

Unveiling Women's Motivations: The allure of alt-right media

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Abstract

Alt-right ideology has become increasingly mainstream despite its dangerous and regressive core (Valasik and Reid, 2023). The messages circulated by alt-right public figures (politicians, influencers, etc.) are often self-described as anti-woke and spread harmful ideology with the focus of oppressing marginalized groups or incite violence either directly or indirectly. One of the groups targeted by the alt-right are women. However, there are women who still consume alt-right media despite the harm it causes. This study will apply Uses and Gratifications Theory to examine why everyday people, especially women, consume alt-right media and the role parasocial relationships play in alt-right media consumption.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

In recent years, alt-right ideology ¹ has become increasingly mainstream due to the use of alt-right rhetoric by mainstream conservatives (Valasik and Reid, 2023). While these public figures share a political ideology, they are not all politicians. There are podcasters such as Andrew Tate, news anchors such as Tucker Carlson, and musicians like Kanye West. Each of these people, and others like them, have been advocating for traditional gender roles, the removal of discussions regarding LGBTQ+ people and race from schools, and limiting human rights for minority groups. One of the strategies used to gain support from their audiences is using fear appeals to create panic around the possibility of indoctrinating the innocent, specifically children. Childhood is defined as a physical set of time and the states of innocence and vulnerability (Meyer, 2007). Therefore, when violence happens to a child, they are viewed as having lost their childhood. Ron DeSantis often references “woke indoctrination” and has placed harsh restrictions on what Florida schools may discuss, including factual history (Allen, 2022). In this instance, learning about topics such as racism is viewed as removing the child’s innocence.

Women are placed in a unique position within today’s mainstream alt-right ideology. Voices such as Candace Owens and Pearl Davis are amplified and tokenized to demonstrate the perceived positive outcomes of extreme gender roles while simultaneously pushing women to be homemakers and mothers (Norris, 2022). Recently, discourse surrounding tradwives (an abbreviation for traditional wives) blossomed throughout social media due to the New York

¹ The alt-right is a far-right movement based in white supremacy that focuses on traditional values that removes women’s autonomy and places their value solely on their ability to reproduce. Within the alt-right there is a focus on “purity” to continue producing white children and strictly limits sexual experiences for women. The alt-right is full of hypocrisy while the regressive nature and nationalistic beliefs lead to radicalizing members and oppressing marginalized groups (Norris, 2023).

Times interviewing tradwife @BallerinaFarm. Within the interview Neeleman (Ballerina Farm) shares that she was in Juilliard when she got married and pregnant which led to her giving up her dream and raising eight children. The article written criticizes the lifestyle and points out that Neeleman was often interrupted and overpowered by her husband. She also highlights details such as Neeleman sharing that she was only able to receive an epidural when her husband was not around for one of the births, that the only reminder of Neeleman's career is a small picture of a ballerina in the kitchen, and that they do not have assistance with housekeeping or a nanny which has left Neeleman exhausted enough to need to stay in bed for a week at a time. It is important to note that Neeleman's husband come from a wealthy family that could afford to hire assistance (Kircher and Bennett, 2024). Within the alt-right, there is a misguided anger at capitalism that results in women feeling as if feminism is the root of their issues and requires them to "do it all". Instead, within the alt-right, women are inherently valuable for simply having a womb, even if the alt-right restricts their personal and political freedoms (Love, 2020). Neeleman is an example of the trade off between being valued for your ability to produce children, but having bodily autonomy stripped from you.

It is important to note that despite the seemingly controlling nature of her relationship and the adversity she has faced Neeleman is an influencer that is encouraging others to become tradwives. Social media exacerbates and accelerates the spread of values associated with alt-right ideology through content creation. Content creators, as demonstrate by @BallerinaFarm, can gather an audience by focusing on aesthetics and subtlety, moving towards sharing ideology (Zahay, 2022). Virality assists with the spread of alt-right ideology by increasing the views of content creators and encouraging discussions around trending topics such as femininity or divine femininity (Zahay, 2022). Similarly, other public figures go viral for problematic views, stances,

and actions that align with the alt-right. While various platforms have differing levels of tolerance for harmful content, censorship or negative responses from other users feed into the alt-right's perceived victimization. Therefore, online spaces become a source of advocacy, backlash, harmful rhetoric, and discourse. This is mirrored in offline spaces through a political tug-of-war regarding marginalized group rights and legislation potentially and actively removing protection, for example, the repeal of abortion rights.

Some participants have direct influence over laws and policies, such as Ron DeSantis and Donald Trump; their messages influence the attitudes of their audiences towards these policies and their perception of minorities. Therefore, holding direct and indirect positions of influence places them in a unique placement of power. Other public figures may not directly impact policy, but they do influence their audiences' perceptions and attitudes. In turn, this may create a chain reaction of influencing voting behavior, which then allows more alt-right politicians to be elected and form harmful laws for racial minorities, women, the LGBTQ+ community, and religious minorities. Additionally, there are potential repercussions for daily practices. The spread and acceptance of alt-right ideology could result in discrimination in hiring practices, harassment in the workplace and socially, violence, and an overall decrease in minorities' well-being. In addition to these repercussions, people who accept alt-right ideology may participate in reactionary rhetoric and backlash. We have seen this through the formation of #AllLivesMatter and #WhiteLivesMatter in response to the Black Lives Matter movement. For these reasons, it is vital that we examine *why* everyday people, especially women, are viewing alt-right media and potentially forming parasocial relationships with alt-right public figures.

Corporations and organizations are moving towards placing a higher value on diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, as indicated by a 191% increase in discussion surrounding DEI over

the last ten years (Kratz, 2023). Despite organizations appearing to embrace advancements within their own structures and social movements, this progress is not without controversy and outrage, which is highlighted on polarized, fragmented, and siloed social media channels. One way the polarization is highlighted is through popular culture. In two recent movies, *The Little Mermaid* and *Barbie*, the movies pushing a “woke agenda” were a subject of discussion. Fox News disliked the changes in lyrics during *The Little Mermaid*, which were intended to be viewed as more consensual, and people took to social media with #NotMyAriel (2023). Both actions were focused on the dislike for “woke changes” to the original movie. In *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel is played by a black actress. Many people praised Disney for its casting decision because Halle Bailey helped to increase representation in a significant movie. Praise continued to be amplified on social media by highlighting videos of young black children’s excitement surrounding a main character that looked like them. Others were outraged by the decision to cast Halle Bailey because the original cartoon depicted a white Ariel. *Barbie* caused a similar split in responses. In *Barbie* the patriarchy is discussed and how it influences expectations of women in terms of appearance, labor, and relationships with men. The movie broke at least 17 box office records (Ulaby, 2023), and women took to social media to express that they felt heard by the writing. Various right-wing figures used colorful language to express that they thought the movie was too woke. For example, conservative podcaster Ben Shapiro posted a 43-minute response to *Barbie*, which included lighting a Barbie on fire in a garbage can and claiming, “It was one of the most woke movies I have ever seen” (2023). In addition to Ben Shapiro, Fox News features Tudor Dixon and Peachy Keenan, who describe the film as “the most insidious packaging of feminist cliches and trans-grooming that you have ever seen” (2023). These examples illustrate that reactionary rhetoric and backlash occur in mainstream platforms through influential, highly

networked individuals. With large platforms, such as Fox News, the concepts broadcast has the potential to reach a large audience. The reach is amplified further by each click and view their followers engage in, causing their messages to spread throughout social media.

This can be especially harmful for minority groups such as the LGBTQ+ community. The LGBTQ+ community is at a higher risk for mental health issues and worse overall well-being than their cisgender and heterosexual counterparts (Meanley et al., 2021 & Poulin-Rodriguez, 2019). It is essential to distinguish that this does not mean that being queer is a mental illness. Instead, the risk is due to increased bullying, a lack of healthcare, and poor support (Bishop et al., 2016 & Henriquez et al., 2021).

One way to help these adversaries is to turn to online platforms for connection and information (Fish et al., 2020). Online platforms can help navigate feelings of fear, uncertainty, sadness, anger, and shame and provoke joy (Jia et al., 2020). Additionally, youth used online spaces to find information on relationships, sex, and health for which they could not find resources in their everyday lives (Berger et al., 2021) and forming communities and relationships (McInroy et al., 2019). Online spaces may be a safer outlet for some individuals due to the risk of being outed or harassed (McDaniel et al., 2021). However, the same online spaces can become a target for discrimination (McConnell et al., 2017), with transgender and nonbinary youth experiencing higher levels of discrimination than gay, bisexual, and lesbian peers when looking online for COVID resources (Platero & Lopez-Saez, 2022). Platforms hold some level of agency over what is appropriate for their sites. This makes online spaces inclusive and exclusionary (Simpson & Semaan, 2021). Psychological distress from discrimination, internalized homophobia, and political salience can lead to physical symptoms and risky behaviors such as drug use and self-harm. Alternatively, this also places LGBTQ+ at a higher risk for

homelessness. These studies demonstrate that exposure to alt-right messages online or messages formed by those who are empowered by alt-right public figures, both online and in-person, have real tangible effects on minorities.

As noted, a wide variety of media can be considered alt-right media. Before we delve into why people are consuming alt-right media, we must first define it. Defining the alt-right has become increasingly challenging in the Trump era of politics. Trump entered politics, aligning himself with the Republican Party while leaning into the racist and populist concerns of voters, which created more extremism, pushed postmodern ideas, and contributed to misinformation (Jarvis & Eddington, 2021). Politicians who consistently show conservative values and voting habits but do not support Trump are perceived as more moderate (Hopkins & Noel, 2022). This leaves us to decipher who is truly moderate and conservative. For this study, I define alt-right media as far-right conservative media that is based on the concepts of white supremacy, homophobia or transphobia, sexism or misogyny, and/or Christian nationalism (Norris, 2023). The participants defined the public figures as the focus of the study. The public figures include Candace Owens, Ben Shapiro, Charlie Kirk, Ron DeSantis, Donald Trump, and Tucker Carlson. These public figures have defined themselves as far right, but their content aligns with the definition of alt-right.

This study's focus is not on analyzing specific episodes, social media posts, or speeches given by public figures. However, understanding the context and typical content produced by the public figures mentioned is imperative when analyzing the motivation behind media consumption. We will begin by discussing Candace Owens, her content, and why I believe it is categorized as alt-right media. Candace Owens is a content creator who posts across various platforms, including YouTube and X (formerly known as Twitter), and formerly worked with the

Daily Wire. Her YouTube bio reads, “Sick of the ‘alt-left’? Welcome. I prescribe red pills” (Owens, 2024). As a Black woman, she claims that white supremacy does not exist in America and, instead, the most significant issue is that there is an attack on the family unit. In her video *Feminism is the Number One Attack on Family*, she claims that we are living in a matriarchy under the illusion of a patriarchy that relies on the hyper-feminization of men (2023). In the same video, amongst others, she states homophobic and transphobic comments by claiming that the reason the government is pushing to allow children to mutilate themselves is so that they cannot reproduce. She commonly also references the LGBTQ+ community as freaks and predators (2023). In her own words, Owens claims that there are sinister Hollywood Jews working behind the scenes to threaten people and use their identity to be shielded from accountability, similar to Black gangs.

Similarly to Candace Owens, Ben Shapiro hosts a podcast, which can be found on YouTube, amongst other platforms. These two content creators significantly overlap in their ideologies and rhetoric, as demonstrated by Owens's appearance on Shapiro's shows until recently. Ben Shapiro's YouTube channel often features debates regarding LGBTQ+ identity and rights, abortion, and conspiracy theories, and he argues in *Why Cultural Christianity Isn't Enough* that keeping Christianity pure is required to keep systems from failing. Charlie Kirk also has a talk radio show, *The Charlie Kirk Show*, and founded Turning Point USA. Turning Point USA is a conservative youth organization located in high schools and college campuses advocating for limited government. He often visits college campuses, occasionally with Candace Owens, to host debate-styled discussions with students over abortion, immigration, and speaking out against Black Lives Matter, referring to it as Floyd-a-Palooza. The last content creator discussed was Andrew Tate. He is a self-proclaimed misogynist who recently was charged with

human trafficking in Romania. He has stated that women should take responsibility for being sexually assaulted as well as claiming that he is a force for good acting under the instruction of God (Radford, 2024). Overall, his social media and content presence focuses on extreme and violent gender roles that reinforce a dangerous expression of masculinity.

Since Donald Trump and Ron DeSantis are politicians, they are placed in a unique position of power where they can help perpetuate alt-right values through legislation during their terms. Ron DeSantis has been vital to the contributions of the Don't Say Gay bills throughout Florida and gender-affirming care bans. He has also pushed the Stop WOKE Act, which would ban lessons and training on race and diversity within schools and workplaces (Alfonseca, 2022). To help further justify his goals regarding the school curriculum, he states that slavery helped some African Americans learn skills while being enslaved (Sullivan and Rozsa, 2023). While Trump is often criticized for his harmful language choices surrounding immigration and sexual assault, he also put white nationalists, such as Stephen K. Bannon and Stephen Miller, in positions of power by placing them high up in his administration (Lowndes, 2020). Aligning with DeSantis, he stated that if reelected, he would cut funding to any school pushing "Critical Race Theory, transgender insanity, and any other inappropriate racial, sexual, or political content onto our children" (Betts, 2024).

We have defined alt-right ideology and explored examples of alt-right media. Additionally, we have established why the spread of alt-right ideology and media is harmful to minoritized groups. As we continue throughout the study, the objective is to examine why people, especially women, view alt-right media and how their connections with alt-right public figures influence their beliefs and media consumption. To do this, we will use the Uses and Gratifications Theory and the theory of parasocial relationships.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Historical Context

Through dissecting the historical context of the alt-right and alt-right rhetoric, we can gain a deeper understanding of how the public figures mentioned beforehand form their arguments and how the arguments are rooted in bigotry. We will first discuss the civil rights movement and its relation to masculinity. One of the most notorious hate organizations was the Ku Klux Klan. Specifically, the second Klan was formed during the 1920s and is well known historically for its heinous crimes against the Black community, including, but not limited to, beatings, lynching, and arson, which were prominent throughout the civil rights movement. While the organization is founded on white supremacy, other recruitment tactics were used as well. One was the fear of communism entering the United States (Schmack, 2022). By creating a Red Scare, they could recruit under the guise of protection, a theme we will continue discussing shortly. Federal officials such as President Harry Truman, Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black, and Senator Robert Byrd were notable members of the Klan. Byrd explicitly stated in a 1960 interview that he joined the Klan because the Klan was fighting communism and had been unfairly judged for the acts committed by others. It is important to note that they all eventually renounce their membership. However, despite his membership being known from 1952, Byrd remained a senator until he died in 2010 (Schmack, 2022).

The Klan and Gender

Racism and gender are intertwined in a way that cannot be unwoven without there being injustice within the discussion. Maclean (1995) states, “Without attention to how notions of

proper manhood, womanhood, and parenting infused Klan thought and action, no analysis would be complete. For the Klan, conservative ideology was a deeply gendered phenomenon.

Klansmen could not discuss issues of race, class, or state power apart from their understanding of manhood, womanhood, and sexual decorum.” The film *The Birth of a Nation* depicted and propelled the idea that black men would harm white women. Therefore, white women’s purity was a center of focus within the Klan (Schmack, 2022 & Maclean, 1995). Purity was used as a symbol for innocent as well as untainted in the context of only including pure Americans. In other words, men who were both white and Christian.

Modern Day

To gain a deeper insight into masculinity and how far-right ideology is heavily gendered, we will examine how gender is defined, binary definitions of masculinity and femininity, and how categorizing gender applies to modern-day far-right ideology. After gaining a further understanding of gendered conflict, we will look at the responses to the progression of minority movements through examples of popular culture, counter-movements, and recent events. Lastly, we will discuss how conspiracy theories disseminated by alt-right and far-right public figures have racial undertones and historical connections.

There is a consensus within academia that gender is socially constructed and interacts with sex (Ashcraft, 2022). Sex refers to the biological composition of male or female (or intersex). Gender is the aspect of identity performed by the individual and reconstructed through social norms, interactions with others, and internal negotiation. Often, gender is placed in a binary, positioning masculine and feminine or man and woman in opposition to one another. One example is that feminine features are caring, communal, and submissive, while masculine

features are dominating, individualistic, and direct (Kolb, 2012). Thinking of gender as binary removes identities and is exclusionary to those that do not align with man or woman. However, the discussion of gender and sex goes deeper into controversy. Some individuals view them as one. You were either both born male and are a man or you were born a female and are a woman. The removal of the social construct and focus on biology has been weaponized against transgender people by the alt-right (bathroom laws, participation in sports, refusal to use correct pronouns). As we continue to discuss the alt-right, it is vital to clarify that their definition of gender does not align with the understanding of gender being a social construct. Instead, anti-feminist view men and women as being fundamentally different (Anderson, 2015).

Some traditional women view the progression of feminism to be detrimental to society and family units. These women's testimonies may then become evidence used to validate the Men's Rights Advocates efforts. We can see these testimonies through the #Tradwife movement. As briefly mentioned, this movement primarily takes place on social networking sites. Within the far-right movement women are celebrated for simply being a woman and possessing a womb (Norris, 2023). The women participating have felt ostracized by the feminist movement due to wanting to be stay at home mothers. Connected to how men feel disposable because of women gaining economic advancements instead of blaming their economic insecurity on capitalistic practices, women feel as if the development of feminism has created a space to where they must do everything instead of being able to choose a path outside of motherhood (Ukockis, 2019; Love, 2020).

In addition to feeling ostracized, some women also feel as if it is no longer necessary, like some opinions with MRAs. Beginning with the 1970s, some individuals declared the time to be post-feminist due to the work of feminism being complete due to changes in sexual

harassment and discrimination laws, Title IX in education, and women being allowed in the military and other workplaces (Anderson, 2015; Coste, 2010). Post-feminist views portray white, heterosexual, middle-class women's issues as applying to all women. These women feel empowered and do not view feminism as necessary. (Anderson, 2015). Within this belief, continuing the feminist movement positions men to be the victims of gender discrimination. They state that one of the places this discrimination is depicted is through the media because men are more often portrayed as criminals, which, as a result, will make male viewers feel guilty and portray masculinity as inherently bad. However, this is not an accurate statement. Within movies and television, women are more likely to not work or have an unknown job, while men are portrayed in a wide range of behaviors and professions, including law enforcement, blue-collar workers, and professional roles (Anderson, 2015). It is important to note that women play a role in discrediting and policing other women. However, women who are anti-feminists still frame their work as being in the best interest of women (Ukockis, 2019; Schreiber, 2008). Members within these movements often characterize feminists as monolithic and present themselves as an alternative while borrowing the languages used, such as "empowerment" and "choice."

Another tactic used is to lean into the trope of feminists being man-hating and unhappy (Caste, 2010; Ukockis, 2019). Alternatively, this trope has been used by men to incite violence. Whenever there were homosexual bans in the military, men would use the trope to threaten to disclose that the women were lesbians if they were denied sexual advances regardless of their sexuality. Additionally, rape crisis centers were targets for graffiti and claims that the centers were making women hate men or become lesbians (Anderson, 2015). One of the reasons lesbians are weaponized in this context is because men are not at the center of their experiences, which threatens traditional roles (Anderson, 2015). The men and women involved in anti-feminist work

seem to have a significant overlap in beliefs even if, at times, it is used against women. The contradiction leads us to the question of how women can reconcile by adopting the same beliefs used against them. Anderson argues that the “privileged access of one identity politic (e.g., white), but inequitable status of another (e.g., women, or when one identity is denied, or unacknowledged members of underrepresented groups), creates a context where people can seemingly remove themselves from an oppressed identity” (2021, p.61). In other words, white women benefit from the privileges that come with their whiteness and can get the choice of oppression depending on the circumstances. While we know that women have limited agency within alt-right movements, they are still able to position themselves to benefit from white supremacy if they choose to comply. Within alt-right organizations, women demonstrate the interconnectedness of the public and private spheres. Historically, women have been confined to the private sphere, where the focus is the home. When this is violated, women are often met with harassment, such as cat-calling (Ukockis, 2019). By aligning with anti-feminism, and positioning themselves as tokens, they participate in the public sphere. Often, the use of arguments about which legislation is harmful to children are used as speaking points for anti-feminist groups, thus connecting the private and public spheres (Schreiber, 2008).

Women are excluded from Men’s Rights Advocate (MRA) membership. Schmitz & Kazyak state that they refuse to hire women to help with the online platform because they believe men should remain in control of the organization, but they will hire attractive women to sell merchandise at conventions (2016). This does not stop women from supporting men’s rights (Jarvis & Eddington, 2021). Men’s Rights Advocates have formed in response to feminism as well. MRAs can take various forms, such as meeting online or in person and meeting with varying perspectives of feminism (Ferber, 2000). Some MRAs accept feminism or aspects of

feminism. An example is the mythopoetic men's movement, which believes that absent fathers cause the root of men's issues and that the only way to heal genuinely is to be around other men. Mythopoetic men's groups typically host men-only retreats with the focus of becoming in tune with deep masculinity, or in other words, practicing emotional maturity and intelligence as well as rejecting violence that comes from patriarchy (Ferber, 2000). Despite the potential for mythopoetic groups to advocate for a more emotionally mature and caring manhood and masculinity, an overwhelming majority of MRAs adopt more visceral and vitriolic stances. Most groups outright reject feminism and blame women for men's violence against women. For example, Schmitz and Kazyak (2016) describe one member of an MRA-centered website stating that women are to blame for acts of men's brutality because they would be able to prevent outbursts by engaging in sexual favors with a variety of men. Another member was quoted saying that women need to be tamed and, therefore, should be beaten. Ironically, these men's groups also note that it is important not to damage the women's looks in the process (Schmitz & Kazyak, 2016). Similarly, Eddington's (2020) and Eddington et al.'s (2023) study of The Red Pill men's rights group described various ways that women are simultaneously objectified and revered while being objects of scorn and hatred. These contradictions further objectify women as they are dehumanized as things that men seek to hold power over. Whenever examining the woman as a symbol in this context, it refers to the independence and advancement of women that is credited to feminism.

Other MRAs do not encourage violence but are still harmful due to their avoidance of accountability. Some MRAs take the approach of victimization instead. Members of these organizations view themselves as having to deal with the consequences of other men's actions and the bias placed on them for being men. Within these MRAs, specific statistics and narratives

are cherry-picked or fabricated to validate their arguments (Schmitz & Kazyak, 2016). These cherry-picked arguments often have to do with paternal rights, men's physical and mental health, and higher rates of incarceration. Faludi explains that this is not a new phenomenon and that those issues are often focused on in college courses on men's topics (1991). It must be noted that feminism addressed the adverse effects patriarchy has on men, for example, the pressure not to show emotion leading to poor mental well-being. However, this is omitted from their arguments (Schmitz & Kazyak, 2016). Even if violence is not encouraged, forming a negative frame around feminism and women helps perpetuate the challenges women face, for example, bias within the workplace. Additionally, each of the MRAs mentioned deflects men's accountability. Even when men are the ones perpetrating violence, they are viewed as victims within the system (Ferber, 2000).

The role of masculinity within various MRAs remains one of the most important factors, even if there is some level of variance within the view of masculinity. The mythopoetic views deep masculinity as the ultimate objective. Members of this organization want to step away from generational curses involving toxic masculinity and remove themselves from the idea that men are inherently violent. Unfortunately, mythopoetic groups are an exception to the norm within MRAs. A vast majority of MRAs value traditional masculinity. Traditional masculinity focuses on independence (including from the family unit), providing and advancing economically, pursuing conquests of women and objects, and both physical and mental strength. This leads to activities such as hunting and working out to be viewed as masculine (Schmitz & Kazyak, 2016) and aligns with Connell's (2005) definition of hegemonic masculinity that focuses on aspects of masculinity such as strength. A critical difference between feminist studies and the view of MRAs is that members of MRAs do not view gender or masculinity as a performance or

expression. Instead, they view masculinity as a biological difference that follows the natural order. Therefore, going against masculinity is viewed as unnatural. Going against the norm of masculinity for men and femininity for women is viewed as abnormal, causing it also to be immoral. Stepping outside of traditional masculinity is viewed as a crisis of masculinity (Flood et al., 2020).

Backlash

We have discussed specific movements organized as a response to feminism with a focus on femininity and masculinity. Now, we will discuss backlash. I borrow from Faludi's (1991) and Burke's (2004) definitions of backlash by using the term to identify negative responses due to the possibility of minority equity and progress within policies and movements to help obtain equity (1991, 2004). To Faludi, backlash is experienced through adverse reactions to social justice movements, primarily intersecting with gender, sexuality, race, and disability. Similarly, Burke defines backlash as any form of resistance to policy, initiative, or program that help aid a marginalized group (2004). The reactions, or backlash, can be formal or informal as well as collective or individual (Flood et al., 2020). When examining backlash against feminism, the backlash will fall into two categories. The first is men that once agreed with feminism, but now view it as being inappropriately applied. The second is men who never agreed with feminism and continue to view it as unnecessary (Burke, 2004). Both Burke (2004) and Faludi (1991) agree that backlash is constituted through a perception that men view themselves as being discriminated against because of feminism and the feminist movement. The change they are considering comes from women advancing inequality, even though there is room for drastic improvement. This includes advancing in the workplace, having more agency in how/if women form families, and challenging traditional gender roles (Buzanell, 1994). For example,

whenever women are accepted in roles that are traditionally/historically masculine or not exclusively feminine, there is backlash. Femininity in this context is viewed as the primary goal of a woman, which is to raise a family and be submissive towards the husband. Some men feel lost in understanding what their role has now changed (Burke, 2004). Backlash can be exacerbated if women excel at the role they view as belonging to them, especially if he is not doing as well as the women (Burke, 2004). The perceived loss of power can elicit a response when highlighted through media. For instance, during the rebrand of *Ghostbusters*, which featured women in the main roles that were previously held by men, social media users expressed their dislike for the change through sexist and racist comments aimed at cast member Leslie Jones (Blodgett & Salter, 2018).

A wide range of responses can be considered backlash. As mentioned earlier, posting sexist, racist, or homophobic comments online is considered backlash. As seen in the example by Ben Shapiro, the *Barbie* movie triggered this response due to its discussion of feminism. One of the core concepts within feminist backlash is that women are perceived as selfish. When holding this view, it is believed that when women focus on their individual needs and desires, they have abandoned their family units. Women are responsible for morally guiding the family unit while following the husband's lead (Flood et al, 2020). Examples of women acting as individuals and thus breaking the family unit include initiating divorce, advancing a career, choosing not to become married or have children, and being homosexual. Similarly, men view the agency granted to women by feminist movements as creating tension in their romantic and sexual relationships or potential relationships and a loss of their power (Schmitz & Kazyak, 2016; Eddington, 2020; Jarvis & Eddington, 2021; Eddington et. al, 2023). In response, there is a movement to bring back traditional families and to protect the family unit. In recent years,

tradwife influencers have used their platforms to promote content focused on how femininity and family should look. The influencers use aesthetic and helpful content, such as hair tutorials, to gather their audience before discussing their anti-feminism views (Zahay, 2022). Another large aspect of preserving family units was ensuring white families prevailed. While some feminist movements are critiqued for not being intersectional, the tie between disdain for feminism and racial minorities progressing socially and economically is intertwined.

MRAs and the Trad Wife movement are not the only examples of organizing due to acceptance of alt-right ideologies. All Lives Matter, and White Lives Matter were counter-movements formed in response to Black Lives Matter. All Lives Matter is meant to undermine the Black Lives Matter movement by shifting the focus of the injustices the black community faces and intentionally contrasting the message that Black Lives Matter sends to discredit the movement. All Lives Matter has been used as a slogan and a hashtag, but ultimately to camouflage prejudice (Kaiser, 2021). White Lives Matter is an extremist group with ties to neo-Nazis. White Lives Matter's organization happens in online spaces such as Telegram (Stewart et al., 2023). Whites Lives Matter as a slogan is used by the Ku Klux Klan, the Noble Breed Kindred, and other white supremacy groups (Stewart et al., 2023). Rallies for White Lives Matter had ties to the Proud Boys as well. These alt-right hate groups used the platform Telegram to organize the January 6th Capitol attack. On the platform, users expressed that they were unjustly made the victim in the process of helping minorities gain equality. The feeling of victimhood and othering of minorities led to users expressing racist, sexist, homophobic, and xenophobic comments and threats of violence. Ultimately, the platform was filled with calls to action to take back what they deserved. After the Capitol attack, users showed support for those arrested, referring to them as prisoners of war (Kaiser, 2021). While not every person who participated in

the January 6th attack may identify with a hate group, the participation was sparked by feelings of social movements and the election being unjust. Similarly, incel groups have formed on Reddit, some of which have since been banned due to inciting violence against women. These users felt rejected by women and used the platform to reinforce their mindset and validate their perceived right to feel enraged. Rape and violence were viewed as acceptable “payback” within the discourse (Ukockis, 2019). These are two examples of problematic media usage by alt-right groups but to understand the severity it is important to note that the weaponization of the internet by alt-right members expands past these two instances. The internet is also being used for direct rape threats and revenge porn (Ukockis, 2019).

Backlash does not require official membership to a group. Backlash has the potential to be amplified or initiated due to noticeable changes for minority groups and programs that are put into place to help aid advancement in the workplace. Members of the dominant group, primarily white, straight, able-bodied men, may view these initiatives to increase diversity as discriminatory against the dominant group since they are excluded. However, specific dominant group members are more likely to experience backlash. This includes men who have struggled to advance in their careers and lack a formal education (Burke, 2004). Pierce explains that most backlash caused by affirmative action within the workplace was in private or semi-private conversations between white individuals (2012). Pierce confirms Burke that those members with more secure positions and who have done well in their careers feel less threatened by affirmative action (2012, 2004).

Another phenomenon is that varying groups have different perceptions of the amount of DEI work completed and needed. In Burke’s study, most employees found that the company had conducted an appropriate amount of DEI work but not too much. It is important to note that most

employees belong to dominant groups. A layer of nuance is added because some identities can still be privileged over others within the workplace culture and policies (2004). For example, dress codes may focus on policing Black women's hair, but do not affect white women. This may affect employees' perception of the appropriate amount of DEI programs (Burke, 2004).

It is vital that discussions of backlash are intersectional. While both minority groups have unique experiences, alt-right figures spue rhetoric that is harmful to gender, sexual, religious, and racial minorities. Additionally, there are intersectional differences between members of each group and the attacks used on them. For example, blackness and queerness are identified as a threat against family units. Both groups are being targeted in the American school system due to being viewed as indoctrination and discussions of them as “overly woke.”

Conspiracy Theories

While conspiracy theories are not a criterion to being categorized as alt-right, they are a common symptom. Conspiracy theories have been a symptom historically, such as stating that Martin Luther King Jr was a communist, and are prevalent in today's media. Public figures such as Ben Shapiro, Cadence Owens, and Andrew Tate position themselves as political experts and leaders in morality. However, they often spread misinformation through conspiracy theories. Positioning themselves as a source of credibility for their viewers while simultaneously asking them to “wake up” to see the truth creates a swamp of contradictions and manipulation. The following section will explain what some of the common conspiracy theories are and how they inspire hate and fear towards minorities, especially racial and ethnic groups.

Populist dissent has allowed public figures, such as Donald Trump, to further perpetuate conspiracy theories that focus on a hidden enemy. This hidden enemy is a threat to traditional

values and is often figures such as Satan, communism, the Illuminati, or The New World Order (Wilson, 2018). In the case of Trump, he encouraged the idea of a stolen election and vaccines being a hoax. As mentioned, he is not alone in his role in spreading conspiracy theories. In our example from the beginning of the text, Candace Owens identified the hidden enemy as a secretive, hidden, and violent group of Jewish people in Hollywood. The idea of minorities working behind the scenes to alter America is not new. Schmack (2018) highlights the conspiracy that Martin Luther King Jr was a communist. The theory gained traction due to a staged picture being spread through the Klan and Nazi groups as well as placed on billboards (2018). The rise of anti-Critical Race Theory (CRT) discourse has recently blossomed throughout the states. For context, Christopher Rufo mentioned that CRT was taking place in Seattle schools, which Tucker Carlson picked up, followed by Trump creating an executive order to ban CRT within the military. The wildfire continued to spread, with politicians such as Josh Hawley highlighting what they considered dangerous to children's well-being (Ashcraft, 2022). The argument is that CRT has ties to communism, and they are trying to indoctrinate children as well as make them feel guilty for being white (Ashcraft, 2022).

Parasocial Relationships

Regardless of the harm these individuals cause, people still appear to be connected to them. Parasocial relationships are non-reciprocal relationships between a public figure and an audience member. Defining a non-reciprocal relationship has become more complex in the social media age. A public figure may like a comment on a post or repost someone's commentary about the public figure. If something of this nature happens to an anonymous or unidentifiable account, I would still include it as a parasocial relationship. Many public figures have social media and public relations teams. However, since we cannot tell if the public figure made the interaction,

the data will be eliminated from this study. Similarly, if a participant has seen the individual in person (for example, attending a Trump Rally), but has not had any contact with the public figure, I would still classify their relationship as parasocial.

Parasocial relationships have been proven to influence both consumer behavior and political behavior. Cohen (2021) found that parasocial relationships were a stronger indication of voting behavior than previous voting history. Patlollu and Hans (2023) argue that websites for senators encourage parasocial relationships between politicians and constituents. Both studies, among others, indicate that parasocial relationships could influence attitudes and, in turn, lead to the acceptance of harmful rhetoric and ideologies.

Parasocial relationships have been studied in the context of influencers' power in persuading their audience to buy a product. Chung and Hichang confirmed that self-disclosure played a vital role in forming parasocial relationships and found that the parasocial relationship increased brand credibility and trustworthiness (2017). Aligning with their findings, a parasocial relationship with an influencer resulted in the influencer having more perceived credibility (Reinikainen et al., 2020). Credibility played a role in other ways as well. Content creators who were likable and attractive led to the information they shared being viewed as higher quality and credible (Cheng et al., 2023). In addition to credibility, parasocial relationships influenced interest. Individuals with a pre-existing parasocial relationship with an influencer sparked interest and placed an increased value on political topics the creator posted (Haraff, 2022). By participating in political discourse while holding a large following, the content creator has positioned themselves as a political influencer regardless of whether most of their content is related to political topics (Lukito and Woolley, 2023). In Sweden, four influencers not previously focused on politics were hired by a private company to promote their services in a way that

would attract socially conscious consumers. The influencers did not promote a cause or political party, but they effectively promoted an ideology and lifestyle that their audience wanted to imitate (Arnesson, 2022).

On the other hand, there are content creators whose sole purpose is to promote a political ideology and value system. Viewership of political influencers tends to lead to more extremist views. Additionally, high viewership levels led to higher acceptance of the ideology (Gibson et al., 2023). Alt-right influencers are connected to the spread of misinformation. Often, fear appeals are paired with taglines such as #SaveTheChildren (Moran and Prochaska, 2022). The spread of misinformation becomes increasingly dangerous when examining the persuasive power of parasocial relationships. When looking at political commentators, the stronger the parasocial relationship, the less likely the individual is to be able to identify that the message was persuasive (Dunn, 2018).

Alt-right influencers that are not mainstream also play a role in the spread of ideology. Social media platforms, such as Telegram, have been used to help mobilize white supremacy movements and ideology. The posts are backlash towards increased inclusion efforts and often hold violent calls to action. Mobilization for the January 6th attack occurred on the site through posts encouraging participation. When members of an online space share the same goals, vision, values, and common jargon or communication pattern tools, there is an exchange of engagement involving a social issue (Warren et al., 2014). In this case, the social problem is rooted in advocacy for bigotry and a call to violence. The hate influencers rely on othering minorities, the creation of illegitimate fears, victimhood, and brotherhood to help remain effective. At times, the posts are faceless, while others have the individuals visible. Regardless, some posts have views of around 40 thousand. Ultimately, they form connections based on emotion and parasocial

relationships (Stewart et al., 2023). The parasocial relationships are both with other members, and there is a strong mention of public figures; most notably, members have a solid parasocial relationship with Donald Trump (Stewart et al., 2023).

Chapter 3 - Methodology

Uses and Gratification Theory guided the formation of the study. This theory examines the motivation behind media consumption and repeat media consumption. The needs addressed by Uses and Gratification Theory are cognitive, affective, personal integrative, social integrative, and tension-free. Using the Uses and Gratification Theory, we assume individuals have agency in media consumption. Various contexts, including Uses and Gratification Theory, have been applied, ranging from food delivery apps (Ray et al., 2019) to cyberbullying (Tanrikulu & Erdur-Baker, 2021). Uses and Gratification Theory has also been used in political and media contexts. Regardless of the topic analyzed, the uses and gratification theory aims to help further understand why people participate in behavior and what their perceived benefits are. Within this study, the Uses and Gratification Theory was a guide for shaping RQ1 and the interview questions. Each question relates to cognitive, affective, personal integrative, social integrative or tension free needs. The study also connects Uses and Gratification Theory to parasocial relationships.

This chapter aims to elucidate the research methodology used in this study. Through applying qualitative methods, we can gain a deeper understanding of the motivation behind consuming alt-right media and how alt-right viewers perceive public figures. The chapter will discuss the research questions, participants, data collection, analysis, and the researcher.

Research Questions

With alt-right public figures loudly spewing harmful messages, we must understand why their platforms are appealing. The following research questions were formed to achieve these, guided by the Uses and Gratifications Theory and parasocial relationships.

RQ1: What are the motivations behind why individuals regularly consume alt-right media, specifically produced by alt-right public figures?

RQ2: How do parasocial relationships play a role in alt-right media consumption?

Data Collection

Qualitative methods, specifically semi-structured interviews, allowed participants to elaborate on their specific media usage and experiences. The design of qualitative methods allows for further insight into an individual's experiences, cultures, and contexts (Dent, 2011). Context plays a significant role in this study. For example, participants can elaborate on how they come across the media. Even when the algorithm provides the content, users are active and are not without agency. They can decide to scroll or, on some platforms, dislike a video. I am not downplaying the role of regular and repetitive messages on the users or the influence of the algorithm in indoctrination. Instead, I am stating that allowing the participants to describe their experiences allows us to gain clarity in understanding the process and reasoning behind viewing alt-right media.

The interviews consisted of semi-structured and open-ended questions. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and personal identifiers were removed (e.g., hometown, location of lawsuit, and names). The questions focused on the parasocial relationship between the interviewees and alt-right public figures and their motivation for consuming alt-right media regardless of their own political identity. For example, participants were asked how they would feel if someone spoke poorly about the public figure they chose to focus on and if they used the public figures as a resource for political topics. Through using interviews, participants can go more in-depth about their views and experiences. The interviews began by explaining that the structure would go from broad to narrow questions and that we could have flexibility if there was

anything else they would like to add. The participants were then told that if they felt a question did not resonate with them, it was okay to say it did not apply to their media consumption or experiences. However, regardless of how they respond to an answer, they should elaborate on why that is their response. Lastly, the participants were reminded that the public figures we discussed should be related to their conservative media consumption.

The interviews began with orientation to build rapport, gain a better understanding of participants' general media use, and understand aspects of participants of identity that they view as important. The interviewees were then asked to identify two to three public figures that they favored. The public figures identified became the focus of the remainder of the interview. Questions were divided to focus on parasocial relationships and Uses and Gratifications. Participants were asked to describe how they felt connected to the public figures they identified followed by focusing on feelings. For example, “If someone spoke poorly about Public Figure, how would that make you feel?” and “Have Public Figures made you feel supported within your own beliefs?” When focusing on Uses and Gratifications, questions were formed around cognitive, affective, personal integrative, social integrative, and tension free needs. When focusing on cognitive needs, participants were asked if they use Public Figures to find information on political topics and if they were a source for any other topics as well. To focus on social integrative needs, participants were asked if other important people in their lives consume the same media. They were then asked if they discuss the Public Figures together and if it is a source of bonding. Lastly, participants were asked broadly why they enjoyed consuming media from the Public Figures they identified to open the conversation to any elements the participants wanted to add or elaborate on.

An audio recording was created for each interview which was then used to create a transcript. Following the transcript being created, the audio recordings were deleted per the protocol accepted by IRB. The transcripts were then used to conduct a thematic analysis. To begin the thematic analysis, the transcripts were read several times. This was then followed by writing specific phrases that may be important on sticky notes and grouping similar themes. The process then moved back to a digital format to finish coding. The process and findings of coding will be more explicitly explored in the data analysis section.

Figure 1.1. Recruitment Flyer

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED
EXAMINING THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN MEDIA AND POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

Do YOU....

1. CONSUME CONSERVATIVE MEDIA? (PODCASTS, SOCIAL MEDIA, YOUTUBE, ETC.)
2. WILLING TO PARTICIPATE IN A PHONE INTERVIEW?

MEDIA EXAMPLES:
TATE SPEECH, JUSTPEARLYTHINGS, CHARLIE KIRK SHOW, TIM POOLE, RICHARD SPENCER, THE BEN SHAPIRO SHOW, CANDICE OWENS, ENRIQUE TARIQ, MTG, STEPHEN CROWDER, LINDSAY GRAHAM, TOMMY TUBERVILLE, SNEAKO, FRESH & FIT, SARGON OF AKKAD, TUCKER CARLSON, LIBSOFTIKTOK

CONTACT
MASTERSTHESISRESEARCH2@GMAIL.COM

The flyer features three red arrows: one pointing from the title to the criteria, one from the criteria to the media examples, and one from the media examples to the contact information.

Before the interviews began, the participants filled out and returned an informed consent form. Once interviews were completed, participants were read a debriefing statement reiterating aspects of the informed consent and thanked for their participation.

The population of the study were adults (over the age of 18) that regularly consumed alt-right media. The participants for this study self-identify as conservative, conservative-leaning, or anti-woke, and consume alt-right media. Since the parasocial relationships studies are not confined to influencers (could also be politicians, news anchors, entertainers, etc.), media consumption does not necessarily have to be social media. A convenience sample was utilized with recruitment focusing on Kansas State University and the surrounding area of Manhattan, Kansas. Instead of labeling the media as alt-right, the flyers listed examples that would qualify to avoid deterring or offending potential participants. Additionally, the flyers specified that

Five participants were interviewed. Each participant indicated that they were completing the study as an opportunity for extra credit which allows us to know that every participant had some college education. Out of the five participants four of them identified as women with one identifying as bisexual and one identifying as a woman of color. Since identity is relevant to the study, an in-depth description of participant identities will be listed below with pseudonyms assigned. The terms used in the table below mimic the same language used by participants when asked to describe their identity. Participants were asked to identify what they found to be important aspects of their identity along with explicitly stating their political and gender identities which formed the following categories. Below the table, identities as well as experiences that participants deemed important to share are elaborated on.

Figure 3.2. A Table with Descriptions of Participants

✓ = EXPLICITLY STATED YES ✗ = EXPLICITLY STATED NO / OTHER BLANK = UNSPECIFIED				
PARTICIPANT	CONSERVATIVE	CHRISTIAN	WOMAN	MAN
SARAH	✓	✓	✓	✗
MIA	✓		✓	✗
OLIVIA	✗		✓	✗
EMILY	✓	✓	✓	✗
JACK	✓	✗	✗	✓

Participant A - Sarah

In Sarah’s own words, she identified as conservative, but not republican as well as specifically being Lutheran. She stated that other important aspects of her identity were her English and Jewish heritage and her identity as a science student. Other important contexts that Sarah provided was that she is involved with the university’s campus ministry and that she used to identify as liberal. She explained that this time was around four or five years ago, during late middle school and early high school. She attributed the change in political ideology to finding new information that she thought “actually made more sense”. Sarah specified that she is not anti-vaccine twice throughout the interview. However, she expressed concern over the general

health of the United States in terms of food and thinks that more research should be done before requiring masks.

Participant B - Mia

Other components of Mia's experiences are that she grew up in a military household and attributes that to being independent and responsible. Mia was raised by conservative parents but specified that they did not force the ideology onto her. She became more involved with politics in high school during the pandemic. Her family sued the school district to remove the mask mandate for her and another student. The other important aspects of her identity are that she is a Christian and pro-life.

Participant C - Emily

This participant explained that she had heavily consumed alt-right media for a few years during middle school in high school. During the interview, she reflected on this time in her life. She now identifies as leaning towards socialism and communism. Other important context for Emily was that she did not have a positive homelife and that her grandparents agreed with her conservative views.

Participant D - Jack

In Jack's own words, he identified as a Republican who is not "overly conservative" but leaned further right. However, he said that he agrees with Donald Trump and Ron DeSantis politically and identified Ron DeSantis as a moderate. Other essential aspects of his identity were being from a small town and a farmer who values time with friends.

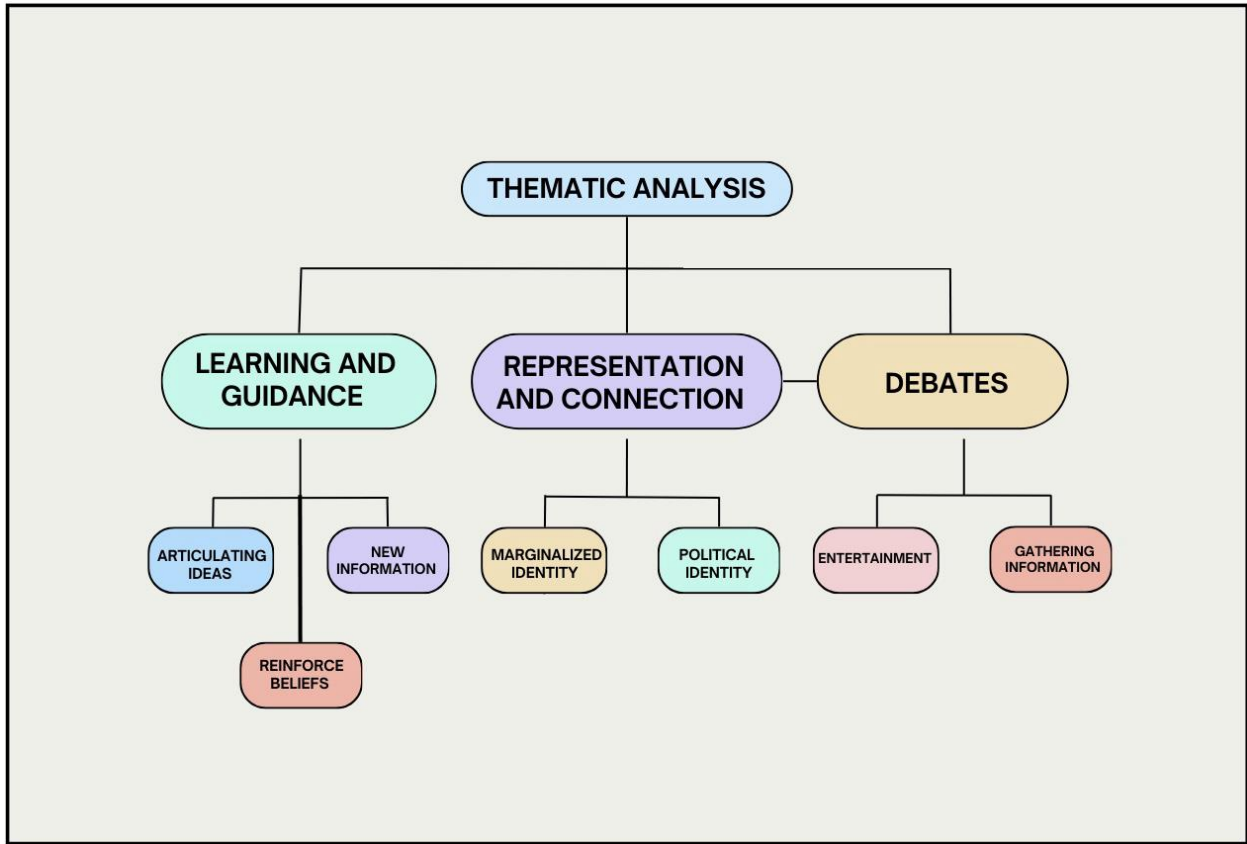
Participant E - Olivia

She identified as a moderate who tends to lean liberal. While her stances on subjects such as abortion leaned to the left, she had strong opinions about transgender rights. When discussing what this specifically meant, she stated that an example is that transgender individuals should not play in traditional men's and women's sports. Additionally, she stated that her mother and other family members played a large role in shaping her political identity. Other important aspects of her identity are that she is a woman of color, specifically Polynesian. She explained that she grew up in a predominantly white area and is the only person of color in her close friend group.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted using an inductive approach guided by Braun and Clarke (2006). Additionally, the analysis was completed at the latent level to delve further into ideology. After meeting with each participant individually. The interviews were transcribed and reviewed. Data was then organized into groups based on common concepts mentioned to form codes. The most common codes included forming their own opinions, forming arguments, the ability to express the argument well, feeling unsure when explaining their own political beliefs, enjoying debates, learning new information, not always agreeing with the public figure, and representation. These codes were then used to create the themes of Learning & Guidance with subthemes of articulating ideas, gathering new information, and solidifying previous beliefs; followed by the theme of Representation & Connection with subthemes of representation within identity and representation of political beliefs; next the theme of Debates with subcategories of entertainment and gathering information from "the opposing side".

Figure 3.3. Thematic Analysis



Trustworthiness

Creating a transcript directly from the audio recording ensures that bias was not inserted into the data by adding or removing information. While the program used to add closed captions is what the Student Access Center instructs educators to use for accessibility purposes, the transcripts had some errors that had to be manually corrected. The video was played and paused to correct these errors while the transcript was edited. However, no major changes were made to the data. For example, the program would place “owns” where “Owens” belonged or write “poly” instead of “Polynesian.” After completing each interview, a brief reflection was written

covering initial thoughts before formally starting analysis and how the process went. Within these notes, the verbal tone of specific responses was also written down. These notes were then expanded to track how potential themes emerged as formal analysis began.

Ethical Concerns

Throughout the process of gaining acceptance from IRB, it was decided that the only risk to the study was if data connected homophobic, transphobic, racist, sexist, etc., comments to specific individuals were to be leaked. All information was stored separately under password-protected files to ensure this did not happen. The email students reached out to was not affiliated with the university, the tool used to schedule held the phone number that they required be used and an email but not the participants' name, the transcripts removed identifying factors and were stored in a university-affiliated folder, and participants were asked for the name of their instructor after the recording had ended. Lastly, instructors were told of participation either in person or through the university-affiliated email.

Participants were advised that political topics would be discussed and that they could end the interview at any point. Throughout the interview, phrases such as "If you are comfortable, could you please elaborate?" were used when discussing specific beliefs and ideologies that participants expressed that they agreed with. To ensure that participation was voluntary, alternative extra credit assignments were provided of the equivalent point value for classes offering the study to earn additional points. As previously mentioned, the participants were not informed of the researcher's beliefs or aspects of identity to ensure that it did not alter how participants responded to the interview questions.

Researcher Positionality

My political ideology and media consumption differed from the participants. My political beliefs align with the left. Before the interviews, I watched brief clips of potential public figures to gain familiarity and be able to ask relevant questions. After the interviews, I watched the specific public figures more in-depth, explicitly targeting the topic areas the participants mentioned to gain a deeper understanding of the references and ideology shared by the public figures and participants. The participants were not made aware of my thoughts, opinions, or beliefs at any point so as not to sway their responses.

While as the researcher, I was placed in ideological opposition to the participants, this was a familiar place. I was raised and lived in Missouri, an overwhelmingly conservative state, where conservative ideology was dominant on a local level as well. Within my hometown, racial and homophobic slurs are commonly used without correction or repercussion; the creation of a Gay Straight Alliance was adamantly opposed by teachers, students, and community members, Anti- Critical Race Theory discourse dominated school board meetings, making national news for not following COVID regulations, and the only options for most local elections are Republicans with various levels of extremism. Most of my time in this environment was spent as a closeted gay woman, where people assumed that because I am a white, straight-passing woman, I would agree with their problematic views and discourse. After coming out and becoming more vocal as I got older surrounding topics such as Black Lives Matter, people tend to censor themselves more to avoid confrontation. However, racist, and homophobic remarks are still made in online spaces and in large groups.

My own experiences and seeing how other minorities are treated in my hometown shaped my interest in studying the alt-right. By understanding the formation and spread of alt-right ideology, we can work towards intervening and creating safer, more cohesive environments. My

own experiences shaped the assumption that participants would be openly problematic and defend alt-right public figures regardless of their actions. By being familiar with common language and phrases used when discussing alt-right public figures and ideology, I have the potential to see patterns in responses that are more hidden if not familiar with them. While being used to harmful discourse is unfortunate, it helped increase confidence that the tone could remain neutral throughout the interviews to encourage participants to express their true beliefs. However, even though neutrality was used during the interview process, the neutrality does not extend to the application of the result. By having lived experiences shaped by the damage alt-right ideology causes, it is important that results will be framed in a way that assists with intervention.

Summary

The objective of this chapter was to elaborate on the methodology used. Specifically, expanding on who the participants were, the procedures followed, and the data analysis process. In the following chapter, we will delve into the findings produced from thematic analysis.

Chapter 4 - Results

To review, research question one focused on applying the Uses and Gratifications theory to explore the motivation behind consuming alt-right media. While exploring research question one, the following themes were identified. They were Connection and Representation, Learning and Guidance, and Debate format. The second research question examines the role of parasocial relationships. While the participants did not express strong feelings of connection to the public figures, which indicates the role of strong parasocial relationships, there were other indications of the intertwining of Uses and Gratifications and parasocial relationships. Participants expressed feelings connected to the public figures via shared beliefs. The language used, particularly in the avoidance of discussing feelings instead of actions/ neutrality and facts, indicated that the arguments made by the public figures had connected to real-world behaviors. Anderson (2015) states that sexism is now packaged in a more palatable, but stealthy form. This is demonstrated by the participants, not just regarding sexism but also racism and homophobia, throughout the interviews.

While participants expressed unique experiences and aspects of their identity, responses were significantly overlapping. All participants expressed that they use media produced by the public figures they identified to learn how to shape their arguments and because the public figure could articulate their ideas eloquently. Every participant also explained that at least one other significant person in their life consumes the same media, however, there was discrepancy for if they perceived it as a bonding experience or simply to share information. Every participant expressed that they enjoyed their time viewing the media they identified. There was a range of one hour to ten hours spent viewing a week. One contributing factor to the various times is the

election. Lastly, even though it does not appear that most participants have a solid parasocial relationship, connection through representation and identity was a common theme throughout every interview.

RQ1: What are the motivations behind why individuals regularly consume alt-right media, specifically produced by alt-right public figures?

Representation and Connection

Another prominent motivation was to find representation and connection. Olivia introduces what representation means to her in the context of books. She states that she enjoys reading books with young women as the lead characters because it connects to her own identity. As the interview continued, how Olivia viewed lead characters within books transformed into representation and public figures. The concept of representation being in terms of identity, specifically conservative women is the context that is used the most often by the participants. For Sarah, there is also representation of her Jewish heritage and identity within Ben Shapiro. Representation was not only used in the context of personal identity. Representation of beliefs and values were prevalent throughout the interviews as well. There was an intersection with feeling connection in relation to the beliefs held by the public figures and feeling represented by the public figures. Every participant mentioned Candace Owens. However, the women had significantly higher viewership and connection. For the women, she was the public figure that was focused on the most.

“I definitely feel more connected because as a female, she represents the female conservative movement and like with all the stuff that with high school where I had to stand up, like so much stuff, and even in college I had to fight for something... like I just

look up to her and like right now, I struggle with my words, but I feel like she feels like she doesn't so that's one thing about her that I really like so... and there's not many like female conservative women out there.” - Mia

Mia expresses that she feels as if she is in the minority opinion for women's political ideologies and, therefore, can look towards Owens as a role model due to her prominent positioning in discourse and openness with her political identity. She is referencing a lawsuit that she was involved in where her parents, along with another student, sued the school for mandating masks. From this experience, she expressed that she had to advocate for herself. Therefore, she finds that watching Owens confidently and persuasively state her stance to be impactful. Ironically, the participants seem to agree that representation matters, at least when it comes to the intersection of personal and political identities.

The idea of Owens providing representation for women conservatives was heavily focused on throughout the interview process and is expanded on during the examination of parasocial relationships. Other public figures included Donald Trump, Ron DeSantis, Ben Shapiro, Andrew Tate, Charlie Kirk, Joe Rogan, Jordan Piercen, and Tucker Carlson. As referenced, three of the five participants identified as moderate to conservative. To test accuracy, participants were asked to elaborate on their political beliefs that align with the public figures and expand on which political beliefs did not align. Participants had varying views on the extremism of public figures. For example, Jack stated that Ron DeSantis would be considered a moderate and able to meet people in the middle. By asking how they align with the public figures' views, we can have more clarity on specific beliefs held by participants instead of relying on a label. Additionally, participants often expressed that they disagree with everything public figures state. By asking them to elaborate, it provided insight into which components of

the public figures' videos resonated with the participants. After hearing a summary of their political ideologies, I believe they correctly identified where they stood politically. Most participants' beliefs fell into the middle ground for issues. For example, Jack stated that he believes that "killing a baby is not right," but the government should not limit the right to an abortion. However, some participants' views were diverse, placing them in the middle of the political spectrum. For example, Olivia only recently started watching Candace Owens. While her connection to Andrew Tate is weakening due to his stance on masculinity, before watching Candace Owens, she had the most interaction with the other two public figures were Andrew Tate and Bernie Sanders. She agreed with Bernie Sanders's economic policies and Andrew Tate's stance on social issues.

Other participants discussed their complex connection to these figures. For example, when asked how they would feel if someone spoke poorly about their selected public figures, some distinctions were made that they would have negative feelings due to their shared beliefs and connection on the topic, which makes it more personal, as opposed to the feeling coming because of a strong connection with the public figure. However, this does not take away from the women expressing that they valued another conservative woman's large platform and admired how she articulated her beliefs. The need for social integration played a role through the alt-right media consumed as a topic of conversation with those close to them. Participants stated that they enjoyed the media and found it to be entertaining. They also expressed that they often watch it passively (turning on a podcast or seeing videos provided to them on social media). However, there does not appear to be a strong connection between viewing alt-right media to be tension-free.

Learning and Guidance

Participants used the public figures' media to help form their own opinions, articulate their opinions better, and hear "both sides" of an argument. Participants expressed that they sought out media that aligns with their beliefs due to hearing opposing arguments being uncomfortable. Mia and Sarah provide examples of this below.

"I follow people that are like minded, a like-minded structure to me like Charlie Kirk, Candace Owens, Ben Shapiro, all of them." – Mia

"I probably tend to watch things that explain more of what I believe in so I can learn more about it and make sure that it's still what I want to follow. I find it much more difficult to watch things with opposing ideas. Maybe not because I am opposed to them, but it's a bit challenging to think of all of those things, right? – Sarah

Contradictorily, they also explained that one of the benefits of watching their media of choice was that they were able to access information from both sides of an argument due to the debate style format that is commonly used in the videos and podcasts they were consuming. Therefore, participants may be looking for the debate style format because they want to appear to be listening to both sides of an argument without being made uncomfortable by confronting their beliefs or they are only looking for an opposing side to know how to respond to the argument. Regardless of if the participants were finding new ideas or solidifying previous ideology, they also used media to help articulate their thoughts.

"The main reason I stay and watch his videos is because he's answering all these hard questions when people come up to him. I think it's interesting to see how calm he is while

answering...I just think it's so interesting to see how calmly he can answer those questions when there's people that are so aggravated by his presence... Since I'm a college student on campus, I've been waiting for the opportunity to try stuff like he does if the situation would find me, so I take notes and if the situation arises, I want to use his strategies to the best of my abilities. – Sarah

While Sarah framed some aspects of her interview as wanting to learn about opposing sides and enjoying the conversations that are occurring, she appears to not be approaching the debate style from an open mind. Instead, she has already prepared for a hypothetical situation in where she needs to defend her position against an upset opponent.

As mentioned, participants did not feel confident in their ability to articulate their beliefs. The inability to confidently explain their beliefs was demonstrated throughout the interviews themselves. Nearly every participant asked if they were “doing okay”. While this could be attributed to inexperience with research through an interview, it aligns with the timing of being asked specific questions about their beliefs. Before being prompted to elaborate on their answers, participants would use vague language when discussing political themes. Common phrasing includes “those people,” “some topics,” and “some groups.” After clarifying their responses to explain their thoughts explicitly, participants asked for reassurance that they were answering questions properly.

Every participant stated that they enjoyed watching their favorite conservative public figures because they could articulate their thoughts and form a well-structured argument. When discussing Candace Owens, participants described her as “well-spoken”. While praising how Owens can articulate her arguments and act as a role model as a Black, conservative woman,

participants still included microaggressions within their admiration: *“I think I find Candace to be entertaining because I think she's like pretty well-spoken. Like when she's asked the question, she like comes up with like a very direct response.”* The micro aggression demonstrates participants' ambivalence towards people of color through valuing systems of oppression while simultaneously feeling connected to Candace because of the representation she provides. Candace herself has been vocal about her views of a postracial society through her claims that white supremacy does not exist in modern America. However, both Candace and her audience are highlighting the contradiction of avoiding conversations and education surrounding race while also depending on Candace for representation as a Black woman. Throughout the interviews it was apparent that the women deeply admired Candace. However, the women mostly focused on consuming alt-right media for social issues (anti-transgender, traditional values, etc.) opposed to agreeing with economic stances. Within the media consumed there are discussions of Black Lives Matter being a terrorist organization and Critical Race Theory being predatorily entered into school curriculum. Even if the participants do not fully agree with these messages, they still have not viewing the messages as problematic enough to stop consuming the media. Therefore, demonstrating the love/hate relationship held with aspects of Candace identity.

The most apparent motivation behind the consumption of alt-right media was information seeking. Specifically, to understand arguments, how to phrase their arguments, and to hear the opposing argument. These components were coded as Learning and Guidance. Ultimately, participants were seeking out information to help them gain a fuller understanding of political and social issues.

“Edu-tainment”

The role of debates in motivation for media consumption can be placed in two separate but intertwined categories. The first is for educational purposes, or in other words, information seeking. Mia stated that debates help her see both sides of an argument. When discussing debates to gain knowledge, participants highlighted that it allows them to better understand the other side of an issue and how to respond to an opposing argument. She expands to specifically the debate-style format used when public figures visit college campuses: “So he goes out to like campuses, like I said, and he's not afraid to have these hard conversations.” An interesting observation from the interviews is that every participant framed the content, including debates, to be civil and utilizing neutral language. Often, debates were framed as conversations or hearing the opposing side, as demonstrated by Mia.

The discussion of debate continues into entertainment. Jack states he likes it when “Trump and DeSantis go after each other.” Mia, Sarah, and Emily shared that humor or jokes were used that sometimes made the discussion seem not as heavy. Overall, the reason education and entertainment are intertwined is that participants find the format and approach to be engaging. They enjoy watching the content, which they then use to form opinions and/or form their own arguments. Having a debate format allows entertainment to be presented as a learning opportunity. Participants also acknowledged that they tend to consume media that confirms their beliefs and avoids discomfort while looking for ways to expand their knowledge. By focusing on a debate style, participants felt they were fulfilling their need to hear an alternative perspective. The videos rarely show productive conversations and are framed to where the public figure always “wins”.

RQ2: How do parasocial relationships play a role in alt-right media consumption?

Participants explained that they watch the same public figures across multiple platforms and interact with the public figures throughout the week. However, they deflected the question whenever participants were asked to reflect on their feelings towards the public figures. Specifically, when participants were asked how they would feel if someone spoke poorly about the public figure they mentioned, they responded with an action or stance of neutrality.

“That’s a good question. I don’t know. I haven’t really thought about that. I am a reasonable person. I would ask them why they felt that way about her. After that I would probably state why I don’t feel that way about her and why she is so influential to me and others.” – Mia

Mia placed being a reasonable person in opposition to emotion, followed by describing how she would respond. After viewing examples of alt-right media, one message that stood out from alt-right public figures is that there should be a focus on fact over emotion. Mia introduces how we may see this concept adapted by participants and influencing their responses.

“I think it would be interesting... When people tend to have different ideas, I tend to get very interested. Actually, I get a little bit on guard, or I suppose you could say defensive when they have, in my opinion, a whole argument just going after someone’s character or just, you know, getting angry for some reason because that’s not really my thing. If it’s a regular conversation that they just disagree with, I would say I’m more interested to hear what they think.” – Sarah

Sarah touches a bit more on feelings and emotions by stating that she would be on guard and defensive. However, she does not initially go in-depth. As she continues, she dislikes attacks on the public figure's characters instead of the topic area and when other people express anger with the discourse taking place. Similarly, Jack does discuss emotion but clarifies that he would not have a strong emotional response. He states, "I don't get overly upset. I just believe that it's their opinion and they are entitled to it." Using this phrasing, he positions himself as neutral, stating that everyone is entitled to their opinions. Olivia starts off neutral as well, but then delves deeper into an emotion.

"I feel like that would make me curious, but I would want to know why exactly they were speaking poorly about her. I guess it would really depend on the context. If it was something I agreed with her on I might feel a little upset because it's like, oh, you are disagreeing with her and I don't know why you are disagreeing right now." – Olivia

Olivia begins with a response by stating that she would want to know more about the other person's perspective. However, she addresses emotion by stating that she feels upset. It is interesting that Olivia expresses that disagreeing with Candace Owens is personal due to the topic being something she also aligns with. Emily on the other hand, reflects over the strong emotions she felt.

"I would feel very upset. It felt like it was personal. I had really strong parasocial relationships with them. Ben Shapiro was like a big brother to me because I had always wanted a brother and my family... Because of how strong of a parasocial relationship I had, I make sure not to get that invested in public figures now since it was so harmful." – Emily

Emily, reflecting on previous alt-right media use, labeled her connection to Ben Shapiro and Candace Owens as a “parasocial relationship.” She continues to explain that she viewed it as both strong and harmful. When specifically discussing Ben Shapiro, she uses familial terms to describe how close she felt the parasocial relationship was and insinuates that it was filling a gap in her everyday life.

Participants who did not fully elaborate on their feelings were asked to reflect internally instead of focusing on a reaction or behavior. Sarah was asked to elaborate on her view of when emotion would be appropriate:

I think that if I ever say anything out of pocket or wrong, especially because the environment matters. I think it's understandable if the other person gets upset. Like my whole point is that I don't like that either. So if I say 'You know, well, you only think this because of this or you don't like them because you're this.' I can understand it because I try not to say that, but it happens sometimes. And it's fair to get upset about and I have some understanding that people feel directly affected by things and the issues can be very negative. I want to say I have some understanding and I would react the same way, but if they truly believe that, it can make sense to me if they feel like they are genuinely hurt by something.” – Sarah

When allowed to elaborate on whether there is an appropriate place for emotion, Sarah reinforces that she does not believe that arguments should be made solely based on the public figure's character and states that she would also be upset. She continues to explain that she understands that some people feel as if they are personally affected by issues discussed that may warrant emotions. Throughout the entire response, she expresses her frustration with arguments

made based on character, which makes her upset. On the other hand, Mia does acknowledge a negative feeling but clarifies that she would not demonstrate that she is upset. Again, this relates back to the idea that emotion does not have a place in a debate: *“I would get a bit more upset internally, but I wouldn’t express it.”* Others, like Jack, began to mirror the language used by placing the word “feel” into his response while expressing his admiration for Trump. However, he still did not elaborate on emotion and reinforced his previous response by stating it is a free country.

“I feel strongly about how I feel about Donald Trump and how he ran the country. And if someone disagrees with me, I am not a very confrontational person, so if they feel that way I am not going to argue. It’s a free country and they can feel however they want about it.”

Participants were asked to name two to three public figures they felt the most connected to that would then be the focus of the interview. After answering the question, participants were then asked to describe the connection and what the connection meant to them when they answered the question. During this, we see similar responses to the question regarding feelings. For example, Olivia simply describes it as “very surface level,” and Jack describes it based on similarities, specifically “just some topics on how we view politics”. However, it was the first indication that participants felt connected to the public figures due to political topics and personal identity. For example, Olivia stated, “As a person of color, I enjoy listening to her (Candace Owens) even when I don’t agree all the time with everything she says. I feel like I can understand where she is coming from a lot of the time.” Although Mia stated, “She represents the female conservative movement”, Emily mirrored her response by saying “Yes, with her being a woman it made me feel more connected.” Jack does not align with the women in the group by

discussing the importance of Candace Owens being a conservative woman or identifying that he feels connection due to seeing himself represented in the Ron DeSantis and Donald Trump.

Instead, there is a heavy focus on aligning with political topics:

“He (Trump) has definitely made me feel strongly about how I view certain topics and what the importance of how people should be like or how the importance of the topics. I guess you could say that some topics may be ahead on other agendas... I feel like there are just some more important issues that focus on the people in America... I am not sure if they make me understand my own personal identity, but they definitely help me find a path of belief...”

Jack describes his connection as being based on topics instead of personal connection. Throughout his interview, he focused on Donald Trump and Ron DeSantis, which resulted in a discussion of specific actions that they have taken that affect him instead of more abstract forms of connections mentioned by the other participants. Alternatively, when asked why he enjoyed interacting with Trump and DeSantis, he summarized it as, “Their beliefs, their values, and their characters.” However, even participants who showed connection through representation also demonstrated that they felt connected through the topics discussed. Specifically, participants explicitly discussed the topic of the LGBTQ+ community. For example, Olivia shared,

There's like transgender people competing in sporting events. Her take on that I agree with... I think Thea Thomas is one of the best examples. She competed and I want to say it was a collegiate swimming event where she ended up winning. And there was a lot of just like issues. I believe the swimmer who came in like second or third place, that it was just unfair because she's transgender. And that's one of the like points that Candace

Owens made that I agreed that she brought that up and was just saying like, maybe like they should not obviously be banned from participating in like collegiate or Olympic sports. But she was saying that maybe there is a way to include them without, like I think she said something about making a separate category or just something that doesn't take away from everyone else, it's just cause like the biological differences.

She also stated, “I think whenever I come across someone like her who has beliefs that are similar and different from mine, it helps me feel like, I guess I'm more confident in some of my beliefs, like, if that makes sense.” She explained that since sometimes their beliefs did not align, she felt that the ones that did were more impactful because she was not following Owens’s lead. Sarah elaborates on how her media consumption has impacted her view of the LGBTQ+ community but does not specify which specific public figure influenced her beliefs:

I think I feel pretty strongly about identity being more related to mental health issues and all these just new things that are coming up with identity. Not to say they maybe haven't existed before, but maybe that they're inflated by kind of this the world we live in where everything is so available to us that we don't know what to do with ourselves. We kind of need to feel like we have something to last one to and it's time. I feel pretty strongly about that.

Parasocial relationships are typically described intimate and viewers feeling as if they know the personae personally (Hartmann, 2023) which indicates that the participants did not have strong parasocial relationships. However, their inadvertence to discuss feelings demonstrates that the parasocial interaction occurring is having an effect on the participants. The public figures mentioned consistently emphasize that emotions are negative when discussing

politics and human rights as emphasized by Ben Shapiro's book *Facts Don't Care about Your Feelings* (2019). The participant's discussion about looking towards these public figures as guides for articulating their beliefs reinforces that there is a connection between the participants' responses and their embodiment of the messages put forth by the public figures. Additionally, the concept of removing emotion to hold a legitimate stance is gendered within itself. Positioning emotion that is considered a feminine trait to be lesser than logic is privileging the masculine (Kolb, 2012). The logic of removing emotion to win an argument is flawed. When elaborating on a lived experience, specifically by a marginalized group, emotion is a valid response and should not be used to delegitimize the argument. The weaponization of emotion leads to harmful stereotypes such as the angry Black woman or hysterical woman. By doing this, it also reinforces the concept of masculinity being the default within society.

Summary

Throughout Chapter Four, I analyzed how the data interacted with the research questions. Connection and Representation became a critical aspect of the discussion by indicating parasocial relationships and motivation for consuming alt-right media. The conversation of representation primarily focused on Candace Owens and her identity as a conservative Black woman. However, the representation of ideas was also discussed. Participants indicated that they sought the content to help them learn how to articulate arguments, form beliefs, and solidify existing beliefs. Lastly, the concept of edutainment came to light because participants stated that the debate-style format was engaging while allowing them to learn.

When dissecting parasocial relationships, one of the challenges was that participants avoided talking about emotions. Instead, they would respond with a behavior or state a position

of neutrality. However, this indicates that they are adopting the concept of facts over feelings pushed by public figures. Additionally, even when participants would describe their connection as “surface level,” they would reveal through statements such as “I understand her (Owens)” that there was a deeper connection than initially disclosed, even if the overall parasocial relationship is relatively weak.

Chapter 5 - Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter will summarize the key findings and provide a practical implication for the results. Lastly, it will explain the limitations and future recommendations for the study.

Key Findings

The study applies Uses and Gratifications theory to help evaluate why alt-right public figures platforms continue to be viewed, legitimized, and valued as indicated by and through high levels of viewership and discourse surrounding their content. Although the study included one man, overwhelmingly, the participants for this study identified as women. As such, this study provides further insight on why young women are motivated to consume their media. The consumption of alt-right media from this demographic seems counterintuitive as the media often discusses limiting their rights and safety (Love, 2020). Hearing their perspective helps make sense of this study's unique contributions.

To review, RQ1 focused on the motivations behind why individuals regularly consume alt-right media, specifically produced by alt-right public figures. After conducting thematic analysis, the most prevalent theme was connected to information seeking. Participants looked towards the public figures to help shape their opinions, solidify current opinions, and articulate their opinions when discussing them with others. An important aspect of these discussions is that they often take a debate format in the content produced. In individuals' lives, they often talk to those who discuss their beliefs, but they also use the verbiage provided when they need to "stand up" for themselves to those who do not agree with them. The content's debate format also played a role in consuming it for entertainment purposes. The participants often thought that the debates made the videos podcasts humorous and engaging even when humor was absent. The second

question guiding this study explored the role parasocial relationships played in alt-right media consumption. One of the challenges in examining parasocial relationships was that participants did not elaborate on questions that focused on feelings. Instead, participants would define their neutrality or state a behavior. Additionally, participants described their connection to the public figures as “surface level” or having a stronger connection to the topics than to the public figures. However, this does not mean that parasocial relationships were not present. Overall, participants felt they “understood” the public figures and connected through their shared identities. The roles of representation and connection became a linking factor between parasocial relationships and the motivation behind consuming specific media.

Contributions of Thesis

From previous literature it is established that parasocial relationships can influence behavior (Cohen, 2021; Patlollou & Hans, 2023). Additionally, attitudes and ideologies can also be influenced by parasocial relationships (Haraff, 2022; Arnesson, 2022). Throughout the interviews, participants demonstrated through their responses and language that the adoption of “facts over feelings”, or the idea that facts have a higher value than feelings when it comes to politics and debates demonstrated by alt-right public figures. This thesis aligns with and expands the intersection between parasocial relationships and Uses and Gratification Theory. Hwang and Zhang examine the intersection of UGT and parasocial relationships and state that forming a parasocial relationship may be a way to fulfill a need (2018). This study elaborates on the role of representation in seeking out media consumption and as evidence of parasocial relationships.

Gender played an essential role in the study—even if not explicitly acknowledged by the participants. The public figures mentioned often shared sexist or misogynist beliefs. Andrew Tate identified himself as a misogynist (BBC, 2024). Regardless of whether the public figures

held biases against women or truly hated women, arguably the largest groups affected would be women. Sexism and misogyny could lead to discrimination, relationship tensions, violence, and revenge porn (Ukockis, 2019). However, the four women participants still valued the content and used the content as a tool for knowledge. The content promotes anti-establishment narratives and an individualistic mindset by discussing conspiracy theories, encouraging research that contradicts mainstream beliefs (such as being against vaccines), and advocating for a capitalistic "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" mentality. Participants stated that they shared similar values when asked which specific topics they agreed with the public figures on, thus making the public figures more appealing. Specifically, when discussing Candace Owens, the women expressed admiration and valued the representation of conservative women. Through representation, individuals can view experiences like their own experiences. Connecting with public figures on shared experiences and values lends itself to forming parasocial relationships (Chung and Hichgan, 2017). As previously mentioned, these alt-right public figures frame themselves as experts on the material. They can form connections with their audience by positioning themselves as authentic voices to empower a group that feels as if they are unfairly ostracized due to their beliefs.

Contradictions have occurred throughout the conservative women's movement. Anti-feminism during the 1970s was founded on the idea that women were valued in their current societal position and, therefore, did not need liberation. Anti-feminists claim gender equality has been achieved, making feminism redundant. However, this contradicts their initial stance that feminism was never needed. As Coste (2010) points out, this shift from denying the need for feminism to acknowledging its past necessity but current irrelevance reveals a gap in their logic. Postfeminism, a reactive movement (Genz & Brabon, 2009; Faludi, 1991), plays a crucial role in

understanding why some individuals accept contradictions regarding gender equality. It focuses on the idea that feminism has achieved its goals (Brooks, 1997; Rivers, 2017), like claims of a post-racial America after Barack Obama's election (Ukockis, 2019). This notion of "completion" refers to advancements in women's rights, such as working and opening a bank account, while overlooking persisting inequalities. Thus, women may feel empowered by the representation provided by figures like Candace Owens while simultaneously consuming content that perpetuates harmful gender stereotypes and biases. This cognitive dissonance allows them to maintain a sense of progressiveness while rejecting core feminist principles. Although postfeminism positions itself as accepting these advances, it is a direct threat and in opposition to feminism (Genz & Brabon, 2009).

Despite the contradiction, the formation of anti-feminist movements is framed as aiming to help women, even if the efforts are misguided. This does not leave the movements without fault. They often result in advocating against the LGBTQ+ community and abortions (Schreiber, 2008). Often, the focus of the traditional family latches onto the idea of whiteness which then perpetuates racism (Norris, 2023). The participants continue to consistently view and seek information from public figures that spue harmful messages, which lead to real-life consequences, while simultaneously expressing admiration for Candace Owens and highlighting how she represents conservative women of color. Perhaps representation is not only sought after as a reason to continue to view the content and instead is the missing puzzle piece within contradiction. By seeing a successful Black woman vocally express conservative views, it may help ease the dissonance formed by consuming messages that may be harmful specifically to women.

Additionally, acceptance of postfeminism and seeing their beliefs mirrored through representation may cause women to feel empowered while upholding heteronormative gender roles and norms. The idea of facts over feelings is consistently valued within the content consumed. Feelings are considered feminine logic, and therefore, by stating that emotions do not have a place in the conversation, it is being reinforced that masculinity should be privileged and deemed more reputable. Other groups, such as the intersection between multi-level marketing schemes and QAnon, position men in positions of authority while the women can feel empowered without disrupting their home life and traditional values (Mastrangelo & Longo, 2024). While participants are women and primarily discussed a woman who has built a career out of speaking in the public sphere, they still favored masculine logic as more credible. The participants embodying the concept of facts over feelings by redirecting questions regarding emotion demonstrates acceptance of the belief.

Practical Applications

As we continue to study alt-right media consumption, it is important to remember that the people consuming the content produced by public figures are everyday people. The participants for this study were college students. They are currently in our classrooms, participating in campus organizations, and will shortly transition into their careers. These participants do not appear to be extremists, but that does not take away from their problematic views or the harm their discourse may cause their peers who belong to marginalized groups. Throughout the interview process, participants clarified that they were not blindly following the beliefs of the public figures and did not agree with everything they stated. For example, Sarah explained that the media she was consuming viewed the Black community as “inherently bad” and “responsible for crimes.” She disagreed and expanded on her thoughts by stating the following:

I think that there's correlation, but not causation. I think that, you know, for example, we have the epidemic of the government introducing drugs into black communities perpetually. And I think that plays a big role in, in what's happened in the community. I think I think people pushing the narrative is actually part of the reason why they struggle so much. I feel like telling African American individuals, oh, you know, you guys are all just about gangs or all about violence or all about this. I mean, hearing that from a young age is going to make them feel like that's their identity, even if it's not something that they want to follow. You're kind of pushing them toward that because they feel that there's no other option.

However, even with this viewpoint and stating that they view the Black community as violent, she continues to value alt-right media, which is demonstrated through her continued consumption. Sarah highlights another contradiction within her interview. As previously mentioned, she expressed that her Jewish heritage is an essential aspect of her identity, and that Ben Shapiro was able to provide representation for Jews. Apart from Ben Shapiro, she felt admiration for Candace Owens. As a reminder, Owens has spread antisemitic rhetoric through the form of conspiracy theories. Perhaps Sarah's identity as a woman is held closer to her than her Jewish identity, or possibly, she was unable to identify the antisemitism in Owen's videos. These two contradictions demonstrate the complexity and nuance surrounding these issues.

Based on the sample's specific demographic, the study's application will focus on college campuses. The materials suggested may still benefit individuals outside of universities, but due to the possibility of differing motivations within other demographics, other solutions that are not recommended may be more applicable and successful. However, the focus on college campuses

provides an evolving challenge due to legislation challenging conversations related to diversity, equity, or inclusion efforts (Betts, 2024).

As campus communities of both faculty and students, we must openly weigh the benefits and drawbacks of engaging with alt-right public figures who visit our campuses. One stance may be that interacting with public figures opens an opportunity to correct misinformation and to advocate with a large audience. However, I suggest disengaging as a tool to delegitimize their position as an expert and their stance on problematic topics. Mansbridge explains how when we openly accept topics into discourse, we legitimize and validate them as acceptable beliefs. For example, there is a consensus that pedophilia is immoral, so one would not allow an argument for decriminalization to take place (1999).

In the context of on-campus debates, allowing harmful beliefs to be viewed as valid helps perpetuate the issue. I am not stating that racist, homophobic, transphobic, etc., beliefs should not be discussed or corrected. Instead, I am saying that the context and setting matters. For example, within Ben Shapiro's channels, you will find videos of his visits to campuses. Within the videos, they use combative language such as "destroys" or "demolishes" liberals as the titles (2024). While they are being framed as showing both sides to an argument, looking deeper shows that this is not the intention. For these reasons, more productive conversations would take place in another setting. Participants also expressed that they enjoyed the videos on campus because they were in college. Limiting the content available from campus trips may help lessen the appeal of the public figure.

Another suggestion could be the integration of media literacy into the curriculum. Most, if not all, of the public figures mentioned have been criticized for spreading conspiracy theories. However, they are being sought out as credible sources by individuals. Viewing some of the

content that participants discussed, it is apparent that they frame their channels as educational spaces designed for free thinking and reference specific pieces of literature. By refining media literacy skills, students can work towards dissecting alt-right public figures' arguments to determine factuality, identify conspiracy theories, and evaluate the sources mentioned within the content. Additionally, even if restrictions tighten the tools needed to think critically about the arguments provided, they could be taught without explicitly addressing diversity, equity, or inclusion.

Limitations and Recommendations

It was anticipated that recruitment would be challenging due to the discussion of alt-right ideology. One specific group was more willing to participate, leading to the sample used for this study being predominantly young women with some college education that identified as moderate to conservative. Historically, women have played a role in white supremacy and far-right movements, making them an important group to study (Norris, 2023). As the tradwife movement continues to gain momentum, the role of women and gender in alt-right media remains an important component to study. Young women sought out and followed through with the opportunity to participate in research, while the pattern with men was that they would initially show interest but not follow through. This indicates that women are open to discussing these topics, and future researchers can use this as an opportunity to interact with a group that may be challenging to reach. The sample was identified as moderate to conservative. Both parasocial relationships and motivation behind alt-right media should be studied in a sample with more extremist views. By altering the level of intensity when it comes to acceptance of alt-right ideology, the results may vary. Similarly, since gender, masculinity, and femininity play a large role in the content produced by public figures and the discourse surrounding the content, future

studies should also expand to have a larger group of men. Interviews provided their own challenge due to self-reporting, specifically with inadvertence to discuss emotion. Interviews were valuable in gathering background information, unique and specific opinions, and hearing verbal cues such as tone. However, combining interviews with other data collection methods would be beneficial for future studies.

Conclusion

The study sought to answer the questions of what motivates individuals to consume alt-right media and how do parasocial relationships influence alt-right media consumption. Through establishing an understanding of why alt-right public figures are problematic and gaining insight into common beliefs held by these public figures, we were able to clarify why the study is needed and valuable. By utilizing semi-structured interviews, we discovered that Candace Owens played a large role in the consumption for young conservative women because they valued representation. Additionally, the public figures were used as a tool for seeking information on how to articulate their beliefs and form arguments.

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