Challenging Hegemonic Reproduction Discourse: A Critical Discourse Analysis on a Childfree Subreddit

Linnea Frangén
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English studies
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Abstract:

Climate change is increasingly influencing young people's reproductive decisions, and more and more people are hesitant to have children due to climate change and climate anxiety. In contrast, the hegemonic reproduction discourse in the West, pronatalism, portrays having children as universally desirable and fulfilling and stigmatises childfreedom. Consequently, childfreedom is inherently situated in resistance to pronatalism and it is examined here as a counter-discourse. This study aims to contribute to research about the interconnection of reproduction and the climate crisis from a critical discourse analytic perspective, as linguistically oriented studies are currently lacking in what is already an under-researched field.

This study examines how a childfree subreddit is challenging the hegemonic pronatalist reproductive discourses from the perspective of the climate crisis and environmentalism. The question is answered by examining (1) the main themes in the discourse and (2) the linguistic resources that are utilised. The material is collected from a subreddit r/childfree, a discursive space where pronatalist ideology is contested and consists of 11 threads where the interconnection of reproduction and climate change are discussed. An online environment was chosen because they can enable solidarity, offer respite from hegemonic ideologies and discourses, legitimize and normalize alternative discourses and even formulate strategies of resistance. I conducted a critical discourse analytic study using content analysis as a method. Critical discourse analysis was chosen because it enables one to examine how discourse structures reproduce or challenge relations of power. Content analysis, on the other hand, is a systematic and transparent way to classify text into categories.

The results not only showed that the people who post on the subreddit use the climate crisis strategically and deliberately to counter pronatalism, but also that they deploy linguistic resources creatively and playfully in the interests of their own ideologies. The posts demonstrate awareness of pronatalist discourse and behaviour, which are often collectively analysed. Interestingly, both childfree and pronatalist discourses use climate change rhetoric to accommodate to the changing cultural context, and the constant negotiation between the discourses is evident in the data. On the one hand, climate change is used to create a reflective, selfless, and morally superior childfree subject. On the other hand, it is employed to portray all "breeders" not only as irresponsible, selfish, hypocritical, susceptible to external pressure, but also as in denial of climate change. "Breeders'" naivety and denial are contrasted with the seriousness of the climate crisis. Although children are mainly portrayed in a negative light, some posts use child-centred rhetoric to justify why having children is immoral in the age of climate change, thus challenging pronatalism. Regardless of how the topic is framed, the different categories identified in this study all work to deconstruct the parenthood mandate.

Tables

Table of contents

1   Introduction

Growing concern about climate change is increasingly affecting young people's reproductive decisions. A recent global survey on youth's climate anxiety discovered that 39.1% of the respondents were hesitant to have children due to climate change (Hickman et al. 2021, e868). Environmental activists have even declared birthstrikes due to climate anxiety and frustration with governmental inaction in the face of the climate crisis, choosing not to procreate until things change for the better (Frangén 2020). These recent events are in sharp contrast with the hegemonic reproduction discourse, *pronatalism*, that portrays having children as universally desirable and fulfilling (Moore and Abetz 2019, 391). As a predominant discourse, "pronatalism shapes social and institutional practices and constrains the reproductive freedom of a range of people" (Morison et al. 2016, 196). In this thesis, I examine the way a childfree online community is challenging hegemonic discourses on reproduction in relation to climate change.

Childfreedom is a central concept in this study because it is inherently situated in resistance to pronatalism. A key aspect of pronatalism is the stigmatisation and othering of childfree individuals in dominant discourses (see e.g. Morison et al. 2016; more detailed discussion in Sections 2.1 and 2.2). The current study is therefore significant both in terms of examining how oppressive discourses may control reproductive freedom and how they can be resisted, as well as in charting the changes in *eco-reproductive* discourse, as used in Schneider-Mayerson and Leong (2020). In this study, I aim to answer the following research question: how is the childfree subreddit challenging hegemonic pronatalist reproductive discourses from the perspective of the climate crisis and environmentalism? I answer the question by examining

(1) the main themes in the discourse and

(2) the linguistic resources that are utilised.

The material used in this study comes from the r/childfree subreddit, a Reddit community of childfree individuals who explicitly discuss the interconnection of reproduction and climate change in numerous threads. I will conduct a critical discourse analytic study using content analysis as a method.

I examine the childfree subreddit as a counter-discourse. Feltwell et al. refer to Foucault's (1970) work when elaborating that "when those who are normally spoken for and spoken about begin to speak for themselves, they create a counter discourse, which is an act of resistance to power oppressing them" (Feltwell et al. 2017, 350). As a historically stigmatised group, the childfree subreddit is therefore an online *space of resistance* where the posters can speak freely despite cultural norms and discursively resist assumptions about childfree individuals, societal pressure to have children, and the larger discourse on pronatalism (Moore and Abetz 2019, 407). I hypothesise that climate change is one way to challenge oppressing discourses and to deconstruct the social norm of having children.

While many studies, especially those from the field of feminist studies, have analysed motherhood, reproductive decisions and voluntarily childlessness, the interconnection of reproduction and environmentalism is still an under-researched topic. Virtual childfree communities have been analysed before (Morison et al. 2016), but not in relation to climate change and eco-reproductive reasoning. Empirical research focused specifically on how climate change is affecting reproductive choices has been done by Schneider-Mayerson and Leong (2020) and Schneider-Mayerson (2021). In a recent study, Schneider-Mayerson acknowledges the research gap and states that there is currently little understanding of how people negotiate among these topics and how reproductive decisions are being rationalised in the age of climate change (2021, 5). Kallman and Ferorelli's book chapter also discusses the intersection of climate and reproduction, but in the form of personal essays (2018). My thesis aims to contribute to this emerging field by approaching the intersection of climate change and reproduction from a critical discourse analytic perspective, as linguistically oriented studies are currently lacking in the field. Furthermore, I aim to bring awareness of gendered social norms and power relations to the analysis of eco-reproductive choices.

Discussions about being childfree for environmental reasons are part of a larger discourse on reproduction, which is becoming increasingly polarized in the age of climate change as groups with differing interests are trying to influence people's reproductive choices. While economically motivated groups and even governments aim to increase birth rates to maintain their age-dependency ratios, environmentally conscious individuals are concerned about overpopulation and a lack of resources. As such, this study participates in ongoing debates about reproductive freedom, the relation between capitalism and climate change, and the psychological effects of climate change.

This thesis consists of six sections. In the next section, I will discuss the theoretical background for this study, focusing on pronatalism and childfreedom as well as previous research on eco-reproductive concerns. In section 3, I will move on to describe the methodological approach of this study, namely discourse analysis and content analysis. I will also give an account of the data collection process and illustrate how the analysis was conducted in practice. I offer an analysis of the data in section 4, where I present a categorisation of the arguments used to resist pronatalist views. I will provide examples of each main theme and concurrently examine the linguistic devices used throughout the posts. In section 5, I will review these thematic categories and linguistic resources in relation to previous research. I will also examine their significance in a larger societal context and offer suggestions for further investigations on the topic. Finally, I conclude the thesis with a brief summary of my main aims, findings and implications in section 6.

2 Theoretical background

I begin this section by conceptualising pronatalism and normative motherhood, which provide the historical context for the childfree discourse, as pronatalist discourse is something that the members of the subreddit community are actively trying to contest. I will then move on to childfreedom and childfree discourses, providing a review of earlier research in the field and illustrating the way such discourse is situated in opposition to pronatalist ideology and discourse. I will discuss the term *childfree* and the stigmatisation of childfree individuals, as well as the rhetorical strategies used to overcome such stigma and counter-oppressive discourses. I will also briefly review digitally mediated communication, as online communities have been a fruitful source for analysing childfreedom. Finally, I discuss previous research examining the interconnection of environmentalism and reproduction discourse, highlighting the sensitive relation between the two.

2.1 Pronatalism and discourses of motherhood

Since the second wave of feminism, many feminist scholars have critiqued the way that femininity and motherhood are linked (see for example Rich 1995; Friedan 2001; O'Reilly 2007 for an overview). Normative discourses situate motherhood as the foundation of femininity (Gillespie 2000; Gillespie 2003) to the point that "good womanhood" is discursively linked to "selfless maternity" (Hayden 2010, 277). "The construction of womanhood as motherhood has been established through social, political, medical, and religious institutions. In so doing, motherhood has become constructed as a 'fixed' and 'natural' practice that is central to feminine identity" (Saphiro 2014, 10). Conflating the concepts of woman and mother and expecting that all women desire to become mothers are central parts of the hegemonic discourse on reproduction in western culture, all of which reinforce pronatalist ideology. This results in "cross-culturally ingrained pronatalist ideology [that] glorifies parenthood, presenting the bearing and raising of children not only as a key purpose of adulthood, but as the source of ultimate human fulfillment" (Moore and Abetz 2019, 391). Consequently, those that desire to stay childfree are seen as aberrant and need to explain their choice (Heitlinger 1991, 346).

According to Matley, pronatalist ideology defines "bearing and raising children as women's essential biological function" (2020, 2). I argue that such open biological determinism is increasingly rejected, yet pronatalism continues to function in more subtle ways and remains deeply rooted in our society. This is partly because pronatalism operates on multiple levels: through culture, ideology, psychology and population policy (Heitlinger 1991, 344–345). Furthermore, pronatalist discourses are reworked over time. They transform to accommodate social change yet continue to maintain motherhood as central to feminine identity (Bartholomaeus and Riggs 2017, 3; Gillespie 2000, 231). Modern pronatalism does not expect women to stay at home and take care of the household and children. Instead, new motherhood discourses promote the idea of women "having it all" (Gillespie 2000, 230). Even though there has been a shift from reproductive duties to reproductive rights (Gembries 2018, 56), the expected outcome of exercising these rights is that women will eventually have children.

Heitlinger notes that the term *pronatalism* contains a wide spectrum of ideas, even to the point of extreme racist and eugenic approaches that heavily limit reproductive freedom (1991, 345–346 and 371). Moore points out that reproduction discourses have historically been "heterosexist, classist, and racist", encouraging couples with desirable traits (highly educated or white) to reproduce and sanctioning those with undesirable traits (poor or coloured) for having too many children (2014, 160). Coercive reproduction ideology may combine a "strong pronatalism for some with strong anti-natalism for others" (Heitlinger 1991, 345), although most people in western democracies do not tolerate open coercive pronatalism. In this study, I conceptualise pronatalism as the normative assumption that everyone wants and eventually has children and consequently, childfree individuals are stigmatized. Pronatalism may nevertheless intersect with nationalist or religious rhetoric (Morison et al. 2016, 185).

The progress that has been made in the late 20th century has been celebrated for giving women reproductive freedom and making motherhood a *choice*, despite the fact that the possibilities to exercise this choice are complex and unequal in reality (O'Brien Hallstein and Hayden 2010). Even though we are living in an "era of choice" (Ibid.), some choices are seen as more "right" than others. Moore and Abetz explain how "[w]omen—especially those who are white, middle- to upper-class, able-bodied, and married—are compelled by pronatalist ideology to make the 'right choice' to have children or suffer social stigmatization" (2019, 393). According to pronatalist ideology, having children and becoming a parent is the norm. In a recent study, Bartholomaeus and Riggs discovered that this norm is enforced through an

intergenerational pronatalist discourse; in other words, the normative expectation to mother is reproduced across generations (2017). Motherhood and later grandparenthood are portrayed as central to a "'heteronormative life course' discourse" (Bartholomaeus and Riggs 2017, 14). Mother-daughter relationships were found to be a principal source for strengthening these expectations, which in turn are intertwined with the wider cultural discourses on motherhood (Bartholomaeus and Riggs 2017).

Even though pronatalist discourse has a long-standing hegemonic position, alternative discourses have existed alongside it for a long time. Heitlinger's study on pronatalism from 1991 concedes that pronatalist ideology coexists with "anti-natalist ideologies exposing the environmental advantages of 'zero population growth' or the individual advantages of a 'child-free lifestyle'" (1991, 347). A decade later, Gillespie writes that "an increasing number of women reject and resist pronatalist cultural imperatives of femininity that conflate woman with mother, highlighting the emergence of a positive feminine identity separate from motherhood" (2003, 133). Next, I will discuss the linguistic and rhetorical strategies through which childfree individuals have challenged pronatalism and the stigmatisation of childfree people.

2.2   Childfree as a counter-discourse

Childfree is a term that rejects associations with absence and deficiency that terms such as *infertile* and *childless* connote (Gillespie 2003). Other terms that similarly emphasise choice in the matter of having children are *voluntarily childless* and *childfree-by-choice*, which are often used synonymously with the term *childfree* (Morison et al. 2016, 185). Even within groups that embrace the childfree label, "complex, contradictory, and nuanced identities" exist, and some individuals who do not want children prefer not to be labelled at all (Moore 2014, 160). Moore rightly points out that the attempts of previous research to define and set boundaries on who constitutes as childfree, such as requiring the biological ability to have children, has reinforced heteronormative understandings of reproduction and thus excluded many voices and nuanced experiences (2014, 176–177). Hayfield et al. thus fill an important research gap regarding diverse sexualities by examining the childfree identities of heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual, and queer women in their study (2019). They conclude that "LBQA women cannot be assumed to be child-free by default" and that they are somewhat similarly impacted by pronatalist and motherhood ideologies (2019, 535).

The childfree "identity is historically and culturally situated in resistance to pronatalism, resulting in stigma and stereotyping, which must be discursively managed by individuals who choose to communicate their choice to remain childless" (Moore 2014, 160). Childfree individuals are open to stigma because they openly deviate from the pronatalist mandate, and as such, the pronatalist discourse positions the childfree individual as the "other", deficient, damaged, deviant, or selfish (Morison et al. 2016, 186). Childfree individuals must explain their choice and even after doing so, the legitimacy of their reasons is questioned. Gillespie shows that others superimpose more acceptable explanations on childfree individuals, such as infertility, thus effectively leaving the pronatalist ideology of motherhood as universally desirable intact (2000, 227–228). Pronatalist ideology is similarly reproduced when childfree individuals' accounts of choice are disregarded by claims that they will change their mind or end up regretting their choice (Gillespie 2000, 228–229). The considerable amount of stigma that childfree individuals continue to face is a sign of the hegemonic position of pronatalist discourse in our society, despite the work done by feminists in the field of reproductive justice.

Previous studies on childfreedom have focused especially on the identity work and stigma management of childfree individuals and the ways normative expectations and oppressive discourses are challenged, thus making it a fruitful topic to examine counter-discourses. Both Park (2002) and Hayden (2010) explored ways to resist and recast the negative assumption that childfree individuals, especially women, are selfish and unnatural. Park interviewed childfree individuals and found a strategy of "condemning the condemners" and taking a position of moral superiority by claiming that most people have children for selfish reasons or that they do not stop to think and simply conform to expectations (2002, 34–35). Additionally, participants were asserting the importance of other values, including environmental responsibility, and therefore were "confronting pronatalism with parallel culturally resonant themes" (2002, 39). The strategies in Hayden's study were very similar and included "reversing the charge" by claiming that having children is selfish, because the parents either gave into societal pressure or neglected the environmental impact of having children (2010, 275–276). Furthermore, Hayden reports that some relied on alternative discourses such as feminist discourse to legitimate their right to put themselves first. Others rejected the simplistic view of selfish/selfless and instead emphasised simultaneously fulfilling own goals and contributing to the world (2010, 282 and 284).

7

Morison et al. (2016) have analysed childfree individuals' identity management and rhetorical strategies used to challenge pronatalist discourses in online discussions and email interviews. Similar to the current study, they see the childfree discourse as a "struggle against dominant, regulatory norms that promote procreation", all the while taking into consideration the social norms and power relations of reproduction discourse (2016, 184–185). They focused on stigma management and found that the participants utilised a childfree-by-choice script to maintain positive identities and reject negative associations: on one hand, it constructs childfreedom as a legitimate lifestyle choice and on the other hand, it inverts stigmatising attributes, thus positioning the childfree as a rational, reflexive, and responsible decision-maker (2016, 190). These strategies are also prevalent in the findings of this study, as will be demonstrated later. Morison et al. also discovered an opposite stategy: the "disavowal of choice script" which constructs childfreedom as a natural and biologically determined, such as lacking a "maternal instinct", or as a "nonchoice" based on the untenable horrors of parenthood (2016, 192–193). Both strategies minimise culpability and criticism by portraying the decision to be childfree as something that is beyond personal control, rather than a deliberate choice (Morison et al. 2016, 193).

Studies on pronatalist discourses and childfreedom have focused largely on motherhood and women's perspectives, whereas fatherhood has received much less attention from scholars. There are disparate gender ideologies and therefore different expectations regarding reproduction and parenting (Moore and Abetz 2019, 408). Terry and Braun discovered in their study on childfree men who had preemptive vasectomies that unconventional life choices were positively framed through neoliberal discourses of choice (2012, 219–220). The men in the study willingly claimed negative identities such as selfishness, and the subjects' positions were not framed in terms of stigma but in terms of rebellion (2012, 222). Terry and Braun concluded that accessing such discourses may be easier for men due to their privileged status in society (2012, 217 and 221). Although more research is needed for conclusive evidence, Park notes that childfree women seem to be more stigmatized than childfree men (2002, 26).

It is inconclusive whether these strategies succeed in opposing or deconstructing dominant ideologies based on the findings of these studies. According to Park, the condemning the condemners strategy does not "represent a full fledged attack on dominant ideologies" but it is not simply defensive either (2002, 35). However, she points out that the strategies may "emerge as reactive, intermediate, or proactive depending on the degree to which they accept

or challenge pronatalist ideologies" (2002, 39). Gillespie observes that in childfree discourse, motherhood is represented as a "a sacrifice, a duty, and a burden" (2003, 130) and that there is a radical rejection of motherhood as a "normative female gender marker" (2003, 133). In contrast, Hayfield et al. found that childfreedom was framed as ordinary rather than extraordinary or radical (2019, 533). Nevertheless, "people who challenge stigma emphasise and reconfigure their difference from normative identities; they reframe their status as desirable and even as indicative of superiority" (Morison et al. 2016, 186). It is debatable how radical or transgressive certain discourses are, yet the struggle over meanings ascribed to childfree individuals is inherently related to power relations in our society.

2.2.1 Digitally mediated communication and online childfree communities

Many of the studies discussed above utilised digitally mediated communication to explore childfree and pronatalist discourses (Matley 2020; Morison et al. 2016; Moore 2014; Moore and Abetz 2019). Angouri outlines that online communities consist of geographically separated individuals who come together through the internet around a common interest (2015, 323). Morison et al. enumerates that "[o]nline childfree communities allow spaces for information-sharing, legitimation, and solidarity, and also potentially for the formulation of strategies of resistance" (2016, 185). Online spaces and digitally mediated communication can offer temporary escape from powerful discourses, and they may reform discursive practises. Moore and Abetz's thematic analysis on parental regret in Reddit shows how online discussion forums can work to legitimize and normalize discourses and "emotional experiences that have traditionally fallen outside the boundaries of acceptability" (2019, 407). They explain that "Reddit […] creates a lasting space of resistance to the linear pronatalist narrative of life fulfillment (fall in love, get married, have children, live happily ever after)" (2019, 407).

Matley has analysed counter-discourses of maternity and femininity and considers online media as a discursive space for contesting and critiquing ideologies (2020, 1). The study focuses on how posters on online communities like *Mumsnet* "employ linguistic resources to counter the taboo of maternal regret" (Matley 2020, 2). Emphasising the first-person singular pronouns is used to contest maternal altruism and child-centric motherhood, which are at the heart of pronatalism (2020, 5). Matley explains that the digitally mediated communication "may empower women to contest dominant discourses of motherhood" through anonymity, although he notes that regulatory norms still exist in such environments and many posters nevertheless

9

reinforced dominant discourses (2020, 5–6). Danet explains that when communicating via chat, one's identity is disguised, thus giving the poster reduced accountability. This, along with the interactivity, makes cyberspace "anarchic, playful and even carnivalesque" (2001, 8–11). The engineering and designing of digital environments enable and inspire alternative ways of communication while restraining others (Georgakopoulou and Spilioti 2015, 3), which will be discussed in more detail in the methods section. Technological properties do shape discourse and allow the interlocutors more liberties than in a socially sanctioned environment. However, to avoid technological determinism, it is important to remember that social and cultural factors are still somewhat present in digitally mediated spaces (Herring and Androutsopoulos 2015, 143). Online discussions do not happen in a void, and the speakers are never fully free of the societal restrictions of the real world.

2.3   Intersection of reproduction and environmentalism

Thus far, there is little research that examines the connection between reproductive choices and climate change / environmentalism. A few studies on pronatalism and voluntary childlessness mention environmental concerns in passing. For example, Moore's study on the identity of childfree women notes that the zero population growth movement helped legitimize the choice to not have children (2014, 161). According to Park, some participants relied on the global population growth argument to justify childfreedom (2002, 38), and Hayden writes that a few childfree individuals used environmentalism to reverse the selfishness charge (2010, 275).

However, the environmental aspect of reproduction is the sole focus of a book chapter by Kallman and Ferorelli. In it, they discuss how the climate crisis impacts parenthood and family planning through their personal experiences and their work in the organisation "Conceivable Futures" (2018). Their organisational work helps many to articulate the concerns they already had and legitimize environmental concerns as a factor in reproductive decisions. While Kallman and Ferorelli's interwoven personal essay contributes significantly to bringing this topic into the spotlight, more empirical research is needed on the intersection of climate change and reproduction.

Schneider-Mayerson and Leong's research focuses solely on the climate aspect of reproduction as well, and they conducted a large survey directed at climate concerned individuals (Schneider-Mayerson and Leong 2020 and Schneider-Mayerson 2021). They set

out to find how climate change factors into reproductive choices and found that a deep concern for the well-being of (hypothetical) children was prominent: 80.3% of the respondents stated that they were "extremely concerned" about the climate impacts their children will experience (2020, 1014). Another concern, although less significant, was the carbon footprint of procreation (2020, 1015). The authors use the term *eco-reproductive hesitation* to describe the negative effects that climate change has on reproductive plans (Schneider-Mayerson and Leong 2020).

In a related study using the same data, Schneider-Mayerson divided the environmental reasons for not having children into two categories: "the opportunity cost of parenting" and "fertility as a socio-political tool" (2021, 13–15). For Schneider-Mayerson, the opportunity cost comprises the time, money and energy taken away from climate activism or other work that could help mitigate the crisis if one chooses to have a child. He frames the second category as using reproductive potential strategically to influence the environmental attitudes of family members and friends. Additionally, Schneider-Mayerson and Leong point out that climate concerns may be used to explain reproductive choices post facto (2020, 1020). They conclude that "individuals make sense of and explain their reproductive choices to themselves and to others by drawing on what they imagine to be socially and culturally acceptable explanations", which the authors call *eco-reproductive vocabulary of motives* (Schneider-Mayerson and Leong 2020, 1020).

Another study found similar reasons for being childfree when examining BirthStrike, a digital activist group whose members declared not to procreate until governments undertake radical climate action (Frangén 2020). A total of nine categories were established, of which the most prominent was an intense fear of the future, including anxieties about dangerous chemicals, pollution, natural disasters, and societal and environmental collapse. The second most common category dealt explicitly with the immorality of bringing a child into an environmentally unstable world, although morality was an underlying factor in all categories. The third most common factor was "activism as a priority", which corresponds to the "opportunity cost" in Schneider-Mayerson's study (2020). Individual members did not mention weaponising fertility as a reason for going on birthstrike, although the purpose of the activist group as a whole was to use fertility as a political tool.

Climate concerns do not always correspond with a negative approach to reproduction, as individuals may experience the effect of climate change on reproduction differently. In

11

Schneider-Mayerson's study, some climate leftists said having children was crucial for the environment because it increased "the parental investment in environmental politics" (2021, 9–11). The category contains the claims that individuals with children are more committed to fighting for the future whereas individuals without children would simply give up (Schneider-Mayerson 2021, 9). A related worry is that not having children for environmental reasons would cause moral licensing, which means that the "adoption of one moral behavior results in a decreased likelihood of the adoption of another" (Schneider-Mayerson and Leong 2020, 1019). Some individuals saw "children as future environmentalists", a generation that would solve the crisis (2021, 9–13). Having children who would become environmentalists in the future was also important for some of the respondents to counterbalance a political fertility gap between liberals and conservatives in the USA (2021, 18). Even though reproduction discourse in the context of climate change is usually discussed from an anti-natalist perspective, Schneider-Mayerson's study is an important reminder that there can also be pronatalist motivations (2021, 18). Environmentalism can therefore be utilised to promote both pronatalist and childfree ideologies.

Another link between environmental and reproduction discourse is how consumerism and motherhood are linked. De Grazia points out that there is a "conventional association of women with consumption, as a consequence of their role in the household division of labor" (1996, 7). This is especially true of women who are mothers, and Hayden writes that purchasing the correct toys, clothes and gadgets for their children can even be used to measure how successful and committed a mother is (2015, 177). "The subject-positions of mother and consumer now overlap in unprecedented ways" (Demo 2015, 2), which the collection of ten in-depth essays on parenting and consumption illustrate (Demo, Borda and Kroløkke 2015). The link between consumerism and parenting is another argument that childfree individuals utilise, which I will return to later in the analysis.

In a study about reproduction and climate change, it is important to acknowledge the precarious connection between environmentalism and reproduction. As Kallmann and Ferorelli note, "The mainstream environmental movement has a long history of coercive, racist, and colonialist efforts to control the fertility of poor women and women of colour in the United States and around the world through forced or reward-based birth control and sterilization programs" (2018, 31). Reproduction is a human right, and it is important to approach conversations about overpopulation carefully so as to not violate that right. Schneider-

Mayerson and Leong remind us that when researching the intersection of climate and reproduction, we must be able to distinguish between individual reproductive choices and oppressive or violent policies (2020, 1009). In this study, I do not examine childfreedom as a solution for climate change or "overpopulation." Instead, I aim to answer how climate change is affecting individual people's desires to have children and how it is being discursively used to negotiate social norms. Neither does this study aim to answer the question of whether having children in the age of climate change is morally acceptable, which has been studied in the field of ethics (Pinkert and Sticker 2020; Rachels 2014; Licon 2012; Rieder 2016), although the posters touch on both topics in the data. In the process of analysing childfree environmental discourse, I take care not to limit anyone's reproductive sovereignty or to judge anyone for having children.

3   Data and Methods

In this section, I will provide an overview of the primary data and the data collection method. I examine the connection among discourse, power, and other social elements. This provides an understanding of how power relations are sustained but also challenged discursively, as in the case of childfree discourse. I aim to draw attention to how critical discourse analysis is used to address broader societal questions, such as reproductive justice, in the age of climate change. Furthermore, I briefly review content analysis as a method and the coding process that I use in this study. I will close by discussing certain limitations of this study and ethical considerations.

3.1   Data collection and processing

The material for this study was collected from the social media site Reddit. "Reddit is a global online community where users create and maintain subreddits dedicated to any topic that they desire to discuss" (Moore and Abetz 2019, 395). Reddit was chosen because there are large, active communities of voluntarily childfree individuals, such as subreddits called r/childfree and r/truechildfree, which at the time of writing this thesis had 1.4. million members and 90.9 thousand members, respectively (Reddit 2009 and Reddit 2012). Furthermore, one of the strengths of Reddit is that it allows users to have many accounts: they may create "throwaway accounts", which means that information will not be linked back to their main account (Leavitt 2015). This gives users privacy and comfort, which in turn lets the posters express their views more freely and without fear of being identified. Due to the amount of material and the limited scope of this study, the analysis was restricted only to the subreddit r/childfree.

Many subreddits have community-specific rules for conducting discussions which are enforced by moderators. The rules for r/childfree include, among others, that all content must be directly related to childfreedom, no hateful or abusive language and no "bingos" are allowed. *Bingo* is defined as follows: "Posts and comments to the effect of 'Wait till you're a parent', 'You'll change your mind someday', 'You only think that cause you are young', etc. (what we call 'bingo', for short) will be removed" (Reddit 2009). What the members of the subreddit have labelled bingoing is, in practice, the reinforcing of pronatalist views through the disregarding and disbelieving of childfree individuals' choices, as discussed in the previous

section regarding Gillespie's research (2000, 228–229). This shows an awareness of normative expectations that makes critical discourse analysis a suitable choice.

The r/childfree subreddit contains discussion threads about various aspects of the childfree lifestyle, and to find relevant posts, I used the website's search function. I searched for threads within the childfree subreddit using the keyword "climate". After reviewing the results, eleven threads that focused on reproductive choices from an environmental perspective were chosen. The collection process was conducted in November 2021. The material therefore consists of user-generated threads and discussions that took place without any prompts. The existence of numerous threads on climate change and environmentalism on the childfree site indicates that climate questions are indeed a significant concern for those pondering their reproductive choices.

After suitable threads were identified, I then filtered the comments chronologically from oldest to newest. By default, the posts are sorted based on relevancy using an algorithm labelled "best", which changes the order of comments based on multiple aspects such as the number of upvotes and downvotes. Previous studies on Reddit have used the "best" filter. For example, Moore and Abetz used the algorithm in order to find the most relevant posts to the original topic (2019, 396). I chose the chronological filter for objectivity because using the "best" algorithm might have distorted the results. What made collecting the material more complicated was Reddit's function that automatically minimizes unpopular comments. It was therefore necessary to go through the threads manually to make sure all posts were included in the data. Like filtering the posts chronologically, this step also ensured objectivity and allowed diverse and less popular opinions to be considered. Despite these steps, the group rules limit the types of posts that are acceptable in the subreddit, and any posts that deviate from the commonly accepted ideas are downvoted and then deleted, either by the original poster or a moderator. This increases intergroup polarisation and affects the types of comments users choose to post to begin with. It is noteworthy that the material is therefore extremely homogenous, with very few posters who challenge or disagree with each other.

The data were then processed to include only the first twenty posts from each thread. An important methodological decision was to count only topic-initiating posts (including the titles) and first and second level comments, as comments further down the line tended to digress from the original topic. This also created more variety in the data as it included posts from many different posters, rather than a conversation between just a few posters. Whenever a comment

15

had been deleted, the lower-level comments regarding the deleted post were also not considered for clarity. In one instance, there was a post written in a language other than English, which was also omitted from the data. The threads garnered comments varyingly, from several hundred to just a few dozen, so in two cases the threads had only thirteen and fourteen first- and second-level comments. After the data-cleaning process, the primary data for this study consists of 11 threads with a total of 207 posts. The threads vary in length from 500 to 1000 words, as illustrated in the table below. In total, the dataset consists of 8956 words.

Table 1 Data set size

Thread name	Words
Anyone else think that having a kid now is selfish given the state of the world and climate change?	916
Being childfree because of climate change	969
Does climate change affect your decision to be child free?	869
Gen Z is gonna save the planet, so I should have kids	1026
"I'm a climate activist, and I have kids"	718
It's ethically wrong to bring a child into a world of so much suffering. (Kids to become cogs in capitalist machine and witness theend of the world due to climate change = no go for me)	681
There are a lot articles and opinion pieces about lower birth rates lately	771
my coworker thinks i'm selfish for not wanting children despite climate change worsening	903
The cognitive dissonance of conservationists having kids	507
Who the fuck looks at this world and goes like "yeah, I'll force another human to existence"	851
You guys seeing all this climate crisis news?	745
Total	8956

3.2   Methods employed

3.2.1   Critical discourse analysis

The main methodological approach for my thesis is critical discourse analysis (CDA). A key aspect of critical discourse analysis is examining the relationship between discourse and other social elements such as power relations, ideologies, and institutions (Fairclough 2012, 9). Therefore, CDA often has a social problem or a political issue as its starting point, which in the case of this study is the way pronatalist reproductive discourse oppresses people, forcing them to negotiate between societal expectations to have children and worries about the climate crisis. In a more recent chapter, Fairclough develops his understanding of CDA by introducing the notion of *dialectical reasoning*, summarised as follows: "CDA combines critique of discourse

and explanation of how discourse figures in existing social reality as a basis for action to change reality" (2018, 13). This means that discourse and social reality critique ought to advocate (political) action (Fairclough 2018, 16). In line with the view of CDA as political is van Dijk, who argues that an important characteristic of scholars in Critical Discourse Studies is explicitly positioning oneself "with the aim of contributing to specific social change in favour of the dominated groups" (2008, 7). As mentioned previously, this study does not comment on whether having children is good or bad, but by explicitly taking the perspective of individuals who choose not to have children, I aim to highlight the discursive reproduction of oppressing social norms and thus advancing genuine reproductive freedom. In other words, the aim is that having or not having children would be a neutral and truly individual decision.

As Fairclough puts it, "The focus is not just on power *in* discourse but also power *behind* discourse"; the focus is not only on linguistic representations but the wider social structure (2018, 14). This means that the object of study is simultaneously material and semiotic (Ibid.). Fairclough argues that critical discourse analysis is inherently interdisciplinary, as it combines disciplines that are interested in material or social aspects as well as disciplines in which the primary foci are semiotic aspects (2012, 9 and 2018, 14). Indeed, in this thesis, I combine a linguistic analysis with a feminist approach as gender studies are focused more on the material/social effects of reproductive decisions and parenthood. This approach, therefore, covers both the semiotic and social aspects of the research topic. Furthermore, van Dijk points out that feminist studies and CDA have a lot in common, as both are concerned explicitly with social inequality and take a critical approach (2015, 476).

Discourse and power cannot be separated from each other, and as van Dijk explains, very few people can say whatever they wish wherever and whenever, not just because of laws but also because of norms of appropriateness (van Dijk 2008, 9). Going a step further, he argues that "[t]hose who control discourse may indirectly control the minds of people", as discourse affects attitudes and ideologies (Ibid.). The ideological aspect of discourse comes from its contribution to "sustaining particular relations of power and domination" (Fairclough 2012, 15). However, the way these power relations are being contested is also a relevant aspect of CDA. According to van Dijk, CDA research focuses on how "discourse structures enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce, or *challenge* relations of power abuse" (2015, 467, emphasis added). This study focuses particularly on the ways of discursively resisting and challenging hegemonic beliefs and ideologies. Feltwell et al. examined counter-discursive activism on social media,

and they maintain that CDA enables insight into both language and acts of power when analysing how discourses are being challenged (2017, 356). Terry and Brown, referring to Foucault's (1980) work, explain that "where power exists, where discourses are dominant, there is always the potential for resistance" (2012, 220).

Van Dijk's theoretical framework enumerates discourse structures that explain how dominant discourses work to manipulate beliefs or, in other words, how the "discursive reproduction of power" works (2015, 474). These include implications and presuppositions, metaphors, passive sentence structures and nominalizations, intergroup polarization, and certain lexical expressions (2015, 473–474). Opinions are often codified in the lexicon and dismantling the implications in lexical items uncovers ideological meanings (van Dijk 1998, 205). Rhetorical figures that have persuasive functions also include metaphors, euphemisms, irony, and contrast (van Dijk 1998, 272). In addition to grammatical structures, discourse analysts can also focus more loosely on aspects such as the "development of themes or images across the sentences" (Gee and Handford 2012, 5). Just as these features are utilised to naturalize and legitimize hegemony, they can also be utilised to build alternate ideologies and resist dominant discourses.

3.2.2 Content analysis

CDA is not a specific method of doing discourse analysis, and van Dijk emphasizes that all relevant methods may be used to do critical discourse analysis (2015, 466). In this study, I use content analysis, which allows me to analyse the data in a way that is as systematic and transparent as possible. A key idea in content analysis is that "the many words of the text are classified into much fewer content categories" (Weber 1990, 12). There are several ways of doing content analysis. Drisko and Maschi illustrate how *basic content analysis* uses word counts and other quantitative analytic methods and focuses on manifest meanings, whereas *Interpretive Content Analysis* and *Qualitative Content Analysis* focus instead on describing the meaning in context (2015, 2–3). The latter also enables the researcher to analyse the latent, underlying meaning that requires interpretation (Cho and Lee 2014, 4). For example, irony and sarcasm require active interpretation of implicit communication, often across several sentences or paragraphs (Drisko and Maschi 2015, 4). Content analysis can be done either from an inductive or deductive approach, which has an impact on the initial creation of the categories (Cho and Lee 2014, 4). The deductive approach is used if the researcher has pre-existing

knowledge of suitable categories, and the inductive approach is used if the categories are derived directly from the data analysed in the study, which is the case in the current study. According to Cho and Lee (2014, 17), one of the strengths of content analysis is that it aids one's understanding of social reality or phenomena, which makes it a suitable method of study for an under-researched topic.

I first identified patterns and themes in the text that I used as a basis for the initial categories. Through a careful coding process, I categorised the text into thematic units of varying length according to the categories. One unit can consist of an individual word, a clause or multiple sentences, and longer units might encompass smaller units. After I completed the initial coding and gained a more thorough understanding of the discourse in question, I revised the categories and the coding to increase accuracy and reliability. I did this to decrease the threat to reliability posed by only one person doing the coding, as word meanings and categories can be ambiguous and interpretative (Weber 1990, 15). The process described here was conducted using a text analysis tool NVivo 12, which is designed for qualitative data analysis.

Next, I will present examples of the categorisation process, and the issues connected to providing numerical data. Because only first- and second-level comments were included in the material, the posts were generally very relevant and discussed reproduction and climate change as intended in the topic-initiating post. Naturally, there were some departures from the topic, such as a post "I saw something on a vegan sub 'You don't love animals, you love pets.'" These unrelated instances were not coded. Some posts were easily divided into thematic units, such as the post below:

(1) I would think you can't be selfish towards someone that does not even exisit. Indeed adoption would be very selfless looking at it like that opposed to creating more people

(thrilledtube)

This post was categorised as "Childfree individuals' positive aspects" and further in the subcategory "Selflessness". However, not all text in the material fit neatly into one category. Below is an example of a post that is appealing to the reader using multiple different arguments that are interwoven, making it complex to code.

(2) What strikes me the most is that they don't realise that **their kids are/will be the VICTIMS of the climate change**. Not just contributing cause.

19

> Even if they are a potential *saviour*, which let's be honest, it's highly unlikely, what is guaranteed is that **they will suffer and suffer greatly.**
> The question I would love to ask these types is:
> "You birthed **a climate collapse victim**. How can you live with that?"

> (highjump; emphasis in cursive original, other emphasis added)

This extract highlights parents' negative aspects, especially denial of climate change as well as a demonstration of selfishness/immorality, as implied in the final question (underlined). The poster is calling attention to the children's suffering in several parts of the text (in bold), but also noting that they are simultaneously contributing to climate change. The extract is also discrediting the argument that the next generation will save the planet by highlighting how unlikely it is that the child would be a "saviour". I will expand on all these categories in the analysis section, but I gave this example here to illustrate that many of the categories are often expressed together and repeated.

It is challenging to provide numerical data because the same argument is often repeated in different forms throughout the post and it would be dubious to draw the line where one thematic unit ends and another one begins. Furthermore, the thematic units often overlap and sometimes the same unit of text can simultaneously invoke arguments from more than one category, even when categories are mutually exclusive and not confounded (Weber 1990, 23). Counting separate instances would have been artificial and manufactured. Providing statistical or quantifiable data is not the purpose of this study, which is why I chose to focus on the qualitative analysis. Interpretative and qualitative content analysis may focus on "summarizing and describing meanings in an interpretive, narrative manner" instead of quantification (Drisko and Maschi 2015, 4–5). Drisko and Maschi highlight that this does not mean any less systematic or transparent analysis, as the author is instead publicly justifying "how the analysis was completed, with many links back to the original texts" (Drisko and Maschi 2015, 4–6). In this study, the descriptive and explanatory power of content and discourse analysis are more significant than the frequency counts of certain categories.

3.3   Limitations and ethical considerations

Shapiro called for research on voluntary childlessness that takes into consideration racial, ethnic, sexual, gender and socio-economic differences (2014, 4). As mentioned earlier, one of the

strengths of using Reddit is that it offers anonymity required for discussing sensitive topics and challenging norms. However, in this case, this is also a drawback as it limits the possibility of making conclusions regarding cultural contexts (Moore and Abetz 2019, 395). Since the data in this study were collected from an online, anonymous setting, it is difficult to reliably record the demographics of participants, such as their gender or sexual identities, nationality, or age. In a few instances, the posters disclosed some of this information, mainly in topic-initiating posts or in a user flair, which is an icon or text that one can set up to appear right below the username each time you post in a specific community (Reddit 2022). An example of such a user flair from the data is "Lesbian and CF🏳️‍🌈" (fiddleytalk). Most of the posts did not mention any personal information, which is why the information is not used to draw generalisations about the posters or childfree individuals. I nevertheless aim not to overlook sexual orientation or gender identity as many previous studies on childfreedom have done, as discussed in section 2.2. During the analysis process, I took extra care not to assume the person's gender or sexual orientation. Unless the poster stated their gender explicitly, pronouns *they/them* were used in this study.

Finally, Reddit is an open online platform and you do not need to be a member to access the content posted on the r/childfree subreddit. As Morison et al. (2016, 189) write, the ethical considerations for open sites are limited as anyone can access all the content, meaning that forum discussions are happening in the public domain. Even though all posts on Reddit are posted under anonymous usernames, I chose not to use the original nicknames for greater identity protection. Following the example of Matley (2020) and Morison et al. (2016), I used an online pseudonym generator to assign all posters new names, which are used to refer to them for the purposes of this study (Jimpix 2022). Each forum participant is given a pseudonym that is used consistently. If the user posted several times, the same auto-generated name is used each time. This was done so that it would be visible to the reader if certain views were repeatedly expressed by the same person.

4   Analysis

In this section I will enumerate and expand on the different ways language is used to challenge pronatalist views. Using content analysis, I identified five main themes, which are further divided into subcategories. These themes are prevalent in the Reddit discussion and utilise linguistic resources in a variety of ways, which I will discuss along with the themes. The table below presents ways to challenge pronatalism and promote childfree ideology. The categorisation is not exhaustive and does not represent every single view in the data, but it highlights the main themes and arguments in the discussion. Very few posters voiced opinions that contradicted the main childfree arguments in the categorisation, and possible reasons for this were discussed in section 3.1.

Table 2 Categorisation of the arguments used to resist pronatalism

Category	Subcategory	Description	Example
Awareness of pronatalism	Bingoing	Discussion about and responses to bingoing; having to repeatedly answer why you do not want children and justify your reasons	"I bottomline with reasons specifically to me (health, feelings), so people can't successfully claim they know me better than myself, that they just know I'll love parenting and be great at it."
	Choice rhetoric	Resisting pronatalist arguments by relying on individual's freedom of choice	"And who are they to decide what's a valid reason? There is no wrong or right reason. If you don't want children, you don't want children. End of discussion."
	Racist pronatalism	Connecting pronatalism to racist and eugenic approaches	"What they're really saying - and what seeming most anti-CF "people" are saying - is there are too few WASP babies being born."
	The next generation argument	Refuting the argument that the next generation will solve the climate crisis	"Yeah it's amazing how many prospective parents have said in response to climate change, 'well I'm just gonna raise my kids as a climate warrior! The next gen is going to save the world!' ...sure. That's what people said about my gen"
	Miscellaneous	Various topics related to pronatalism and societal expectations	"Also, I effing hate the assumption that people were having children *willingly* in the olden days and in war situations. As if family planning/a woman

22

			refusing to have children was acceptable in those years, and as if birth control/sterilization were accessible."
"Breeders'" negative attributes	Denial	Portraying "breeders" as being naïve and in denial of the seriousness of the climate crisis or children's environmental impact	"Grasping the reality that their future kids, grandkids, etc will inherit a long, slow, violent extinction is too painful and conflicts too strongly with the romantic picture in their heads. So they choose to believe things will get better and it will all be solved before it's too late."
	Lack of responsible reflection	"Breeders" are framed as either unable or unwilling to carefully reflect on the decision to have children	"*gasps* giving thought to huge life decisions and thinking about what might impact another human being? That's just too much!"
	Selfishness	Claiming that "breeders" are being selfish for having children in the current situation	"To believe that the world is in serious danger AND to just not give a fuck, AND have children? That is far more selfish than being childfree."
	Hypocrisy	Highlighting the hypocrisy in the actions and arguments of "breeders" as well as their lack of self-awareness	""I don't give an eff about my children's suffering 'cuz I won't be here to see it." "I'm not having children. I woudln't want them to suffer." "GASP! yOu'Re sO sElFisH!""
	Susceptibility to external pressure	"Breeders" are said to have given into societal expectations and to have internalised the pronatalist mandate	"Maybe they always pictured themselves having kids, and they receive constant exterior pressure telling them this is what you're supposed to do. That you're not a full person unless you're a parent."
Childfree individuals' positive attributes	Responsible reflection	Highlighting childfree individuals' unique capabilities of careful and rational reflection regarding reproductive choices and the climate crisis	"That's why I'm childfree, I stopped and thought about my potential child's future."
	Selflessness	Explicitly stating that not having children is selfless or putting the needs of the hypothetical child before your own	"I can't, in good conscious, put those types of burdens on another human being."
	Embracing selfishness	Embracing selfishness by portraying it as a sign of strength and taking charge of your life	"I spent my 20s being focused on what everyone else needed. I want to be selfish now. I am loving every second of my current life. i get to do whatever the hell I want."
Children as victims	Climate	Claiming that children will suffer in the future and	"When they're grown up theres gonna be cities underwater and

23

		will have to witness the climate collapse or even suffer a painful death	micro plastics everywhere. Right now the current state of the world is terrible, pandemic and constant heatwaves, fires, droughts, floods, etc."
	Capitalism	Connecting the climate crisis and capitalism and claiming that children would suffer under the current system	"Bringing a kid just to be part of a labor force that will drain them mentally as they become a cog for the American capitalist machine who either in their lives or their children's lives will suffer a terrible end of the world."
Children's climate impact		Discussion regarding children's carbon footprint and overpopulation	"Overpopulation is a huge part of the climate change issue, and I want no part in it."

The number of subcategories is not indicative of the popularity of the category. Providing exact numerical data is not straightforward, as explained in section 3.2.2. "Awareness of pronatalism", "Breeders'' "Negative attributes" and "Children as victims" were prominent in the data set. There were fewer incidents that explicitly highlighted childfree individual's positive attributes and children's climate impact. The term *breeder* used in this categorisation and throughout this study is used widely on childfree sites also beyond the r/childfree subreddit (Morison et al. 2016, 191). The term is used in this study to cover not only people who already have children, but also anyone who wants children or has never questioned that they will have children, or someone who accepts the parenthood mandate as indubitably true. It is, however, written in quotation marks to acknowledge its derogatory nature. Next, I will discuss each category in more detail, and explain why the examples in the table above represent the category in question.

4.1 Awareness of pronatalism

The category labelled "Awareness of pronatalism" consists of posters analysing the way pronatalism works, discussing it and recounting real as well as hypothetical conversations with people who express pronatalist views.

4.1.1 Bingoing

The first subcategory, "Bingoing", refers to a situation in which one has to repeatedly answer the question as to why one does not want children and to justify their reasons for being childfree.

24

I included bingoing in this category because naming this phenomenon and discussing it with others requires but also increases awareness of pronatalism. Such discussions also involve the sharing of tips and tricks on how to better handle such encounters in the future. The following example presented in the table above is one such case:

> (3) I bottomline with reasons specifically to me (health, feelings), so people can't successfully claim they know me better than myself, that they just know I'll love parenting and be great at it.
>
> <div align="right">(Cottonpositive)</div>

This poster explains that they rely on unique and personal reasons to counter other people's persuasive attempts. The poster refers to the disregard and denial that those who (consciously or unconsciously) maintain pronatalist ideology exhibit when encountering childfree individuals (Gillespie 2000, 228). The women in Gillespie's study reported encounters where they were told that "they would change their minds when they 'met the right man'" (ibid.). The assumption here that you will "love parenting and be great at it" works in a similar way: the parent in question supposedly *knows better* because they have children as opposed to the childfree individual who has not gained this knowledge yet.

As this study is examining reproductive choices specifically in relation to climate change, the chosen threads discuss bingoing experiences from an environmental perspective. Several posters on the subreddit comment that they use the climate crisis as a response when encountering bingoing. Posters highlight that regardless of how much climate change truly factors in their decision to not have children, it is useful when discussing your choice with others:

> (4) I'd still be childfree if I was a billionaire living on a non-messed up planet. It just reinforces the point.
>
> <div align="right">(Carrotsominous)</div>

> (5) it's always good to have another tally in the book for why I don't want kids. I find people are more likely to leave me alone about my decision if I can keep throwing reasons why not to have kids at them. They run out of steam but I never run out of zingers!
>
> <div align="right">(evewindlass)</div>

> (6) It's one more item on a long list but a useful one when discussing your choice with others.
>
> <div align="right">(messageligament)</div>

The examples above show how the childfree individuals are subject to repeated, continuous attempts at persuasion. These posts show that the interlocutor is unlikely to stop after an initial reply and therefore, they must "keep throwing" reasons and to always have "another tally in the book". In these examples, the posters utilise climate change as a shield, an external way to justify their way of life to others. Nevertheless, the way climate crisis factors in the reproductive decision-making process should not be dismissed because it is used strategically and sometimes insincerely to make a point. Numerous posters on the subreddit name climate concerns as one of their top reasons for being childfree. Instead, what is significant here is that the posters feel the need to come up with arguments that convince others, which exemplifies the prevalence of modern pronatalism and the pressure it still creates on people who do not wish to follow the parenthood prescription.

4.1.2 Choice rhetoric

The second subcategory in the awareness of pronatalism section is "Choice rhetoric". This is closely related to bingoing, as it and other dismissive behaviours can invoke choice rhetoric. *Choice rhetoric* in this study refers to utilising freedom of choice and bodily autonomy to refute pronatalist arguments and to legitimise each reason for being childfree as sufficient. As discussed previously, Morison et al. convincingly exemplified how the concept of choice was used as a rhetorical strategy to resist stigma that comes with childfreedom, either through the childfree-by-choice script or by the disavowal of choice script (2016, 190–193). It should be noted that this definition of choice rhetoric is different from that of Taylor, who argues that the childfree movement claims that parents should be stripped of all public support and benefits because having children is an individual choice and children are therefore private responsibility (2003, 65). Taylor strongly opposes strategic rhetoric of choice because according to her defintion of the term, it assumes that all parents choose to have children unaffected by cultural prescriptions (2003, 59). However, in the current data, choice rhetoric was only used to highlight that *not* having children is a legitimate choice.

In the material analysed in this study, a few topic-initiating posters ask whether climate change is a valid reason to be childfree. Several posters argue that any reason at all is valid because having or not having children is ultimately *your choice*:

(7) It's a valid reason. Any reason is a valid reason as long as its yours. What are they thinking, that you'll agree it's not enough of a reason and then decide to procreate even if you don't want to?

(amusexmas)

(8) And who are they to decide what's a valid reason? There is no wrong or right reason. If you don't want children, you don't want children. End of discussion.

(grouchstrategy)

(9) Definitely a valid reason, so many valid reasons. Don't want them? Still a valid reason.

(unicornpigface)

The posters claim that there is no such thing as an invalid reason to be childfree because whatever the reason is, it should be enough. Simply not wanting children is valid according to unicornpigface. This use of rhetoric of choice demands respect for childfreedom by appealing to individual rights and freedom. Even reasons that might be considered vain or selfish are embraced in the community: "don't want skid marks on your hardwood floors? Valid reason", says strawinstructor. These posts celebrate individuality and agency and refuse to explain personal choices to others. Choice rhetoric is particularly persuasive because autonomy and freedom of choice are central to a neoliberal and feminist discourses, prevalent in Western culture (Gill 2008, Budgeon 2015, 314). Similarly individualized discourses of choice were deployed in relation to neoliberalism but also hegemonic masculinity in Terry and Braun (2012, 221).

Even though the posters unanimously agree that any reason to be childfree is valid, they do not extend the same choice rhetoric to having kids. On the contrary, throughout the material, all reasons for having children are seen as lacking and inadequate.

(10) I'm 17 and have asked my parents why exist and all they can fucking give me is: "bEcAuSe wE YeArNeD aFtEr yOu".

(pointlessmorose)

In this example, pointlessmorose portrays their parents as unable to give a legitimate reason for having had a child. Simply wanting a child is deemed as being an insufficient reason, whereas not wanting one was reason enough on its own. The poster is mocking the lack of reasoning behind the decision, which is signalled with alternating caps. Alternating caps are a sign of mockery or irony on message boards (Urban Dictionary, n.d.-a). McCulloch, on the other hand, mentions "wOrDs iN mIxEd cAPiTaLiZaTiOn" as a part of sparkle punctuation popular in the

27

1990s and early 2000s (2019, 127–128). Digitally-mediated communication brings about "linguistic innovations by which participants attempt to compensate for social cues normally conveyed by other channels in face-to-face interaction" (Herring and Androutsopoulos 2015, 140). In the absence of other cues, the alternating caps create a playfulness that is hard to miss. As discussed in the background section, chat modes are especially conducive to spontaneous playfulness and creativity, such as alternative spellings and use of all capital letters (Danet 2001, 8, 17).

4.1.3 Racist pronatalism

As discussed in the background section, pronatalism has connections to racist and eugenic approaches and explicit discussions about this aspect makes up another subcategory of pronatalism awareness. Referring to the example in table 2, gymcorn says "anti-CF 'people'" are worried that "there are too few WASP babies being born". The pressure to have children is directed to specific groups of people, namely, those who are seen as desirable for the country demographics (Moore 2014, 160). The comments below exemplify an awareness of how pronatalism can be motivated by nationalism and racism:

> (11) And it's exactly why the anti-abortion people have been working overtime this year. Because census data dropped during the summer and the white **non-histpanic** population is the lowest it's ever been at 60%. I specify **non-hispanic** here because when the latinx community is included, the white population jumps to 76%. But racists don't consider them "white enough" in the same manner they didn't consider Italians "white enough" back in the 19th century.
>
> (unlikelybeen)

> (12) And often the articles particularly mention 'lower birth rates in *the West'*. Like, Oh no, will we need to import [shudder! /s] immigrants to do all the ass wiping jobs then?
>
> (Bentochips)

In this discourse, anti-CF and anti-abortion groups are juxtaposed with childfree people, as both anti-CF and anti-abortion groups enforce traditional pronatalist values. The posts in this subcategory raise awareness of the inconsistencies towards birth rates; high birth rates in "developing" countries are often seen as a problem for overpopulation but lower birth rates in the West are construed as a threat to the economic balance. This is in line with previous studies that found a "strong pronatalism for some with strong anti-natalism for others" (Heitlinger 1991, 345). The way unlikelybeen discusses "anti-abortion people" and "racists" in the same

28

paragraph lumps then together, thus discursively strengthening the connection between pronatalism and racism. Bentochips, on the other hand, is imitating a pronatalist's horrified response to idea of addressing lower birth rates through immigration; even the thought makes the pronatalist shudder. Bentochips is also marking the sarcastic attitude with */s*, where the *s* is an abbreviation of *sarcasm*. McCulloch explains that using a forward slash is an example of play with the language of computers, a "humorous pseudo-code" command imitating a programming language (2019, 127) and a form of metacommentary (2019, 129). Similar to the alternating caps previously discussed, such symbols compensate for the fact that contextual cues such as facial expressions and gestures are missing from text-based digitally mediated communication (Herring and Androutsopoulos 2015, 133–134).

4.1.4　The next generation argument

A prevalent topic of discussion among the r/childfree subreddit users was the question of whether the next generation will save the planet. Due to the childfree nature of the community, such an idea was harshly protested. The posters comment on prospective parents' arguments that there is no future without children, either because without them there would be no motivating factor to save the planet or because the children themselves will be the ones to take action to save the planet. I refer to such comments as "the next generation argument", which the childfree community is challenging in this subcategory. These arguments are similar to those found in a study by Schneider-Mayerson, as discussed in the background section (2021, 9 –13). Although Schneider-Mayerson does not touch on pronatalism in his study, these arguments seamlessly fit into the pronatalist narrative and ideology, and I consider them to be a part of modern, reworked pronatalism.

　　The posters on the subreddit are therefore working to refute these newly emerged pronatalist climate arguments with their own competing eco-reproductive discourse.

> (13)　Yeah it's amazing how many prospective parents have said in response to climate change, 'well I'm just gonna raise my kids as a climate warrior! The next gen is going to save the world!' ...sure. That's what people said about my gen
>
> (Flavorimage)

> (14)　How many generations have been saying "the kids will do something about it" only for those kids to just grow up and do the same exact *nothing*?
>
> (anythingjerky)

The posts above aim to dismantle the next generation argument by highlighting the bad track record of previous generations and casting doubt on the idea that this generation would be any different. The posters utilise rhetorical devices such as sarcasm in example 13 and a rhetorical question in example 14. Other posts rely solely on sarcasm to make the point, such as the following: "But little BRAYYYYIIIYYYYYDAN is going to save the world" (shrimpcovey) and "But just in case he doesn't, let's have another!" (glovesoup).

An additional way that the next generation argument is being countered is emphasising the urgency of the situation and that we have already ran out of time. This reasoning is being supported by referring to statistics and scientific papers such as in the post by scenarioquiz below. These posters mention that even if the next generation was motivated enough to save the planet, it is already too late:

(15) That's so funny because within the last week they've released several articles stating that we waited too long to do anything about the climate and that theres literally no turning back now. Pretty sure they've been saying that since the 70s, but seems like every generation since then has said "someone from the *next* generation will solve the problem". Well, here we are

(scenarioquiz)

(16) What is Gen Z even supposed to do? Become scientists and save the planet with scientific breakthroughs? Bruh, by the time they even remotely studied enough to be educated enough to start any significant research, we'll already be in the midst of climate change consequences.

(licensegrubby)

In addition to the phrase "no turning back" in the above post, phrases such as "we are passed the point of saving" (tolerantmomentous) and "past the point of possible return" (shameoffice) are continually used in the subreddit. Even though such discourse does partly confirm the pronatalist argument that, without children, there is no reason to continue the fight, there are other strong motivators once we step away from an anthropocentric and child-centred worldview. This is evident in the post by favoriteplums: "I feel most of all sorry for all the animals going extinct." When thinking about the future, the fate of animals worries them more than human suffering.

Another way one reddit user counters the next generation argument is by relying on the opportunity cost of parenting (Schneider-Mayerson 2021, 13–15):

(17)   Who's to say there aren't a thousand mothers out there who would've saved the planet or cured cancer, except they couldn't get an abortion that they wanted and are now stuck spending all their time and energy on a child?

(pretzelattracted)

Pretzelattracted argues that instead of endlessly passing on the responsibility to the next generation, perhaps a parent could have fulfilled their true potential if they had not invested the majority of their time in raising a child. "The next generation argument" category shows that climate change rhetoric is not only reserved for the childfree community. Pronatalist ideology has similarly incorporated an environmentally conscious discourse, which the posts in this category aim to challenge. This subcategory explicitly breaks apart one specific pronatalist argument, which is why it is creating awareness of pronatalism and thus contesting pronatalist discourse.

4.1.5   Miscellaneous

Finally, some examples in the data do not fit into the subcategories listed above, but they still showcase explicit awareness of pronatalism. The "Miscellaneous" category contains, for example, general discussions about pronatalism and societal expectations. The following posters comment on socially acceptable behaviour and life choices:

(18)   Also, I effing hate the assumption that people were having children *willingly* in the olden days and in war situations. As if family planning/a woman refusing to have children was acceptable in those years, and as if birth control/sterilization were accessible.

(bentochips)

(19)   I hate when people say that having children is necessary for a complete life because right now the pandemic and the overpopulation on the planet is fucked...

(attackkidney28)

Bentochips asserts that the belief that everyone desires to have children is only a false *assumption*. The poster resists and even challenges pronatalism because ideologies are most influential when they are taken for granted and accepted as the natural way of things (van Dijk 1998, 50–51). The second post, on the other hand, rejects the assertion that children are necessary for experiencing real fulfilment in life. Both posts display alternative views, which are necessary to understand hegemonic cultural beliefs as ideological (Ibid.).

31

Even though the posters on the subreddit do not use the term *pronatalism* in their comments, it is evident that they are explicitly aware of it and the way it influences people's beliefs, attitudes and behaviour. Shredvessel points out how the majority of people accept the pronatalist ideology without question and consent to the established meanings and ideas:

(20)   most people believe reproducing is a requirement/"just what people do"

(Shredvessel)

Shredvessel is creating a distinction between themselves and "people who have children, want children or have never questioned that they will have children" (Terry and Braun 2012, 217). Shredvessel is effectively claiming that they are different from "most people". Likewise, the childfree men interviewed in Terry and Braun's study exhibited a desire to be different from the mainstream and they argued that "resisting intense pressure of pronatalism was only possible through […] a capacity to see past the expectations of society and/or culture" (2012, 221). These results differ from Hayfield et al., in which childfree identities were portrayed as ordinary (2019, 535). Individuals may challenge these expectations and thus create their own *ideology of resistance* (van Dijk 1998, 51). The "Awareness of pronatalism" category as a whole is crucial in the way the childfree community discursively challenges pronatalism, because it is only by naming and discussing the phenomenon that people can start to understand and dismantle it.

4.2   Attributing negative and positive qualities

The second and third categories emphasise "breeders'" negative attributes and childfree individuals' positive attributes, respectively. They are jointly discussed in this study because they are two sides of the same coin: by attributing certain qualities to one group, the posters attribute the lack of those qualities or the opposite qualities to the other group. To give an example, "breeders" are characterized as irresponsible whereas childfree individuals are portrayed as uniquely reflective and responsible. I will discuss this in more detail below. As you can see from table 2 in the beginning of section 4, not all attributes have a direct opposite. Criticism towards "breeders'" arguments and behaviour was prominent in the data, whereas praise for childfree individuals' characteristics was more implicit in the text.

4.2.1 Denial

A particularly interesting aspect of the "breeders'" negative qualities was portraying them as naïve, vain and in denial. Posters portrayed them as being in denial of various things: climate change, the harsh reality of their children's future, and/or the environmental impact of having children. Such thinking is clearly exemplfied in a post by fortuneperform:

> (21) Grasping the reality that their future kids, grandkids, etc will inherit a long, slow, violent extinction is too painful and conflicts too strongly with the romantic picture in their heads. So they choose to believe things will get better and it will all be solved before it's too late.
>
> <div align="right">(fortuneperform)</div>

Fortuneperform claims that parents have a "romantic picture" that they can't let go of and because they are too weak to face reality, they *choose* to remain in denial. The posters also exploit the naivety of prospective parents in their discussion about whether the next generation will save the planet, as discussed in section 4.1.4. Posts along the lines of "But maybe my kid will solve climate change! /s" disparage the hopes and dreams of parents (mallrarely).

Another poster creates a sense of naivety and denial by contrasting the seriousness of the climate crisis with baby showers, grandkids, and an overused platitude:

> (22) Terrible news about climate change today and how humans have basically f*cked up the planet to no return. Apparently no more ice in the Arctic 20 years from now. BuT bABy ShOwErS anD I waNt GrANDkidS aNd CHilDReN ArE a GiFT.
>
> <div align="right">(canoeingfink)</div>

The posters further emphasises the harshness of the reality by using an expletive. A feeling of finality is invoked with the phrase "no return" and illustrated with the mention of the Artic melting. Following this, the preoccupations that fit the pronatalist mandate and the trite catchphrase "children are a gift" are portrayed as frivolous, trivial, and naïve. This mocking effect is strengthened by the alternate use of capital letters, as discussed in section 4.1.2.

A term used within the community to refer to this naivety is having *blinders*. In response to the question about who could possibly want to have children in the current circumstances, trianglevalue commented, "Narcissists whose theme song is 'Kumbaya' and favourite fashion accessory is blinders" and fortuneperform retorted "Blinders, big time." The innocent American folk song refers disparagingly to people who naively sing Kumbaya around a campfire (Urban Dictionary, n.d.-b). Blinders are used to keep horses from getting distracted from the race, and

33

the posters therefore imply that the "breeders" have a narrow, restricted view of the world and are unwilling to see the climate crisis and the way it will impact their children's future.

4.2.2 Responsible reflection and the lack of it

Within the childfree subreddit, the posters are positioning themselves as responsible and reflective decision-makers, and diametrically opposing parents as unable or unwilling to contemplate issues rationally. This lack of responsible reflection can be unintentional, such as in the examples below where the "breeder" is portrayed as incapable of considering things from multiple perspectives due to a lack of intelligence or inferior mental capabilities.

(23) "You can't think about it when deciding to have kids"
Why, because I'd think *twice* about it? Oh, no! Anything but that! /s
(anythingjerky)

(24) *gasps* giving thought to huge life decisions and thinking about what might impact another human being? That's just too much!

(recognizemethod)

(25) People aka carbon footprints are the main cause of all this shit so the logic apparently is…to make more? I can't stand the stupidity.
(huhbrewer)

The first two posts rely on sarcasm to express that reflecting on things carefully is far too challenging for "breeders", which is why the prospective parents simply refuse to think about climate change in their decision to procreate. Like several examples discussed so far, anythingjerky is also using the */s* pseudo-command to signal sarcasm. Descriptions of actions are used in online communication to give information about non-verban aspects of communication, such as the gasping written in cursive by recognizemethod (Danet 2001, 18). The poster in the third example claims that parents' reasoning is "stupid", and, like the other two posters, they label parents as foolish. At the same time, these posters implicitly elevate their own intellectual capabilities. Similarly, Park has convincingly drawn the conclusion that "[a]sserting that individuals become parents unthinkingly allows the childfree to condemn the condemnors as they take on the morally superior identity of reflective decision makers" (2002, 35). In the same way, the posters in this study emphasise that parents are not *thinking twice* or *giving thought* to having children. Oceanjeer also mentions their lack of actions to preserve the planet: "people love breeding and then don't *think* about their kids' futures or at least attempt

34

to preserve it" (emphasis added). Highlighting the difference between parents and childfree individuals in rational reflection and thinking is a key strategy used to undermine pronatalism.

On the other hand, some posters considered the "breeders'" lack of responsible reflection deliberate, and they believe parents are consciously disregarding all consequences that reproducing in the current circumstances might have. The emphasis on irresponsibility is evident in imagery related to gambling:

> (26) This is exactly the same mentality as people with a genetic condition who play Russian roulette with their offspring because there "might be a cure in the future". Yeah, and there might not be. And your kid might die too young and in terrible pain.
>
> (reservelooting)

> (27) What kind of person rolls those dice on another person's life?
>
> (Supernosy)

A poster compares having children despite the climate change to "Russian roulette" and another one to "rolling dice". As Russian roulette and rolling dice are both purely games of chance, the comparison suggests that "breeders" have an impulsive and ill-considered approach to reproducing, which might have fatal consequences in the case of Russian roulette. These posts claim that parents bypass the careful thinking process that should come with any major life decision, and they do so deliberately. The use of gambling metaphors is particularly powerful, as it makes "abstract mental models more concrete" (van Dijk 2015, 473). The childfree community adopts an additional level of moral superiority because they are consider the lives of future generations as opposed to "breeders'" carefree attitude and behaviour.

Childfree individuals portray themselves as careful, considerate, and logical, the antithesis to parents and prospective parents. Posts that criticise parents implicitly express this, but the posts below focus on the posters' own internal thought process:

> (28) That's why I'm childfree, I stopped and thought about my potential child's future. I'd be bringing them into a world that's a literal dumpster fire and on top of that; I'd be a neglectful and abusive parent. I don't have the patience for kids and I'd be too focused trying to take care of myself to care for my kid.
>
> (sushienraged)

> (29) A lot of parents are too much focused on themselves, and have no patience or time, and still have kids. Most of those kids would be better off if they never happened.im glad some of us stop and think.

These posts explicitly highlight the active thought process of the childfree individuals, as made clear by phrases such as "I stopped and thought" and "im glad some of us stop and think". A study by Morison et al. demonstrated similar findings in which childfree participants prided themselves as rational and active decision-makers (2016, 190). In the data for this study, the thinking is related to awareness of climate and environmental issues, and the concern for the environment allows childfree individuals to claim another level of responsibility and moral superiority.

4.2.3 Negative Selfishness, Selflessness and Embracing Selfishness

In the previous subcategories, parents or "breeders" were mainly portrayed as unaware of the reality or unable to process it. Even though naivete or unpremeditated behaviour are negative attributes, the posters view the alternative of consciously making the choice to have children even worse. These posts criticise "breeders" who are fully aware of the climate crisis but choose to have children anyway as selfish:

(30) Wow... you wanna talk about selfish, that's pure selfishness 1,000%! […] To believe that the world is in serious danger AND to just not give a fuck, AND have children? That is far more selfish than being childfree.

(fleetclouded)

(31) "Instead of us adults handling the issue ourselves, we'll just go ahead and drop it on the shoulders of our spawn! Enjoy kids, saving the earth is *your* responsibility now!"

(basalteveryday)

In the examples above, the hypothetical parents are portrayed as selfish because they are aware of the climate crisis and the looming disasters, yet they happily pass the disasters on to their children.

The argument that living a childfree lifestyle is selfish is a classic example of pronatalist discourse as illustrated in section 2.2, and the posters are fully aware of this. As in many cases, there are posts in which multiple categories are visible to a certain degree. The following post shows awareness of pronatalism while also taking apart the selfishness claim, attributing selfishness only to parents:

(32) "Selfish" is one of the tired tropes the traditionaists throw at us. Ignore it. It's selfish to:
have a kid you don't want
have a kid to "love you unconditionally"
have a kid so "someone will take care of me when I'm older."
have a kid to "pass on your genes."
have a kid to "experience parenthood"
have a kid to "have someone to love"
have a kid to save your marriage, trap your SO, or make you feel absolutely anything.
We aren't the selfish ones.

(Runningquickest)

Runningquickest's post exemplifies an "inversion of stigmatising attributions" (Morison et al. 2016, 190), where parents are the ones portrayed as selfish. Runningquickest concludes the inverted accusations with the statement "We aren't the selfish ones", thus highlighting the difference between "us" and "them". Claiming that most people have children for selfish reasons was a strategy that also the participants in Park's study used (2002, 34–35). Returning briefly to the one-sidedness of choice rhetoric discussed in section 4.1.2, this post also marks numerous reasons for having a child as inadequate in an almost reversed bingoing.

Many posts in the material focused on "breeders" being selfish, but there were also posts that focused on childfreedom as a selfless act. These posts tended to take on a more ethical approach to the topic by pondering the moral implications of (not) having children.

(33) I can't, in good conscious, put those types of burdens on another human being.

(tiremelons)

(34) i have literal nightmares about climate disasters and other apocalyptic situations and wouldnt be able to forgive myself if i brought someone into this world without their consent, to live on a burning, dying planet, in the most treacherous country in the world.

(sounderlilac)

(35) I would think you can't be selfish towards someone that does not even exisit. Indeed adoption would be very selfless looking at it like that opposed to creating more people

(thrilledtube)

The selflessness in the first two posts comes from putting aside any personal desires of becoming a parent and considering reproduction as a moral question, from the perspective of the unborn child. The impact of environmental concerns in reproductive decision-making is clear in these instances. Example 35 by thrilledtube, on the other hand, says explicitly that choosing not to create more people is a selfless act. As Morison et al. put it in their study, not having a child was framed as a "sacrifice made in the interests of children and broader society" in order to counter the pronatalist discourse and resist stigma (2016, 19). The study by Morison et al. refers to socio-economic reasons for not having a child, but the aspect of overpopulation and limited resources adds another considerable reason why childfreedom is in the interest of many.

Finally, the data included also a single approach that differs from the usual selfish/selfless claim. The poster here is *embracing* selfishness:

> (36)   I spent my 20s being focused on what everyone else needed. I want to be selfish now. I am loving every second of my current life. i get to do whatever the hell I want.

<div align="right">(accountantice)</div>

Accountantice is openly stating that they are selfish and proud of it. The post is drawing from a discourse that values individual freedom and empowerment. Putting a a positive spin on traiditionally negative attributes such as selfishness was also utilised in Terry and Braun's study on voluntarily childless men, who described their choice as selfish, but as "a selfishness that was thoughtful and to be reveled in" (2012, 216). In comparison, parents were unthinkingly selfish (Ibid.). This creates a link between the selfishness argument and the responsible reflection argument.

4.2.4   Hypocrisy

The posts in the hypocricy category discuss the way parents judge childfree individuals for things they themselves are guilty of. In the previous section I analysed the way selfishness has been inverted, rejected or embraced. I will now draw attention to the additional accusation of hypocricy which is clear in the two examples below:

> (37)   "I don't give an eff about my children's suffering 'cuz I won't be here to see it."
>   *"I'm not having children. I woudln't want them to suffer."*
>   "GASP! yOu'Re sO sElFisH!"

38

(38)   It's so odd, you would think they would care more because it's the world they
       are leaving for their babies to deal with.
       But nope, so oddly (/s) selfish for a group that pride themselves on their
       selflessness. It's one of those masks they drop thinking no one notices.

(shelfinfielder)

Example 37 is a stylized narrative of a conversation between a "breeder" and a childfree person, where the breeder acts pointedly selfishly yet is appalled by the selfishness of not having children. The hypocricy in the breeder's actions is emphasised with the alternating capital letters. Shelfinfielder on the other hand is also commenting on the discrepancy between the self-proclaimed selflessness and the real actions, describing the selflessness as a "mask" that hides the truth. Hypocricy was exposed most commonly when it came to claims about selfishness. Hypocricy is therefore an additional layer on top of selfishness or other negative attributes.

Another significant aspect of hypocricy was visible in the discussions about environmental actions. One forum participant narrated how a mother of six came to lecture her on the use of plastic straws (although according to the poster the straw in question was reusable and a part of a reusable plastic cup). Onerousgrace steps in to comment:

(39)   Wow, I would've said, "I could build a mansion out of plastic straws and it still
       wouldn't contribute as much of a carbon footprint as just ONE of your crotch goblins
       are going to produce in their lifetime."

(onerousgrace)

Onerousgrace, along with other posters, argue that the mother is being hypocritical because of the environmental impact her children create. The post above exhibits signs of moral licensing, where one environmental lifestyle choice or decision leads to neglecting other environmentally consequential actions (Schneider-Mayerson and Leong 2020, 1019). However, playful claims that aim for maximum rhetorical impact provide little insight into the actual environmental decisions made in real life, but they do illustrate the linguistic resources the posters deploy against pronatalist discourse.

4.2.5 Susceptibility to external pressure

The final subcategory in the "breeder's" negative aspects is being susceptible to external pressure. In the post below fortuneperform ponders why someone would have children despite the climate crisis:

> (40) Maybe they always pictured themselves having kids, and they receive constant exterior pressure telling them this is what you're supposed to do. That you're not a full person unless you're a parent. Changing course from this is, in their minds, impossible.

<div align="right">(fortuneperform)</div>

Fortuneperform implies that parents are weaker and less independent because they cannot resist the pressure, whereas childfree individuals have the strength and mental capacity to think for themselves. The posts in this subcategory argue that parents are unable to separate their own desires from what the society tells them they should want. This strategy is a reversion of the way traditional pronatalist discourse has disbelieved that the desire to stay childfree is genuine and permanent (Gillespie 2000, 227–228). The posts in this category imply that the childfree individuals have been able to escape the cultural prescription to have children, whereas parents remain under false consciousness (see also Taylor 2003, 59).

The impact that the attribution of the negative as well as positive qualities has is counter-discursive, because it allows childfree individuals to occupy a positive, non-stigmatised position. The way these Reddit users attribute certain qualities to the in-group and the out-group follows a pattern that van Dijk refers to as an *ideological square*: "The general strategy of dominant discourse and mind control often follows the basic intergroup polarization of underlying ideologies: Emphasizing Our good things, Emphasizing Their bad things, Mitigating Our bad things, and Mitigating Their good things" (van Dijk 2015, 474). As was pointed out in section 2.1, pronatalism is the dominant discourse. Hoever, within this online community the childfree discourse has taken a dominant position. These positive and negative attributes work along the lines of the ideological square, emphasising childfree people's good things and "breeders'" bad things. Juxtaposing the negative and positive attributes is in line with previous studies on the childfree movement, with childfree individuals being presented as more "evolved" than others (Morison et al. 2016, 192). The claim that parents are unable to resist external pressure strenghtens the narrative that childfree individuals have a higher, evolved form of knowledge, as do all the subcategories in this section.

4.3 Children as the victims of climate crisis and capitalism

Climate change is inextricably linked to all the categories in this study. As described previously, the negative aspects of "breeders" often emanate from their approach to climate change, and awareness of pronatalism is combined with the awareness of climate change. The categories "Children as victims" and "Children's climate impact" (discussed in section 4.4) deal with climate change the most explicitly. Although similar in some aspects, the way these categories differ from what has been discussed so far is that the focus here is on the children, rather than the (prospective) parents.

4.3.1 Climate

This subcategory contains posts that worry for the children's future because of the suffering that the climate crisis will bring. Much of the childfree discourse so far has rejected the importance of children, and instead celebrated self-fulfilment, individualism, and environmental values. Unlike the discourse that we have seen so far, these posts rely on child-centred rhetoric and consider the situation from the child's perspective:

> (41) Or most realistically the earth is close to a hellscape.
> I couldn't imagine what it would look for a kid when their time comes to an end.
>
> (halyardmotivated)

> (42) Like...why bring a kid into this shitty world. Why expose them to dangerous weather conditions, low quality of life, and become sheep for the government to corral. I'm good. No thanks.
>
> (Gunfather)

> (43) And yes - thinking about "their" future on this planet is reason enough to say "hard pass" thanks.
>
> (accountantice)

The word choice *kid* in the posts by halyardmotivated and Gunfather evoke an idea of innocence, someone who is "just a kid" does not deserve to experience the future horrors that could be caused by the climate crisis. Child-centred rhetoric has traditionally been aligned with pronatalism, although childfree discourse can also utilise this discursive resource from the perspective of the "innocent human-being" (Morison et al. 2016, 191). Throughout the material

rhetorical questions are used profusely. Fleetclouded relies on child-centred rhetoric by asking "Why would I want to have children who will suffer?" and cracklesteam questions "How fucking dare you to bring another human to existence while you know what this world is like? How do you live with yourself?". Appealing to children's needs and their right for a fulfilling and happy life are powerful and emotional arguments.

Additionally, word choices such as *hellscape* and *shitty world* envision the kind of world into which you would not want to bring children. A similar strategy is in a post by Shelldelay, who lists what consequences the climate crisis brings: "When they're grown up theres gonna be cities underwater and micro plastics everywhere. Right now the current state of the world is terrible, pandemic and constant heatwaves, fires, droughts, floods, etc." The focus is both on the climate as well as the potential children, as Shelldelay paints a picture of how the world looks by the time the children are adults. However, not everyone in the subreddit agreed with these claims:

> (44) Science will save us. These posts are absolutely ridiculous. The point is to make contribution to the science now to make a difference instead of having this woe is me loser attitude.
>
> (flowerloganberries)

Flowerloganberries is one of the few voices in the forum that disagrees with the seriousness of the climate crisis and accuses the others of overreacting. Apart from individual exceptions, climate change is utilised in the r/childfree subreddit widely to portray all children as victims, which allows the posters to resist the procreation mandate.

As the examples I have quoted so far illustrate, the discourse on the r/childfree subreddit is antagonising and does not leave much room for amiable dialogue between parents and the childfree community. However, some posts within the "Climate" subcategory are an exception to this. Sounderlilac expresses the wish to not have children *without* judging those who do:

> (45) the people i know with kids are lovely and smart and raising their children in a way that i admire and adore (outside play, no devices, kids are polite and naturally curious about the world) but i fear for them because no matter how bright these children are, the likelihood that they won't be able to change the trajectory of our planet, country, economy, or global politics, is extremely high if not guaranteed (USian here)
>
> (sounderlilac)

Most posts in the data are completely rejecting the idea of having children and denigrating anyone who chooses to reproduce, but sounderlilac even mentions that they "admire and adore" the way some parents bring up the children. Sounderlilac questions the sensibility of having children by appealing to the climate crisis, but does nothing to overturn the pronatalist assumption that wanting to have children is universal and natural. Relying on the climate change only means that everyone would still be expected to parent if it were not for the adverse contextual factors.

4.3.2   Capitalism

The second and final subcategory in this section is the criticism of economic values. It is linked to eco-reproductive discourse in the data, as the critique of capitalism goes hand in hand with worries about overconsumption and the climate crisis. The climate crisis and capitalism are not treated as two separate issues in the data, but instead the first is caused by the latter. For example, MindlessToday argues that food shortages are a "byproduct of capitalism". Reproduction features in these posts either in the form of naming the capitalist system as a personal reason not to have a child or by expressing worries about how difficult it would be for a future child to find a job or make a decent wage. The following post combines worries about capitalism and climate change:

> (46)   Bringing a kid just to be part of a labor force that will drain them mentally as they become a cog for the American capitalist machine who either in their lives or their children's lives will suffer a terrible end of the world.
>
> (shameoffice)

Shameoffice feels that capitalism and an environmental collapse combined result in a life that is not worth living. Towardalembic shares the sentiment that they would not want to bring a child into this world due to economic as well as environmental reasons:

> (47)   But the big difference between animals and kids is that I'll never have to worry about my animals being forced into wage slavery to survive when they grow up. […] Also, the world is on fire. Often literally.
>
> (towardalembic)

Phrases such as "wage slavery", "cog for the American capitalist machine" as well as "slave of the system" (cracklesteam) paint a gruesome picture of the world. When seeing the world from

43

this perspective, it is easier to reject pronatalist arguments. Like the posts in the previous section, these posts also adopt a child-centred rhetoric which is hard to refute from a pronatalist perspective.

Furthermore, some posters suggest that maintaining pronatalism as the hegemonic ideology favours the capitalist elite and that it is no coincidence that there exists such a strong cultural prescription to procreate.

(48)   That is why the elite and religious orgs all promote (propaganda) and push people to have kids…gotta keep a cheap workforce and donors for this cesspool.

(pretzelhater)

(49)   We need more wage slaves! No sex Ed in school!

(Supernosy)

Pretzelhater shows awareness of the pronatalist mandate by talking about how they "push people" to have children, but there is an added dimension of economic criticism in the post. In the same manner, Supernosy ironically suggests removing sexual education at school in order to keep the capitalist machine running. *Cesspool* and *wage slave* demonstrate the posters' negative view of the world, which makes any future offspring seen as victims.

My previous research also supports the suggestion that capitalist critique and eco-reproductive concerns are connected. A group of activists who were on a birth strike for environmental reasons viewed capitalism as the root cause for climate change and argued that the economic system made having a child undesirable (Frangén 2020, 9). This world view is in line also with the study by Hickman et al., which found that climate anxiety was associated with "beliefs about inadequate governmental response and feelings of betrayal" and "pessimistic beliefs about the future" (2021, e870). Similar feelings towards the elite, government and the economic system are evidently present also in the r/childfree subreddit, and especially in the "Capitalism" category.

4.4   Children as the cause of climate crisis

The final category is "Children's climate impact", which considers reproduction from the perspective of carbon footprints and overpopulation. Whereas the previous category saw

possible new humans as the innocent victims of future horrors, the posts in this category point out that the existence of new children will inevitably contribute and accelerate the crisis. Desertedexclaim and mallrarely both state that reproductive choices have a significant environmental impact:

> (50) Overpopulation is a huge part of the climate change issue, and I want no part in it. Past generations (including my own) have created a total hellscape in so many ways, I have no intention of adding another child to that.
>
> (desertedexclaim)

> (51) It is the most effective choice you can make, and far exceeds the combined effort of going plant-based diet, car-free and no transatlantic trips by a loooong shot.
>
> (mallrarely)

Desertedexclaim does not want to contribute to overpopulation, whereas mallrarely mentions that being childfree is a *choice* that can reduce one's carbon footprint. Both approach the topic as an individual lifestyle choice.

The strain that adding another human being puts on the planet is a common concern on the discussion forum and a significant part of childfree discourse. As discussed in section 2.3, in the current consumer focused culture where success is measured by having the latest phone model or the right brand shoes, it is necessary to purchase the right toys, clothes and gadgets to be seen as a successful parent (Hayden 2015, 177). The posters are aware of the link between consumerism and parenthood. Managereassuring writes "think of all that plastic shit from unrecycled toys and diapers rotting in landfills. Way to go!". Attempting to raise children without all these products and commodities is seen as a vain attempt: "Their kids are going to be resentful they weren't able to have the same glorious consumerism their peers enjoyed growing up, and are going to be resentful" (abnormalbicycling). Abnormalbicycling's post about the "glorious consumerism" combines criticism towards capitalism, reproduction and worries about the environment. Consumerism and harming the planet are seen as inevitable consequences of having children.

As was pointed out in the background section of this study, debates concerning overpopulation become easily oppressive and begin to restrict reproductive freedom (Kallmann and Ferorelli 2018, 31). Although most posters on the chosen threads comment on children's climate impact as their own personal reason to stay childfree, some posts do consider overpopulation as something that should be stopped on a societal level:

(52) How do we stop over population in a democratic society when people just pump out children and give no consideration to the future.

<div align="right">(intrepidapple)</div>

Intrepidapple's offensive tone regarding "pumping out children" is not uncommon in the data, yet the suggestion to stop and control reproduction on a societal level goes beyond what is generally discussed in the chosen threads. Reproduction is mostly seen as a personal and individual decision, and childfreedom is not generally considered a solution to the climate crisis that should be imposed on others. This result is influenced by the decisions made during the data collection process to focus on how climate change is used discursively to resist hegemonic reproduction discourse rather than to examine threads solely on overpopulation. However, fully separating this from the childfree discourse is not possible, because it is closely linked to this conversation.

5   Discussion

At the beginning of this study, I set out to examine how pronatalism is being challenged in an online childfree community and what role climate change plays in this. The analysis shows that the Reddit r/childfree subforum is a discursive space where pronatalist ideology is being contested and that climate change plays a key role in these negotiations. As stated in section 2.2.1, online environments offer respite from hegemonic ideologies and discourses. They allow the users to resist said discourses, legitimize and normalize alternative discourses and even formulate strategies of resistance (Matley 2020; Morison et al. 2016; Moore 2014; Moore and Abetz 2019). These potentials are realised in the material of this study, as the evidence presented thus far shows. A further example of this is seen in the text of cottonpositive, one of the frequent posters on the site, who writes "'Closeted' CF, family unaccepting" as their user flair. Being forced to hide their childfree identity in real life, the posters find that the likeminded and supportive online community allows them to escape the hegemonic discourse that stigmatises being childfree, and it offers an alternative, childfree discourse. To answer my research question "how is the childfree subreddit resisting hegemonic (pronatalist) reproductive discourses from the perspective of climate change and environmentalism?", I will next outline the main themes that were previously identified.

Moreover, the subcategories in the "Awareness of pronatalism" category all enable the posters to collectively identify pronatalist discourse and critically evaluate and analyse its argumentation. In the "Miscellaneous" category, they discuss topics such as the societal pressure to procreate, and they assert that having children is not an inevitable, natural outcome of adult life. The category "Racist pronatalism" critiques pronatalism specifically for having a different attitude to reproduction depending on the person's ethnicity, "race" or their socioeconomic status. In the "Bingoing" subcategory the posters retold conversations from their private lives, which they then collectively discussed. This included offering others reliable strategies to counter pronatalist discourse, such as citing unique personal reasons or utilising climate change as a morally compelling reason. Some posters who felt unsure about the validity of their climate-related reasons for being childfree sought confirmation from others. The posters used choice rhetoric among other means to legitimize childfree lifestyle as an acceptable and valuable one as well.

47

"The next generation argument" is an example of the constant negotiation happening between opposing discourses. My initial hypothesis was that climate change would be utilised by childfree individuals against traditional pronatalist discourse outlined in previous studies (Bartholomaeus and Riggs 2017, Gillespie 2000; Gillespie 2003, Heitlinger 1991). However, the subcategory "The next generation argument" shows that it also works the other way. Pronatalist discourse has adapted to the changing values and adopted an environmentally conscious discourse, transforming like it has done previously by advocating women's dual role as both mothers and breadwinners (Gillespie 2000, 230). While pronatalist discourse argues that the next generation is the only motivator to continue to fight against climate change and that it is the future children who will save the planet from an environmental catastrophe, the childfree community counters these arguments by highlighting humanity's bad track record. They argue that we have already ran out of time, and cite the opportunity cost of parenting. This shows that pronatalism keeps transforming, and Gillespie's quote from two decades ago is still as relevant as ever: "pronatalist cultural discourses and those that posit motherhood at the cornerstone of feminine identity persist, albeit in a manner recast and transformed" (2000, 231). Using the next generation argument, the pronatalist ideology attempts to maintain parenthood as the only legitimate and justifiable lifestyle choice even in the era of climate change.

The study offered insight into how climate change is utilised to resist and challenge pronatalism. Some posters' reproductive choices were deeply influenced by the climate crisis, whereas some declared outright that it did not affect their choices at all. These results cannot assess exactly how much climate change contributes to individual reproduction choices because they are extremely complex and nuanced, and determining such a percentage was not the aim of this study. What is interesting, however, is the strategic use of climate change. Several posters stated that they use climate change as a reason to deflect pronatalist arguments or to justify their childfreedom to those who have children or have never questioned that they will have children one day. The categories "Children as victims" and "Children as the cause of climate crisis" showcase how environmentalism is used to challenge the reproduction norm. In the case of the former, the posts rely on child-centred rhetoric and the power of painting a picture of future horrors. These included talking about the *hellscape* that is a planet full of heatwaves, extinction of animals, pollution, fires, floods and so much more. Furthermore, eco-reproductive discussion is sometimes combined with worries of the capitalist system and consumerism, using terms such as *wage slavery* to persuade. The addition of the environmental

48

rhetoric is a key aspect of the childfree rhetoric, and it creates a powerful discourse of childfreedom.

The posters on r/childfree deploy linguistic resources creatively and even playfully in the interests of their own ideologies. The use of different linguistic devices is the second part of my research question, and they are discussed throughout this text. These include juxtaposing the horrors of the climate crisis with the idea of innocent children and cheerful baby showers. Furthermore, much of the critique towards pronatalism was delivered in the form of sarcasm, sometimes explicitly signalled by writing */s* in the style of a programming language or using alternating caps to signal sarcasm and to create a humorous, mocking effect. Alternating caps and descriptions of actions such as *sigh* and [shudder] showcase the innovative and playful nature of online language (Danet 2001). It should be noted, though, that linguistic play is an age-old phenomenon but only recently has it been written down and easily accessible (McCulloch 2019, 62). Other extensively used linguistic devices included rhetorical questions, especially when asking morally compelling questions about the future of our planet and the children's suffering in the future. Many posters chose to use strongly loaded metaphors and word choices instead of more neutral options. Certain lexical expressions included the term *breeder* itself, as well as names such as *spawn* or even *crotch goblins* for future offspring. Pejorative terms for children were used frequently and deliberately, which served to further illustrate the posters' rejection of the pronatalist ideology that posits children as life's ultimate fulfilment. In contrast, when the posters deployed child-centred rhetoric, the children were called *kids* to appeal to people's emotions.

An important strategy for countering pronatalism in the data was the inversion of negative attributes and the attribution of positive characteristics to the childfree community. This followed the logic of an ideological square, as outlined by van Dijk (2015, 474). The results of this study align with previous studies on childfreedom, which have also identified this counter-discursive strategy. Previous studies have similarly found that childfree individuals portray parents as selfish while simultaneously highlighting their own selflessness (Morison et al. 2016, 191–192; Park 2002, 34). Morison et al. (2016, 191–192) and Park (2002, 35) showed in their studies that childfree individuals emphasised their superior ability to be rational and reflexive, which was also reproduced in this study. Lexical expressions such as *playing Russian roulette* and *rolling dice* were used to describe the "breeders'" recklessness. Previous studies

49

have likewise suggested that childfree discourse portrays parents as susceptible to external pressure and desirous to conform (Morison et al. 2016, 192; Park, 2002, 35).

However, a few new negative attributes were identified in the data. The subcategories "Hypocrisy" and "Denial" have not been discussed previously in relation to childfree discourse. "Breeders" were described as hypocritical when they accused childfree individuals of being selfish. Criticising a childfree individual's actions as environmentally unfriendly was also seen as hypocritical, because the posters argued that all ungreen actions are insignificant in comparison to the environmental impact of having a child. This exemplifies how the childfree community is continuously mitigating the in-group's bad actions and the out-group's good traits (van Dijk's 2015, 474). The accusations of denial concentrated on the person's approach to the climate crisis. "Breeders" were said to be in denial or simply naive because they did not take the climate crisis seriously and instead focused on supposedly frivolous things. Denial has not been discussed by previous studies on childfree discourse, and I propose that the accusations of denial were prominent in the r/childfree forum because of the focus on eco-reproductive discourse in this study.

In addition to a more detailed analysis of the positive and negative attributes, the current study's contribution to inverting the accusation discussion is an added dimension of climate change and environmental concern. In a study by Park (2002, 38), a few participants made brief comments about the environmental impact of reproductive choices, yet the intersection of reproductive discourse and climate change are insufficiently researched in the field. The climate crisis plays an important role in building negative and positive representations of both parents and childfree individuals, and climate rhetoric lends weight to the adoption of a moral high ground. In this study, all the accusations by child-free individuals at parents involved climate change specific argumentation to some extent, such as claiming that parents are selfish for bringing a child to a world suffering from pollution, global warming, and other environmental catastrophes. Respectively, the childfree individuals portrayed themselves as more selfless and reflexive because they cared about the planet or put the hypothetical child's life before their own desire to have children.

Emphasising the "breeders'" bad attributes and the childfree individuals' good attributes opposes pronatalism directly, but it has also negative consequences. R/childfree is refuting negative stereotypes about individuals who are childfree and it creates a safe space to for its members express their childfree views. However, it simultaneously strengthens negative

perceptions about people who do have children. The process of blindly attributing negative qualities to "Breeders" and the corresponding positive qualities to the childfree in-group divides people into two distinct and separate groups, thus hindering positive and constructive dialogue. The structural opposition of the groups on the level of language is visible throughout the study. For example, the recurring use of the personal pronouns *us* and *them* juxtaposes childfree individuals and parents: "I wish there was more of us then them, fucking breeders" (cracklesteam). The results of this study strongly support the suggestion that inverted pronatalist discourse is effectively "pitting parents and 'nonparents' against one another" (Morison et al. 2016,195). A crucial point is that these negative stereotypes are of parents but most often especially of mothers, thus hurting the feminist movement (Morison et al. 2016,195).

Even though childfree online communities can be empowering and they play an important role in contesting normative values, I am not suggesting that the childfree discourse should replace pronatalist discourse. The discourse in r/childfree is restrictive in its own way, with plenty of unhelpful judgement. One reason for this could be the polarization of attitudes in a group that consists of people with very similar views, as discussed in section 3.1. However, examining these online discussions offers fresh insight into alternative discourses. This study shows how the childfree discourse functions outside the hegemonic reproduction discourse and yet is in constant dialogue with it. In addition, examining counter-discourses enables us to see the ideological and cultural power in discourses that might otherwise remain uncontested and therefore appear natural. Discourse plays a significant role in the reproduction of ideologies in society, as the expression and manipulation of ideologies is mostly discursive (van Dijk 1998, 5–6). Dominant discourses of reproduction are not free from ideology, and neither are the discourses that challenge them. The threads analysed in this study are examples of eco-reproductive discourse, and the interconnection of reproduction and environmentalism is likely to become stronger as the climate crisis becomes more visible and as people with varying views adopt eco-reproductive discourse.

This study had several limitations. For example, it did not distinguish among the experiences of women, men and non-binary individuals, even though it is likely these groups experience the pronatalist mandate differently. Sexuality was another factor that was not explicitly analysed. Collecting this information comprehensively was not possible due to the nature of the material, as discussed in section 3.3. The purpose is not to overlook these factors or silently endorse a heteronormative viewpoint, and I acknowledge that the childfree identity

is by no means limited only to cisgender or heterosexual individuals as stated by Hayfield et al. (2019). Furthermore, the subreddit participants rarely mentioned their own or other people's gender and instead of discussing gendered experiences, they focused on how the climate crisis affects everyone on this planet. These aspects led to the decision to analyse parenthood collectively. Nevertheless, (non)motherhood remains central to this study because motherhood is uniquely portrayed as a cornerstone of feminine identity (Gillespie 2000, 224), and much of the past research has focused on the cultural significance of motherhood and the experiences of childfree women. Analysing gender and sexual identities in relation to this topic could lend further insights into how gendered social norms feature in eco-reproductive discourse.

The data in question contained discussions within a likeminded group where opinions were hardly challenged and if they were, the opposing messages were often downvoted and deleted. Therefore, another question that demands further research is how effective these different strategies are, either at challenging pronatalism or at persuading ambivalent indicuals. There are various discourses within the larger reproduction discourse. Studying the way these discourses function in a more open dialogue with each other and how different views and motives on reproduction are being negotiated in the age of climate change would be a fruitful topic for future research.

6   Conclusion

The climate crisis has become a significant factor in reproductive decisions, and it affects a growing number of young people. Therefore, it is important to ask how reproductive discourses are being challenged and renegotiated amidst the climate crisis. I have examined the childfree community on Reddit as a discourse of resistance, focusing specifically on the way environmental reasons are utilised to discredit pronatalist discourse that portrays parenthood as the norm. I identified five thematic categories: "Awareness of pronatalism", "'Breeders'' negative attributes", "Childfree individuals' positive attributes", "Children as victims" and "Children's climate impact". In each category, posters are challenging the hegemonic reproduction discourse. The first category contains thematic units that demonstrate awareness of pronatalism, for example, by collectively identifying and analysing pronatalist discourse or behaviour and offering tips to help resist persuasion attempts. The second and third categories use climate change to create a reflective, selfless, and morally superior childfree subject and portray all people who have children, want children or have never questioned having children as irresponsible, selfish, hypocritical and susceptible to external pressure, but also in denial of climate change. The "Children as victims" category uses the climate crisis and capitalist system to justify why having children is unfair to those children. "Children's climate impact" is a controversial category, which, on the one hand, contains units where posters explain their personal unwillingness to contribute further to overpopulation, but it also contains posts that are dangerously close to suggesting that limiting reproductive freedom could be a means to mitigate climate change. All of the categories work to deconstruct the pronatalist "truth", namely, the social norm that everyone desires children and will eventually have them.

This study has shown that the climate crisis is used strategically and deliberately to resist and challenge pronatalism. What is more, both childfree and pronatalist discourses are constantly reworked to accommodate the changing cultural context. Eco-reproductive discourse is becoming more mainstream with the growing climate awareness. While environmentalism is not inherently connected to childfreedom, it can also be used to strengthen the parenthood mandate. In the material analysed in this study, a key point of discussion was countering the next generation argument, which is utilising climate change to promote pronatalist ideology. This subcategory exemplifies the way the childfree discourse and pronatalist discourse are

constantly negotiated. The interconnection of climate change and reproduction is therefore far from simplistic, and this study could be conducted again from the perspective of pronatalist climate change rhetoric. In some respects, the childfree discourse on the Reddit page challenges economic discourse as well as pronatalist discourse. Declining birth rates are a threat to economic growth, and such economically oriented reproduction discourses are in complete opposition to communities that are childfree for environmental reasons. This polarization of reproductive discourses makes analysing them especially important in our time and would warrant further research.

The ways in which the hegemonic discourse on reproduction are challenged inform us about the changing values in our society, many of which should be taken into consideration when making environmental policies and decisions that affect family planning. It is important to be aware of who gets to define how we talk about reproduction and parenthood, and whether it is portrayed as the "normal" thing to do in our everyday lives. Analysing counter-discourses on reproduction allows us to become aware of alternative perspectives and ideologies that are hidden beneath everyday talk. This study has focused mainly on challenging restrictive cultural norms that limit which choices are publicly acceptable and which are considered abnormal, yet reproduction discourse also plays a significant role in the wider societal context. Throughout the writing of this thesis, several countries have curtailed reproductive freedom. For example, the United States recently overturned the constitutional right to an abortion. In Poland, a bill that bans abortion in nearly all cases took effect and the sexual education curriculum was changed to promote more conservative and pronatalist values. Not only does pronatalist discourse create stigma about those who are childfree, but discourses in general shape the way we see life and can even influence legislation, which is why it is critical that we continuously examine and question them.

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