Unveiling childfree voices: representation, humor, and resistance on Instagram

Voces sin hijos al descubierto: representación, humor y resistencia en Instagram

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Abstract

This research aims to reveal the social representation of voluntary childlessness (VC) on Instagram, focusing on how individuals construct and defend their childfree identity in a digital visual environment. Grounded in Social Representations Theory (SRT), the analysis examines 212 posts from Instagram accounts dedicated to VC content. Using netnography—a qualitative method for studying online communities—and thematic analysis, recurring patterns in how VC is communicated and negotiated are explored. Posts were selected based on relevant hashtags (e.g., #childfreebychoice) and representation-focused content, excluding promotional or antinatalist material. The analysis identifies three key mechanisms of representation: anchoring (e.g., the use of terms like "childfree" instead of "childless"), objectification (e.g., memes that visualize social stigmas), and repudiation (e.g., direct responses to common stigmas such as regret or selfishness). Findings demonstrate how Instagram functions as a space for identity performance, defensive communication, and resistance to dominant pronatalist narratives. This research contributes to digital representation scholarship by showing how platform affordances and user-generated content reshape marginalized social identities and offers practical implications for understanding how visual media enables counter-narratives that challenge traditional norms around parenthood.

Keywords: social representation, voluntary childlessness, childfree, Instagram, netnography, thematic analysis.

Resumen

Esta investigación tiene como objetivo revelar la representación social de la childlessness voluntaria (VC) en Instagram, analizando cómo los individuos construyen y defienden su identidad sin hijos en un entorno visual digital. Basada en la Teoría de Representaciones Sociales (SRT), se examinan 212 publicaciones de cuentas dedicadas a contenido sobre VC. Usando la netnografía y el análisis temático, se exploran los patrones recurrentes en la comunicación y negociación del VC. Las publicaciones se seleccionaron en función de hashtags relevantes (como #childfreebychoice) y contenido relacionado con la representación, excluyendo material promocional o antinatalista. El análisis identifica tres mecanismos clave de representación: anclaje (uso de términos como "sin hijos" en lugar de "infertilidad"), objetificación (memes que visualizan estigmas sociales) y repudiación (respuestas directas a estigmas comunes como arrepentimiento o egoísmo). Los hallazgos muestran cómo Instagram funciona como un espacio para el desempeño de identidad, la comunicación defensiva y la resistencia a narrativas pronatalistas. Esta investigación contribuye al campo de la representación digital al mostrar cómo las plataformas y el contenido generado por los usuarios reformulan identidades sociales marginadas, y tiene implicaciones prácticas para comprender cómo los medios visuales permiten narrativas contra las normas tradicionales de la paternidad.

Palabras clave: representación social, decisión voluntaria de no tener hijos, sin hijos por elección, Instagram, netnografía, análisis temático.

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How to cite this work

1. Introduction

The decision to remain childfree challenges dominant social norms surrounding parenthood and motherhood, which are often reinforced by mainstream media (Hintz & Haywood, 2021). Voluntary childlessness (VC) is frequently portrayed in traditional media as an anomaly, with childfree individuals being subjected to stigmatization and moral scrutiny (Giles *et al.*, 2009). Print, television, and film have long upheld pronatalist discourses by framing parenthood—particularly motherhood—as a moral imperative and a central component of feminine identity. However, the rise of social media has begun to disrupt this paradigm by offering alternative spaces for identity construction and narrative contestation (Morison *et al.*, 2016).

Unlike traditional media, which tends to perpetuate hegemonic ideals, social media platforms foster participatory cultures that allow individuals to represent themselves and form communities around shared experiences. In this context, VC individuals can challenge pronatalist norms, reclaim agency, and resist stigmatization more visibly and interactively (Volsche, 2019). Compared to platforms like Reddit, which emphasize anonymity and discussion-based interactions, or TikTok, which favors short-form performative content, Instagram stands out as a visual and narrative-rich platform. Its emphasis on curated imagery and personal storytelling makes it particularly suitable for examining how VC individuals construct and share their identities. Instagram's combination of public visibility, community-building affordances, and aesthetic self-representation make it a compelling site for observing how cultural understandings of parenthood are being reshaped.

How VC individuals represent their lifestyle on Instagram and how these representations align with Social Representations is examined. SRT (Moscovici, 1984) examines how the unknown gradually transitions into a familiar concept through a range of representation methods over time. The theory is relevant for media and communication research through various avenues. It outlines several communicative mechanisms that clarify how concepts are conveyed and converted into what is widely recognized as common sense (Höijer, 2011). Furthermore, individuals' comprehension of societal matters is molded by the media they consume, and they frame their own reality within their routine dialogues (Höijer, 2011). Consequently, societal issues eventually solidify into prevailing public sentiment. SRT explains this phenomenon by incorporating a communication element.

This work focuses on the representation of childfree choice on a social media platform. The dynamics of employing SRT to explore childfree identity on Instagram will be examined. The research is divided into six parts. The first section introduces SRT as an approach, focusing on its communicative perspectives—naming, anchoring, and objectification (Ittefaq *et al.*, 2022). The second section presents VC studies that have been previously discussed in the literature. The third part describes the methodology. The fourth section presents the findings. The fifth section examines the discussion, and the final part addresses the limitations.

2. Theoretical background

Social Representations Theory, introduced by Moscovici in 1961, is the community's collective development of a social concept intended for guiding behavior and communication. It pertains to the collective processes of constructing shared meanings. These shared cognitions foster social connections that bind societies, organizations, and groups together (Moscovici, 2001). The historical origin of the concept is based on Durkheim's "collective representations" which pertain to shared approaches for conceptualizing, contemplating, and assessing social reality. Yet, Moscovici (2000), views his concept as static when applied to our comprehension of 2000's society. It fails to capture the dynamics and adaptable nature, as well as the diversity and multiplicity of social perceptions in the current era. Academics propose that SRT encompasses not just the representations in isolation, but rather, focuses on the process of their continual construction and reconstruction through everyday social exchanges (Ittefaq *et al.,* 2022).

Communicative viewpoints covered by SRT are elaborated on below. SRT has two main communicative perspectives: anchoring and objectifying (Markowitz, 2023). Anchoring involves a classification process that situates the unfamiliar within the realm of the familiar. The alien entity is reconstructed using a familiar interpretive structure, and as the unfamiliarity diminishes through increased familiarity, it subsequently becomes less menacing (Moscovici, 1984). In essence, anchoring signifies the connection of novel ideas or phenomena with established concepts or contexts (Höijer, 2011). On the other hand, objectification is an externalization process through which representations are projected into the world using images or propositions. During the process of objectification, social representations adopt a symbolic essence—a tangible perception

of social entities that gradually becomes ingrained, facilitating communication among members of the social collective. These images permeate society, embedding themselves in collective memory and evoking emotions (Cohen *et al.,* 2022).

3. Previous studies

VC has captured the attention of traditional media (TV, newspapers) for over thirty years (Hintz & Haywood, 2021). Giles *et al*, (2009) examined articles published in British newspapers between 1990 and 2008 and found that VC was addressed through four main themes: VC as an individual rights issue, as a form of resistance, as a social trend, and as a personal decision. Hintz and Haywood (2021) identify additional concepts in U.S. newspaper coverage, including conflict, human interest, consequences, morality, and responsibility. Peterson, (2018) found that childfree couples are framed as carefree, fulfilled, and content in Swedish newspapers. (Kaklamanidou, 2019) argued that U.S. network television, with few exceptions, avoids depicting childless women and instead promotes pronatalism, linking it to neoliberal market values like surrogacy and elite education.

VC has been explored in a limited capacity within the context of social media platforms. A study uncovers how women participants in online childfree communities articulate their identities in opposition to hegemonic indicators of 'good' womanhood such as motherhood, being a housewife, being an innocent young girl (George-Allen, 2022). However, that study lacks data beyond the year 2012. Another study investigated mediated representation, collecting data from print media, broadcast media, and the internet (Moore & Geist-Martin, 2013). Morison *et al.,* (2016) examine how childfree individuals actively negotiate their identities and resist stigma within online communities. Their study, employing a feminist discursive psychology approach, explores how individuals engage in identity work to challenge pronatalist norms and avoid stigmatization. Two central rhetorical strategies emerge in this process. The childfree-by-choice script enables individuals to position themselves as rational, responsible decision-makers who have consciously opted out of parenthood. This discourse counters negative stereotypes of selfishness by framing childfree individuals as autonomous actors exercising their reproductive rights. Conversely, the disavowal of choice script presents childfreedom as an inherent trait rather than a voluntary decision, minimizing social culpability by attributing childlessness to biological predisposition or the untenable costs of parenting. These findings highlight how online spaces serve as crucial arenas where childfree individuals reclaim agency over their representations, resisting the dominant pronatalist discourse that permeates traditional media. Another study examines how leading online news sites in Indonesia (Detik.com and Kompas.com) represent "childfree" women. The author argues that these sites frame childfree women negatively, portraying them as selfish, cold, and incomplete individuals. The research, analyzing 137 news articles, demonstrates how media discourses shape these representations and reproduce pronatalist ideologies in Indonesian society (Stephani, 2025). A study conducted on TikTok focuses on Polish content, analyzing how individuals who choose to remain child-free are subjected to social shaming, the counter-narratives and defense strategies developed by the child-free community, and the psychological impact of the "authority rule" (Ryndzionek, 2024). A study examining voluntary childlessness on Reddit analyzes 424 Reddit posts by voluntarily childless ("childfree") users using Relational Dialectics Theory 2.0 to examine how discourse shapes and limits meaning in "bingo-response" interactions. The findings reveal a tension between dominant norms around reproduction and personal autonomy, highlighting how users resist social pressure through humor, monologue, and discursive strategies like countering and redefining parenthood (Hintz & Brown, 2019).

However, there is limited research exploring the role of image-centric social media platforms like Instagram in shaping VC representation. This gap is addressed by analyzing Instagram posts that depict VC experiences, focusing on their representations and framing practices. Following the theoretical framework of SRT, the first research question explores how the components of SRT are expressed in the social representation of VC on Instagram: RQ_1: How are the core mechanisms of Social Representations Theory reflected in the representation of VC on Instagram?

Even as being childfree becomes more common, individuals who are childfree, encounter social disapproval for choosing not to have children. They are generally viewed less favorably than both childless individuals (who desire children but do not have them) and parents (Hintz & Tucker, 2023). They encounter significant societal stigma (Ekelund & Ask, 2021; Hintz & Brown, 2019; Morison *et al.,* 2016). Moreover, the traditional media portrays them in a negative discourse (Hintz & Haywood, 2021), framing being VC as a social trend (Giles *et al.,* 2009) marked by challenges, stereotypes, and uncertainties (Peterson, 2018). The negative framing in traditional

media prompt the question of how childfree individuals could represent themselves if they had their own media. Examining the content created by VC individuals on Instagram will help fill this gap. Accordingly, the second research question is as follows: RQ_2: How are stigmas surrounding voluntary childlessness anchored and objectified in Instagram representations?

Departing from previous research, the social representation of VC on Instagram is examined (RQ_1) rather than focusing solely on stigma. While it does identify the dominant stigmas in these representations (RQ_2), it takes a broader approach by analyzing how childfree individuals construct and negotiate their identities within a digital visual space.

Thematizing the VC content on Instagram, a platform where users can directly produce their own content, presents an effective method for addressing these research questions. This approach allows for the exploration of representations created by the users themselves, providing valuable insights into the social dynamics at play. This methodological choice is grounded in the view that social media platforms such as Instagram offer unique affordances for identity construction and meaning-making through visual and user-generated content. As a space where individuals can curate narratives and engage in semi-public discourse, Instagram enables an in-depth exploration of how voluntary childlessness is represented and socially negotiated. The thematic analysis, guided by social representation theory (SRT), is well suited for uncovering shared symbolic structures and meaning patterns within culturally embedded discourse. By focusing on organically produced user content, this approach facilitates the investigation of everyday sense-making processes that are often absent in more traditional forms of data.

The representation of the childfree choice by VC individuals practicing VC was focused on in this study. A thematic analysis of 212 posts from Instagram accounts that produce VC content was conducted, using the framework of SRT. This analytical focus leads to the methodological approach outlined below.

4. Methodology

A qualitative methodology is employed in the research. The aim of qualitative research is to understand phenomena in context, explain behaviors and beliefs, and identify underlying processes (Hennink *et al.*, 2020, p. 10). The analysis aims to analyze 212 images from Instagram accounts that produce VC content within the framework of social representations theory. To achieve this, two different techniques were employed: netnography, to observe the social representation process of VC, and thematic analysis, to categorize the themes within VC's social representation. The implementation stages for both techniques are detailed below.

4.1. Netnography

Stenström's (2022) methodological framework for the practice of netnography was employed. A novel Instagram account (@forscientificreasons_) was generated, and accounts dedicated to the VC theme were selectively followed. The operational dynamics of the Instagram algorithm, as expounded by Mosseri, head of Instagram, inherently accord precedence to user-account interactions. In other words, new follow suggestions for an account are determined based on its previous clicks and follows. The common theme among the accounts that were followed was recognized by the Instagram algorithm, which began suggesting similar themed accounts. The algorithmic system of Instagram commenced offering recommendations of accounts that bore a thematic resemblance to those VC-themed accounts that had been chosen to follow. This algorithmic logic enabled more than two hundred pertinent VC-themed accounts to be rapidly followed within a mere ten-day timeframe. The account was started on the 27th of July 2023 and the research was ended on the 30th of September 2023.

To establish an observational framework on Instagram, accounts with an English language focus on VC-themed content were followed. The VC-themed accounts were distinguished by their usernames, posts, or by the hashtags used in their biography section, such as #childfree, #childfreebychoice, #voluntarychildfree, #intentionallychildfree, #childfreechoice, #childfreeonpurpose, #nokidding, and #dink2. As VC-focused accounts were followed, Instagram's algorithm began recommending antinatalist profiles. The Instagram algorithm perceived VC and antinatalism as representing the same worldview and associated the following of VC accounts with antinatalist content. However, antinatalism and VC stem from different philosophical perspectives.

"Antinatalism is the thought that all human beings or all sentient beings should not be born" (Morioka, 2021). In this case, an individual holds the belief that everyone should refrain from procreation, yet in the other, a person is determining their own reproductive and bodily self-governance. Due to this fundamental philosophical difference, antinatalist profiles were excluded from the study. Profiles labeled "childless" were also omitted, as they do not align with the voluntary aspect. Hence, a discernible habitus amenable to observational analysis was established, wherein exclusive attention was directed towards accounts generating content exclusively aligned with the subject matter of VC choice. At the end of this process, 232 accounts were followed.

4.2. Online sample

The 232 active Instagram accounts focusing on VC themes were encompassed. Determining the quantity of data analyzed over a three-month period from these accounts, which generate content nearly every day, presents a challenge. Due to the difficulty of predetermining the sample size in digital media, theoretical sampling was adopted. The process of theoretical sampling involves gathering, coding, and analyzing data concurrently, aiming to determine the subsequent data collection steps (Coyne, 1997, p. 625). Specific selection criteria were employed in choosing posts from VC-themed accounts. Initially, posts utilizing hashtags were focused on, as these contribute to the overall representativeness of the content. Posts featuring the hashtags #childfree, #childfreebychoice, #childfreelife, and #childfreelifestyle were incorporated into the sample. Secondly, posts were assessed for their form of representation. Promotional posts, such as those advertising a podcast or accommodation, were omitted from the sample. In total, 212 posts were included in the thematic analysis.

4.3. Qualitative Thematic Analysis (QTA)

An analysis of online content has been conducted to discern themes, employing the approach advocated by Braun and Clarke (2006). As emphasized by the authors (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 86), the first phase of the analysis involves acquainting oneself with the data. Regular visits (multiple times a day) to Instagram played a vital role in gaining an in-depth understanding of the community environments, their standards, and their characteristics (Stenström, 2022). These visits manifest in the form of the VC community on Instagram following each other, liking posts, sharing content, and offering support. According to Instagram's "time spent" menu, the average time I dedicated to acquainting myself with the data over the course of three months was 42 minutes per day.

Instagram stories that disappear within 24 hours exhibit a higher sharing frequency compared to regular posts. The post's nature is relatively straightforward. It remains on the Instagram feed unless removed by the creator, allowing for perpetual retrospective viewing. Using the netnography method, numerous stories shared by 232 accounts throughout the day were examined, and screenshots were captured and notes were taken to simplify the coding process. These screenshots and notes were then stored in the MAXQDA (2018) software package. Despite Instagram's visual nature, VC communication occurs through text-based posts. Texts in written form are transformed into photo format by users and then posted. As these posts are not in a copied and pasted format, they are preserved in their visual formats.

Initial codes were derived from a set of approximately 212 screenshots taken from Instagram posts. These 212 posts served as a reflection and representation of the prevalent themes and characteristics identified within the entire online content.

During the thematic coding process, focus was placed on semantics as proposed by Smith et al. (2021, p. 79). The following question was inquired of the posts: What is the representative purpose of this post? Initial coding was as follows: (1) establishing a positive connotation, (2) embracing VC lifestyle, (3) reversing the judgments, (4) comparison of lifestyles (with and without children). Subsequently, in accordance with the recommendations of Braun & Clarke (2006), noteworthy elements within the data were sought that bore relevance to the research question, embodying a discernible level of patterned response or meaning within the dataset. Thus, representation was uncovered, and themes relating to anchoring and objectifying were identified.

Once initial codes were established, related codes were grouped into potential themes. These thematic categories were then refined and interpreted in light of Social Representations Theory (SRT), specifically focusing on the processes of naming, anchoring, and objectification.

To enhance the validity and transparency of the analysis, a coding rationale (Table 1) was developed iteratively during the process, documenting each code, its definition, and criteria.

According to the *Guidelines for the Optimal Use of Social Media in Professional Psychological Practice*[1], researchers are advised to be aware of the public nature of social media and the fact that privacy and confidentiality cannot always be guaranteed on such platforms. The selected hashtags and keywords predominantly returned accounts with anonymous usernames, which were therefore included in the research sample.

Table 1. Theoretical Coding Rationale

Code Name	Definition	Coding Criteria
Anchoring	Anchoring involves a classification process that situates the unfamiliar within the realm of the familiar.	Posts were coded under anchoring when the childfree lifestyle was framed as a shift from an unfamiliar or stigmatized concept into something more familiar and socially recognizable.
Objectification	Objectification is an externalization process through which representations are projected into the world using images or propositions.	Posts were coded under objectification when the idea of voluntary childlessness was represented in symbolic or concretized forms, aligning with the process of making abstract concepts tangible.

Source. Own elaboration

5. Results

The findings reported in this section are structured in direct response to the research questions outlined earlier, and are interpreted through the theoretical lens of Social Representations Theory (SRT), particularly focusing on anchoring, objectification, and the additional process of stigma repudiation. Below, Figure 1 provides the themes of how VC is anchored and objectified. The following title explains each sub-theme.

Figure 1. Social Representation of Childfree Choice on Instagram
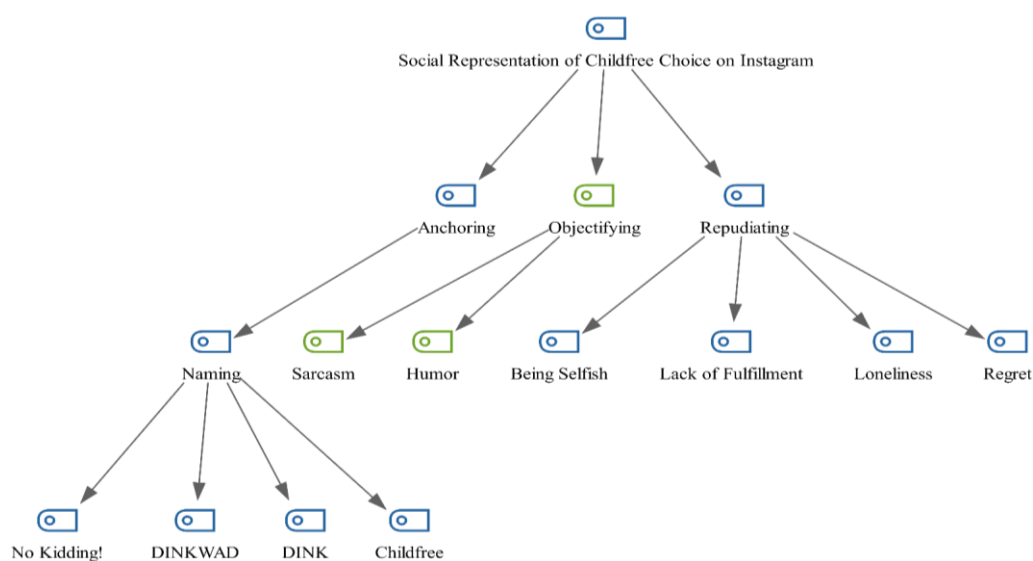
Source. Own elaboration from data.

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[1] https://www.apa.org/about/policy/guidelines-optimal-use-social-media.pdf

5.1. Anchoring via naming

In alignment with RQ_1, which asks how VC is represented on Instagram, this theme illustrates how the anchoring process takes place through naming choices.

The anchoring is defined as the categorization and naming something (Moscovici, 1984) and naming is an anchoring mechanism (Höijer, 2011). The naming component of SRT explains that the unfamiliar is anchored and labeled using pre-existing conceptual frameworks that hold significance for the public (Ittefaq *et al*., 2022). In the current research, all the 232 sampled accounts utilize the terms "childfree" or "voluntary childlessness" instead of "childless". Childfree dual-career professional couples (Boiarintseva *et al*., 2022) utilize the term DINK which stands for "double or dual income no kids." The term highlights the positive aspect of not having kids and conveys the idea of a deliberate choice. According to Statista[2], the number of DINKs is increasing in the world. In 2020, the number of DINKs in Germany reached 8.62 million, marking an increase from the previous year when it stood at 8 million. According to United State Census Bureau[3] in 2022, 43% of U.S. households were without children, reflecting a 7% rise from the figures in 2012. As a term used by content creators rather than as a label for voluntary childlessness, the most recent example encountered is "No kidding!" This expression carries a humorous connotation, both in the context of a firm decision not to have children and in its playful use of the word "child". In the work, when portraying the VC accounts on Instagram, it becomes evident that words carrying positive connotations and playful expressions are favored when selecting names for IG accounts. Communities are defined by names that represent their self-assigned identity and by the way their members interact through a common system of meanings. When we assign a name to something, we rescue it from a state of vague anonymity, giving it a lineage and integrating it into a network of precise terms. In essence, we position it within the cultural identity framework (Moscovici, 1984). As a result, the social representation of not having kids on Instagram, as manifested through the selection of names, endeavors to shed the prevailing negative connotations, and reframe them in a positive light.

In the formation of social representations, the process referred to as anchoring operates in conjunction with objectification.

5.2. Objectifying via humor

The concept of representation can be articulated as it is equal to image/signification. Within this theoretical framework, it is the process of objectification that engenders the figurative facet of representation (Hakoköngäs & Sakki, 2016). During the process of objectification, social representations develop a concrete essence, which entails a tangible perception of social entities that gradually becomes naturalized, thereby facilitating communication within the social group (Cohen *et al*., 2022). The findings from conducting netnography on Instagram feed that exclusively featuring VC accounts indicate that VC communication primarily involves written text, while visuals are primarily employed in humorous content. Humorous elements are visualized in the posts.

According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary[4], humor is defined as the quality that appeals to a sense of the ludicrous or absurdly incongruous, often eliciting laughter or amusement. It involves the ability to recognize, express, or appreciate the comical aspects of situations, behaviors, or language. This encompasses various forms, including jokes, satire, and irony, which highlight contradictions or unexpected outcomes to provoke amusement. In the context of VC representation on Instagram, humor often manifests through sarcasm, exaggeration, or self-parody, making it a dynamic discursive strategy rather than a fixed textual formula. While humour is culturally and contextually embedded, its forms—such as visual memes—carry layered meanings that are not always reducible to a single linguistic structure. The following table (Table 2) was used as a framework during the analysis of humor in the study.

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[2] https://www.statista.com/statistics/1102279/dinks-number-germany/
[3] https://www.census.gov/data/datasets/2022/demo/cps/cps-asec-2022.htm
[4] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/humor

Table 2. Humor strategy

Discursive Strategy	Example Quote/Text	Humorous Technique	Purpose
Reframing "regret"	"You'll regret it" "I regret nothing since 1979"	Irony / Counter-narrative	Rejects stereotype
Self-parody	"Yes, I'm selfish—and loving it"	Self-deprecating humour	Normalizes VC identity
Mocking parenthood	"When messing you own life is not enough"	Sarcasm / Meme	Critiques parenthood ideal

Source. Own elaboration.

The humor is mostly in the form of mocking criticisms directed at the childfree lifestyle. At times, humor is used to directly criticize the reasons for having children. Objectification entails transforming an abstract concept into a tangible representation by emphasizing its iconic characteristics, a process that can ultimately lead to naturalization, wherein knowledge assumes a status of being taken for granted (Moscovici, 1984). In this case, humor is the iconic characteristic of the social representation of VC lifestyle.

Humorous memes are used to respond to labels such as loneliness, regret, and selfishness that are often directed at childfree individuals. Loneliness (Image 1), regret (Image 2), and being selfish (Image 3) are depicted in these memes (see Appendix A for further examples of regret-referential humor: Images 6-9). The visuals effectively convey the message that the choice of a childfree lifestyle is not only accepted but actively embraced. It portrays this lifestyle as a liberating alternative that offers opportunities for personal fulfillment, autonomy, and lifestyle flexibility—without the responsibilities of parenthood.

Image 1. An example of age-referential humor
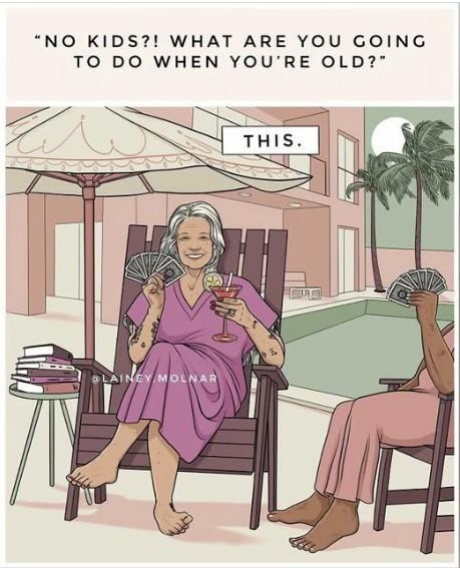
Source. The.dikcouple [@The.dikcouple]. (2023, September 5). https://www.instagram.com/p/CwzeMHqv4Bj/

Image 2. An example of regret-referential humor

Source. Childfreehumor [@childfreehumor]. (2023, September 16). [https://www.instagram.com/p/CxQqKfyhOrp/

Humor aids VC representers who are non-parents in dealing with societal pressures. When dealing with labels is challenging, users cleverly turned to humor, playfully mocking the choice of parenthood as a way to lighten the mood and deflect scrutiny. VC individuals employ humor to jest at themselves. Women portrayed themselves as "selfish, childish, and irresponsible", yet even in doing so, they consistently infused it with humor and self-parody (Clarke *et al.*, 2018). Humor is common in the sharing of images and videos related to the VC lifestyle (Hintz & Brown, 2020). The outcome of incorporating visuals into the objectification obtained in this study is frequently observed.

Image 3. An example of being selfish humor

Source: childfree_mumbai [@childfree_mumbai].
(2023, March 11). https://www.instagram.com/p/Cpohn2JoLql/

Sarcastic memes have been used in the objectification of the childfree representation (Images 4, 5). (See Appendix B for further examples of sarcasm: Images 10-13). The sarcasm in the images cleverly shines a spotlight on the trials of parenthood, the endless stigmas about regret, and a host of other sweeping generalizations, transforming them into a humorous commentary on the everyday realities of parenting.

Image 4. An example of sarcasm on parenting

Source. Childfreehumor [@childfreehumor]. (2021, October 21). https://www.instagram.com/p/CU0CPugDVy-/
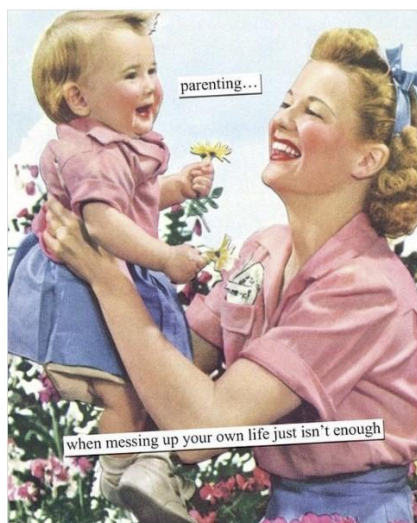
Image 5. An example of sarcasm on having kids
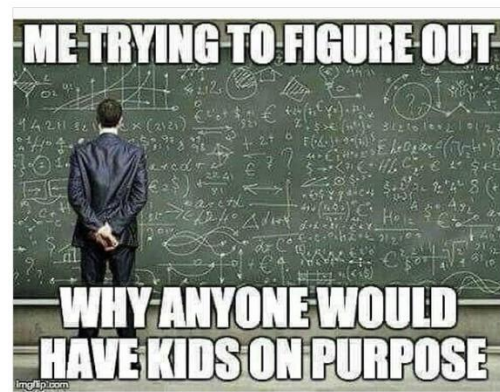
Source. Childfreehumor [@childfreehumor]. (2021, October 4). https://www.instagram.com/p/CUl9jP0D-_e/

Sarcasm serves as a communicative way employed by individuals who have chosen a childfree lifestyle when addressing stigmas (Venkatesanand & Murali, 2021). Volsche (2019) demonstrated that sarcasm and humor are conveyed through memes. The author's analysis, using online ethnography, showed the extensive use of memes in the digital representation of the childfree lifestyle.

Social representations serve the purpose of re-acting, rejecting, or reshaping a portrayal of the world that contradicts one's interests, standpoint, and self-identity. The findings of the investigation reveal that the representation of the VC lifestyle on Instagram is oriented towards the transformation of ingrained social perceptions.

5.3. Repudiating via debunking stigmas

In response to RQ_2, which explores the prominent stigmas in VC representation, this section presents how stigmatizing assumptions such as regret or selfishness are actively challenged through visual humor and user narratives.

The thematic analysis indicates that the third form of representation of VC on Instagram is focused on repudiating stigmas. Findings (See Figure 1) have pointed out that on Instagram, a significant portion of VC representation is directed towards rebutting allegations made against individuals who have chosen not to have children. Various misconceptions are stigmas attributed to individuals who are childfree. The stigma directed at childfree individuals has always been highly prevalent (Ekelund & Ask, 2021; Morison *et al.*, 2016). Hence, it is reasonable to anticipate that representation of VC has evolved into a form of defense. The most prevalent representations are associated with the following themes: regret, loneliness, a lack of fulfillment, and selfishness.

5.4. Regret

VC Content creators on Instagram counter the claim that those who remain childfree will regret it in the future in three distinct ways. The first approach involves sharing research findings that demonstrate childfree individuals do not experience regret in old age. They often represent these findings by visualizing the results of a study or sharing them directly. The second approach involves refuting this claim through their own personal experiences. A VC Instagram account owner says, "This old lady has been hearing 'you'll regret it' since 1979 and, still doesn't regret it." (Instagram Post, 2022). Below, several examples are provided gleaned from the posts of other VC content creators:

> "It is a far greater risk to have children and regret having them" (Instagram Post, 2023).

> "Everyone always assumes and talks about how lonely and full of regret a woman or even man will be if they decide to be childfree..... It's not the struggle of the decision to remain childfree that's the struggle, it's the harsh comments and uninvited opinions of those closest to us" (Instagram post, 2022).

> "I won't regret being childfree when I'm older because know and understand my choice" (Instagram post, 2020).

The third approach involves making comparisons. Content creators highlight posts that feature expressions of regret from parents, emphasizing that regret is a potential outcome in both scenarios. This resonates with the finding that some women regret choosing to become mothers (Matley, 2020). There are representations that refute regret by sharing an image of an account claiming that motherhood is unsatisfying, along with visually incorporating other comments that agree with this sentiment.

Studies indicate that the majority of childfree individuals do not experience feelings of regret about their decision to remain childfree during menopause, perimenopause, and as they entered midlife or after the sterilization procedure (DeLyser, 2012; Doyle *et al.*, 2013).

Upon analyzing VC representation on Instagram, the sentiment of regret does not seem to emerge. Instead, a discourse challenging this stigma is prevalent.

5.5. Loneliness

Another VC representation on Instagram addresses the notion that childfree individuals will suffer from loneliness. VC content creators represent the misconception of equating being a VC with being lonely by opening a discussion on the concept of loneliness. It is reminded in the posts that individuals with children may also have to cope with loneliness. One user expressed this by stating:

> "Having children is not guarantee that you're not going to be alone" (Instagram post, 2022).

The literature supports these statements. Children do not alleviate feelings of loneliness and isolation (O'Driscoll & Mercer, 2018), moreover, parenthood does not inherently preclude the experience of loneliness (Greenblatt-Kimron *et al.*, 2021).

Another argument produced against the claim of loneliness is that VC individuals can maintain healthy and long-lasting relationships, thereby not remaining alone. For instance, one user stated:

> "It is often assumed that childfree people will be lonely in old age. However, many childfree individuals build social connections, maintain close relationships with extended family, and plan their retirement and elder care as parents do" (Instagram post, 2021).

The claim of loneliness reduces the motivations of parents to have children to merely avoiding loneliness. A post by a user criticizing this perspective is as follows:

> "Fear of old age or loneliness does not trump mental health or generational trauma" (Instagram post, 2023).

Society promotes reproduction for various reasons, such as mitigating loneliness in old age, preempting potential regrets in the future, and allowing parents to experience grandparenthood. However, VC representers on Instagram reject this linkage and portray themselves as ordinary people living their lives like any other members of society.

The choice argument is used against the label of loneliness. Individuals who consciously choose a childfree life embrace their own decisions. A user posted the following, emphasizing the choice argument:

> "Have can you be truly lonely if you ENJOY the life you choose for yourself?" (Instagram post, 2021).

> "Our choice gives us a great freedom to design our days with a balance of meaningful work, while pursuing our many passions" (Instagram post, 2023).

5.6. Lack of fulfillment

On Instagram, there are representations that challenge the notion of a childfree life being incomplete or unworthy of living. The findings of the current analysis suggest that VC representation on Instagram generates counterarguments against the notion that VC individuals not have children lack a sense of fulfillment. The posts are formulated as open and straightforward narratives as in the following statements:

> "I live my life filled with gratitude. I am grateful for my time" (Instagram post, 2020).

> "I am living my best life. I can do whatever I want" (Instagram post, 2023).

> "I wanted to live a full expansive life without limits and having children felt too limiting" (Instagram post, 2021).

VC content creators, who view Instagram as a platform to reach their target audience, engage in VC representation by conveying various messages to individuals encountering the "lack of fulfillment" label. The analyzed material clearly shows that VC representatives disagree with the idea of lack of fulfillment. Users underline that there are numerous ways to find fulfillment in life beyond having children such as spending time with loved ones, adopting pets, helping those in need, traveling, and engaging in artistic pursuits. According to VC representatives, the meaning of life should not be reduced to having children, and personal fulfillment can be achieved through various means. VC representatives emphasize the need to consider the possibility that individuals with children may also experience a lack of fulfillment.

> "Please do not fall into this mindset trap. Meaning, fun, fulfillment, laughter, and joy are exclusive to parenting and not guaranteed by parenting either" (Instagram Post, 2021).

> "There are many different paths to fulfillment and happiness and motherhood is just one of them" (Instagram post, 2023).

These findings correspond with the finding of Stahnke *et al.*, (2022) analyzing peer-reviewed articles spanning from 1979 to 2020, reveals a discernible positive association between being VC and levels of life satisfaction. The persistent devaluation of a satisfying life by society is mirrored within VC representation as a form of defense mechanism.

5.7. Being selfish

As indicated by findings, the representation of the stigma surrounding selfishness is constructed in a way that separates it from being directly linked to the choice of having or not having children. In the representation of VC individuals on Instagram, the rhetoric suggests that selfishness is not vehemently rejected, but rather seen as a commonplace, human, and natural attribute. One of the VC content creators shared the following statement:

> "Everyone is selfish. It shouldn't be a dirty word. But parents are not any more selfless than childfree people just by virtue of being parents" (Instagram post, 2023).

VC representatives advocate that no one should need a disclaimer when it comes to making choices, in response to accusations of selfishness. This creates the impression of insecurity regarding the VC choice and is a form of people-pleasing behavior. Users alert each other on this matter and embrace their VC choices.

As a rebuttal to the stigmatization of people who choose not to have children as selfish or self-centered, this counter-narrative encompasses accomplished women who have made significant contributions to civil rights, environmental causes, systemic reform, and women's rights. For instance, an Instagram user posted about successful childfree women and artists[5], emphasizing their contributions to humanity (Instagram post, 2022). Moreover, there are a non-altruistic motivation to have children, such as avoiding feelings of uselessness (Newton *et al.*, 1992), succumbing to familial and societal pressures due to the prevalence of parenthood (Cassidy & Sintrovani, 2008) or driven by materialistic desires (Cassidy & Sintrovani, 2008). Therefore, it is expected that the representation of VC functions as a response to the label of selfishness.

6. Discussion

The analysis of findings directly addresses both research questions by illustrating how anchoring and objectification serve as foundational mechanisms of VC representation (RQ_1), while the theme of stigma repudiation sheds light on how childfree individuals resist dominant cultural narratives (RQ_2). This analytical structure reinforces the coherence between theory, method, and findings.

The study contributes to digital media research literature. Within the framework of SRT, it finds that anchoring takes place through naming, while objectification is achieved through humor. Findings indicate that, the concept of VC has achieved a distinct representation on Instagram, one that cannot be explained solely through anchoring and objectification: repudiating stigmas. Instagram users representing VC have engaged in defensive communication by displaying representations aimed at refuting the labels of regret, loneliness, lack of fulfillment, and selfishness directed at voluntarily childfree individuals. This theoretical implication leads discussions. Moscovici (1984) refers to these representations as "emancipated representations," which, akin to VCs, attain a level of autonomy compared to the level of society. The representation of childfree choice on Instagram functions as framing in digital media. The digital representatives of VC framed the matter with a focus on addressing misconceptions and adopting a defensive communication stance. Social representation and framing function as two complementary theories. As such, these two theories have been previously employed

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[5] The women mentioned in the post: Rosa Parks, Dorothy Height, Helen Keller, Jovita Idar, Rachel Carson, Mavynee Betsch, Jane Addams, Sophonisba Breckinridge, Shirley Chisholm, Antonia Pantoja, Susan Anthony, Lida Heymann, Sheila Michaela

and jointly examined (Bugden *et al.*, 2017). Framing reveals the structure and format of the content, while social representations focus on their meanings. These two theoretical stances are interconnected through the concept of ideology, which comprises a set of beliefs influencing how individuals take positions on social issues (Reyes-de-Cózar *et al.*, 2022). As those who represent the VC are also the creators of digital media content, framing in this context can be described as self-framing. Thereby the VC representatives frame their way of life.

Focusing on the representation of VC within a social platform such as Instagram allows for a comparative analysis of VC's representation in digital media versus traditional media. In a study examining the coverage of VC in the UK press following frames are used: "dissolution of the family unit", "Delayed motherhood" (VC represented as a temporary phase), "children dilemma", "Inevitability of children" (Giles *et al.*, 2009). Another examination indicates that in Australian print media, VC women were predominantly depicted in a negative light, marked by tones of reprimand, pity, and veiled threats (Graham & Rich, 2014). Furthermore, network television, with few exceptions, doesn't just steer clear of represent female VC; it actively promotes pronatalism (Kaklamanidou, 2019). In light of the findings regarding how VC is represented in traditional media, it's clear that the representation of VC in digital media follows a different trajectory. Within the digital landscape, there is a concerted effort to challenge misperceptions about VC and refrain from trivializing it through humor. These findings underscore a significant divergence between the representations of VC in traditional and digital media. Whereas traditional media—such as print journalism and television—tend to frame voluntary childlessness through lenses of deficiency, deviance, or delayed conformity (Giles *et al.*, 2009; Graham & Rich, 2014; Kaklamanidou, 2019), digital platforms such as Instagram enable more varied, agentic, and affirmative portrayals. As Morison *et al.* (2016) suggest, online spaces provide childfree individuals with the opportunity to engage in active identity work and challenge pronatalist stigmas. Similarly, Volsche (2019) highlights how social media fosters counter-narratives that reclaim reproductive autonomy. On Instagram, VC users not only assert their choices but also construct supportive communities through relatable and aesthetically curated content. Humor, rather than trivializing VC—as often seen in traditional media—is reappropriated as a rhetorical strategy to resist stigma and reframe societal expectations (Hintz & Brown, 2019). A recent research on TikTok further supports this by showing how Polish childfree individuals confront social shaming and develop defense narratives to counter the "authority rule" that positions parenthood as a moral obligation (Ryndzionek, 2024). These dynamics suggest that platforms like Instagram function as discursive counter-publics where dominant cultural narratives about parenthood are negotiated, resisted, and reimagined from within.

The major theoretical implication of the examination lies in adding a third dimension at repudiating stigmas. Besides, the efficacy of SRT in explaining the representation of VC in social media is affirmed. Those findings underline the need for society to cultivate greater understanding toward individuals who choose to be childfree. The research also holds practical significance, revealing that new media serves as a conducive platform for representing practices that diverge from the dominant norm. VC's representation on Instagram introduces a novel means of asserting one's existence in societies where the opportunity to express that opting not to have children is a valid choice is not evenly distributed. These platforms enable VC individuals to create alternative narratives and assert their choice not to have children as a valid, positive decision. Morison *et al.*, (2016) smilarly discovered that VC individuals have developed a strategy to address stigmas, combatting them effectively. In the formation of social representations, the process referred to as anchoring operates in conjunction with objectification.

The affordances and dominant usage patterns of Instagram—often centered around entertainment, visual aesthetics, and lifestyle presentation—inevitably shape the tone of voice employed in VC-related posts. The platform's informal and image-driven nature encourages users to adopt a light, witty, or even humorous tone, even when addressing serious topics such as social stigma or reproductive autonomy. This tone may serve a dual function: it aligns with the communicative norms of Instagram while also softening the potential tension around counter-normative messages. As such, the affective and stylistic choices observed in the data are not only reflective of individual identity work but also of the platform's broader cultural expectations.

On Instagram, embracing the childfree lifestyle involves the use of anchoring, objectifying, and repudiating techniques for representation. Repudiating is another communicative perspective of the VC representation in the exploration. The results imply that the repudiation of stigmas constitutes a crucial aspect of VC representation. Active engagement in repudiation by childfree individuals on Instagram not only challenges societal stigmas but also creates empowering narratives around their lifestyle. This process of repudiation allows them to reshape public perceptions, making the childfree choice more acceptable and legitimate within a broader social context.

7. Limitations

The findings of this exploration are confined to the sample defined by the specified time frame and quantity. Should the selection of keywords or the scope of the sample be broadened, the results may be subject to variation.

The media's role in shaping social representations extends beyond anchoring, objectifying, or repudiating. Other processes such as naturalization also contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted role of media in constructing these representations (Ittefaq *et al.*, 2022). The results of this research support the need for greater exploration of the context of the social representation of VC on social media. Future research endeavors focusing on diverse dimensions of VC within online social representation will contribute to a more profound scholarly understanding of the topic.

The analysis is restricted to content produced in English and within a specific cultural-linguistic context, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research could expand the scope by incorporating other image-based platforms such as TikTok or Pinterest, or by conducting comparative analyses across culturally diverse VC communities. Additionally, a cross-platform approach may reveal how different affordances shape the construction and circulation of VC-related narratives. These extensions would contribute to situating the present findings within a broader conversation about digital identity, reproductive autonomy, and platform-specific media practices.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that this research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.
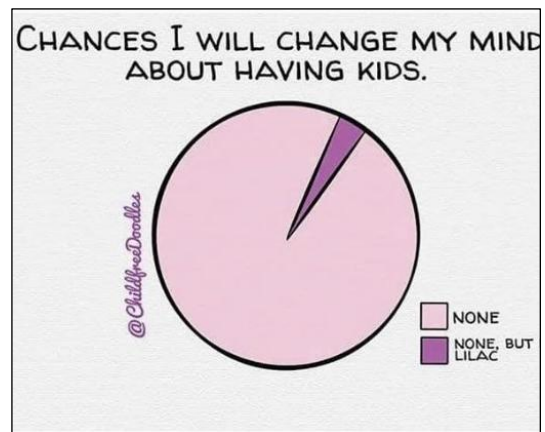
Appendices

Appendix A

Image 6.

Source. Childfreehumor [@childfreehumor]. (2023, July 6). https://www.instagram.com/p/CuXWptov1CQ/

Image 7.

Source. Childfreehumor [@Childfreehumor]. (2023, July 20). https://www.instagram.com/p/Cu7jmEUP_vl/

Image 8.

Source. childfree_as_fuck [@childfree_as_fuck]. (2022, July 22). https://www.instagram.com/p/CfMvufOthGz/

Image 9.

Source. Childfreehumor [@childfreehumor]. 2023, July 20). https://www.instagram.com/p/CqGpRUbJM_v/

Appendix B

Image 10.

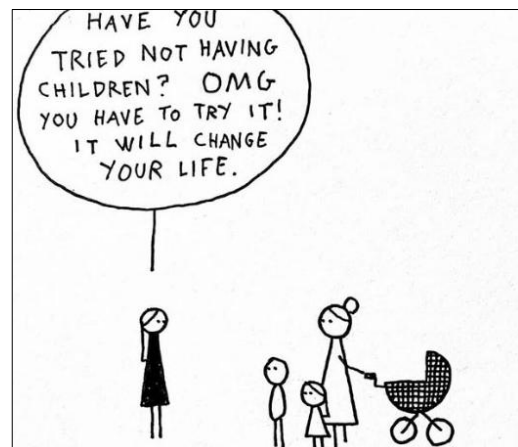Source. Beingchildfree [@beingchildfree (2021, September 24). https://www.instagram.com/p/CxlkqJ9y91J/

Image 11.

Source. Childfreehumor [@childfreehumor]. (2022, March 23). https://www.instagram.com/p/Cbc6rqLjGbZ/

Image 12.

The.dikcouple [@the.dikcouple].
(2023, July 26). https://www.instagram.com/p/CvJ27Zo
vNzs/

Image 13.

Childfreehumor [@childfreehumor].
(2023, August 28). https://www.instagram.com/p/Cwf2p
IJPlIT/