Confrontation versus Ambiguity: Exploring Interpretation of Responses to Sexism in a
Polarized Turkish Context

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Abstract

Sexism is a persistent problem affecting women in various aspects of their lives. Responses to sexism, ranging from active confrontations to passive acceptance, carry different implications for social norms and attitudes. This study focuses on how confrontational versus ambiguous responses to sexism influence individuals' attitudes, behavioral intentions, and perceptions of norms around gender equality within the highly polarized Turkish society. It also investigates the role of perceived moral and structural polarization in these effects. Through an experiment with 251 participants, we found that strongly identified secular individuals who witnessed confrontational responses developed more secular attitudes. These individuals also perceived conservative norms around gender equality more strongly, although their perceptions of secular norms around gender equality remained unchanged. Regardless of the response type, moral and structural polarization perceptions were positively associated with attitudes and norm perceptions. While confrontations promote secular attitudes among strongly identified secular individuals, such responses also exacerbate existing polarization. These findings contribute to understanding the dynamics between social identity, normative influence, and polarization in shaping attitudes toward gender equality.

Keywords: sexism, gender equality, moral polarization, structural polarization, norm perception, behavioral intentions

Confrontation versus Ambiguity: Exploring Interpretations of Responses to Sexism in a

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In 2022, over 50% of respondents across 15 countries believed their nations were more divided than ever before (Statista, 2023). This divide has continued to worsen, manifesting in contentious debates over issues from immigration policies to LGBTQ+ rights (Knöchelmann & Cohrs, 2024). When these disagreements shape the formation of contrasting ideologies and identities, they can fuel conflict between these groups (Mason, 2018; Smith et al., 2024). This phenomenon goes beyond political disagreement and affects one's attitudes and norms (Dawkins & Hanson, 2022; Kingzette et al., 2021). For instance, concerning gender equality, previous research shows that higher political divisions inhibit progress towards gender equality (Koornneef, 2023). In Turkey, the effects of the divisions are particularly evident in attitudes toward gender equality (Konda, 2019). This complex landscape shapes how people handle and perceive responses to sexism, offering a lens to examine both individual actions and perceptions of societal divisions. This exploration is particularly essential not only for understanding the dynamics of gender inequality but also for the broader question of how societies can navigate toward harmony.

In this thesis, we focus on responses to sexism - specifically confrontational or ambiguous - in shaping attitudes towards gender equality, behavioral intentions to act against sexism, and norm perceptions regarding gender equality within a highly polarized Turkish society. In addition, we examine how perceptions of a divided society influence interpretations of these responses, attitudes, intentions, and norms perceptions of gender equality. Our research examines whether confrontation increases the salience of intergroup conflict, which, according to social identity perspectives, should increase conformity to

group-specific norms and, consequently, polarization (Turner et al., 1987; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Responses to Sexism

Women frequently experience sexist behavior in their daily lives. However, their experiences and how they respond to such sexism differ, ranging from passive acceptance to active responses, including confrontation and collective action (Ayres et al., 2009; Sakallı, 2021). Active responses, such as interpersonal confrontations, are crucial in shaping societal perceptions, behaviors, and broader societal norms (Czopp et al., 2006; Czopp, 2019). By expressing disagreement and dissatisfaction, confrontations signal to bystanders what actions are inappropriate in a particular situation and help set injunctive norms (Czopp, 2019). For example, Gervais et al. (2010) found that witnessing a confrontation increased the perception of the behavior as biased. Sakallı (2021) also argues that confronting sexism is necessary to induce social change, while passive responses inhibit it. Supporting this, it was found that men used less sexist language when confronted (Mallet & Wagner, 2010). Confronting, within this context, is contextualized as verbally conveying dissatisfaction with the sexist remark to the person responsible for the behavior or remark.

Conversely, when people witness passive responses, these effects diminish. Passive responses or silence in the face of prejudice can be interpreted as implicit approval, potentially reinforcing existing norms (Czopp, 2019). When faced with such bias and discrimination, one's inaction influences how others interpret and respond to the situation (Latané & Darley, 1970). For example, Czopp (2013) found that participants who observed a student ignoring anti-environmental remarks displayed more negative environmental attitudes and behaviors than those who observed a confrontation. The lack of confrontation affected participants' attitudes by implicitly endorsing anti-environmental comments. Our study focuses on ambiguous responses to sexism, which we define as reactions that are neither

clearly confrontational nor explicitly accepting, thereby making them open to interpretation. Unlike confrontation, these ambiguous responses do not challenge the sexist remark but display passive behavior.

The consequences of confrontation extend beyond immediate social interactions as they affect broader social norms (Blanchard et al., 1994). When individuals confront sexism, they highlight and reinforce group norms that reject sexism, making these norms salient. This increased salience can encourage others to conform to their norms, aligning their behaviors with their' groups' expectations (Crandall et al., 2002).

Norm Perception & Conformity to Group Norms

When evaluating discriminatory scenarios, responding to offensive jokes, or displaying prejudice, individuals strictly follow social norms (Crandall et al., 2002), which are formed based on one's valued groups (Sherif & Sherif, 1953). The social identity perspective explains that people acquire their self-concept from the groups and categories they belong to (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Through this process, individuals assess their ingroups (those they identify with) and outgroups (those they do not see themselves as part of). Specifically, ingroup norms guide individuals on how other ingroup members perceive and interact with the outgroup, influencing their perceptions and behaviors (Borinca et al., 2021). Individuals' perceptions of the norms guide their opinions and behaviors, making these perceptions a catalyst for social change (Tankard & Paluck, 2016). This perception and identification affect individuals' behavior and responses to social issues, including gender equality. Previous research demonstrated that when the perception of ingroup norms was manipulated as changing, the gender gap in interests toward stereotypically feminine fields was reduced for those who strongly identify with their ingroup (Iacoviello et al., 2022). Similarly, another study found that ingroup endorsement (when men saw other men as endorsing gender equality) effectively promoted gender equality (Roden et al., 2021).

The social identity perspective argues that group influence is maximized when the social identity is salient rather than when behavior or definition is ambiguous (Turner, 1982). Consistent with this perspective, previous research has indicated that when norms about equality and fairness are emphasized and activated, people are less likely to express prejudiced responses (Monteith et al., 1996). Further supporting the importance of group norms, a study by Badea et al. (2021) found that participants who identified significantly with a group value were more likely to support collective action in alignment with group norms, regardless of the norms' perceived fairness.

While the social identity perspective provides a framework for understanding how and why individuals conform to group norms, it does not detail conditions under intergroup comparisons that become highly salient or how such salience can escalate into conflict. This gap presents an opportunity for our study, which aims to understand these dynamics. For this reason, understanding how confrontational responses might exacerbate intergroup conflict represents a novel extension of this theoretical framework. In line with this, we hypothesize that witnessing a confrontational response to sexism (as opposed to an ambiguous response) will result in an increased divergence in perceived norms between secular and conservative groups (Hypothesis 1). For secular individuals, this will lead to more progressive attitude shifts, and for conservatives, they will shift their attitudes toward conservatism to protect their traditional values. This effect occurs as confrontational responses signal opposition to sexism, encouraging groups to align their attitudes with their ingroup norms by activating these norms. In contrast, ambiguous responses lack this clear normative signal, resulting in less pronounced attitude shifts.

Moral & Structural Polarization

Polarization refers to the division within a society that aligns individuals along distinct ideological or moral axes, often manifesting as an "us versus them" mentality (McCoy et al.,

2018). This division can occur in different forms, including moral and structural polarization. Moral polarization occurs when these divisions are based on deeply rooted values that are central to how individuals define themselves (Crimston et al., 2021; Ellemers & van den Bos, 2012). Structural polarization refers to perceived divisions of society into different subgroups, influencing willingness to engage in discussion and potentially exacerbating societal divisions (Koudenburg & Kashima, 2021). When polarization occurs, perceived intergroup differences are highlighted, and intragroup differences are minimized, leading to more extreme norm perceptions (Crimston et al., 2021).

As confrontation might make group differences highly salient, secular and conservative, people might react differently depending on their group membership. For secular individuals, the confrontation is likely to reinforce alignment with ingroup progressive norms, which can be observed in several dimensions. Firstly, their attitudes toward gender equality might strengthen as they reaffirm their commitment to secular values. Secondly, this attitude can translate into proactive behavioral intentions against sexist actions or remarks, displaying commitment to act in accordance with their normative beliefs. Thirdly, they may perceive ingroup and outgroup norms more strongly, thus making clearer distinctions between their own values and those perceived to belong to the conservative outgroup.

On the other hand, conservative individuals might react to maintain their traditional norms when confronted. This may result in more endorsement of conservative attitudes, as they might perceive the confrontation as contrary to their fundamental values. Thus, such confrontation might diminish their behavioral intentions to engage in or support progressive actions against sexism, maintaining a status quo aligned with their conservative principles. In addition, the confrontation might lead to a strengthened perception of ingroup norms as they might seek to secure their identity in contrast to secular ideologies, possibly leading to increased awareness of the normative conflicts between the groups.

These effects can be stronger when individuals perceive higher degrees of moral and structural polarization (Hypothesis 2). In addition, secular individuals might be more likely to interpret ambiguous responses to sexism as reinforcing the status quo when they perceive higher degrees of moral and structural polarization (Hypothesis 3).

Present Study

Marked by significant political and social polarization in the last few years, Turkey provides a suitable context for examining this research question in a non-western context. In Turkey, values are the most determining factor of existing polarization (Konda, 2019). A country-wide survey indicated that seculars are completely against women having to obtain permission from their husbands to work, whereas 67% of the conservatives and 89% of the people in the middle think that they should obtain permission (Konda, 2019). Secular individuals strongly support equality between men and women, whereas conservative people strongly endorse patriarchy.

It is no surprise that this polarization of these values is often portrayed by media, including comedy sketches and TV shows where conservative versus secular families and values and their differences are highlighted. One of the TV shows that is highly popular in Turkey is 'Kızılcık Şerbeti' (Cranberry Sorbet), centered around the marriage of the son of a conservative family and the daughter of a secular family, portraying disparities of the lifestyles of conservatives and seculars from gender-based doctor preferences to sentiments against violence against women (Karakoyunlu, 2023). In the present study, we have depicted a video clip from this TV show where the couple is arguing about the wife going out with slight editing to make the video more or less confrontational.

In this research, our primary goal is to examine how confrontational and ambiguous responses to sexist behavior influence attitudes and perceptions of ingroup norms about gender equality. Specifically, we will examine the impact of confrontational versus

ambiguous responses to sexist behavior on individual levels (i.e., attitudes) and collective levels (i.e., norm perceptions). Moreover, we examine whether perceived moral and structural polarization in Turkish society alters interpretations of responses to sexism. Considering these, our study assesses behavioral intentions to understand how confrontational versus ambiguous responses influence individuals' readiness to act against sexism. Specifically, we argue that as confrontations will clearly display disapproval, it might encourage secular individuals to engage in actions to support gender equality instead of ambiguous responses that may include unclear normative cues and insufficient for change. For conservative individuals, confrontations might provoke resistance or reinforce their existing views, reinforcing the status quo.

Given this, we aim to understand, in highly polarized societal contexts, how different responses to sexism, specifically confrontational versus ambiguous, influence individuals' attitudes and perceptions and how the degree of perceived moral and structural polarization alters this effect. In line with this research question, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 1: In a high-polarization context, witnessing a confrontational response to sexism (as opposed to an ambiguous response) will result in an increased divergence in perceived norms between secular and conservative groups. For secular individuals, this will lead to more progressive attitude shifts; for conservatives, they will shift their attitudes toward conservatism to protect their traditional values.

Hypothesis 2: The effects observed in H1 will be stronger for individuals who perceive a higher degree of moral and structural polarization.

Hypothesis 3: Secular individuals will be more likely to interpret ambiguous responses to sexism as reinforcing the status quo when they perceive higher degrees of moral and structural polarization.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited through online posts on social media and snowball sampling. The inclusion criteria included being a Turkish citizen and being over 18 years old. Initially, 366 individuals started the online survey; however, due to incomplete responses, the data from 113 participants were discarded. Additionally, two individuals were excluded for not providing consent to the study, resulting in a final sample of 251 participants.

The gender distribution of the sample was 74.1 % female (n=186), 25.1% male (n=63), and 0.8% non-binary (n=2). The sample is skewed in terms of age, with 33.5% (n=84) of participants aged between 18 and 24 years old, 34.3% (n=86) were between 25 and 34 years old, 22.3% (n=56) were between 35 and 44 years old, 4.8% (n=12) were between 45 and 54 years old, and 5.2% (n=13) were between 55 and 64 years old. In addition, the distribution of participants' political orientation scores was skewed, with 82.8% scoring themselves a six or higher on a scale from 1 to 10, where 10 represents the most secular orientation (M = 7.57, SD = 2.07).

Design and Procedure

This experimental study employed a between-subjects design where participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: exposure to a confrontational response (n= 128) or to an ambiguous response (n= 123) following sexist remarks made by a male character towards a female character in clips from TV Series Cranberry Sorbet. The primary research question investigated how confrontational versus ambiguous responses to sexism (independent variable), moderated by perceived moral and structural polarization, influence attitudes towards gender equality (dependent variable) and behavioral intentions (dependent variable) and how norm perceptions mediate this relationship. In addition, the study explored the perceived alignment of attitudes as an explanatory measure. The power analysis conducted before the study using G*Power (Version 3.1) indicated that a total sample size of 179

participants would be required based on an alpha level of 0.05, a power level of 0.80, and an effect size of 0.25 in an ANOVA with main effects and interactions. Before the study, ethical approval was obtained from the Faculty of Behavioral and Social Sciences Ethics Committee at the University of Groningen. The study took place online through Qualtrics. Participants were invited to participate in the study through posts or stories containing links distributed through various platforms, including Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook. Before starting the survey, participants gave informed consent regarding their participation and usage of data. After the study was completed, participants were debriefed and informed about the study's aims. All the study materials were in Turkish. The duration of the experiment was approximately 8 minutes.

Materials

Demographics

Participants indicated their age category (18-24 years old, 25-34 years old, 35-44 years old, or 45-54 years old) and gender (male, female, non-binary, prefer not to say).

Secular-Conservative Identification

In line with the prior studies in which participants self-rated their positions on the political orientation spectrum (Galli & Modesto, 2023), participants rated their secular-conservative identity using a scale from 0 (*completely conservative*) to 10 (*completely secular*).

Perceived Moral Polarization

We adapted Crimston et al. (2021)'s measure of moral polarization, using images of circles to capture participants' perceptions of value alignment between conservatives and seculars in Turkish society. With a scale from 1 (no overlap) to 5 (complete overlap) and using circles as a reference, we used the following item: *"Imagine the circles below represent the core moral values held by two major groups, seculars and conservatives, in Turkish*

society with respect to issues like gender equality, sexism, and LGBTQ+ rights. By this, we mean the values that determine their attitudes towards these important social issues. Using the graphics as a guide, to what extent do you think the core moral values and beliefs of these two groups overlap in Turkish society today?"

Perceived Structural Polarization

Adapted from Koudenburg & Kashima (2021), participants rated their perceived structural polarization on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) using two items: *'Groups of people with respect to gender equality, are in direct opposition of each other.'* and '*There are subgroups forming in society with respect to gender equality that represent the different opinion camps.'* The Spearman-Brown coefficient for the two items was .644, indicating moderate reliability, possibly due to translation and differences in interpreting the scale items within the Turkish context.

Responses to Sexism Videos

A clip from the Turkish TV Series "Cranberry Sorbet" was used for two conditions: confrontational and ambiguous responses. The clip's setting is a private conversation between a married couple at home in which the husband confronts his wife with a sexist comment about her behavior at a social event. We edited this clip to depict different responses to sexism: one version was edited to demonstrate a confrontational response (the wife stands up for herself, challenging his husband's accusations in a firm tone), while the other one included an ambiguous response (barely reactive, attempting to justify herself without challenging his husband's comments). Thus, both versions were consistent regarding the characters involved and the dialogue presented to enable controlled comparison between response conditions.

Manipulation Check

We utilized a two-level manipulation check to ensure participants accurately engaged with the video presented. The first question tested whether participants had seen the clip in

which they had to choose the dialogue setting from options at home, 'in the park,' or 'in the car.' Then, we assessed participants' interpretation of the video clip with two items:*"To what extent did the woman confront?"* and *"To what extent did the woman respond passively?"* with a 7-point Likert Scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *completely*). The Spearman-Brown coefficient for the two items was -644, indicating a successful manipulation.

Attitudes Towards Gender Equality

We measured attitudes towards gender equality using seven items from the Gender Roles Attitudes Scale developed by Zeyneloglu & Terzioglu (2011) with a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). To this, we added four items specifically tailored to the context of the video, including '*Women should be honorable*' and '*Women should adhere to dress and behavior standards in public.*' (Cronbach's alpha: .856).

Ingroup & Outgroup Norm Perceptions of Gender Equality

We used the 11 items provided to assess attitudes towards gender equality from the above scale to indicate participants' ingroup and outgroup norm perceptions of gender equality. With the question: "*On average, conservative people think [attitude item],"* on a 7-point Likert scale (1= *conservative people would strongly disagree*, 7 = conservative *people would strongly agree*), we assessed their perceptions of conservative norms in which secular items were recoded (Cronbach's alpha: .892). For the secular norm perception, we used the following question: "*On average, secular people think [attitude item]*" (Cronbach's alpha: .871) on a 7-point Likert Scale in which conservative items were recoded (1= *secular people would strongly disagree*, 7 = *secular people would strongly agree*). For both scales, higher scores reflect a stronger perception of the group in question.

Behavioral Intentions

Participants rated their likelihood of confronting or encouraging to confront sexism with three items, including "*If I see someone in this situation, I will confront the male*." and

"If I see my female friend experience this situation, I will tell them to confront." (Cronbach's alpha: .745) within a 7-point Scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

Perceived Alignment of Attitudes

We asked participants to rate how much they thought the male character in the video clip would support various topics, including gender equality and religious practices. They provided their ratings on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (completely) for each of the ten items (Cronbach's alpha: .761).

TV Show Familiarity

Participants indicated familiarity with the TV Show Cranberry Sorbet, choosing from never watched, some episodes, and (almost) all episodes.

Analysis Plan

We calculated descriptive statistics for the primary variables: moral and structural polarization, attitudes towards gender equality, ingroup/outgroup norm perceptions, and behavioral intentions. Before conducting regression analysis, we checked assumptions for normality and homoscedasticity using scatter plots and Q-Q plots. We then employed hierarchical regression analysis to test our hypotheses.

First, we analyzed the main effects of response type (confrontational vs. ambiguous) and also its interaction with political orientation on attitudes toward gender equality, norm perceptions, and behavioral intentions. Secondly, we examined the moderation effects of perceived moral and structural polarization on the relationship between the response condition and the dependent variables. To explore these effects, we added interaction terms (response condition x perceived polarization) to our regression models. Thirdly, we investigated how perceived moral and structural polarization, as fixed factors, influenced interpretations of ambiguous responses. This analysis followed the same procedure as previously described but with an interpretation of ambiguous responses as a dependent variable. Lastly, we explored

the perceived alignment of attitudes by comparing intraclass correlations between conditions to determine if there was consistency in participants' responses across different scenarios. We used SPSS 28.0.0 software for all statistical analyses.

Results

All participants successfully detected the context in which the dialogue occurred in the video. The manipulation of confrontation was successful: an independent sample t-test revealed that participants in the confrontation response ($M = 4.58, SD = 1.49$) perceived significantly more confrontation than those in the ambiguous response condition ($M = 3.15, SD = 1.32; t(249) = -8.058, p < .001$).

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics for all primary variables. Participants generally held strongly positive attitudes towards gender equality ($M = 5.63, SD = 1.29$). They also reported moderately high perceptions of conservative norms ($M = 5.63, SD = 1.29$) and secular norms ($M = 5.75, SD = 1.12$), suggesting participants perceived both group norms as relatively strong. Behavioral intentions to confront sexism were also high ($M = 5.70, SD = 1.41$). Participants perceived relatively high structural polarization ($M = 5.94, SD = 1.31$) and high moral polarization ($M = 4.97, SD = 2.29$). The sample showed a moderate negative skew towards secular viewpoints ($M = 7.57, SD = 2.07$, skew $= -0.767, SE = 0.154$), in which more participants scored towards the higher (more secular) end (see Figure 1). In addition, the majority, 38.6%, of the participants have never watched the TV show presented, while 33.9% have watched some episodes and 27.5% have watched nearly all episodes.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Between Core Study Variables

Variables	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6

		1	2	3	4	5	6
1.Attitudes Towards Gender Equality	6.02 (1.09)	-	-	-	-	-	-
2.Conservative Norm Perception	5.63 (1.29)	.369**	-	-	-	-	-
3.Secular Norm Perception	5.75 (1.12)	.497**	.249**	-	-	-	-
4.Behavioral Intention	5.70 (1.41)	.501**	.094	.300**	-	-	-
5.Perceived Moral Polarization	3.87 (.94)	.177**	.199**	178**	-.042	-	-
6.Perceived Structural Polarization	5.94 (1.31)	.295**	.315**	.182**	.151	.056	-
7. Political Orientation	7.57 (2.07)	.330**	.233**	.182**	.206**	.061	.210**

Note: *N*=251, **p <.01.

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations Per Response Type

Variables	Response Type	
	Confrontation M (SD)	Ambiguous M (SD)
Attitudes Towards Gender Equality	6.08 (1.06)	5.97 (1.12)
Conservative Norm Perception	5.66 (1.29)	5.60 (1.29)
Secular Norm Perception	5.75 (1.14)	5.75 (1.11)
Behavioral Intentions	5.78 (1.35)	5.63 (1.46)

Moral Polarization	4.02 (.86)	3.70 (1.01)
Structural Polarization	5.93 (1.36)	5.95 (1.25)
Political Orientation	7.52 (2.02)	7.60 (2.12)

Note: *N*=251

Assumption Check

We checked for normality and homoscedasticity. The Q-Q plot for the standardized variable of attitudes towards gender equality suggests that data is approximately normally distributed with a slight deviation in the lower tail and an outlier in the upper tail, indicating the presence of extreme values (see Figure 2). Given the skew towards secular viewpoints, we decided to focus our primary analysis on the secular subgroup (participants scoring themselves six or higher on the political orientation scale) to provide clearer insights into the influence of different responses to sexism within a predominantly secular context. This focus was necessary as including the full sample where conservative representations were limited diminished some of the interaction effects of political orientation and condition predicting attitudes towards gender equality and conservative norm perception.

Scatterplots of standardized predicted values against standardized residuals for response types show no pattern of heteroscedasticity, indicating consistent variance across predicted values (see Figure 3). Since our study includes a categorical independent variable with two conditions, we did not test for linearity, as it is not required (Casson & Farmer, 2014).

Hypothesis Testing

The analyses reported below include only the sample's secular subgroup (participants who scored themselves six and above for political orientation) ($N = 208$).

For H1, we conducted a step-wise hierarchical regression analysis to understand the effects of response type (confrontational vs. ambiguous), political orientation, and their interaction on attitudes toward gender equality. Response type alone did not predict attitudes

towards gender equality ($p > .05$). Including political orientation accounted for a 5.8% increase in explained variance in attitudes towards gender equality ($\Delta R^2 = .058, \beta = .243, p < .001$). A further inclusion of interaction between response type and political orientation significantly increased the variance explained by 2.7% ($\Delta R^2 = .027, F (3, 204) = 6.60, p < 0.01$). This interaction was significant, ($\beta = .237, t = 2.462 p = .015$) whereas the main effects of political orientation ($\beta = .072, t = .740 p = .460$) and response type ($\beta = .072, t = .740 p = .460$) were non-significant.[1] In line with H1, in the ambiguous response condition, political orientation has a minimal predictive effect on attitudes toward gender equality ($R^2 = 0.004$). In contrast, in the confrontation response condition, the relationship is notably stronger ($R^2 = 0.184$) (see Figure 4).

We used a step-wise hierarchical regression to assess norm perceptions, including response type, political orientation, and their interaction as predictor variables. For conservative norm perceptions, political orientation significantly improved model fit ($\Delta R^2 = .039, \beta = .199, p = .014$), with interaction term further increasing variance by 1.9% ($\Delta R^2 = .019, F (3, 204) = 4.29, p = .06$). The interaction term significantly predicted conservative norm perceptions ($\beta = .198, t = 2.018, p = .045$) whereas political orientation ($\beta = .056, t = .572, p = .568$) and response type ($\beta = .056, t = .814, p = .417$) did not.[2] Political orientation did not predict conservative norm perceptions in the ambiguous response condition ($R^2 = 0.003$). However, in the confrontation response condition, political orientation predicted conservative norm perception ($R^2 = 0.112$) (see Figure 5). These findings, in line with H1, indicate that the impact of political orientation on conservative norm perceptions may be more pronounced in confrontation response.

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[1] The interaction effect of response type and political orientation predicting attitudes towards gender equality was not significant for the full sample ($\Delta R^2 = .012, F (3, 247) = 11.732, p = .068$).
[2] The interaction effect of response type and political orientation predicting conservative norm perception was not significant for the full sample ($\Delta R^2 = .012, F (3, 247) = 5.948, p = .072$).

For secular norm perception, political orientation significantly increased variance by 3.1% ($\Delta R^2 = .031$, $F (2, 205) = 3.27$, $p = .040$) was a significant predictor ($\beta = .214$, $t = 2.145$, $p = .033$), while the response type was not significant ($\beta = .022$, $t = .312$, $p = .756$). The interaction term did not result in a significant change in variance ($\Delta R^2 = .001$). Similar hierarchical regression analyses for behavioral intentions showed that response type alone was not a significant predictor ($\beta = .070$, $t = 1.006$, $p = .316$). However, political orientation explained an additional variance of 6.7 % ($\Delta R^2 = .067$, $F (2, 205) = 7.89$, $p < .001$), significantly predicting behavioral intentions ($\beta = .259$, $t = 3.835$, $p < .001$). Including the interaction term did not account for a change in variance ($\Delta R^2 = .000$).

Table 2

Standardized Coefficients in Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Attitudes, Norm Perceptions, and Behavioral Intentions

Variables	Attitudes Towards Gender Equality	Conservative Norm Perception	Secular Norm Perception	Behavioral Intentions
Step 1				
Response Type	.055	.037	.022	.070
R²	.003	.001	.000	.005
Step 2				
Response Type	.079	.057	.039	.095
Political Orientation	.243***	.199**	.175*	.259***
Δ R²	.058	.039	.031	.067
Sig. F Change	<.001	.004	.012	<.001
Step 3				
Response Type	.078	.056	.039	.095
Political Orientation	.072	.056	.214*	.272**
Response Type* Political Orientation	.237*	.198*	-.053	-.018
Δ R²	.027	.059	.001	.000
Sig. F Change	.015	.045	.594	.855

Note: *N*=208. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

For H2, we focused on perceived moral and structural polarization as predictors in regression models. Response type was not significant in any of the models ($p > .05$). In line with H2, perceived moral polarization significantly predicted attitudes towards gender

equality ($\beta = .173, t = 2.733, p = .007$), accounting for 2.9% variance ($\Delta R^2 = .029, F (2, 205) = 6.50, p = .002$). Including interaction terms with response type did not result in a significant change in variance ($R^2 = .010$), showing that the impact of moral polarization on attitudes was consistent across response types. Structural polarization had a stronger effect on attitudes ($\beta = .276, t = 4.122, p < .001$) and resulting in 7.6% increase in variance ($\Delta R^2 = .076, F (2, 205) = 8.83, p < .001$). The interaction of structural polarization with the response type did not result in a significant change in variance ($R^2 = .010$), indicating that the impact of structural polarization on attitudes was consistent across response types.

Perceived moral polarization significantly predicted conservative norm perceptions ($\beta = .274, t = 4.050, p < .001$), explaining an additional 7.4% increase in variance ($\Delta R^2 = .074, F (2, 205) = 8.35, p < .001$). The interaction between moral polarization and different types of responses to sexism did not change the variance of our model ($\Delta R^2 = .000$), suggesting that the impact of moral polarization is consistent regardless of the response type. Results for structural polarization were similar: a 9.8% increase in variance ($\Delta R^2 = .098, F (2, 205) = 11.36, p < .001$) and significant prediction of conservative norm perception ($\beta = .314, t = 4.733, p < .001$). For secular norm perceptions, moral polarization accounted for a 4% increase in variance ($\Delta R^2 = .040, F (2, 205) = 4.34, p = .014$) and significantly predicted secular norm perceptions ($\beta = .202, t = 2.930, p = .004$). The addition of the interaction term with the response type did not result in a change in the variance ($\Delta R^2 = .010$), showing that the relationship between moral polarization and secular norm perceptions remains consistent across different response types to sexism. Structural polarization also displayed a similar pattern: when it was added to the model, it accounted for a 5.1% increase in variance ($\Delta R^2 = .051, F (2, 205) = 5.51, p = .005$) and significantly predicted secular norm perception ($\beta = .225, t = 3.304, p = .001$). The third model with interaction term did not account for any change in variance ($\Delta R^2 = .000$). None of the models, including moral and structural

polarization and their interaction terms with response types, significantly predicted behavioral

intentions ($p > .05$).

Table 3

Standardized Coefficients in Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Attitudes, Norm

Perceptions, Behavioral Intentions, and Interpretation of the Ambiguous Response

Variables	Attitudes Towards Gender Equality	Conservative Norm Perception	Secular Norm Perception	Behavioral Intentions	Interpretation of the Ambiguous Response
Step 1					
Response Type	.055	.037	.022	.070	-.248***
R²	.003	.001	.000	.005	.062
Step 2					
Response Type	.023	.000	-.006	.081	-.262***
Moral Polarization	.240***	.274***	.202**	-.079	.103
Δ R²	.057	.074	.040	.006	.010
Sig. F Change	<.001	<.001	.004	.263	.132
Step 3					
Response Type	.024	.000	-.005	.081	-.262***
Moral Polarization	.330***	.286**	.291**	-.004	.088
Response Type* Moral Polarization	-.135	-.017	-.133	-.112	.022
Δ R²	.010	.000	.010	.007	.000
Sig. F Change	.141	.850	.151	.234	.806

Note: N=208. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

Table 4

Standardized Coefficients in Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Attitudes, Norm

Perceptions, Behavioral Intentions and Interpretation of the Ambiguous Response

Variables	Attitudes Towards Gender Equality	Conservative Norm Perception	Secular Norm Perception	Behavioral Intentions	Interpretation of the Ambiguous Response
Step 1					
Response Type	.055	.037	.022	.070	-248***
R²	.003	.001	.000	.005	.062
Step 2					
Response Type	.058	.040	.024	.071	-248***
Structural Polarization	.276***	.314***	.225***	.125	.090
Δ R²	.076	.098	.051	.011	.008
Sig. F Change	<.001	<.001	.001	2.370	.183
Step 3					
Response Type	.058	.040	.024	.071	-.248
Structural Polarization	.158	.305**	.238*	.077	.131
Response Type* Structural Polarization	.156	.011	-.017	.040	-.057
Δ R²	.010	.000	.000	.001	.002
Sig F. Change	.129	.912	.872	.708	.563

Note: N=208. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

For H3, we conducted an analysis similar to that used for H2, but we examined the interpretation of the ambiguous response as the dependent variable. The step-wise hierarchical regression analysis for both moral and structural polarization shows that while the response type significantly predicts how responses are interpreted ($p < 0.001$), interaction terms with perceived polarization (both moral and structural) do not significantly explain additional variance ($p > .001$). This finding indicates that participants' interpretation of ambiguous responses is not significantly influenced by the degree of perceived moral and structural polarization.

Exploratory Analysis

To understand whether participants have a unified image of the outgroup, we calculated the intraclass correlations between the perceived alignment of conservative and secular attitudes. The intraclass correlation coefficients for the ambiguous and confrontational conditions showed significant differences, as indicated by non-overlapping confidence intervals (see Table 5). For secular items, participants indicated high alignment in the ambiguous response condition (ICC = .906, 95% CI [.873, .933]), which decreased in the confrontational response condition (ICC = .738, 95% CI [.652, .809]), suggesting confrontation led to more varied responses. Similarly, for conservative items, there was a notable alignment in the ambiguous response condition (ICC = .748, 95% CI [.660, .819]). We observed less alignment in the confrontational response condition (ICC = .664, 95% CI [.553, .755])), showing the influence of confrontational contexts in increasing variability in how conservative attitudes are perceived.

Table 5

Average Measures of Intraclass Correlations of Perceived Alignment of Attitudes

	Intraclass Correlation	95 % Confidence Interval	
		Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Secular Items			
Ambiguous	.906	.873	.933
Confrontation	.738	.652	.809
Conservative Items			
Ambiguous	.748	.660	.819
Confrontation	.664	.553	.755

*Note: For ambiguous response condition: N=99, For confrontation response condition: $N = 109$

We conducted a repeated measures ANOVA to evaluate changes in perceived moral and structural polarization from pre-to post-video across different response types (confrontational vs. ambiguous). The analysis revealed that perceived moral polarization showed no significant change from pre-to post-video exposure ($F(1, 206) = .094$, $p = .759$),

indicating that the video clip did not alter participants' perceptions of moral polarization. For structural polarization, the analysis showed a significant main effect of time on structural polarization (F (1,206) = 6.930, p = .009), indicating that structural polarization increased from pre-video to post-video, regardless of the response type. There was no significant interaction effect of time and response type (F(1, 206) = .050, p = .853), which indicates that while a sexist video increased perceptions of structural polarization, differences in the responses to sexism did not influence the responses (see Figure 7).

Discussion

As sexism remains a pervasive issue affecting many women, understanding how different responses to it are interpreted and their impact on individuals is crucial for promoting gender equality and social change, especially in highly polarized societies. In this study, we investigated how confrontational and ambiguous responses to sexism influence egalitarian attitudes among a secular population in Turkey. Moreover, we examined the role of us versus them dynamics in this respect to understand if perceptions of polarization promote convergence to the ingroup and divergence from the outgroup norms of gender equality. To the best of our knowledge, no previous study has examined this. We tested our research question among seculars in a traditional society in which patriarchal views are dominant, and gender roles are well-defined by long-standing cultural and religious practices (Arat, 2010).

In line with Hypothesis 1, our findings revealed that confrontational responses to sexism were interpreted differently depending on participants' political orientation. Specifically, the more individuals identified themselves as secular, the more egalitarian attitudes they showed after witnessing a confrontational response to a sexist remark. When a sexist remark was not confronted, we did not find a relation between egalitarian attitudes and political orientation. This finding supports previous research that confrontational responses

might lead to attitude change by signaling what is unacceptable (Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Becker et al., 2014) but only for those who strongly identify with their ingroup as the effect of confrontation was not uniform for each individual.

Similarly, when participants identified as highly secular witnessed a confrontational response, they also perceived conservative (outgroup) norms around gender equality more strongly, increasing the disparity between secular and conservative groups. This finding further supports the social identity-intergroup differentiation hypothesis, which posits that individuals who identify with their ingroup more strongly also perceive greater differences with the outgroup (Lalonde, 2002), but only when they witness a confrontation, in which an intergroup conflict is salient. This dynamic may be due to the content of the confrontation, which did not provide constructive dialogues or solutions, thus reinforcing group boundaries and exacerbating existing polarization.

When participants witnessed a more passive and unclear response to sexism, these effects were diminished: their attitudes and perceived norms did not depend on their degree of secular political orientation. Without any cues signaling the sexist behavior is wrong, they did not reinforce their ingroup norms, nor did they view the outgroup's norms as typical. When such a group norm is not salient, participants were not encouraged to have more progressive attitudes or perceived norms of gender equality of different groups as typical, regardless of their identification with seculars. Furthermore, these findings highlight that confrontation empowers individuals who identify as highly secular to support more egalitarian attitudes, but by doing so, it also sharpens the polarization between groups as conservative norm perceptions are affected.

Interestingly, the same effect was observed with the type of response participants witnessed, and their political orientations did not have the same effect on secular (ingroup) norm perception and behavioral intentions to act/encourage people to act against sexism.

Previous research showed that ingroup norms are typically a more powerful determinant of behavior than outgroup norms (Smith & Louis, 2009). However, in our study, we observed that confrontational responses to sexism did not influence ingroup norms but only outgroup norms, which indicates the existence of an intergroup process rather than merely an ingroup process. Political orientation was associated with attitudes, norm perceptions, and intentions to act against sexism in participants. This aligns with prior research showing that individuals' political identities significantly impact their attitudes and behaviors, including support for gender equality (Collins et al., 2021; Sevincer et al., 2023). In light of these findings, the first hypothesis was partially supported: In a highly polarized context, a confrontational response affects the perception of conservative norms of gender equality and attitudes but not behavioral intentions and secular norm perceptions.

We did not find support for Hypothesis 2, which posited that the effects of observing a confrontational response to sexism would be more pronounced when individuals perceive higher levels of polarization. However, we found that individuals' perceptions of society as morally and structurally divided into groups strongly impacted their attitudes and perception of norms. This influence was consistent regardless of the female target's response in the video. In addition, peoples' intention to act against sexism was not affected by their perception of polarization. Previous research also indicated that people's attitudes and beliefs are strongly influenced by their perception of polarization, even more so than actual polarization (Enders & Armaly, 2018). In addition, watching the video clip made participants more aware of the existence of different groups with varying opinions on gender equality, and this awareness happened regardless of which type of video they watched. On the other hand, the video clip was ineffective in changing people's perceptions of moral polarization.

Hypothesis 3 posited that perceptions of polarization would influence how secular individuals interpret ambiguous responses to sexism. However, we did not find support for

Hypothesis 3; participants' perceptions of divisions in society did not change their interpretations of the ambiguous response. This suggests that although polarization may heighten group identities and norms under confrontational conditions, it does not significantly affect interpretations of ambiguity similarly. Thus, perceptions of polarization did not uniformly impact how individuals process ambiguous responses.

Unexpectedly, we found that participants' views about the attitudes and beliefs of their ingroup and outgroup were more aligned and consistent when the response to sexism was unclear. However, when the response to sexism was direct and confrontational, there was less agreement among the participants about these attitudes, leading to more varied opinions. We expected that confrontation would unify perceptions of the outgroup by clearly showing group norms. Instead, confrontational responses appear to have intensified individual differences.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings of the study have important theoretical and practical implications. Self-categorization theory holds that when faced with clear signals of group norms, individuals adopt the norms and beliefs of their ingroup while distancing themselves from the outgroup (Turner et al., 1987). Our research extends this theory by illustrating a distinction. When people identify more strongly with their ingroup, a clear signal of intergroup conflict group norms (through confrontation) influences perceptions of outgroup (conservative) norms but not their ingroup (secular) norms. Explicit normative signals reinforce perceived differences between groups and increase identity boundaries for individuals who identify strongly with the ingroup. This differentiation highlights the complexity of norm processing in polarized contexts, suggesting that confrontational cues may selectively reinforce the salience of outgroup norms without affecting ingroup norms. This could be due to the tendency to hold more stereotypical views of the outgroup, which are often exacerbated when intergroup conflict is salient.

Additionally, the finding that ingroup norm perceptions were not affected despite clear cues could indicate a ceiling effect in which ingroup norms are well-established, which makes them less susceptible to further reinforcement through normative cues. Alternatively, it might suggest that the nature of confrontation in polarized settings serves more to highlight differences, particularly when these confrontations involve deeply rooted social issues like sexism. Another important finding of the present study is that explicit signaling through confrontation shapes attitudes. When people identified with their ingroup more strongly, clear responses to sexism further promoted progressive attitudes.

Practically, the study highlights the importance of confrontation and explicit signaling with sexist behavior in promoting progressive attitudes and challenging existing norms. Especially in highly polarized societies, such as Turkey, these confrontations might play a vital role in signaling unacceptable behavior and enabling social change. In addition, confrontation is also essential for people to reflect more on their pre-existing beliefs. However, it is also essential to consider potential risks associated with confrontation in highly polarized contexts, as they might exacerbate polarization by reinforcing perceived differences between groups. As a result of this heightened polarization, tension and conflict might increase, making it harder to achieve mutual understanding and cooperation on social issues. For this reason, a nuanced approach to confrontation is vital. Strategies should be designed not only to challenge sexist behavior but also to foster constructive dialogue and understanding between opposing groups. Promoting social change while reducing the risk of further polarization might be possible by balancing confrontation efforts with efforts to maintain intergroup relations.

Limitations & Future Directions

The study sample was skewed in terms of political orientation towards secularity. This may limit the generalizability of the results to the broader population, including conservative

individuals. Conservative individuals may resist changes toward egalitarian attitudes as confrontational responses can be perceived as a threat to traditional values, potentially reinforcing their existing conservative norms. For this reason, future research should include a more diverse sample that includes a broader range of political orientations to understand the different dimensions of intergroup conflict.

Additionally, the use of different video scenarios might be effective in broadening the understanding of responses to sexism. As we observed that confrontation without any constructive elements increased the polarization between groups, different video clips depicting different scenarios, such as offering a constructive dialogue in the face of sexism from an educational perspective, might be more successful in changing attitudes and norm perceptions without further fueling polarization. Such scenarios could also include content that emphasizes secular values to provide a balanced view that captures the full spectrum of polarization, as the present study consists of a video in which conservative values were highlighted to justify sexism. Thus, it may facilitate a more comprehensive exploration of how different groups perceive and interpret sexism.

Conclusion

This paper examined how responses to sexism (confrontational versus ambiguous) affect attitudes toward gender equality among a secular population in a polarized Turkish society. Our findings highlight the dual nature of confrontation. On the one hand, it empowers individuals who are highly identified with seculars to foster more egalitarian attitudes, which is important to show direct challenges to sexist behaviors that can promote a clear stand against gender inequality. On the other hand, it intensifies the perception of conservative norms of gender equality, suggesting an increased polarization between secular and conservative groups. For this reason, although confrontations are effective in enhancing support for gender equality, they can also deepen the divide between conservative and secular

individuals, portraying a complex interplay of us versus them dynamics. For this reason, it is necessary to promote strategies that not only challenge unacceptable behaviors but also promote dialogue and understanding between differing groups. In societies marked by significant polarization, like Turkey, where secular and conservative values are deeply divided within the society, our findings illustrate the importance of approaching gender equality efforts with an awareness of the broader intergroup conflict at play.

People's perceptions of divisions within their society influence their attitudes toward gender equality and their perceptions of norms of gender equality. Thus, addressing gender inequality requires a nuanced understanding of the broader societal context. Efforts to promote gender equality should, therefore, consider underlying perceptions of polarization, as these perceptions are important in shaping one's attitudes and norm perceptions.

By going beyond WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) contexts, our research offers a nuanced understanding of social identity perspective, in which we explore how the salience of intergroup comparisons can heighten or potentially escalate into conflict.

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Appendix A

Figure 1

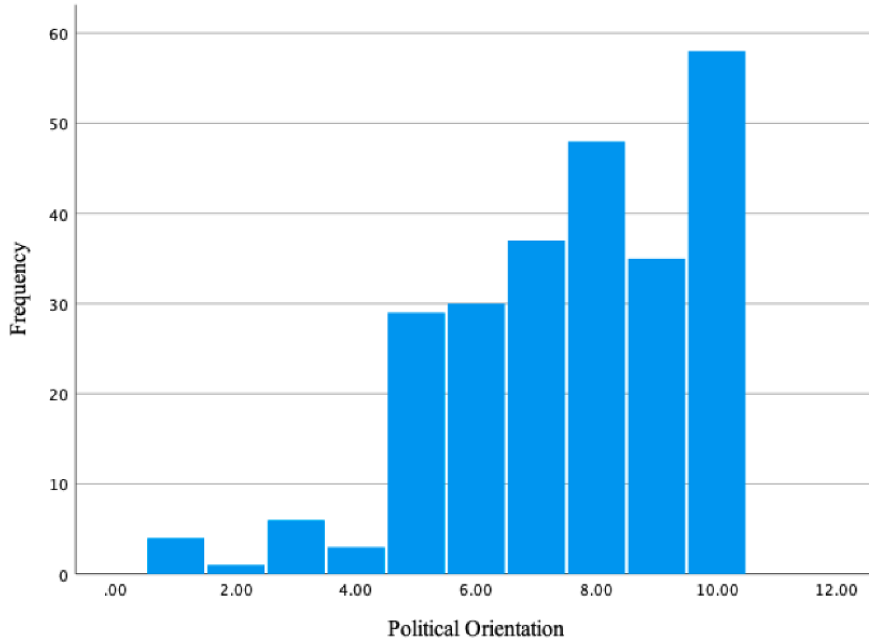*Histogram of the Political Orientation of the Participants*

Figure 2

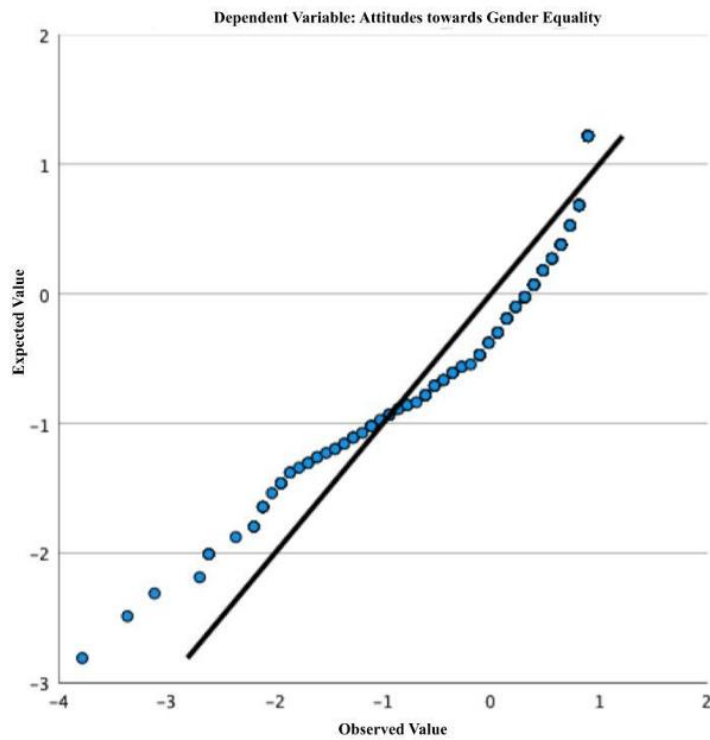*The Q-Q Plot for Normality Assumptions Check.*

Figure 3

Scatterplot of the Dependent Variable Attitudes Towards Gender Equality
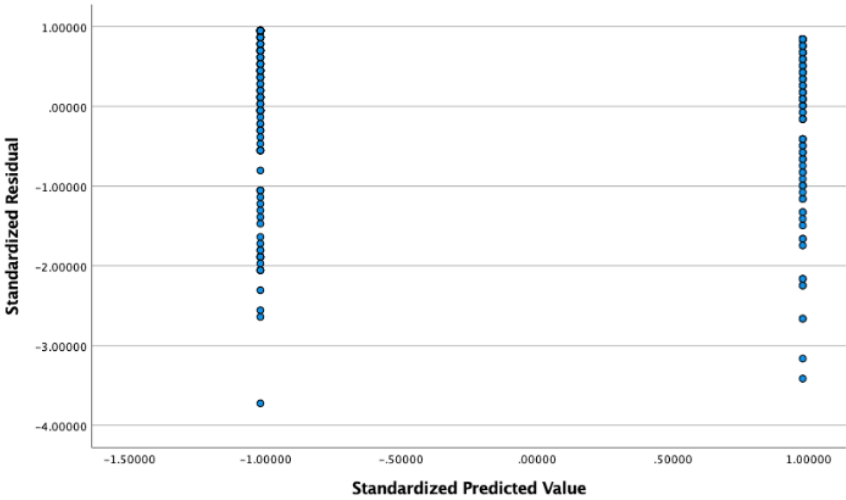

Figure 4

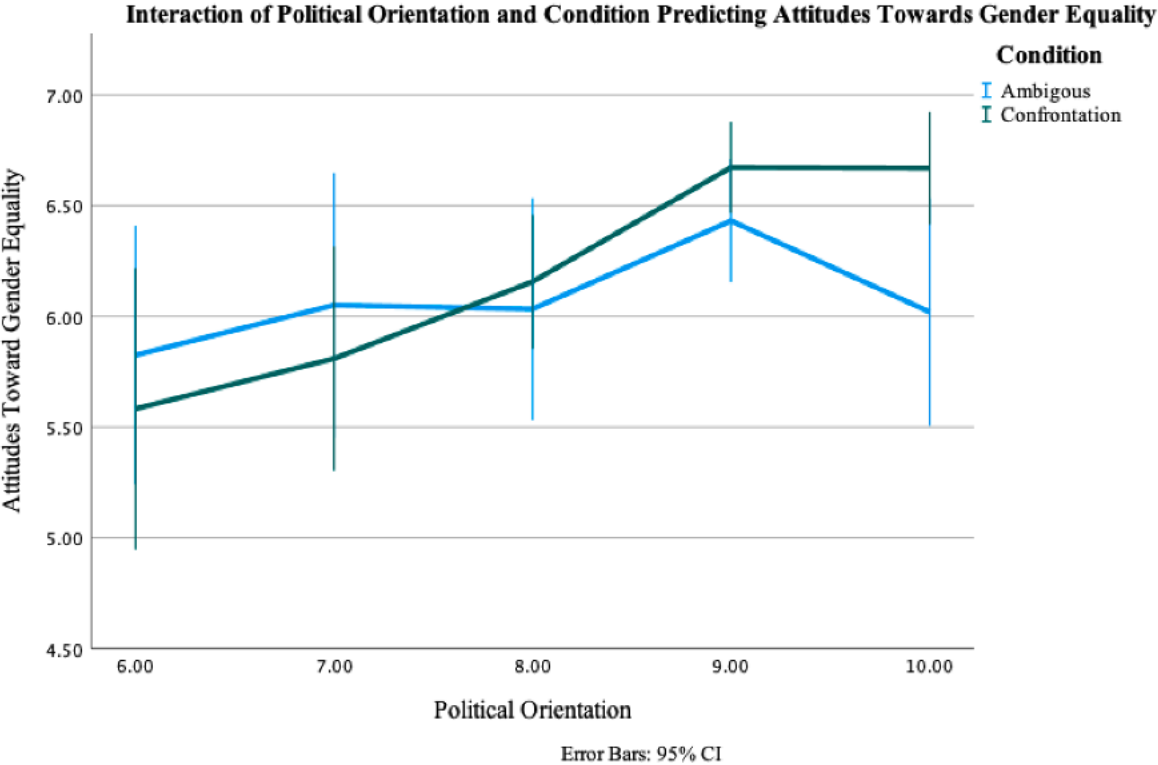*Interaction of Political Orientation and Condition Predicting Attitudes Towards Gender*

Equality

Figure 5

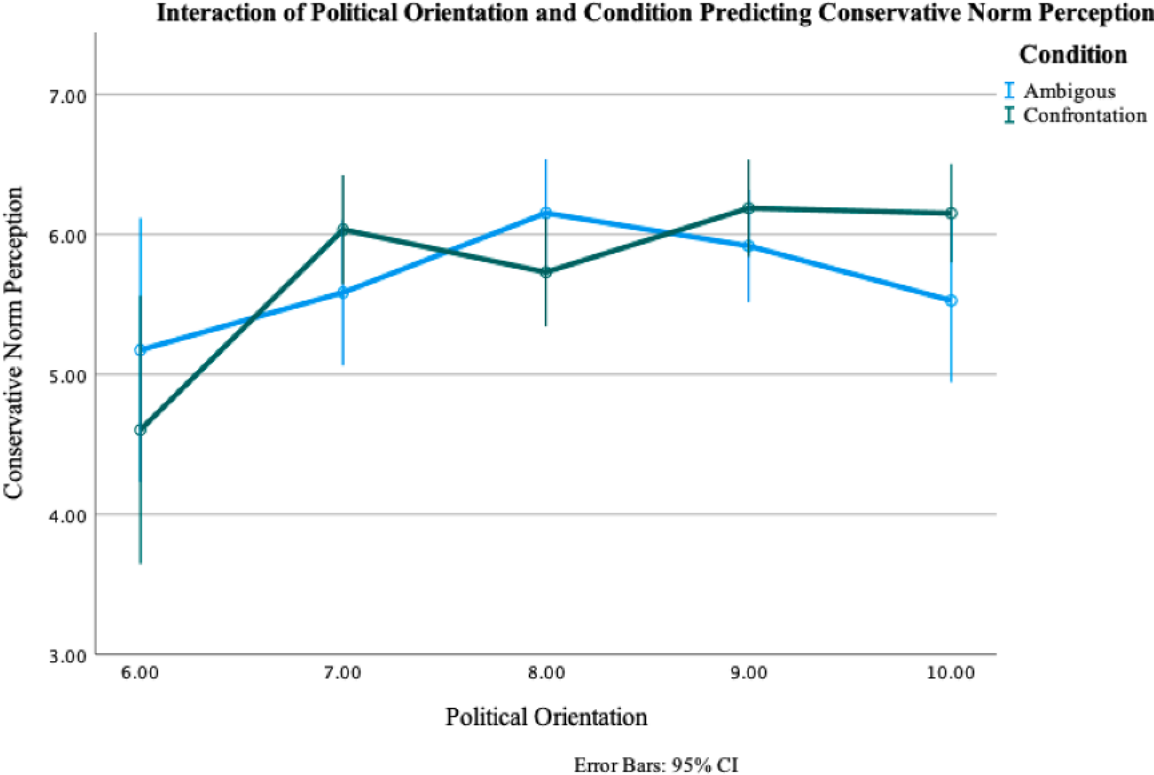*Interaction of Political Orientation and Response Type Predicting Conservative Norm*

Perception

Figure 6

Pre-post-Video Measures of Perceived Moral Polarization within Different Conditions

Pre and Post Video Measures of Perceived Moral Polarization within Different Conditions

Figure 7

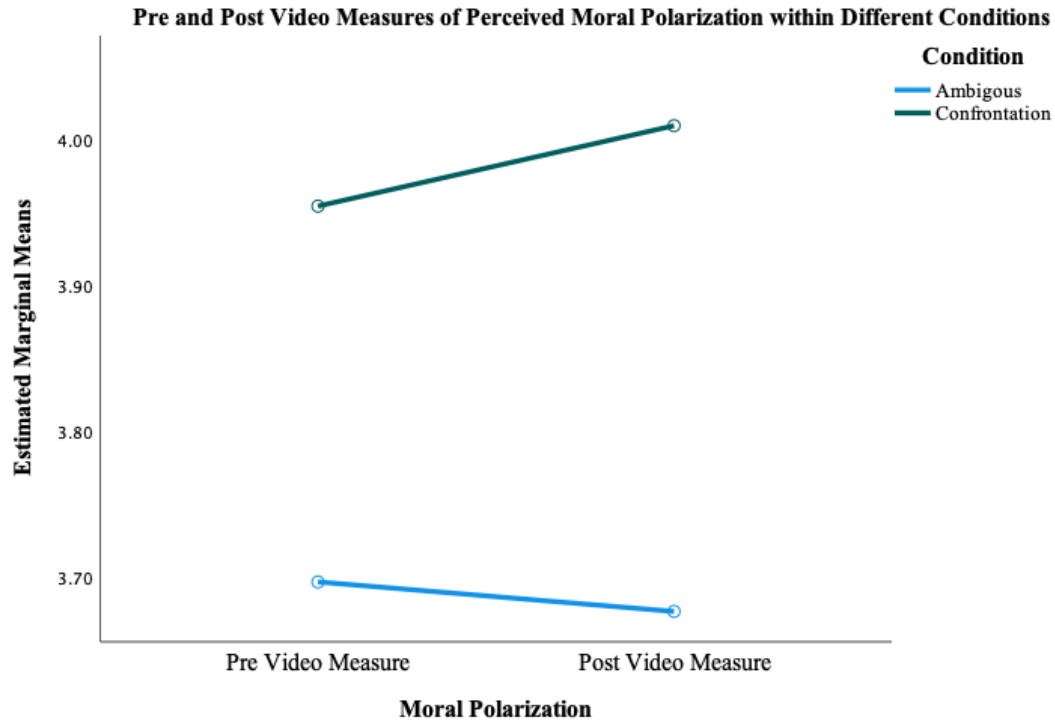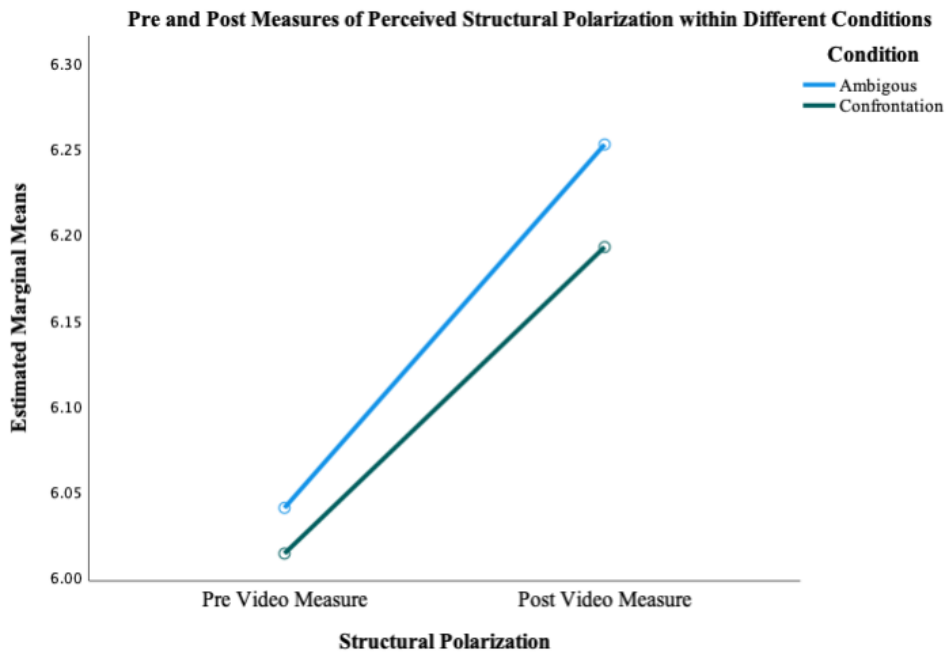*Pre and Post-video Measures of Perceived Structural Polarization within Different Conditions*

Pre and Post Measures of Perceived Structural Polarization within Different Conditions

Table 6

Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Attitudes, Norm Perceptions, and Behavioral

Intentions for Full Sample

Variables	Attitudes Towards Gender Equality	Conservative Norm Perception	Secular Norm Perception	Behavioral Intentions
Step 1				
Condition	.054	.019	-.001	.053
R²	.003	.000	.000	.003
Step 2				
Condition	.061	.024	.003	.058
Political Orientation	.332***	.234***	.182**	.208***
Δ R²	.110	.055	.033	.043
Sig. F Change	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001
Step 3				
Condition	.061	.024	.003	.058
Political Orientation	.225**	.126	.140	.169
Condition * Political Orientation	.153	.155	.060	.055
Δ R²	.012	.012	.528	.002
Sig. F Change	.068	.072	.474	.528

Note: *N*=251. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

Table 7

Hierarchical Regression Analysis of Moral Polarization Predicting Attitudes, Norm

Perceptions, and Behavioral Intentions for Full Sample

Variables	Attitudes Towards Gender Equality	Conservative Norm Perception	Secular Norm Perception	Behavioral Intentions
Step 1				
Condition	.054	.019	-.001	.053
R²	.003	.000	.000	.003
Step 2				
Condition	.025	-.015	-.032	.062
Moral Polarization	.173**	.202**	.183**	-.052
Δ R²	.029	.040	.033	.003
Sig. F Change	.007	.002	.004	.416
Step 3				
Condition	.027	-.014	-.029	.065
Moral Polarization	.262**	.247**	.295***	.063

Condition * Moral Polarization	-.135	-.068	-.169*	-.174*
Δ R²	.010	.003	.016	.017
Sig. F Change	.107	.414	.043	.039

Note: *N*=251. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

Table 8

Hierarchical Regression Analysis of Structural Polarization Predicting Attitudes, Norm

Perceptions, and Behavioral Intentions for Full Sample

Variables	Attitudes Towards Gender Equality	Conservative Norm Perception	Secular Norm Perception	Behavioral Intentions
Step 1				
Condition	.054	.019	-.001	.053
R²	.003	.000	.000	.003
Step 2				
Condition	.056	.022	.001	.055
Structural Polarization	.295***	.316***	.182**	.152*
Δ R²	.087	.100	.033	.023
Sig. F Change	<.001	<.001	.004	.016
Step 3				
Condition	.056	.022	.001	.055
Structural Polarization	.216*	.228*	.210*	.101
Condition* Structural Polarization	.107	.117	-.038	.068
Δ R²	.005	.006	.001	.002
Sig. F Change	.239	.195	.689	.470

Note: *N*=251. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001