

Negotiating criticism and contradictions: Tradwife discourse as recruitment strategy

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Abstract

The online ‘tradwife’ movement, which promotes a return to rigid gender roles rooted in biological essentialism, has drawn widespread criticism from feminist commentators and mainstream media. Yet, tradwife influencers like Estee Williams are able to cultivate large, engaged audiences. This article analyses how Williams and her followers respond to criticism through a three-month digital ethnography and critical discourse analysis (CDA) of her TikTok and Instagram content. The analysis identifies three interconnected rhetorical strategies used to deflect critique and present the ideology as palatable to heterogeneous audiences: first, the reframing of traditional gender roles as individual lifestyle choices through the language of choice feminism; second, the use of neoliberal logics to individualise structural economic concerns and reinforce essentialist ideas of masculinity and femininity; and third, the deployment of defensive meta-commentary that casts critics as intolerant and tradwives as unfairly persecuted victims. While on the one hand, these discourses reveal the inherent contradictions and ideological entanglements of the tradwife movement, these strategies also work in tandem to obscure the movement’s reactionary politics, broadening its appeal across ideological lines. These dynamics have broader implications within an increasingly pro-natalist political climate, where traditional family structures and the reproduction of (white) babies are framed as national imperatives.

Keywords

tradwives, reactionary feminism, neoliberalism, pro-natalism, choice feminism, critical discourse analysis

Title:

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Introduction

The term ‘tradwife’, a portmanteau of ‘traditional wife’, first entered mainstream discourse in 2020 following the broadcast of a BBC segment featuring Alena Pettitt, a self-described tradwife who declared her intention to “submit to... and spoil [her husband] like it’s 1959” (BBC, 2020). The online tradwife movement has since received widespread condemnation in

the mainstream media, with many critics highlighting that its retrograde beliefs around gender are harmful to women, not only for its gender essentialist ideology but also for promoting a lifestyle that makes women vulnerable to physical, emotional, and financial abuse (Elmhirst, 2024; Hanawalt, 2024; Norris, 2023). However, despite this criticism, many tradwife content creators continue to build loyal audiences. Far from being ignorant of the controversy they create, tradwives and their audiences leverage negative media exposure to perpetuate their popularity.

While existing studies of tradwives have largely focused on tradwife-produced content, there is currently limited research that examines audience engagement with tradwives. Drawing on a three-month digital ethnography of the prominent online tradwife Estee Williams, this article analyses both Williams's content and audience reception in the form of comments left on her videos. In particular, this article focuses on comments critical of tradwives and their lifestyle and ideology, and how Williams and her supporters respond to these criticisms. In doing so, not only are elements of the tradwife ideology elucidated, but so, too, are their rhetorical strategies for defending the lifestyle and ideology. Through this analysis, three key discourses emerge: choice feminism is invoked as a rhetorical strategy to obscure the gender essentialism at the heart of the tradwife ideology; neoliberal logic defers systemic concerns onto the individual; and metacommentary perpetuates a victimhood narrative, positioning tradwives as unfairly persecuted. Although these discourses reveal contradictions within the tradwife ideology, rather than attempting to reconcile them, defenders strategically employ these inconsistencies to broaden the appeal of the tradwife lifestyle and reinforce the beliefs that the movement is a righteous one.

Background

Housewives and Feminism

The figure of the 'housewife' and stay-at-home mother (SAHM) has long been the subject of many feminist debates. Betty Friedan's book, published in 1963, *The Feminine Mystique*, which observed the widespread dissatisfaction among housewives in the post-war period, is often cited as having sparked the second-wave feminist movement. Conceptualising housewives' malaise as "the problem with no name", Friedan located women's oppression in their confinement to unpaid domestic labour and their exclusion from public, intellectual, and professional life. Other prominent second-wave feminists, such as Germaine Greer (1999) and Susan Faludi (2006), similarly saw the housewife as emblematic of patriarchal constraint and gender inequality, thus establishing 'the domestic' as a key site of feminist struggle. These perspectives largely saw women's entry into the paid workforce as a site of emancipation through its promise of economic autonomy. As such, within early second-wave feminist debates the housewife was largely painted as antithetical to feminist gains. However, as Hochschild notes in *The Second Shift* (1989), the promises of gainful employment for women to increase gender equality were tempered by the prevailing inequity of domestic labour, contributing to what she terms the 'stalled revolution'. Hakim (1995) additionally controversially suggested that many women prefer homemaking and motherhood over full-

time employment, and that feminism must reckon with these preferences. Black feminists, on the other hand, critiqued white feminists' fixation on the housewife, highlighting that full-time domesticity has been historically inaccessible to Black women whose labour was first forcibly extracted through slavery and then exploited through low-paid service and care work (Davis, 1981; hooks, 2014).

Nonetheless, the housewife has remained implicitly relevant to many contemporary feminist debates. The emergence of 'neoliberal feminism' suggests that women can 'have it all' by emphasising individual female empowerment within a neoliberal capitalist system through hard work and entrepreneurship (Rottenberg, 2018). While sidelining collectivism, neoliberal feminism echoes second-wave feminist perspectives in seeing the workplace as the site of women's liberation. Moreover, the term 'choice feminism', coined by Linda Hirshman (2006), describes the feminist framework that foregrounds women's individual agency and treats all choices made by women as feminist, seeing them as expressions of their individual agency and subjectivity. Hirshman, however, is critical of this notion, urging women to instead 'get to work', seeing homemaking and childrearing as limiting to women and feminism. Ferguson (2010) is similarly critical of choice feminism, arguing that, by focusing on individual choice over collectivism and structural inequality, it depoliticises feminism: "It aims to sidestep the need to make judgments, it aims to avoid making exclusions, and it aims to downplay the radicalism of feminism's challenges to the status quo" (p. 250).

As Genz (2008) identifies, many debates about housewives are "trapped by a dualistic logic" (p. 50). To overcome this dualism, she suggests that the postfeminism framework allows us to "reinterpret the homemaker as a polysemic character caught in a struggle between tradition and modernity" (p. 50). This is because, according to Genz, postfeminism looks both to the past and future, and its many interpretations suggest a movement away from binaries that align men with power and women with victimhood, and the workplace with liberation and the home with oppression. The housewife thus emerges as a figure whose "multifarious significations" result in her meaning being continuously renegotiated (p. 50). As Johnson and Lloyd (2004) observe: "Underlying... popular representations of the housewife is the question of what it means to be a woman in the modern world" (p. 2). Debates surrounding the emergence of the 'tradwife' can thus be partially understood as the latest iteration in a long history of feminist discourses around the figure of the housewife, whose meaning remains contested and unresolved.

Tradwives and the Femosphere

The tradwife movement has emerged from the broader context of the manosphere, an amorphous and interconnected group of online anti-feminist subcultures and influencers that has gained notoriety for promoting a male supremacist worldview (Ging, 2019). While the manosphere was initially widely condemned due to its association with several misogynistic terrorist attacks, it has more recently undergone a process of 'mainstreaming'. Notably, several prominent 'manfluencers' have established direct ties to Donald Trump and the MAGA movement, and have been credited with contributing to his 2024 election victory (Barrett, 2024).

However, it is not only men who have been drawn into the manosphere's orbit; increasingly, women have adopted overlapping ideologies resulting in what has been dubbed the 'femosphere', which Kay (2024) defines as "a loose ecology of online groups which mirrors the affects, vocabularies and logics of the manosphere" (p. 2). Andrea Dworkin suggests that women are drawn to right-wing politics because "by committing themselves to male values, women seek to acquire value" (2025, p. 11). This sentiment tends to be particularly pertinent in times of economic instability (Ehrenreich, 1982). Women's participation in right-wing movements is not new, however, though they have historically functioned as auxiliaries rather than leaders (Love, 2020). Within the femosphere, women capitalise on hegemonic gender essentialist beliefs to popularise their ideology by, for example, exploiting "perceptions of authenticity and accessibility" which, Leidig (2023) argues, "serve as the most powerful tools of the modern far right" (p. 4). This is because women are uniquely positioned, both socially and culturally, to mobilise these dynamics to their advantage. Social media has additionally afforded far-right women a platform to cultivate strong personal brands with loyal followings through appropriating pre-existing online practices and cultures, such as 'mommy blog' and lifestyle vlogging communities (Leidig, 2023). Leidig thus observes that far-right women "are adept at merging banal political messages in everyday life" (p. 7) by weaponising their femininity to obscure the extremity of their beliefs. Tradwife influencers follow this precedent, using their curated aesthetics to facilitate online radicalisation (Sykes & Hopner, 2024).

Central to the tradwife ideology is the valorisation of and adherence to 'traditional values'. However, what is meant by 'tradition' can vary widely from tradwife to tradwife, which, Proctor (2022) argues, means that it "functions as a powerful motivating idea, making it fertile ideological ground" (p. 21). Nonetheless, it generally refers to heterosexual marriage in which the woman is subservient to her husband, a commitment to child-rearing and domestic duties, and right-wing ideals (Proctor, 2022). Some tradwife scholarship has additionally noted that tradwife conceptions of 'tradition', when taken to their extreme, are linked to white supremacy, seeing tradwives' primary role as child bearers who will reproduce the white race in the face of the 'Great Replacement' (Mattheis, 2018; Sykes & Hopner, 2024; Tebaldi, 2023). Not all tradwives adhere to these beliefs, however, as Sykes and Hopner (2024) note, tradwives exist on a "continuum of extremity" as well as at the intersection of other identities (p. 465). However, these categories are not stable, and recruitment and radicalisation may occur across this continuum.

The rise of the tradwife movement, which is broadly understood as anti-feminist, is seen by researchers as a response to and rejection of neoliberal feminism (Bower, 2024; Deem, 2023; Proctor, 2022; Tebaldi, 2021). Echoing Hochschild's observations, tradwives view the expectation to have both a career and a family as unrealistic or overly demanding and thus see opting out of the workforce altogether in favour of embracing traditional gender roles as being "the only real path to joy and fulfillment" (Zahay, 2022, p. 173). Nonetheless, as Deem (2023) notes, despite their ostensible repudiation of feminism in favour of being 'feminine', tradwives tend to incorporate 'postfeminist themes' into their worldview based on the belief

that gender equality has already been achieved, thus rendering feminism redundant. As such, much like Genz's (2008) conceptualisation of the housewife as a postfeminist polysemic figure, the tradwife movement has become a site through which feminist and postfeminist debates are played out.

Case Study and Methodology

This article draws on a case study analysis of the tradwife Estee Williams to examine how online tradwives and their audiences negotiate criticism and ideological contradiction on social media. At the time of data collection, Williams was the most popular tradwife on social media who openly embraced the label, with nearly 200,000 followers on TikTok and another 110,000 on Instagram. Although popular 'homemaker' creators such as Ballerina Farm and Nara Smith have much larger audiences than Williams, they have both explicitly rejected the label despite making content that aligns with the tradwife lifestyle and aesthetic. Williams, on the other hand, has built her following by posting tradwife-oriented content explicitly since 2022. She quickly experienced viral success in her first year of creating tradwife content when one of her videos, in which she expressed a desire to "depend on a man financially" accompanied by a montage of 1950s-era housewives and nuclear families, garnered over a million views on TikTok. She has gained further prominence in the mainstream media through a number of print interviews and television appearances, including *Dr Phil*, *Piers Morgan Uncensored*, and *The New Yorker*. Although Williams is explicit about the traditional beliefs that inform her tradwife lifestyle, when compared with other far-right and white supremacist tradwife influencers, her views are relatively moderate. Within Sykes and Hopner's (2024) typology of tradwives, which categorises them as either conservative, alt-lite or alt-right, she can be understood as a conservative tradwife and therefore on what they identify as the 'less extreme' end of the tradwife spectrum. However, given that these categories are not stable, both Williams and her followers may be susceptible to further radicalisation and recruitment.

In choosing Williams as a case study, I was able to gain an "in-depth, multifaceted investigation... of a single social phenomenon" (Orum et al., 1991, p. 2). Additionally, a digital ethnography (Pink et al., 2016) of Williams's social media, primarily of her TikTok and Instagram accounts, was conducted ~~in order~~ to gain an emic perspective on her online presence and the community she has cultivated. Conducted between February and May 2024, this involved observing and recording the posts she uploaded to her social media, the comments left by her audience, and taking daily field notes that documented high-level themes, personal reflections and observations, and the broader context that Williams existed within and was responding to. In total, 17 videos and 3,221 comments were collated and analysed. A covert approach (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019) was adopted due to the hostility that the far-right communities often express towards researchers. Given the inherent anti-feminism of tradwife ideology, a covert approach is particularly pertinent when the researcher is a woman and therefore more susceptible to misogynistic harassment (Marwick & Caplan, 2018). Although adopting a covert approach precludes the ability to conduct interviews, which are typically conducted during an ethnography, it is nonetheless possible to

gain an emic perspective of online communities because, as Barnes (2018) notes, “While reading the comments but not necessarily leaving a comment of their own, engaged listeners develop an affective relationship with both the website and other commenters” (p. 7). The data collected during this digital ethnography was additionally supplemented by historical content uploaded to her YouTube channel which, while not uploaded ~~to~~ during the data collection period, provided insight into Williams’s beliefs and practices as a tradwife. Informed by poststructuralist feminist theory, particularly Butler’s (2015) conceptualisation of gender as performative, this analysis approaches tradwife femininity not as a fixed or essential identity but as something produced and stabilised through repeated discursive practices.

Data analysis proceeded in two stages. First, an inductive coding process was employed to identify recurring themes across the dataset, including choice, femininity, biological essentialism, neoliberalism, and victimhood. This initial stage focused on identifying dominant nodes of discourse, revealing the key ideological priorities and concerns within tradwife discourse. In the second stage, critical discourse analysis (CDA), which seeks to uncover the ‘naturalised’ ways in which ideology, power, hegemony, and exclusion are created and perpetuated through discourse (Fairclough, 2013), was applied to interpret and analyse how discourse operated within and across these thematic nodes, with particular attention to contested discourses through which Williams and her supporters negotiate criticism and legitimise the tradwife movement and its ideology.

To protect the identity of commenters, users have been anonymised and, while some of their comments have been cleaned for clarity, including typos or grammatical errors, their substance remains the same.

Findings and Analysis

Although this study focuses on how criticism of tradwives is negotiated by Williams and her followers, it should be noted that the majority of comments Williams received across her TikTok and Instagram accounts ~~was~~ were positive. For the most part, comments praised her lifestyle and, in particular, her style and appearance, which aligns with studies (Sykes & Hopner, 2024; Zahay, 2022) that suggest that tradwives’ allure comes from their aesthetic appeal. Additionally, negative or critical comments were more populous on Williams’s TikTok videos. This is likely due to the affordances of the platform as TikTok’s primary feed, or ‘For You’ feed, is algorithmically driven and therefore will often show users creators whom they have not ‘followed’ or even come across before. Although the mechanisms behind TikTok’s algorithms are invisible to the public, studies suggest that videos with higher engagement rates through likes, comments, and shares are more likely to be pushed by the algorithm to audiences’ ‘For You’ pages (Klug et al., 2021). Given that ‘controversial’ and polarising content often farms more engagement (Bazaco et al. 2019), it can be inferred that TikTok’s algorithm may have pushed Williams’s content to audiences who were recognised by the algorithm as having views that were at odds with Williams’s. TikTok’s algorithm thus functions quite differently from Instagram’s, where users’ primary feeds are largely limited to

accounts that they follow. As such, it is less likely that Instagram algorithmic recommended Williams to users who were unfamiliar with her; rather, they likely would have had to specifically seek out her page.

Additionally, data from Google Trends shows that searches for “tradwife” peaked in July 2024 but that its second-highest peak was in April 2024 (Google Trends, 2025). This suggests that interest in the tradwife movement was mounting during the ethnographic period and led to an increased interest in Williams’s content from people outside of the tradwife movement.

Choice Feminism as Rhetorical Cover for Biological Essentialism

One of the key themes that emerged from the comments that were critical of Williams and tradwives more broadly was one that invoked feminist arguments to suggest that she was promoting a lifestyle with potentially dangerous implications for women. These comments highlighted that in ‘submitting’ to one’s husband and surrendering autonomy to him may put women in a position that is vulnerable to physical, emotional, and/or economic abuse. These comments were often some of the most overtly antagonistic in tone. One commenter, for example, wrote:

You are doing extremely sh*t job encouraging women to rely on their husbands financially. This is a base for financial and psychological abuse. You are so young, please look at experience of others. Deaths, illness and divorces happen. Please stop promoting this nonsense!

However, most comments urging Williams to consider the potentially negative consequences of the lifestyle she was promoting appeared to be made in good faith with several, for example, drawing on their personal experiences to demonstrate why relying solely on one’s husband can be harmful. One user shared that their “good Catholic” father was physically abusive to both his wife and children and that, because he didn’t let his wife work, she had “nowhere to go”. Similarly, another user recounted that both of their grandmothers and mother, who were all traditional housewives, were physically abused by their husbands, and suggested that, “The traditional housewife era is romanticised by people with historical amnesia”. Yet another documented her personal experience of how leading a traditional lifestyle resulted in her own abuse, writing:

I, naively, did everything you are recommending. Once my child was born, I became a SAHM, gave up my independence and let him lead. The man I chose to believe and trust did not see my value after years of being a SAHM. Twenty years later, I have nothing. Due to him having full control it turned into financial abuse. Being a SAHM is rewarding but please, plan with your spouse in case of the inevitable.

This user, though not necessarily condemnatory of Williams’s lifestyle, insisted upon her having a ‘backup plan’ should her marriage go awry. This kind of concern characterised many of the comments that cautioned Williams against her chosen lifestyle, with several comments warning her against giving up her financial freedom. Some of these comments were generic, telling her, for example, to “make sure you are protected in case your marriage does not work

out”, while others specifically suggested precautionary measures for those who are or want to be traditional wives, such as prenuptial agreements and life insurance.

The most common defence provided by Williams and her supporters against these kinds of comments was that being a tradwife is a ‘choice’ that should be respected. In one of her videos explaining what tradwives are, Williams states: “Women should have the choice to be homemakers or not without being judged... and not be shunned for wanting to be more traditional”. Similarly, many comments in defence of Williams and the tradwife lifestyle invoke the notion of personal choice as a means of shutting down criticism. In particular, the notion that women’s ability to choose is a legacy of earlier feminist movements was a popular one. For example, one commenter wrote:

It’s sad how feminism’s main objective is to call for equality and the right of women to choose the way they live their lives; at the same time, they critique a woman who chose to be traditional! Feminism took the wrong turn... being a traditional housewife is a choice and should be respected.

By invoking choice feminism in their argumentation, tradwife defenders flipped the script on their critics, who also tended to appeal to feminist lines of inquiry. As a result, those who question tradwives’ lifestyle choices are often accused of “shaming” women who have made different choices than they have. For example:

Women should have the choice to work or stay at home without being shamed. Especially by other women.

Feminism went off the tracks by shaming women for being a tradwife. Women should be able to choose and supported in their choice either way.

I believe if a woman wants to be traditional wife/homemaker that’s beautiful and if they want to work full time that’s fine as well. Why the media/society shames either lifestyle that a woman chooses is absurd and makes no sense.

These comments, in framing criticism as “shaming”, are additionally insightful for their characterisation of tradwives as women who simply wish to be stay-at-home mothers but downplay a key component of being a tradwife: submitting to one’s husband. In doing so, historical feminist debates about the role of the housewife were rearticulated through the figure of the tradwife, obscuring important distinctions between the two.

Moreover, this rhetoric of choice is fundamentally at odds with the biological essentialist beliefs around gender that are foundational to the tradwife ideology. For Williams, this gender essentialism was often expressed implicitly by, for example, suggesting that men should embrace masculinity and women femininity, that women’s inclination for homemaking is “natural”, and that tradwives have existed “since the beginning of time”. This sentiment is echoed and made more explicit by her supporters who made statements such as: “Women and men naturally want to be traditional for the most part”; “it’s a woman’s deep hidden biological dream”; “Quality men despise being with woke lost women working

against their biological instincts”; and “It’s the natural order of things”. The belief that women are biologically pre-determined to be tradwives undermines the suggestion that women are merely ‘choosing’ a traditional lifestyle.

The reconciliation of these two seemingly opposing concepts is revealed in one video in which Williams reiterates that being a tradwife “is a personal choice” before stating, “I appreciate working mothers and wives; I do not bash any woman who wants a career.” This dichotomy, between working mothers and stay-at-home mothers, suggests that women’s choices are nonetheless constrained to the biological imperative to have children, thus revealing a gender essentialist and pro-natalist worldview.

Neoliberalism and the Negotiation of Viability

Another prominent category of criticism directed at Williams was not overtly critical of the ideology underpinning tradwives, but instead questioned its feasibility. In particular, inquiries, both critical and curious, were made by commenters into how Williams is able to afford her lifestyle in the current economy. In response to her video titled “Why is Tradwife Content Blowing up Suddenly?”, in which Williams notes that it is more common nowadays to have two rather than one income-earners in a marriage, one hostile comment read:

"It is more POPULAR having 2 providers." Girl, you're not in society at all. People cannot afford single income households. In Toronto many people need 3-4 incomes to afford homes. Inflation is insane. You're PRIVILEGED to have a partner and to live in an area that allows one provider. Stop being delusional it's so cringe.

Similar sentiments were expressed in milder terms as well, with one user stating, “The financial reality for so many folks is that a single income home is nearly impossible :/”, while another observed that with the “disappearance of the middle class,” Williams’s lifestyle “is basically unattainable and unrealistic”. Several others speculated that it was only because Williams had not yet had children that she could afford, financially and logistically, the aestheticised lifestyle she posts online: “Wait until you have kids” was an oft-repeated sentiment. Others suggested that she could afford her lifestyle because of her income she earned as an influencer.

However, there was a smaller proportion of comments that suggested it was *because* of the economic crisis that women were drawn to the tradwife lifestyle, citing that the burden placed on working women to additionally bear the brunt of domestic duties has resulted in women wanting to retreat into the home:

Women are sick of working full-time AND carrying a disproportionate share of parenting responsibilities and the mental load for the household. Meanwhile, husbands have hobbies and things they get to do to relax on the weekends, while she does the house cleaning, laundry and grocery shopping. It’s absolutely bull****.

Another comment similarly laments:

That is what has led to increasing divorce rates. Most women cannot work, take care of the children and the home, and keep a relationship going. Even with your partner contributing, the relationship suffers.

This sentiment aligns with prior findings from studies on tradwives which see it as a response to the failures of neoliberal feminism (Bower, 2024; Deem, 2023; Proctor, 2022; Zahay, 2022). However, while these comments seem to repudiate the demands of neoliberal capitalism, Williams's answers to questions about how she afford her lifestyle reinforced both a neoliberal and gender-essentialist logic. In one TikTok video offering advice to women who wish to pursue the tradwife lifestyle, she advised:

Ladies, if you are dating a man and your ultimate dream is to be a homemaker, and you have expressed this to that man, and that man says that living off one income is 1) impossible 2) outdated and that it is more realistic to live off of 50-50—meaning you both split the bills and the responsibilities around the house—just know that is that man's way of telling you he does not want to be a provider. He does not have what it takes to do what is needed to provide for you and your family and you don't need to ask any more questions, you shouldn't have to convince a man to be a provider. Some men just aren't providers and that's okay... There are plenty of men out there who make this lifestyle realistic, and they do what needs to be done. They might work more than one job, they might put you in a smaller home, they might change states to a state that is more realistic to live off one income.

This framing places the onus on the individual to make ends meet while overlooking broader structural economic forces that may impede that ability. In other videos, she highlighted the importance of budgeting, similarly reinforcing an individualistic neoliberal logic that implies it is a personal failure, and not a systemic one, if you are unable to live on a single income. However, Williams simultaneously invokes gender essentialism by suggesting that it is men's 'natural' duty to be a 'provider' and thus the personal imperative to provide is masculinised. This sentiment was also found amongst commenters. For example:

Many men do not have a provider mentality, unfortunately, and women have fallen for the lies of the modern feminism movement. You can live on one salary, it may require certain sacrifices (downsizing home, one car only, not shopping organic, moving to a different state, etc.). But I think ultimately it begins with choosing the right man first who has the right mindset in providing for his family and wanting a stable household.

This comment, which suggests that it is a problem of 'mindset' if a man is unable to provide for his family, additionally invokes a sentiment found across the manosphere more broadly; Andrew Tate, for example, exemplifies the ways in which Red Pill ideology connects masculinity with entrepreneurialism, suggesting that failure is the result of 'not working hard enough' (Bujdei-Tebeica, 2023).

Defensive Meta-Commentary to Promote Narratives of Victimhood

The final key discourse that emerged in relation to the ways in which Williams and her supporters negotiated criticism was not direct responses to criticism but, instead, meta-commentary that pre-emptively defended the tradwife lifestyle. These comments were often gushing in tone, encouraging Williams to pay no mind to her critics. Additionally, many referenced having discovered her profile through other media criticising her. One comment, for example, recounted:

I found you on a feminist page, they were shitstorming you, but I was so happy that I found a young girl who thinks exactly like I do and who is an inspiration in this world of confusion. Being feminine, a housewife and a devoted wife should not be satanised.

Another stated:

Saw a video saying you were getting some female hate for being what many men are looking for in a woman. Had to seek your page and show you some male support.



This kind of commentary, contrary to the comments that invoke choice feminism in defence of Williams, positioned her and, by extension the broader tradwife community, as being, not only in opposition to feminism, but vilified by it. It additionally framed her as being the unfair victim of “shitstorming” and “hate”, with other women being the primary attackers. Williams herself perpetuated this narrative through referencing the widespread criticism she received on multiple occasions. In one TikTok, a clip from what appears to be a news outlet is incorporated, claiming that Williams is “becoming the most hated TikTok influencer”. Williams’s caption, addressed to her followers, read: “Thank you for all the support no matter what the media critics show”. However, a closer look at the apparent news outlet referenced by Williams revealed it to be a TikTok account that exclusively uploaded ‘drama’ videos apparently in an effort to farm engagement. Considering that several legacy media outlets also provided critical coverage of the tradwife movement, by strategically selecting which criticism she engaged with, Williams was able to portray herself as an unfairly maligned victim. Nonetheless, commenters engaged with her video sincerely, offering their support and telling her to ignore the ‘haters’:

That’s what they are saying about her in the media 🤡 they’re liars. They hate her because she’s everything they’re not. They want to destroy society and the family. It’s obvious.

This framing is reminiscent of Bujalka et al.’s (2022) findings that, within the manosphere, “influential content producers construct a perception of threat in their audience while simultaneously positioning themselves to provide a solution to this same threat” (p. 1). In the tradwife imaginary, specifically, the ‘threat’ is one of a ‘woke’ and ‘satanized’ media and liberal elite who are intent on ‘destroying’ traditional family values and structures. This additionally aligns with Tebaldi’s (2023) understanding that, for the far-right, “Traditional womanhood is both something to be protected and an important element in the fight against modernity, homosexuality, globalism and cultural Marxism” (pp. 15-16). This demonstrates

how tradwives are able to weaponise their femininity and gender essentialist beliefs, which frame women as being in need of protection, to mobilise their audiences. Moreover, by engaging in defensive meta-commentary, Williams and her supporters align themselves with the broader manosphere and online far-right.

Discussion

Analysing the defensive discourses mobilised by Williams and her supporters in the face of criticism reveals that they are less concerned with resolving the inherent contradictions of the tradwife worldview than they are with ‘softening’ the most extreme aspects of the ideology and making it more palatable to a broader, heterogeneous audience while simultaneously attempting to draw clear ideological boundaries. They repudiate feminism while simultaneously invoking it to defend traditional lifestyles as a ‘choice’; they reject the hustle culture characteristic of neoliberal feminism while invoking market logics of individual entrepreneurialism; and they perpetuate narratives of victimhood while vilifying those they deem as ideologically opposed to their worldview.

The operationalisation of a rhetoric of ‘choice’ by those defensive of tradwives invokes decades-long feminist debates regarding the role of the housewife and her relationship to patriarchy. Within these defensive discourses, much like previous debates, the question lies in whether it is possible to be a liberated woman when you sacrifice financial independence in favour of domesticity. The displacement of these debates from the housewife to the tradwife additionally suggests the success of the far-right in shifting the ‘Overton window’ (Nagle, 2017). By invoking notions of ‘choice’, tradwives suggest that it is actually a marker of women’s liberation and autonomy, rather than a mechanism of oppression, to be able to ‘choose’ to be a tradwife. In this way, even though tradwives and their defenders largely reject the label of ‘feminism’, they nonetheless engage with a postfeminist sensibility that treats the tradwife, much like Genz’s (2008) postfeminist understanding of the housewife, as a ‘polysemic figure’ who at once embodies the ideals of feminism through her agency and autonomy while simultaneously ‘submitting’ to her husband and adhering to ‘traditional’ gender roles. That the bio-essentialist beliefs of tradwives, which inherently see women’s ‘natural’ place as in the home and men’s role as being providers, undermine these notions of choice is not reckoned with; rather, the ‘multifarious significations’ of the tradwife allow these contradictory perspectives to coexist. This polysemy additionally allows choice feminism to be invoked as a rhetorical strategy that presents an inherently anti-feminist ideology in postfeminist terms, as evidenced by the line of argumentation suggesting that past feminists fought for the right for women to ‘choose’, therefore implying that it is critics of tradwives and not tradwives themselves who are anti-feminist. This affirms Ferguson’s (2010) contention that choice feminism is “radically depoliticizing” in that it allows individual decision-making to be framed as empowering, thereby shutting down critical discussions regarding the social conditions that structure and constrain the choices women make. In the tradwife discourse, this depoliticisation becomes a political strategy in itself: it enables the promotion of a far-right, patriarchal worldview under the guise of individual empowerment. Moreover, in the context of a US government with an explicitly pro-natalist

agenda, the obfuscation of systemic factors that contribute to women's decision-making abilities may serve to naturalise the politically-motivated imperative that women's primary societal role is as domestic and reproductive labourers.

In their refutation of neoliberal feminism as being 'unrealistic' for most women while simultaneously invoking market logics to defend the material viability of abiding by 'traditional' gender roles in a precarious economic environment, tradwife discourses share significant overlap with what Kay (2024) identifies as 'reactionary feminism', which she conceptualises as an emergent strain of feminism that marks a departure from, or mutation of, neoliberal postfeminisms. Like tradwives, reactionary feminists share bio-essentialist understandings of gender; however, their worldviews also diverge in key ways. For example, while reactionary feminists have a deeply fatalistic perspective regarding capitalism and gender hierarchies, tradwives purport to offer a solution by embracing gender roles and retreating into the domestic sphere. Nonetheless, Blee, Futrell and Simi (2024) suggest that attempting to categorise and demarcate the boundaries of extremist and reactionary ideologies may be less useful than understanding them through a "constellation framework" which recognises the dynamism of the "large and spiraling network configuration that facilitates the circulation of key practices, ideas, and emotions" (p. 436). Identifying the interconnectedness between tradwives and reactionary feminists through a constellation framework, therefore, suggests that these should not be understood as discrete positions, but as overlapping perspectives that converge in their reassertion of bio-essentialist conceptions of gender. This additionally suggests that recruitment and radicalisation may occur across these movements and ideologies. In particular, their shared rejection of neoliberal feminism, which would see women's inability to balance a career and family as an individual failure, suggests that women who are increasingly disillusioned with the current socio-economic system may be particularly susceptible to ideologies that affirm this dissatisfaction. Yet, both tradwives and reactionary feminists are unable to fully eschew neoliberal logics altogether, invoking hyper-individualism as a means of overcoming, for example, financial challenges or abusive relationships. This additionally mirrors the logics of the manosphere, which similarly invokes notions of individualism as the solution to systemic failings (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019; Van Valkenburgh, 2018), further exemplifying the ideological entanglement between ostensibly distinct movements.

Yet, in characterising criticism of tradwives as unjust, Williams and her defenders attempt to discursively draw stark ideological lines between 'us' and 'them' (Van Dijk, 2011). By creating this binary, which frames tradwives as morally righteous victims and feminist critics as intolerant, oppressive, and even dangerous, tradwife discourse perpetuates division in an already polarised social media environment. Moreover, in doing so, they simplify both tradwives' and feminists' worldviews, placing them diametrically at odds with one another despite their complex entanglements, as demonstrated through their implicit engagement with historical feminist debates on the subject of the housewife and choice. In particular, tradwives' criticism of neoliberal feminism in some ways aligns with other feminist perspectives that are similarly skeptical of the possibility of 'have it all'. By disavowing feminists altogether and construing them as their enemy, tradwives inoculate themselves

against alternative political imaginaries that may otherwise respond to their anxieties and grievances. On the one hand, these divisive discourses align with tradwife scholarship which understands tradwives to be symbolic of a nation under threat; as Tebaldi (2023) writes, tradwives “are stars in a gendered narrative of the nation that positions them as both incarnating and defending national purity” (p. 15). On the other hand, they function to perpetuate the ideological polarity characteristic of the broader ‘culture wars’.

Conclusion

This article has examined how tradwife influencers and their audiences negotiate criticism, revealing the rhetorical strategies that are mobilised to legitimise and defend the tradwife lifestyle. Through a digital ethnography and critical discourse analysis, three key discursive patterns emerged: the deployment of choice feminism to obscure the movement’s bio-essentialist underpinnings; the use of neoliberal logics to individualise structural economic issues; and the circulation of defensive meta-commentary that reframes critique as persecution and perpetuates broader ideological division.

While these findings gesture towards the inherent contradictions of the tradwife ideology, Williams and her supporters do not attempt to resolve inconsistencies. While Deem (2023) sees this entanglement of apparently conflicting beliefs and goals as an affective form of ‘trad truth-making’ through which women attempt to achieve security in a volatile world, this analysis demonstrates that it simultaneously functions as a discursive strategy which obfuscates the inherently gender essentialist and patriarchal worldview at the heart of tradwife ideology. For casual viewers who are less likely to identify these incongruences, these discourses may function to make what is ultimately a regressive ideology appear more palatable to contemporary audiences.

Although Google Trends data (2025) suggest that public interest in tradwives is waning, their enduring impact is evident through the adoption of their gendered and pro-natalist logics by prominent politicians (Brady, 2025). As such, further research should continue to explore the evolution of the tradwife movement and audience engagement with it. Additionally, tradwives’ ideological entanglements with reactionary feminism and other adjacent worldviews would benefit from further analysis to elucidate the pathways through which women are recruited to, and radicalised within, anti-feminist gender ideologies.

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