Women in Leadership Roles in Canadian Public Relations/Communications Management:

"You've (almost) come a long way, baby"

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Course: MCM 740 Capstone Research for Communications Management

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August 29, 2024

Abstract

Despite decades of advocacy and research at the intersection of gender and public relations, and an encouraging increase in the overall number of women who have entered the profession, significant issues of gender discrimination and inequity persist. Women now comprise the majority of professionals working in public relations, but they remain excluded from most executive positions and lack access to the dominant coalition. While certain industries are more likely to encourage female advancement and pay equity, the persistence of this issue in other sectors is not only a human rights obstacle but a failure to acknowledge the competitive advantage of diversity and representation at the most senior levels. While research has captured facets of this inequity in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and Europe, little evidence exists as to the experiences of women in public relations in Canada. This study, using survey data and in-depth interviews, builds on previous research into the factors that advance or prevent the career progression of women in public relations/communications management, including mentorship, professional memberships and the impact of the "boy's club". It turns particular attention to the phenomenon of imposter syndrome, how it is discussed amongst women in PR, and what can be done to reach long-term gender equity in the public relations/communications management sector.

Keywords: public relations, communications management, communications, gender, women, equity, leadership, mentorship, imposter syndrome, Excellence Theory, Queen bee syndrome

Acknowledgements

I am profoundly grateful to my thesis advisor, Colleen Killingsworth, for her tremendous patience, encouragement, guidance, and mentorship on this project. At a time when she faced many other challenges, she consistently gave me grace and lifted me up.

Additionally, she and Amy Thurlow generously allowed me to present my early findings alongside them at the Institute for Public Relations 2024 Bridge Conference–a clear example of female mentorship and role-modelling. I am so honoured to know both of you.

To my professors and fellow members of cohort MCM15, I truly didn't anticipate meeting such kindred spirits, intelligent colleagues, and wonderful human beings, and I am grateful to have taken this journey in your company.

Finally, I could not have completed this project without the love and support of my friends and family, especially my parents, my children Meghan and Erik, and my husband Andrew. Thank you for many pep talks, hugs, and for your unwavering belief in me. It means everything.

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Introduction

"The truth will set you free, but first it will piss you off."

-Gloria Steinem

In a volatile and highly digitized world, the strategic importance, perceived value, and complexity of public relations/communications management continues to grow within organizations. As a conduit for information from stakeholders to the dominant coalition, communications and public relations has made in-roads to the C-suite over the past several decades, especially as platforms like social media have become increasingly unpredictable and intense vectors of sentiment and reputational risk.

Yet despite decades of advocacy and research at the intersection of gender and public relations, and an encouraging increase in the overall number of women who have entered the profession, significant issues of gender discrimination and inequity persist. Women now comprise the majority of professionals working in public relations, but the industry has been nicknamed a "pink collar" ghetto (Howe, 1978) or "velvet ghetto", meaning that, as a result of so many women entering the field, the status and ultimately the pay grade of the industry have dropped.

In a seminal International Association of Business Communicators report on the phenomenon, Cline et al. (1986) suggested that this was due to women adopting technician over managerial roles, failing to negotiate higher pay, and facing discrimination due to family responsibilities. However, larger social issues are still at play in this landscape–as much as women must meet and raise the professional bar in public relations, systemic barriers continue to unfairly target women. As noted by Daymon & Demetrious (2010), "It is impossible to

understand adequately the social construction of public relations without closely examining its gendered nature."

Despite more than 50 years of female professionals in the PR landscape, they are still excluded from the loci of power, receive less compensation, and often face outright discrimination due to gender. While certain industries are more likely to encourage female advancement and pay equity, the persistence of this issue in other sectors is not only a human rights obstacle but a failure to acknowledge the competitive advantage of diversity and representation at executive tables and on boards (Eswaran, 2019). In a 2018 McKinsey & Company report, researchers found that organizations that embrace gender diversity at the executive level were 21% more likely to experience above-average profitability and had a 27% higher likelihood of outperforming their peers on long-term value creation. In this instance, the goals of finance and feminism align.

While research has captured facets of this inequity in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia and Europe, little evidence exists as to the experiences of women in public relations in Canada as they attempt to reach executive levels. The study aims to add to the conversation by collecting and giving voice to the women working in Canada's public relations/communications management sector. The findings reflect the factors that are advancing women in their career path along with the barriers that exist, while examining key challenges including pay equity and imposter syndrome. Finally, it looks to the future, suggesting further areas of study and potential actions that could advance current and future generations of Canadian women in PR as they seek to take their rightful place alongside the dominant coalition, and offers recommendations for measures to improve gender parity and leadership opportunities for Canadian women in public relations/communications management.

Literature Review

Like most industries, public relations began as a male-dominated bastion. Between 1940 and 1952, the Public Relations Society of America admitted 733 active members, yet less than 30 of them were women.

One of the first female leaders in Canadian public relations was Ruth Hammond, who began her career in the 1940s in teaching and journalism and later founded her own PR consulting firm (*Toronto Star*, 2015). She was the first woman ever accredited by the Canadian Public Relations Society. Over her 50-year career, Hammond established public relations courses at several Ontario universities:

> More often, men rather than women managed the public affairs of large firms and corporations. They knew men who were on the board of directors, they had the advantage of key contacts in the communities they served. Men continued to develop their public relations networking. To some extent, at least initially, women were at a disadvantage. They had not been allowed to penetrate the male-only networking system and perform case assignments as men did. Women had the skills and the determination to succeed but they needed to be allowed to practice in the profession. (CPRS, n.d., Hammond, R.)

Don Labelle, another influential member of CPRS over many decades, described a highly gendered industry in the 1960s: it was an old boys' club: only men and managers, most of whom had started their careers in media...That changed in the 1970s when women came into the profession and formal education programs began. Today the dynamics is about 30% men and

70% women, and most of them have college or university education in PR." (CPRS, n.d., Labelle, D.)

The 1970s marked a period of rapid growth in the number of women in the PR industry. In the U.S., the percentage of women in the field grew from 25% to 50% between 1970 and 1982 (Horsley, 2009). Given the pervasive attitudes about which types of work were appropriate for women, public relations was considered an acceptable space within existing "workplace hierarchies" (Fitch & Third, 2010). Beginning in the 1980s, nascent research on women in the public relations industry was launched with two landmark studies by large professional societies. The International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) "Velvet Ghetto" study (Cline et. al., 1986). One of the study's key concerns was that the gendering of public relations would lead to "reduced status and salary" (1986, I-2). It was closely followed by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) "Glass Ceiling" report (Wright et. al., 1991), which laid the foundations for future examination of this topic (Wright, D.K., 2021).

In the United States, where significant research on this topic has been conducted, Donato (1990) suggested that women were recruited to work in public relations because it "increasingly involves emotional labour" which is considered "women's work." Taken to extremes, however, stereotypes about women and the innate communication and empathy could lead to labels like "PR bunny" or "PR slut"--although research suggests that these terms are used by men and women alike (Fröhlich & Peters, 2007). To counter these stereotypes, women reported "restating their professionalism, or their masculine attributes, by presenting themselves as well informed, serious-minded, self-aware and guarded" (Yeomans, 2010).

Initially, women were hired into the field but had no real opportunities for advancement or power. The term "Velvet Ghetto" came from a 1978 *Business Week* article that referred to the

hiring of women in public relations as a way to fulfil affirmative action requirements (Toth, 1988). Over time, the ratio of women in the field has grown steadily. During the 1980s and 1990s, roughly 45% of PR practitioners in the U.S. were female, which grew to 70% by 2015 (Wright, D.K.,2021).

Yet the avenue to the C-Suite has remained elusive for women. As noted by Daymon & Demetrious (2010), this increase in numbers did not translate to similar changes in pay scales, promotion opportunities, and earnings.

The 2003 Annenberg Public Policy Center report on women leaders in communications companies found that women held no more than 15% of executive or board-level roles (Falk & Grizard, 2003). Additionally, out of 1,247 total executives included in the survey, only 5% of women had "clout" titles: chairperson, chief executive officer, president, etc., suggesting that women were largely excluded from the dominant coalition. More recent data suggests that women hold between 70% and 75% of all public relations roles; despite this, women remain largely excluded from positions of power, holding fewer than 30% of senior level leadership positions (Shah, 2015 and FitzPatrick, 2013, in Place and Vardeman-Winter, 2018).

A 2017 study by Global Women in Public Relations found that although women make up the majority of public relations positions around the world, 78% of the CEOs in the top 30 PR agencies worldwide are men. Moreover, between 2014 and 2017, *PR Week*'s prominent Power List rankings of public relations leaders have consistently featured approximately 32 men and only 18 women (Place & Vardeman-Winter, 2018).

These persistent inequities have the potential for worrying long-term impacts on the public relations and communications management sector. The 2019 Plank Centre for Public Relations Leadership report found that–compared to their 2017 survey–women were

experiencing less engagement, job satisfaction, trust in the organizations and confidence in their work cultures (Madden & Levenshus, 2021). Overall, the Canadian experience mirrors that of women in public relations around the world wherepay inequity remains an issue and women continue to struggle to reach the dominant coalition; in essence, the "glass ceiling remains" (Thurlow et al., 2018).

Existing barriers

      The factors behind this ongoing disparity are numerous and varied. They range from human resources-style issues such as pay inequity and job security, to more covert forms of discrimination, including stereotypes about feminine leadership styles, a "boys' club" culture at the executive level and so-called Queen bee syndrome, when a woman at the executive level intentionally prevents career advancement for other women perceived as threats.

      In comparable leadership roles, women's behaviour and performance is judged less favourably (Meister et al., 2017), as they are measured against societal expectations for women to be "warm and kind" (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Previous research has shown that women who adopt traditionally "masculine" qualities in their leadership style are at risk of being labelled "'dragon lady', 'battle axe', 'honorary men' or 'flawed women'" (Etzkowitz et al., 2000); Tannen, 1994). Women must walk a tightrope of gender identity–other research notes that women report "dressing conservatively hoping to ward off attention to womanly features or concealing behaviours, identities, or emotions that may be stereotypically associated with women, to make them appear less 'feminine'" (Meister et al., 2017).

      A broadly identified theme is the gendered view of leadership styles; while men are viewed as assertive or decisive, a woman demonstrating the same approach is more likely to be seen as confrontational or emotional (Dubrowski et. al, 2019). As one study noted, "when

women are too soft they are not seen as managerial material but when they are tough then they are labeled as 'bitches'" (Topić, 2021).

Not only are women penalized for their leadership style, but gender can influence income, through a multitude of factors. The 2018 Kobenhaver Center report found that women in the communications industries earn lower salaries, are more likely to dominate junior and middle-manager positions, and describe work cultures that prevent women from being promoted over men (Kopenhaver & Abreu, 2018). In Europe, women make up twice the number of men in the lowest wage groups, but there are far fewer in the highest paid echelons (Moreno et al., 2021). Yet even reaching those hallowed halls doesn't level the playing field–women who attain those executive positions are still more likely to receive less compensation than their male counterparts (Zerfass et al., 2018). While decades have passed, these findings mirror the conclusions of the 1995 U.S. federal glass ceiling report: "At the highest level of business, there is indeed a barrier only rarely penetrated by women or persons of color [sic]...and when there are women and minorities in high places, their compensation is lower" (U.S. Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995).

The financial scale of these barriers is significant: while a 1998 article in *prreporter* note that female PR professionals in Canada and the United States made $0.78 cents for every $1 made by men, more than a decade later, women still earned only $0.87 compared to men (Dozier et al., 2013). Over the course of a woman's 40-year career, this salary discrepancy could surpass more than $332,000 in U.S. dollars (Dozier et al., 2013), although one study estimated the impact could be as high as $US 1 million in U.S. dollars (Hon et al., 1992). However, less clear is the professional or financial impact of having children–while women are more likely to have

mid-career interruptions for childbearing, men also take leaves, although they are more likely to use them to pursue education (Dozier et. al, 2007).

In a study of Canadian PR professionals, Thurlow et al. (2018) provide some of the most recent data on salary inequities due to gender. The average salary for women in PR was $95,600 in Canadian dollars, while the average male salary was $127,500. In the most senior positions, Thurlow and her colleagues found an even greater difference: men earned, on average, $163,500 while women earned $107,000. Of note, the highest paid survey respondent–a male–held only a high school diploma.

The same Canadian study found that most men and women surveyed had post-secondary education, however, women were more likely than men to have graduate/post-graduate credentials (32% vs 23%) and were more likely to have studied PR/communications (75% vs. 51%). Yet those same women did not garner the same benefits–they earned an average of $110,000 in Canadian dollars while the men earned $138,000.

Surveys of women in public relations have repeatedly cited pressures due to work-life imbalance, such as inconsistent policies around flexible work hours, working from home (Dubrowski et al., 2019), or pressure to be available by email or phone outside of work hours (Topić & Tench, 2021). With women still more likely to bear an unequal share of family caregiving responsibilities (Place & Vardeman-Winter, 2018), the COVID pandemic escalated this pressure, as factors like childcare, home-schooling and eldercare fell disproportionately on their shoulders (Rauhala et al., 2021).

At the same time, other research cites factors such as lack of mentorship or role models, and forced or self-selected funnelling into technician versus managerial roles. Mentorship has emerged as a critical accelerant for female leaders, across all stages of their career. According to

Ewing & Redmond (2017), mentorship helped women take smaller leadership opportunities to gain experience, encourage risk-taking and overcome fears of failure, gain trust and credibility, seek leadership education and build a strong network of other leaders and mentors.

Imposter syndrome

In an environment where external factors often restrict female career advancement, some high-performing women internalize insecurity and self-doubt to such an extent that it can limit their own progress. In the 1970s, psychologists began to document "imposter syndrome", an internal sense that–despite an individual having earned outstanding academic, professional and other forms of career recognition–they are unintelligent, have fooled others, have achieved success through luck or error, and are not worthy of their actual success (Clance & Imes, 1978).

For many women, imposter syndrome surfaces when they make a transition from a junior to a more senior position. Meister et al. (2017) describe it as "identity asymmetry"— a discrepancy between their internal view of their own capability and their perception of how others view them.

Although believed to be predominantly reported by women, a meta-analysis of 62 studies found a vast difference in diagnostic tools used to assess imposter syndrome, and concluded that while it is common in women, it also exists in men (Bravata et al., 2020). If a person believes that performance is due to luck, the individual is not confident that future success will be achieved. Choi and Hon (2002) identified differences in how men and women attribute their success, suggesting that women tend to explain their success as the result of luck or an easy task, while men are more likely to attribute it to skill or effort.

The role of mentoring in challenging imposter syndrome presents an interesting gender duality. While men tend to view the purpose of mentoring as focused primarily on career

advancement through sponsorship and challenging assignments. (Ragins, 2002), women are more likely to both give and receive "psycho-social support", such as friendship, counseling, and confirmation of competence and self-image.

Feenstra et. al. (2020) argue that rather than viewing the syndrome as a dysfunction that develops out of the affected individual, research and society should explore the external forces that shape this distorted view of success, with the aim of reducing the severity and prevalence of imposter syndrome.

Leveling the playing field

Along with capturing and illustrating various gender inequities in leadership in Canadian public relations, this study also aims to identify ways to tackle these challenges and level the playing field. Going back as far as the "Velvet Ghetto" study, researchers have stressed the need for salary transparency, improved mentorship programs, and increased educational opportunities for women to prepare them for high-level positions (Cline et. al., 1986). Incorporating gender education and feminist studies into public relations training could lay the groundwork for a new generation of professionals who prioritize equity and actively fight gender stereotypes (Place, 2011).

Further, researchers have suggested that current public relations education may contribute to gendered notions of leadership, possibly by emphasizing the contributions of male industry professionals or failing to acknowledge inequities (Place & Vardeman-Winter, 2018). Other studies identified the need for both formal and informal initiatives to assist women in public relations with career advancement; Prompper & Adams (2006) suggested supplements to college training and networking opportunities, along with "softer" training like how to navigate organizational hierarchies and even how to dress for success. Existing research suggests that not

only does the industry need more women in executive levels, but it may need to adjust mindsets and cultural norms: Choi and Hon (2002) found that balancing the gender ratio at the executive level was critical to changing women's perceptions that they have lower status or skills than men.

Yet the job of overturning these challenges is not only that of the women in the field–as noted by Madden & Levenshus (2021), it is essential that scholars, professional associations and other colleagues in the industry are advocating for equity.

As one top female communications executive put it, the goal is "not just to put more women in executive positions, but to make sure that our profession doesn't limp into the brilliantly diverse marketplace of the future, but reflects and leads it." (FitzPatrick, 2013). Without fully understanding PR's current gendered nature (Daymon & Demetrious, 2010), we cannot create a better future.

Research Problem

While research captures the existing disparity in the U.S., U.K. and other nations, little data exists on the current state of women in public relations leadership in Canada. This study addressed this gap by gathering data on women in public relations/communications management leadership positions in Canada. Further, it focused on how and to what extent various factors are influencing the ability of Canadian women to advance to executive leadership roles in public relations/communications management. The factors examined include: work-life-balance (including the challenge of maternity leave); lack of female mentorship; bias towards male leaders; and, in particular, the issue of imposter syndrome. Based on these findings, this study offers recommendations for measures to improve gender parity and leadership opportunities for Canadian women in public relations/communications management.

Research Questions

RQ1: How and to what extent are women represented in leadership positions in public relations/communications management in Canada?

This question explores the current state of knowledge around women's access to executive leadership roles and proximity to the C-suite, a critical aspect of Excellence Theory (Grunig, 1992). It distinguishes between the presence of women in junior, senior and executive roles, as a means of understanding how women are progressing (or not) within the industry.

RQ2: What barriers exist for women attempting to obtain leadership roles in Canadian public relations/communications management?

Although significant shifts have occurred in society over the past 50 years, several barriers continue to impact female advancement within public relations/communications management. This study explores various factors, including pay inequity, lack of mentorship, work-life imbalance, lack of role models, technician vs. manager, the "boys' club" and "Queen bee" syndrome.

RQ3: How and to what extent does imposter syndrome/lack of confidence prevent women from attaining leadership positions in public relations/communications management in Canada?

Along with external factors, some women in public relations/communications management are limited by imposter syndrome, an internal barrier that undercuts their confidence in their abilities, and prevents risk-taking and advancement. This question explores the prevalence and impact of imposter syndrome in Canadian female PR practitioners.

RQ4: What measures should be implemented, at various levels, to reach true gender parity in leadership in Canadian public relations/communications management?

By illuminating the leadership challenges facing Canadian women in public relations/communications management, this study aims to identify measures to remove barriers and encourage women to strive for and achieve executive-level leadership positions in this field. Previous research suggests that this may include factors such as increased options for informal mentorship and flexible work arrangements.

Methodology

In order to conduct this study, the researcher used methodological triangulation incorporating an extensive literature review, in-depth interviews (see Appendix A) with ten women leaders in Canadian public relations (mix of private and public sector, government, healthcare, and academic leaders), and a comprehensive anonymized online survey (see Appendix B) of female Canadian public relations/communications management professionals. This approach, using multiple sources of evidence, is necessary to avoid potential biases, uncover relevant information, identify common themes, and corroborate evidence towards the study's findings (Yin, 2018).

The one-hour interviews were conducted virtually using the Zoom online video conferencing platform. For all four research questions, the interview participants were asked some similar interview questions, in order to identify any common themes or reveal differences in perspective. Some interview questions were unique to each participant, based on their role, sector or experience. These interviews were recorded and transcribed for accuracy, and both recordings and transcriptions will be securely erased following data analysis. As this research involves human beings, these interviews were conducted with care and respect, in accordance with McMaster Research Ethics Board approval (see Appendix B). In order to protect each

participant from harm, they provided informed consent, and their anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained, as per their request.

The second source of collected data was an anonymized online survey via McMaster LimeSurvey platform. While survey responses can contain inaccuracies or biases, they can be used to corroborate other evidence (Yin, 2018). Participants in this survey were recruited via snowball sampling via email and social media using the researcher's professional networks, leading to 159 completed surveys.

Results

The survey was active for a two-week period, during which time it collected 259 partial responses and 159 complete responses that passed the screening questions. Along with consent, screening involved self-declaration that the participant worked in Canada and identified as female (including transgender/non-binary/two-spirit/other). All eligible responses ($N = 159$) are included in the results.

Data collected from all ten in-depth interviews were considered eligible ($N = 10$) and included in the results. All interview participants work in Canada for Canadian-based or multinational organizations, in a range of industries: education, health care, automotive, finance, policing, transportation, government, and energy. On average, the interview participants had spent 20.4 years working in public relations/communications management.

RQ1: How and to what extent are women represented in leadership positions in public relations/communications management in Canada?

As shown in Table 1, the survey respondents represented a large range of career experience, ranging from 0-5 years (n=16), 6-10 years (n=21), 11-15 years (n=36), and 16-20

years (n=27). Of the respondents, 37% had more than 20 years of experience in the industry,

with 22 reporting 21-25 years and 37 reporting 25 or more years.

Table 1

Survey: How many years have you worked in the public relations/communications industry?

Number of years	*n*
0-5 years	16
6-10 years	21
11-15 years	36
16-20 years	27
21-25 years	22
25 or more years	37
No answer	0

N = 159.

As shown in Table 2, respondents were split fairly evenly between the for-profit

(n=87) and not-for-profit sectors (n=72).

Table 2

Survey: Is the corporation or organization that you work for for-profit or not-for-profit?

Organizational mandate	*n*
For-profit	87
Not-for profit	72
No answer	0

N = 159.

The majority of respondents reported that the executive level public

relations/communications management role in their organization was held by a woman (n=123),

while 31 responded negatively and five respondents did not answer, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Survey: In your organization, is the executive level public relations/communications management position held by a female?

Executive level held by woman	*n*
Yes	123
No	31
Don't know	0
Prefer not to answer	0
No answer	5

N = 159.

Building on the previous question, the data in Table 4 shows that a majority of women (n=129) reported that the executive PF/CM position in their organization had previously been held by a woman, while the remaining responses were negative (n=15), don't know (n=12) or no answer (n=3).

The interview participant in the finance sector noted that their head of communications was male. The interview participant in the automotive sector, who works at an organization that has existed for more than seven decades, is their first female vice-president of *any* kind, not just communications.

Table 4

Survey: In your organization, has a woman ever held the executive level public relations/communications management position?

Executive level ever held by woman	*n*
Yes	129
No	15
Don't know	12
Prefer not to answer	0
No answer	3

N = 159.

As shown in Table 5, women also represented a majority of senior (not executive) level positions in their organizations. Of the respondents, 156 reported women in senior positions, compared to just one negative value. An additional two respondents provided no answer.

Table 5

Survey: In your organization, are senior (not executive) level positions held by women?

Senior level held by woman	n
Yes	156
No	1
Don't know	0
Prefer not to answer	0
No answer	2

N = 159.

RQ2: What barriers exist for women attempting to obtain leadership roles in Canadian public relations/communications management?

Pay inequity remains a key challenge for women in PR, even as they advance into more senior positions. As shown in Table 6, many women report having experienced pay inequity due to gender (n=74), however, privacy around salaries makes this topic difficult to assess. Overall, a higher number of women reporter either no (n=27) or that they didn't know (n=53), although in the in-depth interviews, several women based in Ontario mentioned the provincial government's "Sunshine List", an annual publication of public sector salaries over $100,000 as a helpful way to determine if male counterparts are making more money in similar roles. A total of five women did not answer this question.

Table 6

Survey: Have you been affected by pay inequity due to gender?

Affected by pay inequity due to gender	*n*
Yes	74
No	27
Don't know	53
Prefer not to answer	0
No answer	5

N = 159.

As shown in Table 7, confidentiality around salary makes it difficult for women to assess if they are being impacted by gender-based pay inequity, with only a few respondents able to definitively report how much less they were earning than male colleagues in comparable positions. While 83 respondents didn't know, one preferred not to answer and 14 did not answer, the remaining participants described the following breakdown: 1-5% less (n=6); 6-10% less (n=10); 11-15% less (n=19); 16-20% less (n=18), and more than 20% less (n=8).

Table 7

Survey: Compared to men in comparable positions, are/were you aware of how much less money you earn(ed)?

Less income earned	*n*
1-5% less	6
6-10% less	10
11-15% less	19
16-20% less	18
More than 20% less	8
Don't know	83
Prefer not to answer	1
No answer	14

N = 159.

When captured, however, the numbers are shocking. An interview subject in the energy sector had to increase her salary budget by 20 percent to account for a new government regulation that demanded equitable pay for female employees in her industry.

Despite the clear inequity and discrimination inherent in gender-based pay inequity, many women reported that they did not raise the issue with their employer. Of the respondents, 43 said that they raised the issue, while 93 did not, one didn't know, three preferred not to answer and 19 did not answer the question.

Survey respondents cited many reasons for not raising the issue of pay inequity with their employers, but the most common theme was fear of potential career reprisal. "I was afraid of being cut out altogether," wrote one woman, while another disclosed that she had been demoted previously for bringing up similar gender-based inequity. "I did not want to rock the boat," wrote another woman, and another respondent recalled that "when I'd raised the issue of pay inequity in general, I had been told that it was inappropriate and unprofessional."

While several respondents explained that they didn't have access to concrete salary figures, which made it difficult to argue for a raise, others described a male-dominated culture and fear of retribution. "I was young, and worked for a sexist male boss who made it his goal to raise the profiles of the men around him," wrote one respondent. "I knew that raising the issue would anger him and put me in a worse position."

Table 8

Survey: Did you raise the issue of gender-based pay inequity with your employer?

Discuss pay equity with employer	*n*
Yes	43
No	93
Don't know	1
Prefer not to answer	3
No answer	19

N = 159.

While a small number of respondents who raised the issue with their employers said they received a small raise, or did have the salary level corrected, the majority described being ignored, laughed at, or dealing with denial, deflection, or promises to address the inequity that were never kept. For one woman who raised the issue, "my boss stopped speaking to me for a month. His response to my email which asked if we could discuss it was that he 'didn't like my tone.'"

Another woman, when she was made a vice-president at a multinational firm, discovered that she was being paid less than an equivalent male counterpart. When she requested to have the salaries equalized, she was told that the man had negotiated for more money when he was hired, and that she should have done the same.

Another respondent described the response that she received when she asked for pay equity:

> You are doing really well for a woman, especially one who has children and leaves at 5 every day…Why can't you be happy with what you have? It's better than many women make." When I pointed out that I was always available after hours, just not in the office, and often worked from home in the evening, I was thanked. Not rewarded with a promotion or raise.
> Just thanked.

According to one respondent, she was told that the men receiving higher salaries "had families to support so I shouldn't make a fuss"; another was fired after advocating for a raise due to gender-based inequity. For many women, leaving was the only option:

> It was clear that I would be tainted by asking for what I was worth. The boys' club was at work. I was labelled as difficult and opinionated, and

subsequently excluded from other leadership conversations as a result. I

was effectively made to feel uncomfortable until I made the decision to

leave.

An interview respondent in the healthcare sector described facing pay inequity in a

previous role. Although she had clear evidence of the difference between her salary and that of

her male counterpart, the organization was unwilling to change anything, and she realized that

she had no choice but to leave. She was hired elsewhere at a significantly higher salary.

As shown in Table 9, responses were mixed regarding knowledge of institutional policies

designed to prevent gender-based pay inequity. While 48 participants were aware of such

policies, 53 responded negatively and 52 said that they didn't know. An additional respondent

preferred not to answer, and five did not answer.

Table 9

Survey: Does your organization have any policies in place designed to prevent gender-based pay

inequity?

Do pay equity policies exist?	*n*
Yes	48
No	53
Don't know	52
Prefer not to answer	1
No answer	5

N = 159.

The lack of awareness around policies designed to prevent gender-based pay inequity

may explain the similar spread of responses in Table 10 around the effectiveness of such

policies. Of the respondents, 24 said that they were effective, 23 said that they were not, 59

responded that they didn't know, while two preferred not to answer, and 51 did not answer the question.

The compounding effect of taking maternity leave was raised by several women in the study. According to one survey respondent, "compensation progression was halted for members of my team due to maternity leaves–women missed out on annual pay increases." Another woman spoke from personal experience: "I took two maternity leaves and lost out on upward movement/pay raises/job opportunities because of this [compared to] someone who has similar experience–my husband, who started comms at the same time."

An interview participant in the energy sector agreed, noting that women who take maternity leave miss a year of advancement that impacts both their short-term and long-term compensation. Another interview participant, an executive in the automotive industry, identified changes in how she was perceived/treated when she returned from maternity leave. Colleagues made "microaggressive" comments about her family obligations, and she began withholding information about her personal life. "Yes, I have kids. Yes, this is their age. Yes, here are some basic facts. And then, pivot right back to business."

Table 10

Survey: Do you feel that those policies are effective?

Do pay equity policies work?	*n*
Yes	24
No	23
Don't know	59
Prefer not to answer	2
No answer	51

N = 159.

A clear pattern emerged from survey respondents about the factors that advanced their career progression, as shown in Table 11. In particular, education (n=103) and informal mentorship (n=102) stood out as the most helpful factors to the participants, followed by formal mentorship (n=36), female role models (n=70), and flexibility/work-life balance (n=60). Forty-eight respondents did not answer this question.

In text responses to the survey, participants also described the value of networking, hard work, experience on "stretch" assignments that are both challenging and transformative, and cited the value of mentors who champion women.

Table 11

Survey: What factors have been most helpful to you in advancing your career progression? (select all that apply)

Factors helpful to advance career progression	*n*
Education	103
Informal mentorship	102
Formal mentorship	36
Female role models	70
Flexibility (work-life balance)	60
Other (specify)	48

N = 159.

Unfortunately, participants had many stories to share about factors that have stood in the way of their career progression. In both the survey and the in-depth interviews, respondents shared experiences of subtle and outright discrimination, work-life balance and challenges of internal confidence. As shown in Table 12, factors inhibiting career progression included: covert discrimination (n=26); "boy's club" (n=61); maternity leave or childcare demands (n=45); eldercare demands (n=5); lack of mentorship (n=27); imposter syndrome (n=53); lack of confidence (n=37); "Queen bee syndrome" (n=30), while 12 participants specified other factors.

Table 12

Survey: What factors stood in the way of advancing your career progression? (select all that apply)

Factors helpful to advance career progression	*n*
Covert discrimination	26
"Boy's club"[1]	61
Maternity leave or childcare demands	45
Eldercare demands	5
Lack of mentorship	27
Imposter syndrome	53
Lack of confidence	37
"Queen bee syndrome"[2]	30
Other (specify)	12

N = 159.

[1] *An informal system of male relationships that keeps men in positions of power, excluding women and other marginalized groups*

[2] *A derogatory term applied to women who have achieved success in traditionally male-dominated fields. These women often take on "masculine" traits and distance themselves from other women in the workplace in order to succeed. They may also view or treat subordinates more critically if they are female, and refuse to help other women rise up the ranks as a form of self-preservation.*

Boy's club

Interview participants universally acknowledged the existence of a "boy's club", but many made the distinction of how prevalent it was based on the type of industry in which they worked. For example, women who worked in academia or health care were less likely to report it as an issue, while those in the automotive, energy or mining sectors identified it as a significant concern.

A woman in the energy sector put it bluntly: "The old boys club is alive and well," describing a "pack mentality [that] is absolutely painful."

Diminutive language was commonly cited among interview respondents, describing how male colleagues would refer to them using terms like "honey"or "precious". One woman, who was the head of communications in a predominantly masculine company, recalled how she was given flowers on National Secretaries Day–simply because she was a woman. (She placed them in the reception area.)

According to the interview respondent in the automotive industry, barriers like the boy's club continue to keep women out of executive or middle-management positions. "The rate of [women] leaving middle-management is through the roof. They just get tired of running into those barriers. It's exhausting. You know, if the entire board and all the leadership is men, how do I get there? How do I get to be myself in that space?"

In the agency world, said one interview respondent, clients in the technology, consumer, and global arena tend to be male, and often prefer male agency representatives. "They look like each other, they sound like each other. There's just a level of comfort there that they identify and bond with. When you look at leadership in those organizations, it reflects their clients; clients mean money, so a lot of that has not changed."

In the finance sector, another male-dominated industry, the interview participant noted that all the banks work hard at setting female employees up for success, but "it definitely gets lonelier at the top."

Queen bee syndrome

While not all interview participants were immediately familiar with this term, hearing its definition triggered strong responses. One woman with more than three decades of experience in the education sector related an experience with another woman in a meeting. "I remember this woman reaching across the table in the middle of the meeting, grabbing my cheek and saying

'Oh, my goodness, look at that! She's not only cute, she's smart, too!'And I thought, what the hell was that? I've just been belittled!"

Another woman described her relationship with the only other woman on the executive team at a multinational company. "You would think we would be allies and try to make a difference together—she saw me as competition."

"I think Queen bee is a much kinder term than what I would generally use to describe the behaviours I see from a person like that," said a woman in the energy sector, who – when she confronted a woman with that behaviour –was told, "Everyone here is so damn sensitive!"

An interview subject from the automotive sector suggested that the Queen bee effect was often generational, appearing in women who had to navigate a very aggressive and cut-throat path to the executive suite in previous decades. In her experience, these women would ignore or disregard her at executive tables, apparently perceiving her as a threat. "It was just so isolating–I will always remember how they made me feel. I never want to leave someone with that feeling walking away from an interaction with me."

Survey respondents were split almost equally on the topic of membership in public relations organizations, with the Canadian Public Relations Society (n=42) and the International Association of Business Communicators (n=41) being the most popular memberships. As shown in Table 13, the most useful aspects of membership were reported to be networking (n=90), mentorship (n=67), certifications (n=47), professional development/training (n=72) and examples of other female leaders (n=62).

Table 13

Survey: What aspects of these memberships help women reach positions of leadership? (select all that apply)

Useful aspects of membership	n

Networking	90
Mentorship	67
Certifications	47
Professional development/training	72
Examples of other female leaders	62
Other	9

N = 159.

Yet while respondents cited several helpful aspects of membership in these organizations, as shown in Table 14, it was not clear that they believed such a membership necessarily helped women to reach positions of leadership in public relations/communications management.

Table 14

Survey: Does membership in such an organization help women reach positions of leadership?

Does membership increase chance of leadership	*n*
Yes	38
No	42
Don't know	57
Prefer not to answer	1
No answer	21

N = 159.

The value of mentorship was frequently cited in the survey results and the in-depth interviews, but respondents carefully parsed the importance of different kinds of mentorship. As shown in Table 15, 118 survey participants had received formal/informal mentorship from a more senior woman in PR during their careers. In this study, formal mentorship was considered a structural, organizational program, while informal mentorship was a more casual relationship between colleagues/individuals.

Table 15

Survey: Have you received formal/informal mentorship from a more senior woman in public relations during your career?

Mentorship by more senior female	*n*
Yes	118
No	34
Don't know	1
Prefer not to answer	0
No answer	6

N = 159.

Women listed a wide range of benefits from membership, as shown in Table 16. They ranged from identifying a role model (n=94), gaining professional development (n=69), building confidence (n=100), opportunities for networking (n=74), and receiving advice on work-life balance (n=58).

Table 16

Survey: If you have received mentorship, what benefits did it provide to you in terms of career progression? (select all that apply)

Benefits of mentorship	*n*
Role model	94
Professional development	69
Build confidence	100
Networking	74
Advice on work-life balance	58
Other	9

N = 159.

In the in-depth interviews, however, a compelling pattern arose: several subjects cited mentorship from *male* colleagues as particularly valuable to their career progression. "I have never had mentorship from a woman colleague," said a female executive in the software industry. "They have not been as helpful to me as my male colleagues."

A communications executive in the finance industry–traditionally a more masculine environment–also stressed the value of male mentors in that sector. In her view, she appreciates their candour, and the benefits of learning how to be aggressive and a straight shooter. She related an interaction with a male mentor during a time in her career when she felt she was being "wishy-washy" and asked for advice about how to advance in her career. "This man, who was in a very senior position, just said 'I'm where I am because I told someone I wanted to be here. Now tell me where you want to be.' I think that took me up to the next level of maturity."

Another woman in the transportation industry noted that along with mentorship, it was critical to have men sponsor and advocate for her when she was not in the room, suggesting that men may continue to have persuasive power in places of leadership.

A majority of women confirmed that they had, in turn, provided mentorship to younger women in public relations/communications management. As shown in Table 17, 128 women had "paid it forward" and given advice to younger women in their field.

Table 17

Survey: Have you provided formal/informal mentorship for a more junior woman in public relations during your career?

Mentored more junior women in PR	*n*
Yes	128
No	22
Don't know	2
Prefer not to answer	0
No answer	7

N = 159.

One interview participant, who mentors junior women, says they often ask for advice about how to take their place at professional tables–that they feel like they are not being taken seriously. Others ask questions about work-life balance and the kinds of compromises that they

may be forced to make to succeed. "For me, mentoring is a way of demystifying certain things…actually, just to show you 'how the sausage gets made.'"

RQ3: How and to what extent does imposter syndrome/lack of confidence prevent women from attaining leadership positions in public relations/communications management in Canada?

Conversations with high-performing women in virtually any field often lead to discussions of imposter syndrome, and public relations/communications management is no different. During the survey and interviews for this research, many respondents raised the topic independently or responded with vigour when it was used as a prompt. While it was not the universal experience of survey respondents, as shown in Table 18, (117 responded that they had experienced it, versus 38 who said they had not), it was widely recognized as an issue that affected women, and–to a lesser degree–men.

Table 18

Survey: Have you experienced imposter syndrome in the context of your career in public relations?

Have you experienced imposter syndrome?	*n*
Yes	117
No	38
Don't know	3
Prefer not to answer	0
No answer	1

N = 159.

The study respondents had extensive and passionate responses to questions about how and to what extent they have experienced imposter syndrome. "It really made me second-guess my seat at the table or lean on the praise of others to validate my success," wrote one respondent.

Others described a lack of confidence, hesitancy to speak up, second-guessing their judgement, and a fear of pursuing advancement.

The chorus of stories was overwhelming: "I struggle with sleeping at times, worrying about whether I came off as smart enough in meetings"; "I didn't think I was eligible for higher positions, so I didn't even apply"; "I make jokes in meetings as a defence mechanism to hide that I worry that I am not smart enough to be there"; "It was emotionally draining."

For those who have worked in the industry for years, the persistence of imposter syndrome is discouraging. "It breaks my heart a little bit–especially as a mom of a daughter," said one woman.

The interview participant in the finance industry shared that while she is outwardly confident, her anxiety sometimes keeps her up late at night, but she doesn't discuss it widely because she doesn't want people to know it exists.

While imposter syndrome persists amongst women, it would appear that it is a growing topic of discussion. As shown in Table, 19, the majority of survey respondents (n=93) reported discussing it with other women in PR, compared to 63 who said they had not. As other high-profile women, from Michelle Obama to Sheryl Sandberg, continue to give voice to the issue, and as professional PR organizations provide forums for discussion and mentorship on this topic, society can continue to challenge the stigma and prevalence of imposter syndrome.

Table 19

Survey: Have you discussed imposter syndrome with other women in PR?

Discussed imposter syndrome with other women in PR	*n*
Yes	93
No	63
Don't know	2
Prefer not to answer	0

N = 159.

RQ4: What measures should be implemented, at various levels, to reach true gender parity in leadership in Canadian public relations/communications management?

Study participants expressed frustration that solutions were still needed, but also provided extensive suggestions on measures that could potentially address the challenge of gender parity. Their suggestions were grouped into three major themes: more female role models; mentorship programs; and systemic policies that promote equity.

"More exposure to senior female leaders," "more women at 'the table," "female role models as guest speakers," were common suggestions from the survey respondents. According to one survey respondent, we need "more women of power and influence in executive roles that are willing to speak to their real experiences–not how they got to the top…but the raw reality and how women *must* advocate for themselves and not succumb to negative inner voices."

"At a high level, we need examples," said an executive in the automotive industry, "At the mid-level, we need to give women more spaces." And at the ground level, she said, there should be honest conversations with junior women about the current state and what needs to be done. "This is garbage…I hate the way that we walk into a room and it's all men and we're the only women sitting there."

Along with seeing more female leaders, women in PR need access to formal and informal mentorship options–with both male and female leaders. These could range from "lunch-and-learn" events to more formalized training or job-shadowing options, wrote the survey respondents. One suggested "encouraging them to advocate for themselves and to find mentors/sponsors who can give them practical advice to keep moving forward/upward in their

careers." Another respondent said it should be a more common topic for discussion within professional organizations like the CPRS and IABC.

Beyond mentorship, another respondent suggested advocacy. "When you have an advocate on your side and fighting for you when you are not in the room, it gets easier to believe that you belong where you are."

Another survey respondent argued for a systemic approach. "Men need to be educated on unconscious bias and organizations need to adopt processes that mitigate individual bias in decision -making. The company culture has to reject sexism."

Some responses revealed deep anger about the challenges faced by women:

> Imposter Syndrome is just systemic oppression in a fancy dress. We live in a patriarchal and often misogynistic society. Everything about our working lives from our clothes to the temperature and operating hours of our workplaces has been overtly designed with men in mind. Imposter syndrome is a symptom of women becoming self-aware in a system designed to break us. We aren't supposed to have power. We aren't supposed to get paid what men do. We're supposed to roll over and take their toxic abuse. It's hot garbage. But so is labelling 'imposter syndrome' so we feel like we're the problem. We are not and we never were.

"Honestly, there's such entrenched bias against women," said another survey respondent. "I would say tenures/secondments into operations, finance, anywhere the 'real' money is spent to build those connections and negotiation skills before spending time in PR." Several respondents advocated for salary transparency laws.

However, several respondents say that these issues are not unique to public relations/communications management. "As a society–and the pandemic has shown this–-there are still gender roles that are expected of career women no matter the industry. Women struggle to have both career and family. There is still more equality that needs to happen in order for women to have the confidence to grow as female leaders but the support needs to be there– otherwise women won't apply for executive roles or take on big challenges."

Part of the solution starts in the classroom, according to the interview participant in the finance sector:

> In PR school and in journalism school, one of the big messages is that it's highly male dominated. We really should start early on teaching people the real expectations of what it's like to work in certain industries…I think that's the gap–that's where imposter syndrome comes in. Because if someone doesn't have that confidence attached to their personality, they come in, they sit there, they don't thrive, their confidence never grows and their imposter syndrome grows even more. It's a foundational thing.

On the topic of imposter syndrome, a female executive in the software industry suggested that women need to change their mindset. "We have to change from saying, 'Well, why me…to why *not* me?'"

The interview participant from the automotive sector argues that the time has come to shift the conversation about imposter syndrome from acknowledging it to taking away its power, by creating more spaces for women to lead. "It's more about–how do we lift as we rise."

Overall, several women called for broader systemic approaches to increasing the number of women in leadership positions, citing examples like the 50-30 Challenge (50% women/30% diversity on boards) or the federal cabinet's adherence to roughly 50% of women since 2015. At the same time, they note that these efforts are often attacked by groups who feel that their traditional areas of dominance are being threatened–often by suggesting that women or minorities are not qualified for these positions.

Discussion

In the current Canadian public relations/communications office, women are more likely to interact with female colleagues at the junior, middle management, and senior levels, and demographics suggest that the next generation graduating from PR schools are largely female. This continues the trend noted by Toth, Cline, Aldoory and other female luminaries in the field of public relations research. Yet with the exception of specific sectors, such as healthcare and education, the final step up to the C-suite remains elusive for most women–a frustrating reality as we approach the 40th anniversary of the publication of the Velvet Ghetto study (Cline et al., 1986).

This research aimed to add to the existing knowledge on women in public relations by gathering data from a Canadian data set–a nation that is, as yet, less reflected in scholarly research on this topic. As with previous research, this study found that public relations is predominantly female, with exceptions in certain industries. And while this study solicited the voices of experienced women in public relations–particularly those who had made it as far as the executive level–several still reported to one or even two male superiors.

Overall, respondents to this study cited education, informal/formal mentorship, and female role models as the most powerful aids in their career progression, along with the

secondary effects of building confidence and networking. At the same time, the option for flexibility and work-life balance was critical to their success, as many women still report that they carry the heaviest burden for child- and eldercare.

Despite many advances in the workplace, women in Canadian PR still reported facing multiple barriers to their advancement, most commonly the existence of a pervasive "boy's club" that prevents women from achieving positions of power. Other external forces include the stress of maternity leave/childcare/eldercare demands, lack of mentorship, covert discrimination and Queen bee syndrome. At the same time, many women report that they struggle with internal barriers–particularly imposter syndrome and lack of confidence.

Many women reported that joining organizations like the Canadian Public Relations Society, the International Association of Business Communicators, or the Arthur Page Society has helped them to find mentorship, build networks, develop confidence, and advance their careers. In these environments, many find the female role models that may be lacking in their own organizations and have the opportunity to pursue professional development or certifications that springboard them to the next level in their career. Yet overall, the respondents were split on the value of membership in advancing their careers, suggesting that these organizations need to further understand what their stakeholders are looking for, and how to best market their services to the latest generation of PR professionals.

The anonymized nature of the research encouraged respondents to share their experiences with pay inequity in a safe environment, and the results suggest that more legislation, transparency and advocacy is needed to bring female salaries in line with those of their male counterparts. Respondents were asked both about perception and evidence of pay inequity, and it was disheartening to learn that women continue to earn less than men, even in cases where their

education outstrips their male colleagues. Policies and processes are essential to making systemic changes that level the playing field, as noted in one interview response around government legislation to equalize salaries based on gender–revealing a 20% difference. This is clear evidence that best intentions are not sufficient–they must be followed by enforceable policy and top-down culture change.

Study respondents flagged mentorship as perhaps the most powerful tool at their disposal for advancing their careers–although they leaned more towards informal structures than formal programs within the workplace. In their words, it helps to build confidence and identify a role model among female PR professionals, along with encouraging the growth of their professional network. Respondents repeatedly stressed the value of hearing honest and realistic answers to their questions about career progression and what executive roles would truly demand of them, and encouragingly, the vast majority of respondents reported that they mentor younger women in public relations.

Yet a surprising trend emerged amongst the interview respondents–most of whom were at the senior or executive level–they most appreciated the mentorship of senior male colleagues, raising the question of whether that advice is valued because they need to understand the rules of how to thrive in a "man's world." If women cannot advance to the upper echelons of organizations without changing or hiding behaviours that are stereotypically "feminine," how far have we actually come?

For respondents, a major topic of discussion–with mentors, colleagues and personal friends of the respondents–was imposter syndrome. Since it first appeared in scholarly research (Clance & Imes, 1978), discussion of this phenomenon has grown from a whisper to a roar. While it is in no way gender-exclusive, women are far more likely to report dealing with

imposter syndrome: "The persistent inability to believe that one's success is deserved or has been legitimately achieved as a result of one's own efforts or skills" (see Appendix A).

Survey respondents were adamant that mentorship, role-modelling and "celebrating women without tokenizing them" was critical to fighting imposter syndrome. Others felt that women need a "tool-kit" for handling self-doubt and lack of confidence, in particular when they may be transitioning into more senior roles and may be more vulnerable to imposter syndrome. Further, they suggested that company culture must normalize the experience of imposter syndrome, through conversations, training sessions, mentorship, and wraparound supports that help women–and men–move past self-doubt and into a mindset where they trust their own instincts.

For the respondents in this study, imposter syndrome accompanied them into workplaces and board rooms, undermining their belief in their intelligence, capability, value, and worthiness to be present. For some, it prevented them from applying to roles that they were well-qualified for, or left them awake late at night, replaying conversations through a negative filter of self-doubt and recrimination. It is critical that imposter syndrome becomes/remains an open, non-judgemental topic of conversation within the workplace–with the aim of understanding and moving past it.

There is no single solution to ensure that Canadian women have equal access to the top of the public relations ladder, across multiple industries. Rather, the suggestions of the survey respondents must be woven together in a quilt that lifts future female practitioners. "Its pieces may come from anywhere; many hands may work to assemble it; and making a quilt may take years, even generations" (Kendrick, 1991). It would be naïve to suggest that sweeping changes

can be made overnight, but women and their male allies must continue to advocate and force the issue of access and equity in the public relations realm.

Several respondents and interview participants suggested that professional organizations should spend more time discussing the issue of gender parity in leadership with their membership. These organizations, and individual companies, must establish or grow existing mentorship and other leadership development programs, concentrating on women in the early stages of their PR career. More initiatives like the 50-30 Challenge (Government of Canada, 2020) should be launched–with government-backed incentives for organizations that make the commitment. Traditionally male-dominated industries can apply for additional incentives if they exceed their targets.

Within public relations, organizations must commit to salary transparency; along with including salary bands on job postings, more companies should voluntarily equalize payment structures. To address those organizations who don't opt in, governments should mandate gender equity in compensation, enforced by annual reporting and stiff financial penalties for those who fail to comply. Further, policies must address the compounding impact of maternity leave on women's careers, ensuring that they are given the option to upskill and develop their competencies upon their return, rather than having their career stall or slide backwards because of a socio-biological sweepstake.

Along with mentorship programs, role models, and membership in professional organizations, the impact of imposter syndrome should be challenged through open dialogue, sharing personal stories, and being authentic and vulnerable as a leader.

Women could also parlay their communications strengths to develop a technological advantage in their PR careers, potentially helping their advancement. Studies from the

Netherlands found that individuals who use social media frequently tend to be 1) social, 2) involved, 3) dedicated, 4) seeking intimacy, and media-smart (Boschma & Groen, 2008; Veen, 2009), and that these competencies align with a "female style of communications" (Tannen, 1994). Given the growing strategic value of social media platforms in public relations/communications, this alignment could potentially serve as a professional advantage for women:

> Female professionals tended to use social networks significantly more than their male colleagues for interactive communication, such as initiating dialogue, establishing new relationships, demonstrating innovation and openness, stimulating new ideas and exploring digital communication cultures. Public relations women use online communities more than men to execute two-way communication and to strengthen resources and competencies. (Verhoeven & Aarts, 2010, p .10).

However, given that the merits of social media are often minimized–highlighting the triviality of specific content tropes over the insight into global communications behaviours–it could further force women into a digital pink collar ghetto, leading to poorly valued and poorly compensated social media communications roles.

Overall, suggested one female executive in communications, the field is hobbled by the organizational mindset that public relations/communications management is a simple role that anyone can do, which reduces its value against other portfolios. Going further, she suggested that the work is undervalued as communications' "worker bees" are more often female. Another interview participant, who works in policing, stated that one of her biggest challenges has been to convince leaders of the value that her portfolio brings to the force. "Communications is

different. There's just so many intangibles," she said. "They're not seeing the value of the role…it's hard to measure and articulate the mess you *didn't* step into. Then it's easy to keep it in middle management." From her perspective, it is a professional rather than a gender issue keeping her from the executive table.

One interview participant raised the impact of menopause on women's career advancement (in general), citing physical and mental effects that have implications for work performance and perception of capability in a professional environment. This could prove to be an interesting avenue of research in future, along with a broader examination of ageism and women in the PR workplace (Zatepilina-Monacell & Han, 2024).

PAD Framework

To highlight the factors assisting women in their career advancement, the barriers preventing their elevation, and the recommended ways to increase the former and remove the latter, a three-pronged framework (see Figure 1) is proposed. This framework suggests that career advancement for Canadian women in public relations/communications management can be improved through policy changes, improving access, and disruption of cultural norms.

The top portion of the framework captures the major factors that help women in Canadian public relations/communications management advance their careers: education, mentorship, role models, work-life flexibility. On the right, each factor is tagged with relevant element of the framework; for example, education provides access through existing industry standards, while mentorship provides access through networks and training, role models provide access through inspiration and career modelling, and work-life flexibility makes it possible (through policies and disruption of cultural norms) for women to advance without sacrificing personal commitments.

As far as barriers, discrimination impacts access to executive roles, and must be challenged through policy, while pay inequity must be addressed through enforceable policy and disruption of cultural norms around women's value in the workplace. Work-life stress, generally attributable in this study to issues of childcare, eldercare and other factors that demand flexibility, must be tackled through policy change and disruptions to cultural norms. Finally, imposter syndrome exists because historical norms imply that women don't deserve a "seat at the table", and organizations and society must disrupt this fallacy to both create high-performing corporations and to right a moral wrong.

Figure 1

Proposed framework to assist women and remove barriers to career advancement in PR/CM
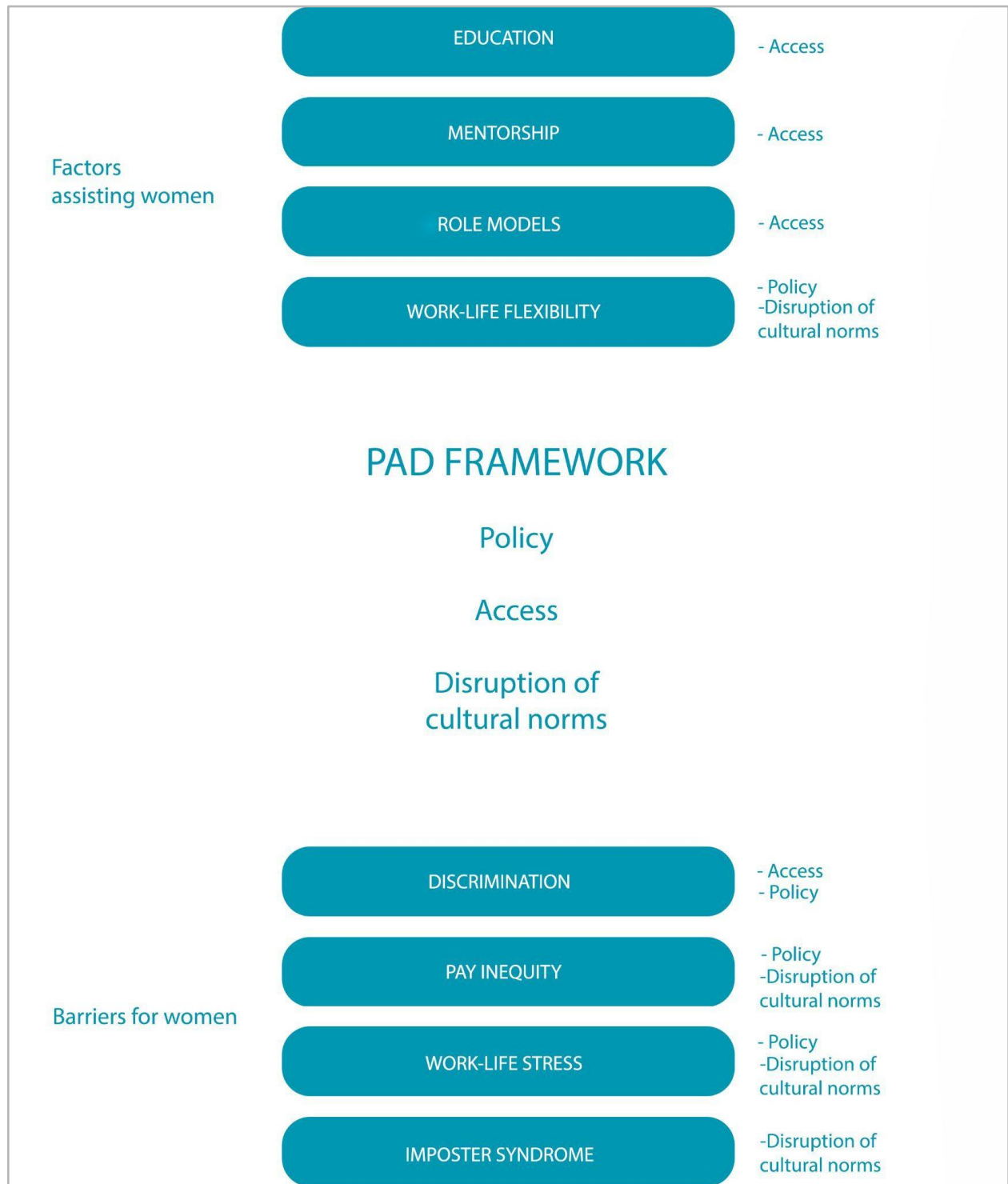
Conclusion and Limitations

This research, using survey data and in-depth interviews, builds on previous studies into the factors that advance or prevent the career progression of women in public relations/communications management, including mentorship, professional memberships, and the impact of the "boy's club," with a focus on Canadian public relations/communications management. It turns particular attention to the phenomenon of imposter syndrome, how it is discussed amongst women in PR, and what can be done to reach long-term gender equity in the Canadian public relations/communications management sector. The findings suggest that education, increased access to formal and informal mentorship programs, and interaction with female role models are essential to advancing careers for women in PR. They continue to face barriers, including the existence of a "boy's club" mentality, covert discrimination, and the stress of maternity leave/childcare/eldercare demands. And despite decades in the industry, women still struggle with pay inequity compared to their male colleagues. Many report significant struggles with imposter syndrome and lack of confidence as they attempt to breach the C-Suite, with mixed responses about the value of professional organizations in their journey to become part of the dominant coalition.

This study did not adequately consider the additional challenges faced by racialized or Indigenous women working in public relations/communications management, which could be corrected through additional screening questions, targeted survey recruitment and careful selection of a more diverse cohort of interview subjects.

Additionally, future research should also examine the unique experiences of 2SLGBTQI+ women and men in Canadian public relations, as evidence suggests that this population faces both similar and additional challenges in the fight for equity and representation. Any learnings

from the past decades, as women have fought for advancement, should be shared with equity deserving groups in hopes of shortening their journey to success. Another avenue of future research could explore the impact of menopause and ageism on women in Canadian public relations, given that this biological transition occurs when a woman is at a critical stage in her career advancement–when the C-suite might actually be in reach.

Finally, delving deeper into the experiences of women in PR at different stages of their life journal could provide insight into the different challenges faced over the course of the women's careers, and how to most effectively address them. With so many women graduating from public relations programs, there is a tremendous opportunity to establish a baseline of expectations, hopes, and concerns in the newest generation of Canadian women to enter the PR workforce. The baseline could provide the foundation for a national or even international longitudinal study–perhaps in collaboration with an organization like the CPRS or IABC–to follow these women over the course of their careers and track their experiences, challenges, and successes.

The participants in both the survey population and the in-depth interviews included colleagues within the researcher's network, and while attempts were made to eliminate bias in data collection, it is possible that responses were biased as a result of these connections. As the researcher works in the higher education sector, which is dominated by women and includes many women in high-ranking positions, it is possible that this influenced the results of the survey. Future research should endeavour to recruit more women in traditionally male-dominated industries to ensure that a breadth of lived experiences are represented.

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Appendix A

Glossary of Relevant Terms

"Boy's club"

An informal system of male relationships that keeps men in positions of power, excluding women and other marginalized groups

Imposter syndrome

The persistent inability to believe that one's success is deserved or has been legitimately achieved as a result of one's own efforts or skills

Queen bee syndrome

A derogatory term applied to women who have achieved success in traditionally male-dominated fields. These women often take on "masculine" traits and distance themselves from other women in the workplace in order to succeed. They may also view or treat subordinates more critically if they are female and refuse to help other women rise through the ranks as a form of self-preservation.

Appendix B

Certificate of Ethics Clearance to Involve Human Participants in Research

McMaster University | **Research Ethics Board**

McMaster University Research Ethics Board (MREB)
c/o Research Office for Administrative Development and Support
MREB Secretariat, GH-305
1280 Main St. W.
Hamilton, Ontario, L8W 4L8
email: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca
Phone: 905-525-9140 ext. 23142

CERTIFICATE OF ETHICS CLEARANCE TO INVOLVE HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH

Today's Date: Sep/16/2023

Supervisor: Ms. Colleen Killingsworth
Student Investigator: Master's student Nicolle Wahl
Applicant: Nicolle Wahl
Project Title: "You've (almost) come a long way, baby": Women in Leadership Roles in Canadian Public Relations/Communications Management
MREB#: 6627

Dear Researcher(s)

The ethics application and supporting documents for MREB# 6627 entitled ""You've (almost) come a long way, baby": Women in Leadership Roles in Canadian Public Relations/Communications Management" have been reviewed and cleared by the MREB to ensure compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement and the McMaster Policies and Guidelines for Research Involving Human Participants.

The application protocol is cleared as revised without questions or requests for modification. The above named study is to be conducted in accordance with the most recent approved versions of the application and supporting documents.

Ongoing clearance is contingent on completing the Annual Report in advance of the yearly anniversary of the original ethics clearance date: Sep/13/2024. If the Annual Report is not submitted, then ethics clearance will lapse on the expiry date and Research Finance will be notified that ethics clearance is no longer valid (TCPS, Art. 6.14).

An Amendment form must be submitted and cleared before any substantive alterations are made to the approved research protocol and documents (TCPS, Art. 6.16).

Researchers are required to report Adverse Events (i.e. an unanticipated negative consequence or result affecting participants) to the MREB secretariat and the MREB Chair as soon as possible, and no more than 3 days after the event occurs (TCPS, Art. 6.15). A privacy breach affecting participant information should also be reported to the MREB secretariat and the MREB Chair as soon as possible. The Reportable Events form is used to document adverse events, privacy breaches, protocol deviations and participant complaints.

Document Type	File Name	Date	Version
Recruiting Materials	Recruitment - Snowball Script NWahl MREB project 6627	Aug/19/2023	1.0
Consent Forms	Consent Preamble & Post Study Actions for Online Studies NWahl MREB project 6627	Aug/20/2023	1.0
Recruiting Materials	Survey Screening Questions NWahl MREB project 6627	Aug/21/2023	1.0
Consent Forms	V1.1 August 21 Consent - Oral Consent Script NWahl MREB project 6627	Aug/21/2023	1.1
Recruiting Materials	V1.0 Sept 9 Recruitment - Survey--Email Script sent to industry associations NWahl MREB project 6627	Sep/09/2023	1.0
Recruiting Materials	V1.1 Sept 9 Recruitment - Social Media post NWahl MREB project 6627	Sep/09/2023	1.1
Recruiting Materials	V1.2 Sept 9 Recruitment - Interview--Email Script sent direct to participants NWahl MREB project 6627	Sep/09/2023	1.2
Recruiting Materials	V1.2 Sept 9 Recruitment - Survey--Email Script sent direct to participants NWahl MREB project 6627	Sep/09/2023	1.2
Interviews	V1.2 Sept 9 Interview Guide NWahl MREB project 6627	Sep/09/2023	1.2
Test Instruments	V1.1 Sept 9 Online Survey Questions NWahl MREB project 6627	Sep/09/2023	1.1

Document Type	File Name	Date	Version
Consent Forms	V1.3 Sept 10 Consent - Survey Letter of Information_Consent NWahl MREB project 6627 copy	Sep/10/2023	1.3
Consent Forms	V1.2 Sept 11 Consent - Oral Consent Log NWahl MREB project 6627	Sep/11/2023	1.2
Consent Forms	V1.4 Sept 12 Consent - Interview Letter of Information_Consent NWahl MREB project 6627	Sep/12/2023	1.4
Response Documents	V1.1 Revisions to MREB application Sept 12 2023 NWahl MREB project 6627	Sep/12/2023	1.1

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Appendix C

Interview--Recruitment email sent directly to participants

Email subject line: Request from master's student to interview you re: Women in Leadership

Roles in Canadian Public Relations

Hello,

My name is Nicolle Wahl, and I'm a student in the Master of Communications

Management program at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. I am conducting research

about the current state of women in public relations leadership in Canada, focusing on the

various factors that are influencing the ability of women to advance to executive leadership roles.

I'm working under the supervision of Colleen Killingsworth of McMaster's Department

of Communication Studies and Media Arts, and I would like to invite you to participate in an

interview that will take approximately 60 minutes. The interview will take place via Zoom online

videoconference.

To be eligible to participate in this study, one must be female, aged 18 and older and

working in the area of Canadian public relations/communications management.

For the full details of the study, please read the attached Letter of Information.

I know you have a busy schedule and may not be able to participate at this time; that is

understandable, I have other participants set up for interviews. However, if you don't have time

to be interviewed, please consider completing this survey. You can access the survey by clicking

on the following link: [https://surveys.mcmaster.ca/limesurvey/index.php/571762?lang=en] You

will be presented with the Letter of Information followed by a consent button before the

survey begins.

I would like to thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

If you are interested in participating or if you have any questions, please contact:

Nicolle Wahl   Colleen Killingsworth

wahln@mcmaster.ca   colleen@ckcommunications.ca

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance from the McMaster Research Ethics Board, project #6627.

Appendix D

Survey--Recruitment email sent directly to participants

Email subject line: Women in Leadership Roles in Canadian Public Relations

Hello. I'm Nicolle Wahl.

I am conducting research about the current state of women in public relations leadership in Canada. It will focus on how and to what extent various factors are influencing the ability of Canadian women to advance to executive leadership roles in public relations/communications management.

This study is part of my Masters studies at McMaster University's Masters of Communications Management in Hamilton, Ontario. I'm working under the supervision of Colleen Killingsworth of McMaster's Department of Communication Studies and Media Arts.

I'm inviting you to participate in an online survey that will take approximately 15 minutes. The survey will take place on McMaster's Limesurvey platform.

To be eligible to participate in this study, one must be aged 18 and older and employed in the area of Canadian public relations/communications management.

For the full details of the study, please read the attached Letter of Information.

You can access the survey by clicking on the following link: **[study link]** You will be presented with the Letter of Information followed by a consent button before the survey/experiment begins.

I would like to thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

If you are interested in participating or if you have any questions, please contact:

Nicolle Wahl   Colleen Killingsworth

wahln@mcmaster.ca   colleen@ckcommunications.ca

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance from the McMaster Research Ethics Board, project #6627.

<center>**Appendix E**</center>

<center>**Survey—Social media post**</center>

Version 1 (longer):

[Image]

Research Volunteers Needed

Nicolle Wahl from the Department of Communication Studies and Media Arts at McMaster University is looking for volunteers aged 18 and older who are employed in the area of Canadian public relations/communications management.

The study is looking at current state of women in public relations leadership in Canada. It involves an online survey and will involve approximately 15 minutes of your time.

You can access the survey by clicking on the following link: [study link] You will be presented with a Letter of Information followed by a consent button before the survey/experiment begins.

For the full details of the study, please click on this link to the Letter of Information.

This study has been reviewed by and received ethics clearance from the McMaster Research Ethics Board (#6627).

Version 2 – (shorter):

[Image]

McMaster researchers are looking for Canadian public relations professionals to take part in an online survey on the current state of women in public relations leadership in Canada. Please click here [insert link] for more information.

Appendix F

Interview questions for participants

Introduction

- What is your name?

- What is your current title and place of work?

- What is your gender?

- How many years have you worked in the PR/CM industry?

- How did your career in PR begin? What drew you into the field?

- At that time, in terms of gender distribution, how would you describe your work environment?

- At that early stage of your career, did you interact with the executive level at all?

- (If yes) What do you remember about the individuals at that level at that time?

Career progression

- What factors have been most helpful to you in advancing your career progression? (Probing:

  - Education

  - Informal mentorship

  - Formal mentorship

  - Female role models

  - Flexibility (work-life balance)

- If you are a woman at the executive level in PR, what factors were most helpful to you in advancing your career progression? (Probing:

  - Education

- Informal mentorship

- Formal mentorship

- Female role models

- Flexibility (work-life balance)

- If you are a woman at the executive level in PR, what factors stood in the way of advancing your career progression? (Probing:

  - Covert discrimination

  - "Boy's club"

  - Maternity leave or child care demands

  - Eldercare demands

  - Lack of mentorship

  - Imposter syndrome

  - Lack of confidence

  - Queen bee syndrome)

- In your opinion, which of the following factors affect why women do not hold executive, or even senior-level positions? (Probing:

  - Covert discrimination

  - "Boy's club"

  - Maternity leave or child care demands

  - Eldercare demands

  - Lack of mentorship

  - Imposter syndrome

  - Lack of confidence

- Queen bee syndrome)

Professional organizations

- Are you a member of a professional PR organization?

- What organization(s) are you a member of?

- Does membership in such organizations help women reach positions of leadership? Why?

- What aspects of these memberships help women reach positions of leadership? (Probing:

  - Networking

  - Mentorship

  - Certifications

  - Professional development/training

  - Examples of other female leaders)

Mentorship

- Have you received formal/informal mentorship from a more senior woman in public relations during your career?

- If you have received mentorship, what benefits did it provide to you in terms of career progression? (Probing:

  - Role model

  - Professional development

  - Build confidence

  - Networking

  - Advice on work-life balance)

- Have you provided formal/informal mentorship for a more junior woman in public relations during your career?

- Does your organization provide formal opportunities for mentorship?

- Which do you feel is more effective–formal or informal mentorship? Why?

Imposter syndrome

- Are you aware of the concept of imposter syndrome? (Provide standard definition)

- Have you discussed imposter syndrome with other women in PR?

- Have you encountered women in PR who identified as experiencing imposter syndrome?

- Did those conversations happen in the context of professional discussions, like workshops or meetings, or was it in a private context?

- Anecdotally, do you think more women are discussing a sense of imposter syndrome?

- Is there a stigma related to imposter syndrome? What impact do you think it has?

- Have you experienced imposter syndrome in the context of your career in public relations?

- How has imposter syndrome affected your approach to your career?

- What interventions do you think would prevent/reduce imposter syndrome in younger women in the PR workforce? Probing:
    - Mentorship
    - Additional opportunities for education
    - Counseling
    - Female role models at executive levels

Pay Inequity

- Have you been affected by pay inequity due to gender?

- In terms of percentage, how much did/does gender-based inequity affect your salary? (range options)

- Did you raise the issue of gender-based pay inequity with your employer? If not, why?

- If yes, what was their response?

- Does your organization have any policies in place designed to prevent gender-based pay inequity?

- Do you feel that those policies are effective?

- Mid-life career interruptions happen for a variety of reasons, however, for women, it's more likely to be the result of childbearing/childrearing. In 2023, is there still a link between starting a family and long term pay inequity?

- What do you think will make a difference in erasing pay inequity in PR?

Women at your organization

- In your organization, is the executive level PR/CM position held by a female?

- In your organization, has a woman ever held the executive level PR/CM position?

- In your organization, are senior (not executive) level position(s) held by women?

- During your career, have you been aware of women who held executive positions in PR and served as role models?

Final thoughts

- In public relations, 70-75% of professionals are women, yet they make up less than 30% of executive leadership positions.
  - Why is this still the case?
  - What needs to be done to reach true gender parity in leadership in Canada?

- Do you have any final thoughts that you'd like to share on this topic?

Appendix G

Survey questions for participants

*Note: This will include appropriate consent preamble and post-study actions, allowing participants to opt out at any time.

Introduction

- Do you work in the PR/CM industry? (Yes; No–no leads to end of survey)

- What is your gender? (m/f//other/prefer not to answer)

- How many years have you worked in the PR/CM industry? (range options)

- Do you work in the profit/not-for-profit sector? (radio buttons; prefer not to answer; I don't know)

Women at your organization

- In your organization, is the executive level PR/CM position held by a female? (Y/N/don't know/prefer not to answer)

- In your organization, has a woman ever held the executive level PR/CM position? (Y/N/don't know/prefer not to answer)

- In your organization, are senior (not executive) level position(s) held by women? (Y/N/don't know/prefer not to answer)

- During your career, have you been aware of women who held executive positions in PR and served as role models? (Y/N/don't know/prefer not to answer)

Pay Inequity

- Have you been affected by pay inequity due to gender? (Y/N/don't know/prefer not to answer)

- In terms of percentage, how much did/does gender-based inequity affect your salary? (range options)

- Did you raise the issue of gender-based pay inequity with your employer? (Y/N/prefer not to answer)

- If not, why? (Text field)

- If yes, what was their response? (Text field)

- Does your organization have any policies in place designed to prevent gender-based pay inequity?(Y/N/don't know/prefer not to answer)

- Do you feel that those policies are effective? (Y/N/don't know/prefer not to answer)

Career progression

- What factors have been most helpful to you in advancing your career progression?
  - Education
  - Informal mentorship
  - Formal mentorship
  - Female role models
  - Flexibility (work-life balance)
  - Other (specify)_____

- If you are a woman at the executive level in PR, what factors were most helpful to you in advancing your career progression?
  - Education
  - Informal mentorship

- Formal mentorship

- Female role models

- Flexibility (work-life balance)

- Other (specify)_____

- If you are a woman at the executive level in PR, what factors stood in the way of advancing your career progression?

    - Covert discrimination

    - "Boy's club"

    - Maternity leave or childcare demands

    - Eldercare demands

    - Lack of mentorship

    - Imposter syndrome

    - Lack of confidence

    - Queen bee syndrome

    - Other (specify)_____

- In your opinion, which of the following factors affect why women do not hold executive, or even senior-level positions?

    - Covert discrimination

    - "Boy's club"

    - Maternity leave or childcare demands

    - Eldercare demands

    - Lack of mentorship

    - Imposter syndrome

- Lack of confidence

- Queen bee syndrome

- Other (specify)_____

Professional organizations

- Are you a member of a professional organization? (Y/N/prefer not to answer)

- What organization are you a member of? (choose all that apply)

  - CPRS

  - IABC

  - PRSA

  - (Other; specify)_____

- Does membership in such an organization help women reach positions of leadership?

  (Agree←—---> Disagree, don't know, prefer not to answer)

- What aspects of these memberships help women reach positions of leadership? (choose

  all that apply)

  - Networking

  - Mentorship

  - Certifications

  - Professional development/training

  - Examples of other female leaders

Mentorship

- Have you received formal/informal mentorship from a more senior woman in public

  relations during your career? (Y/N/don't know/prefer not to answer)

- If you have received mentorship, what benefits did it provide to you in terms of career progression?

    - Role model

    - Professional development

    - Build confidence

    - Networking

    - Advice on work-life balance

    - Other (please specify)

- Have you provided formal/informal mentorship for a more junior woman in public relations during your career? (Y/N/don't know/prefer not to answer)

- Does your organization provide formal opportunities for mentorship? (Y/N/don't know/prefer not to answer)

Imposter syndrome

- Are you aware of the concept of imposter syndrome? (Provide standard definition) (Y/N/don't know/prefer not to answer)

- Have you experienced imposter syndrome in the context of your career in public relations? (Y/N/don't know/prefer not to answer)

- How has imposter syndrome affected your approach to your career? (Y/N/don't know/prefer not to answer)

- Have you discussed imposter syndrome with other women in PR? (Y/N/don't know/prefer not to answer)

- What interventions do you think would prevent/reduce imposter syndrome in younger women in the PR workforce? (Select all that apply)