

Not Yet or Never? Deliberation State and Perceived Barriers to Parenthood

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Abstract

Record-low birth rates are increasingly attributed to preferences for autonomy rather than financial constraints, raising doubts about whether economic support can increase fertility. Using AI-led, open-ended interviews with 1,074 childless adults in Singapore, South Korea, and the United States, we find a sharp divide. Among the 42% who have ruled out having children, lifestyle considerations dominate, consistent with several prominent surveys of childlessness. Yet among the 58% who have not ruled out having children, economic security dominates instead. Thus, financial constraints remain central precisely among those for whom parenthood remains a possibility.

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1 Introduction

Fertility has fallen well below replacement levels in most high-income countries and to record lows in East Asia (OECD 2024, Kearney et al. 2022). These declines raise concerns about population aging, labor supply, and long-run fiscal sustainability (Bloom et al. 2010, Lee and Mason 2011), although the severity of these consequences is debated (Marois et al. 2020, Marois and Lutz 2026). Recent accounts increasingly attribute low fertility to a durable shift in values towards autonomy and self-realization (Lesthaeghe 2010, 2014, Routledge and Johnson 2022, Pew Research Center 2024), rather than to the financial and opportunity costs of having children emphasized by the traditional neoclassical account (Becker and Lewis 1973, Becker 1981, Cigno 1991, Baudin et al. 2015). If preferences rather than costs are the primary barrier, policies that reduce the costs of childbearing may have limited effects. This argument now runs through prominent media discussions of why people do not have children and why financial support may fail to encourage more births (Lim 2023, Yoon 2023, Emba 2024, Ip and Adamy 2024, Burn-Murdoch 2024).

We show that the primary perceived barrier differs sharply between childless adults who have ruled out having children and those who have not. To do so, we conduct AI-led, open-ended interviews with 1,074 childless adults in Singapore, South Korea, and the United States. Respondents aged 21 or older with no children participate in a one-on-one, text-based interview with an AI agent powered by GPT-5. The agent begins with a neutral, open-ended question about respondents' views on having children and asks roughly ten adaptive follow-up questions that probe their reasoning without presenting a researcher-defined set of possible considerations.¹ We then use an LLM to map respondents' reasoning, identify recurring narratives about perceived barriers and motivations for parenthood, and classify respondents as *never* if they have settled against having children or *not yet* if they remain open to having children, including those who currently lean against it but would reconsider if their circumstances changed.

¹We build on recent work using AI agents to conduct qualitative interviews (Chopra and Haaland 2023, Geiecke and Jaravel 2024, Hwang et al. 2025) and, more broadly, on the integration of large language models (LLMs) into the design, implementation, and analysis of behavioral research (Charness et al. 2025). Unlike closed-ended surveys, such interviews allow respondents to raise considerations that researchers neither anticipated nor pre-specified; unlike one-shot open-ended questions, they allow the interviewer to probe and clarify respondents' answers. AI interviewers also make such interviews scalable and multilingual while maintaining a standardized interview protocol. Respondents may also disclose more on sensitive topics to a non-human interviewer (Lucas et al. 2014). See Hwang et al. (2025) for a fuller discussion.

We find that two narratives dominate respondents' reasoning: *Economic security*, which captures cost-of-living pressures, debt, and housing constraints, and *Lifestyle autonomy*, which captures a preference for self-direction and personal time. These narratives are highly salient in 43.9 and 31.4 percent of transcripts, respectively.

The relative importance of these two narratives reverses sharply across the *never* and *not-yet* groups. Among the 41.9 percent of respondents who have ruled out having children, *Lifestyle autonomy* is highly salient in 61.1 percent of transcripts, while *Economic security* is highly salient in only 34.2 percent. This pattern is consistent with several prominent surveys of childlessness that emphasize lifestyle considerations. Our key finding emerges among the 58.1 percent who have not ruled out having children: *Economic security* dominates, with high salience in 51.0 percent of transcripts compared with only 9.9 percent for *Lifestyle autonomy* (Figure 2). This reversal holds across all 13 demographic subgroups defined by country, gender, income, age, and partnership status. Thus, among the sizeable share of childless adults for whom having children remains a possibility, financial considerations rather than lifestyle preferences are the principal perceived barrier.

This distinction highlights an important issue in interpreting survey evidence on the reasons for childlessness. Prominent surveys elicit reasons specifically from people who have already ruled out parenthood, corresponding to our *never* group. Pew Research Center (2024), for example, elicits reasons from U.S. adults under 50 who say they are unlikely ever to have children, while Routledge and Johnson (2022) surveys childless adults who report not wanting children. Media coverage has subsequently extended these conditional findings to childless adults more generally (Axios 2024). Yet while these surveys accurately describe the populations they sample, their conclusions need not generalize to childless adults whose decisions remain open.

The potential selection problem arises because some considerations are more likely than others to settle the childbearing decision. A durable preference for autonomy can provide a reason to rule out parenthood altogether: someone who views having children as fundamentally incompatible with the life they want has little reason to wait for circumstances to change. Financial constraints can operate differently. Someone may want children, or remain open to having them, but decide against them for now because of insufficient income, high housing costs, or other financial pressures. Because these circumstances may change, financial constraints can delay childbearing without resolving the underlying decision. Surveys restricted to people who have already ruled out parenthood are there-

fore more likely to include the former type of respondent while excluding the latter. Conditioning on settled decisions can consequently overrepresent durable preferences and underrepresent potentially changeable constraints.

Our findings therefore do not reject the ideational account. Rather, they clarify the population to which it most strongly applies. Autonomy best characterizes people who have settled against having children, whereas economic constraints best characterize those for whom having children remains a possibility. This distinction also has implications for policy: cost-reducing measures remain relevant at the childbearing margin, even though our evidence does not identify the causal effects of such policies. More broadly, our findings suggest that stated reasons for a decision can depend systematically on whether that decision has been resolved or remains open. Studies seeking to understand why people make decisions should therefore consider not only the decisions people reach, but also whether those decisions remain open to reconsideration.

2 Data and interview design

We recruit participants through Pureprofile, a global market research platform, and impose quotas on gender, age, income, and education to generate broad demographic variation within countries while keeping the three country samples broadly comparable. For further comparability, we restrict the U.S. sample to respondents of East Asian ethnicity. The resulting samples are therefore not nationally representative. The survey was conducted in early 2026.

Respondents first complete a screening survey (Online Appendix A). Those aged 21 or older with no children proceed to a one-on-one, text-based interview with an AI agent powered by GPT-5 (<https://br-ai-interview.streamlit.app/>).² The agent begins with a neutral, open-ended question: “Hi, I appreciate you taking the time to talk with me. This interview is about understanding your perspectives on *having children*. To start, could you tell me how you *personally think and feel* about the idea of having children in your life?” The agent then asks roughly ten adaptive follow-up questions and probes for considerations not yet discussed. Interviews are conducted in English or Korean, according to the language selected by the respondent at the start of the session. Our instructions to the agent mirror standard interviewer training by emphasizing neutrality, adaptive

²We use gpt-5-2025-08-07, the most recent GPT model available when we developed the interview app.

follow-up, and non-leading probing, so that considerations enter the conversation through the respondent rather than the interviewer (Chopra and Haaland 2023, Geiecke and Jaravel 2024). At the end of the interview, the agent summarizes the conversation and asks several closing questions.

The final sample contains 1,074 respondents, comprising 517 women and 557 men from Singapore, South Korea, and the United States.³ Interviews lasted about 14 minutes on average. Every respondent who began the interview completed it, and 86.6 percent rate the agent’s summary as “good” or “very good.” Online Appendix Table OA1 and Figure OA1 report the full sample composition and respondents’ evaluations of the interview quality.

We analyze the resulting interview transcripts using GPT-5.2.⁴ Our primary goal is to identify recurring patterns in how respondents reason about perceived barriers and motivations for parenthood and to assess the salience of these considerations for each respondent. Figure 1 summarizes our approach in three steps.

First, we convert each transcript into an argument map that represents the respondent’s reasoning as a directed graph. Nodes capture the factors raised by the respondent, while directed links capture how the respondent perceives one factor as influencing another and, ultimately, their thinking about having or not having children. For example, if a respondent says that high housing costs make them rule out having children, the map contains a path from housing costs to *not having children*. If stable employment provides greater financial security, which in turn makes the respondent more willing to have children, the map contains a two-step path from stable employment through financial security to *having children*.

Importantly, respondents need not articulate these factors in their logical order during the interview. When a respondent raises a consideration, the AI interviewer probes what gives rise to it, what consequences follow from it, and how it ultimately bears on the respondent’s thinking about having children. The resulting argument map therefore organizes a potentially lengthy and nonlinear conversation into a compact representation of the respondent’s perceived causal reasoning. This approach is closely related to the use of directed acyclic graphs in structural causal models (Pearl 2009) and to recent work using causal graphs to represent economic narratives.⁵

³An additional 20 respondents passed the screening survey but revealed during the interview that they already had children. We exclude them from the sample.

⁴Throughout the post-interview analyses, we use gpt-5.2-2025-12-11, the most recent GPT model available at the time of the analyses.

⁵See, for example, Andre et al. (2026).

Second, from the 1,074 argument maps, we identify “recurrent narratives,” which we define as recurring patterns of reasoning across respondents. Representing each interview in a common graph structure abstracts from differences in wording and conversational order while preserving how respondents connect different considerations. This common representation facilitates systematic comparison across interviews and helps the LLM identify recurring patterns of reasoning (Manning et al. 2024).

Third, for each transcript, we score the salience of each narrative from 1 (absent) to 4 (high). We also record its direction, that is, whether the narrative pushes the respondent’s reasoning towards or away from having children. We define a narrative as *highly salient* for a respondent when it receives the highest salience score of 4. We retain as “key narratives” those that are highly salient in at least 5 percent of transcripts.

Table 1 describes the nine key narratives we identify: *Economic security*, *Lifestyle autonomy*, *Parenting confidence as a constraint*, *Medical constraints*, *Time scarcity*, *Caregiving equity*, *World outlook*, *Intergenerational ties*, and *Parenting confidence as a driver*.⁶ Online Appendix B and Online Appendix C describe the technical implementation of the interviews, argument-map construction, and narrative-identification and scoring procedures, including the complete prompts and scoring rubric.

Separately from the narrative analysis, we classify each transcript into one of four deliberation states: active consideration, postponement, ambivalent, or permanent refusal (Online Appendix C.4). We group the first three states as *not yet* and the last as *never*, yielding 624 *not-yet* and 450 *never* respondents.⁷ Importantly, the model receives each transcript only up to the closing questions. We withhold responses to these questions from the model and use them as an independent validation of the transcript-based classification.

In particular, one closing question asks respondents how often they think about having children. If our classification captures whether the childbearing decision remains open, respondents who have settled against having children should have less reason to revisit the question, whereas those whose decisions remain open should continue to think about it. Consistent with this interpretation, among

⁶Online Appendix Table OA2 reports the complete catalog, including narratives that are highly salient in fewer than 5 percent of transcripts.

⁷Only 67 respondents are classified as ambivalent. Our results are very similar when we exclude them from the *not-yet* group; Online Appendix Figure OA7 displays the ambivalent group separately.

respondents who report never thinking about having children, 85.5 percent are classified as *never* based on their interview transcripts. Among those who report thinking about having children often or always, 93.2 percent are classified as *not yet* (Online Appendix Figure OA2). The transcript-based classification thus closely aligns with an independently elicited self-report that was withheld from the model. Our main results are also very similar when we use this self-report, rather than the transcript-based classification, to distinguish between *never* and *not yet*.

3 Results

We begin by examining which considerations are most prominent across the full sample. Two narratives stand out: *Economic security* is highly salient in 43.9 percent of transcripts and *Lifestyle autonomy* in 31.4 percent. The pervasiveness of these two considerations is notable because respondents raise them on their own, without being presented with a researcher-defined list of possible reasons.

The other key narratives that push respondents against having children are *Parenting confidence as a constraint* (23.6 percent), *Medical constraints* (14.1 percent), *Time scarcity* (10.5 percent), *Care-giving equity* (9.0 percent), and *World outlook* (9.0 percent). Two key narratives push respondents towards having children: *Intergenerational ties* (24.8 percent) and *Parenting confidence as a driver* (9.4 percent).⁸

These pooled averages are informative, but they mask a sharp divide between respondents who have and have not ruled out having children. Figure 2 shows that among respondents in the *never* group, *Lifestyle autonomy* is by far the most prevalent narrative, with high salience for 61.1 percent of respondents, compared with 34.2 percent for *Economic security*. *Never* respondents describe the value they place on autonomy in concrete terms. One respondent (Singapore, male, 21–30) explains, “I value independence, flexibility, and being able to focus on my own goals and interests without the long-term responsibility that comes with raising a child.” Another (United States, female, over 40) says, “I love to travel and I love quick, weekend solo trips. You can’t do that with kids. I wanted to create a life for myself that let me have my freedoms.”

Among respondents in the *not-yet* group, this ordering reverses. *Economic security* is highly

⁸Table 1 reports the complete taxonomy of key narratives and their exact definitions.

salient for 51.0 percent of respondents, compared with only 9.9 percent for *Lifestyle autonomy*. *Not-yet* respondents describe economic security as a constraint that binds now rather than as a reason to forgo children. One respondent (United States, male, 31–40) explains, “It is expensive to care for a child properly. Right now with our combined income we would max out our capabilities, so a little more liquidity would be helpful.” The pooled averages therefore conceal two sharply different patterns of reasoning by two distinct groups. Among those who have settled against having children, lifestyle considerations dominate; among those whose decisions remain open, financial considerations dominate instead.

This reversal is not explained by differences in observable characteristics between the two groups. Figure 3 separately compares *Economic security* and *Lifestyle autonomy* within 13 demographic subgroups defined by country, gender, income, age, and partnership status. The same inversion appears in every subgroup. Among *never* respondents, *Lifestyle autonomy* is more prevalent than *Economic security* in Singapore, South Korea, and the United States; among both men and women; across all income and age groups; and among both partnered and single respondents. Among *not-yet* respondents, the ordering reverses in each case, with *Economic security* more prevalent than *Lifestyle autonomy*. The contrast between *never* and *not yet* therefore does not appear to reflect differences in the observable demographic composition of the two groups.⁹

Regression estimates reinforce this conclusion. In linear probability models controlling for country, gender, age, income, education, and partnership status (Online Appendix Table OA3), the *not-yet* indicator is associated with a 52.1-percentage-point lower probability that *Lifestyle autonomy* is highly salient and a 12.9-percentage-point higher probability that *Economic security* is highly salient. In the *Lifestyle autonomy* regression, no demographic coefficient approaches this magnitude; in the *Economic security* regression, only the country and age indicators are of similar size. The same contrast appears when we ask how well demographics and respondents’ reasoning separately account for deliberation state. Observable demographics alone explain only 8.8 percent of the variation in whether a respondent belongs to the *never* group, whereas narrative salience alone explains 45.2 percent (Online Appendix Table OA4). Whether respondents have ruled out having

⁹Online Appendix Figures OA3 and OA4 replicate Figures 2 and 3 using self-reported deliberation frequency in place of the transcript-based classification. The reversal appears in all 13 subgroups. Online Appendix Figures OA5 and OA6 report, by demographic subgroup, the prevalence of each key narrative and respondents’ overall sentiment towards having children.

children is therefore much more closely related to how they reason about parenthood than to the demographic characteristics we observe.

The two groups also differ in the considerations that *draw* respondents towards parenthood. *Intergenerational ties*, which captures the anticipated enjoyment and meaning of family bonds across generations, is highly salient for 41.2 percent of the *not-yet* group but only 2.0 percent of the *never* group. This difference helps clarify what *not yet* means. These respondents are not simply less strongly opposed to parenthood than those in the *never* group. Many see substantial value in having children even while describing constraints that make parenthood difficult under their current circumstances. Another *not-yet* respondent (United States, male, 31–40), for whom *Economic security* is also highly salient, describes the future he has in mind: “I imagine myself coming home from work, possibly to a house we own, to my family coming to greet me and me playing with the kids, maybe wrestling around or out in the backyard.” The coexistence of positive motivations for parenthood and concerns about economic security is consistent with a decision that remains open rather than one that has settled against having children.

The argument maps provide further evidence on this distinction by showing not only which considerations respondents raise, but also how those considerations enter their reasoning. Among *not-yet* respondents who raise economic considerations, 66.3 percent connect them to a path ending in *having children*. For these respondents, financial readiness often operates as a condition that would need to be met for parenthood to become more feasible. Among *never* respondents, by contrast, financial considerations more often form part of a path towards *not having children* (Online Appendix Table OA5). The same concern about money can therefore occupy fundamentally different positions in the reasoning process.

Respondents’ own words illustrate this difference. One *not-yet* respondent (United States, female, 31–40) describes financial stability as a condition that could change the timing of parenthood: “I think once I find a more stable high paying job we will then talk about the timing of having a child together.” By contrast, a *never* respondent (Singapore, female, 31–40) treats a similar financial concern as having settled the question: “I have already come to terms with the fact that I would not be having children due to my financial means,” adding later in the interview that “it is a decision I firmly believe in.” In the first case, improved economic circumstances could open paths towards having children; in the second, financial concerns closed them.

Finally, the prominence of autonomy among *never* respondents does not appear to arise because older respondents have aged out of parenthood and retrospectively describe their childlessness as chosen. Among *never* respondents, *Lifestyle autonomy* is, if anything, more salient among those aged 21–30 than among those over 40, at 66.7 versus 57.1 percent.¹⁰ This pattern is consistent with autonomy-based decisions often settling relatively early in life.¹¹ As one *never* respondent (United States, female, over 40) explains, “I made that decision as a teenager, no kids period.”

4 Discussion

Our findings help reconcile the ideational and pecuniary accounts of low fertility. Rather than competing explanations that apply uniformly to the childless population, they characterize people in different decision states. The ideational account best describes respondents who have settled against parenthood; the pecuniary account (Baudin et al. 2015) better describes those for whom parenthood remains a possibility.

For policy, this distinction redirects attention towards material constraints. Financial readiness is the principal perceived barrier among respondents whose decisions remain open, suggesting that cost-reducing measures such as cash transfers, housing support, childcare subsidies, and paid leave remain relevant at the childbearing margin.¹² Our findings also suggest that timing matters: economic support may have greater scope to affect childbearing while parenthood remains a possibility than after someone has ruled it out. Although we do not estimate the causal effects of these policies, our evidence cautions against dismissing economic support simply because lifestyle preferences dominate among those who have already settled against having children.

More generally, our results illustrate a selection problem that extends beyond fertility. When researchers ask why people made a particular choice only after that choice has become settled, the reasons they recover need not characterize people for whom the same decision remains open. Consider decisions such as leaving school, renting rather than buying a home, or forgoing en-

¹⁰In untabulated results, we find that among the 450 *never* respondents, *Lifestyle autonomy* is highly salient for 66.7 percent of the 51 aged 21–30, 66.0 percent of the 147 aged 31–40, and 57.1 percent of the 252 over 40.

¹¹Our evidence does not distinguish whether a preference for autonomy leads decisions to settle early or instead comes to describe decisions that have settled on other grounds. Either way, autonomy characterizes settled decisions and economic insecurity characterizes open ones, which is what our central finding requires.

¹²Existing studies examine how such cost-reducing measures affect childbearing and related outcomes, including household resources, investments in children, and access to childcare (Parolin et al. 2024, Gennetian et al. 2024, Carbuccia et al. 2026, Zhang et al. 2026).

trepreneurship. Durable preferences can settle these decisions early, whereas constraints that may ease as circumstances change can keep them open. Conditioning on resolved decisions can therefore overrepresent durable preferences and underrepresent potentially changeable constraints. When the object of interest is the margin at which behavior can still change, researchers should distinguish between people whose decisions are settled and those whose decisions remain open, and elicit reasons from both. This prescription complements the broader practice of eliciting forward-looking expectations before outcomes are realized (Manski 2004).

Finally, our study contributes to a small but growing literature showing how open-ended, AI-led interviews can uncover economically important distinctions that researchers may not know to ask about *ex ante* (Chopra and Haaland 2023, Geiecke and Jaravel 2024). Neither the narrative taxonomy nor the distinction between respondents whose decisions are settled and those whose decisions remain open was imposed through researcher-defined response options. Instead, respondents describe their reasoning in their own terms, while adaptive, non-leading follow-up questions probe how their considerations fit together. The AI-led implementation makes standardized yet adaptive interviews feasible at scale, while the argument maps convert lengthy conversations into structured data that preserve how respondents connect different considerations. In this sense, the approach combines some of the exploratory richness of qualitative interviews with the scale and systematic measurement needed for quantitative analysis.

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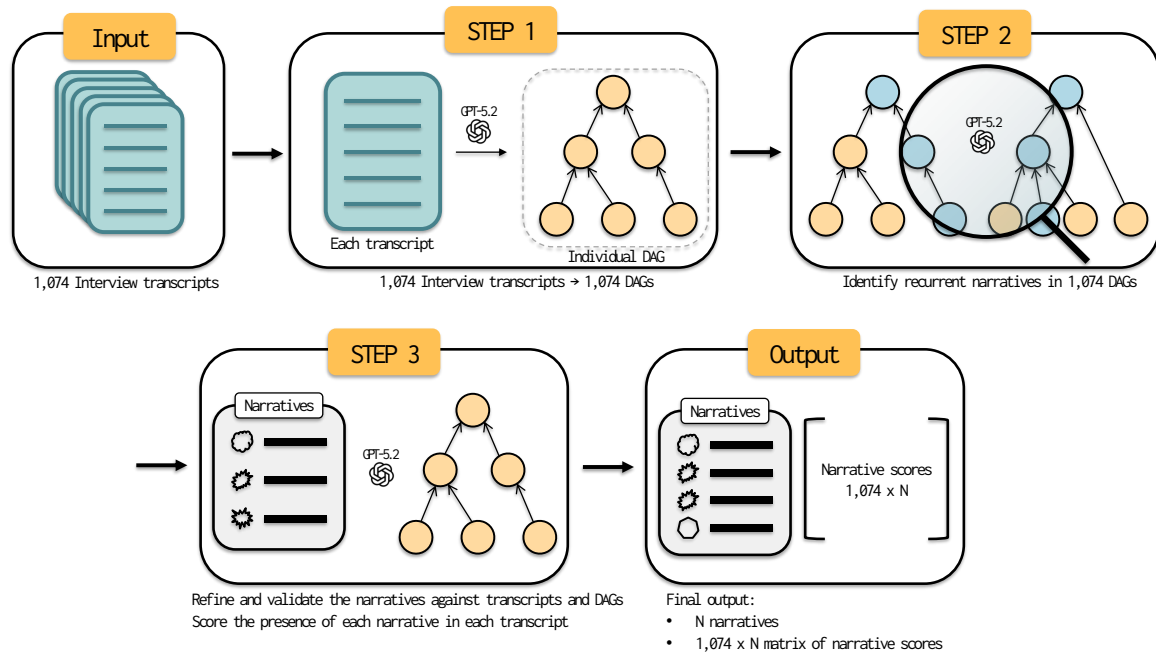


Figure 1. Overview of the narrative analysis

This figure summarizes the narrative analysis. In Step 1, we convert each of the 1,074 interview transcripts into an argument map, a directed acyclic graph whose nodes are the considerations a respondent raises and whose directed edges record how the respondent connects these considerations to one another and, ultimately, to the decision of whether to have children. In Step 2, we identify the narratives that recur across the 1,074 argument maps. In Step 3, we refine and validate these narratives against the transcripts and argument maps, and scores the salience of each narrative in each transcript from 1 (absent) to 4 (high). The output is a set of N narratives and a $1,074 \times N$ matrix of narrative salience scores. We use GPT-5.2 to run these analyses. Online Appendix C describes the procedure in full.

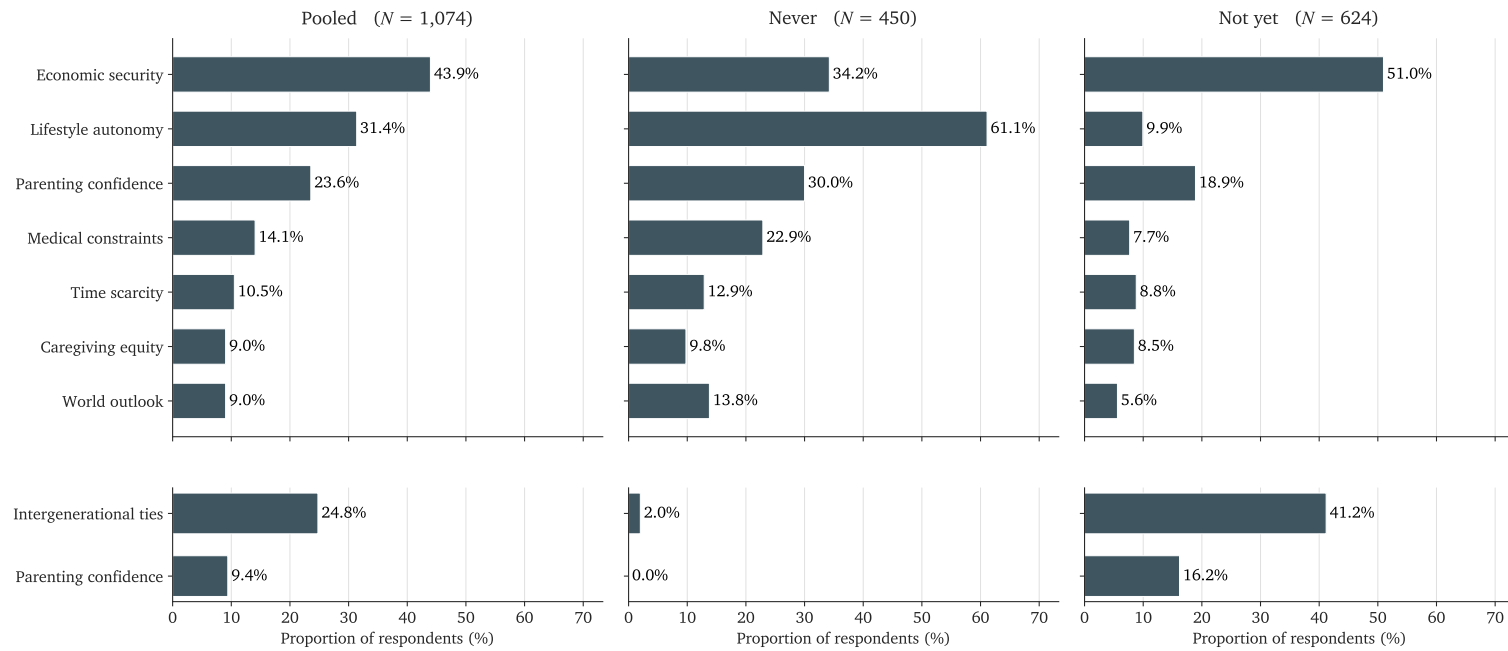


Figure 2. Prevalence of key narratives, pooled and by deliberation state

This figure reports, for each key narrative, the share of respondents for whom the narrative is “highly salient” (a salience score of 4 on the 1–4 scale). Upper panels show narratives pushing against having children; lower panels show narratives pushing towards it. The leftmost column pools all 1,074 respondents; the remaining columns split by transcript-based deliberation state: *never* (permanent refusal, $N = 450$) and *not yet* (active consideration, postponement, or ambivalent, $N = 624$). All panels share the same scale.

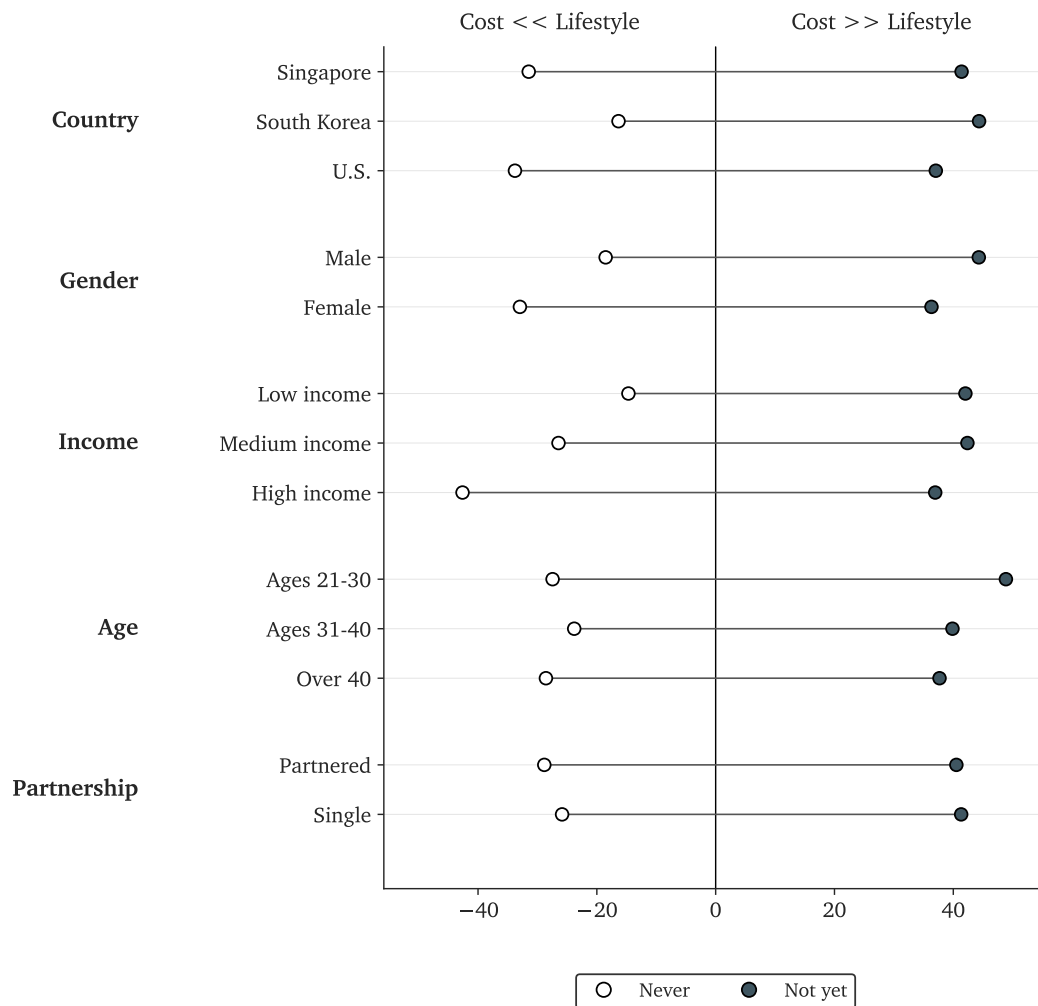


Figure 3. Cost-versus-lifestyle considerations by deliberation state across demographic subgroups

For each of 13 demographic subgroups, this figure plots the difference, in percentage points, between the share of respondents for whom *Economic security* is “highly salient” and the share for whom *Lifestyle autonomy* is “highly salient” (*Cost-versus-lifestyle considerations*), separately for the *never* group (open circle) and *not-yet* group (filled circle), with a line connecting the two estimates for each subgroup. Negative values indicate *Lifestyle autonomy* is more prevalent; positive values indicate *Economic security* is more prevalent. Subgroups span country, gender, income bracket, age group, and partnership status. “Partnered” denotes respondents who are married or currently in a relationship; “Single” denotes all other respondents.

Table 1. Taxonomy of key recurring narratives

This table reports the key recurring narratives identified in the 1,074 interview transcripts. The *Direction* column reports whether the narrative pushes respondents towards or against having children. *Parenting confidence* appears twice because it pushes some respondents towards and others against. The narrative descriptions are based on GPT-generated text. We report the complete catalog, including narratives with prevalence below 5 percent, in Online Appendix Table OA2. The *Prevalence* column reports the share of respondents for whom a narrative is “highly salient,” defined as receiving a salience score of 4 in the corresponding direction. Parentheses report the share of respondents for whom the narrative is at least “moderately salient,” defined as receiving a salience score of 3 or higher in the corresponding direction.

Narrative	Direction	Description	Prevalence
Economic security	Against	A stable material base—income, savings, manageable debt, and secure housing—turns parenthood from a gamble into a plan. Cost-of-living pressure or housing constraints can trigger cascading strain, making having children feel unsafe and leading to not having children; perceived financial and housing stability supports committing to having children.	44% (58%)
Lifestyle autonomy	Against	When autonomy and low-stress living are core values, parenthood is evaluated as a loss of flexibility, travel, and self-direction. Choosing calm routines and alternative nurturing roles can stabilize a childfree orientation and lead to not having children. Alternatively, autonomy values feed a deliberate decision process that still ends in having children.	31% (46%)
Parenting confidence	Against	Beliefs about being a good parent set the bar for trying. Family-of-origin trauma, fear of repeating harm, and fears of judgment can raise perceived burden and steer toward not having children; commitment to provide a better childhood can motivate having children as cycle-breaking. Duty standards can deter parenthood when efficacy feels low, or motivate action when preparation feels sufficient.	24% (40%)
Medical constraints	Against	Biology, health, and medical or legal conditions impose hard constraints on becoming a parent. Age-related timing pressure, infertility, and health limitations can close the window and lead to not having children; access to treatment or adoption options can still enable having children. Fear that pregnancy or birth is unsafe—especially amid uncertain care rights—can also directly deter parenthood.	14% (24%)
Time scarcity	Against	Parenthood competes with time and labor demands. Heavy workloads, stigma, and anticipated career disruption translate into time scarcity that can steer toward not having children, while leave and work-life balance can make having children possible. Caring for aging relatives intensifies the same time and stress squeeze, making the added responsibility of a child feel untenable.	11% (27%)

Table 1. Taxonomy of key recurring narratives

Narrative	Direction	Description	Prevalence
Caregiving equity	Against	The decision depends on whether caregiving can be shared reliably and fairly. Partner availability, agreement about children, and support from family or community can make having children feel doable; conflict, partner loss, or thin networks can foreclose it. Gendered expectations and workplace barriers that signal unequal care burdens increase perceived unfairness and push toward not having children.	9% (22%)
World outlook	Against	Assessments of the wider world shape whether bringing a child into it feels responsible. Climate, conflict, violence, discrimination, and distrust can make a child's future look risky and steer toward not having children. The same concerns can motivate having children when a desire for safety, stability, or collective renewal becomes central. Ethical antinatal commitments point toward not having children.	9% (18%)
Intergenerational ties	Towards	Motivation often rests on anticipated ties across generations. Enjoyment of children, a vivid family-life vision, legacy and resemblance, and expectations of companionship or later-life support make having children feel meaningful. When relying on children for aging support feels unrealistic—or independent retirement planning is preferred—the same later-life horizon can support not having children.	25% (45%)
Parenting confidence	Towards	Beliefs about being a good parent set the bar for trying. Family-of-origin trauma, fear of repeating harm, and fears of judgment can raise perceived burden and steer toward not having children; commitment to provide a better childhood can motivate having children as cycle-breaking. Duty standards can deter parenthood when efficacy feels low, or motivate action when preparation feels sufficient.	9% (21%)