



It takes a village. Or does it take a post-nuclear sense of shattering, to raise non-nuclear families? And what are families, ultimately? Communities? Kinships? Chosen bonds among two or more people? Or, cages so many of us spend most our lives escaping? This issue of de genere explores the very definition of “family”, delving into the question of what words we choose, and the maps of meaning we are immersed in. Crucially, the issue sets to ask what is the discourse on and around the things that make us who we are, and make us make sense of old, new, accepted, or unrecognized kinships. The popular and normative notion of family is here put under erasure, in order to see and hear the village voices, the stories in the news, and most of all the new stories. The kids are alright.

We are happy to launch with this issue the miscellaneous section “Grafts”. A very moving characteristic of grafting is that it involves “the wounding of two growths and the arranging of them so that they heal together” (Time-Life Encyclopaedia of Gardening, 1978). We are not entirely sure healing is our aim here, but by inserting – or better, grafting – a miscellaneous section into the main body, or, botanically speaking, into the rootstock of de genere, we wish to let compounds and interventions happen. Grafts is a space not independent from but also not fused with the coherent space of the monothematic issues already in place. It is a miscellaneous space for hosting and breeding encounters and departures, with articles on topics nearby or far off from each issue’s topic.

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The Discursive Construction of Contemporary Family Types: An Introduction

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Contemporary family types

The traditional nuclear ideal of a cisgender, heterosexual mother and father giving birth to a child through the fulfilment of marital duties has been central to definitions of family and parenthood for centuries. This view relies on normative discourses that define families according to heteronormative and binary conventions of marriage and procreation. In the last sixty years, social norms and expectations around partnership, family and child rearing have shifted in many contexts, prompting a number of social, legal and political changes to family formations and practices. For example, in the UK the 2002 Adoption and Children Act meant that unmarried and same-sex couples could adopt children; since the 2008 Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act, same-sex and unmarried couples (including those who conceived via donor conception and/or surrogacy) have been able to apply for a parental order, and the 2014 Marriage (same-sex couples) Act led to state recognition of same-sex marriage. These changes have contributed to a steady rise in single and same-sex family formations (ONS 2022). Likewise in the United States and Canada, there have been notable legal and societal shifts concerning adoption, same-sex relationships, and reproductive rights, though challenges persist in the navigation of differing state and provincial laws. In the United States, many states now allow unmarried and same-sex couples to adopt children, and a 2015 Supreme Court ruling legalized same-sex marriage nationwide. Similarly, Canada legalized same-sex marriage in 2005, leading to more inclusive adoption policies in many provinces. In both the U.S. and Canada, assisted reproductive technologies are generally accessible to unmarried and same-sex couples, although specific regulations may differ by state or province.

In Italy, where most of the authors in this collection live and work, same-sex marriage was legalized in 2016 through the Cirinnà Law, which recognised civil unions but did not entirely equate them with traditional marriage. Although the Constitutional Court ruled in 2016 that the ban on adoption by same-sex couples was unconstitutional, the Italian situation concerning adoption by unmarried and same-sex couples is still the subject of harsh debate and regulatory claims for change. Moreover, assisted reproduction is still restricted by Law 40 of 2004, which prohibits the practice for unmarried and same-sex couples, thus creating legal complications in the recognition of such a practice when carried out abroad. Lastly, the parliament is currently considering passing a law which defines surrogacy as a criminal offence, leaving couples (same-sex and heterosexual) and their children in a particularly problematic situation. In fact, these families could be fined to up to one million euros, causing in most cases bankruptcy, and the non-biological parent could face up to two years in prison, ultimately leaving the children without a parent

In line with these shifts in family formations and practices, cross-disciplinary research in the past few decades has attended to the dynamics, social practices and representations of parents and families who break from traditional moulds. This includes a significant body of social and psychological research that points to the success of “new” western family formations such as same-sex and single-parent families who bring children into their lives through surrogacy, donor conception, or other reproductive practices. There is a wealth of research, for example, consistently demonstrating that children with same-gender parents, and children of parents who are single-by-choice, are thriving – by some measures even more so than their peers with

more traditional family types (e.g. Golombok 2015; Golombok et al., 2016; Green et al. 2019).

Despite these shifts in family practice and academic discourse, negative and discriminatory depictions have continued to limit the production of dialogic spaces in which non-normative families can exist and feel acknowledged. Worldwide, conservative and right-wing political parties are in a continuous effort “to preserve the patriarchal and cis-heteronormative ‘natural’ social order” (Baran 2023, p. 78), reinforcing and perpetuating discrimination towards identities and practices that do not conform with cisheteronormative and binary views. These efforts gravitate around the so-called concept of “gender ideology” (Borba 2022, Zottola and Borba 2022), which is used as a scarecrow to ignite discrimination and persecution against minority groups.

Popular media has a significant role to play in the circulation of such negative discourses, whereby two-parent heterosexual families are taken as the benchmark for “good” and “natural” family relations. Same-gender parents and marriages, for example, are frequently depicted in entertainment and news media as a threat to the social welfare of children (Goldberg 2012; van der Bom et al. 2015), whilst single parents can be represented as ignorant, irresponsible, and a drain on national resources (Salter 2018; Tyler 2008). Furthermore, Balirano and Hughes (2024) underscore how prevalent it remains on social networking sites to depict LGBTQ+ individuals as “pedophiles”, “family wreckers”, and “child groomers”, thereby portraying traditional family values as tainted by alternative family structures.

Nevertheless, contemporary media has the power to overturn negative representations and drive forward new, alternative and transformational perspectives. Indeed, parents in new and marginalised family formations have long been mobilising media resources to find information and community, promote wider recognition of diverse family formations, advocate for and support other families, share new and emerging family practices, and seek support in the face of wider social stigma and misunderstanding. For example, Hogben and Coupland (2000) have shown how gay individuals and couples negotiate their desire for parenthood in relation to societal norms within advertisements seeking reproductive partners. The authors point to the role of these ads in reshaping public perceptions of family, reproduction, and sexuality, suggesting they can be seen as a form of social activism that promotes greater acceptance and understanding of diverse family forms. More recently, Mackenzie (2023) has shown how UK-based single, LGBTQ+ and/or adoptive parents use digital and social media to connect with like-minded individuals, groups and communities, forging connections that have the potential to transform their own and others’ parenting practices, as well as broader understandings of diverse family structures and social actions. Both studies point to the significance of media platforms for social activism, change, and improved recognition of diverse family forms.

Discourse analytical approaches offer a range of tools and perspectives for the exploration of social norms and structures around parenthood and family formation as they are constructed, contested and negotiated in specific texts and practices. As Mackenzie and Zhao (2021) have suggested, these approaches are particularly well suited to explorations of the interaction between parenthood and family as social constructs, parenting and care-giving as social practice, and media discourse as social action. Although there is a relatively significant body of work that examines the representation of non-traditional parenthood and family forms across the globe, especially in the news media (e.g., Landau 2009; Zadeh and Foster 2016), there is far

less that takes an explicitly discourse analytical perspective. Studies that do exist in this area are able to deconstruct and identify some of the specific discursive strategies through which macro-level normative discourses of parenthood and family can be taken up, reproduced or challenged at the micro-textual level. For example, Sunderland and McGlashan's (2012) multimodal discourse analysis of 25 picture books that feature two-mum and two-dad families shows how mums tended to be constructed as co-parents, whilst dads tended to be constructed as partners. Riboni (2022) has also analysed children's picture books, in this case combining critical metaphor analysis with multimodal metaphor studies to investigate representations of multiethnic families in pre-adoption narratives. Examining below-the-line comments in articles about LGBTQ+ adoption in socially conservative UK newspapers, Sokalska-Bennett (2017) examines the construction of the ideal "nuclear" family. Through an in-depth membership categorisation analysis, she shows how parental roles are persistently gendered as feminine and masculine, with the implication that these binary role models are central to successful child-rearing.

This issue of *de genere* continues to refine and develop scholarly understanding of the social norms, structures and practices that shape conceptions of family, parenthood, and means of family formation. By examining media constructions of contemporary family types, both within and beyond the heteronormative ideal, all the articles in this issue seek to chart the current discursive landscape for families, parents and intended parents. Each investigation focuses on media representations of different family formations, including the "traditional family" (Fruttaldo), surrogacy and same-gender couple parenting (Mongibello), transracial adoption (Riboni), and single parent families, including single parents by choice (Nisco and Zollo; Rizzo; Scotto di Carlo). The explorations also cover varied geographical contexts, including Italy, Canada, the U.S., and global online discourses. Further, they examine a wide range of media data, including relatively static and traditional platforms such as news media (Mongibello) and entertainment media (Rizzo), as well as newer, multidimensional platforms through which a range of perspectives may converge, such as Twitter/X (Fruttaldo) and YouTube (Riboni; Scotto di Carlo).

Contributions to this collection adopt a range of discourse analytical approaches, including critical discourse analysis, and variations of this approach such as social media critical discourse analysis (Fruttaldo; Riboni) and multimodal positive discourse analysis (Nisco and Zollo). Several articles adopt an innovative combination of methods, with Fruttaldo and Mongibello each combining corpus-based and critical discourse analysis, and Rizzo charting new methodological ground with a Conversation Critical Discourse Analysis that examines the representation of solo mums "by choice" in a British sitcom. Scotto di Carlo, further, combines quantitative sentiment analysis with qualitative critical discourse analysis to examine two large corpora of YouTube comments. Such mixed-methods approaches are key to understanding the complex interplay between relatively dominant and more marginalised narratives around family formations in the media. Methodological synergies, such as that between CDA and corpus-based approaches, (see Baker 2006; Taylor and Marchi 2018) provide reliable methods for tracing discursive patterns and ideological implications. Selecting the most appropriate tools for their investigations, the authors analyse the discursive construction of contemporary family types through a range of semiotic means and across a wide range of media data.

Structure of the issue

The Discursive Construction of Contemporary Family Types opens with Fruttaldo's exploration of the discursive strategies used in the representation of the concept of "traditional" (nuclear, heterosexual and cisgender) family on Twitter/X. In this paper Fruttaldo shows how, despite some users contesting the notion of a traditional family, a large number of tweets are structured around the idea that traditional families are under attack, leading to a loss of values, cultural heritage and gender roles. These results confirm and mirror the current situation described at the beginning of this introduction with regards to the marginalization of, and/or discrimination against diverse family types that overturn traditional concepts of "family".

One of the controversial topics currently invading the public debate in Italy (and worldwide) has to do with the possibility of creating a family through surrogacy. Two of the authors involved in this special issue deal with this topic from different perspectives. Mongibello draws a comparison between the media representation of this practice in Italy and in Canada. The analysis of Canadian and Italian online news reports, which focus on stories related to surrogacy and alternative forms of parenthood, highlights some locally relevant threads that are related, in Italy, to the difficulties of the legal and political situation and in Canada, to a legitimization of different family types or alternative parenthood as the author defines it. Scotto di Carlo also touches on the topic of surrogacy, looking at the representation of single mothers and single fathers by choice on YouTube. The author concludes that single fathers seem to be represented more positively than single mothers, nonetheless she points to a growing optimism around the representation of different family types and suggests that children's wellbeing is increasingly associated with nurturing bonds rather than the gender of the parents.

Nisco and Zollo also focus on single parenthood in the Canadian context, but rather than discussing how the family came about, they look at the way in which these families are supported in this country and how charities and associations are working to eradicate the social stigma that is associated to single-parent families. Specifically, they focus on single-motherhood and analyse multimodal resources available on the websites of three Canadian non-profit organizations. In particular, their findings put forward a positive multimodal representation of single mums supported by positive messages related to having a support community and being resilient.

On the same topic, Rizzo analyses the British televised representation of such reality. In this regard, we must bear in mind that even though they are fictional, televised representations generally mirror societal realities. The author provides insights into the conversational patterns used in sitcoms and how these are valuable tools to explore power relations and the ideologies that underline specific cinematic choices. Rizzo, in fact, highlights how the series does not lack negative stereotyped representations of single motherhood shedding light on the societal norms and expectations that in many cases taint parenthood.

One last family type is represented in this issue. Riboni, in fact, shifts the focus to families created through adoption. Here she looks at strategies used on YouTube by a user of this social media platform to challenge mainstream narratives on transracial adoptions. The author underlines the importance of constructing a trustworthy and expert online persona in order to voice the needs and experiences of transracial adoptees.

The diversity of experiences and the variety of family types described in this issue of *de genere* point to the fact that, despite what religious fanatics or right-wing extremists want us to believe, non-conventional, non-heteronormative, non-cisgender family types exist and are thriving. People have understood it, the media has understood, society is ready, now it's time for politics to catch up!

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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.¹ 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

¹ 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*”² 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.³ 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

² 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.

³ 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.

Discursive strategies (DSs) in the TFC			
<p>DS1 Family values</p> <p>Subcategories:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – DS1a: Moral stance towards traditional family values – DS1b: Emotional work for private purposes (resulting in emotional labour) – DS1c: Subjectification of the everyday lives of individuals 	<p>DS2 Moral deviation and decadence</p>	<p>DS3 Religious persecution and cultural heritage</p>	<p>DS4 Government policies and conspiracy agenda</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 DS₂, 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 DS₂ 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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The Discursive Construction of Intended Parents from Surrogacy: A Corpus-based Critical Discourse Analysis of Italian and Canadian News Reports

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The present study examines how surrogacy-related parenthood has been represented in news discourse in Canada and Italy. These two countries present contrasting approaches to surrogacy, with Canada allowing formal surrogacy arrangements while Italy maintains some of the strictest laws on assisted conception and surrogacy in Europe. The analysis is based on two corpora consisting of online news reports from Canadian and Italian sources spanning from 2016 to 2023, focusing on stories concerning surrogacy and alternative forms of parenthood, particularly emphasizing the representation of gay couples. Employing a methodological framework that combines Critical Discourse Analysis methods with a Corpus-based approach, the study aims to uncover the ideological underpinnings in the discursive portrayal of intended parents from surrogacy. Results show that the Canadian corpus (Can_SUR) features medical information and personal surrogacy accounts, with limited focus on intended parenthood narratives. Conversely, the Italian corpus (Ita_SUR) portrays surrogacy and alternative parenthood as political struggles within the legal framework, suggesting these issues are debated in Italian courts rather than treated as personal matters. Overall, in Canadian news discourse alternative parenthood is represented as legitimate, whereas in Italy surrogacy and same-sex couples' rights are represented in opposition to discourses of biological kinship and nature, thus echoing a heteronormative framework.

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1. Introduction

In the last fifty years, advances in medicine have resulted in the overcoming of barriers connected to human reproduction through Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTs). The term ARTs is an umbrella term that encompasses various techniques or “therapies used to treat infertilities [including] pharmacological stimulation of ovaries, intrauterine insemination (IUI), in-vitro fertilization (IVF), and IVF with intracytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI)” among others (Chuck and Yan 2009, 1). These technologies have gained significant attention since 1978, when the first “test-tube baby” was born in the UK (Lie and Lykke 2017), therefore potentially disclosing new possibilities for allegedly equal access to childbirth and family-building. The availability of these technologies varies from country to country, and so do the groups of people they are accessible to, depending on the presence or absence of specific legislations disciplining such practices. Despite being practices that deal with intimate aspects of people’s lives, ARTs have become part of the public debate as a biopolitical matter. This is because they arise political, social, cultural, religious, legal and biological concerns that have triggered ongoing negotiation processes of procedures, regulations and rights.

As an ART practice, surrogacy is one of the most controversial and highly debated across the globe, “shaped not only by politics but also by each culture's key values” (Teman 2010, 10). Consequently, multiple voices as well as different social and cultural responses to surrogacy and commercial in-vitro fertilization have risen, more or less influenced by religious positions, legal prohibitions, women’s rights concerns, ethical issues, and moral dilemmas in regard to “natural” vs. “unnatural” parenthood. The reason is that surrogacy challenges the “traditional”, heteropatriarchal view of family formation and has gradually led to a reconceptualization of the concept of family (Franklin 2013). The alleged commercialization of parenthood has also been problematized in relation to global inequalities. For instance, surrogacy has often been represented as being exploitative of low-income women, who are driven by poverty towards becoming surrogate mothers.

The present study aims at filling a gap in the current critical debate on surrogacy (Riggs and Due 2019) and parenthood, by proposing an analysis of how parenthood from surrogacy has entered news discourse, comparatively, in Canada and Italy. These are two geopolitical arenas where surrogacy has been dealt with in opposite ways. While in Canada formal arrangements for surrogacy are possible, Italian laws around the use of assisted conception and surrogacy are some of the most restrictive in Europe. The analysis herein proposed will be both quantitative and qualitative. It will be conducted on two corpora collecting online news reports from Canadian and Italian outlets between 2016 and 2023, covering stories on surrogacy and (the possibility of) alternative parenthood. More specifically, the focus of the analysis is placed on the representation of gay couples. The methodological framework is the result of a combination of Critical Discourse Analysis methods driven by a Corpus-based approach (Baker et al. 2008; Baker and McEnery 2005; Baker and Levon 2015), so as to unveil the ideological implications in the discursive construction of intended parents from surrogacy, encompassing contrasting political viewpoints. The aim of the study is to unveil discourses on parenthood and ideological positionings with regard to gender roles, kinship, social vs. biological parenthood. It will therefore single out the narratives on heteronormative vs. alternative families.

2. A brief history of surrogacy

Surrogacy consists in an arrangement in which a woman - the surrogate - bears a child for someone else - the intended parent(s) - whether an individual or a couple (Yee and Librach 2019). Intended parent(s) may or may not be genetically related to the child. In any case, they agree to be the child's social and legal parent(s) and raise the child from birth (Fantus 2021). The practice began flourishing in the USA in the 1980s. Ever since, it has turned into a global trend (Payne, Korolczuk and Mezinska 2020). Arrangements between intended parents and surrogates can be altruistic, therefore not involving any direct form of payment if not reimbursements, or, conversely, commercial, which is the most common form of surrogacy. In this case, the arrangement is usually between intended parents from industrialized countries and surrogates from non-industrialized countries, and it implies payments beyond direct expenditures. When the surrogate's eggs are used, the surrogate and the surrogacy-conceived child are genetically related and the surrogate is defined as a genetic carrier. This form of surrogacy is known as traditional surrogacy. In gestational surrogacy, the surrogate's eggs are replaced with either anonymously donated eggs or with the intended mother's. Embryos from fertilized donor gametes are implanted in the gestational carrier who therefore has a gestational relationship with the child.

While surrogacy is not a new practice, it has recently seen a growing increase which also includes arrangements that cross national borders. However, a study by the European Parliament's Directorate General for Internal Policies states that, as of 2013, precise statistics are hard to estimate for three reasons: firstly, traditional surrogacy often goes undetected as it does not require medical intervention and can therefore be arranged informally between the parties; secondly, while gestational surrogacy does require medical intervention, usually only the IVF procedures are registered; lastly, in many countries lacking regulations in this regard there are no formal reporting procedures available, whereas in countries where surrogacy is illegal it is simply impossible to collect data as the people involved may face criminal prosecution (Brunet, Carruthers and Davaki 2013). However, the rise of this practice is visible from the number of clinics and agencies devoted to surrogacy arrangements, as well as from the media visibility of surrogacy stories, for instance in news outlets, movies and shows.

A common practice that has been tracked by social scientists is that of cross-border reproductive care (CBRC), that is the mobility of intended parents who travel beyond national borders in search of ARTs. Couples or singles reach Southeast Asia, the Middle East and North America (Speier 2020) mainly to get access to commercial surrogacy. India, Thailand and Nepal used to be popular destinations for CBRC, generating a phenomenon that has been defined as "reproductive tourism" (Nahman 2013) or "reproductive mobilities" (Schurr 2019). However, in recent times, most of these hot destinations have drastically reduced accessibility to ARTs to curb procreative traveling and counter the alleged commodification of reproduction. In the US and Canada, regulations are still permissive (more in the former than the latter where surrogacy can be altruistic only). However, the high cost of reproductive technologies has been discouraging intended parents from reaching North America for treatments. Until 2016, Israel was one of the busiest markets for fertilization clinics in the world, whereas, as of 2023, Barbados (*Forbes* 2023) is becoming a leading destination. Other reproductive markets include Kenya, Mexico and Albania (Aznar and Peris 2019).

Commercial, either gestational or traditional, surrogacy has become a prominent solution for individuals facing infertility as well as singles and queer couples, especially

same-sex male couples, seeking parenthood through transnational surrogacy services. Since its beginnings, though, it has been surrounded by controversy and suspect. This is due to cultural, ethical and moral issues pertaining to women's rights, reproductive rights, gender roles, kinship and conceptualizations of parenthood and family. Remuneration for commercial surrogacy, for example, has often been criticized because of its potential to lead to the exploitation of the surrogates, especially when these women live in economically disadvantaged countries. On the other hand, altruistic surrogacy, although less common than commercial surrogacy, seems to be more morally acceptable (Ammaturo 2020), as it allegedly prevents surrogacy from becoming a paid occupation. Both forms of surrogacy have been harshly criticized, anyway, by opposite factions. Some critics believe that commercial surrogacy may turn into a financial gain for women who have limited employment options (Capron and Radin 1990) thus pushing them towards choosing reproduction over other forms of occupation. There is also a common belief that paying for parenthood entails the commodification of women and babies (Anderson 1990). In sharp contrast with these positions, those who support commercial surrogacy believe that altruistic surrogacy enforces gender stereotypes as it frames reproduction as an act of love or another form of women's domestic labor (Snow 2016). Some feminist scholarship supports commercial surrogacy as an empowering source of income (Pande 2014).

New reproductive possibilities have also challenged traditional concepts of parenthood and family, consequently sparking off intense debates in public discourse over family, parenthood and gender roles. The reason for this may be traced back to the traditional, commonsensical Christian conceptualization of family, still deeply entrenched in conservative, populist and nationalist ideologies. In fact, the role of blood ties and genetic bonds has always been crucial in defining parenthood (Birenbaum-Carmeli and Rudrappa 2022), and still is for some. On the other hand, surrogacy challenges the centrality of genetic bonds, especially when gestational, as it allows the disentanglement of biological relatedness from social parenthood. As a matter of fact, surrogacy implicates new declinations of parentage while also questioning the standard forms of family conceptualization. However, the idea that parental relationships are grounded in the natural derivation of one person from another and, therefore, in genetics and DNA, is still quite valued. So much so that a persistent genetic bias in perceptions and definitions of parenthood is key to a genetic discourse dominating public debates over surrogacy. A connected criticism is the claim that surrogacy endangers the welfare of the children because it produces harmful environments that ultimately may inflict psychological harm on the children born out of surrogacy (Oultram et al. 2016).

These objections usually rely on claims of parenthood authenticity and traditional nuclear family values, i.e. the "real" parent is the biological one and therefore the best one. Therefore, "artificial" forms of gestation, defying genetic norms, are often demonized, especially in countries where religious pressures are exercised. This genetic discourse is also picked up in nationalist narratives and then naturalized in nationalist discourses of far-right parties across the globe, where it also intertwines with conservative values and gender stereotypes.

3. Surrogacy regulations in Canada and Italy

Due to the above-mentioned cultural, moral and ethical issues, regulatory frameworks operate quite differently in each country on a global scale, making it hard for couples and individuals seeking surrogacy to navigate the wide variety of laws and

jurisdictions. Regardless of the many differences, all regulations range from permissive to restrictive in regard to ARTs, parenthood and surrogacy. In some cases, these regulations reflect a heteronormative orientation on the basis of which surrogacy is constructed “as the domain of married, heterosexual couples” (Leibetseder and Griffin 2020, 312). As a consequence, it can be hypothesized that experiences of parenthood derived from ARTs are framed and construed in ways that tend to perpetuate and echo heteronormativity.

For the purpose of this study, we are interested in comparing and contrasting two different cultural, legal and geographical scenarios where surrogacy regulations stand at the two opposite sides of the permissive/restrictive scale, i.e. Canada and Italy. The reason why we chose these countries is that, given the differences in ARTs regulations in general, the way parenthood is talked about in news discourse may consequently differ. The comparison would therefore allow the identification of possibly different discourses of parenthood. Before turning to the analysis, it is important to clarify in what ways Canada and Italy differ in terms of ARTs regulations, by briefly referring to the legal framework within which surrogacy is disciplined.

Surrogacy in Canada is regulated under the *Assisted Human Reproduction Act* (2004), a piece of federal legislation adopted by the Parliament of Canada in 2004, ten years after a Royal Commission report urged the Canadian government to regulate the growing issues (legal, ethical and social) connected with ARTs (Lemmers and Flavelle Martin 2016). The Act criminalizes commercial surrogacy which means that a strict set of restrictions prohibits the commercial sale of human reproductive material as well as the compensation of surrogates. Even though commercial surrogacy is forbidden, altruistic surrogacy is accepted. Therefore, reasonable expenses connected with pregnancy are allowed. Both gestational and traditional surrogacy are permitted, provided that the agreement relies on altruistic intentions and that a surrogacy agreement is established between parties prior to initiating pregnancy. This means that the carrier can still be reimbursed for medical expenses, although the regulation of financial reimbursements is still vague (Fantus 2020). Typical out-of-pocket expenses that are reimbursed include maternity clothing, prenatal vitamins, travel and accommodation costs, childcare and lost wages or medications associated with pregnancy (Fantus 2021, 1362). The practice has grown rapidly, also as an effect of prohibitions imposed in other countries like India or Nepal. While heterosexual couples represent the majority of people getting access to surrogacy in Canada, statistics show that 21% of intended parents from surrogacy are same-sex male couples (White 2017). Parental rights are recognized upon registration of the birth. Parentage laws vary from province to province, though. In Ontario, for example, unless the surrogacy agreement provides otherwise, the surrogate and the intended parents share the rights and responsibilities of a parent in respect of the child from the time of the child’s birth until the court makes a declaration of parentage (All Families Are Equal 2016). In March 2023, the federal government led by PM Justin Trudeau announced the implementation of a new parental benefit offering parents who adopt or grow their families with the help of a surrogate more time at home with their newborn.

The situation is completely reversed in Italy, where surrogacy is mainly forbidden, whether it be traditional or gestational, commercial or altruistic. The Italian parliament provided very strict guidelines in matters of ARTs in 2004. Act n. 40 of 19/2/2004, entitled *Rules about Medically Assisted Reproduction*, prohibits the employment of gametes from donors, and specifically decrees that anyone who, in any form, realizes, organizes or commercializes gametes, embryos or surrogate motherhood is sentenced to 3 months

to 2 years' imprisonment and to pay a 600,000 to 1,000,000 euro fine. However, surrogacy can be carried out in case of gametes provided by one of the intended parents and a third party. This option, though, is accessible to heterosexual couples only, whereas same-sex couples or single individuals are not allowed to access any form of ARTs.

The political debate over surrogacy in Italy has seen the struggle between supporters of ARTs and its legalization and extension to singles and LGBTQ+ couples, and opposers of the so-called “womb for rent” (“*utero in affitto*”), a derogatory term that has become the preferred term to discuss surrogacy by those opposing the practice. As a matter of fact, the non-scientific terminology stresses the commodification dimension of the practice by foregrounding the alleged economic outcomes for surrogates. Reasonably, in the last twenty years or so, Italy has seen an increasing demand for the recognition of such practices as legal, especially coming from LGBTQ+ associations, led by “Rainbow families” (same-sex family association). In the meantime, Italian couples, especially same-sex male couples, embarking in journeys abroad for accessing CBRC do not always know the legal effects of their choices upon return to Italy. That of foreign-born babies from surrogacy abroad is, in fact, a grey area in the Italian legal system as no Italian legislation entails the legal recognition of children born out of CBRC. While there have been cases of foreign-born children being legally certified upon return with the indication of both parents, out of Supreme Court judges decisions, the legislative vacuum has often led to long and excruciating battles for the recognition of legal parentage, identity rights and citizenship (Lavacchini 2021). This is especially true when it comes to same-sex couples. Stepchild adoption (or adoption in particular cases) has sometimes been allowed by the Supreme Court to protect the best interest of foreign-born children, although the legal status of same-sex couples adoption is still under debate.¹ As a matter of fact, even though civil partnerships for same-sex couples were legalized in 2016 (in Italian: *unioni civili*), adoption rights are currently lacking.

While in Canada a new parental benefit is being planned for people who choose surrogacy, in March 2023 in Italy the far-right government led by Giorgia Meloni announced stricter rules regarding cross-border surrogacy, accusing intended parents of enslaving female bodies. As a consequence, PM Meloni ordered municipalities to stop certifying foreign birth certificates for same-sex couples who used surrogacy, thus leaving some babies in a legal limbo (*The New York Times* 2023).

4. Previous studies on surrogacy and parenthood

Surrogacy and parenthood have been analyzed from several perspectives, including legal, psychological, political, philosophical, sociological and anthropological perspectives. For example, a growing body of empirical studies has focused on the psychological aspects of surrogacy, including cross-border experiences, intended parent(s) motivations and parental relationships (Jadva 2020, Joseph et al. 2018). Studies focusing on parenthood experiences from surrogacy, in particular, have been limited. Much research concentrates on intended parents' relationship with the surrogates and/or the reasons why they decided to pursue surrogacy (Gunnarsson et al. 2020), whereas there

¹ The lack of legislation regarding same-sex couples adoption seems to be directly connected to same-sex couple marital status in Italy. The request of same-sex couples to get access to marriage rights has partly been accepted in 2016, when same-sex civil unions (i.e. “*unioni civili*”) were finally legalized, after a long battle. However, adoption rights are still lacking.

is still a lack of studies covering single and same-sex couples' experiences of surrogacy (Blake et al. 2017). Ethnographic research has shown that surrogates defy gendered ideas of maternal obligation, but, at the same time, the experience of surrogacy reinforces genetic notions of kinship (Markens 2012). Research has also investigated the impact of surrogacy on women who act as surrogates (Bakshi et al. 2018), especially by critical and feminist scholars in studies approaching the political and socio-cultural dimension of surrogacy (Becker 2000). A more discourse oriented work is that by Eyal and Moren (2017), in that it provides insights into how the international surrogacy market is construed by surrogacy agencies, concluding that there is a significant difference in discourse practices when reproductive labor is rhetorically distanced from commodification processes and when it is linked to those processes. However, the amount of works on surrogacy and parentage is still mainly ethnographic.

Another strand of research is that of media studies focusing on media representations of surrogacy and parenthood. An extensive body of research has shown how “the media is an important claims-maker” and source of information about health issues, including reproductive practices (Mankens 2011). Therefore, what the general public knows about surrogacy and alternative forms of parenthood mainly derives from the media. Media can also influence group members' perceptions of their status and place in society, as well as public attitudes and policies (Tukachinsky 2015, Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart 2009). Some works have dealt with popular representations of surrogacy and connected parenthood. According to Sarah Franklin, “popular representations are a powerful force in the social world and cultural construction of reproduction” (Franklin 1990, 227). This is why studies by Le Vay (2019) and Cavalcante (2014), among others, have tackled the issue of TV representations of non-normative families and same-sex parenting from surrogacy. These studies found that same-sex parenting is usually represented in a positive way so as to manage the cultural anxiety generated by LGBTQ+ issues and themes and normalize gay characters (Cavalcante 2014). Soap operas, in particular, were identified as being the most successful in encouraging empathetic representations of surrogacy. In *Surrogacy and the Reproduction of Normative Family*, Le Vay (2019) concludes that non-normative representations of family have as their primary aim to placate social anxieties of homosexuality and that, for this reason, they end up reproducing heteronormativity by means of references to monogamy, domesticity and romantic love placed at the forefront of the narratives.

Fewer studies have dealt with the analysis of parenting from surrogacy in news media, in a discourse-analytical perspective. One example is that of Landau (2009) who investigated same-sex parenting in US print news stories, concluding that same-sex relations are usually framed within homophobic, heterosexist and heteronormative norms, and that same-sex parenting is represented through an assimilating verbal and visual rhetoric that can be ultimately damaging. In her work on U.S. media framings and public discourse about transnational surrogacy, Susan Markens (2012) conducted a qualitative analysis of news accounts of surrogacy published between 2006 and 2010. She identified some key frames including exploitation/inequality and opportunity/choice and highlighted that parenting from surrogacy is portrayed as a social problem because the media reports on it, while dramatic frames shape the way surrogacy is seen by the public. At the same time, intended parents try to distance themselves from accusations of commodification and draw on “discourses of altruism” (Markens 2012, 1750). Another study by Carlile and Paechter (2018) examines various aspects of the media landscape concerning LGBTQ+ parents in the UK thus providing an insight into how media influences and is influenced by policy decisions. The research

was conducted on a sample of 144 newspaper articles from various news media in the UK and Ireland published between 2014 and 2015. Some patterns were identified, for example news reports acknowledged lesbian mothers in dramatic stories of child abuse and death. Also, negative moral judgement on LGBTQ+ parents passed on average or low incomes. Lastly, reports of alternative families “often tended towards the spectacle or carnivalesque” (Carlile and Paechter 2018, 42).

To our knowledge, none of the above mentioned studies combines Corpus Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis to investigate the representations of intended parenthood from surrogacy. This lack represents a gap in the current research on the representation of families, especially families from surrogacy, which the present study aims at filling. In fact, using a corpus-based approach to the analysis of how intended parents from surrogacy are discursively produced across news media allows for a more systematic examination. For instance, quantitative data from corpus analysis can help identify patterns, trends, and frequencies of certain words, phrases in news media discourse. Also, key themes and keywords can be identified in recurring linguistic features used to represent alternative families. This helps in understanding the dominant narratives and discursive strategies employed by the media.

5. Corpus Design and Methodology

The aim of this study is to unveil discourses on parenthood from surrogacy as well as contrasting ideological positionings with regard to gender roles, kinship, and social vs. biological parenthood. Two are the research questions that we will address:

1. How are parental experiences and/or parenthood from surrogacy represented in news discourse in Canada and Italy?
2. What are the mainstream/alternative narratives circulating through Canadian and Italian news outlets?

In order to undertake the analysis, two specialized corpora were assembled for the purpose of this study: the Can_SUR Corpus and the Ita_SUR Corpus. Specialized corpora are corpora “of text of a particular type” that are “used to investigate a particular type of language” (Hunston 2002, 14). Both corpora contain news articles from online newspapers, including broadsheets and tabloids, and press release sources, retrieved from ProQuest, an online database, using advanced research tools. The time-span was set to January 1, 2016 - May 18, 2023. The year 2016 was particularly significant in Italy as it marked the legalization of civil unions. As a consequence, the public discourse on fertility rights saw a remarkable increase. In October 2016 Health Canada signaled its long-overdue intention to regulate reimbursement of surrogacy expenses, which led to an intensification of news reports covering issues related to surrogacy and parenthood as well. Over the years, in both Italy and Canada, news media outlets have covered stories concerning experiences of surrogacy either national or international, political debates, LGBTQ+ requests to legalize the practice in Italy and, more recently, attempts to further restrict cross-border surrogacy. The selection of the query terms to extract corpus data from the ProQuest database was carried out in advance using the *Assisted Human Reproduction Act* and the *Legge 40 (2004)*, the Italian act disciplining assisted reproduction, as a starting point, so as to identify the key words that have featured the Canadian legal discourse on fertility rights and ARTs. The texts were

processed in search for relevant keywords that might facilitate the selection of our query terms.

The Can_SUR Corpus comprises 690 news articles, written in English, rounding up 728,171 tokens and 609,729 words. Can_SUR collects news articles from national daily broadsheet newspapers like *The National Post*, *The Vancouver Sun* and *The Toronto Star* and local tabloids like *The Toronto Sun*. Our search terms for collecting the articles were “surrogacy” or “surrogate” and “parenthood” or “intended parents” or “intended parent” or “surrogate carrier” or “surrogate mother” or “family”. We then sorted the results in chronological order and eliminated any duplicates, based on identical titles. Table 1 displays the distribution of articles across newspapers. As expected, some newspapers have devoted more coverage to issues pertaining to surrogacy and parenthood than others. For example, *The Toronto Star* and *The National Post* published 26.8% and 25.5% of the articles in our dataset, respectively. The distribution of articles seems quite homogeneous if we compare *The Toronto Star*, *The National Post* and *The Toronto Sun*, as almost the same amount of articles was published in these newspapers. The sources are diverse, though, in their ideological orientation, format, geographical representation and circulation. *The Calgary Herald*, *The National Post*, *The Vancouver Sun* and *The Toronto Sun* lean towards right-center/right political orientation, whereas *The Toronto Star* is more left-centered (Media Bias Fact Check 2023).

The Ita_SUR Corpus gathers 830 news articles, written in Italian, ranging to 392,223 tokens and 324,859 words. A detailed distribution of articles according to newspapers is provided in Table 2. Our research terms used to retrieve articles from ProQuest were “maternità surrogata” or “utero in affitto” or “gestazione per altri” and “famiglia” or “genitori” or “genitore”. The term “genitori intenzionali” (“intended parents”) is not commonly used in Italian and for this reason it was not included in the selection of query terms. Common terms that feature the public discourse on surrogacy were added to the legal terminology extracted from *La legge 40 - Procreazione assistita* in order to widen the selection of articles and diversify the ideological orientation of each source. The retrieved articles were published in national daily newspapers like *Corriere della Sera* and *La Stampa*, regional broadsheets like *Il Resto del Carlino* and newspapers published in compact-formats like *La Nazione* and *Il Giornno*. It must be noted that the segmentation differentiating quality newspapers from tabloids is typical of English speaking countries, whereas in Italy tabloids are rare. Regardless, the political leaning of the Italian newspapers in the Ita_SUR Corpus includes more left-centered, liberal newspapers like *La Stampa* and *Corriere della Sera* and right-oriented, conservative outlets like *La Nazione*, *Il Giornno* and *Il Resto del Carlino*, all belonging to the same media group (RCS). *Il Fatto Quotidiano* is politically close to the Five Star Movement and has often been accused of both right-wing or left-wing populism, alternatively. ANSA (National Associated Press Agency) is the leading news agency in Italy and, interestingly enough, in this corpus its coverage accounts for 59.7% of the overall number of articles in the Ita_SUR corpus.

Name	n. of reports
<i>The Calgary Herald</i>	81
<i>The Toronto Star</i>	185
<i>The National Post</i>	176
<i>The Vancouver Sun</i>	84

<i>The Toronto Sun</i>	164
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Table 1: Articles included in the Can_SUR Corpus, by newspaper

Name	n. of reports
<i>La Stampa</i>	50
<i>Il Resto del Carlino</i>	74
<i>Il Giorno</i>	33
<i>La Nazione</i>	42
<i>ANSA</i>	496
<i>Corriere della Sera</i>	123
<i>Il Fatto Quotidiano</i>	7

Table 2: Articles included in the Ita_SUR Corpus, by newspaper

The study conducted herein draws from quantitative and qualitative techniques, using corpus tools to complement Critical Discourse Analysis (hereafter CDA). CDA consists of “attempts to study the organization of language above the sentence or above the clause, and therefore to study larger linguistic units such as conversational exchanges or written texts” (Stubbs 1983, 1). The combination with a CDA-informed approach is particularly fruitful to interpret the ideological implications in patterns of language. Such an integrated approach, which combines qualitative readings with a corpus-linguistics approach, creates a methodological synergy (Baker et al. 2008) that has proven to be a reliable method to track down discursive patterns. The synergy between qualitative and quantitative methodologies addresses the limitations of both. In other words, “by using computer software, analysts can deal with much larger quantities of data, and so put forward more convincing evidence in support of their claims” (Cameron and Panovic 2014, 81).

For the quantitative informed analysis, the online software program *Sketch Engine* (Kilgarriff et al. 2014) was employed as a corpus manager and text analysis software. Our first stage of analysis focused on keyness and collocations. Keyness refers to the level of significance of higher or lower frequencies (keywords). Keyness values were generated automatically based on log-likelihood calculations. Keyword analysis was therefore employed to find out which words were significantly most frequent in the Can_SUR and in the Ita_SUR, respectively. The keyness analysis of the Can_SUR corpus was conducted using the SiBOL corpus, an English corpus made up of articles collected from various English language newspapers of the years 1993-2021, containing around 850 million words. The analysis of keywords was useful for identifying particular themes in both corpora. The Ita_SUR keywords were retrieved using the Italian section of the Timestamped JSI web corpus, a corpus made up of news articles gained from their RSS feeds. The corpus consists of news articles gained from newsfeed created by the Jozef Stefan Institute, Slovenia. The general JSI Timestamped Italian corpus is a clean, continuous, real-time aggregated stream of semantically enriched news articles from RSS-enabled sites across the world. The corpus is updated with new texts daily and grows by ca 200 million words each month. The Italian section of the Timestamped JSI web corpus comprises Italian news articles from 2014 to 2021. The analysis of collocates in corpus linguistics is often used to identify discourses, through the investigation of words co-occurring within a pre-set span. Collocational analysis served as a gateway to CDA as it provided indications of discourse prosody (Baker et al. 2008), i.e. the

associations of a given word or phrase with other words or phrases which are positive or negative in their evaluative orientation. The analysis of collocates can provide a helpful sketch of the meaning/function of the node within a particular discourse. Discourse prosody indexes the topics and issues associated with a given key word. *Topoi* or *loci* can be described as parts of argumentation which belong to the obligatory, either explicit or inferable premises: they are “content-related warrants or ‘conclusion rules’ which connect the argument or arguments with the conclusion, the claim” (Wodak and Meyer 2001, 76). According to specific topics or “argumentative topoi” (Baker 2006), words can be grouped to identify types of discourses. Richardson explains the *topoi* in terms of “reservoirs of generalised key ideas from which specific statements or arguments can be generated” (Richardson 2004, 230). Another useful notion was that of agency (Van Leeuwen 1996) as well as taxonomy to understand how social actors are represented. In Fairclough’s words, “social actors are usually participants in clauses” (2003, 145) although they may be represented as agents or patients in specific contexts.

6. Results

This study takes a comparative approach in that its ultimate goal is comparing Italian and Canadian news discourse in an attempt to shed some light on the picture of parenthood from surrogacy in Italy and Canada as seen through the lens of the news media. To this end, this section was structured into two main parts. In 6.1, a presentation and analysis of the data retrieved from the Can_SUR corpus is introduced, whereas 6.2 comprises the interpretation of the results obtained from the Ita_SUR corpus. The last block, section 6.3, provides a comparative analysis between data from 6.1 and 6.2.

6.1 Analysis of the Can_SUR corpus

The first stage of analysis is informed with quantitative methodologies. A list of keywords was automatically retrieved from *SketchEngine* using the SiBOL corpus as a reference corpus. Non words and strings of symbols were deleted, since they were not relevant to the analysis. The query terms used for retrieving the articles from the ProQuest database were also manually removed, in order not to hamper the results. Identifying keywords was necessary so as to reveal broad trends in the Can_SUR corpus. We obtained a list of the top 50 keywords, their frequency in the focus corpus and reference corpus as well as their relative frequency in both the focus and the reference corpus along with their keyness scores. The initial list was further revised. Each keyword was checked by screening manually through the news articles where they occurred in order to confirm the coherence of the results with our research aims. We obtained a final list of 28 keywords displayed in Table 3.

Item	Freq. (focus)	Freq. (reference)	Relative freq. (focus)	Relative freq. (reference)	Score
jonathon	242	571	332,33951	0,56578	212,89
ailah	150	0	205,99557	0	207

kristin	181	1315	248,56799	1,30297	108,37
health-care	106	735	145,57021	0,72828	84,807
roseanne	85	499	116,73082	0,49444	78,779
caryn	58	67	79,65162	0,06639	75,631
sperm	307	5070	421,60428	5,02363	70,158
embryo	242	3920	332,33951	3,88414	68,249
uterus	94	1004	129,09056	0,99482	65,214
fertilization	52	177	71,4118	0,17538	61,607
paulin	53	260	72,7851	0,25762	58,67
honjo	42	3	57,67876	0,00297	58,505
fertility	332	7043	455,93686	6,97858	57,27
trudeau	95	1385	130,46387	1,37233	55,415
chalke	47	254	64,54528	0,25168	52,366
audia	36	2	49,43894	0,00198	50,339
ndp	44	227	60,42537	0,22492	50,146
hospitalizat ion	74	1059	101,62448	1,04931	50,077
crockett	50	437	68,66519	0,433	48,615
shermans	34	13	46,69233	0,01288	47,086
vitro	44	418	60,42537	0,41418	43,435
parentage	30	2	41,19912	0,00198	42,116
gestational	39	307	53,55885	0,30419	41,833
ivf	163	4446	223,84853	4,40533	41,598
gamete	31	78	42,57242	0,07729	40,446
mom	234	8270	321,35309	8,19436	39,876
fetus	46	875	63,17197	0,867	39,372
dads	152	5454	218,3553	5,40411	38,952

Table 3: Final 28 keywords in the Can_SUR Corpus

In order to detect discourse patterns in the focus corpus, the 28 keywords were then coded to identify thematic patterns and the prominence of certain themes over others. As a result, we obtained three broad categories based on the semantic similarities between keywords:

Item	Category
<i>jonathon (242), ailah (150), Kristin (181), Roseanne (85), caryn (58), paulin (53), Shermans (34), audia (36), honjo (42), chakle (47), crockett (50), trudeau (95)</i>	NAMES

<i>health-care (106), sperm (307), embryo (242), uterus (94), fertility (332), fertilization (52), hospitalization (74), vitro (44), gestational (39), ivf (163), gamete (31), fetus (46)</i>	ARTs TERMINOLOGY
<i>dads (152), parentage (30), mom (234), ndp (44)</i>	MEMBERSHIP

Tab. 4: Keyword categories in the Can_SUR Corpus and their raw frequencies

Most of the keywords in our list are personal names, including first and/or last name of either lay or famous people experiencing surrogacy, or having to do with surrogacy to some extent. These encompass the following: *jonathon, ailah, kristin, roseanne, caryn, paulin, shermans, audia, honjo, chakle, crockett*. One name only, *trudeau*, pertains to the sphere of politics as it stands for Justin Trudeau, Canada's current PM. Specialized terminology is also common among our keywords. This category includes terms that pertain to the specialized field of ARTs. Fewer keywords fall into the category of membership. These can be further divided into family membership (*dads, mom, parentage*) and political membership (*ndp* i.e. New Democratic Party). Based on preliminary results, it could be assumed that there is a relevant tendency in the Canadian press to cover personal experiences of surrogacy, especially by reporting extraordinary stories of gestational carriage. The lack of names related to political actors, on the other hand, may suggest that surrogacy is not a political theme and that the coverage of surrogacy in Canada in the selected time-span does not include political debates over the issue. Similarly, the lack of terms related to parentage, especially legal terms like "intended parents", may suggest that the coverage relies on personal stories of surrogacy from the point of view of the gestational carrier, rather than the experiences of parenthood that emerge from that. At the same time, we may also hypothesize that parenthood from surrogacy is a normalized topic in Canada, therefore not calling for media attention. Based on the keyword categories in Tab. 4, the following themes were identified:

Theme	Frequency	Prominence
Medical information	1530	49.95%
Personal accounts	978	31.92%
Kinship	416	13.58%
Politics	139	4.53%

Table 5: Most frequent themes and prominence rates in the Can_SUR corpus

Prominence was established by calculating the frequency of each theme as a percentage of the overall number of occurrences of each item associated to that theme. Based on the results in Tab. 5, keywords vehiculating meanings related to medical information account for 49.95% of the total number of keywords, meaning that medical discourse is more frequent in the coverage of surrogacy stories in the Can_SUR compared to other themes.

While it would have been interesting to look at the usage of specialized ARTs terminology in this corpus, the analysis would have stretched too far beyond the scope of this research. Given the purpose of this study, and because of space constraints, we only focused on the theme of kinship by zooming into the context of use of *dads*. In so doing we tried to narrow down the analysis to experiences of parenthood from surrogacy, as they are more common among gay couples. To this end, contexts of usage were further investigated through collocational analysis. In analyzing collocates, the word span was set to 3L/3R in the collocate window. The minimum frequency of a collocate to co-occur with the node was set to 5.

Keyword	Collocates
<i>dads</i> (152)	<i>moms</i> (3), <i>gay</i> (4), <i>two</i> (9), <i>how</i> (4), <i>surrogate</i> (3), <i>are</i> (5), <i>who</i> (4), <i>be</i> (3), <i>have</i> (3), <i>with</i> (3)

Table 6: Collocates of *dads*

Collocates of *dads* include words pertaining to kinship (*moms*), surrogacy (*surrogate*), relationship and gender identity (*gay*), quantifiers (*two*) and verbs (*are*, *be*, *have*). *Two*, *gay* and *moms* are its strongest collocates based on log likelihood scores (77.11, 43.42 and 37.65, respectively). A collocational analysis was conducted on these collocates.

Occurrences of “two dads” feature news stories about surrogacy experiences for gay couples (extract 1) and father’s day celebrations (extract 2):

Extract 1: Milo's *two dads* hold him close, their faces awash with emotion as they meet their baby boy for the first time. In 2014, a photo of Toronto couple BJ Barone and Frankie Nelson cradling their newborn went viral. “That image has probably been seen in every country” said Lindsay Foster, who took the photo and is a friend of Milo's surrogate mother.

(*The Toronto Star*, March 1, 2016)

Extract 2: “Not all families are the exact same,” he said. “It's a beautiful thing to see different types of families being accepted.” His husband, Shaw, a manager at Whitehorse General, said a Father's Day story about *two gay dads* puts the focus on parenting. “It talks about the commitment and love that people have for their children regardless of the boundaries of sexual orientation,” he said.

(*The Vancouver Sun*, June 19, 2021)

In both articles, published at different times by two different newspapers, the representation of “gay dads” relies on positively connoted words (*emotions*, *love*, *beautiful*, *commitment*) that bring about a positive discourse prosody about non-heteronormative families. In **extract 1**, the reporter refers to a photo of two dads holding close their newborn baby from surrogacy. The photo went viral worldwide in 2014 but, in 2016, when the article was published, it was used by the conservative Italian Fratelli d'Italia party, without permission, in their campaign against gay parenthood, as the article explains. The positive, normalizing representation of gay parenthood stands in contrast with the illegal usage of their images for anti-gay propaganda. A legal/illegal framework is therefore employed in such a way that the same-sex couple and their baby are represented as legitimate, whereas the improper usage by Italian politicians is construed as illegal and illegitimate. In **extract 2**, the normalization of gay parenthood is embedded in the narrative of inclusive Father’s Day stories, by means of references to

the diversification of family structures and love for children, regardless of sexual orientation, as opposed to heteronormative understandings of fatherhood, traditionally attached to the celebration of Father’s Day.

Co-occurrences of *moms* and *dads* appear in three concordance strings, as Fig. 1 shows:

	Details	Left context	KWIC	Right context
1	<input type="checkbox"/> doc#0	body of brain research suggests yes, giving hope to adoptive parents,	dads	, lesbian moms - and maybe some Peppa Pig fans The Toronto Star Or
2	<input type="checkbox"/> doc#0	whole root causes let cops be social workers and surrogate moms and	dads	to kids lacking good parenting thing has been the same talking point for
3	<input type="checkbox"/> doc#0	whole 'root causes let cops be social workers and surrogate moms and	dads	to kids lacking good parenting thing has been the same talking point for

Figure 1: Concordance strings of co-occurrences of *moms* and *dads*

In concordance strings #2 and #3, which are identical quotes picked up by two different newspapers, the reference to “surrogate moms and dads” is not related to surrogacy but to experiences of adoption and guardianship, as the context of the sentence reveals (“surrogate moms and dads to kids lacking good parenting”). In string #1, the experience of adoptive parents, dads and lesbian moms is presented in relation to an experiment conducted by American anthropologist Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, supporting the evidence that mothers who give birth and those who adopt could reasonably be considered as capable of love and care as biological mothers. While the article’s focus is on experiences of gestational parenthood by two lesbian mothers, it also presents parenthood from surrogacy as a positive experience for the newborn, given the evidence provided by Hrdy’s and previous experiments that non-biological parents have the same nurturing instincts as gestational moms, even in the case of gay fathers from surrogacy:

Extract 3: For example, a 2014 study out of Israel by researchers Ruth Feldman, Eyal Abraham, and others, compared the brain responses of gay and straight couples raising children. The study looked at 41 heterosexual biological parents in which women were the primary caregivers, and 48 **gay fathers** who had their babies through surrogacy. What they found, writes Conaboy, were “similarities in amygdala activation between primary caregiving fathers and primary caregiving mothers.” And there were no major differences “in brain region activation” between the biological gay fathers and the adoptive ones.

(*The Toronto Star*, October 8, 2022)

The article represents non-heteronormative parenthood by referring to the natural/unnatural framework that is usually adopted in political debates over birth control, abortion and surrogacy. The reporter’s position aligns with that of Hrdy’s and other researchers’ in saying that science marches on towards the understanding of non-heteronormative parenthood as perfectly “natural”. It therefore subverts the categorization of gay parenthood as unnatural by reporting on scientific evidence supporting the opposite. Interestingly, it also refers to Giorgia Meloni’s opposition to surrogacy and adoption by gay couples, referred to by Meloni’s culture spokesman, Federico Mollicone, as unnatural. Meloni’s and associates’ positions are harshly criticized for being “regressive”.

Overall, the analysis of the Can_SUR showed that, in the representation of surrogacy in Canadian newspapers, not much space is devoted to experiences of parenthood from surrogacy, although personal, extraordinary accounts of surrogacy are common. Nonetheless, whenever issues concerning kinship and surrogacy are brought

into the discourse of news media, this is done in such a way that alternative experiences of parenthood are praised as being positive and a positive discourse prosody is therefore activated by means of positively connoted words as well as in the framework of normality and legitimacy. Although the presence of a positive discourse prosody is not immediately evident from the collocational analysis, the analysis of concordances revealed that references to love, affection and nurturing do occur in the surroundings of relevant keywords like *dads*. Personalization seems to be a common strategy in the Can_SUR corpus. Based on the list of collocates as well as the analysis of Extract 1 and 3, it is also worth noticing how *dads* is activated as the query occurs as subject of verbs like *hold* and *have (babies)*. Therefore gay fathers from surrogacy are represented as active participants performing activities that characterize them as dads in relation to their babies (es. holding their babies or having their babies). The stories of personal experiences are told by referring to lay people by means of nomination, i.e. using personal names and details of their life as parents. In the Can_SUR corpus gay fathers from surrogacy are discursively construed as legitimate parents. A common trend is also an emerging opposition between the positive representation of alternative parenthood from surrogacy in Canadian newspapers and regressive/repressive policies disciplining surrogacy elsewhere, criticized by Canadian reporters of *The Toronto Star*, specifically (as Extract 1 and 3 showed).

6.2 Analysis of the Ita_SUR corpus

The keyword analysis of the Ita_SUR corpus was conducted through *SketchEngine* using the Timestamped JSI web corpus as a reference corpus. Non words and strings of symbols were deleted, as well as all the query terms used for retrieving the articles from the ProQuest database. We gathered a list of the top 50 keywords, their frequency in the focus corpus and reference corpus as well as their relative frequency in both the focus and the reference corpus along with their keyness scores. As with the Can_SUR keyword list, the initial list was further revised by checking each keyword manually through the screening of the news articles. A final list of 29 keywords was obtained and displayed in Table 7.

Item	Freq. (focus)	Freq. (reference)	Relative freq. (focus)	Relative freq. (reference)	Score
giudici	144	24	367,13809	0,00232	367,286
stepchild	153	13703	390,0842	1,3248	168,223
gpa	74	1621	188,66818	0,15672	163,971
gandolfini	75	4405	191,21776	0,42587	134,807
genitorialità	117	13666	298,29968	1,32123	128,94
omogenitoriali	55	1346	140,22635	0,13013	124,965
roccella	106	14558	270,25443	1,40746	112,672
vendola	118	17864	300,84927	1,72709	110,686
unioni	58	3861	147,87506	0,37328	108,408

filiazione	54	2956	137,67679	0,28579	107,854
coghe	47	1259	119,82979	0,12172	107,718
gameti	48	3169	122,37936	0,30638	94,444
zan	83	15475	211,61432	1,49612	85,178
procreazione	70	11749	178,46989	1,13589	84,026
trascrivere	80	16786	203,96561	1,62287	78,146
gabicce	39	3017	99,43323	0,29168	77,754
tobia	53	7835	135,12721	0,75749	77,456
fecondazione	79	17856	201,41603	1,72631	74,245
schuster	36	3373	91,78452	0,3261	69,968
nichi	49	8401	124,92893	0,81221	69,489
eterosessuale	57	12112	145,32549	1,17099	67,4
trascrizione	156	51151	397,73291	4,94527	67,067
cirinnà	94	26916	239,65958	2,60223	66,808
omosessuale	240	86635	611,89679	8,37585	65,37
gestante	39	5845	99,43323	0,56509	64,171
Arcobaleno	130	44864	331,44409	4,33744	62,285
donatrice	35	6060	89,23495	0,58588	56,899
mercificazione	29	3405	73,93753	0,32919	56,378
famiglie	51	14809	130,02808	1,43173	53,883

Table 7: Final 29 keywords in the Ita_SUR Corpus

The keywords were coded to identify thematic patterns and the prominence of certain themes over others. As a result, we obtained three broad categories based on the semantic similarities between keywords:

Item	Category
<i>coghe (47), tobia (53), schuster (36), nichi (49), cirinnà (94), zan (83), vendola (118), roccella (106), gandolfini (75), gabicce (39)</i>	NAMES
<i>Trascrizione (156), trascrivere (80), unioni (58), stepchild (153), giudici (144)</i>	LEGAL TERMINOLOGY
<i>Eterosessuale (57), omosessuale (240), omogenitoriali (55), genitorialità (117), arcobaleno (130), famiglie (51)</i>	MEMBERSHIP
<i>Gestante (39), fecondazione (79), procreazione (70), gameti (48), filiazione (54), gpa (74), donatrice (35)</i>	ARTs TERMINOLOGY
<i>Mercificazione (29)</i>	ECONOMICS TERMINOLOGY

Table 8: Keyword categories in the Ita_SUR Corpus and their raw frequencies

Most of the keywords from Table 7 are names of politicians who were involved in different ways in the Italian political debate over surrogacy in the last seven years. Among the most prominent, Nichi Vendola, former Italian left-wing politician and LGBTQ+ activist who, together with his husband Edward Testa, became father through surrogacy in California of a child whose name also features in the keyword list (*tobia*). Other political actors include Monica Cirinnà, a Senator of the Democratic Party from 2013 to 2022, known to be the author of the Unioni Civili (civil unions) Bill approved in 2016, also known as Legge Cirinnà. Other public figures in this category include Alexander Schuster, an Italian attorney as well as an independent legal expert to the EU Commission on civil rights; Jacopo Coghe, president of the Pro Vita & Famiglia Onlus, a pro-life, anti-gay and conservative organization; Eugenia Roccella, current minister of the newly re-named Family, Natality and Equal Opportunities Ministry in Giorgia Meloni's government; Alessandro Zan, an Italian left-wing politician and LGBTQ+ activist; Massimo Gandolfini, leader of the so-called "Family Day", a pro-life demonstration opposing same-sex marriage, surrogacy and civil rights for LGBTQ+ people. Legal terminology is also common in the Ita_SUR corpus. It encompasses words related to legal decisions, the act of transcribing babies born abroad from surrogacy, civil unions and the much debated stepchild adoption law that was never approved. Membership terms include terminology related to sexual and gender identity like *eterosessuale* (heterosexual), *omosessuale* (homosexual) and *famiglie arcobaleno* (rainbow families) and also terms referring to alternative parenthood like *omogenitoriali* (same-sex parenthood), or parenthood in general (*genitorialità*). ARTs terminology is also present in the Italian press coverage of surrogacy and alternative parenthood in the form of specialized terms related to the gestational process like *fecondazione* (fecundation), *gameti* (gametes) as well as the technical acronym used for gestational carriage (*gpa*) and names referred to the women carriers/eggs donors (*gestante* and *donatrice*). One last category is that of economics terminology. Here we found only one keyword (*mercificazione*) indicating the accusation of commodification that usually features public debates about surrogacy, childhood, parenthood and women's bodies. Based on preliminary data, the coverage of surrogacy in Italian newspapers seems highly politicized as an ongoing political debate featuring opposite voices and factions. The occurrences of legal, medical and economics terminology in combination with the names of politicians may suggest that surrogacy is treated as a political issue, rather than a personal matter. So much so that in the membership category we found no reference to family roles (e.g. mother, father, parents etc.). On the contrary, parenthood from surrogacy seems to be covered as a political theme (*genitorialità* i.e. parenthood), rather than an experience that people undergo when choosing surrogacy. However, references to "rainbow families" indicate that the existence of alternative forms of parenthood is acknowledged in Italian news media discourse, although these are not conceived as civil entities in the Italian legal system.

The categories in Table 8 were associated with the themes displayed in Table 9. As anticipated, politics, in the form of politicians' names, dominates the corpus as a persistent theme across news articles. Law and legislation register a slightly lower percentage, though still being quite present. This suggests that surrogacy and the recognition of family rights is a political issue also debated in courts.

Theme	Frequency	Prominence
Politics	700	29.54%

Law and legislation	591	24.94%
Medical information	399	16.84%
Kinship	353	14.90%
Gender identity and sexual orientation	297	12.53%
Commodification and usurpation	29	1.22%

Table 9: Most frequent themes and prominence rates in the Can_SUR corpus

As in 6.1, we focus our attention on the Kinship category. Both *genitorialità* and *famiglie arcobaleno* were selected for a deeper investigation of their contexts of usage and collocates. The same settings were used: word span set to 3L/3R in the collocate window and minimum frequency of a collocate to co-occur with the node set to 5.

Keyword	Collocates
<i>genitorialità</i>	<i>Modello</i> (5), <i>piena</i> (5), <i>desiderio</i> (6), <i>forme</i> (4), <i>riconoscendo</i> (3), <i>doppia</i> (3), <i>riconoscimento</i> (6), <i>nuove</i> (3), <i>principio</i> (3), <i>progetto</i> (3), <i>materia</i> (3), <i>naturale</i> (4), <i>certificato</i> (3), <i>entrambi</i> (3), <i>riconosciuto</i> (3), <i>diritto</i> (3)
<i>famiglie arcobaleno</i>	<i>Rete</i> (4), <i>associazione</i> (5), <i>esistono</i> (4), <i>associazioni</i> (4), <i>festa</i> (3), <i>manifestazione</i> (3), <i>gruppo</i> (3), <i>legale</i> (3), <i>figli</i> (4), <i>diritti</i> (3)

Table 10: Selected keywords and their collocates

Based on preliminary considerations, the collocates of *genitorialità* encompass some positively connoted terms like *desiderio* (desire), *riconoscendo* (recognizing), *riconoscimento* (recognition) and *riconosciuto* (recognized). The last three collocates lead back to the theme of Law and Legislation, as surrogacy in Italy is illegal and therefore intended parents from cross-border surrogacy have to be legally registered as parents upon their return. However, the practice falls into a legal void and is often a struggle. *Modello* (model) and *piena* (full) are its strongest collocates (53.67 and 48.30 rates). Both collocates feature in extracts where the traditional model of parenthood and the right to full parenthood were discussed in court cases, as extracts 4 and 5 show:

Extract 4: Secondo la Corte, infatti, “l’insussistenza di un legame genetico tra i minori e il padre non è di ostacolo al riconoscimento di efficacia giuridica al provvedimento straniero: si deve infatti escludere che nel nostro ordinamento vi sia un **modello di genitorialità** esclusivamente fondato sul legame biologico fra il genitore e il nato; all’opposto deve essere considerata l’importanza assunta a livello normativo dal concetto di responsabilità genitoriale che si manifesta nella consapevole decisione di allevare ed accudire il nato”.

(ANSA, February 28, 2017)

Extract 5: “In tema di genitorialità, la sentenza della Corte d’Appello di Trento finalmente ci libera dall’ossessione del biologico e rimette al centro l’interesse dei bambini e delle bambine”: così Gabriele Piazzoni, segretario nazionale di Arcigay, commenta la sentenza che ha riconosciuto la **piena genitorialità** ad una coppia di padri che hanno fatto ricorso alla gestazione per altri.

(ANSA, February 28, 2017)

Both extracts were taken from the same press release by *ANSA* covering a 2017 court case that recognized full parenthood to a same-sex couple from Trento whose baby was born abroad through surrogacy. Extract 4 quotes from the final verdict, whereas in Extract 5 the decision is commented by Arcigay president Gabriele Piazzoni who foregrounds the importance of such a crucial moment in the history of same-sex parenthood as it finally liberates LGBTQ+ people from the obsession of biology and blood relationships when it comes to parenthood. In both cases, parenthood is represented within the legal framework by referring to issues like responsibility, children's rights and legal efficacy. While the court's decision is praised in these extracts, other examples show the co-existence of an opposite trend in public discourse, i.e. the defense of a traditional model of parenthood grounded in biological kinship:

Extract 6: Con questa decisione il giudice milanese “sembra trascurare - sottolineano Gambino e Bilotti - la recente presa di posizione del giudice delle leggi, secondo cui la pratica della maternità surrogata ‘offende in modo intollerabile la dignità della donna e mina nel profondo le relazioni umane’”. “In particolare - proseguono i civilisti all'Università Europea di Roma - ciò che il giudice milanese sembra trascurare del tutto è l'implicazione necessaria che sussiste tra il modello costituzionale della genitorialità naturale e la norma personalista posta a fondamento di quel grandioso progetto di emancipazione umana e sociale che è racchiuso nelle norme della nostra Costituzione. Laddove infatti la libertà di dare la vita si traduce nel riconoscimento del diritto di essere genitori, il figlio degrada inevitabilmente a oggetto di un diritto degli adulti”.

(*ANSA*, November 29, 2018)

In Extract 6, Gambino and Bilotti, vice-rector and chair of the Law faculty at the European University in Rome, harshly criticized the court's decision to recognize full parenthood to a gay couple who was officially transcribed as fathers of twins from surrogacy abroad. The article quotes from an interview with Gambino and Bilotti, signaled by quotation marks, where they discuss surrogacy as offensive and delegitimize non-biological parenthood as being unnatural. It is worth noticing how surrogacy is referred to as “surrogate motherhood” in Extract 6 and “gestation for others” in Extract 5, thus unveiling the occurrence of either negative or positive discourse prosodies when one term is preferred over the other.

Collocates of *famiglie arcobaleno* encompass words that categorize rainbow families as a network (*rete*), an association (*associazione*), a demonstration (*manifestazione*) or a group (*group*). Considering its collocates, rainbow families seem to be treated in this corpus as a political entity fighting for their children's rights and for the full recognition of their existence. As a matter of fact, *rete* and *associazione* are its strongest collocates (45.37 and 50.81 LL rates). It is also worth noticing how, among the node's collocates, there is only one verb *esistono* (exist). Despite being discursively construed as political entities, rainbow families are not represented as agents performing activities. When co-occurring in the surroundings of *rete* and/or *associazione*, rainbow families are represented in relation to their struggles for the recognition of egalitarian marriages, same-sex couples' children and reproduction rights, or their path towards the full recognition of their own existence.

Extract 7: Sono 1741 le persone (1391 famiglie) che hanno risposto a un questionario online (compilazione anonima) promosso dal Centro Risorse Lgbtqi, in collaborazione con le associazioni **Famiglie Arcobaleno** e Rete Genitori

Rainbow nell'ambito del progetto finanziato da Ilga-Europe, con l'obiettivo di raccogliere dati sulle famiglie composte da coppie omosessuali con o senza figli, genitori transessuali, famiglie ricomposte, genitori Lgbtqi single.

(ANSA, May 10, 2017)

Extract 8: Albini ricorda che alla Camera è stato depositato ad inizio della legislatura un testo di legge sull'uguaglianza della famiglia proposta da **Famiglie Arcobaleno** e Rete Lenford. “Quattro - spiega - sono i punti fondamentali: matrimonio egualitario, riconoscimento alla nascita per i figli di coppie dello stesso sesso, accesso alle adozioni per i single a prescindere da orientamento sessuale e identità di genere e coppie dello stesso sesso e accesso ai percorsi di procreazione assistita per le donne single e coppie di donne”

(*Corriere della Sera*, March 16, 2023)

Similarly to the representation of *genitorialità*, *famiglie arcobaleno* are discursively construed within a legal and political framework, therefore as political actors rather than as lay individuals. No personal account is provided in relation to rainbow families and same-sex parenthood. On the contrary, the public dimension of parenthood is preferred over the narrative of private experiences, probably due to the fact that same-sex parenthood is still an ongoing struggle rather than a normalized experience, as Extract 9 shows:

Extract 9: La ministra aveva precisato poco tempo fa che “dire che un bambino può avere due mamme e due papà non è la verità”, negando così con un pugno di parole l'esistenza e la legittimità di migliaia di **famiglie arcobaleno** i cui figli non sono certo meno amati - o meno validi - a causa del genere dei genitori, sottolineano.

(ANSA, December 22, 2022)

Extract 9 provides an example of how rainbow families in Italy are still invisible to the Italian legislation and to Italian political institutions, as the words of Eugenia Roccella, Minister of the Family, Natality and Equal Opportunities ministry, exemplify. While directly quoting from the Minister's statements, ANSA also gives voice to the Circolo di cultura omosessuale “Mario Mieli”, a cultural group who publicly responded to Roccella's words. Here a discourse of love and kinship intertwining with that of legitimacy is included in reference to the relationship between same-sex parents and rainbow children, who, as said by the Circolo's spokesperson, are not less loved, or less legitimate, than any other children, and therefore should not be discriminated against on the basis of their parents' gender identity.

7. Concluding remarks

The present study offered an analysis of how parenthood from surrogacy has entered news discourse, comparatively, in Canada and Italy, in the years 2016-2023. Canada and Italy are two different geopolitical arenas when it comes to reproduction rights, surrogacy and alternative forms of parenthood. While in Canada altruistic surrogacy is allowed, Italian laws around the use of assisted conception and surrogacy are some of the most restrictive in Europe. The analysis conducted on the Can_SUR corpus and the Ita_SUR corpus was quantitative and qualitative. News coverage of surrogacy and parenthood was analyzed in the Canadian and the Italian press. Recurrent

themes were identified in each corpus, with significant differences between the Canadian and Italian news discourse.

In response to research questions 1 (how are parental experiences and/or parenthood from surrogacy represented in news discourse in Canada and Italy?) and 2 (what are the mainstream/alternative narratives circulating through Canadian and Italian news outlets?), the analysis showed that the Can_SUR corpus is dominated by the theme of medical information and personal accounts of surrogacy. Not much space is devoted to the narrative of intended parenthood. However, when same-sex family stories enter the news, same-sex couples and their babies are usually represented as legitimate, in an oppositional framework that marks the difference between the Canadian law and that of more restrictive countries like Italy. Overall, alternative experiences of parenthood are openly praised and a positive discourse prosody is activated by means of references to discourses of love, affection and nurturing, as well as within the framework of normality and legitimacy. Personalization is the main strategy featuring Canadian news discourse as personal experiences are told by referring to lay people's personal names and details about their intimate life as parents.

In the Ita_SUR corpus, surrogacy and alternative parenthood are represented as political struggles within the legal framework of law and legislation. The analyzed extracts suggested that surrogacy and the recognition of family rights is a political issue also debated in Italian courts, rather than a personal matter. Family roles (e.g. mother, father, parents etc.) do not feature the keyword list retrieved from the Ita_SUR corpus, however parenthood from surrogacy is still covered, although using different discursive strategies compared to the Can_SUR corpus. Parenthood enters the Italian news discourse through impersonalization, therefore as a theme rather than a personal experience that single individuals or couples undergo when choosing surrogacy. The existence of alternative forms of parenthood is still acknowledged in Italian news media discourse by means of references to rainbow families presented as a network or an association within a legal and political framework, therefore as political actors rather than as lay individuals. Impersonalization seems to be preferred to more personalized renditions of surrogacy and parenthood. This may come as an effect of the coverage of surrogacy and alternative parenthood as a political struggle which is still far from being a normalized experience. It could also be hypothesized that, in so doing, the Italian coverage grants rainbow families authority or power, although, as the analysis showed, non-heteronormative families are not represented as active participants in their own struggles.

Overall, in both corpora, alternative forms of parenthood tend to be associated mainly with gay couples experiencing parenthood from surrogacy. Consequently, less space is devoted to lesbian couples, trans couples or other forms of alternative parenthood, and both mainly rely on frameworks of legitimation and opposition. In the Can_SUR Corpus alternative parenthood is represented as legitimate as opposed to other countries like Italy; in the Ita_SUR Corpus, surrogacy and same-sex couples' rights are represented in opposition to discourses of biological kinship and nature. Contrasting political viewpoints emerge from both corpora. However, while Canadian reporters seem to openly align with same-sex couples and their "healthy" experiences of alternative but legitimate parenthood, Italian reporters, especially from *ANSA*, are less explicit about their ideological positioning. It could be argued that the way alternative parenthood is framed in the Can_SUR Corpus is consistent with Le Vay's study (2019) as references to legitimacy, love and care may placate social anxiety in regard to homosexuality and parenthood. As these themes lack in the Ita_SUR Corpus, media

framings of alternative parenthood in Italy still echo the heteronormative framework identified by Landau (2009).

To conclude, we are aware that the present analysis has shown only a partial understanding of how surrogacy and alternative parenthood is treated in Italian and Canadian news discourse. Given the ongoing debate over surrogacy in Italy and the struggles of LGBTQ+ associations, more critical studies addressing the role of the news media in the public perception of non-heteronormative families are necessary. For instance, additional research work is needed in order to examine how the representation of surrogacy and parenthood has changed over time, and the impact that specific discourse themes still have onto the exclusion of LGBTQ+ people from surrogacy and parenthood, in Italy and elsewhere.

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The Discursive Construction of Non-Conventional Parenthood Online: Single Mothers and Single Fathers by Choice

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In the last few decades, advancements in reproductive technologies have granted the opportunity to pursue parenthood regardless of one's relationship status, sex, gender, or sexual orientation. Nevertheless, the emergence of Single Mothers and Single Fathers by Choice (SMBC and SFBC) has sparked significant controversy, challenging the conventional concept of family, which typically includes both maternal and paternal figures. In this context, this study delves into the intricate discourse surrounding SMBC and SFBC as it manifests on social media. These platforms wield substantial influence in either perpetuating the stigmatisation or promoting acceptance of these non-traditional family structures. By conducting a qualitative and quantitative sentiment and discourse analysis of two corpora of YouTube comments on this topic, this research examines the representations associated with these family choices as disseminated through media outlets. Overall, the corpora reveal a more positive stance expressed towards SFBC, either through genuine expressions of praise or subtle forms of benevolent sexism. Conversely, comments tend to adopt a more critical tone when discussing SMBC, often portraying them as self-centered women pursuing their maternal desires potentially at the expense of denying their children a paternal presence. Despite notable disparities, both corpora express optimism regarding increased access to assisted reproductive technologies for single individuals in the future. Furthermore, they underscore the idea that children's well-being may not hinge on the presence of both a mother and a father, but rather on nurturing bonds capable of ensuring their social and psychological development.

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1. Introduction: Single Parents by Choice

In recent decades, advancements in reproductive technologies have offered individuals the opportunity to pursue parenthood irrespective of one's relationship status, sex, gender, or sexual orientation (Raja *et al.* 2022). However, this option has ignited substantial controversy in public opinion due to its departure from the heteronormative ideal of a family consisting of two parents – a maternal and paternal figure – traditionally believed to be essential for ensuring children's socio-psychological well-being (Antecol and Bedard 2007). Policies regarding assisted reproductive technologies for singles vary worldwide and often depend on the applicant's biological sex. Some countries, such as Italy, prohibit singles from accessing these services regardless of their gender (Pesce 2019), while others delegate the decision to clinicians (De Wert *et al.* 2014). Notably, single men have only recently started to be considered as candidates for surrogacy, and only in some countries such as the United States (Volgsten and Schmidt 2021). Consequently, the available body of research on individuals who choose single parenthood, often referred to as “solo parents”, “single parents by choice”, or “choice parents”, is notably skewed towards women, primarily residing in the United States and Great Britain (Layne 2015).

The socio-demographic profile of Single Mothers By Choice (SMBC) typically indicates highly educated and financially stable women in their thirties and forties (Bergnehr and Wahlström Henriksson 2020). Surrounded by a stable supportive social network, they are carriers of what Skeggs (1997) defines as “respectability”, since they are generally not associated with the stigma of typical single mothers abandoned by their partners. On the other hand, the literature generally portrays these women's decision not as a first hand choice, but rather as a “plan z” (Zadeh and Foster 2016) for the approaching of the end of their fertility window. Many of these SMBC have previously been in long-term relationships but assert that they lack the time or inclination to seek another stable partner solely for the purpose of having a child (Jadva *et al.* 2009).

Definitely fewer are the studies on Single Fathers by Choice (SFBC). Similar to SMBC, these men typically occupy stable professional and economic positions, hold a high level of education, and benefit from strong social networks (Biblarz and Stacey 2010). However, a key distinction between men and women who make this choice is that the former tend to be older, with single men typically seeking reproductive assistance in their mid to late forties (Jadva *et al.* 2009). Their decision to embark on a solo parenting journey is a carefully considered one, often discussed with family, friends, medical professionals, and fellow single fathers. Most SFBC identify as homosexual men, and are believed to be more inclined to embrace assisted reproductive technologies due to their awareness that surrogacy or adoption may be their primary avenues to parenthood (Baiocco and Laghi 2013). However, whether it is single fathers or single mothers, the data predominantly reflect a preference for surrogacy or egg/sperm donation over adoption, a preference that stems from a desire for a genetic connection with the child and to avoid the legal, economic, and socio-psychological challenges typically associated with the adoption process (Jadva *et al.* 2009).

While there is a substantial body of literature exploring various facets of single parenthood stemming from divorce, separation, and widowhood (Michelle 2006; Salter 2018; Zadeh and Foster 2016), a notable gap remains in the realm of research and literature when it comes to single parents by choice. The distinct dynamics and

motivations behind single parenthood by choice have received relatively scant attention especially in the field of linguistics (Rickwood 2021). This oversight presents a compelling avenue for future research, as it not only sheds light on the evolving nature of family structures but also provides valuable insights into the lives, decisions, support systems, and discourse of individuals who actively opt for single parenthood as a deliberate life choice. Addressing this gap is essential for a more comprehensive understanding of the diverse landscape of contemporary family structures.

As a matter of fact, from a social and discursive standpoint, it is intriguing to examine how society represents and verbally responds to alternatives to heteronormative family structures. For this reason, this study aims to explore stance (Hyland 2002) expressed towards single parents by choice. Stance, in this context, pertains to how individuals convey their attitudes toward a particular subject, encompassing their credibility, evaluation, engagement, and their connection to a topic (Hyland 2002). To achieve this, the work applies both qualitative and quantitative analysis to two sets of comments retrieved from YouTube videos discussing SMBC and SFBC. The first section will provide a concise introduction to the corpus and methodology used, with a specific focus on sentiment analysis and its prior applications in social media research. Subsequently, the second section will present the outcomes of the analysis, shedding light on the sentiments expressed and the discursive strategies used throughout the corpora. Finally, in the concluding section, the findings will be drawn together and further insights for future research will be provided.

2. Corpora

The analysis is based on comments retrieved from 20 YouTube videos, specifically the first 10 videos with the highest view counts concerning SFBC (hereinafter referred to as SFBCor) and the first 10 most watched videos on SMBC (SMBCor). These corpora were collected on August 8, 2022, with the comments spanning from 2013 to 2022 for SMBCor and from 2008 to 2022 for SFBCor. The extended time-span for SMBCor reflects the longer existence and popularity of SMBC, whereas the narrower range for SFBCor is a result of the more recent emergence of this phenomenon.

For SMBCor, queries via YouTube were performed on the keywords “solo mother”, “solo mum”/“solo mom”, “single mother by choice”, and the related acronym “SMBC”, in their singular and plural forms. SFBCor was compiled by querying the platform for the keywords “solo father”, “solo dad”, “single father by choice”, and the acronym “SFBC”. Any comments irrelevant to the topic have been excluded. Using these criteria, the final version of SMBCor results of 8426 comments (7200 types and 169265 tokens), whereas SFBCor consists of 1244 comments (2462 types and 20936 tokens)¹, as displayed in Table 1:

¹ In the field of corpus linguistics, the term “types” denotes distinct words within a corpus, while “tokens” represent the total instances of those words. To illustrate, consider a corpus comprising social media posts addressing gender issues. In this corpus, the word “feminism” might appear 50 times (50 tokens), but the count of unique words or “types” related to gender issues (e.g., feminism, patriarchy, misogyny) may be 20 (number of types). Consequently, the word “feminism” is tallied only once as a “type”, yet it registers 50 times as a “token”.

SMBCor			
Title of the video	Views	Comments	Date
Single mom by choice: an IVF journey	309.638	746	2019-02-04
Women Become Single Mothers by Choice, They Are Not Victims	83.426	2512	2017-07-29
A Single Mom by Choice? Woman Says She Manifested Being a Single Mom	56.939	334	2022-05-02
Single Mother by Choice Has a Meltdown on TikTok about Having To Raise Her Children Alone	56.734	955	2022-02-16
More women are choosing to have children on their own	52.948	1202	2022-05-06
Single Mother by Choice Official Trailer HBO Max	51.350	397	2021-10-19
Why I decided to be a 'single mother by choice' GMA Digital	47.155	1715	2019-04-25
Some Women Are Becoming 'Choice Moms'	40.537	446	2021-03-12
'First Comes Love' Documentary & Becoming a Single Mother by Choice	34.567	113	2013-10-27
Meet Liliias - A single Mum by choice IVF Testimonial Barbados Fertility Centre	28.264	6	2020-03-25
<i>Tot.</i>	<i>761.558</i>	<i>8426</i>	<i>Types 7200 Tokens 169265</i>
SFBCor			
Title of the video	Views	Comments	Date
How a single, gay man finally became a father	34.836	563	2015-03-23
Single Dad by Choice	27.516	133	2017-09-27
How A Single Father Raised 9 Kids through Surrogacy and Adoption The Oprah Winfrey Show OWN	26.769	64	2018-12-06
Daddy Baby Boom - more single men turn to surrogacy to have children	22.626	3	2008-12-23
Single Father by Choice – MGTOW	20.040	137	2017-12-21
A SINGLE MANS Journey through SURROGACY The Dad Diaries	19.696	208	2018-05-26
Indian music teacher in Dubai becomes single dad via surrogacy	18.004	32	2020-01-22
A single father through surrogacy SBS The Feed	1.951	81	2022-06-15
How much did I spend on Surrogacy?	1.329	22	2021-05-08
Single Father by Choice: Episode 1	1.101	1	2021-05-17
<i>Tot.</i>	<i>22.385</i>	<i>1244</i>	<i>Types 2462 Tokens 20936</i>

Table 1: SMBCor and SFBCor

It is important to note that these corpora exclusively consist of publicly available data, encompassing a wide range of video subgenres. This includes content created by private individuals embracing single parenthood by choice, influencer vlogs, mainstream media documentaries, and news reports. The deliberate selection of diverse content has significantly influenced the composition of the corpus. Vlogs, with their

personal and relatable content, foster a strong connection between creators and viewers, often resulting in empathetic, shared experiences, and a supportive online community. In contrast, non-vlog YouTube videos, focusing on information, entertainment, or discussion, elicit a broader array of comments, spanning agreement, disagreement, appreciation, criticism, and humour. This diversity has ensured a rich spectrum of emotions for analysis.

The corpora have been compiled by using the Facepager software (Jünger and Keyling 2019), a data-mining tool for automated data collection from social-media platforms. The corpus includes both YouTube comments and replies to comments. After collection, all hyperlinks and stopwords were removed. Additionally, non-standard spelling variations, such as “&” instead of “and”, or “ain’t” in place of “is not”, as well as misspellings like “to” instead of “too” were rectified. This step was taken to ensure the integrity of the data and prevent potential biases in the results. Regarding ethical considerations, in adherence to the guidelines outlined in the British Psychological Society’s directives for ethics in social media research (Oates *et al.* 2014), all comments were anonymised to minimise the risk of identity discovery.

It must be said that there are some limitations to the corpora. First of all, the viewers’ geographical locations are unknown, as YouTube refrains from disclosing such information for privacy considerations and users might provide inaccurate information about their location, making it virtually impossible to reliably ascertain their true origins. This limitation extends to potentially falsified information regarding political, social, and cultural views as well. Consequently, the analysis pertaining to viewers’ backgrounds – a dimension profoundly influential in shaping individual perspectives on the subject matter – has proven infeasible, and was outside the scope of the study. Moreover, even if frequencies are normalised, there is a significant disparity between the number of videos and comments in SFBCor compared to the extensive data collected for SMBCor. This discrepancy can be attributed to the novelty of men choosing single parenthood, which has attracted less popularity and attention.

3. Methodology

The study relies on a combination of sentiment and discourse analysis performed using the software tools LIWC2022 (Pennebaker *et al.* 2022) and Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff *et al.* 2014).

Sentiment Analysis, also known as “opinion mining”, is the application of natural language processing, statistical methods, and text analysis to discern the positive, negative, or neutral sentiments expressed in a text (Hamborg and Donnay 2021). It encompasses two primary methodologies: the first approach, known as the “Machine learning approach”, allows researchers to train a subset of data and subsequently apply the acquired knowledge to a larger dataset (Thelwall *et al.* 2011). A research team annotates a random sample of data drawn from the corpus with sentiment categories, which serves as training data for constructing a model using algorithms. While this approach allows for tailoring categories to specific research objectives, the accuracy of the results hinges greatly on the quality of the initial training data.

The second approach, termed the “Lexical approach”, involves using pre-annotated dictionaries to assess the emotional tone (“sentiment polarity”) of a corpus. Each word in the text is assigned a score denoting its negative, positive, or neutral sentiment intensity. This approach has obtained successful outcomes in prior studies, such as

Tumasjan *et al.*'s (2020) analysis of the psychological profiles of candidates in the 2011 German federal elections, Griffith and Pope's (2016) investigation of Twitter sentiment during the European refugee crisis, and Rasulo's (2021) exploration of reactions to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's political persona and activism as portrayed in U.S. news media.

For its reliance on experts in the quantification of emotions, this study has chosen to apply the lexicon-based sentiment approach by means of the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count 2022 software (LIWC2022), a natural language text processing tool developed by James Pennebaker (2001). This software relies on large internal dictionaries, also known as "lexicons", to capture people's social and psychological states. LIWC offers an extensive range of over 90 categories and presents four summary psychological dimensions that provide a comprehensive description of the text: Clout, Authenticity, Analytic, and Emotional Tone. For the purposes of this study, we have focused exclusively on the Emotional Tone categorisation, as it provides a precise perspective on polarised sentiment orientations. This category encompasses more than 2450 words and word stems (represented by the wildcard "*") associated with the following sentiment categories:

- Positive Emotion (Pos_emo): words such as "love", "nice", "sweet", "fantastic", "heal", "decent", "honest", "hope", their corresponding stems (e.g. "sweet*"), and emoticons associated with positive emotion such as ":)".

Subcategories:

Positive Feelings (Pos_feel): "happy", "joy", "love"

Optimism and energy (Optim): "certainty", "pride", "win"

- Negative Emotion (Neg_emo): words such as "agony", "destruct", "pain", "resent", their corresponding word stems (e.g. "pain*"), and emoticons associated with negative emotions such as ":(".

Subcategories:

Anxiety or fear (Anx): "nervous", "afraid", "tense"

Anger (Anger): "hate", "kill", "pissed"

Sadness or depression (Sad): "grief", "cry", "sad"

Nonetheless, it is essential to acknowledge that Sentiment Analysis, like other quantitative methodologies, possesses the inherent limitation of lacking context analysis—a fundamental aspect often vital in studies of this nature. For instance, an automated classification will typically struggle to discern instances of sarcasm or irony. Consider the word "nice", which is conventionally categorised within the realm of "positive emotions". In practice, however, this word can be used ironically, as exemplified by "it would be nice to see you fail". In such instances, "nice" should rightfully be classified as conveying a negative rather than a positive emotion, but it might not be detected as such. Unfortunately, this challenge is a pervasive concern in the field of automated sentiment analysis, given the inherent complexities of human language. In light of this constraint, this research will adopt a dual approach, combining quantitative findings with a qualitatively-informed, corpus-driven analysis (Baker *et al.* 2013). This integration aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the subject under investigation, and try to avoid miscategorisations.

Drawing upon Critical Discourse Studies (KhosraviNik and Esposito 2018), which scrutinise the dialectical interplay between discourse, ideology, and power (Van Dijk 2001), the inclusion of qualitative analysis enhances the ability to discern potential gender-related disparities within the two corpora. It allows for a deeper exploration of the nuances of language use, revealing underlying biases, stereotypes, and power dynamics that may not be immediately apparent through quantitative methods alone.

More specifically, discourse analysis permits the examination of evaluative attributes used in reference to SFBC and SMBC. It can uncover whether there are differential judgments or stereotypes applied to individuals based on their gender when making this life choice. It also facilitates a deeper understanding of the arguments both supporting and opposing the decisions of men and women who opt for single parenthood. This exploration can reveal whether gender-related biases play a role in shaping public opinion or discourse around this topic. Finally, discourse analysis enables the identification of any overt or covert toxic stereotypes that may be embedded within the discussion threads. This entails looking for language or framing that perpetuates harmful stereotypes about the phenomenon, potentially reinforcing existing gender biases. Therefore, the integration of qualitative analysis techniques allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how gender-related issues are constructed and negotiated within the discourse surrounding single parenthood. This approach not only identifies potential disparities but also sheds light on the ways in which societal norms, power structures, and ideologies are reflected and perpetuated through language and discourse. Ultimately, it contributes to a more nuanced and critical examination of the topic, offering insights that extend beyond mere statistical data.

4. Results

4.1 Emotional Tone

As explained by Pennebaker *et al.* (2022), the scores presented within the psychological dimension of Emotional Tone serve as indicators of the overall evaluation of the corpora in terms of positive or negative sentiment polarisation, since they calculate the ratio of positive or negative emotion words compared with the total word count of the corpora. Table 2 displays the results retrieved through LIWC2022 as follows: the names of the corpora (column 1), total word count (column 2), Emotional Tone score (column 3), and the scores of positive (column 4) and negative words used in the corpora (column 5):

1	2	3	4	5
Corpus	Word Count	Tone	Pos_tone	Neg_tone
SMBCor	164204	37,46	4,47	3,96
SFBCor	20870	66,59	7,83	2,80

Table 2: LIWC2022 scores for SMBCor and SFBCor

The LIWC algorithm is built so that the higher the number, the more positive the emotional tone. A higher score signifies a prevalence of positive sentiment in the comments. Generally speaking, numbers below 50 suggest a particularly negative

emotional tone. Therefore, an initial observation of the data reveals that SFBCor boasts a substantially higher Emotional Tone score than SMBCor (66.59 vs. 37.46-normalised frequency). This signifies that the corpus featuring SFBC content places greater emphasis on emotional aspects related to single parenting by choice rather than on other aspects when compared to SMBC.

Upon examination of negative and positive emotional scores, it becomes evident that SFBCor exhibits a slightly higher score of positive reactions (7.83) than SMBCor (4.47). Additionally, SFBCor demonstrates a clear predominance of positive sentiment (7.83) over negative sentiment (2.80), while SMBCor presents a more balanced distribution between positive (4.47) and negative (3.96) comments. While these results might be influenced by the numerical disparity between the two corpora, the quantitative analysis suggests a more favourable stance towards men who choose the path of single parenthood than towards women. Of course, it is impossible to ascertain the gender of individual respondents, which could potentially influence their stance on this phenomenon; however, the quantitative data aligns with the author's observations made during a pre-reading of the corpora. Specifically, it appeared that comments generally tended to express greater admiration for men who made this type of decision than for women. Such reactions may also stem from the novelty of men having the opportunity of single parenthood or perhaps from a form of "patronizing" (or actually "matronising") attitude toward them, which could be a conscious or unconscious manifestation of "benevolent sexism" (Fiske and Glick 2001; Mills 2008; Scotto di Carlo 2021) rooted in beliefs surrounding gender roles and differentiation. Given that men are not typically associated with child-rearing in stereotypical gender norms, these comments might be "cherishing" men for their voluntary choice. Nevertheless, it remains challenging to conclusively infer the genuine intentions of viewers solely from YouTube comments.

Conversely, lower emotional reactions towards women might be due to the fact that they are more prototypically linked to the child-rearing role, and thus they might be seen more as "the norm". Nevertheless, the notably lower emotional tone found in SMBCor has raised the question of what topics are predominantly discussed in the comment sections of YouTube videos related to SMBC. Consequently, a subsequent inquiry expanded the scope of analysis to encompass some of the main additional classifiers provided by LIWC2022, including drives, cognition, affect, social elements, culture, lifestyle, and perception, as displayed in Table 3:

Filename	Word count	Tone	Drives	Cognition	Affect	Social	Culture	Lifestyle	Physical	Perception
SMBCor	164204	37,46	6,32	16,06	5,81	20,16	0,51	2,19	1,63	6,85
SFBCor	20870	66,59	5,4	14,01	6,28	17,87	0,34	2,46	1,4	7

Table 3: Comparison between Tone and Additional LIWC2022 scores

From a quantitative perspective, the comparison between SMBCor and SFBCor has highlighted that the former exhibits higher scores in the Social Behaviours category (20.16) than SFBCor (17.87). Given that this category represents the highest-scoring aspect within SFBCor, it was decided to delve deeper into it through qualitative examination.

4.2 SMBCor

As outlined by Pennebaker *et al.* (2022), the LIWC2022 Social Behaviours category encompasses words typically associated with pro-social behaviours, politeness markers indicating adherence to social norms and manners (e.g. “please” and “thank you”), and moralisation/judgmental vocabulary (e.g. “generous”, “good”, and “bad”). By cross-referencing data obtained through Sketch Engine’s KWIC function with the LIWC2022 dictionaries, it can be noticed that the adjective “selfish”, which is part of the LIWC2022 “social behaviour” category, emerges as the predominant descriptor used in reference to women, with 231 occurrences. Impressively, there are only 35 instances of this word in SFBCor, while it claims the position of the third most frequently used keyword within SMBCor, following only the stopword “SMBC” and the phrase “two-parent household”. Some examples of the adjective used in context are provided and discussed below:²

1. These single moms are selfish AF. they don’t even think about the child it’s all about her her her babies are like fashion accessories nowadays.
2. Those who want to be single mothers by choice are nothing but selfish. Think about your children and not yourself. You know how much it hurts to want to get to know your father so badly but you can’t? Why would someone be so selfish.
3. It’s innate narcissism. It’s raw female nature. They all revert to it when they ‘feel’ their needs aren’t being met. [...] To be female is to be a narcissist. It’s always either one or the other “My needs first”, or “My needs only”. Children are just an extension of those needs. I’ve witnessed the most ‘wonderful’ of women, turn. It’s always the same. Even their need to procreate, is selfishly narcissistic.

SMBC are discursively represented as “selfish” women eager to satisfy their personal desire of motherhood only to reach a biological milestone, seemingly without genuine concern for the future well-being of their children. SMBC are said to view children like “fashion accessories” (Ex. 1) used to fulfill a whim before they reach their biological fertility limits. Taking this representation to an extreme, as illustrated in Example 3, SMBC is depicted as a result of women’s “innate narcissism”, a “part of raw female nature”, which urges women to “put their needs first”.

This “maternal egoism” (Michelle 2006: 112) is further supported by concerns about children’s lack of a paternal figure (“You know how much it hurts to want to get to know your father so badly but you can’t.”- Ex. 2). Some posts, such as Example 4, claim that this absence deprives them of the opportunity to forge the “special father/child bond”, a relationship that social media emphasise as crucial for a child’s healthy socio-psychological development (Azzimonti and Fernandes 2022):

4. I kind of feel sorry for the baby because they will never have that special father/child bond. Selfish.

² Disclaimer: The data analysis sections of this work quote offensive language. Owing to the topic studied in this article, quoting offensive language is academically justified, but neither the author nor the Journal in any way endorse the use of these words or the content of the quotes. Likewise, the quotes do not represent the author’s opinions or the opinions of the Journal, which condemn all forms of offensive language. Original spelling has been retained.

Single women who choose to mother alone are depicted as pathological examples of nature going “too far” (Zadeh and Foster 2016). More specifically, within SMBCor, the absence of a paternal figure is consistently portrayed as having a statistically “extremely detrimental” impact on these children (Ex. 5). This assertion is often bolstered by vague references to “studies” (Ex.6) purportedly suggesting a negative correlation between the absence of a paternal figure, mental health issues, and criminal behaviour (“Children without fathers do worse in every measurable metric”- Ex. 7). However, no references to official sources are provided to substantiate these claims:

5. Selfish is the best word because she’s doing it for her. Studies show that it is extremely detrimental.
6. The studies are out there for decades about how raising children in a single parent home harms them. This is selfish and arrogant as all get out!
7. Disgustingly selfish. Children without fathers do worse in every measurable metric. More likely to be depressed and commit suicide. Do worse in school, more likely to commit crime, go to prison, have behavioural disorders, lower IQ. Putting yourself before a potential child is awful!
8. Single-parent home lead typically to a 17 percent increase in juvenile crime. [...] But hey, let’s advertise a person’s decision to deliberately become a single mother.

It is important to note that these assertions receive criticism from supporters of SMBC, who contend that children raised without a paternal figure do not inherently lack the love and support essential for their well-being. These arguments are exemplified by reference to lesbian households (“I’ve met people who were raised in lesbian households who are much more well-adjusted than people in the traditional mom and dad household”- Ex. 9) and heterosexual families in which men work long shifts while women assume child-rearing responsibilities (“Up until the 80s, men worked long hours and barely even saw their kids”- Ex. 10). These examples aim to illustrate the perspective that, beyond the presence of a paternal figure, what children truly require for positive development is attention, love, and support within their environment:

9. I don’t think every child needs a father I think children need love and support and to be cared for. I’ve met people who were raised in lesbian households who are much more well-adjusted and well raised than people in the traditional mom and dad household. Same with people raised by a single dad or single mom. Also there are ways to find male role models if that’s something that’s needed. But it doesn’t make or break a family structure and insinuating that is super harmful in my opinion.
10. I’ve never understood where the idea of children needing a father comes from. Up until the 80s, men worked long hours and barely even saw their kids. The only thing they contributed to the household was money. The mother was the one who raised her children alone. That’s how things have been for most of American history.

Additional support for SMBC emerges from instances where women opt to remain in “toxic marriages” (Ex. 11) composed of “abusive 2 parent homes” (Ex. 12) solely for the sake of their children and due to socioeconomic constraints:

11. So many women stay in toxic marriages and relationships just so their child can have a father, when in reality, that child would be happier and healthier if their mother was single. People need to spend less time worrying about kids having fathers, and more time making sure that the environment they are bringing their child into is a healthy and positive one. If a single mom can provide that, her kids are going to be perfectly happy.
12. And how many children do well in physically and emotionally abusive 2 parent homes?

These examples underscore the paramount importance of prioritising the creation of a safe environment for children rather than fixating on ensuring the presence of a paternal figure. As expressed in Example 11, it is crucial to redirect focus away from concerns about children having fathers, and channel their efforts towards ensuring that the environment they provide for their child is both nurturing and positive. (“People need to spend less time worrying about kids having fathers, and more time making sure that the environment they are bringing their child into is a healthy and positive one”- Ex. 11).

One comment offers valuable insight and a potential rationale for the prevalence of descriptors emphasising the “selfishness” of SMBC. Example 13 invokes the maternal archetype of a “self-less” “angel of hearth and home” expected to set aside her own life to dedicate it solely to her children and husband, because, after all, “being selfless is a huge part of being a good mother” (Ex. 13):

13. I agree with [nickname omitted], for some women it is a selfish ,mother instinct, self fulfillment to have children, not realizing that being selfless is a huge part of being a good mother, and help, a village, that part.

The comment also touches upon another recurring theme in videos concerning SMBC, namely, the significance of having a robust support system consisting of family, friends, and professional networks (help, a village - Ex. 13). This support network aids SMBC in navigating the various intricate stages of motherhood, echoing the sentiment encapsulated in the adage “it takes a village to raise a child”. Nevertheless, negative comments such as Example 13 emphasise that “selflessness” – and not the concept of “the village” – should be the primary characteristic of ideal motherhood.

While Examples 1-13 do not provide clear indications that would definitively attribute them to either a male or female author, Example 14 appears highly likely to have been posted by a man. Consequently, it offers an opportunity to examine at least one instance of a negative comment purportedly authored by a man. This comment conveys a palpable sense of anger and frustration, describing the feeling of being reduced to “a disposable sperm donor” within a “gynocentric society” populated by “selfish” and “privileged” women:

14. Damn fucking straight they do it by choice. They’re so selfish and privileged, they don’t even need your money. They don’t need you for anything. You’re just a disposable sperm donor, but what can you do in a gynocentric society.

Overall, comments within SMBCor appear to place greater emphasis on social and moral considerations associated with this form of motherhood rather than expressing genuine emotional reactions. This might include discussions about the impact of single

motherhood on society, moral judgments about it, or ethical considerations surrounding this choice, and it could be due to various reasons, such as the perceived need to conform to societal expectations, maintain a certain level of objectivity in the discussion, or even fear of judgment. This could mean that discussions around single motherhood in the context of SMBCor tend to be more analytical or focused on the broader implications for society and ethics, and it might also suggest that people participating in these discussions may not feel comfortable sharing their personal emotions or experiences openly, possibly due to social stigmas or taboos still associated with single motherhood.

4.3 *SFBCor*

As previously mentioned, SFBCor is characterised by a higher positive emotional score than SMBCor, and it is precisely within this category that SFBCor attains the highest score among all the LIWC2022 categories. Consequently, this aspect has been selected for further qualitative examination.

Cross-referencing data retrieved via Sketch Engine's KWIC function and the LIWC2022 dictionaries, it becomes evident that the predicates "great" and "beautiful" rank as the top two most frequently used qualitative adjectives within SFBC. Additionally, the lemma "love", used both as a noun and a verb, is notably prevalent. The noun "love" is employed to convey that SFBC individuals are believed to possess an abundant reserve of love to offer to children while receiving love in return ("He has so much love to give"- Ex. 15). Meanwhile, the verb "love" is used by viewers to express their positive sentiments, often indicating their enjoyment of the video stories ("I love this"- Ex. 16 and 17):

15. He has so much love to give and it's adorable. Blessings to him and his beautiful family.
16. This is amazing to see! As a single mom by choice ttc my first child (hoping & praying for my set of boy/girl fraternal twins) I love this!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
17. hi sweetheart I am really proud of you. you are a top guy ever doin g this I really love this I am 38 years' old and I am bisexual to God bless you [...] keep your top hard work up

These comments, as well as those praising these men for being "great", "amazing", "awesome" (Ex. 18-20), and "beautiful" (Ex. 21-23) might be genuine expressions of praise or subtle forms of conscious or unconscious benevolent sexism linked to the unexpectedness of seeing men deciding to have children on their own ("I'm proud of you"- Ex. 18). Even if this latter claim is difficult (if not impossible) to prove conclusively, given that we cannot ascertain the true stance and intention of the respondents, these comments undeniably commend these men as role models to be proud of (Ex. 18-22) while also emphasising the novelty of such a choice ("I had no idea"- Ex. 23):

18. What an amazing and awesome man!!! This is so awesome!!! THIS is a great dad Super human Role model dad, proud of you

19. Great man. He looks so tired and drained, but he's organized as heck. It's hard for me to even take care of myself and to organize my own stuff, and to even do well in school. I can't imagine 9 kids :0
20. I have so much respect for you brother!! It's so cool to hear your story of surrogacy! It's refreshing to hear that there are fathers like you in the world! That's great.
21. This is so beautiful. Where can you get the full thing? Very good man This man is clearly a good example of a great father and stand-up guy.
22. Beautiful! And I know he'll be a great dad. Hopefully I can do this one day.
23. What a beautiful heart First This gives me hope. I'm a 20-year-old who grow up in a single parent household. I hope to God I am given the opportunity to be a parent. Wow this interesting. I had no Idea.

Nonetheless, it is worth noting that in the case of SFBCor, the keyword list extracted via Sketch Engine prominently features the stem “surroga*”, indicating that the theme of surrogacy plays a significant role within this corpus. This prominence is likely due to the necessity of men who opt for single fatherhood, as surrogacy often plays a pivotal role in their choice. Consequently, as was done for the term “selfish” in SMBCor, it was decided to create an additional sub-corpus encompassing all comments containing instances of the stem “surroga*” to assess their specific tone scores in LIWC2022. The quantitative results of this inquiry have validated an overall positive disposition toward this choice, as evidenced in Table 4:

Filename	Tone	Affect	tone_pos	tone_neg
SURROGA* in SFBCor	69,67	5,89	4,32	1,18

Table 4: LIWC2022 emotional tone scores for “surroga*” in SFBCor

It must be said that the ethical, legal, and social dimensions of surrogacy have sparked extensive discussions and divergent viewpoints on a global scale, making it a subject of ongoing contention in both domestic and international contexts (see Markens 2007; Di Gangi and Piccinin 2023). Acknowledging this controversy is essential to provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of surrogacy issues. In SFBCor, surrogacy is debated through a spectrum of both positive and negative sentiments. Negative emotions are articulated in comments that claim that adoption should be preferred so as to not deprive other children of a maternal figure (“There are millions of kids that need adoption”- Ex. 24). Some derogatory comments even recommend that these men should get a pet instead (“Get a damn dog or something”- Ex. 25):

24. There are millions of kids that needs adoption think twice before using a surrogate
25. So, they don't have a mother, bio or surrogate? I'm confused. Why do this? Why intentionally deprive a kid of one parent? This is as bad as women who go to sperm banks to create and birth fatherless kids. On purpose. [...] That's wrong. It's all wrong. Get a damn dog or something. This world is going down the drain.

Other negative comments are spurred mainly by the high costs of surrogacy (“Vitamin M is the answer”- Ex. 26; “He had \$\$\$\$”- Ex.27), which makes it a prerogative of wealthy and famous individuals who (allegedly) do not want to engage in long-term relationships with women (e.g. Leonardo di Caprio and Cristiano Ronaldo- Ex. 28):

26. Surrogate? vitamin M (money) is the answer

27. He had\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$

28. Here’s a tale of two rich and very famous MGTOWs: There’s Leonardo di Caprio, who keeps telling the press “I’ve not found someone with whom I connected on that deep level to become my wife.” Then there’s Cristiano Ronaldo, who had a son through surrogacy, just to enjoy that daddy experience. The son gets to be about 7 years old, then the dad gets twin surrogate babies so the boy will at least have siblings. Then dad’s girlfriend says, “Instead of all these surrogate strangers, why not just have one with me and I can become officially Mom to everyone?” So he did. Question: Which of these two MGTOWs would not see it coming until it hits them square in the face?

The latter example highlights a distinct perspective held by certain YouTube viewers regarding MGTOW and homosexual singles (“Sandman” 2017). MGTOW, the acronym for “Men Going Their Own Way”, is a male-only movement emphasising personal independence, self-reliance, and autonomy, particularly in relationships. Accused of severe instances of misogyny and sexism (Lin 2017), it encompasses various beliefs, including critiques of traditional gender roles and concerns about legal and societal risks in relationships, with most discussions occurring in online communities. MGTOW encompass a wide spectrum of relationship perspectives and choices, ranging from abstaining from serious relationships with women (as suggested is the case for the two VIPs mentioned in Ex. 28) to opting for complete isolation from women and society.

Ex. 28 refers to the fact that within the MGTOW context, there is a notable focus on their motivations for pursuing surrogacy, highlighting the distinctions between their choices and those of homosexual singles. MGTOW advocates argue that the latter group does not face the same challenges associated with women and divorce (“I don’t want crazy ex-wives that wanna dupe me”- Ex. 29). Consequently, some MGTOW assert that “gays cannot speak for single men” (Ex. 29), because “homosexual singles rarely choose surrogacy as single individuals”, therefore, they do not represent those interested in undergoing this procedure (“poor gay men dont do this but single strait men do cos they want a family without crazy relationships”- Ex. 30):

29. my point us that gay men can’t speak for single men like me who are mgtow im going through this procedure cos i dont want crazy ex-wives that wanna dupe me i to child support or divorce me cos there fucking someone else or getting bored then take all my money that’s my reason and im prepared to rase my own kids without a partner for a man if he has his own kids from a previous divorce or is a widow the next wife can come along and take his kids away in court

30. if your gay its different they dont face this stigma they want kids to have a family with their partners and its very rarely a single gay man goes through surrogacy on their own unless their rich cos poor gay men dont do this but single strait men do cos they want a family without crazy relationships and to be financially independent from

women when raising their own kids so if he is gay he is not representing single straight men who want to undertake this procedure

Conversely, homosexual men emphasise that they encounter heightened legal challenges when embarking on this path, particularly due to recent changes in the laws of countries that do not acknowledge same-sex couples or the possibility for homosexual singles to have children on their own (Ex. 31-33). These laws are seen as “shameful” (Ex. 31) and “unfair” (Ex. 33):

31. Now single gay man can't do this as government banned surrogacy to singles, which is so shameful step
32. Hello there. Me too wanna hv my biological kid. I'm gay man from India. But now surrogacy rules r changed here.
33. it's so sad, that loving gay people cannot adopt easily, just cause mainstream society thinks they're unfit or whatever. hundreds of thousands of children would be happy to have a home and loving parent. It's so unfair to them, that they kind of miss out on a chance for happiness, because of legal issues.

It is essential to acknowledge that certain comments convey mixed sentiments regarding surrogacy and SMBC and SFBC as a whole. While endorsing surrogacy and single parenthood for men (“it’s so sad, that loving gay people cannot adopt easily”- Ex. 33), these comments within SFBCor also underscore the fact that women face more criticism from public opinion than men do (“I am so ANGRY [...] I'm so fucking MAD [...] there is so few comments supporting them”- Ex. 34). These comments appear to validate the previously examined data that indicate distinctions between the two corpora. Specifically, negative comments directed at SMBC often emphasise women’s perceived selfishness and the belief that children require a paternal figure (Ex. 34-36), whereas such criticism is comparatively scarce in SFBCor (“I don’t see one comment saying he needs some good pussy”- Ex. 35; “It’s crazy how all of the single mothers by choice gets a ton of hate but the single fathers by choice are praised”- Ex. 36):

34. Can I just say I am so ANGRY at these comments. I'm over joyed for this person but I'm so fucking MAD. Don't get me wrong it's amazing how supportive people are but I'm a woman, you look at the single mums by choice and there is so few comments supporting them and the ones that do are bashed and shamed for that support. “There’s something wrong with those women, they just need a good dick, the father figure?” It’s the most important thing!
35. I don't see one comment saying he needs some good pussy, or there needs to be a mother influence, or he’s a broken man for doing this. I fucking hate the world. Again so happy for you there shouldn't be laws. people should be allowed to become parents how they want to.
36. It's crazy how all of the single mothers by choice gets a ton of hate but the single fathers by choice are praised. There are many single dads out there who do a good job of raising their kids, and lots of single moms who also do a good job of raising their kids.

However, comments pertaining to surrogacy predominantly co-occur with words associated with positive emotions, including “help” and “hope”. As for the term “help”, YouTube comments see the dissemination of such information as motivational and supportive for singles who aspire to become parents irrespective of their relationship status (Ex. 37-39). The sharing of videos related to surrogacy and fertility clinics that offer this service is warmly received by viewers (“really motivational”- Ex. 37 and 38; “this is very helpful”- Ex. 39). These videos provide firsthand accounts from SFBC who elucidate the pros and cons of their journey. This is especially valued as such information is still relatively scarce and intricate, due to its social and legal ramifications:

37. Hello! Really hard time you have gone through. It is good if you have moved to surrogacy. This information will be a worth full to other couples. Hope It would be very helpful. Good you have posted such story. Really motivational.
38. Good you have posted such story. XXXXX is the best clinic ever. Really motivational. Stay blessed
39. Hello, thank you for sharing the information about the surrogacy. This is very helpful. My husband and me plan to do the same and hopefully we will find the right places. A few days ago, I sent you an email to the email address mentioned in the description of the video. Do you still monitor it? Or maybe you would not mind sharing with us here the name of your surrogacy agency and clinic in [...]. Thank you again for your help!

Last but certainly not least, it is worthwhile to examine the co-occurrence of “surroga*” with the lemma “hope”. Viewers suggest that videos of this nature instill hope in those who would like to become parents even if they are single. To elaborate, viewers express hope that more men will have the opportunity to experience fatherhood in the future, thanks to alternative reproductive technologies that can facilitate the realisation of their dreams (“it has been my dream to be a father”- Ex. 40). Others hold hope for the increased significance of fathers’ involvement in the future (“single dads spread hope that father’s involvement is very important in a child’s life”- Ex. 41), irrespective of one’s sexual orientation (Ex. 42 and 43). Some viewers hope for a higher number of women choosing to become surrogates, considering it a “gift for those who are unable to conceive or carry a baby” (Ex. 44):

40. Hello, I am pursuing traditional as a single gay guy and she is currently pregnant. The surrogate is due in May 6, 2019. I’m so excited, it has been my dream to be a father.
41. This gave me hope... single dads spread hope that father’s involvement is very important in a child’s life... I may also prefer surrogacy, because it can save my future kid and me from divorce, mental torture, cheating and many more... life would be much better! Thank you... love and strength to single dad by choice!
42. I love this!! So beautiful! It’s so silly that single men can’t adopt. The gender discrimination (both for men and women) that exists in our society is so disheartening. I’m a queer woman who is having a baby on my own. I hope things change in the future for more men to be able to do this. It shouldn’t cost a man \$150k, but it shows your commitment. What lucky kids! Makes me think about maybe volunteering to be a surrogate. I want men to experience this, too.

43. This video gives me hope, I've always wanted kids, but as 54-man women look over me (pun intended) Not to mention how untrustworthy the modern marriage and dating climate is for straight couples these days. This shows me it is possible as a single man, as my greatest fear with looking into surrogacy is the assumption of ill intent as one would find with the adoption option.
44. Surrogacy is a gift for those who cannot conceive or carry a baby! I tried surrogacy in Europe and couldn't be happy more! My agency worldcenterofbaby.com helped me become a happy mother of a son Jason! My precious baby bears. I wish everyone feel it as well

Hope is a theme that resonates across both corpora: in these instances as well, the stories shared through YouTube have paved the way to “a whole new world of dreams” (Ex. 45) and “hope” (Ex. 46) for single women who, for various reasons, aspire to create a family on their own (“Single or married, I know someday I'll get pregnant”- Ex. 48):

45. Thank you for sharing your story. [...] A whole new world of dreams has opened up to me. Seriously, thank you for sharing your journey and giving me hope that i too can achieve this dream of mine. You're a beautiful woman, with a beautiful baby girl, and also a beautiful story of hope for millions of women. Again thank you so much for sharing your story!
46. Definitely gives me hope for the future. This is what I plan to do in the next two years.
47. I'm 27 and have lupus. I have always wanted to be a mother, and with my body and its limitations now I would need to do it soon. This gave me so much hope and made me cry tears of joy. IVF is such a wonderful tool helping to make great mothers.
48. I hope to be able to do this in the future. I'm only 17 but I'm pretty sure I want to be a mom. The 'natural way' is not a choice for me, since I've never liked men. Single or married, I know someday I'll get pregnant.
49. I'm 38 childless. hope to do an IVF but I have to save up the money

Similarly, comments in SFBCor commend men for their choice, demonstrating a positive attitude toward single fathers. However, it is important to note once again that these reactions may encompass both genuine expressions of praise and subtle forms of deliberate or unconscious benevolent sexism. The main keyword of SFBCor, “surroga*”, is connoted both negatively and positively, and it highlights the disadvantages of surrogacy primarily linked to its costs and the notion that it deprives children of a maternal figure. Conversely, the advantage lies in the hope it provides to men who lack a female partner, be it due to their status as homo/heterosexual singles or MGTOW.

Conclusions

The concept of a two-parent hetero-normative family predicated solely on “biological naturalness” (Hayford and Guzzo 2015) is out of step with the diversity of family structures in today's world, which encompasses single parents, LGBTQ+ individuals parenting singly or in couples, adoption, fostering, and donor conception,

among others. Although these family forms are not new, contemporary media have cast a light on them, exerting a considerable influence in either perpetuating their stigmatisation or promoting their acceptance. The corpora analysed in this study underscore how the dissemination of YouTube narratives featuring SMBC and SFBC has opened up “a whole new world of dreams” for single individuals who, for various reasons, aspire to establish families on their own. The quantitative and qualitative analyses have unveiled significant gender-related disparities between the two corpora, with SFBC eliciting a higher emotional tone rate than SMBC, and most notably, a more favourable disposition expressed towards SFBC than SMBC.

The varying responses observed between the two corpora could be attributed to a mixture of authentic commendation directed at men who make this unconventional choice and a manifestation of deliberate or unconscious “benevolent sexism”, wherein men are celebrated for embracing a role prototypically associated with women. Conversely, comments on women appear to place greater emphasis on discussions concerning the impact of single motherhood on society, moral judgments about it, or ethical considerations surrounding this choice. SMBC are accused of selfishness for pursuing their maternal desires, seemingly at the cost of denying their children a paternal figure, and probably censured for diverging from the conventional image of “ideal” women. The results might also suggest that people participating in these discussions may not feel comfortable sharing their personal emotions, possibly due to social stigma still associated with single motherhood.

However, the two corpora do exhibit some similarities. Both express the hope that, one day, singles can choose to have children on their own in an easier way, since a hetero-normative, two-parent family is not the only option available. While the study does not aim to present statistical evidence regarding whether children require both a mother and a father, it underscores the importance of nurturing emotional bonds that can ensure a child’s overall social and psychological well-being, regardless of the number of individuals who form their family.

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Single-Parent Families in Canada: A Positive Discourse Analysis of Non-Profit Organizations' Websites*

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Family patterns have diversified considerably in the last sixty years going beyond the married nuclear family (a married couple with children) and single-parent families are a now widely recognised phenomenon and family assemblage (UN 2017). Yet, single parents face not only several financial and practical challenges, but also social stigma and stereotyping (Sussman and Hanson 1995; Zartler 2014). In the context of Canada, despite the fact that the proportion of families with children has remained rather stable over the decades, the types of families with children have changed consistently, and over one-fifth of Canadian children are being raised by a lone parent. Against this backdrop, charities and associations are supporting single parents through a series of actions to reduce social stigma and make services more accessible to them. This study specifically aims to investigate how new concepts of family are discursively construed and conveyed, to frame single-motherhood from a different and more positive perspective. Following the tradition of Social Semiotics (Kress and van Leeuwen 2021) and research on Positive Discourse Analysis (Martin 2004; Bartlett 2012), this work analyses a range of multimodal resources available on the websites of three Canadian non-profit organizations. In particular, it focuses on how single-parent families are represented assuming that the resulting discursive construal can work to eradicate persistent cultural and social stereotypes.

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1. Single-parent families in Canada: An Introduction

In the last few decades, family lifestyles have considerably diversified in most Western societies, although with different degrees and at different speeds (UN 2017). Canadian families, in particular, have seen rapid change, with a trend towards increasing diversity of family structures, so that the traditional family consisting of a (working) father and a (full-time caregiving) mother is only one of a wide range of family types. With the increasing diversity of Canada's population, a variety of descriptions of family types (beyond the nuclear family) has emerged. Among the main trends in family structures, as identified by the Ontario Human Rights Commission, are the following:

- Common-law unions, which have dramatically increased over the last decades, becoming a significant feature of conjugal relationships, often including children born in the union or in a previous relationship;
- Divorced families, which result in higher rates of re-marriage and the creation of blended families;
- Single-parent families (mostly female-headed), which generally tend to face greater disadvantage in accessing housing, employment, and services;
- Same-sex couples, which were included in the 2001 census for the first time.¹

Single-parent families, in particular, are one of the fastest-growing demographics in Canada,² and statistics show that the percentage is currently at its highest point in Canada's 150-year history.³ In fact, over one-fifth of Canadian children are being raised by a single parent and, according to statistics, 1.83 million single-parent families were living in Canada in 2021 (compared to 1.56 million in 2010, and 1.47 million in 2006).⁴

Since the terminology concerning single parenthood is complex and has changed over time, for the sake of clarity, the term "single parent/mother", "single-parent/mother family", or "single-parent household" will be hereafter used to refer to persons who never married, are separated, divorced, are not currently living with a legal or common-law spouse, or are widowed with children. As is clear, there is a variety of pathways into single parenthood: divorce is a frequent cause, together with the partner's death and unplanned pregnancy (especially at a young age), but it is worth noting that single parenthood is increasingly becoming a conscious decision (Sussman and Hanson 1995; Jones 2008; Popper 2012). Single motherhood, in particular, is on the rise, with concepts such as agency, autonomy, pride, and self-reliance appearing as crucial components involved in the decision-making process of having a child (Jones 2008; Popper 2012). Such factors make the category of "single parents" a heterogeneous one.

Among the numerous aspects that are often associated with single-parent families and contribute to defining them, social, economic/financial, health factors are usually seen as constituting the main challenges (Pierce, Sarason and Sarason 1996;

¹ <https://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/human-rights-and-family-ontario/changing-face-canadian-families> .

Unless otherwise specified, all websites were last accessed in June 2023.

² <https://www.timminstoday.com/spotlight/benefits-and-grants-available-for-single-parents-in-canada-4462006> .

³ <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/170802/dq170802a-eng.htm> .

⁴ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/443342/single-parent-families-in-canada/> .

Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado 2018). Indeed, the absence of a partner usually leaves such families more vulnerable to a number of disadvantages if compared to two-parent families, with a large and growing proportion of single-parent families headed by women. Single mothers, more often than many other families, have to negotiate the complexities of a triple bind, involving the interplay between inadequate resources, inadequate employment and inadequate policies and services, which jointly heavily affect their mental and physical health (Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado 2018, 7).

Inadequate resources are a pivotal factor: poverty rates for single-mother families appear generally higher than for single fathers and couples with children. Since they lack additional economic resources, they struggle to have adequate earnings. They are more likely to depend on welfare and to live in poverty for extended periods of time than two-parent families: in fact, the lack of a potential second earner makes it more difficult for single-parent households to have sufficient income, thus making them more vulnerable (Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado 2018).

As for the second factor, inadequate employment, although employment rates for single mothers have increased, the children's age remains a critical factor in determining whether or not single mothers can seek a job. In fact, generally speaking, day-care facilities are central to a mother's ability to accept paid employment, and even when they do access the labour market, their employment is often characterized by wage inequality and precariousness (Kramer et al. 2016; Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado 2018). Therefore, the lack of a national commitment to affordable, quality childcare can be the greatest challenge to employment for single mothers, who appear more likely to choose jobs close to home or their children's school, part-time jobs with work hours that match children's school hours, or jobs where they can easily exit or enter following their children's needs (Gucciardi, Celasun and Stewart 2004).

This is directly linked to the third factor involved in the triple bind, that is inadequate policies and services, which heavily impacts on single-parent households.⁵ The available scientific literature claims that single mothers do not have substantively different problems from those of other families: they are simply exposed to greater levels of constantly evolving challenges (McLanahan and Booth 1989; Mc Bride Murry et al. 2001; Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado 2018, 1). In this respect, policies, services and programs become central to face such issues, addressing and improving the social and economic conditions single-mother families experience. Unfortunately, in ongoing debates on high and rising inequality (Jackson et al. 2000; Mc Bride Murry et al 2001; Caragata and Cumming 2011; Lu et al. 2020), there seems to be reason for concern as to whether policies are able to keep up with the changing dynamics of families. There seems to be scarce emphasis on the wellbeing of single mothers and their children, which broadly includes their emotional and cognitive wellbeing, work-family balance, economic wellbeing and employment opportunities, health, and so forth (Jackson et al. 2000; Mc Bride Murry et al. 2001; Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado 2018, 1).

Health is another issue. Single mothers generally report worse self-perceived health than married mothers: this is mainly due to the fact that fulfilling multiple roles (which derives from the fact that single mothers try to cover two roles, that of the nurturer and that of the provider) may lead to increased stress, role overload, and a variety of mental

⁵ It is worth noting, however, that a series of tax incentives, federal government benefits, provincial government benefits and various additional programs are in place in Canada to help single parents (see <https://icash.ca/learn/single-parent-benefits/canada>).

health problems (particularly frequent among poorer single mothers) (Gucciardi, Celasun and Stewart 2004). They tend to have higher levels of caregiving strain and problems associated with work-home conflict – the latter has proved to be a significant predictor of depression among single mothers. Indeed, they show consistently higher rates of depression than married mothers, and they are more likely than other women to report stress and anxiety, despite the fact that participation in the workforce may enhance their feelings of self-worth, competence and financial independence (Gucciardi, Celasun and Stewart 2004).

In this context, a series of educational disparities can also be detected in most of single-parent households headed by women; according to some scientific literature, single mothers have, on average, lower levels of education, which often leads to high poverty risks (Härkönen 2017). Indeed, back in the 2000s, educational differences in family structure received more attention with McLanahan's (2004) research on trends in single motherhood (contrasting the contexts of the US, Canada and Europe): she coined the term “diverging destinies” to describe educationally uneven trends in family formation and specifically found that education has a huge impact on single motherhood. Her study showed that from 1960 to 2000, the prevalence of single motherhood remained relatively stable among highly educated women (below 10%), but generally increased among both the medium educated (from below 10% to close to 30%) and especially the lower educated (from around 15% to above 40%) (see also Härkönen 2018, 32). However, broadening the scope outside the US, Canada and Europe, it is also worth noting that the trends in many Latin American countries are dissimilar: highly educated mothers appear more likely to be single and raise their families alone (Boertien 2015), which marks great diversity even within single-mother families.

When the above-mentioned factors add up, single mothers' agency appears extremely compromised and the challenges they face seem hugely complex (Hobson 2011; Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado 2018). This is probably the reason why, overall, most of social science research on single motherhood has concentrated on income poverty, forms of material deprivation deriving from inadequate resources, and the disadvantages commonly experienced in everyday life. However, apart from material difficulties and challenges, single mothers often suffer forms of social stigma, which makes them feel isolated, stigmatized and frustrated with negative stereotypes (Sussman and Hanson 1995; Zartler 2014).⁶ Stereotyping is certainly the most common symptom of stigma, where labelling and dominant cultural values cause “us and them” distinctions, which then lead to status loss and discrimination (Link and Phelan 2001). In this view, wider economic, social and political power structures are to be regarded as essential to the reproduction of stigma. It is against the backdrop of traditional definitions of (nuclear) family that resources are distributed (in terms of financial support, fringe benefits, tax breaks, housing) and roles are recognized (in terms of who is entitled to create families, thus taking part in the delicate process pertaining to the socialization of citizens). It follows that, in order to elevate the status of the nuclear family, other family structures need to be devaluated and stigmatized (Dowd 1995).

⁶ Scientific literature shows that being a single parent, especially a single mother, is one of the most stigmatized positions in the British society (Treanor 2018): in fact, according to some views, they are seen as a political and social problem and as deficient parents (Dermott and Pomati 2016). Single mothers feel judged and labelled, they are often criticised by relatives, acquaintances and/or colleagues, and usually feel “dropped” from their social circle or are not invited when couple families get together for meals and outings. See <https://www.hud.ac.uk/news/2019/december/single-parent-sigma/>.

Research has shown that single-parent families are construed predominantly in terms of deficits and disadvantages, with the nuclear family serving as an ideological code (Zartler 2014). Further on this point, single mothers often appear (socially and legally) stigmatized as bad parents who have broken, incomplete, and dysfunctional families (which usually results in bad consequences for their children) (Dowd 1995). The very idea of being a single mother is often perceived in terms of feelings of dissatisfaction and unhappiness from society's point of view; as Brookhart states:

[s]ingle parents, regardless of choice, are faced with society's social norms, resulting in social disapproval and rejection [...]. They are perceived as having something wrong with them and living a life that does not coincide with a traditional family, when in reality, they can be a happy and thriving nontraditional family. (Brookhart 2019, 11)

While single parenthood is often construed as a unidimensional, homogeneous category – thus omitting the great diversity existing within the group itself, which makes the concept of single-parent families contextual – non-traditional family forms seem worth exploring. This investigation seeks to investigate the discursive construal of single parenthood proposed by some Canadian non-profit organizations supporting single mothers, in the attempt to view them from a more positive lens which “normalizes” non-traditional forms of family.

2. Single-mother families non-profit organizations in Canada: data and aims of the research

Canada boasts a (relatively-high) number of non-profit organizations, charities and foundations supporting single-mother families. They all have in common the aim of offering single parents, and single mothers in particular, a series of programs and activities to help them regain control over their lives. These organizations are usually founded by a team of passionate people and/or professionals who experienced the challenges of single parenthood themselves, and then recognized that there were several gaps in the services available and little awareness of the issues facing single-parent families. Such organizations offer programs that promote the emotional, physical, intellectual and social wellbeing of children and their families. Programs may include: parent education and support groups, parent resources, prenatal nutrition programs, drop-in play, toy-lending libraries and so forth. Above all, they aim at creating a support network to find ways to minimize the isolation of parenting through activities and information sharing. They work to provide mothers with the tools they need to handle their child/children, building positive relationships with them, while tackling the challenges of parenting solo. Most of all, they claim to be realistic about the challenges single mothers face, and they also advocate for the fact that with the right resources single mothers can move from feeling overwhelmed to feeling empowered, which would give their families a chance to thrive.

By exploring the websites of a number of Canadian non-profit organizations (that will be shortly detailed) supporting single-parent families, this paper tries to disentangle the association between single parenthood and negative (societal) portrayals. While the lack of visibility of various ways of being a family remains a highly problematic domain both from a social and a discursive perspective (Brookhart 2019), this study investigates

how these non-profit organizations discursively construe single-motherhood through the following research questions:

- How are single-mother families textually and visually represented?
- What are the multimodal discursive strategies used to promote diversified voices?

To answer these research questions, a dataset of verbal and multimodal texts was collected from the web. Among the many charities and organizations based in Canada, three were specifically selected for this case-study: *Moms Canada*,⁷ *Toronto Single Moms*,⁸ *Single Mothers by Choice*.⁹

Moms Canada claims to be the place where single mothers find hope; their mission is to encourage and equip single mothers in a supportive and compassionate community. In order to do this, they offer a free emotional support group program and qualified mentors for friendship and guidance, while also providing mothers with a series of organizations that can give them food, medical assistance and a variety of support services.

Toronto Single Moms is the leading Ontario non-profit organization that was created to help single mothers find resources and support. It states that it has long been at the forefront of shaping policy and services to improve the lives of single parents and especially mothers, advocating for and valuing the diversity of family life.

Single Mothers by Choice provides a welcoming community for guidance and support to women who have decided to become single mothers, offering assistance from the decision-making process, through the attempts of conceiving and pregnancy, to the very act of parenting. Its founder has pushed the idea according to which motherhood is not necessarily contingent on a romantic relationship, against the backdrop of mainstream culture which, instead, pushes women towards a soulmate as a prerequisite to starting a family.

A small textual and multimodal dataset was collected from the three websites, specifically surfing their homepages together with the “About us” section and a section that was variously named as “Blog” or “Single mums stories”, which had the common aim of allowing single mothers to share their stories. While being well-aware of the risks of working with a small dataset (above all in terms of the extent to which findings can be generalised), the authors of this article deemed it worth of scientific investigation to conduct this initial research. For the collection of texts from the last section, we decided to exclusively focus on the stories posted online in 2022.

3. Theoretical framework: Multimodal Positive Discourse Analysis

Since the present research aims at exploring how the websites under investigation textually and visually represent single-parent families in order to convey a new vision of family, a multimodal positive discourse analysis approach was considered beneficial to detect the main discursive features used to promote alternative and positive voices.

⁷ <https://momscanada.ca> .

⁸ <https://torontosinglemoms.com> .

⁹ <https://www.singlemothersbychoice.org> .

Positive Discourse Analysis (henceforth PDA), which is one of the most recent approaches of discourse analysis, favours discourses that support empowerment and social change. The term PDA was first introduced by Martin when he argued that deconstructing social processes can be helpful but not sufficient for designing better futures. By looking at the voices, feelings and narratives on the topic of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, he called for constructive ways of empowering the oppressed which can renovate discourses to design a better world.

The lack of positive discourse analysis (PDA) cripples our understanding of how change happens, for the better, across a range of sites – how feminists re-make gender relations in our world, how Indigenous people overcome their colonial heritage, how migrants renovate their new environs and so on. And this hampers design, and perhaps even discourages it since analysts would rather tell us how struggle was undone than how freedoms were won. (Martin 2004, 9)

PDA is an analytical framework that values social changes and focuses on the discourses that people like rather than the discourses they want to criticize (Macgilchrist 2007). According to Nartey and Ernanda, PDA aims to investigate inspiring texts which promote progress and resistance, although “resistance within PDA is not only viewed as a response to injustice, but also as a social action capable of instigating progressive social change” (Nartey and Ernanda 2020, 24).

Considered as an emerging strand of discourse analysis, PDA has been criticized for being a form of propaganda (Flowerdew 2008) or for limiting the analysis of texts to the textual and rhetorical level without considering the contexts in which they circulate (Bartlett 2012). This approach is rooted in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) but it goes beyond it, since rather than focusing on the language used by dominant groups to maintain their power in society in order to detect injustices and inequalities, PDA aims at noticing encouraging discourses and promoting radical alternatives. According to Bartlett, “PDA then is an attempt to enable marginalised groups to identify and solve their own problems, developing their own distinctive voices rather than relying on the advocacy of intermediaries from traditionally powerful groups” (Bartlett 2009, 6).

Many scholars (Stibbe 2007; Bartlett 2017; Hughes 2018) see PDA as a complementary approach to CDA to critically analyze discourses, aiming at progressive social change. PDA must not replace CDA but encourage to expand the focus of CDA beyond texts which are imbued with oppression and abusive power relations. While CDA uses deconstructive discursive strategies, PDA utilizes constructive techniques of analysis to “strengthen groups, build communal identities and emancipate the discourse from CDA’s ideological import” (El-Falaky 2023, 4). In this context, Hughes proposes another term, Progressive Discourse Analysis, because “we must work to amplify progressive discourses and better understand semiotic mechanisms of resistance and empowerment in order to increase their positive impact on society” (Hughes 2018, 194). This entails that such an approach centers on spaces of resistance and investigates those discourses of resistance which fight against oppressing ideologies, but according to Nartey “resistance is not only considered to be a reaction to injustice and oppression, but also as a social action that can bring about progressive change and transformation in society” (Nartey 2020, 195). While CDA focuses on the deconstruction of oppressive and discriminatory practices to unveil hegemonic discourses and their negative consequences on society, Nartey (2022) argues that a more interventionist stance is

necessary, and analysts must not only resist inequalities but also embrace an activist-scholar attitude to offer models of analysis for progressive social change.

This evolving approach has already been used in different contexts such as politics (Macgilchrist and Van Praet 2013; Su 2016; Kampf and David 2019), education (Rogers and Mosley Wetzel 2013), environment (Stibbe 2017; Caimotto 2020), among others. Nevertheless, multimodal discourses are still understudied from a PDA perspective (Guan 2022), therefore the present study seeks to make a contribution combining PDA with Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996, 2021) visual grammar. Since all modes (images, words, colour, sound, gestures, etc.) are forms of signs that transfer meaning, Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) includes other semiotic resources, besides language, into the analysis category. Given the multimodal nature of the collected data, Kress and van Leeuwen's social semiotic approach to multimodality was adopted, together with their metafunctions as an analytical lens. In fact, following Halliday's (1994) systemic functional linguistics, which considers language as a kind of social symbol, Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) expand the ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions identified by Halliday to visual images. In their view, any semiotic system can fulfil these three basic meta-functions renamed as representational, interactive and compositional. The representational metafunction deals with the representation of the world and how it is experienced by human beings. This function is visually realized by a grammar of transitivity, which comprises two major processes – narrative (participants are connected by actions and vectors) and conceptual (participants are represented as timeless essences). The interactive metafunction explores the relation between the producer and the receiver of a text. Interpersonal meanings can be realized through social distance (how close to the viewer a person is represented in an image), angle of interaction (the camera angle reproduces the features of the ways we look at and interact with people) and the gaze of represented participants, which can address viewers directly or indirectly realizing respectively a symbolic “demand” or “offer”. Modality refers to the way people communicate as to how “true” or “real” a representation should be taken. Finally, the compositional metafunction is concerned with the way the content of an image is structured. It includes information value (how elements are placed in relation to each other and to the viewer), salience (how certain elements are arranged to draw attention), and framing (how elements are represented as separate units or as related). The data sample will be analysed in the following section in accordance with the analytical structure provided by Kress and van Leeuwen's multimodal framework by discussing key concepts such as distance, gaze and salience.

4. Analysis and findings

The website *Moms Canada* tries to eradicate the traditional vision of single mothers as isolated, discouraged and stuck women through positive multimodal discursive strategies. Thanks to the verbal and visual modes interplay, the organization tries to sculpt a positive representation of single parenting and engage in solidarity formation for group empowerment. Visually, both individual photos of smiling mums and children in close shot (Figure 1) and group photos of happy and relaxed people (Figures 2 and 3) contribute to building a more positive representation of them thanks to how the images have been framed, communicating specific ideas about the represented participants and a specific attitude towards them. The two “image acts ‘offer’ and ‘demand’” (Machin

2007, 111) are both present. This has two functions: looking at the viewer suggests them entering in an imaginary relationship with the single mothers depicted, while, by looking off frame, viewers are invited into the thoughts of the mothers represented. Even if the use of a long shot for the group photo in figure 3 may evoke detachment, the fact that all the actors are looking at the viewer creating a contact with them and the angle of interaction is horizontal symbolically suggest closeness and friendliness.



Figure 1. From the website *Moms Canada*



Figures 2. and 3. From the website *Moms Canada* (<https://momscanada.ca>)

The slogan “Where single mothers find HOPE” helps build the positive message that single mothers can not only find support but also hope of living their life as a happy and successful single parent. This is visually highlighted by the use of capital letters for the noun “hope”. The above photos of happy women, which are mostly “demand images”, demonstrate that they love connecting with each other and their direct gaze is an invitation for the audience to become part of their community and engage with them.

The “about us” section of the website seems worth additional exploration. As is well known, the “about us” page is specifically designed to present the institutional profile of the company (Breeze 2013; Turnbull 2013), and it usually includes a short description of the mission of the organization: “[t]he traditional printed version of mission statements usually consists of textual information, while other semiotic modes, as for instance visuals, are almost absent” (Tenca 2018, 87). Interestingly, the “about us” section of *Moms Canada* has an unconventional format since its mission and vision are explained through a letter by the Executive Director (see example 1) by using different linguistic strategies: the use of inclusive pronouns (we, us, our); personal pronoun direct address (you); positive connotative binomials (“positive and lasting change”) and tricolons (“You are loved. You are enough. You are not alone”; “connection, support, acceptance”; “emotional, physical, and spiritual”; “safe environment, a listening ear, fellowship”); storytelling (“As a single mother myself, I know all too well the feelings of loneliness, inadequacy, and the fear of the unknown”); appeal to authority (God) and

intertextuality (“The LORD your God is with you”;...). All these discursive choices contribute not only to normalizing the condition of women as single mothers but also empowering them toward successful motherhood.

Example 1

Welcome from the Executive Director

You are loved. You are enough. You are not alone.

Here at MOMS Canada, we want you to know that hope is real. It is attainable. It is here for you.

As a single mother myself, I know all too well the feelings of loneliness, inadequacy, and the fear of the unknown. The good news is that you are not alone. There are thousands of single moms who desire connection, support, acceptance, and that is why MOMS Canada is here.

God has allowed MOMS Canada to impact the lives of many single mothers and their children. With the blessing of our amazing volunteer mentors (who dedicate their time to investing in our moms’ lives), we can help single mothers in several different ways. Encouraging the emotional, physical, and spiritual growth of single mothers; and providing a safe environment, a listening ear, fellowship with other single mothers, and referrals to community resources.

Our 12-week program, Empowered MOMS, works through topics like Emotional Health, Wellness, Financial Stability, and Parenting. Our faith-based curriculum helps to build a foundation for positive and lasting change.

Witnessing the positive changes in our moms’ lives and their children is a gift from God. They inspire me with their hope, courage, beauty, strength and who they have become. This is a blessing that all of us at MOMS Canada are thankful we can be a part of.

“The LORD your God is with you; His power gives you victory. The LORD will take delight in you, and in His love He will give you a new life. He will sing and be joyful over you.” ~ Zephaniah 3:17GNT

Blessings,

Cherise Giesbrecht

Executive Director

(<https://momscanada.ca>)

The non-standardized design of this section and its communicative choices play a key role in disclosing the organization’s alternative message, since it not only provides information about its mission, but it also projects a positive image as a supportive “humanized” institution which can encourage single mothers and make a tangible contribution to their lives. Lexical terms with positive connotation, such as “hope”, “attainable”, “support”, “acceptance”, “blessing”, “gift”, “beauty”, “courage”, and “strength”, are recurrent and feature a highly positive semantic prosody. In addition, visually, the signature at the end of the letter makes the letter appear more realistic and heart-felt.

As for the second website under scrutiny, *Toronto Single Moms*, in the section “Single mum stories”, some women narrate how they became single mothers due to abusive relationships. It contains vivid descriptions of brutal acts of violence and abuses. The detailed stories of physical and sexual violence are counterbalanced by the homepage where we find images of happy children doing some school activities such as painting or learning the alphabet and mums playing with their children (Figures 4 and 5). Since

Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 2021) refer to colour in terms of grammar and identify some regularities and communicative functions, the use of bright colours with high saturation, high differentiation, and no contextualization in figures 4 and 5 contributes to creating a fairy-tale atmosphere, which may seem even too unrealistic.



Figures 4. e 5. From the website *Toronto Single Moms* (<https://torontosinglemoms.com>)

The main verbal text of this section (example 2) underlines the importance of policies to fight against prejudices and stereotypes. Through their programs, the organization aims to offer single mothers the necessary “skills and opportunities” to get a permanent job or stable finances or more accessible services so that stigma can be reduced and people can learn to value the diversity of family life. Also, here we find several terms with a positive connotation (“treated equally and fairly”). The presence of intensifiers (adverbs of manner in this case) underlines how some policies should be implemented and the frequent use of infinitives (“to get there”, “to help”, “to equip”, “to gain”, “reduce”, “to make”) explicitly shows the organization’s willingness to act. Further on this point, the use of the personal pronoun “we” emphasises their determination to carry out concrete actions to improve single mothers’ living conditions. The interconnection between different semiotic resources from a constructive perspective may enable the community of single mothers to develop their own distinctive voices and fight against marginalisation and the internalization of the stigma label.

Example 2

We want a society in which single moms are treated equally and fairly. To get there, we provide information to help single moms support themselves and their family. We run programmes to equip single moms with the skills and opportunities to gain employment. And we campaign and influence policy to reduce stigma against single moms, and make services more accessible to all families – whatever their shape or size. (<https://torontosinglemoms.com>)

Moving to the third website under investigation, *Single Mothers by Choice*, through the section “Blog”, the organization reconstructs single mothers’ experiences so as to give them voice, agency and a positive identity. The blog contains hundreds of posts grouped in four main categories (thinking, trying, pregnant, parenting). The headline “Our members are always happy to share their experiences and wisdom with those who are on the same journey” reiterates the concept that the vision of these organizations is to build communities of serene people who are eager to share their experiences. Many of the personal stories shared on the blog convey a new image of single motherhood. For instance, in one post (see example 3 below) Roberta decides to share a letter

addressed to her daughter's new teacher where she explains she is a single mother by choice. She stresses out that no father is present in her daughter's life and specifies that "there was no divorce, separation or death". This is clearly an example of positive narrative, reinforced by the sentence "I want to assure you that J doesn't need to be corrected". The verbal description of a new family structure where children happily grow up is visually supported by the "demand image" on the top of the post which depicts Roberta's smiling daughter in a very close shot.

Example 3

A letter to J's teacher

August 5, 2022



In a few weeks, J starts "big kid school" and this is the letter I will be giving to her new teacher:

Hi Miss C — I am excited for J to be in your class this year; she's excited for school to start.

I would like to explain a little bit about our family. We are a mom-and-kid family – I am an SMC – a single mother by choice. There is no father involved in J's life, nor has there ever been; there was no divorce, separation or death. Of course, J has an extended family, a Nana and many "aunties" and "uncles" (but no father and no brothers or sisters).

J's understanding of our family structure is evolving. One of her favorite books is "The Family Book," which explains that families come in all sizes and configurations. We also read an age-appropriate story about her unconventional conception. I bring this to your attention mainly because sometimes J likes to talk to her imaginary friends, which include a sister, a brother and (occasionally) a daddy, which can be confusing for people. I want to assure you that J doesn't need to be corrected; her imaginaries are important to her. However, it is helpful for her teachers to understand when she is pretending.

Please share this letter with anyone you think it is relevant for.

Roberta

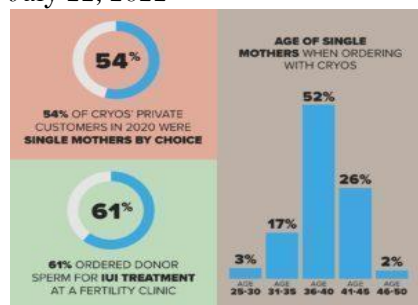
(<https://www.singlemothersbychoice.org>)

In another post (see example 4) the author provides a positive message on single motherhood since she states that nowadays more and more women are mothers by choice and there is a more open-minded attitude towards these different forms of family. In order to endorse this statement, she mentions some statistics which are also visually represented in a graph.

Example 4

Single mom by choice statistics

July 22, 2022



You may be surprised to learn just how many Single Moms by Choice are out there. When I started the process, I thought I was one of few. I had a hard time finding stories about SMCs that share their real life experiences. But as I have dived into my research and connected with many other SMCs, I've learned that it is becoming a popular path to motherhood for single woman. We are fortunate that today, a family can look different than the traditional mom, dad, and child make-up. Different family forms are emerging, and the number of single mothers by choice is increasing.

I've done some research to learn more about what is happening with Single Moms by Choice in recent years. Cryos' Sperm and Egg Bank has released these statistics of 300 of Single Moms by Choice. [...]

(<https://www.singlemothersbychoice.org>)

The narratives of these women denote inspiring discursive practices and strategies by reconstructing a different representation of single motherhood. They lay emphasis on the power of commitment to a discourse of social change and on the ways by which traditional and oppressive discourses on single motherhood can be opposed through a more positive and encouraging narration.

5. Concluding remarks

The verbal and visual texts included in the multimodal dataset under investigation portray single-mother families through a series of recurrent frames: 1) the idea of solidarity which is meant to counterbalance the isolation and discouragement commonly felt by single mothers; 2) the importance of a community of support which can create a safe environment for both mother and child; 3) the concepts of hope and resilience in the face of the challenges experienced by single mothers (their condition being quite stressful, since they can be overwhelmed by the responsibilities of juggling caring for the child/children, maintaining a job, keeping up with the bills and household chores).

Despite the fact that single-mother families deal with a series of pressures and potential problematic areas that other families may not face, and the fact that some systemic factors in society perpetuate isolation and inequalities, the key frame emerging from this case-study is positive single parenting. Relying on some external support and encouragement, single mothers can move away from the stereotypes that usually alienate single parenthood, and explore ways of coping with society, and this can help them withstand the stigma they are exposed to. In order to do so, they can strategize together and try to change the negative views about their family structures. As types of families increase, "their definitional process expands exponentially, rendering their identity highly discourse dependent" (Galvin 2006, 3). Although all families are discourse dependent to a certain extent, non-traditional families depend more on

discourse to attain their “status” of family and a recognition of authenticity (see also Brookhart 2019), because they are faced with stereotypes which challenge and undermine their identity.

The analysis of the dataset of verbal and visual texts collected from the three non-profit organizations’ websites shows that, despite the many challenges of single motherhood, the benefits and tips for a positive experience are also increasingly mentioned in the Canadian context. By doing so, these organizations seem to counterbalance some outdated narratives of despondency. In other words, no matter how difficult, the positive sides coming with single parenting are accentuated. Through a series of multimodal strategies – individual and group photos of smiling mothers as well as happy and relaxed people around them, the textual and rhetorical use of inclusive pronouns, tricolons, intertextuality, storytelling, and so forth – they foster a differing image of single motherhood, which questions the stigma and social exclusion single mothers usually face. These organizations stress the importance of kindness and compassion to oneself and one’s children, acceptance of the situation, focusing on what single mothers can do, not what they cannot. In doing so, they acknowledge differing and unique family structures, revamping the very definition of family, changing people’s perceptions and expectations, thus affecting societal views on the very characteristics of a family.

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Single-Parenting Portrayal: The Discursive Construction of Solo Moms “by Choice” in Entertainment Media.

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The cultural discourse surrounding single women raising children post-divorce or through sperm donation hastened in the latter 20th century, notably in the 1970s, paralleling societal shifts towards recognizing diverse family structures and empowering women’s reproductive autonomy. Influenced by the feminist movement, legal changes like divorce legalization, and reproductive technology advancements, society increasingly accepted non-traditional family formations. Social media became a platform for individuals to share experiences and discuss these topics. This research deals with intentional motherhood, focusing on representations of single mothers “by choice” in entertainment media, particularly examining Katherine in the British series *The Duchess*. Using qualitative data from the show’s first two episodes, a Conversation Critical Discourse Analysis framework investigates dialogue nuances regarding Katherine’s decision to have another child via sperm donation, highlighting power dynamics in discourse. The analysis reveals three significant issues: a woman’s autonomy in reproductive decisions, societal influence on unconventional choices, and gender dynamics. By integrating Conversation Analysis with Critical Discourse Analysis, this study provides insights into televisual discourse’s broader societal and power dynamics, offering a valuable tool for examining sitcom dialogue.

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1.1. Single mother “by choice” and the media portrayal

As early as the 1960s, the landscape of television reflects a commitment to showcasing the complexity and diversity of family life, contributing to a more inclusive and representative media environment (Douglas 2003). Including single moms in TV series is part of a broader trend towards acknowledging and celebrating the variety of family structures in society (Gupta and Sharma 2020; Silbergleid 2002; Rabinovitz 1989). Since then, the concept of parenthood has undergone a profound transformation, challenging traditional norms and expanding our understanding of what constitutes a family. The conventional image of the nuclear family has given way to diverse family structures, each uniquely shaped by love, commitment, and shared experiences (Bengtson 2001). At the forefront of this evolution are families embracing non-conventional parenthood, where the traditional roles of mothers and fathers are redefined, and the concept of family is broadened to include a rich tapestry of relationships (Balirano and Hughes 2023; Allen and Mendez 2018; Lehr 1999).

This change in fundamental beliefs is especially noticeable in the increasing acknowledgment and support of non-traditional forms of parenting, wherein individuals and couples embrace the journey of raising children beyond conventional norms (Beck-Gernsheim and Camiller 2002). Whether through surrogacy, adoption, same-sex partnerships, or single parenthood by choice, these families challenge societal norms, offering a fresh perspective on the various facets of non-conventional parenthood and contributing to the broader conversation about the evolving nature of family life (Mintz and Kellogg 1989), promoting inclusivity, understanding, and respect for the myriad ways in which love and commitment manifest themselves in the beautiful mosaic of non-conventional parenthood (Bianchi 2011; Amato 2010; Cherlin 2010; Beck-Gernsheim *et al.*, 2002; Mintz and Kellogg 1989).

Contemporary portrayals increasingly highlight single mothers’ resilience, strength, and diverse experiences, challenging outdated stereotypes and acknowledging the multifaceted nature of their lives. This shift is particularly evident in the emergence of the “single mother by choice” (SMC) phenomenon (Morrissette 2008; Hertz 2006), where mothers decide to have a child, distinguishing themselves from mothers who became single due to break-ups or unplanned pregnancies (Hayford and Guzzo 2015)¹.

The intentional nature of motherhood for women who identify as “choice moms” highlights a contrast with broader trends observed among unmarried mothers and nonmarital births (Holmes 2018). Research indicates that extramarital pregnancies often face socio-economic disadvantages, and the concept of the “choice mom” is considered relatively rare (Rowlingson and McKay 2005). The analyses of the National Survey of Family Growth carried out in 1988, 1995, 2002 and 2006-2010, focusing on

¹ The concept of single mothers “by choice” first emerged in 1981 when a psychotherapist Jane Mattes, herself a SMC, founded an organization to offer support and resources to women embracing single motherhood. It gained prominence in the early 2000s with Rosanna Hertz’s qualitative study of single mothers (2006) and Mikki Morrissette’s book “Choosing Single Motherhood: The Thinking Woman’s Guide” (2008) challenging traditional narratives surrounding unplanned pregnancies or post-divorce single motherhood. The visibility of solo moms “by choice” continued to rise with documentaries, movies, TV shows, and successful reality programs focusing on their experiences, and this aligns with the growing ease of becoming a SMC, facilitated by the proliferation of sperm banks and fertility clinics since the 1970s.

trends in first births to Single Mothers by Choice (SMC)², shows that there are few “single mothers by choice” and even fewer women match the age and the education profile (35 or older with at least a bachelor’s degree) often portrayed by the media and Single Mothers by Choice (SMC) support organizations (Hayford and Guzzo 2015, 72). The persistence of the SMC image could be attributed to the prevalence of SMCs in the social networks of journalists and media professionals, who, being university-educated and wishing to delay family formation, may well generalize from their own experiences. The portrayal of the SMC archetype is implicitly contrasted with other stereotypes of unmarried mothers, such as reckless teens with unplanned pregnancies and “welfare mothers” (Wall 2007; Bissell 2000). These portrayals frame childbearing as an individual decision, potentially diverting attention from social changes or economic constraints. The focus on affluent, older single mothers by choice in media narratives, according to Hayford and Guzzo (2015) may, at best, ignore and, at worst, disparage other single parents. The figure of the SMC further detracts attention from the high numbers of single mothers, often not by choice, among the disadvantaged, which is linked to structural social and economic conditions.

As a popular television genre, sitcoms have significantly shaped cultural perceptions of family dynamics through their portrayal of various family structures, relationships, and interactions. The image of single mothers as protagonists navigating the challenges of raising children independently began to gain prominence in sitcoms during the late 20th century (Russell and Stern 2006).

Media depictions have often framed single mothers within narrow stereotypes, emphasizing struggle, victimhood, or ordinary judgment: they have frequently been portrayed as victims of circumstances, facing insurmountable challenges without a partner, and such narratives have often emphasized struggle and hardship, reinforcing societal biases against single motherhood (Valiquette-Tessier *et al.* 2019). Once relegated to marginalized roles or depicted within the context of tragedy, single motherhood has gradually shifted in narrative focus and complexity. Single mothers, ranging from Lucille Ball’s *The Lucy Show* (1962) to more contemporary figures, such as Lorelai Gilmore from *Gilmore Girls*, Katherine’s character in *The Duchess* or Penelope Alvarez’s in *One Day at a Time*, depict single mothers as resilient, resourceful, and capable individuals. Indeed, *The Lucy Show* played a role in challenging norms by featuring a widow and a divorced character as central figures in a primetime sitcom even if, to minimize perceived risks, the network opted to make Lucy Carmichael a widow instead of a divorcee (Fernandez 2011).

As societal perspectives on family dynamics have evolved, media representations have become more diverse and nuanced. While there has been an increased effort to diversify representations of single parenthood in sitcoms, the archetype of the single mom remains a prevalent and influential portrayal, contributing to both the normalization and positive representation of single motherhood in popular culture (McRobbie 2004).

The choice to analyze the portrayal of the single mom in entertainment media stems from the profound impact that such representations can have on societal perceptions and attitudes. In recent decades, the traditional family structure has evolved, and the figure

² Definition of SMC based on the concept of birthmothers who are neither cohabiting nor married and opt for an intended conception.

of the single mother has become increasingly prevalent in both fictional and reality-based media (Rutter, William and Risman 2009).

This analysis seeks to explore how the media frames and depicts single mothers, examining the nuances of their portrayal, challenges, and triumphs. In order to support this argument, the research focuses on the theoretical principles of CCDA and then shows how they can be applied in the televisual media. There are two research questions addressed in this paper:

1. What types of adjacency pairs appear in the conversation to construct a discursive strategy of non-conventional parenthood?
2. How do the adjacency pairs depict the alternative family through the conversations?

Media, including television shows, films, and online platforms often function as a mirror reflecting and shaping cultural norms. By focusing on the media representation of single mothers, this study explores how specific conversational patterns contribute to the portrayal and understanding of non-traditional forms of parenthood and it aims to unravel the complexities surrounding this role, shedding light on the diverse narratives, and contributing to a broader understanding of the evolving landscape of family dynamics. Ultimately, this exploration is rooted in the recognition that media has the power not only to mirror societal attitudes but also to influence perceptions and contribute to a more inclusive and nuanced discourse surrounding single motherhood (Layne 2015).

1.2. Theoretical Background

The sitcom

The theoretical background of sitcom conversation is deeply rooted in comedic and dramatic traditions, drawing on various communication theories to create engaging and humorous dialogue. One considerable influence is incongruity theory, which suggests that humor arises from the unexpected and contradictory elements of a situation. The literature on humor and laughter, as well as on media studies, is vast and interdisciplinary. However, few studies investigate the interactional dynamics of television sitcoms beyond the jokes they contain (Bubel and Spitz 2006).

Sitcoms often capitalize on incongruities in conversations, using misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and unexpected twists to generate comedic moments (Mills 2009). Additionally, incongruity extends to the characters themselves, as sitcoms frequently feature quirky personalities placed in everyday situations, leading to amusing interactions (Russell and Stern 2006). Social exchange theory also plays a role, as characters engage in witty banter and playful teasing, reflecting the give-and-take dynamics of real-life conversations. Furthermore, scriptwriters draw from the principles of timing and pacing, utilizing comedic timing to enhance the impact of punchlines and one-liners. Overall, the theoretical foundation of conversation in sitcoms intertwines psychological, sociological, and comedic principles to create a unique and entertaining viewing experience.

The representation of single mothers by choice in sitcoms is a noteworthy and evolving aspect of television storytelling (Rabinovitz 1989). Over the years, sitcoms

have been extensively studied for their various aspects, including their influence, relevance, and portrayal of stereotypes and have played a role in reflecting and, in some cases, challenging societal norms surrounding family structures (Rockler 2006). However, this paper contributes to the literature by examining how the portrayal of single mothers by choice introduces a narrative that diverges from traditional family dynamics and explores the complexities, joys, and challenges of this unconventional path to parenthood. By presenting nuanced and relatable characters who actively choose to become mothers without a partner, sitcoms contribute to dispelling societal misconceptions and broadening perspectives on diverse family formation (Mills 2009).

Conversation Critical Discourse Analysis and Adjacency Pair Patterns

The role of language in expressing thoughts and ideas is highlighted by some scholars (Rabiah 2018; Sirbu 2015; Halliday 2014) as a communication tool categorized into two primary forms: spoken and written. People extensively utilize spoken language to interact and communicate with others in everyday life. Communication is a fundamental means through which individuals engage with their surroundings and establish connections with one another. The spoken form of language, in particular, is crucial in facilitating interpersonal communication and fostering interaction in various social contexts (Alsaawi 2019; Sindoni 2012; Halliday 2001; Yule 1989).

Indeed, in daily life, communication takes on various patterns, and one prominent form is conversation or oral communication (Pridham 2013). As social beings, humans rely on conversation as a primary means of interacting with others (Shotter 1993). Individuals exchange information, express thoughts and feelings, and maintain social connections through conversation. The dynamic nature of conversation allows for real-time interaction, enabling people to engage in dialogue, negotiate meaning, and build relationships. It is a fundamental component of human socialization and is vital in daily communication (Halliday 1971).

Conversations have a structured and organized nature and examining the spoken expressions of participants provides insights into how meaning is constructed, how turns are taken, and how participants contribute to the overall flow of discourse (Wiemann and Knapp 2017). The context and stage of a conversation are crucial in determining the function of an utterance within a particular pair part: for example, an utterance can serve as a greeting, a summons, or a response to a summons, such as answering the telephone (“Hello” – “Hello”). Similarly, expressions like “Thanks” can respond to various situations, including statements of congratulations, compliments, or offers. Moreover, a pair of utterances may fulfil multiple roles in a conversation, adding complexity to the dynamics of communication (Paltridge and Burton 2000, 88).

By closely examining the structure and content of utterances, researchers and linguists can uncover patterns, social norms, and the implicit rules that govern conversational interactions. This analysis is fundamental to fields like Conversation Analysis (CA) and helps to unravel the intricacies of human communication (Paltridge 2022; 2000). Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson’s work (1974) in conversation analysis has highlighted the complex ways participants spontaneously construct and manage meaning in collaborative interaction. The idea that speech is shaped to meet the anticipated needs of others reflects the dynamic and cooperative nature of conversational exchanges, aligning with the broader understanding of how participants in a conversation actively contribute to the organization and flow of discourse. In essence,

speakers are tuned in to the expectations and preferences of their conversational partners, and they adjust their speech in real-time to facilitate effective communication. This speech shaping can involve various aspects, including the choice of words, tone of voice, pace, and pauses. These adjustments aim to enhance mutual understanding, acknowledge social norms, and maintain the smooth progression of the conversation.

The analysis of conversational utterances can be effectively conducted by examining adjacency pairs, a critical component of the CA approach (Siahaan 2019). The concept of adjacency pairs, developed predominantly by Schegloff and Sacks (1973), refers to a specific structure in a conversation where a related or expected response from one participant follows the previous participant's utterance. The structure of an adjacency pair involves two sequential and interdependent turns, often revealing the organization and normative expectations within a conversation. According to Richards and Schmidt, as cited in Paltridge (2000, 87), adjacency pairs are sequences of utterances involving two successive speakers, where the second utterance is identified as an expected follow-up related to the first one (Richards and Schmidt 2013). This aligns with Yule's (1996) perspective, which emphasizes that adjacency pairs are conversation units and consist of an automatic sequence between two parts produced by two speakers.

Heritage, as mentioned in Wooffitt (2005), provides a comprehensive definition of the term adjacency pair as a sequence of two utterances that are adjacent to each other in the conversation: the adjacency pair has a specific order, with one utterance serving as the "first pair part" (FPP) and the other as the "second pair part" (SPP). Heritage's definition captures the essential characteristics of adjacency pairs and functions, highlighting their role in structuring and organizing conversational interactions (Heritage and Atkinson 1984). This concept, fundamental to understanding the systematic nature of language use in dialogue, is also included in Isgianto's research on "The Adjacency Pairs Analysis On 'Six Minutes English' Conversation Script of BBC Learning English: A Study of Discourse Analysis" (2016), which investigates the application of adjacency pairs in the context of conversations within the "Six Minutes English" program from BBC Learning English. According to Isgianto, adjacency pairs in conversation create clear meanings in social interactions: the structure and pattern of these pairs contribute to conveying specific meanings and minimizing misunderstandings between participants. Ermawati *et al.*'s research on "An Analysis of Adjacency Pairs as Seen in Oprah Winfrey's Talk Show" (2016) appears to be another interesting study focusing on the patterns of adjacency pairs in the context of Oprah Winfrey's talk show. The results of this research reveal the existence of two types of adjacency pair patterns in the conversation. This suggests that there might be identifiable structures or sequences in the manner in which Oprah Winfrey and her guests interact through speech.

Although adjacency pairs, rooted in the work of conversation analysts, are sequential speech units where one utterance expects a specific response, sitcoms adeptly utilize several types of adjacency pairs in the discourse to elicit humor and advance the narrative. For instance, the classic setup and punchline structure often follow the adjacency pair pattern, where a character's statement serves as the setup, prompting another character to deliver the comedic punchline. Interruptive pairs, where characters talk over each other or abruptly change the topic, are also common in sitcoms, adding an element of surprise and chaos to the dialogue. Moreover, repair sequences, where characters correct each other's misunderstandings, contribute to the humor and reinforce the intricacies of social interaction.

In investigating the types of adjacency pairs to be found in sitcoms, what this study aims to do is show the benefits of applying a Conversational Critical Discourse Analysis (CCDA) framework to televisual discourse. While research in literary and cultural studies, as well as in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), has previously utilized such data samples, strict conversation analysis (CA) has been hesitant to incorporate this type of talk into its investigation (Raymond 2013, 203). This reluctance stems from CA's preference for naturally produced, unedited data, aiming to better understand how humans interact in real life (Heritage and Atkinson 1984). Utilizing scripted, edited, or otherwise "un-naturalistic" or invented data poses a challenge as the result may not accurately represent actual human social interaction. The benefits can be traced in the manner of structured nature of conversational exchanges within this genre of television that aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of discourse by simultaneously examining both the micro-level features of talk-in-interaction and the macro-level socio-political dynamics embedded within language use. Combining the principles and methodologies of Conversational Analysis (CA) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) into a unified framework, one gains insights into the deliberate crafting of dialogue to engage audiences in the discursive construction of non-conventional parenthood.

1.3. Research methodology

Assuming that adjacency pairs refer to automatic sequences of two utterances produced by two speakers in a conversation, where the second utterance is related to the first one as an expected follow-up (Paltridge, 2014), these pairs represent a structured aspect of conversation where one utterance typically elicits a predictable response from the other speaker (Pardede/Manurung, 2021). In essence, the response given by the second speaker is a spontaneous reaction to what the previous speaker has said, and it is expected to be coherent with the preceding utterance. However, in practice, conversations may not always proceed smoothly, leading to misunderstandings or inappropriate responses between participants.

The linguistic expression of televisual discourse, comprised of scripted dialogues delivered in front of a camera, sets it apart as a distinct form of communication, alongside its multimodal nature. Some scholars, such as Emmison (1993) and Schegloff (1988), have contested the suitability of Conversation Analysis (CA) for analyzing spoken interaction in films and TV series due to its scripted and non-spontaneous nature. Many Conversation Analysis (CA) studies have expanded beyond the data restrictions imposed by original CA scholars, suggesting that CA can be applied to cinematic discourse for analyzing film dialogues (Chepinchikj and Thompson 2016). However, there are few studies employing CA in this context as a tool for analyzing non-spontaneous, scripted speech. Some examples of CA studies analyzing script-based talk include Bubel's (2006) examination of friendship construction in "Sex and the City," Stokoe's (2008) exploration of humor in "Friends," and Raymond's (2013) discussion of gender and sexual stereotypes in animated sitcoms like "Family Guy" and "American Dad!". Bubel's study combines CA with discourse analysis and membership categorization analysis to explore friendship construction in "Sex and the City," while Stokoe argues that violations to preference organization in adjacency pairs and interruptions in turn-taking structure are intentionally used for comedic effect, and Raymond utilizes CA to highlight gendered discourse in animated sitcoms.

Based on these studies, this paper wants to reinforce the concept that CA theory can and should be utilized as a research method in linguistic contexts beyond natural conversations. Despite televisual conversations being pre-scripted and therefore not entirely “natural” or spontaneous, the actual performance of these dialogues often adheres to the rules and norms of everyday conversations. In sitcoms, for example, actors may also improvise or alter scripted utterances during performance (Braínne 2010) and this flexibility allows them to adapt to the moment and sometimes enhance the comedic or dramatic effect of the scene. The organization of conversation focuses on the turn-taking process in which two or more participants manage the exchange of speaking turns (Fairclough 1989). Each turn is composed of turn constructional units (TCUs), which can range from individual words to complete sentences, and what constitutes a TCU is determined by the context of the conversation (Liddicoat 2021).

In this study, the data were selected to explore how turns are taken. Responses are generated between the participants in order to contribute to a deeper understanding of how the discursive construction of single parenthood is constructed and conveyed in this specific conversational context.

The case study is the British sitcom *The Duchess*, which premiered on Netflix on 11 September 2020 and was cancelled after one season on 29 April 2021. The series of 6 twenty-minute episodes has been selected because the straightforward and unfiltered female “leading role” is of particular interest in that it attempts to narrate, with raw simplicity, the experiences of Katherine, a woman who does not hesitate to speak her mind, especially when provoked, and is willing to do anything to achieve her goal of having a child in an unconventional way.

To ensure focused and efficient analysis, the study is limited to examining a feature of talk-in-interaction organization, such as the adjacency pairs in a restricted number of dialogues throughout the sitcom. The data analysis specifically concentrates on the utterances of two speakers during pivotal stretches of conversation, avoiding unnecessary overlap in the research process. The study utilizes the theory of adjacency pairs proposed by Paltridge (2000), who recognizes 11 types of adjacency pairs, such as Requesting – Agreement, Assessment – Agreement, Question – Answer, Compliment – Acceptance, Leave – Taking, Complaint – Apology, Greeting – Greeting, Warning – Acknowledgement, Blame – Denial, Threat – Counter-Thread and Offer – Acceptance and it provides a comprehensive analysis of a number of dialogues, allowing for a nuanced interpretation of the communicative dynamics between the interlocutors.

Using a qualitative method, the corpus, collected and analyzed through the transcript of some characters’ communicative behavior, will be used in order to analyze the first pair part (FPP) of an adjacency pair followed by the second pair part (SPP) for inferring that there are underlying societal norms, stereotypes, and attitudes towards single motherhood.

The adoption of a conversation analysis (CA) based approach does not aim to draw conclusions about how real humans interact in daily life, as is traditionally done in CA. Instead, these examples are viewed as illustrating society’s interpretation and indexing of socio-interactional practices of various groups and individuals, put on display in television shows. Whether or not these programs accurately depict how individuals engage in naturalistic conversation in reality, they still present a representation – albeit rehearsed and acted-out – that is received and interpreted by viewers.

1.4. Research design and data analysis

The research design, based on a qualitative descriptive method, is justified by the nature of this study. The characteristics of qualitative research align with the end goals of the investigation of televised conversation when exploring the discursive construction of single motherhood and moving beyond the traditional definition. By focusing on in-depth observation and analysis of the characteristics of individual units (in this case, adjacency pairs), qualitative research allows for a rich exploration of the multifaceted phenomena within spoken discourse. The absence of a need for predefined hypotheses, as stated by Isaac and Michael (1987), is suitable for the research, where the primary objective is to understand and describe the types of adjacency pairs present in the conversations.

The primary data source is the video of the sitcom *The Duchess* featuring the conversation between Katherine and the other participants in the sitcom. The six episodes touch on the challenges of split families, forming new relationships, and the often messy and under-represented process of pregnancy planning as a single woman, as seen through the direct conversations between Katherine and the doctor, Katherine and her boyfriend, and Katherine with her ex-partner. However, understanding the nuances of communication dynamics within a sitcom requires considering not only the words exchanged but also the broader context in which those conversations take place, including the external and internal settings and the roles of the characters involved. The following steps were followed when collecting the data:

- Searching for the sitcom on Netflix
- Watching the episodes to verify alignment with the study
- Transcribing the conversation
- Verifying the data through video matching
- Selecting the relevant utterances for analysis
- Classifying data based on adjacency pair criteria
- Analyzing and discussing the data
- Drawing up the final observations

Outlining the steps for data analysis serves to demonstrate a systematic and thorough approach to extracting meaningful insights from the various conversations between Katherine and her interlocutors. The interactions from the first two episodes were collected because they encapsulate the pivotal moments leading to Katherine's decision. Since the transcription was not available, English subtitles were used to construct an orthographic transcription, rendering the content of the characters' utterances. These transcriptions of four interactions totaling 1165 words constitute the corpus. While the entire series of *The Duchess* is only partially represented in the corpus, the episodes primarily draw upon the characterization of the discursive construction of solo mom that was established in the first two episodes. Nonetheless, the study was conducted by watching and re-watching the interactions of each episode, and representative interactions of the first two were transcribed, including them in the corpus to incorporate discursive construction developments.

The corpus consists of four conversations of varying length, ranging from ten up to forty turns, and takes place at the fertility clinic, at the restaurant, in the street, and on the boat, so that all of them are face-to-face. In all cases, non-verbal cues such as gestures, facial expressions, and the woman's body posture were also transcribed, especially if they replace a verbal turn. The corpus includes conversations between Katherine and the doctor, Katherine and her boyfriend, and Katherine and her ex-partner. All the talks are dyadic interactions except at the restaurant where the conversation between Katherine and Evan is interrupted by the waiter. These participants have specific character relationships, with Katherine being the central person in this network who has closer relationships with Evan and Shep than the doctor.

The transcription conventions follow Dressler and Kreuz (2000),³ Chafe (1994)⁴ and are outlined in the text. Transcribing the conversation into a written form was a fundamental step in order to provide a text-based representation of the spoken dialogue, allowing for a detailed and close examination of the language used. After checking the transcription against the actual video content, choosing specific parts of the conversation that reflect adjacency pairs focuses the analysis on key instances, allowing for a more targeted and efficient study. The systematic classification of data according to the criteria for adjacency pairs is the next step in organizing and categorizing the information. This sets the groundwork for a structured analysis.

The analysis draws conclusions based on the discussed data by collating the findings and providing a coherent interpretation of the types of adjacency pairs in order to reveal how these male characters are negotiated in the discursive construction of single motherhood.

1.5. Findings and discussion

The sitcom *The Duchess* stands as a captivating portrayal of contemporary life, navigating the complexities of relationships, family dynamics, and societal expectations. Aired in 2008, this sitcom rapidly gained acclaim for its witty humor, relatable characters, and a nuanced exploration of unconventional themes. Set in London, the series follows the lives of its central characters, each bringing a unique perspective to the narrative. The main characters are Katherine, an upper-middle-class mother, Shep, her ex-partner, Evan, her current boyfriend, Olive, Katherine's daughter, Bev, Katherine's best friend and Cheryl, Shep's fiancée. The core of the plotlines is formed by their interactions and relationships.

One of the distinguishing features of *The Duchess* is the fact that it tackles unconventional topics with a blend of humor and sincerity. From unconventional career

³ Dressler and Kreuz (2000) proposed guidelines for transcribing oral discourse, offering a systematic approach to capture the nuances of spoken language. Their methodology emphasized the importance of accurately representing various aspects of speech, including intonation, pauses, overlaps, and non-verbal cues. A model transcription system is based on a set of 6 design principles: specificity, universality, consensus, transparency, parsimony, conventionality.

⁴ Chafe's transcription symbols are commonly used in discourse analysis to represent various aspects of spoken language. These symbols allow researchers to transcribe spoken language in a detailed and systematic manner, capturing aspects such as pauses, intonation patterns, overlapping speech, and phonetic features.

choices to atypical family structures, the series fearlessly investigates the nuances of modern living. This approach makes it an ideal subject for the present analysis, where the discursive construction surrounding the unconventional idea of becoming pregnant without being in a stable relationship is explored.

As we embark on the analysis of a carefully selected sample, the first two episodes from *The Duchess*, the commitment of the series to authenticity, humor, and pushing societal boundaries is evident. The characters' interactions, nuanced dialogues, and unique story arcs provide a rich backdrop for the discursive elements that contribute to the unconventional themes explored within the series.

The identification of 8 specific types of adjacency pairs within the episodes from the sitcom, namely "Question – Answer", "Assessment – Agreement/Disagreement", "Threat – Counter-Thread", "Offer – Acceptance/Refusal", "Greeting – Greeting", "Complaint – Apology", "Warning – Acknowledgement", "Blame – Denial" suggests a focused and clear classification of the conversational exchanges that support the discursive construction of the figure of a single mom "by choice".

The types of adjacency pairs found in the sample are chronologically presented in the following excerpt, which reports a meaningful extract from the original conversation. Some parts were omitted because they are not relevant for identifying patterns, trends, or shifts in conversational dynamics as they naturally occur.

The storyline of *The Duchess* revolves around Katherine Ryan, a character known for her chaotic lifestyle, bluntness, narcissism, and commitment issues. As a single mother to Olive, shared with her ex-boyfriend Shep, Katherine decides to explore options for having a second child. Unwilling to commit to her current boyfriend Evan, as she considers him a last resort, for Olive's ninth birthday, Katherine takes her on a trip to a fertility clinic to seek out a sperm donor:

Episode 1: At the fertility clinic

Extract conversation 1 (Question-Answer)

Doctor: Right. How old are you now?

Katherine: Thirty-three

[...]

Doctor: [...] What's your reason for wanting a child this way?

Katherine: Well, my entire family are dead. To me. So, when Olive was born, I was alone, but now we have each other for support and we both agree that we're ready for this next step.

[...]

Extract conversation 2 (Assessment-Disagreement/ Threat-Counter-Threat)

Doctor: Okay (exhales) So... your test results show that if you're serious about growing your family, Olive is wise to be in a hurry.

[...]

Doctor: Egg production slows down dramatically for women approaching their mid -30s. Your best chance of conceiving is to do it now.

Katherine: Doctor, I'm only 33 and "it" looks about 16, (she gestures downwards) so trust me, I have plenty of time.

Doctor: Trust me, you don't. We have donors in their late teens and early 20s.

Katherine: -EW

Doctor: They're match fit ... for a geriatric pregnancy.

Katherine: What did you just call me? [scoffing] Olive, we're leaving.

[...]

(The Dutchess 2008, Ep. 1)

In the above conversation, Katherine and her daughter are at the fertility clinic where the doctor initiates the conversational exchange by asking Katherine about her age and about the reason she wants a child with a donor. Katherine, in turn, provides a direct answer to the question, giving the information requested and a clarification that the doctor had probably never thought about previously; in fact, he visibly exhales and looks at the woman. The participants take turns, and this exchange illustrates the typical structure of a “question-answer” adjacency pair, where a relevant response follows a question. Subsequently, the doctor assesses the availability of donors in their late teens and early 20s, implying that they are suitable for Katherine’s situation. However, Katherine strongly disagrees with the doctor’s assessment, expressing her discontent by questioning what was said and deciding to leave the clinic with Olive. This latter sequence illustrates the dynamics of an “Assessment – Disagreement” adjacency pair, where one statement is met with a clear expression of disagreement from the other party. Moreover, in this exchange, the doctor delivers information that could be perceived as a threat to Katherine’s perceived abundance of time for having a child (*Egg production slows down dramatically for women approaching their mid-30s. Your best chance of conceiving is to do it now [...] Trust me, you don’t. We have donors in their late teens and early 20s*). In response, Katherine issues a counter-threat by expressing her displeasure at the Doctor’s comment and deciding to leave (*Doctor, I’m only 33 and “it” looks about 16, so trust me, I have plenty of time [...] What did you just call me? [scoffing] Olive, we’re leaving*). The tension and assertiveness in the conversation exemplify the threat-counter-threat pattern within adjacency pairs.

When her initial plan proves unsuccessful, Katherine considers reaching out to her ex-partner, Shep. She holds the belief that their past relationship resulted in the creation of a perfect child, Olive. There are two pivotal moments in the storyline that center around the decision to pursue the pregnancy with the assistance of Shep as a donor, when Katherine is at the restaurant with her boyfriend Evan and when Evan meets Shep.

Here, the conversation between Katherine, Evan and at a certain point the waiter, provides insight into a new form of relationship and single-parenting.

Episode 1: At the restaurant

Extract conversation 3 (Offer-Acceptance/ Greeting-Greeting)

Waiter: Another bottle?

Evan: Oh, yes, please, man. It was the Argentinian Malbec.

Waiter: You having a good night?

Katherine: Yeah

Waiter: A much-needed break from the little one?

Evan: Yeah

Extract conversation 4 (Complaint-Apology)

Katherine: Why would you agree with him? I don’t need a break from Olive. I like her.

Evan: Hey, I was just saying it’s nice to be having this time, -just the two of us occasionally.

Katherine: Every weekend is not occasionally. It’s too long to be away from your own kid.

Evan: She’s with her dad. I...I thought this was cool?

Katherine: I wish she never went over there.

Evan: Then why do you let him see her?

Katherine: Because he’s her dad, and love don’t cost a thing.

Evan: J. Lo. You're right, it's always J. Lo. Look... I'm sorry, can ...Can we start again?

Katherine: I just feel like I should be using this time to sleep.

Evan: Katherine, I didn't mean to offend you.

Extract Conversation 5 (Warning-Acknowledgement)

Katherine: Sorry. I've had a lot on my mind. Um...[sighs] I've been meaning to tell you ...

Evan: Yeah?

Katherine: [sighs] I'm ready to have another baby.

Evan: Uh... Okay. This is a big step. This is bigger than what I thought you wanted, but... You know what? [bangs table] Fuck it. Yes. Yes, yes, yes. I'm in. I'm in, 100%. When do you want to start trying?

Katherine: Soon

Extract Conversation 6 (Offer-Refusal)

Evan: Truth is, Katherine, uh, we're on exactly the same page. How about this? How about we start with me moving in? I've actually already got some boxes packed. [...] That's out of the question. I'm very responsible in that sense. Am I talking too much? Should I back up? I'll do whatever it takes, -is what I'm trying to...

Katherine: um...

Evan: ...say. Okay

Katherine: no

Evan: no, okay.

Extract Conversation 7 (Warning-Acknowledgement)

Katherine: I need to do this with a sperm donor. It's the safest way for me.

Evan: Sperm don- -

Waiter: Here we are.

Evan: Can you give us a minute? (the waiter goes away). [laughs] God, I thought you were being serious for a minute there.

Katherine: I'm not joking.

Evan: (laughs) Yeah, right. You have a donor baby so that it's all yours and you keep me at a safe distance, so nothing changes for you. SILENCE (she looks at him) Oh, fuck me, you mean it.

Katherine: well, I feel really badly about it, though.

Evan: Don't you love me?

Katherine: I do love you. That's the problem. I hate Shep.

Extract Conversation 8 (Blame-Denial)

Evan: You were a 23-year-old girl who got pregnant by a lunatic in a boy band. - You didn't love him.

Katherine: But I thought I did.

Evan: Well, I'm not Shep. I'm not gonna end up in rehab and lose record deals, because I don't have a record deal. I have a medical degree.

Katherine: I know you're not Shep but you could hurt me way worse. I just want us to keep dating. I...I'm not breaking up with you.

Evan: Oh, you're not?...That's ...Ah, well, thank you very much.

Extract Conversation 9 (Warning-Acknowledgement)

Katherine: Well, I don't wanna lose you! Equally, I don't wanna be trapped with you. Do you understand?

Evan: [exasperated] Fuck me [...]

Evan: Mate, can you fuck off? (waiter goes away) SILENCE How about I just take you straight home?

[...]

(The Dutchess 2008, Ep. 1)

Here, Evan is taken aback by Katherine's decision, and he is entirely unaware of her decision regarding having a child through sperm donation. The dialogue at the restaurant portrays a mix of humor, tension, and serious discussion about relationships and parenting, creating a dynamic and engaging interaction between the participants. The examples show the variety of adjacency pairs present in the conversation, such as "Offer – Acceptance", "Greeting – Greeting", "Complaint – Apology", "Offer – Refusal", "Warning – Acknowledgement", "Blame – Denial", demonstrating the interplay between different conversational elements.

The next pivotal conversation is at the end of Episode 1. It is characterized by humor and sarcasm with a mix of seriousness and playfulness and concludes with Katherine and her ex-partner discussing her non-conventional plan to exploit him as a sperm donor.

Episode 1: In front of Olive's school

Extract Conversation 10 (Assessment-Agreement/Greeting-Greeting)

Katherine: ... I need to talk to you.

Shep: If this is about that meat for the dogs, I didn't know it was stolen. I heard about that venison heist over my police scanner, same as everyone else.

Katherine: No, I assumed it was stolen.

Shep: Grocery stores are giant corporate tax thieves, anyway, putting small butchers out of business. I haven't set foot inside a Starbucks, any Starbucks, since they first opened.

Katherine: Yeah, 'cause you're a rebel who's smarter than everybody else. I got that. Listen! I am going to have another baby.

Shep: Yeah. I can tell. You look like shit. It was either that or leukemia. Could have both.

Katherine: No, I am not pregnant, you GI Joe crackhead. I am going to have another baby, with a sperm donor.

Shep: (laughs) You're gonna stick some pathetic random loser's spunk up yourself?

Katherine: (laughs sarcastically) Yeah, yours.

Shep: - what do you mean mine?

Katherine: Well, I've been thinking for some time that, even though you are, by far, the worst human being that I have ever met and I wish you a lifetime of pain and misery... we somehow made the best kid. And she needs a sibling.

Shep: (tuts and sighs) (scoffs) I knew this would happen.

Katherine: You knew what would happen?

Shep: You want to get back on my dick.

Katherine: Christ, no! I've been to a fertility clinic. We would do it there.

Shep: (inhales) Hmm. Yeah, I'm gonna have expenses.

Katherine: You've dedicated your entire life to being a wanker, you might as well start getting paid for it. Fine.

Shep: It's an interesting proposition, Kit.

Katherine: So, is that a yes?

Shep: I'm gonna need some time to talk it over with my legal team.

Katherine: Great. Okay.

Shep: (sighs). They love me. Even when they hate me, they love me. (scoffs).

(The Dutchess 2008, Ep. 1)

The adjacency pairs in this final part of episode 1 demonstrate a communicative sequence in which one participant makes a statement or proposal, and the other responds

with questions, requests, or reactions, contributing to the flow and progression of the dialogue.

Another dialogue within the selected sample involves Katherine discussing the possibility of Shep becoming a donor while she is aboard his boat and seeking insights into his willingness and suitability for such a role. In the following extract, the conversation highlights how the adjacency pairs illustrate the complexity of the dialogue between Katherine and Shep, marked by disagreement, negotiations, and attempts at humor.

Episode 2: At Shep's boat

Extract Conversation (Greeting-Greeting / Assessment-Refusal)

Katherine: Hey.

Shep: Take a seat, please. Don't touch anything. (Opens a beer and slurps while Katherine groans). For my own legal protection, I've been advised to record this conversation.

Katherine: Advised by whom? A talking serpent?

Shep: You're very manipulative and it's the best way to protect my assets.

Katherine: (laughs) Oh yeah you got me. This whole "let's have another baby" thing isn't because Olive needs a sibling and I desperately want my perineum re-torn. It's so I can trick you out of half your nothing.

Shep: I've been advised.

Katherine: In a fucking fever dream.

Shep: (inhales) (recorder clicks) – Tuesday evening, legacy agreement, meeting one. Subjects on the agenda: Name, Religion, conception style, stud fee, hypnobirth.

Katherine: Hypnobirth? You weren't even at Olive's birth. You went to motocross in Bucharest.

Shep: And whose fault was that?

Katherine: Mine? Obama's? Amazon's? One of your top three enemies.

Shep: Petition A. If it's a boy, he is to be called Ethos.

Katherine: You're not naming the baby. Not after your suggestions for Olive's name. [...]

Shep: Petition B. Stud fee. Ten grand

Katherine: Shep!

Shep: I never wanted kids in the first place. I love the one we've got but she's cost me a lot.

Katherine: Cost a lot what? Precious hours you've could've spent smoking hash on a dinghy? [...]

Shep: Petition C. The baby is to be conceived naturally.

Katherine: No! No. I've got a perfectly qualified reproductive endocrinologist - -

Shep: Whoa, whoa, whoa. Let me stop you there. No fucking way. I do not trust Western medicine. (*Katherine stands up and moves around*). Doctors are a bunch of sick freaks playing God with pseudo-science. That's an absolute deal-breaker.

[...]

Shep: Yeah, you're bluffin'. These are my requirements, kid, and I ain't backing down. Think it over. I'll have a hard copy biked to your house. [...]

(The Dutchess 2008, Ep. 2)

In this highly amusing conversation between Katherine and her ex-boyfriend, he lays down his terms through a grudge-fueled role play. This conversation can be

categorized into “Assessment – Disagreement” adjacency pairs where one participant states their own requirements and the other challenges or rejects them.

From the sample, it can be seen that there are different adjacency pair patterns present in the conversation, reflecting the natural flow of dialogue and interaction between the participants. It is clear from the investigation that the conversations between Katherine and the participants involved in her project to enlarge her family featured a total of 15 adjacency pair patterns. The following table (Table 1) summarizes the findings of the research:

Episode	Conversation	Context	Types of adjacencies
Episode 1	Extract 1	At fertility clinic	Question-Answer
Episode 1	Extract 2	At fertility clinic	Assessment- Disagreement/ Threat-Counter-Thread
Episode 1	Extract 3	At the restaurant	Offer-Acceptance/ Greeting-Greeting
Episode 1	Extract 4	At the restaurant	Complaint-Apology
Episode 1	Extract 5	At the restaurant	Warning-Acknowledgement
Episode 1	Extract 6	At the restaurant	Offer-Refusal
Episode 1	Extract 7	At the restaurant	Warning-Acknowledgement
Episode 1	Extract 8	At the restaurant	Blame-Denial
Episode 1	Extract 9	At the restaurant	Warning-Acknowledgement
Episode 1	Extract 10	In front of Olive’s school	Assessment-Agreement/ Greeting-Greeting
Episode 2	Extract 11	At Shep’s boat	Greeting-Greeting/ Assessment-Disagreement

Table 1. Types of adjacency pairs in the conversation

Among these patterns, a significant majority, specifically 9 out of the 15, revolved around the structure of “Assessment – Agreement/Disagreement”, “Greeting – Greeting” and “Warning – Acknowledgement” (Table 2).

Types of adjacencies	Occurrence	Percentage
Question-Answer	1	6%
Assessment- Agreement/Disagreement	3	20%
Threat-Counter-Thread	1	7%
Offer-Acceptance/Refusal	2	13%
Greeting-Greeting	3	20%
Complaint-Apology	1	7%
Warning-Acknowledgement	3	20%
Blame-Denial	1	7%
Total	15	

Table 2 The number of occurrences

The occurrences and percentages of various types of adjacencies within the corpus show a prominent trend of adjacency pairs in the conversations analyzed: one participant’s statement often triggers a response from the other, involving either agreement or disagreement (“Assessment – Agreement/Disagreement”), a greeting from one participant that is reciprocated by a greeting from the other party (“Greeting – Greeting”) and the interaction between participants involving a warning being issued, followed by acknowledgment from the recipient (Figure 1).

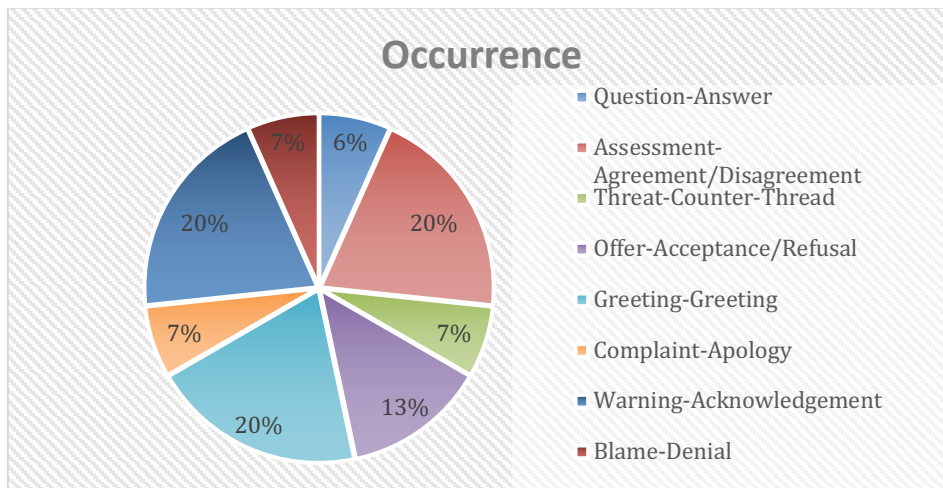


Figure 1 Percentage of each occurrence

6% for question-answer and 7% for threat-counter-thread, complaint-apology, and blame-denial seem to suggest low frequencies despite the occurrence of these specific patterns. There could be several reasons for this, for instance small sample size, specific contextual importance, focused analysis on specific types of adjacency pairs or unique conversation dynamics. In this context, however, the data may not be problematic because they align with the primary object of the study, which concerns the discursive construction that reveals the unconventional manner of becoming pregnant.

The adjacency pair patterns reveal the characters' attitudes, conflicts, and negotiations surrounding having a child through non-traditional means and they provide insights into how participants engage in a back-and-forth interaction that explores societal norms, personal beliefs, and the dynamics of relationships in parenthood.

1.6. Conclusion

This paper has focused on the use of an inclusive approach of discourse analysis to examine a corpus on an interactional level whose structure is organized into turns-at-talk. This approach aligns with Robin Lakoff's (2001) idea for an interdisciplinary approach to discourse analysis which, including multiple analytical perspectives, allows for the exploration of multiple meanings and ensures consideration of both large abstract entities, such as speech events and situations, and smaller entities, such as words, phrases, and turns. This approach bridges the gap between microanalysis, which focuses solely on data without considering larger context, and macroanalysis, which is disconnected from empirical, language-focused work.

Data analysis shows a number of specific pivotal segments of discourse that are exemplificative of Katherine's decision to embark upon an unconventional journey towards pregnancy. There are a number of both verbal and non-verbal features, such as adjacency pairs, gaps and overlaps, that have been found to occur in natural conversations (Schegloff 2007) and these are used as purposeful interactional devices (Berliner 1999) of the discourse that holds decisive weight in Katherine's decision-making process to embrace non-conventional parenthood.

Adjacency pairs are a fundamental aspect of conversational interaction, always interconnected and present. They encompass various types with distinct responses in conversations and aid in discerning the genuine intentions behind the utterances rendered by the speakers. The analysis reveals that conversations occurring in the sitcom predominantly consist of the activity of giving an assessment, issuing a warning or cautionary statement, and offering a contrasting viewpoint or acknowledging the validity or importance of the warning. The first speaker assumes the role of an information provider, aiming to provide truthful answers to satisfy the inquiries of the second speaker. Conversely, the second speaker acts as an information seeker, seeking information and confirmation by posing questions.

A noteworthy observation from the analysis is the emergence of adjacency pairs that occasionally portray a discriminatory image of motherhood, particularly in the context of Katherine's choice to give a sibling to her daughter (see *extract conversation 7*, *extract conversation 8*, *extract conversation 10*). These moments in the discourse shed light on societal norms and expectations, showing how even conversations around unconventional parenthood can inadvertently reinforce stereotypical views. This recognition prompts a critical reflection on the broader societal narratives and biases that individuals navigating non-traditional paths to parenthood may encounter.

The research presented in this paper concentrates exclusively on the diegetic level of cinematic discourse, particularly the speech within televisual dialogues. This encompasses both verbal and non-verbal aspects of spoken interaction, such as prosodic features including intonation, volume, and pauses. While acknowledging that examining solely one feature of talk-in-interaction provides a limited understanding of cinematic discourse, integrating all their associated elements would necessitate a wider study beyond the scope of a single article.

Based on the results, however, the sitcom under examination introduces a fresh perspective on unconventional parenthood, offering a glimpse into the evolving landscape of family dynamics. While the narrative unfolds with humor and wit, it is essential to recognize that, even in the modern era, the representation of non-conventional families continues to grapple with challenges and often falls prey to negative stereotypes. Societal attitudes toward non-conventional families are slow to evolve, and the sitcom's portrayal, while being progressive, might inadvertently reinforce existing biases. The persistence of negative representations can hinder societal acceptance and perpetuate misconceptions about unconventional family structures. It is crucial to acknowledge that different forms of media, including sitcoms, play a pivotal role in shaping public opinion, and responsible storytelling is imperative for fostering inclusivity and dismantling stereotypes.

In essence, this study underscores the significance of examining discourse as a powerful tool in the construction of narratives around unconventional parenthood. By unveiling the nuances of communication dynamics, it contributes to a deeper understanding of the challenges, biases, and societal expectations that individuals like Katherine may navigate in their unique journeys to redefining the concept of family. By challenging stereotypes and presenting diverse family narratives authentically, the genre of sitcoms and other media can contribute to a more inclusive societal mindset, fostering acceptance and understanding of the evolving tapestry of parenthood and family life.

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“Flip the Script” on Transracial Adoption: Counter Discourse Activism on Social Media

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This paper presents a case study of counter discourse activism on YouTube. By analysing a selection of videos produced by the social media user Lilly Fei, the research sets out to investigate the lexical, rhetorical, and discursive strategies she uses to challenge dominating narratives on transracial adoption, thus “flipping the script” on the issue. The recently emerging approach of Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS), which relies on the tenets of both Critical Discourse Analysis and digital humanities, was chosen for the investigation. Results suggest that the counter discourse promoted through Lilly Fei’s channel finds its legitimacy in her personal involvement in the topic and the first-hand quality of her narratives. The YouTuber is also able to construct a trustworthy and expert online *persona* that gives voice to the minority of transracial adoptees, thus providing them with the possibility of being publicly represented while, at the same time, offering their parents some guidance as to how they can communicate with and support their children adequately.

Giorgia Riboni holds a PhD in English Studies from the Università degli Studi di Milano. She teaches English Language and Linguistics at the Università di Torino. Her research interests lie mainly in the field of discourse analysis, with particular regard to new media communication. In the course of her research activity, she has investigated a variety of linguistic-discursive areas and different types of specialised communication. She has recently focused her research on parenthood and adoption discourse and the metaphorical representations of adoptive families in both new and old media contexts. Her publications include the volume *Discourses of Authenticity on Youtube: From the Personal to the Professional* (2020) and the journal article “‘Breast Is Best’ or ‘Fed Is Best’? A Study of Concessive Relations in the Debate on Methods of Infant Feeding.” (2022).



1. Introduction

This paper presents a case study of counter discourse activism on YouTube. It investigates a data set of videos posted by Lilly Fei, a content creator interested in challenging hegemonic representations of transracial adoption and raising awareness of what it means to be an adoptee having a distinct ethnicity inheritance than one's parents. More specifically, this study focuses on the language strategies she uses to debunk dominant, positively biased accounts of the process of placing and raising a child into a new, racially-different environment.

The metaphor "flip the script" indicates the possibility of dramatically changing prevailing narratives, which are collectively and traditionally agreed-upon and generally go uncontested. This expression has been widely used (often becoming a hashtag) on the Internet, due to the fact that the latter affords common individuals access to the public sphere, thus providing unprecedented visibility to discourses which do not align with hegemonic ones.

However, though Digital Theory establishes a connection between new media affordances and their democratising role, most studies shed light on the existence of a significant gap between the potential for democratisation of the Net and its actualization (see, among others, Papacharissi 2002; Jenkins and Thorburn 2004; Hindman 2009; Coleman 2017; Schradie 2019). As regards social media specifically, their introduction has produced a shift away from traditional communication patterns "based on an authority that uni-directionally filters and delivers Internet content to the mass of users" (Yus 2011, 93), but their main goal is "to commoditize and monetize individual communication" (Gayo-Avello 2015, 11), not to foster democratisation or participation. Web 2.0 platforms are "the product of communicative capitalism" (Gayo-Avello 2015, 11) and are known to mainly reproduce dominant discourses. As a matter of fact, they rely on an algorithm that heavily incentivizes posts uploaded by a restricted set of users (i.e. "political, corporate, and media elites [that] have colonized social media", Gayo-Avello 2015, 10) and content that is already popular; these forms of mechanical decision-making can ultimately lead to conformity (Caplan and Boyd 2018). *YouTube*, the second ranking website worldwide (see www.similarweb.com),¹ is no exception. Its algorithm has been proven to "intentionally scaffold [...] videos consistent with the company's commercial goals and directly punish [...] noncommercially viable genres of content through relegation and obscurity" (Bishop 2018, 71; see also Jenkins et al. 2013).

As far as transracial adoption is concerned, the videos with most views are those shared on either adoptive parents' or mainstream media channels.² This means that the viewpoint of children, whose lives are primarily impacted by the adoption process, does not weigh more than the other narratives. It is also to be noted that many transracial adoptees do not offer an alternative stance on the matter, although an increasing number of them are using *YouTube* to flip the script.

This study thus admittedly focuses on a relatively circumscribed phenomenon and adopts a purely qualitative approach to examine the linguistic and communicative features of counter discourse identified in the content posted by activist Lilly Fei. The remainder of the paper is organised as follows: after a review of the literature about

¹ Data updated in March 2023 (<https://www.similarweb.com/top-websites/>).

² Mainstream media channels normally re-post content intended for TV distribution, sometimes edited in shorter fragments and thus more similar to the typical *YouTube* format.

transracial adoption narratives and the issues surrounding them (cf., § 2), the data set and method are described (cf. §3). The analysis of the videos, carried out in order to evince their lexical (cf. §4.1), textual/generic (cf. § 4.2), and discursive characteristics (cf. §4.3) is then illustrated, completed by some concluding remarks (cf. §5).

2. Literature Review

In the USA and in Western countries, multi-ethnic households are still a minority but their number is rapidly increasing. This demographic transformation has an impact on collective assumptions about what a family is and what it should be (Sun 2021, 232): whereas ethnic heterogeneity has always been the only accepted norm, nowadays things are changing. The debate also extends to transracial adoption, a practice that has always been deemed controversial. Adopting from different racial backgrounds became common in the U.S. in the years of the Korean War, during which many children were orphaned and in need of care (Garcia Gonzales and Wesseling 2013, 257). Since then, transracial adoption and its possible benefits and drawbacks have been at the centre of numerous public discussions. Detractors think that having parents belonging to another ethnicity (typically White/Caucasian) may cause adoptees to experience difficulties in forming their racial identity and even feel ashamed of their origins (Docan-Morgan 2010, 337). Those in favour maintain that, in spite of these issues, placing children into permanent families is more beneficial than keeping them in institutions (Docan-Morgan 2010, 337).

Transracial adoption discourse mainly consists of narratives – social constructions through which we interpret the world and communicate our experience to those around us (Gergen and Gergen 1986) – produced, spread, and consumed by the main actors of the adoption process, principally parents and adoptees. For the latter, especially if they are very young, narratives about adopted people may offer repertoires for identity construction (Garcia Gonzales and Wesseling 2013, 258) and help come to terms with their present and past situation (Suter et al. 2014). However, these narratives are not without criticism and engender diverging views among experts, practitioners, and adoptees.

As regards to the linguistic resources deployed, the introduction of the so-called Positive Adoption Language (PAL) to reduce negative associations about adoptions (for instance, the expression “make an adoption plan” is favoured over the verbs “abandon” or “give up”; Branco et al. 2002, 4) has been welcomed by some, while others are in favour of Honest Adoption Language (HAL) because they maintain that PAL can potentially invalidate adoptees’ and birth parents’ feelings and history (Myers 2014).

At the level of discourse, it has been underlined that some features of adoption narratives may not be empowering for all the parties involved. For example, the voices of birth families and children are often marginalised or silenced in favour of those of professionals or parents (see Sun 2021, 237) who, for understandable reasons, tend to generate uncritical, positively-biased representations of adoption. This practice is typically depicted as a movement towards salvation, where children are “rescued” from abandonment, neglect, danger, poverty, and sadness and are brought to safety, nourishment, love, and happiness (see Sun 2021; Riboni 2022). This kind of narrative frames the arrival in an adoptive home as a process of gain and not loss, in spite of the fact that it also coincides with the permanent separation of biological family members.

Birth parents are very rarely mentioned, whereas adoptive ones are invariably represented as selfless individuals whose sole purpose is to help children in need (Chen 2013). As a consequence, adoptees are depicted as harbouring only positive feelings towards their new households (a portrayal which, besides being unrealistic, does not provide validation for possible negative emotions). Moreover, potential problems arising from their different ethnic backgrounds are often disregarded or downplayed. Finally, another dominant narrative describes adoptive children and parents as destined to live together, which indirectly conveys the message that their match is unquestionably right and appropriate (see Chen 2013; Sun 2021; Riboni 2022).

Against this background, digital transracial adoption activists such as Lilly Fei attempt to attract public attention in order to show how problematic hegemonic discourse is, flip the script, and give voice to adoptees' perspectives.

3. Data and Method

The case study examined in this paper regards Lilly Fei's *YouTube* channel. Lilly was adopted from China when she was six months old and placed in a white family. She is a twenty-eight year-old PhD student as well as a social media activist. She has approximately 1,670 *YouTube* subscribers.³ Her activist videos do not reach a wide viewership and normally receive very few comments.⁴ Most of the feedback she gets from her audience is positive and encouraging but, just like many other users who cover sensitive topics and promote counter discourse, she has to deal with online hate and harassment (for a systematic review of these phenomena, see Chetty and Alathur 2018; Castano-Pulgarín et al. 2021). Fei's videos sporadically attract criticism from those who are ideologically opposed to multi-ethnic families and those who accuse her of being ungrateful and disrespectful for debunking positively biased narratives on adoption.

The data set investigated in this research belongs to a collection of posts called "Lilly's Adoption Story" playlist, which consists of 129 videos (dubbed as "parts") posted between 2017-2022. Ten entries specifically dealing with issues associated with transracial adoption (see *Appendix*) have been selected for the analysis.⁵ Fei's content was chosen for this paper not because her channel is particularly popular (as already stressed, transracial adoption counter discourse is still very marginal in the public sphere as well as on social media platforms) but for its extremely specific focus on the cause and the completeness of its arguments which make it a representative case study. Fei's adoption story playlist relies on the "sit-down format", a kind of video which has been proven particularly effective to present narratives and get one's ideas across. Sit-down content is "usually filmed in a private room (e.g., in a bedroom), where a YouTuber is framed close-up sitting in front of the camera facing the viewer" (Himma-Kadakas and Ferrer-Conill 2022, 157). Visual and audio resources typically reproduce "an intimate

³ Data collected in September 2022.

⁴ Whereas YouTube's most successful posts generate millions (or even billions!) of views, Lilly Fei's rarely get more than 1,000. Her videos typically get fewer than 10 comments each, which confirms that transracial adoption counter discourse is still marginal on YouTube.

⁵ As previously noted, in spite of the highly interactive nature of YouTube, Fei's content does not foster much user-generated dialogue; as a consequence, it was decided to only focus on her and not on the few comments posted under her videos.

and calm environment in which the message stands out” (Himma-Kadakas and Ferrer-Conill 2022, 164) and in which concentration is facilitated, especially if the topic is complicated and requires focused attention (Himma-Kadakas and Ferrer-Conill 2022, 165). Differently from other social media platforms, which typically allow for very short posts, YouTube and, more specifically, sit-down videos provide the possibility of broadcasting rather long monologues and fully articulate one’s narratives. However, just like any other Web 2.0 content, they are able to generate more engagement than traditional media (Himma-Kadakas and Ferrer-Conill 2022, 152) and reach (potentially global) audiences.

The methodological framework applied in this research is Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS), a relatively new paradigm which combines “tenets from Critical Discourse Studies with scholarship in digital media and technology” (KhosraviNik and Esposito 2018, 45; see also KhosraviNik 2014, 2017, 2018). In line with Fairclough’s model typically relied on in traditional CDS (1995), this approach also provides a systematic description of the three main levels of processes involved in a communicative event, i.e. processes of production, consumption, and distribution. Starting from the acknowledgement that “[s]ocial media have brought about a paradigmatic shift in communicative systems at the heart of conceptualisations in CDS” (KhosraviNik and Esposito 2023, 17) which has significant repercussions on all these processes, SM-CDS investigates them all in light of the affordances specific to the digital environment.

In spite of the pre-eminently textual focus of the research, SM-CDS was deemed more suitable for the research than any other discourse-based analytical method; this is because Lilly Fei’s decision to embed her message in the YouTube ecosystem as well as her choice of the sit-down format have significant repercussions on her communicative and language strategies. Although affordances which make social media highly multimodal and interactive admittedly play a secondary role in the examination of her channel (as already stressed, reliance of non-textual semiotic resources and user-audience interaction are circumscribed), the impact of the digital environment on the data set should not be underestimated. In actual fact, Lilly Fei’s preference for YouTube as a vehicle for transracial adoption counter discourse affects her videos at different levels, e.g. it impinges upon their organisation or it influences the kind of self she displays in them.

In the study the examination of these levels operationally translates into a three-tiered analysis which explores the micro-, meso-, and macro- structures regularly occurring in her monologues. The first level of investigation is concerned with the examination of “vocabulary, grammar, cohesion and text structure” (Fairclough 1992, 75) and rests upon the main concepts featured in research about Languages for Special Purposes and Popularization (Halliday and Martin 1993; Gotti 2003; Calsamiglia and van Dijk 2004; Garzone 2006, 2020) and its later development which takes the peculiar features of Web 2.0 into account (Hafner et al. 2022). The meso-level of analysis focuses on the identification of text types (Werlich 1976), rhetorical moves and generic conventions (Swales 1990; Bhatia 1993; as regards web genres see, among others, Giltrow and Stein 2009) in the videos selected, whereas the third and final level deals with the isolation and interpretation of the counter discursive strategies utilised by the YouTuber in order to position herself vis-a-vis other users discourses, especially prevailing ones, on transracial adoption (Fairclough 1992, 1995; KhosraviNik and Esposito 2018, 2023). This final step in the examination will be guided by not only the

main tenets of SM-CDS but also the most important concepts of (Transracial) Adoption Studies (see, among others, Chen 2013; Garcia Gonzales and Wesseling 2013; Suter et al. 2014; Sun 2021) and Critical Race Theory (see, among others, Essed 1991; Delgado 1995; Duster 2000; Twine and Warren 2000): digital activism on transracial adoption finds itself at the crossroads of multiple discourses, which should all be taken into account.

The description of the three levels illustrated above and of how they combine will reveal how Lilly Fei constructs alternative narratives capable of flipping the script on this delicate subject matter.

4. Analysis

4.1 Lexical analysis

The first step in the analysis is the identification of the lexical features of the videos collected. Two main patterns emerge from them: the use of transracial adoption specialised lexicon and the introduction of terms borrowed from other specialised domains. As regards the former, the following examples suggest that Fei carefully selects the words that she utilises because she is interested in popularising the terminology related to the adoption process and typically found in therapy and or psychology literature. She appreciates the importance of using the correct words to express, distinguish, and categorise the different aspects of this experience.

1. People should know about *adoption trauma* and *adoption grief*, and know about the layers of transracial adoption [...].⁶

Although they may appear similar, the expressions "adoption trauma" and "adoption grief" indicate two distinct conditions: whereas the first has to do with the trauma of being separated from one's family as a newborn, the second refers to the feelings of pain and loss perceived by birth parents when they are giving their children up for adoption. In example 1, Fei illustrates the meaning of these specific terms in order to make her audience aware of the multifacetedness of transracial adoption, in contrast to the fact that it is often portrayed in simplistic or biasedly positive ways by dominant discourses. The inclusion of the phrase "adoption grief" also allows the YouTuber to incorporate biological parents into the picture, which, as already mentioned, rarely happens in prevailing narratives.

2. I think *I'm just going to re-define what my definition of being in the fog is and being out of the fog*. And to me being out of the fog is just recognizing all of the complexities that come with your adoption story and recognizing that in order to gain this new adoptive family and this new adoptive life you had to lose a biological family first, and that family separation is going to cause trauma and it's going to cause some pain and grief for you and that's just something that you have to process and work through and it's going to affect people differently. It's recognizing that adoption isn't just this rainbows and unicorns adoption as a blessing story, and it's recognizing that adoption stories are very unique.

⁶ Emphasis in the examples has been added to highlight the presence of the phenomena investigated; it does not provide intonation information.

Being in the fog is basically just ignoring all of the trauma and ignoring anything other than “I would have been dead if I was not adopted.”

In example 2 Fei relies on the specialised metaphor “being in/out of the fog”. The ground of resemblance between source and target (to use Lakoff and Johnson’s terminology; 1980) is represented by (lack of) sight: adoptees who emerge from the fog are portrayed as progressively able to see and come to terms with their traumatic memories of separation from their original families. In psychological terms, the metaphor of “coming out of the fog” designates the passage from a stage of denial to one of increasing awareness of the painful feelings inherent to being adopted (see, among others, Branco *et al.* 2022). Although Fei prefaces this explanation with the statement that she intends to re-define the expression “being in the fog”, her definition does not differ significantly from those provided in psychology and therapy literature (Branco *et al.* 2022.). However, her remark (similarly to her comment in the previous example) reveals that she is very aware of the crucial role played by words and definitions in the process of reality construction and interpretation.⁷

Besides relying on adoption language, the content creator appropriates words borrowed from other special languages. For example, she utilises the verb “to normalise”, which is a buzzword of social media discourse;⁸ she bends the meaning of this term in order to be able to incorporate it in her monologue and the title of her video, possibly with the intent of attracting attention:

3. *I do not mean normalise transracial adoption as, like, let’s make this a normal practice.* Let’s make this the default method of saving a child, or whatever you wanna call it. [...] So what I mean when I say, like, normalise transracial adoption is educate the general public and educate other people, so that way, transracial adoptees don’t get stuck in these really uncomfortable, awkward, and triggering situations.

She also employs the term “code-switch”, which belongs to the domain of (socio)linguistics, to refer to her continual changing of language variety or register to adapt to the different ethnic backgrounds she was immersed in.

4. I was constantly in-between and I was constantly *code switching* and trying to find my place in both worlds and I really just wanted to fit into one.

The items of specialised lexicon analysed in examples 1-4 are either transparent in their meaning (which can be worked out on the basis of the context) or accompanied by some kind of (re-)definition or explanation. This may be an indication of the fact that Fei envisages the target audience of the videos is non-expert whereas she portrays herself as authoritative in the field. It might thus be hypothesised that she intends to address viewers who either do not have any direct experience in transracial adoption and have a limited knowledge of the issue or may have a personal involvement but still be unable to challenge dominant narratives (esp. adoptive parents and “in-the-fog” adoptees). The examination of text types and generic features of her posts may provide useful

⁷ Fei’s content shows that she is well-read on the topic. She is probably aware of the debates about adoption terminology which have been taking place among scholars and practitioners and her lexical choices seem to align with the approach promoting Honest Adoption Language (HAL; cf. § 2).

⁸ “Normalize X is a phrasal template used to call for normalization of various practices that has seen regular use on Twitter since January 2019.” (*Know Your Meme*, www.knowyourmeme.com).

information to investigate the communicative purposes and intended public of Fei's videos.

4.2 Textual and Generic Features

The data set selected for the study reveals a prevailing rhetorical organisation which features a recurring alternation of text types, personal pronouns, and referents. The YouTuber tends to start her monologues in front of the camera with a personal anecdote. The latter is normally followed by a generalisation of the issue and an argument that culminates – as often happens in social media genres – in a call to action.

The narrative text type (Werlich 1976) and the first person singular therefore expectedly dominate the beginning section of the videos, that is to say in the rhetorical move where Fei tells an episode of her past or describes her life as a young adopted child.

5. I wasn't taught how to cook the food. I wasn't taught the language. I also played a part in that I didn't want to do those things.
6. *As early as elementary school* I had the fellow... the few fellow Chinese students in my class, you know, *constantly* telling me that *I'm not Chinese, I don't speak the language, I don't eat the food, I don't go home to Chinese parents.*

These short narratives are cleverly placed at the opening of posts as they accomplish two functions: first, they are meant to attract the attention of the audience and retain it as much as possible and secondly, they serve as a discursive foundation that allows her to widen the scope of her speech to discuss transracial adoption issues in more general terms.

Social media makes an incredibly vast amount of content available, so starting out on a strong, emotional note by sharing something personal allows the YouTuber to be appealing and competitive on the platform. The struggles she often recounts in her memories (which she selects with the aim of underscoring how difficult it can be for adoptees to "fit in" in an ethnically-different environment and debunking discourses that either ignore or downplay the problems they may encounter in their new context) can also prove strategic in provoking stronger and more sustained reactions in her public, since it has been demonstrated that most YouTube viewers, if not properly engaged, exit videos after ten seconds on average (*Data Box*, www.databox.com) and that, by and large, human beings are more likely to focus on negative than on positive information (see, among others, Soroka and McAdams 2015).

Fei's linguistic and rhetorical choices appear to emphasise how problematic her life as a transracially adopted child has always been. Whereas example 5 is rather neutral in this regard, example 6 abounds in terms and expressions that stress Lilly's difficulties with identity issues. The initial adverbial "as early as elementary school" and the adverb "constantly" underline that she was made to feel an outsider by her Chinese school-friends often and that this started happening when she was really young. The anaphoric repetition of the first person singular followed by the negative form of the auxiliary do (significantly in the present tense, indicating either the presence of a free direct speech or the fact that Lilly still lacks some aspects of the Chinese identity, or possibly both) gives prominence to her feeling of isolation from her peers, too.

Personal anecdotes normally occur at the beginning of posts also because they can provide a credible basis to support the ideas put forth in the following parts of the videos. They represent what Theo van Leeuwen would dub as a form of legitimation (2007) for ensuing generalisations and arguments, which represent the core segment of each entry: since the primary purpose of the footage selected seems to be the utilisation of Fei's story as a tool to raise a debate and facilitate a deeper understanding of the dynamics involved in transracial adoption, the generalisation and argument moves play a crucial role in the videos and feature the main message that the woman wishes to relay; these moves are realised by means of the argumentative text type and contain pronouns in the third person plural that mostly refer to either transracially adopted children or their adoptive parents.

7. [...] a lot of the issue is that parents don't think that kids are capable of understanding physical differences and race and a lot of times parents – white parents – think that it [racism] won't happen to their non-white kids. [...] I think it's important for parents to [...] teach their kids that, yeah, not everyone in the world thinks that your race is equal.
8. [...] to me it [having to go to Mandarin lessons] was always “Why would my mom force me to do this?” And it really just highlighted another difference between *me, an adoptee, and them, everyone else. No one else* has to work hard to embrace another culture, that is their own. Adoptees have all of these feelings inside them but they may not know how to express them, especially if the adoptee is younger. And so I think that parents should be sensitive to that and maybe consider “Hey, maybe I shouldn't be forcing this culture on my child”.⁹

Example 7 represents an instance of generalisation followed by an argument; the latter is presented as the logical consequence of the initial statement that many parents do not consider the possibility that their transracially adopted children might be the victim of discrimination and racism. Example 8 starts with the recollection of the YouTuber's resentment towards her parents who forced her to engage in activities aimed at making her acquire some knowledge of her first family's language and culture. Fei highlights the mismatch between the (good) intentions of the parents and the undesired effect that their choice produced on her, that is to say that, rather than helping her embrace her Chinese origins, she felt all the more alienated from her peers. This feeling is linguistically encoded not only in the juxtaposition of the personal pronouns “me” and “them” but also (and more strongly) in their referents, respectively “an adoptee” and “everyone else”. In the same vein, the following antithesis between “everyone else” and “no one else” contributes to underscoring the stark contrast between children who are adopted from other cultures and those who are not, besides providing a smooth transition from Lilly's memories to the generalisation of the issue of lack of communication between the members of adoptive families. The final argument, where she reflects on the importance of parents being attentive to children's emotions, especially because young adoptees may not be able to express them effectively, appears

⁹ The author is aware of the inconsistency between examples 5 and 6, where Fei states that she does not know the Chinese language, and example 8 where she maintains that she was forced to take Mandarin lessons. There might be a variety of reasons for this inconsistency (these claims may refer to different moments in the YouTuber's life, she might have attended lessons but not remember much of them...) but they go beyond the scope of this study and will not be investigated.

as the natural conclusion of the monologue since it is presented after the personal anecdote and the generalisation of the problem.

Most videos end or contain a call to action formulated as an instruction. This is a very common feature of social media and YouTube specifically as it prompts viewers to do something as a result of their watching.¹⁰ People relying on the platform for marketing purposes perform a call to action to invite the audience to make a purchase. Activists like Lilly Fei realise this closing rhetorical move to provoke change in the discursive and in the social practices they disagree with. In the case at hand, the ultimate goal is to affect the awareness and the behaviour of the audience, especially of those members directly involved in transracial adoption.

9. Really, I’m saying “*normalise compassion for transracial adoptees*”. So yeah, please do that. (laughter)
10. If *your* child of colour comes to you and talks about this, *don’t ignore them, don’t turn a blind eye* and say, “Oh no there’s no way that could happen. You’re *my* kid. You’re not going to experience racism.”

Example 9 represents the ending of a post which culminates in the request to show compassion for transracial adoptees. The imperative forms are addressed to a generic “you” whose referent corresponds to any member of the audience watching the video. Differently, example 10 contains a call to action which is clearly directed to a specific sector of the public, adoptive parents. These two examples might indicate that there are two target viewerships the YouTuber has in mind when she speaks in front of the camera: a global one, consisting of users who might access her channel by chance, and a more selected one, comprised of adoptive parents who are personally invested in getting insight into the life of adoptees to better understand their children. In both regards, Fei acts as a spokesperson for her category.

4.3 Discursive Strategies

The discursive strategies identified in the data set combinedly concur in challenging dominant narratives about transracial adoption, thus flipping the script. They coagulate around three main discursive *foci*: adopted children’s experiences with racism and discrimination, their issues with identity construction and in-betweenness, and the importance of representation as a means to empowerment.

As regards racism and discrimination, Fei utilises the term “microaggressions” to refer to the hostile attitude transracial adoptees are often victims of because of their ethnicity. This term belongs to a special language, that of Critical Race Theory (Solorzano and Perez Huber 2020; Perez Huber *et al.* 2021). This lexical choice not only further confirms that the YouTuber is very knowledgeable about the academic work related to the issue of transracial adoption and can use the relevant specific terminology, but also shows her willingness to incorporate scholarly concepts and definitions in her videos so that they can be disseminated to the general public.

¹⁰ Experts suggest placing this move at the end because the call to action rhetorically represents the culmen of the video. Moreover, if viewers have watched it to completion, demonstrating clear interest, they may be more inclined to do as suggested by the YouTuber (*Vidyard*, www.vidyard.com).

Whereas microaggressions are common also to other children belonging to racial minorities, she sheds light on a dynamic which, instead, only involves youngsters with mothers and fathers from another background: numerous strangers tend not to treat them and their parents as members of the same family. In example 11, the YouTuber stresses that, in spite of the ways she behaves with her parents, some people seem to attach more importance to their distinct ethnic origins and do not recognize their familiar bond:

11. [*talking to her boyfriend*] In my opinion *you look about as much like my parents as I do. The only difference is that you are also white but you also weren't interacting with my parents in any way that would imply you were their son.* [...] I could probably have like [*sic*] walked arm-in-arm with my mom in the store and been like, "MOM I want this. MOM I want that," but people would still be like, "Wait, that white dude HAS TO BE her son".

In this example, she starts from the implicit assumption that family ties have to do more with feelings and behaviour than with genetics and race: she claims that skin colour and eye shape are only a component of the outward aspect of a person. Lilly discursively decouples the notions of ethnicity and appearance and maintains that the shop assistants who mistook her boyfriend for her mother's son totally based their supposition on the fact that they are both white, whereas they should have paid more attention to their dissimilar looks and, more importantly, to their (not maternal-filial) interaction style.

She further complicates the concept of race by arguing that her first ethnic identity coincided with that of her adoptive family, and it was only when somebody else pointed out her different background that she became aware of it:

12. I was being raised by a white family, *I felt very white*, and then I realised, when I was going to school and I was going out, *people did not see me as white* and, as a child, *that didn't really make sense to me.*

Fei states that the kind of experience described in example 12 is extremely common among transracial adoptees, thus implying that racial belonging is a discursive construction. In the case of children adopted from other ethnicities, this discursive construction is the object of an ongoing negotiation between them and the outside world. Sadly, whereas they tend to privilege the commonalities they share with people from their environment, their racial dissimilarities are more visible to the latter (see example 13).

13. Nobody wanted to point out how we were similar. It was just like, "No, you're, you're different, you're different". [...] I am sure there were many ways that I was very similar to the other students in my class and my friends, but we weren't really focusing on that.

This kind of situation often leads to a feeling of in-betweenness and identity crises which can prove particularly painful for adoptees. Dominant narratives about transracial adoption consistently overlook any negativity and do not validate children's suffering. As a result, adoptees themselves often struggle to acknowledge and understand their negative emotions.

14. [...] I knew I wasn't white and then I had the other Chinese kids telling me that I wasn't Chinese. I was like, "*Well what the heck am I?*" So that just raised a lot of confusion for me and I didn't talk to my parents about it at all and so obviously I was confused. No one could explain to me what was happening if I wasn't gonna speak up.

In example 14, Lilly explains that she was confused but could not rely on narratives featuring sensations of not belonging in order to comprehend what she was experiencing. As a consequence, she did not share her identity issues with her parents and could not count on any external support to deal with them. By foregrounding this problematic, she attempts to make it visible to her public. In particular, she addresses her viewers who are personally involved in the process of transracial adoption with the intent to normalise their struggles. When she was young, she was unable to identify and communicate her feelings of in-betweenness to her parents, but now that she is more mature and more aware of these issues she can act as a spokesperson for adopted children and give voice to them. As already noted, she expects a sector of her intended audience to be made up of mothers and fathers who might be interested in getting insight into the perspective of transracial adoptees and into their often tacit and unrecognised difficulties. At the same time, Fei's admission of her responsibilities in not reaching out to her parents might also be a gentle invitation to speak up addressed to those of her viewers who have also been adopted.

She emphasises the importance of embracing one's being in-between. Just like it happens with the concept of race, hegemonic discourses simplify the notion of identity and depict it in absolute terms, that is to say they tend to represent people as completely identifying with either the group they were born into or their adoptive one.

15. I'm trying to embrace the fact that I am in-between and that's ok because *being a transracial adoptee is an identity in itself*.

In example 15 the YouTuber rejects the prevailing discursive construction of identity, (probably among the main factors to determine children's sense of not belonging), and proposes a new one which also contemplates the possibility of being in-between.

Starting from this assumption, she argues that transracial adoptees' is an identity in its own right and, as such, it should be collectively acknowledged. Moreover, although it is possessed only by a very limited minority of people, its representation in media and cultural products should be widened as it can be turned into a powerful means to achieve self-acceptance and empowerment.

16. I'm in my late 20s and *part of embracing myself comes* with growing up and maturing and just having more life experience, but it also comes *with more representation and seeing more people like me and getting excited that there are other people like me out in the world* and I think it's important for transracial adoptees especially to see that because they don't have that representation in their own home and they may not have it in their community.

Fei points out that being able to mirror oneself in public figures as well as fictional characters is beneficial for young adopted children. On account of this, she has devised a YouTube channel aiming to provide more representation to the transracial adoptee

identity. As a matter of fact, her content offers narratives other transracial adoptees can relate to and feel understood and “seen”.

5. Discussion and Concluding Remarks

The three-tiered analysis of the data set selected for this study allows us to make some considerations regarding the strategies utilised by social media activist Lilly Fei in her counter discourse on transracial adoption. The YouTuber creates an online *persona* which displays traits aiming to attract visibility to a very small minority, that of children adopted transracially, which has traditionally been silenced and excluded from the public sphere. To make herself “watchworthy”, she presents herself to the audience as authoritative in the field and she appeals to *ethos* to do so. Lilly constructs her credibility by emphasising how knowledgeable she is about the topic and all the three levels taken into account in this research, i.e. the lexical, rhetorical, and discursive level, concur in the formation of her trustworthiness.

The use of specialised lexicon enables her to appear as someone with a theoretical knowledge of the issue of transracial adoption; the fact that specific words or expressions often come with an explanation or definition suggests that the YouTuber discursively assumes the role of instructor and envisages her monologues in front of the camera as instances of expert-to-layperson communication.

The construction of her expertise also stems from a careful rhetorical organisation of her posts which reveals regularly occurring patterns: as already mentioned, they typically start with short personal narratives and end with an argument and a call to action. The last moves of this structure, which are meant to affect the beliefs and the behaviour of the viewers, find their legitimacy and efficacy in the first-hand accounts shared by the content creator at the beginning of her videos. The fact that Fei is personally concerned about the issue and has direct experience of what it means to be placed in an ethnically different family make her a reliable source, thus contributing to conferring more power to her arguments.

The combination of strong involvement and theoretical knowledge of adoptive issues thus represents the most conspicuous features of her social media character. These characteristics make her comparable to many other categories YouTubers, especially influencers or wannabe influencers, who want to relay persuasive messages to their audiences and do so by discursively portraying themselves as both passionate and proficient in their field of expertise (Riboni 2020). However, whereas the latter rely on this amalgam of traits to gain their followers’ trust in order to ultimately promote products or services, Fei exploits similar linguistic and rhetorical strategies to promote counter discourse on transracial adoption.

Although her channel is not widely popular and dominant narratives (mainly reproduced by parents but sometimes even by adoptees themselves) still prevail on YouTube, new ways of discursively approaching the topic, which make the struggles and difficulties of belonging to a multi-ethnic family (more) visible, are slowly emerging. These evolving representations also contribute to normalising the negative feelings that adoptees may harbour with respect to the contexts in which they were placed.

Lilly Fei’s channel has been turned into an advocacy platform through which she challenges the collectively-accepted script according to which children who are adopted are saved by their parents and live happily after their arrival in their new environment.

From an ideological perspective, her videos are a tool to give voice to the category of transracial adoptees, traditionally unable to participate in public debates about their own situations and experiences. Her choice to post content on a global platform such as YouTube has to do with her wish to spread her message and reach as many people as possible, thus provoking a change in social and discursive practices. At the same time, though, she is also targeting a very specific kind of audience, mainly comprised of adoptive parents, who might not be able to communicate with their children adequately and might therefore benefit from Fei's stories and explanations, and transracial adoptees, who might relate to the YouTuber and find a validation for their negative emotions in her words. Her online activism may therefore raise awareness on the multifacetedness of transracial adoption and provide a valid (albeit small) contribution to the prevention of stereotypes and discrimination.

As a consequence, it is hoped that more and more narratives questioning commonly-held views on the topic are produced and disseminated on social media and elsewhere. It is also hoped that more research such as this – admittedly limited – study will be carried out on transracial adoption and that it may play a part in the promotion of counter discourses which flip the script.

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Appendix

Lilly Fei's YouTube Channel <<https://www.youtube.com/c/lillyfei>>

"Pt. 2 Elementary School Microaggressions",
oct, 2 19, 2017 8 min

"Pt. 5 Who's the Child?"
oct 22, 2017 8 min 38 sec

"Pt. 23 Exploring Cultures and Transracial Adoption"
jan 11, 2018 5 min 16 sec

"Pt. 26 Racism",

feb 18, 2018 8 min, 55 sec

"Pt. 27 Prep for Racism"

march 3, 2018 13 min, 3 sec

"Pt.60 Covid-19 and Racism",

march 29, 2020 11 min, 8 sec

"Pt. 74 Owing My Identity"

march 30, 2020 11 min, 35 sec

"Pt. 76 Feeling In-Between"

june 13, 2020 10 min, 53 sec

"Pt. 82 Representation Matters"

aug 3, 2020 9 min, 41 sec

"Pt. 99 Normalising Transracial Adoption"

feb 6, 2021 8 min, 14 sec



Navigating the Afterlife: Transhumanism and Televised Visions of Eternity

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This article examines contemporary representations of the afterlife in television series such as *Upload*, *The Good Place*, and *Black Mirror*. It highlights a shift from traditional spiritual depictions to technologically mediated and merit-based afterlives, reflecting broader trends towards secular, technology-driven paradigms of post-mortem existence. These series, embedded in cultural pop imagery, address significant technological and social transformations, including the digital revolution and corporate economies. The article explores how these depictions raise ethical questions about the impact of technology on human values and societal structures, intersecting with Christian theological perspectives on the body and spiritual fulfilment. By analysing these narratives, the article underscores the evolving relationship between humanity and technology, prompting a re-evaluation of life and death in the digital age and highlighting the critical role of media in reflecting on ethical and existential implications of technologically mediated afterlives.

Aureliana Natale is a researcher in English Language and Translation at the University of Naples Federico II. She earned her Ph.D. in 2017 at the University of Bologna and the University of L'Aquila. Her research interests encompass topics such as: studies on melancholy and trauma from the modern to the contemporary era, studies on performativity and storytelling, studies on the relationship between media and collective imagination and Shakespearean studies. Her recent publications include the article "Climate Trauma and Activism: the Social Media Coverage of Climate Crisis and its effects, an Overview" (*Anglistica*, 2022) and the essay "Uscire dal bosco incantato: il linguaggio della fiaba nel racconto del trauma" (*Editoriale scientifica*, 2023). She also published the books *Per-formare il trauma. Evoluzioni narrative dai conflitti mondiali al terrorismo* (ESI, 2019) and *Lo scrigno del bardo. Storie ritrovate prima e dopo Shakespeare* (Pacini, 2023) co-edited with A. Leonardi.



*Far other dreams my erring soul employ,
Far other raptures, of unholy joy [...].*
Alexander Pope, *Eloisa to Abelard*

Introduction

The concept of an afterlife has been a staple of human storytelling since time immemorial. From the ethereal heavens of religious belief to the ghostly realms of folklore, the question of what lies beyond death holds enduring fascination. In contemporary television series, a new paradigm emerges in the representation of the afterlife; one deeply intertwined with technological advancement, capitalistic structures, and a transhumanist philosophy that seeks to transcend the limitations of human existence. This article examines the depiction of the afterlife in popular television series such as *Upload*¹ (2020–present), *The Good Place*² (2016–2020) and, to a lesser extent, *Black Mirror*³ (2011–present). We will argue that these shows have ventured into the previously uncharted territories in TV series of the afterlife, presenting visions that diverge sharply from traditional portrayals infused with spirituality and the supernatural in favour of a distinctly transhumanist perspective on life, death, and the potential for technologically mediated immortality. The focus on technologically mediated or merit-based afterlives reflects a broader trend in contemporary popular culture, exemplified in works like *The Matrix* (1999) and *Ready Player One* (2018). These narratives reveal a shift away from traditional religious and spiritual frameworks towards a secular vision of the afterlife shaped by technological advancement and the pursuit of individual enhancement.

Transhumanism, a movement advocating for the use of technology to transcend human biological limitations, provides a fertile ground for reimagining life after death. As noted by Ronald Green (2013) it emerges as a multifaceted intellectual movement that has evolved over the past two decades, deeply rooted in the Enlightenment’s quest not primarily for societal improvement but for the transformation of the human organism itself. It envisions a future where technological advancements significantly extend human health and lifespan, as well as enhancing our physical and cognitive abilities. This movement looks to biotechnology, stem cell research, genetic manipulation, nanotechnology, bionics, and computer science as avenues to forestall ageing and enhance human capabilities, promising more fulfilling and productive lives.

¹ *Upload* is a science fiction comedy series created by Emmy Award-winning writer Greg Daniels. The production is ongoing, with the fourth and final season awaiting release. Set in a near-future world brimming with technological advancements, the show depicts companies offering luxurious afterlife experiences. Its backdrop, futuristic and bordering on dystopian, serves as the background for a comedic series infused with sharp satire regarding technological progress and its societal repercussions, delving into the realm of the afterlife.

² *The Good Place*, created by Michael Schur, is a US fantasy tv series. The show follows the story of the protagonist, Eleanor Shellstrop, who awakens in the afterlife only to realize she has been mistakenly placed in “The Good Place,” a utopian afterlife crafted as a reward for leading a virtuous life.

³ *Black Mirror* is a British anthology television series. Each episode delves into various genres, predominantly set in near-future dystopias featuring advanced sci-fi technology. In particular, this article will discuss the first episode in the second season, “Be Right Back”, and the fourth episode in the third season, “San Junipero”, both written by the series creator and showrunner Charlie Brooker.

Nick Bostrom (2014), a prominent voice in transhumanism, encapsulates this vision by advocating for the improvement of current human conditions through rational methods and applied science, aiming to augment health-span, cognitive and physical capacities, and control over mental states. Transhumanism's most ambitious aspirations include eliminating human suffering and achieving personal immortality. Ray Kurzweil (1998), for instance, speculates about a future where humans could transcend death by digitising consciousness and living indefinitely in a disembodied state. However, this perspective raises profound ethical and philosophical questions about the essence of human life, the balance between technological enhancements and basic human needs, and the voluntary versus obligatory nature of such enhancements.

The discourse of transhumanism intersects intriguingly with Christian theological reflections on human life, sin, and eschatological salvation. Contributions within Christian theology, as explored in discussions of figures like Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and historical concepts like "theosis" and *imago Dei*, reveal a nuanced dialogue between Christian visions of human transformation and transhumanist futures. While there are points of convergence – such as the role of humans as co-creators and the potential for technological manipulation to extend human capabilities – significant divergences remain, particularly regarding the redemption and glorification of the body, contrasting with transhumanist desires to transcend physical limitations. This discussion underscores a fundamental value inquiry into the nature of bodily existence and its inherent value. It probes whether life's significance is rooted in our finitude and the natural arc of life from birth through death, challenging the transhumanist pursuit of physical immortality to enduring value. Christian perspectives, drawing on the Incarnation and resurrection, affirm the inherent goodness of creation and the physical body, offering a counter-narrative to transhumanist aspirations, which often devalue or seek to escape bodily existence. In summary, the intersection of transhumanist and Christian thought on the transformation of human life illuminates deep philosophical, ethical, and theological questions about the nature of human existence, the pursuit of improvement, and the essence of human fulfilment and salvation. These discussions invite a broader contemplation of what it means to be human in an age of unprecedented technological capabilities, challenging both transhumanist and traditional religious understandings of human destiny.

Upload and *The Good Place* exemplify this reimagining, portraying afterlives that are not only devoid of traditional spiritual or divine governance but are also extensions of earthly existence, enhanced through technological or ethical advancements. Their transhumanist afterlife embodies this ambition by envisioning a continuation of existence made possible through technology or merit-based systems. *Upload* presents a future where death can be circumvented through economic means, offering the wealthy elite the chance to continue their existence in a digital utopia. This afterlife, characterised by limitless fulfilment of material desires, serves as a critique of contemporary materialism and consumer culture, casting death as a luxury item within reach of those with sufficient financial resources. In this series, the afterlife is a digitally constructed paradise reserved for those wealthy enough to afford the process of uploading their consciousness. This exclusive digital heaven mirrors the inequalities of our capitalistic world while perpetuating a materialistic vision of immortality.⁴ Likewise,

⁴ Indeed, *Upload* addresses the socio-economic issue by emphasizing how access to digital paradises is a privilege of the wealthy few. At the same time, as is now customary in this type of production, the series appears to be attentive to applying an inclusive policy regarding ethnic and gender representations.

The Good Place offers a vision of the afterlife where ethical behaviour in life dictates one's eligibility for a paradisiacal existence that mirrors the earthly realm, albeit without its tribulations. While not directly technology-driven, this system still offers a materialistic reward of endless desire fulfilment, reflecting a meritocratic transhumanist ideal. Both series portray the afterlife as a continuation of earthly existence rather than a spiritual realm. Death becomes a hurdle to be overcome, a transition toward an enhanced form of life. This view aligns with the transhumanist ambition to use technology to extend and improve upon the human experience. *Black Mirror*, with its anthology format, often explores the darker implications of a technologically mediated afterlife. Episodes like "San Junipero" and "Be Right Back" address the potential pitfalls of digital immortality, exploring themes of grief, loss, and the blurring of lines between the real and the simulated.

Through a comparative analysis of these series, this article identifies key trends and motivations underlying contemporary depictions of the afterlife. All of them challenge conventional paradigms of death and eternity, suggesting that technological and ethical advancements could redefine our post-mortem existence. However, their approaches to this redefinition vary significantly, reflecting differing views on the role of technology and morality in shaping the afterlife. They prompt us to consider the ethical implications of technologies that might enable such visions of the afterlife, questioning the fairness of access to these technologies and the value of human life in a world where the boundaries between the human and the technological blur. By engaging with themes of transhumanism, technological advancement, and ethical conduct, these series do more than entertain; they encourage reflection on the potential direction of our society and the ethical considerations that should guide our approach to the future. As we navigate the complexities of the digital age, these series offer invaluable insights into the evolving relationship between humanity and technology, challenging us to envision a future where death may no longer signify the end but rather the beginning of a new form of existence.

In Pursuit of Perfection: Memory, and the Appeal of "Eternal Sunshine"

Steve Fuller's (2023) commentary on the enduring appeal of "the eternal sunshine of the spotless mind," a concept originating from Alexander Pope's poem *Eloisa to Abelard* (1717) and reimagined in the eponymous 2004 film by Michael Gondry, offers a rich framework for understanding the dynamics of human memory, romance, and the philosophical underpinnings of transhumanism. The phrase itself, embodying the desire to escape the pain of undesirable memories while celebrating an untarnished mental state, provides a compelling metaphor for exploring the human condition through the lenses of history, literature, and future-oriented ideologies like transhumanism. Fuller's analysis suggests that our fascination with revisiting and reinterpreting past romances reveals a pattern of human behaviour that is cyclically regenerative and reflective. This cycle suggests that humanity is perpetually drawn to the allure of idealised pasts and the promise of rectifying or reimagining them in the present and future. This phenomenon is not merely about the persistence of certain themes across generations but speaks to a deeper, intrinsic human tendency to find meaning, redemption, and progress in the reinterpretation of past ideals and errors. Furthermore, Fuller cleverly extends this discussion to the realm of transhumanism, a movement that embodies the quintessence of human aspiration towards overcoming biological limitations and

achieving a form of perfection or divinity. By invoking nostalgia as a mechanism through which transhumanism operates, Fuller highlights the movement's roots in humanity's long-standing quest for transcendence and improvement. This perspective is intriguing because it frames transhumanism not as a break from human history but as its continuation and evolution, motivated by the same desires that have propelled humanity forward through ages. Fuller's critique also touches on an essential aspect of intellectual discourse and progress: the dialogue between past and present ideas, and how this dialogue shapes future directions. His mention of key figures in the transhumanist movement, such as Max More and James Hughes, and the evolution of their ideas over time, underscores the importance of philosophical and ethical considerations in shaping the trajectory of transhumanism. It is a reminder that while technological advancements are at the forefront of transhumanist objectives, the movement is deeply rooted in philosophical questions about the nature of human existence, freedom, and progress.

Contemporary discussions and advancements in transhumanism lack depth in historical and philosophical engagement. Transhumanism does not discuss the negative externalities of indefinite human longevity, which points to the need to integrate ethical, social, and philosophical considerations into the transhumanist discourse. This integration is crucial for ensuring that the pursuit of technological advancements remains aligned with broader societal values and ethical standards and raises important questions about the direction and sustainability of the movement. It suggests that for transhumanism to achieve its lofty goals, it must not only innovate technologically but also engage deeply with the philosophical, ethical, and social implications of its endeavours. This includes a conscientious reflection on the lessons of the past and how they inform our visions of the future. *Entertaining Judgment: The Afterlife in Popular Imagination* by Greg Garrett (2015) explores the various ways the afterlife is represented and imagined in popular culture. Garrett highlights the richness and diversity in portrayals of heaven, hell, and other afterlife scenarios in media and literature, reflecting broader cultural and social trends, emphasising the significant impact of popular culture on our understanding and envisioning of afterlife concepts. Garrett argues that discussions of the afterlife have moved away from the domain of serious theological reflections and into popular culture. Cartoons, movies, music, and TV shows now more frequently express our thoughts and anxieties about what lies beyond death. Despite the shift in focus, these popular culture portrayals of the afterlife are not frivolous. They offer comfort, a way to shape our understanding of death, and reflect our underlying beliefs even when presented with humour or light-heartedness. Garrett spends considerable time examining the imagery and concepts of heaven, hell, purgatory, and encounters with the undead as they appear in contemporary media. His focus is on how these depictions contrast with traditional religious portrayals. He argues that popular culture afterlives, whether in heaven, hell, or elsewhere, tend to emphasise the themes of divine assistance, judgement/punishment, and the possibility of rewards after death. Garrett's work suggests that popular culture is a crucial terrain for the exploration of afterlife beliefs, offering a space to question, affirm, and negotiate ideas about what may lie beyond this life. This engagement with the afterlife in popular imagination not only entertains but also serves deeper functions, potentially influencing individual and collective attitudes towards death, morality, and the meaning of life.

Eternal Pleasures, Earthly Divides: Exploring the Secular Afterlife in *Upload*

Garrett's reflections appear highly relevant in the context of contemporary media's portrayal of the afterlife, which is depicted as increasingly secular rather than spiritual. In this regard, series such as *Upload* and *The Good Place* serve as quintessential examples, embodying this shift towards a more secular interpretation of post-mortem existence. *Upload* presents a futuristic vision of the afterlife that is both a technological marvel and a societal critique, wrapped in a narrative that is as much about human connection as it is about the implications of digital eternity. Set in a near future where humans can cheat death and choose a form of tech-driven immortality by uploading their consciousness to a luxurious virtual environment, called Lakeview, allowing them to continue living a seemingly idyllic existence, the series explores themes of love, inequality, and the moral dilemmas posed by technological advancement. In the series the afterlife is not determined by spiritual beliefs or moral actions but by economic status and personal choice. Lakeview caters to every whim and desire. It is a materialistic playground for the wealthy, with unlimited food, entertainment, and even simulated physical interactions. This reflects a secular vision of the afterlife, where happiness is equated with endless consumption and fulfilment of desires. Indeed, this digital heaven, filled with luxurious amenities and customizable experiences, mirrors earthly desires and consumer culture, suggesting that even in death, the pursuit of comfort and pleasure prevails. This commodification of the afterlife raises questions about the essence of the human experience and the value placed on material versus spiritual fulfilment, and sharply critiques current societal trends, projecting them into the future.

Uploading is a privilege reserved for those who can afford it. This creates a stark contrast between the wealthy who get to live eternally in luxury and the rest who face an unknown fate. The availability of a digital afterlife based on one's ability to afford it highlights the stark inequalities that pervade society persisting even beyond death. The series thus does not shy away from showing the problems inherent in this system. Lakeview is riddled with microtransactions and limitations placed on those with lower tiers of service. After computer programmer Nathan Brown dies prematurely, he finds himself uploaded to the luxurious Lakeview digital afterlife. However, his newfound digital existence comes with a twist: he is still under the control of his possessive, living girlfriend, Ingrid. As Nathan adjusts to the highs and lows of this digital heaven, he forms a bond with Nora, his living customer service representative. Meanwhile, Nora grapples with the challenges of her job and her growing feelings for Nathan, all while beginning to suspect foul play in Nathan's death. Nora and Nathan's relationships with the living and other uploads are central to the narrative, emphasising that human connection and love transcend the boundaries of life and death, physical and digital. In reflecting the inequalities and consumerism of the real world, the series suggests that death does not erase societal problems and aligns with Elise Bohan's (2022) critique of the practical aspects of transhumanist aspirations, particularly the current limitations of technologies like cryonics. This critique not only addresses the legal and ethical quandaries posed by such technologies but also reflects on the broader implications of seeking to transcend human mortality. The selective adoption of cryonics among wealthier transhumanists underscores issues of access and equity that are often overshadowed by the movement's more abstract philosophical debates. Moreover, while the characters seem happy, there is a sense of isolation and artificiality. They are

disconnected from the real world and their loved ones who cannot afford to upload. That is why, as the series progresses, the characters start to grapple with the limitations of this materialistic afterlife. They begin to question if true happiness lies solely in fulfilling desires or if there is something more profound missing from this digital existence. *Upload* uses its premise to discuss issues like the digital divide, privacy concerns, and the potential for exploitation by corporations that control these digital realms. It forces viewers to consider the ethical implications of such technology: Who has access to this afterlife? Who controls it? And what does it mean for concepts of mortality and eternity? At its core, the series delves into the human capacity for growth and connection beyond physical existence.

While the show does not delve deeply into the implications of uploading consciousness, it does ask viewers to consider deep philosophical questions about the connection between earthly existence and digital afterlife: What makes us human? Is consciousness preserved in digital form still “us”? Is it truly the same person or just a copy? And how should we live, knowing an afterlife can be guaranteed, albeit a digital one? This ambiguity adds another layer to the exploration of what it means to live and die in this digital age. By exploring these themes, the series touches on debates in philosophy of mind, ethics, and the nature of existence, making it a thought-provoking exploration of future possibilities. It serves as a speculative mirror, reflecting our hopes, fears, and ethical dilemmas regarding the role of technology in human life and its potential to redefine death itself, suggesting that while technology may offer new realms of existence, the quintessential human concerns – love, inequality, moral growth, – remain unchanged.

Eternal Questions, Digital Answers: Between Heaven and Code in *The Good Place*

The comparison of transhumanism to millenarian religions, albeit with qualifications, points to the deep existential and ethical questions that emerge as the movement edges closer to realising its goals. Bohan’s discussion of the potential societal impacts of indefinite human longevity – such as the philosophical reconsideration of the meaning of life and the moral implications of human mortality (or the lack thereof) – underscores the profound implications of these scientific pursuits. The notion that achieving the option to live indefinitely may lead to ethical debates about the value and purpose of extending life indefinitely highlights the need for a more comprehensive discussion on the consequences of transhumanist ambitions. From this perspective, *The Good Place*, created by Michael Schur, is a refreshing and innovative take on the afterlife that combines humour, philosophical inquiry, and ethical dilemmas. Unlike traditional depictions of heaven and hell, this series introduces viewers to a complex afterlife system where the moral value of one’s actions on Earth determines their eternal destination: the Good Place or the Bad Place. Unlike the tech-based system of *Upload*, entry into the Good Place is based on your actions during life. Points are awarded for good deeds and subtracted for bad ones. This creates a meritocratic afterlife where your behaviour determines your eternal reward. The Good Place itself is a beautifully designed paradise where residents can pursue their passions and indulge in their interests. However, it is still structured with a point system and challenges, creating a somewhat gamified afterlife experience. The point system raises questions about the definition of good and bad. Is it truly objective, or are there cultural biases? The show explores these

complexities and the challenges of defining morality in a diverse world. In fact, the series quickly reveals that this binary system is fraught with complications and inaccuracies, leading to unexpected twists and profound questions about what it means to be good. At its core, *The Good Place* challenges conventional notions of the afterlife by portraying it as an administrative system overseen by immortal beings and subject to bureaucratic errors. The series cleverly subverts traditional heaven imagery. It is not a place filled with angels and harps, but rather a constantly evolving world shaped by the residents' desires. This reflects a more modern and personalised vision of the afterlife. This setting allows the series to explore the afterlife not as a static realm of eternal reward or punishment, but as a dynamic space where characters continue to grow, learn, and confront their flaws. One of its most striking aspects is its engagement with moral philosophy. The series introduces viewers to ethical concepts and dilemmas through the experiences of its characters, particularly Eleanor Shellstrop, a morally flawed individual mistakenly sent to the Good Place. Through Eleanor's journey, the series explores questions of what it means to lead a good life, the importance of intention versus outcome in ethical actions, and the possibility of moral improvement. Relationships with others are central to ethical development and personal growth. The connections formed between Eleanor and other main characters – Chidi, Tahani, Jason, Michael, and Janet – demonstrate how interpersonal relationships can lead to profound ethical insights and personal transformation. The series suggests that heaven is not so much a place as it is the bonds we form with others, highlighting the importance of empathy, understanding, and cooperation in achieving a good life.

As the series progresses, it becomes increasingly critical of the afterlife's rigid and oversimplified system of judgement, ultimately advocating for a more nuanced understanding of morality, one that acknowledges the complexity of human actions and the influence of external circumstances on ethical decision-making. The focus shifts from simply accumulating points to personal growth and selflessness. Characters learn that true happiness comes from genuine connection and striving to be better people, not just racking up points. Even those who haven't lived perfectly can potentially earn their way into the Good Place through self-improvement. This challenges traditional concepts of eternal damnation and suggests the possibility of redemption, culminating in a radical overhaul of the afterlife system which emphasises continuous ethical development over static judgement. It also encourages further reflection on the nature of progress and the human desire to transcend, which aligns well with Bohan's exploration of psychological mechanisms in the context of transhuman historical and existential inquiry into human beliefs and their consequences. Leon Festinger's (1956) theory of cognitive dissonance, as applied to failed prophecies within millenarian movements, provides a useful framework for understanding the psychological dynamics inherent in transhumanism, particularly in relation to its anticipation of the "Singularity"—a theoretical future point when technological growth becomes uncontrollable and irreversible, resulting in unforeseeable changes to human civilization.⁵ The varied responses within the transhumanist community to the potential

⁵ The concept of Singularity in transhumanism is often associated with the development of artificial intelligence that surpasses human intelligence, leading to a point where AI can improve itself autonomously, potentially leading to rapid advancements beyond human comprehension or control. The term, in this context, was popularised by Vernor Vinge, a science fiction writer and retired San Diego State University professor of mathematics, and later by futurist Ray Kurzweil (1998), who predicts that Singularity will occur around the middle of the 21st century. Kurzweil and others speculate that post-

outcomes of such an event – ranging from enthusiastic promotion to cautious deterrence – reflect a complex negotiation of hope, fear, and expectation reminiscent of the adaptive mechanisms Festinger describes. Bohan’s reference to the “Dark Enlightenment” and its pessimistic view of the Singularity introduces a critical counterpoint to more optimistic transhumanist visions. This perspective, foreseeing a kind of anti-utopia where humanity is reduced in the face of overwhelming challenges, highlights the inherent tension between technological advancement and human vulnerability. It underscores the necessity of engaging with the ethical, societal, and existential implications of transhumanist goals, rather than simply advancing them unconditionally. Also, it suggests that transhumanism, with its futuristic scenarios and radical aspirations, is as much a reflection of human desire for meaning and improvement as it is a genuine pursuit of technological advancement. The psychological underpinnings of this movement, illuminated by the concept of adaptive preference formation, highlight the complex interplay between belief, expectation, and reality that characterises human engagement with the future. *The Good Place* has been praised for its unique blend of comedy and philosophical exploration, making such complex ethical preoccupations accessible and engaging to a broad audience. By using the afterlife as a backdrop, the series invites viewers to reflect on their values, the nature of goodness, and the possibility of change, proving that philosophical inquiry can be both enlightening and entertaining.

As a matter of fact, both *Upload* and *The Good Place* prompt reflection on the social and ethical responsibilities of transhumanist advocates. The emphasis on “technological fixes” for human limitations echoes historical and contemporary examples of utopian thinking, where the promise of a future salvation can sometimes overshadow the complexities and uncertainties of such pursuits. This comparison to millenarianism invites a critical examination of the ways in which transhumanism engages with questions of risk, morality, and the value of human life in the context of unprecedented technological change. It becomes clear that transhumanism occupies a unique position in contemporary discourse, straddling the boundaries between science, ideology, and spirituality. As the movement continues to evolve, it will be essential for its proponents to navigate these dimensions thoughtfully, balancing the pursuit of technological advancement with a deep engagement with the ethical, societal, and existential questions that such advancements inevitably raise.

Technological Transcendence: The Role of Virtual Paradises in Shaping Future Human Aspirations

Both *Upload* and *The Good Place* can thus be linked to Bohan’s idea of transhumanism as both a political ideology and a secular religion. They capture the dual nature of the movement: on one hand, a set of ideas aimed at improving the human condition through technology; on the other, a belief system with its own rituals, practices, and visions of a transformed future. This characterization highlights the deep emotional and existential investments that many transhumanists make in the pursuit of their goals, akin to the commitments seen in lifestyle politics and religious faith. The divergence of transhumanism from mainstream politics towards a more millenarian

singularity, humans and AI might merge, leading to profound and fundamental transformations in society, economy, and human identity itself. (See also Fuller 2023)

outlook is a critical point of analysis. As Bohan notes, the movement's focus on radical, future-oriented technologies – such as cryonics, digital afterlives, and life extension treatments – positions it at the fringe of conventional scientific and ethical debates. This shift reflects a deeper tension within transhumanism between its aspirations for widespread societal transformation and the practical, ethical, and existential dilemmas posed by its proposed technologies. In expanding upon Bohan's insights, it becomes evident that the study of transhumanism offers valuable lessons about the limits of human knowledge, the ethics of technological intervention, and the enduring quest for enhancement and transcendence. It calls for a sensible understanding of how technological aspirations intersect with psychological needs and societal values, urging a careful consideration of what it means to advance human capabilities in a manner that is ethically responsible, socially equitable, and deeply reflective of the diverse dimensions of the human condition. The two series' reliance on anthropological freedom and its implications for evolutionary biology and societal norms represents a thoughtful engagement with one of transhumanism's most radical and controversial tenets.

In this regard, “San Junipero,” a standout episode from the anthology series *Black Mirror*, presents a more nuanced and emotionally resonant vision of the afterlife. The episode centres on San Junipero, a digital afterlife simulation where people can choose to upload their consciousnesses after death and exist within this 80s-themed virtual world to experience potentially endless youth and joy. This virtual afterlife allows its inhabitants to choose an idealised version of themselves, frozen in a specific time period to relive their best years (thus raising questions about the value of facing reality, with all its imperfections, versus clinging to a perfect memory), or explore periods they never experienced, embodying a form of transcendence made possible through technology. As is apparent, unlike other afterlife depictions, San Junipero offers complete control. People can choose their age, appearance, and even decide when to “pass over” into the simulation. This freedom reflects a move away from traditional concepts of heaven and hell, where one's own eternal fate is predetermined, exploring the complexities of choosing to enter San Junipero and the emotional weight of letting go of earthly life. However, the core message centres on the power of love and connection that can transcend death itself. More specifically, by focusing on the love story between Yorkie and Kelly, two women who find solace and connection in San Junipero, the episode offers a significant portrayal of the afterlife as a possible haven for LGBTQ+ relationships, highlighting a theme often absent from traditional afterlife narratives: the possibility of same-sex relationships continuing after death.

In another vein, the episode “Be Right Back” presents a bleak and unsettling vision of the afterlife, or rather the lack thereof. It does not depict a traditional afterlife realm like heaven or hell, but instead focuses on the desperate attempt to cling to a semblance of a loved one after their death. The episode revolves around Martha, who, after losing her boyfriend Ash, utilises a service that creates a digital replica based on his digital footprint. This “Ash” can interact with Martha through messages and even a robotic body. However, this digital Ash is a hollow imitation. It lacks the true essence of the person, his memories, and the emotional connection Martha shared with him. The episode highlights the limitations of technology in capturing the complexities of human life and love and is more consonant with Rosi Braidotti's (2019) emphasis on the importance of embodied subjectivity, acknowledging the role of the body and lived

experiences in shaping knowledge.⁶ Martha's dependence on the digital Ash prevents her from processing her grief and moving on. This vision suggests a future where mourning and loss can be mitigated by technology, offering a simulacrum of the deceased that can interact with the living. The episode critically examines the human desire to hold on to loved ones and the lengths to which people might go to avoid the finality of death.

These episodes of *Black Mirror* illuminate the tension between traditional evolutionary frameworks and the avant-garde visions of humanity proposed by contemporary transhumanists. By identifying the intrinsic challenges posed by human nature itself—specifically, the cognitive and psychological biases hardwired into our species—on the other hand, *Upload* and *The Good Place* posit a more introspective obstacle to the transhumanist agenda. The concept of internalising barriers goes beyond the usual external factors blamed for hindering progress, such as financial constraints, regulatory issues, and societal views. It instead highlights a critical challenge within transhumanism itself: the movement's ability to overcome the psychological and emotional limitations that are deeply ingrained in human nature. This shift in focus emphasises that the obstacles to achieving transhumanism's goals are not just external, but also lie within the very psychological fabric of humans, questioning whether transhumanism can truly surpass these innate human conditions. The exploration of moral enhancement through digital or other electronic means as a solution to these biases reflects the transhumanist inclination towards technological interventions.

Above all, the caution that all of the series referred to here oppose against fuelling unrealistic expectations speaks to a critical aspect of transhumanist advocacy: the need for a balanced approach that acknowledges both the potential benefits and the limitations of current scientific understanding and technological capabilities. This caution serves as a reminder that while the pursuit of indefinite longevity may hold tremendous promise for humanity, it must be approached with a clear-eyed recognition of the challenges, uncertainties, and ethical dilemmas that accompany such profound transformations in human life. It becomes evident that the discussion around transhumanism and longevity research is not just about the technical feasibility of extending human life but also about the broader implications of such advancements for society, ethics, and the human condition. As transhumanist endeavours continue to push the boundaries of what is scientifically possible, they also invite us to reflect deeply on what it means to be human in an age of unprecedented technological potential.

⁶ In her 2019 work, *Posthuman Knowledge*, Rosi Braidotti lays out a comprehensive framework to grasp the nuances of the posthuman condition, a state of being that emerges from the complex interplay between technological advancements, the forces of globalisation, and evolving bioethical considerations. This condition is characterised by increasingly blurred distinctions between humans and machines, as well as between nature and culture, challenging our conventional understanding of these categories. Braidotti critically addresses the limitations of traditional knowledge systems that prioritise human experiences and perspectives (anthropocentrism) and depend on clear-cut, binary distinctions to define the world. She argues that such approaches are inadequate for capturing the complexities of the posthuman era, where the lines demarcating different forms of existence are continually shifting and evolving. *Posthuman Knowledge* advocates for a departure from rigid binary classifications, such as human versus non-human, proposing instead a more integrated and fluid perspective on life. According to Braidotti, this perspective encompasses not only humans and technology but also animals and the broader environment, all of which coalesce to form the tapestry of the posthuman condition.

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