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# The *Un*-dependents

A group of people, mostly seen from behind, walking away from the camera in a vast, open field. The scene is captured during sunset or sunrise, with a warm, golden light illuminating the sky and the ground. The people are dressed in casual, outdoor-appropriate clothing. The overall mood is one of freedom and exploration.

A report celebrating consciously  
child-free lives

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*“It’s like asking when someone decided they identify as queer. I’ve always known I wanted to be child-free. I’ve always known.”*

US interviewee, 47



*37%* of Britons  
say that they  
never want to  
have children

YouGov, 2020

In the US, *27%*  
of Gen Z women  
report not wanting  
to have kids

Ruby Home survey, 2022

# *The stigma is lifting*



**I**n most developed countries, the number of people not having children by choice is rising. In the UK, one in eight 18-24 year olds has already decided to never have kids; 34 percent of young Americans say that having children isn't on their agenda (up 7% from 2018); and one in five men in Denmark report never wanting to become a parent.

Elsewhere, New Zealand's birth-rate has sunk to its lowest ever level; and in 2021, China's birth-rate plummeted for a fifth consecutive year. Similar declines have been recorded in European countries – Italy's birth-rate is one of the lowest in the world. All this points to the growth in acceptance of choosing to be child-free.

The stigma – and silence – around the decision is being replaced by curiosity about how it changes what it means to live a full and happy life.

We wanted to hear more about the cultural changes driving this, the trends emerging from it, and how consciously child-free adults feel when portrayed by brands and the media (TLDR: not good).

*Noted: there is a stark divide along lines of education, social class and race. It is a privilege to deliberate on the decision to have children.*

Top reasons why people across 30 different countries opted to not have a child: financial concerns (**21%**), career prospects (**15%**) and concerns due to the Covid pandemic (**11%**)

Ipsos poll, 2022



They say it takes a village to raise a family. But it also takes reliable employment, affordable child-care, accessible education and robust medical systems. It takes not living from crisis to crisis – whether global or personal. The specific events of 2022-23 have put stressors on these support systems.

Climate anxiety, a global recession, the pandemic and conflict in Europe are perspective-shaping events causing people to question whether to have children.

Meanwhile, Gen Z across all continents continue to assess traditional milestones – redefining linear life paths, embracing singledom and exploring other forms of family, sexuality and happiness.

## Why having kids doesn't necessarily make you happier, according to research

Published Tue Mar 16 2021 1 04 PM EDT

Cory St eg  
@CORYSTIEG

## Women Who Stay Single and Don't Have Kids Are Getting Richer

Forgoing marriage and parenthood has a bigger payoff for American women than men, according to new research.

# The Un-dependent generation

The stigma once attached to not bringing children into the world is being shifted by a generation exploring all the reasons why not...

## Baby bust: Pandemic accelerates fall in China's birth rate

## As a science journalist I'm reconsidering having kids. I'm not the only one

With a flurry of new Australian books exploring the decision to have children, doing so is still considered the default - a position worth interrogating in the climate crisis

Declining birth rates linked to secularization, growing hostility toward religion

Parents and parenting

## 'More people is the last thing this planet needs': the men getting vasectomies to save the world

More women like me are choosing to be childfree. Is this the age of opting out?

## Why More Black Women Are Choosing To Be Child-Free

## What Workism Is Doing to Parents

Public policy should assist families—but not by helping adults spend more time on the job

By Lyman Stone and Laurie DeRose

Case study:

## Why aren't Singaporeans having kids?

The Asian country has one of the lowest birth-rates in the world

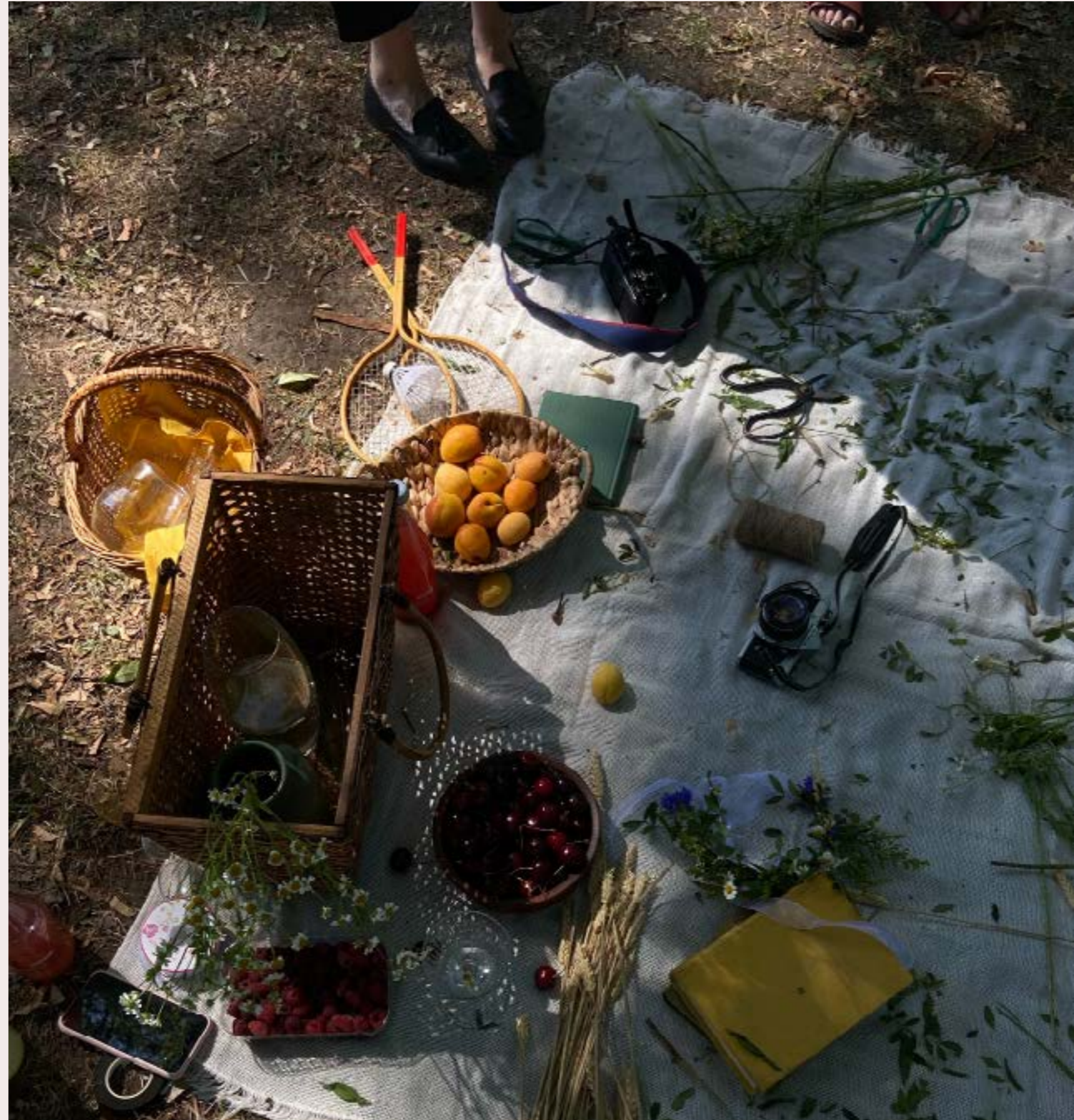
Singapore has struggled to boost its birth-rate for decades. Reasons most often cited include the broader range of life goals and changes in social norms that have contributed to decreasing stigma around singlehood. The government has weighed in recently with a 'pandemic baby bonus' to boost births. And an ad campaign famously released a spoof rap online encouraging procreation for the country:

"I'm a patriotic husband, you're my patriotic wife. Let's do our civic duty and manufacture life."

BBH Asia-Pacific

We spoke to men and women who are childless by choice in the UK, North America and Europe. This report follows why it makes sense to them; the common issues and circumstances around their choice; and the fulfilment they're experiencing as a result.

**So, as the numbers are growing and the stigma is lifting, this is the story of the Un-dependents...**



*“People can see  
that I live a life  
of joy.”*

US, 48



Chapter two:

# Meet the *Un-dependents*





*Adults without children  
are no longer on the  
sidelines of society*

**T**ime was when the decision to not have children resulted in people feeling marginalised. Judgement abounded over the idea that real, meaningful happiness could be found elsewhere.

Now, the Un-dependents are challenging the narrative that marriage and children equals a fulfilled life. Over the last decade they have experienced a shift away from a typical response being pity, or judgement. From our conversations, it's clear that they no longer feel they exist in an 'otherhood'.

It's time to find alternatives to the negative descriptors like child-less or DINKS (double-income-no-kids). They aren't deprived, or -less. They haven't made the wrong choice, nor are they defined by the fact they don't have kids...



“ I’m ‘child-free by choice’. Language specificity is important to me. **US, 48** ”

“ I have a real aversion to anything that is negative – the word, -less. I would call myself child-free, or an active-aunt and god-mother. **UK, 40** ”

“ I say I don’t have children, and that it’s just not for me. **Netherlands, 38** ”

As the Un-dependents move in from the sidelines, we can start to celebrate how their lived experience is unique. We heard how choosing to not have children can mean:

*Freedom to take on roles  
not so heavily curated  
by society*

*(page 24)*

*Freedom to choose  
who can be dependent  
on you*

*(page 28)*

*More choice of community  
and where to show up  
with financial or  
emotional resources*

*(page 32)*





The Un-dependents embrace their unique position to create their own

● way of living

# Disrupting roles

Without the prescriptive labels and assumptions that come with being a parent, the Un-dependents are free to choose their own roles. Diverting from a 'traditional' life path means they often embrace alternative ways of living, or ways not so heavily curated by society. Whether that's being a kidult without guilt; living as a digital nomad; not having children to save the planet or resist late capitalism; or challenging how motherhood plays a central role in the subordination of women.

The choice to not have children can be a rejection of so much of our social conditioning. It's radical to take a step away from the idea of life as two parents, two kids, maybe a dog, probably a cat - no matter what sexual orientation or identity expression you hold.



“ I’ve rejected a lot of what was expected from me as a Black woman. And one of them was motherhood. **US, 47** ”

“ I’m very politically oriented so it just wouldn’t work for me to prioritise a family. **Netherlands, 38** ”

“ What I couldn’t name when I was a child is that I don’t want to be anyone’s wife or mother. I want to own *me*. **US, 47** ”

*“We can do so many more important things than have children. We can be pregnant with ideas and dreams and revolution.”*

Spain, 30

# Altruism

The Un-dependents put their time into helping others

Selfish is a word often levied against the intentionally child-free. But if you aren't in the parenting trenches, then maybe you're distributing that time to nurture a wider community. It's often referred to as 'mothering the world', but it speaks of so much more.

Ultimately, we heard that being free of 'dependents' in the traditional sense opens up the possibilities of who and how you can help. It's not that this group has no dependents (ageing parents, for example), it's that their net can be cast much wider than the familial home.






“ Being a father would mean I didn’t have time to travel the country and commit to my nature preservation work.  
**Scotland, 48** ”

“ For the African diaspora there is the message that motherhood is an act of service... but I choose to nurture this community in other ways. Me being a martyr doesn’t help anyone.  
**US, 48** ”

“ I have the time to nurture the feminist queer community I live in – to take care of our building and do the work to keep our group living an autonomous lifestyle.  
**Netherlands, 38** ”





Community is especially important and 'family' is found elsewhere

# Community

*"I'm an auntie to a few kids and very, very close to them. And I'm also close to my god-son. That fills the child gap."*

UK, 40

The Un-dependents know that a one size fits all approach to 'loving units' doesn't exist. This leads to establishing formal communities online, such as We Are Childfree - a thoughtful site: 'celebrating childfree lives, one story at a time' - as well as strong, informal communities and bonds elsewhere. The Un-dependents cheer on the importance of close friendships, and the joy that comes from being a hands-on god-parent or #bougieauntie.

Society is catching up. Workplace procedures are starting to acknowledge other types of families - for example, dog-parents and the subsequent leave policies surrounding pet bereavement. Workplace support for dependents in an individual's wider community has become fairly mainstream.

Your life can be as fulfilling as you make it regardless of whether or not you have kids



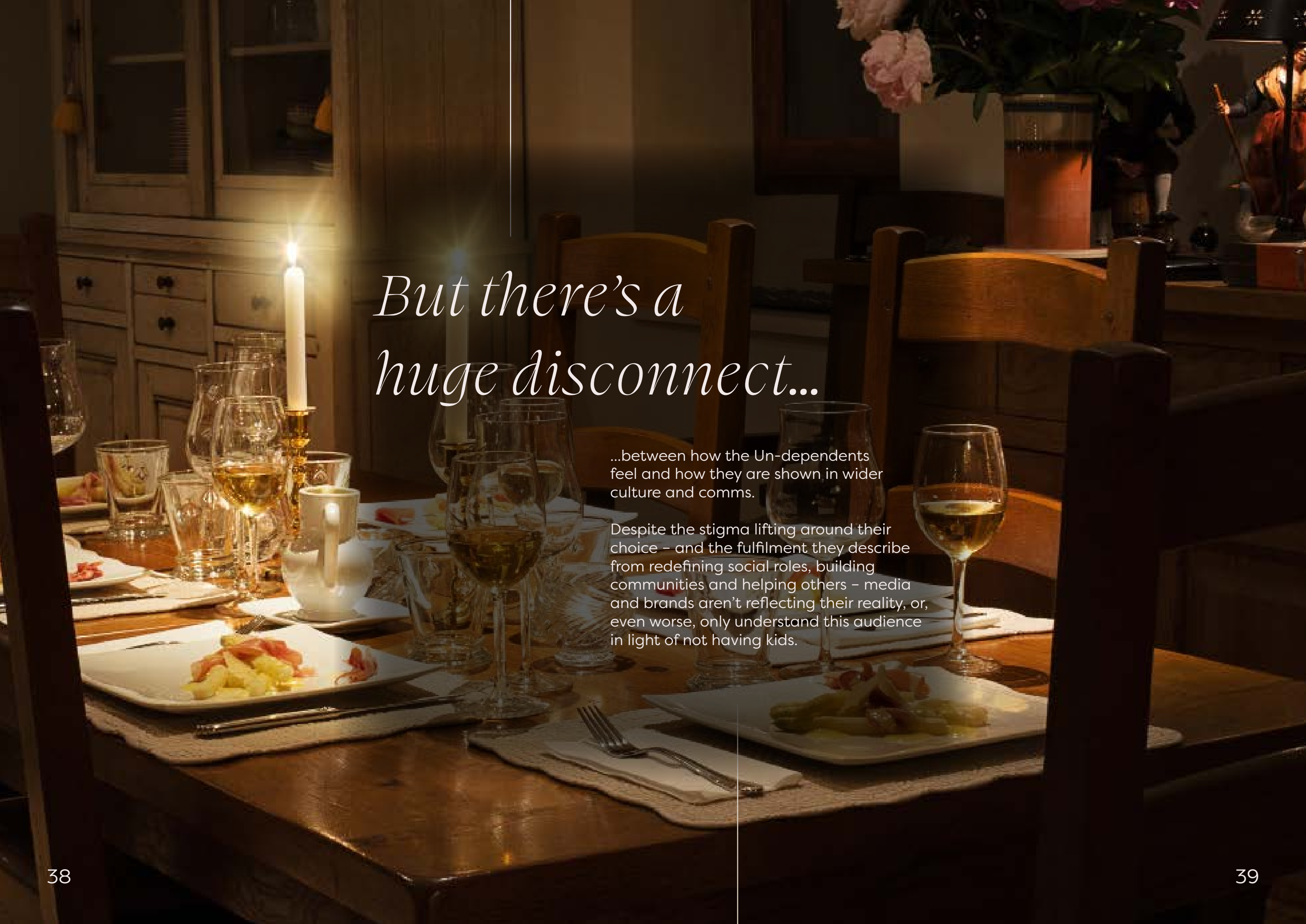
# #childfree community

Online also provides community, alongside celebration, humour and knowing winks...



*“I’m a digital nomad  
and travel the world. I seek out  
inspiration and advice from my  
child-free community.”*

UK, 32



*But there's a  
huge disconnect...*

...between how the Un-dependents feel and how they are shown in wider culture and comms.

Despite the stigma lifting around their choice – and the fulfilment they describe from redefining social roles, building communities and helping others – media and brands aren't reflecting their reality, or, even worse, only understand this audience in light of not having kids.



Chapter three:

# Join the *child-free party*

(Whether  
you have  
kids or not)

*“It’s hard to say where I feel included by brands... travel commercials of young people with friends, or 30 plus travelling with kids. What about me?”*

Netherlands, 38



## *Warner Hotels*

'A kid-free break', 2022

This campaign for adults only Warner Hotels features kids running riot before it's revealed to be a glitch. There's an assumption that all guests must have children (and their only motivation for a stay: to spend time away from them!). It could instead zero in on an adult-only break for the Un-dependents simply wanting a place to stay without other people's noisy offspring.



## *The Baby*

HBO, 2022

A consciously child-free woman gets landed with a baby. Natasha's decision to not have children is explained by the trope of a dissatisfied, non-committal, messed-up childhood. We need to show narratives where this choice isn't depicted as a character flaw.

# How the media misses the Un-dependents

## *Skippy*

'Fun aunt', 2020

When adverts do focus on this audience, here again is a narrative that includes children or the parenthood role: the 'Professional Auntie-No-Kids' (PANKS). Adults without kids are seen only by their relationship with children or the parenting role. What about their other identities?



## *Succession*

HBO, 2022

Shiv is clearly ambivalent about the possibility of being a mother, and rejects her husband's pleas to have a baby. She then offers to store her eggs for 10 years – just in case. It reinforces the legacy subtext of 'You'll regret it/ change your mind.'



A photograph of two elderly women sitting at a table outdoors. The woman on the left is seen in profile, wearing a light-colored long-sleeved shirt and glasses. The woman on the right is facing her, smiling, wearing a light blue button-down shirt over a red top. A small dog is sitting on the table between them. The background shows a blurred outdoor setting with trees and a string of lights.

# Join the child-free party

(whether you have kids or not)

# 1.

### **Champion Un-dependent narratives**

Far too often, the Un-dependents are understood solely in their relationships with children: in light of *not* having them. Forget the kids, make them the main story instead. A couple who are committed to and enjoy each other's company; a middle-aged, same sex couple who don't have a puppy (read: child surrogate). The Un-dependents have stories to tell far away from the perils of parenthood.

# 2.

### **Create products just for them**

There are a multitude of categories – from financial and life planning, to leisure and travel – that are missing a trick with the Un-dependents. Think deals for solo travellers; cars designed for families of two; provision for dependents other than children. There's also a huge opportunity to develop activities and products for people who buy for kids, who aren't their own kids.

# 3.

### **Respect child-free as a destination**

It's not up for debate. Choosing to not have children isn't just a stop on the journey and the narrative arc will end with parenthood. Being consciously child-free is for life.



4.

**Reflect the reality of the Un-dependents**

Avoid adopting a negative or, worse, pitying tone when talking about adults who have consciously chosen to not have children. This is a fulfilled group, happy with their decision.

5.

**Validate their choice**

Avoid the 'parenthood vs child-free' rhetoric. Instead, be unapologetic at celebrating the unique opportunities of living as an adult without children. Namely: the freedom to take on roles not so heavily curated by society (pg 24); the means to choose who can be dependent on you (pg 28), and the chance to build and nurture new types of community (pg 32).

6.

**Embrace all types of family**

Dog parents are a family unit, as are households that don't have children, or same sex couples that do. No one choice is superior and they all bring their own dynamics and traditions to the table.

7.

**And cheer on this challenge to the status quo**

After all, there are so many ways to live a full and happy life.



*“Brands tell me: you don’t have kids... yet. But child-free is a destination, too. Talk to me about that instead.”*

US, 48

# Thanks for reading.

Crowd DNA is a cultural insights and strategy consultancy with offices in London, Amsterdam, New York, Singapore, Sydney, Stockholm and Los Angeles.

Formed in 2008, operating in 75+ markets, we bring together trends specialists, researchers, data analysts, strategists, writers, designers and film-makers, creating culturally charged commercial advantage for the world's most exciting brands.

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