

Contexts of Loneliness in Women Choosing Voluntary Singlehood: A Qualitative Study in Mexico

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to explore the emotional, sociocultural, and existential contexts of loneliness among women in Mexico who have consciously chosen voluntary singlehood.

Methods and Materials: This research employed a qualitative exploratory design using semi-structured interviews to capture the lived experiences of women identifying as voluntarily single. A total of 22 participants aged between 27 and 49 years were recruited through purposive sampling from various regions in Mexico, including Mexico City, Guadalajara, Puebla, and Monterrey. Interviews were conducted in Spanish, recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's framework, supported by NVivo 14 software for systematic coding and organization. Rigor was ensured through member checking, peer debriefing, and maintenance of an audit trail throughout the analysis process.

Findings: Three overarching themes emerged: (1) Emotional Landscapes of Solitude, describing women's redefinition of loneliness as reflective solitude balanced with emotional ambivalence; (2) Sociocultural Frames of Expectation, capturing the influence of cultural scripts, family pressure, and stigma in shaping the social experience of singlehood; and (3) Strategies of Meaning-Making and Self-Construction, reflecting participants' agency in redefining fulfillment, establishing supportive social networks, and framing singlehood as a feminist and existential choice.

Conclusion: Voluntary singlehood among women in Mexico represents a complex psychosocial process of self-definition within traditional cultural boundaries. Loneliness in this context is best understood not as deprivation but as an evolving emotional state rooted in agency, meaning-making, and resistance to normative gender expectations.

Keywords: *Voluntary singlehood; loneliness; women; cultural expectations.*

1. Introduction

The notion of singlehood has undergone profound social and psychological transformation in recent decades, challenging long-standing cultural associations between adulthood, marriage, and fulfillment. The growing number of individuals, particularly women, who consciously choose to remain single represents not only a demographic trend but also a cultural reconfiguration of intimacy, independence, and identity (Kumar & Mukherjee, 2025; Lee et al., 2025). Across societies, the meanings attributed to singlehood vary significantly, reflecting local gender norms, religious traditions, and evolving conceptions of selfhood. In many contexts, singlehood is still viewed through a deficit lens—equated with loneliness, incompleteness, or social deviation—despite mounting evidence that voluntary singlehood may reflect personal autonomy and a deliberate strategy for well-being (Kislev, 2020; Lesch & Alberta, 2018).

The experience of loneliness within voluntary singlehood has attracted growing scholarly interest as researchers seek to disentangle emotional solitude from social marginalization (Adamczyk, 2016; Beutel et al., 2017). Loneliness is not a uniform condition; it fluctuates across the lifespan (Luhmann & Hawkey, 2016), varies between genders (Nicolaisen & Thorsen, 2023), and is influenced by socioeconomic, cultural, and psychological factors (Træen & Kvalem, 2022; Valle et al., 2022). While much prior research has focused on involuntary singlehood or the consequences of widowhood and divorce, fewer studies have explored how women who *choose* to remain single construct meanings around solitude and belonging. In this light, voluntary singlehood emerges not as a social failure but as a complex identity negotiation balancing autonomy and emotional needs (Parlak & Tekin, 2020; Símónardóttir, 2024).

The psychological implications of choosing to remain single are deeply intertwined with perceptions of agency and self-determination. Research suggests that single individuals with greater clarity about their relational goals experience lower loneliness and higher subjective well-being (Kredl et al., 2025). This aligns with findings that emotional outcomes are not determined solely by relationship status but by the quality of one's social connections and satisfaction with chosen lifestyles (Shiovitz-Ezra & Ayalon, 2011; Træen & Kvalem, 2022). In societies where marriage is idealized, voluntary singlehood often represents resistance against normative pressures and gendered expectations

(Símónardóttir, 2024; Yoshida, 2023). For many women, this resistance requires navigating both empowerment and stigma—a dual experience of freedom and alienation that defines the emotional context of single life.

Sociological analyses further highlight that singlehood is embedded in cultural systems that privilege coupledness as the normative unit of adulthood (Stahnke et al., 2023; Yodovich & Lahad, 2017). Women who remain unmarried often confront contradictory cultural messages: they are encouraged to pursue education and professional success yet simultaneously judged for prioritizing independence over traditional family formation (Arnosó et al., 2022; Huda et al., 2022). Studies in diverse regions, including Spain, South Africa, and Japan, indicate that women's experiences of singlehood are filtered through social class, religion, and gender hierarchies, which shape both their opportunities for self-realization and their vulnerability to social isolation (Arnosó et al., 2022; Lesch & Alberta, 2018; Yoshida, 2023).

Although loneliness is often assumed to be a universal correlate of singlehood, empirical research challenges this generalization. Population-based studies reveal that while loneliness is indeed prevalent among older adults and marginalized groups, it also manifests differently depending on voluntary or involuntary status (Ausín et al., 2017; Beutel et al., 2017). Voluntary singles may experience solitude not as deprivation but as emotional space for growth and creativity (Parlak & Tekin, 2020; Símónardóttir, 2024). Nevertheless, structural conditions—such as work instability, limited social policies for singles, and cultural expectations of marriage—can amplify social and emotional isolation, particularly among women (Bąk-Grabowska et al., 2021; Wickens et al., 2021). These contradictions highlight the necessity of examining singlehood as a contextual and intersectional phenomenon, rather than a mere marital status.

Gender plays a decisive role in shaping the meanings and experiences of singlehood. Comparative studies demonstrate that women's loneliness is more strongly influenced by social stigma and family expectations than by the absence of intimate relationships per se (Arnosó et al., 2022; Nicolaisen & Thorsen, 2023). The internalization of cultural scripts regarding femininity, motherhood, and partnership often produces ambivalence in women who choose nontraditional life paths. In South African and Polish contexts, for instance, single women describe a tension between personal autonomy and social recognition—a condition that mirrors experiences reported in Western and Asian societies alike (Lesch & Alberta, 2018; Mynarska & Rytel, 2017; Yoshida,

2023). This ambivalence reflects what Kislev (Kislev, 2020) terms the “relational paradox” of modern singlehood: a simultaneous desire for intimacy and independence within environments that still define adulthood through relational attachment.

Beyond psychological and cultural dimensions, the COVID-19 pandemic further exposed vulnerabilities linked to solitude and gender. Studies during and after the pandemic show that social distancing measures exacerbated loneliness among women, particularly those living alone, by disrupting informal support systems and heightening emotional stress (Stickley & Ueda, 2022; Wickens et al., 2021). Yet, qualitative findings also reveal that some women used isolation as an opportunity for self-reflection and personal transformation, reframing solitude as a site of empowerment rather than deprivation (Arnosó et al., 2022; Valle et al., 2022). Such perspectives underscore the heterogeneity of single women’s experiences: while some encounter social alienation, others find meaning, productivity, and peace in solitary living.

Research on voluntary childlessness offers a useful comparative lens for understanding voluntary singlehood. Both phenomena involve conscious departures from traditional life scripts and the negotiation of societal judgment (Parlak & Tekin, 2020; Shaw, 2010). Women who remain single by choice often share narratives with voluntarily childfree women—stories of self-determination, stigma management, and the redefinition of femininity (Símonardóttir, 2024). These narratives contest essentialist notions that equate womanhood with caregiving and relational dependency. Instead, they reflect the emergence of what Yoshida (Yoshida, 2023 294929) describes as *anomic independence*—a lifestyle choice that both challenges and is constrained by structural inequalities in employment, housing, and social policy.

Cross-national findings suggest that satisfaction with singlehood depends on psychological variables such as relationship clarity, social support, and alignment between personal values and lifestyle choices (Adamczyk, 2016; Kredl et al., 2025). Individuals who perceive their single status as a deliberate and coherent life choice report higher well-being than those who see it as circumstantial or imposed (Kumar & Mukherjee, 2025; Lee et al., 2025). Moreover, the emotional experience of singlehood cannot be isolated from broader social transformations: delayed marriage, economic precarity, and changing gender ideologies have collectively redefined intimacy and

domestic life (Luhmann & Hawkley, 2016; Træen & Kvalem, 2022).

Importantly, scholars note that women’s engagement with work and self-development can simultaneously alleviate and reproduce loneliness. Employment often provides structure, community, and validation, but may also reinforce social perceptions that single women are “career-focused” at the expense of relational life (Bak-Grabowska et al., 2021; Stahnke et al., 2023). As Huda et al. (Huda et al., 2022) argue in their study of women’s agency under structural constraint, the negotiation between autonomy and vulnerability remains central to understanding gendered experiences of social isolation.

Despite increasing normalization of single lifestyles in urban environments, single women still face subtle exclusion in institutional and policy domains. The absence of legal recognition for single-person households in many welfare systems, combined with persistent cultural biases, limits social support for single women (Arnosó et al., 2022; Beutel et al., 2017). Furthermore, age intersects with singlehood to produce distinct emotional patterns: while younger women may celebrate independence, older single women often report heightened experiences of invisibility and marginalization (Nicolaisen & Thorsen, 2023; Stahnke et al., 2023). Nevertheless, cross-generational research indicates that loneliness is not inevitable—emotional satisfaction depends more on social engagement and internalized acceptance than chronological age (Luhmann & Hawkley, 2016; Valle et al., 2022).

In light of these theoretical and empirical insights, the present study explores the contexts of loneliness among women who have chosen voluntary singlehood in Mexico.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study design and Participant

This study adopted a qualitative exploratory design to gain an in-depth understanding of the contexts and meanings of loneliness among women who have chosen voluntary singlehood. The qualitative approach allowed for rich and nuanced descriptions of participants’ lived experiences, social contexts, and emotional narratives. The study was conducted in Mexico, a setting where cultural expectations regarding marriage and womanhood remain highly influential.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify participants who self-identified as women who had consciously chosen to remain single. Inclusion criteria

required participants to be over 25 years of age, have no current or past marital experience, and express a personal decision to remain unmarried. Recruitment was facilitated through social media platforms, women's professional networks, and word-of-mouth invitations.

A total of 22 participants took part in the study. They represented diverse socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, and their ages ranged from 27 to 49 years. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached—that is, the point at which new interviews yielded no additional themes or insights relevant to the study objectives.

2.2. Measures

Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews, which offered flexibility for participants to elaborate on their perspectives while ensuring consistency across interviews. An interview guide was designed to explore key dimensions such as personal definitions of loneliness, perceived sources of emotional isolation, coping mechanisms, social stigma, and the influence of cultural norms on the singlehood experience.

Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and was conducted in a private and comfortable environment, either face-to-face or through secure online platforms. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent, and participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality throughout the process. The recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim in Spanish and then reviewed for linguistic and contextual accuracy.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the principles of thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process was iterative and interpretive, aiming to identify patterned meanings across the data set. Transcripts were imported into NVivo 14 software to facilitate systematic coding, categorization, and organization of emerging themes.

The analysis proceeded in several stages:

1. Familiarization: Researchers repeatedly read the transcripts to gain a holistic understanding of participants' narratives.
2. Initial Coding: Open coding was performed line-by-line to capture salient phrases and meanings related to loneliness, autonomy, and social perception.

3. Theme Development: Codes were grouped into categories reflecting broader conceptual patterns, which were refined into overarching themes that represented distinct contexts of loneliness.
4. Review and Refinement: Themes were compared across cases to ensure internal coherence and external distinction, and interpretations were discussed among the research team for analytical rigor.

To enhance trustworthiness, the study employed strategies such as member checking, peer debriefing, and audit trails documenting analytical decisions. Reflexive notes were maintained to ensure awareness of researchers' positionality and potential biases in interpreting participants' experiences.

3. Findings and Results

A total of 22 women participated in this qualitative study, all of whom resided in various regions of Mexico, including Mexico City ($n = 9$), Guadalajara ($n = 6$), Puebla ($n = 4$), and Monterrey ($n = 3$). The participants ranged in age from 27 to 49 years, with the majority ($n = 14$; 63.6%) between 30 and 40 years old. In terms of educational background, 11 participants (50%) held university degrees, 7 (31.8%) had completed postgraduate education, and 4 (18.2%) had completed secondary or technical education. Regarding employment status, 15 participants (68.2%) were employed full-time in professional or administrative positions, 4 (18.2%) were self-employed or freelancers, and 3 (13.6%) were temporarily unemployed or between jobs.

In relation to socioeconomic status, most participants ($n = 16$; 72.7%) identified as belonging to the middle class, while 4 (18.2%) described themselves as upper-middle class, and 2 (9.1%) as lower-middle class. The majority ($n = 19$; 86.4%) lived independently, either alone or with friends, while 3 participants (13.6%) lived with family members. All participants self-identified as single by personal choice, with none having been previously married or in long-term cohabiting partnerships. In terms of religious affiliation, 12 participants (54.5%) identified as Catholic, 6 (27.3%) described themselves as spiritual but non-religious, and 4 (18.2%) reported no religious affiliation. Collectively, the sample reflected a diverse range of life experiences, professions, and personal philosophies regarding autonomy, belonging, and emotional fulfillment within voluntary singlehood.

Table 1
Thematic Structure of the Contexts of Loneliness in Women Choosing Voluntary Singlehood

Main Themes (Categories)	Subthemes (Subcategories)	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Emotional Landscapes of Solitude	1.1 Shifting Meanings of Loneliness	Personal redefinition of solitude; distinction between loneliness and aloneness; acceptance of independence; emotional neutrality toward being alone
	1.2 Emotional Ambivalence	Coexistence of freedom and emptiness; nostalgia for intimacy; fear of dependency; emotional oscillation between pride and sadness
	1.3 Inner Dialogue and Self-Reflection	Self-talk during solitude; journaling or introspection; confronting past attachments; growing emotional self-awareness
	1.4 Coping and Emotional Regulation	Engagement in creative activities; mindfulness practices; emotional self-soothing; reframing loneliness as personal time
	1.5 Desire and Emotional Needs	Longing for connection; selective emotional openness; resistance to emotional vulnerability; redefinition of love beyond partnership
2. Sociocultural Frames of Expectation	2.1 Cultural Scripts on Womanhood	Marriage as moral duty; social labeling of single women; pressure to fulfill traditional roles; internalization of gendered expectations
	2.2 Family and Social Pressures	Questions from relatives; parental disappointment; subtle guilt induction; social gatherings as sites of comparison
	2.3 Stigma and Social Visibility	Being pitied or criticized; avoidance of intrusive conversations; managing public identity; social invisibility after certain age
	2.4 Professional Identity as Compensation	Career success as validation; overinvestment in work life; work as refuge from social judgment
	2.5 Generational and Urban Differences	Acceptance in metropolitan settings; resistance in rural areas; intergenerational dialogue about autonomy; evolving norms in younger women
	2.6 Media and Representation	Lack of positive single female models; stereotypes in films and television; social media as a space of both empowerment and comparison
3. Strategies of Meaning-Making and Self-Construction	3.1 Redefining Success and Fulfillment	Shifting from relational success to personal growth; valuing autonomy over conformity; expanding self-concept beyond marital status
	3.2 Social Networks and Companionship Alternatives	Building friendships as emotional families; engagement in online communities; adopting pets as companions; volunteer work as social connection
	3.3 Spiritual and Existential Anchors	Spiritual self-reliance; connecting with nature; meaning-seeking through religion or philosophy; existential acceptance of solitude
	3.4 Future Orientation and Life Planning	Financial independence; living arrangements for later life; acceptance of aging alone; reframing future without marriage anxiety
	3.5 Agency and Feminist Consciousness	Awareness of gender norms; political dimension of choosing singlehood; rejecting patriarchal validation; empowerment through self-definition
	3.6 Emotional Resilience and Growth	Learning emotional boundaries; increased self-compassion; resilience from past relationships; emotional maturity through solitude
	3.7 Community and Belonging	Formation of single women's circles; activism for lifestyle acceptance; finding belonging in shared values rather than marital ties

Theme 1: Emotional Landscapes of Solitude

The first overarching theme, *Emotional Landscapes of Solitude*, captures the participants' nuanced emotional experiences and inner negotiations with loneliness as women who consciously chose singlehood. Many women described a gradual redefinition of loneliness, transforming it from a sign of deprivation into a meaningful and chosen solitude. They spoke of learning to distinguish between "being alone" and "feeling lonely," often emphasizing that solitude could be "a companion, not a punishment." As one 34-year-old participant explained, *"People assume I must be sad because I live alone, but honestly, I feel peace in my space — it's my own world."* However, this sense of peace coexisted with emotional ambivalence, as participants oscillated between empowerment and longing. Several mentioned nights when

the absence of emotional intimacy felt heavier, particularly during holidays or family events, while others admitted that maintaining independence sometimes conflicted with desires for closeness: *"I miss affection sometimes, but not the kind that takes away my freedom."*

Participants also described extensive inner dialogues and self-reflection as mechanisms to process emotional solitude. Journaling, creative writing, and meditative routines were cited as ways to confront emotional voids and past attachments. Through these reflective practices, many experienced increased emotional clarity and self-awareness. Coping and emotional regulation emerged through self-care strategies such as engaging in art, mindfulness, or personal rituals that provided emotional grounding. One woman noted, *"When loneliness comes, I paint; it's how I speak to*

the silence.” Finally, participants articulated their desires and emotional needs in nontraditional ways, reframing affection and love as experiences that could exist outside romantic partnerships. This subtheme reflected an emerging understanding that emotional fulfillment could stem from friendship, spirituality, or self-expression rather than dependency on another person.

Theme 2: Sociocultural Frames of Expectation

The second major theme, *Sociocultural Frames of Expectation*, reveals the social and cultural pressures shaping the participants’ experiences of singlehood and loneliness in Mexico’s predominantly family-oriented culture. Participants expressed that cultural scripts of womanhood still equate marriage with virtue and social legitimacy, leading to feelings of marginalization. As one 39-year-old respondent put it, *“In my town, being unmarried after 30 makes people whisper that something is wrong with you.”* Such scripts were reinforced through family and social pressures, with participants recounting recurring conversations with relatives urging them to “settle down” or expressing disappointment. For some, family gatherings were emotionally taxing, becoming moments of comparison and judgment.

The stigma and social visibility of being single also contributed to feelings of loneliness. Several participants shared experiences of pity or unsolicited advice from peers and coworkers, while others described a sense of invisibility at social functions designed around couples. *“You start to feel like an observer, not a participant,”* said a 31-year-old engineer. To counteract this, some women turned toward professional identity as compensation, investing in their careers as a means of validation and social respectability. For many, professional success symbolized autonomy and shielded them from criticism, though it also risked reinforcing stereotypes of “career women who sacrificed love.”

Subthemes also emerged around generational and urban differences, with participants noting greater acceptance of single lifestyles in metropolitan settings like Mexico City compared to rural regions. Younger women, in particular, were perceived as more vocal in defending their autonomy. Media and representation further shaped perceptions, as participants criticized the scarcity of positive single female figures in Mexican media. Social media, however, provided mixed effects: while it offered empowerment and visibility for single women, it also intensified social comparison and loneliness through curated portrayals of romantic or family life.

Theme 3: Strategies of Meaning-Making and Self-Construction

The third theme, *Strategies of Meaning-Making and Self-Construction*, encompasses the adaptive and identity-reconstructive processes through which participants navigated and transcended their experiences of loneliness. A central aspect was redefining success and fulfillment, as women shifted their life goals from relational validation to self-development and autonomy. One participant reflected, *“I stopped measuring happiness by having a husband. Now I measure it by the peace I have with myself.”* This cognitive shift represented an emancipatory reframing of social norms, emphasizing internal validation over conformity.

Participants also developed social networks and companionship alternatives, forming emotionally supportive relationships outside romantic contexts. Close friendships, online communities, and volunteer networks became key sources of belonging. Some described their pets as “emotional partners,” while others built informal “families of choice.” Similarly, spiritual and existential anchors played a significant role, with participants citing meditation, connection to nature, or faith as tools to cultivate inner peace. One participant stated, *“In my quiet mornings, I feel connected to something bigger than love — something like serenity.”*

The theme further revealed participants’ forward-looking reflections through future orientation and life planning, where they considered aging, financial security, and independence in later life without fear or social anxiety. The notion of agency and feminist consciousness was also salient, as participants framed their singlehood as a political and philosophical stance challenging patriarchal definitions of female worth. As one respondent said, *“Being single is not a failure; it’s my way of saying I belong to myself.”* Finally, emotional resilience and growth emerged as an outcome of sustained self-reliance and introspection. Many women viewed solitude as a form of strength, stating that enduring and embracing it had expanded their emotional maturity. Within community and belonging, several participants reported forming or joining networks of women advocating for social recognition of voluntary singlehood, emphasizing that their choice was both legitimate and fulfilling.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study illuminate the complex and multidimensional contexts of loneliness experienced by

women who have chosen voluntary singlehood in Mexico. Through thematic analysis, three major themes emerged—emotional landscapes of solitude, sociocultural frames of expectation, and strategies of meaning-making and self-construction—each revealing distinct yet interconnected aspects of how women interpret, experience, and cope with solitude in a culture where marriage remains a social ideal. The results indicate that voluntary singlehood is not merely an individual lifestyle choice but a socially negotiated process that involves emotional self-regulation, cultural resistance, and redefinition of fulfillment. This discussion situates these findings within the broader literature on loneliness, gender, and singlehood, demonstrating both consistencies and divergences with previous studies.

The participants' accounts revealed that loneliness in voluntary singlehood is often reframed as *chosen solitude* rather than *emotional deprivation*. This transformation aligns with findings from studies emphasizing that loneliness is not inherently negative but contextually defined by the quality of one's relationships and sense of agency (Adamczyk, 2016; Beutel et al., 2017). In this study, women described solitude as an opportunity for emotional self-discovery and reflection rather than as a symptom of social disconnection. Similar to Lesch's phenomenological analysis of South African single women, participants portrayed solitude as both liberating and introspective, reflecting an evolving narrative of selfhood that challenges traditional femininity (Lesch & Alberta, 2018).

Nevertheless, participants' ambivalence toward solitude—marked by oscillations between empowerment and vulnerability—confirms the coexistence of autonomy and longing found in earlier research on the “relational paradox” of singlehood (Kislev, 2020). This paradox encapsulates the tension between valuing independence and desiring intimacy, suggesting that voluntary singlehood does not equate to emotional disengagement. Rather, it reflects a dynamic negotiation of personal boundaries. Women in this study often used introspective practices such as journaling and meditation to process solitude, consistent with findings that emotional regulation strategies mitigate the psychological risks of prolonged aloneness (Træen & Kvalem, 2022). Emotional neutrality toward being alone, as reported by several participants, also supports the claim that subjective satisfaction with singlehood depends more on psychological adaptation than marital status (Adamczyk, 2016; Kredl et al., 2025).

However, despite this adaptive redefinition, traces of emotional ambivalence persisted, especially during family-

oriented events or moments of social comparison. These experiences echo cross-cultural studies highlighting that emotional loneliness is situational and socially induced rather than continuous (Stickley & Ueda, 2022; Valle et al., 2022). Some women described temporary episodes of sadness tied to cultural rituals such as holidays or weddings, demonstrating how emotional well-being fluctuates in response to social environments that privilege coupledness. This observation parallels findings from Beutel et al. (Beutel et al., 2017), who noted that the perception of loneliness often stems from the incongruence between personal lifestyles and societal expectations. Therefore, the emotional dimension of voluntary singlehood can be understood as an active and ongoing process of meaning-making rather than a static psychological state.

The second major theme—*sociocultural frames of expectation*—underscored how cultural narratives of womanhood and marriage shape the social experience of loneliness. In Mexico's traditional context, participants reported feeling constrained by norms equating femininity with partnership, echoing global findings that cultural scripts of gender continue to define women's social legitimacy (Arnosó et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2025). These women's accounts confirm that singlehood often represents both a form of liberation and a site of social marginalization. As in the work of Símonardóttir (Símonardóttir, 2024) and Parlak (Parlak & Tekin), participants described social stigma as an ever-present backdrop to their lives, manifesting through family pressure, unsolicited pity, and questions about their “failure” to conform.

Consistent with prior research, the participants' testimonies revealed that social expectations surrounding marriage remain a powerful determinant of women's emotional experiences (Mynarska & Rytel, 2017; Yoshida, 2023). The persistent equation of singlehood with deficiency rather than choice reflects what Yoshida (Yoshida, 2023) conceptualizes as “anomic independence,” a condition in which women's autonomy is simultaneously celebrated and pathologized. This ambivalence reinforces earlier feminist analyses showing that women who deviate from relational norms are often subject to moral scrutiny and symbolic exclusion (Lesch & Alberta, 2018; Shaw, 2010). Within the Mexican cultural landscape, this manifests as family interventions and subtle guilt induction, consistent with cross-national observations of relational pressure among single women in collectivist societies (Kumar & Mukherjee, 2025).

The findings also suggest that socioeconomic and urban differences mediate how single women experience loneliness and stigma. Participants in metropolitan areas such as Mexico City described greater acceptance of singlehood, reflecting broader global trends where urbanization and individualization foster alternative life paths (Bąk-Grabowska et al., 2021; Kislev, 2020). In contrast, women from smaller towns encountered intensified social scrutiny, supporting the view that community cohesion in traditional settings often amplifies conformity pressures (Valle et al., 2022). Moreover, family expectations remained gendered and intergenerational, echoing the longitudinal findings of Nicolaisen (Nicolaisen & Thorsen, 2023), who identified enduring cultural disparities in how men and women experience social isolation.

Interestingly, participants often compensated for social judgment through professional achievement—a coping mechanism observed in similar studies on women’s empowerment and nontraditional work roles (Bąk-Grabowska et al., 2021; Stahnke et al., 2023). For these women, career success provided not only financial independence but also moral legitimacy, reinforcing the notion that work can serve as both a refuge and a platform for identity construction. However, this adaptation is double-edged: while it enhances self-esteem, it may also reproduce stereotypes that single women prioritize careers over emotional life (Arnosó et al., 2022; Huda et al., 2022). The interplay of empowerment and stigma mirrors the broader sociocultural dynamics identified by Simonardóttir (Simonardóttir, 2024), who found that women’s autonomy continues to be interpreted through patriarchal lenses that equate relational absence with emotional deficiency. Thus, the results underscore that the emotional experience of loneliness among voluntarily single women cannot be divorced from the cultural, economic, and gendered structures in which it unfolds.

The final theme—*strategies of meaning-making and self-construction*—captures the ways in which participants redefined success, belonging, and identity through voluntary singlehood. Many described a deliberate process of reconstructing self-worth independent of marital status, consistent with the notion of *self-determined singlehood* observed in studies across Europe and Asia (Kredl et al., 2025; Kumar & Mukherjee, 2025). This internal reorientation aligns with evidence that individuals with greater relational clarity and alignment between values and lifestyle report higher well-being and lower loneliness (Adamczyk, 2016; Træen & Kvalem, 2022). The

participants’ emphasis on autonomy and peace reflects a psychological adaptation to solitude that is more attuned to meaning-making than to avoidance of loneliness.

Participants developed multifaceted strategies to maintain emotional balance, such as cultivating close friendships, joining social or professional networks, and engaging in creative or spiritual practices. These findings echo the intersectional insights of Arnoso et al. (Arnosó et al., 2022), who argued that social support networks act as protective factors against loneliness in women facing structural or cultural marginalization. Similarly, the notion of alternative companionship—expressed through friendships, online communities, and self-selected families—supports the broader idea that intimacy in modern societies is no longer confined to romantic relationships (Lesch & Alberta, 2018; Yodovich & Lahad, 2017). In this sense, voluntary singlehood can be viewed as an evolving social identity rather than a transitional state.

A noteworthy observation concerns participants’ forward-looking attitudes and acceptance of aging alone. Many articulated detailed plans for financial independence, living arrangements, and emotional security, demonstrating an anticipatory approach to single life. This finding aligns with long-term studies indicating that emotional satisfaction among singles is linked to proactive life planning and internalized acceptance (Luhmann & Hawkey, 2016; Nicolaisen & Thorsen, 2023). Spirituality also emerged as a recurring theme, with participants invoking religion, mindfulness, or existential reflection as tools for constructing meaning in solitude—an aspect comparable to Yoshida’s (Yoshida, 2023) theorization of singlehood as an existential condition of autonomy.

Furthermore, the study revealed that voluntary singlehood for many participants carried a feminist dimension, representing resistance against patriarchal norms and reassertion of agency over one’s body and choices. This is consistent with Kumar’s (Kumar & Mukherjee, 2025) ethnographic research in India and Simonardóttir’s (Simonardóttir, 2024) exploration of voluntarily childfree women, both of which depict singlehood as a site of gendered self-realization. By redefining success through personal growth and self-sufficiency, participants challenged the traditional gender contract that links women’s worth to marital status. Yet, while autonomy was empowering, it was also emotionally taxing, reflecting the “cost of independence” observed in global singlehood research (Parlak & Tekin, 2020; Yoshida, 2023).

Overall, these findings advance the conceptualization of loneliness as an *interactive phenomenon*—a product of personal agency within social structures that privilege coupling. The emotional and social experiences of single women in Mexico resonate with patterns observed in Western, African, and Asian contexts, underscoring both the universality and specificity of female singlehood (Arnosó et al., 2022; Beutel et al., 2017; Lesch & Alberta, 2018). The participants' narratives illustrate that voluntary singlehood involves an ongoing dialectic between freedom and belonging, choice and constraint, solitude and social connection. These results not only validate but extend existing frameworks by emphasizing the interplay between individual meaning-making and cultural context in shaping the emotional realities of single life.

5. Limitations and Suggestions

This study, while providing rich insights into the lived experiences of voluntarily single women in Mexico, is limited by several factors. First, the sample size of 22 participants, though appropriate for qualitative inquiry, restricts generalizability. The findings capture in-depth personal meanings rather than population-level patterns. Second, participants were largely urban and educated, which may not represent the diversity of experiences among women in rural or conservative regions. The urban bias might overrepresent narratives of empowerment and underrepresent those facing harsher social sanctions. Third, all participants self-identified as voluntarily single, yet degrees of voluntariness are fluid; some may have internalized external constraints as personal choices. Finally, the researcher's interpretive role and cultural positioning might have influenced the analysis despite reflexive efforts. Future research should integrate intersectional and cross-cultural comparisons to expand the theoretical scope.

Future studies should explore cross-national comparisons of voluntary singlehood across Latin American, European, and Asian contexts to understand how cultural and economic variables shape the meanings of solitude and belonging. Quantitative or mixed-methods research could also assess psychological well-being, resilience, and social support among single women to complement qualitative insights. Moreover, investigating age and life stage variations—for instance, between younger single women and those approaching midlife—may reveal developmental shifts in attitudes toward autonomy and emotional connection. Longitudinal designs could examine how these meanings

evolve over time, particularly in relation to societal changes in gender norms, digital connectivity, and family policies. Finally, future work might examine intersectional identities such as class, sexuality, and ethnicity, which intersect with singlehood to produce diverse experiences of empowerment and exclusion.

Practically, the findings underscore the need for social and institutional recognition of voluntary singlehood as a valid and fulfilling life choice. Community programs and mental health interventions should adopt inclusive frameworks that acknowledge nontraditional lifestyles and support emotional well-being among single adults. Media and educational systems can play a transformative role by normalizing alternative narratives of womanhood, emphasizing independence, friendship, and personal growth alongside relational fulfillment. Policymakers should consider expanding social protection systems to accommodate single-person households, ensuring equitable access to housing, healthcare, and social participation. Moreover, counselors and therapists working with single clients should integrate a strengths-based perspective that validates autonomy and self-defined fulfillment, fostering resilience rather than pathologizing solitude.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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