

How the Rhetoric of Women in the Alt-Right Broadens the Movement's Appeal*

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Abstract

What role do women play in social and political movements? In male-dominated movements where women's leadership is contested, do women gain authority because they are more effective mobilizers? We investigate these questions in the case of the white nationalist social movement known as the alt-right. Using a topic model that combines text and image content, we analyze 12,000 YouTube videos by prominent figures in the alt-right movement to describe the differences between the content women and men produce, and the reactions that content provokes. We find that the women create more racist and sexist content than the men in our sample, and that women's videos prompt more viewer engagement than men's videos, and provoke more racist and sexist language in the viewer comments. We conclude that women can gain authority in male-dominated social movements by expanding the movement's reach while spreading its most extreme ideas.

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1 Introduction

Ayla Stewart, a “mommy blogger” promoting a “wholesome, uplifting space for the promotion of traditional Christian living”¹ struck some observers as a surprising spokesperson for the White Nationalist movement when she was scheduled to speak at the now infamous 2017 “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville. The speeches never happened because the rally turned violent, but she stood out as a woman on a list of men like Richard Spencer and Chris Cantrell known for aggressively stating white supremacist views.

Irma Hinojosa similarly stood out as she spoke on steps of the Lincoln Memorial two months before at a “Free Speech Rally,” visibly contrasting with the row of male speakers standing behind her.² Speeches warning of “White genocide”³ and crowds chanting “you will not replace us”⁴ made the intent of the rally clear.

These and other high-profile appearances sparked a flurry of journalistic interest in women in the alt-right⁵ (Kitchener, 2017; Gordon, 2018; Darby, 2020), but these important descriptions rely on interviews and evidence from just a few key figures. Academic scholarship has explored the roles of women in earlier white supremacist movements (Blee, 1991, 2002), and in other social movements with patriarchal gender norms (Ben-Shitrit, 2015; Mahmood, 2011). However, with a few exceptions (Latif et al., 2020; Squire, 2019), scholars have not yet analyzed the role of women in the alt-right. Recent experiments show that women can “pinkwash” far-right ideas to make them more palatable (Ben-Shitrit, Elad-Strenger and Hirsch-Hoefler, 2021), but survey responses in a general population experiment might not match real-life behavior of far right audiences for a variety of reasons.

We examine how female leaders of the alt-right support the movement through a systematic analysis of 12,000 YouTube videos produced 29 alt-right activists, 11 women and 18 men, who position themselves as spokespersons for the alt-right. YouTube videos were a primary platform for many alt-right movement leaders until YouTube began large-scale removal of alt-right content in 2019 (Munger and Phillips, 2022). While alt-right figures spread content through many formats and social media platforms, these videos were the core of their content, and the purpose of most other social media outreach was to point viewers to their YouTube channels. An analysis without video content is likely to miss important aspects of how alt-right

¹From the About section of Stewart’s blog captured on July 2017, prior to the Unite the Right rally. <https://web.archive.org/web/20170702233158/https://wifewithapurpose.com/about/>, accessed 1/24/2024.

²<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F0JclPYUJIY&t=72s>.

³<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y4td5K4i91E>, minute 20:05.

⁴<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y4td5K4i91E>, minute 15:00.

⁵Short for “alternative right;” coined by Richard Spencer.

women present themselves. The data we obtained are now impossible to collect because of censorship, so we believe our video repository will be valuable for the research community.

Prior scholarship offers divergent predictions for what we expect to find. On one hand, a substantial amount of scholarship suggests that women adopt complementary roles to men in patriarchal social movements, both prior white nationalist movements (Blee, 2008) and others (Ben-Shitrit, 2015). If women in the alt-right behave as predicted by this strand of scholarship, then we expect to see women complementing men with rhetoric that is gentler, less focused on the most extreme views of the movement, and more focused on modeling the “ideal woman.” This aligns with the “pinkwashing” argument: women are more compelling advocates for the white nationalist movement because their rhetoric is less overtly threatening. We investigate the alternative possibility that women use more extreme rhetoric than men. We argue that despite the misogyny of the movement, women find receptive audiences among those who want women to validate their misogynist and racist views. Women with who also have other minority identities can paradoxically find even more acceptance and influence, as long as their rhetoric is extreme.

We examine our corpus of alt-right YouTube videos by adapting a structural topic model to incorporate the text, audio, and images of video. Our results show that women in the alt-right have a distinctive visual presentation that could be described as “pinkwashing” white nationalism, but their rhetorical presentation is more aggressive: women devote more of their rhetoric than men to the movement’s most controversial stances about race and gender. We estimate the impact of women’s rhetoric using comments, views, and measures of engagement and find that women’s videos garnered more racist and sexist comments than men’s videos. These comments are driven by the content of women’s videos rather than variation in the portrayal of gender in women’s videos, contrary to what we expected from earlier findings on pinkwashing (Ben-Shitrit, Elad-Strenger and Hirsch-Hoefler, 2021). Our qualitative examination of videos and comments shows how these women gain acceptance and influence followers by emphasizing the contrast between their intersectional identities, and the implications of their extreme rhetoric.

To complement our observational analysis, we also conducted a survey experiment mimicking the comment section of YouTube. In this survey experiment, on a different population, we find no evidence that readers find racist statements less objectionable when they are made by women, again suggesting that pinkwashing effects are small, if they exist.

Our findings suggest that the pinkwashing effect of women leaders in the alt-right is perhaps overstated. While women may frame racist content in a more palatable light, their leadership does not moderate the

movement's bigoted rhetoric. Instead, we show that women gain influence by doubling down on the core racist ideas of the movement. They may be especially effective at activating racist sentiments among their audience. Beyond the White Nationalist movement, our research adds to a growing body of scholarship about which frames help social movements gain societal traction (Bonilla and Tillery, 2020; Benford and Snow, 2000).

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section considers the roles of women in social and political movements, focusing on questions of how women gain authority in movements and what impacts they have as authorities. We then argue that women are effective framers and mobilizers for social movements because they reach new audiences and communicate different messages than men. This has already been appreciated to some extent in the literature on the alt-right movement which we review here, but at the moment, we find significant disagreement about whether women “pinkwash” the movement's most extreme ideas by “softening” their rhetoric to emphasize themes of femininity and family or by aggressively doubling down. We introduce our data from 12,000 YouTube videos, the 7.8 million comments we collect in reaction to them, and our approach to analyzing them. We present findings from these data suggesting that women emphasize racist and sexist content more than men in their videos, and that this in turn increases racist and sexist reactions by viewers. The primary mechanism seems to be women's video content, rather than an independent effect of viewer perceptions of gender, though this is admittedly hard to disentangle with observational data. We turn briefly to an experimental analysis that suggests that in our subject pool, alt-right statements are viewed as just as offensive when stated by women as men. We conclude with implications and lines for future research.

2 Women in social and political movements

Scholars recognize the need to understand the role of gender – and its intersection with race, ethnicity, and class – on the collective identities and tactics deployed in social movements (Hurwitz and Taylor, 2012). Taylor (1999) argues for more thoroughly considering gender as a set of cultural beliefs that interact with aspects of social movements. Of course, no universal culture of women exists, but considering a subgroup's culture as a type of “toolkit” has become an important conceptual idea for understanding the habits, skills, and styles to strategically accomplish social change (Swidler, 1986). Historically, women have drawn collectively on such toolkits of women's culture to advance both feminist and anti-feminist agendas (Klatch,

2002).

The visible leadership of social and political movements has often been overwhelmingly male. Nonetheless, women emerge as leaders in various male-dominated movements, including those in which the status of women as leaders is contested; women have gained leadership authority in terrorist, violent combatant, and far-right extremist groups. As a result, scholars have sought to understand both 1) how women gain authority in male-dominated movements, and 2) the effects of women in leadership positions.

How do women gain authority?

In settings where patriarchal practices and attitudes remain prevalent, Morris and Staggenborg (2004) argue that women must gain leadership authority through their complementary relationships with men. The literature on conservative social movements highlights examples of this complementarity. Ben-Shitrit (2015) shows that women frame their contentious activism in ways that appear not to challenge the gender norms of those social movements. Women often justify their activism by emphasizing traits perceived as motherly, and by deploying “frames of exception” to make activism temporally bounded.

One strand of research has focused on women entering American politics as members of congress lean into their feminine identity and differentiate themselves from men. Shogan (2001) shows that women in congress are uniformly more likely to mention women than male members of congress, though the contexts are quite different depending on political party. Walsh (2002) argues that “women are transforming Congress by contributing perspectives that their male colleagues are not“ (370), through distinctive rhetoric that calls on their experiences as women. “Any legislator can talk about the effect of welfare reform on mothers, but only a woman who has herself been a mother on welfare can represent that point of view directly” (373). Osborn and Mendez (2010) finds that female members of congress devote more of their floor speeches to issues that particularly concern women, and Gulati (2004) finds that women in congress in the US are more likely than men to portray themselves as outsiders in the photographs on their websites, though this varies by political party. Suggesting that such complementarity is effective at helping women enter male dominated politics, Herrnson, Lay and Stokes (2003) show that women who run “as women” — emphasizing issues like health care and child care — gain a strategic advantage with potential voters. Outside of the US context, Hargrave and Langengen (2020) show that women House of Commons representatives “evidence arguments with personal experience, discuss policies in a concrete way, and are less adversarial than men.“

A contrasting vein of scholarship argues that women in politics face strong incentives *not* to differentiate

themselves as women, but rather to adapt to the norms of the institutions they are entering. A long line of research argues that US members of congress must adhere to the rhetorical norms of the body in order to successfully get things done (Matthews, 1959). Contrary to Gulati (2004), Niven and Zilber (2001) finds no important difference in the way female members of congress represent themselves in images online. Grimmer (2013), which is perhaps the most exhaustive work to date on Congressmembers' representational style, apparently finds no notable gender differences in the online representational styles of US members of congress. The incentives women have to act in "masculine" ways come from the severe challenges women face to be taken seriously as authorities in political spaces previously dominated by men. Wang, Merolla and Manganiello (2023) find that among women running for office in 2018, those who highlight more masculine traits are perceived to be more competent and than women who highlight more feminine traits. Kathlene (1994) finds that "as the proportion of women increases in a legislative body, men become more verbally aggressive and controlling" in twelve state legislatures for which she examines hearings. (Mattei, 1998) finds that women offering expert testimony to Congress use "what is defined as masculine language to compete within a male-dominated institution," but still struggle to have impact because they are given less time and face more resistance than their male colleagues.

Role congruity theory (Eagly and Karau, 2002) explains these challenges: women face prejudice when they are considered for leadership because the female gender role is incongruous with traits people associate with leadership when prior leaders have been male. Women feel a need to play up their masculine qualities to get ahead, earning nick-names like "Iron Lady" (i.e., Golda Meir and Margaret Thatcher). Although women are often assumed to be peacemakers in international affairs, empirical studies find that female heads of state are more likely to escalate conflict than their male counterparts (Caprioli and Boyer, 2001; Koch and Fulton, 2011), perhaps to demonstrate their credentials as leaders on the international stage (Powell and Mukazhanova-Powell, 2019; Schwartz and Blair, 2020) and signal toughness and competence (Schramm and Stark, 2020).

What are the effects of women gaining authority?

In addition to how women gain authority, scholarship has investigated the effects of women in positions of authority. Understanding these effects can offer insight into why women might gain authority in patriarchal movements – for instance, if women are able to reach broader audiences, or are effective mobilizers.

One common explanation for involving women in political or social movement leadership is that women

reach unique audiences. Diverse leadership teams are able to address a broad range of problems for social movements Ganz (2000), and Morris and Staggenborg (2004) suggest that the most effective leaders will appeal to heterogeneous support groups. A recent meta-analysis of candidate choice experiments suggests that women tend to prefer women candidates, though both men and women tend to view women candidates favorably (Schwarz and Coppock, 2022). Among radical right populist parties in Europe, empirical evidence suggests that far-right parties who increase the proportion of women MPs employ a form of “strategic descriptive representation” aimed at increasing voter support among women (Weeks et al., 2022).

Women in leadership positions can influence public perceptions to advance a movement’s goals. Women in office may be more responsive to constituents (Richardson and Freeman, 1995), and scholars of international relations have documented that gender stereotypes affect leaders’ abilities to generate audience costs, with women’s threats viewed as more credible during international military crises (Schwartz and Blair, 2020). Manekin and Wood (2020) find that women combatants not only encourage positive narratives about armed rebel groups, but can improve audience perceptions of rebel groups legitimacy which increases transnational support for rebel movement efforts. Marks and Chenoweth (Forthcoming) argue that movements with women on the front lines are more threatening to autocracies. Robnett (2000) documents the significant contributions of African American women as active, mobilizing participants in the civil rights movement. And women leaders can amplify other women’s voices in politics, for example when female ministers help other female MPs speak up in debates (Blumenau, 2021).

On the other hand, women entering male-dominated political spaces face challenges, and gendered perceptions may not always favor them. Self-promotion is usually acceptable for men but perceptions of “ambition” in women are sometimes viewed negatively (Smith and Huntoon, 2014), especially on the political right (Weeks and Saha, 2020). Women are often sidelined in male-dominated politics; a study of women in Arab legislative committees shows that women are shunted to to less influential roles (Shalaby and Elimam, 2020). Gender quotas sometimes lead to few policy changes – and perhaps even more unequal outcomes for women (Clayton, 2021).

3 Why Women are Effective Framers and Mobilizers in the Alt-Right

How do the dynamics of women’s authority play out in the alt-right? We argue the primary goal of social movement leadership is “to inspire and organize others to participate” (Morris and Staggenborg, 2004).

We argue that women gain authority in the alt-right because they are effective mobilizers who can reach new audiences and inspire those audiences to express ideas in line with the movement's ideals. The same identities that makes women marginal in the movement can paradoxically be a resource for cultivating authority. As prior theory predicts, potential followers that share the minoritized identity may relate better to these spokespersons. But we argue that members of dominant groups also respond positively to these unexpected spokespersons because they enjoy the validation of seeing unexpected individuals endorsing their views. Role incongruity becomes an asset: women White Nationalists are effective mobilizers for racists and sexist ideas precisely because their rhetoric clashes with their appearance and identity. When these women have other intersecting identities that are minoritized in the White Nationalist movement, those also become resources for mobilizing potential followers.

Women's roles as leaders in the alt-right can seem surprising because the movement often espouses patriarchal values. Richard Spencer, for example, said women should not vote (Hayden, 2017), and white supremacist journalist Matt Forney has advocated for men's responsibility to "bring girls to their proper place," warning against rewarding women for their "clown college degrees, their meaningless cubicle jobs, or their supposed intelligence" (Anti-Defamation League, 2018). A persistent concern of the alt-right is a fear of "replacement" of whites by racial minorities, so many agree that the primary role of white women should be motherhood, who should increase white birth rates.

Blee (1996) notes that organized racism has often been portrayed in media and scholarship as the exclusive purview of men, but thanks to her research and others, we know that women are important contributors to these movements as well, both as participants and as leaders. The conclusion of the literature on gender and far right movements is that female spokespersons can make potential supporters more receptive. Blee writes "Racist women understand that groups of women who seem innocuous can attract people to racist politics" (Blee, 2002, 133). This is typically described as happening because women change the terms of debate in some way. For example, Ben Shitrit (2017) argues that female activists in the Israeli far right seek to "domesticate" the conflict over the sacred space of the Temple Mount. In this case, women's involvement shifts the terms of debate from being primarily about male religious fanaticism to being about women's faith, family and children, and personal religious celebrations. "Women labor to change the issue from one championed solely by actors considered 'extreme' . . . to one that is increasingly 'mainstream.'"

We consider this type of changing the rhetoric to be a form of "framing" for a movement's ideas. Much of the literature on framing in social movements focuses on how leaders "define grievances and construct

social reality” to motivate collective action, strategically emphasizing the severity of social conditions while concretely attributing blame (Benford and Snow, 2000). Some frames work better than others for attracting different followers, and the frames alt-right women use — including the performance of gender — might be more effective than the frames of men.

Recent experimental evidence suggests that female spokespersons can improve attitudes about the far right. Ben-Shitrit, Elad-Strenger and Hirsch-Hoefler (2021) examine the role of gender in perceptions of far-right policies and parties in Israel. They find that when Jewish Israeli respondents reacted to fictitious social media posts by anonymous male and female political candidates, the women in their sample “demonstrated higher support for a radical-right policy and party...when it was presented by a woman candidate” (9). When they change the issue and present the fictitious social media post as if it was written by an activist, they find that both men and women are more likely to support a far-right policy presented by a woman. This effect is because respondents attributed more “warmth” to the fictitious women politicians and activists, presumably because of gender stereotypes. Commentators on the alt-right agree with this conclusion that women might naturally be able to frame the movement in a more positive light. In this theory, women offer “softer” rhetoric that draws in new audiences who would initially be turned off by direct expression of racist ideas. In this argument, women are effective mobilizers because they can recruit new audiences that men cannot, and then they eventually connect these new audiences to the most extreme views of the movement (which are largely communicated by men).

We argue the opposite: women can be effective framers and mobilizers when they accentuate the racism and misogyny of the White Nationalist discourse. Women who use extreme rhetoric appeal to current members of the social movement who disregard women’s views generally, but enjoy hearing women reinforce their misogyny and racism. For some followers, this even involves a fantasy of finding a romantic partner who shares their White Nationalist views. Furthermore, while intersectional identities must be recognized for the overlapping systems of oppression they expose individuals to (Crenshaw, 2013), we argue that White Nationalist women can leverage their intersectional identities to create intersectional “identity authority” (Nielsen, 2020). Just as we expect White women spokespersons in the White Nationalist movement to say “as a woman, I reject feminism,” a non-white woman has even greater rhetorical leverage because they can endorse both misogyny and racism in a way that appears to be against their self-interest. For example, Irma Hinojosa leveraged her identity as the child of Mexican immigrants in a “Free Speech” Rally held by White

Nationalists in 2017.⁶

To some extent, our expectation that alt-right women use more extreme rhetoric than men echoes aspects of the pinkwashing argument. If audience attitudes about gender make them more receptive to women, then we expect that women might be empowered to say more extreme things than men as a result. One of the alt-right women we study, Lana Lokteff, espouses this logic explicitly: “Since we aren’t physically intimidating, we can get away with saying big things” (quoted in Mattheis, 2018, 140). But in a typical pinkwashing argument, we find a subtle assumption that women are placed in positions of authority strategically by men. Unlike a political party that intentionally chooses women to market its extreme ideas, we are studying women who compete for authority organically. Thus, extreme rhetoric must be effective at attracting a following from core White Nationalist supporters who hold misogynist and racist views already, as well as mobilizing new audiences. Thus, while there is much to support the pinkwashing argument in other settings, we believe that augmenting it with insights from theories of (intersectional) identities and authority better explains how women are gaining authority in an amorphous social movement in which many male leaders openly espouse misogyny.

4 Reactions to the Rhetoric of Alt-Right Women on YouTube

To understand women’s rhetoric in the alt-right, we analyze the content of the videos they use to communicate with followers and the reactions those videos provoke among viewers worldwide. We supplement our findings with an experimental analysis of how individuals in the United States respond to some of the offensive ideas of the alt-right when presented by different genders in the next section. However, experiments testing the effects of exposure to white supremacist content are ethically and practically difficult, so we draw our primary conclusions from observational data on the YouTube platform.

At a high level, our approach is to identify key female and male figures in the alt-right, collect their videos, descriptively analyze how the visual and audio content of these videos differs by gender, and then predict differences in the reactions to these videos based on gender and content. The fact that we cannot experimentally manipulate the gender of alt-right video creators inhibits our ability to estimate credible causal effects. Readers should nonetheless be interested in the descriptive correlations we report: women’s videos contained more racist and sexist content than men’s, they attracted more racist and sexist reactions,

⁶<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F0JclPYUJIY&t=72s>, minute 1:40.

and they sparked more engagement.

4.1 Video Data from the Alt-Right

We analyze the transcripts and images from 12,273 videos posted by 29 prominent alt-right YouTubers, 11 women and 18 men. We started by identifying a larger set of prominent figures in the alt-right movement and adjacent social movements, such as the Men Going Their Own Way movement.

As of mid-2019 when we collected data, videos were the most important medium for alt-right content, and YouTube was the most widely used platform distributing those videos (also see Munger and Phillips, 2022). We collected data from the individuals on our list who openly expressed alt-right views on YouTube channels. Working with YouTube has the significant advantage that we can ignore platform effects; it is difficult to compare user reactions across platforms because platform idiosyncrasies shape how audiences express their reactions. This resulted in 11 alt-right women: Blaire White, Blond Buttermaker (of the Red Ice TV channel⁷), Blonde in the Belly of the Beast, Bre Faucheux, Brittany Pettibone, Cassandra Fairbanks, Faith J Goldy, Irma Hinojosa, Lana Lokteff (Red Ice TV), Lauren Southern, and Wife with a Purpose (Ayla Stewart). Figure 1 shows the self-presentation of these 11 women in randomly sampled face shots from their videos. There is homogeneity in the visual performance of female gender among these women, which we believe is an important part of the politics that allows them to claim authority as spokespersons for the movement.

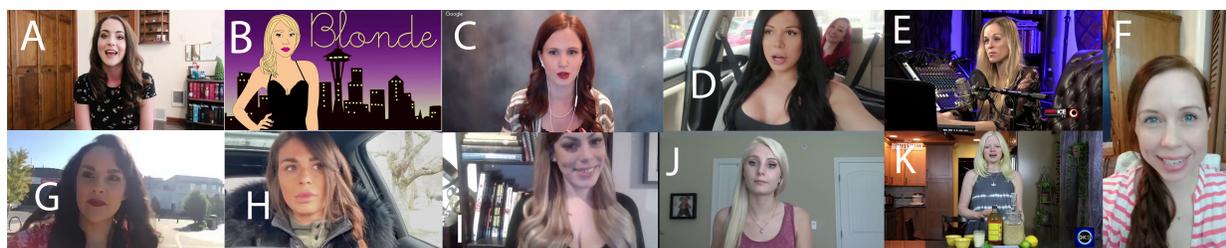


Figure 1: *Self-presentation by women alt-right activists.*

A. Brittany Pettibone. B. Rebecca Hargraves (Blonde in the Belly of the Beast). C. Bre Faucheux. D. Blaire White. E. Lana Lokteff (Red Ice TV). F. Ayla Stewart (Wife with a Purpose). G. Irma Hinojosa. H. Faith J Goldy. I. Cassandra Fairbanks. J. Laura Southern. K. Blond Buttermaker (Red Ice TV).

For comparison, we selected 18 channels run by men: Jared Taylor (American Renaissance channel), Andywarski, Baked Alaska, Black Pigeon Speaks, Caolan Robertson, Coach Red Pill, Jean-Francois

⁷Red Ice TV is primarily hosted by Lana Lokteff and Henrik Palmgren, with subchannels hosted by blond buttermaker (female), Patrick Casey (male), Stephen Mcnallen (male, and Impivaara (male).

Garipey, Jeff Holiday, Millennial Woes, Mister Metokur, Paul Joseph Watson, Henrik Palmgren (Red Ice TV), impivaara (Red Ice TV), Patrick Casey/Reinhard (Red Ice TV), Stephen Mcnallen (Red Ice TV), Sargon of Akkad, Stefan Molyneux, and Styxhexenhammer666. Although this list is missing well-known figures in the alt-right movement, some of them appear in our data as guests on YouTube shows. For example, Richard Spencer appears on at least nine Red Ice TV videos, so we feel confident that the core ideas of the alt-right are represented in this sample. There is significant contestation about who constitutes the “real” alt-right, both within and outside the movement, so different researchers could reasonably arrive at a different list of alt-right figures to compare.

We collected 12,803 videos created by these 29 individuals.⁸ However, we are forced to analyze subsets because of missing data from YouTube content moderation during our data collection in 2019 and 2020. We collected video closed caption transcripts first, so those are mostly complete. We collected video files for image analysis after approximately 2,600 had been removed by YouTube, but we found copies from other websites, so our image analysis includes 12,273 videos. We could not recover the comments from censored videos on YouTube when we went back for them in 2020, so our comment analysis relies on a subset of 9,613 videos that were still available at the time we collected. We luckily collected comments from a small random sample of videos prior to censorship, which allows us to include several channels that were entirely shut down. The data are sparse for these channels, but because we randomly sampled, the results are representative.

The censorship creates other limitations: we cannot easily add more individuals to our analysis now. Yet this highlights the importance of the data we do have. Because we happened to begin our collection just before YouTube began heavily censoring the alt-right, our data is an essential source for documenting white supremacist content among alt-right circles from 2006 to 2019.

We consider each video to have an “author,” and we code the gender of that author as male or female. In most cases, we determine the author gender by observing the gender of the owner of the YouTube channel that posted the video. We do not consider the gender of interviewees and guests because we want to code the rhetoric that channels run by women decide to present, and women may choose to present the rhetoric of men. For the Red Ice TV, which has multiple subchannels, we coded the gender of the video hosts by hand using the text and video files; we code Red Ice TV videos hosted by both Lana and Henrik as having a

⁸Throughout, we identify videos by the unique identifier YouTube uses in video URLs (e.g. video QEh87xZAg60 corresponds to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QEh87xZAg60>).

female author.

Collectively, there are over 200 days of continuous video, so watching and coding them by hand is not feasible. We analyze the video content with a structural topic model (Roberts, Stewart and Airoldi, 2016). Topic models have been primarily used for text analysis in political science; we adapt the model to multi-modal video data by incorporating both audio and visual content in a single topic model. To our knowledge, we are among the first researchers to insert image data into a topic model, so we describe our approach in detail.

Video data are multi-modal; rhetoric in videos comprises audio, images, and visually displayed text. Although fully representing the rich rhetoric in these videos is beyond our ability, we represent the most important multi-modal aspects of this rhetoric through text and image analysis, inspired by the “bag of visual words” approach (Torres, 2023), but using off-the-shelf algorithms. We use YouTube’s closed captions to represent the audio component of the videos. For the most part, this produces a transcript of the words spoken in each video along with time-stamps, but the closed captions also record some non-verbal communication such as the presence of music (rendered as “[Music]” in the closed captions).

To complement the textual data representing the audio components of these videos, we use machine learning methods for image analysis to represent the visual components. There are many visual aspects of these videos, but we feel two are particularly important: face detection and detection of on-screen text. We analyze the visual component of these videos by sampling images from them. Videos are simply a rapidly displayed series of images or frames; we sample one frame per minute for each of our videos, resulting in approximately 360,000 images all told.

Figure 2 illustrates how we use computer vision algorithms to convert visual aspects of videos into “visual words.” First, we use a face detection algorithm from the firm Face++ to detect the number, probable gender, and probable emotion of each face (shown in blue). We use several Google Vision algorithms to detect objects (shown in green), recommended labels for each image (shown in red), and image text recognition (shown in orange). Despite minor mistakes, the algorithms perform well, offer a feasible alternative to hand-coding visual information frame by frame, and allow us to summarize the distinctive visual aspects of alt-right women’s rhetoric in our topic model.

Many videos have limited visual variation (e.g., video hosts talking in their bedroom for a half hour), which can result in repetitive visual words. To account for the lack of new visual information, we down-weight visual words that are identical to those in the frame before it. We removed terms that were highly

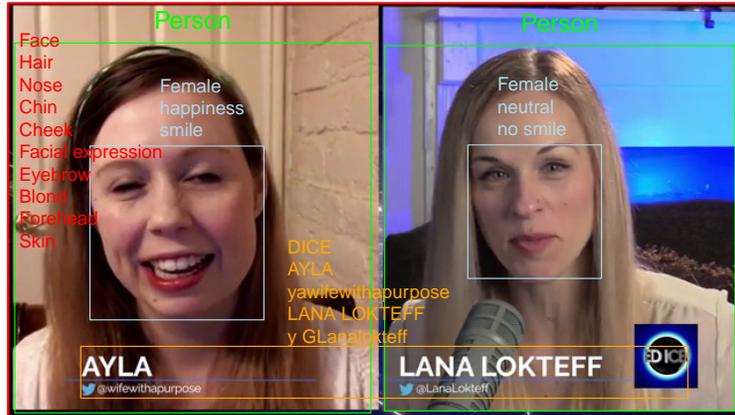


Figure 2: Extracting “visual words” from video frames.

Green: Google object detection. Orange: Google text recognition. Red: Google recommended labels. Blue: Face++ gender and emotion detection.

correlated with particular channels. For example, Red Ice TV has its logo in the corner of most frames (see Figure 2), and this tended to result in channel-specific topics.

Women’s Videos Contain More Racism and Sexism

Figure 3 summarizes a structural topic model of the text and images from 12,273 videos of alright YouTubers. We estimate 50 topics to provide a granular view of the video content and use video author gender as a predictor of topic prevalence.

Figure 3 presents the topics in a way that emphasizes their content and correlation with video author gender. Each (arbitrarily) numbered topic is listed with the top 7 key words that are frequent within each topic and relatively exclusive to it. These terms summarize the multimodal video content: terms in all capital letters are from visual content, terms with the first letter capitalized are from on-screen text, and terms in lower-case are from closed captions. Black discs (with 95% confidence interval bars) show the estimated topic proportions for women, and white discs show them for men. Topics more prevalent in women’s videos are at the top and those more prevalent in men’s videos are at the bottom.

In Figure 4, we summarize the same topic model with emphasis on the relationships between topics. We calculate the correlation between topics in the model and use it to construct a network graph in which thicker ties indicate stronger correlation. Women’s videos are on the left and men’s on the right; the node size indicates prevalence.

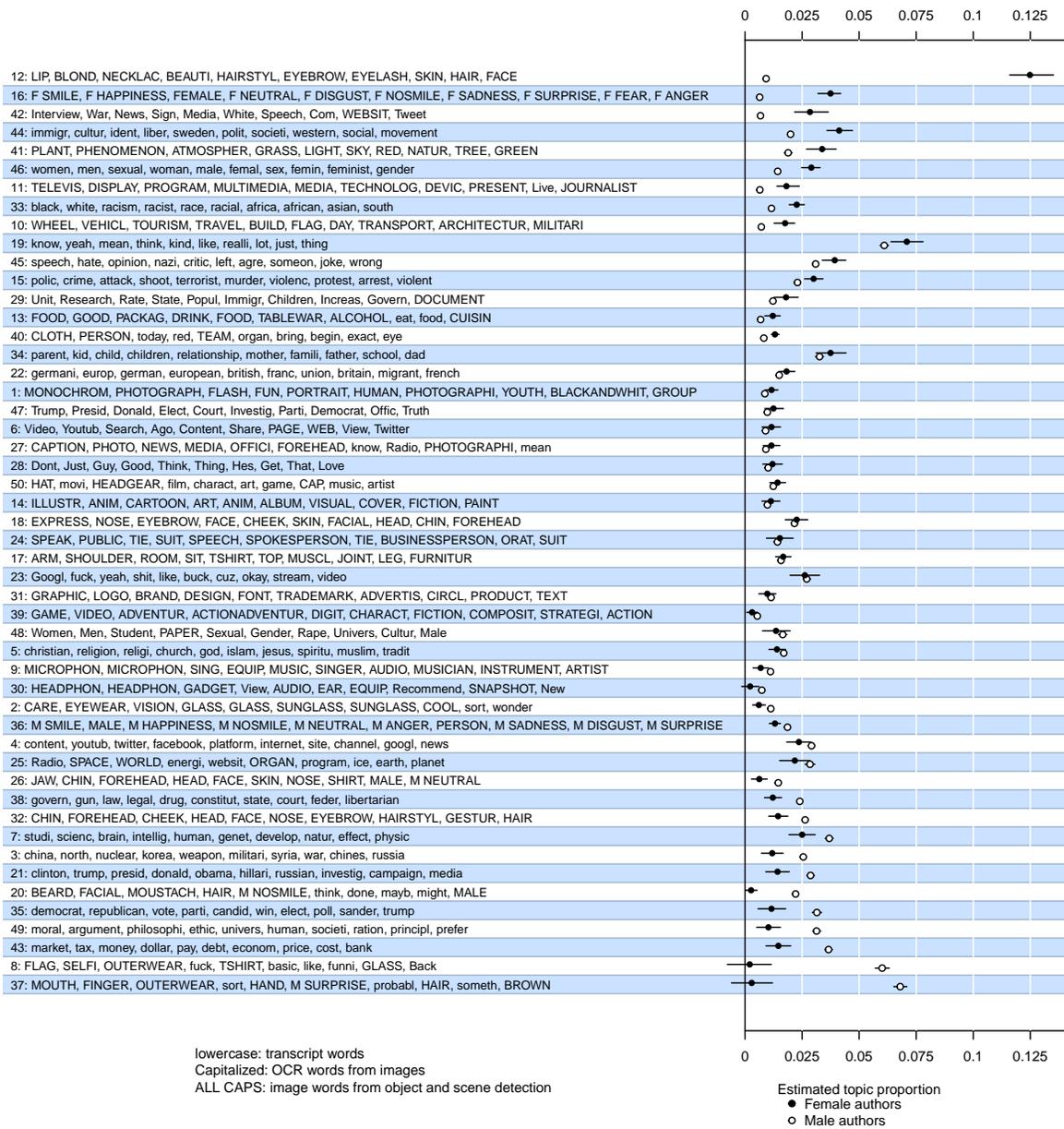


Figure 3: Female and Male Authors Emphasize Different Verbal and Visual Topics

A structural topic model of video transcripts and images with author gender as a predictor of topic prevalence. Terms in ALL CAPS are from images (via Face++ or Google image APIs). Terms with the first letter Capitalized are on-screen text identified by Google OCR. Terms in lowercase are from the closed captions. Complete model results are in Table 16 of the supplementary materials.

The starkest distinction between men’s and women’s videos is visual. Women’s videos emphasize a topic dominated by visual associated with the performance of a certain vision of femininity: emphasis on lips, blond hair, necklaces, beauty, hairstyles, eyebrows, eyelashes, and skin. The second most distinctive topic in women’s videos is also about women’s faces, with a clustering of visual words from the Face++

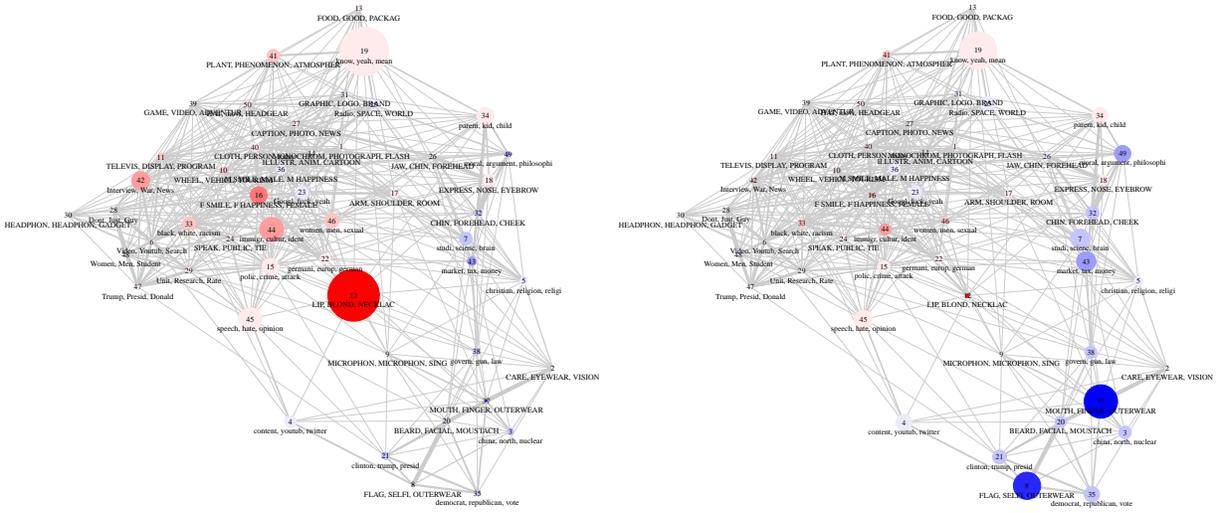


Figure 4: Topic Correlation Network Showing Emphasis by Women (Left) and Men (Right)

A network summary of a structural topic model of video transcripts and images with author gender as a predictor of topic prevalence. The topic model is the same for both networks, and the graph structures shows the correlation between topics. The left panel shows the network with nodes sized to indicate prevalence of topic use by women (also indicated with red), and the right has nodes sized to indicate prevalence of topic use by men (also indicated with blue). Corresponding complete model results are in Table 16 of the supplementary materials.

API indicating female faces displaying various emotional states. In combination, the “conventional feminine beauty” topic and “female face“ topic present a distinctive visual experience for viewers, one that would be lost in our analysis without a topic model that incorporates visual content.

Core topics to the alt-right movement — race, immigration, and gender — are more prevalent in women’s videos than in men’s. We identify the core topics to be Topic 44 which we label “immigration,” Topic 46 “gender,” and Topic 33 “Race.” Inspecting the videos most associated with these topics confirms that they capture the more extreme racial and gender ideas associated with the alt-right. Topic 33 is most prevalent in videos with titles like “Why I Don’t Want to Become a Minority“ by Lana Lokteff, “#BLMKidnapping | A Few Reflections” by Bre Fauchaux, and “Who Wants to Abolish the White Race” by Jared Taylor of the American Renaissance channel. These videos are full of openly white supremacist ideas, often couched in “reasonable” terms. Lana Lokteff mocks the notion that she is a white supremacist: “According to numerous media outlets — the ADL and other lefty orgs — I am a white supremacist. [Applause] Not just any white supremacist but the queen bee of white supremacy. I’m also a wife mother and smile a lot, but don’t be fooled by my kindness because I’m really trying to secretly seduce and convert you to evil white supremacist ideology“ (video ID oemFQLKtvx4). Then she lists sixteen ideas she claims are not white

supremacist but seem to be, including “do you want white people to be a majority in the countries that they created?” and “do you want Europe to remain a continent for Europeans aka white people?” It is almost as if she is trying to fool viewers with kindness and smiles.

Videos that emphasize Topic 44 have a different but complimentary flavor of white nationalism focused on cultural threat, diversity, and immigration (e.g., “What No One Says About ‘Identity Politics’” by Lana Lokteff and “Multiculturalism has FAILED: How to Successfully Manage Diversity” by Black Pigeon Speaks.) Topic 46 is a largely feminist treatment of gender issues. Top videos featuring this topic include “Feminism is for Idiots and Uglies” by Blonde in the Belly of the Beast and “The Damage Done by Women’s Liberation” by Bre Faucheux. Figure 4 shows that these topics are all highly correlated, and also correlated with the “female face” and “conventional feminine beauty” topics. Conventionally attractive female faces are a major visual feature of many of the videos that emphasize race, cultural threat, and anti-feminism. By contrast, men are more likely than women to talk about economics (Topic 43), philosophy (Topic 49), US politics (Topics 35 and 21), and International politics (Topic 3). These topics are standard fare for talking heads in the alt-right movement, but they are not the core issues around which the movement galvanizes. We interpret this evidence to mean that, on average, women deliver more racist and anti-feminist messages per video than equivalent male influencers in the movement, and they use their faces as the central image accompanying these messages.

There is variation in how alt-right women present themselves, which we explore by clustering the women based on the average topic proportions of their videos, using the k-means clustering algorithm. When we group the women into two clusters, the algorithm returns 11 out of 12 women in a single cluster, and the Blond Buttermaker from Red Ice TV in her own cluster. Blond Buttermaker’s preferred topics are very different from the rest: she has a cooking show, so her top topics are Topic 41 (visuals of nature scenes 31%), Topic 13 (food and kitchens 18%), and Topic 7 (science 6%). Although prominent alt-right women such as Ayla Stewart are often described (and self-described) as “trad wives” (Proctor, 2022) or “housewives of white supremacy” (Kelly, 2018), our clustering results suggest that only one of 12 women is distinguished by the topics that we might associate with the gender performance of “trad wife.” The others, including Ayla, emphasize Topic 12 (conventional feminine beauty, 12%), Topic 19 (filler words 10%), Topic 45 (controversial speech 5%), and Topic 44 (cultural threat 5%). When we allow for three or four clusters to form, more groups appear but they are distinguished primarily by emphasis on conventional feminine beauty and which of the core race and gender topics get priority. Thus, we conclude that to a first approximation,

all of these women follow the same rhetorical style of heavily emphasizing the core ideas of the alright movement, with the Blond Buttermaker the lone exception.

Women’s Videos Provoke More Racist, Xenophobic, and Sexist Comments

After comparing the rhetoric of alt-right women to alt-right men with a structural topic model, we explore reactions to these videos with trace data recording engagement and comments. We estimate correlations between the gender of video authors, the video content, and the audience reactions in comments and engagement. We find evidence that audiences respond more, on average, to the women alt-right leaders we study than to the men, and the content of their responses is more racist.

We find the most robust differences in the language of viewer comments, which are the richest form of reaction we record. We are able to collect comments for 9,613 of the videos; the rest had been censored by the time we returned to collect. We are concerned about non-random censorship, but luckily have a much smaller data set of comments from 248 randomly sampled videos that we collected before censorship began. Here we present the results from both comment data sets combined, but the results are substantively very similar with the smaller set that was not subject to censorship.

We obtain 7.8 million comments from over 1.6 million unique commenters, with an average of 679 comments per video. Reading this many comments is infeasible so we again summarize with a structural topic model. We combine the comments for each video into a single pseudo-document, and fit a model with 50 topics and the gender of the video author as a predictor of topic prevalence. Figure 5 summarizes the topics that emerge in the comments on alright videos, with comment topics that are relatively more prevalent on women’s videos at the top. Mirroring the differences in video content, we find that comments on women’s videos are more likely to emphasize racism, xenophobia, and misogyny. We note that while interpreting these topics, we found that obscenity, racism, and vitriol is even stronger than the topic model portrays because commenters sometimes are orthographically innovative when typing their most inflammatory words to preempt algorithm-based content moderation, and by extension, our text model (e.g., writing “f u c k e d”⁹ or “j.e.w.s”¹⁰).

Racism, xenophobia, and religious bigotry are prevalent in the comments, and especially prevalent in comments made to women’s videos. We consider six comment topics — 12, 37, 25, 44, 22, and 49 — to

⁹Comments in video id AxjH5hZYTbQ.

¹⁰Comments in video id 4QJ3wYi.Fug.

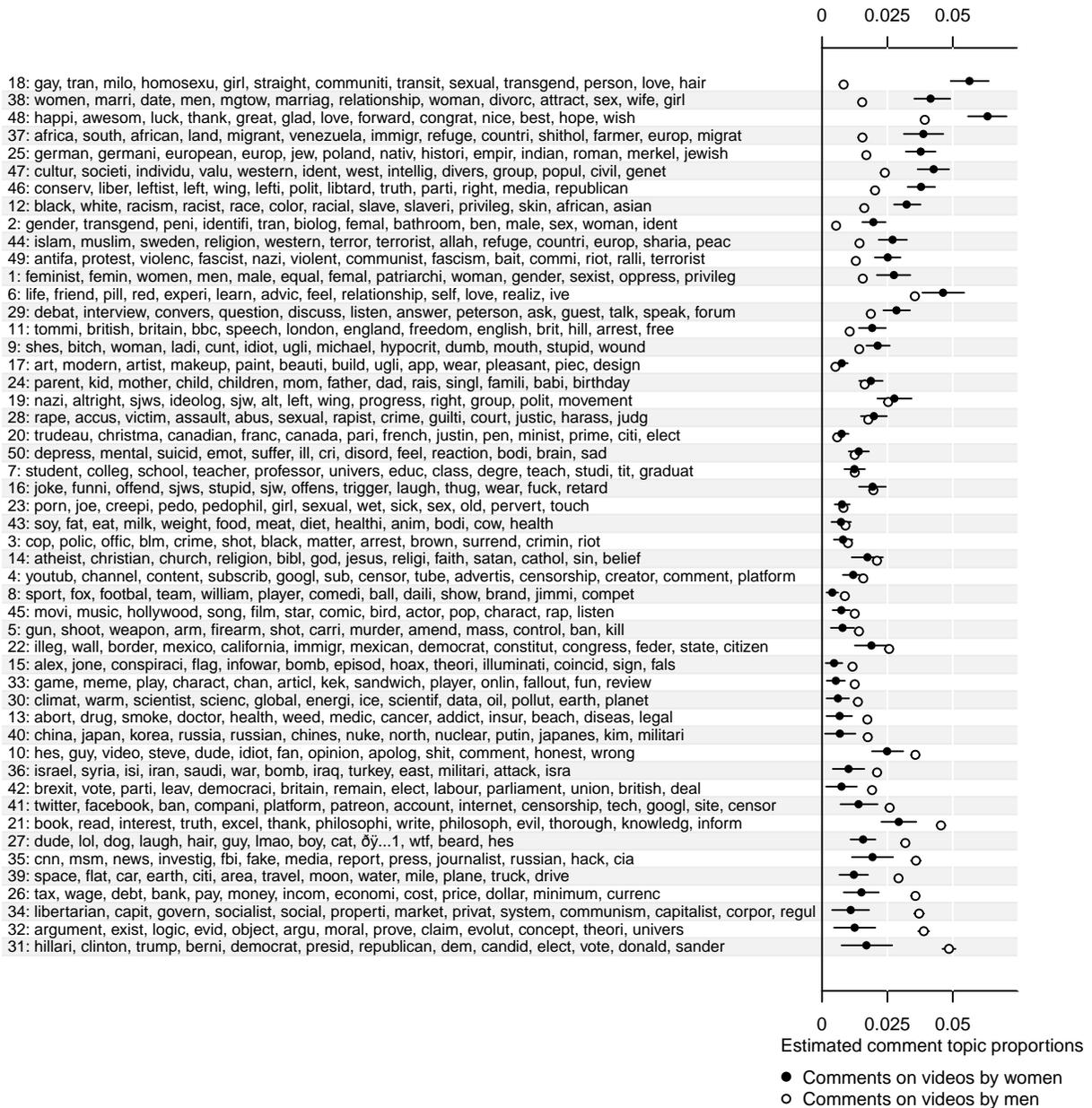


Figure 5: Topics of Comments on Men's and Women's Videos

A structural topic model of comments on alright YouTube videos with the video author gender as a predictor of topic prevalence. Complete model results are in Table 17 of the supplementary materials.

be about race, cultural threat, or religious threat. Comment Topic 12 is the most overtly anti-black, with numerous comments in the tenor of “I’m fucking proud to be white the blacks are erasing history...,” “stop crying black ppl and do something productive with ur life,” and fewer, but still some, in the vein of “STFU [n-word].” This topic accounts for 3.2% of the words in comments on women’s videos compared to 1.6% on

men's videos. Comment topics 37 and 25 are about xenophobia and racial replacement in Africa and Europe respectively. Many comments in the Africa topic reference reports of white South Africans being attacked and predicting threats to white people everywhere, while the European topic is dominated by antisemitism. Topic 44 is largely Islamophobia, especially in the context of supposed cultural replacement in Europe. Topic 22 is about illegal immigration to the US over the southern border with Mexico and has plenty of anti-Hispanic racism. This is the only topic that is slightly more prevalent in comments on men's videos, and only marginally so. Finally, Topic 49 is primarily about Antifa and the far left, but largely in terms of racial and religious prejudice.¹¹ Collectively, these six topics constitute 18% of the comment content on women's videos and 10% on men's.

Sexism and anti-feminism are also more prevalent in the comments on women's videos. We consider topics 18 (LGBTQ issues), 38 (heterosexual relationships), 2 (gender), 1 (feminism), and 9 (misogynist slurs) to be about gender, sexism, and feminism. Collectively, these are 16.6% of the content of comments on women's videos, and only 5.9% of the content of comments on men's. Almost none of the sexism is directed at the video authors, however. And commenters on the videos of Blaire White, who is trans, often remark favorably about her identity and willingness to speak in support of extreme views despite it.

If race and gender attitudes are at the core of the alt-right project, then our analysis of comment content suggests that women are better at eliciting these responses from commenters. More than a third – 34.5% — of the words in comments on women's videos are devoted to topics of race or gender, and the language is often disturbing enough that we prefer not to report it directly. By contrast, only 16% of men's comments are devoted to these topics; a bit less than half.

We interrogate this finding more rigorously using statistical models that control for the content of videos. We extract the topic proportions from the image topic model for each video and include them as covariates in a linear regression predicting the topic proportions of comments, along with other predictors of comment content in some specifications. Giving these results a causal interpretation requires strong assumptions because of the non-random assignment of video author gender. Even if our results are purely descriptive, knowing that women's videos stoked more racist comments than men's is an important finding. As we add covariates, it is important to carefully articulate our target inference.

When we do not adjust for covariates, we most closely approximate a counterfactual where every aspect

¹¹Comments linking Antifa to racial or religious bigotry are pervasive: “Is Portland’s mayor a bloody MOSLEM too!?” (WKBzPeqzaig); “(((Antifa)))” with tripled parentheses to insinuate Jewish control (WKBzPeqzaig); and “These people are anti white social fascists. They will accept nothing less than White Genocide.” (QEH87xZAg60).

of the video is posttreatment to the author’s gender, which in practice is the case. But this analysis leaves us with unanswered questions. Maybe men’s videos would result in as much comment racism as women’s if we compared women to only those men who included racist content in their videos as much as women. Does gender primarily provoke more racist comments by influencing the content of videos, or is there something about the delivery of that content by a woman that provokes more racism? An ideal experiment might be to generate white nationalist video script and then randomize the gender of the person delivering the content. This experiment faces practical and ethical challenges (and we tried), so we first approximate it very roughly using our observational data.

When we control for topics, the precise counterfactual we have in mind is a situation where the content of a video is held fixed and the gender of the video author varies. We report several combinations of control variables, including none, text topic controls (as if the videos had the same script, but the visual aspect could vary with gender), text + image topic controls (as if both video script and visuals were held fixed, while gender varied), with a few additional controls for the length of video and year fixed effects, and with the analysis restricted to the Red Ice TV channel, which has both male and female video authors on a single channel for which the subscribers are the same. In all but the Red Ice TV analysis, we cluster standard errors by channel to account for within-channel correlations in comment content.

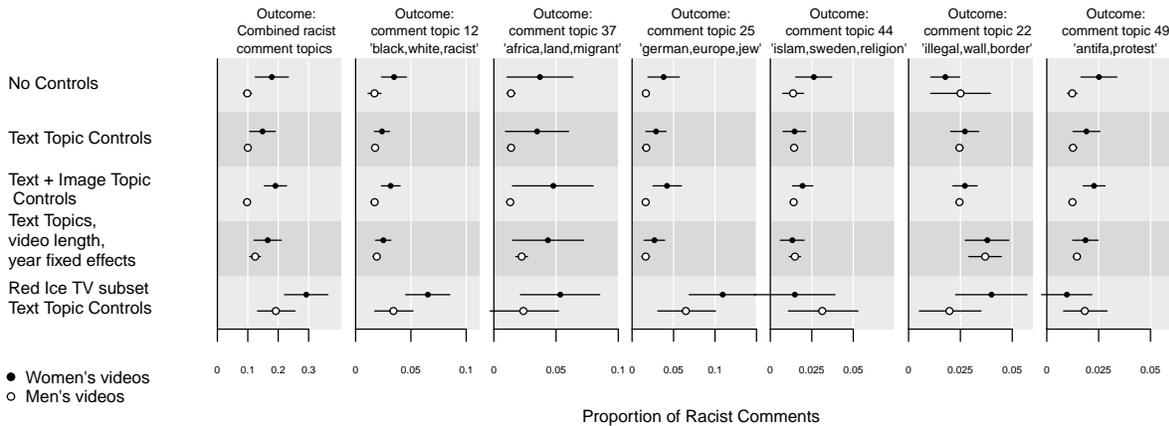


Figure 6: *Gender of Video Author Predicts Racism in Comments*

Predicted proportion of racist topics in comments on videos by women (black discs) and men (white discs). The left column is the sum of topics 12, 37, 25, 44, 22, and 49, and the other columns show them individually. Each row is a different specification. Full regression results in Tables 1-7 of the supplemental materials (Column 1 results in supplementary materials Table 1; Column 2 in Table 2; Column 3 in Table 3; Column 4 in Table 4; Column 5 in Table 5; Column 6 in Table 6; Column 7 in Table 7.)

Figure 6 reports key estimates from a series of statistical models showing that in general, racism is more

prevalent in the comments on women's videos. This is true for the aggregate of racist comments, which we calculate as the sum of the topic proportions for comment topics 12, 37, 25, 44, 22, and 49. In most of these models, in the first column of Figure 6, women's videos have more racism at the 5% confidence level, though in one model the statistical significance drops to the 10% level. The results are mixed for individual racist topics. Women's videos reliably correlate with increases in comments with racist topics 12, 37, and 25. The correlation is less consistent for topics 44, 22, and 49, though on balance, women's videos still probably garner more of these topics. On balance, these results show that more racist comments were posted to women's videos than men's. Conditioning on the text topics of these videos reduces the strength of the correlation somewhat, suggesting that the differences in women's and men's video content explains some of the racism we see in women's comments. This is further supported by the very strong correlation we find between racist topics in video transcripts and racist topics in video comments; if male alt-right YouTubers talked about race as much as the women, our models predict they would drum up almost as much racism. Thus, women's ability to drive racist reactions on YouTube is real, but has more to do with the content that alt-right women produce than a "pinkwashing" effect in which women make racism inherently more palatable. This may matter on the margins, but women drummed up more racist reactions largely because they published more racist content. This result is consistent with recent findings that inflammatory elite speech emboldens ordinary citizens to express and act more on their prejudices (Newman et al., 2021; Lieberman and Miller, 2021).

Women are less consistent at increasing misogyny and queer-phobia in the comments on their videos. In Figure 7, we find that women's videos on average generate more comments with these topics, but the correlation typically becomes statistically indistinguishable from zero if we control for the content of videos. Again, this reinforces our conclusion that it is the content of women's videos that makes their activism for the alt-right effective, rather than some effect of gender operating independently of content.

Women's videos are still more effective than men's by most measures of engagement, even controlling for content. In Figure 8, we report key predicted values from regressions predicting various measures of engagement: views; "likes;" "dislikes;" number of comments; the proportion of comments devoted to praising the video content; the proportion of comments with misogynist slurs (that we suspected might be directed at female YouTubers); the proportion of female commenters; and the proportion of first-time commenters. Women's and men's videos get the same views, statistically speaking. On all other measures of engagement, women's videos are significantly higher: more reactions from viewers in the form of likes,

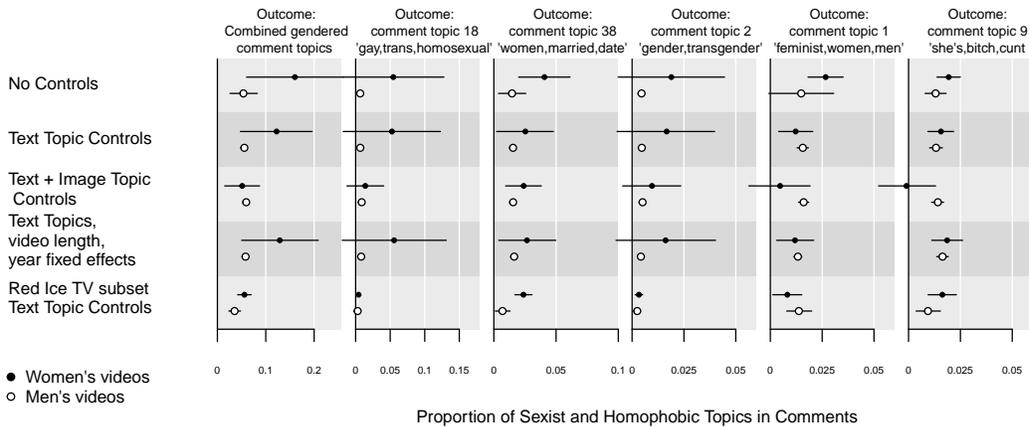


Figure 7: *Gender of Video Author Weakly Predicts Sexism and Homophobia in Comments*

Predicted proportion of sexist topics in comments on videos by women (black discs) and men (white discs). The left column is the sum of topics 18, 38, 2, 1, and 9, and the other columns show them individually. Each row is a different specification. Full regression results in Tables 8-13 of the supplemental information. (Column 1 results in supplementary materials Table 8; Column 2 in Table 9; Column 3 in Table 10; Column 4 in Table 11; Column 5 in Table 12; Column 6 in Table 13.

dislikes and comments. And beyond these quantitative measures of engagement, we observe in individual comments that women are often praised for their videos in gendered terms. Sometimes commenters even professes romantic longing: “I wish I could find a girl like you.” We conclude from this positive reception that followers value seeing individuals with minoritized identities endorsing their misogynist and racist views.

Are women reaching different audiences than men? We cannot observe who watches the videos, but the comments give some indication of who the audience for each video is. We do not have direct information on the gender of each commenter. Instead, we use the names that commenters give themselves to guess their gender. This task is time consuming so we limit our analysis to a sample of 9,113 randomly sampled comments. A majority of the self-chosen commenter names do not clearly suggest one gender or another so we do not code them. We are able to code 3,456, resulting in comments from 2,941 individuals we believe are men and 515 we believe are women. This lopsided gender ratio is in line with other indications that the alt-right is a male dominated movement. This result is confirmed statistically: women’s videos get more comments from YouTube users with typically-female user names, even conditioning on video content via topic proportions.

Women’s videos also expand the movement to new people of all genders. We can’t track which viewers are encountering alt-right content for the first time, but we can determine which commenter usernames are

unique: users that don't comment on any other video in our data set. We find that women reach substantially more first-time commenters by this proxy measure.

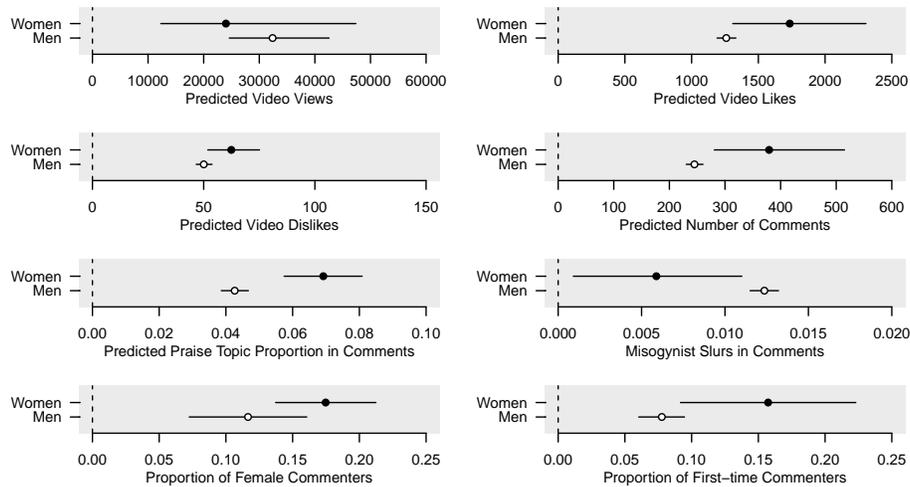


Figure 8: *Gender of Video Author Predicts Audience Engagement and Enlargement*

Predicted values and 95% confidence intervals from a series of regression models predicting views, likes, and dislikes, and other measures of engagement with alt-right YouTube videos. Full regression results in Tables 14-15 of the supplemental information. (Results from the top four models in supplementary materials Table 14 and bottom four models in Table 15.)

All of these results suggest that women expand the reach of the alt-right movement. In combination with the result that women get more racist reactions in their comments, we conclude that these women are core mobilizers for the alt-right. Their ability to expand the reach of the movement comes, we think, from their propensity to say racist things, rather than from a large “pinkwashing” effect of their gender presentation on viewers. There may be a modest pinkwashing effect in play, but the fact that controlling for video content reduces the correlation between video author gender and racist/ misogynist comments makes us think that the key story is that alt-right women promote the movement’s racial and gender ideology more persistently than the movement’s male spokespersons.

5 Experimental Evidence Contradicts a “Pinkwashing” Effect

We sought to complement our observational evidence with experimental evidence. This is challenging for a number of reasons. From an ethical standpoint, experimentally testing whether racist, sexist, and otherwise objectionable views are more palatable coming from a woman requires us to present subjects with those objectionable views. We are aware of experimental results from other fields showing that presenting

subjects with objectionable views, such as “being invited to express a preference for war crimes,” can shift the attitudes of survey respondents toward those objectionable views (Carpenter, Montgomery and Nylen, 2021). However, understanding the drivers of support for racism has enough societal benefit that we believe it worth the risk. We take efforts to minimize the impact of our questions on respondents (framing the statements we present as possibly objectionable).¹².

From a practical standpoint, it is difficult to conduct experiments with the actual audiences that engage with alt-right material naturally online. If we conduct experiments on the general population and fail to find the correlations we report above, it may be due to confounding or it may be due the artificial nature of our experiment, including the sampling of participants, as well as the realism of the presentation.

To test whether statements made by influencers in the alt-right are viewed as less offensive by the general population if they are perceived to be stated by a woman, we ran an experiment on a sample of 566 adults on MTurk in April 2021.¹³ We showed potentially offensive messages formatted as if they were comments on YouTube, randomizing apparent author gender. We cued the gender of the commenter using popular names for men and women among Americans, paired to start with the same letter, with a gender neutral treatment arm. We crafted the statements to look like YouTube comments so that the rating task would feel real to subjects and mirror the setting of our observational study.

Respondents rated the statements from 1 (Not objectionable at all) to 10 (Extremely objectionable) on a sliding scale with discrete labels. We included several statements that contain racial prejudice, drawn from actual statements by alt-right figures, as well as positive statements, anti-feminist statements, profanity statements, and left-leaning objectionable statements.

We find that in this sample, roughly from the population, the presence of a female name accompanying a comment did not affect how objectionable subjects found the statements. Table 1 shows the experimental results. If women are able to “pinkwash” offensive statements, then we expect that subjects in the *Male username* and *Gender neutral username* treatment conditions will rate the same statements as more offensive than subjects in the *Female username* treatment condition. We fit linear models with the Female username treatment as the baseline, and find that we generally cannot statistically detect any effect of male or gender neutral usernames on subject rating of offensiveness. For one outcome — a statement about mixed-race relationships — the statement is rated as more offensive when coming from a man. However, this is a single

¹²See the *Ethical Considerations* section in the Appendix.

¹³Preregistration for this experiment is at `redacted`.

coefficient out of 10, and a Bonferroni correction for multiple testing returns a p-value that is not statistically significant at conventional levels.

Simulated alt-right comments

J Jessica A 2 hours ago
We can't restore our nation with someone else's babies. I'm issuing a white baby challenge! I've made 6, match or beat me!
👍 🗨️ REPLY to Jessica A

J Julie L 11 hours ago
I'm fine with mixed-race relationships in films but you don't have to go out of your way to put them in, you know they are going to start normalizing that as well and then when I have my own kids I'm going to not want to take them to see that.
👍 🗨️ REPLY to Julie L

C Christine 10 hours ago
I don't want to take the risk of crossing the road where there's black people on the other side. Well maybe an employer doesn't want to take the risk of having a black person working for him if he's more likely to eventually commit a crime or use drugs on the job.
👍 🗨️ REPLY to Christine

M Michelle F 4 hours ago
If the Mexicans are gonna come in, this is the reality. You're gonna deal with low socioeconomic status, bad neighborhoods, high crime.
👍 🗨️ REPLY to Michelle F

M Mary M 17 hours ago
Let's talk about the damage modern women and feminism have done to our society. If we want society to function, gender norms have to be observed. Women have to support men. Men have to lead.
👍 🗨️ REPLY to Mary M

Treatment contrast: neutral, female, male

J Jg376 2 hours ago
We can't restore our nation with someone else's babies. I'm issuing a white baby challenge! I've made 6, match or beat me!
👍 🗨️ REPLY to Jg376

J Jessica A 2 hours ago
We can't restore our nation with someone else's babies. I'm issuing a white baby challenge! I've made 6, match or beat me!
👍 🗨️ REPLY to Jessica A

J Joe A 2 hours ago
We can't restore our nation with someone else's babies. I'm issuing a white baby challenge! I've made 6, match or beat me!
👍 🗨️ REPLY to Joe A

Figure 9: *Experimental Prompts*

Simulated alt-right YouTube comments (text drawn directly from real comments in our observational data) with experimental manipulation of cues about commenter gender.

	outcome: “babies”	outcome: “mixed-race”	outcome: “crime”	outcome: “Mexicans”	outcome: “feminism”
Female username (Intercept)	8.10*** (0.18)	6.97*** (0.19)	8.72*** (0.14)	7.83*** (0.18)	6.91*** (0.21)
Male username	-0.09 (0.26)	0.68** (0.26)	-0.01 (0.21)	-0.12 (0.26)	0.31 (0.30)
Gender neutral username	-0.25 (0.26)	0.49* (0.28)	-0.02 (0.21)	-0.31 (0.26)	-0.18 (0.30)
Observations	566	566	566	566	566
R ²	0.002	0.011	0.00002	0.002	0.005

Table 1: *Female gender cues do not “pinkwash” offensive statements. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01*

We interpret these experimental results to mean that there is no detectable “pinkwashing” effect of gender when ordinary Americans encounter alt-right ideas in YouTube comments. This aligns with our observational finding that when women and men use the same “script,” they generate similar racist and misogynist reactions.

6 Conclusion

In this paper, we compare the verbal and visual rhetoric of male and female spokespersons in the alt-right white nationalist movement. We were unsure before our analysis whether this rhetoric would be “softer” or “harsher” than men’s. Many prior accounts of the role these women play in the movement have focused on how they differentiate themselves from men rhetorically, seeking to complement men’s messages with an emphasis on home and family. This literature suggested to us that women might support the alt-right movement with a focus on “softer” content emphasizing motherhood, family, and other topics that are often considered areas where women have natural authority in otherwise patriarchal settings. Yet we found the opposite.

The women we investigate used more bigoted rhetoric in their videos for social media than men. This was true even those who frame themselves as “trad wives” such as Ayla Stewart, and the only clear exception was the cooking show of the Blond Buttermaker on Red Ice TV. This concentration of racist and sexist content in women’s videos is reciprocated with an increase in racist and sexist language in the comments viewers leave on this videos. Overall, women’s videos had twice the proportion of racist comment content as men’s videos. Combined with the fact that women’s videos provoked more comments, likes, and dislikes than men’s, we conclude that that women in the alt-right increased public expressions of racism beyond what the movement would have achieved without women as movement leaders.

To the extent possible with observational data, we attempt to parse whether the increase in racist comments on women’s videos is due to their gender or other factors. Most of the racism in the comments is correlated to racial content in the videos. When we control for video content, the correlation between video author gender and racist comment weakens. Contrary to a “pinkwashing” hypothesis, if men and women in the alt-right had delivered the same video scripts, they might have similar numbers of racist comments. We further test this argument with an experiment in which we mimic YouTube comments with racist and sexist alt-right ideas and vary cues about the gender of the person making the comment. We found no evidence that a pool of MTurk subjects found these offensive statements more palatable when they were perceived to come from women. Where gender matters is the audience. Alt-right women get more engagement from women, and more one-time comments, which we interpret to mean they are better at reaching audiences outside the alt-right’s core supporters.

Still, our conclusions should be interpreted cautiously. It is difficult for us to estimate the causal effect

of this rhetoric on alt-right audiences because of at least two selection effects: among spokespersons deciding to deliver a message on YouTube and among audiences selection to watch and react to the message. Descriptively, we can be confident from our analysis that the conversations these alt-right women curated on their YouTube channels were different than those curated by men.

Although YouTube has deplatformed many of the individuals we study, our findings remain relevant. The alt-right is still active on other platforms that are harder to study, but have significant impact. If our analysis were possible across the varied platforms they use, and comparable measures of engagement were available (they aren't), we would expect to find these women and those who will come after them are still reaching new audiences with racist content.

Our analysis faces challenges that future research might creatively surmount. Censorship by YouTube impeded our data collection; this could be overcome through an academic-industry partnership. Moreover, complex and opaque algorithms from YouTube shape who sees and responds to the videos we analyze, so it is difficult to know which correlations are a result of differences in content or differences in the audience. Experimental research might surmount part of this challenge by exposing a fixed population to alt-right content, but this approach might produce different results simply because subject pool is different. It is difficult to recreate the sub-population seeing these videos as a result of YouTube's algorithms. Nevertheless, extensions using observational and experimental approaches could illuminate more about the roles women play in the alt-right, and in social movements more generally.

More generally, our paper breaks new ground for future researchers in several ways. Substantively, we add to a body of knowledge about how women gain authority in male-dominated politics, especially in patriarchal social movements. Methodologically, we are among the first to use a topic model that combines information from both text and images. This approach has application far beyond the videos to which we apply it here.

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