

Gel Manicures, a Thirty-Thousand-Dollar Stove, and Gender Oppression: The Lives of Mormon Influencers

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Abstract: Through an analysis of Mormon TikTok creators Nara Smith and Hannah Neeleman (alias Ballerina Farm), this paper examines how the persistence of traditionally feminine ideals and gender roles intersects with class status and religious doctrine in the digital age. By drawing on Barbara Welter’s “Cult of True Womanhood” and Thorstein Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class*, I investigate how these influencers utilize social media to construct aspirational images of idealized womanhood that in turn can be leveraged for financial gain. Through close readings of content produced by Nara Smith and Hannah Neeleman, this paper argues that, despite their contrasting aesthetics, they strategically perform wealth and leisure. Consequently, both content creators reinforce traditional gender roles and perpetuate harmful class distinctions within their religious community. This research ultimately demonstrates the enduring influence of historical ideals on contemporary online performance and highlights how social-media platforms not only allow but encourage unrealistic and potentially damaging expectations of (religious) femininity.

From the pristine kitchens of luxury influencers to the picturesque farmhouses of homesteading creators, social media offers a glimpse into the resurgence of interest in traditional gender roles. In this paper, I will analyze two videos posted on the social-media platform TikTok, which will serve as my primary sources: a post featured on Nara Smith’s (@naraazizasmith) account titled “absolute perfection [heart hands emoji],” published on February 26, 2024, and a post by Hannah Neeleman (@ballerinafarm) captioned “Ballerina Farm bratwurst and homemade sauerkraut recipe coming in all meat boxes this week! Enjoy!” published on March 25, 2023. Both of these videos, in their content and aesthetics, are generally representative of Nara Smith’s and Hannah Neeleman’s online personas. My analysis is grounded in two key theories that offer insights into the construction of influencer images and their impact on contemporary femininity. First, Barbara Welter’s concept of ‘true womanhood’ provides a framework for

understanding how traditional expectations of domesticity are maintained and modernized. Additionally, Thorstein Veblen's work *The Theory of the Leisure Class* illuminates how influencers utilize 'conspicuous consumption' and displays of 'leisure' to signal exclusivity and reinforce their social status within influencer culture. Both theories expose the complexities of portraying aspirational lifestyles on social media and highlight the power dynamics inherent in the performance of idealized domestic roles. Against this backdrop, I will then conduct my analysis by close-reading two TikToks by the influencers Nara Smith and Hannah Neeleman.

Nara Smith is a mixed South African-German model, a young stay-at-home mother (SAHM), and an influencer based in Dallas, Texas, who converted to Mormonism through marriage. She is known for her meticulously curated online image, with her most popular posts featured on TikTok portraying a life of effortless, glamorous domesticity and a seemingly put-together aesthetic. From spontaneously whipping up elaborate homemade treats for her children to modeling a wardrobe of loungewear and elegant dresses, Nara embodies a modern, luxurious idealization of the young SAHM (Cubbin). She does not say whether she personally identifies with the 'tradwife' TikTok trend that is currently sparking discourse and controversy—a trend that emphasizes a return to traditional gender roles in the domestic sphere—however, her audience does associate her and the image she presents with it (Cubbin). Questions about the authenticity of her image are being discussed on the platform, with users pointing to the detachedness of her TikTok posts by calling them an "influencer lobotomy" (edgarallanwhore) and criticizing their potential to perpetuate restrictive standards of femininity.

Hannah Neeleman, who grew up Mormon herself (Haddock), presents her audience with an idyllic, picture-perfect vision of rural family life and homesteading. Her content portrays a wholesome existence rooted in living off the land: raising livestock, growing their own vegetable garden, and, most importantly, having their many kids frolicking around. In her content, Hannah embodies the pinnacle of the 'homesteader' aesthetic. However, her carefully crafted online persona conceals an important truth: Hannah's family is the "[heir] to a billion-dollar fortune" to be inherited from her father-in-law, founder of several "major airlines including Morris Air, WestJet, JetBlue Airways," and others (Findlay). This revelation highlights the complex interplay of authenticity, wealth, and the construction of aspirational online identities, sparking controversy not only about Hannah Neeleman but also about inherent contradictions of the entire homesteader tradwife trend itself.

Through a close reading of their content, I argue that while both Nara Smith and Hannah Neeleman embody modern interpretations of 'true womanhood,' their social-media identities strategically utilize conspicuous consumption to obscure

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different realities of religious patriarchy and class, and they thus perpetuate lifestyles that are idealistic yet unattainable for their audiences.

THEORY: MORMONISM, GENDER, AND THE ‘TRUE WOMAN’

Defining ‘True Womanhood’: Complications of the Ideal

Barbara Welter’s concept of ‘true womanhood,’ coined in her 1966 article “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860,” explains the key cultural ideals imposed on nineteenth-century US American women, which will serve as a base for my analysis. The ‘true woman’ was understood as pious, pure, submissive, and domestic—and as adhering to these “four cardinal virtues [...] [that] promised [her] happiness and power” in society (Welter 152). Piety was women’s “divine right,” their most valuable virtue, “as it did not take a woman away from her ‘proper sphere,’ her home” (153). As mothers and wives, they became the moral backbone of the household, responsible for the religious instruction of their husbands and children. According to Welter, the “great task” of a ‘true woman’ “[consisted] of bringing men back to God” (162) and “[raising] her sons to be good Americans” (172). This, in turn, made women the upholders of morality for the entire nation, which “depended upon her mothers to raise up a whole generation of Christian statesmen” (171).

Sexual purity and adherence to strict standards of chastity and modesty went hand in hand with religious piety and became central to a woman’s moral and spiritual identity. Purity was a woman’s “greatest gift” to give to her husband—such a “priceless virtue” of “female superiority” (156, 157) that it created the necessity for a cultural insistence on submission in order to overcome the dilemma that marriage as “an end to innocence” would pose (158). Women were supposed to remain obedient and defer to male authority, i.e., fathers, husbands, and even sons, in matters of decision-making to avoid the corrupting influences of the outside world. Their status as “passive, submissive responders” (159) required women to bear annoyances quietly, to refrain from giving their unsolicited advice, and, most importantly, to not retort abusive behavior but to “give up gracefully” (161). A woman’s position as a homemaker was argued to have a “sedative quality [able to] subdue even the most restless spirits” (170). Domesticity, according to Welter, thus meant not only seeking “refuge [in] the warmth and safety of her home” (162) and “[keeping] busy at morally uplifting tasks” (164) but also “[focusing her] whole interest [...] on her husband” (170).

Of course, this ideal status of being the perfect, obedient, and cheerful wife “who [...] work[s] in silence” (160) was not easily attained. Women were subjected to

immense pressure to make their domestic labor appear effortless, often feeling like they “did not live up to [...] True Womanhood” (174). Homemaking was idealized as a natural expression of femininity instead of actual labor, dismissing the fact that “true domestics are workers, members of a distinctly unglamorous service economy, and—as such—hardly goddess material” (D’Albertis 26). Therefore, outward appearance was often at odds with lived reality, and keeping up this image became a priority. Class difference and privilege further complicate this reality of ‘true womanhood.’ Working-class women or single mothers had to participate in the workforce to support their families with their own income, which proves that “the experiences and expectations of motherhood are emphatically class specific” (Klaver and Rosenman, Introduction 10). Only extremely privileged families could even begin to afford to truly live out this sacred, ethereal form of domesticity without strain or servants. According to Welter, this ideal was so hard to fulfill that it “carried within itself the seeds of its own destruction” (174).

Relevance of the Ideal in the Mormon Church

The Mormon Church’s emphasis on living according to the boundaries of traditional gender roles in a modern society keeps women firmly placed within the domestic sphere. Mormon family values and social expectations still characterize them as mainly wives and mothers. Mormon scholar Richard Lyman Bushman states that “most Mormon women think of marriage and children as the life they most desire” (94). Insisting that Mormon women’s “most significant role is in the home as nurturers of the next generation” (94) reveals that the “stereotype [...] of what [a] woman was and ought to be persisted” (Welter 174), signifying its continued presence in modern Mormon society. According to Caroline Kline, Mormon doctrine ascribes to women an “inherently different nature than men, a ‘feminine’ nature, one characterized by gentleness, altruism, and motherliness” (193). Modern Mormonism operates mostly under the doctrine that these different roles are not the reflection of a superior/inferior power dynamic (194)—but practicing such gender-essentialist views and expectations inevitably results in exactly that. Stereotyping based on gender roles, however positive it may seem at first, puts society and individuals alike into constraints that can serve as excuses for exclusion and oppression (195).

This is not the only connection between conventions of the Mormon faith and the ideal of ‘true womanhood.’ Mormon women are still raised within the constraints of “restrictive patriarchal ideas and practices which sublimate [them] and place them under male authority, control, and which limit their visibility and power” (Kline 188), similar to how nineteenth-century women were trained to be passive and deferential. This expectation of obedience expands from the household

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into the church and doctrine as well, since Mormon women are not allowed to hold priesthood. Taking a stance against this rule and “advocating gender equality” can lead to excommunication from the church (Urban 53). Again, this is legitimized by ‘positive’ stereotypes already present in nineteenth-century society, resulting in the argument that Mormon women should not strive for power within the church because their spiritual equivalent is motherhood (Kline 197). Kline argues that, therefore, men are able to continue upholding this power structure within church and home alike, “making [this] equation [serve] as a distraction from the real situation—that women are excluded” (198).

The ‘True Woman’ in Influencer Culture

Many viral TikTok trends, which could arguably be classified as cultural movements, tap into ideals and conventions rooted in religious doctrine by making use of aspirational and nostalgic content. An emerging trend directly connected to both the ideal of ‘true womanhood’ and to the doctrines of Mormon faith and lifestyle is the concept of the tradwife. Creators have by now crafted an Internet niche of discourse and heated debates, with content specifically catering to an audience favoring traditional family values, while also carefully curating content that aims to sway those previously uninterested in this kind of dynamic.

Tradwife influencers like Nara Smith and Hannah Neeleman tap into visuals and aesthetics that inherently connect them to images and ideals similar to the ‘true woman.’ Their online personas specifically emphasize their traditionally feminine appearance, visuals of domestic life, and an image that is mostly “white, straight, Christian, [and] cleaving to traditional gender roles and family structures” (Beddington). Especially in terms of keeping up appearances and making the continuation of nineteenth-century ideals seem effortless, the curated and extremely aestheticized nature of social-media content allows tradwife influencers to project an idealized version of themselves. Their audiences witness a performance, a staged image of their domestic life while being sold “a seemingly intimate relationship” (Van Driel and Dumitrica 69). Tradwife influencers who specifically and primarily showcase this idealized image of effortless domesticity without challenges in balancing family, religion, and labor promote a one-sided perspective of (Mormon) gender roles. They deliberately advertise misconceptions about their religion to their possibly non-Mormon/non-Christian audiences. Some Mormon tradwife influencers thereby suggest that they are somewhat able to circumvent gender expectations, for instance by choosing outfits that would be classified as immodest in Mormon society. In the analytic section of this paper, I will analyze the performance of TikTok creators Nara Smith and Hannah Neeleman and

contextualize their social-media appearance and adherence to religious ideals compared to their ‘offline’ reality.

SOCIAL CLASS, CONSUMPTION, AND VEBLÉN’S LEISURE CLASS

Thorstein Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class*

Celebrities, influencers, and members of the upper class are often generally described as being and acting out of touch with reality, tone-deaf, and oblivious to the current zeitgeist. This becomes painfully visible especially when they are trying—and more often than not failing—to appear relatable to their fans, audience, or social environment of perhaps lower economic status. I will use Thorstein Veblen’s nineteenth-century work as a critical lens that shows how a certain performative aspect in wealthy people’s behaviors has not just emerged during the age of social media but has always been there. In this case, the performativity extends deeper than simply deciding on a certain appearance to portray in front of a camera via creative expression.

Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class* posits that wealthy upper-class members of society signal their affluence not only through material possessions but also through literally and deliberately wasting them and their own time. “Conspicuous consumption” (Veblen 47) and “conspicuous leisure” (32) are concepts referring to wasteful, exaggerated, and extravagant displays of possession and use of free time. Members of the ‘leisure class’ are thus able to demonstrate their financial superiority and distinguish themselves from the lower working classes because “the performance of labour has been accepted as a conventional evidence of inferior [status]” (29). The most important factor here is the “abstention from productive work” (28) and showing off this ability as well as the resulting abundance of free time that allows them to engage in leisure activities. Employing staff or servants that take care of essential labor for the leisure class further highlights their ability to free up more of their time (32) and use it for “vicarious leisure” (50) simply by having enough money to spend on others’ time.

Within social media, influencer culture thrives on projecting specifically curated lifestyles through the performance of status. Influencers represent a contemporary evolution of Veblen’s concept of the leisure class, as their work is centered around promoting certain lifestyles, goods, or ideals of status. Even though they are still engaging in a form of productive labor—as it generates wealth—their labor does not follow the goal of social production but one of crafting a wishful image of abundance and leisure. Online, conspicuous consumption extends beyond the ‘traditional’ material displays to project a curated digital identity that aligns with

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the broader shift in how status is signaled in an increasingly digital economy. Here, the appearance of this lavish lifestyle is more important than reality. Projecting and performing the ideal on social media helps to leverage wealth more than just simply being a member of the upper or leisure class. In conclusion, the performative nature of social-media content helps to further cultivate access to higher social status and signify certain class privileges.

Class and Gender in Mormon Doctrine

Of course, the Mormon community is not one homogeneous group but encompasses a range of subgroups with individuals coming from different economic backgrounds. While wealthy, upper-class Mormon influencers may possess and display considerable amounts of wealth, many ‘regular’ Mormon families live a different reality. As discussed before, Mormonism typically embraces traditional gender roles. Therefore, it can be assumed that a number of Mormon households rely on single incomes to support a SAHM. Here, the factor of religious faith and doctrine complicates the already existing disparity between what is portrayed in aspirational content and the lived reality of non-influencers. While Mormon doctrine emphasizes equality of everyone before God, socioeconomic inequality can create difficulties in navigating religious expectations.

Some Mormon SAHMs fall prey to multi-level marketing schemes (MLMs) that are especially popular in socially isolated communities, as they “[tap] into a religious emphasis on self-reliance” (Johnson). MLMs become specifically appealing to SAHMs because of “the allure of being able to make money while fulfilling one’s familial role as a wife and mother” (Johnson). They often promise flexible and remote work that would generate a second stream of income for their household, seemingly requiring minimal time and effort without having to take away time from their family, childcare, and domestic labor.

By creating the illusion of easy, enjoyable work that almost feels like a leisure activity itself, MLMs align with Veblen’s concept of the leisure class. It highlights the economic disparity between Mormon SAHMs and the carefully curated online images of wealthy Mormon influencers. Influencers showcase a seemingly effortless compatibility of domesticity and affluence, while ‘regular’ Mormon women try to perform status, leisure, and conspicuous consumption without the same economic means, thereby becoming trapped in the cycle of MLMs. The desire for leisure and escaping domestic labor is not exclusive to those with financial privilege, but they can leverage it to project appearances aligning with this aspiration. This allows them to utilize their social status to circumvent or stay within the constrictions of their religious faith, such as strict gender roles in Mormonism, while others cannot.

Religious Ideals and Negotiating Class in Influencer Culture

Mormon doctrine prescribes to its followers a path to spiritual growth that can be reached through covenants, sacred promises to God affirmed by ordinances and obedience—the ‘covenant path’ (Urban 53). As mentioned in the above section, Mormonism promises equality before God and therefore emphasizes the potential of every individual to achieve the highest level of spirituality, called exaltation (Kline 187; Urban 51). The realities and different interpretations of how to live and fulfill the covenant path and the equal potential for exaltation, however, can be complex and influenced by different factors, one of them being social class.

Greater financial resources can create more opportunities for the privileged to participate in religious activities or contribute financially to the church. Veblen’s concept of the leisure class also suggests that wealthy individuals would be able to afford to invest more time and labor into their religious community than others, therefore signaling greater religious devotion. Missionary work, for example, plays a significant role in Mormon culture and identity and is understood as “one of the main reasons for the global success of Mormonism” (Urban 53). Going on a mission trip is usually “strongly encouraged” and self- or family-financed (53). Thus, wealthy members of the community are certainly able to fulfill the call to proselytize more effortlessly. However, this is not the only complication that can create a skewed perception of wealthy individuals being ‘further along’ the covenant path than others, despite the doctrine’s aforementioned emphasis on equality before God.

Due to the performative nature of social media, wealthy Mormon content creators like Nara Smith and Hannah Neeleman may showcase select aspects of their lives that align particularly with those religious ideals that they want to fulfill—showing them ‘speedwalking’ the covenant path. Through regularly attending temple, performing missionary work, or adhering to gendered standards, they would be engaging in what Veblen calls conspicuous consumption, in the sense that they display markers of their religious devotion alongside their luxury goods, travel, and leisure activities. In contrast, content creators also have agency about what not to portray. Challenges, struggles, and setbacks in their religious identity can easily be left out of “highly curated and over-edited” content that is “now becoming the norm on [social-media platforms]” (Van Driel and Dumitrica 77). However (un)intentional this may be, it creates a potentially misleading image of effortlessness, righteousness, and fulfilled ideals, subtly suggesting a connection between spiritual progress and conspicuous wealth and leisure.

This is not to claim that the influencers themselves necessarily believe that their wealth directly equates to greater righteousness or devotion. Still, just as other idealistic content can be harmful, Mormon content creators hereby unintentionally suggest to their audience a connection between wealth, social class, and being on

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the right path to higher spirituality. These unintended consequences of their creative expression can lead to feelings of judgment and inadequacy among Mormon viewers with fewer financial resources, but they can also promote misleading impressions to their audiences. Outsiders might form a skewed opinion about Mormon faith based on content that centers effortless religious adherence, thereby downplaying the level of dedication and sacrifice expected from all Mormons regardless of wealth.

ANALYSIS: NARA SMITH

Modernizing the ‘True Woman’

In my theory section on the “Cult of True Womanhood,” I established nineteenth-century ideals on femininity and domesticity and their inherent complications. I demonstrated how they are still upheld and modernized in Mormon doctrine and by religious influencer culture, specifically the tradwife trend. In this section, I will analyze in detail how this trope and its complications can be applied to content by TikTok creator Nara Smith and the persona she created for her online presence.

Her appearance and demeanor embody a modernized ‘true woman’ who is able to effortlessly blend domesticity, traditionally feminine appearance, and aspirational aesthetics. In the TikTok post I am analyzing, Nara wears an elegant sleeveless brown dress, which is low-cut and skintight, and the shoulder straps are adorned with golden details. It is certainly not an apron made for potentially messy kitchen endeavors, nor is it comfortable loungewear that would suggest a day spent at home in the company of her young children. Her hair, as well as her makeup, is carefully styled in an elegant, minimalist, but decidedly poised manner. She wears lipstick, eye shadow, blush, and highlighter. Her hair is slicked down into a classy French bob. She sports not only a necklace and earrings but also rings on each hand and a freshly manicured set of French nails. She does not take off her jewelry while handling fresh dough (Nara Smith 00:00:56) or homemade butter and cheese with her bare hands, and she visibly avoids getting food stuck under her long nails with slow, measured movements (00:01:12). Nara is thus intentionally not willing to sacrifice any aesthetic aspect of her elegant, traditionally feminine appearance for the sake of convenience. She further projects an image of elevated sophistication instead of just homeliness and domesticity. Creative expression, in this case the creation of curated content, allows her to fulfill this modernized image of a traditional and gendered ideal without sacrificing the visibility of her affluence.

While Nara’s elegant contemporary appearance deviates from the nineteenth-century ideal of a sheltered woman residing purely in the domestic sphere and

therefore modernizes this image, she still prioritizes the emphasis on her traditionally feminine appearance in her content, adhering to the basic aspects of this image of ‘true womanhood.’ The entire video is overlaid with a voice-over of her speaking in an extremely calm and measured manner, in a low and soft voice. Her soft demeanor aligns well with the nineteenth-century expectation of female submissiveness and passivity, which extends into her own household through Mormon faith and gender roles. In the context of TikTok content, however, this specific style of voice-over is common in aspirational content. It can, for example, be linked to the currently popular ‘clean girl’ trend that emphasizes effortless and portrays “a ‘perfect’ girl with her life in order” (Rawte). Here, Nara is also able to combine a traditional ideal rooted in religion and a modern aesthetic, allowing the expectations placed on her to manifest as creative expression instead of strict religious constraint and oppression.

The fact that Nara insists on making everything ‘from scratch’ plays into complicating the ideal of ‘true womanhood’ as well. Her emphasis on strictly homemade cooking echoes the domestic prowess that a ‘true woman’ should display, yet her ‘influencer privilege’ allows her to elevate this display and align it with the current zeitgeist. Being careful not to show any prepackaged grocery products, using only visually high-quality cookware—which are simultaneously the only items displaying logos of trendy luxury brands, such as her white KitchenAid (Nara Smith 00:01:03), a SMEG toaster and kettle set (00:00:27), or a Le Creuset dutch oven (00:00:17)—and emphasizing elaborate, time-consuming preparation (e.g., even producing the cheese for a grilled cheese sandwich) is her own modernized version of the ‘true woman’ as an ideal homemaker. Here, she is able to blur the lines between upholding religious gender ideals through skilled domestic performance and producing extensive and aestheticized material catering to current trends on TikTok. Her established status as an influencer enables her to frame domestic tasks as an aesthetic choice rather than a conformity to gender roles.

Aesthetics of Leisure

My theoretical basis of Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class* served the purpose of showing how influencers use conspicuous consumption to signal their social status and class affiliation, which also manifests in their freedom from essential domestic labor. In this section, I will analyze how Nara Smith performs ‘leisure’ in her TikTok content, thereby perpetuating harmful class distinctions within the Mormon community.

Nara’s kitchen and cookware that are visible in her content align with Veblen’s concepts in that they signal not only wealth but also the ability to afford leisure. Her minimalist, ‘clean girl’ interior, visible in the background of her videos through a

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complete lack of clutter on her stark white countertops (Nara Smith 00:00:14), suggests either that no domestic labor takes place or that Nara has both the time and the resources to keep the video frame clean in between every single cut. The apparent impracticality of her appearance is created by keeping all of her jewelry on while churning butter (00:01:12) and wearing an elegant dress with a full face of makeup to make lunch on a casual afternoon. This evokes the impression that she can afford not to care if any of her accessories or designer clothes get dirty or ruined while cooking; it even implies that she simply does not have old clothes used only for messy kitchen endeavors. According to Veblen's theory, Nara Smith can be viewed as engaging in conspicuous consumption. Her videos give the impression that she is thereby part of Veblen's idea of the leisure class. However, it is important to note that these videos are a product of her job as a content creator and thus complicate Veblen's notion. Nara Smith's videos can therefore be understood as a performance rather than an actual representation of 'leisure.' Linking this back to expectations according to her faith, by creating this aspirational content, she obscures the reality of this life for those in her religious community who may not have the same status, resources, or abilities to perpetuate this illusion of effortlessly meeting religious ideals.

The abundance of leisure time as an aspect of Nara's content becomes apparent in her elaborate cooking processes that mimic "vicarious leisure" (Veblen 50) and create a performance of domesticity that seems to exist outside of the time constraints that other people may face. In the beginning of the video, she explains that her children "both wanted a grilled cheese [sandwich]" (Nara Smith 00:00:05) for lunch. She then proceeds to make the bread, cheese, and pesto for the sandwich, as well as the garlic butter to fry the sandwich in, entirely by herself over the course of what must be several hours. All these extremely time-consuming tasks are neither necessary nor essential domestic labor and seem undeniably excessive, given that her children wanted a meal that is typically considered to be a quickly prepared dish. However, because of her financial status, she is able to freely 'waste' this time, which Veblen argues is a display of class distinction used by the wealthy (29). Nara is performing vicarious leisure by complicating and prolonging tasks that others might do out of necessity, and her influencer status allows her to use this as content that she can then leverage to increase her affluence even more. This aspect can also be related back to the idealization of motherhood and domesticity in Mormon faith, as Nara Smith's financial privilege, stemming from being a content creator, obscures the reality that many other, less affluent SAHMs have to live up to this standard while being under significantly higher constraints of time and resources.

Interpreting the ‘True Woman’

In contrast to Nara Smith’s modernized image of ‘true womanhood,’ Hannah Neeleman, also known as Ballerina Farm, introduces elements that challenge the pristine, idealized form of the concept while still subtly reinforcing it with her creative choices. Her content and online persona undoubtedly emphasize her focus on the domestic sphere: In addition to the kitchen setting of her video, cooking a homemade meal while simultaneously partaking in childcare—such as letting her children help with preparing the food (Ballerina Farm 00:00:27) and supervising a toddler in a high chair (00:00:06)—are traditionally feminine activities that align with performing ‘true womanhood,’ similar to Nara Smith’s content. Hannah’s simple appearance may contrast Nara’s curated elegance with minimal or no makeup, modest clothing, and a functional braided hairstyle, which reinforces her focus on practicality over fashionability. Nevertheless, they are both just different interpretations of presenting a traditionally feminine appearance.

Hannah Neeleman’s dedication to centering motherhood in her content is another similarity to Nara Smith, but she places emphasis on the portrayal of the related physical labor in the domestic sphere instead of effortlessness, grace, and perfection. Compared to Nara’s children not interacting with her or the camera in her videos, Hannah’s children are regularly shown helping to the best of their abilities. By this, they add to the messiness of the process (Ballerina Farm 00:00:18) rather than ensuring that the kitchen is clean at all times. Hannah’s husband Daniel does not participate in kitchen chores beyond coming in to spread butter onto the freshly baked buns under the careful supervision of his wife (00:01:05) and eating the food she plated for him (00:01:13). Their young son also appears to only enter the kitchen to help himself to a plate of food (00:01:23), whereas her daughter can be seen helping her prepare the food earlier in the video. This choice of inclusion in the video, portraying her style of ‘mothering,’ furthers the notion that the domestic sphere is the wife’s domain and that their daughters are being raised this way as well.

Hannah’s demeanor adds to this emphasis on physical labor. While she is working on preparing the food in the video, she is often frowning with exertion, brows furrowed and forehead pinched (Ballerina Farm 00:00:19). Her arm movements when stirring or mashing something are forceful, practiced, yet hurried. She puts her full body into the cooking process while balancing not only bowls but also a child on her hip (00:00:28). The chosen sound in the video plays a role here as well: Her children can be heard talking, coughing, and clattering

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around, while she uses a cheerful marching-band sound titled “German Folk Dance” partially overlaying the audio. This is a stark contrast to the calm, soft-spoken Nara Smith, who works with slow, deliberate gestures focused on showing off the aesthetic aspects of her work rather than the actual effort going into it. Ultimately, both are promoting childcare and preparing homemade meals as an essential aspect of their interpretation of the ideal domestic ‘true woman.’

The ‘Shabby Chic’ Status Symbol

Hannah’s style of content and her creative choices portray an aesthetic alluding to a much simpler, modest lifestyle and fewer financial resources than needed to sustain it, which strategically obscures her family’s true social status for their own benefit. Her focus on presenting the preparation of artisanal homemade food suggests that she is choosing the simpler, down-to-earth option for feeding her family. Still, this practice aligns with Veblen’s theory of conspicuous consumption and the ability to waste valuable time on unnecessary activities. It suggests that she can afford to spend so much time in the kitchen instead of getting prepackaged, store-bought products. This is similar to the effect that Nara Smith’s content has, but it is complicated by her choice of aesthetics. Her kitchen features worn-out wooden countertops, where stains, crumbs, and discarded leftovers litter the surfaces (Ballerina Farm 00:00:38). Items such as power cords for a wall-mounted lamp and mason jars filled with plants and vegetable roots appear carelessly strewn and placed in the kitchen and in the frame. However, a bit of a closer look at the old-fashioned stovetop in the background uncovers that this is a cast-iron range by the Swedish brand AGA, with the design type in Hannah Neeleman’s kitchen retailing for around thirty thousand US dollars (Findlay). This suggests an unexpected economic reality, revealing a carefully constructed, calculated persona rather than a genuinely modest lifestyle. This allows her to leverage the obscurity created through her content for further financial gain, as it promotes both traditional scenes of domesticity and the appeal of ‘rustic’ authenticity for her influencer brand.

The complicated representation of Hannah’s social status in her content also subverts her performance of the tradwife ideal, exposing the intersections of economic reality, adhering to standards of traditional femininity, and producing profit-driven influencer content. As established above, her aesthetics still signal ‘leisure’ even through the obscurity of her ‘shabby chic’ aesthetics and, thus, seemingly align with Veblen’s leisure theory, just as much as her appearance conforms to traditional ideals of femininity. The complication here is that her career as an influencer is itself labor that produces significant amounts of financial income, considering the popularity of her account. While Hannah may not appear to fit into Veblen’s category of leisure-class members, her economic status reveals

that she is actually engaging in vicarious leisure. Simultaneously, her videos distort the image of traditional SAHMs, who do not have to work as their husbands function as the sole providers for their families.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I explored the enduring influence of traditional ideals of femininity and their reshaping within contemporary digital culture. I argued that, despite Nara Smith's and Hannah Neeleman's contrasting aesthetics, both influencers strategically perform wealth and leisure through their curated TikTok content. By revisiting the nineteenth-century concept of 'true womanhood' and its alignment with Mormon doctrine's emphasis on domesticity and motherhood, I demonstrated how these historical ideals still persist in today's influencer culture. Aesthetic trends and traditional gender norms, both represented by the content creators whose videos I analyzed, continue to shape the portrayal of modern idealized femininity.

Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* works as a critical framework for understanding how influencers can use performative displays of wealth and leisure to construct their online personas and aspirational identities. This performativity not only distinguishes content creators like Nara Smith and Hannah Neeleman within their own social and economic class but also creates harmful standards for their less affluent audiences. Both content creators' videos further perpetuate misconceptions about the attainability of the tradwife lifestyle, which is generally tied to traditional Mormon beliefs.

The analysis of a TikTok video posted by creator Nara Smith revealed how her content modernizes and reinforces the ideal of 'true womanhood' conceptualized by Barbara Welter. Although her online self-expression as a member of the leisure class is merely performative, it promotes a harmful image for less affluent members of her religious community. Similarly, Hannah Neeleman's embodiment of the 'true woman' is only achievable through intentionally concealing her wealth and privilege. Both influencers, consequently, perpetuate the tradwife ideal that is unattainable for most Mormon households of lower economic status.

These findings emphasize how influencer culture operates as a microcosm of broader social dynamics, where gender, class, and performativity intersect in ways that shape cultural perceptions of success and identity. Ultimately, I conclude that by using social media to market curated lifestyles, influencers like Nara Smith and Hannah Neeleman contribute to a digital economy of purely idealized value, perpetuating conservative gender roles veiled in contemporary media aesthetics. Examining these dynamics through Veblen's and Welter's theoretical lenses not only reveals the persistence of class and gender hierarchies but also challenges the ideals that dominate contemporary cultural narratives, especially on social media.

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