

Baby FOMO or Glow Solo? Parenting FOMO, Freedom Glow, and the Psychological Well-Being of Childfree and Childless Women in Malaysia

Wanda Kiyah George Albert¹, Norafifah Bali¹, Norzihan Ayub¹, Agnis Sombuling¹, Husmiati Yusof³, Ahmad Rasyidee Abdul Razak², Suszma Khairitszi Mamat², ⁵Adi Fahrudin, Nur Suhaidah Sukor⁴, Azahar Che Latif⁴ Risalshah Latif⁴ & Andriana Singong

¹Fakulti Psikologi dan Kerja Sosial, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia

²Population and Family Research Division, National Population and Family Development Board (LPPKN)

³National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN), Indonesia (BRIN), Indonesia

⁴Faculty of Education and Sports Studies, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia

⁵Universitas Esa Unggul, Indonesia

Co-responding:wanda@ums.edu.my

Abstract

Background: Malaysia's Total Fertility Rate (TFR) has fallen below replacement level, yet fertility decline is increasingly shaped by women's conscious reproductive re-evaluation rather than solely economic or biomedical factors. This study examines the psychological dimensions of non-motherhood through two emergent constructs: Parenting Fear of Missing Out (Parenting FOMO)- anxiety about foregone parenting experiences and Freedom Glow- emotional relief and self-definition from rejecting normative maternal expectations. The objective of this study is To explore how childfree (voluntary non-parenthood) and childless (involuntary non-parenthood) women in Malaysia negotiate emotional well-being, social pressure, and identity within a pronatalist socio-cultural context. Qualitative phenomenological design with in-depth semi-structured interviews. Nine women (aged 28–45) were purposively sampled across childfree (n=5) and childless (n=4) identities. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) identified patterns of emotional experience, autonomy, and social negotiation. Three themes emerged: (i) Freedom Glow-emotional relief, bodily autonomy, and enhanced self-definition, predominant among childfree women; (ii) Parenting FOMO-grief, incompleteness, and fear of missing socially valued

experiences, concentrated among childless women; and (iii) Normative Motherhood Pressure-familial expectations, moral judgment, and stigma affecting both groups differentially. Childfree women demonstrated higher psychological well-being (autonomy, environmental mastery, self-acceptance) aligned with Self-Determination Theory, while childless women experienced identity disruption and chronic grief resembling prolonged bereavement. Fertility decline in Malaysia reflects evolving psychological landscapes, not merely economic constraints. Women's reproductive e trajectories whether chosen or circumstantial demand gender-sensitive, non-judgmental policy frameworks that recognize autonomy, address unmet psychosocial needs, and move beyond motherhood-centric family ideologies.

Keywords: Parenting FOMO, Freedom Glow, childfree women, childless women, fertility decline, psychological well-being, Malaysia, reproductive autonomy

INTRODUCTION

Declining fertility has become one of the most significant demographic transformations of the twenty-first century, reshaping population structures,

family institutions, and social policies across the globe. Countries throughout East Asia, Europe, and Southeast Asia have experienced fertility rates below replacement level, raising concerns regarding population ageing, shrinking labour forces, and the long-term sustainability of economic development and social protection systems (United Nations, 2023; OECD, 2024). Malaysia has followed a similar trajectory, with its Total Fertility Rate (TFR) declining to approximately 1.6 births per woman in 2024, well below the replacement threshold of 2.1 births per woman (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2024, 2025; Yip & Siow, 2025). This demographic transition has stimulated growing scholarly and policy interest in understanding why increasing numbers of adults are postponing parenthood, remaining childless, or deliberately choosing lives without children.

Historically, fertility decline has been interpreted primarily through structural and economic perspectives. Previous studies have emphasised delayed marriage, prolonged educational participation, women's increasing labour force involvement, urbanisation, financial insecurity, housing affordability, and the escalating costs of childrearing as major determinants of reproductive behaviour (Abdullah & Lee, 2023; Tey et al., 2021). While these explanations remain important, they provide only a partial understanding of contemporary fertility decisions. Increasingly, reproductive choices are influenced by psychological well-being, personal aspirations, relationship quality, work-life priorities, identity construction, and subjective evaluations of life satisfaction (Sobotka, 2021; Morison & Macleod, 2021). Parenthood is therefore no longer perceived solely as a social obligation but as one of several legitimate pathways through which individuals seek purpose, fulfilment, and meaningful lives.

Within Malaysia, however, motherhood continues to occupy a privileged cultural position. Pronatalist values embedded within collectivist family structures and religious traditions often construct motherhood as an essential marker of successful womanhood, marital fulfilment, and adult identity (Hashim & Hamzah, 2021; Peterson, 2021). Women who remain without children frequently encounter intrusive questioning, social stigma, family expectations, and moral judgement, regardless of whether their reproductive status reflects personal choice or circumstances beyond their control (Ashburn-Nardo, 2017; Blackstone, 2019). Consequently, non-parenthood should not be understood merely as the absence of children but as a socially

negotiated identity shaped by complex interactions between individual agency and cultural expectations.

Despite increasing international scholarship on declining fertility, an important conceptual limitation remains evident within existing literature. Research frequently combines all women without children into a single analytical category, overlooking the fundamental distinction between childfree women, who voluntarily choose not to become mothers, and childless women, who experience involuntary non-parenthood due to infertility, health conditions, delayed partnerships, or other structural constraints (Ashburn-Nardo, 2022; McQuillan et al., 2022; Neal & Neal, 2021). Although both groups share the demographic characteristic of living without children, they differ substantially in terms of emotional experiences, identity formation, psychological adjustment, and coping mechanisms. Failing to differentiate these populations obscures the complexity of women's reproductive lives and limits the development of effective psychosocial interventions and inclusive family policies.

To address this gap, the present study introduces two complementary psychological concepts that frame women's experiences of non-parenthood from contrasting yet interconnected perspectives. The phrase "Baby FOMO", used in the title as an accessible and engaging expression, symbolises women's emotional concern about missing socially valued experiences associated with motherhood. Conceptually, this phenomenon is operationalised throughout the study as Parenting Fear of Missing Out (Parenting FOMO), referring to the psychological distress associated with perceiving that one has missed, or may never experience, the emotional, relational, existential, and socially valued dimensions of parenthood (Widhyasetyanti et al., 2024). Parenting FOMO extends beyond infertility itself by encompassing emotional longing, social comparison, identity uncertainty, and anxiety arising from pronatalist expectations.

Conversely, this study introduces Freedom Glow as a novel psychological construct representing positive psychological flourishing among women who build meaningful lives beyond biological motherhood. Freedom Glow is defined as a multidimensional psychological state characterised by autonomy,

emotional fulfilment, self-determination, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (Ryff, 1989; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Rather than conceptualising childfree women through a deficit framework, Freedom Glow recognises that psychological well-being may emerge from consciously aligning life choices with personal values, aspirations, and alternative forms of social contribution (DeBruine & Jones, 2022). Women experiencing Freedom Glow derive fulfillment through careers, intimate relationships, community engagement, creativity, caregiving beyond biological parenting, and personal growth, thereby challenging traditional assumptions that motherhood represents the sole pathway to feminine fulfilment.

The conceptual foundation of this study is grounded in Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and Ryff's Model of Psychological Well-Being (Ryff, 1989). Self-Determination Theory argues that psychological well-being is achieved when individuals experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness, whereas Ryff conceptualises well-being as encompassing autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relationships, purpose in life, self-acceptance, and continuous psychological development. Integrating these perspectives allows this study to argue that women's psychological well-being is determined not simply by motherhood or non-motherhood, but by the extent to which their reproductive trajectories are congruent with their personal values and perceived autonomy.

Accordingly, this study advances the argument that women's experiences of non-parenthood exist along a psychological continuum ranging from Parenting FOMO, characterised by grief, perceived loss, and unmet aspirations for parenthood, to Freedom Glow, characterised by autonomy, resilience, and psychological flourishing beyond motherhood. Rather than representing opposing identities, these concepts capture two distinct pathways through which women negotiate meaning, well-being, and social identity within a pronatalist society. By introducing these concepts, the study contributes a new theoretical lens to fertility research, extending existing demographic explanations toward a more comprehensive psychosocial understanding of women's reproductive lives in contemporary Malaysia.

Research Objectives

- i. Examine how childfree and childless women in Malaysia experience Parenting FOMO and Freedom Glow.

- ii. Analyse how sociocultural pressure shapes emotional well-being and identity negotiation.
- iii. Explore how women reconstruct femininity, fulfilment, and social contribution beyond biological motherhood.
- iv. Assess implications for understanding fertility decline and informing inclusive family policy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Global Fertility Decline and the Transformation of Reproductive Decision-Making

Declining fertility has become one of the most significant demographic challenges confronting contemporary societies. According to the United Nations (2023), more than half of the world's population now resides in countries where fertility has fallen below replacement level. This demographic transition has been particularly pronounced across East Asia, Europe, and Southeast Asia, where declining birth rates have generated concerns regarding labour shortages, population ageing, increasing dependency ratios, and the long-term sustainability of national welfare systems (OECD, 2024; Sobotka, 2021).

Malaysia mirrors this global pattern. The country's Total Fertility Rate (TFR) has steadily declined over recent decades, reaching approximately 1.6 births per woman in 2024, considerably below the replacement threshold of 2.1 births per woman (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2024, 2025). Although policy discussions frequently attribute this decline to delayed marriage, economic uncertainty, urbanisation, housing affordability, and women's increasing participation in higher education and the labour market (Abdullah & Lee, 2023; Tey et al., 2021), these explanations capture only part of a much broader transformation occurring within contemporary societies. Fertility decisions have progressively shifted from being socially prescribed obligations towards highly individualised life choices that are increasingly influenced by psychological, relational, and existential considerations (Morison & Macleod, 2021; Peterson, 2021).

Recent demographic scholarship therefore argues that fertility should no longer be understood solely through economic rationality or structural constraints. Instead, reproductive decision-making reflects changing perceptions of identity, personal fulfilment, emotional well-being, relationship quality, and life satisfaction (Sobotka, 2021). Parenthood has consequently become one possible life pathway rather than a universally expected milestone of adulthood. This transition reflects broader cultural changes associated with individualisation, self-determination, and the diversification of family life, whereby women increasingly negotiate motherhood alongside competing aspirations related to career development, financial independence, personal freedom, and psychological well-being (Neal & Neal, 2021; Blackstone, 2020).

Childfree and Childless Women: Two Distinct Reproductive Trajectories

Although women without children are often discussed as a single demographic category, contemporary research increasingly recognises the conceptual distinction between childfree and childless women (Ashburn-Nardo, 2022; McQuillan et al., 2022). This distinction is fundamental because the absence of children does not necessarily imply identical motivations, emotional experiences, or psychological outcomes.

Childfree women consciously decide not to become mothers. Their decision frequently reflects personal values, lifestyle preferences, career aspirations, environmental concerns, financial priorities, or broader conceptions of meaningful living (Blackstone, 2019; DeBruine & Jones, 2022). Previous studies demonstrate that voluntary non-parenthood is often associated with greater perceived autonomy, stronger self-determination, higher life satisfaction, and greater flexibility in pursuing alternative life goals (Neal & Neal, 2021; Peterson, 2021). Rather than rejecting family relationships, many childfree women redefine caregiving through professional work, community involvement, extended family relationships, mentoring, and other forms of social contribution.

In contrast, childless women experience involuntary non-parenthood despite desiring motherhood. Their circumstances may result from infertility, reproductive health conditions, delayed marriage, partnership instability, financial barriers, or other structural constraints beyond their personal control

(Greil et al., 2011; McQuillan et al., 2022). Consequently, involuntary childlessness is frequently associated with chronic grief, identity disruption, emotional distress, relationship strain, and feelings of incompleteness (Sheppard et al., 2022). Numerous studies have documented elevated risks of anxiety, depressive symptoms, prolonged grief, and social isolation among women who perceive motherhood as an important yet unattainable life goal (Greil et al., 2011; Prigerson et al., 2009).

Despite these substantial differences, demographic research continues to combine childfree and childless women within the same analytical category (Neal & Neal, 2021). Such aggregation obscures important variations in emotional well-being and limits theoretical understanding of reproductive diversity. Distinguishing between these two populations is therefore essential for developing more accurate conceptual models of psychological well-being among women living without children.

Pronatalist Society and the Social Construction of Motherhood

Motherhood is not merely a biological event but a socially constructed institution shaped by cultural, religious, and political expectations (Russo, 1976; Ross & Solinger, 2017). Pronatalism refers to ideological systems that promote parenthood as a moral, social, and cultural obligation, particularly for women. Within pronatalist societies, motherhood is frequently portrayed as the natural culmination of femininity, successful adulthood, and marital fulfilment.

Malaysia continues to exhibit strong pronatalist characteristics. Influenced by collectivist family values, religious traditions, and intergenerational expectations, motherhood remains highly valued as a symbol of family continuity and social responsibility (Hashim & Hamzah, 2021). Women are commonly expected to marry, bear children, and prioritise caregiving responsibilities as central components of adult identity. Consequently, women who remain without children frequently encounter intrusive questioning, unsolicited advice, familial pressure, and moral judgement regardless of whether their reproductive status reflects personal choice or involuntary circumstances (Ashburn-Nardo, 2017; Blackstone, 2019).

The consequences of pronatalism, however, differ substantially between childfree and childless women. Childfree women often experience social stereotypes portraying them as selfish, career-oriented, immature, or insufficiently feminine (Ashburn-Nardo, 2017, 2022). In contrast, childless women are more likely to encounter sympathy intertwined with stigma, feelings of personal failure, and assumptions regarding infertility or reproductive inadequacy (Greil et al., 2011; Sheppard et al., 2022). These contrasting experiences demonstrate that reproductive status functions as a socially regulated identity rather than simply a demographic characteristic.

Understanding psychological well-being among women without children therefore requires consideration not only of reproductive outcomes themselves but also of the broader sociocultural environments within which reproductive identities are negotiated and evaluated (Foucault, 1977; Ross & Solinger, 2017).

Parenting FOMO: Extending Fear of Missing Out into Reproductive Psychology

Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) was originally conceptualised as anxiety arising from the perception that others are experiencing rewarding events from which one is absent (Przybylski et al., 2013). Although initially examined within digital media and social networking contexts, subsequent research has demonstrated that FOMO extends into numerous life domains involving identity, relationships, career development, and major life transitions.

This study extends the FOMO framework into reproductive psychology through the concept of Parenting Fear of Missing Out (Parenting FOMO). Parenting FOMO refers to persistent emotional distress arising from the perception of missing socially valued experiences associated with parenthood (Widhyasetyanti et al., 2024). Rather than focusing exclusively on biological fertility, Parenting FOMO captures women's emotional responses to the possibility that they may never experience motherhood as represented within their families, peer networks, communities, and wider society.

Drawing upon previous conceptualisations, Parenting FOMO is proposed as comprising four interrelated dimensions:

- i. Emotional Parenting FOMO, referring to perceived loss of emotional bonding associated with raising children;
- ii. Social Parenting FOMO, referring to comparisons with peers who have become parents and perceptions of exclusion from parent-centred social networks;
- iii. Existential Parenting FOMO, referring to concerns regarding legacy, life purpose, ageing, and continuity across generations; and
- iv. Normative Parenting FOMO, referring to anxiety generated by societal expectations that motherhood represents an essential marker of successful womanhood.

Collectively, these dimensions conceptualise Parenting FOMO as a multidimensional psychological experience extending beyond infertility itself to encompass identity, belonging, meaning, and social recognition.

Freedom Glow: A New Positive Psychological Construct Beyond Motherhood

While previous literature has primarily conceptualised women without children through deficit-oriented frameworks emphasising grief, infertility, loneliness, or social exclusion, considerably less attention has been devoted to understanding positive psychological flourishing beyond motherhood (DeBruine & Jones, 2022; Neal & Neal, 2021).

To address this limitation, this study introduces Freedom Glow as a novel psychological construct describing the positive psychological state experienced by women who construct meaningful and fulfilling lives without becoming mothers. Freedom Glow does not simply represent satisfaction with remaining childfree; rather, it reflects a multidimensional experience characterised by emotional autonomy, self-determination, self-acceptance, environmental mastery, personal growth, and purposeful living (Ryff, 1989; Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Unlike concepts centred exclusively on freedom from parenting responsibilities, Freedom Glow emphasises psychological flourishing achieved through alignment between personal values and life choices. Women

experiencing Freedom Glow derive fulfillment from diverse life domains, including professional achievement, intimate partnerships, community engagement, creativity, lifelong learning, caregiving beyond biological motherhood, spirituality, and social contribution (Blackstone, 2019; DeBruine & Jones, 2022).

Importantly, Freedom Glow should not be interpreted as the opposite of Parenting FOMO. Instead, these concepts represent two distinct psychological pathways through which women negotiate reproductive identities. Although many childfree women may experience high levels of Freedom Glow, psychological flourishing remains theoretically possible among some childless women who gradually reconstruct meaning beyond involuntary reproductive loss (Boss, 1999). Likewise, women who voluntarily remain childfree may occasionally experience elements of Parenting FOMO during life transitions. Accordingly, the present study conceptualises Parenting FOMO and Freedom Glow as dynamic psychological experiences rather than mutually exclusive identity categories.

2.6 Theoretical Framework

The present study is underpinned by two complementary theoretical perspectives. The first is Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which proposes that psychological well-being depends upon satisfaction of three universal psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Within reproductive decision-making, autonomy represents women's capacity to make reproductive choices aligned with personal values rather than external expectations. Women whose reproductive lives reflect self-endorsed decisions are expected to report greater psychological well-being than those experiencing externally constrained reproductive trajectories.

The second framework is Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Model, which conceptualises well-being as comprising autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relationships, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (Ryff, 1989, 2014). These dimensions provide an appropriate conceptual foundation for understanding how women construct meaningful identities beyond motherhood while simultaneously explaining the psychological consequences of unmet reproductive aspirations.

Integrating these frameworks, the present study proposes that psychological well-being is influenced not simply by parental status but by the congruence between reproductive circumstances and personal autonomy. Childfree women whose decisions reflect autonomous choice are expected to experience higher levels of Freedom Glow, whereas childless women whose reproductive aspirations remain unrealised are more likely to experience Parenting FOMO. Pronatalist social pressure is expected to influence both groups but through different psychological mechanisms.

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework underpinning the present study. The framework integrates Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Model (Ryff, 1989) to explain the psychological experiences of women living without children within a pronatalist society. Guided by these theoretical perspectives, the study assumes that women's psychological well-being is influenced by the degree of congruence between their reproductive circumstances and their personal autonomy, rather than by motherhood itself.

The framework further recognizes pronatalist sociocultural pressure as an important contextual factor shaping women's emotional experiences and identity negotiation. Depending on whether non-motherhood is experienced as a voluntary or involuntary condition, women may experience contrasting psychological responses, conceptualized in this study as Freedom Glow and Parenting FOMO. These concepts provide the initial conceptual lens for exploring participants lived experiences and understanding how women construct meaning, negotiate identity, and achieve psychological well-being beyond conventional expectations of motherhood.

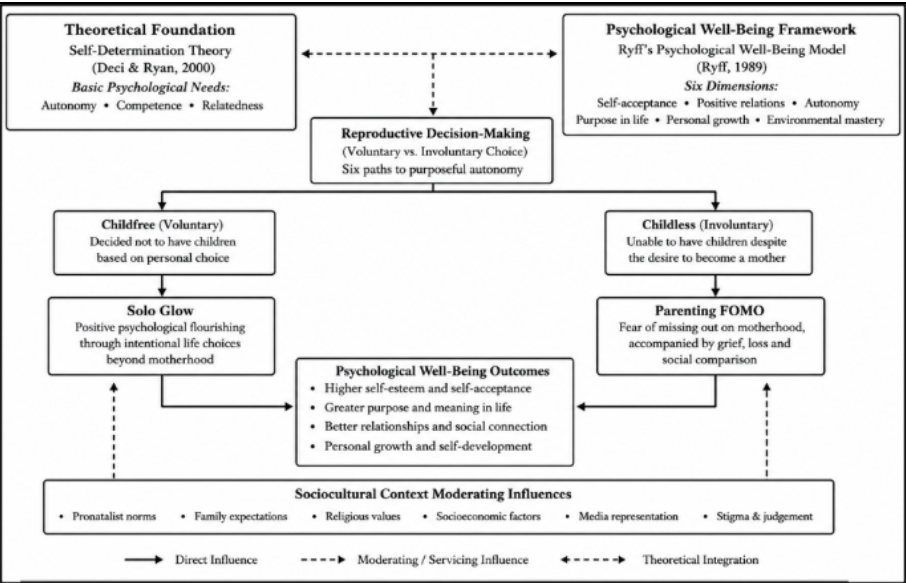


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework Of The Study

Accordingly, the conceptual framework guided the development of the interview protocol, informed the thematic analysis, and provided the theoretical foundation for interpreting the findings. The relationships proposed in this framework were subsequently examined through participants' narratives and refined into the Baby FOMO–Solo Glow Psychological Continuum presented in Figure 2, which emerged from the qualitative findings.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of Malaysian women navigating non-motherhood. A phenomenological approach was selected because the study sought to understand how women construct meaning from their reproductive experiences, negotiate their identities, and interpret their psychological well-

being within a pronatalist society. Rather than examining fertility behaviour as a demographic outcome, the study focused on participants' subjective interpretations of voluntary and involuntary non-parenthood.

The research was underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed through individual experiences, interactions, and meaning-making processes. From this perspective, psychological well-being is understood as context-dependent and shaped by women's personal narratives, cultural expectations, and social relationships. This paradigm was particularly appropriate because the study aimed to develop an in-depth understanding of two emerging psychological concepts Parenting Fear of Missing Out (Parenting FOMO) and Solo Glow within the Malaysian sociocultural context.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling, a strategy commonly employed in phenomenological research to identify individuals with direct experience of the phenomenon under investigation. Eight Malaysian women participated in the study, comprising four voluntarily childfree women and four involuntarily childless women.

Childfree participants were women who had consciously decided not to become mothers, whereas childless participants desired motherhood but remained without children due to infertility, delayed marriage, reproductive health conditions, or other life circumstances beyond their control. Participants ranged in age from 29 to 45 years and represented diverse demographic backgrounds in terms of ethnicity (Malay, Chinese, and Indian), marital status (married, single, and divorced), educational attainment (diploma to postgraduate qualifications), and occupational sectors (lecturer, administrator, entrepreneur, and other professionals). This diversity enabled the study to capture a broad range of perspectives regarding reproductive identity and psychological well-being.

Eligibility criteria required participants are :

- Malaysian citizens;
- women aged 25 years and above;

- self-identify as either childfree or childless;
- willing to participate in an in-depth interview; and
- provide informed consent.

Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, whereby no substantially new concepts or themes emerged from successive interviews, indicating sufficient depth and richness of the data.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Participants

Participant	Age	Reproductive Status
P1	32	Childfree
P2	35	Childfree
P3	29	Childfree
P4	38	Childfree
P5	37	Childless
P6	42	Childless
P7	39	Childless
P8	45	Childless

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants included in this study. A total of eight Malaysian women participated, comprising four women who voluntarily identified as childfree and four women who experienced involuntary childlessness. Participants ranged in age from 29 to 45 years, representing the adult life stage in which decisions and experiences related to parenthood are particularly salient. The inclusion of participants with different reproductive trajectories enabled the study to capture diverse lived experiences of non-motherhood, thereby providing rich insights into the psychological experiences of Parenting FOMO and Freedom Glow within the Malaysian sociocultural context.

Data Collection

Data were collected between January and March 2026 through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was conducted either face-to-face or via secure online video conferencing according to participants' preferences and geographical accessibility.

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed to ensure consistency across interviews while allowing participants sufficient flexibility to elaborate on their lived experiences. The interview guide explored five broad domains such as reproductive intentions and decision-making processes, emotional experiences of non-motherhood, including feelings associated with Parenting FOMO and Solo Glow, sources of sociocultural pressure and strategies for coping with pronatalist expectations, identity negotiation and the reconstruction of femininity beyond biological motherhood and alternative pathways to meaning, fulfilment, and psychological well-being.

All interviews were conducted in a confidential environment and audio-recorded with participants' permission. To enhance contextual understanding, field notes were recorded immediately after each interview, documenting non-verbal observations, interview dynamics, and preliminary analytical reflections. Reflexive memos were also maintained throughout the research process to support methodological transparency and minimise researcher bias.

Data Analysis

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase thematic analysis framework, consisting of:

- familiarisation with the data;
- generation of initial codes;
- searching for themes;
- reviewing themes;
- defining and naming themes; and
- producing the final analytical narrative.

The analytical process combined inductive and deductive coding strategies. Inductive coding allowed new concepts to emerge directly from participants' narratives, facilitating the development of the Solo Glow construct. Deductive coding, guided by existing theoretical perspectives on Fear of Missing Out, Self-Determination Theory, and psychological well-being, enabled the identification and interpretation of the multidimensional components of Parenting FOMO. To enhance analytical rigour, coding decisions and emerging themes were discussed collaboratively among members of the research team. Differences in interpretation were resolved through iterative discussion until consensus was achieved. This collaborative analytical process strengthened the credibility, consistency, and trustworthiness of the findings.

3.5 Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the study was established using the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), encompassing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with participants, iterative questioning during interviews, and continuous comparison of emerging themes across transcripts. Reflexive memo writing further facilitated critical reflection throughout the analytical process. Transferability was supported through rich descriptions of participants' demographic characteristics, sociocultural contexts, and lived experiences, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar settings.

Dependability was strengthened by maintaining a comprehensive audit trail documenting methodological decisions, coding procedures, theme development, and analytical reflections throughout the research process. Confirmability was achieved through researcher reflexivity, collaborative coding, and continual reference to participants' narratives to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in the data rather than researchers' prior assumptions.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Universiti Malaysia Sabah Research Ethics Committee before data collection commenced. All participants received detailed information regarding the purpose of the study, interview procedures, confidentiality measures, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence.

Written informed consent was obtained prior to each interview.

To protect participants' privacy, pseudonyms (P1–P8) were assigned during transcription and reporting. Audio recordings, transcripts, and research documents were securely stored in password-protected digital files accessible only to the research team. Given the sensitive nature of discussions surrounding infertility, reproductive choices, and emotional well-being, interviews were conducted using a trauma-informed approach. Participants who experienced emotional discomfort during or after the interview were provided with information regarding appropriate counselling and psychological support services.

Study Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the relatively small sample size limits the statistical generalisability of the findings; however, this is consistent with the aims of phenomenological inquiry, which prioritises depth over breadth of understanding. Second, most participants were urban, highly educated women, potentially limiting the transferability of the findings to women living in rural communities or those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Third, participants' narratives were based on self-reported experiences and may have been influenced by social desirability or recall bias, particularly given the sensitivity of reproductive issues within a pronatalist culture. Finally, the cross-sectional design captured participants' experiences at a single point in time and therefore could not examine how Parenting FOMO and Solo Glow evolve across different stages of the life course.

FINDINGS

The thematic analysis of the interview transcripts generated three overarching themes that illuminate the psychological experiences of childfree and childless women in Malaysia. Although all participants navigated similar sociocultural expectations surrounding motherhood, their emotional experiences and identity construction differed according to their reproductive trajectories. As summarised in Table 2, Freedom Glow emerged exclusively among childfree participants, whereas Parenting FOMO was evident only among childless

participants. In contrast, Normative Motherhood Pressure was shared across both groups, reflecting the pervasive influence of pronatalist expectations regardless of women's reproductive status.

Table 2 : Overview of Emergent Themes Across Participants

Theme	Childfree	Childless	Participants
Freedom Glow	/	–	P1–P4
Parenting FOMO	–	/	P5–P8
Normative Motherhood Pressure	/	/	P1–P8

Theme 1: Freedom Glow (Emotional Relief, Autonomy, and Self-Definition)

Freedom Glow emerged as a dominant theme among childfree participants (P1 to P5), encompassing emotional liberation, bodily sovereignty, lifestyle flexibility, and reconstructed identity beyond normative maternal expectations.

Emotional Liberation and Stress Reduction

Childfree participants described Freedom Glow as the absence of parenting burdens freedom from sleep deprivation, financial strain, relationship tension, and perpetual caregiving responsibility. This was framed not as selfishness but as intentional life design:

"I feel free because I can focus on my career, travel, and my own happiness without needing to follow society's expectations about motherhood." (P1, 32, childfree)

"I do not feel incomplete without children. My life already feels meaningful through my work, my relationship, and the things I enjoy." (P2, 35, childfree)

The emotional relief derived from opting out of motherhood was consistently linked to self-determination and personal agency. Participants emphasized that their well-being was not contingent on conforming to traditional reproductive roles.

Bodily Autonomy

A distinct sub-dimension of Freedom Glow involved explicit claims to bodily sovereignty. Participants rejected pregnancy, childbirth, and the physical demands of reproduction as unwanted impositions on their corporeal selves:

"I want control over my own body and life decisions. I do not think motherhood should be compulsory for every woman." (P3, 29, childfree)

"My body is mine. The idea of pregnancy feels like losing myself to something I never wanted." (P4, 38, childfree)

This assertion of bodily autonomy reflects a broader feminist reclamation of reproductive choice, wherein the decision not to reproduce is framed as equally valid and empowering.

Self-Definition Beyond Motherhood

Freedom Glow involved active identity reconstruction through career, partnership quality, personal growth, and social contribution. Participants challenged the assumption that motherhood constitutes the sole pathway to feminine value:

"I contribute to society through my work, my students, and the people I help. Motherhood is not the only way for women to have value." (P5, 40, childfree)

"Women can still nurture others without becoming mothers. Care is not limited to having children." (P1, 32, childfree)

This redefinition of care and social contribution extends beyond biological reproduction, positioning women as agents of social value through multiple pathways.

Environmental Mastery and Purpose

Childfree participants demonstrated confidence in managing life circumstances and deriving purpose from non-reproductive goals:

"I have been able to build a home and lifestyle that is satisfying to me on my own terms." (P2, 35, childfree)

The capacity to direct one's life trajectory without external prescription emerged as a core component of Freedom Glow, distinguishing it from mere absence of children.

Theme 2: Parenting FOMO (Grief, Incompleteness, and Fear of Missing Out)

Parenting FOMO was concentrated among childless participants (P6–P10), manifesting as acute grief, social comparison distress, existential anxiety, and normative pressure sensitivity. This theme captures the emotional toll of involuntary non-parenthood within a society that equates womanhood with motherhood.

Emotional and Existential FOMO

Childless participants expressed profound grief about missing the parent-child bond and anxiety about foregone emotional experiences:

"Sometimes I feel something is missing. I see friends with children and wonder what that love feels like." (P6, 37, childless)

"I fear I won't experience the happiness that parents feel that unique bond everyone talks about." (P7, 42, childless)

Existential FOMO extended beyond immediate emotional loss to encompass broader questions of legacy, meaning, and mortality:

"Who will remember me when I'm gone? What is my purpose if not to create life?" (P8, 39, childless)

This existential dimension reveals how Parenting FOMO penetrates fundamental identity structures, threatening coherent self-narrative when reproductive desires remain unfulfilled.

Social Comparison FOMO

Intense peer comparison characterised childless participants' experiences, particularly during culturally significant life-stage transitions:

"Raya gatherings are torture. Everyone shows baby photos, and I smile while dying inside." (P6, 37, childless)

"Social media is the worst perfect family portrait, first days of school. I scroll and cry." (P9, 34, childless)

Social media and communal celebrations functioned as constant reminders of foregone experiences, amplifying distress through curated displays of parental fulfilment.

Normative FOMO: The Weight of "Should"

Childless participants experienced acute anxiety from societal expectations that positioned motherhood as natural and obligatory:

"I feel pressured when people ask when I will have children. The question assumes I'm failing at being a woman." (P7, 42, childless)

"My mother-in-law says 'God's plan' but I hear 'you're broken.'" (P8, 39, childless)

Religious and familial framing of childlessness as divine punishment or personal deficiency intensified normative FOMO, conflating reproductive capacity with moral worth.

Prolonged Grief and Identity Disruption

Childless participants' Parenting FOMO resembled chronic bereavement unresolved loss of imagined futures that defied conventional grieving processes:

"I've mourned children I never had. Every period feels like a small death." (P9, 34, childless)

"I am not childless by choice. I am childless by circumstance and that difference destroys me." (P10, 45, childless)

The distinction between voluntary and involuntary non-parenthood emerged as critical: childless participants experienced their status as externally imposed, preventing the cognitive reframing that enabled childfree participants' Freedom Glow.

Theme 3: Normative Motherhood Pressure (Stigma, Judgment, and Differential Impact)

Both childfree and childless participants encountered pronatalist pressure, but effects diverged critically based on perceived autonomy over reproductive status.

Childfree Resistance and Resilience

Childfree participants reported stigma but demonstrated reframing capacity, externalising judgment and maintaining self-validation:

"People think I'm selfish or too career focused. They don't understand this is a personal decision." (P3, 29, childfree)

"I've developed a thick skin. Their judgment says more about them than me." (P4, 38, childfree)

Coping strategies included selective disclosure (controlling who knew their childfree status), online community support, partner solidarity, and cognitive reframing (viewing stigma as reflecting others' limitations rather than personal deficiency).

Childless Internalised Shame

Childless participants more frequently internalised stigma, absorbing societal devaluation into self-concept

"I feel guilty because I cannot give my family grandchildren. It feels like I am disappointing everyone." (P6, 37, childless)

"At weddings, aunties pinch my arm and whisper 'still waiting?' I want to disappear." (P7, 42, childless)

Social exclusion from maternal networks compounded isolation

"My friends only talk about schools, tuition, diapers. I've become invisible." (P8, 39, childless)

Figure 2 illustrates the Baby FOMO–Solo Glow Psychological Continuum, a conceptual model developed from the findings of this study. The continuum represents the dynamic psychological experiences of women living without children, ranging from Parenting FOMO, characterized by grief, perceived loss, existential uncertainty, and concerns about missing the emotional and social experiences associated with motherhood, to Freedom Glow, characterized by autonomy, emotional fulfilment, self-acceptance, purpose in life, and positive identity reconstruction beyond motherhood.

The continuum further demonstrates that these psychological experiences are shaped by the interaction between reproductive status, personal autonomy, and pronatalist sociocultural pressure. Women who voluntarily identified as childfree predominantly occupied the Freedom Glow end of the continuum, whereas women experiencing involuntary childlessness were more likely to experience Parenting FOMO. Nevertheless, the findings indicate that psychological experiences are not entirely fixed or mutually exclusive. Instead, women may move along the continuum over time as they negotiate personal values, cope with reproductive circumstances, and respond to changing social expectations.

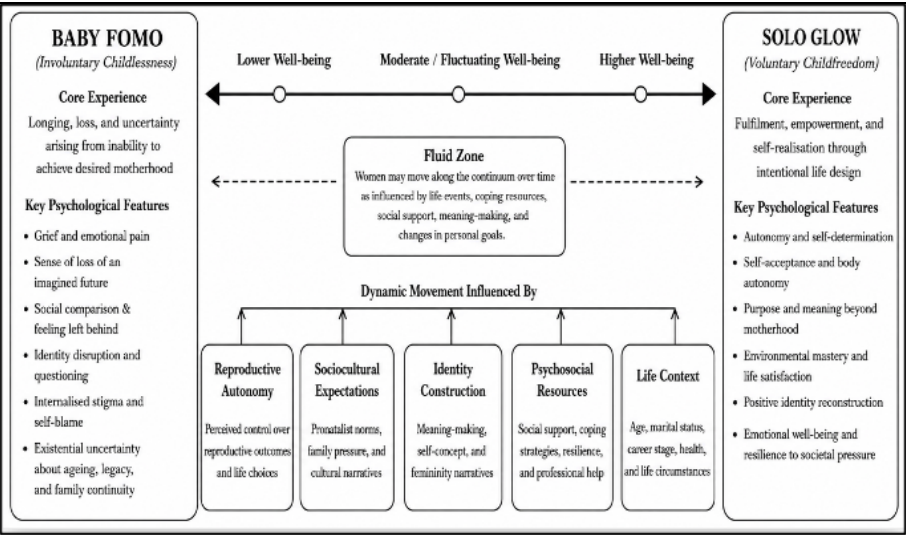


Figure 2. The Baby Fomo-Solo Glow Psychological Continuum

Overall, the Baby FOMO-Solo Glow Psychological Continuum provides an integrative conceptual explanation of the findings, demonstrating that psychological well-being among women without children is influenced not by motherhood itself but by the extent to which their reproductive circumstances align with their personal aspirations, autonomy, and meaning-making processes. The continuum therefore serves as a conceptual bridge between the empirical findings and the broader theoretical implications discussed in the following section.

DISCUSSION

The present study provides new insights into the psychological experiences of women living without children by demonstrating that non-motherhood is neither a homogeneous nor a psychologically uniform phenomenon. Rather than representing a single demographic category, the findings reveal two distinct yet interconnected psychological trajectories that shape women's well-being within a pronatalist society. These trajectories are conceptualised as Parenting Fear of Missing Out (Parenting FOMO) and Solo Glow,

representing contrasting patterns of psychological adjustment among childless and childfree women, respectively.

The three themes identified in this study Solo Glow, Parenting FOMO, and Negotiating Pronatalist Expectations suggest that psychological well-being is influenced less by the presence or absence of children than by the degree to which women's reproductive experiences align with their personal aspirations and perceived autonomy. These finding challenges conventional demographic perspectives that interpret declining fertility primarily through economic or structural determinants and instead positions reproductive decision-making as a deeply psychological and socially negotiated process.

Reproductive Autonomy as the Foundation of Psychological Well-Being

This finding provides empirical support for Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which argues that autonomy represents one of the three fundamental psychological needs underlying optimal human functioning. Recent research has further validated that autonomy satisfaction in reproductive decision-making significantly predicts psychological well-being among women in pronatalist contexts (Aknin et al., 2022; Martela & Ryan, 2022). Participants experiencing Solo Glow appeared to satisfy these psychological needs by exercising agency over their reproductive choices and redefining fulfilment beyond biological motherhood. Consequently, motherhood was viewed not as an obligatory life achievement but as one among several legitimate pathways towards a meaningful life.

The present study contributes to an emerging body of research demonstrating that reproductive autonomy serves as the principal determinant of psychological well-being among women living without children in pronatalist societies. Recent longitudinal evidence confirms that autonomy satisfaction in reproductive decision-making significantly predicts sustained psychological flourishing, regardless of parental status (Aknin et al., 2022; Martela & Ryan, 2022). The identification of Solo Glow as a positive psychological construct extends beyond deficit-oriented perspectives that have historically dominated literature on non-motherhood, offering empirical

validation that voluntary childlessness can constitute a pathway towards psychological flourishing when aligned with personal values and aspirations.

Beyond Parenthood: Reconceptualising Women's Well-Being through Solo Glow

The findings align closely with Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Model (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995), particularly the dimensions of autonomy, environmental mastery, self-acceptance, personal growth, and purpose in life. Recent comparative studies demonstrate that voluntarily childfree women in pronatalist societies report higher levels of life satisfaction, marital satisfaction, and self-fulfillment when their choices align with personal values rather than externally prescribed gender expectations (Aknin et al., 2022; Yildiz & Yildiz, 2026). Childfree participants consistently described meaningful contributions through professional careers, community engagement, mentoring, and intimate relationships, suggesting that motherhood is not the exclusive source of feminine identity or social contribution. These findings challenge traditional pronatalist assumptions by demonstrating that women's psychological flourishing is achievable through diverse life pathways beyond biological motherhood.

The conceptualisation of Parenting FOMO as a distinct multidimensional psychological state advances existing understandings of reproductive grief by integrating emotional longing, social comparison, existential uncertainty, and pronatalist anxiety into a unified framework. Recent research in pronatalist contexts substantiates that involuntarily childless women experience persistent grief that remains invisible and socially misunderstood, characterised by the loss of an anticipated future rather than an existing relationship (Mroz & Łapniewska, 2020; Vikström et al., 2024). This study underscores the necessity for mental health professionals and policymakers to recognise involuntary childlessness as a legitimate form of disenfranchised grief warranting targeted psychological support and social acknowledgment.

Parenting FOMO as a Distinct Form of Reproductive Grief

These findings support theories of prolonged grief and disenfranchised grief (Doka, 1989; Day, 2021; Darroux, 2022), whereby losses that lack formal social recognition often generate prolonged psychological distress. Recent

research in pronatalist societies confirms that involuntarily childless women experience persistent feelings of exclusion, identity disruption, and emotional suffering that remain invisible and socially misunderstood (Mroz & Łapniewska, 2020; Vikström et al., 2024). Unlike bereavement following death, involuntary childlessness is characterised by the loss of an anticipated future rather than the loss of an existing relationship. Consequently, participants frequently experienced grief that remained invisible, socially misunderstood, and psychologically unresolved. The concept of Parenting FOMO therefore expands existing understandings of reproductive grief by incorporating emotional longing, social comparison, existential uncertainty, and anxiety generated by pronatalist expectations into a single multidimensional framework.

The findings regarding digital social comparison extend contemporary understandings of how online environments amplify reproductive distress through algorithm-driven exposure to idealised family representations. Recent empirical studies confirm that frequent social media use intensifies upward social comparisons and FOMO, which subsequently motivates maladaptive self-presentation behaviours and psychological distress (Dhir et al., 2024; Sriharini & Rathidevi, 2024; Yue et al., 2022). However, this study demonstrates that reproductive autonomy functions as a protective psychological resource, with childfree women exhibiting greater resilience through selective disengagement and cognitive reframing strategies. These findings suggest that digital literacy interventions promoting critical evaluation of online content may serve as valuable adjuncts to psychological support for women experiencing Parenting FOMO.

Negotiating Pronatalist Expectations in Malaysian Society

The findings illustrate that women's psychological experiences cannot be understood independently of the sociocultural context in which reproductive identities are constructed. Malaysia's collectivist family orientation and strong pronatalist values continue to position motherhood as a normative expectation of adulthood and successful womanhood. Recent cross-cultural research in pronatalist contexts confirms that childless women encounter stigmatization, derogatory labelling, and social exclusion due to their departure from

established reproductive norms (Mroz & Łapniewska, 2020; Yildiz & Yildiz, 2025). Participants from both groups reported frequent questioning regarding their reproductive status, unsolicited advice from relatives, and assumptions that motherhood represents an inevitable life transition. However, the psychological consequences of these experiences differed markedly according to reproductive autonomy. Childfree women generally resisted societal expectations by redefining womanhood beyond motherhood, utilising cognitive reframing and selective disclosure strategies (Yildiz & Yildiz, 2025). In contrast, childless women were more likely to internalise pronatalist expectations, interpreting involuntary childlessness as personal inadequacy rather than structural circumstance. These findings suggest that pronatalist norms function as powerful social mechanisms influencing women's identity construction and psychological well-being, with stigma operating differentially across reproductive trajectories.

Digital Social Comparison and the Emergence of Baby FOMO

These findings extend Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954; Wills, 1981; Tesser, 1988) by suggesting that online environments amplify Parenting FOMO through continuous exposure to idealised representations of family life. Recent empirical studies demonstrate that frequent social media exposure intensifies upward social comparisons and fear of missing out (FOMO), which in turn motivates self-presentation behaviours and psychological distress (Dhir et al., 2024; Sriharini & Rathidevi, 2024; Yue et al., 2022). Unlike previous generations, women today experience repeated algorithm-driven comparisons that reinforce perceived deviations from culturally celebrated reproductive trajectories. Interestingly, childfree participants demonstrated greater resilience in responding to digital content. Many selectively disengaged from pronatalist narratives or interpreted such content without perceiving threats to their identities. This contrast suggests that reproductive autonomy may function as a protective psychological resource that buffers the negative effects of digital social comparison, consistent with recent findings that mindfulness and self-compassion interventions can mitigate social comparison effects on well-being (Fardouly et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on reproductive psychology by demonstrating that women's experiences of non-motherhood are far more complex than conventional demographic explanations of fertility

decline suggest. Rather than viewing women without children as a homogeneous population, the findings reveal two distinct psychological pathways that shape well-being within a pronatalist society: Baby FOMO, representing the emotional experience of involuntary non-parenthood, and Solo Glow, representing positive psychological flourishing among women who voluntarily construct meaningful lives beyond motherhood. This conceptualisation aligns with recent comparative research demonstrating that voluntarily childfree women in pronatalist contexts report higher levels of life satisfaction and self-fulfillment when their reproductive choices align with personal values rather than externally prescribed gender expectations (Yildiz & Yildiz, 2026; Akin et al., 2022).

The findings indicate that psychological well-being is influenced not by motherhood itself but by the extent to which women's reproductive circumstances align with their personal aspirations, values, and perceived autonomy. Women who voluntarily chose not to become mothers demonstrated higher levels of autonomy, self-acceptance, environmental mastery, and purpose in life, collectively conceptualised in this study as Solo Glow. Recent longitudinal evidence confirms that autonomy satisfaction in reproductive decision-making significantly predicts sustained psychological flourishing, consistent with Self-Determination Theory's proposition that autonomy constitutes a fundamental psychological need underlying optimal human functioning (Martela & Ryan, 2022; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Conversely, women experiencing involuntary childlessness described persistent grief, identity disruption, existential uncertainty, and social comparison, conceptualised as Parenting Fear of Missing Out (Parenting FOMO). This conceptualisation extends contemporary understandings of reproductive grief, as recent research in pronatalist societies substantiates that involuntarily childless women experience persistent emotional suffering that remains invisible and socially misunderstood (Mroz & Łapniewska, 2020; Vikström et al., 2024).

Importantly, the study demonstrates that both childfree and childless women continue to experience substantial pronatalist pressure within Malaysian society. However, these pressures produce different psychological

consequences depending upon women's perceived reproductive autonomy. Childfree women generally resisted external expectations through identity reconstruction and self-determination, utilising cognitive reframing and selective disclosure strategies that have been identified as effective coping mechanisms in recent cross-cultural research (Yildiz & Yildiz, 2025). In contrast, childless women were more likely to internalise social expectations and experience diminished psychological well-being, consistent with findings that stigma operates differentially across reproductive trajectories in pronatalist contexts (Mroz & Łapniewska, 2020). Furthermore, the increasing influence of digital environments on reproductive experiences was evident, with social media amplifying Parenting FOMO through continuous exposure to idealised representations of family life. Recent empirical studies confirm that frequent social media use intensifies upward social comparisons and FOMO, which subsequently motivates psychological distress (Dhir et al., 2024; Sriharini & Rathidevi, 2024; Yue et al., 2022). However, childfree participants demonstrated greater resilience through selective disengagement, suggesting that reproductive autonomy functions as a protective psychological resource that buffers the negative effects of digital social comparison.

Beyond its empirical findings, this study offers a significant theoretical contribution through the introduction of the Baby FOMO–Solo Glow Psychological Continuum, a conceptual framework that explains psychological well-being among women without children as a dynamic interaction between reproductive autonomy, identity reconstruction, sociocultural expectations, and emotional adjustment. This framework extends existing fertility research beyond demographic and economic explanations by incorporating psychological processes that have received limited scholarly attention, particularly within Southeast Asian contexts. The continuum framework aligns with contemporary positive psychology interventions that emphasise gratitude, purpose, and hope as mechanisms for enhancing well-being across diverse populations (Chilver & Gatt, 2022; Beshai et al., 2020). Future research should validate this continuum across diverse sociocultural contexts, examine longitudinal trajectories of movement along the continuum, and develop targeted interventions that facilitate progression towards Solo Glow for women experiencing Parenting FOMO. Additionally, the integration of positive psychology principles into digital mental health platforms presents a promising avenue for scalable intervention

delivery, particularly for populations experiencing geographic or cultural barriers to traditional psychological services.

Implications of the Study

The findings carry significant implications for policy development and clinical practice within pronatalist societies. Recent cross-cultural research confirms that childless women encounter substantial stigmatisation and social exclusion due to their departure from established reproductive norms, necessitating structural interventions that challenge pronatalist assumptions and validate diverse reproductive pathways (Yildiz & Yildiz, 2025; Mroz & Łapniewska, 2020). Future research should prioritise the development and evaluation of culturally sensitive psychological interventions for women experiencing Parenting FOMO, investigate the moderating role of digital media literacy on social comparison processes, and examine the applicability of the Baby FOMO Solo Glow continuum across non-Western contexts including Malaysia and other collectivist societies. Additionally, the integration of positive psychology principles into digital mental health platforms presents a promising avenue for scalable intervention delivery, particularly for populations experiencing geographic or cultural barriers to traditional psychological services.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

This study has several strengths. First, it distinguishes between childfree and childless women, two populations that are frequently treated as a single group in fertility research despite their fundamentally different reproductive experiences. Second, the study introduces two novel psychological concepts Parenting Fear of Missing Out (Parenting FOMO) and Solo Glow which contribute to expanding current theoretical understanding of non-motherhood and psychological well-being. Third, the qualitative phenomenological approach enabled an in-depth exploration of women's lived experiences, providing rich insights into the emotional, social, and identity-related dimensions of non-parenthood within the Malaysian sociocultural context.

Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. The relatively small sample of eight participants limits the transferability of the findings to

the wider population. Most participants were urban and highly educated, which may not fully represent the experiences of women from rural communities or lower socioeconomic backgrounds. In addition, the cross-sectional design captured participants' experiences at a single point in time and was unable to examine changes in psychological well-being across different stages of the life course. Finally, as the study relied on self-reported narratives, participants' accounts may have been influenced by recall bias or social desirability, particularly given the sensitive nature of reproductive experiences in a pronatalist society.

Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable theoretical and empirical insights into the psychological experiences of childfree and childless women in Malaysia and establishes a foundation for future quantitative validation and longitudinal investigation of Parenting FOMO and Solo Glow.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) prior to data collection. All research procedures involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and relevant institutional guidelines.

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before participation in the study. Participants were informed of the study objectives, voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation in the study. Participants were provided with detailed information regarding the study objectives, research procedures, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Ethics Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and received ethical approval from the Universiti Malaysia Sabah Research Ethics Committee prior to data

collection. All procedures involving human participants complied with institutional ethical standards for research involving human subjects.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no financial, professional, or personal conflicts of interest that could have influenced the research, analysis, or interpretation of the findings presented in this study.

Author Contributions

All authors contributed substantially to the conception and design of the study. Wanda Kiyah George Albert conceptualised the research, designed the methodology, conducted the interviews, analysed the data, and prepared the original manuscript. Norafifah Bali contributed to data analysis, interpretation of findings, and manuscript revision. All authors critically reviewed the manuscript, approved the final version, and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are not publicly available because they contain sensitive personal information that could

compromise participant confidentiality. De-identified data may be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request and subject to approval by the relevant institutional ethics committee.

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