When Is Sexism Seen as Sexist? Perceptions of Hostile and Benevolent Sexism by Perpetrator Gender

By

Corinne Montesclaros

Primary supervisor: Dr Erik Landhuis

Secondary supervisor: Dr Ying Wang

Abstract

Although society has made some progression toward gender equality over the years, the mechanisms of sexism have evolved alongside it. While overt forms of gender discrimination have become increasingly less socially acceptable, sexist ideology remains a pervasive undercurrent to society and has developed into subtler and more complex forms. In the face of gender-based discrimination, a key part of disrupting harmful cultural narratives is learning how to recognize discriminatory behavior and articulate it. To do this, we must first tackle the influences that create blind spots in sexism perception. The present study examined factors that may influence sexism detection, in particular, perpetrator gender and sexism type. Using a within-subjects design, 220 participants in New Zealand aged 16 and older were anonymously surveyed and asked to respond to a series of written scenarios that depicted hostile sexism, benevolent sexism, and a neutral condition. Additionally, an analysis of individual differences in ideological beliefs were examined as a predictor of sexism recognition. Results revealed a significant main effect of sexism type, where hostile sexism was more readily recognized than benevolent sexism. A significant interaction between sexism type and perpetrator gender was also observed, with hostile interactions rated more highly when enacted by a man than a woman. Individual differences in ideology were also found to be significant predictors of sexism recognition. The study underscores the need to move beyond a sole focus on overt forms of sexism and address the detection gap that allows subtle forms of discrimination to maintain gender inequality.

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Ethics Approval

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When Is Sexism Seen as Sexist? Perceptions of Hostile and Benevolent Sexism by Perpetrator Gender

Over the years, there has been substantial social and legal advances toward gender equality and yet sexism remains a pervasive issue that has evolved with the times (Barreto & Doyle, 2023; Glick & Fiske, 2001). Contemporary research indicates that sexism has evolved into more subtle, complex, and socially acceptable forms which reinforce traditional gender roles and power imbalances (Barreto & Doyle, 2023; Glick & Fiske, 2001). Sexist attitudes are not solely personal biases, but inextricably exist as part of wider, structural gender inequality that is maintained across societies (Brandt, 2011). These evolved forms of modern sexism often make detection and calling out more difficult and allows inequality to persist in spheres that outwardly reject authoritarian values (Napier et al., 2010). As society progresses toward gender equality, the evolving shape of sexism calls for evolving psychological research that helps us better understand how sexism operates, how it is perceived, and when it is recognized as prejudice.

A foundational part of understanding the pervasiveness of sexism is the ambivalent sexism theory, which identifies sexism as having two complementary mechanisms; an overtly negative form categorized as hostile sexism; and a paternalistic, seemingly positive form categorized as benevolent sexism. Recognizing and categorizing sexism is a key aspect of changing behavior, regardless of whether it is through social influence, self-surveillance, or legal policies (Baron, 1991). Benevolent sexism is often mistaken for flattery, which prevents it from being recognized as prejudice. Consequently, this creates a "detection gap" that makes discrimination tolerated, accepted, or normalized (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005). At times this detection gap is also exacerbated by perpetrator identity as the psychological expectation of what a "sexist" looks like is often limited to hostile male perpetrators (Baron et al., 1991).

When sexism is enacted by women or is framed in a paternalistic way, it is often overlooked or less likely interpreted as discriminatory.

The recognition of sexism is further complicated by differences in belief systems like social dominance orientation where individuals endorse and express preference for group-based hierarchy, and the belief in sexism shift which postulates that modern day discrimination has shifted from women to men (Pratto et al., 1994; Schmitt et al., 2003; Zehnter et al., 2021; Kehn & Ruthig, 2013; Ruthig et al., 2017). These belief systems work as psychological lenses that can justify gender inequality and create a defensive barrier to acknowledging female victimization, particularly when societal progress for women is interpreted as losses for men (Ruthig et al., 2017, Kehn & Ruthig, 2013). This process is particularly relevant to contemporary contexts like online discussions of masculinity where content is centered on framing gender relations as threats to male status (Renström & Bäck, 2024). Understanding the function of these individual differences within the New Zealand context is key to uncovering how sexism operates and is maintained even within a largely egalitarian-based society.

The present study seeks to examine the complexities of sexism recognition by making perpetrator identity and sexism severity its primary focus. Furthermore, the endorsement of ambivalent sexist beliefs, social dominance, and belief in sexism shift will be examined in its ability to predict prejudice detection across different social scenarios. By using a New Zealand sample, this study seeks to contribute to the growing literature around the barriers of recognizing discrimination.

The traditional framework of gender prejudice has previously been understood as exclusively hostile and has been insufficient in understanding the complexities of gender relations (Glick et al. 2000). The development of ambivalent sexism theory was a key theoretical advance in psychological literature that categorized sexism into two distinct forms

of prejudice against women: hostile sexism and benevolent sexism (Glick & Fiske 2001). Hostile sexism is an overtly negative view of women that characterizes them as seeking to control men through sexuality or by threatening or manipulating male power (Glick & Fiske 2001; Dardenne et al., 2007). Conversely, benevolent sexism is cloaked as positive, with paternalistic and protective beliefs that center in on the nurturing and pure characterization of women and positioning them as in need of male care (Glick & Fiske, 2001). These components are complementary sides of the same oppressive coin that justify and maintain patriarchy (Glick & Fiske, 2001; Glick & Fiske, 1996). The insidious nature of benevolent sexism lies in its subjectively positive and flattering mask of warmth which hides its ideological function (Barretto & Doyle, 2023; Barretto & Ellemers, 2005; Hopkins-Doyle et al. 2019). Despite its complimentary nature, benevolent sexism functions to reward conformity to traditional gender roles and legitimize women's subordinate social status (Glick & Fiske, 2001; Glick et al. 2000; Glick & Fiske, 1996). Hostile sexism forms an ambivalent alliance with benevolent sexism by punishing non-traditional women such as feminists or women in masculine-typed roles through a targeted display of prejudice (Glick & Fiske, 2001; Masser & Abrams 2004). In an assessment of 19 nations, research found that benevolent sexism and hostile sexism were positively correlated and able to predict national levels of gender inequality (Glick & Fiske, 2001; Glick & Fiske, 1996; Glick et al., 2004).

The socialization of sexist beliefs

The development and endorsement of sexism can be traced back to experiences in early childhood and strengthened throughout a lifetime (Gutierrez et al., 2020; Hammond & Cimpian, 2021). Research with children aged 3-11 years old found that the foundations of benevolent sexism were reflected in who they believed should be heroes coming to the rescue and who they believed should receive special care (Gutierrez et al., 2020). Although both boys

and girls chose their own gender to be the recipient of care, boys at all ages generally believed that heroes ought to be boys. In a similar study with 5–11-year-old children, stronger agreement with ambivalent sexism was found in younger children, with the exception of unvaried benevolent attitudes in boys across ages (Hammond & Cimpian, 2021). Additionally, children in US regions that are more gender-egalitarian reported lower agreement with benevolent gender attitudes (Hammond & Cimpian, 2021).

During adolescence, familial influence can play a part in the transmission and socialization of benevolent sexist beliefs. A study by Montañés et al. (2012) explored the connection between a mothers' benevolent sexist beliefs and the impacts on their daughters and found it to significantly predict their daughters' endorsement of benevolent sexism. Higher benevolent sexism was further associated with stronger endorsement of traditional goals and lowered academic aspirations to get a degree (Montañés et al., 2012). These results indicate how benevolent sexism can be intergenerationally transmitted, particularly in mother-daughter dynamics.

The transition into adolescence also comes with shifts in ambivalent sexist attitudes, although gender differences remain salient. A longitudinal study with Spanish adolescents aged 12-14 found that boys and girls scored similarly in benevolent sexism and decreased as they got older (Ferragut et al., 2017). This suggests that sexist attitudes soften in intensity with age, echoed by another study finding age predicting fewer sexist beliefs (Ferragut et al., 2017; De Lemus et al., 2010). Despite this, it was found that at each annual assessment boys scored significantly higher than girls on hostile sexism (Ferragut et al., 2017). Adolescent experiences in romantic relationships also play a significant role in predicting sexist beliefs. A study with Spanish adolescents aged 12-19 found that heterosexual relationship experience predicted increased benevolent sexism in boys, and hostile sexism in girls (De Lemus et al., 2010). In boys aged 12-14, greater romantic experience was associated with higher hostile sexism. This

suggests that as boys age, their hostile sexism may develop into benevolent sexism in the pursuit of romance, and girls may also participate by expressing hostility to members of their own group that are deemed unattractive (De Lemus et al., 2010). The study suggests that although heterosexual romance brings two genders together, the underlying status hierarchies are cemented rather than removed (De Lemus et al., 2010; Shnabel et al., 2016).

In contrast, a longitudinal study on ambivalent sexism across the lifespan found that men's benevolent sexism followed a positive linear trajectory, meaning that benevolent sexism increased as they got older (Hammond et al., 2017). Results also found a U-shaped trajectory for hostile sexism in both women and men over the years, indicating that attitudes formed can change and shift across the course of adulthood (Hammond et al., 2017). This study echoes some of the findings in De Lemus et al. (2010) as the importance of achieving relationship goals was linked to a tendency for hostile sexism to decrease over time, particularly in young men (Hammond et al., 2017). Differences between research indicates that more investigation on adolescent relationships and how they influence ambivalent attitudes is required to uncover what influences young men to lean hostile or benign in development.

The relational rewards of benevolent sexism

The pervasiveness of benevolent sexism is strengthened by the societal benefits awarded to those who appeal to hegemonic norms (Glick & Fiske, 2001; Glick et al., 2000). In relatively egalitarian nations, the utilization of complementary (both hostile and benevolent) justifications over solely hostile justifications creates a strong palliative effect that causes individuals to report higher subjective well-being (Napier et al., 2010; Jost & Kay, 2005; Spaccatini & Roccato, 2021). Expanding on this, individually held benevolent sexist beliefs are suggested to act as psychological buffers to sexism exposure in environments like the workplace, thereby reducing anxiety, depression, and distress (Spaccatini & Roccato, 2021).

Research indicates that benevolent sexism may offer personal benefits to women who endorse it despite perpetuating inequality at a structural level (Connelly & Heesacker, 2012). For women, endorsing benevolent sexism can boost life satisfaction because it creates an illusion that gender roles are equitable (Connelly & Heesacker, 2012; Hammond & Sibley, 2011). By rationalizing men's greater power and access to resources as a way to protect women, the existing gender hierarchy is justified as a fair and beneficial arrangement (Hammond & Sibley, 2011). This endorsement is also suggested to be a self-protective trade-off in hostile sexist environments, where accepting the 'protection' of benevolent sexism may provide a sense of security in the face of a society that would otherwise treat them harshly (Fischer, 2006; Connelly & Heesacker, 2012). Romantic contexts make the benefits of benevolent sexism most visible as it positions men's protection and adoration as a reward to be earned, making benevolent sexism in men highly desirable to some women (Cross & Overall, 2018; Gul & Kupfer, 2019). This is evidenced by studies that report women rating men with more benevolent sexist attitudes as more likeable than those without, perceiving their sentiments as a considerate and appropriate courtship style despite imposing restrictions on women's behavior (Bohner et al., 2010; Viki et al., 2003). This manifests in social settings as the "white knight" effect, where men intervene without request to protect women in perceived distress (Leone et al., 2020). However, the potential likelihood of intervention was only seen to be increased in men with high benevolent sexism who thought that social status accomplishment was key to male identity. This indicates that the motivations for potential intervention are structured on the endorsement of social hierarchy, and conditional to women they deem deserving of protection (Leone et al., 2020).

Benevolent sexism is functional for women because the concept of protection resonates with socialized understandings about gender-based threat and violence (Phelan et al., 2010; Brownhalls et al., 2021). It is suggested that violence shapes women's masculinity preferences,

with lowered preferences for facial masculinity in those with higher violence exposure (Borras-Guevara et al., 2017). Thus, it is argued that men romantically benefit from the actions of violent men as it steers women's relationship priorities towards safety assurances (Borras-Guevara et al., 2017). Women in heterosexual romantic contexts are promised to be the recipients of security, protection, commitment and investment from potential partners who endorse benevolent sexist beliefs, despite also perceiving benevolent sexism as patronizing and undermining (Gul & Kupfer, 2019). This makes it difficult to resist the personal benefits, especially in individuals with heightened needs for relationship security or higher in attachment anxiety (Cross & Overall, 2018; Fisher & Hammond, 2019). For women, relationship security in benevolent sexist conditions still come at additional costs, with research revealing that benevolent sexism fosters caring behaviors that promote dependency-orientated support from men (Hammond & Overall, 2017; Shnabel et al., 2016). Furthermore, this romantic dynamic makes women more vulnerable to dissatisfaction when faced with relationship issues (Hammond & Overall, 2017). Conversely, men in this relationship dynamic are seen to obtain enhanced influence and satisfaction (Hammond & Overall, 2017). In comparison to gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals, heterosexual individuals scored significantly higher in hostile and benevolent sexism, suggesting heterosexual intimacy to be a primary driver of ambivalent ideology (Cowie et al., 2019). Thus, gendered romantic dynamics help explain how gender inequalities are widely accepted and sustained in the private sphere.

The cost of sexism

A substantial body of research on benevolent sexism highlights how benevolent sexism can be just as detrimental to women as hostile sexism. Research has identified benevolent sexism as a persistent presence throughout the course of a lifespan (Salomon et al. 2020; Hammond et al., 2017). The well-intentioned warmth that shrouds benevolent sexist

experiences makes it difficult to pinpoint and challenge the negative consequences that occur (Bosson et al., 2010; Hopkins-Doyle et al., 2019).

The cost of being the target of benevolent sexism can be observed in its psychological and cognitive impact. Research indicates that exposure to benevolent sexist comments can undermine women's cognitive performance more than hostile sexism because it can trigger intrusive, detrimental thoughts about competency that interfere with performance (Dardenne et al., 2007; Dumont et al., 2010). The ambiguity of benevolent sexism creates a deviation from the effects of hostile sexism because hostile sexism is more easily recognizable as prejudice, thus facilitating external attribution (Dardenne et al., 2007). Although hostile-sexist experiences are perceived as more distressing, frequent experiences with benevolent sexism have been associated with decreased self-esteem, increased self-doubt, and overall lower psychological well-being (Oswald et al., 2019; Barreto & Ellemers, 2005a). Gender stereotypes often characterize women in contradictory terms; they can be seen as overemotional and incompetent yet simultaneously seen as gentle and warm (Barreto et al., 2010). Navigating these stereotypes can create social pressure to maintain harmony and may lead women to adopt these stereotypes. Barreto et al. (2010) found that when women were expected to collaborate with someone who expresses benevolent sexism, they were more likely to assimilate to these views rather than reject them. Consequently, these women began to de-emphasize their task-related skills and instead defined themselves through their relational abilities (Barreto et al., 2010). The cognitive consequences of sexist ideology can also extend to how women are perceived by others. In a study investigating neural responses to sexualized targets, men who were higher in hostile sexism had reduced neural activation in regions related to mentalizing and a diminished attribution of agency when viewing sexualized women (Cikara et al., 2011). This suggests that the endorsement of sexist ideologies is associated with the cognitive dehumanization of women, reflecting a potential reduction in the cognitive effort needed to

view women as complex people (Cikara et al., 2011). Interestingly, this correlation was not observed for benevolent sexism, underscoring how the two ideological components of ambivalent sexism are linked to distinct cognitive processes (Cikara et al., 2011). The effects of benevolent sexism can also be observed at a physiological level, with benevolently sexist feedback from an evaluator resulting in cardiovascular threat responses during a subsequent task (Lamarche et al., 2020). Furthermore, ambivalent sexism has been observed to foster anxiety in the workplace, particularly among women who do not hold system-justifying beliefs (Pacilli et al., 2019). System-justifying beliefs refer to the rationalization of existing social, political, and economic arrangements, like gender hierarchies, as fair, inevitable and legitimate (Pacilli et al., 2019; Jost & Kay, 2005). For women who do not hold these beliefs, it is suggested that because of their awareness of gender discrimination in the workplace, exposure to ambivalent sexism may cause them to feel as though their personal efforts are unable to improve their situation (Pacilli et al., 2019). Furthermore, system justification was not observed to affect the level of generated anxiety in benevolent sexist conditions (Pacilli et al., 2019). This suggests that the palliative effect of benevolent sexism may obscure its negative impact regardless of personal beliefs on social inequality.

The cost of benevolent sexism can manifest as academic and professional consequences. Benevolent sexism can sustain a double bind for women in professional settings where they are penalized for conforming to or resisting traditional gender expectations (Becker et al., 2011). For example, if a woman accepts help on a difficult task from a male colleague, she may be perceived as warm but incompetent. However, refusing such help may mean she is perceived as cold, uncooperative, and less suited to various roles (Becker et al., 2011; Good & Rudman, 2010). The need to navigate dependency-related stereotypes may discourage women from seeking assistance, as doing so risks reinforcing perceptions of incompetence. Conversely, accepting help can intensify negative self-evaluations rather than mitigate them

(Wakefield et al., 2012). This pattern may function as a barrier in fields where help-seeking is central to the role, such as teaching, counselling, and healthcare. In these contexts, women may be expected to help others (e.g. students or patients) as well as seek help from coworkers, potentially placing them in a double bind whereby doing so may result in negative evaluations from others (Wakefield et al., 2012).

Expanding on this, benevolent sexism creates shifting standards where women are evaluated against a lower, within-gender benchmark rather than the standard of expected success that is commonly applied to men (Cassidy & Krendl, 2019). Specifically, benevolent sexists may deem a high-achieving woman as especially competent when compared to other women, and yet the overall expectation is that men will be more successful (Cassidy & Krendl, 2019). This shifting standard allows benevolent sexists to outwardly praise competent women while internally evaluating them against a lower baseline of expectations than their male counterparts. Although women may be perceived as competent, the suitability for challenging leadership positions are ultimately awarded to men (Cassidy & Krendl, 2019).

The two-sided nature to ambivalent sexism creates distinct barriers that steer women away from breaking gender hierarchies. Hostile sexism acts as a direct deterrent, serving as the main driver of negative evaluations and lower employment recommendations for female candidates in masculine-typed roles (Hideg & Ferris, 2016). Simultaneously, benevolent sexism contributes to occupational gender segregation by promoting women exclusively to more “feminine” positions (Hideg & Ferris, 2016). While both men and women experience negative social consequences when performing well in gender-incongruent typed roles, there are differences observed in how these manifest (Heilman & Wallen, 2010). Successful men in female-typed roles are viewed as ineffectual and garner less respect than a woman in the same job, whereas successful women in male-typed roles faced increased interpersonal derogation and often disliked (Heilman & Wallen, 2010). This coincides with the double-edged sword

effect imposed on women who violate gender norms in a professional setting (Becker et al., 2011).

Benevolent sexism also functions to monitor and enforce traditional moral standards for women, particularly when it comes to their bodies and sexual autonomy. Research indicates that benevolent sexism is a unique predictor of negative attitudes toward women who violate traditional expectations of what is appropriate female conduct, like engaging in premarital sex (Sakalh-Uğurlu & Glick, 2003). Other factors such as older age, political conservativism, and sexual inexperience also predicted greater disapproval of premarital sex and stronger inclinations to marrying a virgin (Sakalh-Uğurlu & Glick, 2003). Building on this, sexist beliefs reinforce a sexual double standard, with research indicating that women with a higher number of sexual partners are judged more negatively than men with the same number, or even more, sexual partners (Zaikman & Marks, 2014).

The social regulation of women's bodies extends to maternal choices. The endorsement of ambivalent sexist ideologies across studies have been observed to illicit varied responses to breastfeeding women. Huang et al. (2020) found that benevolent sexism was positively correlated with opposition to breastfeeding in public by women, and hostile sexism was positively correlated with opposition by both men and women. Conversely, a study by Forbes et al. (2003) found that men who were higher in benevolent and hostile sexism expressed more favorable impressions of breastfeeding women, with this effect observed to be stronger for benevolent sexism. Taken together, these findings suggest that benevolent sexism works to endorse maternal behaviors due to its alignment with traditional gender roles but simultaneously regulates the conditions in which these acts are deemed acceptable. Parental endorsement of benevolent sexism is also linked to body dissatisfaction, with stronger endorsement by fathers being positively correlated to their daughter's weight and fitness-related body esteem (Oswald et al., 2012). Mothers and daughters also showed links between

benevolent sexism and body dissatisfaction, with this relationship indicated as stronger for mothers than daughters (Forbes et al., 2005). Expanding on this, endorsement of Western beauty ideals can be linked to hostility toward women as well as sexist beliefs (Forbes et al., 2007). Importantly, ambivalent sexism disproportionately affects victims of sexual violence as it underpins assumptions that produce sexist reactions to assault and correlates with rape myth acceptance. (Russell & Trigg, 2004; Chapleau et al., 2007). Furthermore, higher benevolent sexism is a significant predictor of victim blaming in acquaintance-rape scenarios (Abrams et al., 2003). Taken together, these studies highlight the severity and range of sexist ideology on women's bodily autonomy and well-being.

Ultimately, benevolent sexism functions to maintain traditional gender norms and suffocate social movement. Endorsing benevolent sexism in women predicts negative attitudes toward other women who use their agency to challenge gender-based threats, except when agency is used to support traditional gender roles (Kahn et al., 2021). Research shows that benevolent sexist attitudes promote the acceptance of restrictive gender roles (Moya et al., 2007) and predicts the opposition of gender equality initiatives such as reproductive rights and workplace equity (Huang et al., 2016; Hideg & Ferris, 2016). While hostile sexism was found in a study by Becker and Wright (2011) to promote social change in women, exposure to benevolent sexism reduced their motivation to engage in collective action. Expanding on this, a study by Lemonaki et al. (2015) found that women's exposure to hostile sexist beliefs elicited complex emotional responses which also affected their readiness to compete socially with men. Exposure to hostile sexism increased levels of frustration and anger but also decreased their feelings of comfort and security. While their anger served to enhance their readiness to compete, the lack of comfort and security also quelled the readiness, with the net impact being lower readiness to compete (Lemonaki et al., 2015). This highlights how hostile sexism can simultaneously motivate and demotivate collective action. Extending past individual-level

effects, a study by Connor and Fiske (2019) showed that hostile sexism cultivates attitudinal barriers at the societal level, particularly for politically conservative individuals. Exposure to hostile sexism increased the acceptance of gender income inequality and encouraged explanations that attribute women's personal choices as the reasoning for pay-gap inequality rather than societal unfairness (Connor and Fiske, 2019). Taken together, these studies highlight how ambivalent sexism create cognitive and emotional barriers that maintain and protect the status quo.

The detection gap and the impact of perpetrator identity

The maintenance of sexist norms is not only achieved by its endorsement, but through how it is perceived and interpreted. Studies have indicated that observers are substantially less likely to associate benevolent sexism as prejudice in comparison to hostile sexism because it is distinctly different to what sexism usually "looks like" (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005a; 2005b). The mental prototype of a "sexist" becomes a barrier to recognition as the association of benevolent characteristics is not consciously linked to social inequality (Chisango & Javangwe, 2012). Although benevolent sexism has been reported to have been experienced more often by women than hostile sexism, it feels inoffensive and tolerable because it is often interpreted as affectionate, polite, or kind (Hopkins-Doyle et al., 2019). Positively correlated with misogyny, research indicates that benevolent sexism acts as the carrot to the stick that underpins systems of societal control (Hopkins-Doyle et al., 2019). The implication of this perpetual bias is the failure to recognize sexism, and therefore a decreased likelihood of resistance.

Research indicates that one factor that may shape the perception of sexism is the gender of the perpetrator. A foundational study investigating the detection gap of perpetrator gender found participants eight times more likely to perceive an action as sexist when the perpetrator was male compared to female and judged the level of male-driven sexism as more extreme (Baron et al., 1991). Furthermore, this detection gap extends to relationships that are intimate

or professional, with sexist comments made by boyfriends being perceived as less sexist than if they are made by a boss or a stranger (Reimer et al., 2014). Similarly, women are more accepting of protective, paternalistic restrictions when enacted by a husband over a coworker (Moya et al., 2007).

Social factors like the conscious awareness of one's gender (also known as gender identity salience) has also been found to influence sexism detection. When primed with a stronger awareness of gender, women were found to be more likely to recognize and confront sexist encounters (Wang & Dovidio, 2017). In contexts where gender identity salience is minimal, sexism detection may be more likely overlooked.

Overall, despite extensive research on ambivalent sexism, there are still gaps in the understanding of sexism recognition in everyday contexts. The current literature has established that the warm nature of benevolent sexism makes recognizing it as prejudice difficult, creating a "detection gap" (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005a; Hopkins-Doyle et al., 2019). In addition to this, research suggests that perpetrator gender influences perceptions of discrimination (Baron et al., 1991). The interaction between these two factors requires further investigation. Furthermore, although ideological beliefs like social dominance orientation, belief in sexism shift, and ambivalent sexism have been associated with supporting gender-based hierarchy, their role in shaping sexism recognition also requires further exploration. The present study aims to address these gaps by investigating whether perpetrator gender and the type of sexism influence the recognition of sexism in a written scenario. The influence of individual ideological beliefs on this recognition will also be explored.

Research questions

RQ1: How do sexism type (hostile, benevolent, or neutral) and perpetrator gender (male or female) influence (a) the recognition of sexism and (b) perceived sexism intensity in vignette-based scenarios?

RQ2: To what extent do individual differences in social dominance orientation, belief in sexism shift, and ambivalent sexism predict the recognition of sexism in hostile, benevolent, and neutral vignettes?

Study hypothesis

H1: Participants will be more likely to recognize hostile sexism as sexist than benevolent sexism.

H2: Vignettes depicting a male perpetrator will be more likely to be recognized as sexist and will receive higher sexism-intensity ratings than vignettes depicting a female perpetrator.

H3: There will be an interaction between sexism type and perpetrator gender such that hostile sexism perpetrated by a male will be most readily recognized as sexist and rated as most sexist, whereas benevolent sexism perpetrated by a female will be least readily recognized as sexist and rated as least sexist.

H4: Higher levels of social dominance orientation, belief in sexism shift, and ambivalent sexism will be associated with a lower likelihood of recognizing hostile and benevolent sexist behaviors as sexist.

Methods

Study Design

This study employed a within-subjects design to investigate factors influencing the recognition of sexism. The study examined how the type of sexism (either benevolent or hostile) and the gender of the perpetrator influenced sexism recognition and the perceived severity of the sexism.

Sampling

Participants were recruited using a non-random, convenience sampling approach. Participants were recruited using flyers with a QR code to an online link posted around Auckland University of Technology and University of Auckland, as well as advertisements posted to Facebook and Instagram. Using online advertisements allowed participation to be accessible to individuals across New Zealand. All participation was voluntary.

Participants

Participation was open to anyone aged 16 and older. A total of 242 individuals participated in the study. From these responses, 22 were excluded from the analysis due to evidence of automated (bot) participation, with all entries shown to be entered within seconds of each other and showed very similar response patterns which were incongruent to the rest of the dataset. The final sample consisted of 220 participants whose data were retained for analysis. Of the 220 participants, 150 (68%) were female, 42 (19%) were male, 18 (8%) were

non-binary, and 10 (4%) preferred not to say/other.[1] The age range of participants was between 17 - 67 years old.

The majority of the participants identified as NZ European (n = 130; 59%). Of the remaining participants, 25 (11%) identified as multiple ethnicities like NZ European/Māori and NZ European/Asian. There were 44 (20%) participants who identified as Asian, and 7 (3%) participants who identified as Latin American. There were three participants who identified as Māori, four participants who identified as Pasifika, three participants who identified as Middle Eastern, one participant who identified as African, and three participants who identified as 'Other'.

Measures

Vignettes measuring the perception of sexism severity

The main dependent variable of this study was the participants perceived severity of sexism, measured using 12 vignettes depicting interpersonal interactions. To control for stimulus bias, the vignettes were divided into two sets. Each set contained the same six scenarios, with only the perpetrator gender counterbalanced across sets. Two of the six vignettes depicted hostile sexism, two depicted benevolent sexism, and two were neutral interactions. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two sets, and the presentation order of the vignettes was randomized. All conditions contained equal representation of male and female perpetrators. Below is an example of the vignette describing a benevolent sexist interaction with a male perpetrator:

> While unloading gear on a group camping trip, Irene begins to pick up one of the heavier backpacks. Daniel notices and quickly says, "Whoa, let me take that. It's not

[1] Due to the small number of participants who identified as non-binary, analyses that included gender as a variable did not include data from these participants.

right to make a woman do the heavy lifting!" He smiles warmly and adds, "You should be relaxing! We've got this." Irene hesitates, then steps back as Daniel and another friend handle the gear. (see Appendix A for all 12 vignettes).

After reading the vignette, participants were asked the question “Do you think this was sexist?” Participants used a four-point response scale from 1 (*not sexist*) to 4 (*very sexist*) to rate the intensity. To prepare the results for analysis, the scores were aggregated by condition. This resulted in six sexism scores for each participant: hostile female, hostile male, benevolent female, benevolent male, neutral female, neutral male.

Ambivalent Sexism Inventory

The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996) measures the degree to which a person endorses hostile and benevolent sexist ideologies. This scale consists of 22 items and are evenly split into two subscales, hostile sexism and benevolent sexism. Example items include “Women are too easily offended” (hostile sexism) and “Women should be cherished and protected by men” (benevolent sexism; see Appendix B). Items were scored on a 7-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree).* Of the 22 items, six are reverse coded, for example “People are often truly happy in life without being romantically involved with a member of the other sex.” Prior literature has shown a strong reliability and construct validity for the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory across diverse cultural contexts. Typically, internal consistency estimates exceed $\alpha = .80$ for both subscales (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Glick & Fiske, 2001). The present study found high internal reliability for hostile sexism ($\alpha = .91$), and good internal reliability for benevolent sexism ($\alpha = .82$).

Belief in Sexism Shift

The Belief in Sexism Shift scale (Zehnter et al., 2021) measures a modern form of sexism that is founded on the belief that the target of gender-based discrimination have shifted from women to men as a direct consequence of women's social and political advancement (Zehnter et al., 2021). This scale consists of 15 items such as "While women can use the "gender-card" to get ahead, men can't" and "If anything, men are more discriminated against than women these days" (see Appendix C). Items are scored on a 7-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Of the 15 items, three are reverse coded, for example "Men are not particularly discriminated against" (see Appendix C). Zehnter et al. (2021) demonstrated a high internal consistency ($\alpha = .96$) and a strong test-retest reliability ($r = .92$ over two weeks). Its validity is also supported by a one-dimensional factor structure and strong convergent validity with measures of modern and hostile sexism. It was reported to be less susceptible to desirability bias compared to traditional sexism measures. The present study found high internal reliability ($\alpha = .95$).

Social Dominance Orientation

The Social Dominance Orientation scale (Pratto et al., 1994; Schmitt et al., 2003) measures the degree to which a person prefers or endorses inequality and hierarchy between social groups (Pratto et al., 1994; Schmitt et al., 2003). This scale consists of 16 items such as "Some groups of people are simply inferior to other groups" and "Sometimes other groups must be kept in their place" (see Appendix D). Items are scored on a 7-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Of the 16 items, eight are reverse coded (e.g., "Group equality should be our ideal" and "We would have fewer problems if we treated people more equally"; see Appendix D). The Social Dominance Orientation scale has established strong internal and temporal reliability across multiple prior studies (Pratto et al., 1994; Schmitt et al., 2003). The

predictive validity is well supported, with higher Social Dominance Orientation scores correlating consistently with hierarchy-enhancing ideologies like meritocracy, sexism, and ethnic prejudice. This study found high internal reliability ($\alpha = .93$).

Procedure

Participants were able to access the anonymous online survey using a QR code on flyers posted around Auckland University of Technology campus, or through clicking on the link in the paid online advertisement posted to social media websites Facebook, Messenger, and Instagram. The online advertisements targeted participants 16 years and older throughout New Zealand. The survey was available to complete from August 5th, 2025, to August 31st, 2025. Data were collected using Qualtrics using an anonymous questionnaire.

Once participants opened the link, participants were able to read through the participant information sheet and confirm their age to continue. Participants were then asked to answer some demographics questions, asked to read and respond to vignettes, and then the rest of the survey questions. After participants completed the survey, they are asked if they would like to enter the draw to win 1 of 8 Prezzy Cards valued at $50 and $100. If they clicked yes, participants would be redirected to a separate survey on Qualtrics asking for their email. The use of a separate survey meant participant responses were kept anonymous and unlinked to their email.

Analysis

The aim of this study was to examine whether sexism recognition differs depending on vignette type (neutral, benevolent, hostile) and the gender of the perpetrator (female, male). A 3 (neutral, benevolent, hostile) x 2 (female, male) repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) was be used to examine the main effects of sexism severity and perpetrator gender.

Results

Descriptive statistics

Prior to conducting the primary analyses, a series of checks were conducted to ensure that the two vignette sets (version 1 and version 2) were comparable. These sets were the same scenarios, but with gender counterbalanced across the two sets. Results from a chi-square test of independence showed that the gender distribution was comparable across vignettes, with no significant differences observed (χ^2 (N = 219) = 0.59, p = .746).

Mean differences between the two randomised vignette sets were analysed using independent samples t-tests. Across the ideological measures (social dominance orientation, belief in sexism shift, ambivalent sexism inventory), there were no significant differences found by version (p > .05). The vignette recognition scores shown in Table 1 shows that half of the ratings did not show statistically significant differences by version, however, there were three instances showing significant differences. These conditions were hostile sexism with a male perpetrator, benevolent sexism with a male perpetrator, and benevolent sexism with a female perpetrator. Generally, with the exclusion of these three cases, the randomized assignment to vignette sets indicated comparable recognition scores across the sample.

Table 1

Independent Samples T-tests Comparing Recognition Scores by Vignette Version

Vignette condition	Perpetrator gender	*t*	*p*
Hostile sexism	Male	-2.68	.008**
	Female	1.32	.188
Benevolent sexism	Male	5.46	< .001***
	Female	2.35	.020*
Neutral	Male	-1.10	.271
	Female	-0.71	.477

Note. p < .05*, p < .01**, p < .001***.

To examine potential gender differences in hostile sexism scores, benevolent sexism scores, belief in sexism shift, and social dominance orientation, independent-samples *t*-tests were conducted. Male participants showed significantly higher levels of benevolent sexism, hostile sexism, and belief in sexism shift compared to female participants (see Table 2). There were no significant gender differences found in social dominance orientation scores.

Table 2

Means, Standard Deviations, and Gender Differences for Participant Ideological Beliefs

Variable	Male M (SD)	Female M (SD)	*t*	*p*
Hostile sexism	26.17 (13.46)	22.20 (9.86)	2.14	.034
Benevolent sexism	34.26 (9.29)	26.26 (9.72)	3.57	< .001
Belief in Sexism Shift	46.50 (22.12)	36.67 (17.70)	2.98	.003
SDO	33.61 (17.70)	29.73 (14.78)	1.42	.158

Note. SDO = Social Dominance Orientation

To examine the relationships between vignette sexism recognition scores, social dominance orientation, belief in sexism shift, hostile sexism, and benevolent sexism, Pearson correlations were conducted (see Table 3).

Table 3

Correlations Among Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Hostile sexism	-					
2. Benevolent sexism	.45***	-				
3. SDO	.66***	.54***	-			
4. Belief in sexism shift	.87***	.39***	.67***	-		
5. Neutral sexism ratings	.25***	.14*	.23***	.16*	-	
6. Benevolent sexism recognition	-.39***	-.33***	-.35***	-.40***	.04	-
7. Hostile sexism recognition	-.54***	-.23***	-.48***	-.48***	-.17*	.42***

Note. SDO = Social dominance orientation. Higher scores on recognition variables indicate greater identification of sexism in vignette scenarios. $p < .05$*, $p < .01$**, $p < .001$***.

Results show that the recognition of sexism in the vignettes was associated with social dominance orientation, belief in sexism shift, hostile sexism, and benevolent sexism. Higher endorsement of social dominance orientation, belief in sexism shift, hostile sexism, and benevolent sexism were all negatively correlated with the recognition of hostile and benevolent sexism in the vignettes. In contrast, the endorsement of these beliefs was positively associated with higher ratings of sexism for neutral vignettes. Benevolent and hostile sexism were positively correlated, showing that those who endorsed subtle, protective forms of sexism also tended to endorse more overtly negative views of women. Hostile sexism also showed

particularly strong associations with social dominance orientation and belief in sexism shift, indicating that endorsing negative ideas about women is closely tied to broader beliefs about group-based social hierarchy and perceived gender-based disadvantage. Similarly, benevolent sexism was also related to these variables, although the relationship was weaker than hostile sexism. This indicates that benevolent sexist beliefs also align with belief systems about social hierarchy and a gender-based disadvantage shift but may operate in less overt forms.

Assumption testing

Before testing the main hypotheses, the data was screened for violations in assumption testing. To test normality for each vignette rating variable, we examined the skewness and kurtosis and found the values to be within acceptable ranges (±2) for repeated-measures analysis. Mauchly's Test of Sphericity was conducted and showed that the assumption of sphericity was met for severity ($W = .976$, $\chi^2(2) = 5.36$, $p = .068$). However, for the severity x perpetrator gender interaction Mauchly's Test of Sphericity was violated ($W = .852$, $\chi^2(2) = 34.84$, $p < .001$). The Greenhouse-Geisser corrections are reported for the sexism type and perpetrator gender interaction.

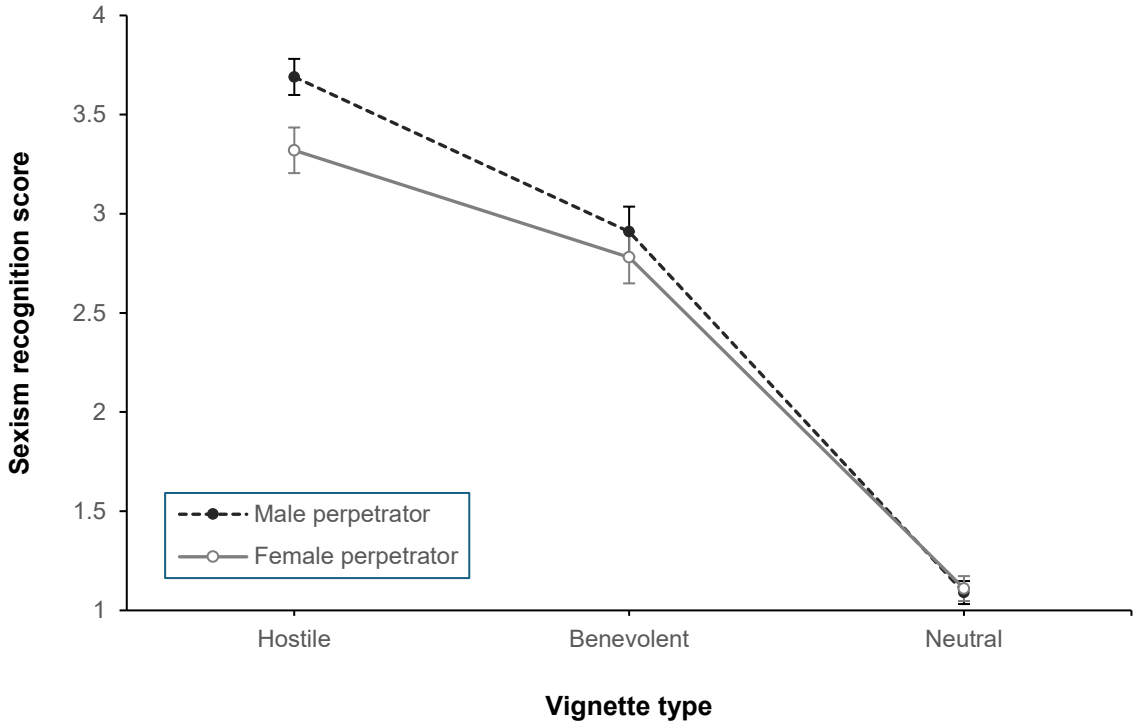
Main analysis

To explore the primary research question, a 3 (sexism type: benevolent, hostile, neutral) x 2 (perpetrator gender: female, male) repeated-measures ANOVA was conducted. Results revealed a significant main effect for sexism type (see Table 4). Participants consistently identified hostile sexist vignettes as the most sexist, followed by benevolent sexist vignettes, and neutral vignettes as least sexist. This was found regardless of perpetrator gender. Pairwise comparisons showed that the differences between the three different vignette types were statistically significant ($p < .001$ for all).

Although we found a significant main effect for perpetrator gender, this effect interacted with sexism type. As illustrated in Figure 1, the impact of gender varied significantly depending on the vignette type. Male perpetrators in the hostile sexist vignettes were considered significantly more sexist than female perpetrators in hostile sexist vignettes ($p < .001$). Similarly, this pattern existed in benevolent sexist vignettes, although the interaction was non-significant ($p = .059$). Gender had no meaningful impact on perceptions in neutral vignettes ($p = .618$). This suggests that the effects of gender differences were most pronounced in overtly hostile sexist scenarios and less impactful in subtle or ambiguous scenarios.

Figure 1

Interaction Between Vignette Type and Perpetrator Gender on Sexism Recognition Scores.



Note. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals around the mean. Recognition ratings range from 1 to 4, where higher scores indicate greater perceived sexism.

To determine if participant gender or vignette version influenced the results, the model was rerun as a repeated-measures ANCOVA. Results showed in Model 2 that after adjusting for participant gender and vignette version, both the main effect of sexism type and the interaction between sexism type and perpetrator gender remained significant.

In Model 3, the analysis was further adjusted by introducing ambivalent sexism (hostile sexism and benevolent sexism), social dominance orientation, and belief in sexism shift scores as covariates. Results showed that the main effect of sexism type remained highly significant. Additionally, the interaction between sexism type and perpetrator gender remained statistically significant.

Pairwise comparisons for the fully adjusted model showed that in both hostile ($p < .001$) and benevolent ($p = .037$) conditions, male perpetrators were perceived as significantly more sexist than female perpetrators. Overall, these findings suggest that although sexism perception is heavily grounded in socio-political ideologies, it is the perpetrator gender that remains as the significant influence in how sexism is perceived.

Table 4

Comparison of Repeated-Measures ANOVA and ANCOVA Models for Sexism Recognition

	F	*p*	η^2_p
Model 1			
Sexism type	991.55	< .001	.82
Perpetrator gender	24.28	< .001	.10
Sexism type x perpetrator gender	11.20	< .001	.05
Model 2			
Sexism type	133.65	< .001	.38
Perpetrator gender	1.25	.265	.01
Sexism type x perpetrator gender	4.00	.023	.02
Model 3			
Sexism type	162.98	< .001	.44
Perpetrator gender	0.33	.567	.00
Sexism type x perpetrator gender	4.16	.020	.02

Note. Degrees of freedom were adjusted using Greenhouse-Geisser corrections where the assumptions of sphericity were violated. Model 1 is unadjusted. Model 2 adjusts for participant gender (dummy coded with Female as the reference group) and vignette version. Model 3 includes all variables in Model 2, and further adjusts for hostile sexism, benevolent sexism, social dominance orientation, and belief in sexism shift.

Discussion

Original aims

The primary aim of this research was to investigate the "detection gap" in sexism recognition by examining how sexism type and perpetrator gender may influence the ability to detect discriminatory behavior. This study also investigated whether individual differences in ideological beliefs could predict participant ability to recognize sexism. Specifically, we examined the role of ambivalent sexism, belief in sexism shift, and social dominance orientation.

Interpretation of findings

The present study underscores the idea that the recognition of sexism is not a straightforward evaluation process, but rather one that is assessed through the identity of the perpetrator, the nature of the sexist behavior, and the ideological beliefs that are held by the observer. The results of this study support the hypothesis that hostile sexism would be more easily recognized than benevolent sexism. Participants consistently rated hostile sexist vignettes as more sexist than benevolent sexist vignettes, supporting previous findings that hostile sexism is more easily recognizable and more readily attributed to discrimination (Dardenne et al., 2007). This finding highlights the uniquely pernicious nature of benevolent sexism, reinforcing what previous studies have identified as a "detection gap" where individuals are less likely to view sexist behavior as discriminatory when the type of sexism is paternalistic and flattering (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005a; Glick & Fiske, 2001).

Rather than reflecting a simple difference in the perception of severity, the reduced recognition of sexism may indicate the mechanism by which benevolent sexism maintains gender inequality. When prejudice is framed as well intended and complimentary, it goes

unchallenged due to its inoffensive form. This pattern aligns with previous literature on the detection gap of sexism recognition which suggests that benevolent sexism is less likely to be recognized as prejudice due to its delivery being incongruent with typical understandings of sexism (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005a; 2005b; Chisango & Javangwe, 2012). Chisango and Javangwe (2012) discuss how there is a profound difficulty in recognizing the "ambivalent alliance" between hostile sexism and benevolent sexism even when they share ideological reasoning. Benevolent gestures (like offering to carry heavy items on a camping trip) coincide with hostile assumptions that women do not possess the same capabilities as men, yet these behaviors are not cognitively linked to prejudice.

One interpretation of this is that the subjective positivity and paternalistic intent of benevolent sexism mask the prejudice and therefore fails to trigger the mental prototype of a "sexist" (Chisango & Javangwe, 2012; Hopkins-Doyle et al., 2019). This framing may also serve as a palliative function, softening the harshness of gender inequality by presenting benevolent sexist attitudes as protection or a reward. Rather than relying on blunt hostility to enforce gender hierarchies, benevolent sexism may reinforce gender hierarchies by operating as a system that conditionally rewards women who comply to their gender role, awarding them with social and material protection. By emphasizing the presumption that women are fragile and need protection, benevolent sexism also provides the moral justification needed to participate in behavior that perpetuates restrictive gender norms.

The ambiguity of benevolent sexism further contributes to its persistence. Because benevolent sexism is framed as well-intentioned or prosocial, it may provide perpetrators with plausible deniability, allowing them to respond to accusations of sexism as misunderstandings or overreactions. This ambiguity may also discourage targets from confronting the behavior even when it is recognized. As a result, benevolent sexism may bypass sexism detection as well as resist social correction, enabling its ability to pervade common social interactions.

A key point of consideration in this research is the degree to which the label of "benevolent sexism" may contribute to the detection gap. This terminology is the established academic standard, but it is important to consider whether the use of "benevolent" inadvertently contributes to the minimization of harm. The sexist behaviors depicted in the 'benevolent' vignettes all inherently reinforce gender inequality, juxtaposing the definition of benevolence as kind and well-meaning. By continuing to use this terminology, it is possible that we linguistically minimize the impact of sexist behavior.

The role of perpetrator gender brings further nuance to the detection gap. The results of this study partially support the hypothesis that male perpetrators would be perceived as more sexist than female perpetrators. While male perpetrators were generally rated as significantly more sexist than female perpetrators, this effect was not consistent across conditions, indicating that this association is more nuanced and context dependent. These results are similar to Baron et al. (1991) where there was a strong generalized association with men being perceived as more sexist. One interpretation of this finding is that individuals may rely on gender-based heuristics to evaluate social behavior. This means that sexism, as it relates to patriarchy and male dominance, is more likely to be associated with men as the primary actors of discrimination. Consequently, male perpetrators of sexism may be viewed more easily as being intentionally sexist, whereas female perpetrators who enact the same behavior may more easily be dismissed or viewed as less deliberate. This suggests that perceptions of sexism may be evaluated against assumptions about the perpetrators intent and their ability to enact harm. However, given that our results were inconsistent across conditions, the influence of these heuristics appears to depend on the clarity of the prejudice, with this effect most pronounced in hostile sexist scenarios.

The nuance between the influence of gender and its context-dependent effects is reflected in the interaction between sexism type and perpetrator gender. The results of this research provide support for the hypothesis that there would be an interaction between sexism type and perpetrator gender. There was a significant interaction between sexism type and perpetrator gender, even after adjusting for covariates. Specifically, the influence of the perpetrator gender being male is most pronounced in hostile sexist scenarios and less pronounced in benevolent sexist scenarios. Although these results align with prior understandings of gender as a strong influence on sexism perception (Baron et al., 1991), our study extends this work by highlighting that this effect is strongest when the intent is clear. This pattern indicates that when the intent of the behavior is more direct, individuals may rely on gender associations to evaluate the severity, reinforcing the link between men and sexism. On the other hand, when sexism is more ambiguous like in the benevolent sexism condition, these gender-heuristics may become less effective. Thus, the sexist behavior may not be recognized as prejudice regardless of perpetrator gender as the typical cues used to identify discrimination are disrupted. This finding demonstrates how individuals use both situational cues and social stereotypes when evaluating instances of sexism.

Building on this, the present study suggests that individual ideological beliefs are associated with sexism recognition differences. The findings of this study support the hypothesis that higher scores on ideological scales predict the reduced sexism recognition. Higher endorsement of social dominance orientation, belief in sexism shift, and the ambivalent sexism inventory was associated with lower recognition of sexism in the vignettes. These results reflect how system-justifying beliefs work to legitimize social hierarchies (Pacilli et al., 2019; Connor & Fiske, 2019). Individuals who endorse benevolent sexism likely view benevolent sexist behavior as a relational reward (Cross & Overall, 2018) or as an equitable arrangement (Hammond & Sibley, 2011) rather than as discrimination. Although the present

study found that higher scores in social dominance orientation, belief in sexism shift, and ambivalent sexism was associated with lower sexism recognition, they did not fully account for the differences in sexism perception as the interaction between sexism type and perpetrator gender remained significant. Taken together, these findings suggest that sexism recognition is influenced by both ideological beliefs and contextual features of the behavior.

Strengths and limitations

A key strength of this study was the use of vignettes as experimental stimuli. By using vignettes, this study was able to systemically manipulate perpetrator gender and the type of sexism. The vignettes depicted commonplace interactions that may resemble real-life interactions, allowing us to gauge perceptions that may manifest in daily social settings. This allowed us to gain more nuance on how perceptions may fluctuate based on situational cues. The controlled manipulation of the variables strengthens the internal validity of the study and made it clearer for us to identify how different factors influence sexism recognition.

However, the use of these vignettes introduces a few limitations worth noting when interpreting the results of the present study. Although vignettes are useful for a controlled manipulation of perpetrator identity and sexism type, they are inherently limited in their ecological validity. The evaluation process of sexism in written scenarios is vastly different to experiencing real-world interpersonal interactions. Situational factors like body language, pre-existing relationships, and tone of delivery, all shape perceptions of behavior. This is particularly relevant to our study where we explore the detection gap because the effect of benevolent sexism being less detectable is likely stronger in real-world social dynamics. The implication of this is that the current findings may underestimate the degree to which benevolent sexism bypasses detection in daily interactions.

Additionally, the construct validity of the hostile and benevolent vignettes warrant consideration. Although the vignettes were designed to be grounded in theoretical frameworks by Glick & Fiske (2001), it may be possible that the vignettes were not interpreted as intended. This is relevant to our study because benevolent sexism is defined as subtle, ambiguous, and subjectively positive, making interpretations more prone to variability. What one participant may interpret as condescending paternalism, another may interpret as simply a protective gesture. If the vignettes representing benevolent sexism were perceived as too subtle or too overt, it may shift the findings of a detection gap. Thus, some of the observed differences in sexism recognition may be due to variability in how individuals interpret the stimuli rather than their detection ability.

Finally, consistent with typical research constraints, the use of a non-random, convenience sampling approach for recruitment using flyers and social media advertisements meant that the resulting sample was predominantly female and New Zealand European. Consequently, the findings of this study may not be as applicable or representative of the wider New Zealand population. This method of sampling also meant that the study was limited to those who used the social media platforms it was advertised on.

Significance within the wider world

The findings of this research are important for understanding how gender inequality is maintained and its implications within relatively egalitarian societies like New Zealand. The results of this study echoes concern about a "detection gap" found in prior literature, where female perpetrators are less likely to be identified than male perpetrators, as well as benevolent sexism being less likely to be recognized than hostile. These findings highlight that even within egalitarian societies that aim to progress gender equality, the mechanisms of patriarchy remain pervasive and successful. In order to evolve with prejudices that evolve with us, it is imperative

that we move beyond focusing on overt forms of discrimination and begin addressing the subtleties of palliative forms of discrimination that function to restrict women's agency.

Additionally, this research may be useful for educational and organizational initiatives that target gender discrimination. By understanding how recognizing gender discrimination is influenced by perpetrator identity and personal endorsement of hierarchy-based ideologies, trainings aimed at reducing gender discrimination may find it useful to target the underlying mechanisms that create barriers for social awareness.

Suggestions for future research

Due to the significance of the interaction between perpetrator gender and sexism recognition, future studies should investigate the effect of the female perpetrator further. Although this study has indicated that sexist actions enacted by women were rated less severely than men, the reasons behind this remain unclear. Whether this is because of the sexist "prototype" or because women are viewed as unable to enact systemic harm is yet to be determined. Further studies could employ the use of open-ended response formats for participants to uncover their reasoning.

While this study primarily focused on perpetrator gender using vignettes, future studies could expand on this by exploring how perpetrator gender influences sexism recognition across varied social contexts. Examining the role of perpetrator gender in workplace hierarchies, relationship types, and cultural contexts could provide more insight into how discrimination is interpreted. Sexist behavior enacted by a male coworker may be evaluated differently than a romantic connection or peer exhibiting the same behavior. Similarly, cultural norms related to gender roles may also affect the interpretation of sexist behavior. Investigating contextual variations may provide more clarity in determining when the effect of gender is more or less influential.

Future studies could also investigate ways of increasing the detection abilities of subtler forms of prejudice, perhaps by priming or educating participants. In doing so, studies may find remedies or targeted approaches to mitigate detection gaps and potentially work toward progressing gender equality.

Another avenue for future research in sexism recognition is exploring the impact of exposure to political online discourse. With the surge of popularity in short-form video content and podcasting (Renström & Bäck, 2024), it may be interesting to observe how people respond to content that is made to effectively maximize engagement. Using snippets of podcasts or videos may capture a more nuanced response from participants as the tone of delivery may embody a more realistic representation of real-life interactions. Additionally, responses to these forms of content may also provide insight into how beliefs are reinforced and shaped through the media we ingest.

Conclusion

The current research sought to explore the psychological mechanisms that influence sexism recognition within the New Zealand context. By investigating how perpetrator gender, social dominance orientation, belief in sexism shift, ambivalent sexism, and sexism type interact, this study has demonstrated how the detection of prejudice is not an objective process, but rather one that is influenced by benevolent framing and perpetrator identity. The findings provide support for the existence of a "detection gap" where benevolent sexism was less readily identified than hostile sexism, and where perpetrator gender influenced the perception of sexism. In this, the findings critically highlight how particularly insidious benevolent sexism can be, as its ambiguous and well-intentioned nature can disarm the mechanisms we rely on to detect prejudice.

This study also suggests that ideological beliefs are a contributing influence on sexism recognition. Taken together, this study highlights that the maintenance of gender prejudice is driven by both the endorsement of sexist beliefs and the limitations in recognizing them. Through investigating both situational and ideological influences on sexism detection, the findings of this study support current research and contributes to a vital body of literature directed at deconstructing psychological barriers to identifying subtle forms of prejudice.

To conclude, achieving true gender equality requires more than addressing gender discrimination in its overt forms. It also requires a critical evaluation of the ways we have normalized prejudice against women within everyday social interactions. By unpacking the underlying inequalities that are embedded in gender norms and how we characterize women, we may become more cognizant of prejudice in any form. A sophisticated and nuanced understanding of how subtle forms of sexism operate is imperative to improving awareness and challenging broader systems that maintain gender inequality.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Experimental vignettes

Hostile sexism, male perpetrator:

A group of friends are watching a basketball game at an apartment. The referee makes a controversial call, sparking a group debate. Natalia confidently expresses her opinion, backing her favorite team. Liam laughs and says "Didn't you just start watching basketball last year? Don't act like you're some expert. This is why I can't take females seriously." Some of the group chuckle, but Natalia looks annoyed and doesn't respond.

Hostile sexism, female perpetrator:

A group of friends are out at brunch and are discussing dating and relationships. Someone mentions a mutual friend who recently ended a long-term relationship. Beth shakes her head and says, "To be honest, I feel like women nowadays are too much. Women overthink everything, get upset over small things, and then wonder why guys leave. It's no wonder relationships don't work out anymore- we just can't let things go." The group goes quiet for a moment and the conversation shifts.

Benevolent sexism, male perpetrator:

While unloading gear on a group camping trip, Irene begins to pick up one of the heavier backpacks. Daniel notices and quickly says, "Whoa, let me take that. It's not right to make a woman do the heavy lifting!" He smiles warmly and adds, "You should be relaxing! We've got this." Irene hesitates, then steps back as Daniel and another friend handle the gear.

Benevolent sexism, female perpetrator:

At a family get-together, relatives are chatting in the kitchen while preparing food. When Jared offers to set the table, aunt Linda smiles and says, "That's sweet of you to offer, but you don't need to worry about it. The girls have it under control." Aunt Linda gently shoos him away and turns back to chatting with the women, who continue setting up.

Neutral vignette, male:

During a lunch break at the office, a few coworkers are chatting about weekend plans. James mentions he's planning to try out a new recipe he saw online. A colleague asks for the link, and others join in sharing cooking tips. The group laughs and swaps stories about past cooking disasters.

Neutral vignette, female:
At a local pub's trivia night, a group of friends is splitting into teams. Emily suggests a team name and volunteers to keep score. Throughout the game, everyone takes turns answering questions from different categories. When Emily gets a tough science question right, the group cheers, and they move on to the next round.

Gender counterbalanced vignettes

Hostile sexism, male perpetrator:
A group of friends are out at brunch and are discussing dating and relationships. Someone mentions a mutual friend who recently ended a long-term relationship. Mike shakes his head and says, "To be honest, I feel like women nowadays are too much. Women overthink everything, get upset over small things, and then wonder why guys leave. It's no wonder relationships don't work out anymore- they just can't let things go." The group goes quiet for a moment and the conversation shifts.

Hostile sexism, female perpetrator:
A group of friends are watching a basketball game at an apartment. The referee makes a controversial call, sparking a group debate. Natalia confidently expresses her opinion, backing her favorite team. Aimee laughs and says "Didn't you just start watching basketball last year? Don't act like you're some expert. This is why people can't take females seriously." Some of the group chuckle, but Natalia looks annoyed and doesn't respond.

Benevolent sexism, male perpetrator:
At a family get-together, relatives are chatting in the kitchen while preparing food. When Jared offers to set the table, uncle Anthony smiles and says, "Don't worry about all that- the girls have it under control." Uncle Anthony directs Jared to the living room, and the women continue setting up.

Benevolent sexism, female perpetrator:

While unloading gear on a group camping trip, Irene begins to pick up one of the heavier backpacks. Leah notices and quickly says, "Whoa, let the guys take that. It's not right to make a woman do the heavy lifting!" She smiles warmly and adds, "You should be relaxing! They've got this." Irene hesitates, then steps back as their male friends begin unloading the gear.

Neutral vignette, male:

At a local pub's trivia night, a group of friends is splitting into teams. Travis suggests a team name and volunteers to keep score. Throughout the game, everyone takes turns answering questions from different categories. When Travis gets a tough science question right, the group cheers, and they move on to the next round.

Neutral vignette, female:

During a lunch break at the office, a few coworkers are chatting about weekend plans. Chloe mentions she's planning to try out a new recipe she saw online. A colleague asks for the link, and others join in sharing cooking tips. The group laughs and swaps stories about past cooking disasters.

Appendix B

Ambivalent sexism inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996)

1. Women exaggerate problems they have at work.
2. Women are too easily offended.
3. Most women interpret innocent remarks as being sexist.
4. When women lose to men in a fair competition, they typically complain about being discriminated against.
5. Many women are actually seeking special favors, such as hiring policies that favor them over men, under the guise of asking for "equality".
6. Feminists are making entirely reasonable demands of men.*
7. Feminists not seeking for women to have more power than men.*
8. Women seek power by getting control over men.
9. There are actually very few women who get a kick out of teasing men by seeming sexually available and then refusing male advances.*
10. Once a woman gets a man to commit to her, she usually tries to put him on a tight leash.
11. Most women fail to appreciate all that men do for them.
12. A good woman should be set on a pedestal by her man.
13. Women should be cherished and protected by men.
14. Men should be willing to sacrifice their own well being in order to provide financially for the women in their lives.
15. In a disaster, women need not be rescued first.*
16. Women, compared to men, tend to have a superior moral sensibility.
17. Many women have a quality of purity that few men possess.
18. Women, as compared to men, tend to have a more refined sense of culture and good taste.
19. Every man ought to have a woman he adores.
20. Men are complete without women.*
21. No matter how accomplished he is, a man is not truly complete as a person unless he has the love of a woman.
22. People are often truly happy in life without being romantically involved with a member of the other sex.*

*Items are reverse coded

Appendix C

Belief in Sexism Shift scale (Zehnter et al., 2021)

1. In New Zealand, discrimination against men is on the rise.
2. Men are not particularly discriminated against.*
3. If anything, men are more discriminated against than women these days.
4. Giving women more rights often requires taking away men's rights.
5. Under the guise of equality for women, men are actually being discriminated against.
6. In the pursuit of women's rights, the government has neglected men's rights.
7. Nowadays, men don't have the same chances in the job market as women.
8. Feminism is about favoring women over men.
9. Feminism does not discriminate against men.*
10. All in all, men have more responsibilities and fewer benefits.
11. In today's society, women can say things that men are not allowed to say.
12. It is evident that the media is biased against men.
13. In today's society, men are often punished for acting manly.
14. All in all, men are well respected in today's society.*
15. While women can use the "gender-card" to get ahead, men can't.

*Items are reverse coded

Appendix D

Social Dominance Orientation scale (Pratto et al., 1994)

1. Some groups of people are simply inferior to other groups.
2. In getting what you want, it is sometimes necessary to use force against other groups.
3. It's OK if some groups have more of a chance in life than others.
4. To get ahead in life, it is sometimes necessary to step on other groups.
5. If certain groups stayed in their places, we would have fewer problems.
6. It's probably a good thing that certain groups are at the top and other groups are at the bottom.
7. Inferior groups should stay in their place.
8. Sometimes other groups must be kept in their place.
9. It would be good if groups could be equal.*
10. Group equality should be our ideal.*
11. All groups should be given an equal chance in life.*
12. We should do what we can to equalize conditions for different groups.*
13. Increased social equality is beneficial to society.*
14. We would have fewer problems if we treated people more equally.*
15. We should strive to make incomes as equal as possible.*
16. No group should dominate society.*

*Items are reverse coded

Appendix E

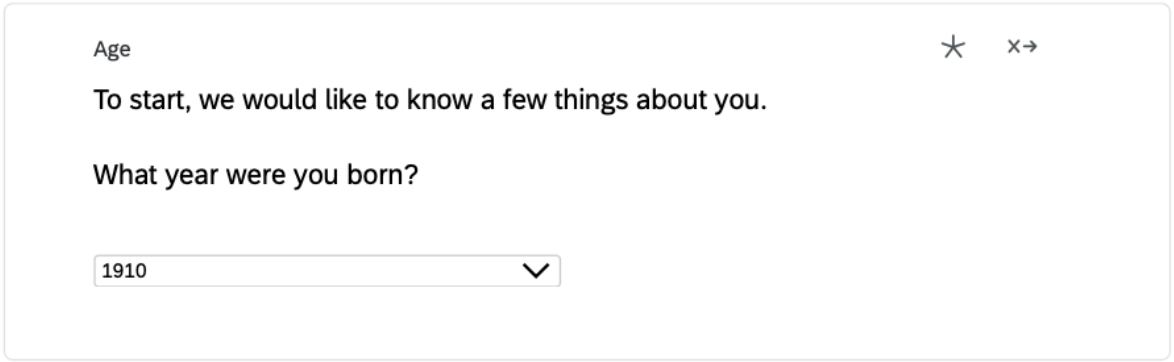
Participant information sheet

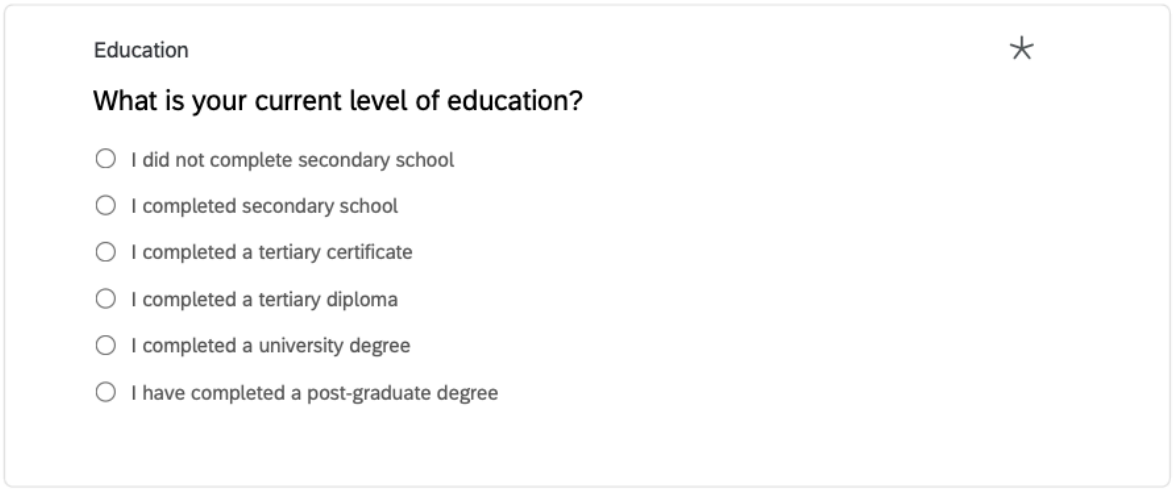
Appendix F

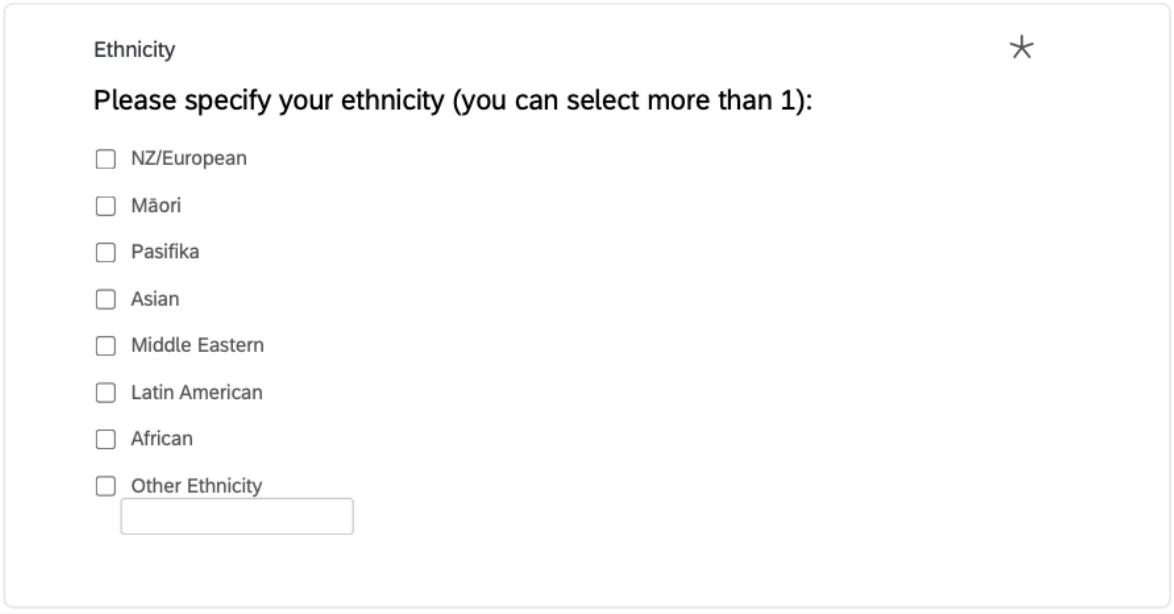
Ethics approval

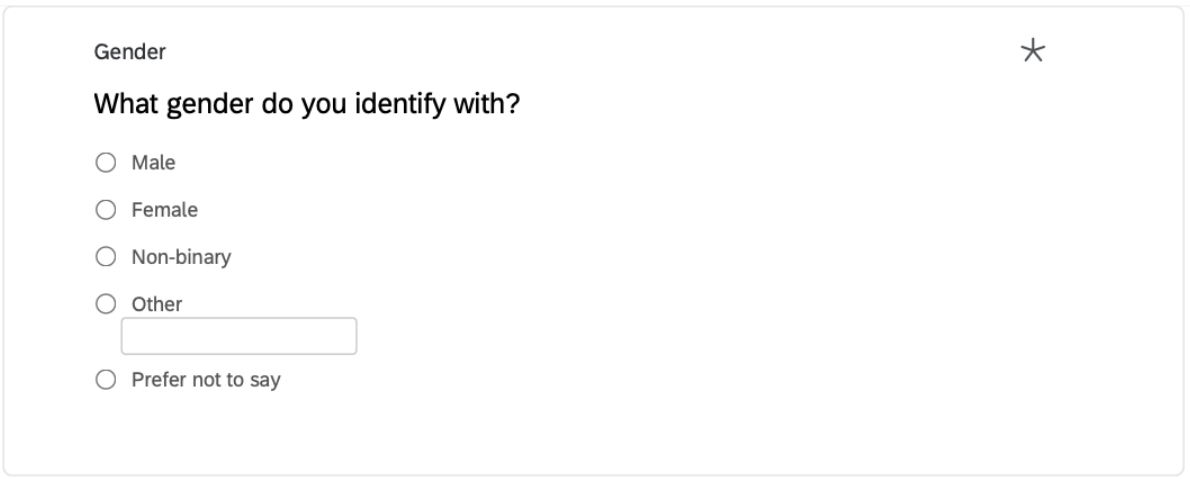
Appendix G

Demographics questions








Gender
What gender do you identify with?
Male
Female
Non-binary
Other
Prefer not to say

Appendix H

Recruitment flyer and online advertisement