
BETWEEN PAMPERS AND PASSPORT: NEGOTIATING CHILDFREE DECISIONS AND FREEDOM GLOW AMONG MALAYSIAN WOMEN

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Abstract

The increasing prevalence of voluntary childlessness has challenged conventional assumptions that motherhood represents a universal aspiration among women. Although the childfree movement has gained growing scholarly attention internationally, limited research has explored how women in collectivist societies negotiate the decision to remain childfree. This study explores the lived experiences of Malaysian women who voluntarily choose not to have children, with particular attention to the emergence of Freedom Glow as a positive psychological experience resulting from autonomous reproductive decision-making. Guided by an interpretivist paradigm and integrating Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and Ryff's (1989) model of psychological well-being, this qualitative study employed semi-structured, in-depth interviews with eight Malaysian women who self-identified as childfree by choice. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2021) Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Four interrelated themes emerged: (1) Choosing Myself: Reclaiming Autonomy Beyond Motherhood; (2) Living Under Constant Questions: Negotiating Pronatalist Expectations; (3) Between Doubt and Freedom: Navigating Parenting FOMO and Freedom Glow; and (4) A Passport to Possibilities: Redefining Success Beyond Childbearing. The findings reveal that participants viewed childfree

decisions as thoughtful, intentional life choices rather than rejections of family values. Although participants experienced persistent social expectations, family pressure, and gendered stereotypes surrounding motherhood, they simultaneously described profound feelings of autonomy, emotional peace, flexibility, and personal fulfilment. These positive experiences are conceptualised as Freedom Glow, a psychosocial state characterised by self-determination, authenticity, and the freedom to pursue personally meaningful life trajectories. This study contributes to the growing literature on reproductive autonomy by extending understanding of childfree experiences beyond Western contexts and introducing Freedom Glow as an emerging conceptual framework for understanding women's psychological well-being within pronatalist societies. The findings provide important implications for family policy, gender equality, and social work practice in contemporary Malaysia.

Keywords: Childfree, Freedom Glow, reproductive autonomy, Parenting FOMO, collectivist society

INTRODUCTION

The decision to become a mother has traditionally been regarded as one of the most significant milestones in a woman's life. Across many societies, motherhood is not merely considered a personal choice but is deeply embedded within cultural expectations, gender norms, and social identities (Gillespie, 2003; Letherby, 2002). Women are often expected to marry, have children, and fulfil caregiving responsibilities as part of a socially prescribed life course. Consequently, women who choose not to have children frequently encounter questions regarding their femininity, life satisfaction, and commitment to family values (Ashburn-Nardo, 2017; Morison et al., 2016). While these expectations remain influential, contemporary societies are witnessing profound demographic and cultural transformations that are reshaping women's reproductive aspirations.

Globally, fertility rates have declined to historically low levels. According to recent demographic reports, more than half of the world's countries have fertility rates below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman, reflecting changing family formation patterns, delayed marriage, economic uncertainty, and evolving gender roles (United Nations, 2022). Although declining fertility has frequently been explained through structural factors such as rising living costs, housing affordability, employment insecurity, and

delayed marriage, recent scholarship argues that reproductive decisions are increasingly influenced by women's aspirations for education, career development, personal autonomy, and psychological well-being (Berrington & Pattaro, 2014; McQuillan et al., 2012). Motherhood is no longer viewed as the only pathway towards adulthood or personal fulfilment but has become one of several possible life trajectories.

Within this demographic transition, voluntary childlessness, commonly referred to as childfree, has emerged as an increasingly visible reproductive choice. Unlike involuntary childlessness, which results from infertility or other circumstances beyond an individual's control, childfree women intentionally decide not to become mothers (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012). Existing studies demonstrate that this decision rarely reflects impulsiveness or rejection of family life. Rather, it often represents a carefully considered process involving financial planning, career aspirations, relationship quality, health considerations, environmental concerns, and the pursuit of personally meaningful lifestyles (Hakim, 2003; Peterson, 2015). Consequently, childfree decisions should be understood as expressions of reproductive agency rather than simply the absence of motherhood.

Despite the growing international literature, research on childfree women remains dominated by studies conducted in North America, Europe, and Australia (Hoffman & Levant, 1985; Koropecykj-Cox & Pendell, 2007; Morison et al., 2016). These contexts are characterized by relatively higher acceptance of individual autonomy and diverse family structures. In contrast, considerably less is known about the experiences of women living in collectivist societies, where family obligations and pronatalist values continue to shape expectations surrounding marriage and motherhood (Yang & Rosenblatt, 2008). Cultural context is particularly important because reproductive decisions are never made in isolation; they are negotiated within relationships, communities, and broader systems of social expectations (Chirkov et al., 2003; Markus & Kitayama, 2003).

Malaysia offers a unique context for examining these negotiations. As a multicultural Southeast Asian nation with Malay, Chinese, Indian, and indigenous populations, Malaysia embodies complex intersections of religious traditions, ethnic identities, and modernizing influences. Although Malaysian women have achieved remarkable progress in higher education,

professional careers, and economic participation—with female tertiary enrolment exceeding male enrolment since 2000 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021) motherhood continues to be widely regarded as an essential marker of successful womanhood. Marriage is commonly associated with childbearing, while motherhood symbolizes responsibility, maturity, and continuity of the family lineage (Tey, 2007). Women who voluntarily choose not to have children therefore frequently experience persistent questioning from family members, social judgement from their communities, and assumptions that they will eventually change their minds (Liu, 2023). These experiences suggest that childfree decisions involve continuous negotiation between personal aspirations and deeply embedded cultural expectations rather than simple individual preferences.

Existing Malaysian literature has primarily focused on infertility, delayed marriage, fertility decline, and family planning (Tey, 2007; Tey et al., 2014). Comparatively little attention has been devoted to women who intentionally decide not to have children. Furthermore, previous research often combines childfree women with women who are involuntarily childless, overlooking the distinct motivations, identities, and psychological experiences associated with voluntary childlessness (Letherby, 2002). This conceptual ambiguity limits current understanding of women's reproductive autonomy and reinforces deficit-oriented assumptions that women without children inevitably experience regret, loneliness, or reduced well-being.

Recent psychological scholarship has begun challenging these assumptions by recognizing that voluntary childlessness may also generate positive emotional experiences. One emerging concept is Freedom Glow, referring to feelings of autonomy, flexibility, emotional peace, self-determination, and personal fulfilment that arise when reproductive decisions are aligned with an individual's deeply held values and aspirations. Rather than conceptualizing childfree women through narratives of absence or loss, Freedom Glow emphasizes the possibility that women may experience psychological flourishing by constructing meaningful lives beyond motherhood. However, empirical evidence regarding this concept remains limited, particularly within non-Western societies where pronatalist values continue to dominate public discourse.

At the same time, childfree decisions should not be interpreted as entirely free from emotional complexity. Women may continue to encounter societal expectations that equate motherhood with feminine identity, resulting in moments of uncertainty, social pressure, or reflections about alternative life pathways a phenomenon conceptualized here as Parenting FOMO (Fear of Missing Out). Their experiences therefore represent ongoing negotiations between personal autonomy and collective expectations rather than fixed or static decisions. Understanding these negotiations requires approaches that privilege women's own voices and lived experiences instead of relying solely on demographic statistics or psychological measurements.

1.1 Theoretical Framework

This study integrates two complementary theoretical frameworks to understand Malaysian women's childfree experiences: Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017) and Ryff's (1989) model of psychological well-being. Self-Determination Theory posits that human flourishing depends upon the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy (volitional self-regulation), competence (effectiveness in interacting with one's environment), and relatedness (meaningful social connections). While SDT has been criticised for Western individualistic bias, subsequent cross-cultural research has demonstrated that autonomy represents a universal psychological need, albeit expressed differently across cultural contexts (Chirkov et al., 2003; Ryan & Deci, 2020). In collectivist societies, autonomy is not necessarily equated with independence or separation from others; rather, it involves volitional engagement and self-endorsement of one's actions within meaningful social relationships (Markus & Kitayama, 2003). This distinction is crucial for understanding Malaysian women's experiences, as their reproductive decisions were negotiated within family and community contexts rather than in isolation.

Ryff's (1989) six-factor model of psychological well-being provides complementary dimensions for understanding Freedom Glow. Ryff identified autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance as core components of eudaimonic well-being. This model moves beyond hedonic conceptualisations of well-being (happiness, life satisfaction) to emphasise positive psychological functioning and self-realisation. The integration of SDT and Ryff's model

offers a robust theoretical foundation for examining how autonomous reproductive decisions contribute to multidimensional well-being in a pronatalist cultural context.

Research Objectives

- i. To explore the lived experiences of Malaysian women who voluntarily choose not to have children.
- ii. To examine how Malaysian women negotiate societal, familial, and cultural expectations surrounding motherhood.
- iii. To understand how childfree women construct their identities beyond traditional motherhood roles.
- iv. To explore the emergence of Freedom Glow as a positive psychosocial experience associated with autonomous reproductive decision-making.
- v. To develop a conceptual understanding of how reproductive autonomy shapes women's well-being in the Malaysian sociocultural context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Childfree Decisions: International Perspectives

Research on voluntary childlessness has expanded considerably over the past four decades, predominantly in Western contexts. Early studies by Veivers (1980) and Houseknecht (1987) established foundational understandings of childfree women as a distinct population from those experiencing involuntary childlessness. Subsequent research has examined motivations for childfree decisions, revealing diverse factors including career prioritization (Hakim, 2003), financial considerations (Duxbury, 2005), environmental concerns (Stewart & Bachan, 2024), relationship quality (Pelton & Hertlein, 2011), and desires for personal freedom and self-fulfillment (Peterson, 2015).

More recent scholarship has examined the stigma and discrimination faced by childfree individuals. Morison et al. (2016) demonstrated that childfree women encounter significant social stigma, being perceived as less warm, less fulfilled, and more morally questionable than mothers. Ashburn-Nardo (2017) found that voluntarily childfree individuals elicited moral outrage from observers, suggesting that childfree decisions violate deeply held social norms

regarding parenthood as a moral imperative. These findings highlight that childfree decisions are not merely personal choices but carry significant social and moral dimensions.

The psychological well-being of childfree women has been a contested area. While early research often assumed that childlessness led to regret and reduced life satisfaction, more recent studies have challenged this deficit perspective. A landmark study by Neal and Groat (2021) found no significant differences in life satisfaction between childfree individuals and parents, challenging assumptions that parenthood is essential for happiness. Similarly, research by Blackstone and Stewart (2012) demonstrated that childfree women reported high levels of life satisfaction, particularly when their decisions were autonomous and value concordant.

The Childfree Experience in Asian and Collectivist Contexts

Research on childfree decisions in Asian and collectivist societies remains comparatively underdeveloped. Yang and Rosenblatt (2008) examined childless couples in South Korea, finding that Confucian family values created substantial pressure for childbearing, with childlessness viewed as a failure to fulfil filial obligations. In China, the phenomenon of "*nuding*" (women who choose not to marry or have children) has garnered increasing attention, with media representations often framing such choices as individualistic rebellion against traditional gender roles (Lu et al., 2023).

In Southeast Asian contexts, research has primarily focused on fertility decline, delayed marriage, and family planning rather than voluntary childlessness per se (Tey, 2007; Tey et al., 2014). The limited existing research suggests that pronatalist norms remain strong, with women's reproductive decisions heavily influenced by family expectations, religious values, and cultural traditions. However, rapid urbanization, increased educational attainment, and expanding female labour force participation are creating conditions conducive to diverse reproductive choices (Jones, 2021).

The negotiation of autonomy within collectivist cultures presents theoretical challenges. Markus and Kitayama (2003) distinguished between independent self-construal (predominant in Western individualistic cultures) and interdependent self-construal (predominant in East Asian collectivist cultures). While independent self's priorities personal goals and self-

expression, interdependent selves emphasize harmony, obligation, and relational fulfilment. However, subsequent research has challenged the assumption that autonomy is irrelevant in collectivist contexts. Chirkov et al. (2003) demonstrated that autonomy remains a universal psychological need, but its expression may involve integration with social relationships rather than separation from them. This "collectivist autonomy" (Chirkov, 2009) the capacity to make self-endorsed decisions while maintaining meaningful social connections provides a more culturally sensitive framework for understanding Malaysian women's reproductive agency.

2.3 Freedom Glow: Conceptual Foundations

The concept of Freedom Glow builds upon several established theoretical traditions while addressing a gap in the literature on positive psychological experiences associated with voluntary childlessness. The term itself captures the enduring sense of well-being that emerges when individuals live authentically according to their deeply held values a phenomenon distinct from temporary pleasure or hedonic enjoyment.

Theoretical antecedents for Freedom Glow can be identified in several literatures. Within Self-Determination Theory, the concept of vitality (Ryan & Frederick, 1997) refers to the energetic state accompanying autonomous self-regulation. Authenticity research (Wood et al., 2008) demonstrates that living congruently with one's true self predicts enhanced well-being. Eudaimonic well-being (Ryff, 1989; Waterman, 1993) emphasises self-realisation and meaning as core components of positive functioning. Liberation psychology (Martín-Baró, 1994) examines how freedom from oppressive social conditions enables psychological flourishing.

Freedom Glow specifically extends these concepts by focusing on the reproductive domain and the collectivist cultural context. It captures not merely the absence of parenting burdens but the active presence of positive psychological states autonomy, authenticity, emotional peace, purposeful living that emerge when reproductive decisions align with personal values within socially constraining environments. The "glow" metaphor emphasises that this is not a defensive or reactive state but an affirmative, radiant experience of living one's chosen life.

2.4 Parenting FOMO: Negotiating Uncertainty

While Freedom Glow captures positive experiences, Parenting FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) acknowledges the emotional complexity of childfree decisions. Originally conceptualised in social media research (Przybylski et al., 2013), FOMO refers to apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent. Applied to the reproductive domain, Parenting FOMO describes moments of doubt, reflection, or anxiety that childfree individuals may experience when confronted with societal narratives that position parenthood as uniquely fulfilling.

Recent research by Scharp and colleagues (2023) found that fear of missing out was a significant motivator among regretful parents, suggesting that FOMO operates bidirectionally in reproductive decision-making. For childfree women, Parenting FOMO may manifest as questioning whether they will regret their decision, concerns about social isolation from peer groups of parents, or reflections on alternative life possibilities. However, unlike paralysing anxiety, Parenting FOMO in the context of autonomous decision-making may represent adaptive reflection rather than pathological doubt moments of conscious evaluation that ultimately reinforce commitment to one's chosen path when processed within a supportive self-concept.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Paradigm

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded within an interpretivist paradigm to explore how Malaysian women negotiate voluntary childfree decisions and construct meanings around their reproductive choices. An interpretivist approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to understand participants' subjective experiences, personal interpretations, and the sociocultural contexts that shaped their reproductive decision-making (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Rather than seeking universal explanations, this approach acknowledges that reality is socially constructed and that individual experiences are influenced by cultural norms, personal values, and interpersonal relationships.

The study formed part of a larger explanatory sequential mixed-methods research project examining reproductive decision-making among Malaysians. However, the present article reports exclusively on the qualitative component involving women who voluntarily identified themselves as childfree. Focusing solely on women's narratives allowed for a deeper understanding of

how reproductive autonomy is negotiated within a society where motherhood remains a dominant cultural expectation.

Participants and Sampling

This article presents a secondary qualitative analysis of a larger mixed-methods study that explored reproductive decision-making among Malaysian adults. The original qualitative phase involved 15 participants, comprising eight women and seven men. For the present study, only the narratives of the eight female participants were analysed because the study specifically aimed to understand women's lived experiences of negotiating childfree decisions and experiencing Freedom Glow within the Malaysian sociocultural context.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed during the original study to recruit information-rich participants who represented diverse reproductive experiences. The women included in this analysis varied in terms of age, marital status, occupation, educational background, and reproductive intentions, thereby providing a broad range of perspectives on voluntary childfree decisions, reproductive autonomy, and societal expectations surrounding motherhood.

Participants ranged in age from 29 to 44 years ($M = 36.5$, $SD = 5.2$) and represented different reproductive categories, including women who voluntarily chose to remain childfree, women experiencing involuntary childlessness, women who decided not to have additional children, and unmarried women who intended to remain childfree after marriage. Although these participants differed in their reproductive circumstances, all shared experiences of negotiating cultural expectations regarding motherhood. This diversity enriched the analysis by allowing comparison across different reproductive pathways while maintaining the central focus on women's experiences.

Data saturation for the present analysis was achieved through repeated examination of the eight interview transcripts, where no substantially new concepts emerged. Rather than aiming for statistical representativeness, the study prioritised depth, richness, and contextual understanding, consistent

with interpretivist qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Guest et al., 2006).

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews using an interview guide developed from the study objectives, theoretical framework, and existing literature on childfree decisions, reproductive autonomy, Parenting FOMO, and Freedom Glow. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to describe their reproductive journeys, motivations for remaining childfree, experiences with family and societal expectations, emotional responses, and perceptions of personal well-being.

Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 90 minutes (M = 62 minutes) and was conducted either face-to-face or through secure online platforms, depending on participants' preferences and geographical locations. All interviews were conducted in participants' preferred language (Bahasa Malaysia or English), audio-recorded with informed consent, and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. Field notes were maintained to document contextual observations and researcher reflections.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2021) Reflexive Thematic Analysis. This approach was selected because it provides a flexible yet rigorous framework for identifying, interpreting, and constructing patterns of meaning across qualitative datasets, while explicitly acknowledging the researcher's active role in meaning-making.

The analysis followed six iterative phases which is familiarization, Coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition and analytic narrative.

- i. Familiarisation
Immersion in the interview transcripts through repeated reading and initial note-taking.
- ii. Coding
Systematic generation of initial codes representing meaningful units of data, conducted inductively to remain close to participants' own language and meanings.

iii.	Theme	Generation
	Collation of related codes into preliminary themes, informed by both semantic (explicit) and latent (underlying) meanings.	
iv.	Theme	Review
	Critical examination of themes against coded extracts and full transcripts to ensure internal coherence and conceptual distinctiveness.	
v.	Theme	Definition
	Refinement and naming of final themes, with attention to capturing the essence of each pattern and its relationship to the overall theoretical narrative.	
vi.	Analytic	Narrative
	Production of an interpretative narrative supported by representative participant quotations, with explicit integration of theoretical frameworks.	

The analysis emphasised both semantic and latent meanings, allowing the researchers to explore not only what participants explicitly described but also the underlying assumptions, cultural influences, and psychological processes shaping their experiences. Analytic memos were maintained throughout to document interpretive decisions and theoretical developments.

Trustworthiness

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the study adopted criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), adapted for contemporary qualitative research. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with the data (approximately 120 hours of analysis), iterative analysis, member-checking of preliminary findings with two participants, and regular peer debriefing sessions among members of the research team regarding coding and theme development. Transferability was supported through rich, thick descriptions of participants' experiences and the Malaysian sociocultural context, enabling readers to determine the applicability of the findings to similar settings (Tracy, 2010).

While dependability was achieved by maintaining a transparent audit trail documenting methodological decisions, analytic procedures, and theoretical

developments throughout the research process. Then confirmability was enhanced through reflexive memo writing, continuous examination of researchers' assumptions during data interpretation, and explicit discussion of researcher positionality.

Researcher Reflexivity

Given the interpretivist nature of this study, reflexivity formed an integral component of the research process. The research team comprised scholars with backgrounds in social work, psychology, and family studies, several of whom are Malaysian women who have navigated societal expectations regarding marriage and motherhood in their personal and professional lives. These positionalities provided both insider advantages (cultural fluency, shared understandings of pronatalist pressures) and potential biases (assumptions about autonomy, emotional investments in gender equality).

Throughout the analysis, reflective discussions and analytic memos were maintained to critically examine personal assumptions and minimize potential researcher bias while preserving participants' voices. The team engaged in bracketing exercises to identify preconceptions about childfree decisions and deliberately sought disconfirming evidence that challenged emerging interpretations. The first author, who conducted the original interviews, maintained a reflective journal documenting emotional responses and interpretive hunches throughout the analytic process.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the larger research project was obtained from the Universiti Malaysia Sabah Research Ethics prior to data collection. All participants received detailed information regarding the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Pseudonyms are used throughout this article to protect participant identity. Given the sensitive nature of reproductive decisions, particular attention was paid to emotional safety, with participants informed of counselling resources available should distress arise during or following interviews.

FINDINGS

Analysis of the eight women's narratives generated four interconnected themes that illustrate how Malaysian women negotiate voluntary childfree decisions within a pronatalist society. Rather than describing childfree decisions as a single event, participants portrayed them as an ongoing process of negotiating personal aspirations, cultural expectations, intimate relationships, and psychological well-being. Across the interviews, women consistently described balancing societal expectations of motherhood with their own visions of meaningful adulthood. The themes are presented below.

Theme 1: Choosing Myself (Reclaiming autonomy beyond motherhood)

The first theme reflects participants' desire to reclaim autonomy over their own lives and reproductive decisions. For many participants, choosing not to have children was not an act of rejecting family values but rather an affirmation of their right to determine their own life trajectories.

Participants consistently described their decisions as thoughtful and deliberate. They viewed motherhood as one possible pathway rather than an obligatory life destination.

One participant explained:

"I don't oppose marriage, but I want marriage without pressure to have children" (P1)

Another participant similarly reflected:

"For me, love doesn't need to be validated with children." (P2)

Rather than associating marriage exclusively with parenthood, participants emphasized emotional intimacy, companionship, and mutual support as the foundations of successful relationships. They believed that marital fulfilment could exist independently of childbearing.

Several participants also described career aspirations, financial stability, personal development, and psychological well-being as legitimate priorities that influenced their reproductive decisions. They rejected the assumption that motherhood should automatically supersede individual aspirations.

These narratives demonstrate that reproductive autonomy was experienced as an active process of self-determination. Participants were not distancing themselves from family life; instead, they were redefining what family, partnership, and personal fulfilment meant within their own lives. Their decisions reflected agency rather than avoidance, illustrating that autonomy emerged through conscious negotiation rather than resistance alone.

Theme 2: Living Under Constant Questions (Negotiating Pronatalist Expectations)

The second theme captures participants' experiences of living within a society where motherhood is widely regarded as the expected and natural progression of marriage. Although participants described confidence in their reproductive decisions, they also reported continuous exposure to questions, assumptions, and subtle forms of social pressure from family members, relatives, friends, and colleagues.

Participants explained that conversations surrounding marriage were almost inevitably followed by questions about pregnancy and childbearing. Rather than perceiving these questions as isolated incidents, participants viewed them as recurring reminders that society continued to define women's success through motherhood.

One participant reflected:

"I don't oppose marriage, but I want marriage without the pressure to have children.." (P1)

Another participant shared:

"Marriage is important, but children are not my choice." (P4)

These narratives illustrate that participants did not reject marriage itself; instead, they challenged the widespread assumption that marriage must inevitably lead to motherhood. For these women, the pressure originated not only from explicit expectations but also from deeply embedded cultural beliefs that equated femininity with childbearing.

Participants described how these expectations often generated emotional labour. Rather than openly confronting family members, many chose to negotiate social interactions carefully by avoiding discussions about children, providing vague responses, or redirecting conversations to other aspects of

their lives. This negotiation enabled participants to preserve family relationships while maintaining personal autonomy over their reproductive choices.

Importantly, participants did not portray themselves as resisting Malaysian culture. Instead, they emphasised balancing respect for family values with commitment to their own aspirations. Their narratives suggest that reproductive autonomy was not exercised in isolation but continuously negotiated within interpersonal relationships and cultural expectations. Several participants also explained that societal assumptions frequently overlooked alternative definitions of family and fulfilment. They believed that meaningful relationships could be cultivated through emotional intimacy, mutual support, friendships, professional achievements, and contributions to the wider community rather than exclusively through parenthood.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that pronatalist expectations remain deeply embedded within participants' everyday lives. Nevertheless, the women actively negotiated these expectations by redefining what constituted a successful marriage and meaningful adulthood. Rather than accepting motherhood as an unquestioned obligation, they constructed alternative narratives of womanhood grounded in autonomy, mutual partnership, and personal authenticity.

Theme 3: Freedom without Guilt – Experiencing Freedom Glow

Beyond negotiating societal expectations, participants consistently described an overwhelming sense of psychological freedom after embracing their reproductive decisions. Rather than perceiving childfree living as a sacrifice, they portrayed it as a conscious pathway towards personal fulfilment, emotional stability, and self-directed living. This positive psychological experience is conceptualized in the present study as Freedom Glow.

Participants described Freedom Glow as more than simply having additional time or financial resources. Instead, it represented an enduring sense of inner peace derived from living authentically according to their personal values rather than external expectations. Many women explained that deciding not to have children allowed them to invest more fully in their careers, intimate

relationships, personal interests, and future aspirations without experiencing feelings of regret.

Theme 4: A Passport to Possibilities (Redefining Success Beyond Childbearing)

The final theme illustrates how participants reconstructed the meaning of legacy, success, and womanhood beyond biological motherhood. Contrary to dominant cultural narratives that equate legacy with having children, participants described multiple pathways through which they believed their lives could remain meaningful and impactful.

For many women, legacy was no longer understood as limited to biological descendants. Instead, they viewed legacy as the values they embodied, the relationships they nurtured, the careers they built, and the positive contributions they made to their families, communities, and society. Participants believed that a meaningful life could be measured through compassion, personal growth, professional achievement, and social contribution rather than parenthood alone.

P4 explained that marriage itself did not require parenthood to be meaningful:

"If I marry, I focus on quality relationships, not children."

P1 stated:

"My legacy I want to be a lecturer who inspires students. I want to write books. That's how I leave an impact."

These narratives illustrate that participants actively separated the institution of marriage from the expectation of motherhood. Instead of perceiving childbearing as the ultimate purpose of marriage, they viewed intimate relationships as spaces for companionship, mutual support, and shared life goals.

Participants also described success using broader definitions than those traditionally associated with motherhood. Professional accomplishments, lifelong learning, financial independence, meaningful friendships, community engagement, and emotional well-being were frequently mentioned as equally valuable achievements. Several women explained that choosing not to have

children enabled them to devote greater attention to these aspects of their lives without experiencing feelings of incompleteness.

P5 reflected:

"Success for me, finishing my PhD, doing research that helps society, travelling, learning new languages. I feel proud of my achievements."

Importantly, participants rejected the assumption that women without children inevitably lead less meaningful lives. Rather than describing themselves as lacking something, they emphasised living intentionally according to their personal values and aspirations. For these women, fulfilment emerged from authenticity rather than conformity to socially prescribed expectations.

The findings further suggest that participants continuously reconstructed feminine identity throughout adulthood. Womanhood was no longer interpreted solely through reproductive capacity but through personal integrity, self-determination, and meaningful contributions to others. This reinterpretation enabled participants to maintain positive self-identities despite living within a society where motherhood remained highly valued.

P2 articulated this reconstruction:

"I am a woman, I am strong, I am independent. I don't need children to prove I'm a complete woman."

Collectively, this theme demonstrates that childfree women actively redefine legacy beyond biological continuity. Their narratives reveal that meaningful lives may be created through diverse forms of contribution, relationships, and personal achievement. In doing so, participants challenged dominant pronatalist assumptions and proposed alternative understandings of fulfilment, identity, and successful womanhood within contemporary Malaysian society.

Summary of Findings

The four themes collectively demonstrate that voluntary childfree decisions among Malaysian women are neither impulsive nor indicative of rejection towards family values. Instead, they represent an ongoing process of

negotiating personal aspirations, cultural expectations, and psychological well-being.

Participants first described reclaiming autonomy over their reproductive decisions by viewing motherhood as one possible life pathway rather than an obligatory destination. They subsequently explained how pronatalist expectations remained pervasive within everyday interactions, requiring continuous negotiation with family members and broader society. Despite these challenges, participants consistently described experiencing Freedom Glow, characterised by emotional peace, authenticity, self-determination, and purposeful living following autonomous reproductive decision-making. Finally, participants redefined legacy and womanhood beyond biological motherhood by emphasising meaningful relationships, professional achievements, community contributions, and personal growth.

Taken together, these findings suggest that childfree decisions should be understood as dynamic negotiations between individual agency and sociocultural expectations. More importantly, the findings introduce Freedom Glow as a multidimensional psychosocial experience that expands existing understandings of women's reproductive autonomy within pronatalist societies.

DISCUSSION

The present study explored how Malaysian women negotiated voluntary childfree decisions and experienced Freedom Glow within a sociocultural context where motherhood remains a dominant expectation of womanhood. Rather than viewing childfree decisions as simple expressions of personal preference, the findings demonstrate that reproductive decision-making is a dynamic process shaped by interactions between individual agency, cultural expectations, family relationships, and psychological well-being. The four themes generated from the analysis collectively suggest that women's reproductive choices involve continuous negotiation between personal aspirations and pronatalist norms.

Negotiating Reproductive Autonomy within a Pronatalist Society

The findings reveal that participants exercised reproductive autonomy through deliberate and reflective decision-making rather than impulsive rejection of motherhood. Consistent with previous international research (Blackstone &

Stewart, 2012; Hakim, 2003), participants described childfree decisions as emerging from careful consideration of career aspirations, relationship quality, financial stability, personal values, and desired lifestyles. However, unlike much of the existing literature originating from Western societies, participants in the present study described autonomy as a negotiated rather than absolute experience.

Women consistently emphasized that their decisions were made while remaining aware of family expectations, cultural traditions, and social obligations. Rather than distancing themselves from Malaysian cultural values, participants attempted to balance respect for family relationships with commitment to their own aspirations. This finding supports the view that reproductive autonomy within collectivist societies differs from autonomy commonly conceptualized in highly individualistic cultures (Chirkov, 2009; Markus & Kitayama, 2003). Autonomy was experienced not as independence from others but as the capacity to make authentic decisions while maintaining meaningful social relationships a pattern consistent with Chirkov et al.'s (2003) cross-cultural research on Self-Determination Theory.

These findings also reinforce previous studies suggesting that pronatalist norms continue to shape women's reproductive experiences even when women exercise personal agency (Ashburn-Nardo, 2017; Morison et al., 2016). Participants' narratives illustrate that motherhood remains culturally positioned as the expected destination of marriage, requiring women who choose alternative pathways to repeatedly justify their reproductive decisions. Consequently, reproductive autonomy should be understood as an ongoing social negotiation rather than a single personal choice a conceptualization that has important implications for how autonomy is theorized and measured in collectivist contexts.

Freedom Glow as an Emerging Psychosocial Framework

Perhaps the most significant contribution of this study is the development of Freedom Glow as an emerging psychosocial framework for understanding women's well-being following autonomous reproductive decision-making. While previous studies concerning voluntary childlessness have primarily focused on stigma, regret, discrimination, or social isolation (Ashburn-Nardo,

2017; Gillespie, 2003; Morison et al., 2016), the present findings demonstrate that women also experience positive psychological outcomes associated with living authentically according to their personal values.

Participants consistently described emotional peace, flexibility, self-acceptance, life satisfaction, and purposeful living following their reproductive decisions. These experiences extended beyond temporary feelings of happiness and reflected a deeper alignment between personal identity and everyday life. Freedom Glow therefore represents a multidimensional psychosocial state characterized by authenticity, autonomy, emotional stability, and meaningful self-direction dimensions that map closely onto Ryff's (1989) components of psychological well-being and Deci and Ryan's (2000) basic psychological needs.

Importantly, participants distinguished Freedom Glow from simply enjoying greater freedom without children. Instead, they emphasized that positive psychological well-being emerged because their reproductive choices were voluntary and congruent with their personal aspirations. This distinction is theoretically important because it separates voluntary childfree experiences from involuntary childlessness, where psychological distress may result from unrealized reproductive aspirations rather than the absence of children itself (Letherby, 2002). The concept of Freedom Glow therefore extends current scholarship by shifting attention from deficit-oriented perspectives towards strengths-based understandings of reproductive decision-making.

The integration of Self-Determination Theory and Ryff's model provides a robust theoretical foundation for understanding Freedom Glow. From an SDT perspective, Freedom Glow reflects autonomy need satisfaction the experience of volition and self-endorsement in one's reproductive choices. From Ryff's perspective, Freedom Glow encompasses multiple dimensions of eudaimonic well-being: autonomy (self-determination), environmental mastery (effective life management), personal growth (continued development), purpose in life (meaningful goals), positive relations (intentional relationship investment), and self-acceptance (positive self-regard). This multidimensional conceptualization offers greater explanatory power than unidimensional measures of happiness or life satisfaction.

Parenting FOMO: The Emotional Complexity of Childfree Decisions

The present findings also illuminate the emotional complexity of childfree decisions through the concept of Parenting FOMO. Rather than representing pathological doubt, Parenting FOMO emerged as adaptive reflection within a pronatalist social environment. Participants' experiences suggest that occasional moments of uncertainty are natural and potentially reinforcing when processed within a supportive self-concept and value system.

This conceptualization differs from prevailing narratives that position childfree decisions as either firmly resolved or fundamentally conflicted. Instead, the findings support a process-oriented understanding in which reproductive decisions are continually reaffirmed through reflection and lived experience. Parenting FOMO, when experienced by women with strong autonomous motivation, may strengthen commitment to childfree decisions by prompting conscious reevaluation of values and life goals.

The coexistence of Parenting FOMO and Freedom Glow within participants' narratives challenges simplistic binary conceptualizations of childfree experiences. Rather than viewing these phenomena as mutually exclusive, the findings suggest they represent different temporal and contextual moments within an ongoing process of reproductive identity construction. This dynamic understanding has implications for counselling and therapeutic practice with women navigating reproductive decisions.

Redefining Womanhood Beyond Motherhood

The findings further demonstrate that participants actively reconstructed dominant meanings of womanhood by separating feminine identity from biological motherhood. Rather than perceiving motherhood as the defining criterion of successful adulthood, participants described multiple pathways through which women could experience meaningful lives, including professional achievement, lifelong learning, intimate relationships, community engagement, and personal growth.

This reconstruction of identity challenges traditional pronatalist assumptions that position motherhood as women's primary social role (Gillespie, 2003;

Letherby, 2002). Participants did not reject family relationships or caregiving values; instead, they broadened the definition of fulfilment to include diverse forms of contribution beyond childbearing. Such findings support contemporary feminist perspectives that advocate recognising women's agency in defining their own life trajectories rather than measuring fulfilment exclusively through reproductive roles (Peterson, 2015).

The findings also suggest that identity reconstruction represents an important coping strategy within pronatalist societies. By redefining legacy, success, and meaningful adulthood, participants were able to maintain positive self-identities despite encountering persistent societal expectations regarding motherhood. Consequently, childfree decisions should not be interpreted solely as reproductive outcomes but also as identity work through which women negotiate social expectations while preserving psychological well-being.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE, POLICY, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings have important implications for social work practice, family policy, and reproductive health services in Malaysia and similar collectivist societies. For social work practice, professionals should recognize that reproductive decisions are deeply personal and should avoid assumptions that motherhood represents the preferred outcome for all women. Person-centered and rights-based approaches should acknowledge diverse reproductive pathways while respecting women's autonomy. Counsellors working with women experiencing Parenting FOMO can help clients distinguish between adaptive reflection and unresolved ambivalence, supporting decision-making processes that align with core values.

For family policy, policymakers should move beyond deficit-oriented narratives surrounding declining fertility by recognizing the complexity of contemporary reproductive decision-making. Rather than framing childfree women as contributors to demographic decline, policymakers should consider broader structural issues including employment conditions, housing affordability, gender equality, work-life balance, and access to reproductive health information. Policies that support diverse family forms and recognize

women's reproductive autonomy are more likely to promote psychological well-being than pronatalist incentives that ignore women's agency.

For future research, the concept of Freedom Glow provides a promising direction for inquiry. Further qualitative studies involving women from different ethnic, religious, socioeconomic, and geographical backgrounds could refine this emerging framework and examine how cultural contexts shape experiences of psychological well-being following voluntary childfree decisions. Quantitative research could develop and validate measures of Freedom Glow, enabling large-scale examination of its predictors, correlates, and outcomes. Longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable for understanding how Freedom Glow and Parenting FOMO evolve across the life course. Comparative studies across Southeast Asian countries may also contribute to a broader understanding of reproductive autonomy within collectivist societies.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how Malaysian women negotiate voluntary childfree decisions and construct meaningful lives within a sociocultural environment where motherhood remains a dominant expectation of womanhood. By foregrounding women lived experiences, the findings demonstrate that reproductive decisions are neither simplistic nor solely determined by economic or demographic considerations. Instead, they emerge through continuous negotiations between personal aspirations, cultural expectations, intimate relationships, and psychological well-being.

The findings challenge conventional assumptions that women who choose not to become mothers inevitably experience regret, loneliness, or incomplete lives. Instead, participants described childfree decisions as thoughtful, intentional, and deeply aligned with their personal values and long-term aspirations. Although they encountered persistent pronatalist expectations from families and society, the women actively negotiated these pressures while maintaining positive identities beyond motherhood.

A key contribution of this study is the conceptualization of Freedom Glow as a multidimensional psychosocial state characterized by autonomy,

authenticity, emotional peace, purposeful living, and psychological congruence following autonomous reproductive decision-making. Rather than viewing voluntary childlessness through deficit-oriented perspectives, this study demonstrates that psychological flourishing may also emerge when women are empowered to make reproductive decisions consistent with their own aspirations. In doing so, the study broadens current understandings of reproductive autonomy by highlighting positive dimensions of childfree experiences that have received limited scholarly attention, particularly within collectivist societies.

The findings also contribute to the literature by illustrating that reproductive autonomy should not be understood as complete independence from social influence. Instead, autonomy is negotiated within family relationships, cultural traditions, religious values, and broader societal expectations. This perspective offers a more culturally sensitive understanding of reproductive decision-making in Malaysia and other Southeast Asian contexts where motherhood remains closely intertwined with feminine identity and family responsibility.

From a practical perspective, the study highlights the importance of recognizing diverse reproductive pathways within policy development, healthcare services, counselling practice, and social work interventions. Professionals working with women and families should adopt person-centered and rights-based approaches that respect reproductive autonomy while avoiding assumptions that motherhood represents the preferred or only pathway towards fulfilment. Greater public awareness may also reduce stigma experienced by women whose reproductive choices differ from prevailing social expectations.

Despite these contributions, the study has several limitations. The analysis focused exclusively on eight Malaysian women drawn from a larger qualitative dataset and therefore does not seek statistical generalization. The participants also represented specific reproductive experiences within the Malaysian sociocultural context, and their perspectives may differ from those of women living in rural communities, different cultural settings, or other countries. The secondary nature of the analysis meant that the interview guide was not specifically designed to explore Freedom Glow and Parenting FOMO,

potentially limiting depth in these areas. Future research should therefore examine Freedom Glow across more diverse populations, longitudinal life stages, and cross-cultural contexts to further refine its theoretical and practical relevance. Mixed methods approach combining qualitative exploration with quantitative validation would strengthen the empirical foundation of the Freedom Glow framework.

In conclusion, this study argues that voluntary childfree decisions should not be interpreted as a rejection of motherhood but rather as an expression of women's agency in constructing meaningful and authentic lives. As Malaysian society continues to experience demographic and social transformation, recognizing women's diverse reproductive choices becomes increasingly important for promoting gender equality, psychological well-being, and inclusive family policies. Ultimately, understanding Freedom Glow provides a new lens through which scholars, practitioners, and policymakers can appreciate the complexity of women's reproductive lives beyond traditional narratives of motherhood.

Informed Consent Statement

All participants provided written informed consent prior to their involvement in this study. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw at any time without consequence, and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. The informed consent process was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines established by the Universiti Malaysia Sabah Research Ethics Committee and the Declaration of Helsinki. Participants were given adequate time to consider their participation and ask questions before providing consent. Audio recordings were made only with explicit permission, and participants were informed that pseudonyms would be used in all publications to protect their identity.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest. This research was conducted independently without any commercial, financial, or personal relationships that could influence the study design, data collection, analysis, interpretation,

or manuscript preparation. All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of this manuscript.

Ethics Statement

This study received ethical approval from the Universiti Malaysia Sabah Research Ethics Committee prior to data collection. The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and the Malaysian Guidelines for Responsible Conduct of Research. All procedures involving human participants were designed to minimize risk, ensure voluntary participation, maintain confidentiality, and protect participant anonymity. Participants were informed that their data would be used for research purposes only and that pseudonyms would be employed in all published materials. The study involved no deception, and participants were fully debriefed regarding the study's objectives following data collection. Given the sensitive nature of reproductive decision-making, particular attention was paid to emotional safety, with participants informed of available counselling resources should distress arise during or following interviews.

Author Contributions

Conceptualisation: Wanda Kiyah George Albert; Adi Fahrudin, Methodology: Wanda Kiyah George Albert and Norafifah Bali; Investigation: Wanda Kiyah George Albert, Norafifah Bali, Norzihan Ayub, Ahmad Rasyidee Abdul Razak, and Suszma Khairitszi Mamat; Data Curation: Wanda Kiyah George Albert and Norafifah Bali; Formal Analysis: Wanda Kiyah George Albert; Writing- Original Draft Preparation: Wanda Kiyah George Albert; Writing-Review & Editing: Wanda Kiyah George Albert, Norafifah Bali, Norzihan Ayub, Ahmad Rasyidee Abdul Razak, and Suszma Khairitszi Mamat; Visualization: Wanda Kiyah George Albert; Supervision: Wanda Kiyah George Albert; Project Administration: Wanda Kiyah George Albert; Funding Acquisition: Wanda Kiyah George Albert.

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