinely sustainable development in the Ring of Fire region.

Theme 1: Legitimacy

The theme of Legitimacy encapsulates the degree to which corporate and governmental actions align with established legal frameworks, environmental standards, and socio-cultural responsibilities towards Indigenous communities. Within the sensitive context of Northern Ontario's Ring of Fire, characterized by significant environmental and cultural value, legitimacy serves as a foundational element necessary for securing and maintaining a Social License to Operate. The literature consistently emphasizes that legitimacy is not merely about adherence to legal requirements but also involves proactive engagement with Indigenous rights, extensive community consultation, and genuine consideration of socio-environmental impacts (Prno & Slocombe, 2012; Hall, Lacey, Carr-Cornish, & Dowd, 2015).

Given Canada's fraught history regarding Indigenous rights, legitimacy also necessitates active fulfillment of commitments outlined in national frameworks such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action (TRC, 2015) and UNDRIP (Allard & Curran, 2021). This dimension underscores the ethical imperative for resource governance to move beyond mere regulatory compliance towards practices deeply rooted in cultural respect, meaningful consultation, and informed consent (Millington et al., 2019). The analysis of legitimacy in this research was guided by a deductive approach, focusing on three pre-defined sub-themes that were identified as critical to understanding the Social License to Operate (SLO): (1) Legal and Environmental Standards, (2) Socio-Political Integration, and (3) Respect for Indigenous Lands and Culture. These sub-themes were selected based on a review of relevant literature and formed the basis of the coding framework used to analyze the data. The presence

or absence of these elements within the data was systematically assessed to draw conclusions about their influence on SLO. Each sub-theme highlights particular challenges and opportunities facing companies attempting to secure legitimacy.

Legal and Environmental Standards

This sub-code addresses adherence to environmental laws, standards, and agreements by corporations and governments involved in the Ring of Fire development. Given the region's ecological sensitivity, stakeholders emphasize strict compliance and proactive mitigation measures to prevent harm to significant ecosystems, such as the James Bay Lowlands—recognized as one of the world's largest peatland complexes and a critical global carbon sink. The ecological risks posed by mining operations, such as potential contamination of waterways, soil erosion, habitat disruption, and carbon emissions, heighten the importance of rigorous environmental oversight.

Companies such as Noront Resources have attempted to implement sustainability measures that align with industry's best practices. For example, Noront has committed to responsible waste management strategies, stating that, "Mine tailings will be stuffed back underground as backfill rather than stored above ground in a waste management area" (Northern Ontario Business, 2022(a)). Furthermore, in efforts to minimize their environmental footprint, corporate actors have explored renewable energy alternatives: "We have installed a WindCube lidar system at the site to analyze the possibility of using wind power in the future, which will help to reduce our carbon footprint" (Northern Ontario Business, 2022(b)). Additional environmental commitments include investments in advanced water treatment technologies, as outlined in the company's public statements: "Our commitment to water sustainability ensures

that all processed water undergoes thorough treatment before being reintroduced to the environment” (Northern Ontario Business, 2025). Other proposed initiatives include “rigorous monitoring systems to track changes in water quality and wildlife populations over the course of mining operations” (Government of Ontario, 2025).

Despite these commitments, concerns persist within Indigenous communities regarding the sufficiency of these measures. Many Indigenous stakeholders continue to question whether these environmental safeguards go far enough to prevent long-term ecological damage: “Much of the natural environment is covered by vast peatlands, considered a global carbon sink, and several Indigenous communities in the region have raised questions and concerns about industrial development” (Northern Ontario Business, 2022(c)). A broader ecological critique emerged from environmental organizations, emphasizing the lasting impact of industrial activities: “Peat, a soil-like substance made up of partly decomposed plants, is a major carbon sink. It's estimated the James Bay Lowlands store up to 35 billion tons of carbon” (CBC News, 2023). Additionally, localized concerns about water contamination remain central: “Water is life for our communities, and we fear that mining operations will disrupt our lakes and rivers beyond repair” said Chief-elect Chris Moonias, from Neskantaga First Nation (CBC News, 2023(b)).

Further skepticism has been expressed regarding accountability in environmental reporting. Some stakeholders argue that companies have provided insufficient data regarding long-term environmental risks: “Environmental assessments must go beyond initial reports and require sustained accountability to prevent corporate greenwashing” (Northern Ontario Business, 2025). Indigenous communities have also pointed to a lack of long-term environmental monitoring commitments: “There needs to be a legally binding agreement ensuring that companies remain accountable for land and water quality decades after mining operations

conclude” (CBC News, 2025). As one community advocate noted, “History has shown that promises of sustainability do not always translate into action. We need concrete guarantees, not just voluntary commitments” (Northern Ontario Business, 2025). Similarly, a regional environmental analyst emphasized, “Without strict enforcement, companies may prioritize economic efficiency over ecological responsibility” (Northern Ontario Business, 2025).

Concerns have also been raised about the cumulative effects of multiple resource projects in the region, highlighting the need for a broader, long-term environmental strategy: “A single mine is not the issue—when you factor in roads, infrastructure, and multiple developments, the overall impact could be devastating” (CBC News, 2021). Indigenous communities have called for more extensive collaboration in decision-making, stressing that “environmental policies must be co-developed with Indigenous leadership, rather than imposed through industry-led initiatives” (Northern Ontario Business, 2025). Such concerns underline the critical importance of stringent compliance with environmental assessments and highlight the necessity of meaningful Indigenous participation in the formulation and monitoring of environmental management strategies. Without robust legal enforcement and ongoing oversight, corporate commitments may lack credibility and fail to prevent long-term damage.

Legitimacy, therefore, requires a nuanced and comprehensive approach, integrating legal compliance, transparent communication, and genuine respect for Indigenous knowledge and governance structures. Corporations and governments face ongoing challenges in proving their commitments through demonstrable, consistent actions rather than mere rhetorical assurances. This section has demonstrated these aspects of legitimacy through analysis of adherence to environmental standards and highlights the foundational importance of such legitimacy in achieving the broader goal of securing a Social License to Operate. In subsequent sections, the

themes of Socio-Political Integration and Respect for Indigenous Lands and Culture will be further explored through detailed examples and quotes.

Socio-Political Integration

The socio-political integration of Indigenous communities into decision-making processes is a critical component of legitimacy. This involves recognizing Indigenous governance structures, ensuring meaningful participation in negotiations, and upholding treaty rights in all aspects of mining development. Without the inclusion of Indigenous leadership in policy formation and project planning, corporate initiatives risk being viewed as exploitative rather than collaborative. Indigenous representatives have repeatedly emphasized the necessity of their voices being heard, as one leader stated, “First Nations require a seat at the table” (Webequie Chief Cornelius Wabasse, Northern Ontario Business, 2020).

Corporate and governmental actors have, in some cases, sought to foster more equitable engagement. The Ontario government has expressed commitment to supporting Indigenous-led infrastructure projects, with one report noting, “The supply road is the first Indigenous-led project in Ontario and the first under the new federal environmental assessment framework” (Government of Ontario, 2025(a)). Similarly, agreements such as the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between key First Nations and mining companies illustrate a formal attempt at collaboration: “This MOU demonstrates our commitment to work together with Webequie to develop projects based on shared values and collaborative decision-making” (Northern Ontario Business, 2021).

However, despite these gestures, Indigenous communities continue to highlight systemic barriers to full participation. In some cases, governments have announced development

initiatives without prior consultation, leading to backlash from Indigenous leaders: “I am disappointed to see an announcement by the Wynne government...when there is no community approval recognizing the inherent rights and treaty rights of First Nations” (Chief Liz Atlookan, Northern Ontario Business, 2017). Similarly, lack of transparency in negotiations has led to skepticism regarding the true intentions of mining companies: “The chiefs of the Matawa First Nations accuse Noront of ‘driving its agenda, rather than working together’” (Northern Ontario Business, 2015). This reflects broader concerns that while consultation mechanisms exist, they often fail to empower Indigenous communities with genuine decision-making authority.

Despite these ongoing challenges, Indigenous leaders continue to advocate for greater involvement in decision-making and project oversight. Some First Nations have successfully negotiated Impact Benefit Agreements (IBAs), which secure financial and employment opportunities in exchange for land access: Aroland First Nation Chief Dorothy Towedo said, “Our First Nation is encouraged by Noront's inclusive approach to advancing mutually beneficial opportunities” (CBC News, 2019). However, these agreements remain controversial, with some Indigenous activists arguing that they do not adequately compensate for the cultural and environmental losses associated with large-scale mining projects. Others express concern that IBAs often serve as a means for companies to gain access to land rather than fostering true partnership.

Additional barriers to integration include jurisdictional conflicts and the complex regulatory landscape governing Indigenous land rights. As one legal expert explained, “Different levels of government often send conflicting messages on Indigenous engagement, making it difficult to establish clear and enforceable agreements” (Northern Ontario Business, 2025). This

creates uncertainty regarding who holds ultimate decision-making power in mining development projects and leaves Indigenous nations with limited recourse in disputes over land use.

Respect for Indigenous lands and culture

Respect for Indigenous lands and culture emphasizes corporate and governmental recognition and protection of Indigenous cultural identities, traditional practices, and spiritual relationships with their ancestral lands. Ensuring legitimacy within the Ring of Fire requires a deep understanding of these relationships and proactive measures to safeguard cultural heritage and traditional livelihoods. This sub-code assesses how effectively mining projects have respected and integrated Indigenous cultural priorities into project planning and execution.

Several Indigenous leaders have underscored the profound spiritual and cultural connections communities hold with their traditional lands: “The community members and their ancestors have lived on these lands for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. They know and have relationships with these lands, spiritual and life-sustaining” (CBC News, 2023(c)). Such statements highlight the significant concerns Indigenous communities face regarding the cultural and environmental disruptions caused by mining.

Indigenous stakeholders have frequently expressed deep concerns about how resource extraction activities could permanently alter their cultural practices and traditional ways of life: “Mining has a history of destroying land and water. I know I can't stop [the Ring of Fire], so I want to show it before something happens to [the land]” (CBC News, 2020). Similar anxieties are echoed broadly across the communities, reflecting an understanding of land not merely as a resource, but as integral to cultural identity and survival: “The mining development would mean changes to Aboriginal and treaty rights, hunting and fishing, and the way of life in the

community” (CBC News, 2021). Indigenous knowledge holders advocate strongly for greater recognition of traditional ecological knowledge within resource governance frameworks: “Our knowledge of this land, developed over generations, is essential for its preservation and sustainable use” (CBC News, 2023(c)). Despite acknowledgment of traditional knowledge in corporate rhetoric, substantive integration into operational decisions remains limited.

Corporate and governmental responses to these cultural concerns have been mixed. While some corporate communications express sensitivity and understanding—“We have a genuine desire to respect the traditional lands of the Webequie people. This is the start of a strong and positive relationship” (Northern Ontario Business, 2021)—there remains skepticism about their sincerity and follow-through. Community leaders consistently advocate for accountability measures that would legally enforce respect for their cultural values: “If we don’t answer their concerns and address those concerns within our processes, we’ll be failing” (Northern Ontario Business, 2022(d)). The need for cultural impact assessments as standard practice in mining proposals has also been emphasized by Indigenous representatives: “Every environmental assessment should include a thorough cultural assessment, detailing impacts on traditions, spirituality, and community cohesion” (CBC News, 2025). Yet, this practice remains inconsistently applied across projects.

The complex dynamics surrounding land and cultural respect are further complicated by differing perceptions of what constitutes adequate protection and compensation. While some communities view financial compensation through Impact Benefit Agreements as helpful, others see these agreements as inadequate in addressing profound cultural disruptions: “Economic benefits cannot replace the cultural and spiritual loss experienced when lands are altered beyond recognition” (Northern Ontario Business, 2025).

Additionally, concerns persist about cumulative impacts on sacred sites and ceremonial grounds. Indigenous community members have emphasized, “Protecting sacred sites is crucial because they represent the living history and spiritual foundations of our people” (CBC News, 2025). Indigenous representatives argue that the fragmented nature of consultations often leads to the neglect of sacred spaces: “We find ourselves repeatedly having to remind government and corporations of the spiritual significance of our lands” (Northern Ontario Business, 2025).

Some Indigenous communities are advocating for formal legal protections that go beyond current environmental assessment frameworks. A prominent community leader articulated this clearly: “We must establish legally binding measures that explicitly protect our cultural heritage, ensuring our ways of life are preserved for future generations” (Northern Ontario Business, 2021). This perspective highlights an increasing insistence on embedding Indigenous cultural preservation into enforceable regulatory frameworks rather than voluntary corporate practices alone.

Theme 2: Credibility

The theme of Credibility captures the extent to which corporate and governmental actions align with their stated commitments, ethical obligations, and expectations articulated by Indigenous communities and the broader public. Credibility is recognized within academic literature as a critical foundation for achieving and maintaining a Social License to Operate (SLO), particularly in contexts involving high-stakes resource extraction, such as Ontario’s Ring of Fire (Thomson & Boutilier, 2011; Prno & Slocombe, 2012). Literature consistently emphasizes that the ability of resource extraction companies and governmental authorities to maintain credibility directly influences their perceived legitimacy and long-term sustainability,

significantly shaping community trust and acceptance of projects (Hilson, 2012; Jenkins & Yakovleva, 2006). Credibility, therefore, emerges not merely as an ethical requirement but as a strategic necessity that significantly affects operational outcomes.

In the context of the Ring of Fire, achieving credibility requires more than the publication of corporate social responsibility (CSR) policy statements or high-level governmental commitments. Instead, genuine credibility is earned through sustained, demonstrable actions reflecting authentic intentions, transparency in operations, and a consistent responsiveness to the concerns and expectations of Indigenous communities (Millington, Shaw, & Wyndham-West, 2019; Kemp & Owen, 2013). Indigenous communities in Canada have historically encountered numerous instances of broken promises, superficial engagements, and unmet obligations from both corporate and governmental actors, resulting in deeply entrenched skepticism toward development initiatives (Hall, Lacey, Carr-Cornish, & Dowd, 2015). This skepticism underscores the imperative for corporations and government bodies to transcend rhetoric and engage in measurable, consistent actions. Academic research confirms that the absence of tangible evidence of corporate sincerity can significantly undermine corporate credibility, contributing directly to heightened resistance and distrust from affected Indigenous communities (Millington et al., 2019; Hall et al., 2015).

The credibility dimension is especially critical in resource extraction projects situated in areas that hold profound environmental sensitivity and cultural significance, such as the Ring of Fire. Scholars argue that in such regions, the ability of corporations and governments to demonstrate reliability, transparency, and responsiveness directly influences Indigenous community trust and overall acceptance or opposition to industrial initiatives (Thomson & Boutilier, 2011). Indeed, credibility serves as a barometer for community willingness to engage

collaboratively, thus shaping the potential for meaningful partnerships or, conversely, triggering active resistance and prolonged conflict. The detailed qualitative analysis conducted within this study breaks down credibility into three distinct but interconnected sub-codes: Transparency, Consistency, and Responsiveness. Each sub-theme provides insight into specific areas in which corporate credibility is either strengthened or weakened in the Ring of Fire context.

Transparency

Transparency is a foundational component of credibility, as it determines the accessibility and clarity of information provided by corporations and government entities regarding mining operations, environmental risks, and stakeholder engagement. Within the Ring of Fire, transparency is particularly crucial given the historical context of exclusion and misinformation in Indigenous-settler relations. The ability of corporations and governments to provide timely, accurate, and complete information significantly influences the degree of trust they can establish with Indigenous communities.

Corporate actors often emphasize their commitment to open communication in public statements. For instance, one corporate representative stated, “We reaffirm our commitment to transparency, accountability, and meaningful engagement, and we respect the concerns brought forth by Aroland First Nation” (Northern Ontario Business, 2024). Similarly, companies have pointed to efforts to improve accessibility of information through public disclosures: “Wyloo officially makes its foray into Canada to take stock of its holdings in the Ring of Fire and build relationships with nearby communities” (Northern Ontario Business, 2022(d)). Additionally, some companies have taken steps to make environmental data publicly available, such as posting impact assessments and independent evaluations on their websites: “Our goal is to ensure all

stakeholders have access to comprehensive environmental and operational data at every stage of development” (Northern Ontario Business, 2025). While these statements present a public image of openness, Indigenous communities have often questioned whether transparency commitments translate into genuine accountability.

In contrast, many Indigenous stakeholders have voiced concerns over a lack of transparency in decision-making processes. Reports indicate that key negotiations have frequently occurred without adequate consultation: “Ontario’s enthusiastic support for the Northern Road Link without any meaningful dialogue...makes us extremely concerned that they are not approaching their duty to consult in good faith” (Northern Ontario Business, 2020(b)). Additionally, concerns have been raised about limited access to critical environmental impact data: “It’s not publicly known what progress, if any, was made over four years, since the talks were kept confidential” (Northern Ontario Business, 2018). This lack of transparency fosters uncertainty and reinforces skepticism regarding corporate and governmental intentions.

Further complicating matters, discrepancies between public statements and actual decision-making processes contribute to a perceived lack of openness. Indigenous leaders have criticized the selective dissemination of information: “The province considers the area ‘one of the most promising mineral development opportunities in Ontario,’ yet key questions remain about the roads” (CBC News, 2021). Similarly, conflicting information about project timelines has raised doubts: “Despite public assurances of ongoing dialogue, multiple communities have reported that their input has been ignored in final decision-making” (Northern Ontario Business, 2025). Legal disputes have further underscored these concerns: “Without clear documentation and accessible reports, Indigenous nations are forced to fight for basic information through the courts” (CBC News, 2025). In one case, “a provincially issued permit...was revoked by the court

based on inadequate consultation with local Indigenous people” (Northern Ontario Business, 2023). Such cases highlight the ongoing struggle to ensure that corporate and governmental actors proactively share information without external pressure.

In response to these criticisms, Indigenous communities and advocacy organizations have called for improved mechanisms to guarantee transparency. Proposals include independent oversight bodies to monitor corporate disclosures and governmental decisions, as well as legally mandated transparency requirements in all major infrastructure projects. As one Indigenous leader stated, “Transparency should not be optional—it should be embedded in every decision that affects our lands and communities” (CBC News, 2021).

Consistency

Consistency is a critical factor in assessing credibility, as it determines whether corporate and governmental actors maintain alignment between their public commitments and actual practices over time. For Indigenous communities in the Ring of Fire, consistency is especially important due to the historical pattern of broken promises, shifting policies, and unfulfilled agreements related to resource extraction. When corporate and governmental actors fail to uphold commitments or change their positions based on political or economic pressures, trust erodes, and resistance to development increases.

For many Indigenous leaders, consistency is measured not only by long-term adherence to agreements but also by the stability of corporate and governmental approaches to Indigenous engagement. One First Nations representative noted, “We have seen years of shifting policies and unfulfilled promises—each new government and company comes in with a new strategy, but nothing actually changes on the ground” (Northern Ontario Business, 2025). This frustration is

echoed in legal disputes over consultation agreements: “A lack of follow-through on commitments has forced our communities to take legal action just to ensure our voices are heard” (CBC News, 2025).

Corporate actors frequently make public assurances about their long-term commitments. For instance, one company spokesperson stated, “We remain dedicated to ongoing partnerships with Indigenous communities, ensuring that our projects reflect their priorities and concerns” (Northern Ontario Business, 2025). However, Indigenous leaders have raised concerns about the disconnect between public statements and actual corporate behavior: “Companies claim to work with us, but in reality, they push ahead with projects without integrating our input” (CBC News, 2025). This inconsistency in engagement practices creates uncertainty about the sincerity of corporate commitments.

Government policy shifts further complicate issues of consistency. Indigenous stakeholders have highlighted how successive provincial and federal governments have altered agreements and policy directions, often without Indigenous consent. One community leader explained, “We negotiated a framework agreement, only to have it stalled by a new administration with a different approach” (Northern Ontario Business, 2022). These abrupt changes in governmental policies and priorities contribute to a sense of instability and weaken long-term trust in regulatory processes. Additionally, inconsistent government enforcement of corporate commitments has led to growing concerns about regulatory oversight: “Regulations exist, but they are not always enforced consistently, which undermines trust in the system” (CBC News, 2021).

Furthermore, inconsistent corporate messaging has contributed to Indigenous skepticism. While some companies promote reconciliation and community partnerships, their operational decisions sometimes contradict those messages. One Indigenous leader observed, “They tell us they value our input, but when decisions are made, we are left out of the process entirely” (CBC News, 2021). A pattern of corporate rebranding and shifts in corporate leadership have also made it difficult for Indigenous communities to hold specific actors accountable: “A company changes hands, and suddenly all prior agreements are ‘under review’—this is an ongoing issue we face” (Northern Ontario Business, 2025).

To address concerns about consistency, Indigenous leaders have called for legally binding agreements that ensure corporate and governmental accountability over time. Leaders argued the need for long-term agreements that are protected from political changes and economic pressures verbal assurances are not enough. Some communities have pushed for independent oversight mechanisms to track corporate and governmental adherence to commitments: “Ongoing monitoring and third-party evaluations are essential to ensuring that what is promised is actually delivered” (CBC News, 2023). Others advocate for direct Indigenous-led governance over impact agreements: “Self-determined oversight mechanisms would ensure that corporate commitments align with our long-term priorities” (Northern Ontario Business, 2021). Some communities have pointed out that without legally binding agreements, Indigenous interests remain vulnerable to political and economic fluctuations.

Responsiveness

Responsiveness is a key determinant of credibility, reflecting the ability of corporate and governmental actors to adapt to stakeholder concerns, modify their approaches based on

Indigenous feedback, and engage in ongoing dialogue that prioritizes mutual understanding and trust. Within the Ring of Fire, responsiveness is particularly critical given the history of strained relations between industry, government, and Indigenous communities. A failure to meaningfully respond to concerns about environmental degradation, land rights, and economic benefits can deepen skepticism and resistance to mining developments.

For many Indigenous leaders, responsiveness is not just about acknowledging concerns but about implementing tangible changes to policies, project designs, and engagement strategies. As Chief Elizabeth Atlookan of Eabametoong First Nation put it, “We said a balanced, joint decision-making [process is needed] because it's going to forever change the landscape of where we're from” (CBC News, 2023). This statement reflects a broader frustration that concerns—particularly about land and water protection—are often met with vague assurances rather than concrete action. Similarly, frustrations have been expressed about delays in responding to Indigenous-led proposals. As five First Nations stated in a letter to the federal government, “We will not accept mere 'participation' in a unilateral, top-down, Crown-led process” (CBC News, 2023). This underscores how communities that have developed their own frameworks for responsible development continue to face externally imposed processes, rather than genuine collaboration.

A critical issue affecting responsiveness is the speed and effectiveness of corporate and governmental reactions to emerging concerns. When issues such as environmental contamination or land disputes arise, delayed or inadequate responses can exacerbate tensions. One Indigenous leader noted, “Our communities raised concerns about potential water contamination months ago, but we are still waiting for a concrete response or preventative measures” (Northern Ontario Business, 2025). Similarly, past experiences of neglect have shaped skepticism: “We have seen

cases where concerns were ignored until legal action was threatened—this is not real engagement” (CBC News, 2025).

Another challenge is the depth of responsiveness in corporate commitments. While some companies have introduced grievance mechanisms to allow communities to raise concerns, these mechanisms are often perceived as procedural rather than substantive. One environmental advocate stated, “Complaint mechanisms exist on paper, but they rarely lead to changes in company behavior or policy adjustments” (Northern Ontario Business, 2025). Additionally, Indigenous communities have pushed for more direct involvement in monitoring and oversight processes: “If companies were serious about responsiveness, they would give us a seat at the table in all environmental and operational assessments” (CBC News, 2025).

In response to ongoing criticisms, some stakeholders have proposed independent monitoring and accountability frameworks that would measure responsiveness in concrete terms. One Indigenous leader explained, “We need formal accountability structures that ensure companies and governments act on community concerns—not just acknowledge them” (Northern Ontario Business, 2025). Proposals include binding agreements requiring companies to report on their responsiveness efforts, third-party evaluations of engagement practices, and Indigenous-led oversight committees: “True responsiveness means co-governance, not just consultation” (CBC News, 2025).

The degree to which corporate and governmental actors genuinely listen to and act on Indigenous concerns will significantly influence the future of mining development in the Ring of Fire. Without clear mechanisms to ensure responsiveness translates into meaningful change, trust will remain fragile, and skepticism will persist. As one Indigenous community member

succinctly put it, “Words without action mean nothing. We need commitments that lead to real change” (Northern Ontario Business, 2025). This concludes the analysis of Credibility. The next section will introduce the final major theme, Trust, which examines the broader relationship dynamics that shape Indigenous perceptions of corporate and governmental legitimacy.

Theme 3: Trust

The theme of Trust captures the quality, depth, and authenticity of relationships between corporate and governmental actors and Indigenous communities within the context of resource extraction projects, specifically within the Ring of Fire in Northern Ontario. Trust is widely recognized in academic literature as a foundational component of the Social License to Operate (SLO), especially given Canada's historical legacy of Indigenous relations, characterized by recurrent patterns of broken promises, mistrust, inadequate consultation, and exploitation (Millington, Shaw, & Wyndham-West, 2019; Kemp & Owen, 2013). Scholarship emphasizes that trust must extend beyond mere fulfillment of legal obligations or financial compensations, fundamentally requiring sustained, authentic efforts toward meaningful relationship-building characterized by mutual respect, fairness, and a genuine commitment to community well-being (Thomson & Boutilier, 2011; Prno & Slocombe, 2012).

Establishing and maintaining trust demands that corporate and governmental actors engage in consistent, proactive, and transparent communication and demonstrate ongoing, authentic responsiveness to Indigenous concerns. Historically, Indigenous communities across Canada have confronted substantial obstacles in developing trust toward resource extraction companies and governmental agencies due to recurrent experiences of marginalization, neglect,

and exclusion from critical decision-making processes (Hall, Lacey, Carr-Cornish, & Dowd, 2015; Allard & Curran, 2021). Literature consistently demonstrates that Indigenous communities often view development initiatives with considerable skepticism, rooted in historical experiences of unfulfilled promises, superficial consultation, and exploitative practices that failed to respect Indigenous sovereignty, cultural practices, and traditional ecological knowledge (Hilson, 2012).

Thus, in the contemporary context of resource extraction, trust is assessed through demonstrable actions rather than rhetorical assurances. Academic research highlights the critical importance of actions that confirm genuine respect for Indigenous perspectives, adhere explicitly to cultural sensitivities, and display openness toward genuine shared decision-making processes (Millington et al., 2019; Kemp & Owen, 2013). In other words, trust is relational and incremental, requiring repeated confirmation of integrity, accountability, and equitable participation by Indigenous communities in project governance.

Trust is especially vital in regions like the Ring of Fire, given the deep interconnections between community well-being, traditional land-use practices, and Indigenous cultural identity and spirituality. The literature underlines that the extent of trust Indigenous communities hold toward corporate and governmental actors directly impacts their willingness to support or oppose resource development initiatives, thereby significantly influencing project sustainability and community acceptance (Thomson & Boutilier, 2011; Prno & Slocombe, 2012). Within this detailed qualitative analysis, the theme of trust has been categorized into three distinct yet interconnected sub-codes: Interactional Trust, Institutionalized Trust, and Community Perceptions. Each sub-theme provides deeper insight into specific dimensions that influence the presence or absence of trust within corporate-Indigenous relationships in the Ring of Fire.

Interactional Trust

Interactional trust addresses the nature and quality of direct interactions and communications between Indigenous communities and corporate and governmental actors. It emphasizes mutual respect, cultural sensitivity, genuine engagement, and openness to collaborative dialogue. These relationships are often built not just on policy, but on emotional and cultural connections that take time to develop. The establishment of interactional trust requires not merely transactional encounters, but meaningful conversations, shared learning, and sustained engagement over time. Without this continuity and depth, relationships tend to default to superficial formalities that erode credibility.

Indigenous leaders have consistently emphasized the importance of respectful, culturally grounded communication as a foundation for trust. For example, Neskantaga Chief Wayne Moonias said, “I have tremendous respect for having respectful dialogues and I think it's important that we must have that. But we must be honest” (CBC News, 2023). This sentiment reflects a broader desire for truthfulness, accountability, and openness in all stages of dialogue. Similarly, Chief Elizabeth Atlookan explained, “We should be shaping these processes from the ground up. Anything less is not consultation, it's control” (CBC News, 2023).

Corporate representatives have also acknowledged the importance of cultivating interactional trust. As one Fortescue spokesperson noted, “We respect these relationships and are committed to listening carefully to these communities, and learning from them to fully understand their perspective” (CBC News, 2023). Noront Resources has also stated their approach includes, “ensuring community perspectives inform project decisions at every stage” (Northern Ontario Business, 2023).

However, the quality of these interactions varies significantly across different stakeholders and contexts. Some Indigenous community members have raised concerns about consultation fatigue, where repeated meetings and forums yield little visible change. Others describe interactions that feel symbolic or procedural rather than genuinely reciprocal. For instance, Chief Elizabeth Atlookan remarked, “We said a balanced, joint decision-making [process is needed] because it's going to forever change the landscape of where we're from” (CBC News, 2023). Another leader noted, “They say they listen, but then we see the same plans go forward unchanged” (CBC News, 2023). This underscores a disconnect that often emerges between being heard and being respected in actual decision-making. When participation feels performative rather than collaborative, trust can quickly erode.

Efforts to enhance interactional trust have increasingly emphasized structured, consistent, and culturally appropriate engagement practices. Community engagement programs that include local facilitators, language interpreters, and Indigenous-led planning processes are increasingly being adopted as best practices. Follow-up meetings, community visits, and transparent updates help to keep communication open and inclusive. As Qasim Saddique, project co-lead for the Northern Road Link, shared: “We are willing and able to show up at any community at a time of their choosing... We try to work with them on their schedule and wait for availability for them to participate” (CBC News, 2023). These types of flexible, community-centered approaches are often cited as effective ways to build and maintain trust. Another Webequie community member remarked, “They came back, month after month, and that made a difference. We felt seen” (CBC News, 2023).

Transparency plays a pivotal role in establishing and maintaining interactional trust. Without open, two-way communication, misunderstandings and skepticism can proliferate. As

Chief Wayne Moonias stressed, “That's not just going to be rolled over because it's for economic purposes; there's more to that when we're talking about our lands and resources” (CBC News, 2023). Another comment reflected this, stating, “Transparency should not be optional—it should be embedded in every decision that affects our lands and communities” (CBC News, 2023). Clear and culturally respectful dialogue demonstrates that Indigenous worldviews are being taken seriously. Furthermore, transparency must go beyond language and include clarity in data, decisions, and follow-through.

Historical patterns of broken promises, sudden policy changes, and exclusionary practices have left lasting scars in many communities. Though not always explicitly stated, the memory of these experiences shapes how new engagements are interpreted. Multiple articles indicate that consistent corporate accountability, especially over long time horizons, is essential to healing fractured trust. This involves not just delivering on current commitments but also acknowledging past missteps and setting new, co-developed standards for the future. Practices such as recurring informal meetings, respectful listening sessions, and incorporating traditional knowledge into decision-making are vital for rebuilding trust. As one advocate shared, “When companies actually implement what we suggest, trust starts to grow” (CBC News, 2023).

Additionally, meaningful interaction requires understanding the deeper cultural, historical, and social contexts of Indigenous communities. Surface-level engagement often misses the significance of land, language, and spiritual practices, which are central to Indigenous identity and governance. Proactive efforts by corporate and governmental actors to educate themselves and their staff about Indigenous histories and values demonstrate a willingness to engage beyond economic interests. These actions help reframe relationships from stakeholder

management to true partnership. A Matawa leader commented, “You can’t build trust unless you understand who we are and where we come from” (CBC News, 2023).

As the process continues, stakeholders on all sides must prioritize relational depth, sincerity, and long-term relationship maintenance to foster and sustain interactional trust. This includes not only showing up when projects are being negotiated but maintaining a presence throughout the life of the project and beyond. Building trust is an ongoing, relational commitment that must be embedded in everyday interactions and institutional culture. Without it, even the most well-intentioned policies risk falling flat in the eyes of communities who have seen too many promises broken.

Institutionalized Trust

Institutionalized trust pertains to the formal structures, agreements, and policies established by corporate and governmental actors that embed Indigenous participation, decision-making power, and benefit-sharing into the development process. Institutionalized trust is crucial for long-term relationship stability, providing tangible assurance that Indigenous rights, concerns, and interests will be consistently recognized and protected over time. Trust becomes sustainable when Indigenous communities perceive that their involvement is structurally guaranteed, rather than dependent solely upon individual relationships or informal arrangements.

Formal mechanisms such as Impact Benefit Agreements (IBAs), co-management agreements, and joint oversight committees are key instruments for institutionalizing trust. For example, an Indigenous leader emphasized the importance of formal arrangements: “Without legally binding agreements that outline clear roles, responsibilities, and benefits, trust remains vulnerable to changes in corporate or government leadership” (CBC News, 2023). Similarly,

another community advocate noted, “We need institutional guarantees, not just goodwill promises. IBAs and similar mechanisms must explicitly ensure our community's long-term welfare” (Northern Ontario Business, 2023).

Some companies operating in the Ring of Fire have attempted to institutionalize trust by proposing significant Indigenous procurement strategies and benefit-sharing arrangements. One such company publicly committed, stating, “Wyloo has committed to spending \$100 million on contracts with Indigenous businesses to embed economic participation directly into our project framework” (Northern Ontario Business, 2023). However, Indigenous leaders remain cautious, emphasizing that institutionalized trust must go beyond financial compensation highlighting that money alone doesn't build lasting trust. They need guaranteed roles in environmental management and oversight to ensure projects align with our long-term sustainability goals..

The effectiveness of existing institutional frameworks, such as co-management committees and advisory bodies, has also been scrutinized. While some communities view these structures positively, others argue that they remain largely symbolic without genuine authority: “Advisory committees are good in theory, but without meaningful decision-making power, our participation risks being tokenistic” (Northern Ontario Business, 2025). To address this gap, Indigenous leaders advocate for enhanced roles in decision-making processes, including co-management and joint oversight committees: “Real institutional trust requires structures where Indigenous and non-Indigenous parties have equal authority in decisions affecting our lands” (CBC News, 2025).

Institutional trust also faces challenges related to consistency in implementation and enforcement. Community stakeholders often criticize governmental and corporate actors for

symbolic participation and failure to uphold commitments. As stated by Treaty 9 leadership, “We will not accept mere ‘participation’ in a unilateral, top-down, Crown-led process” (CBC News, 2025) To address these concerns, First Nations called for a framework that is “mutually and equally co-developed and co-led and co-enforced by an Indigenous Governing Body” (CBC News, 2025)

The effectiveness of existing institutional frameworks, such as co-management committees and advisory bodies, has also been scrutinized. While some communities view these structures positively, others argue they remain largely symbolic without genuine authority. As legal scholar Dayna Scott emphasized, current frameworks must shift toward “a government-to-government manner that doesn't tokenize their involvement” (CBC News, 2022) First Nations leaders d.... To address this gap, Indigenous leaders advocate for enhanced roles in decision-making processes, including co-management and joint oversight committees. As Chief Elizabeth Atlookan of Eabametoong First Nation explained, “We said a balanced, joint decision-making [process is needed] because it's going to forever change the landscape of where we're from” (CBC News, 2018)

Community Perceptions

Community perceptions encompass Indigenous community views regarding the sincerity, intentions, and overall commitment of corporate and governmental entities toward community welfare in the Ring of Fire. This sub-code reflects the extent to which Indigenous communities perceive corporate and governmental actions as genuine, respectful, and aligned with community values and priorities. Indigenous perceptions significantly influence their willingness to engage

in dialogue, support, or oppose resource extraction projects. Community trust is often the cumulative result of past experiences, current interactions, and expectations for future behavior.

Indigenous community members frequently express skepticism about corporate and governmental intentions, often rooted in historical experiences. One community advocate articulated this skepticism, stating, “We’ve heard promises before, but we’ve seen them broken again and again. We need to see consistent actions that match these promises before we can truly trust” (CBC News, 2022). Another community representative echoed this sentiment, noting, “Companies often present themselves as our allies, but their decisions repeatedly prioritize profits over community needs” (Northern Ontario Business, 2023).

Community perceptions can also be positively influenced by transparent communication and demonstrable actions that benefit local communities. Some corporate initiatives have been viewed favorably, particularly those explicitly designed to benefit Indigenous communities economically and socially: “The procurement commitments and local employment opportunities provided by companies show promise, but we need to ensure these are sustained and substantial, not just temporary incentives” (CBC News, 2028).

However, negative perceptions persist, often stemming from discrepancies between corporate public statements and on-the-ground realities. Indigenous stakeholders have expressed skepticism about the sincerity of companies’ stated intentions, with one leader stating, “They speak publicly about respecting our rights and collaborating with us, yet their actions frequently tell a different story” (CBC News, 2021). This gap between rhetoric and reality undermines trust, creating lasting doubts about corporate intentions.

Community perceptions are also influenced by corporate and governmental responsiveness to local concerns. Positive experiences of meaningful responsiveness can significantly bolster community trust. For instance, one community leader noted, “When companies genuinely listen and adapt their projects to address our concerns, it builds credibility and encourages deeper collaboration” (Northern Ontario Business, 2025). Conversely, when responsiveness is superficial or absent, skepticism deepens: “We have raised countless issues about environmental impacts and cultural disruptions, but often our concerns seem ignored or downplayed” (CBC News, 2023).

In addition, Indigenous perceptions are shaped significantly by the historical and ongoing experiences of marginalization and exclusion. Community advocates emphasize the need for meaningful, sustained, and respectful engagements, asserting, “Our history teaches us to be cautious. Trusting means seeing consistent, genuine efforts to include us as true partners in every decision” (Northern Ontario Business, 2024). Another community member highlighted the emotional and social impacts of broken trust, saying, “Every broken promise reinforces our belief that outsiders view us merely as obstacles or resources, not partners” (CBC News, 2023).

To foster positive community perceptions, Indigenous representatives recommend more inclusive practices, genuine power-sharing arrangements, and visible, consistent corporate social responsibility initiatives that directly address community priorities. Communities suggest that corporate entities demonstrate their sincerity by embedding Indigenous governance structures directly into their operational frameworks and decision-making processes: “Trust will only be established if companies demonstrate long-term commitment to our well-being, rather than short-term gains” (Northern Ontario Business, 2022).

Conclusion of Findings

The analysis of the themes of Legitimacy, Credibility, and Trust provides a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing the Social License to Operate (SLO) within the Ring of Fire context. The findings indicate that Indigenous communities closely evaluate corporate and governmental actions based on adherence to legal and environmental standards, socio-political integration, and respect for cultural practices and traditional lands. Furthermore, credibility emerged as a central concern, highlighting the critical importance of transparency, consistency, and responsiveness in maintaining positive stakeholder relations.

Trust emerged as a complex and multifaceted theme, emphasizing that successful relationships depend heavily on genuine and sustained interactions, formal institutional commitments, and the overall perceptions of Indigenous communities. Throughout this analysis, it became evident that achieving and maintaining an SLO within the Ring of Fire hinges on structural changes and demonstrable efforts to integrate Indigenous communities as equal partners in resource governance.

As the findings illustrate, considerable gaps remain between stated corporate intentions and actual practices, highlighting areas where improvements in engagement, accountability, and genuine collaboration are needed. The insights derived from these themes provide a critical foundation for understanding current dynamics and identifying actionable steps toward building stronger, more sustainable relationships with Indigenous communities.

The following Discussion section will further explore the implications of these findings, situating them within the broader context of corporate social responsibility, reconciliation frameworks, and environmental justice. Recommendations for enhancing corporate and governmental strategies to achieve meaningful reconciliation and secure a sustainable Social License to Operate will also be presented.

Discussion

The central aim of this study was to critically evaluate how mining companies operating within Ontario's Ring of Fire (ROF) have sought to secure and maintain a Social License to Operate (SLO) through corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategies. By explicitly addressing legitimacy, credibility, and trust as core analytical dimensions, this research directly responds to the primary research question: What is the state of the SLO in the ROF with specific reference to legitimacy, credibility, and trust? Employing qualitative content analysis guided by methodologies outlined by Mayring (2000), this study analyzed corporate documents, media coverage, public statements, stakeholder interviews, and community feedback, revealing substantial discrepancies between publicly stated CSR objectives and actual operational practices. It also examines the extent to which reconciliation frameworks and Indigenous rights discourses have shaped corporate behavior and influenced project timelines.

Specifically, the findings illustrated persistent gaps between corporate intentions and practical implementations. These gaps were manifested through inconsistent and often superficial community engagement strategies, ineffective grievance mechanisms, and frequent

misalignments between corporate actions and the expectations of Indigenous communities. The resulting skepticism among Indigenous populations concerning the authenticity of corporate initiatives has significantly undermined genuine corporate efforts to acquire and maintain a robust SLO. This persistent skepticism highlights the deep-rooted issues companies face when attempting to reconcile business interests with community welfare, cultural values, and longstanding calls for justice and recognition. These findings also address the second research question regarding how Indigenous rights and reconciliation frameworks have influenced the SLO, showing that while such frameworks have been acknowledged, their translation into actionable policies remains limited.

Legitimacy

Legitimacy emerged as a pivotal determinant in securing an SLO, closely aligning with theoretical arguments by Melé and Armengou (2015), who emphasized that ethical legitimacy demands active and meaningful contributions to the common good beyond mere compliance with regulatory frameworks. While companies operating in the ROF typically demonstrated formal adherence to legal standards—including obligatory environmental assessments and basic community consultation processes—their efforts often lacked authentic integration of Indigenous cultural values, sustainable operational practices, and respect for Indigenous governance structures (Melé & Armengou, 2015).

The distinction between legal legitimacy and ethical legitimacy becomes particularly crucial in the context of resource extraction in Indigenous territories. Ethical legitimacy, unlike its legal counterpart, demands deep alignment with community values, cultural protocols, and

genuine sustainability standards (Hall et al., 2015; Allard & Curran, 2021). Indigenous rights and reconciliation frameworks such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) Calls to Action significantly influence corporate legitimacy. However, their superficial implementation within the ROF has diminished their potential impact. Companies often employed procedural rather than genuinely transformative applications of these frameworks, resulting in limited enhancement of ethical legitimacy and a tenuous SLO.

Furthermore, it is essential to recognize that legitimacy is not static but evolves over time based on how companies adapt to social expectations, political developments, and environmental concerns. In the ROF, evidence suggests that corporate actors often lag behind evolving community expectations, relying on outdated consultation models that fail to address contemporary demands for co-governance, Indigenous data sovereignty, and climate justice. As a result, companies may find themselves continuously struggling to re-establish legitimacy amidst growing scrutiny from both Indigenous stakeholders and civil society.

Credibility

Credibility was identified as another critical factor in establishing and maintaining an SLO. This dimension relies significantly on the consistency, transparency, and accountability of corporate actions, as emphasized by Thomson and Boutilier (2011). The analysis conducted in this research highlighted notable inconsistencies between corporate narratives, particularly those surrounding reconciliation and environmental sustainability, and observable operational practices. A significant credibility gap was observed regarding grievance mechanisms, which were frequently perceived by Indigenous communities as tokenistic, slow, and ineffective. Such

perceptions exacerbated community frustration, distrust, and resistance, further compromising the credibility of corporate CSR initiatives.

The credibility challenges were compounded by observable discrepancies between public corporate communications—often rich with promises of reconciliation, sustainability, and transparency—and the lived realities of Indigenous communities experiencing ongoing environmental degradation, economic inequities, and ineffective conflict resolution. Furthermore, the lack of independent verification of corporate claims and insufficient external monitoring mechanisms further undermined credibility. In many cases, communities expressed frustration not only at company actions but also at provincial and federal regulatory bodies for failing to enforce transparency or hold corporations accountable. To rebuild credibility and thereby secure an SLO, mining companies need to significantly enhance their transparency, responsiveness, and accountability mechanisms, embedding these principles deeply into corporate culture and practice rather than merely using them rhetorically in public statements.

Additionally, building credibility involves more than just communication, necessitates the co-creation of knowledge and shared understanding. Companies must include Indigenous knowledge holders in impact assessments and decision-making processes to ensure cultural integrity and local relevance. If these collaborative spaces are not created, the credibility of corporate initiatives will continue to be undermined, resulting in delayed timelines, community opposition, and increased reputational risk.

Trust

Trust emerged as profoundly influential in shaping long-term, sustainable relationships between mining companies and Indigenous communities. Aligning with the findings of

Millington et al. (2019), the research indicates that trust-building efforts in the ROF region were frequently undermined by superficial corporate gestures and symbolic actions, often labeled as "redwashing." Such performative behaviors towards Indigenous reconciliation, without addressing underlying structural inequities and governance power imbalances, have deepened existing community skepticism, distrust, and resistance.

The minimal involvement of Indigenous leadership in oversight processes and corporate governance further exacerbated trust-related issues. Institutional trust, as suggested by Prno and Slocombe (2012) and Kemp and Owen (2013), requires structural changes, including authentic empowerment and the meaningful participation of Indigenous communities in decision-making and oversight frameworks. Without substantial institutional reforms reflecting genuine power redistribution, inclusivity, and accountability, achieving and sustaining meaningful trust remains elusive, thereby delaying further development and investment in the ROF.

This study also reveals that trust is both a process and an outcome, built through sustained engagement over time. Trust cannot be generated through short-term funding initiatives, sponsorships, or one-off meetings. Instead, it requires companies to institutionalize respect, reciprocity, and transparency in every layer of their engagement with Indigenous partners. Mechanisms such as Indigenous-led monitoring, joint environmental assessments, and shared decision-making forums are examples of trust-enhancing strategies that remain underutilized in the ROF. Furthermore, failure to build trust in one project often impacts the social license of future initiatives, highlighting the interconnectedness of corporate reputations across time and space.

Broader Implications

Beyond the specific findings, this research carries broader implications for debates surrounding environmental justice, resource governance, and reconciliation in Canada. Recent political developments further emphasize the systemic vulnerability of Indigenous rights frameworks within Canadian resource governance. The announcements by political figures such as Pierre Poilievre, advocating expedited extraction processes without due Indigenous consultation, directly contradict the ethical and operational principles essential to long-term project viability (CBC News, 2025). Similarly, Nova Scotia's removal of fracking moratoriums without adequate Indigenous consultation reinforces structural patterns of environmental racism and undermines foundational reconciliation commitments (CBC News, 2025).

These developments starkly illustrate the fragility of existing reconciliation efforts within Canadian resource governance, highlighting the ethical imperative of embedding Indigenous worldviews and legal orders into the core of resource policy and planning. Such integration must go beyond symbolic inclusion, actively reshaping governance practices to ensure that Indigenous sovereignty, knowledge systems, and environmental stewardship guide extraction projects meaningfully and equitably.

Recommendations

Based on the insights derived from the analysis, several clear and actionable recommendations emerge that may significantly enhance corporate practices and governmental policies around resource extraction, particularly in sensitive regions such as Ontario's Ring of Fire. Firstly, corporations and government entities must move beyond voluntary memoranda of understanding (MOUs) towards legally binding agreements that explicitly delineate the roles,

responsibilities, and expectations of both Indigenous communities and resource extraction companies. Such legally enforceable arrangements, emphasized by Allard and Curran (2021), would ensure greater accountability and reduce ambiguity around corporate commitments to environmental protection, economic benefit sharing, and cultural respect. This structural change is necessary to shift the prevailing paradigm from one of vague corporate assurances toward clear, transparent, and enforceable obligations that genuinely reflect Indigenous community priorities and rights.

Secondly, there must be an intentional strengthening of Indigenous-led oversight and environmental monitoring mechanisms. Indigenous communities should not merely be participants but rather leaders and decision-makers in oversight frameworks. Current literature emphasizes that robust Indigenous-led monitoring systems substantially enhance environmental outcomes and significantly increase community acceptance and trust (Prno & Slocombe, 2012; Kemp & Owen, 2013). Such frameworks would involve explicit roles for Indigenous environmental guardians, independent Indigenous environmental assessment processes, and transparent reporting mechanisms directly accountable to the communities involved. This shift toward institutionalized Indigenous leadership in environmental governance is not merely a gesture towards inclusivity but a fundamental reorientation that respects and leverages traditional ecological knowledge and Indigenous governance systems, creating a genuinely co-managed approach to natural resource stewardship.

Thirdly, a critical recommendation derived from this research involves transitioning from mere consultation to genuine co-governance in decision-making. Consultation processes, as practiced currently, are often superficial or procedural, frequently characterized by insufficient responsiveness or genuine dialogue. The literature consistently argues that co-governance,

characterized by equal and empowered decision-making roles for Indigenous representatives, represents the most ethical and effective pathway towards long-term sustainability and reconciliation (Hall et al., 2015; Millington et al., 2019). True co-governance involves joint committees with equal representation, formal veto powers for Indigenous leadership over certain environmental or cultural protection measures, and integrated decision-making processes. This structure ensures meaningful participation, facilitates consensus-building, and reduces conflict, ultimately enhancing the legitimacy, credibility, and trust essential for a sustained Social License to Operate.

Lastly, all extraction projects in sensitive regions should formally integrate comprehensive cultural impact assessments (CIA) within standard environmental review processes. CIAs specifically evaluate how proposed projects might affect the cultural practices, heritage, and identity of local Indigenous populations. These assessments should be conducted collaboratively with Indigenous communities from the initial stages of project planning and should directly inform decision-making and regulatory approvals (Kemp & Owen, 2013). Institutionalizing CIAs ensures explicit consideration of Indigenous cultural heritage, spiritual practices, and traditional land use, further contributing to ethical legitimacy and community acceptance.

Meaningful CSR practices—as identified earlier in the literature review and emphasized in Melé and Armengou's (2015) work—are characterized by genuine and sustained efforts in consultation, co-governance, and cultural understanding. These are not auxiliary to corporate activity but foundational components of responsible resource governance. When companies implement mechanisms such as inclusive decision-making bodies (Owen & Kemp, 2013), formalized co-governance agreements (Hall et al., 2015), and culturally informed impact

assessments (Prno & Slocombe, 2012; Kemp & Owen, 2013), they align themselves with a CSR agenda that reflects ethical commitment and community relevance. These practices, in turn, serve as necessary prerequisites for building and maintaining a SLO. Rather than treating CSR as a performative exercise, meaningful CSR embeds respect for Indigenous knowledge systems (Borrows, 2010), recognizes collective rights (UNDRIP, 2007), and promotes long-term partnerships based on mutual benefit and accountability. Embedding these dimensions into corporate practice not only increases the likelihood of project success but also contributes to broader goals of reconciliation, justice, and sustainable economic transformation (Millington et al., 2019; Allard & Curran, 2021). a rethinking of how resource development is conceptualized and governed in Canada. It necessitates a paradigm shift toward reconciliation-based development models that treat Indigenous communities not as stakeholders to be consulted, but as equal partners with governance rights, environmental expertise, and vital contributions to the country's sustainable future.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides extensive insights into corporate strategies and Indigenous responses in the context of the Ring of Fire, certain methodological limitations are worth noting. Primarily, the reliance on publicly available data, including media coverage, corporate communications, and publicly accessible government documents, limits the ability to capture internal corporate motivations or detailed behind-the-scenes interactions between stakeholders. Public data sources, while valuable, inevitably provide a partial view, shaped by institutional narratives and media framing. Future research could thus enhance these findings by incorporating qualitative methods such as direct interviews, focus groups, and field visits. Engaging directly with community members, corporate executives, and governmental regulators

would provide richer, more nuanced perspectives and deeper insights into motivations, barriers, and opportunities for collaboration.

Additionally, future research should expand the geographic scope and comparative analyses to other Canadian regions undergoing similar extraction projects. By exploring diverse contexts—such as British Columbia, Alberta, or Nova Scotia—researchers could generate a more robust understanding of systemic factors influencing SLO across different governance and cultural landscapes. Comparative studies might reveal region-specific factors or universal patterns that further illuminate how SLO and CSR strategies could be optimized.

Further methodological enhancements might include longitudinal analyses examining the evolution of SLO and corporate-community relationships over extended periods. Such studies could provide critical insights into how trust, credibility, and legitimacy develop or deteriorate over time, illuminating potential tipping points, successful interventions, or systemic failures. Longitudinal research is particularly critical given the incremental nature of trust-building and community engagement highlighted by this and other scholarly works (Prno & Slocombe, 2012).

Finally, future research might explore the potential role of policy innovations or legal reforms in enhancing corporate accountability and promoting genuine co-governance. Analyzing comparative international policy frameworks or emerging best practices in other resource-intensive countries could provide useful models for Canadian policymakers and Indigenous leaders. Such research would be valuable in advancing practical solutions that integrate Indigenous rights more robustly within national resource governance, thereby contributing significantly to reconciliation and environmental justice objectives.

Contributions and Conclusion

This thesis critically examined how mining companies operating within Ontario's Ring of Fire have approached securing a Social License to Operate (SLO), with particular emphasis on legitimacy, credibility, and trust as core analytical lenses. Through comprehensive content analysis of corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategies, community responses, public narratives, and media reports, this study illuminated significant disparities between corporate intentions and actual operational practices, highlighting ongoing tensions and systemic challenges in achieving genuine reconciliation and sustainable resource development in Canada.

The research objectives were oriented toward understanding not merely the stated goals of corporate actors, but critically assessing whether and how these actors substantively engaged with Indigenous communities, integrated environmental sustainability, and acknowledged Indigenous rights and governance structures. The findings reveal a clear and persistent gap between corporate rhetoric around sustainability and Indigenous consultation and the lived experiences of Indigenous communities. Specifically, companies consistently demonstrated a legalistic interpretation of legitimacy, adhering to minimal regulatory standards but failing to achieve ethical legitimacy, which demands deeper integration of Indigenous cultural values, genuine consultation, and authentic power-sharing mechanisms.

Moreover, credibility emerged as a significant challenge to sustain a SLO. Despite claims of transparency, corporate actors were frequently inconsistent, with visible discrepancies between public commitments and actual performance. The inadequacy of grievance mechanisms

and ineffective responsiveness further eroded community trust, aligning closely with scholarly insights highlighting credibility as foundational to achieving long-term, stable relationships with communities (Thomson & Boutilier, 2011). These credibility issues underscore the necessity for companies to transition from superficial CSR communication toward comprehensive, transparent, and accountable operational practices, fundamentally reshaping community engagement.

Trust, as demonstrated through this research, is perhaps the most critical factor influencing long-term relationships between corporate actors and Indigenous communities. The study confirmed that trust-building is incremental, relational, and deeply institutional. Companies operating in the Ring of Fire region often employed performative or symbolic gestures—what critical scholarship refers to as "redwashing"—rather than undertaking substantive institutional change (Millington et al., 2019). Genuine trust necessitates profound shifts toward co-governance frameworks, robust Indigenous oversight, and authentic representation in decision-making processes. These structural adjustments must be institutionalized to genuinely empower Indigenous communities, moving beyond mere symbolic inclusion.

Beyond these detailed thematic analyses, the broader implications of this thesis are substantial, particularly given recent political developments that threaten to undermine even modest progress achieved in Indigenous reconciliation and environmental stewardship. Recent commitments from political leaders to expedite extraction processes without meaningful consultation represent significant threats to the hard-earned advancements in SLO practices, highlighting a worrying reversion to colonial resource governance models. The implications of these developments cannot be overstated, as they directly oppose ethical obligations under

frameworks such as UNDRIP and the TRC's Calls to Action, risking intensified conflict and environmental degradation.

In response, this thesis proposes a series of clear and actionable recommendations aimed at fundamentally transforming resource governance in Canada. First, legally binding agreements should replace vague voluntary measures, establishing clear accountability standards. Second, Indigenous-led environmental oversight and governance structures must be institutionalized, ensuring that Indigenous knowledge systems guide project management. Third, genuine co-governance frameworks should be adopted, moving beyond superficial consultation towards equal and empowered Indigenous participation. Lastly, comprehensive cultural impact assessments (CIAs) must be standard in all environmental assessments, explicitly considering the cultural dimensions of resource projects from inception to conclusion.

This study's contributions to scholarly literature lie in its rigorous application of legitimacy, credibility, and trust frameworks to the Canadian resource extraction context, providing empirical validation of theoretical models of SLO and CSR. By integrating theoretical insights with detailed empirical evidence from the Ring of Fire, the research offers critical lessons and a nuanced understanding of how ethical, relational, and institutional dimensions intersect in achieving sustainable resource governance and reconciliation objectives.

Despite these contributions, the thesis recognizes methodological limitations inherent in relying on publicly available secondary data sources, which may only partially capture the nuanced dynamics of corporate-community interactions. Future research could significantly enhance these findings through direct qualitative engagement—such as interviews and community consultations—and comparative analyses across diverse geographic and sectoral contexts. Longitudinal studies examining the evolution of SLO relationships over time could

provide invaluable insights into the incremental nature of trust and credibility, offering practical guidance for corporate and governmental stakeholders.

Ultimately, this thesis underscores a critical juncture for Canadian resource governance, urging policymakers, industry leaders, and Indigenous communities alike to embrace transformative change. Extractive industries must move decisively toward equitable co-governance, ethical legitimacy, and accountable sustainability, not only as moral imperatives but as strategic necessities. Without these fundamental shifts, the Ring of Fire risks becoming another historical site of environmental injustice and Indigenous marginalization. However, with dedicated institutional commitments to genuine partnership, transparent governance, and authentic reconciliation, resource development can serve as a powerful catalyst for economic justice, environmental sustainability, and lasting reconciliation. It is this transformative potential grounded firmly in respect, equity, and stewardship that offers a path forward toward a truly sustainable and equitable resource future in Canada.

Appendix A: Coding Structure

Theme	Code	Sub Code
1. Legitimacy	4. Legal and Environmental Standards	13. Adherence to environmental regulations
		14. Compliance with legal frameworks and agreements
		15. Efforts to minimize environmental damage
	5. Socio-Political Integration	16. Engagement with Indigenous governance systems
		17. Inclusion of Indigenous knowledge in decision-making
		18. Recognition of Indigenous rights (e.g., TRC Calls to Action, UNDRIP)
2. Credibility	6. Respect for Indigenous Lands and Culture	19. Acknowledgment of traditional lands and sacred sites
		20. Preservation of cultural practices and customs
	7. Transparency	21. Corporate policies addressing land stewardship
		22. Disclosure of environmental and social impacts
8. Consistency	8. Consistency	23. Clarity in sustainability reporting
		24. Accessibility of corporate information to stakeholders
	9. Responsiveness	25. Alignment of corporate actions with public commitments
		26. Evidence of follow-through on reconciliation promises
9. Responsiveness	9. Responsiveness	27. Integration of CSR frameworks into business practices
		28. Corporate responses to community concerns

3. Trust	10. Interactional Trust	29. Adjustments to strategies based on stakeholder feedback 30. Timeliness of addressing grievances 31. Quality of direct dialogue and consultation 32. Evidence of reciprocal relationships 33. Efforts to build genuine partnerships with Indigenous communities 34. Long-term agreements (e.g., Impact Benefit Agreements) 35. Shared decision-making processes 36. Evidence of sustained commitments to Indigenous priorities 37. Indigenous communities' views on corporate intentions 38. Public perceptions of corporate integrity 39. Stakeholder evaluations of relationship-building efforts
	11. Institutionalized Trust	
	12. Community Perceptions	

Appendix B: Thematic Coding Framework

This appendix outlines the thematic coding framework used for qualitative content analysis. The framework is organized into three primary themes—Legitimacy, Credibility, and Trust—each with corresponding codes and sub-codes. These themes were developed to systematically evaluate how mining companies communicate efforts related to the social license to operate and engagement with Indigenous communities.

Theme 1: Legitimacy

Evaluates the extent to which corporate practices conform to legal and ethical standards, ensuring that operations are not only lawful but also morally justified and widely accepted by society.

Codes and Sub-Codes:

- Legal and Environmental Standards
 - *Adherence to Environmental Regulations:* Examines the degree to which companies follow stringent environmental regulations, including proactive measures beyond compliance.
 - *Compliance with Legal Frameworks and Agreements:* Scrutinizes how well corporations adhere to legal requirements and the terms of agreements made with Indigenous communities and government bodies.
 - *Efforts to Minimize Environmental Damage:* Assesses the implementation of advanced technologies and practices that mitigate environmental impacts and promote sustainability.
- Socio-Political Integration
 - *Engagement with Indigenous Governance Systems:* Analyzes the depth and effectiveness of corporate integration with Indigenous governance, including respect for self-determination and sovereignty.
 - *Inclusion of Indigenous Knowledge in Decision-Making:* Measures the extent to which Indigenous knowledge systems and perspectives are incorporated into environmental management and corporate planning.
 - *Recognition of Indigenous Rights:* Evaluates explicit actions taken by corporations to recognize and support Indigenous rights, referencing specific legal frameworks such as the TRC Calls to Action and UNDRIP.
- Respect for Indigenous Lands and Culture
 - *Acknowledgment of Traditional Lands and Sacred Sites:* Focuses on corporate recognition and protection of lands traditionally owned or used by Indigenous peoples, including measures to avoid disrupting sacred sites.
 - *Preservation of Cultural Practices and Customs:* Assesses efforts to consult with Indigenous communities to ensure that operations do not disrupt cultural practices.
 - *Corporate Policies Addressing Land Stewardship:* Reviews corporate policies for their effectiveness in promoting sustainable land use and stewardship that respects Indigenous connections to the land.

Theme 2: Credibility

Assesses the reliability, transparency, and accountability of corporate communications and actions, focusing on how these contribute to a trustworthy corporate image.

Codes and Sub-Codes:

- Transparency
 - *Disclosure of Environmental and Social Impacts:* Evaluates the completeness and honesty of information disclosed about the environmental and social impacts of operations.
 - *Clarity in Sustainability Reporting:* Checks for the clarity, detail, and accessibility of sustainability reports, ensuring they meet industry standards and are understandable to non-experts.
 - *Accessibility of Corporate Information to Stakeholders:* Measures how easily stakeholders can access detailed, relevant, and timely information about corporate activities and policies.
 - Consistency
 - *Alignment of Corporate Actions with Public Commitments:* Assesses the alignment between what companies publicly commit to and their actual practices.
 - *Evidence of Follow-Through on Reconciliation Promises:* Examines specific instances where companies have followed through on their commitments to reconciliation and other promises to Indigenous communities.
 - *Integration of CSR Frameworks into Business Practices:* Evaluates the thoroughness with which corporate social responsibility principles are embedded into everyday business operations and decision-making.
 - Responsiveness
 - *Corporate Responses to Community Concerns:* Looks at the promptness and appropriateness of corporate responses to concerns raised by Indigenous communities and other stakeholders.
 - *Adjustments to Strategies Based on Stakeholder Feedback:* Assesses the extent to which companies modify their strategies and operations in response to feedback, especially from Indigenous groups.
 - *Timeliness of Addressing Grievances:* Measures how quickly and effectively the company addresses grievances and conflicts, aiming for resolutions that are satisfactory to all parties involved.
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Theme 3: Trust

Explores the development and maintenance of trust through consistent, positive interactions and institutional practices that demonstrate commitment to stakeholder interests, especially those of Indigenous communities.

Codes and Sub-Codes:

- Interactional Trust
 - *Quality of Direct Dialogue and Consultation*: Evaluates the depth, frequency, and quality of direct dialogues between the corporation and Indigenous communities.
 - *Evidence of Reciprocal Relationships*: Looks for signs of genuine reciprocal relationships that bring mutual benefits, rather than one-sided corporate gains.
 - *Efforts to Build Genuine Partnerships with Indigenous Communities*: Assesses the sincerity and effectiveness of efforts to build partnerships that respect Indigenous leadership and input.
- Institutionalized Trust
 - *Long-term Agreements (e.g., Impact Benefit Agreements)*: Reviews the substance and execution of long-term agreements that involve shared decision-making and benefit-sharing.
 - *Shared Decision-Making Processes*: Analyzes the degree to which Indigenous communities are involved in decision-making processes regarding projects that affect them.
 - *Evidence of Sustained Commitments to Indigenous Priorities*: Measures the consistency and longevity of corporate commitments to addressing the priorities and concerns of Indigenous communities.
- Community Perceptions
 - *Indigenous Communities' Views on Corporate Intentions*: Gauges the perceptions of Indigenous communities regarding the intentions and integrity of the corporation.
 - *Public Perceptions of Corporate Integrity*: Assesses the broader public's view of the company's integrity and the authenticity of its engagement with Indigenous issues.
 - *Stakeholder Evaluations of Relationship-Building Efforts*: Measures stakeholder satisfaction with the company's efforts to build and maintain relationships, focusing on trust and transparency.

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