

# Reclassifying Singlehood: A Dual-Perspective Exploration of Individual Motivation and Social Identity

**Authors:** Kong Fancong, Sun Xinlong, Jin Yuchang, Zhu Hongjin, Jin Yuchang

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## Abstract

Singlehood has become increasingly prevalent in modern society, yet academic research has predominantly operated under homogeneity assumptions, neglecting variations in motivational sources and identity within single populations, and consequently failing to uncover their psychological heterogeneity and dynamism. To redress this limitation, the present study integrates Self-Determination Theory and Social Identity Theory, proposing a two-dimensional typology based on “motivational autonomy” and “identity” that classifies single individuals into autonomous, identity-driven, passive, and adaptive types, and explores differences across these categories in psychological profiles, social behaviors, and underlying transition mechanisms. This model not only furnishes a new theoretical lens for comprehending singlehood but also provides an actionable framework for subsequent empirical investigations and practical applications.

## Full Text

### Preamble

#### Reclassification of Singlehood: An Exploration from Dual Perspectives of Personal Motivation and Social Identity

KONG Fancong<sup>1</sup>, SUN Xinlong<sup>1</sup>, JIN Yuchang<sup>1</sup>, ZHU Hongjin<sup>2</sup>

(1 College of Psychology, Sichuan Normal University, Chengdu 610066, China)

(2 School of Management, Zhejiang University of Technology, Hangzhou 310023, China)

**Abstract:** Singlehood has become increasingly prevalent in modern society, yet academic research often operates under a homogeneity assumption, neglecting differences in motivational sources and identity recognition within single

populations. This oversight limits our understanding of the psychological heterogeneity and dynamic nature of singlehood. To address this gap, the present study integrates Self-Determination Theory and Social Identity Theory to propose a two-dimensional classification model that categorizes single individuals into four types: autonomous, identity-based, passive, and adaptive. The model further explores differences among these types in psychological characteristics, social behaviors, and potential transformation mechanisms. This framework not only provides a new theoretical perspective for understanding singlehood but also offers an operational framework for future empirical research and practical applications.

**Keywords:** singlehood, autonomy, social identity, two-dimensional classification model of singlehood

## 1 Introduction

With socioeconomic development and evolving cultural values, traditional marriage norms face unprecedented challenges, making singlehood an undeniable social phenomenon. People are entering romantic relationships significantly later in life (Girme et al., 2023; Kislev, 2023), divorce rates continue rising (Schoen & Canudas-Romo, 2006), single-parent households are increasing (Heuveline et al., 2003), and the number of individuals choosing to live alone is growing (Hou et al., 2024; DePaulo, 2023; Kislev, 2019). In China, the proportion of single adults rose from less than 5% in 2000 to over 10% in 2020, reaching nearly 12% by 2023, with a continuing upward trend (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023).

Despite the growing prevalence of singlehood, academic research often associates it with negative psychological states. Many studies conceptualize singlehood as a “relationship deficit” and compare singles to married individuals on life satisfaction, happiness, and health, typically finding singles at a disadvantage (Girme et al., 2023; Watkins et al., 2024). This research orientation reinforces stereotypes equating singlehood with loneliness and unhappiness (Adamczyk, 2017; Himawan et al., 2017, 2018) while overlooking heterogeneity within single populations (Bergström & Brée, 2023; Kislev, 2023). For instance, partnered individuals often represent those satisfied with their current relationships, while some singles (e.g., divorced individuals) may be in relationship recovery stages, creating bias in comparative analyses (Bergström & Brée, 2023).

In reality, singlehood is not a homogeneous life state. Some individuals experience passive singlehood due to breakups, divorce, or other factors, while a substantial proportion actively choose and maintain singlehood despite having the capacity and conditions for intimate relationships. These voluntary singles often exhibit high autonomy and stable life satisfaction (Adamczyk & Segrin, 2015a; Kislev, 2019). German Pairfam data reveals that 23% of singles aged 18 and above explicitly state they do not desire a partner, with this proportion remaining at 9-13% even among those aged 30 and above (Brüderl et al., 2019), reflecting clear value orientations and identity foundations in their choice.

Meanwhile, the social structure of intimate relationships is rapidly evolving. Diverse relationship patterns such as non-marital cohabitation, short-term relationships, and open relationships continue to emerge, challenging traditional singlehood definitions based on marital status and limiting deeper understanding of singles' psychological states and social interactions (Lehmann et al., 2015; Pepping et al., 2018, 2025). Therefore, it is necessary to reclassify single populations using more nuanced dimensions to explore the psychological motivations behind choosing singlehood and the mechanisms of social identity construction.

To address this dual theoretical and practical challenge, this paper integrates Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Social Identity Theory (SIT) to propose a two-dimensional classification model of singlehood from the perspectives of “motivational autonomy” and “social identity.” This model examines not only the level of intrinsic motivation for choosing singlehood but also emphasizes individuals' social cognition and sense of belonging regarding their “single identity.” The study constructs four singlehood types and explores their psychological and behavioral characteristics and dynamic transformation mechanisms. This model helps transcend traditional research paradigms that view singlehood as homogeneous and static, providing a more systematic, dynamic, and diverse theoretical framework for understanding contemporary singlehood.

## 2.1 International Perspectives on Singlehood Typologies

International research on singlehood typologies has developed relatively early, yielding various classification models. Stein (1978) pioneered a framework crossing “voluntary/involuntary” and “temporary/stable” dimensions, covering types such as voluntary celibacy, temporary unmarried status, and passive singlehood due to objective factors. This framework emphasized differences in intention behind singlehood, offering important insights.

Subsequently, attachment theory became a crucial pathway for understanding psychological differences among singles. Pepping et al. (2018, 2025) classified singles into four categories based on adult attachment dimensions—avoidance and anxiety: secure, anxious, avoidant, and fearful-avoidant. This typology reveals how different attachment styles shape attitudes toward intimate relationships and emotional responses, predicting satisfaction and adjustment in singlehood.

To expand sociological explanations, Park et al. (2023) proposed three singlehood types based on social motivation theory: independence-focused singles (emphasizing self-actualization), socially-focused singles (concerned with external evaluation), and low-security-focused singles (lacking security). This model effectively distinguishes individual differences in social interaction strategies and relationship needs.

Additionally, Kislev (2023) proposed understanding singlehood as a social identity, dividing it into stigmatized, marginal, and core-identity singlehood, emphasizing the role of sociocultural factors in shaping self-positioning and expanding

social-psychological perspectives on single populations.

## 2.2 Singlehood Phenomena and Social Labels in Domestic Research

Compared with systematic theoretical modeling in international research, domestic scholarship focuses more on the actual characteristics of singlehood, attitudes toward marriage, and social reactions. Existing research primarily describes trends in marriage postponement, late marriage and childbearing, and the solo-living economy against the backdrop of social transformation (He, 2023; Hou et al., 2024; Li & Zheng, 2023).

A few studies attempt preliminary typologies. For instance, Chen (2023) categorized single women based on temporal, spatial, and value dimensions into transitional/lifelong singles, living-alone/cohabiting singles, and voluntary/involuntary singles. While this classification reveals the diversity of Chinese women's singlehood experiences, its criteria primarily rely on behavioral states and social roles rather than systematic examination of psychological mechanisms.

Moreover, in Chinese internet discourse and popular culture, labels such as "empty-nest youth," "born single," "non-marriage advocates," "Buddhist-style singles," "economic singles," and "leftover men/women" frequently appear. Though not systematic academic concepts, these labels reflect public perceptions of singlehood states and psychological characteristics, providing potential clues for constructing singlehood typologies regarding motivational differences, social expectations, and identity conflicts.

## 2.3 Limitations of Existing Typological Research

Despite growing research on singlehood classification, overall limitations persist (see Table 1 ). First, the voluntary-involuntary classification pioneered by Stein (1978), while emphasizing "intention" differences, remains at the level of narrative choice with vague motivational expressions, failing to reveal how individuals identify and position their singlehood within social contexts (Kislev, 2023). Second, while attachment styles can explain differences in relationship orientation (Pepping et al., 2018), their explanatory power for adult singlehood is limited. Research shows attachment is more malleable in early life, while adult singlehood is more influenced by social contexts and choice factors (Fraley & Roisman, 2019).

Furthermore, recent social motivation and identity perspectives, while expanding understanding (Kislev, 2023; Park et al., 2023), have limitations: motivation perspectives emphasize reasons for singlehood formation but fail to reveal how motivations evolve over time and experience; identity perspectives explain how singles construct meaning and achieve stability in social contexts but cannot account for heterogeneity in singlehood choices under different motivations. In

other words, these approaches provide independent entry points but lack systematic integration.

Consequently, existing frameworks reveal differences among singles but cannot simultaneously answer two core questions: why singlehood forms (motivational mechanisms) and how it evolves (dynamic changes in social contexts and psychological processes). This limitation restricts comprehensive understanding of singlehood heterogeneity and weakens explanations of developmental trajectories and potential transformation pathways. Against this backdrop, this study's motivation  $\times$  identity dual-dimension model aims to compensate for previous frameworks' shortcomings, providing a more integrated theoretical framework for understanding singlehood's heterogeneity and dynamism.

### **3.1 Self-Determination Theory: The Intrinsic Dimension of Singlehood Motivation**

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) posits that individuals have three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2006). Among these, autonomy—the experience of choosing and acting from one's own will rather than external pressure—is particularly crucial for sustaining committed behavior. Even when other needs are satisfied, lacking autonomy often prevents individuals from maintaining positive motivation and vitality (Nix et al., 1999). Therefore, in the context of intimate relationships and singlehood, autonomy becomes the core psychological mechanism distinguishing active choice from passive circumstances, revealing motivational differences beyond external situational factors (Deci & Ryan, 2014).

More importantly, autonomy is closely related to the internalization of identity. SDT suggests that when individuals choose and maintain a life state autonomously, they more easily integrate this choice into their self-system, forming a stable identity (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In singlehood, high autonomy means individuals can view singlehood as part of their self-value and maintain more stable psychological states when facing social norm pressures. Conversely, low-autonomy singlehood often lacks this self-congruence, making individuals more susceptible to external expectations and manifesting uncertainty and ambivalence about being single. Research also shows that actively choosing singlehood correlates with higher happiness and life satisfaction, while passive singlehood often accompanies stronger anxiety and stress (Adamczyk, 2017; Spielmann et al., 2020). However, SDT's limitation lies in revealing why some maintain long-term singlehood but not how these motivations generate and evolve in social contexts.

### **3.2 Social Identity Theory: The Extrinsic Dimension of Singlehood Identity**

Social Identity Theory (SIT) emphasizes that self-concept derives not only from individual attributes but also from group membership (Tajfel, 1979). Through

“depersonalization,” individuals align with their groups and continuously adjust behaviors to maintain identity standards through “self-verification” (Burke, 1991). Social identity is not fixed but changes with social evaluation, cultural context, and group status (Turner & Onorato, 2014). When group identity holds positive value, individuals more readily accept and strengthen it; otherwise, conflict and distress may arise (Hogg & Smith, 2007). Recent SIT research also emphasizes the processual construction of identity (Quayle, 2025), where individuals not only passively accept social definitions but actively negotiate and reshape their identities through actions, language, and symbolic behaviors (Beauparlant & Machia, 2024).

This perspective is particularly important in singlehood research. Unlike traditional voluntary/involuntary or temporary/stable distinctions, SIT reveals singlehood as not merely a life state but a social identity (Kislev, 2018, 2023). Whether individuals identify with this identity directly influences their understanding of freedom, norms, and belonging, as well as their coping with social prejudice and pressure (Moore & Radtke, 2015). Importantly, it provides a new entry point for understanding the formation and change of autonomous motivation: positive singlehood identity can strengthen individuals’ sense of autonomy, enabling them to maintain singlehood more congruently, while negative identity may weaken autonomy, leading to ambivalence and distress. Thus, SIT not only compensates for SDT’s limitations in motivation generation but also provides sociocultural support for explaining singlehood’s heterogeneity and dynamism.

### 3.3 The Necessity of Theoretical Integration: A Bidirectional Process of Motivation and Identity

Given existing classification frameworks’ insufficient explanation of singlehood heterogeneity and dynamic evolution, constructing a more explanatory theoretical model is necessary. SDT emphasizes autonomy’s key role in distinguishing active from passive singlehood and its psychological adaptation, revealing psychological mechanisms for choosing and maintaining singlehood and its impact on well-being from a motivational perspective. However, its view is relatively static, rarely addressing dynamic changes in motivation during social interactions. SIT highlights the construction and evolution of singlehood identity in social contexts, explaining how social evaluation and group belonging affect self-concept and behavior, but inadequately explains the intrinsic motivational basis driving identity evolution. Each theory has its focus but cannot independently answer core questions about why individuals choose singlehood and how it is continuously reshaped in social evaluation.

Therefore, integrating SDT and SIT is not only theoretically complementary but necessary for explaining singlehood’s complexity. Their complementarity offers new possibilities: SDT reveals the intrinsic motivational basis for choosing singlehood, while SIT explains how these motivations are constructed as stable identities through social evaluation and group relations. In other words, motivation provides psychological drive for identity construction, while iden-

tity recognition conversely influences the level and sustainability of autonomous motivation. Based on this bidirectional interaction, this study proposes a two-dimensional framework combining motivational autonomy (intrinsic individual dimension) and social identity (extrinsic social dimension), revealing their dynamic synergy in singlehood formation and evolution. This model helps systematically clarify the sources of heterogeneity, psychological adaptation differences, and potential transformation pathways among single populations.

## 4 A Two-Dimensional Classification Model of Singlehood

Based on the theoretical analysis above, this study constructs a two-dimensional classification model of singlehood with motivational autonomy and social identity as core dimensions, identifying different combinations of motivational sources and identity recognition. As shown in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper], the model uses motivational autonomy as the vertical axis, reflecting the degree of initiative in choosing singlehood, and identity recognition as the horizontal axis, representing acceptance and evaluation levels of the “single” social identity. The intersection of these two psychological dimensions forms four basic types: autonomous singlehood (high autonomy–high identity), adaptive singlehood (high autonomy–low identity), identity-based singlehood (high identity–low autonomy), and passive singlehood (low identity–low autonomy).

This chapter sequentially elaborates the model’s two constituent dimensions and their operational definitions, analyzes the core psychological characteristics of the four singlehood types, and further compares differences among types in attitudes toward intimate relationships, psychological states, and social behaviors, providing a theoretical framework for subsequent research.

### 4.1.1 The Autonomy Dimension

“Motivational autonomy” refers to the strength of intrinsic motivation and degree of subjective agency in maintaining singlehood. It extends SDT’s motivational continuum framework, categorizing motivation from low autonomy (e.g., passive compliance, intimacy avoidance) to high autonomy (e.g., value-driven, self-actualization) (Ryan & Deci, 2006).

Conceptually, motivational autonomy differs from the static distinction between voluntary and involuntary singlehood, focusing more on whether individuals view singlehood as a life choice consistent with their values and self-identity. High-autonomy singles typically maintain singlehood actively due to pursuit of freedom, self-development, or life satisfaction; low-autonomy individuals may be passively single due to emotional trauma, social exclusion, or external pressure.

In measurement, researchers have developed relevant tools. For example, Apostolou et al. (2024) designed a scale measuring “desire for independence” to capture attitudes toward autonomous lifestyles. The 9-item scale (e.g., “I wouldn’t trade my independence for anything”) uses a 5-point Likert format with good reliability (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.86$ ). Park et al. (2023) proposed the Singlehood Mo-

tivation Scale (SMS), distinguishing multiple levels of motivational regulation (e.g., “I choose to be single because it fits the life I want”), aligning with SDT’s regulation types (intrinsic, identified, external). Additionally, the Regulation of Relationship Motivation Questionnaire (RRMQ) can supplement measurement of relationship motivation regulation (Knee et al., 2005).

#### 4.1.2 The Identity Dimension

“Social identity” refers to whether individuals incorporate singlehood into their social identity and form positive or negative cognitive and emotional evaluations of that identity. This dimension originates from SIT, focusing on identity construction processes in social belonging and self-positioning (Tajfel, 1979; Ellemers et al., 2002).

Conceptually, identity recognition comprises two key dimensions: identity acceptance—whether individuals view “single” as part of their self-label—and emotional evaluation—positive or negative attitudes toward that identity (Leach et al., 2008). High-identity individuals actively accept singlehood as part of their choice, while low-identity individuals may deny this identity due to social stigma and cultural prejudice, generating shame and alienation (Kislev, 2023).

In measurement, Fisher and Sakaluk (2020) developed a measurement framework for singlehood identity based on Leach et al.’s (2008) multidimensional identity structure, including dimensions such as “self-definition,” “group connection,” and “emotional evaluation.” Sample items include: “I consider ‘single’ an important part of my identity,” “I feel proud/ashamed of being single.” Such measurements help reveal psychological mechanisms between self-evaluation, group belonging, and social identity, providing operational basis for the identity dimension.

#### 4.2.1 Autonomous Singlehood

With changing times and modern marriage attitudes, increasing numbers of people pursue a positive life state of “being alone but not lonely” (Hou et al., 2024; Aersheng et al., 2024). Autonomous singles not only actively choose singlehood based on intrinsic motivation but also hold high social identity toward this status (Crocetti et al., 2023). They view singlehood as an ideal state for achieving self-worth, maintaining independence, and pursuing quality of life.

Empirical research supports this group. Timonen and Doyle’s (2014) interviews found some individuals firmly believed from youth they would never marry, viewing singlehood as authentic self-expression sustainable long-term. DePaulo (2023) conducted qualitative interviews with 41 adults self-identifying as “Single at Heart,” with respondents universally valuing “freedom/autonomy” as singlehood’s primary benefit and explicitly stating singlehood made them feel “most fulfilled,” demonstrating high internal consistency and positive identity. Large-sample and longitudinal studies also show actively choosing singles generally

have higher life satisfaction and mental health levels, not significantly declining due to social pressure (Kislev, 2019, 2023). Furthermore, Slonim et al. (2015) found society tends to attribute more positive traits like independence and happiness to “choosing singles” compared to “involuntary singles,” reflecting cultural environments’ positive evaluation of autonomous singlehood. Crocetti et al. (2023) further note some individuals can integrate singlehood into a stable core identity label, deriving lasting value and belonging.

Thus, autonomous singlehood is not only an autonomous lifestyle choice but may constitute part of individuals’ core identity, demonstrating high stability and sustainable happiness.

#### 4.2.2 Passive Singlehood

Passive singles typically lack realistic conditions for forming intimate relationships, such as economic pressure, scarce interpersonal resources, appearance-related insecurities, or social anxiety, resulting in non-voluntary singlehood (Adamczyk, 2021; Beauparlant & Machia, 2024). Simultaneously, they lack social identity toward this status, often evaluating singlehood negatively, viewing it as failure, deficiency, or temporary transition (Kislev, 2023).

Research shows this group’s psychological adaptation is vulnerable. Spielmann et al. (2013) found individuals fearing singlehood are more likely to rush into relationships, even maintaining low-quality ones, leading to unstable or draining relationships. Apostolou et al.’s (2024) surveys further indicate involuntary singlehood correlates closely with low achievement, low self-esteem, and poor emotional regulation, collectively undermining well-being. Slonim et al.’s (2015) research reveals “involuntary singles” are often socially labeled as “lonely” and “pitiful,” with such stigmatization exacerbating negative experiences and hindering positive adaptation. Additionally, structural factors reinforce their circumstances, such as gender imbalances in East Asia leaving some men in long-term involuntary singlehood due to insufficient marriage opportunities (Raymo et al., 2015).

In summary, passive singlehood’s core characteristic is vulnerability: lacking both autonomous choice and positive identity, these individuals easily experience loneliness, shame, and social exclusion, remaining passively single due to external constraints.

#### 4.2.3 Adaptive Singlehood

Adaptive singles exist in a state of internal-external tension: they maintain singlehood based on autonomous motivation yet do not fully identify with this identity. In other words, they view singlehood as a “temporary choice” or “transitional state,” hoping to enter high-quality intimate relationships when conditions are right (Lahad, 2012). Unlike passive singles, they are not forced into singlehood by lack of resources but adopt a “rather be alone than settle” attitude, actively delaying relationships until meeting suitable partners.

Existing research supports this type. Reynolds et al. (2007) found women often shift between “choice” and “helplessness” when explaining singlehood reasons, describing “not meeting a suitable partner” as either coincidence or self-protective choice. Hostetler (2009) revealed some gay men claiming “active choice of singlehood” were actually responding to social pressure, still harboring dissatisfaction with their current state. Byrne and Carr (2005) also noted middle-aged singles often hold “temporary” identity cognitions, indicating they do not view singlehood as a long-term identity. Kislev’s (2023) review further points out that although such individuals maintain singlehood through autonomous choice short-term, their failure to positively identify with this status often limits happiness and creates conflict with social expectations.

Thus, adaptive singlehood’s core characteristic is its transitional plasticity: they temporarily maintain singlehood but may enter intimate relationships at appropriate times or shift toward autonomous singlehood through positive self-growth. Unlike passive singlehood’s vulnerability, adaptive singlehood’s instability stems from tension between motivation and identity, with transformation reflecting internal choice adjustments rather than forced external changes.

#### 4.2.4 Identity-Based Singlehood

Identity-based singles’ singlehood often originates from external constraints such as physical disabilities, economic hardship, or marginalized gender identities (Adamczyk, 2017; Kislev, 2019). However, unlike passive singles, they do not view singlehood as failure but reconstruct their circumstances through positive identity construction. They often integrate into specific communities, transforming singlehood into value expression or even an identity label to achieve psychological coherence and group belonging (Kislev, 2024).

Empirical research provides concrete cases. Ruberg and Ruelos (2020) found many LGBTQ+ individuals could view singlehood as an autonomous identity choice with community support, strengthening positive identity through values of “embracing diversity.” Similarly, some members in feminist communities reject traditional marriage norms, positioning singlehood as part of value expression and political stance (Crocetti et al., 2023). In China, Zhang (2020) found the term “leftover women” reversed through discourse to acquire positive meaning as “victorious women,” with feminist communities transforming singlehood into a political stance and identity label. Additionally, Kislev’s (2019) research shows that with the rise of single communities and support networks, individuals in socially marginalized positions—whether women, sexual minorities, or others—can gain belonging and support, alleviating isolation and enhancing psychological stability (Kislev, 2020).

Therefore, identity-based singlehood’s core characteristic is “transforming external constraints into active identity”: initially entering singlehood due to external limitations but not equating it with failure or deficiency, these individuals integrate singlehood into their self-identity through community support and

discursive reconstruction. This identity internalization process enables them to achieve psychological stability and social meaning through group belonging and value expression. Unlike passive singlehood's vulnerability or adaptive singlehood's temporariness, identity-based singlehood emphasizes "redefinition" and "internalization," where individuals 赋予 singlehood positive value and make it a lasting identity label.

### **4.3 Psychological and Behavioral Differences Across Singlehood Types**

Different singlehood types exhibit not only distinct formation motivations and identity positioning but also significant differences in specific psychological states, attitudes, and behavioral patterns (Watkins et al., 2024). To deepen understanding of these types' actual psychological manifestations, we next compare their differences across three aspects: attitudes toward intimate relationships, subjective well-being levels, and social behavioral patterns.

#### **4.3.1 Differences in Attitudes Toward Intimate Relationships and Marriage**

The four singlehood types differ fundamentally in cognition and emotional attitudes toward intimate relationships and marriage. Autonomous singles tend to view singlehood as better meeting their needs than marriage, seeing marriage as an unnecessary life option (Kislev, 2023). In contrast, passive singles generally view partners as important sources for meeting emotional, belonging, and life goals (Adamczyk, 2017). Research indicates these individuals often believe having a partner is crucial for personal happiness, viewing their singlehood as passive and undesirable, triggering inferiority, loss, and emptiness (Pepping et al., 2018).

Adaptive singles' attitudes show greater tension: although they maintain singlehood short-term due to "rather be alone than settle" motivation, they remain open to high-quality intimate relationships (Lahad, 2012). Unlike passive singles' urgency to "escape singlehood," they show prudence and goal orientation; simultaneously, they differ from autonomous singles' "complete acceptance of singlehood," more likely viewing it as a temporary choice. Identity-based singles understand singlehood as a sustainable identity expression through group identity and cultural discourse. They do not completely reject intimate relationships but no longer view marriage as a core path to self-actualization (Zhang, 2020).

#### **4.3.2 Psychological States and Subjective Well-Being**

The four singlehood types show significant differences in psychological states and subjective well-being. Autonomous singles, through active choice and high social acceptance, often exhibit high life satisfaction and psychological stability. They satisfy basic autonomy and competence needs with clear self-goals (Timonen

& Doyle, 2014). Passive singles, due to non-voluntary status and low identity, often feel lonely, helpless, and self-doubting, with negative emotions common when coping with relationship failures and unmet social expectations, including depression and low self-esteem (Kislev, 2021).

Adaptive singles occupy a middle ground: they can achieve psychological regulation through career development and interest cultivation, avoiding persistent negative emotions, but due to failure to positively identify with singlehood, still experience anxiety and conflict when facing social marriage pressures, resulting in moderate happiness levels (Kislev, 2023). Identity-based singles typically gradually 赋予 singlehood positive meaning through social identity construction, which helps alleviate self-conflict and enhance psychological stability and happiness (Crocetti et al., 2023). However, since their positive identity often depends on external group support, their well-being may be affected when social environments are unstable or identity resources are scarce.

#### 4.3.3 Social Behavior and Lifestyle

The four singlehood types demonstrate differentiated pathways in lifestyle and social participation. Autonomous singles tend to construct active, planned life rhythms, taking initiative in career, interests, health, and social connections. They achieve emotional connection and social support through high-quality non-romantic relationships, leading independent and growth-oriented lifestyles (DePaulo, 2006; Kislev & Marsh, 2023). Passive singles, dissatisfied with their circumstances, often have limited social investment, possibly showing avoidance or low-standard interaction strategies that undermine relationship quality and social support (Eastwick et al., 2007; Spielmann et al., 2013).

Adaptive singles show strategic and temporary social behaviors. Since they haven't fully internalized singlehood identity positively, they often partially conform to marriage norms in social interactions. For example, they may participate in matchmaking or social activities responding to family expectations while not internally rushing into relationships (Apostolou, 2017; Spielmann et al., 2013). In contrast, identity-based singles more often 赋予 singlehood social meaning through cultural or political actions. They actively participate in communities, public discourse, and even social movements, transforming singlehood into value expression and identity labels to gain social visibility and positive recognition (Moore & Radtke, 2015; Kislev, 2021).

Overall, the four singlehood types show significant differences in intimate relationship attitudes, subjective well-being, and social behaviors. These differences not only supplement previous definitional logic about classification but also provide new perspectives for understanding singlehood diversity. It should be noted that systematic examination of these differences in existing literature remains limited, requiring more empirical research to verify psychological and behavioral differences across singlehood types.

## 5 Dynamic Transformation Mechanisms of Singlehood Types

Singlehood types are not static but may evolve with individual psychological development, social environments, and cultural contexts. Transformation here does not mean everyone necessarily experiences identical change paths but reveals potential flows and migration directions between different singlehood types. In other words, transformation means individuals continuously seek new balances in motivational autonomy and identity recognition, with outcomes possibly being identity reconstruction, lifestyle adjustment, or relationship choice shifts. Examining transformation processes helps understand singlehood's dynamism and plasticity, providing theoretical value for explaining diverse trajectories in intimate relationships and identity construction.

### 5.1 Potential Transformation Directions Across Four Singlehood Types

Autonomous singlehood is typically most stable. This group often internalizes singlehood as a core identity, showing high life satisfaction and psychological consistency (see 4.2.1). Existing qualitative and longitudinal research indicates their state has strong persistence (Timonen & Doyle, 2014; DePaulo, 2023), making transformation relatively rare and dependent mainly on major life events or strong social environmental changes.

Passive singlehood is most prone to transformation. Previous research shows they generally desire intimate relationships (Spielmann et al., 2020; Apostolou et al., 2024), making “escaping singlehood” the most direct path. Meanwhile, if they gain support in communities, they may reinterpret their originally passive state as active choice, transforming into identity-based or adaptive singlehood (Slonim et al., 2015).

Adaptive singlehood, caught in internal-external tension, shows the greatest plasticity. On one hand, qualitative research reveals they often interpret “not meeting a suitable partner” as a transitional choice (Reynolds et al., 2007; Hostetler, 2009), making entering intimate relationships at appropriate times a common direction. On the other hand, they may shift toward autonomous singlehood through internalizing singlehood values during self-growth, or revert to passive singlehood when pressure accumulates (Kislev, 2023).

Although identity-based singles initially remain single due to non-voluntary conditions, through community identity and discursive reconstruction, they can transform singlehood into a stable identity label (Zhang, 2020; Moore & Radtke, 2015). In this process, some further evolve into autonomous singlehood, achieving “low autonomy → high autonomy” transformation; but if external identity resources are scarce, they may fall back into passive singlehood. A minority may enter intimate relationships after social structural constraints are removed.

In summary, autonomous singlehood is most stable, adaptive singlehood most

plastic, while passive and identity-based singlehood are more sensitive to external conditions and social support.

## 5.2 Transformation Mechanisms Across Singlehood Types

Singlehood type transformation does not occur spontaneously but results from combined effects of multiple psychological and social factors. These factors may either promote or undermine motivational autonomy and affect identity recognition levels, shaping different transformation directions. Based on existing research and theory, attachment styles, intimate relationship experiences, developmental stages, gender socialization, and cultural norms and social support are key variables influencing singlehood type transformation (Girme et al., 2023).

### 5.2.1 Factors Influencing Motivational Autonomy

Changes in motivational autonomy are the core mechanism for potential singlehood type transformation. Individuals' intimate relationship motivation is not stable but influenced by psychological factors including attachment styles, relationship experiences, developmental stages, and gender. Based on these, individuals may transform from passive to adaptive, or from identity-based to autonomous singlehood.

Attachment experience adjustments can enhance or weaken relationship motivation. MacDonald and Park (2022) found avoidant individuals report higher singlehood satisfaction, tending toward autonomous singlehood, while anxious individuals more easily experience loneliness and desire companionship, showing passive singlehood characteristics. However, attachment styles themselves are malleable due to relationship experiences, subsequently affecting dynamic evolution of motivational autonomy. Pepping et al. (2025) used latent profile analysis to show some originally intimacy-avoidant individuals reduce defensive motivation after positive interaction experiences, while individuals with continuous relationship disappointment may develop stronger autonomous motivation to protect themselves, promoting transformation from adaptive or identity-based to autonomous singlehood. This research emphasizes motivational structure's adjustability through experiences.

Intimate relationship experiences' enhancement or weakening effects on relationship motivation are key transformation triggers. Apostolou and Michaelidou (2022), in a study of 629 adults, found more negative events in relationship experiences increase tendencies to remain single; this conclusion is further supported in Apostolou's (2017) questionnaire research and content analysis of Reddit users' "why I'm single" posts, where "unpleasant previous relationships" was categorized among the most common reasons for voluntary singlehood. These negative experiences can weaken relationship expectations, enhance defensive motivation, and facilitate transformation from identity-based to autonomous singlehood. Conversely, positive and secure relationship experiences may en-

hance relationship expectations and confidence, promoting transformation from passive to adaptive singlehood. This mechanism shows intimate experiences' positive and negative changes play important roles in motivational autonomy's dynamic evolution.

Developmental stages and gender also moderate motivational autonomy's evolution. Longitudinal research shows singlehood satisfaction and motivational autonomy are not static but show stage-specific adjustments with age (Oh et al., 2022). Younger individuals' motivations are more unstable, heavily influenced by external evaluation and norms, while accumulated age and experience may gradually enhance autonomy, showing trends from adaptive to autonomous singlehood (Beckmeyer & Jamison, 2024). Additionally, research finds significant gender differences in motivational autonomy changes. For instance, Apostolou's (2017) study of 648 singles found men more likely to actively choose singlehood due to valuing freedom and avoiding family responsibilities, showing more autonomous motivation, while women more easily avoid intimate relationships due to self-denial or fear of hurt, showing higher defensive motivation tendencies. Apostolou et al. (2024) further found that for men, freedom orientation is the main motivation for autonomous singlehood, but this tendency may weaken with age and increased responsibility from social role changes; women may be passively single due to emotional risk avoidance but show transformation potential from passive to identity-based singlehood after gaining identity support.

### 5.2.2 Factors Influencing Identity Recognition Levels

Singlehood identity level has decisive influence on transformation pathways. Under similar motivation levels, differences in individuals' social identity toward singlehood may promote lateral transformations from autonomous to adaptive, or from passive to identity-based singlehood.

Singlehood identity construction is directly influenced by social norms. In mainstream cultural contexts, heterosexual monogamous marriage is typically established as the ideal model in socialization processes, positively associated with happiness, responsibility, and "successful adulthood" (Finkel et al., 2014; DePaulo, 2023). Fisher and Sakaluk (2020) found through two empirical studies that compared to partnered individuals, singles are more likely to be seen as personally responsible for their relationship status, with negative views toward singles more easily accepted and justified. In this process, gender norms become key moderating factors. Long-term singlehood, especially for women, is more easily viewed as deviating from social expectations, accompanied by obvious stigmatization pressure, particularly after exceeding common marriage and childbearing ages (Lahad, 2017; Budgeon, 2016). Qualitative research further finds single women often feel they must provide rationalizations for their singlehood and endure "deficiency" narratives (Moore & Radtke, 2015; Gui, 2020). These structured cultural and gender norms jointly shape the basic context of singlehood identity construction.

Evaluation mechanisms from others are core social psychological processes in identity construction. Watkins et al. (2024) found through questionnaire and experimental research (N = 534) that individuals' singlehood status activates external stereotypes about competence, warmth, and loneliness, affecting social acceptance and self-identity construction. Greitemeyer (2009) also found singles are more easily labeled with negative tags like "cold," "immature," and "unhappy." These social stereotypes not only widely exist in interpersonal interactions but also permeate institutional environments like housing and workplaces, creating hidden discrimination (Morris et al., 2008). Gendered stereotypes further exacerbate differential impacts: single men are more often associated with "irresponsibility," while women are more frequently labeled "vulnerable" or "pure" (Sakallı Uğurlu et al., 2021). These gender-based negative evaluations, when internalized through long-term social comparison, may weaken positive identity toward singlehood and promote transformation from autonomous to passive or identity-based singlehood to cope with social exclusion risks.

Additionally, differences in cultural value orientations moderate singlehood identity construction. In collectivist cultures (e.g., Japan, India, South Korea), marriage is often seen as an important manifestation of family and group obligations, with singlehood more easily stigmatized as family failure or responsibility avoidance (Raymo et al., 2015). Mukherjee et al. (2025) found in ethnographic research on Indian women that traditional gender roles and marriage expectations create structural oppression, marginalizing single women in social spaces with relatively scarce social support systems. In individualist cultures emphasizing personal autonomy and diverse choices, singlehood is more likely to gain positive meaning reconstruction. Bergström and Brée (2023) note that as individuals' sense of control over relationship choices increases, singlehood can transform into a symbol of autonomy and identity freedom. Gonzalez Avilés et al. (2024) found based on German national panel surveys (N = 2936) that later-born adolescents (2001-2003) reported higher singlehood satisfaction compared to those born a decade earlier (1991-1993), particularly during adolescence. This cross-generational comparison reveals positive impacts of cultural destigmatization trends on singlehood identity construction.

Overall, singlehood type transformation results from multi-level factors including individual psychology, society, and culture. Enhancement or weakening of motivational autonomy reveals internal adjustments in intimate relationship motivation, while identity recognition changes reflect self-positioning in social evaluation and cultural contexts. These mechanisms jointly show that singlehood type evolution is not merely individual psychological choice but deeply embedded in social norms, cultural values, and relationship experiences. Therefore, exploring dynamic transformation mechanisms not only deepens developmental understanding of singlehood phenomena but also promotes future theoretical and empirical research expansion.

## 6 Research Outlook

This study attempts to respond to existing theoretical limitations rather than simply overlaying previous frameworks. By combining motivational mechanisms of “why individuals choose or maintain singlehood” with identity processes of “how singlehood is understood and internalized in social contexts,” the study proposes a two-dimensional classification model to reveal heterogeneity and dynamic transformation pathways within single populations. This integrated perspective not only theoretically compensates for limitations in SDT and SIT individually but also practically provides an operational hypothesis framework for subsequent research. In other words, the model’s value lies not in creating new complexity but in addressing core questions that single theories cannot explain: how single individuals form diverse psychological states and social performances through the interaction of motivation and identity. However, the model currently remains mainly theoretical, with its explanatory power and applicability requiring further testing and expansion. As a multi-dimensional, dynamic social-psychological phenomenon, singlehood’s theoretical construction and improvement still require continuous empirical testing and theoretical deepening. Based on this, future research can develop along several directions:

### 6.1 Deepening Research on Dynamic Transformation Mechanisms of Singlehood Types

This study proposes potential transformation pathways for singlehood types, but related assertions remain mainly theoretical deductions lacking systematic empirical verification. Therefore, based on existing theoretical integration and transformation frameworks, future research requires more empirical studies to verify these inferences.

First, longitudinal tracking is the most central research approach. By repeatedly measuring individuals’ motivational autonomy and singlehood identity levels at multiple time points (e.g., university, early career, marriage pressure period), actual transformations between types can be observed, clarifying their occurrence rates, directions, and critical time nodes.

Second, latent profile analysis (LPA) can be employed for in-depth mining of longitudinal data. Such methods can not only identify latent categories of individuals on motivational autonomy and identity recognition dimensions but also reveal which psychological factors, social resources, or cultural backgrounds increase transformation likelihood between types, thus more finely depicting transformation conditions and mechanisms (Pepping et al., 2025). Compared to simple cross-sectional analysis, LPA in longitudinal designs can capture dynamic changes in type distribution, providing more explanatory evidence for understanding singlehood type evolution (Weller et al., 2020).

Additionally, experimental research can provide causal evidence for mechanism verification. Future studies can draw on mature paradigms from social psychology: for example, manipulating social evaluation to simulate acceptance or re-

jection contexts to examine whether immediate changes in identity recognition levels cause transformation from autonomous/adaptive to passive singlehood; activating relationship experiences by having participants recall positive or negative intimate relationship memories to observe whether enhanced or weakened intimate motivation promotes transformation from passive to adaptive or autonomous singlehood (Burrow & Rainone, 2017; Wildschut et al., 2006).

## 6.2 Strengthening Measurement Tool Development and Empirical Validation

Although this study's two-dimensional classification model of singlehood based on motivational autonomy and social identity has strong theoretical explanatory power, it currently lacks systematic measurement tools and large-sample empirical support, limiting the model's promotion and application in empirical research. Future research urgently needs to develop scientific and effective scales around the model's core dimensions and adopt diversified methods to verify its structural, discriminant, and predictive validity, promoting transformation from theory to empirical evidence.

Currently, existing research provides partial measurement frameworks for motivation and identity dimensions (e.g., Apostolou et al., 2024; Park et al., 2023; Fisher & Sakaluk, 2020), but has not integrated both into a unified classification tool. Based on this, it is necessary to develop a systematic measurement tool, such as the "Singlehood Type Inventory" (STI), based on the dual dimensions of motivational sources and identity recognition, covering core psychological elements including individual value orientation, self-congruence, social belonging, and emotional attitudes. The scale design should highlight the interaction between the two dimensions, avoiding simple labeling and preventing blurred type boundaries and stereotype formation. Moreover, measurement tool development should fully consider variables unique to Chinese sociocultural contexts, such as gender role expectations, family intervention, marriage pressure, and "leftover women" stigma (Liu & Xiong, 2023; Dupuis & Girme, 2024). This localized exploration helps test the model's external validity in non-Western cultures and enrich understanding of singlehood diversity and intervention pathways.

At the methodological level, researchers can draw on Pepping et al.'s (2018, 2025) approach: first construct classification models based on clear psychological mechanisms, then use latent class analysis and other statistical methods with large-sample data to test the model's structural validity and category differences. Furthermore, to deeply reveal transformation mechanisms between types, longitudinal research designs can be introduced (Oh et al., 2022). Through tracking measurements of the same group over six months to one year, dynamic changes in motivational autonomy and identity recognition dimensions and their interactions can be observed, providing more solid empirical evidence for the model.

### 6.3 Attention to New Relationship Forms and Singlehood Identity in the AI Era

With the emotional evolution of artificial intelligence (AI) technology, its functions have gradually transformed from auxiliary tools to “human-like interactive entities” with social attributes (Cave & Dihal, 2020, 2021). In companionship, caregiving, and emotional support domains, AI systems (e.g., emotional robots, virtual lovers) already possess certain empathy capabilities, with some individuals beginning to establish intimate-like emotional connections with AI (Zhang & Li, 2025). This trend challenges traditional interpersonal intimacy paradigms and provides alternative emotional fulfillment pathways for singles.

From this study’s “motivational autonomy  $\times$  social identity” model perspective, AI relationships may have differential impacts on different singlehood types. For identity-based and adaptive singles, AI companions can provide structured responses and low-risk emotional investment when real social resources are lacking, alleviating social loneliness and enhancing positive identity and stability toward singlehood (Gulrez et al., 2016). For autonomous singles, AI relationships may become extensions of their independent lifestyles, helping them maintain moderate connections while pursuing autonomy. This “bounded intimacy” can strengthen their intrinsic motivational structure and life satisfaction. Passive singles may show ambivalence toward AI relationships due to low autonomy and low identity: while desiring emotional compensation, they lack motivation or confidence for long-term connections. Such individuals are more likely to fall into dependency risks on AI relationships, even using AI as alternative strategies to avoid real relationship failures, forming “negative compensatory attachment” patterns (Prescott & Robillard, 2021).

Future research should examine AI relationships’ mediating and moderating roles across different singlehood types, exploring their pathways in social identity construction, motivation maintenance, and emotional regulation mechanisms, and further testing whether they help promote transformation from low-identity/low-autonomy singlehood states to more positive types.

### 6.4 Attention to Singlehood Differences Across Cultural Contexts

Current theoretical construction and empirical research on singlehood mostly focus on Western societies, often based on values like self-actualization and autonomous choice under individualism (Bergström & Brée, 2023). However, across cultural contexts, singlehood’s psychological experiences, social meanings, and acceptability differ significantly, with neglect of these cultural differences potentially leading to one-sided and limited understanding of singlehood phenomena (Thomson et al., 2018; Yuki & Schug, 2020).

Specifically, East Asian Confucian culture emphasizes intergenerational obligations and marriage norms, with singles often facing high pressure from family and society. In this context, “active singlehood” may be harder to gain social recognition, with passive and adaptive singlehood more easily formed (Liu &

Xiong, 2023; Raymo et al., 2015). In cultures with stronger individualist orientations, singlehood choice is more easily viewed as individual rights and lifestyle expressions, with higher proportions of active and identity-based singlehood and more space for social identity construction (Kislev, 2023, 2024). This shows different cultural attitudes and evaluations toward singlehood directly determine individuals' developmental pathways on autonomy and identity dimensions.

In the Chinese context, gender norms further intensify these cultural differences. Women's marriage and childbearing timelines are more strongly socialized (e.g., "marriageable age," "reproductive obligations"), with long-term singlehood often accompanied by stigmatization and family pressure. The conflict between external expectations and personal autonomy demands creates more prominent tension for women between autonomy and identity (Chen & Han, 2020; Lahad, 2017). In contrast, while single men face less moralizing evaluation, they are often constrained by institutional factors like economic responsibilities and marriage market conditions (e.g., high housing prices, bride prices), which similarly weaken their freedom in singlehood choice (Li & Zhu, 2024). Thus, although both male and female singles may face external pressures in motivation and identity construction, pressure types, intensity, and manifestations differ by gender (Dupuis & Girme, 2024; Sakallı Uğurlu et al., 2021). Existing research has not clearly revealed overall gender differences in singlehood circumstances, but it is certain that gender plays an important moderating role in singlehood type formation, transformation, and stability, with mechanisms requiring deeper exploration. Future empirical research should unfold under the interactive framework of "culture  $\times$  gender  $\times$  singlehood type" to more comprehensively explain heterogeneity within single populations.

Future research should also further test the cultural adaptability and stability of the two-dimensional classification model from cross-cultural perspectives. Through cross-national sample comparisons, researchers can explore whether the mechanisms of "autonomy" and "social identity" dimensions are consistent across cultures and identify moderating effects of cultural variables including familism intensity, social relationship mobility, and collectivism levels. Simultaneously, research should attend to cognitive reconstruction brought by cultural changes, exploring how traditional marriage views gradually transform under globalization, urbanization, and value diversification, subsequently affecting individuals' intimate relationship choices and identity construction (DePaulo, 2023; Kislev, 2024).

By integrating cultural psychology and social change perspectives, future research is expected to build more inclusive and explanatory singlehood theories.

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*Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.*

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