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ABSTRACT

The present study examined employees' knowledge of their organization's workplace romance policy and its relationship with their workplace romance experiences and beliefs. It also investigated differences in employees' beliefs about workplace romance's reputational effects based on their workplace romance experiences. Quantitative and qualitative analyses of self-reported responses obtained from a sample of 642 adults working across industries in major US cities yielded several meaningful findings. Namely, employees in organizations with (versus without) a workplace romance policy were more likely to have participated in and observed a workplace romance, were more comfortable with future workplace romance participation, and were more likely to believe workplace romances were common and affected professional reputations. Employees with (versus without) workplace romance experience were also more likely to report positive reputational effects of hierarchical workplace romances for both male and female executives. Based on reported findings, we offer evidence-based recommendations for policy development.

KEYWORDS

HR; organizational communication; policy; relational communication; workplace romance

A workplace romance[1] (WR) is a particular type of personal workplace relationship (Horan et al., 2021) that blends the partners' work and life domains. Partners discuss their personal lives, such as household chores and intimacy issues, at work, and they discuss work issues, such as deadlines and clients, in their personal/home lives (Horan & Chory, 2011). Other organizational members witness the blending of the WR partners' work and home domains and may experience the effects of undesired WR spillover (e.g., breakups, arguments). Productivity and morale may decline as a result (Pierce & Aguinis, 2003; Pierce et al., 1996), prompting management to take action, oftentimes by establishing WR regulations (Boyd, 2010).

There is scant research on *how* WR regulations or policies affect employees' WR thinking and their WR-related communication and behavior. In fact, we could locate only one study on the topic. This vignette-based research showed that the effect of WR policy type on participants' hypothetical WR behavior

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varied according to participants' personality (Doll & Rosopa, 2015). No main effect for WR policy was found.

To address the paucity of research on two increasingly notable organizational phenomena – workplace romantic and social-sexual behavior and employer policies to regulate them – the present study inquired how employees' knowledge of their organization's WR policy influenced their WR experiences and beliefs about WR's reputational effects. This study also investigated differences in reputational beliefs based on WR experience, and organizational members' general experiences and beliefs surrounding WR policies, reputational effects, and difficulties. These questions were examined through quantitative and qualitative analyses of employees' self-reported responses.

Workplace romance and social-sexual behavior

Organizations have sought to expel employee sexuality from the workplace dating back at least to the time of classical management theory and the proliferation of bureaucratic organizational structure (Schultz, 2003; Silverbrand, 2009).[2] Accordingly they have instituted various WR policies. Some companies ban these relationships altogether, others mandate HR reporting, and others have no policy. Over the past few decades, however, the potential for organizations to be held legally liable for their employees' sexually harassing behavior has been the primary motivator of WR policy development (Boyd, 2010; Pierce et al., 2012). In 1991, fewer than 10% of HR professionals reported that their organization had a WR policy (Rapp, 1992). That number rose to 25% in 2005 and to 42% in 2013 (SHRM, 2013). The advent of the #MeToo movement and the COVID-19-influenced explosion of hybrid and remote work have only intensified the organizational drive to regulate employees' romantic and sexual liaisons (Cavico & Mujtaba, 2021; SHRM Research Institute, 2023). In 2018, 45% of working professionals' organizations had a WR policy (Vault Careers, 2018).

Despite any organizational response, the rate of WR has remained relatively steady. From 2005 to 2019, approximately 58% of US professionals had engaged in a WR (Cupid in the cubicle, 2005; Vault Careers, 2019). Forbes' research reveals that 60% of adults have had a WR (Main & Hansen, 2023), and LiveCareer's research shows that 75% have had a WR and 59% had had sex with a colleague (Paczka, 2022). SHRM's surveys have consistently yielded lower WR rates—37% in 2001, 40% in 2005 (Parks, 2006), and 27% in 2020 (Gilchrist, 2020) and 2023 (SHRM Research Institute, 2023).

Employees and WR policy

The presence of a WR policy may not be sufficient, however, to protect employees and organizations from WR's negative effects, as many employees are unaware of company policy. In 2009, for instance, 22.5% of working adults were unsure if their company had a policy prohibiting WRs, and later 23.8% were similarly unsure (Horan & Chory, 2009, 2013). Recent research indicates that approximately 30% to 40% of working adults were unsure whether their organization had a WR policy (LaFrance, 2022; Vault Careers, 2018, 2019). Even so, employees advised other employees to learn whether a policy existed in their workplace (LaFrance, 2022).

Another communication aspect related to policy is employee compliance. This is difficult to establish. A 2023 survey revealed that 71% of US employees believed they were not required to disclose their WR, and not surprisingly, only 18% of WR participants did (SHRM Research Institute, 2023). Another 2023 study showed that, regardless of policy, about a third of employees in a WR did *not* disclose the romance (Main & Hansen, 2023). From 2005 to 2023, the proportion of employees who disclosed their WR to their coworkers increased from 19% (Cupid in the cubicle, 2005) to 40% (SHRM Research Institute, 2023).

Rationale and research questions

Our study aimed to better understand the role of WR policy in organizations. In doing so, our study departs, methodologically, from previous WR research in significant ways. First, we focused on working adults' lived experiences surrounding WRs they may have observed and participated in, and their employers' WR policies. As the majority of research on WR policies has been carried out through hypothetical scenario-based experimental studies (Cole, 2009; Doll & Rosopa, 2015; Karl & Sutton, 2000; Pierce et al., 2004, 2012), our research provides a deeper look into *how* employees think, behave, and evaluate real-life WRs and policies. Furthermore, and as recommended (Horan et al., 2019, 2021; see; Duck & VanderVoort, 2002), this method allowed us to document both insider and outsider perceptions. Second, we report on a sample recruited across major US cities, answering calls for WR studies to "converge from different geographical perspectives" (Anand et al., 2023, p. 8). Third, our sample included individuals working in a variety of industries, including manufacturing and construction, thereby responding to critiques that workplace relationship studies have neglected examining blue-collar and manual labor employees (Horan et al., 2021). Before presenting research questions, we first overview relevant research.

WR policy

Research on employees' perceptions of WR policies and how they impact their WR beliefs and experiences is very limited. The fairness of the policies has been the only employee perception studied to date. This research indicates that most employees with a WR policy thought it was fair (Horan & Chory, 2009, 2013) or were nearly tied in their (dis)agreement that "organizations should have policies about its members engaging in consensual sexual activities with each other" (LaFrance, 2022).

Fairness perceptions of types of WR policies have also been examined. Utilizing hypothetical scenarios, this research demonstrates that organizations with no policy or a lenient one were perceived as fairer than organizations with a restrictive policy (Pierce et al., 2012). A separate scenario study revealed that counseling WR partners was perceived by employees as the fairest type of policy, followed by organizations not taking any action. Issuing a verbal reprimand, giving a written warning, and transfer policies came next in terms of fairness. Termination as a WR response was perceived as the least fair of all policies examined. Stricter policies (e.g., termination), however, were seen as fairer when the WR partners' job performance declined than when it improved and no action as a policy was judged to be fairer when performance improved versus declined (Karl & Sutton, 2000).

In addition, WR policy perceptions influence other WR-related outcomes. For example, perceptions of policy fairness among hypothetical job seekers predicted stronger beliefs that the hypothetical organization would be a fun place to work and that its values were similar to the respondents'. These beliefs went on to predict job seekers' attraction to the organization, which was linked to stronger employment intentions (Pierce et al., 2012).

More relevant, participants' knowledge of their companies' policy is related to how they perceive their organizations and their colleagues. When a policy existed, particularly one that prohibited WRs, employees perceived managerial WR interventions to be fairer (Cole, 2009) and the alleged sexually harassing behavior of a partner in a dissolved WR to be more immoral (Pierce et al., 2004).

On the other hand, the impact that WR policies have on employees' desire or tendency to engage in WR with their fellow employees is unclear. For instance, results of a vignette study showed that the type of policy (none, warning, termination) was not related to respondents' willingness to engage in a WR. However, respondents with higher levels of conscientiousness were less willing to engage in a WR when policies were strict, but more likely to engage in a WR when there was no policy (Doll & Rosopa, 2015).

Aside from Doll and Rosopa's (2015) study, the association between WR policies and WR experiences and beliefs has not been empirically investigated. Our first research question sought to bridge this gap in the literature by

examining employees' knowledge/awareness of their organization's WR policy and their WR participation, observation, and beliefs about WR prevalence and reputational effects. Formally, our first research question asked:

RQ1: Do organizational members' WR experiences and reputational beliefs differ according to their knowledge of their organization's WR policy?

Employee reputation

Employee reputation may be defined as a shared belief among employees about another member's work-related appeal, esteem, or attractiveness (Baer et al., 2018; Horan & Chory, forthcoming). As Pierce and Aguinis (2005) caution, although legal, WRs may be perceived as unethical, potentially damaging reputations, likely more than the partners realize (Chory & Gillen Hoke, 2023).

Though communication-based studies of employees' reputations are rare (Chory et al., 2022), relevant research on WR participants' credibility, justice, and gossip implicate WR's influence on reputations. First, perceptions of WR participants' credibility vary based on the sex, sexual orientation, and status dynamic of the WR partners (Horan & Chory, 2011, 2013). In addition, assessments of competence, a component of credibility, and employee reputation are directly related (Foste & Botero, 2012). Second, third-party employees perceive that WR partners unfairly benefit at work due to their romance (Chory & Gillen Hoke, 2019, 2023; Malachowski et al., 2012; Powell & Foley, 1998). Third, research documents the relationship between gossip and WR (Horan & Chory, forthcoming).

WRs generate gossip (Chory & Gillen Hoke, 2019; Cowan & Horan, 2014; Pierce et al., 1996; Quinn, 1977), and along with employee sexual relationships, they were shown to be the most common workplace gossip topic (Vallade & Chory, 2013). Hierarchical WRs, WRs attributed to job motives (especially among women; Dillard, 1987; Michaelson et al., 2010; Pierce et al., 1996), and WRs occurring in organizations without a WR policy (Chory & Offstein, 2023) were associated with more frequent employee gossip.

Potentially, *how* the WR is discussed by outsiders – via gossip – may help to explain reputational effects. Possibly, it is not the WR that is problematic, but how it is viewed. As Duck (2022) described: "The fact that two partners in the same relationship may describe it differently is not evidence of error . . . the social construct is never identified merely by the agreement of its two constituents, and far less is it identifiable by the firm pronouncements of an outsider" (p. 7).

WR's influence on reputations is also important because reputations are used to judge employees' leadership potential. Leadership continues to be associated with stereotypically male characteristics such as aggression, competitiveness, ambition, confidence, and initiative (Carli & Eagly, 2016). Furthermore, men still occupy most high-level organizational positions (Gartzia & van Knippenberg, 2016). Combined with Western culture's tendency to link men's sexuality to power (Collinson & Collinson, 1989; Riach & Wilson, 2007; Salzinger, 2000), participating in a WR may communicate confidence, daring, boldness, and initiative; that is, it may be perceived as an indicant of the WR participant's leadership potential (Chory et al., 2022).

Estimates of employees' beliefs about WR's reputational effects vary. From about one-fifth (18%; Main & Hansen, 2023) to two-fifths (40%; SHRM Research Institute, 2023) of US working adults believe WRs are unprofessional. Thirteen percent believe they should be prohibited (Main & Hansen, 2023). Among US WR participants, 18% stated the WR negatively affected their career (SHRM Research Institute, 2023). Among US workers who had not been in a WR, 52% believed that doing so would negatively impact their career (Navarra, 2023).

The combined findings suggest that WR affects many aspects of participants' reputations and various factors explain *how* WR participants' reputations may be impacted. To further explore this idea, our second research question was posed:

RQ2: Do organizational members' WR reputational beliefs differ according to their WR experiences?

Employees' perspectives

In many WR studies, participants are instructed to respond to items about constructs identified a priori by the researchers and their responses are quantitatively analyzed – a design choice we made for our first two research questions. Though there are exceptions to this design, the primarily quantitative focus of WR studies limits participant voice to convey lived experiences. Therefore, in addition to obtaining quantitative data, we collected employees' qualitative descriptions of their experiences with WRs, WR policies, and WR's reputational effects. These responses inform our quantitative findings and may provide unique insights or (dis)confirm prior quantitative findings. Consequently, research question three asked:

RQ3: What experiences and beliefs about WR policies, reputational effects, and difficulties do organizational members report?

Method

Participants and procedure

Participants were 642 employed adults living in major US cities. Slightly more than half of the participants were male (51.9%, $n = 333$; 48.1%, $n = 309$ female). Participants ranged in age from 21 to 71 years ($M = 29.19$, $SD = 10.15$). The majority had earned a bachelor's degree ($n = 243$, 37.9%) or had at least some college or an associate's degree ($n = 225$, 35.0%; 14.6%, $n = 94$, = high school education or less; 12.5%, $n = 80$, held a graduate or professional degree).

Most participants were employed full-time (82.2%, $n = 528$; 17.8%, $n = 114$ part-time) and worked in Health, Education, Administration, or other Professional (HEAOP) fields ($n = 145$, $n = 22.6\%$), followed closely by Blue-Collar/Manual Labor (BCML) fields ($n = 139$, 21.7%). An additional 18.1% ($n = 116$) of respondents worked in the Finance, Trade, and Sales (FTS) industries, followed by the Hospitality, Accommodation, Leisure, and Care Services (HALCS; 14.3%, $n = 92$), and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) fields, (13.6%, $n = 87$). Roughly 10% (9.8%, $n = 63$) of respondents were employed in the Entertainment, Arts, and Media (EAM) industries. Over half were non-managers ($n = 341$, 53.1%), 25.1% ($n = 161$) were considered senior/upper-level managers (21.8%, $n = 140$, in middle management[3]).

To obtain reports from employees across US cities, we worked with an American market research firm. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. IRB considered the study *exempt*.

Measures

WR Policy

To assess the WR policy status of the respondents' organizations, participants were asked, "Does your company have a policy that addresses romantic relationships within the office?" Most participants indicated that their company did not have a WR policy (39.1%, $n = 251$), 23.1% ($n = 148$) responded that they did not know if their company had a WR policy, 20.4% ($n = 131$) reported their company had an informal WR policy, and 17.4% ($n = 112$) indicated that their company had a formal written WR policy. Participants who indicated that their company had a formal or informal policy were then

asked to describe the policy via an open-ended item, resulting in 243 textual responses for analysis.

WR Observation

Participants were asked a series of questions about the types of WR (if any) they had observed in their current organization. Almost two-thirds (62.3%, $n = 400$) of respondents indicated they had observed a WR in their present organization: 33.8% ($n = 217$) had observed a long-term WR that turned into marriage or a committed partnership, 44.5% ($n = 286$) had observed a short-term WR (short-term flings, hookups, or one-night stands), and 10.7% ($n = 69$) had observed an extramarital affair/WR.

WR Participation

WR engagement was assessed by asking participants to indicate whether they had participated in a WR, and if so, how many. Most indicated they had never participated in a WR ($n = 395$, 61.5%), 28.8% had participated once, and 9.7% ($n = 62$) had participated in a WR more than once . For ease of interpretation, the latter two categories were collapsed to create a "Yes/No" WR participation variable (Yes: $n = 247$, 38.5%; No: $n = 395$, 61.5%), which was used in analyses of RQ1 and RQ2[4], [5].

Comfort with Future WR Participation

To assess participants' comfort with potential WR involvement, they were asked, "In the future, would you feel comfortable engaging in an office romance in your office setting?" Forty-seven percent (47.2%, $n = 303$) indicated "no,", 36.9% ($n = 237$) responded "maybe", and 15.9% ($n = 102$) indicated "yes."

Prevalence of WR

Participants were asked how common it was for coworkers to date in their workplace. Half of the participants (50.2%, $n = 322$) indicated it was very rare, 31.6% ($n = 203$) indicated it was hardly public, and 18.2% ($n = 117$) responded that dating coworkers was extremely common in their organization.

WR's Reputational Effects

Beliefs about the reputational effects of participating in a hierarchical WR and a short-term WR were assessed. To investigate beliefs about hierarchical WRs' reputational impact, participants were asked "In your industry, if a man/woman is a powerful executive and dates a lower-level employee, how does this affect his/her reputation in the office? Response options were "neither enhances nor detracts from reputation," "negatively, it should not take place," and "positively affects reputation, as (s)he is seen as an aggressive player." In the case of male superiors in hierarchical WRs, 46.6% ($n = 299$) of respondents

indicated that the male executive's reputation would be negatively impacted, 41.6% ($n = 267$) indicated the WR would have no effect on the man's reputation, and 11.8% ($n = 76$) indicated his reputation would be positively impacted. For female superiors in hierarchical WRs, 48.1% ($n = 309$) indicated the female executive's reputation would be negatively affected, 40.8% ($n = 262$) reported the WR would have no effect on her reputation, and 11.1% ($n = 71$) indicated that her reputation would be positively affected. Participants were then presented with the open-ended item "can you provide detail on what this means for the workplace today?" Six hundred ten ($n = 610$) participants responded to the open-ended item, resulting in 610 text entries for analysis.

To examine beliefs about short-term WRs' reputational impact, participants responded to one open-ended item: "Can you offer any stories or anecdotes about women or men involved in short-term relationships in the office, specifically in terms of how the romance affected their office reputations?" Textual responses were provided by 250 participants, yielding 250 units that were analyzed for this item.

Effects of WR Difficulties and Dissolution

The impact that disruptive events within the WR had on the larger workplace was assessed by two open-ended items. Participants were asked, "Have you ever observed an office romantic breakup and its impact on office morale?" One hundred forty-two participants ($N = 142$) provided text in response, constituting 142 distinct entries for analysis. They were also asked, "Can you offer any stories or anecdotes about love gone wrong in the office?" to which 185 participants responded, constituting 185 units for analysis.

Analysis

For the quantitative data (RQ1, RQ2), separate chi-square tests with pairwise comparisons of column proportions were conducted for each variable. For RQ1, five 2×4 and four 3×4 contingency tables were produced and analyzed. For RQ2, four 3×2 contingency tables were generated and analyzed. To account for the multiple comparisons of column proportions that occurred, p-values were adjusted using the Bonferroni correction.

For the open-ended items (RQ3), an inductive thematic analysis was conducted to describe themes in workers' perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis allows for exploring similarities and differences across more extensive data sets (King, 2004). After familiarizing ourselves (i.e., reading and re-reading) with these data, we coded all responses line-by-line, inductively capturing the essence of similar words or phrases grouping and labeling. During this initial coding phase, data were reduced, and patterns emerged. Those patterns were further developed into themes, making sense of the connections between codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We identified themes for each open-ended survey

question and then looked for relationships between codes and categories, refining themes to describe patterns in our data. To enhance trustworthiness, an audit trail was maintained with reflexive journaling and memos regarding coding decisions by the primary coder (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, we utilized excerpts from responses to enhance the credibility of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results

RQ1: WR Experiences and Reputational Beliefs by WR Policy Knowledge

RQ1 inquired whether WR experiences and reputational beliefs differ according to employees' knowledge of their organization's WR policy. Results indicate that WR policy was associated with WR observation, χ^2 (3) = 81.61, p < .001; past WR participation, χ^2 (3) = 53.78, p < .001; and comfort with future WR participation, χ^2 (6) = 32.39, p < .001. Specifically, WR policy was linked to the observation of long-term WRs, χ^2 (3) = 29.60, p < .001; short-term WRs, χ^2 (3) = 57.16, p < .001; and extramarital affairs, χ^2 (3) = 8.10, p < .05. Furthermore, WR policy knowledge was related to how common WR was in the employee's workplace, χ^2 (6) = 53.04, p < .001; and beliefs about the reputational impact of male, χ^2 (6) = 14.77, p = .01; and female, χ^2 (6) = 20.64, p = .002; executives in hierarchical WRs.

Table 1 shows that employees whose organization had either a formal or informal WR policy were more likely to have participated in a WR and to have

Table 1. WR experiences and WR reputational beliefs by knowledge of WR policy.

	Does your company have a WR policy?			
	Formal Policy	Informal Policy	No Policy	Don't Know
Have Observed a WR of any Kind	$73.9\%_{b}$	$87.3\%_{a}$	$57.5\%_{c}$	$38.3\%_{d}$
Have Observed a Long-term WR	$47.1\%_{a}$	$44.0\%_{a}$	$30.0\%_{b}$	$20.1\%_{b}$
Have Observed a Short-term WR	$48.7\%_{b}$	$70.1\%_{a}$	$38.8\%_{bc}$	$27.5\%_{c}$
Have Observed an Extramarital WR	$10.9\%_{a}$	$14.2\%_{a}$	$12.5\%_{ab}$	$4.7\%_{b}$
Report WR is Extremely Common	$26.9\%_{a}$	$26.1\%_{a}$	$16.7\%_{b}$	$6.7\%_{b}$
Have Participated in a WR	$50.4\%_{a}$	$59.0\%_{a}$	$30.8\%_{b}$	$22.8\%_{b}$
Are Comfortable w/Future WR Participation				
Yes	$22.7\%_{a}$	$21.6\%_{a}$	$12.9\%_{ab}$	$10.1\%_{b}$
Maybe	$34.5\%_{ab}$	$49.3\%_{a}$	$33.3\%_{b}$	$33.6\%_{b}$
Reputational Impact of a Male Executive in a Hierarchical WR				
Neither enhances nor detracts from reputation	$30.3\%_{b}$	$35.1\%_{ab}$	$48.3\%_{a}$	$45.6\%_{ab}$
Negatively affects reputation, that should not take place	52.1%	50.7%	42.1%	45.6%
Positively affects reputation, as he is seen as an aggressive player	17.6%	14.2%	9.6%	8.7%
Reputational Impact of a Female Executive in a Hierarchical WR				
Neither enhances nor detracts from reputation	$29.4\%_{b}$	$33.6\%_{ab}$	$46.7\%_{a}$	$47.0\%_{a}$
Negatively affects reputation, that should not take place	54.6%	15.0%	45.4%	45.6%
Positively affects reputation, as he is seen as an aggressive player	16.0%	16.4%	7.9%	7.4%

N = 642; percentages with no subscripts in common differ from each other at p < .05 according to two-sided tests for equality for column proportions. Tests for the pairwise comparisons are adjusted using the Bonferroni correction.

observed WRs of various types. They also felt more comfortable engaging in future WRs and reported WRs were more common in their workplaces. Furthermore, they were less likely to believe that male and female executives' participation in a hierarchical WR had no impact on the executives' reputations.

Further, employee sex, χ^2 (3) = 11.63, $p < .01$; age, χ^2 (3) = 18.57, $p < .001$; and management status, χ^2 (6) = 51.53, $p < .001$; were related to WR policy. A greater proportion of men (24.9%, $n = 83$ vs. women, 16.5%, $n = 51$), employees 21–29 years old (22.6%, $n = 121$ vs. employees at least 30 years old, 12.3% $n = 13$), and senior managers (28.0%, $n = 45$ vs. non-managers, 16.4%, $n = 56$) reported their organization had an informal WR policy. Younger (20.3%, $n = 109$ vs. older, 9.4%, $n = 10$) employees were also more likely to report that their organization had a formal WR policy.

In terms of who lacked knowledge of their employer's WR policy, a greater percentage of women (27.5%, $n = 85$) than men (19.2%, $n = 64$) did not know if there was a policy. In addition, a greater proportion of non-managers (32.8%, $n = 112$) than middle managers (20.0%, $n = 28$), and a greater proportion of middle than senior managers (5.6%, $n = 9$) did not know whether their company had a WR policy.

RQ2: WR Reputational Beliefs by WR Experiences

WR observation and beliefs about the reputational impacts of hierarchical WRs on male, χ^2 (2) = 13.57, $p < .001$; and female, χ^2 (2) = 11.25, $p < .001$; executives were related. Similarly, WR participation and beliefs about the

Table 2. WR reputational beliefs by WR experiences.

	WR Observed?		WR Participated?	
	Yes	No	Yes, at least once	No, never
Reputational Impact of a Male Executive in a Hierarchical WR				
Neither enhances nor detracts from reputation	42.8%	39.7	40.5%	42.3%
Negatively affects reputation, that should not take place	$42.3\%_b$	$53.7\%_a$	$41.3\%_b$	$49.9\%_a$
Positively affects reputation, as he is seen as an aggressive player	$15.0\%_a$	$6.6\%_b$	$18.2\%_a$	$7.8\%_b$
Reputational Impact of a Female Executive in a Hierarchical WR				
Neither enhances nor detracts from reputation	42.3%	38.4%	39.3%	41.8%
Negatively affects reputation, that should not take place	$44.0\%_b$	$55.0\%_a$	$42.5\%_b$	$51.6\%_a$
Positively affects reputation, as he is seen as an aggressive player	$13.8\%_a$	$6.6\%_b$	$18.2\%_a$	$6.6\%_b$

N = 642; comparisons are between the categories (Yes, No) within each variable (WR Observed? or WR Participated?). Percentages with no subscripts in common differ from each other at $p < .05$ according to two-sided tests for equality for column proportions. Tests for the pairwise comparisons are adjusted using the Bonferroni correction.

reputational impacts of hierarchical WRs on male, χ^2 (2) = 16.33, $p < .001$; and female, χ^2 (2) = 21.48, $p < .001$; executives were related.

As displayed in Table 2, those who had observed a WR (versus those who had not) and those who had participated in a WR (versus those who had not) were more likely to believe that both male and female executives' participation in hierarchical WRs positively affects their reputation. WR observers and participants were also less likely to believe that male and female executives' reputations are negatively affected by their participation in hierarchical WRs.

A greater proportion of men (13.8%) than women (8.1%) indicated that the WR positively impacts the female executive, χ^2 (2) = 6.85, $p = .033$. Respondent sex and reputational beliefs about male executives, however, were not related, χ^2 (2) = 2.78, $p = .249$.

RQ3: WR beliefs and experiences of WR policies, reputational effects, and difficulties

In exploring employees' WR beliefs and experiences, five overarching themes were identified: (1) mixed views on employee sex and WR, (2) diverse policies across organizations, (3) repercussions for employees' reputations, (4) adverse effects on the workplace environment, and (5) positive or neutral views of WR. These themes are illustrated in the following section.

Mixed views on employee sex and workplace romances

Inappropriate Regardless of Sex

More than 15% of responses expressed the view that WRs are unsuitable or inappropriate for both male and female employees. For instance, a participant explained, "I think those types of relationships should not be happening for males or females" (STEM, 83). Another described workplace romances as "unprofessional and irresponsible" (FTS, 4).

Perceptions of Sex-/Gender-Related Differences

Although some employees viewed WRs as inappropriate, regardless of the participant's sex, others discussed perceived sex-related differences. Several respondents emphasized how women in WRs are viewed more negatively by other employees. For example, one participant said, "Females dating their boss looks desperate, not as big of a deal for men" (BCML, 98). An employee explained, "Females are already taken less seriously the relationship would increase that" (FTS, 80). Multiple workers also mentioned how women in WRs are perceived as using the connection to advance their position in the organization. A participant said, "It's a double standard. At any level if a woman dates a coworker, people think she is trying to advance her career" (BCML, 56).

Some respondents also described how male colleagues in WRs may be viewed more adversely than women in WRs. A participant explained, "I think it looks worse for a man in power to date a woman than the other way around" (STEM, 88). Another participant described, "A male is seen as a player and unprofessional if he dates a junior, but a female dating a lower-level employee doesn't have an effect on her reputation" (EAM, 52).

Further, nearly 30% of employees highlighted their views that men and women should be treated equally regarding WR. A participant explained, "Gender does not matter when it comes to office romance" (HEAOP, 45). Workers also emphasized how rules or policies should be the same, regardless of sex: "Both men and women should be held to the same standards, regardless of the position they hold" (FTS, 14).

Power Differences as the Issue

Power and position in the organization were also significant factors in employees' WR perceptions. For instance, an employee described, "Those in power should not, under any circumstances, date those they have power over" (HEAOP, 41). Others mentioned how a relationship with a power imbalance (e.g., boss/subordinate) may influence others' views of the subordinate's skill or capabilities. A participant said, "Executives dating other employees is bad because it looks like favoritism would evolve from it whether or not people are rewarded based on pure merit" (BCML, 10). Other workers noted how higher-ranking employees, regardless of their sex, should follow WR rules. One employee said, "I do feel that, regardless of gender, all people in a position of power should be held to the same standard, and that includes not dating subordinates. It's never appropriate" (HEAOP, 75). Some respondents commented on their organizations' policy. An employee stated, "Employees are not allowed to date those who are in a position higher than themselves, and vice versa" (FTS, 107).

Diverse policies across organizations

Explicit Policies

About 20% of responses described explicit or clear policies that prohibited WRs. Several workers noted that their organization did not permit WRs between individuals with certain types of formal working relationships. For instance, a respondent described, "Basically, no romantic encounters between those in the same department" (STEM, 71). Another participant explained, "You cannot date someone in the same reporting chain as you" (BCML, 66).

Less Restrictive Policies

Several respondents explained that WRs were not strictly prohibited, but more implicit rules existed, such as "no public displays of affection." Several employees explained how their organization allowed WRs, but asked employees to keep them private and away from work. For instance, one participant said, "you can have a relationship with a coworker just make sure it is outside the office" (STEM, 24). Employees noted that a significant organizational concern regarding WRs is how it will impact productivity. As one employee emphasized, "work and personal life should be kept separate if this involves dating or relationships. It can put a strain on work morale and can distract production" (EAM, 53). Several workers also described how their organization requests WR partners to disclose the relationship to leadership. For instance, an employee said, "A couple must let the company know and behave in a responsible behavior" (HALCS, 80).

Clearly, the data suggest variance in policy approaches and one way conceptualize this variance may be through a continuum, with policies ranging from clear to ambiguous.

Reputational repercussions

In addition to productivity and morale threats, participants described various negative reputational repercussions for WR participants. In reflecting on romantic relationships that failed, a worker described, "They were talked about, laughed about, watched more closely" (HALCS, 92). Employees attributed such ramifications to the perception that involved parties were unprofessional or undedicated to the job. For example, an employee said, "Generally, it makes them appear to be a bit less concerned about the image they portray within the work environment" (EAM, 8). Another employee described that being in a romantic relationship "makes them less trustworthy" (BCML, 103). Participants noted that colleagues in WRs with a power imbalance are especially at risk for being perceived as less thoughtful or earnest in how they approach their work. One employee described, "Having a romantic relationship at work for an upper management team member means they are not taking work seriously enough" (HALCS, 86).

Adverse effects on the workplace environment

Workplace Disruptions

In describing negative WR views, workers explained several consequences for the workplace. For instance, an employee said, "they are always speaking loudly and trying to have contact with each other, which distracts everyone" (BCML, 106). Workers noted that breakups were particularly challenging for other colleagues. An employee described, "It makes the working environment

difficult and awkward. The office divides, and people choose sides making it intolerable to work alongside certain individuals" (EAM, 8). Relationship dissolution can also make it difficult for former WR partners to continue working together. An employee recalled, "We had a couple who were together for quite a while, but it ended badly, and it was hard to work together anymore" (FTS, 107). Participants noted that employees often leave the organization due to the WR ending and the difficulties of continuing to work together.

Relationship Dissolution Leads to Leaving

Workers in a dissolved WR may leave the organization because they no longer feel comfortable working there. One employee explained, "Co-workers have broken up, and the work has suffered as they could not get along or one of them stopped working" (HALC, 78). Another noted, "Some people have lost their jobs or had to give up their jobs because continuing to work with an ex-lover was painful or embarrassing" (HEAOP, 65). Participants also described how employees were terminated for engaging in a WR or subsequent inappropriate behavior related to WR. For example, one employee said, "It causes a rift between employees and makes it, so one or the other has to be let go due to problems" (BCML, 116).

Positive or neutral views of workplace romance

Long-Term Romances

In addition to discussing challenges and negative consequences of WRs, some workers talked about WR benefits. However, these positive views were limited, and were linked to long-term relationships. One employee described, "This company has several couples who are now married or soon to be married and are still working together" (EAM, 41).

No impact

Fewer than 10% of responses noted that WR did not appear to influence job performance or the environment in general. Some workers described how the couple's ability to remain professional was critical to others' views of the WR. As one employee recalled, "The only couple I ever worked with was very professional. They did not put anything on display at work. It was a very normal thing, and everyone seemed happy for them, not bothered at all" (FTS, 60).

Discussion

Our research confirmed that WRs are a regular part of organizational life: 62.3% of employees had observed a WR and about one-third had participated

in one. Approximately 10% had participated in more than one WR. Speaking to policy, 37% of participants indicated their organization did *not* have a WR policy, whereas 19% said there was a formal policy and 21% stated there was an informal policy. Concerningly, yet not uncommon (Horan & Chory, 2009, 2013; LaFrance, 2022), 23% were unsure whether a policy existed.

Summary of Findings

RQ1 asked about the role of policy knowledge in WR experiences. Findings revealed that employees in organizations with either a formal or informal WR policy (vs. without a policy) had more experience with WR, be it through having been involved in a WR, feeling comfortable with future WR, or simply witnessing a WR. They were also more likely to believe that WRs were more common in their organizations, but they were less likely to believe that hierarchical WRs did not impact executives' reputations.

These results suggest that employees working in organizations with a WR policy may have a more realistic WR view. They recognize how common WRs are and have witnessed WRs play out in their own organizations. Speaking to this realistic view is the notion that individuals whose company had a formal WR policy reported less agreement with the belief that hierarchical WRs did not impact executives' reputations. They appear to be more open to the idea that WRs may have reputational effects.

The fact that their organization had a WR policy of which these employees were aware suggests that the employees may also have been exposed to the policy's rationale. Because WR policies generally seek to avoid organizational risk and minimize costs, they tend to focus on the potential damage that WRs can do. Therefore, the policies may have communicated and explained WR's risks to employees, dispelling any naïve notions about WR's effects that employees in organizations without WR policies may have. Those employees with a WR policy seem to realize that a colleague's WR may send a message that employees use to evaluate that colleague's reputation. In other words, workers whose companies have WR policies may be better educated about WRs negative impacts and may feel more confident about avoiding the pitfalls associated with participating in them.

Research question two explored the relationship between WR experiences and beliefs about WR's reputational effects. Counterintuitively, employees with WR experience (participation and/or observation) were more likely to believe that hierarchical WRs positively affected the executives' reputations "as they were seen as aggressive players" in the workplace, and they were less likely to believe that hierarchical WRs negatively impacted these reputations.

Although, in general, engaging in a hierarchical WR may damage the superior's reputation to a greater extent than it benefits it, our research shows that individuals with WR experience relative to those without such

experience are more inclined to report the romance's reputational benefits. One explanation for this finding is that employees who have been in or around WRs have experienced or witnessed how organizational superiors actually gained prestige from their hierarchical WRs. For example, employees with WR experience may have seen how superiors were admired for their ability to cultivate WRs with younger, less experienced, more attractive junior colleagues. They may have witnessed subordinates in WRs with their supervisors assuming some of the supervisors' more mundane job duties in order for the supervisors to concentrate on achieving more visible goals. They, themselves, may have been the subordinates in WRs who helped their supervisor partners, or they may have been the superiors who were admired for their junior WR partners. In contrast, employees who had not participated in a WR or had not observed one may have had to rely on the common narrative, perpetuated by most WR policies, that hierarchical romances are always destructive to all concerned. Therefore, those without WR experience may have been less aware of hierarchical WR's positive reputational effects for the executive partner, leading them to respond as they did here.

The pattern for WR experience and beliefs about hierarchical WR's reputational effects held for both male and female executives' reputations. These results stand in contrast to prior research indicating that female WR participants were perceived as less credible and more job-motivated, and they were trusted less than their male WR counterparts (Horan & Chory, 2011, 2013; Jones, 1999; Powell, 2001).

Somewhat more consistent with prior research is that male versus female respondents were more likely to believe that hierarchical WRs positively impacted female executives' reputations by causing them to be seen as aggressive players. This finding reflects Western culture's conception of male sexuality as being associated with power and boldness (Collinson & Collinson, 1989; Riach & Wilson, 2007; Salzinger, 2000). It is also consistent with men's sexual self-schema including aggressiveness, independence, and power (Andersen et al., 1999).

Research question three delved into participants' descriptions of their own WR experiences and thoughts, speaking directly to policy and reputation. The findings, collectively, revealed mixed views of WRs (inappropriate regardless of sex; perception of sex-related differences; power differences as the issue), diverse policies across organizations (explicit policies for WR; less restrictive policies for WRs), repercussions for reputations, adverse effects on the work environment (relational dissolution leads to leaving), and positive or neutral views of WR (long term romances; no impact).

These findings paint a picture of organizational life that depicts variance in types of WRs observed (e.g., long term romances), WR policies (explicit policies for WR; less restrictive policies for WRs), views of WRs

(inappropriate regardless of sex; perception of sex-related differences; power differences as the issue), reputational effects, and organizational effects (relational dissolution leads to leaving). LaFrance (2022) recently reported that employees strongly believed that "supervisors who direct sexual attention toward their subordinates should be reprimanded" and "I would never get intimately involved with my supervisor" (p. 8). These beliefs might explain the findings obtained regarding status differential romances. Organizational exit following WR breakups described by respondents may be due to voluntary resignations or terminations associated with the WR. For example, WR participants' voluntary turnover and job changes have been associated with employee gossip surrounding the WR (Chory & Offstein, 2023). Participants here also discussed that work may suffer due to relational tensions or work-life spillover. This aligns with previous WR research that found both negative and neutral organizational outcomes following failed WRs, including employee exit (Horan et al., 2019).

Evidence-Based Recommendations for Practice

The results of the present research offer several implications for organizational communication. To that end, we provide the following evidence-based recommendations for practice. First, our policy findings, combined with results of prior studies (Horan & Chory, 2009, 2011; LaFrance, 2022), indicate that many employees are unaware of whether their workplace has a WR policy. Interestingly, men were more likely than women to know whether their organization had a WR policy. Because men are more apt to be accused of sexual harassment (Cortina & Areguin, 2021), perhaps they sought out or paid closer attention to their employer's policies concerning workplace romantic/sexual interactions. Non-managers were also less likely than managers to know whether their company had an informal WR policy. This lack of awareness is most certainly a communication issue.[6] Therefore, we first recommend that organizations clearly articulate their WR policy during employee onboarding *and* maintain this information on their websites (Chory et al., 2022). The policy should be described in detail, with any required reporting steps, as employees here described variance in policy approaches and among organizations.

Second, rather than denying or downplaying the existence of WR, organizations would be wise to have practical and realistic policies in place for the management, not the prohibition, of WRs. Scholars have been critical of management approaches that prohibit WR (Boyd, 2010; Chory & Horan, 2023; Horan et al., 2021). For those companies that allow WRs, issues regarding the types of interactions and/or relationships that must be disclosed, the relational stage at which disclosure must occur, and how the reported

information is protected are often overlooked or unspecified by WR policies (Chory & Horan, 2023; Chory et al., 2022; Horan & Chory, forthcoming). Special attention should be given to these issues and sensitivity should be exercised in addressing them in practice.

Third, when designing policy, organizations should work to protect the privacy, rights, and reputations of the employees involved in the WR. *If* an organization believes it has the right to require disclosure of an employee's sex life, the WR policy should protect the honor, dignity, and privacy of those involved (Chory & Horan, 2023; Fiori-Khayat, 2022). WRs send a message to other organizational members (Chory et al., 2022) that may alter their perceptions of their colleagues' reputations – positively or negatively. As such, disclosed WRs should be kept confidential by the organization. Moreover, participation in a WR should in no way be considered in assessments of employee competence or job performance, unless the employee's behavior violates the policy.

Fourth, organizations should design WR policies that also protect third-party employees and the organization. This recommendation is in line with Fritz's (2022) recent discussion: "Professional civility as applied to workplace relationships is defined by communicative interaction that honors the organizational context as a 'third,' to whom any organizational relationship is accountable … It is possible that the relationship may suffer harm or undergo reconfiguration as a result of this orientation. The potential clash of public and private domains is central to the framework of professional civility, which highlights the constraints of the work context that may come into conflict with expectations tied to the realm of personal friendship … " (p. 5). With Fritz's arguments in mind, organizational policy should protect WR participants so their relationships do not "suffer harm or undergo reconfiguration."

Though we offer the previous policy recommendations regarding WR, LaFrance (2022) recently reported that employees strongly believed that "a person's personal life is not the business of management" and "a manager should be unconcerned with an employee's sexual habits" (p. 8). Clearly, organizational members would prefer their employers to stay out of their love lives. We encourage organizations engaged in WR policy development to honor these wishes to the greatest extent possible.

We recognize, however, that sex and romantic affectionate relations occur within and outside of WRs (e.g., friends with benefits, polyamory, hookups, one-night stands), and are complex phenomena. Ultimately, ethical questions abound as to whether an organization has the "right to know" about employees' sexual activity (Afifi et al., 2007, p. 63). Could employers ever legitimately require their employees to disclose the private details of their one-night stands, regretted sex, or ongoing casual hookups? Such information is likely private (colleagues do not have the "right to know") and secret (kept from individuals

who have a legitimate right to it; Afifi et al., 2007). After all, would employees ever have to disclose private aspects of their sex lives when they have sex with non-organizational members (see Horan et al., 2021)[7]?

Limitations and Future Research

Findings should be interpreted with the following limitations in mind. First, data were collected prior to two recent significant events: the #MeToo movement and the COVID-19 pandemic. Both of these events influenced how we understand the relationship between work and life. The #MeToo movement brought to the forefront a public conversation surrounding sexual harassment. COVID-19 required work from home, completely blending work and life. Thus, these two events undoubtedly impacted how WRs were thought of, approached, initiated, and communicated about. This should be kept in mind when understanding reported findings.

Second, we did not ask whether WRs began *before* the partners worked together – that is, whether the two people started a relationship and, months or years in, began working together. Third, we collected data from employees in major US cities, which fails to inform how WRs may be perceived outside of these areas. As the daily lived social and professional experiences of individuals living in major cities differ from those living in suburban areas and small towns, it is unknown if and how our data would generalize to employees working in those locations. Fourth, important to consider is that 72.9% of the sample had at least some college experience, naturally limiting generalizability. Similarly, communication research has been criticized for using WEIRD samples (**W**estern, **E**ducated, **I**ndustrialized, **R**ich, and **D**emocratic; Afifi & Cornejo, 2020). Our sample here, though informative for understanding the experiences of US employees, shares the WEIRD sample limitation. Fifth, we did not ask about race or ethnicity. Finally, though we asked employees about their knowledge of their organization's WR policy and to describe the policy if one existed, we did not ask explicitly what the policy was.

Research exploring close relationships that blend the work/life border "constitute[s] a specific focus of study with an identifiable and growing body of literature" (Fritz, 2022, p. 1) worthy of additional exploration. The study of WR is of interest to many relevant disciplines, and does not live exclusively in one discipline (Anand et al., 2023; Chory & Horan, 2023; Horan et al., 2021). Though it has been established that the presence of a WR sends a message (Chory et al., 2022), that people communicate differently with colleagues based on WR dynamics (see Horan et al., 2021), and that people communicate with others *about* the WR (see Cowan & Horan, 2014; Horan & Chory, forthcoming; Vallade & Chory, 2013), it is surprising that communication researchers have devoted such little research attention toward understanding

this relationship. Given that communication issues are central to WR, communication scholars are encouraged to explore the organizational and relational communication implications of WRs.

Both researchers and practitioners need to study sex among organizational members. Grounded in the Post Sex Disclosure Model (Denes, 2018, 2021) researchers have (Horan & Chory, forthcoming; Horan et al., 2021) described how the biological processes associated with orgasm may prompt over disclosure and potentially regretted disclosure (see Denes, 2012). This paints an especially complex picture considering that this over-or-regretted disclosure could contain confidential or proprietary organizational information. Although this is an especially important area for research, it has primarily been ignored by researchers. This is an area woefully overdue for research and practitioner attention.

Conclusion

The research reported here demonstrated that WRs are not uncommon and that organizational policies designed to regulate them are related to employees' WR experiences and reputational beliefs. Though companies vary widely in their approaches to WR policy, our findings and evidence-based recommendations for practice should be considered in WR policy development. Ultimately, policies designed to respect and serve the needs of both employees and organizations are likely to yield the greatest benefits for all concerned. Communication scholars are particularly well-positioned to contribute to the knowledge upon which such policies are based. As such, we strongly encourage them to engage more deeply in the theoretical, philosophical, empirical, and practitioner conversations surrounding this prevalent communication phenomenon.

Notes

1. A WR is defined as "a nonplatonic relationship between two members of an organization in which sexual attraction is present, affection is communicated, and both members recognize the relationship to be something more than just professional and platonic" (Horan & Chory, 2011, p. 565). As with other WR research, we focus on consensual, non-harassing relationships.
2. For exceptions, see Burrell (1992), Warhurst and Nickson (2009), and Williams et al. (1999).
3. Additional data from this sample was previously reported (see Chory et al., 2022).
4. WR policy was related to the number of times employees had engaged in a WR, χ^2 (6) = 53.78, $p < .001$. A greater proportion of individuals whose companies had an informal policy (45.5%, vs. no policy, 23.8%) had participated in a WR only once. One-time WR participation was also more likely to occur among those in companies with either WR policy type (informal, 45.5%; formal, 35.3%) than among employees who did not know if their company had a WR policy (16.8%). The likelihood of participating in only one WR

did not differ according to the formal or informal nature of the WR policy. The proportions of employees who participated in more than one WR did not differ based on the company's WR policy: Formal (15.1%), informal (13.4%), no policy (7.1%), don't know if there's a policy (6.0%).

5. The number of times employees had engaged in a WR was linked to their beliefs about the reputational impacts of hierarchical WRs on male, χ^2 (4) = 19.17, $p < .001$; and female, χ^2 (4) = 23.43, $p < .001$; executives. Employees who had been in a WR once (16.2%) and more than once (24.2%) compared to those who had never been in a WR (7.8%) were more likely to believe that male executives' reputations were positively impacted by participation in a WR. A similar pattern was observed for beliefs about the reputational impact of female executives' hierarchical WRs: participated in WR once (16.8%) and more than once (22.6%) versus never (6.6%).
6. We suspected that differences in policy awareness were due to differences in employees' relationship status, however employee knowledge of their employer's WR policy was not associated with employees' relationship status, χ^2 (2) = .445, $p = .800$. Almost a quarter (24.2%, $n = 64$) of married or partnered respondents and 22.2% ($n = 84$) of single, divorced, or widowed respondents did not know whether their organization has a WR policy.
7. Aside from considering the information private, employees may be hesitant to disclose their sexual activity to their organization for other reasons. Consider situations in which employees are LGBTQ but do not want their employers to know. Disclosure of WR would force sexual orientation disclosure, introducing both legal and ethical questions. In addition, research shows that individuals may engage in limited or one-time same-sex sexual activity due to curiosity and/or fluidity (see Diamond, 2018). If an employee maintains a heterosexual identity but has same-sex sexual activity once, the employee is unlikely to disclose this to the organization (see Festinger, 1957). Likewise, individuals in committed, monogamous relationships who are cheating on their partners with their colleagues are unlikely to report this information to their organization, as many people would consider jeopardizing a marriage or committed romantic relationship to be more undesirable than facing organizational sanctions. Altogether, it cannot be emphasized enough that organizations should question their role in legislating employees' close relationships and required reporting, whether it be casual sex or an ongoing relationship.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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