

Gender Differences in Childfree Discourse: A Discourse Analysis of Reddit Communities

Introduction

The decision to remain childfree is a growing social phenomenon in the U.S. and worldwide (Aragão et al., 2024; Blackstone and Stewart 2012; Gemmill 2019; Rybińska 2021), yet research on the motivations behind this choice remains disproportionately focused on women (U.S. Census Bureau 2019; Hintz and Tucker 2023). Prior research has suggested that gender influences these decisions -- women might experience more societal pressure regarding reproductive choices, whereas men may have different incentives or barriers. However, existing research highlights women's childfree motivations (e.g., autonomy, avoidance of patriarchal expectations) but neglects men's perspectives. The current paper compares how men and women articulate their reasons for being childfree on Reddit, a platform where candid, community-driven discussions thrive. To date, I have collected data from over 72k users and 1.8 million posts and replies, during the time period from 2009 to 2025. By applying Fairclough's three-dimensional critical discourse analysis (CDA) -- which examines discourse at the levels of text, discursive practice, and social practice -- this study analyzes how gendered societal norms around parenthood shape narratives about being childfree, including whether and how they reproduce or challenge the existing power structure.

Keywords: Childfree, Voluntary Childlessness, Gender, Reproduction, Discourse Analysis

Literature Review

Gender and Childfree Choices

Gendered expectations significantly impact reproductive decision-making. The literature on gendered expectations and reproductive decisions explores how societal norms, economic structures, and cultural narratives shape women's and men's choices regarding parenthood. This body of work highlights persistent inequalities, evolving norms, and the complex interplay of individual agency and structural constraints. For example, women's reproductive choices are heavily influenced by cultural norms that emphasize motherhood as an essential role and central life goal; delaying or forgoing childbirth is often stigmatized as "selfish" or "unnatural" (Blackstone 2019; Rich et al. 2021; Morell 2014). In the meantime, workplace discrimination, inadequate parental leave, and the "motherhood penalty" create financial and professional disincentives for women (Budig and England 2001; Correll et al. 2007). Women of color and low-income women face compounded pressures, such as stereotypes linking fertility to welfare dependency (Collins 1994; Roberts 1997). Access to reproductive healthcare, such as abortion restrictions, further limits autonomy (Foster 2020; Loretta and Solinger 2017).

On the other hand, men often face societal discouragement from active caregiving as well as the pressure to prioritize economic stability and embody the "breadwinner" ideal (Hadley 2019). Conversely, stable income can incentivize fatherhood as a marker of masculinity, and voluntarily childless men may experience threats to their masculinity as they are considered as failing to be providers (Berrington 2017). In addition, current studies on fatherhood also reveal that fatherhood enhances perceptions of maturity and reliability, and not having children can have a negative impact on their social network and workplace (Ciaccio et al. 2021). The current literature on reproductive decision-making remains disproportionately focused on women,

reflecting entrenched societal assumptions that frame parenthood as a predominantly female domain. While extensive research explores women's experiences, men's perspectives are often marginalized or treated as secondary, and existing reproductive research on men mostly focuses on masculinity (Almeling 2015).

Recent demographic data highlight a growing trend of men remaining childless, with surveys in countries like the U.S. and Germany indicating that approximately 20-25% of men aged 45 to 49 have no children (Federal Statistical Office of Germany 2022; U.S. Census Bureau 2021), a figure that has risen steadily over the past decade. Yet, scholarly attention to voluntarily childless men remains sparse, with limited exploration of how masculinity norms, economic anxieties, or shifting relational dynamics shape their choices. Existing studies, such as those by Marsiglio and Roy (2012) and Hadley (2018), suggest that men who opt out of parenthood often navigate stigma for deviating from the "breadwinner father" ideal, but their motivations -- whether rooted in individualism, environmental concerns, or ambivalence about caregiving roles -- are underanalyzed. This gap perpetuates a narrow understanding of reproductive agency, reinforcing gendered stereotypes and overlooking how men's decisions intersect with structural factors like workplace policies or cultural narratives. Expanding research on male childlessness is critical to fostering inclusive dialogues about parenthood in an era of evolving gender roles.

Motivated by the persistent gap in scholarship on men's reproductive decision-making and the disproportionate focus on women's experiences in existing literature, this study seeks to interrogate how gendered societal norms surrounding parenthood shape narratives of voluntary childlessness for both men and women. By comparatively examining how childfree men and women articulate their decisions on an online platform, this research asks: *How do childfree individuals formulate narratives regarding reproductive decisions, and to what extent do these narratives reinforce or subvert traditional power structures that equate parenthood with gendered identity and social value?* The study aims to uncover how cultural scripts are navigated, contested, or legitimized, thereby shedding light on whether voluntary childlessness acts as a site of transformative agency or reproduces existing hierarchies. This inquiry bridges gaps in gender, family, and reproduction scholarship while challenging the obscure men's roles in redefining reproduction norms.

Methods and Data

Use of Reddit

Reddit has emerged as a valuable platform for conducting discourse analysis, offering researchers a rich source of user-generated content across diverse communities. There are a few distinctive features of Reddit. First, Reddit allows for a high degree of anonymity. Users can create accounts freely and abandon used accounts at any time. This feature enables users to discard an account once they share content they wish to disassociate from their broader online presence or real-world identity. The platform's primary users include individuals from varied demographics, interests, and expertise, ranging from hobbyists and enthusiasts to professionals and academics. Content is primarily generated by users who participate in topic-specific communities (subreddits), with contributions coming from both casual posters sharing personal experiences and knowledgeable members offering detailed insights or verified expertise (e.g., "Ask Me Anything" sessions with experts).

Second, the structure of subreddits makes it an ideal place to study specialized discussions. Each subreddit can form its own rules and community guidelines. Subreddits are moderated by volunteer users or teams who enforce community guidelines, remove rule-breaking content, and maintain focus on the group's theme, though moderation strictness varies widely across communities. Third, the platform's feedback system relies on upvotes and downvotes, which determine a post's visibility and perceived value, while comment threads enable dynamic discussions, peer validation, or critique. The immediate feedback system also reflects the reception of ideas within a community. To an extent, the upvote and downvote system can shape the perceived legitimacy of the content. When a post or comment receives significant upvotes, it will be algorithmically prioritized for visibility, such as appearing on the "hot" page, which reinforces its perceived credibility as "community approved." Conversely, downvoted content may be buried quickly, signaling rejection by the community and casting doubt on its legitimacy. There are also concerns with using Reddit data, such as misinformation and the echo chamber effect in niche communities. However, Reddit's anonymity often fosters candid sharing, making it a rich source for qualitative insights into trends, behaviors, and underrepresented perspectives. Relatedly, Barak et al. (2008) highlight that digital support groups offer individuals with shared experiences a platform to exchange knowledge, give and receive emotional assistance, connect socially, and foster meaningful relationships.

Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis Model

This framework connects micro-level linguistic features such as to macro-level social structures, making it ideal for analyzing how language reinforces or resists gender norms (Fairclough, 1992). Three levels of analysis interconnects. At the text level, I will examine how linguistic features, such as vocabulary, grammar, metaphor, and so on, differ between men and women in childfree discourse. Vocabulary highlights specific word choices with connotations, while patterns of grammar such as passive versus active voice and nominalization can reveal expressed distance and a sense of agency. For example, if the text uses the passive voice, the agency is often obscured: think "Mistakes were made" instead of "We made mistakes." Relatedly, linguistic features such as transitivity, i.e. who does what to whom, may expose the "unspeakable." For example, in a phrase like "jobs are being taken," the use of passive voice avoids stating who is taking the jobs, hiding the actors, and creating a vague threat.

After a close examination of the linguistic features and structures of the text, I will connect these features to discursive practices, and explore how users produce, explain, defend, and challenge childfree identities and experiences within Reddit communities. Taking the following sentence as an example: "Choosing to be childfree is not selfish. Society wants us to follow the lifescrypt and get married and have kids, but why should we?" The first level analysis identifies specific lexical choices, such as "selfish" and "lifescrypt," as well as the grammar usage, such as the rhetorical question "why should we?", the pronouns "us" and "we", and negation. Then I link the lexical features with discursive practice to interrogate the narrative production. By refuting the stigmatizing label "selfish," the author is challenging a dominant narrative about childfree individuals. "Lifescrypt" is a coined term that combines "life" with "script," metaphorically framing parenthood as a socially enforced expectation rather than a choice and critiquing the social norms to be rigid and unoriginal. The rhetorical question "why should we?" invites the audience to question the prevalent beliefs, turning passive readers into active participants. The plural pronouns "we" and "us" create solidarity between the author and the reader, while

implicitly creating a boundary to resist the authoritative voice (which is the “society” in this case.) Here, the author is doing the reclaiming – implying that the autonomy has been taken away by social norms and now initiate to regain the power of defining. The author contested a popular discourse, and the reclaiming also demonstrates a discursive practice of resistance.

Lastly, I will explore how such discourses reflect or challenge broader societal norms about gender, parenthood, and reproductive autonomy. The advantage of using the CDA model is that while integrating the micro-level textural data with macro-level social processes, researchers can identify hidden power relations, ideologies, and inequalities in discourse. The dynamic nature of the framework also accounts for how discourse both shapes and is shaped by societal structures.

Data Analysis

I use Reddit’s official RESTful Application Programming Interface (API) to access the data. The API is compliant with Reddit’s terms of service. I use the Python Reddit API Wrapper (PRAW) to download the structured JSON data with built-in pagination. However, the Reddit API has a limit on the number of posts per query, so I supplement the data with archived Reddit data from Pushshift API. With Pushshift API, I can also access the deleted and removed content. I focus on three signature subreddit groups: r/childfree, r/ChildFreeSucks, and r/Fencesitters.

Upon downloading posts and comments from the designated subreddits communities, I use the Python Gensim library (Rehurek & Sojka 2011, 2022) to build the topics based on Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) to obtain descriptive features of the posts and comments (Blei et al. 2003; Hoffman et al., 2013; Grimmer et al. 2022). LDA is a probabilistic, unsupervised machine learning model used for topic modeling in text analysis. It uncovers latent (hidden) thematic structures in a corpus of documents by identifying groups of words (topics) that frequently occur together. In other words, each topic is characterized by a set of words, and the LDA process can help describe the topics present in the corpus, the composition of each discussion, and the word distribution of each topic.

Next Steps

Building on the preliminary findings from the initial data analysis, the subsequent phases of this research will prioritize three core objectives:

1. Validating the refining latent thematic structures identified through LDA;
2. Expanding the depth of discourse analysis to systematically compare gendered narratives;
3. Contextualizing results within broader sociological theories of gender and reproduction.

The first two steps will be done by the end of April, and a manuscript will be ready for circulation by June.

Implication

Empirically, the use of Reddit data and mixed-methods discourse analysis (Fairclough’s CDA + LDA) provides a novel lens to study gendered power dynamics in digital spaces, where anonymity allows for more candid expressions of stigmatized identities. This approach bridges macro-level societal norms (e.g., pronatalism) with micro-level discursive practices, enriching sociological understandings of agency and structure in reproduction.

The study examines an underexplored part of reproductive politics by analyzing the gendered binary that frames childfreedom as a “women’s issue.” This duality perpetuates the

marginalization of men in reproductive justice movements, which have rightly centered on women's bodily autonomy but risk reinforcing the stereotype that men are disinterested or irrelevant to parenthood debates. Therefore, the current study explores whether voluntary childlessness acts as a site of transformative agency or reproduces existing hierarchies. This inquiry bridges gaps in gender, family, and reproduction scholarship while challenging the obscure men's roles in redefining reproduction norms.

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