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Becoming Mothers? No Thanks! The Phenomenon of Childfree Women in a Web Community

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Abstract. The article intends to examine the cultural phenomenon called “childfree”, that is, those women who choose not to have a child, and examines the forms of symbolic and relational psychological resistance that they give rise to in opposition to a culture that, instead, still forcefully affirms the equation “woman = mother”. To this end, the study focuses on two web communities on the social media Facebook that bring together online all the women who adhere to this subcultural universe in which the experience of motherhood does not constitute a goal of fulfillment. Applying a digital ethnography approach, the researchers wanted to examine, through the posts, the discursive and communicative practices through which women define themselves as childfree; the motivations that lead to giving up, to the point of belittling, what is still considered the maximum expression of a woman’s fulfillment: becoming a mother. The study also aims to verify whether a “collective self” is created where the community becomes a catalyst for identity, culture, emancipation and struggle, as well as the nucleus of resistance to dominant models to build alternative visions on concepts such as motherhood, gender roles, educational models, representations of femininity.

Keywords: Childfree Women, Propensity to Motherhood, Digital Ethnography, Web Community.

1. INTRODUCTION

The demographic trends of Europe signal a worrying decrease in the birth rates of some countries – especially for Italy – such as to induce sociologists and demographers to foresee a real “demographic winter”. In the face of this aspect, as scholars report, today’s society increasingly highlights a pronatalist orientation that exalts and encourages procreation with ad hoc policies aimed at families, in the form of family allowances, housing subsidies, leave and tax breaks for dependent children, discouraging the use of contraceptive systems, abortion and supporting traditional values on gender and family (Kroløkke, Myong, Adrian and Tjørnhøj-Thomsen 2016).

Men and women are therefore confronted with the imperative (cultural, social and now also institutional) to procreate, as an essential stage in their biographical and biophysical journey, but also as a personal, social and economic cost that the parental function requires. Parental obligation particularly affects women, who have always been subjected to strong pressures, despite the feminist movements having made it increasingly clear that women's social identity is not limited to the maternal function, but rather to the possibility of reconciling this need with other fundamental goals of fulfillment (Rich 1976; Butler 2004) – such as, for example, that of having a job that gratifies them. Faced with such pressures, the female universe responds with different strategies, some of which vary in relation to those that are the social determinants that predispose (or not) to the propensity for motherhood, (such as for example age, social status, educational qualifications, adequate support networks, etc.). Among these are also women who decide to postpone this eventual maternity, to defer it over time (for example after completing their studies and becoming professionally successful), or to renounce it altogether, increasingly highlighting how the decision to become mothers is also a subjective fact, and not only the result of favorable conditions of a structural nature that predispose it. In light of this premise, this article intends to examine the cultural phenomenon called “childfree”, that is, those women who choose not to have a child, and examines the forms of symbolic and relational psychological resistance that they give life to in opposition to a culture that, instead, still forcefully affirms the equation “woman = mother” (Gillespie 2003). To this end, the study focuses on two web communities in the social media Facebook that bring together online all the women who adhere to this subcultural universe in which the experience of motherhood does not constitute a goal of fulfillment (childfree). By applying a digital ethnography approach, the researchers wanted to examine, through the posts, the discursive and communicative practices through which women define themselves as childfree; the motivations that lead to the renunciation, to the point of belittling, what is still considered the highest expression of a woman's fulfillment: becoming a mother. The study also wants to verify whether a “collective self” is created where the community becomes a catalyst of identity, culture, emancipation and struggle, as well as the nucleus of resistance to dominant models to build alternative visions on concepts such as motherhood, gender roles, educational models, representations of femininity (Jenkins 2006).

2. ITALIAN WOMEN'S INTENTION TO PARENTHOOD

In recent years, the governments of EU countries have reported a sharp decline in population and the consequences that this phenomenon will produce in the decades to come on the stability of welfare states.

In Italy, in 2023 there were only 379,890 births (Istat 2024), the lowest value in its history. The birth rate in Italy is among the lowest of those recorded in other European countries (6.4 per 1,000 inhabitants in 2023), with a reduction of 3.6% compared to 2022, data that confirm that the country is no longer in an emerging but structural situation that must be remedied quickly to ensure a better future compared to the present condition.

Focusing on the gender component, it emerges that women choose to postpone the birth of children, for work and professional fulfillment objectives, an aspect that in turn has repercussions on the fertility rate which, again in Italy, has fallen to 1.20 children per woman in 2023. Italian women decide to have children later and later: the average age at childbirth has risen to 32.5 years in 2023 (32.6 years in the North, 32.9 years in the Center and 32.2 years in the South), with an increase of 2 years compared to the data of 20 years ago (Istat 2024: 4). This is due to the structural reduction of the female population of childbearing age (15-50 years): not only are fewer children being born, but there are also fewer women of childbearing age who could give birth to them, since having children is a choice that is increasingly postponed over time. From the results of a recent research that investigated through a mixed methods approach the propensity to parenthood of young people in a specific area of Italy (Mangone *et al.* 2025), significant gender differences between men and women emerge. While on the one hand a lower propensity of men towards parenthood is confirmed, women have developed a more complex vision of the problem compared to the past, highlighting the difficulties in carrying out this project, on which they perceive not only psychological fears, but also difficulties resulting from precarious economic and work conditions, all these factors together affect the imagining of themselves as mothers, at least in the short term (Palidda 2021).

In the face of these data, policies seem to fail to consider how the collective imagination on parenthood that affects the new generations has changed, and women with respect to their desire to become mothers.

In fact, despite the many achievements of feminism, it is women who are primarily looked at when talking about generativity, as well as being the main recipients of awareness campaigns on the topic, such as the particularly discussed “Fertility Day”, promoted in 2016 by

the then Minister of Health Beatrice Lorenzin (Grilli and Parisi 2024). The issue particularly affects women also because in Italian culture an often idealized vision of the maternal figure is established, with which women throughout the country are confronted, both because they themselves have been socialized within this model, and because this imagery, in addition to proving to be anachronistic for the times, contrasts heavily with the difficulties that they experience first and foremost during their existence in reconciling the goal of educational and professional self-realization and the desire for parenthood. To complicate matters further, Italian society is particularly ineffective in responding to the broader problem of gender equality, where women still do not achieve the same results as men in terms of employability, nor have they been able to break through that “glass ceiling” that condemns them to poorly paid and low-skilled jobs. The persistence of a Mediterranean-style welfare model and the centrality that these occupy in making up for the lack of care services make the issue of motherhood a choice that is particularly invested in women, on whose shoulders culturally falls the social expectation of having to “sacrifice” themselves for others and in particular for their children, according to a scheme still strongly based on a sexist and patriarchal vision of gender roles (Abbatecola 2023).

If a part of the female world lives with frustration this difficulty in starting a family and in particular in bringing children into the world, another part of this world does not seem to care, and not only because of a growing individualism (which today seems to affect all individuals regardless of their gender), but also because of some doubts of an ethical nature, which strengthen their choice (such as for example the question of abortion), or even because of fears that refer to psychological concerns (not feeling sufficiently ready, fear of conception, post-partum depression, etc.), as well as factors, as mentioned above, linked to the possibility of supporting them, and therefore to economic conditions, or to being able to take care of them, such as the lack of services for childcare. These women today are identified with the term Childfree and includes a group of people of different ages and social backgrounds who for different reasons decide to give up the intention of becoming mothers. According to the most recent data from the Youth Report of the Toniolo Institute (2024) and IPSOS, 21% of women of parental age (between 24 and 34 years old) say they do not want children, a sharp increase compared to 2020 when the percentage was 14.5%; furthermore, 29% express a low motivation for motherhood, and only 50% are eager to become a mother. The choice to be a woman with a childfree orientation lends itself to

two types of evaluations made by the outside world: on the one hand, this is seen as a form of failure, connected to the idea that women cannot feel complete without having found a form of fulfillment in becoming mothers; on the other hand it is considered as a sign of emancipation of a female universe that rejects visions that focus on the equation “woman = mother”, but on the contrary valorizes the imperative built within feminism that women have power over their own bodies and that therefore they are autonomous in relation to the decision whether or not to bring a child into the world, on a par with the autonomy culturally and socially granted in this aspect, which has always been granted to the male gender (Blackstone 2014)

3. BEING A CHILDFREE WOMAN: BETWEEN CHOICES AND STRUCTURAL CONDITIONING

Over time, following the economic boom and urbanization, the family structure has evolved from an extended and patriarchal configuration to a poly-nuclear structure within which the relationships between the genders are more symmetrical, and where the meaning of some passages, such as getting married or having children, are almost no longer conceived as pre-established and obligatory stages, but processes of voluntary choice (Bramanti and Bosoni 2024). In fact, offspring ceases to be seen as the pursuit of a surname and the strengthening of the workforce, becoming within the couple the realization of a shared desire, but above all the product of a choice. If on the one hand a child-centric orientation is affirmed in which the couple directs its commitment and interest on the complete development of children, at the same time the desire of some not to want children and to cultivate other interests of personal fulfillment is affirmed.

In fact, if it is true that the theme of motherhood has been the subject of various studies, especially within a specific current of feminism that has exalted specific and positive aspects as distinctive elements of being female (Cavarero and Restaino 2002), on the other hand, there have been residual reflections that have highlighted how pregnancy and motherhood affect the psychological and social well-being of women. Some studies (Doyle *et al.* 2013), instead, highlight how pregnancy most often constitutes a psychologically and socially complex experience, within which women can experience various emotions, including negative ones, such as the fear of childbirth, the anguish connected to the changes to which the body is subject, the painful experience of

breastfeeding and the subsequent psychological “detachment” from the child.

The complexity with which women relate to the desire for motherhood refers to the thought of Elisabeth Badinter (2012) who highlights how maternal love is uncertain and fragile and not deeply engraved in female nature like any human feeling. Following an evolutionary conception of love, one could affirm that maternal love is not an “absolute” love, it “can exist” “or not exist” and characterizes each woman differently.

Women who choose not to procreate due to a lack of desire often emphasize the centrality of self-determination and individual empowerment. This conscious choice reflects the refusal to conform to predefined social expectations and illustrates the strength in the assertiveness of one’s preferences (Hintz and Tucker 2023). The absence of desire for motherhood does not imply a lack of love or commitment to family or community life, so much so that many of these women contribute significantly to family relationships, are involved in volunteering and other forms of social participation (Foster 2000; Stahnke *et al.* 2022).

To better clarify the relationship that is established between “the choice” to be a childfree person and the historical and social conditions within which this is accomplished, it may be useful to return to the distinction that is made in literature between “childless” and “childfree”, which is now more widely used to describe this condition.

The concept of “involuntary childless” around the 70s refers to the group of people, couples who do not have children for involuntary reasons, mostly related to health reasons of one or both partners, or to sterility (Calhoun and Selby 1980; Gillespie 2003). However, it is only starting from the 80s, also due to the data that were recorded regarding the lowering of fertility rates and the first studies on the subject, that the condition of “voluntary childness”, or “childness by choice” characterized by the permanent will of non-fertility, began to be studied. Terms, today replaced by that of “childfree” (Gillespie 2003; Letherby 2002) where the suffix “free” was chosen precisely to be able to capture the sense of freedom for the lack of obligations deriving from those who voluntarily decide not to have children.

The clear demarcation between the two terms “childless” and “childfree”, however, presents the risk of not considering how the choice not to have children is placed within a process that unfolds over time, subject to potential renegotiation, conditioned by aspects such as health, gender and generational relations, as well as structural aspects that affect or predispose to becoming parents. Identifying the boundary between voluntary

choice and choice dictated by external factors becomes complex in some cases, for example, some women may postpone the choice to become mothers over time, until this becomes impossible or highly unlikely.

As Serri *et al.* (2019: 169) point out, «clearly defining the different identities of childfree women risks overshadowing the processes – always contradictory and ambivalent – of situated construction of the meaning of social and personal reality. The reality of ‘childfreedom’ cannot be understood as a fixed and unambiguous condition and, like all human experiences, has no intrinsic essential meaning».

Although the term refers to both men and women, research has focused on the latter, placing itself in line with the dominant biopolitical regulation of bodies and reproduction that entrusts women with the responsibility and obligations connected to reproductive choices. Most governments in Western countries have introduced pronatalist policies in recent years; childless women challenge the dominant social themes of a society that promotes the reproduction of human life, procreation and parenthood to ensure the continuity of the human species. As Grilli and Parisi point out: (2024: 49) «Procreation is thus considered a social good that needs to be controlled and cultivated from childhood to adulthood through lifestyles appropriate to the reproductive function of the subjects, avoiding incorrect habits and behaviors [...] particularly harmful to the good health of spermatozoa and oocytes».

Considering these aspects, childfree women are often the object of condemnation and judgment by society. Many, due to their choices, are perceived as “selfish” people who renounce their natural predisposition, an impoverishment not only of their social identity, but more generally of their feminine identity.

The equation “woman = mother” is deeply rooted not only in common sense, but also within political institutions, and is evident from the orientation of family policies in which women and in particular motherhood is considered central pivots that also find their maximum expression in the model of the traditional nuclear family (Guerzoni, Trappolin and Parisi 2024).

In light of these considerations, the choice to be Childfree women also refers to the reflective capacities that they develop about themselves, in relation to a patriarchal and sexist system that assigns them, on the basis of a naturalized vision of gender roles, certain attitudes and stereotypes, including taking for granted their propensity for motherhood, their predisposition for care work, and other aspects that have always been put under the lens of observation and criticism of feminist thought (Rich 1976). From this point of view, the relationship

between childfree women and feminist thought is not a given, therefore there will be childfree women who will not question an essentialist vision of gender identity and roles, others who on the contrary will claim a precise position within precise currents of this matrix of thought, often presenting their point of view as a form of resistance to counter the reproduction of the gender order and its power relations.

4. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF THE STUDY OF CHILDFREE WOMEN'S ONLINE COMMUNITIES

In light of the theoretical aspects presented and assuming a certain lability of the boundary between self-determination and structural conditions (health, relational, social, economic, including the issue of time), the general objective of the research was to examine the variety of motivations that push women to choose not to become mothers, trying to arrive with the results collected to the synthesis of a theoretical model that can make evident in a more intelligible way the set of factors called into play in the condition of childfree women (Tarozzi 2008). A second objective, instead, was to understand how childfree web communities could, in addition to providing support to women, give rise to alternative narratives on issues such as motherhood, parenthood, gender roles, etc., connecting to some form of active feminist claim both online and offline.

To this end, the study focused on this subcultural universe within two childfree web communities that bring together people for whom the experience of parenthood is not a goal of fulfillment. Applying a digital ethnography approach, the researchers wanted to analyze, through the posts of this community, the discursive and communicative practices with which the women themselves define themselves as childfree within the web communities.

Digital ethnography or 'netnography' falls fully within the so-called "digital methods" (Delli Paoli and Masullo 2022) and consists of the direct observation (participated or not) of the narratives in the form of posts and comments expressed within digital spaces, including both the circumscribed ones (as in the case of a blog or specific web communities) and the decontextualized cross-media digital ones, connected through sharing and comments on a topic of common interest. The cognitive objective of netnographic research concerns the cultural, relational and value experiences developed within these digital spaces, to which the research aims to give meaning and interpretation (Masullo 2023). The choice of a

netnographic research approach, therefore, is linked to the fact that feminist media studies have highlighted how new ways of "saying" and "doing gender" emerge from the digital environment that question the traditional essentialist and sexist visions of gender identities and roles, an aspect that has led scholars to define this era as that of the "fourth wave" of feminism¹ (Farci and Scarcelli 2023); on the other hand, studying the theme of the propensity to motherhood in the digital environment allows us to examine how the new communication tools promote from below «forms of discourse and representations of the self and of reality implemented» (Locatelli 2023: 173) that through a classic approach to research would not have been easy to grasp due to the difficulties that some women still experience offline within interpersonal face-to-face relationships dominated by traditional visions of gender and gender roles. Online communities are configured, for childfree women, privileged spaces within which they can "co-construct" new points of view with relative safety², experiment with forms of agency with other women who otherwise would not have the means to intercept. From these spaces, sociocultural processes can thus arise and come to life that have practical effects on society, since «digital technologies are becoming central to the understanding of culture and society, of human experience and the social world [...] they actively constitute the self, embodiment, social life, social relations, social institutions, in a word, human beings» (Punziano and Delli Paoli 2023: V).

Going into the specifics of the Facebook communities selected ("Community 1" and "Community 2")³ based on some criteria considered fundamental in this type of approach, that is, those that presented themselves in the light of a preliminary exploration as the most: "active", as they are characterized by regular interactions; "interactive", as they are rich in relational exchanges between members; "heterogeneous", as they contain different categories of participants, etc.; "rich in

¹ Mainly composed of women who reached adulthood around 2000 and belonging to Generation Z born between 1995 and 2005, this type of feminist activism fully established itself around the early 2000s (for example with the blog promoted by Jessica Valenti feministing.org) and found full realization in 2006 with the #MeToo movement, which by using hashtags spread awareness of the extent of sexual abuse by asking for the perpetrators of the crimes to be punished (Farci and Scarcelli 2023).

² Alongside the advantages of using digital for the fourth wave feminist cause, however, the disadvantages must be considered, namely forms of abuse typical of these environments such as trolling, death and rape threats, and revenge porn.

³ The choice to label the two communities as "Community 1" and "Community 2" is explained to protect the privacy of the users present in the two groups.

information”, as they present a wide range of data useful for research (Masullo and Coppola 2023).

The observation period, in covert mode, lasted 1 year (from October 2024 to March 2025), in which 200 posts from the two communities were analyzed and collected in a special Excel grid. Regarding the metadata collected, the first group “Community 1” was born in recent years and is very active and presents daily interactions. The second group, “Community 2”, was also born in recent years and is less active than the previous one, but more inclined to discuss specific topics, and presents itself from its description as a web community with a feminist orientation in an intersectional perspective. At the time of writing, the groups have, the first, 868 members, the majority of whom are women, while the second has 1324 members, the majority of whom are female, although there is also a group of male people (98 men). The personal details of the participants who wrote the posts examined have been modified and replaced with fictitious names to preserve privacy and respect the basic principle of covert observation.

5. SUBJECTIVE PROPENSIONS, STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS AND CULTURAL MODELS OF THE CHILDFREE CONDITION

Leaving aside the numerous posts that highlight a total aversion, or real idiosyncrasy towards children and more generally towards motherhood⁴, many discussions that take place within the two web communities focus on two main themes: the first is related to the reasons that have pushed some women to identify themselves as childfree women, the second concerns the way in which women themselves deal with the “social expectations” of the most widespread collective imaginaries on gender identity and roles, aspects, the latter, that connect the choice of being a childfree woman to the themes connected to the broader feminist or post-feminist debate.

Regarding the reasons that women give for choosing to give up being mothers, the theme of “not feeling adequate for this role”, of “not feeling psychologically ready” or “up to the task” constantly emerges, declaring a lack of predisposition, or an absence of maternal sense. Other factors that seem to weigh on this choice are the traumatic experiences and events that would have marked these women in childhood and/or adolescence (abuse, bereavement, orphanage, poverty, etc.), which they would like to avoid for any future offspring, as well as

concerns related to physical change, the emotional burden required before and during pregnancy, fear of childbirth, etc.

Now I am 38 years old, I am single, I have zero maternal sense, and I do not want to have children, I do not see myself as a mother, I do not feel able to give enough emotional and economic support to a child who is totally dependent on me (Anonymous, Community 1).

Another psychological aspect can be traced back to Depleted Mother Syndrome, a condition that occurs when a woman has already become a mother and the demands connected to the parental role cause the woman physical and emotional exhaustion, feelings of inadequacy and a sense of being overwhelmed, an aspect that confirms how voluntary renunciation is an aspect that must be placed in time, and within specific historical-social circumstances:

I am tired of this accumulation of responsibilities and worries. Among the things I would change in my life is precisely not having another child. Mind you, I love my son, and I have dedicated my life to him, but I am tired, and I look with envy at those who do not have children, they do not realize how lucky they are. That is why I did not want any more (Susanna, Community 2)

From the analysis of the posts, the concept of “parental responsibility”⁵ emerged not infrequently in the discussions as a reason used to justify the choice of women not to have wanted to be mothers. The concept of parental responsibility was introduced with Legislative Decree 154/2013, which replaced the previous term “parental authority”. The choice not to have children would therefore be made in the interest of the children themselves and is therefore based on the idea that the minor must grow up in an emotionally, economically and physically stable environment, bringing out the work behind it both in terms of time commitment, physical and mental energy, and in terms of responsibilities associated with motherhood.

Having children requires time, energy, specific attention, and it is not a choice that one makes without thinking about it, thinking about the consequences. I see it in many

⁴ Indeed, we must not forget how online platforms often encourage the expression of extreme points of view on things, often in the terms of hate speech, which in other contexts would be difficult to observe.

⁵ The legislative reform of 2013 brings with it not so much the innovation of the concept and contents of authority or responsibility, but the value meaning in recalling the exercise of the educational relationship. In other words, in the relationship between parents and children and in coherence with the principle of responsibility for procreation, the parent has the burden not only of protecting the minor but also of promoting the development of his personality, respecting his needs in relation to the different stages of development.

friends who wanted children, and today they continually complain about being tired, about not having time for themselves. [...] These are responsibilities that I honestly don't feel like facing (Anna, Community 1)

From the results of the observations carried out on the two online communities, a second declination of the concept of responsibility emerges, namely a critical awareness of the interconnection between individual actions and global impacts, aiming at concrete actions for the benefit of planetary well-being. Giving up motherhood thus becomes an act of “environmental responsibility”, a way to reduce the personal ecological footprint and contribute to the mitigation of climate change.

The fact is that we care a lot about the quality of life both for ourselves and our children, furthermore we don't believe it is an obligation to have children. More quality less quantity, let's consider that the world is overpopulated, nothing bad is done. Another matter are some populations that would do them even in their total famine a little unaware a little irresponsible a little ignorant (Alice, Community 2).

Alongside these factors that identify dimensions of a purely psychological nature, and which therefore refer to one's personal feeling regarding a propensity for parenthood, posts also emerge that see among the main reasons for the decision to have given up children, the lack of those economic, relational and support conditions, including that of the couple, which make this purpose impracticable

If you don't have the means, for me it is absurd to bring children into the world. How much I am annoyed by those women who boast of being mothers, who show off their team of children on TV, but then you realize that they barely make it to the end of the month [...] I find them reckless (Concetta, Community 1).

A second theme is the way in which women relate to the cultural models that underlie the relationship between women and motherhood and to the main social expectations linked to gender differences.

Childfree women from the two web communities feel more the weight of a culture that identifies them as those naturally predisposed to the desire to become mothers, a desire that is seen as the source of their satisfaction and fulfillment according to the dictates of an essentialist vision of gender and gender roles. Although today there is a widespread awareness that women, like men, also intend to fulfill themselves in other vital fields, the belief persists that a woman must put other interests on the back burner, especially if these conflict or compete with the desire for motherhood and with the care

responsibilities called into play in the parental role. This need to “sacrifice” for children, and in general for the family, is an aspect that the childfree women of the web communities examined here question, on the contrary they ask for more spaces of freedom and self-determination for themselves, showing themselves to be extremely critical towards a female culture (even feminist) that has contributed to solidifying the idea that the desire for motherhood is a natural and implicit need in women, while on the contrary they believe that it is more linked to historical reasons and cultural conditioning (De Beauvoir 2016).

Why should I have children? As if it were an obligation, and as if I was born to do this and not to fulfill myself as a person [...] It is something that was instilled in us as children, when they made us play with dolls to be “mothers”, and the absurd thing is that many women do not realize it, they seem dissatisfied without this step, unhappy (Annarita, 25 years old).

A second group of childfree women is made up of those who do not deny a continuum between femininity and the desire for motherhood, because they are socialized within a culture that has not problematized this connection, considering it on the contrary a fundamental aspect of being feminine, a natural aspect and connected to what is commonly called the “biological clock” with which women sooner or later at a certain point in their existence have to deal. In this vision, the “right times” are fundamental, both in terms of physical energy (children are born when you are young) and in terms of expected results (the more time passes, the less likely you are to get pregnant, and the more likely you are to run into health problems both for yourself and for your unborn child)

For now, I don't think about it, because I'm still young, I have other things to think about, but I think the need for a child will emerge, it's a natural fact that you must deal with sooner or later. Today, I don't think about it because I study, but I have doubts the more time passes, because then I ask myself, will I have the strength to have a child?, and do it when I'm older and if he or she will have physical or mental disabilities?

Another key question of the study was to understand whether the communities examined could give rise to alternative narratives on issues such as motherhood, parenthood, gender roles, etc., to understand how online participation strengthened individual and collective action, to give life to forms of active feminist claims “onlife” (Floridi 2015).

From the observations, the undoubtedly important role that digital spaces have always played in offering

their users support, opportunities for discussion, and imaginaries useful especially for those who find themselves in a condition of relative isolation (Rheingold 1994) emerges.

While it is true that some of the positions examined above (identified in the Childfree women's profiles) take up central concepts and themes of some well-known currents of both classical and contemporary feminism (for example, the profile defined as liberal is close to post-feminist thought, the critical one to Marxist and intersectional feminism), the posts that appear in the communities do not always allow us to frame these within a specific current or onlife movement. On the contrary, the communities in question (although they are closed groups that can be accessed by accepting certain rules) are characterized by being environments frequented by women with different points of view, and different motivations that have led them to make this type of choice (hence the profiling of Childfree women). Although it was not possible to explore this assumption with specific techniques, the relationships that are configured are typical of what Wellman and Haythornthwaite (2002) define as network individualism, that is, very "permeable" relationships, which can be created and abandoned just as quickly. The presence of some members in both communities leads us to think that childfree people are not part of a single socially homogeneous community, on the contrary they interact in multiple digital environments that are heterogeneous, elements that lead us to believe that the communities examined do not potentially configure themselves as reference online communities on the issue, nor do they promote an ideal model of a childfree person, aspects that reverberate on the possibility that these are configured as "places of resistance" in which members can build (or rebuild) their own identity without being bound by the dominant culture (De Vries 2002) as well as privileged spaces for the debate on the childfree female condition inside and outside the digital world.

6. PROFILING CHILDFREE WOMEN IN WEB COMMUNITIES

In order to identify the main profiles of childfree women that emerged from the observation in a digital environment, on the basis of the intersection between identified motivations, i.e. psychological factors (linked to reasons that do not psychologically predispose to motherhood) vs structural dimension (linked to the absence of those economic, environmental and relational conditions necessary for parental functions) adherence to a culture that identifies women with the role of mother (woman = mother) and a culture that rejects this assumption (woman ≠ mother), four theoretical profiles of childfree women emerge from the results that can be summarized in Table 1.

In the first condition we find the childfree woman who perceives herself as "deficient" or rather someone who, while not questioning a culture that takes for granted the idea that a woman has a natural propensity to become a mother, nevertheless realizes – for purely subjective and psychological reasons – that she is not ready to carry out this task, also due to the great burden of responsibility that it implies.

In the second condition we find the childfree woman here defined as "realistic" or rather the point of view expressed by those women who believe that a natural psychological predisposition to motherhood alone is not enough to constitute the reason for bringing children into the world, but who consider economic, environmental and relational conditions to be fundamental, which if absent do not allow one to adequately carry out the parental function, which in the end they renounce out of a sense of responsibility.

In the third condition, we find the childfree woman who presents a more "liberal" point of view on the subject, that is, of those who do not feel attracted or sufficiently predisposed to the parental function which is conceived as the result of cultural and social conditioning, nor do they see in this a full realization of their feminine identity. In fact, women here are conceived as people who can have other life goals or purposes, and

Table 1. Profiles of Childfree women of the communities examined.

	<i>Psychological factors (lack of maturity, lack of predisposition for motherhood)</i>	<i>Structural factors (lack of economic, environmental and relational conditions)</i>
<i>Woman = Mother (essentialist vision of gender identity and roles)</i>	Deficient	Realist
<i>Woman ≠ Mother (constructivist view of gender identity and roles)</i>	Liberal	Critical

Source: Our Elaboration.

not only that of motherhood and therefore “affirm their freedom to become everything they want to be and fulfill themselves on a personal level” (Locatelli 2022: 177).

In the fourth condition, we find women who have a “critical” point of view, not sharing a culture that conceives the equation woman = mother as a given, especially within a society in which the social, relational and environmental as well as political conditions necessary for the exercise of the female parental function are lacking. Therefore, they are the ones who are particularly severe and critical, towards a pronatalist society that pushes and sees in particular women as their main recipients, without providing them with any practical support in having to manage parental functions, forgetting to involve other fundamental figures such as men.

As is evident, in the four identified profiles of child-free women, some typical orientations of feminism can be highlighted, although this connection is not always made explicit or emerges consciously from the posts with references to a specific current. The “deficient” and “realistic” profiles identify points of view that do not touch or problematize the origin of the factors of inequality associated with gender differences: if the first profile sees the origin of the problem in an aspect of a subjective and psychological nature, the second identifies them in the absence of economic and relational conditions without critically calling into question for example the link that exists between patriarchal/sexist ideology and forms of devaluation of women functional to the maintenance of a capitalist system that is functionally supported precisely on sexual difference in establishing precise and differentiated tasks for women and men.

The third and fourth profiles, namely the “liberal” and the “critical” ones, on the contrary, are fully situated within a point of view that on the contrary problematize the origin of this differentiated and unfair system of social expectations and opportunities, but they do so according to different paths. The “liberal” profile groups women who ask for more space for freedom and self-determination and feel less burdened by the issue of gender equality, which for them seems to be an objective now achieved; in fact, they are very critical of policies that tend to protect only the objectives and needs of working women with children and not of women tout court. In the communities investigated, they often underline the advantages and benefits provided in the workplace for colleagues who have children, for example the ease with which they obtain parental leave and permits and the consequent imbalance of treatment that they suffer.

Too bad they then want family allowances and subsidies, choose holidays first, take sick leave even for a broken toe-

nail of their child... they always burden others, especially those who have not made that choice (Tania, Community 2)

If the “liberal” profile is characterized by having an individualistic orientation, the “critical” profile mainly calls into question the collective responsibilities of today’s female condition, since it feels more clearly the contradictions inherent in a system in which serious absences of protection and equal opportunities for women are still evident. The users of this profile urge to recover a “feminist conscience”, to choose motherhood consciously, and suggest policies that can involve men who have always been great absentees of pronatalist policies.

Do you remember Lorenzin’s campaign, the one in 2016? Men were not even mentioned, as if the problem of the low birth rate in our country only concerned women, forgetting that today men themselves have changed their attitude towards fatherhood. I believe that women are tired of being considered only as gestational chambers and that the choice whether to do them or not depends on us, if we feel like it (Cristina, Community 2)

From the analysis of the posts of the two chosen communities, the composite nature of the motivations that led women to define themselves as childfree emerges, these are located in the complex interaction between subjective factors, structural conditioning and changes in cultural imaginaries of the female gender, thus allowing us to arrive at a more intelligible analytical scheme of the factors that can explain why a woman decides to give up the idea of wanting to become a mother. At the end of the study, we conclude that online childfree communities, although they constitute spaces within which women arrive at a common definition of their condition, obtaining here forms of symbolic, emotional support, these are unable to generate shared visions that can be integrated into a unitary project that can be shared inside and outside the digital world. The analysis of the posts allows us to reach the conclusion that the members of the Childfree community present conditions typical of those belonging to a minority, that is, a group of people who, by virtue of their specific ideological positioning – namely the absence of the desire to become parents, and a certain idiosyncrasy towards children – are perceived from the outside as such and with a negative connotation. Participation in these communities is only rarely an opportunity for a reflection that is characterized by urging a broader form of feminist awareness, which can also include different positions. This is even more true when it emerges that the oppressors identified are not men, or more generally the patriarchal system (a classic objective of feminism) but children, and in particular women who

peacefully live their “vocation” to motherhood. The web community presents itself as a space from which it is possible to grasp different models of digital social relations (Bakardjieva 2003) from those who simply search for information within it, to those who, in addition to this, are interested in interacting and comparing themselves with others, sharing personal experiences and feelings experienced for example on the occasion of discrimination suffered, up to those who, through the network, urge some form of feminist awareness and mobilization.

Finally, we must not forget the effect produced by the characteristics of the medium itself, considering that Facebook web communities are not only affected by a certain obsolescence, which today leads them to be gradually abandoned due to the competition of more immediate and effective social networks, but also because these spaces are particularly lacking in the new generations, those who are certainly more socialized to the effects of the changes that have affected current gender imagery, and therefore the research has the limitation of having potentially excluded them. It is concluded that the digital environment constitutes a preferential place to study new forms of positioning in terms of agency and imagery on controversial issues such as motherhood or propensity to parenthood, (in particular in detecting points of view of often stigmatized subjects such as childfree women), therefore studies on these issues should be expanded in different cross-media spaces, verifying how these contribute to modifying women’s culture and whether an onlife political translation of the project, values and claims advanced by the childfree movement is imminent.

With regard to future research on this topic, another aspect to keep in mind is that if it is true that a woman’s choice not to have children is part of a network of relationships, in the future the role that the partner plays in this decision will also need to be better investigated, as well as broader proximity relationships (family of origin, friends, the existence of formal and informal parenting support) (Freeman and Dodson 2014).

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