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Online Radicalization of White Women to Organized White Supremacy

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Abstract

Since its early mainstream adoption in the 1990s, the Internet has been leveraged by white supremacist groups to recruit and radicalize individuals. Twenty years later, social media platforms, like YouTube, reddit, and Twitter, continue to further this practice. The attention of researchers has been primarily centered on white supremacist men, and this focus on white men erases white women's roles as active agents in the spread of white supremacy, skewing our understanding of white supremacy as a whole. This study used digital ethnography and interviews to examine the ways white women are radicalized to organized white supremacy through popular social media platforms YouTube, reddit, and Twitter. The study found white women were radicalized by engaging with posts and joining communities focusing on beauty, anti-feminism or "The Red Pill," traditionalist gender values or #TradLives, and alt-right politics. White supremacist recruiters leveraged gendered topics and weaponized platform features – likes, sharing, comments, recommendation algorithms, etc. – to cultivate a sense of community. Through involvement with these communities, women were introduced to racialized perspectives on each topic, usually after a catalytic pop culture or newsworthy event, and slowly radicalized to organized white supremacy.

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Introduction

The Internet has been used by white supremacist groups to spread propaganda and radicalize individuals since the mid-nineties.[1] Often, this radicalization takes place on websites dedicated to white supremacy or those cloaked to be seemingly benign historical sites but are actually propaganda.[2] With the ubiquity of social media, white supremacists are utilizing mainstream online platforms, such as Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and reddit, to normalize and radicalize users through their functionality, including instantaneous dissemination, anonymity, and a cheaper reach to a large, targeted audience. This use of the Internet as a tool for recruitment has drastically increased the membership of white supremacist groups, created new white supremacist organizations, and increased the organizing ability of these groups.[3] The ensuing hate speech, harassment, and violence both online and offline have reached new heights prior to and during the election of Donald J. Trump as U.S. president.[4]

Furthermore, the attention of researchers has been on white men, ignoring the process and question of white women's radicalization to organized white supremacy. White men are viewed as the main actors and leaders of white supremacist movements, and white women are victims of their boyfriends' or husbands' actions. The resulting research reinforces gender norms and erases white women's roles as active agents in the spread of white supremacy, thus skewing our understanding of white supremacy as a whole. Studying white women and the tactics used to recruit them provides a more holistic, nuanced picture of the way white supremacist

[1] Jessie Daniels. Cyber Racism: White Supremacy Online and the New Attack on Civil Rights. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009, 3.
[2] Ibid., 117-137.
[3] "Eye of the Stormer." Southern Poverty Law Center. Accessed October 16, 2017. https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2017/eye-stormer.
[4] "Hate Groups Increase for Second Consecutive Year as Trump Electrifies Radical Right." Southern Poverty Law Center. Accessed December 11, 2017. https://www.splcenter.org/news/2017/02/15/hate-groups-increase-second-consecutive-year-trump-electrifies-radical-right.

organizations recruit, normalize, and radicalize white men and women – and the specific gendered tactics used to do so.

These white supremacist groups, including neo-Nazi, Christian identity, and alt-right groups, are actively recruiting women to their cause, and their cause devalues and promotes violence and genocide against all those who are not white.[5] It is important that we learn how white women users of these mainstream online platforms are normalized and radicalized to organized white supremacy as a means to disrupt the process.

Research Questions

This study aims to answer the following question: How are white women normalized and radicalized to white supremacy on the online platforms reddit, Twitter, and YouTube? The study collected data on the use of these online platforms to radicalize white women through specific platform cultures and the offline circumstances and experiences of these women that prime them in this radicalization process.

Additionally, the following question was kept in mind: How do specific platforms' content policies and features, including recommendation algorithms, facilitate this radicalization process? I observe these white women within the contexts and cultures of these three platforms and examine the ways these digital spaces facilitate their identity formation in and community building around white supremacy.

[5] Denise Bostdorff. "The Internet Rhetoric of the Ku Klux Klan: A Case Study in Web Site Community Building Run Amok." Communication Studies 55, no. 2 (June 1, 2004): 352. https://doi.org/10.1080/10510970409388623.

Section I: Literature Review

Organized White Supremacy Offline

White Women & Organized White Supremacy

Current research on white supremacist organizations, recruitment tactics, radicalization, and organizing methodologies are gendered – specifically, they exclude white women from their studies.[6] White men are viewed as the main participants in, and therefore subjects of research for, white supremacist movement making, while women are viewed as easily manipulated victims of their boyfriends' or husbands' stories.[7] Researcher Kathleen Blee points out this "lack of specific attention to contemporary U.S. women racist activists"[8] and that it has "two consequences that limit our ability to understand the modern racist movement and that undermine efforts to design effective strategies against the politics of organized racial, religious, and ethnic bigotry."[9] In much of the current rhetoric, women are viewed as things to be protected and cherished to continue the white lineage.[10] Women are to be protected from rape and violence by black men. Bostdroff writes of the Ku Klux Klan's recruitment appeal for men using women in the following way:

> " If the white race is to be preserved, then Klan websites argue that white men must protect white women from the guile and/or physical force of minority men that might lead to the intermixing of the races."[11]

[6] Kathleen Blee. "BECOMING A RACIST: Women in Contemporary Ku Klux Klan and Neo-Nazi Groups." Gender & Society 10, no. 6 (December 1, 1996): 680–702. https://doi.org/10.1177/089124396010006002.
[7] Ibid., 680-681.
[8] Ibid,. 681.
[9] Ibid., 681.
[10] Ibid., 680.
[11] Ibid., 352.

This rhetoric erases the motivations and agencies of those white women joining racist organizations and therefore their power and responsibility in furthering white supremacist ideologies.[12] A significant part of the picture of white supremacist group normalization, radicalization, and violence remains unknown if researchers fail to explore white women's attitudes, choices, and active participation in white supremacist groups. Without a full picture of the ways in which white supremacy is organized, government and anti-violence organizations are unable to stop the cycle of radicalization of white women and resulting violence against non-white communities.

White supremacist groups have had special auxiliary groups for women and recruitment strategies since its early creation. With the advent of the Internet, the Ku Klux Klan began propaganda campaigns to "create a virtual tribal identity of white masculinity to attract white men, while some Klan groups exploit the Internet's audience segmentation to make specialized community-building appeals to women and to youth and children."[13] According to Bostdorff, Klan sites appealed to women through women-only forums, uplifting their strength through shared motherhood: reinforcing gender stereotypes.[14]

Kathleen Blee's research on the process of white women's radicalization utilized life stories of white women to determine their affinity for the group. Female racist activists would retroactively construct their "conversion" stories that integrate the teachings of the white power group they're in with a series of traumatic events, such as robbery, near-death experience, or difficulty making a living.[15] These women slowly joined the groups after acquaintances and

[12] Ibid., 680-681.
[13] Ibid., 340.
[14] Ibid., 353.
[15] Ibid., 681.

friends invited them to a meeting or showed them propaganda material.[16] Women also showed selective adoption of some beliefs or attitudes exercised by the white supremacist group they were in; instead, they ‘‘they adopt[ed] the ideas that least threaten their own lives and personal commitments; the rest [were] simply ignored.”[17]

Gendered Expectations of Organized White Supremacy

Organized racism and white supremacy are, by default, a gendered enterprise. Much of the work of white supremacist groups has been a man’s enterprise, rooted in the idea of a white man’s masculinity and intertwined nationalism. Men are explicitly recruited to white supremacist organizations through appeals to their masculinity and entitlement to women. Men are expected to exercise their masculinity as protectors of whiteness and its privileges from the barbarism of communities of color that threaten the pure, patriotic, and white population of the country — true citizens.[18] As well, they are the saviors of white women’s womanhood and, subsequently, their gallant lovers.[19] Men are expected to restore their masculinity – and get women – by joining a white supremacist group.[20]

Women’s Roles in Organized Racism

White supremacist ideology dictates men to be active agents, warriors, and fighters of white supremacy, while women assume roles as docile sisters, mothers, and wives. White women’s role is to be one of regression, rejecting new feminist ideals and protecting traditional

[16] Ibid., 682.
[17] Ibid., 694.
[18] Michael Kimmel. Healing from Hate: How Young Men Get Into--and Out of--Violent Extremism. University of California Press Books, 2018, 10-31.
[19] Ibid., 112-120.
[20] Ibid., 10-19

gender norms: women's submission, docility, domesticity, and motherhood. Historically, according to researcher Kathleen Blee, white supremacist groups fit women into four distinct roles: Goddess/Victim, Race Traitor, Wife and Mother, and Female Activist.[21] These roles were, in part, recruitment tools to urge men to join, partly out of a sense of duty to protect white women as mothers, wives, and sisters, as well as to seduce or reward a woman. The Goddess/Victim is an archetype placing white women on equal footing with Aryan goddesses. Yet even as a goddess, she is vulnerable to attack. Her beauty attracts non-white lovers or, more likely, rapists, who wish to soil her innocence and dilute her beauty. Recruitment flyers and memes for white supremacist groups urge men to protect these vulnerable women, lest they become victims of the dangers of non-white men.

The archetypes also serve as warnings to women of unacceptable behavior. White women may be victims, but they can also be sluts and Race Traitors, easily tricked by non-white men into romantic and reproductive relationships. These women actively work against the white supremacists' cause, by diluting their whiteness with non-white partners and bearing non-white children. These Race Traitors were juxtaposed with the ideal: Wife and Mother. White women's main role within white supremacy is to continue to build the white population through heterosexual marriage and reproduction. Women were responsible to "perform the wifely supportive roles that enable white Aryan men to maintain their racial vigilance."[22]

[21] Ibid, 112 - 122.
[22] Ibid, 119.

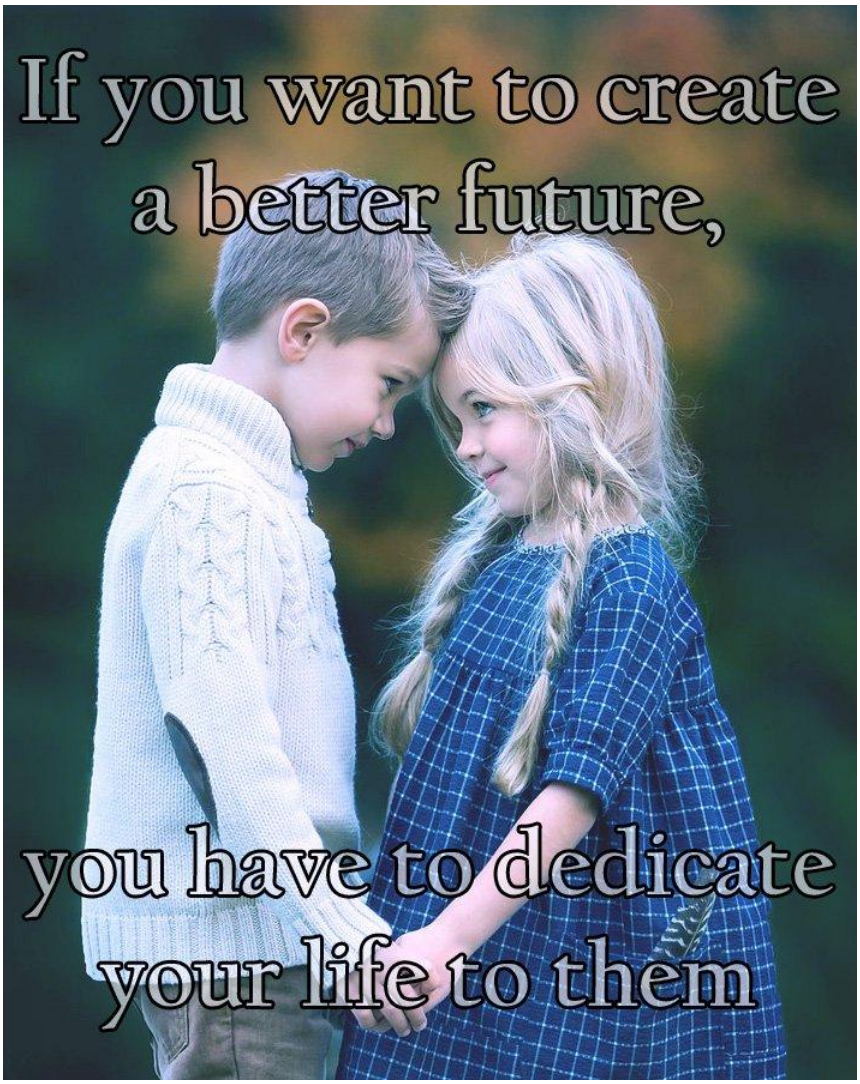

Figure 1: Wife and Mother Meme[23]

Last, women were depicted as racist activists with their own agency to support white supremacist organizations. “White sisters” are viewed as “necessary in organized racism [by] a women’s neo-Nazi group [that claims] women are needed as movement activists, not only as racist mothers and wives.”[24] These female activists often do not stand out as white supremacists. These activists make white supremacy more accessible to mainstream ideals and media because they are viewed as less violent or militant in their activism due to their gender and motherhood.

[23] Wife and Mother Meme 1. Digital Image. Twitter. Accessed Aug. 20, 2018.
[24] Ibid, 121.

The same women's neo-Nazi group that declared women are not only "racist mothers and wives" but activists was also quick to clarify that it is not a feminist organization.[25] A strong anti-feminism sentiment runs through the ideologies of these organized racist organizations, both past and present. Anti-feminism sentiment is a useful recruitment tool that is discussed further in later sections.

Case Examples of Women in White Supremacist Groups

Women in white supremacist groups are not passive in their engagement. They are active agents in furthering and promoting white supremacy. Their reasons for joining white supremacist groups are wide-ranging but often focused on the need for community and a narrative history of trauma in their lives. As part of the initial research to understand traditional, offline recruitment, I interviewed two white women who were formerly white supremacists - specifically Skinhead groups. The two women identified trauma and community in their recruitment and engagement narratives, as presented by other research.

These interviews served as a background context into the ways in which white women were recruited to and joined white supremacist groups prior to the Internet. Insights from these interviews helped further develop the research online by providing context on traditional recruitment tools, iconography, and women's roles within organized white supremacy. I am using an alias, Veronica, for one informant at her request due to concerns of privacy for her family and retaliation from her current community for her past conduct and from white supremacist members for openly sharing her experience. The other interviewee, Angela King, was willing to be identified.

[25] Ibid, 121.

Veronica

Veronica was born into a military family that traveled constantly in her early infancy. From kindergarten to nine years old, she lived in Germany. Much of what she remembers when living in Germany was unpleasant. She experienced bullying and violence from other kids for not speaking German. At nine, her family moved again. Her father was stationed in a mid-sized city in Arizona. She and her family hated Arizona but did their best to make it work.

Veronica continued to dislike school due to constant bullying and hostility with other students. She identified as an angry outcast and gravitated to heavy metal and death metal starting in 5th grade. She recognizes now that some of the music she listened to was laced with white power sentiments. In middle school, Veronica began having issues with particular students of color at her school. She was bullied by a group of popular Mexican girls for her metal aesthetic — hair, clothes, etc. The bullying got so bad she moved to another school, but the bullying and violent altercations continued with Mexican and black classmates. During one incident, she wrote in a "slam book" derogatory, racist content about a group of popular black girls.[26] These girls were perceived by Veronica to hold a lot of social capital, and as a social outcast, Veronica was resentful. Some students soon found out it was her, and she received punishment by school staff and intimidation by the group of black girls she targeted.

After this experience, Veronica and her best friend joined a small group of Skinheads for, as she put it, "protection."[27] Veronica did not believe what she did was wrong. Instead, she "felt like [she] was part of some special group who was smart enough to know the truth about things that other white people were too scared to admit out loud."[28] She dug deeper into her original

[26] Veronica. Interview by author. Skype recording. New York City, February 16, 2018.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.

racist rhetoric and blamed the black and Mexican girls for her misery at school and found refuge within the local racist group. She found community within this group and acceptance for her anger. After middle school, her parents divorced, and she moved to a different high school. She continued her involvement with the Skinhead group and experienced gendered interactions – sexual harassment and unwanted attention – by men within or associated with the group as old as 35. Still, Veronica felt safe within the group.

A continued factor in community with Skinheads for Veronica was music. Veronica enjoyed heavy metal, punk, and psychobilly music, scene, and aesthetics. Others within the group did as well, which was an important bonding tool. She met other racist individuals – both formally and informally part of white supremacist groups – through online punk forums and live shows.

After graduating from high school at 17, Veronica moved to Arkansas for a brief stint and then to Oregon at 19 to be near former racist friends. These friends got out of the neo-Nazi scene during their time in Oregon and began to distance themselves from Veronica and her racist rhetoric. She then moved to Florida to be near her father and continued to associate with Skinhead culture. She notes she saw sexism take place in the group – expectations around drinking, drugs, sex, etc. – but didn't feel it was directed at her because she was "cool." She married a man from the area who was not directly associated with her Skinhead group. Veronica recalls the beginning of her de-radicalization started in Florida, stating:

> "I was getting involved with political stuff and trying to figure out why it was so hard to get ahead in life and realizing that minorities had it the same as us. Why were we

being enemies with these people when they're not the one who is keeping us down? I started to examine a lot of that stuff and to think about it on my own."[29]

Veronica later divorced her husband and moved to a Northwest state to start fresh. She slowly became involved in politics in these areas, particularly concerning economic issues, and realized people of color have it just as bad, if not worse, than white people. She now has a family and is active in political movements, in part to make up for her racist past. Veronica identified her main reasons for joining a white supremacist group came from similar interests, a sense of protection, and a feeling of belonging to a community.

Angela King

Angela grew up hearing racial slurs and homophobic rhetoric in her home in South Florida. From a young age, she heard jokes, comments, and even warnings — "don't come back with a black or a woman."[30] They became her norm. So, when she moved far away from her school, experience continued bullying, and felt isolated, she finally found community in a local Skinhead gang with similar rhetoric. She said: "In the very beginning, there were points where I started to think to myself, 'This is stuff that I already know. I learned it from my parents. I already learned these racial slurs. I already know these racist jokes, and I have these papers that I used to collect from my father's printing shop, so I see very much that this is where I'm supposed to be, finally.'"[31]

Angela was overflowing with anger, much of it stemming from bullying, the feeling of being an outcast, and hiding her sexual orientation. She knew she was attracted to other girls early in her childhood but kept this hidden from her family and community. But with this silence

[29] Ibid.
[30] Angela King. Interview by author. Skype recording. New York City, January 30, 2018.
[31] Ibid.

came anger. Throughout high school, she found acceptance and justification for her anger within the Skinhead group. "Oh, they really get me…. They actually want me around."[32] Similar to Veronica, Angela bonded with her small group, in part, through punk rock music. She found mentorship from the two other women in the group, teaching her how to shave her head, roll up her jeans, what shoes to wear, etc.

She learned about the aesthetics of the group from the women and expectations of women from the men of the group. These spoken and unspoken rules included restrictions on drinking, doing drugs, being "promiscuous," and dating outside the white race.[33] And, while there were no rules against women in leadership, it was expected women were not to have a formal leadership role. Once she dropped out of high school and received her GED, she began to run whole chapters, but she said she never received official recognition. She met with hundreds of white supremacists and found many individuals with similar stories to her own:

> "I was bullied. I didn't fit in. I was looking for something. You know, this is what I found, or they found me...This is my place. A lot of what I experienced: bullying, trauma, looking for acceptance or belonging. There are things like people looking for, maybe, a safe place. Looking for an escape from an abusive situation. Looking for personal protection."[34]

Angela was later arrested and sentenced to five years in federal prison for the robbery of a pornography shop as part of what she viewed at the time as a "race war."[35] In prison, she interacted with women of color who challenged her beliefs. These women became her support

[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.

network during that time, and she fell in love with a black woman who shared a cell with her. They dated until the woman was relocated to another prison, but the experience and love remained with her. By the time she left prison, she no longer associated with white supremacist groups or ideology. After being released, Angela decided she wanted to meet other people in the LGBTQ community and go to community college. She was honest about her history and wanted to do work to redeem herself. She and several other former white extremists founded a non-profit, Life After Hate, which provides peer support and programming to help others within extremist groups and their families try to leave. She is now the Programs Director and talks about her experience to researchers, at panels, and with news media.[36]

Organized White Supremacy Online

Organized White Supremacy Online

White supremacist and nationalist groups were quick to utilize the Internet in the mid-nineties.[37] David Duke and other white supremacists "were early adopter[s] of digital media," particularly cloaked websites, websites that are not immediately distinguishable as white supremacist propaganda.[38] According to Southern Poverty Law Center, 626 white supremacist-hate groups (under the following categories: White Nationalist, Racist Skinhead, Neo-Nazi, Neo-Confederate, Ku Klux Klan, Holocaust Denial, Hate Music, Christian Identity, Anti-Muslim, Anti-immigrant, and Radical Traditional Catholicism) exist within the United States, and most have websites and use social media for spreading propaganda.[39] Many of these groups existed prior to the Internet, while some have risen from it.

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[36] "Team." Life After Hate. Accessed September 1, 2018. https://www.lifeafterhate.org/team/.
[37] Ibid., 3.
[38] Ibid., 3.
[39] "Hate Map." Southern Poverty Law Center. Accessed October 12, 2017. https://www.splcenter.org/hate-map.

One of the largest websites and online gathering centers for white supremacists is Stormfront.org.[40] The website, with the slogan "White Pride World Wide", was created in 1996 by former Ku Klux Klan leader and white supremacist Don Black and has 300,000 registered members as of May 2015.[41] It is home to discussion boards for users with the mission "to provide information not available in the controlled news media and to build a community of White activists working for the survival of our people."[42] It was among the first white supremacist websites to take advantage of the ease and access of the Internet and is still utilized today in white supremacist recruitment and discussion. Another infamous white supremacist and "alt-right" news outlet is *The Daily Stormer*, created by Andrew Anglin, a neo-Nazi, in 2013.[43]

According to Daniel Koehler and his findings from interviews, groups like Stormfront leverage the Internet for its "cheap and efficient way to communicate, network and organize meetings or make other arrangements,"[44] "perceived constraint-free space and anonymity,"[45] and "individuals the perception of a critical mass within the movement."[46] These points are mirrored by scholars Jessie Daniels and Denise Bostdroff. Bostdroff delves deeper into the "critical mass"[47] to focus on the way the Ku Klux Klan promotes community building in its recruitment and retention of Klansmen and women.[48] Community building through informal social networks

[40] Ibid., 62.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Daniel Koehler. "The Radical Online: Individual Radicalization Processes and the Role of the Internet." Journal for Deradicalization 0, no. 1 (December 19, 2014): 116–34.
[45] Ibid., 118.
[46] Ibid., 121.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid, 340.

is one of the most important ways to recruit new members, and it is usually through known persons and friends that individuals are introduced to white supremacy – both on and offline.[49]

A recently formed white supremacist-aligned group is the digital-savvy alternative right, known as alt-right.[50] The group's emergence corresponded with the presidential campaign and election of Donald J. Trump in 2016, and its creation was facilitated heavily by the Internet, including subforums, such as reddit's r/The_Donald. r/The_Donald is notorious for its influence on the 2016 presidential election and as a community place for alt-right members.[51] Online organizing on r/The_Donald, Stormfront, and other Alt-Right websites contributed to offline participation in the Unite the Right rally in August 2017. The United the Right rally was a white supremacist gathering in Charlottesville, Virginia that turned violent and resulted in the death of an anti-racist organizer, Heather Heyer. Participants were vocal about their membership in the alt-right and use of the Internet to organize the rally. Prominent white supremacists Jason Kessler and Richard B. Spencers were organizers of the rally and leveraged the Internet to build momentum behind their rally.[52]

Online Radicalization to Extremism

Much of the research pertaining to online radicalization to extremism focuses on post-9/11 efforts to understand Islamic extremism and radicalization. A well-known study on

[49] Joseph Schafer, Christopher W. Mullins, and Stephanie Box. "Awakenings: The Emergence of White Supremacist Ideologies." Deviant Behavior 35, no. 3 (March 1, 2014): 175. https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2013.834755.
[50] "Alt-Right | Southern Poverty Law Center." Accessed August 20, 2018. https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/alt-right.
[51] "Day of the Trope: White Nationalist Memes Thrive on reddit's r/The_Donald." Southern Poverty Law Center. Accessed August 20, 2018. https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/04/19/day-trope-white-nationalist-memes-thrive-reddits-rthedonald.
[52] Sheryl Gay Stolberg. "Hurt and Angry, Charlottesville Tries to Regroup From Violence." The New York Times, January 20, 2018, sec. U.S. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/13/us/charlottesville-protests-white-nationalists.html.

radicalization, the NYPD Intelligence Division, claimed the Internet had "an important role during the radicalization process"[53], creating a " cyber world to the extremist sites and chat rooms — tapping into virtual networks of like-minded individuals around the world who reinforce the individual's beliefs and commitment and further legitimize them."[54] The Internet is therefore a "virtual echo chamber" for radicalization to violent extremism – in this case, Jihadism. The Internet allows for radicalization to happen without in-person contact due its "thousands of extremist websites and chat-rooms" and therefore is a "virtual incubator of its own."[55]

Research by the RAND Corporation corroborated the use of the Internet as an echo chamber for both extreme and non-extremist ideologies.[56] The report, a combination of a literature review of radicalization online and case studies of extremists who were radicalized through Internet technologies, also highlights the increased opportunities for radicalization or self-radicalization sites on the Internet opposed to offline.[57] Their research did not conclude that the Internet accelerates radicalization, although other literature often portrays it as an accelerant "by virtue of the fact that it allows individuals to connect in an instantaneous and continuous way."[58] Rather, it is another tool to facilitate this process and may or may not accelerate it. The report also acknowledged the lack of research between online and offline behaviors and how the two interact – an area of interest for this thesis study.[59]

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[53] Mitchell D Silber, Arvin Bhatt, New York (N.Y.), and Police Department. Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat. New York, N.Y.: Police Dept., 2007; 9. http://www.nyc.gov/html/nypd/pdf/dcpi/NYPD_Report-Radicalization_in_the_West.pdf.
[54] Ibid., 9.
[55] Ibid., 22.
[56] Ines von Behr, Anais Reding, Charlie Edwards, and Luke Gribbon. "Radicalisation in the Digital Era." Product Page, 2013; 18. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR453.html.
[57] Ibid, 18-20.
[58] Ibid, 19.
[59] Ibid, 21.

In terms of recruitment for white supremacist groups, the ability to provide propaganda cheaply and to a large population instantaneously is one of the most appealing reasons for leveraging online platforms for recruitment and radicalization. Koehler writes:

> "These structural amenities...(effectiveness, cheap communication, anonymity, economical gains etc.) allow for a better integration of each member into the movement. arguably leading to the stabilization of the ideological commitment and the consolidation of the worldview."[60]

Adolescents and young adults are particularly susceptible to extremist values, as they are beginning to build their identities and seek out their communities. Koehler identifies examples of factors "motivating adolescents to get involved in right-wing groups: sympathy for the underdog position of the extreme right in relation to radical and violent opponents; protection against enemies and perceived threats; curiosity; search for excitement; opposition to previous generation or to parents; search for alternative to family or parents; search for friends or a community; search for status or identity; tendency to be docile in friendships."[61] Once again, friendships, community building, and social connections are found to be a driving force for radicalization and assimilation of individuals into extremist hate groups, including white supremacist and terrorist organizations. How then are common online platforms, like YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, and their social networking functions leveraged to radicalize individuals online – in particular, white women?

Another area of interest is how algorithms are utilized by these platforms to recommend content or shape the user's experience toward extremist ideologies.[62] In O'Callaghan's research

[60] Ibid., 127.
[61] Ibid., 125.
[62] Safiya Umoja Noble. Algorithms of Oppression : How Search Engines Reinforce Racism. New York: New York University Press, 2018.

on the extreme right (ER) and online platform recommendations, the authors researched the way YouTube's recommender system could be utilized to immerse users into extreme right spaces and content, leading to potential radicalization.[63] They "emphasize the hidden politics of online recommender systems, particularly the way in which the immersion of some users in YouTube's ER spaces is a co-production between the content generated by users and the affordances of YouTube's recommender system, and the potential implications of and suggested responses to this."[64]

Their findings show how "automated social media 'recommendation' can result in users being excluded from information that is not aligned with their existing perspective, potentially leading to immersion within an extremist ideological bubble, supports a shift of the almost exclusive focus on users as content creators and protagonists in extremist cyberspaces to also consider platform providers as important actors in these same spaces. This, in turn, suggests that YouTube's recommender system algorithms are not neutral in their effects but have political articulations…"[65] Thus, these algorithms may intentionally facilitate the spread of white supremacist propaganda and recruitment.

It should be noted, Dylann Roof, a white supremacist who murdered nine black individuals in a church basement in Charleston in 2015, self-radicalized using online communities and resources. Roof's radicalization started with online inquiries on Google about Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black teenager shot and killed by a neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman in 2012. Roof said he was "awakened" by the case and searched for more

[63] Derek O'Callaghan, Derek Greene, Maura Conway, Joe Carthy, and Pádraig Cunningham. "Down the (White) Rabbit Hole: The Extreme Right and Online Recommender Systems." Social Science Computer Review 33, no. 4 (August 1, 2015): 459–78. https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439314555329.
[64] Ibid., 461.
[65] Ibid., 473.

information online.[66] After some initial searches, he was "prompted…to type in the words 'black on White crime' into Google…" and he said he was "never...the same since that day." Through the search, he found white supremacist sites, like The Daily Stormer and Stormfront, where his white supremacist education and radicalization continued.[67]

Section II: Methods – Understanding Online Platforms' Norms and Cultures

Theoretical Framework

I framed the research and discourse around a trauma-informed gender theory, as it intersects with critical race theory, radicalization studies, and digital sociology. Gender theory provided a lens to examine how white supremacist organizations and their participants – including women – interpret and reinforce gender roles in recruitment and socialization into the group. Particularly, I was interested in how white women see themselves as both white and women. Gender theory provided an exploration into how these white women view themselves within the groups and how these views may be shaped by their own understanding of their gender – a place of power, oppression, or neutral. I centered these women as both free agents, not just accomplices, in the promotion of white supremacy and as oppressed persons within the patriarchal nature of organized white supremacy.

Simultaneously, I leveraged critical race theory to examine white women's association with whiteness and its source of identity, power, and privilege. White supremacy is an ideology institutionalized in the systems, structures, and culture of the United States, the country of which all informants reside. These white women were born into and normalized to a white supremacist

[66] "What Happened When Dylann Roof Asked Google For Information About Race?" NPR.org. Accessed August 31, 2018. https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/01/10/508363607/what-happened-when-dylann-roof-asked-google-for-information-about-race.
[67] Ibid.

culture. Understanding this foundation, I focus on the radicalization of these white women into organized white supremacy, which I define as both formal membership in a white supremacist group as well as overt identification with white supremacist ideology. White women are free agents in their membership in white supremacist groups, not damsels. I looked to Jessie Daniels and Kathleen Blee's research, which incorporated gender and feminist theory in their critical racism and anti-racist work.

Radicalization studies around Jihadist Islamic radicalization provided context on online tactics and the psychology behind them for how extremist organizations recruit and radicalize potential members. This context was important to identify recruitment tactics by other such groups and common themes concerning persons most susceptible to radicalization.

Digital sociology provided a lens to explore how white women, groups, and movements create identity, communities, norms, behaviors, and police each other in online communities. Digital sociology "connects digital media technologies to the traditional sociological areas of study, like labor, culture, education, race, class and gender."[68] The theories explore how identities affect an individual's use of technology and how technology impacts these identities and inequalities. This framework helped as I parsed out the way identity and the functionality of these online platforms impact each other.

Methods

During this IRB-approved study, I utilized digital ethnography and interviews with white women who are current or former white supremacists to explore the process of normalization and radicalization. There is currently no set bar of measurement to determine if someone is

[68] Jessie Daniels, Tressie McMillan Cottom, and Karen Gregory. Digital Sociologies. Policy Press, 2017.

radicalized to an extremist ideology. For this study, the threshold will be a net increase in the below measurement behavior and an eventual self-proclamation of membership of a white supremacist group or ideology online or through an interview.

I define radicalization behaviors as both the online use of coded and uncoded hate speech and harassment, as well as offline hate speech, discrimination, harassment, violence, and attendance at in-person white supremacist rallies. I measured radicalization and this change in the white women's ideology online using: their increased participation on specific white supremacist subforums (subreddits) and hashtags through likes, shares, tags, comments, and posts; increased use of white supremacist iconography, memes, and coded language; in-real-life (IRL) participation in physical rallies; increased hate speech, harassment, and threats to those who disagree with or are targets of white supremacist groups and ideologies; self-proclamation of membership of a white supremacist group or ideology.

Keeping these measurements as guides, I observed online interactions, posts, videos, comments, and other content previously posted by white women users with active profiles between 2007 and present on YouTube, Twitter, and reddit. The criteria for selection of informants was that they are white women who are either current or former white supremacists with formal membership to a white supremacist group or identify with a white supremacist ideology or subculture, as identified by the Southern Poverty Law Center or Anti-Defamation League. I excluded white women who were self-proclaimed white supremacists at the beginning of their profile history, as this study focuses on how engagement on the platform leads to radicalization and not the ways currently radicalized individuals use the platforms. I identified 10 informant profiles across the three platforms through their self-identification as a current or former member of a white supremacist group in their profile description, press, organization

websites, hashtags, or other iconography that are identifiers. I limited the observation to 10 informants due to my own time constraints in conducting the research and analyzing a large amount of post data.

I analyzed the change over time in user behavior, language, use of white supremacist iconography, changes in engagement on the specific Internet platforms between the creation of their user profile and most current posts, and personal testimonies over their use of YouTube, reddit, and Twitter to understand the patterns and pathways by which these women joined organized white supremacy. I chose YouTube, reddit, and Twitter as the digital locations for this research, as they are popular social media platforms, ubiquitous in the current digital culture. All three platforms are used by millions of users, which makes their use by extremist groups to radicalize users a heightened risk for society. Twitter and reddit have been noted for being a gathering spot for white supremacist groups.[69] YouTube has begun to gain popularity as a broadcast network for white nationalism.[70]

I created new user accounts on YouTube, reddit, and Twitter to follow or subscribe to informants' profiles and some users they mentioned or followed, as well as to browse or search as I conducted this study. The accounts I created generated data, including follower lists, likes, and search history, used by the platform for its recommendation algorithms. I gathered each informant's post history (including retweets), like history, comments, list of users or channels they follow, list of frequented subreddits, favorited videos, curated playlists, and profile descriptions. The unit of analysis is each informants' online social interactions. I used an open coding method to develop codes from initial observation of informants' post history and patterns

[69] Roderick Graham. "Inter-Ideological Mingling: White Extremist Ideology Entering the Mainstream on Twitter." *Sociological Spectrum* 36, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 24–36. https://doi.org/10.1080/02732173.2015.1075927.
[70] Lewis Rebecca. "Alternative Influence: Broadcasting the Reactionary Right on YouTube." Data & Society, n.d., 61.

of engagement with white supremacist content and groups. The codes related to patterns of behavior, common subcommunities, emerging radicalization pathways, and known white supremacist groups. Codes included beauty, alt-right, trad wives, anti-feminism, dating, and politics.

I also recorded field notes of these patterns in recruitment and radicalization, including common memes, hashtags, subcommunities, trends, and symbols (such as emoji use), both by informants and those recommended by the platform through my user experience. Through this, I examined how specific online platform features, cultures, moderation policies, norms, and sub-communities facilitated in this radicalization process. In the sections below, I discuss the relevant features and policies that served as an undercurrent for the radicalization process to explain the pathways that formed for these white women to join organized white supremacy.

Additionally, I interviewed 2 former white supremacist women, including a co-founder of a nonprofit working to de-radicalize current extremists, for background information about the gendered nature of organized racism. I settled on 2 interview informants, as it was difficult to find current or former white supremacist women willing to be interviewed. Interviews were conducted through Skype and Google Hangout over two hours each. Interview questions included:

- What were your childhood and adolescence like? What's your family like?
- What was the community you grew up in like?
- Tell me about how you learned about white identity.
- Why did you join [white supremacist organization]?
- How do you feel as a woman within the white identity community?

I used these interviews as background, rather than the focus of the research, because their radicalization process took place during the 1990s without the Internet as a main factor in the process. The interviews provided corroboration with current literature on gendered organized racism in the Literature Review.

Platform Norms and Culture

Each of the three social media platforms examined – Twitter, reddit, and YouTube – contains its own norms and culture due to its unique platform features and content policies. These cultures foster identity and community in unique ways and allow for the rapid evolution of white supremacist iconography and recruitment pathways. Below is a discussion of the prominent features and content policies for each platform in the following sections as a foundational understanding to discuss the pathways by which white women are radicalized on these platforms.

Platform Features

Twitter Features

Created in March 2006, Twitter is one of the most popular news and social media platforms with 335 million active users worldwide.[71] Twitter is viewed as a micro-blog, and its main feature is the ability to publish bite-sized text posts or "tweets" of 280 characters in length, upgraded in 2017 from 140 characters, on a user's profile.[72] These tweets can also include photos or videos and allow for rapid dissemination of information in quick bursts. Other users can

[71] "Twitter Lost 1 Million Monthly Users in the Second Quarter - The Washington Post." Accessed September 2, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2018/07/27/twitters-monthly-users-fell-by-million-second-quarter-following-purge-fake-suspicious-accounts/?utm_term=.38b5f2308ce0.
[72] "Tweeting Made Easier." Accessed September 2, 2018. https://blog.twitter.com/official/en_us/topics/product/2017/tweetingmadeeasier.html.

retweet content or reply. Users can also string several tweets into a thread to share longer trains of thought.

Users can follow other users, allowing them to see new content by such users in their homepage feed — usually in chronological order or tweets weighed for priority by an algorithm. Users usually find related content through retweets by users they currently follow, hashtags, or lists of users curated by other users. Twitter does not have forum capabilities, but many users still find and share subcommunities on the platform, such as "Black Twitter"[73] or "Bikini Bottom Twitter." These sub-communities can be identified in part by identity, similar post content, a popular fandom, or participation in a hashtag. Hashtags and trending keywords remain the most popular way for users to share content that can be viewed outside their followers' views and direct retweets.

In addition to hashtags and trending keyboards, Twitter users can be introduced to similar content and users through Twitter's recommendation algorithms. The recommendation algorithm shows content it weighs as interesting to users using their previous behavior — follows, likes, retweets, searches. Usually, recommendations come as likes from users they follow. The algorithm also recommends users to follow. After a user follows one account, they are presented with other, similar accounts to follow. So, while Twitter does not have specific subcommunity features, its recommendation algorithm creates unintentional networks of similar users and content. This becomes useful in facilitating connections between white women interested in or part of organized white supremacy.

The rapid-fire nature of Twitter's content creation and distribution leads to an equally rapid change and evolution in language and iconography by these communities. In relation to

[73] Sarah Florini. "Tweets, Tweeps, and Signifyin': Communication and Cultural Performance on 'Black Twitter.'" *Television & New Media* 15, no. 3 (March 1, 2014): 223–37. https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476413480247.

white supremacist content online, this can lead to the rapid change in signifiers for membership or cloaked hate speech targeting non-white communities to circumvent platform Trust & Safety mechanisms. For example, white supremacist users on Twitter developed the (((echo))), three parentheses on either side of the name of a Jewish person, to signal to other white supremacist users that the person they are referring to is Jewish.[74] Usually, this was included in a tweet insulting the individual but not using common language that overtly pointed to hate speech. The symbols evolved to allow them to target a person quickly due to their ethnicity in a short character count without leading others to flag it for Twitter Trust & Safety. Flagged content that is deemed in violation of Twitter's content policies would be removed, and the account may receive a suspension or ban depending on the severity of the violation.

The iconography was exposed, and soon the (((echo))) was known to be a signifier for Jewish ancestry by white supremacist groups.[75] The symbol was then reclaimed by some Jewish users, who willingly used the signifier in their profile names, wearing the symbol as a proud proclamation of their ethnicity instead of a harmful label. Symbols like this continue to evolve and those that relate to white women in organized white supremacy are discussed in the following sections.

reddit Features

reddit touts itself as the front page of the Internet. It is an aggregator of interesting content and news posted by its registered users and viewed by many more non-registered viewers, or lurkers. reddit has over 330 million active users posting within the 138,000

[74] Matthew Yglesias. "The (((Echo))), Explained." Vox, June 6, 2016. https://www.vox.com/2016/6/6/11860796/echo-explained-parentheses-twitter.
[75] Ibid.

subforums, called subreddits. Each subreddit is its own smaller community.[76] Much like a forum, registered users can publish posts, comment on posts, and build their own profiles. Subreddits are focused on a particular theme, topic, community, identity, or fandom ranging from r/lakers for Los Angeles Laker fans to r/TwoXChromosomes for women-identified users.

Photo, video, and gif posts are often the most popular content. However, long-form text posts of several paragraphs to pages are also valued by users on this platform. Users can vote on how much they like or dislike the content – upvoting and downvoting – to push the popularity and page ranking of specific content to the top of the subreddit. redditors, the name for users, view this as a democratic process to identify the higher quality or favored content. The most popular content from all subreddits is displayed on r/all or the default homepage of reddit. Users can join – "subscribe" – to specific subreddits. The aggregate of top posts on all subreddits to which a redditor is subscribed becomes their own curated homepage when they go to reddit.com.

Besides r/all and a redditor's curated homepage, reddit is organized by subreddits. Many subreddits will reference related subreddits in their "community panel." For example, r/loseit, a subreddit dedicated to weight loss, recommends other fitness and weight loss subreddits, such as r/fitness or r/mealprepsunday, under its related communities section.[77] These similar subreddits create a loose network around a specific topic or ideology and share subscribed redditors. This is the case for white supremacist subreddits, including r/ White_Pride, which support and promote each other.[78] reddit also employs recommendation algorithms but not to the same extent as Twitter and YouTube. Instead, it relies on redditors to filter content collaboratively through voting and create their own recommendations via subreddit community panels and posts.

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[76] "Homepage - reddit." Accessed August 21, 2018. https://www.redditinc.com/.
[77] "Related - Loseit." Accessed August 21, 2018. https://www.reddit.com/r/loseit/wiki/related#wiki_fitness_and_exercise.
[78] "White Pride Worldwide." Accessed August 21, 2018. https://old.reddit.com/r/White_Pride/.

YouTube Features

YouTube is a video-sharing website and the second most frequented website on the Internet with one billion hours viewed each day.[79] Users are able to upload their own videos and watch others' videos. Most users do not upload their own videos and instead view, comment on, favorite, and curate video playlists. Videos are given their own web pages, and users can like, dislike, comment on, and add to playlists of their own design. Videos are linked back to the main user page, known as a channel, and if a user likes another user's content, they can subscribe to their channel. Comments are voted on with likes or dislikes and given a specific ranking on a video page. Video content is weighed more highly than other content, including comments or text posts. Users who upload multiple videos and have a large number of followers are referred to as YouTubers. There is no specific threshold of videos or subscribers one must have to be given the title. Instead, YouTubers either self-identify as such or are given the title by the press, their followers, and other YouTubers.

While comment functions allow users to leave their opinion or start a dialogue with the video poster, YouTube is widely a broadcast platform, with information being sent in one direction to many viewers and subscribers. Like Twitter, YouTube does not have a forum function. Instead, users find videos and channels largely through the search feature on the site, featured channels on the side of a channel curated by the channel's owner, trending videos – the most watched video in a specific span of time – on the site's front page, and recommended videos and channels curated by the site's recommendation algorithm. Informal and formal networks of channels can exist with similar content, the same owner, or partnering channels to

[79] "You Know What's Cool? A Billion Hours." *Official YouTube Blog* (blog). Accessed August 27, 2018. https://youtube.googleblog.com/2017/02/you-know-whats-cool-billion-hours.html.

promote each other's content. Some of these networks become known as specific communities with users self-identifying as followers or contributors to the community, such as the Beauty Community or BeauTubers.[80]

YouTube's recommendation algorithm curates the majority of a user's experience on the platform, including recommended videos or channels on their front page, recommended videos from current video pages, and search results. These recommendations are based on the user's interactions with the platform, such as likes, views, favorites, and comments.[81] Like other recommendation algorithms, YouTube's recommendation algorithm is optimized to keep users on its platform for the longest duration to increase the number of ads a user watches.

This strategy of optimizing a user's time can lead to inciting, controversial content being weighed more by the algorithm. The algorithm can then, unintentionally, facilitate the spread of conspiracies, misinformation, and hateful content, including white supremacist content, on the platform.[82] A user may find themselves down a rabbit hole of innocuous content that eventually leads them to videos promoting hate speech, white supremacy, and anti-feminism. There is concern about artificial intelligence (AI) by good and anti-hate advocates that these recommendation algorithms could facilitate the radicalization of individuals to hate groups.[83] Data & Society researched the phenomena of radicalization of YouTube audiences to the reactionary right and white nationalism. Researchers referred to this "assortment of scholars,

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[80] "Urban Dictionary: Beautuber." Urban Dictionary. Accessed August 27, 2018. https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=beautuber.

[81] Paul Covington, Jay Adams, and Emre Sargin. "Deep Neural Networks for YouTube Recommendations." In Proceedings of the 10th ACM Conference on Recommender Systems, 191–198. RecSys '16. New York, NY, USA: ACM, 2016. https://doi.org/10.1145/2959100.2959190.

[82] "AlgoTransparency." Accessed August 31, 2018. https://algotransparency.org/index.html?candidat=is%20the%20earth%20flat%20or%20round?&file=ytrecos-science-2018-08-01.

[83] Paul Lewis and Erin McCormick. "How an Ex-YouTube Insider Investigated Its Secret Algorithm." The Guardian, February 2, 2018, sec. Technology. https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/feb/02/youtube-algorithm-election-clinton-trump-guillaume-chaslot.

media pundits, and internet celebrities who use YouTube to promote a range of political positions, from mainstream versions of libertarianism and conservatism, all the way to overt white nationalism" as the "Alternative Influence Network."[84]

This Alternative Influence Network utilizes "captivating video content...on the pages of the internet's most popular video platform...to lend their credibility to openly white nationalist and other extremist content creators."[85] When speaking on the power of YouTube to show white supremacist content, Angela King, an interview informant and anti-hate advocate, said she tested the YouTube rabbit hole:

> "It literally unfolded so simply and easily, I was horrified. I started with something about being bullied [on Google], and then I went to "white kid is bullied". It had links right to YouTube, then another video recommendation to racist songs, and right in the comments of those songs, links to Stormfront. So, it was very quick. Very few clicks to get there, and something — you know, in this age of misinformation, I could literally envision in my head how easy it would have been for a young person like myself, with the Internet as it is today, to just fall right into [white supremacy]."[86]

Platform Content Policies

Twitter's Content Policies

Most platforms with user-generated content have content policies to dictate what content is not allowed on their platform, how to report the content, and what actions can be taken by the platform to respond to a violation of the policies. The team that enforces these policies is

[84] Ibid.,1- 61.
[85] Ibid., 13.
[86] Ibid.

generally referred to as Trust & Safety. Many platforms have content policies that incorporate hate speech or violent threats based on identity. These content policies can change and evolve over time, such as Twitter's content policies.

During and after the Arab Spring, Twitter was perceived as a catalyst and bastion for free speech — the good, the bad, and the ugly. The content was not vigorously moderated in fear of promoting censorship. This perception became a draw for some prominent hate groups, including white supremacists. These groups viewed Twitter as a space for promoting and sharing their ideology proudly, in attempts of bringing it to the mainstream.[87] These groups would target and harass other users based on their identities. Groups would organize into cyber mobs to intensify their efforts. These efforts usually targeted vulnerable populations, including women, people of color, and people with disabilities.[88] Notable harassment campaigns include the targeting of Leslie Jones, a black woman comedian, and women in videos during #GameGate.

Twitter has had a long, slow battle and response against hate speech, harassment, and violent threats on its platform.[89] Twitter's original content policies did prohibit threats or attacks based on identity, but enforcement was lacking. Twitter largely did not respond to these coordinated harassment attacks with changes to their content policies or enforcement efforts until 2016. Twitter's content policies include sections against abuse, prohibiting violence and physical harm (threats of violence, promoting suicide or self-harm, and child sexual exploitation), abuse and hateful content (abuse/harassment, unwanted sexual advances, hateful conduct against another's, and hateful imagery and display names), private information and intimate media (private information, intimate media/revenge porn, and threats to expose or hack), and

[87] Ibid.
[88] Allison Krumsiek. *Cyber Mobs: Destructive Online Communities*. Greenhaven Publishing LLC, 2017: 59 - 63.
[89] Georgia Wells, and Kirsten Grind. "Inside Twitter's Long, Slow Struggle to Police Bad Actors." Wall Street Journal, September 3, 2018, sec. Tech. https://www.wsj.com/articles/inside-twitters-long-slow-struggle-to-police-bad-actors-1535972402.

impersonation.[90] Twitter is moderated by its Trust & Safety team in accordance with its content policies through users flagging potentially harmful or explicit content. These policies have supporting documentation and reasoning explaining their nuances and how the Trust & Safety team responds to such reports on Twitter's Help and Safety subsites.[91]

reddit's Content Policies

reddit, like Twitter, was viewed as a platform for free speech and allowed questionable content on its platform for many years before changes were made to policies and enforcement. Some controversial communities that remained on the platform for years before being banned included r/coontown, which hosted anti-black sentiments, including images of lynching, and r/jailbait, a subreddit dedicated to explicit images and videos of minors. reddit has several content policies prohibiting harassment, hate speech, and violence on its platform, including content that: "is involuntary pornography, is sexual or suggestive content involving minors, encourages or incites violence, threatens, harasses, or bullies or encourages others to do so."[92] Many of these policies were formalized in 2015 in response to harmful subreddits, like r/coontown.[93]

Each subreddit is governed internally, though they must follow the general content policies set forth by reddit.com. Subreddits are governed and moderated by a mixture of upvoting/downvoting and volunteer moderators. Volunteer moderators are redditors who are dedicated to the community created by a specific subreddit, subject matter experts of the topic of the subreddit, the creator of the subreddit, or a mixture of the three. Moderators are not paid and

[90] "The Twitter Rules." Accessed September 2, 2018. https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/twitter-rules.
[91] "Safety on Twitter." Accessed September 2, 2018. https://about.twitter.com/en_us/safety.html.
[92] "Content Policy - reddit." Accessed September 1, 2018. https://www.redditinc.com/policies/content-policy.
[93] Annalee Newitz. "reddit Bans /r/Coontown For All the Wrong Reasons." Gizmodo. Accessed September 1, 2018. https://gizmodo.com/reddit-bans-r-coontown-for-all-the-wrong-reasons-1722356507.

often build internal subreddit guidelines with the help of the subreddit community.[94] Instead, a strong sense of community identity drives moderators to remain engaged and build specific norms and cultures within a subreddit. However, moderators often suffer from harassment and violent threats due to their moderation work and note little to no support from reddit staff.[95]

Each subreddit can have its own set of rules in addition to the reddit-wide guidelines. These guidelines can include being civil with each other, only posting relevant content, or tagging the post with subreddit-specific terminology for easier browsing. Some guidelines are more insidious, such as r/WhiteBeauty. r/WhiteBeauty is a subreddit dedicated to white European beauty ideals, stating: "White people are some of the most beautiful people in the world. This subreddit hopes to collect images of the most beautiful white women, the most handsome white men, and the sweetest and most innocent white children." The subreddit's only two rules are no nudes and "no Jews."[96] Thus, while there may be site-wide content policies to prevent hateful culture, each subreddit can dictate its own norms, rules, and enforcement, as long as they don't overtly violate site policies.

reddit increased its anti-abuse efforts starting in 2015 through increased staff dedicated to Trust & Safety, expanded its content policies and examples, employed algorithms to predict whether specific posts will violate content policies, and increased its enforcement efforts, banning communities that obviously violate content policies or quarantining those that are harmful or controversial but do not rise to the level of a ban.[97] The banning of prominent harmful subreddits, such as r/coontown, r/jailbait, r/deadjailbait, and others, led to a positive culture change on the platform. Users who previously engaged in hateful behavior on those banned

[94] "Moderation - reddit.Com." Accessed September 2, 2018. https://www.reddit.com/wiki/moderation.
[95] "Unpaid and Abused: Moderators Speak out against Reddit." Engadget. Accessed October 21, 2018. https://www.engadget.com/2018/08/31/reddit-moderators-speak-out/.
[96] "R/Whitebeauty." reddit. Accessed September 1, 2018. https://www.reddit.com/r/whitebeauty/.
[97] Ibid.

subreddits showed an 80-90% decrease in such behavior, and the banning of those subreddits did not lead to an "invasion" or "takeover" of other subreddits with hate speech, as some critics feared.[98] This shows positive culture and safety gains for platforms that enforce their content policies through hard bans.

YouTube's Content Policies

YouTube's content policies, also known as "community guidelines," include many of the same categories as reddit's around anti-abuse and hate speech. YouTube's anti-abuse guidelines include prohibitions on hateful content, violent and graphic content, harassment and cyberbullying, threats, privacy, and child safety.[99] YouTube's supporting documentation on each category – pages or blog posts with deeper explanations of each category and context considerations for reporting the content – is lacking compared to the two other platforms.[100]

YouTube users can report hateful content by flagging the content, a video, comment, or channel on the page or by filling out an auxiliary report for YouTube's Trust & Safety team. Some users complain YouTube's response to reports is flippant and inconsistent. The perception that YouTube allows or does not strictly enforce hateful, white supremacist content leads to a culture that can promote such content and users. Thus, YouTube is often used by white

[98] Eshwar Chandrasekharan, Umashanthi Pavalanathan, Anirudh Srinivasan, Adam Glynn, Jacob Eisenstein, and Eric Gilbert. "You Can't Stay Here: The Efficacy of reddit's 2015 Ban Examined Through Hate Speech." Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction 1, no. CSCW (December 6, 2017): 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1145/3134666.
[99] "Policies - YouTube." Accessed September 2, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/yt/about/policies/#staying-safe.
[100] "Hate Speech Policy - YouTube Help." Accessed September 2, 2018. https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/2801939?hl=en.

supremacist influencers and groups as a broadcast system to their supporters, referred to as a new talk radio for white supremacy.[101]

Ethical Considerations

In the presentation of this study's findings, I chose not to include the original usernames of informants and instead alter the usernames and text of their posts to mitigate any potential harm to the research subjects.[102] In the case of images, I chose to share some original memes I viewed as relevant and popular enough not to be traced back to the original subject. For other relevant images, I describe the contents of the image. I discuss the ethical considerations of this decision below.

Public social media is considered exempt from informed consent forms and processes normally afforded by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval processes to gather subject information and data. The IRB considers publicly available social media a public space since online users consent to the public nature of their social media content by adjusting certain privacy settings and agreeing to the Terms of Service (ToS) and Privacy policies upon the creation of their profile. However, many users are unaware of the implications of these decisions and the ways in which their content can be published elsewhere without their express knowledge. When some users were asked how they would feel "if a Tweet [theirs] was used in a research study and [their] Tweet was quoted in a published research paper, attributed to [their] Twitter

[101] "For the New Far Right, YouTube Has Become the New Talk Radio - The New York Times." Accessed September 2, 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/03/magazine/for-the-new-far-right-youtube-has-become-the-new-talk-radio.html.

[102] Desmond U Patton. "Ethical Guidelines for Social Media Research with Vulnerable Groups." Medium (blog), April 16, 2018. https://medium.com/@SAFELab/ethical-guidelines-for-social-media-research-with-vulnerable-groups-1a7035cfa5de.

handle", only 22.4% of respondents indicated they would be comfortable with this.[103] I argue publishing such content without the explicit consent of the individual is not truly consensual since many users do not consider the ways in which their data can be used.

Whether a profile or post is public is not the only relevant factor in publishing such content in a research study. I wanted to minimize any potential harm these women would face with the publishing of their unadulterated content and usernames. I referenced Dr. Desmond Patton's "Ethical Guidelines for Social Media Research with Vulnerable Groups" in the presentation of informants' posts, profiles, usernames, and any other content in this thesis. These subjects may not be considered by most to be a vulnerable group, but these guidelines still apply for the reasons outlined above. Some key recommendations I incorporated for the presentation of this research include:

- "No longer using usernames
- Altering the text of the social media post to render it unsearchable
- Proactively removing social media posts and users from our dataset who have gone private or been removed/suspended from a certain platform."[104]

My greatest obligation as a researcher is to respect my subjects' right to choose and do my best not to introduce more risks to their lives because of their participation in this research. Thus, in consideration for their privacy and wellness, I rendered any of the published examples unsearchable to prevent retaliation by redacting, changing, or paraphrasing tweet content and account names. The purpose of the study is to understand the stories and context of these women, not publicly identify and shame them or make it easier for interested white supremacists to find relevant content for their cause through access to this thesis.

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[103] Casey Fiesler, and Nicholas Proferes. "'Participant' Perceptions of Twitter Research Ethics." *Social Media + Society* 4, no. 1 (January 2018): 205630511876336. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118763366.
[104] Ibid.

Section III: Markers of White Identity and Community Building

White Identity and Community Online

White Supremacist Iconography

White supremacist iconography that existed offline is used or translated online. Important identity markers 14 (representing the 14 words slogan "we must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children") and 88 (representing the letters HH for Heil Hitler) are incorporated in usernames, tweets, videos, and subreddit posts.[105] Symbols of white womanhood show up in similar ways, for example, White, goddess, rose, Aryan, and angel are abundant.[106] Confederate or swastika flags are now .jpgs used as cover photos, thumbnails, and profile pictures. The medium may have changed, but the symbols and icons remain.

And while these symbols show up online, they are changing. Social media provides rapid iteration of symbols and icons. Technology has facilitated new language, some overtly racist and others cloaked to prevent expulsion from the platforms. Cloaked symbols are particularly insidious, as some users may engage with the symbol without understanding its true intention. I observed informants first engaged with hashtags, memes, and other content that was not overtly white supremacist — instead, it related to a particular interest around beauty, dating, or politics. They slowly, through engagement by white supremacist accounts and groups, learned and participated in conversations around whiteness and supremacist ideology. Some of these new, cloaked symbols are innocuous memes or pop culture references co-opted for a new purpose. Below, I review the prominent hashtags, memes, and subcommunities that informants engaged in

[105] "1488." Anti-Defamation League. Accessed September 1, 2018. https://www.adl.org/education/references/hate-symbols/1488.
[106] Ibid, 63 - 68.

and that, as I argue in the proceeding section, helped introduce and normalize these women to white supremacist ideals.

Hashtags

Hashtags are the easiest way for users to engage with new content and users on Twitter. It is also the main entry point through which informants engaged with racialized, white supremacist-leaning content on broad subjects, such as beauty, family, politics, and dating. Below are three categorizations and some examples of the popular hashtags observed. These categories overlap and some hashtags fall within multiple categories.

Whiteness and Beauty Hashtags

A common theme of hashtags observed were those around whiteness and beauty. Usually, informants were introduced to a seemingly benign hashtag before eventually stumbling upon, within the same hashtag search or conversation, a more overt white supremacist hashtag. For example, the most widely used hashtag in this category was #ItsOkToBeWhite. The hashtag is a congregation space for white users to respond to growing concerns that their white identity is valued less than other identities in the current "politically correct" culture. Users showed insecurities around their white identity and adamantly rejected that they hold any form of privilege. The hashtag became a space for white users to affirm and validate other white users by celebrating their whiteness.

The popularity of the hashtag would increase during political moments around race, such as the killing of an unarmed black individual in the United States, a political debate around white privilege and history of colonialism, or even scientific research showing recently exhumed bodies of early human ancestors with dark skin. It also became a place for casual Twitter users to

share affirmation or solidarity with white influencers and celebrities when they received backlash for appropriating beauty, fashion, or art by communities of color. From this, many active white supremacist users and groups would post memes, articles, and commentary using the #ItsOkToBeWhite hashtag with other, sometimes more overtly, white supremacist hashtags accompanying it, such as #AntiWhite, #WhiteGenocide, #EuropeanHeritage, #WhiteCulture #WhiteBeauty, or #EuropeanBeauty.

These hashtags would feature their own content and conversation, pulling informants into new ideas around white supremacy. #WhiteBeauty and #EuropeanBeauty seem innocuous enough, but much of the content that comes up from a simple query will show they are not just highlighting or sharing the beauty of white and European individuals. They focus primarily on white women and, in tweet commentary, affirm their supremacy to other non-white beauty ideals. A popular poster on this hashtag is @WhiteDateNet, a Twitter account for a dating platform for only white identified individuals. Their posts focus on #WhiteBeauty of women, promoting their platform and commenting or retweeting other users who use the hashtag.

#AntiWhite, #WhiteCulture, and #WhiteGenocide are the most overt of the hashtags observed. These usually accompanied other, less overt hashtags in large text blocks of hashtags. While none of the informants posted their own commentary with the hashtags, they did share tweets of other users, such as @wginfonetorg or “WHITE GENOCIDE INFO” with educational images and memes.

Figure 2: #WhiteGenocide Meme[107]

Figure 3: #WhiteGenocide Image[108]

[107] #WhiteGenocide Meme. Digital Image. Twitter. Accessed Sep. 11, 2018.
[108] #WhiteGenocide Image. Digital Image. Twitter. Accessed Sep. 11, 2018.

Political and Reactionary Hashtags

The most common hashtags I observed were those related to politics and the alt-right. The hashtags most frequently used by informants were #altright, #MAGA, and #LNYHBT. #MAGA is a hashtag representing "Make America Great Again" and showing support for President Trump. #LNYHBT is an acronym for "Let Not Your Heart Be Troubled" from John 14:1, a passage in the Bible and the hashtag commonly used to show support for conservative TV-personality Sean Hannity. The popularity of these hashtags coincided with the lead up to the 2016 U.S. Presidential Primary and General Elections and political moments post-Donald J. Trump's inauguration as the 45th president of the United States. #MAGA remains the most popular of these hashtags, used in four informants' profile names and bios on Twitter.

Additionally, informants engaged with hashtags reactionary to progressive movements or moments. As an example, #BlackGirlMagic is a hashtag celebrating black girls and women for their accomplishments, beauty, and culture, since mainstream culture does not. Crying reverse racism, some white Twitter users and white supremacist groups created and used the hashtag #WhiteGirlMagic to celebrate white girls' accomplishments, beauty, and culture. This hashtag is used at times to promote white supremacist memes or groups. Two other, more popular and polarizing, examples are #AllLivesMatter and #BlueLivesMatter. These two hashtags sprang from the vehement backlash of the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag and movement, which focuses on bringing public spotlight and finding justice for the killing of unarmed black individuals by police and the racism that exists within the United States. #AllLivesMatter, similar to #WhiteGirlMagic, sprang from an idea of reverse racism and defense of users' whiteness. #BlueLivesMatter was used to show support for police officers and specifically the white officers being called out by #BlackLivesMatter.

Six informants engaged with these hashtags, four of them regularly. The popularity of these hashtags coincided with political events, such as another killing of an unarmed black individual by police or a political debate. These hashtags were especially popular during the lead up to the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election.

Anti-Feminist and Gender Traditionalist Values Hashtags

All of the informants' early profile histories included posts celebrating traditional gender roles and rejecting feminism. The anti-feminist sentiment was an undercurrent across all informants and their radicalization pathways. Some common hashtags that promoted traditional values, gender roles, and anti-feminist ideologies were #TradLife and #TradWife.

#TradLife refers to living a "traditional life" — specifically falling back on traditional gender roles of men and women within a heterosexual marriage and nuclear family. #TradWife is a hashtag representing an identity, "traditional wives." These traditional wives share content related to traditionally accepted interests of women and wives — domestic work, marriage, and motherhood. However, #TradWife is also home to white supremacist ideologies of white women and white motherhood. A vast majority of images on both hashtags showcase white women and white heterosexual families. Whiteness and traditional gender roles go hand-in-hand with these hashtags. Some posts with #TradWife or #TradLife also include #WhiteMother and #WhiteSister, traditional terms used in organized white supremacy pre-Internet. The #WhiteMother hashtag has similar content to #TradWife, though more explicitly racist. #WhiteSister, while often included in large hashtag blocks with #TradWives, contains mostly benign content.

Additionally, four informants engaged with hashtags in support of Men's Rights Activists, a movement of men and their allies that believe men have lost their rights and privileges due to feminism. Men's Rights Activists (MRAs) subscribe to traditional gender roles and women's subjugation to men. MRAs generally refer to their awakening to the reality of men's victimization and women's privileges as taking "the red pill," a reference to *The Matrix*.[109] MRAs and anti-feminists often use #theredpill to share content, particularly memes, to awaken other men to this reality. Women also join these conversations as supporters of men. Within the hashtag and subsequent communities of MRAs, white supremacists leverage the idea of men losing their rights to compare it with the perceived struggle of all white people losing their rights. Or, the comparison is made to bait white men to believe the reason they are no longer getting white women is because of non-white men. Women seem susceptible to the same arguments in their defense or protection of white men.

Memes

Mashups of White Supremacist Iconography in Memes

Memes observed often included references to traditional white supremacist symbols and utilized new technologies, particularly meme creation sites and Adobe Photoshop, to create mashups of these symbols in one meme image. For those who do not know the specific, less overt, iconography, these images look like a rather random meme and not one that is dangerous. Users may retweet, share, comment, or like these for the image itself, rather than the ideology it condones.

[109] "Incels – Subcultures and Sociology." Accessed September 1, 2018. http://haenfler.sites.grinnell.edu/subcultures-and-scenes/incels/.

Figure 4: #ItsOkToBeWhite Meme[110]

In Figure 4, there are many white supremacist symbols, such as 14, 88, Hitler, Schwarze Sonne (sun symbol in the background), Taylor Swift, Titanic, and SS Volk. The symbols 14 and 88 have been described above. Hitler is obvious. SS Volk references the idea of "volk" or Aryan people. Schwarze Sonne is "synonymous with myriad far-right groups who traffic in neo-Nazi and/or neo-Volkisch ideologies. The symbol is based on the ancient sun wheel artifacts that were made and used by Norse and Germanic tribes as a symbol of their pagan beliefs."[111] Taylor Swift has been referenced as an example of a white woman victim and her image co-opted by white supremacist groups, and the Titanic sinking represents a loss of white life.[112] This particular

[110] #ItsOkToBeWhite Meme. Digital Image. Twitter. Accessed Mar. 16, 2018.
[111] "Flags and Other Symbols Used By Far-Right Groups in Charlottesville." Southern Poverty Law Center. Accessed September 1, 2018. https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/08/12/flags-and-other-symbols-used-far-right-groups-charlottesville.
[112] "ACLU Scolds Taylor Swift for Effort to Protect Reputation." Washington Post. Accessed September 1, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/11/07/aclu-scolds-taylor-swift-for-effort-to-protect-reputation/.

meme could be considered hilarious for its poor execution and shared as a joke. This leads to the image being shared more widely and more easily accessible to other users.

Recreations of White Women Tropes in Organized White Supremacy in Memes

Many white supremacist memes targeted to women and women's experiences recreate the four tropes about white women in organized white supremacy, women as Wife and Mother, Goddess and Victim, Female Activist, and Race Traitor. Often, these memes are presenting a particular moral, lifestyle, beauty, or dating ideal with a white supremacist bend. Much like the mashup memes, these memes can be considered innocuous by an average user. The Wife and Mother trope is especially popular in the form of #TradWife and #TradLife memes and content.

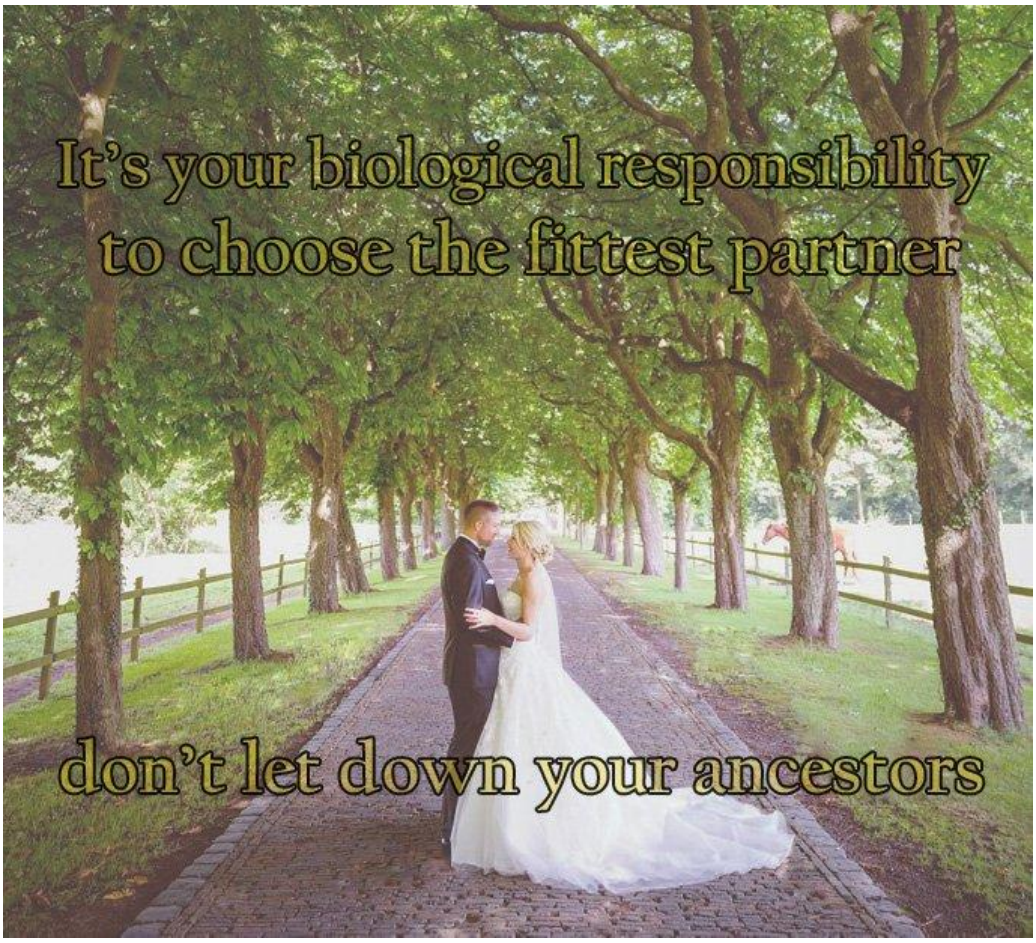

Figure 5: Wife and Mother Meme[113]

[113] Wife and Mother Meme 2. Digital Image. Twitter. Accessed Sep. 11, 2018.

Figure 6: Female Activist, Wife and Mother Meme[114]

Figure 7: Goddess and Victim Meme[115]

[114] Female Activist, Wife and Mother Meme. Digital Image. Twitter. Accessed Sep. 11, 2018.
[115] Goddess and Victim Meme 1. Digital Image. Twitter. Accessed Sep. 11, 2018.

Figure 8: Goddess and Victim Meme[116]

[116] Goddess and Victim Meme 2. Digital Image. Twitter. Accessed Sep. 11, 2018.

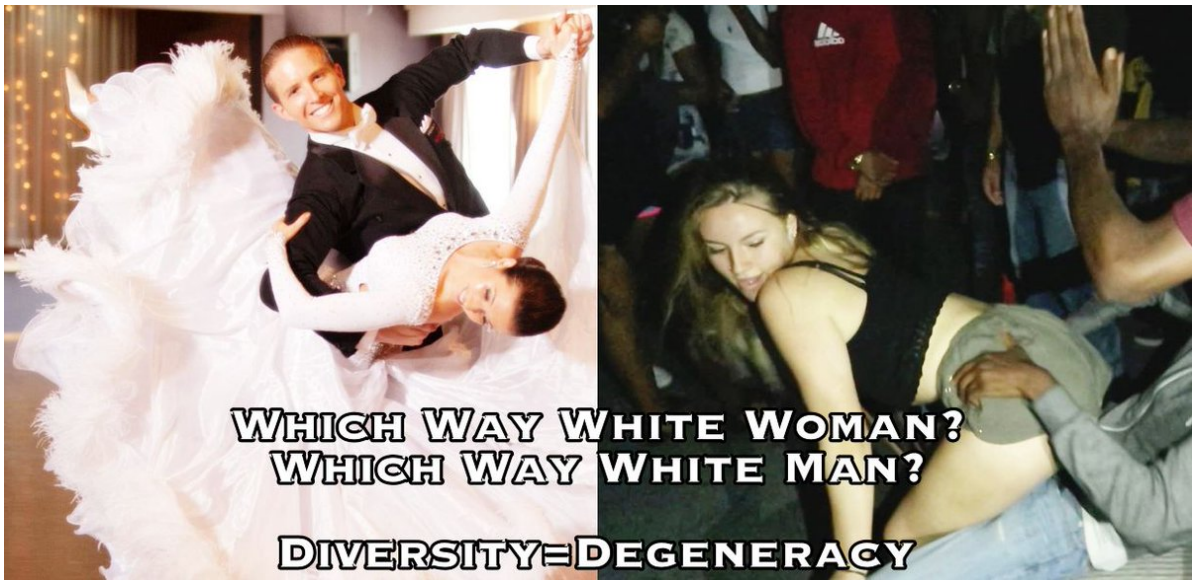

Figure 9: Race Traitor Meme[117]

[117] Race Traitor Meme 1. Digital Image. Twitter. Accessed Sep. 11, 2018.

Figure 10: Race Traitor Meme[118]

Popular Subreddits

Popular subreddits and communities focus on much of the same content shared through hashtags such as beauty, dating, and women's roles. The most active communities focus on anti-feminist or traditional values, such as r/TheRedPill, r/RedPillWives, and r/TradWives. r/TheRedPill is a popular sub-community for anti-feminists and Men's Rights Activists who wish to learn more about the degradation of men's rights and unfair advantages of women around dating, divorce, child custody, and finances. Other harmful communities, such as r/incel, sprang from this subreddit. r/incels stand for "involuntary celibates" or men who are unable to have sex with women due to the rise of feminism and women's refusal to grant men access to their bodies. r/incels was banned in 2017 due in part to its promotion of violence against women.[119]

r/RedPillWives is an interesting subcommunity. Much like women-only white supremacist groups, r/RedPillWives is a separate space for women to talk about their role within anti-feminism and Men's Rights Activism. The subreddit promotes #TradLife and #TradWife content, as well as discussion around women's roles within relationships, families, society, and marriage. The women on the subreddit go to each other for advice on how best to serve their husbands and boyfriends, fulfilling their duties as women as much as possible. Domestic work and parenting advice are also widely popular. Two informants posted content from r/RedPillWives. There are also subreddits that focus on white female beauty, r/WhiteBeauty

[118] Race Traitor Meme 2. Digital Image. Twitter. Accessed Sep. 11, 2018.
[119] "Reddit Bans 'Incel' Group for Inciting Violence Against Women - The New York Times." Accessed September 12, 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/09/technology/incels-reddit-banned.html.

being the most prominent. These beauty subreddits generally feature images with some discussion in the comments of each post.

General white supremacist subreddits remained the most popular communities Twitter users linked to as a way of encouraging other users to learn more through safe discussion off Twitter. These subreddits included r/HBD, r/LiberalDegeneracy, r/NorthwestFront, r/WhiteNationalism, r/White_Pride, r/ZOG, r/Odalism, and r/WhiteBeauty. Some of these subreddits have been quarantined, put behind a warning wall and posts unable to reach r/all, by reddit. Another popular white supremacist, subreddit r/WhiteRights, was banned during the course of this study due to violations of the reddit content policies.

Influential YouTubers

YouTube is generally used as an education tool for the observed radicalization process, giving white supremacist influencers a place to broadcast their message. Often conversations from hashtags like #TradWife or #ItsOkToBeWhite are augmented with videos by a YouTuber corroborating the user's belief. I focused on white supremacist women influencers, and while there are active white supremacist news channels and male influencers with more followers than these women, I observed informants engaging in more conversation around a video by white supremacist women YouTubers due to the YouTuber's use of a personal narrative and a similar identity to prove their point.

Four of the five influential white supremacist women YouTubers identified as #TradWives. These YouTubers leveraged their personal stories and traumas to rationalize and create empathy for their anti-feminist and white supremacist ideologies. They covered topics such as dating, cooking, housekeeping, childbearing and raising, marriage advice, and grocery tips, as well as the scourge of feminism, black on white crime, #AllLivesMatter, dating white

men, and white genocide. These women carry the image of a friendly, young mother and disseminate hate rhetoric with a smile and their children on screen.

One YouTuber with over 10,000 followers released a series of videos sharing her personal transformation into a #TradWife and white supremacist. She spoke about her childhood and experiences of personal trauma, experiencing isolation and bullying at school and financial hardship with her family. She, in retrospect, creates a link between this and the rise of feminism and the degradation of white peoples' rights in the United States. She only found herself, identity, and community when she returned to traditional gender roles and did not subscribe to the "hypocrisy and downfall of feminism." This #TradWife creator also connected her marriage and motherhood to a renewed sense of purpose, including speaking for and protecting the white race's future for the sake of her children.

She features her children in her videos, even during moments when she states overtly white supremacist statements. Aesthetically, she seems like a normal, young mother with kids she cares for. This aesthetic makes her much more palatable to the mainstream and curious white women looking for more information about traditional gender values or mothering. The powerfully friendly image of these white supremacists, #TradWife women, perceived as fragile, yet strong when protecting their family, is dangerously palatable to mainstream users.

Section IV: Radicalization Pathways to Organized White Supremacy

Platform Use Patterns in Radicalization

From these popular hashtags and patterns of engagement, I have observed four pathways through which white women are radicalized to organized white supremacy through YouTube, reddit, and Twitter. Much of the radicalization I observed started and/or took place openly on

Twitter, where users searched for conversation around a particular topic and shared their candid opinions frequently. White supremacist recruiters would then use YouTube for education, sharing videos that corroborate a viewpoint or lesson they want to instill or use to educate a potential new convert. reddit was finally used to organize and host deeper discussions. The general flow used by informants was thus Twitter as an entry point, YouTube as a teaching tool, and reddit as a more organized congregation space.

Radicalization Pathways

Anti-Feminists and the Red Pill Pathway

Two of the ten informants flowed through a pathway centered on anti-feminism. These women, from their user history, were showing anti-feminist sentiment with posts and shares referring to the feminist movement as man-hating or cancerous. Their entry point into radicalization to organized white supremacy was a then-current feminist pop culture moment. These moments include a celebrity, such as Beyoncé or Taylor Swift, identifying as a feminist publicly in their music, in the press, or at a concert, a current debate around women's reproductive rights, or, in the case of one informant, in response to the #MeToo movement. The #MeToo movement is an organic storytelling and accountability campaign predominantly centering on the stories of women who experienced sexual harassment or assault by powerful men. The movement started as a backlash to harassment and assault faced by women in Hollywood by movie producer Harvey Weinstein and became a larger storytelling opportunity for thousands of women through the #MeToo hashtag on Twitter, Facebook, and other social media platforms.

Informants proceeded to post criticism of the feminist pop culture moment by sharing counter-argument articles, tweets, and comments on Twitter. One informant posted a rebuke of women, stating they would not be sexually harassed or assaulted if they had adhered to traditional roles and expectations of women, rather than wearing provocative clothes and having sex freely. Both informants used their personal narratives as women, countering the idea the feminist movement speaks for all women. Informants posted about their feelings of being a woman, disagreements with feminism, and frustration with feminists. From these public posts of personal storytelling, informants received validating likes, comments, retweets, and engagement from other users, including other anti-feminist women who self-identified as Trad Wives and Men's Rights Activists. These opportunities for conversation and dialogue allowed informants to learn about new language, hashtags, and sub-communities around anti-feminist ideals. Informants started liking, retweeting, and commenting on posts that included new hashtags, such as #TradWife or #TheRedPill.

Informants were linked to communities off Twitter, such as r/theredpill and r/redpillwives. Within these communities and conversations, informants were introduced to racialized, anti-feminist content by shared articles, posts, and comments on their posts or other posts. This content included similar tropes around women and white supremacy, such as white women having an obligation to have white children, men of color being rapists and stealing white women, white women as race traitors, and whiteness as the pinnacle of beauty. Traditional gender roles are augmented with racist ideologies. Over the course of two years, informants increased their engagement with white supremacist users and content within the anti-feminist community. Both informants overtly stated their agreement with white supremacist ideologies by

sharing content from prominent white supremacist groups' Twitter accounts with comments agreeing with or defending the content.

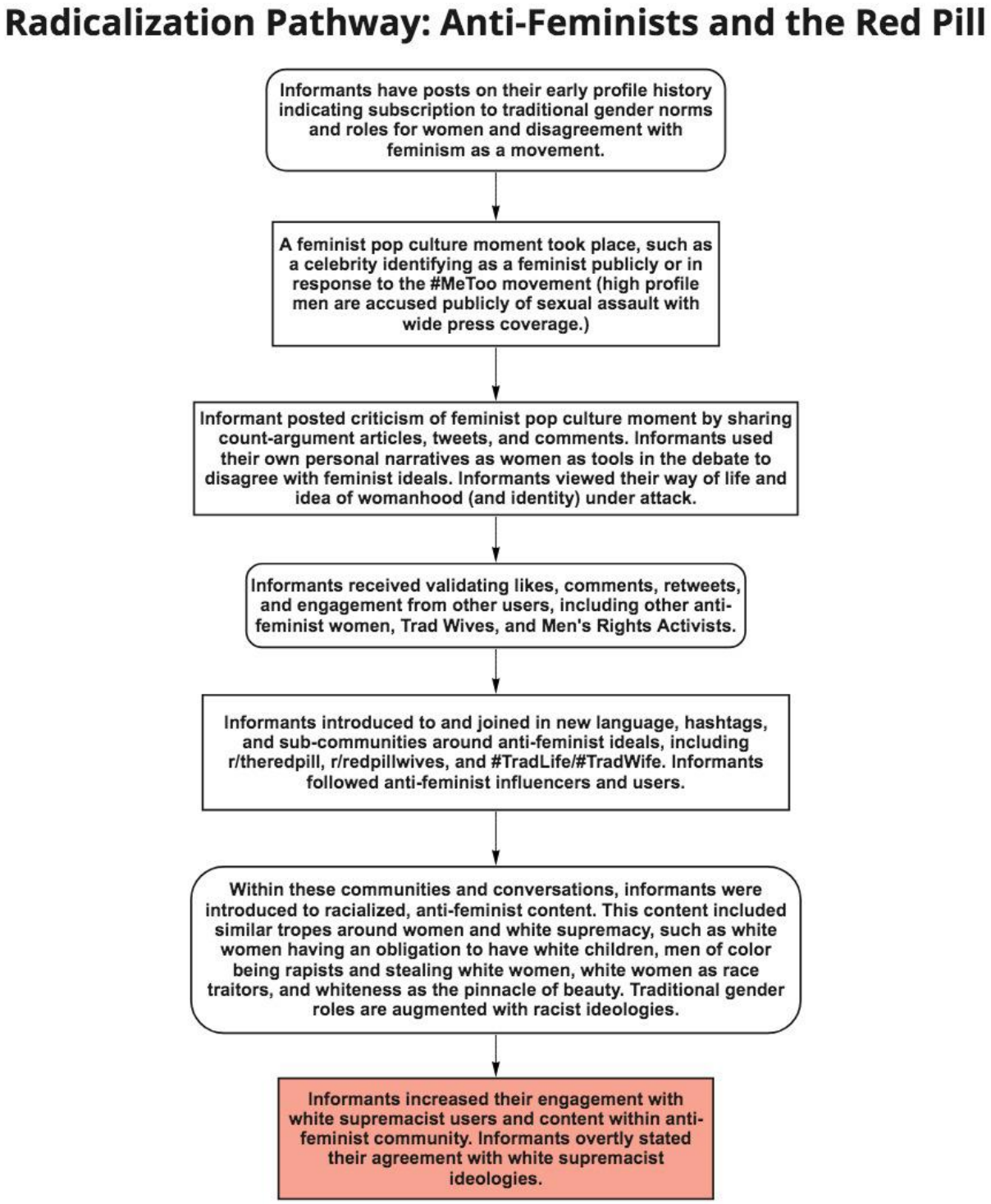

Chart 1: Radicalization Pathway – Anti-Feminists and the Red Pill

Beauty and Whiteness Pathway

Another popular radicalization pathway is through the beauty community and beauty-related content online. Beauty tutorials, subreddits, videos, and hashtags are more popular than ever with people of all genders.[120] Two informants started their journey into organized white supremacy through their interest in beauty. Their journeys followed a pattern starting with two potential catalytic moments: the rise in popularity of hashtags and movements celebrating the beauty of non-white traits, such as #BlackGirlMagic or #BlackBeauty, or a white beauty creator or celebrity receiving backlash for appropriating black culture or Columbusing a black beauty trend. Columbusing refers to the act of a white person or community "discovering" parts of non-white culture, a specific beauty trend, cuisine, etc., and popularizing it through their privilege.[121]

From the potential catalytic moment around non-white beauty, the informant felt intentionally excluded and a victim of reverse racism. Informants respond to #BlackGirlMagic hashtags with engagement with reactionary hashtags like #WhiteBeauty or #WhiteGirlMagic. From the second moment featuring appropriation or Columbusing, the informant posted in solidarity or defense of the white creator or celebrity. In the process, the informant stumbled upon and engaged in white beauty hashtags, like #ItsOkToBeWhite, and retweeted content on the hashtag. Both informants continued along this pathway with similar patterns of interaction. Both informants received likes, retweets, and comments from overt and subtle white supremacist users validating their views. White supremacist users pushed the informants to consider that

[120] Brodie Lancaster. "Glam or Sham: How the Big Brands Cash in on YouTube's Beauty Vloggers." *The Guardian*, March 7, 2018, sec. Fashion. https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2018/mar/08/glam-or-sham-are-youtubes-beauty-vloggers-selling-out.

[121] "'Columbusing': The Art Of Discovering Something That Is Not New." NPR.org. Accessed October 31, 2018. https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2014/07/06/328466757/columbusing-the-art-of-discovering-something-that-is-not-new.

white beauty is under attack. These white supremacist users further pushed that hashtags like #BlackGirlMagic are part of a bigger conspiracy against white people by people of color.

Informants found affirmation of their white identity by these white supremacist users. Informants increasingly retweeted racialized content and tweeted white supremacist-sympathetic ideas. Other white supremacist users continued to cultivate a relationship with these informants by sending them YouTube videos about white genocide conspiracies and offered them online spaces for deeper engagement, such as r/WhiteBeauty or r/RedPillWives. Over the course of three years, both informants increased their engagement with white supremacist users and content. Informants overtly stated their agreement with white supremacist ideologies, particularly white supremacy as it related to beauty and aesthetics, through tweets on #ItsOkToBeWhite and in response to posts by white supremacist groups.

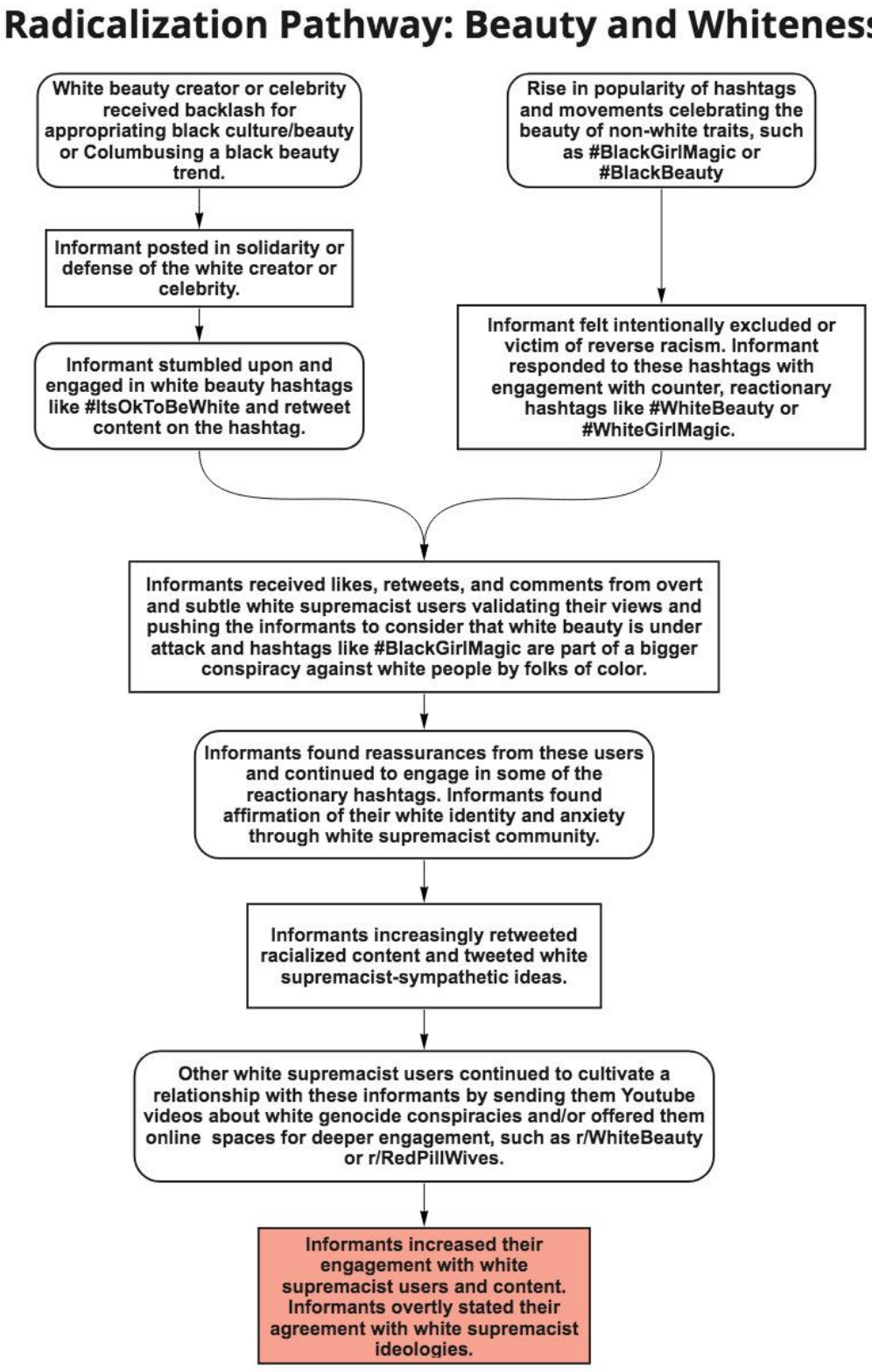

Chart 2: Radicalization Pathway – Beauty and Whiteness

Politics and the Alt-Right Pathway

Four informants traversed the pathway centered on politics. This pathway showed the politicizing power of the 2016 U.S. President Election and the alt-right as gateways to organized white supremacy. Specifically, there were two entry points: the 2016 election with support for presidential candidate Trump and anxiety around anti-racist movements like #BlackLivesMatter. For the first entry point, informants posted about their distrust of President Obama, Hillary Clinton, and the current political system. Most of this content were conservative-leaning posts during Obama's presidency starting in 2012 and leading up to the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election. They posted their support for Donald J. Trump as a presidential candidate in the lead up to the primary and general U.S. Presidential elections in 2016, using posts, videos, memes, and hashtags. Specifically, informants engaged with the #MAGA hashtag, the unofficial hashtag of presidential candidate Trump. The alt-right was active during this period, building support online for Trump and creating sub-communities, such as r/The_Donald, to coordinate organizing efforts.

For the second entry point, #BlackLivesMatter and similar hashtags gained attention nationwide with popularity spiking after the most recent killing of an unarmed black individual. Informants posted in defense of and solidarity with police officers through #AllLivesMatter or #BlueLivesMatter hashtags. Similar to the Beauty and Whiteness pathway, both entry points began to converge to similar patterns of liking, retweeting, and validating the informant's posts. Informants received validating likes, retweets, and supportive comments from alt-right and white supremacist users for posting pro-Trump, anti-Hillary, #AllLivesMatter, #BlueLivesMatter, and similar content. Informants followed alt-right users and continued to engage them in

conversation, being introduced to hashtags around whiteness, such as #ItsOkToBeWhite, #WhiteGenocide, and #UniteTheRight.

Alt-right users shared alt-right YouTube videos for informants to learn more about their political ideology. Informants are introduced to subreddits, like r/WhiteNationalism, and popular white supremacist forums, such as Stormfront.org, to ask questions about their white identity. Informants are steadily politicized by alt-right content pulling on their sense of white anxiety around losing their privileges and fear that people of color are threatening their way of life. Informants increased their engagement with white supremacist users and content through alt-right participation. Informants overtly stated their agreement with white supremacist ideologies, and two informants formerly identified themselves as white supremacists and involved in formal white supremacist organizations.

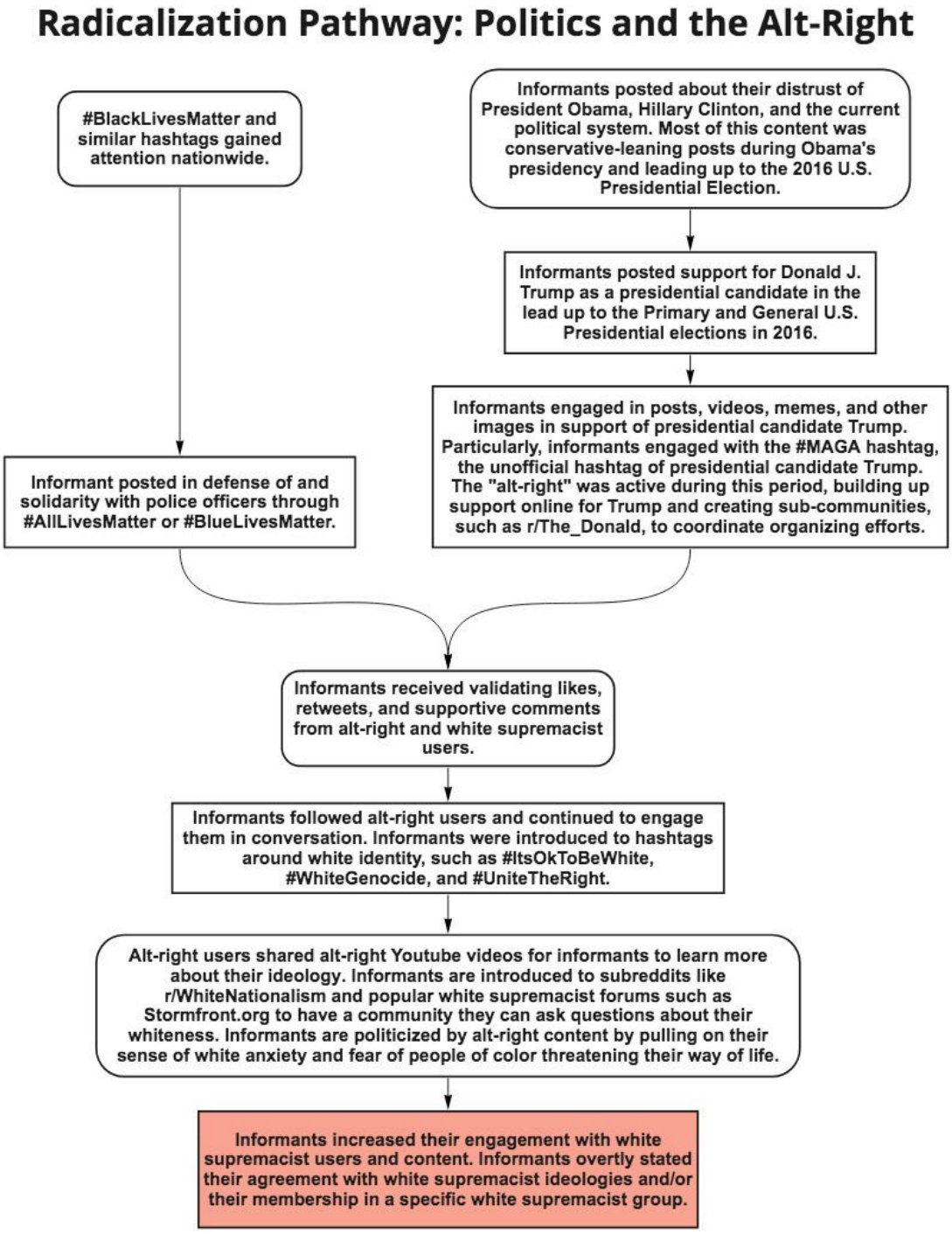

Chart 3: Radicalization Pathway – Politics and the Alt-Right

Heterosexual Dating and Trad Wives Pathway

Two informants started their radicalization through an interest in traditionalist gender values and heterosexual dating. Much like the anti-feminist pathway, both informants have content on their early profile histories indicating beliefs in traditional gender roles for women and heteronormative views on dating. Informants posted content on dating, cooking, beauty, motherhood, and other feminine-coded activities. This content included BuzzFeed Tasty videos, links to dating advice columns, and beauty tutorials. Informants stumbled upon and shared content by users who identify as Trad Wives. Trad Wives engage regularly in content about feminine-coded activities and follow non-Trad Wife women as well. Informants discovered the hashtags #TradLife and #TradWife. Informants explored, liked, commented, retweeted, followed and generally engaged with #TradWife and #TradLife hashtags, users, and sub-communities. This includes following #TradWife influencers on YouTube and Twitter and #TradLife-leaning subreddits, like r/RedPillWives.

Informants identified and felt community with other #TradWife/#TradLife women by using the hashtag as a self-identifier in their profiles or posts. Informants continued to share content and follow influencers. Some notable #TradWife influencers are also open white supremacists or share white supremacist ideas in their content, notably on YouTube. Informants slowly engaged with this white supremacist content that racialized traditional values on womanhood. Informants shared more racialized #TradWife/#TradLife content and overtly white supremacist content within the #TradLife/#TradWife community. Informants overtly stated their agreement with white supremacist ideologies, noting the importance of protecting their white children and families from the danger of multiculturalism.

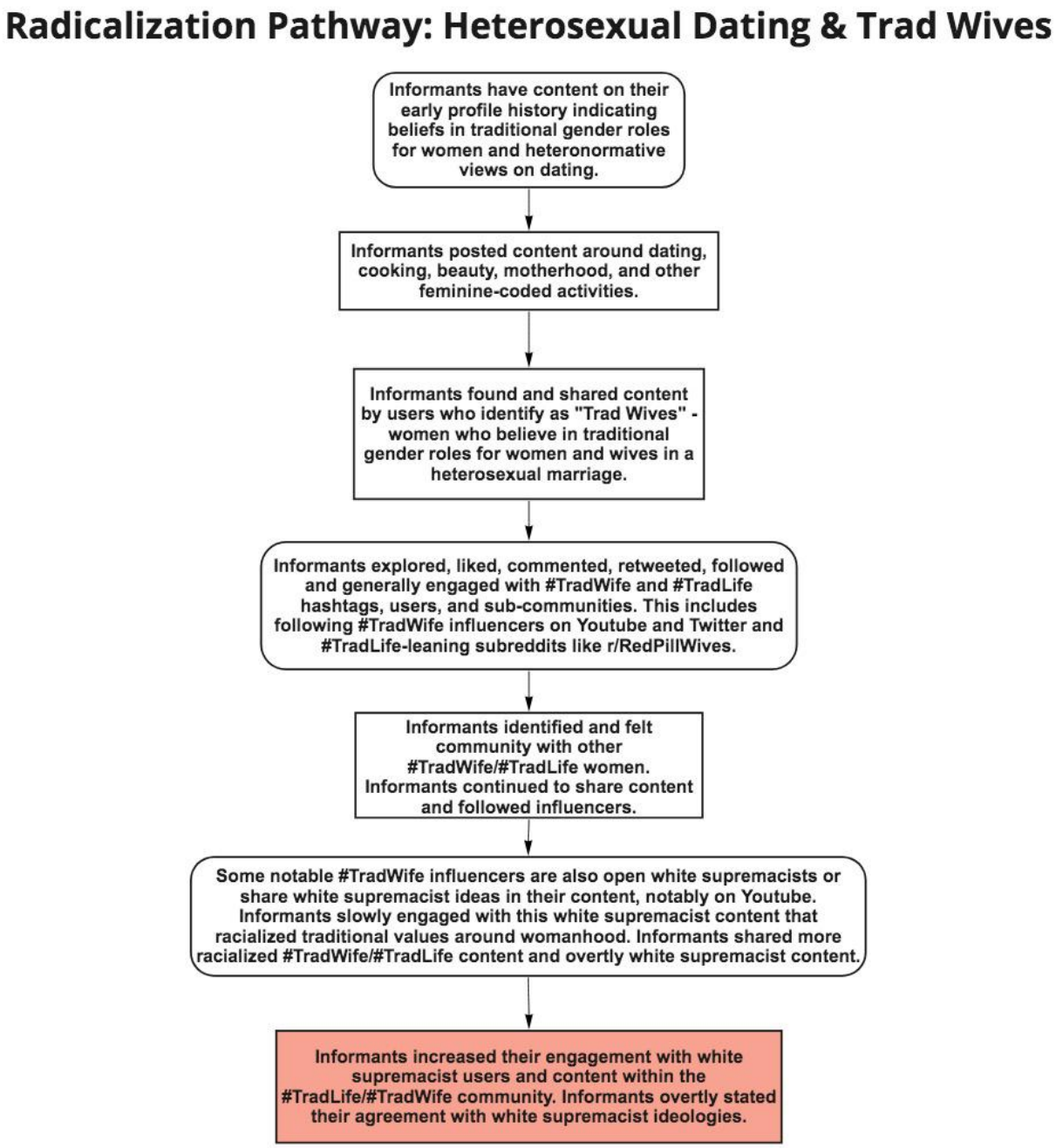

Chart 4: Radicalization Pathway – Heterosexual Dating and Trad Wives

Section V: Conclusion

Since the Internet became mainstream in the 1990s, white supremacist groups have used it as a tool to spread their message, recruit, and radicalize individuals. However, over the past two decades, their methods have expanded to include the use of social media platforms, including YouTube, reddit, and Twitter. These platforms and their features, namely recommendation algorithms, have been exploited by white supremacist users and groups looking to recruit white women to their violent ideology. These women did not initially go online to find white supremacy. Rather, they began looking to build a community around their hobbies, interests, and beliefs. In pursuit of like-minded individuals, these women searched Twitter, reddit, and YouTube. Among those individuals, they found many white supremacists. These white supremacists leveraged their shared interests to radicalize these women to their worldview. These shared interests were key radicalization levers for white supremacist users to engage with random white women users. People who could bond over shared values around beauty and family could also find common ground in white supremacy.

This social media-based approach worked. This study found white women were radicalized online to organized white supremacy by engaging with posts and joining communities focusing on beauty, anti-feminism or "The Red Pill," traditionalist gender values or #TradLives, and alt-right politics. These women were slowly introduced to racialized perspectives of each topic and were frequently drawn to these communities after a specific pop cultural or news-related event. White supremacists recruiting users consistently leveraged gendered recruitment tactics: focusing on traditionally "feminine" hobbies, interests, and duties – such as marriage, dating, beauty, and motherhood – to reach women. White supremacist groups and users racialized these topics, in part appealing to the informants' sense of anxiety around

their white identity in a culture that is becoming more ethnically diverse and socially vocal around racism in overt and subtle ways. White supremacist users exploited their fear, anxiety, and guilt, creating a narrative where white women could find comfort by blaming non-white communities for the social issues they were facing. White supremacist users leveraged platform features – liking, sharing, commenting – to validate informants' fears, build community, and share white supremacist educational content – usually memes or videos – to radicalize informants slowly.

All informants subscribed to traditional gender roles — gender roles that relegate women to a decisively lower social status than men. However, they never dwelled on this ironic loss of power. Instead, these women felt victimized because of their whiteness and aspired to regain their racial power, while compartmentalizing the hyper-masculinity and patriarchy in organized white supremacy. White supremacist women felt they were provided power by positioning themselves beside white men and projecting their anger, fear, and trauma onto non-white communities. White supremacist women often used their personal narratives of trauma to justify their racist beliefs, citing experiences of reverse racism and violence by people of color as catalytic moments. This storytelling was then used to recruit other women. Empathy became a tool for radicalization. That empathy is especially powerful for white women as white women are afforded less suspicion and viewed as less violent in their participation in organized white supremacy due to their femininity. #TradWives and their perfumed brand of white supremacy are terrifyingly palpable for mainstream users due to their innocent, motherly, and young aesthetics.

The use of gendered recruitment tactics in organized white supremacy is not new, and the use of these tactics has been studied previously. However, the use of gendered tactics on new mediums – the Internet and user-generated social media platforms – has not. This study

addresses that gap. It also shows how contemporary media tools, specifically online social media platforms, have been weaponized by providing access to abundantly larger groups of people unbounded by geographical region to facilitate and potentially accelerate the radicalization of white women to organized white supremacy. Particularly, the way in which recommendation algorithms can curate a user's experience to introduce users to even more reactionary material and create an echo chamber for white supremacist content is troubling. Simply put, this feature makes it easier for white supremacist users to recruit. However, while these platforms help facilitate radicalization, they are not the sole factor in the radicalization process. Informants faced experiences offline, including trauma, loneliness, self-esteem issues, economic inequality, and anxiety for the future, which primed them to adopt white supremacist ideology and community.

There are limitations to this study. Unfortunately, this study's sample size is too small to provide conclusive results. I was unable to conduct interviews with women who were radicalized to organized white supremacy primarily through the Internet. Any requests for interviews were either ignored or denied. And, the findings on the recommendation algorithms' effect were only through my observation and anecdotal commentary by interviewees. Important next steps in continuing this research would include a larger informant pool, who could be interviewed to gain a deeper insight in their motivations, their defined narrative arc into organized white supremacy, and if platform recommendation features facilitate new learnings or introductions.

Radicalization to organized white supremacy is a subtle, slow process with many factors. And while responsibility for radicalization cannot be fully levied on social media platforms, they still have culpability in this process. YouTube, reddit, and Twitter were built fast and grew fast, with little foresight for how their features may be exploited. These platforms took entirely too

long to address issues of hate speech, violence, and harassment at scale, creating and reinforcing a culture in which white supremacist ideology and groups thrived. Moreover, given the rapid increase of users and the amount of content each produces, it is both understandable and necessary that these platforms chose to utilize algorithms to curate content. However, the way algorithms have now been shown to weigh particularly inflammatory content, including white supremacist content, is dangerous and can contribute to the radicalization of a user to an extremist view.

Despite these radicalization processes, there is an opportunity to leverage the Internet and these platforms to prevent radicalization or de-radicalize current extremists. YouTube, reddit, and Twitter are responding with more holistic approaches to anti-abuse strategies on their platforms to prevent harassment campaigns, misinformation, and the spread of hate speech. From embedding Trust & Safety team members in product development teams to responding proactively to abuse through machine learning, platforms continue to iterate on ways to protect their users from misinformation and violence. And they must continue.

White women have been historically viewed as supporting characters in the work of organized white supremacy. However, white women are free agents in organized white supremacy, not just accomplices, wives, and girlfriends. White women are participants and leaders within these groups, and their experience – from recruitment to participation – is shaped by their gender. These women hold dual roles as oppressors in their exercise of white supremacy and being oppressed within the patriarchal nature of organized white supremacy. How can we hold both realities of these women to be true, affording them empathy and accountability to break their radicalization pathways?

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