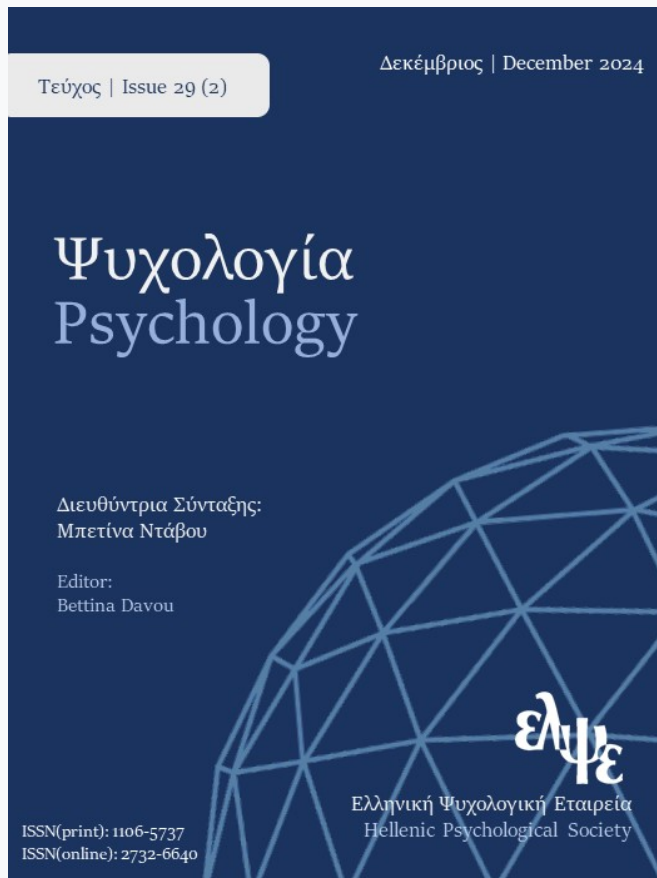


# Psychology: the Journal of the Hellenic Psychological Society

Vol 29, No 2 (2024)

December 2024



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doi: [10.12681/psy\\_hps.37452](https://doi.org/10.12681/psy_hps.37452)

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### To cite this article:

Flouli, A., & Athanasiades, C. (2024). Spoken sexism as a threat to women's well-being . *Psychology: The Journal of the Hellenic Psychological Society*, 29(2), 224–240. [https://doi.org/10.12681/psy\\_hps.37452](https://doi.org/10.12681/psy_hps.37452)

## ΕΜΠΕΙΡΙΚΗ ΕΡΓΑΣΙΑ | RESEARCH PAPER

# Spoken sexism as a threat to women's well-being

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## KEYWORDS

Spoken sexism  
Foucauldian discourse analysis  
Patriarchy  
Feminism  
Feminist discourse

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## ABSTRACT

While the consequences of gender-based violence on women's mental health are well documented, the impact of everyday sexist comments on their psychological well-being is still understudied. For this reason, the present paper aims to explore how women discursively construct spoken sexism as a threat to their well-being, drawing upon a feminist discourse, while sculpting for themselves a subject position of oppression. The study was qualitative in nature and thirty women took part voluntarily in individual semi-structured interviews. Post-structuralism was adopted as an epistemological perspective while a Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) was employed for the analyses of the material. At the same time, a feminist viewpoint was upheld throughout the entire research due to its gendered nature, given that spoken sexism is discursively constructed within patriarchal power structures. In their discourse, the participants constructed sexist comments as restrictive and threatening to their mental health while experiencing them as oppressive and abusive.

## Introduction

Despite the noteworthy progress that has been made when it comes to gender equality, women continue to be exposed to sex-based discrimination, oppression, and violence, which has serious effects on their mental health (Pemberton & Loeb, 2020; Taylor, 2020). To make matters worse, the recent COVID-19 pandemic put women's psychological well-being at even greater risk (Almeida, 2020), leading, for example, to an increase in domestic violence incidents and a decrease in domestic violence reports to the authorities (Bau, 2022; Kourti, 2023). It should be mentioned that not all women are victims of direct physical or sexual abuse. In contemporary societies, however, women continue to live in oppressive environments and are regularly exposed to sexist microaggressions (i.e. sexist comments) that distort their personalities, can result in internalized sexism, and constitute a risk factor to their physical as well as their mental well-being (Berg, 2006; Cherry & Wilcox, 2021; Sue, 2010).

The negative effects of violence against women are well-known and have been significantly studied (Chrisler & Ferguson, 2006; Goodman et al., 1993; Pemberton & Loeb, 2020; Taylor, 2020). However, everyday sexist incidents, such as sexist comments, can also have a negative effect on women's well-being (Hosang & Bhui, 2018). Sexist discourse, including both spoken words and written text, is defined as "language in use" which stereotypes or discriminates against a person based on their gender (McPhillips & Speer, 2015). The norm that the prototypical human is a male, forms the very structure of many languages (Menegatti & Rubini, 2017; Silveira, 1980). Additionally, everyday speech is characterized by a plethora of both overt and indirect linguistic assets that contribute to the continuation of male dominance, while oppressing women by imposing on them stereotypical sex roles (Mills, 2008; Sunderland, 2004). For most women it is the indirect or benevolent

expressions of sexism that burden them and dominate their daily lives (Berg, 2006). For this reason, the present paper focuses on women's discursive construction of everyday spoken sexism as a threat to their well-being.

In general, psychological well-being refers to a person's overall level of satisfaction with life, focusing on a sense of self-fulfillment and self-development (Linley, 2013; Matud et al., 2019). Even to this day, there is a notable gendered disparity in psychological well-being, with mental health providers being consistently biased against women, whose mental health remains a neglected research area (Silverio, 2021). One could argue that the most significant risk factor to their well-being is none other than the patriarchy, which is the bedrock of women's oppression. Patriarchy can be defined as male dominance over women both in the public and the private sphere, where women are excluded from positions of power (Lerner, 1986; Millett, 1970; Weedon, 1999). Patriarchy is the source of various forms of sexism, such as everyday sexist comments and its impact on the lives of women is evident both in the public and the private sphere (Adisa et al, 2020; Brysk, 2022; Javed & Chattu, 2020; Khelghat-Doost & Sibly, 2020). Catcalling, for example, which is a distinct and widespread form of spoken sexism, has been found to function as a threat for sexual assault (Flouli et al., 2022). At the same time, everyday sexist comments serve as a tool for controlling women and thus, endorse the preservation of the patriarchy (Flouli & Athanasiades, 2022).

During the 4th wave of feminism and the #metoo era, however, a feminist discourse in support of women began to emerge, with women raising their voices collectively through social media and challenging rape culture and sexual harassment while showing empathy, solidarity and support to one another (Loney-Howes et al, 2021; Rodino-Colocino; 2018). This was seen as a threat to the existing patriarchal power structures because it aimed at their deconstruction by providing a new interpretative framework for conceptualizing oppressive experiences as well as how to respond to systemic injustices (Lisnek et al., 2022; Clark-Parsons, 2019). Within this context, the aim of the present research was to provide women with a safe space for conceptualizing and discursively construct their experiences about spoken sexism in relation to their well-being.

### ***Consequences of everyday sexism on women's mental health***

Prolonged exposure to everyday sexism, including sexist comments, can affect women's mental well-being to a greater extent in comparison to other stress factors because it focuses on a very central piece of their identity; their gender (Cherry & Wilcox, 2021; Landrine & Klonoff, 1997). More specifically, it has been found that the systemic discrimination against women and everyday sexism are related to higher psychological distress (Hurst & Beesley, 2013) as well as various mental illnesses (Hosang & Bhui, 2018). For example, gender-based discrimination can lead to chronic traumatic stress, PTSD symptomatology and depression (Berg, 2006; Goodman et al., 1993; Herman, 1992; Hosang & Bhui, 2018; Klonoff et al., 2000; Oswald et al., 2019; Root, 1992). Sex-based trauma refers to the manifestation of trauma-related symptoms on women due to the oppression they experience (Cherry & Wilcox, 2021). It has also been suggested that differences in symptomatology between men and women could be due to everyday sexist incidents experienced by the latter (Klonoff et al., 2000).

Everyday experiences of sexist oppression, including sexist comments, can lead to anger and intense anxiety, have a negative effect on self-image and even lead to eating disorders (Garaigordobil & Maganto, 2013; Swim et al., 2001). Furthermore, sexist language can affect women's sense of belonging while making them more reluctant to take on roles that do not match their stereotypical gender role (de Lemus & Estevan-Reina, 2021). At the same time, many women internalize sexist stereotypes (a psychological phenomenon known as internalized sexism) and objectify themselves, burdening their psychological well-being (Becker & Sibley, 2016; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Szymanski et al., 2009). In addition, experiencing the self as a sexual object can also affect the mental health of women in a negative way (Moradi & Huang, 2008).

Interestingly enough, both men and women tend to overvalue the negative psychological consequences of hostile sexism while undermining those of benevolent sexism (Bosson et al., 2010). This could make women less

likely to share their distress related to benevolent sexism while burdening even further their emotional well-being (Bosson et al., 2010). When it comes to hostile sexism, women usually experience anger, anxiety, and frustration (Bosson et al., 2010; Schneider et al., 2001). More particularly, it has been found that hostile sexism comments and overt sexist jokes cause women stress, rage, and aversion (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005; LaFrance & Woodzicka, 1998).

Negative emotional consequences such as anger, however, can be caused even by experiences of benevolent sexism (Bosson et al., 2010). Moreover, benevolent sexism can reinforce self-objectification, making women feel ashamed of their bodies (Calogero & Jost, 2011). For example, it has been found that benevolent yet sexist compliments that are about women's bodies and / or their weight can negatively affect their self-image (Calogero et al., 2009), making them spend more time on their appearance (Calogero & Jost, 2011). Furthermore, benevolent, yet sexist jokes can affect the cognitive function as well as the performance of women, making them think that they are incompetent while negatively affecting their self-confidence (Dardenne et al., 2007, 2013).

Due to the above, mental health professionals have an ethical responsibility to be aware of the multiple consequences of sexism on the mental health of women while being aware of their own bias. It was only in the late '60s when feminist psychology and psychotherapy began to expand as a brunch both in research and in clinical practice, focusing on issues of gender such as gender-based violence (Brown, 2017; Kaschak, 2016). Additionally, in recognition of the pivotal role that gender has on mental health, the American Psychological Association has published specific guidelines about clinical psychological practice with girls and women (APA, Girls and Women Guidelines Group, 2018).

It should be noted that while researching the relevant literature, no academic research about the negative effects of everyday sexist comments on women's well-being was found to have been conducted in Greece. At the same time, extreme forms of sex-based violence, such as femicide are on the rise, with women being increasingly often victims of domestic homicide (Karakasi et al., 2023). Sexist comments are not only a Greek phenomenon of course. Given the lack of relevant research, however, producing new knowledge on how spoken sexism is discursively constructed within the Greek context was the main driving force and purpose of this research.

### ***Discourse analysis and feminist research***

Alternative approaches regarding the theorization and examination of phenomena such as sexism begun to emerge already during the second wave of the feminist movement. Post-structuralism affected feminist research to a significant degree, turning the attention from the "subject" to "discourse" as context for meaning and power (Burr, 2003; Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1987). Discourse analysis became the basic theoretical and epistemological ground for feminist research (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1995) while "discourses" were seen as a tool that creates and maintains unequal relations of power (Lazar, 2007; Philips & Jorgensen, 2002). The goal was to develop meanings and knowledge that are historically, socially and culturally placed, aiming at dismantling gender inequality by challenging oppressive discourses (Gavey, 1989).

When it comes to feminist research regarding sexism in language, the post-structuralist perspective played a pivotal role, given that it is not easy to characterize a word or a phrase as inherently sexist. As Sunderland (2004) suggested, its meaning will always vary with context, (2004, p. 192). In addition, attempts of radical reformation of language which aim in what Cameron (1995) described as verbal hygiene, do not consider the cultural, political or social context in which languages are spoken (Speer, 2002). This led to a turn from researching "sexist language" to researching "sexist discourse". In other words, it was discourse and not language that was seen as the basic tool for constructing as well as for challenging the existing gender power-relations. According to Van Leeuwen (2008), discourses constitute social cognitions and are developed within certain social contexts. At the same time, discourses construct and offer identities while they position the speakers in various social contexts (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003; Weedon, 1987). When it comes to gender inequality and sexism,

discourses help us understand how sexist ideas persist and are being communicated (Speer, 2002).

Turning from the “subject” to “discourse”, however, does not mean that people are just passive language users. On the contrary, they have agency and make choices when it comes to how they position themselves in relation to the available discourses (Gavey, 1989). This way, discourse can be manipulated by those who already are in a position of power and have the means to construct a reality that matches their needs while ignoring or even oppressing others. As Cameron (1985) suggests for example, men can use certain discourses in various ways to benefit themselves even more. Thus, sexist comments in everyday discourse can be seen as a tool for maintaining and communicating sexist views and ideas while reinforcing the privileged position of men within the patriarchy.

## **Aims of the present study**

The existing research about the negative effects of everyday sexist incidents, including sexist comments, on women’s mental health is mostly quantitative in nature (Calogero & Jost, 2011; Garaigordobil & Maganto, 2013; Swim et al., 2001). In contrast, women’s subjective understanding regarding the negative effects that sexist comments can have on their well-being through the lens of a qualitative perspective appears to be missing. Driven by the fact that women’s subjective expressions of their experiences have been systematically ignored for years, the present study aims primarily at providing them with a safe space to communicate their views.

In detail, this is a qualitative study, solely focused on women’s discourse. The core purpose of the research was to examine how spoken sexism is discursively constructed in reference to the well-being of the participants. A deeper understanding of their lived experiences through qualitative lens can help in acquiring new knowledge as to how women discursively shape sexist comments as a risk factor for their well-being.

Furthermore, according to the European Union Gender Equality Index (2023), Greece ranks 24th among the other European countries, with 58 out of 100 points, a score that is 12.2 points below the average score of the EU countries. It appears that Greek women are still facing numerous challenges regarding patriarchal oppression and violence while striving for equal rights. For these reasons, researching how women in Greece discursively construct spoken sexism was considered integral.

## **Method**

As mentioned before, the fundamental aim of the present study is to explore the participants’ discursive constructions when it comes to the impact of spoken sexism on their well-being. Due to the nature of the research question, a qualitative methodological approach was selected for the present study. More particularly, the researchers employed a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) in their effort to explore spoken sexism as a discursive object. FDA is concerned with language and its part in constituting social and psychological life through culturally available discourses that shape what can be said, by whom, where and when. Discourses can construct objects and offer subject positions while making available certain ways-of-seeing as well as certain ways-of-being (Willig, 2013). FDA was selected because it offers a much-needed space for diverse and subjective understandings regarding spoken sexism which are often neglected by traditional positivist research methods.

The present paper is solely focused on the discursive construction of spoken sexism as a risk factor for women’s well-being, emanating from a feminist discourse which operates within the broader spectrum of feminism and gender equality. The findings that will later be presented research are part of a wider research project on discursive constructions of spoken sexism (Flouli, 2022). The whole research was carried out between the years 2017-2022 and the results in their totality revealed numerous discursive constructions deriving from various discourses, often opposing ones (i.e. the discourse of hegemonic masculinity vs the discourse of resistance, see Flouli & Athanasiades, 2022, 2023). Furthermore, it was conducted in line with the research ethics protocol as defined by the research committee of Aristotle University.

### ***Participants and recruitment***

Thirty women, aged between 18 and 45 years old, agreed to take part in the study. All of them had experienced spoken sexism personally (purposive sampling). At first, a limited number of first informants nominated potential candidates via their social networks which led to subsequent snowballing. All the participants who were interviewed for the purposes of this study agreed to do so voluntarily and gave their informed consent in writing.

The recruitment process was ongoing until data saturation was reached, leading to 30 interviews in total. The women who agreed to take part came from the areas of northern and central Greece. Almost all of them were employed except four university students and four job-seekers. Apart from the students, all others were tertiary education graduates. When it comes to their relationship status, ten of the women were single, eight were in a relationship and the rest of them were married. Lastly, seven of them had children. To uphold anonymity, no further demographics are presented.

### ***Materials***

For the aims of the present study, a semi-structured interview protocol including 20 open-ended questions was designed and piloted. The questions were designed to cover various forms of spoken sexism (i.e., humor, compliments, insults etc.). Furthermore, the participants were provided with informed consent forms including information about the purpose of the study, the research procedures, anonymity, protection of sensitive information and voluntary participation. Contact information of the researcher as well as the of the supervisor were also included.

### ***Procedure***

All participants were interviewed in private environments to minimize random distractions. During the interviews, they were asked to share their lived experiences as well as how they make sense of sexist comments in everyday spoken language. Detailed attention was given to their discursive construction of sexist comments as something that has a negative impact on their well-being.

The interviews were audio-recorded with the informed consent of the participants. Following that, each audio recording was transcribed verbatim. Then, each transcribed interview was carefully read while listening to the recorded audio. This was done to ensure accuracy but also to help the researcher familiarize with the research data prior to the analyses. Finally, each participant was given a unique alias (pseudonym) to protect their anonymity.

### ***Analysis***

The selected qualitative data were then analyzed in line with Willig's (2013) six stages of FDA. Firstly, each transcribed interview was read several times. All implicit and explicit references regarding spoken sexism, which was the discursive object of the analyses, were highlighted and noted down as a way to be systematically identified. The researcher also noted down thoughts and ideas that were considered relevant to the aims of the study. Moreover, spoken sexism, being the discursive object, was examined for variability and consistency in the interviews of the participants (Willig, 2013).

The next step was to track down the discursive constructions of spoken sexism within wider discourses. The researcher tried to also explore how the women who took part in the study positioned themselves and others within such wider discourses. Furthermore, the discourses that were identified were then studied in terms of subjectivity (i.e., how they were experienced by the women) and analyzed with regards to their effects on gendered power structures within patriarchal societies and social practices.

Following that, the researcher paid attention to the wider contexts within which spoken sexism was discursively constructed, being mindful of potential implications both on social and political level. Next, the focus of the analyses was turned towards the subject positions that the participants upheld in relation to the identified discourses. After that, the researcher tried to examine not only the relationships between discourses and practices but also the relationships between discourses and subjectivity, as directed by the suggested FDA stages (Willig, 2013).

### ***Reflexivity and transparency***

When it comes to the qualitative paradigm, research is understood to be a subjective process (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Qualitative researchers bring their personal assumptions, interests, and experiences into the research while the very topics they choose to focus on reflect their subjectivity. Furthermore, the researchers employing FDA tend to engage with their analyses in a more active manner which is in line with the scope of post-structuralism; that there is no absolute and objective truth. However, issues of power could potentially arise when it comes to how one manages research material (Parker & Burman, 1993). For this reason, critical reflection regarding the new knowledge that was produced, as well as the role that the researchers played in producing that knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2013), was proved to be an essential and valuable tool to ensure the quality of the present study. Of equal value was also the close guidance and consultation that were provided by the doctoral advisor (second author) of the whole research project, particularly when it came to identifying the wider discourses as well as the subject positions upheld by the participants. Various ideas and alternative concepts were discussed thoroughly, leading to further modifications when deemed necessary.

Apart from that, the doctoral counselling committee also provided guidance. Furthermore, the findings of the study were also discussed with some of the participants, who were asked by the researcher to provide feedback on the analyses and interpretations. The comments that we received were much encouraging as to the correct understanding of their experiences regarding spoken sexism. It is important, however, that the reader keeps in mind that these qualitative findings concern the subjective experiences of the women who participated in the study in a given time and space.

## **Results**

The women who participated in the study discursively constructed spoken sexism as a risk factor for their well-being. In their discourse, they portrayed sexist comments as a burden irrespective of the context or the intentions behind them. For this particular discursive construction, the participants drew upon a feminist discourse, being able to identify and express the psychological impact of spoken sexism in terms of oppression, restriction, and abuse. Furthermore, they named a plethora of affective responses triggered by sexist comments such as anger, rage, sadness, disappointment, self-restriction, and feelings of oppression. The aforementioned discursive construction is presented and discussed through selected extracts from the interviews.

In the first extract, Emilia (aged 29), when speaking about the consequences of spoken sexism, stated:

“Researcher: I see. Would you say that such comments have an impact on you?”

Emilia: Absolutely! They do have an impact on me and not only momentarily because I can keep thinking about them for days and not feel well. I can feel devastated.

Researcher: How would you characterize such comments?

Emilia: Abusive! I think that when they make such comments, they may not understand that what they do to me then and there is to abuse me, because I can truly feel devastated, I cannot let it go, it follows me for days! For them it may be just a comment, but I feel enraged and then I feel hurt.”

The above extract is emotionally charged to a notable degree. In first person, Emilia cites the negative emotions that sexist comments trigger in her while conceptualizing the latter as abusive. She portrays the impact of spoken sexism as something obvious and as something that can last for days. Moreover, her choice of words (abusive, devastated, enraged) when discursively constructing sexist comments, speaks volumes about the level of the emotional distress that she reports to experience.

It is important to note that Emilia clearly states that she feels like she is being abused even if the individuals who make the sexist comments are not aware of the impact of their words. In her discourse, she positions them as responsible for the negative impact on her well-being. Furthermore, even though Emilia suggests that the individuals who make such comments may not understand the impact of what they are saying, she does not try to use this as a way to excuse or justify them. It appears that the intention behind the comments does not reduce the negative impact on Emilia's self-expressed well-being. On the contrary, she still holds them accountable for their words.

Consequently, and intentions aside, Emilia discursively constructs spoken sexism as a burden which she carries in her for days. This burden appears to emotionally exhaust her, causing her to experience intense anger and disappointment, followed by emotional pain. In this case, Emilia vividly depicts the consequences of sexist comments as lasting in time, following her for days and burdening her psychologically. At the same time, the fact that she can identify and express those negative consequences show a sense a feminist awareness and an understanding that spoken sexism and its impact is not to be taken lightly. In other words, she does not show apathy or disregard but rather speaks up about how sexist comments threaten her well-being.

In the second extract, when asked about the consequences of spoken sexism, Elisa (aged 30), stated:

“Researcher: Would you say that sexist comments can affect a person’s behaviour?”

Elisa: Yes, yes.

Researcher: In which way?

Elisa: Compliance. With what a person is supposed to do. Meaning that the behaviour is impacted because, a woman, who may want to put something else on for example, she may instead try to cover up her body way more, out of fear of being called certain names or other things that could happen to her”.

In the above extract, Elisa discursively constructs spoken sexism as a risk factor for women's well-being due to the compliance they lead to. To better illustrate this compliance, she chooses to shape her discourse around a rather common example: that of a woman monitoring her appearance and limiting herself out of fear when it comes to her clothes. Drawing upon a feminist discourse, she clearly identifies the controlling nature of spoken sexism and suggests that a woman may be forced to comply and cover up her body way more than she may desire. This example is a very characteristic one, when it comes to the many ways that patriarchy tries to control the sexuality of women through dictating how they are supposed to dress and cover up their bodies.

According to Elisa, the women's fear that leads to compliance has to do with being called “particular” names or other things that could happen to her. In other words, she suggests that women are being stripped of their right to freely choose their clothes because the “wrong” choice could result in catcalls, verbal assault or “other things that could happen.” When it comes to those “other things”, one could suggest that she is potentially referring to sexual abuse. Drawing once again upon a feminist discourse, Elisa suggests through this particular example that women may be forced to make fear-based decisions about their bodies. This not only limits their freedom of expression when it comes to choosing what to wear, but also negatively affects their well-being as much as their way of being, compelling women not to act in accordance with their desires but rather setting them aside due to fear.

In the next extract, when speaking about the negative impact of spoken sexism, Lyda (aged 26) stated:



“I think it promotes deeply... men’s sexism towards women promotes deeply internalized sexism in women. They internalize all these comments they hear and turn them into an internal compass when it comes to leading their lives. They internalize them and see them as unbreakable rules, thinking that since the majority of men believes in those things therefore I must too...I will try to follow these rules, that, for example, women must not have many sexual partners or that women must dress modestly otherwise they may rape them. So, instead of realizing that this is something sick, this is something pathological that must be uprooted, they consider it as something normal because it is so pervasive, and they base their personality and their life on such comments.”

In her discourse, Lyda constructs sexist comments as something that women internalize, as something that restricts them and leads them to compliance. More specifically, she talks about internalized sexism which she discursively constructs as a product of men’s sexism against women that is communicated to the latter through the use of sexist comments. Additionally, she cleverly uses a metaphor to describe what spoken sexism does to women; it functions as an internal compass that women use to navigate their lives, following the patriarchal rules that dictate what women should or should not do.

Moreover, Lyda positions men as the basic conveyors of sexist comments and holds them responsible for their negative effect on women. On the other hand, she positions women as oppressed via her view that women internalize sexist comments and adjust their lives accordingly. This way, she brings into the conversation the psychological oppression that women are exposed to, showing empathy, and understanding. However, by speaking mostly in third person, she appears to detach herself from them. Drawing from a feminist discourse, she seems to have developed her own understanding about the negative impact of spoken sexism on women and therefore does not identify with the women who, as she describes, base their personality and their life on such comments.

Furthermore, Lyda gives in the above extract two characteristic examples of female oppression. Both examples refer to women’s bodies and their sexuality, the first being that women should not have many sexual partners and the second that women should dress modestly otherwise they may get raped. These two examples reflect very accurately the psychological oppression that women are exposed to as a result of misogynistic stereotypes, which are communicated to them through sexist comments. Lyda characterizes this situation as something sick and as something pathological that should be uprooted. Drawing from a feminist discourse, however, she explains that women base their personalities and their lives on such comments because sexism is a pervasive phenomenon. Through feminist lens, she can identify the impact of spoken sexism and the misogynistic stereotypes that it communicates. Furthermore, she goes ahead and constructs them as a hazard for the psychological well-being of women, while depicting the latter once more as oppressed.

When asked about the consequences of spoken sexism, Roxanne (ages 20), stated:

“It surely lowers your self-confidence. Because there are many things that a person wants to do and dares not to do them out of fear, due to such comments that they may hear about themselves or others. For example, I stopped playing sports due to this exact reason. And I know that many of my friends who were female athletes also stopped for this reason.”

In the above extract, Roxanne discursively constructs spoken sexism as a risk factor for her well-being via an example about women in sports, by reporting that she stopped playing basketball out of fear. She also adds that this is not only her personal story but also the story of many of her female friends who were athletes and stopped training. In her discourse, she highlights the fact that sexist comments can stop a person from doing things they may want to do and thus, restricting them.

However, it is not only that Roxanne is being robbed of the chance to continue taking part in sports. Apart from feeling restricted and scared, she also reports that sexist comments lower her self-confidence, impacting

her well-being. This particular example, as well as the previously mentioned examples regarding women's clothes, illustrate the various ways in which sexist comments can burden and restrict the well-being of women; from their appearance and how they are supposed or not supposed to dress, to the activities they can or cannot engage in. Drawing upon a feminist discourse, Roxanne highlights and acknowledges the impact of spoken sexism on women's well-being in an effort to show that their negative consequences should not be ignored or taken lightly.

In the next extract, when asked to describe how she reacts when she hears sexist comments, Daphne (aged 29), responded.

"I get angry, I get upset, I think that's when I lose it...I would like to be calmer, but I don't succeed. Basically, due to the fact that I get angry, and I get upset and I start yelling I think that is when I lose my point. If I could speak more calmly it would, maybe, be better for me. Meaning that I lose control because I get so mad, I mean, my anger goes beyond me."

In her discourse, Daphne constructs spoken sexism as a risk factor for women's emotional stability and more specifically, as something that burdens her with anger. In detail, she describes that sexist comments make her upset, make her lose control. At the same time, she points out that she would like to be calmer, but she fails doing so. She goes on to explain that she does not like this situation and that she would prefer to be able to cope with such comments without yelling. However, it appears that spoken sexism affects her to such an extent that it leads to conflicts. As a result, she admits that she loses control, starts yelling and thus, her well-being is compromised.

It is important to note that sexist comments appear to be a double psychological trap for Daphne. She states that she gets angry and yells when she hears sexist comments. Then on top of that, she gets angry again, only this time her anger is towards herself. She then goes on to explain that she gets angry at herself for getting mad and yelling in the first place. This appears to cause a lot of frustration in her, being trapped in her anger. Drawing from a feminist discourse, she subjectively positions herself as oppressed by the psychological consequences of spoken sexism, which threaten her emotional stability and well-being.

### ***Subject positioning***

The women who participated in the study and discursively constructed spoken sexism as a risk factor and a threat to their well-being, sculpted for themselves a subject position of oppression. Drawing upon a feminist discourse, they are raising their voices and speaking up about the many ways spoken sexism impacts them and their well-being. In detail, they discursively construct themselves as women that are subjected to restrictions and discriminations, as they are being forced to adapt their behaviour to the patriarchal stereotypes that are communicated to them through sexist comments. This way, their well-being appears to be compromised. The negative feelings they reported to experience due to sexist comments included anger, shame, disappointment, frustration, and fear. Such feelings are also very common among victims of gender-based violence (Taylor, 2020).

Despite the noteworthy progress that has been made so far, when it comes to gender equality, the participants stated that spoken sexism burdens them by restricting and controlling their self-expression. This underlines the existence of a patriarchal social context that perpetuates spoken sexism while ignoring its negative impact on women (Sunderland, 2004). The control and the restrictions apply to various instances both in the public and the private sphere; the way they dress, the way they express their sexuality, their life choices. This practice can have serious effects on the construction of their gender identity as women because they are being related to an outdated system of values that matches neither their needs nor their self-perception (Butler, 1997; Mills, 2008; Sunderland, 2004).

Moreover, it has been found that spoken sexism and the stereotypical messages that it communicates is a significant factor, when it comes to forming opinions regarding the place that people have in societies based on

their sex (Briere & Lanktree, 1983; Jost & Kay, 2005; Maass & Arcuri, 1996; McMinn et al., 1990; McPhillips & Speer, 2015; Mills, 2008; Weatherall, 2015). By adopting a subject position of oppression, the women who participated in the study pointed out that sexist comments are being used as a tool to control their freedom of self-expression, their agency, and their way of being. In other words, they identified and acknowledged that spoken sexism restricts them not only on a psychological level but also on systemic level by safe-guarding the existing patriarchal power-structures in favour of men. This oppressive discrimination also affects the well-being of women as it perpetuates gender inequality in societies.

Furthermore, it is important to note that a central aspect of their way of being that is restricted by sexist comments is the way they express their sexuality. In their discourse, the participants named that on many occasions they fear they may be sexually assaulted, if they do not follow the norms; if they do not, for example, dress according to patriarchal standards. In this case, their well-being is affected not only due to their fear but also because they are being denied the freedom to dress as they like and to express their sexuality the way they desire. By identifying these restrictions to their freedom through feminist lens, the participants depict themselves once more as oppressed while their well-being is at risk.

## Discussion

The women who participated in the study subjectively constructed spoken sexism in their discourse as a threat to their well-being. This discursive construction emerges within a broader context of collective empowerment, where women speak up and challenge the patriarchy while showing solidarity and empathy to each other. It is an in-depth illustration of the negative effects that sexist comments can bring. Drawing upon a feminist discourse, they portrayed themselves as oppressed by the restrictions that are imposed on them through spoken sexism, especially when it comes to their bodies and the expression of their sexuality. This is rather significant given the current neopatriarchal backlash against women's rights and freedoms such as the recent overturn of *Roe v Wade* in the US (Lewandowska, 2022; Sun, 2022) and the restrictive abortion laws in EU countries like Italy and Poland (Bielska-Brodziak, et al., 2020). Furthermore, their discourse abounds in negative emotions such as anger, shame, fear, and frustration while they focus on how much they feel burdened by them. It should be noted that the negative emotions are they report to experience are like those reported by victims of gender-based violence (Taylor, 2020). The construction of spoken sexism as a threat to the well-being of women is in line with similar findings in other studies that examined the negative impact of sexism, including sexist comments, on women's mental health (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Miles-McLean et al., 2015).

Moreover, the participants discursively constructed spoken sexism as a threat to their well-being in form of intense anger and frustration. They spoke at length about how such feelings weigh them down and confuse them. Other studies have shown relatively similar findings with women experiencing high levels of anxiety, anger, depression, and helplessness when being targeted by sexist comments (Chhun, 2011; Farmer & Smock Jordan, 2017). One could argue, that acknowledging these feelings as a result of patriarchal oppression through a feminist perceptive could maybe lead to empowerment. Anger and frustration could be channeled in a way of speaking up against spoken sexism, sending a message that oppression is not something that women are willing to tolerate any more. This, however, does not necessarily alleviate the psychological distress that sexist comments can cause.

It appears, however, that the plethora of negative emotions that the participants named in their discourse is not the only burden they carry. They, also, chose to focus on the freedom restrictions imposed on them when it comes to self-expression, autonomy, self-determination, and expression of their sexuality and their effects of their well-being. This way, they draw attention to the function of spoken sexism as a "guardian" of sexist stereotypes that are communicated to women in an effort to force them to comply with their traditional gender role while leading to their objectification. A key-factor for this is the cultivation of fear; what will happen to you as a woman if you go against your traditional role, the one that the patriarchy dictates for you? The participants

made clear in their discourse that this practice affects their well-being to a severe degree, leading not only to forced compliance but even to internalization of sexist stereotypes. Other studies have shown similar findings revealing that female objectification and conformity to feminine norms is associated with psychological distress, shame, and depression (Rooney, 2016; Iwamoto et al., 2024).

It is important to note that the women who participated in the study made almost no mention in their discourse about possible intentions behind the sexist comments. Interestingly, they discursively constructed spoken sexism as a risk to their well-being regardless of context and intentions. They left no room for excuses, nor did they try to conceptualize the impact of sexist comments based on the intentions behind them. In other words, the circumstances under which a sexist comment was communicated appear to play no significant role. One could say that this shows a no-tolerance standpoint from the part of the participants whose discourse was focused exclusively on the construction of sexist comments as something negative for their well-being.

The present study covered an important gap in the existing literature when it comes to how women discursively construct the impact of spoken sexism on their well-being. Despite the pervasive nature of the patriarchy and the current backlash on feminism, the women who participated in the study chose to speak up and condemn spoken sexism within a broader feminist ideology. The subject position of oppression that they adopt should not be interpreted as giving up hope. Instead, the participants make clear through this position that they are very much aware not only of the patriarchal power structures they live in but also of the negative consequences they experience because of them. Unfortunately, the study also revealed that sex-based oppression is still prevalent and that everyday incidents of spoken sexism, such as catcalls, remain a reality for women and are used as a tool to deepen even further the structural disadvantage against them when it comes to power relations. Nevertheless, the participants showed that they can identify the threat that sexist comments pose on their well-being and are not willing to keep silent.

Qualitative approaches in research have many advantages, including the in-depth study of complex concepts. However, it is important to note that the results presented in this study concern solely the experiences of the participants at a given time and space. This means that they cannot be generalized in the same manner as those of a quantitative study. However, generalization of results was never the focus of this qualitative study. The aim has always been an in-depth exploration on how women discursively constructed the impact of spoken sexism on their well-being.

Another limitation that could be considered has to do with the sample. The women who agreed to be interviewed were all highly educated (either tertiary education students or graduates) and came from specific parts of Greece. In this sense, one could argue that the sample somewhat lacked in diversity. For this reason, it would be more than interesting to see future studies examining spoken sexism as a discursive object with a more diverse sample when it comes for example to cultural background or gender identity.

## Funding

The authors did not receive any form of financial support for the research, authorship, or publication of the present study.

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## ΕΜΠΕΙΡΙΚΗ ΕΡΓΑΣΙΑ | RESEARCH PAPER

# Ο προφορικός σεξισμός ως απειλή για την ευζωία των γυναικών

Αναστασία ΦΛΟΥΛΗ<sup>1</sup>, Χριστίνα ΑΘΑΝΑΣΙΑΔΟΥ<sup>1</sup><sup>1</sup> Τμήμα Ψυχολογίας, Αριστοτέλειο Πανεπιστήμιο Θεσσαλονίκης

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Προφορικός σεξισμός Φουκωική ανάλυση λόγου Πατριαρχία, Φεμινισμός Φεμινιστικός λόγος	Ενώ οι επιπτώσεις της έμφυλης βίας στην ψυχική υγεία των γυναικών έχουν διερευνηθεί σε σημαντικό βαθμό, η επίδραση που έχουν τα καθημερινά σεξιστικά σχόλια στην ευημερία τους δεν έχει μελετηθεί επαρκώς. Για τον λόγο αυτό, η παρούσα έρευνα αποβλέπει στην διερεύνηση του πώς οι γυναίκες δομούν ρητορικά τα σεξιστικά σχόλια ως απειλή για την ευζωία τους, αντλώντας από έναν φεμινιστικό λόγο, διατηρώντας παράλληλα μια θέση υποκεκμένου καταπίεσης. Πρόκειται για μια ποιοτική έρευνα στην οποία συμμετείχαν εθελοντικά τριάντα γυναίκες μέσω ατομικών ημιδομημένων συνεντεύξεων. Για την ανάλυση των δεδομένων, διατηρήθηκε η επιστημολογική θέση του μεταστρουκτουραλισμού, ενώ για την αποτύπωση των επιμέρους λόγων αξιοποιήθηκε η Φουκωική ανάλυση λόγου. Παράλληλα, διατηρήθηκε μια φεμινιστική οπτική σε σχέση με την ερμηνεία και τη συζήτηση των αποτελεσμάτων λόγω της έμφυλης φύσης του υπό μελέτη θέματος αλλά και σε αναγνώριση του ότι ο προφορικός σεξισμός κατασκευάζεται ρητορικά μέσα στο πλαίσιο πατριαρχικών δομών εξουσίας. Τα ευρήματα αποκαλύπτουν ότι οι συμμετέχουσες κατασκευάζουν και αντιλαμβάνονται τα σεξιστικά σχόλια ως περιοριστικά και απειλητικά για την ευζωία τους ενώ παράλληλα τα βιώνουν ως καταπιεστικά και κακοποιητικά.
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