CAPSTONE

REPUTATION AND REPRESENTATION: STUDY OF ONTARIO PUBLIC

RELATIONS AND ITS BLACK FEMALE PRACTITIONERS

Researcher: Sharlyn Carrington, 400107053

Supervisor: Dr. Terence (Terry) Flynn, Ph.D., APR, FCPRS

Date: December 10, 2018

Course: MCM 740 Capstone Research for Communications Management

Department of Communications Studies and Multimedia

Faculty of Humanities

McMaster University

Abstract

This study investigated how and to what extent the reputation of public relations, as well as experiences of discrimination, could be deterrents or barriers for black women entering and advancing in public relations. It also explored the potential impact a lack of diversity may have on the effectiveness of the practice. Based on in-depth interviews with 21 black female practitioners in Ontario, Canada, participants described the reputation of practitioners as being mostly white females and white male leaders. Participants believed that the lack of black representation, lack of diverse mentors, and subtle yet existent experiences of discrimination could be barriers to advancement and deterrents for black women considering a career in public relations. The study uncovered a consistent opinion among participants about experiences of subtle discrimination, the importance of diversity, and led to several recommendations to increase diversity in the field.

Keywords: reputation, public relations, diversity, black women, discrimination, barriers

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1. Introduction

Canada is well known as a welcoming and tolerant society, one that values diversity (Burgess, 2017). Ontario, the province with the largest population and the most cultural diversity in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2011; Government of Ontario, 2016) contributes greatly to Canada's overall reputation in this regard.

Public relations, and its practitioners hold their own reputations, ones that are extremely understudied and therefore difficult to validate (Sriramesh, Zerfass & Kim, 2013; Holtzhausen, & Zerfass, 2013; Serini, Toth, Wright & Emig, 1997). If one were to explore how practitioners are represented in popular culture, they would see a recurring image of a high-powered, aggressive, well-dressed, white female spin doctor made famous by the ladies of 'Absolutely Fabulous' and Samantha Jones of 'Sex and The City.' As a result of this image, could there be a perception that public relations is only publicity related, and only conducted by white female practitioners?

Public relations is of course more than just publicity. Most scholars define it as a management function that contributes to the performance of an organization by understanding the needs of publics both inside and outside of the organization. It reduces potential threats caused by business-related actions, builds relationships with publics that can strengthen the organization, and maintains a strong and positive organizational reputation and identity (Grunig, Toth & Hon, 2000). In this way, practitioners are more than publicists. They "manage relationships between an organization and its diverse publics, through the use of communication, to achieve mutual understanding, realize organizational goals and serve the public interest" (Flynn, Gregory & Valin, 2008, para. 2). It is this strategic function that

provides a unique opportunity to help organizations and communities celebrate diversity

instead of fear it (Hon & Brunner, 2000).

According to 2016 Statistics Canada census data there were 43,360 professionals

working in advertising and public relations services in Ontario (2016a) and only 5.7% of those

professionals self-identify as black (2016b). Unfortunately, it is difficult to determine the exact

number of those professionals that *are* black women, and exactly how many of them work in

public relations as opposed to advertising. This lack of available data is telling as it

demonstrates another problem — the lack of public relations data available in Canada.

Research conducted in the U.S. however, paints a clear picture regarding both gender

and ethnicity. Women account for more than two thirds of all practitioners in the States

(Grunig, et. al, 2000; Pompper, 2004), yet still make an average of six per cent less than male

practitioners (Austin, 2010). Public relations teams tend to skew mostly towards Caucasian

females (Appelbaum, Walton & Southerland, 2015) although leadership teams are largely

male (Jiang, Ford, Long & Ballard, 2015). In fact, there have been predominantly women in

Public relations since the 1980s in the U.S., yet few have had the opportunity to advance into

management levels, particularly when compared to their overrepresentation in the field as a

whole (Pompper, 2005; Vardeman-Winter & Place, 2017).

These disparities are even more obvious when it comes to racial and ethnic groups

(Austin, 2010), with public relations adapting the alias of "the last of the lily-white

professions" (Pompper, 2005, p.299; Kern-Foxworth, 1989, p.40). Studies conducted in the

U.S. have demonstrated that few black women are employed in the field (Pompper, 2005) and

that the population of practitioners do not proportionately reflect the diversity of the country

(Hong & Len-Rios, 2015). Not only does this underrepresentation include women of colour, but LGBT practitioners and those with disabilities as well. A 2014 study noted that 11% of public relations practitioners in the U.S. were practitioners of colour, where five per cent are black, four per cent, Hispanic, and two per cent, Asian (Vardeman-Winter & Place, 2017). Breaking into management is no different. Among public relations managers, approximately 91% were white according to a study released in 2010 (Austin, 2010). Black women in particular are underrepresented in senior management (Pompper, 2004), and are more likely to hold lower-level positions (Hong & Len-Rios, 2015).

Although this data represented the state of public relations in the U.S., the researcher, a public relations professional, considered her prior roles in public relations, thought about a possible relationship between who is represented as the typical public relations practitioner, and the practitioners she saw around her. She considered studies that spoke about disadvantage and what that meant in terms of gender, race and social status (Edwards, 2014), and her eyes, ears, and personal experiences told a similar story. Practitioners seemed to be mostly white and female, with many white male practitioners in leadership roles. This led to a line of questioning — was there actually a lack of diversity, and in particular a lack of black women in public relations? If there was, what was keeping these black women out of the field?

This study has three parts. First, it explores relevant literature about reputation, image, identity and diversity in organizations that may serve as an explanation of why there could be a lack of diverse practitioners in the field. Part two details the research problem, methodology and results of this study. The final part provides an analysis and discussion of the results, as well as offers some approaches to increasing diversity in Ontario's public relations practice.

PART ONE

2. Literature Review

Prior to conducting interviews, the researcher needed to better understand what factors could change someone's opinion and attitude towards an organization, or in the case of this study towards an entire industry. If reputation, image, identity, perception and experience can each deter or contribute to someone's attitude and behaviour, could these concepts contribute to someone's perception of an entire industry, and furthermore contribute to their decision to pursue a career in that field? One can only begin to unpack this question with a thorough understanding of each concept.

2.1 Reputation

Reputation is the character attributed to a person, thing or action (Gotsi & Wilson, 2001), a set of meanings used to describe, relate and simplify one's understanding of a person or organization (Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007). Corporate reputations are no different. They are the evaluations of organizations (Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007); how they are viewed, conceptualized and valued by their publics (Bromley, 2000). They are collections of interactions over time and; the history of people's experiences with an organization (Dowling, 1986; Gotsi & Wilson, 2001). This means that each organization may hold several reputations based on each person's experiences (Gotsi & Wilson, 2001). Van Riel and Fombrun (2007) argue that reputations are a collection of *different* images. Taking public relations as an example, it has a social image (public relations is undervalued and practitioners misunderstood as only high-powered publicists), a product image (its output or job function like press releases and attending flashy events) (Brown, White & Waymer, 2011), and it also has a recruitment image (mostly white females work in the role) (Vardeman-Winter & Place, 2017).

If this is the reputation and representation of public relations, one wonders how reputations themselves are formed.

Van Riel and Fombrun (2007) have explained that reputations are formed over time as people have experiences (stimuli). They then evaluate those experiences, classify them into concepts and associate those concepts with information already stored in their memory. People process information at three levels, based on personal experience, what their friends and colleagues have told them, and what they may have seen and remembered from mass media. As this information is processed and classified, once there are similar repeating representations of an action or experience, reputations are then formed into one's long-term memory. This entire process would be positive, if all associations with a person or an organization were good. But that is often not the case. Research has shown that companies with positive reputations attract and retain good employees more easily than those without (Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007). Is this not the same for a sector? One could argue that if public relations had a positive reputation, it too would be able to attract and retain good employees. Because good reputations demonstrate legitimacy (Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007), if an organization (or in this case an industry) is not considered legitimate, it is only logical that it will have problems retaining employees and potentially even clients.

There are those scholars that argue reputation is only a component of a 'corporate image.' To some scholars, corporate image holds more importance (Gotsi & Wilson, 2007).

2.2 Image

An image is how an object is known. Similar to a reputation, it is a set of meanings, beliefs and ideas that aid people in relating to, and describing an object (Dowling, 1986; Gotsi

& Wilson, 2001). Traditionally, it could take years with consistent repeating messages to

create this mental representation of our understanding and perception of a person, place,

phenomenon or occurrence (Gotsi & Wilson, 2001; Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007). Although

ones reputation can be both built and shattered within a shorter period of time due to the

constant and immediate nature of social media (Dijkmans, Kerkhof, & Beukeboom, 2015).

Often used interchangeably with corporate reputation, corporate image is the collection

of qualities and psychological attributes that consumers and publics accumulate in their mind.

These characteristics and qualities are what signal an organization's attractiveness to

employees, investors, clients, consumers, governments etc. (Gotsi & Wilson, 2001).

Much like reputation, people form an image of a company or organization based on

both factual and imaginary qualities; based on their personal interaction with an organization,

and the way it is portrayed in the media. This is both an opportunity and a threat for

organizations. Media portrayal or encounters with employees can be either positive or

negative, and can greatly impact or persuade publics into adopting or rejecting the type of

image the organization is attempting to uphold (Dowling, 1986).

Organizations should be mindful about the image they portray, because a good image

can influence positive behaviour towards an organization (e.g. a consumer would buy a

product from a company that has a positive image, a skilled worker would vie to work in an

organization of which they are proud). It is important therefore, that companies work to build

positive images to not only create goodwill, but to reinforce positive identity for its employees

as well (Dowling, 1986). Public relations, as a sector and much like any organization, should

be cognizant of the image portrayed, as it can either bolster or diminish its value to clients,

other professionals, and of course to those skilled individuals considering entering the field as a viable profession.

2.3 Identity and perception

An image, constantly repeating has the power to impact a reputation. A positive or negative reputation can impact identity, whether a personal, organizational or group identity. "Identity" comes from the Latin root meaning *same*. It is a significant component of how we identify and classify our reality (Tsetsura, 2011), a constantly changing and transient combination of symbols, behaviour and communication (Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007; Edwards, 2014; Hall, 2014). This identity mix (Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007) can be applied to an organization (what a company does or says), a person's culture (how members of that group dress/act/communicate), or other groups like public relations practitioners for arguments' sake (what practitioners look like, how they act, what they say). They are constantly reshaped and negotiated because of many relationships and interactions between a person, organization and society (Tsetsura, 2011).

Corporate identity is based on how members of the organization understand and conceptualize the key specific and independent characteristics of an organization. It is a tangible representation of what makes the company distinct (Bromley, 2000; Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007); what characteristics and values are shared, which ones are most used by members, and which characteristics are perceived as being the most unique when compared to other organizations. It is formed not just from the visual characteristics, but also from the shared beliefs and goals of organizational members. Of course, not all characteristics are positive, and therefore organizations construct the identities that they want to be associated with or based on how they want to be perceived (Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007).

Personal identity (e.g. to what norms, culture or race you ascribe), follows the same definition. Individuals usually have several hierarchical or ordered identities in which culture and race are included (Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton & Smith, 1997). Cultural identity is one shared collective of self that reflects a commonality in history, food, sometimes language and other cultural frames of reference (Hall, 2014). It is the identity of a person as they relate to a cultural group (Grunig et. al, 2000). Racial identity, often closely linked, describes a phenomenon where someone's race is a more significant aspect that forms their sense of self. This concept has been studied in great detail with African Americans in particular.

Racial identity has been linked with several phenomena, particularly when it comes to those who identify as black. For example, lack of self-confidence and other adverse effects can be caused by the negative stigma surrounding being black (Sellers et. al, 1997). Studies have also demonstrated that group identification can impact the way black Americans perceive negative encounters. In fact, those who identify more strongly with being black, tended to have a heightened awareness of negative incidents of prejudice. Additionally, those who were more likely to report stronger identification with their race, were more likely to be aware of race-salient environments, than those with "diffused identities" (people who were not connected to their ethnic group and are not committed to membership) (Seller & Shelton, 2000, p. 31). Those who *do* identify as black have been known to change their behaviour based on their surroundings, demonstrating different parts of themselves in different environments. This is referred to as 'code-switching.' This identity negotiation is in itself a form of strategic communication and can be applied to the way practitioners, particularly practitioners of colour, practice public relations (Tsetsura, 2011).

For practitioners that may ascribe to several social identities – gender, race, age, class, orientation – may be operating within the effects of multiple concurrent intersectional identities. Living in a reality with concurrent identities can positively impact the way they perform as practitioners and the communications they create for vast groups of people that may fall within similar identity groups (Vardeman-Winter & Place, 2017).

People and practitioners, as do organizations, have several types of identities as well. Firstly, a desired identity or how they want to be viewed. Secondly, a projected identity or how they portray themselves; and lastly the perceived identity of how others understand them (Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007). Race plays a role in both the way we think of ourselves and of course perceived identity.

Research by Kim and Cheong in 2011 (cited in Hong & Len-Rios 2015) has shown that organizations pick spokespeople to promote a positive reputation and image of their company, and that the race of the spokesperson when matched with consumers had the potential to increase positive perception of that company. In this same study released about publics' perception of a black spokesperson and his perceived credibility, the key finding was that the black spokesperson was described outwardly as more credible. However, that same spokesperson was being evaluated more negatively by survey participants on a subconscious level, when compared to his or her white counterpart. In the absence of any historical information about the company, these participants reacted more quickly using perceived stereotypes associated with the ascribed identity of being black (Hong & Len-Rios, 2015).

This concept is not hard to grasp, it is seen in other areas like employment. Studies have shown that when hiring or recommending others for promotions and raises, hiring

managers tend to perceive those candidates most like themselves as the best candidates for

those rewards, more so than any other objective measure (Hon & Brunner, 2000).

If one considers public relations — a practice that relies on maintaining positive

reputation and image — one can understand how image, identity and perception can become

both opportunities and threats for many diverse people attempting to work in corporate North

America. Public relations practice holds a common existing reputation, image and identity

(whether perceived, ascribed, or actual), that can greatly impact the way it is valued as a

business function. This reputation can likely also impact whether it is viewed as a viable field

to work in.

2.4 Reputation of public relations

As mentioned earlier, public relations has a very particular reputation, it is seen as

glamorous; a function that deals with publicity, damage control or event planning (Brown,

White & Waymer, 2011). Recognized as a job that goes well beyond the regular 9 to 5 hours

(Pompper, 2007), it has been defined as largely an easy job, perfect for a woman, often held

only by young, pretty, less intelligent young women (Tsetura, 2011). A study conducted of

movies and TV shows over a 15-year period identified a trend where women in public

relations were portrayed as attractive, social, stylish and white (Brown, et al., 2001). Although

some of the stereotypes seem accurate (women *are* largely employed in the field and they *do*

often work longer hours), these practitioners also work very hard (Tsetsura, 2011). These

perceived attributes were a large concern of many students who considered entering the

workforce in public relations, as many feared work-life balance would be impossible to attain

(Sha & Toth, 2005).

Other studies demonstrated that practitioners were satisfied with their salaries, received recognition, and the prestige of the industry (Serini et. al, 1997). One criticism has been that public relations is often characterised by its lack of racial diversity. White skin in North America has historically been perceived as a prototypical attribute of leaders in business, while black, has been the opposite (Logan, 2011). So, while young African American practitioners are mostly happy with their career choice, their concerns about the industry (i.e. lack of upward mobility, lack of mentors, the general perception that other fields are more accessible), may be turning the younger generation away from pursuing public relations (Appelbaum et. al, 2015; Zerbinos & Clanton, 1993).

If one were to unpack public relations' reputation even further, the first criticism is that public relations is a gendered profession with mostly women in those roles, and yet work-life balance is still unattainable.

2.5 Gender Barriers

There are strong correlations between gender and leadership, work-life balance, income and opportunities for career development (Vardeman-Winter & Place, 2017). In public relations, studies have shown the same relationships. Women hold over 70% of all public relations positions in the U.S. (Sha & Toth, 2005). Not only are more women in the field, more women are pursuing formal education in public relations as opposed to men which signals a trend that will last in the industry for some time (Grunig et. al, 2000). And although more men disagreed, and reportedly believe that gender discrimination in public relations no longer exists (Sha & Toth, 2005), female practitioners, particularly those from ethnic groups have reported earning less, being pigeonholed in lower positions, and promoted less frequently (Winter & Place, 2017; Pompper, 2007; Edwards, 2014). As a result when surveyed, women

in the industry reported being less satisfied and less engaged with their current employment

than did men, (Heyman & Meng, 2017), while many cited other barriers and hardships like

balancing the constant demands of a job in public relations with family responsibilities (Sha &

Toth, 2005; Pompper, 2007) and being given less opportunities than their male counterparts

(Heyman & Meng, 2017).

More women are willing to sacrifice career progression for their families (Serini, Toth,

Wright & Emig 1997), and studies have shown that women in public relations worry more

about how to balance all of these sometimes conflicting home and work aspects of their lives

(Pompper, 2012). Juggling these traditional aspects of housekeeping, caretaking with working

hard at their career is harder for women, and some women have even reported feeling like they

are betraying their family's needs when they strive for the best in their career (Pompper, 2007;

Sha & Toth, 2005; Serini et. al, 1997).

Though women out-number men in the practice of public relations, gender stereotypes

that attach subordination to women and dominance to men still persist (Grunig et. al, 2000).

One wonders whether these traditional values of women; values of cooperation and equality,

nurturance, care and dialogue (Grunig et. al, 2000) hinder their ability to lead. Some argue the

opposite, that these qualities attributed to women make them better leaders. Yet, there are still

more men in public relations management roles than women (Vardeman-Winter & Place,

2017; Grunig et. al, 2000), and many women that *do* occupy management roles, report that

they lack power in decision making, that their opinions are de-valued, being successful as a

woman is still a challenge, and that they are still being paid less than male leaders (Tsetsura,

2011; Heyman & Meng, 2017). All of this feminist research has identified that there are

gender barriers that still exist, but other factors like ethnicity and race impact where women

are placed in the gender-power scheme, where white women are placed higher than others (Vardeman-Winter & Place, 2017). In fact, because many consider the power dynamics or space between white men and women to be smaller than that of a white man and a minority, more significance is placed on the effect of racial or ethnic variables in organizational power than gender variables (Pompper, 2007).

2.6 Barriers and deterrents for black women

White women enjoy more privilege in this power structure than do African American women according to research conducted in the U.S. (Pompper, 2004; Vardeman-Winter & Place, 2017). Black women are more likely to be in a worst situation than their counterparts when it comes to job level, income, security and satisfaction, and have more barriers that exclude them from getting promoted (Logan, 2011; Pompper, 2004). While some black women profess their invisibility compared to their white male counterparts as a barrier to career growth (Place, 2015), intersectionality researchers build on the idea that this dual discrimination experienced by black female practitioners cannot be ignored when considering what may be impacting professional advancement (Vardeman-Winter & Place, 2017). Research has explained this exclusionary phenomena as a consequence of discrimination that continues to disadvantage black women (Vardeman-Winter & Place, 2017), and although legal measures were taken to end discriminatory practices across industries, the law was never set up to adequately address the mechanisms in place that can subvert the law and keep some people disadvantaged (Logan, 2011). Racial discrimination is still commonly faced by many visible minorities particularly black Americans in the workforce, where instances of racism occurred mostly with strangers that had no continued direct contact with participants of those studies (Sellers & Shelton, 2003).

Research that has been conducted on black female practitioners in the U.S. has attempted to uncover the extent to which women felt discriminated against, and whether these feelings of discrimination impacted satisfaction with their roles. Although many respondents expressed feelings of empowerment in their career, most admitted that they *did* feel marginalized and impacted by some negative stereotypes and limited mindsets from media contacts and colleagues (Pompper, 2005). Those who have directly experienced overt discrimination in the field have shied away from directly confronting situations out of fear of escalating the conflict, reprisal from their jobs and losing out on yet even more opportunities for job advancement (Noh, Beiser, Kaspar, Hou & Rummens, 1999). It is believed that black women will continue to face unique challenges until organizational leaders become less homogenous white and male (Pompper, 2012).

Although discrimination is of course a barrier, so too is a lack of role models and mentors, and there could be a positive correlation between lack of mentors and low retention of black women in the field (Appelbaum et.al, 2015; Len-Rios 1998). In fact, less than half of new African American and Hispanic practitioners surveyed in a 2014 study reported having a mentor that helped them, and even less had mentors that represented their race (Appelbaum et.al, 2015). The lack of minority faculty with which students coming up in the field can see and relate to, and from whom they can obtain career counselling, can also be a deterrent for students progressing in the field (Pompper, 2005). Beyond a lack of a mentor, participants of a similar study talked in depth about their difficulty in finding people of colour in the field, those people they would seek to create social support groups and broader networks with (Tindall, 2009; Pompper, 2012). This social network has become increasingly important for female practitioners of colour who express the need to feel like they belong, to talk about issues among people they feel they can relate to and trust, and because there are so few women

in management positions, practitioners are often forced to search outside of their organization

to build these networks (Pompper, 2012).

2.7 Why black women enter public relations

Despite these deterrents, there are still black women entering the practice. Although

many have expressed that they entered the field accidently after pursuing another path, many

chose public relations because of the perceived opportunity to work in a newer field that is

increasingly gaining more importance in business (Brown et. al, 2011). Others have admitted

they pursued public relations as a way to promote issues that are important to other African

Americans and an opportunity to mentor others looking to enter the field (Pompper, 2004).

Some black female practitioners also believe they have a unique skill set with which to

offer an organization. They can understand and respond to issues not only of their own

community, but of the mainstream as well, and therefore are uniquely qualified to be the

mechanism by which two-way communication between an organization and its public can

occur (Pompper, 2004). Yet, there is still a perception, as well as the numbers to support the

claim that there are few black women in the field. A 1995 study credited the lack of black

women in public relations to a lack of education, lack of career counselling and the existence

of prejudice (Pompper, 2004). Some have cited a lack of diversity among faculty and

curriculum in schools (Pompper, 2005). Others have blamed the public's perception that

people of colour cannot be public spokespeople, as a reason black practitioners are not hired as

often and are therefore not working in the field (Hong & Len-Rios, 2015).

Because black women are not often seen in mainstream public relations roles as

practitioners, this lack of visible representation could also be feeding into this perception that

black women aren't meant to work in the field, and therefore could be a significant deterrent to others entering it (Tindall, 2009).

2.8 What is discrimination?

Noh, Beiser, Kaspar, Hou & Rummens (1999) describe discrimination as an intentional set of acts or judgements that lead to the unequal treatment of a group of people solely based on a bias. Pager and Shepherd (2008) build on that definition to include that this discrimination leads to the advantage of one group of people over another. 'Racism' is the attitude, social structure, stereotype or policy that positions one group as superior over another (Grills, Aird & Rowe, 2016; Pager & Shepherd, 2008).

Racial discrimination can be both blatant and subtle (Sellers & Shelton, 2003), and both explicit or implicit bias can shape one's attitudes and behaviours (Grills, et. al, 2016). Subtle racism may include decisions and actions that may not themselves have racial content or may not be as easy to detect, but still produce and reinforce a disadvantage based on one's race (Pager & Shepherd, 2008).

Where social studies on race are carried out, more modern instances of racism seem to be subtle and more difficult to define (Noh, et. al, 1999). And because those instances are more difficult to pinpoint, many who have experienced racism previously can be more attuned to perceiving racism. Perceived discrimination occurs when a member of a minority group subjectively perceives unfair treatment based on his or her race. This unequal treatment may be expressed more subtly or indirectly, making it more difficult to identify (Noh et. al, 1999). Existing evidence in the U.S. continues to suggest that racism still impacts how opportunities are allocated (Pager & Shepherd, 2008), and studies have shown that increasingly these

instances of disadvantage have been more difficult to identify. The same has been uncovered in the practice of public relations.

2.9 Discrimination in public relations

Recent studies have indicated that there is a decline in the traditional explicit racist attitudes, yet discrimination does persist in hiring decisions. The traditional openly racist attitudes that reinforce inferiority of some based on race, has evolved into modern, subtle racism, where hiring decisions are masked by other non-racist reasons to maintain a status quo of white superiority (Ziegert & Hanges, 2005). Modern racists will still act on their beliefs, but mostly when they are in the right social environment that reinforces and justifies their belief, and in an environment that would not result in a negative consequence for them (Ziegert & Hanges, 2005). Therefore, even though there have been many advances toward the eradication of racial discrimination in the workforce, it can be difficult to contradict the deep-rooted ideas of racism that still exist and hold influence whether explicitly demonstrated or not (Edwards, 2014). Minorities are still underrepresented in public relations (Edwards, 2014; Jiang et. al, 2015) and this may be a result of the many barriers these minorities are facing in the industry including racial barriers, existence of certain unwritten rules and other double-standards (Appelbaum et. al, 2015) as well as perceived white male club due to overrepresentation of male leaders (Pompper, 2012; Jiang et. al, 2015).

Almost 30 years ago the Atlanta Interassociation Council for Public Relations (IAC) conducted a study that questioned employers, asking why more minorities were not hired into the field. Employers responded that they couldn't find qualified minorities, that they were not looking for race, and that perhaps more opportunities for mentoring and internships were needed to give minorities more skills and experience in the field (as cited in Zerbinos &

Clanton, 1993). Almost 30 years later, there have been improvements. Diversity, is now increasingly a focus of organizations and in particular of public relations leaders (Jiang et. al, 2015). When comparing this study from 30 years ago to a more recent study conducted by Appelbaum, Walton and Southerland in 2015, 75% of employers hired at least one African American or Hispanic young professional over the previous six years. However, 46% of them admitted that they were "sometimes", "often" or "frequently" put on slow moving tracks when compared to their counterparts. Although both sets of employers, decades apart denied an explicit choosing of a white candidate over a minority, Kraiger and Ford's research (as cited in Ziegert & Hanges, 2005) uncovered that both black and white hiring managers (not exclusive to public relations) historically gave higher ratings to applicants of their own race. And while positions of power in public relations are mostly held by white women and men, this hierarchy has therefore created a closed system and a standard for those who are hired into the public relations field (Pompper, 2007).

Public relations is not a colour-blind field. Over the years many researchers have studied the race-based experiences of practitioners in the field and discovered the considerable impact of both subtle and blatant forms of racism. Many practitioners of colour openly discussed feelings that their careers had been hindered because of their race (Zerbinos & Clanton, 1993).

Findings of an IABC study conducted 30 years ago (as cited in Kern-Foxworth, 1989) reported 60% of respondents had experienced both race and gender-based barriers in their career. In 2015, young minority practitioners are *still* pointing to challenges they face in the workplace due to racial (Appelbaum et. al, 2015) and gender biases (Heyman & Meng, 2017).

For many practitioners, racial discrimination comes in the form of comments, and actions

from both direct colleagues and managers (Tindall, 2009).

A 2002 study (as cited in Pompper, 2007) conducted in the U.S. identified almost

30,000 filed race-based discrimination charges. Appelbaum, Walton and Southerland (2015),

reported a study on young professionals of colour, where 70% felt they were representing their

race in everything they did, 40% believed they were not being treated with respect because of

their race, and that less qualified colleagues were promoted more often than they were. More

recent studies have told stories of macroaggressions in the workplace as a persistent reality of

black practitioners (Appelbaum et. al, 2015) and feelings by younger practitioners of colour

that their employers do not care to create positive relationships with them because of their race

(Vardeman-Winter & Place, 2017). Of all the studies researched, the most common results

included practitioners feeling pigeonholed into only dealing with accounts where the public or

audience were minorities, instances of stereotyping, and limited opportunities to advance

compared to their white counterparts (Len-Rios, 1998).

The Arthur W. Page Society – a professional association for senior leaders (CEOs,

chief communicators and celebrated academics) in communications and public relations field

(Arthur W. Page Society, 2018) – conducted a study in 2015. This study reported that 93.5%

of members believed racial and ethnic minorities were treated with respect by their colleagues

(Jiang et. al, 2015). So, there is a clear discrepancy between the opinions of society members

and the overall experiences of many minority practitioners.

Many studies have questioned the experience of black women and other minorities in

public relations, however the bigger question is how these practitioners have responded and

what the impact of these experiences has been. While many studies have tried to explain a lack

of advancement, lower salary etc. to racial discrimination — and that may be true — there are

other impacts to the practitioner that may be deterring minorities' entry into the field.

2.10 Discrimination impact

In all the studies explored thus far in this review, many have described the response of

practitioners who have faced racial discrimination in the workplace. Some have simply

ignored the comments, others have quit their jobs, others have started their own companies,

some had expressed their concerns to higher levels which left them with fear of reprisal, as

well as a negative connotation on their future performance and diminished relationships with

others in the organization (Pompper, 2007).

When black women *have* reported incidents of discrimination they have been seen as

overly loud, or too aggressive, or as troublemakers (Pompper, 2004). These actions speak

volumes about the nature of diversity in the field (Vardeman-Winter & Place, 2017). If

practitioners therefore have felt like they have no other recourse in the face of discrimination,

this can (and studies have shown), have had an effect on their mental health, and their comfort

in their role as a public relations practitioner. Sellers and Shelton (2003) discussed in detail the

ongoing negative psychological and mental health consequences of black Americans who

perceived racism and had no recourse or place to turn to address those experiences. Grills,

Aird & Rowe (2016) as well as Noh et. al, (1999) discussed a psychological stress leading to

anger, depression, anxiety, hopelessness, resentment and lowered self-esteem, and these

symptoms can also be a huge barrier for black female practitioners as they attempt to achieve

job satisfaction in their careers (Pompper, 2004). These practitioners face identity crises, as

they attempt to suppress elements of their identity as black women, to conform into a white

standard of management positions. This need to maintain strength has led these women to

ignore personal needs and led to a refusal to ask for help when needed (Pompper, 2004; 2007).

A significant coping method for women in these positions has been seeking out a network of

other minority practitioners for support. However, as discussed earlier, a huge barrier

continues to be the lack of minority networks and mentors for these practitioners (Zerbinos &

Clanton, 1993).

        If both a barrier and a solution to discrimination is increased diversity in the field, a

deeper look at what diversity means and what it means for public relations is warranted.

2.11 Diversity

        The lack of diversity in the field has been widely recognized as a problem for public

relations (Edwards, 2014; Brown et. al, 2011). Diversity, defined as a difference in race,

ethnicity, ability, belief-systems, orientation, age, nationality etc. (Austin, 2010), remains an

issue in public relations because of how the industry inherently values some people as more

useful than others (Edwards, 2014). But minorities feel quite the opposite, that their ethnic

backgrounds and cultures can bring more value to their workplace, even though for some it

has been a liability to their advancement and resulted in pigeonholing (Appelbaum, et. al,

2015). As an attempt to avoid being limited by their ethnicity, 80% of practitioners admitted

they code-switch when appropriate (Appelbaum et. al, 2015). But this should not be the status

quo. An environment needs to be created where practitioners don't feel the need to separate

themselves to be accepted in the workplace. The implications of not hiring diverse employees,

and of not creating an environment where those employees are comfortable, are significant.

Organizations should not be overlooking minority practitioners, including female black

practitioners because the more they do so, the more they risk losing a large portion of the

workforce (Hon & Brunner, 2000).

2.12 Why diversity is important

Diversity is extremely important. In fact, public relations is only effective when it

includes people of all backgrounds and abilities, genders etc. (Grunig, 2009; Pompper, 2004;

Hon & Brunner, 2000). There should be as much diversity inside the organization as there is

outside for the organization to be the most effective (Pompper, 2004). When organizations and

the public relations function within neglect to embrace diversity, it can miss huge

opportunities not only to reach diverse publics, but also it can become more vulnerable to

possible crises (Hon & Brunner, 2000). The media have reported on several mishaps where

companies have ignored the diversity of its publics, created products and advertisements that

are not culturally sensitive, severely offended stakeholders, and losing customers, business and

reputational capital as a result (Diggs-Brown & Zaharna, 1995). This is why it is so important

to include diverse employees and diverse thought, in organizations and in public relations

campaigns as it positively affects an organization's bottom line (Hon & Brunner, 2000).

Companies are starting to realize that the best way to reach diverse audiences is to employ a

diverse workforce. This type of workforce would be able to better understand the nuances of

communicating with diverse audiences, and may be better able to build relationships with, and

establish the legitimacy of the business in the eyes of diverse groups (Hon & Bunner, 2000;

Zerbinos & Clanton, 1993; Kern-Foxworth, 1989). The fact is, diversity of thought leads to

new ideas, better solutions, and more innovative products (Hon & Bunner, 2000; Brown et. al,

2011).

2.13 How to fix the diversity problem

As discussed earlier, diversity can be restricted particularly when employers seek to attract and hire only those who are like themselves, to achieve a certain "fit" for the company environment (Hon & Brunner, 2000). Hiring practices of course are a huge component of encouraging diversity in organizations as well as in the public relations industry. Recruitment practices should ensure that more candidates' applications are seen, and that there are equitable promotion and career advancement opportunities, as well as flexible working arrangements that help navigate some of the work-life balances many women admit they face (Edwards, 2014). Training for managers is therefore necessary to help them understand equitable hiring options. Training is also helpful not only for managers, but for employees to help create an environment where they understand the impact of micro-aggressions, where diversity issues are addressed openly, and can be tackled without fear of reprisal or being outcast by those diverse members who raise concerns (Appelbaum et. al, 2015; Jiang et.al, 2015). Mentoring in school programs as well as in the workplace would also help develop minorities, women and other employees from underrepresented groups (Jiang, Ford, Long & Ballard, 2015). Public relations and communications courses should also emphasize and integrate multiculturalism, race and identity as other variables to consider when communicating or when conducting research on communications. This focus alone could help attract more minorities to the field (Hong & Len-Rios, 2015; Pompper, 2005).

Employing a diverse workforce is not the only answer to increasing diversity. Every practitioner should learn the best ways to communicate with multicultural audiences in a multicultural world (Sriramesh, 2002).

PART TWO

3. Research Problem

This exploratory study (Yin, 2014; Stacks, 2017) took a Canadian view of some of the similar studies conducted in the United States and investigated possible deterrents for black women entering the practice in Ontario. It applied literature surrounding reputation, image and identity, and used data from other studies relating to racial and gender barriers in the field to analyze research findings. It also aimed to shed light on the importance of diversity and identify possible solutions to a diversity problem in the field (if this problem existed).

The researcher focused this research primarily in Ontario, as it has the highest population of black Canadians (and the largest population in the country). Additionally, it was more feasible for the author to conduct interviews with participants in the same province, as opposed to across the country. Although, the findings of this research can provide a solid basis for understanding barriers and experiences faced by practitioners in the province, as well as some understanding as to the lack of black women in the field, there is an opportunity to conduct a nationwide study of public relations professionals in Canada and diversity therein in the future. The challenge will be identifying a large enough sample size for it to be representative of all practitioners.

4. Research Questions

This study investigated the reputation of public relations, as well as gender and racial barriers experienced by practitioners as deterrents to entering and advancing in the field. The author questioned the impact of diversity and representation on the effectiveness of the practice, and focused on the following three research questions:

Q1. How and to what extent is the reputation or image of public relations a deterrent and/or barrier for black women entering the field?

This question investigated whether the idea/image of the typical public relations practitioner, i.e. high-powered, primarily Caucasian female and/or white-male leader is both a barrier to employment for black women, as well as a deterrent for black women who have considered entering the field. It explored whether a lack of diverse role models and mentors, or a perception of limited upward mobility may be demonstrating to black women, that public relations is not the opportune industry for them.

Q2. To what extent is discrimination (perceived, explicit or implicit) a deterrent or barrier for black women entering the field?

This question explored the experiences of black women in public relations in Ontario. It led to a line of questioning about experiences of discrimination, and whether those experiences became barriers to participants' advancement in the field. It applied literature about the impact of all forms of discrimination whether perceived, or explicitly experienced by a practitioner, and also led to conversations about diversity in Ontario as a whole.

Q3. To what extent is this lack of representation a detriment to the public relations industry in Ontario?

Findings from this line of questioning can contribute to advancement of the public relations profession in the province, and conclusions can be applied beyond the Canadian context. It led to an exploration of why representation is important. Many scholars have argued that diversity in public relations is vital to its effectiveness, and this question addressed the opinions of black women in the field and uncovered some concrete suggestions they provided to increase diversity in the future.

5. Methodology

The researcher conducted 21 in-depth interviews of about an hour in length, to gather rich insights into how and to what extent there are so few black women in the practice, and to collect data about their lived experience in the field (Stacks, 2017). If the researcher were to have administered an online survey, it would have been extremely difficult to target the necessary participants for this study, as black practitioners are not clearly identified nor assembled through an association in the province.

When choosing a number of participants to interview, the researcher notes that similar studies conducted in the U.S. focused on interviews with anywhere from 12 to 32 practitioners (Len-Rios, 1998; Tindall, 2009), and surveys including more than 82 practitioners (Jiang, et. al, 2015; Appelbaum et. al, 2015). Each of these studies aimed to describe phenomenon surrounding public relations practitioners in the United States, a much larger population. In the end, 21 participants therefore became a strong sample for such a small population of practitioners in Ontario.

Participants were chosen by purposive sampling because they fit the demographic of the study. They were black women, between the ages of 22-65 (age of working professionals), currently residing and working in Ontario, in a public relations or communications role. This role generally includes analyzing, developing and implementing communication and promotion strategies; publicizing activities and events; managing relationships between an organization (or person) and a public or stakeholder; and/or maintaining media relations on behalf of businesses, government, organizations and/or public figures.

After McMaster Ethics Review Board approval was secured, participants were recruited through personal emails, messages on LinkedIn, Instagram and Facebook, and were recommended through snowball sampling as a result of recommendations from the researcher's professional and personal networks (Stacks, 2017). Each participant was also asked to suggest other black female practitioners with which the author could contact to conduct an interview.

The researcher conducted the focused hour-long interviews between September 1 and 30, 2018. Although meeting space at the local library was set up for private interviews, each participant chose to conduct her interview online using Skype. The author sent individual and private Skype meeting invitations to each participant. The audio of the interviews were recorded for accuracy and verification purposes. The researcher also asked participants to complete a demographic information sheet before the interview began.

The interviewer pre-tested the interview questions with a few sample participants (these sample participants may not have fit the demographic of the study, however they helped to identify any gaps, any misleading questions, or any necessary changes for clarity). The interviewer also took handwritten notes to aid in data analysis, and through a letter of information, gave participants an indication of the type of questions they would be asked. The researcher aimed to be open to contrary evidence, present all information honestly, and conducted a thorough literature review within the parameters of this study (Yin, 2014). She relied on the interview schedule of mostly open-ended and probing questions, to collect data in a way that limited her own bias from impacting participant responses (Yin, 2014). The researcher recorded and transcribed each interview and confirmed consent and a strict

commitment to confidentiality with each participant, prior to the interviews and again in the interview's introduction.

The recordings and transcripts were only used to aid the researcher to analyze results and to classify data based on any apparent themes. Recordings were deleted after data analysis took place. Data was analyzed for each question. Common themes and words were recorded, and frequencies were noted to capture a quantitative description of the recurring themes and answers mentioned.

The interview questions posed to participants are below in the order in which they were asked:

1. Tell me about why you entered the public relations field? What drew you to the profession?
2. Did you have any preconceived notions of what public relations was, or who public relations professionals were? Can you describe your thoughts and perceptions of who public relations professionals were and what they did?
3. Was it easy for you to secure your first job in public relations? Why do you say that?
   a. When you were interviewing can you tell me about anything special you did to prepare?
4. When you first started in public relations, did you believe it was a welcoming and inclusive profession?
   a. Do you still feel that way?
5. When you first started in the field did you have any mentors or people that you looked up to or guided you in your career? Without mentioning them by name, what was most useful

to you about that relationship? Did you feel that your mentor(s) could relate to your experience?

6. Do you think you are where you want to be in terms of your career? (i.e. salary/level)

7. In your opinion have you faced any barriers in getting to where you'd like to be in your career, and how would you describe those barriers?

8. Have you personally faced any discrimination in the field? Can you tell me about that experience?

      a.   Was it based on your physical appearance? What makes you say that?

9. How did you respond: Did this experience deter you at all, or make you act or think differently? In what way?

10. Do you believe that there are a lot of black women in the profession now? What makes you say that?

11. In your opinion, what factors may be attracting or deterring black women from entering the field or from advancing in the field?

12. Do you think having a diverse workforce of practitioners can help the profession, and what makes you say that?

13. In your opinion, are there steps that can be taken to increase diversity in the profession, and can you describe any you would suggest?

14. Is there anything else you would like to share about this topic?

6. Results

6.1 Participant demographics

There were 21 participants in this study. All but one openly identified as a black woman, each worked in public relations in Ontario, and an equal number (28%) were working at an intermediate, middle management, and senior-leader level at their place of employment.

The majority of participants worked in the industry between 5 and 9 years, and 10 and 19 years respectively, in a broad range of industries including government; not-for-profit; agriculture; manufacturing; financial; healthcare; education; construction and directly in a public relations or marketing agency. Most of the participants were between 31 to 54 years of age. Sixty-six per cent had undergraduate degrees, followed by 33% who had graduate level training, and of that education, 76% had pursued formal training in communications or public relations.

6.2 How participants viewed public relations

Before entering the profession, half of the participants reported having some concept or preconceived notion of what the profession entailed, as opposed to the other half, who had no idea what it was. One participant said, "I didn't know what it was. I had no reference point. People would make reference to pop culture shows, and there was very much this idea that PR agencies were more like sweatshops." Those that believed they understood public relations imagined the field as mostly what was seen on television and in the media; that of a glamorous, high-powered and flashy individual, who dressed well, wore significant makeup, and worked as a spin doctor in the negative side of public relations. Their perception was that practitioners had very fast-paced roles with little-to-no work-life balance and worked mostly in highly competitive agency settings, surrounded by white females. Only one participant mentioned that she believed the role involved storytelling and networking. Another mentioned the aspect of managing image, outreach and visibility. While another participant spoke about the versatility of the role, from licking envelopes one day to shaking hands and networking the next. One participant aptly explained that she didn't know what public relations was before she entered the field, she didn't know of anyone in the profession, and she didn't think of it as an optional career choice.

Many respondents (39%) started out in a journalism related position before entering public relations, and many of them entered because they saw it as a field that could provide more stability and a larger range of industries they could work in. Thirty per cent of participants fell into the profession after pursuing another type of career; they started engaging in communications-based tasks at their other job unknowingly; or were pursuing it through volunteer work that interested them before officially pursuing careers in the field. Another 22% of participants did in fact pursue communications and public relations through their studies at school, because they saw it as an opportunity to use their writing skills, something they greatly enjoyed.

6.3 Getting into the industry

Equal parts (50%) of participants said they had a difficult time entering the industry as those who said it was easy. Many (26%) spoke about doing a lot of networking and specific courses, some (11%) spoke about completing internships first to obtain their positions, and others (16%) talked about being lucky because they were afforded opportunities through school programs. Two participants spoke about the importance of getting their graduate level degrees, so that prospective employers would value their experience. These participants spoke about their concern on interview day, how they struggled with how much colour to wear or how natural to wear their hair and believed it may have impacted whether they successfully got the job. "Going into an interview, I was worried about my curly wild hair, and was very conscious of how I looked. So I tried to be fairly conservative," said one participant. Two other participants spoke about starting their own companies after leaving journalism roles, and therefore it was easy for them to pave their own way, although they worried about getting clients because they were black.

Forty-four per cent of participants said that it was not an inclusive profession at all when they first entered the industry. Those with this response said that it was a white dominated environment (22% of participants), and although many of them did not necessarily feel excluded because they were black, they did not feel like they were part of the club. "I can't pinpoint it," said one participant. She continued to say, "I have faced exclusion and have been the only visible minority in a large organization. It's a sense of feeling like I don't fit in; like I fit out instead." Of those who mentioned race specifically, they talked about feeling pressure to look a certain way, to wear their hair straight to fit in. Several participants (11%) said that they thought public relations could be inclusive, but it depended on the organization. For example, a participant mentioned that it was "hard to say if the profession is inclusive. Inclusivity goes beyond the practice and more about the workplace. I'm almost always the only black person in the room, so I'd say it's not inclusive in terms of diversity." Some participants *did* feel included but it was because of a particular minority leader who worked hard to make them feel that way. Others (11%) felt that the younger the team was, the more included they were and although they had been the only black face among the crowd, they still felt as if they belonged.

Most (71%) participants talked about having mentors in their careers particularly in the earlier stages, while 29% did not. Of those that *did* have mentors, 24% of the mentors were black women, 12% were white women, 12% were of another ethnic group but understood the challenges that come along with being different. Three participants talked about having male mentors that were either in their industry and understood industry challenges or were also minorities and therefore could relate to challenges related to racial bias. Only four participants explicitly talked about whether their mentor was in public relations. Of those mentors that

were black women, many of them were sought out from beyond the public relations industry, and instead provided more general guidance about navigating the workplace, and could speak to their journey. Some of the other good qualities mentioned about mentors, were that participants felt comfortable telling their mentors about their true experiences, and even though not all of the mentors could relate, they shared at least a similar sense of work ethic and understanding of how to navigate a particular organizational structure. Many who had a mentor also mentioned that it was difficult finding black female mentors in their field, and explained this difficulty could be considered a barrier as they could have benefitted from the insight of a mentor who could relate to their experience.

6.4 Barriers

When asked whether they felt they were where they wanted to be in their careers, whether that meant salary, level or autonomy, 57% said they were not satisfied and not where they expected to be. When asked, only two participants said that they had not, or could not identify any specific barriers in their careers. Everyone else said they faced barriers, but not everyone admitted that those barriers were complete roadblocks. One of the largest barriers expressed by participants was being held back by managers (21%), some cited racism, and others cited motherhood.

The concept of intersectionality came up quite often as well, not only being black, but also being a woman, and needing to think about the familial and psychological barriers that come along with that. For example, some participants talked about being afraid to apply for new jobs because they did not have 100% of the experience listed, knowing that their male counterparts likely would not hesitate to apply. Similarly, two participants specifically talked about how motherhood was a barrier to their careers, as getting pregnant either alienated them

from certain work, forced them out of the workplace for months on end, and impacted their ability to accept a public relations role, roles that often are not isolated to 9 to 5 hours. Others (12%) talked about themselves, their own negative self-talk, and their lack of self-confidence as barriers to their risk-taking abilities and new steps in their careers.

Only 12% of participants when asked about barriers, specifically cited "racism" and "stereotyping" as a barrier. Yet, these practitioners admitted that they felt held to a higher standard than their white counterparts because of their race, and that they did not have the same latitude to make a mistake and learn from it. For example, one participant thought that "there is this added barrier surrounding my counterparts who may not be women of colour. It's no problem for them to make a mistake vs. when I make a mistake it's a huge deal." Another participant said, "You have to be spot on because no one is going to give you a pass. They are always searching for a reason to justify their initial stereotypes. So there is no normal room to mess up."

These same women expressed that they needed to learn how to navigate white spaces, and that they could not be as assertive because of the "angry black woman" stereotype that was always working against them. One participant mentioned:

When you go into the workplace, they want you to be assertive. But when you're assertive, you'd get the angry black woman reaction. And then I struggled with how to show assertion and passion without actually showing passion. All of these confusing messages were masked in racism. And then I'd get comments like 'I'm not sure a client would respond to your hair well.'

This was a hardship for each of the participants that mentioned it, and they expressed that this constant additional battle at the workplace caused a desire to speak out, but a need to repress themselves in fear of how they would be (or were) being perceived by others in the workplace. This extra repression is a barrier. Additionally, 24% spoke about their natural hair and the way they dressed as a constant part of their daily thought process, and as a form of suppressing their own authenticity to fit in. One participant mentioned:

"When I was younger I did feel the pressure to manipulate my hair a lot. I reacted in a way to appease that pressure in the workplace. That was my response to all the comments. As I've gotten older, I know this is how my hair grows out of my head. I'm older and I'm more confident now."

There was a constant need to not take up too much space and to fit in, and many felt constrained by that. On a similar note, one participant spoke about working in a place where she felt outnumbered, and particularly in social settings she felt excluded.

When the researcher asked specifically about whether they had experienced discrimination 43% said 'yes', 26% said 'not directly', 22% thought it was difficult to determine for sure, and 9% said they had a feeling, but couldn't prove it. Of those that said 'no, not directly' they talked about journalists with whom they were pitching stories, and that discrimination would not be a factor due to journalists' desire to tell a good story.

Thirty per cent of participants who talked about their experiences admitted that discriminatory attitudes were subtle and engrained. Fifteen per cent talked about the unconscious bias of many colleagues and managers who wouldn't necessarily even realize that

their actions were offensive or racist. For example a participant said:

> Discrimination is hard to identify. People are smart. They'll find other reasons not to
> hire you. It is very subtle. [It's] more about their comfort. Sometimes they don't even
> realize they are doing it, they just keep hiring each other. And then everyone is white
> and female. And you can't use the big "D" word because its a serious accusation and it
> looks bad on me, not the person doing the discriminating.

Another 18% talked about receiving negative and inappropriate comments related to their hair, amounting to the fact that their natural hair was not corporate enough for that organization or could somehow deter clients. 13% spoke about how they'd felt sabotaged by colleagues and managers, that they would see managers consistently hire employees that looked and sounded similar to themselves, and that this form of systemic racism made them feel overlooked and demoralized. For example, one participant spoke about "Insidious stereotyping. Unconscious bias." She spoke about being passed over for opportunities by white counterparts and thinking "What is the only difference between me and them? It's that they are white. I can't say it's 100% racism, but I couldn't see any other reasons why." Those participants also spoke about constantly needing to 'code-switch', or to move from a state of authenticity, to a state that would more closely conform to the environment that was largely white. Many participants admitted feeling discriminated against because of their accent, feeling ignored and invisible by management, and struggling to manage the negative connotations associated with both being a woman and a woman of colour.

For these women who had experiences of discrimination, many avoided the problem, didn't address it and became very careful and self-conscious about what they said for fear of

backlash, or fear of being seen as the 'angry black woman' in an environment where there was existing difficulty finding common social ground. Others talked about code-switching in an attempt to deter further discrimination, and some spoke about going home and crying because the treatment bothered them so much. "I didn't react, I didn't report it. Even though there were witnesses… because if I were to react, I would still be judged. The mental maneuvering this takes during the day is the toughest part. It's a mental health issue," said one participant. These experiences drove some participants to quit and find other opportunities, while others began their own companies. Others talked about doing the opposite, feeling as if it wasn't worth the effort to be upset, and that it only made them work at being more confident in themselves and in their work ethic. These women also spoke about starting their own internal networks for black communicators, about finding opportunities where they could speak up and address discrimination not just for themselves, but for others as well. Some spoke about straightening their hair to conform, while others did the opposite and began to show up to work in natural hair styles as a form of rebellion.

6.5 Diversity and representation

Participants were asked whether they believed there were a lot of black women in the profession. Thirty per cent said 'not a lot but more', 26% said 'no', another 26% said 'if so, I don't see them,' and 19% spoke about an increased number of black female students entering public relations and wondered whether or not that would eventually translate to higher numbers of black female practitioners in the field. Although it was asked, many participants did not talk about aspects that attracted black women to the field. Those that *did*, spoke about the power of voice, the idea of exposure through communications, the idea of being client facing and the ability to use their voice to tell a story.

Participants did not hesitate to talk about what they thought was deterring black women. Forty-one per cent said that the lack of representation, of role models, and of black leaders could deter many who may perceive this underrepresentation as a sign, that they won't succeed in public relations that they would be held back, or would be treated like an outcast. "You don't see a place for yourself in it," said one participant. "I can see how a young black woman might not consider the profession when you mostly see white women. You are probably going to be the only black person and you'll have to fight for a voice and credibility."

Similarly, 5% of participants spoke about structural barriers in schools, not seeing professors of colour and having guidance counsellors who direct black students to college and lesser level programs, instead of university and other academic opportunities like their counterparts of other races. Not having a network or not having the *right* network of people who can be a connection to opportunities, is a huge barrier and deterrent for people of colour and new immigrants in particular. In fact, one participant said:

> I've realized the power of informal networks. As you move forward it's less about the job posting and more about the people who can put you into the job. When you're just starting out there can be a lot of competition. So it can be barrier if you don't have these connections, particularly for those people of colour or new immigrants who don't have access to those networks."

Four participants spoke about this phenomenon and the importance of a network at length. Many participants (13%) also spoke about traditional backgrounds from their parents and families who pushed the traditional careers of doctors and lawyers as something to strive for, while 10% admitted that a lack of awareness about public relations, is also likely to deter

black women. "Family background had a lot to do with it, said one participant. "My family

wanted me to be a doctor or lawyer… They didn't know what PR is."

An additional deterrent listed was the lack of money. Many participants had formal

training in public relations, and some achieved jobs directly from public relations programs or

related internships. For those women of colour that may come from immigrant communities,

or may have had to pay for their own undergraduate training, the extra cost of public relations

training is seen as a barrier and a deterrent. So too is not being able to accept unpaid public

relations internships that may be necessary to build experience and obtain jobs in the field.

One-hundred per cent of participants said that having a diverse workforce could help

improve the profession. Many participants (42%) pointed to the different opinions, dynamic

solutions and better discussion that would result from having diverse people and voices at the

table. Twenty-seven per cent discussed the nature of communicators as being storytellers, and

that diverse publics and audiences meant there were diverse stories to tell, and could be best

told by diverse people who could relate. Another 19% proclaimed that public relations needed

to be as diverse as Canada in order to represent all members of the group in a cultural context.

The last few opinions revolved around organizations being accountable and authentic, by

having diverse voices around the table, and so too should the practice of public relations. In

addition, having diverse communicators could help avoid instances of crisis surrounding

cultural insensitivity.

There were many steps identified by participants on how to increase diversity in the

profession. Many mentioned the responsibility of associations to do outreach to more black

women. Many spoke about a need for increased paid internships, and formal mentorship

programs for minorities of colour. Others spoke about the role organizations should be playing

in looking at their work environment; trying to create more tolerant environments that encourage employees to talk about discrimination while feeling safe to do so. Participants also pointed to a need for cultural sensitivity and unconscious bias training not only for managers but for staff level employees as well.

The majority of participants said simply that having more representation in the field and in the media would remove the stigma that could be keeping black women out of the field. Women need to see themselves represented and need to see that it is possible to excel in public relations. As a result, participants spoke about the responsibility of black women to become mentors, to get more black women into the industry, to help form networks and to find opportunities to be seen, whether that means finding speaking opportunities, or participating in career days at schools and through associations as a way to be visible.

PART THREE

7. Analysis

7.1 Participant demographics

All the women invited to participate in this study were black women, although it was interesting that one participant did not identify as black, but understood that to the external world everyone else would label her as such. What stood out was the underlying theme about identity and perception of self as well as perception of others. Identity and perception are so intertwined as earlier literature would suggest (e.g. Sellers, et al., 1997), that in order to overcome the stereotypes people impose to race, the researcher wondered if that was a way of rejecting racial constructs, to create and project a different sense of self that would not be tied to the stereotypes and barriers that most of the participants said they had experienced.

It was helpful in this case to have found such a range of participants working in a breadth of industries, because it suggests that the similar commentary they each demonstrated goes beyond their sectors, but may speak to the profession itself. Alternatively, many of the experiences participants recounted do not need to be tied to this profession alone, and may indeed be indicative of a Canadian culture flaw as much as it is a professional public relations flaw.

The majority of participants had pursued training in communications and public relations, likely in order for them to obtain and excel in their jobs. Public relations is not a regulated profession, it is more of a practice, and yet many are required (not by law, but in order to gain experience and skills) to pursue professional training in order to succeed. Does this suggest that public relations is organically becoming, or alternatively *should* become a professional field with a professional regulating body? Would this professionalization perhaps help to improve the reputation of public relations and maybe change it from "woman's work" (as described in Tsetsura, 2011) to esteemed work similar to that of doctors and lawyers?

7.2 How participants viewed public relations

The responses really varied for those who had a concept of public relations and what the concept was. The highest percentages of course included the perceptions of public relations women on TV (also noted in Brown, et al., 2001). None of the women, identified seeing themselves when they were younger as public relations professionals, and a few appropriately explained that when you thought of public relations then and when you think of public relations now especially in an agency setting, people do not think of black women. One participant said, "When people think of PR agencies they don't see or think of black women. They think of Samantha Jones in Sex And The City. And this misconception of what the

industry is can either detect or attract people to it." The image held of the profession, even by these women who are now working in it, was not a diverse one. This image depicts a very narrow view of how the profession contributes to business, the activities performed by a practitioner, and the type of person engaged in that work. Yet, a vital point uncovered by these participants is about visibility, or the lack of visibility of black women in the profession. This lack of visibility of the profession itself has contributed to development of this limited understanding of public relations and its value.

This can also explain why so few participants started out directly from post-secondary communications streams. Initially, many did not have an accurate understanding of what public relations was, which could speak to the lack of awareness or visibility of its activities, beyond those who are studying it directly or already employed in the field. It was not surprising however, that many started out as journalists. These women didn't initially see themselves working in public relations. Many in fact were taught in journalism school that public relations practitioners were the devils and spin doctors who recraft the truth. These participants all explained that they came to value public relations as a way to use their skills in a more balanced and stable field. Even though they spoke about public relations being too high-powered and not diverse, these factors did not trump their desire to use their skills and find balance in their lives in public relations.

7.3 Getting into the industry

For those participants who had experience in a related field, or great connections through their personal network or school programs, getting into public relations was easy. But for many others, gaining employment in public relations was very difficult, particularly for those black women who didn't have mentors or other connections, and who may be entering

the field believing they must manipulate their identity for an interview, or to be accepted while on the job.

The role of management in making someone feel a sense of inclusion and belonging is very important. Many spoke about a pressure to fit in and to conform to the culture they saw around them; a culture that was not representative of their own. And although very few had stories of explicit racism, many still did not get the impression from colleagues that they fit in. This impression was largely based on the images portrayed around them; what people were wearing, how they presented themselves, and what they looked like. For example, one participant said:

I didn't feel not welcome. But it's not inclusive. I was one of two black women in PR school. Everyone was white… I never expected to be interviewed by anyone other than a white woman. When I was young I did feel the pressure to look a certain way. I started to straighten my hair. I was left to believe that it looked more polished that way.

When discussing inclusivity, none of the participants pointed to the job activities or the work itself. And when the researcher asked, without referencing race, ethnicity, culture or identity, many participants began to tell stories of race-salient experiences.

Participants also spoke about mentorship in the workplace, and largely agreed that mentorship is very important. The literature also explicitly talked about the importance of having a mentor (as argued by Appelbaum et. al, 2015; Len-Rios, 1998), someone who can relate to workplace challenges and talk about their own experiences of how to navigate those situations. Although many participants had mentors, a common theme was a desire to have a

<u>black female</u> mentor. This is likely because participants desire to see themselves represented

by someone who has made strides in the industry and was successful, signalling their own

potential future success. It is also likely because participants crave the opportunity to talk

candidly about the experiences they had, particularly because many of them did not feel

comfortable discussing those experiences at work with their current leaders. Many

participants who did not have a mentor, felt as if they missed an opportunity to obtain help and

to garner support. Some participants went as far as saying that it was a barrier for them not

being able to find the type of mentor they wanted to help guide them, to help them make

strategic career decisions, as well as to help contribute to their network. This lack of

mentorship is therefore a barrier.

7.4 Barriers they identified

Not being able to express oneself because of imposed stereotypes is both a barrier and

a point of stress that was demonstrated strongly in participants' answers. The researcher had

not yet questioned their experience with discrimination, when racial discrimination was cited

directly by participants on their own. These questions black practitioners ask themselves,

'how am I seen,' 'how am I perceived,' 'what do my natural features say about me' became a

significant thematic barrier identified in this study. In an industry that is very focused on

visibility, perception and reputation, black women are constantly working on manipulating

how they will be seen in an environment and industry that is traditionally described as

"white." Pompper (2004) and Logan (2011) similarly spoke about how whiteness is accepted

where blackness is not. So even without explicitly talking about racism as a barrier, many

spoke about feeling the need to suppress their race to get ahead, while believing their white

counterparts did not have that same concern.

Being a woman is another and additional barrier at times, despite working in a field that is dominated by women. Women are still expected to neglect familial obligations to get the job done and that is particularly difficult in public relations that revolves around a never-ending news cycle, constant and immediate world of social media, and potential unforeseen communications crises (concepts uncovered in Pompper, 2007; Sha & Toth, 2005; Serini et. Al, 1997). For those women who did not start their own businesses, having a manager who is not supportive in those situations is a barrier. And for a black woman that may already be working amongst discrimination and pigeonholing, familial obligations that take focus and time away from the job, can feel like an added nail in the coffin of one's career. This is why considering intersectionality in workplaces is of particular importance. Simply being aware of the concurrent and unique challenges faced by employees can help organizations create more flexible and tolerant environments that enable employees (and their work) to thrive despite these other considerations.

As participants spoke about discrimination, almost all of them spoke about it being subtle and difficult to pinpoint in the form of tangible evidence. This was not a new concept as Pager & Shepherd (2008) and Noh et. al. (1999) also talked about subtle and implicit discrimination but in an American context. Yet, few participants spoke about this discrimination as being their "perception." It was a <u>fact</u> that they had received specific comments or been passed over by less qualified white colleagues. It was also a fact that they were limited in how to describe incidents of racism for someone who has not experienced it in the same way. Because participants noted their colleagues and leaders are mostly white men and women, this inability to talk to senior leaders about their experiences, became an inability to improve their work environment, and therefore is also a barrier.

This could be perhaps why so many women did not respond at all in the face of discriminatory experiences. It could also be why so many avoided the problem, or felt they had no other recourse but to quit and find another organization, if not starting their own. One participant said:

> [Discrimination] would have deterred me, yes. There is a very specific dance we do as women, as black women on how we respond, because we want to ensure we remain in our jobs. We are always fighting this uphill battle.

Despite these challenges, it must be noted that those participants who quit their jobs did not leave public relations, they simply found another way or place to practice. Perhaps this demonstrates that discrimination may not be impacting public relations' retention rate, rather an organization's ability to retain employees. Without a doubt, the results of this study closely resembled the results of Grills et. al, (2016) and Noh et. al, (1999) which argued the significant psychological effect discrimination can have. And although these findings do not conclusively show that black women who are in the profession are leaving due to negative experiences; they also cannot deny that some black women may indeed be hearing these negative stories and choosing careers in other professions.

7.5 Diversity and representation

Participants talked at length about diversity and representation in the field, and their discussion led to potential opportunities for the public relations practice. They spoke about those who may be deterred by a lack of representation. It is possible that those who are deterred could be thinking about the mental and psychological toll it takes, constantly fighting for equal footing in a white space, and believing that this reality is a hurdle they won't need to overcome if they don't pursue public relations. Some also believed that there was definite

interest from black women thinking about pursuing public relations, however many may feel

that it is a difficult industry to infiltrate, particularly with an additional disadvantage of being

black in a white dominated field. However, what if some black women saw all of this as an

opportunity to be a voice for those that are not represented, and to engage with those

audiences that may have been inaccessible before. Therefore, perhaps there is <u>more</u> space for

black women in the industry than participants identified, more opportunities for black women

to succeed.

Black women in Ontario are largely first or second generation Canadians with parents

and families from other countries. Participants spoke about the narrow view of what was

considered an appropriate career choice as traditionally being doctors, lawyers or engineers. If

this is the case, one could argue that the lack of professionalization of public relations may

actually be deterring black women from entering the field. Perhaps this demonstrates an

argument for the professionalization of the field, and maybe if it were a regulated profession,

public relations would attract a more diverse workforce to the practice.

All participants agreed that having a diverse workforce of practitioners was important

for public relations to remain relevant and effective in reaching all audiences. When talking

about the importance of diversity one participant said, "100%. Because you need those points

of view. How are you going to tell stories if you don't understand the perspectives of those

you are talking to?" Another mentioned, "It's a no brainer. Diverse means different opinions,

bringing different experiences to that table. Makes for more dynamic solutions and better

discussion." This is a theme explored by various scholars (Grunig, 2009; Pompper, 2004; Hon

& Brunner, 2000). Participants expressed this sentiment not out of concern for themselves and

their jobs, but they each pointed to the business value and bottom line of being able to

communicate with all audiences and customers, and being able to produce different ideas for new products and better solutions.

The steps towards a diverse workforce from participants were all steps that not only can be applied to public relations, they were steps that organizations and black women could take to help increase representation in any and every field. The respondents portrayed a rather balanced view, one that placed responsibility not only on employers, the public relations industry, association leaders, and educators, but on black women themselves as being a catalyst for the change they desire. This idea highlights the level of influential power black women may have on other black women; a notion that perhaps has not been explored in other studies related to public relations.

8. Discussion

The results of the study gathered from interviews seem to be similar to the many studies conducted in the U.S. The researcher started this study asking how and to what extent public relations' reputation may be deterring or may be a barrier for black women entering and working in the field.

If reputation is the evaluation people attach to an organization, or in this case the practice of public relations, these participants aren't necessarily painting a positive picture. Public relations is still largely an unknown field to those that do not practice it, but what people see from the outside is of a largely white female, cookie-cutter world. Glamorous, high-powered, seemingly filled with less capable professionals, it also appears to be highly competitive and unwelcoming to certain people who do not fit a particular mold. This idea of women not conforming to a particular ideal and thus being rejected from jobs is not a new concept.

Participants spoke about the nagging feeling that they needed to conform before even attending an interview, how they tried to match a visual of a "best fit" in hopes it would help them obtain the job. What's problematic about this reasoning is that someone has determined or defined what "fit" is, and what it would take to belong. The second problematic issue here paints public relations as less credible than traditional professions. If people are seeing in the media and on the street only a certain type of person in the role, and are coming to conclusions about a narrow and limited type of work, it is not surprising that there are so many misconceptions about that value of public relations in business.

Traditional fields like doctors and lawyers have existed since early years of civilization, and so too have early iterations of public relations, but because public relations practitioners can practice in any industry, it becomes even more difficult to describe to someone who is not directly engaged in it. And when a practitioner uses descriptive words or examples from the media to describe what it is that they do, what describe is the reoccurring image that is widely seen and accepted i.e. the agency girl, the celebrity publicist, the event planner. Widely ignored or underrepresented are the strategists, the crisis solvers, the storytellers, and the reputation managers. And maybe this is because public relations does such a poor job of managing its own identity and reputation. People don't know what it is, and who does it. What they see is only one type of person, and the demographics of those who work in the field are also reinforcing this limited view of what it can be and who can be great at it.

It is clear that companies (the same goes for industries) that have positive reputations can attract and retain good employees. An image can do the same. It can influence behaviour toward a practice and create a positive identity for those who identify as practitioners.

As discussed, not only by practitioners in this study, but by U.S. practitioners of previous studies alike, public relations roles are mostly occupied by women. Yet, men still occupy the top positions. Gender stereotypes that attach power to men and subordination to women still exist, and women are still struggling with the responsibilities that have traditionally been imposed on women, and women alone. The identity of being a career person and a mother or caregiver has many times over been studied, and has many times over demonstrated, that this balance is very difficult to achieve. In an industry that is female-dominated like public relations, it is problematic that these challenges still persist in 2018, and the author as many before her questions whether the demands of this industry may be alienating more women, or at least deterring women from striving to higher level positions, leaving a pathway for more men to earn the top spots.

If these are challenges faced by women of any race or ethnic origin, adding the challenges that accompany other identities (race, orientation, and ability) can certainly impact one's perception of their climb to the top. Whether or not one feels like they can climb to the top at all. This is also problematic. If women are not seeing themselves at the top, do they consider whether they can obtain management or leadership positions? Do they question whether they are good enough, whether there could be something standing in their way, what they would have to sacrifice to get there, and whether "there" is somewhere they even want to be? If women could possibly be having this conversation, it stands to reason that black women (and men) are having similar conversations about their lack of representation, not only in management levels but in the industry as a whole. And if an outsider is looking at public relations critically, and only seeing white male leaders, and white agency-bound females, it is a wonder this field has attracted minorities at all.

The second question the researcher explored was whether discrimination is still playing a factor in deterring or blocking black women from entering the field.

Thinking about identity was a huge theoretical component impacting this question. If an identity is a set of independent characteristics that make someone (or a group of people) distinct from others, and if public relations demonstrated the identity of only one group of people, would that alienate another group? Specifically, if public relations' identity (regardless of whether this was self-ascribed or imposed) was that of solely (mostly) white practitioners, would that alienate minority practitioners from feeling like they could belong or could achieve in that field? Participants largely said 'yes,' they didn't and don't see themselves represented. They fell into the industry, and they didn't know it was an option for them early in their careers. Yet, participants of the study were still here and still actively working in public relations.

Many of them spoke about the discrimination that in 2018 still impacts their careers, and to some, have even been a barrier. Of course, for the most part the discrimination experienced was mostly in the form of inappropriate comments, and other subtle and perceived microaggressions. Black women in the U.S. are still making less than their white counterparts, and a 2011 report by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives argues that the same is happening here in Canada across industries. Participants said, they are still being passed over for jobs and pigeonholed by management. They are still playing the extra game of code-switching between their natural identities to one that more closely aligns with the space they are in. They are also still wrestling with the mental toll having to be constantly hyper-aware of how and what they say is perceived out of fear of being labelled 'angry' or 'aggressive.' They are still being told their natural appearance and hair is too authentically

black, "un-corporate," or inappropriate to match the 'fit' of a white space that apparently belongs and has attached itself to public relations. The researcher was surprised in fact, how many times the topic of natural hair came up in conversation without prompt. Black hair is a clear point of difference from white women, a clear aspect that creates an "otherness" that separates black women from everyone else. So if the hair that grows out of black women's head naturally, aside from the colour of their skin, or the stereotypes associated with blackness is not considered corporate enough, it is clear that this can indeed become a barrier for black women and the profession. In addition to mostly seeing white men and women as managers, black women may believe that the door to management is closed to them, and this of course may deter women from remaining in the field.

Because there seems to be so few black women in the industry, many black women may feel the void of not having mentors or a network to whom they can turn and who would understand not only the struggles facing communicators, but also those impacting black women. Many participants spoke about how important it is to leverage a network to get jobs, but if black women can't have a network for themselves, and they don't feel like they are welcome in other networks, this is in itself a disadvantage. Without a network to leverage for career opportunities, they may not be aware about the new job at a great company that would be perfect for them. Perhaps this job was not posted anywhere publicly. And if by some miracle they found out about the job, and were interviewed, they may still be at a disadvantage because the hiring manager may have unconsciously preferred another candidate that more closely resembles him or herself. This is how a lack of network and how bias (whether conscious or unconscious) can still impact how opportunities are allocated.

This tells the story of several problems. Firstly, of parents who don't understand public relations; who want the best for their children and encourage their children to pursue careers they see as credible. Public relations, constantly misunderstood and misrepresented unfortunately may not be one of those careers. Second, there is a problem of communicators who are themselves crafting a reputation for public relations, one as being 24-7, and exclusive to only a certain type of person. Third, there are young professionals or students who don't see themselves represented and can't find a mentor or a role model to emulate. As a result they abandon public relations and pursue another career entirely.   Lastly, there is the problem of school programs and public relations network associations which may only be contributing to the first three problems, by not recognizing communications as a credible opportunity for students, and for not finding opportunities to demonstrate diversity in the field.

Although, this study illuminated several problems, the biggest takeaway here is that it isn't all negative. Black women are still entering the field, and if one were to do a study on those entering university and college programs in public relations and communications, the numbers of black women would have likely spiked over the past decade considerably. Participants spoke about their experiences, and there were some negative experiences – yes. But these participants were still practicing public relations. They still talked about their love for writing, problem solving, strategizing, storytelling, and the power they felt bringing their voices to their work. They all agreed diversity is extremely important.

This was the last area, the researcher explored. If diversity is so important, can the lack of it be detrimental to the public relations industry at large in Ontario?

Respondents plainly, said 'yes.'

Publics and audiences in Ontario are not of a singular type of person, from a singular type of culture, language or creed. Ontario is extremely diverse, and the biggest challenge communicators have is understanding how best to communicate with each person. No one is the same, therefore communications cannot be the same. Communicators who serve as spokespeople, who create the voice for organizations cannot and should not be exactly the same.

Businesses are starting to realize this. Diversity benefits their bottom line, their effectiveness, and their success to have diversity of thought to create innovative solutions, just like diversity of thought can point out potential crises before it happens. Diverse storytellers can help tell a story that may not yet have been told, and that may attract a new audience or stakeholder that hadn't been reached before. Having a diverse bench of communicators (and of employees overall) makes good business sense, and the biggest threat to the credibility and effectiveness of public relations is not having diverse communicators who can provide that level of strategy and service.

9. Conclusions and limitations

When the study began, the researcher set out to investigate whether the reputation of public relations, as well as discriminatory barriers (gender and racial) experienced by practitioners were deterrents to entering and advancing in the field. The author also questioned the impact of diversity and representation on the effectiveness of the practice as a whole.

9.1 Limitations

The major limitations the researcher experienced was the lack of Canadian research to draw from, most of the research was from the U.S. Even the population and census data could not narrow down the exact number of public relations professionals in Ontario, nor how many practitioners were black women in the province. This would have been particularly helpful to compare the population of black female Ontarians with the proportion of black female practitioners, but the data does not exist. The researcher relied instead on the opinions of the participants. Therefore, the results are not generalizable.

9.2 For future study

If another researcher were to take this topic further, they could gather more generalizable research on Canadian practitioners of colour. It would be pertinent to explore black women and diversity in other industries and then compare those findings to that of public relations in the province. One could question whether the state of representation in public relations is better or worse in comparison to other industries in Ontario.

As mentioned, it would have been extremely useful to build on this study by interviewing black women who left the field to determine what were the factors that drew them away, as well as students that may have originally pursued communications in postsecondary institutions and yet abandoned public relations to pursue careers in other professions.

9.3 The results

After analysing the literature and interviewing 21 black female public relations professionals in Ontario the answers were not simple, but they were clear. The reputation of

public relations is very narrow, and there is a clear possibility that it could be deterring black women from entering the field because they do not see themselves represented. This lack of representation may suggest that they would not belong, and that there would be barriers for them to reach management levels.

Gender and racial barriers still exist and are still impacting the experience of these participants, and likely others in the field. Even though some participants spoke about their experience impacting their advancement, it had not driven them from the field itself, yet many admitted it could have driven others away. It would have been beneficial to question students who chose not to enter public relations and black women who have left the field in order to find a more conclusive answer to those questions.

Participants mostly agreed that there were few black women in the profession, that many are not visible, and that there is likely an increase coming through university and college programs. Even though there are increased numbers at school, this may not conclusively translate into increased black women obtaining jobs and remaining in the industry.

Black women are not represented in the field, and since all participants agreed that diversity was vital to the continued effectiveness and credibility of public relations, it is crucial that strides are made to encourage more black women (and women of other ethnicities and backgrounds) to pursue opportunities in the field. This can only happen if public relations as an industry and organizations take strides to make that happen.

10. Recommendations

What this study has uncovered is that when facilitating an increase in diversity and representation, black women, public relations associations and organizations all have a distinct role to play.

10.1 Black women must be disruptors.

Black female practitioners have a huge responsibility to be disruptors, to be brave and speak out when they see and experience unacceptable behaviours in the industry. This is not easy, but there are easier steps that can be taken. These practitioners can encourage more black women to enter and to stay in the field. Primarily, they can find more opportunities to mentor students or young professionals looking for guidance on how to navigate the industry. They can help create networks and create connections for other black women in the field. Lastly, they can find opportunities to be seen. Take speaking opportunities, talk to students and participate in career days, so those younger black women can begin to see this industry as a possibility for them, through the success of the ones that paved the way.

10.2 Public relations associations must be sculptors.

It is the responsibility of associations and public relations programs to reshape and rebuild the reputation of public relations, and this starts with them. They should look for opportunities to employ more diverse faculty as well as guest speakers, because seeing black leaders and practitioners represented, can send the signal to diverse audiences and students that they too can succeed in this practice. Public relations associations in particular should find ways to actively pursue practitioners of colour, making the benefits to them and to the industry clear. Associations can also increase diversity by simply reaching out to communities (schools and other networks) where diverse people frequent and promoting the value of the practice.

This can, not only attract more students and more practitioners but it can simply educate many, particularly from immigrant communities who are not aware of the true credible nature of public relations.

10.3 Organizations must be nurturers.

Organizations need to shape the environment in which public relations operates. They can increase diversity by creating an open environment where people can talk about inclusion, diversity and their experiences without fear of reprisal or social punishment. They can enforce cultural sensitivity and unconscious bias training. Hiring managers should think strategically about where and how they are getting candidates for positions, whether some have inherent advantage over others, and how they could level the playing field. Lastly, organizational leaders should also look critically at the composition of their teams, and question whether there could be more opportunities for outreach to diverse candidates and mentorship for diverse staff.

Reputation matters and representation matters. Although public relations was once a lily-white field, reputations can change.

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