

Unveiling the Hidden Consequences of Endorsing Traditional Gender Roles in Heterosexual Relationships

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Introduction

Recent social media trends targeting young women have been encouraging a regression toward traditional gender roles in heterosexual relationships (Ironmonger, 2023; Jennings, 2023). These trends advise women to embrace their role as passive nurturers and seek men who are providers, leaders, and protectors (Jennings, 2023). The promises of love and satisfaction as

rewards for embodying the traditional woman have long been the tool of women's suppression. This is reflected in the historical categorizations of women as Madonnas or whores who were either "rewarded" or punished based on their adherence to or deviation from traditional gender roles (Hertler et al., 2023). The theory of Ambivalent Sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996) reflects contemporary

interpretations of these dichotomous sexist attitudes, asserting that sexism encompasses both hostility and benevolence. While hostile sexism echoes overtly negative attitudes toward women, benevolent sexism is characterized by seemingly positive attitudes of protecting, cherishing, and providing for women (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Although benevolent sexism and the rewards of embodying the idealized Madonna seem great at face value, they reinforce traditional gender roles that ultimately aim to suppress women. This essay will investigate past and present literature on these sexist ideologies to propose an intervention warning young women about what is hiding beneath the seemingly positive aspects of traditional relationship dynamics.

Background

Social media endorses traditional gender roles by presenting gender-stereotypic "rules" for successfully navigating dating culture (Ironmonger, 2023; Jennings, 2023). Examples of such rules include women never reaching for their wallet in the presence of a man, men opening doors and planning all dates, men making the first move,

and other similar gender-normative expectations (Jennings, 2023; Smith, 2023). Among these dating rules, there is a consistent notion that in order for men to deem women as worthy of a relationship, women must withhold sexual access outside of serious commitments (Smith, 2023). This notion is manifested in the resurgence of the "three-date rule" and similar waiting periods that can be traced to the dating guidelines of the 1990s and early 2000s (Coughlan, 2023; Smith, 2023). Such sentiments are based on the underlying belief that having sex outside of serious commitments diminishes a woman in men's eyes. These beliefs have existed for generations and are simply rebranding in this modern dating advice.

The belief that a woman's value depends on her sexual purity is often paired with the assumption that women are inherently less sexual than men (Hertler et al., 2023). Opposing this belief, Enlightenment philosopher Pierre Bayle attributed differences in men's and women's sexual expression to the suppression of women's sexuality in society (Israel, 2006, as cited in Hertler et al., 2023). Feinman (1994, as cited by Hertler et

al., 2023) attributed the suppression of women's sexuality to men's vulnerability in reproduction, likely due to issues of paternal uncertainty. According to this perspective, men's response to this vulnerability was to dichotomize women's sexuality as either virtuous or promiscuous and to ascribe social responses of reward and punishment to each label (Hertler et al., 2023). This dichotomization is reflected in Freud's Madonna-Whore complex (MWC) theory (Kosman & Kahalon, 2024). According to Freud, men who endorse the MWC hold women they categorize as pure Madonnas in high esteem, but they do not sexually desire these women (Kosman & Kahalon, 2024). Their sexual attraction can only be directed towards women when they have in some way degraded them (Hartmann, 2009). As stated by Freud, "Where such men love, they have no desire, and where they desire, they cannot love" (Hartmann, 2009, p.2335). They deem Madonnas as worthy of motherhood and being a wife (Hartmann, 2009; Hertler et al., 2023), which is the ultimate ideal for women per traditional gender norms. The whores, often placed in

the role of the mistress, the seductress, and the femme fatale, are thus left to fulfill men's desires (Hartmann, 2009; Hertler et al., 2023). Embracing the role of the Madonna offers women the protection and respect of society at the cost of suppressing their sexuality and confining them to oppressive traditional gender roles (Hertler et al., 2023). On the other hand, embodying the role of the whore offers liberation from traditional gender roles and the suppression of sexual desires, but it comes at the cost of being ostracized by society (Hertler et al., 2023). Thus, women face consequences regardless of which role they play (Hertler et al., 2023).

Although Freudian theories were a product of their time and do not entirely apply to modern psychology, some aspects of the Madonna-Whore complex have maintained their relevance. The representations of the Madonna and the Whore are reflected in modern dichotomizations of women's sexuality as either "for the streets" or "wifey material" on social media (Anderton, 2023). Paralleling the Madonna, women who adhere to traditional gender roles of modesty and passivity are

placed into the "wifey material" category (Warren-Lister, 2023). Comparatively, paralleling the whore, women who are immodest and non-traditional are referred to as "for the streets" (Anderton, 2023). Accordingly, much of the dating advice targeted towards women revolves around teaching women how to act "wifey material" (Jennings, 2023). Social media can often act as an echo chamber, exposing individuals to content that reinforces their beliefs. However, not everyone will necessarily be exposed to the same content. Therefore, it is undetermined to what extent these labels have been internalized by the average person. However, Bell et al. (2015) found that these categories had been adopted by a sample of thirty-three adolescent American boys, ages fourteen to sixteen, who describe their ideal partners as "wifey material." In interviews, these teens described "wifey" as a girl who respects herself and who will not have sex (Bell et al., 2015). Such notions illustrate how traditional gender roles that aim to suppress women's sexuality have simply been rebranded in modern dating contexts (Warren Lister, 2023; Anderton, 2023).

To demonstrate the true harm of this rebranding, we can refer to the literature investigating the complex duality of sexist attitudes and their impact on men's and women's dynamics. The MWC offers a historical perspective on this duality, and the theory of Ambivalent Sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996) offers a better understanding of its contemporary manifestations. The theory of Ambivalent Sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996) asserts that sexism is not only composed of hostility towards the target, as is the case with other forms of prejudice, but that there is also an aspect of sexism that is inherently benevolent. Unlike the easily recognizable hostile sexism, benevolent sexism is harder to detect due to its subjectively favourable presentation. However, even though benevolent sexism may seem positive at face value, it is still founded on patriarchal gender role formulations that ultimately restrict and harm women (Glick & Fiske, 1996).

Glick and Fiske (1966) clarified that men who display benevolent sexism do not necessarily have ill intentions. The attitudes that comprise benevolent sexism are to protect, provide for, and cherish

women (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Yet, the targets of benevolent sexism may not receive it positively and may instead view it as undermining their capabilities. This can perhaps be attributed to benevolent sexism's foundations on "positive" stereotypes about women that praise them in traditional roles of femininity (as wives, mothers, and caretakers) but often view them as inept in positions of power and significance outside the home (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Glick & Fiske, 2011). Essentially, benevolent and hostile sexism are two sides of the same coin in their suppression of women.

Engaging in intimate relationships with the opposite sex is an important contributor to heterosexual men's and women's happiness (Glick & Fiske, 1996). The negative view of women that hostile sexism encompasses does not allow for the formation of healthy heterosexual romantic relationships. As such, men balance their hostile sexism with the provide, protect, and cherish mindset of benevolent sexism (Hammond & Overall, 2017, p. 120). Benevolent sexism allows men to enjoy the benefits of a relationship without sacrificing their power, ultimately reinforcing gender disparity (Bareket & Fiske, 2023).

Women's endorsement of benevolent sexism, however, is a bundle of hidden consequences wrapped in a pretty pink package.

Consequences of Endorsing Traditional Gender Roles in Relationships

Benevolent sexism is at the root of most traditional ideals for romance and chivalry (Lee et al., 2010). This may explain why some women, especially younger women, find benevolent sexist men appealing. Emerging adult women are still exploring the dynamics of romantic relationships, so they may rely on and even enjoy men being the protector, paying on dates, and making the first move (Leaper et al., 2022). As such, they report being happier in relationships when their partner endorses benevolent sexism, likely because they have not yet faced its true consequences (Leaper et al., 2022). In line with this idea, Hammond and Overall (2013, as cited by Leaper et al., 2022) found that women's relationship satisfaction decreased over time when in relationships with partners who scored high on benevolent sexism. This was particularly true when those relationships failed to fulfill the promises and expectations set

forth by benevolent sexism (Casad, Salazar, & Macina, 2015; Hammond & Overall, 2013; Overall et al., 2011, as cited by Hammon & Overall, 2017). Longer relationships, marriage in particular, place much more of a physical and emotional burden on women when they are founded on traditional gendered dynamics than when they are based on gender-equal expectations. When women endorse benevolent sexism or are in relationships with partners that endorse benevolent sexism during emerging adulthood, there is much less responsibility and cost associated with playing the role of the traditional woman. However, when those women marry their benevolent sexist partners, they are often burdened with the majority of the childcare and the domestic responsibilities of the household. Thus, endorsing traditional gender roles in long-term relationships demands too much from women to leave room for relationship satisfaction, even when presented through the seemingly positive lens of benevolent sexism.

Another proposed reason behind women's dissatisfaction in these traditional relationships is that women who rely on the security offered by benevolent sexism are

likely to lose themselves in their relationships (Bareket & Fiske, 2023). This can be explained by women's tendency to encompass the role of their partner's caretaker when embodying traditional gender roles. In doing so, women place the emotional burden of the relationships on themselves, so their investment in the relationship exceeds that of their partners. Additionally, women who endorse benevolent sexism tend not to prioritize their education, career aspirations, and financial independence (Lee et al., 2010). This leaves women more vulnerable than men in the case of the relationship's end (Hammond & Overall, 2017). Women's vulnerability is further exacerbated as their endorsement of benevolent sexism fosters dependency on a partner (Hammond & Overall, 2017). Since men endorsing benevolent sexism treat women as dependent on them, they tend to underestimate the capabilities of their partner, leaving women in relationships with them to feel incompetent and undervalued (Hammond & Overall, 2017, p.123).

Considering the significance placed on women's prioritization of domestic pursuits in traditional relationships, the expectation that

women's identities should revolve around their roles as wives and mothers is not unexpected. The undermining of women's individuality is further illustrated in social perceptions of traditionally gendered dynamics in relationships. For instance, in long-term commitments like marriage, the husband may be seen as an individual who happens to be married, whereas the wife may be expected to adopt her role in the relationship as part of her identity. Demonstrating this point are the terms Miss and Mrs. that assign identities to the marriage status of women, compared to the label of Mr. that men are addressed with regardless of their marriage status. Another example would be the tradition of women taking the last names of their husbands and, in doing so, adopting an identity as an extension of their partner rather than as individuals.

Endorsing sexist attitudes is further associated with the devaluation of women's sexual satisfaction. Using orgasm as a measure of sexual satisfaction, we can see the devaluation of women's pleasure reflected in the discrepancy between men's and women's rates of orgasm (Mahar et al., 2020, as cited by Klein et al., 2023). The

orgasm gap is commonly attributed to the belief that women's orgasms are biologically harder to achieve (Klein et al., 2023). However, this gap is better explained by socio-cultural barriers that suppress women's sexuality rather than inherent biological differences (Klein et al., 2023). More often than not, sex is centred around men's pleasures, such that their orgasm is considered an essential part of sex, while women's pleasure is either neglected or viewed as an afterthought (Klein et al., 2023). Women's own beliefs contribute to the neglect of their pleasure as well. In their study, Klein et al. (2023) found that women's MWC endorsement was associated with prioritizing their partner's sexual satisfaction and undermining their own. Women's feelings of shame regarding their sexual desires are understandable and even expected when considering how our society pressures women into embodying the modest Madonna (Fassinger & Arseneau, 2008, as cited by Klein et al., 2023; Tolman, 2002, as cited by Klein et al., 2023). In addition to women's undermining of their own sexual pleasure, men who endorsed the MWC also tend to prioritize their own pleasure over that of their

partners. As such, when a woman who endorses the MWC engages in a relationship with a man who endorses the MWC, both partners prioritize men's orgasms, contributing to the orgasm gap. Men who endorsed the MWC additionally tend to have lower sexual satisfaction compared to men who did not endorse it (Klein et al., 2023). This is not an entirely unexpected finding, considering that sexual relationships are most fulfilling when the pleasure of both partners is prioritized (Klein et al., 2023). These findings illustrate how endorsing traditional gender roles harms the sexual and relationship satisfaction of both genders, although they are especially detrimental for women.

Women are thus continuously faced with the reality that even if they manage to be the perfect traditional partner, engaging in relationships with men who display benevolent sexism or idealize the "Madonna" has consequences. As they marry their benevolent sexist partners and experience the devaluation of their independent identities, neglect of their sexual pleasure, and the burden of carrying the domestic and emotional labour in their relationships, young women realize just how much their romanti-

cization of traditional gender roles has cost them.

Limitation

One major limitation of the literature on Ambivalent sexism and the MWC is the heavy reliance on self-report measures and correlational observations, preventing causal or definite conclusions from being drawn from these findings (Bareket & Fiske, 2013). Additionally, most of the studies in this review have been conducted in Western countries, which limits their cross cultural generalizability. However, in their comprehensive review of studies on Ambivalent sexism, Glick and Fiske (2011) note that the high correlation between benevolent and hostile sexism, as well as the harmful effects of endorsing ambivalent sexism, have been found cross culturally.

Future research would benefit from analyzing the MWC and Ambivalent sexism using experimental and longitudinal studies and prioritizing cross-cultural comparisons to increase the generalizability of these findings.

Proposed Intervention

Realizing the consequences of endorsing traditional gender roles

can be unnerving, especially when women are constantly confronted with social media content that promotes these ideals as the solution to finding love and commitment (Jennings, 2023; Smith, 2023). Recognizing the false promises that such content promotes and understanding its hidden costs is the first step in dismantling internalized beliefs that glorify restrictive traditional relationship dynamics. Unfortunately, such information is not widely available to young women, which is exactly the issue this project aims to tackle.

Since much of the recent dating content endorsing traditional relationships is on Instagram and TikTok (Jennings, 2023), the best way to reach and inform young women against them is on the same platforms. Therefore, we propose an intervention developed through TikTok, Instagram, and eventually a Spotify podcast to educate women about the hidden consequences of the traditional relationships they have been encouraged to idealize.

The first step of the intervention involves making a TikTok account. The videos posted on TikTok tend to be quite short, often spanning less than a minute. College students are the primary consumers of these

short videos (Kaye et al., 2021, as cited by Linlin et al., 2023). This age range is also the one dating content is geared towards, making short TikTok videos the ideal way to reach our desired demographic. The content posted on this TikTok account should be so engaging that it immediately captures the attention of users. One way to do this is to post a video in response to the TikToks glorifying traditional gender roles. Stitching videos, wherein a short clip of the original video is posted followed by a response from another user, is a common video format on TikTok. Since the videos offering this type of outdated dating advice tend to go viral, using them as an introduction to the critique of these gender roles could be a great way to capture the attention of our targeted audience. To illustrate, we could post a video that begins with a 5-second clip from another video telling women to seek men with provider mentalities and embrace their feminine nature. After that 5-second clip is played, our video would then go on to say that even though this type of relationship may sound nice, it is riddled with hidden consequences.

The explanation regarding the consequences of traditional gender

roles should be very simplified and generally span no longer than 20 seconds. It is important to recognize that the goal of these TikTok videos is not to explain the consequences of endorsing traditional gender roles in depth: TikTok is simply not the platform for the longer type of video necessary to explain these concepts. Rather, the TikTok videos should aim to capture the attention of young women enough to make them curious about the subject and encourage them to want to learn more about it. Instagram infographics and reels could also be used to capture the attention of the audience we may miss from merely posting on TikTok. The same video formats could be used for Instagram reels, which are often reposts from TikTok. In addition to the videos, Instagram posts could include infographics that highlight the MWC and benevolent sexism in very simple terms, and perhaps even give warning signs of how they can manifest in relationships. An example could be a post saying "5 signs that your boyfriend is a benevolent sexist", followed by a very quick definition of what benevolent sexism is and how it is harmful. Once we have captured the attention of our target audience, we

could then go on to promote a podcast on Spotify that would delve deeper into the consequences of acting as the traditional woman only to attract a man.

The first episode of the podcast should be an introduction to the series and give a very brief overview of the trending dating advice promoting traditional relationship dynamics. This episode should discuss how this type of dating advice reflects a long history of sexist ideals. To illustrate this point, podcasters could compare modern dating advice to dating advice in self-help relationship books popularized in the 1990s and 2000s, as well as the relationship tips from 1950s magazines (Smith, 2023). They should then connect the purity culture promoted in these guidelines to Freud's MWC theory. The second episode should define and explain the history of the MWC. Furthermore, it should explore how aspects of the theory are echoed in some modern perceptions of women, perhaps by referring to the "wifey" and "for the streets" examples (Bell et al., 2015). The third episode should revolve around an overview of Ambivalent Sexism and a discussion of how benevolent sexism is at the root of what we

often idealize as romance or chivalry (Lee et al., 2010). This episode should end with a brief statement emphasizing how benevolent sexism holds consequences despite its appealing appearance. Episodes four to seven should discuss the consequences of endorsing traditional gender roles in relationships. The topics of these episodes would be the undermining of women's competence, individuality, and sexual satisfaction in traditional relationships, in addition to the emotional labour and uneven domestic responsibilities placed on women in long-term traditional relationships (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Glick & Fiske, 2011; Hammond & Overall, 2017; Klein et al., 2023). Episode eight should be a very brief overview of all that the audience has learned, followed by a "What now?" statement. This episode should then go on to inform women of the signs of benevolent sexism and MWC endorsement that they should look out for as they are navigating the dating scene. For instance, they could give an example of how a man who refuses to ever let a woman pay due to her gender could potentially have underlying issues with benevolent sexism. Episode nine should further the audience's

understanding of these warning signs by educating women on how outdated and harmful traditional gender roles can manifest in their current relationships. This episode should additionally inform women of how they can perhaps break out of the habits that confine them in these roles. Episode ten should act as a conclusion to the series and give a very brief overview of all topics discussed, followed by a statement on how important it is that young women understand the hidden consequences of the "rewards" offered to them in traditional relationships.

The hope is that by engaging young women in these TikToks and Podcasts, we can arm them with information that will help them recognize the disadvantages of endorsing traditional gender roles and thus allow them to navigate dating culture successfully.

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