

Women's Experiences with Sensitive Jokes in the Workplace

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the forms of sensitive jokes experienced by female workers in the workplace and their responses. Employing a qualitative approach through interviews, the findings identify six categories of sensitive jokes: career ambitions, marital status, gender stereotypes, sexuality, physical appearance, and physical touch. Predominantly made by male colleagues, these jokes adversely affect women's emotional well-being and the workplace atmosphere. Female workers employ various response strategies, including directly reprimanding the perpetrator, reporting to superiors, maintaining professionalism while ignoring the joke, shifting the conversation, or withdrawing from the situation. The study underscores the necessity for organizations to cultivate a professional and safe work environment

INTRODUCTION

The terms joke, humor, laughter, and comic are often used interchangeably, as they all relate to expressive culture (Driessen, 2001). Joking is an integral part of social interaction and cannot be eliminated (Elisabeth & Adim, 2022). It is generally associated with actions or words that evoke laughter and happiness (Robbins, 2008). Joking is an act intended to entertain others, making them smile or laugh through playful behavior, without the intention of cornering or hurting others by making them the object of a joke (Rahmanadji, 2009).

Joking can take place anywhere, including in the workplace. In this setting, it can serve as a tool to reduce stress levels and enhance employee engagement with the company (Jalal & Safrizal, 2023). In a professional environment, joking is considered appropriate as long as it is not intended to demean or harm others and does not contradict the organization's values. However, when workplace jokes are intended to belittle or hurt others and contain sexist, racist, or abusive elements, they are classified as inappropriate workplace humor (Evans & Warren, 2018).

In terms of gender, men tend to prefer jokes that contain sexual or aggressive elements (Marlowe, 1985). On the other hand, women favor jokes that bring joy to others, provide entertainment, and help break the ice (Crawford, 2020). Previous research suggests that women typically have a sense of humor that is cooperative, inclusive, supportive, integrative, spontaneous, and self-healing. In contrast, men's sense of humor tends to be more exclusive, challenging, segmented, pre-formulated, and self-aggrandizing (Jenkins, 1985).

Women are often the victims or objects of sensitive jokes, as they are frequently perceived as funnier when used as the subject of humor (Elisabeth & Adim, 2022). This suggests that women may also become the target of jokes in the workplace. Sensitive jokes can be considered a form of verbal sexual harassment, which may include jokes or messages containing sexual comments with suggestive or vulgar meanings, as well as sexist remarks about women's clothing, bodies, or sexual activities, either implicitly or explicitly (Kurnianingsih, 2003).

Based on the introduction above, joking is not always positive or beneficial; it can also be sensitive and harmful. Therefore, this study aims to identify the forms of sensitive jokes experienced by women in the workplace and to understand their responses to such jokes. Additionally, this research seeks to provide recommendations for companies to foster a safe and inclusive work environment for female employees. Moreover, it can help raise awareness among workers about the boundaries of humor in professional settings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sensitive Jokes

Joking can serve as a means to discuss sensitive topics such as sexuality and gender issues (Riquelme et al., 2021), mental health (Twardzicki & Jones, 2017), racial and religious stereotypes (Linando, 2023), politics (Ridwan, 2010), and death (Fitzgerald et al., 2022). Everyone has the ability to make jokes and receive jokes from others. The ability to joke and recognize humor is universal; however, each individual has a different level of sensitivity when it comes to interpreting and responding to jokes (Horisk, 2024). What is considered funny varies from person to person, suggesting that the perception of humor is subjective (Driessen, 2001). Jokes can be particularly sensitive, especially when they involve controversial topics such as disadvantaged social groups, newcomers, body image, or physical appearance (Horisk, 2024). They become even more problematic when delivered in a disrespectful manner, such as belittling, insulting, or mocking (Shi & Wang, 2023).

Women's Responses to Sensitive Jokes

According to Swim & Hyers, several factors influence women's responses to sensitive jokes, including their commitment to resisting such jokes. Women who are committed to pushing back tend to respond by confronting the situation. Another key factor is social pressure, which includes fears of being perceived as disrespectful or overly aggressive. This fear can lead women to avoid confrontation and instead remain silent. Group composition also plays a role in shaping women's responses. When women are in a group that supports resistance to sensitive jokes, they are more likely to respond assertively. Additionally, perception of the situation influences responses – this refers to how women interpret jokes as either sensitive or harmful. Fear of retaliation is another factor, as some women may avoid responding due to concerns about negative reactions from others. Lastly, self-esteem considerations also affect responses. Women who feel empowered and confident are more likely to confront inappropriate jokes, whereas those who internalize such humor may choose to stay silent (Swim & Hyers, 1999).

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative approach using the phenomenological method, which allows researchers to explore women's subjective experiences in dealing with sensitive jokes in the workplace. The phenomenological approach enables researchers to explore individuals' subjective experiences and analyze their perspectives (Fiantika et al., 2022). The phenomenological approach was also chosen because it helps researchers understand experiences from the interviewees' perspectives, rather than solely from a theoretical or researcher-driven point of view (Pertiwi & Linando, 2024). To gather relevant information, interviews were conducted with female informants working in various industries. The interviews were guided by several questions related to the phenomenon of sensitive jokes in the workplace. These questions were open-ended, allowing participants to share their experiences in detail.

The study involved 15 female workers with at least one year of work experience across various industries. The sample size was determined based on data saturation, meaning no new information emerged. In qualitative research, data collection continues until saturation (or redundancy) is reached – that is, when researchers no longer obtain additional data that provide new insights (Subhaktiyasa, 2024).

Table 1. Research Informants

No	Initial	Job	Length of employment	Industry
1	HDF	Lecturer	2 years	Education
2	ANH	Senior Associate	4 years	Law firm
3	ARS	Public relations and IT	4 years	Education
4	AEP	Administration staff	1 years	Education
5	FNT	Librarian	16 years	Education
6	RS	Legal officer	5 years	Banking finance
7	MNS	Communication and secretarial staff	5 years	Health insurance
8	EDU	Doctoral program coordinator	1 years	Education
9	RAS	Finance staff	4 years	Banking finance
10	ANK	Senior officer	15 years	Banking finance
11	NF	Librarian	22 years	Education
12	NRL	Finance staff	8 years	Banking finance
13	NNA	Academic staff	1 years	Education
14	ASS	Legal officer	5 years	Banking finance
15	RSH	Financial administration	6 years	Banking finance

The data in this study were collected using a semi-structured approach, where the questions were designed by the researcher and served only as a guide. During the data collection process, responses deemed interesting were examined in greater detail by the researcher. After data collection, data analysis was conducted. Data analysis involves organizing data sequentially, then grouping it into patterns, categories, and fundamental descriptive units (Patton, 2001). Thematic data analysis is a technique used to identify, analyze, and report patterns or themes within the data (Mulyana & Linando, 2024). In this study, the researchers performed data reduction to identify information relevant to the study's focus. The data were then coded to facilitate classification into similar groups. The data reduction process included summarizing data, assigning codes, identifying themes, and categorizing data (Miles et al., 2013).

To ensure the validity of the data, the peer debriefing method was employed. This method involves an expert to verify the accuracy of the data. Peer debriefing is a technique used to assess the trustworthiness of research findings by engaging an expert (peer debriefer) (Creswell, 2009). In this study, data triangulation was not used, as the research focused on the personal experiences of each informant, which did not require validation from others.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Women's Experiences with Sensitive Jokes in the Workplace

Based on the analysis, researchers identified several forms of sensitive jokes experienced by women in the workplace. The first form pertains to career ambitions, where women's aspirations become the subject of ridicule. The prevailing assumption that women should not pursue higher education often results in sarcastic or disparaging remarks (Rahmayani, 2021). Furthermore, women who have entered the workforce are frequently subjected to criticism or mockery by society, being labeled as individuals who have abandoned their "natural" roles as women and are perceived as neglecting their families (Saefulloh et al., 2023). One of the contributing factors to the lower prioritization of women's education compared to men's is the deeply rooted cultural belief that women do not require higher education, as their ultimate role is confined to domestic responsibilities (Huda & Widdah, 2018). This cultural perception subsequently gives rise to the second form of sensitive joking.

The second form of sensitive jokes pertains to gender stereotypes. These jokes use gender stereotypes as their subject, particularly those related to women's domestic roles. In Javanese culture -the dominant culture in the place where this research takes place (Nugroho et al., 2024)- there is a saying that women are only responsible for the "3M" duties: *macak* (dressing up), *manak* (giving birth), and *masak* (cooking) (Dwi Astuti & Kistanto, 2022). This expression shapes societal perceptions of women's roles, limiting them to traditional domestic responsibilities (Saefulloh et al., 2023).

The third form of sensitive joking pertains to marital status. These jokes target a woman's marital status, making it the subject of ridicule. The interviewees in this study emphasized that unmarried or single women often receive derogatory comments or intrusive questions. Previous research indicates that single women are commonly perceived as lonely, less happy, emotionally unstable, and less valuable (Sternberg & Barnes, 1988). In contrast, married individuals are viewed as happier, emotionally stable, and leading more meaningful lives (Hetherington & Kelly, 2003). This perception aligns with the phenomenon of *singlism*, which refers to the stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination faced by single women in society (Paulo & Morris, 2005).

The fourth form of sensitive joking is sexual jokes. These jokes use sexual aspects as their subject. Sexual humor refers to jokes related to sexual topics, including sexual activity, reproductive organs, or any content containing sexual elements (Soedjatmiko, 1991). Such humor can offend individuals. Previous research indicates that women tend to feel more offended than men when exposed to sexist humor (Duncan et al., 1990), and that men generally enjoy sexual humor more than women (Brodzinsky et al., 1981).

Previous research has revealed that sexual jokes can negatively impact employees in the workplace. Although such jokes are often considered normal in professional settings, they have the potential to decrease job satisfaction, negatively affect mental health and emotional well-being, and lower employee morale (Hommelhoff et al., 2024).

The fifth form of sensitive joking is physical jokes. These jokes target physical appearance and are often referred to as body shaming. Body shaming involves criticizing or making negative comments about an individual's physical appearance (Muallifah et al., 2020). It entails ridiculing someone's body for not conforming to societal standards or perceived ideals of beauty (Sari & Sunesti, 2021). According to Rozin et al. (2001), in the 18th century, the ideal female body was muscular, large, strong, and highly fertile. In the 19th century, it was characterized as weak, lethargic, and pale. In the 20th century, the ideal female body varied between being slim, strong, and muscular; maternal and fertile; or extremely thin with large breasts. By the 21st century, the prevailing ideal has been a thin, model-like figure. This standard has become deeply ingrained in society and continues to shape contemporary perceptions of the ideal female body.

The sixth form of sensitive joking involves inappropriate physical touch. This type of joke occurs when someone touches another person without their consent. Such behavior can be classified as unwanted sexual attention. Unwanted sexual attention refers to acts of sexual harassment intended to attract attention but are unwelcome, fail to receive the desired response, and cause offense. These actions include exposing genitals in public, addressing someone with overly affectionate terms, using seductive body language or facial expressions, touching or holding another person's body without permission, and making jokes or comments with sexual content (Fitzgerald et al., 1999).

Based on the explanation above, it can be concluded that forms of sensitive jokes fall under the category of unethical humor. Lycan, in his research, identified several types of humor that are ethically contradictory, including (1) humor that demeans certain groups, such as racist and sexist humor; (2) humor based on stereotypes or targeting minority groups; (3) humor that supports unethical actions, such as joking about violence or exploitation; (4) humor that undermines an individual's dignity; and (5) humor that inhibits the emergence of more morally valuable emotions. The latter includes jokes that belittle someone's suffering, which may shift focus toward laughter rather than fostering understanding or responding to the situation with empathy (Lycan, 2020).

In addition to being ethically contradictory, sensitive jokes can also be categorized as harassment. Previous research has shown that unwanted verbal and non-physical behaviors—such as secretly observing someone, taking pictures without consent, making jokes in an inappropriate tone or context, giving seductive looks, asking or sharing personal information, and commenting on or criticizing someone's physical appearance with sexual content—can be classified as harassment. Such behaviors, whether directed at individuals of the opposite or same sex, have the potential to cause discomfort, particularly in public settings (Tuhepaly & Mazaid, 2022).

In the workplace context, joking can have positive effects, such as enhancing employee performance, fostering creativity, and strengthening interpersonal relationships (Clouse & Spurgeon, 1995). However, joking can also have negative consequences for an organization. Negative joking includes behaviors that may lead to bullying, insults, degradation of dignity, and psychological pressure, whether intentional or unintentional, within the organizational environment. This type of joking has the potential to harm relationships between employees and may even result in legal action against the organization (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006).

Sensitive jokes in the workplace are often made by men, as research suggests that men tend to use almost all types of humor more frequently than women (Duncan, 1982). This tendency becomes more apparent when the humor used is negative or offensive (Decker & Rotondo, 2001). Men are more likely to find jokes containing sexual elements (Groch, 1974) and insults (Decker, 1986) amusing compared to women. Additionally, men are generally less likely to be offended by racist and sexist jokes than women (Smeltzer & Leap, 1988). Furthermore, men are more prone to using humor that includes sexual content and insults in the workplace (Decker & Rotondo, 1999).

Table 1. Form of Sensitive Jokes

No.	Form of Sensitive Jokes
1	Jokes related to career ambitions
2	Jokes related to marital status
3	Jokes related to gender stereotypes
4	Sexual jokes
5	Physical jokes
6	Joking in the form of inappropriate physical touch

Women's Responses to Sensitive Jokes in the Workplace

Based on the results of the interviews, five forms of women's responses to sensitive jokes in the workplace were identified. These responses were then classified into two categories: confrontational responses and passive responses. When faced with offensive comments, individuals typically respond in one of four ways: ignoring, confronting, diverting, or responding (Schneider, 1994).

One of the common responses' women exhibit when encountering sensitive jokes is direct confrontation. Confrontation is an action taken to challenge the perpetrator or respond to the comment (Schneider, 1994). In this study, direct confrontation involved reprimanding the perpetrator immediately or reporting them to a supervisor.

Confrontational actions can have both benefits and barriers. Individuals benefit from confrontation, as such actions can influence perceptions of the perpetrator and highlight that certain behaviors are offensive (Czopp & Monteith, 2003). Additionally, confrontation can encourage further confrontational actions by fostering support for those who speak out (Mallett & Wagner, 2011).

The biggest barrier to confrontation is the social cost individuals may face for speaking up (Kaiser & Miller, 2001). This social cost can influence whether a person decides to confront or remain silent. When individuals anticipate high social costs, they are more likely to avoid confrontation (Nicole & Stewart, 2004). Common forms of social costs include negative perceptions from others, particularly when the confronter is a woman.

Confrontational women are often perceived as troublemakers and complainers (Eliezer & Major, 2012). Additionally, women who engage in confrontation are often seen as overly sensitive and as having excessive or aggressive reactions (Becker et al., 2011). Previous research has shown that, in social contexts, women who take confrontational actions are viewed more negatively than those who choose to remain passive. In workplace settings, confrontational women are perceived slightly more favorably than those who remain silent, though they are still judged more negatively overall (Vaccarino & Kawakami, 2021). In this study, the confrontational actions taken by women included reporting sensitive jokes to superiors or relevant authorities.

When faced with high social costs, women tend to exhibit passive or non-confrontational responses, such as ignoring the situation while maintaining professionalism, changing the subject, or leaving environments where sensitive jokes occur. Women's responses to sensitive jokes in the workplace reflect their tendency to uphold professionalism. These jokes present a challenge for women, requiring them to navigate the situation carefully to avoid being perceived as "too sensitive" or "unprofessional" (Crawford, 2020). To maintain professionalism, women often choose to ignore such jokes and focus on their work. Additionally, ignoring sensitive jokes can serve as a strategy to preserve relationships with coworkers (Smeltzer & Leap, 1988).

The interviewees in this study also revealed that they have established specific boundaries for joking in the workplace. Setting such boundaries is essential to prevent the negative effects of inappropriate jokes. These boundaries are socially shaped by employees and managers within the organization, meaning they are influenced by workplace experiences and cultural norms. Joking boundaries are dynamic and adapt to different contexts, shifting between formal and informal interactions. Although these boundaries are not explicitly defined in organizational policies, there is an implicit understanding of what types of jokes are considered acceptable in the workplace (Plester, 2016).

Table 2. Women's Responses to Sensitive Jokes

No.	Women's Responses to Sensitive Jokes
1	Give the perpetrator a direct warning
2	Report the perpetrator to a superior
3	Ignore and stay professional
4	Change the subject
5	Leaving the sensitive joke situation

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusion

Based on the study's findings, it can be concluded that joking in the workplace is not always positive, particularly when it involves sensitive topics related to female workers. Six common forms of sensitive jokes in the workplace were identified: jokes about career ambitions, jokes about marital status, jokes based on gender stereotypes, sexual jokes, jokes about physical appearance, and jokes involving inappropriate physical touch. These sensitive jokes are often made by male workers, either consciously or unconsciously, and have the potential to reinforce social norms that disadvantage women. As a result, such jokes can contribute to an uncomfortable and unprofessional work environment.

In response to such sensitive jokes, women employ various strategies that can be categorized into five main forms: directly reprimanding the perpetrator, reporting the incident to superiors, ignoring the joke while maintaining professionalism, changing the subject, and leaving the situation.

By understanding the forms and impacts of sensitive jokes in the workplace, companies are encouraged to foster a more inclusive and professional environment by implementing stricter policies on jokes that may harm female workers. Additionally, raising employee awareness about the boundaries of humor is essential. With increased awareness, workplaces can cultivate a culture of mutual respect and minimize uncomfortable interactions.

Recommendation

Future research is recommended to expand the sample size and diversity by including male workers from various industries and backgrounds. This approach will provide a more comprehensive understanding of men's perspectives on sensitive jokes in the workplace. Additionally, it is important to explore the underlying reasons behind such behavior, whether influenced by cultural factors, workplace inequality, or other contributing factors.

Companies are expected to foster a professional and safe working environment for female employees by implementing mechanisms for reporting complaints securely when they feel uncomfortable with certain jokes. Additionally, companies should provide training or workshops to raise awareness of inappropriate jokes and their potential impact in the workplace.

Male workers are encouraged to develop a better understanding of the boundaries of humor and exercise self-control by avoiding jokes that may demean or offend female colleagues. Likewise, female workers are encouraged to enhance their self-awareness in recognizing and responding to jokes that make them uncomfortable, whether by directly addressing the issue or reporting it to the appropriate authorities.

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