“We the People”: White Liberal Identity Formation and Engagement in Racial Activism

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“We the People”
White Liberal Identity Formation and Engagement in Racial Activism

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ABSTRACT

This study uses a Critical Race Studies approach to understand how White liberals construct their identity and how this impacts their racial activism. It is based on twelve semi-structured interviews with White self-identified liberals and participant observation at a Democratic Party rally. In this thesis, I argue that White liberals construct a Good/Bad hierarchy to create a morally-elite, non-racist ‘We the People’ identity. However, this identity does not translate into effective racial activism. This is due in part to the broader context of neoliberal capitalism that conditions my participants to be passive consumers. Thus, they do not engage in racial activism unless it is ‘marketed’ as universal, appealing, and easy. Ultimately, I found that the White liberal identity shaped liberals’ racial activism in ways that served to uphold White supremacy.

Keywords: White liberals, identity formation, liberalism, neoliberalism, Critical Race Studies
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Ask any White person in your life who identifies as a liberal what comes to mind when thinking about racism or White supremacy and you will probably hear one of the following answers: The South; Conservatives; Trump; Republicans; The KKK; The Far Right. The list goes on, but I expect answers revolve mostly around right-leaning figures, groups, and issues. From my experience with news media and personal interactions, when discussing issues of racism, White liberals draw a stark line between White people on the left and right side of the political spectrum. Conservatives on the right are definitively racist, while liberals are non-racist by virtue of standing opposed to them and their values. And if one looked at definitions of ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’, it would make sense as to why White liberals view themselves as non-racist and conservatives as racist. According to the dictionary, liberals are “favorable to progress or reform” while conservatives are “disposed to preserve existing conditions, institutions, etc., or to restore traditional ones, and to limit change” (Anon 2019a; Anon 2019b). Thus, it also makes sense as to why White liberals might meet critiques of their beliefs and behavior regarding racial issues with the defensive, “Are you calling me a racist?”

Inspiration for this research project stemmed from my desire to understand White liberals’ strong disbelief of how they can be racist and what they consider as racial activism. I have been highly critical of what racial activism White liberals cite to praise themselves as non-racist. However, the more I critiqued the White liberals I interacted with, the more I found myself reflecting on why I considered myself a racial activist. From this reflection, I noticed the hypocritical way I defended myself as ‘non-racist’. I used the same logic they did by pointing out my opposition to conservatives and the progressivity of my ideology. I saw us, White liberals, constructing ourselves as moral racial activists yet only engaging in racial activism we felt
comfortable with. We were not engaging in the racial activism people of color advocated for. Believing this to be a larger issue among White liberals and curious as to what other ways White liberals understood themselves and their racial activism, I sought out on this research project. Consequently, I relied on the research question, “How do White liberals form their identity and how does this impact their engagement in racial activism?”

The overall structuring of this thesis relies on theories in Critical Race Studies, though more specifically Whiteness Studies. This provides an understanding as to how White liberals construct a non-racist identity despite their socialization as White people in a society structured by White supremacy. In addition, I make connections between this literature and research on the history of liberalism and neoliberalism. This sets up my analysis as to how both liberal and neoliberal ideologies influence the way White liberals think, understand themselves as liberals, and then act in relation to racial issues.

With this foundation, I designed an interview guide to explore these issues and conducted twelve semi-structured interviews with White self-identified liberals. I complemented these interviews with ethnographic observations at a Bernie Sanders Rally that occurred in the week leading up to the 2018 midterms. Through literature and data analysis, I was able to examine what strategies White liberals use to construct their racial activist identity and how this impacts the way they engage in racial activism.

While the Critical Race literature has examined how White liberals both construct their identity in opposition to conservatives and fail to challenge White supremacy, I believe gaps remain in the literature. To fill these gaps, my research updates these studies to contemporary

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1 One individual who responded to my interview recruitment email identified as Black-White biracial. I address this exception in both my methods and conclusion.
times, incorporates the voices of newer generations, and specifically examines White liberals’ racial activism. A central issue is the heightened politicization of racial issues during the transition from the Obama to Trump administrations. This study, therefore, can help reveal if this increase in tension has affected how White liberals construct their identity, and if so, the new strategies they implement. In addition, more recently published literature is limited, in my view, by an overly broad focus on White people. I believe without targeting specific groups of White liberals in their analyses, they contradict their own acknowledgement that White liberals reject generalizations made about them due to liberalism’s value in individualism, or uniqueness. Therefore, White liberals can continually dismiss the critiques of their beliefs and behavior made in these scholars’ studies. Lastly, much of the literature on White liberal identity formation does not explore the function racial activism serves in creating their identity and how this identity impacts their racial activism as a reciprocal relationship. Thus, my research fills gaps in the existing discussion on White liberals by (1) exploring how the current social climate and newer generations impact the strategies White liberals use to construct their identity; and (2) how this identity and White liberals’ racial activism impact each other.

In Chapter 2, I lay the foundation on which I base my research. To contextualize the findings of my first data chapter, I describe how perceptions of morality affect the process of affiliating with an ideology and, subsequently, identity formation. Once affiliated with liberalism as their moral ideology, the similarity-liking effect causes White liberals create in-group versus out-group, moral versus immoral identities (Day et al. 2014; Bruchmann, Koopman-Holm, Scherer 2018). I further expand on their moral self-perceptions and in-groups versus out-groups by explaining their use of the Good/Bad binary to create non-racist versus racist labels (DiAngelo 2018). Lastly, I explain how White liberals’ use of these moral/immoral, Good/Bad
binaries demonstrates the Critical Race concepts of *the epistemology of ignorance* and *hegemonic storytelling* to deny the racialized aspect of liberalism (Bell 1992; Mills 1997; Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Mueller 2017).

To situate my second data chapter’s findings, I explain a brief history of neoliberalism, focusing on how it has impacted marketing strategies and the way we view ourselves as consumers (Curtis 2002; Cahill and Konigs 2017). I also discuss strategies marketers use to change citizen behavior and engage them in campaigns for social change (Rothschild 1999; Lee 2017). I then outline how White liberals have relied on *interest convergence* to move them to racial activism and connect this idea with the concept of *mystifying solutions* and *colorblindness*. (Bell 1992; Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Geismer 2015; Cahill and Konigs 2017; Mueller 2017).

I conclude by showing how both liberalism and neoliberalism influence White liberals to uphold White supremacy and the *permanence of racism* because they have an interest in keeping *Whiteness as property* (Bell 1992; Harris 1993).

In Chapter 3, I focus on my methodology, explaining what researchers and theories drew me to my chosen methods and the limitations of these methods. Additionally, I reflexively analyze my role as the researcher throughout the course of my study. I explain my sampling methods and introduce my participants and participant observation setting. Lastly, I explain how I collected, analyzed, and coded my data.

In Chapter 4, I begin analysis on how my participants form their inherently moral, and therefore non-racist, liberal identity, which I call ‘We the People’. Participants’ responses revealed this identity relied on their association between morality and liberalism. However, to deny this association was subjective rather than natural, they cited their knowledge of racial issues and asserting the immorality of conservatives as objective proof of liberal morality. These
strategies of proving their morality against the immorality of conservatives to maintain distance from the racist label echoed DiAngelo’s (2018) Good/Bad binary. However, examining White millennial liberals’ perceptions of an increasing political divide and heightened racial tensions in the Trump era revealed how their generation has complexified this binary into a hierarchy. This complexity allows them to better protect their ‘We the People’ identity. Ultimately, the implementation of this hierarchy demonstrated White liberals’ constant work to define themselves as an exception to White socialization, allowing them to ignore or not challenge their perpetuation of White supremacy.

In Chapter 5, I explain how White liberals’ insistence on holding this moral, non-racist identity impacts their engagement in racial activism. Upon analyzing responses, I realized neoliberalism conditioned them to be consumers and expect everything marketed to them, including racial activism. Therefore, my respondents enacted their role as perceived ‘We the People’ racial activists instead as comfortably passive consumers. As one strategy, they framed their consumer demands as recommendations to help people of color be more successful engaging White people in racial activism and achieving racial progress. However, their suggestions for universal, appealing, and easily accessible racial activism opportunities revealed they wanted racial activism kept colorblind, non-challenging or threatening, and easy for them to do. This meant they could perform their ‘We the People’ identity without departing from their passive consumer role and stay within the comfortability of their White privilege. When people of color ‘marketed’ them racial activism this way, White liberals could cite these opportunities as solutions for racial progress and prove this identity. However, when people of color did not ‘market’ racial activism according to these three demands, White liberals disengaged as consumers.
Needing another strategy to maintain their ‘We the People’ identity without relinquishing their comfortable, White consumer role, they justified this disengagement as the fault of people of color, or insurmountable broader social forces and then mystified practical solutions they could enact themselves. This worked to ‘bookmark’ their place as ‘We the People’ racial activists until racial activism satisfied their demands. Ultimately, by devising strategies to simultaneously protect their ‘We the People’ identity and passive consumer role, White liberals once again created powerful ways to ignore, and therefore uphold, the comfortable, privileged position they held by virtue of their Whiteness.

Chapter 6 serves as the conclusion where I summarize how my findings fit with existing literature. Specifically, I connect my findings back to seven Critical Race Studies concepts: the epistemology of ignorance, interest convergence, colorblindness, mystifying solutions, hegemonic storytelling, Whiteness as property, and the permanence of racism. Additionally, I present the outliers of my research and how they challenge the findings I concluded with my other participants. Lastly, I examine the limitations of my research and state how I believe future research can provide more comprehensive analysis.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This body of literature explains how White liberals’ identity and engagement in society are both consciously and subconsciously shaped by their ideology. To consciously construct their identity, White liberals use their belief in liberalism’s inherent morality to construct moral/immoral, Good/Bad binaries. This allows them to mark themselves as moral non-racists and conservatives as immoral racists (DiAngelo 2018). However, a Critical Race perspective helps to reveal that this moral, non-racist identity in fact ignores how both racialized liberalism and neoliberalism condition White liberals them to uphold White supremacy.

Liberal Perceptions and Implications

To understand the foundations of White liberals’ perceptions of themselves and liberalism, I must first explain how and why White liberals affiliate themselves with liberalism. According to moral foundations theory, we subscribe to social and political ideologies based on how we personally define morality (Day et al. 2014; Bruchmann, Kooperman-Holm, Scherer 2018). As the theory posits,

liberals are more likely to endorse individualizing foundations, which focus on individual’s rights through preventing harm towards others and promoting fairness, while conservatives tend to be more likely to endorse binding foundations, which are factors that bind groups together through respecting authority, loyalty to in-group members, and physical or spiritual purity (Bruchmann et al. 2018:3)

Thus, White liberals’ definition of morality as respecting individual rights leads them to mark liberalism, which holds protection of individual liberties and freedoms as its core value, as the inherently moral ideology (Mills 1997). By affiliating themselves with liberalism, White liberals then become inherently moral beings. This moral liberal identity is further strengthened by the similarity-liking effect and the stereotypes it subsequently creates. This effect dictates that White
liberals positively view those who share their values, stereotyping them as moral. Additionally, they negatively view those who hold conservative values, stereotyping them as immoral (Bruchmann et al. 2018). This fosters a sense of “in-group favoritism and outgroup bias,” meaning White liberal socialization reinforces their ideology as moral and conservatism as immoral (Bruchmann et al. 2018:2). Therefore, through their association with liberalism, White liberals gain the ability to cite a moral identity and maintain distance from the immoral conservative identity.

While this moral/immoral binary shapes the general perceptions White liberals hold of themselves and liberalism, the Good/Bad binary narrows these perceptions. This gives them a way to understand themselves and their ideology in relation to racism (DiAngelo 2018). In order to create this binary, distinguishing racists from non-racists, one first must define what qualifies as racism. Since witnessing White violence against people of color during the Civil Rights era, White liberals have recognized racism as overt, purposeful, and malicious (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Mueller 2017; DiAngelo 2018). As a result, they combined the characteristics of those who committed their definition of racist acts to form the racist archetype, as detailed below (DiAngelo 2018).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Racist = Bad</th>
<th>Not Racist = Good</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ignorant</td>
<td>Progressive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bigoted</td>
<td>Educated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prejudiced</td>
<td>Open-minded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean-spirited</td>
<td>Well-intentioned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old</td>
<td>Young</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern</td>
<td>Northern</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1 Racist archetype according to the Good/Bad binary (DiAngelo 2018:72).*

With both this definition of racism and image of racists, White liberals hold the values of their ideology and actions against these forms of measurement. This comparison proves not just that they are non-racists, but that their ideology’s morals place them completely antithetical to racism.
Thus, the combination of positions White liberals give themselves on the moral/immoral and Good/Bad binaries make them believe they are moral non-racists. Through these methods of protecting themselves against the immoral, racist label, White liberals effectively dismiss any need to reflect on their own behavior or ideology (DiAngelo 2018).

Use of these binaries then becomes problematic because they reinforce White liberals’ reliance on the epistemology of ignorance to explain reality (Bell 1992; Mills 1997; Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Mueller 2017). These binaries are based on subjective and false binaries, meaning people exist as both good/moral and bad/immoral. As a result, White liberals must engage in constant work to uphold these binaries as objective and true (DiAngelo 2018). They fully direct their energy towards legitimating these binaries because the alternative – recognizing these binaries as fake – would cause a White liberal identity crisis. First, it would take away the moral, non-racist identity White liberals believe they deserve. And second, with no way to prove themselves as non-racist/moral versus racist/immoral White people, they would be forced to examine the ways in which they and their ideology uphold White supremacy (DiAngelo 2018). Therefore, the work they do to uphold these binaries demonstrates the epistemology of ignorance at work, defined as using purposeful ignorance to create a different understanding of reality apart from the reality of White supremacy’s existence in society. (Bell 1992; Mills 1997; Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Mueller 2017). This epistemology then results in hegemonic storytelling, enabling White liberals to use their power to recast, or ignore, the historically racialized nature of their ideology (Bell 1992; Mills 1997; Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Mueller 2017).

If we look at how liberalism has actually functioned since its inception, the ideology has been historically racialized. It has structured society to prioritize the individual rights of White
people and encourage White self-interest at the expense of people of color’s rights and well-being. Enlightenment era Kantian, Lockean, and Hobbesian writings touted liberalism as protecting an individual’s right to “life, health, liberty, or possessions” (Locke 1689: 206). However, White people have repeatedly afforded these rights to only themselves and denied them to people of color (Mills 1997). Beliefs expressed in Enlightenment writings also institutionalized this practice of prioritizing White rights over the rights of people of color by arguing for a social contract. Rather than being an actual, physical document, the social contract is a tacit agreement that members of society will submit to the rule of the government under the condition the state ensures the protection of their rights (Mills 1997). However, due to its silent nature and agreement only between White parties, this social contract truly is a racial contract that normalizes the protection of only White rights (Mills 1997).

Liberalism further naturalizes this through another of its key principles, Rational Choice Theory. The theory posits all people behave self-interestedly to protect their individual rights. Further, it labels this behavior as rational, a trait highly valued and accepted by society, because individuals act based on calculations of what best upholds their rights and supports their individual desires (Scott 2000; Cahill and Konigs 2017). This became racialized because only White people were deemed rational. People of color, as White intellectuals believed, were too savage and primitive to know what was in their best interest and therefore deemed irrational (Mills 1997).

The practice of slavery serves as one of the most recognizable demonstration of liberalism’s racial contract and racialized Rational Choice Theory. Instead of the state intervening to protect the rights of enslaved people of color, they implemented legislation to protect the rights and desires of rational White slave owners. Further, the narratives White people
created of ‘patriarchal’ slave owners display how society justified slavery by reasoning irrational, enslaved people of color required the care of rational White people (Mills 1997). While just one historical example of how liberalism is racialized, White liberals have ignored this history of liberalism by insisting they follow an inherently moral, non-racist ideology. This shows how the epistemology of ignorance has effectively allowed White liberals to revise their ideology’s history to disassociate themselves from their perpetuation of White supremacy.

**Neoliberal Influence and Implications**

White liberals have also ignored how neoliberalism has conditioned them to be consumers and allows them to further uphold White supremacy. Through analyzing the history of marketing since post-WWII and the rise of neoliberalism, we can see how this ideology has reshaped the ways White liberals socially and politically engage in society. Specifically, it has caused them to move from social activists to passive consumers, prioritizing their own well-being and desires. Additionally, this analysis exposes the ways marketers of social change campaigns have had to adapt their messages to White liberals. Lastly, I give a historical example of how neoliberalism has shaped the way White liberals involve themselves in racial issues. This demonstrates the Critical Race Studies concepts of interest convergence, mystifying solutions, and colorblindness.

While liberalism previously held the government responsible for protecting individual rights, this belief changed starting in the post-WWII era (Curtis 2002). White people began looking to the free market as a better positioned structure to respect their rights and desires (Curtis 2002; Cahill and Konigs 2017). This updated version of liberalism, known as neoliberalism, made them believe a free market economy, unregulated by government, best
enabled them to make individual choices. After all, businesses during this time declared, “the consumer is king” (Curtis 2002). However, White liberals during the 1960s protested how the economy operated to keep the masses docile and conforming to consumer culture. They considered this conformity as forced upon them by businesses. Thus, they saw this as a direct threat to their liberal values of individualism and freedom of choice. An era of widespread protest and activism emerged from this decade. However, strong repression from the state made White liberal protesters reconsider their strategy of challenging these consumerist social norms (Curtis 2002).

Instead of directing their efforts towards changing society, developing psychoanalytical theories rooted in liberalism’s value of individualism convinced White liberals the solution lay in changing themselves and their relation to society (Curtis 2002). Thus, they disassociated themselves from a collective identity as activists and their concerns for social justice (Cahill and Konigs 2017). As an effect of neoliberalism, White liberals no longer viewed remedying social injustices as their core concern. Rather, they sought individual expression and fulfillment as their main mission in life, prioritizing their own needs and well-being over others (Curtis 2002). Important to note, most Black activists of the time did not embrace individualism because they derived the strength to challenge American institutions from their collective identity. Therefore, White liberals’ abandonment of activism for the appealing idea of individualism meant their withdrawal of support for Black activists (Curtis 2002).

Not only did White liberals withdraw their support from racial activism, they ended up conforming to the consumer culture they had originally protested so vehemently against. Marketing to White liberals’ value of individualism and self-expression, corporations exploited ideas from neoliberal psychoanalysis (Curtis 2002). Psychologists and economists at Stanford
Research Institute developed a sort of personality test to categorize people into typologies, called Values and Lifestyles (VALs). These VAL typologies reflected their individual desires and made them feel unique. When researchers passed this data to corporations, they could then translate these VALs into types of consumers to market to (Curtis 2002). Ironically, in less than two decades after White liberals’ protests against consumerism, corporations found ways to market ‘self-expression’ back to them as a consumable product. With this transition from an activist to a consumerist identity, White liberals eventually agreed the free market economy recognized their sense of self and rights. As a result, any government intervention in the economy incited backlash. Although government intervention meant addressing inequalities in the economy, White liberals equated it with repression of individual liberties (Curtis 2002; Cahill and Konigs 2017). Inspired by people’s faith in free markets and cognizant of public perception of government, the state reconsidered its role in people’s lives by turning to neoliberalism, hoping to harness public appeal like the neoliberal economy did.

Similar to how corporations socially changed White liberals to engage as consumers, not activists, the government’s adoption of neoliberal policies and marketing politically changed White liberals to vote more as consumers. Ronald Reagan’s presidency marked the government’s adoption of neoliberal thought, promising to get government off people’s backs and respect individual rights. Eventually, Democrats followed suit (Curtis 2002; Cahill and Konigs 2017). Election after election, Republican politicians espousing neoliberal policies won out over candidates from the Democratic party. This was because Democrats continually relied on their New Deal progressive platform and called for their base to think about the welfare of their fellow citizens. With this strategy, they alienated their voters. White liberals wanted a government that
would listen to their individual needs and protect their individual rights, not infringe upon them by asking them to take care of others (Curtis 2002; Cahill and Konigs 2017).

As a result, the Democratic party looked to the practices of neoliberal psychoanalysis to understand their base and swing voters. Focus groups, a tactic politics borrowed from businesses, revealed voters expected the government to cater to their individual demands and veto policies inhibiting their freedom of choice. As seen in the candidacy of Bill Clinton, he tailored his message to appeal to liberal individuals, winning the presidency with his promise he would not raise taxes. His public approval as president plummeted when he eventually had to raise taxes to fund welfare programs, an idea completely antithetical to liberalism’s value of individual choice and their right to wealth (Curtis 2002). Raising taxes took away their choice in how they spent their money. Additionally, they considered this policy as taking earned money away from them, rational people, and handing it over to welfare recipients, irrational people. As they believed, only irrational people lacked the ability to make choices in their best interest and, therefore, required welfare (Curtis 2002; Cahill and Konigs 2017).

Attempting to save his presidency and win back the public, Clinton cut back welfare and instead focused on addressing the everyday problems concerning the individuals in his focus groups (Curtis 2002). This concession served as the end of New Deal politics, concerned with the collective well-being of citizens, and beginning of liberal politics rooted in self-interested individualism as the Democratic party platform (Curtis 2002). Ultimately, White liberals’ transformation to socially and politically engage as consumers forced all groups concerned with effecting policy change to use marketing strategies to gain White liberals’ participation.

With White liberals’ expecting others to cater to their individual desires and rejecting laws that infringed on their individual rights, groups had to adopt the use of social marketing to
get White liberals to participate in their social change campaigns. This departs from the traditional view policymakers have held as to how they can change citizen behavior. With this original understanding, policymakers saw only two options to influence citizen behavior for social change – using educational campaigns or passing laws (Lee 2017).

With educational campaigns, also known as the “Show Me” approach, policymakers release messages to inform the public about a certain social issue. This is done in hopes they will persuade citizens to change their behaviors and, therefore, remedy the social issue (Lee 2017). However, these campaigns are only effective when citizens themselves recognize personal benefits to changing their behaviors and there is little effort required on their part to change their behavior (Lee 2017). The “Buckle Up” campaign serves as an example of an educational campaign to convince car passengers to use their seatbelts. However, it failed to achieve policymakers’ desired effect of reducing seatbelt-related injuries and deaths. This serves as an example of how policymakers have to implement laws when education does not achieve the desired social change (Lee 2017).

Laws, such as the “Click It or Ticket” law, follow what Lee (2017) calls the “Make Me” approach, forcing citizens to change their behavior with the threat of legal punishment. But, as the literature has noted, neoliberalism has conditioned liberals to view government regulation a violation of individuals’ rights. Therefore, marketing experts like Lee (2017) and economists like Rothschild (1999) advocate for a compromise between these two approaches: social marketing. As Rothschild (1999:35) writes, “Marketing offers a mechanism to find a cooperative balance between the rights of the individual and the rights of society. By operating through free choice, marketing protects the rights of the individual, because no one is forced to accept the societal offering.” Social marketing endorses neoliberal consumerism by recommending policymakers
for social change become more like marketers. By adopting this role, they show an understanding of individuals’ lifestyles and respect towards their individuals rights. Therefore, citizens see proposed policies as benefitting them, rather than as a blanket social policy forced onto them. Lee (2017) describes this as the “You’ll Need to Help Me” approach because policymakers must convince individuals there is a personal benefit to them changing their behavior and the social policy being implemented.

Under Critical Race Studies, this approach demonstrates both interest convergence and mystifying solutions (Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Mueller 2017). Interest convergence simply means individuals operate on a quid pro quo basis and support policies because their interests align with others’ interests (Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Geismer 2015). Interest convergence is not realized by individuals on their own but rather through other parties convincing them they could benefit from involving themselves in a certain issue (Lee 2017). Secondly, mystifying solutions means that without these other parties convincing individuals of the personal benefits they will experience, individuals will justify not changing their behavior or doing a certain action. They will either claim there is no practical solution or they cannot know how to be a part of the solution (Mueller 2017). Like the name of social marketing’s approach alludes to, someone must be held as responsible for telling White liberals what to do (Lee 2017). While I have discussed social marketing in the context of generic social issues, neoliberalism has conditioned White liberals to also expect the social marketing of racial justice issues. This demonstrates not only Critical Race concepts of interest convergence and mystifying solutions, but colorblindness as well.

Serving as a historical example, White liberals support for fair housing policies and neighborhood desegregation in the 1970s demonstrates their expectation to be socially marketed
racial issues. Consequently, this exhibits interest convergence, colorblindness, and mystifying solutions. White liberal activism against unfair housing practices began only after Black activists made them aware of real estate agents denying Black families houses in White neighborhoods. In other words, people of color ‘helped’ them realize they could benefit from desegregation, too (Geismer 2015). Demonstrating interest convergence, White liberals advocated for Black families to be accepted into White suburbs because they realized desegregating the suburbs would give their children opportunities to play and go to school with Black children. They believed this exposure would set their children up for success in a society that was beginning to value one’s ability to understand and interact with ‘other cultures’ (Geismer 2015; Warikoo 2016). However, they did not participate in activism efforts to allow Black singles to buy homes in White neighborhoods. This single individuals had no children for their kids to interact with (Geismer 2015).

Additionally, White liberals only supported allowing Black families to live in White suburbs if they alone could afford the price of the house, without government assistance (Geismer 2015). Exhibiting colorblindness, they did not recognize the structural disadvantages Black people faced versus the advantages they experienced by virtue of their Whiteness (Bell 1992; Zamudio and Rios 2006; Bonilla-Silva 2014; Mueller 2017). Ignoring how post-WWII government policies made housing affordable for White families to finally buy houses, White liberals refused to support initiatives making housing in White neighborhoods cheaper for Black families (Geismer 2015). They stated that making policies or requiring others to support – or as they believed, benefit – one certain group went against their individual liberty of choice (Geismer 2015; Cahill and Konigs 2017). As a way of mystifying solutions, White liberals only considered colorblind initiatives. This meant solutions for racial justice had to provide equal
benefits for all groups involved to be considered practical or viable (Geismer 2015; Cahill and Konigs 2017; Mueller 2017).

Ultimately, as this example shows, White liberals’ neoliberal conditioning to be self-interested consumers caused them to only become racial activists when people of color market colorblind solutions converging with their interests. This effectively neutralizes challenges to the racial status quo and enables them to uphold White supremacy.

_WHITE SUPREMACY PROTECTING WHITENESS AS PROPERTY_

While the assertion that White liberals uphold ‘White supremacy’ might evoke a defensive reaction from readers, it is important to dispel our current understanding of the term. Instead, we must focus on Critical Race scholars’ definition to understand why and how White liberals continually allow White supremacy to operate. White supremacy “does not refer to individual White people and their individual intentions or actions but to an overarching political, economic, and social system of domination” (DiAngelo 2018:28). Further, it is “the unnamed […] system that has made the modern world what it is today” (Mills 1997:122). Unnamed in this context refers to how we have a very narrow definition of what qualifies as White supremacy. As a result, we never acknowledge White supremacy as the overall system all White people, regardless of ideology, have been socialized to participate in and have a stake in upholding (Harris 1993; Bonilla-Silva 2014; DiAngelo 2018).

As mentioned, White liberals have been socialized to participate in the system through their racialized ideologies. Liberalism and neoliberalism teach them to self-interestedly protect their individual rights and desires. This accustoms them to a privileged lifestyle that prioritizes their rights and desires above people of color’s. Therefore, they have a stake in upholding White
supremacy because it keeps Whiteness as property and allows them to maintain this lifestyle. According to Bell (1992) and Harris (1993), keeping *Whiteness as property* means creating Whiteness as a legally protected possession only White people have the right to enjoy. Consequently, White people then have the right to exclude people of color from experiencing their White status and benefits. In other words, it means not having to sacrifice or diminish the level of comfortability and privilege in life they have always known. Therefore, even though some White people may not openly advocate for White supremacy, all White people benefit from keeping White supremacy unnamed as an underlying, invisible system (Mills 1997).

Because White people’s socialization and stake in upholding White supremacy makes them unwilling to name it, they allow for the system of domination to continue. With other systems of domination, like capitalism, we have named these overarching systems. As a result, we can then study, challenge, and work towards dismantling them (Mills 1997). However, White supremacy gains protection from these threats through the invisibility we give it. Thus, we perpetuate Whiteness as property and guarantee the *permanence of racism* (Bell 1992; Mills 1997; Bonilla-Silva 2014; DiAngelo 2018).

**Conclusion**

While literature shows White liberals use moral/immoral, Good/Bad binaries to assert their moral, non-racist identity, it also reveals these binaries are based on the subjective belief that liberalism is inherently moral. Despite this subjectivity, White liberals use their power of hegemonic storytelling to defend these binaries as legitimate. As a result, they can hold on to this desired identity and deny the racialized nature of liberalism. Their effort to create a reality where they, as White liberals, are inherently moral and non-racist demonstrates their use of the
epistemology of ignorance. This effectively leaves White supremacy upheld and unnamed as the system of domination they have been socialized to participate in.

Unlike with liberalism, White liberals do not consciously acknowledge neoliberalism as an influence on their identity. However, the ideology still conditions them to uphold White supremacy and ignore how they do so. By teaching them to expect social and political issues marketed to them, neoliberalism sets a problematic precedent. Literature shows White liberals only engage with social or political issues under specific conditions. They must have marketers show them the personal rewards of engagement. Additionally, the proposed solution cannot infringe on their individual freedoms. Otherwise, they mystify solutions as non-existent or unviable. Applying this consumer conditioning to racial issues, requiring that marketed solutions converge with their White interests means solutions must be colorblind or else White liberals will mystify them.

Ultimately, the literature demonstrates that, despite White liberals’ self-perceived moral and non-racist identity, both liberalism and neoliberalism subconsciously condition White liberals to uphold White supremacy. The ideologies encourage self-interested behavior that protects their rights and freedoms over people of color’s, otherwise known as keeping Whiteness as property. As my research will show, White liberals must constantly devise new strategies and justifications that prove this moral, non-racist identity without requiring them to actually challenge White supremacy.
CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Answering my research question stated in my introduction required an understanding of White liberals’ perceptions of morality, awareness of racism and current racial issues, and what they deemed as work toward racial progress. With this understanding I could examine their self-perceptions for the underlying influence of racialized liberalism and neoliberalism and see how White liberals’ projected self-image may interfere with their racial activism.

Methodology

My study relies on qualitative methods to study the phenomenon of White liberal identity formation and how this shapes their involvement in racial activism (Kumar Astalin 2013; Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey 2011). To allow my participants to more fully express their opinions and subsequently collect richer data, I relied primarily on semi-structured interviews. I chose to interview because literature shows communicative interaction fosters trust and builds the rapport needed to expose White racial ideology (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Hennink et al. 2011).

I supplemented these responses with data I gathered while attending a Bernie Sanders “Get Out the Vote” rally for the 2018 midterms. I chose to supplement with participant observation instead of surveys because the event enabled me to see the interactions occurring between individuals. Additionally, I could experience the emotions these collective actions created among liberals. Survey responses could not provide me with this, as respondents would be required to choose from a short list of what I subjectively considered likely answers. If they did not identify with any answer, they would have to type their answers in a text box with limited room for explanation. Also, I worried that respondents would choose answers they considered to best portray themselves as non-racist. Previous research has shown White individuals’ tendency
to do so (Bonilla-Silva 2014). Interviewing and observing White liberals allowed me to see contradictions between their self-perceptions and subconscious biases, behaviors, and actions rooted in racialized liberalism and neoliberalism.

Bonilla-Silva (2014) presents the main limitation of my methodology, as I draw conclusions from a small sample gathered from convenience and snowball sampling. Despite the repetitive answers I began to collect, it is not a representative sample. This leaves me with limited abilities to generalize about a larger population of White liberals. I agree with this critique of my small sample; however, I more strongly agree with his view of the “dangerous but necessary role of the analyst” (Bonilla-Silva 2014:14). Analysts’ interpretations have their faults; my fault in analysis may lie in my small number of respondents. But rejecting generalizability plays into the liberal belief of individualism that upholds uniqueness and exceptionalism. Consequently, it would allow White liberals to ignore or reject my points (Mills 1997; DiAngelo 2018).

While my thesis calls White liberals’ self-perceptions into question and theorizes possible effects of their ideologies, I must clarify that my main objective is not to force but suggest the possible applicability of my findings onto the larger White liberal population and facilitate self-reflection. As DiAngelo (2018:14) writes, instead of rejecting the generalizability of findings and claims of racism, White liberals need to ask ourselves, “What would this mean if it were true?”

**Reflexive Statement**

I specifically focused on White self-identified liberals because, despite Critical Race Studies explaining how White people uphold White supremacy, I believe White liberals exclude themselves from this generalization. I base this not just on the value liberalism and neoliberalism
places on individualism and uniqueness as previously discussed in my literature review. This assumption also comes from my socialization as a White liberal – being raised by White liberals, growing up in the liberal Bay Area, going to a liberal high school and college, and developing relationships with, for the most part, only White liberals. Such experience conveyed a message to me that being a liberal naturally placed me in opposition to something as immoral as racism and, therefore, excluded me as a root of this problem. My surroundings taught me the addendum of ‘liberal’ to my White identity meant I was a ‘good’ or ‘nice’ White person, certainly not contributing to White supremacy. Although I recognize this was my personal experience, I sought to understand if other White liberals received the same messages and shared this understanding of a liberal identity. And if a larger group of White liberals did in fact collectively learn and reinforce these messages, what problems or obstacles might that pose to racial progress?

Although I am biased in my belief that White liberals’ activism does not challenge White supremacy, I acknowledge myself as part of this problem. Additionally, I acknowledge the racism and White dominance my ideology perpetuates. Even upon completing this research, I find myself still using the Good/Bad hierarchy and being a passive consumer of racial activism. This thesis allowed for me to critically reflect on my contributions to White supremacy and voice my findings from the lens of a White liberal, which I believed could provide White liberal readers with relatability. I hoped my position as a White liberal calling out the strategies and justifications we use to call ourselves non-racist could encourage receptivity and honest reflection with readers.
To recruit interviewees, I relied on convenience and snowball sampling (Hennink et al. 2011). I first posted advertisements on Facebook and the bulletin boards of the Sociology, Ethnic Studies, and Humanities departments. I then sent emails to campus and other local political or racial justice organizations the described themselves as ‘progressive’ or ‘activists’ in their mission statements. Lastly, I asked friends and my initial interviewees to mention my research to people they knew and contacted the individuals they said were interested in participating.

I only required participants to identify as “White, liberal, and 18+,” leaving the definition of White liberal open to my respondents’ interpretation. I believed it was necessary to rely on respondents’ perceptions of ‘liberal’ because part of my research question sought to explore how White individuals were socialized to understand a liberal identity. However, I believe just using the word ‘liberal’ to recruit limited the number of racial activists I was able to sample because, as they expressed to me in their interviews, they considered ‘radical’ or ‘Democratic socialist’ as a better descriptor of themselves.

As defined both by literature and my respondents, White meant specifically not having black or brown skin. While Ignatiev (1995), Brodkin (1998), and DiAngelo (2018) have shown Whiteness to be socially constructed using more than just skin color as a marker of Whiteness or Non-Whiteness, the foundation of race relies on holding Whiteness diametrically opposed to Blackness, creating the two extreme ends of the racial hierarchy. Whiteness cannot exist without the definition of Blackness, thus my respondents know what they are by knowing what they are not – brown or black skinned. Additionally, DiAngelo (2018) shows being White does not just mean having a light skin tone, it also means they receive a status or benefit they did not have to actively work for, an advantage that came solely as the result of their Whiteness – White
privilege. Therefore, I define a White person as someone who experiences implicit benefits from their light skin tone and has societal priority over black and brown individuals.

As I found, my respondents defined their liberal identity in line with a characteristic Bonilla-Silva (2014:180) gave as his definition of a racial progressive: they “recognize the significance of discrimination in the United States.” Similar to how they defined Whiteness by a White/Black binary, I found they constructed their liberal identity on the Good/Bad binary. Additionally, the categorization into one group is predicated on not belonging to the other group.

As my respondents explained, a liberal is the opposite of a conservative. Liberals are open-minded and welcoming, unlike conservatives who are close-minded and unaccepting. White conservatives are most likely to be racist and Republicans, so White liberals are most likely to be non-racist and Democrats. The White, rural South runs rampant with conservative racists, so diverse city-dwelling creates liberal non-racists. While the list my respondents gave of opposites goes on, these were the most common responses. Ultimately, the definition I concluded from their descriptions is as follows. Liberals are moral people (most likely, but not always, Democrats) who see the social injustices around them. Because of their social justice awareness and diverse experiences, combined with their acceptance those who are different from them, they would not support White supremacy or actively do racist things.

Setting

My research was focused in the Rocky Mountain college city I attended as an undergraduate. Analysis of the area’s demographic data reveals the city to be overwhelmingly Democrat, White, and middle to upper class.
If looking at liberalness based on the political party my participants voted for, the predominantly Democratic blue areas of my college city in Figure 1 confirm the areas’ liberalness. According to the state’s Voter Registration Statistics, as of October 1, 2018, 90,600 active voters in the city registered with the Democratic party while 32,204 active voters registered with the Republican party. Since 2004, the first available year for digitized registered voters’ party affiliation data, Democratic dominance in the city has held (Colorado Secretary of State 2018).

In addition to their blue voting trend, the city is overwhelmingly White. According to annual reports conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, the area has an overwhelmingly White population. Of those surveyed for this report, 90.5% of residents self-identified as White. If broken down to specify White/Non-Hispanic, this number drops to 77.9% (United States Census Bureau 2017). While both of these statistics show White people make up the majority of the city, I find the overall self-identification as White has more significance than the subcategories of White/Non-Hispanic and White/Hispanic. This self-identification demonstrates that over 90% of
city’s residents, either consciously or subconsciously, view themselves as my definition of White and in contrast to non-Whites.

Lastly, my college city is middle class, with a median household income at $70,158 (Fry and Kochhar 2018). However, this average is driven down because the income of currently enrolled college students was included in the calculation (American Community Survey 2016). Therefore, I believe a classification of middle to upper class would be more fitting.

I chose to study this area not just out of ease, but also because the overwhelming amount of White, self-identified liberals in this city created a concentrated area for these individuals to interact. I believed through these interactions, a liberal image would be shared and reinforced. By interviewing and observing these individuals, I could understand what strategies White liberals learned from others to use to create and protect their liberal self-image.

Classifications

Affiliation to social activism.

The first classification I organized my respondents under was affiliation to social activism. I used these categories to explore possible correlations between affiliation to social activism and their engagement racial activism. However, for most of my data analysis, I found no difference between laypeople and political activists. Thus, when describing my respondents, I only highlight their affiliation when relevant.

The first category is layperson. This individual is politically active in terms of voting, but does not engage in further actions, like calling senators or attending city council meetings. They are socially active, as in reading and reposting articles on social media or going to protests and marches. However, they have not joined racial or political activist school or community groups.
A political activist is a member of a political organization with social change as a part of their platform or mission statement. While they do not dismiss grassroots movements, they focus their energy in the institutional sphere of politics. They will be ones to register people to vote, advocate for legislation, and attend city council meetings to promote social change. However, racial justice is not an explicit objective in their mission statement.

Lastly, racial activists are a part of an anti-racist student or community group with anti-racism specifically in their mission statement. They have little faith the structuring of U.S. government will allow them to achieve racial progress. As a result, they mostly operate extra-institutionally, or independent of political institutions, to incite changes in social norms and beliefs.

*Generational group.*

For my second classification, I focused on respondents’ self-identified generational group. I believed it was important to see how different generational groups of White liberals have been socialized. I also wanted to explore how White liberal socialization has evolved for the different, younger generational groups and how that might impact how they see their role in racial issues.

I went back three generational groups to include millennials, Gen X, and baby boomers. I did not include the most recent generational group, Gen Z, because most of my respondents were on the cusp of Gen Z and millennial but did not identify with how young Gen Zs could be. Additionally, I did not create a category for the generation above baby boomers, the Silent Generation, because only Bernie Sanders was older than this generation, but he displayed the same behaviors as the baby boomers I interviewed and observed. As a result, I analyzed his data under the classification as baby boomer.
To categorize the generational groups, I used Pew generational guidelines (2019). Millennials include the birth years of 1996 – 1981. Millennial respondents characterized themselves in opposition to baby boomers, who they considered not as racially aware or active as them. They also considered themselves the most diverse generational group and most outspoken on social issues. Gen Xers include the birth years of 1980 – 1965. Only one respondent identified as a Gen Xer, stating her age disqualified her as a baby boomer. Additionally, her kid qualified as a millennial, so she found herself caught in between, not identifying with either of the two predominantly referenced generational groups. I include her as a distinct generational group because the data I collected from her interview placed her as an outlier, not demonstrating the behaviors or ways of thinking of either millennials or baby boomers. Baby boomers fall into the birth year range of 1964 – 1946. Boomers I interviewed and observed expressed optimism towards millennials and Gen Zs affecting social change and becoming more progressive.

While I was able to collect the generational groups my interviewees identified with, I was unable to do the same with speakers at the Bernie Sanders rally. Unless they stated the generational group they considered themselves to be in, I had to Google their birthday and use their birth year to place them into a group. Only one rally speaker did not have their birth year accessible, so I roughly assumed their age and generational group.

Data Collection

Interviews.

Throughout Fall 2018 and early Spring 2019, I conducted semi-structured interviews with twelve White, self-identified liberals. However, during my snowball sampling, one self-identified “Black-White biracial” liberal individual expressed a desire to be interviewed for my
research. With her interview, I used her responses more as insights into further avenues of research, not as data to include in my coding or analysis chapters.

After completing demographic questions (age, gender, race), I focused on the interview on background questions to understand the messages they received about being a liberal and what it meant to them. These background questions helped me understand in group/out group distinctions. I asked about their self-identified generational group and description of political affiliation and ideologies. What does ‘liberal’ and ‘liberalism’ mean to you? Who is a liberal? Who is not a liberal? How did your upbringing and education shape your ideology as a liberal?

Next, I moved to questions about social movements to further understand what they considered liberal issues and where they stood in racial issues. What social movements resonate with you and why? What got you into protesting or activism? If they were a political or racial activist: what motivated you to join such a group? This gave me richer data as to what issues motivated them to take action.

After, I asked questions about the political climate to understand how the current political climate has affected White liberals. I wanted to know how the government or politicians shaped their understanding of racial issues and their role within them. Additionally, I wanted to understand how White liberals see racial progress in political terms. What was racially different between Obama’s administration and our current administration? What impact did a liberal president have on racial progress versus a conservative president? What difference did a Democrat-majority Congress make from a Republican-majority?

To conclude the interview, I asked miscellaneous follow-up questions to gather richer data. Some respondents made distinctions not just between White liberals and conservatives, but within the grouping of White liberals. How do you [the respondent] differ from other White
liberals? What are those distinctions? Bringing up youth activism became a pattern in my interviews that respondents, so I also asked what effect they believed millennials had on racial progress.

*Participant observation.*

I also attended a rally hosted by Bernie Sanders and the Democratic Party in anticipation of the 2018 midterm elections. The purpose was to motivate younger voters to go vote. During the rally, I took note of the crowd and speaker demographics; messages conveyed through clothing, signs, and distributed pamphlets; overheard conversations in the crowd, and the speeches of three Democratic candidates running in the state’s midterms. I also took note of Bernie Sanders’ speech. Throughout the event, I took pictures of the volunteers they recognized on stage for organizing the rally and a video panning the crowd so I could more accurately analyze demographic makeup. I chose to analyze the video of the crowd after Bernie Sanders’ speech because, from multiple recordings I took of the crowd during the duration of the rally, the crowd appeared largest to me during this time. Additionally, conversations between attendees around me indicated high anticipation of hearing Bernie speak. I acknowledge estimates of crowd size and demographic makeup measured this way are extremely rough; however, from the sample of people I analyzed the crowd was overwhelmingly [over 80%] White.

*Data Analysis*

I started my data analysis by first relying on deductive coding, associating data from my transcribed interviews with existing sociological concepts (Hennink et al. 2011). I drew these deductive codes from themes, definitions, and other explanations of White liberal logic found in my review of the literature. This was an ongoing process throughout my research, as I
continually referred to new literature to see how other scholars’ work might explain my data.

Using NVivo software, I organized my transcripts, memos, and field notes based on these deductive codes. From this, I used inductive coding to explain the relationships, connections, and processes I believed my deductive codes pointed to. Additionally, I relied on inductive coding to describe any definitions, themes, or explanations of logic I found important that were not already related back to existing literature.
CHAPTER 4: ‘WE THE PEOPLE’: CREATING THE WHITE LIBERAL IDENTITY

As the literature explains, liberalism and conservatism are both dissimilar moral philosophies and political ideologies. Thus, when individuals subscribe to the liberal ideology, they do so because they believe it stands for what they view as morality. Upon grouping themselves into one of the two ideological camps based on shared beliefs, the resulting similarity-liking effect pits the camps against each other through the emotional attachment to a moral identity. By White liberals being socialized to recognize themselves as moral, their othering of conservatives positions them as immoral, thereby setting up a Good/Bad binary. Demonstrated in my participants’ responses, liberals invoke this binary when experiencing racial stress, even from something as benign as explaining their understanding of current racial issues, to project themselves as moral non-racists and conservatives as immoral racists.

As liberals continue to use this Good/Bad binary, they make the ideological divide between themselves and conservatives greater and have to invoke Good/Bad binary in more polarizing and complex ways. Additionally, my data showed White liberals’ perception of a growing ideological divide increases the racial stress they feel, specifically with those who identify as millennials. Through efforts to neutralize the threat racial stress poses to their moral, non-racist identity, White millennial liberals complexify the Good/Bad binary into what I refer to as a Good/Bad hierarchy to maximize elite moral status and distance from immorality. By examining the basic ways liberals are socialized to understand their identity, we can better understand how they adapt perceptions of themselves when under racial stress and, therefore, form the contemporary liberal identity.
White Liberal Identity Formation

Through analyzing my interviewees’ perceptions of liberal ideology, I found White liberals must construct their ideology as inherently moral to protect their self-image. Because ideological alignment is determined by personal understandings of morality, their moral identity is only an emotionally-based perception. Their responses echo this, clearly showing emotions establish their perceptions of who is moral or immoral. When describing the differences between the two ideologies, they frame their responses around how they feel towards the two groups or how they “like to think” of themselves. However, acknowledging their moral identity is just a subjective assertion leaves them vulnerable to critiques of immorality and completely undermine how they have come to understand themselves. Thus, as an effort of self-preservation, they reframe the ideology to be inherently moral and not just based on feelings.

To deny the emotional and subjective basis of their morality, White liberals cite their education on social issues to prove themselves as ‘We the People’, the moral elite who can and will make the nation racially progressive. However, because this moral identity is truly only an emotional self-perception, by projecting themselves as the inherently moral ‘We the People’, White liberals cause the exact opposite of their intended effect. Rather than being a strategy of self-preservation, their confident assertion of inherent morality in a politically divided nation makes them perpetually vulnerable to moral criticism. Ultimately, they end up constantly fighting to prove their moral self-perceptions are fact rather than fighting for racial justice.

As seen in my respondents’ verbiage, White liberals’ understanding of liberal ideology drew from their subjective feelings, specifically a strong desire to be considered moral. For example, Dana (57), who saw Democrats as synonymous with liberals, believed the Democratic platform inherently fought for racial justice. When asked to explain how, she responded, “I think
the sheer, basic ideology is just, I like to, I guess I can only speak for my own, well no I have to think like more of a, as a party, right? […] I like to think that the Democrats fight for the people who can't fight for themselves and I don't feel like the Republicans do that.” Rather than pointing to initiatives or specific action, she bases her perceptions of the political parties on emotions. She goes on to mention how she “feels” Democrats and Republicans are three additional times in her answer. This would be unquestioned, easily understandable logic if it just was a conversation between Dana and I, two liberals with shared emotions, in her home. However, these beliefs do not and cannot prove liberal ideology is inherently moral, especially to society.

To reframe their perceptions as objective and not emotional, my participants emphasized how educated they were on social issues to provide substantive proof of morality and project their moral liberal identity. All respondents discussed how they educate themselves about current racial issues through reading, watching the news, and being active on social media. To them, education was foundational to a ‘true’ liberal identity because it meant knowledge of different perspectives and gave them an ability to objectively, not emotionally, understand social issues.

During my interview with Clare (20), a political activist, she demonstrated this reframing of the liberal ideology as moral due to their education, not emotion. She acknowledged the liberal ideology as moral by understanding it as “accepting,” “open-minded,” and not judgmental or hateful towards a person on the basis of who they are. When asked then who could consider themselves a liberal, she said, “I think there’s a difference between like calling yourself a liberal and like actually knowing what you stand for.” She protects the moral liberal identity by rejecting individuals that only have emotional attachments to the ideology. To her, true liberals educate themselves on social issues and have facts to back up their stances. In other words, only those who have substantive proof of their moral identity can be associated with the liberal
ideology. By believing they educate themselves to objectively understand racial issues, White liberals can deny how morality is based on emotional identification and, therefore, protect their ideology and identity as inherently moral. This perception of being inherently moral and objective creates an understanding of themselves to be, what I call, ‘We the People’. Through identification with ‘We the People’, they believe they have the ability to truly understand the nation’s needs and the path to racial progress.

However, by getting caught up in their perceived ‘We the People’ identity and denying their emotional drive to prove their morality, they blind themselves to how they harmfully contribute to an increasing political divide. As seen at the Bernie Sanders’ rally to “Get Out the Vote,” political speakers appealed to their sense of ‘We the People’ by asking the liberal audience to “stand with Democrats” and “make sure [their] vote nullifies [Republicans] hateful rhetoric.” As they conveyed, the 2018 midterms represented a chance to “fight” Republicans who supported enacting violence against reporters, snatched babies from their mothers, and incited fear and racism in America. The audience responded to these points with collective boos or screams of “Fuck Trump” or “Fuck Pence.” Further, speakers addressed the audience as educated, “progressive champions” and “symbols of hope.”

Even though my participants did not attend the rally, their responses echoed these messages. Every respondent described how Trump, “a fucking dick,” created the emboldened, racist “Alt-Right” or “Neo Nazis” that they needed to fight. Additionally, they all talked about how it was their responsibility as liberals to fight for, as Clare put it, “the people who aren’t able to speak out for themselves.” While White liberals as ‘We the People’ do show an awareness of social issues and could fight for racial justice, my respondents showed defending their moral
position as ‘We the People’ took precedent over actually fighting inequalities as ‘We the People’.

_Millennials as the Savior_

Because my interviewees overwhelmingly identified as millennials, my interviews revealed their understanding of the current political climate. They believed, as Ashley (21) put it, the “divide is bigger than ever” under the Trump administration. Additionally, they expressed a feeling that, because they came of voting age during a time of such great political divide, they had a greater responsibility to defend and prove the moral liberal identity. While they based these feelings partly on their generation’s statistics, a large amount of this pressure came from expectations vocalized by older liberals.

Due to her experience and beliefs as a recent political activist, Beth (24) considered millennial engagement in politics as key for enacting progressive social change. According to the statistics she learned through her political activism organization, she cited “the 18 to 25 year old range is the most progressive but it’s also the largest generation in history as well.” While other interviewees did not necessarily cite this as an exact statistic, they did echo it in their responses as something they believed as true. All respondents agreed the millennial generation is the most “diverse”, “representative”, and “educated” generation in history. My millennial respondents took pride in these statistics because they could use them as evidence of their moral ‘We the People’ identity, as they did many times throughout their interviews. In fact, many cited the emergence of #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, the Women’s March, and March for Our Lives as their generation’s doing. As Hanna (23), one of Beth’s political activist coworkers, said, “Young people are the most willing to do the work.” However, when older liberals use these statistics to create expectations that hold millennial accountable for social activism, millennials believe they
are placed under unfair stress. Ultimately it shows they are not “the most willing to do the work,” they just have a strong drive to prove their ‘We the People’ identity.

For example, even though Beth positively explained her generation as following the moral ‘We the People’ identity, she expressed irritation when this identity became an expectation of them by older liberals. When I asked her what she thought about the hope liberals had in her, as a millennial, making social progress, she replied:

I mean I think that we definitely have power to make change but I wish that like, the current administration and older generations before us had like a more forward perspective and took responsibility on their own shoulders, rather than being like, “Oh, yeah. This generation is really big and well-educated and they can, they can figure it out.” But there’s a lot of mistakes that can get made, that are irreversible. Yeah. And even like my parents are extremely progressive, they’ve been voting for progressive policies their entire life. And yet, they still are like, “Your generation is going to save us!” But like, why does it have to be us? It’s really frustrating.

She is careful to avoid negating the millennial ‘We the People’ identity by making clear in the beginning of her response that she and other millennials “definitely” possess the capabilities to enact change. After all, this identity is a source of great pride for millennials. But interestingly, Beth shows a disconnect in wanting to be ‘We the People’ and wanting to do the work that is required of ‘We the People’, as many of my other millennial respondents also displayed. They want recognition for the big social movements of this decade because it gives them the affirmation of their ‘We the People’ identity. However, when they feel a personal responsibility placed on them, these social changes become too big for them to possibly achieve, cited as “irreversible” mistakes made by irresponsible baby boomers. By framing her response this way, the focus becomes less on if millennials are actually enacting change and more on how this responsibility should not be placed on them in the first place.
Creation of a Good/Bad Hierarchy

As a result of this perceived unfair responsibility placed on them, the in-group bond between liberals weakens as millennials cope with this stress. Consequently, they find reasons to place themselves above other liberals. Instead of just holding themselves against immoral conservatives, they hold themselves against other liberals. This distancing complexifies the Good/Bad binary into a Good/Bad hierarchy, focused on holding other liberals responsible for the lack of racial progress moral millennials make.

The main way my millennial respondents placed themselves above other liberals was by considering themselves as not just liberal, but progressive. Four out of five political activists and one non-activist explained their ideology as progressive, with three of those five respondents specifically wanting to be identified as a progressive, not a liberal. In fact, her response to my initial recruitment email, Beth said, “One thing I would recommend doing, though, is changing your language to progressive instead of liberal. Most people at [the political organization] definitely identify as liberal, but there is a connotation with that phrasing that might turn people away from participation.” In addition to Beth’s statement, political activist Isadora (23) and non-activist Grace (21) also echoed this idea of ‘liberal’ having a negative connotation because of how other liberals acted, or rather, did not act. As previously alluded to, respondents criticized how baby boomer liberals looked to millennials to enact change rather than doing it themselves. Thus, because baby boomers considered themselves liberals, millennials labeled themselves progressives to remain morally above their inaction. Additionally, millennials criticized other liberals from their generation for only reposting videos about social injustices on their Facebook or Twitter feeds, explaining that they only complained and never became socially active.
However, their subsequent responses indicated how this identity only served to protect their moral self-perceptions by creating an illusion of superiority over other liberals. When asked the difference between liberals and progressives, Grace explained, “I don't know, they mean the same thing, but I feel like liberal just has this connotation with it that ... I don't know, I feel like a lot of times we talk about just, like, liberals who think they know what they're talking about, but they really don't.” Further proving this progressive identity was just a semantical rebranding to project a moral image in line with her self-perception, her responses as a progressive, not liberal, completely followed the responses from Clare, who considered her liberal identity progressive. Because both Grace and Clare believed moral, progressive individuals had to know what they were talking about or what they stood for, I thought they would be able to describe to me what this progress they stood for looked like. However, neither of them knew how to respond. Clare concluded, “Like progressive progress. I don’t know.”

Another group of liberal millennials specifically wanted to distance themselves from was the liberal, Democratic party, as they negatively viewed them as being too wrapped up in political games and winning elections to actually fight for racial justice. As Hanna (23) put it, Democrats co-opted the moral liberal identity “to be seen as very socially liberal because they think that’s going to appeal to a strong base of potentially youth voters.” Beth cited this reason in her interview as why she wanted to use the term progressive rather than liberal. However, her response revealed the same contradictory logic as Grace and Clare. She explained, I don’t actually think, like the word liberal doesn’t actually have to be associated with a party. Because you could say that the word liberal is just like more, like more, I’m trying to think of a good synonym. Like out of the norm, risky thinking kind of things, like you know. That’s not quite right but rather than sticking to tradition. Like looking for something new. Which I realize sounds exactly like what I just said progressive is, you know, looking forward. But it’s really just that societal connotation I think, at this point. Just because of it being used in the media and whatnot, for years and years.
Rather than actually standing for something different, Beth based her preference of being considered progressive on the fact that she believed society degraded the liberal identity to no longer be inherently moral. Thus, her transition from being a liberal to a progressive was not a shift to a different ideology but a superficial reframing of her liberal ideology to protect her moral identity.

Conclusion

As seen in my interviewees’ responses, the contemporary liberal identity is riddled with contradictions and illusions. While the liberal identity is moral strictly because liberals believe so, they devise defensive strategies to validate these emotional, moral self-perceptions. One effective way of proving their morality is to set up the Good/Bad binary. Thus, liberals cite themselves as moral because they are educated on social issues. Through this education, they can further claim they an objective ‘We the People’ identity, fighting for others, rather than just seeming like emotional individuals subjectively asserting their morality. On the opposite side of the binary, liberals construct conservatives as immoral. However, in doing so, they completely undermine their claims of objectivity through the use of highly emotional rhetoric to ‘other’ conservatives.

The more liberals try to prove inherent morality, the stronger they have to deny their moral identity’s emotional and subjective basis. Ironically, by refusing to acknowledge this fact, they are further blinded by emotions and cannot see how their determination to prove an inherently moral identity creates more problems for them. Their emotions increase the political divide by polarizing liberals and conservatives and force them to continually justify their assertion of inherent morality. This constant work creates immense stress on White liberals,
especially seen amongst my millennial respondents. To cope with this stress, millennials splinter the Good/Bad binary into a hierarchy, which allows them to separate themselves from any other liberals that threaten their morally elite, ‘We the People’ identity. Ultimately, analysis of contemporary liberal identity formation reveals White liberals’ emotional attachment to their moral self-perceptions causes them to focus on perpetually distancing themselves as ‘We the People’ from others, rather than actually practicing activism as ‘We the People’. As the next chapter shows, this focus on proving an identity rather than practicing activism means they not only fail to challenge White supremacy, they actually uphold it.
CHAPTER 5: RACIAL MARKETING FOR WHITE ACTIVISM

With White liberals’ intent on proving and projecting their ‘We the People’ identity, they distract themselves from what they actually do as ‘We the People’. Through the constant distancing from others to maintain their ‘We the People’ identity, they fail to reflect on their own problematic actions as racial activists. While the previous chapter discussed White liberals’ ignorance of the subjective, emotional basis of their moral liberal identity, this chapter discusses how they neglect to challenge, and therefore uphold, the neoliberal, consumerist basis of their racial activism.

Under the influence of neoliberalism, White liberals are taught to expect products marketed to their lifestyle and desires. Thus, they apply this expectation to racial activism, believing that people of color will “market,” racial activism to them because they perceive racial issues as produced in their communities. As product marketers, people of color must create the voice of their product –opportunities of racial activism– while making sure White liberal consumers can access and understand the value they can receive from consuming. In other words, we cannot expect White liberals to educate themselves on existing oppression and be moved to action on their own. People of color have the burden of convincing White liberals through social, or in this case racial marketing of the existence of oppression and the benefits of them taking action. As consumers, White liberals expect a universal, appealing, easily available product that provides a solution to their problem – achieving an inherent ‘We the People’ identity without leaving their White comfort zone. By remaining outside product development as consumers and having people of color present them with solutions to racial inequalities, they maintain their ‘We the People’ objectivity to racial issues. Additionally, they can claim this
education as what creates their inherently moral identity. Thus, the ‘We the People’ identity is not only constructed through emotions, but also passive consumption.

All my respondents highlighted their concern for racial justice and commitment to racial activism as a key part of their identity. However, because of this emphasis on consumerism, we would be inaccurate in calling them ‘racial activists’. Rather than being active as ‘We the People’, White liberals’ consumerism renders them passive in racial activism. Thus, when asked what they consider as opportunities of racial activism or solutions for racial progress, White liberals only cite ideas that people of color have ‘successfully marketed’. These are proposals White liberals have chosen to consume because they meet their consumer demands. Because neoliberalism also teaches them they can disengage as consumers, White liberals can also be rendered completely inactive. This disengaged, inactivity occurs when people of color’s marketed message fails to address their demands or White liberals become fatigued by current marketing strategies,

As previously mentioned, White liberals can construct a ‘We the People’ identity through this passive consumption of racial activism. However, this passivity or disengagement presents White liberals with a challenge to their ‘We the People’ identity if asked why they do not take a more active role in racial activism. As a response, they alter their understanding of social situations to naturalize racial justice consumption and explain why they remain inactive or do not push themselves to act further. As a part of this understanding, White liberals cite people of color’s inability to ‘market’ solutions to their oppression and their powerlessness against social forces. This mystifies any practical solutions they could take to be more active. With these defensive strategies justifying their passivity or inactivity as consumers, they have the ability to
constantly “bookmark” their place as moral, ‘We the People’ racial activists and resume what they perceive as activism whenever they want.

Ultimately, White liberals uphold what I call ‘neoliberal racial justice consumerism’ to justify their passive version of racial activism. In so doing, they perpetuate an ignorance of how they uphold White supremacy.

**Marketing Racial Activism to White Consumers**

Since the evolution of marketing and rise of neoliberalism, White liberals understand themselves as consumers and expect marketers to cater to their lifestyles and desires (Curtis 2002; Cahill and Konigs 2017). As my respondents showed, due to both expectations set by neoliberalism and marketing avenues provided by social media, racial activism has become another product to be marketed and consumed. If put into a product development model, racial activism is organically manufactured in communities of color as a result of cultural and institutional racism. Thus, White liberals designate the role of ‘marketers’ to people of color. As the previous chapter demonstrated, White liberals as ‘We the People’ like to portray an objectiveness in racial issues. Combined with their neoliberal conditioning, this allows them to remain outside of the product development process as potential consumers. As this role, they expect ‘marketers’ of color to make their product – racial activism – understandable, appealing, and easily available. Consequently, they place an immense amount of responsibility and work on people of color. Their failure to meet these expectations results in White liberals disengaging as consumers, as they can either no longer see the value or their stake in activism. Additionally, they can disengage after experiencing consumer fatigue, becoming desensitized to overly marketed racial issues or exhausted marketing strategies.
To successfully ‘market’ racial activism, I argue that people of color’s message must meet three demands that White liberals have as consumers: universalism, appeal, and ease of access.²

**Universality.**

First, people of color must put the racial issue they want White liberals to acknowledge and fight for into understandable terms for them. In other words, they have to reframe their oppression in a universal way so White liberals see a personal value of acting. Their message’s universality moves White liberals to action because it appeals to their value of individual rights and/or shows them the personal stake they have in the issue. For example, when asked how people of color could be more ‘successful’ in achieving their racial justice goals, Ashley said,

> I mean definitely remain active in however, whatever way possible. But also I think it’s really important to sort of like work together for a common goal. So if it’s an ethnic group or people from one specific country or people that follow the same religious traditions, putting it in a broader context that of, yeah, uh, religious freedom or that of just equality in the US, is really important.

Having different ethnic groups working together for religious freedom may seem like an intersectional approach. However, the neoliberal consumer aspect to White liberals’ racial activism prevents this from being a true showcase of intersectionality and equal commitment to activism. This is due to the fact that White liberals’ desire for “common goals” is less about helping people of color achieve justice and more about getting people of color to involve White liberals in their racial activism. While these two distinctions may not sound very different, the difference lies in who takes the active role, the possible efficacy of solutions, and White liberals’ intent.

² I analyze respondents’ quotes as an example of one demand for clarity. However, every quote demonstrates a combination of, if not all, the three demands.
Truly helping people of color achieve racial justice requires White liberals give up their passive consumer identity. They, themselves, must to identify the root(s) of the oppression, possibly the “common goal,” and also propose intersectional solutions that address the specific vulnerabilities each oppressed group faces. White liberals’ direct intention would be to recognize and prioritize each groups’ specific needs, not prove their moral, non-racist identity.

Relying on people of color to involve White liberals in racial activism requires people of color to go ‘above and beyond’ to rebrand their specific oppression into “a common goal” for White liberals. Additionally, they must do it in a way that is relatable or understandable to White liberals and, therefore, moves them to action. By having to create a universal message, White liberals effectively negate the nuanced aspects of people of color’s experiences. As a result, we lose the ability to implement the targeted solutions necessary for their specific vulnerabilities. While achieving racial justice may be a claimed intention, White liberals’ direct intention is to achieve their ‘We the People’ identity.

Hanna reiterated Ashley’s thoughts when asked the same question. She explained, “I guess they basically have to find a way to make their issues seem universal, I guess, in a way. They shouldn't have to, but I think for better or worse, it would have to be like, ‘This is a universal issue. This affects you too, not just our racial group.’” Through their responses, both Ashley and Hanna show their consumer identities have rendered them colorblind. Even though both rebuked White people who said ‘they don’t see color’ in their interviews, the basic principle of asking for or suggesting people of color use a universal message is colorblind. By wanting people of color to frame their oppression in liberal terms of individual rights, or ‘affecting you, too, not just us’, White liberals erase the gravity and specificity of oppression because not all racial injustices are felt or felt equally by all racial groups.
An additional note to make when analyzing this quote is Hanna’s phrasing “They shouldn’t have to, but […] for better or worse, it would have to be”. While White liberals’ ‘just the way it is’ language will later be discussed in relation to mystifying solutions, this language should be noted regarding universality and consumerism because it implies a subconscious, unquestioned recognition of White liberals as colorblind consumers. By accepting the racial marketing of universal, colorblind messages as a necessary evil, Ashley and Hanna fail to both recognize their role in perpetuating racial oppression and call out White liberals who disengage when people of color do not ‘market’ them a sanitized, universal message. Instead, they uphold White supremacy and racial justice consumerism by demonstrating, “for better or worse,” people of color need to ignore their specific oppression and vulnerabilities when ‘marketing’ to White liberals or else they cannot be successful in achieving racial progress.

*Appeal.*

Second, White liberals want racial activism ‘marketed’ to them in an appealing manner. Different from being universal, the appealing message demonstrates a newness or provocativeness. Messages grab White liberals’ attention, captivate them, and invite them in to an exciting opportunity. Grace quite explicitly demonstrated this demand for appealing messages. In her interview, she specifically stated that activists of color should “try to appeal to White liberals.” When asked to clarify what she meant by “appeal,” she said people of color needed to, “as bad as it sounds,” make White liberals “at least pay attention” to their racial issues.

While this stood for the broad definition of ‘appeal’, Grace demonstrated the word had a much narrower meaning in her subsequent response. When I left her in a moment of silence after her initial definition, Grace continued,
I don't know, I'm thinking of it from kind of like sales point of view, but I think like Black Lives Matter is seen as really extreme, and I think that that ... I think Black Lives Matter is a really good thing, and it should ... it's really good for the community, but I think it does scare white people away. So, it is this hard thing of like, they shouldn't have to change what they're doing to appeal to white people, but at the same time, it might make it easier, if that makes sense. I don't really know.

Here, her response shows an appealing message is not only attention grabbing, it also conveys an inviting or welcoming sense to White liberals. Consequently, this definition means successfully marketed messages do not make White liberals feel threatened or challenge their way of life.

The implication of this definition, as also shown in her response, is that White liberals can once again naturalize racial justice consumerism as a necessary evil and uphold White supremacy. For example, in considering Black Lives Matter as scaring White people away, Grace fails to challenge White liberals’ right to both be consumers and demand people of color ‘market’ them appealing opportunities of racial activism. She does call Black Lives Matter “a really good thing” and says “they shouldn’t have to change.” However, her display of weak, wavering opinions shows these two statements function more as a way she can shallowly prove to me she is moral and non-racist rather than a challenge to racial justice consumerism. Without questioning the passivity White liberals gain from ‘neoliberal racial justice consumerism’, she consequently perpetuates the ‘above and beyond’, burdensome expectation placed on people of color to be ‘marketers’ of racial activism.

Because Grace effectively naturalizes racial justice consumerism, focus is placed on whether people of color succeed or fail in ‘marketing’ an appealing space or opportunity where White liberals can display their version of ‘We the People’. Importantly, this draws attention away from White liberals’ passivity or their disengagement from ‘unappealing’ opportunities of racial activism. Thus, this naturalization upholds White supremacy by subjugating people of
color as marketers and elevating White liberals as passive consumers who get to both define what an appealing opportunity is and engage when they please.

_Easiness._

Third, people of color must provide White liberals with a way to easily access and engage with their product. As mentioned in the last chapter, all respondents cited ways they learned about social issues to claim education as the basis of their inherently moral and objective ‘We the People’ identity. These cited ways of learning expressed how respondents had either a strong or complete reliance on social media for this information. To them, social media provided quick and easy ways to educate themselves, which made them prefer all information provided to them via these platforms. Therefore, White liberals’ education was less self-directed and more passively consumed than they acknowledged, revealing how modern social media use has reinforced neoliberal consumerism.

In follow-up questions to Ashley’s statement on universal messages, she demonstrates people of color’s responsibility of strategizing ways to effectively reach White liberal audiences. She and, ironically, I reveal White liberals’ subconscious reliance on people of color to present us with their message over our familiar social media outlets:

Me: Okay. So, how could racial groups market their – not market but… I guess I’ll use the word market – market their issues?

Ashley: I think information needs to be available to people so they can learn and teach themselves. But, also for those people to reach out and, you know, give a lecture about it or post a YouTube video explaining whatever it is. You know, that’s just one more way for people to access that information, which is important. Cause if you don’t understand a cause, you’re not going to fight for it.

While at least the first part of her response seems to advocate for White liberals educating themselves, the entire quote actually demonstrates White liberal consumers’ reliance on people of color. Without understanding White liberals as consumers, this quote appears to demonstrate
equal responsibility between White liberals and people of color; an egalitarian relationship working towards racial justice. However, her assertion that White liberals can only teach themselves if the information is available proves otherwise.

If we revisit the White neoliberal product development model, we can understand how this response exemplifies White liberals’ passivity and the unjust burden they place on people of color. First, the phrases "be available" and “reach out” talk about this information as if it is solely ‘manufactured’ inside communities of color. This implies that information on racial oppression is not available unless people of color engage in emotional and physical labor to ‘put it out on the market’. Additionally, this ignores that the ‘availability’ of information is determined by the power White liberals have to deem people of color’s message as ‘successfully marketed’ and a legitimate racial issue. Proof of this lies in the fact that information of people of color’s oppression in the U.S. has been described and documented for centuries. Thus, White liberals’ perception of equal responsibility for education ignores the full responsibility they place on people of color to keep marketing “one more way” for White liberals to educate themselves. Ashley proves this point when I ask her:

Me: If a racial group said, “We have tried to educate other people, and they’re not listening,” what do you do then?

Ashley: I wish I had a good answer. I don’t know, in all honesty. I mean definitely keep trying, I think that there are certain platforms and places where people are more welcoming to hearing things that, you know, are new to them and learning about things that they don’t understand and one of those is definitely college campuses. I mean that’s huge, but then also, we rely so heavily on the internet today, you know, posting articles to Facebook or making a YouTube channel. Just little things that can make someone think for even a couple minutes about your issue. But yeah, that’s the best answer I’ve got, I don’t know.

Again, people of color are required to strategize as marketers what avenues will successfully target and engage White liberal consumers. They must cater to the lifestyles of White liberals
through their preferred or easiest methods of information consumption – social media platforms. Otherwise, as she previously put it, White liberals are “not going to fight for” racial justice.

As a result of White liberals’ demand for easily accessible information, people of color’s calls for White allyship, which can mean the difference of life or death, instead become clickbait articles on Facebook or provocative thumbnails on YouTube. All become easily consumable ads to not necessarily “make someone think for even a couple minutes,” but rather think for just a couple minutes and then return to their White comfort zone. And unfortunately, by creating bite-size and omnipresent ads so White liberals’ can access them during their everyday routines, these messages could be too insignificant to convey enough value or they could become so incessant that White liberals stop paying attention.

Disengagement

Just as any product marketer experiences, a failed marketing strategy loses consumers. Inability to ‘market’ their product in these three ways loses White liberals’ sympathy, enthusiasm, and attention because they no longer perceive a personal value in racial activism or are desensitized to marketed messages. Grace aloofly recognized her detachment from racial activism, saying,

So I think we're allies in the sense that we want all these things for them, and I want to ... like, Black Lives Matter to be taken seriously, and I want police brutality to stop. But at the same time, I have, as a white upper class woman, I just don't have a stake in it unless we look at it as just a human thing.

Here, Grace shows she considers herself an ally and would be involved as a racial activist, if only people of color marketed their oppression as a universal. Revisiting how White liberals do not want to exert any more work than they already perceive themselves to do, Grace can still see herself as holding a ‘We the People’ identity without doing the ‘We the People’ work by citing
people of color’s failure to properly ‘market’ their issues. In other words, she is a willing consumer, wanting “all these things” for people of color, but their non-universal message dissuades her as a consumer and convinces her, because she is not affected, to disengage. As will be discussed later, placing responsibility on ‘marketers’ of color to make them active allows White liberals to mystify solutions and ‘bookmark’ their place as ‘We the People’ until people of color successfully engage them again.

Another way ‘marketers’ of color lose White liberal consumers is by not updating their marketing strategies. Especially because social media has increased both the speed and amount of information that becomes available for us to consume, White liberals experience consumer fatigue, otherwise known as desensitization, from viewing too repetitive messages or modes of marketing. During my interview with Beth, I asked her if she thought White liberals had become desensitized to police camera videos, made so easily consumable by Facebook. She strongly denied this assertion at first, saying, “I think that’s a little bit of sweeping statement. I’m still as affected every time I see like, one of those police cams.” However, when asked to explain why more “affected” White liberals are not moved to action, she contradicts herself:

I, yeah, I mean, so I guess I would define that, like, phenomenon, not like desensitization, cause I feel like everyone still is very impacted by it, very, they feel it. But, well, so maybe it is desensitization. Like you can just scroll down on your newsfeed and think about the next video that comes after, you know? Like, um, yeah. So maybe somewhat, it is, yeah.

Between these two responses, she shows a reluctance to admit White liberals are not “as affected every time” because acknowledging themselves as consumers – able to ignore videos of violent attacks and murders – undermines their inherently moral ‘We the People’ identity. In both responses, she holds on to her feeling that police camera videos impact or affect White liberals.
However, she does recognize that White liberals have maybe become fatigued from these messages constantly being in their face and, therefore, move on to consuming “the next video.”

To keep the ‘We the People’ identity and deny White liberals as consumers, she concludes their inaction is “maybe somewhat” desensitization. This answer fails to challenge their racial justice consumerism by allowing White liberals to believe their desensitization is more a natural psychological response to being marketed repetitive, depressing messages and less their privileged decision to not be active. Consequently, naturalization of consumerism and consumer fatigue enables White liberals to see the perpetuation of racial injustices as ‘just the way it is’. Ultimately, this results in the same mystifying and ‘bookmarking’ effects as when ‘marketers’ of color fail to show them the personal value of activism.

**Disengaged White liberals on next steps.**

As I saw in my research, when asking respondents how we could achieve racial justice, they deferred to the solutions people of color successfully marketed to them. They answered we could share Facebook videos to educate our friends; go to the “more intersectional” (but still universal) Women’s March; and we could vote for our state’s first Black congressional representative in the midterms. However, when asked what White liberals could do beyond these examples – beyond taking an Instagram picture at the Women’s March or simply casting a vote – they did not have an answer. This showed the repercussion caused by their disengagement from non-universal, unappealing, and not easily accessible opportunities of activism.

To protect their ‘We the People’ identity, White liberals justify their disengagement by mystifying any solution that requires them to give up their passive consumer role and faulting anything besides their own unwillingness to be a racial activist. As a result, they ignore steps they could take to educate themselves or become more active and, instead, subtly place blame
on ‘marketers’ of color for not engaging them. Additionally, they point to social forces as preventing racial progress to occur or putting them in circumstances that prevent them from being racially active. This allows them to normalize slow social change and gives them the ability to ‘bookmark’ their place as ‘We the People’ racial activists without having to admit they have chosen to disengage. By blaming others and mystifying solutions, White liberals practice what they view as racial activism from the comfort of their Whiteness. Ultimately, this enables them to ignore how they uphold White supremacy.

In the previous chapter, my respondents demonstrated the belief their education on social issues marked the basis of their moral ‘We the People’ identity. But when asked how this education does not move them to take more action, they protected this assertion by explaining they just needed more education. Their responses indicated they believed they had educated themselves as much as they could. Therefore, additional education could only be provided by people of color. As Grace said,

I don't know, I guess part of the reason I don't do anything is because I don't really know what to do, so I don't know. I feel like I educate myself and I'm like, oh, now I'm educated, so I don't know. Yeah. I guess the opportunities are kind of hard to find.

Because of the naturalization of racial justice consumerism, as Grace’s response shows, White liberals constantly rely on people of color to ‘market’ them “the opportunities” to become a racial activist. Otherwise, they “are kind of hard” for White liberals to find. However, this is simply a case of White liberals mystifying solutions, as her following statement clearly shows:

I feel like I've learned a lot in my classes about that stuff, but I would never be able to Google, or ... Yeah, I guess I don't really know where I would even look to ... I don't know. I'm sure there's some links on how to be politically active, but ... Like, I don't ... I don't know who or what I would even look up to figure out what would actually ... I don't know. Yeah, I don't know where I would go to look that up.
Instead of just acknowledging her disengagement as a consumer of racial activism and unwillingness to actually practice ‘We the People’, she creates a distorted system of logic to mystify the more practical solution of working harder to educate herself. Further, this logic convinces her that racial justice consumerism is not only natural but needed for racial progress. Impediments to racial progress then are not the fault of her unwillingness to practice ‘We the People’. Instead, they are the fault of people of color challenging racial justice consumerism and refusing to educate White liberals through racial marketing.

With this blame shifted, Grace can justify slow change and her inactive role by telling herself she is an educated racial activist simply awaiting more instruction from people of color. Or as Hanna explained her inactivity as a racial activist: “not being a hero co-opting the movement, but being an advocate and expressing my support.” With this justification, my respondents could ‘bookmark’ their racial activism, with no negative repercussions to their ‘We the People’ identity, until they perceived themselves to be engaged again by people of color.

In addition to shifting blame onto people of color, White liberals also cite social forces as responsible for their disengagement. Under this justification, it is not that White liberals do not want to put in the work. Rather, it would be irrational to try and overpower these larger social forces to achieve racial progress. However, my respondents never named these social forces besides vaguely insinuating they were something structural and deeply engrained in our society. My interview with Mark (21) most clearly demonstrated this logic, as he explained,

I mean I don’t want [racial progress] to happen slowly. I wish, listen, I wish I could snap my fingers and in, in an instant, like, we got rid of all our issues in society. But it’s just how it is. Sadly. […] So, it’s just simply with the passing of time that it will get better. And that’s just how history works and stuff.

By not naming what makes society “just how it is,” Mark mystifies what practical steps White liberals can take to address racial inequalities. Additionally, it allows White liberals to justify
their disengagement as consumers because they believe they must wait for “the passing of time” to make social circumstances more favorable to racial progress rather than answer people of color’s calls to challenge White dominated systems. As Dana said, “I’m going to quote Ruth Bader Ginsberg: ‘Real change takes time.’” Just like Grace and Hanna, Mark and Dana naturalize slow change as a part of racial progress. They rationalize that even though they wish they could achieve racial progress, it cannot be forced upon a society that is not ready for it. As a result, they can ‘bookmark’ their ‘We the People’ racial activist identities by reframing their inactive roles as them waiting until society is ready to work for racial progress.

Respondents also stated social forces put them into certain circumstances that made being more racially active infeasible. Instead of concluding ‘that is just how society is’ as they did in the examples above, respondents’ answers reflected the idea that ‘life just happens’. As Dana explained,

I think you get really busy in your life and you sort of, you know, focus on what, I mean like, “Well was my kid out of college?” […] I think you get busy with your immediate life. And sometimes it's not that people aren’t looking for [opportunities], or they don't know that it's there. It's just that they're just getting through the day.

While Dana uses the example of taking care of her kid, millennial respondents still echoed this idea of being too busy to be racially active by citing their responsibilities as a student. As a result, they mystify practical solutions they could incorporate into their lifestyle by viewing racial activism as a whole lifestyle, completely different and incompatible with their current lifestyle. By viewing racial activism this way, they could tell me “I know I could be doing more” or “I wish I could do more” to project their ‘We the People’ identity but hide their unwillingness to actually practice ‘We the People’ behind their ‘debilitating’ social circumstances.
Additionally, by faulting their life situation for their racial inactivism, they could justify slow change as a result of them having to wait until their situation allowed them to be more active. This kind of answer enables White liberals to consider themselves deserving of their ‘We the People’ identity despite their disengagement as consumers of racial activism. According to them, they have the desire to be a racial activist, just not the current possibility of being one. Like with the previous examples, respondents could direct blame to their situation and justify ‘bookmarking’ their racial activism until they believed their situation allowed them to be racial activists again.

Ultimately, when asked to provide solutions for racial justice, White liberals must create strategies to prove their racially active ‘We the People’ identity but still allow them to be passive consumers, as neoliberalism has made them accustomed to. The easiest strategy for them is to simply recite back the opportunities of racial activism that people of color have ‘successfully marketed’ to them. However, in the cases where they have disengaged as consumers, they must use different strategies to prove they still deserve their ‘We the People’ identity despite not actually practicing ‘We the People’. Thus, they redirect blame towards people of color or other social forces for preventing them from being racial activists. My respondents never acknowledged they chose to disengage and not be a racial activist. Additionally, to defend themselves against critique that they should put in more work, or give up their passive consumer role, they mystify solutions. In regards to faulting people of color, White liberals reason they are educated. However, out of respect for people of color, they are waiting on them to provide more education and propose solutions. When blaming social forces, White liberals justify they cannot be more racially active until society or their life situation changes.
With these reasons, White liberals deem themselves as still deserving of their ‘We the People’ identity and, therefore, justify ‘bookmarking’ this identity until people of color engage them again or social forces change. Overall, all of these strategies serve to naturalize racial justice consumerism and the passivity it allows White liberals to enjoy. As a result, White liberals are never forced to acknowledge how this passivity is upholding White supremacy.

Conclusion

Even though my respondents clearly demonstrated neoliberal conditioning to be consumers, they never acknowledged or questioned this thinking and how it affected their involvement in racial activism. By ignoring how racial justice consumerism influenced them as activists, they effectively convinced themselves of its naturalness in society. Through this naturalization, they could keep people of color responsible for marketing them racial activism according to their demands. They could also remain consumers, keeping their ‘We the People’ identity without fully putting in the effort to practice ‘We the People’.

In effect, naturalized racial justice consumerism preserved White supremacy both when they were engaged and disengaged as ‘racial activists’. First, White liberals only engaged in colorblind, non-threatening, easily accessible opportunities of racial activism as solutions to racial injustice. This allowed White liberals to project the image of a ‘We the People’ identity without having to leave their White comfort zone. Additionally, this maintained the existence of their White comfort zone by neutralizing people of color’s power to actually challenge the racial status quo. Second, when they disengaged, the naturalization of racial justice consumerism allowed them to justify this passivity or inactivity. They simply had to blame others and mystify practical solutions they could take to be more active on their own. With no fault ever pointing
back to them, they could ‘bookmark’ their ‘We the People’ identity until racial activism became universal, appealing, and easy to access again. In other words, they would resume their activism when it became comfortable to practice and non-challenging to the racial status quo again. Ultimately, my respondents revealed they protected racial justice consumerism as natural because it was instrumental in upholding White supremacy as the system they received their privilege and comfortability from.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

While Critical Race Studies has examined White liberal identity formation and engagement in racial activism, my research fills gaps within these findings by including an analysis of the current social and political climate and of predominantly millennial perspectives.

In doing so, I found White liberals perceive increasingly high levels of political and racial tension under the Trump administration. Therefore, they are put under more racial stress to prove they are not racist. As a result, the contemporary White liberal identity relies not on the Good/Bad binary, but a Good/Bad hierarchy to place themselves as the ‘We the People’ moral elite and ensure the utmost protection of their moral, non-racist identity. This new understanding shows future scholars the need to target specific groups and distinctions made within the hierarchy to dismantle it and hold more White liberals directly accountable for their racial inactivity.

Additionally, I found my respondents very clearly demonstrated their neoliberal conditioning as consumers. Under this conditioning, they transformed racial activism to fit a product development model, both creating and naturalizing what I called ‘neoliberal racial justice consumerism’. With the naturalization of this consumerism, my respondents normalized people of color’s active, assigned role as ‘marketers’; their passive role as consumers; and their freedom to choose when to engage or disengage. Consequently, they got to control demands of ‘marketers’ of color had to meet to earn their engagement. They also could maintain their disengagement as consumers as justifiable, enabling them ‘bookmark’ their ‘We the People’ identity. Ultimately, this revealed ‘neoliberal racial justice consumerism’ gives White liberals the power to hold a ‘We the People’ identity without actually practicing the ‘We the People’ work that would affect racial progress. This finding contemporized past findings by revealing how
social media reinforces this passive consumerism. Additionally, this provided existing literature with an explanation as to how White liberals can justify the constancy of their ‘We the People’ identity despite breaks of disengagement.

While these findings explain how White liberals form their identity and the impacts this has on their engagement in racial activism, I have yet to provide an overall explanation as to how this equates to my respondents upholding White supremacy. However, fitting these findings into seven concepts of Critical Race Studies presents a comprehensive report.

*Epistemology of Ignorance*

Respondents’ use of the Good/Bad hierarchy demonstrates the complicated logic White liberals have to create to maintain the epistemology of ignorance (Bell 1992; Mills 1997; Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Mueller 2017; DiAngelo 2018). Instead of recognizing the reality that they are upholding White supremacy, they exerted so much continual effort to assert the existence of a reality where they were inherently moral and non-racist (Day et al. 2014; Bruchmann, Koopman-Holm, Scherer 2018). Respondents exhibited these attempts through citing their education and examples of others’ immorality, believing this showed their moral identity as legitimate, not emotionally or subjectively constructed. Even though it took my respondents so many confusing, contradictory explanations to sustain the epistemology, they still committed all their energy to sustaining it. For example, millennial respondents expressed their frustration towards baby boomer liberals putting activist responsibilities on them. Thus, they directed all energy towards putting themselves above baby boomer liberals rather than towards reflecting on or challenging their actions or behaviors in regards to how they upheld White supremacy (DiAngelo 2018). As a result, in line with literature, their use of the epistemology
upheld White supremacy as the unnamed system they operated under (Mills 1997; DiAngelo 2018).

*Interest Convergence and Colorblindness*

In my analysis of their racial activism, respondents simultaneously demonstrated interest convergence and colorblindness (Bell 1992; Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Geismer 2015; Cahill and Konigs 2017; Mueller 2017). By demanding universal, appealing, and easy ways to be racial activists, they expected people of color to convince them engagement in racial activism was also in their interest. In line with social marketing’s “You’ll Need to Help Me” approach, people of color either had to show White liberals they had a personal stake in the issue or that engaging would provide an easy opportunity to prove their ‘We the People’ identity (Lee 2017). If they failed, White liberals disengaged. This means people of color have to whitewash, sanitize, or cut back the specific oppression they experience to cater to White liberals’ consumer demands.

With White liberals only agreeing to engage in easy, colorblind, appealing racial activism, the possibilities to challenge systems or institutions upholding White dominance is extremely limited. My respondents demonstrated this by suggesting solutions such as sharing posts on social media. To be fair, they also proposed going to the Women’s March and voting for more representation in political office, which could promote structural changes. However, this more ‘radical’ engagement did not continue beyond taking a picture at the march or casting their vote every two years. Thus, White liberals’ demand for colorblind, easy, and appealing opportunities neutralizes the threat racial activism poses to White supremacy and, again, enables them to uphold it.
Mystifying Solutions

In continuation of my analysis on respondents’ racial activism, their need to prove a moral, non-racist identity but unwillingness to engage in non-colorblind, non-interest convergent opportunities of racial activism meant they turned to mystifying solutions (Mueller 2017). In their responses, their neoliberal conditioning as consumers allowed them to view this passivity as an individual right. Therefore, they never accepted it as their responsibility to educate themselves or become more active. Rather, their inactivity was the fault of people of color or larger social forces.

Beyond the activism they already engaged in, any other solutions that did not meet their demands were considered unknown, impossible, or impractical. The ‘unknown’ aspect traces back to people of color failing to engage them in racial activism. Again demonstrating a reliance on the “You’ll Need to Show Me” approach, my respondents justified that, out of ‘respect’ for people of color, they could not take any further action without people of color telling them what solutions to take. Therefore, these solutions remained unknown. This mystified solutions because people of color, like those involved in Black Lives Matter, are telling them what solutions to take, White liberals simply do not want to take those solutions. In their justification that solutions were ‘impossible’, White liberals reasoned that society just was not ready for racial change and their actions as individuals could not defy the powers of larger social forces. Speaking to solutions’ ‘impracticality’, White liberals reasoned the social forces shaping their lifestyles prevented them from working towards proposed solutions. Both justifications of impossibility and impracticality mystified solutions by accepting racial activism as all-or-nothing, enormous undertaking, requiring them to live a lifestyle solely revolving around racial activism.

Ultimately, mystifying solutions allows White liberals purposefully overlook the fact that racial
activism asks they give up the White privilege that has created a comfortable lifestyle for them (Harris 1993). By holding on to this passivity and way of life, they uphold White supremacy.

*Hegemonic Storytelling*

Through my respondents’ use of the epistemology of ignorance and their ability to mystify solutions, they exhibited the power they hold as White individuals to write the historical narrative in their favor (Bell 1992). Showing this power, they are able to create this ‘We the People’ identity based off emotional and subjective binaries and also have other liberals accept the binaries as real and natural in society. Additionally, their Whiteness allows them to omit from the historical narrative the ways their ideology is racialized. Consequently, this narrative hides how they are socialized to uphold White supremacy. Lastly, their Whiteness enables them to ‘bookmark’ their racial activist identity but still assert to society they are moral non-racists. Using this power to recognize themselves however they desire means they uphold White supremacy.

*Whiteness as Property and Permanence of Racism*

While I repeatedly conclude my respondents uphold White supremacy throughout this thesis, it should be noted that upholding White supremacy is a process that also upholds Whiteness as property (Bell 1992; Harris 1993). Through using the epistemology of ignorance to create their ‘We the People’ identity, demanding racial marketing be colorblind and show interest convergence, mystifying solutions they could take to practice ‘We the People’ activism, and rewriting their role in racial activism in their favor, White liberals never challenged themselves to leave their White comfort zone or change any aspect of their life. While this did
leave White supremacy invisible, unchallenged, and therefore upheld, White liberals were able to implement those four stated strategies and remain in their comfort zone due to power White supremacy had already given them. In other words, my respondents revealed a cycle of White liberals as passive, self-interested consumers upholding White supremacy, which allows them to remain as passive, self-interested consumers, and so on. As a result, this cycle maintains Whiteness as property because hegemonic power never switches hands. From the inception of the social contract to present day, this cycle consistently awards White liberals the right to a passive, comfortable, privileged position. Further, it continues to exclude people of color from this right by forcing them to be marketers. Ultimately, viewing the upholding of White supremacy as a constant cycle that maintains Whiteness as property reveals the permanence of racism in our society (Bell 1992).

Outliers

In my analysis, four respondents – the two racial activists and two political activists – did not fit with my findings. In their responses, they expressed criticism of how White liberals use the Good/Bad hierarchy as ways to believe they are uniquely moral and how they do not take a more active role in racial activism. As Jay (21), a racial activist, believed, generational groupings just existed to further marketing schemes and divide people by encouraging animosity between or blame towards groups. Further, Fiona (22), a bi-racial political activist, called White liberals out for desperately trying to prove they were ‘woke’. Demonstrating her disapproval of White liberals’ passivity, Isadora (23), a political activist, described White liberals as wanting everything to be “very pander-y.” She viewed White liberals as too reliant on interest convergence and colorblind messages to become involved in racial activism.
All outliers, including Eliza (50), a Gen X racial activist, discussed how White liberals needed to accept being uncomfortable as part of doing racial activism, otherwise they should not consider their actions ‘racial activism’. Further, they expressed a need for White liberals to take more steps to educate themselves, believing racial activism could easily be incorporated into one’s lifestyle if only they were willing to cede their comfortability and privilege. When asked what ways liberals could further educate themselves, Eliza scoffed and said, “Google’s free.”

Instead of mystifying solutions, they all provided examples of how they themselves actively worked as racial activists, such as attending weekly workshops or discussions hosted by racial activist groups, addressing White liberals’ use of microaggressions, and supporting businesses owned by people of color. Eliza mentioned how, after educating herself on racial discrimination in the workplace, she used the connections from her full-time job to put together reports on the racial demographics of the companies she worked with to start dialogues with them on how they could be more representative and supportive of people of color. As we were wrapping up our interview, she told me racial activism was not hard to do at all; the hard thing to do was give up your White comfortability.

Unlike the respondents in my data chapters, these four individuals demonstrated a critique of White liberals’ use of the Good/Bad hierarchy and their passive, consumerist racial activism. Additionally, my White outliers did not rely on interest convergence or colorblind messages to become involved, nor did they mystify solutions. Ultimately, their focus on

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3 While supporting businesses of color does make these outliers consumers, I still counted these individuals as outliers because they did not show the same passive consumerism as my other respondents. Rather, they demonstrated an active consideration of how they could use their consumerism to redistribute wealth and support people of color. If I structured my research more around these outliers, I would have researched the idea of ‘active’ consumerism to understand the even larger extent to which neoliberal consumerism and capitalism impacts White liberals’ racial activism.
accepting uncomfortability and ceding their privileged lifestyles showed efforts towards challenging the cycle of upholding White supremacy and deconstructing Whiteness as property to elevate the needs and rights of people of color.

**Future Research**

While my research did capture a more specific demographic of liberals and incorporate an analysis of contemporary times, I believe there are numerous other groups of liberals that future research can analyze to understand how liberalism and neoliberalism influence one’s identity and their engagement in racial activism. For example, Fiona was bi-racial and Eliza, Isadora, and Jay belong to the LGBTQ+ community. Therefore, I would question how the intersections of their identities impact their liberal identity and racial activism.

Specifically in Fiona’s case, I believe further research needs to be conducted as to how Non-White liberals internalize neoliberal conditioning and expectations to be ‘marketers’ of racial activism. While I discuss the ways in which designating this marketer role to people of color excludes them from the same rights as White liberals, I believe further research can help address specific harms this causes for people of color.

In conclusion, I believe future research in Critical Race Studies studying liberal identity formation and racial activism must continue to update their findings to contemporary times and incorporate specific liberal groups. As a result, we can better hold White liberals accountable for the racialized nature of liberalism and neoliberalism and how they uphold White supremacy.
Works Cited


# APPENDICES

## Appendix 2: Demographic Breakdown of Interviewees and Participant Observation Speakers

| Interviewees | Name     | Affiliation         | Generation | White(W) or Non White (NW) | Gender | Notes  
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4 These notes are attributes they specifically brought up as influencing their identity.