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# The mediating role of social dominance orientation in the relations between political identity and sexism

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Acceso abierto diamante

## Abstract

The present study aimed to analyze the mediating role of social dominance orientation in the correlations between political identity and ambivalent sexism. The sample was composed of 152 people who answered a questionnaire with the Social Dominance Orientation Scale, the Sexism Ambivalent Inventory, and questions regarding political identity, age, gender, educational level, and income. The analysis of the results confirmed positive relations between political identity, social dominance orientation, and ambivalent sexism. It also demonstrated SDO as a mediator between political identity and both forms of sexism. The results confirm that the tendency to support social hierarchies indicates greater alignment with right-wing politics and endorsement of sexist attitudes.

**Keywords:** Ambivalent Sexism, Social Dominance Orientation.

## Resumen

El presente estudio pretendía analizar el papel mediador de la orientación de dominación social en la relación entre la identidad política y el sexismo ambivalente. La muestra estaba compuesta por 152 personas que respondieron a un cuestionario con la Escala de Orientación a la Dominación Social, el Inventario de Sexismo Ambivalente y preguntas sobre la identidad política, la edad, el género, el nivel de educación y los ingresos. El análisis de los resultados confirmó las relaciones positivas entre la identidad política, la orientación a la dominación social y el sexismo ambivalente y demostró que el SDO es un mediador entre la identidad política y ambas formas de sexismo. Los resultados obtenidos expresan que la tendencia a apoyar las jerarquías sociales indica una mayor adhesión a la política de derechas y la aprobación de actitudes sexistas.

**Palabras clave:** Sexismo Ambivalente, Orientación a la Dominación Social.

## Introduction

Prejudice as an expression of violence is a strategy of oppression that tends to lead to a discriminatory process. Considering the historical context, discriminatory practices have marked Brazil, resulting in a hierarchized society in which different segments do not have access to rights and suffer from social exclusion (Bandeira & Batista, 2002). Therefore, the present paper aims to understand the correlation between social dominance orientation (SDO), ambivalent sexism, and political identity by analyzing the mediating role of SDO in the relations between political identity and ambivalent sexism.

According to Allport (1954), prejudice can be understood as a negative attitude toward members of certain social groups simply because they belong to a socially devalued group. Thus, prejudice provides a basis for discrimination, social exclusion, and violence (Allport, 1954). From this perspective, Ferreira (2004) notes that prejudice manifests itself in various ways and conceptualizes a specific type of discrimination against women, sexism, as negative attitudes, and discriminatory actions directed against women. However, recent theoretical developments have pointed out that the construct of sexism goes beyond Allport's traditional definition of prejudice as a hostile attitude directed toward members of certain social groups, as it is not uniformly negative (Formiga et al., 2002; Ferreira, 2004; Mesquita Filho et al., 2011).

Contributing to this discussion, Glick and Fiske (1996) highlight new expressions of sexism, calling them ambivalent because they are not as direct or violent as more traditional definitions of discrimination. Considering traditional and modern manifestations of sexism, Glick and Fiske developed the theory of ambivalent sexism to represent how prejudice against women manifests in two dimensions: the hostile and the benevolent (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Glick & Fiske, 2011).

Hostile sexism is expressed as a great antipathy against women and is similar to the classic definition of prejudice (Allport, 1954). Thus, Glick and Fiske (1996) argue that male domination, a characteristic of patriarchal ideology, forms the basis of modern sexism directed at women who challenge male power and question the supposed inferiority of women. Additionally, Mesquita Filho et al. (2011) define hostile sexism as beliefs and practices of people who regard women as inferior to men and reflect intolerance toward women who occupy spaces of power and criticize male superiority. Hostile sexism would then be the most blatant and violent manifestation of prejudice toward women (Mesquita Filho et al., 2011).

In contrast, benevolent sexism concerns feelings and behaviors that highlight the supposed functions, both biological and social, of women to take care of the home and the offspring. Thus, this prejudice characterizes women as pure and docile creatures that must be protected and whose love is necessary to make a man feel complete (Glick & Fiske, 2001).

Thus, Ferreira (2004) points out that while hostile sexism expresses a more direct and aggressive form of this prejudice, benevolent sexism, even when expressed in a protective and loving attitude toward women, is only superficially positive because it is supported by the same ideology that underlies hostile sexism, namely that women are the weakest and inferior group. For this reason, they must be cared for and protected.

Despite the more significant social acceptance of benevolent sexism, studies suggest that both forms of sexism are responsible for discriminatory acts that justify and maintain inequalities between men and women (Glick & Fiske, 2001; Ferreira, 2004; Formiga et al., 2002; Mesquita Filho et al., 2011). In this sense, studies show that hostile sexism is positively related to men's tendency to commit violence (Garaigordobil & Aliri, 2011; Rollero et al., 2019). For example, Farias et al. (2021) highlight prejudice (including sexism) as one of the leading causes of violence against women. Violence becomes an essential social tool for maintaining women's subordination to men and is influenced by sexist attitudes.

From the perspective of Glick and Fiske's theory (1996), sexism, as an expression of prejudice, presupposes a hierarchization between the male and female genders that establishes unequal power relations. In this sense, forms of intergroup conflict and discrimination, such as sexism itself, can also be

understood as consequences of the human tendency to form group-based social hierarchies (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

According to Rollero et al. (2019), Ambivalent Sexism Theory, as a tool for analyzing power relations and inequality, shares conceptual foundations with Social Dominance Theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Developed to analyze and explain systems of social inequality, Social Dominance Theory assumes that all societies tend to structure themselves as group systems based on hierarchies, in which a dominant and hegemonic group is established at the top of the social pyramid and subordinate groups at the bottom (Fernandes et al., 2007).

Considering such social groups, as postulated by Ambivalent Sexism Theory, gender is a factor of group distinction; that is, men place themselves as the dominant group, while women fall into inferior positions (Rollero et al., 2019). From the perspective of Social Dominance Theory, both benevolent and hostile sexism legitimize beliefs that justify and maintain inequality between men and women (Sidanius et al., 1994). In this way, sexism can be seen as a legitimizing aspect of Social Dominance Theory because it affirms a hierarchical relation between genders (Sidanius et al., 1994).

Moreover, according to Sidanius and Pratto (1999), Social Dominance Theory considers an intra-individual dimension for hierarchical power relations besides analyzing historical and contextual aspects. This individual dimension, called social dominance orientation (SDO), is the inclination to support establishing and maintaining hierarchical relations in society, contributing to the continuity of dominant groups' economic and social superiority (Vilanova et al., 2022). To this end, "SDO reflects opposition to equality among groups through beliefs, social policies, and affinity for ideologies that maintain inequality" (Wachelke & Matos, 2018, p.3). Individuals with higher levels of SDO prefer social relations to be unequal and therefore tend to support ideologies that promote the superiority of one group and legitimize forms of discrimination (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). From this perspective, SDO is an essential predictor of prejudice as it relates to attitudes and behaviors that promote inequality in intergroup relations (Sidanius et al., 1994; Wachelke & Matos, 2018).

Given the relationship between Ambivalent Sexism Theory and Social Dominance Theory, studies point out that social dominance orientation predicts both forms of sexism since hostile sexism acts on male domination over women and benevolent sexism conveys women's subordination role (Christopher & Wojda, 2008; Malatyali et al., 2017; Rollero et al., 2019).

Although SDO can be understood as a predictor of sexism, the discussion on sexism and violence against women has been inserting itself into the Brazilian political agenda. As an example, there are some statements of a leading right-wing politician stating that "She does not deserve (to be raped) because she is very ugly, she is not my type, and I would never rape her" (Ramalho, 2016, para. 4). Such statements demonstrate how violence against women is represented in sexist speech.

In addition to the political orientation in Brazil pervading the discussion on sexism, self-categorization on the political right-wing is a factor used to predict the level of SDO (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Ho et al., 2015; Vilanova et al., 2022). Thus, self-categorization on the political right-wing is associated with views favoring the maintenance of social hierarchies. As a result, individuals more aligned with the right-wing generally hold that social inequalities are inherent to the human condition (Jost et al., 2003; Sirbu, 2017; Vilanova et al., 2022).

Camino et al. (2001) state that an individual's view of society is related to their political position. In this sense, when voting, the citizen expresses a political identity when they accept the values and ideologies of a party or political spectrum. Wachelke and Hammes (2009) point out that people aligned with the political left-wing have a conception of society that criticizes social inequalities and advocates social justice. In opposition, people related to the political right-wing defend opinions that maintain social hierarchization and tend not to agree with an egalitarian social dynamic.

To this end, to understand the different ideologies that mark political identity, several studies portray the relationship between high rates of SDO and right-wing-aligned political stances consistent with unequal and conservative ideas (Fernandes et al., 2017; Pratto et al., 1994; Sirbu, 2017;).

The present study aimed to understand the relations between SDO, political identity, and ambivalent sexism. Specifically, we proposed a mediation model in which SDO would mediate the relations between political identity and ambivalent sexism. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to expand on existing research that correlates SDO and ambivalent sexism (Christopher & Wojda, 2008; Malatyali et al., 2017; Rollero et al., 2019; Sidanius et al., 1997) by adding political identity as a variable and proposing a mediation model. The mediation model is presented in Figure 1.

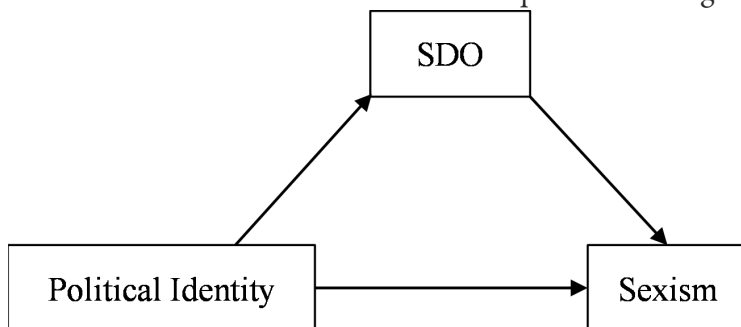


Figure 1

Mediation model of political identity, social dominance orientation (SDO), and sexism.

Consistent with previous studies, the following hypotheses were stated:

H1: Political identity exhibits a direct relation with SDO, i.e., the more to the right-wing, the higher the social dominance orientation.

H2: Political identity directly influences sexism; that is, the more to the right-wing an individual positions himself politically, the higher the levels of sexism.

H3: SDO mediates the relation between political identity and sexism; that is, the more right-winged an individual is, the higher the level of social dominance orientation and, consequently, the higher the levels of sexism.

## Method

### Participants

The sample size was estimated to be 132, based on a power of 95%, effect size of  $f^2 = 0.10$ , at 5% significance level, for a multiple regression test with 2 predictors. However, we achieved a higher sample size, counting 152 people, 64.5% female, 34.2% male, and 1.3% non-binary, ranging in age from 18 to 78 years ( $M = 32.21$ ;  $SD = 14.01$ ). Education ranged from incomplete high school to graduate level, with the largest portion of the sample concentrated in incomplete college (33.7%), complete college (23%), and graduate level (23%). Income ranged from no income to over 16 minimum wages, with the largest portion of the sample reporting no income (22.4%) and between 1 and 4 minimum wages (18.4%).

### Instruments

**Ambivalent Sexism Inventory:** The used version of the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick and Fiske, 1996) was validated and translated into Portuguese (Ferreira, 2004). The inventory, composed of 22 statements, evaluates attitudes of prejudice towards the two dimensions of sexism: hostile (11 items) and benevolent (11 items). It was applied using a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (6). The benevolent sexism measure showed adequate internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.93$ ), similar to the hostile sexism measure, which also showed a satisfying reliability index ( $\alpha = 0.98$ ).

**Social Dominance Orientation Scale (SDO):** The reduced version, translated into Portuguese, of the Social Dominance Scale was applied. The reduced SDO consists of 8 items tested using a Likert scale

ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). In the present study, the measure showed a satisfying internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.96$ ).

**Sociodemographic Questionnaire:** Sociodemographic information was requested (age, gender, education level, and income), and a single-item measure was used to assess political identity, ranging from 1 (extreme left-wing) to 5 (extreme right-wing). Notably, some Brazilian studies have used political item measures to assess political identity, showing positive predictive potential (Galli & Modesto, 2021; Modesto et al., 2020).

## Procedures

Data collection was conducted online through a questionnaire on the Google Forms platform. The link was shared on social networks. If the individual chose to participate in the study, they had to first read and agree with the Consent Form, then answer the sociodemographic questionnaire, the SDO, and the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory. An ethics committee approved this research (opinion number 5.703.097).

## Results

First, a Pearson correlation test was conducted to verify the relation between political identity, social dominance orientation, and ambivalent sexism. The results found can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1

		Political identity	SDO	Benevolent sexism	Hostile sexism
Political identity	Pearson correlation	1	0,76*	0,72*	0,73*
SDO	Pearson correlation	0,76*	1	0,87*	0,89*
Benevolent sexism	Pearson correlation	0,72*	0,87*	1	0,89*
Hostile sexism	Pearson correlation	0,73*	0,89*	0,89*	1

Correlation Coefficient and Significance Level between Political Identity, Social Dominance Orientation, Benevolent Sexism, and Hostile Sexism

Note. SDO = social dominance orientation. Political identity: Higher values indicate a more right-wing position.

\*  $p < 0,001$ .

As shown in Table 1, it is possible to verify that political identity had positive relations with social dominance orientation and both forms of sexism. Moreover, the social dominance orientation also showed positive relations with benevolent and hostile sexism. These results suggest that the further the right-wing individuals identify themselves in the political spectrum, the higher the level of social dominance orientation and the rates of sexism, and it is also evident that the higher the SDO rates, the higher the rates of both forms of sexism.

Next, given the objective of this research to verify the relations between political identity, ambivalent sexism, and social dominance orientation, we tested the hypothesis that SDO can mediate the relations between political identity and sexism through two different mediation analyses involving benevolent and hostile sexism.

The first mediation model tested included benevolent sexism as the dependent variable, and the results, identified using SPSS PROCESS Model 4, can be seen in Table 2.



Table 2.

Dependent variable	Model parameters
SDO	Political identity: $B = 1,26$ , $t(151) = 14,21$ , $p < 0,001$ ( $LIIC: 1,08$ ; $LSIC: 1,43$ ) $R^2 = 0,57$
Benevolent sexism	Political identity: $B = 0,20$ , $t(151) = 2,54$ , $p = 0,0119$ ( $LIIC: 0,04$ ; $LSIC: 0,35$ ) SDO: $B = 0,58$ , $t(151) = 12,49$ , $p < 0,001$ ( $LIIC: 0,49$ ; $LSIC: 0,67$ ) $R^2 = 0,77$

Mediation model for benevolent sexism

Note. Indirect effect:  $B = 0,73$ , Boot SE = 0,09; BootLIIC = 0,55; BootLSIC = 0,90

As described in Table 2, it is apparent that political identity predicts social dominance orientation. Similarly, both political identity and social dominance orientation predict benevolent sexism. Such results support the hypotheses of the mediation model and suggest that a right-wing political identity positively influences SDO, and a right-wing political identity also contributes to benevolent sexism rates. Additionally, SDO positively influences benevolent sexism rates and can be characterized as a mediation.

Table 3.

Dependent variable	Model parameters
SDO	Political identity: $B = 1,26$ , $t(151) = 14,21$ , $p < 0,001$ ( $LIIC: 1,08$ ; $LSIC: 1,43$ ) $R^2 = 0,57$
Hostile sexism	Political identity: $B = 0,20$ , $t(151) = 2,56$ , $p = 0,0116$ ( $LIIC: 0,04$ ; $LSIC: 0,36$ ) SDO: $B = 0,65$ , $t(151) = 13,82$ , $p < 0,001$ ( $LIIC: 0,56$ ; $LSIC: 0,74$ ) $R^2 = 0,80$

Mediation model for hostile sexism

Note. Indirect effect:  $B = 0,81$ , Boot SE = 0,12; BootLIIC = 0,57; BootLSIC = 1,05

Next, the mediation test was repeated for the hostile sexism variable, and the results, as shown in Table 3, present the same pattern as the benevolent sexism variable. Thus, a right-wing political identity positively influences SDO. Similarly, a more right-wing political identity also contributes to hostile sexism rates. Furthermore, it was possible to verify that SDO is characterized as a mediator since it interferes with the relation between political identity and hostile sexism.

## Discussion

The present study investigated the relations between political identity, social dominance orientation (SDO), and ambivalent sexism. Additionally, it sought to evaluate SDO as a mediator between political identity and dimensions of sexism.

As described in the results, political identity positively correlated with SDO. This result corroborates the first hypothesis of this study that the more to the political right-wing an individual identifies with, the higher level of SDO. The relation found between these variables is consistent with previous studies (Ho et al., 2015; Jost et al., 2003; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), in which self-categorization on the political right-wing was used to predict levels of orientation to social domination, indicating that individuals more aligned to the right-wing tend to defend social inequalities as inherent to the human condition and, for such reason, believe in the legitimacy of a dominant group that subordinates others (Vilanova et al., 2022).

Regarding sexism, the results found confirmed the second research hypothesis by demonstrating the positive correlation between political identity and both forms of sexism. In this sense, the more to the political right-wing the participant identified, the higher the rates of benevolent sexism and hostile sexism. Such ideas corroborate existing literature that individuals with more conservative, right-wing-aligned ideas tend to promote sexist attitudes that delegitimize women and place them in a position of inferiority relative to men (Belo et al., 2005; Christopher & Mull, 2006; Christopher & Wojda, 2008; Rollero et al., 2019).

Additionally, the mediation of SDO in the relation between political identity and ambivalent sexism was analyzed, and the results confirmed the hypothesis of SDO as a mediating variable. In this sense, individuals who identify with the political right-wing, by presenting conservative ideas that endorse the maintenance of social hierarchies, demonstrate high levels of SDO and, consequently, express high rates of sexism by defending the inequalities and discriminations that sustain social hierarchies. Although we did not find literature that points to SDO in a mediation model with political identity and ambivalent sexism, the present study acknowledges the vast theoretical contribution that directly links SDO with both forms of sexism, as male domination acts by repressing women through hostile sexism and subordinating them through benevolent sexism (Christopher & Wojda, 2008; Glick et al., 2015; Malatyali et al., 2017; Rollero et al., 2019).

The present work has some limitations. First, it is worth noting that the sample of participants was limited to a sociodemographic background with high education. Future investigations should be extended to other contexts to investigate the reproducibility of the results in populations with more diverse levels of education. In addition, this study did not use instruments that verify levels of conservatism. The current literature demonstrates significant relations between conservatism and SDO (Christopher & Mull, 2006; Rollero et al., 2019), and from this perspective, future studies may benefit from inserting measures of conservatism to understand its relations with sexism, political identity, and social dominance orientation.

The present study contributes to the research regarding sexist attitudes and social hierarchies by proposing an investigation that analyzes the relations between political identity, ambivalent sexism, and social dominance orientation. Furthermore, it indicated SDO as a mediator between political identity, hostile sexism, and benevolent sexism.

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