

Love Affair at Workplace: How Motif and Type Linked to Employee Work Behaviour in Male Employee Experience

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Abstract

Men tends to act more positively than female when it comes to romance in the workplace (Pierce et al., 1996; Powell, 1986). This research presents an exploratory assessment of workplace affairs using a qualitative approach to identify how motives and types of workplace affairs, linked on how it affect employee work behavior from a male employee experience. Social exchange theory and power dynamics approached are used to explain this phenomenon. Respondents were collected using purposive and snowball sampling methods due to the sensitive nature of the respondent criteria. The semi-structured, one-on-one in-depth interview was done to nine male employees who had and/or are engaging in workplace affair. Finding reveals motives and types of workplace affair linked to each other especially ego/fling motive with hierarchical type of relationship. Workplace affair does affect work behavior in vary ways. Additionally, male employee experienced negative effect despite them being superior or subordinate. A negative effect mentioned such as favoritism, power abused even workplace bullying. This study emphasizes more of workplace affair as the dark side of workplace romance thus enriched the findings of previous study regarding workplace affair in Indonesia especially from male employee experience.

Keywords: Qualitative, office affair, motive, type, social exchange theory, power dynamics, work behavior.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, workplace romance is becoming more common than ever. Rabin-Margalioth (2005) in Shuck et al. (2016) stated that many people spend most of their time at work; thus, workplace romance becomes an unavoidable phenomenon, and sometimes it plays as a way for workers to find their soulmate. According to a survey conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), of the 550 employees in the US, 33% are currently and/or have been involved in workplace romance (SHRM, 2021).

Foley & Powell (1999) and Pierce (1998) argue in Ariani, Ebrahimi, & Saeedi (2011) that workplace romance is a consensual relationship between two parties who work in a similar organization, and it may involve physical attraction. The keyword of workplace romance is the mutualism of both parties to form a relationship. Although literature has struggled to distinguish between many different types of workplace romance, it has primarily focused on lateral relationships (i.e., relations between employees and co-workers of the same rank and status) and hierarchal relationships (i.e., relations between a manager or supervisor and a subordinate). Hierarchal romances have typically been associated with more negative consequences than lateral romances (Wilson, 2015). (Quinn, 1977) categorized someone's motive to indulge in workplace romance into three motives: love, job, and work-related. Love motives exist when partners show genuine love for each other, whereas ego motives exist when partners show gratification for their egos or sexual interactions. Last, a job-related motive exists when a lower-level worker is driven by work-related considerations like advancement, security, authority, and financial benefits. (Foley & Powell, 1999).

As two sides of the coin, workplace romance has both positive and negative effects. Both consequences often contradict each other (Anand et al., 2023; Sidhu et al., 2020; Wilson, 2015). It might increase overall productivity (Anand et al., 2023; Wilson, 2015). Meanwhile, (Riach & Wilson, 2007) found that workplace romance has a negative impact as it

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might diminish employee motivation and concentration at work due to conflict between them or being too focused on their partner instead of working. Workplace romance can also generate bias in the process of decision-making taken by superiors that benefits their partner. Another negative effect caused by workplace romance is the workplace affair. According to (Quinn, 1977), a workplace affair happens when two parties engage in a romantic relationship, but one or both of the parties are already engaged in a legal relationship, such as marriage. A workplace affair is perceived as the dark side of workplace romance. It is illegal and unethical (Abzug, 2016). According to a survey conducted by CareerBuilder, in the US, at least 20% of total workers involved in workplace romance engaged in an illegitimate relationship because one of the parties had been committed to marriage (Khalilzadeh & Pizam, 2021).

Gender differences may also affect the perceived negative consequences of WR. For example, females appeared more likely than males to find WRs disadvantageous (Anand et al., 2023; Chory & Hoke, 2023; Foley & Powell, 1999). In correlation with motives, women are more likely to engage in WRs to advance their careers than are males, while males are more likely to engage in WRs to gratify ego motives (Anderson & Fisher, 1991). Additionally, men demonstrate a more favourable attitude toward and incentive to engage in office romance than women do (Khan et al., 2023; Quinn, 1977; Wilson, 2015).

Thus, the current study explores the phenomenon of workplace affair as an extended negative effect of workplace romance and presents the findings using the following research questions:

- a. How motives (job, ego, and love) of a male employee play a role in engaging workplace affair?
- b. With whom would a male employee have an affair at work? Is it with a superior or subordinate (hierarchical) or someone who has an equivalent position level (lateral)?
- c. How does the affair impact his work behaviour at work?

Based on the research questions, this research aims to identify the motive, type of workplace affair, and how those linked to their work behaviour from a male experience.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Workplace Romance: Motives and Type

Mainiero (1989), and Quinn (1977) define workplace romance as an intense emotional relationship between two employees expressed through intimate contact or simply dating. Workplace romance can also be explained as a reciprocal relationship between two parties in the office, and within that, a sexual relationship may occur. Biggs et al. (2012); Foley & Powell (1999); Pierce (1998a); Quinn (1977) formulated workplace romance as “a mutually desired relationship that includes physical attraction between two members of the same organization” (Ariani, Ebrahimi, and Saeedi, 2011). This relationship is mutual and not based on coercion or compulsion. If there is an element of coercion, it is defined as sexual harassment in the workplace. Sexual harassment in the workplace involves actions that are not based on mutual consent and are not desired by any of the parties involved (Fitzgerald et al., 1995; Pierce & Aguinis, 2001; Syaebani et al., 2020).

Various empirical studies have been conducted to explain the motives behind an employee’s involvement in a romantic relationship at work. According to Pierce & Aguinis (2001), and Quinn (1977) the motives of an employee involved in a romantic relationship at work can be divided into three motives, namely: love/sincere/passionate motive, where the romantic relationship with this motive underlies the relationship with a sincere sense of love and aims to find a life partner and establish a long-term relationship; ego/fling/compassionate motive, where this motive is often found in relationships that are solely looking for fun, excitement, sexual fulfilment, and ego gratification. The nature of the relationship is not long-term, and there is a job-related or utilitarian motive where individuals engage in romantic relationships with this motive to gain power, secure a job position, and obtain financial rewards and promotions. In an attempt to update Quinn (1977) typology, Cowan & Horan (2014) identified four motives for romantic relationships: time spent together, ease of creating opportunities, similarity between employees, and hook-up motives.

Pierce (1998b) in Anand et al. (2023) divided romantic relationships into two types based on the level of position of the parties involved in the relationship: hierarchical and lateral. hierarchical type defined as the romantic relationship between two people with different levels of organizational positions or positions in an organization (Chan-Serafin et al., 2017; Powell, 2001). Meanwhile lateral relationship explained as a romantic relationship between two people with the same position level in an organization (Anand et al., 2023; Pierce, 1998a).

2.2. Workplace Affair

Workplace affairs, as explained by Abzug (2016) occur when two individuals in a work environment have a romantic relationship; however, one or both of them have entered into a legal relationship, such as marriage. This phenomenon is the dark side of romantic relationships in the workplace and is considered illegal and unethical. According to research in *Psychology Today* (2010) conducted by LaBier (2010), a psychologist and director of the Progressive Development Center in Washington, DC cited in Syaebani (2013) workplace affair is categorized into six categories as follows: a) “It’s just lust” affair. This is the most common category and is related to sex. This type can be very intense but usually ends in a short time. The main motive for both parties in this relationship is to satisfy sexual desires. In this type of affair, neither party intends to leave their legal partner to create a new relationship. Therefore, this relationship will end when both parties have lost the desire to have sexual relations with each other. b) “I’ll show you” affair or revenge. This relationship occurs when one party is in a state of hatred or resentment toward their legal partner and wants to take revenge by having an affair. Usually, this relationship is triggered by deep feelings of sadness, neglect, and abandonment. This relationship arises out of the belief that it is the only way to feel empowered and heal the pain. A person in this relationship typically uses it to gain bargaining power. c) “just in the head” affair or emotional affair. Infidelity is not just sexual. This affair occurs because both parties are attracted to each other physically and because they share similar views, spirituality, and hobbies. Although this relationship does not involve sexual activity, it does not mean that there is no sexual tension between them. In this relationship, people have no intention of leaving their legal partners. They consider it a close friendship or platonic love. d) “All in the family” affair. This relationship is between two people in the same family. A common example is the relationship between a husband and his sister-in-law. The worst consequence of this relationship is family dysfunction. e) “It’s not really an affair.” This type is either an actual or imaginary affair. It occurs when one party believes they are in a serious relationship while the other party denies it. In this relationship, one party looks forward to, wants, and is willing to leave their legal partner for a real relationship. In contrast, the other party sees no future in this relationship. Women are often the ones trapped in these relationships. They believe their partner wants to build a serious relationship with them, while men tend to be reluctant and refuse to legalize this relationship. f) Mind-body affair. This category is the deadliest relationship. This relationship’s effects often lead to divorce. In this relationship, both parties are involved, both physically and mentally. This relationship is solid and provides benefits to both parties. However, one of the parties has committed to a marriage relationship. Often, the party involved in this relationship fails to end their affair because they consider their partner to be a spouse (Syaebani et al., 2020).

Sternberg (1998), with his Theory of Love (Triangle of Love), describes three main elements of love: intimacy, desire, and commitment. Intimacy refers to the closeness, connection, and bonding in romantic relationships, whereas desire is the trigger for romantic relationships, such as physical and/or sexual attraction. Commitment is the willingness to commit (in the short term) and maintain the relationship (in the long term). Those elements combine and create several forms of relationships. Sternberg’s (1998) explanation of the combination of elements of intimacy in interpersonal relationships emphasizes how these relationships move along a spectrum of qualities and types of intimacy that cannot be separated from the meaning of each element contextually and culturally. So, this theory can be used as a basis for the phenomenon of romantic relationships in the workplace because of the close relationship between the theory and the type of relationship and the motives of a person to conduct a relationship, especially in the context of romantic relationships in the workplace.

2.3. Consequences of Workplace Romance

Studies have shown a positive correlation between satisfactory workplace romances and job satisfaction (Kumar, 2012; Syaebani, 2013). Additionally, workplace romances can boost employee morale and create an engaging organizational atmosphere (Horn & Horn, 1982; Anand et al., 2023). The consequences of workplace romances on the individuals involved can be positive or negative. Such relationships can positively influence performance by enhancing concentration, job satisfaction, effort, timeliness, productivity, and work engagement while reducing turnover intention (Anand et al., 2023; Chory & Hoke, 2023; Dillard, 1994; A. G. Khan et al., 2023; Quinn, 1977; Arani et al., 2011; Baker, 2016). However, the positive effects may also stem from efforts to mitigate negative perceptions from co-workers regarding the relationship (Chory & Hoke, 2023; Cowan & Horan, 2014).

However, workplace romances can have negative implications, including perceptions of injustice and increased conflicts of interest at the group level (Voza, 2017; Anand et al., 2023). Such relationships may lead to anxiety among team members and a decline in group morale due to perceived favoritism towards the romantic partner in decision-making processes (Anand et al., 2023; Balaban, 2019; Dechamplain, 2021). Hierarchical workplace romances often

result in biased promotion decisions, fostering feelings of unfair treatment (Quinn, 1977; Judge, 1978; Appelbaum et al., 2007; and Syaebani, 2013). Additionally, workplace romances may lead to ostracism and knowledge sabotage, disrupting workflow and the overall work atmosphere (Chory & Horan, 2023; Qiu et al., 2023). On individual level, studies have shown negative performance impacts of workplace romances, such as decreased productivity due to increased focus on the relationship rather than work tasks (Kumar, 2012, cited in Syaebani, 2013; Appelbaum et al., 2007). Hierarchical relationships particularly tend to negatively affect performance (Mainiero, 1989, cited in Pierce, 1998; Syaebani, 2013; Cowan & Horan, 2021).

2.4. Social Exchange Theory

Most social exchange models by Thibault & Kelley (1959) share the following basic assumptions; a) social behaviour is a series of exchanges; b) individuals attempt to maximize rewards and minimize costs, and c) when individuals receive rewards from others, they feel obligated to reciprocate. (Sprecher, 1998). This study focuses more on the outcome-interdependence theory and investment model. This model focuses on the reward and cost derived from the relationship for the individual as the major variable in this theory are: reward, cost, comparison level (CL), and comparison level for alternatives (CLalt) (West & Turner, 2010). Sprecher (1998) further explained comparison level as one's expectation of what one deserves in such a relationship and is a standard for evaluating the relationship one's currently in, based on past experiences and an awareness of experiences of others. While Comparison level for alternatives affects how dependent one feels on relationship. Individual compare the outcome they receive from the relationship with something they expect to receive in an alternative, available relationship or what would be available to them from their social network but without obtaining another primary relationship. If the reward they are receiving from their current relationship are better than what they expect to receive from their best alternative(s), they will feel dependent on the relationship and become committed to it (Sprecher, 1998; West & Turner, 2010). According to Rusbult (1983) investment model, commitment is increased not only by greater satisfaction (outcome compared to comparison level) and comparison level of alternatives, but also by investments. Investment can be in a form of intrinsic elements put directly into the relationship or extrinsic yet are connected to the relationship. The models described as below:

Commitment (Stay/Leave) = Satisfaction – Comparison Level for Alternatives + Investments

In workplace romance/affair, social exchange theory shown in Quinn (1977) study regarding someone's motivation for engaging in a workplace romance/affair. Someone in hierarchical type of relationship, with ego/fling motives engaging in workplace romance with his co-worker because there's an exchanging benefit in a form of power actualization and job-safety.

2.5. Power Dynamics

There are two types of workplace romance based on power dynamics between the participants of workplace romance/affair; hierarchical and lateral. Hierarchical type defined as the romantic relationship between two people with different levels of organizational positions or positions in an organization (Chan-Serafin et al., 2017; Powell, 2001). Meanwhile lateral relationship explained as a romantic relationship between two people with the same position level in an organization (Anand et al., 2023; Pierce, 1998a). Hierarchical type is considered as problematic due to many potential negative effects often emerged from it Workplace romance/affair that involve power imbalances, such as hierarchical ones, are less accepted since they are thought to be the most disruptive to the workplace (Anderson & Hunsaker, 1985; Powell, 1986; Quinn, 1977).

According to 70% of respondents, management should forbid romantic relationships between superior and subordinates (SHRM, 2001). The potential for exploitation could increase significantly when a subordinate reports directly to the supervisor with whom they are romantically attached, is at the heart of much of the discussion surrounding hierarchical romance (Anderson & Hunsaker, 1985; Foley & Powell, 1999; Quinn, 1977). A supervisor involved in a romantic relationship with his/her subordinate might potentially abuse his power in hand that can extend into sexual harassment (Biggs et al., 2012; Boyd, 2010; Pierce & Aguinis, 2009). Many are afraid that their coworker, who is the subordinate in the relationship, may be getting better assignments, having fewer job demands, or even knowing private information, and that they may tell their supervisor about confidential team knowledge. Not only do coworkers of the subordinate feel frightened by the potential sharing of sensitive information in a hierarchical romance, but coworkers of the supervisor may also be afraid of the exchange of resources (Anand et al., 2023). These factors make romantic relationships at work, particularly those that are hierarchical, potentially harmful for the office.

3. Research Method and Materials.

The present study aims to explore the motives and types of workplace affairs, and how it linkage to employee male work behavior based on their experience. Therefore, the study uses phenomenon qualitative approach by performing one-on-one in-depth interview to obtain insight from the participants, to elicit information concerning workplace affair and how it's affecting working behavior.

An interview-based methodology was chosen as the most suitable research method for this project. A purposive and snowball sampling technique was used to recruit participants due to the sensitive nature of the topic. Researcher creates a specific criterion to captured the real experience of male employee engaging in workplace affair, thus the criteria are:

- a. Male
- b. Employee of any level (staff to director)
- c. Married and having an affair with single co-worker / Single and having an affair with married co-worker / both are married.

Friends of the lead researcher were first contacted to share a poster regarding respondent needed filled with brief information of topic research, respondent criteria and google form link for anyone who meet the criteria and willing to be respondent through messenger and social media. Once respondent candidate filled the google form, researcher contacted respondent through e-mail or instant messenger (WhatsApp) to explain further about the research and scheduling the interview. Before the interview begin, researcher passed informed consent which stated inside that the interview will be recorded, and data collected will be used for academic purpose, thus some data such as name, and workplace are classified and respondent privacy are guaranteed. Interviewed begin once the respondent signed the informed consent form.

The semi-structured interviews were carried out on a face-to-face basis, although one interview was conducted online due geographic limitation. They were loosely structured in order that participants could raise the issues which they saw to be significant. The face-to-face nature of the interviews was important to facilitate what the participant wanted to discuss using their own language and terminology. The discussion was facilitated by a researcher and recorded. The interview method was particularly valuable to this research project. The interaction between researcher and participant encouraged an open dialogue developing the ideas and recommendations in dealing with workplace romance.

Interview times ranged from 45 minutes to two hours depending on how comfortable participants were with speaking on the topic and how many cases respondent experienced. First information regarding the participants' age, job level, the industry they worked at and marriage status was collected to act as a point of comparison. Other questions regarding chronology of how workplace affair happens and which specific types of workplace romance including hierarchical relationships (i.e. an employee dating a boss), and romances where participants are on an equal level in the organisation were asked to get the participants views on specific topics should they not come up naturally. The interview also contained questions on the motives, whom he's engaging in affair with and how it affects his work behaviour.

Data then was analysed using open coding, axial coding and selective coding to find a general topic that sums information gathered from the informant. To ensure validity and reliability, researchers adapt a triangulation method confirming informant responses during interview to avoid misinterpretation. Triangulation include combining various methods, collecting data from each participant and comparing finding with key reference.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

Nine employees who had and or are engaging in workplace affair were interviewed as informant. Ages are varying from 29 age years old to 46 years old. When the relationship happened, two out of seven respondents were single and the rest were married. More information about respondent can be seen on Table 1.

Table 1. List of Respondents

Informant	Age*	Industry*	Level*	Division*	Education Background	Marital Status*
1	36	Banking	Manager	Operational	Bachelor degree	Marriage
2	32	Banking	Staf	Marketing	Bachelor degree	Single
3	32	Educational	Staf	Library	Bachelor degree	Marriage
4	34	Retail	Staf	General Affair	High School	Marriage
5	31	Retail	Staf	Human Resources	Bachelor degree	Marriage
6	46	Manufacture	Staf	General Affair	Middle School	Marriage
7	31	Manufacture	Manager	Production	Bachelor degree	Marriage
8	29	Consultant	Staf	Business Development	Bachelor degree	Single
9	36	IT	Manager	Business Development	Bachelor degree	Marriage

*) When engaging in workplace affair

Source: Researcher (2024)

As shown in Figure 1. from nine gathered respondents, 66.7% are staff-level while 33.3% or 3 informants are on manager level. This is describing many workplaces nature as the higher position it gets, the leaner number who qualified to fit the position.

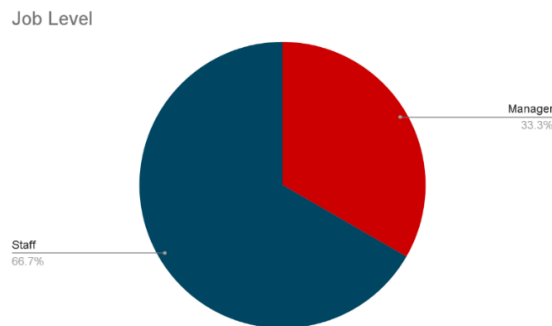


Figure 1. Job Level

The majority of respondents hold a Bachelor’s degree, indicating a well-educated workforce. Specifically, 7 (77.8%) out of 9 respondents have attained this level of education. Higher education linked to higher opportunity for someone to land a formal job and getting better position. Better position leads to better income. While the middle and high school graduated could land a formal job yet with lower position such as cleaning services and technical/mechanical support staff.

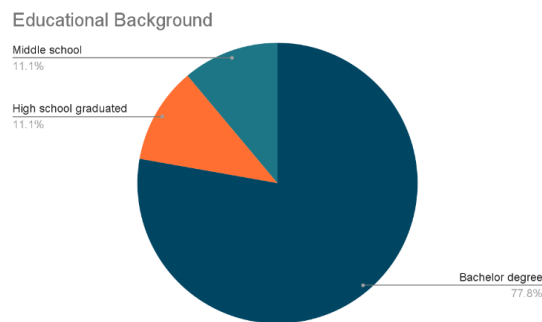


Figure 2. Educational Background

Informant came from varying industries including: banking, education, retail, manufacture and consultant. Retail, Banking, and manufacture each contribute two informants while STEM and Consultant industry each contribute one informant as shown in Figure 3.

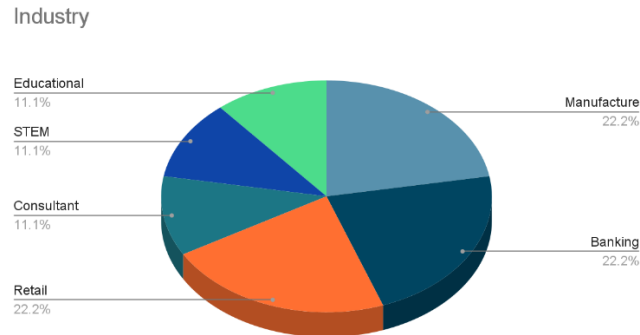


Figure 3. Industry

Open coding based on the interview transcripts resulted in three categories; motives, type and workplace effect. Each category has its own sub categories which are:

- a. Motives includes Ego/fling motive, Love motive, and Job-related motive
- b. Type of relationship including lateral and hierarchical type
- c. Consequences/effects of workplace affair including positive effect such as increasing motivation, punctuality and job involvement, negative effect such as power abuse, favoritism and decline employee concentration.

A meaningful correlation between each category then identified through axial coding. From the developing analysis, the researcher identified that someone’s motives correlates to with whom (type) they engaging in an affair. Type of relationship experienced can bring a positive, and negative effect. Some of them even claimed that their affair has no effect on their work behavior. Those categories corelates each other in a chronology of affair as shown in Figure 4.

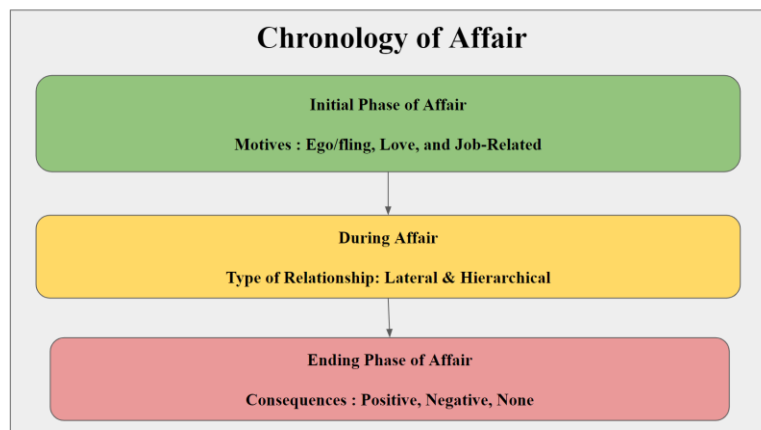


Figure 4. Chronology of Affair

4.2. Discussion

4.2.1. Motives Workplace Affair

Findings from 12 cases that experienced by informants, 75% of male employees engaging in workplace affair due to ego motives. Initially, it is mostly triggered by work condition such as distant work placement from homebase, long

working hours and support from co-workers. Being long distance create a gap in sexual satisfaction in a male employee, and spending nine to five hours- five day a week create an opportunity to build intimacy outside professional matter, thus creating an alternate satisfaction outside his primary relationship. While 16.7% or two out of 12 cases are having a job-related motive. And 8.3% or one case out of 12 is having a love motive. In this study researcher finds that informant often did not say their motives distinctly. They highlight more on intense feelings as if it is love-based. What differentiate between ego/bling motive and job-related with the love motive is informant willingness to leave their legal-primary partner to be with their affair partner. They who are not willing to leave their primary partner are likely to have the ego/bling motive.

4.2.2. *Type Workplace Affair*

Seven from 12 cases or 58.3% of informant had a lateral type of relationship. Five out of seven are with a co-worker in different department/branch/business unit. High collaborative workplace culture facilitated by information and communication technology is the reason why even individuals in different space are able to create such an intimacy.

The rest or 41.7% of informant had hierarchical type of relationship. Three out of five hierarchical type were with their direct report (subordinate or superior). This type of relationship explains through social exchange as how individuals exchange equal benefits from the power and position, they're in. A male production manager practices their legitimate power in the affair with his subordinate. This relation enables the manager to attained both professional and personal favor from his subordinates while in the other hand, she obtains physical and economic advantages such as job-security and pay raise.

Although having the same hierarchical type, the relationship dynamic can be different when the male employee is the one who on the lower level. Despite having lower satisfaction in the relationship with his superior, he chose to endure due to the potential negative effect that he might get from leaving the relationship. While some respondent prefers to engage in an affair with non-subordinate as a mitigation, minimizing the risk of unprofessionalism.

4.2.3. *Consequences/Effect of Workplace Affair*

Like two sides of the coin, engaging in workplace affair could affect someone's work behaviors both in a positive or negative way. This study finds that there's more of negative effect than positive one. Engaging in workplace affair with peer does boost motivation, and job involvement. Someone's punctuality also increases as they wanted to meet their partner even prior before the working hour start. Unfortunately, those positive effect not necessarily always happen from engaging in an affair with a supervisor/subordinate. When it emerged to the surface, it surrounding might perceived any favoritism towards that certain someone, creating rumor, and uncomfortable workplace environment. Researcher find that when hierarchical type of relationship ends badly, even a male employee can experience office bullying and career sabotage, especially them who had lower position level. Five out of nine informant stated that engaging in workplace affair doesn't affect his performance at all. This finding shows that how important for an organization to have policy to address this phenomenon.

5. **Conclusion, Implication & Recommendation**

The phenomenon of workplace affair is a complex issue with many contributing factors. This study indicates that there's a correlation between ego/love/job-related motif, hierarchical/lateral type and the effect of workplace romance especially towards work behaviour which vary depending on the person and circumstances. Ego/bling motive often correlates more with hierarchical type thus resulting more in negative effect. It is important for organizations to have clear policies about inter-organizational relationships at work and to create a work environment that is both rigorous and consistently respectful.

The main challenge of this study is finding an informant to participate due to high sensitivity topic. Researcher only managed to gain insight from six industries, thus might not represent several industries with cold climate (healthcare, civil servant (ASN), etc), and hot climate (hospitality, agency, etc).

This research contributes significantly to the study about workplace affair phenomenon and managerial practice on how the organization sees, approach and manage this issue through developing its policy from the insight of male employee experience. As workplace romance is a sensitive matter and a situation that 'takes two to tango', future research needs to explore how female experienced workplace affair to give a whole knowledge and understanding about this phenomenon.

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