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Article

Voluntary Singlehood in a Greek-Speaking Cohort: Different Priorities and Giving Up Intimate Relationships as Reasons for Singlehood

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Abstract

People frequently choose not to be in an intimate relationship, but the reasons behind this choice vary. In the current study, we analyzed a dataset pooled from previous studies, consisting of 3226 Greek-speaking participants, 357 of whom were voluntarily single, to estimate the occurrence of different types of voluntary singlehood. We found that the largest subgroup, accounting for more than 60% of cases, consisted of individuals who indicated that they preferred to be single because they had different priorities. This was followed by those who indicated that they had given up on trying to attain an intimate relationship, comprising more than 26% of cases. Furthermore, about 13% of voluntarily single participants indicated that they were in this group for "other" reasons. Additionally, we found that participants in the different priorities group were single significantly longer than participants in the group who had given up on finding an intimate relationship. No significant sex differences were detected in the occurrence rates of the two types of voluntary singlehood. Moreover, younger participants were significantly more likely to indicate that they had different priorities than that they had given up on finding intimate relationships.

Keywords: singlehood; voluntary singlehood; voluntarily single; mating; mate choice

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1. Introduction

An increasing proportion of people living in Western societies are single; that is, they do not have an intimate partner (Apostolou and Michaelidou 2023; Kislev 2019; Kislev and Marsh 2023). Many of these single individuals are voluntarily so, meaning that they chose not to be in an intimate relationship. However, this subgroup of single individuals is not homogeneous, as people choose to be single for different reasons (Adamczyk and Trepanowski 2023; Girme et al. 2023; Park et al. 2024; Pepping et al. 2025). Two main reasons include giving up on finding an intimate relationship and having different priorities (Apostolou and Michaelidou 2023). The current study aimed to analyze previous data to break down the voluntary singlehood group and estimate the occurrence of the different sub-categories of voluntary singlehood.

1.1. Why People Choose to Be Single

Singlehood, and voluntary singlehood in particular, can be examined within an evolutionary framework. In this view, human behavior arises from brain mechanisms that have evolved through natural selection to promote the propagation of the genes that code

for them (Barkow et al. 1992). These mechanisms produce behaviors that help individuals survive and reproduce. For example, when the body lacks fuel, a hunger mechanism triggers feelings that motivate the individual to seek food, thereby supporting survival.

From an evolutionary standpoint, attracting and retaining mates is of the utmost importance (Buss 2016). Humans reproduce sexually; to pass their genetic material to future generations, they must gain access to the reproductive capacity of the opposite sex. Moreover, raising children to sexual maturity demands a considerable, prolonged, and reliable investment, something that is difficult for a single parent to provide. An intimate partner can also supply emotional support, financial resources, and physical protection (Buss 2016). Consequently, selection pressures have favored mechanisms that motivate people to form lasting intimate relationships and obtain these benefits. Voluntary singlehood, therefore, appears paradoxical. If human behavior aims to enhance survival and reproductive success, then forming enduring pair bonds is a major route to those ends; as such, why do many adults choose to remain single? The paradox resolves when we recognize that, under certain circumstances, not having an intimate partner can also improve one's reproductive success.

More specifically, people do not choose mates randomly; they have well-defined preferences that guide their choices (Buss and Schmitt 2019). Some of the traits they prefer in a mate, such as being educated, having a good job, and enjoying a high social status (Thomas et al. 2020), are not innate but need to be developed. Human mating is strategic in the sense that people make specific decisions and follow specific courses of action to choose, attract, and retain mates (Gangestad and Simpson 2000). One strategy people are likely to follow to attract higher-quality mates is to temporarily exit the mating market, focusing their energy on building such qualities—for instance, obtaining a good education—and re-entering the mating market at a later time when they have adequately developed these qualities (Apostolou and Michaelidou 2023). Consistent with this argument, frequent reasons why people are single include focusing on their career and being free to pursue their own goals (Apostolou and Michaelidou 2023).

Moreover, unforeseen circumstances such as health problems, unemployment, and financial difficulties could prevent people from attracting mates. For instance, people losing their jobs are deprived of the resources they need to participate effectively in the mating market. Additionally, as resource acquisition capacity and having a job are highly valued in a mate (Buss and Schmitt 2019), unemployment makes individuals less attractive as mates, further constraining their mating effort. In this scenario, it would make more sense for people to opt out of the mating market and focus their energy on addressing the problem, i.e., finding another job, and returning to the market at a future time when it has been resolved. Furthermore, some of these issues require more immediate attention to avoid severe negative consequences. For instance, a health problem, if left untreated, could be life-threatening. On the other hand, failing to attract a mate would have severe negative reproductive consequences, but these consequences are not immediate. Thus, some issues require exiting the mating game and focusing on resolving them before they cause more serious problems. Consistent with these arguments, health and personal issues were common reasons singles gave for not being in an intimate relationship (Apostolou and Michaelidou 2023).

Mating is regulated by several behavioral mechanisms that predominantly evolved in the ancestral context. Yet, the contemporary context where these mechanisms have to function is very different from the ancestral one, resulting in the fact that these mechanisms are not able to effectively address the challenges of the contemporary environment, known as the mismatch problem (Crawford 1998; Li et al. 2017). Thus, several people today face difficulties in attracting and keeping mates, staying involuntarily single as a consequence

(Goetz et al. 2019). Repeated failures to attract and/or keep an intimate partner can cause emotional pain and disappointment, which could drive people to give up on mating entirely, preferring to stay single instead. Consistent with this argument, single individuals frequently indicated that following repeated failures, they had given up on trying to attract mates (Apostolou and Michaelidou 2023). In total, there are at least two main reasons why people choose to stay single: they want to focus their attention on achieving different goals, meaning that they have different priorities, or they have been disappointed by repeated failures and have given up on trying to achieve an intimate relationship.

1.2. The Current Study

Existing evidence indicates that about one-third of single individuals are voluntarily so (Apostolou and Michaelidou 2023; see also Pepping et al. 2025). Nevertheless, this finding does not tell us how many voluntarily single individuals belong to this group because they have given up on obtaining an intimate relationship, and how many want to focus their attention on achieving different goals. Addressing this question is important as it will give us a better understanding of what people mean when they indicate that they are voluntarily single. Accordingly, the current study aims to (a) estimate the occurrence of these two sub-categories of voluntary singlehood in the Greek cultural context, (b) examine sex and age differences in the occurrence of these sub-categories, and (c) examine the associations of years being single with the different categories of voluntary singlehood.

The Greek Cultural Context

The present research took place in the Greek cultural context, so we will discuss here the prevailing mating patterns in this setting. To begin with, the Greek cultural context has traditionally placed a high value on marriage and the family unit as the foundational structure of society. This perspective is historically reinforced by the influence of the Greek Orthodox Church, which frames marriage as a central institution for community and procreation. Social standing and family reputation hold considerable weight, and relationship choices have often been guided by these considerations, reflecting a collectivist orientation where individual desires may be aligned with familial expectations (Georgas et al. 2006). However, over recent decades, Greece has experienced substantial social and economic transformations, including urbanization, increased educational attainment for women, and economic instability. These factors have contributed to shifts in mating patterns. Research indicates a clear trend towards postponing marriage, an increase in non-marital cohabitation, and a growing acceptance of singlehood as a lifestyle, particularly in urban centers (Gavalas and Raftakis 2024). The prolonged economic crisis beginning in the late 2000s further shaped these trends, as financial precarity made establishing an independent household and family more challenging, leading many young adults to delay or forgo marriage. Consequently, contemporary Greece presents a dynamic environment where traditional values coexist with modernizing attitudes toward relationships and individual life paths.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

In the present study, we combined three datasets from previous studies (i.e., Apostolou et al. 2024a, 2024b; Apostolou and Michaelidou 2023). The pooled dataset consisted of 3226 Greek-speaking participants: 1758 women, 1445 men, 14 who indicated their sex as "other," and nine who did not indicate their sex. The mean age of women was 32.3 years (SD = 10.9; Minimum = 18; Maximum = 75; Range = 57), and the mean age of men was 35.4 years (SD = 12.2; Minimum = 18; Maximum = 80; Range = 62). Additionally,

27.7% of the participants were in a relationship, 22.2% were involuntarily single, 17.2% were married, 16.4% were between relationships, 11.1% were voluntarily single, and 5.5% indicated their relationship status as "other." Moreover, single participants were not in an intimate relationship for an average of 4.5 years (*SD* = 7.5).

2.2. Procedures

In all three studies, participants were recruited using the following methods: a. The study link was distributed to students and colleagues, who were asked to forward it further. b. The study was promoted on social media platforms (i.e., Facebook and Instagram), targeting participants residing in Greece and the Republic of Cyprus. c. In Apostolou et al.'s (2024b) study, specifically, an additional recruitment method was used: a QR code linking to the study was created, and two research assistants recruited participants in shopping malls and coffee shops located in Athens and Nicosia. Participants did not receive monetary or other forms of compensation for their participation.

2.3. Materials

In all cases, participants' sex, age, and relationship status were recorded. For relationship status, the following categories were recorded: "In a relationship," "Married," "Involuntarily single: I want to be in a relationship, but I find it difficult to attract a mate," "Single between-relationships: My relationship has recently ended and I have not yet found another partner," "Prefer to be single: I am not interested in being in a relationship," and "Other." Participants who indicated that they were voluntarily single were subsequently asked to indicate the reason for this. Three options were provided: "I have become disappointed with relationships and I have given up trying to get into one," "At the moment I have other priorities and I don't have time for relationships," and "Other reason." In addition, participants who indicated that they were single were subsequently asked to indicate how many years they had not had an intimate partner for.

2.4. Data Analysis

To explore the occurrence of the different types of voluntary singlehood, we calculated the frequencies of each type as well as the means and standard deviations of the years that individuals were single in each category. Moreover, to examine whether there were significant differences in the years being single between categories, we performed an ANCOVA test. Specifically, years single was the dependent variable, voluntary singlehood (three levels) was the categorical independent variable, and age was a continuous independent variable. Additionally, to identify significant effects of sex and age, we performed multinomial logistic regression. Voluntary singlehood (three levels) was the dependent variable, and sex and age were the independent variables.

3. Results

3.1. Occurrence

As shown in Figure 1, "different priorities" was the most frequent reason for preferring to be single, with more than 60% of voluntarily single participants being in this group. The mean age of the participants in this category was 28.4 (*SD* = 10.4; Minimum = 18; Maximum = 79; Range = 61). Additionally, more than 26% of voluntarily single participants indicated that they had given up on trying to obtain an intimate relationship, with their mean age being 32.1 (*SD* = 12.9; Minimum = 18; Maximum = 65; Range = 47). Furthermore, more than 13% cited "other" reasons with their mean age being 29 (*SD* = 9.3; Minimum = 18; Maximum = 53; Range = 35). In terms of the entire sample, 6.7% of participants were single due to different priorities, 2.9% were single because they had given up on trying to find an

intimate relationship, and 1.5% were single for other reasons (Figure 2). Participants in the different priority groups were single for an average of 5.48 years (*SD* = 7.77), those who had given up on relationships were single for 3.63 years (*SD* = 4.62), and those in the other group were single for 7.23 years (*SD* = 10.66).

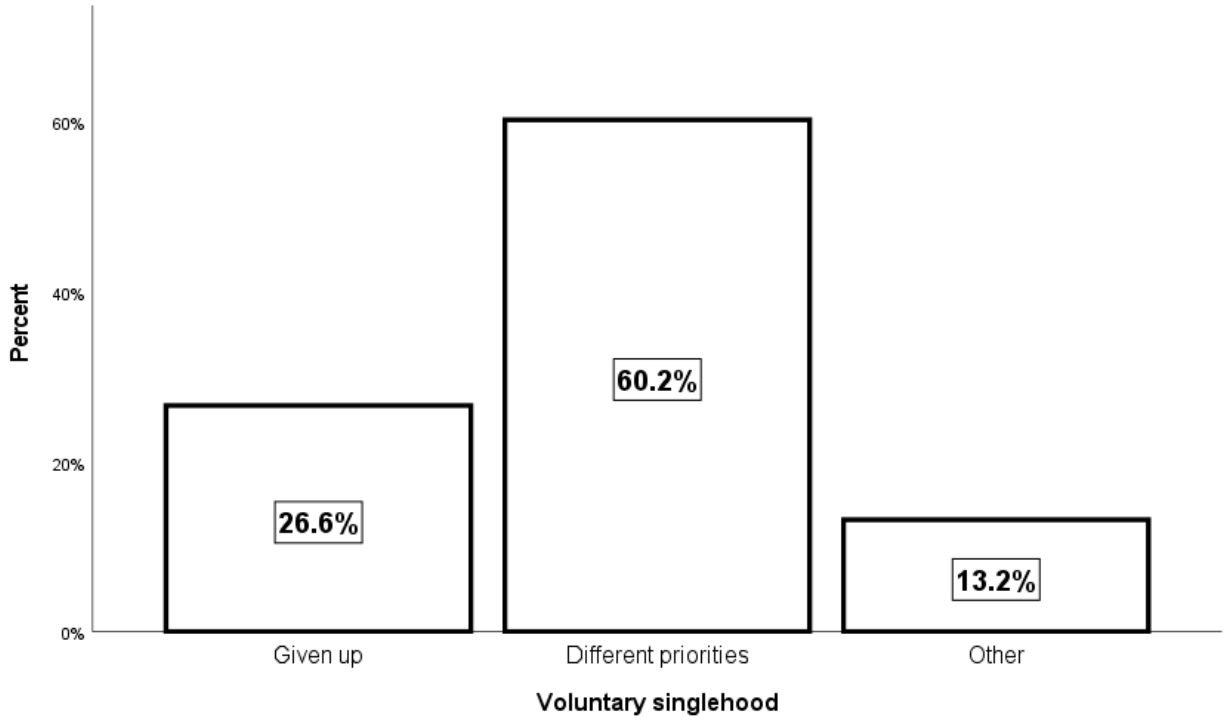


Figure 1. The graph above depicts the occurrence of the different types of voluntary singlehood in our sample.

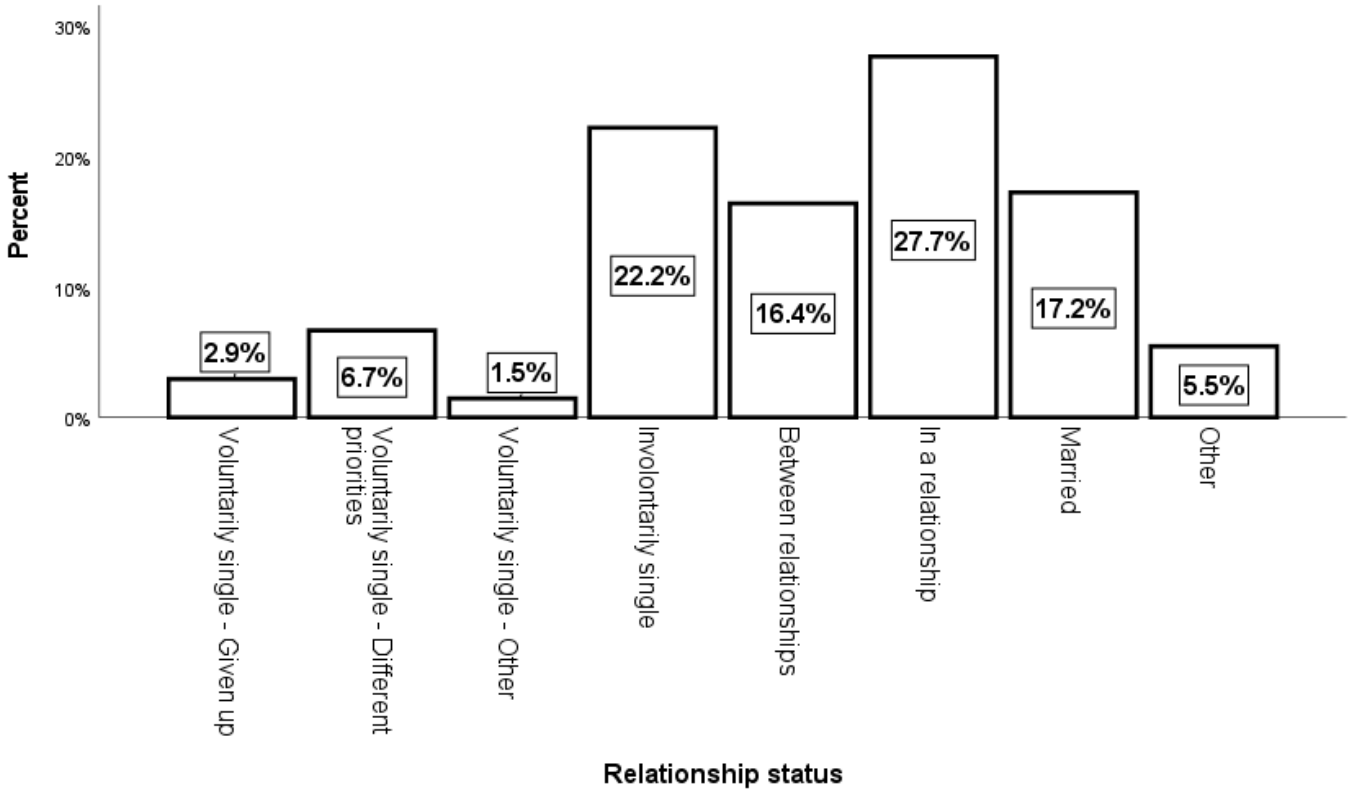


Figure 2. The graph above depicts the occurrence of the different categories of relationship status in our sample.

3.2. Significant Effects

Multinomial logistic regression examined the effects of age and sex on the types of voluntary singlehood and indicated that sex had no significant effect, but age did have a significant effect (Table 1). The odds ratio (OR = 0.97) indicated that a one-year increase in age was associated with a 3% [$(1 - 0.97) \times 100$] decrease in the probability of being in the different priorities category compared to the given up on relationships category. This finding indicates that younger participants are more likely to be voluntarily single because they have different priorities than because they have given up on finding an intimate relationship. Additionally, the odds ratio (OR = 0.98) suggested that a one-year increase in age was associated with a 2% [$(1 - 0.98) \times 100$] decrease in the probability of being in the other category compared to the given up on relationships category. However, as indicated by the Wald statistic, the OR was not significant in this case ($p = 0.128$).

Table 1. Logistic regression and ANCOVA results.

			Types of Voluntary Singlehood	
Logistic Regression	Chi square	*p*-value	Given up	Other
Sex	1.14	0.565	0.34	0.80
Age	8.19	0.017	1.03	1.01
ANCOVA	F	*p*-value	η_p^2	
Reasons	3.36	0.036	0.020	

Note. For the sex variable, the reference value is "women" and for the types of voluntary singlehood, the reference value is "different priorities".

With respect to the ANCOVA analysis that examined significant differences in years of being single across the different levels of voluntary singlehood, reasons for voluntary singlehood had a significant effect on the years of being single (Table 1). Post hoc analysis using the LSD test indicated that there was a significant difference between the different priorities and given up on relationships groups ($p = 0.050$). In addition, the other group was significantly different from the given up on relationships group ($p = 0.016$), but not from the different priorities group ($p = 0.230$).

4. Discussion

By analyzing a pooled sample of datasets, we found that more than half of the participants who classified themselves as voluntarily single indicated that they were so because they had other priorities. About one in four voluntarily single participants indicated that they were in this group because they had given up on trying to find an intimate relationship, and more than one in ten cited other reasons. We also found that single individuals in the different priorities group were single significantly longer than those in the given up on trying to find an intimate relationship group. Additionally, younger participants were significantly more likely to indicate that they were single because they had different priorities rather than because they had given up on trying to find an intimate relationship.

Participants who indicated that they were single because they had given up on trying to find an intimate relationship reported the fewest years of being single. One possible interpretation of this finding is that failures in mating have a temporary rather than a permanent effect on one's willingness to remain single. In other words, if failures in mating had led people to completely give up on mating, then individuals in this group would have a long-term single status, and thus their reported years of being single would be the highest, not the lowest, within the voluntarily single group. This does not preclude the possibility that there are some cases where failures in mating have led people to decide to be permanently single. Thus, this group could be further divided into those who have

given up on trying to find an intimate relationship temporarily and those who have given up more permanently.

The different states of voluntary singlehood could be better understood when seen as different developmental stages. Developmental stages can be studied within the life history perspective, which is an analytical framework used to understand how evolutionary processes shape the timing and allocation of energy and resources in an organism's lifecycle (Stearns 1992). In particular, it would be more advantageous for younger people, who have not yet developed their strengths, to opt out of the mating market to focus on developing these strengths, compared to older people who have already developed theirs. Consistent with this interpretation, research on singlehood has found that developing personal strengths, focusing on studies, and advancing careers are frequent reasons for choosing to be single (Apostolou and Michaelidou 2023). Also consistent with this interpretation, we found that younger participants are more likely than older participants to indicate that they prefer to be single because they have different priorities.

After individuals strengthen their personal qualities and, as a result, become more desirable partners, they may then enter the mating market. Possessing attractive traits, however, is not sufficient to secure and maintain a suitable partner. People often need to engage in different relationships to gain experience and develop the skills required for relationship maintenance. This experimentation inevitably includes encounters with partners who are not a good match, which can lead to disappointment. Such disappointment may prompt some individuals to remain single for a time so they can reflect on past failures and avoid repeating the same mistakes. Voluntary singlehood prompted by dissatisfaction with previous relationships can therefore be viewed as an intermediate stage before establishing a long-term intimate partnership.

Additionally, we found that about 13% of the participants indicated "other" as a reason for being voluntarily single. This means that although our division of voluntary singlehood into different priorities and giving up on finding an intimate relationship captured most of the variation, it did not capture the entire variation. Simply put, this group could be further divided (see Adamczyk and Trepanowski 2023). One possibility is that some people choose to be single to pursue a short-term mating strategy, that is, to have different casual sex partners (see Buss 2016). Future studies should attempt to divide voluntary singlehood into a more refined set of categories.

Consistent with our original prediction, a considerable proportion of participants who preferred to remain single indicated that they were disappointed by intimate relationships and had given up on pursuing them. This form of voluntary singlehood displays characteristics like involuntary singlehood (see Apostolou and Michaelidou 2023). Specifically, although these individuals desire intimate relationships, traits such as inflexibility or inconsideration toward a partner's needs cause repeated relationship failures and disappointment, eventually leading them to prefer singlehood (Apostolou and Michaelidou 2023). If these difficulties were absent, they would likely engage in relationships, suggesting that their current status is not ideal. This reasoning implies that individuals who are single due to prioritizing other goals would report greater satisfaction with their relationship status compared to individuals who are single due to disillusionment with intimate relationships—a prediction that future research should empirically test.

It has been argued that singlehood constitutes, in many ways, a superior state compared to being in a relationship (DePaulo 2007). Consequently, one might argue that some people choose not to be in an intimate relationship because they perceive singlehood as generally preferable and consciously choose this path; these are individuals whom DePaulo describes as "single at heart." Nonetheless, our findings suggest that this is not the primary reason why people choose to remain single. Rather, most people who choose not to pursue

an intimate relationship do so temporarily in order to address other, more pressing matters or because they have experienced disappointments in previous relationships. Thus, at least within the Greek cultural context, most individuals who prefer to remain single are not "single at heart."

Related to the argument above, the relatively high prevalence of voluntary singlehood might be interpreted to suggest that singlehood is a desirable or even superior state and that this explains why many people choose it. Our findings do not support this view. Most voluntarily single individuals reported adopting the status to focus on other priorities, indicating that they regard it as temporary. As noted in the introduction, these priorities include enhancing personal strengths that could make them more appealing to prospective partners. A substantial proportion also cited past difficulties in intimate relationships, implying that they do not see singlehood as an ideal condition. In short, voluntary singles are not single because they believe the status is intrinsically better than being partnered; instead, they wish to pursue other immediate goals, work on self-development, or face challenges to help attract or keep partners. Furthermore, the results show that voluntary singles should not be treated as a homogeneous group, because individuals forego intimate relationships for diverse reasons. Future research should examine this category further and develop measures that classify voluntary singles into more nuanced subgroups.

One limitation of the current study is that it was based on self-report instruments, which are subject to biases. One such bias is that some people may not easily admit that repeated failures have led them to give up on trying to obtain an intimate relationship, so they may indicate that they prefer to be single because they have different priorities or for other reasons. If this is the case, the observed occurrence of the given up on relationships category likely underestimates the true occurrence. As discussed above, these two groups are expected to differ in their satisfaction with their relationship status. Accordingly, future studies that measure this dimension could better control this bias. Also, our measure of relationship status did not account for categories such as divorced or widowed participants. These groups can contribute to the broader category of singlehood and experience it in distinct ways.

Moreover, we employed non-probability samples, so our findings do not readily generalize to the population (see Coppock et al. 2018). Accordingly, future studies need to attempt to replicate our findings using probability samples. Yet, even though with the present dataset we cannot be certain about the prevalence rates of the different subcategories of voluntary singlehood in the population, we can reasonably say that our data make a strong case that the two main categories of voluntary singlehood are giving up on relationships and having different priorities, with the latter being more common than the former. Additionally, the current study focused on the Greek cultural context; thus, our findings may not readily generalize to other cultural settings. In particular, there is likely to be cross-cultural variation in the occurrence of different types of voluntary singlehood. For instance, the occurrence of individuals having different priorities is likely to be higher in more individualistic societies. Future cross-cultural research should investigate potential variations in the prevalence of different types of voluntary singlehood across diverse cultural contexts and identify factors that may account for such variations. Furthermore, our study used an evolutionary framework to understand voluntary singlehood. Future research could refine this approach by integrating insights from sociology, gender studies, and cultural psychology.

People may choose to be single for different reasons. In the current study, we found that most individuals are voluntarily single because they have different priorities, while a considerable proportion are single because they have given up on trying to find an intimate

relationship. More replication studies in different cultural settings are necessary to better understand the occurrence of different types of voluntary singlehood.

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Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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