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## Unveiling the social-psychological underpinnings of women's self-silencing to sexist personal experiences. The role of ambivalent sexism and gender role-related attitudes

**Abstract:** The present study examined the social-psychological underpinnings of self-silencing to sexist personal experiences, focusing on the role of hostile sexism, benevolent sexism, gender role-related attitudes, and personal beliefs in a just world. An online cross-sectional study was administered between September 2 and December 30, 2021. The sample comprised two hundred twenty-one respondents ( $M_{age} = 38.22$ ,  $SD = 2.75$ ). A between-subject, correlational design was utilized to test the current study's hypotheses. This study's results provide evidence that gender role attitudes may shape the lens through which sexist experiences are interpreted, providing a framework for how women navigate such situations. Accordingly, a strategic goal in achieving gender equality is the need to deconstruct gender stereotypes and the established gendered socio-cultural expectations.

**Keywords:** *Ambivalent sexism, personal belief in a just world, gender role-related attitudes, self-silencing to sexism, system legitimizing beliefs*

Individuals may favor various tactics to confront sexism in their lives. Self-silencing may serve as a tactic for avoiding interpersonal conflict, enabling individuals to navigate their familial or social connections without discord. Nonetheless, self-silencing constitutes a significant obstacle impeding social progress regarding gender inequity. As regards everyday discrimination, research findings show that women experience one to two sexist incidents per week (Swim et al., 2010). These incidents may involve traditional gender stereotypes (i.e., expectations about women's appropriate behaviors) and unwanted sexual attention (e.g., unwanted sexual touching).

Moreover, violence against women persists in intimate relationships (Swim et al., 2010). Consequently, many women may be accustomed to sexism since it is assimilated into everyday routines and socio-cultural norms. In addition, women may internalize it as normal behavior or do not consider it harmful (Benokraitis & Feagin, 1995; Swim et al., 2005). West and Zimmerman

(1987) argue that gender per se and, hence, all gender differences are socially established. In particular, "doing gender means creating differences between girls and boys and women and men, differences that are not natural, essential, or biological" (West and Zimmerman, 1987, p.24). In this way, both women and men internalize gender stereotypes and gender-specific behavior. Hence, social and cultural constructions of gender shape how individuals perceive their gender (Fields et al., 2010).

In particular, socio-cultural norms and expectations concerning women maintain gender-restrictive patterns about how women are supposed to behave, act, and withhold, in many cases, their feelings and thoughts (Hurst & Beesley, 2012). Accordingly, socio-cultural messages related to gender profoundly influence self-silencing (Jack, 1991; Jack & Dill, 1992). Hence, self-silencing beliefs might stem from gender-related beliefs about appropriate behavior for women. In turn, women may internalize self-silencing beliefs, portraying their inclination to restrict their thoughts and feelings (Swim et al., 2007).



Gender differentiation and stereotyped considerations of gender may also be reinforced by sexism. The ambivalent sexism framework reports that sexism influences self-perceptions through gender stereotypes (Smith-Castro et al., 2019). Interestingly, belonging to the target group of gender discrimination does not necessarily prevent women from endorsing the current gender hegemony (see Jost & Banaji, 1994). Thus, many women might agree with sexist beliefs (Salvaggio et al., 2009). Taking into account that sexism is essentially ambivalent (i.e., is comprised of both positive and negative characteristics; Glick & Fiske, 1996) and that many women endorse sexist considerations towards other women, the current study examines the relationship between women's sexist attitudes and their self-silencing tendency to sexism.

### SELF-SILENCING

Self-silencing, the internal constraint of self-expression, is the outcome of a gendered society (Jack, 1991). Gender implies a set of social norms and cultural expectations from women and men. Thus women's self-silencing could be characteristic of the societal expectations attributed to the female gender (Cramer & Thoms, 2003; Ussher & Perz, 2010). Gender-specific origins of self-silencing propose that women's self-silencing is culturally enforced since any counteraction to sexism could be negatively considered and have undesirable consequences on women's lives (Hurst & Beesly, 2013; London et al., 2012). Research findings concerning gendered messages and societal expectations for women to silence themselves support the influence of societal gender roles on the prevalence of women's engagement in self-silencing (Tolman et al., 2006). In addition, research data show that women's self-silencing is significantly predicted by the level of women's commitment to traditional gender roles (Swim et al., 2010; Witte & Sherman, 2002). Moreover, self-silencing is significantly associated with cultural and relational contexts rather than specific personality characteristics (Hurst & Beesley, 2013). Hence, within a gendered social context, self-silencing becomes apparent as an expression of the social roles and expectations appointed to women (Harper & Welsh, 2007).

### AMBIVALENT SEXISM

One way to evaluate the acceptance of gender stereotypes is by assessing sexist attitudes. Specifically, attitudes are considered an interpretative lens that affects people's evaluations of others (Salvaggio et al., 2009). Swim & Hyers (2009) define sexism as "individuals attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, and organizational, institutional, and cultural practices that either reflect negative assessments of individuals based upon their gender or support unequal status of women and men". Due to societal changes from explicit to subtle sexism, scholars have developed new models to reflect contemporary forms of sexism, such as the concepts of Modern

Sexism/Neosexism (Swim et al., 1995) and the concept of Ambivalent Sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Ambivalent sexism is based on traditional woman stereotypes that support masculine dominance (Etchezahar & Ungaretti, 2014). In particular, ambivalent sexism theory suggests that hostile and benevolent sexism are deep-rooted in culture and, therefore, pervades all levels of society (Fields et al., 2010).

Ambivalent sexism theory implies that contemporary sexism involves complex beliefs about women (Glick & Fiske, 1996). This means it comprises both positive (benevolent) and negative (hostile) components. In particular, benevolent sexism (BS) involves seemingly positive attitudes toward women based on "likable" stereotypes of women (Fiske et al., 1999), while hostile sexism (HS) reports antipathy toward women based on the traditional antipathy model of prejudice (Allport, 1979; Glick & Fiske, 1996). In this way, benevolent and hostile sexism act as an interlocking set of beliefs that reflect a system of rewards (benevolent sexism) and sanctions (hostile sexism) that give women a significant motive to accept, rather than challenge, power differences between the sexes (Glick & Fiske, 2001, p.117). Thus, women who behave according to sexist prescriptions that maintain traditional gender role behaviors are "rewarded" (e.g., with affection).

In contrast, those who challenge men's power (e.g., feminists) are penalized with hostility (Glick et al., 1997). In addition, benevolent sexism is negatively linked with values of self-direction, such as freedom and independence, undermining the aspirations of women toward autonomy. Altogether, benevolent sexist ideology increases women's forbearance for acts of discrimination. Hence, benevolent sexism is more likely to promote gender inequality, whereas hostile sexism is more likely to provoke women's rebellion (Feather, 2004).

On the other hand, both women and men may benefit from being sexist or from subtle sexism and hence not consider various attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors as prejudicial (see Watkins et al., 2006). Interestingly, past studies show that a substantial share of women reinforce subtle sexism (Benokraitis & Feagin, 1995). Benevolent sexism provides women a way of coming to terms with a sexist system individually without having to challenge the structure of the system as a whole. Therefore, several women may not consider benevolence as discriminatory to their own lives (Glick & Fiske, 2001). In addition, since social conformity is appreciated, whereas deviation is repressed, some women may want to avoid rejection by not confronting sexism. Specifically, several women were found to comply with sexist humor to be accepted by a male group (Benokraitis & Fegan, 1995). Research findings also show that complaining about discrimination might lead to negative consequences (e.g., being a whiner), inhibiting women's will to confront sexism (Swim et al., 2003). Thus, since people generally desire to appear nice and get potential rewards from dominant group members, self-stereotyping may increase women's self-esteem in several cases, reinforcing gender stereotypes (Swim et al., 2003).

Grounded on the notion that sexism does not concern the behaviors and practices of men alone (Fordham, 2019), this study examines the impact of women's endorsement of sexist ideologies on women's self-silencing tendency. According to Akarsu and Sakalli (2021), benevolent and hostile sexism are associated with women's self-silencing tendency; however, they also argue that there is still little research emphasizing these relationships.

## GENDER ROLES

Based on a constructivist view, we acknowledge gender not as a person's characteristic but as something an individual does in a social context, which also varies according to the situation (Bohan, 2002). As Lorber (2001) suggests, gender inequality is grounded in dividing people into two distinct categories valued differently. In particular, social discourse concerning explicit as well as implicit information from the media, education, religion, family, and other social institutions affects how attitudes and expectations are established and enacted as people "do" gender. Thus, everyday social interactions among people both replicate gender differences and promote gender inequalities (Kimmel, 2000). Hence, dichotomous beliefs about gender profoundly influence everyday behaviors, activities, and power imbalances (Baber & Tucker, 2006).

Considering gender as a configuration of social norms and practices that develop through social relationships influenced by power differences provides a perspective of how gender differences are generated and maintained (Bohan, 2002). Despite extensive critique throughout the decades, the enduring presence of biological determinism and essentialism indicates a continued necessity for opposition to these antiquated ideologies (Greene, 2020). Therefore, women's gender role-related attitudes are useful in examining self-silencing tendencies. To summarize, the social constructivist approach challenges the culturally embedded notion of naturalness of the gender concept, moving beyond a system comprised of only two categories (Baber & Tucker, 2006). Therefore, the social constructivist perspective underlines the need for an instrument that assesses gender equality (i.e., role egalitarian) and binary categorized roles (Naz et al., 2021). This study uses the Gender-Linked Subscale of the Social Roles Questionnaire (SRQ) to examine women's gender role-related attitudes. Given that people who endorse a gender-egalitarian approach to social roles tend to support nontraditional roles for women (Baber & Tucker, 2006), a link between women's support of gendered role-related attitudes and higher self-silencing tendency was assumed. Thus, women's efforts to meet prescribed gendered socio-cultural roles and expectations are assumed to be associated with self-silencing. In addition, acknowledging that gender-role-related attitudes may shape the lens through which sexist experiences are interpreted, providing a framework for how individuals navigate such situations, we also examined whether gender-role-related attitudes mediate the relationship between ambivalent sexism and self-silencing.

## PERSONAL BELIEF IN A JUST WORLD (PBJW)

The just-world theory posits that people need -or rather want - to believe that they live in a world where everyone harvests what they sow (Hafer & Sutton, 2016). Believing otherwise might entail the notion that the world is an unpredictable place and that they may be treated unfairly (Dalbert, 2009; Furnham, 2003). People usually avoid such beliefs as they may raise feelings of discomfort (van den Bos & Lind, 2002). Accordingly, belief in a just world reduces anxiety and uncertainty and rationalizes inaction against social injustice, as the most disadvantaged have the most to legitimize and explain (Jost & Hynady, 2002).

While general belief in a just world (GBJW) may influence societal attitudes toward justice (e.g., Dalbert, 1999, 2009; Schindler & Reinhard, 2015), it may be less predictive of personal coping mechanisms in situations of perceived injustice, such as self-silencing in response to sexism. Personal belief in a just world (PBJW) reflects how individuals believe that justice operates in their lives rather than in the broader world or society. This makes PBJW more directly applicable to understanding how individuals respond to personal experiences of sexism, which inherently involve subjective and individual perceptions. PBJW may also be associated with the internalization of gender role-related attitudes, as individuals who believe they personally experience justice might rationalize adherence to traditional gender norms as part of a "just" personal life. In light of the above, the present study introduces the socio-psychological construct of personal belief in a just world in examining women's self-silencing tendency. Specifically, this study examines the association between women's personal beliefs in a just world and their self-silencing tendency. In addition, based on the notion that personal beliefs in a just world often help individuals cope with injustice by minimizing its emotional impact, this study also explores whether personal beliefs in a just world mediate the relationship between ambivalent sexism and self-silencing.

## THE CURRENT STUDY

Taking into account that sexism is still culturally ingrained and the contemporary decrease in the social acceptance of overt sexism (Fields et al., 2010), this study examines the relationship between sexist attitudes, gender role-related attitudes, personal belief in a just world and women's self-silencing to sexist experiences. Grounded also on the notion that sexism does not concern behaviors and practices of men alone (Fordham, 2019), this study uses a female-only sample. Glick & Fiske (1996) argue that even though benevolent sexism may often be experienced as emotionally positive by women, both hostile and benevolent sexism suggest a stereotyped conceptualization of women (Fields et al., 2010).

This study also explored the relationship between ambivalent sexism, personal belief in a just world, and women's self-silencing to sexist experiences. In particular,

this study examines whether women's sexism and wish to preserve a sense of fairness in their personal lives relate to their self-silencing when encountering sexist incidents. Along the same line, we also examined whether women's sexism and a stereotyped conceptualization of women (i.e., gender role-related attitudes) relate to their self-silencing tendency in sexist experiences.

Based on the above reasoning, this study examined the following hypotheses: (H1) Ambivalent sexism (i.e., benevolent and hostile sexism), gender role-related attitudes, and personal belief in a just world will be associated with women's self-silencing to sexist experiences. (H2): Gender role-related attitudes and personal belief in a just world will mediate the relationship between women's benevolent sexism and their self-silencing tendency. (H3): Gender role-related attitudes and personal belief in a just world will mediate the relationship between women's hostile sexism and their self-silencing tendency.

To the researcher's knowledge, there is limited research associating women's sexist attitudes, personal beliefs in a just world, and gender role-related attitudes with their self-silencing tendency. Moreover, additional research is needed to understand women's self-silencing tendency toward everyday sexism (Akarsu & Sakalli, 2021). Greece is a religious nation located in Southeastern Europe. Greeks regard Christianity as an integral component of their national identity. Seventy-five percent of Greeks assert that Orthodox identity is at least somewhat significant to authentic Greek identity; a substantial proportion of Central and Eastern Europeans similarly associate religion with nationality (median of 57%), although a lesser percentage of Western Europeans do so (median of 34%). Religion holds greater significance in the personal lives of Greeks compared to many Western Europeans. Ninety-two percent of Greeks believe in God, with 59% expressing full certainty, but only a median of 15% of Western Europeans assert conviction regarding God's existence. Fifty-five percent of Greek adults assert that religion holds significant importance in their life, a figure that is more than double that of Ireland, Italy, and Spain, and five times that of France, Germany, and the UK. Greece is more religious than the majority of Central and Eastern European nations according to these criteria (Pew Research Center, 2023). Despite Greece being classified as a WEIRD country (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic; Henrich et al., 2010), Greek society is inadequately represented in research studies, especially in the field of psychology (Muthukrishna et al., 2020).

## METHOD

### Participants and procedure

An online cross-sectional study was administered between September 2 and December 30, 2021. Respondents participated by employing incidental, non-probability sampling. The URL of the research project was publicized in social media groups and accounts (e.g., LinkedIn) and on the researcher's university networks and forums. In addition, respondents were asked to forward the

project's link to other possible participants. The online questionnaire was completely anonymous. Respondents indicated their agreement to participate by clicking the consent checkbox. Inclusion criteria were a) to identify as a woman, b) to agree to participate, and c) to be at least 18 years old. The process lasted approximately 10-15 minutes. The Institutional Review Board's approval was secured as the study followed the 1964 Helsinki Declaration of the World Medical Association and did not entail physical intervention or information on specific health conditions. We set the sample size required to identify low to moderate mediation (i.e.,  $\alpha = .25$ ,  $b = .25$ , in which  $v = .25 * .25 = .06$ ) using WebPower (Zhang & Yuan, 2018). With 80% test power, we required a sample of 220 participants. The total sample comprised two hundred and twenty-one respondents. The samples' mean age was 38.22 ( $SD = 2.75$ ). All the participants were Greek.

### Measures

Respondents completed a demographics form (gender, age, ethnic group) and the following questionnaires.

### Explanatory variables

Translation accuracy for the Greek social context was verified through back-translation for all measures (Brinslin, 1980).

### *Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI).*

Ambivalent sexism was assessed with the two subscales of the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI), namely hostile sexism (eleven belief statements concerning hostile sexism; e.g., "Women are easily offended" and "A wife should not be more successful in her career than her husband") and benevolent sexism (eleven statements relating to benevolent sexism; e.g., "Every man ought to have a woman he adores" and "Every woman should have a man to help her when she is in trouble"; Glick & Fiske, 1996) using a 6-point Likert scale. Responses ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree. Possible total scores ranged from 11 to 66 for each subscale. Total scale scores were estimated by calculating the average across items. Higher scores indicated higher levels of sexism. Past research findings have documented the psychometric properties of the ASI (see Glick & Fiske, 2001a; Rudman & Glick, 2008; Viki et al., 2004). In the current study, the alpha for the hostile sexism subscale was .89, 95% CI [.86, .91], and for the benevolent sexism was .83, 95% CI [.78, .85].

### *The Gender-Linked Factor*

The Gender-Linked Subscale of the Social Roles Questionnaire (SRQ) provides a way to assess participants' views concerning the association of specific roles with a particular gender. This component of the SRQ comprises eight items (assessing culturally specific binary roles for women and men; sample item: "Mothers should work only if necessary; Baber & Tucker, 2006). All items were rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale (i.e., 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). Items were averaged in one index.

A higher score indicates more traditionality (i.e., respondents' positive attitudes toward gendered social roles). In the current study, the alpha for the 8-item gender-linked subscale was .81, 95% CI [.77,.85]

### ***Personal belief in a just world (PBJM)***

Using Dalbert's scale (1999), PBJM was measured with seven items ( $\alpha = .93$  [.92, .95]; e.g., "I believe that by and large, I deserve what happens to me"). Participants responded to all items on a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating a stronger PBJM.

### **Outcome measure**

#### ***Self-silencing to Sexist Personal Experiences***

The first factor of the Self-Silencing to Sexism scale (i.e., self-silencing to sexist personal experiences; Akarsu and Sakalli, 2021) was used, and it included five items. According to Akarsu and Sakalli (2021), the Self-Silencing to Sexism questionnaire comprises of three factors: a) Self-silencing to sexist personal experiences, b) Self-silencing to observed sexist communications, and c) Self-silencing to discrimination against women. Self-silencing to sexist personal experiences concerns individual's silencing when they perceive gender discrimination and self-restrictions. The scale used was that by Akarsu and Sakalli (2021). Translation accuracy for the Greek social context was verified through back-translation (e.g., 'I do not allow people to restrict me because of my gender'; Brinslin, 1980). Participants completed 5 items on a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". Items were averaged in one index. Increased scores signified a self-silencing tendency to sexism. In the current study, the alpha for the 5-item self-silencing to sexist personal experiences was .67, 95% CI [.60,.73].

### **Design and Statistical Analysis**

A between-subject, correlational design was utilized. For the Gender-Linked subscale, the PBJM, and the Self-silencing to Sexist Personal Experiences instruments, a single value was computed based on the average of the items. IBM SPSS statistics version 19 was utilized for the analysis of the data. Prior to the main statistical analyses, the parametric assumptions were examined (normality,

outliers). Shapiro-Wilk test was utilized to determine the normality of the data distribution. Data were non-normally distributed. The Mahalanobis distance reported no outliers. Bivariate correlation (Kendall's Tau correlation analysis) was used to examine the relationships between variables of interest. Next, we examined our hypotheses using multiple regression analysis and a bootstrapping analysis for parallel mediation models (Hayes, 2013; Model 4). Bootstrapping is proposed as a non-parametric approach to estimating indirect effects that do not assume a normal distribution (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). In addition, it bypasses power concerns in samples less than 200 (Hoyle & Kenny, 1999). Alpha level was set at 0.05.

## **RESULTS**

### **Descriptive results**

To examine the associations between the variables of the research, Kendall's Tau correlation analysis was performed between all variables of interest. The results are presented in Table 1. Self-silencing to sexist personal experiences was positively correlated with hostile sexism ( $\tau_r = .103$ ,  $p < .05$ ), benevolent sexism ( $\tau_r = .112$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and gender role-related attitudes (the Gender-Linked subscale;  $\tau_r = .205$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and negatively associated with personal beliefs in a just world ( $\tau_r = -.126$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Hostile sexism was positively related to benevolent sexism ( $\tau_r = .512$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and gender role-related attitudes ( $\tau_r = .506$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In addition, hostile sexism was negatively correlated with personal beliefs in a just world ( $\tau_r = -.161$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Also, benevolent sexism ( $\tau_r = .516$ ,  $p < .01$ ) was positively correlated with gender role-related attitudes.

### ***The Association between Hostile Sexism, Benevolent Sexism, Gender Role-related Attitudes, Personal Beliefs in a Just World, and Self-Silencing to Sexist Personal Experiences***

We defined a regression model in which hostile sexism, benevolent sexism, gender role-related attitudes, and personal beliefs in a just world were specified as predictors, while the criterion variable was the self-silencing to sexist personal experiences subscale. Accordingly, linear multiple regression was performed. The predictors were significant in predicting self-silencing to

**Table1.** Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Study Variables

| Variables | Mean | SD  | 1       | 2      | 3       | 4      | 5 |
|-----------|------|-----|---------|--------|---------|--------|---|
| 1. HS     | 2.15 | .04 | -       |        |         |        |   |
| 2. BS     | 2.63 | .06 | .512**  | -      |         |        |   |
| 3. PBJW   | 2.80 | .06 | -.161** | -.071  | -       |        |   |
| 4. GLS    | 1.89 | .05 | .506**  | .516** | -.076   | -      |   |
| 5. SSSPE  | 3.94 | .07 | .103*   | .112*  | -.126** | .205** | - |

**Note:** HS = Hostile Sexism, BS= Benevolent Sexism, PBJW = Personal Belief in a Just World Questionnaire, GLS = Gender-linked subscale, SSSPE = Self-silencing to Sexist Personal Experiences.

\*\* $p < .01$ .

sexist personal experiences,  $F(4, 216) = 6.737, p < .001, R = .333, R^2 = .111$ . In the model, gender role-related attitudes emerged as the only predictor. Notably, the bivariate correlations revealed that hostile sexism, benevolent sexism, and personal beliefs in a just world were associated with self-silencing to sexist personal experiences; however, its standardized  $\beta$  coefficients were not significant (see Table 2).

### Mediation Analysis

We examined two parallel mediation models, where hostile sexism and benevolent sexism relate to self-silencing to sexist personal experiences through gender role-related attitudes and personal beliefs in a just world. The PROCESS macro assessed the models (Hayes, 2018, model 4). Two indirect effects are involved in each model. The first indirect effect assessed whether personal beliefs in a just world mediated the relationship between hostile sexism and self-silencing to sexist personal experiences and was insignificant (indirect effect = .019,  $bootSE = .014$ ,  $bootCI [-.001, .053]$ ). The second indirect effect assessed whether gender role-related attitudes mediated the relationship between hostile sexism and self-silencing to sexist personal experiences and was significant (indirect effect = .175,  $bootSE = .050$ ,  $bootCI [.077, .275]$ ; Figure 1). Parallel mediation analysis results indicated that hostile

sexism is indirectly associated with self-silencing to sexist personal experiences through its relationship with gender role-related attitudes. Figure 1 shows that higher hostile sexism was related to higher endorsement of gender role-related attitudes, and higher gender role-related attitudes were subsequently associated with more self-silencing to sexist personal experiences. In contrast, personal belief in a just world indirect effect was not different from zero (Figure 1 shows the impact related to these pathways). Moreover, the direct effect of hostile sexism on self-silencing to sexist personal experiences in the presence of the mediators was found insignificant ( $b = -.063, p = .342$ ). Hence, gender role-related attitudes fully mediate the relationship between hostile sexism and self-silencing to sexist personal experiences.

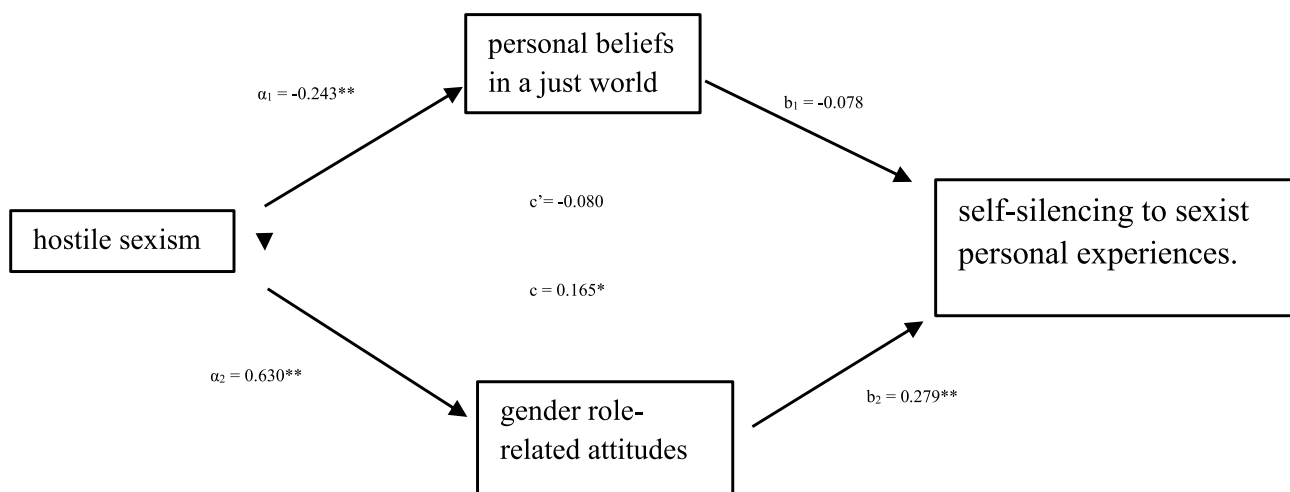
In the next model, the first indirect effect assessed whether personal beliefs in a just world mediated the relationship between benevolent sexism and self-silencing to sexist personal experiences and was not significant (indirect effect = .009,  $bootSE = .009$ ,  $bootCI [-.004, .033]$ ). The second indirect effect assessed whether gender role-related attitudes mediated between benevolent sexism and self-silencing to sexist personal experiences and was significant (indirect effect = .207,  $bootSE = .059$ ,  $bootCI [.093, .328]$ ; Figure 2). Thus, the results indicated that benevolent sexism is indirectly associated with self-

**Table 2.** Standardized and unstandardized regression coefficients for study variables predicting Self-silencing to Sexist Personal Experiences ( $n = 221$ )

| Predictors | B     | SE B | $\beta$ | Sig. | 95%CI       | VIF  |
|------------|-------|------|---------|------|-------------|------|
| HS         | -.047 | .073 | -.059   | .525 | -.191, .098 | 2.08 |
| BS         | -.048 | .082 | -.057   | .558 | -.210, .114 | 2.32 |
| PBJW       | -.076 | .048 | -.105   | .112 | -.171, .018 | 1.05 |
| GLS        | .300  | .077 | .372**  | .000 | .149, .452  | 2.20 |

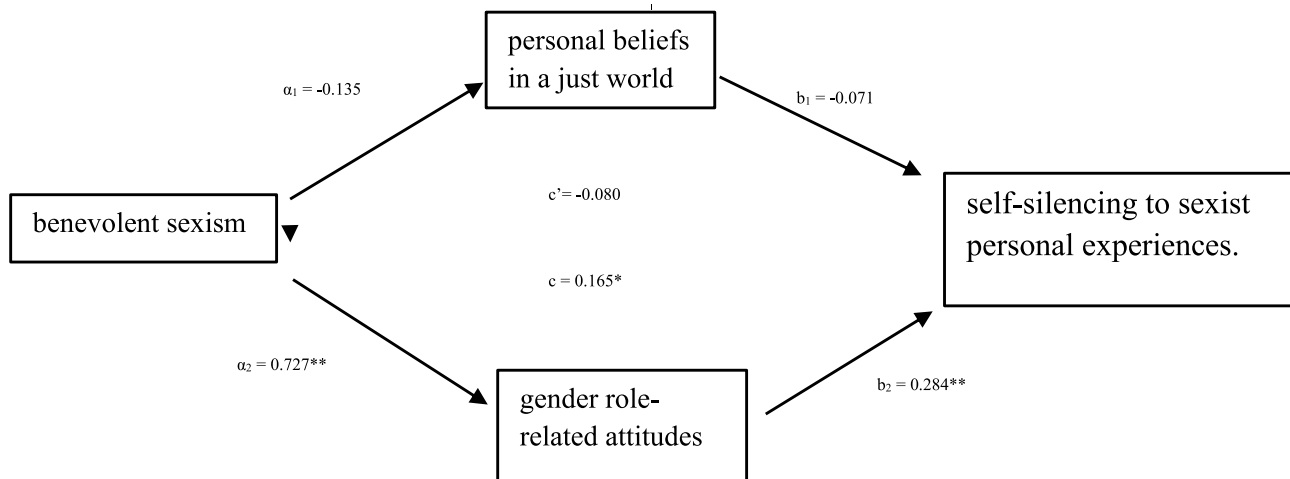
**Note:** HS = Hostile Sexism, BS= Benevolent Sexism, PBJW = Personal Belief in a Just World Questionnaire, GLS = Gender-linked subscale.

95% bias-corrected intervals are reported. Confidence intervals and standard errors are based on 1000 bootstrapped samples.



**Figure 1.** Indirect effects of personal beliefs in a just world and gender role-related attitudes on self-silencing to sexist personal experiences.

\*\* $p < .001$ , \* $p < .05$



**Figure 2.** Indirect effects of personal beliefs in a just world and gender role-related attitudes on self-silencing to sexist personal experiences.

\*\* $p < .001$ , \* $p < .05$

silencing to sexist personal experiences through its relationship with gender role-related attitudes. Figure 2 shows that benevolent sexism was related to higher endorsement of gender role-related attitudes, and higher gender role-related attitudes were subsequently associated with more self-silencing to sexist personal experiences (Figure 2 shows the impact related to these pathways). Moreover, the direct association of benevolent sexism on self-silencing to sexist personal experiences in the presence of the mediators was found insignificant ( $b = -.082$ ,  $p = .358$ ). Hence, gender role-related attitudes fully mediate the relationship between benevolent sexism and self-silencing to sexist personal experiences.

## DISCUSSION

The present study examined the social-psychological underpinnings of self-silencing to sexist personal experiences, focusing on the role of hostile sexism, benevolent sexism, gender role-related attitudes, and personal beliefs in a just world. The results of this study provide evidence (H1) that among the factors mentioned above, only positive attitudes toward gendered social roles are associated with higher levels of self-silencing to sexist personal experiences.

Social role theory (Eagly, 1987) posits that societal expectations about gender roles emerge from historically prescribed labor and social power divisions. These roles shape individuals' beliefs about appropriate behaviors for men and women. Accordingly, women with traditional gender role attitudes are more likely to conform to societal norms that dictate compliance, passivity, and silence as appropriate for women. When confronted with sexist experiences, women with more traditional gender role attitudes may internalize the idea that speaking out against sexism contradicts these socially prescribed roles. This could create cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), resolved through self-silencing—choosing not to express

discomfort or opposition to maintain alignment with traditional expectations.

Furthermore, normative social influence (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955) shows how societal norms pressure individuals to conform. Traditional gender role attitudes align with cultural norms that discourage assertive behavior in women. This creates a fear of social sanctions or backlash (e.g., being labeled as aggressive or unladylike) if they voice opposition to sexist behavior, leading to self-silencing.

The finding that gender role attitudes, rather than hostile or benevolent sexism or PBJW, predict self-silencing underscores the pervasive influence of gender role socialization. While sexism and just-world beliefs may create a backdrop for interpreting sexist experiences, it is the deeply ingrained attitudes about gender roles that shape whether (in our case) women feel empowered to challenge or compelled to silence themselves in the face of sexism. Women's self-silencing is implied as a socially-expected characteristic stereotypically attributed to the female gender (see also Cramer & Thoms, 2003; Ussher & Perz, 2010). In this way, gender injustice is maintained and made even more complex to challenge. Individuals are more likely to challenge social inequalities when they perceive them as illegitimate (Wright, 2010). Future studies could emphasize examining whether the internalization of ambivalent sexism affects gender-role-related attitudes and, in turn, self-perceptions and motivations.

The current study also tested the hypothesis that personal belief in a just world and gender role-related attitudes would mediate the association between ambivalent sexism (hostile and benevolent sexism) and self-silencing to sexist personal experiences. This study's results partially supported our hypotheses (H2 & H3). In particular, this study examined whether the association between hostile and benevolent sexism with self-silencing to sexist personal experiences would be mediated by a personal belief in a just world. This study's results did not support the hypotheses mentioned above. This could be

explained by the fact that personal belief in a just world often helps individuals cope with injustice by minimizing its emotional impact. While this might reduce distress, it does not necessarily drive behavior like self-silencing.

Moreover, this study's results support our hypotheses concerning the mediating role of gender-role-related attitudes as this factor mediates the relationship between ambivalent sexism and the self-silencing tendency to sexist personal experiences. Specifically, this study's results show that women's justification of gender differences fully mediated the relationship between hostile sexism and the self-silencing tendency to sexism. Past research findings have also demonstrated that self-silencing in women is significantly predicted by the level of women's adherence to traditional gender norms (Swim et al., 2010; Witte & Sherman, 2002). Thus, the stereotypic representations of women offered by hostile sexism are associated with the justification of gender differences, resulting in an association with a self-silencing tendency to sexism (i.e., increasing the self-silencing tendency). Hence, this study's results provide support for the relationship between hostile sexism and the self-silencing tendency toward sexism through women's endorsement of gender differences. Finally, this study's results demonstrate that the endorsement of gender differences fully mediated the relationship between benevolent sexism and the self-silencing tendency to sexism in line with previous research data showing that women tend to consent to beliefs that justify existing gender inequality to make the best of an adverse situation (Napier et al., 2010; Wakslak et al., 2007).

The finding that personal belief in a just world (PBJW) was negatively correlated with self-silencing to sexist personal experiences underscores the complexity of personal belief in a just world as a predictor of behavioral responses to injustice. It suggests that, in contexts of personal sexism, personal belief in a just world may act as a protective factor that reduces self-silencing by encouraging individuals to uphold fairness in their personal interactions. Women with strong PBJW may be less likely to conform to traditional gender role expectations, which often discourage assertiveness or resistance in response to sexist incidents. Their belief in fairness could empower them to reject these restrictive norms, reducing self-silencing behavior. In addition, PBJW emphasizes personal control and agency in achieving fairness. This perspective aligns with assertive responses to sexism, where women may feel empowered to challenge injustices to restore balance in their personal lives. Consequently, they are less inclined to engage in self-silencing behaviors that conflict with this empowerment.

To sum up, when encountering sexism, women with traditional gender role attitudes may perceive self-silencing as a way to maintain their expected role, avoid conflict, and preserve social harmony. Those with egalitarian gender role attitudes, however, may be more likely to recognize sexism as a violation of their autonomy and respond assertively rather than self-silencing.

This theoretical perspective underscores the centrality of gender role attitudes in shaping responses to sexism,

offering valuable insights for both research and practical interventions. In particular, efforts to reduce self-silencing in response to sexism should address the internalization of traditional gender roles, promoting egalitarian attitudes that empower women to challenge sexist experiences. Educational programs should challenge traditional gender norms, fostering a culture where assertive responses to sexism are normalized.

In all, the process of putting interventions into effect to combat gender inequalities and gender injustice may be interrupted by individuals considering these differences as legitimate. Hence, the focus of gender equality policies should emphasize combating the endorsement of sexist beliefs as well as adherence to traditional gender roles. Taking into account that stereotypes influence judgments and behavior (see Wheeler & Peety, 2001), actively encouraging individuals to question stereotypic representations of women offered by hostile and benevolent sexism and the societal justification of gender norms might raise awareness concerning gender injustice. Thus, a strategic goal in achieving gender equality is the need to deconstruct gender stereotypes and the established gendered socio-cultural expectations. Information about the negative consequences of ambivalent sexism and how it promotes gender inequality (Becker & Wright, 2011) both for women and men might contribute to overcoming gender dichotomies that lie at the foundations of stereotypic representations of women and men (Etchezahar & Ungaretti, 2014).

## LIMITATIONS

This study is not without limitations. There may be a sampling bias as participants more interested in sexism, in general, may have taken part. In addition, internet research limits the participation of some social groups. This use of respondents limits the general applicability of the results. Also, the present study does not permit causal explanations of the relationships among the variables tested.

## CONCLUSIONS

Amidst changing attitudes, the current study echoes prior work suggesting self-silencing to be driven by attempts to meet cultural imperatives prescribing what it means to be a "good woman" (Jack, 1991, p.85). This seems most significant in the light of research data suggesting that girls and women experience countless instances of sexism wherein they act in ways that are inconsistent with their own or their group's best interests. Interestingly, scarce research surrounds the sexism that occurs within groups of women. This study's results provide evidence that gender role attitudes may shape the lens through which sexist experiences are interpreted, providing a framework for how women navigate such situations. Traditional attitudes perpetuate self-silencing as a means of conforming to societal expectations. Hostile and benevolent sexism reinforce traditional attitudes, increasing the likelihood of self-silencing when women confront sexist behaviors.

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