

RESEARCH NOTE

Sexual jokes and conversations at the workplace and their relation to employee well-being: Results from a longitudinal study

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Abstract

Ambient social sexual behaviour at work refers to sexual jokes and conversations at the workplace. Prior cross-sectional studies indicate that this behaviour is relatively widespread and tends to be associated with negative well-being. We revisit this research by investigating the outcomes of sexual jokes and conversations at work after 1 year in a comparatively large employee sample. The perceived frequency of sexual jokes and conversations at work was negatively related to job satisfaction and positively related to sick days and anger 1 year later, controlling for baseline levels. Moderating effects of gender and age were not significant. Half of the sample reported that such jokes and conversations were relatively common in their workplace, both before and after the onset of the *MeToo* movement. We discuss implications and propose ideas for studying the theoretical mechanisms of this phenomenon.

KEYWORDS

ambient social sexual behaviour, job satisfaction, negative affect, sick days, social sexual behaviour, well-being

BACKGROUND

Important aspects of human life, for example, individuals' identities as emotional and sexual beings, are in tension with fundamental features of organizational life (Pillemer & Rothbard, 2018). The research stream on social sexual behaviour at work has been examining this tension in professional settings

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Practitioner points

- This preregistered analysis shows in a sizeable employee sample from Germany that sexual jokes and conversations at the workplace are relatively common and associated with lower job satisfaction and more sick days and anger over time, with no systematic differential effects for gender or age.
- The *MeToo* movement that started in 2017 does not seem to have changed the frequency of sexual jokes and conversations at workplaces in Germany.
- Practitioners should be aware that sexual jokes and conversations at work may slowly undermine employees' well-being over time.

since the 1980s (Gutek et al., 1983; Gutek & Morasch, 1982). Workplace social sexual behaviour (SSB) generally refers to non-work-related behaviour with a sexual component at work (Aquino et al., 2014; Gutek et al., 1990). It can take on harassing and non-harassing forms. Harassing sexual behaviour is unwanted, appraised as threatening, legally actionable and creates a noxious work environment (Willness et al., 2007). However, not all work SSB is perceived as harassing and the demarcation is debated. Rawski et al. (2022) argue that the same behaviour can be interpreted as harassing or non-harassing depending on how participants jointly decide on its meaning. Yet, others have used the term *ambient* or *non-harassing* SSB a priori when it comes to flirting or sharing sexual jokes (Aquino et al., 2014; Berdahl & Aquino, 2009; Gutek et al., 1990). As to the prevalence of ambient SSB, 27–78 percent of employees reported the experience of these behaviours at work in past surveys (Berdahl & Aquino, 2009; Gillanders et al., 2021; Gutek et al., 1990).

Workplace sexual harassment has strong adverse effects on the well-being of those affected (Willness et al., 2007). By comparison, the consequences of ambient work SSB, for example sexual jokes and conversations, are less clear. Positive outcomes such as stress relief have been reported (Sheppard et al., 2020), but ambient work SSB has more often been linked to negative outcomes such as lower well-being, lower trust in co-workers and higher withdrawal cognitions (Baker, 2016; Berdahl & Aquino, 2009; Gillanders et al., 2021; Salvaggio et al., 2011). Still, findings are based on only a few studies that have mostly relied on cross-sectional designs and small samples (Baker, 2016; Berdahl & Aquino, 2009; Salvaggio et al., 2011).

We revisit this research by analysing in a relatively large sample how the perceived frequency of sexual jokes and conversations at work (2016) relates to different well-being indicators a year later (2017). Leveraging the sample size, we also examine moderating effects of gender and age. While there is first evidence that women perceive ambient work SSB more negatively than men (Berdahl & Aquino, 2009), there is no research on age differences. Yet, it has been speculated that younger employees may be more likely to approve this behaviour (Aquino et al., 2014; Sheppard et al., 2020). Lastly, we assessed the perceived frequency of workplace sexual jokes and conversations again in 2020 and can thus compare responses before and after the onset of the *MeToo* movement in 2017 (Saguy & Rees, 2021).

Past studies often relied on theories of power and gender (Berdahl & Aquino, 2009; Gutek et al., 1990) and have conceptualized work SSB as an exercise of power (Gutek et al., 1990) that can make salient for women that they often still have less power (Berdahl & Aquino, 2009). This should result in particularly negative well-being outcomes of work SSB for women. Yet, the rationale for the *overall*, gender-independent negative well-being outcomes of ambient work SSB (Baker, 2016; Berdahl & Aquino, 2009; Salvaggio et al., 2011) is still debated. It has been suggested that ambient work

SSB acts like a ‘stealth poison’ (Berdahl & Aquino, 2009, p. 44); it seems fun at first but may trigger emotions related to vulnerability, insecurity or embarrassment over time (Baker, 2016; Berdahl & Aquino, 2009). From a resource perspective (Hobfoll, 2002), this process could be considered a deterioration of psychosocial resources because employees may start pondering about the appropriateness, intention and interpretation of a sexual joke or story. Integrity perceptions of others and the feeling of working in a supportive social environment (i.e., key resources) may be threatened when non-work-related sexual topics infringe on the workplace (Gillanders et al., 2021; Hobfoll, 2002). However, for some, work SSB may help to build psychosocial resources (e.g., flirting and complimenting may be perceived as truly benign and flattering by some employees, so they may feel more attractive and confident; Sheppard et al., 2020). The research showing positive effects included relatively young participants who are more likely in a life phase of finding a romantic partner than older workers (Sheppard et al., 2020)—suggesting that younger workers may not experience ambient work SSB as a resource deterioration as much as older workers do. For younger employees, emotional and sexual parts of their identity may be more salient at work, rendering it more likely that they may feel attractive or socially empowered by sexual jokes and stories at work (Aquino et al., 2014; Sheppard et al., 2020).

Thus, we assume negative well-being outcomes of sexual jokes and conversations at work overall, but moderating effects of gender and age. As to well-being, we included job satisfaction (like Salvaggio et al., 2011), but also life satisfaction as a more distant cognitive indicator. Negative affect captures the affective facet (similar to Berdahl & Aquino, 2009). Finally, we used sick days as a behavioural well-being indicator, going beyond withdrawal cognitions (Baker, 2016).

Hypothesis 1. The more frequently sexual jokes or conversations are perceived at the workplace at Time 1, the lower the well-being of employees at Time 2, controlling for well-being at Time 1.

Hypothesis 2a. Gender moderates the negative relationship between the perceived frequency of sexual jokes or conversations at the workplace at Time 1 and well-being at Time 2, such that the effect is stronger for women than for men.

Hypothesis 2b. Age moderates the negative relationship between the perceived frequency of sexual jokes or conversations at the workplace at Time 1 and well-being at Time 2, such that the effect is stronger for older employees than for younger employees.

METHOD

Participants belonged to the Innovation Sample of the German Socio-Economic Panel, a longitudinal study established in 2011 (SOEP-IS; Richter & Schupp, 2015). Workplace sexual jokes and conversations were assessed in 2016 and 2020 as per our proposal, while well-being indicators are measured in the SOEP-IS every year. Our sample comprised 1891 working adults ($M = 44.83$ years, $SD = 12.34$ years, 51% female, 49% male; $M = 12.86$ years of education; 25% with managerial responsibilities) who provided data on our variables of interest in 2016 and 2017. As sick days are measured retrospectively, data from 2017 (2018) were used for sick days in 2016 (2017). Therefore, the sample for analyses including sick days was reduced to 1580 respondents ($M = 45.29$ years, $SD = 12.01$ years, 50% female). Longitudinal data on sexual jokes and conversations were provided by 1148 respondents in 2020 ($M = 44.41$ years, $SD = 11.57$ years, 49% female). Sensitivity analyses yielded an effect size of $f^2 = .0051$. Thus, the sample is sufficiently large to detect small effects (i.e., increase in R^2 ; $\alpha = .05$, power = .80).

The *perceived frequency of sexual jokes and conversations* was measured in 2016 and 2020 with the question (adapted from Gutek et al., 1990): ‘When you think about your current workplace: How often do people talk about sexual issues or make jokes about it?’, answered on a scale from 1 (*very frequently*) to 5 (*never*). Responses were reversed before analyses. In a separate follow-up online survey 2020 (convenience sample of $N = 334$ German-speaking employees with different occupational backgrounds, 74% female, 26% male; $M = 34.75$ years, $SD = 10.55$ years, range 18–64 years), we correlated this item with a new scale (Sheppard et al., 2020) on workplace sexual storytelling (5-item version: Cronbach’s $\alpha = .81$; 4-item version: $\alpha = .74$) to address reliability concerns ($r = .62$ and $r = .59$, respectively, $p < .001$).

Job satisfaction was measured in 2016 and 2017 with the question ‘How satisfied are you with your job?’, using a scale from 0 (*totally dissatisfied*) to 10 (*totally satisfied*). *General life satisfaction* was measured in both years with the question ‘All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life in general?’, using the same response scale. In exploratory, non-preregistered analyses, we also included health satisfaction and sleep satisfaction. They were measured with the questions ‘How satisfied are you with your health?’ and ‘How satisfied are you with your sleep?’, also using the above scale anchors.

As to *negative affect*, respondents indicated in 2016 and 2017 how often they felt ‘angry’, ‘worried’, ‘happy’ and ‘sad’ in the last 4 weeks, using a scale from 1 (*very rarely*) to 5 (*very often*). After reversing the positive item, items were collapsed into a single score. Because Cronbach’s alpha was below .70 (2016: $\alpha = .65$; 2017: $\alpha = .66$), we also analysed data at the item level. Finally, *sick days* were measured with the question ‘How many days were you unable to work in [previous year] due to illness?’ Respondents could freely state the number of days.

RESULTS

Table 1 displays correlations. The frequency of workplace sexual jokes or conversations in 2016 correlated negatively with age ($r = -.20$, $p < .001$). Mean comparisons showed that women reported fewer sexual jokes or conversations at work than men in 2016 ($M_{\text{female}} = 2.49$, $SD = 1.18$; $M_{\text{male}} = 2.71$, $SD = 1.18$), $F(1, 1889) = 17.43$, $p < .001$; and 2020 ($M_{\text{female}} = 2.52$, $SD = 1.16$; $M_{\text{male}} = 2.79$, $SD = 1.07$), $F(1, 1146) = 17.37$, $p < .001$.

Figure 1 illustrates the response distribution to the focal item on sexual jokes or conversations at work. In both years, half of the respondents (51% in 2016 and 53% in 2020) reported that this behaviour would happen sometimes, frequently or very frequently. The mean difference ($M_{2016} = 2.60$, $SD = 1.19$; $M_{2020} = 2.66$, $SD = 1.12$) was not significant, $t(1147) = 1.81$, $p > .05$.

We found support for Hypothesis 1 in terms of job satisfaction, sick days and anger, but not in terms of life satisfaction and other affect-related variables (see Table 2). Thus, the more frequently sexual jokes or conversations were reported in 2016, the lower the job satisfaction in 2017 ($\beta = -.083$, $\Delta R^2 = .007$, $p < .001$), the higher the number of sick days in 2017 ($\beta = .096$, $\Delta R^2 = .009$, $p < .001$) and the higher the anger level 2017 ($\beta = .059$, $\Delta R^2 = .003$, $p = .007$). For example, these findings imply that when sexual jokes and conversations at work increase by one unit, then sick days will increase by two per year (unstandardized $B = 2.08$). There were no changes in life satisfaction and further affect-related variables ($\Delta R^2 < .001$, $p > .05$). Exploratory analyses using further non-preregistered health outcomes revealed no effect on health satisfaction ($\Delta R^2 < .001$, $p > .05$), but a negative effect on sleep satisfaction ($\beta = -.050$, $\Delta R^2 = .002$, $p = .007$; see Notes of Table 2). Regarding the hypothesized moderating effects of gender and age, we found no effects ($p > .05$) and thus no support for Hypotheses 2a and 2b for any of the well-being indicators (see Table 2). Further exploratory analyses regarding differences based on (female versus male-dominated) job sectors and number of job changes can be found in the Supporting Information (see Tables S1 and S2 and Figure S1).

TABLE 1 Means, standard deviations and intercorrelations for SOEP-IS data.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1 Sexual jokes/conv. (2016)	2.60	1.19	–											
2 Sexual jokes/conv. (2020) ^a	2.66	1.12	.42**	–										
3 Job satisfaction (2016)	7.26	1.87	-.07**	-.05	–									
4 Life satisfaction (2016)	7.63	1.44	-.03	-.05	.36**	–								
5 Negative affect (2016) ^b	2.31	.64	.06**	.05	-.33**	-.47**	–							
6 Sick days (2016) ^c	8.85	20.87	.06**	.02	-.11**	-.07**	.10**	–						
7 Job satisfaction (2017)	7.19	1.99	-.12**	-.06	.48**	.30**	-.25**	-.08**	–					
8 Life satisfaction (2017)	7.67	1.47	-.01	-.03	.25**	.52**	-.30**	-.03	.41**	–				
9 Negative affect (2017) ^b	2.27	.63	.03	.02	-.22**	-.35**	.51**	.08**	-.33**	-.46**	–			
10 Sick days (2017) ^d	9.83	25.13	.11**	.11**	-.09**	-.08**	.09**	.26**	-.14**	-.15**	.15**	–		
11 Age	44.83	12.34	-.20**	-.16**	-.02	.00	-.01	.02	.01	-.01	.02	-.01	–	
12 Years of education	12.86	2.70	-.12**	-.17**	.02	.07**	-.08**	-.08**	.04	.06*	-.06*	-.09**	.06**	–
13 Gender (1 = male, 2 = female)	1: 49% 2: 51%	–	-.10**	-.12**	-.02	-.04	.18**	.05*	-.03	-.03	.18**	.04	.03	-.02

Note: *N* = 981.

Different significance levels at values of $r = .06$ are due to rounding.

^a*n* = 1148.

^bNegative affect comprises feelings of anger, sadness, worry and low happiness. Correlations on single item level revealed that anger was the most influential item: Anger in 2016 and 2017 was associated negatively with age, job satisfaction (2016/7) and life satisfaction (2016/7) ($p < .001$) and associated positively with the perceived frequency of sexual jokes 2016 and 2020 ($p < .01$).

^c*n* = 1848.

^d*n* = 1613. The number of sick days in 2016 and 2017 were reported in 2017 and 2018, respectively.

** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$. Correlations greater or equal .08 are also significant on the level $p < .001$.

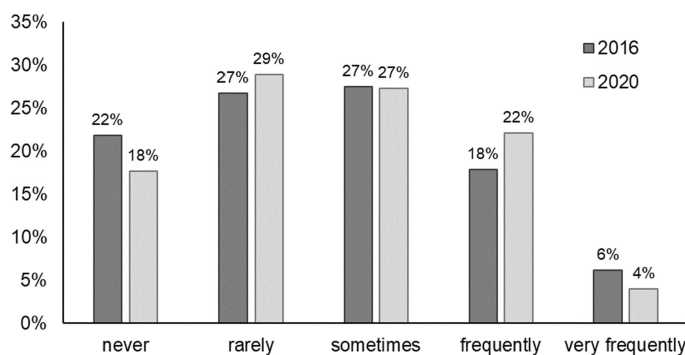


FIGURE 1 Distribution of responses to the item on the perceived frequency of sexual jokes or conversations at the workplace in 2016 ($N=1891$) and 2020 ($n=1148$).

DISCUSSION

Prior studies on ambient work SSB have revealed mixed effects on well-being, yet negative effects (e.g., Baker, 2016; Salvaggio et al., 2011) outweighed positive ones (Sheppard et al., 2020). Our findings concur with this tendency, adding a longer-term perspective. Yet, the detected effects were very small to small (Funder & Ozer, 2019). However, following the idea of ambient work SSB as a stealth poison (Berdahl & Aquino, 2009), it is possible that sexual comments unfold their full effect over even slightly longer timespans (see Funder & Ozer, 2019, on the cumulation of small effects over time). As to the prevalence of roughly 50 percent, our study also confirms earlier US studies (Berdahl & Aquino, 2009). Surprisingly, the *MeToo* movement seems to have had no effect on the occurrence of this phenomenon in Germany. Perhaps, this movement impacted the prevalence of harassing SSB forms, which remains to be examined.

We did not find systematic differential effects for gender or age. Thus, ambient work SSB may generally come with costs, which calls for theoretical explanations that affect all working people alike. We suggest that sexual matters arising at work can be considered a boundary transgression, a violation of relationship norms, or a threat to psychosocial resources. Thus, it seems promising to study ambient work SSB in future studies with the theoretical lenses of boundary theory (Ashforth et al., 2000), relationship norms (Clark & Mills, 1979) and conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 2002).

For organizations, our findings underscore the importance of attending to ambient forms of work SSB. Organizations could recommend avoiding such topics in their communications about respectful team conduct. Thus, inappropriateness and transgressions should be prevented, yet without eliminating other forms of fun or joviality.

This study also has limitations. Single items prevailed, and the interval of 1 year does not allow for establishing more immediate responses. Future research may untangle ambient work SSB at more fine-grained time scales and at multiple levels. At person level, it is worthwhile to examine differential effects based on who told the jokes, at whose expense they were made, and how they were perceived (see Gillanders et al., 2021, for findings in a startup context). This is important as sexual topics may be particularly harmful in hierarchical relationships and may pave the way for more offensive transgressions to occur. At organizational level, it is desirable to examine the role of gendered occupations and workplace culture, as SSB can be its corollary (Baker, 2016; Costas, 2022; Gillanders et al., 2021; also see Figure S1). Building on our findings of well-being implications and the high prevalence of workplace sexual jokes and conversations, future studies should illuminate the theoretical mechanisms underlying this phenomenon.

TABLE 2 Hierarchical regression analyses predicting well-being indicators (T2) from the perceived frequency of sexual jokes or conversations at the workplace (T1).

	Job satisfaction (T2)			Life satisfaction (T2)			Negative affect (composite T2)			Angry (single item T2)			Sad (single item T2)			Happy (single item T2)			Worried (single item T2)			Sick days (T2)		
	β	ΔR^2	R^2	β	ΔR^2	R^2	β	ΔR^2	R^2	β	ΔR^2	R^2	β	ΔR^2	R^2	β	ΔR^2	R^2	β	ΔR^2	R^2	β	ΔR^2	R^2
Step 1: Controls		.229**	.229**		.271**	.271**		.273**	.273**		.143**	.143**		.186**	.186**		.205**	.205**		.243**	.243**		.070**	.070**
Age	.022			-.077			.016			-.065*			.024			-.12**			-.027			-.011		
Gender	-.023			-.014			.093**			.063*			.144**			.009			.099**			.020		
Job sat. (T1)	.477**																							
Life sat. (T1)				.520**																				
Neg. af. (T1)							.497**																	
Angry (T1)										.357**														
Sad (T1)													.378**											
Happy (T1)																.423**								
Worried (T1)																								
Sick days (T1)																								.263**
Step 2: HI																								
Sexual jok./conv. (T1)	-.083**	.007**	.007**	.003	.000	.000	.012	.000	.000	.059*	.003*	.000	-.005	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.002	.000	.000	.000	.000	.009**
Step 3: H2a,b, interactions																								
Age x sexual jok./conv. (T1)	-.104			-.029			.083			.015			.093			-.031			.114					-.026
Gender x sexual jok./conv. (T1)	-.092			.088			.050			-.037			.040			-.027			.098					.091

Note: Analyses were conducted with SPSS 28, N = 1891 (but n = 1580 for predicting sick days). T1 refers to 2016 and T2 to 2017. As to gender, 1 denotes male and 2 denotes female. This table shows the test of Hypothesis 1 while controlling for age, gender and the baseline level of the respective outcome. When controlling for baseline well-being only (as preregistered), all effects are stable. We explored three-way interactions (i.e., the joint effect of gender, age and sexual jokes/conversations on well-being) and found no interaction effects ($p > .05$). We explored two further health outcomes that had not been preregistered, health satisfaction and sleep satisfaction. We found no effect in terms of health satisfaction ($\beta = -.027, \Delta R^2 < .001, p = .171$). However, we found that the perceived frequency of sexual jokes and conversations at work (T1) had a negative effect on sleep satisfaction at T2 ($\beta = -.050, \Delta R^2 = .002, p = .007$). Effects are stable whether we control for baseline well-being only or additionally for age and gender.

** $p \leq .001$. * $p < .01$.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Sabine Hommelhoff: Conceptualization; writing – original draft; formal analysis; data curation. **David Richter:** Data curation; writing – review and editing; conceptualization. **Susanne Scheibe:** Writing – review and editing; conceptualization.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT


None of the authors has any conflict of interest to report.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The SOEP-IS panel data used in this manuscript are made publicly available by the German Institute for Economic Research (<https://www.diw.de/en/soep>). The SOEP-IS is a household panel study in which all household members aged 17 and above are interviewed yearly by a professional fieldwork organization (Infratest Social Research, Munich) since 2011 (i.e., please note that the SOEP-IS is a separate study of its own and not part of the core SOEP that started 1984). The data collection takes place in German; English translations are provided by the German Institute for Economic Research in case no established translations exist. Responses of an individual over time can be linked via a permanent personal identification number. As to the SOEP-IS data collection, ethics permission is provided by the Scientific Advisory Board of the German Institute for Economic Research Berlin. The sampling technique ensures the representativeness of the data for the population of households in Germany (for details, see Richter & Schupp, 2015). The item on sexual jokes and conversations was included in the SOEP-IS 2016 and 2020 as per the authors' proposals. The author team preregistered hypotheses, key variables, expected sample size and analyses plans before starting data analyses in 2019 ([aspredicted.org](https://aspredicted.org/#24897), #24897, June 2019). The outcome variables used in this manuscript (job satisfaction, sick days, negative affect and life satisfaction) are standard part of the SOEP-IS and have not been proposed by the authors. We also preregistered depressive symptoms as a well-being indicator, but these symptoms were not assessed in 2016 and 2017. To the best of our knowledge, the variables and associations examined in this manuscript have not been examined in any current or previous articles. The data of the follow-up study have been collected for the purpose of this manuscript only and have not been previously used. All materials are available on OSF https://osf.io/48c5f/?view_only=2b7fea7fe81e4a289e229480c264b861.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

Appendix S1.

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