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Article

## What “Real” Women Want: Alt-Right Femininity Vlogs as an Anti-Feminist Populist Aesthetic

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### Abstract

This article suggests that one reason for the resurgence of populism we see in the digital age is its resonance as a political *aesthetic* with the style and aesthetics of online culture. Influencers on social media platforms like YouTube and Instagram rely on style to attract viewers and identify themselves with a community. This makes fertile ground for far-right populist movements like the alt-right, who can package extremist politics in attractive content that appears to represent viewers’ everyday concerns. A growing alt-right community on YouTube known as traditional or “trad” wives create videos about femininity, beauty, and relationships. However, viewers who seek out these channels for clothing or hair styling tips leave with another kind of styling: populist messaging that frames feminism as an elitist threat to the “real” femininity of everyday women. Through rhetorical analysis, I find that trad wife vloggers’ videos stylistically suture alt-right anti-feminism to the broader online influencer culture through repeated aesthetic displays of the feminine self, home, and family. I argue that this visuality acts as an aesthetic mode of veridiction for the anti-feminist message that is uniquely powerful on image-based social media platforms. It creates the appearance of broad support as similar aesthetics are repeatedly performed by many trusted influencers. I conclude by calling scholars of populism and rhetoric to attend to the way multi-layered conventions of aesthetics on social media platforms can spread extremist messaging through ambiguous content within and beyond online communities.

### Keywords

aesthetic; alt-right; extremism; femininity; gender; internet culture; populism; rhetoric; social media; trad wife vlogs; YouTube

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

In February 2019, a beautiful, bubbly, blond-haired YouTuber from the United States named The Radiant Wife published a video that welcomed future viewers to her new channel. It was titled “Dear Lonely Feminine Women,” and in it, she confronted her audience with a problem. “This problem,” she explained, “is the belief that all women resonate with feminism....This is not true.” The Radiant Wife explained that contemporary culture was devaluing the real essence of womanhood encapsulated by the notion of *femininity*. This is isolating to feminine women, “women like me, who....I don’t want to be a boss babe!...I want to be a wife, a mother, run a household.”

The Radiant Wife explained to her viewers that elite feminism was being pushed in publications and the media. “We used to have beauty magazines,” she observed, “but now all of those magazines, if you look [at them], it’s all feminism....And it doesn’t talk about the topics a lot of women actually care about.” This leaves feminine women in the lurch, without a social or cultural space that acknowledges their true desires. She asked, “So what does a woman like that do in a culture where she feels so marginalized, feeling like I’m not a real woman because I don’t want to be a lawyer, doctor, blah blah blah?”

Instead, The Radiant Wife explained that the way to get in touch with this *real* womanhood is through

intentional femininity. Embracing their femininity would make women visually beautiful and appealing to men, help them become better mothers, and, most importantly, get in touch with their natural, biological selves. But since this viewpoint was no longer represented in mainstream media like fashion and beauty magazines, The Radiant Wife has turned to the internet to provide such content to her viewers:

I want to help you guys realize that other people feel the same way you do, and it's okay!....There's a lot of women out there like me, like you probably, who just don't fit into this current narrative in our culture....Welcome! That's what this channel is all about.

YouTube viewers may easily encounter The Radiant Wife and other anti-feminist channels through keyword searches for terms like “feminine” or “femininity.” Users who search these terms looking to update their wardrobe, learn beauty styling tips, or even explore their gender identity instead encounter messaging that tells them to reject feminism and get in touch with a conservative, traditionalist womanhood. They argue that this represents a “real” womanhood that “most” women appreciate but which has been denigrated by elite liberal feminists who promote a “girl boss” ideology. This image of a *girl boss* is presented as a diminutive yet masculinized strawman in opposition to the supposed real *womanhood* represented by trad wife vloggers.

This analysis demonstrates the pressing need to better understand how populist discourse is mobilized among everyday women online. Further, it shows how the increasing importance of aesthetics in online communication is changing what it means to participate in populist political discourse, and that a rhetorical approach is well positioned to “unmask” (Mckerrow, 1989) the extremist ideologies this discourse at times contains. In this article, I find that trad wife vloggers’ videos stylistically suture alt-right anti-feminism to the broader online influencer culture through repeated aesthetic displays of the feminine self, home, and family. I argue that this visuality acts as an aesthetic mode of veridiction for the anti-feminist message that is uniquely powerful on image-based social media platforms. It creates the appearance of broad support as similar aesthetics are repeatedly performed by many trusted influencers. In the sections that follow, I first outline the relationship between populism, gender, and the alt-right. Then, I perform a rhetorical analysis of trad wife YouTube content by two prominent influencers, focusing on how their visual and verbal rhetoric comes together as an anti-feminist populist aesthetic. Finally, I conclude by calling scholars of populism and rhetoric to attend to the way multi-layered conventions of aesthetics on social media platforms can spread extremist messaging through ambiguous content within and beyond online communities.

## 2. Populism, Gender, and the Alt-Right

Populism has been variously understood as a “thin-centered ideology” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017), a discursive construction (Laclau, 1977), a form of nostalgia (Taggart, 2004), and even a mode of political authenticity (Cover, 2020). At its most basic level, populist discourse establishes an opposition between a “pure people” and a “corrupt elite” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 6). “The people” here emerges as a rhetorical device which outlines the “parameters of what ‘the people’ of that culture could possibly become” (McGee, 1975, p. 243). For this reason, the term has an implicit othering property that divides an actually existing collection of persons into mythical categories of “us” and “them.” In this manifestation, populism need not be linked to a particular political ideology. These “minimal definitions” (De Cleen & Glynos, 2021) are useful because they allow researchers to account for the variety of populist discourses that are deployed across a range of ideological positions—Consider, for example, appeals to “the people” by figures as diverse as conservative Republican Donald Trump and Democratic Socialist Bernie Sanders.

Yet, in context, many authors link populist style with conservative politics, particularly as it manifests in nationalism (Anastasiou, 2019; De Cleen & Glynos, 2021). Such populism today often takes the appearance of consensus-building, even when it operates as a resentful “form of wedge politics” (Cover, 2020). Social media technologies play a key role in contemporary populism. Cover (2020, p. 757) argues that today’s populist base “[has] been brought together through social media networking and marginal online publications (the alt-right) to recognize or, more rightly, rethink themselves as a community or class.” This occurs because today’s populism draws on new “rhetorical tools that produce a sense of community and shared experience among [a] population, moving from stoicism and racial authenticity to perceived vulnerability” (Cover, 2020, p. 759).

While there are benefits to both minimal and substantive approaches, the online context of today’s populism calls for an understanding of its function as a strategic performance in these spaces. This approach highlights the uniquely stylized nature of populism which distinguishes it from other types of political appeals. Moffitt (2016, p. 29) defines a political style as “the repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performance made to audiences that are used to create and navigate fields of power that comprise the political, stretching from the domain of government through to everyday life.” Populism, then, is differentiated from other styles by three features including an “appeal to ‘the people’ versus ‘the elite’; ‘bad manners’; and crisis, breakdown or threat” (Moffitt, 2016, p. 29). In our contemporary political landscape, in which traditional relationships between citizens, parties, and classes are shifting while the public sphere grows increasingly coterminous with the media,

style becomes the gravitational mass around which our politics is oriented (Moffitt, 2016, p. 39).

For better or worse, the internet is a new public sphere in which some modes of communication are more effective than others, as we have seen in movements like the alt-right (Cover, 2020). It provides particular benefit to populist leaders who can use new media platforms as an alternative to traditional media for reaching their audiences across historically bounded regions (Moffitt, 2016, pp. 89–91). Moreover, the increasingly visual nature of mainstream platforms like YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok calls our attention to the way populism is not only discussed but visually performed and displayed on our screens. For that reason, here, I consider populism as a political aesthetic. This approach is closest to the discourse theoretical perspective in which, drawing on Laclau (1977, 2005), populism is “a way of formulating and bringing together (‘articulating’) political demands, of interpolating subjects” (De Cleen & Glynos, 2021, p. 183). These subjects may have unique interests and identities, but the populist appeal creates a substrate through which all feel they can bring forth their demands (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014). Applying this approach to both visual and verbal performances on social media helps us see how the aesthetic dimension of populism makes it so effective in bringing various audiences together into a common cause.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines aesthetic as “a particular conception of beauty or art, a particular taste for or approach to what is pleasing to the senses and especially sight” (Aesthetic, n.d.). Focusing on the aesthetic foregrounds the visual aspects of social media, which is a key affordance of platforms that increasingly promote image and video content (Cotter, 2019; Duffy, 2015, 2017). The aesthetic also calls to mind a sense of beauty or taste that is pleasing to the viewer. Countless articles encourage would-be social media influencers to develop a coherent aesthetic that concisely represents their brand to audiences (for example, Carbone, 2018; Fontein, 2019).

Historically populism has been associated with masculine aesthetics, particularly when it appears on the political right. Moghadam (2018, p. 295) notes that “contemporary right-wing populist and nationalist movements and parties constitute a gendered backlash to the ills of neoliberal capitalist globalization and its attendant values.” Such movements usually focus on men’s concerns and male leaders, and “their notions of femininity are traditional and would strike many feminists as downright dangerous” (Moghadam, 2018, p. 295).

There are, however, notable exceptions to populism’s seeming masculinity. In Europe, politicians like Pia Kjaersgaard, Marine Le Pen, and Siv Jensen, and far-right populist parties are gaining an increasing number of women voters despite their often-stereotypical portrayals of women (Meret et al., 2016). These women defy traditional conceptions of charismatic leadership as defined through stereotypically masculine attributes

(Meret et al., 2016). While they utilize many of the same rhetorical strategies as populist men, women leaders also emphasize personal responsibility and issues of familial care (Pettersson, 2017). In the United States, figures like former vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin or Fox News host Laura Ingraham have successfully used populist appeals (Anderson, 2021; Mason, 2010; Peck, 2019). Nonetheless, despite their own professional accomplishments, these women forward a traditionalist womanhood in which mothering and nurturing are still their primary roles, complicating the relationship between the public and private (Anderson, 2021). For example, Pia Kjaersgaard has referred to herself as the “mother” of her political party (Meret, 2015), a position not uncommon among other women politicians in far-right parties (Pettersson, 2017). This constrains their agency within a framework of masculinity that ultimately preserves an unequal gender dynamic (Anderson, 2021).

Moghadam (2018) notes that literature on populism and women is sparse, and instead approaches this intersection through the lens of nationalism and gender, on which a great deal has been written. The identification of the nation and social reproduction with womanhood is vast, not only but especially in extremist spaces (Anderson, 2021; Shome, 2011, 2014). In such a framework, women’s role is limited to bearers and caretakers of the pure folk, and their labor is cloistered within the domestic sphere. Often intersecting with conservative religious discourses, women may also be seen as “complementary” to men. Complementarian discourses reify traditional gender roles through a language of “naturalness” and “instinctualness” that we will see the trad wives use below. This focus on the “naturalness” of femininity resonates with far-right and nationalist women’s view of their role as reproducers not only of children but of the culture and nation (Kajta, 2022). Because it is legitimated through procreative capacity, the identity of womanhood within this discourse is inextricably bound to a superficial notion of the biological. What is gained when we think about these discourses in relation to populism is an understanding of the way that they bring together diverse interest groups under the banner of traditional gender roles and articulate those demands in the public sphere. Reactionary attitudes toward so-called “gender ideology” is a particularly strong coalition builder, as well as linking such groups to more mainstream politics (Keil, 2020).

Like populism, the story told of the alt-right is primarily a masculine one. The term was coined by Richard Spencer in 2010 in his zine *The Alternative Right*, which espoused the desire for a white ethnostate. As the movement wormed its way through notoriously unregulated online forums such as 4chan, its disaffected male proponents soon linked up with other trolling-oriented online communities that developed in the wake of Gamergate, while strengthening its white nationalism and supremacism. These groups have been known to

target women in strategic harassment campaigns, and they have been correctly understood through the lens of misogyny (Mantilla, 2015). Today the alt-right as a self-identified movement has largely disbanded, yet the coalition that it built through various interest communities has continued to impact the political world both on and offline.

Despite this masculine narrative, white women have been an important part of both traditionalist and extremist movements historically until the present day. Women support, promote, spread, and participate in anti-feminist movements, including the alt-right (Blee, 1991; Burkholder, 1989; Kelly, 2018). Although it has been viewed as the result of assimilation into male systems or even coercion by men, women's participation in radical movements is often a considered personal choice (Blee, 1991; Kajta, 2022). While women's discourse in such movements can at times simply reiterate stereotypes of submissiveness, they increasingly revise the meaning of "feminism" to be compatible with rather than reject traditional femininity. This serves to expand their audience to "white women disaffected with racially and gender-inclusive and intersectional feminism" (Anderson, 2021, p. 32), and this effect is amplified in the digital age as women turn to the internet as a space of empowerment. One well-known example is Lauren Southern, a YouTuber and activist who used aspects of influencer culture like makeup and beauty vlogs to inject extremist and white supremacist ideology into public conversation (Anderson, 2021; Lombroso, 2020). Despite her adeptness at promoting racist politics, she eventually had to withdraw from the public eye due to misogynistic attacks against her from within her own community (Lombroso, 2020).

Given their heavy emphasis on traditionalism, it makes sense that the alt-right would take on a populist aesthetic which similarly has been "characterized by a kind of nostalgia" for the life of times past (Harsin, 2018; Taggart, 2004). Trad, short for "traditional," wives are a set of women within the alt-right who emphasize gender roles within heterosexual, usually white, relationships that are imagined to have been preserved or recovered from a historical past. They promote the idea that these roles are biologically or instinctually ingrained in men and women and that, because of this, living out traditional gender roles is the only real path to joy and fulfillment. However, the majority of trad wife content creators do not explicitly express racism or racial supremacism. Instead, they focus on beauty, fashion, relationships, and motherhood, which allows them to appeal to many mainstream audiences while blending into broader influencer culture (Kelly, 2018). As we will see below, they are able to frame themselves as oppressed through their appeals to a "real" and instinctual womanhood that is being stamped out by an elite feminism "interested in abolishing traditional womanhood" (Kajta, 2022, pp. 75–76).

### 3. Gendered Social Media

In contrast to populism and the alt-right, the culture of social media as it developed on platforms like YouTube and Instagram has been conceived of in explicitly feminine ways. Despite early assumptions that women primarily use social media for socialization, Duffy (2017) argues that not enough attention has been paid to how women use social media for networking and professionalization. Often, this is a kind of aspirational labor in which women perform unpaid work believed to "have the potential to pay off in terms of future social/economic capital" (Duffy, 2015, p. 60), not unlike unpaid domestic labor. Permeating the way women present themselves online is the assumption that they are simply being themselves, and this authenticity obscures the emotional, strategic, and even "glamour" labor that they must also perform (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017). Nonetheless, the importance of "authenticity" in online spaces (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Duffy, 2015; Hund & McGuigan, 2019) resonates with populism's articulation of the people as authentic in relation to the elites and outsiders (Cover, 2020).

Even before the advent of social media platforms as we think of them today, women created supportive networks with one another online in spaces that focused on issues relevant to them. In the early blogosphere, women penned "mom blogs" or "mommy blogs," which, simply put, "chronicle the lives of mothers as they raise their children" (Abetz & Moore, 2018, p. 267; see also Lopez, 2009). Although the opportunity to monetize such blogs can contribute to women's economic empowerment and promote alternative framings of motherhood (Lopez, 2009), Chen (2013, p. 510) warns that they can also "reinforce women's hegemonic role as nurturers, thrusting women who blog about their children into a form of digital domesticity in the blogosphere."

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, there is considerable overlap between the contemporary mom blogosphere and far-right women's blogs, which also promote traditionalist gender roles and relationships. In fact, studies have shown that new media spaces can be particularly fruitful for far-right women politicians and activists who use them to both maintain a level of control over their public image and build community among alternative audiences (Pettersson, 2017; van Zoonen, 2002). This linkage between far-right populist and mom-blog spaces is useful for trad wives because it provides a context in which their content is easily assimilated and does not stand out. Indeed, many trad wife vlogs/blogs appear nearly indistinguishable from other mom blog content. This approach functions across various cultural and national contexts by engaging a vision of white femininity that Shome (2011) has called "global motherhood." By performing this digital labor from within the home, women like the trad wives can maintain their fulfillment of a traditional gender role while promoting the spread of alt-right ideology.



#### 4. Anti-Feminist Populist Aesthetic: Visualizing What “Real” Women Want

Rather than calling their audiences together under signs common to populism like “the working class,” “the people,” or “citizens” (Harsin, 2018, p. 36), trad wives on social media use the sign “femininity.” They figure feminine women as forgotten, neglected, and excluded (Cover, 2020) by elite culture, which has become obsessed with feminism. The role of the trad wife influencers, then, is to save the real, pure, and traditional feminine women under attack by the dominant culture’s oppressive feminism. As such, the trad wives’ populist appeals articulate the feminine woman as *vulnerable* in a deeply affective way (Cover, 2020).

The sign of “femininity” bridges the gap between extremism and the mainstream because it allows these women to engage in populist appeals without explicitly articulating their ideological grounding. Doing so would mitigate their ability to amass a large audience, whereas focusing on generalist topics like beauty and family expands their reach without revealing connections to the alt-right. This allows them to use a populist political strategy without ever “talking politics” because the sign of “femininity” functions as an ideological shorthand (Harsin, 2018; Laclau & Mouffe, 2014). Because of this, they can oscillate between audiences and prime viewers for more extremist content.

In the next sections, I demonstrate how trad wife influencers articulate alt-right populism by drawing on popular online feminized aesthetics and norms. Addressing their strategic display of a feminine self, feminine home, and feminine family, I argue that such aesthetics make an implicitly populist argument that femininity represents a “real” women’s resistance to the elite. Framed in this way, trad wife influencers’ content about femininity functions polysemically (Ceccarelli, 1998), speaking to multiple audiences while encouraging viewers to sympathize with alt-right extremism. Importantly, this does not suggest that trad wives do not believe in their arguments or only use them strategically, though some certainly do so. Rather, it demonstrates one reason populism has been so effective in online contexts. As Laclau (2005, p. 17) observed about the seeming vagueness of populist discourse, “wouldn’t populism be, rather than a clumsy political and ideological operation, a performative act endowed with a rationality of its own—that is to say, in some situations, vagueness is a precondition to constructing relevant political meanings?”

I focus on content from two YouTube influencers: The Radiant Wife and Finding Elegance. Due to the increasing risks of targeted harassment toward researchers who study these communities (Association of Internet Researchers, 2019), I have changed the names of the YouTube channels and modified video titles where appropriate to attenuate keyword searches. This approach serves my goal of focusing on the systemic effects and structure of the discourse rather than on

any particular personality or figure (McKinnon et al., 2016). I have not included specific video URLs in the references list for the same reason, though it will be easy for the reader to find similar content simply by searching “feminine” or “femininity” on YouTube. Direct quotes have not been changed. Both influencers have public ties to well-known alt-right and far-right figures in online and offline contexts. However, they have different levels of public visibility. At the time of this writing, Finding Elegance has 107,000 subscribers on YouTube, 75,800 followers on Twitter, and 76,300 on Instagram. The Radiant Wife is a lesser-known figure who, in addition to her YouTube channel, runs a blog about what she calls “women’s heart and mind issues,” including topics like relationships, dating, marriage, beauty, and femininity. At the time of this writing, she has 195,000 subscribers on YouTube and 52,100 followers on Instagram.

A rhetorical approach is apt for understanding how trad wife influencers express their politics through an anti-feminist populist aesthetic. Style, as authors like Moffitt (2016) point out, has often been conflated with rhetoric, particularly in its colloquial and pejorative usage as “mere” rhetoric. This points to the common understanding that rhetoric comprises not the substance of an argument but its presentation, performance, or delivery. In fact, Moffitt (2016, p. 33) goes so far as to observe that the study of style has been “relegated to the ‘outside’ of mainstream political science as a ‘surface level’ feature of politics—something for media scholars, cultural theorists or rhetoricians to study rather than ‘serious’ political scientists.” This critique of rhetoric as the shallow counterpart of substance is, of course, nothing new. As far back as Plato’s *Gorgias*, Socrates argued that rhetoric was a kind of knack or form of flattery, with no proper subject matter of its own. Likewise, today we deride insincere or manipulative language as “sophistry,” harkening back to Plato’s disdain for the ancient Greek professional speech writers. And yet, rhetoricians themselves have long recognized the semiotic weight of style. Style is laden with meaning that participates in the construction of messages. Rhetoric identifies (Burke, 1969) and constitutes identities (Charland, 1987). It orients subjects in space (Blair, 1999) and crafts new spaces (Flores, 1996).

For this study, I monitored 15 self-described femininity vloggers on the YouTube platform over a period of two months. Accounts were located by searching terms like “feminine” and “femininity.” I also drew on previous research on white evangelical motherhood vloggers and white nationalist women vloggers who create topically similar content in order to flesh out the range of participants in this discourse. As is the case in many social media-based online communities, group boundaries flow between various sub-networks. The accounts discussed below were selected because they exemplify the anti-feminist populist aesthetic common to such spaces, and they maintain explicit ties to public alt-right figures. They are both well-known within the community

and are frequently referenced in online discussions about alt-right femininity and anti-feminism, both on YouTube and in other forums.

After selecting these accounts, I collected their first and most recent three videos, as well as several additional videos published throughout the history of their channel which addressed anti-feminism. This amounted to 18 videos in total. I then performed a critical close reading of these videos' verbal and visual messaging. Brummett (2010, p. 3) defines close reading as a "mindful, disciplined reading of an object with a view to deeper understanding of its meanings." The critical approach aims to "unmask or demystify the discourse of power" with the aim of destabilizing domination (Mckerrow, 1989, p. 91). As Kenneth Burke (1939) described in his famous analysis of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, our job must be to "make Hitlerite distortions...apparent." This "making apparent" is a crucial function of rhetorical analysis in that it publicizes the mechanisms through which political discourse functions. It allows us to reveal the underlying ideology of a text in which it is (purposely or incidentally) hidden (McGee, 1980; Wander, 1983), a move that is particularly necessary in response to anti-democratic movements like the alt-right.

#### 4.1. A Feminine Self

For trad wife vloggers, femininity encompasses a range of attributes and practices related to traditional gender roles. However, none of these is more common or significant than the display of a feminine self. The feminine self is comprised of a traditionally beautiful face and body, dressed in fashionable yet modest clothing, complemented by elegant comportment and even elocution. These physical displays function not only as a strategy for attracting masculine men but also as a visual argument for the naturalness of the trad life. The aesthetic quality of a popular content creator's own self suggests its desirability to most women. Even more, it reinforces their role as reproducers, as bearers both of literal people and the people as a populist signifier.

As part of her "Embrace Your Femininity" series, The Radiant Wife offers women advice about how they can improve their physical appearance and mannerisms to embody traditional femininity. The videos serve a normalizing function that makes femininity appear to be hidden within most women even as it is under attack by feminist elites. In the series, The Radiant Wife opens by reminding viewers that they are in the company of many others. She calls out, "I just want to continually remind you that if you've ever felt alone in your beliefs, if you've ever felt like no one understands you, I hope that you remember that there is [sic] literally thousands of other women who feel the same way." She suggests that by focusing on femininity, viewers are entering into a community and common cause with many others. It also implicitly suggests that contemporary society stunts these women's ability to express the feminin-

ity that they desire, a theme reinforced in many of her other videos, such as "How to Protect Your Femininity." Here, she encourages women to emphasize their femininity against a feminist culture which "prizes that masculine energy."

As in other conservative contexts, modesty is a key issue on trad wife blogs. It serves two functions. First, it creates a foil for elitist feminism, which is imagined to over-sexualize women and make them aggressive. About feminist narratives of body confidence, The Radiant Wife cautions viewers:

Just because you're uncomfortable in your nudity, doesn't mean some creep over here thinks you look bad. So, when you offer yourself in fleshly nudity to the world to empower yourself...these guys are just benefitting from looking at your naked body.

Second, it pushes back against the potential criticism that focusing on attractiveness to men is itself overly sexualized. About her focus on beauty content despite concerns with modesty, The Radiant Wife comments that "Yea, I can be pretty, but I'm not a sex object." Nonetheless, it should be noted that the majority of the videos on her channel are indeed about how women can improve their appeal to men.

But the most important part of the feminine aesthetic is that it will show other women that they do not have to hide their real desires anymore. The Radiant Wife explains, "Don't hide your femininity. It's important to flourish as a feminine woman in a public sense because it's powerful and it brings other women out of hiding, and I have seen that in my own journey." She remembers that when she finally came out as a housewife, "all these women came out of the woodwork, and they were saying 'I'm so happy you are talking about these things because I believe it, but I'm too scared to talk about it.'" Here, The Radiant Wife frames femininity as an aesthetic political strategy for amplifying anti-feminism. It has the potential for efficacy because it lies dormant in "all these women" who will "come out of the woodwork" if only the viewer is brave enough to publicly represent them.

#### 4.2. A Feminine Home

In populist discourse, the home is often the space from which value emerges. Politicians speak about "kitchen table" issues that matter to "working American [or another nation's] families." For alt-right women, the home creates a space for the married, heterosexual couple and nuclear family, which is the foundation of a stable society. It is the ultimate arena in which trad wives can express their competence as women. Unlike elite feminists who only celebrate their professional work, in the home, trad wives enjoy the fruits of their own labor.

In their videos, homemaking is the expression of femininity in space. The home is figured as the vessel to cultivate oneself, one's marital relationship, and

eventually one's children. Visual platforms like YouTube and Instagram provide the perfect outlet to display this cultivation and to show other women the benefits of doing the same. Homemaking features heavily in trad wife content, as creators both demonstrate their own work and share tips with viewers.

For both *The Radiant Wife* and *Finding Elegance*, the feminine home is filled with the ephemera of one's womanhood, products that will appear inviting and familiar to young and usually white female viewers. *Finding Elegance* creates well-manicured spaces as the background of her videos. In "DON'T Be Ashamed to Stay Home, No Matter WHAT Feminists Say," *Finding Elegance* is surrounded by décor and props which look similar to what viewers might encounter in a Target department store: a white flower mirror with gold-tipped petals on the wall, a string of bright twinkle lights, white star-shaped ceramics, and even a rack with trendy clothing. This background follows her across many videos published during the same period, and it is remarkable precisely because it is so similar to that of other influencers. Even more importantly, it is aspirational in that it can be potentially obtained by her viewers, a key facet of influencer culture (Hund & McGuigan, 2019). The relatability of *Finding Elegance's* space suggests that she is just like her viewers and other everyday women as opposed to elite, removed feminists who do not understand their concerns or share their lifestyle. It argues that her views are simply an expression of what most real women desire because she is one of them.

Another way to connect with viewers is through "day in the life" (DITL) vlogs. This genre is typical of YouTube culture and popular across many communities. In the thumbnail for one of her DITL videos, *The Radiant Wife* is outdoors on what appears to be a large property, smiling radiantly in a modest dress, the wind blowing through her hair as she cradles a chicken. Throughout the video, titled "Days Filled With Joy," she shares excitement about her pregnancy and takes viewers along as she explores the property with her husband and dog. The images are vibrant and bucolic, often resonating with the "homesteader" aesthetic so popular in digital spaces like Instagram and YouTube.

Portraying the home in this idealized way is an aesthetic argument for its value. Whereas they argue that feminists culturally punish women who want to become stay-at-home mothers, trad wives celebrate their presence within it. In her video "DON'T Be Ashamed to Stay Home, No Matter WHAT Feminists Say," *Finding Elegance* suggests that:

When women kind of start to realize that maybe they don't find their happiness through work...[or] decide that maybe they're happier at home, women feel trapped, they feel like they've done something wrong, and they feel like they're betraying their sex by actually wanting to be mothers or stay at home moms.

Furthermore, doing so "is more natural to the way humans function." Just as it did with the feminine self, idealizing this traditionally feminine relationship to the home implicitly argues that it will naturally fulfill women, and it primes viewers for the content which makes this connection explicit.

#### 4.3. A Feminine Family

While femininity appears at first to focus on the comportment and presentation of the individual woman, it quickly becomes clear that the goal of trad wife femininity is to secure and support a traditional nuclear family. This family structure is the source of the trad wife's motivation and the ultimate objective of her work on herself and in the home. As content creators, they encourage women from a range of ideological positions to do the same. Their vlogs showcase motherhood as a slow, intimate, and bucolic experience in which they can most fully express their femininity.

Their focus on motherhood makes some trad wives' videos almost indistinguishable from more mainstream family and motherhood content. Called "mom-" or "mommy-blogs," these diary-like entries chronicle women's everyday triumphs and struggles raising their children, managing their household, and growing their family. The vast majority of mom blogs are not extremist in any way. Instead, most mom bloggers view their content as a creative outlet that connects them to other mothers with similar experiences, or they may even be a path to financially supporting their families or themselves (Lopez, 2009). Nonetheless, because they often focus on traditional gender roles and the nuclear family, the popularity of mom blogs provides a ready point of connection for alt-right trad wives to enter mainstream online spaces.

As one would expect in a vlog, when *The Radiant Wife* and *Finding Elegance* became pregnant, the majority of their content shifted to discussing their growing family. This content largely chronicles their daily experiences preparing their bodies and homes for motherhood. In her video titled "DITL ~ Wife Stays at Home Preparing for Baby," the thumbnail shows an idyllic still of *The Radiant Wife* in a long dress, working on a large painting in the dappled sunlight shining in through her windows. The vlog is largely about organizing and cleaning her home in preparation for the arrival of her first child, but its presentation is pastoral, calling up notions of rurality often championed by populist movements. It is also achievable, suggesting to viewers the desirability and everydayness of this lifestyle. Similarly, *Finding Elegance's* pregnancy and motherhood videos create this desirable, pastoral aesthetic. This aesthetic is intentionally created as she explains that:

I know that this has been a lot of pregnancy content, and I'm happy to do it because I think it's really important to share such a positive view of



pregnancy....There's so much negativity surrounding pregnancy, and I hate that. So, I have been glad to share my journey and share it joyfully.

Obviously, Finding Elegance is sharing her personal experience, but the implicit message, particularly within the context of her other content, is that a feminist culture devalues pregnancy and looks down on women who prioritize it in their lives. Instead, trad wives offer an idealized image of pregnancy that is easy because it is the ultimate expression of their natural role. Even more pointedly, it is presented as a desirable alternative to the grind and hustle culture of contemporary "boss babe" feminism that the trad wives reject. By presenting their experience through a pastoral aesthetic that calls up images of an idyllic and peaceful life, motherhood is forwarded as a blissful, natural alternative to the drudgery pushed on them by elite feminists.

### 5. Conclusion: Feminine Pathways to Extremism

The trad wives speak to a variety of audiences through the sign of femininity. Often without any explicit references to the political, their aesthetic presentation argues that the traditional, gendered role of wife and mother is the only natural and fulfilling responsibility for women. At the same time, the term "femininity" functions as a shorthand for a host of political and extremist ideologies that can be accessed through gender traditionalism. From mainstream conservatism to alt-right and white nationalism, the strategic deployment of populist aesthetics creates bridges between a colloquial understanding of the term femininity and its instantiations in extremist communities. Trad wives support the alt-right not simply through their association with the men who promote it, though this is important, but through their own strategic messaging, which primes audiences and introduces them to new pathways of extremism. Because "femininity" is such an unassuming term, YouTube users can unintentionally engage with these videos in just a few clicks. More insidiously, the political nature of the content will not be immediately clear. Much of it will appear no different from the many other fashion, beauty, lifestyle, and motherhood spaces online. It will tell them that most "real" women feel the same way and encourage them to come together to fight back against the feminist elites who are oppressing them. As The Radiant Wife says in her video "How to Protect Your Femininity," "Unite with other feminine women and encourage them in what we're doing!"

This analysis has several implications for the way we understand populism, gender, and rhetoric. First, where scholars like Moffitt (2016) develop the concept of a political style outside the field of rhetoric, an implicit argument here is that a rhetorical approach is well positioned to account for the linkages between style and content that Moffitt hopes to address. Indeed, rhetoricians have long recognized that "political performance

and action [are] *constitutive* of identities" (Moffitt, 2016, p. 40, emphasis in original), of which Maurice Charland's (1987) theory of constitutive rhetoric is the best known.

The second implication of this analysis is our need to better understand how populist discourse is mobilized among everyday women online. Recent scholarship has begun to account for the role of women in populism, but it has largely done so through analysis of traditional political figures such as party leaders and elected officials (Kajta, 2022; Meret, 2015; Meret et al., 2016; Pettersson, 2017). The present analysis suggests that everyday women in their capacity as influencers and audiences through the popular genre of "mommy blogs" play a key role in the dissemination of contemporary populism. This is particularly salient in light of social media's growing centrality to the public political discourse around the globe. Social media expands the access that would-be political actors have to reach and even create new kinds of audiences. This process is amplified in a polarized media environment that increasingly finds shared truth elusive.

A final implication of this analysis lies in the way that the increasing importance of aesthetics in online communication is changing what it means to participate in populist political discourse. The trad wives are empowered to amplify alt-right ideologies precisely because they need never explicitly name them. Instead, the networked nature of online communication does this work on their behalf as recommendation algorithms materialize the aesthetic linkages between mainstream and extremist content. For example, searching for something as innocuous as "feminine outfits" returns a list of results in which fashion-oriented and alt-right content is visually indistinguishable. This is a problem for a democratic public sphere, and it calls us as scholars to "unmask" oppressive discourses that may be hiding in plain sight (Mckerrow, 1989).

Understanding the phenomenon of trad wife influencers as an anti-feminist populist aesthetic, then, takes into account the stylistic nature of their appeal while calling particular attention to the role of new media in its amplification. The movements' rise on platforms like YouTube, in which identity and community are organized around repeated and recognizable aesthetic displays, necessitates an approach that foregrounds the way that aesthetic *becomes* political substance in this new public sphere.

Online spaces like YouTube have the unprecedented ability to both isolate content from its political context and feed viewers increasingly extremist iterations (Tufekci, 2018). As we have seen, what begins as a video on feminine beauty tips quickly becomes an invitation for white women to bear children on behalf of extremist movements like the alt-right. Future research should continue to expand our understanding of the distinct processes through which women push and are pushed toward extremism.

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## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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