# Ambivalent Sexism and Perception of Gendered Comic Material in Emerging Adults

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| KEYWORDS | A B S T R A C T |
|---|---|
| Ambivalent sexism; Prejudice; Gender discrimination; Gendered comic material; Emerging adults | Sexism is the ideology of male (or female) supremacy, of male (or female) superiority and of beliefs that support and sustain it. In simple terms, it is the exertion of supremacy of one gender upon the other. The study looks at sexism as an ambivalent entity – Hostile and Benevolent to explore the influence of sexist attitude in the perception of a gendered comic sample with sexist content. Importantly, the study also aims to examine its influence on the likability and readiness to share the sexist comics with others. One hundred and sixteen emerging adults (N= 116; M=61, F=55, $M_{age}$=22.54) responded to an online survey regarding their attitudes towards comic material. Correlation and regression analyses suggested that there was a moderate correlation between hostile and benevolent sexist attitudes. Importantly, hostile sexism but not benevolent sexism correlated with likeability of a gendered comic material. Hostile and Benevolent sexism both did not correlate with willingness to endorse gendered comic material. The study is the first of its kind to explore Ambivalent Sexism in an Indian context and sheds light on the prevalence of sexism in India, the threat it poses and provides scope for further research and awareness about the issue at hand. |

## Introduction

*"Woman is not born: she is made. In the making, her humanity is destroyed. She becomes symbol of this, symbol of that: mother of the earth, slut of the universe; but she never becomes herself because it is forbidden for her to do so."* ― Dworkin, 1974

Sexism, the ideology of male (or female) supremacy, of male (or female) superiority and of beliefs that support and sustain it (Lerner, 1986), is one of the major concerns faced by women all over the world, for quite a long time. It is an important determinant of human behavior and bias towards a particular gender, and exerts control over people of that gender. It also affects the way

one perceives himself/herself. Sexist attitude often leads to suppression of women, inequality, and violence against women. As Andrea Dworkin pointed out in her book Woman Hating, women are often trapped inside the social stigma and stereotyping most of their life. She is restricted from doing what she desires, and sometimes even doesn't get the opportunity to explore what she truly desires. The expectations, the 'should's and 'must's thrust upon her forms her identity and a false or an incomplete sense of self. This proves a major threat to the society and questions the way it is moving in.

The study can be expanded on the grounds that in recent times, in many films, songs and comedy scenes are focussed on objectifying or ill-treating women, and there is also a wide-spread appreciation for such a trend, even among women (Ryan, Kanjorski, 1998). This in turn affects the way we see women in our daily lives and also the type of knowledge we impart on the children about women.

The paper aims to understand the effect of sexism in people and also examines if it influences their likability towards a comic story that has sexist storyline and their readiness in recommending or sharing the comics with their friends. The study also gives light on the various perceptions and interpretations people have about a sexist storyline.

Ambivalent Sexism (Glick and Fiske, 1997) is a theoretical framework which supports the study. It discusses sexism on two levels. They are: i) Hostile sexism – an adversarial view of gender relations in which women are perceived as seeking to control men, whether through sexuality or feminist ideology (Glick and Fiske, 2001), and ii) Benevolent sexism – characterizing women

as pure creatures who ought to be protected, supported, and adored and whose love is necessary to make a man complete (Glick and Fiske, 2001). People in general may endorse various levels of both hostile and benevolent sexism, proving the concept of Ambivalent Sexism. However, the proportion and preference of the type of sexism may vary across individuals.

**Ambivalent sexism**

Gilck and Fiske in their studies deeply explore ambivalent sexism across various domains. They introduced the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI) to explore sexism in two parts, namely Hostile and Benevolent sexism (1996), proved its validity and also suggested alternate scales to measure sexism, like the Attitudes toward Women Scale (AWS), for various domains (1997). In a study in 2001, Glick and Friske also suggested that benevolent sexism is more like a mask for gender inequality. Fiske (2012) explored the various types of sexism thrust on women.

The study threw light on women considered as either being warm and caring, but are too weak to do anything or women who are strong and in managerial positions, but are seen as cold. Thus the study expressed how women are either seen as pitied or envied.

**Contributing factors of sexism: Development of sexist attitude**

Martin, Wood, Little (1990) propose that children appear first to learn associations among characteristics relevant to their own sex and, later, to learn them for the other sex. It was also found that when the men of a country more strongly endorse sexist ideologies, women also followed suit (Gilck *et al.,* 2000).

## Negative attitude towards women

Ford (2000) proved that exposure to sexist humour increases tolerance of sexist discrimination among people high in hostile sexism. Ryan and Kanjorski (1998) further proved in their research that sexist humour is associated with hostility and aggression towards women. They also showed that in men there is a positive correlation between enjoyment of sexist humour and rape-related attitudes, and in women, it is positively correlated with adversarial sexual beliefs and acceptance of interpersonal violence.

## Sexism and worldview

Barreto and Ellemers (2005) emphasized that women don't see modern, benevolent sexism as prejudicial anymore. This in turn is a threat to the self, and brings about anxiety in women. They thus argued that while benevolent sexism goes unnoticed, it is a very dangerous practice and since it goes unnoticed, it also remains unchallenged.

## Sexism in comics, books and other media

Béreaud (1975) examined a group of French picture books for preschool children and found that there is a strong male bias in the numerical representation of the sexes and strict sex role stereotyping of characters. The study shows male characters coping better with their environment and that the progress of French women in professions is ignored, thereby lowering the status of women. Kalia (1986) explained in his study how Indian textbooks have a strong gender bias, not only in terms of the content, but also in terms of the language used. He surveyed 41 school textbooks and supported that gender biased, or sexist content should be removed from the books. Plakoyiannaki *et al.,* (2008) explored on the portrayal of females in online advertisements and also on a world-wide study on the way women are depicted in various product endorsements. The results showed how women are in fact portrayed in a stereotypical manner and how they are often seen doing "traditional" or "decorative" tasks, while men are given more of a "dependent" role.

Over the years, there have been significant studies on the topic. But there is a lag when it comes to studies done in India, one of the majorly gender-biased countries. This research is conducted on the hopes to bridge this gap.

## Hypotheses

Predictor Variable – Sexism

Outcome Variable – Likability and readiness to recommend the story to others

H1 – Hostile sexist attitude would be positively associated with the likability and readiness to recommend the comic to others

H2 – Benevolent sexist attitude would be positively associated with the likability, but negatively associated with the readiness to recommend the comic to others

H3 – Non-sexist sexist attitude would be negatively associated with the likability and readiness to recommend the comic to others

## Materials and Methods

## Sampling

267 participants of age group 18 to 25 yrs, selected by Purposive sampling answered the survey, out of which 116 responses were usable. The inclusion criterion was participants who are active on social

networking sites and the exclusion criterion was people who are visually challenged.

It was a Quantitative study with a Correlative Design, which explores the relationship between sexism and likability/endorsement of the comics

## Procedure

### Pilot study and standardisation of the scales

Various comics which seem to portray a sexist attitude towards women were collected, and were given to a group of students to rate them on the extent of sexist attitude in them. Questions were given at the end of the comics as "to what extent do you think is this comic sexist in nature?", "to what extent do you think is this comic offensive?" etc. to get a better understanding and to ensure absolute credibility of the comics. The 3 comics which got the highest rating were thus selected for the stimuli.

Following this, the Scales developed to measure the likability and endorsement of the comics were given to the same population too to check the effectiveness of the questionnaire. The data was then analysed and checked for the reliability and validity, thus standardising the scale.

### Data collection

The study was conducted online, given the scope that it can cover more people in a shorter time, and also because the stimulus material used would be provided in a better manner if presented online, rather than on a face-to-face level. The participants would also be more willing to answer an online questionnaire, given the advantage of anonymity and confidentiality. The comic strips portraying sexist attitude towards

women were uploaded online on Qualtrics website – used for research surveys, and the link for the survey was circulated through Facebook. The sample population were asked to read it. By the end of the comics, the scale to measure the likability and readiness to recommend the comics was given. Once the scale is done, they were directed to the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI), and were asked to fill it in. The inventory was then evaluated and based on their scores on different questions, and their levels of sexism – Hostile and Benevolent were measured. These scores were then compared with their responses for the likability questionnaire of the comic and the results were thus derived.

## Measures

Comic Book Sample, which basically portrays sexist attitude towards women

Scale to explore the perception of the comic sample, which ultimately brings out the positive and negative perceptions the participants have on the comic. The scale measures the likability and interest participants have on the comic, as well as taking into account of whether they were offended by any part of the story. Following this is the scale to explore the endorsement participants will be willing to make for the comic story. The scale aims to explore the level to which the participants are willing to recommend the comic to their peers or share it on social media, etc. (Rel: 0.640).

Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI), developed by Gilck and Fiske. The scale consists of 22 questions, and measures the two various level of sexism – Hostile and Benevolent, as separate entities. It was designed to measure three sub-components of sexism – Paternalism (dominative and protective), Gender differentiation

(competitive and complementary) and Heterosexuality (hostile and intimate) (Rel: 0.784).

## Results and Discussion

The responses recorded, along with the demographic details were explored. The participants were of varied age groups – the mean value being 22.54 years, varied religious and social backgrounds. The responses for each questionnaire were recorded, and the negative questions were reverse scored. The variables were created using the mean values from the responses. An independent samples t-test was conducted to explore the effect of gender on the variables. As seen in Table 2, it was found that there was a significant difference (Sig. <.5) in the Endorsement, Hostile Sexist attitude and Benevolent Sexist attitude between male and female participants and that male participants reported higher levels when compared to female participants. With reference to Likability, it was found that there was no significant difference between the two genders.

Following this, the association between age and the variables were explored and it was found that there is no significant correlation between them. It was found that there is no significant correlation between age and likability, endorsement, hostile or benevolent sexist attitudes.

Bivariate correlation was used to explore the correlation between the variables. Hypothesis 1 stated that Hostile sexist attitude would be positively associated with the likability and readiness to recommend the comic to others. Analysis showed that hostile sexist attitude is positively correlated with likability, but not with readiness to recommend the comics - thus partially proving Hypothesis 1. According to

Hypothesis 2, Benevolent sexist attitude would be positively associated with the likability, but negatively associated with the readiness to recommend the comic to others. It was found that benevolent sexist attitude is marginally correlated with likability, but not with readiness to recommend the comics.

As seen in the table, hostile sexist attitude was significantly correlated with likability of the comics (p<.01). But it had no significant correlation with the endorsement of the comics. It can also be seen that there is no correlation between benevolent sexist attitude and likability. However, the significance is.07 and could bring mean a marginal correlation between the variables. It was also found that there is no significant correlation between benevolent sexist attitude and the endorsement of the comics. However, there is a significant correlation between Likability and Endorsement of the comics. A significant correlation can be found between Hostile and Benevolent sexism too, thus proving that people in general have both types of sexism in them, with a probable difference in their proportions, thus making them Hostile or Benevolent sexist in nature.

To test the third hypothesis, Non-sexist sexist attitude would be negatively associated with the likability and readiness to recommend the comic to others, participants who scored a Mean score of less than 3.5 on the 7 point ASI scale (13 participants – 11%) were selected as those with Non-sexist attitude and the correlations were tested. Thus it was found that there is no significant correlation (p>.01) between non-sexist attitude and likability or the endorsement of the comics.

Following this, a linear regression analysis was carried out to verify whether hostile

sexist attitude predicts likability of the comics. The same was done for benevolent sexist attitude and likability, since it did have a marginal significance in correlation.

The analysis was carried out using ANOVA and the $R^2$ value for Hostile sexist attitude was calculated to be.080 and for Benevolent sexist attitude was.028. Thus it was found that Hostile sexist attitude significantly predicts (Sig: 0.02) Likability towards Gendered comics. It was also found that Benevolent sexist attitude marginally predicts (Sig: 0.07) Likability towards Gendered comics.

### Findings

### Hypothesis 1 is partially supported

There is a significant correlation between Hostile Sexism and Likability of the comics, but no significant correlation between Hostile Sexism and Readiness to recommend the comics.

### Hypothesis 2 is marginally supported

There is a marginal significance (Sig: 0.07) in the correlation between Benevolent Sexism and Likability of the comics, but no significant correlation between Benevolent Sexism and Readiness to recommend the comics.

### Hypothesis 3 is not supported

There was no significant association between Non-sexist attitude and Likability of the comics or Readiness to recommend it to others.

The findings from the study show that sexist attitude is highly prevalent in a country like India, and is manifested either as hostile or benevolent form in almost everyone at some point of their life.

Having said that, the research has given a picture of the Indian scenario, and has thus given scope for further studies to be conducted in the future.

The fact that both Hostile and Benevolent Sexism are correlated with Likability of Sexist comics, shed light on the perception and reception of such content in comics, books, movies, advertisements and other forms of media, thus giving way for more such content in the future.

**Table.1** Means, Standard Deviation, and Pearson correlation coefficients of sexist attitude with likability and endorsement of the comics

|   |   | Mean | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|---|---|------|-----|------|------|------|
| 1. | Hostile Sexism | 4.29 | .854 | - | - | - |
| 2. | Benevolent Sexism | 4.33 | .805 | .549** | - | - |
| 3. | Likability | 3.06 | .852 | .283** | .169 | - |
| 4. | Endorsement | 2.86 | .842 | .013 | .012 | .541** |

*\*\*p <.01*

**Table.2** Means, Standard Deviation, and Pearson correlation coefficients of non-sexist attitude with likability and endorsement of the comics

|   |                    | Mean   | SD      | 1    | 2    |
|---|--------------------|--------|---------|------|------|
| 1.| Non-sexist attitude| 3.1643 | .64484  | -    | -    |
| 2.| Likability         | 2.7473 | 1.00026 | .512 | -    |
| 3.| Endorsement        | 2.6769 | .90384  | .200 | .592 |

On the other hand, both Hostile and Benevolent sexism are not statistically associated with the readiness to recommend the comics to others, showing though they like the comics, it is not necessarily expected of them to endorse it. This could be the result of social conformity, the roles played out in the society, the fear of their social image being questioned, etc, which could be explored in further studies.

Also, the fact that hypothesis 3 could be statistically tested only with 11% of the participants in the category shows how greatly sexist attitude is prevalent and accepted in a country like India, not just among men, but also among women.

The results prove that there is scope for work to be done in this area, though Feminist ideas and Women empowerment statements are being made on a regular basis. The results could help prove the chauvinistic roles played out in the society and probably alter the way women are being portrayed. It could also give insight into how big an issue this is, and thus take some serious and effective measures to control it.

However, the study has its own limitations. Since it is a part of a college project, there is a limitation in terms of time spent for the research. Also, the sample is limited to people who are active on Social networking sites, so it cannot be generalised to the whole population. It majorly looks at only the literate group who can read and interpret comics. The study couldn't focus on the illiterate population, where sexism could be more commonly seen.

Though the limitations confine the scope of the study, the results have proven the true dynamics in the Indian society.

The fact that it is the first of its kind studies in India which looks at the causal relationship between sexism and the perception of media, and how something seemingly miniscule in nature can have a greater reason and meaning to it, makes it one of its kind and a solid ground for future studies to start off with.

Taking it a step further, the study was done using Comics as stimuli. The same could be expanded to books, films or other forms of media, and the influence of such content on people, or children in their growing ages can be explored. This could in turn be linked to the factors contributing to the development of sexist attitude in people.

Awareness camps, psycho-education, help-lines to cater to the needs of victims of domestic violence, etc could be initiated from the Government and an individual level to prevent such situations as much as possible.

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