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Exploring the factors and challenges of involuntary singlehood and its impact on psychological well-being among women in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Singlehood is an increasingly concerning phenomenon, particularly among women who desire romantic relationships but remain single due to various barriers. This qualitative study explores the factors contributing to involuntary singlehood, the challenges experienced, and its psychological impact among young adult women in Malaysia. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 women aged 20–35 who self-identified as involuntarily single. The data were analysed using thematic analysis. The results identified three factors contributing to involuntary singlehood: limited romantic opportunities, lack of relationship skills, and negative perception of romance. Participants also reported challenges related to changes in social life and perceived societal expectations, largely shaped by cultural and familial norms. Lastly, participants' psychological well-being was affected in a mixed manner. Although many participants maintained positive well-being through adaptive coping strategies, concerns were raised regarding potential declines in well-being if involuntary singlehood persists alongside unmet desires for a romantic relationship. Coping mechanisms, particularly social support and a sense of autonomy, were identified as protective factors. The findings contribute to the limited literature on singlehood amongst women in Southeast Asia and provide insight for mental health professionals and future researchers to better support the well-being of involuntarily single women.

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Introduction

Singlehood is an increasingly concerning phenomenon, particularly among women who desire romantic relationships but remain single due to various barriers and is defined as an individual without an intimate partner and is typically linked to marital status, including widowed, divorced, separated or unmarried (Girme et al., 2023; Kan et al., 2023). Malaysia, an Asian country with a collectivist culture, places significant importance on marriage, particularly for women. Within this cultural context, women are often expected to marry and bear children to fulfill the idealized image of womanhood (Chung et al., 2024; Hill, 2020; Kan et al., 2023). Islam is the most practiced religion in Malaysia, adhered to by approximately 63.5% of the population (DOSM, 2023), further reinforcing this norm, as marriage is considered a religious obligation for Muslims (Alwi & Lourdunathan, 2020). Despite these societal and religious expectations, a noticeable shift has occurred in marriage trends. In 2023, the number of recorded Muslim marriages was 140,176, a 16.8% decrease from 168,467 in 2022. In contrast, non-Muslim marriages saw a slight increase of 2.9%, from 46,555 in 2022 to 47,924 in 2023 (DOSM, 2024). These statistics suggest a growing prevalence of singlehood, especially among Muslim women, even though many acknowledge marriage as a must in Islam (Alwi & Lourdunathan, 2020). Hence, this study explores the factors

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contributing to involuntary singlehood, the challenges faced, and its impact on the psychological well-being of young adult women in Malaysia.

Currently, Malaysia has a population of 34.1 million, with approximately 15.2 million individuals reported as single (DOSM, 2024). The proportion of individuals who have never married has increased over time, particularly among women. For instance, among those aged 25–29 years, the percentage of never-married females rose from 25.9% in 1991 to 29.8% in 2000, and further to 37.8% in 2010. Meanwhile, the proportion of males in the same age group showed a slight decrease from 54.9% in 2000 to 53.1% in 2010 as reported by the UN (Lai, 2021). These figures indicate that women are increasingly more likely to remain single. A similar trend is observed globally. In the United States, the unmarried population increased from 28% in 1970 to over 44% in 2012, while the proportion of married couples declined from approximately 70% in 1970 to 49% in 2011 (DePaulo, 2014; Tan et al., 2021). The world-wide rise in singlehood encompasses a substantial portion of involuntary singles, who desire a romantic relationship but are unable to enter one due to perceived barriers that hinder them from doing so (Adamczyk, 2017). Research indicates that nearly half of single individuals fall into this category (Apostolou et al., 2019, 2020).

Involuntary singlehood is often linked to lower psychological well-being compared to those who voluntarily choose singlehood, as such individuals tend to experience higher levels of depression, anxiety, mood disorders, adjustment difficulties, and alcohol-related issues than their married counterparts (Adamczyk, 2017; Braithwaite et al., 2010; Fitzpatrick, 2023). The lack of emotional and social support from a romantic partner can heighten stress, reduce life satisfaction, and lead to negative mental health outcomes (Apostolou et al., 2019). Moreover, fear of being single and dissatisfaction with one's single status are predictors of poor well-being (Adamczyk, 2017; Lehmann et al., 2015; Pepping et al., 2018; Spielmann et al., 2013).

The phenomenon of singlehood is influenced by shifting cultural norms, economic pressures, and evolving gender roles (Himawan, 2020; Hoan & MacDonald, 2025; Shahrak et al., 2021; van den Berg & Verbakel, 2022). The factors and challenges experienced by involuntary singles are distinct from those of voluntary singlehood. Women tend to be involuntarily single because they might find it difficult to attract a romantic partner, often associated with a lower extraversion and self-perception as undesirable mates (Apostolou et al., 2020; Apostolou & Michaelidou, 2024; Apostolou & Tsangari, 2022; Apostolou & Wang, 2019). Additionally, many women remain single to avoid emotional pain or rejection (Apostolou et al., 2020; Lisa & Shephard, 2024).

Social and familial pressures to conform to established norms and expectations surrounding marriage are challenges often faced by women in involuntary singlehood (Chen & Tong, 2021). Single individuals frequently face negative stereotypes for not conforming to societal expectations around marriage (Kan et al., 2023). Dupuis and Girmé (2024) found that women in particular, are more likely to perceive other single women as being subject to stereotype discrimination compared to single men. Another challenge associated with involuntary singlehood is that women who are frustrated with their single status tend to be lonelier and may regret it, especially in old age (Himawan, 2020; Shuzhuo et al., 2010; Timonen & Doyle, 2014). It highlights how involuntary singlehood is closely linked to lower life satisfaction, intensified emotional distress, and increased feelings of insecurity, loneliness, and disconnection from social networks (Alwi & Lourdunathan, 2020; Hsu & Barrett, 2020). The societal prioritization of romantic relationships can amplify these challenges, leading to long-term negative effects on single women's psychological well-being.

The decline in psychological well-being among involuntarily single women in Malaysia is an emerging concern, with many women remaining single despite their desire for romantic relationships (Adamczyk, 2017). According to UN Population Division Malaysia's single population has increased significantly, reaching 44.68%, placing the country as the third most single-populated nation in Southeast Asia (Choudhury, 2024). This figure includes never-married women as well as those who are divorced, separated, or widowed (Mortelmans et al., 2023). Research shows that involuntary singlehood is associated with lower psychological well-being than both voluntary singlehood and marriage, as involuntarily single individuals report higher levels of loneliness, depression, anxiety, and reduced self-esteem (Adamczyk, 2017; Hsu & Barrett, 2020). Humans have an inherent need for intimacy and belonging, and the absence of such relationships often results in social stigma and marginalization (van der Watt, 2015). Research has shown

that single individuals often experience reduced well-being due to the stigmatization associated with their single status (Girme et al., 2023). When involuntary singlehood extends across young, middle, and late adulthood, it may lead to involuntary childlessness and unmet parenthood goals, resulting in greater psychological distress, including health complaints, anxiety, and even complicated grief (Adamczyk, 2017; Lechner et al., 2007).

Additionally, prolonged singlehood may have societal consequences. In Malaysia, where Islam prohibits premarital sex, single Muslim women are unable to reproduce outside of marriage, as such acts are considered sinful (Himawan, 2020). This situation contributes to Malaysia's declining population, as evidenced by a 5.6% decrease in live births from 111,265 in the fourth quarter of 2023 to 105,044 births, a trend attributed to the increasing single population (Chong et al., 2022; DOSM, 2024; Kan et al., 2023). If involuntary singlehood remains unaddressed, mental health issues and social challenges such as depression, anxiety, and social isolation are likely to worsen (Oh et al., 2022).

Despite the rising number of involuntarily single women, research in Malaysia primarily focuses on gender roles and religious perspectives, rather than the psychological impact of involuntary singlehood or the experience of being in such situations (Apostolou & Michaelidou, 2024; Himawan, 2020). While existing studies have explored the reasons and challenges associated with singlehood (Alwi & Lourdunathan, 2020; Beckmeyer & Jamison, 2024; Chung et al., 2024), few have investigated the psychological well-being of singles (Alias et al., 2022; Hsu & Barrett, 2020). Research on involuntary singlehood among women in Asia context remains scarce (Himawan et al., 2018). This study aims to fill that gap by providing insights into how involuntary singlehood affects women's psychological well-being, thereby potentially informing mental health policymakers in developing targeted interventions and promoting greater societal awareness to support and empower women navigating this experience.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research method, which aims to explore and comprehend phenomena in depth, rather than measuring variables or testing hypotheses through numerical data, as is typically done in quantitative research (Oranga & Matere, 2023). Without focusing on measurable aspects such as frequency or statistical representation, the qualitative study aimed to investigate the nature of phenomena, including the settings, quality, and variety of perspectives (Ugwu & Eze, 2023). This approach emphasized the importance of participant perspectives and internal feelings (Naderifar et al., 2017), which were critical for examining the subjective nature of involuntary singlehood phenomena. The reporting of the study adhered to the requirements of the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research Checklist (COREQ-32; Tong et al., 2007).

Sample and location

A sample of 15 young adult women in Malaysia was recruited. Individuals were required to fulfil the following inclusion criteria: be Malaysian women aged 20–35 years, categorized as young adults according to the American Psychological Association (2023), and currently residing in Malaysia. This age range was selected as young adulthood is a developmental stage in which romantic relationships significantly influence psychological well-being by fulfilling the human need for intimacy and connection (Gómez-López et al., 2019). They needed to be single, lack a romantic partner, whether never married, divorced, widowed, or separated, and perceived their singlehood as involuntary due to circumstances beyond their control. Additionally, participants who had been single for less than one year, had severe mental health conditions, or were single by choice were excluded, as the study aimed to focus on individuals who had sufficient time to experience the psychological effects of involuntary singlehood.

Furthermore, this study employed non-probability sampling strategies that combined purposive and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling was valuable for accessing participants with diverse and insightful experiences of the phenomenon (Urcia, 2021). The snowball technique involved referrals from initial participants to other potential participants who met the inclusion criteria (Obilor, 2023); it was flexible, cost-effective, easy to implement, did not need a rigorous plan, and was particularly effective for recruiting hard-to-reach or socially sensitive populations, such as individuals affected by stigma or taboo

(Pasikowski, 2024). Together, these sampling techniques ensured a rich and diverse sample, providing meaningful data for the study.

Research procedure

Ethics approval was sought and obtained from the Asia Pacific University of Technology and Innovation APUFE/10/2025 and the researcher proceeded to recruit potential participants who met the specified inclusion criteria. Recruitment was carried out through a research poster distributed on social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, as well as through the dating application Omi, which provided access to single women who fit the study's target group. In total, 10 participants were recruited using purposive sampling, while 6 additional participants were obtained through snowball sampling, where existing participants referred others who met the criteria. The researcher personally explained the purpose and scope of the study to all potential participants to ensure they had a clear understanding of the research objectives, procedures, and their rights. Those who expressed willingness to participate were then provided with a participant information letter and an informed consent form, which they were asked to read carefully before signing. Only after obtaining written informed consent and providing participants with the participant information letter did the researcher schedule and conduct the semi-structured interviews, either online via Microsoft Teams or in-person, based on the participants' preference and convenience. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and was conducted solely by the researcher.

The interview questions consisted of four sections: (A) Demographic Information, (B) Factors of Involuntary Singlehood, (C) Challenges of Involuntary Singlehood, and (D) Psychological Well-Being. Section A collected basic demographic information such as age, race, religion, occupation, and marital status to provide context for each participant's experiences and ensure their eligibility according to the study's inclusion criteria. Section B explored the factors contributing to participants' singlehood, with questions such as 'What do you think are the main reasons you are currently single?' and 'How does your career or academic commitment impact your relationship status?' These questions aimed to identify internal and external factors influencing involuntary singlehood. Section C examined the challenges of involuntary singlehood through questions like 'How does being involuntarily single impact your mental health?' and 'How does society react to your singlehood?' to explore societal pressure and psychological well-being. Lastly, Section D addressed psychological well-being, including questions such as 'What sources of support help you cope with the challenges of singlehood?' and 'How satisfied are you with your life as a single woman?' to understand participants' resilience and coping strategies. These questions were developed based on relevant literature reviews to ensure that each section aligned with the research objectives. The inclusion of these questions aimed to identify the factors and challenges associated with involuntary singlehood and to understand how these experiences influence women's psychological well-being. The semi-structured format provided participants with flexibility to share their experiences in depth while allowing the researcher to probe further for clarification or elaboration where necessary.

Before the main data collection, a pilot study involving one individual was conducted to assess the clarity and effectiveness of the interview questions and overall research procedure. Feedback from the pilot study led to refinements in the interview questions. Redundant or overlapping questions were removed to improve the overall flow and efficiency of the interview process. Additionally, a Malay version of the interview questions was developed to accommodate participants who were less proficient in English, ensuring inclusivity. The translation's accuracy was verified during the pilot study, with a native speaker conducting the review. All collected data were treated with strict confidentiality and stored securely, in accordance with the ethical standards of research.

Reflexivity

To ensure an objective perspective, given that the interviewer was a young female and that her experiences might influence how she conducted the interviews, the interviewer adhered to the semi-structured interview's focus and discussed only information related to the research. Only when participants

discussed a point outside the formal interview questions did the interviewer probe deeper. A single researcher conducted all interview sessions to minimize any inter-interviewer differences. During the coding process, regular bi-weekly meetings were held. Two researchers (the first and last authors) analyzed the data word by word and independently reflected on each participant's experiences before coming together to discuss the themes and sub-themes to ensure they were on the same page. Lastly, another researcher (the second author) reviewed all the coded data for a third-party perspective.

Data analysis

This study adopted a reflexive thematic analysis, a widely used method in qualitative research, known for its flexibility and suitability for exploring personal experiences and identifying patterns within data (Kiger & Varpio, 2020; Naeem et al., 2023). Its adaptability to various research questions, sample sizes, data collection methods, and approaches to meaning-making made it particularly appropriate for this study on involuntary singlehood (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Reflexive thematic analysis was a good fit for this study, as it is flexible, recognises the active role of the researcher in shaping the focus and direction of analysis, and is not bound to a specific epistemological framework (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Campbell et al., 2021). An inductive approach was employed, requiring subjective and reflexive engagement with the data to achieve nuanced analytical depth (Pearson et al., 2025). Coding was conducted at the semantic levels to identify participants' statements and determine their relevance to the research questions. This approach prioritised participants' own perspectives and ensured that interpretations remained grounded in the data rather than in inferred underlying assumptions (Byrne, 2022). This study followed the six-step process of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019), including familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and presenting the results.

Results

Our results were grouped according to the research questions that they addressed, and themes were elaborated upon in the following sections with relevant quotes supporting their description. A summary of the results is presented in Table 1.

Factors associated with involuntary singlehood among women

Three major themes were identified as factors experienced by single women, despite their desire for a romantic relationship. Limited romantic opportunity, lack of relationship skills, and negative perception of romance are the underlying reasons for women to be involuntarily single. Limited romantic opportunities represented external barriers, whereas a lack of relationship skills reflected internal challenges individuals encounter in their pursuit of romantic relationships. Meanwhile, the negative perception of romance is influenced by past experiences and societal narratives.

Participants shared that they had limited romantic opportunities due to various situational constraints and stringent partner criteria, which restrict women's chances of forming meaningful romantic connections. For example, geographical location, age (particularly among those in their 30s) and time limitations

Table 1. Summarization of themes.

Research questions	Themes
What are the factors associated with involuntary singlehood among women in Malaysia?	Limited romantic opportunity Lack of relationship skills
What are the challenges experienced by women in Malaysia in relation to involuntary singlehood?	Negative perception of romance Changes in social life
How does involuntary singlehood affect the psychological well-being of women in Malaysia?	Perceived societal expectation Positive psychological well-being Negative psychological well-being

Note. Table presents themes related to factors, challenges, and psychological impact of involuntary singlehood among women in Malaysia.

due to career commitments often prevented them from meeting a wider selection of potential partners. In contrast, others had certain criteria they expected their partners to meet, as reflected in a disinterest in casual relationships and a preference for long-term romantic connections with someone familiar, further narrowed the dating pool. These narratives demonstrate how external barriers limit romantic opportunities for these individuals.

'Because due to the fact that obviously at the age of 33, the number of single men there are very limited scope. As well as I have some expectations and standards in my future spouse making it more harder to find them. As well as I am living in Jengka. It is quite outskirts. It is a rural area. So, the number of prospective men that I find attractive would be very limited.' (Participant 14)

'It's quite difficult because I have limited male friends and I want my partner to be someone that I know, not someone stranger like I met online, no I don't like it. Because I think having a good relationship is having both relational between the woman and the man, I think.' (Participant 3)

Lack of relationship skills emerged as the second theme. Some participants highlighted that the people they met often lacked strong relationship skills, which prevented them from forming connections with these individuals. Seven out of 15 respondents mentioned having a poor understanding of relationships.

'We've met before. We've talked... So, our communication is like... Out of the blue... He talks about his topic, I talk about mine. And then... He doesn't understand what my job is, I don't understand his job either. He's like, what do you want? Communication... And then... And then... He's like, I don't understand, I don't understand...' (Participant 7)

'Being single, I am not really confident talking to male friends because they think differently with girls, you know? Somehow, when I am having a conversation with them, at the end, I always thought that am I overly mean? Am I saying something that makes them uncomfortable because I don't know how they think personally. Because in my family, my male family members also, they are all grown up, not in my age, so we are in different generations. So, I don't know that. It makes me like... not confident to talk with the male around my age.' (Participant 3)

This suggested that participants' perceptions of their own or others' social competence may affect their ability to establish meaningful interactions, highlighting the psychological impact of relational skills on confidence and engagement.

Additionally, 9 out of 15 respondents experienced psychological barriers like trust issues affecting their ability to get into relationships, as it was difficult to navigate situations such as long-distance type relationships or to open up to people easily.

'Trust issues, I think. Like I said, I'm not the type who easily trusts people. It's quite hard for me to open up or have deep talks. My experience... it's mostly because of my ex... makes me... have a trust issues. I can't handle long-distance relationships. Because with long-distance, I have to trust the other person to behave, to not look at other women. So, because of him, I became a bit clingy. It's hard to trust men like that nowadays' (Participant 5)

'I think I'm the kind of person who takes time to really trust and open up to someone new. I'm more of a quiet observer at first, so it might take a while before I feel fully comfortable. I also tend to overthink things a bit... I like to make sure I'm doing the right thing, especially when it comes to relationships. But once I do feel safe with someone, I'm very loyal and all in.' (Participant 13)

This suggested how self-perceived relationship skill gaps can lead to avoidance or hesitation, even when the desire for a relationship is present.

The final theme was the negative perception of romance. Out of 15 respondents, 11 had previously experienced unfulfilling romantic relationships, which influenced their current views, while the 4 who had never been in a relationship but still expressed at least some level of skepticism toward romantic involvement due to media exposure or other societal narratives. For some, negative past relationship experiences led to fear of emotional hurt and repeated mistakes, shaping how they approach potential partners.

'Because... before this... the men I met... in the first three months... all were fine, okay, no problem at all. But then, after three months... what he said was different from what he did. That's why, I'm afraid to try again. I'm afraid to make a mistake and scared to have my heart broken again.' (Participant 11)

For others, emotional cautions were shaped by negative societal narratives, further reinforcing hesitation toward romance. Differences in experiences highlight past disappointments and cultural narratives

that shaped women's relationship expectations, suggesting that involuntarily single women approach romantic relationships with caution and restraint.

'I've heard a lot of bad stories about dating around my age, like dating earlier, which causes a lot of like bad things that is very, that is not in, that is not aligned with our religion beliefs. So that's why I feel a bit scared to actually go into a relationship.' (Participant 15)

Challenges experienced by women in relation to involuntary singlehood

All respondents reported experiencing challenges throughout their singlehood journey, including changes in their social life and perceived societal expectations. For example, many experienced changes in social life as their peers entered romantic relationships or marriages, which reduced opportunities for shared activities and social interactions. Additionally, the absence of instrumental support from male partners, such as emotional companionship, assistance with daily tasks, safety, or financial stability, further contributed to feelings of disconnection, loneliness, vulnerability and lifestyle changes.

'Because a lot of my friends are not in the same degree with me, like in my university. And the ones that I do know that are in my degree usually have other plans and other commitments. And whenever I want to go outside or like having a vacation or travel somewhere, I think those are the possible problems that I feel not safe if I travel alone... I feel that I might get vulnerable with being alone compared to inviting friends or actually inviting my possible romantic partner with me to enjoy more of our companion...' (Participant 15)

'Whenever my group, my friends, we organise, we organise a trip abroad, or a trip somewhere inside the country. And then, obviously, my friend, who already married can't join. All right, they won't join, we have been together for about like 10 years. Every time, there will be something is happening, whether she's pregnant or they are pregnant or they are just getting, they are having small children or the husband said no.' (Participant 14)

Moreover, participants also discussed how these societal expectations created pressure for them, particularly for women in their late 20s, to marry before the age of 25. Furthermore, besides feeling a need to get married, all respondents also reported experiencing stigma or negative stereotypes associated with being single and described feeling as if they were being portrayed in certain ways, as discussed below. Such expectations contribute to feelings of scrutiny and self-evaluation.

'I think in Malay community is... something like they think is like normal, which is everyone need to, every girl needs to be married by 25. So, I think there, I think there is that kind of pressure a little bit because I'm already in my 20s. So, I think like only like this year I actually realised oh, I'm already 22 like usually people like some, some of my friends already like got married. Some of them, like my age, like out there or do like have kids like two or three kids. So, like I think, there is, that's a little bit of pressure.' (Participant 2)

'They think that women who are not married yet or marry late, those who are still single, are women who have high demands. They feel that those who don't have a partner are... choosy, meaning we are too picky.' (Participant 4)

These challenges highlight how tensions between personal and societal expectations regarding romantic relationships shape the experiences and psychological well-being of involuntary single women.

Psychological well-being of women throughout singlehood

Despite being single, all respondents reported experiencing positive psychological well-being. They described their singlehood as an opportunity for personal growth, embracing their autonomy, and striving towards an emotionally manageable state, often supported by strong coping mechanisms. All respondents demonstrated the use of adaptive coping strategies, such as relying on social support, adopting a positive mindset, and engaging in hobbies. Coping strategies were found to help them sustain emotional balance and resilience. For example, respondent 15 mentioned that relying on others for emotional support allows her to maintain positive psychological well-being, while respondent 7 described coping by embracing independence and engaging in relaxing activities such as reading, watching dramas, and playing games. Respondent 12 mentioned that she often copes through positive self-reflection. This helped participants reaffirm their self-worth and manage uncertainty about their relationship status.

'I try my best to call my mom every single day, even though it annoys her a lot. And if I do manage to annoy her so much, I try my best to call other relatives to annoy them and try to share my life, share things that occur in my life and problems if I do have one and ask for advice. And I think having pets help out a lot because at least they don't judge if you learn a lot of things or do something or learn a lot of things and hug them.' (Participant 15)

'Before this, if I want to go somewhere, I have to tell him that I'm here or I have to go there... After that, I don't have any relationship. After that, I don't feel trapped. After that, every night, I have a me time for myself. Sometimes, I like to read novels, watch dramas, play games.' (Participant 7)

'I reflect on myself. I tell myself to relax. It's always the same. I'll meet someone one day. I reflect on myself. It's not that I'm not pretty. If I really want it, I'll dress up and go out. From there, I can tell myself that I'm pretty.' (Participant 12)

However, while all respondents perceived involuntary singlehood as both a positive and negative experience, there were often trade-offs as well. For example, they appreciated the autonomy and personal growth being single offered, but also acknowledged feelings of loneliness. Notably, all participants described their loneliness as manageable rather than overwhelming, indicating an ongoing process of emotional regulation rather than persistent distress.

'Maybe for single women, there are both positive and negative sides. On the positive side, I might feel happier because I am not tied to anything. Once I get married, I become bound to someone, and we have to follow everything, right? On the negative side, maybe I'll feel lonely sometimes.' (Participant 10)

'I think overall, I'm mentally strong and I enjoy my own company. But like I said, occasionally I do feel lonely and sad sometimes. But it's not like overly sad, not overwhelming.' (Participant 6)

Furthermore, a lack of self-acceptance, purpose in life, and positive relationships with others among some respondents was associated with reduced psychological well-being. Even though respondents developed strong coping mechanisms, they did acknowledge psychological strain, often stemming from the unmet desire to have a romantic partner, leading some to question or doubt themselves and reflect on the challenges that came from not having a romantic partner. These findings indicate that involuntary singlehood has a nuanced influence on psychological well-being.

'Sometimes, I question myself, like, why is it so hard to find a partner? Am I not enough?' (Participant 5)

'Sometimes I feel down. For example, in a situation when I go to a wedding... ...or Eid, or a big day. That's it. Because, when it's a big day, people will get together with their partner. If I'm being alone, no friends were solo like me, so I'll feel lonely la...' (Participant 11)

'I would say being single does create emotional and social challenges. And I think because of my current education commitments and spiritual development and Islamic beliefs, I think there are times that I do feel that not having a romantic relationship might cause me to feel a bit lonely. And sometimes feel like I don't have a lot of support system compared to others.' (Participant 15)

Discussion

Our study aimed to explore the factors and challenges of involuntary singlehood and its impact on psychological well-being among women in Malaysia. Regarding the factors that influenced involuntary singlehood, three main themes were identified: limited romantic opportunity, lack of relationship skills, and negative perception of romance. Situational constraints such as time limitations due to demanding work or academic schedules, geographic distance, increasing age, and prioritization of career or education significantly reduce opportunities for romantic interaction. Participants frequently described having time constraints due to life commitments, which left little room for dating or socializing with potential partners. A lack of time to socialise eventually led to lower motivation and impacted an individual's mating efforts. Similarly, Apostolou (2021) noted that low mating effort is linked to prolonged involuntary singlehood. This aligns with past findings by Yoshida and Yoshida (2011), who found that long working hours hinder romantic involvement, especially for women balancing multiple jobs.

Next, in regions where the ideal age for marriage is lower, such as Penang (Vignato, 2012), women past that age often feel 'out of market' due to societal expectations (Himawan et al., 2018). Besides, Choi

and Ramaj (2023) note that solo living is more prevalent in rural settings, where social and economic constraints reduce the number of eligible partners. In marriage markets, urban men are often perceived as possessing higher social status, making them more desirable partners (Lui, 2016). Hence, it will decrease the dating pool for single women living in less urbanised areas. High selectivity in partner criteria decreases the perceived romantic opportunity, as they unintentionally reduce the number of acceptable potential partners. Prior research shows that women with higher education or economic status are more likely to set higher standards and be more cautious in partner selection (Apostolou & Michaelidou, 2024; Himawan et al., 2018; Vignato, 2012). This aligns with findings that high choosiness and low mating effort prolong singlehood (Apostolou & Michaelidou, 2024).

Many participants struggled with poor relational understanding, particularly in initiating or maintaining communication, recognizing romantic cues, or interpreting emotional signals from others. These struggles often led to mismatched expectations and short-lived relationships. As found by Apostolou (2021), individuals with difficulty interpreting flirtation signals are more likely to remain single. This gap is especially evident among those with limited experience socializing with the opposite gender. Epstein et al. (2013) emphasized that relationship skills improve with age and experience. Hence, without regular practice, those skills can remain underdeveloped. The study also highlighted psychological barriers such as low self-esteem, trust issues, introversion, and insecure attachment styles resulted to a lack of relationship skills. Collins and Feeney (2004) and Lopez and Brennan (2000) similarly observed how psychological vulnerabilities can limit romantic development. Attachment theory supports this, with anxious or avoidant individuals often displaying hypersensitivity to rejection, leading to overanalyzing minor relational shifts and creating emotional tension (Khoshkam et al., 2012; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). These patterns potentially disrupt the development of secure interpersonal relationships and indicate underlying emotional regulation challenges that may hinder the establishment of a stable romantic relationship.

Our participants also perceived romantic relationships negatively due to personal experience or external observation influenced by media or other narratives. Participants who experienced betrayal, ghosting, or toxic relationships developed trust issues and emotional fatigue, causing them to be wary of new relationships. These findings support van Vliet (2010), who found that trauma often leads to avoidance as a defensive strategy. Women frequently internalize the failure of the relationship to themselves (Rowland et al., 2019). Even those without direct romantic experience were influenced by societal narratives. Exposure to toxic relationships via friends, family, or media shaped sceptical attitudes toward romance. As shown by Anderegg et al. (2014), observational learning can strongly influence one's expectations and relational behaviour.

Involuntary singlehood presents various challenges in daily life. Single women might become overly self-reliant due to prolonged independence without a partner. The absence of this support often heightened feelings of vulnerability, especially in situations that raised concerns about personal safety. Research on female travel behavior supports this concern, noting that despite women's desire for independence, they are disproportionately more anxious about safety while traveling alone (Aitchison & Reeves, 1998; Carr, 2000; Wilson & Little, 2008). Study participants acknowledged that having a male partner would likely reduce such concerns and make them feel more secure during social or travel activities. Another challenge linked to changes in social life is a reduction in social interaction. Involuntary single women felt left out or socially isolated, especially when friends are now focused on partners or families. As reported by Chung et al. (2024), single individuals often experience loneliness in social environments dominated by couples. Over time, reduced opportunities for socialization can deepen feelings of loneliness. Similarly, Maner et al. (2007) found that young adults are less likely to engage with others when they have limited social networks or experience high social withdrawal, which compounds feelings of loneliness.

Societal expectations, particularly the societal pressure for women to marry by the age of 25, were also constantly brought up by our participants. Gui (2020) found that single women are frequently judged unfairly because of their unmarried status. Societal expectations often dictate that marriage is the ultimate goal for women, and deviations from this norm may be seen as failure (Himawan et al., 2018). In the Malaysian context, single women, especially those in their 30s and beyond, often face societal judgments and are stereotyped as being unlucky, too selective, or dependent on their parents (Alwi

& Lourdunathan, 2020). Additionally, DePaulo (2023) notes that single individuals are often judged against the benchmark of coupledness, with their happiness perceived as exaggerated and their sadness assumed to be a result of their relationship status. Many study participants shared that they felt judged during social or family gatherings, often receiving intrusive questions about their marital status. Similar findings were reported by Chung et al. (2024), where single women felt pressured to explain or justify their status at such events.

Moreover, our findings highlighted both positive and negative aspects of psychological well-being experienced by single women. Previous research has shown that never-married individuals, particularly in Asian contexts, often report lower psychological well-being compared to married individuals (Himawan et al., 2018; Hsu & Barrett, 2020; Kim & McKenry, 2002). However, this study suggests that protective factors, such as coping mechanisms, perceived autonomy, and social support, shape the psychological well-being of involuntary single women. Single women who practised effective coping strategies, such as engaging in hobbies, building close friendships, and maintaining strong family bonds, reported higher levels of life satisfaction. For many, being single also allowed for freedom and self-growth, such as focusing on their careers or studies without the responsibilities of a romantic relationship, which can positively impact life satisfaction. These outcomes reflect the findings of Adamczyk (2017), who noted that relationship status alone does not predict well-being unless satisfaction with that status is also considered. All participants in this study rated their life satisfaction at above 5/10, indicating moderate satisfaction with their singlehood. However, none rated it as a perfect 10 out of 10, suggesting that the unmet desire for a romantic relationship still leaves a gap.

For some, the absence of a romantic partner amplified emotional distress, including loneliness, self-doubt, or perceived inadequacy. Fatima et al. (2021) found that individuals with lower psychological well-being tend to face more emotional struggles in their daily lives. While some women are content with their independence, the absence of a close emotional partner still leads to loneliness and sadness from time to time, particularly when considering the long-term implications of not finding a partner. These reflections suggest the emergence of emotional strain, a fear of missing milestones, and internalized social timelines, all of which may impact future psychological well-being.

Limitations and implications

While we have taken steps to ensure the rigour of the study, several limitations could be considered for future research. Firstly, the cross-sectional nature of the data collected prevents us from understanding the progression of their experiences and determining areas where intervention could make the biggest impact. Future research using longitudinal designs could further enhance the understanding of how involuntary singlehood and psychological well-being evolve. Secondly, as our focus was on understanding the experiences of women who were involuntarily single, we did not account for male perspectives on the phenomenon. However, incorporating male perspectives on involuntary could also provide nuances that are missed, which may explain why females may feel the way they do, further illuminating the underlying reasons for our findings. Moreover, our study found that young adults in their early 30s reported lower psychological well-being than those in their early 20s, suggesting that experiences of involuntary singlehood may change with age. Hence, future research could benefit from including older adults to examine how involuntary singlehood is experienced across different life stages and to reveal evolving coping mechanisms, motivations, and values in later adulthood. Lastly, given the taboo nature of the subject, our sample may have consisted of females who were more open to sharing and could represent individuals with more open-minded views on such matters. Nevertheless, it could also reflect the changing times, although such attitudes were outside the scope of our exploration and could be worth studying in the future.

The practical implications of this study are significant. It highlights the importance of recognizing and supporting the emotional needs of single women, not only through mental health services but also through inclusive public policies, awareness campaigns, and the creation of social spaces that foster connection. Relationship coaching approaches could also be considered that incorporate these desires and help women to better navigate an increasingly complex dating scene. Theoretically, this research contributes to the limited literature on singlehood in Southeast Asia, emphasizing the value of

understanding singlehood not as a deficiency but as a valid and evolving life experience. These findings also challenge the notion that romantic partnership is essential for psychological well-being, underscoring the importance of viewing singlehood through a nuanced and individualized lens.

Conclusion

Single women often describe facing social challenges especially pressure to marry before a culturally defined ideal age. In particular, there are three important takeaways from our findings. First, factors of involuntary singlehood contributed come from internal and external factors. Our findings provide novel evidence that some reasons for being single are due to limited opportunity to be in a relationship or a lack of social skills. Second, different individuals experience varied challenges. Most of the individuals experienced stigma and negative stereotypes associated with being single. Meanwhile, some individuals need to balance their own social life and fulfill societal expectations. Third, we found that single women showed strengths in areas such as personal growth and autonomy, while they faced challenges in self-acceptance and purpose in life. Most young adults currently express positive psychological well-being. However, due to the persistent circumstances they are facing, the experience may ultimately lean toward the negative. As the study focuses on gender specific issues, future research could consider including men in future studies to compare the gendered experience of involuntary singlehood.

Ethical approval

The ethical approval for this study was granted by Dr. Jalil Md Desa and Dr. Ahmad Albattat from APU Research Ethics Committee, Asia Pacific University of Technology and Innovation, with the reference number APUFE/10/2025. In addition, all participants were provided with consents that highlight their voluntary participation, how the data will be used in the research and how their confidentiality will be maintained during and after the study.

Author contributions

Conceptualization: Sofeeyah Mohamad Sidik, Raihan Munira Moh Sani. Data curation: Sofeeyah Mohamad Sidik, Raihan Munira Moh Sani. Formal analysis: Sofeeyah Mohamad Sidik, Raihan Munira Moh Sani, Jonathan Kuek Han Loong. Investigation: Sofeeyah Mohamad Sidik, Raihan Munira Moh Sani. Methodology: Sofeeyah Mohamad Sidik, Raihan Munira Moh Sani. Project administration: Sofeeyah Mohamad Sidik, Raihan Munira Moh Sani. Resources: Sofeeyah Mohamad Sidik, Raihan Munira Moh Sani, Jonathan Kuek Han Loong. Supervision: Raihan Munira Moh Sani. Writing – original draft: Sofeeyah Mohamad Sidik, Raihan Munira Moh Sani, Jonathan Kuek Han Loong. Writing – review & editing: Sofeeyah Mohamad Sidik, Raihan Munira Moh Sani, Jonathan Kuek Han Loong

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Data availability statement

Data are available on request to the authors

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