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**“White Power Barbie”:
American Women of the Alt-Right and Online Extremism**

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the significance of women in online right-wing extremism, an escalating threat. The ideological movement is centered on the preservation of the “white identity” and taken up by connected violent extremist organizations. To understand and counter that threat, this paper analyzes the identity, role, and influence of American women in the alt-right. Women are the new face of the alt-right, empowered by success in “red-pilling,” or radicalization, and enabled by generally unregulated free speech on online platforms.

INTRODUCTION

In August of 2017, in a now widely shared video, a Dodge Challenger accelerated and drove into a crowd of peaceful demonstrators in Charlottesville, Virginia, killing Heather Heyer and injuring thirty-five others (Allyn and Wamsley). Behind the wheel was 20-year-old, self-proclaimed neo-Nazi James Fields (Allyn and Wamsley). An Ohio native, he was in attendance for the controversial and now infamous Unite the Right rally, a white nationalist rally hosted by leaders of the alt-right (Allyn and Wamsley). Heather Heyer, remembered as a “sweet soul” and a “passionate advocate for the disenfranchised,” was one of the many counter protesters present as tensions and hostility overwhelmed Charlottesville (Caron). A violent act to advance the political objective of a white nation, James Fields committed a “a hate-inspired act of domestic terrorism” (Allyn and Wamsley). From Charlottesville to the recent violence incited by the Proud Boys in Washington DC, the alt-right is a man’s world. Women are largely absent from the picture unless they are the victim. However, while women are not present on the frontlines or involved in perpetrating violence, women are engaged and influential in the alt-right movement, especially on the frontlines of the Internet. This paper will attempt to explore the online presence

of American women of the alt-right and the advancement of alt-right ideology and narratives to facilitate red-pilling.

BACKGROUND: CONTEMPORARY AND HISTORICAL

The far-right is the dominant terrorist threat to the United States, accounting for about two-thirds of all attacks and plots in 2020 (Jones et al. 4). The alt-right is a significant part of this threat. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, the political objective of the alt-right is the preservation and protection of the “white identity” from multiculturalism (SPLC). Acting on perceived grievances, it counters the supposed racial cleansing of America (Crenshaw 381). It is a “repackaging of white supremacy” and a purposefully expansive ideology intended to go mainstream (ADL). The alt-right is distinguished by its extensive online presence. Most discourse and operations take place on the Internet, including popular social media: Parler, 4chan, 8chan, Reddit, and the dark web (ADL). James Fields, for example, sought out a community on Twitter and followed Richard Spencer, the founder of the alt-right (Allyn and Wamsley). There is greater potential for violent extremism because the movement is accessible, and more individuals are at risk of radicalization. It presents a unique challenge for the government, law enforcement, civil society, and social media companies. The alt-right’s online presence is precisely what makes it a threat.

The expected role of women in the alt-right movement is contested. In its few years, the movement has primarily targeted young, white men disillusioned by today’s society and active on the Internet. Further complicating the participation of women, the alt right is connected to the misogynistic incel, or involuntary celibate, movement and the “manosphere,” or online sexism (ADL). The alt-right ideology characterizes feminism as an attack on white men, depriving them of their rights and legitimate power. Notably, however, women make up about fifteen to twenty

percent of the alt-right (Kenny). The paradox of women in the alt-right is that women willingly enter a hyper-masculine environment with a regressive and anti-feminist ideology. However, for the women in the alt-right there is a perceived rationality to joining. Red-pilling targeted to women constructs an ideology and narrative that presents recruitment to the alt-right as a rational and empowering decision.

To analyze women in the “repackaging of white supremacy,” it is necessary to understand women in America’s original white supremacist organization: the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). Though invisible in history, white women played a significant role in the KKK, even founding the Women’s KKK (WKKK) (Kerbawy 1). According to the constitution of the Women’s KKK, the purpose was “to shield the sanctity of the home and the chastity of womanhood” (Kerbawy 45). A desire to protect traditional family values and gender roles motivated women. In addition, women wanted to be protected from non-white men. The WKKK recognized women’s role as mothering and socializing white children to “maintain forever white supremacy” (Kerbawy 45). The women of the WKKK, like the men, were motivated by these personal and political reasons. Interestingly, the WKKK presented an inherent contradiction on gender. It espoused traditional values of women in the domestic space, but its members were active outside of the home as members of the WKKK. The WKKK was accepted because “this advocacy was in the name of further protecting the home, American children and to positively affect the church” (Kerbawy 55). The same motivations, roles, and paradox of women in the WKKK translates to the women of the alt-right.

PARADOX: THE FEMINISM OF ANTI-FEMINISM

Women are increasingly visible players in the alt-right. Developed in the context of a broader gender-unequal society and adopting the traditional patriarchal values of the alt-right,

there is a distinction between the role of men and women. Men, the providers and protectors, have carried out all known acts of alt-right violent extremism (SPLC). Women, the nurturers, “offer emotional and ideological support,” an objective equivalent to their role in greater society (Sjoberg et al 5). Women do not commit violent extremism but in an equally important role, they justify violent extremism. There is no violent extremism without a justifying ideology.

In their participation, however, the women of the alt-right ultimately contradict gender norms. Society generally believes women to be inherently peaceful and “the very statement that ‘women’ can be terrorists or even violent seems to be a contradiction in terms” (Sjoberg et al 3). Gender norms translate to the ideological space too. Women are expected to be peaceful, tolerant, accepting, and reserved in action and word. Though women of the alt-right do not engage in violent extremism, their extremist ideology and outspoken support for hate and violence is a contradiction to gender norms.

The women of the alt-right actively construct and promote alt-right ideology. Some women have become outspoken figures in their effort to radicalize and recruit women and girls online. Lana Lokteff, Brittany Sellner, Ayla Stewart, and Sydney Watson are successful propagandists and recruiters for the alt-right (Campion). Their work is a point of debate within the alt-right. It contradicts gender norms and the patriarchal values of the alt-right, but it contributes positively to the growth of the movement. A commentator on AltRight.com wrote, “Those claims of . . . ‘women being the force behind the men’ etc., are just feminism infecting the so-called ‘movement,’” (Darby). These women work independently and outside of the domestic area. Their success and informal power present a threat to the traditional, formal male leadership. Ironically, the participation and work of women breaks gender norms in their effort to preserve the patriarchal structure of the “white identity”.

RED-PILLING

Lana Lokteff, Brittany Sellner, Ayla Stewart, and Sydney Watson are the social media influencers of the alt-right (Ebner and Davey 33). All these women are young and attractive white women with popular social media profiles. Owing to the idea that women are inherently peaceful, these women give an innocent face to an extremist ideology. Yet, they have the capability to push alt-right messaging to millions of social media users. The appearance of innocence and peace underestimates their violent extremist ideology, making these women a threat that is hidden in plain sight.

The alt-right takes a multidimensional approach to red-pilling. Women's involvement in extremism is explained by a comprehensive understanding "that women terrorists (like all terrorists and all people) live in a gender-unequal world" and "that [an] individual's personal and political choices are complicated and contingent" (Sjoberg et al 2). The narrative constructed and publicized by Lana Lokteff, Brittany Sellner, Ayla Stewart, and Sydney Watson appeals to the complex motivations pushing women to join extremism. They tell the story of a "white identity" under attack and engage in fearmongering to build support for the political objective, a white nation. In this story, the alt-right is a community in which those disillusioned and disconnected from the impure modern world can build meaningful, personal relationships and find happiness. A gendered approach connects these political and personal narratives to the experiences and desires of women. A political, gendered, and personal narrative thus influences women to make the rational decision to enter the alt-right.

POLITICAL: THE WHITE IDENTITY

Women, like men, seek the achievement of the alt-right's political objective, a white nation. Lana Lokteff, Brittany Sellner, Ayla Stewart, and Sydney Watson center their social

media profiles on discussions of politics. Their power lies in their ability to characterize the alt-right as a movement based not in hatred but self-defense in the protection of the white identity. In a 2015 video on the European refugee crisis, Ayla Stewart summarizes alt-right messaging: “Why, logically, would anyone allow hundreds of thousands of refugees to come over into your country, to live off of your social welfare programs, to increase horrible crimes like rape, and to, honestly, quite frankly, take over your culture?” (Darby). Relying on stereotypes, Stewart attributes the modern problems of a white European society to the acceptance of refugees from the Middle East. This propaganda builds fear and blames diversity. The solution to the problems of society is clear in this view: closed borders and a white nation.

Nationalism is, interestingly, framed in a gendered context. The moral order of the white family, a representation of the nation, must be protected from multiculturalism, feminism, and queerness (Bjork-James 58). This framing radicalizes and mobilizes men, the protectors of the white family. The connection between nationalism and the household also brings women of the alt-right into the political discussion. Referencing the nurturing role of women, Ayla Stewart commented, “Women see downtrodden people as their children and want to be very motherly toward them and throw open their borders” (Darby). The alt-right characterizes these “downtrodden people” as a threat to the white family. Women in the alt-right support a white nation because it will protect their children and the “moral order of white family values” (Bjork-James 63). Utilizing fear, online propaganda effectively radicalizes and mobilizes women to support the political objective of a white nation.

GENDERED: EMPOWERING AND PROTECTING WOMEN

The work of alt-right women must be understood in a gendered context. The online presence of Lana Lokteff, Brittany Sellner, Ayla Stewart, and Sydney Watson is intended to

overcome the myth that the alt-right is a misogynistic movement of only men. Propaganda must paint the alt-right as empowering and respectful of women. At a live streamed event, Lana Lokteff said, “It was women that got Trump elected. And, I guess, to be really edgy, it was women that got Hitler elected,” (Darby). Lokteff argues women are the real changemakers. She believes women are a necessary asset to the political objective. To expand and advance toward a white nation, the alt-right needs women. It must, therefore, appeal to women as a freeing and empowering movement.

The alt-right constructs a gendered narrative to target women and girls. It creates a disillusionment with modern society, its ideas on gender, and the treatment of men and women. In a tweet, Sydney Watson writes, “Choose femininity, not feminism” above a selfie (Appendix C). The problems of society are attributed to feminism. In contrast, the alt-right is characterized as an environment in which women are empowered and respected. Femininity, a concept that cannot coexist with feminism, is an ideal that is to be desired. A tweet comparing the traditional and modern style of men, Watson writes, “The destruction of masculinity is upon us” (Appendix D). Femininity and masculinity are linked to the “white identity” that is disappearing. Analyzing the gendered representations of extremism, *Terrorism, Gender, and History* concludes femininity and masculinity positively or negatively characterize violent extremists. Women of the alt-right embrace femininity. Feminists, women that oppose the alt-right movement, are not considered feminine, resulting in a negative characterization of feminist women as unnatural and masculine. The narrative identifies white nationalism as more advantageous and empowering for women than feminism.

The traditional patriarchal values of the alt-right are twisted to be empowering. Mothers are respected and idealized. Women are valuable because they are life givers and responsible for

indoctrinating alt-right values to their children, the future of the white race. Ayla Stewart exemplifies this ideal as a mother to many children (Appendix E). She posts frequently about motherhood and the respect it brings: “The legacy of a man lies within the womb of his women” (Appendix F). In this statement, the powerful men of a patriarchal society are dependent on women. The future of the movement and the white race is dependent on women.

Contributing to the belief of a “white identity” under attack, fearmongering propaganda identifies non-white men as a threat to white women. White women are to be protected by white men from rape by non-white men. These “stereotypes vilifying blackness as expressed in rampant sexual lust in opposition to a sexually controlled whiteness” have historically justified the participation of white women in white supremacy (Bjork-James 60). In a Red Ice TV segment on terrorist attacks in France, Lana Lokteff and her husband, Henrik Palmgren, analyze art displayed under the Eiffel Tower of a “Black figure raping a white woman” and white men being murdered. This propaganda suggests non-white cultures permit rape. It sets the rape of white women within the context of a greater attack on a white nation. On Twitter, Brittany Sellner shared a story of a young white girl decapitated by her adult Iraqi boyfriend (Appendix G). The article’s focus on the story of a minor, a seventeen-year-old girl, adds to the representation of white women as pure and innocent victims. Non-white men are portrayed as predatory and evil. The violence of non-white men is amplified on social media. However, the alt-right is silent on the violence of white men, particularly those connected to the alt-right. For example, Richard Spencer, the founder of the alt-right, abused his ex-wife Nina Koupriianova often saying, “The only language women understand is violence” (Ansari). The women of the alt-right sustain a narrative that white men protect white women from predatory non-white men by ignoring white men’s abuse of white women.

PERSONAL: A COMMUNITY

A sense of belonging and the promise of meaningful relationships with like-minded people attracts men and women to the alt-right. Women seek community, sisterhood, and love, “a refuge where white women can embrace their femininity and their racial heritage without shame,” (Darby). Online interactions between Lana Lokteff, Brittany Sellner, Ayla Stewart, and Sydney Watson exemplify the happiness found in alt-right sisterhood. In a YouTube collaboration, Brittany Sellner and Lauren Southern, a Canadian alt-right member, discuss their friendship (Appendix H). The women attribute the difficulty of making female friends to feminism’s alpha-female attitude (Sellner). Their friendship signifies a deeper, more meaningful relationship. This propaganda describes the relationships of today’s society as fake and superficial. To find a friendship like Sellner and Southern’s, the women and girls watching must engage in the alt-right community, women who share the same beliefs and values. Membership in the alt-right promises community.

In addition, the alt-right movement offers love and marriage. Social media influencers like Lokteff, Stewart, and Sellner are all married to men within the movement. In a speech uploaded to YouTube, Lokteff shared, “You say “I want a husband. I’m 29, I need to have kids.” I say – come to a right-wing conference” (Mattheis 144). Brittany Sellner speaks frequently about love and marriage on her YouTube channel. Once again, propaganda builds disillusionment. She discusses the difficulties of dating and finding a partner that shares the same political and religious beliefs (Sellner). In contrast, the alt-right is positioned as an environment in which relationships are more natural and easy because of a shared ideology. The community of the alt-right is presented as one in which women can find true personal connection and happiness.

LESSONS LEARNED: WOMEN ARE A THREAT

Women are the new face of the alt-right. The social media influencers of the alt-right apply modern, innovative methods to successfully radicalize and recruit on the Internet. Giving an innocent face to an extremist ideology, these women characterize the alt-right as a necessary movement of self-defense, an appealing and radicalizing framing. By constructing a political, gendered, and personal narrative, their propaganda appeals to the complex factors that motivate women to join the alt-right. However, their work outside of the domestic area and informal power in the alt-right challenges the traditional gender roles and hierarchy of the alt-right. Considering that women have already moved out of the domestic area and opposed the traditional gender roles of the alt-right by their participation, women will possibly take a step further to support or engage in future violent extremism. In any case, women as social media influencers or violent extremists are an extremist threat and must be considered as such.

CONCLUSION

Women are a domestic terror threat. To counter the far-right, the most dominant terror threat in the United States, it is not enough to examine violent extremism. Women, often underestimated figures, construct the extremist ideology that motivates these attacks. They are responsible for the growing numbers of the alt-right and its increasing threat. Women of the alt-right have access to millions of social media influencers and a well-developed, successful strategy of radicalization and recruitment. Social media companies, currently limited and ineffective in their actions on online extremism, must take a more active role. There is much more work to be done to successfully reduce the amount of hateful content, online extremist groups, fake news, and more that incites the alt-right. The government and civil society groups are responsible for deconstructing the myth that the “white identity” is under attack.

Counterterrorism cannot be limited to violent extremism; it is necessary to understand and counter the factors that drive violence. At the center of the ideological factor driving violent extremism are women.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A: Alt-right violent extremism had killed or injured 110 individuals by 2018.

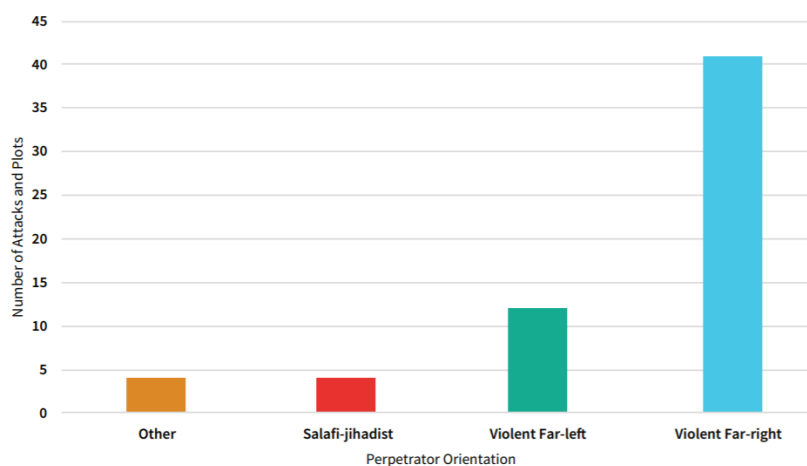
Source: [Southern Poverty Law Center](#)

| NAME | AGE | DATE OF INCIDENT | KILLED | INJURED | TOTALS |
|--|----------------------|------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| Elliot Rodger | 22 | 5/23/2014 | 7 | 14 | 21 |
| Dylann Storm Roof | 21 | 6/17/2015 | 9 | 1 | 10 |
| Christopher Sean "Chris" Harper-Mercer | 26 | 10/1/2015 | 9 | 9 | 18 |
| Alexandre Bissonnette | 27 | 1/29/2017 | 6 | 19 | 25 |
| James Harris Jackson | 28 | 3/20/2017 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Sean Urbanski | 22 | 5/20/2017 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Jeremy Joseph Christian | 35 | 5/26/2017 | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| Lane Maurice Davis | 33 | 7/14/2017 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| James Alex Fields | 20 | 8/12/2017 | 1 | 19 | 20 |
| William Edward Atchison | 21 | 12/7/2017 | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| Nicholas Giampa | 17 | 12/22/2017 | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| Matthew Riehl | 37 | 12/31/2017 | 1 | 4 | 5 |
| Samuel Woodward | 20 | 1/2/2018 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| TOTALS | 25.75 (Avg.) | | 43 | 67 | 110 |
| TOTALS 2017 | 26.667 (Avg.) | | 17 | 43 | 60 |
| % of total casualties during 2017 | | | 39.53% | 64.18% | 54.55% |

Appendix B: In 2020, the far-right conducted 67% of all terrorist plots and attacks in the US.

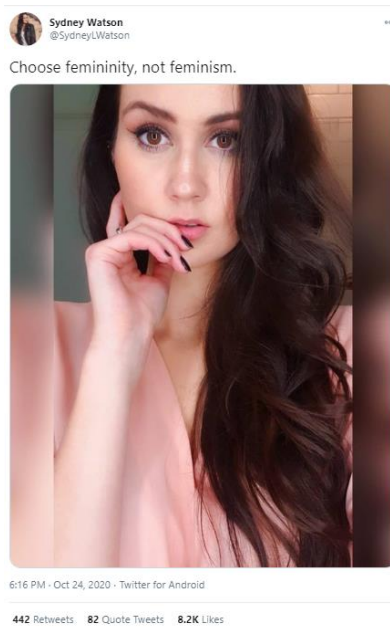
Source: [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#)

Figure 1: Number of Terrorist Attacks and Plots by Perpetrator Orientation, January–August 2020



Appendix C: A tweet written “Choose femininity, not feminism” and a selfie.

Source: Twitter of Sydney Watson



Appendix D: A tweet compares masculinity of men in the past and present.

Source: Twitter of Sydney Watson



Appendix E: Ayla Stewart and her family.

Source: [Topic.com](https://www.topic.com)



Appendix F: “The legacy of a man lies within the womb of his woman.”

Source: Instagram of Ayla Stewart



Appendix G: A tweet sharing the article of a white girl murdered by her Iraqi boyfriend.

Source: Twitter of Brittany Sellner



Appendix H: A YouTube collaboration with Lauren Southern on “Why It’s Hard to Make Girlfriends” with 114K views.

Source: YouTube of Brittany Sellner

