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Emphasised, Feared, Despised and Hegemonic: Images of Femininity in the US Far-Right Digital Ecosystem on Telegram Channels

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Abstract
In this article we deliver an empirical analysis of far right visualisations of womanhood on US Telegram channels. Previous studies show that the far right, which increasingly engages in misogynist, anti-LGBT rhetoric and opposition to feminism, is marked by the growing involvement of women in the roles of active political actors. Such engagement by women within the far right causes an ‘image problem’ as it makes the traditional gender image of wifely submission less convincing. Our systematic empirical analysis of visual images of womanhood shared on US far right Telegram channels shows that far right digital images of ‘approved’ performances of womanhood include transgressive gender performances of hegemonic femininity, which are in conflict with conservative representations of womanhood in traditional nationalist ideology. Our findings show how hateful, racialising images of liberal and non-binary women serve as a tool for the construction of a variety of ‘approved’ far right identity images of hegemonic femininity.

Key words: Far right femininities, anti-LGBT, anti-feminism, US Telegram, hegemonic femininity

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INTRODUCTION

Existing research shows that digital media serve far-right activists in forging connections across subgroups (Caiani and Kröll, 2015) through images that construct symbolic bonds (Askanius, 2021), fostering shared identification across a wide spectrum of organisations and ideologies (Caiani and Parenti, 2016). While racism and hatred towards religious and ethnic minorities are well-known features of traditional far-right discourses (Wodak, 2015), far-right actors’ increasing engagement in misogynistic, anti-LGBT rhetoric and opposition to feminism, gender equality and women’s fundamental rights needs more scrutiny (Keskinen, 2017). To fill this gap, this article empirically scrutinizes visual images of women posted in the contemporary US far-right digital ecosystem. The article draws on the research on anti-gender and anti-LGBTQIA+ discourses, which show that far-right activists engage in the construction of a threat that blames a so-called dangerous ‘gender ideology’ for the emancipation of women and LGBTQIA+ people (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017; Verloo and Paternotte, 2018; Graff and Korolczuk, 2022; Rottenberg and Orgad, 2020). At the very same time, however, the increased involvement of women in all fields of public life has also contributed to the growing number of women’s active involvement in far-right political projects as active political subjects, selectively embracing far-right versions of feminism and LGBTQIA+ rights (Askanius, 2021; Blee, 2002; Blee and Creasap, 2010; Farris, 2017). Such engagement by women in far-right activism causes an ‘image problem’ for far-right projects, as it makes the traditional gender image of wifely submission less convincing. In this article we study the complex interconnections between the femonationalism and anti-genderism of the far right from an empirical perspective, focusing on visual, digital media images of women. We argue that the far right traditionally constructs two categories of performances of womanhood: “approved” and “disapproved.” While the approved performances of womanhood are in agreement with nationalist ideas on gender roles in society, the disapproved performances of womanhood are primarily in conflict with it. Finally, we argue that far-right digital images of ‘approved’ performances of womanhood also include transgressive gender performances, which contradict the traditional nationalist representations of womanhood, as they include politically active women who do not perform the nationalist ideal type of womanhood, i.e. “wifely submission.” Drawing on Geva (2020), we label this category as “hegemonic femininity.”
The first, empirical, contribution of this article to existing studies on gender aspects in far-right politics lies in the innovative multi-method research design that combines a qualitative, in-depth visual analysis with a quasi-quantitative computerised content analysis of large data sets. Thus, our work extends existing critical discursive approaches (Wodak 2015) to the study of visual representations of women in far-right online spaces. Another, theoretical, contribution is that we hope to provide new conceptual insights into the existing literature on the gender aspects of far-right women’s leadership (Geva, 2020; Meret, 2015; Scrinzi, 2017). We show that, while far-right members have traditionally rejected any involvement of women in politics, the performance of “hegemonic femininity” combining typical feminine traits with the masculine type of leadership has become acceptable within contemporary online far-right spaces. Our in-depth analysis shows how online the far right overcomes the tensions between its own emphasis on women’s rights discourse and a nationalist ideology that promotes wifely submission.

Our digital data collection is based on a random sample of far-right Telegram images in an analysis of large data sets, which enabled us to study dominant visual images in the US far-right ecosystem on Telegram in the period from April to December 2021. Our focus is on Telegram, which has become one of the most frequented outlets of the extremist far-right and radical right digital ecosystem in the US, with tens of thousands of users migrating to US Telegram channels following the effects of mass banning and deplatforming of other social media, such as Facebook (Urman and Katz, 2020).

We start this article by looking at existing theories on the articulation of gendered identities in nationalist and far-right discourses. We continue by discussing our methodological focus on multi-modal visual analysis, inspired by a critical historical perspective of far-right discourse analysis and research on visual political mobilisation (Richardson and Wodak, 2009). Finally, we present our findings and the typology we have developed inductively: four ‘ideal types’ of female identity constructed on Telegram through visual representations of womanhood, which we labelled as: (1) emphasized femininity, (2) despised femininity, (3) feared femininity, and (4) hegemonic femininity. Based on these findings, we argue in our concluding remarks that the contemporary far right, which arises from a deeply misogynistic and racist ideology, has managed to re-articulate some non-traditional performances of femininity as acceptable, even celebrated, without having to give up the ideological aspects of promoting traditional femininity.
FEMININITY THROUGH A FAR RIGHT GAZE

Drawing on the existing literature on far-right ideology (Wodak, 2015; Forchtner & Kølvraa, 2017), we assume that far-right members draw on nationalist ideology that divides society into groups of those who belong and those who do not. As previous research demonstrated (Yuval-Davis, 1997; Mosse, 1985), these dichotomies are deeply gendered. The central idea is the role division among the sexes, in which women are perceived as biological and cultural reproducers of the nation, whereas men are supposed to be the head of the family and protect and provide for their women and offspring (Yuval-Davis, 1997; Mosse, 1985). Within nationalist ideology, women are idealized as the guardians of morality, and both beauty and decency are seen as their main characteristics (Mosse, 2020, p. 17). This means that women have to not only be good mothers but also attractive to the male gaze. Nationalist ideology deems any deviation from these gender roles, including attraction between people of the same sex, as immoral and ultimately wrong (Mosse, 1985) and this outdated gendered imagery still plays a crucial role in contemporary far-right discourse. Thus, the contemporary far right opposes mainstreaming of the values of ‘68, sexual revolution and any feminist ideas, and their institutionalization. To do so, they construct a powerful enemy of so-called “gender ideology”, which they describe as a dangerous, neo-Marxist ideology whose aim is to erase the differences between men and women (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). There is a burgeoning body of literature covering the gendered aspects of far-right discourse (e.g., Blee, 2002, Blee and Creasap, 2010; Meret, 2015; Geva, 2020; Norocel, 2017; Miller-Idriss, 2017; Askanius, 2021). However, the visual representation of women in contemporary far-right digital media has remained overlooked. Hence, the aim of this article is to fill this empirical gap.

Until recently, the literature addressing the crucial role of gendered identity construction in the process of recruiting new activists into far-right groups focused mainly on the construction of masculinity in far-right online spaces dominated mostly by men (see, critically, Keskinen 2017; Semenzin and Bainotti, 2020; Hoffmann et al., 2020; Kimmel, 2013). However, contemporary far-right political mobilization, in both its online and offline forms, is significantly marked by women’s involvement, both as activists and political leaders (cf. Geva, 2020; Meret, 2015; Scrinzi, 2017). Such involvement of women often softens the public face of far-right political projects as well as bringing an emphasis on – often nationalist versions of – women’s rights (Farris, 2017). Consequently, the far right faces the challenge of how to deal with the contradiction of preaching wifely submission (Yuval-Davis, 1997; Mosse, 1985), while at the
very same time supporting far-right women leaders and presenting themselves as protectors of women’s rights, which are associated with women’s emancipation from the household and the right not to be economically dependent on their husbands (Farris, 2017). Farris argued that scholars should not only focus on the instrumentalization of women’s rights by the far right, but also note the much larger, ongoing mainstream media adaptation of femonationalist discourse, which has been emphasized also in the work of Özcan (2013). Several scholars (Farris, 2017; Lépinard, 2020; Zakaria, 2021; Yilmaz, 2015) show the broad, mainstream appeal of far-right instrumentalization of Western white feminist discourses as part of racist discourses stigmatizing women and men with an immigrant background (Zakaria, 2021; Lépinard, 2020). Thus, Western views on gender equality play an important role in the construction of a socially exclusionary imagery of “us” (the nation) and “them” (immigrants as perceived ‘backward’ Other) (Yilmaz, 2015).

Our empirical study adds new insights into understanding the puzzle of how the far right faces an image problem in the sense of both promoting nationalism with its strong anti-feminist ideological aspects of wifely submission, while at the same time arguing through an appropriation of women’s rights. Our visual, digital media analysis answers this question empirically by examining how visual representations of womanhood on far-right digital media resolve these potential tensions and internal contradictions in far right’s role expectations towards women. In doing so, we drew on Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity (2005) and the Schippers’ theory of hegemonic femininity (2007). These theories assume that geographical, ideological and cultural hierarchies structure gendered performances in which masculinity is always superior to femininity. According to these theories, there are hierarchies between superior masculinity (white, heterosexual masculinity) and inferior masculinity (non-white, queer masculinity). Likewise, Connell (2005) conceptualized hierarchies between different performances of femininity and labelled the most valued way of being a woman as an ‘emphasized femininity,’ a concept which we use in our own analysis. Such ‘emphasized femininity’ is the gendered performance of womanhood desired by the male gaze of the representatives of ‘hegemonic masculinity’. In nationalist ideologies, emphasized femininity would be represented by women who perform wifely submission, fit into the beauty stereotypes and are sexually and morally chaste.

To understand the perception of the gendered performance far-right women leaders, we further draw on Geva’s (2020) concept of ‘hegemonic femininity,’ which helps in our
conceptualization of the changing landscape of far-right views on women’s roles. Geva (2020) describes ‘hegemonic femininity as an intersectional performance of femininity and of heterosexuality reproducing hierarchies of race, sexuality, gender, and class; and also the masculine domination over women’ (Geva, 2020: 6). According to Geva (2020), radical right women leaders combine masculine traits, such as toughness, with feminine stereotypes to ‘proclaim their personal moral authority and a caring ethic as mothers, sisters, wives, widows, or daughters, for the purposes of accentuating their devotion to the people’ (Geva, 2020: 9).

Finally, Francesca Scrinzi (2017), who studied the performance of gender and ideological aspects of the French new far right, pointed out the ideological shift from “mothers” to “working mothers” as the ideal type of womanhood. Complementing these scholars’ valuable studies on formal political arenas, our study will investigate the construction of far-right imaginaries of womanhood in informal, potentially radical arenas of digital mobilization (cf. Polletta, 2009; Blee and Creasap, 2010)

A VISUAL APPROACH TO STUDYING FAR-RIGHT DIGITAL IMAGES OF WOMEN

In conceptualizing visual images in relation to our research interest in far-right-gendered identity mobilization, we contribute to the literature on far-right movements and polarization through online discourse (Caiani et al., 2012; Mudde, 2019; Askanius, 2021). Several scholars working on hate speech and far-right online discourse have shown how gendered bullying of racialized target groups works through irony, memes and cultural tropes (Askanius 2021; Caiani et al 2021; Jasser et al. 2022). Scholars in this field have increasingly called attention to visual aspects of ideology as a communicative tool that facilitates cross-ideological knowledge exchange, symbolic bonding, and convergence of ideas between professional political parties on the far right and grassroots, extremist far-right activists (Miller-Idriss, 2017; Bogerts and Fielitz, 2019; Caiani et al., 2021). In this context, visuals became one of the most frequently used tools for conveying far-right messages (Shifman, 2014; Nagle, 2017). Even though dark humour as a coded language was always an important aspect of far-right communication (Wodak, 2015), communication became even more playful with the realm of social media,

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within which ideology is communicated in DIY meme aesthetics, blurring the line between the serious and funny, the real and fake, and ideological issues and lifestyle (Shifman 2014).

Furthermore, far-right images have a strong dimension as carriers of affect (Kølvraa, 2015). As Ahmed’s ([2004] 2014) theory of affective economies and hated bodies manifests, the process of othering characteristic for the nationalist ideology underpinning far-right discourses functions through emotion work. This means that the familiar narrative of the gendered ‘other,’ portrayed as inferior and dangerous enemies of the nation, invites media consumers to adopt a ‘you’ perspective through emotion work. As Ahmed ([2004] 2014) puts it: ‘becoming this “you” would mean developing certain rage against illegitimate others, who are represented as “swarms” in the nation’ (Ahmed, ibid: 1). In accordance with Ahmed’s theory, we argue that the gendered representation of the far-right ideology is necessarily a politics of body portraying certain women’s identities as approved and others as rejected. Thus, as the swarms of the nation. This affective dimension is particularly important in the representation of women in the far-right digital ecosystem as researchers document growing instances of incel (involuntary celibate) mass killings and gendered violence targeting in particular women and LGBTQIA+ people (Witt, 2020; Semenzin and Bainotti, 2020; Hoffman et al, 2020). The perpetrators of these terrorist attacks often express their feelings of anger and injustice in their manifestos and justify their killings as revenge on the immoral women who denied them what they deserved – the love and care of a white, submissive wife and offspring (manly duty to the nation). Such cases serve as evidence that the narratives studied in this paper can mobilize emotional responses and lead to radicalization and terrorism (Askanius, 2021).

RESEARCH DESIGN, METHOD AND DATA

Data Selection, Sampling Strategy, and Challenges of Sampling and Data Analysis

We draw on 1,600 randomly selected Telegram images collected during the period from June to April 2021 among 200 Telegram channels. This sample includes a broad sample of the variety of far-right, extreme-right, and alt-right activist digital media channels, excluding both mainstream media platforms and established political party webpages. To allow for full transparency, the data used here is shared as an appendix to the paper. The initial sampling process was a ~5% random sample, meaning of all the messages we had posted in those
channels, we took a sample of 5% of them to look for images and downloaded any attached images, amounting to 269,366 images in total. Based on this large-N sample, we created a subsample by discarding channels related to COVID, subsetting further, clustering to identify people. Only then did we manually code select images of women already described in our original article.

The seed lists were created based on a combination of theoretically preselected sampling of far-right extremist networks and inductive scrolling, with the ambition of covering the entire far-right and radical-right US Telegram digital ecosystem. We considered sampling strategies based on relevant literature in the field of international far-right alternative online media and activism and gendered images (e.g., Miller-Idriss, 2017; Bogerts and Fielitz, 2019; Hokka and Nelimarkka 2019; Askanius, 2021). In terms of content, this sample includes channels that feature a range of voices on the extremism continuum in terms of content (e.g., from openly extremist hate speech to the implicit targeting of out-groups), and subcultural affinities, such as channels close to the American alt-right, and the increasingly prevalent QAnon movement (Guhl and Davey, 2020). Quantitative studies show how far-right Telegram channels are structured mainly along national and ideological lines, with numerous far-right subcultures, including channels influenced by 4chan, neo-Nazis, QAnon, and the alt-right, as well as Trump/MAGA, The Proud Boys and militia groups, which our sample included (Baele et al, 2022). We did not include official formalized party channels, since these are situated beyond our research focus on the far-right digital ecosystem within the movements themselves (Caiani and Parenti, 2016). We faced and considered multiple challenges in studying the many thousands of digital channels and webpages in the galaxy of far-right and extreme-right digital networks, which is known for its volatility following official censorship and leads to migrations to new channels (Caiani et al, 2012; Caiani and Parenti, 2016; Urman and Katz, 2020).

Our sampling strategy also draws insights from a previous systematic overview of the far-right digital ecosystem and its construction of gendered images in the manosphere (Jones et al, 2020; Hoffman et al, 2020; Jasser et al, 2020). We used handcoding to avoid computerised coding mistaking certain objects or pictures as ‘woman’ while excluding others to reproduce gendered and sexualised hierarchies and racist bias.

For both coding or presenting far-right extremist images of ‘women’ for research, we are aware of the dimension of hate speech, misogyny, racism and violent extremism that our data corpus
implies, both for researchers and the audience. As data analysts, we are aware of our situated positionality as white, privileged, female-identified researchers and of the harm and traumatising effects for victims of extremism, and we have selected the data we present in accordance with ethics approval.

**A Multimodal Approach to Visual Political Mobilisation**

The research design in this article draws methodological insights from multi-modal, interdisciplinary approaches to studying visual data in research on political mobilization, art history, and multi-modal Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Müller et al, 2009; Richardson and Wodak, 2009; Özcan, 2013; Author et al, 2013; Forchtner and Kølvraa, 2017). Inspired by the Discourse Historical Approach in Critical Discourse Studies (DHA), the authors are interested in contributing to a critical visual literacy of far-right images (Richardson and Wodak, 2009: 50; Wodak, 2015).

The multi-modal, interdisciplinary methodology in this article proceeds through three steps of visual analysis. In the first step of visual content analysis, we analyse the content of images in the campaign, their representation of gender and spatial organisation as well as the applied visual technologies (cf. Müller et al, 2009). For visual content analysis, we sampled the clusters of visual presentations of ‘woman’ in our data set by dividing them into theoretically relevant categories, such as images of ‘approved femininity’ as the affirmed ‘us’. We also focused inductively on denigrating images of ‘disapproved femininity’, which we expected, given the ideology, to apply to ‘non-white’ or ‘non-feminine’ women represented by feminists, queer, transgender and lesbian feminine subjectivities articulated as the ‘enemies’ and traitors of the nation. Finally, we created four categories, which consisted of two types of ‘approved femininity’ and two types of ‘disapproved femininity’. Each type had two subtypes, which differed based on whether the depicted woman was portrayed as a passive or active political subject (see Table 1).
Table 1 The Types of Femininity Present in the Online Communication of US Far Right Forums at Telegram

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Approved Femininity</th>
<th>Disapproved Femininity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Active political subject</strong></td>
<td>Hegemonic femininity</td>
<td>Feared femininity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Passive political subject</strong></td>
<td>Emphasised femininity</td>
<td>Despised femininity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 illustrates the variety of visual representation of femininity as reflected in our data set which we shall discuss in our empirical findings. For the presentation of data in this article, for each theoretically relevant category illustrated in Table 1 we select one ‘typical’ image, which reflects a broader variety of similar images, and which we analyse in depth, considering the context, ideology and historical legacies.

Then, in a section step, we apply the interdisciplinary methodology of visual iconography (Müller et al, 2009) in order to analyse the complex aesthetic of the racist, sexist/misogynist and homophobic content within visual representations of women (Özcan, 2013). Our aim is to trace how visual representations and images of femininity recreate and quote historic fascist, ethno-nationalist and extremist iconography (such as nationalistic flags or allusions to Nazi iconography) (Müller et al, 2009; Richardson and Wodak, 2009).

Following our iconographic interpretation, we add a third step of contextual analysis (Richardson and Wodak, 2009; Caiani and Parenti, 2016). In this context-sensitive step of analysis, we situate far-right digital visuals in their social context of discourse understood as broader media debates about gender, femininity, and purity (Richardson and Wodak, 2009; Wodak, 2015).

**FINDINGS**

**Overview**

Our findings show that far-right Telegram posts containing images of women contain images of both ‘approved’ or ‘disapproved’ women identities. In detail, among 1,600 images, almost 10% (9.6%, 153 images) featured women (depicted both positively and negatively).
Table 2 presents the most recurrent categories of visual images of ‘approved’ versus ‘disapproved’ women in two different columns. Note that in our sample of 130 images almost half of the images (71 out of 130 images in total) portrayed women through the ideals of ‘emphasized’ or ‘hegemonic’ femininity (Table 2, left column). We compared these ‘approved’ images with 59 images in total of ‘disapproved’ femininity (Table 2, right column).

**Table 2 Images of Women on Far Right US Telegram Channels (April–June 2021)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Typology of Far Right Visual Representations of Women</th>
<th>Number of images of Approved Femininity in sample</th>
<th>Number of images of Disapproved Femininity in sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emphasised femininity</td>
<td>54 (76%)</td>
<td>38 (64.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hegemonic femininity</td>
<td>17 (23.9%)</td>
<td>21 (35.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>71 (100%)</td>
<td>59 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total sample: 130, NA: 23</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in Table 2, when it comes to the positive ‘approved’ representation of idealized womanhood, 76% of images depicting women in a positive light were categorized as ‘emphasized femininity,’ i.e. women in the roles of mothers and fragile victims in need of men’s protection. On the other hand, 24% of the positive images of womanhood depicted ‘hegemonic femininity,’ i.e. strong, politically active women whose bodies and performance of gender still fits the ‘emphasized femininity’ stereotypes: feminine look, chastity, motherhood.

In the case of the negative portrayals of femininity, 64.4% of images portrayed the category of ‘despised femininity’. These included images of women being shamed for their bodies, clothing or performance of sexuality. Among these were images of women who looked ‘masculine’ or represented queer, non-binary people and trans women. The category also contains images of fat-shaming and slut-shaming, and images of Muslim women, who are despised for not being emancipated in the Western way and covering their hair with headscarves. Among ‘disapproved’ and targeted women were further negatively portrayed political opponents. Negative images of political opponents amount to 21 images (35%),
featuring mostly liberal and feminist leaders, most of whom are women of colour, among whom were politicians from the Democratic Party (Democratic Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez was featured 5 times), and so-called ‘woke’ women, such as leftist activists (7 times). We labelled this category as “feared feminity.” In the following we conduct a more detailed visual analysis of the categories summarized in Table 2.

**Women as Passive Objects: ‘Emphasized Femininity’ versus ‘Despised’ Others**

As highlighted in Table 1, we found that portrayals of women served variously as ‘passive’ objects of far-right imaginary or ‘active’ political subjectivities. The passive objects, i.e. the “emphasized” and “despised” femininity are anonymized depictions of women’s bodies either appealing or unappealing to the male gaze. The most frequent portrayal of women was ‘emphasized femininity’; women who were represented as wives, girlfriends and mothers; who are attractive to the male gaze, submissive and non-emancipated; and, importantly, often potential victims of violent crimes perpetrated by migrants. A typical image of such emphasised femininity is Visual 1.

**Visual 1** Emphasized Femininity [about here]

*Source: Posted on Brotherhood of Blood, 9 April 2021*

Visual 1 was selected because it represents the ideal of ‘emphasized femininity’ in our random sample, often styled in our sample as old, realistic paintings.
At the level of iconography (Step 2 Visual Analysis), the genre of historic paintings with Caucasians has also been used by populist right-wing parties, who adopt known historical nationalist art paintings of flags (cf. Richardson and Wodak, 2009). What is distinct in the use of historic paintings in our Telegram data set is that ‘emphasized femininity’ is presented as a white, idealized past, before things ‘started going downhill’.

In contextual terms (Step 3 Visual Analysis), the realist painting style corresponds with far-right political ideologies, which often associate modern art with cultural revolution and decay (Antliff, 2007). It is a well-known fact that historical national socialist propaganda rejected modern art as degenerate, arguing that art should follow given rules, and artists should be adored for their skills in mirroring reality on canvas. We would therefore assume that the choices of a popular genre of traditional ‘natural’ beauty paintings of white mothers serve as visual ideal-types to invoke a certain feeling of nostalgia for a glorified white past (e.g., Wodak 2015). When it comes to the affective dimension of the visual representation of ‘emphasised femininity,’ the discourse draws on the feeling of love for Caucasian families representing the nation and nostalgia for an imagined idealized past. Here, the white, heteronormative subject is a fantasy that can mobilise hate through the evocation of a passionate attachment closely tied to love (Ahmed, [2004] 2014: 43).

In contrast to idealized and nostalgic notions of white ‘emphasized’ womanhood, we document explicit and implicit forms of discriminatory and hateful rhetoric in visuals and texts targeting ethnic minorities, lesbian, trans, bi, feminist, left-wing and liberal female identities. Almost all images of fat-shaming are projected implicitly or explicitly towards ‘despised’ women identity groups. We found that, among the whole sample, cartoons often conflated the variety of images of fat-shaming and othering of political enemies with symbols representing non-binary, lesbian, bi, and trans femininities. The following meme from a Telegram post is a typical image that reflects the visual content and iconography of ‘despised femininity’ (see Visual 2 on following page).
Among our sample of images of ‘despised’ women, visual representations of woman as oversized and unappealing to the male gaze were one of the most frequent subcategories, together with negative representations of non-binary women. Text surrounding these posts explicitly targeted the ‘despicable’ ‘enemies’. Yet, some images were also posted without text, supposed to speak for themselves as hateful images and needing no further explanation for the audience.

In terms of visual content (Step 1 Visual Analysis), in the centre of the meme is an oversized white woman wearing a T-shirt depicting her as a consumer of porn and, because of the tattoo with the transgender flag, supposedly also as a transgender person or ally. Often, memes and edited images of oversized people were depicted with images of food, sometimes with images of fast food such as McDonalds. Such images are, in fact, a less sophisticated criticism of modern consumerism and neo-liberal marketing that promotes “self-love” and body-positivity in order to increase growth and drive sales. Instead of targeting the marketers, however, they usually scapegoat the consumers. Such satirical criticism draws on ‘anti-system populism’,
which portrays modern people as brainwashed sheep and consumers of fast food and the propaganda of the system in the mainstream media. In this reversed discourse, transgender rights are promoted not as the struggle of marginalized people for recognition and emancipation, but as an ideology imposed on people by the elite.

In terms of visual iconography (Step 2 Visual Analysis), the visual conflates two different anti-consumerist iconographies by connecting the McDonalds logo (equating ‘unhealthy’ fast food consumption) with the (allegedly unhealthy) consumption of porn. The meme uses popular icons from consumer culture, i.e. ‘unhealthy’ food and ‘unhealthy’ porn industry, to construct transgender sexuality and identity as degenerate (cf. Bogerts and Fielitz, 2019). While the obesity allegedly gained through the overconsumption of fast food is disapproved of as not attractive to the male gaze, the Pornhub reference suggest that it is also contrasts with the nationalist view on women as the guardians of chastity and morality.

As the third step of contextual analysis (Step 3 Visual Analysis), note that the text in the cartoon makes explicit the ambivalent visual message: the character in the centre is presumably ‘getting tired of these super straight posts’. The post combines text and visual aesthetic styles that serve to ridicule the character in the centre. The broader discursive context to this post is the result of a large stock of anti-LGBT images. In text comments surrounding hateful images of women, Telegram posts position themselves as openly far-right activists giving voice to authentic anti-feminist discourse and networks of affiliated audiences (cf. Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018; Verloo and Paternotte, 2018). In the context of anti-gender and anti-LGBT discourse, digital images of ‘despised femininity’ represent targeted Others whose proximity threatens not only to take something away from the subject (jobs, security, wealth) but to take the place of the subject (Ahmed, [2004] 2014: 43). The representations of ‘despised femininity’ thus endanger the place of ‘straight emphasised femininity’ in society. By demanding respect for gender difference and sexual rights, ‘despised women’ undermine the efforts of idealized white women who ‘followed the patriarchal rules’ and worked hard to fit into the idealized imagery of traditional gender roles. The individuals portrayed as representatives of despised femininity are accused of ‘ruining’ their bodies, which belong to the nation, and thus ruining the gene pool of the entire nation and depriving its men of the male gaze.
Women as Active Political Subjects: Feared Femininities vs Hegemonic Femininity

Complementing the positive or negative portrayal of emphasized or despised femininities as passive objects of far-right hate speech, we found another, more active, category of gendered images of women mobilized and negatively portrayed as enemies of the movement: that is, images of ‘feared’ or fear-invoking women leaders representing heroes of feminism, the liberal left and/or the US Democratic Party, i.e. ‘the feminist Other’. In empirical terms, ‘feared’ feminist women are different from ‘despised’ women in that they are active subjects as political elites of the left or the mainstream. Unlike the “despised femininities”, the representatives of the “feared femininities” were portrayed as conventionally beautiful, but wrong in their activities and political ideology. As will be shown, the images used in the far-right platform attempt to dismiss both the image of beauty of these women, as well as their role as politically active heroines – the elite status of these feared women – which is achieved visually through memes. In our data set on feminist enemy images on Telegram, the most frequent ‘feared’ feminist ‘enemy’ of the far right was visually represented by US liberal Democrat Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (see Visual 3).

Visual 3 Feared Femininity [about here]

Source: Telegram post 2819, example of post with meme of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez
Visual 3 is a meme representing Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in a negative way based on several racializing visual stereotypes. We selected Visual 3 for our in-depth visual analysis as a typical and, indeed, the most frequent image of a well-known individual portrayed by extremist Telegram users as ‘dangerous’ women. Here, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is represented as a meme.

In terms of visual content (Step 1 Visual Analysis), note that Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in Visual 3 is portrayed with a large, open mouth, which makes her look unattractive. In terms of iconography (Step 2 Visual Analysis), the place-specific context of the United States is important. In the US mainstream media context, the loud mouth is a recognised traditional conservative racist icon. The angry, loud-mouth symbol is used in the US context by, among others, conservative media outlets towards women of colour to stigmatise and delegitimise social justice protests by poor Black women as ‘angry’ and irrational Black women (Milman, 2014). In this vein, it is interesting that the meme shapes Ocasio-Cortez’s face in a way that seems to resemble known Black female protest icon Ella Parks (cf. Schudson, 2012). However, while in remembering and celebrating Ella Parks the liberal media and school books always portray her positively, notably with her mouth closed and as a fragile, kind and quiet all-American woman (Schudson, 2012), Visual 2 depicts Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez as the racialised ‘angry black woman’ stereotype, a known racist image for the US media context (Milman 2014). Visual 3 also has symbolic associations with the visual iconography of historical nationalist socialist movements, which use the loud mouth image as an anti-Semitic stereotype (cf. Richardson and Wodak, 2009).

In terms of context (Step 3 Visual Analysis), note that Visual 3 was part of a larger web of similar negative memes and caricatures in our data set, all of which individually depict Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in unattractive ways. Moreover, in our data we found a larger set of photographs of Ocasio-Cortez edited in such a way as to make her face appear in the stereotype of an elderly woman of colour next to pictures of Stalin to symbolise communism, or portrayed in unattractive ways as an elderly and dramatically aged, angry woman. As a result of this iconography of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez as a hated and dangerous woman, Visual 3 did not require any text for insiders to understand – indeed, Visual 3 is from a post without text.

These findings show how a variety of visual strategies serve to belittle and deny dignity to the ‘feared’ femininity of liberal-leaning elite women. Moreover, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s
‘crime against femininity’ was not that she would not be attractive to the male gaze. Quite the contrary, since although Ocasio-Cortez fits the stereotype of a conventionally attractive woman, she was often featured in memes that made her look unattractive.

In direct response to the othering of ‘feared’ feminists, there is a fourth category of images of women among the most frequent subset (17) of ‘ideal women’ in the context of US far-right Telegram channels portraying strong, self-confident political leaders. We conceive of this dominant, unfrightened and openly racist performance of femininity in terms of what Geva (2020) and Schippers (2007) have termed a ‘hegemonic femininity’. In our data set we distinguish images of hegemonic femininity from those of ‘emphasized femininity’ in that images of ‘hegemonic’ femininity challenge and transgress the ideal of the ‘submissive, fragile wife’ by conflating female- and male-gendered attributes, for example, by reflecting the ideology of white women having the right to possess a gun to protect themselves (part of the right’s pro-gun argumentation). Such images depict white women with guns and describe them as active agents who are able to protect themselves and their families, but also, simultaneously, embracing traditional feminine role aspects. Very often such women are described as mothers and use this role as moral capital, allowing them to be active political agents involved in the negotiation of how society should look. We argue that this representation of womanhood is a legacy of women’s increased involvement in far-right projects, the consequence of which was the re-articulation of some former claims about women’s duty to remain in the private sphere and stay silent. Visual 4 (see the following page) shows a textbook example of ‘hegemonic femininity’: the Republican Congresswoman Lauren Boebert, who describes herself as ‘Owner of Shooters Grill’ and ‘the mom who told Beto HELL NO you are not taking our guns!’; intersecting her identity of a mother with her pro-gun views (see Visual 4 on the following page).
Visual 4 Hegemonic Femininity in the Far Right

![Image of Trump and Lauren Boebert](https://example.com/image)

*Source: Telegram* post by Benny Johnson, reposting Boebert’s Tweet on 5 November 2021

Visual 4 is a press photograph of Lauren Boebert, shared and celebrated widely on US far-right digital media and on Telegram. With regard to our selection of this particular image, note that Boebert, a radical-right populist politician, is just one version of hegemonic femininity images in the far-right digital ecosystem on Telegram. Nevertheless, we chose this character as we found that far-right Telegram posts portrayed Boebert as a counter-icon to the feared femininity of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

Moreover, in terms of visual content (Step 1 Visual Analysis), while despised and feared women are portrayed mainly by memes, the majority of Boebert visuals on US Telegram channels in our data set are photographs presenting her as attractive. Trump is taller than

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2 The press photograph was posted first on 5 November in *The Hill*, a large political news website owned by Nexstar Media Group, and was widely shared among far-right activists on Telegram.
Boebert in Visual 4, and her portrayal from behind in a childlike feminine dress and posture suggests a patriarchal hierarchy and admiration.

In terms of iconography (Step 2 Visual Analysis), note that Visual 4 is a press photograph portraying Boebert as the mirror image of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. In fact, the dress worn by Boebert is a mirror image and a copy that responds to the dress worn by Ocasio-Cortez with the text ‘Tax the Rich’. Portrayed as a response to Ocasio-Cortez, Boebert’s dress states ‘Let’s go Brandon’. This slogan is a known slogan among far-right and radical-right activists, which subverts hate speech limitation to actually mean ‘F**k Joe Biden’.

Contextualizing the Boebert icon in terms of gendered femininity discourse, we argue that while Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is conventionally young and attractive, like Boebert, the two women use contrasting rhetorical strategies. As a context to the press photography itself, note that Ocasio-Cortez wore a ‘Tax the Rich’ dress at the 2021 Met Gala, in a period when Congress debated sweeping reforms through the Build Back Better bill as a way to speak symbolically for ‘childcare, healthcare, and climate action’ policy through taxation. While Ocasio-Cortez’s message was closely related to the content of policy debates in Congress, Boebert appropriated Ocasio-Cortez’s idea of a politicized dress code to the means of repeating a known far-right slogan, effectively expressing the inferiority and rejection of liberal elites through hate speech (Ahmed, [2004] 2014). As an image appropriated and celebrated by far-right activists on Telegram, Boebert’s political dress is one particular image that contributes to a broader iconography of active ‘hegemonic women’ leaders promoting hate speech and far-right slogans, while appropriating dress codes initiated by liberal, feminist ‘feared women’ such as Ocasio-Cortez.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The aim of this article was to understand how contemporary US far-right digital platforms operating on Telegram use images depicting various performances of womanhood to express gendered aspects of nationalist ideologies, constructing an ‘us’ vs ‘them’ division. Based on our findings, we argue that the new far right, marked by an increased number of involved women, has managed to re-articulate some non-traditional performances of femininity as ‘approved’, even celebrated, without having to give up the ideological aspects of promoting traditional femininity through the spread of misogynistic and racist images of women. Several
cross-national comparative studies have shown how radical-right and far-right actors promote hate speech through the spreading of toxic, racist, and exclusionary out-group discourse (Bhat and Klein, 2020, Caiani et al, 2021). Our distinct contribution to this field is to show how it is not only text-based political messages that promote hatred and far-right ideologies, but also a variety of popular cultural images of “disapproved” and “approved” femininity spread online.

Drawing on the literature on hegemonic performances of gender (Connell, 2005; Geva, 2020; Schippers, 2007), we conducted a qualitative visual analysis of randomly selected far-right US Telegram channels. Based on the findings, we have distinguished four umbrella categories representing performance of femininities, divided as ‘approved femininity’ and ‘disapproved femininity’. Each category consists of two subcategories: ‘passive objects of ideologies’ or ‘active political subjects’. We argue that visual representations of women in our data set carry collective affect of hatred towards ‘disapproved femininities’, among which are individual feminist and liberal leaders representing feared femininity, but also anonymized women’s bodies that do not fit into the “beautiful, submissive women” stereotype and representing the category of “despised femininity.” With Ahmed ([2004] 2014), we argue that the repetition of the same themes (oversized women, non-white women, “masculine” women) worked as a means to accumulate the emotional content of images and the construction of ‘them’ through work on negative emotions directed towards entire groups of people that the individual bodies depicted on the images represented. The disapproved types of femininity were portrayed in a derogatory manner and as a threat to emphasized femininity. On the other hand, the images of “emphasized femininity,” anonymized women’s bodies that fit into the “beautiful, chaste woman” stereotype, were presented as the idealized past, often depicted as old paintings and something we can only remember.

We make a contribution to studies on far-right women leadership in which we add a mixed methods, digital data perspective on the categorization of womanhood. Our visual, multi-modal research perspective allows us to show that the far right has indeed developed a variety of “approved” and “disapproved” women gender performances online, which we categorize in our typology. Polletta (2009) has shown how a variety of different female gendered role models facilitate the outreach of political movements to diverse groups. Due to our digital analysis of visual far-right gender identity images of womanhood, we could show how the far right diversifies femonationalist image politics, thus multiplying its potential outreach potential. Moreover, we could show how binary images of approved vs. disapproved womanhood served
far-right actors to appropriate feminist emancipation struggles in competition for hegemony with alternative conceptions of social justice and LGBT rights. Thus, the visual and digital dimension of our findings help researchers working on gendered mobilizations to understand the broad, political implications of ‘anti-gender’ frames being so central to polarized public debates in economically and politically critical junctures (cf. Della Porta, 2020). Our analysis of one particular aspect of the contemporary far-right ideology helps to shed light on the entire ideological matrix. Disapproved femininities are not only portrayed as something ultimately wrong and deviant, they are further portrayed as a threat to the nation. Accordingly, repetitive posting of images of disapproved femininities contributes to far-right visual narratives of replacement conspiracy theories (Krouwel & Önnerfors, 2021).

Due to our visual perspective and our data set, we can demonstrate that while members of the far right used to reject any involvement of women in politics, the performance of “hegemonic femininity”, which combines typical feminine traits with the masculine type of leadership, has become acceptable for them. This shows that far-right circles do endorse such women politicians, instead of rejecting women altogether. Thus, we show how the online far right overcomes the tensions between its own emphasis on women’s rights discourse and nationalist ideology that promotes wifely submission. While Geva (2020) and Meret (2015) focus on the performances of these women leaders in formal political arenas, we have shown how a variety of female identity characters are spread informally on Telegram, where hateful anti-gender memes and racializing images serve to disseminate extremist and violent ideologies to thousands of online users (cf. Polletta 2009).

Finally, our analysis showed that the contemporary far right has accepted some forms of women’s political involvement and has creatively articulated an approved form of femininity, which can be represented by a politically active subjectivity of women. Far-right digital spaces approve of women politicians when they (1) look feminine, heterosexual and motherly; (2) demonstrate strength and toughness in the sense of being harsh on racial and sexual Others, and promote the far-right agenda, such as the absence of gun control. Thus, our findings show how digital visions of feared and despised femininities threaten to deprive the nation of the possibility to reproduce, as they do not appeal to the male gaze. As such, the disapproved femininities do not represent only ‘deviant individuals’ but something ‘bigger’: the system’s conspiring to stop white nations from reproducing in order to replace them with people from the Middle East and Africa (Krouwel & Önnerfors, 2021). Further research should explore the
global diffusion and local translation of gendered images that are internationally mainstreaming extremist conspiracy theories, in which white people are allegedly forced by feminist and liberal elites to reduce their reproduction (through contraception, abortion, having same-sex sex) in order to replace them with racial minorities.
REFERENCES


