

Feminization of the film?

Occupational roles of public relations characters in movies

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Abstract

This study applied role theory to examine occupational roles and gender differences of public relations practitioners in films. A content analysis of 22 films produced 1995-2010 found that when it comes to societal expectations regarding the occupational roles and gender of public relations practitioners, films with public relations characters present a distorted view of reality. The majority of characters were men, suggesting that films may not perpetuate feminization of the profession. Male and female practitioners were equally likely to be in managerial roles, but females were more likely to have social interactions, perpetuating the myth of the “PR bunny” (Fröhlich & Peters, 2007). Most characters were publicists or spokespersons and the overall tone of the films was negative. Male public relations characters were characterized more negatively than female characters were, but all characters scored low on positive character traits such as honesty and trustworthiness, and higher on negative traits such as being manipulative and profit-driven. Inaccurate media presentations of public relations practitioners can negatively affect public relations by influencing how society views the profession and by perpetuating erroneous assumptions.

Keywords: role theory, public relations perceptions, public relations portrayals, media presentations

Feminization of the film?

Occupational roles of public relations characters in movies

More than a billion film tickets are sold in the United States (U.S.) annually; the average American goes to the movies 8.5 times each year (US Movie Market Summary, 2010). These figures are based on theater reports, and do not include the number of films watched on DVDs, television, and computers. It is no surprise that films have a significant influence in most people's lives. Films are used as "equipment for living" (Young, 2000); they not only provide entertainment and escape, but also contribute to beliefs about social reality, and, for some people, cause changes in attitudes and behaviors.

The contentions that media, including films, contribute to the social construction of reality and that media messages have a cumulative, culture-building effect and play a role in the formation of cultural assumptions are widely accepted (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989; McQuail, 2005). Among these cultural assumptions are gender expectations, including expectations of women in the workplace. How roles are depicted in films can both mirror socially accepted roles and perpetuate stereotypes, regardless of the accuracy of the perceptions (Herrett-Skjellum & Allen, 1996). Johnston (2010) suggested that films and television series are components of a mediated public sphere, which are used "as reference points about the profession within the broader structure of society and the workplace" (p. 6). Behm-Morawitz and Mastro (2008) found that gender-based images in films influence young adults' attitudes about women's roles in society.

The purpose of the current study is to assess film depictions of public relations practitioners in regard to role and gender. It differs from previous studies in that it specifically looks at occupational roles of public relations practitioners in films and gender differences using quantitative data. The study has implications for understanding how women may be socialized to seek and accept technician roles in the field of public relations, which is an area of academic concern (e.g., Aldoory & Toth, 2002; Creedon, 1991; O'Neil, 2003; Wrigley, 2002). The study

also looks at how the practice of public relations is stereotyped in films. Inaccurate media presentations can negatively affect the practice of public relations by influencing how society views the profession and by perpetuating erroneous assumptions. Film depictions can reinforce suspicions that viewers may have about public relations as a profession (Lee, 2009). Films may not portray reality, but they affect perceptions of reality. In this study we argue that, when it comes to societal expectations regarding occupational roles and gender of public relations practitioners, films with public relations characters present a distorted view of reality.

Role Theory and Public Relations

Social and occupational roles often are based on culturally determined expectations for patterns of behavior. Social role theory suggests that the roles of men and women in everyday life are a function of what society deems appropriate based on gendered stereotypes (Eagley & Steffen, 1984). Traditional gender-role attitudes, which are socially learned as cultural values, may cause people to aspire to sex-typical occupations and thus perpetuate occupational sex segregation (Abrahamson & Sigelman, 1987; Johnston, 2010; Liao & Cai, 1995).

Gendered Occupational Roles

Occupational roles that are most often held by men are regarded as having higher status than roles traditionally held by women (Liao & Cai, 1995). Although the ratio of women to men in certain occupations may change over time (e.g., law and nursing), the proportion of women and men in a particular occupation is the best predictor of whether it is typed as a masculine or feminine occupation (Creedon, 1991).

Gendered Public Relations Roles

Men in public relations are more likely to be promoted into managerial roles; most women in public relations are employed in technician roles. Women in public relations earn less than men overall (Aldoory & Toth, 2002). Although factors such as years of experience, skills and training (O'Neil, 2003), and balance of work and family contribute to the likelihood that women will work in public relations technician jobs, socialization—that is gender role

orientation—is also a factor (Aldoory & Toth, 2002; Aldoory, Reber, Berger, & Toth, 2008).

O'Neil (2003) found that female public relations practitioners have less formal structural power than male public relations practitioners. The literature leads to the following hypothesis about the films analyzed for the study:

H₁: Male public relations characters are more likely to be in managerial roles than female public relations characters.

The field of public relations is becoming increasingly “feminized” with more than 70% of public relations positions in the U.S. held by women; female students are the majority in academic public relations programs (Wrigley, 2002). Roles and professional status are often intertwined, and there is concern that the feminization of the public relations field could result in overall lower salaries and status of the profession (Creedon, 1991; Toth, 1989; Wrigley, 2002). The literature leads to the following hypothesis about the films analyzed for the study:

H₂: There will be more female public relations characters than male public relations characters.

Gendered Public Relations Expectations

Geyser-Semple (2011) found that public relations majors echoed stereotypical images of women as better at communicating and worse at business skills in her mixed-methods study of student expectations and practitioner realities of gender's role in public relations. Farmer and Waugh (1999) found that female students scored higher on the desire to perform technical roles and male students expected higher salaries, perhaps because women are socialized to be less aggressive when seeking management positions and negotiating salaries. Creedon (1991) argued that women may be attracted to jobs that allow them to write and be creative, perhaps because they have been socialized for these roles, and that technician roles should not be devalued.

Public Relations Occupational Roles

Specific task roles of public relations practitioners that have been defined through the years include expert prescriber, communications facilitator, problem-solving facilitator, technical

service provider, communication liaison, and media relations specialists (Broom & Smith, 1979; Dozier, 1984). Broom and Dozier (1986) determined that many of the roles were interchangeable and loaded into the same factor, concluding that all of the activities of public relations practitioners fell into two primary role types: technicians and managers. Grunig and Hunt (1984) described managers as those who systematically plan public relations programs, counsel management, and make communication policy decisions. Technicians are those who provide journalistic skills such as writing, editing, and production, but who do not make decisions for the organization. Even though scholars have argued that the manager-technician dichotomy is less important than job satisfaction, the roles are nonetheless important in terms of salary and status (Creedon, 1991; Wrigley, 2002).

Stereotypes and Public Relations

Stereotypes can be useful ways of categorizing the world, but are often inaccurate. Accuracy is the correspondence between perception and true attributes. Judd and Park (1993) purport that the variability of the central tendency is a form of stereotype inaccuracy in itself: Stereotypes are often exaggerated in the sense that the group mean is overestimated. Lippmann (1922) believed all stereotypes are false by their very nature because it is false that all members of a group share all traits and only those traits. Regardless of inaccuracies, once a stereotype becomes a cultural mindset, it is resistant to change.

Public Relations is Stereotyped as Negative

Studies spanning several decades show public relations has been negatively stereotyped in the media. One theme that emerged from Saltzman's (2012) meta-analysis of public relations characters in film and television from 1901 to 2011 was the villain who lied, cheated, or stole to protect a client's image. Spicer (1993) found that more than 80 percent of the time, the media presented public relations as an attempt to sidestep or manipulate the truth. In an examination of Canadian newspapers, Scrimger and Richards (2003) found the term public relations was often inflammatory, and more than half the time used in the lead paragraph

of news stories, possibly to provide drama. Henderson (1998) looked at not only whether public relations was presented positively or negatively, but if the term was used accurately, and found media definitions matched the standard Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) definition only about five percent of the time; public relations was presented negatively 85 percent of the time. Yoon and Black (2007) identified “heartless,” “bully,” and “manipulative” among the recurring traits of public relations presentations in television. In an analysis of how women public relations practitioners are depicted in film and television roles, Johnston (2010) found that the industry is presented in part as manipulative, scheming and unethical.

White and Lambert (2006) used newspaper stories as texts to look for contextual definitions of the term public relations. They found the term was frequently used as an adjective, often to ascribe negative meaning to the noun it modified (such as stunt or gimmick), and that negative connotations were embedded in the texts regardless of the topic of the article. Kinsky and Callison (2008), in an analysis of evening news broadcasts, also found the term was used frequently as an adjective (public relations battle, PR nightmare) and was often used as a meaningless cliché or platitude (e.g., Yoon & Black, 2007). Lee (2001, 2009) looked at how government public relations professionals are depicted in films and found in most cases, depictions were negative. Studies that looked at television presentation of public relations in drama and situation comedies have found similar negative themes (Priest, 2004), leading to the first research question:

RQ₁: Is the overall tone of films featuring public relations characters positive or negative?

Public Relations is Stereotyped as Publicity

Public relations is frequently stereotyped in the media as limited in scope and often equated with publicity and media relations. Public relations practitioners are called by other names such as publicist and spokesperson (Priest, 2004). Yoon and Black (2007) found public relations characters in television shows were involved in publicity and event planning, both of which seemed to require very little work and usually were performed by women. Tasks included

media releases, launches, and addressing press conferences. Tavcar (1993) also found that public relations professionals were often cast as press agents and publicists rather than in managerial or symmetrical public relations roles. Lee's (2001) study indicated that most of the characters were engaged in media relations as their primary activity. In her analysis of how women public relations practitioners are presented in film and television roles, Johnston (2010) found in part that the industry is portrayed as publicity, media and events-based work, and this generally coincides with women performing the tasks. This literature leads to the next research question:

RQ₂: Are public relations characters in films portrayed in publicity and media relations roles?

Public Relations Practitioners are Stereotyped as PR Bunnies

A recurring public relations stereotype is that of the *PR bunny*, coined by Fröhlich and Peters (2007). PR bunnies are characterized by their attractive physical attributes and lack of management competence. The female practitioner who uses her sex appeal to win clients and get promotions is a theme of public relations characters in film and television from 1901 to 2011 (Saltzman, 2012). They possess a series of gendered traits including being natural communicators, sensitive, empathetic, relationship-builders, and well-suited for service-oriented professions. Most of the television-based public relations characters Yoon and Black (2007) studied were women who did very little work. McFarlane (2002) looked at both films and television programs released during a 15-year period and found women in public relations were disproportionately presented as physically attractive, involved in social activities, stylishly dressed, and engaging in sexual acts. The literature leads to the following hypotheses about the films analyzed for the study:

H₃: Female public relations characters are more likely to have social interactions with other characters.

H₄: Male public relations characters are more likely to have professional interactions with other characters.

Miller (1999) looked at public relations characters in film and fiction and found that women were often included mainly as a love interest. She identified “ditzzy” (shallow but loveable) as an archetypal characteristic of public relations practitioners. In interviews with women in public relations agencies in Germany, Fröhlich and Peters (2007) found evidence of the evolution of a PR bunny stereotype that the researchers believe adds a negative aspect to the feminization of the profession. This literature leads to the following hypothesis:

H₅: Female public relations characters are more likely to be characterized as ditzzy than male public relations characters.

Distorted Media Presentations of Public Relations

Miller (1999) conducted a thematic analysis to study depictions of public relations and its practitioners in film and fiction appearing in the U.S. from 1930-1995, and noted antisocial behaviors among the public relations characters in her sample. Even when characters were skilled in public relations, behaviors of the public relations characters included lying, alcohol abuse, and promiscuity; traits included greed, cynicism, and manipulation. Most of the characters in the study were male.

Males were the vast majority of public relations characters in films from the 1920s through the 1990s—189-to-44—but by the 21st century, the ratio had shifted dramatically to 26 male and 16 female characters (Saltzman, 2012). Media presentations in television were more in line with societal expectations regarding public relations practitioners, however. Saltzman (2012) found that there were 60 female public relations characters as opposed to 68 male public relations characters on television from the 1950s to 2011.

Ames (2010) used traits from Miller’s study, but found that the presentation of public relations has become more positive over time. However, she noted that being good at the job did not equate with doing good and being good. The literature leads to the following hypothesis about the films analyzed for the study:

H_6 : Male public relations characters are more likely to have negative traits than female public relations characters.

Role theory has been applied to occupational roles in organizations, including those of public relations professionals (Broom & Dozier, 1986; Broom & Smith, 1979; Creedon, 1991; Dozier, 1984). The present study applied role theory to occupational roles and gender differences of public relations practitioners in films. This assessment of film depictions of public relations practitioners enhances our understanding of the profession of public relations in regard to role, gender, and societal expectations.

Method

The researchers used standard content analysis (Kassarjian, 1977) to analyze the films and depictions of characters in the study. Two units of analysis were coded: films with characters in public relations roles ($N=22$) and the characters in public relations roles ($N=36$). The films aired in U.S. movie theaters between 1995 and 2010 and featured characters who worked in public relations roles. The films from the dataset were drawn from previous studies of public relations characters (e.g., Ames, 2010; McFarlane, 2002; Miller, 1999). The years were chosen to provide a manageable and meaningful population of study. The researchers reviewed the plot summaries available on the

Table 1

Films and characters in public relations roles

FILM	CHARACTER(S)	GENDER	RACE	AGE	JOB
America's Sweethearts	Danny Wax	Male	White	30	Assistant to film publicist
	Lee Phillips	Male	White	50	Film publicist/Agent
Bridget Jones' Diary	Bridget Jones	Female	White	35	Publicist for publisher
For Your Consideration	Corey Taft	Male	White	40	Publicist
	Pam Campanella	Female	White	35	Publicist
	Morley Orfkin	Male	White	55	Publicist/Agent

Gordy	Gilbert Sipes	Male	White	40	Public relations director
Hancock	Ray Embrey	Male	White	35	Publicist
Independence Day	Constance Spano	Female	White	30	White House press secretary
Jersey Girl	Ollie Trinke	Male	White	30	Publicist
	Arthur Brickman	Male	White	25	Publicist
Mars Attacks!	Jerry Ross	Male	White	35	Press secretary
Miss Congeniality 2: Armed & Fabulous	Joel Meyers	Male	White	35	Public relations consultant/Stylist
Paperback Hero	Ziggy Keane	Female	White	35	Publicist
People I Know	Eli Wurman	Male	White	60	Publicist/Event planner
Phone Booth	Stuart (Stu) Shephard	Male	White	35	Publicist/image consultant
Sex And The City	Samantha Jones	Female	White	50	Publicist
Showtime	Chase Renzi	Female	White	35	TV producer
	Trey Sellars	Male	Black	35	Spokesperson
	Mitch Preston	Male	White	55	Spokesperson
Sliding Doors	Helen Quilley 1	Female	White	25	Public relations practitioner
	Helen Quilley 2	Female	White	25	Public relations practitioner
State Of Play	Dominic Foy	Male	White	35	Public relations executive
Thank You For Smoking	Nick Naylor	Male	White	35	Lobbyist
	B.R.	Male	White	50	Lobbyist
	Bobby Jay Bliss	Male	White	35	Lobbyist
	Polly Bailey	Female	White	30	Lobbyist
The American President	Sydney Ellen Wade	Female	White	35	Lobbyist
	Robin McCall	Female	Black	30	Press secretary
The Big Tease	Candy Harper	Female	White	55	Publicist
The Kid	Russ Duritz	Male	White	40	Image consultant
	Amy [no last name]	Female	White	30	Assistant
Valentine's Day	Kara Monahan	Female	White	25	Publicist
Wag The Dog	Conrad Brean	Male	White	50	Consultant
	Amy Cain	Female	White	30	Press secretary
	JohnLevy	Male	White	35	Press agent

Internet Film Database and Rotten Tomatoes film review websites to ensure the films were suitable for study parameters. Both sources contain extensive plot summaries and character descriptions. The coders for the study were male and female graduate students enrolled in public relations courses. The researchers trained coders during in-class coding sessions. They used written and oral instructions to ensure consistent coding for analysis purposes. Each film was individually and independently coded by two coders who followed up to reconcile differences. Intercoder reliability, measured as percent of agreement, was 76 percent for each pair of coders.

Likert scales with items adapted from Priest (2004) and based on previous studies were used on the coding sheet (Table 2). Coders scored the overall tone of public relations in each film as 1 (*Extremely negative*) to 7 (*Extremely positive*). Professional and social interactions of public relations characters with other characters in each film were rated from 1 (*Never*) to 7 (*Extremely often*). Coders assessed characters' managerial role in each film on a scale from 1 (*Obviously a subordinate*) to 7 (*top manager/big boss*). Character attributes were measured for each person in a public relations role. Positive attributes consisted of honest, trustworthy, responsible, moral and socially responsible; negative character attributes included manipulative, cynical, and money-minded as shown in Table 3. While the attribute of ditzy was originally expected to be a negative character trait, ditzy decreased the internal consistency of the scale for negative attributes, and was thus removed from the respective scale and treated as a separate character attribute. Data were analyzed using SPSS.

An open-ended question asked coders to describe the public relations activities and tasks performed by each public relations character in the films.

Table 2

Mean scores of code sheet items

	M	SD
Overall tone of public	3.28	1.60

relations		
Interactions with other characters work-related and professional	4.91	1.72
Interactions with other characters social	4.23	2.07
Character the boss/supervisor	4.86	2.24
Positive character attributes	4.12	1.70
Negative character attributes	4.99	1.82
Ditzy	2.54	1.91

Table 3

Character traits

	M*	SD
Positive traits		
Honest	3.27	2.07
Trustworthy/credible	3.41	2.13
Responsible	3.73	1.90
Moral/ethical/good conscience	3.36	2.50
Socially responsible/public-interest minded	2.64	2.40
All positive traits	Male: 3.51 Female: 5.13	
Negative traits		
Manipulative	5.73	1.70
Cynical	4.86	2.19
Money-minded/profit driven	5.41	2.06
All negative traits	Male: 5.33 Female: 4.41	

*Seven-point Likert-type scale, 1=not at all and 7=extremely

Results

Twenty-two films ($N = 22$) depicting characters who played public relations roles ($N = 36$) were analyzed (see Table 1). Of the 36 characters, 21 were male and 15 were female. Because of the small number of films and characters in public relations roles, there were not enough cases to provide strong statistical support when determining differences in likelihood of a character to hold managerial positions, perceptions of a character's positive and negative traits, and frequency of a character's social and professional interactions with other characters across gender and age. For purposes of extracting the effects of gender, a series of t-tests were employed.

H1 predicted that male public relations characters would be more likely to be in managerial roles than female public relations characters. An independent sample t-test was employed to test the effect of gender of characters in public relations roles on likelihood to hold management positions in films. Findings indicated no significant difference between male and female characters $t(33) = .49, p = .63$. This hypothesis was not supported.

H2 predicted that there would be more female public relations characters than male public relations characters. The majority of the public relations characters in the sample were male. Only 41% were female. Therefore, this hypothesis was not supported.

H₃ predicted that female public relations characters would be more likely to have social interactions with other characters than male public relations characters. To test if female public relations characters are perceived to have more frequent social interactions with other characters compared to male public relations characters, an independent sample t-test was conducted. Findings yielded a significant difference in that female characters ($M = 5.38$) were more likely to have social interactions with others than male characters ($M = 3.55$) in films, $t(33) = 2.77, p < .01$. This hypothesis was supported.

H₄ predicted that male public relations characters would be more likely to have professional interactions with other characters than female public relations characters. An

independent sample t-test indicated difference between males and females with regard to frequency of professional interactions, $t(33) = 1.42$, $p = .40$, showing no support for this hypothesis.

H_5 predicted that female public relations characters would be more likely than male characters to be characterized as “ditzy.” A series of independent sample t-tests were employed to test the effect of gender of the character in public relations roles on the “ditzy” attribute. Findings show that male characters had a higher mean on “ditzy” ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 2.08$) compared to female characters ($M = 2.46$, $SD = 1.66$), $t(33) = .190$, $p > .01$. As shown in Table 3, the mean for ditzy was 2.54. Results yielded no significant difference in the characteristic of ditzy between male and female characters in public relations roles. Thus, this hypothesis was not supported.

H_6 predicted that male public relations characters are more likely to have negative traits than female public relations characters. A series of independent sample t-tests were employed to test the effect of gender of the character in public relations roles on character attributes. Positive attributes consisted of honest, trustworthy, responsible, moral and socially responsible (Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$), while negative character attributes included manipulative, cynical, and money-minded (Cronbach's $\alpha = .80$). Findings show that male characters had a higher mean on negative traits ($M = 5.33$, $SD = 1.63$) compared to female characters ($M = 4.41$, $SD = 2.04$), $t(33) = 3.06$, $p < .01$. As shown in Table 3, the mean for positive traits for female characters was 5.13 compared to a mean of 3.50 for men. Therefore, this hypothesis was supported.

The first research question asked whether the overall tone toward public relations in films was positive or negative. Findings show that the overall tone toward public relations in films was neutral ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.60$). Responses ranged from 1 to 6 with nobody scoring a 7. Internally the researchers noted the range from 1 to 6 due to a high standard deviation suggesting tone could be a multidimensional construct.

The second research question asked if public relations characters in films were portrayed in publicity and media relations roles. Data from the open-ended question that asked

coders to list activities in which the public relations characters were involved indicated the majority of the 36 characters performed media relations and publicity activities. Coder responses to characters' roles and work-related activities included publicist, agent, image consultant, lobbyist, event planner, spokesperson, and press secretary. Many of the characters in public relations roles conducted media relations activities such as holding press conferences, pitching stories to the media, or facilitating interviews. Coders also noted that public relations characters often were publicists for celebrity clients. Characters often put a positive spin on things or manipulated information for the client.

Discussion

Films may affect perceptions of reality, but in this study, presentation of public relations does not always mirror reality. These results indicate that, when it comes to societal expectations regarding the occupational roles and gender of public relations practitioners, films with public relations characters present a distorted view of reality.

Men in public relations are more likely to be promoted into managerial roles and most women in public relations are employed in technician roles (Aldoory & Toth; 2002, O'Neil, 2003, *PR Week*, 2004). In the film world, women were as likely as men to be the boss. This surprising finding may be due to the speculative nature of each character's role. Although the job titles of some characters were clearly identified, other characters did not have a job title. Coders were instructed to rank each character from "obviously a subordinate" to "top manager/big boss". For some characters, the script and nature of the film role made it hard to determine the occupational role. Characters who worked as independent agents or consultants did not clearly fall in either category; thus, rankings of some characters may have been coded with incomplete character information. While it appears that managerial and technician roles were equally distributed across the sample of characters in the present study, it is unclear which public relations characters were serving in managerial positions.

In the film world, the public relations field is not as feminized as the real world. In the sample of public relations characters, only 41 percent were women, compared to 70 percent in the public relations workforce in the U.S. This finding aligns with research regarding the number of men versus women in public relations roles (Johnston, 2010; Lee, 2001, 2009; Miller, 1999; Saltzman, 2012). It is tempting to conclude that films are not perpetuating the feminization of the profession, but researchers would be wise to consider these findings in light of Saltzman's (2012) meta-analysis. His results indicated that the ratio of women to men in public relations film roles only began shifting in the 21st century. He also found that film presentations of public relations practitioners continue to lag behind gender ratios of television presentations.

The fact that female public relations characters were more likely to have social interactions with other characters than male public relations characters was troubling, but unsurprising. McFarlane (2002) found that women were disproportionately involved in social activities. Public relations majors repeatedly expressed interest in the social opportunities for practitioners when Geysler-Semple (2011) interviewed them for a study of student expectations and practitioner realities of gender's role in public relations. Media presentations such as those in the present study reinforce stereotypes about gender and occupational roles. By presenting public relations as a social arena rather than a professional field, media are perpetuating an erroneous assumption about the practice of public relations as a whole.

It is encouraging that male and female public relations characters in the present study were equally likely to have professional interactions with other characters. McFarlane (2002), Miller (1999), Johnston (2010), and Saltzman (2012) found that female public relations characters were often presented in one-dimensional roles focused on their sex appeal rather than their mental acumen. The gender balance of professional interactions may suggest that characters overall are being depicted in multiple settings. The length of films, and the platform for further character development, may have contributed to the inclusion of professional interactions across both genders.

The lack of significant difference in the characteristic of ditzy between male and female characters in public relations roles may point toward lack of understanding of the “shallow but lovable” operational definition of ditzy. Fröhlich & Peters (2007) suggested that the stereotype of the PR bunny as a fun-loving character may send conflicting messages to film viewers about public relations overall and whether or not to pursue it as a career. Viewers may perceive “shallow but lovable” presentations as complementary to traditionally feminine traits: sensitive, relational, and natural nurturers. Conversely, viewers may be insulted by the continued preoccupation with the physical attractiveness of female practitioners and the assumption that they lack management competence.

The lack of difference in the characteristic of ditzy between male and female characters may instead point toward one-dimensional presentations that preclude ascribing certain characteristics. Conceding that such characters may be endearing, Johnston (2010) argued that representations of the profession are harmful. Depictions of female public relations characters as negative (Saltzman, 2012) or limited (Johnston, 2010) reflect a distorted view of reality.

The finding that male public relations characters were not more likely to have negative traits than female characters in the present study was unexpected, especially considering the quantity and depth of roles available to men (Saltzman, 2012). Miller (1999) noted several negative and antisocial behaviors among the mostly male characters she analyzed; likewise, Lee (2001, 2009) noted negative depictions of male public relations characters. But conclusions from Miller (1999) and Ames (2010) clarified results of the present study. Both researchers noted an ambiguity among public relations characters that were good at their jobs—but not necessarily ethical.

Even though female public relations characters were rated higher than male public relations characters on positive traits, both men and women were rated lower than the center of the scale on positive traits and higher on negative traits. Public relations characters scored particularly low on being socially responsible and public-interest minded. It was unexpected

that the overall tone toward public relations in films was neutral in the present study—especially considering media presentations of the villainous public relations practitioner who lies, cheats, or steals to protect a client's image (Saltzman, 2012). But these results may represent a shift towards the *morally ambiguous character*, characters with positive and negative traits that hold appeal for different reasons (Krakowiak and Tsay, in press). Coders noted that the role of characters was to put a positive spin on things or to manipulate information for the client.

The fact that the majority of the characters in the dataset were involved in media relations activities and publicity supports the contention of Henderson (1998) that public relations is not presented accurately in all its functions by the media. In the current study, public relations characters were often spokespersons and publicists, working for a celebrity, athlete, or politician, and heavily involved in media relations. The findings contradict Ames (2010) who looked at how Grunig's four roles were depicted in films about public relations, and found media presentations of public relations were more strategic and symmetrical. Public relations practitioners performing publicity and media roles could be simply a production decision by filmmakers. Characters depicted holding press conferences, pitching stories to reporters or facilitating interviews are much more visually appealing than writing press releases conducting research.

Conclusion

When it comes to societal expectations regarding the occupational roles and gender of public relations practitioners, films with public relations characters present a distorted view of reality. One of the limitations of the present study is the number of films and the timeframe in which the films were produced. Future research studies could expand the dataset to include multiple years as well as analysis comparing different decades. Another limitation of the study is the presence of multiple coders. Limiting content analysis to two coders rather than pairs of coders could enhance the reliability of the findings. Finally, the researchers recognize that films

are produced for entertainment. The story line of a film may focus on social life over professional life, for example, leading to a skewed presentation of the film's characters.

Nonetheless, films provide a component of "equipment for living" (Young, 2000) and contribute to the social construction of reality. Films may be in part responsible for the misconceptions about what public relations is and does.

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