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Constructing Non-Parenthood: Childfree and Childless Discourses between Television Series and Reddit*

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This article analyses how non-motherhood and voluntary non-parenthood are discursively constructed at the intersection of contemporary TV series and digital communities, focusing on the distinction between childfree and childless positions. Drawing on social constructionism and on media and cultural studies, the study analyses a mixed corpus of posts and comments from r/childfree and four TV-related subreddits (The Handmaid's Tale, How I Met Your Mother, Workin' Moms, Fleabag), combining quantitative techniques (lexical frequencies, topic modelling) with qualitative analysis (digital ethnography, interpretive coding). The findings show that serialised narratives continue to foreground motherhood and frame non-motherhood mainly in terms of lack or failure, marginalising childfree trajectories, whereas r/childfree functions as a gender-neutral space in which non-parenthood is explicitly named and normalised as a positive biographical choice. Here, non-motherhood and non-fatherhood are articulated more horizontally, weakening the symbolic link between femininity, motherhood and a "successful" life course. Read through Fraser and Foucault, online childfree communities function as counter-spaces in which alternative grammars of reproduction and adulthood are elaborated against mainstream audiovisual imaginaries.

Keywords: non-parenthood; childfree; Reddit; Femininity; television series.

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Introduction

In recent decades, fertility has become a central focus of public and political debate in Europe and beyond. Declining birth rates are widely framed as a structural crisis that challenges the sustainability of welfare regimes, intergenerational balances, and the prospects of contemporary societies. Within this context, reproduction is no longer confined to the private sphere but emerges as a deeply political, moral, and symbolic domain (Gillespie, 2003).

Although Italian public discourse tends to frame declining fertility as a 'national emergency', similar dynamics characterise most OECD countries, where fertility rates remain consistently below replacement level (ISTAT, 2024; UN, 2024). Within this context, voluntary non-parenthood, commonly referred to as childfree, remains socially controversial because it challenges both parenthood as a naturalised biographical destiny and as a key marker of adulthood, especially for women, whereas childless usually denotes an absence of children experienced as lack, loss, or constraint. These demographic shifts are also symbolic, bringing the distinction between childless and childfree to the centre of public and academic debates (Merz & Liefbroer, 2012; Letherby, 2002; Kaklamanidou, 2019). The distinction between childfree and childless is far from neutral: it delineates different configurations of responsibility, desire, and moral legitimacy, inscribing childlessness in a lexicon of lack and childfree in one of positive choice (Gehlawat & Thumati, 2023; Varian, 2021). Yet social acceptance of voluntary non-parenthood remains highly uneven across cultural and geographical contexts, with parenthood persisting as a norm of adult life (Szalma et al., 2024).

Within this framework, the rhetoric of "choice" and reproductive autonomy is deeply ambivalent: while it formally upholds the right to have children or not, it also individualises conflict and obscures the structural inequalities that make reproductive agency unevenly distributed across gender, class, health and migration status (Salgado & Magalhães, 2024), so that childfree narratives inhabit a discursive field marked by tensions between agency and constraint, between critique of pronatalism and the internalisation of some of its moral categories. These tensions do not circulate in a vacuum. Audiovisual media play a central role in defining the couple with children as the "normal" life course while marginalising alternative trajectories. In continuity with the paradigm of symbolic annihilation (Tuchman, 1978), childfree and childless figures are framed as exceptional, deviant or moralised cases, and parenthood remains a central node in the narrative organisation of female characters (Buonanno, 2017; 2018; Klecker, 2023; Schwartz, 2023). Even where Italian television has begun to portray mothers as multidimensional figures combining professional and family roles, non-motherhood continues to occupy the margins of representation (Natale, 2020, in Buonanno & Faccioli, 2020; Williamson, 2023). Digital platforms, meanwhile, emerge alongside these mainstream texts as spaces in which alternative grammars of non-parenthood are elaborated and circulated.

In particular, in studies of scripted television representations of women, non-motherhood continues to be configured as a form of feminine incompleteness: women without children are depicted as ambitious and career-driven, or as sad and lacking, but in any case, not fully

realized as women (Schwartz, 2023; Kaklamanidou, 2019). While recent television production has diversified its representations of femininity — offering more complex, multidimensional female characters (Natale, 2020; Williamson, 2023) — such portrayals rarely escape the gravitational pull of pronatalist framing: even when motherhood is complicated, questioned, or deferred, it remains the structuring horizon against which female identity is measured.

Theoretical Framework

Pronatalist Normativity, 'Choice' and the Childfree/Childless Distinction

In media, feminist cultural studies, and sociology, the childfree/childless distinction has become central to understanding changing life-course trajectories and representations of non-parenthood (Buonanno & Faccioli, 2020; Ward & Grower, 2020; Klecker, 2023). Childfree refers to individuals who explicitly claim a deliberate decision not to have children, whereas childless denotes an absence of children experienced—by themselves or by others—as lack, loss or constraint, marking different configurations of reproductive agency and moral legitimacy (Gehlawat & Thumati, 2023).

Quantitative studies in low-fertility countries indicate either an increase or, at minimum, greater statistical visibility of adults without children (Merz & Liefbroer, 2012; Szalma et al., 2024). Longitudinal analyses of female cohorts suggest that around age forty about 4–5 per cent of women are voluntarily childfree, while higher proportions are classified as childless due to infertility or intersecting constraints such as precarious employment, illness, and partnership dissolution (Jin et al., 2024).

These demographic trends intersect with shifts in public representation, particularly in scripted television, cinema, and digital media (Ward & Grower, 2020; Scarcelli & Farci, 2024; Spalletta & De Rosa, 2025); the figure of the adult without children has moved from marginal exception to explicit narrative object, yet remains marked by stereotypes of selfishness, immaturity and deficit relative to the normative parental trajectory. Comparative analyses of media coverage across different national contexts confirm that such representational patterns vary significantly depending on demographic trends and cultural frameworks, with pronatalist framing proving particularly pervasive in low-fertility and religiously conservative settings. While top-down narratives tend to foreground absence and deficiency (Tuchman, 1978; Ward & Grower, 2020), childfree online communities such as r/childfree operate as counter-spaces in which non-parenthood is explicitly named and normalised as a legitimate biographical choice. These statistical transformations do not exist in a discursive vacuum: shifts in reproductive behaviour are simultaneously reflected in, and actively shaped by, the symbolic frameworks through which media represent — or fail to represent — non-parental life trajectories.

To interpret the symbolic conflict surrounding non-parenthood, and non-motherhood in particular, recent scholarship has conceptualised pronatalism as a cultural and political

frame. Contemporary pronatalism operates not only through explicit “pro-natalist” policies, but through a diffuse constellation of social norms, family expectations, media discourses and welfare arrangements that naturalise the link between adulthood, stable partnership and parenthood, focusing especially on women and turning the absence of children into a site of symbolic friction between normative trajectories and differentiated biographical projects (Tan, 2024).

Within this context, the paradigm of “reproductive rights” and “choice” appears deeply ambivalent. While it presents itself as universalistic, in practice the capacity to exercise such choice is unevenly distributed along lines of class, gender, racialisation, migration status and health, and ostensibly “family-friendly” policies may reinforce expectations of motherhood by tying access to resources and recognition to maternal roles, thereby reproducing an implicit equivalence between womanhood and motherhood (Tan, 2024).

Childfree women’s narratives thus occupy an ambivalent position. They frame non-parenthood as a positive choice oriented towards alternative life projects, self-care, creative work or other forms of social engagement, yet the emphasis on “choice” risks privatising the issue, obscuring the pronatalist structures and material inequalities that constrain reproductive autonomy. The resulting discursive field is marked by persistent tensions between individual agency and structural constraint, and between critique of pronatalism and the internalisation of some of its moral categories, such as responsibility towards “good” citizenship committed to “reproducing society” and towards “proper” femininity (Salgado & Magalhães, 2024).

Childless “by Circumstance”: Biographical Constraints and Narratives of Blame

Life-course studies show that a share of adult childlessness results from sequences of postponements and biographical contingencies (partnerships, employment, health), rather than from a single, stable decision, rendering the boundary between “voluntary” and “involuntary” childlessness porous (Rybińska, 2018; Szalma et al., 2025; Miettinen, 2010). From this perspective, the distinction between childfree and childless women operates as a discursive device that redistributes responsibility and blame: childfree women present themselves as agentic and self-determining, while childless women are more often captured by narratives that translate structural constraints into personal deficits (Donath et al., 2022). Television series constitute a key site where this boundary is symbolically constructed and negotiated, typifying the couple with children as the “normal” life course and marginalising childfree and childless trajectories as deviant or deficient (Buonanno, 2017; 2018; Buonanno & Faccioli, 2023; Tuchman, 1978; Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Through repetition and extended narrative arcs, seriality thereby naturalises motherhood as female destiny while rendering non-motherhood only cautiously conceivable as a legitimate or non-blameworthy condition.

From a constructionist perspective — understood here not as a single empirical research programme but as a foundational epistemological orientation shared across media studies, cultural sociology, and feminist scholarship (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Hall, 1997;

Buonanno & Faccioli, 2020) —, television series are among the primary sites where reproductive reality is "externalised, objectified, and internalised" as self-evident order (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The figure of the mother remains central to the organisation of female characters, in line with Tuchman's framework of symbolic annihilation, which recent scholarship shows still operates in contemporary scripted television despite shifts in production culture (Klecker, 2023; Schwartz, 2023; Tuchman, 1978). When childless women appear, they tend to be rare, distorted or moralised figures, while narrative arcs remain oriented towards characters who eventually become mothers, and childfree women are doubly marginalised as those who deviate from the maternal script and from dominant narratives of happiness grounded in romantic love and procreation (Ahmed, 2010).

Television series can be productively analysed along three interrelated analytical levels. The conceptual tools mobilised here draw on authors whose primary concerns lie beyond media studies proper, but they have been extensively appropriated within feminist and cultural media scholarship to analyse the symbolic reproduction of gender norms in cultural texts (Hall, 1997; Buonanno & Faccioli, 2020).

The first level is that of habitus. Read through Bourdieu's account of the gendered habitus (1990; 1998), the internalised expectation that a "successful female life" includes motherhood operates as a form of symbolic violence: not through explicit enforcement, but through the naturalisation of what is historically constructed (McNay, 1999; Adkins & Skeggs, 2004). On screen, non-mother figures are accordingly ridiculed, accused of selfishness, punished or rendered invisible — precisely because they violate a pre-reflexive biographical norm that presents itself as natural.

The second level is that of simulacra. Drawing on Baudrillard's notion of hyperreality (1981; 1995), in which media images no longer reflect a prior social reality but constitute a self-referential normative order, the family with children appears as a hyper-real image: a simulacrum without an original that nonetheless functions as the self-evident baseline of adult life. Within this representational economy, childfree biographies figure as "off-script bodies" — tolerated only when framed individualistically or ironically.

The third level is that of relational ties. Read through Bauman's framework of liquid modernity (2000; 2003; 2011), within a horizon of biographical uncertainty and reversible life courses, non-motherhood can be reinterpreted not as a psychological trait or a pathological rejection of femininity but as a rational response to uncertain conditions that serial narratives themselves render structurally intelligible.

Because they are located "within the realm of the plausible" and the "subjunctive reality" (Buonanno, 2007), television series offer models of possibility through which audiences negotiate their relationship to motherhood and non-motherhood (Czarniawska, 1998; Bruner, 1991). In this sense, the analysis of serial representations of childfree and childless women is not a mere exercise in content analysis, but a way to interrogate how the pronatalist order is reproduced, contested or symbolically endorsed.

For the present study, four television series were selected as what we term "bridge cases" — a heuristic concept, not a field-specific term, used here to denote texts that function as cultural mediators between dominant audiovisual imaginaries and the discursive practices of online communities: series whose representational regimes regarding motherhood

generate sufficiently rich audience engagement to allow systematic observation of how viewers negotiate, contest, or reproduce pronatalist frames. Selection criteria were high circulation, dedicated Reddit communities and variation in genre, tone and representational regimes of motherhood/non-motherhood. This design enables comparison across contexts where reproduction is central, normalised or peripheral, and supports analysis of how (non-)motherhood is articulated or left implicit in user discussions.

The Handmaid's Tale: a dystopia focused on reproductive control, fertility, and female non-agency; a maximal case for observing reproduction as politics.

How I Met Your Mother: a sitcom grounded in romantic-family scripts (couple, marriage, children), addressing feared or absent motherhood trajectories.

Workin' Moms: a dramedy portraying motherhood as an everyday experience, emphasizing professional fulfilment; motherhood as ongoing challenge rather than end point.

Fleabag: an anti-idealizing dramedy exploring femininity and relationships, useful for capturing implicit, conflicted, or non-central articulations of (non)motherhood.

Across the four series analysed in this study, non-motherhood is articulated through markedly different representational regimes, which in turn condition the discursive uptake observable in the dedicated subreddits. In The Handmaid's Tale, non-motherhood is dramatised primarily as imposed condition: June Osborne's reproductive agency is structurally annulled by the dystopian regime, and the very category of childfree choice becomes politically unthinkable within the narrative world. In Workin' Moms, motherhood is portrayed as ordinary challenge rather than fulfilment, but non-motherhood remains at the margins of the narrative economy. Fleabag stages a refusal of conventional family scripts without ever naming it as childfree positioning, leaving the protagonist's reproductive future suspended in ambivalence. How I Met Your Mother offers the most telling case: Robin Scherbatsky's arc shifts her from childfree by choice to childless by infertility, with the narrative inflecting the discovery towards sadness and loss rather than alternative life trajectories—effectively reabsorbing her earlier refusal within a normative horizon of motherhood as feminine destiny. These differential representational regimes help explain why, in the corresponding online discussions, explicit reflection on the childfree choice is markedly more constrained than the lexical visibility of children-related terms alone would suggest.

What Has Been Done So Far and Why

Recent scholarship at the intersection of non-motherhood and media distinguishes systematically between childfree and childless, showing how narratives associate the former with autonomy and the latter with a lexicon of loss, regret and failure (Letherby, 2002). Within this framework, television series have largely reinforced the link between femininity and motherhood by treating non-motherhood as a temporary deviation, experimenting with eccentric or comedic "non-mother" figures that provide narrative relief without altering the

canon, and only in some contexts introducing more complex childfree characters, still framed as exceptional (Pezzoli & Brancato, 2024, 2025).

These patterns are partly systemic. On the production side, national television fields remain embedded in politico-cultural contexts where low fertility is framed as a collective problem and motherhood continues to underpin female recognition, consistent with a biopolitics of reproduction that treats women's bodies as resources to be governed (Foucault, 1976; Bourdieu, 1998)[1]. On the audience side, the rhetoric of choice and empowerment has made struggling, imperfect and renegotiating mothers more acceptable, whereas non-motherhood remains harder to naturalise because it unsettles the linkage between happiness, heterosexuality and the normative family (Ahmed, 2010).

These dynamics resonate with research on online childfree and childless communities. Morison et al. (2016) show how childfree women develop stigma-resistance narratives grounded in responsibility, critical reflection and non-parental forms of care, while also highlighting that the "choice" frame individualises conflict with pronatalism. Rivera reads r/childfree as a space where identity boundaries vis-à-vis parents and childless individuals are negotiated through discursive strategies that oscillate between self-legitimation and exclusion (Rivera et al., 2025). Bozkanat emphasises how humour and memes operate as practices of stigma resistance but can also rigidify the boundaries between "us childfree" and "others" (Bozkanat, 2024). From a constructionist perspective, Reddit thus appears as a site where typifications of normativity and non-conformity are produced and negotiated, continuously redefining what counts as a "normal" life course and what remains deviant or problematic (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

From Stigma to Agency: Childfree Communities and Reddit as a Socio-Technical Space

Studies on online childfree communities indicate that these spaces function as "common condition communities" in which collective responses to stigma are articulated, rather than merely as outlets for venting (Morison et al., 2016; Hummer et al., 2024). On r/childfree, "stigma-resistance scripts" foreground the rationality and responsibility of the childfree choice, reject labels such as selfish or childish and invert judgement onto those who "reproduce without reflection" (Morison et al., 2016; Rivera, 2025). Reddit makes visible a tension between childfree-by-choice scripts, which construct a strongly agentic self, and disavowal-of-choice scripts, which enable users unable to have children to sustain a "blameless" identity vis-à-vis the parental norm (Morison et al., 2016).

Reading these practices through a constructionist lens requires distinguishing between three complementary analytical levels: Berger and Luckmann's (1966) framework illuminates how Reddit functions as a site of collective typification, where shared definitions of normality and deviance are produced and stabilised through recursive discursive interaction; Bourdieu's notions of habitus and symbolic violence (1990; 1998) allow us to see how stigmatized subjects negotiate and partially transform a devalued biographical

attribute into a principle of positive distinction; and Foucault's biopolitical framework (1976), as elaborated by Bajaj (2023), positions such communities as micro-laboratories of counter-conduct against a pronatalist regime that governs female bodies through norms, demographic responsibility discourses, and family policies.

Reddit's persistent, loosely anonymous conversations and community structures foster interpretive publics that mobilise serial narratives as resources for making sense of social experience, stabilising shared definitions of normality, deviance and identity through recursive interaction, while parasocial relations position characters as moral interlocutors whose plots elicit extra-textual judgements, so that r/childfree threads render explicit what remains implicit in the series and series-specific subreddits immediately elaborate media representations, generating a tension between symbolic annihilation in mainstream texts and counter-discursive spaces of nomination and politicisation (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Tuchman, 1978; Schramm et al., 2022).

Reddit emerges as a particularly apt site for examining childfree identity construction, since its thematic communities combine forum-like features — threaded conversation, persistent archiving, self-governance and relative anonymity — with social-media affordances that enable individual self-expression and collective norm formation (Proferes et al., 2021; Sciannamblo & Gandolfi, 2026). From a constructionist perspective, it is not a neutral container of pre-existing opinions but an active socio-technical environment in which meanings are produced, contested and stabilised, as subreddits operate as bounded discursive communities where typifications of normality and deviance, legitimate biographical choices and appropriate naming practices are continuously negotiated (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Hall, 1997; Rogers, 2013; Hine, 2020). In this sense, r/childfree can be read as a counterpublic in Fraser's sense, a subordinate discursive space in which an alternative grammar of non-parenthood is elaborated and from which counter-narratives may circulate into the wider public sphere (Fraser, 1990; 1992).

Research Design and Methods

This study adopts an integrated mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023) aimed at investigating representations and discursive practices related to childfree positions within digital media contexts. As argued throughout the theoretical framework, the objective of the study is to examine how non-parenthood is constructed, problematised, or normalised through situated discourses, in relation to a broader pronatalist regime that shapes gendered expectations and life-course trajectories.

The study is guided by the following research question (RQ), which links online discursive practices to media representations of (non-)parenthood: How is the childfree identity constructed and legitimised within r/childfree as an alternative biographical, social and moral position to the pronatalist "couple with children" script? The methodological design combines computational quantitative analysis and interpretive qualitative analysis in an integrated, multi-level framework, with quantitative methods mapping the lexical and thematic structure of large-scale digital content and qualitative methods examining discursive practices,

narratives of agency and constraint, and the explicit or implicit articulation of the childfree category (Creswell, 2014).

The empirical field consists of user-generated content on Reddit, understood as a socio-technical space of symbolic construction in which identities, norms, and boundaries of reproductive normality are continuously negotiated (Rogers, 2013; Hine, 2020). This framing is consistent with the constructionist perspective outlined in the theoretical section (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Hall, 1997): Reddit is not treated as a neutral archive of opinions but as a discursive arena where typifications of normality and deviance regarding (non-)parenthood are actively produced and stabilised. In particular, the thematic subreddit r/childfree is analysed as a discursive community dedicated to legitimising and sharing non-parental experiences, while comments posted in subreddits dedicated to specific television series enable observation of how discourses on non-parenthood circulate in non-thematic contexts, closer to ordinary media consumption.

The empirical corpus comprises user-generated textual content from Reddit, selected according to thematic and comparative criteria consistent with the study's aims, as a platform whose publicly accessible threaded discussions organise contributions dialogically and contextually, enabling observation of individual narratives and collective dynamics of legitimisation, normalisation and conflict (Hine, 2020; Kozinets, 2019).

The primary corpus comprises the thematic subreddit r/childfree, selected as an explicitly dedicated space for discussing non-parenthood. Using the Reddit API, 249 posts and 69,721 comments (over 70,000 textual units) were collected exhaustively within the defined temporal window and query parameters, so that all posts and associated comments meeting the extraction criteria were included rather than sampled. Posts were treated as primary discursive units with narrative and problematising functions, while comments were read as interactional contributions, and this distinction was retained to account for different communicative formats and dynamics, even though lexical and thematic analyses were ultimately conducted on the corpus as a whole, where the post/comment distinction served mainly contextual and interpretative purposes (van Dijck et al., 2018; Messerli, 2025).

The television-related corpus was drawn from r/TheHandmaidsTale, r/HIMYM, r/Workinmoms and r/Fleabag, prioritising the largest, most discussion-oriented communities for each series and thereby covering diverse genres, audiences and representational regimes of motherhood and non-parenthood. Only user comments were analysed in these subreddits, which function as privileged sites of reception and reworking of media content, and extraction targeted references to parenthood, non-parenthood and childfree or childless conditions to isolate relevant discourse segments. The two datasets are therefore asymmetrical: r/childfree is an explicitly thematic, identity-oriented community, whereas the series subreddits are broader interpretive spaces centred on narrative and entertainment, so references to childfree or childless positions arise under different discursive conditions and levels of explicitness and should be compared heuristically as distinct regimes of visibility and discursiveness rather than equivalent environments.

In addition to computational and textual analysis, a limited non-participant digital ethnography was conducted in November 2025 by three researchers, focusing on recurrent interactional patterns, self-presentation, emotional support and discussions of non-

parenthood; this observational component did not involve user interaction and served primarily to contextualise and interpret the quantitative and qualitative textual analyses (Beneito-Montagut, 2011; Pink et al., 2016; Kozinets, 2019).

The analysis was conducted through a computational pipeline applied to the digital data, consistent with approaches in computational social science and digital methods (Rogers, 2013; Salganik, 2018). Data were collected using Reddit's official API and processed through scripts developed in Python (v. 3.x) (Grimmer, Roberts & Stewart, 2022). Once the corpus was constructed, the content underwent preliminary cleaning and normalisation (tokenisation, stop-word removal, lemmatisation) to ensure comparability between posts and comments and to reduce textual noise.

In an initial phase, lexical frequency analyses were conducted to identify the most recurrent terms and highlight structural differences between posts and comments. Subsequently, bigram analysis was performed to detect recurring lexical combinations and standardised discursive formulations, useful for capturing the circulation of shared scripts within the subreddit. The analysis of content extracted from the r/childfree subreddit was carried out through a two-stage natural language processing (NLP) procedure. First, the texts of posts and comments underwent preprocessing to reduce statistical noise: data were normalised to lowercase, cleaned of URLs and special characters, and filtered through an English stop-word list to remove non-informative functional terms.

Next, Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), a generative probabilistic model, was applied to identify latent themes by clustering documents based on term co-occurrence. The model was implemented using the scikit-learn library (Pedregosa et al., 2011). For corpus vectorisation, the CountVectorizer class was employed, setting a relative frequency threshold (max_df = 0.5) and a minimum absolute frequency (min_df = 10) to ensure the semantic relevance of selected terms. The LDA model was configured to extract ten topics, using the batch learning method to maximise the stability of results. Topic distributions were then compared between posts and comments to highlight structural differences in discourse between original content and user interactions. Topic prevalence refers to the proportional distribution of dominant topics across the corpus and was calculated as the percentage of documents in which a given topic obtained the highest probability assignment within the LDA model. Prevalence values therefore indicate the relative thematic weight of each topic within the dataset rather than the absolute frequency of specific terms.

In the television series subreddits, the analysis focused on identifying and coding references to non-parenthood, distinguishing between childfree and childless positions and between explicit and implicit forms, to estimate their relative visibility in non-thematic discursive contexts. This procedure made it possible to construct a systematic map of recurring discursive patterns, which were subsequently interpreted and contextualised through qualitative and ethnographic analysis.

Results

Lexical frequency analysis of the r/childfree subreddit, conducted on 249 posts and 69,721 comments, reveals a marked structural difference between the two content types. Posts are numerically far fewer but significantly longer, averaging 171 words, compared to comments, which average approximately 38 words. This suggests that posts primarily serve a narrative and introductory function, whereas comments are oriented toward brief, reactive, and dialogic interactions.

From a lexical perspective, terms such as kids, children, child and want to emerge prominently in both posts and comments, underscoring the centrality of parenthood and the desire for, or refusal of, children. However, these terms reach substantially higher frequencies in comments (for instance, “kids” exceeds 14,000 occurrences), reflecting high participatory intensity and the reiteration of shared discursive frames. Alongside these semantic cores, words associated with personal experience and subjective evaluation (life, time, think, know) are recurrent, indicating that the childfree choice is consistently articulated through individual lived experience. Bigram analysis further reinforces this interpretation: expressions such as want kids, child free, change mind and birth control appear in both posts and comments, but with substantially higher frequency in the latter, signalling the presence of standardised and recurrent discursive formulations. Thus, the distribution of lexical frequencies indicates that the subreddit functions as a highly interactive space in which a small number of relatively long posts mobilises a large volume of short comments characterised by a lexicon strongly concentrated on parenthood, self-determination and personal experience.

Topic modelling analysis of the r/childfree subreddit.

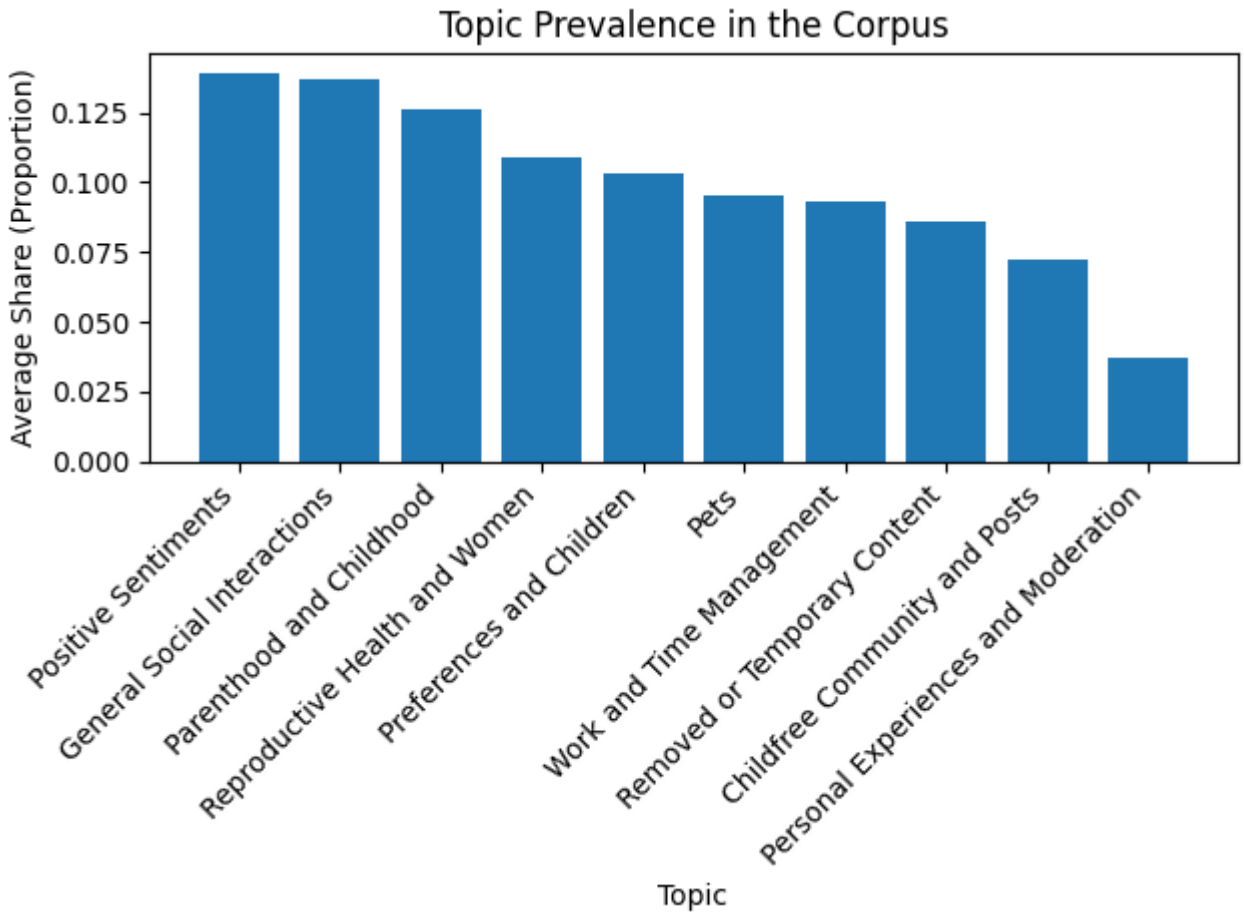
Topic modelling analysis of the r/childfree subreddit conducted on a corpus comprising both posts and comments, reveals a complex thematic structure that extends beyond a mere opposition to parenthood. The most salient topic in terms of topic prevalence to the sphere of emotional support, gratitude, and empathy, encompassing approximately 15.3% of documents. This indicates that a substantial portion of posts and comments serves a relational function, contributing to the construction of a space for mutual support and legitimisation.

Topics centred on children, family and social interaction (14.8%), together with those on parenthood and caregiving (13.1%), account for almost one third of the corpus, indicating that engagement with pronatalist expectations is a central axis of discourse. A further salient topic concerns reproductive health, pregnancy and abortion (10.8%), underscoring the close entanglement of childfree positions with bodily autonomy and rights, particularly for women. Contextual topics linked to life-course experience (age, country of residence) and to work, time and economic resources each represent about 8–9%, while pets as affective alternatives (9.2%) recur prominently, and conflict-, trolling- and moderation-related topics remain marginal (1.5%), suggesting limited problematic interaction overall.

The topic distribution thus portrays a community that mobilises childfree discourse to construct meaning, belonging, and mutual support (see Figures 1 and 2).

Topic Label (English)	Keywords (English)	Average Share (Proportion)	Relative Relevance (Inferred)
Positive Sentiments	thank / happy / love	0.139	Very High (First position)
General Social Interactions	people / just / like	0.137	Very High (Second position)
Parenthood and Childhood	kids / child / children	0.126	High
Reproductive Health and Women	women / abortion / pregnant	0.109	High
Preferences and Children	don / like / kids	0.103	Medium–High
Pets	dog / dogs / pet	0.096	Medium
Work and Time Management	work / time / job	0.094	Medium
Removed or Temporary Content	removed / deleted / temporary	0.086	Medium–Low
Childfree Community and Posts	childfree / post / community	0.072	Low
Personal Experiences and Moderation	personal / experience / mod	0.038	Very Low

Figs.1 Distribution of topic labels and their associated keywords.



Figs.2 Distribution of topic prevalence across the corpus

Non-Parenthood in Television-Series Subreddits

Analysis of comments indicates that references to non-parenthood (childfree and childless) are present across all analysed subreddits, although overall frequencies are relatively low and vary substantially by context. The proportion of comments containing at least one explicit or implicit reference to these themes ranges from 0.20% in the How I Met Your Mother subreddit to 1.21% in The Handmaid's Tale, with intermediate values for Workin' Moms (0.58%) and Fleabag (0.33%).

In all subreddits, references classified as childless are markedly more frequent than those classified as childfree, with ratios ranging from approximately 3.5:1 (Workin' Moms) to over 30:1 (The Handmaid's Tale) and 50:1 (Fleabag). Another notable finding concerns the discursive form of these references: for both childfree and, to an even greater extent, childless, the vast majority of occurrences are conveyed through implicit frames rather than explicit labelling. Specifically, between 95% and 98% of childless references are articulated through narratives of impossibility, infertility, or loss, while explicit use of the term "childless" is marginal. The narrative arc of Robin Scherbatsky in How I Met Your Mother exemplifies this dynamic: her transition from a voluntary choice (childfree) to a condition of infertility (childless) shifts the audience's discourse toward themes of 'sadness' and loss, reinforcing motherhood as a normative destiny. Similarly, the extreme 50:1 ratio in Fleabag demonstrates that, in the absence of explicit identity labels within the series, users tend to interpret non-motherhood exclusively as a relational or biographical 'lack' rather than an agentic choice.

Similarly, childfree is predominantly expressed implicitly, via statements of rejection or misalignment with parenthood, with very few cases of explicit self-identification. Finally, across all subreddits, a pronatalist normalisation frame is observable, characterised by expressions that assume parenthood as a natural or inevitable life outcome. This frame coexists with childfree and childless discourses, shaping the overall discursive context within which these themes are articulated.

Discussion

The results of the analysis indicate that the childfree choice is configured not merely as an individual decision linked to economic or biographical circumstances, but as a discursive and symbolic positioning that takes shape across different media spaces. In particular, the comparison between discourses emerging within Reddit communities and representations conveyed through television series highlights a significant gap between practices of self-representation and mainstream imaginaries. This divergence must also be interpreted considering the structural differences between the analysed datasets. The r/childfree subreddit is explicitly organised around the articulation and legitimation of non-parenthood, encouraging direct self-disclosure and identity-based interaction, whereas television-series subreddits are not primarily oriented toward reproductive issues. In these contexts, references to non-parenthood tend to emerge indirectly, episodically, and through

discussions centered on characters, plots, or relationships. The lower visibility of childfree discourse in television-related subreddits should therefore not be interpreted simply as absence, but as the effect of different communicative and thematic conditions shaping discourse production.

Within the analysed childfree subreddit, non-parenthood for both men and women emerge as a narrated, debated and legitimised choice, sustained by mutual support, experience sharing and collective meaning-making (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Jedlowski, 2025). The prevalence of content oriented toward emotional support, stigma resistance and the affirmation of individual agency confirms earlier findings on online childfree communities as sites of stigma management and alternative identity construction, where the decision not to have children is framed less as lack or failure than as an expression of distinct desires, values and life projects in tension with intrusive familial and social expectations (Morison et al., 2016; Rivera, 2024).

By contrast, comments on contemporary television series that foreground motherhood—as destiny, choice, presence or absence—show that voluntary non-motherhood remains largely implicit or marginal: childless rather than childfree characters predominate, are defined by deprivation more than choice, and are seldom named explicitly as childfree, thereby contributing to a symbolic normalisation of parenthood as the dominant life trajectory and reproducing dynamics of invisibility long noted in media and family studies (Tuchman, 1978). The divergence between these environments underscores a central tension: Reddit operates as a space of symbolic re-emergence for marginalised subjectivities, where the childfree choice can be explicitly articulated, named and legitimated, whereas television series function primarily as devices for reproducing pronatalist norms. Low percentages of references to voluntary non-motherhood in series-focused subreddits thus signal not irrelevance, but weak thematization and limited cultural debate in mainstream contexts, where voluntary non-motherhood remains scarcely speakable, rarely named and often confined to implicit formulations within a normalisation regime that presupposes parenthood as the natural outcome of adult life.

This dynamic is particularly salient against the backdrop of structural fertility decline: the persistence of media representations that privilege motherhood as a “natural” destiny reinforces symbolic stigmatisation of those who deviate, and the discursive marginality of childfree identities in mainstream media operates as a normalising mechanism that makes alternative trajectories less thinkable and less legitimate, foregrounding the biopolitical dimension of reproductive narratives (Foucault, 1976; Goffman, 1963). The weak thematization of voluntary non-motherhood in mainstream arenas, contrasted with its intensive elaboration in digital communities where men and women interact, confirms its status as an identity position still in tension with the dominant symbolic order.

The Marginalization of the Childfree Choice in Television Discourse

In online discussions related to the analysed television series, the childfree condition, and more broadly the theme of motherhood and non-motherhood, do not emerge as central discursive nuclei. Although these cultural products offer potentially significant representations of female subjectivities that do not align with the traditional maternal model, such imaginaries are not sufficiently valorised within user conversations. Discussions

appear predominantly oriented toward other narrative, aesthetic, or relational aspects of the series, leaving little space for explicit reflection on the choice not to have children. This finding suggests that, while television series may contain elements potentially "subversive" to the pronatalist paradigm, they do not function as catalysts for collective discourse on these issues.

The Discursive Construction of the Childfree Choice on the r/childfree Subreddit

In contrast, r/childfree emerges as a genuine space for discursive legitimation and collective support, rather than merely a site for expressing opposition to parenthood. The asymmetry between a small number of narrative posts and a large volume of responses is not a quantitative accident but a structural feature: a few acts of self-positioning function as activation devices, around which comments operate as practices of support, normalisation, and identity reinforcement. It is through this recursive interaction that individual experience is converted into shared meaning. The recurrence of standardised expressions such as wants kids, change mind, and birth control signals the sedimentation of discursive scripts that users mobilise to anticipate and counter recurrent social pressures. Crucially, these scripts do not articulate non-parenthood in a vacuum: they render the childfree choice socially intelligible precisely by positioning it against a pronatalist regime that persists as the normative horizon of reference.

Agency, Body, and Rights: The Political Dimension of the Childfree Discourse

Topic analysis reveals that a substantial portion of the discourse is devoted to reproductive health, pregnancy, and abortion. These findings highlight that the childfree choice is not constructed solely as a preference but as a position deeply intertwined with issues of bodily autonomy, reproductive rights, and control over life trajectories, particularly for women. In this sense, the childfree discourse assumes an implicitly political dimension, even when not explicitly articulated in terms of advocacy. The prominence of topics related to emotional support and empathy further reinforces this interpretation: the community does not merely share rational arguments against parenthood but cultivates an affective environment in which experiences of stigmatisation, familial pressure, and social delegitimization are collectively recognised and reworked, producing a form of collective self-awareness. This suggests that r/childfree functions as a counter-narrative space, capable of compensating for the symbolic asymmetry produced by dominant pronatalist norms and the ensuing narratives surrounding motherhood and non-motherhood.

Normalization and Affective Alternatives: Beyond the Traditional Family Model

The recurrence of pets as affective alternatives is not anecdotal: it redefines the grammars of care and intimacy around forms of attachment that do not rely on filiation. Rather than substituting for parenthood, such discourses—articulated by men and women alike—sever the assumed link between emotional fulfilment and reproduction, displacing the traditional family as the necessary horizon of affective life.

Final Remarks

This research engages with the tradition of media and cultural studies that conceives media not merely as channels of representation, but as central sites for the production of meaning (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and the articulation of symbolic conflict (Hall, 1973; 1980; Buonanno, 2006; 2018).

The results show that digital contexts, particularly Reddit communities, provide spaces in which the choice not to have children can be narrated, named, and symbolically legitimised, in contrast to its persistent marginality in contemporary serial narratives (Jedlowski, 2025). Treating fertility and non-parenthood as media objects entails an analytical perspective consistent with a constructivist approach: the focus is not on individual choices per se, but on the processes through which these choices are rendered socially sayable, evaluable, and normatively oriented. Media representations do not simply reflect transformations that have already occurred; they actively participate in their construction, contributing to the establishment of which life trajectories appear normal, desirable, or legitimate (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

In this framework, r/childfree can be read as a particularly effective identity laboratory, not only because it renders non-parenthood shareable and legitimate, but also because, as a discursive space that is gender-neutral, it directly links narratives of non-motherhood and non-fatherhood. This facilitates the sedimentation of a shared semantic background, freeing the choice not to have children from being framed solely in terms of female lack or fault (e.g., cold, emancipated, selfish). The article has focused primarily on non-motherhood, reflecting the asymmetric way in which pronatalist norms weigh on women; yet the active presence of men in r/childfree, set against their relative invisibility in mainstream representations of non-parenthood, indicates that male childfree subjectivities are themselves a substantive empirical and theoretical object, one that future research should address more systematically. Furthermore, it must be emphasised that the concept of pronatalist 'childfree' is inherently relational, acquiring meaning only in opposition to the norm it contests. As a 'counterpublic' (Fraser, 1992), Reddit's gender-neutral space allows both men and women to negotiate their non-parenthood. The relative invisibility of men in mainstream media representations, contrasted with their active presence on r/childfree, confirms that the reproductive burden is still socially constructed as a primarily female 'problem'—a perception these communities actively challenge by de-privatizing and politicizing the choice not to have children.

In the subreddits dedicated to the analysed television series, where motherhood and its expected – or failed – fulfilment structures the narrative, references to non-motherhood are sporadic and predominantly encoded through a childless lexicon. Horizontal exchanges of everyday experience between men and women without children allow non-mothers to anchor their trajectories to relatively less stigmatised non-parenthood scripts, fostering forms of self-definition that loosen the symbolic equivalence between femininity, motherhood and a “successful” biography and render the boundary between “normal” and “deviant” reproductive pathways more porous.

The distance between digital discursive practices and consolidated audiovisual imaginaries should not be read as mere cultural lag, but as the effect of a conflictual pluralisation of the public sphere in which childfree subjectivity takes shape within subaltern discursive spaces capable of generating counter-narratives and straining the dominant symbolic order, thereby exposing the power-laden nature of reproductive and life-course narratives (Fraser, 1990; Foucault, 1976; 2001). Viewed through the lens of subaltern counterpublics (Fraser, 1992), voluntary non-parenthood appears not as a pre-discursive social fact but as a category whose meaning is continuously constructed, negotiated and made socially intelligible within alternative arenas where subordinated groups elaborate shared interpretations, specific lexicons and counter-hegemonic narratives that may, in turn, inflect the wider public debate. Taken together, these findings suggest that the childfree position crystallises at the intersection of demographic restructuring, pronatalist imaginaries and digitally mediated counterpublics, where new grammars of non-parenthood are experimentally articulated against – and at times partially reabsorbed into – the dominant symbolic order.

Biographical note

Silvia Pezzoli is Associate Professor of Sociology of Cultural and Communicative Processes and holds a PhD in Sociology of Communication. Her research lies at the intersection of cultural sociology and media/communication studies, focusing on how individual and collective identities are produced, negotiated, and contested across everyday life and mediated environments. A core strand of her work examines how media narratives shape symbolic boundaries, belonging, and exclusion—linking “real” territories to imaginary and platform-mediated ones. Alongside research on online hate speech (with a focus on gendered and racialized hostility), she has recently developed studies on contemporary TV series and digital cultures of reproduction, analysing how childfree and childless women are represented, legitimised, or stigmatized through recurring narrative scripts and cultural expectations surrounding motherhood.

Marina Brancato is a visual anthropologist. She received her PhD in Anthropological Science and cultural change analysis from L’Orientale University in 2011 working on the relationship between anthropology and journalism with a focus on the media coverage of Italian earthquakes. She is a member of the Postcolonial and Gender Studies Center at L’Orientale University, EASA Media Anthropology Network, and serves on the editorial board of the journal *Visual Ethnography*. Her research intersects multiple disciplinary paths, with a focus on collective imagination, the concept of loss, and the relationship between anthropology, gender, and feminism. She is the author of visual essays and works in media and feminist anthropology. She currently holds the position of Full Professor of Cultural and Visual Anthropology at the Academy of Fine Arts of Florence.

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Notes

[1] The pronatalist framing of declining fertility as a national emergency cuts across the political spectrum. In Italy, Prime Minister Meloni has defined natality as “una priorità assoluta per questo governo”, denouncing a “narrazione ostile alla famiglia” (Avvenire, 12/04/24, https://www.avvenire.it/attualita/pagine/demografia-il-futuro-si-misura-dalla-capacita-di-dare-risposte-ai-giovani). In the United States, Vice-President JD Vance has described childless women as “miserable at their own lives and the choices they’ve made” (NBC Chicago, 11/09/24, https://www.nbcchicago.com/decision-2024/taylor-swifts-presidential-endorsement-what-the-music-superstars-childless-cat-lady-sign-off-means/3545401/). In Russia, a 2024 law bans “child-free propaganda” (The Conversation, 2025, https://theconversation.com/russia-is-paying-schoolgirls-to-have-babies-why-is-pronatalism-on-the-rise-around-the-world-258979). The widely used Italian expression “inverno demografico” encodes crisis rather than transformation, obscuring the possibility of reading low birth rates as expanded biographical agency, a counter-reading advanced by Dalla Zuanna and by Luppi & Rosina (Neodemos, https://www.neodemos.info/2024/10/15/donne-senza-figli-i-gatti-non-centrano/; https://www.neodemos.info/2024/04/19/si-fa-presto-a-dire-childfree/).