

THE #TRADWIFE PERSONA AND THE RISE OF RADICALIZED WHITE DOMESTICITY

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ABSTRACT

The “momosphere”—a collection of parenting, relationship, cooking, and crafting blogs and social media—has seen exponential growth during the socially distant pandemic years. It has also seen the rise of a new domestic online persona: the “tradwife.” These #tradwives write blogs and social media posts that promote “traditional” gender roles and family life, wherein the man provides for and protects the family, and the woman has children and takes care of the needs of the family. To combat the inevitable critiques of misogyny, many self-identified tradwives use feminist rhetoric to frame the movement as a choice they are making about how to live their own lives as empowered women. But the problematic nature of tradwife identity can go beyond issues of gender roles and into radical white supremacy. While these tradwives do not always identify as alt-right and/or white nationalists themselves (though some do), they are sometimes accompanied by either overtly white supremacist content or hashtags that signal allegiance to white supremacist hate groups (e.g., #thirdposition, #14words, #1488). Focusing on three well-known tradwife profiles, this article applies the five dimensions of online persona (Moore, Barbour & Lee 2017), to unpack the construction of tradwife persona. As the networks around the profiles widen to include multiple platforms and expanding lists of followers, they reveal different possible paths that the tradwife persona can take, and how online identities can contribute to the process of extremist radicalization—whether implicitly or explicitly—through their personas alone.

KEY WORDS

Tradwife; Momosphere; Online Persona; Radicalization; Gender Roles; Blogs

INTRODUCTION

Among the various sites in the momosphere—the portmanteau given to a new crop of parenting, cooking, crafting, and relationship blogs that sprang up during the socially distant reality of pandemic life—new lifestyle genres have emerged with strange names like *cottagecore*, *coastal grandma*, and *tradwife*. While new to many in the mainstream Internet public, the term ‘tradwife’ has been around in intermittent usage for a couple of decades, before a notable surge in searches in early 2020 (Google Trends 2022). Tradwife is not just an aesthetic style or pandemic fad; it is, for many women, an identity. Simply put, a tradwife is a woman who believes in ‘traditional’ gender roles and family dynamics. In popular media, these tradwives are often characterised in rather dismissive terms: “women who believe the greatest happiness is to be found in female domesticity or chores” (Morgan 2020); “a woman who chooses to focus solely on her family, husband and home, rather than doing paid work or having a career” (Lang 2022); or even a woman “who sticks to traditional gender roles and broadcasts it on social media” (Kosoff 2021). What “traditional” means in this context can vary greatly, as

we shall see, but it usually involves heterosexual marriage with masculine dominance and feminine subservience, child-rearing, homeschooling, and right-wing political ideals (Christou 2020; Freeman 2020; Mattheis 2021).

The uptick in tradwife searches in 2020 came on the heels of a *BBC Talkback* episode, ‘Submitting to my husband like it’s 1959: Why I Became a TradWife’, featuring Alena Kate Pettitt (Sitler-Elbel 2021, p. 15). Pettitt, whose blogsite *The Darling Academy* acts as hub of all things a traditional British wife should know and do, introduces the term thus: “You may have noticed a new movement of ladies calling themselves ‘Traditional Housewives,’ Homemakers of our generation who are happy to submit to, keep house, and spoil their husbands” (Pettitt 2022a). Pettitt is not the first contemporary woman to adopt the mantle, but with this video, she became famous, and infamous, overnight as the global face of the phenomenon.

This article will examine the construction of online persona through three well-known tradwives: Alena Kate Pettitt of *The Darling Academy*; Caitlin Huber, aka *Mrs. Midwest*; and Ayla Stewart, aka *Wife with a Purpose*. Following this introduction, I will analyse the tradwife concept itself in terms of its relationship with race and gender politics. Then I will briefly touch on the ways the online tradwife community uses internet platform affordances to practice its aims in persona construction. The organization of the article will then follow the three tradwives through five dimensions of online persona as laid out by Moore, Barbour and Lee: “public, mediated, performative, collective and having intentional value” (2017, p. 1). As the dimensions of these tradwife personas are explored, they will reveal—through networks of followers and their own posts, tweets, videos, selfies, and guest appearances—how the tradwife persona implicitly, and at times explicitly, relies upon and promotes white supremacy and misogyny. These forms of racism and sexism manifest in tradwife persona performances to 1) establish tradwifery as a legitimate practice and form of identification, 2) illustrate how a person should act/talk/live to be considered a tradwife, and 3) establish themselves as part of a community of tradwives.

I chose these specific tradwife profiles for various reasons. Pettitt, as mentioned above, became the first widely-known tradwife in 2020 and introduced the term to the mainstream public: at the time of writing, her BBC video has been viewed 195,000 times (Submitting to My Husband like It’s 1959 2020). Caitlin Huber, however, is without doubt the most successful current online tradwife persona, with followers and fans of *Mrs. Midwest* in the hundreds of thousands and views approaching millions. Ayla Stewart, while not as popular in terms of follower numbers, has been a tradwife online for the longest, since at least 2010 as *Wife with a Purpose*, and is somewhat notorious for political statements that get her banned from platforms and featured in news segments. Together, the three women represent the diversity of the tradwife persona. In this exploration of persona—its construction, its networks, and its politics—the focal point from which questions will arise is the concept of *tradition*. The latter half of the portmanteau—wife—is clear, but what is meant by ‘tradition’ in this context? And perhaps as importantly, *whose* ‘tradition’? How does the concept of ‘tradition’ traffic notions of race and gender?

TRADWIFE POLITICS

Tradwife sexism

The first and most obvious critique frequently deployed against the concept of tradwifery is that it is inherently sexist: it portrays women as subservient to men and unequal in society. “Women who participate in #Trad culture articulate their desire to return to ‘traditional’ gendered roles where men are ‘strong’ leaders and patriarchs, and they can be submissive helpmeets” (Mattheis 2021, p. 93). So, is the tradwife movement sexist? Yes. And it is not controversial to assert that it is even explicitly anti-feminist. Tradwifery stands firmly against many feminist struggles over the past half-century: the right to work, the right to maintain one’s own finances,

the right to bodily autonomy, the right to freedom from harassment. And as demonstrated through this article, many tradwives wear their anti-feminism as a badge, supporting a false dichotomy of ‘feminism versus femininity’ and fighting against what they see as a rising tide of woke anti-feminine rhetoric.

This is not the first time an assumed ‘feminist attack’ has seen a backlash among women calling for a return to ‘traditional feminine’ gender roles. In the mid-1960s, Helen Andelin’s *Fascinating Womanhood: How the Ideal Woman Awakens a Man’s Deepest Love and Tenderness* (2020)—now in its sixth edition, having sold over 2 million copies—was published in direct response to Betty Friedan’s (1963) *The Feminine Mystique* (Christou 2020). Tradwives who do not openly advocate anti-feminist positions often maintain that this chosen lifestyle is their way to express a version of feminism: “How can it be a waste to invest time in my husband and children? True feminism is about choice and, as a Tradwife, that’s what I have” (Nicholas 2020). This concept is called “choice feminism”: the idea that all choices women make are inherently feminist, because they are made by women (Ferguson 2010). The fallacy in this belief lies in the fact that so many women simply do not have that choice. For racial, geographic, cultural, and many other reasons, many women are unable to work even if they would choose to. And for economic and systemic reasons, many women have to work who would choose not to: the choice itself reflects privilege.

The ideas that undergird ‘choice feminism’ reflect the schisms that characterized feminist discourse in the United States throughout the 20th century. Feminism in the late 1800s and early 1900s, often referred to as the *first wave*, primarily focused on women achieving the right to vote, whereas the *second wave*—initiated largely by Friedan’s work in the 1960s—fought for further equality for women on social and legal levels. The women’s liberation movement, as the second wave is often called, represented global womanhood as a monolith, as a united force that demanded attention, which was its strength as well as its downfall. This purportedly unified alliance was represented mostly by white women and thus portrayed a hegemonic vision that did not accurately speak for all women. Critiques of this construct, brought forth by Black feminist thinkers like bell hooks and Audre Lorde, ushered in the *third wave* of feminism, characterised by intersectionality and the understanding that “there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives” (Lorde 2007, p. 138).

Realities of gendered labour practice also contradict these choice feminist assertions. The decisions to stay at home “may be presented as entirely personal. However, they are inseparable from the profound crisis of both work and care under neoliberal capitalism” (Rottenberg & Orgad 2020). So those women who choose to not work are exercising a privilege to embody a traditional version of feminine gender roles, as these traditions are often “frozen moments in history arbitrarily chosen from the cultural repertoire as “the’ authentic expression of the national collective” (Christou 2020). Indeed, very likely these arbitrary historic traditions themselves are complete inventions (Hobsbawm 1992). For instance, it is a myth that women in the far past didn’t work. They were wives and mothers, but also worked the fields, brewed mead, sold and bartered goods, spun wool, and very often worked alongside guildsmen to learn a trade (Shahar 2003). By framing the woman’s role in the home as ‘traditional’, tradwives continue a long project of delegitimizing women’s contributions in the workforce as separate and less valid than the formalized economy of male labour (Milkman 2016).

Tradwife racism

The link between tradwife identity and racism, by way of white supremacy, is less visible than its link to misogyny. Ashley Matthies (2021, 92) argues that the tradwife persona represents relationships as universal (a biologically-based heterosexual gender binary) and thereby, “white, western heteronormative ideals of femininity and masculinity become fixed as trans-historical and trans-geographic ‘facts’”. In this way, the tradwife concept “approximates whiteness through an unhinging from space and time” (Gaztambide-Fernández & Angod 2019,

p. 721). In other words, by framing these particular formations of gender roles and identities seen in the white middle-class United States of the 1950s as traditional, the tradwife persona reifies them into natural fact for *all* humans. One can imagine that Black families in the United States in the 1950s—many living under Jim Crow laws, financial insecurity, and the threat of violence and incarceration—did not resemble the same traditional gender roles and distribution of labour as their white counterparts. This discrepancy is exactly the type of insight that intersectional feminism seeks to address, rather than continuing a “discourse of denial” that gives gendered difference prominence over race (Bhopal 2020).

The assertion that gender is central to constructions of race, and that tropes of gender serve in the construction of whiteness as a form of structural and social power serves as a central tenet of Black feminist scholarship (Collins 2008; Crenshaw 1991; Higginbotham 1992; hooks 1981; Lorde 2007). Sojourner Truth, asking, “Ain’t I a woman?” spoke to the reality of womanhood as constructed in tandem with whiteness: she had worked her whole life, like virtually every other Black woman of the time. She had withstood hardship, abuse, and backbreaking labour. The construction of feminine, fragile, Victorian womanhood did not describe her, and yet, was she not a woman? This construction of fragility still influences the current mainstream notion of (white, hegemonic) feminist womanhood that “ideologically grounds itself in a gendered victimology that masks its participation and functionality in white supremacy” (Moon and Holling 2020, 253). Further, a weaponized version of this fragile white femininity has motivated race-based violence, from Klan aggression based on rape scares perpetuated by media like *Birth of a Nation*, to the lynching of Emmet Till, to contemporary “Karens” who threaten Black birdwatchers and barbecuers today with state violence.

The tradwife movement appeals to and supports an infrastructure of systemic white supremacy. This does not necessarily mean that it is inherently hateful or extremist, but it does make for fertile ground. Mattheis (2021, p. 94) further argues, “while it is true that participants in #Trad culture are not necessarily participants in extremist, white supremacist, or neo-fascist ideologies, supporters of these latter ideologies make incursions into #Trad culture precisely because they see it as useful”. A nationalist vlogger on YouTube, who records under the name The Golden One, posted a video called ‘The Woman Question’ that urges his followers to “dial down the open misogyny and consider new strategies to win over more women to the white nationalist cause” (Kelly 2018). The tradwife movement is one of the spaces in which these men seek to recruit. It is useful as a site to introduce radical and extreme ideas, because “it is not explicitly racist and extremist. Instead, it amplifies extant racialized and gendered discriminatory beliefs intrinsic to normative culture” (Mattheis 2021, 94). So, is tradwife racist? Yes, but not necessarily to the extent of extremist white nationalism. Except, as we will see, when it is.

Tradwife platforms

We now know what a tradwife *is* to a certain extent, but how do we look at the phenomenon as one of online persona? The tradwife acts as a sort of archetype, after all, rather than a celebrity role model or villain. It is an aspirational invention, a person while also a personified assemblage of discourses, beliefs, and practices. In this sense, the tradwife is the very definition of persona, not quite the individual, but also not the collective. As Moore, Barbour and Marshall (2019, p. 3) discuss, an online persona will have “the appearances of being an individual, but it is in fact the way an individual can organize themselves publicly [as] a projection and a performance of individuality”. Alena Kate Pettitt, Caitlin Huber, and Ayla Stewart perform these seemingly individual identities as their online personas on their blogs, posting pictures of themselves and their families in various scenes of familial bliss: matching outfits, beautifully prepared meals, walks in nature, and other curated-to-seem-candid moments. These photos—and the personal testimonies, bits of advice, and ‘favourite things’ lists that accompany them—frame the women on the screen as individual people, but it is important to remember that these performances are “destined for some type of audience, some community and some collective”

(Moore, Barbour & Lee 2019, p. 3). Specifically, this intended audience is made up of self-identified tradwives, those who aspire to be them, and those who are curious about (or even dubious of) the label.

On these blogs, the intended audience is often spelled out rather explicitly. Pettitt's *The Darling Academy* identifies itself as "a lifestyle website for housewives, homemakers, traditionalists & anglophiles. A place to embrace your love for home, and your role in it" (Pettitt 2022a). As expected, the site is populated with recipes for prototypical British foods like Yorkshire pudding and plum pie, articles about the joys of marriage, and even books for purchase outlining proper ladylike etiquette. Huber's *Mrs. Midwest*, on the other hand, offers a youthful American tone for its audience, with "the goal of creating a haven for traditionally feminine women trying to find their place in this modern world" (Huber 2020). Huber has similarly categorized blog posts for "femininity", "homemaking", and "relationships", but in place of *Darling Academy's* etiquette books are articles like "YouTube Content I've Binged" that enacts her youth and contemporary relevance.

Ayla Stewart's *Wife with a Purpose* site is rather stark in comparison, missing the "news, inspiration, and blog entries that WordPress deleted without cause given in September of 2019" (Stewart 2019b). At the time of writing, it simply hosted a gallery of un-captioned pictures and a narrative about how and why she recently retired from political commentary. The only indication of audience is the site tagline, "Tradlife: the Restoration and Preservation of Traditional Family Values" (Stewart 2019a). Going back a few years, however (via the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine) to the home page in October of 2018, we see that the site is described as "an online forum which brings together people interested in God's plan for happy families and wives dedicated to traditional homemaking. It also serves youth interested in an alternative to feminism and liberal ideology" (Stewart 2018). Where Pettitt and Huber's sites stray away from overt political opinion, Stewart's is plainly articulated as anti-feminist and anti-liberal.

The three women—and their three constructed personas—act here as our entry point to the online movement. They reflect the collective but are not *the* collective. They are, rather, "the indexical signs of the collective itself ... essentially a way to negotiate one's self into [the tradwife] collective" (Marshall, Moore & Barbour 2020, p. 3). If we envision the tradwife movement as a type of *public*, i.e., as a group of people who are joined due to a shared interest in and circulation of a particular discourse (Warner 2002; Habermas 1991), then a persona can be understood as a way to embody that discourse as a way of claiming one's part in that public. While Pettitt, Huber, and Stewart vary in the specifics of tradwife performance, their similarities work to create, support, and appease the larger tradwife collective.

As mentioned in the introduction, online tradwives perform the persona to 1) establish tradwifery as a legitimate practice and form of identification, 2) illustrate how a person should act/talk/live to be considered a tradwife, and 3) establish themselves as part of a community of tradwives. As we will see in the coming pages, they use different platforms to achieve these aims, utilizing the specific *affordances* of those platforms. In this context, "affordances" can be understood as the "aspects which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action" on a specific platform, i.e., the tools an interface provides a user to appropriately operate the technology (Hutchby 2001, p. 444). For instance, the discussion of tradwife online content thus far in this piece has relied on the specific affordances of blogging: creating long-form written posts with static pictures, with little interaction from the audience. While blogs often have commenting ability afforded to readers, the commenting features have been turned off on these sites. As a one-to-many broadcast type of platform, a blog serves the first aim—to establish tradwifery as a legitimate practice and form of identification—and also helps establish a tradwife public among audience members. As we move through the tradwife persona constructions and into new platforms, the affordances change, as do the ways persona is constructed and the aims these constructions serve. YouTube and Instagram are primarily

visual media, affording the tradwives the ability to post videos and pictures, but they also afford their audience members options for communication: commenting, liking, following, etc. In this way, the platforms serve the second aim—to illustrate how a person should act/talk/live to be considered a tradwife—while also fostering the creation of an inter-communicative layer to the tradwife public. At this point, a tradwife’s followers can see each other and communicate, forming a community out of a public. Further on, when we consider the Twitter, the tradwives themselves enter the group by communicating, reposting, commenting, and responding, which serves the third aim—establishing themselves as part of a community of tradwives.

TRADWIFE AS PERSONA

In examining these tradwives as personas, rather than individuals, and attending to the ways these personas obscure sexist and racist notions, we must recall that they are highly curated in their “intensive focus on constructing strategic masks of identity” (Marshall and Barbour 2015, p. 1). They are *tactical* in nature, not merely being people, but crafting negotiated identities to perform personhood in specific contexts with explicit aims (2015; see also de Certeau 1984). This may seem like Goffmanian presentation of the self (1959), but Marshall, Barbour and Lee (2017) have established five key components to show how online personas are something quite different that has developed over the last two decades. Online persona, they argue, are *public, mediatized, performative, collective, and see value as derived by agency, reputation, and prestige* (Moore, Barbour & Lee 2017, p. 3–7). The rest of this article will unpack what those five dimensions entail and how our three tradwife persona exemplars enact the dimensions in the service of performing a tradwife persona. As we explore how each tradwife persona is constructed along its five dimensions, we will also unravel three very different relationships between tradwife identity, politics, gender, and race.

Public

Personas are *public*. A person’s online persona is not only public in the sense that it can be seen by strangers but also because there is potential for virality. That is, any online persona could expand its audience from a few close friends to becoming a global celebrity. This is not probable, of course, but it is within the realm of possibility, so preparation for celebrity is a part of the construction of persona. Part of wide success in this context is being universally relatable, which makes any appeal to overtly racist or sexist sentiment an ineffective route to virality.

Both Huber and Pettit represent their brand of “traditional” femininity on YouTube as a part of the aim to illustrate how a person should act/talk/live to be considered a tradwife, but shy away from any overt statements about race and only implicitly support misogynistic narratives. This tactic has shown them some success. Since her introduction via the *BBC Talkback* segment in 2021, Pettit has started her own YouTube channel—with 8,070 subscribers—and uploaded seven on-brand, persona-supporting videos concerning etiquette and featuring interviews of her on other outlets. Her most successful video, “Five Reasons I Love Being a Tradwife,” has been viewed 76,000 times (Pettitt 2022b). Though her blog *The Darling Academy* has been active since 2016, her first video was uploaded after the BBC spot came out and greatly amplified her audience. Huber’s *Mrs. Midwest* blog started after Pettitt’s, in 2017, but reflecting her ‘modern’ and youthful persona, she made the leap to YouTube first in 2019. There she currently has 201,000 subscribers and 144 videos, of which the most-viewed (‘My Glow Up | 7 Ways I Changed My Appearance’) has been seen by over 600,000 people (Huber 2022). While this may seem like an unimportant list of numbers, it speaks directly to the levels of virality that a persona’s publicness can achieve.

Stewart has been vocal on issues of race and feminism since she began posting content online in 2010. Her first blog, *Wife With a Purpose*, predates both other tradwives significantly, as does her move to YouTube in 2015 with her first (and still most-viewed) video “Welcome Refugees?? I blame feminism, this is why” (Ayla Stewart Exolains 2015). Despite her earlier

appearance on the platform, her numbers—10,100 subscribers, 34 videos, and 141,000 views of the video above—are far more like Pettitt’s than Huber’s. While manifesting in different forms and varied size, all three personas show the ability to “go from a small public of close and intimate friends to a massive and global public audience, enabled by the act of sharing” (Moore, Barbour & Lee 2017, p. 3).

Mediatized

Personas are *mediatized*. By posting videos on YouTube and running blogs—not to mention the various Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Gab, Twitter, Patreon, and Etsy accounts between the three of them—these tradwives are undoubtedly using media platforms and technologies as a part of their persona production and dissemination, but that by itself is not fully what mediatization means in this context. The use of the media itself is incorporated, because a persona is more than a person: it is a collection of person/brand/audience/marketing message/politics/business and all of the various platforms that host, spread, and link those related aspects. All of these aspects of persona, in this context, serve the aim to establish tradwifery as a legitimate practice and form of identification.

The line between explicit and implicit racist or sexist rhetoric in this context takes the form of platform censorship and corporate caution, respectively. The mediatization dimension of persona construction involves “the naturalisation of platform censorship and the negotiation between the personal, corporate, and institutional agency” (Moore, Barbour & Lee 2017, p. 4). Stewart’s constant censorship, for instance, is a part of her persona: the deletion “without cause” of blogs from her WordPress site *Wife With a Purpose* in 2019 and her very public ban from Twitter in 2017 are a part of this censored aspect of her persona. She even refers to herself on her current site, *A Wife’s Purpose*, as “the most censored Christian mom in America” and details how she was “deplatformed, with no reason given, from Twitter, Facebook, WordPress, Etsy, Pinterest, Tee Spring, Patreon, etc.” (Stewart 2019c).

Huber and Pettitt do not have the same censorship claims and focus much more on the corporate and institutional agency of their personas. Huber has a ‘Shop’ tab on her blog that links out to allow purchase of her “favourite things”. She does not produce these items, but in the site’s frequently asked questions, she explains: “I get ad money from YouTube from my videos, and when I do a sponsorship, I will negotiate to get paid. I also get a little money from any links that I offer to y’all from Amazon!” (Huber 2022). She is letting us know (with a colloquial “y’all”) that even though she is making money from this, she’s really just like us: a normal person, where ‘normal’ is code (for all three women) as white, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgendered, neurotypical, and able-bodied. Pettitt takes corporate agency a step further by offering her own books on ‘Traditional Lifestyle & Etiquette’—co-authored by herself and The Darling Academy—for purchase via Amazon link. Co-authoring allows her personal self, Alena Kate Pettitt, to be a separate entity from the Academy itself, even though they are two facets of the same persona. It is also noteworthy that she is selling *books*, actual paper-bound books, which is quite uncommon for an online persona with a blog and a YouTube channel. This strategic attention paid to the ultra-traditional media platform of the printed word supports her version of tradwife persona and her intended audience.

Performative

Personas are *performative*. One could consider most examples up to this point to be performative in nature: Stewart’s political heavy-handedness and consequent censorship; Pettitt’s use of the term “Academy” and production of glossy bound books; Huber’s “y’alls,” and binge lists. These are, indeed, strategic acts and behaviours that help perform the three as different shades of the tradwife persona. But how are they exhibiting performativity in a deeper sense together (e.g., Austin 1975; Butler 1990)? How are they performing gender, motherhood, and marriage in a way that establishes what a tradwife persona is and should be? Moore, Barbour, and Lee (2017, p. 4) suggest “to present a publicly mediated persona, we must perform

our identity, our profession, our gender, and effectuate our tastes, interests, and networks of connection, through activities like commenting on posts, liking other's contributions or framing a selfie". We have seen above how they perform identity in specific and slightly different ways, and in each blog they explicitly state their professions as "traditional wife", "homemaker", and "traditional homemaker and wife." How they perform gender and gender roles (and both implicit and explicit misogyny), is smuggled through less overt means. These blogs do not contain the necessary affordances look at these commenting, framing, and liking activities, but it is possible to view these practices via the women's Instagram pages.

In Pettitt's Instagram selfies, she is always in a dress reminiscent of 1950s style, and usually wearing subtle makeup. In some she is alone, either cooking, setting a table, or walking in nature. Many are with girlfriends (in similar period dresses) out and about doing things around town. A few show her with her husband, but none include her children. We know she has children, as she writes about homeschooling and missing the "baby stage", but she never shows them. Huber's selfies follow a very relatable chronological trajectory for a normal person (see 'normal' above): they start with her on adventures, shift to pictures of her meeting, having more adventures with, and marrying a man, and very soon nearly every picture is her with her children. Both Pettitt and Huber's feeds have a staged feel with beautiful lighting, and often seem like they are taken by another person (though Huber swears she uses a self-timer on the camera). Stewart's pictures, however, feature very few selfies. The selfies that do appear are obviously self-taken, but she is in full makeup and usually wearing period dresses from the 19th century era up to the 1950s. Most of her pictures are of her children.

The women frame the 'tradition' aspect of tradlife in different temporal registers, from Stewart's pioneer aesthetic, to Pettitt's mid-century nostalgia, to Huber's contemporary influencer style. Aside from the pictures of people, however, the majority of all three feeds are comprised of nature, cooked food, and home decoration. So, while they perform their personas separately for slightly differing audiences, together they reconstruct and mutually support the tradwife ideals of nature and simplicity, and the importance of cooking and making a beautiful home. These performances for social media audiences serve the aim of illustrating how a person should act/talk/live to be considered a tradwife much like those performed on YouTube, but also work to establish themselves part of a community of tradwives, which the next section takes as its focus.

Collective

Personas are *collective*. The tradwives, like everyone on social media, are part of their own webs of connection, both within and across platforms. This is what boyd calls a "networked public", the "imagined community that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice" (boyd 2014, p. 4; with reference to Anderson 1991). In terms of the persona, Moore, Barbour and Lee (2017, p. 6), describe this spreading-across-platforms as a "micro-public" involving a network of friends and followers, along with their interconnecting networks, wherein "the individual is a node, but they are also simultaneously orbiting nodes in other networks". At this point in the analysis, the three tradwife exemplars' networks start to diverge, and the various threads of tradwifery become very visible.

To sample the overlapping networks in which Pettitt, Huber, and Stewart act as nodes of tradwifery, I decided to filter the possible results into something manageable. I had to do this because of the sheer numbers involved: while Stewart has roughly 2,500 Instagram followers, Pettitt and Huber's skyrocket to 39,100 and 52,300, respectively. I parsed these out in two ways. First, I ran a search in each profile's Follower and Following lists for the root word at the foundation of the tradwife persona: tradition. Second, I checked these lists against each other for repeats that would indicate mutual follows: who among their tradition-related followers do they follow back? My reasoning for this distinction is that anyone can follow a profile, and while that puts the follower clearly into the *public* of the profile, it does not imply any reciprocal engagement with the persona. If they follow each other, however, that is evidence of mutual

recognition and a relationship on some level—mutually orbiting “nodes” across publics. This dimension of persona—how it is disseminated and linked across other personas and publics—is key to the overriding questions of this article, so this section will dig deeper than the others thus far, in hopes of exposing ideologies that overlap with tradwifery.

Surprisingly, of the 784 profiles Pettitt follows, not one mentions the precise word “tradition” in the username, bio, or tagline. This could, of course, be strategic on Pettitt’s part, to distance herself from some of the content below, and could also reflect how the concept of tradition can be deployed in a wide variety of ways. Among her followers, however, 31 exhibit some sort of connection to tradition, usually as an identity descriptor in the username (traditional_wife, that_traditional_girl, traditionalmomlife) and among these, patterns begin to show themselves quickly. Note the following three profile bios, all followers of Pettitt that incorporate “tradition:”

traditionalguy
I believe in traditional gender roles and old values
Waiting till marriage
Vegetarianism
Femininity>Feminism
#propatriarchy

traditionallytiffany
🌸~Feminine not Feminist~🌸
Housewife and Homemaker💕Embrace Tradition
Proverbs 31:30//Follower of Jesus Christ🏠👶🏠
Mama of Four👶🏠





traditionalpowerexchange
Traditional Power Exchange
Patriarch and Husband
Trying to Understand How We Revive Patriarchy
30, Father, Professional
Believe in Domestic Discipline

In all three, we see a different public being represented: that of overt anti-feminism. The pitting of femininity as counter (and preferable) to feminism does not merely imply anti-feminist sentiment, like the dog-whistles of “traditional gender roles” and “family values”—it explicitly states the position as a mathematical formula: “Femininity>Feminism.”

Of Huber’s 54 “tradition” related followers, she shares four with Pettitt, three of whom expressed identical anti-feminist sentiments:

ladylikelevelup
For Feminine, Traditional, and Spiritual Sirens
Feminine, not feminist.
Embracing a Feminine and Traditional life.

traditional_wife
Tradition
Anti-feminist
-Love
-Honor
-Obedience

traditionalwifelife
 Traditional Wife Life    
 30yo UK Trad Wife & Mother GB
 Domestic Discipline / Taken in Hand Marriage
 Rejecting feminism, pro-patriarchy 🏠

Again, we see femininity against feminism and talk of supporting patriarchy. Huber has several other followers that express similar assertions, (with “Anti-Feminist” and “feminine, not feminist” both repeated several times). The fourth follower they share goes in a very different direction with her definition of tradition:

thetraditional.lady
 The Traditional Lady
 -Catholic
 -American
 Anglo-Saxxon, Celtic, Nordic ancestry

This traditionalism is neither gender, femininity, nor politics related; rather it is about ancestry, specifically Western European ancestry. And she is not alone. Another of Pettitt’s followers similarly evoke tradition in the European sense:

familyvaluesmatter
 Traditional European Family
 Celebrating Traditional European Aesthetic With Nuclear Family Values

Tradition in this same vein comes up repeatedly among Huber’s tradition-related followers, but in a much less subtle and more political way. For instance, no bio text is given for the account southern_traditionalist, but the profile picture is a tattered Confederate flag, a symbol which also appears in pictures throughout the profile, aligning the account with neo-Confederate traditionalism in a visual register. Other accounts spelled out their traditionalist allegiances with text and emoji:

western.traditionalism
 Nationalism 
 Traditionalism 
 Catholicism 
 Environmentalism 

Far from Pettitt’s followers’ comparatively subtle white supremacy, these profiles identify themselves as neo-Confederates and nationalists. Whether these sentiments are rogue dissenters or represent a larger network within the micro-public of the two women’s personas is unclear from this exercise, and these are not statistically meaningful numbers, to be sure. This is only a sample taken from 85 of their combined 89,600 followers, less than 1%. Also, they are followers that Pettitt and Huber may know nothing about (they each have tens of thousands).

In Huber’s ‘tradition’ list of followers, though, there is a single mutual follow implying a two-way engagement between nodes:

worth_fighting_for
 Traditional Aesthetics
 Tradition is not the worship of ashes, but the preservation of fire.
 Wear your heritage, support your culture

Worth_fighting_for is the Instagram platform of Western Aesthetics, a brand which produces clothing and web-aesthetics. The images posted by the account follow a fairly strict formula: collaged images overlaid with text, like stylized memes. Many of these images advise men to be physically and mentally strong because “hard times are coming” and tell their audience to reject

the “modern feminist agenda” and have children. All of this is to be expected within the tradwife umbrella of discourse. But Western Aesthetics also advises its audience to think about “heritage” and “culture”. One of the often-repeated memes on the site reads “Remember Who You Are”, surrounded by pictures of young white women in “traditional” dress, labelled “Germany, Italy, France, The Netherlands, Austria, Poland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Belarus, Estonia, Russia” (worth_fighting_for 2021). In an original article on the main site, Western Aesthetics defines traditionalism as “Rooting people together under a common identity, showing that people and their culture didn’t pop out of nowhere. Tradition is history, tradition is geography, the way that people settled in a specific territory” (Western Aesthetics 2021). By grouping these young “traditional” women together in the previous meme, worth_fighting_for is doing just that: forming a common identity across different nations and cultures. “Who You Are” in this case is divorced from these national differences and congealed into one European (i.e., white) identity.

Moore, Barbour and Lee remind us that “Micro-publics have a tremendous porousness, connecting to other networks effortlessly and with often unpredictable and unforeseen consequences” (2017, p. 6). In that vein, Huber’s mutual following could be explained away as a benign aesthetic choice—worth_fighting_for is, after all, a clothing brand at its core—if it wasn’t for other details. The first is that worth_fighting_for regularly features pictures from Huber’s Instagram in their memes, cast as the prototypical European beautiful mother figure, so the relationship goes beyond mere aesthetic tastes. The other detail is back at Huber’s blog, in the article, “20 ‘Things’ I Recommend.” Number fifteen, sandwiched between a Betty Crocker pie recipe and a self-made Spotify playlist, sits the recommendation “This Presentation: *Stefan Molyneux, The Fall of Rome*. I’m a big fan of this man and his philosophy: it’s brash, offensive, and my favorite type of YouTube content. I love his presentations in particular because they combine culture, history, and philosophy into one amazing learning session” (Huber 2019).


Stefan Molyneux is a self-identified alt-right philosopher and purveyor of scientific racism who communicates the belief that white people have a higher IQ than non-whites and views races as different species of human (SPLC 2022). The video Huber recommends is about the purported danger of non-white immigration and deals heavily in the Great Replacement Theory that drives much of the hate-based violence in contemporary white power extremism. The link she gives to the video does not work because YouTube banned his videos from the platform for hate speech violations, in a sweep that also included David Duke (former KKK Grand Wizard) and Richard Spencer (white nationalist who coined the term ‘alt-right’).

In calling herself “a big fan of this man”, Huber is hiding this part of her strategic persona performance in plain sight. Along with this link, she has an ongoing relationship with the ultra-misogynists of the “manosphere” including pushing diet and lifestyle tips from “neo-masculinist” online vlogger Roosh V, who has asserted that if he sexually assaults a woman on his property, it should not be legally considered rape. In an interview in 2019 with online manosphere vlogger YogiOabs, Huber actually reveals her strategy: “Because my message can be kind of like, intense for some people—like, the things I believe—I like to pad it with, well, skincare and like, how I clean my house, you know?” (God is Grey 2020). How she deals with situations when people see past the packaging is covered in the next section, but now we turn to our third tradwife, Ayla Stewart.

Stewart has far fewer followers than Huber or Pettitt, so her mere 13 flagged for “tradition” is unsurprising. She seems to have a closer relationship to them, though. Of the seven “tradition”-related profiles she follows, four of them are mutual follows. One is an Anti-feminist profile that should be anticipated:

traditional_woman_80

Anti-Feminist. Traditionalist. Awake. Country Wife and Mom

 CL UM I wear my weirdness like a badge.

Another is a seemingly non-political Mormon profile (Stewart identifies as Mormon):

traditionalmormon
 Mormone Tradizionale
 Italian American. LDS convert. Job 27:5

And the other two fall into the previously mentioned “ethnic European” category:

traditionaleuropeanfemininity
 Traditional European Woman
 Bringing back the femininity of traditional European culture
 ethnic_europa
 Traditionalism
 “A brave man may fall, but he cannot yield”

The ‘ethnic European’ tropes above also contain the ‘strong man, feminine woman’ aspects from the anti-feminist strain of tradwifery. Even ‘traditionalmormon’, while seeming innocuous, hides far-right political messaging, using the hashtags #fascism, #fascist, #nationalism, #nationalist, #altright, and #thirdposition throughout their profile. These connections show that Stewart has an audience for, and a stake herself in, the idea of a unified ‘European’ ethnic culture. Scrolling through her feed reveals more support for this idea; she reposts others’ posts about “white identity”, uses hashtags like #BlueEyedBabyChallenge, #WhiteCulture, #ItsOktobeWhite, and even posted her DNA results. When the onward_america Instagram profile (now banned) posted a “fashwave” meme of Stewart, haloed by the black sun (*Sonnenrad*) Nazi symbol, her response was “@onward_america turned me into a fashwave meme and I love it ❤us.”¹

Stewart’s YouTube video ‘Welcome Refugees?? I blame feminism, this is why’ (Ayla Wife 2015) helps to contextualise =the somewhat baffling mixture of dog-whistle white supremacy and overt alignment with white nationalists in Stewart’s Instagram. When the video was posted, Stewart had virtually no Internet presence, save her largely unfollowed blog. But someone at Stormfront—the largest neo-Nazi web forum on the Internet—saw the video and brought it to the attention of other Stormfront members. Here is a sample of the ensuing conversation (with spaces between speakers):

Thread: Pro-White Woman On Youtube Gives Her Take On Muslim Migrants

This video is excellent and gives me hope. [embeds link]

I haven’t seen or heard of this woman (Ayla Stewart) before. She has a few videos out and not one of them have over 100 views. Please give her some likes and subscribers. We need to stick together.

Loved it. She seems like someone who might be open to WN. I hope someone who is both knowledgeable and patient introduces her to it. I went ahead and opened a youtube acct just to subscribe to her. 😊

Once this girl becomes Jew wise, it will change her world

Well gave her a thumbs up, and a message to look deeper, and to always follow the money. Gave her a little hint also. Show support, and try to steer in the right direction. I advise more do the same.

She’s a half-awakened white woman, and people like her should be the ones we spend the most time “recruiting.” (Stormfront 2015)

In this interchange, we see the initiation of a new public and the birth of Stewart's white nationalist (WN, as above) audience. A month later, she joined Stormfront as 'Adorableayla', introducing herself by saying "Hi, everyone. I just joined up. I tweet over @apurposefulwife, I YouTube at Wife With A Purpose, my blog is nordicsunrise.wordpress.com and I was on Radio Three Fourteen a few weeks ago if you listen to that" (Adorableayla, 2015). Although Stewart has not posted on the forum since, her account there is still active. Her WN audience has continued their interest, which explains some of Stewart's other Instagram followers: Angry White Man, White International News, angrygermanboy1488 ⚡ ⚡, and 1488_archives². The WN interest in her becoming "Jew wise"—referring to the WN antisemitic idea that a Jewish cabal runs all of the world's banks, governments, and entertainment, with the goal of erasing and/or enslaving the white race—has had some effect, too, shown by her tweeting comments like "Jews/banking created the World wars, not Europeans" (apurposefulwife 2017). On Twitter, she describes herself in her bio as "Christian, wife, mom of 6, Nationalist panderer on white Western heritage & my god's love for white people." It would seem her persona has fully incorporated white nationalism publicly, but it is perhaps more complicated than that, as we see in the following, and final, dimension of personality.

Agency, reputation, and prestige

Personas value *agency*, *reputation*, and *prestige*, which Moore, Barbour and Lee shorten to "VARP" (2017, p. 7). Personas are curated carefully with specific intent in mind, and "ideally, lifestyle bloggers strike a balance between presenting a lifestyle that is aspirational and yet *ordinary*" (McRae 2017, p. 22). These tradwives must maintain a somewhat non-controversial public stance in order to perform that ordinariness, even as they wink slyly at their audience. This risk of controversy has become problematic for Pettitt and Huber as tradwife identity continues to grow in mainstream recognition.

The most visibly controversial aspect of the identity is the definition of gender roles being viewed as a move backwards, away from contemporary roles fuelled by decades of feminist work. Pettitt takes this on directly in her BBC video, aligning tradwife identity with feminist ideals: "My view of feminism is that it's about choices, and to say on one hand you can go into the working world and compete with men, yet you're not allowed to stay home, that's actually taking a choice away" (BBC Stories 2020). She has stuck to the "choice feminism" line of argument, and it has largely worked for her. While implicitly endorsing misogyny, she does not openly argue against feminism, staying 'above the fray' which serves her refined, British construction of tradwife femininity. Huber took a different approach and took time away from her platforms because of the stress of being in the public eye. The alt-right connections to some of her content and interviews with "manosphere" über-misogynists discussed above had gone somewhat viral on Reddit, and she had been flooded with emails and messages asking for explanations (e.g., Kitty_Burglar 2020). After a two-month hiatus, she returned with a video addressing her time off:

You know when you are a traditional homemaking Christian wife online you attract people who hate everything that you stand for, and they want to disparage you, they want to talk badly about you, they want to make up insane conspiracy theories about you and associate you with political movements from the 1930s and 40s that it's just really disturbing and hurtful and the slander was getting to be too stressful. (Mrs Midwest 2022)

Rather than face allegations or explain why people might have been upset—even refusing to say the word 'Nazi'—she supports her relatable persona and talks about how stressful it was. Who among us would not find that overwhelming? And judging by the response it works: the video has 718 comments, every single one of them supportive.

But where did this connection to white nationalism come from in the first place? Tradwives' white nationalist messaging began before the public writ large knew *The Darling*

Academy or *Mrs. Midwest* existed. In 2017, Ayla Stewart issued what she called the “white baby challenge” on Twitter:

The Mormon religion is under attack by black ghetto culture. As a mother of 6, I challenge families to have as many white babies as I have contributed. We can win the Utah racial war and protect its unique LDS European culture. (apurposefulwife 2017)

We will get to how this tweet affected Stewart and the construction of her persona below, but first, this moment is notable because it predetermined much of the public beliefs about tradwife identity. When Pettitt’s BBC video aired and thrust the movement into the mainstream, the “white baby challenge” and tradwife identity’s links to white nationalism were unearthed. When asked about these links in the video, Pettitt responds with complete surprise at the concept: “Someone said this type of housewife was promoted by the Third Reich, and it’s like, ‘was it really? I didn’t even know that!’” Later in the video, discussing the choice of “1959” as a focal year, she pivots into well-trod dog-whistle racism, under the auspices of “safety:”

It’s almost harnessing kind of what made Britain great during that time, when you could leave your front door open and know you were safe, and you knew your neighbours in the street. And we can have that again. You know times are changing so fast and we don’t even know the identity of our country right now. (BBC Stories 2020)

In a later interview, she alters her position slightly (possibly due to the transparency of the response above). It’s not that tradwives are not racist, but that *most* of them are not:

The term tradwife has kind of been hijacked by some really fundamental people who have got links to white supremacy and the alt-right and things like that which is just, it’s a case of the few spoiling it for the many ... we’re just this like really quiet group of people who have no representation in the media whatsoever. (Brandman 2021)

In their discussion of VARP, Moore, Barbour and Lee explain that “the intent to create personas can vary from the personal or intimate (designed to facilitate personal or familial relationships) to the professional (more associated with work), or the public (produced by those who wish to claim a level of fame or notoriety)” (2017, p. 7). While Pettitt and Huber definitely perform their persona for the fame, Stewart, it seems, can’t choose between fame and notoriety. A month after issuing the white baby challenge, she posts on her twitter and Instagram a picture from the 1960s of a black family and writes: “#Tradlife isn’t race based. All people, all communities operate at their peak with traditional gender roles, families and faith” (apurposefulwife 2017). In Stewart’s introduction post to Stormfront, she refers to being interviewed on *Radio3Fourteen*, which is a show hosted by self-identified white nationalist Lana Lokteff as a part of the larger alt-right media group *Red Ice TV*. She was asked to appear in an interview with Lokteff called “Trad Women vs The Feminist Lifestyle” in 2015 very soon after her video about refugees gained a niche, far-right popularity on YouTube. Two years later, within months of her “white baby challenge” tweet, Stewart appeared again on *Radio 3Fourteen* in three videos: “Woman Who Issued White Baby Challenge Responds to Media Attacks,” “Tips on Raising a Large Family,” and a round table of five women titled “Debunking the Claim that Nationalism is Hostile Towards Women” (Radio 3Fourteen 2022).

Currently her blog’s front page (where, recall, she talks about Wordpress deleting all her previous posts) she asserts:

Several far left news outlets, as well as journalists who wanted to pick up the story for click bait, created the lie that I had claimed white people should outbreed black people. I have never said that, I have never said anything close

to that. I was one of the first targets of the far left trying to smear any conservative as a “white supremacist.” (Stewart 2019a)

Stewart is riding the line between two of her intended audiences—two publics that overlap in persona construction. Does she know that people will see through this on some level? Is she winking at them? This rebellious stirrer-of-the-pot attitude is, after all, very much a part of her persona.

CONCLUSION

Tradwives are not all anti-feminists or white nationalists. I feel the need to state this clearly, so as not to confuse the issue or seem like I am making extravagant claims. The concept of tradwifery absolutely contains aspects of systemic misogyny and white supremacy but does not necessarily ally itself officially with those movements. And as we have seen in the preceding pages, tradwife persona construction engages with these themes in very different ways.

Pettitt—with her construction of a British, reserved, author-of-etiquette-manuals tradwife persona—feels that claims of sexism and racism are completely off-base, and thus she will not engage with them. It is completely possible that she considers herself neither of these ugly things and has simply absorbed a certain amount of existing misogyny and racism from society. Many people who do not march or write hateful things online have absorbed those same beliefs, and subsequently vote, think, and act in ways that are systemically damaging to women and people of colour.

Huber’s persona of a youthful, tech-savvy, fun tradwife obfuscates some of the real links she has to the more toxic areas of the anti-feminist and fascist Internet, notably the neo-masculinist manosphere and the European aesthetics movements. When confronted with this, she responds on brand/persona as a young internet personality who has been unfairly painted with this brush. She maintains this ignorant innocence even in the face of videos wherein she blatantly admits to cushioning her “kind of like, intense beliefs” with skincare videos. It should be mentioned that on her blog she lists her collegiate major as “strategic communications”.

Stewart *is* an anti-feminist and a white nationalist, by her own account. Her tradwife persona takes on the form of a trickster—saying incendiary things, then acting bewildered at being censored with “no reason given.” She has used this persona to gain fame in the small but very active alt-right internet world, giving speeches and interviews on nationalist shows, and even hosting some of her own, where she openly discusses what a future white ethnostate might look like, while bouncing a child on her lap (Ayla Wife 2018). At the same time, Stewart blogs, tweets, and posts about her unfair censorship, not because she believes herself to be innocent of the accusations, but because she knows that anti-watchdog, anti-“woke”, free speech sabre-rattling appeals to “recruits” who “might be open to WN” as those Stormfront members said of *her* back in 2015.

The complicated, slippery concept of ‘tradition’ stands at the centre of all of these narratives, but is it a call to nation (Pettitt), gender (Huber), or race (Stewart)? Tradition is simultaneously difficult to be cleanly defined and functions as a powerful motivating idea, making it fertile ideological ground. As Miranda Christou explains, “appealing to the importance of maintaining ‘tradition’ is one of the ways in which nationalist rhetoric claims an essentialized and largely a-historical version of culture” (2020). And rather than unpack the ways nationalism traces this essentialized version in a direct line from lifestyle to gender to race, I’ll let a tradwife herself voice the transition. Around the same time Stewart was doing her guest appearances on *Radio 3Fourteen*, Lana Lokteff aired a few other episodes on the tradwife movement. In one called, “Is a Traditional Housewife the Ideal Woman?” one of her tradwife guests talks about the meaning of the term:

[Traditionalism is about] the opposition to women having superiority over men and also the opposition to the idea that women are exactly like men and that we can be exactly like men, so that's how I first got introduced to the traditional movement. Now, when embracing nationalism, I see it more than just an opposition to feminism, of course it is but also incorporating heritage, race, culture, nation, all of these things that go along with it ... And I like to look at traditional, the word traditional, holistically, so it's anti-feminism, it's anti-globalism, it's for the nuclear family, it's for your nation. That's how I look at it. (Radio 3Fourteen 2018)

A few minutes later as they wrap up, Lana says to the two interviewees: "The ideal woman I would say, is probably women like you two, especially for our audience, women that can, you know, bake cookies, have a fashy household, but talk about the JQ" (Radio 3Fourteen 2018). The term "fashy" is how members of the alt-right refer to fascism in a more youthful and hip way. Lana's use of "JQ," however, is much older. JQ stands for the Jewish Question (as in, what to do with them). This "question" and your answer to it, is the ultimate test of whether you are, in fact, a white nationalist. Indeed, this is the exact question that the Third Reich came up with a "final solution" for.

Not all tradwives are white nationalist fascists, but some are. And unless we address that fact, every time we talk about 'traditional' lifestyles, family structures, or marriage dynamics, then we are complicit. If we view all tradwives the same way, as carbon copies of Alena Kate Pettitt churned out by the *Darling Academy*, we miss the reality of Caitlin Huber behind the fun of *Mrs. Midwest*. We fail to take the Ayla Stewarts seriously, despite her consistently showing us that she is a *Wife with a Purpose*. We must continuously ask: what "tradition"; what "purpose"; whose "tradition"; whose "purpose"?

END NOTES

¹ "Fashwave" is an Internet-born art style that combines "vaporwave"—a fluorescent collage of 1990s computer graphics and Greek classical architecture and statuary—with fascist messaging, including swastikas, black suns, and Nazi slogans.

² The number 1488 is very important in neo-Naziism. The 14 stands for the "14 words"—the unofficial slogan for contemporary white nationalism—"We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children." The 88 stands for HH (the eighth letter) and signifies "Heil Hitler."

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