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EXPERIENCING AND NEGOTIATING SOCIAL SINGLISM: GENDERED PERSPECTIVES OF SINGLE PROFESSIONALS IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

Despite the growing trend of singlehood globally and within Malaysia, discrimination, prejudice and negative stereotyping against single people, a phenomenon known as singlism, remains underexplored, particularly in non-Western contexts. Malaysia presents a theoretically significant setting given its collectivist and marriage-normative cultural values, making it a relevant context to examine how singlism operates beyond Western frameworks. This study examines how single professional men and women in Malaysia experience singlism within their social networks and the strategies they use to negotiate it. Using semi-structured interviews with 30 participants aged between 30 and 39, and analysed using thematic analysis, this study identifies two distinct forms of singlism, unintentional and intentional. Unintentional singlism occurs without the awareness of its stigmatising effects as it is deeply rooted in marriage-normative cultural assumptions. Intentional singlism is characterised by its more deliberate and exclusionary practices. While singlism is experienced by both genders, gender asymmetry was observed, with gender mediating the intensity and frequency of singlism experienced. Female participants reported more pervasive and intense experiences and employed more active negotiation strategies. Negotiation strategies were employed in accordance with the types of singlism experienced, with more passive deflection towards unintentional singlism and more active counter-narratives to tackle intentional singlism.

Keywords: Singlehood, Singlism, Gender, Negotiation Strategies

INTRODUCTION

Marriage has long been considered a near-universal social institution, yet a growing number of single people continues to be observed worldwide (Mortelmans, et al., 2023). In recent years, the increase in singlehood is becoming more evident in East Asia (Esteve et al., 2020) and Southeast Asia (Yeung & Jones, 2023). A similar growing trend is also observed in Malaysia (Jones & Tey, 2021). In Malaysia, the percentage of single men and women aged 30 to 34 has increased tremendously in the past years (National Population and Family Development Board, Malaysia, 2016) and the number of marriages has been decreasing (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2024). Despite the visibility of single people, the social prejudice targeted at single people remains a largely neglected area (DePaulo, 2014).

This social pressure is closely tied to singlism, a term introduced by DePaulo and Morris (2005) to describe the discrimination, prejudice and negative stereotyping against single people. Beyond its interpersonal dimensions, singlism functions as a form of social regulation, that penalises non-conformity to the marriage imperative (DePaulo, 2011). It operates through both formal structures such as workplace policy (Chen, 2020) and housing access (Ahmad & Masud, 2013), and informal channels, including social exclusion, unsolicited scrutiny and

cultural shaming. In this sense, singlism is not merely prejudicial, but it actively reproduces the cultural expectations that marriage is the normative and desirable milestone of adulthood. Singlism, despite its social prevalence, has received comparatively limited academic attention relative to other forms of social prejudice as it is often considered "non-violent" and "acceptable" (Paynter, 2020, p. 226). While singlehood is a common phenomenon in many Western contexts, it is considered uncommon in marriage-normative Asian societies where single people, particularly single women, are expected to marry (Azmawati, et al., 2015). Nevertheless, as the number of single Malaysians continues to grow, particularly among people who are highly educated (Lai, 2021), experiences of singlism have become increasingly prevalent, particularly in marriage-normative societies where singlehood is viewed as deviant from the norm (Bokek-Cohen, 2016).

This marginalisation of single people is a sign of a broader problem. Marriage is broadly presumed to represent the standard endpoint of adulthood. Transition to adulthood has been theorised as a sequential progression through institutionalised life events such as education, employment, home-leaving, marriage and parenthood (Furstenberg, 2010). Within this framework, adulthood is not merely considered a biological state but a socially regulated accomplishment, in which marriage functions as a normative benchmark (Mandujano-Salazar, 2019). Singlehood is generally viewed as a transitional phase to marriage (Bokek-Cohen, 2016) and complete transition to adulthood is viewed as an accomplishment based on the conformity of socially prescribed milestones (Mandujano-Salazar, 2019). Therefore, failure to complete these life events and to marry by the normative marriageable age results in single people being stigmatised (Gui, 2020). This suggests that singlism is not merely a form of personal prejudice but a socially enforced penalty for deviating from institutionally prescribed social norms.

Nevertheless, singlism remains underexplored as existing scholarship has treated it as a monolithic phenomenon. This invisibility is itself theoretically significant. DePaulo (2006) established a foundational framework for singlism as a pervasive social prejudice, not only in interpersonal domains but also across institutional contexts (DePaulo, 2011). Subsequent scholarship has also extended this into structural analysis of formal disadvantages such as in law and workplace policy (Chen, 2020), housing discrimination (Ahmad & Masud, 2013) and unfair workplace treatment (Alwi & Lourdunathan, 2020). Yet, singlism has not been widely acknowledged as a form of systemic oppression, which is a gap that explains its marginal standing in academic discourse. Unlike racism or sexism, singlism has not been institutionally recognised as discriminatory, hence, making it easier to naturalise and harder to contest (Paynter, 2020). This under-theorisation is because singlehood is frequently framed as voluntary or temporary, which conceals the social pressures that reinforce the expectation to marry. Additionally, the distinction between unintentional singlism (i.e., well-intentioned behaviour rooted in cultural norms) and intentional singlism (i.e., deliberate and exclusionary practices) has not been examined. This distinction is significant because the types of singlism experienced shape how single people respond to it.

This study addresses these gaps. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 30 single professional men and women in Malaysia between 30 and 39 years old, it examines how singlism is experienced within multiple social networks and what strategies individuals use to negotiate it. In doing so, this study contributes to existing literature in three important areas. Firstly, it situates singlism scholarship with a Malaysian cultural context. Secondly, it explores how gender shapes the way single people experience and negotiate singlism. Most importantly, it proposes a framework that distinguishes between unintentional and intentional social singlism. This study seeks to address the following research question: *How do single professional men and women in Malaysia experience singlism in social contexts, and what strategies do they use to negotiate it?*

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding Singlehood and Singlism

The study of singlehood and singlism has grown over two decades with scholars increasingly recognising that single people are being subjected to distinctive forms of discrimination and negative stereotyping. To put it simply, singlehood refers to the state of being single. From a legal perspective, a single person refers to a person who is not legally married and from a social perspective, a single person refers to "a person who is not in a serious relationship" (Adamczyk, 2021, p. 164). However, the definition of singlehood has expanded over the years due to evolving social norms and individual values. According to Adamczyk (2021), the word 'single' is insufficient to reflect the meaning of singlehood. This is especially true with the "emergence of new types and patterns of romantic relationships" (Kislev, 2023, p. 2).

In addition to the expansive definition of singlehood, it is also important to distinguish between voluntary and involuntary singlehood as people who actively choose to remain single experience singlehood differently than those who are single due to difficult circumstances. Adamczyk (2016) found that single people who remain single voluntarily tend to demonstrate greater well-being compared to those who are single involuntarily. Voluntary singles are inclined to stay focused on their careers (Apostolou et al., 2020) and prioritise their freedom and autonomy (Heng et al., 2023), which allow them to live a "liberating and fulfilling" (Osteria, 2015, p. 107) life through achieving meaningful personal and professional growth (Nanik et al., 2020). In contrast, involuntary singles are predisposed to financial concerns (Petrowski et al, 2015) and elderly care work (Timonen & Doyle, 2014), which limit both freedom and opportunities, thereby resulting in comparatively lower level of well-being.

Despite the rising social acceptance of singlehood, many single people are still subjected to discrimination in their everyday lives. DePaulo and Morris (2005) introduced the term 'singlism' to describe the discrimination, prejudice and negative stereotyping targeted at single people, positioning it as a social issue comparable to racism and sexism. A major cause of singlism is the glorification of marriage as it has often been considered "the normative life path" (DePaulo & Morris, 2005, p. 57). This glorification is not merely cultural but is actively sustained through material and institutional privileges accorded to married people, including legal benefits and social recognition, hence positioning marriage as the rational and desirable choice (Morris & Osburn, 2016). This ideology rests on the presumptions that marriage is universally desired and married people are inherently better (DePaulo, 2018). This also renders singlehood not simply as a different lifestyle but as a deficit status (Sarfo et al., 2021), thus causing single people to be persistently viewed as incomplete by the society (Mandujano-Salazar, 2019).

Singlehood and Singlism in Malaysian Context

The phenomenon of singlehood is no longer confined to the Western countries but in recent years it has been more evidently observed in East Asia (Esteve et al., 2020) and in many Southeast Asian countries (Yeung & Jones, 2023). In Malaysia, the rising rate of singlehood has also been observed, and this trend is projected to continue growing as the country develops socioeconomically (Jones & Tey, 2021). This trend is particularly prevalent among educated urban populations due to expanding educational and career opportunities for women (Abdullah, et al., 2021). Although singlehood as a valid lifestyle is slowly gaining acceptance (Chong et al., 2022), marriage pressure and gendered expectations persist as Malaysia remains a family-oriented society (Alwi & Lourdunathan, 2020).

This persistence is inseparable from Malaysia's collectivist cultural orientation, in which individual life choices are subject to communal scrutiny and familial expectations (Sumari et al., 2020). In collectivist societies such as Malaysia, the family unit, rather than the individual, is considered the primary social unit. Hence, marriage is viewed as a collective expectation rather than a merely personal decision (Sumari et al., 2020). This intensifies singlism because remaining single is not merely perceived as a personal failure but as a source of familial shame and social deviance (Gui, 2020), making the pressure to conform to the marriage imperative particularly acute in the Malaysian context (Alwi & Lourdunathan, 2020).

The percentage of never-married Malaysians has been increasing significantly since the 1970s (Jones & Tey, 2021). This trend is evident across all ethnic groups and better educated populations (Lai, 2021). Social expectations and perceptions towards single men and women differ greatly due to the deeply ingrained cultural and gender norms in Malaysia. For example, single women are more often negatively stereotyped and labelled with derogatory terms despite being highly educated and economically independent (Alwi & Lourdunathan, 2020).

Gendered Dimensions of Singlism

While singlism affects both men and women, a substantial body of literature indicates that single women experience it to larger and more negative extent as compared to single men. In many patriarchal Asian societies, the practice of traditional gender roles has confronted single women with more negative consequences (Kim & Cheung, 2015). Single women are more likely to experience negative stereotypes (Moore & Radtke, 2015) as well as marriage pressures (Lahad, 2017). For example, single women are often negatively labelled as "leftover women" but single men are often positively portrayed as "golden bachelors and diamond single men" (Zhang & Sun, 2014, p. 125). Gendered cultural stereotyped also embed the misconception that single women remain single due to their inability to find a romantic partner, but single men remain single due to having too many options (Hill, 2020). Successful single women are also often ridiculed for being overly selective and imposing excessive requirements when it comes to seeking a partner (Lahad, 2013).

Furthermore, women who have reached the age of 30 are frequently perceived to have surpassed the socially acceptable age for marriage, partly due to the decline in female fertility with advancing age. Unlike men, women face increasing difficulties conceiving as they grow older (Beamon, 2009). Gendered expectations surrounding the norms of family formation and childbearing have made both marriage and motherhood benchmarks of achievement for women (Gui, 2020). This results in single women who are childless to be regarded as incomplete and inferior (Reilly et al., 2018). This further entrenches the idea that singlehood in women is an undesirable trait, perpetuating the expectation that women should marry while they are still of childbearing age.

However, this gendered experience of singlism is not limited to women. Lai et al. (2015) found that single men are also subjected to certain negative perceptions but social stigma against them is generally less detrimental than that faced by single women. Single men are commonly perceived as intellectually inferior and dishonest (Byrne & Carr, 2005). Additionally, they are frequently subjected to assumptions regarding their sexual orientation (Lai et al., 2015) or stereotyped as promiscuous, self-centred, eccentric or "mama's boy" (Koropeckyj-Cox, 2005, p. 94).

Singlism as a Multi-Faceted Phenomenon

Even with the growing body of literature on singlism, existing scholarship has largely regarded it as a monolithic issue. Singlism is generally described as discrimination and negative

stereotyping against single people without systematically examining the different forms it takes or the degree of intent behind this phenomenon. Wynne (2021) introduced the concept of "everyday singlism" to describe routine microaggressions experienced by single people, usually in interactions with family, friends and co-workers. These microaggressions usually include remarks such as "why are you still single?" or "when are you getting married?" (Wynne, 2021, p. 1). While DePaulo (2006) provided a foundational framework for understanding singlism as a pervasive social issue, there is an overall lack of distinction in the forms of singlism that may be performed intentionally and unintentionally.

Singlism does not happen only in daily existence, but it also takes place in politics, religion, workplace and media spheres (DePaulo, 2011). Some scholars have drawn attention to the structural dimensions of singlism, which include organisational policies, legal frameworks and social institutions, which formally disadvantage single people. Morris and Osburn (2016) said that marriage often comes with "institutionalised financial benefits" (p. 147) where married people are entitled to various spousal benefits including better insurance rates and tax reliefs. Due to certain governing policies that actively promote family formation, subsidised housing remains inaccessible for single people below 35 years old (Strijbosch, 2015). Family-friendly workplace policies that privilege married employees have further contributed to the marginalisation of single people (Chen, 2020).

However, interpersonal and structural singlism are rarely examined in relation to each other. Interpersonal singlism, manifested through everyday microaggressions and social exclusion, tends to be treated as culturally specific and informal (Wynne, 2021). On the other hand, structural singlism, embedded in law, policy and institutional practice, is analysed as formal and systemic (DePaulo, 2011). This separation is analytically limiting because the two forms are mutually reinforcing as structural privileges accorded to married people legitimise and normalise interpersonal discrimination against single people and at the same time, everyday singlism reproduces cultural conditions that sustain discriminatory policies.

Despite these contributions, several important gaps remain in the existing literature. Firstly, singlism is predominantly documented in the Western context (Kislev, 2023) but it generally remains underexplored in Malaysia (Alwi & Lourdunathan, 2020). Secondly, while the gendered dimensions of singlism are increasingly acknowledged, how gender shapes singlehood experiences and singlism in the Malaysian context have received limited attention as available literature has tended to focus on single women (Ibrahim & Hassan, 2009). Third, and most significantly, existing scholarships have yet to systematically distinguish singlism that is produced intentionally and unintentionally. This study aims to address these gaps by examining how single professional men and women in Malaysia experience singlism across social contexts and how gender shapes their experiences and negotiation strategies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on two theoretical perspectives, namely Risman's gender structure theory and Swann and Bosson's identity negotiation theory, to examine how single professional men and women in Malaysia experience and negotiate singlism. Rather than functioning as independent frameworks, these theories are analytically integrated to explain how marriage normativity is structurally enforced and interpersonally negotiated.

Risman's (2017) gender structure theory states that gender influences people at individual, interactional and macro levels. At an individual level, gender shapes the formation of selves and identities which begin at birth through consistent reinforcement of gendered activities and behaviours (Risman & Davis, 2013). At an interactional level, individuals

continuously adapt to meet the gendered social roles and norms prescribed by the society (Risman, 2004). At a macro level, gender structure persists in the forms of "institutional laws, rules and organisational norms" (Risman, 2011, p. 20), placing women in a more inferior position as compared to men (Risman, 2018). Within the context of this study, Risman's framework explains how marriage normativity operates as a gendered structure, one that places greater pressure on women to marry than on men, thereby producing conditions under which singlism is experienced differently across gender.

Swann and Bosson (2008) conceptualise identity negotiation as a process that requires at least two parties, a target and a perceiver, who communicate their identities using different cues and adjust their responses based on mutual feedback. Central to this process is self-verification (Swann, 1987), in which individuals behave in ways consistent with how they wish to be perceived. Identity negotiation is deemed successful when the perceiver's perception of the targets corresponds with the target's intended self-presentation. If this outcome is not achieved, identity renegotiation is engaged until a mutually accepted outcome is reached. In this study, identity negotiation theory explains how single people actively negotiate stigmatised identities imposed upon them through singlism, which directly extends Risman's macro and interactional levels into the interpersonal domain of everyday encounters.

Taken together, these two theories offer a layered and dynamic account of how singlism is experienced and negotiated. Risman's gender structure theory establishes how the practice of gendered norms, assumptions and expectations at an individual, interactional and macro level have shaped how singlism is experienced by single people, particularly single women. This is because marriage normativity operates as a gendered institutional force, holding women to stricter marriage expectations than men across all three levels. Swann and Bosson's identity negotiation theory explain the strategies used by single people to negotiate singlism at the interactional level, capturing how participants negotiate their singlehood identity. In short, gendered norms reinforced by marriage normativity shape single people's experiences of singlism and identity negotiation captures various strategies single people use to actively respond to and negotiate it.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative in-depth interview research approach to explore how single professional men and women in Malaysia experience and negotiate singlism in social contexts. This method was considered the most appropriate as qualitative research allows researchers to better understand "people's belief, perspectives, opinion, lived experiences and meaning making" (Roulston & Halpin, 2022, p. 668), given the study's focus on lived experiences and meanings the participants attached to their encounters with singlism. Semi-structured interviews were employed as the primary data collection method as this method provided the greatest form of flexibility, allowing the participants to describe their experiences freely while enabling the researcher to probe for depth and nuance. The use of an interview guide also kept the interview focused and relevant and ensured data consistency.

Participants were recruited using purposeful sampling, ensuring that all participants shared key characteristics relevant to study's focus. A total of 30 participants, 15 males and 15 females, all aged between 30 and 39 years old, holding professional occupations, possessing at least a bachelor's degree and currently working and residing in the urban area of Klang Valley were interviewed. While the original recruitment criterion targeted single professionals aged 30 and above, eligible and willing participants identified during the recruitment process happened to fall within this age bracket. This age group is nonetheless particularly relevant as individuals from this bracket are the most socially exposed to heightened marriage expectations, rendering them especially susceptible to singlism. Professional occupations were

targeted as this group navigates singlism across both workplace and social domains, where intersecting pressures of career and marital expectations are most acutely felt. Klang Valley was chosen as it is Malaysia's most urbanised region, where tension between modern singlehood and entrenched marriage norms is most pronounced, making it the most contextually relevant site for this study. This sampling strategy ensured sufficient homogeneity to allow meaningful comparisons across gender while maintaining the contextual relevance of the findings to single professionals in Malaysia.

Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis framework, which involves familiarisation of the data; coding of the data; generating initial themes for the data; developing and reviewing themes for the data; refining, defining and naming themes for the data; and writing up the final report. This approach was selected for its flexibility and its suitability for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within qualitative data (Clarke, et al., 2015). Coding was conducted in two stages. Complete coding was first applied, in which all interesting and relevant information across the data was coded. This was followed by selective coding, in which only prominent and recurring codes were retained. Related codes were then clustered into initial subthemes, which were subsequently developed, reviewed and refined into broader final themes. For example, codes such as *repeated questions about marriage*, *pressure during festive seasons,* and *questioning from elderly relatives* were grouped into the subtheme of *marriage pressure,* which was later refined into the broader theme of *unintentional* singlism. Although the sample comprised 30 participants, this number was sufficient to achieve data saturation as recurring themes and patterns were consistently observed across interviews, with no new codes or themes emerging in the later stages of data collection.

While the interviews were conducted mainly in English, some participants code-switched to other languages such as Mandarin, Chinese dialects and Bahasa Malaysia during the interviews. These translated parts were returned to participants for verification to ensure the translated versions accurately reflected their original responses. Ethical approval was obtained from the Universiti Malaya Research Ethics Committee (UMREC) prior to data collection. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation. Anonymity was ensured using pseudonyms throughout the study.

FINDINGS

This study examined how single professional men and women in Malaysia experience singlism in multiple social contexts, including family members, close friends, acquaintances and the public. Findings reveal that social singlism can be categorised in two dimensions, which are unintentional singlism and intentional singlism, where both are rooted in cultural norms. Unintentional singlism often stemmed from well-meaning behaviours, whereas intentional singlism can be seen from persistent questioning of one's single status. Gendered patterns are observed in both dimensions and discussed in the following sections.

Unintentional Singlism

All participants expressed having experienced unintentional singlism. While describing the situation as innocuous and a result of well-meaning intent, it was nonetheless an unpleasant experience for them. These experiences reflect what this study defines as unintentional singlism, an act that was performed without the awareness of the discomfort it may cause.

The most frequent form of unintentional singlism for both male and female participants was frequent questioning of their single status during festive seasons and family gatherings, particularly from their elderly relatives. Participants did not view these questions as harmful but considered them as well-meaning expressions. Despite the good intention behind these questionings, participants expressed that the situation could be frustrating and annoying because questions related to their single status had been repeatedly asked for a long period of time. Such a persistent form of questioning reflects the deeply normalised nature of marriage expectations in the Malaysian context.

> For Chinese [people] especially, if you have reached a certain age, very likely after 30, you will be pressured by your family, especially during Chinese New Year. 'When do you want to get married? Do you have a girlfriend?' and so on. That is the pressure from the family. (Paul, Manager, 37).

Another frequent form of unintentional singlism was unsolicited matchmaking, which was particularly directed towards female participants. Family members, specifically parents and elderly relatives, frequently arranged formal introductions and matchmaking sessions on behalf of the participants. For male participants, a similar situation occurred in a more informal manner, with friends introducing them to new people in social settings. Both actions may look non-intrusive but deeply implied that singlehood is not a legitimate life choice and that single people should be coupled.

> My parents have seriously pushed me into one. It was quite a bad experience because I tried to argue. I said no, I didn't want to [go] because I had heard some comments about how, and this is again for Indians only, the boys were only interested in lighter-skinned girls, whereas I am on the darker side. That made me feel really annoyed, and I tried to fight against my parents' demand, but it got out of hand. With my mum, I can argue, but with my dad, when he started raising his voice and literally forcing me to go, I just caved. (Devi, Doctor, 34).

Additionally, participants also described encountering singlism in public spaces and among acquaintances. When travelling or dining solo, participants expressed receiving weird glances from people around them.

> When you eat [alone] sometimes, the whole restaurant kind of looks at you weirdly. It is not so obvious in other countries, like in London [sic] or Canada, or any other countries that I have been to. You can choose to sit by the bar quietly. Nobody stares at you awkwardly. (May, Manager, 34).

Some participants also noted a shift in tone when interacting with acquaintances or strangers when they learned about the participants' single status. While these encounters were often brief, this shift in tone often showed subtle signs of pity or curiosity, which reflected singlehood as a stigmatised social identity in the Malaysian context. While these occurrences cannot be considered as well-meant, the actions reflect unconscious reflexive responses to singlehood, further showing that single people are marginalised.

> A few weeks back, I attended a workshop with some friends. Someone new was there, and then they said, 'Oh, it is already 6pm. I am sure you must go back. Your wife will be waiting for your call.' And I said, 'No, I am not married yet,' and they went, 'Oh!' [expressing disbelief]. I said, 'It is fine, I am just not married yet, that's all.' They replied, 'Oh, I am so sorry for you.' That came out in that

> way. It feels as though it was sympathy rather than empathy, per se. (Rajesh, Lecturer, 38).

Intentional Singlism: Implied but Unrecognised

When asked whether they had experienced intentional singlism, participants' responses revealed a striking pattern of ambiguity. Only a few of them acknowledged experiencing intentional singlism and a smaller fraction denied experiencing it. Most of the participants neither acknowledged nor denied intentional singlism. This suggests that singlehood is routinely stigmatised and that singlism is so deeply normalised that most single people cannot clearly distinguish whether their experiences were deliberate or not. This aligns with Paynter's (2020) findings that single people are "unaware" (p. 226) of the stigmatisation themselves.

The most prominent example of intentional social singlism is social exclusion by the participants' married friends. Participants described often being excluded from conversations by their married friends as the topics generally centred on their married lives, spouses and children.

> They would try their best [to keep me in the conversation], but sometimes I end up feeling left out, although I know they do not mean to. I end up feeling left out because sometimes they would be sitting down talking about their children, their husbands, and [their] life as a wife. (Jody, Lecturer, 33).

Some participants also indicated that their married friends sometimes proclaimed the superiority of married life by depicting marriage as the best and most fulfilling life path.

> My friends, some of them can be quite persistent, and they insist that their married life is the best. Well, I do not refute that. It is just different. (Anthony, Animal Welfare Inspector, 34).

More significantly, participants explained that their married friends would often complain about their married lives, spouses or children but actively refused to receive opinions from the participants. When participants tried to share their perspectives, they were often dismissed on the basis that they are single and therefore cannot understand the realities of married life, implying that they are inexperienced or unqualified. This pattern suggests that the conversations are one-sided, functioning as complaints rather than genuine exchanges between friends, which renders the participants as passive listeners of their married friends' frustrations, and not equal participants in the conversations.

> Sometimes I feel a bit hurt because I am in the education line, and I know a lot about kids. Sometimes I will give advice to them. They will fight back, saying, 'You do not have your own kids. Wait until you have your own kids. Only then can you advise us or tell us what to do. (Emily, Teacher and Centre Owner, 34).

Participants also noted that they often had to accommodate the schedules of their married friends and to serve as organisers of social gatherings based on the assumptions that they have more flexibility in time and fewer obligations in life. This expectation reflects a form of intentional singlism where single people are deliberately given extra social tasks because of their single status. The fact that participants do not consider this as discriminatory suggests a

profound and culturally embedded normalisation of marriage-normative assumptions within the Malaysian context.

> The other day when we were wanting [sic] to meet up with another two friends who are married with kids. One of these friends wanted to go to a steamboat place where you have to wait for hours. That was on her bucket list. She wanted to do that very much. The other friend, I do not know whether she was jokingly suggesting or whether she was really hoping that perhaps I could queue for them because I am without kids. Yes, I am without kids and therefore I am supposedly freer. (Alicia, Lecturer, 39).

Gendered Experiences of Social Singlism

Both male and female participants experience social singlism within their social networks but there is a clear distinction in the intensity of their experiences between both genders. Female participants described their experiences as more pervasive and tended to elaborate on their experiences in detail. Male participants, on the other hand, acknowledged the existence of singlism in their lives but emphasised that their experiences were less pervasive in comparison to the female participants. Male participants also tended to provide shorter and less elaborated accounts of their experiences. This pattern may suggest a lower intensity among male participants or a general reluctance among men to discuss their struggles openly.

Findings reveal that female participants generally experience more acute scrutiny of their singlehood, citing reasons and concerns related to their biological clock. Female participants expressed that there is a specific time frame for childbearing and there may be higher risks involved if they were to give birth at an older age. In Malaysia, childbirth outside marriage is socially unacceptable, which explains why biological clock pressure is more intense for women. In contrast, men have fewer biological consequences as they can marry and have children at an older age.

> The society feels that a female's biological clock stops ticking at the age of 35, so they cannot have kids anymore. But for men, they do not have a biological clock. They can father children until 70. It is not a problem for them. If they are single at 30, it is not a problem. But for a single female at 30, it is a problem for them. (Irene, Lecturer, 31)

Female participants also experienced more parental restrictions in their daily life activities, which include limitations in going out at night, travelling alone and socialising with male friends.

> My mum has said things like, 'What if someone sees you, someone in future who wants to matchmake or propose?' and 'Oh, actually this girl, you know, she likes to go to the bar and all; she has been there, she goes alone.' There will be such negative implications for me as a marriageable prospect. (Devi, Doctor, 34).

These restrictions suggest cultural assumptions that single women require greater surveillance and control, particularly from their parents. This also implies that single women are more vulnerable and less autonomous.

> Because I am single, my mum will not allow me, or she will very strongly discourage me, from going overseas to work on my own. Because to her, I am still her daughter; I am still her responsibility. I think if I were married, my

> permission would probably have to come from my husband instead. (Alicia, Lecturer, 39).

Both male and female participants indicated that their single status is viewed as incomplete by their social network, which suggests that the stigma surrounding singlehood as a deficient status is not exclusive to one gender. Male participants were more likely to have their sexuality questioned in social situations, with others assuming they were gay simply because they were single.

> Are you normal? Are you gay? Are you too choosy? These questions are the ones I am asked most frequently. (Paul, Manager, 37).

Additionally, male participants often positioned themselves in provider roles within a romantic relationship, reflecting deeply ingrained assumptions what masculinity should look like.

> If I am married, of course I have the responsibility to take care of my wife, you know, and to be a family man as well. It is also part of the priority as well. (Elias, Human Resources Executive, 34).

Notably, most male participants also acknowledged that society is harsher towards single women than single men. This presents a recognition and awareness of gender inequality.

> For females, I think the pressure would be more than for males. For males, even after 30, if you are still not married, it is still okay. You do not have as much pressure as females. For females, I think the pressure is a lot because of pregnancy. They have a certain age, the suitable age to get pregnant. (Nandan, Engineer, 38).

Negotiation Strategies

Participants' negotiation strategies towards singlism were not uniform but were in accordance with the nature of encountered singlism. There is a distinct pattern in how different types of singlism handled. The relational context and the gender of the participants further shapes strategies used and its intensity.

In negotiating unintentional singlism, milder and more accommodating approaches were used. Participants were found to adopt more passive strategies with minimal confrontation only when necessary. Generic or spontaneous responses, humour and deliberate ignoring were the most used approaches. These strategies were particularly prevalent in interactions with elderly relatives. This shows a tendency among participants to deflect rather than address the situation directly.

> No matter how many times I tried to talk to them, they have that mindset, so it is kind of hard. I have been through that before, but it never worked. So, I just move forward and divert the topic to stop them from talking about that anymore. Every time they bring it up, I will just say, you know, 'Let us talk about food, let us talk about TV programmes. (Oliver, Pharmacist, 34).

Participants generally expressed tolerance towards unintentional singlism as they considered it to have stemmed from well-meant intentions. When well-meant intentions turned into persistent questioning, some participants shifted to a mildly defensive approach.

> I think it is very important that we explain to them the current situation and what we are looking for. It is not that we do not want to get attached to someone, it is just that we are looking to find the right one so that we can be committed for the long run. (Carmen, Manager, 35).

In negotiating intentional singlism, harsher and more confrontational approaches were used. Participants were found to adopt more active strategies which include using sarcasm, irony and satire to signal displeasure, deliberately creating social awkwardness for the asker, openly confronting the instigator or immediately stopping the conversation.

> I think the best thing we can do to make a difference as women is not to shun away. I think it is to ask probing or serious questions and make them think: 'Have you made the right choice in your life by marrying and having five kids?' 'Are you happy now?' That is what I feel the approach should be, because it is educating them, in a way. (Vanishree, Manager, 33).

Another distinct strategy adopted was actively highlighting the advantages of single life and the disadvantages of married life to counter and challenge the marriage-normative assumptions.

> Sometimes I just shoot it down, saying that I can go anywhere I like. You [the married friend] need to go back and get a licence. (Zachary, Sales Executive, 34).

Despite these more active approaches, a notable exception was observed in the context of implied intentional singlism from close friends, where participants were less inclined to confront, even when they found the situation uncomfortable. This shows that participants' responses to singlism largely depend on their relationship with the party involved. Even when the situation is intentional, they are less likely to push back.

Gender differences in negotiation strategies were also evident. Female participants were more likely to adopt elaborate and educative responses, regardless of whether it was unintentional or intentional singlism. Oppositely, male participants were less likely to respond to the situation and mostly ignored or ended the conversation without elaboration. This pattern aligns with the findings that female participants generally experience social singlism more intensely and therefore were more likely to negotiate in a more assertive manner. Male participants experienced social singlism at a comparatively lower intensity and therefore likely to negotiate in a more avoidant manner.

DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that singlism operates as a multi-faceted social phenomenon which can be understood in two forms, unintentional and intentional. The negotiation strategies are shaped by various factors such as the type of singlism encountered, the relational context in which it occurs and the gender of the individual experiencing it. These findings extend existing scholarship on singlism by offering a framework that moves beyond treating singlism as a monolithic phenomenon.

A central contribution of this study is the distinction between unintentional and intentional singlism as two analytically meaningful categories. Unintentional singlism, manifesting through repeated questioning about one's single status, well-intentioned but stigmatising assumptions and unsolicited matchmaking, aligns with Wynne's (2021) concept of everyday singlism. These acts are deeply rooted in a marriage-normative society and are performed without awareness of the discomfort they produce. In contrast, intentional singlism, manifests through social exclusion, epistemic dismissal and the assigning of additional social obligations to single people on the grounds of their single status. Within Risman's (2004) gender structure theory, these acts can be understood as operating at the interactional level, where social scripts normalise marriage and render singlehood as deviant, thereby reproducing gendered institutional pressures through everyday encounters. Together, these two categories show that singlism takes many forms, from subtle, well-intentioned behaviour to more deliberate acts of exclusion.

Critically, participants demonstrated considerable difficulty in categorising their experiences, particularly in distinguishing intentional singlism from unintentional singlism especially when it originated from their close friends. Participants could readily identify unintentional singlism from elderly relatives, despite receiving some unsolicited remarks and questioning. However, when excluded or epistemically dismissed in conversations by their married friends, most of them neither acknowledged nor denied this behaviour as singlism but rather attributed it to a natural consequence of different life stages. This tendency to normalise singlism within close friendships reflects the macro-level dimension of Risman's (2004) gender structure theory, where cultural ideologies surrounding marriage and adulthood are so deeply embedded that they become invisible, rendering singlism as unremarkable rather than discriminatory.

Both male and female participants experienced singlism in their daily lives, reflecting that marriage normativity is embedded in Malaysian society regardless of gender. However, female participants experienced singlism more intensely, particularly with pressures tied to their biological clock as well as more stringent parental restrictions. These gendered pressures are consistent with Risman's (2018) argument that gender operates as a social structure that distributes unequal expectations at institutional level, where cultural norms around reproduction and marriage disproportionately regulate women's life choices. While male participants experienced comparatively less scrutiny, they were more likely to have their sexuality questioned. Notably, male participants also acknowledged that society is harsher on single women than on single men, a recognition of gender inequality that highlights that male singlehood is relatively normalised and less scrutinised in Malaysia. These patterns align with Risman's (2018) gender structure theory which argues that gender shapes social expectations and penalties unequally across individual, interactional and macro levels.

Participants' negotiation strategies towards singlism were not uniform and highly depended on the type of singlism they encountered, the relational context in which it occurred and their gender. When facing unintentional singlism, participants adopted more passive strategies which include generic responses, humour and ignoring, particularly in interactions with elderly relatives. When singlism felt intentional, participants responded more actively, often with sarcasm, confrontation and counter-narratives highlighting the benefits of singlehood. An exception was observed with implied intentional singlism from close friends, where relational stakes discouraged active resistance even when the situations were uncomfortable. This suggests that when singlism is embedded within a close relationship, the capacity to resist is significantly limited. Gender differences were also evident, in which female participants tended to give elaborated and educative responses aimed at shifting others' perspectives, while male participants tended to ignore or end the conversation without

elaboration. These gendered negotiation patterns reflect the individual level of Risman's (2004) gender structure theory, where internalised gender norms shape how individuals respond to social pressure, with women more likely to actively negotiate their identities and men more likely to adopt avoidant strategies. These patterns align with Swann and Bosson's (2008) identity negotiation theory, which suggests that individuals actively work to align their self-views with how others perceive them, and that the strategies they employ are shaped by both relational context and gendered expectations.

CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE STUDIES

The findings indicate that singlism is not a monolithic but a multi-faceted issue. This study found that singlism is shaped by cultural norms, relationship context and gender, where it can be enacted intentionally and unintentionally. As singlism is so deeply normalised in a marriage-normative society, participants themselves often had difficulties recognising the type of singlism they experienced, especially when it came from close a relational context such as their close friends. By documenting gendered differences in singlism experiences and the range of strategies used in negotiation, this study extends the understanding of singlism within a Malaysian context, adding to existing literature that has largely focused on Western contexts. However, it should be noted that findings are specific to urban professional singles in Klang Valley and may not reflect the experiences of singles from different Malaysian regions, rural settings or lower socioeconomic group, where marriage norms and social pressures may operate differently.

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. Firstly, the sample was drawn from urban professional singles between 30 and 39 years old with at least a bachelor's degree. This limits the generalisability of the findings to singles in rural areas, those aged 40 and above, those in non-professional occupations and those not holding a bachelor's degree. While the original recruitment targeted single professionals aged 30 and above, eligible and willing participants happened to fall within the 30 to 39 age brackets, which means the experiences of singles in their 40s and beyond remain underexplored. As all participants held at least a bachelor's degree and were employed in professional occupations, the findings may reflect a middle-class bias. Higher socioeconomic status may afford individuals greater social capital and confidence to articulate and negotiate singlism, and therefore the experiences documented in this study may not reflect singles from lower socioeconomic background. Furthermore, this study was conducted exclusively in Klang Valley and may not represent singles in other regions or rural communities, where distinct cultural norms may produce different forms and intensities of singlism. Although the samples comprised participants from Chinese, Malay and Indian ethnic backgrounds and findings suggest broadly similar patterns of singlism across groups, the unequal distribution across ethnicities means that ethnicity-specific nuances cannot be fully ruled out.

Secondly, this study focused on social singlism within multiple social networks, including family members, close friends, acquaintances and the public, but it did not examine workplace singlism which may operate through different dynamics. Thirdly, this is a qualitative study relying on self-reported accounts. As participants were asked to recall and interpret their own experiences, the findings are subject to self-reporting limitations, including recall bias and the tendency to present experiences in socially desirable ways, which may affect the accuracy and completeness of the data. Furthermore, as singlism is deeply normalised, participants may not have recognised or articulated all instances of singlism they encountered, which means the scope of singlism in this study may be an underestimation of participants' actual experiences. The findings reflect participants' interpretation of their experiences rather than direct observation of occurrences of singlism.

Future research would benefit from examining across broader social contexts, age groups and cultural settings to develop a more comprehensive understanding of singlism beyond urban professional experience. Future studies should also include older single people, those in rural areas and those in non-professional occupations to build a more complete picture of how singlism is experienced across different groups. Future research with more balanced ethnic representation would allow for a more systematic examination of whether and how singlism manifests differently across communities in Malaysia. Studies focusing on professional workplace contexts would further provide an in-depth understanding of how singlism operates beyond social settings.

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