

UNMAKING MOTHERHOOD: ARGUMENTATIVE EVIDENCE FROM ROMANIA-BASED BLOGS AND MEDIA

Oana Mara STAN

Lecturer Ph.D.

Faculty of Sociology and Social Work

University of Bucharest (Romania)

Mara.Stan@sas.unibuc.ro

Abstract: *The current study inquires whether women's narratives and prescriptive comments related to the burden of being a mother echo socialization practices typical for these corporate cultures that implicitly promote a counter-maternalistic discourse by demanding on-call availability and total commitment from employees. The study relies on grounded theory, meaning that it starts from examples of arguments and dwells on empirical evidence to connect it to the conceptual framework and larger-scale theoretical input. It strives to determine women's vocabularies of motives on rejecting motherhood and to showcase how rational and affective language gravitates around the childfree rhetoric performativity. The netnographic analysis concerns 188 anti-motherhood comments posted on seven Romanian media (six blogs and one media article) with predominantly feminine readership. Informants' arguments are immersed in a corporate culture that is time voracious and hostile to motherhood. Argumentative streams and deliberative threads belong to the following thematic categories: feminism, heteronomy, neoliberal free choice and rational choice, uncontrollable and unpredictable outcomes, ecological concerns and incompatibility with lifestyle, overwhelming responsibility, time voracity and maternal role spill-over, lack of maternal skills, in-built career penalty, downshifting options and hedonistic outlook. These thematic categories are customized according to contributors' status (mother or non-mother) and biographical background. Due to work-family conflict, women face the dilemma of professional upskilling in the absence of children or professional deskilling subsequent to motherhood. Conclusions show the eclectic and multi-layered nature of discourse that combines (self) narratives with prescriptions, with a strong connotative dimension illustrated by a vivid vocabulary of emotional social imagery.*

Key words: *voluntary childlessness; agency; heteronomy; deliberation; netnography*

Rationale

At present the decline in natality affects both developed and developing countries in Europe. According to Eurostat reports (2017), Romania holds an intermediate position compared to other EU member states in terms of total fertility rate (i.e. the average number of live births per woman).

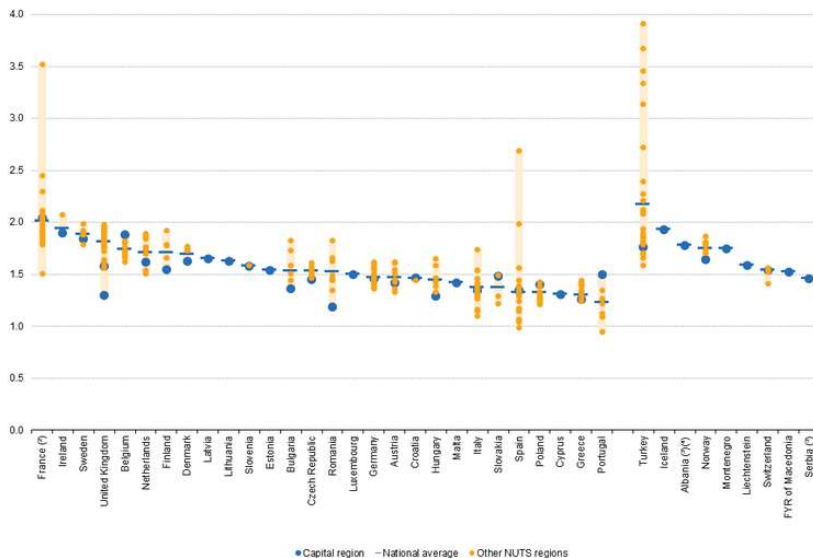


Fig. 1. Total fertility rates in EU member states and candidate states.

Source: Eurostat, 2017

A cross-section analysis of fertility indicators at EU-level valid for 2017 (Eurostat, 2019) reveals Romania has an above-average total fertility rate, with 1.7 live births per woman, whereas the mean age of women at the birth of their first child is of 26.5 years, echoing a traditional tendency of relatively early childbearing. It is the third smallest age in the EU, with only Bulgaria and Albania ranking slightly below according to this indicator.

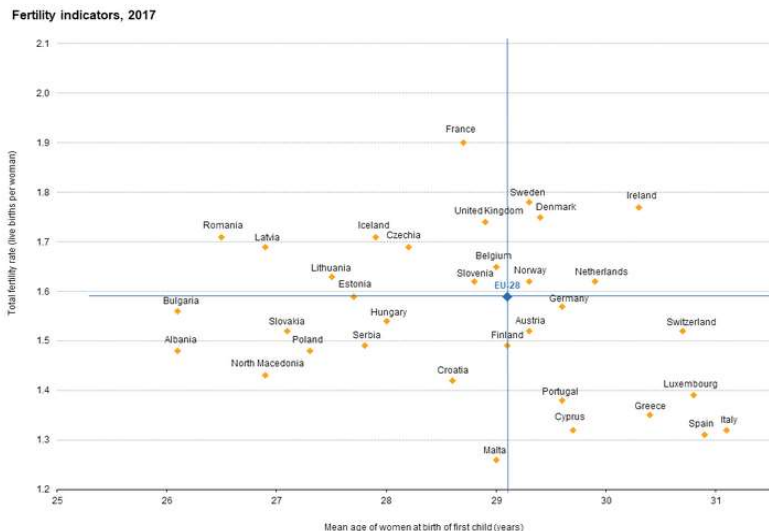


Fig. 2. Fertility indicators for EU member-states: total fertility rates and mean age of women at the birth of their first born (year 2017).

Source: Eurostat (2019)

Data patterns (INS, 2017) show an involution of natality rates for both rural and urban households in Romania, in 2017 compared to 2016. The decrease in the national average natality rate is of 0.5% in just one year, and the rates of decrease are relatively steady for urban and rural territorial units.

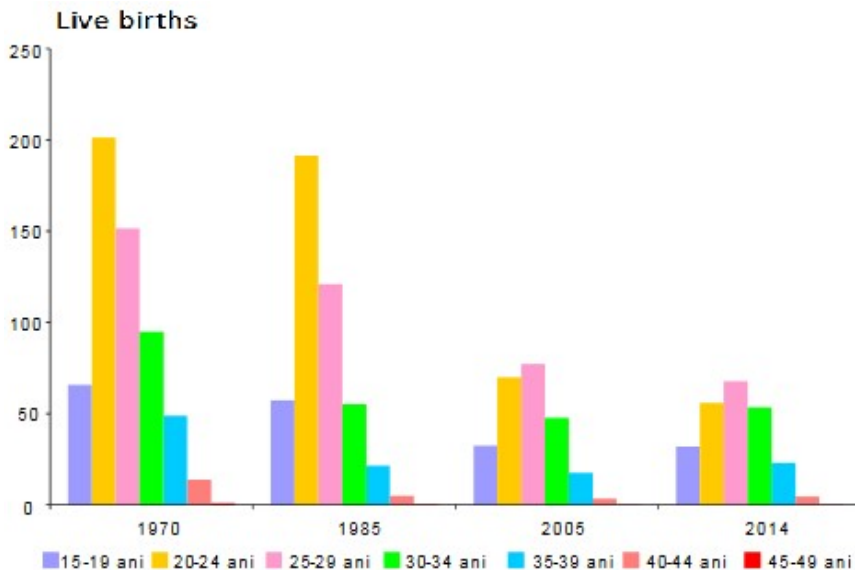


Fig. 3. Evolution in natality rates per age groups - 1970-2014.

Source: INS annual report 2015

A longitudinal analysis of natality rates in Romania from the mid-1970s to the mid-2010s indicates more than 60% decrease in 40 years: from an overall average of 19,7 live births per 1000 inhabitants in 1975, to 8,3 live births per 1000 inhabitants in 2014. This decrease is most evident for the lower age groups (20-24, 25-29 and 15-19).

Considering this demographic background, the study explores the discursive constitution of childfree identity for women who are blogosphere contributors. It searches for evidence-driven answers to the main question: How do women explain their choice to remain childfree? Associated research questions that derive from this main preoccupation are the following: What does the communicated decision to stay childfree tell us about deliberative means by which women define coherence and rationality across the decision-making processes? How do bloggers (as discourse builders and influencers) filter in and filter out, zoom in and zoom out the argumentative and persuasive dimension of elective childlessness, by choosing macro-scale (i.e. institutional) and micro-scale (i.e. individual) arguments to back up this decision? This argumentative and deliberative dimension is essential for depicting cognitively hard-wired processes and embedded assumptions by which

women reach a life-course decision that is still controversial, by conventional standards of social norms, and legitimize it to the world.

1. Theoretical outline

Within the advent of late modernity, numerous discourses suggest that kin networks are in decline, together with collective identities and the sense of affiliation and belonging that communities fuel (e.g. Wood & Newton, 2006). In nowadays versatile society marked by the strain of commodified time pressure (Adam 1995) and the volatile dynamics of liquid modernity (Bauman 2000), normative prescriptions lose strength, including those related to parental roles. A more fluid workplace policy centred on a more relaxed outlook on lifestyle diversity accommodates a reconfiguration of female roles and social identities, with caring fatherliness, help from extended family, outsourcing household devoted unpaid time and state support allowing women to devote time to their careers.

Allen and Hawkins (1999) discuss 'maternal gatekeeping', a process wherein a woman seeks to retain her power and control over the domestic sphere that she considers her only certain area of expertise and safe haven of self-validation. This risk-adverse practice hinders women's professional attainment. However, an alternative explanation for women's low rate of involvement in managerial positions can regard their different time use styles that contrast to masculinized workplaces where the long hours culture, after-hours networking and spontaneous unscheduled meetings infringe on family time (Bonnevillie 2016). Hence, the childfree status appears as facilitating asset for women's on-boarding and retention in high commitment career paths.

The anti-natalist philosophy associates to time pressure and the 24/7 society (Levine, 1998). Work-intensive environments focused on high career attainment share the vision that simultaneity of multitasking takes precedence over its complementary stance of time discursivity, unitasking or successive duration. Meanwhile, the acceleration and densification of tempo and the pace of life leaves little-to-no time for contemplating parenthood, and less so for enacting it.

The debate over the motherhood penalty that impedes on professional development occurs especially in the context of high commitment careers. In this case, being a mother emerges as status that is too expansive personally, and overly taxing both relationally and vocationally (Laney et al, 2014). Empirical evidence confirms the intuitive hypothesis that highly skilled, highly paid women experience the largest motherhood penalty (England et al, 2016). The study furthers this line of thought by inquiring whether – and, if so, to what extent - women are aware of the barriers they face and have to overcome prior to having children. Is this anticipative knowledge limited and, if so, how do they negotiate and handle this limitation?

Mitigating conflict between care work with small children and first-time motherhood reveals a counter-narrative to the congruity of the two roles (i.e. child

care service professional and mother). Hence, the troubling reflexivity over intense emotional attachment reverberates in feelings of rupture, abandonment, pondering and rumination over choices on how to best accommodate relational and professional needs and to prioritize limited time resources (Thomson & Kehili, 2011)

Overlapping responsibilities across these two regimes of care (i.e. family and organizational) are divergent, since professionals such as nurses and social workers are expected to display a thorough, yet detached attitude towards their beneficiaries, aiming to avoid the risk of burn-out. Meanwhile, at home they display a more expressive attachment associated to positive emotions and wellbeing, as Grunberg and Matei (2019: p.18) reveal in the case of nurses working in the state healthcare system: "Ultimately, the separation between domestic and occupational life is framed as a distinction between two cultures of caring: caring for patients requires different modes of involvement than does caring for one's own children".

"A dialectic of resistance and accommodation" (Pickering 1995:22-23) proves helpful in exploring the argumentative dimension that women express concerning childlessness decisions. Women choose either an attitude of opposition or one of accommodation to the normative control that stereotypes exert over the idea that women are meant to be mothers and therefore childless women are emotionally and personally unfulfilled. Women who decide to remain childfree or mothers who argue for women's inalienable right to choose if motherhood is suitable for them have to fight against public prejudice and stereotypes, especially in societies tributary to traditionalist and segregationist ideologies. The stereotypical mindset tends to propagate in that it filters experiences and informational inputs. Hence, it overreacts to information that confirms the initial stereotype and downplays all contradictory evidence, making factual evidence difficult to penetrate in the world of prescriptive convictions (Lippmann, 1922). Stereotypes hence impact on social actors' capacity to interpret social reality and take their toll on simplified social cognition by creating mental shortcuts deeply engrained in the collective imaginary. The image of women with children has a prototypical function and performative value in that it legitimizes vocabularies of motives involved in the process of information classification and advanced processing (Ivan, 2013). All women are compared to this desired prototype of their reference category and those who do not fulfil the maternal condition run the risk of being undervalued.

Empirical pursuits in social work practice (Mihai et al., 2016) and academic work climates (Bonneville, 2016) discuss stereotypes as distorting cognitive reference points (Rosch, 1975), in the context of technology-based organizational change and ensuing reconfiguration of professional assignments. Change in all shapes and at all levels encounters resistance because it distorts taken-for-granted beliefs and forces stakeholders to reconsider stereotypes. The upside of tokenism is that encounters with atypical members of a category (e.g. women senior executives or celebrities who explain why they decided to remain childfree) can modify stereotypical cognition and attitudes (Hilton/Hippel, 1996).

The internalized requirement to publish as much and as often as possible affects women academics in particular because their culturally imposed domestic duties detract them from the steady concentration needed to perform a knowledge-intensive work (Bonneville, 2016). The motherhood penalty aggravates when job enrichment and job enlargement appear as mandatory career development strategies in the context of constant upskilling following the “more is better” and “up or out” ideology. Also in academia, the neoliberal age of individualized risk (Beck, 2000) manifests through fixed-term contracts and other dispersed temporary assignments. This job insecurity contributes to the decision to either postpone motherhood or cancel it altogether. Hence, academia embraces the gig economy across precarious work practices that permeate a promising discourse on entrepreneurial universities and academic capitalism (Nikunen, 2012). The gig economy operates by no expected loyalty from contracting parties (employer and employee alike), more job variety, fewer responsibilities, temporal and spatial flexibility. Job insecurity in today’s moving world influences the self-reported level of somatic health and subjective wellbeing (Nica, Manole & Brișcariu, 2016) and can be a deterrent against having children, not only due to a financial rationale, but also on account of increased levels of emotional despondency.

The unwillingness to disconnect feeds the psychological conflict that soars when women feel compelled to do it all. They are taught it is their intrinsic, irrevocable duty to be the main caretaker and be nothing short of excellent and exceptional in balancing all duties. Bonneville (2016) found women professors in academia expressed more anxiety toward their career prospects and career path compared to their male counter-parts, also more frustration about structural inequities (i.e. distributive and procedural justice) and work-life imbalance. They argue that the unlimited, unmitigated investment in career is an implicit, albeit sine-qua-non condition of this highly competitive, albeit meritocratic environment wherein women’s identity is not even primarily, but solely defined by the content of their work (Bonneville 2016; Aubert 2010).

Delving into the rationale for individual agency and heteronormative models of childless feminineness, Wood and Newton (2006) found Australian managers considered the work-life balance image as utopian and creating neurotic pressure to succeed in all arrays of life. The fact that mothers are statistically under-represented in top-tier professional areas of management, politics (Zamfirache, 2010) or research suggests childlessness (either biological or elective) is a facilitator or even a precondition for career success (Wood & Newton, 2006). Pursuing such time-intensive career tracks means sacrificing personal and family pastimes in a time-greedy corporate culture where not staying overtime, taking career breaks or any such discontinuity are displays of weakness, insufficient dedication and failure.

A post-structuralist analysis of identity work (Morison et al., 2016) performed in communities showed childfree persons respond to social stigma related to their elective childlessness by the strategic use of the choice rhetoric. As

such, their 'childfree-by-choice' script shapes their self-identity as responsible decision-makers characterized by autonomy and rationality. They advocate for reproductive freedom and challenge pronatalism on grounds of the necessary acceptance for diversity that includes the deviation from the conventional parenthood model. Whereas the above-mentioned research focuses on non-parents' opt-out discursive scripts, the current study involves women – both mothers and non-mothers (i.e. childfree by choice) as it intends to explore whether the deployed argumentation varies for the two categories.

The portrayal of the childfree status and its impact on discursive identity elaboration through critical feminist post-structuralism (Moore, 2014), also performed on e-communities (i.e. forums and blogs), generated three dimensions, respectively: naming, negotiating and enacting childfreedom. The last two dimensions were more challenging inasmuch as they led to nuanced, complex, contested and sometimes activist identities, and illustrated gendered power relations in terms of asymmetries and incongruencies. Childfreedom is the term coined to designate the elective status of non-parent (i.e. voluntary infertility), whereas childlessness generally associates to the incapacity to have children (i.e. biological, unintentional infertility). The discussion on childfreedom also brings forth the double standards associated to the decision to forego parenthood. For women, this decision is framed as rejection of motherhood, a far more aggressive, disruptive term compared to that used for men who refuse fatherhood (Moore, 2014; Terry & Braun, 2012). Twelve interviews with men who underwent pre-emptive vasectomies exhibited they rejected contemporary modes of involved fatherhood and their self-definition or identity work revolved around leading selfish, nonconformist lifestyles (Terry & Braun, 2012). Their self-referential discourse suggested they considered societal marginalization in their case to have negative connotations, as well as positive outcomes, in that they felt different, special and empowered in terms of reproductive control and neoliberal rhetoric of choice.

Pronatalist ideologies permeate also social attributions related to what is defined as authentic and appropriate or ladylike for a woman. Hence, intended audiences can judge as inauthentic and hypocritical a woman's discourse by which she explains why she chooses to remain childfree. The double standards apply also to the evaluation of self-referential discourse, as audiences filter authenticity through gender-biased lenses. To this point, a multimodal media analysis revealed public disapproval for a woman CEO who made budget cut-offs. The public considered her conduct as unladylike and questioned her authenticity, whereas a male CEO from the same field (banking) who took the same unpopular measures appeared as decisive in a situation requiring immediate action (Liu et al., 2015). Hence, "this attribution of authenticity is not stable, but is continually constituted through the enactment of embodied gendered leadership (...) embedded in a context that itself is discursively constructed" (Liu et al., 2015: 249).

Influencers have powerful voices from the position of role models in both pronatalist and antinatalist discourses. Corporate leaders take on the role of coaches in modules of ethical development in business education (Schmidt et al, 2009). Analogically, also celebrities presumably play their implicit part in informal interventions meant to raise women's moral awareness and mindfulness on life-course choices such as being a parent or not.

2. Method

The study explores blog posts and media article comments in women's magazines to elucidate argumentative lines that support the anti-natalist discourse. The study deciphers commenters' views using the qualitative interpretive framework of netnographic methodology relying on inductive thematic analysis. Netnography is at ethnography performed using online resources, that analyses discourse as language in use across an online text entity (Van Leeuwen, 2008). It gives special attention to rhetoric means by which informants make use of time-bound dynamics (e.g. flow of deliberation stages and impact of choice for the future) to explain their decision not to become mothers.

The steady demographic trend of childlessness is coupled with the ascent of the established middle class with high engagement careers. These double-career families, a.k.a. DINKY ("double income, no kids yet") are financially powerful couples with above average education and professional attainment who choose the postpone childbearing and childrearing indefinitely, most often permanently. The qualitative, explorative study delves into the discursive ethos of this target group to examine rhetoric means and semiotic repertoires by which they explain to themselves and the world the decision to remain childfree. Another target group of text contributors includes mothers who warn fellow women against the risks that motherhood elicits. The socio-linguistic tools of this secondary analyses focus on the denotative and connotative dimensions of verbal speech by scrutinizing blog posts and articles, both sources extracted from Romanian media landscape. The qualitative thematic analysis of contributor-provided descriptors of voluntary childlessness decisions involves 14 blog posts and a total of 188 individual qualitative feedback stances (i.e. readers' comments) available via six Romanian blogs centred on a female audience: Kudika.ro, Smartwoman.hotnews.ro, Cosmopolitan.ro, Perfecte.ro, Qbebe.ro, Printesaurbana.ro. The seventh media source consists of comments to an article (entitled "Why not have children") posted in the Dilema Veche magazine, traditionally associated to an intellectual readership. Quotes are labelled according to the source and the identifier code of the article.

Their salience is estimated in relationship to their readership and to the reactions they elicit among audiences. Discursive repertoires refer to ideas and (counter)arguments that are socially reproduced through interpersonal and organizational interaction. The declarative intentions can be distanced from actual

practices, as was the case for school counsellors (Toth, 2016), however they prove fruitful for this investigation because they provide explanations about women's anti-natalist choices in terms of minority positioning in a high-stake lifestyle debate. Thus, the process of building these arguments is more important here than the behavioural outcome.

Thematic analysis captures and synthesizes argumentative practices, by envisioning language as immersive rhetoric and performative framing mechanisms that pass along meaning while transfiguring it (Wooffitt 2005). Hence, the study dynamically pieces together the social imaginary behind the childfree discourse in an attempt to streamline the sense-making work-in-progress constructed through discourse (Wood and Newton, 2006).

3. Empirical findings

The categorization phase of the thematic analysis revealed how the text contributors' comments spread over a large spectrum of rationales, with 11 thematic category headings and indicative quotes thereof (with attached excerpt code) synthesized in the following table:

Tab. 1. Thematic analysis of recurring discursive patterns in the netnographic argumentation against motherhood, and subjacent quotes.

<p>Career associated motherhood penalty to</p>	<p><i>When I imagine my future, I just don't see any [kids]. I love what I'm studying and I want to get the most out of my career. Whether that includes endless overtime, sleepless nights, relocating, and/or travel. (Kudika, B75)</i></p> <p><i>My kids would hate me, because I'd have to pursue my career, I can't hold back, and they would have to suffer because I sacrifice them and spend too little time with them. (Cosmopolitan, A62)</i></p> <p><i>Will I be able to get back on track or will I be left behind? I think, in my line of work, becoming a mother is the death of all career ambitions. (Qbebe, B23)</i></p>
<p>Neoliberal free choice</p>	<p><i>Some marry, others don't. Some struggle for a career, other lay low and take it light. Some have five children, others buy a dog, abandon corporations and move to the countryside. Each one feels fulfilled in his or her own way. (Kudika, B40)</i></p>
<p>Heteronomy</p>	<p><i>It's very frustrating, because I feel like people don't respect my decision not to have children as much as people respect the decision to have children.</i></p>

	<p><i>We don't have to all live in the same way. (Qbebe, B6)</i></p> <p><i>I admire my female friends with children – I admire their dedication and hard work. I'd like them to start admiring me in return. I work just as hard and am just as dedicated to my own way of life. We are all women. We should be celebrating difference, not creating barriers. (Kudika, B58)</i></p> <p><i>Unmaternal women are just as worthy of respect as maternal ones and they should have equal rights. (Printesaurbana, B14)</i></p>
Downshifting option and hedonistic outlook	<p><i>It certainly makes life much easier to remain childfree. If you want to have fun, that's the way to go. Because life is short and not meant to be difficult, but enjoyable. (Smartwoman, A44)</i></p> <p><i>Being a parent ultimately means consistently putting the child first. What about me and my selfish genes? What if I want to be first? (Cosmopolitan, A7)</i></p> <p><i>Why it's better to remain childfree? You go wherever you like, whenever you feel like it. You are free to spend your money for your own pleasure or development, for the benefit of your own soul. And when you're old no one will reproach you that you made mistakes. (Printesaurbana, B37)</i></p> <p><i>Things I'd have to give up on if I chose to have kids: The bike. Minimalism. Quiet. Sunday mornings poring over one or three of my many, many books... Dilema Veche, A22)</i></p>
Ecological concern	<p><i>I joined the zero growth movement. Children have the nasty habit of adding to the pollution with a massive carbon footprint, with their diapers and baby gadgets and garments and endless needs and whims. (Printesaurbana, B38)</i></p> <p><i>I am worried that the future of the planet, and therefore our children's future, is utterly compromised. (Kudika, B22)</i></p>
Lifestyle incompatible with childrearing	<p><i>I love to travel and relocate for work and pleasure alike, so a child would not fit in my plans. (Kudika, B9)</i></p> <p><i>From early morning till late at night I'm caught up in my job, I come home exhausted. I barely make time for myself, to sleep, eat, meet my basic needs, not to mention a child. (Qbebe, B21)</i></p>

<p>Lack of maternal skills or propensities</p>	<p><i>Not all women are pre-programmed with maternal instincts. I have had multiple encounters with children throughout life and it is always an awkward and anxious experience for me. (Dilema Veche, A36)</i></p> <p><i>I don't have the skills needed to cater for the weak ones, and I don't like to take care of kids. (Cosmopolitan, A34)</i></p> <p><i>I see children who are traumatized in their relationships with abusive fathers or over-protective mothers and I realize that these people should think long and hard before deciding to have children. They should judge whether being a parent suits them or is merely the result of societal pressure. (Printesaurbana, B80)</i></p>
<p>Overwhelming responsibility</p>	<p><i>I cannot cope with split energies, for me multitasking involved in childrearing is not an attractive lifestyle option. (Smartwoman, A42)</i></p> <p><i>Parenting is full of traps. You have to learn to separate from them, to detach yourself, because they are not your property, they don't belong to you, they should be left free to interact with other people and if they leave you alone when you're old and / or miserable, that's perfectly fine. So lot of psychological distress to handle another complicated relationship, arguably the closest, emotionally overloaded and most personal of them all. (Dilema Veche, A13)</i></p>
<p>Unpredictable and uncontrollable outcomes</p>	<p><i>It takes a saint to accept with infinite tolerance that kids will look how they look, learn what they learn, and be who they are regardless of us. (Cosmopolitan, A38)</i></p>
<p>Time voracity and spillover of parental status</p>	<p><i>Having kids will adversely affect our satisfaction in the couple relation.</i></p> <p><i>As mothers, each day is a fight. Making good decisions for them, feeding them healthy food, nurturing their self-esteem, preparing them for life, providing them with defence and fight mechanisms, teaching them to make the difference between good and bad, ensuring they feel your unconditional love, being kind, gentle, appearing relaxed. (Smartwoman, A11)</i></p>

	<p><i>I think many of my friends would be better off without children. For them, the “nesting” period is latent, disabled time. They will resurrect and try to get their life back only when their kids will be grown-ups and empty the nest. (Cosmopolitan, A19)</i></p>
<p>Feminist manifesto</p>	<p><i>My body is also meant to do a lot of things; that doesn't mean I'm going to go run out and do them. (Printesaurbana, B55)</i></p> <p><i>It's that social pressure I fear, the one that pushes you, first discretely and apparently harmlessly, then with increasing aggression, until it crushes you, powerless to desist or resist. (Perfecte.ro, A23)</i></p> <p><i>We, women, are perfectly capable of figuring out for ourselves what we want from life, without society telling us what to do and when, what is right or wrong. (Smartwoman, B30)</i></p> <p><i>Women who decide they do not want children listen to their heart and also they listen to reason; they have the courage to live by their own rules. (Perfecte.ro, A19)</i></p>

The argument for the time voracity of the maternal status concerned the fact that it is expected to spill-over and propagate to other roles and has the tendency to monopolize a woman's time budget, and hence to seize and drain resources to the utmost. The thematic category of feminist manifesto brings forth comments that defy conventions about the appropriateness and the necessity of becoming a mother for leading a fulfilled life as a woman.

These media sources expose inter-woven discursive threads of different semantic granularity. The network of meaning and sense-making strategies of women who contemplate motherhood with mostly negative feelings is wired in a neo-liberal discourse of free choice, self-determinism, overruling agency and empowerment. The common ideology of childfree options boils down to the message of doing whatever one likes and decides, denying and defying social rules and conventions as coercive, outdated and harmful for self-enhancement and self-awareness. These detractors' wording choices feature figurative stances of metaphors, analogies, allegories, oxymorons and paradoxes. These figures of speech connect to the discursive attempt at cultivating discretionary, individually dispensable time capital and investing time in oneself.

When comparing the argumentative tactics of the two categories, it is noticeable how childfree informants tend to favour macro-scale motives and

philosophical rationales regarding their decision, whereas women who are mothers emphasize the personal-level anti-natalist reasons that include time pressure, social and career restrictions. Hence, the latter regard their maternal role as an ocean of endless chores, which implies the absence of personal free time, an irretrievable loss of wellbeing, a series of painful sacrificing, doubts and guilt, and longing for contemplative life, the “dolce far niente” as distant dream. From the 11 thematic categories of motives identified earlier, non-mothers mostly evoke the following: feminism, heteronomy, neoliberal free choice and rational choice, uncontrollable and unpredictable outcomes, ecological concerns and incompatibility with lifestyle. Meanwhile, mothers present self-biographical situational examples and specify rationales related to: overwhelming responsibility, time voracity and maternal role spill-over, lack of maternal skills, in-built career penalty, downshifting options and hedonistic outlook.

Apart from the burden of commitment, debate contributors’ moral reasoning exposes doubt in determining which act is (more) selfish: bearing children or refusing motherhood? Hence, some argue motherhood is an egocentric self-perpetuation, “*when so many kids out there in the world are orphans starving for food and affection*” (Cosmopolitan, A25). Another line of reflection against motherhood dismantles arguments for having kids like securing a social standing, having someone to fight for, avoiding regret later on in life, avoiding solitude, claiming that “All motives based on fear, not love, are so inconsistent and fickle” (Qbebe, B18).

The convergence point between philosophical and biographical (self-referential) arguments concerns the parental status as inescapable and incompatible with many other status-roles. Text contributors depict mothers as wearing multiple hats, overridden with guilt, anxiety and frustration, and in survival mode, fighting with clenched teeth to remain wired to a hectic life rhythm. Under these circumstances, drained of energy and enthusiasm, mothers “have no gratification and gratitude lesson to pass along to kids” (Dilemaveche, A31). Actual mothers insist on this perspective on the super-woman myth as neurotic ideology embedded into the social expectations regarding motherhood: “*I am in the smack-dab middle of motherhood and I feel lost. I feel time-sucked and threadbare. I feel like I’m responsible for carrying the world... There is no break. There is no quitting. There is no vacation. There is constant guilt. That reality is sobering and exhausting*” (Qbebe, A55).

Another testimony acknowledges that mothers are often denied the need of free time or downtime, which social norms regard more in terms of a luxury privilege than a legitimate right in their case: “*Our lives — and days — don’t have to be manically <filled>. After having my kids, I forgot how to be a human being, I was only an activity, a robot fending for their needs* (Printesaurbana, B14). Other text contributors also contest motherhood on grounds of the social labelling as motherhood as exclusive form of legitimate motherhood and quintessential

identifier for a woman: *“Many people are anxiously agonizing over the white space of childlessness. “If not kids, then what?!” They need to know. They need a box, a marker, a label, a reason, and an explanation as to <why> — and <what if> or <what instead>.* The normative pressure to have children is evident when women who decided to declare publicly that they intend to remain childfree find it difficult to “come out of the closet”, and the process seems similar to that of confessing alternative sexual orientations.

There is a polemic sense of tribalization in that pro-choice women view their pro-natalist counterparts as not educated and opposed to modern egalitarian gender practices. Feminist vocabularies of motives carry the idea that pro-natalists need to rethink their life script and reassess deeply rooted assumptions about parenthood: *“When we question pronatalist beliefs and see them for what they are – beliefs – we will also see that choosing not to reproduce is just as normal as the choice to reproduce”* (Perfecte.ro, A27). Feminist perspectives also insist on the double standards and illegitimate advantages that parents have, compared to non-parents, in terms of fiscal bonifications, tourism benefits or political facilities: Why are museums and galleries so dedicated to children’s activities that you can’t look at a painting in silence or have a proper adult-level information display? Why are childfree singles and couples discriminated against in pricing structures? (Cosmopolitan, A11), *“Why do politicians assume women are only interested in policies that involve children?”* (Perfecte.ro, A82).

Pro-choice contesters focus on the idea of individuation and empowering agency that they regard as opposed to belonging to communities or affiliation through lineage: *“All this idea of family, tribe or clan no longer exists, we don’t have to copulate and populate anymore”* (Qbebe, B20); *“No question of carrying on a bloodline: we’re happy to be in an evolutionary cul-de-sac. The world is a hostile, threatening place: aggression, unfairness and discrimination, pollution and climate change, lack of community belonging, empathy and solidarity, social polarization and inequality”* (Perfecte.ro, A26). Against the backdrop of environmental concerns over the wellbeing of children in a problematic future for the planet’s liveability, comes the idea of in-built obsolescence in a de-commodified future: that there is nothing left to inherit, as objects, as well as traditions and knowledge lose their value and quickly become outdated.

The public authorities’ involvement in handling childfree decisions reveal double standards that feminist contesters build on. Hence, one such case involved medical staff accepting pre-emptive vasectomies for men even if they did not have offspring yet (Terry & Braun, 2012), whereas empirical evidence shows women who did not have children were denied elective sterilization because society still regards the parental role as essential for women and peripheric for men: *“Doctors expect that, because I’m in my 20s, I’ll soon change my mind. They assume that once I hit 30, or when my friends start having babies, that’ll be it. I find it quite offensive. As is*

the idea that it's not fair on all those poor women who want children and are unable to conceive." (Cosmopolitan, A54).

Comments also focus on work-life incompatibility for mothers, relying on the idea that these are two parallel social worlds: *"If you don't have a career, you cannot afford a child, and if you have one, you don't have time to attend to a child. So there's no way out, you cannot win."* (Dilemaveche, A29). From this vantagepoint, childbearing presumably hinders intellectual development, and narrows career options: *It's a very narrow, shallow world, that of children. It takes a special kind of everyday saint to deal with all of the mind-numbing mundanity and intellectual atrophy that soon sets in*" (Kudika, B31). Exceptionalism comes into play here, with emotional resilience, patience and the relational intricacies and mother-child intimacies seen as tokens of heroism or sainthood.

Also, the unpredictable, nomadic lifestyle of liquid modernity is assessed as inappropriate for a child who needs comfort and security. Informants feel the burden of cognitive dissonance that comes with the high social pressure to play the part of a perfect mother in a challenging individual and social context: *With kids comes the pressure to be perfect, to make perfect choices (from best kindergarten, to parenting, to healthy cooking). How can I be expected to give a child the life he/she deserves? As unsure as I am, I would hang my identity on it, or offload my insecurities into my children. try too hard to "mother," putting too much of themselves into it, I'd just take it too seriously*" (Perfecte.ro, B33).

As is the case in Hilton and Hippel's (1996) research, informants use the points of views of childfree celebrities to undermine social stereotypes about pro-choice women. The need for deliberate reasoning and careful soul-searching in the case of deciding whether or not to have children highlights the need for mindful deliberation as a trope of self-discovery journey and quest for introspection: *"I don't feel inferior for not having kids, it's part of who I am. I know I'm not destined to be a mum. It is equally important in life to know what you're meant to be as to discover what you're not meant to be"*. (Elizabeth Gilbert, in: Qbebe, B40). The next quote illustrates the incompatibility of the maternal status with personal preferences and pastimes, as well as, once again, the need for strategic deliberation and data-driven pondering over alternatives: *"I like kids, but not for longer periods of time. They are adorable, funny and sweet, but after playing with them I get headaches. When I was 5, I wished I had 100 dogs and 100 kids. Meanwhile I realised this wish was born more out of external stimuli. I'm not ready to be a mum. Being a biological mother isn't part of my experience"* (Kim Cattrall, in: Qbebe, B36). The intricate dynamics of decisional ambivalence and deliberation is scrutinized as follows: *There were moments when I wanted kids and moments when I felt grateful and relieved I had none. I'm an emotional wreck when I part with my dog for more than one day. I don't know how I could handle saying goodbye to my kids every morning to go to work* (Angelica Houston, in: Qbebe, B37).

Conclusions

The analysed empirical evidence suggests maternity is only an accessory, not a key attribute to the multi-fold valences of the feminine condition. Informants' express the unavailability or unwillingness to fit career choices around family needs, or to navigate the challenge of priority setting. There are worries that work-intensive, time-consuming caring responsibilities reduce mothers' professional productivity and ambition, leading in turn to career penalties e.g. slowdown in advancement, refusing job-related travel and relocation opportunities. In this dichotomist view, motherhood is counter-meritocratic and counter-performance, breeds professional underachievers, follows an ascription-based system of achieving status that goes contrary to career enhancement. This career-motherhood polarization is one discursive facet that strengthens Vair's (2013) rejection of the discourse of balance as feasible ideology.

Discourse points to the issue of ascription: women strenuously oppose society telling them what to do and they are aware about the superimposed normalizing mechanisms that make discretionary choices instead of them. By means of reflexive deliberation, they want to make sure that the motherhood status is elective and not prescribed. In so doing, women informants question the thin fabric of a hegemonic ideology, exposed to contradictions, paradoxes, ambivalence and ambiguities.

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