

FEBRUARY 2025

PINCURLS, PASTRIES, AND PATRIARCHY: TRADWIFERY AND THE AESTHETICIZATION OF ILLIBERALISM



CAITLYN SHREWSBURY

Institute for
European, Russian,
and Eurasian Studies

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

i||iberalism
Studies Program

Pincurls, Pastries, and Patriarchy: Tradwifery and the Aestheticization of Illiberalism

Caitlyn Shrewsbury

*Illiberalism Studies Program Working Papers
No. 28 February 2025*

Photo by zzzdim, Adobe stock

The contents of articles published are the sole responsibility of the author(s). The Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies, including its staff and faculty, is not responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement expressed in the published papers. Articles do not necessarily represent the views of the Institute for European, Russia, and Eurasian Studies or any members of its projects.

©IERES 2025

In her most recent cover shoot with *Evie Magazine*, titled “The New American Dream,” Hannah Neeleman showcases the timeless Western Americana of her home and lifestyle.¹ The sepia-toned footage, set to soft instrumental piano, captures Neeleman in a variety of settings: in cowboy boots, arranging tack in the stables; carrying a small hen with a lacy ribbon flowing through her hair; a white milkmaid dress billowing in the wind as she milks her family’s dairy cow; laughing gently as she places her husband’s cowboy hat atop her beautiful blonde hair. Such scenes of farm life, marital harmony, and feminine charm are commonplace on Neeleman’s social media, where she is better known by her Instagram handle: @ballerinafarm. In the last two years, Neeleman and Ballerina Farm have become household names. Her content, which includes everything from scratch recipes and farm living to caring for her eight children, has propelled her into the wider cultural consciousness and earned her the infamous title of “queen of the tradwives.”²

Neeleman, and other influencers like her, represent an increasingly popular online subculture that has exploded across social media. Known as “tradwives,” they promote a lifestyle that revolves around women’s traditional roles: motherhood, homemaker, and wife. With their demure attitudes and warm, pristine kitchens, they advocate for a complementarian view of women’s empowerment and oppose Third Wave feminism’s so-called denigration of traditional womanhood. Based on the aforementioned characteristics, I argue that the tradwife movement represents an inherent repudiation of liberal values and an endorsement of an illiberal social order. Coupled with the peaceful, nostalgic imagery commonly associated with the movement, tradwives have transformed illiberalism from an academic or political exercise into a charming, algorithm-friendly aesthetic.

Tradwives: Ideology, Evolution, and Commercialization

A tradwife is defined as a woman who fulfills the traditional roles of a woman, such as raising children, cooking, cleaning, and being an attentive wife.³ The tradwife movement encourages women to adopt feminine traits like modesty and submissiveness and to trade postmodern feminism for patriarchal gender norms.⁴ It argues that women do not have to chase the elusive #girlboss ideal; instead, tradwives claim that women can find happiness and empowerment by embracing their true role as

¹ Bryce Thompson, “The New American Dream,” *EVIE Magazine*, November 27, 2024, Instagram Reels, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DC4pNDXP78a/?igsh=MXRlb3c3bWdlldAZba>.

² Megan Agnew, “Meet the Queen of the ‘Trad Wives’ (and Her Eight Children),” July 20, 2024, <https://www.thetimes.com/magazines/the-sunday-times-magazine/article/meet-the-queen-of-the-trad-wives-and-her-eight-children-plfr50cgk>.

³ Ruby Scott, “Girlcore: The Right Way to Be Female? Examining the Effect of Choice Feminism on What It Means to Be a ‘Woman’ through the Language and Trends of Tiktok,” *Plurality* 1 (October 2024), <https://doi.org/10.2218/plurality.10080>.

⁴ Mariel Cooksey, “Why Are Gen Z Girls Attracted to the Tradwife Lifestyle?” Political Research Associates (website), July 29, 2021, <https://politicalresearch.org/2021/07/29/why-are-gen-z-girls-attracted-tradwife-lifestyle>.

wives and mothers.⁵ This vision of a traditional household appeals to women who feel that post-1960s feminism engaged in false advertising. To them, feminism promised that women could have it all: motherhood, marriage, a career, and financial independence simultaneously. However, the reality for many women was not the idealized image touted by popular culture. The reality is that women often found themselves exhausted and frustrated trying to balance their careers with the social expectations faced by mothers and wives. Tradwife influencers capitalize on these feelings of anger and disappointment by implicitly or explicitly villainizing popular feminism.⁶ They advocate for a return to traditionalism as “a form of liberation from this perceived oppressive liberal ideology.”⁷ They offer an alternative to the “double shift” perpetuated by popular feminism⁸ by creating content that depicts a life wherein women are free of the challenges of a globalized, polarized world, insulated from the mental overload of modern society.⁹ Often without explicit political references, their use of visual symbols argues that women’s only path to fulfilment lies in the role of wife and mother.¹⁰ Most, if not all, tradwife content emphasizes the importance of faith and religion (Christianity in particular) in a traditional household, with some creators urging their followers to be a “Proverbs 31 woman”¹¹—an “ideal” woman described by King Solomon in the Book of Proverbs as wives of “noble character” who wake before dawn to prepare the family’s food, tend the mills and fields, and make linen sheets with the flax from their husband’s harvest.¹²

To that end, tradwife content often depicts a romanticized vision of the mythical postwar American housewife: a blonde, white woman with a baby on her hip, baking her own sourdough from scratch.¹³ The stars of tradwife content are almost exclusively young women who epitomize Western standards of beauty.¹⁴ They film themselves performing a range of domestic tasks from baking to organizing while extolling the virtues of staying at home, bearing and rearing children, and submitting to male leadership.¹⁵ Homemaking is a central theme in tradwife content, as influencers exhibit their own immaculate homes and share recipes, cleaning tips, and affiliate links with their audiences.¹⁶ In fact, their focus on motherhood makes some tradwife content indistinguishable from mainstream mommy bloggers.¹⁷ The calming, nostalgic Americana showcased in most tradwife content appeals to social media users’ aesthetic sensibilities, and users’ engagement with the content through views, likes, and comments, prompts social media algorithms to amplify and spread the content to users ranging

⁵ Cooksey, “Why Are Gen Z Girls Attracted to the Tradwife Lifestyle?”

⁶ Isabel Sykes, “From ‘girlboss’ to #stayathomegirlfriend: The Romanticisation of Domestic Labour on TikTok,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494241285643>.

⁷ Maria-Elena Kisyova, Yannick Veilleux-Lepage, and Vanessa Newby, “Conversations with Other (Alt-Right) Women: How Do Alt-Right Female Influencers Narrate a Far-Right Identity?” *Journal for Deradicalization*, no. 31 (June 2022): 35–72.

⁸ Sykes, “From ‘girlboss’ to #stayathomegirlfriend.”

⁹ Cooksey, “Why Are Gen Z Girls Attracted to the Tradwife Lifestyle?”

¹⁰ Megan L. Zahay, “What ‘Real’ Women Want: Alt-Right Femininity Vlogs as an Anti-Feminist Populist Aesthetic,” *Cogitatio* 10, no. 4 (November 2022): 170–179, <https://www.cogitatiopress.com/mediaandcommunication/article/view/5726>.

¹¹ Sophia Sykes, “Tradwives: The Housewives Commodifying Right-Wing Ideology,” GNET (blog), July 7, 2023, <https://gnet-research.org/2023/07/07/tradwives-the-housewives-commodifying-right-wing-ideology/>.

¹² Proverbs 31:10 – 31, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Proverbs%2031%3A10-31&version=NLT>.

¹³ Cooksey, “Why Are Gen Z Girls Attracted to the Tradwife Lifestyle?”

¹⁴ Sykes, “From ‘girlboss’ to #stayathomegirlfriend.”

¹⁵ Annie Kelly, “The Housewives of White Supremacy,” *New York Times*, June 1, 2018, Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/01/opinion/sunday/tradwives-women-alt-right.html>.

¹⁶ Zahay, “What ‘Real’ Women Want.”

¹⁷ Zahay.

across the ideological spectrum.¹⁸ Furthermore, tradwife content often includes elements of populist illiberalism by fomenting distrust of government institutions like public schools, which they claim teach values antithetical to those of the nation in which they live.¹⁹ In the United States, this often manifests as support for religious curricula in public schools and defunding federal education initiatives. While there is no singular model or brand of tradwife (tradwife creators range from Marilyn Monroe impersonators to farmgirls dressed like Dutch milkmaids), the use of nostalgic imagery, traditional values, and wifely care remains the uniting theme.²⁰

The concept of tradwives—a portmanteau of “traditional” and “wife”—has existed in far-right internet chatrooms for decades, but it slipped into mainstream internet discourse in the early 2020s. Many articles credit tradwifery’s ascent into popular culture with a BBC article, published in January 2020, called “#TradWife: ‘Submitting to My Husband Like It’s 1959,’ ” wherein British tradwife influencer Alena Kate Pettitt describes the movement as “submitting to and spoiling [one’s] husband like it’s 1959.”²¹ While restrictive gender roles for women have prevailed in right-wing religious groups for centuries, tradwifery is a uniquely contemporary movement that sees social media influencers employ modern commercial strategies to generate social clout.²² With their thousands to millions of followers, tradwives use social media marketing techniques “to co-opt and retrench patriarchy in both traditional and creative new ways.”²³ Tradwife influencers’ recent success can be attributed to their ability to consistently produce aesthetic, relatable content that social media algorithms reproduce *ad infinitum*.²⁴

Women’s roles in amplifying and perpetuating far-right ideology online are well-researched: creators such as Lauren Southern, Estee Williams, Lana Lokteff, Abby Roth, and others proudly denounce modern feminism as a man-hating, oppressive ideology that teaches women to hate their true selves. In addition to their condemnations of “woke feminism,” the aforementioned creators also use their platforms to promote far-right ideas of nationhood, race, and gender.²⁵ However, the majority of contemporary tradwives do not explicitly express white supremacist or nationalist ideology, instead focusing on fashion, wellness, marriage, and motherhood.²⁶ By doing so, they appeal to mainstream audiences and are unrestrained by social media platforms’ community guidelines. The popularity of the tradwife movement surged during the COVID-19 pandemic, when social media users used tradwives for inspiration for activities to do during quarantine (baking, for example). Their appeal only increased as a result of post-pandemic economic difficulties that encouraged many Americans to seek out cost-saving recipes for cooking store-bought items from scratch.

¹⁸ Hannah Trivette, “A Guide to Social Media Algorithms and SEO,” *Forbes*, October 14, 2024, <https://www.forbes.com/councils/forbesagencycouncil/2022/10/14/a-guide-to-social-media-algorithms-and-seo/>

¹⁹ Sykes, “Tradwives.”

²⁰ Sophie Elmhirst, “The Rise and Fall of the Trad Wife,” *The New Yorker*, March 29, 2024, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/the-rise-and-fall-of-the-trad-wife>.

²¹ BBC, “#TradWife: ‘Submitting to My Husband Like It’s 1959,’ ” BBC, January 16, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/stories-51113371>.

²² Cooksey, “Why Are Gen Z Girls Attracted to the Tradwife Lifestyle?,” *Political Research Associates*, July 29, 2021, <https://politicalresearch.org/2021/07/29/why-are-gen-z-girls-attracted-tradwife-lifestyle>.

²³ Sophia Sykes and Veronica Hopner, “Tradwives: Right-Wing Social Media Influencers,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 53, no. 4 (August 2024): 453–487, <https://doi.org/10.1177/08912416241246273>.

²⁴ Sykes and Hopner, “Tradwives.”

²⁵ Seyward Darby, “The Rise of the Valkyries,” *Harper’s Magazine*, September 2017, <https://harpers.org/archive/2017/09/the-rise-of-the-valkyries/>.

²⁶ Zahay, “What ‘Real’ Women Want.”

Critics and observers have noted the potential dangers of promoting a lifestyle of feminine subservience and dependence yet failed to identify the hidden motif within such content that poses the greatest threat.²⁷ By engaging with social media content that promotes traditional family structures, power dynamics, and aesthetics, individuals are susceptible to receiving more sinister content, courtesy of attention-economy algorithms. Tradwifery, due to its origins in alt-right, so-called “red-pilled” internet environments, acts as gateway content to male supremacist and white supremacist content.²⁸ Young women in particular are vulnerable to radicalization and harassment should their algorithm direct them to the darker sides of the right-wing internet. The advent of tradwives helped the alt-right attract women to their cause, which is vital to the survival of any extremist group.²⁹

The Illiberal Ideology of the Tradwife Movement

In order to connect the ideology of tradwives to the broader illiberal movement, one must first understand the concept of illiberalism itself. The term “illiberalism,” though a relatively recent arrival to academic and political discourse, can be defined as a “thin” ideology that both exists within and opposes liberalism. It is considered an *ex negativo* concept in that its definition is inherently relational; it is what liberalism is not.³⁰ It reacts against cultural, economic, and political liberalism by promoting hierarchical, majoritarian, and nationalist political positions.³¹ Therefore, if liberalism is based on the premise that all individuals have equal moral worth and advocates for a person’s right to live according to their own beliefs, then illiberalism describes a belief system that, when taken to its logical conclusion, rejects individual liberty and subsequently gender equality.³² Another important consideration in illiberal political philosophy, especially in the American and European context, is the supremacy of fundamentalist Christian values, for proponents of illiberalism make little to no distinction between religious convention and legal tradition.³³

The role of gender—its definition, construction, and position—in illiberal political thought revolves around hierarchy and national identity. First and foremost, illiberalism’s emphasis on and support for hierarchy extends to the heteropatriarchal relationship between men and women.³⁴ In its divergence from liberal values, illiberalism opposes gender equality and the contemporary feminist movement in favor of traditional power structures. Many illiberal critiques of liberalism include a denunciation of contemporary feminism as a deviation from a woman’s biological, social, and moral place in the

²⁷ Marika Lindholm, “The Tradwife Trend Is a Risky Throwback” *Psychology Today*, September 27, 2024, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/more-than-womens-work/202409/the-tradwife-trend-is-a-risky-throwback>.

²⁸ Miranda Christou, “#TradWives: Sexism as Gateway to White Supremacy,” *openDemocracy* (news site), March 17, 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/countering-radical-right/tradwives-sexism-gateway-white-supremacy/>.

²⁹ Extensive research has been done on the role of women in reproducing and internationalizing both white supremacist and jihadist extremism. See Julia Roth, “Gender, Populism and Anti-Immigrations: Ethno-Sexist, Femonationalist and Femoglobal Alliance,” *Moving the Social* 65 (August 2021): 61–79, <https://doi.org/10.46586/mts.65.2021.61-79>.

³⁰ Marlene Laruelle, “Illiberalism: A Conceptual Introduction,” *East European Politics* 38, no. 2 (June 2022): 303–327, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2022.2037079>.

³¹ Julian G. Waller, “Illiberalism and Authoritarianism,” in *Oxford Handbook of Illiberalism*, ed. Marlene Laruelle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023): 61–94, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197639108.013.1>.

³² Elisabeth Holzeithner, “Reactionary Gender Constructions in Illiberal Political Thinking,” *Politics and Governance* 10, no. 4 (October 31, 2022): 6–15.

³³ Holzeithner, “Reactionary Gender Constructions in Illiberal Political Thinking.”

³⁴ Holzeithner.

household as caregiver and caretaker.³⁵ Similarly, tradwives and trad-women frame compliance with gender norms as “the lynchpin of Western societies” and the “reproduction of tradition.”³⁶ The nuclear family comprises the foundation of the homogenous nation, and feminism prevents women from embracing their natural, God-given talents.³⁷

The idea that women could have it all, that they could be corporate executives while managing family and home, has proven nearly impossible for most women. Overload work culture has become the expectation rather than the exception in many developed countries; meanwhile, governments fail to provide critical support, such as subsidized childcare, to working families.³⁸ In fact, the trad lifestyle can be seen as an escape from the pressure of “always-on neoliberal work cultures” that push women to balance the demands of motherhood and career.³⁹ Instead, tradwives reframe the gendered division of labor wherein women are responsible for most, if not all, of the unpaid domestic work as the antidote to the corporate girl boss lifestyle.⁴⁰ In choosing to embrace a rigid definition of femininity, some women feel that they are able to assert some control over their lives in an increasingly chaotic world.⁴¹ In particular, young women are lured in by the tradwife “anti-hustle hustle,” the escape from job dissatisfaction and economic insecurity, and the psychological peace of a simple, coherent identity.⁴² Illiberalism offers a viable alternative centered on the family, the nation, and fundamentalist Christian values.⁴³

Both illiberalism and tradwifery are based upon a rejection of and opposition to neoliberalism. They rebuke the failures and unfulfilled promises of neoliberalism and form their own antithetical ideologies: for illiberalism, the unrealized economic gains of free trade and globalization; for tradwives, the hollow promise of work-life balance in a world of late-stage capitalism, wage attrition, and limited investment in social or community support policies.⁴⁴ The very terminology behind “tradwife”—namely, tradition—introduces the language of nationalism by describing frozen moments in a selective history that claim to represent “ ‘the’ authentic expression of the national collective.”⁴⁵ The tradwife lifestyle offers women security, freedom, and contentment by prioritizing traditional gender roles.⁴⁶

³⁵ Holzleithner.

³⁶ Alexandra Deem, “Feminine, Not Feminist,” *Ethnologia Europaea* 53, no. 2 (December 2023): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.16995/ee.8841>.

³⁷ Deem, “Feminine, Not Feminist.”

³⁸ Catherine Rottenberg and Shani Orgad, “Tradwives: The Women Looking for a Simpler Past but Grounded in the Neoliberal Present,” *The Conversation* (news site), February 7, 2020, <http://theconversation.com/tradwives-the-women-looking-for-a-simpler-past-but-grounded-in-the-neoliberal-present-130968>.

³⁹ Deem, “Feminine, Not Feminist.”

⁴⁰ Deem.

⁴¹ Rottenberg and Orgad, “Tradwives.”

⁴² Elmhirst, “The Rise and Fall of the Trad Wife”

⁴³ Andrea Pető, “Gender and Illiberalism,” in *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, eds. András Sajó, Renáta Uitz, and Stephen Holmes (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021).

⁴⁴ Christou, “#TradWives.”

⁴⁵ Christou.

⁴⁶ Sykes, “Tradwives.”

The Aestheticization of Illiberalism

Tradwives make illiberal ideals palatable to their audiences by aestheticizing their illiberal message. They create content centered on relationships, motherhood, and family life to capture social media users' attention, thereby creating an audience to whom they can direct their implied or explicit endorsements of traditional social hierarchies and national pride.⁴⁷ The tradwife aesthetic often includes the following elements: ambient music, soft or feminine décor, nature, fresh-baked bread, etc. The methodical performance of domestic ritual exudes comfort, presented as aesthetically pleasing and even therapeutic.⁴⁸ The aesthetic appeal of tradwife content conceals the problematic origins of the movement's ideology and enabled its spread to social media users who would otherwise never interact with such content.

In late-stage capitalism, where aesthetics are formed and reformed around consumption habits, the commodification of traditional femininity by tradwives established an aesthetic that content creators can draw from to expand their reach on social media. Success on social media depends on a content creator's ability to create a brand or aesthetic and to manage their different social media platforms.⁴⁹ To that end, tradwives learned to produce content that exploits social media algorithms and avoids violating a platform's community guidelines. Tradwife content on stricter platforms like Facebook and Instagram features majority wellness, beauty, and lifestyle content, while content on sites such as YouTube, Twitter, and Reddit is more ideologically driven.⁵⁰ Their aesthetic curations, fueled by the profit-motivated, consumerist social media algorithms, have manufactured tradwives' success.⁵¹

The recent success of the tradwife aesthetic can be further attributed to the post-pandemic global economic environment. Prolonged inflation and wage stagnation prompted consumers to find more cost-effective alternatives to many household and alimentary products. The aesthetic embraced by trad content creators—particularly their focus on scratch cooking, do-it-yourself projects, and self-sufficiency—has been amplified by social media algorithms' demand-based model due to audiences' increased financial limitations. Furthermore, many tradwife influencers offer courses in affiliate marketing and other profitable social-media-based “side hustles” to their followers, which some women may view as an alternative source of income that would allow them to earn money while performing otherwise unpaid domestic tasks such as cooking and childcare.⁵² Though ironic, tradwives' embrace of social media-based entrepreneurship makes their lifestyle more accessible to everyday women who cannot afford to sacrifice a second income yet desire the stay-at-home lifestyle of a traditional homemaker.

By consuming tradwife content, followers and social media users as a whole directly and indirectly consume illiberal ideology, ranging from patriarchy and antiglobalism to racial supremacy and xenophobia.⁵³ Tradwives use their aesthetic to “stylistically suture” illiberal, anti-feminist ideas to mainstream influencer culture through displays of femininity, homemaking, and family life.⁵⁴ Tradwife creators may distance themselves from explicitly white, male, or heterosexual supremacist content, but the illiberal themes within their content prompt the algorithm to direct their followers

⁴⁷ Kisyova, Veilleux-Lepage, and Newby, “Conversations with Other (Alt-Right) Women.”

⁴⁸ Sykes, “From ‘girlboss’ to #stayathomegirlfriend.”

⁴⁹ Sykes, “Tradwives.”

⁵⁰ Sykes.

⁵¹ Sykes and Hopner, “Tradwives.”

⁵² Rottenberg and Orgad, “Tradwives.”

⁵³ Sykes, “Tradwives.”

⁵⁴ Zahay, “What ‘Real’ Women Want.”

to more niche, extremist accounts.⁵⁵ They need not name the ideologies they endorse; the algorithm does it for them.

Case Study: Hannah Neeleman and Ballerina Farm

In the last year, Hannah Neeleman of Ballerina Farm has become synonymous with the tradwife aesthetic and lifestyle. With millions of followers across her social media platforms, she creates content centered around motherhood, farming, faith, cooking, and wellness. Her effortless beauty—blonde hair, blue eyes, clear skin, toned body—and calm demeanor have captivated followers since she and her husband, Daniel, launched the Ballerina Farm brand on social media in 2017.⁵⁶ Beyond her beauty and her addictively nostalgic content, she also provided her audience with a compelling testimony. Raised in Springville, Utah, by two Mormon parents and eight siblings, Neeleman (née Wright) discovered a passion for ballet. When she was 16, she was accepted into Juilliard’s prestigious ballet program, which accepts just 12 women per year.⁵⁷ She was on the precipice of a successful career as a dancer when she married her husband and decided to give it all up to buy a farm in Utah and raise a family. She shared her journey into motherhood and first-generation farming on her social media page, which quickly went from a few hundred followers of friends and family to several million at the beginning of 2022. Neeleman’s Instagram page has now surpassed 10 million followers, putting her well into the top 1% of creators, with a combined 22 million followers across TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube.⁵⁸ (Most tradwife accounts have a few hundred thousand followers at most.)⁵⁹

Like most of her counterparts, Neeleman weaves illiberal themes into her content to develop and maintain an engaged, loyal following that can supply her with revenue through affiliate marketing and brand collaboration. She makes money by selling Ballerina Farm products like flour, aprons, and flowers and by using her platform for advertising.⁶⁰ Depictions of her relationship to her children and her husband reinforce and endorse traditional social hierarchies and gendered divisions of household labor. Scenes of cooking meals from scratch while her children swarm around her and her husband is nowhere to be seen pepper her social media. Her bucolic, old-fashioned lifestyle is both a masterclass in aesthetics and branding and an illiberal vision of traditional culture and lifestyle. In addition to the characteristic housewife imagery that comprises much of Ballerina Farm’s content, Neeleman further embraces elements of digital folkism—a visual and cultural aesthetic in which influencers promote ancestral approaches to food, health, and even morality, romanticizing a pre-internet, pre-civil rights society.⁶¹ In the American context of illiberalism’s “ideological universe,”⁶² nationalist imagery manifests in the digital traditionalist space as sprawling Western landscapes, scenes of family life, and

⁵⁵ Elmhirst, “The Rise and Fall of the Trad Wife.”

⁵⁶ Stephanie McNeal, “Hannah Neeleman, a.k.a. Ballerina Farm, Is Ready to Reintroduce Herself,” *Glamour*, December 5, 2024, <https://www.glamour.com/story/hannah-neeleman-aka-ballerina-farm-is-ready-to-reintroduce-herself>.

⁵⁷ Ellen O’Connell Whittet, “On Ballerina Farm and Ballet’s Crushing Lessons in Femininity,” *Vogue*, July 31, 2024, <https://www.vogue.com/article/on-ballerina-farm-and-ballets-crushing-lessons-in-femininity>.

⁵⁸ Julia Moskin, “Tycoon or Tradwife? The Woman Behind Ballerina Farm Makes Her Own Path,” *New York Times*, December 3, 2024, Food, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/03/dining/ballerina-farm-hannah-neeleman.html>.

⁵⁹ At the time most research on tradwives was conducted (2020–2023), researchers across the board cited this statistic. See the work of Sophia Sykes, Veronica Hopner, and Catherine Tebaldi, among others.

⁶⁰ Sykes, “Tradwives: The Housewives Commodifying Right-Wing Ideology.”

⁶¹ Catherine Tebaldi, “Granola Nazis: Digital Traditionalism, the Folkish Movement and the Normalisation of the Far-Right,” GNET (blog), March 22, 2023, <https://gnet-research.org/2023/03/22/granola-nazis-digital-traditionalism-the-folkish-movement-the-normalisation-of-the-far-right/>.

⁶² Laruelle, “Illiberalism.”

a sense of freedom from the constrictions of government.⁶³ Ballerina Farm’s story is “overwhelmingly American.”⁶⁴ The narrative behind the content exemplifies an old-fashioned American story: a young family finding success, self-sufficiency, and freedom by moving to a parcel of land in the mountains of rural Utah. The story of the American West, in particular, represents a moment in the country’s history full of national pride, homogenous communities (though the American West, in truth, was diverse, it is often remembered as being exclusively white), and American sovereignty over its territory. These themes are present throughout Neeleman’s content, introducing her followers to the ideals of American illiberalism. Her faith, too, contributes to the illiberalism of her story. Her Mormon beliefs, which she often shares on social media, emphasize traditional gender roles and wifely subservience. Additionally, Mormonism is a uniquely American religion, inherently tied to ideas of frontier life, religious freedom, and American exceptionalism. The illiberal ideology underpinning the scenic imagery, though never explicitly stated, permeates her content and is amplified to millions of users across her different social media platforms.

Her first experience with the national spotlight came after the Mrs. World pageant in January 2024, where she skyrocketed to fame for competing just 12 days after giving birth to her eighth child, Flora Jo, at home.⁶⁵ Social media users expressed a variety of reactions ranging from awe at her strength to concern for her welfare, but the controversy (read: engagement) helped propel the Ballerina Farm brand into the mainstream of social media. Her followers and friends now include such celebrities as actress Jennifer Garner, supermodel Lucky Blue Smith, pianist Jon Batiste, and other public figures. Despite the criticism she faced for promoting the tradwife lifestyle, Ballerina Farm remained during this time an inspiration for women, mothers, and other tradwives. In late July, however, the fantasy was punctured by a scathing interview published by *The Times* of London. The article presents an altogether darker picture than the golden scenes featured on Ballerina Farm’s Instagram. The interviewer paints a grim picture of Neeleman’s life: steamrolled and manipulated by her husband, a man she initially refused to go out with, into giving up the dancing career she had dreamed of her whole life; pressured into having endless numbers of children; depleted and exhausted by the demands of childcare and farm work.⁶⁶ Neeleman tells the interviewer that it is not uncommon for her to be bedridden for days at a time from sheer exhaustion.⁶⁷ Most alarming is the way in which her husband talks down to Hannah, often correcting her answers or answering the interviewer’s questions on her behalf. The article highlighted the unspoken truth of tradwifery: that wives are their husband’s subordinates, and that power is firmly concentrated in his hands.

Despite the grim realities revealed in the interview, Neeleman’s content remains wildly popular on social media, as evidenced by her millions of followers. The power of the illiberal aesthetic and the consumerist model of social media has made it so that Ballerina Farm continues to grow and thrive in spite (or because) of controversy. Neeleman’s scenes of farm living, child rearing, and homemaking, which are often accompanied by typical 1940s, postwar instrumentals, have proven irresistible to viewers who long to escape the hustle of modern life and trade in their pantsuits for pinafores. One commenter notes: “The reason many middle-aged moms with left-leaning views like me are so bedeviled by Ballerina Farm is that it’s confusing that content so visually appealing can also represent such a threat to our sense of equality.”⁶⁸ Tradwives have so successfully crafted an aesthetic that appeals to the illiberal tendencies in their audience that even when viewers become aware of the problematic nature of the ideologies they consume, they refuse to halt their consumption of the

⁶³ Tebaldi, “Granola Nazis.”

⁶⁴ McNeal, “Hannah Neeleman, a.k.a. Ballerina Farm, Is Ready to Reintroduce Herself.”

⁶⁵ Agnew, “Meet the Queen of the ‘Trad Wives’ (and Her Eight Children).”

⁶⁶ Agnew.

⁶⁷ Agnew.

⁶⁸ Whittet, “On Ballerina Farm and Ballet’s Crushing Lessons in Femininity.”

content. It satiates their desire for escape, for an alternative lifestyle that promises the true fulfillment that liberalism failed to deliver.

Implications for the Illiberal Future

In spreading illiberal ideals, tradwife influencers like Hannah Neeleman have succeeded where alt-right counterparts have failed, because they have been able to co-opt feminist language while successfully distancing themselves from the unsavory elements of far-right internet discourse. For this reason, I argue that the tradwife movement of recent years has popularized illiberalism independent of conservatism, the alt-right, or other ideological spheres. The commodification of femininity and tradition by tradwives contributes to the reinvigoration of illiberal values such as heteropatriarchal distributions of power and the idea of a homogenous nation. At its core, tradwifery exploits the politics of division, the liberal-illiberal tension within democratic societies, to reproduce its own ideology for financial gain. The popularity of the tradwife aesthetic threatens to popularize the ideological themes behind it, thereby exacerbating cultural divisions and eventually undermining the liberal democratic values upon which many marginalized communities depend.

Research on the role of women in alt-right online spaces is extensive. It effectively explains their motivations for joining such movements and their role in spreading traditionalist ideology online. However, the mainstream popularity of the tradwife aesthetic demonstrates what many societies are beginning to realize: illiberal ideas of the nation, gender, race, and religion are becoming increasingly normalized. The combination of a variety of structural factors—global economic downturns, profit-motivated social media models, recommendation algorithms, and the commodification of aesthetics—have created an international political environment wherein illiberalism is mainstream. Therefore, future research should focus not on the ways in which tradwives are radicalized or radicalize other people in turn, but instead on the tools far-right, nationalist, and illiberal movements cross into the mainstream. This knowledge is vital to understanding ideological evolution in the digital age.

Additionally, the success of the tradwife movement in promoting illiberal values can be a lesson to policymakers. Across the ideological spectrum, citizens (read: social media users) devour tradwife content because it promises them an alternative to the realities of the urban corporate lifestyle. Preserving liberal democracy, therefore, requires policymakers to address people's desire for security and stability by fulfilling the promises they made in the era of neoliberalism. Women will continue to embrace the illiberal offering so long as the economic and social failings of Western societies around the world continue to prevent them from being able to pursue a life outside the home while simultaneously managing a home and family. By providing social and community policies that combat the isolation of the globalized digital age and remedy the economic dysfunction of the post-pandemic market, governments may be able to stymie the spread of illiberalism and defend liberal values in the future.