

Questions for Atheists: Constructing Atheism Through Response Videos

The internet and social media have played a key role in the development of 21st Century atheism (Smith & Cimino 2012; Taira 2021). Atheism has had a strong presence on YouTube since its founding in the mid-2000s, which coincided with the rise of the new atheism movement, and the video platform remains a significant space for atheist discourse to this day.

This paper looks at how atheist identities are constructed, and how creators negotiate their role as a representative of atheism, in videos where atheist YouTubers respond to “questions for atheists” from religious believers. Through critical discourse analysis of 39 videos, including close analysis of 10, and over 24,000 comments, it reveals a tension between two atheist discourses, which has been noted in other research on atheist discourse (Laughlin 2016; Isomaa 2022); on the one hand, atheists are consistently associated with particular virtues (intellectual honesty and curiosity, empathy), and on the other, atheism is said to merely be a lack of belief in God(s). Through the question-answer format, this apparent contradiction is masked, allowing both discourses to exist in the same video. Furthermore, it discusses how response videos reverse the power dynamics of the question-answer interactional structure (Fairclough 1992: 140), and serves as an example of how to do close discourse analysis on YouTube.

References:

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Primary author: ISOMAA, Robin (Åbo Akademi University)

Presenter: ISOMAA, Robin (Åbo Akademi University)