

Introduction

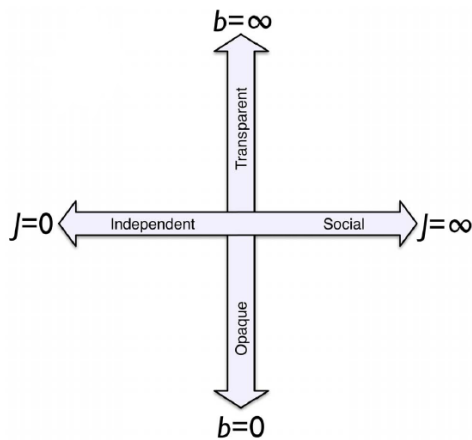
There is growing recognition in demographic research that fertility intentions are not binary but exist along a continuum of certainty and intensity (Badolato et al., 2025). Uncertainty in fertility intentions varies across the life course and may be influenced by personal circumstances such as unemployment and economic uncertainty, but also macro level forces such as economic climate change (Vignoli, et al. 2020; Lappegård, et al 2022; Zimmerman, et al 2024; Puglisi, et al 2025).

Another source of uncertainty that has received less attention is uncertainty in the costs and benefits of becoming a parent. For childless people the decision of when to have a child, or whether to have one at all, is shaped by their understanding of what the overall experience will be including specific perceived costs and benefits. As the experience of parenthood cannot be fully understood until it is lived, individuals who have not yet had children form their expectations indirectly by observing the lives of parents around them including family, friends or colleagues, but also through various media including social media. This type of social learning has been shown to be an important potential influence on fertility (Bernardi 2003; Rossier & Bernardi 2009; Keim et al 2013; Balbo & Barban 2014; Lois & Becker 2014).

This paper connects the literature on uncertainty in fertility intentions with theories of social learning and transparency. We argue that for the childless, uncertainty is partly a function of *opacity*: without first-hand experience, individuals rely on observing and interpreting others' parenting experiences. The clarity of these observations (their transparency) depends on how concrete, credible, and relatable they are. When information about parenthood is detailed, realistic, and trusted, transparency increases, and uncertainty is reduced. Conversely, when information is conflicting, extreme, or filtered through social expectations, transparency falls and uncertainty grows. The source of social learning is closely associated with its transparency. Offline observation, for example seeing friends, siblings, or colleagues parent and interact with their children, tends to increase transparency by supplying concrete, high-fidelity information. Online observation (aggregated stories, algorithmically selected extremes) can simultaneously broaden exposure but reduce transparency through noise, exaggeration, and uncertain comparability.

To formalise this relationship, we draw on the discrete-choice theory decision map of Brock et al (2014) (Figure 1), which situates behaviour along two intersecting dimensions: the degree of social influence (west–east) and the transparency of payoffs and risks (south–north). The degree of social influence reflects the degree to which individuals use information from others in making their decisions. At the western edge individuals make decisions completely independently with no information from others, and at the eastern edge individuals simply copy or imitate others (Bentley, et al 2014). The North-South dimension reflects the extent to which there is a transparent correspondence between an individual's decision and the consequences (costs and payoffs) of that decision and further down the axis individuals are less and less able to discern differences in potential payoffs among the choices available to them, and as you move up the precision of understanding of which choice is best increases (Brock, et al 2014; Bentley, et al 2014). In contemporary, media-saturated contexts, transparency may decline as conflicting narratives of parenting or childbearing experiences compete for attention. We situate our analysis within this framework to understand how people without children navigate these informational environments.

Figure 1. Decision-map of social influence and transparency.



Source: Brock, et al 2014. The vertical axis represents transparency of options and payoffs, from opaque (south) to transparent (north); the horizontal axis represents the strength of social influence, from independent (west) to social (east).

Research questions

We focus on three key questions to guide the study.

- (1) What do childless adults report learning about parenthood from others offline and online?
- (2) Which information characteristics: vividness, credibility, proximity, shape perceived manageability and timing?
- (3) How do learning, pressure, and contagion co-occur in decision narratives?

Using Reddit as a rich data environment for naturally occurring discussions, this study opens the “black box” of pre-decisional learning and links it to broader demographic theories of uncertainty, intentions, and parity progression.

Data & Methods

The study uses data from an online forum called Reddit. Reddit provides a naturally occurring corpus of peer-to-peer discussion that allows us to observe how people talk about learning from their offline and online environments.

Posts and comments were collected from a sub-group on the main Reddit website (subreddit) dedicated specifically to discussions relating to childbearing decision making. Posts and comments made between 1 Jan–31 Dec 2024 (800 posts, ~30,000 comments) were selected for analysis. Inclusion criteria focused on threads discussing decision-making about having (more) children, experiences of observing others’ parenting, or reflections on the quality of information encountered elsewhere. Low-content or meme posts were excluded. The study has ethics approval (ANU Human Ethics Approval H/2025/0363) and all submissions were de-identified through the removal of user-names and to prevent possible re-identification, the content is summarised and illustrative quotes are paraphrased.

A grounded-theory approach was used to code mechanisms of learning (observation, contagion, pressure, support) and indicators of transparency (clarity, concreteness, credibility). Reliability was assessed through double-coding of a subset. Discussions (“threads”) dominated by firsthand close-tie accounts correspond to north–west or north–east quadrants (greater transparency), while abstract, viral narratives occupy the south–east quadrant (high social influence, low transparency). Shifts northward occur when participants exchange detailed, credible, solution-oriented accounts that reduce uncertainty.

Preliminary Results

We present six cross-cutting themes, illustrated with anonymised, paraphrased exemplars.

- 1) Close tie stories carry more weight.** When information comes from a sibling/best friend/colleague transparency is increased and is given more weight. Seeing known, comparable peers succeed (“people like me”) also reduces perceived distance and fear and can shift narratives toward conditional openness (e.g., “maybe being a parent is possible if my partner shares care and we have nearby support”). For others, intensive involvement with children discourages parenthood by revealing sustained workload and long run uncertainty (special needs, adolescent challenges).
- 2) Social media amplifies negative base-rates and corrodes transparency.** Participants attribute increased ambivalence to algorithmic curation: “doom-scroll” exposures to extreme parenting narratives (postpartum crises, regret) receive high engagement and are repeatedly surfaced. Parents note that mundane gratifications and long-horizon rewards are hard to communicate online and underperform as social media content. Some respondents mitigate bias by triangulating with *offline* observation of well-adjusted families, which often moderates fears.
- 3) Stage of observed children matters.** Most vivid learning comes from the *infancy and toddler* phase. Across threads, “in-the-trenches” accounts of the *early years* (sleep deprivation, relentless chores, identity strain, relationship friction) are cognitively dominant and often push childless individuals toward delaying or rejecting parenthood. Contact with families of *older children* sometimes re-balances perceptions (greater autonomy, resumed hobbies/careers, renewed couple time). This temporal asymmetry may bias childless individuals perception of parenting toward over-weighting early-years costs.
- 4) Transparency is increased when information is specific rather than generic.** Generic or abstract information such as ‘children bring happiness’ rarely moves intentions. However observations of practical steps such as sleep routines, dividing labour, building support networks have a stronger impact.
- 5) Social learning interacts with social pressure and social contagion**
Social pressure and contagion coexist with learning. Discussants note that emotional contagion is often generated following pregnancy announcements or intense contact with toddlers in their social networks. In some networks, *pronatalist* pressure is salient (family expectations, sibling sequences, workplace baby waves); in others, *antinatalist* norms dominate (peers who view childbearing as irresponsible given climate/economic concerns).

Conclusion

Observational socialisation and learning, both offline and online, is an important influence shaping beliefs about parenting through three key channels: vividness (emotionally rich,

early-years accounts dominate), credibility (close, comparable exemplars outweigh strangers), and proximity (hands-on contact vs parasocial viewing). These mechanisms help explain persistent ambivalence and stalled parity progression among the undecided.

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