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# The Italian “No Mommy” women Motivations for childlessness in the North-East of Italy

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*Abstract.* Nowadays about 20% of the female population of industrialized countries conclude their fertility cycle without experiencing motherhood, in the face of a deliberate choice or of certain conditions that have occurred in the courses of life. The procreative project is characterized as one of the many aspects of personal fulfillment on which every woman can decide whether to invest or not, choosing the times and the ways. The present study aims to provide a picture of the No Mommy phenomenon in the North East of Italy, through 50 interviews with women without children: efforts were made to understand what are the motivations underlying childlessness and what are the related factors. Analyses have allowed to identify five different profiles characterizing the childlessness, besides showing the importance of the personal factors (childhood experience, affective relationships, aspirations and expectations) in comparison to the structural factors (economic and working condition, presence of services for childhood)

*Keywords:* Childlessness; Choice; Motherhood; Fertility; Biographies.

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## Introduction

Starting from the mid-twentieth century in Western European countries there have been important changes in demographic and reproductive behavior; among these, the increasing female population that at the end of their fertile age do not have children seems to show the characteristics of a phenomenon typical of post-modernity. Whereas previous generations were directed and almost forced to parenthood by social, cultural and often religious rules, as well as by limited contraceptive methods, the possibility of current generations to choose whether or not to have children shows itself as a new condition within life courses. «Easy access to modern contraception, including to emergency post-coital contraception, which first became available in the late 1990s, has vastly expanded the ability of couples to decide whether and when to become parents, and has arguably made it more likely that they will choose to remain childless» (Sobotka, 2017, 17).

The shake-up of family ties over the last few decades has led to a redefinition of relationships, where every woman can choose if and when to have a partner and what kind of relationship to establish: marriage, cohabitation, engagement, casual relationships, and multiple relationships. At the same time she can choose whether, how and when to have a child because motherhood no longer identifies itself within the biological boundary but it is colored by other possibilities. In this regard, our society has within itself the paradox of motherhood: as much as there are those who decide to invest in a parental project and pursue it at any cost, going through tortuous paths such as assisted procreation, passing through adoption, up to the more recent surrogacy, there are also those who deliberately refuse motherhood and parenthood more generally, considering them not essential for their life design. «The result of this process makes forms of constraint and female profiles, which were once unthinkable, possible and acceptable» (Rosci, 2013, 22).

Psychological, sociological and demographic studies and researches question the new reproductive choices (Ritchey & Stokes, 1974; Veevers, 1973; Houseknecht, 1987; Dye, 2008; Mencarini & Tanturri, 2005; Blackstone & Stewart, 2012; Abma & Martinez, 2006; Albertini & Kohli, 2009), finding various explanations often at odds with each other: starting from the studies on individualism (Giddens, 2000; Beck, 2000; Bauman, 2006), continuing with those on lifestyles (Hakim, 2003), on the choice on an economic basis (Becker, 1998 ; Easterlain 1985; Easterlin & Crimmins, 1987) and on the value of the networks they belong to (Kohler, 2000), through those focusing on the paths of identity and gender equality

(Chesnais 1998; McDonald, 2000), up to the extremes of feminist studies (Gillespie, 2003) that regard the choice of non-maternity as a form of female emancipation. One may wonder then what kind of reasons influence individual action, leading a woman to choose not to become a mother or to postpone this event over time: lack of maternal instinct, disinterest for children, fear linked to the birth event, ideological concern for the growth of the world population, investment in one's own professional career, greater satisfaction in the relationship as a couple, greater personal freedom (Park, 2005; Peterson & Engwall, 2013; Peterson, 2014), without ever forgetting that the childlessness condition encompasses different situations and lifestyles.

At a conceptual level, it is interesting to note that the first term coined to define this condition was "childless" (Houseknecht, 1977; Mosher & Bachrach, 1982) in which «the negative connotation clearly emerges because the suffix "less" implies an absence, something that is deprived, unlucky» (Kreyenfeld & Konietzka, 2017, 7). Subsequently the words "childfree" or "childless-by-choice" were introduced (Tessarolo, 2006; Defago, 2005; Gillespie, 2003) to indicate that the childlessness can also be an intentional choice. Some scholars (Baum & Cope, 1980; Barnett & MacDonald, 1986; Calhoun, 1980; Callan, 1986; Kelly, 2009; Noordhuizen et al., 2010) further distinguish between voluntary childlessness, for those women who have voluntarily chosen not to have children, and involuntary childlessness, for those women who have not had children due to problems related to infertility or to the absence of a stable partner. Further distinctions are made within these two groups: among the voluntary childless there are the permanent postpones (Testa and Toulemon, 2006; Morgan 1991), i.e. those women who do not reach motherhood as a result of a long series of referrals, and the early articulators, i.e. those women who have claimed from childhood onwards that they have rejected motherhood, that they never wanted to become mothers, decidedly and without regrets. One final category is related to the waverers, the indecisive types: these women do not show themselves to be in favor, nor against motherhood, maintaining an ambivalent attitude. These are women who can have children, since no physiological impediments are present, who intend on having them, but who actually come to the end of the fertile age without having had them.

### *The Italian contest*

The Italian Statistical Institute, conducted a research called "Families, Social Subjects and Life Cycle" (Istat, 2016), which shows that women without children between 18 and 49 are about 5 and a half million,

almost half of the women of this age range. Among these, only 1.8% stated that having children is not part of their life project. The highest incidence of childfree women has been registered between 40-44 year-olds (2.8%) and among the youngest (2.3%) for women aged 18-24. Northern Italy is the geographical area where the largest number of women who discard motherhood from their life is present: 3.1% of residents in the North-East and 2.6% of residents in the North-West. These are the areas of the country also with the highest female employment rate (58.8% of women employed in the North), with higher quotas for separations and divorces and consensual unions. An analysis of individual features makes it clear that women with higher educational degrees have life projects different from parenthood (2.9% of those with at least a university degree) and this applies as well to those women who are employed (2.1%).

In the Italian language there is no term defining non-maternity (Demetrio & Rigotti, 2012): the words that come closest to it are “zitella”, i.e. an unmarried woman and therefore according to the ideal of traditional family also certainly without children, or sterile, indicating a woman who is not able to procreate (Rich, 1996). As demonstrated by one of the few researches on motivations to childlessness conducted on the national territory (Tanturri and Mencarini, 2008), 63% of the over 800 interviewees are women in a relationship or who in the past had a regular partner. As far as motivations are concerned, only 1% report physical problems, whilst for the remaining part of the sample “other reasons” are mentioned: the most quoted are related to not having enough time to properly take care of the child (35.1% ) and to not feeling the bond as a couple as strong enough (34.3%). Almost a third of the couples, on the other hand, state how the discrepancy of opinion with the partner on the subject of procreation led to the condition of non-maternity. The analysis of the costs reveals how the investment in terms of time affects the economic costs: children take time away from one’s professional career and personal fulfilment. The temporal factor also affects the right time to become a mother: one in five women states that when she had a stable relationship she felt too young to have a child, while 13% claim that the partners felt they were too old. Furthermore, at the level of the couple, marriage seems to favour procreation projects. As far as the “forever singles” are concerned, the majority claim that they have never desired a stable relationship, nor have they ever wanted to experience the maternal role, while others believe that having never had regular partners has negatively influenced the choice of maternity. Cusinato and Colesso (2007) outline the 4 main reasons related to the intentional waiver of parenthood: fear of the responsibilities and consequences that the choice entails; love of freedom and satisfaction of the living conditions reached;

fear of reliving in the relationship with children the negative childhood experiences; desire to exercise a sexuality free from generativity.

## **Methods**

The aim of this study is to investigate the universe of women who, by choice or circumstances, do not have children, in order to provide a picture of this recent and complex phenomenon starting from the personal reworking of the experiences which the interviewees have undergone. In particular, we tried to understand the motivations behind the lack of procreative investment and what are the contributing factors (personal, relational, cultural, economic). The research method is of a qualitative type and the survey tool used is the narrative interview (Leccardi, 2002; Sala, 2010), which as a consequence of the low degree of directness on the part of the interviewer grants a wide possibility of expression for the interviewee (Bichi, 2000). This kind of interview is defined as «a tale that a person decides to tell about a moment of life he or she has lived, describing in the most honest and complete way what he or she remembers about it and what he or she wants to let others know about it» (Atkinson, 2002, 13). On the basis of the reference literature some significant areas have been identified on which to build the interview track: «childhood experiences; presence and type of relationship with the partner; family and relational networks; path that has led or not to motherhood; opinions relating to social and value aspects connected to motherhood; perception of self and personal identity» (Segatto & Dal Ben, 2017, 139).

The sampling strategy is a non-probabilistic one based on a reasoned choice (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The characteristics identified as essential were gender, age (between 30 and 50 year olds) and the absence of children: the baseline empirical set consists of 50 women. This empirical set recalls the sampling of networks or links between units of the population (Thompson & Frank, 2000), since the first interviewees provided the contacts of other women who met the required characteristics. The interviews, conducted face to face, were subsequently divided into two different subgroups: the first group of 25 women aged between 40 and 50, for whom it is believed that the choice of non-maternity has now been taken (Group 1) (Houseknecht, 1987; Tanturri and Mencarini, 2008); the second group of 25 women between the ages of 30 and 40, for whom the choice is still underway (Group 2).

The analysis of the results took place through a first phase of textual transcription of the contents which was followed by a reorganization of the material and leading to the definition of 4 dimensions affecting maternity

choices: «Past: experiences in the families of origin. Constraints: current romantic relationships. External world: work and social networks. Identity: social and personal» (Segatto & Dal Ben, 2017, 143). By analyzing these dimensions, in relation to the type of choice or life condition, five different profiles characterizing women without children were outlined. It should be specified that the placement within the childfree and childless macro categories was carried out during the interview, by asking the person to which category she felt her life history was akin; in some cases, during the narration, the subjects placed themselves in a different category compared to the one initially chosen. Overall, in Group 1 (age group 40-50 year old) there are 15 childfree and 10 childless; while in Group 2 (age group 30-40 year olds) there are 4 childfree, 11 childless and 10 women who, despite being among the childless, actually declare they want children in the near future.

The average age of women in Group 1 is 44.6 year old and they have a medium-high level of education: 4 of the interviewees have obtained the middle school diploma, 10 have a secondary school diploma and 11 have a university or postgraduate degree. Over 86% of the interviewees claimed they were working full-time, only 3 women had part-time jobs. The analysis of marital status shows a predominance of women who have a significant emotional relationship: 7 women are married, 8 women cohabit and 10 women say they do not have a stable partner at the time of the interview. Finally, compared to the social class to which they belong, the placement of the reference unit is heterogeneous: 10 interviewees are in the middle class, 5 among managers, freelancers and entrepreneurs, 6 among manual workers and 3 among self-employed workers and traders. Passing on to Group 2, the average age is 34.1 year old; in this case as well the level of education is medium-high, with 12 women having a degree or post-degree, 12 a secondary school diploma and an interviewee who obtained the middle school diploma. Employed women have a full-time job. In relation to marital status, the majority of women have a relationship: 6 are married, 11 are cohabiting (2 of whom, however, still live in the parents' house, although they have a stable relationship). Only 7 women are single. Even with respect to the social class to which they belong, the placing is diverse: 7 women are in the middle class, 7 among self-employed workers, 6 among managers and freelancers and 5 among manual workers. As far as the geographical origin is concerned, all the interviewees live in the North East of Italy, mainly in the regions of Veneto and Friuli Venezia Giulia

## Results

Through the analysis of the interviews five profiles of women without children were outlined, which were differentiated according to the reasons given during the interview. These categories are certainly not thorough with respect to the complexity of individual paths and, above all, each person can go through some of these ways of dealing with motherhood in the course of their life, modifying their choice over time.

### *I'm free and I know it*

Women who fall into this profile are those who have deliberately decided not to pursue the procreative choice, they could be defined as the ultimate childfree. They are all above the age of 35 and this can lead to the presumption that once this threshold has been exceeded, the choice will become more conscious and definitive. The level of education is high: most of them have a degree, some have a diploma. Almost all of them have a stable emotional relationship and a full-time job. In relation to the reasons for the choice, some do not provide specific indications, others, on the other hand, simply believe that they have not developed any desire for motherhood and therefore they do not want to change their life condition.

*It's a choice that I have made, my personal choice, because I have never had the desire of being a mother. I've never felt this urge, this thing that everyone calls motherhood desire within me. I had a husband, we got married but inside me there was always the conviction, however, that I didn't want to enlarge the family.*

Martina, 36, graduated, single

*I live with my partner at the moment. He told me that apparently it's not with him that I want to have children. Maybe, I don't know. I take it into account. It's not that he causes this hormone not triggering. I don't know. The strange thing is that I'm not against family and children, but I'm peaceful in saying that I don't want a child.*

Iris, 41, graduate, cohabitant

*On the one hand one might think that having had a long relationship, this could push me or stimulate me to have this need for motherhood, but actually it did nothing but push me further away: because I perceived the idea of motherhood as the end of something,*



*not as the beginning. As if the goal of having children, of having a family, in some way, in my mind represented the death of something, not the beginning of something. A project that ended.*

Gilda, 35, graduate, single

On the other hand, there are women who consider their relationship as sufficiently gratifying, claiming that they have never felt particular affinity with the maternal role.

*I've never had a real desire to have children but I definitely thought I had to have them simply because it seemed mandatory, as for most women; but growing up I became aware of the fact that I'm not prone to family and to children above all; I have therefore decided not to create a family in this sense. The couple's life is fine, the work commits us a lot. This dimension of our life is enough for us, we are happy like that.*

Claudia, 41, graduated, married

*Well, I have no children and I have never wanted to have them and luckily I have a person by my side who shares my point of view. [...] A choice by all means dictated by precise reasons, it is a choice that has long been reasoned, irrevocable and I love presenting it and presenting myself in a decisive and determined way.*

Manuela, 42, graduate, cohabitant

There are some who speak instead of independence and investment in the working career.

*Procreating has never been my main goal and therefore my aim has always been leading an independent life based on work and on building a stable career, ergo I have never felt it as a necessity.*

Ginevra, 41, graduate, single

And there are those who explain their decision in relation to the freedom of cultivating their personal passions.

*I liked travelling a lot, I still like travelling, moving and so I did not want things that would prevent me from carrying on these dreams, these activities, let's say. Over the years, the idea of depriving myself of my freedom for a child, for anything, scared me.*

Lucia, 46, graduate, cohabitant

Some interviewees tell us about their choice on the basis of the childhood experiences in their families: within the paths of women without children negative family stories characterized by separations, divorces, quarrels, mourning, are often to be found. Sometimes these experiences affect the person so strongly that they prevent them from wanting to experience the parental role in turn.

*I was a daughter, I am a daughter, I have lived for many years in the family unit of mum and dad and I have experienced first-hand what were the difficulties and misunderstandings of their relationship and so it was really a choice.*

Giulia, 40, graduate, cohabitant

Finally, there are families in which the maternal role has been lived so intensely and in an all-encompassing way that the children feel unable to reproduce this model.

*My mother always put the family first. And she always gave up everything for her children and her family, so having such an example and holding my mother in high regard, I have always been questioning myself and always telling myself: "I will never be as good as my mother."*

Sofia, 47, graduate, cohabitant

### *Mad World*

Among childfree women, there are also those who ascribe their choice to the characteristics of our society: they believe that giving birth to a child in the current reality, characterized by risks, uncertainties and difficulties is not right. Certainly compared to other motivations, this takes on a residual trait and, apart from the ideological point of view, it is nevertheless related to the personal histories of the parties concerned, which are often characterized in this case as well by difficult experiences.

*I decided not to have children because at a certain age you get to be so responsible that you understand that even if you are depriving yourself of what a child can give you, which is a huge pride and unconditional love ... it can also be a selfish talk, but giving birth to another individual in this world where you do not know what tomorrow brings, where you only live the present because you cannot do any kind of plans, so you suffer, because this life is*

*suffering in so many fields ... I love the child that will never come so much that I prevent him from suffering.*  
Giada, 38, graduate, cohabitant

*It was a choice of both. Because when we got married, so 23 years ago, my husband always thought that he would never have children because it is too dangerous, I mean, the world is dangerous and therefore he would not have had the courage to see his children suffer.*  
Lara, 44, graduated, married

### *Bad Romance*

The interviewees who fall into this profile belong to the childless category: these women state that they have not pursued the maternity project as a result of dysfunctional romantic relationships, of relationship that were not lasting over time or due to the absence of such relationships. They are aged between 38 and 50, most of them still don't have a partner. They did not look for alternative ways to achieve parenthood, even though this was one of the goals they had set for themselves in life.

*I used to think that he would be my life partner and he would also be the father of my children, but because of me or him, there was no longer that dialogue, that complicity we had in being together and we decided to break up. My dream was to continue being with him and having our own home, forming our family unit, and I dreamed of having many children but, unfortunately, it is a dream that has been broken, a dream which could never come true.*  
Amanda, 45, middle school, single

*Mostly I think I haven't met the right person at the right time with whom to make plans for the future together and to start a family, to have children and things like that.*  
Anna, 42, graduated, single

For some of these women, motherhood is intrinsically connected to the relationship with the partner and therefore the procreative project must be shared and accepted by the partner.

*I had relationships with men with whom I did not feel like having children, but then there was a relationship in which I thought and*

*longed to have a child. In this relationship I felt ready, too bad that then the relationship went wrong. In that relationship I had the precise idea of having a child, there was actually a family project.*

Vanessa, 43, graduated, single

According to other interviewees, the couple is necessary for the well-being of the children, who must have two distinct parental figures. Without this condition it is better to give up motherhood.

*There were some people, important relationships in the past, with whom I thought that a family could be built. Then the relationships didn't go well and therefore it didn't happen. My idea of family and children is where there is a mother and a father and so I'm not able to leave this fact out of consideration with the idea of having a child. It takes a couple of parents to make a child. I chose to believe that the family is made up of two people, who are two parents, who want to be parents; if I do not find this, I'd rather not have a family.*

Gloria, 42, graduate, single

*The lack of the soul mate, I mean, that not having met the person with whom to create a family unit ... it is purely selfish to make children alone for oneself, in short, it takes two parents.*

Eleonora, 49, graduate, single

Lastly, others believe that if at any given moment the partner had expressed the desire for parenthood or had insisted more on this, probably things would have turned out different.

*As far as having children goes, for years I haven't had time, I worked a lot and as soon as I had the chance I travelled the world, in short, for me it is the most beautiful thing that exists, the most important. My choice came naturally. Around the age of 42 I thought I wanted one, but my boyfriend at the time in response to my request, not even a very convinced one, said that we had to live together and neither of us decided to move to the other's place, so I don't know. I mean, in hindsight, maybe I wanted one, but now I have no big regrets.*

Bianca, 48, graduate, cohabitant

*What you're waiting for*

Again within the childless category, there are those women who have made the choice of non-choice, i.e. they have postponed the procreative project over time, often feeling ambivalent with respect to motherhood, which has not been immediately discarded, but not even sought or planned. This category collects the most varied stories: there are women who do not say they are against motherhood but who have never tried to get started with a pregnancy; women who have tried several times to complete the procreative project without success, even for health problems; women who have waited for the optimal condition from an economic, working, and relational point of view, thus letting the years go by.

*It's something that I've never really thought of, I've never chosen, I've never really cared about it. So it didn't happen.*

Alice, 43, post-graduate, cohabitant

*I've always been stalling, hoping that sooner or later I would have persuaded myself, which didn't happen. I'm a person who has very high expectations, I'm a nit-picker, so for me everything had to be perfect. And when you are a parent I think perfection does not exist, you have to improvise a lot, and these things scared me, so I've always been taking my time and I said, "But sooner or later I will convince myself, I will convince myself" and I have never convinced myself.*

Iris, 47, graduate, cohabitant

*When you get married you always think of family and having children. Children never came, so it was a period a bit like that: "are we having them, are we not having them", a bit of a crisis like that, then in the meantime time we got older until a certain point where we said: "okay, they aren't coming, enough". No problem, we went on quietly with our life, you can also do other things in the social field.*

Giorgia, 50, graduated, married

Some kept postponing the moment, waiting for the so-called "right time" in terms of time and stability, both from an economic and a relational point of view. But this moment has never come.

*My life went like this, I didn't stop and I lost perhaps the right opportunity to enjoy motherhood because I am still persuaded that motherhood is an important moment for women, for any woman. I also had a moment of crisis because I said: "now or never". And it was "never again".*

Rossella, 50, graduated, single

*Now I find myself at the age of 47 and it is not easy to say: "Now I'm turning back and I'm having a child". It's a bit difficult. When I could, when I wanted to, I had not the chance and now that maybe I would want to, it isn't possible and so you try to adjust to the life choices, anyway, choices that sometimes you are forced to make even if you don't want to.*

Alessandra, 47, middle school, single

#### *Young and Beautiful*

The last profile is characterized by the youngest interviewees, under 35, among whom there is the idea that motherhood will find a place within their lives later in time: they do not rule out the possibility of procreating, but they currently believe they can devote themselves to other investments before thinking about parenthood. These women actually fall into the childless category, though it was decided not to include them in the previous profile because of the age target, which still largely allows them to think about the procreative project.

*Well, I personally don't feel ready at all and plus I want to build a life for myself at the moment rather than devoting myself to children. Now I don't have that maternal instinct that I can see in many other girls. I don't leave it out, actually, I mean, I like children, but at the moment, really, like no way.*

Lisa, 32, graduate, cohabitant

*I haven't got a boyfriend for that long and anyway the moment has not yet come to become a mother. Before I would have fancied of becoming one at this point, but love came around late, or anyway before there was another partner, but we couldn't have children because we were too young anyway.*

Aurora, 30, graduate, cohabitant

Some have been investing in studies and in finding a job and a house, having to deal with economic difficulties.

*Without a degree, without a job and everything else: my fiancé, as a result of the economic crisis, was fired despite having a permanent contract. Now both of us aren't working and we can't feed our children with books. Compared to my working career, in my plans I would have a child around the age of 40.*

Silvia, 30, graduate, cohabitant

*Let's say that since we got married last year, we always felt it was a bit too early to have a baby right now, so we wanted to wait for a few years, thus we got a house, we're having it restored, hence there are so many works and expenses. Having a baby is not a simple thing now so we thought we'd have to wait a bit. We are enjoying our married life.*

Angela, 30, graduated, married

## **Conclusions**

The analysis carried out makes it possible to provide a first portrait of childlessness in the North-East of Italy, an area in which the phenomenon is more widespread compared to the rest of the national territory. Through the overall reading of the results it was possible to outline 5 profiles of childfree and childless women, each of which is characterized by different motivations relating to the choice. First of all, the Italian No Mommy women stand out for a medium-high level of education, for excellent levels of employment with diversified jobs and for stable romantic relationships.

As far as the choice of non-maternity is concerned, among the childfree women explanations are mainly oriented to their own individual history and to subjective factors. Some discard personal fulfilment through the maternal role to find it in other aspects: investment in the professional career, independence and personal freedom, emotional investment in romantic relationships. Others relive their childhood experiences, often characterized by conflicting family ties or painful events such as separations, absences, mourning, thus believing that they do not want to try out similar situations again. Within this group some women stand out because they feel they have had parental models too perfect or so idealized that they are not able to reproduce them in their present. Last but not least, there are those who strongly claim they have opted for this choice as a result of the dangers of current society, characterized by uncertainty and risks.

Childless women, on the other hand, ascribe their condition to external events beyond their will: a good part of the interviewees, believing that a stable relationship is necessary in order to carry out the maternity project, has not pursued the objective as a consequence of the lack of a partner with whom to share it. Many others have instead been stalling over the years without ever achieving the procreating goal, with two main motivations: ambivalence towards the desire for motherhood and the awaiting of the right moment to give birth to a child. The youngest interviewees, aged between 30 and 35, show a "growing" maturation towards motherhood in believing that they still have enough time available: some of them have invested primarily in personal achievement through studies and work, others in romantic relationships through cohabitation and marriages. Within this age group none of the interviewees pronounces themselves as childfree, but there is a good intention towards procreation in the medium-term future.

On the whole it is possible to claim that economic and social factors, such as economic and working stability, the presence of childcare services or of support networks, seem to affect to a lesser degree the choice of non-maternity, which on the contrary appears to be more oriented by individual acting, determined by experiences in the families of origin, by their own expectations of self-achievement and by emotional stability. Furthermore, the fact that childless women ascribe their condition to external factors often appears to be unfounded, as a result of a "non-choice" developing over time in a more or less conscious way. Certainly, in view of the complexity and variability of the phenomenon, it would be appropriate to use the results of this first study as a basis to proceed with a broader analysis, through a quantitative study.

## Notes

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