

“HAVING ONE CHILD IS SELFISH?”: AN ANALYSIS OF ONLY-CHILD DISCOURSE ON
FACEBOOK

by

Katy L. Gabryelczyk

A Thesis Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts
in Communication

at

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

August 2023

ABSTRACT

“HAVING ONE CHILD IS SELFISH?”: AN ANALYSIS OF ONLY-CHILD DISCOURSE ON FACEBOOK

by

Katy L. Gabryelczyk

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2023
Under the Supervision of Dr. Erin Sahlstein Parcell

Families come in a variety of sizes, but family communication research typically represents or at least assumes families with multiple children. Although communication scholarship includes family forms beyond the traditional nuclear family (i.e., husband and wife with multiple biological children), including families who are voluntarily or involuntarily child-free, it has not included families with “just” one child. This thesis highlights the absence of communication research surrounding one-child families (OCFs). Using an interpretive, specifically discourse-dependent, lens I conducted a thematic analysis of Facebook comments in response to articles about OCFs shared by Scary Mommy. Given the absence of communication research on OCFs, this exploratory study sought to identify themes in online discourse about OCFs to help guide future research on this understudied family configuration. The findings affirmed the crossover between positive and negative stereotypes and opinions about only-children and OCFs while also producing counter-narratives. This study provides a compelling exploration of OCF discourse and future directions for family communication scholarship.

© Copyright by Katy L. Gabryelczyk, 2023
All Rights Reserved

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.....	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vii
Part One: Rationale.....	1
Part Two: Method	8
Part Three: Findings.....	16
Part Four: Discussion.....	29
References.....	36
Appendix: Scary Mommy Facebook Posts Used for Study.....	40

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Explanation
OCF	One-Child Family
MC	Multi-Child/ren
MCF	Multi-Child Family
CF	Child-Free
VCF	Voluntary Child-Free
I/O	Insider or Outsider
OA	Only-Adult
FOMO	Fear of Missing Out

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to thank my advisor Dr. Erin Parcell for her guidance throughout the creation of this thesis. Her mentorship has greatly shaped my academic abilities and her expertise will continue to influence me as I pursue further education at the PhD level. Additionally, I would like to thank my committee members Dr. Leslie Harris and Dr. Erin Ruppel for lending their skills to aid in the initial shaping and overall finalization of this project. Your perspectives have allowed me to further strengthen my research skills and prepare me to make future contributions to Communication scholarship.

To my fellow graduate students within UWM's Communication Department. Your advice, insight, and expertise have been invaluable throughout this process. To Daniel, for always being in my corner. Thank you for giving me your hand each time I need to pick myself up and dust myself off during times of stress and doubt. I love you. To Krystal, for listening to me and validating my experiences each and every Wednesday. To, Louie, for being by my side during every late night and showing me a gentle kindness like no other. Lastly, thank you Mom and Dad for your endless love. I won the parental lottery and being your only child is an honor; this is for you.

Part One: Rationale

We ask when people are having kids—never a kid, never one child at a time, which is how it usually happens. If a kid has no siblings, it's assumed that there's a hush-hush reason for it: that the parents don't like parenthood (because they are selfish), or they care about their status—work, money, materialism—more than their kid (because they are selfish), or they waited too long (because they are selfish). (Sandler, 2013, p. 9)

The decision to “start a family” is deeply personal, and numerous factors can influence a person or couple's choice and ability to conceive or adopt children. For example, some parents may be affected by the financial costs of raising more than one child over their lifetime (Fritz, 2012, p. 8). Some parents may have had a traumatic pregnancy or birth (Fritz, 2012, p. 8), some parents may have had difficult experiences during the adoption process (Fritz, 2012, p. 8), and others might just have a personal preference and choose to focus their energy on one child (Fritz, 2012, p. 8). Whatever the case may be, the discourse of raising children is a loaded topic in the United States (Hintz & Brown, 2020, p. 244), and specifically how many children a person or couple will have has been a conversation in many families (Hintz & Brown, 2020, p. 244). While families may or may not include children, those with one child or no children are considered non-normative. The focus of this study will be on one-child families (OCFs).

Despite the numerous factors that affect child acquisition, external pressure from dominating social values remains pervasive because being a parent is seen as a moral and biological responsibility that fulfills a person's life (Hintz & Brown, 2020, pp. 252–253). Social constructions of the family have evolved over time, and presently social constructions that define family by institutional roles have been in favor of nuclear family types (Baxter, 2014, p. 36).

Thornton and Young-DeMarco (2001) categorize the two essential factors that influence the societally ideal number of children. The “oughtness,” (the variables that positively support that couples “should” have children) and “emptiness of lives” (the impact children have on parental fulfillment) (p. 1020). Despite the increase of single-child families in recent years, it is important to recognize the pronatalist social and cultural norms that are still pervasive in the United States and are highly influential in the practice of raising a child(ren) (Durham & Braithwaite, 2009, p. 44).

Although communication scholarship includes family forms beyond the traditional nuclear family (i.e., husband and wife with multiple biological children), even families who are voluntarily or involuntarily child-free, it has not included families with “just” one child. This thesis highlights the absence of communication research surrounding one-child families (families that for whatever reason include “only” one child). Using an interpretive, specifically discourse-dependent lens, I conduct a thematic analysis of Facebook comments in response to articles read about OCFs. Given the absence of communication research on OCFs, this exploratory study identified themes in online discourse about OCFs to help guide future research on this understudied family configuration and identity.

I chose to take a phronetic approach to my study, which is used in qualitative research to highlight concerns and in turn prompt change (Tracy, 2020, p. 6). This research is intended to expand conversations within the area of family communication about the experiences and problems faced by only-children and OCFs and aid in creating an outline of how family communication research can further investigate this understudied group. The impact of qualitative data brought to outsiders can provide a more intimate look at the lived experiences of OCFs, and change is often created from personal connections to issues and real accounts of

others rather than just statistics (Tracy, 2020, p. 8). Through conducting this research, I hope to illuminate the experiences of this family type and spark further conversations within academia about OCFs and how their absence from family communication research is a disservice to this growing family type.

Literature Review

Families come in all sizes (spouses/partners with no kids, multiple kids, one-child, e.g.) and configurations (single parents, stepfamilies, adoptive families, e.g.), but they are not considered equal in society. The nuclear family (husband and wife with biological children) is considered the norm (and even the ideal). Historically, having a large family had a higher importance in agrarian societies, where multiple children were needed to farm, assist with childcare, and supplement high mortality rates (Fritz, 2012, p. 8). At that time, more than one child was considered essential to the family structure and society (Fritz, 2012, p. 8). Discourses of the family are not too often revisited despite the changing family structures that have moved parallel to changes in education, income, age, and other socioeconomic and demographic attributes (Allendorf et al., 2022, p. 16). Baxter (2014) argues that we fail entirely to, “interrogate the dominant circulating discourses that we often take for granted as the appropriate and necessary functional and affective elements of family” (p. 44). While the best practice would be to revise the longstanding nuclear norm, however, those ideations persist, for example, “if the discourse of family views childrearing as crucial to family, then social connections that are without children, therefore, cannot be legitimized as family” (Baxter, 2014, p. 44). For this scholarship to best serve family communication research, change is needed to encompass the varied way people experience “family.”

Thompson et al. (2022) feel so strongly about the revision of how we understand family, they suggest a complete re-definition of family discourse. Thompson et al. (2022) do not believe that “some families are discourse dependent and some families are not, or that some families are more discourse dependent than other families” (p. 2). They argue that all families create their own unique discourse and that “power manifests in discursive practices that recognize, circulate, and accept conceptions of normal, natural, and right ways of being and doing family” (Thompson et al., 2022, p. 2). Instead of pitting family discourses in a competition, it is necessary and change our perspectives to viewing discourse as a spectrum asking, “Who has a discourse of family already built for them, and who must erect their own?” (Thompson et al., 2022, p. 3).

Presently, social norms relative to life-stage progression, specifically meeting heteronormative milestones, revolve around constructed norms of age-stage expectations (Ylänne & Nikander, 2019, p. 467). Being socially enforced in the everyday talk about parenting, “These norms constitute reference frames that guide assessments of being ‘on time’ or ‘off-time,’ which in turn may influence a person’s self-esteem,” also known as the concept of chrononormativity (Ylänne & Nikander, 2019, p. 467). With that, the chrononormative expectation of all families implies that you get married, have children, raise your children until adulthood, your children then get married, your children have your grandchildren, etc. Any family type that falls out of that norm is subject to criticism from those who enforce chrononormative parenting expectations (Ylänne & Nikander, 2019, p. 467). With the influence of time comes greater pressure for maintaining in the expected time frame for children, and the added pressure of having more than one.

One Child Families

Not every couple or individual wants or may have children, and some have (just) one child (i.e., one-child or only-child families; OCFs). For example, OCFs increase in numbers during economic crises such as the Great Depression of the 1930s (Fritz, 2012, p. 8). During this time when resources were scarce, “23% of families opted for having only a single child” (Fritz, 2012, p. 8). Even in today’s economy, scarcity of resources might be influencing the more recent declines in birth rates. Aside from financial factors, other reasons not to increase family size can include infertility, traumatic child-birthing experiences, marrying later in life, general lifestyle priorities, career, travel aspirations, general family turmoil such as divorce, and overall parenting preferences (Fritz, 2012, p. 8).

OCFs are becoming increasingly common in the United States. In 1960, 10% of the population under 18 years old had no sibling connections; in 2012, the number of single children was close to 20% (Fritz, 2012, p. 8). The most recent census reported almost 21% of children had no siblings (“National Siblings Day”, 2022, Table C3). Even so, OCFs and only-children are not viewed positively. Only children are often stereotyped as “lonely, spoiled, and maladjusted” (Mancillas, 2006, p. 268). Parents in OCFs are often blamed for overextending resources on their sole child and “spoiling” them (Mancillas, 2006). Moreover, “many people simply choose not to believe that only-children are happy, well-adjusted individuals” (Mancillas, 2006, p. 273) even though “only-children are strikingly similar to other children, especially those with only one sibling” (Richards & Goodman, 1996, p. 753).

Communication scholars should give attention to this growing family type, and this thesis will make an important contribution by being the first to focus on OCFs, setting the foundation for future inquiry. Even though OCFs are statistically becoming more common, OCFs exist in a

world that overwhelmingly values parents producing offspring and children having siblings making OCFs non-normative and in turn discourse-dependent.

Discourse Dependence

Discourse-dependent families challenge the dominant assumptions of what “family” means or looks like to others (Galvin, 2006, p. 15). Due to the unique nature of discourse-dependent families, scholars turn to the social constructions of the family unit because it is based on how families perform and “do” family (Turner & West, 2015, p. 14). With that, there is a widespread understanding of familial expectations called master narratives (Bergen, 2010). Master narratives are stories that reflect, “the values of the dominant culture and set the standards for normative behavior in relationships, determining (un)acceptable relational behaviors”, drawing attention to unique family systems (Bergen, 2010, p. 47). Through this outside interaction, discourse-dependent families can continually separate themselves from the norm through joint sensemaking and management of their discourse-dependent status. To do this, discourse-dependent families must use communicative strategies to create, maintain, and reinforce their unique identity (Galvin, 2014, p. 18). These strategies help to ensure family cohesion based on the identity traits that make them discourse dependent and continue to separate them from outsiders (Galvin, 2014, p. 18). Specifically, Galvin (2006) describes that in order to successfully maintain these family identities, their discourse is created by managing internal and external boundaries (p. 9).

Based on current research relative to family planning and disclosure of family plans or fertility status (Hintz & Brown, 2020; Durham & Braithwaite, 2009), multiple children within a family are a part of the dominant discourse about “family.” This multi-child expectation marginalizes one-child families (OCFs) and families with no children (i.e., voluntary, or

involuntary child-free/less families). For example, parents of OCFs are often prompted by outsiders, “Don’t you want more kids?”, “Are you sure you don’t want more children?”, “Aren’t you worried about your child being lonely?”, as if to suggest that having one child is inherently less than when compared to having multiple children. There is pressure emitted from outsiders for further acquisition of children (biologically or adoptive) that OCFs resist.

There are multiple problems with this, and differing circumstances may restrict OCFs from adding to their family. Such factors include parental age, adoption costs, physical ability, economic status, and personal preference. Regardless of the method, families are expected to have a child as opposed to not having one (Durham & Braithwaite, 2009; Hintz & Brown, 2020), yet, at the same time it is not enough to have a child, you must have more than one. Due to this reasoning, social barriers do not discourage others from asking the question, “When are you going to have another?” This is because not only is being a parent seen as a moral and biological responsibility that fulfills a person’s life (Hintz & Brown, 2020, pp. 252–253), but in the case of only-children, outsiders might insist that a child should not be “alone” or “lonely,” especially if the parents have the means to have additional children in some way. To analyze the outside perspectives placed on OCFs, gathering qualitative descriptions of experiences and opinions will allow a more concrete conceptualization of OCF discourse. Witnessing OCF-centered conversations in real-time is not an option for this study, however, there is a wealth of publicly available discourse about OCFs throughout the internet. By examining available discourse about OCFs on social media, the present data can illuminate different elements unearthed from online dialogue surrounding OCFs.

RQ: What substantive themes about OCFs are reflected in Facebook comments reacting to articles about this family type?

Part Two: Method

To answer my research question, I analyzed comments made in response to OCF-related articles. The articles originated on a blog (scarymommy.com) and were reposted on the blog's corresponding Facebook page feed. A qualitative analysis of these publicly available data not only allowed me to unobtrusively explore how OCFs are framed but also analyze naturally occurring talk.

Facebook

Using publicly available data provided a promising start in the search for substantive commentary about only-children and OCFs. Facebook provides a unique research environment for its large user population and its ability to connect friends, family, acquaintances, and strangers with ease (Christofides et al. 2009, p. 341). Facebook makes for a data-rich setting for this research because of the platform's ability to reach a wide audience that would be hard to recruit through surveys, polls, or interviews otherwise. Facebook comments offer a unique tool to see communication frozen in time as opposed to witnessing a conversation in person without the ability to revisit the interaction later for thorough analysis (Franz et al., 2019, p. 1). This research focuses on the comments written by Facebook users who shared their perspectives in response to articles posted by the blog Scary Mommy, specifically about only-children and OCFs.

There are two types of Facebook user-generated textual data that are the focus of analysis: posts and comments. Franz et al. (2019) define a Facebook post as written by a Facebook user and is sharable on other Facebook user timelines (p. 2). The posts to be focused on are those created by the parenting-centered blog Scary Mommy, specifically the articles about only-children and OCFs shared for audience response. Franz et al. (2019) define a Facebook

comment as a “response to a Facebook post or a response to another comment itself” (p. 2). By this definition, there are numerous comments in the data that contain extended conversation threads filled with responses and even responses to other responses, adding to the richness of conversation had about only-children and OCFs. Another consideration in the process of collecting and analyzing comments on Facebook includes familiarization, when researchers immerse themselves in the data before coding to ensure a strong and trustworthy analysis (Franz et al., 2019, p. 3). As a Facebook user myself, having familiarity with how the platform operates contributed to and aided in the data collection and analysis of this thesis.

Scary Mommy

Scary Mommy (n.d.) is an inclusive parenting website that emphasizes the joys and difficulties of navigating modern-day parenthood. Upon entrance to the website, you will find articles written by contributing authors about pregnancy, fertility, adoption, surrogacy, marriage, family life, food, beauty, health, entertainment, and more. Some examples of the variety of articles written for the Scary Mommy audience include, “I’m The ‘Old Mom’ With A Young Kid & Yes, Sometimes It’s Weird,” “Your 40s Are Actually Amazing — Here’s Why,” and “It Matters How We Talk About Surrogacy.” Editor-in-chief Kate Auletta (n.d.) describes the site’s philosophy as,

Scary Mommy reaches millions of women celebrating and supporting every mother’s journey — married moms, single moms, working moms, [stay-at-home moms (SAHMs)], LGBTQ+ moms, pregnant women, those who are trying to conceive, and more... We tell it like it is; no sugarcoating, no bullsh*t. We embrace imperfection, and speak the truth, even when it’s uncomfortable.

Overall, Scary Mommy takes a candid approach to their online contributions to parenting

conversations. Scary Mommy also has a presence on social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook. Articles originally posted on the website are re-posted to their respective social media accounts where people can react to the contents of the articles and interact with other Scary Mommy followers.

Data Collection

I chose four Scary Mommy posts where articles about OCFs (originally from the Scary Mommy blog) are shared on its Facebook feed. To identify these articles, I first searched the page using “one-child families” and “only children” as my terms. I then reviewed the articles that resulted from the search. I read the title and content and then cross-referenced the original article that was posted on the blog with each article’s re-sharing on Scary Mommy’s Facebook page. I chose the final four articles (See Appendix) because they were recently shared and have large comment sets ($N = 888$). All four articles have been shared on Scary Mommy’s Facebook page more than once. Therefore, I decided to only include the most recent repost for each (or in one case the repost with the most comments this year).

The posts analyzed came from the comment sections of four articles: “The Secret Benefits of Raising An Only Child” (Arnold-Ratliff, 2022), “The Truth About Only Children (From An Only Child)” (Zunter, 2021), “Why 'Only Child' Comments Are The Most Hurtful Comments I Hear From Other Parents” (Temsah-Deniskin, 2020), and “My Husband And I Are Proudly ‘One And Done’” (Garrity, 2022). Below I provide brief descriptions of each article.

“The Secret Benefits of Raising An Only Child” references six specific benefits when it comes to being a parent of a single child. According to the author, these benefits include only-children being equally successful at socializing, having close relationships with their parents, being go-getters, having better emotional regulation skills, being less likely to be depressed as

teens, and being more environmentally friendly (Arnold-Ratliff, 2022). The qualities listed and defended by the author are based on a variety of statistics. Arnold-Ratliff attributes varied sources for their argument in defense of only children, citing studies from the 1980s and beyond. I chose this article because the benefits listed call into question the validity of only-child stereotypes.

In “The Truth About Only Children (From an Only Child)” Zunter (2021) describes that as an only child, you are subject to lots of questions from the people around you regarding your only child status. I chose this article because the perspective is from an only child, not a parent of an only child. Zunter describes and addresses questions heard from outsiders about only-child status. The questions she recalls being asked draw on stereotypes of only children, and the author challenges those assumptions with her experiences. Overall, Zunter ends the article iterating that we do not have a choice about family birth order situations and, “We all cope the best we can with whatever family environment we arrive in” (para. 25).

In her article “Why 'Only Child' Comments Are The Most Hurtful Comments I Hear From Other Parents” Temsah-Deniskin (2020) recalls an experience when someone stereotyped her only child. After getting rejected by another kid at the playground, she describes hearing from the parent next to her “She’s an only child, isn’t she?” (para. 2). The other parent seemed to connect the sensitivity of rejection with one-child status. The author explains that with all the trauma she experienced during miscarriage, the general pressures of motherhood, and 10 years of fertility struggles made conceiving difficult for her, her only child is a miracle (para. 11). After emphasizing you never know what another person is going through, the author explains the effect those mean words can have on her child,

Did you consider that your comment might make my daughter feel like there is

something wrong with our family as it is? Don't disparage her justified feelings and our wonderful little family by reinforcing the antiquated nuclear family stereotype that society constantly thrusts upon all women of childbearing age...Does not having a sibling make her a lesser person, a second-rate citizen?" (para. 13).

In "My Husband and I Are Proudly 'One And Done'" the author describes the outside judgment she receives from others about her reproductive choices to "only" have one child, and when she does not provide the wanted or expected response, "then I get an earful when I say there is no 'next one'" (Garrity, 2022, para. 1). Tired of the intrusive questions, she explains to the reader why there will not be another child in her future, and what others do not know has contributed to her choice. She cites the painful injections she had to undergo to begin conceiving, trauma from birth, postpartum depression, and if she were honest after people pestered her for answers about having another kid, "maybe that would shut them up" (para. 6).

Data Preparation

Before starting the data analysis, I manually scraped the comments from each of the four Facebook posts. Even though the UWM Institutional Review Board deemed this study as not needing their approval given the data are publicly available and hence do not include identifiable *private* information, all data has been de-identified by deleting any personal information of the commenters (e.g., their names) and assigning each comment an identification number. The dataset was stored in an Excel spreadsheet for analysis. Each of the four articles examined was designated numbers one through four. Responses to initial comments were given a numeric label based on the order of comments and responses in a communication thread. Numbers were assigned to comments by filtering from the first comment to the most recent comment. It was necessary to create a numerical system for the identification and organization of all the collected

comments. When someone left a comment, whatever number in the sequence of total comments they were, it is given that number along with the identification of which article the commenter was discussing. For example, when referencing the content of the fifteenth comment share under article number one, it was coded as 1.15. It was observed that there were different levels of communication within the comments. Facebook users had conversations with each other in the comment section, which created responses to comments, or a comment to another comment. For example, if the fifteenth comment on article one had multiple responses to the original comment and I cited the fourth response, it would be coded as 1.15.4. If there were even further responses to the responses left on the initial comment, they were coded as 1.15.4.1 and so on.

Due to the changing nature of the internet, I recognize that the comments under each reposted article are subject to change at any time. To account for this, I decided to choose a date to scrape the data, February 2023 and did not collect any subsequent comments. I also identified posts without substance (e.g., tagging or solicitations) and bracketed them from the final dataset. These accounted for approximately 48 of the total comments.

Data Analysis

I inductively analyzed the data using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, defined as "a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data...describes your data set in (rich) detail...and interprets various aspects of the research topic" (p. 6). They define a theme as "capturing something important about the data in relation to the research question and representing some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (p. 10). Scharp et al. (2023) described the process of thematic analysis in six steps, "(a) familiarizing...with the data, (b) systematically coding the data, (c) generating initial

themes, (d) developing and reviewing themes, (e) refining, naming, and defining themes, and (f) identifying evocative exemplars” (p. 4).

For something to be considered a theme or to “stand out” in the data set was based upon the three criteria of reoccurrence, repetition, and forcefulness as explained by Owen (1984). The guideline to consider something reoccurring is “when at least two parts of a report had the same thread of meaning even though different wording indicated such a meaning” (p. 275). Repetition was accepted under the “explicit repeated use of the same wording” (p. 275). The difference between the first two criteria is that reoccurrence is implicit while repetition is explicit (p. 275). Lastly, “Forcefulness refers to vocal inflection volume or dramatic pauses which serve distress and subordinate some utterances from other locations in the oral reports” (p. 275). Within this data set, “forcefulness” was determined through emphatic communication found within the comments, as well as recognizing among the comments, the active process of reinforcing and, in turn, the forming of their discourse (Owen, 1984, p. 276). This discourse was created on the basis of each commenter’s understanding of the article they were commenting on, or the other related comments they were replying to (Owen, 1984, p. 276).

Through the process of data analysis, I identified two primary themes: (a) insider versus outsider perspectives of only-children/OCFs, and (b) positive versus negative constructions of only-children/OCFs. Any person from any family type could comment on the articles, and many identified themselves as not being an only-child or from OCFs; therefore, the data include experiences and opinions not only from only-children and those from OCFs but also those from multi-child families (MCFs). Also, the data revealed many different perceived qualities of only-children and OCFs, which ranged in valence from positive, negative, and mixed, which described both positive and negative aspects of being an only-child or being a part of an OCF.

Referential Adequacy

In conjunction with Owen's (1984) criteria of theme identification, I used referential adequacy to aid in my thematic analysis. Referential adequacy is a process where researchers analyze half of their data while archiving the second half, and then checking the validity of their initial themes against the archived data to support the themes discovered or provide new considerations for the data analyses. After returning to the archived data, the researcher(s) then look for evidence of significance or variance within the archives comparatively to the analyzed data. The use of referential adequacy is a valuable tool, as it "provides a rare opportunity for demonstrating the credibility of naturalistic data" and creates "reliability" of themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 313-314). For this study, the archived data echoed the themes identified in the first half. No new themes emerged.

Part Three: Findings

Through the process of data analysis, I identified two primary themes: (a) insider versus outsider perspectives of only-children/OCFs, and (b) positive versus negative constructions of only-children/OCFs. Any person from any family type could comment on the articles, and many identified themselves as not being an only-child or from an OCF; therefore, the data include experiences and opinions not only from only-children and those from OCFs but also those from MCFs. Also, the data revealed many different perceived qualities of only-children and OCFs, which ranged in valence from positive to negative. The themes were based on the comments' content.

Insider/Outsider Perspectives

I recognized in my data that each comment posted reflected insider or outsider (I/O) perspectives of only-children. Insider posts were comments that indicated the poster had an interdependent relationship with an only-child, is an only-child, or is part of an OCF. Most comments contained language that identified their positioning. For example, one comment, "I married an only and we have an only" (comment 1.23.4), identifying their OCF membership via their husband and their child but not claiming only-child status themselves. Another commenter identified their proximity by being married to an only-child but not being from an OCF themselves describing, "My husband is an only child, I'm 3 of 4" (4.5). These two examples fall under the insider category because of the relationship they have with the person who has only-child status, whether that be their spouse and/or their child. The level of interdependency between someone and the only-child status is important to understand and can indicate someone's proximity to the struggles and joys of someone's OCF experience.

Outsider posts indicated the author did not have an interdependent relationship with an

only-child. For example, commenters who were identified as outsiders would preface their comments with phrases like, “I had 3 siblings” (1.6), “I rely heavily on my siblings” (1.2.2.1), “I would be lost without my bros” (3.4.1.2), or “I wasn’t an only child” (2.2). It is important to note that while this theme provides context for commenter opinions, the identified themes are less about the insider/outsider status than what comments are saying about only-children and OCFs. Among the comments, in partnership with the provided I/O context, further specified themes were identified relative to shared thoughts, opinions, and assumptions about family structures.

Assumptions of MCFs

Comments reflected assumptions about both MCFs and OCFs. It is important to first discuss MCFs in order to understand OCFs due to the reality that MCFs are often positioned as the default or preferred family form, and the qualities of OCFs are often held in comparison to MCFs. With this, having more than one child is considered the social norm. When asked about family composition, someone with one child likely will use the term “only” child. There is a seemingly natural assumption that there will be a subsequent child added to a family unit eventually, and if more children are not possible this absence creates potential reactions of disappointment, from insiders and outsiders alike, that there is “only” one child. OCFs that are voluntary are positioned as out of the ordinary, because to others if you could have more children why wouldn’t you? One commenter describes this manifesting interpersonally as outside pressure to expand their family: “No sooner did I have my daughter and people were like, ‘When are you gonna have another?’” (2.1.4) This comment exemplifies the notion that it is non-normative to “stop” at one child. Some people felt so strongly about having multiple children, explaining, “It is cheating the child out of a fully experienced childhood and definitely cheating them out of the most meaningful lifelong relationships” (4.24).

When comparing OCFs to MCFs, having siblings is often connected to reduced feelings of loneliness. By consistently having other children around to play with, those that are related by blood are positioned as the ideal. Due to this assumption, the othering of OCFs continues through comparison, using MCFs to serve as the reference point for appropriate social development. One assumption of MCFs is that siblings aid in the socialization process. When comparing this assumption to only-children, due to the absence of siblings, this may cause others to assume only-children will not develop the appropriate social skills. In fact, the MCF influence can lead only-children to envision what “family” could have looked like for them, or what they want “family” to look like in the future. The lack of siblings created feelings of loneliness for some only-children as described in the comments.

I always wanted a sibling...I just would have liked to have a “family”. Like even irritating Thanksgiving dinners where everyone fights, and the same stories are told over and over, or bad Christmas gift exchanges on Christmas Eve. All the things ppl complain about I want/wanted. I’m hoping to find a partner with a big ol family 😊. (4.24.3.1)

This commentor, who is an only-child, defines family as being comprised of more than one child and envisions their experience of the family needs to be large in number. Similarly, another commentor describes that ideally, their child will marry into a larger family: “I’m hoping my only child marries a spouse that has siblings” (1.11.5). Regardless of how additional family is acquired, it feels necessary to some only-children or parents of only-children for them to feel they have family in the way that is socially ideal.

Another assumption found within the comments was that within MCFs, siblings are supposed to and will take care of the other kids when parents are tired. With this reasoning, one

comment explained that siblings are necessary not only for the benefit of the children but also because, “When the parents are too tired to play, at least the siblings have each other” (4.39.2.5).

Positive & Negative Connotations of Only-Children & OCFs

Among the comments analyzed, there was a clear distinction between positive and negative associations about being an only-child, having an only-child, or not becoming an MCF. There were many distinct reasons brought up for and against the single-child family structure, but all reasons could clearly be divided into good and bad. The positive qualities of only-children and OCFs most often cited included that only-children do not need siblings to be happy, only-children are not bored, OCFs require fewer resources to maintain, OCFs are less work to maintain, and only-children are not inherently selfish. The negative qualities of only-children and OCFs included feelings of loneliness experienced by only-children due to lack of siblings, that only-children lack social skills, and that parents of only-children are selfish. By coding for positive/negative, this information allows us to make judgments about whether only-children and OCFs have the commenters’ approval or disapproval of having “only” one child. The following data have been organized as such to represent the dominant themes within discussions had between commentors about only-children and OCFs in comparison to MCFs. Posts reflected positive and/or negative themes about only-children and the OCF unit.

Only-Children/OCFs as Positive

Positive connotations of individuals include, sibling status does not impact only-child happiness, only-children find ways to satisfy their boredom without siblings, and only-children are not selfish. Positive connotations of OCFs include being less work because they require fewer resources like time, energy, and money. Due to the complex nature of family planning decisions, the many comments discussed may contain overlapping themes.

Lack of Siblings Does Not Impact Only-child Happiness. One positive theme was that commenters insisted that only-children overall produced close friendships outside of family that provided similar levels of closeness as would be expected in sibling relationships. Many of the comments recognized that other relationships could provide similar if not the same kind of social fulfillment for children as siblings. One parent of an only-child described, “My child has never been alone. She has something called friends” (1.21.1). Friendship is often forgotten or looked down upon as a way to be socially fulfilled in comparison to sibling relationships because blood relations are privileged over other connections. Another parent of an only-child hinted at this stereotype of loneliness without siblings using humor stating: “Yes, my only child comes home every day and howls at the moon because he is oh so lonely” (1.6.2). This sentiment pokes fun at those who forget that other relationships can be formed outside of the family. Another comment from an only-child indicated their positive experiences finding close relationships outside their family of origin: “I found a best friend who has been my sister my whole life” (3.2.2.2). Found or chosen family, though often considered less than when compared to blood ties, can make the same impact as a sibling. This same person further added that their experiences of friendship were so impactful that there is no need for a sibling: “To one parent expressing concerns over their only-child, this commenter assures, I promise your kiddo is not missing out on anything” (3.2.2.2). Overall, comments like these argue that only-child status does not necessarily translate into a stunted social life for only-children. Only-children can find other relationships to provide the same closeness of a sibling, which instead allows only-children to develop varying levels of independence.

Only-children are Not Bored. In conjunction with only-children not feeling lonely, parents of only-children described their observations and experiences of their child’s

resourcefulness in correlation to their only-child status. Only-children find other ways to engage in play, satisfy their social needs, and overall occupy their time. From the perspective of a parent of OCF and as an only-child themselves, a commenter described their observations, “[Only-children] also tend to be more comfortable being alone because they’ve had a lot of practice, so they are less needy and demanding” (1.22). Without the presence of a sibling, only-children find a unique way to engage with their environment. From the perspective of a parent of an only-child but not having the only-child experience themselves shared:

Having an only who’s 9...Sometimes she prefers to be alone. One time during a party she disappeared, found her upstairs in her room, she said she needed a minute alone because there were too many people...She’s very independent, wants to do everything herself and only after trying and then she will ask for help. (1.22.1)

For this only-child, spending time alone allows an opportunity to problem solve and try new things. When asked by a respondent to further describe how their only-child is so content, one commenter wrote,

I’ve heard him say ‘I’m not sure what I want to do’ a few times but he’s never just lounging around being bored and whining about it...He has lots of interests and so he bounces between them. (3.5.3.1)

These experiences discussed assert that only-children can develop healthy ways to spend their time alone, without being sentenced to boredom due to the absence of a sibling.

OCFs are Less Work Because They Require Fewer Resources. Many resources are required when raising children. Comments in the data reflected opinions that OCFs have the benefit of allocating all their funds, time, attention, and energy to one child rather than needing to budget their resources as required by MCFs.

Time, Attention, Energy, and Financial Resources. Caregivers who often also work full or part-time jobs concurrently with childcare are often left feeling exhausted. For many, time can become a valuable resource that should be used wisely if they can complete all their tasks at work, at home, spend time with their child/ren, and have some time for themselves at the end of each day. Parenthood is a difficult undertaking and having more than one child means even more work. In becoming an OCF, one parent wrote with pride, “We have been able to dedicate all of our time and efforts to one beautiful child” (4.21). Another commenter, despite wanting to add more children to their family, recognizes the physical, mental, and emotional toll that comes with caring for child/ren and decided that adding to their family would be more strenuous than they prefer. Instead, they wish to allocate the time and energy that they do have to their only-children:

I feel this so deeply. I have always ALWAYS wanted multiple kids...while a sibling would be a fantastic addition to our family there is no way I can give more than 1 kid the life they deserve in the financial climate the country (USA) is currently in. Also, the old phrase comes to mind ‘I’m giving my child a healthy mom instead of a sibling’ and that’s ok too ❤️❤️❤️. (4.34)

Two other commenters that identified themselves as parents of only-children mentioned the importance of their independence and autonomy outside of their family unit when considering the resources necessary to raise multiple children. Referencing this delicate balance, one commenter explains, “One [child] is perfect. Still get to experience motherhood while not losing your sense of self 😊” (4.28.2). For some, having one child is like having the “best of both worlds” or a happy medium between being childfree and juggling the responsibilities of a large family. Relative to personal freedom from the potential stress that multiple children could create, another person stated, “More children for me would mean a lot more responsibilities for ME

because of my schedule” (4.21.5). Despite these reasons to keep their family small, parents of OCF are still subject to outside opinions of their situation. One commenter spoke about how they have been judged for their OCF, and also justifying their reasons:

I only have 1 child and will not have more. I have no more time/energy to give to another child. I’m not going to feel guilty about admitting that and keeping my family small.
(3.19).

This person describes the importance of recognizing the parental workload required in MCFs and resisting the outside pressure put on parents to have more than one child.

Only-Children are Not Selfish. As acknowledged in the previous literature, only-children are often assumed to be selfish individuals because they were brought up in homes without needing to share with a sibling. In line with this assumption, some commenters who were only-children and/or parents of an only-child stated the contrary. One commenter defended their only-child status, explaining,

I am perfectly happy with having been an only child. I am not ‘selfish’, I actually have boundaries about my things as well as other people’s. I didn’t grow up ‘self-absorbed’, I actually became a Social Worker. (3.26)

In response to this person’s comment, another only-child shared an anecdote where they were stereotyped as being selfish. They used MCFs as the comparison to only-child behavior, writing:

I’m an only child and had a roommate once who was one of many. She used to eat all my food...and would call me a ‘selfish only child’ when I would call her out on it. I thought not taking other people's things (without even asking) is common decency, regardless of sibling status 😂. (3.26.1)

Poking fun at the idea of being spoiled, this commenter asserts that MCFs are not exempt from being labeled as selfish just because only-children may or may not have more resources at their disposal.

A parent of an only-child recognized how their only-child is “good at sharing.” This person thinks this is the case because, unlike children from MCFs, their only-child does not have to “battle at home over things.” They mentioned:

His friends are from mostly large families, and the kids hoard anything you give them. Like Gollum with the ring. Makes sense, if you always have to share, you never get anything that is truly yours. They end up being super possessive of things because if they don’t guard it, it will get destroyed/stolen/etc. by siblings. Meanwhile, my son is watching them like “You know that is just stuff, right?” (1.22.3)

The potential availability of resources provided to one child in an OCF does not necessarily mean that the only-child will be selfish or “hoard” resources for themselves. Experiences of only-children can help create a counter-narrative that challenges other stereotypes of only-children and provide different perspectives not yet supported by research.

Only-children/OCFs as Negative

In addition to the positive connotations discussed, only-children /OCFs were concurrently constructed in negative ways. Parents of only-children were viewed as selfish for having “only” one child because some believe OCFs may be depriving their only-child of sibling companionship and early social development skills. Additionally, while there seemed to be more specific themes that were positive, an overarching theme of only-children experiencing loneliness without siblings made up a sizable portion of the data identified overall.

Only-Children are Lonely

Commenters expressed significant concern about only children feeling lonely without siblings. Some of those comments came from parents, who identified themselves as such. Others who claimed only-child status described their childhood as lonely and even adulthood as a lonely experience as well. Similarly, connected to parents' fear that only-children will be lonely, there also is concern about having a good or memorable childhood and whether sibling relationships impact the positivity or negativity of childhood experiences. Some comments indicated that children *need* siblings to have a good childhood.

Lonely as a Child. Within the data, there is a large focus specifically on lonely childhood experiences. Commenters reported assorted reasons for their lonely childhood. One commenter describes how much they wished they had a close relationship as they might have with a sibling. They said,

Only child here! 🧑‍🦰 ♀ There are benefits to being an only child for sure, but I was lonely when I was a kid. I longed for someone to spend my time with...I think it matured me faster than my classmates with siblings. Most of my friends were adults. (1.26)

For only-children, they described the reasons why they felt lonely due to various aspects of their only-child status. Some did not like the attention and wanted a sibling to divert that attention. For example,

I was an only child and it really sucked. It was lonely and you are right about the social skills. I'm an introvert and hated attention on myself even for my birthday. My parents were divorced and my dad was remarried and I remember begging them for a sibling not knowing how it works 😊 😊. (4.5.4)

Another commenter mentioned that despite the article posted discussing the benefits of being a part of an OCF, they did not think the benefits outweighed the costs of not having siblings. They

said, “People can talk about the benefits all they want but I know firsthand how lonely it is...” (1.14.1). Additionally, one person acknowledged that those from MCFs can feel that growing up with siblings can be a negative experience for some, yet, as an only-child, they insisted, “I really wish I had a sibling. No matter what people who have siblings say” (3.1.4). These two commenters overall would rather be potentially unhappy in a large family than to feel alone in an OCF. For some commentors, their definition of “family” has shifted due to their only-child status, and they feel to experience true family, you must have siblings. One person explained, I always wanted a sibling...I just would have liked to have a “family”. Like even irritating Thanksgiving dinners where everyone fights, and the same stories are told over and over, or bad Christmas gift exchanges on Christmas Eve. all the things ppl complain about I want/wanted. I’m hoping to find a partner with a big ol family 😊. (4.24.3.1)

Lonely as Adults. Lonely adult experiences of those with OCF status, which was mentioned frequently, distinguish only-children and “only” adults (OA), specifying that being an only adult is more difficult when compared to their experiences as a child. Some people described this transition from watching their parents age and becoming the sole caregiver. They said,

Hi! Only child here the moment you feel it is when you are aging, you are the only one dealing with a dying parent. It would be nice to share it with someone, and my parents tried it just didn’t happen. 😞 (1.24)

Another person responded in agreement, “I can completely relate... through it all, I wished I had a sibling to share at least even the emotional burden of it all (3.1.10), while another wrote:

“It’s hard when all the emotional and physical responsibilities of parents fall on me” (1.11.3).

Only-Children Lack Social Skills

One of the Scary Mommy articles was about one mother's child being seen as too sensitive because of the dynamic of play between another child at the park. Some responded to this observation about only-children and their feelings were, "The only children I have known as adults tend to be less able to handle hubbub and noise" (3.22). One commenter credits their only-child status as an influential factor that encouraged them to remain isolated, even as an adult. They said, "Being an only child made me a loner. I got so used to being by myself all the time that I still find it hard to be around others for too long" (1.14). Describing a correlation between their only-child status with introversion, "You are right about the social skills. I'm an introvert and hated attention on myself even for my birthday" (4.5.4).

Parents of Only-Children are Selfish

Some feelings of loneliness are attributed to the fault of the parents because of the absence of a sibling for their only-child. Only-children reported they felt like they missed sibling experiences and some even blame their parents' choices or abilities for not having a sibling. Another person proposed that parents of only-children are selfish for not providing a sibling for the existing child. They described,

I missed having a sibling badly when I was a child and I do the same now that I am an adult...Again might be right for some people to simply have one child, but it is not easy being a single child. It is slightly selfish in my opinion. (1.2)

Another commenter discussed how being an only-child without a sibling shaped many of their life choices and being upset that they did not have a sibling bond growing up.

Having one child deprives that one child of SO much...And kids shouldn't be alone most of the time during developmental years...It is cheating the child out of a fully experienced childhood and definitely cheating them out of the most meaningful lifelong

relationships... simply rationalizing that they don't feel like having the responsibility of multiple children. (4.24)

These two comments argue that the absence of a sibling makes a greater impact on an only-child's well-being than what some may realize, and they feel strongly about what could have been if they were a part of an MCF.

Part Four: Discussion

Interpretations of Findings

The data revealed many dimensions of discourse surrounding only-children and OCFs. Positive and negative stereotypes as discussed in previous research can be seen throughout the data.

Positive Thoughts about Only-Children/OCFs

Specific to only-child individuals, having siblings does not impact only-child happiness, only-children find ways to satisfy their boredom without siblings, and only-children are not selfish. Positive connotations of OCFs include being less work and they require fewer resources like time, energy, and money. Those commenting in favor of the OCF structure and experience tended to defend multiple aspects of their experiences that have been criticized or incorrectly generalized.

Friendship and Chosen Family. One positive theme was that only-children overall produced close friendships outside of family that provided similar interdependent levels of closeness as would be expected in sibling relationships. But sibling relationships are not the only kind of relationship that can provide closeness. Friendship is often forgotten or looked down upon as a way to be socially fulfilled in comparison to sibling relationships because blood relations are privileged over other connections.

Independent Play. In conjunction with only-children not feeling lonely, parents of only-children described their observations and experiences of their child's resourcefulness in correlation to their only-child status because the lack of siblings forces only-children to find other ways to engage in play, satisfy their social needs, and overall occupy their time. Without the presence of a sibling, only-children's find a unique way to engage with their environment.

Spending time alone allows an opportunity to problem solve and try new things without siblings influencing their confidence in learning something new.

OCFs are Less Work Because They Require Fewer Resources

Many resources are required when raising children. Comments in the data reflected opinions that OCFs have the benefit of allocating all their funds, time, attention, and energy to one child rather than needing to budget their resources as required by MCFs.

Time, Attention, Energy, and Financial Resources. Not only is there less financial strain with an only-child, but other resources mentioned by only-children and parents of only-children alike were time, attention, and energy. Parenthood is a difficult undertaking and having more than one child means even more work due to further division of attention to meet the needs of each child to their best ability. For some, having one child is like having the “best of both worlds” or a happy medium between being child-free and juggling the responsibilities of a large family.

Only-Children are Not Selfish

As acknowledged in the previous literature, only-children are often assumed to be selfish individuals because they were brought up in homes without needing to share with a sibling. In line with this assumption, some commenters who were only-children and/or parents of only-children stated the contrary. Only-children are not any more likely to be selfish than a child with siblings. The potential availability of resources provided to one child in an OCF does not necessarily mean that an only-child will be selfish or “hoard” resources for themselves.

Negative Thoughts about Only-Children/OCFs

Loneliness. While there were more positive themes related to only-children and OCFs found in this data, the negative theme of only-children being lonely was heavily persistent.

Parents of only-children were viewed as selfish for having only one child and depriving their only-child of sibling companionship and early social development. One understanding of only-children is that they will be bored or live a boring life without the presence of siblings.

Comments addressing only-child experiences of loneliness maintain an underlying assumption that being alone is a sad thing to be avoided at all costs. Additionally, judgment about OCFs is based on assumptions that every parent wants more than one kid and has the means to attain another child through birth, surrogacy, adoption, etc. While this evidence is contrary to some OCF experiences, it is not true for all OCFs and indicates a need for a deeper understanding of the range of OCF experiences.

Parents Are to Blame. When discussing negative stereotypes of only-children, only-children are often assumed to be selfish individuals. As discussed in the literature, only-children are often stereotyped as being “lonely, spoiled, and maladjusted” as described by Mancillas (2006, p. 268) and these stereotypes were prominent features of commenters’ opinions within the data. Parents in OCFs are often blamed for overextending resources on their sole child and “spoiling” them, but commenters were also concerned that only-children were missing the sibling experience.

Continuing to discuss some feelings of loneliness, some of this loneliness is attributed to parents of only-children because of their “failure” to provide their child with a sibling. Parents may have preferred one, decided to consider their health, considered their finances, or did not have any choice at all about childbearing. Judgment about OCFs is based on assumptions that every parent wants more than one kid and has the means to attain another child through birth, surrogacy, and adoption. While this evidence is contrary to some OCF experiences, it is not true for all OCFs and indicates a need for a deeper understanding of the range of OCF experiences.

Commenters provided various justifications for their OCFs, only-children's experiences of joy and loneliness, and the struggle of being an only-child. No matter what was shared, the data was polarized. Benefits of the analyzed data include representation of recent and detailed anecdotes provided by various I/O and parent/child status. The importance of this research, and future research about OCFs, is to show how only-children feel and are made to feel because of their only-child status in the larger setting of MCF-centered family discourse.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. I did not track if the same individuals commented multiple times within and across the OCF articles analyzed. While I did not analyze the data by commentor and thus this is not a significant concern, nonetheless the findings could have been influenced by commenters who posted multiple times (i.e., certain themes could have emerged more prominently). Also, given the nature of the data and how I proposed to analyze it, I did not have the option to ask any follow-up questions to clarify comments or gain further insight. Commenters did not always state their position as being an insider/outsider, parent/self/spouse of an OCF, or clearly identify the positive or negative valence of their comments. This left some data not as useful as other data in the analysis (i.e., I could not confidently use it to derive or reinforce the themes that emerged).

Future Directions

Future communication research regarding only-children and OCFs could go in several directions given the absence of inquiry within the field. In this thesis, naturally occurring online data where only-children and OCFs were discussed was analyzed. In other versions of this research, different data could be collected to further increase understanding of only-children and

OCF experiences. While the data collected for this project has proven useful in helping identify how only-children and OCFs are talked about, qualitative interview data, for example, collected from only-children and/or their parents would allow for in-depth exploration into experiences of this unique family type. Due to the absence of understood discourse within OCFs, there are a variety of theoretical directions that could assist in expanding what family communication scholars know of OCF experiences. To best attain these new understandings, applying other theories that center discourse would be a natural next step in this line of research. Two theories to consider in future analyses of OCF discourses include Kathleen Galvin's (2006; 2014) theory of discourse dependence and Michael Hecht's (2015) Communication Theory of Identity (CTI), which could be used in tandem to deeply analyze the various strategies and layers as tools that create and maintain discourse.

While Galvin's (2006; 2014) theory of discourse dependence was used as a sensitizing concept for this project, the scope of this thesis did not allow space to identify and analyze examples specific to the internal and external strategies of identity management. Due to the leanness of the communication mode used for this study, it was necessary to take the commenter's words at face value, interpreting to the best of my ability, as there was no opportunity to ask any follow-up questions with the commenters. Future iterations of discourse-dependent OCF research could conduct in-depth qualitative interviews to provide further context and detail of OCF experiences, asking specific questions related to identity management in an MCF-dominated world. For example, researchers could ask about practices created and maintained by OCFs when outsiders question or comment about their family type, and, internally, how OCFs maintain connection and understanding to their familial status. By collecting anecdotal data about OCF experiences with outsiders, one could perform an analysis

using Galvin's (2006; 2014) framework of discourse dependence to identify external (labeling, explaining, legitimizing, and defending) and internal boundaries (naming, discussing, narrating, and ritualizing).

Additionally, applying to the Communicative Theory of Identity (CTI) would allow researchers to study OCFs from an identity and identity discourse standpoint. CTI describes the inseparable connection between communication and identity that suggests, "conceptualization of the self as emerging from one's social interaction as well as the perceptions of others" (Hecht, 2015, p. 176). Everyday interactions with others inform the world around us about who we are and how we socially construct ourselves. Soliz and Colaner (2018) describe the impact of family portrayal in media on family identity, explaining, "popular discourse remains nostalgic for an outdated idea of what the ideal family 'used to be'" (p. 75). Social conceptualizations and assumptions of family related to when someone should have children, at what age, at what economic status, how they should have children, how many children someone ought to have, etc. are social expectations that, people adhere to. This difference informs stereotypes of only-children and OCFs which are made up of ascriptions that are group based as opposed to individually based and are applied very rigidly in society (Hecht, 2015, p. 180).

When someone violates familial expectations, like OCFs will experience othering which can cause people to form "identity gaps" (Hecht, 2015, p. 179). These "identity gaps" create dissonance which can influence outsiders to make attempts to adhere to norms, but in the case of OCFs, they cannot always change their OCF status by having more children (p. 181). This difference informs stereotypes of only-children and OCFs which are made up of ascriptions and are applied very rigidly in society (p. 180). By applying CTI to OCF experiences, researchers can identify the identity gaps that shape OCF discourse.

Concluding thoughts

Further investigation of the comments and the connecting themes found in the datum theme of OCF experiences related to eldercare would be a new perspective to be considered in health communication or end-of-life communication. Many comments discussed the feeling of being burdened as an only-child with the solo task of caring for their aging loved ones, parents specifically. The idea is if there are siblings in the family, then elder care will be shared among the siblings. Additional analysis of comments focused on only-children's experiences of eldercare could reveal information about how only-children cope, providing a resource for other only-children with aging parents. In relation to eldercare with siblings, even more comments from those identified as being part of MCFs shared that having siblings does not ensure eldercare support. Commenters who identified themselves as the primary caregiver of their loved one said the absence of support from their siblings to share the weight of eldercare makes them feel that they "might as well be an only child." These unreliable sibling relationships can cause the sibling who becomes the primary caregiver to have feelings of loneliness or pressure like only-children. Further analysis could reduce the distance between these two opposing family structures, exemplifying that they are not so different. As OCFs continue to grow, investing interest in the erected discourses will become an important contribution to family communication studies, adding otherwise overlooked perspectives into future scholarship.

References

- Allendorf, K., Young-DeMarco, L., & Thornton, A. (2022). Developmental idealism and a half-century of family attitude trends in the United States. *Sociology of Development, 9*(1), 1–37. <https://doi.org/10.1525/sod.2022.0003>
- Auletta, K. (n.d.). Scary mommy. BDG. Retrieved March 5, 2023, from <https://www.bdg.com/scary-mommy>
- Baxter, L. A. (2014). Theorizing the communicative construction of “family”: The three R’s. In L. A. Baxter (Ed.), *Remaking "family" communicatively* (pp. 33–50). Peter Lang.
- Bergen, K. M. (2010). Accounting for difference: Commuter wives and the master narrative of marriage. *Journal of Applied Communication Research, 38*(1), 47–64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00909880903483565>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Christofides, E., Muise, A., & Desmarais, S. (2009). Information disclosure and control on Facebook: Are they two sides of the same coin or two different processes? *Cyberpsychology & Behavior, 12*(3), 355–360. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cpb.2009.9998>
- Durham, W., & Braithwaite, D. O. (2009). Communication privacy management within the family planning trajectories of voluntarily child-free couples. *Journal of Family Communication, 9*(1), 43–65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15267430802561600>
- Franz, D., Marsh, H. E., Chen, J. I., & Teo, A. R. (2019). Using Facebook for qualitative research: A brief primer. *Journal of Medical Internet Research, 21*(8), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.2196/13544>

- Fritz, G. K. (2012). The only child. *The Brown University Child and Adolescent Behavior Letter*, 8.
- Galvin, K. M. (2006). Diversity's impact on defining the family: Discourse-dependence and identity. In L. H. Turner & R. West (Eds.), *The family communication sourcebook* (pp. 3–19). Sage.
- Galvin, K. M. (2014). Blood, law, and discourse: Constructing and managing family identity. In L. A. Baxter (Ed.), *Remaking "family" communicatively* (pp. 17–32). Peter Lang.
- Hecht, M. L. (2015). Communication theory of identity: Multilayered understandings of performed identities. In D. O. Braithwaite & P. Schott (Eds.), *Engaging theories in interpersonal communication: Multiple perspectives* (2nd ed., pp. 175–187). Sage.
- Hintz, E. A., & Brown, C. L. (2020). Childfree and “bingoed”: A relational dialectics theory analysis of meaning creation in online narratives about voluntary childlessness. *Communication Monographs*, 87(2), 244–266.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03637751.2019.1697891>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage.
- Mancillas, A. (2006). Challenging the stereotypes about only children: A review of the literature and implications for practice. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 84(3), 268–275.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6678.2006.tb00405.x>
- Owen, W. F. (1984). Interpretive themes in relational communication. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 70(3), 274–287. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335638409383697>
- Richards, H., & Goodman, R. (1996). Are only children different? A study of child psychiatric referrals. A research note. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 37(6), 753–757.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7610.1996.tb01468.x>

Sandler, L. (2013). *One and only: The freedom of having an only child, and the joy of being one*. Simon & Schuster.

Scary Mommy (n.d.). Home [Facebook page]. Facebook.

<https://www.facebook.com/thescarymommy>

Scary Mommy. (2023, January 1). “*Sure, the lower daycare bills and lack of sibling squabbles are nice, but the research reveals even greater perks for singletons — and for their parents.*” <https://z-upload.facebook.com/thescarymommy/posts/10159942837968301>

Scary Mommy. (2022, March 11). “*Being an only child is a dichotomy of sorts.*”

<https://www.facebook.com/thescarymommy/posts/10159395276763301/>

Scary Mommy. (2022, April 23). “*She’s an only child, isn’t she?*”

<https://www.facebook.com/page/295199098300/search/?q=%E2%80%9CShe%E2%80%99s%20an%20only%20child%2C%20isn%E2%80%99t%20she%3F%E2%80%9D%20>

Scary Mommy. (2022, November 8). “*I don’t think that’s weird. But it seems that many people beg to differ.*” <https://www.facebook.com/thescarymommy/posts/i-dont-think-thats-weird-but-it-seems-that-many-people-beg-to-differ/10159789240338301/>

Scharp, K. M., Alvarez, C. F., Wolfe, B. H., Lannutti, P. J., & Bryant, L. E. (2023). Overcoming obstacles by enacting resilience: How queer adolescents respond to being estranged from their parents. *Communication Research*, 0(0), 1–27.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/00936502221142175>

Soliz, J., & Colaner, C. W. (2018). Communication accommodation theory and communication theory of identity: Theories of communication and identity. In D. O. Braithwaite, E. A. Suter, & K. Floyd (Eds.), *Engaging theories in family communication: Multiple perspectives* (2nd ed., pp. 75–86). Routledge.

- Thornton, A., & Young-DeMarco, L. (2001). Four decades of trends in attitudes toward family issues in the United States: The 1960s through the 1990s. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 63(4), 1009–1037. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2001.01009.x>
- Thompson, C. M., Hintz, E. A. & Duerringer, C. M. (2022): Setting the agenda: Beyond discourse dependence and a dependence on discourse. *Journal of Family Communication*, 22(2), 1–7. <http://doi.org/10.1080/15267431.2022.2041997>
- Tracy, S. J. (2020). *Qualitative research methods: Collecting evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact* (2nd ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Turner, L. H., & West, R. L. (2018). *Perspectives on family communication* (5th ed.). McGraw-Hill Education.
- US Census Bureau. (2022, March 25). *National Siblings Day: April 10, 2022*. Census.gov. Retrieved March 3, 2023, from <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/stories/siblings.html>
- Ylänné, V., & Nikander, P. (2019). Being an ‘older parent’: Chrononormativity and practices of stage of life categorisation. *Text & Talk*, 39(4), 465–487. <https://doi.org/10.1515/text-2019-2036>

APPENDIX

Scary Mommy Facebook Posts Used in Study



Scary Mommy ✓
February 8 at 6:00 AM · 🌐

Sure, the lower daycare bills and lack of sibling squabbles are nice, but the research reveals even greater perks for singletons — and for their parents.



SCARYMOMMY.COM

People Don't Talk About These Benefits Of Raising An Only Child Enough
Being an only child tends to have a built-in stigma, but studies show "one and done" has man...

👍❤️ 530 177 comments 83 shares

🔊 Listen 👍 Like 💬 Comment ➦ Share ⦿



Scary Mommy ✓

September 5, 2022 · 🌐



"Being an only child is a dichotomy of sorts."



SCARYMOMMY.COM

The Truth About Only Children (From An Only Child)

If you're an only child then you've probably heard at least two of these inquiries or statements...

👍❤️ 612

286 comments 225 shares

🎧 Listen

👍 Like

💬 Comment

🔗 Share





Scary Mommy ✓

October 16, 2022 · 🌐



"It stabs me in the heart and I pray my daughter didn't hear you."



SCARYMOMMY.COM

Why 'Only Child' Comments Are The Most Hurtful Comments I Hear From Other Parents

👍🥰❤️ 153

30 comments 16 shares

▶ Listen

👍 Like

💬 Comment

➦ Share





Scary Mommy ✓

November 8, 2022 · 🌐



"I don't think that's weird. But it seems that many people beg to differ."



SCARYMOMMY.COM

My Husband And I Only Want One Kid And That Should Be OK

Why isn't that OK!?

1.2K

394 comments 34 shares

Listen

Like

Comment

Share

