

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Age moderates the link between relationship desire and life satisfaction among singles

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## Abstract

Higher desire for a romantic partner has been shown to be associated with lower life satisfaction for singles, but research has not considered whether the strength of this association might vary across age groups. We collected data from single participants ( $N = 3057$ ) across a broad age range (18 to 75 years of age,  $mean = 36.12$ ,  $standard\ deviation\ [SD] = 12.34$ ) to examine age as a moderator of the relationship between desire for a partner and singles' life satisfaction. Our results suggest that having greater desire for a partner is associated with lower life satisfaction for older (1  $SD$  above the mean or 48.46 years) versus younger (1  $SD$  below the mean or 23.78 years) individuals. We also found some evidence that this age-dependent association was stronger for women than men. Further, this interaction effect remained largely unchanged controlling for participants' attachment anxiety or avoidance. This study highlights the importance of considering how singlehood may play out differently for individuals at different life stages.

**Statement of Relevance:** Globally, singlehood is becoming increasingly prevalent. Recent research suggests that there is considerable variability in how single (unpartnered) individuals feel about their relationship status. Our research provides evidence for within-group variability in the experience of singlehood based on age, gender, and desire for a partner.

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**KEYWORDS**

age, desire for a partner, life satisfaction, relationship status, singlehood

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Singlehood is an increasingly prevalent aspect of society (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017; Tang et al., 2019) yet the factors that are associated with well-being among single people (hereafter, referred to as “singles”) are not well understood. We consider individuals to be single when they do not identify as being in a romantic relationship, which can include those who are never-married, separated, divorced, or widowed. Indeed, whereas past research has arguably framed singles as a monolithic group and focused on comparing singles to coupled individuals (e.g., Diener et al., 2000), a growing body of research is attending to within-group variability among singles with the goal of identifying individual differences in the extent to which singlehood is a more or less positive experience (DePaulo, 2017; Kislev, 2019; Pepping et al., 2018; see Girme et al., 2021 for a review). One individual difference variable that has previously been identified as related to well-being in singlehood is the extent to which an individual desires a romantic partner (e.g., Kislev, 2021). However, this research has not accounted for the ways in which the experience of singlehood changes with age (e.g., by considering different motivations for sex and dating; Garcia et al., 2012; Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Perlman & Sprecher, 2012; Raley et al., 2007; Stanley et al., 2011; Weitbrecht & Whitton, 2020). The present study specifically investigates whether the relation between desire for a partner and life satisfaction depends on one's age.

### 1.1 | Desire for a partner and singles' well-being

According to Diener et al. (1999, 2018), evaluations of life satisfaction represent a cognitive process involving judgments of quality of life. One predictor of lower life satisfaction among singles is a stronger desire to enter a romantic relationship. For example, longitudinal data have shown that a reduction in desire for a relationship over time was related to improvements in singles' life satisfaction (Kislev, 2021). In addition, a cross-sectional study by Gebhardt et al. (2010) found that single female participants' commitment to the goal of finding a partner was negatively associated with life satisfaction. Further, satisfaction with singlehood has been associated with higher life satisfaction (Lehmann et al., 2015; Oh et al., 2021), and singles with a stronger desire for a partner have been shown to demonstrate lower satisfaction with singlehood (Adamczyk, 2017; Lehmann et al., 2015; MacDonald & Park, 2022). Combined, these data suggest that the more that a single person holds on to a desire for a relationship, the less satisfied they are likely to be with their life overall.

### 1.2 | Age & singlehood

Beginning around the 1970s, western countries saw a shift towards a later age of marriage with many individuals marrying in their late 20s and early 30s (Fussell & Furstenberg Jr., 2005;

Oppenheimer, 2003). For example, in the United States between 1970 and 2022, the median age of marriage for men increased from approximately 23 to 30 years of age, and for women, it increased from approximately 21 to 28 years of age (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). Shulman and Connolly (2013) emphasize that this shift is accompanied by a change in young adults' romantic and sexual motivations, which have come to differ from those of older adults (Garcia et al., 2012; Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Perlman & Sprecher, 2012; Raley et al., 2007; Stanley et al., 2011; Weitbrecht & Whitton, 2020). An overarching pattern that has emerged as part of these societal changes is that relationship pursuit in young adulthood has taken on a more transient nature, whereby young adults in their 20s date without the intention of marriage and shift more readily between periods of being single and being in a relationship (Arnett, 2004; Shulman & Connolly, 2013). Notably, in spite of this greater relationship turnover, young adults continue to report that they are planning and expecting to get married in the future (Carroll et al., 2007; Krane & Cottreau, 1998; Shulman & Connolly, 2013; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001; Whitehead & Popenoe, 2001). This suggests that many single young adults do not perceive their current status as being solidified; rather, in many cases they are likely to expect that it will change.

Rising divorce rates over the last several decades, particularly for those aged 50 and above, also contribute to a larger number of older singles. For instance, a study by Brown and Lin (2012) found that the rate of divorce doubled between 1990 and 2010. Overall, existing literature suggests that older singles' experience and perception of singlehood differs from that of relatively younger adults. Older singles may be less likely than younger singles to see their relationship status as changeable because it is more difficult to find a partner at older ages due to a shortage of desirable and available potential partners (McIntosh et al., 2011). For example, in the case of those who are other-sex attracted, friendship groups at older ages consist primarily of same-sex friends and thus provide fewer opportunities to meet romantic prospects (Ajrouch et al., 2005; McPherson et al., 2001; McWilliams & Barrett, 2014). Similarly, Wrosch and Heckhausen (1999) found that older, separated participants reported feeling less control over their relationship status compared to younger separated participants. Altogether, older singles may feel they have less opportunity to find a partner than younger singles.

The decreasing changeability of relationship status in older age may lead to the negative relation between desire for a partner and lower life satisfaction growing stronger over time. Indeed, the motivational theory of lifespan development (Heckhausen et al., 2010) suggests that people tend to adjust their goal choices in accordance with changing available opportunities as they age; importantly, doing so can be protective of their well-being (Wrosch et al., 2007; Wrosch et al., 2013). Thus, a continued hope for a romantic partner combined with decreasing odds for success provides a recipe for a mounting sense of frustration and loss (Jackson, 2018) that may well undermine well-being. Carlson (2012) found that the depressive symptoms of never-married participants were not significantly different from those of married participants until they passed their desired age for marriage, after which depressive symptoms for the never-married increased with time. Moreover, the perception of relationship status changeability (i.e., that there is a possibility that one would get married by their preferred age) was associated with fewer depressive symptoms.

In the present research, we analyzed a large sample of single individuals to examine if and how age moderates the association between desire for a partner and life satisfaction. Following our primary analyses, we conducted two additional analyses. First, one important consideration in addressing our research question was the overlap between our key variables and broader interpersonal orientations such as attachment anxiety. Attachment anxiety reflects a tendency

to be concerned about one's self-worth and the possibility of rejection (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002), and has been associated with both higher desire for a partner and lower life satisfaction during singlehood (MacDonald & Park, 2022). Thus, to ensure effects can be attributed more specifically to desire for a partner rather than general patterns of attachment insecurity, we conducted additional analyses in a subsample with available data in which we controlled for attachment anxiety (as well as attachment avoidance). Second, we explored whether our key interaction effect manifests differently for men and women. Previous work has not been consistent as to whether singlehood experiences differ for men and women. For example, whereas Park et al. (2021) did not find that gender had a significant moderating effect on the relationship between singles' sexual and life satisfaction, Kislev (2022) found that the link between desire for relationship and life satisfaction varied among men and women (dependent on marital history). Considering the mixed nature of the existing literature, this exploratory analysis has the potential to offer further insights into the relationship between singlehood and life satisfaction.

## 2 | METHOD

### 2.1 | Participants

We recruited four separate samples of singles for the present analyses. All participants were recruited via Prolific, an online crowdsourcing platform, between December 2020 and June 2021. Data collection was approved by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Toronto. Participants were required to be over 20 years of age (18 in one sample) and not be involved in a romantic relationship to be eligible for participation. The final sample consisted of 1514 men, 1532 women, and 11 people identifying as non-binary. Participants were 36.12 years old on average ( $SD = 12.34$ ; range = 18–75). Please see Table 1 for additional details about participant characteristics in each sample. Participants responded to a series of questionnaires that included the measures below. Please see Table 2 for descriptive statistics about the key measures.

### 2.2 | Measures

All measures were completed on a 7-point response scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*).

#### 2.2.1 | Desire for a partner

The Desire for a Partner Scale is a face-valid measure designed by our lab to measure the extent to which individuals want a romantic partner. This scale consists of five items (“I want to have a romantic partner”, “My preference for my life right now is to be in a romantic relationship”, “I don’t want to be in a romantic relationship right now” (reverse coded), “My ideal right now is to be in a romantic relationship”, “Being in a romantic relationship is not something I really value at the moment” (reverse coded);  $\alpha s > .92$ ). Its validity has been suggested by its moderate to high associations with variables such as fear of being single (Spiellmann et al., 2013) and commitment readiness (Hadden et al., 2018).

TABLE 1 Participant characteristics.

	Sample 1 (n = 942)	Sample 2 (n = 500)	Sample 3 (n = 869)	Sample 4 (n = 747)
Data collection	December 2020	January 2021	April 2021	January 2021
Gender	463 M, 473 W, 6 O	246 M, 254 W	445 M, 448 W, 5 O	767 M, 371 W
Age	37.76 (11.65)	24.78 (8.72)	38.52 (11.78)	38.82 (11.66)
Sexual orientation	81% Heterosexual	79% Heterosexual	81% Heterosexual	86% Heterosexual
Ethnicity	80% White	75% White	77% White	—
Dating history	75% Experienced	62% Experienced	81% Experienced	79% Experienced
Marital history	97% Never married	—	75% Never married	—
Study Description	Study about life and motivation	Study about ideal romantic relationships and partners	Study about life and motivation	Study about self and experiences as a single

Note: Means are presented for age with standard deviations in parentheses. Multiple responses were allowed for the ethnicity question. Dating history refers to participants' response to a question if they have ever been in a romantic relationship. The 11 participants that identified as Other were excluded from our analyses.

Abbreviations: M, Men; O, Other; W, Women.

TABLE 2 Descriptive statistics for key measures.

	Mean	SD	Range
Desire for a partner	4.08	0.52	1.4–7
Life satisfaction	3.48	1.43	1–7
Attachment anxiety	4.36	1.59	1–7
Attachment avoidance	4.48	0.67	1.17–7

Note:  $N = 3057$ . For the sample in which attachment insecurity was assessed;  $N = 1442$ . To help interpret the meaning of the scores, we presented composite scores created for each variable rather than factor scores used for the analyses.

### 2.2.2 | Life satisfaction

The Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985) was used to measure participants' subjective life satisfaction. The scale consists of five items (e.g., “I am satisfied with my life”;  $\alpha s > .88$ ).

### 2.2.3 | Attachment style

In two of the four samples, a relationship-general version of The Experiences in Close Relationships-Relationship Structures questionnaire (ECR-RS; Fraley et al., 2011) was used to assess attachment insecurity. The ECR-RS consists of three items assessing attachment anxiety (e.g., “I worry that other people won't care about me as much as I care about them”;  $\alpha s > .86$ ) and six items assessing attachment avoidance (e.g., “I prefer not to show others how I feel deep down”;  $\alpha s > .81$ ). The instructions were modified such that participants were asked to respond with their close relationships in mind.

## 2.3 | Analysis plan

We used integrative data analysis (Curran & Hussong, 2009) to combine four separate samples of singles. Prior to our primary analyses, we conducted moderated nonlinear factor analysis (MNLFA; Bauer & Hussong, 2009) to obtain commensurate measures of desire for a partner, life satisfaction, and attachment. Although we used the same scales across all samples, it is possible that measurement properties vary across the samples. The MNLFA model allows us to test and account for potential differences in the latent factor and individual items across the samples and other covariates. Our model used both sample membership and gender as potentially influential covariates. Results from this analysis suggested that indeed, some differences in measurement properties were observed across samples and gender. For example, in terms of the factor mean, Sample 4 was higher on life satisfaction and lower on desire for a partner than Sample 2; women were higher on life satisfaction and lower on desire for a partner. We used the aMNLFA package (Gottfredson et al., 2019) to generate syntax for the MNFLA and Mplus version 8 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2017) to run the models. All other analyses were conducted in R (R Core Team, 2019). Please see the supplementary materials for all packages used.

For our primary analysis, we fitted a regression model including age, desire for a partner, and their interaction term as predictors of life satisfaction. Gender and sample membership (dummy variables) were included as covariates. Gender was coded as 0 for men and 1 for

women. Participants that identified as ‘other’ were not included in any analyses. All continuous variables were centered prior to analysis. In the case of a significant interaction, we probed it by examining the link between desire for a partner and life satisfaction at high (1 *SD* above the mean), average, and low (1 *SD* below the mean) values of age. To probe precisely at what age desire for a partner is significantly associated with life satisfaction, we used the Johnson–Neyman technique (Johnson & Fay, 1950). Additionally, we examined the simple slopes with desire for a partner as a moderator.

### 2.3.1 | Robustness check

Next, we ran an additional model controlling for attachment insecurity (anxiety and avoidance) and their interactions with age and desire for a partner. This was done to ensure that our primary moderation effect is not reflective of more general interpersonal orientations (rather than desire for a partner more specifically). We followed Yzerbyt et al.'s (2004) recommendation for using covariates in a regression model by entering all interactions with the covariate simultaneously. Note that this analysis was based on a subset of samples (i.e., those in which attachment insecurity was assessed;  $N = 1442$ ).<sup>1</sup>

### 2.3.2 | The moderating effect of gender

As an exploratory analysis, we also examined gender as a moderator, rather than just as a covariate. We ran a three-variable interaction model for gender, age and desire for a partner, while controlling for sample membership.

## 3 | RESULTS

### 3.1 | Preliminary analyses

We first examined the bivariate correlations between the variables in each sample. Age was not significantly associated with life satisfaction in any of the samples,  $|rs| < .04$ ,  $ps > .32$ , but was associated with desire for a partner in three of the four samples,  $rs < -.11$ ,  $ps < .004$ . Life satisfaction was negatively associated with desire for a partner in three of the samples,  $rs < -.09$ ,  $ps < .005$ .

### 3.2 | Primary analyses

Per our analysis plan, we conducted a regression analysis to examine the relationship between age, desire for a partner, and life satisfaction. The results of the fitted regression model which included the interaction terms as well as gender and sample membership as covariates are shown in Table 3. Significant main effects of desire for a partner and age suggested that individuals who had a greater desire for a partner and/or were older were less satisfied with their lives. However, there was also a significant interaction of desire for a partner and age on life satisfaction (Partial  $R^2 = .01$ ). Simple slopes analyses showed that desire for a partner was a negative

TABLE 3 Fitted regression model.

	Main effects model					Interaction effect model				
	<i>b</i>	$\beta$	<i>T</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI	<i>b</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Age	-.002	-.03	-1.59	.11	[-0.01, 0.00]	-.003	-.04	-2.08	.038	[-0.01, -0.00]
Desire for a partner	-.13	-.12	-6.77	<.001	[-0.16, -0.09]	-.11	-.11	-6.05	<.001	[-0.15, -0.08]
Desire for a partner $\times$ age						-.01	-.10	-5.27	<.001	[-0.01, -0.01]
Gender	.15	.08	4.51	<.001	[0.09, 0.22]	.15	.08	4.58	<.001	[0.09, 0.22]
Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.03					.04				

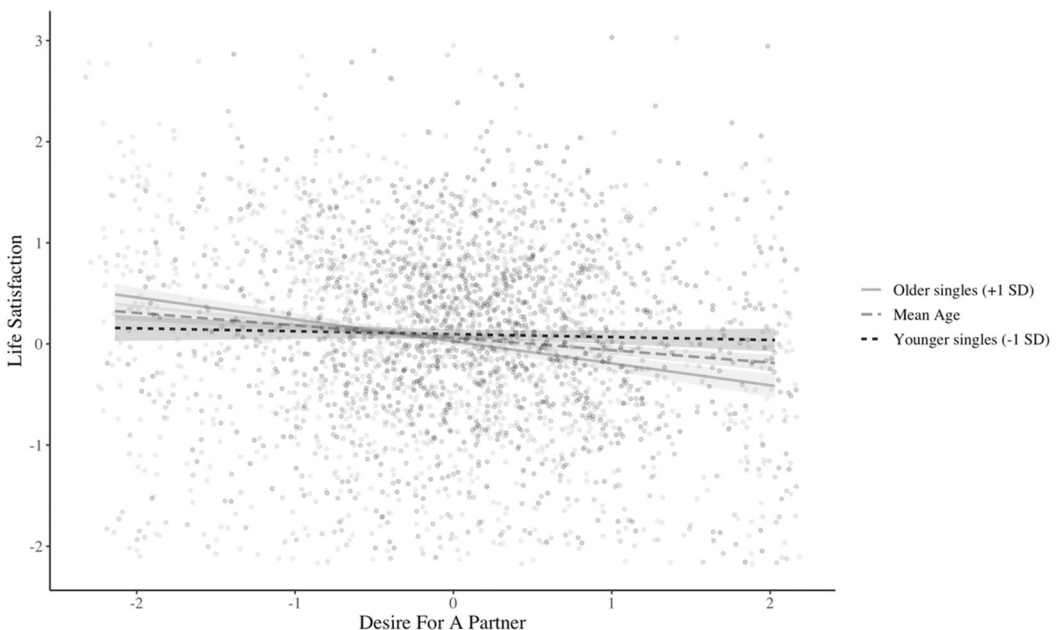
Note: *N* = 3039. Variables are centred. Dummy variables denoting sample membership were included in the model.



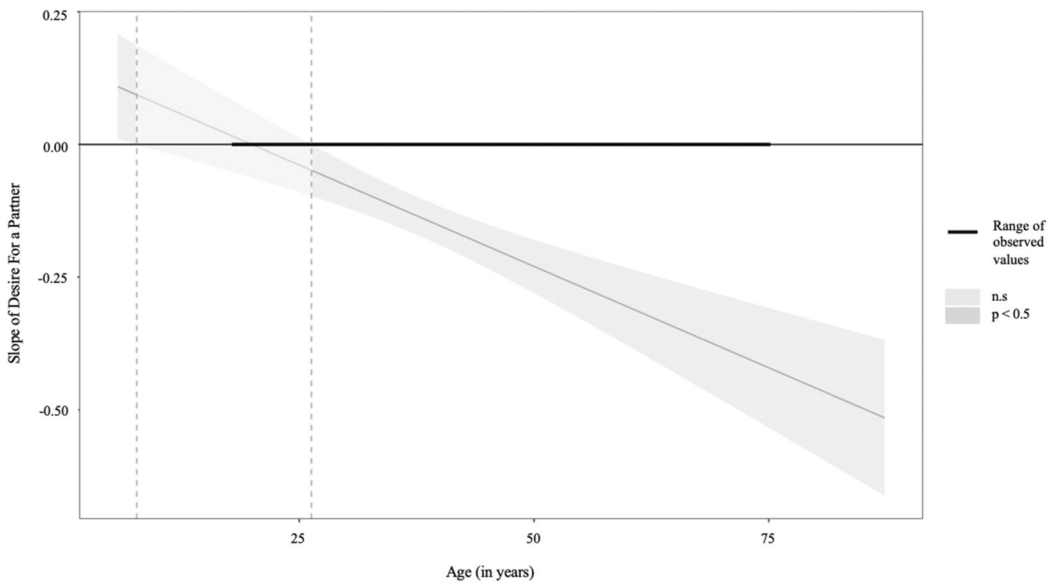
predictor of life satisfaction for older singles ( $+1$   $SD$  or 48.45 years),  $b = -.22$ ,  $\beta = -.22$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ ,  $p < .001$ , and singles of the mean age (36.12 years),  $b = -.12$ ,  $\beta = -.12$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ ,  $p < .001$ , but not younger singles ( $-1$   $SD$  or 23.79 years),  $b = -.03$ ,  $\beta = -.03$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $p = .29$  (see Figure 1). Framed differently, age was a significant negative predictor of life satisfaction for singles high ( $+1$   $SD$ ) in desire for a partner,  $b = -.01$ ,  $\beta = -.13$ ,  $SE = 0.002$ ,  $p < .001$ , and also a negative predictor at the mean level of desire for a partner,  $b = -.003$ ,  $\beta = -.04$ ,  $SE = 0.002$ ,  $p = .05$ , but was a positive predictor of life satisfaction for those low ( $-1$   $SD$ ) in desire for a partner,  $b = .004$ ,  $\beta = .06$ ,  $SE = 0.002$ ,  $p = .03$ . Additionally, our results from the Johnson–Neyman analysis suggested that the link between desire for a partner and life satisfaction was significant only for participants older than 26.37 years of age. This graph is shown in Figure 2.

### 3.2.1 | Robustness check

Next, we ran an additional model controlling for attachment insecurity and their interactions with age and desire for a partner. As shown in Table 4, we found that even when attachment insecurity and relevant interaction terms were included in the model, the original interaction effect of age and desire for a partner remained significant. The results are also shown in Figure 3. Unexpectedly, this analysis also identified a significant interaction between attachment anxiety and age. To examine the nature of this interaction, we conducted exploratory simple slopes analyses (as noted, this analysis was necessarily on the subset of participants for whom attachment data were available,  $N = 1442$ ). We found that there was a nonsignificant effect of age on life satisfaction for those low in attachment anxiety ( $-1$   $SD$ ),  $b = -.001$ ,



**FIGURE 1** Interaction between desire for a partner and age on life satisfaction. High and low values of moderator correspond to one standard deviation ( $SD$ ) above and below the mean.



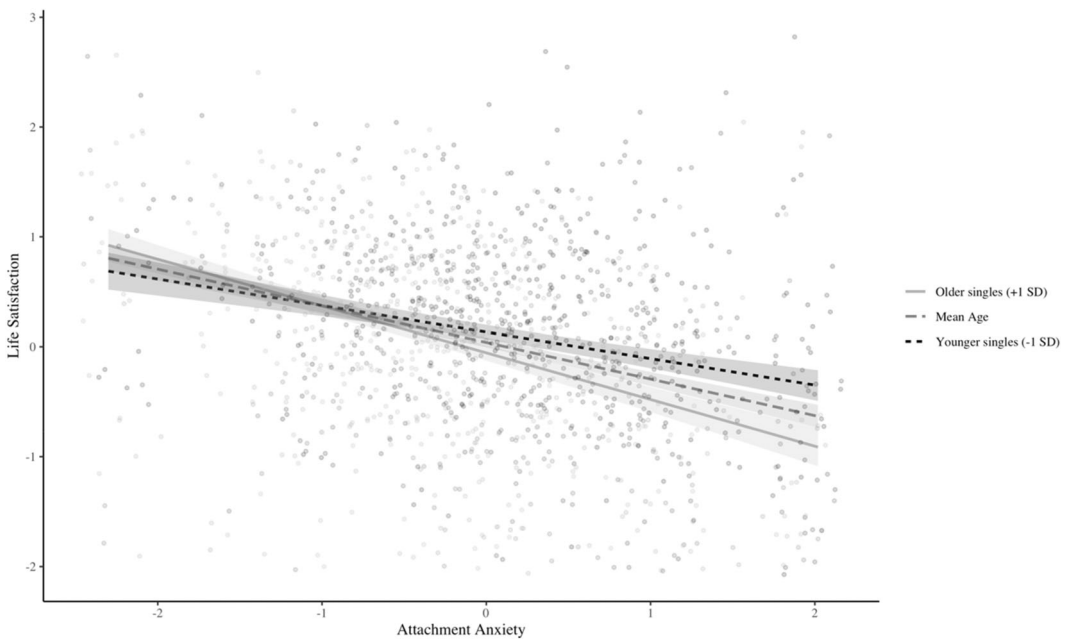
**FIGURE 2** Graph showing results from the Johnson–Neyman analysis. The association between desire for a partner and life satisfaction was significant for participants older than 26.30 years old.

**TABLE 4** Regression model including attachment anxiety and avoidance as covariates.

	Life satisfaction				
	<i>b</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Age	−.01	−.13	−4.51	<.001	[−0.01, −0.01]
Desire for a partner	−.05	−.05	−1.82	.069	[−0.10, 0.00]
Attachment anxiety	−.34	−.36	−13.74	<.001	[−0.38, −0.29]
Attachment avoidance	−.23	−.24	−9.97	<.001	[−0.27, −0.18]
Gender	.09	.05	2.16	.031	[0.00, 0.17]
Age × desire for a partner	−.01	−.07	−2.62	.009	[−0.01, −0.00]
Age × attachment anxiety	−.01	−.08	−3.43	<.001	[−0.01, −0.00]
Age × attachment avoidance	.002	.03	1.09	.277	[−0.00, 0.01]
Desire For a partner × attachment anxiety	−.06	−.06	−2.46	.014	[−0.10, −0.01]
Desire For a partner × attachment avoidance	.02	.02	0.89	.373	[−0.02, 0.06]
Adjusted $R^2$	.22				

Note:  $N = 1424$ . Variables are centred. Dummy variables denoting sample membership were included in the model.

$\beta = -.007$ ,  $SE = 0.002$ ,  $p = .83$ , but a significant negative effect on life satisfaction for those high in attachment anxiety (+1  $SD$ ),  $b = -.015$ ,  $\beta = -.20$ ,  $SE = 0.003$ ,  $p < .001$ . Framed differently, the negative effect of attachment anxiety on life satisfaction was significant at all ages but increased in strength at older ages;  $b = -.24$ ,  $\beta = -.26$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $p < .001$ , for younger participants (−1  $SD$  or 20.88 years),  $b = -.33$ ,  $\beta = -.35$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ ,  $p < .001$ , for those of the mean age (33.26 years), and  $b = -.43$ ,  $\beta = -.45$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $p < .001$ , for older participants (+1  $SD$  or 45.64 years).



**FIGURE 3** Interaction between attachment anxiety and age on life satisfaction. High and low values of moderator correspond to one standard deviation (*SD*) above and below the mean.

### 3.2.2 | The moderating effect of gender

Table 5 shows the results for the three-way gender interaction. There was a significant interaction between desire for a partner and life satisfaction for women,  $b = -.01$ ,  $\beta = -.14$ ,  $SE = 0.003$ ,  $p < .001$ , but not men,  $b = -.002$ ,  $\beta = -.03$ ,  $SE = 0.002$ ,  $p = .304$ . For younger women desire for a partner was not a predictor of life satisfaction,  $b = .004$ ,  $\beta = .004$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $p = .92$ , but for older women lower levels of desire for a partner were associated with higher levels of life satisfaction,  $b = -.27$ ,  $\beta = -.27$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $p < .001$ . For men, desire for a partner was negatively associated with life satisfaction regardless of age. These results are shown in Figure 4.

## 4 | DISCUSSION

The present findings suggest that the relationship between desire for a partner and life satisfaction is moderated by age, such that singles who hold a relatively strong desire for a romantic partner exhibit relatively low levels of life satisfaction particularly if they are older (vs. younger). Using a subset of data for which attachment scores were available, we found that this effect held accounting for effects of attachment insecurity. Our findings align with previous research (Kislev, 2021), in that a stronger desire for a partner was associated with lower life satisfaction. However, our research extends this past work by suggesting that the negative relationship between desire for a partner and life satisfaction is stronger for older singles, particularly women.

Given the correlational nature of our data and the exploratory nature of our analyses, we suggest caution in interpreting the results, especially when it comes to attributions of causality.

TABLE 5 Regression model including three-way interaction for gender.

	Life satisfaction				
	<i>b</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Age	−.006	−.07	−2.82	.005	[−0.01, −0.00]
Desire for a partner	−.08	−.08	−2.98	.003	[−0.14, −0.03]
Gender	.14	.08	4.12	<.001	[0.07, 0.21]
Gender × age	.004	.04	1.41	.16	[0.00, 0.01]
Gender × desire for a partner	−.05	−.04	−1.35	.18	[−0.12, 0.02]
Age × desire for a partner	−.002	−.03	−1.03	.30	[−0.01, 0.00]
Age × desire for a partner × gender	−.01	−.08	−2.94	.003	[−0.01, −0.00]
Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.04				

Note: *N* = 1424. Variables are centred. Dummy variables denoting sample membership were included in the model.

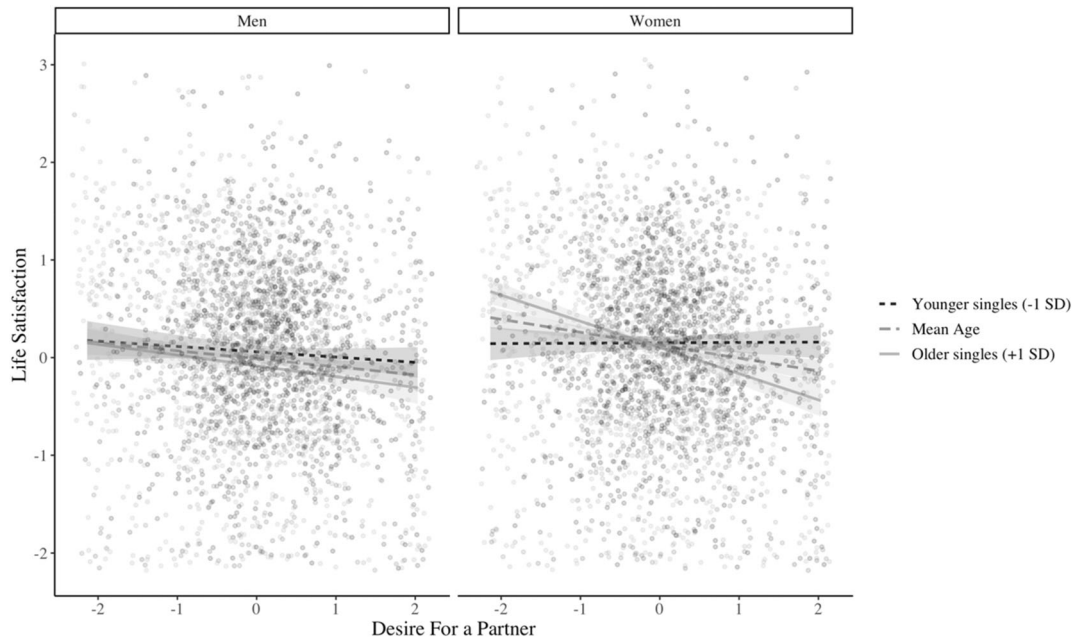


FIGURE 4 Graph showing the interaction between desire for a partner and age on life satisfaction for men (left) and women (right). High and low values of moderator correspond to one standard deviation (*SD*) above and below the mean.

One possible interpretation of our results in terms of causality may be that as one ages, there are changes that alter the meaning of desire for a partner in a way that holding on to such a desire among older singles leads to lower life satisfaction. Younger singles who strongly desire a partner may experience a protective effect of perceiving that they will have many future opportunities to enter a romantic relationship (Krane & Cottreau, 1998; Whitehead & Popenoe, 2001) and thus not experience strong distress in conjunction with such partnership desire. However,

older singles, who may not see exiting singlehood to be as much of a realistic possibility as younger singles, may experience their desire for partnership as distressing in a fashion that lowers life satisfaction.

Of particular interest in this light are the results for women who report low desire for a romantic partner and their relatively high levels of life satisfaction across the age spectrum. Although a number of singles may never desire partnership across their lifetime (Savin-Williams, 2017), among those who do, the ability to let go of that desire and frame singlehood more positively (Laurin et al., 2013) may have a protective effect on life satisfaction (Gebhardt et al., 2010; Timonen & Doyle, 2014). Further, this disengagement from the goal may become increasingly beneficial as one gets older and partnering becomes a less easily attainable goal (e.g., due to structural reasons such as the decreasing size of the partner pool). For example, the motivational theory of lifespan development (Heckhausen et al., 2010) suggests that across the lifespan, individuals adopt different strategies that fit with age-graded opportunities in order to increase their control over goal attainment. These strategies not only include active strivings to achieve a goal but also disengaging from certain goals that are unlikely to be achieved. To the extent that partnering is such a goal people have fewer opportunities to achieve (or more constraints in achieving) as they age, downgrading its value or regulating the desire for it may become increasingly beneficial. Accordingly, a possible interpretation is that for older (female) singles, the ability to successfully detach from this goal is closely linked to their desire for a partner.

Nevertheless, it is possible that disengagement from partnership goals may not be without cost. Disengagement requires the belief that the goal is unlikely to be achieved. The sense that one has missed out on opportunities for partnership might be a particularly painful conclusion to come to terms with (Joel et al., 2019). Moreover, society has little in the way of established grieving rituals for this experience (Jackson, 2018). Further, although disengagement from partnership goals may be protective in terms of life satisfaction, associated reductions in investment in partnership seeking may create a self-fulfilling prophecy by which partnerships that were in fact possible are missed.

However, this possible explanation that singles may benefit from letting go of partnership goals hinges on the notion that romantic relationships can be replaced through other means. Our surprise finding suggesting that older men with relatively low desire for a partner nevertheless exhibit relatively low life satisfaction may reflect men's struggles with social support outside of romantic partnership. Research suggests that men have smaller social networks than women (Igarashi et al., 2005; McLaughlin et al., 2010) and are more dependent on romantic partners for support (Gurung et al., 2003; Liao et al., 2018). Thus, women who let go of desires for partnership may be fulfilling support needs through other relationships but men may struggle to do so.

Another interpretation of causation in our data is the possibility that the experience of sustained, high levels of life satisfaction may lead to a recognition among the women in our study that they are happy without a romantic partner, thus lessening the desire for a partner. Indeed, cultural narratives support the belief that having a partner leads to improvements in life satisfaction (DePaulo, 2006; Greitemeyer, 2009; Hertel et al., 2007; Morris et al., 2007; Sharp & Ganong, 2011), and many of these messages are particularly targeted at women (e.g., Lahad, 2019). As such, singles may need to spend some time observing themselves enjoying life as a single person before shedding societal preconceptions and considering they may not actually desire a partner.

Relatedly, given the changes in the cultural and social norms surrounding both relationships and marriage since around the 1970s, our results might be reflective of a cohort effect regarding attitudes towards singlehood rather than an age effect (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). That is, if younger people are more often exposed to messages that a single life can be a happy life, then younger individuals may be more primed to notice that they are happy without a partner. From this perspective, the relatively weak relation between desire for a partner and life satisfaction for younger singles could be reflective of more modern attitudes towards singlehood as being increasingly acceptable and normative (Arnett, 2004; Garcia et al., 2012; Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Perlman & Sprecher, 2012; Raley et al., 2007; Shulman & Connolly, 2013; Stanley et al., 2011; Weitbrecht & Whitton, 2020). However, longitudinal data will be needed to address the contributions of age versus cohort effects in interpreting the results.

Finally, although our correlational data leave open the possibility of third variable effects, we were able to demonstrate that our effects held controlling for the influence of attachment insecurity. Unexpectedly, we found an effect suggesting the presence of a negative relation between attachment anxiety and life satisfaction that strengthened at older ages (although these results should be considered more tentative as they relied on a smaller sample size). It is unclear whether this effect is specific to singles or represents a broader pattern associated with attachment anxiety generally as little research has examined the interaction between attachment insecurity and age in predicting life satisfaction (cf. Kafetsios & Sideridis, 2006). Nevertheless, our data suggest that, at least for singles, the relatively chronic negative emotion and difficult-to-satisfy longings for intimacy of those higher in attachment anxiety may present a more difficult burden to bear at older ages. Of interest, these data contradict Pepping et al.'s (2018) theoretical supposition that it would be singles high in attachment avoidance, not anxiety, that experience lower well-being with age. Pepping et al. suggested that the increasing dependence that can come with older age might be a challenge for avoidant individuals who prefer to structure their lives around independence and autonomy. However, given that the current data include a relatively small number of participants older than 60, Pepping et al.'s suggestions regarding avoidants may manifest in samples with a higher concentration of participants belonging to older age groups. In any event, the current data suggest that examining effects of attachment insecurity on life satisfaction at different ages may be a valuable future research direction.

In general, our data suggest that research in the growing field of singlehood needs to consider the differing experiences of singlehood across age groups. For example, research by Park et al. (2022) suggests that satisfaction with singlehood increases with age starting around age 40. Future research might consider the ways that other aspects of life such as physical health (e.g., Braithwaite et al., 2010; Carr & Springer, 2010), employment status (Byrne & Carr, 2005), or sexual desire (Park & MacDonald, 2022; Rodrigues & Lopes, 2017) change across the lifespan and thus intersect with the experiences of single individuals. For example, Rapp (2018) provided evidence that, particularly at older age, better physical health predicted higher likelihood of entering a relationship. At a minimum, it seems important for singlehood researchers to attend to the age range of participants who are recruited for research purposes. Additionally, our data suggest that longitudinal approaches to understanding singlehood would be beneficial for separating age, cohort, and period effects (e.g., Böger & Huxhold, 2020; Park et al., 2022) particularly given quickly changing norms around partnership and singlehood (Shulman & Connolly, 2013; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001).

A key strength of our research was that we collected data from a large sample of participants across a wide range of age groups. In doing so, we were able to conduct a relatively high-



powered investigation into age-related differences that are often overlooked. However, as noted, we have limited ability to speak to patterns among particularly older adult populations given the age range of our participants. Additionally, because most participants in the available samples identified as never married, we were unable to fully examine the possible effects of marital history in our model.

This research also does not fully examine how the experience of singlehood may differ for sexual and gender minority adults. In the supplementary materials, we controlled for the effects of sexual orientation and examine it as a possible moderator. However, the majority of our sample is heterosexual and, to conduct these analyses, we aggregated participants who did not identify as heterosexual into one group despite the diversity in sexual identities reported by participants. Ideally, future research should have a larger sample of diverse participants to allow for more granularity when examining possible relationships between age, desire for a partner, life satisfaction, and sexual orientation. For example, a diverse sample, both in terms of sexual orientation and age, would be especially valuable when extending research like that of Allen and Lavender-Stott (2020), which highlights the role of older age when forming and maintaining relationships for LGBTQ adults. This may be related to desire for a partner and be an interesting avenue for adding to the current literature.

Importantly our findings are correlational and do not allow us to make causal claims about the relationship between our variables and the observed differences. Although descriptive data such as ours are useful for a relatively young field of research, the data's inability to speak to causality offers little in terms of understanding of underlying mechanisms. Additionally, the effect sizes we reported are in the small range. Nonetheless, the significance of these effects suggests that it would be worthwhile to investigate these relationships in more depth. Finally, the data presented in this article were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic and the nations from which our participants were recruited were in varying stages of lockdown (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020), limiting our ability to speak to generalizability of the effects outside of pandemic conditions.

Our preliminary findings suggest that singles' life satisfaction is meaningfully tied to their age, gender, and desire for a partner. Specifically, older women with lower desire for a partner appear to experience higher life satisfaction at older age whereas others may experience challenges with enjoying singlehood as they grow older.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data used in the research cannot be publicly shared but are available upon request. The data can be obtained by emailing: [l.hillroy@alum.utoronto.ca](mailto:l.hillroy@alum.utoronto.ca). The materials used in the research cannot be publicly shared but are available upon request. The materials can be obtained by emailing: [l.hillroy@alum.utoronto.ca](mailto:l.hillroy@alum.utoronto.ca).

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## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> We also conducted exploratory analyses using participants' relationship experience (whether they had been in a relationship previously, or not) and marital history (whether they had been married previously vs. not). These were separately included in a three-way interaction model with age and desire for a partner, predicting life

satisfaction. Sample membership was controlled for. Neither interaction was significant,  $p = 0.90$  and  $p = 0.47$ , respectively.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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