

## Family Portrait: A Corpus-Based Analysis of the Discursive Construction of Traditional Families

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Grounded in the understanding that identity is a negotiated concept shaped by discourse and agreed upon by participants in a given social context (Benwell and Stokoe 2006), this investigation centres on the discursive construction of the notion of “traditional family”, and how it is contested and shaped through discourse. To achieve this aim, the study adopts a corpus-based approach (Baker 2006; McEnery *et al.* 2006; McEnery & Hardie 2012), analysing data collected from Twitter to interpret how “bondable” values (Zappavigna and Martin 2018; Balirano 2020) associated with the discursive online construction of the “traditional” are shared and reproduced in these online environments. Special attention is paid to the construction of digital landscapes for culture-specific communities of affective practice (Döveling *et al.* 2018), in order to understand how alignments and meanings are negotiated through SNSs practices (Zappavigna and Martin 2018). Through this analysis, the study identifies discursive loci that define the linguistic practices adopted by online communities in shaping the discourses around the “traditional family”. The findings of this study contribute to the understanding of how discourse shapes and reinforces heteronormative values and the marginalisation of non-normative identities in society. The study also sheds light on the role of online environments in the construction and reproduction of discursive norms related to the “traditional family”.

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## 1. Introduction

Traditionally, the understanding of sexuality, which encompasses the individual's erotic desires, has been intertwined with gender, referring to one's social identity, and sex, relating to one's bodily characteristics (Cameron and Kulick 2003; Motschenbacher and Stegu 2013; Balirano and Baker 2018). However, this conceptual association between gender, sex, and sexuality is not inherent or fixed, but rather shaped by discursive constructions that are reproduced and perpetuated in the context of particular societies. These discursive constructions are influenced by hegemonic norms that dictate the social configuration of the "proper" human being as a heterosexual man or woman, thereby positioning those who identify with other sexualities or genders as deviating from these normative standards. This notion of the hegemonic norms shaping the connections between gender, sex, and sexuality ties in with Butler's concept of "heterosexual matrix" (Butler 1990), which emphasises how societal norms and discourses construct and regulate normative sexual and gender identities. As posited by the author:

[...] the term *heterosexual matrix* [...] designate[s] that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized [...] to characterize a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality. (Butler 1990, 194; italics in the original)

It follows that the concept of the "heterosexual matrix" plays a pivotal role in shaping societal perceptions of bodies, genders, desires, and bonds, prescribing a dominant framework that assumes the alignment of bodies with stable sexes (male or female) and stable gender expressions (masculine or feminine). This framework enforces the expectation of compulsory heterosexuality, wherein relationships and desires between opposite sexes are regarded as the norm. Consequently, the "heterosexual matrix" categorises individuals based on their sex and gender, often perceived as binary categories of male or female, man or woman, which leads to the formation of hegemonic groupings that conform to these norms.

Indeed, this normative interpretation of categorisation creates a context where certain social categories are considered the standard, while those that deviate from this configuration face discrimination and exclusion. A specific case in point is represented by non-conforming families. These family structures inherently challenge traditional norms and expectations, standing in stark contrast to conventional societal ideals that still perpetuate a patriarchal structure of family with traditional gender configurations of a heterosexual man marrying a heterosexual woman and establishing a well-defined family unit that conforms to the "heterosexual matrix".

From this perspective, the role of language and discourse in shaping perceptions, values, and ideologies related to family structures becomes particularly pronounced (Fineman 1995; Mohammed and Jacob 2021). As Thompson *et al.* (2022) argue, our understanding of what constitutes a family is continually shaped through discursive articulations. This highlights the crucial role of communication in the constant reiteration and reconfiguration of the ideologies associated with families. Within this framework, traditional families that align with the heterosexual matrix previously described become the benchmark against which non-conforming families are identified

and, at times, subjected to discrimination. Hence, recognising this intricate interplay between communication and the perpetuation of normative family ideals is essential in understanding the broader sociocultural dynamics at play.

Bearing in mind the circumstances outlined previously, the following investigation examines how digital affect culture is manifested and enacted, highlighting the contours of digital communication on Social Networking Sites (SNSs). In particular, if on SNSs “[i]dentities are constructed in active processes of identification and self-understanding, seeking or eschewing commonality, connectedness and groupness” (Leppänen *et al.* 2014, 112), the following study seeks to analyse the way users linguistically and discursively commune and share their digital affect culture, thus focusing on how people forge alignments and negotiate meanings through social media practices. Indeed, by enabling users to affiliate online, SNSs have become a well-established “place” where individuals can share and negotiate their sets of values as being representative of sociocultural dynamics whose principles are shared and sometimes contested via the use of specific linguistic cues.

While studies of online discourse from a linguistic perspective are relatively established (Herring 2004; Androutsopoulos 2006; Jones *et al.* 2015; Androutsopoulos and Stæhr 2018; KhosraviNik and Unger 2016; Blommaert 2018; KhosraviNik 2018a, 2023; Mackenzie 2019, 2023), there is yet to be an accumulation of research providing linguistic models of online affiliation, especially when it comes to the analysis of the ideological work behind given representations. This research gap calls for further investigation into the ways in which ideology shapes the construction of meaning in online representations. In this regard, scholars widely acknowledge the necessity for extensive research into online texts, thoroughly examining how language is used to express and convey complex social and ideological meanings (KhosraviNik and Esposito 2018). This urgent call for extensive analysis is especially pertinent in the realm of online communication, wherein novel and ever-evolving modes of affiliation and identity formation prevail (Mackenzie 2019). As such, these ongoing transformations actively contribute to the continuous advancement and refinement of linguistic frameworks capable of capturing the intricate nuances embedded in online communication.

Hence, by venturing into an examination of the ways in which users interact on Twitter, this analysis aims to shed light on the manner in which specific discourses influence and shape individuals, directing them towards conforming to traditional values. More specifically, this study seeks to uncover the mechanisms by which certain identities and desires are accorded greater relevance and acceptance, while others are marginalised or even stigmatised. In this way, the concept of the traditional family is explored so as to understand how the discourses around such a representation reinforce prevailing societal norms and expectations related to familial structures and relationships. Therefore, aligning with Thompson *et al.*'s (2022) call for deeper exploration into the ways in which traditional families assert their “normalcy” both to themselves and to others, this study aims to shed light on these intricate dynamics. A more comprehensive understanding of the social and ideological underpinnings of online discourse can, therefore, be attained, contributing to the ongoing development and refinement of linguistic frameworks for analysing online communication.

However, it is important to underline that, while this issue of *de genere* seeks to explore discursive constructions of parenthood and family that move beyond their restrictive traditional definitions, to include other formulations such as single parenting, same-sex couple parenting, adoption, donor conception, chosen families, multi-parent

families, and blended families, the present paper wants to glance at how traditional families are discursively constructed so as to better understand how non-traditional families are sometimes contested. Therefore, this focus will illuminate the complex interplay between traditional and non-traditional family discourses in the digital environment, offering insights on how online communication both reflects and shapes societal norms and values.

## 2. Consciousness of kind and digital affect culture

“Consciousness of kind” can be roughly described as the connection that members of a group perceive towards one another thanks to specific signs, and the sense of difference from others that are not part of that specific community:

From the beginning of conscious life a tendency is manifest to discriminate between one alter and another, and development of the complicit ego is conditioned by a state of awareness which may be described as *a consciousness of similars or of kind*. The rise of this consciousness marks a distinct stage in the evolution of the mind of the many. Also it converts *mere gregariousness into society* [...]. (Giddings 1922, 163; italics in the original)

More specifically, Gusfield (1978) underlines that such a consciousness is at the very basis of any concrete or perceived societal affiliation, facilitated by the ability to evoke specific symbols of community, thus allowing for the emergence of a certain “we-ness”, according to which the “we” group has a different set of obligations and rights when acting toward those perceived as part of the in-group than toward those who are seen as outside of it (Gusfield 1978, 34):

[...] communal consciousness emerges in the perception and recognition that “we” have a different set of obligations and rights when acting toward those perceived as part of “our” community than toward those who are seen as outside that community. The appeal to act as a member of the community, to give special consideration to fellow members, and to place their aims above those of others and of the self must presuppose a recognition of the reality of the community and of the member’s affiliation to it. The “consciousness of kind” thus depends on perceiving that there is such a kind and that one is part of it.

This idea is based on Giddings (1922) who underlines that consciousness of kind converts society into a discriminative association of individuals who consciously or subconsciously share the same likings and dislikings against those whose conduct does not adhere to the general norms:

When the individuals who participate in pluralistic behavior have become differentiated into behavioristic kinds or types, a consciousness of kind, liking or disliking, approving or disapproving one kind after another, converts gregariousness into a consciously discriminative association, herd habit into society; and society, by a social pressure which sometimes is conscious but more often, perhaps, is unconscious, makes life relatively hard for kinds of character and conduct that are disapproved. (Giddings, 1922, 292)

Accordingly, the awareness of different categories or types of beings, along with the tendency to respond to similar stimuli, transforms instinctive behaviour and habitual association into a consciously chosen and preferred social interaction, thus evolving a herd into a society (Giddings 1922). Additionally, this awareness of shared identity or

commonality further enhances cooperative efforts beyond mere instinct, resulting into coordinated and purposeful collective action. In other words, recognising and identifying with specific groups or categories, and responding to similar stimuli, enables conscious decision-making in social interactions and fosters collaborative efforts towards common goals, elevating social behaviour from instinctual to intentional.

This consciousness of kind assuages fears and engenders comradeship, and members of society who subscribe to these values are aware of themselves as preferentially associating similars. Therefore, if fundamental similarities of behaviour and an awareness of the other members are extensive enough to maintain social cohesion, differences of behaviour are sufficient enough to create a division. Such an adequacy or inadequacy to the adherence to specific norms is of course (re)produced in the practices established by given dominant groups and gives rise to affiliation systems whereby individuals see themselves being represented by specific signs:

Such consciousness is facilitated by the capacity to evoke *symbols of community*. [...] When people come into contact with each other, it is through their self-designation and the designation of others in group terms that the situation is defined as an inter-group one and the persons given a standing in group terms. (Gusfield 1978, 34)

These signs are generally found in the texts produced that enable interactants to “negotiate attitudes and alignments, and [...] degrees of ‘otherness’ and ‘in-ness’” (Egkins and Slade 1997, 155). Affiliation accounts for “the sharing of attitudes in text and the participants’ construal of the social functions of bonding and co-identification” (Knight 2010, 134). This is generally achieved by coupling together specific attitudinal meanings in texts with particular ideational experiences, variously valuing different individuals, things and experiences in the world (Döveling *et al.* 2018). These “couplings” of attitude with experience bring together the participants, who construe affiliation by variously communing around or rejecting these couplings as more or less “acceptable” bonds between them (Martin 2000; Zappavigna *et al.* 2008; Zhao 2010; Balirano 2020). In other words, these signs become elements that allow individuals to recognise themselves as being part of that social configuration.

According to Knight (2010), communal identities are constructed through discursive negotiations that involve shared bonds, which form the value sets of communities and culture. However, far from being stable and fixed, these bonds are subject to change and negotiation. In other words, in order to align or disalign with particular sets of values or evaluative stances towards discursive representations, attitudes towards people, places, things, and other elements must be constructed. This fundamental concept can be employed to examine how values are discursively construed and reinforced, in conjunction with expressions of evaluation, as highlighted by Zappavigna (2018, 2019).

Therefore, as previously stated, couplings serve as points of convergence or divergence for the participants who interpret and construct affiliation by either communing around or rejecting these couplings as more or less “acceptable” bonds between them. In this way, the coupling of attitude with experience serves to bring individuals together or set them apart, as they negotiate and navigate the social dynamics of shared meanings in texts.

In the context of SNSs, digital affect culture (Papacharissi 2015; Döveling *et al.* 2018) plays an important role in the (re)production, identification and negotiation of

such couplings. In particular, digital affect culture can be defined as the emergence of “pockets” in the online environment where individuals experience mediated feelings of connectedness. These pockets are characterised by the construction of discursively emotional cultural practices and the formation of online communities of practice through situational, contextual, and relational performances. Therefore, SNSs play a crucial role in activating and sustaining latent ties that are vital for the mobilisation of networked publics in these digital affect cultures. Indeed, participants in these communities not only share common goals and a shared understanding of values, linguistic cues, and semiotic identity performances but also engage in a collective endeavour that positions the community in relation to the wider world. This process leads to the formation of discursively constructed digital affect cultures, characterised by emotional alignment that fosters a sense of belonging among its members.

It is however crucial to underline that, according to this view, individuals using SNSs are seen as members of distinct communities or potentially multiple ones (Danet and Herring 2007). This means that, in these online interactions, they bring with them a collective body of knowledge, shared values, and expectations concerning linguistic exchanges that align with specific world views, thus enabling the creation of that consciousness of kind previously described and those “pockets” of digital affect culture where individuals experience mediated feelings of connectedness. All of this is, of course, enabled by the technological affordances inherent in SNSs. These platforms provide the digital infrastructure and functionalities that facilitate the formation of these distinct online communities and the collective identity associated with them. The design and features of SNSs allow users to connect with like-minded individuals, share information, and engage in discussions that resonate with their shared values and worldviews.

In this digital context, therefore, the exploration of specific discourses emerging from the communicative events that individuals share online becomes seminal. Indeed, as KhosraviNik maintains, the notion of discourse is “what gives coherence to seemingly fragmented expressions” (KhosraviNik 2018b, 433). More specifically, in the context of SNSs, users are encouraged to (or have the perception of being allowed to) prioritise their affective moods (e.g., the expression of their values) as communicative acts that are perceived as individualistic. In other words, these communicative acts are often seen as belonging to the single user, yet they carry within them the potential for a deeper level of collective significance. Indeed, when these communicative events are analysed in their complexity and examined in the context of specific discourses (as in the case of family discourse, for instance), they reveal themselves as forms of groupings around given worldviews and the creation of specific representations in the digital environment. Thus, individual expressions can take on a collective dimension, where users coalesce around shared ideologies and values: the act of expressing one’s affective moods becomes part of a larger discourse, contributing to the articulation of particular digital identities. In this way, discourses on SNSs not only reflect individual perspectives but also serve as means of constructing and reinforcing shared worldviews and representations.

### **3. Family discourse and the discourse of the family: a critical theoretical perspective**

While some scholars may use the term “discourse” broadly to encompass any instances of talk or conversation, a more Foucauldian perspective offers a broader understanding of it. From this viewpoint, discourse is not merely synonymous with casual conversation, for instance, but represents a complex and historically contingent

web of relationships that dictate several critical aspects. These facets include what aspects of the material world are considered permissible topics for discussion, the specific manner in which these topics can be addressed, and the individuals or groups that are granted the authority to engage in such discussions. In essence, such perspective highlights that language is not a neutral or universally applicable tool of communication: it is deeply entwined with power dynamics, social structures, and historical contexts. Language serves as a mechanism through which societal norms, ideologies, and hierarchies are both reinforced and challenged. This perspective emphasises that discourse is a dynamic force that plays a pivotal role in shaping the boundaries of knowledge and the parameters of acceptable speech within a given society. As Laclau and Mouffe maintain, discourse can be therefore regarded as a “structured totality resulting from articulatory practice” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 105), providing meaning and organisation to the material and representational worlds of human beings (Thompson *et al.* 2022).

In their review of critical family communication scholarship, Thompson *et al.* (2022) recognise the importance of discourse in investigating the role that it plays in representing traditional and diverse families. In particular, the claim put forth by the scholars suggests a shift in perspective regarding how specific discursive practices are employed in shaping families. Indeed, traditional theoretical notions of discourse dependence (Galvin 2006) have advanced the idea whereby diverse families, such as those deviating from the conventional “traditional family” model, rely more heavily on language and discourse to construct their identities and meanings. As Galvin argues, “[e]ven though all families engage in some level of discourse-driven family identity building, less traditionally formed families are more discourse dependent, engaging in recurring discursive processes to manage and maintain identity” (Galvin 2006, 3). What this seems to entail is that “families that are not discourse dependent – such a family comprised of a straight couple and one or more biological children – enjoy a structure that is widely taken for granted” (Dixon 2018, 271). This means that for specific conformation of family structures – in particular, traditional family units – discourses are not that necessary for their understanding, since they are perceived as taken-for-granted societal articulations.

This perspective on the influence of discourse in shaping family representations has been embraced by numerous scholars, leading to a substantial body of research, particularly focusing on diverse families. Zadeh *et al.* (2021), for instance, explore how children and adolescents understand and navigate family life and relationships concerning their parents’ trans identity. Their findings are discussed in the context of family display theories (Finch 2007) and discourse dependence theories (Galvin 2006), suggesting that a combined approach could help understand the perspectives of children and adolescents in diverse family contexts. Breshears (2010 2011) examines the pivotal moments recognised by lesbian parents (i.e., coming out to their children, challenges to family identity, and announcement of commitment ceremonies/weddings) that facilitated conversations about family identity and how these parents engage in discussions with their children concerning external discourse related to family identity. The author adopts a phenomenological approach which involves suspending personal judgments, reflecting on related experiences, and including personal experiences in the research process, ultimately aiming to grasp the essence of the participants’ experiences and their subjective realities. In this way, Breshears (2010, 2011) still approaches such

phenomena from a discourse dependence perspective, implicitly recognising that some families are more discourse dependent than others in their experience of the world.

However, as previously stated, Thompson *et al.* (2022) argue for a different viewpoint, advocating for the idea that all families, including traditional ones, are fundamentally constructed and represented through discourse. This shift challenges the notion that traditional families exist as static, self-evident entities outside of discourse and it emphasises that even so-called traditional families are shaped, defined, and maintained through linguistic and discursive practices. This change in perspective carries important implications. Firstly, it underscores the pervasive nature of discourse in our understanding of family structures and dynamics. Secondly, it recognises how meanings about what is normal and appropriate are discursively (re)produced via active and constant forms of articulation, that is, the role that language and communication plays in the constant reiteration and reconfiguration of worldviews:

Rather than positioning diverse families as being discourse dependent and traditional families as not being discourse dependent, a better question might ask: Who has a discourse of family already built for them, and who must erect their own? We encourage family communication scholars to consider how, for example, traditional families prove their “normalness” to themselves and others, even as diverse families construct their own identity. (Thompson *et al.* 2022, 177)

However, it is essential to acknowledge that Thompson *et al.*'s (2022) claim assumes a somewhat homogenising view of discourse. Indeed, it might be argued that while discourse plays a crucial role in constructing family identities, the degree and nature of this influence can vary significantly between different family types and cultural contexts. Additionally, the claim might benefit from a more nuanced exploration of how specific discursive practices and power dynamics impact different families, acknowledging potential variations in the discursive experiences of diverse and traditional families. Therefore, on the basis of these observations, the present study aims to investigate how these elements of discursive representations are enacted on SNSs so as to better understand the way the concept of traditional family is articulated by online users. To achieve this, a comprehensive methodology that encompasses corpus linguistic techniques and discourse analysis is employed. In the following section, the approach to data collection, corpus compilation, and analytical techniques is discussed, shedding light on the methodological tools employed to explore the intricacies of discursive practices on SNSs when it comes to traditional family discourses.

#### 4. Corpus collection and methodology

In order to conduct an in-depth investigation into the discursive representation of the concept of traditional family, a corpus of tweets and replies to tweets was collected covering a timespan that goes from January 1 to December 31, 2021. Therefore, the SNS elected for this investigation was Twitter, a microblogging platform known for its brevity and real-time communication. Twitter's rapid dissemination of information plays a significant role in shaping specific digital affect cultures.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, users on Twitter often engage in concise and immediate exchanges, which can influence the ways in which affiliations and meanings are constructed within this specific online environment. More specifically, Twitter allows what Zappavigna (2018) defines as

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of writing (i.e., May 21, 2023), Twitter had not yet completed a planned rebranding process, where it would adopt the new name X.



‘searchable talk’, that is, the technological affordance whereby individuals can explore and access social media discourses in nearly real-time, facilitating ambient communication by allowing them to discover ongoing discussions and topics of interest within an SNS. This ambient quality arises from the potential presence of other users within the network, even if they are not directly connected through user accounts or actively engaged in direct conversations.

The data collection process involved the use of seed words, specifically the phrases “traditional family” and “traditional families”, which served as the broad search parameters to gather relevant tweets and their corresponding replies. The resulting corpus, named the Traditional Family Corpus (TFC), consisted of 4,747 tweets and replies to tweets (38,740 word tokens). Given the limitations imposed by the tool utilised for the corpus collection, namely the Ncapture Google Chrome add-on provided by Nvivo (QSR International Pty Ltd. 2018), the data acquisition was conducted over the course of the year 2021. Indeed, as the tool used adheres to Twitter’s policy of restricting the retrieval of large amounts of data, the collection necessitated monthly rounds. To clarify, the monthly collection rounds involved initiating the data retrieval process using Ncapture at the end of each month. For instance, on February 1, 2021, the data retrieval for January 2021 was performed; this procedure was then repeated in subsequent months to garner data for each respective month throughout the year 2021.

In collecting the corpus, only the data coming from English-speaking contexts were included. While it is important to recognise the diverse linguistic ecosystems that exist in the digital sphere, this study focuses on English-language data due to its prevalence in global online communication as a lingua franca (in the literature, the so-called computer-mediated English; see Danet & Herring 2007).

In order to ensure data integrity, duplicate instances of tweets were subsequently cleared from the corpus utilising the compile function offered by the Sketch Engine corpus analysis platform (Kilgarriff *et al.* 2004, 2014) during the corpus upload process. Sketch Engine was also used as the main analytical tool for the investigation.

Once the corpus was assembled, a multifaceted array of methodologies and theoretical approaches was employed to facilitate a comprehensive analysis of the data. More specifically, Corpus-Based Discourse Analysis (Baker 2006; McEnery *et al.* 2006; McEnery & Hardie 2012) emerged as the principal methodology adopted in this study, enabling the exploration of the linguistic intricacies through which discourses surrounding the concept of traditional family were constructed and conveyed. Furthermore, the insights coming from the field of Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (KhosraviNik and Unger 2016; KhosraviNik 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2023; KhosraviNik and Sarkhoh 2017; KhosraviniK and Esposito 2018) were used to situate the discursive practices observed in the corpus within their wider socio-political context. By adopting this theoretical framework, the study aimed to uncover the intricate interplay between language use on Twitter and the material socio-political dynamics that shape and are shaped by these discursive practices in the representation of the concept of traditional family.

The analysis of the corpus began with an initial exploration of its prominent discourses through corpus linguistic methods. This entailed the computation of a

concordance list with the phrase “traditional family\*”<sup>2</sup> to identify the most frequently occurring terms and patterns in its context, thereby providing an initial glimpse into its discursive landscape. Subsequently, a more statistically-framed examination of linguistic resources was undertaken by performing a collocation analysis.<sup>3</sup> These served to illuminate the intricate textual features underlying the digital affect culture encompassing the linguistic resources employed by Twitter users. Such features, which extended beyond individual expressions, seemed to work as social adhesives that resonated with broader socio-political issues of societal significance. Therefore, by employing these corpus linguistic methods, the study sought to unravel the multifaceted dimensions of the discursive practices in the corpus, forging connections between linguistic patterns and the broader socio-political fabric in which they are embedded.

The chosen approach bears all the hallmarks of the fundamental principles of Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (KhosraviNik and Unger 2016; KhosraviNik 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2023; KhosraviNik and Sarkhoh 2017; KhosraviniK and Esposito, 2018), which seek to establish meaningful connections between the micro-level interactional and textual practices observed on SNSs and their relevance to our everyday reality. Therefore, by delving into the complex dynamics of online discourse, this research endeavour aimed to identify discursive structures that act as manifestations of broader systems of values and beliefs in society. Particularly, this analytical perspective acknowledges the intricate relationship between language use on SNSs and the larger socio-cultural contexts in which these practices are situated (Blommaert 2018). Indeed, examining the micro-level interactions and textual patterns opens the door to new insights into the underlying socio-cultural practices and discourses that shape and reflect societal norms and ideologies. However, as ever-evolving and changing, the discursive patterns highlighted in the data collected are only representative of the socio-historical context they mirror. Therefore, the observations provided in the next section must be understood as “snapshots” of complex dynamics of online communication when it comes to traditional family discourse in the specific socio-cultural context taken into consideration.

The combination of methodological and theoretical approaches employed in this study has facilitated the identification of distinct discursive strategies (or discourse units; see Egbert *et al.* 2021; Collins and Baker 2023) in the representation of the concept of traditional families. Discursive strategies are characterised by their ability to pinpoint distinct communicative purposes in the linguistic patterns found in the corpus. In essence, each discursive strategy encapsulates a self-contained segment of communication that possesses a well-defined communicative goal, often centred around a singular topic or theme. These communicative goals are expressed through various linguistic patterns discernible in the corpus. This approach to the discursive practices in the corpus under study is informed by previous research conducted by Balirano and Hughes (2023), who have explored the discourses central to anti-gay activism. Their work sheds light on various discursive practices that are particularly relevant to the

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<sup>2</sup> In this paper, the symbol \* is employed to denote that the lemma of specific lexical items has been analysed. For instance, in the context of the phrase “traditional family\*”, it signifies that both “traditional family” and “traditional families” have been included in the examination.

<sup>3</sup> In the specific case of the collocation analysis, a span of five words to the right and five words to the left has been taken into consideration, and the LogDice has been used as a statistical measure for the computation of collocates. The LogDice was chosen since it enables users to extract exclusive but not necessarily rare combinations of words (see Gablasova *et al.* 2017; Brezina 2018).

current investigation, with some of these resonating with those identified in the corpus under scrutiny. Notably, the examination of conspiracy theories in the discourses surrounding traditional families emerges as an area of commonality between the present study and the research conducted by Balirano and Hughes (2023). By drawing on these insights and expanding upon them in the context of the current investigation, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the discursive patterns and dynamics associated with the representation of traditional families in online discourse.

## 5. Analysis and results

Based on the linguistic cues extracted from our corpus, a comprehensive analysis has revealed the primary discursive strategies employed in the representation of the concept of traditional family on Twitter which are summarised in Table 5.1. The discursive strategies are labelled according to the main linguistic features accumulating in the representation of the concept of traditional family as outlined in the methods previously described in Section 4.

<b>Discursive strategies (DSs) in the TFC</b>			
<p><b>DS1</b> <b>Family values</b></p> <p>Subcategories:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– DS1a: Moral stance towards traditional family values</li> <li>– DS1b: Emotional work for private purposes (resulting in emotional labour)</li> <li>– DS1c: Subjectification of the everyday lives of individuals</li> </ul>	<p><b>DS2</b> <b>Moral deviation and decadence</b></p>	<p><b>DS3</b> <b>Religious persecution and cultural heritage</b></p>	<p><b>DS4</b> <b>Government policies and conspiracy agenda</b></p>

Table 5.1. Discursive strategies (DSs) in the representation of the concept of traditional family in the Traditional Family Corpus (TFC).

As can be seen, four main discursive strategies have been identified in the linguistic analysis of the TFC. Among them, DS1 shows a series of subcategories underlined by specific linguistic cues in the concordance and collocational patterns found in the cotext of occurrence of the phrase “traditional family\*” (raw frequency: 869; normalised frequency: 22,431.6 per million tokens). However, it is important to note that, in the TFC, it is uncommon to find instances where only one of these discursive strategies emerges in isolation. Instead, a notable pattern arises wherein multiple strategies coalesce, resulting in a cumulative effect that shapes the traditional family discourse.

Focusing our attention on the first discursive strategy (DS1), as previously stated, this emerged from the concordance and collocation analysis of the phrase “traditional family\*”. More specifically, the methodological approach involved (1) examining where and how this phrase appeared in the text (i.e., concordance analysis), thus studying its cotext and nuances; (2) identifying words or phrases frequently associated with it (i.e.,

collocation analysis); and finally, (3) investigating specific instances where related elements occurred together (i.e., concordance analysis of the collocates). This comprehensive approach was applied in general for the analysis of the corpus but, in the specific case under scrutiny, it resulted in a further subcategorisation into three distinct categories of DS1.

In particular, the first two subcategories of DS1 emerged from one of the strongest collocates of the phrase “traditional family\*”, that is, the lemma “value\*” (total number of cooccurrences: 248; LogDice: 12.73). This is the reason why the label DS1 – FAMILY VALUES was created so as to recognise the close link between these linguistic elements. In particular, the first subcategory MORAL STANCE TOWARDS TRADITIONAL FAMILY VALUES (DS1a) encompasses linguistic patterns that align with a distinct set of values symbolising the meaning of traditional families:

- (1) Build a traditional family with deep rooted cultural values. Marry a traditional woman, stay miles away from feminists and liberals. Make your son a masculine man and your daughter a feminine woman.
- (2) So, when a man goes on a tirade stating that Disney is too “woke” for him and his family, it’s always under the influence of well-off American whiteness and privilege, traditional “family” values, and oppression of working class laborers. I SAID IT, THERE.
- (3) “Defending traditional family values” is just code language for homophobia and sexism. Anxiety over the decline of patriarchy is a fairly universal phenomenon, shared by Erdogan and Orbán alike.

This category serves to either support or challenge the concept of traditional families, which is often perceived to be under attack by certain groups, particularly individuals supporting women’s rights. As will be seen, although this category seems to bear resemblance to DS4, it has been classified and incorporated within DS1 due to its association with the collocational pattern “traditional family values”. In particular, the patterns associated with this discursive strategy seem to take for granted the existence of a well-defined body of knowledge and beliefs that automatically embodies traditional families. Such an articulation is employed by online users to emphasise the importance of upholding traditional family values. It is therefore crucial to note that DS1a encompasses a range of attitudes, from those who staunchly defend traditional family values as a cornerstone of society to those who critique these values as forms of discrimination or privilege. In the examples provided, for instance, we can see the complexities and nuances surrounding the discourses on traditional families. Some individuals invoke traditional family values as a means of preserving cultural values or reinforcing gender roles (i.e., examples [1] and [2]). Others criticise the notion of defending traditional family values (i.e., example [3]), viewing it as a guise for maintaining oppressive structures and discriminating against marginalised groups. In this way, this subcategory highlights the multifaceted and contested nature of discourses surrounding traditional families and their associated values.

The second subcategory, EMOTIONAL WORK FOR PRIVATE PURPOSES (DS1b), encompasses linguistic patterns whereby marketing practices induce emotional states in individuals through their interactions:

- (4) There are plenty of types of car that make good family transport, but when it comes to traditional family values, the best is the exceptionally roomy @SKODAUK Scala, which will set you back thousands less than similarly equipped rivals
- (5) How lucky is this pumpkin and why? Traditional family values #childrensbooks #kidsbooks #kindergarten #familyvalues #halloween #halloweenpumpkin
- (6) Not today Satan! It gets rather tiring when people assume I support the radical “LGBTQIA+” agenda that intends to destroy traditional family values, religious freedom, and basic societal standards. Give episode 22 a listen.

The label chosen for this subcategory refers to a particular concept, that of emotional labour (Hochschild 1983; Cameron 2000; Kruml and Geddes 2000; Ruusuvaori 2013; Hepburn and Potter 2007; Hood and Forey 2008; Benesch 2017; Fruttaldo 2022; Fuoli and Bednarek 2022), which points to the deliberate effort to shape and control one’s emotions to align with organisational expectations. In other words, emotional labour recognises emotions as a valuable resource that can be utilised strategically to achieve desired outcomes, build relationships, and enhance organisational performance. Therefore, in the examples provided, the concept of traditional family values is employed discursively to evoke particular emotions in potential “customers” (or simply affiliates), creating a publicly observable display that is commodified and imbued with exchange value. Consequently, a specific manifestation of emotions, conforming to predetermined company guidelines that align with the particular marketing objectives is fashioned to harmonise customers with a specific worldview. For instance, in example (4), traditional family values are linked to the feeling of contentment, presumably to encourage interest in a family-oriented car model. The same can be said about example (5), where emotional connections are fostered through hashtags like #familyvalues and #halloween, potentially generating a sense of nostalgia or shared values among potential buyers of a book that will reflect their own take on reality. Conversely, in example (6), the concept of traditional family values is juxtaposed with emotions like fear and resistance, framing the discourse in opposition to certain societal changes, to attract a potential audience for a podcast. Therefore, DS1b reveals how language is strategically used to manipulate emotions in the field of marketing, illustrating how traditional family values can be harnessed as a powerful tool for shaping perceptions and influencing consumer behaviours.

The third and final subcategory, denoted as SUBJECTIFICATION OF THE EVERYDAY LIVES OF INDIVIDUALS (DS1c), encompasses all the instances in the concordance lines where the individuals’ ordinary lives are recontextualised on social platforms, rendering them visible and interconnected, as can be seen from the following examples extracted from the corpus:

- (7) Anything better than a lamb roast for our traditional family Sunday meal. At least Kid that didn't know what a wool pack was, knows where this meat comes from, as he shovels it in. Thanks to all the Farmers for this meal. #lambroast #familymeal #tradition
- (8) My mums spent 5 years putting together this blanket for me, as a traditional family heirloom. Lucky to have such an incredible mother
- (9) I'm A Family Man - We're not a traditional family, but a family nonetheless. Quick post: <https://drivewithcompassion.com/im-a-family-man/> #AnimalRescue #Humanity #PuertoRico #Miami #ELS #DWC

In particular, rather than emerging from the collocational patterns associated with the collocate “value\*”, DS1c was introduced as a discursive strategy in the analysis of another group of collocates that emerged as strong ones: personal pronouns such as “I” (tot. number of cooccurrences: 22; LogDice: 9.25), “we” (tot. number of cooccurrences: 17; LogDice: 9.12), “you” (tot. number of cooccurrences: 19; LogDice: 9.05), “our” (tot. number of cooccurrences: 10; LogDice: 8.41), “your” (tot. number of cooccurrences: 9; LogDice: 8.26). It was nonetheless introduced as a subcategory of DS1 – FAMILY VALUES since it highlights how digital environments often serve as platforms for individuals to share personal experiences and daily life activities, while also tying them to the concept of traditional family values. Indeed, what these pronouns seem to convey is the personal and individual nature of the narratives shared on SNSs, as users express their own experiences and perspectives within the context of family values. This is the reason why the label chosen for this subcategory is linked to the concept of “subjectification”, which is based on the work carried out by Zappavigna (2016) and Zhao and Zappavigna (2018). In particular, in the context of verbal elements, subjectification refers to the process by which the language user is encouraged to subjectively engage with and assume the perspectives, emotions, or experiences presented in the text. Unlike visual subjectification, which often involves the viewer's interaction with the depicted participants through gaze (Zappavigna 2016), verbal subjectification focuses on the imaginative identification or fusion with the producer of the text. Therefore, in the examples extracted from the corpus, the term “traditional family” typically occurs both in the vicinity of personal pronouns and as a pre-modifying expression accompanying a head noun that denotes recurring festivities, specific occasions, or tangible objects embodying the values associated with the traditional family system. Through this linguistic mechanism, the concept of traditional family establishes an imaginary connection whereby individuals envision themselves as partaking in or fused with the values emblematic of this concept. Sometimes, the power of subjectification is further augmented through the incorporation of visual elements accompanying the textual message. Moreover, the technological affordances inherent to SNSs evoke the possibility of shared experiences, enhancing the interpersonal dimensions of the message (e.g., the use of hashtags in some of the examples provided). However, as can be seen from example (9), alongside messages that reproduce the characteristics of what is perceived and interpreted as a traditional family, instances of individuals reinterpreting and contesting this concept are also observed in the corpus. But it is important to underline that, while this example emphasises the notion of a non-traditional family, it still acknowledges the value of family bonds.

The discursive strategy DS<sub>2</sub>, denoted as MORAL DEVIATION AND DECADENCE, encompasses linguistic patterns that emerge in the corpus where actual or perceived challenges to the traditional family concept are portrayed as linked to potential social instability and corruption:

- (10) The de-normalization of the traditional family model has been an absolute catastrophe for poor children of every race. But you can't say this to upper class wokists.
- (11) The traditional family's decline has led to society's further polarization. With fewer children having a mom and dad modeling/teaching proper communication skills, kids have gone to insular networks online where communication is one sided, thus making polarization inevitable.
- (12) Every time I watch television it's showing androgynous "non-binary", "one race" looking people in non traditional family units and they're always like "Yay! We're so happy... and very ugly. Welcome to the new world"

As can be seen from the examples provided, the linguistic patterns collated under this category contribute to the construction of what can be defined as a deviancy amplification spiral (Young 1971), wherein discourses are framed in a manner that can potentially generate moral panic (Cohen 1972) as an inevitable consequence. From a linguistic perspective, in this discursive strategy, the term "traditional family" is commonly employed as a premodifier of words such as "traditional family unit/structure". This is shown in the collocation analysis (i.e., "unit": tot. number of cooccurrences: 59; LogDice: 11.01; "structure": tot. number of cooccurrences: 58; LogDice: 10.98). Therefore, the identification of DS<sub>2</sub> brings to the surface the discursive practices that associate deviations from the traditional family concept with broader societal concerns, framing them as threats to social order and stability. In this way, by emphasising the potential consequences of challenging traditional family norms, this discursive strategy plays a role in shaping and reinforcing moral boundaries and heteronormative expectations in society. The language used in these instances contributes to the construction of a narrative that positions the traditional family as a safeguard against perceived moral decay, thus reinforcing its importance and social significance. In this way, the examples found in the corpus are indicative of this specific discursive representation of traditional families. For instance, example (10) emphasises the negative consequences of de-normalising the traditional family model, framing it as catastrophic for children. Example (11) suggests that the decline of the traditional family leads to societal polarisation and poor communication skills among children, contributing to the idea that this decline is a detriment to society. And finally, example (12) uses humour and sarcasm to critique the portrayal of non-traditional family units in media, suggesting that such representations are part of a "new world" that is seen as less attractive. Examples such as these are numerous in the corpus and the linguistic choice of presenting the concept of family as associated with words like "unit" or "structure" is not without implications. In particular, the use of these terms often carries an implicit moral judgment: when "traditional family unit" is juxtaposed with discussions of deviation or change, it suggests that any departure from this traditional structure is morally questionable or deviant. This framing can thus contribute to moral

panic by portraying changes in family structure as harmful or dangerous to society as a whole.

DS3, referred to as RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION AND CULTURAL HERITAGE, exhibits close ties to DS2, as it linguistically constructs the concept of the traditional family as a site of loss. However, if compared to DS2, this discursive strategy specifically targets religious values and the cultural backbone of society. Indeed, while both strategies linguistically construct the traditional family concept as a site of loss, DS3 delves deeper into the realm of religious significance and cultural heritage. In this discursive strategy, the discourse surrounding the traditional family extends beyond social instability and corruption to underscore the perceived threat to religious values and the cultural fabric of society. In this way, the linguistic patterns identified under DS3 emphasise the importance of safeguarding and preserving religious and cultural heritage in the discourses related to traditional families, providing a nuanced perspective that complements the broader concerns addressed by DS2:

- (13) Reporters now discussing how to ban conservative viewpoints of half the country and their elected leaders from any news coverage. How far do we go? Ban Christian pastors from media for pro-life, traditional family viewpoints? Ban scientists that aren't woke enough?
- (14) They tried to destroy the traditional family. That does not sit well with GOD.
- (15) The only way to avoid the spiritual void is to keep hold of our traditions. The traditional family, Christianity, the folklore and history of our peoples. This spiritual connection with our ancestors cannot be broken.

The analysis of the collocations associated with DS3 reveals terms such as “Christian” (tot. number of cooccurrences: 17; LogDice: 9.25) and “Christianity” (tot. number of cooccurrences: 3; LogDice: 6.81), “religion” (tot. number of cooccurrences: 16; LogDice: 9.19), “god” (tot. number of cooccurrences: 7; LogDice: 7.20), or general references to the historical backgrounds of society (i.e., words representative of cultural configurations that are under attack; for example, “Western”: 6; LogDice: 7.79). These linguistic patterns highlight the significance of religious and cultural heritage in the discourses surrounding the traditional family concept. In this sense, the emergence of DS3 in the corpus signifies the intertwining of religious and cultural dimensions in the discourses linked to traditional families. Indeed, the linguistic patterns identified under this strategy point to a perceived threat to the religious values and cultural fabric that traditional families are believed to represent, demonstrated by the use of verbs such as “destroy”, “attack”, “undermine” or “break”. By invoking references to religious doctrines and historical legacies, this discursive strategy seeks to underscore the importance of preserving and protecting the traditional family as a sort of custodian of religious and cultural heritage. The examples provided make this manifest. Example (13), for instance, highlights a perceived threat to Christian values and suggests that such viewpoints are under attack in the media landscape, while example (14) linguistically invokes divine disapproval and religious consequences for challenging traditional family values, emphasising the role of religion in this discourse. Finally, example (15) underscores the importance of preserving cultural heritage, including the



traditional family, Christianity, folklore, and history, connecting these elements to a spiritual connection with ancestors and suggesting that they are integral to maintaining the cultural fabric of society. In summary, DS3 adds a further layer of complexity to the family discourse by emphasising the intertwined religious and cultural dimensions associated with it; in this way, DS3 portrays traditional families as custodians of religious values and cultural heritage, framing their preservation as essential for safeguarding these aspects of society.

Finally, as for DS4, labelled as GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND CONSPIRACY AGENDA, this encompasses all the linguistic patterns that pertain to two distinct aspects. Firstly, it involves instances where the concept of traditional family is not supported by specific political measures and regulations. This first discursive representation emerges from collocational patterns associated with words such as “support” (tot. number of cooccurrences: 29; LogDice: 10.01), “policy” (tot. number of cooccurrences: 10; LogDice: 8.52) and “government” (tot. number of cooccurrences: 7; LogDice: 8.00). Secondly, DS4 includes linguistic cues that indicate the presence of an underlying agenda against traditional families, often attributed to left-leaning political parties (in the corpus, this is achieved by tagging specific left-leaning political figures) or the LGBTQ+ community (i.e., “queer” [tot. number of cooccurrences: 8; LogDice: 8.20]; “LGBT” [tot. number of cooccurrences: 3; LogDice: 6.81]; “gay” [tot. number of cooccurrences: 3; LogDice: 6.79]). The following examples stand as clear manifestations of these aspects:

- (16) Biden threatens sanctions against African nations for not embracing LGBTQQIAAP\* ideology. Western nations should not be engaging in queer colonialism. It is wrong to undermine traditional family values around the world.
- (17) Traditional family life has been made economically impossible. Living wages are much lower than they were 50 years ago; the option for mothers to stay home and nurture children is now only available now to the metropolitan class. We're all expected to sit around and accept it.
- (18) Sex and gender are not defined by anomalies, but the Left doesn't care. They're using transgenderism as leverage in achieving their larger goal of tearing down the traditional family & reshaping culture to fit their ideals. Don't let them.

As can be seen, the inclusion of DS4 in the analysis draws attention to the intersection of political agendas and conspiracy narratives surrounding the traditional family concept. Within this discursive strategy, traditional families are portrayed as either suffering from lack of government support and protection or as targets of alleged conspiracies aimed at undermining their societal standing. The identification of this strategy reveals the complex interplay between political discourse, power dynamics, and perceptions surrounding traditional families. Indeed, a closer exploration of these linguistic patterns provides insights into the nature of the traditional family concept in the broader socio-political landscape. For instance, as can be seen from example (16), the use of terms like “queer colonialism” and “undermine” implies a perception of external forces challenging traditional family norms, thus raising concerns about the influence of international “ideologies” threatening traditional family values worldwide. Economic challenges to traditional families are, on the other hand, articulated in example (17), which highlights the economic factors contributing to the perceived

decline of traditional family life, suggesting that economic changes have made it difficult for mothers to stay at home and nurture children, affecting the traditional family structure. This example, like others, is extremely interesting because it represents families in a patriarchal structure, whereby women are seen as nurturing children while men are portrayed as breadwinners. Therefore, global economic challenges have forced a change in the traditional family structure, thus challenging its very fabric. Finally, as for example (18), it points to a perceived conspiracy by “the Left” to use LGBTQ+ matters as leverage in achieving a larger goal of tearing down traditional family values and reshaping culture. This implies that traditional families are under threat from political forces seeking to promote a different societal ideal.

In conclusion, the analysis presented here has tried to delve deeper into the multifaceted discursive strategies surrounding the concept of the traditional family. These strategies have offered valuable insights into the intricate interplay of language, power dynamics, and societal perceptions related to traditional families. By dissecting these discursive strategies, this analysis has tried to enrich our understanding of how language constructs, challenges, and reinforces the traditional family concept, offering an exploration of this complex socio-cultural phenomenon in the digital age.

## 6. Conclusions

Nearing the end of this study, it becomes evident that the analysis hitherto conducted was able to identify specific discursive practices pertaining to the notion of traditional family on Twitter. Particularly, through the examination thereof, the study has shed light on how individuals’ use of semiotic cues in the online environment is instrumental in defining and characterising their identities in relation to others when it comes to the concept of traditional family. This process of identity construction is closely linked to the adherence to specific sets of values, which are discursively embodied and propagated on SNSs. As Wetherell (2015) contends, affective practices play a crucial role in the recruitment and entanglement of various elements, including bodies, subjectivities, relations, histories, and contexts, resulting in the formation of affective moments or atmospheres that carry distinct classifications. By focusing on the processes that (re)produce a specific affective culture in the discursive strategies investigated in this study, it was possible to understand how an online consciousness of kind is shaped and how pockets of digital assemblage are established. Through an examination of these phenomena, specific aspects related to the ideological resonance among geographically distant individuals have been discussed. It is noteworthy that these individuals perceive themselves as being represented and united around specific repertoires that gradually gain discursive construction as a shared narrative. While this investigation does not claim to provide an exhaustive analysis, it serves as an illustration of the constant and sustained interplay between discursive patterns and affective demarcations. This interplay contributes to the generation, facilitation, and enhancement of emotionally charged contents, which, in turn, serve to construct affective and interpersonal alliances. As a result, a collaborative meta-appraisal of the recipients’ diverse individual appraisals emerges, leading to a harmonisation of different experiences and an amplification of emotional resonance – an *emotive echo effect* – in the context of the discursive representation of the concept of traditional family. In other words, different perspectives come together, intensifying emotional resonance that aligns individuals in the discursive representation of traditional families. The concept of *emotive echo effect* is based on the extensive literature discussing the notion of echo chambers (see Khosravini 2017,

2018b; KhosraviNik and Sarkhoh 2017), a phenomenon facilitated by technology wherein filter bubbles are encouraged, leading to the formation of homogeneous groups comprised of individuals who share similar opinions, beliefs, or ideologies. However, the label here introduced underlines to a greater extent the crucial role played by emotions in online communication, where like-mindedness is fostered and emotions are intensified, often at the expense of critical scrutiny. The architecture of SNSs plays a significant role in creating such emotive echo effects, favouring the formation of homogeneous groups and discouraging exposure to diverse perspectives. As a result, individuals are more likely to reinforce their existing beliefs and amplify their emotional responses, leading to limited engagement with alternative viewpoints.

It is worth noting that the online environment provides a unique space for the formation of affective communities and the amplification of emotional content. The interconnectedness of individuals across various geographic locations enables the formation of virtual alliances that transcend physical boundaries. This digital connectivity allows for the creation of shared narratives and the reinforcement of collective emotions, ultimately contributing to the construction of a digital affect culture surrounding the notion of traditional family. This highlights the significant role played by SNSs as platforms for the articulation and dissemination of affective discourses, shaping perceptions and fostering a sense of belonging among individuals who share similar values and ideologies.

In conclusion, this study has explored the intricate dynamics of discursive practices and affective demarcations in the context of online communication, with a specific focus on the representation of traditional families on SNSs. The analysis has thus provided insights into how individuals use language, symbols, and emotional content to construct and reinforce collective identities and alliances. The findings highlight the powerful influence of affect culture in shaping the online consciousness of kind and the formation of digital assemblages. Moreover, the study underscores the need for further research to delve deeper into the complexities of affective practices in online environments and their implications for social interactions and identity formation. Overall, this investigation contributes to a growing body of literature on the interplay between language, affect, and online communities, providing further insights into the discursive strategies and affective resonances that surround the notion of traditional families. By investigating these dynamics, the study hopes to advance our understanding of the complex interplay between discursive practices, affective culture, and the construction of online identities and alliances in the context of SNSs.

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