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Interacting with Transphobic Content on TikTok is a Gateway to Alt-Right Radicalization via the Algorithm

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Interacting with Transphobic Content on TikTok is a Gateway to Alt-Right Radicalization via the Algorithm

Abstract

While the era of alt-right radicalization on YouTube is at an end, the phenomenon is reborn on TikTok; additionally, the platform's short-form content expedites the time it takes for users to fall down the theoretical "rabbit-hole" that is alt-right radicalization. This study examines a Media Matters study whose primary focus was how Transphobia serves as a signal for the algorithm to serve users increasingly hateful ideologies, including but not limited to misogyny, antisemitism, homophobia, and racism. The paper also connects casual transphobic rhetoric in popular culture, namely political campaigns, and comedy as the primary source of the radicalization occurring on TikTok's platform. This paper demonstrates how casual transphobic behaviors feed into rapid radicalization on social media platforms, namely TikTok. Currently, these platforms face no repercussions for serving radical content. The platforms are incentivized to maintain this radicalization because increasingly extreme content encourages users to spend more time on the platforms.

Research Question

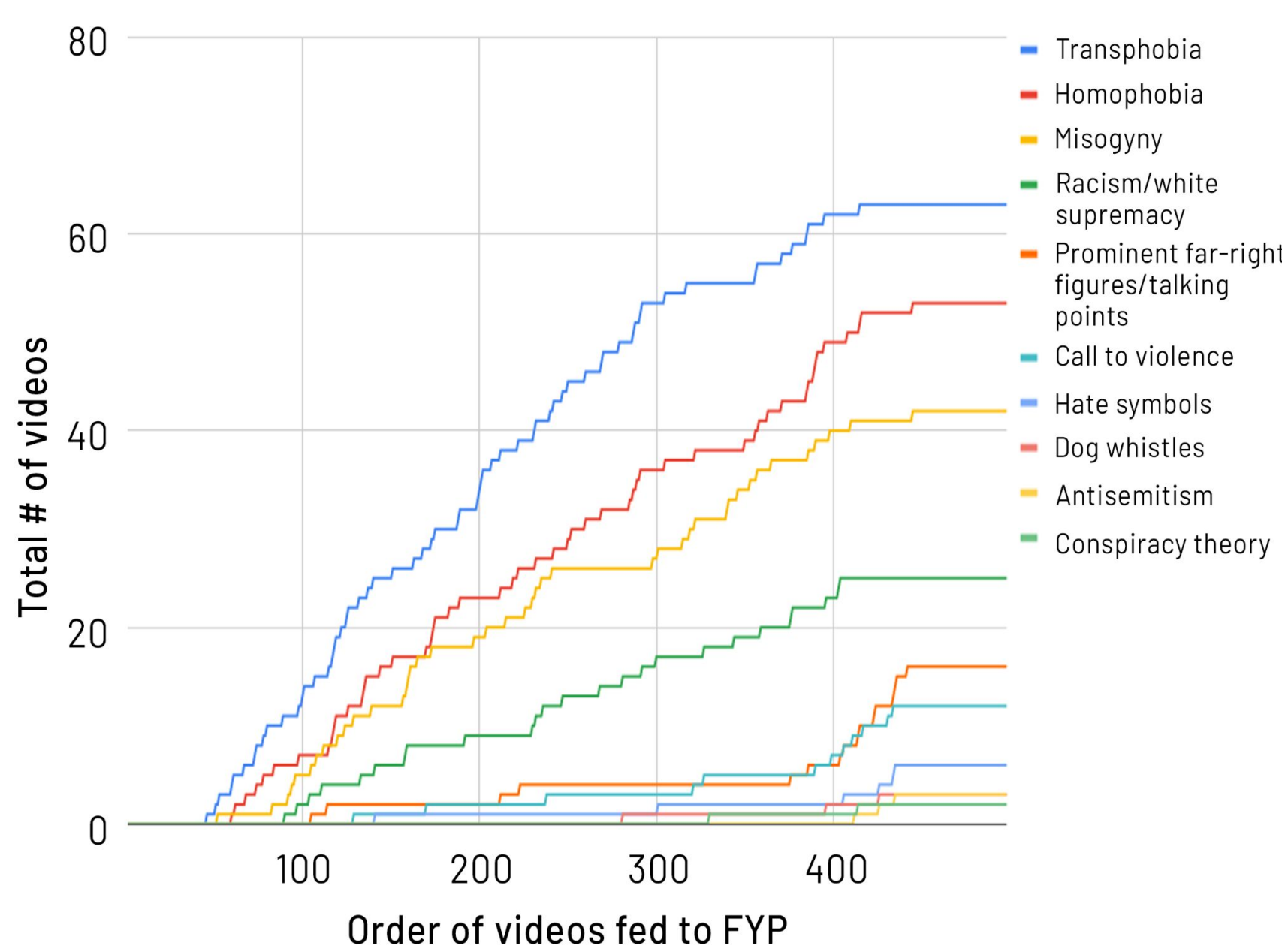
How does online engagement with transphobic content on TikTok relate or funnel into increasingly radical content through the TikTok algorithm?

Background

TikTok is a social media app for short-form videos that lasts from 15 seconds-3 minutes. It is most well-known for its algorithm's accuracy at serving viewers the exact content they'll want to see, and keeping users on the platform as long as possible. TikTok describes the algorithm as "ranking videos based on a combination of factors — starting from interests you express as a new user and adjusting for things you indicate you're not interested in, too" (Worb, 2022).

Evidence

Trends in TikTok's "For You" page (FYP) narratives following engagement with transphobic content



How Groups Radicalize

- Rely on **symbols/ cultural signifiers** to avoid moderation
- Convey messages discreetly with **insider language**.
 - Example: Use of the Punisher logo to affirm membership.
- Escalates from **party affiliation** into Nazi/ White Supremacist ideologies.



Media Matters Study



Read my paper!

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Casual Transphobia

“TrumpTok”

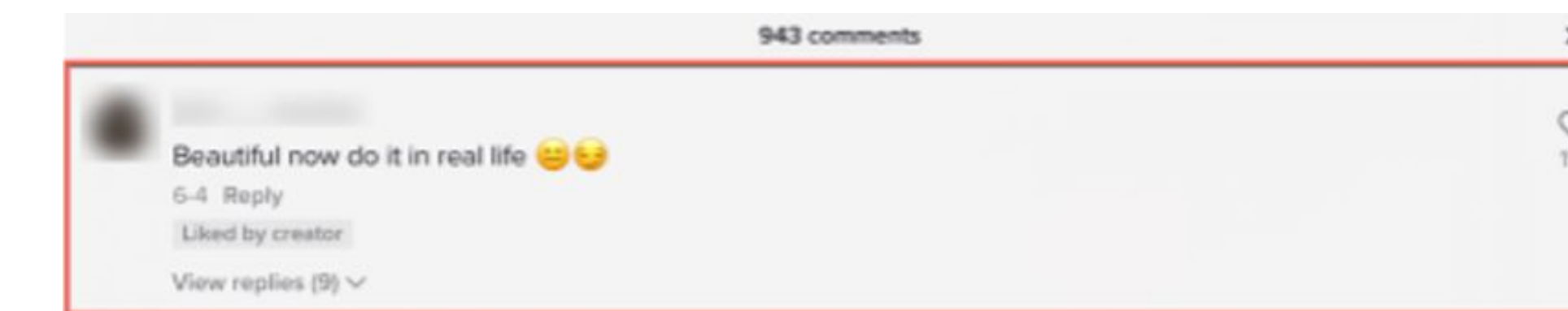
- Republican agenda hyper focused on trans issues.
- Purposeful misgendering of athletes by Donald Trump.

Failings of Chappelle

- Comics are a challenging group to critique.
- Ignores intersectionality of black LGBTQ+ people.
- Espouses team “TERF” talking points.

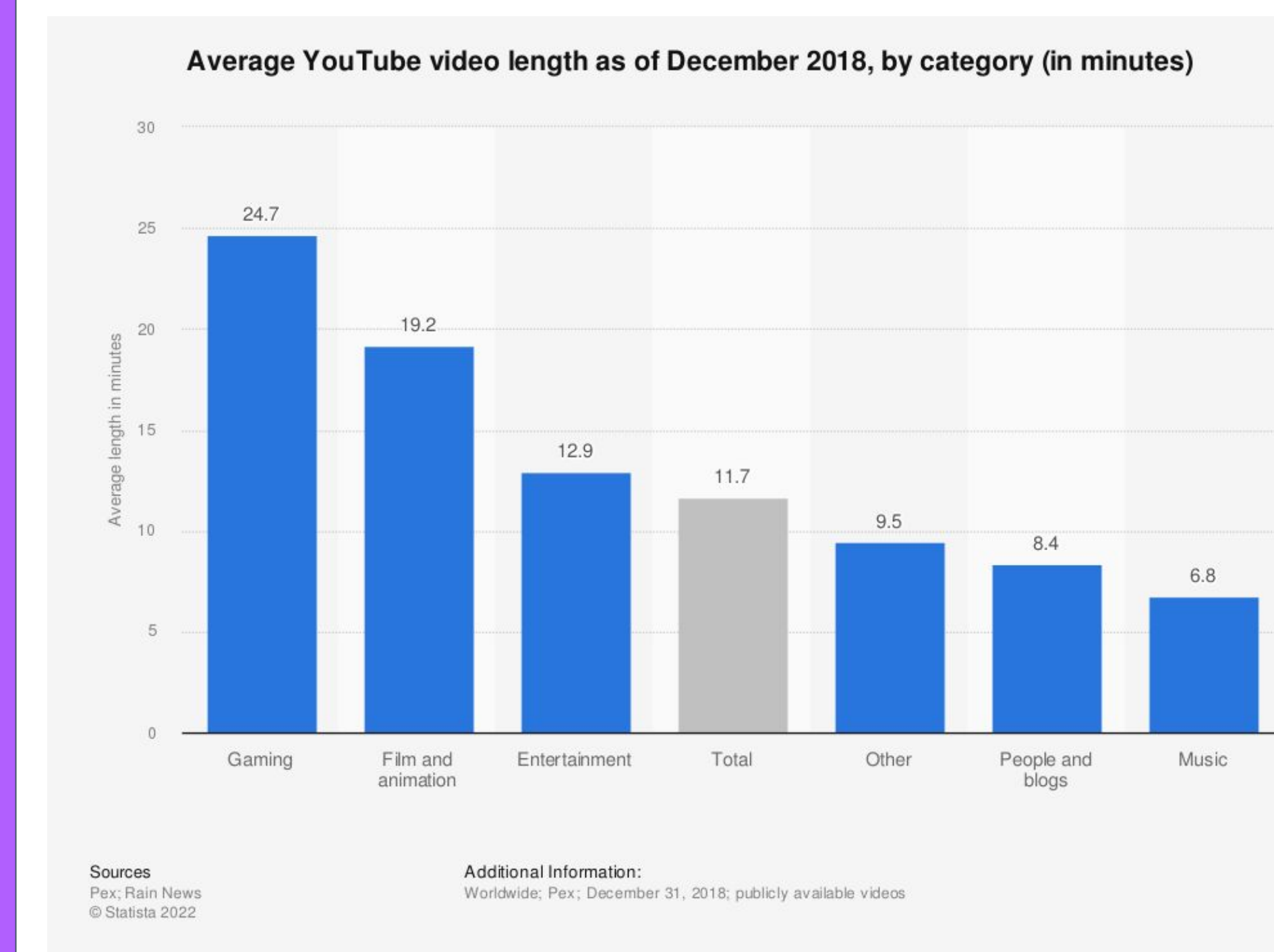
Example

Comment on a video featuring a videogame character shooting NPCs at a rainbow crosswalk



Olivia Little, Abbie Richards, Media Matters 2021

Average YouTube Video Length



Average YouTube video length, L.Ceci, Statista 2021

CONCLUSION

TikTok has a radicalization issue, fueled by casual transphobic rhetoric in entertainment media and political ideologies. The on-ramp from transphobia to the alt-right, as seen in the Media Matters study, demonstrates a problem that is still unsolved (Little & Richards, 2021). Whether TikTok will invest the funds to combat this issue is unclear. However, it's evident that the radicalization once prevalent on YouTube has migrated to TikTok, where the formation of harmful ideologies can solidify in hours.

