



LEEDS  
BECKETT  
UNIVERSITY

---

Citation:

Clayton, T and Beckett Davis, T and Netschay Davis, N and Babunga, A (2021) Women in Public Relations in North America. Technical Report. Creative Media and Communications Research Ltd, Leeds.

Link to Leeds Beckett Repository record:

<https://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/7546/>

Document Version:

Monograph (Published Version)

---

The aim of the Leeds Beckett Repository is to provide open access to our research, as required by funder policies and permitted by publishers and copyright law.

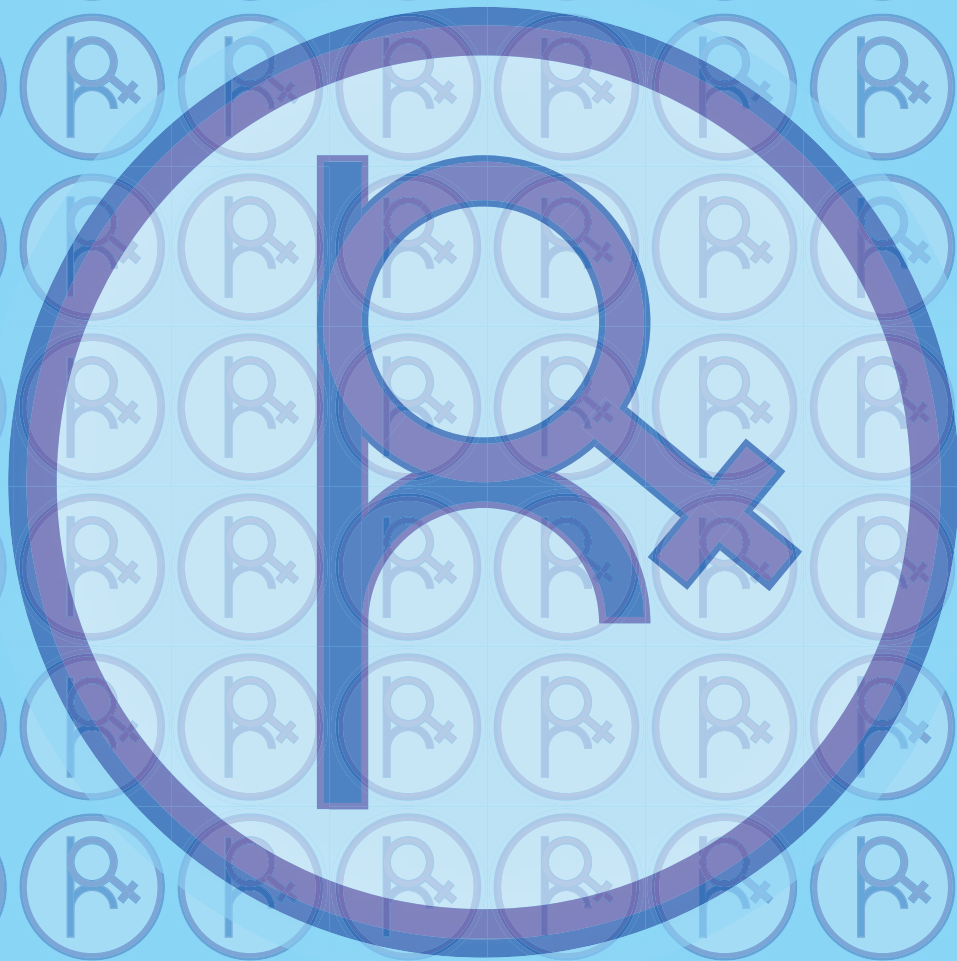
The Leeds Beckett repository holds a wide range of publications, each of which has been checked for copyright and the relevant embargo period has been applied by the Research Services team.

We operate on a standard take-down policy. If you are the author or publisher of an output and you would like it removed from the repository, please [contact us](#) and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

Each thesis in the repository has been cleared where necessary by the author for third party copyright. If you would like a thesis to be removed from the repository or believe there is an issue with copyright, please contact us on [openaccess@leedsbeckett.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@leedsbeckett.ac.uk) and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

ISSN 2633-2353 (Online)

**EUPRERA REPORT Vol.3, N°1**  
Women in Public Relations in North America



Teela Clayton, Talia Beckett Davis,  
Natasha Netschay Davies, Alliancé Babunga

First published 2021

By

Creative Media and Communications Research Ltd, 4 Cobden Place, LS12 5LJ, Leeds, United Kingdom

&

EUPRERA Bd. Du Jubilé 71 bte 3, 1080 Brussels, Belgium

**EUPRERA Report Vol. 3, No. 1**

**Women in Public Relations in North America**

**Authors:**

Teela Clayton

Talia Beckett Davis

Natasha Netschay Davies

Alliancé Babunga

**Cover Page design**

Christian Goodman

**Layout and Formatting**

Martina Topić

**EUPRERA REPORT Series Editor**

Martina Topić

**EUPRERA report ISSN 2633-2353**

The right of the author to be identified as the author of the report has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988. All rights reserved. No part of this report may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter known invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe. The report is produced for non-commercial purposes only.

**Suggested citation:** Clayton, T., Beckett Davis, T., Netschay Davis, N., & Babunga, A. (2021). Women in Public Relations in North America. *EUPRERA Report* Vol 3., No. 1., Topić, M. (ed). Leeds/Brussels: Creative Media and Communications Research Ltd. & EUPRERA. ISSN 2633-2353.

## Content

Authors	3
Summary	5
Introduction	7
Method and Conceptual Framework	11
Findings	17
Lived Experiences of Women in Public Relations	17
The Office Culture	32
The Socialisation and Leadership	42
Conclusion and Further Research	49
References	52

## Authors

**BABUNGA, ALLIANCÉ** is a Research Assistant at Women in PR North America and, an emerging cutting-edge communicator and relations strategist, focusing on what really matters—the client’s key messages, call to actions, and target audience. She’s passionate about working with businesses and local organizations to tell their stories, gain more visibility and engage with their stakeholders. Alliancé brings five years’ experience in political organizing, community engagement and leadership. This is mainly through her broad range of experiences working in multiple municipal, provincial, and federal political campaigns in Canada. She holds a Public Relations certificate from Simon Fraser University, a Bachelor of Arts degree in International Relations from the University of British Columbia and she studied Peace and Conflict Resolution Studies at Uppsala University in Sweden. She is also fluent in Swahili.

**BECKETT DAVIS, TALIA** is the CEO and Founder of Canadian Women in Public Relations and American Women in Public Relations (Women in PR North America), a networking organization that brings together senior PR and media practitioners across the Americas. She is the owner of Pink Pearl PR, an agency that specializes in baby, kids and women’s lifestyle products. NASDAQ recognized her as a PR Influencer, and PR Week highlighted how she is helping women in the PR field succeed. She teaches Media Relations and Crisis Communications at Simon Fraser University and is a member of EUPRERA. Talia has a Master’s degree in International Relations from the University of London, England, and a Bachelor’s Degree in Communications from Royal Roads University. She also spent a year living and studying in Finland at Helsinki Metropolia University. She is currently completing a Sustainable Business Strategy Certificate from Harvard Business School, to learn how businesses can thrive and grow while simultaneously solving some of the world’s biggest challenges—and how she, as an individual, can make a difference.

**CLAYTON, TEELA** is a CIPR Accredited PR practitioner specialising in healthcare comms at Intent Health. Following a teaching career spanning eleven years, Teela obtained a first-class Master’s degree in Public Relations and Strategic Communication at Leeds Beckett University to complement a PGCert in International Journalism. Since then, she has been developing her research skills, with an award-nominated thesis focusing on the dissemination of political brand and ideology via Twitter and latterly as part of the research team at the EUPRERA project on Women in Public Relations and #WECAN (Women Empowered through Coaching and

Networking) exploring how to advance career prospects of women working in SMEs in the Leeds City Region. Teela has many areas of interest within the field and has recently joined a PRCA team who are researching PR's role in the climate crisis with the view to participating in COP26 and making future recommendations for the industry. In June 2021, she will be starting a PhD research looking into the impact of media and Government communication on BAME communities during global pandemics at the Leeds Beckett University, UK.

**NETSCHAY DAVIES, NATASHA** is the Chair of Women in PR North America and Co-Founder of Moonraker PR, a Vancouver-based agency serving clients across Canada. She helps brands (non-profits, organizations, companies, associations) share their stories and messages by integrating public relations, influencer marketing, brand journalism, content marketing and social media tactics. Natasha teaches courses in PR, content marketing, writing and social media community building at Simon Fraser University, one of Canada's leading universities. She has a Bachelor's Degree in Political Science and Journalism from Concordia University. Before pivoting to a career in public relations, Natasha was recognized as one of Canada's first high-tech journalists. Natasha was involved with several dot-com start-ups, as well as an online arts broadcaster for a show about women and technology. A sought-after speaker on all things related to converged media, Natasha regularly gives talks at industry conferences including Canadian Women in Public Relations.

## Summary

Research shows that women face barriers in their work, either by not having enough support to keep the position and maintain a family or through the glass ceiling, unequal pay, etc. This study researches all those issues, adding to the body of work undertaken by Topić et al (2019), however, it also looks at the working culture, such as networking, interaction at work, dress codes, ability to see other senior women as role models, and expectations of women working in the industry to establish whether organizational culture and the socialization process influence women's ability to progress in their careers. Although the PR industry in North America is highly feminised with a 64% female workforce, only 59% of managers are women (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). The masculine work patterns that underpin other workplaces are also prevalent in PR, with long working hours, unattainable work-life balance and difficult and unequal career progression.

This study is based on 16 interviews with women working in the public relations industry in North America (the United States and Canada). Qualitative interviews were conducted through the Organization of Canadian Women in Public Relations and American Women in Public Relations with 16 interviewees; 14 at a managerial level and two in roles in a lower hierarchical position than a manager, to explore lived experiences of women working in public relations, as well as the office culture and socialisation and leadership. The majority of interviewees are in their 40s and their 30s.

Findings show early sex-typing in childhood had manifested as gendered roles in the workplace, with subversive mothers and male figures embedding a hustle culture to ensure success for the women. However, this did not protect women from the implicit and explicit gender bias in the workplace, that champions men above women, who are in turn scrutinised for their roles. Change is happening, and some elements of the office culture, such as the dress code, are not rooted in gender. All participants valued a combination of masculine and feminine characteristics in leaders, with empathy noticeably demonstrated more in female leaders.

Women's experiences in PR in North America were characterised by long working hours, with work taking precedence over family life and the implicit - and at times explicit - suggestion that to further careers, family life had to suffer. Women leaders were more empathetic to the issues women faced about maternity leave, breastfeeding and looking after children, but that didn't

necessarily benefit the women in any meaningful way, though some saw an increase in flexibility. This lack of flexibility in some instances can manifest as discrimination against women who historically and traditionally also have the pressure of raising a family, thus posing questions about the ability of a work/life balance. Most of the women thought this descriptor was problematic and that instead the term 'flexible working pattern' should be used, therefore shifting the focus from work to flexibility through the syntax of the phrasing.



## Introduction

Whilst the Western world acknowledges – and is working to lessen – the disparities between genders in the workplace, little literature exists to quantify the existence of inequalities in public relations, nor to describe the female experience. Research into the role of women in public relations has endured since the 1980s, with the last decade, in particular, seeing an increase in academic research specifically investigating the experiences of women working in the industry (Topić, 2020; Polić & Holy, 2020; Yeomans, 2019; Topić et al, 2017; Topić et al., 2019; Topić et al., 2020) but comparatively little is known in relation to other fields, such as corporate or crisis communications. Current research points to the disadvantages experienced by women in the communications industry, for fields like advertising, public relations and journalism, where women outnumber men (Topić & Tench, 2021).

As a creative industry symbiotic with public relations due to the various media relations tenets, journalism is kindred in some of its gender bias, though the disparity of representation of genders is not so large (Horowitz et al., 2018). In Topić and Bruegmann’s 2021 study of the profession, women working in journalism reported ‘unfavourable work conditions, masculine culture in the newsrooms, having to be like men to succeed and inherent sexism’ (Topić & Bruegmann, 2021). Additionally, Topić’s (2018) study of health reporting by-lines in the British press asked whether topics seen historically as women’s – health, food and lifestyle – entering mainstream could also transpose those female writers to the news section along with their traditional topic. It found men still dominated the news desk, even when the stories had an inherently feminine angle. As Topić (2020a) notes (citing North 2009; 2009b) ‘men in journalism do not join the newsroom culture, but rather, they constitute it’ (p. 7). Yeomans (2019) also argued that the public relations industry has ‘historically reflected unease with feminism’, perhaps in part responsible for the performative gestures aimed at rooting out gender inequalities, that are doing little to effect change.

Additionally, within the PR industry, fashion public relations, seen as a largely female arena in business communication, has to mitigate the historical criticism of the fashion industry when it comes to women’s rights (Topić & Polić, 2021). Seen as the product of a patriarchal construct, which defines women based on fashion and appearance, it has been the target of hostility from feminists who view the fashion industry as conducive to capitalism and exploitative to women (ibid, 2021).

Feminist literature for years has pinpointed the dominance of patriarchal systems that perpetuate and propagate the systemic oppression that withholds power from women in the workplace (Topić et al., 2017). In 2019, Dashper found that despite mentoring being an important contributor to women's career success and progression, women have difficulty accessing the networks beneficial to sponsorship and development of their careers, with schemes reinforcing discourses surrounding the implicit and invisible male norm that is dominant in working life. Polić and Holy (2020) note that of 21 Croatian female respondents interviewed about employment and opportunities for women and men in Croatia, almost half managed their professional development, whilst the others had a mentor. Whilst organisations implement gender-biased eliminating procedures in their performance evaluations, Correll et al. (2020) found that stereotypes persisted such as women being too aggressive - and men too soft - to succeed, despite being equally likely to be described as having technical abilities. The same study highlighted the flawed logic of the American meritocratic ideal when so much of the research points to the biases - around gender and colour etc - rating white male counterparts as more employable (Correll et al., 2020). Yeomans (2019) further posited that women in senior positions in PR had a 'limited scope' to challenge the patriarchal structures perpetuating inequalities, with neoliberal feminist individualism rife in women's PR networks calling upon women to save themselves. The study concluded that whilst there was evidence of feminist visibility, everyday inequalities in agencies were left unchallenged (Yeomans, 2019).

In terms of communication, differences between the way men and women communicate are still perceived to exist - another potential obstacle for women in the workplace - with the term 'genderlect' being coined by linguist Tannen to describe this sociolect based on gender (Topić et al., 2017). Research has suggested women prefer non-personal communication whilst their male counterparts conversely prefer personal forms; controverting the belief that women prefer relationship building and intimacy (ibid, 2017). Tannen posits that female employees are more apologetic and self-deprecating than male employees hence reducing their authority which can be an effective way of communicating (cited in Podesta, 1994). Stroi (2020) researched the gender-biased language in the workplace that proliferates the gender pay gap, studying job advertisements, curriculum vitae, interviews and performance reviews to investigate the effect on women's employability. The study found men were more often described in a semantic field of successors, in agentic terms: 'leaders', 'mentors' and 'achievers' leading to a conclusion that gendered language pervaded the recruitment process at all levels (Stroi, 2020).

The EUPRERA project ‘Women in Public Relations,’ focusing on the period between 1982 and (mid) 2019, analysed 223 articles on women in public relations (Topić et al, 2019; Topić et al, 2020), finding the position of women in the industry has come full circle. The work discrimination of the 1980s – the ‘glass ceiling, pay gap, women being confined to technician positions even though they were better educated’ – and bias – ‘covert discrimination in promotions, chauvinism, stereotypes and decrease in prestige and wages due to feminization of public relations’ – resurfaced between 2010 and 2019 with women reporting the same issues of workplace discrimination and bias, and being perceived as not having good organisational or communicational skills (Topić, 2020a). The global pandemic of 2020 has redesigned roles for many, with stark differences in gender continuing to emerge, exacerbated by the novel childcare responsibilities now falling on working parents and disproportionately affecting working mothers (Collins et al., 2020).

The EUPRERA project (Topić et al., 2019) identified a gap in the literature in office culture and leadership in public relations and therefore carried out original interviews with women working in the public relations industry in all participating countries of the project. The research explored the general position of women in the industry and captured the office culture and leadership skills and experiences of women working in the industry. This research project is, therefore, aimed at analysing the position of women in North America’s public relations industry, in the area comprised of Canada and the United States. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistic data from early 2020, women make up 64% of public relations specialists in North America, and 59% of PR managers are women. Despite this, there is still a documented wage gap (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020; CIPR, 2020; Horowitz et al., 2018), with men disproportionately holding leadership positions, particularly at the C-suite level.

A study carried out by Pew Research Center found partisan gaps – as well as gender gaps – in the perception of women in the workplace, with Democrats believing there were too few women in high (political) offices (Horowitz et al., 2018). The representation of women by elected women has long been the focus in political and gender research (Tremblay, 2006) and is a topic enjoying a renewed focus perhaps in part to the meteoric rise of New Zealand’s prime minister, Jacinda Ardern, and her handling of the Covid-19 crisis, herself a former public relations specialist. Nevertheless, with six-in-ten women attributing gender discrimination as an obstacle to female leadership, only 44% of men think this is an issue in the corporate world, with the figure dropping to 36% in the world of politics (Horowitz et al., 2018). Industry reports in the UK also highlight

the significant wage gap between men and women working in PR, despite women dominating the workforce. The Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR), year on year, in its 'State of the Profession' report, has found that clear differences exist between the wages secured by genders, which cannot be explained by external factors such as working pattern. Though this year for the second consecutive time, the gap is shrinking, the gap significantly widens with practitioner seniority (CIPR, 2020).

Many research studies show that women face barriers in their work, either by not having enough support to keep the position and maintain a family or through the glass ceiling, unequal pay, etc. This study researches all those issues, adding to the body of work undertaken by Topić et al (2019), however, it also looks at the working culture, such as networking, interaction at work, dress codes, ability to see other senior women as role models, and expectations of women working in the industry to establish whether organizational culture and the socialization process influence women's ability to progress in their careers.

Therefore, central to the EUPRERA research at large is the exploration of these pervading gendered attitudes, the concept of blokishness, and masculine cultural nuances in public relations organisations which has become a feminised industry due to its majority female workforce (Topić, 2020). It examines the extent to which gender stereotypes justify gender hierarchy, and whether higher hierarchical positions are deemed to require masculine personality or cognitive attributes (Cejka & Eagly, 1999). This research aims to explore the experiences of women working in PR in North America and is therefore fortified by Bourdieu's sociological theory of habitus (Bourdieu, 2007); organisational theory and the power structures manifested through occupational language; and the concept of blokishness as defined by North (2009) and its impact on the cultures in the workplace. It also acknowledges Swales' (1990) concept of a discourse community, the assumption that communities – be they socially constructed, or academic disciplines – define the conventions through which discourse operates. Thus the language use of the group is a manifest of social behaviour and that discourse is epistemic and both maintains knowledge and initiates new members to the group (Herzberg, 1986).

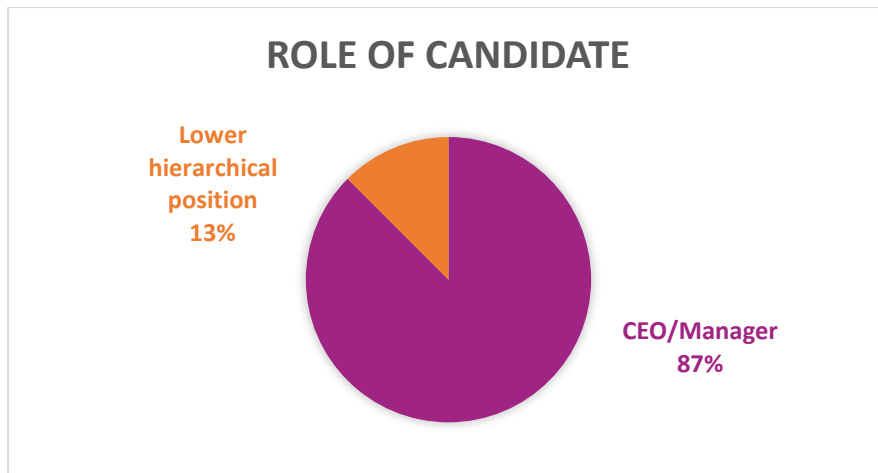
## Method and Conceptual Framework

Many research studies show that women face barriers in their work, either by not having enough support to keep the position and maintain a family or through the glass ceiling, unequal pay, etc. This research project aims to analyse the position of women in North America's public relations industry, to establish whether organizational culture and the socialization process influence women's ability to progress in their careers, by looking at three pre-determined groupings, synonymous with other EUPRERA projects across Croatia and England:

- Lived experiences of women in Public Relations in North America including expectations of women working in the industry
- The office culture such as networking, interaction at work, and dress codes
- The socialisation and leadership and the ability to see other senior women as role models

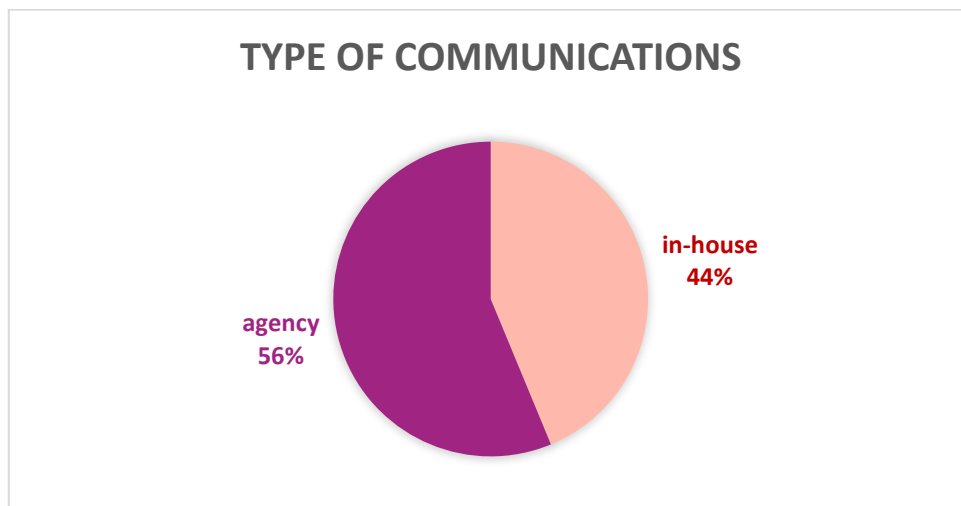
The research took place using the qualitative method of in-depth interviews, with an inductive method deriving meaning from words rather than numbers (Saunders et al., 2019). Interviewees were asked a series of questions through the Organization of Canadian Women in Public Relations and American Women in Public Relations focusing on the three groupings: lived experiences, office culture and socialisation and leadership. A total of 16 interviews were conducted during 2020, with women working in public relations across North America (the United States and Canada).

**Figure 1. The interviewee's role**



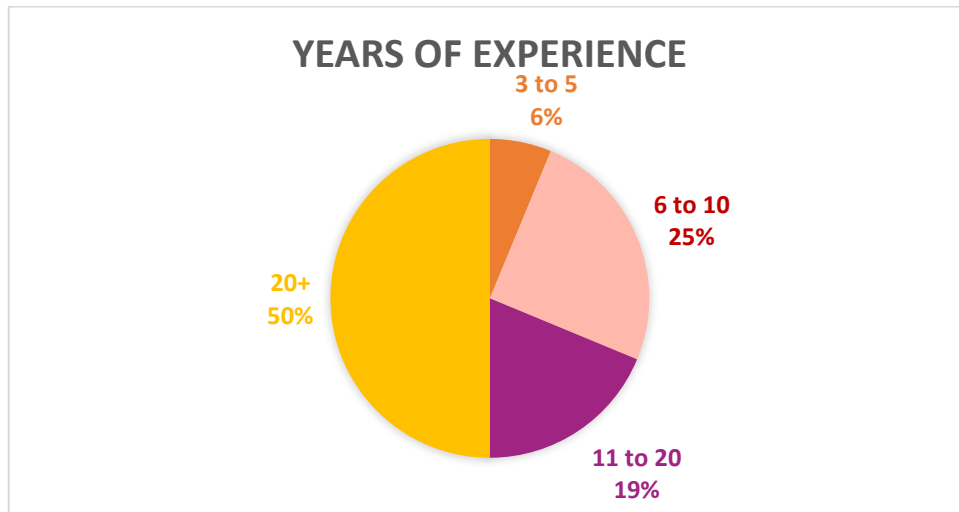
Of the 16 interviewees, 14 held roles at a managerial level whilst two held roles in a lower hierarchical position than a manager (figure 1). Interviewees were emailed a copy of the research questions so that they might develop a narrative answer. An interview was then conducted, which was tape-recorded to enable the capture of direct quotations, to allow the participants to voice their experiences first-hand and to fulfil demands of discourse ethics (Fawkes, 2021). To satisfy ethical conditions, personal details remained anonymous, and any identifiers (examples, names, places, etc.) were amended or removed.

**Figure 2. The dynamic of type of communications**



The interviews comprised of women working both in-house (7) and in agencies (9) across a variety of industries including government agencies, non-profit organisations, and the education sector (figure 2).

**Figure 3. Interviewee's years of experience**



The women were based in Canada (Ontario, Calgary, Alberta, Ottawa, Vancouver) and the US (New York, Los Angeles, Seattle, Missouri), and had between 3 and 44 years' experience, thus giving an insight into women in junior and senior positions across different age groups with a range from 26 years old to 66 years old. The majority of interviewees were in their 40s and the next most represented group were in their 30s.

All participants work in public relations in North America - though not all participants specified their location - and 87% (14 of 16) identify as white. Table 1 below gives information on the interviewees (note the use of question marks shows ambiguity).

**Table 1. Interviewees**

Interview	Type of company	In-house/ agency	Years of experience	Employee/ manager	Place
1	Internal PR agency	In-house	8+	manager	Ontario Canada
2	PR agency	agency	20	CEO	Canada? <sup>2</sup> US?
3	PR agency	agency	22	Founder/ MD	Calgary, Canada
4	consultant	agency	6.5	Founder and principal	Alberta, Canada
5	consultant	agency	20	manager	Ottawa, Canada
6	PR and marketing agency	agency	15	manager	Vancouver
7	Content	In-house	6	Employee? <sup>2</sup>	US
8	Public benefit org	agency	10	Manager (CEO)	New York, US
9	Digital Marketing	agency	20+	CEO	LA, US
10	Government agency	In-house	20	manager	Vancouver, Canada
11	Housing	In-house	13	manager	Vancouver, Canada
12	PR agency	agency	44	Founder/president	New York
13	hospitality	In-house	11	manager	New York
14	Research	Non-profit agency	20	CEO	Seattle, US
15	University	In-house	25+	manager	Missouri, US
16	Digital Marketing	In-house	3-4	employee	Vancouver, Canada



The participants were recruited through the internet, using social media such as the professional networking site, LinkedIn, to verify the credentials of working in the PR industry in North America. Interviewees were asked questions, which were structured around the three areas:

- **lived experiences of women working in public relations:** women were asked questions about their upbringing, work hours, work-life balance, working and raising a family, career progression opportunities, expectations on women's behaviour and attitudes women need to demonstrate to progress, experiences of direct discrimination such as disapproval, different treatment based on gender, sexist comments and practices, having to behave differently to be taken seriously and equality of opportunities;
- **office culture:** women were asked questions on networking, dress codes, chats and 'banter' in the office, gender differences in office banter and social interactions, exclusion from business decisions and expectations of women, such as having to work harder to prove themselves because of their gender;
- **leadership:** where women were asked questions on the socialisation process and early social interactions, communication style, and experiences with their bosses with a distinction on how women and men lead, and experiences with male and female bosses (for employees) and leadership styles (self-assessment of own leadership style for managers and leadership preferences for employees).

The research was underpinned by both sociological and organisational theory, exploring the gendered behaviour determining the development of gender role identity in occupations and the workplace (Connolly, 1998). The first group of questions determined the extent to which characteristics associated with males - occupational aspirations, aggression, competitiveness - manifested themselves in women also wanting to succeed (ibid, 1998) showing that women are socially ingrained in a masculine habitus (Bourdieu, 2007).

The second group of questions considered the nature of social interactions and whether Tannen's (1996) assertions about the differences in men's and women's speech and discourse topics were prominent in the water cooler and staffroom conversations.

The final group of questions explored the genderisation in early experiences and upbringing, questioning whether these early interactions and the cultural and societal act of sex-typing

(Connelly, 1998) impacted leadership styles and the preferences towards a feminine or masculine leadership style.

All questions were underpinned by the exploration of blokishness in the public relations industry: do women have to adapt in the workplace and show more masculine habits to succeed? Is the workplace inherently a patriarchal construct permeated by cultural masculinity? Do women have to embody, imbue, or exude masculine characteristics at work to be successful thus becoming part of Bordieu's (2007) masculine habitus? Is the gender difference in power eroding, and can women reach parity (Diekman et al., 2004).

Thematic analysis was carried out, with the application and definition of themes and the relationships between them (Saunders et al., 2019). This approach was to search for the themes and patterns and cross-reference with the other EUPRERA studies (ibid, 2019). Each section of the report was coded (lived experiences, the office culture and socialisation and leadership), as per the approach of Braun and Clarke (2006) who posit that thematic analysis is fundamental to qualitative analysis before a final thematic analysis from all of the data emerged. To allow interviewees to share their experience through their discourse, the results contain their direct quotations (Berg, 2007; Fawkes, 2021).

The questions guiding this study were, does blokishness pervade public relations organisations? If so, how and to what extent? Are cultural masculinity patterns manifesting in public relations? Are offices operating under cultural masculinity patterns? Are there differences in social interactions and banter between women and men? Is leadership culturally constructed using masculine characteristics? Is there a link between socialisation and work experiences and leadership?

The results below provide an analysis of the position of women in public relations in North America using the method and concepts from the theory outlined above.

## Findings

The three-question groupings from the interviews as outlined above: lived experiences of women working in public relations in North America; the office culture and socialisation and leadership are analysed separately below. The three groupings of the questions allowed for initial thematic coding, before question responses were coded further, allowing discourses to emerge.

### Lived Experiences of Women in Public Relations

A total of eight themes emerged through the analysis of this section of the questionnaire, increased scrutiny, fake it 'till you make it, early sex typing, work-first culture, lack of balance, masculine qualities favoured, lack of sisterhood and masculine discourse (graph 1).

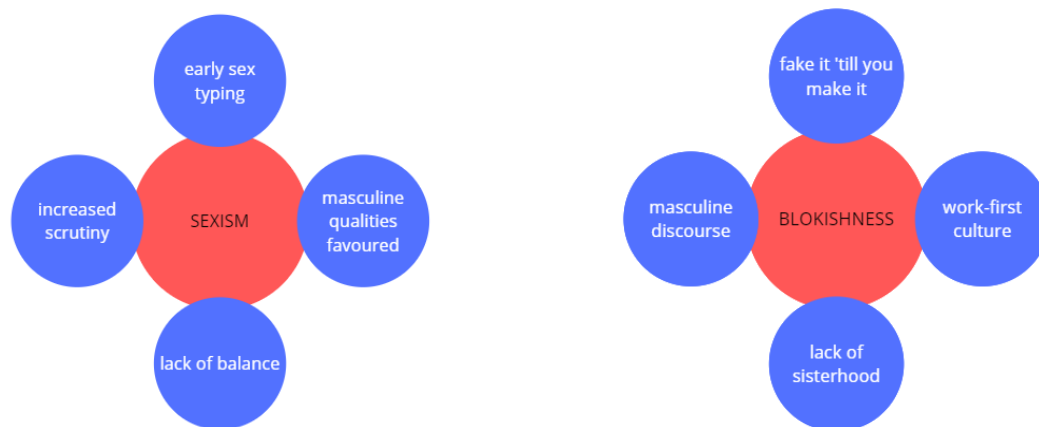
**Graph 1: Initial Thematic analysis**



When these themes are analysed in context, the two main themes - like Topić's (2020) study of the UK industry - appear to be the concepts of sexism (increased scrutiny on women, early sex-typing, a lack of balance, masculine traits favoured over feminine ones) and blokishness (lack of sisterhood, masculine discourse, a work-first culture and a 'fake it 'till you make it' attitude where women altered themselves to fit the male habitus) (graph 2). This similarity between women working in PR in the UK and North America is not surprising given the similarities and relationship between the two, with the UK looking to its US counterpart for communicating

politics and procedures (Minogue, 2000). Additionally, with globalisation and increased mediatisation (Tench et al., 2017) the Western world's practices are increasingly homogenised.

**Graph 2: The second thematic analysis**



Taylor (1996) asks if children differentiate in the same way as adults do as to whether gender roles are biologically or socially determined. According to Connolly (1998, p. 67), all societies perpetuate social differences between males and females, leading to 'sex-typing', the process by which those cultural traits designated by society are incorporated by a person. As such, early upbringing can contribute to gendered ideas of the roles men and women should play in society, and hence both descriptive (what women and men are like) and prescriptive (what women and men should be like) gender stereotypes in the workplace (Heilman, 2012). Interviewees shared their personal experiences of upbringing, with some afforded a degree of freedom:

*“My parents had me later in life - i.e. in their late 30s at the time - so they were always the very relaxed parents - who always allowed us to throw the parties, but ensure we did it in a responsible way by driving everyone home.”*

*“While we had certain expectations of behaviour and doing our chores, we also had a lot of freedom. We could ride our bikes anywhere, be gone for long periods of time, and walk by ourselves to school at a young age.”*

Most of the interviewees described their upbringing as 'strict' or 'traditional', with structures in place including cultural and religious observance. For some, from their early upbringing, they were taught to defer to elders and that 'children should be seen and not heard', mirroring the lack of voice experienced by junior employees compared to their (mostly) older, more

experienced colleagues. Age-related assumptions can transition to organisations, where an understanding of how different ages are perceived and how that in turn associates with sub-optimal deployment (Brooke & Taylor, 2005). For example,

*“My parents were somewhat strict in that we didn’t have cable, they didn’t drink and I was only allowed to go to parties at friends’ houses where my parents knew the friends’ parents.”*

*“Growing up in the South in the U.S., we were expected to behave in the “children should not be seen nor heard” style. Respecting adults was paramount. We went to a Catholic school for nine years and went to church every week. When you disobeyed, you were spanked with a belt.”*

*“[I] Had a strict upbringing and consider myself as the sandwich generation – where parents want to keep the eastern culture in a western world. We would never question our elders and speak back to them. We were polite.”*

The reasons these rules were followed range from the cultural discourse of politeness (‘we were polite’) to a fear of violence (‘you were spanked with a belt), with an implied punishment occurring – in the latter cases, physical – if this deferential expectation was not met. Whitman (2000) notes that some societies ingrain civility behaviours into legal regulation, establishing a law of interpersonal respect. There’s an implicit acknowledgement that these rules were in place to guarantee academic success and this is proliferated by a work hard culture. Attitudes about working women began to change in the US in the 1980s, where there was a marked shift to promote economic growth through recruiting talent and opening up more opportunities for these structures are thus underpinned by the Westernised concept of the capitalist construct of success: work hard and achieve, which ignores the systemic discrimination occurring in both education and employment (Bonnett, 1998). For example,

*“We had rules that were non-flexible, yet we were treated with respect and, from birth, were raised to be independent and ‘leave’ someday.”*

*“My mother always told me that I could do or have anything I wanted as long as I was willing to work for it.”*

*“We worked a lot of hard physical hours, but we also took time to rest and play (family-wide).”*

*“They were strict when I was a young kid because I was very mischievous. But I was always a “good kid,” and got great grades (so they were happy).”*

Interviewees who formed female friendships saw those as different from male friendships, where they also took on ‘male’ orientated interests. Female friendships are described as ‘girl drama’ or ‘nothing heavy’, whereas male friendships are described in terms of sport or labour:

*“I have a couple of close girlfriends from different time periods in my life. We joke and laugh about silly things our kids or husbands have done. Nothing heavy.”*

*“I hung out a lot with boys, but my interests were their interests in light of agriculture, etc.”*

*“I hung out more with girls, but I was active in sports and after-school activities. I think I was competitive, both academically and physically. I did hang out a lot with my brothers’ friends, but not by choice. He was an active boy scout so I was forced to go along with what he did.”*

Most interviewees also viewed their parents as offering different roles/dynamic in a relationship according to gender; mothers were loving and nurturing, promoting creativity and individuality whilst fathers were more distant and pragmatic. Deutsch et al. (2001) in a study of paternal participation found that increased paternal participation, particularly in the emotional side of parenting (e.g., comforting) contributed to a greater preference for feminine activities and higher self-esteem than children whose fathers were less involved. In families where the father was responsible for more of the parenting activities, the children embraced a gender-free model of family life (Deutsch et al., 2001).

*“I preferred playing sports with boys than playing with girls. I had a good relationship with both parents but did different things with each: with my mother, I went clothes shopping; with my father, I would go bowling, play golf, watch baseball on TV.”*

These relationships manifest as the mother being the primary caregiver and developing soft skills in their offspring. The development of these soft skills is crucial to the roles in the PR industry, with communications often considered a woman’s role because of the need to be empathetic and understanding as well as to listen to an audience (Adi & Ayme-Yahil, 2020).

*“I was very close to my mom – she was one of the few moms who worked and was not a stay-at-home mom. I was not as close to my dad growing up, even though I am much closer to him now, especially after my mom passed away.”*

*“I was close with both of my parents in different ways – my dad was passionate about schooling and education and my mom allowed me to tap into my creative side (ballet, fashion design etc.)”*

*“My communication with my father was more intellectual: talking about politics, the news, history, from a very young age I remember. With my mother, it was mostly day to day considerate, but warm and loving, reassuring.”*

*“I am the oldest of nine children, so I was very much a second mother to my younger siblings. My mother was only sixteen when I was born so in some ways, we grew up together. My parents did not live together, so I only got to see my father when time permitted, since he lived out of state; my grandfather and uncles were very much there to help play the fatherly role.”*

*“[I was] Brought up [...] with only one sister and mother as the primary caregiver. Father was around but took much less of a role in caregiving.”*

Some parents explicitly highlighted these gender differences through different treatment and expectations for interviewees compared to their brothers.

*“My parents also made it clear there were differences between boys and girls. Boys were the ‘favoured’ gender and my brother was allowed to do things that I wasn’t.”*

A pervading quality embedded within interviewees’ upbringing was the promotion of independence, though in claiming this, they spoke of identifying as a ‘tomboy’, perhaps suggesting the gendered perception of this attribute. Maccoby (1980, cited in Connelly, 1998) asserts that sex-typing occurs more rigidly for boys and that females can still indulge in ‘tomboy’ behaviour and be socially accepted. This appears to facilitate the transition for females into male designated occupations whilst conversely, males reject female designated occupations (Connelly, 1998). Mothers who supported the development of independence were seen as ‘progressive’ and allowing their offspring to reach for further than the homemaker role many of them had established for themselves, with 100% of interviewees educated to at least degree level, and some educated to master’s level.

*“My brother and I stayed home alone after school and for most summers (starting when I was in kindergarten and he was in second grade) so we were very independent.”*

*“My mother was very progressive and ensured my voice was always heard. I am very direct.”*

*“I did work hard in school and in my jobs. I held three jobs during college to pay for my education. I have always been a bit of a tomboy and enjoy sports, especially football and worked for the Oakland Raiders in my twenties and also cheered for the team as a Raiderette.”*

*“My parents were tough on me. When I started earning money in high school babysitting, my step-father said to me, “great, you can start paying for things yourself,” so I paid for my own clothing, school supplies and any school activity I wanted to participate in.”*

With interviewees primed with gender expectations early on in their experiences, further questions focused on their experiences in the workplace and whether they had felt marginalised or that they had to adopt male characteristics – ‘blokishness’ – to succeed. With 88% of the interviewees identifying at managerial level [and the majority of these as white], data was over representative of women in high hierarchical positions, with some of the women acknowledging that change needed to be reflected not just in gender, but also in ethnicity. Although interviewees felt women could progress in PR careers, they acknowledged barriers to progression faced by women, and the need to ‘clearly stay out of the politics of the workplace’ or ‘keep [their] head down’.

*“There are barriers to progression within the profession (women, overwhelmingly white women – we need to examine and recognize that not all women in PR have the same experience as it’s an overwhelmingly white profession. How do we actually achieve the systemic change that we want to, to be able to build the future that we need? This is a profession where we literally have the ability to shape the future. In order to build a future that we want, we need to actually have a profession that reflects the communities that we serve at all levels.”*



The process of advancing for women working in PR is described using sporting idioms – to ‘step up to the plate’ – with qualities such as ‘trust’, being ‘dependable’ and demonstrating value all key assets to success. Perhaps this demonstrates that Bourdieu’s (2007) male habitus is embedded within discourse, with these women in high positions fulfilling Sapir-Whorf’s linguistic relativity (Lucy, 2001): their thinking has become ingrained by masculine lexis. Some interviewees talk of their ‘fortune’ and ‘good luck’ at being noticed and advancing quickly in their careers – supporting Tannen’s (1996) theory that women are self-deprecating and almost deferential – though all interviewees describe their hard work and multiple moves up or across a metaphorical career ladder, showing their agentic self-efficacy (Yaxley, 2013) with interviewees constantly upskilling in order to accelerate their careers.

*“I have moved quickly in my career, up to senior levels in any organization I have been in. My career has been more a jungle gym than a ladder as I have not moved up in one organization but across sectors; shifted my focus as I am more driven by what I am doing than a specific job title.”*

Some interviewees describe the snobbery and nepotism they have experienced in PR, with one interviewee – despite the documented lack of diversity in PR – actively branding herself as different.

*“Over the last two decades, I have progressed, but it has not been easy. I find this industry is who you know not what you know. Also, [if you’re] a visible minority, good luck. I find it is okay to mentor the other and if the other becomes you, it’s not appreciated.”*

*“I think throughout my career I have tried to differentiate myself, first by being one of the only women in financial comms, and then by becoming someone known as a generator of ‘big ideas’.”*

Some interviewees felt that the nepotism had excluded them from important business decisions: “the PR industry isn’t what you know, rather who.” Many women felt that at some time they had been – or felt – excluded from important business decisions, with many reporting this feeling diminishing the more years spent in their role.

*“When I first started working at [redacted], there was an instance when I was intentionally excluded from a strategy meeting.....in day three of my coming on board.”*

Yaxley (2013) points to some women being critical of subsequent generations, feeling that they have not had to fight as hard for their opportunities in PR. Some interviewees, therefore, put the cause down to their perceived inexperience by senior policymakers rather than their gender. However, one interviewee reported being excluded because of her pregnancy and impending maternity leave, by an organisation that had, ‘systematically discriminated against women with young kids’. This typifies the work-first approach where women have found it increasingly difficult to maintain the roles of both employee and mother and have time to socialise or develop other skills (Saval, 2015). Women’s emotional labour (Yeomans, 2007) seems to be paradoxically both exploited and punished by the male culture and pervading attitudes to work (Bourdieu, 2007).

*“I was told now that you are pregnant, we’ll take you off this project, you do not need to attend these meeting anymore because we know you are going to leave and women with young children cannot take on these responsibilities. It was explicit, explained to me based on gender and identity as a mother. It was exhausting. It’s been 4 years since then, the board of commissioners has issued an apology and several seniors who were instigating the discrimination including the CEO have lost their positions. I hope this leads to systemic change for the employees at that organization.”*

Polić and Holy (2020, p. 13) note that ‘organisations are still cherishing the work-first culture’, which puts the needs of the organisation before that of anything else, including the family. This culture and the expectation that women will care for the family (Saval, 2015) has historically benefitted men, and women have had to choose between children and careers (Bordieu, 2007). This has been exacerbated during the COVID pandemic, with mothers expected to carry out their roles whilst also looking after children or home-schooling, meaning that the usual double burden (Hochschild, 2012) is in fact intensified as working hours are now capitalised by educating and looking after children.

Some of the interviewees spoke of the lack of perceived validity of PR as an industry in the eyes of colleagues, with one of the women highlighting co-workers ‘who are competing for power in communication studies and/or marketing/finance/business management and thus display reticence to accept her as having a value in her role. Perhaps this is because of PR being perceived as a feminised role as opposed to the male-dominated finance and business management roles which are thus seen as superior. The early contribution of women to US public relations was

characterised by derogatory remarks suggesting they were peripheral (Yaxley, 2013 citing Gower, 2001) and provided little value outside of their looks, thus leading to the stereotyping of the feminised industry at large.

Despite often feeling excluded from important decisions, all interviewees felt their chances of progressing in the career were equal to those available to men in the company. This seemingly has little impact on interviewee behaviour, with instead factors like having no role models from which to mimic behaviour and communication, leading to the assimilation with men through exuding masculine behaviours. Perhaps this feeling of equitable chances with male colleagues is due to the positions the women hold (88% at managerial level) and their own agentic self-efficacy ensuring they reach promotions and other opportunities (Yaxley, 2013).

*“I tried to become “one of the boys,” going out to bars, playing sports with the guys, talking about sports, stocks and politics. I sometimes didn’t realize that while I felt accepted, they always saw me as a woman. And the few times I was physically harassed, it was really difficult that they would violate the unwritten rules of work behaviour.”*

Interviewees were asked about behaviour towards them in the workplace and whether they had faced any disapproval or discrimination. The responses show that far from women in PR belonging to a ‘sisterhood’ striving for equity in the workplace and uniting against the systemic discrimination to dismantle patriarchal structures, often, it was women who displayed problematic behaviour. According to Heilman (2012), these prescriptive gender stereotypes of how women should behave promote gender bias by creating normative standards for behaviour that ‘induce disapproval and social penalties when they are directly violated or when a violation is inferred because a woman is successful’. This jealousy seems to drive other women’s behaviour, from perhaps a primal fear that such a woman disrupts the natural order.

*“Two of people that were instrumental to the discrimination against women at that organization were women themselves. It is systemic, built in the organization and I wouldn’t say men more than women as it is how the system operates. Sadly, didn’t have the opportunity to speak to the two women to question and understand their actions. Ironically, at that organization, it has been men leading this change.”*

The unfavourable behaviour of women was endemic, with those particularly at the managerial level experiencing jealousy or being seen as a ‘threat’, again reinforcing Heilman’s (2012) theory that to subvert the norms is to induce disapproval.

*“[I am] savvy, strategic, willing to work hard and step outside comfort zones with a view to ROI (most women don’t want to do this). I’ve worked for high powered executives. Never had trouble with the men, but have with women who were threatened by me.”*

The above example demonstrates another pattern in responses, that other women were seen as being deficient in certain skills or knowledge that were associated with men.

*“I have faced disapproving from both men and women bosses, but the few women who were my boss were very poor at difficult conversations.”*

The women found that often they had to ‘fake it’: behave in a way that was not natural to them, to either live up to a female archetype or simply fit in, with one woman disclosing she had been judged by ‘usually older men who I don’t know very well and they don’t know me’.

*“I have to change how I behave, absolutely. I have to be more friendly, approach things nicely, undermine self and all those mannerisms that women have to do, simply because they work.”*

Some interviewees felt their appearance contributed to how they were perceived in the workplace, with age - or the appearance of youthfulness - a barrier for some women.

*“I’ve had people tell me I’m young or I’m not old enough to do something (some think I look younger than I am, I’m in my mid-40s). Those who are seen as “more important” in the industry are listened to over others, even though they could be wrong. Older people are more likely to discount younger people or those with “less” roles unless they have proven themselves in the past. However, I want to be careful not to blanket or generalize too much. There are definitely many exceptions to this.”*

One woman felt she was able to capitalise on her appearance of ‘blonde hair, white skin and small body’ which lives up to Western ideals of beauty, in a way other colleagues were not able to. Her appearance was deemed to be ‘helpful’ in her career, perhaps emphasising the sexism

that is rife in organisations and the implicit pragmatics of what an attractive woman might mean reinforcing Bourdieu's (2007) notion that a woman should be feminine in a man's world.

*"I fake it all the time, but much less so than my colleagues given the way I look – blonde hair, white skin and small body which have been helpful in my career. I do not feel like I need to change my appearance in a way that some of my colleagues."*

Another woman was deliberately careful that her behaviour was not seen as sexualised and suggestive to 'keep things clean', establishing boundaries in the workplace. As Adi and Ayme-Yahil (2020) note, citing Saltzman (2012), women have long been accused of using their sex appeal to win clients and obtain promotions, and this is propagated by the representation of female PR practitioners in popular culture and works of fiction.

*"I NEVER flirt. Keeps things clean."*

*"I joke around a lot – I'm pretty funny and witty, but I don't act like this unless I know someone and trust them. I'm very behaved but then when I'm around people I'm comfortable with, I'm definitely less so. I'm also very outspoken but not around people I don't know."*

One of the interviewees struggled to confidently speak her view, with many of the other interviewees filtering or moderating their behaviour to progress. This propensity to change habits to fit in with the male habitus (Bourdieu, 2007) seems counter-productive to the collective feminine struggle, however seems to be an individual way of infiltrating the masculine culture.

*"It's only recently that I have gained the confidence to speak my view. Early on my career, my goal was to fit in. However, as I progressed into this field, I realized that difference is what we need to get ahead of, especially when our population is a pure reflection of difference. I have been talked down to by white men and woman. As for younger, I find myself relating to them better because I appreciate their voice and always ensure their views are given a platform to be expressed."*

Some of the interviewees experienced mockery about their choice of career, with stereotypes guiding the perception of the type of person who could succeed in the role.

*“As a young girl, people tried to dash my dreams, with comments such as why cheerleading, what is Public Relations, and why would you want to move to Beverley Hills, you’re not rich. Comments like these made me more committed to pursuing my path. I wanted to show them that PR professionals and cheerleaders could be pretty, wicked smart, and make enough money to live in Beverly Hills without someone else footing the bill.”*

One of the women was adamant that she would not change who she was to meet others’ expectations, separating this from knowing one’s own strengths and weaknesses and working to improve them.

*“It is very important to me that I be myself. I know my strengths and weaknesses and work on improving skills, but this is not the same as changing who I am to meet other people’s expectations, which is not something I would do.”*

To further consider the bloke-ification of the PR workplace, the women were asked if they had ever heard sexist comments about female employees in their workplace or whether they had been treated differently for being a woman. The responses make clear that sexism is not only aimed at women, with women also making comments about men, but also that sexism is ingrained in the workplace culture, driven by both jealousy and apathy.

*“I have heard very sexist comments from women about men. Many times.”*

*“Those threatened by me and my intelligence and/or drive and/or appeal as an employee to upper management.”*

*“In the early years, absolutely. I was one of the first women in financial relations, so the men in meetings often mistook me for a secretary.”*

*“No, but I have heard from my Board.”*

*“At various part of my career in spirits, absolutely – but not necessarily at one particular job/at one company.”*

*“The few times I was physically harassed, it was really difficult that they would violate the unwritten rules of work behaviour.”*

One of the interviewees was given a warning by another woman working for the company, which allowed her to become aware of the gender discrimination that existed, thus modifying her behaviour to assertively dominate the room. Far from the Queen Bee syndrome identified in other studies (Polić & Holy, 2020, Topić, 2020a) this is indicative of women helping each other to challenge the patriarchal structures dominating the workplace (Topić, 2020). It could, however, be argued that this lack of collective agency to eradicate gendered bias in the workplace is merely a means to an end and does not progress the position of women in PR workforces (Yaxley, 2013).

*“Early in my career, I was the first woman in a particular position and when I was hired into this role, the woman who hired me said to me you need to know what you are walking into. There were people in the hiring committee – men – who said we shouldn’t hire you because you are a small woman and people will not listen to you. You won’t be able to command authority in this position. This was helpful as it opened my eyes to the gender discrimination that I wasn’t really aware of. As a result, the very first meeting I walked in to, I walked in and commanded the attention in the room, and I could see those who doubted me as their jaws dropped. Telling me that allowed me to know what I was dealing with.”*

*“I started to feel it more when I became a parent and in different organizations.”*

Many of the interviewees were aware of the systemic discrimination encountered acutely by women and people of colour, and there was a suggestion that this was somewhat unchecked and insidious. Bonnett (1998) argues that white identity is a historical and geographical variable tied up in the re-formation of capitalism, thus suggesting this political system of generating profit is tied to whiteness. Perhaps this idea is embedded in the cultural factors that create an agentic self-efficacy (Yaxley, 2013) in the majority of the white women at the managerial level.

*“In my current workplace, there are microaggression based on race and gender. [For] example, a colleague has this thing where he says, ‘we just need to ask them to open their kimono’, which means like show us your details. But if you think about it, he’s talking about a woman disrobing herself. Plus, it is culturally insensitive. He is not thinking about the meaning of it, but it comes*

*across as a microaggression towards women as well as an aggression on the Japanese community.”*

*“Women have a long way to break the glass ceiling. As a woman of colour, I find the PR industry dominated by white woman and men. There is a lot of systemic discrimination within the industry and only now they are starting to check the box. Also, upon entering the PR industry at a fairly young age, I also faced a lot of agism (too young, too naïve)”*

Two of the interviewees felt this discrimination manifested as sexist comments which demonised women who subverted expectations and were seen as a ‘bitch’ or a game player. Women were also accused of sleeping their way to the top. It is interesting to note that whilst other EUPRERA studies highlighted the existence of Queen bee syndrome in their data (Polić & Holy, 2020, Topić, 2020a), the majority of women in this study – due to their higher hierarchical positions – found their subordinates unsupportive, potentially pointing to a lack of awareness of their individual positions and outside perceptions.

*“Yes. Some include, ‘the only way she got there is by playing the game’; ‘you have to be a bitch to get there’; ‘she dated so and so and got the job’.”*

Women’s abilities were also somehow tied to their appearance, with attractive women assumed to have little intelligence. These sexist ideas are prevalent in the stereotyping of women working in PR, who have been derogatively described as nouns from ‘cheesecake’ to (Yaxley, 2013) to ‘bunnies’ and ‘slut’ (Polić & Holy, 2020).

*“Early in my career, I was criticized for being an upbeat woman who dressed well and took care of herself. The criticism came primarily from women. I was also told by men that I was ‘too pretty to be smart’. The comments from these sexist men and negative women propelled me to bring my A-game to meetings because I wanted to be taken seriously by everyone who thought I could not succeed.”*

The majority of the interviewees had been told – or made to feel like – they were not good at something because of their gender. For one of the women, this happened ‘during pregnancy’ whilst another was asked: ‘how are you going to balance demands and young children?’ One of the interviewees shared her frustrations at the ‘passive-aggressive comments indicating a man could do it instead’. Bandura (2002, p. 279) defines this as a “gendered patterning of perceived



occupational efficacy” which negatively impacts women in career spaces usually occupied and dominated by men. This sentiment has also manifested in the women feeling they have to work harder to prove themselves because they are women. This issue was magnified in women of colour who were under more scrutiny.

*“To achieve promotion, as a woman I was expected to take on significant stretch projects and things that were outside my job description, work evenings and weekends to be considered whereas my male colleagues were not; they were seen as such if they were competent in their roles they’re considered for promotion. I would also say that as a white woman, I have faced lesser of that in comparison to colleagues who are black and women of colour. We have to recognize the systems we operate within are ones that have misogyny and racism baked into them, hence why some of us are focused on dismantling the system.”*

Women also felt that they were assessed on much more than their abilities and that they had to consider carefully how to maintain a work-family balance. Yaxley (2013) speaks of the possible gendered nature of public relations work, with it described as emotional labour (Hochschild 2003, Yeomans, 2007) requiring interpersonal attributes that could later prove a disadvantage for women’s careers.

*“Yes, women are judged on their appearance, their emotions, their ability to balance family and work life. Most dads do not have to feel guilty for wanting to feel fulfilled in whatever their life’s purpose is and neither should we. We’re strong women, and we can balance it all. We can be proud that we are women and can still be feminine, loving, and nurturing mothers and successful businesswomen.”*

The women all felt that they were positive role models to women further down the hierarchy, with one of the women also proving to be an aspirational figure for men in the company. Yaxley (2013) notes - in her study of women in PR in the 1970s and 1980s - that women were not only critical of younger generations but did not act as change agents for the young females in the industry.

*“I’ve had several tell me that or write me letters expressing their appreciation and admiration, so I hope so!”*

*“I have many graduates/mentees who have told me often that I inspired them. They are PhDs, PRWeek 40 Under 40 winners, McDonald’s global comms leaders, etc.”*

*“I have been told that I am strong, and they wish they could be as brave; however, being brave means not always being part of the popular crowd and being side lined.”*

*“Not just women but also men, they see the way I am able to be a parent and employee and member of the team, that they want to do that too – it gives them the ability to do so too.”*

*“I aim to be a mentor and a role model to the women who work for me. While I believe that everyone should be their own person, I hope I have certain behaviours, principles, and attributes that others would want to emulate as they create their own professional identities.”*

Yeomans (2019) argues a ‘new feminist visibility’ has turned collective social change – and the ability for the women to work together against their patriarchal oppressor – into a ‘highly individualised asset’; neoliberal feminism. Whilst the women acknowledge they have been inspiring – or have aimed to inspire – this is unclear whether it has manifested as a mentorship programme or something offering tangible change for a new generation of women.

## **The Office Culture**

Theorists argue that space is gendered, and this can have profound consequences for women (Doan, 2010). The office has historically been seen as a male domain, despite Bullock (1994) asserting that women have always worked. Yaxley (2013) points to the 1970s and 1980s as a time when female employment in public relations ‘increased tenfold’. Though working hours were typically deemed a standard day of 9 am – 4 pm, some found the implications of Covid-19 had impacted on working hours, with one participant feeling like she was ‘always on’. Most of the participants reported working long undocumented hours implementing the work-first culture historically recognised as a masculine trait and thus working under the assumption that there are no caring and family responsibilities (Topić, 2020; Topić et al, 2020; Topić et al, 2019). Despite some workplaces offering a schedule ‘flexible for appointments’ etc, a common theme was the need to work as many hours needed to ‘get [the] job done’, with participants forgoing lunch and

starting and ending early. This total attention to work is what Acker (2009) describes as men's work.

*"I would say however a typical day for me currently starts at 8:30[am] and wraps around 7/8PM"*

*"I am at work seven days a week - more than 10 hours a day pre-Covid. During the pandemic, my working hours increased to 18 hours a day, seven days a week for over 120 days straight without a day off as part of the Covid-19 response team. This was unusual and part of working in social services addressing homelessness; the slowest day was a 10-hour day. At the moment, it ranges between 10 - 12 hours workday, though it's hard to keep track because I am just always on."*

One interviewee disclosed that no adjustments were made to facilitate her return to work: "I had to return to work after my first baby was only six weeks old. No accommodations were made for me." The interviewee's use of the modal verb 'had to' compounded with the modifier 'only' suggests she was forced into making this decision, perhaps with the fear of losing her job. Many of the women faced Hochschild's 'double burden', having to work a shift at work followed by a shift at home with family, particularly as COVID blurred the lines between work and home and schooling (Hochschild, 2012). This puts pressure on women by making it almost impossible to socialise or to develop skills or hobbies outside of the work or home realms, limiting their social capital (Grunig et al, 2009). However, another interviewee with a notably female boss described as 'not only a great businesswoman, but also an empathetic leader' describes a compassionate reaction to her miscarriages:

*"...After I suffered miscarriages, she wouldn't even hear of me coming into the office and made sure I didn't use up vacation or sick time to heal."*

This lack of flexibility in some instances can manifest as discrimination against women who historically and traditionally also have the pressure of raising a family, thus posing questions about the ability of a work/life balance. One interviewee described how: "it's about work-life balance that the PR professional chooses. We have to define what we mean by "success" and "advancement" and remember those definitions." Whilst one of the interviewees - with three children aged between seven and twelve - found the concept of a work/life balance achievable, others spoke of the pressures of presenteeism - being on the job and visible in the workplace, but not fully functioning (Hemp, 2004) - and the additional costs and practicalities of childcare.

*“It is VERY difficult. You need to have childcare you can trust (and that’s expensive). You need to work as close by your home as possible (which I did for a few years then had to work in the city). No such thing. When you are home, you think about what you should be doing for work. When you are at work, you worry about the kids at home. You are really never where you should be, never truly ‘present’.”*

However, despite the attempts to segment time and separate work from life, there was an acknowledgement that a sense of commitment and dedication pervades the more hours invested in the workplace and that this was seen as a way to be promoted.

*“I do think as you move up level/pay-wise, you do have to make more and more sacrifices in my opinion. Given I oversee various departments within my day-job and run a consulting business at night/weekends, the ability to have much a healthy balance is not quite existent however I have made a rule to put work phone and computer away for the weekends minus emergencies.”*

*“The higher up the ladder, the harder it becomes to balance family and work. There really has to be a fundamental shift. I feel that in an individual culture it doesn’t impact as much as collective culture because the definition of families differs.”*

Nevertheless, many of the women thought it was possible to carve out a work-life balance, but in most cases, this was engineered by the woman with little support from the organisation. Bullock (1994) says that gender discrimination is being eliminated, but the contributions are mainly by women themselves.

*“Yes, it is possible as I have. It also depends on the organization one is in. In one organization, I experienced explicit and sustained discrimination, based on parental status so much so that it led to an external ombudsmen investigation on the unfair treatment of women with children, in particular women of colour and black women with children. My black colleagues faced significantly worse discrimination. That organization at the time was not willing to give women responsibility and removed them from positions of responsibility and projects when they became pregnant - never given the opportunity to show that they can do it. This all happened in a public sector*

*organization. In the past two weeks today, the board has made a public apology to employees for the discrimination that they faced.”*

Here the interviewee acknowledges that the intersection of ethnicity and gender is more poorly received, showing the archaic perceptions that need to change in the workplace. Women who were successful at apportioning time to work and home acknowledged a cultural shift was needed and that organisations had to be part of the change. This internalised masculine habitus and patriarchal structures embedded in the workplace are endemic to the values of the industry, which put the onus on women to change their fate or else conform to the status quo (Topić, 2020a).

*“Yes, it is possible. However, a, women need to be supported at home to do that and b, women need to be given the opportunity by the employer. I have two young children, 5 and 7, I am the youngest member of my executive team, and I’m director at a high-profile public-sector organization – so yes, it’s possible. You need support in your workplace, family and community”*

For some of the women, especially further up the hierarchy, it was important for them to instil the values they demonstrated at work into their family life. Children were thus part of the conversation; unlike the generations before them, they were helped to understand the reasons behind the adults’ choices.

*“While some people strive for work-life balance, I strive for work-life alignment. For me, the work that I do is to make my community better and build a better future for my family. I see the two as being one in the same thing, not different – I talk to my kids about the work I do, why I do it, tell them why I’m stressed if I’m experiencing it as well as if I am unable to be there for them, I explicitly explain to them why. For me, it’s all part of the same package. I am building a better world by raising my children and building a better world for my children.”*

*“Different way of seeing it. Finding that connecting bridge between work and family, especially for me, providing and building housing for people who need it. COVID makes it even more challenging for those experiencing homelessness, with a disproportionate majority being Indigenous people. For me, speaking to my children why I see it as part of my responsibility to do what*

*I do and put in the hours to help people. Kids get this - they understand people need a home, so it is an easy thing for them to latch on to or understand why mom needs to work on a Saturday, because mom is helping people.”*

*“Absolutely. My daughter, who is now in college, was born when I was just beginning my career. She watched me grow in my career and also saw the process I went through to found NRPR Group. She’s seen my evolution from intern to CEO. I have always had to take care of my daughter and to work. She was a regular visitor to my offices from a young age and saw my dual commitment to her and my career. I have always worked to set an example for her and to make sure there was food on the table, clothes on her back, and a roof over our heads. It is definitely possible to be a good mother and a good PR professional.”*

The women see having the value of work-life balance demonstrated to their children as a valuable learning experience to help them excel in their future careers.

*“No matter how much work there is to do and there is always so much to do, having a work-life balance is one of the most important things for a healthy, fruitful career. My daughter has always helped me remember this. I always left time in the evening to feed her, help her with homework and to make sure she went to bed on time. I was able to make time for both mom and work responsibilities via time management and prioritization. I learned to own my schedule, own my day, learn when to say no, and let me tell you: those are some of the most valuable lessons anyone could ever learn.”*

Overall, there were some difficulties in the semantics of the term work/life balance not adequately describing the experience, with balance connoting equal shares of time dedicated to the two, and feelings of guilt permeating choices.

*“I wouldn’t call it a balance at all. It’s more of an integration. I try to turn off work on the weekends, though, but people still try to push it. People need to recharge. I think it’s inconsiderate for people to ask people to consistently work on the weekends (see it a lot in academia). I do check my emails in the evening and night, but I try not to spend too much time on my phone in the evenings to spend time with my kids. I give my employees a day off - at least once every couple [of] months to recharge and tell them they are not allowed*

*to check messages. I also tell my team when I take my kids somewhere or when I go for a run so they can do the same. Leaders have to be deliberate with this and set good examples. Plus, they come back refreshed, recharged, and more productive.”*

One of the women suggested re-framing the term as ‘flexible work culture’, with theorists such as Piaget (2002) and Vygotsky advocating that language controls the way we think and speak, with the syntax of removing ‘work’ as the root phrase possibly shifting perceptions of how much importance should be placed in one’s job, and also allowing for other activities outside the realms of work and family. Additionally, Sapir-Whorf posited in the theory of linguistic determinism that our thinking is limited by the words that we know, thus making a strong case for the re-framing of the phrase to change the patriarchal concept imbued within.

*“I think the definition of work-life balance and the term should be replaced with flexible work culture. The goals of work-life balance to have just that - balance. But in demanding jobs where there are busy periods and many expectations, it’s not possible. For working moms and those with other family obligations, flexibility is the key.”*

In public relations, networking plays an essential role, with the literature on work and family life suggesting that women are embedded in different personal networks than men, with potential consequences for their rates of business formation, survival, and growth (Aldrich et al., 2006). One of the women described networking as ‘behind-the-scenes power and access’ and most acknowledged it was a way to build relationships, though COVID had made interacting in close proximity impossible.

*“The majority of my colleagues at a leadership level work remote all over the country - pre and post COVID so a lot of our interactions are calls and Zoom calls.”*

*“We are a small group and before COVID, would get together frequently for pool parties and Happy Hours.”*

There were acknowledged differences in networking in the public versus private sector, with it seen as part of someone’s role, and contrastingly as a ‘threat’.

*“People connect casually; not like the private sector where it’s an expectation within one’s role.”*

*“No networking opportunity and if you did network it was viewed as a threat.”*

The differences in the formality of networking were also highlighted, with some events having an air of professionalism and others being more informal conversations.

*“As a public relations professional, I know the importance of building relationships. People like to work with people they like, and people who respect them, and help them. I attend networking events to meet media, other PR professionals, vendors who may have tools we can use, and to meet prospective clients. There needs to be a certain chemistry between all involved in a working relationship and this chemistry can be built through interactions in a less formal setting such as a networking event.”*

Networking events provide interaction with people outside of the company, but despite the (sometimes) informal setting, there are still cultural conventions to understand, like conversation topics. This is true of the workplace, where different settings allow for different topics. Conventionally, according to Lakoff (1975), men are responsible for topic setting and also have different topics that are inherently masculine, like work, sport whilst women speak less frequently. The women working in PR in North America were asked about the nature of their conversations at work to determine whether they were defined by a male habitus (Bourdieu, 2007). The answers suggested that men did indeed speak about different topics to those women were conversing about, with politics and finance seen as a predominantly male domain. Women were more likely to talk about family and pregnancy and childcare and were more willing to share their feelings, leading to a feeling of bonding.

*“I am mostly around guys and talk about politics and tech. With females over the years, we would talk about pregnancies, treatment by men at work, childcare, feelings of constant exhaustion.”*

*“When I’m not talking about work, I’m typically talking to my husband, kids or friends. Most topics with my husband relate to politics, society, running or hiking, what’s happening in Seattle, or music. With my friends, very similar, but also talk about others we have in common, books we read, their families, Etc.. We are a female-heavy, small-staffed organization, even though my chair and videographer are male. I don’t notice any differences in how people joke around. The female employees do bond over our “femaleness” some. We*



*have stereotypical qualities such as highly organized, and what we term the “GSD – get sh\*t done” type of people.”*

Politics are associated with women insofar as the office politics – behaviour that establishes a competition for power with different factions – with such as Williams and Dempsey (2014) creating guides for how women can master these negotiations and succeed. This seems to hold women responsible for their own failure to get ahead, with office politics benefitting men over women (Williams & Dempsey, 2014).

*“I have a mixed crowd but prefer speaking to males because there is no judgement. It was a very dull culture and elevator jokes were the norm. Jokes were surrounded around gossip, who said what. This was the first time, I worked with so many women and it was difficult and an adjustment.”*

As Yeomans (2019) notes the lack of a ‘feminist consciousness’, being critical of other ‘girly’ women and aligning oneself with masculine identity shows that women in PR are pursuing an individualistic pathway. One of the women acknowledged that rather than gender, the individual person’s interests dictated subject matter in conversations.

*“It depends on the person. When chatting with a colleague, client, or acquaintance, I try to focus on topics that I know would be of interest to them, be it sports, fitness, food, or other issues. I am equally comfortable with males or females and treat everyone with respect.”*

Men culturally had the power to make jokes in the workplace, with some of the women reporting remarks that were discriminatory to marginalised groups. Lakoff (1989) posits that women in the main lack a sense of humour and don’t tell jokes well, though the context of the workplace may have a bigger impact on this, with O’Barr and Atkins (2009) debunking this theory and suggesting it was instead typical of powerless language.

*“At some points over the years, some guys could joke in a sexist way or make remarks about gay or diverse people. I would tell them that these conversations were a violation of our employee handbook.”*

Men could also take or hold the floor, with interviewees feeling that women had less of a voice. Edelsky (1981) found that men took more and longer turns and did more of the joking in conversation in both formal and informal interactions.

*“You can see it every day even on Zoom calls. If a man says something or a particular person, people agree, but women are less listened to. I encourage everyone to watch this on calls. Women are also more likely to state a point and people move on to a different topic without addressing what she said.”*

*Funny student stories, funny processes that happen. No, no problems with jokes from males or females. However, if I go on the hunt for problematic feelings I can surely find them. Anyone can.*

COVID and lockdown dominated many of the conversations, with communication moving online to meet the demands of lockdown.

*“COVID as more of my time has been during the pandemic in current role. I make an effort to communicate with individuals on many topics including their children, community activism, books and Netflix. I have made an effort to connect with fellow executives on a one on one basis. The current comms team has 24 staff, 4 males and 20 females. I have made a deliberate effort to diversity people in my team mostly on gender, identity and race. My branch has a good sense of humour. If there is any difference, it’s probably a difference in status thus more hierarchy.”*

*“Due to the pandemic, we are all working remotely and have continued to hire since the shutdown, which means that we have employees who have never worked in the office. Through instant messaging, texts, email, phone calls and Zoom video calls, staff stay in touch. Their conversations range from clients and work-related topics to coffee, weekend plans, travel, food, and a range of topics. Our staff is primarily female, but there are males, and everyone treats everyone equally, which pleases me. Team members are friends in addition to co-workers and are very supportive of one another.”*

To analyse whether a male habitus (Bourdieu, 2007) was present, women were asked about dress codes and styles at work, to determine whether standards were male orientated, excluded women or were discriminatory. The remoteness afforded by Zoom meant that more informal wardrobes were widely accepted as long as they were ‘presentable’ with one interviewee giving the example ‘no dirty, baggy sweatshirts or smeared makeup’, though she stressed this was not a ‘formally written rule’. Many of the interviewees described the expected style as ‘business casual’, though there was ‘no enforcement’, just cultural markers that prevented anyone dressing ‘like a slob’.

Younger employees and assistants were more likely to flout the implicit rules about dress code, with one interviewee working in higher education sharing: 'I have talked to some of our communication assistants (undergraduate university students) about expected dress codes in the office and at events. Some would show up with crop tops, very short shorts so we expect people to not show their midriff, backside, etc. As a boss and a West Coaster, I'm fairly liberal - I think our industry is too formalized in our dress, but I do expect people to be professional'. One of the interviewees found that her style of 'dressing up' rather than 'down' was frowned upon, with people making derogatory comments about her choices, the ultimate power play which demeans women's professionalism based on their appearance (Grunig et al, 2009).

*"Business casual was the dress code. As a person that enjoys dressing up and tends to dress up rather than down, I found it was frowned upon. There were many times that I heard comments from superiors, "how can you afford that", "do you spend all your money on shopping, etc. Having come from a corporate culture and worked across the country, I find the west coast attitude and way of dressing very boring. I firmly believe that one should dress up. Having been brought up in an eastern culture where my parents had uniforms in school and there was work attire that was taught to us. Take your work seriously including the way you present yourself. Even though our organization was business casual, unless you were an executive, it was not really required."*

Overall, women were seemingly measured against the same expectations as men about the way they dressed and could interpret the dress code in a manner that did not discriminate against them because of their gender. However, perhaps the women were acquiescing to what Lacan terms the mirror stage and apperception: that we see ourselves as objects that need to fit into society so must look and behave in a certain way (Mambrol, 2016).

## The Socialisation and Leadership

Over 1/3 of interviewees at the managerial level (5 out of 14) have been CEOs for 13 years or more, but have previously had both male and female bosses. When asked about the skills integral to a leadership role, interviewees spoke of the need for empathy and goals or being ‘direct’, with many seeing the two as mutually exclusive - though others who were in the managerial positions viewed the two as intrinsically linked - though empathy was more often associated with female bosses and role models.

*“My former boss [...] was not only a great businesswoman but also an empathetic leader. For example, after I suffered miscarriages, she wouldn’t even hear of me coming into the office and made sure I didn’t use up vacation or sick time to heal.”*

**Figure 5. Chart comparing skills needed as a manager or employee**



*(Note sample size was two for employees and fourteen for managers)*

The interviewees’ experiences were largely based on having a man for a boss or line manager. The demographic of males in these leadership positions are overwhelming, with Lynkova (2020) citing statistics that position women in just 31% of the senior roles in North America. The interviewees almost wholly demonstrated a preference for a male leader, with one interviewee

citing 'women are their own worst enemy' with toxic traits such as being 'manipulative and jealous' a danger when working with women. Williams and Dempsey (2014) say that women need to be much savvier than men to get ahead in high powered careers, and remain there, and compare it to walking a tightrope.

*"I have had one good female boss. I've had several bad ones."*

Though two of those interviewed expressed their preferences were embedded in 'the person rather than the gender', males were seen as more confident and unthreatened by others, and unlikely to indulge in 'drama'.

*"I prefer to work with interesting people that show up and ready to do the work. I have worked both with male and female. I gravitate towards male because there is no drama. Having worked with women who are confident in their own skin and not threatened is the key to have a collaborative workplace."*

Interviewees largely felt their leadership style was linked to their personal communication styles, which were quite masculine styles, possibly embedded in early experiences of subverting gender norms.

*"I'm direct and clear with my goals. I like to think I am empathetic and goal-oriented."*

Interviewees were asked about their preferences for leadership; the preferred traits then lent themselves to interviewees' personal styles. Women encounter more obstacles than men in education and are over-represented amongst the lowest paid, and so in being visible at the leadership level, the women are contributing to the efforts being made to promote equality, potentially putting themselves under more scrutiny to represent women as a marginalised group (Bullock, 1994). The adjective 'direct' was seen many times, which has connotations of delivering communications in a straight-forward manner more oft associated with males (Tannen, 1996) though the term was often succeeded by an abstract noun denoting feelings (honest, empathetic, considerate) to perhaps counteract with a feminine trait.

*"I prefer bosses who are direct, open and honest."*

*"Direct and considerate; the two are not polar opposites."*

*“Direct, unassuming, hard worker, not cowed by title, smart, considerate, sense of urgency, willing to lead from behind, not above any task regardless of perception.”*

In observing and dissecting male vs female styles of leadership to ascertain a preference, women’s comments belied the patriarchal construct shaping their views (Acker, 2009). Excellent male bosses were seen as the norm, with female bosses who were well-liked being acknowledged as having masculine traits or subverting the expectations of a female.

*“I’ve worked the best with men, but I had one awesome female boss who was a hardcore marketing and sales whiz. She was probably more masculine than most of the men I worked for, as she was a no-B.S. type of person.”*

Interviewees detailed the essential skills needed by men and women in leadership roles, with interpersonal skills being prized above hard skills – those acquired through formal education and training programs. Gender stereotypes perpetuate gender bias by embedding the perception that women’s skills are lacking the necessary attributes believed necessary for success in male gender-typed roles (Heilman, 2012). Men have greater access and opportunity in education and often women’s activities are considered less important (Bullock, 1994). Besides, perhaps this indicates Tannen’s (2007) theories about the self-deprecation manifested in women’s communication: their hesitancy to recognise the hard skills and expertise necessary for an individual to successfully do the job projected onto the skillset. The skills deemed necessary were overwhelmingly feminine traits described through sensing verbs and abstract nouns: empathy, vulnerability, caring and listening.

*“Honesty, transparency, clear vision and excellent communication. Also, having your team members’ backs.”*

*“Empathy; vulnerability; collaboration; honesty.”*

*“A good leader is one who sets direction for the organization and works to help others to become leaders. A good leader is passionate about the work to be done and this enthusiasm can be spread, resulting in more positive and productive employees. Personally, a good leader is knowledgeable, honest, and confident and always working on ways to grow and improve.”*

*“Good listener, being available, being smart, open-minded. Honest. Good attitude. Being kind, having empathy. The ability to have tough conversations*

*and the ability to follow through with promises. Being transparent. Being the type of person who your team can come to you and ask you anything because they feel comfortable. Someone who takes responsibility and knows when they need to stick their neck out or even protect your team.”*

*“I think it depends on an organization. However, I would say vision, empathy, emotional intelligence, communications and flexibility are effective. We would never question our elders and speak back to them.”*

*“Empathy. Confidence. Ability to establish quick rapport. Enthusiasm. Teamwork. Fairly adaptable, usually pretty comfortable adjusting communication style based on the needs on whom she’s talking with.”*

*“Honesty, respect, authenticity, walk the talk, visionary, good communicator.”*

The interviewees also described their leadership styles, where there was a crossover into the personal from the professional: very caring attributes manifested in their practices which were linked to the woman as nurturer (Bourdieu, 2007) and having compassion.

*“I get very close to those I manage most directly - I tend to have many confide in me personally and professionally. I love to help develop those I oversee to truly reach their highest potential - even if sometimes that entails helping them find their next steps. And ensuring I continue to help them professionally develop even after we don’t work together is an ongoing priority of mine. I am personally and professionally typically very direct, and real - but also veer away from most unnecessary confrontations so I think there’s a lot of crossover in my personal and professional life.”*

*“I value the idea of [being] a compassionate semi-tyrant because I care deeply about valuing others around me while getting value-added work done.”*

These female leaders personally invested in their team as individuals to promote employee growth. They engendered a democratic style with two-way communication (Grunig et al, 2009) to allow their employees to have the voice that they were lacking in their youth as a woman.

*“I’ve definitely grown in my leadership style the last few years. I adore my team. They are such great people and I actively try to get their opinions and treat them as equals. We have a laid-back team, but they GET IT DONE. [They are a] very smart team. Each and every one is amazing. As a leader, attitude is everything. I invite feedback (and they give it), but I allow them lots of freedom and creativity to get their jobs done. I give a lot of compliments and a lot of feedback, both good and bad. I also speak up.”*

Their styles were based largely on how they had been treated in the past and considered how their employees felt, allowing the employees to have agency over their progress. This promotion of the autonomy of employees seems to mirror the process whereby the women have had to be the change they want to see in the workplace.

*“My mom was very smart, but also passive aggressive. I’m the opposite. Because there have been times when I haven’t been “heard,” I try to listen to others as much as possible. I try to be as diplomatic as possible. So I basically take my experiences watching others of what not to do and make them better.”*

There was a consensus that to maximise success, employees needed to have feedback and the interviewees all considered the feelings of subordinates in delivering criticism, again demonstrating the nurturing qualities of the women (Connelly, 1998).

*“There is a fine line between feedback and criticism, and I make sure that team members feel supported even when being reprimanded.”*

*“It is also important to deliver feedback so that improvements can be made, and we stick with what succeeds.”*

One interviewee recognises that her influences from her mother subverted the expectations imposed on gender roles, with the implicit suggestion that women struggled to be heard: “My mother was very progressive and ensured my voice was always heard. I am very direct.” For all the interviewees, being able to give their employees a voice is paramount, perhaps as a consequence of feeling marginalised at some point in their career as seen above. This goes against Lakoff’s (1975) theory about women’s language and that in speech they are submissive, perhaps showing Bourdieu’s (2007) male habitus in their discourse at higher hierarchical levels. Interviewees spoke of their style in terms of ‘empowerment’, giving subordinates the support and resources to maximise personal development and eschewing conventional hierarchical models



to make individuals personally accountable. The ideology of meritocracy is embedded within interviewee response, with concepts of ‘honesty, integrity and authenticity’ seen as pillars to this. Correll et al. (2020) questioned whether there can be true meritocracy given the patriarchal constructs embedded so deeply in the workplace.

*“I believe I am a transformative leader. I am not hierarchal but ensure that everyone knows their role, responsibility, and accountabilities. I believe promoting within but also hiring people who are smarter and ability to bring in a different perspective on the team. I am also one that walks the talk. Having seen my parents fight for everything they have, been discriminated against, and faced many roadblocks and still succeed - this has all helped me navigate through my career. I am a firm believer in authentic communications and not to pretend something I am not. I do not think leadership equates to titles rather how you think about it, your actions and out of the box thinking. Overall, don’t put your own values at the lines to please someone else.”*

Interviewees seem to shoulder some discomfort in being called a leader, instead choosing vocatives that promote nurturing qualities, or soft skills: ‘coach’, ‘communicator’ perhaps demonstrating Sapir-Whorf’s theory of linguistic determinism, that our thinking is defined by the words we know. The women seem to picture themselves as performing more than just the role of a leader, perhaps in turn proving Grunig, Toth and Hon’s (2009) theory that women have to work harder than men to succeed in the workplace.

*“As a communicator, I am a combination of direct and caring. It is my job to advise clients and help my staff to grow in their skills to enable them to progress on their career path. I am a strong believer in communication, keeping people in the loop and making sure that circles are closed. This applies to having employees having relevant information as to what is happening with clients and full transparency with the clients. During the height of the pandemic, when there was so much uncertainty, I worked to alleviate concerns of staff and clients and to help them to reduce their anxiety. I am also a good listener, believing that sometimes if you give a person a chance to talk out their challenges, they will find solutions on their own.”*

*“I see myself as a coach. I help my team to build the skills they need to succeed as PR professionals. I push them to work hard because nothing worth having comes easy. I am also able to see potential in them that they may not see in themselves and also provide encouragement when things go wrong, or the person needs a confidence boost. I give people the ability to own projects and to figure out how to accomplish tasks all the while, keeping a watchful eye on what we’re doing, checking emails and deliverables before they go to clients. Once a project is complete, I let staff know that I appreciate them and their efforts, which provides a warm, fuzzing feeling. Conversely, if someone drops the ball. I will make sure that they know that I am not pleased and help them to remedy the situation. Feedback is critical to helping staff/players to learn and grow.”*

Here, the sports cognitive metaphors (“coach”, “team”, “drops the ball”, “players”) manifested in childhood and intrinsically linked to Bourdieu’s male habitus (2007) have again become part of the leadership discourse, demonstrating the masculine lens applied to management positions. The interviewee understands her position through a semantic field culturally marked as masculine, perhaps demonstrating her cognitive bias towards the necessary skills for success in the role. Another interviewee demonstrates the competitive skills needed to succeed in public relations, having had formative experiences in a male-dominated environment.

*“I believe that my most important role is to be a coach, to provide opportunities for personal and professional growth, to involve them in business decisions, and make them feel valued.*

*Because I spent much of my youth competing against or playing with guys, working with men has always been very easy for me.”*

## Conclusion and Further Research

This research project was aimed at analysing the position of women in North America's public relations industry, in the area comprised of Canada and the United States, where according to Bureau of Labor Statistic data from early 2020, women make up 64% of public relations specialists and 59% of PR managers. Many research studies show that women face barriers in their work, either by not having enough support to keep the position and maintain a family or through the glass ceiling, unequal pay, etc. This research project aimed to analyse whether organizational culture and the socialization process influence women's ability to progress in their careers, using the lived experiences of women working in the industry as evidence.

Early upbringing can contribute to gendered ideas of the roles men and women should play in society, and hence the workplace, making change a slow process. The participants' early experiences were genderised - with the promise of success tied up in masculine traits such as being competitive, confident and outspoken. Early interactions often manifested in women's leadership styles, with them all highlighting the need for empathy, a feminine trait. The majority of participants felt that although they had been treated differently to their peers, it was more about the level they were at, with experience eventually changing the nature of these interactions. In earlier, more junior roles, they felt that they were left out of the decision-making process.

Women's experiences in PR in North America were characterised by long working hours, with work taking precedence over family life and the implicit - and at times explicit - suggestion that to further careers, family life had to suffer. Women leaders were more empathetic to the issues women faced about maternity leave, breastfeeding and looking after children, but that didn't necessarily benefit the women in any meaningful way, though some saw an increase in flexibility. This lack of flexibility in some instances can manifest as discrimination against women who historically and traditionally also have the pressure of raising a family, thus posing questions about the ability of a work/life balance. Most of the women thought this descriptor was problematic and that instead the term 'flexible working pattern' should be used, therefore shifting the focus from work to flexibility through the syntax of the phrasing.

Interviewees in agreeing to the survey were made aware the focus was women in PR, making them hyper-aware of their gender. Thus in answering questions, the researcher was aware of

checking confirmation bias and providing direct quotations in order to fairly represent the views of the women who took part. However, interviewees also unwittingly used the gendered concept of sporting cognitive metaphors to describe leadership activities, possibly showing that masculine habitus is ingrained in practice. The process of advancing for women working in PR was described using sporting idioms - to 'step up to the plate' - with qualities such as 'trust', being 'dependable' and demonstrating value all key assets to success. To use the sports analogy beloved of those in leadership, it was easier for men to get on the team and progress without onerous expectations, and women 'on the field' still want women to perform the role of cheerleader instead of providing competition. Workplace conversations are still characterised by male and female topics, to some extent, with men largely dictating the subject matter and holding the floor. Politics and finance were seen as a predominantly male domain. Women were more likely to talk about family and pregnancy and childcare and were more willing to share their feelings, leading to a feeling of bonding.

All of the interviewees considered themselves feminists - though not all self-labelled as such, but they also pinpointed the 'bitchiness' of women, the perceived threat they exuded and the jealousy of other women as reasons they preferred to work with men. This seeming brand of neo-liberal feminism, proliferated by the culture of work hard, succeed, where women are responsible for their success and their ascension through the ranks - and the glass ceiling - by its very nature is exclusionary of people of colour or lower social classes, who do not have access to the same opportunities in education and employment. Hustle porn is tied up in the same ideology and is perhaps a consequence of the sex-typing upbringing, where all that was required to escape one's societal determined fate was to work hard and be independent - allowing the participants to subsequently become CEOs. Women in these positions also shoulder the responsibility of being role models for their children and other young women, with the deep-rooted patriarchal systems also expecting them to excel at their roles as a mother. Interviewees seem to shoulder some discomfort in being called a leader, instead choosing terms that promote nurturing qualities, perhaps both assailing their societal induced guilt at having to choose between work and home life, and keeping the status quo where women have to become bloke-ified to succeed.

This study is not without its own limitations, the small sample size skewed towards those at the managerial level (88%) who are white, thus giving an under representative view of the North American PR landscape. For most of the women, their position perhaps blinded them to the discrimination faced by younger women and women of colour in the industry. With literature

suggesting women who adopted masculine traits were much more likely to succeed in the workplace, perhaps these women at the managerial level have assimilated to the male habitus (Bourdieu, 2007) and are thus predisposed to behave like men and prefer their company.

Additionally, some of the women talk about the need to dismantle racist and misogynistic structures and the efficacy of this, and the employers' part in it would be interesting to investigate. Is this simply by being visible as a CEO? Is it the responsibility of women at the managerial level to implement these changes? Is it the responsibility of every woman? Or should it become part of the work culture to dismantle these attitudes that prevail in society?

There is lots of passive description of women of colour being treated unfairly and future research could include a more representative sample of the current PR landscape, with more junior roles and more first-hand experiences from women of colour. This would be more difficult to recruit for, with literature suggesting homophily – the tendency to seek out people like us – is rife in PR, especially at recruitment. Additionally, it stands to reason that homophily might happen in networking. North America covers a vast population and given that the study was conducted at a time when COVID and lockdowns were starting to impact lives, it would be interesting to note how different states imposed restrictions impacted or intensified the demands and the far-reaching implications on women and their roles as both mother and employee. Given the research conducted about the Democrat views (women underrepresented at board level), it would also be interesting to see how this element played out in the workforce.

## References

- Acker, J. (2009). From the glass ceiling to inequality regimes. *Sociologie du travail*, 51(2), 199-217.
- Adi, A., & Ayme-Yahil, E. (2020). *Women in PR: Research and opinions about the status, challenges and future of women working in PR/communications*. London: Quadriga University of Applied Sciences.
- Aldrich, H. et al. (2006). Women on the verge of a breakthrough: networking among entrepreneurs in the United States and Italy. *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development: An International Journal*, 1(4), 339-356.
- Bandura, A. (2002). Social cognitive theory in the cultural context. *Applied Psychology- An International Review*, 2, 269-290.
- Berg, B. L. (2007). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences*. London: Pearson.
- Bonnett, A. (1998). How the British working class became white: The symbolic (re)formation of racialized capitalism. *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 11(3), 316-340.
- Bourdieu, P. (2007). *Masculine Domination*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Brooke, L., & Taylor, P. (2005). *Older workers and employment: managing age relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bullock, S (1994). *Women and Work*. London: Zed Books.
- Cejka, M.A., & Eagly, A.H. (1999). Gender-Stereotypic Images of Occupations Correspond to the Sex Segregation of Employment. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 25(4), 413-423.

Collins, C., Landivar, L.C., Ruppanner, L., & Scarborough, W.J. (2021). COVID-19 and the gender gap in work hours. *Gender, Work, Organization*, 28(1), 549- 560.

Connelly, I. (1998). Gender, the internet and new technologies: Theoretical and Analytical Investigations into Genderisation Processes and their Application to the Introduction of New Technologies and Social Structures. (Volume 1). *Doctoral thesis*, Dublin, National College of Ireland. Retrieved from <http://norma.ncirl.ie/244/>

Correll, S. J. et al. (2020). Inside the Black Box of Organizational Life: The Gendered Language of Performance Assessment. *American Sociological Review*, 85(6), 1022-1050.

CIPR (2020). State of the Profession 2020 [ONLINE]. Retrieved from [https://cipr.co.uk/CIPR/Our\\_work/Policy/CIPR\\_State\\_of\\_the\\_Profession\\_2019\\_20.aspx](https://cipr.co.uk/CIPR/Our_work/Policy/CIPR_State_of_the_Profession_2019_20.aspx)

Dashper, K. (2019). Challenging the gendered rhetoric of success? The limitations of women-only mentoring for tackling gender inequality in the workplace. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 26(4), 541-557.

Diekmann, A.B., Goodfriend, W. & Goodwin, S. (2004). Dynamic Stereotypes of Power: Perceived Change and Stability in Gender Hierarchies. *Sex Roles*, 50, 201-215.

Deutsch, F.M., Servis, L.J., & Payne, J. D. (2001). Paternal Participation in Child Care and Its Effects on Children's Self-Esteem and Attitudes Toward Gendered Roles. *Journal of Family Issues*, 22(8), 1000-1024.

Doan, P.L. (2010) The tyranny of gendered spaces - reflections from beyond the gender dichotomy. *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, 5, 635-634.

Edelsky, C. (1981). Who's Got the Floor? *Language in Society*, 10(3), 383-421.

Fawkes, J. (2021). Public relations' professionalism and ethics. In - Tench, R., & Waddington, S. (eds.), *Exploring Public Relations and Management Communication* (fifth ed., pp. 259-279). Pearson Education.

Gower, K.K. (2001). Rediscovering women in public relations: Women in the public relations journal, 1945-1970. *Journalism History*, 27, 14-21.

Grunig, L.A., Toth, E.L., & Hon., L.C. (2009). Feminist values in public relations. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 12(1), 49-68.

Heilman, M.E. (2012). Gender stereotypes and workplace bias. *Research in Organisational Behaviour*, 32, 113-135.

Hemp, P. (2004). Presenteeism: At work - but out of it. Harvard Business Review [ONLINE]. Retrieved from [https://www.npg-rsp.ch/fileadmin/npg-rsp/Themen/Fachthemen/Hemp\\_2004\\_Presenteeism.pdf](https://www.npg-rsp.ch/fileadmin/npg-rsp/Themen/Fachthemen/Hemp_2004_Presenteeism.pdf)

Herzberg, B. (1986). *The politics of discourse communities*. Paper presented at the CCC Convention, New Orleans.

Hochschild, A.R. (2003). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. University of California Press.

Hochschild, A.R. & Machung, A. (2012). *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home*. London: Penguin Books.

Horowitz, J.M., Igielnik, R., & Parker, K. (2018). Women and Leadership 2018. Pew Research Center [ONLINE]. Retrieved from <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2018/09/20/women-and-leadership-2018/>

Lakoff, R. T. (1989). *Language and Woman's Place* (First Edition). New York: Harpercollins College Div.

Lucy, J.A. (2001). Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. International encyclopedia of the social and behavioural sciences [ONLINE]. Retrieved from <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/psychology/sapir-whorf-hypothesis>



Lynkova, D. (2020). Male vs. female CEO statistics 2020. Leftronic. [ONLINE]. Retrieved from <https://leftronic.com/ceo-statistics/>

Mambrol, N. (2016) Lacan's concept of mirror stage. Literary theory and criticism. [ONLINE]. Retrieved from <https://literariness.org/2016/04/22/lacans-concept-of-mirror-stage/>

McGuire, D., Cunningham, J.A.E., Reynolds, K. & Matthews-Smith, G. (2020). Beating the virus: an examination of the crisis communication approach taken by New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Human Resource Development International*, 23(4), 361-379.

Minogue, K. R. (2000). Politics. [electronic resource] : a very short introduction. Oxford: Oxford University Press (Very short introductions). Retrieved from <http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat00621a&AN=leeds.643776&site=eds-live&scope=site>

North, L. (2009). 'Blokey' Newsroom Culture. *Media International Australia*, 132, 5-15.

North, L. (2009b). *The Gendered Newsroom: How Journalists Experience the Changing World of Media*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

O'Barr, W., & Atkins, B. (2009). 'Women's Language' or 'Powerless Language'?. In - The New Sociolinguistic Reader. Retrieved from [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/316501720\\_'Women's\\_Language'\\_or\\_'Powerless\\_Language'](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/316501720_'Women's_Language'_or_'Powerless_Language')

Piaget, J. (2002). *The Language and thought of a child*. Psychology Press. London: Routledge.

Podesta, J. S. (1994) 'Gender games: men and women talk different languages in the workplace' [ONLINE]. Retrieved from <http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsgac&AN=edsgac.A15773093&site=eds-live&scope=site>

Polić, M., & Holy, M (2020). Women in Public Relations in Croatia. EUPRERA Report Vol 2., No. 2. Leeds: Creative Media and Communications Research Ltd. [ONLINE]. Retrieved from <http://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/7016/>

Saltzman, J. (2012). The image of the public relations practitioner in movies and television, 1901-2011. *The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture*, 3, 1-50.

Saunders, M.N.K., Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A. (2019). *Research methods for business students*. Eighth edition. Longman: Pearson.

Saval, N. (2015). *Cubed: A Secret History of the Workplace*. New York: Anchor Books.

Swales, J. (1990). *The concept of discourse community*. Boston: Cambridge UP.

Stroi, O.O. (2020). 'Gender-Biased Language of the Workplace', *Дискурс*, 5(6), 120-131.

Tannen, D. (1996). *Talking from 9 to 5: women and men at work, language, sex and power*. London: Virago.

Taylor, M.G. (1996). The Development of Children's Beliefs about Social and Biological Aspects of Gender Differences. Society for Research in Child Development [ONLINE]. Retrieved from <https://srcd.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1467-8624.1996.tb01814.x>

Tench, R., Verčič, D., Zerfass, A., Moreno, A., & Verhoeven, P. (2017). *Communication excellence : how to develop, manage and lead exceptional communications*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Topić, M., & Tench, R. (2021) Women in public relations: A thematic analysis of ECM data (2009-2019). In - Theofilou, A. (ed.), *Women in PR History*. First edition. London: Routledge.

Topić, M., Tench, R., & Moreno, A. (2017). Male and Female Communication, Leadership Styles and the Position of Women in Public Relations. *Interactions: Studies in Communication*

and Culture, 8(2-3). DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1386/iscc.8.2-3.231\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/iscc.8.2-3.231_1)

Topić, M. (2018). Not Bloke-ified enough? Women Journalists, Supermarket Industry and the Debate on Sugar in the British Press (2010-2015). *Newspaper Research Journal*, 39(4), 433-442.

Topić, M. (2020). Two Englands? Blokishness, masculine habitus and the North-South divide in the advertising industry. *Gender in Management*, EarlyCite [ONLINE]. Retrieved from <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/GM-12-2019-0263/full/html>

Topić, M. (2020a). Women in Public Relations in England. EUPRERA Report, Vol.1, No. 2. Other. Leeds: Creative Media and Communications Research Ltd., Leeds. [ONLINE]. Retrieved from <http://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/6761/>

Topić, M., & Bruegmann, C. (2021). “The Girls at the Desk”: Timeless Blokishness in the Newsroom Culture in the British Press? *Journalism Studies*, 22(1), 77-95.

Topić, M.; João Cunha, M.; Reigstad, A.; Jelen Sanchez, A., & Moreno, Á (2020). Women in Public Relations (1982-2019). *Journal of Communication Management*, 24(4), 391-407.

Topić, M.; Cunha, M.J. Reigstad, A.; Jelen-Sanchez, A.; Diers Lawson, A.; Polić, M.; Moreno, A.; Zurbano Berenguer, B.; Damian-Gaillard, B.; Sanz, P.; Fuentes Lara, C.; Cesarec Salopek, N.; Saitta, E.; Cruz, C.; Simeunović Bajić, N.; Vandenberghe, H.; Bibilashvili, L., & Kaladze, N. (2019). Women in Public Relations – A Literature review (1982-2019). EUPRERA Report Vol 1., No. 1. Leeds/Brussels: Creative Media and Communications Research Ltd. & EUPRERA. Retrieved from <http://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/6138/12/EupreraReportPV-TOPIC.pdf>

Topić, M., & Polić, M. (2021). Fashion Public Relations. In - Tench, R., & Waddington, S. (eds), *Exploring Public Relations and Management Communication* (fifth ed., pp. 547-569). Longman: Pearson Education.

Tremblay, M. (2006). *The substantive representation of women and PR: Some reflections on the role of surrogate representation and critical mass*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [ONLINE]. Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/openview/6a584994f1d146b8f080a1d4baa4d0aa/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=39244>

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020). *Labor Force Statistics from the current population survey* [ONLINE]. Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11.htm>

Williams, J.C., & Dempsey, R. (2014). *What works for women: Four patterns working women need to know*. New York: New York University Press.

Whitman, J.Q. (2000). *Enforcing Civility and Respect: Three Societies*. *The Yale Law Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2307/797466> [ONLINE]. Retrieved from [https://www.jstor.org/stable/797466?seq=18#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/797466?seq=18#metadata_info_tab_contents)

Yaxley, H.M.L. (2013). *Career experiences of women in British public relations (1970-1989)*. *Public Relations Review* <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2013.03.009> [ONLINE]. Retrieved from <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0363811113000441>

Yeomans, E. (2019). *Is a 'new feminist visibility' emerging in the UK PR industry? Senior women's discourse and performativity within the neoliberal PR firm*. *Public Relations Inquiry*, 8(2), 127-147.

Yeomans, L. (2007). *Emotion in public relations: A neglected phenomenon*. *Journal of Communication Management*, 11(3), 174-190.