# BREADWINNER OR BREADMAKER: CONTRADICTIONS IN TRADWIVES' CREATOR LABOR, RELIGIOUS VERNACULAR, AND AESTHETICS

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## Introduction

The hashtag #tradwife yields a wide variety of posts on social media: bread recipes, childcare tips, Bible verses, 1950s kitsch aesthetics, and more. Shared among the creators is a commitment to "traditional" values, religious faith, and antifeminism (Jones, 2024; Mattheis, 2021; Tebaldi, 2023). Through sharing their life and domestic labor online, some tradwife creators have amassed sizable–and profitable–followings. Yet their role as professional (or aspiring) creators seemingly contradicts their belief that women should eschew the economic sphere, paradoxically leaving some of them as the main breadwinner of their supposed "traditional" family. Through this in-progress, mixed-methods project, we aim to understand how tradwife influencers navigate their professed commitment to traditional values and their entrepreneurial labor. Specifically, we aim to shed light through our qualitative analysis on how creators' stated ideology, as derived from a computational text analysis of their websites, are borne out in their Instagram Stories. Our analyses will illuminate how tradwives evoke ideologies about traditional gender roles and how they reconcile their beliefs with their entrepreneurial activities.

## Literature Review

Tradwives fit into a wider ecosystem of right-wing creators, where research has tended to center prominent male figures of the movement. Leidig (2023) argues that tradwives reflect the nostalgic pursuit of a mythical past and a white supremacist utopia. Early tradwives had smaller followings and were more openly politically radical; with one creator calling for a #whitebabychallenge, a cynical appeal to increase the white birth

rate (Leidig, 2023). Tradwives reinforce "traditional" gender roles, emphasizing caregiving as feminine and breadwinning as masculine (Mattheis, 2021). However, this seems at odds with their labor as content creators.

Feminist scholars have long investigated wives' and mothers' self-representations on social media, as well as "feminine-coded model[s] of self-enterprise" (Duffy & Packer, 2022, p. 105; Lopez, 2009). Historically, entrepreneurial opportunities for housewives have been restricted to feminine-coded and economically devalued domains like beauty and household products (Duffy & Packer, 2022; Wrenn & Waller, 2021). Women were thus able to engage in the economic sphere without betraying their "wifely" duties and ideals (Bax, 2010; Duffy & Packer, 2022; Nel et al., 2010). Nevertheless, this entrepreneurial labor renders porous the boundaries between the professional and domestic spheres (Marwick, 2013; Neff et al., 2005; Wrenn & Waller, 2021). Various researchers have observed the role of religious faith in multi-level marketing schemes and "mompreneur" discourse (Bromley, 1995; Prins & Wellman, 2021; Wren & Waller, 2021). Businesses may also be framed as family endeavors (Biggart, 1989; Mastrangelo & Longo, 2024; Peters et al., 2023).

In this in-progress paper, we examine how tradwife influencers navigate their performance of traditional values with their entrepreneurial activities. We ask the following research questions:

RQ1: How do tradwife creators reconcile their professed identification with traditional gender roles and their entrepreneurial activities in text and audiovisual content?

RQ2: In what ways are those entrepreneurial activities portrayed as part of a vocation or profession?

**Methodology**

We selected our sample of 25 tradwife creators based in North America and the United Kingdom by triangulating popular press coverage, prior academic case studies (Mattheis, 2021; Tebaldi, 2023), and a CrowdTangle search of relevant hashtags. We included tradwives who produce English-language lifestyle content and maintain a website outside of Instagram.

We first performed a computational text analysis of the "About Me" and/or product landing page sections on creators' websites using Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC), a psycholinguistic computerized textual analysis program designed to uncover meaning by assigning categories to the words used in the text that has been used to analyze influencer content (Auxier et al., 2019; Haq et al., 2022; Miller et al., 2022; Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010).

Drawing on LIWC's preset categories[1], our analysis will attend to expressions of social relations to decipher the tradwife creators' understanding of their labor in relation to their homemaking and entrepreneurship; religiosity; whether the focus of the text is placed on

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[1] https://lit.eecs.umich.edu/geoliwc/liwc_dictionary.html

their entrepreneurial or homemaking activities; and concerns of work and home to gather the extent to which they see their activities online as a professional vocation. Based on our review of the literature outlined above, we hypothesize the following results:

H1: Tradwives' "About Me" and product landing pages will feature extensive religious vernacular.

H2: Words of social and familial relations and processes will feature heavily in both "About Me" and product pages, and plural pronouns will outnumber singular pronouns.

H3: Language surrounding the home will play a more central role in "About Me" and product pages compared to language of work.

To explore how these themes are expressed in tradwives' multimodal social media presence, we conducted a qualitative audiovisual discourse analysis of the accounts' Instagram Story Highlights. Instagram Stories are ephemeral photos posted to an Instagram account, which disappear after 24 hours unless manually saved in Instagram Story Highlights (Bainotti et al., 2021). Because of their ephemeral nature, Instagram Stories have historically been understudied despite their growing importance for both advertising and audience connection (Bainotti et al., 2021; Belanche et al., 2019; Kreling et al., 2022).

**Emergent Findings**
Our findings show that tradwives are far from monolithic: There are significant differences in how the women in our sample speak about their profession, religion, marriage, and politics. For our first research question, we find that tradwives generally downplay their entrepreneurial labor and financial contribution to the household in their Instagram Stories, but language of work features extensively on their websites' Product pages (partially disproving H3). Thus, tradwives resolve the tension between their ideology and profession by, seemingly, obfuscating it. For example, one creator frames her online presence as "being a sharer" while omitting the brand sponsorships she advertises to her thousands of followers.

Regarding the second research question, these tradwives do not present their entrepreneurial activities or their domestic labor as a *job*. Housework is more explicitly acknowledged than business ventures (in both Stories and on their websites, partially confirming H3), but creators do not politicize it as valuable labor. Work is often discussed in terms of the husbands' or even children's labor, and product offerings are made using plural pronouns (partially confirming H2). The fact that some of them, through their online prominence, emerge as their families' breadwinners and how this aligns with their political ideology remains unspoken.

Religion, which establishes many tradwives' views on gender roles, features extensively in their Instagram Stories and substantially on their websites (confirming H1). Explicit expressions of political ideology, however, are absent from their websites. They rarely feature on their Instagram Stories, except for occasional opposition to feminism and reproductive rights. This makes economic sense: A tradwife running a

#whitebabychallenge would likely encounter difficulty gaining mainstream sponsorships or reaching the 10 million followers Hannah Neeleman, a prominent tradwife, has amassed on her Instagram account. Thus, the creators in our sample make more palatable and mainstream their regressive gender roles through established influencer practices.

We expect our theoretical contribution to explore the relationship between conservative ideology, visual self-representation, and participation in creator economies. Ultimately, we suggest that the idea of a tradwife appears to be a particular stylization and vernacular that coalesces around ideological themes. In their current iteration, tradwives seem to capitalize on this vernacular, strategically prioritizing mainstream appeal and palatability over explicit political rhetoric (Lewis, 2018; Marwick, 2015). In other words, the "tradwife" emerges as a metapolitical branding strategy.

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