

The Internet Missionaries: A Study of Women's Anti-Feminist Discourse Online

Eléonore Cartellier

ABSTRACT: In the United States during the twenty-first century, anti-feminist ideas have found a fertile ground in which to thrive: the internet. Through blogs, websites, YouTube videos, Facebook posts and other such platforms, anti-feminists have been able to develop a strong and coherent discourse which is often championed by women themselves. From the comfort of their own homes, anti-feminist women are able to both voice and share conservative values such as anti-abortion content, anti-contraception ideology (the Quiverful movement), promotion of "housewife life" (which they often call "Tradwife"), discouraging girls from furthering their education, advocating for modest clothing for women, and encouraging punitive parenting (Blanket training). This paper discusses the rhetoric at work in anti-feminist ideology online looking specifically at the discourse of six prominent figures of this movement: "Mrs. Midwest," "Girl Defined," "Classically Abby," "Emily Wilson," "Estee Williams," and "The Transformed Wife." This article shows how these anti-feminist ideas are defended by the speakers and how their discourse is constructed in order to convince themselves and other women. This article also analyzes how key words and concepts are taken up from one speaker to the next creating a coherent and logical discussion among contemporary anti-feminists. Finally, this paper demonstrates how these women conceal two important facts in their internet productions: firstly, that by being content creators on the internet they are not devoting their entire lives to their husbands and children as they claim to be doing, and secondly that the lifestyle that they promote places women in potentially harmful situations as they become completely dependent on their husbands.

KEYWORDS: anti-feminism; women's studies; social media; TradWife; religious right

Introduction

Feminists and anti-feminists have often defended and promoted their ideas through similar media from nineteenth century pamphlets and magazines to television speeches, books, and radio interviews in the twentieth century. The beginning of the twenty-first century is no exception to this rule with both feminists and anti-feminists migrating from the mediums of

television, radio, and print towards the internet and social media. Videos, hashtags, posts, tweets, and blogs are now the new location to share and bolster pro or anti-feminist views.

After successfully taking hold of the radio (with shows such as *Focus on the Family*,¹ *Today's Issues*,² or *Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk*³ which emphasize clear-cut gender roles within the family and promote marriage and children for heterosexual couples), the film industry (with the success of *the God's Not Dead*⁴ franchise), as well as television (with *19 Kids and Counting*⁵ featuring the Duggar family or *Bringing Up Bates*⁶ about super-sized families with nearly sixty members each), anti-feminist discourse has now also created a stronghold online. One of the key variations is that part of this discourse now comes from individuals voicing their views rather than institutions such as the Family Research Council or American Family Association.⁷ Notwithstanding, much of the rhetoric used by individual anti-feminists originates from anti-feminist discourse which dates back to the twentieth century and has trickled down through conservative media. Even though the term "anti-feminist" will be used in this study, one must

¹ The *Focus on the Family* website hosts articles as well as podcasts at www.focusonthefamily.com/.

² *Today's Issues* radio shows can be found at afr.net/podcasts/today-s-issues/.

³ *Family Talk* website is www.drjamesdobson.org/.

⁴ This is a series of four films released between 2014 and 2021 which focus on heated debates between atheists and Christians. The films' point of view is that Christians are under siege and need to defend themselves publicly and through the courts. For further analysis of these films see Courtney J. Dreyer, "The right to believe: construction of white Christian victimhood in the *God's Not Dead* series," *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, vol. 40, no. 4, 30 August 2023, pp. 242-55.

⁵ This reality television show aired from 2008 to 2015 when it was revealed that the eldest son, Josh Duggar, had molested his sisters when they were younger and had had an extra-marital affair. The show then continued as a spin-off looking at the older girls from 2015 to 2020.

⁶ This show aired from 2015 to 2021. The Bates family had previously been on air in 2012 in a different reality television show entitled *United Bates of America*.

⁷ The Family Research Council's mission is to "advance[e] faith, family, and freedom in public policy and the culture from a biblical worldview" (The Family Research Council www.frc.org/). The aforementioned Josh Duggar worked for FRC from 2013 to 2015.

The American Family Association's vision is to be a "leading organization in biblical worldview training for cultural transformation" (The American Family Association www.afa.net). They also have a radio program called "American Family Radio" which features the previously mentioned radio shows: *Focus on the Family*, *Today's Issues*, and *Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk*.

note that the speakers usually use more positive terms to define themselves such as “pro-family,” a term which originated during the second-wave⁸ of anti-feminism (Spruill 40).⁹

Even though these women are not going to foreign countries to promote their message, they are in a way missionaries on the internet as they aim to convince other women to change their feminist visions of the world to an anti-feminist one and to move from a career to staying at home and raising children.¹⁰

This paper explores the anti-feminist discourse emerging online by women content creators. Indeed, it can be surprising¹¹ to see women advocating for fewer rights and for a return to a supposedly lost golden age of homemakers, or stay-at-home mothers. This article will wonder how these ideas are defended by anti-feminist content creators and how their discourse is constructed not only in order to convince other women, but to justify their own choices in a world where their lifestyles could be considered out-of-date. It will also analyze how key words and concepts are taken up from one speaker to the next, creating a coherent and logical discussion among contemporary anti-feminists.

Firstly, the paper will identify some of the leading anti-feminists online and build a framework for their typical characteristics and the differences between them before moving on to analyze their discourse as well as their portrayal of traditional family life. Finally, the paper will take a look behind the scenes at the art and artifices used to reach a wider audience online, as well

⁸ Each wave of feminism saw a backlash from antifeminists who fought against the rights that feminists wanted to achieve. First-wave feminism for example saw women's movements against universal suffrage. In order to identify the rhetoric and timeframes associated with these antifeminist views I will use the notions of first, second, third, and fourth-waves of antifeminists.

⁹ The term “pro-life” is also usually used instead of “anti-abortion” by these groups.

¹⁰ Classically Abby clarifies who her target audience is in her 2022 video entitled “For the women who aren't married and don't have children: this is for you”: “So in a lot of my videos I talk about the importance of having children, the importance of doing these traditional steps in life. And a lot of my content is geared toward those women who don't know that that's important” (1:29-1:48).

¹¹ Françoise Picq expresses similar surprise at the fact that French anti-feminism is also spearheaded by women: “As a feminist, I am struck by the fact that it is women who are leading this obscurantist battle. These women are no doubt magnified by media coverage, but they do not seem to be manipulated or under outside influence” (147-48 [translation my own]).

as how these women's lifestyles contradict their own views as their content creation is a job (it is time-consuming and produces revenue) even though they advocate for women not to work. The concluding remarks will focus on what is left unsaid by these women, that is to say, the personal and political repercussions that such discourse can have on the lives of other women.

The Corpus and Sources

In order to look only at women's resistance to feminism, couples have been removed from the corpus because with influential anti-feminism couples the men often speak more than the women and overshadow the woman's point of view. Cases in point would be Paul and Morgan or Nate and Sutton on YouTube or both the Duggar and Bates couples from the reality television shows mentioned above. On these websites, blogs, and YouTube channels the husband's voice and point of view usually overpowers the woman's, one can identify many instances when the men speak over the women or leave very little space for their narratives. The women are often in positions where they look up to their spouses and nod along to what the man is saying rather than giving their own perspective.

This paper therefore focuses on women who write or appear in front of the camera without men. This study will focus on six anti-feminism influencers: "Mrs. Midwest," "Girl Defined," "Classically Abby," "Emily Wilson," "Estee Williams," and "The Transformed Wife." These six missionaries have similar backgrounds as they all display the accoutrements of a middle-class lifestyle,¹² are white¹³ women and, apart from Lori Alexander, they are all in their late twenties or early thirties. They also all express religious beliefs in their monologues.

¹² The reason why most anti-feminist influencers are middle-class is that much of their discourse is focused on being a stay-at-home wife and / or mother. This necessarily excludes women who need to work and do not have that choice as Farah Dubois-Shaik explains: "[...] these political choices are linked both with a privilege probably reserved for the middle or upper classes, requiring alternative incomes (part-time work, remote work, savings, or shared income as a couple), and with a world of work unsuited to family and personal needs." [translation my own].

¹³ The reason why most of them are white is that there is an overlap between this content and White Nationalism. Mrs. Midwest and Girl Defined have both put out content that reflects such leanings. For an

The first and most eminent anti-feminist in this study is “Mrs. Midwest.” She has a blog, an Instagram account, and a YouTube channel. She is of the Protestant faith and mostly advocates for women staying at home and taking care of their families. She is also a great proponent of cliché femininity which she opposes to feminism. This femininity is estheticized through the wearing of frilly, flowery pastel or pink dresses, long hair, complex make-up, and manicures. As scholar of digital cultures, Annie Kelly has remarked, “The seemingly anachronistic way they dress is no accident. The deliberately hyperfeminine aesthetics are constructed precisely to mask the authoritarianism of their ideology.” Even though she herself studied strategic communication at college and took hormonal birth control,¹⁴ Mrs. Midwest advocates against higher education and birth control for women (Mrs. Midwest Blog, FAQ section).

The second example under study is sisters Kristen Clark and Bethany Baird, who run a ministry known as “Girl Defined.” The tagline for this ministry is “getting back to God’s design.” They have a blog, YouTube channel, and write books for women on the subject of love, sexuality as well as men’s and women’s roles. They are Protestant and uphold modesty and advocate for purity culture; they read the Bible literally in regards to men’s and women’s roles.

The third person being studied is Emily Wilson who has a YouTube Channel and who is also a Christian author, musician, and speaker. Her most recent book, entitled *God’s Glorious Girl*, is

analysis of links between White nationalism and traditional values see Devin Proctor, “The #Tradwife persona and the rise of radicalized white domesticity,” *Persona Studies*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2022, pp. 7-26. Even though, Black anti-feminist influencers do exist—Ebony Nikita, Trinity Sierra, and Krista Bowman Ruth for example—their reach is smaller. See also Ashley A. Mattheis, “#TradCulture: Reproducing whiteness and neo-fascism through gendered discourse online,” *Handbook of Critical Studies in Whiteness*, edited by Shona Hunter and Christi van der Westhuizen, Routledge, 2022, pp. 91-100.

Candace Owens (who has 5 million followers on Instagram and 1.82 million subscribers on YouTube) could be seen as a counterexample but her take is clearly that of political commentator and not a housewife promoting domesticity. Indeed, many of Candace Owens’s videos are interviews with men which dilutes her own voice to some extent.

¹⁴ “Do you use birth control? No. I did when I first got married, and I think it's the biggest regret of my life. The pill was really hard on my hormonal system, and it's taken a while to get all systems back online, if you know what I mean...”

aimed at girls under the age of six. She is of the Catholic faith, is anti-abortion, and promotes traditional values.

The fourth anti-feminist influencer is "Classically Abby." She is an opera singer, of the Jewish faith, and has a blog, an Instagram account, and a YouTube channel where she shares conservative views on family values, children, modesty, the idea of women staying at home, and her opposition to abortion. She believes all women should become mothers as she stated in a 2023 video, "I believe though that motherhood is what life is for. That if you don't choose to put other people ahead of yourself and if you don't choose to live your life for the purpose of raising the next generation, then you are just living a hedonistic life and one that is only for here and now. And honestly this is sad" ("Should you be a mother? Actually answering the question do many of you are wondering about..." 2:33-2:57). Many of her videos portray this kind of invective against women who choose different lifestyles than her own as she belittles them by portraying them as egocentric and potentially damaging to society.

The fifth influencer is relatively new to social media and is called "Estee Williams." She has an Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube platform. She also portrays cliché femininity, advocates for very stereotypical roles for men and women, and defines herself as a "TradWife." She believes that women should stay at home to take care of their husbands and children and does not believe in any safety net for such women. In her 2024 YouTube video entitled "Prayer or Prenups?" she states as much, "I trust him [my husband] to the point where I would have never asked him for a prenup before we got married. In fact, I'm pretty sure he would have taken that kind of as an insult that I don't trust him and I'm not confident in my decision to marry him. In fact, I think prenups make divorce nicer in a way" (0:50-1:10). This quote is typical of her way of presenting facts. She takes a legal document (a prenuptial agreement), which grants each consenting party certain rights to property and money before, during, and after marriage, and portrays it as an instrument of distrust in the stability of a marriage and claims that it can lead to divorce.

The sixth and last person studied is Lori Alexander, who has a blog and YouTube channel under the name "The Transformed Wife." She is a wife, mother, and author and is perhaps the most

anti-feminist and niche influencer analyzed in this article. Whereas most of the other influencers analyzed here try to tone down some of their more divisive content in order to cater to a wider audience, Lori Alexander has very strong opinions about abortion, chastity, raising children very strictly, homeschooling, women staying at home, having as many children as possible, and leaving the vote to men. The last point is reminiscent of first wave anti-feminism which campaigned against votes for women. There is a clear contradiction in her discourse though as she herself went to college, held a job, used contraception, sent her four children to public school, and votes.

The Discourse and Portrayal of Traditional Values

Online antifeminist discourse touches on a number of key themes that are repeatedly heralded by these different women. These themes are reiterated in varying degrees and encompass a wide variety of topics such as anti-abortion, housewives, submission to men, purity culture (reserving sex for marriage with purity rings and purity dances), femininity (engaging in practices which are traditionally associated with women), strict parenting (blanket training, strict obedience, and spanking misbehaving children¹⁵), as well as limiting education to home-schooling and keeping women from pursuing college educations. Modesty culture is also widely touched on, that is to say clothing that covers the body as Sian Norris described in her 2023 article: "Long, floral dresses are the norm, idealising a mythic past of feminine modesty. Women should be covered up, as their bodies are just for their husbands."

As it is impossible to give an extensive study of all these themes in short format, this article has chosen to focus solely on the first three, that is to say anti-abortion, housewives, and submission to men. The first theme has been gaining traction online these last few years, especially leading up to and the subsequent overturning of *Roe vs. Wade* in June 2022. Even

¹⁵ The Transformed Wife has a Blog Post entitled "Teaching Children to Rule their Emotions" where she quotes Proverbs 13:24: "Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him" and advocates for the corporal punishment of children.

though it is an important part of antifeminism rhetoric, this topic is also relayed by many religious and political groups both on and offline.

The themes of housewives and submitting to one's husband have become more prevalent in the wake of the #TradWife movement. This hashtag brings together women who espouse traditional gender roles and wish to have traditional marriages. The subculture borrows many esthetic attributes from the 1950s housewife in dress, makeup, hairstyles, and household appliances that have a retro feel. If we look at Google Trends (a website which evaluates the popularity of Google searches) we can see that the hashtag first became noteworthy in January 2020 and reached its peak in March 2024.

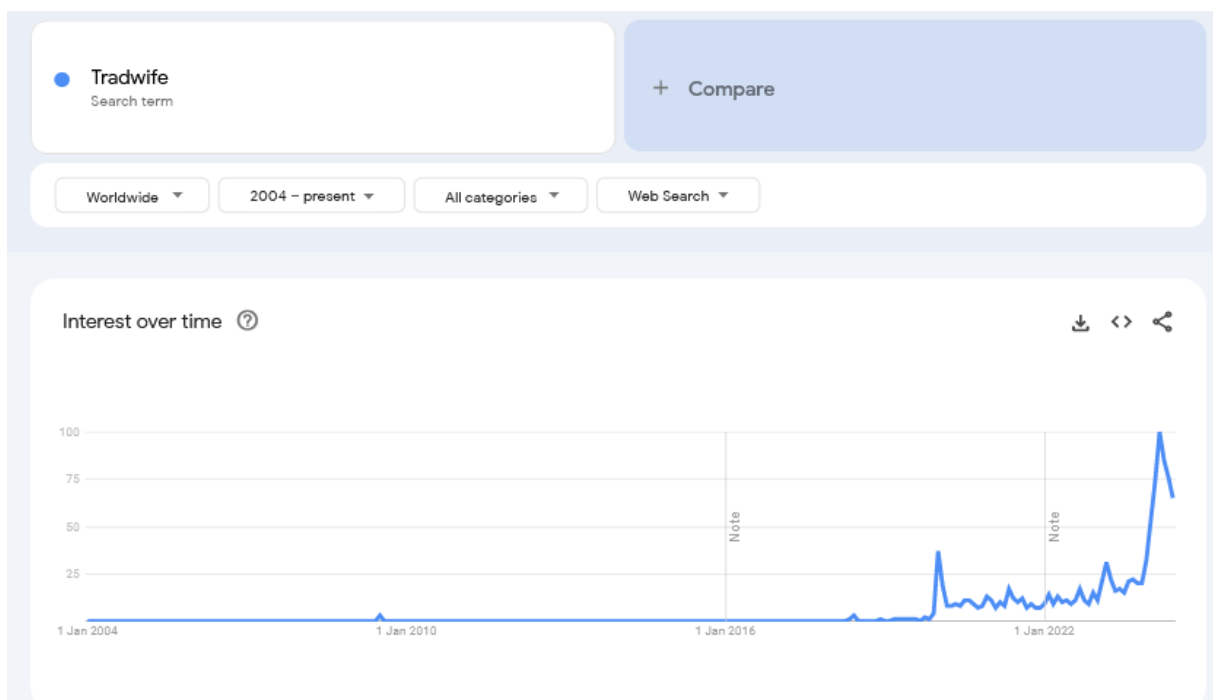


Fig. 1. Screenshot taken from Google Trends. Accessed 19 June 2024.

The three themes chosen have therefore been at the forefront of antifeminist discourse recently and enable us to see how the discussion around these topics has been constructed.

Anti-Abortion

Conservative religious right discourse is rife with the theme of abortion (Holland 78; Ziegler 17) and our anti-feminists are no exception. Just as their political and religious counterparts,

anti-feminists use many arguments to sway public opinion and bring their audiences to embrace the anti-abortion cause. These arguments can be organised into different categories: scientific, religious, and psychological, which shall be analysed in this part.

Emily Wilson outlines the basis of this discourse in her 2019 YouTube video entitled “How Can Someone be Pro-woman AND Pro-life”:

The first thing I want to say is that we as women have a natural instinct and yearning to take care of things [...] It's a part of who we are, we can't help ourselves. And we love to take care of the vulnerable [...] It's part of our instinct, it's part of our femininity, it's part of the fabric of who we are as women. (2:10-2:50)

We cannot escape our nature and abortion goes directly against a woman's inherent nature and inherent desire to take care of things and protect our children. And when we go against our inherent nature as women it will never cultivate peace. (4:15-4:35)

In this first example, Wilson lays down the foundations of the “scientific” argument claiming that women are made in a particular way. The references to “natural instinct,” “cannot escape our nature,” and “can't help ourselves” paints the portrait of a natural or biological truth that encompasses all women. Despite the fact that she uses scientific (or scientific-sounding) terms such as “instinct,” “nature,” and “fabric,” the argument is not made using any studies, references, or measures. It is therefore not scientific and could be classified as a pseudo-scientific argument. Even though this is not evidence-based research, the use of these terms can have an impact on the audience as the words chosen give off an air of scientific authority and for that reason might be more convincing.

Another argument of the anti-feminists is the religious condemnation of abortion, exemplified by Girl Defined in their 2015 blogpost:

Abortion is an onslaught against the youngest, most innocent and most helpless humans. Those little humans are NOT being “gently” put to rest. They are being killed in the most gruesome ways (being torn apart and burned inside the womb). Despite the fact that abortion is totally barbaric, it's also completely anti-biblical and anti-God. [...] Abortion is a direct attack against God. Humans are the only living beings created in the image of God. When a baby is intentionally murdered, an image bearer of God is being destroyed. (“The Horrifying Truth About Abortion and Why it Matters”)

In this example Bethany uses biblical terms with “created in the image of God” which is a quote taken from Genesis 1:27 (“God created man in his own image”) as well as a repetition of the word “God”—four times in as many sentences—in order to underscore the divide between what she understands to be God’s design and abortion. Bethany’s rhetoric is also particularly graphic with terms such as “gruesome,” “torn apart,” “burned,” and “barbaric” which paint a horrific portrait of abortion and are meant to sway the public against the procedure by making them feel nauseated and repelled. This discourse is typical of anti-abortion activists as Jennifer Holland points to in her 2020 book entitled *Tiny You: A Western History of the Anti-Abortion Movement*: “When activists took gory photos of aborted fetuses, fetus dolls, embalmed fetuses, videos of abortions, and symbolic funerals and cemeteries into private and public spaces, they waged a war for hearts and minds” (3). Bethany is thus using the tried and tested technique of blood and gore and pairing it with biblical overtones to create a hybrid argument.

Finally, antifeminists also use moral or psychological arguments to discuss abortion. One such example can be seen in posts by Classically Abby or the Transformed Wife. Abby states:

As a young woman in 2020, you have been told that being pro-life is anti-woman, nothing could be further from the truth. You are pro-women’s rights and that includes the rights of unborn women everywhere. Today women are misled into choosing their desires over the very lives of their unborn children: to lead a life of constantly pursuing pleasure after pleasure as they constantly grow more and more fleeting; to live in the perpetual present with no meaning in sight; and to sacrifice the inestimable value of human life for empty freedom. (“If You Care About Women, Be PRO-LIFE” 3:35-4:10)

Lori Alexander expands on the idea that women’s lives and needs are being juxtaposed with those of children “We are living in an anti-child culture. This culture seeks pleasure and self over all else” (“Are You Truly Pro-Life?”). The notion of “pleasure” is used here in a negative way by both speakers equivocating “pleasure” with selfishness and uselessness. Moreover, this argument lays the blame at women’s feet, as men are not mentioned in the debate. The opposition of anti-feminists to abortion dates back to the second-wave of anti-feminists and the “development of the ‘religious right’” (Spruill 48). Ziegler situates this development in her article explaining that “there was no obvious partisan split on abortion in the 1970s” and that

“[b]etween 1976 and 1980, Ronald Regan helped to engineer the partnership between the GOP [Grand Old Party] and the antiabortion movement, seeing antiabortion voters as a new possible constituency for the Republican Party” (17). In the same vein, Holland argues that the moral argument behind anti-abortion was essential in reconstituting the ethics of the Republican Party in a post-segregated South: “When in the 1970s Americans began to recast the civil rights movement as righteous, not riotous, southerners who resisted desegregation were left outside of history’s moral arc. [...] Anti-abortion activists offered one way out of this conundrum by building a civil rights movement for fetuses” (4). Abby and Lori’s positioning of women who have not had an abortion as more respectable than those who have had one, thus ties in with a wider political vision that has been at work since the end of the 1970s.

These same pseudo-scientific, religious, and moral/psychological arguments can also be found on the subject of housewives as is clear in their advocacy that the ideal place for women is in the home and not at work.

A Woman’s Place Is in the Home

Contemporary antifeminists look back not only to the second-wave of anti-feminism but also to the previous century as they have made their own argument for a nineteenth century notion: women are the “Angel in the House.” This is the title of Coventry Patmore’s 1854 poem which portrays a perfect woman as well as the separate spheres that she and her husband inhabit. The Victorian ideal of separate spheres, where the women inhabit the domestic or private sphere and the men the public or social sphere, is rejuvenated by antifeminists through the glorification of women staying out of the workforce.

Mrs. Midwest gives readers an example of the pseudo-scientific argument for a return to domesticity, when she says, “I do think that cleaning and nesting is more feminine [...] and I do think that it’s genetic. If you look back, you know prehistoric, they had caves: ‘I’ll make your cave nice, you give me meat, I’ll survive and give you babies.’ That hasn’t gone away, that’s still there in us and it’s very fun” (“The Art of Femininity, With Feminine Homemaker Caitlin Ann Huber” 13:30- 14:10). The famous YouTuber uses the “scientific” argument through

genetics (a claim which she does not back up with data) and a re-writing of prehistory to make her point. In this case, she invents a dialogue between a prehistoric man and woman, which in her mind explains why women nowadays have a genetic predisposition for staying home and taking care of children while men “hunt for meat.” This vision of prehistory is one that was not invented by Mrs. Midwest but is a “widespread myth” as Stephanie Coontz explains: “The story that marriage was invented for the protection of women is still the most widespread myth about the origins of marriage. According to the protective or provider theory of marriage, women and infants in early human societies could not survive without men to bring them the meat of woolly mammoths and protect them from marauding sabre-toothed tigers” (35). Mrs. Midwest is thus using a myth that has been debunked multiple times and is historically inaccurate.

Additionally, something interesting about this video is that it does not come from Mrs. Midwest’s YouTube channel but can be found on a notorious misogynist’s channel, Yogi Oabs, who conducted an interview with her. In this interview Mrs. Midwest opens up more than she does on her own channel and goes much further than she does in front of her own fanbase. In one of her videos entitled, “How to Meet AND Attract GOOD Men || Husband Material?? Where Are They!?” published in September 2023, she claims “You can’t beat around the bush. In order to achieve that dream of being a mom, of being at home, you need a man, somebody’s got to be out there making money so you can stay home, that’s just how traditional relationships work. It’s not everybody’s cup of tea nor do I believe everybody needs to live life this way” (1:50-2:07). Here she both reinforces the provider stereotype that she had explained in her 2019 interview with the idea that the man must “make money” and hedges it with the avowal that this life is not meant for everyone. What is interesting is that there is a double discourse at work between the Yogi Oabs interview in which she claims that domesticity is “genetic” and her own video which is meant to cater to a wider audience with less divisive content. This point shall be further analyzed in our last part about dilution techniques used by these content creators.

Kristen Clark from Girl Defined as well as Lori Alexander both hone in on the religious aspect of staying at home with points of view such as, "I pray you will plan your future with homemaking and hospitality as a priority on your list of 'accomplishments.' I pray you will join me in embracing the lost art of homemaking...not for our own sakes, but for the sake of advancing the gospel" (Girl Defined, "Why Modern Girls Should Embrace the Lost Art of Homemaking"). The religious tone is obvious here with of the notion "advancing the gospel," which Clark claims happens when women remain at home even though this is not explicit in the *Bible*. Lori Alexander goes further by stating: "God's will for young women is to be keepers at home. This is in direct contrast to what they are modelled growing up and taught in the schools, churches, and homes. This is why they are so offended when they learn that this is God's will" ("Women don't want to stay at home"). The quote "God's will" opens and closes her paragraph which gives a finality to her words. This epistrophe creates a frame-effect for the reader and the repetition reinforces the message. Moreover, Lori Alexander directly pits society (embodied by the "schools, churches, and homes") against the top-down commandment of "God's will." Her inclusion of "churches" in secular society is interesting here as she seems to consider that even churches do not teach "God's will."

But something else is also at work here. In both of these statements the women seem to be talking to young girls by using vocabulary such as "plan your future," "young women," as well as "taught in the schools." Indeed, the target audience for most of these speeches are young girls who are browsing the internet. Mrs. Midwest even goes as far as calling herself "your big internet sister" in her video "How I overcame feeling insecure and self-conscious," Estee Williams gives "Big Sister Advice," and the Girl Defined sisters often address "Christian girls" in their talks and have thirty-one blog posts on the topic of teens,¹⁶ including videos such as "Advice for Teen Girls on Guys and Crushes." In her video entitled, "Advice to Young Girls Aspiring to be TradWives" Estee Williams specifically targets "high school girls" and actively discourages them from going to university. This rhetoric is used to groom girls and young

¹⁶ See girldefined.com/tag/teens

women into anti-feminists. If the aim is to stop women from going to college and encourage them instead to get married and have children young, then it makes sense for the target audience to be teenagers. The problem with this targeting of youthful audiences is that the women giving this advice are themselves much older and did not follow the advice that they are giving as we shall analyze further in the last part.

In this subculture, homemaking and a wife's deference to her husband are closely yoked. Not only are women enjoined to stay at home, but they are also expected to obey their spouses.

Relationships with Husbands: Wives Must Submit

Anti-feminists defend and justify women's roles as submissive to men's and advocate specifically that wives should submit to their husbands. Mrs. Midwest explains:

In the vows at our wedding [...] you vow to submit to your husband and to follow his lead. And I was always okay with that because a relationship works better if you know who's in charge. You know the red pill concept of captain and first mate. I'm happy to be that person because I'm still important and valuable in the relationship but he's the leader. [...] We're very traditional and honestly because of that we just don't have problems. We just don't because there's just this understanding between us. I feel like we eliminate so many arguments. Because you can't have a peaceful battle for who is in charge. It's just easier for us. ("The Art of Femininity, With Feminine Homemaker Caitlin Ann Huber" 25:20-26:00; 33:30-33:40)

The concept of a "captain" recurs in Kristen Clark's ministering too: "In God's sovereign plan, He has assigned that role to the husbands (Eph. 5:23). [...] I choose to respect the position that God has appointed him to have. Rather than competing for the 'captain' position, I encourage Zack as our leader and cheer him" ("Biblical submission: what it is and what it isn't (Part 2)"). The Transformed Wife has very similar arguments, "Ladies, this is experience talking. Before I totally submitted to my husband, the area of God was a battleground for us. He always tuned it out but, when I submitted to him, as to God (which means completely), God started working in his heart in huge ways. So the choice is to obey God or not—that's what it really comes down to" ("Switch submission to respect?").

The religious argument recurs the most here and is discussed in relation to marriage vows and obeying God's word, but the promise of happiness is also very much present. The Transformed Wife and Mrs. Midwest point to the fact that submission removes problems from marriages and therefore strengthens the relationship. This also means that if one's relationship with one's husband is not perfect then the fault seems to rest with the wife who is not submissive enough. Just like in the psychological argument against abortion, women are at fault when they do not find fulfilment in their God-given role; they have not fulfilled part of the commandment. It is, thus, up to them to ensure that their relationships benefit fully from the promises found in God's plan.

We have seen that this anti-feminist discourse is constructed using different arguments that speak to different positionalities of authority: be they pseudo-scientific, religious, or psychological. An interesting feature of these arguments is that even though the format is anchored in the twenty-first century, modernized with blog posts and online videos, the arguments can be traced back to earlier anti-feminists.

Indeed, this contemporary movement has not come out of nowhere. It has been fed by older anti-feminist arguments. As Angela Howard and Sasha Ranaé Adams Tarrant state in the introduction of *Antifeminism in America, A Reader*: "the antifeminists have not wavered from their fundamental belief that, for women, forever and always, 'biology is destiny'" (viii). The use of biology to define women's feelings and thoughts can be found from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries in anti-feminist discourse.

Biblical arguments were also frequently used by second-wave anti-feminists, in for example Marabel Morgan's *The Total Woman* and Anita Bryant's *Bless this House*. Both Morgan and Bryant employed the argument of biblical proof to justify a wife submitting to her husband and quote Ephesians 5:22-24, just like Kristen does. As Marjorie J. Spruill explains second-wave anti-feminists, "women disturbed by feminist gains were devoutly religious and believed in innate, indeed divinely created differences between women and men that mandated traditional gender roles, patriarchal families, and differential treatment of the sexes under the law" (42).

There is a clear trickling-down effect of these arguments through time and through different media, be it books, the radio, talks, and now the internet. Even though these arguments have been disputed by feminists for years (even centuries) and for some have been scientifically disproven, they are still in use in the twenty-first century.

The Art and Artifice of Fourth-Wave Anti-Feminists

One of the possible explanations for this is the widening of the potential audience on the internet. Indeed, specific books such as Morgan's or Bryant's or even radio or television shows often only catered to a specific audience and were rarely read, listened to, or watched by a global audience. Before the internet many radio stations could only be heard within a limited vicinity of the station and before cable and satellite this was also the case for television shows, which could only be viewed in a specific country (except if the shows were sold to another broadcaster or on VHS tapes). The circulation of books was also limited as online retailers did not exist before the end of the twentieth century.

The potential for an ever-expanding online audience might have fuelled the creation of more anti-feminist content and thus given new life to old arguments. For online content, however, it is important to mention that viewers or readers often disagree with the discourse they consume. A video may have many views but very few likes, for example. Even if people view content that they disagree with, multiple views of such content will feed the algorithms of YouTube and other social media, which means that these videos will be presented to an ever-growing audience. Bad publicity therefore also generates views for these content creators. If one looks at figures on YouTube, one can see the global reach of these women: Mrs. Midwest has 204,000 subscribers; Girl Defined 158,000; Emily Wilson 131,000; Classically Abby 115,000; Estee Williams 60,000, and The Transformed Wife 15,000.¹⁷ Talking about numbers of views and subscribers online Devin Proctor states that "it speaks directly to the levels of virality that a person's publicness can achieve" (12). This list of numbers not only showcases

¹⁷ Figures taken from influencers' YouTube channels. Accessed 17 April 2024.

how influential these missionaries can be but less obviously they indicate that behind these channels and blogs the content creators are working to grow their audiences. One of the ways that they achieve these numbers of followers is through the technique of dilution.

The Art of Hooking an Audience through Dilution

Dilution is a technique which is best described by Mrs. Midwest in the 2019 interview she did with Yogi Oabs: "I was trying pretty hard on Instagram to grow my Instagram to reach women and because my message can be kind of like intense for some people, like the things I believe, I like to pad it with like skincare and how I clean my house to attract more of a female audience" ("The Art of Femininity, With Feminine Homemaker Caitlin Ann Huber" 50:15-50:30). In this interview she gives some behind-the-scenes insight into her videos, something that she never overtly mentions on her own pages. Here she reflects on how she dilutes her "intense" message to make it more palatable for a wider audience. By adding skincare and cleaning tips she is growing her audience and pulling women, who might have only been interested in beauty products, into anti-feminist ideology. There is something quite cynical in this technique as the audience is coaxed into clicking and viewing content that they had not anticipated. Devin Proctor discusses this technique in another of Mrs. Midwest's videos ("20 Things I Recommend") where "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.*" Proctor explains that Molyneux is an "alt-right philosopher and purveyor of scientific racism." This is a perfect example of dilution where an extreme political message is artfully concealed between two components of better homemaking (Proctor 17). Ashley A. Mattheis also points in this direction, "These varied presentations embed (unmarked) white norms in mundane discussions of recipes, etiquette, and homemaking advice where white #Trad wife influencers dominate the blogs/vlogs" (92).

A similar hooking technique happens on Lori Alexander's blog, *The Transformed Wife*, where her alphabetically organised categories point to a padding out of the message to lure people in through a variety of recipes, which might have a much wider potential audience than "chastity" or "Charles Spurgeon" (See Fig. 2). This mixing of "abortion" and "breakfast recipes"

means that a person who stumbled across the blog for baking ideas could easily be drawn into clicking on another category.

CATEGORIES

Abortion

Biblical Womanhood Study

Breakfast Recipes

Charles Spurgeon

Chaste

Child Raising

Conviction

Dessert Recipes

Dinner Recipes

False Teachers

Fig. 2. Screenshot taken from Lori Alexander's website, *The Transformed Wife*. Accessed 10 May 2023.

A Partly Fraudulent Traditional Lifestyle

One could argue that the most convincing values are not those that are merely stated, but those that are actually carried out by the people espousing them. What is interesting with these internet missionaries is that they seem (on the surface at least) to practice what they preach. In the videos they post, they are at home and viewers see them doing chores, preparing food, and taking care of their children and husbands. Even on their blogs there are

many household activities that are described. This portrayal shows them to be anti-feminist role models as they are able to demonstrate to the world that they live fulfilled lives at home. This is in opposition to second-wave anti-feminists, such as Phyllis Schlafly, who, when they decided to become activists for anti-feminism, had to leave their homes on a regular basis in order to speak at conferences, go on book tours, give speeches, be interviewed on the radio, etc. There was therefore a clear discrepancy between what they were saying and the lives they were living. Nowadays, women are able to bridge this divide by advocating for conservative values from the comfort of their own homes. They are thus able to give out a much more coherent ideal as they conform to their own ideology.

What remains unseen, and mostly unspoken, is the amount of time and energy that they spend creating and maintaining their online ministries. Indeed, many post weekly videos and write weekly blog posts as well as being active on other social media, too. Their audience also makes them money to some extent with videos being monetised, sponsored, and even funded. Even though they claim to be stay-at-home wives and mothers it seems clear that their platforms actually constitute at the very least a part-time job. Mrs. Midwest even goes as far as advocating for women not to go to college (“How to become to Homemaker” 7:30) whereas she went to college and got a four-year degree in strategic communication (as mentioned in the FAQ on her blog), which one can suppose she uses to promote her internet presence. Lori Alexander also has a degree in teaching, and she worked for the first five years of her marriage. She probably also uses this education to convey her message to the world. Estee Williams also has a video entitled “College is A PROBLEM. Here’s why” in which she asks and answers the question, “What does this so-called college experience promote? Casual sex, drugs, alcohol, partying. College is where all four of those things I just listed happen the most frequently” (0:45-0:56). Not only does Williams not back up these claims with figures but she herself went to college and again possibly uses the knowledge she gained there to grow her audience.

What may look like comfortable chats to the viewer or reader is in fact something very different as these women use part of their time and energy not for their housework (as the

viewer is led to believe) but for these internet careers. They are thus promoting a lifestyle that they are not actually living as they never mention (nor show) the hours spent on the other side of the camera where they cut, edit, and upload videos as well as write blogposts and answer comments.

One of the ways that these women breach the divide between what they do and what they claim to do is by downplaying their internet presence. In the "Frequently asked questions" page of Mrs. Midwest's website, she answers this question:

Do you still consider yourself a homemaker even though you earn side-money?
Yes I am still a homemaker! First of all, I could never survive off of my little blog income alone, and I really don't do enough work to call it a full-time or even a part-time job! I consider my blog to be a passion project, meant to inspire and help women around the world, as well as to bless my own life. Homemaking is my primary role at home, and because my content fits around that homemaking, it doesn't feel like work.

With 170 videos, 369 Instagram posts, and 267 blog posts created in five years this claim seems unlikely. Even though her content may "fit around that homemaking" in that she films herself accomplishing her daily chores, the editing of her videos (which are very carefully put together with captioning, background music, attention to details such as lighting and transitions, as well as featuring voice-overs and multiple angles) does not. Her videos are often lengthy (between 20 minutes and one hour) so one can assume that there are tens of hours (or even days) of invisible work behind each one. If one adds to this her blog posts (which are between 1,000 and 3,000 words each) as well as her Instagram presence, one might conclude that in terms of time this corresponds to at least a part-time job. The claim that "it doesn't feel like work" also minimizes her actual workload in order to try to erase the paradoxical situation in which she finds herself. Our other YouTubers have likewise created large databases of videos: Estee Williams has 52 (in 1 year), Emily Wilson has 265 videos (in 8 years), Classically Abby has 473 (in 5 years), and Girl Defined 606 (in 9 years).¹⁸ For all of these internet

¹⁸ Number of videos on their YouTube platforms. Accessed 17 April 2024.

missionaries YouTube is not their only platform and therefore all their other content must be added to this workload in order to understand how much time they put into maintaining this online presence.

In her 2020 article for *The Guardian* Hadley Freeman put this question to the Tradwife community as a whole: "After all, if you're constantly posting videos to YouTube about how to press your husband's clothes, and talking to Phillip and Holly about how you love to flirt with your husband, how do you have time to do any tradwife-ing?" The amount of content that each of these women puts out answers the question for us: they do not have the time and thus portray a life that they are not completely living.

Another aspect that is left unsaid are the potential risks associated with this lifestyle. Indeed, if viewers or readers were to embrace this advice whole heartedly and eschew college, get married young without a prenup, obey their husbands, have a large family and stay home, they would become completely financially dependent on their spouses. If they wished to leave the marriage it would be difficult for them to do so as their lack of education and work experience would make it hard for them to support themselves. This means that the wife may find herself in an extremely difficult situation if the husband is verbally or physically abusive, if he cheats, or wants a divorce. As we have seen, these missionaries would likely be spared such pitfalls as they have all received a higher education and create their own incomes through their platforms.

Furthermore, these videos and posts can have effects in the real world, especially when this content is geared at an impressionable audience like young girls. The comments underneath the videos and blog posts speak to this influence:



Hely 2 weeks ago

Your advice is really helpful for me as a teenager, I aspire to be like you one day and have my own thriving family. Best wishes from Spain!



3

Reply

Fig. 3. Screenshot taken from the comments underneath a Mrs. Midwest video entitled, "How I overcame feeling insecure and self-conscious." Accessed 8 May 2023.

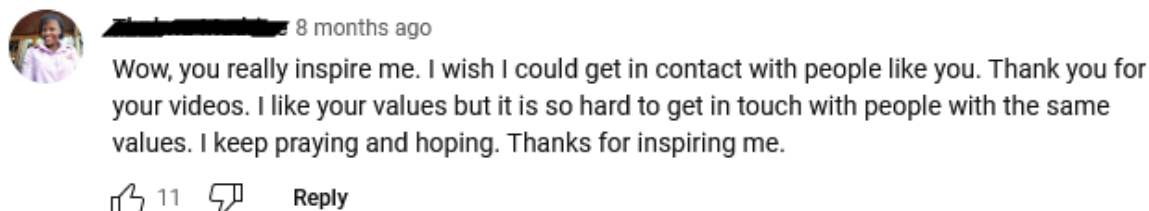


Fig. 4. Screenshot taken from the comments underneath Classically Abby's video, "Do I Think Birth Control Is IMMORAL?? And Other SPICY Questions From YOU!" Accessed 8 May 2023.



Fig. 5. Screenshot taken from the comments underneath Estee Williams' video, "Advice to Young Girls Aspiring to be Tradwives." Accessed 5 March 2024.

These three comments portray the types of positive responses that these videos generate in an audience that not only responds to what is being said but also sees the missionaries as role models. "This is my dream," "inspire me," and "really helpful" show the influence that the content creators have on some viewers. Moreover, two of the viewers correspond exactly to the target audience as one self-identifies as a "teenager" and the other "17 years old." At least

for a part of the audience, the message has been heard and engaged with and the mission has thus been successful.

Conclusion

We can conclude that anti-feminist discourse is still very much present in the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century and that American influencers have emerged online and begun to disseminate this information to a global audience. Their discourse is constructed through tried and tested arguments, be they pseudo-scientific, religious, or psychological. The internet also enables them to reach a wider audience and allows them to better embody #TradWife life, thus posing as role models of their discourse. Nonetheless, part of this is only a façade as the amount of work needed to maintain their ministries and the revenue their online personas generate turns them into working women and not, strictly speaking, housewives. Additionally, the content that they create eludes the difficult questions around financial dependency and possible escape routes from this life, especially as they themselves have a potential parachute through their education and social media work. As part of the audience seems to engage with the content and follow this advice, it is important to point to what is left unsaid by these influencers.

Even though this online phenomenon is relatively limited compared to feminist discourse, which has a wider reach, it is interesting to note that the concept of “back to home and duty” is not limited to a few influencers. Indeed, the use of the hashtag #TradWife on social media has been reported on by mainstream media (Freeman) and the trend has even hit Britain as the BBC’s interview with Alena Kate Pettitt in January 2020 indicates.

As this article has shown, the anti-feminist women under discussion here have thus had a real impact on the world and their mission has been, at least in part, successful. Moreover, social media algorithms suggest similar content to viewers and readers, leading them further down the rabbit hole of anti-feminist videos and posts. An innocent internet search about skincare or dessert recipes can thus lead browsers to videos about why abortion should be stopped, why women should stay at home, and why they should submit to their husbands.

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