

Sexist Experiences in the University Context: The Role of Social Support

Experiencias de Sexismo en el Contexto Universitario: El Rol del Apoyo Social

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This paper studies the effect of sexism experienced by Chilean female university students on psychological distress, self-efficacy and academic persistence, and explores the role of social support as a mediating mechanism of these effects. It is hypothesized that higher levels of experienced sexism will be related to higher levels of psychological distress, and lower levels of self-efficacy and academic persistence. It is also hypothesized that social support acts as a mediating variable in these relationships. An accidental sampling was carried out, consisting of 602 students from a private university in Santiago de Chile. The students answered a self-administered online questionnaire, composed by items from the Sexist Events Inventory, OQ-30.2 -Psychological Distress-, Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, General Self-Efficacy Scale, and the University Persistence Questionnaire. Regression analyses and a bootstrap procedure were performed to explore the role of social support as a mediating variable. The results showed a positive relationship between experiences of sexism and psychological distress. It was found that social support acts as a mediator between these variables. No effect of sexism was found on self-efficacy or academic persistence. It is not possible to establish causality between the study variables. It is concluded that sexism experienced by students has negative repercussions on perceived social support and this, in turn, is negatively related to psychological distress. This could have an impact on the adaptation to the study context, the ability to generate connections and the feeling of belonging to the educational context of the students.

Keywords: social support, sexist experience, psychological distress, mental health

Este trabajo estudia el efecto del sexismo experimentado por estudiantes universitarias chilenas en sus niveles de malestar psicológico, autoeficacia y persistencia académica y explora el rol del apoyo social como mecanismo mediador de estos efectos. Se hipotetiza que a mayor sexismo experimentado mayor es el malestar psicológico y menores los niveles de autoeficacia y persistencia académica. También se hipotetiza que el apoyo social actúa como variable mediadora de estas relaciones. Se realizó un muestreo accidental, compuesto 602 estudiantes de una universidad privada de Santiago de Chile. Las estudiantes contestaron un cuestionario autoadministrado *online*, compuesto por ítems del Inventario de Eventos Sexistas, OQ-30.2 -Malestar Psicológico-, Escala Multidimensional de Apoyo Social Percibido, Escala General de Autoeficacia, y el Cuestionario de Persistencia Universitaria. Se realizaron análisis de regresión y un procedimiento de *bootstrap* para explorar el rol del apoyo social como variable mediadora. Los resultados mostraron una relación positiva entre las experiencias de sexismo y el malestar psicológico, y se encontró que el apoyo social actúa como mediador entre estas variables. No se encontró un efecto del sexismo en la autoeficacia ni en la persistencia académica. Tampoco es posible establecer causalidad entre las variables de estudio. Se concluye que el sexismo experimentado por las estudiantes tiene repercusiones negativas en el apoyo social percibido y este, a su vez, se relaciona negativamente con el malestar psicológico. Esto podría repercutir en la adaptación al contexto de estudio, capacidad de generar vínculos y la sensación de pertenencia al contexto educativo de las estudiantes.

Palabras clave: apoyo social, experiencia de sexismo, malestar psicológico, salud mental

Gender inequality continues to be one of the most important current problems. In this context, universities are conceived as institutions of great power (Rosa & Clavero, 2022), as they are spaces where critical thinking is promoted in the training of new generations.

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Therefore, the higher education system has a fundamental role in promoting social change (Acai et al., 2022; Rosa & Clavero, 2022) and in generating practices of gender equity, support for diversity and inclusive models. Thus, in the national scenario, and as a result of the student demands raised during the "Feminist May" for a "non-sexist education", the Chilean higher education system has undergone multiple changes and adjustments to respond to student ideals and requirements based on the principles of gender equity (Colther, 2022; Espinoza & Albornoz, 2023; Troncoso et al., 2019). Among the actions carried out, the gender quota access systems, the enactment of Law 21.369 (Chile, 2022) and the implementation of protocols and manuals for the promotion of good treatment stand out (Espinoza & Albornoz, 2023).

However, despite the progress that has been made in terms of gender equity in the context of higher education, female university students continue to experience discrimination, harassment and gender-based violence (e.g., Flores-Hernández et al., 2015; Hideg & Shen, 2019; Mingo & Moreno, 2017; Savigny, 2019; Troncoso et al., 2019; Trujillo-Cristoffanini & Contreras-Hernández, 2020). Therefore, it is relevant to delve into the experiences of female university students, in order to deepen the repercussions of sexism in their educational trajectories.

For example, international literature indicates that experienced sexism has an impact on the educational trajectories and mental health of female students (Kuchynka et al., 2018; Lemonaki et al., 2015; Oswald et al., 2019; Smith & Gayles, 2018). However, and as a result of the growing interest at the national level in approaching this panorama, research has focused on detecting experiences of sexism in different areas of institutions and few of them have been dedicated to delving into the consequences that these experiences could have on student trajectories (Espinoza & Albornoz, 2023; Gairín Sallán & Suárez, 2016; Troncoso et al., 2019). Against this backdrop, there is an emerging need to analyse the effect of sexism in the Chilean university context, as well as to better understand the mechanisms through which sexism negatively affects female university students, for example, by increasing their depressive symptomatology or decreasing their academic motivation, among other aspects (e.g., Glass et al., 2013; Kondrat et al., 2018; Leaper, 2015).

It is for this reason that this work fills these gaps, contributing to understanding the specific consequences of experiencing sexism in the university context. Based on this, the aim of this paper was to study the effect of sexism experienced by female university students on psychological distress, self-efficacy and academic persistence, as well as to explore the role of social support as a mechanism that mediates these effects.

The Persistence of Sexism in the University Context

Sexism is defined as a form of discrimination against women, based on prejudices regarding the abilities, skills and attributes they possess that differentiate them from men (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Thus, sexism subordinates men and women to traditional roles pre-established by society and punishes people who do not show consistency between their behaviour and these socially imposed roles (e.g., Ellemers, 2018). This, in turn, results in limiting women's (e.g., Carli et al., 2016; Lameiras Fernández, 2004; Mingo & Moreno, 2017) and men's range of action, aspirations, and capacity for intellectual and professional development.

Although sexism can negatively affect both men and women, it affects women to a greater extent (Rodríguez-Burbano et al., 2021). While the concept is traditionally understood as an attitude directed towards people (Lameiras Fernández, 2004; Rodríguez-Burbano et al., 2021), with respect to their biological sex, new approaches establish that expressions of sexism, such as ambivalent sexism, are based on the domination of men over women, which can be expressed in different ways (Rodríguez-Burbano et al., 2021).

According to the theory of ambivalent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996), on the one hand, hostile sexism corresponds to a negative and explicit attitude towards women, which manifests itself through negative evaluations that directly attack women in order to maintain the asymmetry of power between the sexes (Lameiras Fernández, 2004; Smith & Gayles, 2018).

On the other hand, benevolent sexism is a more subtle discriminatory attitude, based on a traditional perception of women and manifested through paternalistic and seemingly positive messages based on the belief that women are fragile individuals who should be protected and cared for by men (Glick & Fiske, 2001).

Currently, sexism is present in multiple spheres of Chilean society (e.g., Espinoza & Taut, 2016; Guzmán et al., 2017; Jiménez-Moya et al., 2022; Reyes-Housholder & Roque, 2019; Undurraga & López Hornickel, 2020), among which is the university context (Espinoza & Albornoz, 2023; Mingo & Moreno, 2017; Smith & Gayles, 2018).

Different research has reported the high frequency of sexism experienced by female students (e.g., Arcos et al., 2006; Bosson et al., 2010; Contreras Gómez et al., 2020; Garcés Estrada et al., 2020; Santos Pérez et al., 2020; Swim et al., 2001). Specifically, discriminatory episodes are described in the form of mockery, invisibilisation, belittling, denigrating comments and minimisation of female students' abilities to perform in their areas of study (Brito Rodríguez et al., 2020; Reason & Rankin, 2006; Universidad de Chile, 2014).

These sexist experiences have a negative impact on the academic and personal development of female students (Barthelemy et al., 2016; Bradley-Geist et al., 2015; Kuchynka et al., 2018). For example, they have repercussions on levels of anxiety, depression and somatic symptomatology (Oswald et al., 2019), negatively affect identification with their study careers and professional performance areas (Clark et al., 2021; de Lemus & Estevan-Reina, 2021), influence the process of choice and subsequent security of performance in the field of study (e.g., Shin & Lee, 2018), and generate discouragement to continue their studies, especially in typically male subject areas (Aycock et al., 2019; Lee & McCabe, 2021; Sexton et al., 2020).

Therefore, based on this previous literature, sexism experienced by female students in the university context was expected to have a direct and negative effect on their mental health and academic trajectories, operationalised through psychological distress and academic self-efficacy and persistence. In addition, this paper analysed one of the possible mechanisms through which sexism generates negative consequences for female students: social support.

The Effect of Sexism on Social Support

Social support is defined as a person's perception of the availability of his or her social network to provide support and help in the face of need (Marley & Wilcox, 2022). In the university context, perceiving social support favours students' adaptation, as it provides them with help and accompaniment (López-Angulo et al., 2021; Mishra, 2020), a greater perception of self-confidence to face challenges and adaptive capacities (Hou et al., 2019; Rodríguez et al., 2017) and a greater sense of belonging to the degree programme (London et al., 2011).

However, discriminatory experiences can alter the way people perceive their support networks, increasing feelings of social isolation and lack of community support (Lawson, 2020; Moradi & Funderburk, 2006). Along the same lines, sexism is negatively related to perceived social support among female university students (de Lemus & Estevan-Reina, 2021; Doolaard et al., 2022). That is, greater exposure to sexist situations experienced in the university context is related to lower perceived availability of support from professors, peers and other actors in the educational community (de Lemus & Estevan-Reina, 2021; Doolaard et al., 2022; Lawson, 2020).

In turn, the perceived low availability of support networks has an impact on the academic and emotional adaptation capacities of female students to the study context (López-Angulo et al., 2021). Different authors refer to the consequences that this perception can have on students' psychological distress (e.g., Lawson, 2020; Tinajero et al., 2020) and on different aspects related to their academic abilities (e.g., Flynn, 2016; Shin & Lee, 2018), such as self-efficacy and academic persistence.

Psychological Distress

Psychological distress is defined as maladaptive psychological functioning in the presence of stressful events (Ridner, 2003). It manifests itself through depressive, anxious, somatic, self-devaluation, withdrawal and social isolation symptoms, among others (Ridner, 2003).

As mentioned, previous literature shows that sexism can contribute negatively to the psychological distress of those women who experience it (Szymanski & Steward, 2010). Furthermore, lack of social support is also a risk factor for psychological distress (Kendler et al., 2005; Levine et al., 2020; Viertiö et al., 2021); thus, the less social support a person perceives, the higher their rates of somatic, depressive and anxious symptomatology (Levine et al., 2020; Raisa et al., 2021; Viertiö et al., 2021). Therefore, it could be expected that, if sexism decreases perceived social support in the university context, this lack of community support would, in turn, be related to an increase in female students' psychological distress (Doolaard et al., 2022; Settles et al., 2016).

Academic Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to a person's belief in his or her own abilities to perform successfully in a particular area (Bandura, 2001). Academic self-efficacy corresponds to students' judgement of their abilities to successfully achieve their educational goals (e.g., Honicke & Broadbent, 2016).

Experiences of sexism can have a negative effect on female students' educational trajectories (Shin & Lee, 2018). On the other hand, the literature also shows that a greater sense of social exclusion and a low perception of support from teachers, tutors and peers affects academic aspects. Specifically, it translates into greater insecurities for academic performance, impacting on self-efficacy (Arslan, 2016; Hideg & Shen, 2019; Kuchynka et al., 2018). Specifically, this lack of support influences students' security, generates a sense of rejection, alters expectations of their future performance in the field of study, and, finally, impacts on their self-efficacy and educational projections (Al Khatib, 2012; Kuchynka, et al., 2018). Therefore, students' perceived lack of social support was expected to predict a decrease in their perceptions of academic self-efficacy.

Academic Persistence

Academic persistence corresponds to the continuity that students have in pursuing certain areas of study of interest until they achieve their degree (Himmel, 2002). The desire to pursue a career is consolidated when students successfully integrate into the educational institution, both academically and socially (Talley & Martínez Ortiz, 2017).

Previous research has linked sexism with academic variables related to persistence (Aycock et al., 2019), showing the negative effect of this type of discrimination. In addition, social support also appears to be a relevant variable in this context (Altermatt, 2019; D'Amico Guthrie & Fruht, 2020; Skahill, 2002). Specifically, a low perception of support from the educational community impacts on the perception of the study environment - hostile, discouraging, unfavourable - (Flynn, 2016; Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 2001), which impacts on motivation to pursue that area of study and on students' educational projections (Aycock et al., 2019; Flynn, 2016; Foley Nicpon et al., 2006). Based on this, it was expected that low social support would negatively impact on students' academic persistence.

The present study

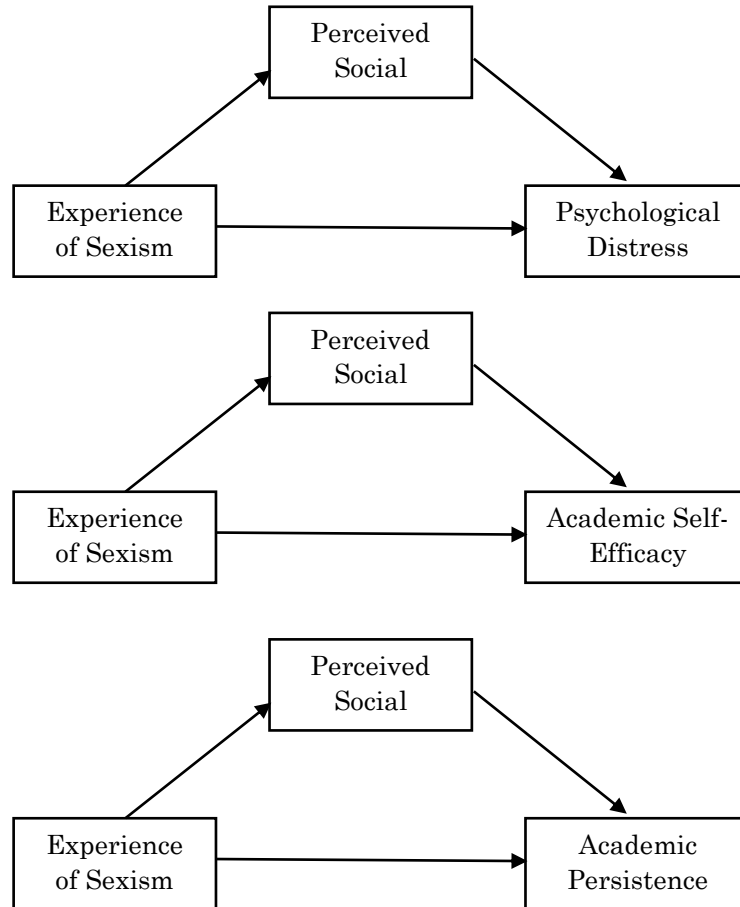
Sexist attitudes are still present in the university context, perpetuating the inequality between men and women and the discrimination experienced by female students. It was therefore necessary to understand the negative consequences of this prejudice, as well as the mechanisms through which it impacts negatively on female students, both in terms of psychological well-being and in the academic dimension.

In this line, this cross-sectional correlational study presents two relevant contributions. On the one hand, it seeks to replicate previous studies in the Chilean university context. Specifically, it analyses the negative consequences of experiences of sexism for Chilean university women living in the university context. On the other hand, it studies social support as a possible mechanism that explains the negative effect of sexism.

Based on previous literature, a direct effect of experiences of sexism on psychological distress and on academic self-efficacy and persistence was expected (Bradley-Geist et al., 2015; Glass et al., 2013; Oswald et al., 2019). Furthermore, an indirect effect of sexism on these variables was expected: in particular, the negative effect of sexism on psychological well-being and academic self-efficacy and persistence was expected to be mediated by female students' perceived social support (e.g., Doolaard et al., 2022). Thus, it was hypothesised that the experience of sexism negatively predicts perceived social support and this, in turn, negatively affects psychological distress and positively affects academic self-efficacy and persistence (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Theoretical Model of Mediation of Perceived Social Support in the Relationship between Experienced Sexism in the University Context and Female Students' Psychological Distress, Self-Efficacy and Academic Persistence



Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 602 female students from a private Chilean university in the city of Santiago, with an age range of 18 to 29 years ($\bar{X} = 20.96$; $SD = 1.97$). In this accidental sample, the participants belonged to the study areas of Arts and Humanities ($n = 88$), Social Sciences and Education ($n = 219$), Health ($N=68$), and STEM (*Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics*) ($n = 227$).

The survey had two instances of asking for informed consent, at the beginning of the survey and at the end of the survey. This decision was taken because, in order to prevent the title and description of the project from biasing the students' response to the issue of "sexism", a generic title was presented, with a slight reference to this variable. The alternative title was "Experiences of University Students". At the end of the survey, the students were presented with the actual title of the project and its description. Due to the nature of this study, informed consent was again requested when this information was presented.

847 students responded to the survey, and 605 gave consent in both instances. From this sample, students who indicated that they were male were excluded (N=3).

To participate, students had to meet the following requirements: be female, be currently enrolled at the university, be in their first to fifth year of their degree and not have postponed their studies the previous semester (as the fact that they were not currently studying a degree could contribute to them not having had recent experiences of sexism in the university context). Students who met the requirements were invited to participate on a voluntary basis during the month of September 2021, through virtual channels -institutional mailings and dissemination by Student Centres-.

Instruments

At the beginning of the survey, questions focused on the characterisation of the sample, inquiring about gender, age, number of children, degree and year of entry into studies, dependence on the school of graduation, socio-emotional segment and year in which they are in their degree.

Experience of Sexism

To measure experiences of sexism, 20 items from two scales used in the Latin American context were used in order to get a more complete picture of the experiences of sexism. Specifically, 15 items from the Sexist Events Inventory (Albitres Vidal, 2019, Klonoff & Landrine, 1995; e.g., *In the university context, how many times have they tried to hit on you because you are a woman?*) and five items from the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996; e.g., *In the university context, how many times have they put you on a pedestal because you are a woman?*) were considered. In the process of data analysis, the internal consistency index of the scale with the different items used was measured. A good internal consistency could be demonstrated for use as a single instrument ($\alpha = 0.93$, $\gamma_1 = 0.79$, $\gamma_2 = 0.15$), so their average was included in the analyses as a single value, to facilitate the analysis of the results. The response scale ranges from 1 (*never*) to 6 (*almost all the time*).

Perceived Social Support

The social support variable was measured with 12 items. Specifically, eight items were included from the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet et al., 1988), an instrument validated in the Chilean population (Oyarzún Gómez & Irriarte Iluffi, 2020; e.g., *Thinking of all the people who are part of your university career... when I need something, I know that there is someone who can help me*). For this process, Oyarzún Gómez and Irriarte Iluffi (2020) conducted exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses on a sample of adolescents in the Metropolitan Region. Through this analysis, the three-dimensional structure of the scale was evidenced, where the standardised factor loadings of the items were found to be between .73 and .84.

In addition, for the context of this study, four items were created to include institutional social support perceived by female students in the university context (e.g., *In the case of experiencing discrimination because I am a woman, I feel that I can turn to the authorities of my course of study to help me*). These sets of items were included as a single score in the analyses, as, from the analysis of the respective survey data, a high internal consistency was demonstrated ($\alpha = 0.89$, $\gamma_1 = -0.08$, $\gamma_2 = -0.71$). A response scale ranging from 1 (*almost never*) to 4 (*almost always*) was used.

Psychological Distress

To measure psychological distress, 29 items of the OQ-30.2 self-report questionnaire adapted to the Chilean context and validated for the non-clinical population were used (Errázuriz et al., 2017). For the validation process of the instrument, Errázuriz et al. (2017) used a sample of 546 clinical patients and 100 non-clinical people, and through exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, they found a three-factor structure as well as internal consistency for both the clinical ($\alpha = 0.90$) and non-clinical ($\alpha = 0.88$) populations.

The questionnaire has previously been used to analyse psychological distress caused by sexist experiences (Hurst & Beesley, 2013). The instrument assesses the levels of psychological distress a person has experienced in the past week (e.g., *I feel hopeless about the future*). The response scale of the questionnaire

ranges from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*almost always*). The internal consistency of the items used in this study was analysed and showed high internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.93$, $\gamma_1 = 0.14$, $\gamma_2 = -0.19$).

Academic Self-Efficacy

The General Self-Efficacy Scale, adapted to the Chilean context (Cid et al., 2010) was used to measure students' perception of their abilities to handle different stressful and challenging situations in their daily lives in the university context. The inventory has 10 items (e.g., *In the university context, I can solve difficult problems if I try hard enough*), structured on a response scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*almost always*). From the validation process of Cid et al. (2010), a unifactorial structure was found, with a high internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.84$).

Through the analysis process of the present study, a high internal consistency was found among the items used ($\alpha = 0.89$, $\gamma_1 = -0.57$, $\gamma_2 = 0.13$).

Academic Persistence

To measure academic persistence, an item from the College Persistence Questionnaire (Davidson et al., 2009) was used (e.g., *How likely are you to re-enrol next semester in the same degree programme*). This item is scored on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). In addition, two items that had been applied in other studies by the same Chilean university were used to explore the reasons for dropping out of the degree programme. It was found that 322 students would have been interested in dropping out, but only 9 reported situations of gender discrimination. Because of this, the results of these items were not used for further analysis.

Procedure

A digital self-report questionnaire was designed for the data collection process (see Annex). The questionnaire was made available for completion over a period of four weeks. Those students who answered the questionnaire were entered into a draw for five *gift cards* worth 20,000 Chilean pesos.

This study was approved by the Scientific Ethical Committee of Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities of the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. All participants digitally signed an informed consent form before completing the questionnaire, which explained the nature of the study.

Data Analysis

The R-Studio software -version 2022.02.03- was used for the data analysis process.

In order to study the relationships between the factors, descriptive and simple bivariate correlation analyses were carried out between the variables [see Table 1].

For the mediation analysis, Baron and Kenny's (1986) method was used to identify the influence of the variables on each other, and to distinguish the effect of social support on the relationship between experiences of sexism and the variables of psychological distress, self-efficacy and academic persistence. For this first step, regression analyses were conducted between experiences of sexism - independent variable - and psychological distress, self-efficacy and academic persistence - dependent variables. This step was carried out in order to select statistically significant regressions for mediation analysis. According to Shrout and Bolger (2002), a mediation analysis requires a relationship between the independent variable (X) and the dependent variable (Y), in order to proceed to study how the mediating variable (M) affects this relationship. A simple linear regression analysis was carried out. This was carried out without standardising the data.

Simple linear regression analysis with experiences of sexism as a predictor variable found a relationship between experiences of sexism and psychological distress ($\beta = 0.16$, $p < 0.01$). On the other hand, no relationship was found between experiences of sexism and self-efficacy ($\beta = -0.013$, $p = 0.588$) or academic persistence ($\beta = -0.012$, $p = 0.789$). Based on this result, mediation analysis was performed only with psychological distress as the dependent variable.

For the mediation analysis, Baron and Kenny's (1986) method was used to distinguish the effect of social support on the relationship between experiences of sexism and the psychological distress variable. The bootstrap procedure with a 95% confidence interval was performed to assess the average mediation effect (ACME) between the experience of sexism and psychological distress. This value indicates whether mediation is statistically significant in the relationship between the dependent and independent variables. The same procedure also yields the average direct effect (ADE). This gives a glimpse of the direct effect between experiences of sexism and psychological distress, taking into account the effect of perceived social support.

Results

Table 1 shows the correlations between the variables.

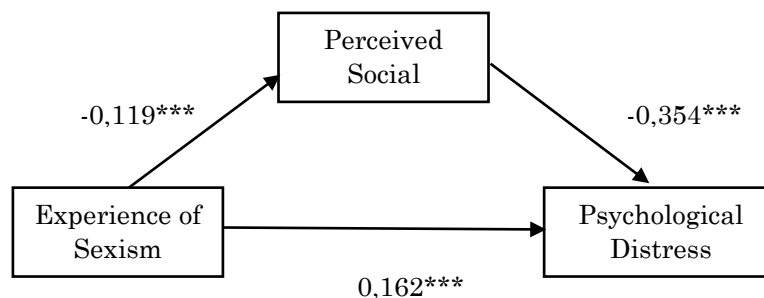
Table 1
Descriptive Statistics and Simple Bivariate Correlations of the Variables of Interest

Variable	Mean (SD)	1	2	3	4	5
1. Experience of sexism	2,02 (0,81)					
2. Social support	2,73 (0,65)	-0,14*				
3. Psychological distress	2,62 (0,58)	0,22*	-0,42*			
4. Academic self-efficacy	3,26 (0,48)	-0,02	0,29*	-0,54*		
5. Academic persistence	4,72 (0,88)	-0,01	0,08*	-0,02	-0,01	

* $p < 0,05$.

Through mediation analysis, social support was found to have a partial mediation effect between sexism and psychological distress (ACME = 0.04, $p < 0.001$, ADE = 0.118, $p < 0.001$, total effect = 0.161, $p < 0.001$). That is, sexism has a negative effect on perceived social support ($\beta = -0.119$, $p < 0.01$) and this, in turn, has a negative effect on psychological distress ($\beta = -0.354$, $p < 0.01$). In contrast to these data, Figure 1 shows a decrease in the effect of experiences of sexism on psychological distress when social support is considered as a mediating variable (see Figure 2).

Figure 2
Mediating Model of Perceived Social Support in the Relationship between Experienced Sexism in the University Context and Female Students' Psychological Distress



Discussion

In recent years there have been multiple feminist demonstrations driven by school and university students around the world; this scenario has been replicated in the Latin American and Chilean context. These demonstrations have demanded non-sexist and egalitarian education for men and women, as well as the reduction of gender gaps and stereotypes, among other aspects (e.g., Alfaro Álvarez & de Armas Pedraza, 2019; Mingo & Moreno, 2017; Troncoso et al., 2019). Despite social demands, sexism is still present in the Chilean university context, generating negative consequences for female students. In this scenario, the aim of this study was to analyse the negative effect of sexism on the psychological distress, self-efficacy and academic persistence of female university students, as well as to analyse the role of social support as a mechanism that explains the relationship between these variables.

In line with the hypotheses, the results showed a positive relationship between the experience of sexism and psychological distress. Thus, more reported experiences of sexism were related to greater psychological distress. This result is consistent with previous research showing that sexism is related to increased hypervigilance and greater symptoms of anxiety and depression, among other aspects (Aycock et al., 2019; Marrero, 2008). However, the experience of sexism was not found to predict self-efficacy or academic persistence, so this hypothesis was not confirmed. A possible explanation for these results may be linked to the heterogeneity of the areas of study of the students in the sample. Previous literature pointing to the relationship between sexism, self-efficacy and academic persistence tends to focus on STEM fields of study (Aycock et al., 2019; Flynn, 2016; Kuchynka et al., 2018), careers associated with skills described as typically masculine and with a majority of male students.

In these contexts, it is to be expected that the sexism experienced by female students has negative consequences on academic variables, but perhaps this relationship is not present in other types of careers, where feeling discriminated against is not necessarily related to not having the skills to study a career.

However, social support was found to predict levels of academic self-efficacy and persistence, which is in line with the literature, which shows that higher perceived social support is related to better social adjustment to career study (Mishra, 2020; Secui et al., 2021).

With respect to the mediating role of social support, in line with what was hypothesised, it was found that social support acts as a mediator between the experience of sexism and psychological distress. That is, the sexism experienced by female students has a negative impact on the social support they perceive and this, in turn, is negatively related to psychological distress. Thus, sustained experiences of stress and discrimination - such as experiences of sexism - have an impact on students' adaptation to the study context, ability to form bonds and sense of belonging to the educational context (Kondrat et al., 2018; Tinajero et al., 2020). As a result of these difficulties, the feeling of social isolation increases, the possibility of perceiving support from their community is limited (Talwar et al., 2017; Thoits, 2011; Yang et al., 2018).

In other words, social support, which helps to reduce psychological distress, is undermined by sexist experiences. This finding is relevant for understanding one of the mechanisms through which sexism generates adverse consequences for female university students, with the aim of intervening in it. Given that sexism is still a problem, understanding the role of social support can form the basis for designing interventions that strengthen and make visible the social support available to female students to counteract the negative effect of sexism. However, the ultimate goal should be to make visible and diminish the discrimination experienced by university women and to eliminate sexism from the university context.

This work has some limitations. Firstly, given that this was a cross-sectional study, it is not possible to establish causal relationships between the variables of interest, although there is previous theoretical and empirical support for the hypotheses put forward. Secondly, the sample was composed of students from a private university with a long history and prestige in the Chilean context. Therefore, although the results are consistent with previous literature, it would be necessary to replicate these results in other university contexts. Furthermore, the results were obtained from a self-report questionnaire, which could be affected by certain response tendencies or biases (e.g., Schemes Kreitchmann et al., 2019). Finally, it is important to note the absence of clear theoretical models that establish what the consequences of experienced sexism are. Further research in this area may generate a solid theoretical perspective in the future.

To complement these findings, future research could analyse whether different types of sexism - hostile, benevolent sexism - may have different effects on female students, as well as explore the manifestations of sexism in different areas of study and its effects on mental health and educational trajectories. In line with

the approach of some international research, it would be interesting to further explore and compare the experience of perceived sexism among female and male students at national level, and its impact on educational and mental health outcomes. For example, studies by Bradley-Geist et al. (2015) have explored the role of exposure to sexist comments and events on the self-esteem and career aspirations of men and women. Research of this nature would allow us to delve deeper into the particularities of men's and women's university experiences, to recognise similarities and differences in the way sexist events influence their respective trajectories, and thus to support the development of university-level action plans for equitable education.

Finally, and considering that this study did not consider the differences between perceived experiences of sexism depending on the career of study, it is hoped that in the future it will be possible to explore this area in greater depth. On this aspect, several research studies have focused on the experience of female students in the STEM area (Canales et al., 2022; Salinas et al., 2023); however, it is also relevant to evaluate the particularities of other areas of study (Arts and Humanities, Social Sciences and Education, and Health). It is believed that each area of study is characterised by a set of particularities that may influence the generation of more conducive or hostile environments for educational trajectories. Identifying these, in relation to the consequences of sexism, can be a way to guide decision-making and the development of lines of action tailored to the needs of the context.

In conclusion, this study shows that the sexism experienced by female university students has a direct impact on their psychological distress, but also indirectly, through the decrease in perceived social support that sexism generates. Thus, experiences of sexism have consequences on the perceived availability of support, which is related to feelings of isolation and social rejection, which, in turn, has an impact on the psychological distress of female students. These results reflect the challenge of promoting changes at the structural level in universities to reduce manifestations of sexist practices, as well as prioritising actions that favour the perception of social support by female students, in order to counteract the various negative consequences associated with their psychological well-being that sexism generates.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

1. Characterisation questions		
Questions		Response Alternatives
1	Sex	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Woman 2. Man
2	Age	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 18 2. 19 3. 20 4. 21 5. 22 6. 23 7. 24 8. 25 9. 26 10. 27 11. 28 12. 29 13. 30 14. 31 15. 32 16. 33 17. 34 18. Over 34
3	Number of Children	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I do not have 2. 1 3. 2 or more
4	Select the course of study you are currently pursuing	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Performance 2. Agronomy and Forestry 3. Anthropology-Archaeology 4. Architecture 5. Art 6. Astronomy 7. Biology 8. Marine Biology 9. Biochemistry 10. Political Science 11. College of Natural Sciences and Mathematics 12. College of Social Sciences 13. Communications 14. Civil Construction 15. Law 16. Nursing 17. Aesthetics 18. Philosophy 19. Physics 20. Speech therapy 21. Geography 22. History 23. Engineering 24. Commercial Engineering 25. Kinesiology 26. Hispanic Letters 27. English Letters 28. Mathematics and Statistics 29. Medicine 30. Veterinary Medicine 31. Music and music performance 32. Nutrition 33. Dentistry

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 34. Pedagogy in Physical Education and Health 35. Pedagogy in Early Childhood Education (Santiago) 36. Pedagogy in Early Childhood Education (Villarrica) 37. Pedagogy in English 38. Pedagogy in Catholic Religion 39. General Basic Pedagogy (Santiago) 40. General Basic Pedagogy (Villarrica) 41. Secondary Education in Natural Sciences and Biology 42. Secondary Education in Physics 43. Secondary Education in Mathematics 44. Secondary Education in Chemistry 45. Urban Planning 46. Psychology 47. Chemistry 48. Chemistry and Pharmacy 49. Sociology 50. Social Work 51. Theology 52. Occupational Therapy
5	Year of entry to your current course of study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 2021 2. 2020 3. 2019 4. 2018 5. 2017 6. 2016 7. 2015 8. 2014 9. 2013 10. 2012 11. Before 2012
6	Mark the unit of your school of graduation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Private Paid 2. Private Subsidised 3. Municipal
7	In our society there are those who tend to place themselves at the highest levels and groups who tend to place themselves at the lowest levels of society, where would you place yourself?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Under 2. Medium 3. High
8	Mark the year of study you are currently in.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 1st year 2. Year 2 3. Year 3 4. 4th year 5. Year 5
2. Perceived Social Support		
<p>Please answer the following questions thinking about the experiences you have had in the UNIVERSITY CONTEXT and taking into consideration all the people who are part of this context (TEACHERS, COMPANIONS, OFFICIALS, ASSISTANTS, etc.). These questions do not refer to a particular experience; you are free to answer them by thinking about all the experiences you have had in the university context.</p>		
Questions		Response Alternatives
1	I am sure that some of these people are trying to help me.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Almost never 2. Sometimes 3. Often 4. Most of the time
2	I can count on some of these people when I am in trouble	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Almost never 2. Sometimes 3. Often 4. Most of the time

3	When I have joys or sorrows, I can share them with some of these people.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Almost never 2. Sometimes 3. Often 4. Most of the time
4	I can talk about my problems with some of these people.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Almost never 2. Sometimes 3. Often 4. Most of the time
5	When I need something, I know that one of these people can help me.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Almost never 2. Sometimes 3. Often 4. Most of the time
6	When I have sorrows or joys, I know that one of these people can help me.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Almost never 2. Sometimes 3. Often 4. Most of the time
7	Some of these people offer me comfort when I need it.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Almost never 2. Sometimes 3. Often 4. Most of the time
8	Some of these people are interested in what I am feeling.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Almost never 2. Sometimes 3. Often 4. Most of the time
9	If I experience discrimination because I am a woman, I feel that I can turn to the authorities of my course of study to help me.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Almost never 2. Sometimes 3. Often 4. Most of the time
10	If I experience discrimination because I am a woman, I feel that I can turn to networks and/or initiatives in my field of study to help me (Student Centres, Student Councils, etc.).	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Almost never 2. Sometimes 3. Often 4. Most of the time
11	If I experience a situation of discrimination because I am a woman, I feel that I can turn to the student support centres provided by the university (Gender Equality Office, Gender Violence Hotlines, Student Affairs Office, etc.).	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Almost never 2. Sometimes 3. Often 4. Most of the time
12	If I experience discrimination because I am a woman, I feel that I can appeal to the university authorities (OMBUDSMAN; Directors, etc.).	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Almost never 2. Sometimes 3. Often 4. Most of the time
3. Psychological distress		
Please answer the following questions with complete honesty. Remember that this questionnaire is completely confidential and anonymous.		
Questions		Response Alternatives
1	I feel like I have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. Almost never 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Most of the time
2	I don't feel interested in things	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. Almost never 3. Sometimes

		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Often 5. Most of the time
3	I blame myself for things	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. Almost never 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Most of the time
4	I am satisfied with my life	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. Almost never 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Most of the time
5	I feel irritated	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. Almost never 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Most of the time
6	I think people would be better off without me	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. Almost never 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Most of the time
7	I feel weak	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. Almost never 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Most of the time
8	I feel scared	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. Almost never 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Most of the time
9	I use alcohol and drugs to get through the mornings.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. Almost never 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Most of the time
10	I feel useless	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. Almost never 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Most of the time
11	I find it hard to concentrate	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. Almost never 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Most of the time
12	I feel hopeless about the future	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. Almost never 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Most of the time
13	I am a happy person	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. Almost never 3. Sometimes 4. Often

		5. Most of the time
14	Disturbing thoughts come into my head and I can't stop thinking about them.	1. Never 2. Almost never 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Most of the time
15	I have a delicate stomach	1. Never 2. Almost never 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Most of the time
16	I feel something bad is going to happen	1. Never 2. Almost never 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Most of the time
17	I feel nervous	1. Never 2. Almost never 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Most of the time
18	I feel there is something wrong with me	1. Never 2. Almost never 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Most of the time
19	I feel sad	1. Never 2. Almost never 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Most of the time
20	I feel stressed in my study career.	1. Never 2. Almost never 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Most of the time
21	I feel satisfied in my study career	1. Never 2. Almost never 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Most of the time
22	I am not studying at the level I used to be.	1. Never 2. Almost never 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Most of the time
23	I have problems in my study career because of my alcohol or drug intake.	1. Never 2. Almost never 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Most of the time
24	I feel that I am not doing well in my study career.	1. Never 2. Almost never 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Most of the time

25	I feel lonely	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. Almost never 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Most of the time
26	In general, I get involved in discussions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. Almost never 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Most of the time
27	People criticise my drinking (or drug use) [If not applicable, check "NEVER"].	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. Almost never 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Most of the time
28	I find it difficult to get along with other people	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. Almost never 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Most of the time
29	I feel satisfied with my relationship with other people.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. Almost never 3. Sometimes 4. Often 5. Most of the time

4. Academic Self-Efficacy

Please answer the following questions thinking about your educational experiences in the UNIVERSITY CONTEXT (the courses you have taken, the tests, tests, presentations, reports and assignments you have done, etc.). Regarding your experiences, do you consider that you have the skills to...

Questions		Response Alternatives
1	Find a way to get what I want, even if someone opposes me.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. Almost never 3. Sometimes 4. Most of the time
2	I can solve difficult problems if I try hard enough	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. Almost never 3. Sometimes 4. Most of the time
3	I find it easy to persist in what I have set out to do until I reach my goals.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. Almost never 3. Sometimes 4. Most of the time
4	I am confident that I could effectively handle unexpected events.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. Almost never 3. Sometimes 4. Most of the time
5	Thanks to my qualities and resources I can overcome unforeseen situations.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. Almost never 3. Sometimes 4. Most of the time
6	When I find myself in difficulties, I can remain calm because I have the necessary skills to handle difficult situations.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. Almost never 3. Sometimes 4. Most of the time

7	Whatever comes my way, I am usually able to handle it.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. Almost never 3. Sometimes 4. Most of the time
8	I can solve most problems if I work hard enough.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. Almost never 3. Sometimes 4. Most of the time
9	If I find myself in a difficult situation, it usually occurs to me what I should do	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. Almost never 3. Sometimes 4. Most of the time
10	When faced with a problem, I usually come up with several alternatives on how to solve the problem	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. Almost never 3. Sometimes 4. Most of the time

5. Academic Persistence

Please answer the following questions thinking about the experience you have had in the UNIVERSITY CONTEXT.

Questions		Response Alternatives
1.	How likely are you to re-enrol next semester in the same degree programme?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Nothing 2. Very little 3. Little 4. Something 5. Much
2	Have you ever thought of dropping out of the race?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Yes 2. No
3	If you tick "yes", for what reason have you considered dropping out of the race? If you tick "no", skip this question.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mental health reasons 2. Academic demands and load 3. Discrimination on the grounds of being a woman 4. Economic reasons 5. Lack of motivation to study 6. Lack of institutional support 7. Family reasons 8. Academic performance 9. Other

6. Sexism Inventory

Please answer each of the following questions thinking about the experiences you have had in your UNIVERSITY STUDY CONTEXT and taking into consideration actors such as TEACHERS, COMPANIONS, ASSISTANTS, OFFICIALS. (Remember that this questionnaire is completely confidential and anonymous). In other words, think about whether these situations have happened to you with any of the people mentioned above.

Questions		Response Alternatives
1	How many times have they tried to hit on you because you are a woman?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. From time to time 3. Sometimes 4. Many 5. Much of the time 6. Almost all the time
2	How many times have you been disrespected for being a woman?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. From time to time 3. Sometimes 4. Many

		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Much of the time 6. Almost all the time
3	How many times have you wanted to confront these people for discriminating against women?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. From time to time 3. Sometimes 4. Many 5. Much of the time 6. Almost all the time
4	How many times have you been angry because you have been subjected to sexual discrimination?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. From time to time 3. Sometimes 4. Many 5. Much of the time 6. Almost all the time
5	How many times have you been told phrases that discriminate against you sexually?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. From time to time 3. Sometimes 4. Many 5. Much of the time 6. Almost all the time
6	How many times have you been involved in an argument or fight over a sexually discriminatory phrase or behaviour towards you or someone else?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. From time to time 3. Sometimes 4. Many 5. Much of the time 6. Almost all the time
7	How many times have you been laughed at, teased, threatened, pushed or hit because you are a woman?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. From time to time 3. Sometimes 4. Many 5. Much of the time 6. Almost all the time
8	How many times have you been excluded from participating in an activity because you are a woman (e.g. participating in a working group, applying for an assistantship, participating in a student organisation, participating in an extracurricular activity, etc.)?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. From time to time 3. Sometimes 4. Many 5. Much of the time 6. Almost all the time
9	How many times have you been treated gently because you are a woman? (e.g., language in front of you has been carefully handled)?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. From time to time 3. Sometimes 4. Many 5. Much of the time 6. Almost all the time
10	How many times have you been advised not to perform a more difficult task because you are a woman?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. From time to time 3. Sometimes 4. Many 5. Much of the time 6. Almost all the time
11	How many times have you been infantilised for being a woman?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. From time to time 3. Sometimes 4. Many 5. Much of the time 6. Almost all the time
12	How many times have you been mansplained to because you	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never

	are a woman? (Mansplaining: when a man repeats or explains what a woman says, without acknowledging his knowledge of the subject).	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. From time to time 3. Sometimes 4. Many 5. Much of the time 6. Almost all the time
13	How many times have you been patronised for being a woman?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. From time to time 3. Sometimes 4. Many 5. Much of the time 6. Almost all the time
14	FINALLY, now, thinking particularly of each of the people who make up the university community: How many times have your TEACHERS treated you unfairly because you are a woman?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. From time to time 3. Sometimes 4. Many 5. Much of the time 6. Almost all the time
15	How many times have you been treated unfairly by your fellow race colleagues because you are a woman?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. From time to time 3. Sometimes 4. Many 5. Much of the time 6. Almost all the time
16	How many times have civil servants (administrative, professional) treated you unfairly because you are a woman?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. From time to time 3. Sometimes 4. Many 5. Much of the time 6. Almost all the time
17	How many times have HELPERS treated you unfairly because you are a woman?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. From time to time 3. Sometimes 4. Many 5. Much of the time 6. Almost all the time
18	How many times have you heard these people make jokes that are degrading or discriminate against women (teachers, colleagues, civil servants, assistants)?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. From time to time 3. Sometimes 4. Many 5. Much of the time 6. Almost all the time
19	Thinking about the experiences you have had in your university context: How many times have you been forced to throw away or not take a bouquet in order to get away or avoid a situation of discrimination because you are a woman?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. From time to time 3. Sometimes 4. Many 5. Much of the time 6. Almost all the time
20	How many times have you been forced to leave a work group or student organisation in order to distance yourself or avoid being discriminated against because you are a woman?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Never 2. From time to time 3. Sometimes 4. Many 5. Much of the time 6. Almost all the time

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