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Fluffy PR and 'Comms Girls': Banter, Social Interactions and the Office Culture in Public Relations in England

Purpose

The purpose of the paper was to explore social interactions, banter and the office culture in the public relations industry in England with the use of the Difference Approach and Bourdieu's habitus theory. The paper explores whether public relations organisations act as masculine habitus.

Method

Qualitative interviews were conducted with 26 women practitioners, and thematic analysis was used to analyse data. Women were asked questions on social interactions, banter and the office culture as well as questions on exclusion from business decisions and having to work harder to succeed.

Findings

Findings show that two main themes dominate in responses from interviewees, 'de-patriarchalisation' of PR with no personal appearance requirements and no business exclusions because of gender, and 'gendered organisations' where interviewees reported dismissive stereotypes of women who work in public relations, networking as a job requirement and differences between male and female offices, which includes differences between social interactions and banter among men and women.

Practical Implications

Results indicate that women feel there are differences in social interactions and banter between men and women. Interviewees also report masculine domination as well as harmful stereotypes of public relations professionals, most of whom are women. Organisations who have public relations departments, as well as those who hire public relations agencies to do the work externally, should design policies on the office culture to ensure equality and respectful work environment for everyone.

Social Implications

In line with the Difference Approach, women report differences in social interactions and banter between them and men, thus signalling that social differences influence the office culture and work interactions, which tend to be gendered. Findings also indicate that organisations are functioning as a masculine world where women struggle to fit in and obtain recognition. Consciousness-raising is needed in the industry because many women do not recognise oppression in the form of social interactions and its effect on the position of women or the fact the most feminised industry is being trivialised by the men on top.

Originality

To the best of the author's knowledge, this is the first paper analysing interactions in public relations offices using the Difference Approach and Bourdieu's habitus theory.

Keywords: women, public relations, office culture, social interactions, banter, Difference Approach

Introduction

The position of women in organisations is a widely researched area and numerous studies recognised that women face the inequality regime in (gendered) organisations where they progress harder and struggle to achieve the same recognition as men (Gupta and Srivastava, 2020; Mate *et al,* 2019; Santos and Garibaldi de Hilal, 2018; Grow and Yang, 2018; Alvesson, 2013; 2009; Acker, 2009; 1990). The situation is similar in communication industries with women reporting the inequality and cultural masculinities in journalism and advertising, for example (Mills, 2014; 2017; Crewe and Wang, 2018; Gregory, 2016; 2009; Broyles and Grow, 2010; 2008; Cooke, 2019; Topić, 2020).

In public relations, the position of women has been of interest to scholars since the 1980s when initial studies recognised issues such as the glass ceiling, pay gap, technician positions for women (women being confined to writing press releases and other written pieces with no managerial or other forms of power) and bias against women (covert discrimination in promotions, chauvinism, stereotypes against women, and feminization and its negative consequences for the public relations industry (VanSlyke, 1983; Cline *et al*, 1986; Miller, 1988; Lance Toth, 1988; Dozier, 1988; Singh and Smyth, 1988; Broom, 1982; Scrimger, 1985; Pratt, 1986; Theus, 1985; Topić *et al,* 2019; Topić *et al,* 2020). However, the situation has not changed much since the early days of scholarship. For example, in a study of four decades of research on women in public relations, Topić *et al* (2019) found that, based on research on practitioners, the discrimination of women in public relations has reached a full circle, and the same issues that women faced in the 1980s (e.g. bias and stereotypes) are re-appearing in the period from 2010 to 2019. Therefore, whilst women practitioners during the 1980s reported discrimination and bias, these issues continued to appear in research findings until the present day (Lee *et al,* 2018; Dubrowski *et al,* 2019; Aldoory and Toth, 2002; Topić *et al,* 2019; Grunig, 1999).

Nevertheless, despite extensive scholarship on women in public relations, studies do not tackle the office culture or structural reasons for inequality, and the majority of scholarship remains within the liberal feminist domain of studying pay gap, glass ceiling and general experiences of women in the industry (Cline *et al,* 1986, Grunig, 1991; 1999; Toth and Grunig, 1993; Aldoory and Toth, 2002; Grunig, 2006; Dozier *et al,* 2007; Creedon, 2009). To that end, in this paper, the office culture in public relations industry in England is explored by using the Difference Approach and Bourdieu's (2007) habitus theory to explore whether women in public relations work in a masculine habitus despite feminization of public relations industry.

Since research has not been conducted in this area in public relations scholarship, this study draws from studies from two communications industries (journalism and advertising) where scholars warned that women work in a masculine habitus and have to be 'blokish' to succeed (Mills, 2014; 2017; North, 2009; Ross, 2001; Gregory, 2016; 2009; Broyles and Grow, 2010; 2008; Cooke, 2019; Crewe and Wang, 2018; Topić, 2018; 2020). With this, the study contributes to knowledge of the office culture from a public relations perspective and adds to current knowledge of women in public relations.

Theoretical Framework and Method

The central aim of the paper was to explore masculinities in public relations industry by asking questions on banter and daily social interactions to explore whether women feel they interact differently than men, which is linked to both Bourdieu's (2007) habitus theory and the Difference Approach (Tannen, 1995; 1990; 1986; Vukoičić, 2013; Maltz and Borker, 1982; Yule, 2006). In other words, women were asked about dress codes, networking, banter and social interactions in offices such as questions on who they mostly interact with, what they talk about, whether they engage in banter and if so, whether they observed differences between men and women, and how these potential differences (when recognised) make them feel. Women were also asked questions about being excluded from business decisions and whether they feel they had to work harder to succeed. The latter question was asked of managers, and this question was directly linked to the notion of power in organisations.

Power has always been prominent in feminist research due to its ambiguous meaning. For example, French (1985) defined power as "the process of the dynamic interaction. To have power means having access to the network of relations in which an individual can influence, threaten, or persuade others to do what he wants or what he needs (…) The individual has no power. It is awarded by a large number of other people to the one that dominates and such allocation is irrevocable" (509). Disch and Hawkesworth (2016) also argued that power can only be defined as 'power over', and in the case of women, this includes marginalisation, denial of autonomy for women, hegemonic masculinity, exploitation and violence. However, some feminists also argued that women's power is a contradiction in terms because power has historically been associated with men (French, 1985; MacKinnon, 1989; Pateman, 1988). Therefore, it was deemed relevant to look at the power within organisations, and thus the question of women having to work harder to succeed is linked to both power and masculine culture.

Scholars have been arguing for decades that men dominate in organisations and monopolise higher positions, which makes organisations gendered (Alvesson, 1998; 2013; Acker, 1990). Therefore, in this paper, the concept of cultural masculinity is explored because organisations (structures, processes and behaviours) are often culturally masculine and come naturally to men rather than women (Alvesson, 1998). Bourdieu (2007) argued that cultural masculinity is embedded into society through social norms and (gendered) socialisation to the point that individuals do not challenge the order of things because the oppression and injustice are deeply incorporated into everyday social practices. Thus, women fail to challenge oppression, injustice and sexism because they do not always recognise sexist practices that disadvantage them

(Bourdieu, 2007; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Chambers, 2005). Therefore, masculine domination becomes "acceptable and even natural" and Bourdieu (2007) calls it "symbolic violence, a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims" (1), and what makes it possible is "arbitrary division which underlines both reality and the representation of reality" (ibid: 3). Thus, Bourdieu (2007) states that "we have embodied the historical structures of the masculine order in the form of unconscious schemes of perceptions and appreciation" (5) and this feeds into daily interactions because women often fail to observe mechanisms of domination due to them being deeply rooted in everyday practice. This assertation was useful for this research because an office culture has been explored to establish whether women think they engage with banter and social interactions differently than men and whether they see these differences as disadvantaging them. In other words, studies have shown that organisations are a masculine world where women are seen as interlopers and reduced to assisting roles (Saval, 2015; North, 2009; Ross, 2001; Acker, 1990), however, the question is whether women always recognise oppression.

Alvesson (2013) also argued that professional roles are constructed as feminine and masculine, which means that jobs that require determination, aggressive approach, toughness and persistence are constructed as masculine and this then leads to a situation where higher positions are constructed as masculine because managers are seen as requiring these skills to effectively manage organisations. On the other hand, technical positions are associated with femininity and this then transcribes to supportive and associate roles, which are often occupied by women whereas men hold managerial positions. This division is recognised in communication and radical feminist scholarship where researchers argued that women and men do things differently, with exceptions on both sides, and these differences in communication and behaviour come from (gendered) socialisation process. Therefore, Tannen (1995; 1990; 1986) argues that as a result of the socialisation process women and men communicate differently, and these differences also then project to the way they lead later in life (Christopher, 2008; de la Rey, 2005; van der Boon, 2003; Growe and Montgomery, 2000; Crawford, 1995; Stanford *et al,* 1995). This approach was deemed useful for this paper because it enabled exploring whether women think they engage in social interactions differently than men and whether they feel they are excluded from relationships of power, e.g. from business decisions because of their gender. In public relations, scholars have been reporting since the 1980s that women are confined to technical positions (Cline *et al,* 1986, Grunig, 1991; 1999; Toth and Grunig, 1993; Aldoory and Toth, 2002; Grunig, 2006; Dozier *et al,* 2007; Creedon, 2009), the

question is, however, whether this stems from a culturally masculine culture of public relations industry despite the rise of women in the industry and public relations becoming feminized?

Against the backdrop above, 26 interviews were conducted with women working in public relations in England. Of 26 interviewed women, 16 hold managerial roles whilst 10 are employees without supervisory or managerial duties. All interviews were conducted in April 2020 during the lockdown in the UK and were thus conducted over the phone. Interviewed women work both in-house (16) and agencies (10) and there is a diversity of industries represented in the sample, such as public service, higher education, fashion and beauty, health, caring, retail, finance, banking, logistics, communications, events, nuclear sector, professional services, technology and the media. Some interviewees worked in multiple industries and were able to reflect on differences between industries, which further enriched the sample. Besides, some women now work as freelancers whereas previously they worked full-time, which also contributed to the sample as these women were able to comment on why they left the industry and what specific challenges they faced.

Interviewees were based in Manchester, Leeds, Channel Islands, Durham, London, Huddersfield, Chester, Birmingham, Nottingham and Newcastle upon Tyne, the sample thus providing a regional diversity. The career experiences range from one and 32 years of experience and the age of women ranges from 22 to 56, thus both junior and senior women were included in the sample. The majority of interviewees were British (two of BAME origin) and three interviewees were of European origin.

Table 1 gives a breakdown of interviewees. In the case of interviewees six and 16, they were based in small places in Yorkshire, and these places were anonymised due to guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity as per ethics requirements of the University. In the case of interviewee 10 based in the south of England, the reference to the place has been removed at the request of the interviewee and the data from this interviewee has not been used in the analysis below.

Table 1. Interviewee' demographics

INTERVIEW NO.	TYPE OF COMPANY	In-house or agency	YEARS OF EXPERIENCE	EMPLOYEE OR MANAGER	PLACE
1	Public service	In-house	25	manager	Manchester

2	PR agency	Agency	25	manager	Leeds
3	Health company	In-house	3.5	employee	Channel Islands
4	Caring company	In-house	1.8	employee	Leeds
5	Retail company	In-house	4	manager	Durham
6	Building society	In-house	10	employee	Yorkshire (place redacted for anonymity)
7	PR agency	Agency	13	manager	Manchester
8	PR agency	Agency	2	employee	London
9	PR agency	Agency	17	manager	Huddersfield
10	Large corporation	In-house	20	manager	South of England (place redacted for anonymity)
11	Freelance (before that in-house, nuclear sector)	In-house	15	manager	Manchester
12	Freelance (before that in-house, fashion sector)	In-house	5	employee	Chester
13	Health corporation	In-house	24	manager	Channel Islands
14	Banking industry (now runs her agency)	In-house	19	manager	London
15	The logistics industry	In-house	20	employee	Chester
16	Education	In-house	20	manager	Yorkshire (place redacted for anonymity)
17	PR agency	Agency	10	manager	London
18	Finance corporation	In-house	6	manager	London
19	Professional services	In-house	4	employee	Birmingham
20	Agency (technology)/freelance	Agency	20	manager	London
21	Freelance	Agency	6	employee	Manchester
22	Freelance	Agency	22	employee	Leeds
23	Education	In-house	32	manager	Nottingham
24	Agency	Agency	12	manager	Manchester

| 25 | Agency | Agency | 11 | manager | Newcastle upon Tyne |
| 26 | Media organisation | In-house | 5 | employee | Manchester |

Interviewees were recruited using personal contacts and LinkedIn network, and each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes with a few exceptions that lasted for 45 minutes.

The data was analysed using, firstly, the coding approach of Morse and Richards (2002). Thus, open coding was done first, and this process helped in identifying critical themes emerging from the data as a whole. Axial coding helped in analysing data against different sections of data. For example, data were first analysed per interview question and findings were then compared against each other. Selective coding helped in capturing the most relevant themes emerging from the data. Thematic analysis has been used in analysing and presenting data, and this method is "a systematic approach to the analysis of qualitative data that involves identifying themes or patterns of cultural meaning; coding and classifying data, usually textual, according to themes; and interpreting the resulting thematic structures by seeking commonalities, relationships, overarching patterns, theoretical constructs, or explanatory principles" (Lapadat 2010: 926). In the presentation of findings, an approach of Braun and Clarke (2006) was used, and thus themes are first presented using a figure and then an analysis is presented also with the use of illustrative direct quotes, as per usual thematic analysis practice.

Whilst thematic analysis is an approach used for new research to inform future inquiries whereas the field of women in public relations is not new, this approach was deemed as useful for this study because the issue of office culture and social interactions and banter has not been explored in public relations scholarship, especially not using Bourdieu's (2007) habitus theory and the Difference Approach. Therefore, the thematic analysis helped in identifying trends and making sense of data, with which it provided a good insight into issues in the public relations office culture.

The questions guiding this study were, are public relations offices operating under culturally masculine patterns? Are there differences in social interactions and banter between women and men? Is there a masculine habitus in the public relations industry and how does this affect women?

Studying social interactions and an office culture using the Difference Approach and the habitus theory is a largely neglected approach despite having a potential to increase understanding of how contemporary organisations operate. In other words, social rules have been set on masculine values and feminist works have argued for decades that the oppression of women is deeply entrenched into society (Jaggar and Rothenberg, 1994; Daymon and Demetrious, 2010; Rakow and Nastasia, 2009). MacKinnon (1989) argued that "inequality comes first, differences come after" (219), suggesting that inequality is justified with differences instead of differences naturally causing inequality. Because of this, radical feminists historically argued about raising consciousness among women so that women can recognise all forms of oppression. Redstockings radical feminist group, for example, argued in their manifesto that "chief task at present is to develop a female class consciousness through sharing experience and publicly exposing the sexist foundation of all our institutions. Consciousness-raising … is the only method by which we can ensure that our program for liberation is based on the concrete realities of our lives" (Chambers, 2005: 336).

Findings

In the office culture in public relations industry in England, some positive progress is notable, such as that women do not report exclusion from business decisions because of their gender and senior women reported that patriarchal expectations have changed in regards to the dress code where women are no longer required to wear feminine clothes that show their femininity. However, women still report networking and after-hours work as an essential job requirement, which fits into cultural masculinity in organisations as reported in organisational and feminist works (Saval, 2015; Bourdieu, 2007; Acker, 1990; 2009; Alvesson, 1998; 2013). In other words, organisations have historically been a man's world whilst women stayed at home, and thus having a work-first attitude is often associated with masculinity (ibid).

Besides, women also report the lack of recognition of public relations, which is seen as fluffy and women who work in public relations are often called 'Comms girls'. This minimises their influence in the department and potentially results with lack of presence in boards (as the majority of interviewed women reported), however, women also reported a difference between male-dominated and female-dominated offices. Therefore, whilst the situation has changed since the early days, the issues still outweigh the positives, and the two central themes that emerged from findings are **'de-patriarchalisation'** of public relations and **gendered organisations**, as per figure 1.

Figure 1. Thematic Analysis of the Office Culture in Public Relations
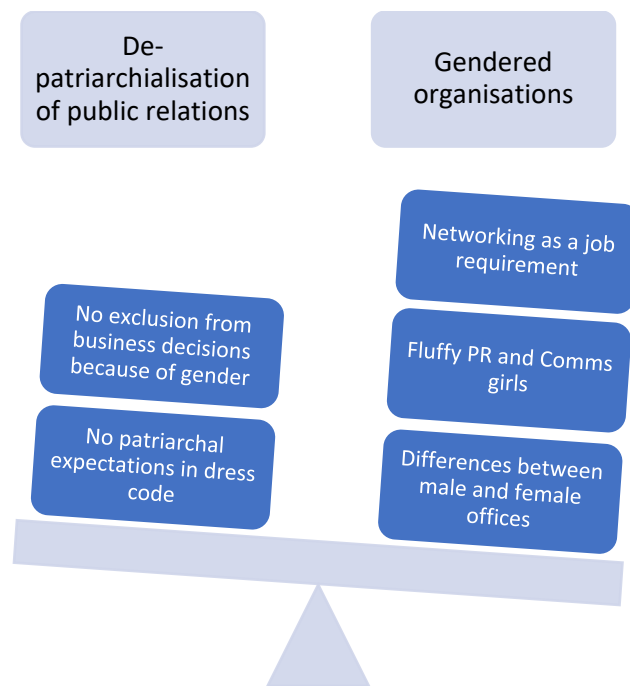
Theme 1: De-patriarchalisation of public relations

Apart from the already mentioned dress code where women reported decreased imposition of expectations on women and their femininity, women commented on exclusion from business decisions. As opposed to other communication industries, e.g. advertising (Gregory, 2016; 2009; Broyles and Grow, 2010; 2008; Cooke, 2019; Crewe and Wang, 2018; Topić, 2020) and journalism (Mills, 2014; 2017; North, 2009), in public relations, many women report they have not been excluded from business decisions because they are women but because of the lack of recognition of public relations. Therefore, women said that "PR or communications wasn't seen as it should be at board level" (interviewee 2, Leeds), and this is seen as a problem in being able to effectively carry out the role. For example, some interviewees reported they are excluded from business decisions "all the time" and in many cases this is because senior management does not perceive they can add any value so they had to learn about business as much as about communications to prove their worth, thus placing extra workload on themselves to succeed in a man's world (Bourdieu, 2007, Acker, 1990; 2009; Alvesson, 1998; 2013),

> "… all the time. It was very common to be excluded from important decisions, especially when they
> didn't think I was capable or I didn't have anything of value to add (…) So to prove my worth I would
> educate myself in certain areas. So when I worked in the aviation industry, I did courses and programmes
> on business and tried to understand what the aviation industry was about so I could speak at the level that

the leaders understood and I could bring in then the comms element once they respected me enough to know that I knew business as well as comms. I think a lot of leaders mistake you just for being that tactical sending-out-stuff person. So I wanted to prove my point. So I spent a long time building relationships with leaders to make sure I wasn't excluded because it's frustrating when the last thing you want to do is not let you be part of that conversation and just be told what to do. You want to add value. You want to have your own opinion and you've got your own views." (interviewee 11, Manchester).

Other women also reported that public relations are seen as fluffy and are expected to get the message out without being on the board, taking any part in the decision-making or even sitting on the board and knowing what is being agreed, however, this also shows that public relations departments are undervalued by men on the top who dismiss a feminized field, thus signalling masculine habitus and the lack of power of women,

"I think communications is seen as a bit fluffy and not necessary, but I had to make a case every time to have a seat at the table. But I do think in the organisation that I was in as my final Director of Comms role, that was largely because I was a woman. The HR Director was a woman, I was a woman as the Communications Director, and we would be excluded from certain things. And you'd think, from my perspective, I'd be thinking "That doesn't bode well," but then obviously, the consequence of that is you're not able to do your job as well, because you're not on the ball and you're not involved, and you'd come to the party late and get information late" (interviewee 15, Chester).

"All the time, but that is what happens in PR. We are not given a seat at the board table (…) A lot of people still see PR as an add-on, a nice to have…" (interviewee 22, Leeds).

"Comms is sometimes seen as a bit fluff (…) You are on the list, but you are on the list in terms of pushing it out, doing the messaging or engaging…" (interviewee 23, Nottingham).

While this exclusion is not necessarily linked to gender and interviewees say this is because of the lack of recognition of public relations, the question remains whether public relations would be dismissed by senior management (the majority of whom are men) had public relations not become a feminized industry? Scholars have been reporting since the 1980s of the danger of feminization of public relations, and feminization as a process generally brings the profession down and reduces benefits and wages (Theus, 1985; Cline et al, 1986; Lance Toth, 1988). Bourdieu (2007) observed that "positions which become feminized are either already devalued (the majority of semi-skilled workers are women or immigrants) or declining, their devaluation being intensified, in a snowball effect, by the desertion of the men which it helped to induce" (91).

Theme 2: Gendered Organisations

Office interactions in the public relations industry tend to be female-dominated due to a high number of women in public relations offices and approximately half of interviewees commented on this. The interactions in female-dominated environments are largely centred on family, popular culture, weekend activities and travel, thus showing the link with what is perceived as traditional women's interest (Christmas, 1997; Van Zoonen, 1994; Topić, 2018).

On the other hand, those interviewees who work in a more diverse office commented on having good working relationships with both men and women, however, there seems to be a difference in conversations in offices with more men. For example, interviewee 2 (Leeds) stated they talk about "art, literature, music, bars, clubs, restaurants" whereas interviewee 24 (Manchester) mentioned that in offices with men current affairs come up a lot in conversations, thus showing some skewing of office interactions in a different direction when men are involved, and also confirming views of the Difference Approach that men and women have different interests (Tannen, 1995; 1990; 1986; Vukoičić, 2013; Maltz and Borker, 1982; Yule, 2006),

> "Like most agencies, it has always been a female-dominated environment. Some agencies I have worked at have had more males than others. It could be anything. Current affairs tends to come up more with men. I don't know why (…) B2B tends to be male-dominated in my experience. Not male-dominated, there tend to be more men in B2B and they naturally have more interest in current affairs so they are more likely to talk about it in the office because that is the nature of their job" (interviewee 24, Manchester).

This again goes in line with traditional male interest in current affairs (Lofgren-Nilsson, 2010; Ross, 2001; Lobo *et al,* 2017), which is in Difference Approach used as an argument that women and men have different interests (Rakow and Nastasia, 2009; Maltz and Borker, 1982; Yule, 2006). In line with views presented in radical feminist theory (Rakow and Nastasia, 2009; Vukoičić, 2013) and communication work of Tannen (1995; 1990; 1986), some women noted that "men usually talk about the football and sport, and the women tend to talk about clothes and what we wear" (interviewee 15, Chester). Some women added that men "are a bit more crude" whereas women "talk about their boyfriends, holidays, babies" (interviewee 18, London). Interestingly, some women reported that they work in a mixed organisation and link this with no sexism, thus signalling that equal organisations are better to work at and less prone to sexism, which goes in line with Wilkinson and Pickett's (2009) and Djerf-Pierre's (2011) research that already established that equal societies are better for everyone,

"No. I don't think I did. There were a few men. I am thinking of one particular organisation I worked for that the balance was fairly equal between men and women. It was a good team. It was a good mix of people. There wasn't any sexism" (interviewee 22, Leeds).

Some women who work in male-dominated environments reported making an effort to talk about topics that are of interest to men and a large gendering in communications expectations that runs in offices, such as, for example, following sports to be able to talk to men and fashion to talk to women, thus showing the internalisation of habitus and conforming to masculine expectations in social interactions (Bourdieu, 2007),

"Most of the colleagues in the team that I lead at the moment are women. I sit on the board and the majority there are men so it depends on who the person is. I usually pick on something (…) if they mention their children a lot, I ask how the kids are or what they managed to do over Easter. I show a bit of interest if they are telling me they are moving house, going on holiday or whatever it happens to be. Men, it usually tends to be sport that I will ask them about. I usually try and find out if they have a team that they follow of some description. That is usually a good opener. That probably sounds incredibly sexist, but I have often found that if I keep an eye on the sports teams particularly of those immediately above me, I can gauge what mood they are going to be in, come the board meeting or on a Monday morning. If you start a conversation with that, it feels more neutral. I very rarely start a question to a male colleague with, 'How is the family?' I usually start somewhere else whereas with women it usually starts with their family (…) It is an opener for a conversation that allows you to build a bond whereas men tend to look a little freaked out if you went straight in with a question about family. Very rarely would you say to a man, 'Nice shoes,' but quite often you say that to a woman" (interviewee 23, Nottingham).

Saval (2015) argued that women have historically obtained lower positions in organisations and "there was never a question that women would be able to move up the company ladder in the way men could, since it remained unfathomable for male executives to place women alongside them in managerial jobs (…) Men were allowed to think of themselves as middle-class so long as women, from their perspective, remained something like the office proletariat" (Saval, 2015, p. 77-78).

The differences in social interactions are translated to banter, and women reported that men and women tend to banter differently, thus showing that humour in an office setting is gendered, and leaning again towards the argument of the Difference Approach that women and men have different interests and that women face oppression in work environments because of these differences (Maltz and Borker, 1982; Tannen, 1986; 1990; 1995; Yule, 2006). For example,

"Yes, definitely, definitely. Yes; the men generally tend to joke more about sports and things and take the mick out of each other a bit more, and I just find the women are just a bit less jokily nasty, whereas men just tend to dig at each other as a joke and everyone just laughs, so that tends to be the case (…) It is a bit odd; I find it a little bit uncomfortable, but it's the way that they act with each other, and they don't do anything to actually be offensive to anyone. So, I just leave them to it" (interviewee 3, Channel Islands).

"I think the girls, we can chat more girly, and have more consideration for each other's feelings. We will talk more about intimate things. I will always ask my boss how her children are, and how things are getting on, and what she is doing for holidays, things like that. We do nice things like that. Obviously, when we have a joke, it is never too personal. We never banter each other. We are always quite supportive. Whereas, the men will banter with us, joke about, and be a bit more… I don't want to say playful and make that sound seedy, because it is never seedy. It is just, they are more likely to make a joke out of things, and more horseplay with them, and do stuff like that" (interviewee 4, Leeds).

This leads to comments that "men are more blunt" and "less considerate with their jokes" (interviewee 8, London), thus echoing research that reports about girls and boys being socialised differently and therefore bantering differently, and women often find themselves in a position they do not belong to the group due to the dominance of masculine behavioural patterns (Tannen, 1995; 1990; 1986; Maltz and Borker, 1982; Yule, 2006; Bourdieu, 2007). Other interviewees echoed this view and stated that when they first started their career, women working in public relations were called 'comms girls' and the banter was offensive towards women. While some women mentioned early days, some said that this situation is a reality in the present day with some sexism in banter. For example,

"Yes, there was, especially in the earlier days. When I first started out in comms, the reference points were very much like, 'you're girls, what are you doing, comms girls' (…) The banter, they classed it as banter but it was still offensive. Internal comms, which is the area that I specialise in, was very much female-orientated, and it was very much seen, in the earlier days, as very much a tactical role and the leaders in the business were male. We were seen as the girls and the poster girls, and, 'Can you go and do this?' The respect was a little bit not there in comparison to the male-dominated teams. As time went on, obviously people become a little bit more conscious of how they are referencing gender stereotypes in the business. So I saw a shift in behaviours but there's still the odd comment like, 'Are you having a mother's meeting? What are you gossiping about?' those terminologies that you associate to a woman. Or, 'Oh, don't get emotional.' 'Oh, is it that time of the month?' (…)" (interviewee 11, Manchester).

"The senior management team, it's insults covered in humour (…) Yes, banter. And that's the males, certainly, and there's a lot of football and sports from the men. I think we women, we're kind of more a bit black humour, if that lends to a situation (…) And if somebody does it to me, you kind of laugh, okay, partly out of shock that they've said it, or partly that you know that it's humorous, but it also makes you feel quite uncomfortable, and then afterwards myself and other people in situations, you second-guess

yourself and think, "Does he mean that? Was it true?" So, yes, and the division, sometimes you feel in some ways, I don't know, not necessarily second-class. Yes, I've never thought there should be a glass ceiling, but yes it does present a barrier" (interviewee 13, Channel Islands).

As opposed to other communications industries, where networking after hours is not required (e.g. journalism) or it seems to be fading away as a work requirement at least outside of London (e.g. advertising, Gregory, 2016; 2009; Broyles and Grow, 2010; 2008; Cooke, 2019; Topić, 2020; Crewe and Wang, 2018), networking in public relations seems to be a job requirement, and many interviewees reported having to network after work such as attending lifestyle events, going to drinks with clients after work, participating in conferences and social events, networking with journalists, travelling in the UK and abroad for trade shows, etc. Many, however, saw this requirement as "nature of the work we do" (interviewee 2, Leeds), and these relationships built outside of work are seen as a way of enhancing relationships to instigate career development, with which internalisation of masculine habitus becomes visible,

> "Yes. That is probably as much the nature of the work that people in my team do and that we do in our sector, but I have been quite senior for a decent period of time now. The networking thing comes in. I am connected to lots of people because that is expected in terms of being able to get hold of information before it is public domain, to be on the front foot in terms of what policymakers are thinking, know the right people to open doors for, whether that is fundraising or a deal to be done" (interviewee 23, Nottingham).

In other words, Bourdieu (2007) argued that domination and doing things the way men do became "acceptable and natural" because these practices are embedded into a society to the point that they become "invisible even to their victims" (1). Thus, Bourdieu (2007) stated that "we have embodied the historical structures of the masculine order in the form of unconscious schemes of perceptions and appreciation" (5) and this feeds into daily interactions because women fail to observe mechanisms of domination due to them being deeply rooted in everyday practice. In some cases, managers encourage networking and attending social events after work (interviewee 13, Channel Islands) whereas in the banking industry there is a rota to work weekends and answer queries from journalists around the globe, which also includes from other countries and working in the middle of the night (interviewee 14, London). These expectations signal masculinity in public relations organisations due to the fact men have historically worked whilst women stayed at home (Saval, 2015) and thus the expectation of work coming first is seen as masculine and impeding prospects for women.

Conclusion

In conclusion, based on findings from this study, it appears that public relations offices are operating under culturally masculine patterns with women reporting having less power in the organisations and facing a lack of recognition. However, it does not seem to be the case that this is done on an individual level which can be connected to one's gender as with other communication industries (e.g. advertising and journalism; Mills, 2014; 2017; North, 2009; Ross, 2001; Gregory, 2016; 2009; Broyles and Grow, 2010; 2008; Cooke, 2019; Topić, 2018; 2020; Crewe and Wang, 2018), but it seems that the whole field of public relations is dismissed as trivial and irrelevant, and this is done by people on top, which are still older men. In this situation, women continue to hold technical positions, have no real power and advance slower (Cline *et al,* 1986, Grunig, 1991; 1999; Toth and Grunig, 1993; Aldoory and Toth, 2002; Grunig, 2006; Dozier *et al,* 2007; Creedon, 2009; Topić *et al,* 2019; 2020). The issue of feminization has been recognised in the literature, and scholars warned that feminization leads to diminishing of salaries and the influence of the profession (Theus, 1985; Cline *et al*, 1986; Lance Toth, 1988; Bourdieu, 2007), which brings about a question whether not only organisations in public relations, but the business world as a whole is inherently patriarchal and discriminatory towards women?

The differences between men and women in social interactions and banter were reported by interviewees who expressed somewhat negative views of masculine banter, however, this confirms the assumption from the Difference Approach (Tannen, 1995; 1990; 1986; Vukoičić, 2013; Maltz and Borker, 1982; Yule, 2006) that men and women communicate and behave differently, and given all literature in the field arguing that women in public relations are confined to technical positions and findings from this study where women reported dismissive attitudes from men working in other departments towards public relations, there seems to be a social problem of men and women not engaging in a meaningful social interaction that would enable progress for both men and women. In other words, women who work with men report having to look into their interests to keep them engaged and having to educate themselves extensively to prove they know the field to further prove their worth, thus signalling masculine habitus in which men set the rule of the game and women have to follow and embrace cultural masculinity to succeed. On the other hand, those women who work in all-female environments reported what is known as feminine social interactions, but they commented on the lack of recognition from senior management and sexism from male colleagues. This view is further exacerbated with some women reporting they feel they had to work harder to succeed and whilst women did not report exclusion from business decisions because of their gender but

because they work in public relations, it is difficult to see how this is not related to gender when public relations is one of the most feminized industries. Research has already shown that men set the rules of the game and support each other through boys' clubs, bonding and networking, and with women in public relations having to adapt to the masculine culture, this inevitably leads to inequality.

Future research should look further into office interactions to explore the link between social interactions and banter, and career progress. In other words, the findings of this study indicate a link between the social culture of offices where women reported differences between men and women and then also having to work harder and facing trivialisation and exclusion, thus leaving a question whether men still progress thanks to bonding and interacting with senior men despite all attempts by feminist activism to eradicate these policies. Besides, the future research should look more closely into experiences of women of BAME origin and specific issues they face in public relations industry.

Nevertheless, since many women reported masculine practices such as work-first attitude and the need to network out of office hours whilst others seem to downplay masculine banter as not harmful, it seems that consciousness-raising is necessary for public relations industry. In other words, it does seem that the "chief task at present is to develop a female class consciousness through sharing experience and publicly exposing the sexist foundation of all our institutions. Consciousness-raising … is the only method by which we can ensure that our program for liberation is based on the concrete realities of our lives" (Chambers, 2005: 336).

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