Women's involvement in online white nationalism:
A Good Lives Model perspective

FULL REPORT

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HANNA RIGAULT ARKHIS

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Hanna Rigault Arkhis | St Andrews

This CREST report is informed by a review of research on protective factors set out in an earlier report. You can find all the outputs from this project at: *www.crestresearch.ac.uk/ projects/constraining-violence/*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report sets out the findings of research into women's online involvement in far-right extremism analysed through the lens of the Good Lives Model (GLM). It addresses the lack of research on the gendered nature of the needs that are being met when engaging in such spaces.

The findings are based on an analysis of a women only right-wing forum hosted by Stormfront, the oldest white nationalist online community. The results highlight which goods are pursued, what needs are met, and how norms around goods are constructed.

A range of goods were identified as important and were achieved in different ways.

- *Healthy living* is usually fulfilled through the creation of a white family and raising children according to white nationalist ideology.

- *Community* is found on Stormfront and sustained through a cluster of primary goods including play, pleasure, and relatedness.

- Ways of meeting the good of *creativity* include cultivating one's appearance in a way that indicates support for their ideology.

- *Agency* is found through a variety of roles; usually that of the stay-at-home mother or as a promoter of white nationalist ideology, either online or offline.

- Stormfront women appear to seek *knowledge* and *work* due to a desire to serve the movement better. They also advocate for a 'softer' expression of their beliefs, that distances them from violence, principally to facilitate recruitment.

By testing the applicability of the GLM to an online platform, this research affords a better understanding of the opportunities provided by online extreme communities to fulfil women's needs. It demonstrates the utility of the GLM and its ability to help interpret the goods women attain through involvement in extremist spaces.

Understanding the goods and needs that online spaces fulfil has the potential to inform gender-responsive programmes to Prevent and Counter Violent Extremism (P/CVE). By highlighting the gendered nature of goods, the analysis illustrates that 'gender blind' programmes are unlikely to address the particular needs of women.

A GLM-informed analysis has the potential to inform P/CVE interventions by identifying the goods that might be relevant to certain communities, and the women who make them up, and using that understanding to identify interventions that make opportunities to achieve those goods in pro-social, positive ways more accessible.

INTRODUCTION

This research contributes to the *Constraining Violence* project by testing the applicability of the GLM to women's participation in extreme milieus.[1] It sheds light on under-researched areas including women's online participation and the opportunities provided by extremist subcultures to meet certain needs (Veilleux-Lepage, et al., 2022; Lee, 2022).

In the past few years, the profile of female figures in the far-right, such as Lauren Southern, Brittany Sellner (née Pettibone) and Ayla Stewart, has risen (Leidig, 2023). Nevertheless, the far-right, and extremist spaces in general, are usually understood as male-dominated environments. Consequently, women's participation is often neglected by researchers and practitioners (Agius, et al., 2022).

Although gender differences have been identified in terms of the vulnerabilities and needs that shape involvement in harmful and criminal behaviour, research including that on the GLM, has mostly relied on male samples (Broidy & Agnew, 1997; Van Damme, et al., 2020). Similarly, the P/CVE field usually targets men, while women "fall through the cracks" (Molas, 2023, para. 2).

Current approaches largely neglect the benefits of a gendered, strengths-based analysis that provides insight into the social and contextual influences on women's participation in extremism (Pflugradt & Allen, 2019). This kind of insight would allow for more gender-responsive P/CVE programmes, to help bridge the 'cracks' and gaps in provision.

The goal of this research is to better understand which needs are met through women's online participation in online extremist spheres and how they might inform women's offline behaviour. To develop this understanding, the GLM was used as a framework to analyse Stormfront's women's forum.

Drawing data from a women's forum promises insight into women's experiences based on their own accounts (Samuels & Shajkovci, 2023). Whilst applying a strengths-based approach, like the GLM, to a case study such as Stormfront enables a better understanding of online communities; something that is still needed in the field (Amarasingam, 2023).

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1 A full overview of the Good Lives Model and its relevance to analysing violent extremism can be found in Marsden and Lee (2023).

DATA AND METHODS

Stormfront was selected as an appropriate case study as it is the oldest and largest white nationalist online community. Two layers of data formed the basis of the analysis.

1. A list of all the thread titles on the forum were analysed to provide a top-level understanding of the content. This amounted to 1946 threads as of July 2023.

2. Six threads were selected for more detailed analysis based on their high numbers of views and responses indicating their popularity with forum participants. A total of 1440 messages were analysed with each thread ranging from 92 to 488 posts.

The GLM was applied to the two layers of data in line with the approach taken in Paalgard Munden et al.'s, (2023) analysis of right-wing autobiographies. This involved using a coding framework organised around the main goods, which was used to identify the scope and nature of the discussion linked to the eleven goods that make up the GLM. Thematic analysis of the data was then undertaken to develop an understanding of which goods were discussed, how they informed norms and values about appropriate behaviour and roles, and how the goods were constructed in relation to white supremacist ideology.

The analysis was subject to a number of limitations including the deletion of threads and messages, potentially due to content moderation or users deleting their contributions. In addition, any replication of the study would benefit from a team of researchers to ensure inter-coder reliability and reduce the degree of subjectivity when interpreting online content.

The first section of the report highlights which goods were identified through the analysis. It is followed by a section on the connections between primary goods and the roles women take in extremist milieus. The paper concludes with a summary setting out the implications for research and practice.

CONSTRUCTING A GOOD LIFE

This section describes how participating in extremist milieus provides women the opportunity to pursue primary goods, especially healthy living, creativity and community, as well as relatedness, play and pleasure. The findings echo previous studies (e.g., Veilleux-Lepage et al., 2022) that reveal the seemingly mundane nature of discussions on Stormfront, which are, nevertheless, heavily influenced by broader narratives present in the far-right. In this way, the analysis highlights how everyday activities become suffused with ideological meaning.

HEALTHY LIVING

The construction of a 'healthy life' is highly dependent on gender dynamics present in the far-right. Men pursue this primary good by enhancing their own physical security and psychological safety (Paalgard Munden, et al. 2023). This corresponds to the far-right's understanding of a masculinity revolving around structures of dominance usually referred to as 'hegemonic masculinity' (Windisch, 2021). Women also construct ideas about how to pursue a healthy life based on conservative gender roles informed by far-right beliefs. For women on Stormfront, a healthy life involves having a white spouse and "at least 3 but preferably 5 to 7" (2.122)[2] children raised according to white nationalist principles.

At the core of this 'healthy life' is childbearing. A multitude of threads focus on women's' pregnancy journey, and include discussion of "Pregnancy fears… the silly questions"(0.152); "anyone else TTC? [trying to conceive]" (0.1150) as well as advice for first-time mothers. Women also exchange information on the risks accompanying pregnancies and how to best avoid them. These tips are extended to questions regarding contraception and fertility issues in "How can you best look after your body/fertility?" (0.1128).

Women of Stormfront discuss their conception of a healthy life and how best to pursue it, but also refer to external barriers that might endanger themselves and their ideals. The most common barrier is that of the 'threatening other' which usually corresponds to people of colour, most often men. Threads such as "Men you dislike at first sight" (0.1205) commonly start by sharing a personal experience, perceived as negative if not threatening, with a person of colour.

While a common response is a complaint about not being able to 'escape' people of colour, others emphasise the need to acquire self-defence skills. On threads such as "Woman's perspective on Carry and First Handgun" (0.1657), participants discuss whether they choose to carry weapons, and if so which ones and the type of training they have. The threads do not focus on where to acquire weapons or how to use them, but rather how best to carry them.

These discussions on birthing white children and the 'threatening other' are embedded in wider far-right discourses such as the Great Replacement or White Genocide. These conspiracy theories revolve around a perception that higher birth rates amongst people of colour threaten white people. Their solution is to increase the number of white children to ensure the survival of the 'white race'. Hence discussions of seemingly mundane topics such as pregnancy become infused by broader far-right narratives.

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2   Messages and titles are referenced as thread number.message_number and refer to the database of Stormfront's women's forum held by the author.

> **"Did you know that we are the subject of liberal 'scientists' research?"**
>
> In 2012, a member of the Stormfront women's forum shared the findings of an academic paper by Castle and Chevalier (2011). Their commentary on the research expressed surprise at how Stormfront women were perceived. One participant said she felt violated by people intruding on her safe haven, providing a glimpse of the importance of the community to its members. Although a few participants reminded others of the public nature of their forum, this kind of reaction highlights the expectations of privacy that surround it. Others ridiculed the authors for their surprise at the seemingly mundane content of the forum or tried to discredit the scientific standing of the research, whilst stressing that reducing them to their childbearing role would be to underestimate them.

CREATIVITY

Creativity is a widely discussed topic amongst the women of Stormfront, especially through threads about personal appearance. Through which participants construct norms about how women are to present themselves while abiding by far-right ideology.

The forum members are often concerned with discussing particular hairstyles or hair care. Hairstyles appears to be a subtle way for women to express their beliefs and share their appreciation of styles considered vintage or reflecting certain traditions believed to align with far-right ideals, for example asking, "How to make Viking braids" (0.408). By expressing themselves and their beliefs in this way, women find a way to pursue the primary good of creativity whilst demonstrating their commitment to white nationalism.

Stormfront women also construct norms regarding fashion and appropriate ways to dress. This is discussed in threads such as "What not to wear" (0.474) or "WN [white nationalist] Women's clothing" (0.341). The impact of their ideology is seen in their recommendations which are informed by their conception of appropriate religious and traditional aesthetics. Conversely, what is considered inappropriate is often based on their assumptions regarding the aesthetic preferences of people of colour or anyone else considered as part of the out-group, for example asking, "What do you consider to be trashy/skanky?" (0.630).

In this way, women use Stormfront as a sounding board to help them match their appearance and their beliefs. Stormfront provides a platform which enables women to pursue the primary good of creativity offline in ways that are constructed and approved by the online community.

COMMUNITY

Stormfront enables its participants to achieve the primary good of community. This is shaped by a common sense of identity represented in the Stormfront community, and is reinforced through norms and group commitment. These are visible in the common use of the term "Stormfront ladies" and the forum guidelines for Stormfront as a whole and for the Women's forum.

The Stormfront guidelines highlight a common mission to provide information unavailable in mainstream medias in order to "build a community of White activists working for the survival of our people". The women's forum guidelines include a ban on male posting, underlining that "this is our [white nationalist women] area ladies". This group identity is reflected amongst participants often referring to Stormfront

as a community of like-minded people; one which they are unable to find under the dominant norms of mainstream society. The lack of which has the effect of making them feel like outcasts. Stormfront provides a way to overcome this barrier to reach the primary good of community.

This feeling of community is reinforced through the pursuit of additional, albeit slightly lower order, goods. Participants nurture the good of relatedness through individual connections and discussions about shared interest and hobbies, for example: "Knitting, weaving and sewing, anyone?" (0.166) or "Ladies – Post your favorite songs" (0.247). Some participants engage with one another extensively and create online friendships, highlighting how women can seek out and find relatedness on such platforms.

Threads about hobbies or content they find enjoyable, such as, "Romance Novels" (0.745) or "Women's Magazines" (0.851) enable women to pursue the primary good of play through a shared enjoyment of recreational pursuits. The online community also enables women to find and share the primary good of pleasure. This is usually expressed through the announcement of engagements, weddings, and pregnancies on threads such as "Engaged! Was just given a beautiful ring!" (0.765) and sometimes sharing fantasies about motherhood or "The Sweetness of Married Life" (0.1151). Once again, these day-to-day activities relate to wider gender norms present in far-right milieus and are underpinned by white nationalist ideology.

There is sufficient trust in the community that they rely on one another for information to help construct a healthy life. On threads such as "Dietary supplements in pregnancy and vaccination of children" (0.1068) there appears to be a lack of trust in medical professionals and a preference for advice from the community. Based on their worldviews, Stormfront women seem to perceive the medical system as a barrier to their pursuit of a healthy life. Choosing to heed the advice from their community provides a way to overcome this perceived barrier and access advice about how to remain healthy.

The trust and interpersonal relationships reflected in the Stormfront women's forum help to build and sustain online extremist communities (Amarasingam, 2023). Stormfront enables women to find a community they might not be able to access in normal life. Through the creation of personal relationships with like-minded individuals, the women are able to overcome barriers to developing pro-social communities in their day-to-day lives because of their commitment to white supremacy. This sense of community is reinforced through relatedness, play and pleasure.

FINDING 'GOOD' ROLES

While the previous section highlighted which goods were reached through women's adherence to the movement, the following unveils how they pursue white nationalist goals. Explaining women's sustained engagement in Stormfront, and white nationalism as a whole, is enabled by understanding the opportunities this milieu provides for women to pursue primary goods in ways they perceive to be fulfilling.

AGENCY

As is often the case in far-right discourses, a woman's ideal role is typically centred around childbearing. From the perspective of the GLM, having children is a means of satisfying a cluster of primary goods including relatedness and pleasure, community and agency. As discussed in the previous section, many of the women on Stormfront fantasise about becoming mothers. The birth of a child is usually described as a great source of pleasure, with posts proclaiming "BABY NEWS!!!!!!!" (0.1518) or "In praise of large white families" (0.249).

Having children is seen as a way for women to express their agency and fulfil what they often consider to be their role in the movement. Not only is childbearing cited in the thread "Ladies, what have you done to contribute to the white race?" (0.6) as the most common contribution to the movement women have made, but also as "the BEST thing at we females can do to support the white race" (2.122).

While being a mother might be seen as a straightforward way to contribute to white nationalist goals, further roles provide routes to expressing agency. Campion's (2020) typology of women in right-wing extremist movements describes the roles of 'exemplar' or 'promoter'. Exemplars are usually tied to the rising phenomenon of 'tradwives' (or traditional wives) and stay-at-home mothers. They pursue a healthy life embracing white nationalist principles and aspire to lead by example: "We would be having a nice time, enjoying the beautiful weather w/ good company and food. We would be SETTING an example." (4.366).

Some women chose a more outward-facing role as promoters both offline and online. For instance, participants discuss engaging in conventional political participation through writing "letters to those whom I feel may influence our rights as needed", attending "numerous anti-immigration rallies" or voting conservatively (2.88). Others take to the online sphere and are active on "social media to awaken the populace about the dangers to our race" (2.88). They also praise the rise of "fame YouTubers making good, well thought out arguments for white nationalism" (1.447). These influencers contribute to the mainstreaming and legitimising of such ideology (Leidig, 2023).

Although the wider far-right context places boundaries on the levels of agency women can exert, the women of Stormfront are able to pursue agency through different, intertwined means and roles. This analysis also illustrates that certain secondary goods (or activities that lead to the attainment of primary goods), such as pregnancy can be means to satisfy multiple needs.

EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Women's agency is often linked to knowledge and skills. Although in contrast to men (Paalgard Munden et al., 2023), the aspiration to lead is less present amongst women, possibly due to gender role expectations in the far-right. Nevertheless, the women of Stormfront do seek education and skills, and do so in ways that are considered beneficial to the movement.

A particular strand of the 'promoter' role is the teacher. Some participants expressed a willingness to teach others about their worldview and way of life. This appears to be popular amongst older women or women who have been involved in the movement longer as "younger ladies need some mentoring and guidance" (6.11).

Other women focus on their children and their efforts to raise them according to white nationalist values, especially if enrolled in the public education system. Public schools tend to be criticised for their diversity and the content of their curriculum, prompting some of the Stormfront women to teach a white nationalist interpretation of history and "work on correcting the corrupted version of the Third Reich our history books cloud our white children's minds with" (2.110).

Stormfront also appears to be a platform for women to seek knowledge. It is a space for ideological debates, with threads such as 'Challenge: Explain the process of how White people ended up in the current racial situation…' (0.1615). Although these tend to happen on other parts of the platform, the women's forum appears to be a safe space where women can acquire introductory knowledge, for instance through asking questions about common abbreviations and sayings used by the community.

Women also share resources they consider relevant such as news articles and scientific studies. These are often published by outlets such as Breitbart, so are rarely politically neutral. However, within the white nationalist context, sharing these kinds of resources can be understood as a way of fulfilling the primary good of knowledge.

Some of the Stormfront women express a desire to acquire knowledge and skills to pursue the movement's goals, which suggests a link between the primary goods of knowledge, work and agency. For instance, one participant said "I got my MA in Psychology, so I might as well put my education / previous knowledge/research to work somewhere!!" (2.9) while another expressed her desire to become a nurse for her "family and folk" (4.50). In this way, Stormfront provides a platform where women can pursue the primary good of knowledge whilst helping shape their offline behaviour and their understanding of how they can serve the movement.

THE SOFT FACE OF RECRUITMENT

Far-right influencers underline the importance of women being spokespeople and presenting a different side of their movement (Leidig, 2023). When discussing what would attract more women to white nationalism, Stormfront women highlight the need for 'good marketing', to show themselves in a positive light. In this way, women's pursuit of agency is enabled through recruitment efforts which are often intertwined with the primary goods creativity and relatedness.

Creativity, especially arts and crafts, is perceived by Stormfront women as a powerful recruitment tool. They enjoy sharing their craft as a way to honour cultural traditions they embrace and make their ideology more accessible to the general public. This also provides a way to emphasise the positive aspects of the white nationalist way of life, by: (i) "presenting ourselves in a decent manner" (1.359)l and (ii) creating "more of a focus on education, health and family" (1.2). In this way, fulfilling the primary goods of creativity and healthy living are perceived as a powerful means of recruitment by the women of Stormfront.

Relatedness is often considered a driver of radicalisation and is referred to as an effective way of recruiting members. Stormfront women have been sharing their worldviews with friends and family "slowly turning on to the pro-White bandwagon" (1.40). However, at times, their beliefs become barriers to relatedness, as the women lose personal connections because of their extreme views.

Cutting ties can also be a choice Stormfront members make when they disapprove of certain behaviours. Participants are typically more reluctant to cut ties with family than friends or romantic partners as they emphasise one's duty to protect their bloodline: "Yes you could lose contact with your sister, but you could also lose her bloodline to Africanus." (0.469). These processes illustrate how women actively choose to engage in 'softer' recruitment methods, which also allow them to pursue agency, creativity and relatedness whilst serving the needs of the movement.

CONCLUSION

This research illustrates how the online platform Stormfront provides avenues for women to pursue primary goods, by creating norms regarding healthy living, creativity and community. It is also possible to see how women's needs are intertwined with their engagement in the milieu and how engaging in certain roles, such as childbearing, becomes infused with white nationalist ideology. Women are not only becoming pregnant, they are doing so in order to save the white race, and counteract the risk of the 'great replacement'.

These findings have implications for the P/CVE field both theoretically and empirically. By testing the applicability of the GLM to online forums, it offers a stepping stone for further research while shedding new light on the role that Stormfront fulfils for white nationalist adherents. It also contributes to a better understanding of extreme communities and the opportunities they offer to meet individual and collective needs.

By demonstrating the potential of the GLM to help interpret the needs and goods that are fulfilled by engaging in extremist spaces, the findings provide support for strengths-based approaches, such as the GLM, to P/CVE programming. This ties in with previous research which highlights the need for gender-responsive exit programmes to compensate for the loss of support derived from extremist milieus (Veilleux-Lepage, et al., 2022). Understanding the goods and needs that are met by engaging in far-right extremism makes it possible to develop interventions that can meet these needs in pro-social, normative ways.

The analysis shows how women's engagement is gender specific and is informed by expectations about appropriate behaviour within white nationalism. This aligns with recommendations to develop gender specific P/CVE programmes. Applying the GLM to more of these milieus in ways that take account of gender, has the potential to help inform the construction of exit and/or prevention programmes that are gender specific, and take account of the range of goods people seek to achieve through engaging in extremist contexts.

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