

Grace Tucker:

Biblical Women in the Digital Age: Exploring Ideas of Motherhood and Femininity within Far-Right Evangelical Communities on Instagram

Bachelor's thesis review

The bachelor's thesis explores a very timely topic of representation of femininity within the American Evangelical movement. Specifically, it focuses on women within the Biblical Patriarchy movement, and it explores the notions of politicization and weaponization of womanhood and motherhood within these communities on Instagram. The thesis focuses solely on the online representation of womanhood within these communities and online ethnography was therefore used as the main research method. While exploring these issues via the lens of the performance of social media identities makes great sense and aligns with how much contemporary research approaches these topics, I think the methodology is not applied entirely correctly in the thesis (see below, comments on methodology). This is also my main criticism of the thesis which I otherwise consider interesting, well-written, and raising interesting questions for possible future research.

One (minor) comment on the structure of the text – it would be useful to include a Table of Contents. There are some typos and misspellings in the text, but nothing major or serious. Overall, the text reads well and formally fulfills the expectations of a bachelor's thesis.

The thesis starts with a review of the topic and the main theoretical concepts used by the author. While most of these concepts are appropriate in this context, a more recent and widely referenced work could also have been mentioned here- for example, the work of Alexandra Mina Stern, Ashley Mattheis, or Annie Kelly. All these authors have published research on femininity and womanhood within the U.S. far-right/alt-right movement, connecting it to the tradwife/tradfem online subcultures. The author does not mention these subcultures in her thesis – I believe that especially the tradwife movement could have been included in the theoretical overview as it now presents one of the most visible representation of womanhood in far-right politics. It would be interesting to know if these subcultures (Biblical Patriarchy and tradwife movement) are connected – I would suppose they are as they share ideological, political, and media roots and context.

The author then offers a useful overview of key terms used throughout the thesis. This part is well written and structured, but I would appreciate more references being included here as these concepts have been extensively explored in academic literature.

As mentioned above, my biggest concern is with the methodology and ethical aspects of the thesis. The author followed about 40 Instagram accounts and their interactions and maintained detailed fieldnotes (it is not mentioned what time period is covered in the research though). But since none of the women that were part of the research were actually aware of it and no interviews were conducted with them (there was no interaction with them whatsoever, as I understood it from how the author describes her methodology), can we really call this ethnographic research – supposing this is what the author aims for, as it is not specified, only hinted at? I agree with the important ethical and safety considerations that the author raises, however, it is not entirely true that “ethics of digital research are complicated and less consistent than many of the ethical standards applied to in-person research” (p.16). The Association of Internet Researchers has very detailed ethical guidelines updated regularly, also, for example, Kozinets (2020) dedicates several chapters to these issues in his widely referenced book on netnography as a method. I think it could be considered problematic to simply say that trying

to obtain informed consent was impossible and hence it was not even attempted. If this is the case, then perhaps another method would be more appropriate – discourse analysis, or ethnographic content analysis? (I believe that what the author did in the end actually comes pretty close to the latter, but again, this should be discussed and specified in the thesis).

This methodological unclearness then unfortunately also influences the analytical part, where the author focuses on the notion of a “godly woman” and “godly mother” – while both of these concepts are interesting and well connected to the theoretical frameworks mentioned in the theory part of the thesis, sometimes it seems that they are a bit disconnected from the actual data and the quotes from Instagram posts and captions serve merely as illustrations of what the author wants to say. I think that this could have been avoided if the method was better specified – because content analysis provides different data than ethnography and the analytical process is different, choosing the appropriate methodology would help the author to be clear in her expectations of what the data can and cannot say and how to incorporate them in the text.

On the other hand, I believe that this is an issue that is persistent also in the work of much more experienced researchers. The student has demonstrated the ability to conduct fieldwork, connect the findings with theoretical concepts, and they have written an interesting text on a well-chosen, timely topic. I recommend the thesis for defense and suggest that it is rated between the marks 1 – 2, the final mark depending on the results of the defense.

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Marie Heřmanová