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## Is the joke on you? The impact of sexist humour and gender dynamics on interpersonal work outcomes

Yara Bouckaert <sup>a,b</sup>, Louisa Vofrei <sup>a,b</sup>, Nina Jonczyk <sup>b,c</sup>, Annika Mertens <sup>b,d</sup>, Meikel Soliman <sup>b</sup>, Laura Venz <sup>b</sup> and David D. Loschelder <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Work and Organisational Psychology, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Brussels, Belgium; <sup>b</sup>Institute for Management & Organisation (IMO), Leuphana Universität Lüneburg, Lüneburg, Germany; <sup>c</sup>Research Institute of Personnel Psychology, Development and Quality of Working Life (IDOCAL), Universitat de València, València, Spain; <sup>d</sup>Future of Work Institute (FOWI), Curtin University, Perth, Australia

### ABSTRACT

(Workplace) humour can have positive effects on interpersonal (workplace) relationships. However, sexist humour – a form of subtle discrimination that communicates disparagement or degradation at the expense of (mainly) women in a humorous manner – might be highly detrimental in various ways. Despite sexist humour being pervasive in the workplace, little is known about when, how, and why sexist humour impacts the recipients and their work relationship with the initiator. With two pre-registered studies, theoretically based on affective events theory and social identity theory, this research advances knowledge on the interpersonal effects and gender dynamics of sexist humour at work. In the experimental Study 1, 255 participants rated an actor telling a (non-)sexist joke. In the field Study 2, 170 participants recalled a (non-)sexist humour event they encountered at work. Both studies produced converging results: Recipients of sexist humour were less willing to collaborate with the humour initiator and perceived them as less competent; this was psychologically explained by elevated negative affect. These detrimental effects particularly emerged when a man (vs. woman) initiated sexist humour toward a woman (vs. man).

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My male colleague joked about it being my supervisor's "time of the month" because she was a bit moody one day. This was in the office, and it was just the two of us. It made me feel awkward because I didn't really know what to say in return.

(Participant 144, Study 2)

Across the globe, legislation is in place aiming to prevent workplace discrimination (Jones et al., 2017). On top, social norms in broader society have shifted, such that discrimination is not accepted in organisations any longer (Cortina, 2008). However, this largely applies to overt discrimination, whereas more subtle forms of discrimination, like gender microaggressions and sexist jokes – that do not violate the law – continue to prevail (Jones et al., 2017; Smith & Griffiths, 2022). Subtle discrimination, in turn, has substantial negative impacts on individuals, organisations, and society; and evidence suggests that subtle discrimination can be even more detrimental than overt discrimination (Jones et al., 2016). This is the case because subtle discrimination is comparably harder to recognise and confront (Mallett et al., 2016), which ultimately reinforces a discriminatory climate in organisations as it makes discrimination more tolerable (Ford & Ferguson, 2004; Lawless et al., 2020).

One form of subtle discrimination is sexist humour, a form of communication with the intention to disparage or degrade (mainly) women and elicit amusement at their expense (Cooper, 2005) and reinforce status (of men; Rappoport, 2005). As a form of negative humour, sexist humour has well-

documented negative effects (e.g., Thomae & Pina, 2015; Woodzicka & Ford, 2010). It is even more detrimental when sexist humour is expressed by men high in hostile sexism because they articulate their sexist beliefs more (Ford et al., 2013). This, in turn, fosters a climate in which discrimination is accepted (Lawless et al., 2020). Although often disguised as a "joke", sexist humour differs from other forms of workplace humour.

When thinking about humour, most people think about fun and laughter, that is, about positive humour. And indeed, a lot is known about positive workplace humour and its positive effects (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). For example, workplace humour can foster teamwork and team performance (Lehmann-Willenbrock & Allen, 2014; Mao et al., 2017), increase well-being (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012) and benefit workplace relationships (e.g., Pundt & Venz, 2017). These studies have all looked at positive humour, meaning humour that tries to bring individuals together and not disparage them. Many studies focusing on positive humour often disregard that negative humour also exists (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012) and that something perceived as funny by one person (e.g., a joke initiator) might be perceived as offensive by another person (e.g., a joke recipient; Romero & Cruthirds, 2006).

Only a few empirical studies (e.g., Huo et al., 2012; Pundt & Herrmann, 2015), examined negative or negatively perceived workplace humour; sexist humour in the workplace is particularly under-researched. Hence, despite some recent scholarly

attention on sexist humour in everyday life (e.g., Lawless et al., 2020; Woodzicka et al., 2020), the understanding of its impact in the workplace remains limited. Specifically, there is a lack of knowledge regarding the interpersonal work relationship outcomes of sexist workplace humour, the respective underlying processes, and the conditions under which these effects occur. With this gap in mind, we aim to investigate why, how and for whom sexist humour impacts working relationships in terms of the humour recipients' willingness to collaborate with and the perceived competence of the humour initiator. These two outcomes are particularly important to consider in the work context due to their impact on successful teamwork and thus team performance and organisational success (Bedwell et al., 2012).

Drawing on affective events theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), we specifically propose that sexist humour, as a form of negative humour, negatively impacts co-worker relationships and that negative affect operates as a mechanism underlying this association. Further, connecting affective events theory with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), we posit that gender dynamics – the interplay between the humour initiator's gender and the humour recipient's gender – play a crucial role in the disparagement of sexist humour. To test our hypothesised model (see Figure 1), we conducted two studies. In Study 1, we rely on a between-subjects experiment, manipulating sexist workplace humour and the gender of the humour initiator. In Study 2, a field study, we ventured into the real-life work environment, considering real events of sexist workplace humour and examining its prevalence within a diverse sample of employees. Combining these two methods enables us to capture internally valid effects that are also highly relevant to real-world workplaces.

We seek to contribute to research and practice in work and organisational psychology in meaningful ways. First, our research sheds light on the prevalence of sexist humour in the workplace as one subtle form of gender discrimination. This is especially relevant as overt forms of discrimination are legally forbidden and, therefore, less likely to occur, while subtle forms seem to be more accepted but could potentially also be more detrimental (e.g., Yao et al., 2022). This makes it more important to look at the legal and subtle ways of

everyday discrimination, which is often disguised as a socially acceptable "joke."

Second, while dominant research looked at positive humour and its beneficial effects in the workplace, we diverge from this approach and disentangle the role of negative, sexist humour in workplace relationships. This under-researched area is important as it helps to understand the circumstances in which organisational cultures develop and have detrimental effects on individuals, organisations, and society (e.g., Lawless et al., 2020). Furthering this understanding helps to foster organisational cultures in which diversity, equity and inclusion are not only legally binding but lived.

Third, we respond to calls for more research on the negative affective responses associated with sexist humour (Woodzicka & Ford, 2010). Supporting recent extensions of affective events theory (Cropanzano et al., 2017), understanding why and for whom sexist humour has negative effects on interpersonal workplace outcomes allows to understand how these subtle forms of discrimination operate in the workplace; this should help to rectify its negative effects. Moreover, as we disentangle the interacting role of the humour initiator's and the recipient's gender, we enable a fine-grained understanding of how sexist humour operates differently as a function of gender constellations. This allows us to better understand how sexism operates in general, contributing to a more thorough comprehension of social identity processes in which one's social group contributes to out-group derogation (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

### Sexist humour and interpersonal work outcomes

Humour is defined as any communicative instance intended or perceived as being amusing, related to cognitive and affective reactions in the recipient (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Various (workplace) humour types are differentiated in the literature (Martin et al., 2003). First, humour is either used to enhance the self (e.g., presenting oneself in a positive light) or to enhance the relationship with others (e.g., making others feel good). Second, humour can either be positive, benign, and benevolent (e.g., the self and others are respected) or negative, detrimental (e.g., either the self or others are denigrated). According to this

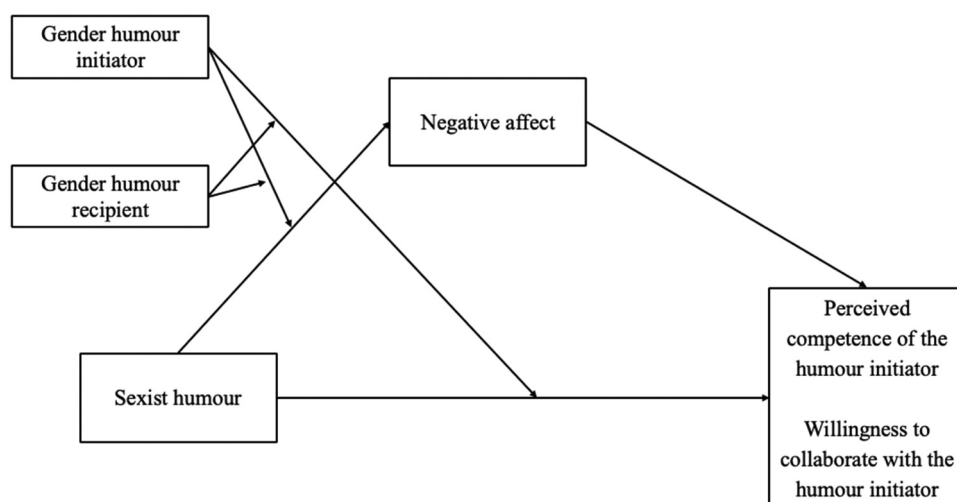


Figure 1. Conceptual model.

classification, sexist humour is a type of negative self-enhancing humour, precisely of aggressive humour (i.e., humour used with the intent to “belittle others, albeit often under the guise of playful fun”, Martin et al., 2003, p. 52), often initiated in the form of degrading comments with the goal to make the initiator feel superior (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006) as well as ridicule others (Zillman, 1983). Specifically, in the literature, sexist humour is defined as a form of communication with the intention to disparage or degrade (mainly) women and elicit amusement at their expense (Cooper, 2005). With sexist humour, sexist beliefs can be expressed by means of a socially acceptable form of communication, such as jokes (Lawless et al., 2020).

When aggressive humour is used to degrade others, as is the case for sexist humour, recipients tend to respond with negative affect and other negative reactions about the humour initiator, which likely undermines relationships (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). These effects of sexist humour on interpersonal work outcomes can be explained with affective events theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Affective events theory considers (work) events as proximal causes of affective reactions, which in turn underlie the relationship of work events with work outcomes, including interpersonal relationship outcomes (e.g., Cropanzano et al., 2017; Guenter et al., 2014). Interpersonal interactions in general (Venz et al., 2020) and instances of (workplace) humour specifically (Robert & Wilbanks, 2012) are an important category of affective events. Following the notion of affect symmetry (Venz et al., 2020), positive affective interpersonal events, including positive humour, are pre-eminently related to positive affect (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012) and negative interpersonal events, including sexist humour, are related to negative affect (see Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Forms of positive humour were further found to be positively related, and forms of negative humour were negatively related to workplace relationship outcomes (e.g., Pundt & Herrmann, 2015; Pundt & Venz, 2017).

Indeed, the interpersonal implications of workplace humour are well established. Humour at work can serve as a tool for enhancing group status and individual power (Taylor et al., 2022) as well as social cohesion, interpersonal liking, and social visibility (Cooper, 2008; Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012; Romero & Pescosolido, 2008). Therefore, humour is an important facilitator for team processes such as collaboration and co-worker evaluations. For example, research associated positive humour with a higher willingness to collaborate (Brender-Ilan & Reizer, 2021), but aggressive humour coincided with lower cooperation (Romero & Arendt, 2011). Finally, jokes with inappropriate sexual content decrease men’s perceived competence, especially when they fail (Bitterly et al., 2017).

Accordingly, we argue that sexist humour is negatively related to the perceived competence of and willingness to collaborate with the initiator – with these relationships being explained via negative affect. As outlined above, we conceptualise sexist humour as a negative affective event (Woodzicka & Ford, 2010) that, as such, should coincide with elevated negative affect, following affective events theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Sexist-humour-induced negative affect should, in turn, explain why sexist humour is related to impaired interpersonal relationships (Robert & Wilbanks, 2012).

Research supports that humour is related to affective states and that affective states shape collaborative behaviours (Avry et al., 2020; Bedwell et al., 2012). For example,

leaders’ positive humour correlates with subordinates’ positive affect, which in turn is associated with engagement in teamwork (Goswami et al., 2016), whereas negative affect mediates the negative association between group-level aggressive humour and teamwork engagement (Gheorghe et al., 2022). In line with this, some studies indicate that negative affect plays a role in explaining specifically the detrimental effects of sexist humour (Woodzicka & Ford, 2010). For example, women reported increases in negative emotions such as feelings of disgust, anger, and hostility after receiving sexist humour (LaFrance & Woodzicka, 1998). Individuals in a negative affective state, in turn, make more negative judgements (Forgas, 1995). Accordingly, we suggest that sexist humour induces negative affect, which shapes the humour recipient’s willingness to collaborate with the initiator as well as how the recipient evaluates the humour initiator’s competence. We hypothesise:

**H1:** Sexist humour is negatively related to the recipient’s (a) willingness to collaborate with and (b) competence perceptions of the initiator mediated by the recipient’s negative affect.

## Sexist humour and gender dynamics

Different people interpret workplace humour differently (e.g., Evans et al., 2019; Pundt & Venz, 2017) and differences in sexist humour interpretation specifically depend on the gender of the humour initiator and recipient (Woodzicka et al., 2020). Such moderating effects of gender on the effects of sexist humour may be explained along the lines of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), which posits that individuals strive toward a positive social identity based on membership in social groups. This social classification of oneself and others is driven by recognisable person characteristics, such as gender. Because individuals want to achieve a positive social identity, social groups compete for positive (in-group) distinctiveness, denoting higher status and positive recognition compared to an out-group.

Being confronted with sexist humour (e.g., about women) might make the in- versus out-group distinction especially salient. This might particularly be the case when the humour initiator makes a remark about the other gender (e.g., a man telling a sexist joke about women directed at a woman; see also precarious manhood hypothesis; Vandello & Bosson, 2013). According to social identity theory, when attacked by an out-group member, for instance, via a sexist joke about women, the in-group member (i.e., woman) will seek to protect the value of their group membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Therefore, sexist humour about women can threaten the social identity of women (i.e., their social group), especially when it is initiated by men. This should result in women more negatively evaluating male sexist humour initiators—a form of out-group derogation, which may be used to uphold one’s positive social identity (Branscombe et al., 1999). This notion is also in line with findings on gender stereotypes (for a review, see Ellemers, 2018).

Evidence indeed shows that gender differences in sexist humour interpretation exist: women seem to find sexist humour more sexist, less funny, and more offensive than men

(Lawless et al., 2020; Smeltzer & Leap, 1988) and men rate jokes about women funnier than jokes about men, whereas women find jokes about men more enjoyable (Abrams & Bippus, 2014; Abrams et al., 2015). Further, whereas manager's use of humour relates to their high perceived competence by male recipients, the opposite is true for female recipients (Brender-Ilan & Reizer, 2021). Moreover, men are judged as less competent and having lower status when making sexist jokes toward women compared to men who joke about high-status men (Betz & DiDonato, 2024).

Against this background, we assume that the effects of sexist humour (on negative affect, willingness to collaborate, and perceived competence) might be conditional on complex gender dynamics. Sexist humour about women initiated by men is likely perceived as a threat to women's social identity because it targets women's positive distinctiveness. Such an identity threat increases the woman's negative affect, which in turn potentially decreases her perception of the male co-worker's competence and her willingness to collaborate with him. Contrary, men might perceive sexist humour about women from a male co-worker as funnier and subsequently have comparably lower negative affective reactions due to in-group favouritism and out-group derogation. In line with this reasoning, women might perceive sexist humour about women as less offending when another woman initiates it, as they belong to the same social group. Consequently, we derive the following three-way interaction hypotheses:

**H2:** The gender of the humour initiator and of the humour recipient interact in moderating the positive relationship between sexist humour and negative affect, such that it is the strongest when men initiate sexist humour toward women.

**H3:** The gender of the humour initiator and of the humour recipient interact in moderating the negative relationship between sexist humour and (a) willingness to collaborate with and (b) perceived competence of the humour initiator, such that it is the strongest when men initiate sexist humour toward women.

**H4:** The gender of the humour initiator and of the humour recipient interact in moderating the indirect negative relationship between sexist humour and (a) willingness to collaborate with and (b) perceived competence of the humour initiator via negative affect, such that it is the strongest when men initiate sexist humour toward women.

## Study 1 – sexist jokes and relationship outcomes

As mentioned previously, most of the literature has conceptualised sexist humour as a form of disparagement humour, referring to intended humorous remarks through the denigration, derogation, or belittlement of women as a disadvantaged group (e.g., Abrams et al., 2015; Mallett et al., 2016; Woodzicka et al., 2020). Hence, the focus of Study 1 is on events of sexist humour about women (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Because sexual behaviour mostly exists between peers (Berdahl & Aquino, 2009) and most workplace interactions occur between

colleagues (Guenter et al., 2014), we focus on sexist humour among co-workers. Because sexist humour is a form of subtle discrimination and, therefore, often disguised as a "joke" (Thomae & Pina, 2015), we examined sexist humour in the form of sexist jokes in an experimental design with an active (non-sexist humour) and a passive (non-humour) control condition. This approach aligns with previous research that used sexist jokes to investigate sexist humour by adopting an experimental design (e.g., Woodzicka et al., 2020).

## Pilot study – developing the stimulus material

We conducted a pilot study ( $N = 229$ ) to refine the experimental manipulation for Study 1 (see OSF<sup>1</sup> for materials). First, participants rated eight actors' attractiveness and likeability (four men, four women) who told the same neutral statement: "Germany is a country in Europe, and it shares borders with nine different countries: The Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, France, Switzerland, Austria, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Denmark". Using paired samples  $t$ -tests, we identified one male and one female actor who did *not* differ regarding their overall ratings of attractiveness and likeability ( $M_f = 4.34$ ,  $SD_f = 0.96$  vs.  $M_m = 4.29$ ,  $SD_m = 1.10$ ),  $t(41) = 0.09$ ,  $p = .925$ . Second, participants evaluated eight sexist and eight non-sexist jokes regarding perceived inappropriateness and funniness (see OSF for all jokes). Using paired samples  $t$ -tests, we selected two pairs of non-sexist and sexist jokes that were equally funny but significantly different in appropriateness. The sexist joke "Is Google male or female? Female, because it doesn't let you finish a sentence before making a suggestion" and the non-sexist joke "What did the ocean say to the shore? Nothing, it just waved" were rated as equally funny ( $M_{\text{sexist}} = 4.19$ ,  $SD_{\text{sexist}} = 2.91$ ,  $M_{\text{non-sexist}} = 4.84$ ,  $SD_{\text{non-sexist}} = 2.27$ ;  $t[42] = -1.22$ ,  $p = .230$ ), but significantly different in appropriateness ( $M_{\text{sexist}} = 6.69$ ,  $SD_{\text{sexist}} = 2.61$ ,  $M_{\text{non-sexist}} = 2.03$ ,  $SD_{\text{non-sexist}} = 1.34$ ;  $t[42] = 10.42$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Likewise, the sexist joke "If I had a penny for every time someone called me sexist, I'd probably be earning more than the average woman" and the non-sexist joke "What do you call an alligator detective? An investi-gator" were equal in funniness ( $M_{\text{sexist}} = 4.37$ ,  $SD_{\text{sexist}} = 2.69$ ,  $M_{\text{non-sexist}} = 5.20$ ,  $SD_{\text{non-sexist}} = 2.59$ ;  $t[33] = -1.20$ ,  $p = .239$ ) but differed in appropriateness ( $M_{\text{sexist}} = 7.10$ ,  $SD_{\text{sexist}} = 2.66$ ,  $M_{\text{non-sexist}} = 1.85$ ,  $SD_{\text{non-sexist}} = 1.30$ ;  $t[33] = 10.21$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Based on these data, we recorded videos with the two chosen actors telling the four jokes (i.e., 8 videos) and the same two actors telling a neutral statement, "The company was founded in 1992, and it has 250 employees" (i.e., 10 videos in total), which we used as stimulus material in Study 1.

## Experimental procedure of study 1

We conducted a pre-registered online experiment with a 3 (sexist joke vs. non-sexist joke vs. non-joke) by 2 (male vs. female actor) between-subjects design (see OSF for all materials). Participants reported their socio-demographics, indicated their momentary affect (baseline), and were then introduced to the scenario with the cover story: "Imagine this is a colleague of yours. You are currently working on a few projects together. While you are both walking to your desk, he/she tells the



following ...". Participants then watched one of the ten videos (with subtitles); the assignment was randomised. After watching the video, participants again indicated their affect and evaluated their "colleague" from the video in terms of willingness to collaborate with them and their perceived competence.

## Participants

We recruited participants via personal contacts, Leuphana University's participants' pool and Academic Prolific. All videos were presented in English, and all participants had at least a B1 language proficiency level. We excluded participants who indicated to be non-binary ( $n = 2$ ), who did not watch the video ( $n = 26$ ) or who did not understand the joke ( $n = 7$ ), resulting in a final sample of 255 participants ( $M_{\text{age}} = 30.54$  years;  $SD = 11.00$ ; 68% women, 32% men) across the conditions (sexist condition,  $n = 73$ , non-sexist condition,  $n = 88$ , non-joke condition,  $n = 94$ ). Participants were mostly from the UK (58%) and Germany (33%) and held a high school (43%) or bachelor's degree (33%). Most were employed in the private (29%) or public sector (24%) or were students (37%). Results of differences-of-mean tests revealed no significant differences between the conditions regarding participants' gender, age, English proficiency, and country.

## Measures

### Negative affect

We measured negative affect using 5 items of the International Positive and Negative Affect Schedule Short Form (Thompson, 2007; 1=*not at all*, 5=*extremely*). The instruction was "How do you feel right now?" and a sample item is "upset" ( $\alpha_{\text{baseline}} = .81$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{after-joke}} = .83$ ).

### Collaboration willingness

We measured willingness to collaborate with the joke initiator with a self-developed 4-item scale ( $\alpha = .91$ ; 1=*strongly disagree*, 7=*strongly agree*). The items are "I would like to work with the person from the video", "I would be disappointed if I would be assigned to a project which requires me to work with the person from the video" (reverse-coded), "If the person from the video asks for help on a project, I would be willing to assist", "The person in the video appears like a good co-worker". A confirmatory factor analysis confirmed the one-factor solution with adequate model fit, CFI = .98, TLI = .95, SRMR = .02.

### Perceived competence

We measured the perceived competence of the person in the video with 5 items ( $\alpha = .92$ ) from the Agency-Communion Inventory (Abele et al., 2016; 1=*does not apply*, 7=*applies fully*). A sample item is "The person is competent".

### Statistical analyses

To test H1 (i.e., mediation independent of gender dynamics), we tested indirect effects with 5,000 bootstrapping iterations to obtain confidence intervals (CI) using PROCESS (Hayes, 2013), Model 4. To test H2, H3, and H4 (i.e., conditional moderated effects to examine gender dynamics), we examined the three-way interaction between the experimental condition (sexist vs. non-sexist joking), the gender of the joke initiator, and the gender of the joke recipient in PROCESS, Model 12, again with 5,000 bootstrapping iterations for indirect effects. For the effects on and of negative affect, we computed standardised residual change scores from pre- to post-manipulation. We first tested all hypotheses with the sexist versus non-sexist condition as the independent variable (coded as non-sexist condition = 0 and sexist condition = 1) and then repeated all analyses with the non-joke (0) versus sexist (1) condition to ensure the robustness of the findings.

## Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and correlations. Table 2 presents the results for H1 (mediation). Table 3 presents the results on moderated mediation analyses and Table 4 conditional moderated (indirect) effects testing (H2-H4) comparing the non-sexist to the sexist joke condition.

Sexist (vs. non-sexist) joking was significantly related to an increase in negative affect,  $b = 0.76$ ,  $SE = 0.17$ ,  $p < .001$ . Increase in negative affect was negatively related to willingness to collaborate with the joke initiator,  $b = -0.40$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ ,  $p < .001$ . Additionally, we found a negative and significant main effect of sexist (vs. non-sexist) joking on willingness to collaborate,  $b = -1.39$ ,  $SE = 0.19$ ,  $p < .001$ . Consequently, we found a significant partial mediation of sexist (vs. non-sexist) joking on willingness to collaborate with the joke initiator via increased negative affect, *indirect effect* =  $-0.30$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ , 95% CI [ $-0.55$ ,  $-0.11$ ], supporting H1a.

Increase in negative affect was not associated with the perceived competence of the joke initiator,  $b = -0.12$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ ,  $p = .134$ . Consequently, there was no significant

**Table 1.** Means, standard deviations, internal consistencies, and correlations for study 1.

| Variables                                | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | 1      | 2     | 3    | 4    | 5    | 6     | 7      | 8     | 9     |
|------------------------------------------|----------|-----------|--------|-------|------|------|------|-------|--------|-------|-------|
| 1 Sexist joke condition <sup>a</sup>     |          |           |        |       |      |      |      |       |        |       |       |
| 2 Non-sexist joke condition <sup>b</sup> |          |           |        |       |      |      |      |       |        |       |       |
| 3 Non-joke condition <sup>c</sup>        |          |           |        |       |      |      |      |       |        |       |       |
| 4 Gender joke initiator <sup>d</sup>     | 1.50     | 0.50      | -.06   | .03   | .03  |      |      |       |        |       |       |
| 5 Gender joke recipient <sup>d</sup>     | 1.32     | 0.47      | -.04   | -.07  | .11  | -.08 |      |       |        |       |       |
| 6 Negative affect pre-manipulation       | 1.54     | 0.66      | .05    | .00   | -.05 | .02  | -.06 | (.81) |        |       |       |
| 7 Negative affect post-manipulation      | 1.45     | 0.62      | .20**  | -.10  | -.08 | .01  | -.06 | .86** | (.82)  |       |       |
| 8 Willingness to collaborate             | 4.87     | 1.31      | -.44** | .44** | -.02 | -.06 | .01  | -.04  | -.24** | (.91) |       |
| 9 Perceived competence                   | 4.12     | 1.18      | -.23** | .18** | .04  | -.03 | .03  | -.07  | -.12   | .57** | (.92) |

Note. Pearson correlations are shown. Cronbach's alphas are shown on the diagonal in brackets. Joke conditions are dummy-coded: <sup>a</sup>sexist humour = 1, all other conditions = 0; <sup>b</sup>non-sexist joke condition = 1, all other conditions = 0; <sup>c</sup>non-joke condition = 1, all other conditions = 0 <sup>d</sup>1 = women, 2 = men.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

**Table 2.** Study 1: results of the mediation analysis with negative affect (PROCESS, model 4).

| Effect                                                    | Estimate | SE   | t     | p      | R <sup>2</sup> |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|----------|------|-------|--------|----------------|
| Step 1: Mediator                                          |          |      |       |        |                |
| Change in Negative Affect                                 |          |      |       |        |                |
| Constant                                                  | −0.28*   | 0.12 | −2.45 | .015   | 0.11***        |
| Sexist <sup>a</sup>                                       | 0.76***  | 0.17 | 4.39  | <.001  |                |
| Step 2a: Outcome                                          |          |      |       |        |                |
| Willingness to Collaborate                                |          |      |       |        |                |
| Constant                                                  | 5.55***  | 0.13 | 43.99 | <.001  | 0.40***        |
| Sexist <sup>a</sup>                                       | −1.39*** | 0.19 | −7.12 | <.001  |                |
| Change in Negative Affect                                 | −0.40*** | 0.08 | −4.67 | <.001  |                |
| Step 2b: Outcome                                          |          |      |       |        |                |
| Perceived Competence                                      |          |      |       |        |                |
| Constant                                                  | 4.37***  | 0.12 | 36.46 | <.001  | 0.11***        |
| Sexist <sup>a</sup>                                       | −0.63*** | 0.19 | −3.38 | .001   |                |
| Change in Negative Affect                                 | −0.12    | 0.08 | −1.50 | .134   |                |
| Indirect effect via Change in Negative Affect             |          |      |       |        |                |
|                                                           |          |      |       | 95% CI |                |
| Effect                                                    | Estimate | SE   | LL    | UL     |                |
| Sexist → Change in Negative Affect → Collaboration        | −0.30    | 0.11 | −0.55 | −0.11  |                |
| Sexist → Change in Negative Affect → Perceived Competence | −0.09    | 0.07 | −0.23 | 0.04   |                |

Note. N = 161. CI = bootstrapped confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit.

<sup>a</sup>Dummy-coded (0 = non-sexist joke, 1 = sexist joke).

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Table 3.** Study 1: results of the moderated mediation analysis (PROCESS, model 12).

| Estimate                                            | Effect   | SE   | t     | p     | R <sup>2</sup> |
|-----------------------------------------------------|----------|------|-------|-------|----------------|
| Step 1: Mediator                                    |          |      |       |       |                |
| Change in Negative Affect                           |          |      |       |       |                |
| Constant                                            | 0.32     | 1.13 | 0.28  | .775  | 0.13**         |
| Sexist <sup>a</sup>                                 | −0.98    | 1.66 | −0.59 | .557  |                |
| Gender joke initiator <sup>b</sup>                  | −0.48    | 0.71 | −0.67 | .501  |                |
| Gender joke recipient <sup>b</sup>                  | −0.50    | 0.83 | −0.60 | .551  |                |
| Sexist*gender joke initiator                        | 1.54     | 1.07 | 1.44  | .152  |                |
| Sexist*gender joke recipient                        | 1.22     | 1.21 | 1.01  | .315  |                |
| Gender joke initiator*gender joke recipient         | 0.39     | 0.52 | 0.74  | .459  |                |
| Sexist*gender joke initiator* gender joke recipient | −1.13    | 0.80 | −1.41 | .162  |                |
| Step 2a: Outcome                                    |          |      |       |       |                |
| Willingness to Collaborate                          |          |      |       |       |                |
| Constant                                            | 7.84***  | 1.15 | 6.82  | .000  | .47***         |
| Sexist <sup>a</sup>                                 | −2.46    | 1.68 | −1.46 | .146  |                |
| Change in negative affect                           | −0.39*** | 0.08 | −4.71 | .000  |                |
| Gender joke initiator <sup>b</sup>                  | −1.42    | 0.72 | −1.97 | .050  |                |
| Gender joke recipient <sup>b</sup>                  | −1.67    | 0.85 | −1.97 | .005  |                |
| Sexist*gender joke initiator                        | 0.59     | 1.10 | 0.54  | .589  |                |
| Sexist*gender joke recipient                        | 1.92     | 1.23 | 1.57  | .120  |                |
| Gender joke initiator*gender joke recipient         | 1.04     | 0.53 | 1.95  | .053  |                |
| Sexist*gender joke initiator* gender joke recipient | −1.22    | 0.82 | −1.49 | .139  |                |
| Step 2b: Outcome                                    |          |      |       |       |                |
| Perceived Competence                                |          |      |       |       |                |
| Constant                                            | 4.60     | 1.14 | 4.05  | <.001 | 0.15**         |
| Sexist <sup>a</sup>                                 | −1.44    | 1.66 | −0.87 | .387  |                |
| Change in negative affect                           | −0.11    | 0.08 | −1.34 | .187  |                |
| Gender joke initiator <sup>b</sup>                  | −0.08    | 0.71 | −0.11 | .911  |                |
| Gender joke recipient <sup>b</sup>                  | −0.27    | 0.84 | −0.32 | .749  |                |
| Sexist*gender joke initiator                        | 0.17     | 1.08 | 0.15  | .877  |                |
| Sexist*gender joke recipient                        | 1.28     | 1.21 | 1.05  | .293  |                |
| Gender joke initiator*gender joke recipient         | 0.12     | 0.53 | 0.23  | .816  |                |
| Sexist*gender joke initiator* gender joke recipient | −0.59    | 0.81 | −0.72 | .471  |                |

Note. N = 161.

<sup>a</sup>Dummy-coded (0 = non-sexist joke, 1 = sexist joke).

<sup>b</sup>Coded as 1 = woman, 2 = man.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

mediation effect of negative affect on the relationship between joking and competence, *indirect effect* = −0.09, *SE* = 0.07, 95% CI [−0.23, 0.04], rejecting H1b. However, we found a negative and significant main effect of sexist (vs. non-sexist) joking on perceived competence,  $b = -0.63$ ,  $SE = 0.18$ ,  $p = .001$ .

The three-way interaction between sexist (vs. non-sexist) joking, gender of the joke initiator and gender of the joke recipient was not significant in predicting negative affect,  $b = -1.13$ ,  $SE = 0.80$ ,  $p = .162$ , willingness to collaborate,  $b = -1.22$ ,  $SE = 0.82$ ,  $p = .139$ , and perceived competence,  $b = -0.59$ ,  $SE =$

**Table 4.** Study 1: conditional direct and conditional indirect effect and index of moderated mediation (PROCESS, model 12).

| Effect                                | Estimate | SE   | t     | p     |
|---------------------------------------|----------|------|-------|-------|
| Step 1a: Conditional Direct Effects   |          |      |       |       |
| Willingness to Collaborate            |          |      |       |       |
| Woman → Woman                         | −1.17    | 0.31 | −3.83 | <.001 |
| Woman → Man                           | −0.47    | 0.43 | −1.09 | .278  |
| Man → Woman                           | −1.80    | 0.30 | −6.01 | <.001 |
| Man → Man                             | −2.33    | 0.56 | −4.18 | <.001 |
| Step 1b: Conditional Direct Effects   |          |      |       |       |
| Perceived Competence                  |          |      |       |       |
| Woman → Woman                         | −0.58    | 0.30 | −1.94 | .055  |
| Woman → Man                           | 0.11     | 0.43 | 0.25  | .803  |
| Man → Woman                           | −1.00    | 0.30 | −3.39 | .001  |
| Man → Man                             | −0.90    | 0.55 | −1.63 | .104  |
| Step 2a: Conditional Indirect Effects |          |      |       |       |
| Willingness to Collaborate            |          |      |       |       |
| 95% CI                                |          |      |       |       |
| Effect                                | Estimate | SE   | LL    | UL    |
| Woman → Woman                         | −0.25    | 0.13 | −0.55 | −0.03 |
| Woman → Man                           | −0.29    | 0.19 | −0.72 | −0.00 |
| Man → Woman                           | −0.41    | 0.17 | −0.76 | −0.12 |
| Man → Man                             | −0.01    | 0.22 | −0.47 | 0.43  |
| 95% CI                                |          |      |       |       |
|                                       | Index    | SE   | LL    | UL    |
| Index of Moderated Moderation         | 0.44     | 0.34 | −0.15 | 1.20  |
| Step 2b: Conditional Indirect Effects |          |      |       |       |
| Perceived Competence                  |          |      |       |       |
| 95% CI                                |          |      |       |       |
| Effect                                | Estimate | SE   | LL    | UL    |
| Woman → Woman                         | −0.07    | 0.07 | −0.23 | .05   |
| Woman → Man                           | −0.08    | 0.08 | −0.27 | .05   |
| Man → Woman                           | −0.12    | 0.10 | −0.34 | .07   |
| Man → Man                             | −0.00    | 0.08 | −0.17 | .16   |
| CI <sub>95%</sub>                     |          |      |       |       |
|                                       | Index    | SE   | LL    | UL    |
| Index of Moderated Moderation         | 0.12     | 0.15 | −0.10 | .46   |

Note.  $N = 161$ . CI = bootstrapped confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit. Gender was coded as 1 = woman, 2 = man.

0.81,  $p = .471$ . Thus, we rejected H2 and H3. Consequently, the conditional moderated mediation effects of sexist (vs. non-sexist) joking on willingness to collaborate, *conditional moderated indirect effect* = 0.44,  $SE = 0.36$ , 95% CI [−0.18, 1.25], and perceived competence, *conditional moderated indirect effect* = 0.12,  $SE = 0.15$ , 95% CI [−0.11, 0.46], via negative affect were insignificant, rejecting H4.

We repeated all analyses comparing the sexist joke condition to the non-joke condition, which revealed the same pattern of results for all hypotheses as reported for the sexist-non-sexist-joke comparison. Results are presented on OSF.<sup>2</sup>

## Interim discussion 1

We found support for a negative direct and indirect effect of sexist humour on willingness to collaborate via negative affect. Although we found support for a significant direct effect of sexist humour on perceived competence as well, the indirect effect via negative affect on competence was not significant.

In line with affective events theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), our results support the idea that sexist humour is a negative affective event, and that negative affect is a crucial mechanism underlying detrimental effects of sexist humour—in this case on willingness to collaborate, which is highly important for effective teamwork and organisational functioning (e.g., Driskell et al., 2018). Importantly, as the joke recipient did not know the joke initiator and only imagined them to be their co-worker, the results show that social categorisation and following derogation can occur without previous interpersonal interaction (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Moreover, the artificial context of Study 1, which created a low-stakes environment without direct consequences associated with evaluating the joke initiator might indicate that effects could be even stronger in real-world workplaces.

This might also explain why we did not find gender dynamics to play a role. Whereas in-group and out-group dynamics have been shown to matter in organisational processes (Haslam & Ellemers, 2005), the artificial low-stakes



online environment of our experiment may have diminished certain dynamics that occur in real-life work settings. Thus, investigating sexist humour in the work environment is crucial because humour in real-world settings is a lot more dynamic, especially when previous relationships are established (Duncan, 1984). Also, sexist humour in real-world workplaces might not only be about women. Accordingly, even though our sole focus on sexist humour about women reflects the prevalent conceptualisation of sexist humour (e.g., Lawless et al., 2020; Woodzicka et al., 2020), such a narrow focus might not adequately reflect all forms of sexist humour in real-life workplaces.

## Study 2 – Recalling Real-Life Sexist Humour at Work

Given the artificially created work context in Study 1 with low ecological validity, we decided to further test our hypotheses considering participants' real-world workplaces with pre-existing work relationships in a field study. On top, in Study 2, we did not solely focus on sexist jokes but investigated sexist humour more broadly. As such, we recognise that sexist remarks might be intended as humorous but not perceived as funny and that humour in a professional setting is not always expressed as a joke with a pun line. Further, Study 2 examined the prevalence of sexist humour at work, about both men and women.

### Procedure

We conducted a pre-registered between-subjects survey study with three randomized conditions. All study materials are presented on OSF.<sup>3</sup> We recruited participants via personal networks and Prolific. Participants first reported on socio-demographics, (sexist) humour prevalence in their current work, and their work environment. They were randomly assigned to one of three conditions, in which they were instructed to recall a recent event at work when a co-worker made (1) a sexist remark intended to be humorous (sexist humour condition), (2) a remark intended to be humorous (non-sexist humour condition), or (3) a neutral encounter at work (non-humour condition). Participants were asked to describe the event as detailed as possible in a free-text format (see introductory quote). Given Study 1's limitation of including only sexist jokes about women, we instructed participants to describe sexist humour either about women or men. Participants then answered questions on how funny, sexist, and neutral they experienced the recalled situation (manipulation check), followed by a rating of their recalled negative affect after the situation. Participants indicated their willingness to work with and perceived competence of the co-worker who had made the remark. Last, we asked some follow-up questions, such as the gender of the humour initiator.

### Participants

After excluding those who failed to describe an adequate scenario ( $n = 48$ ) or identified as non-binary ( $n = 1$ ), our final sample consisted of 170 participants across conditions (sexist condition,

$n = 44$ , non-sexist condition,  $n = 63$ , non-humour condition,  $n = 63$ ;  $M_{\text{age}} = 37.47$  years;  $SD = 10.68$ ; 50% women, 50% men). Most participants lived in the United Kingdom (77%), but also in Germany (12%), Belgium (4%), the Netherlands (2%), Australia (2%), Austria (1%), and others (2%). On average, participants worked 37.80 hours per week ( $SD = 7.58$ ) and had worked in their current position for 7.14 years ( $SD = 7.42$ ). Most participants had a university degree (60%). The most prevalent employment sectors were education (19%), public services (13%), health services (12%), and financial/professional services (11%). Results of differences-of-mean tests revealed no significant differences between the conditions regarding participants' gender, age, English proficiency, and country.

### Measures

We used the same measures as in Study 1 to assess negative affect after the recalled situation ( $\alpha = .87$ ), willingness to collaborate ( $\alpha = .92$ ), and perceived competence ( $\alpha = .95$ ). Moreover, to measure the prevalence of (sexist) humour at work, we asked the following "On average, how often do you encounter (sexist) humour in your current team?". Response options ranged from 1 (*multiple times an hour*) to 7 (*never*).

### Statistical analyses

We used the same analysis approaches as in Study 1. Again, we first compared sexist (coded as 1) to non-sexist (coded as 0) humour and then repeated the analyses with sexist versus non-humour to ensure the robustness of our findings.

## Results

### Prevalence of (sexist) humour

Overall, 89% of all participants reported experiencing humour at least once during their workday, with 49% reporting encounters of sexist humour at least once in their current job; 25% reported experiencing sexist remarks intended to be humorous at least once a month. Interestingly, for those who were asked to describe a situation in which they had encountered sexist humour at their workplace, 60% of the participants described sexist humour about women, while only 4% of participants described sexist humour about men; 36% were unable to recall a sexist humour event. Women rarely initiated sexist humour about women (9%) compared to men (91%).

## Results

Table 5 presents the descriptive statistics and correlations of Study 2 variables. Table 6 presents the results of mediation hypothesis testing (H1). Tables 7 and 8 present the results of conditional moderated (indirect) effects testing (H2-H4) comparing sexist to non-sexist humour.

Sexist (vs. non-sexist) humour coincided with more negative affect,  $b = 0.59$ ,  $SE = 0.15$ ,  $p < .001$ . Negative affect was negatively associated with willingness to collaborate with the humour initiator,  $b = -0.75$ ,  $SE = 0.16$ ,  $p < .001$ . Moreover, sexist (vs. non-sexist) humour was directly

**Table 5.** Means, standard deviations, reliabilities, and correlations for study 2.

|   |                                      | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | 1      | 2      | 3     | 4     | 5    | 6      | 7     | 8       |
|---|--------------------------------------|----------|-----------|--------|--------|-------|-------|------|--------|-------|---------|
| 1 | Sexist humour condition              | 0.26     | 0.44      |        |        |       |       |      |        |       |         |
| 2 | Non-sexist humour condition          | 0.37     | 0.48      | -.45** |        |       |       |      |        |       |         |
| 3 | Non-humour condition                 | 0.37     | 0.48      | -.45** | -.59** |       |       |      |        |       |         |
| 4 | Gender humour initiator <sup>a</sup> | 1.68     | 0.47      | .26**  | -.05   | -.18* |       |      |        |       |         |
| 5 | Gender humour recipient <sup>a</sup> | 1.50     | 0.50      | -.03   | .01    | .01   | .23** |      |        |       |         |
| 6 | Negative affect                      | 1.47     | 0.76      | .35**  | -.15*  | -.16* | .14   | -.07 | –      | (.87) |         |
| 7 | Willingness to collaborate           | 5.58     | 1.37      | -.38** | .14    | .20** | -.18* | .07  | -.51** | –     | (.92)   |
| 8 | Perceived competence                 | 5.26     | 1.36      | -.22** | .04    | .16*  | -.11  | .01  | -.37** | .73** | – (.95) |

Note. Pearson correlations are shown. Cronbach's alphas are shown on the diagonal in brackets. Joke conditions are dummy-coded (sexist humour = 1, all other conditions = 0; non-sexist joke condition = 1, all other conditions = 0; non-joke condition = 1, all other conditions = 0).

<sup>a</sup>1 = woman, 2 = man.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

**Table 6.** Study 2: results of the mediation analysis with negative affect (PROCESS, model 4).

| Effect                                          | Estimate | <i>SE</i> | <i>t</i>  | <i>p</i>  | <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> |
|-------------------------------------------------|----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------------------|
| Step 1: Mediator                                |          |           |           |           |                       |
| Negative Affect                                 |          |           |           |           |                       |
| Constant                                        | 1.13***  | 0.10      | 13.81     | <.001     | 0.13***               |
| Sexist <sup>a</sup>                             | 0.59***  | 0.15      | 4.01      | <.001     |                       |
| Step 2a: Outcome                                |          |           |           |           |                       |
| Willingness to Collaborate                      |          |           |           |           |                       |
| Constant                                        | 6.81***  | 0.26      | 26.51     | <.001     | 0.30***               |
| Sexist <sup>a</sup>                             | –0.67**  | 0.26      | –2.63     | .010      |                       |
| Negative Affect                                 | –0.75*** | 0.16      | –4.76     | <.001     |                       |
| Step 2b: Outcome                                |          |           |           |           |                       |
| Perceived Competence                            |          |           |           |           |                       |
| Constant                                        | 6.08***  | 0.27      | 22.13     | <.001     | 0.14***               |
| Sexist <sup>a</sup>                             | –0.23    | 0.27      | –0.86     | .394      |                       |
| Negative Affect                                 | –0.57*** | 0.17      | –3.39     | .001      |                       |
| Indirect effect via Negative Affect             |          |           |           |           |                       |
|                                                 |          |           | 95% CI    |           |                       |
| Effect                                          | Estimate | <i>SE</i> | <i>LL</i> | <i>UL</i> |                       |
| Sexist → Negative Affect → Collaboration        | –0.44    | 0.16      | –0.80     | –0.19     |                       |
| Sexist → Negative Affect → Perceived Competence | –0.34    | 0.13      | –0.65     | –0.13     |                       |

Note. *N* = 107, CI = confidence interval; *LL* = lower limit; *UL* = upper limit.

<sup>a</sup>Dummy-coded (0 = non-sexist joke, 1 = sexist joke).

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

negatively related to willingness to collaborate,  $b = -0.67$ ,  $SE = 0.16$ ,  $p < .001$ . Consequently, negative affect partially mediated the negative relationship between sexist (vs. non-sexist) humour and willingness to collaborate with the humour initiator, *indirect effect* =  $-0.44$ ,  $SE = 0.16$ , 95% CI  $[-0.80, -0.19]$ , supporting H1a. Negative affect also coincide with lower perceived competence of the humour initiator,  $b = -0.57$ ,  $SE = 0.17$ ,  $p = .001$ . Sexist (vs. non-sexist) humour was not directly related to perceived competence,  $b = -0.23$ ,  $SE = 0.17$ ,  $p = .394$ , and negative affect thus fully mediated the relationship between sexist humour and perceived competence,  $b = -0.34$ ,  $SE = 0.13$ , 95% CI  $[-0.65, -0.13]$ , supporting H1b.

The three-way interaction effect between sexist humour, gender of the humour initiator and gender of the humour recipient was insignificant in predicting negative affect,  $b = -0.44$ ,  $SE = 0.86$ ,  $p = .614$ . Therefore, we rejected H2 and, consequently, also H4 (see Tables 7 and 8). Likewise, the three-way interaction effect between sexist humour, gender of the humour initiator and gender of the humour recipient was

insignificant in predicting willingness to collaborate,  $b = 1.77$ ,  $SE = 1.38$ ,  $p = .201$ , rejecting H3a.

The three-way interaction between sexist humour, gender of the humour initiator and gender of the humour recipient was significant in predicting perceived competence of the humour initiator,  $b = 3.45$ ,  $SE = 1.45$ ,  $p = .020$ . There was a significant relationship between sexist humour and the perceived competence of the humour initiator, particularly when a man initiated sexist humour toward a woman,  $b = -0.92$ ,  $SE = 0.45$ ,  $p = .045$  (see Figure 2). These results support H3b.

The findings considering sexist humour versus non-humour revealed similar patterns of results as reported for comparing sexist humour with non-sexist humour, although the moderated moderation of the mediation for perceived competence did not reach significance (see OSF<sup>4</sup>).

## Interim discussion 2

Study 2 tested the relationship between sexist humour and interpersonal relationship outcomes considering participants' real-

**Table 7.** Study 2: results of the moderated mediation analysis (PROCESS, model 12).

|                                                         | Estimate                                             | SE   | t     | p     | R <sup>2</sup> |
|---------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|------|-------|-------|----------------|
| Step 1: Mediator                                        |                                                      |      |       |       |                |
|                                                         | Negative Affect                                      |      |       |       |                |
| Constant                                                | 0.56                                                 | 1.07 | 0.53  | .600  | 0.16**         |
| Sexist humour <sup>a</sup>                              | 0.08                                                 | 2.36 | 0.03  | .974  |                |
| Gender humour initiator <sup>b</sup>                    | 0.54                                                 | 0.65 | 0.84  | .404  |                |
| Gender humour recipient <sup>b</sup>                    | 0.33                                                 | 0.77 | 0.43  | .670  |                |
| Sexist*gender humour initiator                          | 0.35                                                 | 1.28 | 0.27  | .787  |                |
| Sexist*gender humour recipient                          | 0.69                                                 | 1.61 | 0.43  | .670  |                |
| Gender humour initiator*gender humour recipient         | −0.25                                                | 0.44 | −0.57 | .571  |                |
| Sexist*gender humour initiator* gender humour recipient | −0.44                                                | 0.86 | −0.51 | .614  |                |
| Step 2a: Outcome                                        |                                                      |      |       |       |                |
|                                                         | Willingness to Collaborate with the Humour Initiator |      |       |       |                |
| Constant                                                | 6.78***                                              | 1.72 | 3.94  | <.001 | .33***         |
| Sexist humour <sup>a</sup>                              | 2.99                                                 | 3.78 | 0.79  | .430  |                |
| Negative affect                                         | −0.69***                                             | 0.16 | −4.30 | .000  |                |
| Gender humour initiator <sup>b</sup>                    | −0.37                                                | 1.04 | −0.35 | .725  |                |
| Gender humour recipient <sup>b</sup>                    | 0.43**                                               | 1.24 | 0.35  | .726  |                |
| Sexist*gender humour initiator                          | −1.84                                                | 2.05 | −0.90 | .372  |                |
| Sexist*gender humour recipient                          | −3.45                                                | 2.58 | −1.34 | .185  |                |
| Gender humour initiator*gender humour recipient         | −0.03                                                | 0.71 | −0.04 | .965  |                |
| Sexist*gender humour initiator* gender humour recipient | 1.77                                                 | 1.38 | 1.29  | .201  |                |
| Step 2b: Outcome                                        |                                                      |      |       |       |                |
|                                                         | Perceived Competence of the Humour Initiator         |      |       |       |                |
| Constant                                                | 4.33*                                                | 1.81 | 2.39  | .019  | 0.20**         |
| Sexist <sup>a</sup>                                     | 7.77                                                 | 3.98 | 1.95  | .054  |                |
| Negative affect                                         | −0.52**                                              | 0.17 | −3.09 | .003  |                |
| Gender humour initiator <sup>b</sup>                    | 1.21                                                 | 1.10 | 1.10  | .272  |                |
| Gender humour recipient <sup>b</sup>                    | 1.44                                                 | 1.30 | 1.11  | .272  |                |
| Sexist*gender humour initiator                          | −4.98*                                               | 2.16 | −2.31 | .023  |                |
| Sexist*gender humour recipient                          | −5.61*                                               | 2.72 | −2.06 | .042  |                |
| Gender humour initiator*gender humour recipient         | −0.97                                                | 0.75 | −1.30 | .198  |                |
| Sexist*gender humour initiator* gender humour recipient | 3.45*                                                | 1.45 | 2.37  | .020  |                |

Note. *N* = 107, CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit.

<sup>a</sup>Dummy-coded (0 = non-sexist joke, 1 = sexist joke).

<sup>b</sup>Coded as 1 = woman, 2 = man.

\* *p* < .05. \*\* *p* < .01. \*\*\* *p* < .001.

world encounters with sexist workplace humour. Our results revealed that sexist humour prevails in workplaces and has various detrimental effects, highlighting the relevance of studying workplace sexist humour. Our findings align with affective events theory, demonstrating that sexist humour is an important negative interpersonal event that is related to negative affect (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006) and that sexist-humour-induced negative affect explains why sexist humour is related to impaired interpersonal relationships (Robert & Wilbanks, 2012). By showing that women perceive men as less competent when men make a sexist humorous comment, we further provide support for notions within social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), supposing that sexist humour from a male co-worker threatens the social identity of women, prompting a negative evaluation of him as a form of out-group derogation.

Regarding forms and initiators of sexist humour, our findings reflect the consensus of the literature that most sexist comments in the workplace are, indeed, targeted at women, not men (e.g., Lawless et al., 2020; Woodzicka et al., 2020). Notably, women rarely initiated sexist humour – neither about men nor women – indicating that the prevalence of sexist humour originated mainly from men. Our findings align with prior research suggesting that men prefer sexual humour about women more than women do (Brodzinsky et al., 1981) and that men also find such humour more acceptable and enjoyable than women (Parrott & Hopp,

2019). Moreover, sexist humour is often used as a form of discrimination against a lower-status group – in essence, women (Woodzicka & Ford, 2010).

## General discussion

Across two studies, we investigated the relationship between sexist humour and interpersonal work outcomes. In Study 1, we experimentally tested how sexist jokes told by a male versus female actor – introduced as a hypothetical co-worker – impacted individuals' willingness to collaborate with and the perceived competence of this co-worker. Whereas elevated negative affect mediated the relationship between sexist joking and willingness to collaborate and sexist joking was associated with lower competence evaluations, we did not find gender dynamics at play. In our field Study 2, we replicated the mediating role of negative affect between sexist humour and lower willingness to collaborate. Moreover, negative affect also mediated the negative relationship between sexist humour and perceived competence. Notably, whereas gender dynamics did not play a role in Study 1, sexist humour was particularly related to lower perceived competence when men initiated sexist humour toward women in Study 2.

Our results offer important research implications. Whereas prior research looked at positive humour and its beneficial

**Table 8.** Study 2: conditional direct and conditional indirect effect and index of moderated mediation (PROCESS, model 12).

| Effect                                | Estimate | SE   | t     | p     |
|---------------------------------------|----------|------|-------|-------|
| Step 1a: Conditional Direct Effects   |          |      |       |       |
| Willingness to Collaborate            |          |      |       |       |
| Woman → Woman                         | −0.52    | 0.78 | −0.66 | .509  |
| Woman → Man                           | −2.19    | 1.01 | −2.17 | .033  |
| Man → Woman                           | −0.58    | 0.43 | −1.35 | .182  |
| Man → Man                             | −0.47    | 0.37 | −1.27 | .208  |
| Step 1b: Conditional Direct Effects   |          |      |       |       |
| Perceived Competence                  |          |      |       |       |
| Woman → Woman                         | 0.62     | 0.82 | 0.76  | .449  |
| Woman → Man                           | −1.55    | 1.06 | −1.45 | .149  |
| Man → Woman                           | −0.92*   | 0.45 | −2.03 | .045  |
| Man → Man                             | 0.36     | 0.39 | 0.92  | .360  |
| Step 2a: Conditional Indirect Effects |          |      |       |       |
| Willingness to Collaborate            |          |      |       |       |
| 95% CI                                |          |      |       |       |
| Effect                                | Estimate | SE   | LL    | UL    |
| Woman → Woman                         | −0.47    | 0.41 | −1.45 | 0.18  |
| Woman → Man                           | −0.64    | 0.29 | −1.29 | −0.14 |
| Man → Woman                           | −0.41    | 0.23 | −0.89 | 0.02  |
| Man → Man                             | −0.28    | 0.19 | −0.71 | 0.03  |
| 95% CI                                |          |      |       |       |
|                                       | Index    | SE   | LL    | UL    |
| Index of Moderated Moderation         | 0.30     | 0.54 | −0.81 | 1.36  |
| Step 2b: Conditional Indirect Effects |          |      |       |       |
| Perceived Competence                  |          |      |       |       |
| 95% CI                                |          |      |       |       |
| Effect                                | Estimate | SE   | LL    | UL    |
| Woman → Woman                         | −0.35    | 0.31 | −1.12 | 0.13  |
| Woman → Man                           | −0.49    | 0.22 | −0.97 | −0.10 |
| Man → Woman                           | −0.31    | 0.19 | −0.72 | 0.02  |
| Man → Man                             | −0.21    | 0.14 | −0.55 | 0.02  |
| 95% CI                                |          |      |       |       |
|                                       | Index    | SE   | LL    | UL    |
| Index of Moderated Moderation         | 0.23     | 0.41 | −0.61 | 1.05  |

Note.  $N = 107$ . CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit. Gender was coded as 1 = woman, 2 = man.

**Figure 2.** Three-way interaction effect in the sexist versus non-sexist humour condition in study 2.

effects in the workplace, our results reveal the potentially detrimental role of disparaging, sexist humour in workplace relationships. In line with prior research, these findings provide insights into the prevalence of subtle forms of gender discrimination at work (Algner & Lorenz, 2022; Smith & Griffiths, 2022), which still prevail in the form of sexist humour. Our findings show the negative effects of sexist humour and suggest that tackling subtle ways of everyday discrimination, often disguised as socially acceptable “jokes” (Mallett et al., 2016; Woodzicka et al., 2020), is crucial for developing organisational cultures in which diversity, equity and inclusion are promoted.

Our findings extend both theory and research on sexist workplace humour as a form of negative humour by clarifying the mechanisms underlying its association with interpersonal work outcomes. Corroborating affective events theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), we show that sexist humour is a negative interpersonal affective event that impacts interpersonal work outcomes, particularly perceived competence, via enhanced negative affect. In this regard, we lend support for the long-standing assumption that negative affect plays a role in sexist humour evaluations (Woodzicka & Ford, 2010), substantiating that sexist humour at work is a form of negative workplace humour (Cooper, 2005). While previous research assessed negative affect related to sexist humour (e.g., LaFrance & Woodzicka, 1998), this association has not been translated to interpersonal work outcomes. Our study is pivotal in showing sexist humour’s harmful consequences for employee relationships due to an increase in negative affect.

Moreover, while gender dynamics did not seem to matter for interpersonal work outcomes in Study 1, the field data indicates that some gender constellations, particularly women initiating sexist humour towards women, hardly ever occur. This pattern of results is consistent with social identity theory, suggesting that individuals strive to maintain positive distinctiveness of their own in-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), meaning female employees avoid reinforcing existing gender stereotypes about their social group in the form of sexist humour. More research is needed to better understand the manifestation of sexist humour at work, particularly how women “joking” about men would impact men’s evaluations. Investigations along these lines are crucial as the effects on interpersonal work outcomes might be even stronger because such behaviour by women violates social norms and accepted social gender roles even more.

Relatedly, the discrepancies between the moderating effects of gender in both studies indicate that the context in which sexist humour takes place matters. Whereas the experimental manipulation in Study 1 is high in internal but low in ecological validity, the field data from Study 2 indicates that women rarely use sexist humour directed at other women. This might also be the reason for not finding any gender effects in Study 1, because the female sexist-joke-initiator condition might have simply felt unrealistic for participants. Another potential explanation for the insignificant moderation results in Study 1 might be stripping away an actual shared work context and real, pre-existing co-worker relationships. This observation aligns with research illustrating that, in the work context, sexist humour was considered more inappropriate and offensive than in a non-work, comedy setting

(Gray & Ford, 2013). Although one’s categorisation into social groups would not necessitate a previous relationship (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), interpersonal interaction, shared goals, threats, or history contribute to a more profound in-group versus out-group distinction (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Missing context and mundane realism in Study 1 might thus have reduced social categorisation and, therefore, hindered gender dynamics. Combining Study 1 with the field data from Study 2, allows us to capture the effects relevant to real-world workplaces, strengthening the contribution to the work and organisational psychology literature.

It is, however, important to note that, in Study 2, the gender moderation effect was only significant for perceived competence but neither for negative affect nor willingness to collaborate with the humour initiator. Regarding negative affect, research indicates that disparaging sexist humour aimed at women is not necessarily more threatening to them (Lawless et al., 2020). Therefore, in Study 2, female participants may not have experienced a significant increase in negative affect because they might not have perceived sexist humour as a threat to their social identity. Instead, women may have viewed it as a nuisance that did not provoke strong affective reactions. Additionally, the degree of identification with one’s gender group may influence how one perceives the threat to their social identity (Abrams et al., 2015). Taken together, in Study 2, women might not have strongly identified with their respective gender group and, therefore, did not perceive sexist humour as a threat to their social identity. Thus, future research could explore gender identification as a boundary condition of the affective dynamics of sexist humour at work. Regarding willingness to collaborate, whereas perceived competence involves a current judgement about another person, willingness to collaborate is an intention for future behaviour. Whereas judgements and attitudes are internal, recipients of sexist humour – irrespective of their gender – might lack external control over collaborating with the humour initiator because teams are usually pre-assigned in real workplace settings. This might explain why we found a gender moderation effect for perceived competence only.

Lastly, our findings also have important implications for the broader literature on subtle gender discrimination and microaggressions, denoting “intentional or unintentional actions or behaviours that exclude, demean, insult, oppress, or otherwise express hostility or indifference toward women” (Basford et al., 2014, p. 341). Sexist humour can be understood as a form of gender microaggressions and our finding from the field data that sexist humour negatively relates to the perceived competence of the humour initiator particularly when men initiate such humour toward women, illustrates that gender dynamics play a role in subtle gender discrimination. Accordingly, future research on subtle discrimination might benefit from considering identity-relevant characteristics of all parties involved (i.e., actors, targets and victims).

### **Practical implications**

Our results from an experimental and real-life field study offer a variety of implications for organisations. First, our research illustrates that sexist humour, especially about women, remains



prevalent in 2024. Even though manifold regulations are in place, those subtle practices of humorous sexist comments or “jokes” continue to prevail. This indicates that organisations need to be aware of discrimination beyond avoiding legal liability (Hebl et al., 2020) by addressing the underlying organisational norms and culture. We thus encourage organisations to establish clear policies against any form of sexism to create a safe and inclusive work atmosphere. Further, it is important to reconsider broader organisational structures, processes, and practices, as they can influence the sexist beliefs and attitudes of organisational members, leading to gender discrimination within the organisation (Stamarski & Son Hing, 2015). For instance, leaders communicate organisational norms and shape organisational culture (Jung et al., 2008) and their (potential) sexist beliefs might exert the most detrimental impact. Having an equal representation of women in leadership positions could help prevent such effects, as the gender of leaders is connected to gender discrimination in organisations as well as to the presence of supportive policies and a diverse climate (Ostroff et al., 2012).

Moreover, we highlight that sexist humour has detrimental effects due to increases in negative affect, prompting lower willingness to collaborate and negative evaluations of co-workers, overall impairing workplace relationships. Organisations need to prevent sexist remarks as they can make teamwork especially difficult. For instance, interventions highlighting pro-diversity norms, such as by showing a short 5-minute video or pro-diversity posters, can increase inclusive behaviours (Murrar et al., 2020). Overall, organisations should build structures and encourage HR practices that tackle and prevent sexism at work (Stamarski & Son Hing, 2015). An example of such a practice is creating a system that allows recipients to report such behaviours without facing social backlash. Overall, this would help make organisations less hostile, especially for women, promoting organisational cultures in which diversity, equity, and inclusion are not only legally binding but lived.

### **Limitations and future directions**

Although this research offers insights into the manifestation and effects of sexist humour in the workplace, there are limitations that point to avenues for future research. First, even though this research allows for high internal and ecological validity by combining an experiment with a field study, both studies applied a between-person perspective and merely captured a snapshot of interpersonal interactions in the workplace. Research suggests that the effects of sexist humour at work may be more continuous and incremental (Duncan, 1984), indicating that sexist humour might be even more detrimental if it continues to persist over a longer period of time. Moreover, as affective events theory is an inherently dynamic theory (e.g., Cropanzano & Dasborough, 2015), we encourage future research to adopt experience sampling approaches. Such an approach might be fruitful to critically replicate our findings on the effects of sexist humour on the within-person level. Additionally, these methodologies could disentangle within-person from between-person effects (e.g., Venz & Mohr, 2023) as well as tap into potential chronification effects (see Venz et al., 2020).

Second, both studies adopted self-report measures, which might have induced potential common-source bias (Podsakoff et al., 2024). Further, participants might have responded to the evaluation of sexist humour initiators in a socially desirable way, such that they were influenced by the perceived norm of punishing gender discrimination. For example, this might explain men’s evaluation of men initiating sexist humour at work. Future research could thus adopt multi-rater assessments of interpersonal consequences of humour in organisational teams.

Third, humour is culturally specific (Triana et al., 2019) and organisational practices differ greatly in dealing with discrimination (Garcia et al., 2023). We looked at sexist humour in Western, individualistic cultures, which differ on a variety of dimensions from other cultures, such as more Eastern, collectivist cultures. Culture impacts not only which jokes are acceptable, especially in the workplace, but also how men and women interact with one another in organisations (House et al., 2004). Future research should aim to replicate and extend our studies in other cultures to see whether the results hold (Pitesa & Gelfand, 2023).

Aside from these limitations, our research also raises novel additional questions. For example, future research might critically replicate and extend our findings regarding other forms of subtle gender discrimination like gender microaggressions (Algner & Lorenz, 2022) and examine whether the gender dynamics we found are relevant there as well. Moreover, future research could explore how sexist humour affects a broader spectrum of interpersonal (e.g., willingness to help others, gossiping, reciprocal incivility) and personal (e.g., well-being, job attitudes) outcomes.

Moreover, the context in which sexist humour occurs could inform further investigations. For example, how does sexist humour unfold when told during a meeting versus during a lunch break? As research indicates the importance of the status of the joke initiator (Bitterly, 2022; Bitterly et al., 2017), the question arises what happens if a leader (not colleague) tells a sexist joke that might harm the initiator’s (social) status and ultimately interpersonal processes, such as leader-member exchange (e.g., see Pundt & Herrmann, 2015; Pundt et al., 2022). Other characteristics than gender might also play a role in the effects of sexist humour as a subtle form of discrimination; for example, entitlement (Venz & Mohr, 2023), resilience (Oosthuizen, 2021), or aspects of social identification like identity threat (Emerson & Murphy, 2014). Overall, investigating the context and boundary conditions of sexist humour in the workplace might provide fruitful research avenues. Such studies might also develop and test interventions to raise awareness and train how to respond to sexist humour (Mallett et al., 2016; Woodzicka et al., 2020).

Finally, sexist humour is only one specific form of subtle discrimination and negative workplace humour. Therefore, future research could investigate whether the results replicate using situational and more expressive humour forms, like aggressive humour, and using different forms of subtle discrimination (Smith & Griffiths, 2022) or humour about other minority groups of, for example, ethnicity, mental disorders, obesity, or sexual orientation.

## Conclusion

Sexist workplace humour about women is detrimental to interpersonal work outcomes. Our results show that negative affect explains the relationship between sexist humour and the humour recipient's impaired willingness to collaborate with and the perceived competence of the humour initiator. Moreover, men initiating sexist humour about women is specifically detrimental to women's competence perceptions of those men. By focusing on the social perception of sexist humour and its interpersonal implications in organisations, this study advances insights into the nature of subtle forms of gender discrimination in the form of sexist humour. Concludingly, before making a sexist joke about women, you should carefully consider whether the joke is actually on you.

## Notes

1. <https://osf.io/7ngfh>
2. <https://osf.io/7ngfh>
3. <https://osf.io/97gxxh/>
4. <https://osf.io/97gxxh/>

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## ORCID

Yara Bouckaert  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2434-2000>  
 Louisa Vofrei  <http://orcid.org/0009-0003-2795-017X>  
 Nina Jonczyk  <http://orcid.org/0009-0007-0102-4417>  
 Annika Mertens  <http://orcid.org/0009-0005-2446-1148>  
 Meikel Soliman  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9555-9664>  
 Laura Venz  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0642-988X>  
 David D. Loschelder  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5818-0559>

## Data availability statement

Data and supplementary documents are available on OSF: pre-registered Study 1 (<https://osf.io/7ngfh>) and pre-registered Study 2 (<https://osf.io/97gxxh/>).

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