



**ATTITUDES TOWARD HOMOSEXUALITY
AMONG YOUNG ROMANIAN HETEROSEXUALS:
THE ROLES OF SEXISM, RELIGIOSITY, AND DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS**

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Abstract

We examined the attitudes toward homosexuality in a sample of 531 young heterosexual Romanian adults aged 18 to 30 ($M = 22.92$, $SD = 2.62$). Participants were residents from urban (48.8%) and rural (51.6%) areas, most of them having a university degree (59.1%). Results suggested that age, sexism, and religiosity were positively related to more negative views toward homosexuality. While participants' residential areas and education were not significantly related to their attitudes toward homosexuality, gender contributed to significant variability in this regard. We found that male participants had more negative views toward homosexuality compared to their female counterparts. Regression analyses suggested that, in the male sample, the only significant predictor of negative attitudes toward homosexuality was age. However, in the female sample, religiosity was the most important predictor of negative attitudes toward homosexuality. These findings emphasize the intricate nature of the elements

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that influence the attitudes of Romanian heterosexuals toward homosexuality. Our results may also help direct future therapies, educational programs, and therapeutic strategies intended to reduce these negative attitudes. Also, these findings can shape implications for policy development aimed at fostering inclusivity and acceptance of individuals with diverse sexual orientations, especially in highly religious countries such as Romania.

Keywords: *homosexuality; attitudes; gender; sexism; religiosity.*

Introduction

Attitudes toward homosexuality represent a topic of interest in many recent studies. Previous results suggested that negative attitudes toward homosexuality include discrimination (Caceres et al., 2020), prejudice (Roggemans et al., 2015), and violence (D'haese et al., 2015) against individuals who identify as homosexuals. Moreover, previous research found that negative attitudes toward homosexuality have a negative effect on mental and physical health (Mereish & Poteat, 2015), and the general well-being (Meyer, 2013) of homosexual people. Additionally, previous findings suggested that homosexual individuals facing discrimination and prejudice are at higher risk of school dropout, alcohol, and substance abuse (D'haese et al., 2015).

Previous studies examined several factors underlying the negative attitudes toward homosexuality. Findings suggested that age (Baiocco & Laghi, 2013), gender (Yost & Thomas, 2012), religiosity (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009), and ambivalent sexism (Aosved & Long, 2006) significantly contribute to these negative attitudes. Also, since religious beliefs are rooted in the process of social learning through observation and imitation (Adamczyk et al., 2016), previous literature also emphasizes the significance of Bandura's (1977) social learning theory in understanding the influence of religiosity on individuals' attitudes, specifically concerning its role regarding attitudes toward homosexuality (Akers, 2009). Given the negative effects of negative attitudes toward homosexuality, we consider it important to examine the possible predictors of these attitudes, especially in highly religious countries, such as Romania (Maftai et al., 2022).

Religiosity and Attitudes Toward Homosexuality

According to the available literature, religiosity is generally considered a significant predictor of attitudes toward homosexuality (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009). Individuals who actively engage in religious activities, interact with fellow believers, consider religion important and rely on it to guide their daily choices seem to be more likely to develop stronger reservations about

deviating from their faith (which often implies heterosexuality; Yip & Page, 2014), resulting in negative attitudes toward homosexuality (Hooghe et al., 2010; Lingiardi et al., 2016; Rowatt et al., 2006; Worthen et al., 2017).

The Social Learning Theory proposed by Bandura (1977) provides some insight into how religious beliefs and participation influence individuals' attitudes, in the context of religiosity and attitudes toward homosexuality (Akers, 2009). Social learning theory posits that individuals acquire attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors through observation, imitation, and reinforcement processes within their social environment (Pratt et al., 2010). Thus, individuals who frequently participate in church activities often form strong bonds with fellow religiously engaged individuals to cultivate positive relationships. In this regard, it was suggested that these social connections have an impact on shaping their perspectives and inclinations to align with religious viewpoints toward deviant behaviors such as homosexuality (Adamczyk et al., 2016).

However, previous studies also suggested that the relationship between religiosity and attitudes toward homosexuality is more nuanced. For instance, some studies suggested significant differences between various religious cults (Maher, 2013; Roggemans et al., 2015), while others suggested significant variations within the same religion regarding the attitudes toward homosexuality (Jäckle & Wenzelburger, 2015). Individual factors such as personal religious beliefs, level of religious commitment, and exposure to diverse perspectives also play a significant role in shaping such attitudes (Janssen & Scheepers, 2019).

Sexism and Attitudes Toward Homosexuality

Generally, the term *sexism* refers to prejudice, discrimination, and stereotyping attitudes and behaviors based on the individual's sex or gender (Brown, 2010). Although sexism was initially used to refer to hostile and negative attitudes toward women, Glick and Fiske (1996) developed a theory that posited two dimensions of sexism, based on the idea that hostility toward women disregards the presence of subjectively positive emotions toward women that frequently coexist with sexist hostility. Therefore, the authors developed the *Ambivalent Sexism Theory*, where the concept of sexism is considered a multidimensional construct that encompasses two distinct categories of sexist attitudes: hostile sexism and benevolent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996). While *hostile sexism* refers to negative attitudes toward women and involves beliefs and behaviors that discriminate against women, *benevolent sexism* refers to protective beliefs about women. For example, benevolent sexism includes beliefs that women are nurturing, delicate,

and dependent on men, and individuals high in benevolent sexism often portrays women as objects of admiration and support (Glick & Fiske, 1996).

The association between sexism and attitudes toward homosexuality was the topic of investigation in several prior studies. The findings consistently indicated a significant correlation between these two constructs (Aosved & Long, 2006; Davies, 2004). Furthermore, previous research suggested that negative attitudes toward homosexuality serve as a function of sexism, particularly regarding heterosexual men's attitudes toward gay men (Do Amaral Madureira, 2007). For example, it was suggested that sexism and homonegativity (e.g., negative attitudes toward homosexuality) are similarly related forms of prejudice (Do Amaral Madureira, 2007). However, it was also highlighted an essential distinction between sexism and negative attitudes toward homosexuality: sexism encompasses the devaluation of women, but it does not necessarily lead to universally negative attitudes. Instead, individuals with sexist beliefs may exhibit positive attitudes toward women in traditional roles, and negative attitudes toward women in non-traditional roles (Capezza, 2007).

Overall, previous studies found that sexism significantly predicted negative attitudes toward homosexuality (Davies et al., 2012a; Wilkinson, 2008). Moreover, it was suggested that hostile sexism in men, and both hostile and benevolent sexism in women significantly predicted negative attitudes toward homosexuality adoption (Rye & Meaney, 2010). However, further research is needed to better understand the predictive role of hostile and benevolent sexism on attitudes toward homosexuality, especially in highly religious countries, such as Romania. Consequently, the present study aimed to investigate the predictive role of hostile and benevolent sexism concerning attitudes toward homosexuality, while considering the distinct perspectives of male and female participants.

Age, Gender, Education, and Residence Area-based Differences Regarding Attitudes Toward Homosexuality

Age and gender represent the most common demographic characteristics studied in relationship with attitudes toward homosexuality (Herek, 2002a; Lingardi et al., 2016). Previous research suggested that high levels of negative attitudes toward homosexuality are related to older age (Baiocco & Laghi, 2013). However, the evidence is mixed: some studies did not find age (but did suggest gender as a significant variable) as a significant predictor of the negative attitudes toward homosexuality (Maftai & Holman, 2021), while others indicated that male individuals might hold more negative attitudes toward homosexuality compared to females (Kite &

Whitley, 1996; Parrott et al., 2002; Yost & Thomas, 2012). Thus, further investigations are needed to better understand these relationships.

Only a few studies also examined the relationship between participants' residence area and their attitudes toward homosexuality. For instance, Nguyen and Blum (2014) suggested a significant association in this regard, with urban residents holding more positive attitudes toward homosexuality. One of the explanations offered by the authors was related to the idea that the urban residents might experience a higher exposure to sexual diversity. Similarly, Herek (2002b) found significant differences between urban and rural residents regarding attitudes toward homosexuality, with rural residents having more negative attitudes compared to urban residents. Furthermore, this relationship was examined among Romanians before, and results suggested that Romanian residents from urban areas reported fewer negative attitudes toward homosexuality compared to rural residents (Andreescu, 2011). However, many previous studies suggested that attitudes toward homosexuality are shaped by a combination of various factors, including demographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender, and residence area), psychological, social, and cultural factors (Lingiardi et al., 2016). Thus, it remains important to examine possible differences between rural and urban residents regarding attitudes toward homosexuality, especially alongside other potential factors.

Finally, education level has also been indicated as a significant variable in shaping the attitudes toward homosexuality. In this regard, it was argued that educational systems play a role in fostering liberal attitudes, including the promotion of equal rights for all individuals, regardless of their sexual orientation (Van De Meerendonk & Scheepers, 2004). For instance, previous findings suggested that educational level is significantly associated with positive attitudes toward homosexuality (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009; Dodge et al., 2016). However, not all previous studies found significant differences in this regard. Thus, it remains unclear how educational level might account for some variability regarding the attitudes toward homosexuality, and further research is needed in this area.

The present study

Previous research found that age (Baiocco & Laghi, 2013), gender (Yost & Thomas, 2012), educational level (Dodge et al., 2016), residence area (Herek, 2002b), religiosity (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009), and ambivalent sexism (Aosved & Long, 2006) might be significant predictors of negative attitudes toward homosexuality. However, since the evidence is mixed, the present study aimed to further examine their predictive role in shaping the attitudes toward

homosexuality among young Romanian heterosexuals. Furthermore, we analyzed the proposed prediction models separately - for male and female participants – to better understand these complex relationships.

Our assumptions were the following:

H1. Age, ambivalent sexism, and religiosity would be significantly related to participants' attitudes toward homosexuality (Aosved & Long, 2006; Hooghe et al., 2010; Lingiardi et al., 2016).

H2. Participants' education level would account for significant differences regarding their attitudes toward homosexuality: the higher the education, the more positive the attitudes (Dodge et al., 2016).

H3. Participants' residence area level would account for significant differences regarding their attitudes toward homosexuality: participants from urban areas would report more positive attitudes toward homosexuality than those from rural areas (Nguyen & Blum, 2014).

H4. Age, education level, residence area, religiosity, and ambivalent sexism would significantly predict the attitudes toward homosexuality, for both male and female participants.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Five hundred and thirty-one participants aged 18 to 30 ($M = 22.92$, $SD = 2.63$) formed the present research sample. Most of the respondents were females (70%; self-reported gender). Participants were residents from urban (48.8%) and rural (51.6%) areas, and most of them had a university degree (59.1%). There were no restrictions related to the inclusion criteria except age (> 18) and sexual orientation (i.e., heterosexual).

We ran a web-based survey where participants added their answers. The study was advertised through social media platforms (e.g., Facebook and Instagram), as well as groups of students from the faculty with which the authors are affiliated. Before beginning the survey, participants were given an informed consent form highlighting the study's purpose (i.e., examining the attitudes toward diversity), the anticipated length of their involvement (about 15 minutes), the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses, and their right to decline or quit the study at any time. The current study, which followed the ethical principles of the 2013 Helsinki Declaration, was approved by The Ethics Committee of the Faculty to where the authors are affiliated.

Measures

Religiosity. We used the Romanian version of the Centrality of Religiosity Scale (CRS 15 (Gheorghe, 2018) to measure participants' religiosity. Participants answered on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). Example items included "How often do you think about religious issues?", and "How often do you pray. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was .91. As in previous studies (e.g., Ackert & Plopeanu, 2020), we used the scale's total score, with higher scores indicating a higher level of religiosity.

Sexism. We used The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996) to measure participants' sexism. Items were measured on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory contains two subscales, i.e., *hostile sexism*, and *benevolent sexism*, with higher scores indicating a higher level of sexism. Example items included "No matter how accomplished he is, a man is not truly complete as a person unless he has the love of a woman" (benevolent sexism), "Many women are actually seeking special favors, such as hiring policies that favor them over men, under the guise of asking for equality" (hostile sexism). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was .77 for the benevolent sexism scale and .78 for the hostile sexism. The scale was used in previous similar studies, demonstrating good psychometric properties (e.g., Davies et al., 2012).

Attitudes toward homosexuality. We used the Gender Attitudes Scale (Hendrickx et al., 2022) to measure participants' attitudes toward homosexuality. Items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The Gender Attitudes Scale contains six subscales, i.e., the *Gender stereotypical roles*, the *Gender stereotypical traits*, the *Adolescent romantic expectations*, the *Sexual double standards*, the *Attitudes toward diverse sexual orientation*, and the *Gender stereotypical physical appearances* subscales. In the present study, we used the 4 items measuring Attitudes toward diverse sexual orientation subscale, with higher scores indicating negative attitudes toward homosexuality. Example items included "Gay people are normal like everyone else", "In general, homosexuality is given too much attention", and "Gay people should have the same rights as everybody else". Higher scores indicated negative attitudes toward homosexuality and lower scores indicated positive attitudes. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was .73. The scale was used in previous similar studies, demonstrating good psychometric properties (e.g., Zebua, 2022).

Demographics. Finally, a demographic scale assessed participants' age, gender, education level, and resident areas.

Translation procedures. To ensure the quality of the translated research instrument, we used the back-translation technique suggested by Tyupa (2011), and no discrepancies were identified.

Overview of the Statistical Analyses

We used the 26 version of the IBM SPSS statistical package to analyze the data. There were no missing data since all items were marked as mandatory. We first conducted zero-order correlations between the study's variables. Next, we examined the differences between males and females' attitudes toward homosexuality. Based on the results from these preliminary analyses, we conducted multiple regression models separately for male and female participants.

Results

First, we examined the descriptives statistics (i.e., means, standard deviations, minimum, and maximum) for the main variables (see Table 1). The data were normally distributed, with Skewness values ranging from -1 to 1, and Kurtosis values ranging from -3 to 3 (Kim, 2013).

Table 1.
Descriptives statistics for the primary variables (N = 531)

	M	SD	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis
1. Age	22.92	2.62	18	30	.64	.28
2. Hostile sexism	27.49	5.45	9	42	-.13	.15
3. Benevolent sexism	28.81	4.44	16	42	.02	.01
4. Religiosity	46.09	12.73	15	74	-.08	-.36
5. Attitudes toward homosexuality	10.02	3.20	4	20	.30	-.15

The Pearson correlation analysis indicated significant positive relationship between age and attitudes toward homosexuality ($r = .160, p < .001$). Thus, the older participants, the more negative their attitudes toward homosexuality. We found a significant positive relationship between sexism and attitudes toward homosexuality, both for hostile ($r = .147, p < .001$) and benevolent sexism ($r = .145, p < .001$). Thus, the higher level of sexism, the more negative attitudes toward homosexuality. Finally, our results suggested a significant positive relationship between religiosity and attitudes toward homosexuality ($r = .213, p < .001$). Thus, the higher level of religiosity, the more negative the attitudes toward homosexuality (see Table 2).

Table 2.

Zero-order correlations among the primary variables (N = 531)

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Age	-				
2. Hostile sexism	.02	-			
3. Benevolent sexism	-.10*	.26**	-		
4. Religiosity	-.05	.16**	.35**	-	
5. Attitudes toward homosexuality	.16**	.14**	.14**	.21**	-

Note. ** $p < .001$; * $p < .05$

Next, we conducted independent *T*-tests to investigate whether demographic variables (residence area, educational level, and gender) were related to participants' attitudes toward homosexuality. The independent sample *t*-tests indicated significant gender differences, $t(529) = 2.97, p < .05$. Females reported more positive attitudes toward homosexuality, $M(SD) = 9.76(3.28)$, compared to males, $M(SD) = 10.62(2.93)$. Further, we did not find significant educational level differences regarding the attitudes toward homosexuality, $t(508) = -1.74, p > .05$. Moreover, we did not find significant residence area-related differences regarding the attitudes toward homosexuality, $t(529) = .997, p > .05$ (see Table 3).

Table 3.

T-test results (gender; N = 531)

	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t-test</i>	<i>p</i>
Males	160	10.62	2.93	2.97	.003
Females	371	9.76	3.28		

Based on the preliminary analyses, we further conducted two multiple regression models to examine the potential predictors of the attitudes toward homosexuality, separately for males and female participants.

In the male group, age was the only significant predictor for attitudes toward homosexuality ($\beta = .25, p < .001$). All the independent variables that were included in the regression model (i.e., age, religiosity, hostile sexism, and benevolent sexism) explained 7.5% of the variation in participants' attitudes toward homosexuality, $F(4, 159) = 3.12, p = .017$ (see Table 4).

Table 4.

Summary of linear regression analysis for the attitude toward homosexuality among males
(N = 160)

Variables	<i>B</i>	<i>SE (B)</i>	β
Age	.25*	.09	.22
Hostile sexism	.03	.04	.05
Benevolent sexism	.06	.06	.09
Religiosity	.02	.02	.10
R^2	.07		

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$

In the female group, age ($\beta = .16, p < .001$) and religiosity ($\beta = .06, p < .001$) were significant predictors of participants' attitudes toward homosexuality. All the independent variables that were included in the regression model (i.e., age, religiosity, hostile sexism, and benevolent sexism) explained 10.8% of the variation in participants' attitudes toward homosexuality, $F(4, 370) = 11.03, p < .001$. The most significant predictor of the attitudes toward homosexuality was religiosity ($\beta = .24, p < .001$) (see Table 5).

Table 5.

Summary of linear regression analysis for the attitude toward homosexuality among females
(N = 371)

Variables	<i>B</i>	<i>SE (B)</i>	β
Age	.16*	.06	.12
Hostile sexism	.03	.03	.06
Benevolent sexism	.05	.03	.07
Religiosity	.06**	.01	.24
R^2	.10		

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to examine the role of age, education level, residence area, religiosity, and ambivalent sexism in predicting participants' attitudes toward homosexuality – separately, for male and female participants. In contrast to previous findings (Nguyen & Blum, 2014) and our assumptions, our results indicated no significant differences between rural and urban residents regarding attitudes toward homosexuality. When we constructed this

hypothesis, we assumed that participants from rural areas would report more negative attitudes given (a) the previous literature in this regard, and (b) people from rural areas (at least in Romania) are usually more religious (Sandor & Popescu, 2008). However, these non-significant differences might be explained by the fact that the group we addressed is formed by young students – and studies already showed that younger people are starting to be less religious than older ones (Yonker et al., 2012); thus, the religious-based explanation might not hold due to this specific demographic factor. Other explanations might be related to the fact that urban and rural areas have similar access to news, media, and the Internet in general – which might have exposed participants to diversity in rather similar ways. Since we already know, from previous studies, that social media and the Internet – in general – is a significant factor shaping youth's attitudes toward sexual diversity (Xie & Peng, 2018), this might explain our counterintuitive results. Nevertheless, this topic needs further examination.

Contrary to our expectations and previous findings (Hooghe & Meeusen, 2013), our results did not indicate significant differences based on participants' educational level regarding their attitudes toward homosexuality. One possible explanation for these results might be related to previous literature suggesting that the relationship between educational level and tolerance of/ attitudes toward homosexuality might be moderated by economic development and political freedom (Zhang & Brym, 2019). Since we did not measure these potential influences in our study, this might be an interesting future research direction in this regard.

Although the existing findings are mixed regarding the differences attitudes toward homosexuality between males and females, our results align with previous studies suggesting that male individuals might hold more negative attitudes toward homosexuality compared to females (Parrott et al., 2002; Yost & Thomas, 2012). One explanation for our results might be related to previous findings that suggested that women are more open to challenging traditional gender roles and norms, which can also extend to accepting diversity regarding sexual orientation (Kite & Whitley, 1996). Another explanation might be related to women's experiences of gender inequality and discrimination (Heise et al., 2019), which can influence their attitudes toward homosexuality, and might lead to increased empathy and support for marginalized groups.

Our results also suggested that age was a significant predictor for both males' and females' attitudes toward homosexuality. These results align with previous studies that highlighted the significant relationship between higher age and negative attitudes toward homosexuality

(Baiocco & Laghi, 2013). Moreover, in the males' group, age was the only significant predictor, highlighting its important predictive role especially for males.

Previous studies indicated sexism as a significant predictor for the negative attitudes toward homosexuality (Davies et al., 2012a; Wilkinson, 2008). However, our results did not confirm these assumptions, neither in the male or female group, highlighting the need for further explorations in this regard. Also, our counterintuitive findings might be a result of inconsistent beliefs: some people might hold sexist beliefs, but have less negative attitudes toward homosexuality due to various other individual and societal factors, such as personality variables (Terrizzi et al., 2010), personal values (Kuntz et al., 2015), and unique life experiences (Brumbaugh et al., 2008) that make it challenging to predict homophobic attitudes solely based on sexism.

Although our results align with previous results in this regard (Adamczyk et al., 2016), confirming religiosity as a significant predictor of the attitudes toward homosexuality, religiosity was a significant predictor only in the female's group. One possible explanation might be related to the existing literature that highlighted that women tend to be more religious than men (McFarland, 2010). Moreover, these results were also indicated in a study conducted among Romanians couples, where females reported higher level of religiosity compared to men (Rusu & Turliuc, 2011).

Finally, there are several limitations that need to be addressed in the current study. First, the sample size was relatively small. In order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the topic, future research should consider investigating these variables with a larger and more diverse group of participants. Also, we did not account for participants' religious affiliation, and previous studies highlighted significant differences in this regard (Roggemans et al., 2015). Furthermore, one limitation of our study is the use of convenient sampling, which reduces the generalizability of our results. Next, the measurements of the study's variables relied on self-reporting, which may have introduced a bias toward desirable responses. To reduce this risk, future studies might use alternative measurement approaches, such as experimental measures. Also, the gender distribution within our sample was imbalanced. Future studies might use more gender-balanced samples, and more variability regarding participants' age to ensure a more reliable representation of the examined population. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that the present findings may only be applicable to heterosexual individuals. Therefore, the generalizability of the results to other sexual orientations is limited.

Conclusion

Despite its limitations, we consider that the present findings highlight the complexity of the factors that shape Romanian heterosexuals' attitudes toward homosexuality. Moreover, our results may serve to inform future interventions, educational programs, and therapeutic approaches aimed to reduce such negative attitudes. Accounting for the variability generated by individuals' age, religiosity, and gender, we might contribute to the development of inclusiveness and acceptance of individuals with diverse sexual orientations even in highly religious countries, such as Romania.

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