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GOING BACK TO THE KITCHEN: A NETNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF TRADWIVES AND STAY-AT-HOME GIRLFRIENDS

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GOING BACK TO THE KITCHEN: A NETNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF TRADWIVES
AND STAY-AT-HOME GIRLFRIENDS

By

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ABSTRACT

The year 2022 marks the beginning of a period in the United States of economic stress marked by high inflation, surges in housing prices, and increasing competition in the job market. That same year, social media platforms Instagram and TikTok have witnessed a revitalization of traditional gender roles through the promotion of digital archetypes: the “tradwife” and “stay-at-home girlfriend.” While both archetypes vary in how they negotiate femininity in their use of accessible short-form video content, they both prioritize domesticity and financial dependence on male partners. Recognizing that their rise in popularity parallels speculated stagflation, I argue that women’s reclamation of patriarchal expectations is a way to exploit traditional roles to evade responsibilities of the public sphere as workers under late-stage capitalism. Recalling the anthropological framework of cultural materialism, this article explores the relationship between women and the economy by navigating two distinct questions: how does the economy affect women’s roles, and how are women reacting to these changes? The first question is addressed through analyzing historical documents, policy, and changes in the economy during shifts in expectations for women. Using digital ethnography, I then address the second question by analyzing short-form videos posted by Tradwives and Stay-at-home-girlfriends, alongside content sampled from an algorithm curated by following such content creators, to observe how traditional ideology is utilized to express and avoid frustration. To highlight how economic disparity may be exaggerated for women, the history of women’s gender roles and policy is also factored into how women may employ gender roles.

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Introduction

In the last decade or so, social media platforms have become concentrations of political thought that mainstream collective reactions to the world through trends and instant communication. Peppered throughout my feed, I recall seeing videos of women with beautiful floral dresses under gingham aprons in their kitchens barefoot letting their sourdough rest in their newly renovated kitchen, and other women dressed in sleek Lululemon matching sets narrating their commute to their pilates class. The former had their videos tagged with “#tradwife” and the latter “#stayathomegirlfriend,” (SAHG). Both of which are labels of allegiance to a larger relationship with work. Two distinct lifestyles, but I felt myself envying them both for the same reason. I had gone a couple months rationing my eggs between myself and my six other roommates, while working a job that provided little hours and sacrificing time spent with loved ones to work on college assignments that I was technically paying to complete. Throughout the completion of my degree, I have been haunted with hearsay and warned by online reports that the job market would be at its worst by the time I graduate. Here in my phone women around my age had achieved freedom through financial dependence on a man, while the content I saw of women in the labor force was about either being laid off, coping with a 9-5, or their 300th job rejection. The women glowed through my screen with their lack of stress and abundance of time tending to whatever their daily routines were about. House paid off, pilates class paid off, life paid off, and the only thing keeping me from this was how I’ve been denying my destiny as a woman.

From the beginning of the 2020s, the digital archetypes of the Tradwife and the SAHG have maintained popularity across social media networks like Instagram and TikTok through a shared idealization of domestic labor (Sykes 2024). The term “tradwife” itself is a lexical blend

of the words “traditional” and “wife,” with the text-savvy abbreviation framing the identity of a #tradwife as a post-modern statement rather than casually being a stay-at-home wife or mother. A tradwife is recognized by scholars (Proctor 2022; Leidig 2023; Sykes and Hopner 2024) as a woman engaging in influencer culture to reproduce patriarchal notions of femininity through nostalgia for “tradition.” Conversely, the term SAHG connotes the role of the “stay at home mom/wife” without the woman engaging in marriage or reproduction, appealing more to younger and relatively liberal audiences. Although these archetypes differ in regard to the exact negotiation of labor, they both exploit the superstructure of womanhood to then either commodify domesticity for profit through influencer culture or benefit through financial dependence. Highlighting that these traditional notions of gender have grown during unique periods of recession and speculated stagflation—while women are also expected to perform waged labor—I argue that stressful economic circumstances may lead women to lean into traditional gender behavior in order to soften their effects, resulting in social media trends following gender essentialism. Previous research on these archetypes in fields of anthropology, political science, and media studies has largely focused on defining tradwives and SAHGs mainly in relation to their influence as right-wing agents. Therefore, I hope to contribute to the literature on this topic by highlighting economic activity as an active force in shaping preferences for gendered divisions of labor.

Throughout this work, I will be mentioning cultural materialism to inform my analysis. Cultural materialism is a theoretical model of culture of a material-to-abstract hierarchy that theorizes how cultures change over time. It proceeds as infrastructure informing structure, which then produces superstructure. Infrastructure is the material foundation of a given society, set by demographics, environment, technology for extracting and producing resources, and the

economy—how these resources are to be distributed. To function within these limits, structure is the web of social institutions and ways we organize ourselves that shape how individuals interact with one another. Superstructure then, contains the ideas, values, and symbolic systems arranged into ideological frameworks that justify structure. Harris theorizes that such shifts in culture occur when the infrastructure is no longer compatible with our superstructure, and thus our beliefs adjust according to the material conditions (pp. 52-55). Using this lens, I will focus on how changes in the economy, a part of infrastructure, influences how women perceive themselves and their roles, an aspect of superstructure, and finally speculate how these changes in ideology have ultimately birthed the unique Tradwives and SAHGs. I will hone in on their popularity beginning in 2022 and how they have garnered such attention amidst a time of economic stress, particularly emphasizing how these ideals build from iterations of womanhood reflexively.

Method

Derived from ethnography from cultural anthropology, Netnography is a research method designed to make sense of “identities, practices, values, rituals...and structures of meaning are...created by, or expressed through technology consumption” (Kozinets 2019, 621). Distinct from its predecessor, Netnographies navigate digital spaces as sites rich with forms of interaction and expression that are curated for technology-based communication methods, with experiences being characterized largely by delayed and distant contact between users in each community or between communities. To apply this method, I will be recognizing reels and TikToks as both artifacts and communicated statements due to how users can interact with the reels as posts while the reels also act as a recorded moment in time that perpetuates the user’s beliefs on their behalf. Moving forward in anthropological research, short-form content on social media must be

legitimized as prospective historical documents.

Data Collection

For this study I will be drawing on the two-phase research design of Netnography: investigation and immersion (Kozinets 2020). As Sykes and Hopner (2024) note, influencers host content that is publicly available and designed for an audience on social platforms. This enables data to be collected without direct engagement with the users posting the content and can be analyzed as works designed to be witnessed by a larger audience. In being publicly available, they function to create a community suspended in time without a physical place that allows one to enter at any moment. The period of data collection spanned from April to December 2025, eight months of witnessing the different ways through which women's gender roles are advertised as shields from economic despair.

The entire process began with choosing two dominant social media platforms among Gen-Z: Instagram and TikTok. These platforms were selected due to not only popularity, but also the algorithmic nature. The investigative phase entailed the selection of tradwife and SAHG profiles through (1) natural scrolling (2) searching with hashtags, and (3) examining who these creators were following. Seeing if their content related to economic concerns came after they had been followed to examine it as happenstance. Content was then chosen through (1) feed immersion and (2) scrolling through profiles of candidates.

For immersion, I created a distinct account under a pseudonym to participate in digital spaces of traditional ideology. Respecting the usual user experience of modern social media, I used one account as a catch-all for both Tradwife and SAHG content to observe recurring subjects and narratives. On Instagram I followed 16 tradwives and 16 SAHGs, and on TikTok I followed 15 tradwives and 12 SAHGs, all of whose popularity varied within their respective

communities. To see how economy-driven gender essentialism leaks into the spheres of those uninvolved, I also noted the instances of when relevant content would appear for me on my regular Instagram and TikTok accounts where I do not follow a single tradwife or SAHG. This will provide an experience that mirrors the social media activity of women within this sphere of ideology.

To navigate such a complex relationship between variables, analyzing media and documents will allow me to extract information that would otherwise be hidden or left in nuance using quantitative methods. My experiences scrolling serve as a form of participant observation, allowing me to see what someone compelled by traditional ideology would see whilst casually using social media. For future work building upon this research, I will consider the use of structural topic modeling and regression analysis to complement my netnographic analysis. Such methods were considered for this research but were unused because I desired to read the subtext within cultural signals embedded in the imagery and linguistic choices.

Background on Gender in the United States

Before elaborating further, we must first examine the social skeleton of womanhood that may provide domesticity as a “safety net” among young women. Feminist and decolonial scholars across social sciences (see Oyewumi 1997; Lugones 2007; Maldonado-Torres 2021; Sabsay 2025) distinguish the structure of contemporary womanhood as one undeniably informed by the Eurocentric gender binary. In the 19th century, this was further rationalized through a gender-based bifurcation of society into “public” and “private” spaces. Public spaces concern business, capital, and politics while the private spaces are hubs of social reproduction and domesticity, centering around the home (Rezeanu 2015). This binary of labor has then been translated to the gender binary of man and woman. Anthropologist Gayle Rubin (1975) describes

that Western society assigns placement within this binary using gender essentialism, wherein biological features designate an immutable role in society and thereby make certain duties inherent to an identity. The public space has historically been the domain of manhood with the private space being reserved for women. Although changes in infrastructure of the U.S. led to legal and political developments that have absorbed women into the public space, women are still bound to domestic duties of the private sphere. Sociologist Arlie Hochschild recognizes the performance of this dual commitment as the “second shift,” which is the domestic labor a woman completes after getting home from work that is disproportionate to what her male partner fulfills. Colonial impositions of gender have continuously realized the assumptions of women as people biologically destined to serve men through marriage, reproduction of an heir or worker, and maintenance of property. The interaction between progressive changes and the structural contingency of gender thus produces the second shift that becomes more emotionally tolling during economic uncertainty.

Given this history, the infrastructural impact on gender expectations also varies across racial categories due to inherent contexts of racism, enslavement, and nativism. White women, whose femininity is delegated as the benchmark, were discouraged from working in the public space if they could help it—and if they did work, they were relegated to low-level positions in textile and food production factories. After the onset of the war-induced labor shortage, these women who made up much of these industries were drafted into “sophisticated” war labor like clerical work, radio operation, manufacturing, and engineering; subsequently, Black women shifted into comparatively higher wages as they filled the vacancies (Arnsbager 2023). Given that Black women in the U.S. were also formally enslaved until 1865, the expectation to engage in “masculine” work was already inherent to Black womanhood (Marshall 2022). The movement

of White women into positions originally reserved for men had then moved Black women into jobs originally for their White counterparts. In creating shifts on the basis of gender, changes were also occurring at the intersection of womanhood and race due to an additional recognition of non-white women's contribution to the war effort.

The foundation of women of color's gender roles highlights variation in motives for leaning into and reproducing "traditional" gender expectations. Black women's motivation to adopt the tradwife and SAHG roles derive from the truth that Black women have been historically hypermasculinized. Therefore, opting out of the workforce through marriage is positioned as an act of resistance (Bower 2024; Burton). For Latina women, traditional gender behavior may be a form of resisting losing one's cultural identity or a reaction to seeing one's working mother face exhausted by the workplace (Cerejido 2025). I have noticed myself that exercising my Mexican heritage through cooking has been difficult as a working student given that most of our dishes are extremely time intensive. While I do not have the space to fully elaborate on these nuances, the interactions between racialized labor, traditional gender roles, and economic hardship compel further exploration.

Cultural materialism groups both such labor and gender divisions under the domestic economy as part of structure, with the domestic economy being the "organization of reproduction and basic production, exchange, and consumption" (Harris, p. 52). Our superstructure around these roles, then, appears in our devaluation of women's work in either space through beliefs that women are less capable, ambitious, and competent in relation to men, in addition to beliefs that men are less nurturing than women and therefore more suited for industrial work (Ellemers 2018). In turn, domestic labor becomes devalued in itself. In comparison, the social expectations of men have remained stable amidst changes in infrastructure as independence has always been a

granted attribute to manhood. For women, achieving traditional femininity inherently demands homemaking; at the intersection of economic hardship and the double burden that women are expected to bear, there spawns subcultural movements such as the tradwife and SAHG that praise the domestic half of the double burden to soften economic responsibility. In this way, original negative connotations with femininity in our superstructure are inverted to serve in women's interests through relying on a man's income or income as an influencer through brand partnerships and sponsorships. Tailoring conservative roles to enhance benefits in a stressful period becomes a means for changing the makeup of the workforce demographic. This must be considered when observing changes in how bodies gendered through labor change their relationships with kinds of labor when other variables, like economic changes, are considered.

Section 1: How does the economy influence gender roles?

This section will focus on changes in the economic landscape through an understanding of infrastructure and observe how it pulled or pushed women into waged employment. This effect will be explored through a brief review of changes in cost-of-living compared with wages, employment, and job market availability in the 20th century to set the foundation to assess how the economic fluctuations from 2022-2025 have fostered recent popularity of the Tradwife and SAHG.

The effect of World War 1 on women's gender roles is a prime example of demographic infrastructure impacting structure. Wartime mobilization's effect on the economy created the most profound shifts in women's gender roles and expectations. After the United States joined World War 1 in 1917, President Woodrow Wilson issued the Selective Service Act which drew a total of 4.8 million men into the military on top of volunteers (Library of Congress). The mass departure of men in World War I had created a labor shortage in fields that women had

historically been barred from; however, their entrance into industry was now deemed necessary for the success of the U.S. (Finneman 2019). This resultantly drew women into the paid labor force to substitute for these men enlisted as soldiers overseas. From 1900 to 1920, women's labor force participation rate increased by 15% (Costa 2000). This is not to say that before 1915 women were absent in the workforce, rather, the economic landscape of this era reorganized women by massively pivoting their prospects from low-earning textiles and domestic service industries in addition to encouraging unemployed homemakers to assume new positions in gainful employment (Social Security Administration). Recalling previous definitions, the infrastructure of a society partly refers to the makeup of a population alongside its fertility and mortality rates. This change in the demographics of men in the U.S. temporarily altered the infrastructure, requiring a reorganization in the structure of society, creating long lasting changes in what kind of labor each gender would be synonymous with. Examining this change in labor force participation that occurred in response to wartime demand and men's absence is critical to recognizing how gender roles fluctuate according to variables of infrastructure.

To exemplify how the structure of gender can be impacted by monetary infrastructure I will examine the economic landscape of the years between 1975 to 1985 and women's labor force activity. It is important to recognize that these relations also differ from those of World War 1 because this is both post-women's rights and an era of a dominantly mixed-gender workforce. From 1977 to 1979, the nation had been facing the most severe rates of inflation in retail food prices since after World War II (Bryan 2013). 1979 was a notably terrible year, with retail food price inflation going up to 10%. To put into perspective, the Federal Reserve defines 2% as the "safe" rate of inflation. The late 1970s is recognized as a period of stagflation, characterized by high unemployment, high inflation, and stagnated economic growth. Such

economic turmoil required that, although men were still traditionally considered the breadwinners, married women entered the workforce en masse, but this time alongside men. Jane Humphries' (1988) economic study on women's labor demonstrates that women's employment in the 1970s stood resilient through dire economic cycles because of how pink-collar jobs happened to be insulated due to mostly being of public service as opposed to private industries that rely on consumer demand. Furthermore, her study highlights that businesses might actively seek women for hire because their labor is cheaper than that of men's. High infrastructural strain then standardized dual-income households into a structural feature that organizes our labor today as the need for women's participation proved irreversible (Humphries 1988). In 1983, the U.S. had begun recovering from this era of severe economic distress with inflation rates settling to 3%. However, the cost of living was still disproportionately higher than it was a decade prior. To accommodate this new baseline, women were being assimilated into the workforce with the new expectation of the double burden. The now-permanent material conditions of monetary infrastructure had called for the structure of labor to be organized yet again. Hochschild recognizes this feature as part of a larger "stalled gender revolution" (1989) that deemed women as official workforce candidates while denying appropriate changes in policy, in addition to homemaking remaining an inherent aspect of womanhood. Once inflation rates officially calmed in 1984, the normalization of this concept of the ideal woman was driven by magazines' and newspapers' promotion of the Supermom, a woman who can "do it all" (Schram 1984; Shreve 1984). It is observable that changes in structure were occurring to reorganize women around the new financial demands of the 1980s and onwards. The Supermom, like the tradwife and SAHG, is an archetype of womanhood that women can negotiate with in order to set the extent of how their everyday life is guided by such cultural ideals. The existence of the Supermom herself

reinforces the notion that domesticity is an immutable feature of womanhood as we can see how, despite integration into the workforce, labor force participation is expected to stack onto homemaking instead of replacing it.

The popularization of the Tradwife and the SAHG has likely been the result of the stacked stresses of infrastructure in both the monetary and demographic spheres. In April 2020, women's unemployment peaked at 16.2% while men's peaked at 13.5% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics). In that year, the confinement to domesticity during COVID had driven the population to romanticize homemaking, affording the first wave of the Tradwife's appeal (Proctor 2023). After the beginning of lockdown, employment in leisure and hospitality sank by almost 50%, correlating with women's high unemployment. If Humphries' study observes that public service industries, like education, hospitality, and other care-oriented jobs, were resilient during inflation, the lockdown-induced shutdown of such sectors would flip this "advantage" on its head. The nation's infrastructure during COVID had heightened the demographic of women in unemployment, informally reinforcing a traditional structure of labor division and revoking financial autonomy. Following the dissipation of lockdown in 2022, peak inflation rates led economists to fear that the U.S. was headed for its first period of stagflation since the late 1970s (Hajdini, Ina, et al 2025). Even if we weren't technically in stagflation, people in the U.S. still felt the effects of the economic state. Red flags included a notable 9.9% average surge in food pricing and sharp increases in oil pricing, but unemployment rates remained below the threshold to qualify (Stewart, Diansheng 2026). Housing affordability had also begun to steeply deteriorate with price-to-income ratios soaring to all-time highs, further inflating cost-of-living at rates unseen since the levels that officialized the dual-income household (Hermann, Whitney 2024). Such financial stress may have begun to exceed the

severity of the 1970s. Single family homes cost only 3x the median household income in the late 1970s while today they cost 5.6x the income of the modern household. Alongside the general incompatibility between current incomes and living expenses, 2023 and 2024 bore significant decreases in women's pay in relation to men (U.S. Census Bureau 2025). After President Trump was reelected in 2024, his administration's policies have made stagflation a looming threat since that year onward. Economist Brett House forecasts stagflation being realized through aggressive tariffs, DOGE-directed federal job cuts, and mass deportation policies that have stunted job growth while increasing prices (Aratani 2025). Such circumstances are likely to lead to turmoil among workers, possibly leading to women deferring to previously oppressive expectations of femininity to "free" them from navigating negative economic impacts.

The most striking difference, however, from the infrastructure of the 1970s is that the price of childcare has been the fastest growing essential household expense since the 2000s and thus is now the most inaccessible across the country (Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Price Index). Another detail that is critical to the tension between gender norms and the public space is how the lack of federally mandated paid maternity leave creates a hostile environment for mothers or aspiring mothers. Standard work-family policy in the U.S. stands relatively inflexible in comparison with those of other countries. Some examples include Italy, France, and China which mandate extensive paid maternity leave for up to half a year without punishment. Conversely, the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) in the U.S. only mandates an unpaid leave for up to three months, leaving the mother financially vulnerable and at-risk of job loss if she needs more time (U.S Department of Labor). In Gao and Ruan's survey analysis on U.S. work-family policies, their findings suggest that parental leave policies, along with flextime and flexplace policies, correspond to reduced gender inequality in childcare. Furthermore, they

highlight that although FMLA can be applied to both parents, being unpaid makes it unaffordable for both parents to stay at home and therefore equitably distribute domestic labor (2022). In 2023, the research organization Center for American Progress reported that women are 5-8 times likelier than men to work part time or leave the workforce entirely due to caregiving duties (2023). Resultantly, there has ruptured a “gender quit gap.” In early 2025 there was a 3% decrease in the labor force participation of mothers with children under 5, with childcare expenses being cited as one of the top reasons for labor force exit (Semuels 2025; Zak 2025). Overall, around 400,000 women have opted out of the labor force in 2025, including many women who have completed higher education. New factors have enforced systemic misogyny, similarly to how women were pushed out of the workforce in WW1 due to men’s return and low wages. Recognizing the double burden, the disproportionate costs of living, an increased gender pay gap and a competitive job market, the presence of gender essentialist trends shows that women may be leaving the labor force for mental and financial relief. The option to abandon concerns of the public space for domesticity then becomes an avenue for potential restructuring of labor, in addition to maintaining the structure that fails to accommodate women in the workforce.

Section 2: How do women react?

I will investigate women’s reactions to such new demands of the economy through how both the structure and superstructure of womanhood is resultantly changed by tradwives and SAHGs. Here is where I will be doing my netnographic analysis. This will be done by comparing short-form video posts to historical documents and other primary sources of media to properly extract etic meaning from emic perspectives. For organization, I will discuss my netnographic

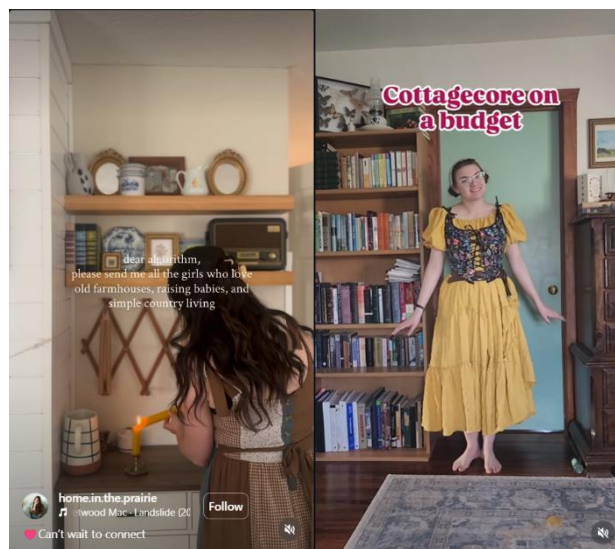
analysis for the tradwife, then the SAHG, and conclude with addressing concurrent microtrends that echo gender essentialism.

Tradwife

Under the account I created, I had been able to scroll through hundreds of videos targeted towards tradwives on both Instagram and TikTok. While scrolling, I was careful to check the hashtags on the content and the creators' other posts to ensure the individuals I am explicitly writing about were declared tradwives rather than stay-at-home moms or SAHGs. A defining feature of the tradwife is that she stays home in compliance with patriarchal ideology, while being a stay-at-home mom influencer does not require beliefs of submission. This is a critical distinction because the goal is to examine a change in belief or negotiation rather than situational change. Bower (2024) recognizes such dedication to be spread across three distinct categories with their own respective expression and motivation: the nostalgic tradwife, the former feminist, and the southern belle. I will be primarily discussing the nostalgic archetype and the former feminist given that in my time scrolling I scarcely found content from the southern belle; this may be due to how both social media factor in location when personalizing your algorithm and I conducted this research in Southern California.

The most well-known self-proclaimed tradwife discussed in media (Kaur 2022; Sole 2023, Lindholm 2024) is the nostalgic type, primarily exemplified by the popular Estee Williams who almost cartoonishly embodies the 1950s "traditional wife" archetype with pinup dresses, pearls, and "retro hair" (Estee 2023). In this case, the use of nostalgia frames confinement to the domestic sphere as a "simpler time" and sells the notion that opting out of the workforce is a return to where women have always belonged. Another example of the use of nostalgia has been through scene setting, such as the image in Figure 1 where the creator films herself by a

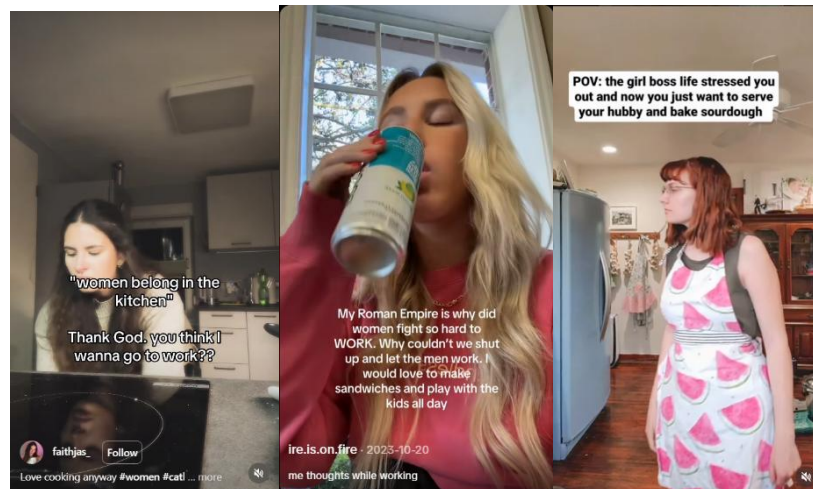
countertop lighting a candle beneath an assortment of antique paraphernalia, channeling the nostalgia of “simple, country living.” This nostalgia is also delivered through clothing choice. Tradwives like @mrsarialewis’s reel from February 2026, as shown in figure 2, uses the cottagecore aesthetic to index the imagined idyllic nature of the coverture era that came with women being in the house. Most of her recent content shows her dressing in this style, and as she stated in one of her videos in 2024 she indirectly claims the Little House on the Prairie as an inspiration (Lewis).



Figures 1 and 2

With videos like these that advocate for women to “return” to a state of absent labor force participation there inherently lies a recognition that the identity of a woman does not automatically include participation in the public sphere. I also saw much content indirectly target nostalgia through articulating attitudes of exhaustion by asking some variation of “why did women ever want to work.” For instance, a TikTok with 312,000 likes from 2023 by @ire.is.on.fire asks “Why couldn’t we just shut up and let the men work. I would love to make sandwiches and play with the kids all day” (2023). Among many creators, even those who weren’t necessarily explicit tradwives, there was a trend of videos that featured a clip of the

influencer preparing food with a caption saying, “Women belong in the kitchen” and an utterance of gratitude in response to the hypothetical speaker. By subverting the misogyny-charged phrase, the trend takes the restriction of women to the domestic sphere into a reprieve from having to deal with the hardship outside of it, overall framing the “kitchen” as a preferable place to be in relation to having to work under unfair, unaccommodating conditions. A reel by @faithjas puts it explicitly, where she responds to the phrase with “Thank God. you think I wanna go to work??” (2025). In this sea of content, there is an underlying, unarticulated agreement that the current conditions of our economic infrastructure, in combination with the structure of work in the U.S., is unfavorable. The danger with the use of nostalgia particularly, is that instead of naming the issue at large, women are posing the desire to opt out of capitalism as a sign to “return” to a time where women could not be financially independent.



Figures 3, 4, and 5

In a reel from June 2023, Estee argues that the reason for the movement’s expansion is that more women are rejecting careers as a form of resistance against the “chaos” in the world, all while geared in nostalgic fashion. The reel being posted in June 2023 positions the statement as commentary on the infrastructure in 2022—here deemed the “chaos.” This reel features an emic claim that domesticity is a woman’s “highest calling,” but from an etic view she is

recognizing that the current structure of labor division is unfair to women. Here, she is iterating the public sphere as a realm that unnecessarily sucks women into turmoil that they could easily withdraw from if they obeyed gender essentialism. In a collection of essays by anti-suffrage women from 1917 Massachusetts, author Edith Melvin laments that her “life has been past amid the heat and turmoil of business life, working shoulder to shoulder with men, pitting my brain against the brains of men” (1917). The rhetoric of patriarchal expectations on social media platforms today echoes a similar false attribution to gender essentialism. Both the tradwife and the suffragette credit one’s own status as a woman for making one unfit for the public space rather than forces of misogyny and capitalist labor structures. For women who burnt out after subscribing to hustle culture and the #girlboss mindset, this is a truth as depicted in a reel by @mrsarialewis depicted in Figure 5, imagining a new pivot in superstructure as opposition to this mindset arises. Likewise, a reel tagged with #tradwife and #traditionalwife features a five-reason list as to why staying home was more financially beneficial, with saving on childcare costs being the number one reason (@withlove_tere, 2024). Much of the content on @withlove_tere’s page preaches submission to a husband for fulfillment, but like Estee, an etic interpretation of her page reads that being able to decenter financial stress is the foundation for this peace.

Noting that 2022 was the year of near-stagflation, I found that the tradwife-aligned influencers with 50,000 or more followers that I investigated had only started their accounts or changed their content direction in the middle of 2022 or the first half of 2023. Distinguished examples include Estee Willaims herself, @gwenthemilkmaid, @ballerinafarm, @mrsarialewis, @gretchy, @domesticdaydreams and @ivyoutwest on TikTok and Instagram. An honorable mention is @naraaziza (Nara Smith), a model and influencer heavily intertwined with the Tradwife movement. Most articles commenting on the topic, including the articles I cited

previously that mention Estee Williams, refer to her either through writing or including a screenshot of her content to make a point. On Instagram and TikTok, her capital derives from cooking videos that record her cooking elaborate meals from scratch for her, her husband, and/or her children. During my observation sessions, the algorithm showed me her extensive cooking reels and TikToks more frequently than any other influencer. Additionally, every single person I have spoken to about the topic of tradwives has brought up Nara Smith, usually also asking if I will mention her in this work and further proving her presence in our current imagination. In an interview on Jay Shetty Podcast, she discloses that she has never once called herself a tradwife (2025). She clarified that she only switched her direction to cooking content because it was consistently her best performing. Looking at her oldest TikToks on her profile reveals that her first viral video documents her making a loaf of bread and peach jam from scratch for her toddler in early 2023. Within conversations I realized Nara's notoriety was a product of the audience's making; her popularity a direct reflection of a heightened collective desire for the free time to perform domestic labor to such an absurd degree. While emically she qualifies as a tradwife, etically, she is a figure we have fixated on and projected that *she* is the one enthralled by domesticity. Rather than perceiving her rise as a “tradwife” to be her own decision it is users themselves proliferating this content, even if they consume her content ironically. Regardless of motivation, fascination with her displays of domesticity indicates a perception that such acts are material of fantasy.

Following multiple American tradwife influencers through my alternative accounts immersed my algorithm into the culture beyond the faces at the frontlines. A considerable chunk of what I saw was about the domestic space itself: beautiful home renovations, elaborate interior design, and methods for interior organization presented in multiple forms like “routine” content,

instructional, or anecdotal. Permanent alterations to a house require homeownership that is today only accessible to the upper-middle class. This content invokes a sense of longing for security and time freedom, something that could be promised if I, a woman, resigned from the workforce to depend on a man financially. I would see so many videos of stay-at-home moms taking on projects to repaint their children's rooms or installing garden beds to be used for years to come. Homes that had two stories, lush backyards without boundaries, high ceilings, and wide windows that welcome the sunlight from any perspective. Along with such multiple-part project series, there was also a share of content consisting of women showing the luxury or the serenity of their home—experiences that could not be enjoyed by a “boss babe” if she’s working at a reclusive office eight hours a day. Figure 5 is a notable example of this vein. Figure 5 is a screenshot of a reel by @the.rosie.home (Rachel Ciatsko) that’s part of a series of “slower morning diaries.” The social media trend of people walking us through their “slow mornings” is a reaction to the fast-paced hustle culture that the structure of capitalism demands from workers. In this case, the woman posting this video is displaying her life on a homestead as a blissful, mindful alternative to rushing to leave the house for a 9-5 shift. In the reel, I am taken through her polished suburban home as she gleefully prepares coffee for herself before tending to her ducks. Here, Ciatsko edits clips in ways that glance over the work of maintaining a homestead. Through pacing and the maintenance being a part of her relaxing morning, the domestic labor graduates into being a ritual of rest. Seeing this on my feed places me in a realm that glorifies the home as a habitat beyond the expectations of capitalism; if my house were as grand, lush, and lively, I—a low-income student graduating into a dreadful job market—could escape the rat race. In place of consuming content that explicitly reiterates traditional ideology, members subscribing to the ideology are algorithmically prescribed content that makes one hyper-aware of their own living

space. Domestic affairs are increasingly perceived as sources of fulfillment for the tradwife.

What is happening within this algorithm is a direction of attention towards the home as a solution to the psychological effects of labor under late-stage capitalism to distract from the idea that the system is inherently flawed and therefore must be fixed.

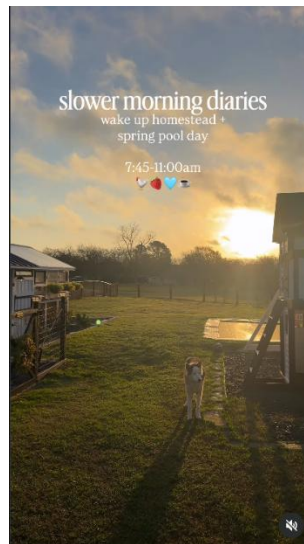


Figure 6

Stay at Home Girlfriend

I mistakenly assumed that SAHGs on Instagram and TikTok were all one kind of influencer. Similar to how Bower recognizes up to three variants of the Tradwife, I have loosely observed that the stay-at-home-girlfriend role is expressed through two major archetypes. The first is the Consumer, whose content revolves around a progressive expression that celebrates financial dependence on men as an asset that funds a high maintenance lifestyle. Women who embody this archetype are often in explicit brand partnerships and/or exhibit themselves purchasing or reviewing products. Domestic labor is part of the content they produce; however, it's not the central focus. The second being the proto-tradwife, a woman who is not officially a tradwife because she is not married, but strives to be and thus fulfills domestic duties explicitly

to respect traditional gender roles. This archetype was difficult to identify because of how women posting such content would name themselves as tradwives through hashtags and other content they posted. A notable proto-tradwife being @juliabouvierr, who has posted herself wearing a red gingham apron under a caption praising traditional virtues and duties, tagging those videos as #tradwife content on both Instagram and TikTok. The proto-Tradwife and the Tradwife overlap intensely regarding the goals of their content, so for this work I will be honing in on the former to highlight the other route in which gender roles are being negotiated.

Such videos from the Consumer SAHG center around shopping sprees, exercise, and child-free afternoons journaling and mildly maintaining the house. The most popular content from the Consumer SAHG is “day in my life” videos that take you through how leisurely her day is. Figure 7 shows a TikTok posted by @officialericaam, where she guides us through a day in her life as a 25 year old SAHG (2023). The TikTok greets us with a high balcony view to signal luxury and success; this is what can be achieved by leaning into traditional femininity. Then, she immediately faces us with a product she is using in the shower, commodifying routine behavior. This shower is to get prepared for a busy morning running errands. The errands in question being, an Ulta and Target run to restock on beauty products and household goods. In today’s economic landscape, this is what people want all their urgent errands to be. Figure 8 is a screenshot of a TikTok from @iammackenzee (2025). Watching this video struck me with envy for the amount of free time she has been granted by being a girlfriend, and the comments agree. @kikasqueak states, “this is the life i was made for” [sic] (2025). A bit further down, @katiee.024 asks, “What does he do for work? my mans needs to retire me from work” [sic] (2025). The latter comment frames it as the male partner’s responsibility to resign their female partner from the workforce, asking what the commenter’s partner could do for work in order to

take her out of the labor force. From this TikTok, I chose to screenshot the user holding a Sephora shopping bag because it epitomizes the consumerist spirit of her entire video: she wakes up, does her skincare while advertising the products, gets dressed to get coffee—that her boyfriend pays for, get a facial, then shop at Sephora to advertise more products. She then finishes her day with a pedicure and another coffee. The traditional gender role for women has always been to stay-at-home, and here both users from each TikTok leverage this expectation to spend their days leisurely.

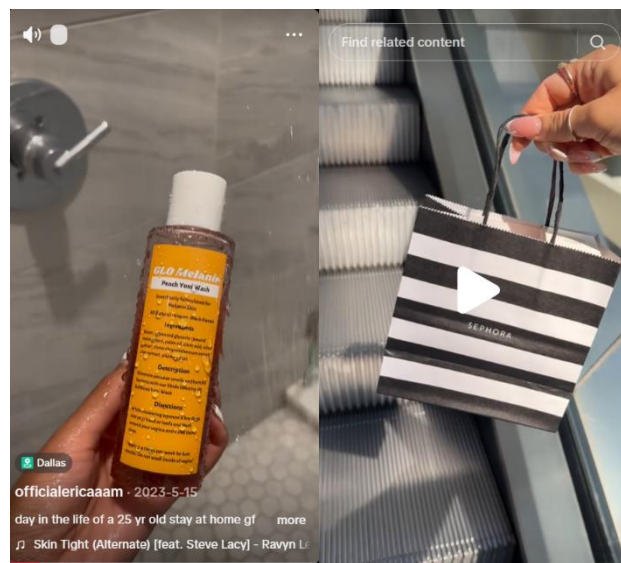


Figure 7 and 8

Consuming beauty products as an “errand” defines, then, the purchasing of these commodities as something urgent. Under gender essentialism, women offer three things as men’s subjects: domestic labor, social reproductive labor, and desirability (Federici 2004; Bhattacharya; 2017; Beauvoir 1949). Considering that in both videos neither of the creators emphasize household duties nor do they have children with their partners, much of their value as women rests in appearance. This lean into how womanhood is performed is still labor nonetheless. In Figure 9, @alexa.styled mentions that her partner is a “provider” whose work lets her go to pilates at

10:00am—a luxury not afforded to women who followed the hustle culture to work a 9-5. The word “provider” is heavy with gender essentialism because it invokes the idea that men ought to be breadwinners. The mise-en-scene of her bathroom reeks of luxury as well: Louis Vuitton makeup bag, Aesop soap or lotion, and rhode products sitting neatly on her sink. Leaning into the idea that men should simply *provide* according to gender roles, she employs her status as a woman to make him conform to masculinity for her benefit. While these women have access to financial support without having to be a worker, they mask the labor required to curate beauty as instead a freedom that they can fulfill because they no longer worry about money. The same standards that oppress women, *as* women, are remade into the ticket out from being oppressed as a worker. Traditional gender behavior of prioritizing prettiness is here negotiated in non-marital relationships.

Compensating for the lack of focus on domestic chores and/or childcare, there is an increased emphasis on physical appearance among the Consumer SAHGs and childless stay-at-home wives that have been unavoidable during my immersion. A recurring theme I noted from both my Instagram and TikTok feeds was this obsession with pilates. On Google Trends, the popularity of the term “pilates” has surged by 400% starting in 2022. An increased interest in pilates seems innocuous given that it is originally a gender-neutral form of exercise, but rhetoric associated with the practice has coded it as feminine maintenance. For instance, the workout is praised as something that does not make a woman bulky, echoing smaller frames and less noticeable strength as a standard for femininity (Ganim 2023). The two TikToks shown in Figures 9 and 10 are only two examples of a myriad of content within this sphere that hails pilates. Emphasizing that SAHGs and SAHWs alike have an “excess” of time due to being childless, long periods of exercise can be interpreted as both keeping oneself busy and

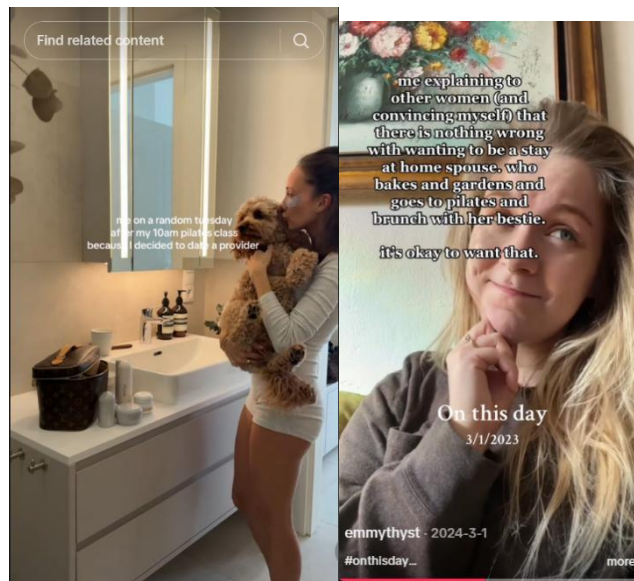
maintaining self-image. The desire to have time for pilates may also be pre-existing, but this desire in of itself may be rooted in wanting to look feminine. Because pilates is also a costly activity both creators may also be expressing desire for a male partner to cover excessive costs in general, leading to further performance of femininity to fulfill this.

For the SAHG, sexual desirability is what is being leveraged in return for sanctuary within the domestic space. This lean into how gender is negotiated to opt-out of the public sphere is still labor nonetheless; however, although these women are performing labor in either sphere, the kinds of labor that women are traditionally expected to perform are posed to be more desirable than the labor that grants one financial independence. Additionally, only having to stay at home and make oneself desirable is undeniably easier than assuming the double burden.

Regarding the consumption of beauty products and exercise regimen, such products operate as tools to reinforce the performance of femininity that enables one's status as a SAHG.

TikTok user @emmythyst's content demonstrates a deep desire to leave the workforce, with her discussing difficulties with work-life balance and financial stresses. As shown in Figure 10, she writes that she simply wants to be a stay-at-home spouse—not mother—who goes to pilates and goes out to eat with friends. This diction illustrates a lack of interest in conducting social reproductive labor because she is only interested in leaving the workforce. Here is a nearly explicitly stated desire to be financially dependent as a worker *through* womanhood. Her choice to say “other women,” rather than “people” first acknowledges that women are expected to participate in the labor force. Then, she states “there is nothing wrong with wanting to be a stay-at-home spouse,” which implicitly acknowledges that this is a lifestyle that had to be abandoned with the normalization of the dual-income household, girlboss culture, and the double shift. This particular video demonstrates the shift in superstructure around the financial dependence that is

inherent to full domesticity, reframing domesticity as something that does not labor whatsoever to make it more appealing.



Figures 9 and 10

The Consumer archetype of the SAHG is a woman navigating influencer culture to promote domesticity, however, not with the explicit goal to reproduce patriarchy. Sykes and Hopner (2024) argue that SAHGs divorce domesticity from labor, regarding domesticity as a form of self-care as a subversion to hustle culture. Like with tradwives, most of the content I found about being a SAHG was posted during or after 2022. Notably, media covering SAHGs mentions that the earliest SAHG content came about during August 2022 although there are less influencers that pride themselves on being SAHGs (Henderson 2022; Jeffery and Rasker 2022). This is immediately after the peak of inflation that hit 2022 in the food, gas, and housing sectors (Hajdini, Ina, et al 2025). Framing domesticity as self-care heightens the appeal of a SAHG by acting as a critique of late-stage capitalism work structure rather than one that is pro-gender roles. While not directly preaching that a woman's duty is to stay at home like the Tradwife and

proto-Tradwife, heteronormative financial dependence is reevaluated as a dynamic that liberates the woman instead of submitting her.

Conclusion

What both tradwives and SAHGs signal to us is what would be a “contradiction” under dialectical materialism, a mismatch of infrastructure and ideas that resultantly ignites social movement towards change in structure; but under cultural materialism, these trends are a result of adapting to the changes in the economy. When the expectation of women is to perform the second shift while wage gaps, work-family policies, and speculated stagflation collide, gender essentialist ideologies may be used to rationalize women’s resignation from the labor force. Emically, both the woman who promotes these archetypes and submits to these archetypes are submitting to a cultural gender role. When zooming out with the etic perspective, observing fluctuations in the economy, in addition to how they are exaggerated for women through systemic misogyny, the gender role is only a channel for women to deviate from the expectations of late-stage capitalism as workers. This, however, is mainly when the opportunity presents itself through the privilege of being able to rely on a male partner for financial dependence.

Based on the observations from this study, I am interested in exploring further implications for how social media spaces can serve as platforms to negotiate superstructures around the different spheres of labor and traditional gender roles under late-stage capitalism. Potentially, viewing these shifts in the production and reproduction of gender through cultural materialism may serve to predict future trajectories for superstructures around gender that may arise to adapt to economic circumstances.

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