# Multimodal Narrative of Childfree in @mubadalah.id: A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis

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**Abstract.** In Indonesia, the choice of childfree has led social media accounts such as @mubadalah.id to voice their concerns. This study aims to examine how @mubadalah.id portrays childfree narratives in its posts. The researcher employed Machin and Mayr's multimodal critical discourse analysis to explore the texts and visuals in the childfree posts and to present the account's narrative from an Islamic perspective. The findings indicate that @mubadalah.id subtly endorses the choice of childfree, as it is a personal decision that does not contradict the reproductive function. The account imposes marriage as sunnah (advisable) and provides sample reasonings on childfree from an Islamic perspective. The account points out changes in mindset and social and economic aspects of contemporary society that favor childfree. Future research can further examine accounts with similar backgrounds or diverse perspectives, as this study focuses only on the perspective of childfree practice from one account.

**Keywords:** Childfree, Instagram, Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis.

## 1 Introduction

When women have children, they encounter a variety of expectations in terms of their position as mothers. These expectations closely align with the established gender roles that society embraces [1]. One of the expectations of married women is to become mothers since mothers are thought to be the vital components of the family, particularly in their nurturing functions [2]. Furthermore, societal values and conventions can shape one's attitude toward parenthood [3]. This perspective burdens women, supporting the creation of the "good mother" ideology. This ideology establishes parental responsibility as an accepted standard in women's lives [4]. This issue can influence women's physical and emotional health [5], as well as a sense of regret over having children [6].

As a result of advancements in information technology and the expansion of educational opportunities, women can increasingly participate in discussion forums discussing topics pertinent to their positions. This enhances women's understanding of their rights, especially those about reproductive function. The decision to have children is a particularly intriguing illustration of this topic. According to Símonardóttir, women often choose to have fewer children, postpone delivery, or avoid having children entirely [7]. As a result, birth rates in

wealthy industrialized countries are falling dramatically. The decision to stay childfree is not new, especially in Western cultural environments. However, the dominant gender discourse, which shapes women's reproductive norms, stigmatizes this decision [8]. As a result, healthcare professionals frequently express less support for women's contraceptive options, such as long-term contraception or sterilization [9]. Consequently, this increases the risk of an unplanned pregnancy.

The decision to live a childless life remains controversial in Indonesian family life. One example is the decision made by an Instagram influencer from Indonesia who currently resides in Germany to embrace a childless lifestyle [10], [11]. The influencer's statement raised controversy due to the perception that it violated the established norms of Indonesian society [12]. Stephani discovered that media coverage of childfree living remains unfavorable, with attitudes that see this decision as deviant, a source of problems, and a feminist movement agenda [13]. Social media is a popular platform for communicating opinions on childfree choices compared to conventional media. Social media is regarded as a tool for sharing, networking, and dispelling myths about the childfree [11], [14]. Additionally, the rapid dissemination of information and the facilitation of interaction and information sharing among individuals from various countries contribute to the advancement of childfree in Indonesia [11].

However, the evolution of views on childfree in society continues to produce mixed results, particularly from a religious point of view, because a perfect marriage includes children [15]. In Indonesia, scholars and some prominent Islamic groups have criticized the childfree practice as being contradictory to the primary goal of marriage [11]. Scholars claim that a spouse's decision not to have children defies Islamic law, as shown in the Qur'an and hadith. The attempt to present alternative arguments to investigate this practice from a non-dichotomous standpoint is intriguing about childfree through the Islamic perspective. One of them is Mubadalah.id, an online media platform concerned with individual-group relationships, particularly between men and women [16]. In its posts on @mubadalah.id, this media outlet has emphasized the concept of childfree from an Islamic perspective. As a medium that adheres to the principle of mubadalah, or reciprocity, this media can conduct discussions on marriage based not just on Islamic tradition but also on science and morality [17].

The ability of Instagram to blend text and visuals in its content is the platform's most notable feature. Consequently, both elements shape the meaning of the uploaded content. Given that this study focuses on the Mubadalah.id Instagram account promotes childfree; multimodality is essential to discuss. Multimodality is how people communicate simultaneously using multiple modes or semiotic resources [18]. Therefore, obtaining a comprehensive meaning of a text or discourse necessitates the inclusion of other elements that complement one another. Machin and Mayr assert that certain conditions exist where visuals can communicate inexpressible information within words [19]. They focus on elucidating visuals' role in constructing meaning within a multimodal critical discourse analysis framework, including photographs, diagrams, and graphs. This study employs a critical multimodal approach to analyze the semiotic resources in multimodal texts associated with the social context of childfree practices.

An array of studies on the childfree has been conducted from multiple perspectives, including religion [20], [21], factors or causes [22], [23], stigma [24], [25], public perception [26], [27], and the philosophy of the practice [28], [29]. In media studies, women without children are underrepresented in the mass media and considered as anomalies [30]. Therefore, the researchers find it important to discuss the phenomenon from multiple approaches (language, religion, and gender) to provide a more inclusive standpoint. Additionally, only some studies

have specifically employed a multimodal perspective with a critical discourse approach in the context of childfree practice. This study aims to address the gap by examining the textual content regarding childfree on @mubadalah.id, the visual content related to childfree on @mubadalah.id, and how the account narrates childfree.

## 2 Research Method

The data was sourced from posts on the Instagram account @mubadalah.id about childfree living. The editorial team of the online media platform Mubadalah.id administers the account. The thoughts shared on Mubadalah.id aims to realize an equitable and just life concerning gender while exposing agendas that promote patriarchy, like oppression, marginalization, and discrimination against women [31]. Although @mubadalah.id does not only address motherhood, it also strives to encourage more balanced and gender-just religious narratives. The account addresses contemporary issues concerning women, including the discourse on being childfree, which remains insufficiently accepted in Indonesian culture. Predominantly Muslim. This study utilizes four posts regarding the childfree issue from the @mubadalah.id account. The data is downloaded and saved to a drive, separated into textual and graphic data. Following the procedures proposed by Machin & Mayr, the researchers worked on textual analysis. Textual analysis relies on lexical analysis, which examines the types or choices of words used in a text [19], [32]. This approach emphasized reviewing lexical choices that indicated variations in discourse or the formation of different lexical fields. Next, the visual analysis based on Machin and Mayr's procedure emphasized an analytical tool that described how images contribute to meaning formation. Finally, the researchers established the relationship between textual and visual analysis among the posts to formulate the narrative on childfree built by @mubadalah.id.

## 3    Result And Discussion

The data utilized in this study focuses on @mubadalah.id's perspective on childfree preference. Most posts reviewed are in carousels, which provide information on several related segments. The carousel feature displays notable dynamism and improves the viewers' engagement more effectively than a single image post [33], [34]. Details of the posts used in this study are in Table 1.

Table 1. Instagram Posts Discussing Childfree in @mubadalah.id

| No | Date | Title | Likes |
|----|------|-------|-------|
| 1 | 18 August 2021 | *Benarkah Childfree Haram?* | 11,300 |
| 2 | 24 August 2021 | *What Our Contributor's Says…* | 3,731 |
| 3 | 24 August 2022 | *Bagaimana Perspektif Mubadalah dalam Menyikapi Fenomena Childfree?* | 1,636 |
| 4 | 11 November 2024 | *Memiliki Anak atau Childfree adalah Hak Perempuan dan Pasangan* | 524 |

The analysis focuses on the textual and visual elements of the four posts, which serve to depict the childfree narrative that @mubadalah.id crafted. Based on the multimodal critical discourse analysis toolkit that Machin & Mayr [19] propose, there are word connotations, overlexicalization, suppression or lexical absence, structural oppositions, lexical choices, and genre of communication to analyze textual elements of the posts. The visual analysis covers the categories of iconography, attributes, settings, and salience.

**3.1 The textual analysis of childfree in @mubadalah.id**

In textual analysis, the findings are divided into categories based on the toolkit developed by Machin and Mayr. The toolkit for textual analysis consists of word connotations, overlexicalization, suppression or lexical absence, structural oppositions, and lexical choices and genre of communication. However, the results only conform to four categories (word connotations, overlexicalization, structural oppositions, and lexical choices and genre of communication). First, word connotations illustrate the essential word choice that shapes the reader's or audience's opinion [19] The findings indicate typical lexical choices in the posts, such as childfree, *anak* (child), *perempuan* (woman), *pilihan* (choice), and *perkawinan* (marriage). These lexical choices specify the account's perspective in narrating childfree. For instance, the word *childfree* is repeatedly used with added words to fit a particular context, as shown in the example.

*Benarkah Childfree Haram?* (Is Childfree Forbidden?)

*... menjadi childfree dianggap kurang atau tidak Islami* (... practicing childfree is considered to be less or not devoted (to Islam)

In the first example, the word *haram* describes the nature of labeling childfree as a forbidden practice. It indicates the dichotomous perception of the goal of marriage within the Islamic context, that is, having children. Thus, a different option than this expectation is considered forbidden, including childfree. The second example also hints at a similar context as practicing childfree decides one's adherence to Islamic teaching.

Secondly, overlexicalization focuses on repeated terminology used in the posts. Machin and Mayr [19]argue that over-completeness, over-persuasion, or terminology repetition typically indicates an ideological dispute. This study's overlexicalization occurs in words related to offspring, as in the following example.

*Tujuan menikah dalam Islam bukan hanya memiliki anak.* (The goal of marriage in Islam is not only on having children)

*Dan memiliki keturunan bukan hanya satu-satunya tujuan pernikahan* (Therefore, having children is not the sole purpose of marriage)

The phrases *memiliki anak* or *memiliki keturunan* are similar in meaning, having children or offspring, and closely linked to women's reproductive function. In this case, @mubadalah.id says that societal expectations, particularly in Indonesia, tend to place a responsibility on women regarding marital success, particularly to the extent that the woman can carry children. Thus, the overlexicalization used in the posts highlights the aim of marriage in Islam, which is not solely on procreation.

Next is structural opposition in the posts about child freedom. According to Machin & Mayr, this category highlights differences from its opponents' characteristics without being overtly expressed. In this context, @mubadalah.id presents its argument on childfree by opposing an ideal situation to an actual condition, as shown in this excerpt.

*Childfree mungkin bukan sesuatu yang ideal jika disandingkan dengan norma umum dalam Islam. Namun bukan juga berarti haram.* (Childfree may not be ideal in regard to Islamic principles. However, this does not make it forbidden.)

*Childfree adalah keputusan personal dan merupakan salah satu bentuk kemerdekaan perempuan. Boleh ditiru boleh juga diabaikan.* (Childfree is a personal choice and a form of women's independence. It can be adopted or disregarded.)

In the first example, @mubadalah.id contrasts Islam's view of childfree with the current circumstances. It explains that childfree marriage is not an ideal option according to the Islamic perspective. However, it does not make the practice forbidden. Similarly, the second example highlights one's choice of childfree. This account assumes that remaining childfree is personal and cannot be forced on others.

Finally, lexical choices and genre of communication signify degrees of authority and engagement with the audience. This category uses precise, official-sounding phrases to convey authority. In its posts, @mubadalah.id bases its views on childfree practices on Quranic texts, hadiths, and caliphate-era stories and analogies, as in the example.

*Q.S. Al-Isra ayat 31 bukan mengarah pada fenomena childfree. Melainkan pada tindakan pembunuhan anak yang dilakukan oleh kabilah Arab di zaman jahiliyah.* (Al-Isra (31) does not address childfree, but rather the crime of infanticide committed by the Arab tribe before the prophetic era.)

*Menikah dihukumi sunnah. Banyak juga ulama yang memilih hidup menjomlo.* (Marriage is regarded as a sunnah. Many Islamic intellectuals opt to remain unmarried.)

In the first example, a Quranic verse becomes the source of discussing childfree misconceptions. The line addresses the discussion on using Al Isra (31) to evaluate childfree. In this post, @mubadalah.id aims to clarify that the verse does not explicitly address the practice of childfree but instead refers to a situation during the prophetic era when infanticide was prevalent. When assessed with the current condition, this account finds the analogy drawn from the comparison inconsistent. The second example emphasizes the principle in Islamic law that marriage is considered sunnah or recommended. The choice to marry is undoubtedly connected to the option to have children. @mubadalah.id offers an analogy from Islamic history, highlighting how intellectuals or scholars of the past dedicated themselves to the pursuit of knowledge. They opted not to marry to focus on their studies.

## 3.2  The visual analysis of childfree in @mubadalah.id

Images make significant contributions to meaning-making [19]. Furthermore, Mostafa [35] underlines the relevance of visual resources in MCDA, citing their greater flexibility of expression over verbal resources. In this part, the results of the visual analysis are divided into four categories: iconography, attributes, settings, and salience. The first category, iconography, is a visual medium that expresses ideas or values through depiction, denotatively or connotatively. Childfree is highly associated with the image of women and their spouses in the posts. The picture shows how their responsibilities in childfree decision-making are inextricably linked, as shown in Figure 1.

**Fig. 1**. An illustration of the choice of childfree in @mubadalah.id post
(Source: @mubadalah.id, 11 November 2024)

The image depicts a man and a woman sitting side by side and conversing. It features a symbol in the shape of a home surrounding these people. With the caption meaning *having children or being childfree is the right of a woman and her spouse*, the image illustrates that each family decision is deeply personal. As a result, it cannot be appraised or comprehended broadly.

The following category is attributes, which reflect the ideas and values conveyed by objects and their representations. Attributes analyze objects within images and how these objects contribute to understanding the significance of the image being studied. Typical post features are soft-colored backgrounds with strong contrast in the text. Also, different colored highlights are used to point out important words. Figure 2 provides an example for the analysis of attributes in this section.



**Fig. 2**. An illustration of @mubadalah.id's standpoint on childfree
(Source: @mubadalah.id, 24 Agustus 2022)

Figure 2 depicts a woman holding a sign stating *childfree by choice*. The background of the post is soft pink with various colored text (i.e., black, red, and yellow). The post's title in the picture states *How Does Mubadalah Respond to the Childfree Phenomenon?* with the words *Mubadalah* and *Childfree* highlighted. There are texts placed next to the woman and inside two bubbles. One of them states people's judgment on being childfree. The other provides a discussion trigger. The account's logo appears in the upper left corner, with several floral images scattered throughout the posting. The female figure in this picture seems to be making a statement or attitude about her decision to remain childless. Furthermore, this image depicts the focus of the upload, which stresses the importance of women in the childfree decision and the account's opinion on the decision.

Next is settings, which, according to Machin and Mayr, convey general concepts that indicate discourses and their values, identities, and actions. Since most posts prioritize textual explanations, the data suggests that the settings are relatively undetermined. However, the data illustrate that images of women and men as partners, family, infants, and children are the selected figures for the posts' background. Figure 3 presents an example of the settings used in the post.



**Fig. 3**. The use of settings in @mubadalah.id's post on childfree
(Source: @mubadalah.id, 18 August 2021)

Figure 3 depicts a family consisting of an adult male (father), an adult female (mother), and a toddler (child). The child is carried in his father's back; the father and mother stroll side by side. The surroundings are unclear in this image, although the three individuals appear to be wandering outside their house (e.g., in a park or recreational area). All three people are positioned sideways, not facing the audience. Hence, the audience is perceived to be distant from them. The title, translated as *Is Childfree Forbidden (in an Islamic context)?*, tries to question the audience's perception of childfree by contrasting it with a portrayal of a happy family. This post seeks to challenge the dominant value, particularly in Indonesia, where the concept of a complete family is often defined by the presence of children in a marriage. Therefore, an alternative perspective seems to oppose the established standards.

The third category, salience, highlights some aspects of compositions that make them stand out. It seeks to capture attention and emphasize certain concepts. Salience can be identified by potential cultural symbols, size, color, tone or brightness, focus, foregrounding, and overlapping [19]. @mubadalah.id, in its posts about childfree, mainly points out three points. First is the potential cultural symbol shown in the dominant value of family construction, which consists of the father, mother, and their children. The posts also imply foregrounding, which characterizes the childfree discourse and is prominently featured in the text. Simultaneously, backgrounding is utilized in the postings to depict different aspects of women. Examples include women as individuals, women with partners, women in nuclear families, and women as members of groups.

For instance, taking Figure 3 as a reference, salience in @mubadalah.id's post can be assessed from color, focus, and potential cultural symbol. The colors used in the post are dominantly grayish blue as the background, with black and yellow in the text and brown, blue and red in the three figures. The grayish-blue background provides the needed contrast for the family picture and title. In addition, the focus is placed on the family picture and title, emphasizing the discussion points presented in the post. The logo of Mubadalah.id's Instagram account appears in the top right corner, yet it does not hold as much significance as the picture and title. This post features a potential cultural symbol represented by a family unit comprising a father, mother, and child. The symbol may pertain to the belief that a happy family consists of all its members being present.

### 3.3 The visual analysis of childfree in @mubadalah.id

Based on the findings from textual and visual analysis of @mubadalah.id's posts, the childfree narrative sums up into three points. First, @mubadalah.id indicates a subtle endorsement of the childfree choice. As a voluntary and personal decision [36], [37], childfree does not contradict women's reproductive function. Also, the stigmatization of childlessness after marriage, especially for women, highlights societal pressures and assumptions. However, many women view not having children as a personal choice, with influencers on social media sharing their experiences and decisions, thereby providing insight into this topic [38]This point can be found in some textual and visual analysis sections. For example, lexical choices in word connotations point out words like *perempuan, anak,* and *pilihan*. It explains that lexical choices used in the post circulate on women and their decisions, including deliberately not to have children. Another supporting finding is in iconography, which specifies childfree with the image of women and their spouses in the posts. This finding also hints that the choice is personal.

Second, the account imposes marriage as *sunnah* (advised) and provides sample reasonings on childfree from the Islamic perspective. From certain theological perspectives, being childfree is still regarded as a deviation from the primary goal of marriage [17], [21], that is, childbearing. However, the result of lexical choices and genre of communication implies that @mubadalah.id provides different standpoints on childfree practices based on Quranic texts, hadiths, and caliphate-era stories and analogies. The posts demonstrate an incorrect reading of Surah Al-Isra (31) and a hadith narrated by Imam Nasa'i regarding women's fertility in resisting childfree decisions. Also, the second finding can be referred to attributes found in the posts. Typical post features are soft-colored backgrounds with strong contrast in the text. Also, different colored highlights are used to point out important words. In this case, the account can identify crucial parts of the texts and make them noticed.

Finally, @mubadalah.id points out changes in mindset and social and economic aspects of contemporary society that favor childfree. Similarly, the study by Rizka et al. [39] identifies several primary factors influencing couples' decisions to remain childfree, including a lack of readiness for parenthood, economic considerations, environmental concerns, and physical factors affecting both individuals and their partners. Findings from the data, especially on structural opposition, suggest that @mubadalah.id presents its argument on childfree by opposing an ideal situation to an actual condition. The account highlights that since childfree is a personal choice, one may either practice it or disregard it. Furthermore, foregrounding and backgrounding in salience signifies that the childfree discourse the account offers revolves around women and their circles. Advancements in mindset, economy, health, and access to information [11] offer women better perspectives and opportunities to address the issues that are important to them.

## 4 Conclusion

This study examines how @mubadalah.id portrays childfree narratives in its posts. It analyzes the textual content on @mubadalah.id, the visual elements present on the platform, and the account's narrative regarding childfree practices, emphasizing the importance of a multimodal approach to understand these practices comprehensively. The textual analysis specifies four findings: (a) typical lexical choices in the posts, such as childfree, anak (child), perempuan (woman), pilihan (choice), and perkawinan (marriage), (b) overlexicalization used in the posts highlights the aim of marriage in Islam, which is not solely on procreation, (c) @mubadalah.id presents its argument on childfree by opposing ideal circumstances to an actual situation, and (d) the account bases its views on childfree practices on Quranic texts, hadiths, and caliphate-era stories and analogies. The visual analysis also reveals four findings: (a) childfree is highly associated with the image of women and their spouses, and (b) typical features in the posts are soft-colored backgrounds with strong contrast in the text. Also, using different colored highlights to point out important words, (c) the settings are relatively undetermined since most posts prioritize textual explanations, and (d) salience in posts covers potential cultural symbols, foregrounding, and backgrounding. Therefore, the childfree narrative sums up into three points: @mubadalah.id subtly endorses the choice of childfree, as it is a personal decision that does not contradict the reproductive function; the account imposes marriage as sunnah (advisable) and provides sample reasonings on childfree in Islamic perspective; and the account points out changes in mindset and social and economic aspects of contemporary society that favor childfree. The study is limited to one Instagram account to examine its perspective on childfree. Therefore, future research can further investigate accounts with similar backgrounds or diverse perspectives. Diverse sources may enrich the current findings and deepen the perspectives of the discussed issue.

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