



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

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

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1. Introduction: Single Parents by Choice

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. Corpora

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

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

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

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

Table 1: SMBCor and SFBCor

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

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

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

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

3. Methodology

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

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

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

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

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

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

Subcategories:

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

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

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

Subcategories:

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. Results

4.1 Emotional Tone

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

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

Table 2: LIWC2022 scores for SMBCor and SFBCor

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

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

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

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

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

Table 3: Comparison between Tone and Additional LIWC2022 scores

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

4.2 SMBCor

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4.3 *SFBCor*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusions

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

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

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

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

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