

The Duality of Satisfaction and Loneliness: A Sociological Analysis of the Lifestyle of Employed Women with Definitive Singlehood

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ABSTRACT

The present study was conducted with the aim of providing a sociological analysis of the lifestyle of employed women with definitive singlehood in the city of Tehran. The research adopted a qualitative methodology based on the grounded theory approach. The study population consisted of 25 employed single women aged between 40 and 50 years who had never married. Sampling was carried out using theoretical and purposive techniques. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Data analysis was performed based on the three-stage coding process and the five-dimensional paradigmatic model proposed by Strauss and Corbin. Upon completion of the coding process, the final research model—entitled The Modern Single Lifestyle of Employed Women Based on the Dual Feeling of Satisfaction and Loneliness—was developed. This model was organized into five dimensions: causal conditions (economic and occupational satisfaction, life satisfaction, marriage criteria, barriers to marriage, and inclination toward singlehood), contextual conditions (deep social and familial bonds, a supportive family, self-sufficiency, independence, and personal conduct), intervening conditions (economic dissatisfaction, marriage conditions, and social status), strategies (fluid leisure patterns, individual-centered religiosity, relationship management, social lifestyle, criteria-based social interaction, leisure-oriented practices, and time-oriented leisure), and consequences (the advantages and benefits of singlehood, as well as its challenges and limitations).

Keywords: lifestyle; employed women; singlehood; grounded theory; definitive singlehood.

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Introduction

The findings of the present study reveal that the lifestyle of employed women with permanent singlehood is shaped through a complex configuration of causal, contextual, intervening, and strategic conditions that together produce a dual emotional experience of satisfaction and loneliness. One of the central results is that economic and occupational satisfaction functions as a key causal condition reinforcing permanent singlehood as a viable and even desirable lifestyle. Participants emphasized financial autonomy, job stability, and control over income as foundational resources that reduce dependence on marriage as a pathway to

security. This finding is consistent with demographic and sociological theories suggesting that women's labor market participation fundamentally alters the cost–benefit calculus of marriage (1, 2). Prior empirical research in Iran has similarly shown that employment and income are strongly associated with more favorable attitudes toward singlehood and delayed marriage among women (3, 4). The present study extends this literature by demonstrating that economic satisfaction does not merely postpone marriage but actively legitimizes a single lifestyle as complete and self-sufficient.

Another important result concerns the role of stringent marriage criteria and perceived barriers to marriage as causal conditions. Participants frequently described high expectations regarding emotional maturity, compatibility, and ethical qualities in a potential partner, alongside dissatisfaction with available marriage options. This aligns with research on marriage market mismatches, which highlights structural imbalances between men's and women's educational and socioeconomic characteristics as a growing obstacle to marriage (5). In the Iranian context, longitudinal analyses have documented a steady increase in never-married individuals partly due to these mismatches (6, 7). The findings of this study suggest that such mismatches are not passively endured but are actively interpreted by women as justification for maintaining singlehood rather than entering unsatisfactory unions. This interpretation resonates with qualitative studies emphasizing agency and reflexivity among single women in redefining marriage norms (8, 9).

The contextual conditions identified in this study, particularly deep social and familial ties and the presence of a supportive family, play a crucial role in stabilizing permanent singlehood. Strong emotional bonds with family members and sustained friendships reduce the perceived necessity of marriage for emotional fulfillment. This finding is consistent with studies showing that family support can compensate for the absence of a spouse, especially in collectivist cultures where kinship networks remain strong (10, 11). At the same time, the results suggest that family support does not simply replace marriage but reshapes its meaning by lowering its symbolic centrality in women's lives. Similar patterns have been reported among never-married women in other Asian contexts, where family co-residence and interdependence coexist with growing individual autonomy (12). The present study contributes to this body of knowledge by showing how family support interacts with self-reliance to produce a stable, though non-traditional, lifestyle configuration.

Self-reliance and independence emerged as core contextual dimensions reinforcing permanent singlehood. Participants emphasized decision-making autonomy, personal competence, and the ability to manage life challenges independently. These findings align with lifestyle-based analyses that conceptualize singlehood as an arena for self-development and identity construction rather than social deficit (13). Prior research has indicated that higher education and occupational status strengthen women's confidence in managing life without marital support (4, 14). The current findings further demonstrate that independence operates not only at the material level but also at the psychological level, reinforcing a sense of completeness that reduces perceived pressure to marry.

Intervening conditions, particularly economic dissatisfaction, marriage conditions, and social status, introduce important nuances into the experience of permanent singlehood. While economic satisfaction supports singlehood, broader macroeconomic instability and inflation create uncertainties that can constrain long-term planning. This ambivalence reflects broader demographic trends in which economic volatility simultaneously delays marriage and generates anxiety about future security (1). Participants'

accounts suggest that unfavorable marriage conditions, including lack of suitable partners and misaligned life circumstances, further mediate the relationship between causal conditions and lifestyle strategies. These findings echo previous qualitative studies showing that permanent singlehood often results from an accumulation of postponed decisions rather than a single definitive choice (8, 9).

Social status, closely linked to education and occupation, also functions as an intervening condition by reshaping women's self-perceptions and social evaluations. Higher education enhances social prestige and bargaining power but may simultaneously narrow the pool of acceptable partners, reinforcing singlehood (5). This paradox has been widely discussed in demographic literature on educational homogamy and delayed marriage (2, 15). The present study adds to this discussion by illustrating how women actively integrate educational and occupational achievements into their identity, using them to counterbalance social stigma associated with non-marriage.

The strategies identified in this study reveal how employed women with permanent singlehood actively manage their daily lives to sustain both autonomy and well-being. Relationship management, characterized by controlled intimacy and selective social engagement, enables participants to maintain social connections while protecting personal boundaries. This finding is consistent with psychological research indicating that singles often cultivate diversified social networks rather than relying on a single intimate relationship (16). The emphasis on criteria-based social interaction further supports the idea that singlehood involves intentional curation of relationships rather than social withdrawal.

Leisure-related strategies, including fluid, culture-oriented, and time-managed leisure, play a central role in meaning-making and emotional regulation. Participants described flexible leisure practices that accommodate work demands while providing opportunities for socialization and personal enjoyment. This aligns with studies demonstrating strong associations between lifestyle habits, mental health, and subjective well-being (17, 18). Moreover, research has shown that engagement in meaningful leisure and physical activities can buffer feelings of loneliness, particularly among single adults (19). The present findings suggest that leisure is not a reminder but a core strategic resource for balancing satisfaction and loneliness.

Individual-centered religiosity emerged as another important strategy, reflecting a personalized and moderate approach to religious values. Rather than strict adherence to institutional norms, participants emphasized ethical boundaries, moderation, and humanistic principles. This form of religiosity allows women to maintain moral coherence without conforming to traditional marital expectations. Such findings resonate with broader sociological analyses of religious individualization in late-modern societies (15). In the Iranian context, this strategy enables women to reconcile personal autonomy with cultural and moral legitimacy.

A central contribution of this study is the identification of satisfaction and loneliness as coexisting, rather than mutually exclusive, emotional outcomes. While many participants reported high levels of life satisfaction and self-fulfillment, they also acknowledged episodic loneliness, particularly in moments of social comparison or future uncertainty. This duality aligns with recent empirical findings indicating that single women often report greater satisfaction with singlehood than men, yet still experience context-dependent loneliness (16, 20). The present study advances this literature by situating this duality within a broader lifestyle framework, showing how strategies and contextual supports moderate emotional outcomes.

The findings have important implications for management and organizational studies, as the growing presence of permanently single women in the workforce reshapes assumptions about work–life balance, career commitment, and employee well-being. Research suggests that lifestyle stability and psychological well-being are closely linked to productivity and occupational engagement (21, 22). Understanding the unique lifestyle configurations of this group can inform more inclusive organizational policies that recognize diverse life trajectories beyond marriage-centered models.

The study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the qualitative design and relatively small sample size limit the generalizability of the findings to broader populations of single women. Second, the focus on employed women in an urban context may not capture the experiences of unemployed or rural single women, whose structural conditions and coping strategies may differ. Third, the cross-sectional nature of the data restricts insight into how lifestyle strategies and emotional experiences evolve over time.

Future research is encouraged to adopt longitudinal designs to examine how permanent singlehood and lifestyle strategies change across different life stages. Comparative studies across cultural and national contexts could further illuminate how institutional arrangements and cultural norms shape the experience of singlehood. Additionally, integrating quantitative measures of well-being, loneliness, and job satisfaction with qualitative insights may provide a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest the need for workplace policies and social programs that acknowledge the diversity of family forms and living arrangements. Organizations can support employed single women by promoting flexible work schedules, inclusive benefits, and opportunities for social engagement. At the societal level, reducing stigma around singlehood and expanding access to economic and psychological resources may enhance well-being and social integration for this growing population group.

Methods and Materials

The present study is qualitative in nature and employs grounded theory for its implementation. Grounded theory is considered one of the major research strategies through which theory is developed based on the core concepts derived from empirical data. In other words, the process of theory construction in this approach follows a movement from the particular to the general. Theory generation in this method is not “armchair” or library-based; rather, it is developed from the data obtained from participants who have experienced a specific process.

The dominant approaches in grounded theory include the systematic approach associated with Strauss, the emergent approach related to Glaser, and the constructivist approach supported by Charmaz. In the present study, the systematic approach of Strauss and Corbin was used to analyze the research data. Although the construction of grounded theory requires a coherent process of data collection, coding, and analysis, Strauss and Corbin (1998) argue that these stages should be considered as overlapping rather than strictly sequential. In the early stages of the study, more time is devoted to data collection than to coding and analysis; however, as the research progresses, this balance changes. Toward the final stages, analysis becomes dominant, and only limited time is allocated to data collection to clarify ambiguities. For coding and analytical memo-writing, particularly in the initial stages, analysis must be temporarily separated from the ongoing research process to allow reflection. In later stages, as categories become clearer, analysis can

be conducted simultaneously with data collection. In the analytical process of grounded theory, interview-based and textual data are coded.

Data coding consists of three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Open coding is conducted in two phases: initial coding and secondary coding. Initial coding may be performed line by line, phrase by phrase, or paragraph by paragraph, with a concept or code assigned to each unit. In secondary coding, concepts are compared, and similar or shared elements are grouped into a single category. Consequently, a large volume of data (codes and concepts) is reduced to a limited number of major categories. These categories are then positioned alongside one another and interconnected. In axial coding, the grounded theorist selects one category from the open coding stage and places it at the center of the process under investigation as the core phenomenon, subsequently relating other categories to it. These related categories include causal conditions, strategies, contextual and intervening conditions, and consequences. This stage involves drawing a diagram referred to as the “coding paradigm.” In selective coding, based on the model developed in the previous stage, propositions or explanatory statements are formulated to link the categories of the model to one another or to construct a narrative that integrates these categories.

The study population consisted of employed single women aged 40 to 50 years who had never married and were residing in the city of Tehran. Based on the inclusion criteria (women with voluntary definitive singlehood who were employed and aged 40 to 50 years), and after obtaining informed consent for voluntary participation in the study with the right to withdraw at any stage of the research, semi-structured interviews were conducted using purposive and theoretical sampling. The interview process continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Ultimately, 25 individuals participated in the study. The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Interviewees

Participant Code	Pseudonym	Age	Education	Occupation	Living With Family or Independently
P1	Roya	44	Bachelor's degree	Tailor	With family
P2	Maryam	45	PhD student	Bank employee	With family
P3	Mahboubeh	45	PhD	Municipality employee	With family
P4	Soheila	47	Bachelor's degree	Accountant	With family
P5	Mahrokh	46	Master's degree	Teacher	Independently
P6	Marzieh	43	Bachelor's degree	Mathematics teacher	Independently
P7	Afsaneh	49	Bachelor's degree	Fitness trainer	Independently
P8	Zeinab	44	Master's degree	Carpet-weaving instructor	With family
P10	Asieh	41	Bachelor's degree	Online shop owner	With family
P11	Tayyebah	48	Master's degree	Administrative manager	With family
P12	Masoumeh	44	Bachelor's degree	Nutrition consultant	With family
P13	Forouzan	54	Bachelor's degree	Shipping company employee	With family
P14	Farzaneh	41	Bachelor's degree	Teacher	With family
P15	Samaneh	40	Master's student	Fashion designer	Independently
P16	Sepideh	47	Master's degree	Lawyer	With family
P17	Sedigheh	42	Bachelor's degree	Pharmacist	Independently

P18	Zahra	52	Bachelor's degree	Lawyer	Independently
P19	Mehrnoush	44	Associate degree	Gym instructor	Independently
P20	Kobra	45	Bachelor's degree	Language teacher	With family
P21	Farideh	48	Bachelor's degree	Bank employee	With family
P22	Mahdieh	43	PhD	Dentist	With family
P23	Sharareh	47	Bachelor's degree	Dental assistant	Independently
P24	Mahtab	42	Master's degree	Language teacher	With family
P25	Fouzieh	49	Master's degree	Bank employee	With family

In the present study, after recording the interviews, all interviews were reviewed and examined, and common patterns among them were identified and labeled. These shared patterns were then analyzed based on the Strauss and Corbin paradigmatic model and the three-stage coding method (open, axial, and selective). Ultimately, from approximately 120 meaning units, 43 subcategories and 17 main categories were extracted, forming the paradigmatic model of a modern single lifestyle based on the dual feeling of satisfaction and fear, under causal conditions, contextual conditions, strategies, consequences, and the core category. To assess the rigor and trustworthiness of the study, the following methods were employed: (1) peer review, in which manuscripts were reviewed, the unit of analysis was selected, and themes were extracted; revisions were made based on supplementary feedback from experts and participants, and suggested points were incorporated; and (2) prolonged engagement in the simultaneous analysis of data, continuous feedback to the research process, and the allocation of sufficient time for analysis.

Findings and Results

Causal conditions refer to categories related to circumstances that influence the core category. In other words, causal conditions are events or occurrences that lead to the emergence or development of a phenomenon. In relation to the phenomenon examined in this study—the lifestyle of employed women with definitive singlehood—there are also conditions that, from a social perspective, facilitate and legitimize the acceptance of this process among them. The relationship between these conditions and the phenomenon is a causal one. What is referred to as the causal conditions of this phenomenon are those circumstances that generate motivations for definitive singlehood and reinforce it. In this study, causal conditions included concepts derived from coded indicators related to the perceived need and necessity for the lifestyle of employed women with definitive singlehood. Indicators of causal conditions encompassed the categories of sense of satisfaction, marriage criteria, barriers to marriage, and inclination toward singlehood.

Table 2. Causal Conditions

Selective Coding	Axial Coding	Interview Excerpts
Sense of satisfaction	Economic satisfaction	“I have independence for myself; I have emotional independence; I live however I want and in whatever way I choose” (Participant No. 7).
	Occupational satisfaction	
	Life satisfaction	
Marriage criteria	Selectiveness	“I do not see not getting married as a problem, and I know it has been my own choice. A partner should add something to you, teach you something, and you have to see this in the other person—whether they add something to me, whether they match the personality I want. If so, then choose them. I do not think a person should choose someone or be with someone just out of loneliness; I am not like that” (Participant No. 5).

Barriers to marriage	Rigid and perfectionistic expectations and criteria in mate selection	
	Family-related barriers to marriage	“Honestly, life has many ups and downs, and when I was younger I had certain ambitions, and because of that I kept postponing marriage. After a certain age, it really became difficult for me to accept another person, and I did not get married; I could no longer align my life with someone else” (Participant No. 25).
	Increasing age and heightened selectiveness toward marriage Lost opportunities for marriage	“The most important thing was independence. In our traditional society, finding a spouse is not easy. You have to wait for someone to come and choose you, especially at the age I was at—my age was higher. And between the person who chooses you and those you might choose, their mindset has to be close to yours. That has not happened for me yet. I think singlehood, in many ways, is better and perhaps more fulfilling than marriage” (Participant No. 18).
Inclination toward singlehood	Cost–benefit evaluation of marriage	
	Inclination toward maintaining single status	“Between being single and married, despite all the shortcomings, I prefer being single” (Participant No. 4).
	Choosing and preferring singlehood	
	Satisfaction with singlehood	“It has been my own choice, and I think I am complete and have no problem in this regard, and I live my own life” (Participant No. 6).
	Conferring identity to singlehood	

The single lifestyle of women in contemporary society, as a conscious and positive choice, reflects an effort to achieve satisfaction and independence in life. One of the most important factors in this process is satisfaction with financial status and income. Through effort and perseverance, these women have attained a stable financial position that provides them with a sense of security and comfort. Satisfaction with income enables them to experience a desirable life without financial dependence on others and, through this, to achieve greater independence. The lifestyle of single women who have reached definitive singlehood may be accompanied by characteristics such as selectiveness, rigid expectations and criteria in choosing a life partner, and perfectionistic standards in mate selection. These women typically possess high standards and expectations in life that extend beyond financial and occupational aspects to include personality and ethical criteria. They often seek to take advantage of unique opportunities and distinctive experiences that contribute to their personal and professional development. This characteristic leads them to approach marriage and partner selection in an idealistic and highly selective manner. They generally maintain high expectations regarding stability, honesty, mutual respect, and personal competencies, which makes them particularly careful and cautious in choosing a life partner. Inclination toward singlehood plays a role as a means of identity formation within the lifestyle of these women. Choosing singlehood allows them to pursue their goals and aspirations without the constraints imposed by marital commitments. By experiencing the benefits of this lifestyle, they prefer to maintain this status and take advantage of greater opportunities for personal and professional growth. This inclination enables them to continue their lives with greater focus and purpose.

Contextual conditions refer to a specific set of characteristics related to the phenomenon and the particular circumstances that influence strategies. Context denotes both the distinctive attributes that signify a phenomenon and the series of specific conditions that affect action strategies. In other words, contextual conditions are a particular constellation of circumstances that converge at a specific time and

place to create a set of situations or issues to which individuals respond through their actions and interactions. Contextual conditions originate from and are intertwined with causal conditions and are the product of how these conditions intersect and integrate with one another to form diverse patterns with multiple dimensions. Indicators of contextual conditions include the categories of deep social–familial ties, a supportive family, self-reliance and independence, and personal conduct.

Table 3. Contextual Conditions

Selective Coding	Axial Coding	Interview Excerpts
Deep social and familial ties	Strong intra-family interactions	“I have very good relationships with my immediate family, and I also have a lot of interaction with my friends; most of my outings are with my friends” (Participant No. 7).
Supportive family	Choosing singlehood due to family support Supportive family	“I grew up in a family with a mother for whom being alone had a strong influence; my brother supported me, and my older brother was very supportive. I think if I had not had the financial and emotional resources my family gave me, I would never have reached this point. For me, family has been very influential” (Participant No. 16).
Self-reliance and independence	Strong family financial base Self-reliance in decision-making	“I made my own efforts and was supported by my family, but I was not solely dependent on them; I tried myself to stand on my own feet and build my life” (Participant No. 20).
Personal conduct	Lack of dependence on others Independence in life Enjoyment of solitude	“I have two dimensions: one introverted and one extroverted. Socially, I communicate with people very quickly, but when it comes to my personal issues or life problems, I am introverted and try to solve them myself rather than seeking help or talking to others. One of my major problems is that when something happens and I want to consult a psychologist, I cannot, but socially I connect with people very quickly” (Participant No. 12).
	Sense of adequacy relative to others and inadequacy relative to oneself	
	Dependency in relationships	“Without effort, a person cannot live at all, and depending on the effort you make, you can achieve results and have a better future. It is not possible to reach a better future without effort. I think in any life—single or married—one must always make that effort” (Participant No. 21).
	Introversion and weak social interaction with others	

Deep social and familial ties render the imagination of alternative or complementary positions for such ties less meaningful for these women. Strong family relationships constitute one of the key factors in choosing a single lifestyle. Women who maintain close relationships with their families typically feel that they receive sufficient emotional support and do not need to establish new and complex relationships to meet their emotional needs. These strong relationships provide them with a sense of security and tranquility and encourage them to choose a single lifestyle. One of the influential contextual conditions in the selection of a single mode of living among participants, along with its associated implications for choosing this lifestyle, is the personal conduct of these women and the characteristics and situations that reinforce such conduct and lead to delayed marriage and the choice of a single lifestyle. These women may enjoy socializing with friends, yet introversion and limited social interaction with others may also constitute part of their personality. Avoidance of crowds and a preference for solitude over social interaction increase their inclination toward a single life. Self-reliance and independence play a fundamental role in the choice of a single lifestyle among women who have reached definitive singlehood. Through self-reliance, these women

are capable of confronting daily challenges and managing their life affairs independently. They employ these skills as tools for maintaining independence alongside the companionship and support of their families. This independence is not limited to financial capability but also encompasses autonomous decision-making and choosing a life path based on personal values and goals. A lifestyle grounded in the family's supportive role diminishes the perceived importance of alternative positions such as marital and conjugal life. Family support, both directly and indirectly—through emotional backing and constructive guidance—plays a significant role in strengthening self-confidence and enhancing a sense of competence among these women. This form of support reassures them that at every stage of life they can rely on their family and benefit from necessary assistance. This sense of support and security helps them to choose and continue a single life path with greater ease and confidence.

Intervening conditions are circumstances that influence strategies and function as facilitators or constraints on strategies situated within a specific context; they shape how action strategies are enacted, make strategies easier to implement or more restricted and instrumental, and mitigate or otherwise modify causal conditions. These conditions often arise from unexpected and contingent situations that require a response through action/interaction. With respect to the phenomenon addressed in this study—namely, the ideas and motivations governing the lifestyle process of employed women with definitive singlehood—beyond the causal conditions that explain the emergence of such ideas, there are other independent variables of secondary importance that exert an intervening influence on this lifestyle process. Indicators of intervening conditions include the categories of economic dissatisfaction, marriage conditions, and social status.

Table 3. Intervening Conditions

Selective Coding	Axial Coding	Interview Excerpts
Economic dissatisfaction	Economic problems and inflation	“For a single woman, in my opinion, it is almost okay, but in the end it is the basic wage set by the Ministry of Labour. You cannot do much with this salary. If a woman wants to move toward marriage or become married, I do not think this income is suitable. But if she is single and it is only enough to cover daily needs, going out, and so on, then it is sufficient in my view. But not that I can cover all expenses with this salary, or if I intend to continue my education and want to pay my educational costs—no, it is really not enough” (Participant No. 12).
Unfavorable marriage conditions	Dissatisfaction with income level	“I had many opportunities—some of them I rejected based on my family's view, and some I rejected myself. In a way, if I had wanted, I could have married and could have had a successful marriage, but it was not that person. If it were that person, I would have married then. But in those life conditions, I did not think I was ready for marriage myself. I had several cases at that time when I wanted to marry, and if they existed now, I could marry” (Participant No. 24).
	Dissatisfaction with occupational position	
	Misalignment of marriage conditions	
Social status	Not finding the “other half”	“I really did not have a challenge during the time I was single, but I think everything happens in its own time. If I get to know someone in a way that supports my growth and self-actualization, I welcome it. It is not that I build a wall around myself and say I will not marry” (Participant No. 22).
	Link between education and social position	“Naturally, education has an impact. But what affects it more than education is the passage of time and increasing age. I think when people pass a certain age, they reach a level of awareness and self-knowledge; their view of life changes. And I think if people do not marry, they look at marriage differently. It is mostly age and education, and the higher the age, the greater the awareness. In my view, nothing happens in study and education without that, and nothing happens outside of it either” (Participant No. 18).
	Link between awareness and education in everyday life	

Economic dissatisfaction is a key intervening factor that can contribute to the choice of a single living arrangement among women who have reached definitive singlehood. Dissatisfaction with economic circumstances—particularly in societies facing economic hardship and inflation—may operate as a deterrent to marriage. In such contexts, these women may be dissatisfied with their income and perceive financial constraints as a primary barrier to marriage.

The role of marriage conditions as an intervening factor in choosing a single lifestyle among women who have reached definitive singlehood is substantial. Misalignment of marriage conditions and not finding a suitable partner are among the factors that can meaningfully shape this decision. Misalignment of marriage conditions may refer to a lack of congruence in financial, social, cultural, or even geographic circumstances between two individuals. Many women may be unable to marry due to inadequate financial resources, insufficient family support, or lack of the necessary conditions for establishing a shared household. Over time, this situation may gradually contribute to the decision to adopt and maintain a single lifestyle.

The importance of social status as an intervening factor in the choice of a single lifestyle among women is evident through the identification of, and linkage between, education and social and occupational position. Higher educational attainment is typically associated with elevated social and occupational status, and single women may benefit from these advantages and experience greater independence.

Strategies refer to action or interaction strategies through which actors manage, regulate, transmit, or respond to a phenomenon under a specific set of observed conditions. Action/interaction, action–interaction, strategies, and strategic practices are terms used to denote strategic tactics, routine modes of conduct, and how individuals manage situations when confronting issues and affairs. Strategic action/interaction involves purposeful and intentional actions undertaken to resolve a problem; through these actions, the phenomenon takes shape. Action/interaction evolves over time as a function of the meanings individuals assign to situations. Strategies constitute purposive and direction-oriented pathways toward meaning-making. Accordingly, the question is what strategies employed women with definitive singlehood use so that their actions carry the specific meanings they intend. These solutions function as negotiation tactics. In the present study, those practices were coded as strategies that can optimize the lifestyle of employed women with definitive singlehood. Indicators of strategies include leisure fluidity, individual-centered religiosity, relationship management, a sociable lifestyle, criteria-based social interaction, and culture- and time-oriented leisure.

Table 4. Strategies

Selective Coding	Axial Coding	Interview Excerpts
Relationship management (managed communications)	Managing intimacy in relationships	“I have good social skills; I communicate and I adapt with almost everyone and connect, but I do not get very close. Still, I do not cut off my relationship with anyone. I have contact; my relationships are good, but I do not get too close. Until I know someone, I do not let anyone enter my personal life” (Participant No. 20).
	Balance between virtual relationships and real-life interaction	
	Criteria for intimacy and socializing	
Sociable lifestyle	Being sociable	“My main leisure is socializing with friends and traveling—both domestic and international, though currently our trips are mostly domestic—socializing with friends and people around me, as I told you; many of these relationships for me are from my bachelor’s period, and alongside that...” (Participant No. 16).

Criteria-based social interaction	Quality of socializing and relational stability	"In general, I can connect with people who are completely different from me, but my preference is to socialize with people who are similar to me and whose dominant traits are like mine" (Participant No. 17).
	Structuring relationships	
	Relationships based on deep deep understanding	
Culture- and time-oriented leisure	Culture-oriented leisure	"From Saturday to Thursday—maybe not all hours, but certain hours, especially mornings or afternoons—almost all my leisure, especially going out, falls on Fridays or holidays. But if I want to watch a good film or do such things at home, I can do it during work hours in between, or late at night. But overall, leisure is mostly for holidays or Fridays" (Participant No. 19).
	Scheduling leisure time	
	Low inclination toward virtual space	
Individual-centered religiosity	Individualistic interpretation of religion	"I cannot say my religious beliefs are strong; I do not have a belief in hijab, but overall I am a person with boundaries, and I have certain frameworks for myself. I do not allow myself to cross those boundaries, and I do not allow others who are in contact with me to break that framework" (Participant No. 25).
	Moderation and balance	
	Emphasis on humanity in relationships shaped by religiosity	
Leisure fluidity	Fluid leisure	"In my free time, I watch some films, then I go out with my friends—maybe to a park, somewhere, a pool—things like that. We also join tours; it is like that, and overall we keep ourselves busy" (Participant No. 19).

One of the effective strategies in choosing a single mode of living among women, and in shaping the implications associated with selecting this type of lifestyle, is the adoption of a managed communication strategy by single women. By applying criteria for intimacy and social interaction, these women attempt to manage their relationships in an effective and efficient manner. Criteria for communication with friends and colleagues are highly significant for these women, as they seek to establish and maintain relationships that align with their values and goals and that can contribute to their personal growth and development. A sociable lifestyle, as a strategy within single living among women who have reached permanent singlehood, plays an important role in creating a meaningful and satisfying life. Through being warm, outgoing, and sociable, these women possess the capacity to form effective and dynamic social relationships that provide them with a sense of belonging and social connectedness. Such interactions help them enjoy their time and experience a wide range of social engagements.

Another strategy is the establishment of criteria-based social interaction by single women. Criteria-based socializing, as a strategy within the single lifestyle of women who have reached permanent singlehood, refers to the creation of standards and boundaries for social relationships and interactions, which can contribute to maintaining the quality and stability of relationships. By defining criteria and limits for social engagement with others, these women seek to manage their relationships more carefully and to prevent the entry of incompatible individuals and superficial relationships into their lives. Culture-oriented and time-structured leisure, as a strategy within the single lifestyle of women who have reached permanent singlehood, plays an important role in creating balance and enhancing quality of life. With a strong interest in nature-based activities, these women seek opportunities to connect with nature and benefit from its tranquility and

aesthetic qualities. Such activities help them distance themselves from daily pressures and engage in psychological and emotional rejuvenation.

Another key strategy involves adopting an individual-centered form of religiosity among single women. Through deriving calmness from religion, women may turn toward moral integrity and altruism, which strengthens their sense of humanity and social belonging. Belief and prayer also play a significant role in this form of religiosity, such that prayer, as a form of positive energy and self-suggestion, helps women continue their lives with hope and faith. The importance of prayer in the lives of these women cannot be overlooked. Prayer, as a direct connection with God, provides them with positive energy and motivation and facilitates a gradual shift in their attitudes toward life's problems and challenges. Adopting a strategy of leisure fluidity, or a fluid leisure style, means that these women incorporate diverse leisure activities into their schedules according to their varying conditions and needs. Spending leisure time through activities such as reading, watching films, participating in cultural and artistic events, and engaging in social activities helps these women make optimal use of their time. This fluidity enables them to enjoy a variety of activities and distance themselves from the monotony of everyday life.

Consequences refer to the outputs and results arising from the implementation of strategies. Whenever the performance or non-performance of a particular action or interaction is chosen by an individual or individuals in response to an issue, problem, or for the purpose of managing or maintaining a situation, certain consequences emerge. Some of these consequences are intended, while others are unintended. By consequences, we mean the anticipated or unanticipated events, experiences, and achievements that employed women with permanent singlehood acquire throughout their lifestyle or during the process of constructing a single identity for themselves. These outcomes take various forms and may be positive and reinforcing or negative and constraining. It is evident that the consequences experienced by each woman as a result of her permanent singlehood are, first and foremost, influenced by the strategies she employs in her lifestyle and daily life, and subsequently shaped by the discursive environment in which she lives. When such consequences align with the individual's expectations and anticipations, she becomes more confident in the correctness of the path she has chosen and is more likely to intensify her efforts to achieve social identity within the framework of the position she has selected. Indicators of consequences include the categories of advantages and benefits of singlehood, as well as challenges and limitations of singlehood.

Table 5. Consequences

Selective Coding	Axial Coding	Interview Excerpts
Advantages and benefits of singlehood	Advantages of singlehood	"In this society, I see people who have married, and I can confidently say that maybe 90% of them regret it. I am afraid of what problems I might face in that regard, and I am happy that I did not marry. The most important point is freedom—this freedom allows me to live as I wish, I am accountable to no one, and all responsibility lies with myself" (Participant No. 21).
	Challenges of marriage	"Your time belongs to yourself. Naturally, when someone is in your life, you always have to coordinate yourself with them. Now you are on your own, you can achieve all your tasks and goals, and you can devote your time to more activities. When no one is in your life, you can have good relationships with everyone without being restricted. Since you do not have certain limitations, you can dedicate your time to yourself rather than waiting for someone to come and add something to your life. When you love your life and enjoy your solitude and spend time with friends, in my opinion, it does no harm at all—it is very good that it is your own choice" (Participant No. 5).
Challenges and limitations of singlehood	Feelings of inferiority and uncertainty	"Sometimes, because I come from a traditional family, they do not accept or approve of this way of life. They define happiness through marriage, regardless of whether that marriage is successful or not. For them, happiness is defined by marriage. Living alone or choosing this lifestyle, in my view, is less accepted in traditional families, especially at younger ages, but over time it becomes better. At present, I do not have many problems in this regard" (Participant No. 19).

Advantages of marriage

“The issue of loneliness and the fact that I will remain alone in old age bothers me” (Participant No. 9).

“Whether you are single or married, there are certain problems and challenges, and perhaps the most important is loneliness and fear of the future—what will happen, the fact that you cannot have children, or that after losing your parents, what will happen to you. These forms of loneliness can be very distressing” (Participant No. 21).

“Naturally, shared life or companionship with another person can be supportive in many ways—economically, socially, and even in terms of peace of mind, if two people are similar and can complement each other. You may see a married person who, under equal conditions, has greater assets and investments than a single person, because two people think together and make decisions together. When you want to buy a house or a car, even if you say you have income and money, when it comes to accumulation and investment, shared resources are more effective. From this perspective, marriage and shared life are desirable. However, in many other respects—such as having time for inner peace and solitude with oneself—in married life, because of the presence of others, this is greatly affected. In my view, a person who lives alone and knows what they want can experience a very meaningful life, because the time spent alone with oneself is much greater. I am satisfied with this lifestyle that I have chosen” (Participant No. 18).

Among the consequences arising from single living among participants, and the implications associated with it, are the interpretations and understandings of both the women themselves and those around them regarding the advantages and benefits of singlehood. One of the most fundamental advantages of singlehood is the sense of freedom accompanied by fear of marriage. Many single women experience calmness and a sense of release from not being compelled to commit to marital life. This freedom enables them to engage in activities of interest without the constraints imposed by marital responsibilities. Another set of consequences associated with single living among participants relates to their experiences and those of people around them concerning the challenges and limitations of singlehood. One of the most significant challenges is societal sensitivity toward single women. In many societies, cultural and social expectations surrounding marriage and family life can place considerable pressure on single women and expose them to negative judgments. Based on the integration of the five layers, factors, and conditions outlined above, the final model of the study is formed within the paradigm of a modern single lifestyle of employed women grounded in the dual feeling of satisfaction and loneliness.

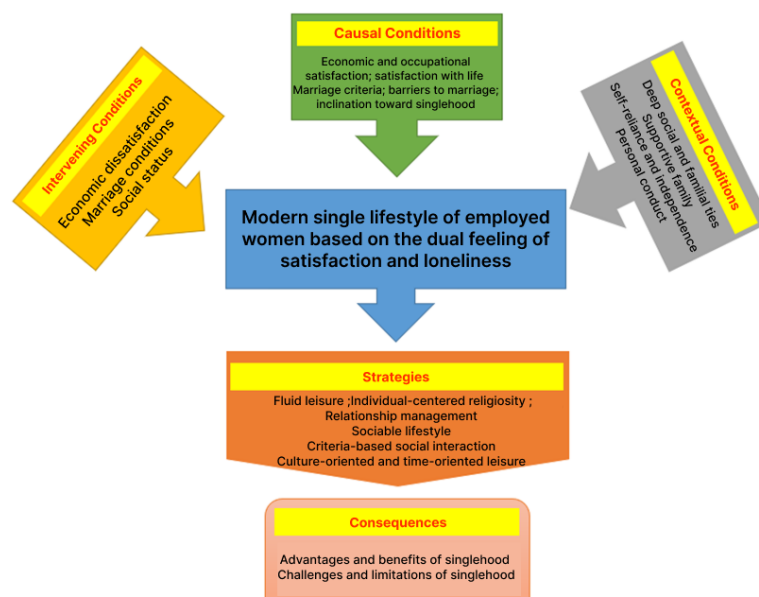


Figure 1. Model of the modern single lifestyle based on the dual feeling of satisfaction and loneliness

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the present study demonstrate that the lifestyle of employed women with permanent singlehood is not a residual or marginal condition but rather a structured and meaning-laden form of social living shaped by intersecting economic, cultural, relational, and individual factors. The core phenomenon identified—namely, a modern single lifestyle grounded in the dual emotional experience of satisfaction and loneliness—reflects a complex negotiation between autonomy and attachment in contemporary social contexts. This duality confirms that permanent singlehood should not be interpreted through a unidimensional lens of either empowerment or deprivation, but rather as a dynamic lifestyle configuration in which positive and challenging experiences coexist.

One of the most salient findings concerns the central role of economic and occupational satisfaction as causal conditions sustaining permanent singlehood. Participants' narratives consistently emphasized financial independence, job stability, and control over income as key resources that enable them to maintain a self-sufficient lifestyle without reliance on marriage. This result is in line with theoretical arguments suggesting that women's increased labor market participation fundamentally alters family formation patterns by reducing the economic necessity of marriage (1, 2). Empirical studies in Iran have similarly shown that employment and income are strongly associated with more autonomous marital attitudes among women, including delayed or foregone marriage (3, 4). The present study extends these findings by demonstrating that economic satisfaction not only postpones marriage but actively legitimizes permanent singlehood as a complete and viable lifestyle.

Closely related to economic satisfaction are the stringent marriage criteria and perceived barriers to marriage identified as key causal conditions. Participants frequently described high expectations regarding emotional maturity, compatibility, and ethical integrity in a potential partner, alongside dissatisfaction with available marriage options. This pattern aligns with research on marriage market mismatches, which highlights structural incongruities between men's and women's educational and socioeconomic profiles as a growing obstacle to marriage (5). In the Iranian context, demographic analyses have documented rising rates of never-married individuals partly due to such mismatches (6, 7). Importantly, the findings of this study suggest that these barriers are not merely experienced passively but are actively interpreted by women as rational grounds for maintaining singlehood rather than entering relationships perceived as misaligned with their values and life goals. This interpretation resonates with qualitative studies emphasizing reflexivity and agency among single women in redefining marital norms (8, 9).

The contextual conditions identified—particularly deep social and familial ties and the presence of a supportive family—play a stabilizing role in the experience of permanent singlehood. Strong emotional bonds with family members and sustained friendships reduce the perceived necessity of marriage as the primary source of emotional security and social belonging. This finding is consistent with studies showing that in collectivist societies, family support can partially substitute for spousal support, especially for women (10, 11). At the same time, the present findings indicate that family support does not simply replace marriage but transforms its symbolic centrality by making marital status less critical for identity and well-being. Similar dynamics have been observed among never-married women in East Asian contexts, where intergenerational co-residence and familial interdependence coexist with increasing individual autonomy (12).

Self-reliance and independence emerged as core contextual dimensions reinforcing permanent singlehood. Participants emphasized autonomy in decision-making, personal competence, and the ability to manage daily life challenges independently. These findings align with lifestyle-oriented perspectives that conceptualize singlehood as a domain of self-development and identity construction rather than social deficiency (13). Previous studies have shown that higher education and occupational status strengthen women's confidence in living independently and reduce perceived pressure to marry (4, 14). The present study adds to this literature by demonstrating that independence functions not only as a material condition but also as a psychological resource that fosters a sense of completeness and self-worth.

Intervening conditions—particularly economic dissatisfaction, marriage conditions, and social status—introduce important nuances into the experience of permanent singlehood. While individual economic satisfaction supports singlehood, broader macroeconomic instability and inflation create uncertainty and constrain long-term planning. This ambivalence reflects broader demographic patterns in which economic volatility simultaneously delays marriage and generates anxiety about future security (1). Participants' accounts also highlight the role of unfavorable marriage conditions, including misaligned life circumstances and the absence of suitable partners, as mediating factors between causal conditions and lifestyle strategies. These findings are consistent with prior qualitative research indicating that permanent singlehood often emerges through cumulative postponement rather than a single decisive rejection of marriage (8, 9).

Social status, closely linked to education and occupation, further shapes women's interpretations of singlehood. Higher education enhances social prestige and occupational opportunities, which can offset the symbolic disadvantages traditionally associated with remaining unmarried (4). However, educational homogamy and status inconsistency within the marriage market may simultaneously narrow the pool of acceptable partners, reinforcing permanent singlehood (5). This paradox has been widely discussed in demographic research on the second demographic transition (2, 15). The present study contributes by illustrating how women actively incorporate educational and occupational achievements into their identity narratives to counterbalance social stigma associated with non-marriage.

The strategies identified in this study illustrate how employed women with permanent singlehood actively manage their daily lives to sustain both autonomy and well-being. Relationship management, characterized by controlled intimacy and selective social engagement, enables participants to maintain social connections while protecting personal boundaries. This finding is consistent with psychological research suggesting that single individuals often rely on diversified social networks rather than exclusive dyadic relationships (16). Criteria-based social interaction further reflects an intentional approach to relationship building, emphasizing quality and emotional safety over quantity.

Leisure-related strategies, including fluid, culture-oriented, and time-managed leisure, play a central role in emotional regulation and meaning-making. Participants described flexible leisure practices that accommodate work demands while providing opportunities for enjoyment and social interaction. These findings align with research demonstrating strong associations between lifestyle habits, mental health, and subjective well-being (17, 18). Moreover, studies have shown that meaningful leisure and physical activity can mitigate feelings of loneliness, particularly among single adults (19). The present study underscores leisure as a strategic resource rather than a peripheral activity in the maintenance of psychological balance.

Individual-centered religiosity emerged as another important strategy, reflecting a personalized and moderate approach to religious values. Rather than strict adherence to institutional norms, participants emphasized ethical boundaries, moderation, and humanistic principles. This form of religiosity allows women to maintain moral coherence without conforming to traditional marital expectations, echoing broader sociological analyses of religious individualization in late-modern societies (15). In the Iranian context, such strategies appear to provide cultural legitimacy while preserving personal autonomy.

A key theoretical contribution of this study is the identification of satisfaction and loneliness as coexisting emotional outcomes. While many participants reported high levels of life satisfaction and self-fulfillment, they also acknowledged episodic loneliness, particularly in moments of social comparison or future uncertainty. This duality is consistent with recent findings indicating that women often report greater satisfaction with singlehood than men, while still experiencing context-dependent loneliness (16, 20). By situating this emotional duality within a grounded lifestyle framework, the present study advances understanding of how structural conditions, contextual supports, and individual strategies jointly shape emotional experiences.

From a management and organizational perspective, the findings have important implications for understanding workforce diversity and well-being. The growing population of permanently single employed women challenges traditional assumptions about work–life balance that are implicitly centered on marriage and family responsibilities. Research suggests that lifestyle stability and psychological well-being are closely linked to productivity, engagement, and career sustainability (21, 22). Recognizing the distinct lifestyle configurations of this group can inform more inclusive organizational policies and support systems.

Despite its contributions, the present study has several limitations. The qualitative design and relatively small sample size limit the generalizability of the findings to broader populations of women with permanent singlehood. In addition, the focus on employed women living in an urban setting may not capture the experiences of unemployed, rural, or socioeconomically disadvantaged single women. Finally, the cross-sectional nature of the data restricts insight into how lifestyle strategies and emotional experiences may evolve over time.

Future studies are encouraged to adopt longitudinal designs to examine how permanent singlehood and associated lifestyle strategies change across different life stages. Comparative research across cultural, regional, and occupational contexts could further illuminate the role of institutional and cultural factors in shaping singlehood experiences. Integrating quantitative measures of well-being, loneliness, and job satisfaction with qualitative approaches may also provide a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon.

From a practical standpoint, the findings highlight the need for organizational and social policies that recognize diverse life trajectories beyond marriage-centered models. Employers can support permanently single women through flexible work arrangements, inclusive benefit structures, and opportunities for social connection in the workplace. At the societal level, reducing stigma associated with singlehood and expanding access to economic, psychological, and social resources may enhance well-being and social integration for this growing population group.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

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

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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