

The Role of Unwanted Celibacy in Predicting Attitudes Towards Sexual Aggression in Single Men

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Abstract

The emergence of an online community named involuntary celibates (incel), which is widely known for its attitude that condones sexual aggression, is seen as a new threat of violence in Western society. Even though the incel community has not been identified in Indonesia, the shared experience incels have can happen to single men in general. This research aims to test the role of unwanted celibacy in predicting attitudes toward sexual aggression in the Indonesian context, where an incel community is yet to be found. This research uses a quantitative method with 223 single men as participants. The result shows support for the hypothesis that unwanted celibacy does have a role in predicting attitudes toward sexual aggression. Unwanted celibacy is also found to be higher in involuntary single men than in voluntary single men. This research contributes to extending research on unwanted celibacy and involuntary singlehood.

Abstrak

Munculnya komunitas *involuntary celibates* (incel) yang dikenal dengan sikapnya yang menormalisasi agresi seksual mengundang ancaman kekerasan baru di negara-negara Barat. Meski komunitas incel belum banyak ditemukan di Indonesia, namun pengalaman yang dialami para anggota incel juga bisa dialami oleh para pria lajang pada umumnya. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menguji peran *unwanted celibacy* dalam memprediksi sikap terhadap agresi seksual dalam konteks Indonesia yang tidak memiliki komunitas incel. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kuantitatif dengan jumlah partisipan pria lajang sebanyak 223 orang. Hasil penelitian membuktikan bahwa *unwanted celibacy* berperan dalam memprediksi sikap terhadap agresi seksual. *Unwanted celibacy* juga ditemukan lebih banyak dirasakan oleh pria yang kesulitan mencari pasangan (*involuntary singlehood*) dibandingkan pria yang secara sadar memilih untuk melajang (*voluntary singlehood*). Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada ekstensi penelitian tentang *unwanted celibacy* dan *involuntary singlehood*.



INTRODUCTION

In Western society, an online community or sub-culture has emerged consisting of involuntarily single men known as involuntary celibates (incels). This online community is created for men who build their identity around their inability to attract a romantic or sexual partner (Costello et al., 2024). This community is also well known for its misogynistic attitudes (Halpin et al., 2023). Incels tend to support violence that was perpetrated by fellow self-identified incels (O'Donnell & Shor, 2022), even normalizing violence towards women physically and non-physically (O'Malley et al., 2022). Even

though the threat of incels is still sporadic in Asia (Ware, 2021), incels are already considered a threat in some Western countries due to the mass violence that has been perpetrated by its' members since 2014.

Being single is not always bad, but there are times when unwantedness brings a deep frustration and hopelessness that later evolves into maladaptive behaviors. In Indonesia, marriage is seen as a religious, social, and cultural duty, which can lead to a negative stigma toward single people (Himawan et al., 2018). This poses problems for Indonesia, as it is currently experiencing an increase in the number of single people. According to data gathered by Statistics Indonesia (Indonesian: *Badan Pusat Statistik*, shortened as BPS), in 2022, out of 65,82 million young adults, 75.09% of men are still reported as single (Maruf, 2023).

The tendency towards sexually aggressive behavior can be seen from how their attitude toward sexual aggression (Flood & Pease, 2009; Moyano et al., 2017; Yapp & Quayle, 2018). Based on frustration-aggression theory (Berkowitz, 1989), aggression can be a byproduct of frustration only when it is followed by negative affect. Incel becomes a vulnerable community due to the tendency of its members to have a particular hatred towards women and normalize sexual aggression and violence against women in digital spaces (i.e., social media; O'Malley et al., 2022). This is aligned with the increasing cases of cyber gender-based violence (GBV) in Indonesia, as reported by the National Commission on Violence Against Women (Indonesian: *Komisi Nasional Anti Kekerasan terhadap Perempuan*, abbreviated as Komnas Perempuan; 2023), with 869 cases, of which 466 reported unknown people do cases. That said, no data shows the exact proportion of said violence done by single men.

Singlehood can occur when an individual chooses not to engage in any romantic or sexual relationship (voluntary singlehood) or when an individual has a hard time finding a romantic or sexual partner even when the desire to have a romantic relationship (involuntary singlehood; Apostolou, Matogian, et al., 2019; Apostolou, Papadopoulou, et al., 2019). So far, involuntary singlehood has been associated with worse mental health conditions such as depression, loneliness (Apostolou, Matogian, et al., 2019; Apostolou, Papadopoulou, et al., 2019), lower life satisfaction, and more negative emotion (Apostolou, Matogian, et al., 2019) compared to voluntary single people.

The frustration-aggression hypothesis (Dollard et al., 1939) postulates that frustration leads to aggression. Putting the hypothesis through an interpersonal relationship lens, being involuntarily single or perceiving unwantedness can result in frustration regarding the struggle to find a partner. As a result, any aggression can be a product of said frustration.

Scaptura and Boyle (2020) attempted to map out traits that are inherent in the incel community and see whether those traits are also found in general men. Their research found that incel traits (i.e., defeated, rejected, weak, aggressive, and hateful) were found in men. When paired with more significant gender role stress and more hostile attitudes towards women, men with said traits tend to fantasize about using dangerous weapons and rape.

Grunau et al. (2022) introduced unwanted celibacy, which is defined as a feeling of frustration and hopelessness that arises as a result of failure in fulfilling the high desire to have a romantic or sexual partner. Grunau assumes that unwanted celibacy can be experienced by men in the general population and not only exclusively experienced by men who identify as part of the incel community. This later was proven in their research where unwanted celibacy was indeed found in men in the general population and also significantly predicted attitudes that condone sexual aggression even after controlling for personality with a sample of single men in general.

Research done by Grunau et al. (2022) gives an extension to research on involuntary celibacy and involuntary singlehood that opens up the possibility of seeing how general single men's experience and grievances about their singlehood and also how the negative experience shapes their attitudes toward sexual aggression that later affects their likelihood of engaging in sexually aggressive behaviors.

Thus far, no research has tried to replicate this research, particularly in non-WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) countries. In Indonesia, religion has served as a way of dealing with the negative stigma associated with being single and has provided a fresh perspective on singlehood despite the presence of a significant number of involuntary single men (Himawan et al., 2018; Himawan et al., 2022). Social support is also found to help individuals with their singlehood (Himawan et al., 2024), which lowers the possibility of them having an attitude that normalizes sexual aggression. Moreover, in the specific population, it is found that the majority of the people that affiliate themselves with the incel community do not support violence (Moskalenko et al., 2022; Speckhard et al., 2021). This raises the question, "How is unwanted celibacy experienced in single men in Indonesia?" and "What is the role of unwanted celibacy in shaping attitudes towards sexual aggression in Indonesia?"

Based on the explanation above, this research aims to replicate research by Grunau et al. (2022) that tested the role of unwanted celibacy in predicting attitudes towards sexual aggression in a non-WEIRD population where there is no community like incel identified yet and with a different cultural context. This research hypothesizes that unwanted celibacy will predict attitudes towards sexual aggression, in which the more an individual feels frustrated with their failure to fulfill a strong desire to have a romantic or sexual partner, the greater the tendency to have attitudes that normalize and condone sexual aggression.

METHODS

This research uses a quantitative, non-experimental approach that uses cross-sectional data. This research aims to test the role of unwanted celibacy in predicting attitudes toward sexual aggression. The research population was men with sample criteria: (1) men; (2) minimum age is 18 years or above; (3) currently single; and (4) heterosexual. This research uses a purposive sampling technique to acquire the data.

Data collection is done using a survey method in the form of a self-report questionnaire. The questionnaire uses a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 for all instruments, with Google Forms as the data-gathering medium. The questionnaire and criteria were spread through social media such as Instagram and Twitter to attract possible respondents who are interested and fit the criteria to take part in the survey.

This research uses two instruments. The unwanted celibacy scale is used to measure unwanted celibacy, which is defined as a condition where an individual who has high desires to have a romantic or sexual relationship tends to fail to acquire that relationship, which is followed by a feeling of frustration and hopelessness (Grunau et al., 2022). Acceptance of the modern myth of sexual aggression (AMMSA) scale is used to measure attitudes towards sexual aggression, which are defined as an attitude that condones a descriptive or prescriptive belief about sexual aggression, where the attitudes aim to deny, underestimate, or justify sexually aggressive behaviors that men perpetrate to women (Gerger et al., 2007).

The unwanted celibacy scale has a total of 12 items. It consists of two dimensions, which are (1) failure in fulfilling a desire to have an interpersonal relationship, which contains eight items, and (2) expression of grievance, which contains four items with a reliability score of Cronbach's alpha .825, which is deemed of good reliability. Examples of the unwanted celibacy scale items are "I have tried

having sexual/romantic relationships, but I have been rejected too many times” and “I have never been lucky enough to enjoy the pleasure of being desired by the opposite sex.”

The AMMSA scale has a total of 30 items and is unidimensional, with a reliability score of Cronbach’s alpha of .895, which is deemed good reliability. Examples of the AMMSA scale items are “When a man urges his female partner to have sex, this cannot be called rape” and “Women like to play coy. This does not mean that they do not want sex.” Both instruments have been adapted to Bahasa Indonesia (Beaton et al., 2000).

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 26 software. The method used for data analysis was the Pearson correlation test to test the correlation between variables and simple linear regression to test the research hypothesis.

RESULTS

Descriptive Characteristics

A total of 289 data was gathered for this research. Data cleaning was conducted to ensure the sanity of the data and the suitability of the respondents’ criteria. The results of the data cleaning were that one data was excluded from the analysis because the respondent did not agree to fill out the survey; one data was excluded because the respondent was female; 14 data were excluded because the respondent was married or in a relationship; 47 data were excluded because the respondents did not provide a reason for their single status; and four data were excluded because the respondents did not provide clarity about their sexual orientation. The data cleaning process produced 223 data that could be analyzed.

A total of 223 men aged 18–40 ($M = 24.74$; $SD = 4.14$) participated in this research. Of those, 219 participants (98.2%) were single (never married), and four participants (1.8%) were divorced. From 223 participants, 71 (31.7%) reported that they are single because they are having difficulties attracting a romantic or sexual partner, 18 (8.1%) reported being single because they just ended a romantic relationship and have not found a new partner, and 134 (60.1%) reported being single because they chose to be.

Normality Test

A normality test was conducted to determine if the data followed a normal distribution. The one-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used because the research sample was above 30. Data is said to be normal if the p-value is above .05. The normality test results showed that unwanted celibacy has a p-value of .055 and attitude towards sexual aggression has a p-value of .200. Thus, it is concluded that the data was normally distributed.

Correlation Test

A correlation test using the Pearson correlation coefficient was used to determine correlations between variables. The results are in Table 1.

Table 1.
Correlation Test Results with Pearson Correlation Coefficient

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
(1) Attitudes towards sexual aggression	81.57	17.31	-	-	-	-	-
(2) Unwanted celibacy	35.74	10.37	.143 ^a	-	-	-	-
(3) Age	24.74	4.14	-.005	-.081	-	-	-
(4) Education	2.17	1.01	-.029	-.105	.399 ^c	-	-
(5) Reason of singlehood	.39	.49	.089	.421 ^c	-.029	.029	-

^a $p < .05$. ^b $p < .01$ (2-tailed). ^c $p < .001$ (2-tailed).

Note. Educational level: vocational/high school = 1; 1–3 year diploma = 2; 4 year diploma/bachelor’s degree = 3, master’s degree = 4. Reason of singlehood: voluntary = 0; involuntary = 1.

Based on the correlation test result, it was found that unwanted celibacy was positively correlated with attitudes toward sexual aggression. In other words, the higher an individual experiences unwanted celibacy, the higher their tendency to have attitudes that normalize sexual aggression, or vice versa. Unwanted celibacy was also positively correlated with the reason for singlehood (voluntary vs. Involuntary). It means that the higher the experience of unwanted celibacy, the higher the individual perceives their singlehood as involuntary. Other demographic variables (age and education) were not correlated with unwanted celibacy. No demographic variables were considered confounding variables that could disrupt the independent variable’s effect on the dependent variable because no correlation was found between demographic variables and the dependent variable.

Hypothesis Test

A simple linear regression test is done to test whether unwanted celibacy could predict attitudes toward sexual aggression. The result indeed found a significant regression where unwanted celibacy significantly predicted attitudes towards sexual aggression ($F[1,221] = 4.61, p < .05$) with R squared value at .02. This means unwanted celibacy explained 2% of the variance in attitudes towards sexual aggression. Given the result, we conclude that the research hypothesis was accepted.

An independent sample t-test was done to see the difference in unwanted celibacy in voluntary vs. involuntary single men. Respondents who answered “because I’m having difficulty having a romantic (or sexual) partner” are categorized as involuntary singlehood, and respondents who answered “because I chose not to have a pre-marriage relationship (romantic or sexual)” and “because my last romantic (or sexual) relationship was recently over and I haven’t found a partner since” are categorized as voluntary singlehood.

Results from the independent sample t-test show that there is a significant difference in unwanted celibacy between the voluntary singlehood group ($M = 32.25, SD = 8.68$) and the involuntary singlehood group ($M = 41.18, SD = 10.49$), where respondents in the involuntary singlehood group have higher unwanted celibacy than respondents who are in the voluntary singlehood group ($t[221] = -6.90, p < .001$). This means respondents having difficulties acquiring a partner felt more frustrated and hopeless with their singlehood than respondents who consciously chose to be single.

DISCUSSION

With the rising cases of sexual violence, particularly in the cyber territory, followed by a rising concern towards the emergence of an online community that’s known for their shared grievance of finding a romantic partner and their attitudes that normalize sexual aggression, it is suspected that frustration that rises from unwantedness and difficulty in finding a romantic partner could also happen in

men in the general population without having to identify to the community. Moreover, the frustration is suspected to contribute to making people have an attitude that condones sexual aggression.

This research aims to replicate research conducted by Grunau et al. (2022) to see whether unwanted celibacy could predict attitudes towards sexual aggression in Indonesia, seeing that Indonesian culture is tight and puts pressure on marriage (Hofstede, 2001; Uz, 2015), and does not have any identified community that's similar to an incel online community that serves as a channel to validate attitudes that normalize sexual aggression.

This research was done on single men in Indonesia and successfully replicated research by Grunau et al. (2022), where it was also found that, indeed, unwanted celibacy significantly predicted attitudes toward sexual aggression. In other words, men who tend to feel frustrated about their failure in fulfilling the desire to have a romantic or sexual partner tend to have attitudes that normalize sexual aggression. This could happen because involuntary celibate men tend to have difficulties acquiring a partner even though they have widened their network and do not set high standards regarding partner selection (Sparks et al., 2024). This difficulty is later translated into frustration, which could lead to a more aggressive attitude towards women (Andrighetto et al., 2019).

This research result also gives ample support for the frustration-aggression hypothesis that suggests aggression is a product of frustration (Dollard et al., 1939) in the context of interpersonal relationships or sexual behavior. Unwanted celibacy is seen as a form of frustration with oneself due to not being able to have a romantic or sexual partner. This frustration then leads men to have a more normalizing attitude towards sexual aggression.

It was also found that men who are having difficulties in finding a partner have a higher experience of unwanted celibacy compared to men who are willingly single. In other words, involuntary single men experienced more significant frustration and hopelessness due to their failure to acquire a partner rather than voluntary single men. This finding further supports Grunau's assumption that unwanted celibacy is indeed identified higher in involuntary single men without the need to identify with a specific group, which helps to validate the frustration they are feeling.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that unwanted celibacy can only explain a 2% variance in attitudes toward sexual aggression. In other words, unwanted celibacy has a feeble predictive power. However, it does not imply that a predictor variable does not contribute to predicting the dependent variable (Götz et al., 2022). A psychological phenomenon is complex and cannot be solely explained by a single variable. Instead, many predictor variables have their unique contribution. For example, it is found that not all incel community members have a sexual aggression supportive attitude (Speckhard et al., 2021). However, when looking at this phenomenon through the 3N (need, network, and narrative) perspective, it is found that need, network, and narrative have an essential role in shaping violent behaviors (Ellenberg et al., 2024; Kruglanski et al., 2023). This goes to show that other variables could also contribute to mobilizing the frustration due to being unwanted into attitudes that normalize sexual aggression as a way to channel their frustration. Unwanted celibacy is then seen as a new contributing variable that offers a different perspective in learning about attitudes that normalize sexual aggression in men in general.

CONCLUSION

Unwanted celibacy was found to predict attitudes towards sexual aggression significantly, and men who perceived their singlehood as a condition due to their difficulties in finding a partner experienced higher frustration and hopelessness rather than men who voluntarily stayed single. This research is without limitations. Even though the finding is significant, the model has a weak predictive power, indicating that unwanted celibacy is not a good predictor for attitudes toward sexual aggression.

sion. Future research needs to see other possible mediators or moderators in the relationship between unwanted celibacy and attitudes toward sexual aggression. Even with the limitation, this research is the first to ever test the unwanted celibacy concept in a non-WEIRD population where there is no misogynistic community (online or offline) like the incel community found active in Indonesia. This research is hoped to be a consideration when seeing how the experience of singlehood, which tends to be seen as an adverse condition, can contribute to a higher attitude that normalizes sexual aggression.

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